



To Read Poetry

Donald Hall

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To Ralph and Mary Lou

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To the Student

Reasons for reading poems

This book introduces poetry—maybe the oldest, certainly the most intense of literature's genres.

When we learn to read poems, we acquire a pleasure and a resource we never lose. Although literary study is impractical in one sense—few people make their living reading poems—in another sense it is almost as practical as breathing. Literature records and embodies centuries of human thought and feeling, preserving for us the minds of people who lived before us, who were like us and unlike us, against whom we can measure our common humanity and our historical difference. And when we read our contemporaries they illuminate a world we share. Whatever we claim for literature in general we must especially claim for poetry, which concentrates the virtues we attribute to drama and fiction. If we learn to read poems first, we will begin the study of literature as literature itself began—with the most concentrated and intense of its utterances.

When we read great poetry, something changes in us that stays changed. Poetry remembered becomes material to think with, and no one who has absorbed Shakespeare or Keats is quite the same again. Reading poetry adds tools by which we observe, measure, and judge the people and the properties of our universe—inside and outside.

In the fable of the ant and the grasshopper, the wise ant builds his storehouse against winter and prospers; the foolish grasshopper saves nothing and perishes. Anyone who dismisses the study of poetry on the ground that it will not be useful—to a chemist or an engineer, to a foreman or an x-ray technician—imitates the grasshopper. When we shut from our lives everything except food and shelter, part of us starves to death. Food for this hunger is music, painting,

film, plays, stories, novels—and poems. Reading poems in our language alone (there is more great poetry in the English language than in the literature of any other language) we take into ourselves the greatness of Chaucer and Shakespeare, of romantics like Blake, Keats, and Wordsworth, of the grandfathers and fathers of modern poetry—down to the contemporary poets who visit our colleges to read their poems. If there is a poetry reading at your school while you are studying poetry, do not miss it.

There is pleasure and understanding to take from the poetry of our language, but first anyone must learn how to read it. No one expects to walk up to a computer and be able to program it without first learning something about computers. We have needed to learn skills in order to ride a bicycle, drive a car, play a guitar, shoot baskets, or typewrite. For some reason—perhaps because we are familiar with words from childhood and take them for granted—we tend to think that a quick glance at a poem should reward us, and that if we do not find instant satisfaction the work is beyond us, or not worth it, or irrelevant, or boring.

There are other problems for the beginning student of poetry. The ideas we derive from literature can seem confusing. Equally great poems may contradict each other in the generalizations we derive from them. One poem may recommend solitude, another society. One may advise us to seize the moment, another to live a life of contemplation. For that matter, two good readers may disagree about the implication of any work and each argue convincingly, with detailed references to the poem, in support of different interpretations. A complex work of literature like a poem cannot be reduced to a simple, correct meaning. In an elementary arithmetic text the answers may be printed in the back of the book. There are no answers to be printed in the back of this book.

Such nebulousness or ambiguity disturbs some students. After an hour's class discussion of a poem, with varying interpretations offered, they want the teacher to supply the answer to "But what *does* it mean?" We must admit that literature is inexact, and that the truth of poetry is not easily verifiable. Probably the poem means several things *at once* and not one thing at all. This is not to say, of course, that it means anything that anybody finds in it. Although differing, equally defensible opinions are common, error is even more common.

When modern people speak of truth, they usually mean something scientific or tautological. Arithmetic contains the truth of tautology; two and two make four because our definitions of *two* and *four* say so. In laboratories we encounter the truth of statistics and the truth of observation. If we smoke cigarettes heavily, we have one chance in four to develop lung cancer. When we heat copper wire over a Bunsen burner, the flame turns blue.

But there is an older sense of truth in which statements apparently opposite can both be valid. In this older tradition, truth is dependent on the agreement of sensible men and women—like the "Guilty" or "Not guilty" verdict of a jury. A poem may be true when its characters behave according to probability within a context highly hypothetical. Because this literary (or philosophical, or legal, or historical) truth is inexact, changeable, and subject to argument, poetry can seem nebulous to minds accustomed to arithmetical certainty.

Let me argue this: If poetry is nebulous or inexact; if it is impossible to determine with scientific precision the value or the meaning of a work of art, this inexactness is the price literature pays for representing whole human beings and for embodying whole human feelings. Human beings themselves, in their feelings and in the wanderings of their short lives, are ambiguous and ambivalent, shifting mixtures of permanence and change, direction and disorder. Because literature is true to life, true to the complexities of human feeling, different people will read the same work with different responses. And literary art will sometimes affirm that opposite things are both true *because they are*. Such a condition is not tidy; it is perhaps regrettable—but it is human nature.

The definition of poetry

Before we attempt to define poetry we must admit that it is impossible. Some words are more definable than others. If we do not know what a grommet or an ampersand is, a dictionary will tell us. If we do not know what love is, a definition will not help. *Poetry* is almost as difficult to define as *love*. With words like these, a definition is useful as a starting point for discussion—but only when we have experienced what we discuss. Once we have experienced poetry firsthand, we can think about it by trying to define it. Here is a useful exercise while you study poetry: at the end of each week, write a one-sentence definition of poetry as you understand it now; keep your changing definitions as testimony to the range of poetry.

Many definitions of poetry center on the delight of reading it. "Poetry," says a contemporary poet, "is a pleasure, like making love." John Milton (1608–1674) compared poetry to philosophical discourse and found it "more simple, sensuous and passionate." Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834) said that poetry's "proper and immediate object" was "the communication of immediate pleasure." Defining poetry, instead, by naming its components, Coleridge also called the art "the best words in the best order." Matthew Arnold (1822–1888) made *best* more particular: "Poetry is simply the most beautiful, impressive and wisely effective mode of saying things. . . ." When he combined *beautiful* with *wisely effective*, Arnold sounded like Robert Frost (1874–1963), who claimed that poetry "begins in delight and ends in wisdom"—or for that matter the Roman poet Horace (65–8 B.C.), who declared that poetry instructs while it pleases.

William Wordsworth (1770–1850) defined poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" and said that it "takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility." This definition derives from an idea of the poet's creative process. Probably most definitions, like the first quoted, describe the effect on the reader. John Keats (1795–1821): "Poetry should surprise by a fine excess, and not by singularity. It should strike the reader as a wording of his own highest thoughts, and appear almost as a remembrance." Or A. E. Housman (1859–1936): "Experience has taught me, when I am shaving of a morning, to keep watch over my thoughts, because, if a line of poetry strays into my

memory, my skin bristles so that the razor ceases to act. . . ." If after this barrage of definitions any student feels confused, let me add one more confusion: Carl Sandburg (1878–1967) said "Poetry is a synthesis of hyacinths and biscuits."

Confusing, yes—but every one of these definitions makes its own sense when you have a broad experience of poems. Sandburg has fun with his definition—making a tongue-twister, among other things—but he is serious also: Poetry combines and reconciles within the same object things seemingly irreconcilable, like the flower with the Greek name and the simple product of the American kitchen. Metaphor brings together things that do not seem as if they could be brought together, as when Robert Frost says, "The petal of the rose / It was that stung. . . ," bringing together the soft rose petal and the bee's stinger. Metaphor is essential to poetry and a clue to its nature, for poetry juxtaposes things that really belong together but seem not to—like love and hate, like passion and indifference. Once again I must say: Poetry does this amalgamating because poetry is true to life, and in our lives we continually experience the simultaneous presence of opposing forces. We are not always aware of our ambivalence; poetry helps us understand the reality of our lives.

On the other hand: Poetry is words, and it is words arranged usually in lines, so that the right-hand side of the page is jagged. This definition is not so silly as it sounds: poems are not statements (the worst thing you can do to a poem is to reduce it to a rephrasing of its ideas) but objects, like paintings or sculptures, that include statements as *part* of their materials. The sound of a poem, controlled in large part by its lines, gives it an object's shapeliness and contributes to pleasure and wisdom both. The sound of a poem captures us—or perhaps we must surrender to it—and allows us access to its interior, which is perhaps why, in T. S. Eliot's words, "Genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood."

It can. But then, with close attention, it can be understood *as well*—and become an even greater pleasure.

The words themselves

Poetry is words. Mostly so far I have talked as if poetry were the feelings and thoughts we derive from reading poems, but feelings and thoughts are not poetry's medium. Whatever poetry accomplishes in us it accomplishes by words. As paint and canvas form the medium of painting; as sequences and combinations of sound different in pitch, duration, and quality form the medium of music, so the right words in the right order make poetry.

A Japanese named Basho wrote this haiku about three hundred years ago:

The morning glory—
another thing
that will never be my friend.

Basho reminds us that the natural world is separate from us, that we may not shoulder our way into it, like invading troops of the imagination, and assume

that we are intimate with everything. The American poet Robert Bly translated these lines. Here are three other versions:

- A. The morning glory
is a separate being
and I can never know it intimately.
- B. The morning glory
is yet another object
with which I will never become closely acquainted.
- C. The morning glory—
something else
that won't call me companion.

To understand and appreciate how these four versions differ from one another is to become sensitive to the words that make literature. In a general way, they all mean the same thing. After the identical first lines, the translations differ in diction, which is the kinds of words chosen, and in rhythm, which is the pace and tempo of the words. Versions A and B are dry, stiff, and unnatural. *Separate being* sounds pretentious compared to *another thing*. *Yet another object* is finicky with its *yet another*, and *object* is more scientific-sounding than the casual *thing*. “With which I will never become closely acquainted” is formal and distant, rhythmically slow. “And I can never know it intimately” lacks interest or surprise in its words. The simplicity of “that will never be my friend,” coming to rest on the surprise of the last word, makes Bly’s translation blossom in its final word. In version C, on the other hand, we have a translation nearly as pleasing as the original one. *Something else* has its own casual simplicity, and the little action of *call me companion*—where the morning glory is imagined capable of speech—has some of the surprise that the original translation found in *friend*.

The difference is the words and their order.

What’s good, what’s bad

The claims I make for poetry are large: that it alters and enlarges our minds, our connections with each other past and present, our understanding of our own feelings. These claims apply to excellent poems only. Some poems are better than others—and some verse is not poetry at all. Even if judgments are always subject to reversal, even if there is no way we can be certain of being correct, evaluation lives at the center of literary study. Of course it is never easy, even after a lifetime of literary study, to explain why one poem is better than another in words that will convince anyone who disagrees. Still, the struggle is worth it. The struggle to name reasons for value—to evaluate works of art—is lifelong, and although we may never arrive at satisfactory explanations, the struggle makes the mind more sensitive, more receptive to the next work of literature it encounters.

And as the mind becomes more sensitive and receptive to poetry, it may become more sensitive and receptive to all sorts of things.

The organization of this book

In reading a poem, we respond to poetry's elements: images and metaphors, for instance, tones of voice and allusions. For the sake of the ultimate pleasure of reading poems, most of the next chapters explore these elements, types, and forms of poetry. Then we collect many poems by four poets—John Keats, Emily Dickinson, Robert Frost, and Theodore Roethke—so that we can read a few poets in depth; and then we gather a few poems by many poets for further reading in the poetry of our language.

But before we take a separate look at poetry's elements, in the first chapter we will discuss two poems as a whole. Because eventually we wish to arrive at a sense of the poem as a whole, it makes sense to begin with models of such reading.

We will also take the time, right at the start, to learn from a little bad poetry.

. . . and to the Instructor

In making selections and in writing the text for this collection, I have tried to serve one purpose: to help students read poetry with intelligence, gusto, and discrimination.

This book begins the study of poetry by examining whole poems, emphasizing that the goal of reading is not the analysis of parts but the understanding of wholes. For a fuller definition of poetry's elements, later chapters concentrate on parts.

Selections are frequently modern or contemporary; students best begin literary study without the distraction of an unfamiliar vocabulary, and without the handicap of historical ignorance. Of course it would be silly to let this principle cheat us of Shakespeare, of Wordsworth. . . . I feel that it is best to begin with contemporary examples, when the students are shyest, then gradually introduce them to examples from poetry's past.

I intend the text to be readable and entertaining while it remains serious. Because everyone is curious about the lives of authors (whether we ought to be or not) I have included biographical notes on all poets. My emphasis is obviously neither biographical nor historical but esthetic: I mean to examine the way poetry works.

Footnotes and glosses translate foreign-language material, provide essential identifications, and define words not available in many dictionaries or words used in an archaic sense. The Appendix, Writing about Poems, should provide guidance for students preparing papers.

I've taken advice from several hundred American teachers of literature. When this book was only a notion, several years back, many people answered a questionnaire about what it should include. I am grateful; I have followed many suggestions.

Other professors read portions of the manuscript and commented in detail. I should like especially to thank Christopher P. Baker, Walter L. Barker, Sylvan Barnet, Ronald Baughman, R. S. Beal, Gary Blake, John Boni, Larry Champion, Barbara J. Cicardo, Paul Davis, R. H. Deutsch, Richard Dietrich, Donald Drury, John L. Fell, Art Goldsher, Randolph Goodman, William J. Gracie, Jr., Barnett Guttentberg, Nancy J. Hazelton, Michael Hogan, Woodrow L. Holbein, John Huxhold, Henry E. Jacobs, Robert C. Johnson, John J. Keenan, Mike Keene, X. J. Kennedy, Hannah Laipson, Bette B. Lansdown, Robert Leggett, James MacKillop, James Moody, William W. Nolte II, Byron Petrakis, Anne Pidgeon, Doris Powers, William C. Pratt, Victoria Price, Jules Ryckebusch, Dennis Rygiel, H. Miller Solomon, Joe Sperry, William Stull, Cathy Turner, Ralph Voss, Martha Weathers, and James D. Welch.

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