**Preface to *SWORD BLADES AND POPPY SEED***

**by Amy Lowell**

**[American (Massachusetts) poet, 1874-1925.]**

No one expects a man to make a chair without first learning how, but there is a popular impression that the poet is born, not made, and that his verses burst from his overflowing heart of themselves. As a matter of fact, the poet must learn his trade in the same manner, and with the same painstaking care, as the cabinet-maker. His heart may overflow with high thoughts and sparkling fancies, but if he cannot convey them to his reader by means of the written word he has no claim to be considered a poet. A workman may be pardoned, therefore, for spending a few moments to explain and describe the technique of his trade. A work of beauty which cannot stand an intimate examination is a poor and jerry-built thing.

In the first place, I wish to state my firm belief that poetry should not try to teach, that it should exist simply because it is a created beauty, even if sometimes the beauty of a gothic grotesque. We do not ask the trees to teach us moral lessons, and only the Salvation Army feels it necessary to pin texts upon them. We know that these texts are ridiculous, but many of us do not yet see that to write an obvious moral all over a work of art, picture, statue, or poem, is not only ridiculous, but timid and vulgar. We distrust a beauty we only half understand, and rush in with our impertinent suggestions. How far we are from “admitting the Universe!” The Universe, which flings down its continents and seas, and leaves them without comment. Art is as much a function of the Universe as an Equinoctial gale, or the Law of Gravitation; and we insist upon considering it merely a little scroll-work, of no great importance unless it be studded with nails from which pretty and uplifting sentiments may be hung!

For the purely technical side I must state my immense debt to the French, and perhaps above all to the, so-called, Parnassian School, although some of the writers who have influenced me most do not belong to it. High-minded and untiring workmen, they have spared no pains to produce a poetry finer than that of any other country in our time. Poetry so full of beauty and feeling, that the study of it is at once an inspiration and a despair to the artist. The Anglo-Saxon of our day has a tendency to think that a fine idea excuses slovenly workmanship. These clear-eyed Frenchmen are a reproof to our self-satisfied laziness. Before the works of Parnassians like Leconte de Lisle, and José-Maria de Heredia, or those of Henri de Régnier, Albert Samain, Francis Jammes, Remy de Gourmont, and Paul Fort, of the more modern school, we stand rebuked. Indeed—“They order this matter better in France.”

It is because in France, to-day, poetry is so living and vigorous a thing, that so many metrical experiments come from there. Only a vigorous tree has the vitality to put forth new branches. The poet with originality and power is always seeking to give his readers the same poignant feeling which he has himself. To do this he must constantly find new and striking images, delightful and unexpected forms. Take the word “daybreak”, for instance. What a remarkable picture it must once have conjured up! The great, round sun, like the yolk of some mighty egg, BREAKING through cracked and splintered clouds. But we have said “daybreak” so often that we do not see the picture any more, it has become only another word for dawn. The poet must be constantly seeking new pictures to make his readers feel the vitality of his thought.

Many of the poems in this volume are written in what the French call “Vers Libre”, a nomenclature more suited to French use and to French versification than to ours. I prefer to call them poems in “unrhymed cadence”, for that conveys their exact meaning to an English ear. They are built upon “organic rhythm”, or the rhythm of the speaking voice with its necessity for breathing, rather than upon a strict metrical system. They differ from ordinary prose rhythms by being more curved, and containing more stress. The stress, and exceedingly marked curve, of any regular metre is easily perceived. These poems, built upon cadence, are more subtle, but the laws they follow are not less fixed. Merely chopping prose lines into lengths does not produce cadence, it is constructed upon mathematical and absolute laws of balance and time. In the preface to his “Poems,” Henley speaks of “those unrhyming rhythms in which I had tried to quintessentialize, as (I believe) one scarce can do in rhyme.” The desire to “quintessentialize,” to head-up an emotion until it burns white-hot, seems to be an integral part of the modern temper, and certainly “unrhymed cadence” is unique in its power of expressing this.

Three of these poems are written in a form which, so far as I know, has never before been attempted in English. M. Paul Fort is its inventor, and the results it has yielded to him are most beautiful and satisfactory. Perhaps it is more suited to the French language than to English. But I found it the only medium in which these particular poems could be written. It is a fluid and changing form, now prose, now verse, and permitting a great variety of treatment.

But the reader will see that I have not entirely abandoned the more classic English metres. I cannot see why, because certain manners suit certain emotions and subjects, it should be considered imperative for an author to employ no others. Schools are for those who can confine themselves within them. Perhaps it is a weakness in me that I cannot.

In conclusion, I would say that these remarks are in answer to many questions asked me by people who have happened to read some of these poems in periodicals. They are not for the purpose of forestalling criticism, nor of courting it; and they deal, as I said in the beginning, solely with the question of technique. For the more important part of the book, the poems must speak for themselves.

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