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John Strachan & Richard Terry 著

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John Strachan and Richard Terry

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Introduction

I

The purpose of this book can be expressed in one sentence. It is intended as an accessible survey of those technical aspects of poetry which students of English literature often see as daunting. It attempts to demystify the study of poetry, aiming to explain the issues in a lively and informative fashion. In effect, *Poetry* is intended as a route map through the poetic maze, with chapters on such essential but often complex issues as rhythm and metre, the use of metaphor in poetry, poetic sound effects and the visual appearance of poetry. Crucially, the book aims to make the jargon of poetry less intimidating, offering clear explanations of poetic terminology allied to close readings which demonstrate how poetry actually works in practice. Its organising principle is tripartite, consisting of the introduction of terminology, exposition and illustration. Our hope is that the text will thus provide a stimulating blend of different types of discussion. Throughout, poetic terms are introduced, explained and demonstrated by citation and analysis. The latter aspect is perhaps the most crucial to the reader. The study of poetic devices, like the study of the terminology of all intellectual disciplines, is best addressed by examples of how poets have actually used these devices. Consequently, each chapter contains several sustained set-piece readings of poems that are presented as illustrations of the critical readings readers can learn to perform for themselves. It is our hope that this book will allow students to move away from the feeling that the formal aspects of poetry are matters which make sense only to a few initiates, and that they will, as a consequence, feel comfortable with these issues in a manner which will directly and practically inform their wider reading and studying of English poetry. If this book can prompt a sense amongst its readers that the

technical analysis of poetry is both valuable and something which is well within their intellectual grasp, then its purpose will have been achieved.

II

In his meditative satire *Table Talk* (published in 1782), the poet William Cowper (1731–1800) worried that his great early eighteenth-century predecessor Alexander Pope, with his carefully contrived and regular verse, had ‘made poetry a mere mechanic art’. Here Cowper stands at the cusp of the Romantic period and, indeed, seems to anticipate the Romantic view of poetry, with its distrust of an undue emphasis upon the technical aspects of verse and attendant privileging of the concepts of originality, spontaneity and self-expression. Indeed, by the end of the eighteenth century, Cowper’s great admirer William Wordsworth (1770–1850) manifests an anxiety that the formal examination of a work of art somehow threatens to mutilate and destroy its effect: ‘we murder to dissect’. Such an attitude has its post-Romantic devotees to this day, amongst those readers of poetry who maintain that there is something cold, even reptilian, about the academic study of literature and that poetry is an art primarily to be enjoyed on an emotional level. A fine poem, according to this line of argument, is, after all, a thing of beauty, appealing to the heart rather than the head; and close, formal analysis serves only to break the butterfly on the wheel. We would not wish to deny the emotional power of verse and acknowledge, furthermore, that the affective potency of good poetry does have something intangible about it, often seeming to deny and defy any attempt to catch its essence. However, and whatever high Romantic argument might suggest, we would also argue that poetry is a contrived and highly wrought cultural product which is heavily dependent upon formal and generic conventions which have developed and evolved through many centuries. This book’s purpose is to explore these formal and technical aspects of English verse in an accessible and entertaining manner. In essence, *Poetry* examines the ‘mechanic art’ of verse, addressing what one might call the nuts and bolts which lock the poetic work of art together. Such an attention to the ‘mechanic’ is not to deny the ‘art’ of poetry, any more than an understanding of the machinery of a Ferrari distracts from its status as a thing of beauty – a mechanically tooled thing of beauty, but a thing of beauty nonetheless. Indeed, we would argue that an understanding of the formal underpinning of a poem actually serves to deepen one’s appreciation of its status as a work of art: the pleasure

and exhilaration which one can feel in reading a fine poem are sensations which should actually be heightened by an appreciation of the skill of its construction.

On a more pragmatic level, it is undeniable that a knowledge of the poetic terminology addressed in this book and the critical skills which it seeks to demonstrate by example are of great utility to the principal audience for this book, the undergraduate student of English. This is a book which aims to give such readers the tools to work on the formal organisation of poetry with confidence. It discusses form both through definition and through example; each chapter's introduction of technical terminology is allied to close readings which demonstrate how poets have *used* these techniques. These illustrations take the form of examples drawn from a wide range of English poetry from the Renaissance to the present day, from the sixteenth-century work of Edmund Spenser (c. 1552–1599) to the contemporary Afro-Caribbean voice of John Agard (b. 1949) – the adjective 'English' is here used with reference to language rather more than to nationality. English poetry is a tradition which continues to develop and mutate in exciting new forms to this day, a rich and diverse set of writings which in recent decades has demonstrated the capacity to assimilate new voices from a multitude of different circumstances (social, sexual, racial). Consequently, the critical skills which this book seeks to demonstrate are not, to use Wordsworth's term, skills of dissection, as the analysis of English poetry does not involve the student conducting an autopsy upon a deceased patient, but rather what one might call the diagnosis of a poetic body which is still healthy and vibrant today.

This book is based on the authors' practical experience of teaching poetry at undergraduate level. Indeed, it is heavily influenced by discussions with our first-year students about the difficulties raised by the study of poetry and, most crucially, by what students see as the key critical skills necessary to that study. We have commonly found that our students initially find the formal study of poetry, with its seemingly impenetrable jargon and preponderance of Greek words, somewhat daunting and this book seeks to dispel this impression. It does not seek to deny that, for example, the discourse of prosody or the varieties of figurative language are intellectually challenging. However, it does assert that these are matters which can be understood by the student, rather than remaining the province of those initiated into the academic and poetic communities. This book attempts to fill the gaps in knowledge identified by our students, readers who feel little apprehension

about being required to answer assignment questions about the themes and contexts of poetry (whether social, political or sexual), but who tend to find the technical aspects of poetry somewhat alienating. In other words, assessing what poetry *says* seems to hold few terrors for the typical student, but the question of *how* these meanings are delivered is rather more problematical. Consequently, our book is an attempt to offer an accessible and clearly-written textbook for both the student and the general reader seeking to understand how poetry *works*. It guides the reader who is, for example, uncertain about the distinction between free verse and blank verse or bemused by the difference between a metaphor and a metonym through the problems raised by the study of poetry.

III

The book is divided into six chapters which address different aspects of the study of poetry, and a concluding Glossary of poetical terms. It opens and closes by considering matters of definition. The opening chapter's examination of certain key poetic terms which are inescapable in the study of English poetry and its history is intended to offer a more in-depth and expansive treatment of these crucial terms than is available in the Glossary's more concise format. Thus the first chapter, 'The key words of poetry', begins from the starting question 'What is poetry?', a deceptively simple question and one which poets and critics have provided with a series of different answers. From this it then moves on to a historical overview of the matters at issue in the rest of the volume in a discussion of the large taxonomic labels which are used in literary history and university survey courses on English poetry: 'medieval', 'Renaissance', 'neoclassicism', 'Romanticism' and so on. The detailed consideration of the history of English poetry is outside the province of this book and is not attempted here. Nonetheless, this chapter's focus upon those vexed definitional questions which underpin the historical study of English poetry, quite apart from complementing the attention to terminology and definition evident throughout this volume, also serves as a reminder that poetry should be read with a sense of its historical circumstance and significance.

Poems are not simply things that we *read*, but also things that we *see*, and Chapter 2, 'The shape of poetry', considers the visuality of poetry, looking at the different ways in which poets exploit the medium of the printed page. For centuries, poets have exploited the visual medium of print by composing

poems that are self-consciously configured on the page and this chapter addresses the ways that poetry recommends itself to the reading eye; whilst some poets have written 'shape' poems which represent visually their own subject-matter, others, while not arranging their poems pictorially, have organised them spatially in an equally self-conscious way, employing the various resources of typography to complement their thematic preoccupations. One particularly important convention in the visual appearance of poetry is the stanza, and the chapter concludes by considering different sorts of stanzaic form which have been used by poets down the centuries. Chapter 3, 'The sound of poetry', complements the argument of the previous chapter by considering poetry not as something that is *seen* but as something that is *heard* and addressing all aspects of poetic sound effects excluding metre and rhythm (which are treated separately in Chapter 4). As with the visual medium, poets also exploit the medium of sound and perhaps the most obvious of such exploitations is through introducing rhyme. Consequently, this chapter considers different types of rhyme and examines how poets can exploit these for particular effect. Rhyme is a sound repetition normally falling at the end of the line, but poetry also uses similar patterns of repetition internal to the line, repetitions that we call alliteration and this device is also examined here. Finally, through a reflection upon the phenomenon of 'sound poems', the chapter examines the question of whether or not sound itself, as a pure entity, can convey meaning.

Chapter 4, 'Metre and rhythm', also attends to sound-patterning, building on the arguments of the previous chapter in an examination of the crucial role of poetic metre in English verse. This chapter addresses that aspect of poetry which many students find particularly terrifying: prosody, the analysis of the rhythmical patterning – the arrangement of poetic lines into stressed and unstressed syllables – evident in almost all pre-twentieth-century English verse. As well as introducing students to the full range of metrical forms, it also reminds them that verse scansion is something of a subjective activity: scanning a poem is not so much a matter of identifying a pre-existent pattern but of working out what the words are trying to say and how the lines would have to be scanned to bear out this meaning. The chapter also demonstrates how stress is important in all spoken language, and how poetry can be seen as merely a specialised kind of spoken or speakable language (a theme also taken up later in the book, in Chapter 6).

Poets often use words to mean something other than what they literally mean and Chapter 5, 'Comparisons and associations', considers the use of

figurative language in poetry. It distinguishes between the overt and covert comparison (simile and metaphor), and uses the nomenclature of 'tenor', 'vehicle' and 'ground' as a way of exploring how both sorts of comparison work. It also looks at specialist sorts of figurative construct such as the 'symbol' and 'conceit', both of which have great importance in English poetry. Chapter 6, 'The words of poetry', considers the ways in which poets negotiate the relationship between their own poetic language and the language of everyday speech and writing. Every time poets write a poem, they must position their work in relation to the language at large and this chapter considers a wide gamut of issues to do with the nature of poetic language. Whilst there have been poets (such as Wordsworth) who have deliberately tried to denude their poetry of ostensible poeticality, others have used poetic idioms deliberately divorced from normal language, from the 'poetic diction' of some eighteenth-century poets to more recent poets' tendency to slew their language towards archaism, dialect or individually fashioned poetic argots. The final part of the book, the Glossary of poetical terms, records, and gives illustrations of, all the specialist vocabulary used in the book as part of a wide-ranging glossary of poetic devices. It offers a systematic lexicon of poetical terminology, providing at-a-glance answers to definitional questions about poetry, from the most commonplace devices used by poets (metaphor, simile and symbol) to the rather more obscure and arcane (anacrusis, cretic, wrenched accent). The latter are included for the sake of comprehensiveness, ensuring that the Glossary will remain a useful tool for students, at whatever stage in their academic career they might be.

IV

This is a book primarily concerned with the formal organisation of poetry. Nonetheless, it should be acknowledged that poetry cannot adequately be discussed solely in terms of itself, in terms of form alone. Poetic language is but a specialised form of linguistic usage and, like all language users, poets use language for effect, using words to communicate, to entertain, to persuade. Any attempt to study the form of poetry divorced from the examination of its meanings and content, and of the various contexts in which it participates, is an arid and inadequate discipline. That said, however, an attention to poetic form remains a crucial part of the study of poetry. Furthermore, we think it fair to argue that the focus of contemporary pre-university study of poetry has, perhaps, moved rather too far away from

an attention to formal structure, leaving undergraduate readers feeling ill-equipped for the task of stylistic analysis. The critic L. C. Knights once wrote that literary criticism is an 'exploration, in the first place, of words in a certain arrangement'; however, the emphasis in much school – and some university – teaching has shifted away from this first principle, stressing what poetry *means* rather than attending to the way in which these meanings are achieved. Poetic content is important and the reader who neglects it is indulging in pointless intellectual manoeuvring. However, the theme of this book, the poetic arrangement of words, is still central to the study of poetry. We hope that this volume will give its readers critical skills to complement those which they employ in their study of poetry's more thematic concerns. Form complements content and an understanding of how poetry works is crucial to its study and to an appreciation of the extraordinary vigour and versatility of English verse.