



# Living Poetry

Reading Poems from Shakespeare to  
Don Paterson

WILLIAM HUTCHINGS



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## **Living Poetry**

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# Preface

I have two principal aims in writing this book. I first wish to show that it is possible and desirable to talk seriously and imaginatively about poetry, using language that is clear, direct and informed without being pedantic. I hope thereby to encourage both students of poetry and general readers to express for themselves the significance and power of this most creative of literary forms. Poetry is not well served if trapped in an arcane and self-referential academic language. The philosopher A. C. Grayling has written of academic study of the arts that ‘the tendency to lock the gates behind polysyllabic obscurities in imitation of scientific method is one reason why we have lost sight of the importance to society of a higher education in the humanities’ (*New Statesman*, 25 October 2010, p. 41). On the other hand, poetry fully releases its potential to move and delight us only if we recognize that it is its own art form, and we equip ourselves to meet its challenges. We need a language that matches its artistic integrity and seriousness, one that does not patronize or trivialize. John Armstrong tellingly writes in his book *In Search of Civilization* (2009) of the urgent need to re-connect scholarly and public interest in the arts. Scholarship needs to emerge from the academy; the public need the knowledge that yields love. The present book is a modest attempt to contribute to such a re-connection.

My second aim is to show that English poetry written in the past can speak directly and strongly to present-day readers. A single book can discuss but a tiny fraction of the poems we have inherited from previous generations. I hope that my selection of poems from the late sixteenth century to the first half of the twentieth – some familiar, some less well-known, some obscure or forgotten – will encourage readers to explore for themselves this literary goldmine. My focus is on English poems, but discussion will include occasional forays beyond, in recognition that no poem is an island and that writers’ creativity is often sparked by their exploration of the world of poetry and channelled into other forms of writing. So Thomas Gray’s creative response to Latin poetry will be considered in Chapter 2, and Chapter 6 will look at Macbeth’s final soliloquy. A final chapter will

indicate how the tradition of poetry lives on and expands in the present day.

I have been encouraged in undertaking this pleasant task by some recent developments within scholarly writing about literature and by direct contact with informed general readers. A number of academic critics have turned their attention of late to matters of poetic form and language, the very heart of what makes poetry. The essays collected under the title of 'The New Lyric Studies' in the journal *PMLA*, volume 123 (2008), are examples. My discussions of poetry with undergraduates at the University of Manchester assure me that large numbers of creative and engaged readers remain very much part of the education scene. My continuing contacts with former students, in particular with a group that meets regularly simply for the pleasure and intellectual stimulation of sharing responses to poetry, convince me that an appetite for poetry exists beyond universities and colleges. I am especially grateful to members of this group for their help, both direct and indirect, with this book.

Any attempt to slot poetry into categories is imperfect, as students of genre know. I am aware that the ways I have disposed poems – particularly my over-simple distinction between feeling and thinking – are open to any number of objections. Poems are really part of the whole human experience, as are emotions and thoughts. But we do need some kind of map to guide us initially. My categories are intended solely as convenient means of providing a focus for individual discussions. That these categories are not those of form, genre or period, but of aspects of our human being, is, I hope, a means of bringing us back to the real significance of poetry as a living experience.



# Acknowledgements

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# Introduction

## 1.1 A. E. Housman, *A Shropshire Lad*, 40

Into my heart an air that kills  
 From yon far country blows:  
 What are those blue remembered hills,  
 What spires, what farms are those?

That is the land of lost content,  
 I see it shining plain,  
 The happy highways where I went  
 And cannot come again.

When asked to say what he meant by ‘poetry’, A. E. Housman wrote ‘I could no more define poetry than a terrier can define a rat.’ But, he continued, both he and the terrier ‘recognised the object by the symptoms which it provokes’. For Housman, if not for the terrier, these symptoms took one of three forms. The first was of bristling skin accompanied by a shiver down the spine. The second was ‘constriction of the throat and a precipitation of water to the eyes’. The third was a feeling akin to that recorded by John Keats, in one of his last letters, about his beloved Fanny Brawne: ‘Every thing . . . that reminds me of her goes through me like a spear.’<sup>1</sup>

‘Into my heart an air that kills’, number 40 in *A Shropshire Lad*, has perhaps sent shivers down as many spines as any poem. Published in 1896, Housman’s volume possessed the common touch right from the outset. Between 1898, when the publisher Grant Richards produced a second edition, and 1948, *A Shropshire Lad* was re-issued 48 times. A 1918 edition ran to 5000 copies. ‘In the course of half a century’,

wrote John Sparrow in 1956, '*A Shropshire Lad* has become for many readers a favourite book of verse, and pocket copies of it must have been tucked... into innumerable knapsacks.'<sup>2</sup> Its recurrent note of nostalgic regret for another land certainly seems to have reverberated in many people's exile from their own individual Shropshires.

However, Housman's repeated tone of lyrical world-weariness has not proved to be to everybody's taste. In the academic world, indeed, his reputation is, to say the least, somewhat shaky, particularly among the sterner ranks of literary theory's New Model Army, ever alert to perceived threats to the intellectual from the sentimental. Housman himself, in the essay in which he so graphically confesses his own physical responses to poetry, explicitly and irascibly rejects the intellect as its true test and mark. He reserved his intellect for his professional life as a classical scholar at University College London and at Cambridge, a calling in the course of which he was not averse to bursts of terrier-like activity when confronted with fellow classicists who looked like rats. Of one commentator he tartly wrote that his 'mind, though that is no name to call it by, was one which turned as unswervingly to the false, the meaningless, the unmetrical, and the ungrammatical, as the needle to the pole'.<sup>3</sup>

Housman is not the only writer who has refused to provide a rational definition of poetry. Samuel Johnson's biographer James Boswell reports a discussion they had about the merits of different poets, which concludes with his direct question:

*BOSWELL.* 'Then, Sir, what is poetry?'

*JOHNSON.* 'Why, Sir, it is much easier to say what it is not. We all *know* what light is; but it is not easy to *tell* what it is.'<sup>4</sup>

Johnson, like Housman, if less provocatively, proposes that poetry is recognizable but indefinable. However, Johnson's poetic spectrum was made of different colours from Housman's. When summing up the disputed status of Alexander Pope, whom he regarded as the greatest poet of the first half of the eighteenth century, Johnson ended with a simple rhetorical appeal: 'If Pope be not a poet, where is poetry to be found?' Housman viewed the eighteenth century as a period in which excesses of intellect fatally polluted the stream of poetry, and considered only four poets in the eighteenth century to have possessed the 'true poetic accent'. Pope was not among them.<sup>5</sup>

Such disagreement seems to show that if we go along with a purely physiological view of the power of poetry, then we commit ourselves

to the principle that all judgements are subjective. Each person can only be his or her own judge of when the spine tingles or the throat tightens. Housman was, of course, perfectly aware of the subjectivity of his tests of poetry. His essay, 'The Name and Nature of Poetry', was first delivered in 1933 as the prestigious Leslie Stephen lecture at Cambridge University. Housman begins his lecture by grumbling that he had been asked in the first place. He ends by bidding farewell to literary criticism – which the lecture refuses to take as a serious intellectual pursuit – and expressing relief that he can now return to his proper job as an editor of Latin texts. He took a cantankerous delight in annoying people, especially academics. So, too, did Johnson. But both also had a serious point to make. Johnson lived in a period when empiricism, the philosophical proposition that we gain knowledge primarily through our senses, had become firmly established. We respond to the world with our bodies; our minds then reflect on the information so gathered. Housman's tests of poetry are the feelings it excites in us as individual readers. We recognize it by its effects on us, as light allows each of us to respond to what we see. Just as you cannot see through my eyes, so you cannot feel the sensations that I have when reading a poem.

This refusal to give an objective definition sets the literary critic a challenge. A clue to a solution lies in Johnson's acute choice of analogy. Light is one of the essential channels of *shared* human experience.<sup>6</sup> Poems move us because they enact experiences of living that are both common to all of us and felt by us as individuals. Although we may think first of the emotions when we speak of intense living experiences, the mind produces equally strong sensations. It is the particular power of poems that they are apprehended through both the senses and the intellect. Johnson and Housman knew this very well. All of Johnson's massively engaged critical observations show him responding as an individual reader, but also rigorously examining the basis of those responses in the language of the poems. Housman's true, or, rather, complete, views emerge more clearly when, in 'The Name and Nature of Poetry', he describes how he writes. He finds, he says, that some parts of his poems come unbidden while others require months of hard intellectual labour. The finished poem reveals no difference between the parts written by the two processes. Writing fuses instant sensation and prolonged thought. And so, let us add, does reading.

Take the most resonant phrase in *A Shropshire Lad*, 40, 'blue remembered hills'. Why does this send a shiver down the spine of most

sympathetic readers? The poem's two stanzas form predominantly a landscape, a vision of a lost 'country'. Through to the nineteenth century this word signified a tract of land or a county as readily as it did a nation. It is, for Housman, a familiar, comfortable land of hills, spires, farms and highways. But the landscape is seen from a distance, as one no longer inhabited by the viewer. All is rendered in language of the utmost simplicity. The poem contains 46 words, of which 37 are monosyllables. There are eight disyllables, including such everyday words as 'into', 'again' and 'cannot'. This is spare, direct and ordinary language. There remains one, the only three-syllable word in the poem. It lies at the heart of our phrase, 'blue remembered hills', guarded by a monosyllabic simple adjective and a monosyllabic simple noun.

The hills are 'blue' in the quite literal sense that distant objects take on a blue tinge. Lovers of the great idealized paintings of the seventeenth-century French artist Claude Lorrain and of those of his many British imitators, such as Richard Wilson and J. M. W. Turner, will at once recognize the visual effect. Distant hills are habitually marked by a soft blue, concluding a landscape that recedes in pastel tones and merges with the clearer blue of the sky. We shall examine in Chapter 5 an extensive poetic description of such a scene, where the clearly marked details of the nearer ground, including hills, spires and towns, give way to a distance where

... the broken landscape, by degrees,  
 Ascending, roughens into rigid hills;  
 O'er which the Cambrian mountains, like far clouds  
 That skirt the blue horizon, dusky, rise.  
 (James Thomson, 'Spring', 959-62)

Housman's language is picking up on regular pictorial vocabulary.

But 'remembered' is an interjection of the unexpected: it is a word not of sight and space, but of time. As such it leaps out of the predominantly visual texture while being naturally contained within it, a part of it. Its force is to tell us that this is really a poem about time, not the depiction of scenery. Yes, the hills may be 'remembered' in the sense that we have seen them before, those places where once we walked. But they are also the hills that exist only in the pictures we paint in our memory. In the land of exile all that we have lost exists nowhere but in our mind's eye. Regret is for another time, wherever each of us spent it. Dennis Potter acknowledged this in his ironic choice of 'Blue Remembered Hills' as the title for a television

play about lost childhood.<sup>7</sup> The phrase exactly synthesizes space and time. The lost time is our childhood, our youth, that which is now gone. Everyone's personal landscape is different; but we all share the resonant recognition that it is now in an irrecoverable past. The blue of the remembered past lives in our individual and collective memories.

We do not know how much thought Housman had to put into the phrase, whether it came unbidden or as a result of conscious labour. We can, however, see and understand whence comes its power while always recalling it with a shiver of recognition. Poems are words on a page. All readers can see them, whether in literal light or in the mind's eye. Appeals to subjective response should not be an excuse for mystique, encouraging the belief that appreciation of poetry belongs exclusively to privileged sensibilities. Housman's phrase, once read or heard, is never forgotten. Its truth becomes a recurrent part of anyone's present existence, felt whenever recollected. It is living poetry for the individual reader and for all of us.

## 1.2 How does poetry live?

A work of art reflects the world, or a part of the world, as experienced by people. A poem is a view on the world from the perspective of a human being. Art is not simply mimetic, not just a mechanical reproduction of reality, because it expresses how we human beings experience the world, not what the world, objectively, is. It does not propose a scientifically accurate version of phenomena. Art is not objective, because it acknowledges and embraces the fact that our perception of the world is precisely that: our perception of it. We are how we see, think and feel.

Art is communicative. Although art emerges from an individual's mind and senses, it is not merely subjective or expressive of one set of personal feelings. Were it to be so, it would remain comprehensible only to its creator. Art seeks a form that embodies experience, enabling readers, viewers or listeners to see in it a reflection of their experience. Art is a development of the basic function of language: to create links with other people.

Art is not progressive in the sense that science is, or at least claims to be. It is not a linear process by which our knowledge of the material world, or our ability to build washing machines, improves through time. Our experience of art is inclusive, not developmental. Past artists have produced works that achieve communication. Each generation

and each individual are engaged in experiences that, although new, unique and subject to cultural and historical differences, are to a large degree variations on those of the past.

Form is not devoid of, or separate from, content. Form is a way of organizing perceptions of the world into a structure that embodies their meaning. The development of forms is the craft of art, what Greek philosophy called *techne*. Artists learn through instruction, practice and experience how most effectively to represent their perceptions.

We develop as readers of literature, as critics, through a process of continuing and repeated attempts to understand the works of art we encounter. This process is assisted by increased knowledge of forms, of the language of art. We learn about the craft of art, its means of expression and its ways of presenting meaning. At the same time, we live and develop as human beings, and so learn more about the feelings communicated by the work of art. For example, our capacity to understand Shakespeare's depiction of destructive jealousy in *Othello* is affected by the extent to which we can recognize similar, if less intense, emotions in ourselves. We educate ourselves as human beings through our own experience of life. We educate our understanding of art by relating our experiences to those expressed by the works with which we engage. The act of criticism, of aesthetic judgement, is an attempt to articulate our recognition of the work of art, to connect its form with our feelings.

### 1.3 Poems as dramatic events

Our responses to drama provide a paradigm for the process of reading and understanding. As Samuel Johnson, in the preface to his edition of the plays of Shakespeare (1765), observes, the power of drama to move us does not lie in the supposed actuality of the events unfolding on stage. No one ever really believes that the drama is the real world, no matter how intense the dramatic representation and how much we may contrive to suspend our disbelief. Its power is more immediate and real than this, lying in its capacity to make us apprehend our own experience of, and potentiality for, feeling:

It [drama] is credited, whenever it moves, as a just picture of a real original; as representing to the auditor what he himself would feel, if he were to do or suffer what is there feigned to be suffered or to be done. The



reflection that strikes the heart is not, that the evils before us are real evils, but that they are evils to which we ourselves may be exposed . . . . Imitations produce pain or pleasure, not because they are mistaken for realities, but because they bring realities to mind.<sup>8</sup>

We do not agonize over the feelings of the actor playing the part of Othello; we agonize over *our* identification of how his language expresses *our* capacity for flawed, tragic emotion. A human being who has never felt jealousy at some level, who has no conception of what the destructive power of extreme jealousy might be, cannot be moved beyond a feeling of incomprehension at the stupidity of the man being impersonated on stage. We comprehend because we have all experienced some form of the emotion, albeit (let us hope) not at the same pitch of intensity and certainly not (let us more fervently hope) with similar results. We are thus able to comprehend the emotion, and feel the power of its representation before us. The emotions depicted are witnessed in another person but identified within ourselves.

Our relationship with a poem is reciprocal. When we read it we are not looking for a manifestation of feelings that we have at that moment, unless we deliberately select a familiar poem which we know has the power to encapsulate our present mood. This we may do for therapeutic reasons at moments of intense feeling, searching for a hand to emerge from the book to seize ours in fellow feeling and say, 'yes, I, too, know this experience'. More often it is the case that the poem itself puts out the hand that seizes ours: 'look: you, too, recognize this experience, or its possibility, within your own consciousness'.<sup>9</sup> The poem can create a state of mind, but only if that state of mind is, at some level, a part of our imaginative potential. 'When we regard something aesthetically, we see in the thing the objectification of our own inner state, while at the same time being aware that the thing is, by entering in through our senses, somehow the determiner of our state.'<sup>10</sup>

In *Le Temps Retrouvé* ('Time Regained'), the last volume of his monumental novel *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu* ('In Search of Lost Time'), Marcel Proust seeks to define 'aesthetic appreciation and understanding'. A present experience is only fully apprehended at the moment when we realize that it awakes in us an intense moment of past experience. It moves us powerfully because it revitalizes the past. It becomes a moment of re-enactment. Because both past and present are felt simultaneously, both are freed from the adventitious,