

Introduction

which exist outside the poem, to which any poem is supposedly attached; (3) the desire to isolate something essential inside the poem which would justify its existence. What all of these ideas have in common is a desire to think about poetry in non-relational terms. After tackling these ideas, I will move on to offering my own relativistic account of writing poetry and explain the layout of the various chapters.

Most popular notions of poetry are derived from the period when poetry last had a wide general audience and real cultural sway: the nineteenth century. Say the word 'poet' to most people and the first person they are likely to think about is a Romantic poet, probably Wordsworth, Byron or Keats. Owing to a peculiar range of factors, which I do not intend to go into here, Romantic poetry of the nineteenth century, in recoil from scientific rationalism and the dehumanizing forms of social organization which followed the Industrial Revolution, conceived of poetry as a radically separate sphere of activity. According to the mythology which the Romantic poets cultivated, and which continues to have widespread general influence, the true poet is a creature regularly visited by something called 'Inspiration', the visits being especially frequent when the poet is in close proximity to 'Nature'. This image of the poet is much like the one described at the end of Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan':

And all should cry, Beware! Beware!
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!
Weave a circle round him thrice,
And close your eyes with holy dread,
For he on honeydew hath fed,
And drunk the milk of Paradise.

While this way of thinking about the figure of the poet is colourful – and that, after all, is why it is popular – it has a number of undesirable consequences. At heart it makes a misleading distinction between poetry and other things we make, from shoes to ships, from choral symphonies to computer games. We would not dream of describing an architect who has designed a beautiful house with the kind of language which Coleridge uses. Just as the image of the architect as a wild-eyed loon is an unnecessary mystification, so too with the image of the poet. Usually when a poet is asked – as they are often asked – from where do they draw their 'inspiration', the question assumes the validity of the nineteenth-century model. The problem with this assumption is that it overlooks the importance of

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work, unglamorous work which any good poet undertakes in various forms: observation, experiment, the creation of patterns of mind. Successful poems are, in general, not only the products of numerous drafts, they are also the products of deliberately cultivated habits of being (in this sense they are dependent on personality, which is after all a habit of being). Inspiration is just a colourful metaphor which we might now do better to discard. Even the word 'creativity' owes something to the influence of the nineteenth-century model. Although it is widely used in universities, most writers I suspect are uncomfortable with the phrase, 'Creative Writing.' Here is what Miroslav Holub, the great Czech poet (and leading immunologist), has to say about the term:

I must state that I have never felt anything like creativity and, even if I had, I would not be caught dead admitting it. For me, 'creativity' is too luxurious a word, too richly coloured. What I know is the will for and the enjoyment of new things, and these are identical in science and art. I think scientific and artistic activities do not exclude one another, no matter how different their techniques are. It is all about energy or steam, all about transformations of energy.³

Rather than use a term like 'creativity', it might be better to use a term like 'design' and to think of poets as 'poetry designers'. 'Design' is a word which does not make us think of a marked-off, rarefied form of activity and, above all, the term has not lost its associations with hard work. The word 'creative' may make the writer seem like a Creator in an unreal sense, someone who is making something out of nothing, bringing something into existence where before there had only been a vacuum.

We are, in general, too apt to picture the writer as an isolated individual, and writing as a solitary activity. Certainly, for many stages of composition a writer is indeed on their own. Yet just as I think it is helpful to think of the poem as a web which is spun out of old webs so I think it better to conceive of writing as an act on behalf of a community, or – better – a series of interlocking communities. By writing we make a series of contracts: with past and present users of the English language, with the peer community which supports and criticizes our work, with publishers, editors and reviewers, and eventually with those readers we will never hear from or see.

In popular mythology, poetry is associated with misty absolutes – Freedom, Beauty, Truth, Soul, Inspiration. Sometimes poetry is turned into

'Poetry' and is given an honorary place alongside these exotic creatures. Why do these absolutes hold such sway? Essentially, because it is hard to think of poetry – or anything else we love – as mortal. To compensate for the vulnerability of the things we love, we bathe them in a glow of permanence. The kind of fixity we look for has been characterized by William James:

Something to support the finite many, to tie it to, to unify and anchor it. Something unexposed to accident, something eternal and unalterable. The mutable in experience must be founded on immutability . . . This is the resting deep. We live upon the stormy surface; but with this our anchor holds, for it grapples rocky bottom. This is Wordsworth's 'central peace subsisting at the heart of endless agitation' . . . This is Reality with the big R, reality that makes the timeless claim, reality to which defeat can't happen.⁴

When we talk about 'the timeless spirit of Poetry', we invoke a reality to which defeat can't happen. This book takes the view that, if there is a 'reality to which defeat can't happen', then it has nothing to do with poetry. There is a wise African proverb which says that a person is a person through persons. In the same way an object is an object through objects, and a poem is a poem through poems. Any fragment of our experience can only be measured by reference to other fragments. As the American thinker Richard Rorty puts it, 'only about the relative is there anything to say'.⁵

As many writers will admit, probably the single best piece of advice to give a prospective author is to *show* rather than *tell* (this piece of advice is well known but that does not stop it from being good). Here is a brief illustration: Let us say we want to describe a character, called Bill, who is ugly. We can simply tell the reader that 'Bill is ugly'. But we could also *show* the reader that this is so with a description, for example, 'Bill has a face like a disappointed bulldog.' Now why should it be that showing works better than telling? Because showing is intensely relational while telling is not. When we show, we set in motion a potentially boundless set of relationships; when we tell we reduce the new to the old, to familiar types.

Absolutes like Truth, Beauty and Freedom (or for that matter Deceit, Ugliness and Slavery) swallow everything that is new and living. What can we say, for example, about the abstraction 'Love'? If we mean by it some absolute quality, or an intrinsic property, then we say nothing. If we love someone then the emotion must be performed in a concrete way – we shed tears or buy flowers or embrace. In the absence of such acts, whatever we

mean by 'Love' will be invisible to others and an illusion to ourselves. By contrast everything that is genuinely new and living is an event and every event is a new relationship: the cat drops in my lap, the arrow strikes the target, the cuckoo flies the nest. And whatever is new in language is a new event in language. Think, for example, what happens when we bring together two words that are not used to each other's company. When we put donkey beside orange; octopus beside mirror; and windmill beside flamenco – we release a new energy. We experience a donkey in a different way when we think of it 'via' an orange and vice versa. Famously, the nineteenth-century French writer Lautreamont compared beauty to 'the chance encounter, on a dissecting table, of an umbrella and a sewing-machine'. Nothing like the same kind of tension is generated by placing the horse beside, or even before, the cart. On the other hand, we might release more imaginative energy if we place the horse *on top* of the cart.

Just as we often handicap ourselves by trying to yoke a particular poem to some overarching idea of what poetry is, so we may try to nail a poem down to something we pretend is inside it: its meaning. These manoeuvres are inner and outer manifestations of the same impulse, a desire to secure the poem to some permanent structure, to take away its fragile set of dependencies. As sparks fly up when flint meets rock, so meanings fly up when reader meets poem. Sparks are contained neither by flint nor by rocks but arise from their relationship. In the same way, meanings are contained neither by the reader nor by the poem but arise from their relationship. To adapt a phrase of the German philosopher Lichtenberg's, if an ass peers into a poem, you can't expect an apostle to look out. Poems do not *contain* meanings. There is nothing beneath, behind or inside a poem, just as there is nothing beneath, behind or inside the universe. There is no way to explain, justify or approve of a poem merely by reference to its meaning. As the literary critic Richard Poirier has put it, every reading experience is a struggle between what the reader wants to make of the book and what the book wants to make of the reader. When a poem, or any other art-work, is successful it is because it makes us 'better' (that is to say, it stimulates an experience which makes us more interesting, more nuanced, more many-sided, more flexible), not because of the rightness or nobility or bravery of its imagined meaning. Poems, like other experiences, may turn out to be good or bad but they cannot be right or wrong. Of course, we are inclined to believe that poems *do* have meanings because of the unfortunate ways we transmit poetry in our culture. Our first encounters with