

Introduction: Reading Poetry

Using This Book

This is a guide to reading and enjoying poetry, intended for students from high school upward and for the general reader. It covers three broad topics: Reading a Poem, Studying a Poet, and Writing about Poetry. The material on the first of these topics, which takes up the main body of the book, is composed of short interlocking sections, each introducing a perspective from which to approach a poem, illustrated with examples taken from a range of poets writing in English. The book is designed to be read cumulatively, to show how consideration of one element of a poem will invariably glide into another, but each section can be taken as a stand-alone unit, and the contents pages should help you locate the discussions on any particular issue.

The best way to develop as a reader of poetry is through practice. The more poems we read, the more we become familiar with the things poems do and the ways they work. The book is a companion to that process. Its emphasis is on asking questions as you read. It aims to supply the knowledge and assurance to enter into dialogue with poems, to spend time with them, and to enjoy what they have to show us. It hopes to give you the confidence to discuss the poems that you have read. Perhaps the words most commonly uttered by students in a classroom or university seminar are ‘I’m probably wrong, but . . .’ And while the world would no doubt be a pleasanter place if everyone were to handle their opinions with such caution, it’s good, too, to feel secure in our judgements. The book shows how to develop that security by reading actively and accepting that our comprehension of a poem will always be gradual and capable of evolution. Above all, the book encourages you to practise reading slowly. It doesn’t claim that reading poetry is easy, but it does say that its challenge is what makes it so rewarding. In a world of immediate gratification, poems invite

us to take our time. When we have the tools to grapple with it, poetry's supposed difficulty becomes part of its pleasure.

The second section of the book deals with the task of studying the life and work of an individual poet. How do we build up an impression of their career? How do we find out about their life and times? How can we benefit from what other people have said about them? Finally, since most students are required not just to read but also to write about poems, and since writing itself is a way of working out what we think and feel about a poem, the book closes with some reflections on that process.

When quoting from poems, I have supplied the date of first publication (where known) in parentheses; on occasions when a poem was published after an author's death, I have given a rough date of composition instead. The aim has been to give some sense of chronology rather than to document the minutiae of any given poem's textual history. I have quoted wherever possible from standard critical editions.

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Why Read Poetry?

Why read poetry? Surely there are more profitable things to study? Surely there are more gratifying ways to spend your time? When you wake up in the morning, you might have all sorts of things to read – many of them with more urgent claims on your attention than the book of poems lying by the bed. There are messages from friends, newspaper reports, opinions pouring onto social media, bills and bank statements to deal with; perhaps, if you are at school, poetry is competing with subjects that apparently have a more practical application: biology, economics, computer sciences. So why reach down to find, say, the following poem by Christina Rossetti (1862)?

Song

She sat and sang alway
 By the green margin of a stream,
 Watching the fishes leap and play
 Beneath the glad sunbeam.

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I sat and wept alway
 Beneath the moon's most shadowy beam,
 Watching the blossoms of the May
 Weep leaves into the stream.

I wept for memory;
 She sang for hope that is so fair:
 My tears were swallowed by the sea;
 Her songs died on the air.

The answer at the heart of this book is that poetry affords pleasure and wisdom. Reading poetry enriches our experience of life. To be able to read Rossetti's lines and appreciate their verbal distinctiveness, their formal patterns, their emotional insight, their vision of what life is, is to make the world a different, perhaps more fulfilling place.

Many things give pleasure, of course: playing sport, bird watching, eating chips, knitting, contemplating a beautiful landscape, even dancing – and a lot of these activities offer more immediate joys or require less work than reading a poem. But pleasure takes different forms. The very fact that the fullest satisfactions of a poem are neither easily nor immediately accessible is a sign that the pleasure offered by poetry has particular depth and quality. The rewards of patiently devoting one's resources to a complex subject are richer than the sugar rush that comes from wolfing down a bar of chocolate.

Rossetti's poem does afford immediate pleasures. On a first reading we might simply enjoy the sounds of the words, the patterns of the rhymes, the attractiveness of the images. The more closely we look and listen to these qualities, the more intricate they reveal themselves to be. Reading becomes its own reward as we linger over the poem's repetitions and variations; its innovations on a sequence of four- and three-beat rhythms, familiar from nursery rhyme and folk song; the similarities and contrasts between the three parts of the poem's structure. The words are arranged with a care and subtlety that makes them worthy of attention for their own sake. Wake up and spend ten minutes following the unfolding of Rossetti's poem, and our time is not frittered away, as it might be in reading a webpage or a text message. Instead, the poem allows us to escape temporarily from the randomness of day-to-day experience into a meaningful verbal pattern.

Returning to the poem another morning, our attention might pass from the poem's sensuous qualities to its emotional impact. Here is a memorable expression of the centrality of hope and

sadness to human life and of the transience of that life. And we might find that the poem calls on us to exercise our intellect, as we consider the persuasiveness of the different perspectives it presents. We might start to see that while the poem offers a pleasurable experience in itself, it also informs and illuminates other experiences. The care with which it is constructed promises a corresponding care over what it has to communicate. Through their richness and complexity, the words draw attention to the richness and complexity of life. Rossetti presents two contrasting outlooks, one joyful, one mournful, and brings us to the view, finally, that neither attitude will change our fate. The poem sharpens our sense of the pathos of the human predicament, and, in its brevity, shows how to accept that pathos without wallowing in it.

Poems enrich the moments we spend reading them. In doing so, they deepen our understanding and appreciation of life beyond those moments. They offer representations of life that help to refine and enlarge our conception of experience. Every poem says, implicitly: 'Look at the world in this way: isn't life like this?' Or, sometimes: 'isn't this the way life could be?' We don't have to endorse that view of the world; we are merely invited to share in it, temporarily. Crucially, poems work by inviting us to view the world through the prism of the experience they offer. Rossetti does not tell us, flatly, that 'whether we are hopeful or regretful, we all end in the same way', as though the job of a poem were to deliver information. Instead, her poem allows us to entertain two opposed perspectives, each with its own validity; it conducts us to its final revelation through representations of hopefulness and mournfulness in a way that does not force its vision of experience upon us. The poem's significance is inseparable from the story that it tells and the way in which it tells it.

One way of putting it might be to say that poems combine two valuable things: beauty and truth. They show us that beauty is not merely decorative but enables us to comprehend experience; it is a way of communicating and preserving an understanding of life. In 'Satire III' (1633), John Donne animates a truth about truth itself:

On a huge hill,
 Cragged, and steep, Truth stands, and he that will
 Reach her, about must, and about must go;
 And what the hill's suddenness resists, win so.

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That is a tricky thought, but the trickiness is part of the point. Donne shows us that arriving at ‘Truth’ – knowledge, understanding – requires effort. It is often difficult, like following the winding path to the top of a steep hill. And Donne’s lines, in their convoluted, halting progress, allow us to feel that difficulty. They seem, magically, to bring truth to life. Just as we don’t always go for a walk merely to reach a destination, so there is something innately pleasing as well as instructive about the way Donne’s lines tell us the truth. Their repetitive patterns (the couplets of rhyme, the labouring phrase ‘about must and about must go’) take us through something like the looping progress round the hill that they describe. And the arrangement and positioning of words also recreate something of the difficulty of the journey: ‘Cragged’ has a craggy prominence at the start of its line; to reach the full sense of ‘he that will / Reach her’ we have to reach our eye from the end of one line to the beginning of another; it is satisfying that it is only as we arrive at the final two words of the sentence that we ‘win’ a full understanding of its sense – a sense that would have been easier, but less rewarding, to untangle had the line been written, perhaps more naturally, ‘and so win what the hill’s suddenness [i.e. its steepness] resists’.

What sorts of thing can poems show us? The answers are almost limitless: we will encounter numerous examples throughout the book. In a wide sense, however, we might say that poems reveal something about human beings and our relation to each other and our world. Poems embody a knowledge of how we belong in the world; they show us the way things are, the way things might be, and the way things should be. Let’s take a pair of seemingly contrasting illustrations. A nursery rhyme such as ‘Rock-a-bye Baby’ (c. 1765) –

Rock-a-bye baby on the tree top.
 When the wind blows the cradle will rock.
 When the bough breaks, the cradle will fall.
 And down will come Baby, cradle and all.

– is evidently different in gravity and outlook to this stanza from the *Rubáiyát* of the medieval Persian polymath Omar Khayyam, translated by Edward Fitzgerald (1859):

But leave the Wise to wrangle, and with me
 The Quarrel of the Universe let be:
 And, in some corner of the Hubbub coucht,
 Make Game of that which makes as much of Thee.

Khayyam's lines are more obviously freighted with wisdom (even if, riddlingly, the thrust of that wisdom is to leave the 'Wise' behind). But what finds expression in both poems is a vision of human experience, and a sense of how we might come to terms with it. Those visions are to some degree contradictory – Khayyam sees life as a game, the nursery rhyme as a struggle – but there is truth in both of them. The poems don't deal in matters that are subject to proof, as in the sciences, but rather of different ways of seeing and responding to the world. And even if we don't share their vision, we find it expressed in words which are true to the experience they convey. The neatly patterned feel of Khayyam's poem suggests how we might treat as a 'Game' the workings of a 'Universe' which 'makes as much' of us; the unrelenting momentum of the nursery rhyme, in which things get worse one line at a time, smuggles into a lullaby a frightening sense of nature's destructive power.

The poems we have looked at so far suggest that life involves a measure of unhappiness. How can we square this with the thought that poetry offers pleasure? One answer is that there is a deeper pleasure in knowing and understanding life than in being deceived. Another is that poems show how we can reconcile ourselves with life's inevitable difficulties. Beauty often reminds us that good things can coexist with – even emerge from – the bad. In the face of painful awareness a poem's words and patterns can rescue significance; they can offer consolation and redeem the situation they address. Even as 'Rock-a-bye Baby' warns of nature's violence, it is a pleasure to sing: art can soothe suffering. The speaker of Rossetti's poem says that she 'wept', but the poem itself is a 'Song', something that brings consolation and joy. In poems dealing with happier circumstances – say a tribute to a landscape or a loved one – the beauty of a poem's words might be a way of consecrating as well as comprehending what they describe, as though in tribute to its value. Poems help us to understand life, but they also affirm life's significance. They give life meaning.

Poems are ways of preserving experience. Rossetti's song describes both its voices vanishing; Rossetti herself is now long vanished (she lived from 1830 to 1894). Yet Rossetti's words are lasting. They give enduring form to Rossetti's distinctive vision and sensibility and allow later readers to share in them and be shaped by their influence. As we read, we are lifted beyond our everyday concerns, and put in touch with something of permanence. That is not to say that a poem will always mean the same thing – for us, or for other readers. A poem endures, in part, because it acquires new significances in the changing circumstances in which it is read. Return the next morning to yesterday's paper, an answered text message, a bill that has been

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paid, and its significance will likely have dwindled; return to Rossetti's poem, and its significance will have endured, perhaps evolved. Come back years later, carrying new understandings of hope and disappointment, and we might find still different significances. The truth and pathos of its apprehension of human transience will last; our pleasure in the sounds and patterns will remain; we might even find it moves us, or illuminates experience, in a new and unexpected way.

A work of art, wrote John Keats, is 'a friend to man' ('Ode on a Grecian Urn' (1820)). It consoles and cheers us with the company of minds from distant times and places. To read poetry is also to find the company of other readers, living and dead. Every reader will have their own response to a poem. We will all have our own sense of the depth and significance of the truths a poem embodies; we are all drawn to share with others our sense of what is beautiful. This is why the act of reading poetry passes naturally into the act of contemplating and discussing poetry – the practice of literary criticism. Literary criticism might be something that we undertake in formal ways, say as a student at school or university, but even outside of any academic context, it is natural to reflect upon what we have read. And, done well, literary criticism becomes another of poetry's joys and values. Perhaps the saddest and most frustrating things one hears as a teacher is students saying that, while instinctively they like reading books, and even poems, that pleasure is spoiled by being made to criticise them in an academic context. One of the hopes of this book is to persuade you that, when it has love of and gratitude for literature at its heart, thinking about, discussing, and even writing about poetry is part of the pleasure of reading it. Criticism should, as James Reeves says, be 'a development of one's pleasure rather than an eradication'; it is 'an act of love'.¹ The process of reflection helps us to work out what we think and feel about a poem, and why we like or dislike it – it is a way of organising our response. As that process passes into debate with other readers, it offers the pleasure of winning people round to our view and, equally, the pleasure of changing our minds and being persuaded to see the truth or beauty of something we had not recognised.

Someone sceptical about the value of studying poetry might leap in at this point and complain that such matters are all subjective: what society needs is people capable of dealing in facts, not squabbling over things that are 'just a matter of opinion'. To an extent, they would be right: whether a poem is good or bad, true or beautiful, *is* subjective; it is a matter of persuasion rather than proof – just as poems themselves deal in a realm of knowledge not limited to fact. But then how many times in life do we face

dilemmas for which there is no factually correct resolution? There is no way of *proving* that choosing to marry a certain person or deciding to pick one particular career path or electing a particular government is definitively the right course of action. But such choices are no mere matter of whim, either. We have to weigh the evidence and decide which option we dislike least. You can't say for certain that it is a better idea to marry the generous and attractive suitor over the mean-spirited alternative, but you can stack up the evidence pretty convincingly in favour. And this is exactly the kind of thinking literary criticism involves. The eighteenth-century critic and lexicographer Samuel Johnson put it best when he said that in practising literary criticism we 'improve opinion into knowledge'.² Everyone has the right to an opinion, of course, but that is not to say that everyone's opinion is of equal merit or that we should be satisfied with the opinions that come instinctively into our head. Some opinions will be better-informed, better-substantiated, and better-made than others (people who proudly 'say what they think' often haven't done a great deal of thinking). The distinction Johnson makes between 'opinion' and 'knowledge' asserts that to have an opinion is not enough, and that in holding an opinion we have the obligation to alter, refine, and improve it as best we can. That process requires looking closely and skilfully at the evidence and orchestrating our observations into a coherent case. It enables us to enter a community, balancing our individual preferences against a common standard of taste. And that, again, is what this book offers help with.

Literary study in schools and universities frequently comes under attack. Governments back subjects such as science, technology, and mathematics, which boast more obvious practical benefits. And who doesn't want to feel that they are studying something valuable, for themselves and others? 'What is the use of poetry?' comes the question. One answer, which it is always fun to offer, is that poetry's lack of utility is exactly the point. What, if it comes to that, is the use of love, or music, or wine? Poetry reminds us that there are more virtues in life than being merely useful. Studying it is an education in things that have a value beyond the everyday: truth, beauty, feeling, imagination, tradition. And as a result, poetry will always trouble those who go through life valuing things according to their practicality, fashionableness, or financial worth. A broader response, though, is to draw attention, as we have been doing in the paragraphs above, to the thought that poetry matters for its ability to shape our values, perceptions, sympathies, and sense of community, our powers of debate, argument, and comprehension. Reading poetry involves expanding our knowledge, understanding, and appreciation of life; it sharpens our ability to perceive

and apprehend complexity; it trains us to evaluate and persuade others of the substance of our views and trains our receptiveness to the views of others – and where is the society which doesn't need more of that?

What Is a Poem?

Many of the things I have just said about why we should read poetry could apply to literature, or indeed art, of any kind. What makes something a poem? The question is harder to answer than it might first appear, and can be an unfruitful one. Samuel Johnson, when posed the question by his friend and biographer James Boswell, pointed out that definition is sometimes redundant: 'Why, Sir, it is much easier to say what it is not. We all *know* what light is; but it is not easy to *tell* what it is.'³ Being able to say what a poem is is not as useful as being able instinctively to recognise one. And, as Johnson said elsewhere, 'To circumscribe poetry by a definition will only shew the narrowness of the definer': good poems reshape our sense of what a poem can be.⁴ Still, it is helpful, before we start reading, to have in mind some expectations about what we might encounter. And if, as with light, we know a poem when we see one, then it should be possible to sketch out what the features are in a poem that allow us to recognise it, even if working backwards in this manner doesn't yield a categorical definition. Everyone would agree to call Rossetti's 'Song' a poem, for instance – but why? Without trying to be exhaustive or definitive, I'd like to suggest three qualities which will characterise any poem we encounter.

First, let's give some thought to terminology. If the question were 'what is poetry?' one answer would be that poetry is the opposite of prose. That answer would suggest something about the quality of experience we anticipate: a 'poetic' (elevated and intensified) and not a 'prosaic' (ordinary) one. It would also suggest something about the writing's form: poetry is organised differently on the page. We should not hold too fast to those expectations, however: poems can be prosaic, and prose can be poetic; and if form is the defining quality, then the more accurate opposite to prose might be *verse*, as we shall see. And while 'poetry' can oppose itself to 'prose', there is no such thing as 'a prose' for a poem to define itself against.⁵ A poem would seem to be not so much the opposite of a novel or a play as a family relation: a different way of accomplishing a similar task. Another answer to the question 'what is poetry?' might be that it is a label for all imaginative literature, and that poems, novels, and plays all fall under its umbrella. And that, in fact, is a good starting point from which to narrow things down: a poem is a work of imagination. It is an act of creativity in

response to the problems or pleasures of human life. As an act of imagination, its nature is fictional. That is not to say that the arguments, feelings, situations, or stories that it embodies are entirely invented, but that they always involve some degree of selection and representation; they operate on a separate plane from the events of life itself. The women in Rossetti's poem may well have been real individuals who sat and sang or wept, but the poem presents their actions less as a record of real occurrences than as possible contrasting responses to life. Even poems which respond to historical people or events – Tennyson's 'The Charge of the Light Brigade' (1855), to take a well-known example – do so by imagining a voice that carries that response. Before every poem, we might imagine reading the words 'What if somebody said . . .' And yet for a work of imagination to compel our attention, its representation of life must have the intensity of something real. A poem invites us to contemplate feelings, circumstances, and actions that we know not to be real as though they were so. Works of imagination, that is, appeal to our imagination. They allow us to transcend our present circumstances; they can project us into other times and places by investing them with their own reality and allow us to reflect back on life from them. They can encourage us to think about how the world might exist differently. Yet imagination is not fantasy. A poem is not a daydream. A poem does not attempt to replace reality, but to exist within it. Rossetti's lines do not say, 'life is sorrowful, but art can allow us to escape it', they say, 'step out of your day-to-day existence, contemplate these opposed responses to life and the thought of how little either affects things, and return to life with your understanding clarified'. Even when a poem presents us with an ideal world, it lets us know we must return from it. In the deepest and most lasting art, the imagination confronts and accommodates itself to reality, rather than fleeing it; it is shaped by, and gives shape to, an understanding of the conditions of this world.

A next step might be to say that a poem is an act of imagination which takes place through language. A poem imagines a voice using words for any number of familiar purposes – to express feeling, shape argument, describe the world, tell stories, dramatise character, and so on. It does so with special flair and control: it takes care over what it says and how it says it, and so encourages us to read with the care and patience we have started to describe. We expect a poem to be resourceful and imaginative in its handling of the expressive possibilities of language; we want it to find out new and surprising ways of speaking about and defining experience, rather than falling back on cliché and imprecision. There is a world of difference, for instance, between Rossetti writing 'She always sat and sang' and 'She sat and sang away', where the odd spelling has an appropriately