

Cold Monuments: Three Accounts of the Reception of Poetry

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Some poets talk of giving birth to a poem and being in the throes of composition, as if poetry were some form of procreation. To be sure, they carry poems in their heads while they are being formed and suffer pains and labour in bringing them before the world, but all such statements are metaphors and bear no more thorough scrutiny than the “vanquishing” of opponents on a football field or a “flight” from the euro. Even responsibility for their poems is not theirs alone, since they draw upon memory of poems by other persons, speech heard in everyday life, and an accumulated experience in which many other persons share.

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Poets who write for a theatre will know that a play cannot be delivered by their efforts alone. They may think, imagine, invent, write, and correct in private and will usually provide the players with a more or less finished script, but the task is not complete, not seen or heard in its full life, until many more agents have made their own contributions to what has been written. While the writer is usually (but not always) the instigator who originally conceives what a play might become, he or she is never the sole maker, cannot give birth to it: the entire complex organism that is theatre company—actors, director, designer, producer, technicians—will play its diverse parts in the arrival of the new product. Nor is any one performance the one necessary form in which a playscript reaches an audience. While the words spoken may not change except in small details, they will be spoken differently and therefore convey different meanings each time they are uttered. And a poet’s words do not make their effect alone: change

the cast, the setting, costumes, lights, music, stage, theatre building, and vary the infinity of choices and accidents which contribute to any one performance, and the life of the play is bound to change, often quite radically. All these modifications, some consciously made, some accidentally or thoughtlessly, can make all the difference between acceptance and rejection of a play by the audience it happens to meet on any one particular day.

Even with the same cast in the same well-organized and efficient production, the life of a play will change from day to day, as the actors and their audience change. Changing circumstances in the lives of the people involved, both on stage and in the audience, will affect what happens in performance and in the minds of the audience: theatre cannot entirely ignore or shut itself off from the grief, happiness, or weariness felt by all participants in a performance. Changes in the wider geographical, social, political, seasonal, and intellectual context in which a play is performed are also influential. Amongst all these many variables, most of them beyond the control of its writer, a playscript finds its ever-changing life in the minds of its audiences.

In an important sense, each audience, and not the poet or even the actors, gives life to a play. At the end of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare neglected the necessities of his plot and the comic potential of its action in order to write about the threefold relationship between play, actors, and audience. As the "tedious brief scene" of *Pyramus and Thisbe* is about to be performed, Duke Theseus is challenged by his warrior bride, Hippolyta:

HIPPOLYTA This is the silliest stuff that ever I have heard.

THESEUS The best in this kind are but shadows: and the worst are no worse, if imagination amend them.

HIPPOLYTA It must be your imagination then, and not theirs.

THESEUS If we imagine no worse of them than they of themselves, they may pass for excellent men. (V.i.209-14)

What Shakespeare's characters say in a play does not represent what their author thought on his own account, but the categories that are used here to describe an obviously faulty play do indicate how this author thought

of performance and his own art. He accepted that members of an audience are at least part-creators of a play's life and could be responsible for the "best" of it. Actors who speak what their author set down are called "shadows": imitations, reflections, portraits, shapes, not creatures with real life; perhaps they are like phantoms, for that, too, was an Elizabethan meaning of the word.

The "best" of the persons appearing in a play are changing, fleeting, insubstantial beings who need to be "amended" and given substance by an audience's own imagination. None of the technical means of Elizabethan theatre production are mentioned here—no costume, stage-property, sound, or music—as if they were not considered essential to acceptance and success. Theseus and Hippolyta agree that, in giving life to what a poet has written, the crucial agents are actors and audience. Between them, a play can find its ultimate and vivid life in the imaginations of an audience.

The Chorus to *Henry V* gives several similar accounts of how life is given to dramatic poetry. Actors are "ciphers" on which he asks his audience to let their "imaginary forces work" so that their minds "piec[e] out" the imperfections of performance (Prol. 17-18, 23). He rallies his hearers, with "Work, work your thoughts," urging them to enhance what is being presented and make everything seem immediate and actual. Sometimes, the Chorus appeals directly to the audience's imaginations as if they could do all that was necessary and nothing need take place on the stage: he tells them to "eke out our performance with your minds" (III, Prol. 25, 35). As they "sit and see," members of an audience are said to be capable of "Minding true things by what their mock'ries be" (IV, Prol. 52-53), of completing what shadows and unreal shapes indicate and, by this process, give life to the words the poet had set down.

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Shakespeare's comments on non-dramatic poetry imply that he did not consider writing for theatre to be a special case, but rather a form of poetry that usefully illustrates how other forms function. Earlier in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Theseus had spoken of poets in general and his words have become proverbial:

The lunatic, the lover, and the poet,
 Are of imagination all compact . . .
 The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,
 Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;
 And as imagination bodies forth
 The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
 Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing
 A local habitation and a name. (V.i.4-22)

Shapes was then a word far closer in meaning to shadows than it is today; in some contexts the words were interchangeable. Theseus implies that, in his imagination, the poet sees visions and then gives them a place and means of identification by what his pen sets down. Neither a "local habitation" nor a "name" involves the giving of life, but both are consequent on being alive in the mind of the poet and the means whereby another life is created in the minds of readers. As a play needs actors and audience, as well as words to speak, so the words of a poem need readers with their own imaginations before its site and structure are inhabited and an "airy nothing" is given lively substance.

Shakespeare's sonnets, in several instances, bear the same message and here we may feel closer to his own thoughts since he was writing in his own person. The clearest instance is the concluding couplet of Sonnet 107:

Now with the drops of this most balmy time
 My love looks fresh, and Death to me subscribes,
 Since, spite of him, I'll live in this poor rhyme,
 While he insults o'er dull and speechless tribes:
 And thou in this shalt find thy monument,
 When tyrants' crests and tombs of brass are spent.

The poet is said to "live" in the poem: the words themselves have no life. Moreover, the young man, to whom the poem is addressed, will "find" his own "monument" in its "poor rhyme." In this context, Monument is a taunting word: it could mean an effigy, a physical representation of some person and here, while it is natural to presume a reference to a figure of the death-marked poet, "thy" of the penultimate line implies that it refers to that of the young man who is still alive; in both interpretations, the poem

would have no more than a simulation of life. But monument could also mean a tomb (and such a reading is supported by “tyrants’ crests and tombs” of the following line) or, more simply, a verbal document or testimony; in either of these senses, monument need not even imitate “life,” but exist only as an inscribed block of stone or piece of parchment. In all these meanings for the word, the transformation of “rhyme” to “monument” has to be found by the young man: it has no validity except through the one who will “find” it; his imagination or, at least, his understanding is necessary to convert the words on paper into an enduring “monument” or representation of a living person.

A variation of the same idea is in Sonnet 81:

The earth can yield me but a common grave,
 When you entombèd in men’s eyes shall lie.
 Your monument shall be my gentle verse,
 Which eyes not yet created shall o’rread,
 And tongues to be your being shall rehearse
 When all the breathers of this world are dead.
 You still shall live—such virtue hath my pen—
 Where breath most breathes, even in the mouths of men.

The “monument” of the poem has no life in itself. It comes alive only when someone responds to its words and reads them. Once everyone now alive has died, only when a person speaks the words, responding to their cues for understanding and feeling, will some one become aware of the life it commemorates. No poetry has life in itself. On this distinction, Shakespeare’s references to poetry and theatre are unequivocal and he invokes the same principle when his characters speak of other kinds of verbal communication. For example, Rosaline, at the end of *Love’s Labours Lost*, varies the phraseology when she warns Berowne that

A jest’s prosperity lies in the ear
 Of him that hears it; never in the tongue
 Of him that makes it. (V.ii.849-51)

Touchstone is more comprehensive in *As You Like It*:

When a man's verses cannot be understood, nor a man's good wit seconded with the forward child understanding, it strikes a man more dead than a great reckoning in a little room. (III.iii.9-13)

Merely to be understood, poetry needs a responsive understanding; to be truly alive, an answering imagination must be at work in a hearer's mind.

In numerous Sonnets, Shakespeare invokes his "Muse" when writing of the poet's task, speaking of her "fury" and "power," calling her "forgetful" and "resty" (100), rebuking her as a "truant Muse" who, in being "dumb," fails to do her appropriate "office" (101). His relationship with this Muse is neither easy nor reliable: he says she brings forth "poverty" when she should "show her pride" (103) and that she is a "slight Muse" who is sometimes "tongue-tied" (38, 85). On one occasion, he writes that he has "invoked" the young man to act as his Muse and "found such fair assistance in my verse" that "arts with thy sweet graces gracèd be" (78). As many poets did at that time, Shakespeare uses the fiction of the Muses, the nine daughters of Zeus and Memory, to show how he could sometimes write as he wished or better than he thought he could, and would sometimes fail in writing anything acceptable. The Chorus of *Henry V* starts addressing his audience by calling for "a Muse of fire, that would ascend / The brightest heaven of invention." Poets would write of their Muse when they wished for more resources than they could command or wanted to explain how their best writing seemed to derive from some source outside and independent of themselves. So they acknowledged that they were not sole progenitors of the poems published in their names.

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Shakespeare's views on these matters, in both sonnets and plays, are echoed with variations by other poets. John Milton, using other terminology, also refused the position of only begetter of *Paradise Lost*. He invoked aid from both a "Heavn'ly Muse" and the Holy Spirit:

What in me is dark
Illumine, what is low raise and support. (i.1-26)

His task was not to speak for himself or bring into existence anything with life of its own; rather he sought to “assert Eternal Providence,/ And Justify the ways of God to men.” In *Paradise Regained*, years later, Milton imagines how Jesus Christ must reject all authors who:

... in themselves seek vertue, and to themselves
All glory arrogate.

With regard to a poem’s effectiveness for readers, his Christ insists that they must share conceptually with its author if any benefits are to accrue:

... who reads
Incessantly, and to his reading brings not
A spirit and judgment equal or superior,
(And what he brings, what needs he elsewhere seek)
Uncertain and unsettl’d still remains,
Deep verst in books and shallow in himself,
Crude or intoxicate, collecting toys,
And trifles for choice matters, worth a sponge;
As Children gathering pibles on the shore. (iv.322-30)

These merciless words value literature according to the understanding of those who read it; without their adequate contribution, all writings dwindle to the status of pebbles beside a vast ocean. Shakespeare was never so dismissive but his insistence on the amending, life-giving function of a reader’s or an audience’s imagination belongs to the same line of thought.

In his epistolatory poems, John Keats often refused the role of sole creator. Writing to Charles Cowden Clarke, he pictured his attempts to write:

Whene’er I venture on the stream of rhyme;
With shatter’d boat, oar snapt, and canvas rent,
I slowly sail, scarce knowing my intent;
Still scooping up the water with my fingers,
In which a trembling diamond never lingers. (16-20)

Less despondently, in *Endymion*, the poet again associated writing with travelling on a flowing stream—providing a point of contrast with Milton’s Christ who speaks of readers as children on the shore of a nameless sea:

I'll smoothly steer
 My little boat, for many quiet hours,
 With streams than deepen freshly into bowers. (46-48)

The poet does not stand alone, firmly grounded and ready to give birth to a poem out of himself: he is carried on some stream that is responsible for his movement: the poet's task is to steer.

At other times, Keats was keenly aware that a poem needed understanding readers. Adverse public criticism accentuated this conviction: "As to my sonnets," he writes to his brother George in 1816:

. . . though none else should heed them,
 I feel delighted, still, that you should read them. (117-18)

Feeling must accompany understanding: in the sonnet "On sitting down to re-read King Lear once again" he pictured himself as ready to "burn through" its "fierce dispute / Betwixt damnation and impassion'd clay" and so "humbly [to] assay / The bitter-sweet of this Shakespearian fruit." (5-8). In the odes, published in 1822, Keats wrote of a Grecian urn so fashioned by an artist that the figures depicted on it do not fade or vanish: it is a "Sylvan historian" expressing a "flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme." Studying those figures, his imagination hears an otherwise unheard music and endows with life its "brede / Of marble men and maidens" so that he, also, can enjoy their happy love that is "For ever warm and still to be enjoy'd." In this way, the "silent form" teases a viewer "out of thought / As doth eternity." Viewing the urn, the poet has found life in a "Cold Pastoral," as the young man of Shakespeare's sonnets is told he will "find" his own monument. Both objects awaken into life only in the mind of the perceiver.

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Representing countless other writers, these three poets imply no essential distinction in the creation and reception of poetry whether it is meant to be read silently, for oneself, or heard with others as part of a performance. The many agents that stand between the poet and a theatre audience greatly

complicate the matter of judging what imaginative life lies behind the words of a play and what life they can be given when received by an audience, but the difference from other poems is a matter of degree not of essence. Poetry has life only in the minds of its author and those who respond to it imaginatively.

All poets use words that have already been influenced by other people and tell stories or create images that have come to them through the medium of others' experiences. A reader's mind can venture further than the strict confines of a poem's subject-matter by gaining familiarity with conditions of its composition and awakening memories of other poems. For criticism, the consequences of these endless collaborations are very great as they complicate and extend the life that may be found in a poem or play, often deepening its effect. While criticism should analyse every word in a poem, together with its structure, music, texture and so forth, it must also explore its history and hinterland so that the genesis of the poem can illuminate its present life in a reader's imagination, much as it did for the poet who wrote it.

A corollary is still more far-reaching. Because each reader or audience member has an imagination that has been fuelled by an individual and particular life-experience, each will find a different experience when that imagination joins with the poet's and so brings a poem to new and unprecedented life. The objects, beasts, human beings, and natural surroundings depicted in a poem, together with its statements and arguments, pleasures and irremovable difficulties, will all be created afresh in new forms with each new response. A critic will not be able to foretell each powerful and revealing manifestation but some progress towards that aim may be made by studying the spirit of the age, the social, political, cultural, intellectual, sensuous, topical, and geographical (or environmental) context in which most present-day readers and audiences live. If it does not relate to present-day lived experience criticism will fall out of touch with a poem's present life. It must dare to be experiential, as well as analytical, scientific, and historical because only imagination, that derives from personal experience, can "find" the otherwise cold monument of a text and so be able to assess its "true" quality.