

THE PRACTICALITIES OF WRITING POETRY

POETS WHO SUBMIT TO *Overland* often ask for feedback on their work, and I can't give it to them, firstly because I don't have time, and secondly because I would be repeating myself. However I thought I would put into an article my thoughts on the practicalities of writing poetry, how to write poetry that will, I hope, prove to be a durable kind of poetry.

George Gascoigne, writing in 1575, said it all when he advised: "I would have you stand most upon the excellency of your invention and stick not to study deeply for some fine device. For, that being found, pleasant words will follow well enough and fast enough." In other words, you have to find something to base a poem on, be it a metaphor, a simile, a phrase, a paradoxical argument, a parody of another poem or familiar argument, or whatever. Unless there is some good starting point for the poem, then the poem will risk "falling into the uncomely customs of common writers", in Gascoigne's phrase.

The most common error for poets of all ages to fall into is writing in the Horatian mode. This is the familiar 'official poem' type poem, of which there are many examples published. It is the result of not having a 'fine device' to begin with, a falling back on rhetoric, on familiar and hackneyed appeals to ordinary and flawed sentiments; the reason the Horatian is such a common type of poetry is that this procedure is very easy for readers to grasp and accept.

The other type of poem to avoid is the descriptive. This is that type of poetry which is written in the 'confessional' mode; here the poet is supposed to pour forth his or her troubled soul, and fre-

quently does so to the accompaniment of a fulsome descriptive set-piece. The problem is that there is no necessary connection between a descriptive backdrop and the poet's feelings. If description does occur in a poem the point is not to judge what is described, but what use the poet has made of his or her description.

However it has to be said that the poets who submit to us manage on the whole to avoid either of these types. The main fault with the poems we get is that they are not wholes, they are not complete poems in which the meaning is explicated and contested throughout the length of the piece by means of an active syntax, but instead are collections of limp and unconnected phrases that are supposed, taken together, to constitute a poem, but do not.

The poem must flow from beginning to end. In order for it to do this the *meaning* must be paramount, and the phonetic and formal aspects of the poem must lend their support to the meaning, and not vice versa, or, as Lewis Carroll put it, "Take care of the sense and the sounds will look after themselves".

The principal task in revising poetry for publication is removing impediments to the poem's meaning. This will firstly involve making sure that the poem means what you want it to mean, and that the expression is adequate to convey the meaning. But secondly the sounds of the poem must not stand in the way of the meaning either. For example, with consonants the poem must not be clogged by too many of the same consonant sounds close together. Similarly with the vowels the poet should try to avoid too many similar vowels too close together.

I'm not suggesting that poets should do phonetic transcriptions of their poems, but it's worth thinking a bit about this, and reading through a poem carefully to ensure that the vowels and consonants are suitably varied. It's also a good exercise to look at other poets' work and see whether or not they have been careful in their vowel music, and if not, whether their poems have suffered as a result, as they probably have.

In my view poetry, good poetry that is, is a category of verbal and written communication characterised not by its dependence on phonetics, but by its careful crafting so that its phonetic aspects are strictly subordinated to its semantic aspects – a characteristic of no other form of human communication.

It might be objected that poetry is no longer read aloud to any great extent, so the sounds are unimportant. Nevertheless I believe that when poetry is read with attention, it is still 'read in the head', and that although the sounds alone cannot make poetry, they can certainly mar poetry.

As to prosody, I am convinced that English of the modern period is still a language in which stress is the most important element of prosody to take into account. Conventional poetics talks of metre and syllable-counts, but these are artificial concepts applied to English by analogy with Latin, Greek and modern European languages. English can tend to an iambic pattern (regular alternation of unstressed and stressed syllables), but there are a number of patterns in English which do not fit well into iambic metre (such as preposition + definite article + noun), and any stretch of regular iambs in English tends to monotony, as in blank verse.

I therefore would always analyse English poetry into stress groups, and describe the famous iambic pentameter as usually being the modern equivalent of the old Anglo-Saxon alliterative line, a line of *four* stresses (if it has five stresses it tends to be iambic and artificial). Lyrical poetry tends to have lines of two stresses.

It is, of course, up to other poets to decide how they want to write poetry, and I wouldn't necessarily recommend any one solution to anyone as *the* poetic form for contemporary English poetry. However I am convinced that a poetic practice for English at present must be based on stressed syllables, rather than syllable-counts, artificial metres or free verse. A lot of the poetry I see in my capacity as poetry editor is based on imitating the varying

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phrase-lengths of natural English conversation. This has a superficial attraction of being colloquial, and can reproduce the hesitancy and, let's be honest, futility of most conversation, but as to whether it is something that a poetic practice can be built on, I remain unconvinced.

Rhyme always seemed to me to be wholly alien to English and I don't know a single poem in English which is the better for its rhymes. Specifically if a poem is to rhyme it must rhyme regularly (a poem rhyming sporadically would be a vulgarity) and yet, although the line-ends are stressed equally throughout the poem, obviously certain lines are more important than others, so there is the danger that rhyme will obscure what is really important in the poem. I conclude that these important points should be marked by syntactic and semantic means, rather than rhyme.

As to the sort of words that poetry contains, they are the ordinary ones. Poets have an obligation to ensure that their vocabulary and diction is more or less the standard of the age. Of course poetry is going to sound different, no-one 'talks poetry', but poets should not exercise themselves trying to revive forgotten words, or in unnatural coinages. Of course sometimes a certain uncommon word has to be used, as the only one that fits the context. However, if such a word is used, it should be the only uncommon word in the poem; it should be a feature.

A couple of years ago I was asked to translate some French poetry into English. I translated it and

I was pretty confident I understood the French correctly, and a lot of its connotations. The author was disappointed, however, with my translation, because he felt I had made it too plain, that I had restricted myself to converting his French into an equivalent English version. I think he expected it to be somehow different and unlike the English he was familiar with. There is, to point out the obvious, no special poetic vocabulary in modern English, and if people want their poetry to be full of gorgeous sounds and words no-one uses any more perhaps they should translate their poetry into Sanskrit! Any form of art, if it comes draped in rhetoric or specious colours, is likely to be worthless; any piece of art has to appeal to the good sense of the reader or viewer and most of its value lies in what the reader or viewer brings to it. In the case of poetry this entails a very careful and non-rhetorical use of language.

These reflections lead to the question of references in poetry. How arcane can the references be? There are numerous poets, especially of the modernist period of the early twentieth century, who, seemingly, tried to outdo each other in obscurity, and each of them has a small coterie of academics who dedicate their careers to unravelling the difficulties of their verse. The only problem is that these academic followers usually do not demonstrate that the effort is worthwhile, as the small readership for this type of poetry shows.

My view would be that it is fine to include whatever level of reference you like in a poem, so long as you give an assurance to the readers, by means of an open, confident flow to the poem, that some sort of argument is taking place. Poets should satisfy themselves that there is at least a relatively plain meaning running through the poem; if there are obscure references making up another pattern of meaning at the same time, so much the better. However poets should remember that no-one apart from themselves can be expected to be able to follow their own personal habits of mental association with unswerving accuracy, and that references that were obscure when the poem was written are not likely to become any more obvious as time goes on.

I think young poets are often frightened of including in their poetry straightforward statements of belief or feeling, that somehow plain poetry is not sophisticated enough. Well poetry can be obscure, and sometimes must, but if it is it must also intrigue. Most obscure poetry is obscure because the

poet's thoughts are confused and their expression incompetent. The obscurity is a result of heaping contradictory and unrelated phrases together and calling it a poem. Useful obscurity is the result of combining several meanings at once in a poem. The sign of the useful obscurity is a confidence and flow to the poem, which gives an assurance of complex, but organised meaning. By the same argument, if the poetry is truly simple, there is nothing to fear, but too often simple poetry is the result of a kind of sentimental failure of imagination, that once spotted is easy to recognise.

It is of course very difficult to judge one's own poetry and it is much easier to find other poetry that you can tell objectively has these qualities. It is a good idea for poets to find a poet who for them is the centre of a poetic tradition, and follow their example.

Above all I think that poets must find in themselves a self-confidence. If we accept the view that the outlets for poetry are few and erratic and success in publication little guide to poetic quality, then poets are going to have to learn a fine sense of self-discrimination when it comes to their own work, especially as traditional methods of poetic apprenticeship have become obsolete in modernity.

There is presently a widespread contempt for poetry in society and to describe oneself as a poet is to invite ridicule. *It is important to realise that this contempt is entirely healthy and understandable.* It is a genuine and valuable reaction to all that is false and worthless in modern poetry and literature, poetry and literature which has been cooked up for our delectation by the global media corporations, and which has been found wanting. It is a sign that people still have useful instincts and discrimination and that these will be able to be used once again when modernity has passed.

Poetry that lasts is the type of poetry that contains an excess of meaning, where the occasion for the poetry, and the original context, does not limit the resources of the poem, or contain its expression. Poets of the present must consider whether their own poetry contains enough resources to have the chance of lasting into the future. Obviously no-one can predict which sort of poetry is going to last, but it is equally obvious that it is not the timid, self-congratulatory or self-defeated poetry of the present.

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