

An Introduction to

POETRY

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Eighth Edition

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Preface

What is poetry? Pressed for an answer, Robert Frost made a classic reply: "Poetry is the kind of thing poets write." In all likelihood, Frost was not trying merely to evade the question but to chide his questioner into thinking for himself. A trouble with definitions is that they may stop thought. If Frost had said, "Poetry is a rhythmical composition of words expressing an attitude, designed to surprise and delight, and to arouse an emotional response," the questioner might have settled back in his chair, content to have learned the truth about poetry. He would have learned nothing, or not so much as he might learn by continuing to wonder.

The nature of poetry eludes simple definitions. (In this respect it is rather like jazz. Asked after one of his concerts, "What is jazz?" Louis Armstrong replied, "Man, if you gotta ask, you'll never know.") Definitions will be of little help at first, if we are to know poetry and respond to it. We have to go to it willing to see and hear. For this reason, you are asked in reading this book not to be in any hurry to decide what poetry is, but instead to study poems and to let them grow in your mind. At the end of our discussions of poetry, the problem of definition will be taken up again (for those who may wish to pursue it).

Confronted with a formal introduction to poetry, you may be wondering, "Who needs it?" and you may well be right. It's unlikely that you have avoided meeting poetry before; and perhaps you already have a friendship, or at least a fair acquaintance, with some of the great English-speaking poets of all time. What this book provides is an introduction to the study of poetry. It tries to help you look at a poem closely, to offer you a wider and more accurate vocabulary with which to express what poems say to you. It will suggest ways to judge for yourself the poems you read. It may set forth some poems new to you.

A frequent objection is that poetry ought not to be studied at all. In this view, a poem is either a series of gorgeous noises to be funneled through one ear and out the other without being allowed to trouble the mind, or an experience so holy that to analyze it in a classroom is as cruel and mechanical as dissecting a hummingbird. To the first view, it might be countered that a good poem has something to say that is well worth listening to. To the second view, it might be argued that poems are much less perishable than hummingbirds, and luckily, we can study them in

flight. The risk of a poem's dying from observation is not nearly so great as the risk of not really seeing it at all. It is doubtful that any excellent poem has ever vanished from human memory because people have read it too closely. More likely, poems that vanish are poems that no one reads closely, for no one cares.

That poetry matters to the people who write it has been shown unmistakably by the ordeal of Soviet poet Irina Ratushinskaya, now living in the West. Sentenced to prison for three and a half years, she was given paper and pencil only twice a month to write letters to her husband and her parents and was not allowed to write anything else. Nevertheless, Ratushinskaya composed more than two hundred poems in her cell, engraving them with a burnt match in a bar of soap, then memorizing the lines. "I would read the poem and read it," she said, "until it was committed to memory—then with one washing of my hands, it would be gone."

Good poetry is something that readers and listeners, too, can care about. In fact, an ancient persuasion of humankind is that the hearing of a poem, as well as the making of a poem, can be a religious act. Poetry, in speech and song, was part of classic Greek drama, which for playwright, actor, and spectator alike was a holy-day ceremony. The Greeks' belief that a poet writes a poem only by supernatural assistance is clear from the invocations to the Muse that begin the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* and from the opinion of Socrates (in Plato's *Ion*) that a poet has no powers of invention until divinely inspired. Among the ancient Celts, poets were regarded as magicians and priests, and whoever insulted one of them might expect to receive a curse in rime potent enough to afflict him with boils and to curdle the milk of his cows. Such identifications between the poet and the magician are less common these days, although we know that poetry is involved in the primitive white-magic of children, who bring themselves good luck in a game with the charm "Roll, roll, Tootsie-roll! / Roll the marble in the hole!" and who warn against a hex while jumping along a sidewalk: "Step on a crack, / Break your mother's back." But in this age when we pride ourselves that a computer may solve the riddle of all creation as soon as it is programmed, magic seems to some people of small importance and so too does poetry. It is dangerous, however, to dismiss what we do not logically understand. To read a poem at all, we have to be willing to offer it responses *besides* a logical understanding. Whether we attribute the effect of a poem to a divine spirit or to the reactions of our glands and cortexes, we have to take the reading of poetry seriously (not solemnly), if only because—as some of the poems in this book may demonstrate—few other efforts can repay us so generously, both in wisdom and in joy.

If, as I hope you will do, you sometimes browse in the book for fun, you may be annoyed to see so many questions following the poems. Should you feel this way, try reading with a slip of paper to cover up the questions. You will then—if the Muse should inspire you—have paper in hand to write a poem.

A WORD ABOUT CAREERS

Students tend to agree that to read poets such as Shakespeare, Keats, Emily Dickinson, and Robert Frost is probably good for the spirit, and most even take some pleasure in the experience. But many, if they aren't planning to teach English and are impatient to begin some other career, often wonder whether the study of poetry, however enjoyable, is not a waste of time or, at least, an annoying obstacle.

This objection may seem reasonable, but it rests on a shaky assumption. It can be argued that, on the contrary, success in a career is not mostly a matter of learning certain information and skills that belong exclusively to a certain profession. In most careers, according to one business executive, people often fail not because they don't understand their jobs, but because they don't understand the people they work with, or their clients or customers; and so they can't imagine another person's point of view. To leap outside the walls of your self, to see through another person's eyes—this is an experience that literature abundantly offers. Although, if you are lucky, you may never meet (or have to do business with) anyone exactly like the insanely jealous speaker of the poem "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister," you will probably learn much about the kind of person he is from Robert Browning's portrait of him. Who knows? Among your fellow students or coworkers may be a J. Alfred Prufrock (the central character of T. S. Eliot's poem), or someone like John Updike's "Ex-Basketball Player." What is it like to be black, a white may wonder? Perhaps Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Gwendolyn Brooks, Rita Dove, Dudley Randall, Yusef Komunyakaa, and others have something to tell. What is it like to be a woman? A man who would learn can read, for a start, Emily Dickinson, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Denise Levertov, Adrienne Rich, Anne Bradstreet, Carole Satyamurti, Mona Van Duyn, Sharon Olds, and many more.

Plodding singlemindedly toward careers, some people are like horses wearing blinders. For many, the goals look fixed and predictable. Competent nurses, accountants, and dental technicians seem always in demand. Others may find that in our society some careers, like waves in the sea, will rise or fall unexpectedly. Think how many professions we now take for granted, which only a few years ago didn't even exist: computer programming, energy conservation, tofu manufacture, videotape rental. Others that once looked like lifetime meal tickets have been cut back and nearly ruined: shoe repairing, commercial fishing, railroading.

In a society perpetually in change, it may be risky to lock yourself on one track to a career, refusing to consider any other. "We are moving," writes John Naisbitt in *Megatrends*, a study of our changing society, "from the specialist, soon obsolete, to the generalist who can adapt." Perhaps the greatest opportunity in your whole life lies in a career that has yet to be invented. If you do change your career as you go along, you will be like most

people. According to U.S. Department of Labor statistics, the average person in a working life changes occupations three times. When for some unforeseen reason you have to make such a change, basic skills may be your most valuable credentials—and a knowledge of humanity.

Literature has much practical knowledge to offer you. An art of words, it can help you become more sensitive to language, both your own and other people's. It can make you aware of the difference between the word that is exactly right and the word that is merely good enough—Mark Twain calls it “the difference between the lightning and the lightning-bug.” Read a fine work of literature alertly, and some of its writer's sensitivity to words may grow on you. A Supreme Court justice, John Paul Stevens, gave his opinion (informally) that the best preparation for law school is to study poetry. Why? George D. Gopen, an English professor with a law degree, says it may be because “no other discipline so closely replicates the central question asked in the study of legal thinking: Here is a text; in how many ways can it have meaning?” (By the way, if a career you plan has anything to do with advertising, whether writing it or buying it or resisting it, be sure to read Chapter 4, “Saying and Suggesting,” on the hints inherent in words.)

Many careers today, besides law, call for close reading and for clear thinking expressed on paper. Lately, college placement directors have reported more demand for graduates who are good readers and writers. The reason is evident: employers need people who can handle words. In a recent survey conducted by Cornell University, business executives were asked to rank in importance the traits they look for when hiring. Leadership was first, but skill in writing and speaking came in fourth, ahead of managerial skill, ahead of skill in analysis. Times change, but to think cogently and to express yourself well are abilities the world still needs.

That is why most colleges, however thorough the career training they may provide, still insist on general training as well, including basic courses in the humanities: No one can promise that your study of literature will result in cash profit, but at least the kind of wealth that literature provides is immune to fluctuations of the Dow Jones average. A highly paid tool and die maker, asked by his community college English instructor why he had enrolled in an evening literature course, said, “Oh, I just decided there has to be more to life than work, a few beers, and the bowling alley.” If you should discover in yourself a fondness for great reading, then in no season of your life are you likely to become incurably bored or feel totally alone—even after you make good in your career, even when there is nothing on television.

CHANGES IN THIS EDITION

Many renovations have been made, while retaining the best-liked material. A whole new chapter has been added: “Poetry and Personal Identity,” exploring ways in which poets have defined themselves in personal, social,

sexual, and ethnic terms. Please review the new chapter—its impact will be stronger than this summary can explain. An opening section examines how a poet's cultural heritage can inform his or her work; and the chapter includes 15 teachable new poems in praise of diversity.

In Chapter 1, "Reading a Poem," a new section on dramatic poetry supplies information on a valuable kind of poetry that was previously ignored—instructors who missed Browning's "My Last Duchess" and wanted it restored will be glad to find it in the new section. In Chapter 13, now called "Myth and Narrative," the section "Myth and Popular Culture" is brand new—and (unless I miss my guess) is provocative.

To reflect late developments in criticism and literary theory, there's a new supplement, "Critical Approaches to Literature," that many instructors told us they wished to see included. Nine critical approaches—some of them immediately useful to students in writing papers—are explained, each followed by passages from prominent critics to illustrate how the method may be applied.

About a fifth of the poems in this edition are new. Presently there are considerably more women and minority poets, among them Carole Satyamurti, Wendy Cope, Carolyn Forché, Alice Fulton, Julia Alvarez, Shirley Geok-lin Lim, Emma Lazarus, Louise Glück, Anne Stevenson, Emily Groscholz, N. Scott Momaday, Claude McKay, Alberto Ríos, Derek Walcott, José Emilio Pacheco, Yusef Komunyakaa, and many more. Those interested in the Cowboy Poetry movement will now find a cowboy poem: Wallace McRae's "Reincarnation." But veteran users of this book needn't fear that it has gone wildly trendy. It now has two of Keats's odes and more Donne, Frost, Millay, and Larkin than ever, and still clings to both "Elegy in a Country Churchyard" and "Lycidas."

The chapter "Poems for the Eye," little used, has disappeared to save space, but you will find its meat in Chapter 11 under "Visual Poetry." Many of the questions and the Suggestions for Writing (useful topics that end practically every chapter) have been fine-tooled, and the popular section "Lives of the Poets" has been updated.

No doubt the most beneficent change, however, is the arrival of Dana Gioia as collaborator. Why should the title page now claim two authors? Some explanation is due. This book was originally written in 1964–66 when I was in my thirties; now, I near the age when retirement is usually mandatory. For the book to stay alive, for it to keep responding to the newer and harder demands of students and instructors today, I realized, it was going to need the insights of someone spryer, someone in the thick of current literary and intellectual life, someone actively engaged in the college classroom. Ideally, I hoped to enlist someone who would be both a good poet and a courageous, broad-minded critic, someone with stamina, zest, a sense of humor, with experience in both teaching and the rough-and-tumble workaday world that many students know—someone, I thought wistfully, exactly like Dana Gioia.

Born in Los Angeles, son of an Italian-American father and a Mexican mother, Dana Gioia (pronounced "Dane-a Joy-a") is used to working hard. On his way up, he garnered a B.A. and an M.B.A. from Stanford, and an M.A. in comparative literature from Harvard besides. Author of two admired collections of poetry, *Daily Horoscope* and *The Gods of Winter* (Graywolf Press, 1986 and 1991), he recently became the first American poet (as far as I know) to have a book selected by Britain's Poetry Book Club. "Can Poetry Matter?," the title essay in his 1992 collection of criticism from Graywolf Press, drew an unprecedentedly large response from readers of *The Atlantic* when it first appeared in May 1991, and the book itself became a finalist for the 1992 National Book Critics Circle Award. In addition, he has translated Eugenio Montale's *Mottetti* (Graywolf, 1990) and co-edited two anthologies of Italian poetry. The perfect guy to tackle a poetry textbook, I figured. But, as a busy and successful business executive, Dana was otherwise engaged.

Then, to my glee, a miracle happened. Dana Gioia gave up his business career to become a full-time writer and teacher at Johns Hopkins University and, later, Sarah Lawrence College. Soon—I couldn't believe my luck!—we were sitting down together in my musty workspace, where old textbooks and textbook paraphernalia had gathered mold for over a quarter-century, mulling the fresh new book that this eighth edition ought to be. I think we were both surprised by how easy it was to work together. This edition pleases me more than did any previous. It builds, I believe, a Golden Gate Bridge across a generation gap. New Chapter 14 and the sections dealing with narrative poetry and with popular culture, also the Critical Approaches supplement, are the result of Dana's inspiration. As they turned out, some thoughts from us both went into them, but mainly they embody his ideas, and indeed, his very words.

THANKS

To tell the truth, this book has never been a one-man show, but always the result of collaboration. Once again it has been revised, corrected, and shaped by wisdom and advice from instructors who actually put it to the test—also from a number who, in teaching poetry, preferred other textbooks to it, but who generously criticized this book anyway and made suggestions for it. (Some responded to it as part of *Literature, Fifth Edition*.)

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X.J.K.

TO THE MUSE

Give me leave, Muse, in plain view to array
Your shift and bodice by the light of day.
I would have brought an epic. Be not vexed
Instead to grace a niggling schoolroom text;
Let down your sanction, help me to oblige
Him who would lead fresh devots to your liege,
And at your altar, grant that in a flash
They, he and I know incense from dead ash.

—X.J.K.

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