

“Introduction: On Poetry

When they see poetry coming, some people lock their hearts, their minds, and their wallets. They are confident they will not understand it, but if they do, they are just as sure it will bore them to tears, real tears. Their reactions are due to a gross misunderstanding.

Poetry, like music, should strike the ear, not the eye. Words on paper are no more poetry than notes on paper are music. Reading a poem without hearing the words is like taking sheet music to your bedroom and leaving your guitar on the couch. Music comes alive only when it's heard, like Elton John playing the Million Dollar Piano at Las Vegas, or the New York Philharmonic fiddling as if their lives depended on it.

Read aloud and thrill to the music of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's serenade to her husband:

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.
I love thee to the depth and breadth and height My soul can reach,
when feeling out of sight For the ends of being and ideal grace . . .

Listen to the hoofbeats of Alfred, Lord Tennyson's "Charge of the Light Brigade," about 600 British cavalry riding into a trap to be slaughtered:

. . . Into the valley of Death
Rode the six hundred . . .
Theirs not to make reply,
Theirs not to reason why,
Theirs but to do and die.

Listen to a nation writhing in pain as you read aloud, "O Captain, My Captain," Walt Whitman's lament at the death of Lincoln at the close of the American Civil War:

. . . The ship has weather'd every rack,
the prize we sought is won,
The port is near, the bells I hear,
the people all exulting,
While follow eyes the steady keel,
the vessel grim and daring;
But O heart! heart! heart!
O the bleeding drops of red,
Where on the deck my Captain lies,
Fallen cold and dead.

All poetry is not for all people, just as all music is not for everybody. Play an aria from a Verdi opera and a foot-stomping ballad about a runaway hound dog in succession. You're unlikely to enjoy both equally. My choice would be to leave the dog alone. If he loves you, he will return. The Paris premier of a Wagner opera resulted in riots in the streets. Parisiennes did not care for it.

Of course, not everyone will get the same picture, but everyone gets something listening to the words of Robert Frost in “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening:”

. . . The woods are lovely, dark, and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep . . .

It’s about the music of the words. I look at a rainbow and say, “Beautiful.” William Wordsworth looked at a rainbow and wrote:

My heart leaps up when I behold
A rainbow in the sky:
So was it when my life began;
So is it now I am a man;
So be it when I shall grow old, Or let me die! . . .

So, a poem is words—one after another—that, when read aloud, make us feel, in the midst of darkness, like someone lit a match. It’s like a movie that is so good we forget we’re watching a film, or a book so engrossing we inhabit another time and place for a season. The sound of a great poem carries us along like the crest of a 20-foot wave on Honolulu’s north shore! Awesome, dude, hang ten!”