

Poetry as Viewed by Its Practitioners: Some Representative Examples

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Abstract

The following is an attempt to explore the various thematic aspects of a particular type of poetry prevalent in twentieth century British and American literatures—the so-called ‘Poetry for Poetry’s Sake’. It is a self-referential type of verse whose paramount emphasis is laid on analyzing the nature of poetry and its problematics and its significance as viewed by its own practitioners. The paper comprises two sections, followed by a brief conclusion. The first section is introductory in that it tries to contextualize this phenomenon of metapoetry within its general and wide framework of other adjacent literary genres such as metafiction, metadrama or metacriticism. The second section, much the longest, is concerned with shedding light on some representative examples from twentieth century British and American literatures.

Key words: self-referential, metapoetry, verbal construct, strenuous, sacrifice, bitter- sweet

“ The great poems of heaven
and hell have been
written; the great poem of
earth remains to be
written.” Wallace Stevens
(qtd.Hartman,G.W.1986:123)

Much critical controversy has been raised concerning the nature of poetry, the poetic sensibility, its objectives, its role and above all its reader's response. Such philosophical and psychological speculations have come to the fore since times immemorial. Suffice it to remember Plato's *Dialogues* and *Ion* as well as Aristotle's *The Poetics*. Such seminal works do draw the attention to what sort of activity the poet does and its beneficial or harmful impact on the auditor(in sermons or oratory), reader or audience (in drama).Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* presents a pioneering function of poetry—a means of introducing narrative material as it did in introducing ancient and medieval dramas.

Despite its satirical and mocking tone, *The Canterbury Tales* falls short of subjecting the poetic process to an in-depth scrutiny. It is left for the Renaissance poet and scholar, Sir Philip Sidney, to foreground the pluralistic and problematic nature of poetry and poets. In his renowned article,’ In Defence of Poetry’, he raises one of the perennial views pertaining to poetry and its writing. As he puts it, writing poetry is a matter of obligation rather than choice” I know not by what mischance (I was driven to my unelected vocation)” (Abrams, M.H. 1986:481).A passing comment on the voluntary or involuntary involvement with the craft of poetry and its rewards or buffets like the one presented here will be the beginning of further and more thoroughgoing

analyses of the irresistible enchantment poetry presents for its practitioners or actants.

Sidney's pre-romantic perception of the poetic craft will be fully explored in the speculations of the romantic poets (who are prominent critics as well) such as Wordsworth, Shelley, Coleridge and Keats. Shelley's often-quoted statement "poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world" (Reiman,D. 1977:168) is a catch phrase for critics and scholars nowadays. The same holds true to Keats's dictum "A thing of beauty is a joy forever" (Mayhead,R.1967: 29). Such stimulating ideas about the positive and heartening role of poetry in human existence can be felt even when leafing through *Lyrical Ballads* (the contributors being Wordsworth and Coleridge) and its influential arguments about the aesthetic aspects of poetry.

Twentieth century abounds with serious and detailed discussions about the poetic process and its medium. A passing glance at T.S.Eliot's *Critical Essays* and those of his mentor, Ezra Pound, or Yeats's arguments, to mention only few examples, enhances the view that poetry and its analysis run hand in hand. One of the reasons behind this phenomenon is the nature of poetry itself. About this debatable question, critic Terry Eagleton reminds us that poetry is of all literary genres the one most apparently sealed from history, the one where "sensibility may play in its purest ,and least socially tainted" (Eagleton,T.1980:63).

What matters, however, for the current purposes of this study is not the critique written by poets in the form of essays or letters. The present study is concerned with a very limited area: how the poet chooses this self-referential side of poetry as a recurrent and overriding theme in his/her own poetry. In this type of poetry, the poet is content with drawing attention

to its own status and procedures as a verbal artifact. This is because it is simply a "partial view of the world" (Barrell, J. 1988:12). In other words, the interest lies in the very process of its composition, its unruly matter and problematics. Of course this process is not confined to poetry only. What is called 'metafiction' has by now become a common term in the literary scene. It is an attempt to investigate the strategies of fiction writing within the corpus of the novel itself. Patricia Waugh's rationale of the narcissistic fiction is relevant to the present study as she sees that this phenomenon poses "an awareness of precisely how its values and practices are constructed and legitimized" (Waugh, P. 1984: 19). This can be felt through Samuel Beckett's trilogy (1950), John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), Kurt Vonnegut's *Breakfast of Champions* (1972). In drama, there are similar experiments such as Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921) and Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (1966) where drama and theatricality constitute the core and main interest of such plays.

This vogue can be felt in the transmutations taking place even in the field of criticism. Criticism as commonly held is the process of "the analysis, interpretation and evaluation of literary works: it does not mean 'finding fault with'" (Peck, J. 1984:149). What has come to the fore in the late twentieth century and the twenty first century is 'metacriticism': the process of investigating the critical devices and showing their validity or invalidity. Beardsley's definition is worth-quoting since he views metacriticism as the investigation of "those principles required for clarifying and confirming critical statements" (Beardsley, M. 1981: 4). The arguments of Barthes and Derrida about the ostensible death

or death of the author especially in the famous essays 'Death of the Author'(1967) and 'What is an Author'(1969) consecutively question the role of the author, if not his total absence, as it were. The meaning is stripped of its agent and is allowed to move in a space where plurality is the hallmark of its free play and endless signification.

The prefix 'meta', then, has become part and parcel of the main literary genres where the very tools of writing receive the brunt of the critical assault and analysis. Given this, poetry can not remain aloof and isolated from such phenomena. Hence the great number of poems whose main interest is the poetic genre and its problematics. In other words what is called 'metapoetry' engages a good space in the poetry of the twentieth century in line with the developments in other literary genres particularly, criticism or its offshoot, metacriticism. There is a time in the poet's life and consciousness when he/she finds that it is the right moment to subject the poetic discourse to rational analysis and judgment. Such a time is convenient for musing upon the verbal craft, its joys and pains, and above all the process of getting involved in its clutches and burdens. This poetry is of the type that A.C.Bradley calls 'poetry for poetry's sake'(Bradley, A.1901:5) as he has in mind a particular label under which he subsumes a certain type of poetry. The Cambridge critic, I.A.Richards elaborates some aspects of the poetry in question in his argument that it" tells us these things. First, this experience is an end in itself and it is worth having in its account, an intrinsic worth alone" (Richards,I.1924:67). As in the case of metacriticism, metafiction and metadrama, metapoetry is essentially involved with the rigorous process of exploring the nature of poetry, its pitfalls, the language barrier and its controllable or

uncontrollable impact. However, one has to raise in advance some assumptions about the difference between metafiction and metapotery in that the former often implies 'death' of the novel or fiction or at least dearth of material at the disposal of the novelist. In total contrast, the poems to be discussed in the following pages stem from other motives and views. Indeed that its seeds date to back to earlier centuries is indicative of its roots in other planes of human experience other than the mere pursuit of what is surprising and innovative. For instance, Anne Bradstreet's poem 'The Author to Her Book' (1678) is a seminal text carrying nearly all the qualities in question. This poem which was posthumously published does show the poet's excessive worry about her product (offspring), the agony of giving it life and shape and above all the fear of the critics's maltreatment of her long-awaited offspring. All these are central in the critical controversy going on in literary theory nowadays:

I cast thee by as one unfit for light/ The visage was so irksome in my sight;/ Yet being mine own, at length affection would/ Thy blemishes amend, if so I could:/ I washed thy face but more defects I saw,/ And rubbing off a spot, still made a flaw./ I stretched thy joints to make thee even feet,/ Yet still thou run'st more hobbling than is meet;/ In better dress to trim thee was my mind,/ But nought save homespun cloth in the house In find./ In this way, among vulgar may'st roam;/ In critics' hands beware thou dost not come;/ And take thy way where thou are not known./ If for thy father asked, say thou had'st none;/ And for thy mother , she alas is poor,/ Which caused her thus to send thee out of door.(Kennedy, X 2005:720)

Curiously enough, in this poem Bradstreet raises a very significant issue about creativity: the impulse to write and the forces that commingle to confer life upon the text. That she stresses that her poem is fatherless is a roundabout way of articulating the modern sensibility stressing the negative or negligible role of the author common in contemporary critical contentions. In his cogent comments on this issue critic Bradley asserts that "the poet did not possess his meaning; it possessed him "(Bradley, A.1901:61).Writing poetry as suggested in Bradstreet's poem is a painful experience, where the poet's toil will be endless and his/her discontent is ever-present.

One of the psychological insight literary theory raises concerning the poetic activity is the perception that writers often compensate their daily bafflements and frustrated sexual and emotional drives by means of creative writing. This is indeed the main argument of Freud and his school as far as this matter is concerned. Such argument is actually substantiated and verified when one considers the blighted lives and experiences of creative writers like Sylvia Plath, Franz Kafka, Ernest Hemingway, Gertrude Stein, Virginia Woolf, D.H.Lawrence...etc. Given this fact, it is not surprising to find a woman of Edith Sitwell's psychological state and fragile health to have such a glamorous image of poetry and its therapeutic impact. Poetry, as she perceives it, "Ennobles the heart and the eyes,/ and unveils the meaning of all things/upon which the heart and the eyes dwell./It discovers the secret rays of the universe,/and restores the forgotten paradises"(Peck,J.1984:427).This excessive admiration of poetry and its sustaining role in the author's life has much to do with the wide vistas of experience it opens

and the imaginative and intellectual pleasures felt only by those who compose or read it.

The other concomitant worry poets or rather all creative writers suffer in general is the ceaseless fear that what is written often does not match what is there in nature or reality. This perfectionist attitude springs from the sensation that this painstaking field (poetry) should encompass and transcend anything outside its realm. Earle Birney in his ' Poet -Tree' acknowledges that,

I fear that I shall never make/ a poem slippier than a snake/or oozing with as fine a juice/ as runs in girls or even spruce/no I wont make not now nor later/pronems as luverlee as pertractors/trees is made by fauns or satyrs (Enright,D.1980:14).

A further equally justifiable worry is about the future of poetry in an increasingly technological and sophisticated world. This is one of the recurrent concerns of poetry as seen in John Heath -Stubbs ' To a Poet a Thousand Years Hence'. Here the poet gives a futurist perception of what unpredictable and dismal destiny awaits the verbal art in those hard times:

I who am dead a thousand years/ And wrote this crabbed post-classic sacred/ Transmit it to you—though with doubts,/That you possess the skill to read/Who, with your pink ,mutated eyes,/Crouched in the radioactive swamp/ Beneath a leaking shelter, scan/These lines beside a flickering lamp.(Enright,D.1980:106). After this chilling picture of the bleak future of mankind that looms in the horizon , the urgent question that preoccupies the poet's mind is the role, if any , assigned to poetry when man's very existence is at stake," But does our art of words survive--/Do

bards within that swamp rehearse/ Tales of the twentieth century,/Nostalgic , in rude epic verse." (Enright, D. 1980:106)

On the technical level, writing poetry poses more than one challenge, particularly when it comes to expressing what is most intimate in one's life. This sense of elating and sublimating what is most grievous in life already suggested in the previous poem is the most outstanding trait of poetry writing. However, the dichotomy between the Saussurean 'signifier' and 'signified' or linguistic sign and object or concept turns into a real baffling force in the face of the poet. In Emily Dickinson's ' I find the phrase to every thought', there is a reference to the pathetic failure of the sign to find convincing suitable equivalence to the concept, the abstract idea. Here the poet moves beyond the linguistic game and contextualizes the whole thing within its wider connotations. There are certain experiences and situations in man's existence which the poem, no matter how deft it may be, falls short of articulating and conceptualizing:

I found the phrase to every thought/I ever had, but one;/And that defies me,-- as a hand/Did try to chalk the sun;/ To race nurtured in the dark,--/How would your own begin?/Can blaze be done in cochineal,/Or noon in mazarin? (Enright,D.1980: 115)

As a matter of fact, the points raised in this poem can be generalized to any poem or rather any author who seeks to express by means of words what he/she has in mind, and the varying degrees of content or discontent following the act of writing.

The problems of writing poetry do not end here. The struggles with the linguistic medium represent only a part of a

wide domain marked by ceaseless discontents whether inside the process of writing or life at large. Ezra Pound's 'The Rest' is not only a celebration of the poetic craft but also an exploration of the extent of misconception and depreciation besetting the poetic process and those involved. Contemporary literary theory keeps on stressing the alienation, aloofness and estrangement of poets or creative writers in their communities. It is left for Ezra Pound to remind the reader of this fact in a voice that sounds challenging, self-confident, self-righteous and away from the common tone of self-pity accompanying these arguments. The last three lines of the poem indicate the poet's firm position regarding the extent of misconception held about poets and their practices. He tells the reader or beholder in a self-congratulatory tone that he has 'weathered the storm' and survived all types of bafflements and intimidations:

O helpless few in my country,/O remnant enslaved!/Artists broken against her,/A-stray, lost in the villages,/Mistrusted, spoken against,/Lovers of beauty, starved,/Thwarted with systems,/Helpless against the control;/You who can not wear yourselves out/By persisting to success,/You who can only speak ,/Who can not steel yourselves into reiteration;/You of the finer sense,/Broken against false knowledge,/You who can know at first hand,/Hated, shut in, mistrusted:/Take thought:/I have weathered the storm,/I have beaten out my exile.(Pound,E.2005:138)

The freedom in choosing a mode of life and thinking away from the prevailing herd mentality is not only confined to Pound. Rather it is a common practice and position poets are wont to hold in good stead. Equally important is the freedom, intellectual, artistic and social, from traditional molds and forms of writing. Many poets, for one reason or

another, find expression encumbered and restrained. Freedom of expression forms the crux of the matter for Robert Graves in his 'Free Verse'. Needless to say, this poem is typical in that its concern is exclusively devoted to exploring the nature of poetry, its structure and roles which may sound at times constraining for the free-wheeling poet:

I now delight/ in spite of the night/ And the right of classical tradition,/In writing/ And reciting/Straight ahead,/Without let a commission/Just any little rhyme/In my little time/That runs in my head....My rhymes no longer shall stand arrayed/Like Prussian soldiers on parade/That march /Stiff starch/Foot to foot/Boot to boot,/Blade to blade...No, No!/My rhymes must go / Turn'ee, Turn'ee,/Twinkling frosty/Will-o'-the wisp-like, misty.(Graves, R.2003:212)

This is not a faddish or luxurious indulgence. It stems from a genuine sense that the poetic expression should not be encumbered by traditional molds and rigid observance of stultifying rules. Instead there ought to be a new task assigned to the poem. The emphasis as viewed by the poet here should be laid on the thematic and ideational rather than the formal and aesthetic. Indeed this is the gist of the matter of Wallace Stevens's 'Of Modern Poetry':

The poem of the mind in the act of finding / What will suffice. It has not always had /To find: the scene was set; it prepared what /Was in the script./Then the theatre was changed/To something else. Its past was a souvenir./It has to be living, to learn the speech of the place/ It has to face the men of the time and to meet/ The women of the time.(Stevens, W. 1997:218)

Here Stevens talks about the serious commitments of the poet as he/she deals with the poet-audience relationship and

its ramifications. There ought to be a sort of lingua franca between the poet and those reading or listening to his/her poetry. Without this rapprochement, things will reach a standstill and the communicative act fails.

Indeed this is the focus of Marianna Moore's controversial 'Poetry' which stands halfway between poetry and prose. Linguistically speaking, this poem is a sort of manifesto heralding the qualifications of genuine poetry, with a particular reference to her disapproval of the unnecessary and deliberate mystification of contemporary poetry. She is of the opinion that poetry has to be written in the language of the tribe and not to be condescending or mystified for its reader. Using a kind of polemic presentation, Moore starts by initially castigating the poetry that does not take into account the reader's needs and range of mind. She tells her readers at the beginning that she does not like this "fiddle". However, after this disheartening start, she begins to sort out the type of poetry she admires " a place for the genuine./Hands that can grasp, eyes,/that can dilate, hair that can rise/ if it must, these things are important.../ because they are useful". So the poet actually differentiates between the real and 'genuine' poetry and --the artificial one written by ' half -poets'. She specifies the main traits of poetry which she finds apt to be admired as lying in the poet's innate ability to transcend the common place and cliché-ridden and show his/her distinct voice:

One must make a distinction/however: when dragged into prominence by half poets,/the result is not poetry,/nor till the poets among us can be /"literalists of the imagination"— above/insolence and triviality and can present/the raw material of poetry in/all its rawness and/that which is on the other hand / genuine, you are interested in poetry.(Perkins,G.2002: 986)

This self-centeredness evident throughout the whole poem as it has no other interests except this exclusive world of poetry is once again reiterated in William Carlos Williams' 'The Wind Increases'. Here the poet finds that the power of the verbal and poetic art is so overwhelming and irresistible that its eventual impact on the recipient is likened to that of the wind—sweeping, encompassing and holding a tight grip on both the writing subject and the beholder:

Good Christ what is a poet—if any exists?/a man whose words will bite /their way/home—being actual/having the form of the motion/at each twigtip/new/upon the tortured/body of thought/gripping/the ground /away/ to the last leaftip.(Williams,W.1991:400)

Williams is actually stating the obvious here in that he stresses the relation between the genuine feelings of the poet and his/her verbal expression. Only when the poet abides by this factor does the poem attain the desired effect. The heartfelt words definitely leave their impact on the reader or auditor and create in him/her the proper response.

Apart from this inseparable link between the authenticity of feeling and verbal articulation, poet R.S.Thmoas raises a further view concerning this point in his ' Poetry for Supper'. This time the reader is reminded of the romantic credo in its great emphasis on the role of nature as the first inspirer and source of creativity as felt in the writings of Wordsworth, Shelley, Coleridge and Keats. This reliance on the invigorating influences of nature can and must be accompanied by individual toil and sensitivity to get the maximum effect:

Listen ,now, verse should be as natural/As the small tuber that feeds on mule/And grows slowly from obtuse soil/To the white flower of immortal beauty....Leave it to nature and

the verse sprawls,/Himself as bindweed, if it break it all/Life's iron's crust. Man, you must sweat/And rhyme your guts taut, if you'd build/Your verse a ladder.(Enright, D. 1980:483)

This strenuous effort to break “life’s iron crust” is once again felt in E.E.Cummings’s interesting poem,’ If you like my poem let them’. Here the poet draws a comparison between the individual and the verbal art and comes to the conclusion that the latter is no more than an ignorant and negligible follower, a member of the entourage of the belle:

If you like my poems let them/ Walk in the evening , a little behind you/Then people will say/”Along this road I saw a princess pass/on her way to meet her lover”(it was /toward nightfall)with tall and ignorant servants.(Cummings, E. 1994:125)

The last few words of the poem refer to the position of poetry compared to the matchless beauty of his sweetheart. This relegation of poetry to an inferior position is striking if we recall that real poets often tend to represent poetry as the sole source of aesthetic pleasure to which many things can not correspond.

Conversely, Dylan Thomas’s vision of art runs in line with the arguments raised by contemporary literary theory that writing poetry is not an easy or rewarding activity. It is as hard as pulling teeth—intellectually, psychologically, mentally and emotionally. In his keen perceptive insight, Dylan Thomas can only highlight the agonies accompanying the creative process and its painstaking labors. In his poem entitled ‘In My Craft or Sullen Craft’ he tackles the gnawing act of excavating the memory or restoring lost sensations:

In My Craft or Sullen Art/Exercised in the still night/When only the moon rages/And the lovers lie abed/With all their

grieves in their arms/I labor singing light/Not for ambition or bread/Or the strut and trade of charms/On the ivory stages /But for common wages/Or their most secret heart....Not for the proud man apart/From the raging moon I write/On these spindrift pages/Not for the towering dead./With their nightingales and psylms.(Thomas,D. 1971:227)

Yes, indeed, writing remains first and foremost a subjective and highly idiosyncratic field that is content with expressing the agonies of the heart. This thankless job of writing poetry is once again explored in Donald Davie's poem,' The Poet – Scholar'. Here the poet reiterates the countless pangs and sufferings of poetry as the writer comes to grips with its nebulous matter of,"The poet-scholar can not keep apart/The grief and the investment. In the least/Anticipated movement of his heart,/He finds a pleasure that reverts, increased,/ To senses what was selfish from the start"(Davie,D.1955:43).

In the same direction moves D.J.Enright's poem' Poet Wondering What He Is Up To' that raises the ticklish question of poetic writing or drive that forces the poet to become its own medium as Carl G. Jung argues in his archetypal assessments of the creative impulse. It is the uncontrollable process of writing that takes control, not the writing agent. Indeed the very title of this poem highlights this issue,"a sort of hunger,/Less easy to assuage than some/-One else an extra ear/Listening for a telephone/ Which might or might not ring".(Enright, D. 1980:109)

The problematic relation between creative writers and critics is not something new. Already Bradstreet has pointed out the necessity of shunning the critics whose detracting views could subvert any creative effort. They often have a destabilizing role in the poet's course of writing. The

contemporary poets refer to this issue in one way or another. A.D. Hope's 'Duncid Minor' has the following to say about poetry and its excellence:

The self-moved Mover as Machinery—/Pure criticism without thought or fuss,/Pure theory formed with nothing to discuss!/This rare device embodies in its guts/No cranks or levers, pistons, cogs or nuts;/A 'magic eye' looks inward and controls/Pure critics musing on their own pure souls.(Hope, A. 1972:7)

The 'negative capability', that John Keats has envisioned in his keen critical insight could be a topic for poets to raise and shed light on. In his masterful and witty way of writing, Oscar Wilde in his 'Helas' brings home the sacrifices the poets offer on the altar of verse and its muses, "To drift with every passion till my soul/Is a stringed lute on which all winds can play/Is it for this that I have given away/Mine ancient wisdom, and austere control?/Methinks my life is a twice-written scroll"(Wilde,O. 2000:311).

This stanza is in fact a critical view about how poetry comes into being. First the actual experience, then the verbal articulation in which the poet has to put himself in various situations in order to have this longed-for identification between matter and expression. Hence the phrase," a twice-written scroll".

The Irish poet, W.B. Yeats , elaborates on this issue of creative writing and its charming circle. Indeed the bewilderment of the poet in his ' The Man and the Echo' reveals the Hamlet-like predicament about the impossibility of choosing between two equally charming options, " to be or not to be" as the 'bodkin' clearly suggests. Poetry in this poem appears to be costly and nerve-racking and what is

more, insignificant. Indeed the poet's predicament is no less woe-inspiring and intimidating:

All that I have said and done,/Now that I am old and ill,/Turn into a question till/I lie awake night after night/Did that play of mine send out /Certain men the English shot?/Did words of mine put too great strain/On that woman's reeling brain?/Could my spoken words have checked/That whereby a house lay wrecked?/And all seems down and lie....The spiritual intellect's great work,/and shirk it in vain. There is no release/In a bodkin or disease. (Yeats, W. 1956:386)

In conclusion, one can say that poets often tend at a late stage in their careers to meditate upon their craft, its mechanism, risks and sacrifices, its relation with adjacent disciplines, pleasures and pains. More important, however, is the serious argument about the validity and feasibility of poetry at a time when many things have become questionable. This is the same central question raised by the poet Margaret Randall in her interesting and relevant article "Does Poetry Matter?"(Randall,M.2010: 74),where she feels that even in the age of technology as the present one, poetry remains indispensable in addressing those sentiments smoldering in the human psyche. It goes without saying that the issues raised by these poets inform the core of literary theory nowadays. Poetry, then, can be a self-contained field whose merits and demerits constitute an enjoyable topic in its own right. A final point to be raised here is that the emergence of this self-investigatory verse is not a symptom of its poverty or imminent death. Rather it is the other way round. That poetry can probe its own tools and strategies is emblematic of its sustainable energy and ever-present flexibility and feasibility.

It is indicative of poetry's renewed activities and diverse interests.

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