# Prose Keys to Modern Poetry

KARL SHAPIRO

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*Edited by*

KARL SHAPIRO
*University of Nebraska*

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PROSE KEYS TO MODERN POETRY

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Excerpt from *Through the Looking Glass* by Lewis Carroll.

Excerpt from *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* by Walter Pater.

"The Philosophy of Composition" and "The Poetic Principle" by Edgar Allan Poe.

Preface to *Leaves of Grass* by Walt Whitman.

Excerpt from "The Decay of Lying" by Oscar Wilde.

# FOREWORD

*The key to understanding modern poetry lies not in the poems but in the prose foundation of the poems.* Modern poetry is a structure of attitudes, carefully and rationally built up into a towering world view of life and art. To some readers this world view resembles the Tower of Babel; to others it represents the reality of modern life.

Ours is perhaps the only poetry in history which must be approached over the heavy causeways of prose. The very landscape of modern poetry is that of the prosaic. It is city poetry, and the city has always fallen or is about to fall. Whether it is the Dublin of Joyce or of Yeats, the London of Eliot, the New York of Lorca, or the Paris of Baudelaire, the centers of modern civilization are shown in dreary decline or under a state of siege. And the poet dwells in this city as an outcast or a "subterranean."

The complex social, political, and religious views implicit in modern literature must somehow be assimilated if the student is to master the literature itself. T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land,* the central poem of the modern canon, has appended to it a series of scholarly notes without which the poem would be a considerable enigma. These notes cover in time and space nearly the whole history of Western culture. Ezra Pound's *Cantos* have had to be explained by a special dictionary of more than 17,000 scholarly references. Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* is written in a special language all its own.

The essays collected in the following pages bring together most of the chief prose documents upon which modern poetry is based and without which the poetry is all but meaningless. (The original texts were followed in all cases; no stylistic changes have been introduced.) The essays divide naturally into those of the "Classical" school and those of the "Romantic." Modern Classicist is the dominant poetry of the twentieth century, and it prides itself on its adherence to tradition, ritual, metaphysical wit, learned irony, and the need for discipline in art and in society. The Classicists identify themselves in their prose, and both define and elaborate their position. The Romantics are equally sweeping in their claims and objectives.

There is no attempt of any kind in this book to advocate one or another of the main philosophies of contemporary poetry. The sole object of this handbook is to provide the instructor and the student with those prose documents that have given modern poetry its special character. It has been my experience for many years that modern poetry cannot be taught or even surveyed without constant reference to these prose essays, notes, studies, and theories upon which it rests. Each essay or excerpt, therefore, will be introduced by a brief explanation of its place in the canon of modern poetry.

The sequence of chapters in this book presents certain problems. A

purely chronological order would throw little light on the ideological background of modern Classicism or Romanticism. (We have appended a detailed chronological guide to the main literary events of the period.) The order of selections is based on *tendency*. For instance, the first chapters deal with the Symbolist tendency from Poe through Mallarmé. This section is followed by essays dealing with the Metaphysical tendency, and is succeeded by essays dealing with theories of myth and myth-making as they apply to modern poetry. In this way the reader can trace the intellectual roots of the Classical or the Romantic tree. It is the belief of the editor that most of the exotic blooms and graftings of modern poetry, especially those usually referred to as "obscure," can best be appreciated by a study of these prose documents.

Modern criticism is a vast field, and we have had to omit many relevant selections. Works such as Irving Babbitt's *Rousseau and Romanticism*, for example, should have a place here, but it was felt that limits had to be placed upon a handbook of this size. The object of the anthology is to lead the student to the poetry and to detain him among the critical documents no longer than necessary.

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PART I

# Keys to Modern Classicism

# THE FORMATION OF CLASSICAL DOCTRINE

*EDGAR ALLAN POE*

## The Philosophy of Composition

This essay, written over a century ago, says more about modern poetry than anything written before or since. Poe's reputation as critic has never been high in this country, but it has been a major influence in Europe since the middle of the nineteenth century. Poe captivated Charles Baudelaire, who translated many of the major works of the American and used them as ballast for his own poetics. Thus Poe revolutionized modern literature indirectly and gave the impetus to the Symbolist Movement which, in France at least, has dominated poetry for generations. The magic of the French or Parisian *savoir-faire* in letters has electrified European and American writers generation after generation. Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Verlaine, Mallarmé, Laforgue, Valéry, Perse are all children of Poe. And although Eliot repudiates Poe, he is deeply in his debt.

"The Philosophy of Composition" is a classic analysis of one's own poem—in this case the famous "The Raven." But it is a great deal more. It states the doctrine of "the effect" as a primary motive of the work of art. It was Poe's theory of the "effect" (as against the didactic and the emotional in poetry) that started certain French poets of the nineteenth century on the road to "suggestion," "association," and "nuance."

Poe's essay also speaks out against the "fine frenzy" of the poet, against poetry written in passion. It legislates against the "long poem" such as *Paradise Lost*. The twentieth-century prejudice

against the "long" poem undoubtedly dates back to Poe, who conceived of a "mathematical" relationship of the length of the poem to its merit.

Perhaps the most sweeping doctrine of Poe's in this essay is his assertion that "Beauty is the sole legitimate province of the poem." In making Beauty the supreme ideal of poetry, he rules out both didacticism and personal feeling, or passion. The far-reaching consequences of this theory have come back to us in later theories of depersonalization of art, variously stated by Mallarmé, Eliot, Yeats, and Pound, and in the idea of a poetic priesthood which may provide a leadership for civilization.

Poe's account of the composition of "The Raven" is a tribute to his ingeniousness as a poet, a critic, and an intellectual.

Charles Dickens, in a note now lying before me, alluding to an examination I once made of the mechanism of "Barnaby Rudge," says—"By the way, are you aware that Godwin wrote his 'Caleb Williams' backwards? He first involved his hero in a web of difficulties, forming the second volume, and then, for the first, cast about him for some mode of accounting for what had been done."

I cannot think this the *precise* mode of procedure on the part of Godwin—and indeed what he himself acknowledges, is not altogether in accordance with Mr. Dickens' idea—but the author of "Caleb Williams" was too good an artist not to perceive the advantage derivable from at least a somewhat similar process. Nothing is more clear than that every plot, worth the name, must be elaborated to its *dénouement* before any thing be attempted with the men. It is only with the *dénouement* constantly in view that we can give a plot its indispensable air of consequence, or causation, by making the incidents, and especially the tone at all points, tend to the development of the intention.

There is a radical error, I think, in the usual mode of constructing a story. Either history affords a thesis—or one is suggested by an incident of the day—or, at best, the author sets himself to work in the combination of striking events to form merely the basis of his narrative—designing, generally, to fill in with description, dialogue, or autorial * comment, whatever crevices of fact, or action, may, from page to page, render themselves apparent.

I prefer commencing with the consideration of an *effect*. Keeping originality *always* in view—for he is false to himself who ventures to dispense with so obvious and so easily attainable a source of interest—I say to myself, in the first place, "Of the innumerable effects, or impressions, of which the heart, the intellect, or (more generally) the soul is susceptible, what one shall I, on the present occasion, select?" Having chosen a novel, first, and secondly a vivid effect, I consider whether it can be best wrought by incident or tone—whether by ordinary incidents and peculiar tone, or the converse, or by peculiarity both of

* [Obsolete variant of "authorial."—Ed.]

incident and tone—afterward looking about me (or rather within) for such combinations of event, or tone, as shall best aid me in the construction of the effect.

I have often thought how interesting a magazine paper might be written by any author who would—that is to say, who could—detail, step by step, the processes by which any one of his compositions attained its ultimate point of completion. Why such a paper has never been given to the world, I am much at a loss to say—but, perhaps, the autorial vanity has had more to do with the omission than any one other cause. Most writers—poets in especial—prefer having it understood that they compose by a species of fine frenzy—an ecstatic intuition—and would positively shudder at letting the public take a peep behind the scenes, at the elaborate and vacillating crudities of thought—at the true purposes seized only at the last moment—at the innumerable glimpses of idea that arrived not at the maturity of full view—at the fully matured fancies discarded in despair as unmanageable—at the cautious selections and rejections—at the painful erasures and interpolations—in a word, at the wheels and pinions—the tackle for scene-shifting—the step-ladders and demon-traps—the cock's feathers, the red paint and the black patches, which, in ninety-nine cases out of the hundred, constitute the properties of the literary *histrio*.

I am aware, on the other hand, that the case is by no means common, in which an author is at all in condition to retrace the steps by which his conclusions have been attained. In general, suggestions, having arisen pell-mell, are pursued and forgotten in a similar manner.

For my own part, I have neither sympathy with the repugnance alluded to, nor, at any time, the least difficulty in recalling to mind the progressive steps of any of my compositions; and, since the interest of an analysis, or reconstruction, such as I have considered a *desideratum*, is quite independent of any real or fancied interest in the thing analyzed, it will not be regarded as a breach of decorum on my part to show the *modus operandi* by which some one of my own works was put together. I select "The Raven" as most generally known. It is my design to render it manifest that no one point in its composition is referable either to accident or intuition—that the work proceeded, step by step, to its completion with the precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical problem.

Let us dismiss, as irrelevant to the poem, *per se*, the circumstance—or say the necessity—which, in the first place, gave rise to the intention of composing *a* poem that should suit at once the popular and the critical taste.

We commence, then, with this intention.

The initial consideration was that of extent. If any literary work is too long to be read at one sitting, we must be content to dispense with the immensely important effect derivable from unity of impression—for, if two sittings be required, the affairs of the world interfere, and everything like totality is at once destroyed. But since, *ceteris paribus*, no

poet can afford to dispense with *any thing* that may advance his design, it but remains to be seen whether there is, in extent, any advantage to counterbalance the loss of unity which attends it. Here I say no, at once. What we term a long poem, is, in fact, merely a succession of brief ones—that is to say, of brief poetical effects. It is needless to demonstrate that a poem is such, only inasmuch as it intensely excites, by elevating, the soul; and all intense excitements are, through a psychal necessity, brief. For this reason, at least one half of the "Paradise Lost" is essentially prose—a succession of poetical excitements interspersed, *inevitably*, with corresponding depressions—the whole being deprived, through the extremeness of its length, of the vastly important artistic element, or unity, of effect.

It appears evident, then, that there is a distinct limit, as regards length, to all works of literary art—the limit of a single sitting—and that, although in certain classes of prose composition, such as "Robinson Crusoe," (demanding no unity,) this limit may be advantageously overpassed, it can never properly be overpassed in a poem. Within this limit, the extent of a poem may be made to bear mathematical relation to its merit—in other words, to the excitement or elevation—again, in other words, to the degree of the true poetical effect which it is capable of inducing; for it is clear that the brevity must be in direct ratio of the intensity of the intended effect:—this, with one proviso—that a certain degree of duration is absolutely requisite for the production of any effect at all.

Holding in view these considerations, as well as that degree of excitement which I deemed not above the popular, while not below the critical, taste, I reached at once what I conceived the proper *length* for my intended poem—a length of about one hundred lines. It is, in fact, a hundred and eight.

My next thought concerned the choice of an impression, or effect, to be conveyed: and here I may as well observe that, throughout the construction, I kept steadily in view the design of rendering the work *universally* appreciable. I should be carried too far out of my immediate topic were I to demonstrate a point upon which I have repeatedly insisted, and which, with the poetical, stands not in the slightest need of demonstration—the point, I mean, that Beauty is the sole legitimate province of the poem. A few words, however, in elucidation of my real meaning, which some of my friends have evinced a disposition to misrepresent. That pleasure which is at once the most intense, the most elevating, and the most pure, is, I believe, found in the contemplation of the beautiful. When, indeed, men speak of Beauty, they mean, precisely, not a quality, as is supposed, but an effect—they refer, in short, just to that intense and pure elevation of *soul—not* of intellect, or of heart—upon which I have commented, and which is experienced in consequence of contemplating "the beautiful." Now I designate Beauty as the province of the poem, merely because it is an obvious rule of Art that effects should be made to spring from direct causes—that objects