

Charging Poetry with Meaning

with a few words from Ezra Pound

Ways to Group Poetry

How would you group different styles of poetry? It seems that there are a whole host of ways of doing this. As we may suspect, as many ways as there are individuals. There will be three types of poetry, regardless of your method. Sure, there are!

One such general manner is to group it according to formality. The use of formal here means structured verse. Though not at all the well-dressèd-ness of the matter, it could well be. This is one of my preferred methods.

1. **Formal**, being that in which we pay note to prescribed styles with attention to meter, rhythm and rime. More so, iambic pentameter is dominant in these pieces. Examples are the sonnet, ottava rima stanzas, heroic couplets, blank verse and the like, to name a few.
2. **Semi-formal**, being that in which we pay attention to meter and rhythm. Rime may or may not be of concern. There is an absence of iambic pentameter. Many structured styles fall into this category.
3. **Non-formal**, being the rest.

I mention meter and rhythm as components to consider. You may recall that meter is the organization of rhythm. One should also note that a poor use of meter results in no rhythm at all.

My distinguishing need for formal poetry is the inclusion of iambic pentameter. This is something I required to distinguish the first group from the second. The group names are only that, names. I could have gone with high-, mid- and low- poetry (to the disgust of some readers).

Some readers may notice the exclusion of the descriptor *free verse*. This is a purposeful act since the thing does not exist. Today, most of what we call free verse ranks as butchered prose or pithy sayings.

Each of us will have our way in how we wish to group poetry or indeed any form of literature, and not always in a unique way. In some instances, it may be as simple as interesting, sufferable, and boring.

As expected, it is always a simple process to determine the first and last groups. These represent the superior and inferior work. The middle of the road grouping is necessary. A piece of work may not be superior, but it is by no means inferior. This second group may indeed be commendable work. The fact is that it does not meet the requirements of the first.

Ezra Pound has a method which is suitable albeit more difficult to understand. It is a way to describe or group the three styles of poetry, and it also serves as a method to charge poetry with meaning. Of all things important to the poet, we want — nay, we must have meaning to our words.

The three terms are of Greek derivation. Their meanings holding something sacred to their representation: **phanopoeia**, **melopoeia** and **logopoeia**. What do these terms mean and what are their purpose? — **Ha! To charge poetry with meaning!**

An Explanation of the Three

In some of Ez's discussion on these topics, he has been quite vague, obscure or opaque. In fact, at some point, it would appear that he was not clear on the matter himself. Now, proceeding with an explanation of the three^[1].
“Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more”^[2]

Phanopoeia

(*phanai* — to show, make visible, bring to light; *-poeia* — making or creating, “I make”)

According to Ez:

Throwing the object (fixed or moving) onto the visual imagination.

Now this is interesting in itself — visual imagination. He once called this imagism, but later did not refer to it as such in his essays. By visual

imagination we mean the words create the image as in an act of throwing something onto a canvas. In this case the imagination. The words are powerful enough that we cannot escape the immediacy of the resulting image. As such, it cannot be unseen.

One would think that if an entire poem were of this type, then it would need to be short. Let us say, three or four well-constructed lines. A poem may have this characteristic in many places for a longer piece. Could imagination withstand the assault? Does there exist a poet capable of such?

As with the imagination, if we translate a poem then the image should still appear quite well. All depends on the skill of the translator. So phanopoeia should in theory translate well enough.

Melopoeia

(*melos* — limb, musical phrase, melody, song)

According to Ez:

Inducing emotional correlation by the sound and rhythm of the speech.

This is the easiest to understand. Now this inducing emotional correlation seems to border on the theoretical. The sound of words — sounds in general. The rhythm encapsulated by these words creates a mood and so an emotion. The degree of emotion will be proportional to the poet's skill.

The degree of emotion will also depend on the reader. Words will not always evoke the same emotions in every person. To do so would be a skill unsurpassed! There is this sensitivity factor which needs to be accounted for. I can be sympathetic and say that the lack of inducement of emotion may not always be a failure on behalf of the poet.

An area of extreme difficulty in this area is translating works into other languages. Yet we find that some languages such as Italian and Spanish hold emotion regardless.

Logopoeia

(*logos* — word)

According to Ez:

Stimulating intellectual and emotional associations that have remained in the receiver's consciousness. This is in relation to the actual words or word groups employed.

Logopoeia is also defined as being:

When we use words for more than their direct meaning. (The dance of the intellect among words.) They stimulate the visual imagination with phanopoeia and include emotional correlations with melopoeia.

Logopoeia comes across as being something far superior. The difficult concept to understand is what we mean by the *dance of the intellect among words*.

An interesting term of expression. We can consider the *dance of intellect* as cleverness with words. We can also be using words in a manner uncommon to their usual meaning. Using a word or group of words in a different manner immediately piques the imagination. Hence the image and thence the emotion. The result is quite an achievement, and it is immediately recognized as an art form. Something to behold!

Logopoeia is not something that will come in an easy or natural manner. It depends on the type of piece you are writing. It could take an exorbitant amount of time and rewriting lines to achieve the result. The form and grouping of words required is often very different to our normal manner of speech.

Destroying Phanopoeia and Melopoeia

and thus dissolve all possibility of logopoeia

Using too many words or irrelevant words to describe an instant in time, blurs the moment we wish to capture. Thus, we destroy phanopoeia and melopoeia. Using too many adjectives or complex words instead of simpler words of equal meaning is also a fault. Such things dictate what we will see, and restricts the imagination. It is like the reader is a mere bystander in the whole thing which is not what we want. As Ez has it:

| “Incompetence will show in the use of too many words.”^[3]

In maintaining meter and rhythm, there is no doubt that some words used do nothing whatsoever. Their use and function is questionable to say the least. I call these filler words. Yes indeed, it is possible to have filler lines — lines of no importance to the matter at hand. No doubt you have seen both.

This type of word and line can be a distraction from what the poet is trying to say. This may run against what they may have thought otherwise at the time. The image and sound become distorted and at times, beyond recognition.

These fillers blur the image and muffle the sound. It makes perfect sense that imagery (sight) and sound should be important in poetry. Is this not what the poet does to create the verse and throw it onto the imagination of reader or listener? Try to describe an object or scene to one who is not familiar with it. We may ask: What does one blind from birth see? This is what you need to do — to evoke those emotions using your words and have them feel what you feel and see what you see.

Considerations and Conclusions

If a work has neither phanopoeia or melopoeia, then it cannot be poetry in any shape or form. A simple fact! Not all poetry will have logopoeia, but there is nothing to say that this is wrong or should be the case.

Charge Poetry with your own Voice

Some will try to mimic another poet’s style. Whereas this is not a bad thing (and lessons will be learnt), it is not something you should continue doing.

With regards to phanopoeia and melopoeia, both will develop if you write using your own voice. Do not be an echo of someone else. It will take time and practice to develop both, even more so the logopoeia. We may say this is the grail form. To a point, this statement may be correct, but logopoeia is not necessary for a brilliant work. It is possible for that of phanopoeia or melopoeia to do the job. A combination of both will prove better. As I say, it

will become immortal! All is with the words and their combination. To get the right word in the right place is a rare achievement.^[4]

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1. Ezra Pound, **ABC of Reading**, Ch. 8, p. 63, *Coming round again to the starting-point.* ↵
2. William Shakespeare, **Henry V**, Act III Scene i ↵
3. Ezra Pound, **ABC of Reading**, Ch. 8, p. 63, *After defining phanopoeia, melopoeia and logopoeia.* ↵
4. Mark Twain, **Mark Twain's Letters**, Volume 2: 1867-1868, p. 182 ↵