Chapter One

What Is Poetry?

Poetry is as universal as language and almost as ancient. The most primitive peoples 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 and conditions of people—by soldiers, statesmen, lawyers, farmers, doctors, scientists, clergy, philosophers, kings, and queens. In all ages it has been especially the concern of the educated, the intelligent, and the sensitive, and it has appealed, in its simpler forms, to the uneducated and to children. Why? First, because it has given 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 one of several alternative forms of amusement, as one person might choose bowling, another chess, and another poetry. Rather, it has been regarded as something central to existence, something having unique value to the fully realized life, something that we are better off for having and without which we are spiritually impoverished. To understand the reasons for this, we need to have at least a provisional understanding of what poetry is—provisional, because people have always been more successful at appreciating poetry than at defining it.

Initially, poetry might be defined as a kind of language that says more and says it more intensely than does ordinary language. To understand this fully, we need to understand what poetry “says.” For language is employed on different occasions to say quite different kinds of things in other words, language has different uses. Perhaps the commonest use of language is to communicate information. We say that it is nine o’clock, that we like a certain movie, that George Washington was the first president of the United States, that bromine and iodine are members of the halogen group of chemical elements. This we might call the practical use of language; it helps us with the ordinary business of living.

But it is not primarily to communicate information that novels, short stories, 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 and with greater awareness, to know the experience of others, and to understand our own experience better. Poets, from their own store of felt, observed, or imagined experiences, select, combine, and reorganize. They create significant new experiences for their readers—significant because focused and formed—in which readers can participate and from which they may gain a greater awareness and understanding of their own 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 of living.

In advertisements, sermons, political speeches, and even some poems we find a third use of language: as an instrument of persuasion, or argument. But the distinctions among these three uses—the practical, the literary, and the argumentative—are not always clear-cut, since some written language simultaneously performs two or even all three functions. For example, an excellent poem we consider “literary” may convey information, and may also try to persuade us to share a particular point of view. Effectiveness in communicating experience, however, is the one essential criterion for any poem aspiring to the condition of literature.

Suppose, for instance, that we are interested in eagles. If we want simply to acquire information about eagles, we may turn to an encyclopedia or a book of natural history. We would find that there are about fifty-five species of eagles and that most have hooked bills, curved claws, broad wings, and powerfully developed breast muscles. We would also learn that eagles vary in length from about sixteen inches to as long as forty inches; that most hunt while flying, though some await their prey on a high perch; that they nest in tall trees or on inaccessible cliffs; that they lay only one or two eggs; and that for human beings eagles “symbolize power, courage, freedom, and immortality and have long been used as national, military, and heraldic emblems and as symbols in religion.”

But unless we are interested in this information only for practical purposes, we are likely to feel a little disappointed, as though we had grasped the feathers of the eagle but not its soul. True, we have learned many facts about the eagle, but we have missed somehow its lonely majesty, its power, and the wild grandeur of its surroundings that would make the eagle a living creature rather than a mere museum specimen. For the living eagle we must turn to literature.

The Eagle

He claps the crag with crooked hands;
Close to the sun in lonely lands,
Ringed with the azure world, he stands.

The wrinkled sea beneath him crawls;
He watches from his mountain walls,
And like a thunderbolt he falls.

Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809-1892)

QUESTIONS
1. What is peculiarly effective about the expressions “crooked hands,” “Close to the sun,” “Ringed with the azure world,” “wrinkled,” “crawls,” and “like a thunderbolt”?
2. Notice the formal pattern of the poem, particularly the contrast of “stands” in the first stanza and “he falls” in the second. Is there any other contrast between the two stanzas?

When “The Eagle” has been read well, readers will feel that they have enjoyed a significant experience and understand eagles better, though in a different way, than they did from the encyclopedia article alone. For while the article analyzes our experience of eagles, the poem in some sense synthesizes such an experience. Indeed, we may say the two approaches to experience—the scientific and the literary—complement each other. And we may contend that the kind of understanding we get from the second is at least as valuable as the kind we get from the first.

Literature, then, exists to communicate significant experience—significant because it is concentrated and organized. Its function is not to tell us about experience but to allow us imaginatively to participate in it. It is a means of allowing us, through the imagination, to live more fully, more deeply, more richly, and with greater awareness. It can do this in two ways: by broadening our experience—that is, by making us acquainted with a range of experience with which in the ordinary course of events we might have no contact, or by deepening our experience—that is, by making us feel more pungently and more understandingly the everyday experiences all of us have. It enlarges our perspectives and breaks down some of the limits we may feel.

We can avoid two limiting approaches to poetry if we keep this conception of literature firmly in mind. The first approach always looks for a lesson or a bit of moral instruction. The second expects to find poetry always beautiful. Let us consider one of the songs from Shakespeare’s Love’s Labor’s Lost (3.2).

Winter

When icicles hang by the wall,
And Dick the shepherd blows his nail,
And Tom bears logs into the hall,
And milk comes frozen home in pail,
When blood is nipped and ways be feald,
Then nightly sings the staring owl,
“Tu-whit, tu-who!”
A merry note,
While greasy Joan doth keel the pot.

When all a-foul the wind doth blow,
And coughing draws the parson’s saw,
And birds sit brooding in the snow,
And Martin’s nose looks red and raw,
When roasted crumbs hiss in the bowl,
When nightly sings the staring owl,
“Tu-whit, tu-who!”
A merry note,
While greasy Joan doth keel the pot.

William Shakespeare (1564-1616)

QUESTIONS
1. Vocabulary: saw (11), brooding (12).
2. Is the owl’s cry really a “merry” note? How are this adjective and the verb “crofts” employed?
3. In what way does the owl’s cry contrast with the other details of the poem?

In this poem Shakespeare communicates the quality of winter life around a sixteenth-century English country house. But he does not do so by telling us flatly that winter in such surroundings is cold and in many respects unpleasant, though with some pleasant features too (the adjectives cold, unpleasant, and pleasant are not even used in the poem). Instead, he provides a series of concrete, homely details that suggest these qualities and enable us, imaginatively, to experience this winter life ourselves. The shepherd blows on his fingers to warm his hands; the milk freezes in the pail between the cowshed and the kitchen; the cook is slowly and unclean, “greasy” either from spattered cooking fat or from her own sweat as she leans over the hot fire; the roads are muddy; the folk listening to the parson have colds; the birds “sit brooding in the snow”; and the servant girl’s nose is raw from cold. But pleasant things are in prospect. Tom is
Dulce et Decorum Est

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs.
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.

Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots,
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame, all blind;
Drunk with fatigue; doubly red eyes even to the hoots
Of gas-shells dropping softly behind.

Gas! GAS! Quick, boys!—An ecstasy of fumbling,
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time,
But someone still was shouting out and stumbling
And flound'ring like a man in fire or water.

Then in unanswerable fair we fell
Asunder like the sea.

In all my dreams before my helpless sight
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams, you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin,
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs
Bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est
Pro patria morti.

Wilfred Owen (1893–1918)

QUESTIONS

1. The Latin quotation, from the Roman poet Horace, means "It is sweet and becoming to die for one's country." What is the poem's comment on this statement?

2. List the elements of the poem that seem not beautiful and therefore "impotent." Are there any elements of beauty in the poem?

3. How do the comparisons in lines 1, 14, 20, and 23-24 contribute to the effectiveness of the poem?

4. What does the poem gain by moving from plural pronouns to the first person singular pronouns and the present tense?

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 as a whole as a concern with all kinds of experience—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 can reread a great novel or a 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.

There is no sharp distinction between poetry and other forms of imaginative literature. Although some inexperienced 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 poetic, but the familiar verse that begins "Thirty days hath September, / April, June, and November..." is not. The difference between poetry and other literature is 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 by before, have a higher voltage than does language. It is language that grows frequently incandescent, giving off both light and heat.

Ultimately, therefore, poetry can be recognized only by the response made to it by a practiced reader, someone who has acquired some sensitivity to poetry. But there is a catch here. We are not all equally experienced readers. To some readers, poetry may often seem dull and boring, a fancy way of writing something that could be said more simply. So might a color-blind person deny that there is such a thing as color.

The act of communication involved in reading poetry is like the act of communication involved in receiving a message by radio. Two devices are required: a transmitting station and a receiving set. The completeness of the communication depends on both the power and clarity of the transmitter and the sensitivity and tuning of the receiver. When a person reads a poem and no experience is received, either the poem is not a good poem or the reader is not properly tuned. With new poetry, we cannot always be sure which is at fault. With older poetry, if it has acquired critical acceptance—\textquotedblleft\textquotedblright;has been enjoyed by generations of good readers—\textquotedblright;we may assume that the receiving set is at fault. Fortunately, the fault is not irremediable. Though we cannot all become expert readers, we can become good enough to find both pleasure and value in much good poetry, or we can increase the amount of pleasure we already find in poetry and the number of kinds of poetry in which we find it. The purpose of this book is to help you increase your sensitivity and range as a receiving set.

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.

All poetry has these extra dimensions—its greater pressure per word and its greater tension per poem—by drawing more fully and more consistently on the 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 be effective 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.

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day? Thou art more lovely and more temperate: Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May, And summer's lease hath all too short a date. Sometimes too hot the eye of heaven shines, And often is his gold complexion dimmed; And every fair from fair sometimes declines By chance of nature's changing course untrimm'd; But thy eternal summer shall not fade Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st, Nor shall death brag thou wander'st in his shade When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st. So long as men can breathe or eyes can see, So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

William Shakespeare (1564-1616)

*Whenever a heading duplicates the first line of the poem or a substantial portion thereof, such typographically the first word (capitalized), it is probable that the poet left the poem untitled and that the anthologist has substituted the first line or part of it as an editorial convenience. Such a heading is not referred to as the title of the poem.
QUESTIONS
1. Vocabulary: temperate (2), shade (11). What different meanings does “temperate” have when used to describe a person or “a summer’s day”?
2. What details show that “a summer’s day” is lacking in loveliness and is in-temperate?
3. What are “the eye of heaven” (5) and “his gold complexion” (6)?
4. The poem begins more or less literally comparing the person being addressed to “a summer’s day,” but at line 9 it departs from what is literally possible into what is impossible. What does the poem gain by this shift in meaning?
5. Explain the logic behind lines 13–14. Is this a valid proof? Why or why not?

The Whipping

The old woman across the way
is whipping the boy again
and shouting to the neighborhood
her goodness and his wrongs.

Wildly he crashes through elephant-ears,
pleading in dusty zinnias,
while she in spite of crippling fat
pursues and corners him.

She strikes and strikes the shrilly crouching
boy till the stick breaks
in her hand. His tears are rainy weather
to woundlike memories:

My head gripped in bony rise
of knees, the wrenching struggle
to wrench free, the blows, the fear
worse than blows that hateful

Words could bring, the face that I
no longer knew or loved . . .
Well, it is over now, it is over,
and the boy sobs in his room.

And the woman leans muttering against
a tree, exhausted, purged—

averaged in part for lifelong hidings
she has had to bear.

Robert Hayden (1913–1980)

QUESTIONS
1. What similarities connect the old woman, the boy, and the speaker? Can you say that one of them is the main subject of the poem?
2. Does this poem express any beauty? What human truth does it embody? Could you argue against the claim that “it is over now, it is over” (19)?

The last Night that She lived

The last Night that She lived
It was a Common Night
Except the Dying—this to Us
Made Nature different

We noticed smallest things—
Things overlooked before
By this great light upon our Minds
Illicit—as ‘were.

As We went out and in
Between Her final Room
And Rooms where Those to be alive
Tomorrow were, a Blame

That Others could exist
While She must finish quite
A Jealousy for Her arose
So nearly infinite—

We waited while She passed—
It was a narrow time—
Too jostled were Our Souls to speak
At length the notice came.

She mentioned, and forgot—
Then lightly as a Reed
Bent to the Water, struggled scarce—
Concented, and was dead—
And We—We placed the Hair—
And drew the Head erect—
And then an awful leisure was
Belief to regulate—

Emily Dickinson (1830-1886)

QUESTIONS
1. Vocabulary: italicized (8), useful (27).
2. Lines 11–12 and 12–13 depart from common word order and grammar. Rephrase them so that their plain sense is clear (e.g., “Rooms where Those to be alive / tomorrow are” means “Rooms in which there were people who would be alive tomorrow”). Notice that both “a Blame” (12) and “A Jealousy” (15) are subjects of the verb “arose” (15).
3. What do the images of “a narrow time” (18) and “Too jostled” (19) contribute to the emotions of the poem?
4. Why is the comparison in lines 22–23 particularly effective?
5. Explain the emotional and spiritual adjustments expressed in the last four lines.

Ballad of Birmingham
(On the bombing of a church in Birmingham, Alabama, 1963)

“Mother dear, may I go downtown
Instead of out to play,
And march the streets of Birmingham
In a Freedom March today?”

“No, baby, no, you may not go,
For the dogs are fierce and wild,
And clubs and hoses, guns and jails
Ain’t good for a little child.”

“But, mother, I won’t be alone.
Other children will go with me,
And march the streets of Birmingham
To make our country free.”

“No, baby, no, you may not go.
For I fear those guns will fire.

But you may go to church instead
And sing in the children’s choir.”

She has combed and brushed her night-dark hair,
And bathed rose petal sweet,
And drawn white gloves on her small brown hands,
And white shoes on her feet.

The mother smiled to know her child
Was in the sacred place,
But that smile was the last smile
To come upon her face.

For when she heard the explosion,
Her eyes grew wet and wild.
She raced through the streets of Birmingham
Calling for her child.

She clawed through bits of glass and brick,
Then lifted out a shoe.
“O, here’s the shoe my baby wore,
But, baby, where are you?”

Dudley Randall (1914–2000)

QUESTIONS
1. This poem is based on a historical incident. Throughout 1963, Birmingham, Alabama, was the site of demonstrations and marches protesting the racial segregation of schools and other public facilities. Although they were intended as peaceful protests, these demonstrations often ended in violence as police attempted to dispense with fire hoses and police dogs. On the morning of September 15, 1963, a bomb exploded during Sunday School at the 16th Street Baptist Church, killing four children and injuring fourteen. How does the poem differ from what you would expect to find in a newspaper account of such an incident? In an encyclopedia entry? In a speech calling for the elimination of racial injustice?
2. What do the details in the fifth stanza (17–20) contribute to the effect of the poem? In “She” (17) the mother at the child?
3. In form, this poem shares certain characteristics with the folk ballad (see Glossary of Literary Terms, page 429). Why do you think this twentieth-century poet chose to write in a form that recalls the ballad tradition?
4. What purpose does the poem have beyond simply telling a story? How does the irony help achieve that purpose?
Kitchenette Building

We are things of dry hours and the involuntary plan,
Grayed in, and gray. "Dream" makes a giddy sound, not strong
Like "rent," "feeding a wife," "satisfying a man."

But could a dream send up through onion fumes
Its white and violet, fight with fried potatoes
And yesterday's garbage ripening in the hall,
Flutter, or sing an aria down these rooms

Even if we were willing to let it in,
Had time to warm it, keep it very clean,
Anticipate a message, let it begin!

We wonder. But not well! not for a minute!
Since Number Five is out of the bathroom now,
We think of lukewarm water, hope to get in it.

Guendolen Brooks (1917–2000)

QUESTIONS
1. Vocabulary: aria (7). A "kitchenette" (title) is a small kitchen or an alcove or part of a room fitted as a kitchen. What, then, is a "kitchenette building"? Who do you suppose is "Number Five" (12)?
2. Who is the "We" of the poem? Why is the use of plural speakers effective?
3. Why would these speakers refer to themselves as "things" (17)? If a dream rose through the cooking fumes and smell of garbage, why might these people not be "willing to let it in" (8)?

The Red Wheelbarrow

so much depends upon

a red wheel
barrow

William Carlos Williams (1883–1963)

QUESTIONS
1. The speaker asserts that "so much depends upon" the objects he refers to, leading the reader to ask: How much and why? This glimpse of a farm scene implies one kind of answer. What is the importance of the wheelbarrow, rain, and chicken to a farmer? To all of us?
2. What further importance can you infer from the references to color, shape, texture, and the juxtaposition of objects? Does the poem itself have a shape? What two ways of observing and valuing the world does the poem imply?
3. What are the possible reasons for "experimental" qualities in this poem—for instance, its lack of capitalization, its very short lines, and its plain, even homely image? Do these qualities give the poem a greater emotional power than a more conventional and decorative poem on the same topic might have achieved?

Suicide's Note

The calm,
Cool face of the river
Asked me for a kiss.

Langston Hughes (1902–1967)

QUESTIONS
1. How is the speaker's desire for death like the desire expressed in the comparison of the river to a person? How are they alike? Explore the frame of mind that would create this comparison.
2. Does the repeated "k" sound seem beautiful to you? Can you explain the repetition in terms that reflect the speaker's frame of mind?
That is not the voice of a critic
nor a common reader
it is someone young in anger
hardly knowing what to ask
who finds our lines our glosses
wanting in this world.

Adrienne Rich (b. 1929)

Ars Poetica

A poem should be palpable and mune
As a globed fruit,

Dumb
As old medallions to the thumb,
Silent as the sleeve-worn stone
Of casement ledges where the moon has grown—

A poem should be wordless
As the flight of birds.

A poem should be motionless in time
As the moon climbs,

Leaving, as the moon releases
Twig by twig the night-entangled trees,

Leaving, as the moon behind the winter leaves,
Memory by memory the mind—

A poem should be motionless in time
As the moon climbs.

A poem should be equal to:
Not true.

For all the history of grief
An empyrean doorway and a maple leaf.

For love
The leaning grasses and two lights above the sea—

A poem should not mean
But be.

Archibald MacLeish (1892–1982)

QUESTIONS
1. How can a poem be "wordless"? (7) How can it be "motionless in time"? (15)?
2. The Latin title, literally translated "The Art of Poetry," is a traditional title for works on the philosophy of poetry. What is this poet’s philosophy of poetry? What does he mean by saying that a poem should not "mean" (23) and should not be "true" (18)?

SUGGESTIONS FOR WRITING
"Writing about Poetry," Part 2 of this book, offers practical advice about the formal requirements and style that are usually expected in student papers. While many of the suggestions presented there may be familiar to you, reviewing them when you prepare to complete these writing assignments should help you write more effectively.

1. The following pairs of poems deal with similar subject matter treated in very different ways. Yet in each case the two poems employ the multidi-

mensional language that is one criterion of poetic excellence. Choose one pair and discuss the ways in which both poems qualify as poetry, even though they take different approaches to similar topics.

a. Tennyson, "The Eagle" (page 4) and Hardy, "The Darlling Buds" (page 309).

b. Owen, "Dulce et Decorum Est" (page 6) and Stevens, "The Death of a Soldier" (page 410).

c. Hopkins, "Spring" (page 58) and Dickinson, "A Light Exists in Spring" (page 54).

d. Angelou, "Woman Work" (page 188) and Wright, "Porridge" (page 424).

e. Hayden, "The Whipping" (page 19) and Roethke, "My Papa’s Waltz" (page 399).

f. Hughes, "Suicide’s Note" (page 13) and Robinson, "Richard Cory" (page 397).

2. According to "Ars Poetica" by Archibald MacLeish, "A poem should not mean / But be." (23–24). Relate this assertion to one or more of the following:

a. Williams, "The Red Wheelbarrow" (page 14).

b. Keats, "Ode on a Grecian Urn" (page 276).