



## POETCRAFT

Perhaps more than practitioners of other arts, poets sometimes take their medium for granted: words conjured in the head and carried on the air. Spoken words, words sitting in on the page like birds on a branch, or launched into etherspace, or just heard, arriving like some summer noise, catbird or katydid, briefly held, then lost. Since we all use words, since we possess words almost as naturally as we breathe, we are tempted not to think about them the way painters must think about their paints; or musicians, their instruments; or dancers, their steps. Who of us would decide, while attending a ballet, to jump up on stage and dance with the troupe? No matter how filled with the moment, only the hopelessly unruly could misjudge the years of training which led to the choreography of the moment. We know we don't know dance-craft. Words, on the other hand, seem so naturally ours. But it is just this apparent ownership that often misleads us from the poet's necessary concerns with form, that other word for rhythm, which puts "the best words in the best order".

One of the earliest and most enduring considerations of poets and their craft comes in 1595 with Sir Philip Sidney's *Apology for Poetry* of 1595. In the *Apology*, Sidney tells us that the word "poet" comes from the Greek *poiein* "to make." The Greeks, he suggests, thought of the poet as an artisan in words, as crafter, just as a potter might fashion a lump of clay on a wheel. Indeed, just before the Renaissance the English word for poet was "maker." This is what Chaucer and his immediate predecessors called themselves. A bit later, the 15<sup>th</sup> century Scots poet William Dunbar titled his famous elegy (wonderfully echoed recently by W.S. Merwin) a "Lament for the Makaris," his lament for his fellow poets dead and gone, "makers." Here is the twelfth stanza and its

modernized English translation:

I se that makaris amang the laif  
Playis heir ther pageant, syne gois to graif;  
Sparit is nocht ther faculte;

*Timor mortis conturbat me.*

I see the makers among the rest  
Playing their pageant then going to grief.  
Spared not is their faculty;

Fear of death disturbs me.

Even earlier, some 700 years before the Middle English period, as the language was being formed out of the dialects of the Angles, Saxons, Jutes, and Frisians, the operative word for poet in Old English was *scop*, “shaper.” Shapers of words, shapers of rhythms. Shapers of lyrics like “Wulf and Eadwacer,” as well as marvelous narratives like “The Seafarer,” “The Wanderer,” and, of course, *Beowulf*.

The central task of these earliest poets in English was to praise divine creation, or *frumscaeft*, composing poems about earthly manifestations of the divine, as we know from the very first English poem, the 7<sup>th</sup> century “Hymn” by Caedmon, the obtuse monk whom God visited in the stable and told to sing: “*Hwæt sceal ic singan?*” (“What shall I sing of?”) asked the frightened and backward monk. “*Sing me frumscaeft,*” said God, who spoke Old English and wanted His Creation to be praised in poetry.

So this notion of poet as an artisan of words—as a shaper and maker—is central to the craft. The notion is built into the very word that we are known by.

W.H.Auden said that the aspiring poets who wanted to write poetry because they had "something important to say" were probably hopeless. On the hand, if they said they just "liked to hang around words and overhear them talking," they had a chance.

A poem, then, in its humblest sense, is a shaped thing, a made thing. The poet could have made it this way or that way, but chose *this* way. The poem is not a helpless accident; it is a composition. If it can be made, it can be remade, revised, reconsidered. The wet clay spinning on the wheel can be fashioned in countless ways. Once its shape has formed, it can be refined and perfected. "A poem is never finished, only abandoned" is the Paul Valéry dictum that Robert Lowell was fond of quoting.

But since poets are artists, not just artisans, the root definition of poetry as the "made thing" or, more elaborately, "the best words in the best order," falls short. Where does the skill in choosing those words come from? How do the words start up? "*Shih*," the ancient Chinese word for poetry suggests the mysterious source of poetry: "The poem is that to which what is intently on the mind goes".<sup>1</sup>

What makes a poem a magical, rather than a mechanical, creation?

In the Western lexicon, there is another word for "poet": *vates*, "seer," "prophet," "diviner." In early Roman history, *vates*, along with *augurs* (interpreters of the flights of birds) and *haruspices* (interpreters of entrails) were part of the priestly faculty of a standing collegium of interpreters of the divine. Indeed, we still have the word "vatic," and also "Vatican," which is, etymologically speaking, "the place of the prophecies". Poetry composed in this tradition is composed at the behest of a god. To be "vatic" is to possess the "divine madness" that Plato ascribed to poets, something beyond

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<sup>1</sup> "The Great Preface," *Shih Ching*, quoted in Stephen Owen, *Readings in Chinese Thought*, (Harvard, 1992) p. 40.

logic and reason and superior to reason. Shakespeare tells us that

Lovers and madmen have such seething brains,  
Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend  
More than cool reason ever comprehends.

This is poet as oracle, as medium of some divine force. In the ancient world, he--and, maybe more often, *she*--was often in a trance state when she or he spoke the sacred verse.<sup>2</sup> Poetry composed this way isn't "made" in the usual way. (Revising the words of a deity would of course be sacrilege.) This is the poetry of "first thought, best thought." What Robert Lowell referred to as "raw" instead of "cooked" poetry. Sibylline poetry, as in the poem from Gerard Manley Hopkins as he marked it for rhythmic stress:

### Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves

Earnest, earthless, equal, attuneable | vaulty, voluminous, ...stupendous  
Evening strains to be time's vást, | womb-of-all, home-of-all, hearse-of-all night.  
Her fond yellow hornlight wound to the west, | her wild hollow hoarlight hung to the height  
Waste; her earliest stars, earl-stars, | stárs principal, overbend us,  
Fíre-féaturing heaven. For earth | her being has unbound, her dapple is at an end, as-  
stray or aswarm, all throughther, in throngs | self ín self steepèd and páshed-quíte  
Disremembering, dísmémbering | áll now. Heart, you round me right  
With: Óur évening is over us; óur night | whélms, whélms, ánd will end us.  
Only the beak-leaved boughs dragonish | damask the tool-smooth bleak light; black,  
Ever so black on it. Óur tale, O óur oracle! | Lét life, wáned, ah lét life wind  
Off hér once skéined stained véined varíety | upon, áll on twó spools; párt, pen, páck  
Now her áll in twó flocks, twó folds—black, white; | right, wrong; reckon but, reck but, mind  
But thése two; wáre of a wórld where bút these | twó tell, each off the other; of a rack

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<sup>2</sup> This function continues in some modern societies. Collecting oral folk poetry in the countryside of Vietnam in 1971, I recorded a Buddhist nun and herbalist who composed perfectly metrical religious poetry in a trance, and a farmer-monk who created new poetry when "God sent down electricity."

Where, selfwring, selfstrung, sheathe-and shelterless, | thoughts against thoughts in groans grind.

Surely most of what this poem might "mean" to us depends on its irrational, right blur of images, rhythms, and words. The words seem to come from a purely uncontrived inspired source. To be inspired is to be "breathed into" by a deity, usually by Apollo in the Western classical world, and by many other deities in many other cultures.

But is this vatic poem of Hopkins really raw, uncooked, unmade? Indeed, if you look at it carefully, you can see that it follows the traditional rules for the English sonnet, as do Hopkins' other famous poems such as "The Windhover." The diction is more excited perhaps, and the argument, more difficult to follow than those other sonnets. But if you do a little research, you discover that Hopkins is delving into an even more contrived shaping of form than might occur in a mere English sonnet. At the same time that this poem follows the rules for an English sonnet, it also is following all the rules of alliteration and assonance, syllable stress, and line structure for a Welsh *cynghanedd*, a language and its poetry that Hopkins taught himself while serving as a priest to a coal-mining village. Paradoxically, or so it might seem to us free versers, vatic poetry is often highly formal.

Indeed, a lot of "spontaneous" poetry is contrived, at another level of artifice, maybe the most artful level. Modern poets such as Dylan Thomas, Elizabeth Bishop (especially toward the end of her career), Allen Ginsberg, Denise Levertov, as well as closer contemporaries such as Maxine Kumin, Eleanor Wilner, W.S. Merwin, and Gary Snyder, go to an awful lot of work to make a poem that seems off the tops of their heads, the tips of their tongues, as if they were just talking to us. *Poiētēs. Vates.* The poet of enduring worth is both maker and prophet.

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Since it is so difficult—pointless?—to talk about genius and inspiration, let's look closer at craft, at form. When I say "form" as it applies to poetry, I mean *rhythm*, whether traditional or free. As Ezra Pound advised, "let the candidate fill his mind with

the finest cadences he can discover, preferably in a foreign language."

In "A Retrospect" Pound said: "I think there is a 'fluid' as well as a 'solid' content, that some poems may have form as a tree has form, some as water poured into a vase."<sup>3</sup>

The vase pre-exists the poem. It is a traditional form. Its past effects and its delineations are generally known by those who have studied such vases. The gifted poet chooses just the right one from the eternal shelf. What one seeks is the trained habit that says: "This is the right glass for the wine of my poem. If I pour the poem in, it won't slop over the lip; it won't make a puddle down there at the bottom."

Then there is form like that of a tree: something in the seed of the poem, in its DNA, as it were, that will command its shape.<sup>4</sup> It is an organic shape, moved by what Pound called "absolute rhythm." Form here is a definite attribute of the poem, but there is no initial separation between form and content, as there is in the vase-poem.

I said "initial" separation because form and content must merge whether one is working in traditional form or free verse. Without that merger, the poem becomes either a mechanical wind-up or a prose opinion. Furthermore, I take it as axiomatic that any successful poet of free verse won his or her success through some knowledge of traditional form; at least this is true of some of the modern and contemporary poets I most admire: Theodore Roethke, Elizabeth Bishop, Robert Lowell, William Carlos Williams, Carolyn Kizer, Maxine Kumin, Donald Justice, W.S. Merwin, Eleanor Wilner, and Gary Snyder whose sense of form includes Japanese and Chinese traditions. "Know assonance and alliteration, rhyme immediate and delayed, simple and polyphonic, as a musician would expect to know harmony and counterpoint and all the minutiae of his craft. No time is too great to give to these matters or to any one of them, even if the artist seldom

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<sup>3</sup> E.P., *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, (New Directions, 1968), p. 9

<sup>4</sup> Science and mathematics have overtaken Pound in describing the formal patterns inherent in nature. See Paul Lake, "The Shape of Poetry," in Robert McDowell, ed., *Poetry After Modernism* (Story Line Press, 1998).

have need of them."<sup>5</sup>

Good free verse poems have their own attractive rigors of form, even if the form itself is not apparent, perhaps even to the poet. Consider, for example, the following poem by William Carlos Williams, entitled "Graph"

There was another, too  
a half-breed Cherokee  
tried to thumb a ride  
out of Tulsa, standing there  
with a bunch of wildflowers  
in her left hand  
pressed close  
just below the belly

At first, we might wonder how this snapshot is even a poem. It takes about fifteen seconds to say it. It is just a single, brief sentence. But there's something troubling about the woman that stays with us. Readers somehow think she is pregnant, even though it is never said in the poem. If you ask readers, "What do you see? Where are you when you see the woman?" they almost always answer "through a car window...riding in a car." Yet that, too, is not explicit in the poem.

Williams gets these critical effects through the "minutiae of his craft," a craft that works meticulously at a level of sound-play so subtle that one has to turn to the discipline of descriptive linguistics for terms to describe what he is doing in the orchestration of the smallest units of English sounds—phonemes—where his "meaning" is cleverly aroused. The lines arrive as they must in poetry: one by one, each line with a new or sharpening image, delaying by milliseconds the full picture until it's all arranged in revelation.

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<sup>5</sup> Ezra Pound, "A Few Don'ts," *Poetry*, I, 6 (March, 1913).

There are eight lines with one pause in the dead middle of the poem, a pause or medial caesura indicated by the comma and accented by the T/s of "Tulsa" back-to-back with the s/t of "standing there," a reversal of small sounds that would be called a chiasmus in classical rhetoric. Everything before that medial pause is relatively abstract and vague, with the poem growing in concrete focus, line by line, until the surprising "wildflowers" and the next line's even more startling "her" (we had assumed it was a man hitchhiking), and then the tense gesture of the hand "pressed close/just below the belly." At the same moment that we viewers-in-the-car see the increased detail and its implications, the image and the sound condense.<sup>6</sup> With close parallel force, "pressed" and "just" rhyme as do "close" and "below," while "below" alliterates and slant rhymes with "belly," just as the "e" (/iy/ phonemically) echoes the "e's" in "breed" and "Cherokee" in the second line, and just as the sound in "belly" seems to contain a bulge echoing the sound in "bunch." Dr. Williams the pediatrician could have chosen other words for belly: stomach, abdomen, gut, tummy; similarly, "bunch" could have been "bouquet." Try inserting them and you render the poem either hilariously awful or merely dull. Such changes, of course, would have killed the poem. Instead, the last two lines close Williams' poem as neatly as a Shakespearean sonnet. In fifteen seconds of crafted words, this woman comes alive.

One could go on considering sound-play and imagery in this poem, but maybe this is sufficient to point out what Pound meant by the organic structure of free verse. Whether Williams was conscious of this structure is beside the point. His sense of poetcraft made this poem, and many others, perfect. In this little free verse poem of Williams, we have a classical composition—that Hopkins might call a "curtail" sonnet—in which eight lines are halved into something like two psychic planes, one of everyday consciousness and the other of heightened consciousness--the whole poem held together and concluded in a harmony of sound and picture. It is a balanced structure of sound and movement that one might call "classical."

Indeed, in 1910, the British critic and poet T.E. Hulme wrote about the new classicism he expected free verse might bring: "Given people of the necessary capacity, it

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<sup>6</sup> "The sound must seem an echo to the sense," Pope tells us in his "Essay on Criticism."

may be a vital thing; without them we may get a formalism something like Pope. When it does come we may not even recognise it as classical."<sup>7</sup>

Finally, let's look at a poem by Robert Lowell who, early in his career, stood for high formalism in poetry, for "putting on the full armor of the past." Nonetheless, in several essays he declared his perplexed admiration for William Carlos Williams. (Describing the effects of a Williams' poem, Lowell said "it was as though some homemade ship, part Spanish Galleon, part paddlewheels, kitchen pots and elastic bands and worked by hand, had anchored to a filling station.")<sup>8</sup> Anyway, here is Lowell's "Words for Hart Crane." It's in quotes as if it were spoken by the reckless and alcoholic poet from some sound stage in heaven:

"When the Pulitzers showered on some dope  
or screw who flushed our dry mouths out with soap,  
few people would consider why I took  
to stalking sailors, and scattered Uncle Sam's  
phony gold-plated laurels to the birds.  
Because I knew my Whitman like a book,  
stranger in America, tell my country: I,  
*Catullus redivivus*, once the rage  
of the Village and Paris, used to play my role  
of homosexual, wolfing the stray lambs  
who hungered by the Place de la Concorde.  
My profit was a pocket with a hole.

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<sup>7</sup> T.E.Hulme, "Romanticism and Classicism," in Herbert Read, ed. *Speculations: Essays on Humanism and the Philosophy of Art* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, Ltd., 1924), p. 125.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Lowell, "William Carlos Williams," in *Robert Lowell: Collected Prose*, R. Giroux, ed. (NY: FSG, 1987), p.40.

Who asks for me, the Shelley of my age,  
must lay his heart out for my bed and board."

I don't think you would know this is a sonnet from hearing it aloud. But it is a rhymed iambic pentameter sonnet employing what Pound calls "delayed rhyme." A sonnet for the driven "Shelley of [his] age," whose only abiding truths, at least in Lowell's poem, seemed to come from poetry. The poem is both a soliloquy and a rant. Its task is to summon up Hart Crane's mania and his drive for poetic perfections. Two lines—i.e. those that refer directly to poetry—are the most audibly metered: "Because I knew..." and "My profit was...". They stand out against the mayhem of the other lines. They are formed against them. As if such pure lines were Crane's "fragments...shored against [his] ruins." Another way of looking at the rhythms in this poem would be to that Lowell's craftful manipulation of rhythm is the wise spiritual assertion of the poem. The rhythmic force of the poem is the *meaning* of the poem.

"Every word was once a poem," Emerson observed. Every word is also a rhythm, or at minimum a single stress about to join with another syllable into possible rhythm. Finally, it is the rhythm of words that heightens our emotions in a poem. It is rhythm that is the main difference and call of poetry as opposed to fine prose.

As mammals, we are rhythmic constructs even before our birth and this may be the key to why some kind of off/on rhythmic alternation occurs in poetry across the human linguistic world. We have systolic and diasystolic heart beats. We have the regular fanning of the lungs. And we have changes in those rhythms that come with little adrenergic spurts (of adrenaline, epinephrine, etc.) in moments of excitement, fear, or exertion.

Ordinarily, we never think of this racket in our bodies. But consider when you were a child and you held your breath when frightened, or when hiding and playing hide-and-seek. You held your breath *to eliminate the noise of your breathing*, so you could

listen more sharply for whatever might be coming your way. Rarely are we aware that our bodies are charged with noisy rhythms. But just imagine the noise against your embryonic ears as you were carried in your mother's womb. Every nuance of emotion that she felt, you felt, even before you were a *you*...because your heart flexed against the rhythms of her heart and lungs. Rhythm is the primal power of poetry. Whether poets are working in free verse or in traditional meters, they must attend to rhythm. Nothing else seems to matter as much.

Let the candidates fill their minds with the finest cadences they can discover.

*Vates. Sibyl. Scop. Makar. Poet.*

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