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Writing

POETRY

SECOND EDITION

JOHN WHITWORTH

FROM THE PUBLISHER OF *WRITERS' & ARTISTS' YEARBOOK*

WRITING HANDBOOKS

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POETRY

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JOHN WHITWORTH

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Poetry and Myself

Who are you?

I am a poet.

What do you do?

I write poems.

What are poems?

The things I write.

Who are you?

I am a poet.

Why do you do it?

You write poems. Or at least you want to write them. Why? It can't be the money because there isn't any, or at least not much and I expect you knew that. Fame, then? I've been on television (late at night when nobody is watching), and on radio too, but no heads turn when I walk down the street. I once talked about poetry to a hall full of French schoolchildren – someone in the question-and-answer session said that it was obviously an absorbing hobby. But it isn't a hobby: poetry is my life.

Philip Larkin said he wrote poems to preserve his experiences. Not for himself – he had diaries for that – but for other people. Poems are part of the memory of the human race. But, to become part of memory, a poem has to be memorable. How? For Ted Hughes it was the sound that did it – the rhymes and the rhythms he first found in Kipling's long-lined poems with an insistent beat. Like 'Mandalay':

Ship me somewhere east of Suez where the best is like the worst,
Where there ain't no Ten Commandments and a man can raise a
thirst.

Hughes was 14 when bitten by the poetry bug. For John Betjeman it happened as soon as he could read, and for Dylan Thomas (another sound man), before that. I read ‘The Ancient Mariner’ at school when I was 12:

Within the shadow of the ship
I watched the water snakes
They moved in tracks of shining white
And, when they reared, the elvish light
Fell off in hoary flakes.

It was the way the long middle lines rhymed, and perhaps it was the word ‘elvish’ – I learned that verse and others by heart, though I didn’t have to. We ‘did’ *The Merchant of Venice* and I recited this – unsure what some of it meant:

Look how the floor of heaven
Is thick inlaid with patens of bright gold.
There’s not the smallest orb which thou behold’st
But in his motion like an angel sings,
Still quiring to the young-eyed cherubins;
Such harmony is in immortal souls,
But while this muddy vesture of decay
Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it.

And then there were the Scottish ballads – it was, after all, a Scottish school:

The cock doth craw, the day doth daw,
The channerin worm doth chide:
Gin we be missed out o our place,
A sair pain we maun bide

What is ‘channerin’? I didn’t know. (Actually it means ‘grumbling’, and is connected with that other splendid Scots word ‘chuntering’.) An older boy did the whole of ‘Tam o’ Shanter’ on Burns Night. I chanted bits like magic charms (to myself, I wasn’t loopy) on my windy, rainy journey to school of a morning:

But pleasures are like poppies spread:
You seize the flower, its bloom is shed;
Or like the snow falls on the river,
A moment white – then melts for ever.

There was the marvellous, sonorous Richard Burton on the record of Dylan Thomas' *Under Milk Wood*: 'The sloe-black, crow-black night!' How did you do that? Could I do it too? I was a slow starter; I didn't write poems then (it wasn't that sort of school) and didn't write a *good* poem until I was nearly 30. In between times I toyed with an actor's life. 'Still doing murderers and brothel-keepers, John?' said a friend breezily at what turned out to be my last play. If I couldn't say it for a living, then I would have to *write* it. I shall go on doing so until I die. If I can. It doesn't always happen – Larkin ran out of poems and it caused him great distress of mind.

And you? Did a voice tell you, as it told Betjeman? Is that voice enough? The New Zealand writer, Janet Frame, says in her autobiography:

There is also the frightening knowledge that the desire to write, the enjoyment of writing, has little correlation with talent. Might I not, after all, be deluding myself like other patients I had seen in hospital, one in particular, a harmless young woman who quietly sat in the admission ward day after day writing her 'book' because she wanted to be a writer, and her book, on examination, revealing pages and pages of pencilled O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O. Or was that the new form of communication?

That *is* a frightening thought. I have it when my poems come back, as they did this morning, with a dismissive note. If you didn't have the desire to write then you wouldn't be reading this book. If you didn't have Janet Frame's fear that your writing was worthless, then you probably wouldn't be reading this book either. Can writing be *learned*? From a *book*?

Can writing be learned?

Between train-spotting and poetry, I played cricket. I read every 'How To' book I could borrow – Don Bradman's, Denis Compton's, Trevor Bailey's. I spent hours in the nets. Alas – I should have listened to the old cricket pro:

Son, this is the whole *enchilada*:
All the books and the coaching are . . . *nada*.
The only sure way
To improve on your play
Is to hit it A BLOODY SIGHT HARDER!

But I *am* an old poetry pro. I know 'po-biz'. I can tell you about technique. I can explain how the market works. I am a mine of useful historical information. However, I can't make you a poet; you have to hit it a bloody sight harder. I did go on playing cricket, by the way: for the Second XI, for my college, for a really terrible club belonging to a firm for which I never worked and that never won a match.

Isn't poetry run by a clique?

The poetry world is full of backscratching and backbiting. Talent does not rise effortlessly, and rewards do not always go to the most deserving. In this, the poetry world is much like those other worlds – academic, political, business, etc. Nevertheless, in the long run it is better to be talented than to know the right people and pull the right strings. If you have the talent, the will and the patience, success is yours – probably.

Perhaps you are already hurling this book to the floor. Perhaps, like Janet Frame, you are very doubtful that you do have talent. If writers were confident, extrovert and outgoing they would probably not be writers. Larkin, with as much talent as any other poet in the last 50 years, was once asked if he had any particular problems as a writer. With his usual Eeyore-ish moroseness, he answered: 'Just not being very good.' He meant

it. By the standards he set himself – the highest – he believed that he was not very good.

But he *was* good; he just thought he might not be, measured by the highest standards – and what other standards matter? If *practice* does not necessarily make perfect, it certainly makes better. Weedy cricketers can take up body-building. This is a mind-building course for poets. Or word-building.

One more thing. I wrote this. Parts of it may seem to you to be mistaken, trivial, or just uninteresting. If so, then either I have written it wrongly, or you are reading it wrongly. But don't believe everything I say, and don't suppose there is nothing else to say, either. At the back there is a list of other books you might want to read. Most important are the books of poems – if you do not like reading poetry then you will never be a poet. But if you do, if you feel you would give a great deal to produce something like that – like Thomas Hardy or Tony Harrison, like Emily Brontë or Elizabeth Bishop – like but different, different because it is yours, then read on.

Exercise 1: The 50-word poem

There are many exercises in this book. Poetry is like most things – the more you do it, the better you get. Try this. Write something, anything, but exactly 50 words long, no more, no less.

A radio is playing in a North London suburban street. A boy, about ten or eleven, drags his toes through the fallen leaves. Horse chestnut leaves, sycamore leaves, beech, lime, plane leaves – all the leaves proper to the pleasant tree-lined avenues of such quiet North London streets in October. It is 1951.

So far, so good. Except that's 52 words. What shall I cut? Perhaps 'or eleven'? No, I need that. I could write 'such streets in October'? But now the word count is 49. Do I add another tree? Rowan perhaps – they have rowan trees in streets like that. You see, already, with one very simple constraint – the 50-word limit – I am led into all sorts of editorial decisions. And poems are like that, the formal element constantly leading one to visions and revisions. It is the part of writing I like best.

Now, if you have successfully produced exactly 50 words, divide it into lines in any way that seems good. There is no rhyme or metre so that will not help you. What will you do? You might do this.

A radio is playing
in a North London
suburban street.

A boy, about ten say,
drags his toes through the fallen leaves.
Horse chestnut leaves, sycamore leaves,
beech, lime, plane leaves –
all the leaves proper
to the pleasant avenues
of such quiet North London streets in October.
It is 1951

The lines follow speech patterns. Rather dull perhaps? What about this?

A radio is playing in a North
London suburban street. A
boy, about ten say, drags
his toes through the fallen
leaves. Horse chestnut
leaves, sycamore
leaves, beech, lime, plane
leaves – all the leaves proper
to the pleasant avenues of
such quiet North London
streets
in
October.
(It is 1951.)

Better? Worse? The problem with such ‘free verse’, as it is called, is that there is no agreed standard of comparison. But is this *truly* a problem? Are we afraid of freedom? Should we be?

What is Poetry?

I am a poet. Not a sentence I often use. It sounds pretentious – isn't 'poet' a title *other* people give you? Nevertheless, I *am* a poet. I give readings in draughty halls and windowless back rooms; I send poems off with an sae (stamped addressed envelope) to literary magazines; I judge competitions; I enter them too, and occasionally win money prizes – grumbling privately, incessantly, that the money is not more. I read what other poets write, with envy, astonishment, admiration, surprise, annoyance. I write poetry. What exactly is it that I write?

BOSWELL: What is poetry?

JOHNSON: Why, Sir, it is far easier to say what it is not.

Most of us are of Johnson's opinion. We know it when we see it but we can't describe it. Let us try the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the one you read with a magnifying glass. It says poetry is 'composition in verse or metrical language' which is 'the expression of beautiful or elevated thought, imagination or feeling'. Obviously true of some poems – Keats' 'Ode to a Nightingale', for instance – but not all verse is poetry, as Johnson himself pointed out with this quatrain (a quatrain is a four-line verse):

I put my hat upon my head
 And walked into the Strand,
 And there I met another man
 With *his* hat in his hand.

Not all verse is poetry and, conversely, not all poems are verse. Some hardly seem to be the expression of beautiful and elevated thought, either:

When you hear it languishing
and hooing and cooing and sidling through the front teeth,
 the oxford voice
 or worse still
 the would-be oxford voice
you don't even laugh any more, you can't.

For every blooming bird is an oxford cuckoo nowadays,
you can't sit on a bus nor in the tube
but it breathes gently and languishingly in the back of your neck.

And on, so seductively superior, so seductively –
 self-effacingly
 deprecatingly
 superior. —

We wouldn't insist on it for a moment
 but we are
 we are
 you admit we are
 superior —

DH Lawrence wrote that. It does not do the sorts of things that poems did before the 20th century – like rhyming or scanning. Is it really a poem? Charlie Brown asks, 'How do you know which poems to like?' Lucy answers, 'Somebody tells you.' So I am telling you: 'The Oxford Voice' is a poem.

You don't have to like this sort of stuff (free verse). You don't *have* to like the poetry of William Shakespeare either: Tolstoy thought King Lear was rubbish and said so. You can prefer some poets to others – all criticism is, at bottom, a matter of opinion. Yet when this rule is applied elsewhere (to politics, say) then some opinions are obviously better than others. An infant's view of Tony Blair may be cute, but it lacks political grasp; a child doesn't know enough, is not informed enough and doesn't care enough about politics.

So, unless you want to stay a poetic infant all your life – and some do – you need to know what Lawrence thought he was up to. You can still dislike it but it will be *informed* dislike. What

you can't do is to ignore it, to pretend it never happened. You can't write like Keats because we don't live in Keats' world any more. Or you can, but it will be a *pastiche*, an imitation of the style of someone else. 'The Ancient Mariner' began as a pastiche of an old ballad, right down to the 'olde worlde' spelling (see also Kit Wright's 'George Herbert's Other Self in Africa' in Chapter 5). But why write like Keats? Keats did that supremely well. Why not write like yourself?

Writing like Keats

St Agnes Eve – Ah, bitter chill it was!
The owl – for all his feathers – was a-cold;
The hare limp'd trembling through the frozen grass,
And silent was the flock in woolly fold;
Numb were the Beadsman's fingers, while he told
His rosary, and while his frosted breath,
Like pious incense from a censer old,
Seem'd taking flight for heaven, without a death,
Past the sweet Virgin's picture, while his prayer he saith.

This is the first *stanza* (the technical word for what many call a verse) of 'The Eve of Saint Agnes'. Not many poems do I like better – to employ a Keatsian inversion. But there are things Keats does, mannerisms he has, which are not the stuff of poetry now. They are of his age.

We would not write 'a-cold' nowadays, nor 'saith' instead of said. These were *archaisms* (old, outdated language) in Keats' own day – people did not speak or write like that, even in poems. We would not speak of a 'woolly fold': that is what is called a *transferred epithet* – the fold is not woolly, it is the sheep within that are so. We would not write 'limp'd' and 'seem'd' instead of 'limped' and 'seemed' – Keats does that to differentiate between limp'd (one syllable) and limped (two syllables), a distinction it is not open to us to make. We would not use inversions of the natural word order, or at least not so many: 'bitter chill it was', 'silent was the flock', 'numb were the Beadsman's fingers', 'his prayer he saith'.

Keats does these things because he is writing in the early 19th century and there was a particular *diction* (way of speaking) proper to poetry then. It was this diction Wordsworth was reacting against when he said that poetry should be written in ‘language such as men do use’. Yet he himself wrote, in his ‘Sonnet Written on Westminster Bridge’:

This city now doth like a garment wear
The beauty of the morning

The archaic ‘doth’ and the inversion ‘like a garment wear’ certainly did not constitute language such as men do use. I’m not sure about ‘garment’; it has a Biblical feel and yet it turned up in very un-Biblical places like garment factories. What I am saying is that even Wordsworth used the prevailing poetic diction. We do not. The flight from it had already gathered pace when Lewis Carroll wrote:

‘For instance, if I wished, Sir,
Of mutton pies to tell,
Should I say, “dreams of fleecy flocks
Pent in a wheaten cell?”’
‘Why yes’ the old man said: ‘that phrase
Would answer very well.’

Poets now generally avoid archaisms, inversions of the natural word-order and ‘poetic’ versions of words (o’er for over, thorough for through) which are shorter or longer for the sake of the *metre* (see Chapter 8). They are freer with the metre too, and when they do rhyme – not as often as they once did, perhaps – they may use near-rhymes (round/send, escaped/scooped). Not all poets allow themselves these liberties – Vernon Scannell grumbles that those making use of traditional metre and rhyme should do so consistently, quoting Thomas Hood: ‘A shilling is a shilling and a bad shilling is no shilling at all.’ Personally, I think rhyming in English is quite tricky if we disallow inversions in natural word-order, and a little loosening up of the rules elsewhere is probably a good idea. See Chapter 11 for a fuller discussion of this.

In some ways then, modern poets allow themselves more freedom than Keats ever did, but in other ways less. Poetry remains about as difficult to write; it is just that its fashions have changed. Why should that surprise us? Look at the clothes Keats wore, and remember that his father probably wore a wig. What about the names of our own great-grandparents – when will Percy, Edith, Cedric and Charity come round again? There are fashions in literature as in everything else. ‘English must be kept up’, as Keats himself said. Or, in the words of the modernist Ezra Pound, 80 years ago, we need to ‘make it new’. Though we won’t write like him either. ‘What hast thou, O my soul, with paradise?’ No, we will not write like that.

But I can’t help thinking of Thomas Lovell Beddoes, Keats’ contemporary, who wrote like Shakespeare – for all the world as if the previous two centuries had not happened. Nearer our own time, John Betjeman ignored the Modernist revolution and wrote like an Edwardian – or he did as far as the *forms* of his poems are concerned; his content is another matter. Many poets and critics still cannot accept that Betjeman was serious or could possibly be any good. But am I saying that Beddoes and Betjeman are no good? No, I am not even saying that they would have been better if they had been more up-to-date. The point is that Betjeman at least was not ignorant of what he rejected, and neither should you be.

Back to our dictionaries. There are two further *OED* definitions, a sign that even the dictionary-writers have trouble. These say that poetry is what poets write – a neatly circular argument that I put into the verse right at the beginning of this book. So what are poets?

What are poets?

‘Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of mankind,’ said Shelley, never one to understate his case. He certainly wanted to be a legislator as well as a poet; he, like Byron – and unlike Keats – was of the class born to rule. He wrote violent political pamphlets and stuffed them clandestinely into the backs of rich

women's dresses. When that failed he attached them (the pamphlets, not the women) to hot air balloons and released them over the Bristol Channel. He also wrote political poems:

I met murder on the way –
He had a mask like Castlereagh –
Very smooth he looked, yet grim:
Seven bloodhounds followed him:

All were fat; and well they might
Be in admirable plight,
For one by one, and two by two,
He tossed them human hearts to chew
Which from his wide cloak he drew.

That is from 'The Mask of Anarchy' and Shelley never wrote better. However, though poor Lord Castlereagh (the Foreign Secretary) blew his brains out, it was not Shelley's poetry but his own depression that led him to do so. WH Auden, very political in his younger, communist days, came to the conclusion that poetry never made any direct difference at all to the world of affairs. Milton – perhaps the most political poet who ever lived, and himself a man of power during his time as Cromwell's Secretary – wrote political pamphlets like Shelley, and, like Shelley, he wrote them *in prose*. The Chinese poet Lao-tzu, disappointed in his political ambitions, made his poems into paper boats and sent them down the Yangtse river, supposing that as good and efficacious a method of publication as any other. The truth is as Auden said, but it is not the whole truth. Poems do make a difference, they do change people's lives (they changed mine) but not directly, not like bombs and speeches.

Someone once told TS Eliot, 'I am a poet.' 'You mean,' said Eliot crushingly, 'that you write verse.' Poet is indeed a title you must earn. Meanwhile, think of yourself as someone who writes, or is trying to write, poems.

Why? why? why?

- Why is 'Modern Poetry' so difficult?
- Why isn't it in metre or rhyme?
- Why is it about unpoetic things?
- Why is it like chopped-up prose?
- Why does nobody read it except other poets?

These are not silly questions. Larkin's reputation is in a dip at the moment, mostly because of his unfashionable political opinions – he admired Margaret Thatcher and even dreamed of her. Despite this he remains, in my opinion, the finest English poet since the War. And he worried about modern poetry. More than 40 years ago he wrote this:

At bottom poetry, like all art, is inextricably bound up with giving pleasure, and if a poet loses his pleasure-seeking audience he has lost the only audience worth having.

I think that is profoundly true. Can poetry have a mass audience? Is John Hegley a poet? Sometimes. Are Beatles lyrics poetry? Cole Porter? Bob Dylan? Often.

Good poets can write bad poetry

WB Yeats was a fine poet. 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree' is possibly his best-known poem, once publicly recited in unison by 100 boy scouts. Or was it 1000? But not everybody likes it. Another fine poet, Robert Graves, remarked acidly that he supposed when Yeats said Peace 'comes dropping slow . . . from the Veils of Morning to where the Cricket sings,' he meant it came down the chimney. He also said that 'the bee-loud glade' sounded like a mealy-mouthed newspaper report – d . . . you and your b . . . piano and the b . . . loud noises you make on it! Graves thought 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree' was a bad poem. Good poets can write bad poems: some marvellously bad poetry has been written by some marvellously good poets. All of us live with failure.