

Poetry and Form

Easter-Wings

Lord, who createdst man in wealth and store,
Though foolishly he lost the same,
Decaying more and more,
Till he became
Most poor:
With thee
O let me rise
As larks, harmoniously,
And sing this day thy victories:
Then shall the fall further the flight in me.

My tender age in sorrow did begin:
And still with sicknesses and shame
Thou didst so punish sin,
That I became
Most thin.
With thee
Let me combine,
And feel this day thy victory:
For, if I imp my wing on thine,
Affliction shall advance the flight in me.

This poem by George Herbert is an extreme example of lineation in verse. Prose does not specify its setting on the page. It is up to the typesetter to decide on the deployment and spacing of the actual words. As long as the words are

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printed in the right order, and with the right punctuation, the writer cannot complain. The situation is radically different with poetry and it is worth asking why.

Lineation in verse not only tells the voice how to speak the lines, but the reading eye how to read them too. Often enough, as in the case of 'Easter-Wings', it is more the latter than the former. Reading the poem out, without seeing the verse set on the page, would not convey the immediate sense we have of the shape of wings: one has to see the actual pattern to understand the full meaning of the poem. The poem forms a visual emblem of its own meaning; it demonstrates in a visual pattern what the words actually utter. Form and content are here clearly indivisible; the grouping of the words on the page is indispensable to the form of the poem. It is seeing on the page the lines 'Most poor/With thee' and 'Most thin/With thee' that emphasizes the sense of deprivation, of spiritual inanition, which is then revived into triumphant flight as the wings are outspread once more. This is a visual effect.

The words in verse cannot be separated from their lineation without a loss. We can see this easily enough if we re-lineate 'Easter-Wings':

Lord, who createdst man in wealth and store,
Though foolishly he lost the same, decaying more and more,
Till he became most poor:
With thee O let me rise as larks, harmoniously, and sing this day
Thy victories: Then shall the fall further the flight in me.

My tender age in sorrow did begin:
And still with sicknesses and shame thou didst so punish sin,
That I became most thin. With thee let me

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Combine, and feel this day thy victory: for, if I imp my wing on thine,
Affliction shall advance the flight in me.

This is still verse, and there are still rhymes and an overall structure, but the intricacies of the emblematic effect are lost entirely. Had this been prose which had been reset in a different configuration from its original, we would almost certainly not have noticed.

Poetry at one level is self-consciously formalized language, language which has deliberately separated itself from daily usage in order to foreground its own resourcefulness. But here is where the difficulties start, since in another sense good poetry is always trying to escape that self-conscious formality which went before it, and which too easily identifies it as 'poetry'. The last thing good poetry wants to be is 'poetic', in the sense of an easily identifiable decorative use of language, one that has no function. In 1798 the language of *Lyrical Ballads* set itself in deliberate opposition to the allusive Latinate self-consciousness of much eighteenth-century poetry, which was more likely to say Phoebus than 'the sun'. The modernists at the beginning of the twentieth century were trying to escape the vagaries of a Symbolism which was all too likely to become vague and indefinable. Ezra Pound gives a specific example of what is to be avoided at all costs: lines like 'the misty lands of peace'. There is here, as Pound would have put it, no direct presentation of the thing, only soft focus gesturings towards grandiose abstractions. 'No ideas but in things,' said William Carlos Williams, or in other words: poetry should not be made up of abstract words softened by moody adjectives and adverbs. This temptation continues to this day, and bad poetry now as then is likely to be very similar to 'the misty lands of peace'.

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And yet poetry is formally insistent, whether it is employing forms or using free verse. The very fact that the lines do not go to the end of the page, that the position of the words on the page is not simply left to a typesetter, indicates a care for the positioning of words in relation to one another, their rhythmic structuring, which leads us back, if we are prepared to go that far, to song; to rhythms so powerful that they were inseparable from music. It is such rhythmic potency, together with lexical astuteness and metaphoric inventiveness, which makes poetry so memorable. We are far more likely to carry lines of verse around in our heads than lines of prose. When we do memorize lines of prose it is likely to be prose that is closest in compression and rhythmic structuring to poetry – lines from the Bible perhaps, or a chunk from James Joyce's *Ulysses*.

So let us summarize the elements we are entitled to expect to find in poetry: compression, lexical fastidiousness, imagistic panache, and metaphoric inventiveness. Poetry chooses the right words, finds an order for them which is rhythmically compelling, presents us with original imagery, and makes connections which surprise us with their originality and justness. This last word is an important one. If poetry employs outrageous imagery simply for the sake of being 'original', we are likely to find it cloys quickly, however 'inventive' it might be. We want, to quote Ezra Pound, to find the surface detail in accord with its root in justice. We want poetry to tell the truth, however unexpected the truth might be. A respect for language informs the inventiveness of all good poets.

The Question of Rhetoric

How rhetorical is poetry? All convincing language is

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rhetorical, and poetry cannot escape that condition. To what extent did Shakespeare's *Sonnets* dramatize and rhetoricize emotion exactly as his plays did? We do not know, and probably never will. 'I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion.' Thus Ernest Dowson at the end of the nineteenth century, and we are surely entitled to translate the line as 'I have not been faithful to thee, Cynara! in any fashion whatsoever'. But given the clear hint of Roman decadence in the 1890s, the possibilities of off-the-shoulder togas at certain discreet addresses in Bloomsbury, we are also entitled to anticipate Cynara's reply: 'And I too have been faithful to thee, Ernest! in my fashion; i.e. not at all'. As Lear almost remarked: 'Here's two on's are sophisticated.' This is poetry as rhetoric and suasion; Yeats was greatly haunted by it, by the swooning cadences and the possibilities of verbal seduction. Later on, the 'modernist' Yeats sought to demolish both the rhythms and the rhetoric which he knew to be firmly rooted in his early verse, but he never quite escaped. This ongoing battle is, to one degree or another, the story of modern poetry. We have grown distrustful of verse which has explicit designs on us, whether erotic or political, and prefer a verse engaged in an exploration of itself and its world, negotiating reality in every possible sense, and ruthlessly examining its own use of language in the process.

But then, the anti-rhetorical stance can become a kind of rhetoric in its own right. Auden grew so accustomed to adumbrating the squalor of the human heart that the strategy starts to feel as predictable in its way as its grandiloquent opponent, and perhaps as falsely comforting. Late Larkin so frequently points towards the disaffection of love that one senses at times a certain love in the disaffection. Neither of these poets, however, breaches what is in effect one of the most important protocols of modern poetry, which is this: it must negotiate

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form without ever sacrificing authenticity of language. Should it depart from the natural word order of speech, then it must be with extreme deliberation, never merely to hold a rhythm or maintain a rhyme. Auden does so depart, and always with something like a hieratic effect: 'Let the more loving one be me'. He knows it is arch; the archness, in other words, is knowing and telling, not a lapse.

The Words

Good poetry repays any amount of attention; it never wears out. It is, in Pound's phrase, news that stays news. No examination is too minute for it. When Macbeth starts his speech 'To morrow and to morrow and to morrow', the repetition emphasizes the ceaseless locomotion towards a sequence of unchanging states. This is a mechanical progress towards succession, not success. Given what we know of Shakespeare's likely accent at the time, 'to morrow' would probably not have been much of a phonetic leap from 'to mort', and tomorrow itself, the sought-for and now dreaded future, has become indistinguishable from death.

Ernst Mach, the leader of that tendency in the physical sciences once known as Descriptionism, called science 'the economy of thought'. Poetry could equally be described as the economy of expression. Nothing extraneous or inessential should be contained in it if it is working to maximum efficiency. The potency of poetry comes not from any eschewal of metaphor, but rather from the acknowledgment that all language is inherently metaphoric. Even the plainest-seeming signifiers usually reveal metaphoric origins. The English language, declared the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, is a graveyard of dead metaphors. Poetry at its best reveals an expanse of living ones, and even manages to resurrect a few defunct

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examples. In the chapter on 'Writing Science', we will see how Thomas Sprat in his *History of the Royal Society* sought to expunge 'this vicious abundance of phrase'; he here meant metaphor, the *métier* as he saw it of poetasters and prattlers, but he misunderstood what it is that language does.

Language does not merely grunt and gesture at the water. It is not simply a pointer; or if it is, it is also pointing to its own inherent creativity, its fecundity of imagery and cross-referencing. In Mach's 'economy of thought', water would be expressed as H₂O, which is to say a molecule in which two atoms of hydrogen combine with one of oxygen to produce that curiously forgiving and unbreakable medium known as water. Language immediately forms tributaries, not in contradiction to the constellation of matter known as H₂O, but in a paradigmatic expansion of association and possibility: riverbank, riverbed, riverside, riverboat. And of course we speak of time as a river, mimicking water's arrival and departure, its force, its constancy, its ability to deliver things to us and to take them away again; it has become a metaphor. And if we take the word river back to its Greek progenitor we will find the word for plunging down. How different all this feels from 'lake', something else made entirely out of H₂O, but plunging nowhere at all. How different again that word feels from loch or lagoon – all words to some degree cognate, but regionally differentiated, and therefore culturally distinct.

And here we come to an essential difference between that economy of thought which is science, and the economy of expression which is poetry: the former seeks to universalize itself into formulae, the latter to exploit the local richness of association which words afford. Another way of expressing this distinction is to think of the translatability of science compared to the highly

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problematic nature of poetry in translation.

Poetry operates at one level through metaphor, simile and the multiple associations which a word accrues about it. If we see the word 'pitfall', then in an industrial society there comes unbidden the horrific imagery of the mine (coal-mine, copper-mine, tin-mine) when a part of it collapses or someone falls down it. Broken bones, darkness, isolation. But in a society where no mineral mining had ever taken place, and where the pit was a hole in the ground, dug there so the lion might be beaten and netted into it, the word would be equally horrific, but for a different reason entirely: the victim would be trapped with an angry predator. Words gain their strength from their context. And there never has been a good poet who has not been an avid student of words. Poets are not exactly lexicographers, but they are always lexical obsessives.