INTRODUCTION

BECAUSE THERE IS LANGUAGE THERE IS POETRY

It's raining, it's pouring
The old man is snoring
He went to bed
With a bucket on his head
And couldn't get up in the morning.

Children as young as two or three can delight in this rhyme and will try to get their own tongues round it. Why is this? Most simply it is because they delight in the noise it makes. Just at the time they are sorting words from their whole acoustic world and beginning to use them themselves, here is a piece of language they can understand and whose sounds give them immediate pleasure.

Exploring how this works in more detail, I think we can recognize several particular features in its short span. First it has strong, obvious beats, here shown in bold: 'It's **rain**ing, it's **pour**ing / The **old** man is **snor**ing / He **went** to **bed** / With a **buck**et on his **head** / And **could**n't get **up** in the **morn**ing.' Moreover there is an intriguing change of pattern within the first four lines. Two strong beats occupy only four syllables in line 3 as against the six or seven of the other lines. Then, in the last line there are three stresses. Line 4 – 'with a **buck**-et on his head' – seems to present a difficulty as the speaker has to scramble over 'with a' to get to the next obviously stressed syllable, '**buck**-et'. Indeed another version of the rhyme gives 'He got into bed / And bumped his head' which is simpler to say because it is more 'regular', and if we combined the two to read: 'He **went** to **bed** / And **bump**ed his **head**' it would be

more rigidly patterned still. However the pleasures of verse don't come from rigidity but often from a flexing of a basic scheme, and the 'difficulty' of articulating lines 3 and 4 presents the same kind of enjoyable challenge as a tongue-twister does. If the game is to recite it ever faster the fun increases until the inevitable hilarious breakdown. However arrived at, it is the not-so-simple irregularities of this simple rhyme that account for its rhythmic pleasure.

At the same time this little verse is dominated by clear ***rhymes***: raining / pouring / snoring / morning, and bed / head. Standing out from the more normal rhythms and sounds of speech this verse encourages a physical response like clapping or swaying, just as modern pop songs do. The importance of the tune always makes it very difficult to compare poetry and song lyrics but in the words of this Abba song we can broadly see rhythm, rhyme, repetition of word-sound and phrase deployed in just the same way as part of the pleasure:

> Mamma mia, here I go again
> My my, how can I resist you
> Mamma mia, does it show again
> My my, just how much I've missed you.

It is just those qualities which make this a children's favourite well before they can make any more sense of the emotional meaning than they can of why a man might go to bed with a bucket on his head.

Rhymes such as these, and even simpler ones like the first lullabies are among the earliest utterances we address to children because we know they will respond to these effects. Through evolution, the human vocal tract has become able to give voice to a variety of particular sounds and their complex combinations. With these we have created languages which can communicate information of very different kinds and to a very high degree of subtlety. As we acquire language we make and respond to sounds, imitating and relishing them, before we learn the particular ones that go to make up words and discover how effectively word sounds denote objects in our world and carry information to others. But however sophisticated our utterances become the sensuous character of language remains.

As the poet **Kenneth Koch** (1925–2002) writes, 'Each word has a little music of its own' which, he goes on to say, 'poetry arranges so it can be heard' (Koch, 1998, p. 28).

> A clock in the eye ticks in the eye a clock
>   ticks in the eye.
> A number with that and large as a hat
>   which makes rims think quicker than I.
> A clock in the eye ticks in the eye a clock ticks
>   ticks in the eye.
>
> (Stein, 1971)

As we have seen with the rhyme and the song chorus, the 'music' of words is further enjoyed in such sequences as a run of the same consonants (*alliteration*), *rhyme*, or the repetition of certain words or rhythmic patterns. The lines above by **Gertrude Stein** (1874–1946) show this kind of fascination. Now the intrigue extends to the surprising juxtaposition of word meanings, as does the title of the poem itself, 'Before the Flowers of Friendship Faded Friendship Faded'. Stein called her book *Tender Buttons*. Ponder for a moment what associations come with putting the words 'tender' and 'button' next to each other.

These resources of language, especially *recurrence* – the anticipated pleasure of a sound or shape being repeated – have been used in the pre-literate, oral tradition of all societies for dances, riddles, spells, prayers, games, stories, and histories. The work of the American poet/researcher **Jerome Rothenberg** (1931–) provides a wealth of examples of this from every continent and many cultures. We should not assume though that work of this kind from pre-literate cultures is simple. Often, as Ruth Finnegan shows in her anthology *Oral Poetry*, work such as the Malay form of the *pantun*, which we will meet in its English adaptation in Chapter 7 on **Stanza**, can be very elaborate.

More familiarly, the early enthusiasm for nursery rhymes, chants, schoolyard games, songs, advertising slogans and jingles all feature the same kind of *gestural* characteristics. *'Gesture'* is an important concept here. What I mean by gesture in language are those qualities we employ to signal our meaning strongly

by emphasizing particular word sounds, rhythmic sequences or patterns, such as those we have recognized in the previous pieces. Thus the words will catch our attention not only through a grasp of their dictionary meanings, but through their sensuous impression, not unlike indeed, the way we accompany speech by hand gestures and variations of *tone*. The incantatory, 'musical' qualities of beat, drum and dance are close to this and are part of the close relation between poetry and song. Indeed the term which is still key to both – *lyric* – points to this connection. Lyric refers to that kind of *verse* most readily associated with the chanted or sung origins of poetry, traditionally to the harp-like stringed instrument known as the lyre. We still refer to the words of songs of all kinds as lyrics, and poetry closest in style and span to songs, as opposed to poems that tell substantial stories or are the medium for drama, are defined as lyric. I shall have more to say about this *genre* of poetry in Chapter 3, 'Tones of voice'.

In poetry without music these qualities have become formalized into what are its most prominent distinguishing features: its *rhythms*, that is the way a sequence of words moves in the ear, and its *metres*, that is the regular patterning of such movement into the poetic line. The character of the many different kinds of poetic line will be explored in separate chapters.

So, while the evolution and use of language has obviously been functional, exchanging information with the necessary clarity, its sounds and shapings, both spoken and written, are also inevitably gestural. Of course, those instrumental uses of language will be as simple and direct as possible, like the bald instructions for using a computer: 'Press Enter'; 'Select the file to be moved'; 'Double-click the Mouse icon'. But even the specialized language associated with computers is not literal but *metaphorical*: the mouse, windows, desktop and bin. My computer manual promises 'Right Answers, Right Now', and the simple emphasis of this punchy phrase – repeating 'Right' – is the kind of language I am calling gestural. This snatch of a conversation is invented, but I think it is recognizable:

> So I had to go back to the bank. No sign of it there. Back to the
> butcher's. No sign of it there. Back to the chemist. No sign of it there.

> Back to the deli. No sign. Back to the café. No sign. Where was it?
> Slap-bang in the middle of the kitchen table.

The speaker wants to express tedium and exasperation at mislaying a purse and these repetitive, truncated phrasings with their slight variations impress this upon the listener. These are the gestural features of language.

So, the argument of this chapter is that poetry is not really a peculiar, demarcated zone out of the mainstream of language-use, but that language is inevitably and intrinsically 'poetic' in the qualities that I'm calling gestural. However, historically, these qualities have been highlighted and formalized for particular uses and occasions. Poetry is a form for special attention and one that calls unusual attention to the way it is formed.

The ancient ceremonial aspect of gestural language persists in our desire for special forms of language for particular occasions. We all know for instance how difficult it is to 'find words' of condolence. In greetings cards, at weddings, funerals, in sorrow and commemoration and in love, wherever we feel the need for heightened, deliberate speech, wherever there is a need for 'something to be said', we turn to the unusual shapes and sounds of poetry. This is also why we might be drawn to write poetry in order to form an utterance that is out of the ordinary and commensurate to the weight or the joy of the occasion. Always at such times we will encounter the familiar difficulty of finding what we know to be the 'right words'.

The deployment of impressive sounds and shapes, the deliberate speech required by that 'something to be said', has been known in the western tradition as **rhetoric**. In this emphasis, from *Paradise Lost* to a local newspaper's *In Memoriam* verses, poetry can be seen to be a part of rhetoric.

However every experience with language teaches us that communication is frequently less transparent than we would wish. Disappointment at the failure of language to be clear, and at its capacity to mislead and sway us into deception has marked our thinking about language for centuries. Ambiguity, double-meanings, 'equivocation', intended and not intended, all manner of '-*speaks*' – 'double-speak', 'meta-speak' – result from, or exploit, the potential anarchy of language. Often it seems 'words run away with

themselves' and take us with them. This may lead into a cheerful gallimaufry of free association and **word-play**, or into saying things we did not mean. Those 'right words' can be very elusive.

As a form of utterance that is especially sensitive to all the various resources of language in both its **semantic** (i.e. meaningful) and sensuous dimensions, poetry has taken upon itself the freedom and opportunity for wordplay, and also its responsibilities. Because language is as it is we might say anything. Because life is how it is we need to watch what we say.

Through language we can convey common information, but also achieve a vast capacity to generalize particulars and to abstract from experience. We can also invent and fantasize and relay any of this to others. Its immeasurable creative flexibility enables an enormous range of associations and communications. So, since the nature of language itself does not necessarily oblige us to be purpose-like, it also enables associations which may seem purposeless. It is often irresistible – even just for the hell of it – to remove its use as far as possible from any externally driven direction.

The philosopher Daniel Dennett observes the essential biological function of language in evolution, but continues, 'once it has arrived on the evolutionary scene, the endowment for language makes room for all manner of biologically trivial or irrelevant or baroque (non-functional) endeavours: gossip, riddles, poetry, philosophy' (Dennett, 1984, p. 48). On this view, *all* poetry, including the most rhetorically purposeful, might be seen as 'baroque', and we shall look at the philosophical problems surrounding rhetoric and **figurative** language in Chapter 8. But when the owl and the pussycat go to sea in a beautiful pea-green boat, then we can see that language can indeed promote those endless associations in ways that seem especially 'baroque'. And delightful.

So language can be deployed 'uselessly', and an alternative emphasis to the rhetorical one would see poetry as the space where the glory and freedom of the possibility to say anything is specialized:

> an orange the size of a melon rolling slowly across the field
> where i sit at the centre in an upright coffin of five panes of glass

Such a relish as this from **Tom Raworth**'s (1934–) poem 'now the pink stripes', may be inspired by a desire to explore the light-spirited freedom afforded by language in a space not subject to instrumental demands. There can be a sheer game-playing element in such poetry, a love of messing with words because we can. Alternatively – or in addition – it may be a response to disillusionment with the use of language in the 'real' world of affairs, transactions and 'information'. This doubt as to whether language really does simply transport common sense from one person to another is deep and long-lived. In **William Shakespeare**'s (1564–1616) *Twelfth Night* the clown Feste complains that language has been so much discredited by being used to lie and deceive that 'words are grown so false I am loath to prove reason with them.' Feste claims here that the character of social discourse has become so unreliable that language itself has become discredited.

Beginning in the 1970s the American L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets have taken a similar view. This appellation, which comes from the title of one of the principal journals associated with the movement, draws attention to language as itself a material rather than an invisible medium *through* which we make meaning or 'express' ourselves. They question the whole idea of poetry as personal expression of experience, ideas or emotions but focus instead upon the features of words as objects in themselves. Further they challenge the dominance of what **Charles Bernstein** (1950–) calls the 'authoritative plain style' of modern industrialized, business-oriented society. Its increasing standardization claims a monopoly over coherence and excludes tones and styles of speaking and writing that do not conform to 'mannered and refined speaking'. How Bernstein and other writers associated with this point of view respond in their own poetic practice will be explored in Chapter 9, 'Writing a poem now: philosophies of composition'.

All of these pleasures and problems are with us because of the character of human language. What we have come to call poetry gives us a constructed, deliberate space in which to enjoy and to tussle with the experience of language. Reading or writing a poem offers a practising awareness of the problems of language and meaning – specifically of what we must say and how we can best say it. *Because there is language there is poetry*: in the rest of this

book I shall try to set out some of the principal ways that poetry in the modern English language has been made across the whole spectrum of rhetoric and nonsense.

SUMMARY

In this introductory chapter we have looked at:

- The character of human language, especially with regard to its sounds.
- The pleasure of rhythm and rhyme from children's verses onwards.
- How language operates functionally, uses *gesture*, but can also work 'uselessly' – and enjoyably.
- The problem of finding 'the right words'.
- The basic idea of rhetoric and the challenge of nonsense.
- The continuity between the general use of language and poetry *and* its distinctiveness.

FURTHER READING

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