

Reading Poetry

by Cliff Burns

Reading poetry requires an aptitude or affinity, like music, trigonometry, or cheap scotch.

Through regular exposure you *can* acquire a taste for it—a fortunate few grasp the power and appeal of great verse almost immediately.

Poetry requires a specific “muscle”, one that atrophies and withers away very quickly once it falls into disuse.

Poetry requires patience, a willingness to go slowly, parsing meaning, unraveling the text, decrypting its structure.

You don't have to be classically educated or have university professors for parents (although, truthfully, it helps).

Poetry is a language. Some people are very good at learning new languages; others are barely conversant in their own.

Poetry is not, by nature, difficult or hermetic. Most poets I'm familiar with strive very hard to make their meaning or intent crystal clear.

Poetry is not elitist. How is it possible to regard a canon that includes "Mary Had a Little Lamb" and Edward Lear as the slightest bit elitist?

Poetry is subversive, the first choice for authors who wish to offer veiled criticism to a regime or administer a good swift boot in the gonads to the powerful and privileged.

Poetry resists jingoism (but, alas, is not always immune to it).

Poetry is humanistic, tolerant of the foibles of our kind (while relentlessly detailing our shortcomings and excesses).

Poetry easily eludes the constraints of space and time, reaching across the centuries, a weathered, barnacle-encrusted bottle washing up on our stony, desolate shore.

Poetry is universal—translatable into every language (with varying degrees of effectiveness and proficiency).

Poetry encompasses everything from the macro- to microscopic, containing whole universes within a few brief lines.

Poetry is a collapsed star, dense and unstable, radiating outward on every frequency, every spectrum of light.

Poetry quickly unmask/reveals the amateur, the tone deaf, the inept. It is the most unforgiving of all fields of writing.

Poetry can be over-analyzed and dissected, its remains sifted through with unhealthy avidity, susceptible to postmortem (and postmodern) butchery.

Poetry is musical and pleasing to the ear, except when it isn't.

Poetry frees the captive soul. Emancipatory and anarchic, refusing the spirit of the times, *all* times. A force of nature, answerable only to itself.

Poetry produces idols and just as quickly discredits and destroys them. Its scrutiny unsparing and ceaseless, allowing for neither evasion nor subterfuge.

Poetry is dying, if not dead. Like huge swaths of our environment. Like God, hope and forgiveness. Like redemption and clear mountain streams. Like you, like me.

Poetry is *us*, with all our complexities and contradictions.

Poetry is finite, like the light of stars.

Poetry speaks, a confluence of voices.

Poetry endures and, like each one of us, aspires for connection, rapprochement, while struggling mightily to make itself understood.

Postscript...

Death to the literal, since it doesn't actually exist.

Reality is that which we can absorb and process through our limited senses. Nothing more.

As Douglas Rushkoff puts it: "Consciousness is based on totally non-computable quantum states in the tiniest structures of the brain".

With that in mind, reaching a consensus on what we perceive is problematic, close to impossible.

And so perhaps we can communicate the shared experience of being alive and sentient through a symbolic language, the kind composed by those who use sacred scripture, psalms and Upanishads to remind us of the traits we hold in common, including the desire to know the circumstances of our creation and what destiny, if any, awaits us.

Poetry as liturgy. An invocation of the great Mystery. The impetus, no, the *necessity* of speaking the words out loud (yes, like prayers).

Reading Rilke in the Hagia Sophia. A *Bible* in every hotel room.

To pierce the veil, silence the incessant *babel*. Communicate what is imperative: a message, a prophecy, a verdict.

In the visions of Blake, the best of Yeats, Milosz and Mary Oliver: the transcendent revealed, secreted in forests of night and, not infrequently, more mundane places, gardens and roadsides, hill and hearth, anywhere a wise, insightful gaze might fall.