

ON FORM



Robert Mezey

1 *A Note on Donald Justice's Ear*

In an essay published about 10 years ago, Donald Justice wrote: "Words sometimes, through likeness of sound, become bound to one another by ties remotely like those of human kinship. This is not to propose that any meaning attaches to the sounds independent of the words. But the interlocking sounds do seem to reinforce and in some curious way to authenticate the meanings of the words, perhaps indirectly to deepen and enlarge them. A part of the very nature of poetry lies in this fact."

For at least one reader, perhaps the essential part. (One can think of poets who have written beautifully without metaphor, without sensuous or concrete diction, without subject or drama, even without intelligence, but none who has done so without an ear.) And I would go further: I would say that the poet who has the requisite power not only discloses the very nature of poetry but seems to penetrate to the very nature of experience. I am not speaking now of onomatopoeia or the various kinds of mimicry, crude and sophisticated, that ingenious poets are capable of. Any poet of sufficient skill can slow down his tempo and articulation "when Ajax strives, some rock's vast weight to throw", or contrive the flashy magic of Tennyson's moaning doves and murmuring bees. Justice's skill is more than sufficient for such professional illusions, as in

To stand, braced in a swaying vestibule,

or, at somewhat greater length:

And then a
Slow blacksnake, lazy with long sunning, slides
Down from its slab, and through the thick grass, and hides
Somewhere among the purpling wild verbena.

(We shall save the delights of that characteristic rhyme for another occasion.) No, I am thinking rather of something like Wordsworth's "Or the

unimaginable touch of Time”, something that cannot quite properly be called imitative form but thrills us all the same with its power to evoke, by means of little more, apparently, than a couple of very light accents and a diction almost entirely abstract, an intense, almost physical apprehension of the slow, soundless crumbling of the centuries. Wordsworth calls it unimaginable even as he makes us imagine it. In such lines we have the sensation that words have somehow slipped free from their characters, their shadowy life in the world of signs, and come down, as Yeats implored his sages to do, to participate in the world of experience. It is as if we are touching, through the medium of language, that constantly receding wonder, reality. We feel that the poem is creating truth itself. Perhaps that is why we cannot do without it, those of us who cannot.

It is not always easy to distinguish between the obvious sorts of verbal mimesis, however fine, and this deeper thing I have been trying to describe. One mark of the distinction may be that the former is likely to be susceptible of analysis and the latter not. For example, in this lovely quatrain about a sofa in a dance teacher’s parlor (her “makeshift ball-room”),

At lesson time, pushed back, it used to be
The thing we managed always just to miss
With our last-second dips and twirls—all this
While the Victrola wound down gradually.

I would say that that last line is a particularly beautiful instance of imitation. One could lead a reasonably sensitive student to see how the third line with its vivid lexicon, fluid cadence and short vowels speeds to the dash, to be pulled up short as the last line, beginning with the long “while”, almost a syllable and a half, descends to the long vowels in mid-line, the insistent nasals, the juncture that enforces a slight pause between “wound” and the unaccented but long, heavy “down”, the faded rhyme, and the limpness, the dying fall, of the adverb with its feeble final accent. (Of course it goes without saying that all such effects depend utterly on the meanings of the words; meters and tropes of sound mean nothing in themselves. So I began my brief analysis by indicating the lexicon, and so Justice was careful to include a similar stipulation in the paragraph I quoted earlier, for there are still many simple souls in the textbooks and classrooms who think that every trochee expresses conflict or resistance and that sibilance in a line of verse signifies evil. One would think that Ransom had laughed such readers off the stage forever; alas, apparently not.)

But how, I wonder, would I analyze the effect of these two lines from an elegy for a friend kicked to death in an alley (a poem, by the way, that has my nomination for the best villanelle in the language)?

I picture the snow as falling without hurry
To cover the cobbles and the toppled ashcans completely.

How does he do it, and so effortlessly, or so it seems? That calm, steady, almost nerveless line, that dry, cruel phrase, “without hurry”, the infinitive that suggests intention without in the least asserting it, the intricate pattern of sound in the second line, subtler than any chiasmus, flakes of vowel and consonant that bond together to cover the fifteen syllables of the five-beater completely—I am waxing impressionistic because I am at a loss to account for the haunting power of these cold-eyed and heart-breaking lines.

Or take the ending of his exquisite version of Rilke’s “Letzer Abend” where the doomed officer’s jacket hangs across a chair

Like the coats scarecrows wear
And which the birdshadows flee and scatter from;
Or like the skin of some great battle-drum.

It is elementary to suggest that the static quality of the trimeter derives partly from the heavy ionic foot, the thick jam of consonants, especially the s juncture, and the internal rhyme, assonance, and alliteration, but it is impossible, at least for me, to tell clearly how the extra syllable of “birdshadows” and the lighter assonance of “—shadows” and “scatter” seem to embody the wild and panicky movement the line describes; it has something to do, surely, with the dramatic preposition that ends the clause and the ominous semi-colon, not to mention the odd force of our realization that we are following not the fleeing birds but their shadows, but now we are trying to explain the inexplicable. And that great last line—yes, only a dullard would fail to feel the reverberation of the internal rhyme (another one!), but what accounts for the power of the final word, a power that lies to some extent in its nearness to and its distance from being a triple rhyme and seems almost to summon up the much more dreadful scattering to come? I don’t know.

This is state-of-the-art, as they say. I wish it were truly representative of the state of the art. But, still, it gives some cheer to remember that at the end of the twentieth century, when American poetry is drearier and more amateurish than it has been at any time since the end of the nineteenth, a few writers are “saying the thing once for all and perfectly.” The

gratitude I feel for "Last Evening" and for so many of Donald Justice's poems is the gratitude I feel for any act or gesture of love and loving care. This is, no doubt, "a love that masquerades as pure technique." But it is love.

2 *To The Editors of Mississippi Review*

I was quite taken aback by the proposition I have been asked to respond to, that "it has sometimes been said contemporary poetry, however technically brilliant., is without a 'statement' or 'vision.'" It is just the reverse. In my view, we have plenty of statement, a good deal of it foolish, and plenty of vision or attempts at vision, although it is seldom visible, whereas the technical level of American poetry is depressingly low. You speak of technical brilliance; it seems to me that mere competence is uncommon. Most American poetry nowadays is written in what is called "free verse" but is not verse at all but a kind of mannered prose broken up into lines. (All this is accompanied, usually in workshops, by endless talk about where to break the lines—as if it mattered.) And what is this "verse" free from? Meter, I suppose, an oppressive system (no doubt white, male, and capitalist) from which our poets have heroically liberated themselves. But there was no oppression and no liberation: they were never there—very few of them could write metrical verse if their lives depended on it. And the situation is not much better among the minority who write in meter. I have just read through an issue of *The Formalist*, a hundred pages or so of (more or less) metrical verse, most of it of very poor quality (and some of it sentimental drivel of the sort that was laughed off the stage eighty or ninety years ago). Of the sixty contemporary poems, I find two or three that are technically skillful and perhaps six more that are passable; even distinguished practitioners like Howard Nemerov and Elizabeth Jennings are represented by work far below their usual level. How could the situation be otherwise when many of the writing classes in our colleges and universities are taught by poets who are themselves untrained amateurs and when the critics of the day display a profound ignorance of versecraft? One contemporary sonneteer (who will go nameless here) is praised in every quarter for the ease and elegance of her sonnets and for her daring innovations in the form, but to any knowledgeable reader, the innovations are simply crudities and ineptitudes and the verse in general is clumsy, bush-league stuff. God help the sonnet. God help blank verse, and verse of every kind. Where is this technical brilliance whereof it is spoken?

It goes without saying, or should, that there are a score or so of

American poets who are writing excellent verse, both metrical and non-metrical, some of it of a very high order. But it needs to be said that the general level is very low.

Well, I have raved enough. I have little to say here about vision. All authentic artists have it, whether they think much about it or not. They have it even when they seem to evade it. Robert Frost, who I think is far and away the greatest poet America has produced so far, was often taxed by critics for what they saw as such an evasion. He affirmed nothing, they said, he refused to make determinate statements, they said, he left everything ambiguous and provisional, they said, not seeing that those very refusals and reticences were in fact an essential aspect of his vision, which, for any alert reader, is intense and coherent and cannot be missed. (Have a look at "For Once, Then, Something".) And most readers would readily agree that Thomas Hardy's work, both in prose and verse, is informed by a large and powerful vision of human existence—indeed, sometimes too large and powerful, too present, too insistent; yet Hardy denied again and again that he had a "harmonious philosophy" and disclaimed any ambitions along that line. In his famous preface to *Poems of the Past and the Present*, his second book of verse, he writes, "that portion [of the subject-matter of this volume] which may be regarded as individual comprises a series of feelings and fancies written down in widely differing moods and circumstances, and at various dates. It will probably be found, therefore, to possess little cohesion of thought or harmony of colouring. I do not greatly regret this. Unadjusted impressions have their value, and the road to a true philosophy of life seems to lie in humbly recording diverse of its phenomena as they are forced upon us by chance and change."

Let's settle for that, ladies and gentlemen. We are no longer tribal seers and magicians, and we were never legislators, unacknowledged or otherwise. It is hard enough to be a good poet without trying to be a guru, shaman, or priest, or a spokesperson (usually very well-paid) for the wretched of the earth. If our eyes are open, we will have vision. But if our ears are tin, we won't have poetry.

3 *Learn Your Trade*

I have been asked to offer some useful advice to beginning writers and I shall address myself to young poets; since poetry is the art I know best. I confess that I feel a little uncomfortable in this role of wise old counselor, being neither particularly old nor particularly wise and, in fact, in want of advice myself. (What wouldn't I give for a conversation with Robert Frost or John Crowe Ransom or W. H. Auden. There are many things I should

like to ask them about this beautiful and difficult art.) Also, I am all too aware that the precepts that immediately spring to mind are the ones that veteran writers always hand out to the young. Nevertheless I will mention a few of them; they are easily summarized, they are no less true for being clichés, and they bear repetition.

First of all, live. Experience, observe, reflect, remember—try to be one of those on whom nothing is lost (in Henry James' great phrase). It is not necessary that your experience be wide, only that it be deep. Think what Emily Dickinson managed to live without—sex, travel, drugs, a career, a lifestyle—; and yet few Americans have ever lived as fully, as intensely as she. Live your life. One cannot write out of books.

Read, for after all, one does write out of books also, and poetry is made of poetry. Reading and writing are inseparable; if you are not a reader, you are not a writer. Read history, novels, science, whatever you like, and above all, poetry. As in life, so in reading: deep is better than wide. And read the best—not your mostly dismal contemporaries, but what has lasted hundreds and thousands of years: Homer, Virgil, Dante, Shakespeare, the King James Bible. Read continually.

Revise what you have written, and then revise it again. You don't want to work all the life out of it, but precision and liveliness and an air of spontaneity are the fruit of long hours of writing and rewriting, of trial and error. First thought is not best and poetry, unlike jazz, is not improvisation. In fact, first thoughts tend to be banal, unfocused, conventional, not quite coherent. Most poems require a number of drafts—maybe twenty; maybe fifty. Don't be too easily satisfied.

Those are perhaps the three essential commandments. (If they are not easily obeyed, it may be that you are not destined to be a poet.) But I want to tell you something that nowadays not many others would tell you or even assent to. You must learn to write verse. Not “free” verse, but verse—numbers, measure, call it what you will. It is what poetry has always been written in until the last century or so, and indeed it is only over the last few decades that non-metrical verse has become the norm (if something which, by definition, violates the norm can be a norm). Before you break the rules, you need to know the rules; before you seek novelty, you ought to demonstrate that you know the ancient craft. That is no more than simple honesty and humility. You cannot properly call yourself a poet otherwise. A poet who cannot compose in verse is like a painter who cannot draw or a scientist who does not grasp the scientific method. Besides, as you acquire facility, you will find that verse-making supports your sentences, generates ideas, leads you where you might not otherwise have gone; and you will find what many poets have long known, that free verse

is not easier than metrical verse but much more difficult, and very few can write it well. As Gide said, art is born of constraint and dies of too much freedom.

How can you go about learning to write in meter? As poets have always learned, by reading good verse and trying to imitate its sounds. You may need to count on your fingers at first, to be sure that you have the permitted number of syllables and the accents in the right positions, but soon you will be able to play by ear. It is useful to have some theoretical understanding, but in the end, an iambic pentameter is a line that sounds like an iambic pentameter and you must know it the way you know the tune of an old familiar song. Be careful where you look for instruction: many teachers don't know much about the meters, and these days most poets don't either, and the books can be misleading or flat out wrong. George Stewart's book is good; so is James McAuley's (the shortest and maybe the best); so is Derek Attridge's. (Remember that good prosodists, though they hear the verse much the same way, may use different terminology or different symbols of scansion.) Be sure you read good models; many contemporary poets who write in meter, or what they call meter, do it atrociously: it is obvious that they don't know how the game is played. You can't go wrong with Marlowe, Herbert, Jonson, Milton, Pope, Tennyson, or Frost, or a hundred others. If you want to read the best of your own times, look for Larkin, Justice, Wilbur, Bowers, Hecht, and Coulette, and there are a few others. All the good poets make up a great free university, which you can attend at any hour of the day or night, choosing whatever teacher you like. Whatever you do, read aloud, both the verse of your models and your own, and listen to it carefully. (It might help to listen to it on tape. It might help to listen to records or tapes of good poets who also read well: Frost, Justice, Larkin, Wilbur, Ransom.) Once you get the tune fixed in your head, you will have it forever, and you will recognize it in all its many varied patterns. You should, at the very least, be able to write pentameters, tetrameters, and trimeters (the longer and shorter lines are more difficult), and in both strict iambic and loose; common measure and ballad meter; rhymed couplets, tercets, and quatrains; blank verse and passable sonnets. The better you can write in meter, the better you can hear the old verse, and vice versa to some extent. And it is essential that you hear the great English poems as they were meant to be heard and that you have some idea of what those poets were trying to do; otherwise you will have a very imperfect understanding of the poetry of your own language, and that is a serious deficiency in a poet. (Not to say in any cultivated man or woman—after all, accentual-syllabic verse, its invention and development, is one of the glories of our civiliza-

tion. Once you have achieved some mastery of your craft, you can have a go at free verse if you like; having learnt something about making verse lines that are really lines, you are likelier to do better than if you had never written anything but free. And you may well discover that for all its charms, free verse cannot do nearly as much as metrical verse can, in expressing feeling, in clarifying thought, in varying tempo, in delineating nuances of tone or subtleties of meaning, in emphasizing, modulating, elevating, clinching both ideas and emotions, and above all, in bringing about that perhaps magical phenomenon that poetry alone is capable of, of making us feel that the sounds of the words are what is being said, that the sounds somehow deepen, enlarge, enact, embody—in a sense, create—the reality behind them. As a distinguished American poet, the late Henri Coulette, once wrote, “Meter is thinking; it is the basis of intimacy between reader and writer.”

These are some of the powers of meter and rhyme, and only the profoundest, sincerest, and most original poet can put them aside, and then only if he knows what he is putting aside. I am no Yeats, God knows, but I urge you, young fellow poets, to do what he urged his young fellow poets to do: learn your trade. Sing whatever is well made.

4 *Picketing The Zeitgeist Picket*

One knows knows pretty much what to expect from *American Book Review*, its literary and political ideology, etc., and its interesting to consider views very different from one's own, but I could scarcely believe my eyes, reading Diane Wakoski's foolish rant in your last issue (May-June 1986).

It's not easy to make out what she is trying to say, she writes so carelessly and contradicts herself so often. She claims to have heard the devil in the person of John Hollander (we shall come, presently, to his satanic nature) and with uncanny penetration has divined the motive for his supposed malice. It is spite and resentment: he is bitter about lack of recognition. But two sentences earlier, Miss Wakoski has described him, accurately enough, as a “very successful” teacher and a poet “lauded with publications and attention.”

What evil thing has Mr Hollander done, to drive her into such confusion and incoherence? He has allegedly denounced free verse, which is what she writes, sort of, and perhaps she feels accused by his jokes about ill-educated and slovenly writers who pass their own illiteracy on to their students. (She may have reason to, and I doubt he was joking.) She doesn't try to refute his observation that many contemporary poets arc

ignorant of their art—how could she?—but in his wilful refusal to enlist under the banners of “the free verse revolution” and “the Whitman heritage” she hears the voice of Satan. And, believe it or not, the voice of Reagan. Yes, children, if you won’t accept Walt Whitman as your personal lord and saviour and if you harbor a secret affection for such decadent bourgeois ornaments as rhyme and meter, then you are reactionary and unAmerican and probably have an evil nature.

Along the way we learn that Allen Ginsberg and Robert Creeley are “major poets” and that Robert Frost, presumably because he was educated, wrote in meter, and liked English poetry, is not truly American but rather a bad European influence whom we have “weathered.” Is she for real? And who is the freedom-loving all-American poet whom she opposes to Frost? Why, William Carlos Williams whose unmetrical verse proves that he was no Reaganite. Well, I love Dr. Williams too (not as much as I love Frost, but, then, I have them both and don’t have to choose), but I wonder why she doesn’t mention Pound, who may be said to have invented free verse for this century. Could it be because he enjoined the aspiring young poet to learn all he could about traditional prosody? More likely it is because he was a fascist, in fact, a Fascist. Yes, children, fascists do write free verse (sometimes of a very high order), just as socialists and Communists often write in rhyme and meter (Hernandez, Brecht, MacDiarmid, etc.) And poor T. S. Eliot gets lumped with Frost and Longfellow (!) and such unAmerican writers—but I seem to remember that he was a buddy of Pound’s and had a hand in (trumpets) “the free verse revolution.” But he is cast into the outer darkness by Miss Wakoski, no doubt because he almost got a PhD and liked English literature and even lived in England and if he were alive today would probably approve of Thatcher and Reagan.

Then she has a vision. She sees the Satan going to and fro in the earth, whispering things in people’s cars, getting them to “espouse tradition.” And these people, we are told, are easy prey because they know very little about classical tradition or about metrical verse and are interested in “form, whatever that is” (*sic*). They seem to include Mr. Hollander, but surely she can’t mean that, for Mr. Hollander, although guilty of being interested in form (whatever that is), knows the classics very well and knows God’s own amount about the meters—has probably forgotten more about both than Miss Wakoski will ever know.

Then, mellow with vision and Truth and securely in possession of what is AMERICAN and NEW, she smiles charitably at the nice but benighted Robert Pinsky, who thinks she is out of her mind because she describes Creeley as “surely one of the foremost users of traditional met-

rics”, etc. I don’t think that Mr Pinsky thought she was out of her mind; I think he simply realized that she didn’t have the faintest idea what the hell she was talking about. He must have understood immediately that when a person thinks of form (whatever that is) as a “set of formulas and rules” for warding off anxiety—well, that is not the sort of person you want to engage in a conversation about poetry.

And how does Miss Wakoski propose to do battle against all the satanic European types like Reagan and Frost and Hollander and Pinsky? Why, she is going to be a “guerrilla fighter” in the university (where she earns her living), teaching the young “about all the possibilities that exist”—excluding, no doubt, the time-honored possibilities of meter and rhyme and form (whatever that is), excluding, that is, most of the great poetry written in our language, our (I blush to say it) beloved English language.

I believe in free speech as much as the next gink, but I thought that editors were supposed to edit and might reasonably suggest to a contributor that she has said a number of extremely silly, if not altogether meaningless, things. Picketing the *Zeitgeist*? Alas, she *is* the *Zeitgeist*, in one of its cruder and more mindless aspects.

These essays (two of which were occasional) were written between 1986 and 1998. They are published together here for the first time.