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In Pursuit of Poetry

ROBERT HILLYER

*IN
PURSUIT
OF
POETRY*

Robert Hillyer

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IN PURSUIT OF POETRY

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In Pursuit of Poetry

詩的追求

— 罗伯特 勃莱

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First Principles of Verse
In Pursuit of Poetry

TO MY WIFE

without whose patient collaboration this book would
not have come into existence

Foreword

Poetry attempts to seize thoughts and emotions from the flow of time and shape them into something more lasting and beautiful than they were in the ordinary course of human experience. Observation and memory play equal parts in the selection of the thought and emotion, while the imagination, working at fiery intensity, selects one element to be expressed and burns away all irrelevant material that clings to it. At the same time, the poet is starting to frame the theme in words, heightening and condensing them, and setting them to a recurrent rhythm, a repetition of emphasis, such as we find at the basis of all natural things, the rotation of the planets, the ebb and flow of the sea, the turning of the seasons, the beat of our own hearts. The Universe has a vast rhythm of its own, to which the poet's ear is like a shell echoing the waves of the sea.

The feeling that man has lost his bright destiny in the confusion of the material world is the inspiring disappointment that spurs on creative temperaments to recapture at least the semblance of perfection. Epic or lyric, love sonnet or folk song, ballad or satire, all poetry seeks to establish the importance of each moment in the experience and growth of mankind. When we speak of the literature of an age or a country we instinctively mean its poetry; comparatively little prose survives beyond its generation. Poetry is the essence; prose the accident.

The ideal reader of poetry would be familiar with the poetry of the past as well as the present, and he would know something about the technique of the art. He cannot hope to develop taste from a few selections or from many works from a single period, especially his own. He should also know something of the technique of verse, which is as delicate and elaborate as orchestration. Music, to which

poetry is allied, has a double set of artists, the composers and the interpreters. It takes a trained performer to change the black dots that the composer provides into the sounds that he intended the audience to hear. But poetry looks deceptively easy. Instead of black dots we see English words, and therefore it would seem that reading it would require no special skill. But it does. In classical and mediaeval times there were trained speakers and chanters of verse. Every Elizabethan was accomplished in singing the lyric verse of his time.

The reader is forewarned that the language of poetry is condensed and that he must listen for the overtones or suggestions as well as the literal meaning. He should then be able to understand the lines unless the poet is willfully obscure. But since poetry is an art primarily for the ear rather than the eye, he may have trouble with the metrics and rhythms. Hence, although there is no occasion for him to learn metrics in detail, he should be able to study the text with some understanding of its manifold structure, to school himself to observe the different lengths of the vowels, the pauses that correspond to rests in music, and the varying strength of accents, or stresses.

It is my intention to discuss and explain many such phenomena. I shall then trace the history and principles of the various metrical and stanzaic forms that have developed in our language through the centuries. Lastly, from my own point of view and indulging myself freely in my own preferences and prejudices, I shall give a brief critical account of important poets and poetical movements from Chaucer to the present.

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In Pursuit of Poetry

Contents

	<i>Foreword</i>	vii
PART I	<i>The Magic of Words</i>	I
PART II	<i>The Elements of Verse</i>	31
	Meter and Rhythm	31
	Metrical Irregularities	34
	The Length of Lines	38
	Adornments	38
	How to Read Verse Aloud	41
	Stanza Forms	52
	The Ode	77
	Blank Verse	80
	Some French Forms	83
	The Sonnet	88
	The Kinds of Poetry	114
PART III	<i>A Brief Survey of the Background of Poetry in English</i>	119
PART IV	<i>Poetry in the Twentieth Century</i>	172
	<i>Some Recommended Reading</i>	219
	<i>Index</i>	223

9/16 Read part I
make 10 questions

PART I *The Magic of Words*

I have called this book *In Pursuit of Poetry* to indicate that the essential spirit of poetry is always on the wing and indefinable. No one can communicate the exact effect of a poem any more than a poet can describe the exact moment when the idea for a poem swung into his mind. "How do you write a poem? Is it a sudden inspiration or do you sit down and say to yourself that you're going to write a poem?" How many times I have been asked that question in almost precisely those words. There is no answer, of course. Every poem has its own method of coming to birth, sometimes by long labor, and occasionally by a quick impulse so overmastering that the result is a kind of divine dictation. The same variety of mood applies to the reception of a poem by a reader.

Music, dancing, and poetry are the oldest of the arts and came into being before the dawn of history, moving to the recurrent rhythms of Nature itself. The most ancient poems that survive from Egypt, China, and the Old Testament speak to us clearly from the heart of our remotest forerunners. In the words of Walter Savage Landor:

Past ruin'd Iliou Helen lives,
Alcestis rises from the shades;
Verse calls them forth; 'tis verse that gives
Immortal youth to mortal maids.

Poetry is the one unbroken thread between us and the past; from vanished cities and civilizations this common utterance links us with the heroism and piety, the loves and festivals—all that has gone before, unchanged and ever renewed.

So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

"With this key," says Wordsworth, "Shakespeare unlock'd his heart." We might say of poetry in general, "With this key Mankind unlock'd his heart." The reader responds with his *memory*, in which are experiences and emotions similar to those expressed in the poem, and with his *imagination*, which is stimulated by rhythm and phrasing.

A good poem can be read again and again and still hold something in reserve for the next reading. The Greek philosopher Heraclitus observed, "One cannot step twice into the same river." The water of the river has changed, we have changed, the seasons have changed; everything is in *flux*. With each new reading of a poem life has flowed past us, the landscape around us is different, and we are never twice in exactly the same mood. Also, memories of former readings add their special gloss of associations to the printed text. Harold Nicolson, in one of his reminiscent sketches, describes how, during his last year at school, the Master recited a passage from Virgil to a group of boys sitting on the lawn in the summer evening. "The warm sun was slanting through the pine trees. The soft and solemn hexameters rolled on." The passage was from the sixth book of the *Aeneid*, that touching and beautiful conversation between Aeneas and his father in the Underworld. In later years, Nicolson could not detach the beauty of the lines from the enchantment of the summer evening long past, and they were woven into the memory of his boyhood. Such associations are common with all of us. The trouble today is that we do not give these associations a chance to form. There is so little reading of poetry nowadays. One reason for the decline of appreciation is the fact that poetry is so seldom read in family groups any more, or among teachers and pupils as a recreation rather than as an assignment. And then, of course, so few people know how to read aloud.

In the mingling of music and sense with our own response at the heightened moment that art provides, we pass through the poetic experience never twice the same. Since human emotions remain the same through the centuries, a lyric from the remotest past speaks to us with a present voice, and the years between seem to dissolve. "A homesick shepherd, I wade into the river to watch the fishes who come swimming from the north where my country lies." There

speaks the Egyptian exile. And again, from ancient Egypt, "There was never anyone, who, having departed, was able to carry away his possessions with him."

Homesickness in its various forms is a pervasive element of our life and of our art, and exemplifies that concentration of the moment which is at the heart of poetry. We are always searching for a country we have never seen and loves we have never known.

Forlorn! the very word is like a bell
To toll me back from thee to my sole self!

says Keats at the end of his *Ode to a Nightingale*. Where had he been whence he did not want to return to the actualities of life? Somewhere in a forest beyond the world "through verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways," opened to him by the song of the nightingale. And even his faery lands brought him at last to the margin of "perilous seas forlorn." But for a moment he had been beyond the bounds of everyday, and he affirmed in his ode the existence of another world governed by fancy and imagination.

With the current of time we see everything flowing away, and we begin to understand that in the ephemeral quality of our world lies its dearest charm. Mankind is born to discontent, divine discontent, as it is often called. If his dreams were translated into reality, then he would push forward yet farther into another dream.

The modern Danish poet, winner of the Nobel prize, Johannes V. Jensen, in his poem on Christopher Columbus, made the point that as soon as Columbus discovered his western world, his dream was destroyed. I have translated one of the stanzas thus:

For when he discovers the saving isle,
his visions flee.
A new world is wedged between his soul and
the ultimate sea.
And turning back, embracing the ocean,
He bears in his heart, forever burning,
The burden of the wandering billows,
the freight of eternal yearning.

It is not the tragedy of life that youth passes, that flowers fade, that the seasons fold away into autumn; tragedy lies in the failure to live the present to the full, to seize on the beauty of life as it passes.

As Walter Pater says, in the famous sentence in his *Renaissance*, "To burn always with this hard, gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life."

He who bends to himself a joy
Doth the winged life destroy;
But he who kisses the joy as it flies
Lives in eternity's sunrise.

So writes William Blake. And Horace, in one of his best-loved odes: *Carpe diem, quam minimum credula postero*: "Seize on the day; there is little trust to be put in the future." This mood is so frequent in poetry that we may well call it the theme of *carpe diem*. An ancient Egyptian advises

Enjoy yourself more than you have ever done.

There is Shakespeare's

What is love? 'tis not hereafter;
Present mirth hath present laughter;
What's to come is still unsure:
In delay there lies no plenty;
Then come kiss me, sweet and twenty,
Youth's a stuff will not endure.

There is Herrick's

Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,
Old Time is still a-flying.

And Robert Frost's

Earth's the right place for love:
I don't know where it's likely to go better.

And there are hundreds of other examples. But *carpe diem* has an undertone of melancholy; the present is passing, passing swiftly. The Egyptians handed around a skull among the banquet guests to make them appreciate their good luck in being alive.

The homesickness which we find in a large body of romantic poetry, for the Eden that lies behind us and the gardens of the Hesperides that lie before, we might call evocative poetry. Sometimes, at its most extreme, it depends on music and imagery alone,

and this we might call *incantational* poetry. At the opposite extreme, there is the poetry of statement, wit, and epigram, as in the couplets of Alexander Pope.

Let us take examples of the two extremes, incantational and epigrammatic poetry. First, the incantational, Coleridge's *Kubla Khan*:

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
A stately pleasure-dome decree:
Where Alph, the sacred river, ran
Through caverns measureless to man
Down to a sunless sea.
So twice five miles of fertile ground
With walls and towers were girdled round:
And here were gardens bright with sinuous rills,
Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree;
And here were forests ancient as the hills,
Enfolding sunny spots of greenery. . . .

At the opposite extreme, take the following passage from Pope's *Essay on Criticism*, wherein the neatness of the phrasing is wedded to the strict heroic (that is to say, classical) couplet:

True Wit is Nature to advantage dress'd,
What oft was thought, but ne'er so well express'd;
Something whose truth convinced at sight we find,
That gives us back the image of our mind.
As shades more sweetly recommend the light,
So modest plainness sets off sprightly wit. . . .

We should not wish poetry to be confined to Coleridge's suggestive incantation or Pope's exquisite statement; these are the opposite bounds of poetry, and between lie numberless gradations of song and epigram. In passing, we note the existence of many an incantational passage in Dryden, the neoclassic poet, such as this:

All, all of a piece throughout,
Thy chase had a Beast in view,
Thy wars brought nothing about,
Thy lovers were all untrue.
'Tis well an old age is out,
And time to begin a new.