

second edition

Western Wind

an
introduction to
poetry



John Frederick Nims

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AN INTRODUCTION TO POETRY
•second edition•

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Preface

This second edition of *Western Wind* has been modified along lines suggested by students and teachers who have used the first edition since its appearance eight years ago. Two major changes have been made: some material has been omitted, some reorganized, so that the original twenty-three chapters are now compacted into fourteen; and an anthology of about two hundred poems, over one-fourth of them new to this edition, now supplements the one hundred and eighty poems included in the chapters. Among those added are—in accordance with the wishes of a number of instructors—many of the familiar masterpieces of the language. Other new poems represent some of the best of our younger poets.

The original structure of *Western Wind*, which is based on human nature and the ways of the world we live in, has been retained. The book begins, as our lives do, with sense impressions and the emotions they arouse. It then proceeds to the words with which the poet, like the rest of us, has to express such images and emotions. It goes on to consider the qualities of these words as poets use them: their sounds as well as their meanings, the rhythms they assume, the forms, traditional or free, in which they find expression.

Individual instructors, who will have their own preferences about the way to approach poetry, are not bound to this sequence. The order of the book, like most things human, is flexible; teachers may move about in it as they choose, lingering over one section, dealing more briefly with another. Some instructors have preferred to begin with the sections on rhythm. The flexibility of this design allows for the

differences one finds in the aptitudes and interests of individual classes and individual students. Some will be happier doing more or less than the typical class or typical individual.

The exercises are suggestive, designed not so much to test a knowledge of facts as to lure the student into thinking creatively. As many or as few may be used as will suit the levels and interests of classes using the book. Questions more elementary and more general than those given will suggest themselves to instructors, who will have their own favorite ways of formulating basic exercises in, for example, paraphrasing, scanning, analyzing, or comparing poems. The writing exercises should be useful to many classes.

Year after year, wherever writers gather, no piece of advice is heard more often than “Show; don’t tell!” Good writers *show* us a world. In critical writing and teaching, too, this advice applies. It is more important, for instance, to show students examples of metaphor than to discuss its nature, more important to let them taste ten tangy metaphors than to spoon-feed them the cold gruel of definition. *Western Wind* is richer in examples, many of them contemporary, than other introductions to poetry known to the author. This feature has been retained, with more than two hundred and fifty brief examples either added to or substituted for earlier ones.

I am grateful to the editors who worked with me on this project: to David Dushkin, who first encouraged it, to James Smith, who took over for him, and to Helen Litton, whose editorial care did much for the first edition. For encouraging the present edition I have to thank David Follmer, Richard Garretson, and Steven Pensinger; for editorial assistance with it I am indebted to John Sturman and Liz Israel. I also wish to thank the many instructors and students who have written me with suggestions over the years, and most of all the many younger poets who have made use of *Western Wind* in workshops and classes they have given.

J. F. N.

Before We Begin

Sometimes we feel like jumping a fence for the fun of jumping, or we burst into song for the fun of singing, or we string words together just for the fun of saying them. What we do “for fun” we do for the pleasure of doing it, without having any other purpose in mind. Fun is an expression of the exuberance we feel at being alive, an overflow of the spirit of play that characterizes so much human activity, though it may be less evident in adults than in children, less common in our time than in earlier and simpler ages. When we *imagine* anything, we are playing with images, combining them as they have never been combined before, perhaps not even in nature itself. Out of such playing with images came primitive ritual and the mythologies of early religion. Out of our playing with rocks and herbs and the mystery of fire came early science. Out of our playing with hollow reeds or tightened sinews or the beat of bone on deerskin came early music; musicians still “play” on their pianos or guitars. And out of our playing with words, with their sounds and shapes and rhythms and the images they conjured, came early poetry, so wonderful that in all parts of the world it seemed a kind of magic.

To some of us today, poetry may seem an artificial refinement of natural speech. But in the literature of every country poetry comes before prose does. It is closer than prose to the origins of language. We can even say it is more natural: more primitive, more basic, a more total expression of the muscular, sensuous, emotional, rhythmical nature of the human animal. The ancient Greeks, childlike for all their sophistication, considered the poet an “athlete of the word.” In the

universities of a truly humane society, they might have felt, poetry would belong at least as much to departments of physical education as to departments of literary criticism.

But what *is* poetry? That is the question this book is setting out to answer. Whatever it is, it is so closely related to the other activities of our life that we will find ourselves dealing with many curious questions about man and his world. Some of them are:

If a baby were born with no senses, would it know it exists?

How can we see sounds and hear colors?

Why do cats dislike getting their feet wet?

Why did the thought of a line of poetry make A. E. Housman stop shaving?

When do singers get a sore throat listening to other singers?

Why does the pitch get higher if we play a 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ rpm record at 78 rpm?

Why do charms against the devil fail to work in translation?

Why do French dogs say "ouâ-ouâ" instead of "bow-wow"?

What kind of rhyme is like a blue note in music?

What American president wrote a treatise on the nature of rhythm in poetry?

Why do metronomes have a poor sense of rhythm?

Why did Picasso say, "Man invented the alarm clock"?

Poetry—like so much we are closest to and know best—is not easy to define. We can begin by saying what it is not. Poetry is not the same as *verse*. Verse is any singsong with rhythm and rhyme, as in

Thirty days hath September,
April, June, and November. . . .

The word "verse" refers only to the shape an expression takes, not to its content or quality.

Poetry *may* be in verse, and often does use some kind of verse-like structure. Many poets, for example, have been attracted by the shape of the sonnet, which arranges rhythms and rhymes in a definite formation. But the sonnet in itself is only a verse-form; a sonnet may be poetry or it may not. Poetry is not poetry *because* it is in verse; to the shape of verse it has to add qualities of imagination and emotion and of language itself. Such qualities, not easy to describe briefly, are what this book is about.

Much about verse (as opposed to poetry) is arbitrary, just as the rules of a game are arbitrary. The limerick, for instance, has five lines of regulation length, as in Arthur Buller's Einsteinian example:

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There was a young lady named Bright,
Whose speed was far faster than light;
She set out one day
In a relative way,
And returned home the previous night.

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The longer lines, 1, 2, and 5, are bound together by one rhyme; the shorter ones, 3 and 4, by another. There is nothing in nature that says a limerick should have this form, just as there is nothing in nature that says we should have four balls and three strikes in baseball, or four downs to make ten yards in football.

But though verse is arbitrary, poetry is not. Everything in poetry is an expression of what is natural: It is the way it is because we are the way we are.

The whole approach of this book will be based upon this certainty: The nature of poetry follows from our own human nature. The main divisions are organized as we ourselves are. Human experience begins when the senses give us

(1)

IMAGES of ourself or of the world outside. These images arouse

(2)

EMOTIONS, which (with their images) we express in

(3)

WORDS, which are physically produced and have

(4)

SOUND, which comes to our ear riding the air on waves of

(5)

RHYTHM. The whole process, from the beginning, is fostered and overseen by an organizing

(6)

MIND, acting with the common sense of our everyday life, even when dealing with the uncommon sense of dreams or visions.

In a good poem the elements work together as a unit, just as our own combination of body and mind works together. But if we were studying body-and-mind as medical students do, we would soon realize that it is impossible to consider all parts of it at once. The way to deal with a complicated subject is to look at it part by part. In medical school we would expect separate lectures on the heart, the stomach, the lungs, and so forth, even though we realize no organ can function

apart from the others. And so with poetry: We have to talk separately about the elements that make it up—such as imagery, diction, rhythm—even though we know they cannot exist in isolation.

Although poetry is not bound by such arbitrary rules as games are, it does fall under the influence of certain natural laws, like those we call the rules of health, or like those that govern mountain climbing. Mountain climbers are not subject to anything as formal as the three-strike rule in baseball, but they cannot forget that they have only so many arms and legs, that some kinds of rock crumble and some do not, and that the law of gravitation can exact more severe penalties than any man-made rule book. Poetry may not have rules and regulations, but, as we shall see, it has to make sense in terms of our own human nature.

In such a study as this, specific examples are more persuasive than definitions. It is helpful to give the definition of a metaphor; it is even more helpful to give enough examples so that—as in life itself—we can come to our own conclusions about what it is.

We can also learn about things by observing what they are not. Just as rudeness can teach us to value courtesy, so a bad line or bad stanza can teach us to appreciate a good one. Some of our bad examples are so clumsy we may find ourselves laughing at them. Nothing wrong with that: A sense of humor is a sense of proportion. It is also a sense of delight—delight in noting that life has its incongruities and absurdities and that we can live in spite of them. Only a fool, said the French poet Paul Valéry, thinks a man cannot joke and be serious.

Our attitude to poetry—as to any subject—should be a questioning one. We might think of nearly every sentence in this book as ending with a ghostly question mark. Is this statement—we should ask ourselves—really true? We can decide only by considering the evidence we have: the poems we have read, the poems we are reading, and what we know of our own nature.

Although we will have to make some general statements about poetry, we can find exceptions to nearly all of them. A recent cartoon showed a professor of mathematics who had written $2 + 2 = 4$ on the blackboard. He was beginning his lecture with a “However. . . .” Readers may come across sentences in this book that they would like to see followed by a “However. . . .” They are certainly free to supply their own. This is a book to live with and be alive with; being alive is often a process of disagreement.

As individual human beings we differ greatly. In a time of increasing standardization, when more and more things and more and more people are being referred to by number instead of by name, it is im-

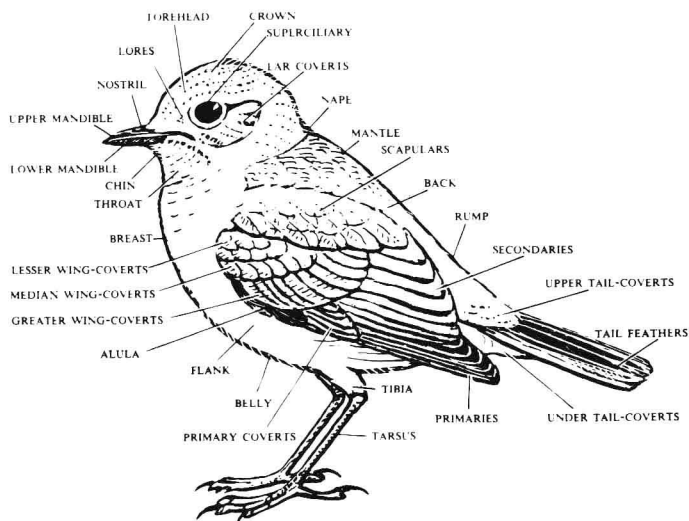
portant to cherish these differences. It seems to be a part of the general sameness of our culture that we are expected to give indiscriminate approval to accepted values. If we say we like poetry, it is assumed we like all poetry. But why should we? It is only human to have what Robert Frost called "passionate preferences." Not all readers are going to like all the poems in this book; nor should they expect to. Nor are these chapters like a tape to be fed into a computer, every millimeter of which is to be processed in exactly the same way. Human attention, like everything human, has its rhythms: Now we concentrate, now we relax, pretty much as our interests dictate. Individual teachers and individual classes, as well as individual students, will have their preferences. There is no reason they should read every poem or every chapter with equal interest. Some groups may prefer to skim or skip certain sections so that they can concentrate on others that are more to their liking. Some may prefer to read, here and there, only the poems, which are always more important than what is being said about them. We should not be misled into thinking that the poems are here only to illustrate something about poetry. Any poem might be cited to illustrate many points besides the one being made in the text that accompanies it. Over and above their relevance to any context, however, is the importance the poems have in themselves.

If we confined ourselves to poetry that belonged to the always changing world of "now," this could be a much shorter book than it is. Some years ago we would not have needed many introductory remarks to understand the lyrics of the Beatles. We would hardly have needed a book at all; we could have learned what we needed to know by going around with a transistor plugged into one ear. But the trouble with the "now" poetry of a season or two is that it fades with the season—whereas poetry, in a phrase of Ezra Pound, ought to be "news that stays news." What Emily Dickinson had to say a hundred years ago is as fresh today as when she said it. So is much of what Shakespeare said nearly four hundred years ago. Many of the lines of Sappho, from about 2600 years ago, are as vivid as news flashes.

If most of the world's great poetry is a product of the past—which is the sum of all our nows—it is only for statistical reasons: More great poets lived in those many centuries than are alive today. In discussing such a body of poetry, we can save time by resorting to what look like technical terms. These may put off some readers, who forget that they themselves make extensive use of such terms in speaking of their own interests. Referring to a midline pause in a poem as a

“caesura” is no more pedantic than referring to split T’s or tight ends or topspin or a chipshot or fuel-injection. Such technical terms are nothing but convenient shortcuts.

There are people who think that knowledge destroys their spontaneous reaction to anything beautiful. They are seldom right; generally, the more we know, the more we see to appreciate. There are people who think that to analyze a poem or, as they like to say, to “tear it apart,” is to destroy it. But one no more destroys a poem by means of analysis than one destroys birds or flowers or anything else by means of a diagram.



The Main Parts of a Bird

There is no reason to worry about this bird. It has not been injured or “taken apart.” If one is interested in birds, one likes to be able to tell one from another—a catbird from a mockingbird, a great racket-tail drongo from a blue-faced booby. The diagram shows where points of difference lie. And so with poems. Diagrams and analyses no more substitute for them than our drawing substitutes for a bird. But they may help to make a point or two.

With poetry we have to return to the reading habits of a more primitive age than our own. Poetry has no use for the kind of speed-reading techniques we are encouraged to practice with informational materials. In speed-reading, we are told not to fixate on any one word,

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not to backtrack over what we have already read, and not to subvocalize, by half pronouncing the words or by moving our lips. But in reading poetry we have to dwell on the words to savor their implications and relationships; we have to glance back and reread whenever we have a mind to; and we have to feel the words alive in our mouths, even if we move our lips to do so. We may have to read a poem several times to feel we know it—and then (as with a favorite record) return to it as many times as we want for further pleasure. In a world increasingly sophisticated, poetry is one of the few ways in which we can still afford to be primitive.

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