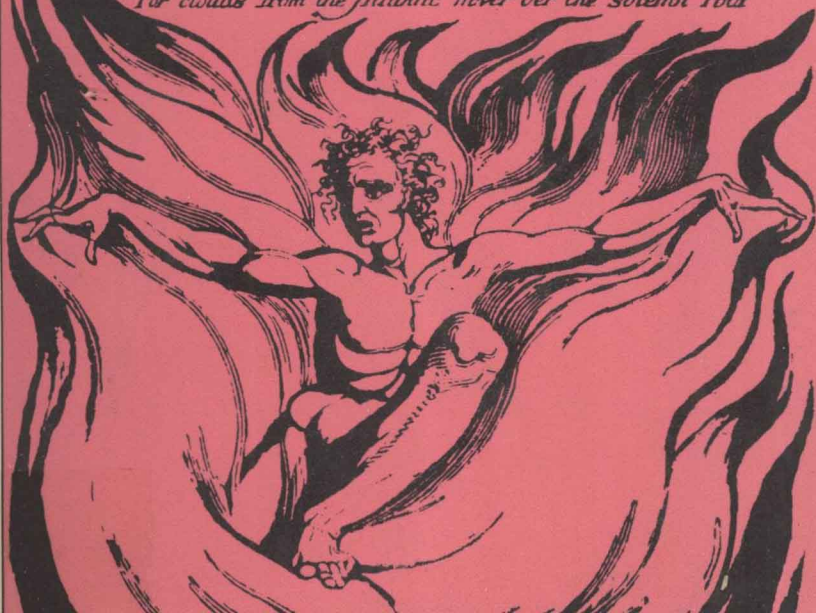


Poetry in English

An introduction · Charles Barber

*On those vast stately hills between America & Albion's shore;
Now barr'd out by the Atlantic sea; call'd Atlantean hills;
Because from their bright summits you may pals to the Golden world
An ancient palace, archetype of mighty Empires,
Rears its immortal pinnacles, built in the forest of God
By Aniston the king of beauty for his stolen bride.*

*Here on their magic seats the thirteen Angels sat perturbed
For clouds from the Atlantic hover over the solemn roof*



POETRY IN ENGLISH

AN INTRODUCTION

Charles Barber

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First published 1983 by
THE MACMILLAN PRESS LTD
London and Basingstoke
Companies and representatives throughout the world

ISBN 0 333 32440 4 (hard cover)
ISBN 0 333 32441 2 (paper cover)

Typeset in Great Britain by
Cambrian Typesetters, Farnborough, Hants

Printed in Hong Kong

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Foreword

There are so many ways of approaching poetry, of enjoying it, of assimilating it. Poetry performs so many functions: it leads us into the infinity of human imagination, as when Milton tries to justify the ways of God to man; it can, in Pope, express 'what oft was thought but neer so well expressed': it can, with Vaughan, reveal Eternity 'like a Great Ring of pure and endless light', or, with Eliot, show us the waste land of spiritual sterility; it can convey the ecstasy of love in Donne's passionate intensity, or record the Whitsun Weddings in Larkin's cautious camera-work; it can capture Yeats's tragedy of Cuchulain, of father killing his son in ignorance, or compel us, say, to the correct compassion James Kirkup creates in his account of a heart operation.

Poetry corresponds to and interprets human experience in all its variety: and to the poetry of England has been added poetry written in English in many other countries: Ireland, Scotland and Wales, to begin with, and then, of course, the United States, and the countries which are or have been within the Commonwealth, as well as countries such as the Phillipines where lively poetry has been written in recent years.

Poets who write in English draw upon a vast wealth of achievement in the past; they are part of a long, noble tradition. Some of them write in full consciousness of what has gone before them, developing, adapting, echoing; others react against their predecessors — as Wordsworth and Coleridge sought to move away from what had become, in their time, an outworn poetic diction. As Ezra Pound put it, there needs to be an impulse 'to make it new' — in whatever way the poet chooses.

In this *Introduction*, Dr Barber conveys not only the variety

of techniques but the wealth of subject matter to be found in poetry written in English; he has selected examples of different kinds of poetry, simple and sophisticated; his comments illuminate the strengths and subtleties to be enjoyed in reading poems, discovering their variety and realising how skilfully poets can express our thoughts and emotions, putting them into patterns of words and images, using metre and often rhyme to make them memorable. For poetry encapsulates human experience in a unique way, economically and precisely, stimulating and satisfactorily. It is there in profusion for our enrichment, and Dr Barber is an excellent guide.

Stirling, 1982

A. N. Jeffares

Preface

This book is an introduction to English poetry, intended for the general reader who wishes to extend the range of his reading and find new things to enjoy. It should be useful for students in their final two or three years at school, especially those who are beginning the serious study of poetry, for example for examination purposes. It should also be useful to first-year students of English literature in universities and colleges. Particular attention has been paid to the needs of overseas students, by glossing difficult words in the poems quoted, and by offering historical and cultural background-information where it helps understanding. Some of this material will not be necessary for home students, but I hope that it will not reduce their enjoyment of the book.

Particular prominence is given to English poets who are commonly studied in the upper forms of schools and in first-year university courses, but some attention is given to all the major English poets since 1500, and to many minor ones. Not much is said about English poetry before 1500, except for Chaucer, who is obviously indispensable. Burns and Yeats are both discussed, but it has not been possible in a book of this size to give a full account of the splendid traditions of Scots and Anglo-Irish poetry.

Short poems which are analysed in any detail are reproduced in full in the text. This is clearly impossible with longer poems, and it is highly desirable that, when such poems are discussed at all closely, you should have your own copy of the poem open beside you.

I am only too strongly aware of the old proverb about leading a horse to the water. I am convinced, however, that a

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book of this kind can help people to react to poetry and to enjoy it better, by removing prejudices and misunderstandings, and by introducing them to new kinds of poetic experience; to do this is one of the main aims of the present work.

CHARLES BARBER

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Professor A. N. Jeffares, who suggested that I should write this book, and who has been unfailingly helpful while I have been doing so. I am also indebted, for advice on points of detail in their particular specialist fields, to three friends at the University of Leeds: Ann Massa, Arthur Ravenscroft and Alistair Stead. For information about the Yoruba *oriki*, I am indebted to Dr Karin J. Barber of the University of Ifè.

The author and publishers also wish to thank the following who have kindly given permission for the use of copyright material:

Faber & Faber Ltd and Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., for 'Whispers of Immortality' and other short extracts from *Collected Poems 1909-1962* by T. S. Eliot; The Marvell Press (England), for an extract from the poem 'Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album' by Philip Larkin from *The Less Deceived*; A P Watt Ltd on behalf of Michael and Anne Yeats, and Macmillan Publishing Co. Inc., for the poems 'Sailing to Byzantium', 'The Coming of Wisdom with Time' and 'He Tells of the Perfect Beauty' from *Collected Poems* by William Butler Yeats. Copyright renewed in the U.S. by Bertha Georgie Yeats.

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1 *The Nature of Poetry*

What is Poetry?

We are all familiar with poems of various lengths and kinds. But what are we to include in our definition of poetry? The nursery rhymes we learnt as children? The rhymes we use to memorise the number of days in each month? The commercial verses in Christmas cards? The advertising jingles on television? The words of the latest pop-song? Where shall we draw the line?

An example

Let us begin by looking at an example of a poem. We would probably all agree that the following short work by William Wordsworth (1770–1850) is a poem:

She dwelt among the untrodden ways
Beside the springs of Dove,
A Maid whom there were none to praise
And very few to love:

A violet by a mossy stone 5
Half hidden from the eye!
— Fair as a star, when only one
Is shining in the sky.

She lived unknown, and few could know 10
When Lucy ceased to be;
But she is in her grave, and, oh,
The difference to me!

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The poem tells us of a girl who lived in a remote country area: the Dove is a river in the Peak District of Derbyshire, a hilly region which in Wordsworth's time had little contact with the outside world. In the second stanza, the poet suggests the beauty and delicacy of the girl by calling her a *violet*, a flower which is sweetly scented and richly coloured, but unobtrusive: there is nothing gaudy or assertive about a violet. The girl, we understand, was sweet and quiet. Living in a remote area, she was half-hidden from people's knowledge, as the violet is by a mossy stone. The moss suggests the dampness of the hedge-bottom and woodland which are typical habitats of the violet, but it also emphasises the natural setting in which the girl lived: she was in a remote region, but was surrounded by natural growth. Her remoteness, loneliness, and beauty are then suggested by a different comparison: she was like a star shining in the sky without competitors. The only time when just one star is visible in this way is when darkness is beginning to fall (or alternatively in the early morning, before it is quite light); the comparison therefore evokes a twilight atmosphere, foreshadowing the rest of the poem. In the final stanza, the poet reveals that the girl is dead, and suggests the grief that this has caused him. The expression *ceased to be* (10) is impersonal and prosaic: the death was merely a statistic in the records, and hardly anybody knew about it. But precisely at this point the poet reveals his personal knowledge of the girl, by using her name for the first time ('*Lucy* ceased to be'); and he immediately goes on to imagine her death in a way which is more concrete and more moving ('she is in her grave'). The poet makes no attempt to describe his feelings about the death: it is sufficient for him to reveal his emotional commitment to Lucy in the final line of the poem, and leave the description of her in the rest of the poem to make its own effect.

Poetry and verse

One obvious feature of that poem is that it is in *verse*. Unlike prose, it is divided into *lines* of a predetermined length, and these divisions are independent of those demanded by grammar or meaning, as can be seen in lines 7 and 8, where

the line-division comes between a grammatical subject (*one*) and its verb (*is shining*). Moreover, the lines have a regular kind of rhythm: in general, unstressed and stressed syllables alternate. A clear example is line 2, where the stressed syllables are *-side*, *springs*, and *Dove*. There are indeed departures from this stressed-unstressed pattern, as in line 7 (in which *Fair* is obviously stressed and *as* unstressed); but the pattern is so strong in the poem that we feel such departures from it simply as variations on a theme.

Moreover, the poem is divided into stanzas of four lines each. In every stanza, the first and third lines have four main stresses, while the second and fourth have only three. In addition, every line ends with a rhyme: in each stanza, the first line rhymes with the third, and the second with the fourth.

All these features — division into lines, regular rhythm, stanzaic structure, rhyme — are common in English poetry. They are not all essential, however: much English verse is unrhymed and unstanzaic (for example, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Wordsworth's *Prelude*). Indeed, the only essential distinguishing feature between English verse and English prose is probably the fact that verse is divided into lines, a division which is independent of the normal phrase-, clause-, sentence- and paragraph-divisions which are also found in prose. It is true that verse, in addition, normally has a more regular rhythm than prose; the degree of regularity, however, can vary greatly in different poems; moreover, some prose is highly rhythmical; so that it is difficult to lay down regular rhythm as an absolute criterion for distinguishing verse from prose. But division into lines does seem to provide such a criterion.

Being composed in verse is an essential characteristic of English poetry: if a work is written in prose, we do not call it a poem. It is true that people sometimes refer to a particular work as a 'prose-poem'; the expression might be used, for example, of Virginia Woolf's novel *The Waves* (1931), or John Ruskin's description, in *The Stones of Venice* (1851), of St Mark's Square. Here, however, we should understand the word *poem* to be used metaphorically: what is meant is that the prose-work in question has many of the characteris-

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tics commonly found in poetry (such as density of verbal texture, richness of metaphor, marked rhythms, imaginative-ness). Such 'prose-poems', however, are to be categorised as prose-works of a particular kind, not as poetry: all English poetry is in verse.

Imaginative literature

But is the converse true? Is all English writing in verse to be classified as poetry? It is not reasonable to say so. We usually restrict the term *poetry* to the kind of discourse which we call *literature*, or more fully *imaginative literature*. Poetry is literature written in verse.

We all know in a general way what kinds of things we mean by literature — plays, novels, short stories, and things of that sort. And we can distinguish literature from other kinds of discourse, such as are found (for example) in a scientific text-book, a philosophical treatise, a manual of technical instructions, a history-book, a theatre-programme, a work of religious or political propaganda, or a tourist-guide. On the other hand, it is not easy to define literature, for it can do many different things. It can celebrate, console, praise, satirise, entertain. It can arouse strong emotions in us, and liberate us from them. Above all, perhaps, we go to literature for illumination: it does not set out to convey information (as a chemistry text-book does), or to teach us skills (as many handbooks do), or to promote the aims of a political or religious organisation (as propaganda does), or to persuade us to buy something (as advertising does); what it does for us above all is to illuminate human life, and to educate our feelings about it. It has to be conceded, on the other hand, that not all literature succeeds in doing this; and moreover it could be argued that other kinds of discourse can also illuminate (for example works of philosophy and of science). Let us therefore add another criterion, and say that literature is in some sense *fiction*, and invites the reader to use his imagination.

Literature is fictional in that it does not claim that its statements are factual or literally true. This is obvious enough with the novel and with drama, in which the author offers us

imaginary characters and events; this is the case even when he handles true events, such as historical material, since what he gives us is an imaginative reconstruction of the events, not a historical documentation of them. But poetry too is fiction: when a poet offers us events, moods, attitudes, emotions, or whatever, he does not invite us to believe that they are a transcription of something that has happened; rather, he invites us to experience them. This applies even if the poet is talking about himself and his experiences, as Wordsworth appears to be doing in the Lucy poem. Perhaps there really was a girl called Lucy in Dovedale who was loved by the poet and who died; or perhaps the whole thing is just an imaginative invention of the poet. Whichever is the case, the poem remains exactly the same to the reader: whether or not Lucy really existed is quite irrelevant. When a poet says *I*, we have to take this to refer to a fictional narrator, not to the historical person who wrote the poem.

Poetry, then, is imaginative literature written in verse. It is possible for other kinds of discourse to be written in verse, but we do not then call them poetry. It would be possible to put a chemistry text-book, or even a railway timetable, into verse, but the result would not be poetry (unless the versifier did a great deal more than just put the information into metrical form). Similarly, because their aims and functions are different from those of literature, we do not recognise as poetry the advertising jingles used on television, or even mnemonic rhymes, like the one which begins:

Thirty days hath September,
April, June, and November.

On the other hand, pop-song lyrics and many nursery-rhymes clearly fall within our definition of poetry. Inevitably, there are borderline cases. A mnemonic rhyme or a skipping-rhyme may have an imaginative power in its use of language that makes us respond to it as poetry. A work that sets out to be religious or political propaganda may transcend its aims and become literature. And the borderline between fact and fiction can be a very uncertain one, as may be seen in much autobiography, and in the memoirs of politicians.

Bad poetry is poetry

Our definition of poetry has nothing to do with value-judgements. We regard poetry as being a particular kind of discourse (literature) written in verse; we may, therefore, recognise as poetry works which we disapprove of, or which we find dull or trivial. The case is exactly parallel with that of the drama or the novel. We give the name 'novels' to works which meet certain criteria (for example, that they are fictional prose narratives of a certain minimum length, handling characters and events recognisably resembling those of the real world); whether particular novels are good, bad, or indifferent is quite a separate question.

It is necessary to say this, because some people dismiss poems which they find unimportant by saying that they are 'not poetry'. This is an unfortunate usage, because it confuses the criteria for a genre with value-judgements on members of the genre. If you find particular poems (those, say, of Patience Strong or of Stephen Duck) quite intolerable, then you should say that they are bad poems (and explain why you think so), not that they are 'not poetry'. In any case, opinions about the value of particular poems vary from reader to reader, and from age to age.

Metre

English poetry is divided into lines, and these lines have some kind of rhythmic pattern. In Wordsworth's *Lucy* poem the lines have four main stresses and three main stresses alternately, and within each line there is an alternation of unstressed and stressed syllables; some lines depart from the regular unstressed—stressed sequence, but it is sufficiently common in the poem to be felt as an underlying rhythmic pattern throughout. Such an underlying rhythmic pattern is called *metre*; and metrical patterns of some kind appear to be basic to all poetry.

Some of the effects of metre are not fully understood. Perhaps the repeated rhythmic beat sharpens the hearer's perceptions, making him more receptive; it may even 'suspend resistance to what is being said in the poem. Other effects of

metre are clearer: it can throw emphasis on particular words; it can set up expectations, and then produce effects by either satisfying or defeating them; it can contribute to the sense of emotional control in a poem, our feeling that the poet is ordering experience, not being carried away by it.

Metrical systems

The metrical systems that are possible depend on the characteristics of the language in question. In Modern English (the English language since about 1500) it is not possible to use a metrical system like that of the Latin poets of the first century BC. In classical Latin poetry, the metres consisted of patterns of long and short syllables; these length-patterns did not coincide with the arrangement of the stresses in the line, for it was possible for the main stress in a word to be carried by either a long or a short syllable; and part of the poet's art was the counterpointing of the length-pattern against the stress-pattern. There have been many attempts to imitate classical Latin metres in English poetry (notably in the sixteenth century), but, for reasons which will become clear later, the system just will not work in English.

Within the limitations of a given language, however, more than one type of metrical system is possible, and the system dominant at a given time may be an accident of cultural history. In the course of English history there has been more than one type of metrical system. In Old English (the English language before about 1100), the poets used an alliterative system. Each line was divided into two half-lines, and in each half-line two of the syllables constituted 'lifts'; there were rules, concerned with syllable-length and stress, as to what syllables could be lifts. Some of the lifts alliterated with one another, that is, they began with the same speech-sound: the first lift of the second half-line always alliterated with one of the lifts in the first half-line, and sometimes with both. A limited number of stress-patterns were permissible in a half-line; but, provided one of these patterns was used, there was no restriction on the total number of syllables: in the Old English epic poem *Beowulf* a half-line can have as few as four syllables and as many as eight.