

Denys
Thompson
The uses of
poetry



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DENYS THOMPSON

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Preface

This book aims to make a general map of a large territory: the needs met by poetry and the purposes proposed for it from the earliest times. Ideally music would be considered too, as it used to be much more than an accompaniment to words, but lack of knowledge precludes this. Ideally too there should be related anthologies as illustrations.

Speech and probably poetry have been in existence for many thousands of years, but the effective life of printing is only about five hundred years. During this time the part played by poetry, once very large, in the life of man has steadily diminished; though there are still countries where poets are punished and imprisoned for writing poems, an activity necessarily dissident under any form of tyranny. As the utility of poetry has decreased, there is less to be said about it; so that poetry before print gets a good deal of attention. But it must be stressed that there is no intention of idealising any past era; an age remarkable for beautiful poetry can be unpleasant and dangerous to live in. The period that produced Shakespeare and other poets was remarkable for vicious religious intolerance, capricious injustice, hideous punishments and a system of police spies.

In a sense the volume is propaganda for poetry. It stems from a belief that the restrictions on thought and language that have been imposed with the devotion of great resources to science have thwarted human beings and stifled their development; and that emotional education such as that given by the arts is needed for the growth of whole men.

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The nature of poetry

The deep roots of speech

There is little point in trying to site a dividing line between the territories of poetry and prose, for some of the corralled inmates will leap over any barrier. Dickens in his novels broke into verse in more than one place, the best-known example being the comment on the death of Little Nell in chapter 72 of *The Old Curiosity Shop*:

Oh! it is hard to take to heart the lesson that such deaths will teach, but let no man reject it, for it is one that all must learn, and is a mighty, universal Truth. When Death strikes down the innocent and young, for every fragile form from which he lets the panting spirit free a hundred virtues rise – in shapes of mercy, charity and love – to walk the world, and bless it. Of every tear that sorrowing mortals shed on such green graves, some good is born, some gentler nature comes.

One might also cite the description of the steeple at the beginning of *The Chimes* and of the tower in the third quarter of the same story. George Eliot too wrote a kind of verse in *Adam Bede*, in the account of Hetty's troubles after she met Arthur Donnithorne, and in Dinah Morris's interview with Hetty in prison. Moreover *poèmes trouvées* can be found in scientific prose:

There is no force, however great,
Can stretch a cord, however fine,
Into a horizontal line
That shall be absolutely straight.

And from a prose translation of Linnaeus (quoted by Elizabeth Sewell) an arrangement in verse form:

Mollusca

Are naked,
furnished with tentacula
or arms; for the most part
inhabitants of the sea;
and, by their phosphorous quality,
illuminate
the dark abyss of waters, reflecting
their lights to the firmament. Thus

what is beneath the water
corresponds
with that which is above.
(*Systema Naturae*, vol. 4.)

Evidently powerful feeling or intense interest can cause a writer to move into verse when he needs a form of expression marked by a pronounced rhythm and a concentration achieved with the aid of imagery. Hardy wrote some good sense about this:

(The shortest way to good prose is by the route of good verse. The apparent paradox – I cannot remember who first expressed it – that the best poetry is the best prose ceases on examination to be a paradox and becomes a truism. Anybody may test it for himself by taking any five lines in verse and, casting off the fetters of metre and rhyme that seem to bind the poet, trying to express the same ideas more freely and accurately in prose. He will find that it cannot be done: the words of the verse – fettered as he thought them – are the only words that will convey the ideas that were intended to be conveyed.

(Hardy 1967, p. 14))

The content of poetry is usually denser and more memorable, the style is more incisive and makes a more immediate impact. But, once more, the borderline is vague, and we must be satisfied with the obvious point that the effective rhythms of speech in all their variety underlie every piece of good writing, whether poetry or prose. We therefore start by considering the part played by speech in human life.

Human beings are not just passive automata. They do not merely suffer the effects of influences from outside, but react positively to every disturbance. It rains, and men put on waterproof clothes; it freezes, and the birds puff out their feathers to get some insulation. All creatures exhibit a consciousness, a general awareness, a disposition to try out their environment, and a drive to 'achieve intellectual control over the situations confronting them' (Polanyi, p. 132). Most people except convinced reductionists will recognise on their own experience and observation the truth of the statement that

Directiveness and creativeness are fundamental characteristics of life, shared by no inorganic system; that they are not to be explained in terms of mechanism or purpose; that human directiveness and purposiveness in thought and action are a specialised development of the directiveness and creativeness inherent in life. . . Psychological activity issuing in purposive behaviour is to be regarded as a specialisation of vital activity. . . Organic and psychological activities are closely akin.

(Russell, p. 178)

This vital activity is seen at its most developed in man, whose special concerns are to rid himself of fear and to attain a mastery over his material environment. This directiveness towards biological ends (Russell adds) is the very essence of life.

Again it was towards biological ends that our impulses were profitably directed when consciousness evolved as a result of its value in the struggle for survival. Self-consciousness followed as social life developed; man became more aware of his fellows and acquired the power of speech, which was physically a part of the central machinery for the control and co-ordination of behaviour (Firth, pp. 145, 152). Speech also was another aid to survival; it enabled groups to keep in touch, and it may be that the families in which the young responded quickly to speech had the best chance of continuing. At some stage came true human communion and communication, for the alarm noises and the sounds that early man made just to keep in contact in the forest are shared with the animals, and are not real speech. Thus human speech reaches very deeply into 'the formative layers of experience' (Masserman, p. 174).

The infant's early cries of discomfort and his noises of comfort express his response to bodily conditions, and his awareness of these utterances is inseparable from his experience of his bodily condition (M. M. Lewis, p. 15). This integration is never dissolved; the body cannot be regarded as a purely material system; the mind's activity is only a function of a complete living organism, so that in any human action the whole being is involved. Here is a small example: 'To help yourself determine how closely you approach a purely auditory image of a word without an actual twittering of vocal organs, try the classic test of attempting to hear yourself think the word "bubble" while holding the lips rigidly apart by the insertion of a couple of fingers between the teeth' (Downey, p. 43). The unity of thought and feeling precludes any compartmentalising of language into language-as-poetry and language-as-science:

The human organism, that body which has the gift of thought, does not have the choice of two kinds of thinking. It has only one, in which the organism as a whole is engaged all along the line. There has been no progression in history from one type of thought to another. We are merely learning to use what we have been given, which is all of a piece. This means too that we have to admit and reaffirm our solidarity with the thinking of the child and the savage. (Sewell, p. 19)

The wholeness of the organism is exemplified from another angle

by the way in which habitual emotions have cumulative physiological effects, and leave their mark on face, posture and movements (M. B. Arnold, p. 267). The unity of the human being appears very clearly in the study by Wolf and Wolff of a man who, as the result of an accident had for many years to insert food directly into his stomach by hand – after chewing it – introducing it straight into the stomach, failed to satisfy his appetite. Thus they were able to observe the stomach, not as an isolated organ, but as a working unit in a whole integrated organism. When the subject was sad and discouraged and self-reproachful, his stomach too suffered prolonged pallor; when he blushed, his gut blushed too (Wolf and Wolff). (The authors commented that therapy should care for the man rather than his stomach, p. 177.) Another example is the fact that pitch discrimination is not a purely aural matter but involves the central nervous system and the brain; it is a functional activity of the mind and not an organic reaction of the body (Howes, p. 114). Elizabethan English reflected the unity we are discussing when it referred to ‘bowels of compassion’ (1 John 3: 17); and in *King Lear* Regan excuses herself from replying to an insult on the ground of her illness: ‘else I should answer From a full-flowing stomach’. Even today there are survivals in our application of ‘liverish’ and ‘hearty’ to moods, and our inability at times to ‘digest’ information or ‘stomach’ an experience. It is worth mentioning too that a study of the finger responses of deaf mutes during thinking indicated that their hands and arms were the seat of both their spoken and written speech.

To the physically energetic William Morris the writing of poetry sometimes seems to have been almost another form of manual exercise (P. Henderson 1967, p. 23); and in the poetry he enjoyed A. E. Housman felt a bristling of the skin and other physical manifestations. These trifles are worth noting only as small examples of the combined expressiveness of poetry and the body, now vestigial but once so close that even now, in R. G. Collingwood’s view, every kind of language is but a specialised form of total bodily gesture. Viewed thus it is the offshoot of an original bodily expression of emotion, dominated by thought in its primitive form as consciousness, so that each one of us, whenever he expresses himself, is doing so with his whole body, and is thus actually talking in this ‘original’ language of total bodily gesture (Collingwood, pp. 243 ff). ‘It is the enactment by the body, through changes of rhythm and stress and intonation, of the dramatic content of poetry, that links spoken verse with the dance’ (Bodkin, p. 321).

A man's voice is just one element in a situation in which he speaks with his whole body, with his body muscles as well as with his breathing apparatus. On this fact complete theories of the origin of language have been based, notably that of Sir Richard Paget, which are illuminating so far as they go. Before we cite some poems that illustrate the impossibility of separating the voice from the whole man, here is a single example from Greek. The word *kata-ptustos* means 'contemptible', and it may be that some readers will agree that its meaning is felt before it is translated. If so, they may care to know that it is derived from *ptuo* (I spit), a gesture word if ever there was one, and that it simply means 'spittable-upon'. There are many instances of this muscular English in Anglo-Saxon, but none is quoted here because the necessary translation would lose the impact of the original. However there are numerous examples in the alliterative poetry of the fourteenth century, which at its best 'conveys sensations of bodily action and movement through effects of rhythm and types of imagery not confined to the purely visual or auditory' (Speirs, p. 30). Here a knight is enduring a rough journey in winter:

Sumwhile with wormes he werres, and with wolves als,
 Sumwhile with wodwos, that woned in the knarres,
 Bothe with bulles and beres, and bores otherwhile,
 And etaines, that him aneleded of the heghe felle;
 Nade he ben dughty and drighe, and Drighten had served,
 Douteless he hade ben ded and dreped ful ofte.
 For werre wrathed him not so much, that winter was wors,
 When the colde cler water fro the cloudes shadde,
 And fres er hit falle might to the fale erthe;
 Ner slain with the slete he sleped in his yrnas
 Mo nightes then innoghe in naked rokkes,
 There as claterande fro the crest the cold borne rennes,
 And henged heghe over his hede is hard iise-ikkles.
 (*Sir Gawayne and the Grene Knight*, 720-32, Penguin edition)

(Sometimes he warred with dragons, and with wolves also, sometimes with wild men of the woods that dwelt among the rocks, with bulls and bears and boars at other times, and giants that pursued him on the high fells. Had he not been doughty and strong, and served his God, he would doubtless have been slain and slaughtered many times. Yet the warring worried him not so much, the winter was worse, when the cold clear water fell from the clouds, and froze before it could fall to the pale earth. Near dead with the sleet, he slept in his armour more nights than enough among the naked rocks, where the cold stream ran clattering from the crests above, and hung high over his head in hard icicles.)

If read aloud with vigour a good deal of its forcefulness comes across even to those who are not familiar with all of the vocabulary. Another passage worth reading aloud is the description of Avarice in *Piers Plowman* v, 188–99 (quoted in chapter 6). Much later, it is impossible to read the well-known lines on the difficulty of reaching the truth, in Donne's third Satire, without feeling a sense of muscular effort:

On a huge hill,
Cragged and steep, Truth stands, and hee that will
Reach her, about must, and about must goe;
And what the hill's suddenness resists, winne so
(suddenness, steepness)

And the sense of weary uphill plodding is marked in Blake's

Ah, Sun-flower! weary of time,
Who countest the steps of the Sun,
Seeking after that sweet golden clime
Where the traveller's journey is done

In Shakespeare too there are many lines where the words enact the meaning, so that it is felt before being apprehended.

Rhythm

Other effects of the movement of poetry may rest on a physiological basis – the contraction and expansion of the lungs for example, the pulse of the blood and the beat of the heart. The ear too can enjoy the recognition in poetry of the sound of wind and sea and the drumming of rain. The poet who writes for reading aloud or singing can utilise the upbeat or intake of breath before a singer begins; thus the beginning of a line is sometimes more stressed than the end. It is worth noting that speech can alter not only the respiratory cycle of the speaker, but also that of his listener. It is a familiar fact that something in listeners causes them to impose a non-existent rhythmic structure on a random time pattern of stimuli (Minifie, p. 230), and that the mind will tend to group evenly intense sounds by accenting them, using stress (more sound), duration, or most commonly physical movement. 'A motor theory of rhythm has been very widely accepted as the fundamental explanation, according to which the experience of rhythm is the result of finely ordered bodily movement, its pleasures those of response to disciplined muscular controls' (Howes, p. 119). The poet is thus able to exploit his listeners' innate sense of rhythm for his own purposes.

In the brain there is a continuously oscillating electric current, known as the alpha-rhythm, which can be recorded on an electroencephalograph. This rhythmicity is the motor for a great variety of rhythmic movements, including speech and perhaps even syntax (Lenneberg 1967, p. 119). There seems to be a basic speech rhythm that plays a part in general psychological and neuro-physiological processes; it serves as an organising principle and possibly as a timing device for articulation; it enables speakers to phrase their utterances, and listeners to impose a rhythmic structure on any speech they may hear (Minifie, p. 230). But in spite of the universal appeal of rhythm in language, not much is known of its exact nature. It may be that the study of kinesthesia will help – the group of senses involved in the perception of movement and position, whose receptors are found in the muscles, tendons and joints; senses basic to the feeling that your body belongs to you and without which it is impossible to imagine yourself. The consciousness of one's own body and what it is doing operates all the time we are awake, and makes us aware of rhythm in what we are doing. There certainly seems to be firm physiological ground for the emotional effects of poetry, controlled and shaped and made communicable with the aid of rhythm in words and music. Words go far back into the subconscious, to the obscure primary zone where human language emerges from a 'pre-vocabulary' of biological and somatic stimulus and recognition:

The emotional life engendered by an articulate culture is, of course, primordially rooted in the emotions of inarticulate creatures. We have seen that the exhilaration shown by apes and babies when solving a problem prefigures the intellectual joys of science... Laments for the dead and songs of love are likewise formulations of earlier shapeless emotions, which are refashioned and amplified into something new by words and music. The originally experienced sentiments are not expressed but alluded to, just as objects are alluded to rather than represented in a painting.
(Polanyi, p. 194)

The deep-rootedness of rhythmic speech may explain why certain rhythms and metres, with the aid of a few key words and tones and changes in the voice, can induce feelings of dissociation, exaltation or relaxed calm, before any intellectual meaning is taken in by the hearer.

Our knowledge of young children and their development affords more evidence for the existence of this innate sense of rhythm. They begin early to engage in rhythmic movement, near to dancing, and to enjoy and make rhymes and jingles almost as soon as they can

use language. When their speech is rhythmic, it is not necessarily because they have learned it; it is not certain that the adults round a child can determine the onset or development of his language – there is no direct mirroring of the input. The child constructs language by himself, and the ability to learn and use language is so deeply rooted that children learn it even in the face of dramatic handicaps, such as congenital blindness, congenital deafness and gross parental neglect (Lenneberg 1964, p. 67). Normally however the child is open to a variety of stimuli from adults, and then he is likely to follow Arnold Gesell's time-table. In his first five years of life the child at eighteen months listens to short rhymes with interesting sounds – he has been responding to music, pictures and rhymes for many months. At twenty-four months the interest in rhymes is developed; his own language is often rhythmical and repetitive; and at forty-eight months he delights in nonsense rhymes. Commenting on the satisfaction that children used to derive from their singing games, Willa Muir wrote:

The satisfaction cannot arise, the tradition cannot survive for long, unless the unformulated energies of the underworld [of feeling] have found a shape to flow into which is accepted directly, without question, by all the participants. It looks as if the shape to be achieved takes a rhythmic form naturally and spontaneously. Human beings are symmetrically fashioned and each day is rounded for them by the sun; when they run or skip or hop they cannot help doing so rhythmically any more than waves on the sea can help following a rhythm. Children combining in play shape a rhythm for their games without thinking about it. (p. 31)

These are findings about 'normal' children, but there is interesting evidence from an autistic case. An autistic boy was fond of music from a very early age; he could reproduce tunes and was soothed by them. Then one day his parents read to him Beatrix Potter's *Apply Dapply's Nursery Rhymes*. Soon he started repeating and joining in, and eventually could say the whole set of poems through with his parents. Stories meant nothing to him, but a rhyme or rhythm would seize his attention. After a couple of readings of Lear or Lewis Carroll he would know whole poems, and by the time he was three he was still not talking except in poems. He was offering his parents something, and the contact grew closer to the normal contact between parent and child (Rowlands, *passim*). The majority of adults seem always to have been able to respond to the crude reiteration of sounds. There are survivals from primitive religions to exemplify this, and if the hideous noises of Nazi rallies are by now forgotten we still have the political rally and football

matches. After mere noise came the repetition of slogans and phrases at revivalist meetings:

Throw out the lifeline, throw out the lifeline,
 Someone is drifting away;
 Throw out the lifeline, throw out the lifeline,
 Someone is sinking today.

But the mere repetition of loud noises, such as those which batter pop fans into insensibility, hardly comes under the heading of rhythm. Some writers on rhythm make a distinction:

Rhythm is important in two quite different areas, in efficiency of movements and in esthetics. Natural rhythms for bodily movements can be utilized to advantage in performing work with least expenditure of effort – walking in the preferred rhythm is less tiring. . . . Rhythm is probably the most basic esthetic expression in the entire animal world.

(Wenger, p. 120)

But there probably never was a clear-cut distinction; the singer of a spinning song may have got through the work more easily, but she also unburdened herself of her joys and sorrows. Many 'work' songs became 'art' songs. Karl Bücher's observation that fatigue was diminished in many occupations by rhythmic effort led him to trace the origin of poetry to the making of concerted effort accompanied by the songs and chants of workers; he traced the main source of rhythm to the habit of fitting vocal sounds to bodily movements. The sounds produced by work, like the noise of the feet in treading, came to be accompanied by words. Then came the sound of tools in use, with a periodicity imposed by breath, muscle and the nature of the task. The hammering of stone and metal, the flail-strokes of threshing, the fanning of husks, are examples of tasks with their own rhythms; other patterned sounds developed when co-operative jobs, like the hauling of a log or the moving and rowing of a heavy boat, were undertaken. As it was found that rhythmical action marked by shouting made work easier, ~~the reflex~~ action of the voice incidental to muscular action was followed by primitive labour songs.

The sense of rhythm in man is thought by some writers to have developed from his necessarily living by the rising and setting of the sun and the changes of the seasons, but it is not easy to see how this happened. It seems more likely that the natural tendency of human beings to impose a pattern of rhythm on the noises around them came into action when they heard the sounds of wind, waves and rain and the cries of birds and animals, and needed (in the

interests of magic, for instance) to imitate them. Here for example is an almost wordless rain chant, with the last line imitating the call of the plover as it is heard before the rain, made up by Australian aborigines:

Rain Chant

Dad a da da
Dad a da da
Dad a da da
Da kata kai

Ded o ded o
Ded o ded o
Ded o ded o
Da kata kai

(Bouquet, p. 28)

And here is a fertility song of the Navajo Indians:

Corn Song

The corn grows up.
The waters of the dark clouds drop, drop.
The rain descends.
The waters from the corn leaves drop, drop.
The rain descends.
The waters from the plants drop, drop.
The corn grows up.
The waters of the dark mists drop, drop.
(*Journal of American Folklore*, 7, p. 191)

Rhythm in poetry sets up a pattern of expectation in the hearer, and to a less extent in the reader of the printed page; the written poem cannot rely on being as effective as the spoken, because the reader can always be interrupted or stand aside and be critical. A monotonous pattern may first be used, to secure some control over the hearer; the most primitive form is the physical stimulus of repetition which may induce unusual states of mind and lull the superficial parts of consciousness. Further:

As the wild rhythms of the ancient dance tended to annul the participant's consciousness of separate personality, exalting him to union with his group and with its God, so, in fainter degree, the rhythms of poetry still serve to hold the reader apart from this everyday self and cares, caught up into the thought and feeling communicated.

(Bodkin, p. 321)

The instinctive inclination to group recurrent sense impressions in such a way as to derive pleasure from the arrangement may be part of the human being's desire for order, for controlling his