

**Robert B. Shaw**

## **The Soul of Wit**

Years ago, when there was more room on my shelves, I made a small collection of offbeat poetry anthologies. One of these was a book called *Eight Lines and Under: An Anthology of Short, Short Poems*, edited by William Cole (Macmillan, 1968). Although there is a certain amount of Leonard Cohen to navigate around, the contents of the book are readable for the most part and agreeably wide-ranging in mood and manner. The inclusion of examples by the neglected British poets Andrew Young and Frances Cornford is commendable. I retrieved this volume recently when I began planning this piece, and I found it a help in formulating thoughts about extremely short poems and their extremely equivocal place in literature. When I say extremely short, I mean less than eight lines; I think Cole made things easy for himself by allowing that many. (Making a rough survey, I counted at least ninety-three eight-line poems out of his more than two hundred selections—a generous proportion.) For a writer of rhymed verse, two quatrains, with all their opportunities for symmetry or contrast, do not seem much of a hurdle. And if you can write in eight lines something like Blake’s “The Sick Rose” or Yeats’s “After Long Silence,” more power to you. But what of work within even tighter margins?

The length of any poem is difficult to discuss without reference to its content. One says that a poem is too long (or less often, too short) “for what it is saying.” This obvious point did not prevent Edgar Allan Poe from advancing his notorious dictum (in the posthumously published essay “The

Poetic Principle”) that “a long poem does not exist.” He argued from his assumption that “a poem deserves its title only inasmuch as it excites, by elevating the soul,” and pointing out that such a rarefied state of imaginative response is bound to be transient: “After the lapse of half an hour, at the very utmost, it flags—fails—a revulsion ensues—and then the poem is, in effect , and in fact, no longer such.” This is no doubt an accurate enough description of how many readers have felt upon slogging into quite a number of the longer poems of Poe’s time and our own. Poets, however, have remained unpersuaded. Poe’s proposition did not deter Pound, or Zukofsky, or Olson from venturing beyond the half-hour limit, though it has provided a handy cudgel for critics disfavoring loose baggy monsters in verse.

Although his dismissal of the long poem has been frequently quoted, Poe’s comments later in the essay on poetic brevity are much less familiar and, from a logical standpoint, may seem surprising:

On the other hand, it is clear that a poem may be improperly brief. Undue brevity degenerates into mere epigrammatism. A very short poem, while now and then producing a brilliant or vivid, never produces a profound or enduring effect. There must be the steady pressing down of the stamp upon the wax.

Poe, like other poet-critics, elevated his own practice into theory: certainly anyone who reads “The Bells” all the way through will by the end feel thoroughly stamped. It is notable, too, that almost every one of the poems he cites with approval in his essay is what a present-day reader would find too long for what it is saying.

Given this situation, it is curious that what Poe called the “very short poem” is not in these days more prominent. Our

attention spans, we are told, have shortened; we absorb information through sound bites. But if this is so, why isn't brevity now more seriously pursued by poets than it has been in the past? Is it simply the case that most poets have more to say than any sensible person has patience to listen to? The phenomenon of blogging suggests that technology has finally gratified for numerous people the human urge to sound off at will (and also at length, and unedited). And some recent poetry seems a verse equivalent of this.

Those attracted to the very short poem can find examples without too much trouble, but usually such poems come with a label attached. The epigram, which it seems Poe thought trifling, is one such category; the Imagist lyric is another, as is one of Imagism's sources, the whole range of Asian poetic forms—haiku and others—that feature extreme compression. These various streams of tradition have fostered a host of poems equally various in aim, in manner, and in subject matter. We are so devoted to pigeonholing that often our first response to an unusually brief poem is to group it with others apparently of its type, and often our sense of the categories is unduly rigid, ignoring the degree of flexibility within each of them. Since in all varieties of the form the central aim is simply concentration, or distillation of expression to the verbal economy of a proverb, it should not be surprising to see a number of different approaches applied to so general a purpose.

The epigram is a case in point. We tend to think of epigrams as poison darts, aimed at individual targets, as many of Martial's and of his imitators' were. But in antiquity and in later centuries epigrams have served purposes other than satire: they have offered praise as well as censure, maxims, epitaphs, personal musings, and descriptions, just as longer poems are accustomed to do. The religious epigram was once a popular form. The modern master of the epigram, J. V. Cunningham, entitled one group of such pieces "Trivial,

Vulgar, and Exalted,” and was accurate in suggesting the range of tone and topic available to an epigrammatist. (Of this, more later.) As to the more abrasive pieces, the satiric thrust certainly makes some of them memorable, but those that wear best depend on a moral awareness of widely shared human shortcomings rather than on skewering a particular enemy. The point is effective deployment of wit within notably compressed precincts. In this mode meter and rhyme usually serve to emphasize the force of wit’s perception. Poems like this sometimes survive their occasions surprisingly well. Consider Alexander Pope’s “Epigram. Engraved on the Collar of a Dog which I gave to his Royal Highness”:

I am his Highness’ Dog at Kew;  
Pray tell me Sir, whose Dog are you?

We don’t need to know in detail about the servility of courtiers surrounding the royal family *circa* 1737 to get the point of this. We observe the same fawning behavior in present-day political appointees, and in middle managers of large corporations.

If epigrams employing traditional prosody draw their energy from wit, the briefer Imagist lyrics draw it from something else—vision, perhaps. The two most famous ones, Pound’s “In a Station of the Metro” and Williams’s “The Red Wheelbarrow,” suggest clicks of the camera shutter in their brevity, offering a sudden glimpse of the thing described while (and this is more important) suggesting further aspects hovering out of view. Of the rules that Pound constructed for Imagists, the one most frequently disregarded has been number 2: “To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation.” Pound adhered to this in his Metro piece and in a few others, but it proved too confining a program, and some later Imagist poems by him and by others sprawled to surprising lengths. Interestingly, the ones we

tend to remember now are the ones in which the verbiage is dutifully and stringently limited, like HD's "The Pool":

Are you alive?  
 I touch you.  
 You quiver like a sea-fish.  
 I cover you with my net.  
 What are you—banded one?

Many Imagist lyrics teeter on the brink of metaphor, brush up against allusion, without quite committing themselves to these strategies. Lurking somewhere in the background of Pound's Metro poem is a parallel between the subway passengers and the souls of the Underworld. Here, HD seems to create a possibility of metaphor with her use of personification. The poem could be what at first it appears to be: a description of a pool, done in the ingenuous voice HD often uses to conjure her version of the idyllic world of Classical pastoral. But again, it could just as well be a view of a human relationship, in which the speaker hesitates before the mystery of the other. How autonomous, how amenable, is the "you" whom the speaker studies? It was common in earlier decades to describe a person one did not understand as "deep waters." Perhaps this poem is saying something like that.

In contrast with the traditional epigram, such poems keep wit under wraps. The unexpected connections between apparently disparate things are not nailed down for the reader by puns, parallel phrasing, rhyme, or other such devices. They are left latent in the imagery; and the reader must put the piece through a fine mesh to bring them to light—if in fact they are there at all. Some Imagist poems (the less interesting ones) are pared-down versions of earlier nature poetry, content to render the scene without giving any sense of penumbra adhering to it.

Image-based poems, like poems of wit, remain viable possibilities for poets seeking to practice extreme compression. Asian forms, such as the Japanese haiku or tanka, or the Korean sijo, were one influence on the original Imagist movement and still offer further formal strategies for the presentation of single or closely related images. By adding to the Imagist program the requirement of a regular syllable-count, such forms tend to add austerity to an already tightly controlled approach to verse. As with the free-verse Imagist lyric, one notices over time a drift away from the brevity initially aimed at, for many Western poets adapting haiku now employ them as stanzas rather than as a stand-alone form. (Richard Wilbur, interestingly, adds rhyme to his stanzaic haiku.) Perhaps in this case the realities of English go against a greater fidelity to the form. English syntax is a good deal less compact than that of many other languages, and seventeen syllables leave little elbow room for our articles and prepositions. The slightly longer tanka or sijo may be more adaptable: certainly it would be nice if they became more familiar. Modern poetry in English took hints from the compression, suggestiveness in descriptive detail, and effective control of tone, often through understatement, in Asian originals. These are still useful resources for poets writing today.

For poets who might care to explore the power of brevity, the field is open. Magazines that once highlighted shorter poems, such as *The Epigrammatist* and *Sticks*, are no longer published. After Cunningham, Howard Nemerov is the last widely-known poet to have produced diminutive poems in quantity. Aficionados of such writing now have few living models to point to. Kay Ryan might come to mind, but her deft, neatly targeted poems are more often narrow on the page rather than lineally brief in the sense being discussed here. Samuel Menashe is sometimes spoken of in this regard. Although better known in the latter phase of his career than

before, he is hardly a household name. His poems are idiosyncratic, veering in unpredictable ways from both the Classical and the Modernist traditions earlier discussed, reading like diary entries of a spirit strangely marooned in flesh, in time, in New York City. This works for him, but his are not the sort of poems likely to provide templates for imitators.

What purpose might be served by increased attention to Pound's neglected second rule? I do not expect that poets any time soon will be producing collections like Herrick's *Hesperides*, containing hundreds of tiny sparklers. More modestly, I have some hope that a more determined pursuit of brevity could have a salutary ripple effect: the twenty-line poem that could just as well be shorter could be cut back to twelve, and so on. But this is probably a pipe dream, since writers of free verse—the majority of poets—show few signs of attraction to compression. No quick Metro rides for them, just the drone of idling motors no one bothers to switch off.

Fundamentally, then, my intention is not to incite a new (or reanimated) literary movement, but to encourage the writing by more poets of a kind of poem now in short supply. My principal wish is that formalist poets who are willing to see compactness as a virtue will dust off the earlier, more capacious concept of the epigram and discover its potential. Among very short poems, satirical epigrams are the crowd pleasers, and they will no doubt continue to gnash away in their niche. But it would be interesting to see what twenty-first-century epigrammatists might offer us in the way of insight rather than invective.

Here are a few examples of what earlier poets have managed to fold into small, pulsing packages. Queen Elizabeth I, in a poem on the Holy Eucharist, manages to be both theologically astute and astutely diplomatic:

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Christ was the word that spake it,  
He took the bread and brake it,  
And what that word did make it,  
That I believe and take it.

In “The Amber Bead,” Robert Herrick, the son of a goldsmith, exhibits a rare trinket:

I saw a Flie within a Beade  
Of Amber cleanly buried:  
The Urne was little, but the room  
More rich then *Cleopatra's* Tombe.

William Blake takes his grievance straight to the top in “To God”:

If you have form'd a Circle to go into,  
Go into it yourself & see how you would do.

W. S. Landor sends his appreciation of female beauty into the beyond in “Dirce”:

Stand close around, ye Stygian set,  
With Dirce in one boat conveyed!  
Or Charon, seeing, may forget  
That he is old and she a shade.

Emily Dickinson sends the mind spinning with an enigmatic analogy:

When Bells stop ringing—Church—begins—  
The Positive—of Bells—  
When Cogs—stop—that's Circumference—  
The Ultimate—of Wheels.



(633, Johnson edition)

And in “Plowmen,” Robert Frost takes four lines to summarize the history of agriculture in New England:

A plow, they say, to plow the snow.  
They cannot mean to plant it, no—  
Unless in bitterness to mock  
At having cultivated rock.

One notices that in such pieces wit and imagery reinforce one another, appearing as partners rather than alternatives. And the involvement of the reader is different here than it is with satirical epigrams: instead of watching the poet locate the precise spot to stick in the knife, we watch him doing something more like tying a quick but intricate knot. Practice at writing such poems could offer many beneficial effects to a poet, the primary one being skill in deriving maximum force from every word.

A long essay on brevity is an absurdity I don’t wish to commit. But the poems I am commending here take so little room that it seems allowable to append one more in closing. Here is “The Poet’s Fate,” by Thomas Hood, a poem I have met with nowhere but in William Cole’s anthology. Notice the lack of a question mark in line 1—could that be because the question can have no answer other than the one immediately offered? Notice, too, how modern, for a mid-nineteenth-century poet, Hood’s use of the word “modern” is:

What is a modern Poet’s fate.  
To write his thought upon a slate;  
The Critic spits on what is done,  
Gives it a wipe—and all is gone.