

IRON · HONEY · GOLD

THE USES OF VERSE

AN ANTHOLOGY COMPILED BY

DAVID HOLBROOK

VOLUME TWO

Three lives bath one life – Iron, honey, gold. The gold, the honey gone – Left is the hard and cold.

ISAAC ROSENBERG

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PREFACE AND NOTES

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VOLUME II

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IMAGININGS

Poems

(Putnam, 1960)

ENGLISH FOR MATURITY

English in the Secondary School (C.U.P. 1961)

For R.B.F., R.O'M. & D.T. and our children

O England! full of sinne, but most of sloth; Spit out thy flegme, and fill thy brest with glorie: Thy Gentrie bleat, as if thy native cloth Transfus'd a sheepishnesse into thy storie:

Not that they are all so; but that the most
Are gone to grasse, and in the pasture lost.
This losse springs chiefly from our education.
Some till the ground, but let weeds choke their sonne...
The way to make thy sonne rich, is to fill
His minde with rest, before his trunk with riches:
For wealth without contentment, climbes a hill
To feel those tempests, which fly over ditches...

GEORGE HERBERT, The Church-Porch

PREFACE

Poetry is language given rhythm. A doctor recently did some experiments on the effect of rhythm on people, in a laboratory in Oxford. He asked some young men to beat time to jazz records for long sessions, and fixed them to a machine that measured the electric waves in their brains, their heart beats, and their rate of breathing. He found that the men tried to breathe in time with the music, and if the music was fast they tried to breathe faster than normal.

Now when you breathe faster than normal more blood flows to your brain, and you tend to lose consciousness. And so some of these young men went to sleep for short periods—just for a minute or two—while they went on making rhythmic movements and kept breathing in time to the music. Something like this must always happen to us when we are affected by rhythm, in marching, dancing, listening to music, in saying poetry, or singing hymns. On the other hand, when we are very excited or upset about something, our minds tend to work rhythmically, and we speak in rhythm. You will have known the kind of night before a party, or Christmas Eve, when you've suddenly heard your brain saying 'I must get up, I must get up, I must get up,' or some such idiotic phrase over and over again: or heard someone shouting in their excitement, 'I've got it, I've got it, I've got it!' Perhaps the most moving kind of natural rhythmical talk one can hear in life is that between the midwife and a mother after a child's first cry as it is born. After quiet instructions and all the calmness you hear them repeating with relief and joy such phrases as 'Oh, my little girl... isn't it marvellous... Oh, my little girl... Now you'll be happy.. isn't it marvellous... Oh my little girl.' And, of course, the phrase, 'It's a boy' has a rhythm all its own.

A poet tries to catch such rhythms from what people say in life and put them into words so that we hear them again and again. A composer setting the words to music will reduce the shape and rhythm of phrases to something very simple, but which reminds us of rhythms in life—if you ever hear Handel's *Messiah*, for instance, listen to the chorus 'He trusted in God that He would deliver Him: let Him deliver Him if He delight in Him', and you will hear the people laughing and jeering at Christ, or in the aria 'Thou shalt break them... Thou shalt dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel', you can hear the pots being thrown, in the rhythm.

When we hear such music or read such poetry we are 'sent'. Of course, people don't always just go to sleep when they are affected by rhythm, or even as they breathe faster and more blood flows to their brains. They can also pass into a kind of trance, and behave in certain kinds of uplifted ways, in which they feel they no longer belong on the earth any more. You know this trance-like state, and you call it 'being sent': and you know it is rhythm that 'sends' you. Rhythm in poetry is, of course, different from rhythm in dance music: but the 'way it goes' you will know from ballads, skiffle songs, nursery rhymes and hymns, and it has things in common with the effect of drums and dances. Poetry began in the dances of primitive people when they danced and chanted to 'send' themselves into magical states.

Primitive people are 'sent' by rhythmical dancing and chanting into trances in which they are able to do things that no normal person could do, or would wish to do. And often they work themselves up into these states in order

to make war without fear, say, or to enlist everyone in a common effort to gather the harvest, to sow, to go on a great expedition. Or they perform rites to overcome fear, of midwinter darkness or of evil spirits: these dances make everyone feel they 'belong' to the tribe: they work themselves into a trance in which the individual doesn't matter any more—only the tribe.

To make everyone feel they 'belong', primitive people will keep up certain stories about the tribe, and celebrate certain big events like battles, just as we remember Waterloo or Remembrance Day. Sometimes the episodes they need to remember are long, and in order to remember them they fit them to a repeating rhythmical pattern, perhaps with rhymes, so that they are easier to remember. Often a primitive tribesman will make a rhyme out of an event that very day, in order to preserve the memory for others. Here is the tune of an Australian natives' song in their 'corroboree': get someone to play it on the piano:



And here is the same kind of chant, but here it is a cante-fable from Europe and tells a story. Once fairy tales must have been told with tunes like this: first a bit of story, and

then a little song such as this, repeated while the teller remembered the next bit:



Many of the ballads in this anthology are in a simple form like this, with melody, to help the singer remember a story.

So primitive people use rhythm to make everyone in the tribe feel he 'belongs', to 'send' people towards great efforts, and to remember what happened in the past.

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Their dance and chants are nearly always done with ceremonies, too, and if you watched them from a helicopter you would see that the movement wasn't aimless as it is in our dances from fox-trot to cha-cha, but meaningful. That is, they move in circles, or patterns, or towards an altar or some central place. If you know any of the old English country dances you will find they have elaborate patterns in this way: and often they are very mysterious, as, for instance, is the Abbots Bromley Horn Dance, which dances a parable of the struggle between light and darkness.

Many of these dances were done at funerals, weddings and birth ceremonies. Of these things primitive people were very afraid. It seemed terrifying to them that we come from nowhere into the world, that when people are married they begin to have babies, and that we all have to die. Indeed, these are the great mysteries of life, and will always be things for us to marvel at, and to be troubled about, however we try to explain them by science or philosophy.

Primitive people used to, and still do, explain these things to themselves, or celebrate them, in their dances and ceremonies at such times as births, weddings and funerals. They danced to drive away evil spirits, and performed all kinds of pantomimes. For instance, some believed that when a woman married it was as easy for evil spirits to enter her body as for a new baby to find its way there: so, in fear of this, they had two or three other women disguised as the bride, in order to fox the spirits. The husband had to guess which of the women behind the veils was his future wife. This is believed to be the origin of the bride's veil and our bridesmaids. Or, when young boys grew up to be young men they were, and still are in places (in Africa for example), given a new 'birth'—

made to stumble through a great heap of muck and mud, or through a narrow passage, or through bushes. This is the origin of several of the games children play, such as 'Oranges and Lemons' or 'Draw A Pail of Water', where players go under a bridge of hands, and the verse says, 'Pray young lady come under my bush' and so on.

So poetry, song, dance and music all began in these ceremonies which were to do with birth, 're-birth' on entering adulthood, marriage, and death. Most poetry is still about love and death, and so are many children's games. The ceremonies for which poetry and music were first invented developed in order that those taking part could be made to feel happier about the things that upset them most. Sometimes such mysteries as death trouble primitive people so much that they observe the most extraordinary rites and taboos to deal with their fears. In the Trobriand Islands, for instance, a widow shaves her head and disfigures herself with grease and soot for many months after her husband's death.

But as ceremonies and celebrations developed into what we would call art—that is, the performances of dances, plays and rituals about marriage or death in general, rather than ceremonies for one particular death or marriage—so human beings came to use poetry, music and drama to ask, What is life for? Naturally, when someone dies, or people get married, or a child is born, or a young man receives the key of life on his twenty-first birthday, we all think, if only for a minute or two, about 'what life is for'. What are we here for? What should we use all our strength and skill for on this earth? And out of such public questionings emerged, in human history, the religious service on the one hand and drama on the other. On the one hand the morning service in the Church of England, matins, say, or the Roman Catholic Mass: on the other, the mum-

mer's play, the plays in the middle ages about the history of the world and the life of Christ, Punch and Judy, and the proper theatre, from Greek tragedy to Shakespeare and Murder in the Cathedral. Another development was in people gathering together to hear the traditional fables, story-ballads, and historical tales recited or sung. From these, then—the religious service, the drama, and the minstrel's recital—came the rhythmical use of words we call poetry. And in these uses of poetry we find shapes and patterns—in the five acts of a tragedy, or the chorus of a ballad, or the movement of the dancers in a mummers' play, and the processional anthems in churches. These patterns and shapes are all devised to make people feel answers to their question. 'What is our life for?'

The circling round in the ring dance, the squares in square dancing, the lines passing through the chopper in 'London Bridge is Broken Down', the movements to and from the altar in the Mass, are all movements which say to us, 'perhaps life has a shape like this'. The one archetypal pattern which runs through all our European art is, of course, the cross, the 'tree' on which Christ was crucified to redeem every human soul. Our churches are in the shape of a cross, and the services of the church are devised to fit that pattern—the theatre, with its auditorium, wings and depth of stage, is not unrelated to the cross in shape.

We have only to get into a ring, as we do in Auld Lang Syne, to feel united, happy together, and better able to face the world. There is a great feeling of unity between the members of an audience at a football match or a circus: a good actor and a good team will use this feeling of at-one-ness in an audience. Soldiers in formation, as they used to be in war before this century, in fours and squares were able, for the same reasons, to face the

terrible things that happened when the cannon balls and bullets hit them: the regiment meant more than any one individual. United we stand—divided we fall: and so, if I think of myself as a member of a forward line in a football match I shall play better than I would if I thought I was all on my own.

If, then, you have a ring, or a square, or a peculiar arrangement of people in a pattern, and make the rhythms of music and poetry with them, they are 'sent'. They are 'sent' into a trance-like state in which they feel happier together, in which they feel that they know what they live for, because of the patterns in their arrangement, or movement, or in the costume, music or words. We all feel safe and sure of ourselves when we see such patterns, particularly patterns which repeat themselves, as on wallpaper: or when we hear themes in music or lines in ballads recurring. And this is like feeling safe as we did as babies, when our next feed came round; or as children when tops or fivestones come out again in March or autumn; or as for all of us Monday morning comes again. We say to ourselves, we're here again, we've been here before, and we know how to deal with this. Poetry, music and dance all have the kind of regularity which pleases us because it makes us feel secure in life.

Changes, of course, do us good, once we have a grasp of the pattern of things, once we feel secure. Changes are painful sometimes, like going to school the first time, or falling in love. Change is, however, often growth, like becoming old enough to run errands or help in the house. And, similarly, a change in the rhythm of a piece of music or poetry, can be both a shock, and a new growth in feeling or understanding. The Oxford doctor's men fell asleep particularly when clarinet solos followed periods of playing by the whole band. And they fell asleep, too, when, with

cheers and clapping, they were made to feel part of a large audience.

What has all this about being 'sent' to do with the poems in this book? Really it is saying that poetry is very different from other kinds of reading matter. It doesn't merely tell you about life: it changes your whole being: and it does this by the complicated movement of the sounds of words in time we call rhythm. Poetry is no good to anyone unless it 'sends' them. Some are more affected by it than others, even bodily, so that the hair stands up on the back of their necks when they hear familiar or very beautiful lines. But everyone responds to some verse, if only to boogie songs. And when you do respond to poetry, you are affected in your whole mind and body, your whole 'you'. It may make you feel happy 'right through'. It may help make you feel safe and secure, as the primitive savage is made to feel safe against his fears by his ceremonies. It may 'send' you by changing your way of seeing things, as the Oxford men were 'sent' by changes in the music. Or, as they were 'sent' by being made to feel members of a large group, it may 'send' you by helping you feel a member of the large community of people, who have used the English language to make sense out of life.

I hope you will find yourselves 'sent' by most of the poems in this anthology: more than you are by popular commercial songs—in whatever form they may be at the moment—rock 'n' roll, cha-cha, or whatever. These are exciting, and they tell you something about life. They send you by their rhythm into states of excitement. But there are some kinds of rhythm that don't lead anywhere. Not long ago a dictator in Germany found he could hypnotise people quite simply by filling a great arena full of men in uniforms and flags. He then walked along in

procession with a drum beating. When he spoke to them, hysterically, though it was utter nonsense, they took it in. He 'sent' them, the German nation, to war—millions were maimed and killed before Hitler was put down. And so rhythm in songs, like that of the Nazi Horst Wessel song, can send people to war, or to live worse rather than better, to be more cruel to one another rather than kinder. This is true of the monotonous rhythms of much commercial music. Those who write it and put it out have found that they can 'send' hundreds of thousands of 'cats' into hysterical states by writing music which is cruder than that of primitive tribes.

And we should always remember that popular songs like the jingles on television advertisements are written not out of personal suffering or love, for 'the advantage of any poor soul', but for money.

Who are the men and women who wrote the songs in this anthology? About half of them we know little; a few like Pope and Wordsworth were regular poets; Burns was a cottar's (cottager's) son; Clare was a ploughboy; Crabbe was a country parson; Chaucer was a customs official and diplomat. Some poems were written by emperors and kings. But many of them were written by unknown people—odd cowboys, miners, prospectors, negroes, soldiers. They wrote for love, not money. They used verse to give them comfort and vitality, to put into words the 'iron, honey, gold' of each life. Their rhythms, and the rhythms of primitive African or negro jazz drummers are far better than the rhythms of commercial music. What do I mean by better? More subtle, more complex, closer to our hearts' beats, meaning moresending us, not to sleep or into a vacant trance, but to fall in love more deeply, to be more courageous, to be good parents and partners in marriage, and to be kinder

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