

Perrine's Poetry: Sound and Sense

Excerpt from Chapter 1: What is Poetry?

- (1) **Poetry is as universal as language and almost as ancient.** The most primitive people have used it and the most civilized have cultivated it. In all ages and in all countries poetry has been **written and eagerly read or listened** to by all kinds of people. The intelligent and the sensitive individual appreciate it greatly and it has appealed, in its simpler forms, to the **uneducated and to children**. Why? Firstly because it gives pleasure; people have read it, listened to it, or recited it because they liked it, because it gave them enjoyment. But this is not the whole answer. Poetry in all ages has been regarded as important, not simply as a form of amusement. Rather it has been regarded as something central to existence, something having unique value to the fully realized life, something without which we are spiritually impoverished. To understand the reason for this we need to have an understanding of what poetry is provisional, because people have always been more successful at appreciating poetry than at defining it.

- (2) **Initially poetry might be defined as a kind of language that says more** and says it more **intensely than does ordinary language**. In order to understand this fully, we need to understand what is that poetry "says." For language is employed on different occasions to say quite different kinds of things: in other words, language has different uses.

- (3) Perhaps the **most common use of language is to communicate information**. We say that it is nine o'clock, that there is a good movie downtown, that George Washington was the first president of the United States, that bromine and iodine are the members of the halogen group of chemical elements. This we might call the practical use of language; it helps us to understand the ordinary level of business living.

- (4) But it is primarily to communicate information that novels and short stories and plays and poems are written. These exist to bring us a sense and a perception of life, to **widen and sharpen our contacts with existence**. Their concern is with experience. We all have an inner need to live more deeply and fully with greater awareness, To know the experience of others and to know better our own experience. **The poet, from his own store of felt, observed, or imagined experiences, selects, combines, and recognizes**. He **creates significant new experiences for the reader**--significant because focused and formed--in which the reader can participate and that he may use to give him a greater awareness and understanding of his world. Literature, in other words, can be used as a gear

for stepping up the intensity and increasing the range of our experience and as a glass for clarifying it. This is the literary use of language, for literature is not only an aid to living but a means to living. (A third use of language is as an instrument of persuasion.)

- (5) Poetry takes all life as its province. Its **primary concern is not with beauty, not with philosophical truth, not with persuasion, but with experience.**

Beauty and philosophical truth are aspects of experience, and the poet is often engaged with them. **But poetry as a whole is concerned with all kinds of experiences, beautiful or ugly, strange or common, noble or ignoble, actual or imaginary. Paradoxically, an artist can transform even the most unpleasant or painful experiences into works of great beauty and emotional power.** Encountered in real life, pain and death are not pleasurable for most people; but we might read and reread poems about these subjects because of their ability to enlighten and move us. A real-life experience that makes us cry is usually an unhappy one; but **if we cry while reading a great novel or poem it is because we are deeply moved, our humanity affirmed.** Similarly, we do not ordinarily like to be frightened in real life, but we sometimes seek out books or movies that will terrify us. **Works of art focus and organize experiences of all kinds, conveying the broad spectrum of human life and evoking a full range of emotional and intellectual responses.** Even the most tragic literature, through its artistry of language, can help us to see and feel the significance of life, appealing to our essential humanity in a way that can be intensely pleasurable and affirming.

- (6) There is no sharp distinction between poetry and other forms of imaginative literature. Although some beginning readers may believe that poetry can be recognized by the arrangement of its lines on the page or by its use of rhyme and meter, such **superficial signs are of little worth.** *The Book of Job* in the Bible and Melville's *Moby Dick* are highly poetical, but the familiar verse that begins "Thirty days hath September, / **April, June, and November...**" is not. The difference between poetry and other literature is only one of degree. **Poetry is the most condensed and concentrated form of literature.** It is language whose individual lines, either because of their own **brilliance or because they focus so powerfully on what has gone before, have a higher voltage than most language. It is language that grows frequently incandescent, giving off both light and heat.**

- (7) Poetry, finally, is a kind of **multidimensional language.** Ordinary language--the kind that we use to communicate information--is one-dimensional. It is directed at

only part of the listener, the understanding. Its one dimension is intellectual. Poetry, which is language used to communicate experience, has at least four dimensions. If it is to communicate experience, it must be directed at the whole person, not just at your understanding. It must involve not only your intelligence but also your senses, emotions, and imagination. To the **intellectual dimension, poetry adds a sensuous dimension, an emotional dimension, and an imaginative dimension.**

- (8) Poetry achieves its extra dimensions--**its greater pressure per word and its greater tension per poem**--by **drawing** more fully and more consistently than does ordinary language on a number of language resources, none of which is peculiar to poetry. These various resources form the subjects of a number of the following chapters. Among them are **connotation, imagery, metaphor, symbol, paradox, irony; allusion, sound repetition, rhythm, and pattern.** Using these resources and the materials of life, the poet shapes and makes a poem. **Successful poetry is never effusive language.** if it is to **come alive** it must be as **cunningly put together** and as efficiently **organized as a tree**. It must be an organism whose **every part** serves a useful purpose and cooperates with every other part to preserve and **express the life that is within it.**