

POETS and OTHERS on POETRY



Some interesting reflections on the way that **print has taken over from sound** - with negative effects on poetry:

"A five or six year old will recite vast quantities of rhymes and jingles ... At some point, though, for most of us, this creative joy fades. The intensity of our perception of the sounds of language begins to grow dim. 16 and 17 year old students learn how to react to a poem as a piece of print, not as a game of sounds. Most English speakers end up feeling at least indifferent to, and sometimes even alienated by, the sight of a poem on a page. The perennial question, what is the poet really saying? – with his underlying implication that poetry is fully paraphrasable – finally deafens the ear and deadens the heart of the common reader. Long forgotten is the fact that all true poetry is based on the delight of using speech sounds creatively, and that this delight was once common to us all." (from 'How Poetry Works' by Phil Roberts, Penguin 1986 second edition 2000).

Another quote from Phil Roberts:

Unlike other language, poetry is not simply and solely a vehicle for meaning. Ordinary language may always be paraphrased – that is, its meaning may be expressed in different words without anything essential being lost – but the language of a poem may not. A poem is exactly what it sounds like and says. It has no larger paraphrasable meaning than this. (In the same way it is pointless trying to create a précis or summary of a poem.) A poem is chiefly a performance. So, if you are not attracted by the sound of words of the particular poem – in the way you might feel unmoved by the sound of a particular piece of music – then move on and look for another. The search itself is a large part of the pleasure that art brings.

Why is Poetry like Wine?

Victoria Moore writes a column about wine and I caught this at the end of one of her pieces, trying to convince readers to spend money on a pricey bottle. "It's like the difference between words and poetry. As a New York Times critic once wrote, 'Poetry is ordinary language raised to the nth power. Poetry is boned with ideas, nerved and blooded with emotions, all held together by the delicate, tough skin of words.' And when you put it like that, £20 doesn't seem too much to ask for pinot noir poetry."

See, s like a good place to insert this quote from Emily Bronte:

"I've dreamt in my life dreams that have stayed with me ever after, and changed my ideas. They've gone through and through me, like wine through water, and altered the colour of my mind." (Catherine in Wuthering Heights)

WHY is a POEM like a CRIME NOVEL?

In conversation with poet and crime writer Sophie Hannah commented that the two genres seemed quite different. She replied that the main similarity lay in the way you had to think through each of them. Plotting a crime novel is like plotting a poem: you have to get

everything in the right place. Think about it: especially those who reckon poems are just a spontaneous outpouring...

Don't expect meaning

In a Guardian series on 'Great Poets of the 20th Century' Craig Raine introduced T S Eliot thus: '...the reader shouldn't expect anything in the way of conventional 'meaning' since the poetry was anyway fetched up from the dark womb of the poet's unconscious.' It's an odd metaphor, but we get the gist. Then: 'All contemporary poetry when it is contemporary is initially baffling to its readers.' That might explain a lot – but is it actually true?

WHO put the VERSE in PERVERSITY?

Here's a nice quote from George Barker about his attitude to poetry (taken from the Guardian Review): 'I believe the responsibility of the poet is to assert and affirm the human principle of perversity ... I believe the nature of the poet to be at heart anarchic so that, in the inconceivable eventuality of ... a society possessing no faults to which one could rationally object, it would still be the job of a poet to object.' See also the review of Barker's life *The Chameleon Poet*: <http://books.guardian.co.uk/reviews/biography/0,,660088,00.html>

Poets are 'disagreeable and, at worst, repulsive'

Ian Sansom, himself a poet, has this to say: 'Most of us would go a long way to avoid the company of poets. They're at best disagreeable, and at worst repulsive. Selfish, testy, irresponsible, humourless, swollen-headed, and infinite liars, they're like crazy aunts or men with stains on their trousers who think it's funny to swear.' OK, students, your comments please...

The spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings

"Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity: the emotion is contemplated till, by a species of reaction, the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind." (William Wordsworth)

A lump in the throat

"A poem begins with a lump in the throat, a home-sickness or a love-sickness. It is a reaching-out toward expression; an effort to find fulfilment. A complete poem is one where the emotion has found its thought and the thought has found the words." (Robert Frost)

"**Poetry is language in orbit**" (Seamus Heaney)

An ancient art

"Poetry...is an ancient art ... using the human body as its medium, evolved for specific uses; to hold things in memory, both within and beyond the individual life span; to achieve intensity

and sensuous appeal; to express feelings and ideas rapidly and memorably. To share those feelings and ideas with companions, and also with the dead and with those to come after us." (Robert Pinsky)

Finally, from a snowy time a few years ago:

Stuart Jeffries, writing about snow in the Guardian ('London's Day of Innocence') mentions experiences such as "The sound snow makes as it packs under your boots! The velvety swish of car tyres on untreated side streets! ... The way you fingers swell after throwing snowballs while wearing functionally useless woollen gloves! (We need poets to invent names for all these things and write sonnet cycles to their joys)." Indeed!