

THE SUBSTANCE OF POETRY

BY JOHN McCLURE

POETRY, as a form of utterance distinct from prose, is simply music in words—an attempt to create beauty in rhythm and tone. Its sole distinguishing characteristic is its harmonization of syllables in rhythm. There is no such thing as a poetic idea. Whatever claims they may advance to the contrary, poets have no monopoly on imagination, sentiment, or tropes. These belong equally to prose, and they characterize any good creative writing.

It has been the habit of poets to designate as poetry—or anyhow as poetic—anything that is charming and impressive, and the world is by no means too wide for them. Thus they speak of poetic justice, and of the poetry of ships or of churchyards, and they found schools to exploit the poetry of machinery. Any delicate sentiment, any arresting or colorful conception, any dramatic event they lay claim to as belonging to their art. If you show them excellent imagery in the jagged prose of Carlyle they at once say that that, too, is poetry—that Carlyle sometimes attained to the beatitude of being a poet. Conversely, they are usually very chary about defining the status of scurrilous, obscene or frivolous verse, which most poets (intent upon preserving a dignity which is, after all, unimportant in this world) say is not poetry at all. Yet they admit caricature and the grotesque to the plastic or graphic arts without a quaver. All this is absurd. They have carried the term poetry to a point where it embraces anything that they wish it to embrace, and therefore means nothing intelligible.

This confusion of subject matter with

the art itself has not occurred in the case of any art except poetry. Indeed, the history of aesthetics offers no other such example of greediness as that of the poets. Painters know very well that their art is in its essence one of color and form. Musicians know that theirs is one of sound. But poets have advanced the preposterous theory that their art is anything which they may at the moment be talking about. The result has been lamentable. Many men and women of ability, deluded by all this rigmarole into believing that the essence of poetry is imagery, or self-exposure, or hysteria, or metaphysics, or gospel, or something other still, have produced beautiful imagery in gargling sounds or advanced surprising and beautiful conceptions in rasping diction that would be disdained even by a cowboy. Such work may be interesting reading, and, as such, respectable literature, but it is unquestionably bad poetry.

The intellectual approach to the problem of poetry such as we find, say, in Mr. Prescott's work on "The Poetic Mind," proves generally to be an approach not to poetry, but to the whole problem of aesthetic creation. All that Mr. Prescott and other similar investigators assert about poets (their processes of thinking, the mental state which accompanies or induces creation) applies equally to painters, sculptors, musicians, dramatists, and writers of creative prose. It probably applies equally to intuitive physicists and mathematicians and to all inventive geniuses. Such inquiries do not assist us in defining the art of poetry any more than they assist us in defining the art of paint-

ing. A poem is a product—like an amphora, a novel, a picture or a fugue—, not a state of mind. It is a definite creation in a form selected by an artist who from choice or inner necessity preferred it. That form is a sound-form.

There is properly no such thing as a poetic idea. There is, however, such a thing as intellectual beauty. Supreme art can be manifested in the arrangement, juxtaposition, sequence or coincidence of ideas, images or concepts. We find it in the novel, the dramatic plot or situation, the essay, and, more concentrated, in the trope, pun and slang. This art of ideas can, but need not, be applied to music, painting or sculpture. It can, and generally does (since language is "thought incarnate") appear in poetry. But this question of ideational content is a problem separate from that of poetry. It cannot be localized. When an aesthetic ideational vista is opened coincidentally with the exercise of a sensuous art the synthetic effect, of course, is more impressive than would be the effect of either the idea or the creation (visual or auditory) alone. We find in this fact of synthesis the explanation of why the Laocoön is more impressive than an amphora; why a crucifixion is more satisfying than a still life, and why "La Belle Dame sans Merci" is more charming than "When Daisies Pied and Violets Blue," and "King Lear" more overpowering than either. Ideational beauty confronts us multifariously in all the arts, suffuses them in fact, and we encounter it throughout our lives, in dreams, on the street, and in the newspapers. It is the last problem in aesthetics to be solved. But idea is not poetry, nor is it the essence of poetry.

There are two types of literature (this term comprises all that is written): the literature of fact, or supposed fact, and the literature of art. The first is simple assertion, as, "A straight line is the shortest distance between two points." The second we generally term creative writing. It includes every exercise of the

imagination and of the aesthetic impulse toward structural form, as "When the sky falls, we shall catch larks"; "Old Ross of Potern, who lived till the world was weary of him"; or "It is no easy task to preach to the belly, which has no ears." The creative writer endeavors to produce a "new work of nature" in symbol or sound or both, or to emphasize an idea by art in a manner not possible by simple assertion. He exercises aesthetic selection in his choice of words and images, and in the arrangement of his words and concepts. He employs tropes, associative double-entendres, condensation, omission, structural design in phrasing, and a multitude of other means to enrich the fabric of the language in which he works and to get from his subject-matter the maximum aesthetic effect. Whether he does this consciously or unconsciously is immaterial to an examination of the art produced. Such creative writers may work in either prose or poetry. Poetry is an advance beyond prose as painting is an advance beyond hieroglyphics, and as music is an advance beyond poetry. The idea is the substance of prose, which is simply speech, an array of symbols evolved to communicate thought. Sound is the substance of poetry, which is an aesthetic arrangement of words evolved to please the ear. The language, the prose, is used as an instrument on which the poet plays as he might play on a flute or a viol, producing a form in sound disconnected entirely from the substance of the thought. The distinction between prose and poetry is thus not one of mental attitude or of ideational content. Beautiful conceptions can be expressed by means of algebraic symbols, if these symbols have been previously defined.

Poetry must be sufficiently rhythmical to be a form of music. It was the mother of music. It must have an intrinsic beauty of sound which would be perceptible even if the words were gibberish. This is absolutely its only distinguishing trait. It differs from prose as singing differs from

declamation. The latter depends upon idea for its effect, the former upon sound. If a sequence of words, without violence to the natural stress and intonation and with pleasing effect, can be played on a pipe, whistled, chanted or sung, it is poetry. But since the instrument used by the poet to produce his harmonies is language and not a violin or a French horn, the product is charged with ideas, partaking inevitably of the attributes of language (all words are symbols, most are tropes). This charged character of the instrument gives to the finest poetry an effect which, one is sometimes tempted to believe, places it at the pinnacle of the arts. The fusion of two glamors—the glamor of ideas and the glamor of music—is not, however, present in all, or even in most poetry, which often is intellectually very dull indeed and not infrequently absurd. Within the mold of form, the poet attempts to be as intelligible and as much an artist in ideas as a dramatist, epigrammatist, essayist, novelist, letter-writer, or metaphysician. But the “obstetric of the idea,” the elucidation of a concept by syllogism or trope, is a prose process, a speech process, like talking. It is dissimilar from the aesthetic process of poetry. It is at most merely accessory to the fact: the fact is music.

II

In the belief that the art of poetry lies in its subject-matter, critics and verse-writers have got the personality of men who happened to be great poets so intimately entangled with their theories of the art that most books of criticism dealing with poetry are, from the standpoint of aesthetics, mere nonsense. They devote much more attention to the question, which should come last, whether a versifier is a democrat, a hedonist, or a Platonist—whether he is philosophically or economically or morally sound—than to the question whether he can write poetry, which should come first. If the verse-

writer seems to the critic to be a true man (that is, a good Presbyterian, a good Platonist, a good Panurge, or a good democrat, depending upon the preference of the critic) he is a good poet; if he is not a true man, he is an execrable poet. Many bad versifiers who have contributed importantly to the literature of ideas, or who have evinced a charming outlook on life, are seriously discussed as good poets, even though the critic, if he has any ear, must know that their verses are mediocre or bad. Poetry is really extremely simple. Anyone who is pleased by the sound of children's voices chanting:

Green gravel, green gravel, the grass is so green,

appreciates the art. If he enjoys “The Lion and the Unicorn” he has very nearly penetrated whatever mystery may be in it. There is more of this mystery in the French nursery-rhyme “Au Clair de la Lune” than in Whitman, Browning or Arnold. It is not an intellectual quality, and we need no more attempt to explain it than we need attempt to explain the charm of music, which is also a charm of sound.

Poetry has fallen into disrepute with a multitude of readers because of this subject-matter heresy, which has been promulgated by a number of very brilliant men. Especially in the last century these theorists (most of them poets, and good ones) have endeavored to prove that poetry is the most intellectual branch of literature—a sublimated gospel or criticism of life. Nothing was easier than to convince the poets themselves that, because they were able to make jingles or invent figures of speech or allegories, they were very clever theologians. For a long time we have had verse-writers actually believing that, because they have an ear for cadence and rhyme, they are in communion with Deity, and therefore qualified to explain what the world is about, and to dispense wisdom. Worse, all instruction in poetry which has been forced upon unwilling youth is designed to im-

press upon him that poetry will make him wiser and better, that the poets are Teachers from whom he must learn. As a result, ninety of every hundred who are introduced to good verse in their school-days cannot abide the thought of it thereafter.

In the time before this heresy sprang up the popular songbooks contained some of the most exquisite poetry in the language. The Elizabethan airs are pure poetry, and a multitude of people liked them well. Now the popular songs are drivel, and the mass even of educated people refuses to read verse. It was evidently a serious mistake to tell men and women that poetry would improve them. Perhaps when this fallacy is forgotten, the mass of men will appreciate good poetry again. Certainly even now a cowboy who would be nauseated by a lecture on or by Matthew Arnold enjoys and sings "The Cowboy's Lament":

As I walked out in the streets of Laredo,
As I walked out in Laredo one day,
I spied a poor cowboy wrapped up in white linen,
Wrapped up in white linen as cold as the clay.
Oh, beat the drum slowly and play the fife lowly,
Play the dead march as you bear me along;
Take me to the green valley and lay the sod over
me
For I'm a young cowboy and I know I've done
wrong.

And the Southern American who could never be persuaded to read Thomas Campion or Walter De la Mare is thrilled when he hears black men and women singing:

Swing low, sweet chariot,
Comin' fo' to carry me home

We must remember that poetry is an art just as drawing is. In the graphic arts we have modulations in technique from caricature and the grotesque to the keen edge of Ingres, the ecstatic vigor of Blake, and the superb beauty of the Renaissance masterpieces. Poetry, too, has its caricature, still containing the essential magic of art. Consider these lines from Thackeray:

Swain the bold sea-king with his captains and
skippers

Walked on the sea-beach looking at the dippers,
Walked on the sea-beach in his yellow slippers.

And recall the jingles, always favorites of children, in which

Nebuchadnezzar, the King of the Jews,
Slipped off his slippers and slipped on his shoes.

The essential charm of such verse is akin to that of

Beauty is but a painted hell!
Ay me! Ay me!
Full fathom five thy father lies

or,

I said to Dawn: Be sudden—to Eve: Be soon.

For the essential charm of the art of poetry is the charm of sound, and the substance of this art, the mother of music, is sound. Here we can do no better than to glance at a few titles or phrases of songs, some of which have come down for hundreds of years. The entire spirit of poetry, as an art of sound, is condensed into them. Consider "Fortune my Foe" (this is the hanging-tune which was sung by thousands of spectators at executions in England four centuries ago); "Ladye, Lie Neare Me," "Lull Me Beyond Thee," "Labor in Vaine," "Green Sleeves," "All in a Misty Morning," "London Ladies," "Oh, London is a Fine Town," "Lilliburlero," "Tom Tinker's My True Love," "I Would I Were in My Own Countrie," "All in a Garden Green," "Bonny Sweet Robin," "John, Come Kiss Me Now," "Highland Harry Back Again," "I am a Man Unmarried," "Gilderoy," "Jamie, Come Try Me," "I Rede You Beware at the Hunting, Young Men," and "Whistle and I'll Come to Ye, My Lad."

We can select from a would-be humorous poem by Thomas Gray, "A Long Story," most of which is wretched doggerel, two stanzas in which are lines of rare art:

In Britain's Isle no matter where
An ancient pile of building stands;
The Huntingdons and Hatrons there
Employ'd the pow'r of fairy hands

To raise the ceiling's fretted height,
Each panel in achievements clothing,
Rich windows that exclude the light,
And passages that lead to nothing.

"Employ'd the pow'r of fairy hands" exemplifies what I am talking about. It is a blossom of sound. Poets, even the rudest, work in sound as their first principle. Here is a passage from "Git Along, Little Dogies," a cowboy ballad:

Whoopee ti yi yo, git along, little dogies,
It's your misfortune and none of my own.

The cowboy, in arriving at such a fluent expression as appears in the second line of this stanza, was doing precisely what Gray did when he formulated the line quoted above, and precisely what Thomas Campion did when he wrote "I Will Go No More a-Maying," and Burns when he wrote

Corn rigs, an' barley rigs,
An' corn rigs are bonnie.

He was fiddling on the strings of his larynx.

In Negro folk rhymes we find excellent examples of music-making in words:

Jawbone ring! Jawbone sing!
Jawbone, kill dat wicked thing.

Oh, don't you see dat turkle dove
What mourns from vine to vine?

De ole hen sot on tucky aigs,
An' she hatch out goslings three.
Two was tuckies wid slender legs
An' one wuz a bumblebee.

Whatever form they choose, all poets are doing the same thing fundamentally—weaving each his own sort of music out of syllables.

III

A great deal of controversy, most of it ridiculous, has raged over regular and irregular rhythms, and over cadences and rhyme. Those who attempt to prove that rhyme is not allowable in poetry are as foolish as those who contend that it is necessary. And those who would tolerate only regular rhythms or only irregular rhythms are equally stupid and bigoted. In various languages (English certainly) rhyme in the vulgar English sense of final coincidence is an ornament because such rhymes are scarce. In Latin such rhymes

were a defect because they were common and wearisome. One must remember here that rhyme is any recurrence of similar sound and that there is rhyme in *Canterbury* and *canteloupe*, *splendor* and *splash*, *mahogany* and *geography*, *asp* and *astonishment*, *dig* and *dug*, *strenuous* and *strategy*, which is as truly rhyme as that in *cat* and *rat*. The vers librists use all the forms of rhyme except their private *bête noire*, the English final rhyme. Beautiful verse has been written in every form. All are welcomed by the real lover of poetry. Consider for example the following quotations, some from free verse and others from conventional metrical prosody, including rhymed verse:

I have loved a stream and a shadow.—*Ezra Pound*.

Love prickt my finger with a golden pin.—*Herrick*.

This is the passing of all shining things.—
E. E. Cummings.

I saw three witches
That bowed down like barley.—*De la Mare*.

I have known the stone-bright place,
The hall of clear colors.—*Pound*.

Cor meum conturbatum est,
Death with Hounds of Fear stirred in the
darkness . . .
Formido mortis cecidit super me,
Such is the doom of Death, none may escape it.
—*Margaret L. Woods*.

My Love is of a birth as rare
As 'tis for object, strange and high;
It was begotten by Despair
Upon Impossibility.—*Marvell*.

Thou art not fair for all thy red and white,
For all those rosy ornaments in thee;
Thou art not sweet, though made of mere delight,
Nor fair nor sweet, unless thou pity me.—*Campion*.

Him the almighty power
Hurled headlong flaming from th' ethereal sky.
—*Milton*

I got me flowers to straw thy way;
I got me boughs off many a tree;
But thou wast up by break of day
And broughtst thy sweets along with thee.
—*George Herbert*.

I fain would take the zither,
By some stray fancy led,
But there are none to hear me
And who can charm the dead?—*Cranmer-Byng*.

The black panther treads at my side,
And above my fingers
There float the petal-like flames.—*Pound*.

The dawn's grey eyes were troubled grey.
—*Francis Thompson*.
We desolate lost ladies of Greece!—*Elizabethan air*.

All these forms seem good to me. But poetry, of course, can be bad writing as well as prose. Intellectually, there is a distinction that cannot be too much emphasized: under the spell of music readers not only accept but enjoy more nonsense than they would accept in Augustan periods. Therefore a certain amount of it is allowable. And nonsense we find in the greatest poetry as well as in the jingles of children. The best poetry is that in which, combined with beautiful sound, we find charming sentiment, beautiful conception and beautiful imagery. This is incontrovertible, but, as I have pointed out, it is equally true of prose. If the following quotations lacked their distinctive rhythmical movement and harmony of syllables, they would still fall into the general category of literature as splendid prose, but they could not—if the term means anything definite whatsoever—be considered good poetry:

But his face
Deep scars of thunder had entrenched, and care
Sat on his faded cheek.

Anon, out of the earth a fabric huge
Rose, like an exhalation.

From morn
To noon he fell, from noon to dewy eve,
A Summer's day; and with the setting sun
Dropt from the Zenith like a falling star.

Thou still unravished bride of quietness!
Thou foster-child of Silence and slow Time.

magic casements, opening on the foam
Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.

I tread upon dangerous ground when I attempt to elucidate this contention. Nevertheless, I shall do so. In a translation from Heine by Ezra Pound, is the following line:

O wounded sorrowfully!

If that is not poetry, I am a horse. But if it is recast: "O sorrowfully wounded," it loses a large part of its poetic magic while

retaining its prose magic complete. Coleridge startles us in "Christabel," with

Beautiful exceedingly!

Recast that into "exceedingly beautiful" and what has vanished? Plainly a spirit of beauty that secreted itself in the sound. It is useless to attempt to explain the charm of "beautiful exceedingly" on the theory of surprise resulting from the transposition of words. On that theory "attractive somewhat" would be charming too. Burns' magical line:

O poortith cauld, and restless love

can be recast "O cauld poortith, and restless love," and the poetry has got away in a flash. Consider, again, this line from T. S. Eliot:

Phlebas the Phoenician, a fortnight dead.

Recast it into "The Phoenician Phlebas, dead a fortnight"!

The following quotation is from Margaret L. Woods:

In cloisters dim and haunted
She met me and I said:
'Art thou the queen enchanted
Of whom long since I read?
Whose heart a great magician
Has hidden from her birth,
Either in the deep ocean,
The forest or the earth?'

Imagine the opening lines recast: "She met me in dim and haunted cloisters, and I said: 'Art thou the enchanted queen of whom I read long since?'" Nothing is lacking here but sound. . . . These examples should be sufficient. They are poetry, because they are beautiful, to a greater or less degree, in sound. In each recasting nothing intellectual or visual has been lost. That which disappears is sound—an auditory creation distinct from content, beautiful in itself. That sound (it is nothing vague, or theoretical, but a definite fact like color or physical form) is poetry: the rest is prose.

PEDAGOGUE: OLD STYLE

BY JAMES M. CAIN

His appearance suggests the esoteric purity of the cloister. Particularly the eyes, which have the liquid depth of clear opals. They are lambent, melting, fine. They have none of the cold penetration of a banker's eyes, nor the craftiness of a tradesman's, nor the heavy-lidded dreaminess of a musician's, nor the suspicious squint of a proletarian's. They are not masculine eyes, nor yet feminine: their sexless glow is like the look you associate with adolescent girls, or maiden ladies of forty-five. They are monastic, upturned eyes, which sometime, maybe years ago, maybe yesterday, have glimpsed the word Excelsior.

His face harmonizes. It is not the face of this vulgar day, but calls up, by style of eyeglass or parting of hair, memories of yesteryear. Whether young or old, it is fresh and ruddy. If here and there are wrinkles, then they are not deep cruel seams, but fine, lightly traced lines. If there are gray hairs, then they are not the streaks of soul-wracking years, but an even, rich powdering. A face finely chiselled, young at twenty-five, youngish at thirty-five, at fifty, at seventy; boyish at eighty, its owner *emeritus* for a decade. A face habitually relaxed in a sunny half-smile. A face that Time has laid on a special shelf and taken great pains with, has etched carefully and stained delicately, burning in one pigment at a time. A face clear, mellow, and serene, like a meerschauum pipe.

When you meet him, you find him charming. His welcome is sunny and genial, like his smile. He plays golf, and will invite you into a foursome. He plays

billiards and will take you to his club, set you up to a rickey, trim you neatly, and console you like a gentleman. He canoes, and always has a place in the boat. He is ready at your whim: he never has any special dressing to do. In the Summer he idles in flannels and soft shirt. In the Autumn he wears the trick breeches prescribed for golf. Other seasons he wears rough, comfortable, collegy-Englishy looking clothes. He is always ready for play, and delighted you have come. Delighted as a nice-mannered boy is delighted when another nice-mannered boy has moved into the block—another boy to play with, and while the time away.

He is cultured. If you are a scientist, he knows something about science, and has a new magazine he would like to show you. If you like music, he has been to concerts, and will tell you about them; possibly he will confess humorously that he plays the violin or clarinet himself, though not as a professional, simply for his own amusement. History, politics, art; he likes to talk of such things. About some of them, he admits, he doesn't know much, but he believes that every intelligent man ought to take an interest in them, if for no other reason than that they affect us all vitally, and beside, a man can't very well afford to ignore any great field of human thought, as he often tells his classes. Your discussion, you will find, will always end on a resolved chord, though you might prefer a dissonance. You will argue at length, about it and about, and admitting for the sake of argument Kant's great postulates concerning Space and Time. Then you will find yourself warped slightly