

STUDYING

Poetry

An Introduction

R. T. Jones



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1 *Introductory Definitions*

And this
Is the upper sling swivel, whose use you will see
When you are given your slings. And this is the piling
swivel,
Which in your case you have not got.

Henry Reed, *Naming of Parts*

A large number of terms that used to be used in the analysis of poetry have fallen into disuse during the present century, and there is no need to regret their loss. Many of them were always misfits when applied to English verse, because they had been developed to describe features of classical Latin verse, which was different in quite important ways. An elaborate system of specialized terms is not necessary anyway for understanding or discussing poetry (nearly all of which was written for non-specialists); one thing that I hope to show in this book is that we can go a long way without bothering about spondees and dactyls. Still, there are a few terms that are likely to be used quite often, so it is necessary that we should mean the same things by them.

Rarely, poetry may be in *prose* – as, for example, in the opening pages of D. H. Lawrence's novel *The Rainbow*. Prose is simply any writing in which the author does not make expressive use of line-endings, but leaves it to every copyist – typist or compositor – to divide each paragraph into lines such as will make the page look tidy (usually with a straight margin on each side).

When a writer wants to exert more control over the way his words are to be read and spoken, he will often set them out in lines which represent rhythmic groups of spoken words. Any piece of writing so set out – where the writer has settled where the line-divisions are to be – is called *verse*. (Whether or not it is

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poetry is another question, involving a value judgement; but the use of verse usually signals a wish on the part of the author that the words should be read as poetry.)

If a passage of verse, when read aloud, reveals no constant rhythmic pattern, no regular arrangement of stressed and unstressed syllables, though strongly marked rhythms may occur within it, it is called *free verse*. An example is the excerpt from D. H. Lawrence's *Kangaroo* on page 36. Since the publication of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* in 1922, free verse has been widely practised; it was rarely used in earlier centuries.

A regular arrangement of stressed and unstressed syllables is a *metre*, or measure. The most usual in English is the line of ten syllables, stressed on alternate syllables starting with the second, as in the line

And put his life between the judge's lips

in the passage by Tourneur quoted on page 23. It is no longer necessary for the student of English poetry to know Greek names for English metres, but this one is so common that it is useful to have a name for it, so it goes on being called the *iambic pentameter*. Most of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, all but the last line of each stanza of Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, nearly all the verse in Shakespeare's plays, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Pope's satires and Wordsworth's *Prelude*, among others, are in iambic pentameters.

This does not mean that every line in these works is strictly an iambic pentameter. There can be many variations; one or two syllables may be omitted or added, one or two of the stresses may occur earlier or later than expected, but the reader may still be kept aware of the iambic pentameter as the underlying pattern of the work. Because this metre is so familiar to every reader of English poetry, we recognize it even when most of the lines diverge from the basic pattern – and, as we shall see when we look closely at particular examples, it is the divergences that then become significant.

When, as in most of Shakespeare's dramatic verse, the iambic pentameters do not rhyme, they are called *blank verse*. (This should not be confused with *free verse*, which is non-metrical as well as unrhymed.) The passage from *The Revenger's Tragedy* by Tourneur on page 23 is in blank verse.

If the iambic pentameters rhyme in pairs, as they do in

Chaucer's tales and in Pope's satires, the verse is said to be in *heroic couplets* ('heroic' only because this metre was in the seventeenth century regarded as particularly appropriate for heroic subjects). Milton's *On the University Carrier*, on page 59, is in heroic couplets.

Some pieces of verse are divided into *stanzas* – that is, groups of lines shaped in such a way that every group could be sung to the same tune. Usually this means that every stanza in the same piece has the same number of lines, each line has the same number of stressed syllables as the corresponding line in every other stanza, and if there is rhyme (as there usually is in stanzaic verse), the pattern of rhymes is the same in every stanza. When there are variations they are generally of such a kind that the variant stanza could still be sung to the same tune as the others by repeating a line or two of the tune. Some verse, of course, was composed for singing, like *I sing of a maiden* on page 33; but a great deal of verse that was never intended to be sung has been composed in the form of stanzas and gains some song-like quality by being in that form, like Blake's *A Poison Tree* on page 71.

When a stretch of blank verse, heroic couplets, or other verse is divided into quite irregular sections by indenting the first line of each new section, like paragraphs in prose, these sections are not stanzas; in fact they can simply be called *paragraphs*, as in *Easter 1916* by Yeats on page 17.

A *sonnet* is usually a complete work in itself, and so cannot properly be called a stanza – though this could be arguable when the sonnet is one of a sequence and so, though able to stand alone, forms part of a larger whole. A sonnet has fourteen lines; in the kind that is called Petrarchan, which follows Italian models; there is first a set of eight lines called the *octave* or *octet* in which lines one, four, five and eight rhyme with each other and lines two, three, six and seven rhyme with each other, and then a set of six lines called the *sestet* with a rhyme scheme that, though it need not always be the same, always links the six lines in a single pattern. The Shakespearean sonnet, on the other hand, divides its fourteen lines into three *quatrains* (groups of four lines) and a couplet; there may be a recognizable break between octave and sestet, but the pattern of rhymes does not make one. A Shakespearean sonnet is quoted on page 8.

Many poets have written sonnets, evidently finding the form suitable for some of their most serious work. The shape of the

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sonnet seems to be adaptable to the presentation of a wide variety of observations. Quite often, for example, the octave presents a state of affairs and the sestet comments on it or interprets it. Probably there is also an element of challenge in the appeal of this form: the poet undertakes to re-think an experience until it can be brought to inhabit the sonnet form with such apparent ease that one could almost believe that the form had been invented to accommodate that particular thought. What is not so obvious is why other equally elaborate verse forms, like the *ballade*, the *rondeau*, and the *sestina*, very rarely in English seem anything but clever exercises. Any reader who is interested may find examples in the early work of Ezra Pound; and it would only be confusing to have definitions without examples.

I have suggested that it is not very useful these days to know names for different metres, with the possible exception of the iambic pentameter. It is unlikely to be helpful, in any discussion today, to say that the metre of *The Song of Hiawatha*, by Longfellow, is trochaic tetrameters, because this will tell most people less than quoting a line or two, and cannot tell anybody more – and the description is very nearly as long as the line it describes:

Then the little Hiawatha. . . .

Given a rather longer extract to consider, we ought to be able to find more informative things to say about the movement of the verse and how, even when it is varied a good deal, it tends to trot along rather monotonously and not to encourage any thoughtful attention to its words.

Some other terms will be used in the chapters that follow, and where they seem to require explanation this will be given as they occur. For the rest, readers are advised to make use of a dictionary.

2 *The Value of Poetry*

'... But do you wish me to attend to what you are going to say?'

'Yes,' replied Belinda, smiling; 'that is the usual wish of those who speak.'

Maria Edgeworth, *Belinda*

One term not defined in Chapter 1 is *poetry*. It seems best not to try to define it. To offer a definition of poetry, which would have to be based on the kinds of poetry I happen to have seen already, would be to limit it to those kinds, and could make it harder to recognize new and unfamiliar kinds of poetry.

Poetry cannot be identified by its shape on the page or by any other external characteristics. To call something a poem is to attribute a value and an importance to it; as Robert Frost said, '“Poet” is a praise-word.' There is no reason why anybody should not say 'I write verse', but 'I write poetry' is a proud claim and should not be made lightly. It is the critic's task rather than the writer's to say whether what has been written is a poem or not; a writer is not always a good critic of his own work.

We, of course, are the critics. Every reader is a critic, even if the only expression of his judgement is his willingness or reluctance to be interrupted while reading, or the gesture with which he closes the book on reaching the end. We cannot read without judgement; the only choice we have in the matter is whether to be careful and responsible critics or not.

Though I offer no definition of poetry, I hope to show how it can be recognized. We do, after all, recognize many things without having definitions to apply to them – dogs, for instance. I propose to display several different kinds of poem, and suggest why I think they *are* poems. This, as I have said, involves value judgements, with some of which the reader may disagree. That is as it should be, for people do often

disagree about whether something is a poem or not. For this reason, a book like this cannot be authoritative; it cannot tell readers *how* to respond to and think about poetry. This book records how one reader responds to and thinks about some poems, in the hope that this may help other readers to find their own ways of doing so – which will be different.

Whatever else a poem is, it is a sequence of words; and as with any other sequence of words that we hear or see, the first thing we have to try to do is to understand them. They may, of course, turn out to be unintelligible, but I think we owe it to the author (as to anybody else who addresses words to us) to start by assuming that he is honestly trying to tell us something. We may in the end find this hypothesis untenable, and have to fall back on the possibility that he is dishonestly trying to tell us something, or that he is trying to obscure something from us, or that what he is offering us is a pattern of shapes on the page or of sounds made in saying the words. But it seems natural to treat the author with the same courtesy as we expect of a friend to whom we speak: to begin by supposing that he is trying to tell something as it really is; that is, to tell the truth.

I shall not, of course, try to say what I mean by 'truth' and 'reality'. Whether we say that there are many different kinds of truth, or that truth has many dimensions, we had better not start with a definition that could make it harder than it need be to recognize modes of truth that we have not previously considered. A poem that begins 'I heard a fly buzz when I died' (as one of Emily Dickinson's does) is perhaps more obviously fictional than most, and it would not be appropriate to suppose that it records a historical fact, but it may still be the best way of communicating a strenuously-achieved insight.

We may value the pursuit of truth in a poem without being convinced by its conclusion. Poets have argued many things – the legitimacy of the Tudor dynasty, the universal fickleness of women, the matchless perfection of one woman, the ability of plants to experience and express pleasure; we may believe that they were mistaken, or we may not think it matters much whether they were or not. But we may value the resourcefulness and intelligence at work in the process of the poet's engagement with problems that are not necessarily our problems.

I hope to show how poetry may make us see things, aspects of reality, that we could not have seen without it, and even, if we

read with a sufficiently open mind, make us see truths that we should prefer not to see. But whether the material with which the poet wrestles is relevant to our own concerns or not, we may value the opportunity the poem gives us to follow, and experience, the process by which the poet works towards the clarification of the truth he seeks.

Let us begin, then, by supposing – or at least hoping – that what poetry can do for us is to enable us to participate in the poet's activity of trying hard to capture in words the exact truth as he experiences it. In order to do this it must have the fullest attention we can give. We study a poem not, in the first place, in order to gain knowledge about it, but to gain knowledge from it.

It is not enough to recognize that a poem is beautiful, for that can happen at different levels: it is perfectly possible to say, 'He spoke beautifully, but I didn't understand a word of it'; and I have seen separate pages of a Hebrew Bible bought for the beauty of their appearance, regardless of whether they were fragments of the Book of Job or the genealogies of the Kings of Edom. This is not to deny the importance of beauty in poetry. From the poet's attempt to tell the exact truth, and from the rare perfection of success in the attempt, beauty may emerge, as from many other well-made things and well-achieved activities; it may even be one of the signs by which we can recognize such success. But if we dwell on superficial or incidental beauty in a poem instead of attending carefully to what it is saying, we are likely to miss the richer and more rewarding beauty that comes of a full response to the whole poem.

Anybody who sets out to tell something as it really is (as one can readily verify by trying to write down what one really feels about one's parents) encounters at a very early stage the difficulty of resisting cliché and conventional ideas. The first ideas and phrases that come to mind are likely to be from the available common stock, and to have more to do with what one is expected to feel, what one would like to feel, or what one would wish others to believe one feels, than with what one really does feel. It is never easy to set these aside, both because all communication depends on shared conventions ('I gotta use words when I talk to you'), and because one normally regards one's own behaviour and attitudes as 'natural' and those of other people as 'conventional' – it is hard to recognize as

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conventions those conventions that one lives by. Sometimes, as in Shakespeare's *Sonnet 130*, the effort to find and tell the truth may require a direct attack on conventions.

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;
Coral is far more red than her lips' red;
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.
I have seen roses damasked, red and white,
But no such roses see I in her cheeks,
And in some perfumes is there more delight
Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.
I love to hear her speak, yet well I know
That music hath a far more pleasing sound.
I grant I never saw a goddess go;
My mistress when she walks treads on the ground.
And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare
As any she belied with false compare.

(The modern reader may need to make a momentary effort to purge the word 'wires' of its associations with electrical and telephonic cables, and to connect it instead with gold wire or thread-of-gold, a conventional comparison for hair. 'She', in the last line, is used contemptuously, as if it were a noun – 'as any female. . . .')

This poem, consisting almost entirely of negations, explicit or implicit, sketches out by suggestion its anti-poem, which would be a compendium of clichés:

My mistress' eyes are like the sun;
Her lips are red as coral;
Her breasts are white as snow;
Her hair is thread-of-gold.
In her cheeks are roses, red and white;
Her breath is the most delightful of perfumes.
Her voice is sweeter than any music,
And she walks like a goddess.

The first quatrain of Shakespeare's sonnet consists of direct denials of the conventional praises. The second starts with 'I have seen roses. . . .', which seems to say, with an air of comic puzzlement, 'I know it's customary to say that one's mistress'

cheeks are like roses; but I've taken the rather unusual step of looking at roses and at her cheeks, and I'm bound in honesty to report that I couldn't see any resemblance at all.' Then the caution of '*some* perfumes' leads up to the blunt shock of '*reeks*'. Impatience is suggested in the way the speaker spells out the truth, as if determined to make it clear to the foggiest intellect, in 'I love to hear her speak, yet well I know/ That music hath a far more pleasing sound.' When he comes to the conventional comparison of one's mistress to a goddess, in respect of the way she walks, he freely concedes that he hasn't been able to verify this, like the roses, by his own observation, but at least he can assure us that his mistress does not step on clouds.

I referred in the last paragraph to 'the speaker' in the poem, rather than to 'Shakespeare' who wrote the poem, but who may, as far as we know, have been imagining what somebody in a given situation might say. The fact that a poem is written in the first person does not entitle us to assume that it reports autobiographical events. As long as we bear in mind the possibility that the sonnet is fictional – a dramatic fragment – we shall not be in danger of using it as a springboard for conjectures (or fantasies) about Shakespeare's life and relationships.

We may then, as a way of focusing from a different angle on the nature and effect of the poem, imagine what the lady herself might have thought of it. She might well have been indignant at first, until she realized that every statement in the poem, every refusal to reiterate blindly the conventional terms of praise, and to pay her compliments in the usual currency, pays her in fact the much greater tribute of recognizing her human reality, as a conventional love-poem could not. The speaker has paid her the compliment of looking at her and seeing her as a real person, rather than a stock idea to be poetically decorated with second-hand praises. And false praise is not kind: it makes the recipient uncomfortably – even guiltily – aware of failing to measure up to it. Infinitely preferable, surely, is the warm appreciation of the lady for being what she is, expressed in the line

My mistress when she walks treads on the ground.

Of course there is much more to be said about this poem. We ought to notice how the ferocity of the closing couplet, the challenge to all comers, is given weight by the clear-eyed

appreciation that has preceded it. And we could consider how much deeper the defiance of convention goes than the simple rejection of verbal clichés – the way in which the poem, by affirming a love that is not dependent on the listed externals, mocks the kind of love that does depend on such things as the lady's pigmentation and the lover's capacity for inexact observation. But I have said enough for my present purpose, which is to present this poem as a fairly clear example of the poet's primary concern with truth, with the attempt to see things as they really are. One could perhaps talk about this poem in terms of its beauty, and this might be useful at a late stage in the discussion: one would have to distinguish between the beauty the poem rejects, the beauty it affirms, and the beauty (if that is the right word) of the affirmation. But it seems to me that the value of the poem is that it brings us to experience for a moment what it feels like to have the courage to see the truth, and the audacity to tell it, however disconcerting it might be; and to perform this grim but unexpectedly rewarding task with a certain teasing gaiety.

My next example, Shakespeare's *Sonnet 138*, is more painful, and brings no comforting affirmation in its tail. It is a greater poem in that the truth it investigates is more complex and harder to tell.

When my love swears that she is made of truth,
 I do believe her though I know she lies,
 That she might think me some untutored youth,
 Unlearnèd in the world's false subtleties.
 Thus vainly thinking that she thinks me young,
 Although she knows my days are past the best,
 Simply I credit her false-speaking tongue;
 On both sides thus is simple truth suppressed.
 But wherefore says she not she is unjust?
 And wherefore say not I that I am old?
 O, love's best habit is in seeming trust,
 And age in love loves not to have years told.
 Therefore I lie with her, and she with me,
 And in our faults by lies we flattered be.

It is generally worth starting a discussion of a poem with an

outline of what one supposes it to be about. It is not often safe to assume agreement about this. Disagreements about the value of a work of literature often turn out to be grounded on different readings, by the opponents, of the words on the page: they have been, in effect, talking about different poems. The difference can often be resolved, in discussion, by carefully attending to the words on the page; and, although there are some who seem to believe that any way in which a poem *can* be read is as valid as any other, it is very often possible to reach agreement that one of the proposed readings is right – or at least that the other is mistaken.

This poem, then, is about a pair of lovers, one of whom, the woman, is false, and the other, the speaker in the poem, is old. He pretends to believe that she is true to him, and even habitually persuades himself that he believes her; and he does this in order to seem simple and inexperienced, so that he can seem young. Neither is taken in by this, though he likes to think that she is. The sequence of mutual deceits seems to stretch on to infinity, like images in a pair of confronting mirrors. She knows that he knows that she knows . . . while each pretends not to know at all. A chain of falsehood has been constructed, in which the falsehood of each is condoned by the other, because it has become necessary to each. But why, he asks, do they not end this horrible sequence by freely admitting, she that she deceives him, and he that he is old? The answer is that in order that love may continue, it is necessary for them to preserve an appearance of trust and an illusion of youth. No doubt trust and youth would be better, but in the relationship here presented these are not available; one has to start from where one is; the only choice here is between the counterfeit of these qualities and their manifest absence. The illusion and the appearance are better than nothing.

So the relationship rests upon lies that deceive neither of the lovers, except in so far as they choose to deceive themselves. And the pun in the closing couplet is no mere ornament. It shows falsehood as being present, inextricably, at the very centre of their love: even at the moment of physical union – a moment when, if ever, pretences might be laid aside – even then this relationship is a sharing of lies: the lying and the lying-with are one.

The lucid precision of the analysis suggests the outcome of a strenuous activity of bringing concealed and self-deceiving