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# **POETRY NOTEBOOK**

## **2006–2014**

# **CLIVE JAMES**

PICADOR

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## Introduction

This book got started early in 2006, when I had lunch in London at an open-air restaurant near Holborn, on an unusually sunny winter's day. My companion was Christian Wiman, editor of the magazine *Poetry*. Operating from its base in Chicago, *Poetry* magazine has always been a force in the world of poetry, even for those of us who believe that a poem should get beyond the world of poetry if it can, and get itself heard in a wider world. I was pleased to discover that Wiman held the same belief.

I was even more pleased when he suggested that I might write my opinions about poetry down, and publish them from time to time in his magazine, in the form of a Poetry Diary. Or perhaps a better title would be Poetry Notebook, to obviate the impression that I was thinking about nothing except poetry every day. Even if I were, it would surely be better to let the daily thoughts accumulate into proper arguments, as long as I kept them short. Brevity would be the watchword; as, indeed, it is for poetry; or anyway it ought to be. Right there was one of the many opinions that I would have the chance to focus on and perhaps clarify, or even, as gracefully as possible, admit to have been wrong. Whichever poem or piece of a poem was in question, if it had vitality then all other considerations would be trumped. I could already hear the book's tone of voice in my head: always a good sign with any writing project.

No, Poetry Notebook would be the right title. Having settled that matter, we talked on: mainly about poetry in Britain, poetry in America, and the function of the Atlantic Ocean in coming between the two. If Robert Frost had not first secured his British reputation, would he ever have risen to supremacy in America? We discussed

whether Seamus Heaney – still alive at the time – could possibly have enjoyed reading all those poetic offerings from his students at Harvard, or whether even he, who had the patience of a saint, might not have prayed for release. All we could be sure of was that he had never written a poem about it. His manners were too good. Perhaps there needed to be a revival of bad manners, on the scale of Auden trashing any spare room he was ever allowed to stay in, or Verlaine expressing his feelings about Rimbaud by putting a bullet into him.

I remember that by the time we got to the coffee we were agreeing that the later Wallace Stevens spent too much time writing in his own manner. To speak on such a theme – instead of falling silent, as if the CIA might have the table bugged – was a testimony to Wiman's moral courage, because for an American editor it is a bold thing to question, even in part, the achievement of an American poetic giant. But it was clear that Wiman was a brave man all round. Fine-drawn with a close haircut, he looked like a more than usually sensitive astronaut. He was, however, carrying a vicious form of bone cancer. It was inspiring to hear so young a man – so young and so cruelly stricken – making such a point of being clear about how poetry ruled his mind, even at a time when his body was putting him on notice that the years ahead would be tough sledding.

A few years later I fell ill myself; but I had already published, in *Poetry*, a few chapters of my Poetry Notebook that treated time as if it were running short. Only occasionally did I still feel inclined to write a longer piece about poetry. I was getting old, and the concentration necessary for writing a long piece seemed better reserved for writing poems, when they came. After I fell ill, I quit writing longer pieces altogether, although I still wrote the occasional short book review when I thought, perhaps foolishly, that the poet had a right to my continued acknowledgement: Michael Longley, Stephen Edgar, Les Murray and Wiman himself. But two or three brushes with death left the thought of any extended prose excursion looking overly ambitious, and even after my leukaemia went into remission I was short of energy. My translation of the *Divine Comedy* still required a lot of attention: the verse-writing was complete, but there were intro-

ductory pages of prose that still needed to be written, and my share of the editorial scrutiny was a hard task. Put it all together and it was no longer likely that I would get many critical articles even started, let alone finished. Critical ideas, however, still thronged in my head, as they always had. Now more than ever they tended to be ideas about poetry, and now more than ever they tended to be conclusions about poetic bedrock: the intensity of language that marked the real difference between poetry and prose. But a lifetime of thinking about the subject had not left me with an aesthetic system to convey. It had left me with a thousand thoughts. To register them, a Poetry Notebook was the ideal form.

One of those ideas will be found to rule this book. The favourite question of any editor of a literary page, anywhere in the world, is: ‘What is a poem?’ Your answer is meant to be short, snappy, quotable, bloggable. One answer, which I devised and published years ago, is that a poem is any piece of writing that can’t be quoted from except out of context. I still find that idea serviceable as an epigram. A better question, but one that you will never be asked, is: ‘How do you recognize a piece of writing as a poem?’ There are trick answers. One of them is to point out that if you have to ask, then already it is not a poem. But the best answers are not tricks. They are registrations of what we feel and think when we encounter a stretch of language that transmits the thrill of human creativity by all its means, even by the means with which it is put together.

Declaring itself to be a poem is one of the main things a poem does. But such a declaration takes a good deal of management: the poet has to have mastered the mechanics of what he is doing, even as he strives to make the result seem inevitable. In my active years as a critic I made it a rule, when talking about poetry, to confine myself to practical points that I felt professionally qualified to discuss, having long been engaged in writing poems of my own. With due allowance for scale, I wanted to stay in the territory that Dr Johnson, himself a great critic, retroactively marked out for Dryden, our first great critic: the poetry criticism of a poet. Thus I steered well clear of theory, although there was always a possibility that there was a

theory behind my approach: the theory that concentrated meaning should be what any poet was after.

But all too often, and especially if they stemmed from recent times, the poets made it clear – it was often the only thing they made clear – that they were less interested in meaning than in just sounding significant. In pursuit of significance, they would say anything, apparently in the belief that they were saying everything. Bits of their poems, as if driven to their isolated positions by no impulse except the random fidgets, would appear all over the page, like the manufactured evidence of an explosion that had never taken place. About such poetry, I seldom had anything to say. On both sides of the Atlantic, and in Australia, the creative writing schools churned forth slim volumes by the thousand, all of them supposedly full of poetry but few of them with even a single real poem in them. Spreading to cover the whole of the English-speaking world, this long eruption of unspecific stuff had one sole merit: nobody could praise it, analyse it or teach it without inadvertently proving that it was fake. There were exceptions of course; real talent can survive anything, even encouragement; and you could pick up the occasional creative writing collection in which the writing really was creative. But all too often there was only the claim, and never the deed. With so much tosh on the loose, the real thing looked more real than ever.

Better to say that it sounded more real than ever. One hears the force of real poetry at first glance. There is a phrase, something you want to say aloud. Sometimes the phrases link together into a whole line. Perhaps there is a stanza of these lines, a memorable unity. Very occasionally, there is a whole poem: a stand-alone unity that insists on being heard entire, and threatens never to leave one's memory. Even if you don't set out to memorize a real poem, it somehow seems to be memorizing itself for you. This authoritative audible presence, I believe, is an indispensable connection between the reader and the thing read. If that connection does not form, there is no real poem.

These and other matters are discussed at greater length in the following chapters; but always, I hope, they are discussed as tersely as possible. In the later part of life, and especially after I fell ill, I became

convinced that the notes I had been putting into the margins and endpapers of poetry books for so many years were the basic stuff of what my critical response to poetry had always been; but that if I published those notes in paragraph form, the chain of argument should be kept brief, and precisely because poetry mattered to me so much. It had always mattered: but now it had become so vital to me that I didn't wish to insult it, or its readers, by manufacturing swathes of prose to convey my reactions. So I composed my chapters for *Poetry* magazine out of miniature essays. Occasionally there were other outlets or institutions which wanted me to write something about poetry – the *Wall Street Journal*, *Quadrant*, the Poetry Archive – but with those assignments, too, I could proceed only by prior agreement that I would keep things terse and particular. The same agreement applied when I wrote a farewell Notebook piece, which I place here at the back of the book, as a kind of finale. Christian Wiman having moved on from *Poetry* magazine, it was time for me to stop anyway; but Alan Jenkins of the *TLS*, visiting me where I was convalescing in Cambridge, kindly suggested that if I wanted to write one more chapter, he would consider it for his pages.

In that last chapter, as in the first, and in all the others in between, my critical arguments were sometimes not much more than a single paragraph long. Sometimes, because the habit dies hard, the paragraphs joined up; sometimes a single topic dominated the whole piece; but most of the pieces were not, at that stage, trying to be a book. Perhaps now, so late in the day, they are. If so, it is a book which can be guaranteed not to treat poetry as anything less than the occupation of a lifetime: except that, for those attuned by their nature to poetry's great mystery, the lifetime can begin very early on, with the first enthralled realization that a single sentence, or even less, is like nothing else they have ever heard.

Cambridge, 2014

## Acknowledgements

For most of the notes in this *Poetry Notebook*, Christian Wiman of *Poetry* (Chicago) must have my thanks for providing a resplendent first home. I should also thank Alan Jenkins of the *TLS* for agreeing to print the Notebook's last chapter. Near the end of the book, before that last chapter, I have placed a sheaf of commissioned pieces that I have written in recent years. I am grateful to the editors concerned. The pieces are not strictly in note form, but one of my role models, Randall Jarrell, never minded mixing various types and formats of essay, as long as they fitted his view of poetry; and anyone who reads Jarrell's *Poetry and the Age* today might soon decide that nobody's view was ever more coherent, as if poetic quality were a world in itself.

My thanks to Prue Shaw, to Deirdre Serjeantson and to David Free for reading the manuscript. Prue Shaw, in addition to several other crucial comments, employed scholastic means to prove that an apparently rogue apostrophe in a line by Marvell actually belonged there; and Deidre Serjeantson reminded me that Milton might not necessarily have thought he was doing an unpoetic thing when he unloaded a classical library into the Garden of Eden. Martin Amis also spoke well in praise of Milton. My daughter Claerwen James designed the book's cover for the British edition. My assistant Susanne Young played a crucial role in assembling the working manuscript: in our cybernetic era there are so many ways of laying out a poem on the page, and almost all of them are wrong. The *Wall Street Journal*, the Poetry Archive and the Reading for Life organization deserve my thanks for encouraging the idea that I should try to pack as much judgement as possible into a small space, at times when I felt that a short piece might not just be best, but all I could do.

I should also thank the editors of publications in Britain, the USA and Australia that asked me for book reviews and for articles about poetry: the *New York Times Book Review*, *Standpoint*, the *Monthly*, the *Spectator*, *Prospect* and the *Financial Times*. Don Paterson, in his role as poetry editor of Picador, commissioned the chapter on Michael Donaghy and also, in his usual generous fashion, edited the initial manuscript of this book. Watching from New York, Robert Weil of Liveright was inspiringly determined to get a transatlantic edition published, even though, in present-day America, the issue of permissions makes it so expensive in time and trouble for the critic of poetry to quote what he is criticizing. Robert Weil also suggested the possibility that there might be some linking interludes to help students conclude that I was not deliberately being elliptical about a subject sufficiently elliptical already: a suggestion that Don Paterson endorsed. So really I had two editors, and I am grateful to both of them; but the opinions are all mine, although here and there, for the sake of narrative logic, I have modified the chronological order in which I wrote them down.

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# **PART I**

## **NOTES ON POETRY**

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## **LISTENING TO THE FLAVOUR**

Almost fifty years ago, Hart Crane was one of my starting points as a reader of modern poetry. He still is. But my admiration for him always led to a quarrel, and it still does. By now, I hope I can do a better job of framing the quarrel as an argument, instead of as one of those impatient snorts we give when we are drawn in but not convinced, put off but can't let go. The argument starts like this. If 'Voyages', one of the stand-out pieces in *White Buildings*, had maintained its show of coherence all the way to the end, it would have been a successful abstract poem sequence. It didn't have to make sense, but it did have to keep up its confident, even if drunkenly confident, tone: and it didn't. Or, to put Hart Crane back into the present tense which is his due, it doesn't. The show breaks down in section IV, where the second stanza seems to be beginning with its second line, a first line having apparently gone missing.

All fragrance irrefragably, and claim  
Madly meeting logically in this hour  
And region that is ours to wreath again,  
Portending eyes and lips and making told  
The chancel port and portion of our June -

A textual crux that Crane might have designed specifically to help give his future scholars tenure, the phantom first line could have been a surmountable anomaly. (Plainly the narrative syntax is a put-up job throughout the poem, so any ellipsis is a hole in a mirage.) But the credibility drops to zero when we encounter 'Madly meeting logically'. In the first three sections of the poem there have been

plenty of adverbs as self-consciously fancy as ‘irrefragably’; and the main reason ‘The chancel port and portion of our June’ rings dead, apart from the exhausted wordplay of ‘port and portion’, is that we have met too many similar structures previously (‘In these poinsettia meadows of her tides’). But ‘Madly meeting logically’ is too much. We might have forgiven the stanza’s cargo of leaden echoes if the mad logical meeting had not forfeited our attention, as when a barroom war hero piles on that fatal implausible detail too many.

After this sudden and damaging loss of pressure in section IV, you don’t, for the rest of the poem – two and a half more numbered sections – hear much that doesn’t remind you of what you have heard before. The structures of phrases and sentences are made more recognizable because the content they had earlier in the poem has not been equalled, so that they stand out like ribs in a starved chest. ‘The bay estuaries fleck the hard sky limits’ is new and strangely gorgeous, but precious little else is, whereas the first two thirds of the poem, up to the point of breakdown, glitter with fragments that you can’t forget. I first read ‘Voyages’ in Sydney, a city in which you can taste the ocean in the summer air, and I can still remember the first thrilling impact of such moments as ‘The waves fold thunder on the sand’, ‘The bottom of the sea is cruel’, ‘Of rimless floods, unfettered leewardings / Samite sheeted and processioned . . .’ (but I thought ‘Laughing the wrapt inflections of our love’ was painfully weak), ‘. . . the crocus lustres of the stars’, ‘Adagios of islands, O my prodigal’ and the catchily florid, neo-‘Adonais’ lines near the end of part II:

Hasten, while they are true – sleep, death, desire  
Close round one instant in one floating flower.

Feeling tolerant, at the time, about preciousness if it sounded sufficiently compressed, I was much taken by that floating flower, and also, of course, by the killer line at the very end of that same section:

The seal’s wide spindrift gaze towards paradise.

For several days I practised a wide spindrift gaze myself, until it occurred to me that I might look like a seal in search of a mate. But the embarrassment didn't stop me writing nonsensical sequential poems on my own account. In several unfortunate instances I managed to get these published by student magazines. Not very many years later, I started having nightmares in which I featured as a fireman from *Fahrenheit 451* vainly searching for any copies of those magazines that I had not yet incinerated. The nightmares stopped when I was at last able to see how unlikely it was that anyone had ever remembered a line I had written. And anyway, like abstract painting, abstract poetry extended the range over which incompetence would fail to declare itself. That was the charm for its author.

But even the most dull-witted author was obliged to realize that his freely associating work of art – proudly meaningless, although really meaning everything – would have no readers unless it had its moments. Whether in a formal poem or an informal one, everything depended, and still depends, on the quality of the moment. Formality and informality are just two different ways of joining the moments up. The question will always be about which is superior, and the 'always' strongly suggests that neither of them is. Whatever kind of poem it is, it's the moment that gets you in.

Just lately I was granted a powerful demonstration of this when I started rereading Robert Frost, something that I have done every ten years or so throughout my adult life. I would never stop reading him if there were not something talkatively smooth about him that allows me to convince myself he is not intense. Then I pick him up again and find that his easy-seeming, usually iambic, conversational forward flow is a deception, a way of not just bringing show-stopping moments to your attention but of moving them *past* your attention, so that you will form the correct impression that he has wealth to spare and does not want the show stopped for such a secondary consideration as brilliance. Take a poem like 'At Woodward's Gardens'. For more than half its length, the monkeys in a cage could be characters in a prose narrative that just happened to possess an iambic lilt. But after the monkeys steal the boy's burning-glass, suddenly you get this: 'They

bit the glass and listened to the flavour.' The moment is so good that the way it serves the poem to perfection is only part of its appeal: once we know about the monkeys and the burning-glass, the line becomes memorable on its own. And I think we could all give examples, from our memories, of how a poetic moment can put the poem it comes from in the shade. Without going to the bookcase, I can write down one of the first lines by Empson that ever bowled me over. 'And now she cleans her teeth into the lake.'

And it *was* a first line, of a poem that has always seemed dark to me after that first magnesium flash. As a diehard formalist myself, I don't like to admit that the unity of a poem, its binding energy, might not be the most important of its energies. But there are clearly cases where this is so. Take 'Good Friday', Amy Clampitt's wonders-of-the-biosphere poem that starts in the Serengeti and does a pretty good job of getting evolution into a nutshell. For its knowledgeable precision, Marianne Moore and Elizabeth Bishop would both have recognized a worthy acolyte. But the poem would hold together better if there were not an isolated burst of lyricism tearing it apart. The second stanza, the one about the cheetah, is the one you remember, and even then only for its first three lines:

Think how the hunting cheetah, from  
the lope that whips the petaled garden  
of her hide into a sandstorm, falters . . .

After which, the narrative falters too. Rhythm doesn't concern Clampitt very much. The syllabics of Marianne Moore are probably somewhere in the background, but not even that system for manufactured unpredictability means much to her. She is just out to avoid the iambic pulse, as Pound once advised, confident as he was that it was creatively exhausted. Clampitt writes poetry shorn of almost every formal effect. But we see the consequences when a moment stands out like the alteration of the cheetah's coat. Not even the rest of the stanza can keep that up, let alone the rest of the poem.

Defenders of the formal poem could plausibly say that it has a

better, not a worse, chance of joining the moments up, so that its ability to contain them, and intensify them with a symmetrical framework and a melodic structure, becomes a satisfaction in itself. Frost did so, many times: 'The Silken Tent' is not only wonderful throughout, it is especially wonderful *because* it is wonderful throughout. In whatever form he chose, writing a poem, not just writing poetry, was what Frost was after. (As Frost wrote to Wallace Stevens after they dined together in Key West, 'our poetry comes choppy, in well-separated poems.') And most of us would not have much trouble in compiling a list of well-separated poems that we keep complete, or almost complete, in our heads: Shakespeare's Sonnet 129, Marvell's 'The Definition of Love', Keats's 'Ode on Melancholy', Dowson's 'Vitae Summa Brevis', Yeats's 'An Irish Airman Foresees His Death', Cummings's 'You shall above all things be glad and young', Stevens's 'The Emperor of Ice-Cream', MacNeice's 'The Sunlight on the Garden', Auden's 'Lay Your Sleeping Head, My Love', just to name some of the poems I could at one time or other in my life recite from memory. (In the old Australian school system, you had to get poetry by heart or they wouldn't let you go home.) There are poets who mainly write poetry but still write the odd poem that gets an extra dimension from being poised like a silken tent: Dylan Thomas's 'In my sullen craft or art', for example. We don't necessarily have to remember the whole poem. (We might not *want* to learn it. Even though I can recognize and place almost any line from Larkin's collected poems, I have never set out to learn one of his poems by heart, because somehow, I find, they frown on that activity.) But we can always remember that it struck us as being all of a piece.

Frost made that his aim. Even in his longer poems, the aspiration to self-containment was always there. His often-stated ideal 'the sound of sense' was meant to be a unifying element. Sometimes the dialogue passages in the longer poems got too high above that unifying tonal range. In 'Snow', the hero, Meserve, is meant to be naturally eloquent, but anyone talking about him becomes eloquent too, so exchanges crop up that sound like nothing ever spoken since the Elizabethan theatre was in flower.

‘He had the gift  
Of words, or is it tongues I ought to say?’  
‘Was ever such a man for seeing likeness?’

It isn’t that Frost’s dialogue isn’t good. It’s too good: too good for the otherwise well-separated poem. But you’d hardly call the fault characteristic. It comes from a high, indeed hieratic, ambition; and his more usual ambition, the more demanding ambition, was the genuinely humble one of ‘lodging a few poems where they will be hard to get rid of’. There is no need to think that he was poor-mouthing himself when he talked like that. He knew very well that the poem that could be remembered as a whole, and not just read through, was the hardest target to aim at. And he hit it dozens of times. If some nervous graduate recites ‘Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening’ at a commencement ceremony, that isn’t a sign of how Frost played the grizzled wiseacre, although he sometimes did: it’s a proof that he attained his object as a poet.

When they knew each other back in England before the First World War, Ezra Pound – excellent critic that he was, when not in the grip of mania – could see the essential strength of the early Frost’s diction. For one thing, it was so classically schooled. (Even today, when so much biographical and critical work on Frost has accumulated, it is often forgotten that it was Frost, and not Pound or Eliot, who really knew Greek and Latin.) But Pound wanted modern poetry to go in a less formal direction, in which a poem could be sustained by its moments – a direction in which a long poem made of fragments might be possible. (In fulfilling that plan some of Pound’s later imitators were to be more convincing than he was: Galway Kinnell with *The Avenue Bearing the Initial of Christ into the New World*, Christopher Logue with his *War Music*.) We have to make our own minds up whether the evidence of the short poems in *Personae* proves that Pound was really such a master of set forms he could afford to abandon them, but what matters is that he did so, and was prepared to back those who did the same. One of them was Eliot, who really was a formal master: but his informal poems, especially

*Prufrock* and *The Waste Land*, changed everything, and deserved to, because the moments were many and unforgettable. Alas, one of the side effects was to create the impression that anyone could do it, and that everything could be said by saying anything.

Frost had a keen and worried eye for trends. He was never as nastily jealous of his turf as his most influential later biographer, Lawrence Thompson, made out. But Frost did have a roost to rule, and he felt it threatened by the runaway vogue for poetry that made a virtue of lacking discipline. How could his concealed discipline be a merit in a field where discipline itself was held to be an inhibition? By the late 1930s, lecturing at Amherst or at Harvard or just dropping funny remarks at any whistle-stop in his endless tour through the poetry-reading circuit that he invented, he was ready to trash Pound's name: politely, but decisively. But Frost the patriarch was all too aware that his lifelong emphasis on craft had become an anachronism, if poetry were to be measured by the sheer number of people writing it. A great Frost poem like 'The Axe-Helve' (even Baptiste's ethnically flavoured dialogue fits it exactly) was a metaphor for the poet's pride in skilled work. Pride in unfettered expression was a different kind of pride, and looked, to him, awfully like unfounded self-approval.

At this distance, Frost's celebrated gibe about formless poetry – tennis without a net – rings hollow, and not just because it has been repeated too often by solemn traditionalists. Too many poems without rhyme, without strict shape, without ascertainable rhythm – without almost everything – have been unarguably successful. But within an informal poet's work, I think, even those successful poems mainly add up to poetry. Few of them are the choppily well-separated thing. Craig Raine's *History: The Home Movie* passes every test for the brilliant moment. It is a universe of brilliant moments. But are its constituent individual poems really self-contained? He might answer that they aren't trying to be, and indeed there is no compulsion any more to try any such thing. (There is still an inner, instinctive compulsion, perhaps: take the way that someone as modest as U. A. Fanthorpe, whose poems are usually shaped by nothing but her unspectacular powers of argument, suddenly writes a lulu like 'Not

'My Best Side' – still formless, but vital in every line.) But if the scope has opened further for the highly talented, it has not done so without making far too much room for the talentless, who are no longer easily recognizable. Apart from the encouragement offered the poetaster to become more productive than he has ever been in history, there is the even more reprehensible encouragement offered such a gifted poet as John Ashbery, in his later career as an arts factory, to turn out a continuous emission of isotropic mincemeat. Still, you can always say that about hamburger: it's as American as apple pie.

In another instalment, if I don't get lynched for this one, I would want to mention the famous 1960 Grove Press anthology *The New American Poetry* (edited by Donald M. Allen), which was instrumental in spreading the American abstract poem across the Atlantic to Britain, and indeed across the Pacific to Australia. Pound (along with William Carlos Williams) gave Charles Olson's poetry the courage to be born, and Olson did the same for a generation of freedom-loving bards not just in America but in the entire English-speaking world. Pound had argued – and Eliot had helped him prove – that a poem could be sustained by memorable moments. Olson proved that it could be sustained by unmemorable ones, provided that the texture of the accumulated jottings avoided the sound of failed poetry, which it could do if the pentameter were rigorously eschewed. Buttressed by the widely shared opinion that his ungovernable output had to be poetry because it wasn't prose, Olson acquired imitators wherever in the world English was haltingly spoken. If Hart Crane had lived to see the day, he would have looked for another ship and thrown himself off the back of that.

As for Frost, he had already foreshadowed all, like Tiresias: his streak of paranoia was actually a perception. In post-war America, there would be hold-outs against temptation: Richard Wilbur, Anthony Hecht. In Britain, the dazzling example of Auden's formal virtuosity was to hold the advancing blob at bay for a long time, all the way to Larkin and beyond. By now, however, the game has irreversibly lost its net: you have to *pretend* the net is still there. But let there be no doubt that Olson's influence was liberating. The question is about

what it liberated. I quote from *The New American Poetry*. Here is the entirety of the sixth of ‘The Songs of Maximus’:

you sing, you  
who also  
wants

That’s all, folks. I can’t believe it was very hard to do. No wonder so many young poets of the future felt inspired. Perhaps that was a kind of freedom, but I still think I might have chosen a better course in emulating Hart Crane, who at least required that his epigones should plausibly echo the slurred volubility of dipsomania.

## Interlude

When I wrote ‘Listening to the Flavour’ for *Poetry* (Chicago) and thus inaugurated my Poetry Notebook, I was gripped by the notion that I might use this approach to sum up my own lifetime of poetry reading, which I had begun by working my way through the constantly varying stack of slim volumes on my cafe table at Sydney University. But it also occurred to me that the world had changed, and that young beginners of today might think differently about those slim volumes. They might not even have seen any. Even with such a literary subject as poetry, you can nowadays get a long way without taking your eyes off the computer screen. Hart Crane’s mysteriously lovely poem ‘North Labrador’, for example, is available at a single click on the PoemHunter site, if you don’t mind dodging a preliminary advertisement on video. But for the young literary enthusiasts that I personally know, the book is not yet dead. I hope that stays true, for their sake; because I remember too well the thrill of buying those slim volumes second-hand. When the *Wall Street Journal* asked me to nominate my five favourite modern poetry books, my first reaction was to ask myself why a serious newspaper was behaving like a blog. (Five Favourite Modern Poetry Books; Five New Teenage Celebrities Forgotten Since Last Week.) But I soon saw an opportunity beckoning: to transmit, for a new generation, my gratitude for the neatness and the concentration of the slight volume densely packed with memorable meaning. A big ‘collected’ volume can overwhelm you: you might bounce off. The slim volume allows you to feel straight away that you might be getting somewhere. Having reached that conclusion, I had to admit that it didn’t apply to Robert Frost, whose slim volumes had always appealed to me less than the big collected volume, getting bigger all

the time as he grew older. Nor did it apply to Yeats, whose work, in my beginning days, was available only in the forbiddingly chubby Macmillan collected edition. So really I had two opinions on the matter, even after so long a time. Anyway, I did my list, and tried to enjoy the tacit contract that anything I said had to fit into a tiny space, like one of the microdots of old-fashioned espionage.

## FIVE FAVOURITE POETRY BOOKS

### W. B. Yeats, *The Tower* (1928)

Every separate collection of Yeats's poems from *Responsibilities* (1918) onward is tremendous, but *The Tower* is my favourite. 'That is no country for old men. The young / In one another's arms . . .' Not a bad start. I'm lucky enough to own a copy of the book – bought long ago as part of a job lot in an Oxford antiquarian bookshop on its way out of business – but I wouldn't fancy even the most determined enthusiast's chances of finding a hardback copy second-hand today. It can be found easily, though, in the *Collected Poems*, where the groupings of the original individual volumes are sensibly preserved. (This is a good rule, often broken by misguided scholarly editors who restore the chronological order that the poet himself once carefully avoided in favour of something more interesting.) The only threat that Yeats's *Collected Poems* offers is that the beginning reader might get caught up in the Celtic fairyland of the great man's winsome early days. Cut straight to *The Tower* and you're in the middle of his full-blown achievement, with masterpieces arriving one after the other: 'Sailing to Byzantium', 'Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen', 'Leda and the Swan', 'Among School Children' and (last poem in the book, and one of the greatest poems written in the twentieth century) 'All Soul's Night'. In everyday life Yeats stayed young and foolish too long, but in the full maturity of his art he got such a rich music out of seemingly ordinary speech that the language found and kept its ideal speaker.

### Robert Frost, *Collected Poems*

Frost's individual collections are useful to have, but the full *Collected Poems* is the book that matters, because his masterpieces, which were

seldom of more than medium length at most, are scattered evenly throughout his long and fruitful career. The trick with the *Collected Poems* is to avoid the longer poems until the shorter ones have taken over your mind. The longer poems have good things in them, but the self-contained showpiece poems give you his essence, and his essence is one you should learn to recognize before watching him distribute it over the framework of an extended edifice. In his case, familiarity breeds reverence: never dodge a Frost lyric just because it is famous. ‘The Gift Outright’ isn’t any less of an achievement because Frost thought it elementary enough for him to recite at JFK’s inaugural. A public life is one of the things Frost wanted for his poetry. The idea of obscurity for its own sake repelled him. Though he could play the part of cracker-barrel philosopher, his reputation for folksiness was largely foisted on him by those who had a vested interest in the oblique and wanted poetry to be taught rather than remembered. Frost wanted it to engage the reader straight away, even when the appeal was subtle. He sets out (the present tense seems more and more appropriate) to get his lines into your head, and with a short but perfect achievement like ‘The Silken Tent’ he can get a whole poem into your head, even though, because of the intricacy of its construction, readers will find it almost impossible to memorize what they can never quite forget.

### **W. H. Auden, *Look, Stranger!* (1936)**

Already a giant in his lifetime, Auden has been treated after his death to the monumental splendours of a pharaonic entombment. The posthumous books with his name on them are so big that you would swear he was occupying his own equivalent of the Valley of the Kings. It would be churlish to begrudge all this scholarly effort (Edward Mendelson is a learned, tactful and often necessary editor) but the original slim volumes are the form that Auden should be read in, if you can find them. A long search on the web for a copy of the marvellously entitled *Look, Stranger!* would be well worth it. (In the US the book was called *On This Island*, from another part of the title poem’s first line.) Safely in hand, the light but weighty volume reminds us that a few individual poems are where a reputation starts

from. Actually there are other Auden slim volumes that yield even richer rewards, but only *Look, Stranger!* has poem No. IX (in a fit of pseudo-simplicity, the rebel angel was avoiding verbal titles in that period), and only poem No. IX starts with the mind-bending line ‘The earth turns over, our side feels the cold . . .’ When I first read that, I didn’t precisely fall out of my chair, but the chair moved about three feet sideways across the linoleum, propelled by my spasm of delighted awe. How did he do that? He did it again late in the book, with the last three lines of the almost equally excitingly entitled poem No. XXX: ‘And all sway forward on the dangerous flood / Of history, that never sleeps or dies, / And, held one moment, burns the hand.’ It seemed so effortless. And so it was, but only for him.

### Richard Wilbur, *Poems 1943–1956*

If I had to pick the greatest separate book of American poetry since Robert Frost, Richard Wilbur’s *Poems 1943–1956* (published only in Great Britain, by Faber) would have to be the one, even though it contains elements from three of his separate books, *The Beautiful Changes*, *Ceremony* and *Things of this World*; even though his *Collected Poems 1943–2004*, arranged in reverse so as to track his career from his later days back to the start, is in itself a mighty book; and even though his initial example was so infectious that at least one of the very best Wilbur poems was written by someone else. (Anthony Hecht’s wonderful poem about Japan would never, I am sure, have been the meticulous miracle that it is if Wilbur hadn’t set the standard for a filigree stanza.) The truth about Wilbur is that his post-war impact was so big it had to be largely ignored if the race of poets was to survive. Robert Lowell’s first volume *Lord Weary’s Castle* is easier to take, even when you open it at ‘A Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket’. Anyone who doubts this contention should open Wilbur’s book at ‘A Baroque Wall-Fountain in the Villa Sciarra’ and note once again the elegant swagger with which a GI could come home from Europe with a whole cultural heritage in his pocket. On the aspiring poets among his fellow Americans he had the impact of a rococo asteroid, burning up their air with his displays of cool fire. Anyone capable of

appreciating his artistry was helpless not to emulate it, and emulation guaranteed mediocrity. Wilbur's brand of conscious artistry could be sustained only by his instinct for a phrase, the impulse 'that flings / The dancer kneeling on nothing into the wings.' Perfect. Some said just perfect, but they said it in helpless envy. The most corrosive enemy of his reputation, though, was the silence of critics to whom his clarity left nothing they could add.

#### **Philip Larkin, *The Whitsun Weddings* (1964)**

Philip Larkin is the most extreme case of a great modern poet who was threatened with a second death when his poems were edited into chronological order for a *Collected Poems* that forgot even the titles of the separate volumes published in his lifetime. Luckily the mistake has been corrected since, and a compendium which restores the original groupings is now available: but it was a close-run thing, because the design of each slim volume was critical to its overall effect. Of the three mature volumes, the second one, *The Whitsun Weddings*, would be my pick for a favourite, although in fact I was introduced to him through the first, *The Less Deceived*, and for years kept it with me, convinced that nothing could come near it. But the true proof of Larkin's supreme art was that he could go on so intensifying his achievement that he defeated the law of rising expectations. With a tonal range stretching effortlessly from colloquial punch to high-flying sonority, *The Whitsun Weddings* turned out to have everything, including a title poem whose last line about the arrow shower ('Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain') became a call sign for a generation. It even had the portents of death that mark the third volume, *High Windows*, and the volume beyond, the one never completed, that would have contained the blood-chillingly desolate 'Aubade'. There might not, at first blush, seem to be much joy in him; but he gets the whole truth of life's transience into unforgettably beautiful poetry, and it is hard to think of a greater source of joy than that.

## Interlude

In my click-bait list of five favourite poetry books, all the poets are important but in my view none of them, not even Yeats, should be called revolutionary. That very adjective is an incongruous diversion into the tumult of politics, whereas poetry is written in pursuit of something more stable, even if not serene. As Richard Wilbur once argued (and his book of critical arguments, *Responses*, is an exemplary prose work about poetry) there might be the occasional revolution in poetry, but it will always be a palace revolution. If he had written that statement after the collapse of the Soviet Union, instead of before it, he might have added that when the stretch of history instigated by the Russian revolution had finally run its course, Mayakovsky, who had convinced himself that his poetry was a historic political instrument, finally stood revealed as having been important only in the history of his art. This should be importance enough, but even by that measure, the mission of the poet is to enrich literary history, not to change it. When the academic study of a poet begins to concentrate on his supposedly game-changing impact on the history of literature, it's time to watch out. All too often it will be a case of the publicity outstripping the event. After the Second World War, Ezra Pound was still alive, and already it was being taken as gospel, throughout the burgeoning international network of academe, that he was the incarnation of modern poetry. His posthumous reputation reinforced that status: the living thaumaturge became an eternal guru. For a while I tried to believe it myself, until I realized – too gradually, alas – that the key requirement of admiring him was to be insufficiently receptive to anyone else.