

The Poem As Experience

From The Journal of English Teaching Techniques

By Morton Marcus © 2004

The most important lesson my own involvement in the writing of poetry has taught me about the teaching of poetry is that most students don't have even a rudimentary idea of what a poem is trying to accomplish. That understanding, alive when they were younger, has been trained out of them by the society in which they live, which has need of obedient workers, not inspired individuals. Consequently, most students conceive of the poem in fuzzy, half-remembered terms, and it becomes in their minds a dilapidated vehicle used for the transmission of undefined feelings, attitudes, and social stances--a private utterance of vague yearnings in a language equally vague and abstract. This, I point out, is the definition of diary-making, not poetry. It does not correlate with the purpose, techniques, or attitudes toward language which the poem, in my estimation, demands.

At this point, I establish a premise. If the students argue with it, that's fine with me: I'm primarily concerned with having them think about what a poem is. Anyway, I establish a premise: that poets are trying to convey an experience to the reader, trying to make the reader experience the poem. Everything follows from this, for it is not that an experience is being recreated for the reader, but that the poem itself is the experience. Vowels and consonants clanging or flowing together, connotations, the tastes words leave between the teeth, the rhythms and the structure--are all events occurring at the moment the reader reads the poem; and further, as he reads the reader is actually creating the poem in his imagination.

The craft of poetry is such that poets must use words to convey the experience: they don't tell what the poem is about, nor do they preach--they show, allowing (or insisting) that the reader participate in the work at hand.

At this point I discuss the poet's concept of language, as opposed to the scientist's, the philosopher's, and the businessman's, showing that this is not a learned response, but one which the poet has had (for psychic, emotional, or unexplainable reasons) since childhood. Language as magic, words as physical entities (slippery, glassy, metallic, tasting like wet salt from the sea of our birth). And from here, I show how the poet's language, besides being free of clichés and trite phrases, is grounded in the senses--that poets look at the world through their bodies, for they have captured the vision-spirit inside their skins. Therefore, they use language as bursts of sense impressions, which we call images. But the image is never used for ornament, I am quick to add; it must always contain vision, always be profound and direct the reader toward the overall vision of the poem. It follows that poets, conceiving of language as physical, eschew abstractions, yet, paradoxically, since poets use physical language so well, they can render a clearer meaning of abstractions.

Finally, what readers experience and half-create in the poem is the primal vision they have forgotten, or which society, with its moral and economic needs, has trained out of them. Thus, at first, the poem acts as a tool of recognition, enabling readers to see who and where they are as social beings, and who and where they are as individuals. In the first, they are members of a social group. In the second, they are evolving, spiritual entities.

Thus the poem allows us to rediscover our spiritual selves: its function is to put us in touch with our feelings, or, in a deeper sense, to reveal to us once again "the primal vision"--the psychic and physical goals of both the human race and life itself, which are indelibly stained on our chromosomes. In a way, poets are doctors. The poem is their medicine. The readers' illness is that they do not know who they are or where they are going in this world. As doctors of the spirit, the poets show the readers the answers to these questions, and in doing so allow them to experience the way in which they can once more psychically enter the harmony of the universe.