The Poet in You

a guided journey into your inner life finding your voice in poetry - Jay Ramsay

for the inspiration we call poetry
for changing my life
and lives of those I've loved & worked with

But often, in the world's most crowded streets,
But often, in the din of strife,
There rises an unspeakable desire
After the knowledge of our buried life;
A thirst to spend our fire and restless force
In tracking out our true, original course;
A longing to inquire
Into the mystery of this heart which beats
So wild, so deep in us—to know
Whence our lives come and where they go
—Matthew Arnold, 'The Buried Life'

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INVITATION

A poem is like a butterfly. A moment seeds itself inside us. A memory. An experience when we saw, we felt, perhaps even, we knew.

It touches deep in us. Deeper than words. And something begins, in that inner space. Spmething that is uniquely ours to speak of.

Creativity is naturally a process of incubation and birth. This book is designed to assist and guide you in this process.

It is an affirmative approach designed to respond to the needs of each individual person. It aims to honour and empower your own unique experience.

All you need is a commitment to yourself.

PREFACE—

FROM CHRYSALIS TO BUTTERFLY

There is a poet in all of us. However unknown or neglected that part of us may be, it is there, often just waiting for the right conditions to present themselves.

Beyond writing poetry and being (and calling myself) a poet, I have known this since I realized that poetry is not just about literature and words on paper, it is alive in the living air all around us in any moment, and it is about our attitude to and relationship with life (all of life, and so death and dying also).

Poetry is also about that primary voice in us that we can also think of as the most radical part of who we are, belonging in our feelings and our individual authentic response to what happens to and around us. That primary voice is something we all get educated and socialized out of (to a greater or lesser degree)—indeed soceity would be impossible without these agreed terms of reference and description—however something is also lost in this process that Wordsworth referred to as 'shades of the prison house', which was why Miroslav Holub, the Czech poet, spoke of poetry as being among 'the first things of Man'. We may think of this in terms of dreams too, as well as play with its sense of expanse and experiment: in both the stirrings of our creative unconscious are free in a way they may later seem not to be.

Poetry is also about the imagination and gaining access to a different level of meaning. Nothing means anything merely at the concrete level beyond its function. That is materialism. For meaning, we have to get to another level which is also symbolic where things and events resonate with spirit. This is what the early 19th C. Romantics—Wordsworth, Coleridge—knew as Imagination (with a capital 'I').Through it, we can open to our lives as intrinsically meaningful as journeys of experience and development in time—that is, when we can find that primary voice, that basic experience of identity in us again. This is where the work begins.

If I don't know how I feel, I don't know who I am. What I have experienced working with groups and individuals again and again is the power of the imagination and the heart to restore us to what we feel and therefore who we are. The expression that comes as a result—through drawing and group sharing as well as in writing—is fundamentally healing, and may also involve the naming of something long held and never spoken. Again and again I have seen faces lit up from within during and as a result of the writing that follows, and it is always a thread in the way I work in my private therapy practice as well. The Greeks knew this as catharsis, for me—wierd and suspect as it may be to the TLS mainstream—it is living poetry where poetry and healing are about the same thing: that spark that makes us know who we are, the relief and wonder of being back inside the skin of things.

NOTE TO THE READER

This book draws on material I have used in my one to one correspondence courses since September 1990. After the Introduction To Poetry which follows there are 9 chapters which offer a structured and experiential journey to and with 'the poet in you'. Each chapter contains teaching in context, a suggested inner exercise, a writing exercise, and also study poems and extracts as well as some additional reccomended reading—the whole originally designed to function over a 9 month period of gestation. They can be taken more intensively, but the minimum period I would suggest would be 9 weeks.

You can choose to work through this book on your own as solowork, and there is the option to correspond either with me as your tutor and guide, or one of the Chrysalis team (please see If You Wish To Work With A Tutor/Guide as well as the Further Information section). Either way, may it happen for you, and all the richness of your inner being come into expression where the poetry within you is waiting.

But first lets look more deeply at the roots and origin of poetry, and what that means for us in the climate of today

INTRODUCTION TO POETRY

Hwaet !

A dream came to me
        at deep midnight
when humankind
        kept their beds
—the dream of dreams !
        I shall declare it.
—'The Dream of the Rood' (10th C.)

The spirit world shuts not its gates,
Your heart is dead, your sense is shut
—Goethe, 'Faust' (19th C.)

Datta:
what have we given ?
—T.S. Eliot, 'The Waste Land' (1922)

1

Poetry is an impulse as old as the human spirit: as old as language itself. We find it deep in time; in Isiah, Homer, St. John, Corinthians (in the Bible), Dante, Shakespeare, Goethe—in writing and in names which have become myth and which have entered the stream of memory of our heritage and of our essence. Poetry and the word 'poet' comes from the Greek poesis, meaning 'one who makes'. The poet , in relationship to words, is a maker of a special kind. In Latin, the word is vates meaning 'seer', or diviner—prophet also. One who makes, and one who sees. These two meanings are at the root of what we are setting out to explore.

The definition of poetry is something primary, it is something that precedes the rational intellect. Poetry comes from the spirit, from inspir-ation. Language it is tool. The mind is its mediator. Long before poetry was written down, and long before it began to be published as we know it, it was spoken—spoken aloud and learnt by heart. In our own Celtic past, this was the function of the bard. In Anglo-Saxon Britain, the earliest English poems we have would have been spoken in many different and slightly varying versions before they reached manuscript form. This would include 'The Dreamof the Rood' quoted above, as well as an epic like Beowulf.

The mediaeval figue of the minstrel, and in 12th C. France, the troubadour, continued this oral tradition—a tradition which is still alive today in Macedonia, for instance, and Russia, where poems of immense length are still memorized. Even in Victorian and Edwardian England, and more recently as well, people in school were learning poems by heart—or by rote.

In connection with other and elated cultures, poetry understood as something magical was deeply rooted in tribal feeling, and embodied in the shaman, the Bushman and the Aborigine, who by going intro a state of receptive trance brought back messages as well as healing from spirit. Ancient priesthoods, like the Egyptian, were imbued with ritual language—personified in the 'poet-pharoah' Akhnaton with his famous 'Hymn to the Aten' (Sun), who transformed his country through its monotheistic inspiration.

Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot's close friend and collaborator, referred to poetry as the wise language of the tribe.

We can see then thar poetry, in its origin and essence, has clear preoccupations: the first is to speak truth, the second is to communicate that truth, and the third is to communicate it in language that sees, feels and dreams—in what ordinary or mechanical language is incapable of, in other words. This is fundamental.

2

Poets are the sensitive antennae of their culture: of the place and time where they live. David Gascoyne, who became known as a young poet inspired by Surrealism in the 1930's, calls the poet a 'seismograph'—someone who experiences things not only personally, but collectively. All art tells the story of its time—poetry, we can say, tells that story uniquely in words. The history of poetry in any culture is bound up with storytelling in this sense—and it is in this sense we can

understand it as ‘divination’.

Poetry divines the psyche of the culture it emerges in, and as poetry moves through time, the evolution of cultures in all their patterns of growth, decay, crisis, and rebirth.

Over time, poetry has as a result emerged in different forms with different emphases, named in periods (usually in retrospect).DSo during Renaisaance England we have the ‘Silver’or court poets of the early 16th C. (court of Henry VIII and Elizabeth I), the ‘Metaphysical’ poets of the mid-17th C.; then the ‘Augustan’ porets of the 18th C. before the sudden brief revolutionary flowering of Romanticism after William Blake in the 1790’s; before its slow dilution in Victorian times, and the disruptive reorientaion of 19th C. poetry in both craft and content in ‘Modernism’ through Pound and Eliot in the early 20th C.

The intellectual (and academic) status of poetry is something relatively recent, in so far as many people still feel the withdrawl of poetry as something comprehensible from them, also in the way it has been taught. In our age of television, DVD’s and popular fiction, it is easy to forget that poetry was read as something seminal by large numbers. Tennyson, the poet laureate of his time, was a best seller, and Byron’s Child Harold initially sold out in London as soon as it was printed. Our age has been one of specialization, and with an emphasis that has been more visual than verbal. Poetry until the 1960’s was part of this specialization, as it has also (in certain areas) remained. Poetry is now more popular again than it has been for at least a century, even though publishers, especially the profit-driven ones, still mostly fail to recognize it.

Poetry has,then, constantly been redefined across the breadth of human emotion and direction: and it has as constantly been ‘defended’, as far back as Sir Philip Sidney’s text of 1519. Others have followed, notably through Romantiucism, with its strongly value-orientated agenda. Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote

The poet, described in ideal perfection, brings the whole soul of man into activity, with the subordination of its faculties to each other, according to their relative worth and dignity. He diffuses a tone and spirit of unity that blends and (as it were) fuses, each into each, by that synthetic and magical power to which we have exclusively appropriated the name of imagination

—*Biographia Literaria*

Percy Bysshe Shelley was both more forthright and more simple in his Defence of Poetry in declaring poets to be the ‘unacknowledged legislators of mankind’, and in his political poems he speaks to that spirit in the English people, both in his ‘Song to the Men of England’ (sung for many years in working men’s clubs), and in ‘The Mask of Anarchy’, written in rage after the terrible Peterloo massacre of 1819. And there weren’t many who thanked him for telling the truth about oppression. Poetic truth isn’t any moe comfortable than the reaching of the Gospels; and near the time of his untimely death (in 1822, aged only 29) Shelley numbered only 11 people he knew of who were actually reading his books.

In both Coleridge and Shelley’s statements, you can hear the ancient echo of the consciopusness I began by naming. The diffeence is that, centuries later, we find the poet in effect ‘de-tribalized’, and the advent of the outsider, named by existentialist philosophers and writers. The relationshop between poets and their soceity has always been tenuous and ambiguous because the best poets find themselves saying what their culture would rather not hear. Even in poets as relatively integrated into their soceity as John Dryden and (in the 18th C.) Alexander Pope, there is an awareness of this and an accompanying solitude. The satirical emphasis which was magnified in his contemporary Jonathan Swift, famous for his Gulliver’s Travels, drove Swift into madness.

Swift’s Gulliver remains, surrounded by a horde of Lilliputians only too eager to tie him down. And there is a Gulliver in all of us.

In more recent times, alieneation in soceity and its lack of ecological relationship has been reflected in maladjustment—and in the suicidal deaths of poets like Sylvia Plath and Harry Fainlight. More and more people are awakening to the price of distance and disconnection through a sensitivity which is, at root, poetry itself: its wellspring and source. And now we find ourselves in a time when contact with that source has become imperative, and not only for those of us who are poets—but, once again, for all of us.

So what is poetry ? Or rather, what can we mean by it ? There is a connection with prose (especially in Modern Poetry), but the diffeence, apart from an obvious intensity and density of language reflects on the function of poetry as heart-speech. Poetry moves the heart where it reaches us and enters us, touching us at a level that is by definition deeper. All poetry aims to do this, whethe rit succeeds or not. But w eknow when it does—there is that distinct

and yet ineffable sense of our breath pausing, our eyes as if opened inards, pouise dover the written form and movement among the lines, or just where the poem ends, leaving us suddenly opened, quietly, bleneded with its feeling through each nuance of its word order and rhythm.

I remember vividly the first time I read Shelley's 'Ode to the West Wind', walking down by a Surrey river, down the hill from school. It was in a little battered leather Victorian edition I'd picked up for pence. not so much to read as to have, and I found myself opening it as I stood near the water. It was an autumn afternoon, and the leaves had turned russet, glowing, and there was a breeze along the river and in the trees above it, enough to suggest wind that the leaves whisperd to, hushing the air and suggesting a sense of anticipation at the same time. My eyes moved into the poem, and immediately its rhythm hled me, and as I read I was no longer awareof myself standing there, as the sound of the leaves blown by the wind began to move and the words glowed and caught fire,

image after image drawing me through towards its ending. It was a moment out of time—we all have them—where the poem entered me and I entered it. It was a turning point, as I only later came to realize.

Something began in me that afternoon. I can say I was moved, but it was more than that. The feeling was of being called—of being addressed. I didn't know what it was, and I put the book away and walked on, finding myself seeing the river and the trees above it and the leaves in a way I hadn't before—or hadn't consciously. I wasn't looking at them, I was seeing them: I was seeing them alive. And they were calling too, and I was saying Yes—I say 'I', but it was also something else in me that was at the same time time more familiar to me: utterly familiar, in fact. It was my own voice.

Poetry has to do with that unique voice we all have in us. It is not something we have generally been taught to believe, or give credence to. Snd this is something more than literature as we generally understand it. These are living words: not merely to be dissected like the wings of a butterfly. We all speak a generalized language, defined by nationality and influenced by conditioning we are all moulded by; and beneath that, spoken or unspoken, is another voice. A door opens—and poetry can open that door into our own heart and towards our own truth, whatever it may be, and whatever it may ned to sound like. A door opens—and a journey begins. it is a call from the depth of us to be who we are.

And it is he voic which can say, or begin to say, 'I am'. It is our birthright.

Poetry is a quest. At the same time (as we have seen) poetry is a response to the world—a response and an argument, both politically and spirititually, and particullarly now the winds of change are blowing. We each need to have a vision of our time and what is happeneing in it and a sense of why it is happening.

By going more deeply into ourselves we are able to go more fully into the world and our relationships in it, with friends and strangers, seeing that we are all part of it. We are part of Creation—and we are co-creators. And we find ourselves different from the world and its current values—and that is the dynamic of poetry. There is a cliche about poetry being 'unworldly', and this is the truth in it. We are in the world, but not of it (as St. John says). You could call this the outer calling. it is a calling to wake up—and to begin to see a way beyond the waste land of nationality, prejudice, denial, exploitation and pollution; seeing a way too beyond these things in us and the unimaginative language we speak.

The poet inside us wakes and stirs, as the world stirs towards rebirth. As George Trevelyan wrote (in Magic Casements):

In our over-masculinated soceity, in which logical analysing intellect is used to gain our ends, the more feminine intuitive faculties are often allowed to go dormant. But these are precisely the faculties that make poetry. True imagination can blend with the being within form, and rediscover the miraculous oneness of all life. The poet is one who can crystallize into words this profound experience of identity.

We need space in order to write, and we need to learn to go inside and make a centre there.Then it can begin.

There are as many ways to write a poem as there are people to write poems. The contemporary scene (which is expanded on in the course which continues where this book ends) is a rich arena ofdiversity and difference. Poetry exists on many levels - light-hearted and serious, meditative and passionate. It is wrong to start out by thinking there must be a 'right' way to write a poem. Poems often know more about themselves than we do, and the important thing is to let them come as they want to - in other words, to let yourself speak. Revision and rewording, if necessary, can come later. Asnothe useful point to make here is to dop with self-esteem (or the lack of it). Your poem, like your experience, need be no better or worse than anyone else's - t is yours. Comparisons are often unhelpful and de-energizing. We ned to focus o and trust what we are trying to say. It is not an exam, and there is no certificate. It's much more challenging and more pleasurable than that—and there's no one here to mark you down.

There's no competition, either - and no prizes. We are the prize - and it's greater than anything we have so far imagined. And perhaps a little stranger, too.

references

epigraphs: 'The Dream of the Rood', translated by Michael Alexander, from his The Earliest English Poems (Penguin). The lines from Goethe's Faust from Colin Wilson's Poetry & Mysticism (City Lights, USA). Eliot's 'The Waste Land' in Collected Poems (Faber).

David Gascoyne's concept appears in his Prelude to a new Fin De Siecle (Greville Press Pamphlets, Emscote Lawn, Warwick). His Collected Poems are published by OUP.

Coleridge's Biographia Literaria published by J.M. Dent; George Trevelyan's Magic Casements by Coventure.

The Poet in You (O Books, 2009) is available from Orca
distribution on 01202-665432 @ £11.95 or from www.o-books.net