

Essay on Matter and Words

(written after reading a great deal of widely assorted poetry in a very short time)

Rem tene et verba sequentur
 was the word in old Porcius's day.
 "Grasp the matter, let words follow after"—
 for we've no time for bull in our day.
 And that *art* was the prize of tenacity,
 which the matter would test for veracity,
 it was not felt needful to say.

Nor that "matter" meant "something of int'rest
 to the folk who're about in their dealings"
 —even those who do not know the poet,
 and are not much concerned with his feelings.
 Of those ancient and workaday ages
 was Homer hailed chief of the sages,
 for his words o'er which matter held sway.

For all poetry then was didactic—
 they'd not yet even learned to write prose—
 what we think of as ancientmost magic
 was as practical then as a post. ~

And even the gods that they worshipped
In fact, poetry was originally didactic, mnemonic—functional, as
 were the other arts and also religion, in a time when knowledge was limited,
 vague (at least w.r.t. foundations), and amorphous, and there were no lines
 between science and practical wisdom on the one hand, and myth on the other.

We've been taught since by suasion and preachment
 (and fire and sword and the stake)
 to Believe the repeated impeachment
 of the world that the ancients did make,
 to exchange the *passé* world of matter
 for the Word's kingdom. (Wait for the latter
 in a Time to come after our day.)

But the world's an insidious tempter.
 (Or as sinners might say: Truth will out.)
 So at times we forgot the Redeptor,
 and studied to help *ourselves* out.
 And our sin was rewarded with riches,
 and begat its antithesis, which is
 with our riches to fence the world out.

In the conquests Belief was too weak for
 jealous Ease quickly carried the day,
 and the matter words once strove to speak for
 was by word-mongers chased clean away.
 And the crime that's damn'd without defense—
 contumacious adherence to sense—
 gets the bureaucrat's *auto da fé*.

For at last we've the Service Economy—
 ship the physical stuff overseas!—
 and a feast of Spiritual bonhomie,
 to which nature shall bend at the knees!
 And the poets so strong in their cliques,
 and the boldest of impudent geeks,
 even they succumbed—yea, even they.

No, their numbers were hardly diminished,
 nor the volume of verse they conferred.
 But reduced to a politic finish,
 they regard, not the world, but the word.
 And unfash'nable readers they flout:
 not a bit of *unfash'nable* doubt,
 nor a thread of real sense to tease out.

But the world's an insidious tempter
 of all who don't know or can't learn
 that the world and the flesh are distemper,
 and the Virtual's where they must turn.
 So the vulgar grant poets disdain,
 and search out some old earthy refrain,

and the circle comes round once again.

If you're minded to write poems for sinners
 in the old and unfash'nable way,
 you will find there's small room for beginners,
 or for those for whom poetry's play.
 For the worldly have but little patience
 with the narcissist's wan lucubrations,
 or for things they themselves could well say.

Do then follow some worldly persuasion
 that links you to all other men,
 And excel in some frank occupation
 that earns you the ink for your pen.
 And for art's sake you must then of course
 read voraciously straight from the source
 what old bards and the wise had to say.

Then at times, and with no prompting needed,
 words and matter will meet in your head,
 and all other pursuits go unheeded
 while you forge something fit to be read.
 And as if by some external force,
 you are held by the sense to your course—
 like a poet possessed by the Muse.

But for most part you'll just make your rounds,
 and your pen it will hide and play dead,
 while you scrabble for pence or for pounds,
 live a life, and hunt food for your head.
 For you've learned, and it may be by vi'lence,
 what the Muse demands mostly is silence
 —till you've something of interest to say.

The more so since, though poets forget
 (still more painters and players and priests),
 it's oft best to write matter direct,
 unembellished by extra conceits.
 For matter's intractable, subtle,
 and obscured can seem ripe for rebuttal—
 unlike whole-cloth and tailor-made lies.

What's more, meter constrains. To be sure,
 its enjoyment does aid penetration,
 and helps wisdom be added to store,
 since conducive to memorization.
 The constraints, though, are not those of sense—
 with half language's tools we dispense
 for the sake of some quirks in our wiring.

In default of the statement direct
 we must *illustrate* each single topic;
 if we've multiplex themes to reflect,
 it goes on to the length of an epic.
 And for epics a poet gets killed
 if in narrative art he's not skilled
 and his notions don't bear the extension.

So of epics we have but a few,
 and poets think briefness their force.
 But concision makes high demands too:
 neat thinking, linguistic resource.
 And short subjects do tend to be small,
 while the line between small and banal
 is a fine one, and frequently crossed.

Both great epics and trenchant vignettes,
 it is true, ageless laurels have won.
 But their range is by limits beset:
 on most subjects, few verses will come.
 For the concepts are quite unaesthetic,

while the terms make for scansion emetic,
or demand the most ludicrous rhymes.

Love, sadness, and life's slings and arrows
are subjects incessantly fresh.
Thanks to old-time poetical fellows,
that whole lexicon's part of our flesh.
But when causes and knowledge we grope for,
comprehension, not art, 's all we hope for,
since the concepts and words just don't flow.

Overcoming his native tongue's poverty,
the great poet of matter, Lucretius,
sang six books of natural history—
in verse that's in spots less than specious.
He could not avoid homely description,
but he mastered the art of conception—
and his children lit more than one age.

His heir Vergil, in four books of georgics
wrought farms and the man into song;
but that matter makes small concrete topics
that run just a few phrases long.
And Vergil the farm boy he knew them,
and expanding on each could construe them
into verses that shone like the day.

But when book-length parade is illicit, we
must use, not word-*pictures*, but words,
attain scope at the cost of felicity,
and strain to avoid the absurd.
We may write for the graver consumer,
but we oft must presume on his humor
(and brevity's wit's best excuse).

With so many temptations to bullshit
when plain sense doesn't readily scan,
or say art must give way at the pulpit
when proclaiming the truth unto man,
it's no wonder that mere mortal poets
do far from infrequently blow it,
sacrificing both ends for each other.

Whereupon it is asked very loudly,
"If the music is all, why not notes?
Or if sense is to lord it so proudly,
then why not express it in prose?"
And that's if there's both art and sense:
many manage with both to dispense,
and unburdened, are joyous in song.

Whence the twentieth-century mode of
trivialities simp'ring, disjoint,
which in lines that the ear can't take hold of
vaunt their lack of both poesy and point
in a socio-spiritual pidgin
that steals most of its licks from religion
and thinks itself damnably new.

While the Ahtists in loft-district caverns
sell slapdash to new-arrived hicks,
or annoying their betters in taverns
imitate inconsiderate pricks,
and when faulted on worth or civility,
plead an Ahtist's refined sensibility
and squeal "Censorship!" (Hear the tape run.)

As to "Art", etymology punctures
the word's callow elitist pretensions.
It once covered both painters and plumbers:
Aht's a recent Romantic invention.
The fine artists whom older times knew
were a thoroughly workmanlike crew,
which the Ahtists do not care to mention.

For Enlightenment proved too revealing
for those better fitted for night,
who proclaimed that their "sensitive feelings"
were a better—and dark—sort of light.
—and explicitly excluded the common

"Now we've got you!" some Ahtists will gnash at me,
"You can eat that 'elitist' canard!
Don't we prate of the common incessantly?
Aht anoints us the people's own bard!"
But then watch as the Ahtist gets snitcal
when the people presume to get critical,
and the common speaks up for itself.

As for "censor!", have no guilty fear;
both hist'ry and English are clear:
"censorship" means "NONE MAY SAY IT."
It does *not* mean "We don't buy that *here*."
Please forgive me the grade-school digression,
but I here must avoid the impression
of twisting my words Left or Right.

For when wordmongers turn into censors
there's something that seems mighty queer.
One might think that it's all just pretenses
for protecting their own bread and beer.
It is gen'rally the crude that constraineth
and the Ahtist is seen when he reigneth
just as ruthlessly crude as them all.

The more timid in classrooms hold forth
but, nowise averse to rough trade,
shield the loud ones with volumes of froth
lest their idols by sense be betrayed
as—not bold intellectual plungers—
but common society spongers,
sponging patrons who're spongers of Aht.

Don't demand that their kind be abolished—
our ecology grants them their niche.
But, as nature's the guide of the polished,
you and I needn't hear out their pitch.
If we like we can let fashion dress us
(in good weather) but fashion oppresses
when permitted to dictate our thoughts.

Mediocrity, then, can't detain us;
we'll forego being vexed by the bad.
An inquisitive nature will train us
to choose freely what's good to be had.
And the raw mass of verses disporting
in each age, time will aid us in sorting—
for we've likely more urgent affairs.

Higher standards no hardships create:
meter's magic appeal is primordial,
and good verse on our human estate
finds us likewise instinctively cordial.
Though the matter's of ancient creation
it's re-minted in each generation
as the world is discovered anew.

In all ages that passed on before us,
in each culture that scribbled or sang,
artful verse on our world couldn't bore us,
though the genres were ever the same.
World and meter persist, and we know it.
If the poetry fails, blame the poet
for not taking the world as it is.

and it happens to answer the facts
 the dividing line is not between triviality and poetry, but between trivial poetry and worthwhile--awkward
 though this is for the trivial majority

wrt to real intellectual merit, not scanning skill
 And/So between alexandrines and doggerel
 the difference in merit is bugger-all
 if the poet has nothing to say.

but to work it has to be plausible, which requires attention to matter, rather than ideological posturing

picking targets
 requires a sense of perspective

Transfiguration (what the ignorant regard as "emotional") poetry is one member of the poetic family, and a unique and uniquely important one. But those of its proponents who attempt to usurp the prestige of the whole family by denying the legitimacy of all other branches, instead of disregarding classifications and letting their work stand on its own merits (with the excuse that the general doesn't understand art) proclaim the likely inadequacy of those merits, the likelihood that their productions are affectation rather than works of import to others.

What sets transfiguration poetry apart is not, as its less broadminded or more immature proponents claim, some "emotional", as distinct from rational, nature. The distinction is rather that the rational connections between the ideas expressed and the words used to express them are so subtle, and so particular to the case, that it is very difficult to describe those connections clearly, and (especially because they are particular to the case, and no generalities can be built on them, except by integrating them into some vast collection of such, to be studied and analyzed—a work that might lead to some interesting results, but might also lead to something already well known, and which would, in the nature of things, likely be bogged down and lost in political nonsense and tangents before it got anywhere), because the very verbal techniques for such description have hardly been developed (due to lack of incentive for the reasons just given), and finally, because the description is not really, in itself, worth the trouble if the poetic expression has been successful.

Another reason the idea content tends not to be seen as such is that the ideas expressed are very often not intellectual ideas, or complicated, or in themselves notable as ideas. (Or if they do express complex ideas, it is through the connections with other, simpler ideas that they work as poetry.) They are important for their association with other ideas (and, at this remove, with emotions too, but never with emotions simple and in themselves—it is button-pusher mass culture that deals with emotions simple and in themselves, and the product is by no means scarce), which are apt to be hinted at in the poem—they evoke a complex of ideas that is significant to many readers (but likely not to all, given the variety of life experience—so it's not necessarily a matter of taste and training), and has associations such that the evocation of this complex is a pleasurable, or at least in some sense positive, experience.

A painting does the same thing, non-verbally—and, at the level of the underlying ideas, a poem probably works non-verbally too. Perhaps the value of expressing these ideas poetically (or in paint), is that, being subtle and often very particular, they could not be expressed in any other manner, except at a length of direct discourse that would be quite excessive in proportion to the intrinsic value or interest of the ideas—like a joke that takes too long to get to the punch line. Such lengthy discourse is reserved for topics that are worth the trouble, and subtle and particular topics become the preserve of the genre of poetry that can express them. The topics themselves are dispensable; each has its own beauty and its own eternal aspect, but they are too numerous and too individually inconsequential—too interchangeable—to be of great import. The value of such poetry is not that it can express one or the other such topic, but that it can, in mass, provide a reserve available to readers of that particular sort of pleasure or positive experience, on whatever topic a poet happens to find a means of expressing. It is that experience, that stimulation of our mental faculties, the particular power and particular joy of the human animal, that makes such poetry a cultural treasure. And the more of it the better, if it's the real thing. —To sum up, it is a question, not of emotion, but of subconscious mentation.

The ability to write such poetry, valuable as it is, does not require any exceptional insight beyond the basically verbal talent of putting that particular type of concept into poetry, a talent not rarer or more demanding than the talent for putting other sorts of insight into poetry. There is good, bad, and abysmal poetry of all types, and probably in about the same proportion for each type. To defend mediocre poetry of one type because it is more demanding, or higher, is to beg the question of whether it really is.

And observation suggests that practitioners of such poetry are not, in fact, generally possessed of any uncommon insight into larger matters, except in the eyes of those who, following the lead of certain poets and their cliques and academic parasites, define "insight" as that which is exhibited by their poets, and "higher matters" as those of which those poets treat. The subtlety and particularity of transfiguring poetry, by obscuring its content, leaves open the opportunity for unfounded claims as to that content. The obscuration is unavoidable. But the opportunity remains nonetheless, and in poetry, as in any other field, such opportunities will be abused without limit, unless limit is imposed from without.

Those who have a feel for the rhythms of thought (Eliot)

Perhaps just add a prose companion essay, to avoid burdening the poem too much (but an all-verse ttmt would be a nice tour-de force), or better, make a full-scale essay to explore some of the themes (the literary ones) more fully.

Poets in freer earlier ages treated of the whole range of subjects, in the whole range of genres—but this is the mark of a free age, it is not what the priesthood/bureaucracy wants. (link to following?, perhaps put all in critical section (pidgin, etc.))

serendipity: the more available the less governed by specifics is the poem; also more play for emotion, which some take to be the essence of poetry
 some take refuge in obscurity
 [unless of course, you prefer obscurity
 with your point laid out rationally, you're exposed to devastating criticism if you're wrong]
 [if it is appealing, it's apt to have the same appeal as popular song or opera]
 It's the music and spectacle mostly,
 and just about never the lyrics.

and if it's conceded that poetry is only appropriate for some subjects, what of some poets' claims to a higher insight or finer sensibility that gives them a uniquely privileged intellectual position]

These great Masters of Antiquity you must sooner or later be able to judge of critically. But you must never imitate them. Study nature, and write accordingly, and you will resemble them. But it is nature, not the Ancients, that you are to imitate and Copy.

—John Adams, to John Quincy, “even in the midst of heckling [J.Q.] into studying his classics (Richard, 230).

What legitimately distinguishes poetry from vulgar effusions is the skills involved (and not spiritual effusions, which anyone can make—even if these are to be valued, they are to be valued as civility is valued—a common enough practice, not a profession), and these are common to all genres.
 More infra

Note on the first verse: *Rem tene et verba sequentur*, pronounced “rem tén-ay et véhr-buh seh-kwéntoor”, is a saying of the early Roman statesman, general, and orator, Marcus Porcius Cato. A summation of his art of oratory, it means, “keep a firm grip on the subject matter, and the words will come.” (I have added the optional ‘et’ for the sake of the sound, as better introducing the anapestic “key”. Cato has been called “the virtual founder of Latin prose literature” (*OCD* s.v.); he was also the first patron of Ennius, the greatest and most multi-talented of the earliest Roman literary poets.

Auto da fé was the sentence of death by burning handed out by the Holy Inquisition. (The term had a certain vogue in the mid-twentieth century.)

Lucretius was a Roman poet of the first century BCE. He put into verse, in six books, the materialistic philosophy of Epicurus, providing a materialistic explanation of natural phenomena as a remedy for the evils caused by superstition. He was influential in his own time, and even more so during the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. He explicitly decried “the poverty of my native tongue” ([*patriae sermonis egestas*]); the refinement of Latin and the extension of its resources to equal those of Greek was a task consciously taken on by Lucretius and other Roman writers of his time. It has always been recognized that his subject matter necessitated occasional aesthetic compromises, and that, great, innovative, and influential though his artistry was, Latin literary language soon evolved to improve on him.

VERSE FORM

Anapestic trimeter with iambic substitution and optional hypercatalexis of one or two levers.
 Stanzas consist of a quatrain followed by a tercet, rhyme scheme xaxacca

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 was the word in old Porcius's day.
 “Grasp the matter, let words follow after”—
 for we've no time for bull in our day.
 And that *art* was the prize of tenacity,
 which the matter would test for veracity,
 it was not felt needful to say.

NOTES

Theme (and rationale) of the 2nd part (The more so since . . .): In any case, poetry has its limitations

Hobbes quote from type showing.

Rerum copia verborum copiam gignit.

— Cicero, *De Or.* III.125. mcv tr: If you have a good supply of knowledge you will have a good supply of words.

The Romantic period, in combination with the industrial printing technology that arose at the same time, along with the concurrent rise of the middle class and the ageless cacoethes scribendi, began a gross overproduction of poetry. And the Romantic ethos in general became more deeply rooted in popular culture than perhaps any other such cultural phenomenon ever was before.

The people most likely to write when they have nothing to say of interest to others are narcissists, who are also the most likely to write about their own emotions. There are quite enough of them to constitute a literary genre. The impulse to defining legitimate poetry as that realting to emotions and other individual perspectives is self-protection for them against the true poets--the vates--who can write about matters of general interest--and especially against those few who can do it pre-eminently well and even in considerable volume.

Brooks. *TCY* 560–64 (xx'd, with rest of that chapter, to shelve with *TWOWI*) gives an account of poetic ideologies of the inter-war years that reflect exactly the same phenomena you discuss in general. Eliot and Pound, e.g., took the side of the Word, and some on that side explicitly denied the importance of "matter", or content; for Eliot and others, the theological and totalitarian component was explicit. Eliot was a dominant figure of the time. Brooks gives reasons for the appeal of that position.

Surtees, *Handley Cross*, Ch. 32, from a lecture by Jorrocks: "A poet, you see, has to measure his words, and werry often the one that would best express vot he vonts von't fit in with t'others, so he's obliged to halter his meanin' altogether, or mount a lame steed." ['halter' = alter, notwithstanding the horsey context]

I remember saying one night at the Cheshire Cheese, when more poets than usual had come, 'None of us can say who will succeed, or even who has or has not talent. The only thing certain about us is that we are too many.' — Yeats, *Four Years* (memoir, published in 1921), end of ch. 16.

Roy Campbell, 1902–57

On Some South African Novelists

You praise the firm restraint with which they write—

I'm with you there, of course:

They use the snaffle and the curb all right,

But where's the bloody horse?

NOT USED

(Let them ask no more grace than they give.)

(See D. Thomas and crapulent crew.)

planned obsolescence: the contemporary disregard for the past the self interest of contemporary mediocrities.

[often/while] substance succinct comes out / just makes doggerel

logaoedic

what we usually get: from mere poets

who are nothing but, and so have little to say of interest and must speak whether or not they have sthg to say however short, turns out too long.