

FRANCES STILLMAN

*The
Poet's Manual
and
Rhyming
Dictionary*

THAMES AND HUDSON

TRUTH IN POETRY

The poet's true vision must always be the subject of poetry, whatever the poem is about, since the major justification of poetry, as of all literature, is that it enlarges life. A genuine insight or moment of illumination is shared by the poet, and because of its truth it is the equivalent — sometimes more than the equivalent — of actual experience for the reader. The poet may sometimes discover or work out this truth in the act of writing his poem. This process has been the subject of considerable thought and analysis on the part of both poets and philosophers, and has never been fully explained — but whatever it is, it has a good deal to do with the matter of getting at truth.

Wordsworth's definition of poetry as "emotion recalled in tranquillity" is of interest in its emphasis on the element of recollection, for the experience of many writers has shown that the poem which is composed when the emotion it expresses is at its height is likely to be a failure. At the moment when love or grief has actually transported the poet, he is least likely to be able to write about it well, to transmute it into a work of art. It is not until a little distance has provided perspective that he can recreate his emotion in a good poem. In short, too close an involvement in the subject is likely to spoil its rendering, for a certain detachment is necessary in creating a work of art. Wordsworth was phrasing a profound truth about poetic creation, even though as a definition of poetry his statement seems inadequate.

Nothing shows up more surely in would-be poetry than a lack of truth, whether the falseness or pose be deliberate or involuntary on the part of the poet. Oddly enough, the ersatz is more apparent in poetry than in prose, for poetry is so highly wrought and so stripped down to essentials that there is nowhere to hide. The very verbiage of prose can camouflage with cleverness a false premise or a basic emptiness and insincerity.

Allen Tate writes, in "Three Types of Poetry," one of the essays in *On the Limits of Poetry*, "Although *The Divine Comedy* is allegorical, it would not be one of the great poems of all time if Dante had not believed its structure of action to be true."

Concerning the communicated truth of Thomas Hardy's poetry, Ezra Pound wrote: "No man can read Hardy's poems collected but that his own life, and forgotten moments of it, will come back to him, in a flash here and an hour there. Have you a better test of true poetry?"

Pound was speaking of the shock of recognition that constitutes the impact of a great work of art on the beholder, and he saw it in terms of correspondence with the recollection of the reader's own life. His statement is deeply sincere, but, however touching, it seems too narrow a definition of the recognition which is the response to art. Even without any previous analogous experience, the reader

may experience that stab of recognition which says, "This is it! This is how it is!" Sometimes the poem seems like a revelation of something remembered from a former life, or what the French call the feeling of *déjà vu* (already seen), even though nothing in it in any way resembles a past experience of the reader. Actually, though, the distilled essence of life in a work of art, and especially in a poem, can be recognized simply by the touchstone of the life within us. If the poem is alive and true, it arouses a response in us; we carry around a sort of inner tuning fork, if we will listen to it, which can detect true pitch. What this means to the poet is simply that he must examine what he says very carefully, and make sure of its truth.

O! 'tis an easy thing
To write and sing
But to write true, unfeigned verse
Is very hard!...

Thus wrote Henry Vaughan, one of the metaphysical poets of seventeenth-century England, who deeply understood, as all good poets must, the difficulty of the search for truth and its expression in poetry. William Butler Yeats held that writing facile verse was the greatest temptation a poet has, and the greatest mistake he can make.

The writer, then, must wrestle with reality and imagination to be sure of what he himself knows and thinks. This search for truth cannot be guaranteed to produce poetry, but without it the effort is hopeless. The beginning writer must question himself: what do I know, what have I experienced, what have I seen with acute vision, that could be used in the writing of a poem?

This is what Sir Philip Sidney's Muse was talking about when she said to him, "Fool! look in thy heart and write!" One caution and one piece of encouragement must be added. Let the fledgling poet, in looking into his own heart, beware of sentimentality; and let him use his mind fearlessly and to the utmost.

IS ANY SUBJECT BARRED?

Is any subject barred from poetry? This is a foolish question, but it is so often posed that one might as well ask it and get it over. The answer is no, nothing is barred, providing it can be made into a poem.

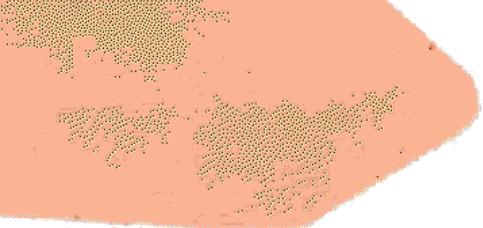
THEMES

The theme is the general field of meaning within which a particular poem takes up its subject. The great themes upon which poets write have not changed much in the last four centuries or so, although in different periods different themes

tend to come to the fore. Love and death are the two greatest universal themes, with time and nature running a close second. Religion and philosophical reflection, human nature, personal loneliness, nostalgia, hope, hopelessness, and frustration, all are frequent themes of poetry. The power of poetry itself is a theme. Social criticism may be written straightforwardly, in a spirit of high moral earnestness and indignation, or it may be written (animated by the same motives) as satire. The celebration of national and heroic greatness may be the theme of an epic. The world, the flesh, and the devil may be one or several themes.

In our time, the themes that relate to psychological insights and analysis, such as personal loneliness and frustration, have been emphasized more than during any other period. During the 1930s, there was an attempt to make social protest the main theme of serious poetry, but, although much passion and ink were expended, not much poetry resulted. Probably the writers of the 1930s were too close to their subject during that decade of economic depression and social ferment to attain the necessary perspective.

The theme of love has been used by poets of ancient and modern times, in Orient and Occident. It is a universal theme, for everybody loves at one time or another, briefly or enduringly, happily or unhappily. It is a wonder there is anything fresh to be said about it, and yet just as no two individuals in the world are exactly alike, no two loves are alike either, if the poet has the courage and vision to express himself truly instead of in a stereotype. Though many poems have been written in a time of war to the distant object of the poet's love, such a poem as Karl Shapiro's "V-Letter" is true and individual. His affirmation of the wholeness of his love, his touching use of unexpected and nostalgic common imagery ("As groceries in a pantry gleam and smile | Because they are important weights | Bought with the metal minutes of your pay"), and his matter-of-fact courage, combine to make one of the most moving poems to come out of the last war.



ELEMENTS OF SUBJECT MATTER

THE IMAGE

| It seems at first glance that everybody knows what an image is, but in actuality the image is not so simple in poetry. It is a graphic description or representation of an object so vividly rendered that its reality seems immediate. All the five senses may be called into play, or the one or two whose apprehension of the image in question are most vivid; in particular, of course, visual comprehension is recreated.

Ezra Pound, who was the main advocate of the imagist movement wrote: "An 'image' is that which presents an intellectual or emotional complex in an instant of time." The original "rules" of the imagist movement spoke of the "direct treatment of the 'thing,' whether subjective or objective."

The image, then, is like an instantaneous snapshot of an object, thing, or state

of mind. It is vividly present. It is important in itself; if it has a premonitory or general significance it is implicit rather than explicit. The image is *presented*; though it often raises further thoughts or echoes in the mind, it is not weakened or watered down by discussion. For the imagist movement, the image was the whole point of poetry. The influence of that movement has done much to strip subsequent poetry of vagueness and generalities, and the image is of prime importance in the subject matter of contemporary poetry.

Usually, however, the image is a vehicle to build a mood or to convey feeling or thought, as in Amy Lowell's "Patterns." Only rarely, as in the Japanese haiku, is the image presented totally without context, and left to echo hauntingly in the mind. This was the imagist's theory of what the image ought to do, but the practice of the movement was usually somewhat closer to conventional usage.

Imagery can bring before us all kinds of intense impressions—heat, cold, sickness, health, and other states of being—in a combination of sensory stimuli. Of all images, visual ones are the most frequent. "The blue and yellow flowers stood up proudly in the sun" is a piece of visual imagery, while "the plopping of the waterdrops" in the same poem ("Patterns," by Amy Lowell, a leader of the imagist movement) is auditory, one can almost hear them plop, since the word is an onomatopoeic one. "The sliding of the water | Seems the stroking of a dear | Hand..." (from "Patterns") is definitely tactile in effect. Imagery that calls on the senses of taste and smell is rarer, but examples are not difficult to find. Keats' "whose strenuous tongue | Can burst Joy's grape against his palate fine" ("Ode on Melancholy") is a vivid gustatory image. Wallace Stevens, in writing "when the grapes | Made sharp air sharper by their smell" ("A Postcard from the Volcano"), is appealing to the olfactory faculty of his readers to make clear the particular sharpness of that autumn air.

THE SYMBOL

The symbol is an image used symbolically, which is to say that it means something more than itself. Its importance lies in the hidden meaning, rather than the surface significance.

The French symbolists wrote poetry which on the surface made no sense; its meaning was supposed to be conveyed "directly" to the subconscious mind by the symbolic meaning or effect of the words. The modern symbolist does not always go that far. His symbols are often meaningful on a logical level, and whether they are universal symbols, like certain well-established symbols in Christian iconography, or personal symbols, they are likely to be recognizable. Certain objects are laden with deep symbolical meaning for certain poets—for Yeats the tower, for Edith Sitwell the rose, for T. S. Eliot the city.

himself indicates that this is not usually the case. A poem may begin with a line or with a phrase, and the poet may feel his way to the poem's final shape without having much idea how it is going to turn out. He knows the direction he is going in, but is not sure where he will end up. Poetry is different in this way from prose, which is primarily a vehicle for meaning; poetry "should not mean, but be," as Archibald MacLeish said in his "Ars Poetica." This is an extreme statement that could not be completely supported by logic, but there is some truth in it.

Because of the nature of poetry-writing, then, a poet does not necessarily start out with a full-blown idea — he may begin with a feeling in his bones or a tickle in the end of his right index finger. In that case, he must cast around for a point of departure, a word, an image, or a remembered moment of illumination, to use as a springboard to plunge into his poem.

language. Although the techniques of versewriting are indispensable to the poet, they would not get him far if he were unable to compose distinctive sentences or wield the primary tool of writing, vocabulary, in a fresh and exact way. Style in this sense is an intensely individual thing.| It may not be the man, but it reveals the man. It is, in a way, the tone of his written voice and the visible sign of how his mind works.

Style in works of literature can be analyzed, and the sources of an author's characteristic rhythm of thought and language can be identified in such matters as his use of periodic and simple sentences, the richness of his vocabulary, and his use of figures of speech. Yet such analysis is an *ex post facto* procedure. How should an author go about forming a style? And if he is a poet, should he approach the

The lyric poet finds much of his material in general autobiographical incident and in his own ideas and emotions, yet he must be careful to place the emphasis in his poems more on the idea or the emotion he wishes to communicate than on himself. The "I" of a lyric poem must be someone with whom the reader can identify. Whenever possible, this "I" must stand aside. He is the experiencer and the relater, but it is the thing experienced that is the real point of the poem. When Yeats writes, "I shall arise and go now, and go to Innisfree, | And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made," the emphasis is upon Innisfree and the cabin, upon the vision of escape to a simpler world which is a universal longing and with which the reader can identify. The "I" is therefore read by the reader as himself, rather than as Yeats, and thus attains the stature of a universal entity.

One danger in lyric poetry, as in any autobiographical or confessional writing, is that the writer may reveal (or seem to reveal) himself as egotistical and self-engrossed. Thus the would-be poet must try to take an objective view of his poetry, to make sure that what he has to say is really of interest in itself, and not to inject his own presence any more than is absolutely necessary. Even though he is, in the last analysis, writing about himself, he must be careful not to use the first-person-singular pronoun any more than is absolutely necessary. It is a good idea to bring other characters into the poem when possible, and to prefer any other pronoun, if it makes sense, to the ubiquitous "I."

Objectivity, modesty, sincerity, and seriousness of purpose are the qualities of attitude with which the poet must start. Sometimes a well-known poet, like Dylan Thomas, leads the kind of flamboyant and notorious life which would seem to deny these qualities, but life should not be confused with art; if one examines this poet's work carefully it is apparent that modesty and sincerity animate his poetry. His life was his own business, but his poetry belongs to the world—and not the other way around.

DICTION

THREE CRITERIA FOR THE RIGHT WORD

In poetry, the individual word must be chosen for its exact meaning, invisible aura of connotations, and music. The choice of the right words is crucial in getting a poem off the ground and making it soar into poetry. There is something mysterious about the way one combination of words is memorable and another is not, and teachers often delight in rewriting famous passages to show how flat they would be in any other form. Yet certain qualities are usually present in the memorable phrase. It is likely to be particular rather than general, to be concise, and to have rhythm as well as a touch of alliteration or assonance or both.

The vivid and particular word and concept should always be preferred to the vague and general one. If an individual example is substituted for a general whole, the lines will usually come alive.

Trite words and phrases should be avoided. Clichés have been debased, like bad coinage, by inflated use; they have thus lost the full force of their meaning and effectiveness. Lovely, pretty, fair, nice, sweet, and awful, for example, are trite words, as are many other general and overworked adjectives. In fact, it is these words and others like them that have been responsible to a large extent for discrediting all adjectives, a reaction that is illogical, but understandable.

The ever-ready little clichés spring into action whenever the writer's mind relaxes for an instant; thus words and figures of speech that come to mind with too much facility should be closely scrutinized. What one has read or heard is recalled all too easily, so that frequently one has to probe relentlessly for real meaning and real words of his own.

The "poetic" words and contractions were done to death in the last century and early in this one, but some of them linger on. Such contractions as e'er, ne'er, 'tis, 'twas, 'gainst, 'gan, and 'neath, as well as shortened forms of words such as morn, ope, oft, and yon, even though they are found throughout the poetry of earlier periods than our own, are now considered bad style. Archaic

The simple sentences of a Hemingway, the extremely long and involved sentences of a Proust or a Faulkner, the stately periodic sentences of a Milton, all have the stamp of their author's individual style. Variation in the construction of sentences provides endless modulation of tempo, and every writer should devote careful attention to this element of composition. The artless innocence of a loose compound sentence is effective in a ballad, while the mounting elegance of the periodic sentence is at home in the formal ode or elegy. The varied music of several types of sentences can come to a stunning climax in the stark statement of a simple sentence at a peak of emotion or tension.

Parallelism is a rule for the construction of sentences containing coordinate elements; its music is familiar to all English readers because of its use in the Bible. Indeed, it is a strong element in all Hebrew literature. Listen to the Beatitudes:

Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted.

Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.

Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.

Is not this kind of incantatory magic part of the very essence of poetry?

No style comes about automatically; style has to be endlessly worked at and improved, and no instrument of style requires more attention or repays it better than sentence structure.

FIGURES OF SPEECH AND FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

Both imagination and intelligence come into play in the employment of figures of speech in composition. What is a figure of speech? It is the use of a word or a longer expression in an imaginative rather than a literal way. And what is the object of using figures of speech? Their use is at the same time practical, as a means of definition, and aesthetic, as the means of making the specific passage of a composition more lively and pleasing.

Whereas the modern prose writer is careful not to use too many figures of speech, the poet seeks ever more effective figurative language, for imagination is the breath of life to poetry.

Three Warnings

1. The writer should not try too hard for a fresh comparison, for it is possible to strain the bounds of likelihood to such a point that the simile or metaphor is unbelievable, grotesque, or distasteful.
2. He should not employ similes or metaphors too vague to be meaningful, as Shelley did when he wrote, "Like an unbodied joy whose race is just begun." What is an unbodied joy? What kind of race could possibly be meant?
3. He should not employ mixed metaphors, in which the poet begins by speaking of his subject in one set of terms and in the same breath ends with another set, creating an absurd jumble; he should take his metaphors one at a time, and should be consistent.