### fourth edition

# UNDERSTANDING POETRY

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# POETRY AS A WAY OF SAYING

Poetry is a kind of "saying." It is, however, a kind that many people, until they become well acquainted with it, feel is rather peculiar and even useless. They feel this way for two reasons: the "way of the saying" and the "nature of the said." As for the "way of the saying," the strongly marked rhythms, the frequent appearance of rhyme, and the figurative language may seem odd and distracting; and as for the "nature of the said," it generally contains neither a good, suspenseful story nor obviously useful information. Poetry, in short, may seem both unnatural and irrelevant.

Yet poetry has existed from the time of the emergence of the human race from shadowy prehistory and has survived, in one form or another, in every society since that time. When we realize this, we may be inclined to consider the possibility that poetry only *seems* unnatural and irrelevant. We may even decide, on reflection, that it does spring from deep human impulses and does fulfill human needs.

Let us look first at the way of the saying. Probably its most obvious feature is its strongly marked rhythm. Rhythm is, we know, the repetition in time of a perceptible pattern. The pattern may be visual, as in the flashing of a light or the advance and retreat of waves on the beach, or it may be a pattern of repetition not in time but in space—we sometimes even speak of the rhythmic elements in a scene or a painting. In poetry, however, we are characteristically concerned with aural (heard) rhythm, that of sound. Aural rhythm is most obvious and assertive in the ticking of a clock or a metronome, but we are commonly aware of many more vital rhythms around us—in the sound of insects on a summer night, in a pulse beat, in a human voice. In fact, the world we live in pulses with rhythms of all kinds—visual, aural, tactile: the procession of the seasons, the wax and wane of the moon, the pattern of tides, the migration of birds. The human body itself is a locus of rhythms: the beat of the heart, the inhalation and exhalation of breath, waking and sleeping, effort and rest, hunger and satiety.

Rhythm is a principle of all life and all activity and is, of course, deeply involved in the experience of, and the expression of, emotion. We all know how the expressions, verbal or other, of love, hate, pain, joy, or grief tend to fall into rhythmic patterns, the very origin of language involves rhythm. This is not to say, of course, that poetry is merely a direct expression of emotion or that the only function of rhythm in poetry is to express emotion. But it is to say that emotional expression is an essential element of poetry, that rhythm is a natural and not an artificial aspect of poetry and is, therefore, an indication of the relation of poetry to the common experience of life.*

Rhyme, too, has a direct connection with our human constitution. It is related, as is rhythm, to the very origins of language, as we sense when we observe babies in their cribs playing delightedly with sounds. This "lalling," as it is termed, gives babies a certain satisfaction; they are acting on a pleasurable impulse. But at the same time, though they don't know it, they are working hard on the great, serious project of learning a language. When they are older, they will be fascinated by tongue-twisters and nonsense rhymes. They will repeat "Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers" and will enjoy the tangled glitter of syllables. Or they will almost effortlessly memorize a nursery rhyme such as

> Hinx, minx, the old witch winks,
> The fat begins to fry.
> There's nobody home but Jumping Joan
> And Father, and Mother, and I.

Here we find only teasing hints of a story, and the hints don't make sense. True, they are provocative, they set the imagination working, but what we are left with is the chime of language in a verbal structure: that is, because the teasing possibilities of sense really come to nothing, the purely verbal effects are more sharply accentuated than if there were no hints of meaning at all.

We have just used the phrase "a verbal structure"—in this case, a structure of rhyme and rhythm; and this notion of a verbal structure, or verbal form, points to another aspect of the "naturalness" of poetry. When we resort to the jingle "Thirty days hath September" in order to remember the number of days in a month, we illustrate our need of a form to make remembering easy. In preliterate cultures, the myths and history of the tribe, the magical incantations, and the religious rituals went into verbal forms which facilitated transmission from generation to generation. In this aspect the form had a practical efficacy in preserving and transmitting information, but the form also, we must remember, combined the urgencies of the material being transmitted with the urgencies of rhythm and, sometimes, rhyme, alliteration, and so on. No doubt the aspect of utility is involved in the origin of all the arts, but even so, whatever the fusion of the practical and specifically poetic aspects of the form, the key fact is that man is a form-making animal, and that to the "natural" origins of rhythm, rhyme, and other verbal factors, we must add the "natural" impulse to create forms by means of them. Man creates forms in order to grasp the world. Even the act of perception is, in a complex way, a creation of forms.

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* This whole question is more fully discussed in Section 3, "Tone."

As rhythm and rhyme are natural, so with metaphor, that is, using words in figurative, nonliteral ways.* But to the purely practical person, metaphor—when it appears in poetry, at least—often seems unnatural, strained, merely decorative, and superfluous. This attitude toward metaphor was seemingly justified by a theory of the origin of language that for a time was widely accepted: the theory that language developed by equating a word with a thing in a no-nonsense fashion, one kind of sound meaning "bear" and another kind meaning "fire," and that in such a language of practical equivalents metaphorical usage developed as a sort of degenerative disease.

That notion of the origin of language and the corollary notion of metaphor as a disease of language has long since been rejected. For instance, Owen Barfield wrote:

> The most conspicuous point of contact between meaning and poetry is *metaphor*. For one of the first things that a student of etymology—even quite an amateur student—discovers for himself is that every modern language, with its thousands of abstract terms and its nuances of meaning and association, is *apparently* nothing, from beginning to end, but an unconscionable tissue of dead, or petrified, metaphors. If we trace the meanings of a great many words—or those of the elements of which they are composed—about as far back as etymology can take us, we are at once made to realize that an overwhelming proportion, if not all, of them referred in earlier days to one of these two things—a solid sensible object, or some animal (probably human) activity. Examples abound on every page of the dictionary. Thus, an apparently objective scientific term like *elasticity*, on the one hand, and the metaphysical *abstract*, on the other, are both traceable to verbs meaning "draw" or "drag." *Centrifugal* and *centripetal* are composed of a noun

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* See Appendix C for a comparison of metaphor and symbol.

> meaning "a goad" and verbs signifying "to flee" and "to seek" respectively; *epithet, theme, thesis, anathema, hypothesis,* etc., go back to a Greek verb "to put," and even *right* and *wrong,* it seems, once had the meaning of "stretched" and so "straight" and "wringing" or "sour."

In other words, language did not develop in a mechanically "pure" form, without the contamination of emotion, but in a form that embodied and expressed the density of experience—the interpenetration of stimulus and response, of object and perception, of idea and emotion, of action and feeling. The word for "bear" not only pointed in a disinterested fashion to a certain kind of creature, but also embodied "bearness"—the terror, awe, power, majesty, and other qualities associated with that creature. Furthermore, language developed in a more specifically metaphorical way by embodying the relation of thing to thing as expressions of human response and feeling. One thing might be like another in various ways. A man might be like a bear, or a bear like a man, not merely by, let us say, their common ability to stand erect. A certain tribe might be "of the bear," and a member of the tribe would carry a certain "bearness" in him. Or the massive power of the stroke of the bear's paw might equate "bear" with "storm" or "storm" with "bear." The naming process might, in fact, embody such relations. When we find in the Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf* the sea being called the "swan's way" or the "whale's bath," we stand at a kind of crossroads: one road leads back to the naming process in the development of language, and the other leads forward toward metaphor as we know it in the formal poetry of highly developed literatures. In common speech we find, too, traces of such a process of naming. There is the "leg" of a table, the "bed" of a river, the "eye" of a needle; and a plumber getting ready to connect two pieces of pipe refers to the "female" and the "male" joinings. The process of naming by metaphor is illustrated here, but the mere name, in such cases, has long since absorbed the metaphorical element.

Looking back on the history of mankind we see that metaphor has been a natural—even essential—way of expression, and looking around us now, we see the same thing. We think of slang as lurking on the outskirts of the accepted language; yet, slang expressions are stretchings and twistings of the ordinary meanings of words and thus are metaphoric, and so are related to the healthy growth of the language.

When slang is "bad," it is bad because its metaphors are ineffective rather than pungent and imaginative, or because constant, mechanical repetition dulls us to its original imaginative force. But, in fact, nothing proves more clearly than slang the persistent vitality and natural function of metaphor. Slang is simply the bastard brother of poetry. Through both slang and metaphor a language continually reinvigorates itself.

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* Owen Barfield, *Poetic Diction: A Study in Meaning.* Faber and Faber, 1928, pp. 63–64.

In discussing rhythm, rhyme, and metaphor, we have been referring to the "way of saying" in poetry. But metaphor represents not only the "way of saying" but also the "said." Poetry is not always metaphorical. It does make plain statements that are, or pretend to be, facts. It may make clear demands and may make direct exhortations. But sometimes, very often in fact, the metaphor is, finally, the main body of content. To take one of the more famous of Shakespeare's sonnets (No. 73):

> That time of year thou may'st in me behold
> When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
> Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
> Bare ruin'd choirs where late the sweet birds sang.
> In me thou see'st the twilight of such day
> As after sunset fadeth in the west,
> Which, by and by, black night doth take away,
> Death's second self, that seals up all in rest.
> In me thou see'st the glowing of such fire
> That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,
> As the death-bed whereon it must expire,
> Consum'd with that which it was nourish'd by.
>   This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love more strong,
>   To love that well which thou must leave ere long.

The main body of the poem consists of three comparisons, each of which is developed in some detail (with metaphors hung upon the primary metaphor): "I am autumn; I am twilight; I am a dying fire." That is all that the poem specifically offers in the first twelve lines; and that is merely a metaphorical way of saying, "I am getting old." Then comes the concluding couplet of the sonnet, which says: "The fact that I am getting old ought to make me dearer to you, for people especially value what they may soon lose."

In other words, in this poem, as in many others, metaphor constitutes a large part (here almost all) of the verbal content—constitutes not only the "way of saying," but also the "said."

But, we ask ourselves, if this is all that Shakespeare had to say, why didn't he simply say it straight out: "I am getting old"? Or if he wanted to use metaphors, why didn't he stick to the three basic ones (I am autumn; I am twilight; I am a dying fire) and omit all the wordy details? Certainly we could get the idea that autumn, twilight, and a dying fire stand for old age without all the elaboration about bare boughs being like ruined choirs, and so on. Something must be involved here beyond the mere statement of information.

What is that "something"?

Perhaps an indirect approach to our answer is best. As practical people going about our daily occupations, we live by information. We watch for road signs, study football scores and stock market quotations, read the menu in a restaurant, take inventory of the stock in our hardware store, follow the directions on the can of weed-killer. It is only to be expected, then, that we assume, offhand, that discourse is—or should be—primarily concerned with information. But after Mr. X has obeyed the road signs, after he has punched the time clock at the factory or given an order to his broker or ordered new stock for his store, after he has weeded his lawn and eaten his dinner, he may be surprised to reflect on the number of nonpractical matters his discourse that day has been concerned with. He had told the office boy a joke, had commented on the fine fall weather to the traffic officer (who could observe the weather as well as he), had told an old friend he was glad to see him again, had reminded his wife of some little episode of their early life together, an event of no importance, something merely pleasant or amusing.

What common denominator, we may ask, would these pieces of nonpractical conversation exhibit? They are all concerned, we immediately realize, with attitudes and feelings. They do not point outward to action in the world, to the control of experience, as communications involving practical information characteristically do; instead, they point inward to the self as it confronts the world—as it makes an assessment of experience. That is, we have feelings and attitudes *concerning* the world of action, just as we have them concerning ideas; and poetry, we may add, does not treat feelings and attitudes except as they come specifically into experience—that is, as they come into the realm of action and ideas.

Poetry, however, does characteristically *focus on the feelings and attitudes* in such a context, and not on the action or ideas as such; this distinction, as we shall see in looking at the particular poems to come, is crucial. As we shall later try to illustrate, poetry is concerned with the massiveness, the *multidimensional quality,* of experience. In a sense, this whole book will be concerned with this issue.

To return to the day of Mr. X, we observe that the realm of practical action and that of attitudes and feelings are not sharply separated from each other. In ordinary life the two realms constantly intersect and interpenetrate.

To sharpen our notion of the realm of attitudes and feelings, then, we may contrast the concern of poetry, not with that of practical action, but with the more specialized concern of science. Science aims to make statements of absolute precision. (Poetry may be said to have its precision too, but it is of a very different kind.) The scientist carefully cuts away from his technical terms all associations, emotional colorings, and implications of attitude and judgment. Science aspires to the condition of mathematics, and the really exact scientific statement can be expressed in mathematical formulae. The chemist describes water as $H_2O$. The molecule of water consists of two atoms of hydrogen joined to one atom of oxygen. This formula differs tremendously from the common word *water,* for that word, neutral as it seems in connotation, has a potential of all sorts of associations—with drinking, bathing, boating, the mystery of distance and the thrill of adventure on the high seas, the pull of the moon to create tides, the sea from which the goddess Aphrodite rose, or, as Keats puts it,

> The moving waters at their priestlike task
> Of pure ablution round earth's human shores.

As with the liquid, so with the word: the scientist needs a distilled product.

The language of science represents an extreme degree of specialization of language in the direction of a certain kind of precision. It is unnecessary, of course, to point out that in this specialization tremendous advantages inhere, and that the man of the twentieth century is rightly proud of his scientific achievements. But it is more often necessary to point out that scientific precision can be attained only in regard to certain materials. Here is an example of an eminent scientist trying to make a precise statement about a subject different from his professional concern:

> For sentimental pacifism is, after all, but a return to the method of the jungle. It is in the jungle that emotionalism alone determines conduct, and wherever that is true no other than the law of the jungle is possible. For the emotion of hate is sure sooner or later to follow on the emotion of love, and then there is a spring for the throat. It is altogether obvious that the only quality which really distinguishes man from the brutes is his reason.*

The author of this statement was Robert Andrews Millikan, an internationally famous physicist and winner of the Nobel Prize. He was making a plea for the scientific attitude in political and international affairs, but when one inspects this statement carefully one finds that it is not "scientific." Some of the propositions asserted could not be proved by Millikan, or by anyone else, in the same way that one can prove certain formulas of physics in the laboratory. The comparisons concerning the jungle and the leap of one infuriated beast at the throat of another represent the sort of comparison one finds in poetry, for the comparisons are not based on any scientific analogy; the resemblance is prompted by the emotional attitude of the speaker and is calculated to incite a corresponding attitude in the reader. But the coloring of the general statement—that is, the bringing in of an implied interpretation of the statement—extends beyond the mere use of a "poetic" comparison.

In the first sentence, for example, the word *pacifism* is qualified by the word *sentimental;* presumably, it is a particular sort of pacifism to which Millikan's objections applied. But does the adjective *sentimental* really set off a "bad" kind of pacifism from a "good" kind? Could the reader determine from Millikan's statement whether or not he would consider the pacifism of Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace, a sentimental or a nonsentimental sort? Since the only kind of pacifism that Millikan admired was a scientific pacifism operating through an organization of sociologists and economists, one might conceivably assume that Jesus Christ would fall into the former classification. Or, to state the matter otherwise: is the basic argument for peace to be found in the fact that war is unprofitable or is horrible, or in the belief that it is wrong to kill one's fellow man? As a matter of fact, the adjective *sentimental* is, on logical grounds, a bogus qualification: its real function is to set up an attitude in the reader that will forbid the inspection of the basis of the statement.

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* "Science and Modern Life," *The Atlantic Monthly,* April, 1928.

Whether or not the general statement is logically sound, Millikan did not state it with scientific precision. In his defense it may be said that *the proposition is one that cannot be stated with scientific precision by anyone.* Millikan, a scientist trying to state the virtues of a scientific method in human relationships, was forced to resort to devices which we associate with poetry. He would never have colored a mathematical formula by referring to a "sentimental figure four" or described a well-known chemical reaction by saying that two ferocious atoms of hydrogen spring at the throat of one defenseless atom of oxygen.

For better or worse, certain kinds of material and certain kinds of concern are not amenable to scientific treatment, and when science does attempt to treat such things, it is so much the less science. The specialized language of science permits precision of statement in—but only in—its special field. Literature in general represents a specialized language that permits precision of statement in—but only in—its special field.

One of the concerns that is inaccessible to scientific treatment is the individual as individual. Walker Percy, in a recent book, puts the matter forcefully:

> There is a secret about the scientific method which every scientist knows and takes as a matter of course, but which the layman does not know. The layman's ignorance would not matter if it were not the case that the spirit of the age had been informed by the triumphant spirit of science. As it is, the layman's ignorance can be fatal, not for the scientist but for the layman.
>
> The secret is this: Science cannot utter a single word about an individual molecule, thing, or creature in so far as it is an individual but only in so far as it is like other individuals. The layman thinks that only science can utter the true word about anything, individuals included. But the layman is an individual. So science cannot say a single word to him or about him except as he resembles others. It comes to pass then that the denizen of a scientific-technological society finds himself in the strangest of predicaments: he lives in a cocoon of dead silence, in which no one can speak to him nor can he reply.*

This special field of literature, in contrast to that of practical and that of scientific concerns, involves, as we have said earlier, feelings and attitudes. At first glance, the field of feeling and attitudes may seem trivial when thought of in contrast to the great bustling practical business of the world or in contrast to the vast body of organized knowledge which science is and which allows man to master, to a certain degree, nature and his own fate.

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* *The Message in the Bottle*, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1975, p. 22.

The field of feeling and attitude may seem to be "merely personal" and "merely subjective," and therefore of no general interest. But at second thought, we may realize that all the action and knowledge in the world can be valuable only as these things bring meaning to life—to our particular lives especially.

Poetry, then, is a response to, and an evaluation of, our experience of the objective, bustling world and of our ideas about it. Poetry is concerned with the world as responded to sensorially, emotionally, and intellectually. But—and this fact constitutes another significant characteristic of poetry that cannot be overemphasized—this response always involves all three of these elements: a massive, total response—what we have called earlier *the multidimensional quality of experience.* As Coleridge put it, poetry "in ideal perfection, brings the whole soul into activity." A major concern of this book will be to investigate, directly or indirectly, how this massive effect is achieved and what it means in human experience.

Poetry enables us to know what it "feels like" to be alive in the world. What does it "feel like," for instance, to be in love, to hate somebody, to be conscience-stricken, to watch a sunset or stand by a death-bed, to be willing to die for a cause or live in a passionate devotion to some chosen ideal? Only poetry—in the broadest sense of the word—can help us to answer such questions, and help us, thus, to an understanding of ourselves and of our own values. We may say, in fact, that literature is the most sophisticated example of the process by which we come to grasp our own environment, especially our human environment, with its complex and ambiguous values; you become aware through imaginative enactment and an imaginative logic that all the possibilities of fate are your own, for better or worse. Literature is the most complicated language that man has invented for talking not only to others but to himself; or rather, it is the language he has invented so that he may be *himself.* As J. Bronowski has put it, in literature, we "enter the contraries of the human predicament more fully" and what "distinguishes literature from other forms of knowledge is that it cannot be understood unless we understand what it is to be human."* In other words, we may have a child chess champion or musical prodigy, but not a child literary critic or dramatist.

Poetry, it is clear, is not cut off from life, but is basically concerned with life—that is, with the lived fullness of the world. It extends our own limited experience by means of imagination. By imagination, it sharpens our sense of the physical world on the one hand, and on the other, it deepens our sense of the emotional, intellectual, and moral implications of human situations and actions. It does not accomplish such things by general description, logical analysis, or abstract reasoning (though it may, as we shall see, involve such activities), but by *imaginative enactment,* by our sense of "living into" the world portrayed by a poem.

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* *The Identity of Man,* Natural History Press, 1971, pp. 82ff.

To take a simple case, we may go back to the sonnet by Shakespeare. The poet does not merely say, "I am like autumn" (that is, "I am getting old"), but gives a picture that in itself is vivid—boughs bare or with a few last yellow leaves hanging. He goes, however, beyond this relatively superficial identification of the self and the boughs. The boughs do not, literally, feel the cold of the season. When they shake, it is because they are being moved by the wind. But as the poet puts it, they "shake against the cold"—and the human identification has subtly, by suggestion, been deepened. The poem goes on to deepen the imaginative involvement. The "autumn-ness" of the aging man is projected beyond the immediate metaphor of the stripped and quivering boughs; the bare boughs become "bare ruined choirs"—that is, the choir section that might be found in the ruins of a medieval church. And this image continues into the metaphorical fusion of birds and human beings who had once sung in joy and devotion. The comparison "I am like autumn" becomes "real" by the sharpness of the physical perception and the evocation of emotional responses; and this implies, of course, the reader's direct imaginative involvement.

In discussing such involvement, we must return to the function of rhythm, which acts to intensify this imaginative involvement. It does so in two ways: first, by its essential part in the "forming" process, which provides a frame and focus of attention, thereby making the material "graspable"; second, by the general emotional association of rhythm, which merges with the particular material here presented. Later we will give a great deal of detailed attention to these ideas, but for the moment, if students make a prose version of the sonnet, with all the details faithfully kept, they will immediately recognize what is lost.

There is one more important element involved in the effect of this sonnet. As we have seen, the poem ends in a general statement. Taking the statement by itself, we may very well say, "Yes, sure, that's true," and pass on. But the business of the poem is not to elicit such merely intellectual assent. It is to make us "feel" the statement—to make us feel what the statement signifies in experience. In other words, the metaphors and the rhythm of the sonnet have made it possible for the statement to come to us as a "lived truth"—and that is the only kind of truth poetry is immediately concerned with. We must here emphasize the word *immediately,* for whatever ideas are stated by a poem exist not only in the poem but in a context of ideas and "truths" outside the poem, including, of course, the deepest convictions of the reader. The relation between a poem's "truth" and what the reader holds to be true is enormously complex and, though we shall discuss it later, we can scarcely promise a ready solution.

The general concern of the last several paragraphs has been the fusion of metaphor, rhythm, and statement as the end a poem seeks to achieve. We are using each of these terms—metaphor, rhythm, and statement—in its broad sense. We take metaphor as whatever kind of aura exists around literal aspects of the world; rhythm as including phonetic qualities in general, with such things as rhyme, alliteration, and sound variation; and statement as literal content, including objects, facts, events, and ideas. What is crucial to poetry is that these elements—metaphor, rhythm, and statement—are absorbed into a vital unity. The poem, in its vital unity, is a "formed" thing, a thing existing in itself, and its vital unity, its form, embodies—*is*—its meaning. Yet paradoxically, by *the fact of its being "formed" and having its special identity, it somehow makes us more aware of life outside itself.* By its own significance it awakens us to the significance of our own experience and of the world.

We see, then, that a poem is not to be thought of as merely a bundle of things that are "poetic" in themselves. Nor is it to be thought of as a kind of box, decorated or not, in which a "truth" or a "fine sentiment" is hidden.

Certainly it is not to be thought of as a group of *mechanically* combined elements—meter, rhyme, figurative language, idea, and so on—put together to make a poem as bricks are put together to make a wall. The total relationship among all the elements in a poem is what is all important; it is not a mechanical relationship but one that is far more intimate and fundamental. If we must compare a poem to the makeup of some physical object, it ought to be not to a wall but to something organic like a plant.

We may investigate this general principle by looking at some particular examples. The following lines could scarcely be called melodious. Indeed, they may be thought to have a sibilant, hissing quality rather than that of melody.

> If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well
> It were done quickly: if the assassination
> Could trammel up the consequence, and catch,
> With his surcease, success, that but this blow
> Might be the be-all and the end-all here,
> But here, upon this bank and shoal of time,
> We'd jump the life to come.

This is the speech of Macbeth at the moment when he is debating the murder of Duncan; innumerable critics and readers have considered the passage to be great poetry. We are not to consider that the passage is great poetry *in spite* of its lack of ordinary melodious effects; but rather we are to see that the broken rhythms and the tendency to harshness of sound are essential to the dramatic effect that Shakespeare wished. The piling up of the *s* sounds in the second, third, and fourth lines helps to give an impression of desperate haste and breathless excitement; the effect is of a conspiratorial whisper. The rhythm and sound effects of the passage, then, are poetic in the only sense that we have seen to be legitimate: they are poetic because they contribute to the total significance of the passage.

Or we may approach the general problem in another way. Here are two lines by Robert Burns that were greatly admired by the poet William Butler Yeats:

> The white moon is setting behind the white wave,
>   And Time is setting with me, O!

Let us suppose that the lines had been written as follows:

> The white moon is setting behind the white wave,
>   And Time, O! is setting with me.

Literally considered, the two versions would seem to say exactly the same thing: they describe a scene and give an exclamation provoked by it. But if we read the two versions carefully with an ear for the rhythm, we shall discover that the transposition of the word *O* has made a great difference in the movement of the lines.

This difference is not finally important merely because the first version may be in itself more melodious than the second. The movement of the first version is superior primarily because it contributes to the total effect, or to what we might call the total interpretation, of the scene. The placing of the cry at the emphatic position of a line-end implies that the speaker had scarcely realized the full force of his own statement until he had made it. The lingering rhythm caused by the position of the exclamation at the end of the second line coincides with the fact that the poet sees in the natural scene a representation of the pathos of the passing of time and of his own life. If we place the exclamation anywhere else we impair this relationship between the rhythm and the other elements involved–the image of the moonset and the poet's statement about the passing of time. Yeats summarizes the general effect of the passage and the relationship of the parts as follows:

> Take from them [the lines] the whiteness of the moon and of the wave, whose relation to the setting of Time is too subtle for the intellect, and you take from them their beauty. But, when all are together, moon and wave and whiteness and setting Time and the last melancholy cry, they evoke an emotion which cannot be evoked by any other arrangement of colours and sounds and forms.*

The remarks by Yeats here apply, as we can see, to the elements of the scene itself as well as to the rhythm. He is not praising the lines merely because the scene of the white moon setting behind the white wave amounts to a pretty picture. As a matter of fact, a white moon may not appear as beautiful as a golden moon, but if we rewrite the lines with a golden moon, we have lost something:

> The gold moon is setting behind the gold wave,
>   And Time is setting with me, O!

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* W. B. Yeats, "The Symbolism of Poetry," *Essays and Introductions,* Macmillan, 1961, pp. 155–156.

The "something" that has been lost obviously depends on the relationship of the color to the other elements in the general effect. The whiteness of the moon and the wave in connection with the idea of "setting," and then more specifically in connection with the idea of the irrevocable passage of time, suggests, even though unconsciously to most readers, a connection with the paleness of something waning or dying. The connection is not a logical connection, as Yeats intimates when he says the "relation . . . is too subtle for the intellect," but it is nonetheless a powerful one. All of this merely means that Yeats is saying that the beauty—by which he means the total poetic effect—of the lines depends on the relationship of the parts to each other. And here we may again quote Coleridge: the good poem must "contain in itself why it is so and not otherwise." Or as Shelley said, it must "contain the principle of its own integrity," by which Shelley meant that the parts of the good poem are unified, are "integrated" in an expressive whole in which all parts by their interrelation participate.

In the discussion of the "naturalness" and the "relevance" of poetry, which has occupied us up to this point, we have deliberately postponed discussing one fundamental element. We began by remarking that poetry is a kind of "saying" and then discussed the "way of the saying" and the "nature of the said." But if poetry is a "saying," there must be a "sayer," and what we have postponed is the question, "Who does the saying?" And that leads to another question: "What provokes the saying?"

Let us take the last question first. A situation underlies every poem, and the poem is what the situation provokes. The poem is a response to a particular situation. It is, then, a little—or sometimes a big—drama. In some poems the situation is quite explicit, as in "Sir Patrick Spence" (p. 23) or "Waking in the Blue" (p. 39). But in other poems it is only implied. For instance, in "Western Wind" (p. 138) and "Go, Lovely Rose" (p. 213) the situation is suggested in only the vaguest terms, while in "The Main-Deep" (p. 99), "In a Station of the Metro" (p. 71), and "If Poisonous Minerals" (p. 330) there is only the most general implication. It does not matter how explicit or implicit the situation may be in a particular poem; the only thing necessary is that it be adequate to spark the poem, and if "Sir Patrick Spence" requires a full-bodied narrative, "The Main-Deep" requires only the impression of a moving wave as viewed by an unidentified observer.

The situation, as we have pointed out, provokes a response which is the poem, and so, for the poem to make sense, we must have some idea of the identity of the "sayer" who responds to the situation. Ultimately, the sayer is, of course, the poet, but for present purposes let us look at the matter more narrowly—that is, scrutinize the poem itself. At one end of a scale we may place the impersonal poem with a totally unidentified speaker. Obviously, such a poem as "The Main-Deep" or "In a Station of the Metro" is of this sort; and the overall "voice," as we may call it, of "Sir

Patrick Spence," even though in the course of the poem clearly identified characters do speak in the first person, is equally not identifiable. Somewhere toward the middle of the scale, we might place a poem like Housman's "Farewell to Barn and Stack and Tree" (p. 36), in which the whole poem is spoken by one clearly identifiable speaker, but a speaker who is fictional: the speaker is presented as a farm boy who has killed his brother and is about to flee, and we know that Housman, the poet, was a highly respectable professor of Latin at Cambridge University and never killed anybody in his life. If we take "Go, Lovely Rose" or "Western Wind," we again find a first person, but there is no reason for us to assume that the "I" is any less fictional than that of Housman's poem. To proceed to the other end of the scale, we do find poems in which the identity (and sometimes the character) of the speaker in a poem tends to fuse with the literal identity of the poet—that is, a poem which the poet proclaims to be directly autobiographical. "Waking in the Blue" is such a poem, and the description there of morning in a mental hospital is drawn from the author's experience—even to the name of the hospital.

We have said that, since a poem is a little drama, we must have some sense of the identity of the speaker, that the voice of a poem is not heard in a vacuum. In fact, we shall come to consider in detail how what we call the tone of a poem, its style in general, and its basic feeling, may be regarded as springing from the identity of the speaker and the situation confronted. Therefore, we must always begin by thinking of the identity of the speaker as revealed in the particular poem, no matter whether the image is identifiable only in the vaguest, most general way (as in "The Main-Deep") or more specifically identifiable as the actual poet (as in "Waking in the Blue").

In an important sense, all poems are fictional, even poems that profess to be autobiographical, for the voice of the poem is inevitably a creation and not a natural and spontaneous outburst. The sly, wise, ironic yet sensitive, somewhat folksy Yankee farmer and cracker-barrel philosopher who is the speaker in many of Robert Frost's poems is very far from the actual man who voted and paid taxes. The actual Robert Frost had been born in San Francisco and been named for Robert E. Lee; and though he was of New England blood and had farmed in that section, his poetic career actually began in England. When he returned to America he deliberately set out, as he himself records in a letter, to "Yankee-fy" himself—that is, to develop the character that speaks in the poems. William Butler Yeats, to take another example, distinguished between himself as poet and himself as man; in fact, he thought of the poet's role as a dramatic role, or as a sort of mask—a persona—to conceal the literal man.* But not only to conceal the literal man; to enable him to speak with clarity. As Oscar Wilde, in an essay called "The Truth of Masks," puts it: "Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask and he will tell you the truth." And a writer as different from Wilde as Emerson (in his Journal of 1841) agrees: "Many men can write better in a mask than for themselves."*

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* *Persona* is the Latin word for the mask worn by actors in classic tragedy. Our word *personality* is derived from it.

The notion of the mask—of the voice special to the poem—does not imply that the poet specifically, in the literal person, is not the ultimate speaker and that we are not, in the end, concerned with that person. After all, the poet is the creator of the poem's world and of its persona, and that experience provides the material of the poetry. Later we shall go more fully into such questions, but for the present, and always when we are making acquaintance with a poem, we must answer these questions: (1) Who is speaking? (2) Why?

The title of this book is *Understanding Poetry.* It might, however, with equal reason have been called *Experiencing Poetry,* for what this book hopes to do is to enlarge the reader's capacity to experience poetry. What is at stake in the choice between the two titles is a matter of emphasis. The title *Experiencing Poetry* would emphasize the end to be hoped for—a richer appreciation of poetry, a fuller enjoyment. Our chosen title emphasizes the process by which such an end may be achieved.

We speak of an enlarged capacity for the experience of poetry as an end to be gained. But some people assume that no preparation, no effort, no study, no thought, is necessary for that experience, and that if a poem seems to make such demands it is so much the less poetry. This assumption is sadly erroneous, but the error represents the distortion of a fundamental truth. When we do truly make contact with a poem, when we are deeply affected by it, the experience *seems* to come with total immediacy, with total naturalness, without effort. It comes with the ease of a revelation.

Let us, however, inspect this situation. When is a reader ready for such an experience of immediacy, naturalness, effortlessness? To begin with, we know that a child of eight years is not ready for the poem that a child of twelve happily seizes on, and that the child of twelve is not ready for *Romeo and Juliet, Lycidas,* or *King Lear,* which may please his big brother (or sister) in college. To be "ready" means to have had more experience of life and the world, directly as well as by education and imagination. We assume, in other words, that the child grows into "readiness" for poetry. And once we assume that much, we must realize, too, that the experience that leads to a sensitive reading of *Romeo and Juliet, Lycidas,* or *King Lear* is not merely the experience of life but of poetry.

We scarcely think of the experience of life, literal or otherwise, as a preparation for the experience of poetry: it is simply the self-justifying process of living. And, too, the preparation for poetry by the reading of poetry may be largely unconscious. For instance, James Dickey, a prominent contemporary poet, while a fighter pilot in World War II, simply stumbled into reading poetry out of the boredom of life at a base in the Pacific; and as he immersed himself in poetry he was not looking beyond the momentary satisfaction, certainly not toward a career as a poet and a teacher of poetry.

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* The created "self"—the persona—is more coherent and more "knowable" than the literal man, even to himself; and is therefore more effective dramatically. But another factor may enter: in the mask, instinctive concealments and reticences can be relaxed.

Given intelligence and sensitivity in some degree, much of our learning of anything is accomplished unconsciously. But to speak specifically of poetry, mere immersion does little good unless the reader is making, however unconsciously, some discriminations, comparisons, and judgments; if he merely wallows in a vague, pleasurable reaction, the immersion can mean little or nothing. And here is where "understanding" may come in. The more or less unconscious process of making discriminations, comparisons, and judgments can be lifted into consciousness and, to a degree, systematized; and that is one of the things this book undertakes to do. By trying to understand the *nature* and *structure* of poetry, how that nature and structure are expressive, and how we respond to them, readers may accelerate and deepen the natural and more or less unconscious process by which they enlarge their experience of poetry.

By way of conclusion we must emphasize two related matters of the greatest importance:

First, criticism and analysis, as modestly practiced in this book and more grandly elsewhere and by other hands, is ultimately of value *only insofar as it can return readers to the poem itself*—return them, that is, better prepared to experience it more immediately, fully, and, shall we say, innocently. The poem is an experience, yes, but it is a deeply significant experience, and criticism aims only at making the reader more aware of the depth and range of the experience.

Second, there is no point at which a reader can say, "I am now ready to experience poetry." The reader may, indeed, be more or less ready for one poem or one poet, yet not for another. But the law of life is change and, ideally, the law of change should imply growth. We, as readers, may grow as we continue to explore the poetry of the past and the new poetry that will be written tomorrow.