Acad. Quest. (2023) 36.1
DOI 10.51845.36.1.4

Articles

Poetry and Western Civilization

Catharine Savage Brosman

A recent book says, *Don't Read Poetry*.[1] This title is an attention-getting ruse: the subtitle says the book is about "How to Read Poems." The distinction is new: poetry is, apparently, one thing; poems are another. Readers are, it seems, to reject the *art* of poetry and the cultural idol but not every text called a poem. The book is really a screed against canonic works, the societies that produced them, and the respect in which they have been held. The author endeavors to "unpack" such works, as critics now say, seeing through their clever or ingenuous traps to discover offensive premises. Anything conventional, anything formerly normative is abusive and to be jettisoned, along with its authors, and a new poetry by and for the marginalized must be substituted. In particular, poems should depart from "consecutive, cohesive sense." (190) Adrienne Rich, for example, having been personally "harmed" by art that purported to offer a vision of order, shook off "stable or fixed ways to live and write." (188) Natalie Eilbert asks what she can "defile" and seeks, as a poet-activist, to change and subvert both law and language.[2] (228) Such projects, if carried out radically, are opposed to the spirit of Western civilization.

Poetry belongs to those enterprises which examine and preserve the past, while sifting and shaping facts to create understanding, so that human beings may know themselves and comprehend their destiny better. Evidence shows that, in the form of heroic epics, poetry was central to Greek culture, as a record of the past and a celebration of what are now called "values." Homeric epics, followed later by

1 Stephanie Burt, *Don't Read Poetry: A Book About How to Read Poems* (New York: Basic Books, 2019).
2 Such aims are reminiscent of French and, later, American surrealism. Most of the French associated with that movement were communists, seeking, as they said, to create a new social order as they experimented with new arrangements in painting, film, and poetry.

Catharine Savage Brosman is professor emerita of French at Tulane University; cbrosman@tulane.edu. Her book, *Arm in Arm: Poems,* was published in 2022 by Mercer University Press.

dramatic poetry, arose from the myth-making of the early Greeks, their general culture, their struggles. For them, poetry was "an activity of the highest social (and human) importance."[3] To believe in poetry was to believe in their civilization. In the *Republic*, Socrates viewed the role of poetry as making "an image of the good." Aristotle, in his *Poetics*, considered poetry a higher undertaking than history, since it used what was in order to imagine what might be.

For centuries thereafter, poetry had high standing in civic life. In the final act of Ben Jonson's *Poetaster: or, The Arraignment* (1601), Augustus Caesar rises in acknowledgment as Virgil enters the scene; the emperor then seats him in a chair more elevated than his own. Poets were sometimes men of action. Sir Philip Sidney, a soldier and royal appointee, who died at the battle of Zutphen, composed sonnets and a romance as well as an *Apologie for Poesie* (posthumous, 1595). Following Greek and Roman models, the position of poet laureate in England was created in 1668 for Dryden. Shelley called poets "the unacknowledged legislators of the world." Alphonse de Lamartine served in the legislature in the Second French Republic (1848-51); from 1852 to 1870 Victor Hugo was a sort of anti-imperial activist. But when questioned by skeptics on the worth of poetry in an industrialized society, the hero of *Chatterton* (1835), a tragedy by Alfred de Vigny, replies only that the poet "reads in the stars the route shown to us by God's finger." Poets were already losing prestige. Two high-placed French diplomats of the twentieth century, Paul Claudel and Alexis Leger, were also major poets; the latter won the Nobel Prize for Literature (1960). But for years, each tried to conceal his literary life and accomplishments, for reasons perhaps personal but also because the label *poet* had, as for Chatterton, become suspect.

Although the terms have changed from mythological to realist, what the most serious poets today mean by poetry is not unlike the Greeks' understanding. Robert Penn Warren phrased one aspect of the matter for the twentieth century: "What poetry most significantly celebrates is the capacity of man to face the deep, dark inwardness

3 M. L. Finney, *The World of Odysseus* (New York: Viking, 1954; second revised ed., New York: Penguin, 1978), 22.

of his nature and his fate."[4] In so doing it must conceive and aspire to ideals. It imagines, as Aristotle proclaimed, what might be; it is *vision*.

While poetic vision must be social, it has been nurtured also in solitude, especially in nature. By its recurrent annual rhythms, cyclical rather than linear, nature seems ahistorical, thus offering a complementary understanding. Poetic landscapes have held the attention of readers for millennia. The verse of Theocritus, Virgil, and the pastoral poets of France and England remains key, as does that of American writers who presented a vision of a new man in a new Eden—Whitman and Warren, for example.

Even in the present iconoclastic age, poetry, though often debased or, if older, judged "elitist," still receives lip-service in America. The position of Consultant on Poetry to the Library of Congress was created in 1937.[5] Today, states, cities, and counties boast of their poets laureate. Numerous small presses, countless creative writing programs, from elementary school level through the Ph.D. workshops in prisons, slams in coffee shops, public readings—all give evidence of obeisance to poetry and public willingness to pay for it. (Meanwhile, ironically, some major publishing houses put out no verse at all.)

But what is this art? What *is* a poem? Because of changes in poetic practice in the nineteenth century and especially the twentieth, under the impulse of modernism, defining a poem has become increasingly difficult. To many, it is entirely subjective—as the minimalist Donald Judd is said to have believed: "It's art if you think it is."

One thing a poem is *not*, at least, is raw, unreflective emotion—screams, howls, weeping, ecstasy. Shelley's lyricism in "To a Skylark" is not raw; emotion is transformed and made memorable by a rich scheme of rhymes, gorgeous images, and development. Paradoxically, such transformative features are what allows for communication. André Gide defined the poetic spirit as "the gift of being moved by plums" (and William Carlos Williams illustrated that insight in his short lyric "This Is Just to Say"). Each knew, however, that poetic expression depended upon skill. Gide's friend the great poet Paul Valéry

4 James A. Grimshaw, Jr., *Understanding Robert Penn Warren* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2001), 9.

5 The first appointee was Joseph Auslander. The title was later changed to Poet Laureate. Leger, a refugee from France, occupied the position in the early 1940s.

believed that the aim of poems was to transform and recreate by "articulated language" otherwise-inexpressible somatic reactions—sighs, cries, tears. All the passions in the world were, he wrote, incapable of creating by themselves a single good line. Everyone has been happy or unhappy. But "to feel does not mean necessarily to *make felt*, still less *beautifully felt*."[6]

Although Ezra Pound called literature, thinking doubtless of poems, "news," he added the qualifier: "that stays news."[7] Poetry is distinctive; its truth-value differs from that of writing, often ephemeral, which seeks chiefly to inform or persuade readers. Poetry is a language-within-language or a metalanguage, using not just words but word-images and all their resonance to induce pleasure as well as meaning. Even when simple in appearance, it is subtle; it often operates by indirection. Yet it has also a primitive, visceral appeal to the body (ears, vital organs). It exploits phonemes (sounds) as well as diction (word choice) and arrangement in phrases, sentences, lines, and, frequently, stanzas. All that constitutes poetic form and style.

Men of letters, asserted T. S. Eliot, are as much concerned with style as with content. In the best poetry, form and substance are not separate but rather two sides of the same coin. The vibrations of an aptly-chosen word or image are dual, sound and sense complementing each other. Style, wrote Proust, is a question not of technique but of vision. Valéry proposed that "thought" should be in a poem like nourishment in fruit. (II, 547) The proximity of form and substance was suggested in the title of John Ciardi's book *How Does a Poem Mean?*[8] Formlessness is impossible; and to the human eye, ear, and mind, interesting form is better than lawless running-on at the mouth.

Aspiring to order, poetry tends toward patterns—repetition amid variation. They may include (1) sonorous and arresting words and word-groups, perhaps rhyme, alliteration, assonance, and consonance; (2) verbal pictures (descriptions, quick evocations of

6 Paul Valéry, "Questions de poésie," in *Œuvres* (Paris: NRF/Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1957, 1960), I, 1284; II, 547.

7 Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading* (1934; rpt., New York: New Directions, 1987).

8 John Ciardi, *How Does a Poem Mean?* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1959). This pedagogical tool remains helpful., Readers may wish to consult also Dana Gioia, *Can Poetry Matter? Essays on Poetry and American Culture* (St. Paul: Graywolf, 1992) and James Matthew Wilson, *The Fortunes of Poetry in an Age of Unmaking* (Oregon: Wiseblood Books, 2015; new ed., Menomonee Falls, WI, 2022).

sights); (3) rhetorical and poetic *devices* (symbol, simile, metaphor, metonymy, antithesis, oxymoron, personification, apostrophe, etc.). Condensation, subtle suggestion, syntactical crafting, shaping of lines and stanzas, in addition to surprise and tonal variety, contribute appeal. (Even lengthy poems illustrate concentration of focus.) Above all are movement and rhythm (beat, or accentuation). "Without rhythm the poem is dead."[9] Poetry is more memorable than prose; ditties, some wise, learned in childhood stick in your mind years after much else is gone.

What can poetry do by means of this enhanced language? For Aristotle, Horace, and many later commentators, its function was to please and instruct. The great modernist Wallace Stevens said that its purpose was to contribute to human happiness. In the same spirit, Faulkner wrote that it should "uplift man's heart."[10] Verse offers beauty, knowledge, experience (your own reflected or others'), morality (things as they ought to be, as Aristotle proposed). It is one expression of what Edmund Burke called the "moral imagination," or what David R. Slavitt and others have termed "the morality of vision."[11] It identifies and illustrates, if sometimes antiphrastically, the true, the good, and the beautiful, participating in them by both form and substance and—what counts the most—inviting readers to share them. Poetry "brings the whole soul of man into activity," said Warren.[12] In previous centuries, it commonly involved narrative elements, as in Longfellow's lengthy poems, with direct emotional appeal and admonitions, aiming at edification. It had its place in the religious order, in the form of the Psalms and hymnody, from paraphrases of the Didache through early and medieval Latin hymns to the stirring words of Martin Luther and his contemporaries, then Milton, Bunyan, and Charles Wesley. Since the Romantic era, most Anglophone verse has been lyrical and decreasingly didactic. Poe is

9 Donald Stanford, "A Backward Glance at the New *Southern Review*," *Explorations* 7 (1993), 181.
10 Wallace Stevens, *Adagia*. in *Opus Posthumous*, ed. Milton J. Bates (New York: Knopf, 1989); *The Faulkner Reader* (New York: Random House, 1954), x.
11 On the moral imagination, see Russell Kirk's commentary on Burke in Reclaiming a Patrimony (Washington, DC: Heritage Foundation, 1982), 46.
12 Quoted in Lesa Carnes Corrigan, *Poems of Pure Imagination: Robert Penn Warren and the Romantic Tradition* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1999), 14.

one who helped knock out the aim of instruction (see "The Principle of Poetry").

Despite its visionary function and its embrace of the true and good, poetry cannot be identical to a cause, nor bad verse redeemed by social and political passions. True, the old epics and many subsequent canonic poems did celebrate virtues such as valor and manliness, honor, patriotism, friendship, hope. They were illustrated, however, through character, story, and poetic language, not by simple declarative statements or sermonizing. "It's with good convictions that one makes bad literature," remarked Gide. While having an edifying purpose, Swift's and Pope's satires did not consist simply of common slurs, accusatory rants; they were poetically brilliant, keen characterizations.

Mediocre poetry means little, alas, and is unlikely to endure. Although recent American poets such as Dana Gioia and the late Richard Wilbur have written outstanding verse in standard modes, the dominant strain of poetic writing now is four-sheets-to-the-wind free verse, found in celebrated magazines and the lowliest workshops. Though sometimes clever, their verse would require more discipline than the poets exercise, and more genius. Judgment has been all but abandoned; the poets coast on the assumed value of their drifting, confused thoughts.[13] There is little individuality or distinction among voices. The verse often lacks linguistic or human appeal; it gets by on vague allusions, arbitrary transitions, and offensive language. Its practitioners should, as a rule, get few points. They can rarely boast of originality in form, since most of their techniques were tried, chiefly in France, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In *Un Coup de dés* (1897) Stéphane Mallarmé scattered words on the page; Guillaume Apollinaire eliminated punctuation (but with no loss) in his 1913 collection *Alcools* and wrote ideograms (poems in the shape of their topics). Seventeenth-century English poets likewise created thematically-shaped poems. Experimental poets in the sixties in America exploited further various Continental techniques. Whining

13 Valéry did not rule out all semi-conscious impulses, such as a haunting rhythm, that might contribute to a poem but warned against taking them uncritically and thus relying on readers' stupidity. See II, 577.

self-indulgence exhibited by poets of the Confessional School did not aid the cause of good poetry.

In any case, one cannot get by on direct self-expression or clever techniques alone. Writing "I'm miserable" or "Life is meaningless" takes one nowhere. Yet that is what Richard Brautigan, salaried at Cal Tech, did in a short piece (available online) complaining that it was raining and he had nothing to do. Gide noted the essential role of discipline (in form, substance, and doubtless the artist's soul); art, he said, lives on constraint and dies from freedom. James Dickey remarked that there was "a vast difference between the extremes of Rimbaud, a genius who screamed, and Allen Ginsberg, an ordinary and somewhat pretentious man who screams."[14]

Fragments from a more recent poet, unnamed here to avoid embarrassing him or his university, suggest warmed-over desperation: "A hay bale rings on the nightstand / and you answer it"; "unrecorded boundaries . . . concept of remoteness . . . something more than distance"; "Let me think category without meaning anything / Let me think noise without meaning camera angle." Compare to that a phrase from Paul Eluard, which, though surrealistic, has sense: "Earth is blue like an orange." The simile is startling, but then one sees that it depends on an unstated middle term, "round," which, when supplied, clarifies it in all its suggestiveness.

Good poetry relies, in a word, on *artistry*, not artifice. It is an act of imaginative creation, distinguished from what journalists mean by "artist" when describing, for instance, a skilled rock star, barista, or soccer player. One need not, certainly, reject everything new. In the past, didn't the tradition embrace or absorb innovations? But let them be good. Order may be understood and maintained in more than one way. But, as political history and literary criticism show, anarchy always yields to some form of discipline; judgment will exert itself. Art, to paraphrase Jean Cocteau's words, is knowing how far you can go too far.[15]

14 James Dickey, *Babel to Byzantium: Poets and Poetry Now* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1968), 5-6.

15 See "Le Coq et l'Arlequin," in Cocteau's *Le Rappel à l'ordre* (Paris: Stock, 1926), trans. Rollo H. Myers as *A Call to Order* (London: Faber & Gwyer, 1926).

In 2019, Simon Armitage, newly named poet laureate of the United Kingdom for a ten-year term, told an interviewer that "in a hectic and sometimes frenetic age the combination of considered thought and crafted language is more relevant and vital than ever."[16] An analogy presents itself: the efforts of the French (and supporters around the world) to restore Notre-Dame in Paris, not just making it structurally sound but rather, insofar as possible, re-creating the edifice by original methods and materials. Architects, stonemasons, sculptors, wood carvers, and stained-glass artists labor in what can only be called pious respect for the original creation and its artisans. Both manner and matter will be preserved. And this project is overseen and budgeted by a secular republic. The restoration is, properly, viewed as for all; the cathedral belongs to the common French and world heritage.

Is poetry still central in the Western heritage? Certainly. Valentine's Day cards offer no great lines, but the card purveyors know that people still want to express their love *in verse*. The writings of Homer and his followers, of Virgil, Dante, Shakespeare, and, for us, the great British, Anglo-Irish, and American poets are monuments and must not be neglected. To them may be added others writing in the Western tradition. By eschewing what is facile, cheap, and vulgar, by demanding close attention, poetry trains the mind in discrimination, evaluation, and mental acuity, producing instruction and pleasure.

Do read poetry—good poetry! In Dr. Johnson's words, it enables us "better to endure life and better to enjoy it."[17]

16 Simon Armitage quoted in *The Independent*, May 10, 2019.

17 Samuel Johnson, review of Soame Jenyns, *A Free Inquiry . . . Miscellaneous and Fugitive Pieces* (London, 1774).