

How to Read Poetry (A talk given at St. Chad's College, Durham, 12-3-2013)

My talk (not lecture) this evening might well be called 'How to Listen to Poetry' because much of it has to do with reading with the ear, reading, even if silently, slowly and out loud in the mind. I will particularly touch on how to read with a mind alerted to poetry's special relationship with rhythm. I remember T.S. Eliot's remark that a poem starts as a rhythm or a wave in the mind before it reaches expression in words. I will also dwell on how to let a poem's ideas and imagery work upon your individual imagination so that you, yourself, contribute to its effect. I owe much to Ezra Pound's essay, 'How to Read', published as a revolutionary document in 1928, but I have to confess that I brought to mind Pound's attack on "Literary instruction in our institutions of learning" – or as he once bad temperedly expressed it, "Institutions for the obstruction of learning" – when I was in a temper myself about the way an easy option in Creative Writing is sometimes offered, these days, as an alternative to the serious study of literature. I have long taken issue with the practice of trying to teach students to write poetry before they know how to read it. I have no objection at all to teaching what you might call Creative Reading. Curiously, the situation now is practically the reverse of that which appertained in Pound's day; instead of being taught by dry-as-dust lecturers to swallow the rules of metre and rhyme like school dinners, students today can be encouraged to be creative and write poems without being nourished by any dinner at all! By dinner, of course, I mean the pleasures to be gained from getting to know and live on intimate terms with poems that have made literature the foremost art form of the English-speaking world.

Now, please don't imagine I am directing this criticism at the University of Durham; I am well aware that students of English Literature here are introduced to a whole gamut of literary masterpieces, from Beowulf through to the present, without being subjected either to the uninspired pedantry of the late 19th century or (as I profoundly hope) to the theory-laden jargon of the later 20th. After all, I have spent most of my working life in an ancillary position at one university or another, supposedly teaching people to write poems, but in reality trying to impart to them something of the English poetic tradition and craft. Early on in my career – or rather, non-career – as a poet-teacher

I discovered that many more people wanted to 'express themselves' in poetry and share their life experiences with sympathetic others than cared about the art of poem making.

In former times, individuals habitually found consolation and companionship in literature, much as they did in religion. I think, for instance, of my gentle unquestioning American grandmother who, without being in the least scholarly or academic, knew many passages of Shakespeare, Dickens, Scott, Emerson and The King James Bible by heart, simply from hearing them read aloud and reading them to her family. Before the radio, before television and long before the invention of the computer, entertainment and education, outside of school, had to be home made. Poetry, like the Bible, came in precious leather-bound books, with gilded pages and beautifully tooled gold lettering. I think of Elizabeth Bishop's poem, 'Over 2000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance', in which the poet recalls her grandparents' family Bible:

Open the book. (The gilt rubs off the edges
of the pages and pollinates the fingertips.)
Open the heavy book. Why couldn't we have seen
this old Nativity while we were at it?
– the dark ajar, the rocks breaking with light,
an undisturbed, unbreathing flame,
colorless, sparkless, freely fed on straw,
and, lulled within, a family with pets,
– and looked and looked our infant sight away. ¹

Elizabeth Bishop here laments her inability to sustain the kind of simple belief in the Bible and its engraved illustrations that enabled her grandparents in rural Nova Scotia to escape the ills of modernity. Having eaten of the fruit of knowledge and educated doubt, she looked back nostalgically to the "infant sight" to which she was forbidden to return in the Garden of Eden.

As the world shrinks and computer technology enables us to communicate instantly with people anywhere on the planet, such anxieties have become universal. The more sophisticated our techniques of verbal and visual communication, the less easy it seems to adapt to human limitations. It seems to me sometimes that the nature of feeling, the actual stuff of human understanding, is changing under the pressure of technology. Instead of being protected by the limits of our small round lives, we can't help being constantly thrown out into a world that is real only to two of our senses: to our eyes and

ears. Every day, on one screen or another, we are subjected to pictures of happenings in Syria or Egypt or Afghanistan, or maybe even in London or Newcastle, but we respond only with the engines in ourselves that look and hear. However much we enjoy and learn from films (and there is no question that film-making is the most influential art to have emerged in the past hundred years) we can't help being subject to their persuasions. Hearing without actively partaking in an event is not listening; it is being exposed to pre-selected sounds; just as looking at is not seeing, in the sense of understanding; it is exposing our eyes to a selection of images. Through our ears and eyes, then, our passive imaginations are swept into global situations with which we personally have nothing to do except as we feel curiosity or pity or a kind of impotent concern. The point is that we do not feel in ourselves; we suffer or triumph vicariously. And curiously enough, while vicarious feelings can distract us and fill our time and even convince us we are deeply concerned, they have worrying repercussions. After we've spent many hours facing the screen, with our minds receiving messages from two 'flat' senses and the rest of us stored away somewhere in the unconscious, when we shut off the screen's world, say of Facebook or Twitter, and turn back to the real one, it is easy to pretend it's not real. And if we try to explain this world in the self-serving chat and glamorously coloured images of the media, we soon find ourselves in trouble. "Something must be wrong with me; I'm not happy; I'm not successful. Despite the thousands of new friends I've made through Facebook, I feel like Woody Allen!"

All sorts of consolations and cures, of course, are on offer for malaises of the psyche. Setting aside the still effective but no longer universally believed consolations of religion, society has never been so ready to offer scientifically authenticated solutions to individual *angst*. Psychoanalysis and psychotherapies of various kinds, each with its own specialist language, are everywhere available. The National Health Service supplies counsellors and carers professionally qualified to ease suffering after every public crisis or private misfortune. Educational bodies are increasingly geared to combat differences of wealth and class with socially equalizing ideas, one of which is (and here I return to my main theme) providing workshops in the creative arts for the purpose of therapy. I think I can even risk saying that, in the public mind, creativity is a word that now has health implications. And, indeed, why not? One of the uses of poetry has always been

therapeutic. Think of John Stuart Mill, after his breakdown, discovering Wordsworth, or of Darwin reading *Paradise Lost* on the Beagle; or of the young, under-schooled Abraham Lincoln, who never set out to work in the fields for his father without a book. As Doris Goodwin writes in her marvellous biography, "Though [Lincoln] acquired only a handful of volumes, they were seminal works in the English Language. Reading the Bible and Shakespeare over and over implanted rhythms and poetry that would come to fruition in those works of his maturity that made Abraham Lincoln our only poet-president." ²

In a wholly different context, we read of George Mallory in 1924, shortly before he fell to his death, sheltering with three fellow climbers in a tiny tent on the approach to Everest, pulling from his pack his well-worn copy of a popular poetry anthology, *The Spirit of Man*. "I began reading one thing or another", he wrote to his wife. "We all agreed that 'Kubla Khan' was a good sort of poem. Irvine was rather poetry shy, but seemed impressed by the Epitaph to Gray's 'Elegy'. Odell was much inclined to be interested and liked the last lines of *Prometheus Unbound*. Somervell, who knows quite a lot of English literature, had never read a poem of Emily Bronte's and was happily introduced." ³

Mallory's therapy on Everest was hardly 'creative writing'; it was poetry reading of a kind that had given soldiers at the front during the Great War a few moments of relief before almost certain death in the trenches. Poetry resorted to in extreme situations is something like poetry read at funerals and weddings; it has always taken pride of place when an occasion has to be noted down in words for remembrance. A more ordinary setting for poetry was in the home, or at school.

I was fortunate in being brought up in a family of readers-aloud. From babyhood my sisters and I were lulled to sleep with cradle songs and dandled awake to the rhythms of nursery rhymes. My grandmother and mother mainly read us stories. But it was my father who read us poetry, and it is to his reading of Scott's *Marmion* and *The Lady of the Lake*, Browning's 'My Last Duchess' and Matthew Arnold's *Sohrab and Rustum* that I'm sure I owe my ear for the music and rhythms of English verse.

Like the romantic musician he was, my father read the iambic lines of the Victorians and later of Yeats and, of course, Shakespeare, as dramatically as any actor,

but he was by no means my only aural inspirer. In the 1940s, school children in the United States were made to learn poems by heart for recitation in class. My 6th grade English teacher at a fairly rough school in New Haven, Connecticut, was an Irish woman – portly, white-haired, red-faced with what was reputed to be 'strong drink'– but with a fanatical taste for poetry. Once a week we children competed for a gold star for reciting, and for the first time in that school, I was more often than not a winner. I can still remember lines from Macaulay's 'Horatius at the Bridge', which I used to be able to recite in full.

Then up spoke brave Horatius, the captain of the gate.
 "To every man upon this earth, death commeth soon or late,
 And how can man die better than when facing fearful odds
 For the ashes of his fathers and the temples of his gods.

Stirring stuff. But for a more notable reason I remember some lines from Longfellow's 'A Psalm of Life'.

Tell me not in mournful numbers,
 Life is but an empty dream!
 For the soul is dead that slumbers,
 And things are not what they seem.

Life is real, life is earnest!
 And the grave is not its goal;
 Dust thou art, to dust returneth,
 Was not spoken of the soul.

I associate one of the memorable experiences of my school days with those lines. For once I had learned the poem by heart, something bothered me about the first verse.

For the soul is dead that slumbers,
 And things are not what they seem.

Even aged ten, I could tell that something was wrong here. Sense told me to read the line: And THINGS are NOT what they SEEM, while the metre told me to read it:

AND things ARE not WHAT they SEEM. (Four stresses, in trochaic metre, like the rest of the poem.) Having deliberated, I decided that Longfellow must have made a mistake. Luckily, being well versed in Gilbert and Sullivan, I knew how to fix it. One of Little Buttercup's songs from *H.M.S. Pinafore* gets the line metrically perfect:

Things are seldom what they seem,

Skim milk masquerades as cream;
 High low pass as paten leathers,
 Jackdaws strut in peacock's feathers...

So I substituted Gilbert's line for Longfellow's:

Tell me not in mournful numbers,
 Life is but an empty dream!
 For the soul is dead that slumbers.
 Things are seldom what they seem.

I can't remember how Miss Turbot received my metrical correction, but when I recited it to my parents later, they collapsed with laughter. What I had diagnosed as wrong about Longfellow's line was a hitch in the flow of the metre. At the age of ten I hadn't given thought to that most important matter, the difference between metre and rhythm. Metre, in English poetry, consists of rules for counting syllables and arranging them in regular beats, like feet walking or clocks ticking. The correct metre for English verse from the time of Chaucer through to and beyond the Victorians was to give an even number of syllables in each line an iambic footfall, iAM, i AM, i AM, that could be reversed as trochees, YOU are, YOU are, or extended by quick, light beats, anapest, (I am RIGHT or dactyl (YOU are right) or even on occasion broken into strong equal beats (SHUT UP) spondee. It was also OK to let a beat or pause represent a syllable, usually at the end of a line. (Row, row, row your boat/ Gently down the stream *rest* is a four-beat verse.)

Any poet with an ear instinctively played with these metrical rules, listening through it, as it were, to the natural rhythms of English speech, then counterpointing one against the other, metre against rhythm. It is to this counterpoint that every poetry reader ought to listen. Here, for example, are the first five lines of Keats's *Endymion*, which in my old college textbook (to which I still return when at a loss for literary terms) are carefully scanned with a clutter of xes and diagonal strokes. Yet a sensitive reader never need bother messing with diacritical marks; the poem stands beautifully without scaffolding, if in your mind, as Robert Frost suggested, you cross its sound with its sense.

A thing of beauty is a joy forever:
 Its loveliness increases; it will never
 Pass into nothingness: but still will keep
 A bower quiet for us; and a sleep
 Full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing.

To be sure, a good deal of stopping mid-line and following around of enjambments is called for to make unforced sense of these lines. You can count on your fingers ten or eleven syllables (or five stresses) in each one, but all you really need do is pay attention to the punctuation and read the lines naturally to bring out their interwoven meaning, rhythm and feeling. For a second opinion about the value of dwelling in the feelings of a poem through listening to its cadences as to a "living voice", let me call to witness your own David Fuller, whose lovingly perceptive study of Shakespeare's Sonnets (titled *The Life in the Sonnets*) confirms at every level my own conviction that poetry's place in people's lives "is not dependent on the poetry's subject or its forms" (i.e. metre) but on the feelings it conveys through rhythms and words.⁴ Far too much is made today, judging from poetry prizes and recent publications, of what poems say, without much regarding their musical or rhythmic components. Ezra Pound's three elements of poetry, though he gives them portentous Greek labels, still apply: (I quote)

"Melopoeia, wherein the words are charged, over and above their plain meaning, with some musical property, which directs the bearing and trend of that meaning.

Phanopoeia, which is a casting of images upon the visual imagination.

Logopoeia, 'the dance of the intellect among words', that is to say, it employs words not only for their direct meaning, but takes count in a special way of habits of usage, of the context we *expect* to find with the word ... and of ironical play. It holds the aesthetic content which is peculiarly the domain of [words], and cannot possibly be contained in plastic or in music."⁵

Logopoeia, or word play, is not lacking in today's experimental poetry. Nor is *phanopoeia* or original imagery neglected. *Melopoeia*, however, or the music and inherited rhythm of English poetry, has suffered a sort of blitzkrieg from the ubiquity of free verse and its unrestricted permissiveness. And with the shunting aside of traditionally cadenced lines as vital bearers of feeling, poetry has become much cruder and closer to prose, energized by everyday talk and street-slang – the language of soap operas and police dramas. To my old, bound-to-be-disapproving eyes, it looks as if our youth culture, happy with its grunge-level clothes, punk music and junk food, has been

pleased to spawn a kind of throw-away poetry that everyone is encouraged to enjoy (as at a poetry slam) but no one much cares to remember. It's as if bad old imperialist civilization has been turned upside down and the 19th century assumption that romantic love, heroic deeds and noble thoughts were the stuff of poetry has been replaced, not by the learned sophistications of the Modernists, but by a post-modern appetite for sensational life stories, eccentric language games and a policy of uninhibited self-expression. Eliot and Pound would have been horrified.

Well, complaining is an old person's privilege; and I do often bring to mind that shifts in cultural taste are healthy for the arts; that "new styles of architecture", in whatever art, usually mean that old ones are played out. Or played out, at least, until their weaknesses have been purged by fresh ideas. We should remind ourselves, too, that for many thousands of years no words were committed to writing at all; there wasn't such a thing. The bard or professional minstrel sang or recited narratives to an audience that knew a common stock of epics by heart. We can even speculate that once writing had become a technologically superior way of preserving myths and heroic stories, as much may have been lost from communal memory, as perhaps was gained in the way of books and libraries.

Peter Redgrove has written a delightful poem on something like this theme, called 'Song', which reflects on the way the natural joy of religious ecstasy – and by extension, poetic ecstasy – exposes itself to sterility and codification once it is written down.

Song

I chuck my Bible in the parlour fire.
The snake that lives behind the bars there
Sucks at the black book and sweats light;

As they burn together, the codex
Flips its pages over as if reading itself aloud
Memorizing its own contents as it ascends curtseying

Like crowds of grey skirts in the chimney-lift,
In particles of soot like liberated print.
The vacant text glows white on pages that are black.

The stars, those illustrious watchers
Arranged in their picture-codes
With their clear heartbeats and their eager reading stares

Watch the guest ascend. Around us in the parlour
 The inn-sign creaks like rowlocks.
 The drinkers glower as my book burns.

Their brows look black
 Like open books that turning thoughts consume.
 Then all at once

With a gesture identical and simultaneous
 Of reaching through the coat right into the heart
 They all bring out their breast-pocket bibles

Like leather coals and pile them in the fire
 And as they burn the men begin to sing
 With voices sharp and warm as hearth-flames.

The black pads turn their gilded edges and
 The winged stories of the angels rise
 And all that remains is our gathering's will

Which assembles into song. Each man sings
 Something that he has overheard, or learnt,
 Some sing in tongues I do not understand,

But one man does not sing. I notice him
 As my song takes me with the others. He is
 Setting down the words in rapid shorthand

In a small fat pocketbook with gilded edges. ⁶

Redgrove's 'Song' is a fine example of the pleasure to be found in free verse, when a poem does not strain for metrical correctness but yields itself wholly to its rhythm. The rhythm is right for a poem when it delivers both meaning and feeling without calling attention to itself and without deferring to outside pressures. Free verse is the dominant form of contemporary poetry, yet I think it's more difficult for a reader to assess (and for a poet to write) than poetry that conforms to metrical rules. The chief element in free verse is indeed what it says, but it's not that simple. For while on the surface 'Song' appears to be a rather startling little parable concerning the joyous (but short-lived) freedom that might be released by disposing of the Bible and returning to unregulated joys of worship, if you read imaginatively behind that message, you can see that, by

extension, it relates to a profound question concerning the nature of human societies. The question 'Song' subliminally asks is: do words, inspirational in the mind and mouth before they are written down, come closer to a full experience of our natures than words fixed immutably in a text? We can extend the question and ask, how much should a society rely on the will of individuals to establish a free but possibly anarchic way of life, how much should it order itself through written words – statutes of law or a national constitution – or the Old and New Testaments. For once a book is written and accepted as sacred or inviolable, it too easily becomes an instrument of absolute power, indispensable in the hands of a virtuous leader, but inhumane and destructive in those of a tyrant. Redgove's poem, to me then, brings to mind still relevant social and philosophical problems that Plato and the old Greeks endlessly debated and upon which Shakespeare, in his plays, constantly played variations.

And so the contrary impulses of religion and song still seem, as at their roots, to be inextricably tangled. When inspiration is caught and captured in texts declared to be infallible, art, like faith, begins to run the danger, as in Shakespeare's sonnet, of being "made tongue-tied by authority." The temptation of free will to overthrow authority is both dangerous and irresistible. It is this familiar mind-forged tug-of-war that Redgrove pin-points (lightly rather than solemnly) in his poem. I myself believe this perpetually active antagonism is a good thing for poetry; it's a sort of metaphysical engine that keeps it from stagnating. We all think we know what we mean when we say we are true to ourselves. We also know what it means to be true to our beliefs. And both 'truths' – if you can call attitudes of mind 'truths' – have to do with what we most value in our lives.

This is why it's important that we who care about poetry identify it as an art, not primarily as therapy or a vehicle of thrilling sensations or a convenient channel for the exchange of gossip – although poetry can encompass all those things if it is genuine. How do you tell if it is genuine? This is what Marianne Moore had to say in her poem, 'Poetry'.

...when dragged into prominence by half poets
 the result is not poetry,
 nor, till the poets among us can be
 'literalists of
 the imagination' – above
 insolence and triviality and can present

for inspection, imaginary gardens with real toads in them,
 shall we have
 it. In the meantime, if you demand on the one hand,
 the raw material of poetry in
 all its rawness and
 that which is on the other hand
 genuine, then you are interested in poetry. ⁷

The style or period of a poem, in other words, doesn't matter. Its rhythm does. Its diction does. And so does its imagery. All of these intermingle in varying degrees, according to how a poem 'gets to' its reader. And that means the reader himself (herself) has to put something imaginative into the poem. As poetry moves away from the past, with its pre-set forms, and closer to the present, reading a poem makes more, not fewer, demands on you. Suppose you open a book of poems and run into a line, "My Life had stood – a loaded gun". Although you can see that the poem is written in stanzas, you stagger back with amazement – not because it scans in iambic tetrameter, and not because there is a satisfying alliterative link between the words 'life' and 'loaded', and not because it is impossible for a gun to have life except in art, but because all these elements together set your mind thinking and your memory working back to a time, or times, when you, yourself, felt that something was about to go off like a gun in your life. As you read it, you discover that the metaphor that runs through this poem (by Emily Dickinson) stands simultaneously for a gun waiting for its owner to fire it and a woman waiting for the crises that will catapult her into physical love. The poem never makes this claim of course. After the first line, it become clear that the poem is spoken throughout by the gun, veering away from its human tenor and becoming almost surreal as it depicts how a gun in the hands of its master (like a woman in the arms of her lover) would feel:

And when at Night – Our good Day done–
 I guard my Master's Head –
 'Tis better than the Eider-Duck's
 Deep Pillow – to have shared –

To foe of His – I'm deadly foe –
 None stir the second time –
 On whom I lay a Yellow Eye–
 Or an emphatic thumb –

In the final stanza, the gun acknowledges its mechanical nature, its inability to die and achieve immortality, like its mortal master. And this suggests yet another layer of meaning. For we see that the poem might have a shadowy Christian dimension.

Though I than He – may longer live
 He longer must – than I –
 For I have but the power to kill,
 Without – the power to die.⁸

The oddness of this poem, the impossibility of translating it into prose, deepens its mystery and yet detracts not at all from its effect. But to understand this, you have to stretch its meaning far beyond its metred words.

On the other hand, conventional rhymes and metres have not lost ground even today, though with the ubiquity of free verse, readers are apt not to notice whether a poet 'makes mistakes' or not in attempting to write what my fellow Americans call 'formalist verse'. Since I am running out of time, I won't inflict what I take to be examples of 'bad' formal or free verse on you. Instead, here is a little poem by Robert Frost that skirts badness, cliches, and every kind of contemporary danger by adhering to iambic pentameter couplets while finding in a natural speech rhythm the right images and the right tone and feeling for what it both says and makes us feel.

Moon Compasses

I stole forth dimly in the dripping pause
 Between two downpours to see what there was.
 And a masked moon had spread down compass rays
 To a cone mountain in the midnight haze,
 As if the final estimate were hers;
 And as it measured in her callipers,
 The mountain stood exalted in its place.
 As love will take between the hands a face ...⁹

It's that final, perfectly metrical line, "So love will take between the hands a face" that transforms a description of a natural phenomenon into an astonishing picture of human love. Frost's handling of the rhyme and metre is so effortless and at the same time so skilful that a reader scarcely realizes that without just those words placed in just those rhythmic relationships, the poem would fail. However, there is one hitch, and let me call

it to your attention to it as a final suggestion about how to read 'creatively'. The hitch occurs in the second line,

Between two downpours to see what there was.

Although I count ten syllables in this line, I can't for the life of me count five stresses. It reads like prose: BetWEEN two DOWNpours to SEE what there WAS. If I were ten years old, I might be tempted to 'correct it', as I once corrected Longfellow. Today, I either give a stress to 'two' or simply lengthen the time I give to the space between 'downpours' and 'to see', giving the effect of a stress or a pause without actually doing so. I think a sensitive reading does this, giving Frost the benefit of the doubt by breaking, at his behest, with the clock-like metre and letting the speech rhythm show through.

What makes a poem memorable? Ultimately, its power to captivate and hold the mind is mysterious, although Pound's three elements – melopoeia, phanopoeia, logopoeia – get us somewhere in the range of saying why. And yet, of the hundreds and thousands of poems that have found places in what we might call the library of the ages, only a few 'stick' in people's memory or get under their skin. Consider A.E. Housman's eight-line lyric (number XL in *A Shropshire Lad*), known to my husband and myself simply as 'Blue Remembered Hills'. Housman was a minor poet who tended to go on to the point of tedium on the subject of doomed youth and the melancholia of passing time. If submitted for a poetry prize in a competition today, 'Blue Remembered Hill' would probably be consigned to the slush pile. A hundred years ago, it might have won first prize. Who cares? What matters to us is that it comes to mind every time we view remembered landmarks on our drive to our cottage in North Wales. All these landmarks are associated with personal memories – of childhood, of the dead, of times past never to be regained.

Into my heart an air that kills
From yon far country blows:
What are those blue remembered hills,
What spires, what farms are those?

That is the land of lost content,
I see it shining plain,
The happy highways where I went
And cannot come again.¹⁰

So poetry may be "after all personal" – again to borrow a line from Marianne Moore. If so, though I would never discourage anyone from taking it up as a subject for academic study, I believe its true and ultimate lodging is in people's hearts. Prose does much better as a vehicle for explanation, instruction, argument – indeed, for almost everything we need to know. But just as poetry owes its origin physically to the rhythms of our hearts and pacing feet, so emotionally it will endure only so long as we listen to it breathing, telling us, like music, what we don't 'know' but only feel to be right when certain mysterious combinations of words, images and, above all, rhythms alert us to our own hidden feelings.

Notes

1. Elizabeth Bishop, *The Complete Poems, 1927–1979* (London: Chatto & Windus, The Hogarth Press, 1983) 58-9.
2. Doris Kears Goodwin, *Team of Rivals* (London: Penguin Books, 2013) 52.
3. Wade David, *Into The Silence: The Great War, Mallory and the Conquest of Everest* (London: Vintage Books, 2012) 507.
4. David Fuller, *The Life in the Sonnets*, in Shakespeare NOW Series, Ewan Fernie and Simon Palfrey, eds. (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011).
5. Ezra Pound, *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, T.S. Eliot, ed. (London: Faber, 1954) 25.
6. Peter Redgrove, *The Moon Disposes, Poems 1954-1987* (London: Secker & Warburg) 186.
7. Marianne Moore, 'Poetry' in *The Oxford Book of American Verse*, F.O Matthiesson, ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1950) 395.
8. Emily Dickinson, Poem 754 in *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, Thomas H. Johnson, ed. (London: Faber, 1970) 369.
9. Robert Frost, 'Moon Compasses' in *Robert Frost, Collected Poems, Prose & Plays* (New York: The Library of America, 1995) 273.
10. A.E. Housman, *A Shropshire Lad, X* in *The Collected Poems of A.E. Housman* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1939) 58.
11. Emily Dickinson, no. 1755, *opt cit.* 710.

Coda: Advice to Students, Mostly

I gave a title to this talk before I wrote it, but I see I have slipped off the subject of how to read poems into opinionated considerations of what poetry is or should be and where it comes from. So here is a sort of Poundian list of instructions about how to read, although unlike Pound, I will spare you a trip through the poems of the Tang Dynasty, Dante or Villon or the Provençal troubadours.

First and foremost, to enjoy the true spirit of poetry, you have to be in the right mood. Forget that you are reading it for an exam, or to write a paper or thesis. Poetry can help you discover what you are and tell you strange truths, but only if you are curious to learn and feel deeply about it. So don't force yourself to read Shakespeare's Sonnets, for example, in a hot library after a heavy lunch when you are likely to fall asleep over the first quatrain. The best time to read poems which demand perfect concentration, is early in the morning, the sooner after you wake the better; six or six thirty is a promising hour. Another fine hour for poetry is in congenial company at nine or ten at night after a glass or three of good wine, when differences of opinion about interpretation can be aired freely by repeated readings. If you want to learn a poem by heart, read and re-read it shortly before falling asleep. When you wake up, bring it to mind but only turn on the light to look up the lines that will so annoyingly have escaped you.

Next, as I have said and say again, poetry, any poetry, should always be read slowly, preferably aloud, or if not aloud, silently aloud in the mind. This allows you leisure to judge whether it is worth re-reading or not. If you skim a poem like a paragraph in a newspaper you aren't giving it a fair chance. If the poem is not so modern as to omit punctuation, follow the poet's, counterpointing, as Robert Frost advised, its speech sense against its rhythm or metre (as in my reading of the first five lines of *Endymion*). Reading a poem slowly aloud should make instantly obvious any good poem's genre; i.e. what kind of poem it is, whether epic or narrative, hymn-like or lyrical, serious or comic, satirical or romantic, or simply challenging like the verses of Whitman, D.H. Laurence and three quarters of the poets writing today.

NB There is no such thing as "free verse". If you can't detect any echoes in free-looking verse – for example, biblical rhythms in Whitman, or carefully balanced prose in Laurence, or of breathing or heartbeat in contemporary poetry (as in the poetry of Lee Harwood, Gillian Allnutt and Pauline Stainer) then what you are reading is probably not a poem.

Much of what I have been saying, of course, relates to what Ezra Pound called 'technique' – "rhythms, cadence and the arrangement of sounds." You need to know enough about prosody and how poetry in the English language developed in parallel with its history to allow your poem a niche in a period or place. You shouldn't have to know your poem's author to read it as an Elizabethan lyric, for example, or piece of metaphysical wit, or as an 18th century satire or a Romantic Ode, but you must understand its tone and tempo.

Once you have got the poem in mind as a rhythmic unit whose meaning is meaningful to you without your having to turn it into prose (remember the proverbial bad teacher's ploy: "What is the poet trying to say?") then you must pay attention to every word – every single word, even the 'thes' and 'ands' – and ask yourself why it is there.

Knowledge of styles and fashions presupposes enthusiasm; if you haven't felt passionately motivated to pore for hours over anthologies of English Verse, you might be lucky enough to have had one or two a brilliant teachers – or directors. The best way to study Shakespeare's plays is to act in them; next best is to watch the plays well acted. We're fortunate these days in that it's easy to find recordings, both of poets reading their own poems, and actors performing them. Be careful, though. Not all the poems you hear on the radio are poems; nor are many you log into on the Internet worth spending time with.

Unless you are an editor or a publisher, don't waste time reading inferior poetry. Bad poetry is like bad wine – life is too short for it. Above all – and this is my last piece of didactic advice, supplementing the "accuracy, spontaneity and [above all] the mystery" that Elizabeth Bishop believed made poetry, poetry. If you want to live with poetry, live continually but not too comfortably with your imagination. Be awake to the poems that inspire you as much as you can so you can bring them to mind when you need them.

They will help you get through many a disappointment, maybe tragedy, maybe the very worst, certainly though many a dreary hour.

Let me finish by reading five lines by Emily Dickinson that seem to say most of what needs to be said about imagination's place at the heart of poetry.

To make a prairie it takes a clover and a bee,
One clover, and a bee,
And reverie.
The reverie alone will do
If bees are few.¹¹