

An Introduction to Literature

edited by

Edmond L. Volpe

Marvin Magalaner

Theodore Gross

Norman Kelvin

The City College of The City University of New York



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POETRY, DRAMA, FICTION



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and Norman Kelvin

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The City University of New York*

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New York

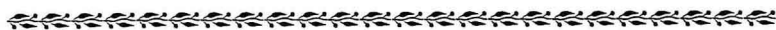
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Edmond L. Volpe AND Marvin Magalaner

FICTION

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POETRY

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Selected from these three volumes

A one-volume omnibus anthology

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POETRY



Introduction

Poetry is perhaps the most difficult kind of literature. This is probably because the very nature of most poetry requires a compactness and intensity not ordinarily found in prose. Not only must each word bear a greater weight in meaning than in ordinary prose, it must also serve a second purpose in enhancing the sound and rhythm of the line in which it appears. Thus, poetry often departs, much more than prose does, from the language of everyday speech. The normal word order of ordinary speech may be inverted in poetry, or a word one would ordinarily expect to find in a sentence may be left out of a line in order to intensify meaning or maintain a rhyme or meter. Again, poetic diction sometimes incorporates obsolete or archaic words or phrases that ultimately enhance the meaning but make it less obvious at first. Finally, most poetry has a lyric quality that presents the poet's thoughts and feelings in an intensely personal way.

It is obvious, then, that poetry requires analysis if readers want to do more than merely skim the surface of its complex statements. Finding out what a poet has to say is often a process of examining the means he uses to say it, and for this kind of analysis one must have a knowledge of metrics and the poetic uses of language that reaches beyond the reading of any single poem. When a poem is a successful work of art it is always in some respects a unique experience for its reader, and for this reason he must often dissect the work in order to fully discover it. But such dissection is a constructive—not destructive—process provided that it is followed, as it must be, by a sympathetic and intelligent reconstitution of the poem with the added understanding obtained. Some students might object that this kind of dissection

would destroy the beauty of a poem but, on the contrary, knowledge of the parts of a poem is what allows one to see the beauty of the whole. Experimental dissection of a frog in the school laboratory is done, after all, only to discover how the whole frog is made, and this its surface alone will never tell you. It is for this reason that the student who deals with poetry must be a scientist of language and must approach his material with the analytical intent of the scientist.

The work of the so-called New Critics in our time—among them I. A. Richards, Cleanth Brooks, and Robert Penn Warren—has made clear the need for close explication of the text of a poem. These critics have shown beyond question that a successful poem is a perfect blend of content with the form in which that content is presented. It becomes essential, therefore, to be as concerned as much with *how* the poet works as with *what* he has to say. Indeed, in a sense the form of the poem is what the poet has to say: the content is made convincing by the form in which it is rendered.

In order to describe more concretely what we mean by the elements of poetry that require analysis we have provided a discussion of them in the *Handbook of Poetry* at the back of this book. Here we shall try to demonstrate how these elements—meter and rhythm, imagery, symbolism, ambiguity, and tone—may be viewed in the analysis of a typical poem.

The Collar

I struck the board, and cried, No more.
 I will abroad,
 What? shall I ever sigh and pine?
 My lines and life are free; free as the road,
 Loose as the wind, as large as store.
 Shall I be still in suit?
 Have I no harvest but a thorn
 To let me blood, and not restore
 What I have lost with cordial fruit?
 Sure there was wine
 Before my sighs did dry it: there was corn
 Before my tears did drown it.
 Is the year only lost to me?
 Have I no bays to crown it?

10

1. 3. *ever*: forever.

1. 5. *store*: a great quantity; an abundance.

No flowers, no garlands gay? all blasted?
 All wasted?
 Not so, my heart: but there is fruit,
 And thou hast hands.
 Recover all thy sigh-blown age
 On double pleasures: leave thy cold dispute 20
 Of what is fit, and not. Forsake thy cage,
 Thy rope of sands,
 Which petty thoughts have made, and made to thee
 Good cable, to enforce and draw,
 And be thy law,
 While thou didst wink and wouldst not see.
 Away; take heed:
 I will abroad.
 Call in thy death's head there: tie up thy fears.
 He that forbears 30
 To suit and serve his need,
 Deserves his load.
 But as I raved and grew more fierce and wild
 At every word,
 Methought I heard one calling, *Child*.
 And I replied, *My Lord*.

[1633]



This poem, by a seventeenth-century clergyman-poet, puts the case for throwing off spiritual restraint (symbolized by collars in general and the clerical collar in particular), and then, in a dramatic reversal, urges by example the necessity of submission to spiritual authority. A careful examination of the short selection will illustrate not only Herbert's techniques of composition but also the way in which most poets go about their task of creating a poem.

First, let us attempt a recapitulation in prose of the action of the poem. The narrator, restive and anxious, strikes the table and considers his state. There is no reason for him to continue in his unhappy way of life. Nothing holds him to his present existence, and he is physically free to go where he will. He asks why he no longer gets any return from the effort he expends ("no harvest but a thorn"). At one time, there was satisfaction—before the onset of his depression. The answer to his agonized crying comes to him: there is satisfaction