

# DYLAN THOMAS

## Poetic Manifesto

You want to know why and how I first began to write poetry, and which or kind of poetry I was first moved and influenced by.

To answer the first part of this question, I should say I wanted to write poetry in the beginning because I had fallen in love with words. The poems I knew were nursery rhymes, and before I could read them for myself I had come to love just the words of them, the words alone. What the words stood for, symbolised, or meant, was of very secondary importance; what mattered was the *sound* of them as I heard them for the first time on the lips of the remote and incomprehensible grown-ups who seemed, for some reason to be living in my world. And these words were, to me, as the notes of bells, the sounds of musical instruments, the noises of wind, sea, and rain, the rattle of milk-carts, the clapping of hooves on cobbles, the fingering of branches on a window pane, might be to someone, deaf from birth, who miraculously found his hearing. I did not care what the words said, much, nor what happened to Jack & Jill & the Mother Goose rest of the world, nor the shapes of sound that their names, and the words describing their actions, made in my ears; I cared for the colours the words cast on my eyes. I realise that I may be, as I think back all that way, romanticising my reactions to the simple and beautiful words of those pure poems; but I think all I can honestly remember, however much time might have falsified my memory. I fell in love—that is the only expression I can think of—at once, and am still at the mercy of words, though sometimes now, knowing a little of their behaviour very well, I think I can influence them slightly and have learned to beat them now and then, which they appear to enjoy. I tumbled the words at once. And, when I began to read the nursery rhymes for myself, and later, to read other verses and ballads, I knew that I had discovered the most important things, to me, that could be ever. There they were, seemingly lifeless, made only of black and white, but out of them, out of their own being came love and terror and pity and pain and wonder and all the other things, abstractions that make our ephemeral lives dangerous, great, and beautiful. Out of them came the gusts and grunts and hiccups and heehaws of the common fun of the earth; and though what the words meant was, in its own way, often deliciously funny enough, so much funnier seemed to me, at almost forgotten time, the shape and shade and size and noise of the words as they hummed, strummed, jiggled and galloped along. That was the time of innocence; words burst upon me, unnumbered by trivial or portentous association; words were their spring-like selves, fresh with Eden's dew as they flew out of the air. They made their own original associations as they sprang and shone. The words, 'Ride a cock-horse to Banbury Cross' were all haunting to me, who did not know then what a cock-horse was nor cared a damn where Banbury Cross might be, as, much later, were such lines as, John Donne's, 'Go and catch a falling star, Get with child a mandrake root,'<sup>1</sup> with which also I could not understand when I first read them. And as I read more and

more, and it was not all verse, by any means, my love for the real life of words released until I knew that I must live *with* them and *in* them, always. I knew, in fact, that I must be a writer of words, and nothing else. The first thing was to feel and know their sound and substance; what I was going to do with those words, what use I was going to make of them, what I was going to say through them, would come later. I knew I had to know them most intimately in all their forms and moods, their ups and downs, their chops and changes, their needs and demands. (Here, I am afraid, I am beginning to talk too vaguely. I do not like writing *about* words, because then I often use bad and wrong and stale and woolly words. What I like to do is to treat words as a craftsman does his wood or stone or what-have-you, to hew, carve, mould, coil, polish and shape them into patterns, sequences, sculptures, fugues of sound expressing some lyrical impulse, some spiritual doubt or conviction, some dimly-realised truth I must try to reach and realise.) It was when I was very young, and just at school, that, in my father's study, before homework that was never done, I began to know one kind of writing from another, one kind of goodness, one kind of badness. My first, and greatest, liberty was that of being able to read anything and anything I cared to. I read indiscriminately, and with my eyes burning out. I could never have dreamt that there were such goings-on in the world between the covers of books, such sand-storms and ice-blasts of words, such slashing of humbug,<sup>2</sup> and humbug too, such staggering peace, such enormous laughter, such and so many blinding bright lights breaking across the just-awaking wits and splashing all over the pages in a million bits and pieces all of which were words, words, words, and each of which was alive never in its own delight and glory and oddity and light. (I must try not to make these supposedly helpful notes as confusing as my poems themselves.) I wrote endless imitations, though I never thought them to be imitations but, rather, wonderfully original things, like eggs laid by tigers. They were imitations of anything I happened to be reading at the time: Sir Thomas Browne, Quincey, Henry Newbolt, the Ballads, Blake, Baroness Orczy, Marlowe, Chaucer, the Imagists, the Bible, Poe, Keats, Lawrence, Anon., and Shakespeare.<sup>3</sup> A mixed lot, as you see, and randomly remembered. I tried my callow hand at almost every poetical form. How could I learn the tricks of a trade unless I tried to do them myself? I learned that the bad tricks come easily; and the good ones, which help you to say what you think you wish to say in the most meaningful, moving way, I am still learning. (But in earnest company you must call these tricks by other names, such as technical devices, prosodic experiments, etc.)

Like writers, then, who influenced my earliest poems and stories were, like simply and truthfully, all the writers I was reading at the time, and, as you see from a specimen list higher up the page, they ranged from writers of school-boy adventure yarns to incomparable and inimitable masters like Blake. That is, when I began, bad writing had as much influence on my stuff as good. The bad influences I tried to remove and renounce bit by bit, shadow

<sup>1</sup> Empty or misleading talk.

<sup>2</sup> By Thomas Browne (1605–1682): English writer and physician. Thomas De Quincey (1785–1859) English writer famous for his *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*. Henry Newbolt (1862–1906) English lawyer and writer of nautical poetry. William Blake (1757–1827): English poet and painter. Baroness Orczy (1855–1947): Hungarian-born author of *The Scarlet Pimpernel*.

(1905). Christopher Marlowe (1564–1593): English dramatist. Imagists: early twentieth-century poets who wrote in direct, clear, image-based free verse, as proposed by Ezra Pound (1895–1972) and others. Edgar Allan Poe (1809–1849): American poet and fiction writer. John Keats (1795–1821): English Romantic poet. D. H. Lawrence (1885–1930): English poet and novelist.

<sup>1</sup> From "Go and Catch a Falling Star," by English poet John Donne (1572–1631).

by shadow, echo by echo, through trial and error, through delight and disgust and misgiving, as I came to love words more and to hate the heavy innards that knocked them about, the thick tongues that had no feel for their multitudinous tastes, the dull and botching hacks who flattened them out into a colourless and insipid paste, the pedants who made them moribund and pompous as themselves. Let me say that the things that first made me love language and want to work in it and for it were nursery rhymes and folk songs, the Scottish Ballads, a few lines of hymns, the most famous Bible stories and the rhythms of the Bible, Blake's *Songs of Innocence*, and the quite incomprehensible magical majesty and nonsense of Shakespeare heard, real and near-murdered in the first forms<sup>4</sup> of my school.

You ask me, next, if it is true that three of the dominant influences on my published prose and poetry are Joyce, the Bible, and Freud.<sup>5</sup> (I purpose to say my 'published' prose and poetry, as in the preceding pages I have been talking about the primary influences upon my very first and forever unpublished juvenilia.) I cannot say that I have been 'influenced' by Joyce, whom I cannot possibly admire and whose *Ulysses*, and earlier stories I have read a great deal, I think this Joyce question arose because somebody once, in print, remarked on the closeness of the title of my book of short stories, *Portrait of Mr. Arthur As a Young Dog* to Joyce's title, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. As you know, the name given to innumerable portrait paintings by their artists is 'Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man'—a perfectly straightforward title. Joyce used the painting title for the first time as the title of a literary work. I myself made a bit of doggish fun of the painting title and, of course, intended no possible reference to Joyce. I do not think that Joyce has had any hand at all in my writing; certainly his *Ulysses* has not. On the other hand, I cannot deny that the shaping of some of my *Portrait* stories might owe something to Joyce's stories in the volume, *Dubliners*. But then I doubt if *Dubliners* was a pioneering work in the world of the short story, and no good storyteller since can have failed, in some way, however little, to have been edited by it.

The Bible, I have referred to in attempting to answer your first question. Its great stories of Noah, Jonah, Lot, Moses, Jacob, David, Solomon and a thousand more, I had, of course, known from very early youth, the great rhythms had rolled over me from the Welsh pulpits; and I read, for myself, from Job and Ecclesiastes; and the story of the New Testament is part of my life. But I have never sat down and studied the Bible, never consciously echoed its language, and am, in reality, as ignorant of it as most brought-up Christians. All of the Bible that I use in my work is remembered from childhood, and is the common property of all who were brought up in English-speaking communities. Nowhere, indeed, in all my writing, do I use any knowledge which is not commonplace to any literate person. I have used a few difficult words in early poems, but they are easily looked-up and, in any case, thrown into the poems in a kind of adolescent showing-off which I hope I have now discarded.

And that leads me to the third 'dominant influence': Sigmund Freud. My only acquaintance with the theories and discoveries of Dr Freud has been through the work of novelists who have been excited by his case-books.

And, of popular newspaper scientific-potboilers who have, I imagine, vulgarised his work beyond recognition, and of a few modern poets, including Auden, who have attempted to use psychoanalytical phraseology and theory in some of their poems. I have read only one book of Freud's, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, and do not recall having been influenced by it in any way. Again, no honest writer today can possibly avoid being influenced by Freud through his pioneering work into the Unconscious and by the influence of those discoveries on the scientific, philosophic, and artistic work of his contemporaries: but not, by any means, necessarily through Freud's own writing.

To your third question—Do I deliberately utilise devices of rhyme, rhythm, and word-formation in my writing—I must, of course, answer with an immediate, Yes. I am a painstaking, conscientious, involved and devious craftsman in words, however unsuccessful the result so often appears, and to whatever long uses I may apply my technical paraphernalia, I use everything and anything to make my poems work and move in the directions I want them to. Old tricks, new tricks, puns, portmanteau-words, paradox, allusion, paronomasia, paragram, catachresis, slang, assonantal rhymes, vowel rhymes, sprung rhythm.<sup>6</sup> Every device there is in language is there to be used if you will. Poets have got to enjoy themselves sometimes, and the twistings and convolutions of words, the inventions and contrivances, are all part of the play that is part of the painful, voluntary work.

Your next question asks whether my use of combinations of words to create something new, 'in the Surrealist way', is according to a set formula or is spontaneous.

There is a confusion here, for the Surrealists' set formula was to juxtapose the unmediated. Let me make it clearer if I can. The Surrealists—that is, super-realists, those who work *above* realism—were a coterie of painters and writers in Paris, in the nineteen twenties, who did not believe in the conscious selection of images. To put it in another way: They were artists who were dissatisfied with both the realists—(roughly speaking, those who tried to put down in paint and words an actual representation of what they imagined to be the real world in which they lived)—and the impressionists who, roughly speaking again, were those who tried to give an impression of what they imagined to be the real world. The Surrealists wanted to dive into the subconscious mind, the mind below the conscious surface, and dig up their images from here without the aid of logic or reason, and put them down, illogically and unreasonably, in paint and words. The Surrealists affirmed that, as three quarters of the mind was submerged, it was the function of the artist to gather his material from the greatest, submerged mass of the mind rather than from that quarter of the mind which, like the tip of an iceberg, protruded from the subconscious sea. One method the Surrealists used in their poetry was to juxtapose words and images that had no rational relationship; and out of this they hoped to achieve a kind of subconscious, or dream, poetry that would be truer to the real, imaginative world of the mind, mostly

4. Grades (British).  
5. Sigmund Freud (1856–1939). Austrian found-

er of psychoanalysis. James Joyce (1882–1941). Irish novelist.

6. W. H. Auden (1907–1973). Anglo-American poet.  
Metrical system using a variable number of syllables per foot, devised by English poet Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844–1889). *Formantean-*

words: words made from the blending of two words. *Paronomasia*: pun. *Paragram*: wordplay involving alteration of letters. *Catachresis*: intentional misuse of a word or figure, as in a strained or mixed metaphor.

submerged, than is the poetry of the conscious mind that relies upon the rational and logical relationship of ideas, objects, and images.

This is, very crudely, the credo of the Surrealists, and one with which I profoundly disagree. I do not mind from where the images of a poem are dragged up: drag them up, if you like, from the nehermost sea of the hidden self, but before they reach paper, they must go through all the rational processes of the intellect. The Surrealists, on the other hand, put their words down together on paper exactly as they emerge from chaos, they do not shape these words or put them in order; to them, chaos is the shape and order. This seems to me to be exceedingly presumptuous; the Surrealists imagine that whatever they dredge from their subconscious selves and put down in paint or in words must, essentially, be of some interest or value. I deny this. One of the arts of the poet is to make comprehensible and articulate what might emerge from subconscious sources; one of the great main uses of the intellect is to select, from the amorphous mass of subconscious images, those that will best further his imaginative purpose, which is to write the best poem he can.

And question five is, God help us, what is my definition of Poetry? I, myself, do not read poetry for anything but pleasure. I read only the poems I like. This means, of course, that I have to read a lot of poems I don't like before I find the ones I do, but, when I do find the ones I do, then all I can say is, 'Here they are', and read them to myself for pleasure.

Read the poems you like reading. Don't bother whether they're 'important' or if they'll live. What does it matter what poetry is, after all? If you want a definition of poetry, say: 'Poetry is what makes me laugh or cry or yawn, what makes my toenails twinkle, what makes me want to do this or that or nothing, and let it go at that. All that matters about poetry is the enjoyment of it, however tragic it may be. All that matters is the eternal movement behind it, the vast undercurrent of human grief, folly, pretension, exaltation, or ignorance, however unlofty the intention of the poem.'

You can tear a poem apart to see what makes it technically tick, and say to yourself, when the words are laid out before you, the vowels, the consonants, the rhymes or rhythms, 'Yes, this is it. This is why the poem is so. It is because of the craftsmanship.' But you're back again where you began.

You're back with the mystery of having been moved by words. The best craftsmanship always leaves holes and gaps in the works of the poem, so that something that is *not* in the poem can creep, crawl, flash, or thunder in. The joy and function of poetry is, and was, the celebration of man, which is also the celebration of God.

1951

# THE PLEASURE PRINCIPLE

In this essay, the English poet Philip Larkin argues for a reclamation of pleasure as the chief end of poetry. Poetry must return to its primary function of capturing an emotional experience and communicating it to the reader if it is to regain an audience wider than academic critics, scholars, and their students. Larkin worries that "once the other end of the rope is dropped" between poet and general reader, poetry becomes self-involved and obscure, because untested by the challenge of communicating to a reader with a different education or experience. "Hence, no pleasure. Hence, no poetry." First printed in *Listen* 2.3 (1957), the essay has been reprinted from *Required Writing* (1984).

PHILIP LARKIN

## The Pleasure Principle

It is sometimes useful to remind ourselves of the simpler aspects of things normally regarded as complicated. Take, for instance, the writing of a poem. It consists of three stages: the first is when a man becomes obsessed with an emotional concept to such a degree that he is compelled to do something about it. What he does is the second stage, namely, construct a verbal device that will reproduce this emotional concept in anyone who cares to read it, anywhere, any time. The third stage is the recurrent situation of people in different times and places setting off the device and re-creating in themselves what the poet felt when he wrote it. The stages are interdependent and all necessary. If there has been no preliminary feeling, the device has nothing to reproduce and the reader will experience nothing. If the second stage has not been well done, the device will not deliver the goods, or will deliver only a few goods to a few people, or will stop delivering them after an absurdly short while. And if there is no third stage, no successful reading, the poem can hardly be said to exist in a practical sense at all.

What a description of this basic tripartite structure shows is that poetry is emotional in nature and theatrical in operation, a skilled re-creation of emotion in other people, and that, conversely, a bad poem is one that never succeeds in doing this. All modes of critical derogation are no more than different ways of saying this, whatever literary, philosophical or moral terminology they employ, and it would not be necessary to point out anything obvious if present-day poetry did not suggest that it had been forgotten. It seems to be producing a new kind of bad poetry, not the old kind that tries to move the reader and fails, but one that does not even try. Repeatedly he is confronted with pieces that cannot be understood without reference beyond their own limits or whose contented insipidity argues that their authors are merely reminding themselves of what they know already, rather than re-creating it for a third party. The reader, in fact, seems no longer present in the poet's mind as he used to be, as someone who must understand and enjoy the finished product if it is to be a success at all; the assumption now is that no one will read it, and wouldn't understand or enjoy it if they