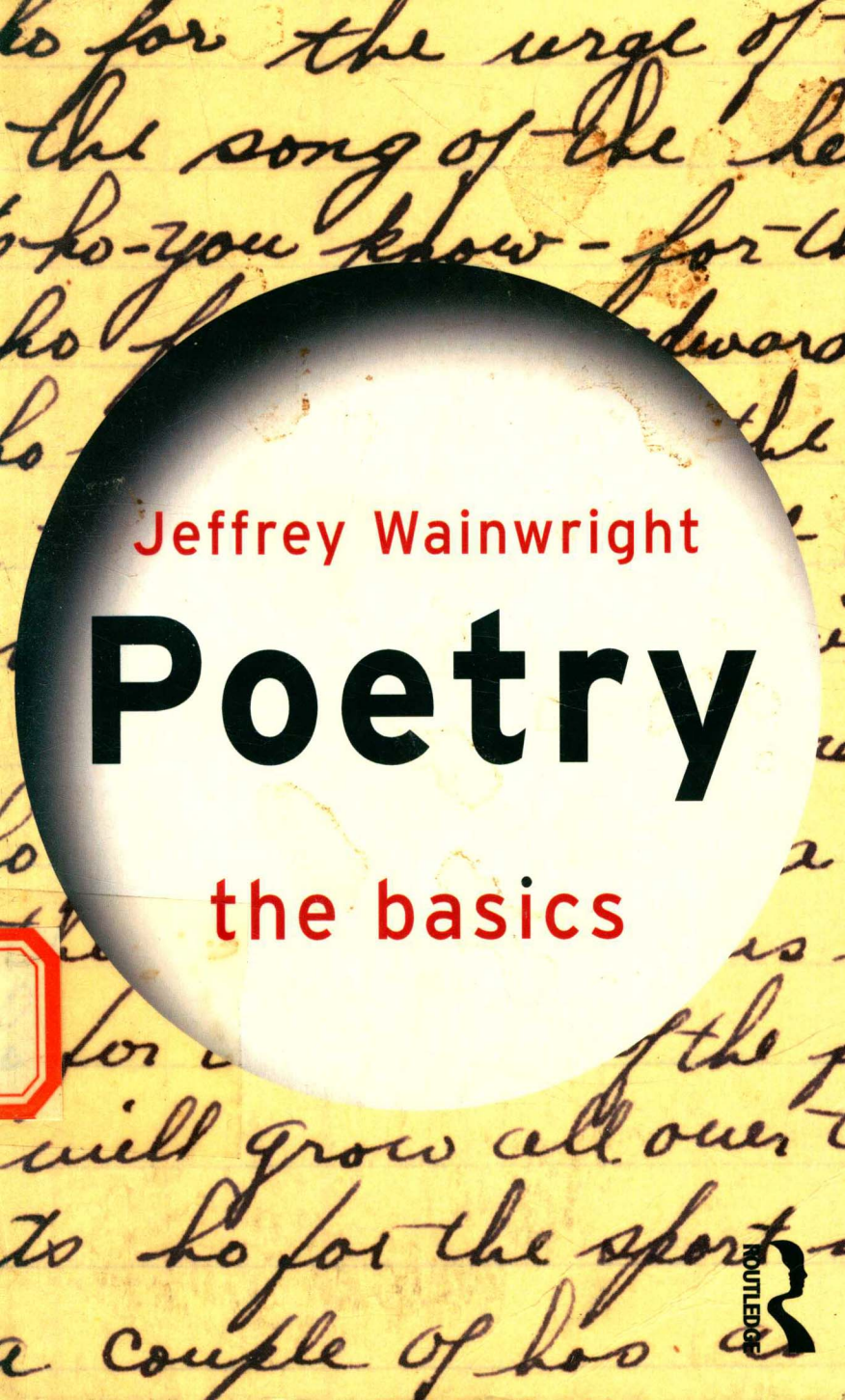
Jeffrey Wainwright
Poetry
the basics
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POETRY
THE BASICS

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'If you have forgotten what sprung rhythm or a Spenserian stanza is, you may use *Poetry: The Basics* as a reference book, or you may allow Jeffrey Wainwright to guide you from room to room through the house of poetry essentials. In either case, you will find this book reliable, illuminating and studded with brilliant examples'
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Poetry: The Basics is a comprehensive guide that demystifies the world of poetry. Covering different poetic forms and traditions, and with examples ranging from Chaucer to children's rhymes drawn from around the English-speaking world, it explores:

- the form and space of a poem
- technical aspects such as rhythm, rhyme and metre
- poetic language and tone of voice

Including a helpful glossary of terms, ***Poetry: The Basics*** is an invaluable and easy-to-read introduction for anyone wanting to get to grips with reading and writing poetry.

Jeffrey Wainwright is a poet and former Professor of English at Manchester Metropolitan University, UK. He is the author of *Clarity or Death!* (Carcanet).

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TO KEN LOWE

PREFACE

This book is – and I hope it will seem to be – a work of enthusiasm. My overriding aim is to enhance the pleasure that readers gain from poetry. No special expertise is required to read and enjoy a poem, but, as with most pleasures, it can be greatly enriched by knowledge. This book tries to provide some knowledge and some ideas to all who want to read, study or write poetry.

There is now substantial evidence that poetry has more writers than readers. Formal studies of literature, in universities and elsewhere, now include composition as well as analysis. The democratization of culture which has encouraged people to be producers of music and visual art has also influenced the language arts, and especially the poem. It is the most practically available literary space. It probably requires paper and certainly some time, but perhaps not as much of either as writing a novel. It needs readers, but not the human and physical resources necessary to realize a play or a film script. Moreover, the development of 'free verse' in the twentieth century has – for good and ill – had the effect of loosening convention, and this, together with the wider availability of knowledge about models in other periods and cultures, has expanded the long-standing practice of verse-making and given the developing poet a great range of possibilities from which to proceed. This book aims to encourage writers, who *must* therefore be readers, and readers who might also practise writing.

It aims to do so by providing knowledge of two kinds. The first is suggested by the topics of the chapters. At the heart of the book are

chapters on the most distinctively formal aspects of poetry: the different 'voices' of poetry, the poetic line both measured and 'free', rhyme and stanza. I hope these will help with those technical aspects readers often find daunting. (Besides their explanation in the text, special terms – marked in ***bold and italic*** – are defined in the Glossary.) Around these are chapters which attempt to associate poetry with wider language-use whilst establishing the special character of what I shall call the 'deliberate space' that a poem occupies. The last chapter explores wider notions about the nature of poetic utterance, 'inspiration', and what it might be to be a poet.

I hope that the second kind of knowledge gained will be a greater familiarity with a wide reach of poets. The range is drawn from the Middle Ages to the present day, and from poetry across the English-speaking world. Each chapter includes sustained discussion of individual poems as well as briefer examples. I hope that these will develop the way readers might read individual poems closely, and draw them on to explore the work of poets, whether new or familiar, who attract them. Whilst I do not believe we all read a 'different' poem, none of us reads a poem exactly like our neighbour. Reading is a process, and the aim of my readings here is to contribute to the reader's own interior and exterior dialogues about the ideas and the whole experience of individual poems.

One particular idea about the nature of the art recurs in this approach to the 'basics' of poetry. This sees writers and readers working in the midst of a perpetual paradox. At one extreme is the desire to use words to *say* something that is meaningful and memorable: for instance, the kind of substantial statement required by grief or love. At the other is the desire to use words to say *nothing*, that is to free language from meaning and revel in the qualities and associations of words, even inventing new words: 'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves / Did gyre and gimble in the wabe.' The creative tension between these poles of interest will be apparent through much of the discussion and I hope that thinking about this will prove part of the pleasure I hope to foster.

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I should like to thank the following students at Manchester Metropolitan University who have taken time to read portions of my draft: Claire Milner, Katie Fennell, Catharine Huggett and Katie Watkinson; my colleagues Margaret Beetham, Michael Bradshaw and Michael Schmidt; Jon Glover and Judith Wainwright. At Routledge I wish to thank Liz Thompson for commissioning this book, Liz Thompson and Milon Nagi for their scrupulous and hugely helpful editing, and Susannah Trefgarne. Thanks are due too to the several anonymous readers whose comments have been invaluable. My special thanks and appreciation go to my school English teacher, Ken Lowe, to whom this is dedicated. All final responsibility is of course my own.

CONTENTS

BECAUSE THERE IS LANGUAGE THERE IS POETRY

A clock in the eye ticks in the eye a clock
ticks in the eye.
A number with that and large as a hat
which makes rims think quicker than I.
A clock in the eye ticks in the eye a clock
ticks ticks in the eye.

Through evolution, the human vocal tract has become able to give voice to a variety of particular sounds and complex combinations of sounds. With these we have created languages which can communicate information of very different kinds and to a very high degree of subtlety. As we acquire them as children we respond to the sounds themselves as we hear, imitate and relish them. Just as we learn how effectively word sounds denote objects in our world and carry information to others, so too we enjoy the reiteration of the sounds themselves in the repetition of favourite new words, and variations upon them. As **Kenneth Koch** (1925–2002) writes, 'Each word has a little music of its own.'

The *sounds* of language are further enjoyed when they are combined in such sequences as a run of the same consonants (***alliteration***), or the repetition of certain words or rhythmic patterns. The lines above from **Gertrude Stein's** (1874–1946) 'Before the

Flowers of Friendship Faded Friendship Faded' show this kind of fascination – as does the title of the poem itself. The intrigue can extend to the surprising juxtaposition of word meanings. Stein called her book *Tender Buttons*. Ponder for a moment what associations come with putting the words 'tender' and 'button' next to each other.

These resources of language, especially ***recurrence*** – the anticipated pleasure of a sound or shape being repeated – have been used in the pre-literate, oral tradition of all societies for dances, riddles, spells, prayers, games, stories and histories. The work of the American poet/researcher **Jerome Rothenberg** (1931–) provides a wealth of examples of this from every continent and many cultures. We should not assume though that work of this kind from pre-literate cultures is simple. Often, as Ruth Finnegan shows in her anthology *Oral Poetry*, work such as the Malay form of the *pantun*, which we will meet in its English adaptation in Chapter 7, 'Stanza', can be very elaborate.

More familiarly, the early enthusiasm for nursery rhymes, chants, schoolyard games, songs, advertising slogans and jingles all feature the same kind of *gestural* characteristics. *Gesture* is an important concept here. What I mean by gesture in language are those qualities we employ to signal our meaning strongly by emphasizing particular word sounds, rhythmic sequences or patterns. Thus the words will catch our attention not only through a grasp of their dictionary meanings but through their sensuous impression, not unlike, indeed, the way we accompany speech by hand gestures and variations of ***tone***. The incantatory, 'musical' qualities of beat, drum and dance are close to this and are part of the close relation between poetry and song. Indeed the term which is still key to both – ***lyric*** – points to this connexion. Lyric refers to that kind of ***verse*** most readily associated with the chanted or sung origins of poetry, traditionally to the harp-like stringed instrument known as the lyre. We still refer to the words of songs of all kinds as lyrics, and poetry closest in style and span to songs, as opposed to poems that tell substantial stories or are the medium for drama, is defined as lyric. I shall have more to say about this ***genre*** of poetry in Chapter 3, 'Tones of voice'.

In poetry without music these qualities have become formalized into what are its most prominent distinguishing features: its

rhythms, that is the way a sequence of words moves in the ear, and its ***metres***, that is the regular patterning of such movement into the poetic line. The character of the many different kinds of poetic line will be explored in separate chapters.

So, while the evolution and use of language has obviously been functional, exchanging information with the necessary clarity, its sounds and shapings, both spoken and written, are also inevitably gestural. Of course, those instrumental uses of language will be as simple and direct as possible, like the bald instructions for using a computer: 'Press Enter'; 'Select the file to be moved'; 'Double-click the mouse icon'. But even the specialized language associated with computers is not literal but ***metaphorical***: the mouse, windows, desktop and bin. My computer manual promises 'Right Answers, Right Now', and the simple emphasis of this punchy phrase – repeating 'Right' – is the kind of language I am calling gestural. This snatch of a conversation is invented, but I think it is recognizable:

> So I had to go back to the bank. No sign of it there. Back to the butcher's. No sign of it there. Back to the chemist. No sign of it there. Back to the sweet-shop. No sign. Back to the café. No sign. Where was it? Slap-bang in the middle of the kitchen table.

The speaker wants to express tedium and exasperation at mislaying a purse and these repetitive, truncated phrasings with their slight variations impress this upon the listener. These are the gestural features of language.

So, the argument of this chapter is that poetry is not really a peculiar, demarcated zone out of the mainstream of language-use, but that language is inevitably and intrinsically 'poetic' in the qualities that I'm calling gestural. However, historically, these qualities have been highlighted and formalized for particular uses and occasions. Poetry is a form for special attention and one that calls unusual attention to the way it is formed.

The ancient ceremonial aspect of gestural language persists in our desire for special forms of language for particular occasions. We all know for instance how difficult it is to 'find words' of condolence. In greetings cards, at weddings, funerals, in sorrow and commemoration and in love, wherever we feel the need for heightened, deliberate

speech, wherever there is a need for 'something to be said', we turn to the unusual shapes and sounds of poetry. This is also why we might be drawn to write poetry in order to form an utterance that is out of the ordinary and commensurate to the weight or the joy of the occasion. Always at such times we will encounter the familiar difficulty of finding what we know to be the 'right words'.

The deployment of impressive sounds and shapes, the deliberate speech required by that 'something to be said', has been known in the western tradition as ***rhetoric***. In this emphasis, from *Paradise Lost* to a local newspaper's *In Memoriam* verses, poetry can be seen to be a part of rhetoric.

However, every experience with language teaches us that communication is frequently less transparent than we would wish. Disappointment at the failure of language to be clear, and at its capacity to mislead and sway us into deception, has marked our thinking about language for centuries. Ambiguity, double meanings, 'equivocation' intended and not intended, all manner of *'-speaks'*, result from, or exploit, the potential anarchy of language. Often, it seems, 'words run away with themselves' and take us with them. This may lead into a cheerful gallimaufry of free association and ***word-play***, or into saying things we did not mean. Those 'right words' can be very elusive.

As a form of utterance that is especially sensitive to all the various resources of language in both its ***semantic*** (i.e. meaningful) and sensuous dimensions, poetry has taken upon itself the freedom and opportunity for word-play, and also its responsibilities. Because language is as it is we might say anything. Because life is how it is we need to watch what we say.

Through language we can convey common information, but also achieve a vast capacity to generalize particulars and to abstract from experience. We can also invent and fantasize and relay any of this to others. Its immeasurable creative flexibility means that 'language enables the promotion of endless associations between any one object/person/event and another', writes the neuroscientist Susan Greenfield. So, since the nature of language itself does not necessarily oblige us to be purpose-like, it also enables associations which may seem purposeless. It is often attractive – even just for the hell of it – to remove its use as far as possible from any externally driven direction.

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