

studying → poetry

second edition

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B L O O M S B U R Y

Studying ↓ Poetry

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Second Edition



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Since this book is very much a joint venture, a note on our method of collaborating is appropriate. Each chapter was written by only one of us, but before the first draft was produced we worked closely together to determine the scope of each chapter, and afterwards worked to try and make chapters fairly consistent in terms of style and tone. Stephen Matterson is primarily responsible for the Introduction, Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 9 and the final section of 8, and Darryl Jones for Chapters 1, 2, 3, 7 and 8. It is likely the reader will perceive the different

authorship because of the range of poems that we tend to draw on for examples and the way our different literary and theoretical interests are engaged, but, to adapt Mark Twain's 'Explanatory' to *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, we did not want readers to suppose that the authors were trying to sound alike and not succeeding.

Darryl Jones would like to dedicate his share of the book to Margaret Robson and Miss Morgan Elizabeth Hannah Jones, age 15, with love.

Stephen Matterson would like to thank Jimmy, Jimmy, John, Nick and Laurie and all the people who know why.

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Introduction

Introduction to the Second Edition

One evening, a few years ago, my neighbour knocked on my door. He told me that his brother had died after a short illness, and, knowing that I taught English, he wanted me to suggest a poem that he might read at his brother's funeral. My neighbour came in and we talked for a while about his brother, who, among other things, had been a sailor, and I suggested a few poems that the neighbour might read. After much discussion of poems by Catullus, Tennyson, A.E. Housman and Michael Longley, he eventually chose Robert Louis Stevenson's short poem 'Requiem':

Under the wide and starry sky
Dig the grave and let me lie.
Glad did I live and gladly die,
 And I laid me down with a will.

This be the verse you grave for me:
'Here he lies where he longed to be,
Home is the sailor, home from sea,
 And the hunter home from the hill.'¹

A few days later the neighbour called by again, this time to thank me and to say how moved everyone had been at the recital of the poem.

This incident seemed not at all unusual at the time, and reflecting on it now, it seems on one level surprising that it did not seem unusual. My neighbour, a retired engineer, had never spoken to me about literature or poetry and, although

a well-educated and well-informed man, was not, as far as I knew, in the habit of reading poetry at all. Yet when he needed something to express his feelings at the loss of his brother, it was to poetry that he turned, expecting to find something that would embody his own emotions and put them into memorable and moving language. This need for poetry is one important reason for poetry's endurance throughout human history. As Philip Larkin wrote in his poem 'Church-Going', 'someone will forever be surprising / A hunger in himself for something more serious', and it is to poetry that we frequently turn to find expression for that seriousness. At times of personal and social crisis, as well as at occasions of joy, such as a marriage or the birth of a child, people look to poetry for articulation. This was strikingly evident after the terrorist attacks in the United States in September 2001, which saw a surge of interest in poetry and in poems that seemed to put the attacks into some larger perspective. Indeed, following those attacks, and others, numerous anthologies of poetry saw remarkable sales. A Faber anthology first published in 1996, *Emergency Kit: Poems for Strange Times*, edited by Jo Shapcott and Matthew Sweeney, was a reissued bestseller in 2004; Neil Astley's Bloodaxe anthologies *Staying Alive: Real Poems for Unreal Times* (2002) and *Being Alive: The Sequel to Staying Alive* (2004) have also been extremely popular books, and there are many other examples. As well as the emphasis on emergency and staying alive, my neighbour might be interested to learn that there is at least one anthology of poems for funerals, Penguin's *Poems and Readings for Funerals*, compiled by Julia Watson (2004), as well as anthologies of poems for weddings and for christenings.

Such anthologies readily testify to a need for poetry, reminding us that, as the essayist Audre Lorde powerfully put it, 'poetry is not a luxury'; it is vital to our sense of ourselves and of our engagement with the world and with each other. Lorde was responding to a remark that in any struggle for liberation, poetry is a luxury and only activism matters. Focusing on the feminist movement of the 1970s, Lorde insisted:

For women, then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought. The farthest horizons of our hopes and fears are cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives.²

As William Carlos Williams has put it in his poem 'Asphodel, That Greeny Flower':

It is difficult
to get the news from poems
yet men die miserably every day
for lack
of what is found there.³

While it is crucial to recognize and to affirm the enduring importance of poetry, this book is very much about how to deepen and to articulate our appreciation of poetry. In part, as we shall see in the first part of this book, this involves observation of the poet's craft, the poet as a shaper of words, and the skill of putting words together in memorable and significant ways. I was gratified to hear from my neighbour how moved everyone was to hear Stevenson's 'Requiem' read at his brother's funeral. Clearly, people were moved mostly because the event generated the emotion. But, if my neighbour had asked me (he didn't), I would have pointed out that they were also moved by the effects that Stevenson created in the poem. For example, there is the nursery-rhyme simplicity of the **rhythm** and the language, which make an immediate impression on the listener (Stevenson wrote a good deal of excellent verse for children). Although the poem is mostly made of up eight-syllable lines with four **stressed** syllables in each, it does not use a strict **metre**, but modulates the four beats throughout each line. There is a very powerful use of **alliteration**, **parallelism** and repetition of key words, all important aspects of poetry. The alliteration of the 'h' sound is especially notable:

*Here he lies where he long'd to be;
Home is the sailor, home from sea,
And the hunter home from the hill.*

In addition to the musical effect, this alliteration unifies the lines, producing the feeling of a completed statement, an enclosed and final thought; in this case, conveying the idea of a life satisfyingly completed. This sense of completion and resolution is also conveyed through the **rhymes**. The poem is made up of simple one-syllable rhymes, but Stevenson uses a striking **rhyme scheme** (aaab cccb), in which the last line of each **stanza** has the same rhyme. The effect, again, is to add to this sense of completion at the end of the poem, here reflecting on the completion of a life, the sense of an ending. The use of parallelism also adds intensely to this. Parallelism is the modulated repetition of syntax, and is very important to poetry. Stevenson exploits this most notably in the third line of each stanza: 'Glad did I live and gladly die' and 'Home is the sailor, home from sea'. The repetition of the word 'home' is also important, primarily because it means that the poem modulates between the literal and the figurative. It is sometimes argued that all poetic language is figurative language, and it is this which most distinguishes poetry from prose. But this is not entirely true. 'Requiem', for instance, relies on a shift from the literal to the figurative, and we need to make the transition (it is, after all, a poem about the most profound of human transitions) from the literal to the figurative or, to put it another way, from the material to the abstract. The repeated 'home' is the most important word in this respect; it is used three times in the last two lines, and each usage carries a different suggestion. Thus, the first appearance can be read in a purely literal way: the sailor is now at home. But the second 'home', 'home from sea', is more

figurative, largely because rather than writing ‘the sea’ Stevenson has written simply ‘sea’, with no definite article. That is, this is not any specific sea, but a figurative, generalized sea, echoing Hamlet’s representation of this earthly life as a ‘sea of troubles’. Tellingly, this line of Stevenson’s poem is often misquoted, as ‘Home is the sailor, home from the sea’. This is understandable because ‘home from the sea’ is parallel to ‘Home is the sailor’, thus providing a more metrical and symmetrical line. But the misquotation also suggests that some readers do not make the transition from the literal to the symbolic.

The third appearance of ‘home’, in the final line, carries the suggestion of a final home, the grave, removed from temporal time. Stevenson also gives depth to the poem by invoking the hunter and the sailor, representing humanity’s most enduring occupations, embodying our human characteristic of battling with nature in order to ensure our survival and our development. In fact, T.S. Eliot provided a bathetic version of this in *The Waste Land*, where he writes of the ‘evening hour’ that ‘brings the sailor home from sea, / The typist home at teatime’.⁴ Certainly the people who heard Stevenson’s poem at the funeral were moved by the occasion into which the poem was contextualized, but it is important to see that the poem does not *record* an emotion, it *creates* emotion through the use of language. As Robert Lowell remarked, ‘a poem is an event not the record of an event’.⁵

It is in seeing what Stevenson has done, in appreciating how his poem works, that the study of poetry truly begins. It certainly would not (we hope) end there; as we assert in this book, the study of poetry can take many diverse directions and can be stimulated by a number of (perhaps conflicting) theoretical approaches. But observing and learning to articulate the language of poetry, the use of genre, and the relation to tradition and to other poems are, we believe, essential basic skills for the study of poetry, no matter what we may choose to build on that foundation.

Another of the things we attempt to do throughout this book is to impress upon readers the sense that all poetry can be read with critical self-consciousness, from the most apparently simple nursery-rhymes to the dauntingly complex experimental work which we discuss in the closing chapter. Critical self-consciousness is not the same as critical evaluation: the question of whether a poem is ‘good’, or even ‘great’, and what our reasons may be for making such judgements, is a subject to which we turn on a number of occasions during this study, most particularly (and with a sceptical eye) in Chapter 3. One thing we want to address briefly here, though, is the perceived rift or disparity that has grown between *good* poetry, on the one hand, and *popular* poetry on the other, as though aesthetic value and popular acclaim (or even, on occasion, general love) were mutually incompatible. They are not, necessarily, though we shall see that the reasons why they have come to be seen as such are in themselves a part of the history of studying poetry.

It seems self-evident, as we have been arguing, that poetry is a constant in human culture, that part of being human is contained in our ideas and definitions

of poetry, and our *need* for poetry. As noted above, at times of personal and national crisis, people turn to poetry, which in some ways seems to make sense of their condition, to give shape and more importantly *form* to otherwise inchoate, inarticulate sensibilities. This is a major component in what we identify throughout the book as the dominant Romantic approach which understands poetry as primarily a medium for the exploration of personal and emotional issues and feelings.

To the apparent consternation of some commentators, poetry remains a popular form. Without receiving much institutional academic critical praise (or even attention), a number of popular poets, from Roger McGough to Pam Ayres to John Cooper Clarke to John Hegley to Murray Lachlan Young, have pursued successful careers over the past decades; others (Simon Armitage and Wendy Cope might be good examples, as might the current poet laureate, Carol Ann Duffy) exist in a shadowy territory between popularity and critical acclaim; while a number of poets whose critical standing might be thought secure occasionally find their way into the bestseller lists: Seamus Heaney, Ted Hughes, Brendan Kennelly and Philip Larkin are all examples of this.

When in 1995 the BBC launched a UK-wide poll to discover ‘the nation’s favourite poems’, the winner, by a comfortable margin, was Rudyard Kipling’s ‘If’. This was understood by some as a vindication of their belief in the inherent philistinism of the public; it is notable that the 5th edition of *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, at 2,000 pages among the largest and most inclusive works of its kind, and one whose editorial policy is exemplary, omits this poem, though other Kipling poems do appear. Kipling, in fact, has long been a problematic figure in literary history, combining great popular appeal and an almost matchless ability for crafting memorable verse with often highly questionable politics and racial attitudes. But these attitudes themselves do not automatically guarantee critical vilification: Ezra Pound, to whom we return again and again in this book, has an exalted reputation as amongst the great poets of the twentieth century – his critical standing is far higher than Kipling’s and yet his politics, as an active propagandist for Italian fascism, are totally unacceptable, rather than merely questionable. Ideological critiques, while certainly valid as an approach to poetry, are clearly not sufficient. Part of the problem with Kipling, it seems, is that, living until 1936, he found himself totally out of step with what was to become the dominant Modernist tradition of twentieth-century poetry and culture, to which he really had nothing to say. While T.S. Eliot, greatest of all anglophone Modernist poet-critics, did attempt to account for Kipling and his importance to English verse in his edited volume, *A Choice of Kipling’s Verse*, this in turn has been treated with a certain puzzlement, for example by one of Kipling’s most recent editors, R.T. Jones: ‘Once [Eliot] had agreed (who knows why) to select and introduce the poems he could hardly have condemned them out of hand, but almost anything that could be said in appreciation of Kipling would have looked like an implicit disparagement of all his own poetry stood for.’⁶ Eliot’s volume of Kipling was itself reviewed by George Orwell, in a 1942 review essay

which has become the classic account of Kipling's poetry. Orwell's basic contention still holds:

Kipling is in the peculiar position of having been a by-word for fifty years. During five literary generations, every enlightened person has despised him, and at the end of that time nine-tenths of those enlightened persons are forgotten and Kipling is in some sense still there ... It is no use pretending that Kipling's view of life, as a whole, can be accepted or even forgiven by any civilized person ... Kipling *is* a jingo imperialist, he *is* morally insensitive and aesthetically disgusting. It is better to start by admitting that, and then to try to find out why it is he survives while the refined people who have sniggered at him seem to wear so badly.⁷

Orwell identified Kipling as perhaps the classic example of what he termed, with considerable enthusiasm and approval, 'good bad poetry', poems which 'reek of sentimentality, and yet ... are capable of giving true pleasure to people who can see clearly what is wrong with them'.⁸ Using a less loaded term, in an evaluative sense, we might want to call this 'successful popular verse'.

This is the famous opening stanza of 'If':

If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you.
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you
But make allowance for their doubting too;
If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,
Or being lied about, don't deal in lies,
Or being hated, don't give way to hating
And yet don't look too good, nor talk too wise:⁹

As students of poetry rather than as casual readers, the first thing to say about this is to draw attention to its very high level of technical accomplishment. The lines are all undeviating **pentameters** (that is, poetic lines of five metrical feet – see Chapter 1 for an explanation of many of the terms used in this brief reading of 'If'), which alternate regular iambic pentameters (one unstressed and one stressed syllable, in lines 2, 4, 6 and 8) with rather more complex metrical lines (1, 3, 5, 7) consisting of four iambic feet followed by a bacchius (a trisyllabic foot of one unstressed and two stressed syllables, relatively uncommon in English **prosody**). The rhyme scheme is again a highly regular ababcdcd, though modified in the opening stanza by the repetition of 'you' across the ending of the first three lines, emphasizing the poem's sense of direct address to a listener or reader, and thus its feeling of intimacy and of important wisdom being imparted – a major component of its enduring popularity. This 'you' at the close of these lines reinforces the repetition of 'If you can' at the beginning of alternate lines through most of the poem, a parallelism which gives the poem its particularly

high degree of memorability, which is yet another aspect of its popularity. Here in the opening stanza and throughout, the poem makes considerable use of a poetic device most commonly associated with eighteenth-century Augustan verse, the symmetrical balancing of a poetic line across a caesura or pause:

Or being lied about, // don't deal in lies,
Or being hated, // don't give way to hating,
And yet don't look too good, // nor talk too wise.

In its balance and parallelism, and in its highly distinctive verse form, the poem quite self-consciously deploys in highly concentrated form an extremely complex and sophisticated prosody. There is much that some readers might find objectionable about this poem. It represents an exclusively masculine world-view and, furthermore, one completely implicated in British imperial history, and certainly the study of poetry ought to include these concerns, as this book does in a number of its chapters. But whatever objections might be made to 'If', they can hardly be on the grounds of formal ineptitude or sloppiness, because this is a poem as technically adroit as any in the language; this is extremely sophisticated, accomplished poetry. We may even appreciate and enjoy the work of many poets while deploring their personal or political views: for example, this book engages with poems by Milton, Yeats, Kipling, Pound, Eliot, Rich, Larkin and Plath, even though we may have little or no sympathy for their world-view. As W.H. Auden put it in his *elegy* for W.B. Yeats:

Time that with this strange excuse
Pardoned Kipling and his views,
And will pardon Paul Claudel,
Pardons him for writing well.

From the Introduction to the First Edition (2000)

When readers first opened *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse 1892–1935*, edited by W.B. Yeats, they were probably surprised to find that the first piece in it was by Walter Pater.

MONA LISA

She is older than the rocks among which she sits;
 Like the Vampire,
 She has been dead many times,
 And learned the secrets of the grave;
 And has been a diver in deep seas,
 And keeps their fallen day about her;
 And trafficked for strange webs with Eastern merchants;
 And, as Leda,
 Was the mother of Helen of Troy,
 And, as St Anne,
 Was the mother of Mary;
 And all this has been to her but as the sound of lyres and flutes,
 And lives
 Only in the delicacy
 With which it has moulded the changing lineaments,
 And tinged the eyelids and the hands.

Yeats had taken one prose sentence from Pater's essay 'Leonardo Da Vinci' and arranged it as though it had been written as a poem. Pater's words were certainly very well known; however surprised readers of Yeats's anthology may have been to find them arranged as a poem, they probably knew the words themselves – in fact, they had already appeared in Arthur Quiller-Couch's *Oxford Book of English Prose* (1925). There, they are printed thus:

She is older than the rocks among which she sits; like the vampire,
 she has been dead many times, and learned the secrets of the grave;
 and has been a diver in deep seas, and keeps their fallen day about her;
 and trafficked for strange webs with Eastern merchants; and, as Leda,
 was the mother of Helen of Troy, and, as Saint Anne, the mother of
 Mary; and all this has been to her but as the sound of lyres and flutes,
 and lives only in the delicacy with which it has moulded the changing
 lineaments, and tinged the eyelids and the hands.

While he has capitalized 'vampire' and abbreviated 'Saint', the only actual word change that Yeats made was to add the word 'was' to begin the line 'Was the mother of Mary'. By way of introduction to *Studying Poetry* it is worth briefly considering both the mechanics and the implications of what Yeats did.

The mechanics involve the formal elements of poetry, which are the chief concern of the first third of this book. The implications include issues of readership, authorship, interpretation, historical context and the very ontology of the poem (that is, its particular way of being), which are discussed in the second and third sections of this study.

In terms of the poem's mechanics, we would need to consider the formal properties that Yeats has either added or emphasized, properties that may be said traditionally to distinguish prose from poetry. How has Yeats made a piece of prose into a poem? There are at least five ways in which he has done this or, to put it in a slightly but fundamentally different way, he has given the reader at least five cues to read this piece as a poem and not as prose. Firstly, the piece is here placed in an anthology of poetry. Secondly, he has given it a title. Thirdly, he has made the piece appear as if it were a self-contained unit rather than an extract from something longer – it is the length we might expect a lyric poem to be. Fourthly, he has arranged the lines so that a parallelism of form and structure is apparent. Fifthly, he has broken up the continuous prose into shorter lines and, at the same time, has capitalized the first letter of each line.

Some of these points may seem so obvious as to be redundant. Or again, to put it differently, they may seem so obvious that they are rarely commented on. The fifth point, that Yeats has varied the lengths of the lines, may seem the most observable difference between the piece as a poem and the piece as prose, but we should not neglect the other, perhaps more subtle cues: more subtle because we may take them more for granted and not stop to question them. When he changed the lines into shorter ones, Yeats also brought out (or did he create?) the rhythm inherent in the language, and he also made prominent a feature which is actually one of the basic elements we associate with a poem: some sort of formal repetition or parallelism. Thus there are nine lines which begin with the word 'And', two with 'She' and two with 'Was'. Yeats, then, did not just print the sentence as prose and ask us to give attention to it as if it were a poem. He formalized or made more apparent some of the patterns that the sentence already possessed, and he invited us to read it as a poem by encoding a series of elements that the reader expects in poetry. When it appears in the poem the reader may notice that line 4, 'And learned the secrets of the grave', is a regular iambic **tetrameter**, while it is unlikely that this would be apparent when the line appears as prose. There is also a powerful rhythmic effect due to the 15 monosyllabic words of line 12; again, an effect that would probably go unnoticed in prose.

What about some of the broader implications of what Yeats has done? Yeats's 'Mona Lisa' can be classified as a particular type of poem, the '**found**' poem, where a piece of writing not intended as a poem is presented as if it were one. Many of the implications that arise from this poem, then, also grow out of found poetry. Some of them involve authorship, or readership, or the status of poetry as knowledge. For instance, who is the author of this poem? Is it Pater, because he is the acknowledged author of the words themselves? Is it Yeats? He made

the prose into a poem, and if it is to be considered a poem, then it is surely his. Was Yeats being generous in attributing this poem to Walter Pater rather than to himself? Was he being appropriately cautious in respect of the legal issue of copyright? Can we do to a piece of prose what Yeats did and call it a poem? Would anyone believe us if we did? Who is the reader? Yeats has invited us to read these words as a poem rather than as prose and in so doing has constructed a different kind of reader. After all, readers opening a book titled *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse* expect to find poems in it, not prose. We are different readers of these words as a poem than we were when we read them as prose. We give each word more weight, more study than we did; we hear the rhythms of the words differently, we find the words more memorable and more resonant. Certainly if we consider poetry as language charged with an excess of meaning, or, as Ezra Pound saw it, as language at its most concentrated, then this poem fits the definition. But the words themselves have not substantially changed: what has changed is the kind of attention we give to them. To extend the question of authorship, could we even say that with Yeats's mediation, it is we, the readers, who make this poem? That is, in giving the words a kind of attention appropriate to reading poetry, are we in fact makers of the poem?

There are a lot of questions being asked here, there are many more that could be, and it is the purpose of this book, if not precisely to answer them, then at least to alert readers to the existence of the questions and some of the answers that have been given to them. That is, one of the aims of this book is to help readers become self-conscious about the act of reading poetry.

Part 1

Form and meaning