

# A DEFENSE OF POETRY

*Michael Reck*

O splendor of living light eternal Who has ever grown  
so pale under the shade of Paradise as I do  
but still that he would not show us that  
remembered, and yet it is the only  
when in the world that is the only  
in it is the only that is the only

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## POETRY

Where people stand for the first time  
and the world is a new world  
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Am I battering in an open door—*enfonçant une porte ouverte?*  
Don't we all love poetry—like mother, progress, and so forth?  
My own experience is that poetry nowadays is the shunned stepchild of technocracy. What any sensible person wants today are facts. I have one or two students per semester who care for poetry. During the fifteen years of an English M.A. at this university, just two students have ventured a thesis on poetry.  
Poetry desperately needs defense. I might help by pointing out what the poor thing is not, then try to show what it is. Though it must be as precise and true as science, it is not science. If we know people are 75 percent water, what do we know about human nature? I've known men who were 75 percent hot air, ladies 75 percent sugar, but never a person who was 75 percent water.  
It is also not ideas or ideology. To be sure, passionately felt ideas are at the heart of much great poetry, as Dante's, Neruda's, Pound's. Robert Lowell once said that Pound's bad politics make his poetry good—that is, his moral indignation, though often wrong, gives drive to the verse—and this may give us pause for thought about the vexed problem of ideas in verse. A poetry without ideas is indeed weak tea. But who remembers Dante's politics today?  
What's most important, it seems to me, is that a poet's politics should not swallow his individuality, that he should hold the ideas, not that they should hold him. Poetry is a communication of one self to another, and a poet who accepts an ideology merges himself into an anonymous mass, denies himself. Of course one may very well be afraid of oneself.

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Poetry, then, is not sociological doctrine, it's not politics (or at least not too much politics), it's not the latest report of a new miracle medicine, it's not even a religion.

It is—quite simply—the most precise definition possible, even of something difficult to define. If a poem is difficult, we may accept only one excuse: the subject itself is difficult. Love and death and a few other things most important to people have, in fact, no easy definition. But must human discourse be restricted to platitudes?

Much contemporary verse is difficult because, to tell the truth, our existence is often (thoughtfully regarded) terribly complex. There are no easy answers. Of course the right answers depend on the right questions. When essayists, philosophers, journalists, politicians give the answers, at least poets may ask the questions. If the poet is true to his deepest self, these will not be loaded questions—formed by ideas he has snapped up here and there—but straight questions. If the questions are straight, he may even be allowed a few answers.

In London some seventy years ago Ezra Pound fluttered doves by insisting that poetry should be as well written as good prose—no more “poetic” diction or syntax, rodomontade, rhetorical traps for the unwary. It seems to me that verse and prose are essentially different in one aspect only: the greater importance given to rhythm in poetry. Yet this difference means a great deal.

Through the spellbinding effect of rhythm, a kind of hypnosis, poetry actually opens part of the mind—we can call it the unconscious. Its rhythm enables poetry to discourse in areas closed to prose.

Poetry uses the hypnosis of its rhythm to engage the whole mind—including the dark part, the unconscious—but if it is to be true to our experience, it cannot deny the conscious, the level of perception and thought. Hence the failure of incantatory verse—as practised by poets like Poe, Lanier, Lindsey—which vainly tries to pretend we have no conscious mind. Verse is in fact the most efficient form of communication precisely because it involves the entire mind, conscious as well as unconscious. Good poetry cannot be a numbing of perception but only an intensification.

A twentieth century view of poetry (Pound's, for instance) is that it's essentially realism—not realism as Flaubert or Zola saw it, a realism of objects and true-to-life behavior, but a realism of human experience recorded as it is. Nowadays we can't accept Shelley's formulation, “Poetry turns all things to loveliness” or Francis Bacon's idealistic view “the use of poetry or ‘Fained Historie’ ... hath been to give some shadow of satisfaction to the mind of man in those

points wherein the nature of things doth deny it, the world being in proportion inferior to the soul.” Pound saw *all* literature as, in the end, realistic: even the wildest fantasy comments, if indirectly, on life as we live it.

The fuzzy assertion that a piece of verse is musical can at best be understood only figuratively, meaning that the poetry *sound* good. Or it can mean that the verse in question affects us as music does—we feel moved without attaching a meaning to the sounds that move us—but this again is merely a metaphorical interpretation. For words have meanings; it is their nature. Tone is of the essence in poetry, as Randall Jarrell well observed, so poetic communication is not entirely paraphraseable—but the fact that we cannot objectively describe or paraphrase the total meaning of a poetic statement does not mean that meaning has not been communicated.

All poetry, no matter how opaque, aspires to some sort of definition (the most precise possible), because that is what words do. The matter may be easily proved. Deliberately make a senseless statement. Your hearer or reader, if he hasn't written you off a madman, will automatically try to make sense of your gobbledygook. A word's essence is its sense.

The pre-Socratic philosophers saw the Word as the basic principle of all, as what made sense of the universe. Thus poetry's definitions, embodied in its words, show people how they fit into their universe. Because the Word has always a sense-making function, poetry is ineluctably didactic. It “trains the muscle,” said Pound—shows us how best to act and react. I dare say all the arts do this. Emerging from an art gallery, we see better, are more perceptive of color, line, form. Music teaches us to hear, to live rhythmically, harmoniously. As any art, poetry motivates action.

Confucius considered poetry a teacher of ethics, and for him ethics led straight to action. Thus he gave a moral interpretation to many ancient Chinese folk poems. Though he often stretched a poem's sense to prove his point, the Master's impulse was correct, because—seen in its simplest elements—poetry tells us what is good and what is bad, morally and aesthetically. The poet says “I like this, I dislike that. This is beautiful, this is ugly. This is laudable, this is reprehensible.”

But how does poetry's didacticism differ from that of philosophy and the essay, whose didactic motives are undisguised?

Deep down, poetry is play. With his eye on experience and not on ideas, the poet knows that paper and ink are simply not real life, no matter how much they may be used to comment on it. He uses them as instruments of a game. Man, the only laughing animal, has through paper and ink powers of playfulness your kitten never

dreamed of. No poet—even Wordsworth or Milton at his most ponderous—can lack playfulness. In the “stitching and unstitching” of verse composition—Yeats called it this—play holds the composing poet rapt.

The delightful thing about verse composition is that anything, simply anything, can happen. The sky (or the poet’s imagination) is the limit. This seems to be Li Po’s meaning when he writes that if he holds his pen, the mountains tremble. Nowadays when—if we’re to believe Science—our every action is determined by chemical, biological, economic, or social necessity, only poetry affirms the ancient lovely truth: all is possible to the imagination. Emily Dickinson put it this way

I dwell in Possibility—  
A fairer House than Prose—  
More Numerous of Windows—  
Superior—for Doors—

Of Chambers as the Cedars—  
Impregnable of Eye—  
And for an Everlasting Roof  
The Gambrels of the Sky—

Of Visitors—the fairest—  
For Occupation—This—  
The spreading wide my narrow Hands  
To gather Paradise—

By the imagination’s leap, as when a spark leaps between two electrodes, poetry does its work: shows us things in a new way, breaks clichéd associations and makes new ones, teaches us to see.

In effecting a correspondence between objects not materially connected, poetry is magic. In all discourse a kind of sympathetic magic joins words and things—the words should approach the thing described—but poetry uses its rhythm, syntax, and sound, as well as its words’ meaning, to intensify this magic. An uncertain subject will be described hesitantly, uncertainly in rhythm, syntax, sound; a mild subject mildly, without strain; a harsh subject harshly, etc. Thus *all* good verse is, in a broad sense, onomatopoeic: it tries to assume the character of the thing described.

One device to intensify this magical effect is a reduction to maximum simplicity—the most simplicity the subject will permit—by saying more with less. In poetry as in physics, more density makes more powerful impact. *The Power of Few Words* is the excellent title of a poetry anthology. Robbe-Grillet says he “writes with an eraser” and Pound incites poets: “get it across—e poi

basta.” Since the unsaid is as important as the said in verse, good poetry can well spare verbiage.

After Federico de Onis had dared to declare him a lesser poet than Antonio Machado, Juan Ramón Jiménez packed years of resentment into one word. Confronted with a new anthology by Onis, Juan Ramón said only, pointing to the subtitle: “Sobra”—it’s superfluous. I take this anecdote, still circulating orally in Puerto Rico, as a parable of how to write verse—and, incidentally, a refutation of the false idea that Spanish cannot be terse.

Poetry may be difficult only because it is shockingly direct. It moves straight to the point, perhaps straighter than we can at first follow, gains precision of definition by taking the shortest distance between two points—in verse as in geometry, a straight line. “I have a mania for straight writing,” Marianne Moore said of her own verse.

In this age of technology (why? whither?) I invite a scientific attitude toward verse. It should cut to the truth precise as a laser beam.

But what is truth? Pilate did not wait for an answer. Somehow, somewhere, it is a universal rhythm and harmony, and poetry’s rhythm and harmony help magically to approach it.