

THE ANATOMY OF

POETRY

MARJORIE BOULTON

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by

MARJORIE BOULTON

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WITH A FOREWORD BY

L. A. G. STRONG



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To
HENRY TREECE
the best teacher I ever had
and a most loyal
and understanding friend

FOREWORD

A BOOK about poetry which can be used in the classroom needs first of all to be honest and sensible. This book is very honest and sensible. It is also practical, and written by someone who has never allowed classroom work to dull her original response to poetry.

I am by nature and from experience suspicious of classroom attempts to explain works of art, since they are so often the work of prosaic minds incapable of appreciating anything but rules. Such teachers can comment upon structure and metre, but are insensitive to rhythm, read badly, and never get beyond a strictly rational account of what they think the poem is about. They are of the kind that asks children to paraphrase a poem, and award marks for the result.

This little book is an excellent corrective to any such malpractice. The author shows that it is possible to approach a poem in a business-like manner without spoiling its magic or losing enjoyment of its music. She shows, in fact, that no other approach *is* business-like, since no other will get near the reality of the poem. I do not agree with everything she says, but I commend her book most warmly as a sincere and useful introduction to a great subject; clear-headed, realistic, and easy to understand.

L. A. G. STRONG

AUTHOR'S INTRODUCTION

I HAVE tried to prevent this from becoming an ill-tempered book, but it was written as the result of prolonged irritation. As a student of literature and later as a teacher in school, emergency training college and three-year training college, as a private coach and lecturing for the W.E.A., I have steadily accumulated exasperation at being unable to find and recommend to my pupils a book on the technique and content of poetry which should be what I wanted them to read. The book I required must be fairly small; it must be more than a string of technical terms yet explain all the usual technical terms; it must have plenty of examples to avoid misunderstanding; it must draw its examples from a wide range of English poetry; it must be up to date, explaining such things as pararhyme and free verse; and, since most of my pupils are trying to take examinations, it must be helpful to the examination candidate without killing poetry by an excess of formalism and pedantry. Never having found such a book, and finding that the appendix on poetry at the back of the grammar book is often too dry to be swallowed, the mass of excellent advanced criticism available to-day rather too rich to be digested by the inexperienced, I have tried to write the book myself and to give an outline of the subject which shall begin at the beginning, but be sufficiently comprehensive on its elementary level. I hope it may be useful to students and teachers.

I should have liked to use more contemporary poetry, but have been deterred by the obstacles of copyright; however, I

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have tried to encourage the student to read contemporary work. I have made no attempt at giving a potted history of literature such as is readily available elsewhere. This is frankly a technical book, but I have tried to bear in mind that the only sound reason for examining poetry technically is that this adds to our enjoyment.

I have to acknowledge the kindness of Faber & Faber Ltd. for permission to quote from W. H. Auden's 'As he is' (in *Collected Shorter Poems*, 1950), and from Louis MacNeice's 'Aubade' (in *Poems*, 1935); of Mr. George Fraser for permission to quote from one of his sonnets; of Routledge & Kegan Paul for permission to use a quotation from Sidney Keyes' 'The Wilderness' (in *The Cruel Solstice*, 1944); of Chatto & Windus for permission to quote three extracts from poems by Wilfred Owen from *The Poems of Wilfred Owen*, 1931; and of Mr. Robert Penn Warren for permission to quote from his poem *Original Sin*.

The help I have received in writing this book has really extended over at least the last fifteen years, for all kinds of educational experiences and chance remarks have contributed to it. However, I should like to mention particularly my friends and sometime colleagues, Miss Helen Smith, Miss Freda Sachse, Miss Grace Keenleyside, and Miss Mary Fowler, with all of whom I have had many stimulating discussions on poetry as well as many less bookish pleasures; my pupils of all ages from eleven to forty-five who have asked me difficult questions and sometimes helped me to knowledge by their alert suggestions, sometimes forced me to clarity by their misunderstandings; my mother, Mrs. E. M. Boulton, whose fresh and sincere approach to the arts is an inspiration to me; Mr. J. F. Danby, who has given me much mental stimulation and personal encouragement; Allan Jacobs, who read the first

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draft of this textbook and improved it by a number of penetrating criticisms and thoughtful suggestions. A debt I can never hope to pay is acknowledged in my dedication.

I do not expect that everyone who reads this book will be satisfied; I shall never myself be satisfied with anything I write; but I hope that everyone who reads this book will learn something or be provoked to think.

Stoke-on-Trent

January 1953

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I. THE IMPORTANCE OF FORM

Form: 1. Relative grouping of the parts of a thing.

WYLD: *Universal Dictionary of the English Language*

THE things that are most interesting and most worth having are impossible to define. If we use our common sense, and are careful to say enough, so as to exclude all other objects, we can easily explain what a shovel is, or a telephone, or a bracelet, or even something a little more symbolic such as a sceptre or a pound note. The fact that a man or woman deeply in love can 'find no words' is well known, though the attempt to find words has produced some of our greatest poetry; the fact that the mystic cannot describe intuitive experience accounts in part for the constant arguments on the subject of religion; and hundreds of serious thinkers have been defeated in the attempt to define beauty. Thus, in any analysis which aims at 'explaining' the beauty of poetry, we are to some extent trying to explain the inexplicable.

It does seem, however, that most people agree that one ingredient of beauty is form. Form implies some kind of definiteness or coherence, shape of some kind. A three-tier wedding cake has form, though not usually much beauty; a jelly which has been successfully turned out of a mould has form, though it would be more difficult to describe the exact shape of a moulded jelly than the wedding cake with its three cylinders

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of different sizes. A cake which has crumbled or been cut into small pieces, a jelly which has failed to set and fallen into an amorphous mass on the dish, lacks form, and although this may be just as digestible and delicious as the geometrical cake or moulded jelly, it is much less attractive to the eye. We appreciate form in such matters as the arrangement of a room or a person's clothes, and dislike an untidy desk or a slovenly person; if we are at all conscious of the artistic possibilities of words, we do not like to hear a speech in which there is no logical sequence or to read a badly written article. Before I began to write this book, I made a plan so that it should at least have form and sequence.

There seems to be one interesting exception to this liking for form; I cannot explain it and shall content myself with stating it. It is that experience in which energy or magnitude alone gives us the feeling that 'this is beautiful'. I love thunderstorms and bathing in a rough sea; almost everyone is fascinated by a moving stream or river, or the sea, although water is one of the most formless things in the world; fire, snow and high winds give the same kind of excitement. While we wish to be generally in a state of balance and dignified tranquillity, those of us who are vigorously alive know that there are certain states of overwhelming passion, indescribable tenderness or sudden elation that provide the most perfect and memorable experiences of our lives. There seem to be two kinds of beauty to which we respond; the beauty of form and the beauty of splendid formlessness. Perhaps the second kind is either much more primitive, or much more advanced, than the first kind. However, the pleasure we find in poetry is usually dependent more or less on formal beauty; Whitman and some of Blake are the only obvious exceptions to this. We can assume that those experiences of beauty which can be

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analysed in an 'Anatomy of Poetry' are experiences of the beauty of form; the purpose of this book is to analyse the things that can be analysed, and a residue that is wonderful and cannot be explained will always be left.

Here I must give a warning. The analysis should not be studied too soon. Many people, trying to pass examinations or to please a teacher, have to approach poetry from the wrong end. This generally creates a distaste instead of increasing pleasure, and I should hate to think that this book would be used to give anyone a distaste for poetry.

If you do not care for poetry at all, please do not read any further. You cannot find anything to enable you to like poetry in any book except a book of . . . poems. If you feel you may be missing something by not liking poetry, go and buy or borrow some of the anthologies listed at the end of this book. Dip into them till you feel like reading something steadily; if you find a poem you like, try to read more poems by the poet whose name is at the bottom and so try gradually to expand your own capacity for poetry. Perhaps later you will be seized by a curiosity as to how these exciting effects are achieved; that will be the time to read this book and other books on the subject. Of course, if you are taking an examination in English Literature in six months, you had better not leave your textbooks alone till you can approach them in the right spirit; but so long as you know you are, from pressure of circumstances, approaching them in the wrong spirit, you will do yourself no harm.

Or perhaps you like to read poetry for yourself, but cannot bear to read it aloud or hear it read or recited. You may have heard it mangled and desecrated by little girls with coy squeaks, resentful little boys with raucous shouts or the wrong kind of teacher with soulful mooings. No wonder you feel

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that poetry brings out the worst in people! Try to listen to some of the readings on the wireless, or some really good records of spoken poetry by such speakers as Anthony Quayle, Mary O'Farrell, Cecil Day Lewis, Carleton Hobbs, T. S. Eliot, Edith Evans and John Gielgud; you will probably have one of the surprises of your life!¹

Ideally, literary criticism ought to arise out of pleasure. What should happen is that we find something delightful and for a time are satisfied with the delight; later, because the healthy mind seldom remains unmoving, we begin to wonder what is the cause of our delight. We may find, rather disconcertingly, that the cause has nothing to do with beauty. You may admire Donne's *Holy Sonnets* because you find them theologically sound, 'edifying'; if so, you may still be unable to see why they are better poetry than *Dare to be a Daniel*. You may like Harold Monro's *Milk for the Cat* because you enjoy the words in their aptness or because you like cats; in the latter situation, a live cat would give you more pleasure. If, however, you read and re-read a poem with pleasure and come to notice that it has an agreeable rhythm, that the sequence of thoughts leads to a climax, that the rhymes are arranged in a pattern which provides reassuring repetitions and stimulating shocks, that the words are more appropriate than any you could put in their place . . . then you are practising the criticism of poetry.

In the early stages of discovering poetry for ourselves, we often find that to pull it to pieces in any way, even to repeat it

¹ A useful list of recorded poetry is issued by the Speech Fellowship, 1 Park Crescent, Portland Place, London W.1, for the price of 1s. 1d, post free. Anyone who is sick of the low standards prevalent in the speaking of poetry and speech in general might be cheered by joining this organization.

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to another person, spoils it. Our first worthwhile experience of poetry is very personal, and we feel we want to keep it to ourselves much as we are inclined to be secretive about the beginnings of love in ourselves or about our experience of religion. We may feel that it is almost a profanation to investigate a poem too closely, just as it would be a liberty to be familiar with some person greatly respected. Yet once we have learned to pull poems to pieces intelligently, we find that our pleasure is made deeper by our understanding and the poem is not spoilt. A good poem is more interesting at the twentieth reading than at the first; we can always find something new in it; and, no matter how much we pull it to pieces, as soon as we stand back and look at it the pieces leap together once more.

Readers are often discouraged by the fact that a piece of criticism seems to contain a great many difficult words. Some of them are words which are a stumbling-block to poor spellers; *onomatopoeia* and *alliteration* are among these. There is a reason for the use of these long words. It would be possible to dissect a rabbit and explain our dissection to someone else without using a single recognized anatomical expression; we could make up comprehensible names for ourselves, such as *breath-bags*, *food-bag*, *blood-tubes* and *think-stuff*; yet these terms, being unfamiliar, sound uncouth and childish, and we would actually prefer to use the words that are accepted already. Similarly, a set of defined terms to describe the technique of poetry saves time and misunderstanding. Sometimes it saves too much time, as when a student uses a critical term without knowing the exact meaning, in the hope that it may give the right impression. These terms should be methods of communication and not methods of impressing people with our knowledge. It is as well to learn the critical terms, and a

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good many will be explained in the course of this book; but what are you to do if you see something in a poem on which you would like to comment, but for which you do not know a special name? Why, simply comment on it in your own words! The proper term would merely make things a little shorter; if you are intelligent enough to be enjoying poetry, you know enough about words to be able to put together some expression for yourself.

We always find something in a poem that we cannot analyse because it exists only in the poem as a whole. If we are trying to understand why a poem delights us, we separate the different parts; the reason for this is the crudely practical one that, though we can perceive several things at once, we cannot describe the several things that we perceive at once, all at the same time; we cannot think two complete sentences simultaneously. When we have separated the various things that go to make a poem what it is, we shall find that one thing is missing; part of the beauty of a poem, part of its form, is the way in which all the component parts are appropriate to each other and fit together. Obviously we cannot analyse this, any more than, when we dissect a rabbit, we can produce its life as a component part. A poem, unlike a rabbit, can be brought to life again after being dissected, but the vital unity can never be adequately defined.

We can usefully distinguish and discuss a number of aspects of form in poetry. The form of poetry is often more obvious than the form of prose, partly because poetry, though the most beautiful form of literature, is also historically the most primitive. The earliest poetry was, so far as we know, social in purpose: the incantation, the rite, the carol, the record of the tribe, the ballad; they were associated with ritual, dance or feasting. Nowadays poetry tends to be a personal, intimate,

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even introspective activity, though the growing popularity of the art of Choral Speaking suggests that there is still room in a self-conscious and sceptical society for a social and ritual function of poetry. Poetry, because of its primitive element, has perhaps more physical form than any other kind of literature. By *physical* I do not of course mean *material*; the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* is a more impressive mass of paper and binding than the *Sonnets* of Shakespeare; I mean that much of the form of poetry can be perceived physically, by the ear and eye, without any intellectual process occurring. Very small children enjoy things that have a marked rhythm, and most of us have had the experience of being captivated by the sound of a poem without fully understanding the words.

In criticism, as often in life, everything is connected with everything else, but to simplify this book I am going to separate the Physical Form and the Mental Form of poetry. The Physical Form is the appearance on paper, and, much more important, the sound of poetry. It may be either the sound when poetry is read to us, or the sound we hear mentally when we read it to ourselves. It includes: rhythm, rhyme, intonation and various kinds of echo and repetition. Mental Form might be described as Content in the usual sense of the word when applied to literature; it includes: grammatical structure; logical sequence; the pattern of associations; the use of a dominant image; the pattern of image and emotion. All these things combine to give a good poem its power over our imagination.

II. THE PHYSICAL FORM OF POETRY

Untwisting all the chains that ty
The hidden soul of harmony.

MILTON: *L'Allegro*

It is never possible to distinguish physical form completely from mental form, for the two are inter-related. We do not, indeed, know the exact relationship of our physical to our mental being, the extent to which our bodily condition causes our temperament or the exact process by which the mass of stuff known as a brain makes the intangible things called thoughts. Indeed, the mystery of the relationship of physical and mental is one of the mysteries that provides material for much art and speculation. Whenever I am trying to explain something quite clearly, I am hindered by an embarrassing awareness that everything is mixed up with everything else. I cannot hope to unmix them completely; I can only try, by means of a few deliberate over-simplifications, to make the study of poetry more comprehensible to the inexperienced reader. When I write about physical and mental form, I am not forgetting that as soon as we begin to define the physical form of a poem, we have not merely had a physical experience of it, but have thought about it; when I speak of the mental form of a poem, I do not dispute that we hear or read something by means of our ears or eyes, and that this is a