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David Mason

BEFORE WE BEGIN

Sometimes we feel like jumping over a fence for the fun of it, or we burst into song for the fun of singing, or we string words together just for the fun of saying them. What we do “for fun” we do for the pleasure of doing it, without having any other purpose in mind. Fun is an expression of the exuberance we feel at being alive, an overflow of the spirit of play that characterizes so much activity, though it may be less evident in adults than in children, less common in our time than in earlier and simpler ages. When we *imagine* anything, we are playing with images, combining them as they have never been combined before, perhaps not even in nature itself. Out of such playing with images came primitive ritual and the mythologies of early religion. Out of our playing with rocks and herbs and the mystery of fire came early science. Out of our playing with hollow reeds or tightened sinews or the beat of bone on deer-skin came early music; musicians still “play” on their pianos or guitars. And out of our playing with words, with their sounds and shapes and rhythms and the images they conjured, came early poetry, so wonderful that in all parts of the world it seemed a kind of magic.

To some of us today, poetry may seem an artificial refinement of natural speech. But in the literature of every country, poetry comes before prose does. It is closer than prose to the origins of language. We can even say it is more natural: more primitive, more basic, a more total expression of the muscular, sensuous, emotional, rhythmical nature of the human animal. The ancient Greeks, childlike for all their sophistication, considered the poet an “athlete of the word.” In the universities of a truly humane society, they might have felt, poetry would belong at least as much to departments of physical education as to departments of literary criticism.

But what *is* poetry? That is the question this book is setting out to answer. Whatever it is, it is so closely related to the other activities of our lives that we will find ourselves dealing with many curious questions about humans and their world. Some of them are:

*If a baby were born with no senses, would it know it exists?
 How can we see sounds and hear colors?
 Why do cats dislike getting their feet wet?
 Why did the thought of a line of poetry make A. E. Housman falter while shaving?
 Why do charms against the devil fail to work in translation?
 Why do French dogs say "ouâ-ouâ" instead of "bow-wow"?
 What kind of rhyme is like a blue note in music?
 What American president wrote a treatise on the nature of rhythm in poetry?
 Why do metronomes have a poor sense of rhythm?
 Why did Picasso say, "Man invented the alarm clock"?*

Poetry—like so much we are closest to and know best—is not easy to define. We can begin by saying what it is not. Poetry is not the same as *verse*. Verse is any singsong with rhythm and rhyme, as in

Thirty days hath September,
 April, June, and November. . . .

The word "verse" refers only to the shape an expression takes, not to its content or quality.

Poetry *may* be in verse, and often does use some kind of verselike structure. Many poets, for example, have been attracted by the shape of the sonnet, which arranges rhythms and rhymes in a definite formation. But the sonnet in itself is only a verse-form; a sonnet may be poetry or it may not.

Poetry is not poetry *because* it is in verse; to the shape of verse it has to add qualities of imagination and emotion and of language itself. Such qualities, not easy to describe briefly, are what this book is about.

Much about verse (as opposed to poetry) is arbitrary, just as the rules of a game are arbitrary. The limerick, for instance, has five lines of regulation length, as in Arthur Buller's Einsteinian example:

There was a young lady named Bright,
 Whose speed was far faster than light;
 She set out one day
 In a relative way,
 And returned home the previous night.

The longer lines, 1, 2, and 5, are bound together by one rhyme; the shorter ones, 3 and 4, by another. Nothing in nature says a limerick should have this form, just as nothing in nature says we should have four balls and three strikes in baseball, or four downs to make ten yards in football.

Although verse is arbitrary, poetry is not. Everything in poetry is an expression of what is natural: It is the way it is because we are the way we are.

The whole approach of this book is based upon this certainty: The nature of poetry follows from our own human nature. The main divisions are

organized as we ourselves are. Human experience begins when the senses give us

(1)

IMAGES of the self or of the world outside. These images arouse

(2)

EMOTIONS, which (with their images) we express in

(3)

WORDS, which are physically produced and have

(4)

SOUND, which comes to our ears riding the air on waves of

(5)

RHYTHM. The whole process, from the beginning, is fostered and overseen by an organizing

(6)

MIND, acting with the common sense of everyday life, even when dealing with the uncommon sense of dreams or visions.

In a good poem the elements work together as a unit, just as our own combinations of body and mind work together. But if we were studying body and mind as medical students do, we would soon realize that it is impossible to consider all parts at once. The way to deal with a complicated subject is to look at it part by part; in medical school we would expect separate lectures on the heart, the stomach, the lungs, and so forth, even though we realize no organ can function apart from the others. And so with poetry: We have to talk separately about the elements that make it up—such as imagery, diction, rhythm—even though we know they cannot exist in isolation.

Although poetry is not bound by such arbitrary rules as games are, it does fall under the influence of certain natural laws, like those we call the rules of health, or like those that govern mountain climbing. Mountain climbers are not subject to anything as formal as the three-strike rule in baseball, but they cannot forget that they have only so many arms and legs, that some kinds of rock crumble and some do not, and that the law of gravitation can exact more severe penalties than any human rule book. Poetry may not have rules and regulations, but, as we shall see, it has to make sense in terms of our human nature.

In such a study as this, specific examples are more persuasive than definitions. It is helpful to give the definition of a metaphor; it is even more helpful to give enough examples so that—as in life itself—we can come to our own conclusions about what it is.

We can also learn about things by observing what they are not. Just as rudeness can teach us to value courtesy, so a bad line or bad stanza can teach

us to appreciate a good one. Some of our bad examples are so clumsy we may find ourselves laughing at them. Nothing wrong with that: A sense of humor is a sense of proportion. It is also a sense of delight—delight in noting that life has its incongruities and absurdities and that we can live in spite of them. Only a fool, said the French poet Paul Valéry, thinks a man cannot joke and be serious.

Our attitude to poetry—as to any subject—should be a questioning one. We might think of nearly every sentence in this book as ending with a ghostly question mark. Is this statement—we should ask ourselves—really true? We can decide only by considering the evidence we have: the poems we have read, the poems we are reading, and what we know of our own nature.

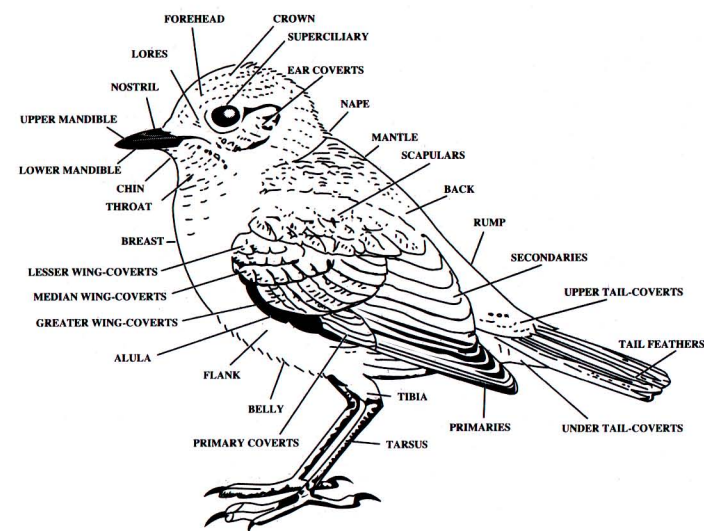
Although we will have to make some general statements about poetry, we can find exceptions to nearly all of them. A recent cartoon showed a professor of mathematics who had written $2 + 2 = 4$ on the blackboard. He was beginning his lecture with a “However . . .” Readers may come across sentences in this book that they would like to see followed by a “However . . .” They are certainly free to supply their own. *This is a book to live with and be alive with; being alive is often a process of disagreement.*

As individual human beings we differ greatly. In a time of increasing standardization, when more and more things and more and more people are being referred to by number instead of by name, it is important to cherish these differences. It seems to be a part of the general sameness of our culture that we are expected to give indiscriminate approval to accepted values. If we say we like poetry, it is assumed we like all poetry. But why should we? It is only human to have our “passionate preferences.” Not all readers are going to like all the poems in this book; nor should they be expected to. Human attention, like everything human, has its rhythms: Now we concentrate, now we relax, pretty much as our interests dictate. Individual teachers and individual classes, as well as individual students, will have their preferences. There is no reason they should read every poem or every chapter with equal interest. Some groups may prefer to skim or skip certain sections so that they can concentrate on others that are more to their liking. Some may prefer to read, here and there, only the poems, which are always more important than what is being said about them. We should not be misled into thinking that the poems are here only to illustrate something about poetry.

Our range of disagreements may be broad—nothing wrong with that. Some of us love the connections that can be made between popular music and the Slam scene, while others are more intrigued by the complexity and precision of “literary” poetry. Some of us respond most readily to contemporary voices, while others have no difficulty taking in poetry of the past or works in translation from other languages. This book is only a place to begin, but it assumes that knowledge is not a danger to your health. The more kinds of poetry we can love—old and new—the richer we are as readers. Learning from old masters of the art helps us put contemporary techniques and visions into perspective.

In discussing such a body of poetry, we can save time by resorting to what look like technical terms. These may put off some readers, who forget that they themselves make extensive use of such terms in speaking of their own interests. Referring to a midline pause in a poem as a “caesura” is no more pedantic than referring to split T’s or tight ends or topspin or a chip shot or fuel injection. Such technical terms are nothing but convenient shortcuts.

There are people who think that knowledge destroys their spontaneous reaction to anything beautiful. They are seldom right; generally, the more we know, the more we see to appreciate. There are people who think that to analyze a poem or, as they like to say, to “tear it apart,” is to destroy it. But one no more destroys a poem by analysis than one destroys birds or flowers or anything else by means of a diagram.



The Main Parts of a Bird

There is no reason to worry about this bird. It has not been injured or “taken apart.” If one is interested in birds, one likes to be able to tell one from another—a catbird from a mockingbird, a great rackettail drongo from a blue-faced booby. The diagram shows where points of difference lie. And so with poems. Diagrams and analyses no more substitute for them than our drawing substitutes for a bird. But they may help make a point or two.

If we can talk about the parts of poems without killing them, we can also notice that poems come in different types or genres. The **lyric** or songlike poem can be found in early works like the little four-liner that gave this book its title; it can be found in Edmund Waller’s “Go, Lovely Rose” (Anthology, p. 383) or a contemporary work like Joe Bolton’s “Adult Situations” (p. 565). **Narrative poetry** is simply that which tells a story. Examples include Robert

Frost's "Out, Out—" (p. 439) and B. H. Fairchild's "Brazil" (p. 533). The **dramatic monologue** is a poem in which a character other than the poet is speaking. Famous examples include Tennyson's "Ulysses" (p. 410) and Browning's "My Last Duchess" (p. 412), but dramatic voice can also be found in such poems as Margaret Benbow's "Crazy Arms: Earlene Remembers" (p. 531). Another genre would be the **ode**, an elaborate and more meditative extension of the lyric. Odes have been written not only by Shelley (p. 401) and Keats (p. 405) but by such contemporaries as Brigit Pegeen Kelly in "Song" (p. 548), her meditation on the origin of tragedy. Knowing the kind of poem you are reading will help not only with analysis but with performance as well. Most poems in this book will be better understood if you read them aloud more than once.

With poetry we have to return to the reading habits of a more primitive age than our own. Poetry has no use for the kind of speed-reading techniques we are encouraged to practice with informational materials. In speed-reading, we are told not to fixate on any one word not to backtrack over what we have already read, and not to subvocalize by half pronouncing the words or by moving our lips. But in reading poetry we have to dwell on the words to savor their implications and relationships; we have to glance back and re-read whenever we have a mind to; and we have to feel the words alive in our mouths, even if we move our lips to do so. We may have to read a poem several times to feel we know it—and then (as with a favorite recording) return to it as many times as we want for further pleasure. In a world increasingly sophisticated, poetry is one of the few ways in which we can still afford to be primitive.

Western wind, when will thou blow,
The small rain down can rain?
Christ! if my love were in my arms,
And I in my bed again!