What is Poetry?

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Poetry, among the arts, has a history of being poorly, even mysteriously, defined. Part of the problem is that many of those offering definitions have been poets; and too many of their definitions have been more poetical than precise. Emily Dickinson, for instance, on being asked her criterion for poetry, wrote: "[i]f I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can warm me, I know that it is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry." This is vivid and forceful, but it tells us much more about Emily Dickinson than it does about poetry.

Dylan Thomas called poetry "...the rhythmic, inevitably narrative movement from an over-clothed blindness to a naked vision." In his inclusion of the word "rhythmic," Thomas's definition is a step up from Dickinson's, for he indicates one of poetry's distinguishing marks.

An all-too-common failing of proposed definitions of poetry is that they could apply equally as well to other art forms. Witness Shelley's: "[p]oetry is the record of the best and happiest moments of the best and happiest minds." Poe did better: "I would define the poetry of words as the rhythmical creation of beauty." This excludes most of the other arts, but does not sharply distinguish poetry from *song*, which also uses words and rhythm.

A formal definition combines a genus and a differentia -- the general class to which a thing belongs, and the characteristics that make it different from the rest of the things in that class.

The proper genus of poetry is art form. We differentiate art forms from one another by the specific material media of the forms. The medium of poetry is language, but novels and vocal songs also depend upon language. The unique medium of poetry is *language utilizing the musical elements intrinsic to the language*. In contrast, prose makes little use of language's musical potential, and song turns upon a musical element which is extrinsic to language: melody.

Two classical definitions of poetry, "musical speech" and "rhythmical speech" are not far off the mark. The trouble wjth "musical speech" is that it does not differentiate poetry from song. The trouble with "rhythmic speech" is that rhythm is *not* the only musical element that poetry employs. There is *much* more to the music of language than beat.

An objection to be expected here is that I am simply defining poetry as *verse*, and that I must consequently accept as poetry commercial jingles, such as: "Hold the pickles, hold the lettuce! / Special orders don't upset us." However, the purpose of defining poetry's genus as "art form" was precisely to forestall such classification. An art form must project a deeply held view of life -- which the above Burger King jingle does not.

It is true that much of modern "poetry" cannot qualify as real poetry by this definition. But I consider this to be a virtue rather than a fault. Verse and poetry are intimately related. "Verse" names a specific musical way of Using language. "Poetry" refers to the use of verse for esthetic ends. It is accurate then, to say that *poetry is that art form which utilizes verse*. This is a common layman's definition. Its only drawback is that the layman usually cannot define what he means by "verse."

Verse is language which makes full use of the language's own musical potential. It should be noted that different languages have different musical potentials. For instance, it is easier to find rhymes in Italian than in English. Accordingly, native Italian verse forms, such as Dante's *terza rima* and Petrarchian sonnets, are very difficult to imitate in English since they require multiple interlocking rhyme lines. The typical English poet is happy to get two lines to rhyme, and abstains from trying for three.

A major factor contributing to the general confusion on the nature of poetry is poetry's ability to combine with both fiction and music.

Poetry's true relationship with the art of fiction is more easily grasped in our age, when most fiction is written in prose, than in times past, when most fiction was written in verse. Today we have the distinctly separate concepts "fiction" and "poetry." But this was not always so. Aristotle's work on the literary esthetics, the *Poetics*, is actually more concerned with the fictional aspects of Greek epic and drama than with their poetical aspects. The development of prose fiction is a relatively recent event. Even in the 19th century many plays were written in verse (including those of Victor Hugo and Edmond Rostand) although the prose novel dominated that century's fiction.

Today we have no difficulty grasping that poetry is not essential to fiction, and are likely to be puzzled that fiction so long remained linked to poetry. The reason may be fairly simple: it is much easier to memorize poetry than prose, and until the invention of the printing

press in 1445 by Johann Gutenberg, fiction had to be memorized. The epics of Homer may even have been *composed* orally, and not written down at all until later ages.

It remains true that the combination of fiction with poetry can produce works of great power and beauty. Shakespeare's plays are usually thought to be the outstanding example of such a union in English. A special favorite of my own is the Brian Hooker transl tion of *Cyrano De Bergerac*.

Although it is not generally recognized, fiction is the dominant partner in its marriage with poetry. In any *long* poem that tells a story, the story is more important to the overall esthetic effect. In terms of its basic esthetic effect, an epic poem is a novel in verse. Likewise, a Shakespeare play is a *drama* in verse, not "just a long poem," (a view which some modern critics have put forth with regard to Shakespeare).

Poetry does not have to tell a story. This can be seen clearly in many poems, including this one by Wordsworth:

> *My heart leaps up when I behold*
> *A rainbow in the sky;*
> *So was it when my life began;*
> *So is it now I am a man;*
> *So be it when I shall grow old,*
> *Or let me die!*
> *The child is father of the Man;*
> *And I could wish my days to be*
> *Bound each to each*
> *by natural piety.*

This well-known poem does not so much tell a story as make a *statement*. So we must deny Dylan Thomas's assertion that poetry is "inevitably narrative." It is true that to have any meaning at all a poem must refer to reality, and thus directly or indirectly describe some state of affairs, but we must distinguish description from narrative. Moreover, in most *short* poems that tell a story, there is not enough story for a successful story in prose. Consider the story in Robert Frost's "Stopping By The Woods On A Snowy Evening." Although it is a very nice poem, if we were to see the same bare-bones "story" written up in prose, we should declare that it is hardly a story at all. Its events could not stand up on their own as a short story. It is only the incorporation of the musical effects of language that turns the description of stopping by the woods into a work of art. This is not true of Shakespeare's plays or Homer's epics. Translated

into prose, they still stand on their own as works of art, because most basically they are fiction.

Generally speaking, the longer a poem is, the more dominance its narrative elements acquire. In deed, the longer a poem is the more it requires a fictional structure to keep it from falling apart into a disorganized shambles. Thus, Keats' middle-length "Eve of St. Agnes" works because it is insufficiently organized as a narrative. As a rule, short poems are basically poetic, and long poems are (or should be) basically fictional. ("Long poem" here refers to book length poems.)

Poetry also combines with the art of music, in the form of song. This is most clearly observed in classical art song, or *lieder*, in which composers set to music lyrics which were intended to stand on their own, as poetry. The talents of the greatest poets and composers of the 19th century were often combined in these productions. Beethoven's setting to music of Schiller's "Ode To Joy" in his ninth symphony is one of the best known and monumental works of this type.

Music dominates this combination esthetically, providing the more fundamental element in the experience of song, but this is no more generally recognized than the dominance of fiction in story-poems, though indications of it abound. For instance, it is often remarked that many of the best songs are based on relatively inferior poems. But no one considers a song good if its melody is bad, no matter how good its poetic base is.

More generally, music so dominates poetry in song that the lyrics to most songs make no attempt to stand on their own as poems at all, although they may possess some poetic qualities. It is a common experience, when listening to a song, to feel that the song's words are profoundly poetic. But a reading of the lyrics on the printed page, without music, very often seems to reduce the words to triviality.

Just as many song lyrics do not make good poems, so many poems would not make good song lyrics. Or, at least, some poetry seems more suited to melody, and some less so. The more suited kind is called "lyric poetry," naturally enough, and is generally characterized by a "flowing" quality of sound and thought. The transitions in thought should not require such concentration that no part of the mind is left free to listen to the melody. The metrical arrangement of the words should not be too closely allied to normal speech patterns, for all such effect will be lost when the words are set to music. The following verse by Burns exemplifies the qualities of lyric poetry:

My love is like a red, red rose,
That's newly sprung in June;
My love is like a melody,
That's sweetly played in tune,

In fact, Burns intended this poem to be set to music.

To get an idea of why abrupt thought-transitions and speech-allied rhythms are unlyrical, try to imagine Hamlet's 'To be or not to be" speech set to music. Perhaps it would not be impossible, but it would certainly present a challenge. And rather than being an isolated song, such a production would most likely be a part of an entire opera based on Hamlet. Opera combines music, fiction and poetry all together, and is the last combination of art forms into which poetry enters. In opera, poetry is dominated by both the fiction and the music, and the fiction itself is dominated by the music.

This completes our discussion of poetry's combination with other forms of art. Because fiction and music dominated these combined forms, many definitions of poetry, failing to differentiate these forms from poetry *qua* poetry, have done little more than confuse the nature of poetry with that of fiction and music.

One of the special reasons people find it difficult to make such a differentiation, is that poetry *as suc*h strikes them as being itself a "combined art form" in some sense. After all, poetry seems to combine elements of literature and music. And aren't literature and music both arts in their own right? Shouldn't poetry, then be regarded as a merger of the two?

The answer is no. Why? Be cause in the form in which they are found in poetry, neither music nor literature can stand on its own. Music without melody is not an art form. Neither is prose without a story. Try listening to a poem written in a foreign language. One's inability to understand the meaning of the words totally destroys the poem's esthetic effect. Those musical elements that remain, and which one does *hear*, are not enough for art. Try reading a prose translation of a foreign poem, a translation which communicates the conceptual content, but which drops the musical element. You will find that it falls very flat.

Thus we see that in the form in which they appear in poetry, mu sic and language need each other to work. However, it is true that language and music represent basically different modes of awareness for man, as is seen in the fact that in their proper forms, each *is*

capable of supporting an art form of its own. Poetry is a combined form of art, then, in that it unites elements of two different modes of awareness, the linguistic and the musical, into one form in which neither mode is self-sufficient.

Poetry cannot be analyzed as "basically" concerned with the sound of words, nor as "basically" concerned with the meaning of words. It is concerned with the union of sound and meaning.

Poetry can in no sense be *reduced* to some other, more basic, art form. Poetry represents an esthetic bare-minimum, from which nothing further can be taken away if its esthetic effect is to stand, even though its elements, words and sounds are also found in other art forms. In this respect, poetry resembles sculpture, which seems to combine the modes of sight and touch, and which seems to fall midway between painting and architecture.

Because poetry combines two different sensory modes, judging the esthetic merit of a poem requires judging the merit of 1) the literary element, 2) the musical element, and 3) the harmonious integration of sense and sound. Of the three steps, little is understood about the two which involve consideration of poetry's musical aspect. We don't know much about how music works. Hence, we don't know much about how poetry works.

Since poetry has less music than music itself, it is possible that the problem of music in poetic evaluation could be solved before the more general problem of musical evaluation. But this merely hypothetical possibility is little help for us today.

Despite the authoritative air of many critics, and despite the often obscure references to "technical prosody" on the part of critics wishing to back up their assertions, we don't know what makes a poem sound good or bad. And no one has ever proposed a comprehensive theory to account for our perceived preferences -- not even a *wrong* comprehensive theory. Our knowledge of prosody (the study of poetry's sound effects) has never really been organized. It exists chiefly as a debated set of unintegrated "rules of thumb," and is startlingly inadequate to the task of objective evaluation. "Educated taste" and "the judgement of history" may be given some weight in lieu of objective standards for the musical aspect of poetry, but they are hardly to be revered. I suggest you trust your own ear.

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