

THE *Bluffer's*[®] GUIDE TO

POETRY

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NEW EDITION

THE *Bluffer's*[®] GUIDE TO

POETRY



Nick Yapp

Edited by
Richard Meier



Colette House
52-55 Piccadilly
London W1J 0DX
United Kingdom

Email: info@bluffers.com
Website: bluffers.com
Twitter: @BluffersGuide

First published 1989
This edition published 2013
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Publisher: Thomas Drewry
Publishing Director: Brooke McDonald

Series Editor: David Allsop
Design and Illustration: Jim Shannon

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A CIP Catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

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ISBN: 978-1-909365-36-0 (print)
978-1-909365-37-7 (ePub)
978-1-909365-38-4 (Kindle)

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Poetry is ‘the spontaneous overflow of powerful emotions recollected in tranquillity’. Put another way, more mathematically if you like: emotion + time elapsed = poetry. Emotion + immediate outpouring = tweet.

THE SPONTANEOUS OVERFLOW

WHAT IS POETRY?

In the days when typesetting was still done by hefty blokes arranging small pieces of lead in a wooden box, pretty much everything on paper that looked neatly aligned on the left and a raggedy mess on the right could be considered poetry. Now that we're all dab hands at document layout, such certainty has long evaporated and a more complicated definition is needed. It's really a question of discovering what Donne, Anon, ee cummings, Ovid, Pam Ayres and Percy Bysshe Shelley have in common; or what connects *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, greetings card verses, naughty limericks, 'Ode to a Nightingale', 'Sing a Song of Sixpence' and *Paradise Lost*.

To do this, the biggest mistake is to look at the end products themselves. There appear to be no similarities whatsoever between a Shakespearean sonnet and a Matsuyaman haiku, between a Milligan couplet and three or four thousand lines of Alexander Pope, between one of Edward Lear's nonsense rhymes and the neo-futuristic monologues of Andrei Voznesensky.

Note: Don't worry if a lot of words like 'neo-futuristic', 'polemical', 'panegyric', 'iconoclastic', etc. mean nothing to you. Just use them in a slightly haughty manner before anyone else does, and then add: 'Not a word that one would normally think of applying to his (or her) verse, perhaps...'

This book concentrates on English poetry, with a nod towards the USA and the wider world. Even so, somewhere, someday, someone will hurl a name at you that you don't recognise, a balladeer of whom you know nothing. This is when you should smile enigmatically, and fall back on one of the following bluffs:

- a) 'Yes, I suppose it's about time I rediscovered him (or her).' This implies that you were aware of this poet ages ago, practically before the ink (or blood) dried on the manuscript. Equally, you might say: 'Yes, I suppose it's about time I rediscovered his (or her) work.' Poetry buffs never refer to poems, only to the poet's work. This may or may not be because they have never done any in their lives and don't know what real work is.
- b) 'Too deceptive for me, I'm afraid.' This implies that you have seen through the poet's deception, whereas your companion hasn't.
- c) 'I'm afraid that my approach to him (her) can only be described as lacklustre.' Although you are ostensibly criticising yourself, the implication is that the poet is hardly worth considering.

You can rediscover anybody – Byron, Ogden Nash,

Banjo Paterson, even Gertrude Stein ('Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose'). Here you are using a Compound Bluff technique, suggesting that not only have you known the poet's work since infancy but that you are constantly re-evaluating poetry, seeking (and finding) new levels of appreciation, new depths of meaning.

'Depths of meaning' is what poetry is all about. All poetry is deep, profound, heavy, bottomless, suffocating, unfathomable. If you can understand it, it isn't poetry – it's verse. And then your appreciation should draw on the language of the wine expert. Verse is 'crisp and dry' like a white Burgundy, or 'sparkling and clear' like a young Champagne. Verse can be about anything. Poetry concerns itself only with the inexorable course of love, rejection and death, although a great many poets don't bother too much with the first two, but hasten to the last.

Poetry is what happens when sensitive people find themselves overcome and have pen and paper (or tablet) to hand. They may be overcome by all sorts of emotions or feelings: love, joy (rare), despair (every day), wonderment (often faked), death wish (enormously common), horror, patriotism (outmoded), faith, lust (but only in a caring sort of way) – the list is endless. The source of the emotion may be almost anything: the Bible, a battle, a daffodil, a woman, a man, a bird, sunsets, the smell of frying onions. The reaction is always the same. Out come pen and paper, down goes the poem.

Other types of writer don't say: 'I wrote this novel when I was walking along Hadrian's Wall' or 'One night, when

I was swimming the Hellespont, I simply had to write this play'. Poets do. The outcome of their jottings may be very long or very short. The works may or may not rhyme. They may or may not scan (*see* 'Glossary'). It doesn't matter. Because they are verbal responses to surfeits of emotion; they are poetry. Whether or not they are good poetry is, of course, another matter. Poetry, as Wordsworth so succinctly put it, is 'the spontaneous overflow of powerful emotions recollected in tranquillity'. Put another way, more mathematically if you like: emotion + time elapsed = poetry. Emotion + immediate outpouring = tweet.

POETS AS BLUFFERS

400 years ago, Sir Philip Sidney (poet, wit, scholar, soldier, courtier and gent) wrote: 'Now for the poet, he nothing affirmeth, and therefore never lieth.'

It's an interesting line for two reasons. Firstly, it shows that even in those days poets were using archaic English – 'thees' and 'thous' and 'listeth' and 'lieth'.

Secondly, brave hero and jolly good chap though he may have been, Sir Philip was also a consummate bluffer. Poets are inveterate liars, constantly bending and breaking rules and ignoring Truth for the sake of Art.

Rupert Brooke was one of the worst offenders. Thousands can quote from his poem 'The Old Vicarage, Grantchester'; it's one of the Good Old Good Ones of English Verse:

*Stands the church clock at ten to three?
And is there honey still for tea?*

The church clock did stick in Grantchester in 1911, but at half past three, not 10 to three. Why the change? Half past three rhymes; it even scans as well. Either Rupert Brooke couldn't wait for his tea, or he simply wanted to bluff for the sake of bluffing. It's a common practice in verse and is known as 'poetic licence' – granting poets a special station not accorded anyone else. A street trader's licence doesn't legitimise untruths or malpractices on the trader's part.



Poetic licence allows any
and every poet to indulge in regular
bouts of bluffing.

A publican's licence doesn't permit him to water his beer (see GK Chesterton, 'Other Schools to Know About', page 84) or falsify the labels on his bottles. A driving licence is not a passport to deceit. But poetic licence allows any and every poet to indulge in regular bouts of bluffing. Not that poets have always had it their own way, however. Plato, for example, saw through them and their ways, and banished the whole lying lot of them from his imaginary republic. Sensible chap.

One of the most egregious manifestations of poetic mendacity goes by the name of the 'pathetic fallacy'. This is a literary device where a poet will attribute a human emotion (usually his own) to some inanimate object or

other (often, but not exclusively, an aspect of the natural world, such as a landscape). This bit is the fallacy. Poetry buffs will tell you that the pathetic part refers to the pathos or empathy required by the poet to pull off this feat. Others might argue that it's called pathetic because describing, say, a Welsh dresser or a Bognor Regis beachscape as, for example, sad, is, well, sad.

And the porkies don't stop at the composition of poetry. As a young poet, John Clare used to recite his work to groups at markets and fairs. They laughed at his poems until, as he explains, he 'hit upon a harmless deception by repeating my poems over a book as though I was reading it. This had the desired effect. They often praised them and said if I could write as good, I should do.' This, you should maintain, is why poets, above all others, are prepared to pay to see their work in print.

Other examples of bluffing are scattered throughout this slim volume. Take the whole convention of the pastoral – the independent, cheerful, hardy, virtuous peasant, hugely enjoying a life of poverty-stricken, back-breaking grind in a mixture of appalling weathers – which is just one enormous poetic bluff, delivered by Burns, Clare, Wordsworth and Duck (among others). And Newbolt, Tennyson, Kipling and the Patriotic Poets of the nineteenth century were wildly inaccurate in their depictions of historical events.

Having considered all of this, there might still be a question niggling at the back of your mind about the precise purpose of a guide such as this. After all, why would anybody want to bluff about an arcane literary genre which

began when primitive man first picked up a piece of flint and gouged a rudimentary ode on a cave wall – and effectively ended when Paul McCartney wrote the memorable words: ‘But if this ever-changing world in which we live in...’ (Yes, it was a song lyric – but it’s much the same sort of thing – see ‘American Poetry and Some of the Rest’).

As a literary art form, poetry has surely had its ups and downs, but for anyone wishing to state their literary credentials, a passing knowledge of poems and poets is vital. You don’t need to know why; you just need to know.

This book sets out to guide you through the main danger zones encountered in poetry discussions, and to equip you with a vocabulary and an evasive technique that will minimise the risk of being rumbled as a bluffer. It will give you a few easy-to-learn hints and methods that will allow you to be accepted as a poetry aficionado of rare ability and experience. But it will do more. It will give you the tools to impress legions of marvelling listeners with your knowledge and insight – without anyone discovering that you don’t actually know the difference between a *leitmotif* and a limerick. As far as the former is concerned, look no further than the war poet Edmund Blunden’s words in his 1917 poem ‘Pillbox’:

Come, Bluffer, where’s your wits?



When entering a competition,
send in a totally inappropriate poem.
That way you can trumpet your lack
of success to the poetry community
by saying that ‘the Philistines’ didn’t
have the guts to consider your stuff.

POETRY BASICS

For some people, Poetry is Life. They buy books of poetry; they go to poetry readings and performances; they go to poetry clubs and societies; they write the stuff and pay to get it published; they care and worry and fuss about poetry.

These are the Poetry Fanatics and you must beware of them. If you live in certain parts of London, the lush suburbs of other cities, or towns with literary connections or festivals (Cheltenham, Hay-on-Wye and Aldeburgh, for example), you may find them hard to avoid. They're in the mould of the Ancient Mariner – mad eyes staring, dribble coming out of the corners of their mouths, seeking some poor wretch to whom they can recite at length. If you can't avoid them, you may consider joining them.

HOW TO DRESS FOR POETRY

Don't:

- Wear a velvet smoking jacket or thick cord trousers; people will think you're a psychotherapist.

- Grow a beard. No great poet of the last 100 years or so has sported a beard. Okay, Ginsberg had a real faceful but you might challenge anyone on this point by observing that a great big beard doth not a great poet make.
- Slap on a beret. People will think you're from the Royal British Legion or the local farmers' market.
- Wear sandals. People will think you couldn't afford a decent pair of trainers.
- Drip around in a silk dressing gown. People will think you're emulating Ivor Novello or Noël Coward.

Do:

- Roll your own cigarettes, as messily as possible, if you happen to smoke.
- Kit yourself out in a Panama hat, white linen jacket, and two-tone brogues. People won't know which poet you evoke, and that will disturb them.
- Whatever you do, though, you must ensure that nothing that you wear matches. Poets are renowned for their heightened powers of observation but this faculty must absolutely not extend to noticing that one's lime-green chinos clash rather garishly when coupled with that favourite, and seldom-washed, puce cardie.

HOW TO TREAT POETRY BOOKS

The moment you buy a book of verse, mutilate it:

- Break the spine.
- Fold down the corners as though marking pages.
- Spill some dark brown (or, better, Burgundian red) liquid on it.
- Tear out a few pages.
- Scribble dates and obtuse references in the margins.

Most people who buy poetry books never even open them, let alone read them, so when you turn up with a volume that looks as though London Wasps have been playing with it, you will be regarded with awe.

WHAT TO DO WHEN SOMEONE THREATENS YOU WITH A POEM THEY'VE WRITTEN

The vital thing is to prevent them reading it to you. If they do, you have to try to listen and then make a comment. So, when they say: 'May I read you my latest oeuvre?', firmly respond: 'No. Don't do that. I've just spent three days and nights reading *The New Apocalypitics* and my mind is completely shattered. Do you know *The New Apocalypitics*, by any chance?' They won't.

HOW TO BEHAVE AT POETRY READINGS

Two or three decades ago, when performance poetry was in its heyday, one could turn up, quite innocently, at the Royal

Festival Hall, the Barbican or any large theatre, hoping for some foot-tapping, lightweight, free entertainment while you guzzle real ale, and find two men (it was always two men) shouting bits of verse at each other and making strange and obscene noises into handheld microphones.



Unless you are an attendant social worker or conducting important research into egomaniacal behaviours, you must simply leave at once.

These days, the poetry 'slam' is the thing. If you have the misfortune to stumble upon one of these events where very unshy 'poets' vie with each other to declaim their right-on, self-referential tosh, there are two strategies open to you:

1. Run away and drink elsewhere.
2. Wait until they appear to have ground to a halt (it may take a very long time), then trot over to them and say how much you enjoyed it and could they please do something of Eleanor Farjeon's?

Even when the entertainment on offer is of the more traditional poet-mumbles-a-few-poems-from-his-slim-book-interspersed-with-interminable-explanations-of-the-

arcane-references-he-put-in-said-poems-to-make-himself-appear-more-interesting-than-he-really-is variety, the organisers of such events will more often than not devote some portion of the proceedings to an ‘open-mic’ (pronounced ‘mike’) section. This is where anyone with a mild-to-moderate mental-health problem will get up from the audience and spout a truly terrible and incomprehensible bit of drivel which has been repeatedly rejected by editors of poetry magazines up and down the land.

In this case – unless you are an attendant social worker or conducting important research into egomaniacal behaviours – you must simply leave at once.

POETRY COMPETITIONS

There are an enormous number of these, organised both nationally and locally. The Poetry Library at London’s Southbank Centre has a comprehensive list but it’s no good entering any of them as every poetry competition has about 2 million submissions, even if the first prize is less than a fiver (it usually is). Very often the entries are sifted by an undergraduate student who is currently enrolled in the creative writing course on which the poet-cum-adjudicator is a teacher, and thus only a handful or so of the poems entered ever pass in front of the big cheese poet supposedly judging the prize.

If you feel you must take part, however, here are a few pointers to increase your chances of success: ensure that the poems you enter are between 16 and 24 lines long. No poem shorter or longer than this ever wins a poetry competition:

any shorter and the adjudicators will be scared that the entrants might think they couldn't be bothered to read the medium-length ones; any longer and the adjudicators, who will have thousands of entries to wade through, will never read it to the end.

Alternatively, send in a totally inappropriate poem (obscene or blasphemous if it's your local paper; coyly sentimental or nauseatingly anthropomorphic if it's The Poetry Society). That way you can trumpet your lack of success to the poetry community by saying that 'the Philistines' didn't have the guts to consider your stuff. A word of warning, though: don't submit a coyly sentimental or nauseatingly anthropomorphic poem to *The Spectator* poetry competition. You may just win it. Better to enter a paean to the Labour Party or the union block vote (which will give you no chance). And make sure there is not a single rhyme.

ANTHOLOGIES

Never admit to having bought any of the general anthologies of verse (*The Oxford Book of English Verse*, *The Faber Book of English Verse*, *Palgrave's Golden Treasury*, *The Reader's Digest Book of Rhymes*, etc.). Be sneering in your approach to them ('One up from *Poems for Children Under Nine*, perhaps...'). Reserve maximum levels of dismissiveness for the slew of self-help anthologies that now exist with faux-dramatic titles such as *Poems You Need to Make It through the Morning* and *Poems You Absolutely Need to Read Because this World is Very Cruel and Not at all Fair*,

aimed at convincing the troubled and faintly narcissistic poetry lover that this particular tome (and they are always tomes – who ever heard of a short anthology?) will solve all their woes.

In addition to these, there are hundreds of different sorts of anthologies, and the bluffer should go full tilt for the most unlikely (*French Cowherd Songs*, *Burmese Love Poetry*, *CND Battle Cries*, *Boardroom Ballads*, etc.). However, such is the proliferation of anthologies these days that you may find that your chosen bluff does in fact already exist (if you think this is a far-fetched claim, check out *Poetry of the Taliban* ('Decapitation: An Ode', anyone?), or *There's Rosemary: 'An Anthology of Poetry, Published By The Monmouthshire Education Committee in 1969, the Year of the Investiture of the Prince of Wales'*).

The only other way to use anthologies to your advantage is to make a careful note of the compiler and the date of publication. If you talk of Stallworthy's 1973 *Compilation of Love Poetry*, Hadfield's *Sea Verse* for Chameleon Books in 1940, or Weissbort's *Post-war Russian Poetry* for Penguin in 1974, you will be exhibiting knowledge that no one else possesses, which to many poetry buffs (not bluffs) is the Essence of Life.

It doesn't matter how obscure the anthology is; in fact, the more obscure the better. *A Third Ladybird Book of Nursery Rhymes* may be the only book of poetry you possess, but if you refer to it as *Wills & Hepworth's Folk Verse Anthology* ('1962, wasn't it, or '63?'), people can't help but be impressed.

UNDERSTANDING THE VOCABULARY

Bluffers should realise that poets not only find spelling difficult, they also use words and phrases that the rest of us don't. Here are a few, with translations:

Fain would I I'd like to, but I really don't think I can

Lo! I say! (or) Wow!

Muse I say! (or) Wow!

Behold Look

Ah! Oh!

Sith Since

Bootes Avails

Avails Benefits

Methought It occurred to me...

Roseate Pinkish

Hark! Please pay attention!

Goodly Dull

Plentious In stock, available

Such an one One of them

Doubt you? You sayin' I'm lyin'?

Alas! Oh dear

Hoarie Freezing

For the nonce While I'm waiting...

Bosome Chest, lap, hill, sea bed, schooldays, heaven – anything but breast.

The poetic vocabulary also includes thee, thou, thereto, thy, doth, ye, commeth, whiles, twixt, makyth, fayrest, unto, eeke, begot, wilt, e'en, ere and heaps of other words whose meaning is nearly obvious; and certain constructions, such as 'much was I', 'quoth he', 'twas so', 'your trumpets sound'. Most of these constructions stem from an understandable desire on the part of the poet to end the line with an easy rhyme; it's much easier to find a rhyme for 'so' than 'twas', for 'sound' than 'trumpets'.

The other philological vagary of poets is that they find it impossible to make other than classical allusions to certain objects – the sun is always 'Phoebus'; the nightingale, 'Philomel'; a canine, 'Cerberus'; heaven, 'Elysium'; a wedding, 'Hymen'; a tease, 'Nymphé' or 'Nymph'.

You just have to get used to all of this.