

## Sound and Sense in Poetry

A recent spat in the poetry world as to the alleged amateur nature of performance poets has diverted attention away from a more serious issue – that of the increasingly one-sided approach to writing poetry which is being encouraged in schools and poetry manuals. This approach starts at primary school level where poetry is equated with proficiency in class work intended to help pupils express themselves – a view endorsed by the Poetry Society in its ‘Teaching Poetry’ programme with its recommendation that ‘Poetry is a powerful tool for raising standards of literacy.’ This emphasis on self-expression is also promoted in primers like Ted Hughes’ ‘Poetry in the Making’ with its exercises after each chapter aimed at developing pupils’ imaginative writing as, for instance, in his suggestion for composing ‘a free poem of sorts where grammar, sentence structure, etc. are all sacrificed in an attempt to break fresh and accurate perceptions and words out of the reality of the subject chosen.’

Leaving aside the thought that these exercises in self-expression could equally well be applied to the practice of prose writing, it is teaching pupils to run before they can walk as more attention should be paid to the way in which sentences are put together, which is to say, the actual words themselves. For it is words that make up the building blocks out of which sentences are formed and it is the characteristics of words that need to be studied: their phonic quality (how they sound), their actual physical shape and their relation to the words on either side of them. The ability to value these properties is best learned from poetry lines that are tensioned by some form of metrical arrangement as there is a greater concentration on the sound of words than in the more loosely constructed prose-poetry lines. A lack of this ability is like asking a piano pupil to play a tune before he or she has a basic mastery of the keyboard. As Robert Graves said: ‘Poetry is the profession of private truth, supported by craftsmanship in the use of words.’

This focus on the imaginative side of writing poetry more than the ‘mechanical’ skills is further encouraged by the sort of poetry that wins prizes. Alice Oswald’s collection ‘Falling Awake’ that won the plaudits of commentators last year, illustrates the dangers of this approach with its proneness to bizarre and often disconnected images as in her poem ‘Vertigo’, where the first fifteen lines contain the following unrelated images – ‘a flying carpet, an eye opening after an operation, a suicide from the tower-block of heaven, as if sculpted in porridge.’ Elsewhere, a dead swan is likened to a crashed plane and a dead badger to a falling suitcase – all images that bring to mind Samuel Johnson’s comments about the Metaphysical Poets that ‘Nature and art are ransacked for illustrations, comparisons and allusions.’ How different is her beautiful opening poem ‘A Short Story of Falling’, where no extravagant images interrupt the sense and an unobtrusive rhyme scheme helps the quiet forward movement of the lines.

In America, the American Academy’s ‘Poem-a-Day’ series (for poems that have not been published before) also illustrates the consequences of this over-imaginative approach to writing poetry with submissions that are so choked with imagery that all sense is lost. An excerpt from a recent piece (‘Not Verb, but Vertigo’) is a good example: ‘I scratched down the word ‘flower’ & felt/ the parts draw away from the tongue./ Not gnomes, grown man, but ghost:/ to gnaw on the crisp/ skin once it’s been stripped/ down from the meat ....’ The notes that accompany these poems are often more confusing than the piece itself. The fact that in many cases the poems featured in ‘Poem-a-Day’ are by university teachers must serve to propagate the view that poetry is just self-expression with no need to arrange it into a form that is comprehensible to anyone reading or listening to it and which brings to mind e.e. cummings’ teasing comment that ‘If poetry were anything .... which anyone did, anyone could become a poet merely by doing the necessary anything; whatever that anything might or might not entail.’ It should be more fully recognized that writing poetry is not a universal entitlement, although there is an unwillingness to accept this both in America and England,

where the multitude of poetry outlets and competitions encourage a 'have-a-go' approach, encouraged by entry conditions that often state 'Any style, any form.'

There is a strong case for performance poetry being cited as a counter to this self-indulgent approach to writing poetry, as poet and audience are carried along in a rapid and immediately accessible form. It certainly received Simon Armitage's vote when, as the newly elected Oxford Professor of Poetry, he commended performance poets as being the inheritors of the ancient tradition of balladry. Unfortunately, he then went on to criticize anyone who was unsporting enough to examine their lyrics too closely. But performance poetry has the great asset of making people listen to the sound of poetry – the one quality that is liable to get lost in the writing of so much poetry today.

There is, however, a common factor and bridge between performance poetry and more 'serious' poetry – recitation. Recitation is not only about the sound of poetry but also its coherence as it is not possible to maintain the interest of an audience if it is continually falling behind through inability to follow the sense. In France, recitation is still a valued and important ingredient of primary education. In England, the Poetry Archive's 'Poetry by Heart' competitions, in which pupils compete in reciting two poems (one from pre-1914 and one post-1914) now has over a thousand secondary schools signed up to take part in them. Their popularity emphasizes the importance of speaking poetry aloud and in demonstrating that in the composition of poetry sound and sense need to be successfully combined.

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