

## 1 - The Conundrum of the Workshop

What is the difference between:

a good poem,  
a bad poem  
and  
something which is not poetry at all?

There is no simple answer, but there are a few simple responses which can render the question less problematical. First, it would help to try to see the matter in historical terms. Each succeeding age has its own notions of what poetry is for and how it should work. It has its own view of what is real or valuable, and seeks to find new ways to express itself.

Pope, writing in the first half of the C18th, was a typical Augustan poet, splendidly sure of himself and his purpose. Art was concerned with decorum, taste and proportion. Reason was paramount, architecture was classical and poetry gave public voice to common sense truths well known to all educated men:

What oft was thought but ne'er so well expressed.  
*- Essay on Criticism, 298*

The natural form to express this polished confidence was the heroic couplet, in which bad poets, of course, wrote excruciating empty stuff, with too many poor and obvious rhymes:

Where-e're you find "the cooling western breeze"  
In the next line it "whispers through the trees":  
If crystal streams "with pleasing murmurs creep"  
The reader is threatened (not in vain) with "sleep"  
*- ibid-350-53*

In the Romantic revolution, truth became something radical, personal and subjective. Poets were the priests of a new religion of freedom and self-exploration. Wordsworth rejected the excesses of a self-consciously 'poetic' diction for more 'everyday' language and, refusing the ordered world of the couplet, often used blank (unrhymed) verse. This was still recognisable as poetry - it used iambic pentameters like Milton and Shakespeare - but much of what the Augustans valued, he refused to provide. In all such revolutions, poets react against the worst excesses of the previous generation, and there is a time lag between the arrival of new forms and popular appreciation of them. New kinds of reader have to be created.

The Victorians had their experimenters - Hopkins and his sprung verse was outlandish at the time - but we enter the C20th under the sway of the Georgians. Masfield, Graves, Houseman, Sassoon and Brooke had returned to regular rhymes and traditional forms which, when used badly by weaker poets, seemed as outmoded and empty as the poor stuff Pope mocked and Wordsworth rejected. It *is* possible to keep the rules of such poetry and say nothing interesting, to resemble a poem like a stuffed owl resembles a bird.

The next generation wanted to strip away the empty rule-keeping habits and force attention upon the essence of what made poetry work - what makes words poetic, in effect. They decided it was the dynamic image, hence the terms Imagists. Consider these two examples:

### Fan-piece for her Imperial Lord

O fan of white silk,  
clear as frost on the grass blade,  
You are also laid aside

*Ezra Pound*

### Yoshiwara Lament

Golden peacocks  
Under blossoming cherry trees,  
But on all the wide sea  
There is no boat.

*Amy Lowell*

Both embody a sense of - what? - loss, rejection, loneliness, absence? Pound's is almost a haiku - cogniscenti would recognise that he was adapting a Japanese syllabic verse form. Lowell's doesn't even have a safety net. If it works, it is welcomed as poetic. If it doesn't, it is called 'not poetry'. You have the essence or an absence, but at least you can't have empty formalities.

A mixed inheritance of Imagism and Romanticism can encourage awful self-indulgence with no obvious public meaning or recognisable technique. But adding rhyme and regular rhythm to bad Imagism only makes it bad Georgianism, not more like a good poem. Georgian poems can be bad but still called poetry in one (technical or formal) sense. Imagist texts look less like poems in that sense, but successful ones have an effect beyond question.

Of course, nervous readers may feel afraid that what they are confronting is not art, that they will be made to feel foolish by something which is itself inadequate. And this very fear ruins necessary conditions for receiving the work. So where does that leave us?

The next article will look in more detail at the futility of trying to divide poetry from prose, with a simple rule for doing so the third will look closely at how a knowledge of traditional forms and critical history helps to make sense of what might otherwise appear to be nonsense. Both will argue that the only infallible guide is sensual pleasure - if the text doesn't yield it, who cares what you call it?

And the first rude sketch that the world had seen was a joy to his mighty heart,  
Till the devil whispered behind the leaves, "It's pretty, but is it Art?"

- *Kipling, The Conundrum of the Workshops*

## 2 - Galumphing Sublunaries

*I wish all our clever young poets  
would remember my homely definitions of  
prose and poetry; that is, prose - words in  
their best order; poetry - the best words in  
their best order.*

Coleridge, Lectures on Shakespeare and Milton delivered 1811-12

I suggested in the first article that the best guide to whether a text was Art was whether it yielded pleasure, implying that whether it was a 'poem' might be a less important question. But we have to allow for what Eliot called "pit or gallery fright", a desire to say the right thing, or fear of being taken in - which is "very unfavourable to poetic receptivity". Poems are more frightening than prose, and never more so than when they most resemble it. What is supposed to be the difference?

Coleridge's homely definitions don't help much, but they imply that poetry is superior, its words more carefully chosen. Others say it is more compressed, or relies more on strong images. Auden argues:

*The difference between verse and prose is self-evident, but it is a sheer waste of time to look for a definition of the difference between poetry and prose.*

- Writing, Selected Essays (Faber)

Sometimes the term verse (as in light verse) is used for a form of poetry considered less serious, but what Auden meant is that while certain forms (sonnets, limericks, ballads, etc.) are not called prose, good prose can use all the other techniques of poetry. So the only difference is form. Unfortunately, the main complaint against modern poetry is that it does not have any recognisable form - it seems like chopped up prose. And meaningless to boot.

But how does a poem 'mean' something? Eliot again:

*... some of the poetry to which I am most devoted is poetry which I did not understand at first reading; some is poetry which I am not sure I understand yet; for instance, Shakespeare's. - The Use of Poetry (Faber)*

The word 'understand' might involve ideas which need time to develop, layers of interpretation to be unveiled. Other pleasures are more immediate. Poetry was sounds before it was print, and sound is a vital component of the meaning.

When the hero of *Jabberwocky* stands in uffish thought before beheading the monster and galumphing back to mother, it is the sound plus the context of these invented words which tell us he is slow, heavy and hairy-palmed. Poems can best be enjoyed when treated as sound systems, and meanings may be lost if they are read only with the eyes. If it does not invite you to say it aloud, perhaps it is a failure?

But our best prose demands to be read aloud, and in the twentieth century we normally meet poetry in print. When we do, one obvious but undervalued fact is that poems have wider margins. They have a form which says 'read me as a poem'. So perhaps the answer lies in poetic forms and in the different way we read when we meet them.

The next article looks in more detail at how form and meaning can inter-relate. Different forms invite different kinds of reading, but all of them signal to the reader that a degree of attention is required, the faith to enjoy sounds first and allow 'meaning' to develop slowly over several readings if necessary.

And consider this text:

### **Of the Earth**

Hearing the lift ascending,  
voices on the stairs,  
a short-lived quarrel,  
the old dog vacates her blanket  
and the contemplation of another world,  
and grudgingly goes to the door  
to express an opinion.  
She embraces sublunary life,  
but without conviction.

*Piotr Sommor*  
(translated from the Polish by the author and D. J. Enright)

I don't know if it loses anything in translation, and I am not aware of any particular traditional form to which it corresponds. It could be called chopped-up prose, if you wanted to reject it.

To me, it conveys lightly yet memorably a kind of sad dignity in precisely the right words and in a pace/rhythms entirely right for the feeling. It is hardly world-shattering or revolutionary, but it had wide margins and I enjoy it and remember it. So it is poetry.

In this case, there is nothing I can add to the meaning from a knowledge of form. Perhaps some wise Pole will write to say that it is a traditional shape and size for zoological laments, or fables, or religious writing, and I shall have to read it again, differently. Perhaps not.

But try different arrangements of the words on the page. In this shape, each line has a rhythm and logic which seems somehow just right. It justifies itself. It asks for close attention and repays it.

If you meet poems  
which don't,  
perhaps they are failures.

Maybe.

### 3 - Icon, Icon OK?

Does a knowledge of literary forms and of critical history help us to enjoy modern poetry more easily? Well, shall I compare thee to a summer's day?

When you meet a sonnet, you recognise the squat form on the page and expect to read a poem about love in which the first eight lines offer an idea or feeling which the next six develop and possibly contradict. That is what sonnets do. e e cumins (sic) used sonnet form, including rhymes, for his unpunctuated poem beginning:

next to of course god america i  
love you land of the pilgrims  
and so forth oh

At first, this looks uninterpretable, until we realise that the speaker is a politician using manipulative patriotic clichés. To do so in sonnet form underlines the destructive nature of his words - the contrast of traditional ordered form and modern cant is part of the poem's meaning. Experienced readers would benefit from their wider knowledge.

Terence Hawkes explains how poems

*emit iconic messages about their nature through the visual means of typography over and above... the symbolic messages of their content.*

- Structuralism and Semiotics - Routledge

In other words - notice the shape and this helps you decide how to read it - form is part of meaning. In this sense, at the extreme, you could argue that chopped-up prose becomes poetry simply by being chopped up, and thus asking to be read differently! That would be a verbal equivalent of Karl Andre's bricks - Art happens when you make familiar things strange and people look at them differently. The 'making strange of the familiar was precisely how Russian Formalists defined the purpose and hallmarks of Art. And literary language does not just tell a story, it points to itself, saying 'look at me, I am interesting'. Literary forms warn us this is intended.

Some forms are not immediately recognisable. The Tanka, for example, is a Japanese form of five lines in which the first and third lines have five syllables and the others seven. • It provides the writer with a necessary discipline. Imagination will be controlled and provoked by order and restraint. But inexperienced readers will approach it with trepidation. It looks unfamiliar, potentially unordered, and they will not know what kind of reading is associated with Tanka. A quick browse through *Pear's Cyclopedica* can avoid such wastage of potential pleasure.

Traditional forms can be adapted. Peter Reading's, *I Have Invented*, celebrates his creation of a new sonnet form using tanka and haiku, and uses it to reflect on how forms bring order to emotion, and thus generate poetry. Yehuda Amichai's, *Again Love Has Ended*, is based on sonnet form but adapts it subtly. Iambic pentameters are familiar enough through Shakespeare and most readers would recognise blank verse. Eliot's Prufrock uses the same neo-conversational effects but without rigidly employing five beats to each line. It is in this sense "free" verse, although he famously remarked that no verse was truly free., because it always has an underlying order. Its sound should justify itself and prove this to your ear.

Finally, of course, we might reflect that all writers are shaped by some kind of tradition, if only

unconsciously. Modernists such as Woolf and Joyce reflected the confused and fractured nature of twentieth century in experimental forms, trying to capture the experience of the subconscious. Imagism rejected the empty formalities of bad Georgian poetry and thus robbed modern readers of familiar shapes and techniques, whilst structuralism insisted that in any case meaning has nothing to do with authors and their so-called intentions, and depends entirely on how we choose to read. Each reader gains a different experience.

Increasingly, nothing was certain, true or familiar, and poets like William Carlos Williams seemed to many to revel in new-minted obscurity, as if declaring 'I refuse to be the kind of stuff you called poetry before - I will not allow you to read in the old ways'. But consider this text:

### **Nantucket**

Flowers through the window  
lavender and yellow

changed by white curtains –  
Smell of cleanliness -

Sunshine of later afternoon –  
on the glass tray

a glass pitcher, the tumbler  
turned down, by which

a key is lying -  
And the immaculate white bed.

Nantucket is a whaling island in the US, which doesn't help British readers. The two-line stanzas insist you take the images slowly, individually, and allow them time to work. Capital letters seem to start new thoughts/images, but stanzas are divided according to rhythm (roughly 3/2/break).

It invents its own order - does it justify it? I think of death in an institution - hospital, hotel, home? - the body gone and the room prepared afresh. Life contrasted with a cleanliness which is attractive but disturbing. Its quiet mood ponders this image, considers the feeling without having anything more to say about it. Except, of course, "Look, I made a poem about this. Learn how to read it."

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