

POETRY AND THE IMAGINATION

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Alegra Marcel Bartzat

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In a time when teaching poetry is considered “a waste of taxpayer money” (Severin), I argue that poetry is not a waste, but that it is essential to the survival of the imagination of our language. By examining the nature of poetry, in comparison to the other types of literature, which, for my purposes in this essay, will be considered fiction and drama, we can rediscover the importance of poetry in our education and in our lives. Let us begin by differentiating poetry from prose.

“A poem is a thing made of words,” said William Carlos Williams. However, both a prose composition and a poem contain the same basic elements (words). “The difference between a poem and a prose composition cannot, then, lie in the medium, for each employs the same medium, words. [A poem] must therefore ‘consist of a different combination of them, in consequence of a different object being proposed’” (Daiches 101). A poem uses words in a different fashion, one that is essential to the purpose of the composition. “You can if you like ... call anything in rhyme or meter or in both a poem, but a legitimate poem is a composition in which the rhyme and the meter bear an organic relationship to the total work; in it [Coleridge writes] ‘the parts mutually support and explain each other, all in their proportion harmonizing with, and supporting the purpose and known influences of metrical arrangement’” (Daiches 102).

On the French psychologist Ribot’s two chief types of imagination, Wellek states, “The former of these, the ‘plastic’, characterizes the sharp visualizer who is primarily incited by the outside world, by perception, while the ‘diffluent’ (the auditory and symbolic) is that of the symbolist poet or the writer of romantic tales... who starts from his own emotions and feelings, projecting them through rhythms and images unified by the compulsion of his *Stimmug*” (85). I believe the best poetry comes from both these types of imagination, which can be roughly paralleled to be the

classical imagination and the romantic imagination, respectively. Therefore, I filter life through my imagination, creating my poetry.

The classical, or plastic, aspect of my imagination is the part of my imagination that is spurred by my own perceptions. I almost always base my poems on a place, object, person, event or other concrete object, being or experience that moved me intellectually, emotionally or spiritually. However, I then filter the concrete object, being or experience through rhythms and images in order to achieve the work that I believe captures the appropriate emotion or feeling that resulted from the experience. An example of this process of writing is clear in “A memorable Presence.” The third stanza is the most concrete, and wraps up the story line of the poem, as well as clarifies the emotion that moved me to write the poem.

That night you spent in a one-and-a-half man tent
with two people in it,
out in the middle of nowhere
(which was definitely somewhere)
on the flat of a dried out lake
surrounded by miles of thirsty earth
with a black and grey Mexican blanket
covering your thermarest
and two down sleeping bags on top
and two pillows with yellow cases
impressioned with orange poppies
was the best night of the orbit.

The last line clarifies that there is a camping trip that is being compared to a traveling in

outer space. The landscapes in the other stanzas are reminiscent of another planet, but the final stanza pulls the reader back to familiar items, like the pillows and down sleeping bags. This poem filters the event, the camping trip, through images both familiar and unfamiliar to explain the more important emotion behind the trip: the significant bond between two people that occurred because of this trip. The two people, crammed into a small tent, are in the middle of nowhere, but, because they are there together, it becomes definitely somewhere.

Poets “...render things in their fullest or most revealing details” (Aesthesia). Be it through metaphor, imagery, allusion or other rhetorical and descriptive tools, a poem must have layers before I consider it a good poem. There must be a reality created as some sort of physical imagining, as well as a more subtle feeling or intuition to the poem. By bringing the familiar images into the unfamiliar description of space travel, “A Memorable Presence” filters an event through my imagination, therefore creating images, in order to express the emotional experience that went along with the travels.

A poem in any mode, style, approach, or form, requires vivid images. This can include images of sight as well as sound, taste, smell, touch and intuition. For imagery “...should not be confused with actual, sensuous, visual image-making” (Wellek 26). Poetry takes “show don’t tell” and interprets it as “create don’t describe.” Images that are fresh, that surprise, that reveal the kinship between apparently different things will reveal emotions, and make the invisible visible. Description does not suffice. By illuminating a situation, moment, relationship or idea through her own imagination, a poet creates a world.

The structure, or the action, of a poem relies on strong formal pressures. As Sharon Bryan claims, “The pressure needs to be strong enough to shape the poem. It’s like the pressure that transforms carbon into diamonds.” This is what makes the poem an art. Poets can invent formal problems for themselves or they can work within the bounds of traditional forms. The issues of form, technique, and craft are what poets can work on directly and deliberately.

Stichic poems pose the risk of containing lines that run beyond a natural length. That is, they are prone to sentences that diffuse the energy because the poem itself is not broken into pieces. Take for example Timothy Daniel Welch's poem, "Ronald, Or Land." This poem is available in two forms, stichic and in lines and stanzas. I believe it was originally written in stanzas, and then compressed into stichic form. I think this because there is no breathing room in the poem. The first few lines demonstrate this feeling

The first name of my father,
this island upon islands –
the only word here in the sand –
where green tides flatten, undress,
and recede deep as waking.

This poem falls into the common problem of running together thoughts. The lines need to take breaks, which must be provided for in the language in a stichic poem. Welch's poem is also in syllabics, a form in which line integrity is at risk; it is often the weakest aspect of syllabic poems. Welch avoids destroying line integrity by choosing phrases that work as end-stopped lines, which help maintain the structure of this dense poem.

The poem must invoke the muse. This means, in my mind, that the poem comes from a place of passion in the writer and is then imagined into a poem. There must be a personal motivation for writing the poem, or the poem must tap into a deeper consciousness so that others feel something from reading or hearing it. "After Traveling" is based on my parents love story, something I have been told. But this is my own imagining of it. I fill in the blanks with my own images of the aching

my father felt being without my mother, and the bamboo and tropical fruits that could not replace her.

Paradox and contradiction are inevitable human nature, much like my father demonstrates in “After Traveling.” As well, I have written it in stichic form to further demonstrate the contradictory nature of this poem. The poem tells a story that takes place over the course of a year. However, by focusing on the one emotion I imagine for my father, I condense a lengthy time spent traveling into one stanza, for the one over-bearing emotional conflict. He leaves the one he loves “to find a fresh start.” He soon learns that all the tropical locations do not give him what he desires, the idea of the girl he left behind. Though I know the end of story, as it is based on my parents, the readers do not. Personal associations of reader and writer further enrich the poem. For me, the poem ends with my mother still single, and a new love blossoming from the start they had before he left. For readers, though, they do not know the end of the love and they can imagine it a number of ways, and probably will, depending on their own life knowledge and imaginations. By connecting with strong, complex and driving emotions, the poet admits something is at stake. Layers of emotions are a human reality; no feeling exists in isolation.

Quatrain rhymes and stanzas, because of their history of use, often invoke a feeling of solemnity or sadness. In Scott Tinley’s “The Hands of Central Park” the subject of homelessness is addressed in quatrains. He ends this thoughtful work with a poignant stanza.

Whose only hands can only want
To feel the skin of warmer hands –
One more cartwheel, just once again
To hear that song, “this is your land.”

Quatrains are best used to invoke the pathos, the emotion, of the reader, as Tinley has done

with his ABCB rhyming quatrains that really hit home the wanting of a the homeless. The repetition also works to enhance the sadness and longing in this poem by creating a feeling of endlessness that the homeless must endure. As well, this elegy points out the cruelty afforded to those who have committed no crime except poverty.

Coleridge defines two types of imagination, primary and secondary. The primary imagination is the eternal act of creation, essentially the bringing of order out of chaos. The secondary imagination is that which man utilizes, it is the use of conscious perception to “project and create new harmonies of meaning.” This act of perception and imagination is a poetic activity, which belongs to the poets who are “distinguished by the activity of their imagination” (Daiches 107). In the act of creating, the act of poetry, man can reconcile polarities, capture moments or perception, and so on. But a poem must still be created through a special and attentive handling of language.

A poem that achieves reconciliation between opposing or polar experiences is “Eaten Alive.” In this poem a man is being eaten alive by an unknown disease. The doctors tell him continually that there is nothing wrong with him because their tests cannot find anything. The experience of knowing that he is dying and the experience of being told there is nothing wrong with him are impossible to reconcile. The poets imagination allows the readers to realize that the subject is condemned to death, “They sent him home at execution speed; / A temperate ignorance was their truth.” The doctors do not have the knowledge that the patient has; he knows there is something wrong, but medicines limitations do not allow anything to be done. By working out the tragedy in this poem, the reader can begin to heal the polarities that often exist in modern life, such as this man’s experience.

“Eaten Alive” was composed in accentual syllabics, stichic, iambic tetrameter. Iambic tetrameter is perhaps the form most prone to regularity that causes it to become like a nursery rhyme. When writing about a serious subject such as death from disease, I had to be particularly careful to avoid this pitfall. A line that I had to change because of this read, “The predators now

can reap what they sowed.” Clearly, this sing-songy line did not work to convey the weight this poem carried. The poet must shape the poem and choose excellent content in order for the poem to succeed.

Cindy Maresic’s poem, “Some Tree Swallows,” is another fine example of accentual syllabics. She captures the ephemeral aspects of love and lovers through nature and swallows. The poet maintains a feeling of control by the way the poem is shaped on the page. Using rhyme can help to maintain the integrity of the poem, and guide the reader through. In this poem Maresic loses control at the exact point where her rhyming is weakest.

With accuracy, their beaks entwined in the fronds
of hooking plants. Their rumpled lace of feathers
clattered through blades of grass as one gesture
with the thing of darkness. I didn’t know whether

However, this poem succeeds overall because the form is asserted through the strength in imagery and is well structured by strong syntax and rhymes in the rest of the poem.

Symbols in poetry allow the poet to transcend the immediate and temporal in order to touch the eternal and universal. Poetry can be conceived as truth, or an equivalent of truth (Wellek 191), but the poem must reach into the depths of cultural symbolism in order to move beyond the immediate and individual experience. Symbols also enrich a poem by adding layers of meaning. Symbols are images that have meanings beyond the concrete. Free verse, with its dependence on imagery, demands the highest quality of imagery for the poem to be successful. While there is no particular form that must be followed, free verse poems often contain internal action and can utilize ghost meter or include metered lines as appropriate to the poems effect. Free verse poems must convey the experience of humanity no less than other forms.

In “The Clearing” there are several images that can be explored as symbolic. “My body” in the fourth line can represent the physical body as it appears to in this poem, as well as the spiritual body or soul. “Gasps” can be read as several different things, there are gasps of fright, gasps of drowning, gasps of physical pleasure and so on. “My first breath” can refer to the first breath upon waking, or it can recall the first breath after emerging from the womb. “Clues” also open the readers’ imaginations, especially since the rise of the detective novel as a genre. Clues are commonly known as hints in solving a puzzle, but can also refer to solving a crime. As well, a clue used to refer to a ball of twine, before the commonality of detective characters. In this poem, with the air of suffering and the description of gasping and the reference to choking in the last stanza, the ball of twine might invoke an image of being hanged.

The language in a poem must be well crafted, which can be achieved through several means. Some of those means include being interesting, clever, unusual or precise. Whether the poem is formal or free verse, it must use interesting language. Words are the building blocks that create poetry, and no other form is as bound to these basic components as poetry. “The Clearing” portrays physical suffering as inseparable from emotional suffering. The speaker, however, doesn’t recognize (or doesn’t admit to) the emotional pain. To convey this ignorance, I had to struggle to find a balance between keeping the true pain a mystery while revealing enough to my readers that they could understand.

Poetry cannot settle for almost the right word or phrase, but always finds the precise one. I chose “something,” a word that often doesn’t work in poetry because it is so vague. However, it is later attached to an event, “The first time he hit, / It knocked my tears out of sight.” Poetry necessitates a proficient vocabulary and awareness of sentence structure, which can encompass a wide range of diction, tone, and emotion. By repeating syntax in sentences and repeating key lines, such as “Something in my past haunts me,” I reiterate to the readers the confusion and denial of the speaker. As well, I use varied techniques, like the caesura in “My first breath is always a

wheeze,” to create variety in the lines and to surprise my readers. Interesting words and sounds are also an important aspect; by choosing unexpected words like “mucus,” I force my readers to think about the line and sentence that contain that word, and therefore re-imagine the entire poem.

It is the imagination that allows us to move beyond the senses to create a holistic reality by combining the physical with the emotional, mental and spiritual. “The Clearing” uses simple, yet rich images to create a poem about the suffering of the narrator, that come alive with the many possibilities of imagining because of cultural symbolism.

Poetry is limited primarily by time and space. While a novel gives great details to particular aspects of a story, poems are confined to the essence of an idea or moment. Fiction can include poetic descriptions, but it is difficult for a poem to become very prose-like without becoming prose. Leila Monroe’s “Chrysanthemum” demonstrates the ambivalence that tears at a young girl, similar to what James Jones’ Karen Holmes feels about her situation. While Jones develops Karen’s situation throughout the 900 pages of *From Here to Eternity*, Monroe describes a single incident in the life of a girl. The girl sees her father hit her mother, and runs screaming out the door. Though she wants to hurt her father, instead “[She] could only grow pale roots, / deeply burrowed, holding [her], / in [her] cotton dress, eyes turned / to clouds. Trying to ascend / but always pushing further, / further into the dark ground.” This desire to break free, but growing more and more stuck can be compared to Karen Holmes’ inability to leave her husband. Women in the forties had very few options, just as a child has very few options, and both end up tethered to the man of the house.

The relationship of Karen Holmes and her son is another unfortunate one in the life of an officer’s wife. The son follows in the father’s image; he is institutionalized into the military caste system and knows he’s on top. Karen is estranged, and feels despair, but knows she has no hope to change the situation. Courtney Franklin’s “*Deliverance*” offers another mother’s estrangement. Though Franklin’s mother’s situation is not quite as desperate, as it describes the more natural

and expected time of a daughter leaving home when she is a woman, it captures the essence of a mother's pain that can be compared to Karen Holmes' more unnatural pain in *From Here to Eternity*. Franklin reflects on this sorrow:

Cinda Franklin- once Taylor,
now defined as mother-wife.
Tears welled around the corners
of her eyes, the green enhanced
by the redness of sorrow,
for the child she would set free.
Delivering me again-
this time from the arid womb
of the desert I'd outgrown,
to a city on the coast.

The strictly defined roles of a woman are two: mother and wife, for both Cinda Franklin and Karen Holmes. As a result, their children become their only productivity for society, so it must be painful to let go. And how much more horrible to have a child that learns from his father to never love you, as Karen's son has. Many scenes in Jones' novel can be described as poetic, for they truly capture the essence of emotion and situation. The pains these women suffer are captured in words, though the method in which they are developed differs in length and detail.

Consider the love affair of Lorene and Prewitt in *From Here to Eternity*. Though Lorene and Prewitt are truly in love, they cannot amend their circumstances, just as Warden and Karen cannot. As T. S. Eliot proclaims in *The Four Quartets*, "Love is itself unmoving, / only the cause and end of movement," the novel agrees. Courtney Franklin developed this idea further when she stated,

“Love is not to give oneself, but to find oneself.” Both these poets know what Lorene and Prewitt cannot. Love allows the men of the army an opportunity to show the tender aspects of themselves, as well as it allows them to see the women for who they truly are. But this is only a process of discovery and it does not change the final cause; for Warden and Prewitt, this is their dedication to the army. And the women remain stuck, unable to find or achieve any greater cause than their current roles, because society offers them no opportunities to advance.

Before judging whether a work of literature is “good” or “bad,” we must be able to differentiate between writing and literature. We may “...recognize ‘fictionality’, ‘invention’, or ‘imagination’ as the distinguishing trait of literature...” as a descriptive (not evaluative) conception (Wellek 26). In other words, the presence of the imagination allows us to classify, but not to judge, a piece of writing as a piece of art. This allows us to separate journalism, philosophy, historical or other accounts, diaries and other works of utilitarian value from true fiction, poetry and drama, which can be considered the three overarching genres of literature.

To create a value system for writing, a more complex definition is needed. This subject must begin to address the interaction of the work with its context, be it sociological, psychological, biographical, ideological, ecological, etc. As the Aestheticians state in their manifesto, “All things are best ordered and arranged with concern for their relation to context; each elemental thing has a vital influence on the essential being.”

Writers must maintain fidelity to the perception and to the idea of their art. “In essence, [the artist] affirms the primary human value of beauty before the secondary convenience of utility, remembering that it is only the original individual and personal nature of man, his and her spirituality and sensuality, that actually may enjoy, and therefore must judge, the potential advantages of any practicality... Insofar as we can establish the essential ends of existence, we can easily have the means to improve our world accordingly, and to free it aesthetically, as well as ecologi-

cally, from the degradations of utilitarian commodity and conformity” (Aesthesia). The language of poetry, therefore, reigns supreme, for poets must be true to the beauty and the essence of that idea, object, scene or emotion that the poetry portrays.

Excellence is achieved through imagination and craft. If a poet handles form with grace, the product will be beautiful. A really great work must be polished, but it also allows the reader room to imagine the action in his mind. The act of poetry, as an act of creative perception, is the making of metaphors for universal truths. On the outside, poems are made up words, but on the inside they speak profound truths. The imagination “... projects personality upon the outer world of things, which animizes and animates nature” (Wellek 204). Through this projection, the poet begins to create an ideal reality. When the poem acts as an organic piece, each word, line, rhythm and rhyme work together to produce a particular effect. The poet works with the words to reveal a perception. When everything fits together, it is electric; it can be felt in the bones and in the blood. This is excellence.

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