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*Poetry is 'the spontaneous overflow of powerful emotions recollected in tranquillity'. Put another way, more mathematically if you like: emotion + time elapsed = poetry. Emotion + immediate outpouring = tweet.*

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## THE SPONTANEOUS OVERFLOW

### WHAT IS POETRY?

In the days when typesetting was still done by hefty blokes arranging small pieces of lead in a wooden box, pretty much everything on paper that looked neatly aligned on the left and a raggedy mess on the right could be considered poetry. Now that we're all dab hands at document layout, such certainty has long evaporated and a more complicated definition is needed. It's really a question of discovering what Donne, Anon, ee cummings, Ovid, Pam Ayres and Percy Bysshe Shelley have in common; or what connects *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, greetings card verses, naughty limericks, 'Ode to a Nightingale', 'Sing a Song of Sixpence' and *Paradise Lost*.

To do this, the biggest mistake is to look at the end products themselves. There appear to be no similarities whatsoever between a Shakespearean sonnet and a

Matsuyaman haiku, between a Milligan couplet and three or four thousand lines of Alexander Pope, between one of Edward Lear's nonsense rhymes and the neo-futuristic monologues of Andrei Voznesensky.

Note: Don't worry if a lot of words like 'neo-futuristic', 'polemical', 'panegyric', 'iconoclastic', etc. mean nothing to you. Just use them in a slightly haughty manner before anyone else does, and then add: 'Not a word that one would normally think of applying to his (or her) verse, perhaps....'

This book concentrates on English poetry, with a nod towards the USA and the wider world. Even so, somewhere, someday, someone will hurl a name at you that you don't recognise, a balladeer of whom you know nothing. This is when you should smile enigmatically, and fall back on one of the following bluffs:

a) *'Yes, I suppose it's about time I rediscovered him (or her).'*

This implies that you were aware of this poet ages ago, practically before the ink (or blood) dried on the manuscript. Equally, you might say: *'Yes, I suppose it's about time I rediscovered his (or her) work.'* Poetry buffs never refer to poems, only to the poet's work. This may or may not be because they have never done any in their lives and don't know what real work is.

b) *'Too deceptive for me, I'm afraid.'* This implies that you have seen through the poet's deception, whereas your companion hasn't.

c) *'I'm afraid that my approach to him (her) can only be described as lacklustre.'* Although you are ostensibly criticising

yourself, the implication is that the poet is hardly worth considering.

You can rediscover anybody – Byron, Ogden Nash, Banjo Paterson, even Gertrude Stein ('Rose is a rose is a rose'). Here you are using a Compound Bluff technique, suggesting that not only have you known the poet's work since infancy but that you are constantly re-evaluating poetry, seeking (and finding) new levels of appreciation, new depths of meaning.

'Depths of meaning' is what poetry is all about. All poetry is deep, profound, heavy, bottomless, suffocating, unfathomable. If you can understand it, it isn't poetry – it's verse. And then your appreciation should draw on the language of the wine expert. Verse is 'crisp and dry' like a white Burgundy, or 'sparkling and clear' like a young champagne. Verse can be about anything. Poetry concerns itself only with the inexorable course of love, rejection and death, although a great many poets don't bother too much with the first two, but hasten to the last.

Poetry is what happens when sensitive people find themselves overcome and have pen and paper (or tablet) to hand. They may be overcome by all sorts of emotions or feelings: love, joy (rare), despair (every day), wonderment (often faked), death wish (enormously common), horror, patriotism (outmoded), faith, lust (but only in a caring sort of way) – the list is endless. The source of the emotion may be almost anything: the Bible, a battle, a daffodil, a woman, a man, a bird, sunsets, the smell of frying onions. The reaction is always the same. Out come pen and paper, down goes the poem.