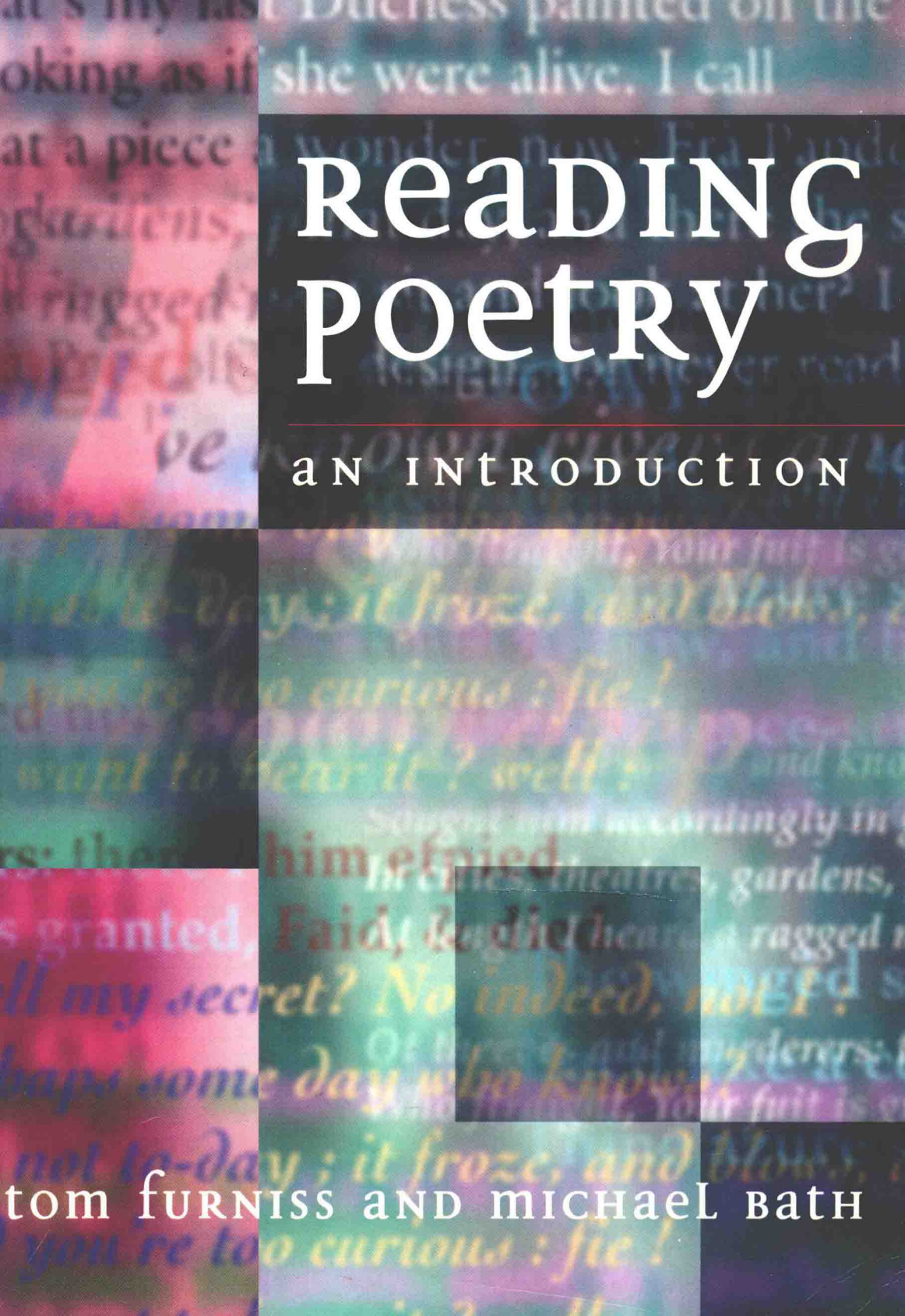

Reading Poetry

An Introduction

tom furniss and michael bath

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Michael Bath

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To all our students and teachers,
past, present and future
and to Linda Glenn

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Preface

This introduction to the study of poetry has its origins in a first-year undergraduate course taught by the authors at the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow. Our decision to write the book arose from our feeling that there was no textbook available which discussed poetry in the ways in which we were trying to teach our students. Most introductions to poetry written for students are based on outmoded and problematic assumptions about poetry and the reading of poetry. Developments in criticism and theory over the last twenty or thirty years have transformed academic research into literature in general, but such research rarely filters down into student guides to poetry. Thus a gap has opened up between academics' research interests and their teaching practices. This is largely a result of developments in the discipline over the last thirty years or so which cannot be ignored in any teaching that accepts what we take to be a fundamental responsibility of any university course – that is, the education of students in ways that are informed by current thinking and research. Today's students need to acquire an unprecedented range of technical, historical and theoretical skills – they have to be technically competent, theoretically literate, and historically informed.

A second problem teachers have to face is that it is no longer realistic – if it ever was – to assume that students come to university with any great familiarity with poetry and ways of reading it. This book is aimed at readers who have not read much poetry, and we have tried not to make too many assumptions about the kinds of knowledge which students currently bring to the texts they are required (or choose) to study at university. Many students nevertheless bring an implicit awareness of linguistic and cultural conventions and social and political issues to their reading, derived from their experience of popular cultural forms. The present book tries to make use of this knowledge, and to show how it can be highly productive in the study of poetry.

One of the traditional assumptions about reading poetry at university has been that it calls upon a range of specialized skills which demand particular kinds of instruction. Ever since English was instituted on the educational curriculum in the early years of this century, teachers have recognized that students find poetry

particularly difficult. The growth of 'practical criticism' in the 1930s and 1940s can be seen, to a large extent, as a response to this recognition, since although 'practical criticism' was eventually applied to other genres and literary forms, it originated in the attempts of I.A. Richards and those who followed him to develop a methodical set of techniques for the close reading of poetry in particular. More recent developments have called into question many of the theoretical assumptions and pedagogic principles on which 'practical criticism' based its analytic methods. Yet most teachers, including the authors of this book, still believe that particular kinds of close reading are fundamental to the study of literature at university. Much of what we do in this book can be seen as an attempt to introduce students to what seem to us to be the current forms of those essential skills of close reading and analysis.

Unlike traditional exponents of 'practical criticism', however, we stress throughout this book that close reading cannot be divorced from theory or from history. Today's students need to recognize the theoretical basis of what they are doing when they are reading and writing about literary texts. Teachers demand increasingly sophisticated skills from students whose knowledge of the literary base is increasingly attenuated, so it is vital to work out ways of bridging this epistemological gap. Although literary theory is sometimes thought to have contributed to this problem, the fact that it has increasingly returned to examine basic principles means that it can enable students to understand and articulate their own experience of literary texts. Our method throughout this book is continually to ask our readers to question for themselves what is going on in the process of reading, and thus to become more self-reflexive about the processes and assumptions involved in studying poetry.

The fact that all reading is informed by theory means that all reading is also historical, since theoretical assumptions about what poetry is, and what reading it involves, change through history. History in this sense involves not only the historical context of poetic texts but also the history of literary forms, of writing practices and ways of reading. We have tried to introduce students to each of these dimensions of literary history in the chapters that follow, even though we do not claim to have dealt with any of them at all comprehensively. We give the date of every poem cited or referred to because we believe it is important for readers to 'place' the poems we examine, even when historical issues are not under discussion. (The date is normally that of the poem's first publication; in some cases, however, if a poem was not printed until some time after it was written, the date is that of composition, where this is known.)

Although we do not assume readers' familiarity with 'major' texts and authors from the traditional canon, we have not attempted in this book either to reinstate or to replace that canon. Our choice of examples is usually determined by their relevance to our argument, though we have also attempted to show that the skills and issues we attend to are applicable across a range of texts that are familiar and unfamiliar, canonical and marginal. One of the things we have tried to do is to read canonical and non-canonical poems alongside one another in order to see what differences each makes to the other.

The book is intended for different kinds of uses and users. Teachers and university lecturers may wish to use it as a course text or as a resource for their own teaching.

Students may be required to use it as a course text, but they may also find it useful for private study or as back-up reading for a poetry class in a college or university. It is also hoped that non-academic readers may find it stimulating and helpful. Each chapter is devoted to a particular set of skills, formal features and theoretical questions, and usually attempts to place them in a historical framework. To a certain extent, therefore, each chapter is a discrete, self-standing unit. The sequence of the chapters is carefully staged, however, so that each chapter builds on what has gone before and prepares readers for later chapters. Later chapters often return to poems or issues discussed earlier in order to develop a new point in the context of the new issue being discussed. Nevertheless, teachers and students may use the chapters in any sequence they please.

Each chapter ends with an exercise which invites the reader to test out what he or she has learned in the course of the chapter. Some of the questions are more leading than others, though the aim of the exercises is to enable readers to work out their own readings and responses rather than to reach predetermined conclusions. Most of the exercises can be carried out by an individual reader, but all of them are also appropriate for collaborative discussion in a classroom or 'workshop' session. Some ask the reader to try out particular exercises with a friend or colleague – reading aloud, rewriting or reformatting a text – in order to check out the results. As well as rewriting poems into different forms, some exercises also involve readers attempting to write their own poems according to the formal or generic principles dealt with in particular chapters.

The discussion in the main text makes frequent reference to the published research of other scholars, and readers may wish to follow up some of those references by using the Bibliography at the end of the book. As John Smith implies in the epigraph we have used for this book, the study of poetry, like any other university discipline, has to be in touch with the latest research. This is also why we have used on-page footnotes. Writing, teaching and studying at university level involve the acknowledgement that ideas and arguments arise out of the work of an intellectual community, not out of thin air. At the end of the book, there are two kinds of index: a General Index and a Key to all texts discussed in the book or used as exercises. Again, both students and teachers may wish to consult these in order to enhance the book's usefulness for their own particular needs.

We have abbreviated the titles of a few works to which frequent reference is made. *Princeton* is Alex Preminger and T.V.F. Brogan, eds (1993) *The New Princeton Encyclopaedia of Poetry and Poetics; Abrams* is M.H. Abrams (1993) *A Glossary of Literary Terms.* For full details of all works cited, readers should consult the Bibliography.

T.F.
M.B.

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Part One

Formal Introduction

Chapter 1

What Is Poetry? How Do We Read It?

Received Ideas and Common Assumptions

One of the concerns of this book will be repeatedly to ask questions about what poetry is, and to question those things about poetry which we take for granted – including the category of poetry itself. This might seem a rather peculiar line of enquiry, since we tend to assume that we know what poetry is.[1] Our claim, however, is that reading poetry involves often unrecognized or unthought-out assumptions about the nature of poetry. We want to show that it is important to become aware of these assumptions and to place them alongside other, quite different assumptions, because this will enhance or even transform our reading of poetry.

Attempts to answer the question 'What is poetry?' usually end up trying to define it against what it is not. There are perhaps three interrelated ways of doing this. Poetry can be defined as a *genre* by saying that it is different from the other main literary genres, fiction and drama. A second definition – based on features of *language* – distinguishes between the way poetry uses language and so-called 'ordinary' uses of language. A third definition – this time on *formal* lines – would differentiate poetry from prose on the basis that it is arranged differently on the page.[2] We will examine each of these claims throughout the course of this book. What this examination will reveal is a set of common assumptions about poetry which are probably shared by a large proportion of readers in Britain and North America in the late twentieth century (and perhaps in many other parts of the English-speaking world and beyond).

One of the arguments of this book will be to suggest that poetry is not one thing but many things. This is not only because we have different ways of describing poetry, or because there is a huge variety of language practices which are included under the umbrella term 'poetry', but also because what are assumed to be the defining characteristics of poetry change through history. These changing assumptions

[1] It is revealing that M.H. Abrams does not provide an entry on 'poetry' in his *Glossary of Literary Terms* (he does give entries on 'novel' and 'drama').

[2] For a more elaborate exposition of the various ways of defining poetry against what it is not, see *Princeton*, pp. 938–42.

not only affect the practice of poets but also influence the kinds of poetry which are valued and the ways of reading which readers tend to adopt. The result of all this is that the category we call poetry is unstable and, possibly, that there may be no essential thing called 'poetry' at all.

Yet it would seem possible to challenge this line of argument by the commonsensical assertion that we know a poem when we see one. Even readers who have not read very much poetry seem to share certain conceptions about what poetry is, and about what constitutes 'good' poetry. It will therefore be useful at this point to examine a poem to which, experience tells us, most people will usually respond as 'good' or 'proper' poetry. In doing this we will try to identify those features which make it seem 'poetic' to such readers. For reasons which we will examine later, Keats seems to embody our collective idea of the quintessential poet, and his 'Ode to a Nightingale' (1819) is often thought of as an exemplary poem. It is for these reasons that we will make this poem a test case in our attempt to make explicit our culture's implicit assumptions about what poetry is.

Ode to a Nightingale

1

My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains
  My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,
Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains
  One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk:
'Tis not through envy of thy happy lot,
  But being too happy in thine happiness –
    That thou, light-winged Dryad of the trees,
      In some melodious plot
  Of beechen green, and shadows numberless,
    Singest of summer in full-throated ease.

2

O, for a draught of vintage! that hath been
  Cool'd a long age in the deep-delved earth,
Tasting of Flora and the country green,
  Dance, and Provençal song, and sunburnt mirth!
O for a beaker full of the warm South,
  Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene,
    With beaded bubbles winking at the brim,
      And purple-stained mouth,
  That I might drink, and leave the world unseen,
    And with thee fade away into the forest dim:

3

Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget
  What thou among the leaves hast never known,
The weariness, the fever, and the fret
  Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;

Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs,
  Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;
    Where but to think is to be full of sorrow
      And leaden-eyed despairs;
  Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,
    Or new Love pine at them beyond tomorrow.

4

Away! away! for I will fly to thee,
  Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,
But on the viewless wings of Poesy,
  Though the dull brain perplexes and retards.
Already with thee! tender is the night,
  And haply the Queen-Moon is on her throne,
    Cluster'd around by all her starry Fays;
      But here there is no light,
  Save what from heaven is with the breezes blown
    Through verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways.

5

I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,
  Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs,
But, in embalmed darkness, guess each sweet
  Wherewith the seasonable month endows
The grass, the thicket, and the fruit tree wild;
  White hawthorn, and the pastoral eglantine;
    Fast-fading violets cover'd up in leaves;
      And mid-May's eldest child,
  The coming musk-rose, full of dewy wine,
    The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves.

6

Darkling I listen; and for many a time
  I have been half in love with easeful Death,
Call'd him soft names in many a mused rhyme,
  To take into the air my quiet breath;
Now more than ever seems it rich to die,
  To cease upon the midnight with no pain,
    While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad
      In such an ecstasy!
  Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain –
    To thy high requiem become a sod.

7

Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!
  No hungry generations tread thee down;
The voice I hear this passing night was heard
  In ancient days by emperor and clown:
Perhaps the self-same song that found a path

Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,
She stood in tears amid the alien corn;
The same that oft-times hath
Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam
Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.

8

Forlorn! the very word is like a bell
To toll me back from thee to my sole self!
Adieu! The fancy cannot cheat so well
As she is fam'd to do, deceiving elf.
Adieu! adieu! thy plaintive anthem fades
Past the near meadows, over the still stream,
Up the hill-side; and now 'tis buried deep
In the next valley-glades:
Was it a vision, or a waking dream?
Fled is that music: – Do I wake or sleep?

What we would like to do here is draw attention to various features of the poem which contribute to the feeling that this is 'authentic poetry'. This will entail examining how the poem uses certain poetic conventions which are themselves based on particular assumptions about what poetry is. It will also involve asking whether these assumptions and conventions require us to read poetry in ways which accord with them – that is, do particular kinds of poetry encourage or demand particular ways of reading? Our answers to both questions are deeply bound up with each other: our assumptions about what poetry is will shape our way of reading poetry, and our way of reading poetry will tend to influence which poems we regard as exemplary poetry. In other words, we want to suggest that poetry is as much a product of ways of reading as of ways of writing.

Poetry As Expression – the Experience of Its Speaker?

Some of the most deep-rooted preconceptions about poetry in our culture are that it records profound personal emotion and experience, that it is often about nature, and that it should be 'imaginative'. Keats's 'Ode' seems indeed to confirm these preconceptions. The very event itself – a poet listening in solitude to a nightingale, surrounded by woods and flowers – seems especially poetic. And this poet's imaginative response to the bird is presented as a powerful and deeply significant experience which we are invited to share. One of the questions that we will be asking is the extent to which the 'poetic' quality of this event is derived from the profundity of the experience itself, from the specific ways in which the poem articulates the experience, or from the fact that Keats has chosen a topic which certain cultural assumptions have attuned us to regard as already intrinsically poetic. As we shall see below in Chapter 10, nightingales – as opposed to, say, starlings – are birds which come already invested with 'poetic value' from their frequent appearance in poetry.