Rhythm

Two Factors in Poetic Rhythm

If your purpose is to acquire not only metrical skill but the sense and the power of rhythm, to study the poets may do something, but not all. There are two factors in poetic rhythm,—there is the technique (the variation of movement without spoiling the fundamental structure of the metre, right management of vowel and consonantal assonances and dissonances, the masterful combination of the musical element of stress with the less obvious element of quantity, etc.), and there is the secret soul of rhythm which uses but exceeds these things. The first you can learn, if you read with your ear always in a tapasyā of vigilant attention to these constituents, but without the second what you achieve may be technically faultless and even skilful, but poetically a dead letter. This soul of rhythm can only be found by listening in to what is behind the music of words and sounds and things. You will get something of it by listening for that subtler element in great poetry, but mostly it must either grow or suddenly open in yourself. This sudden opening can come if the Power within wishes to express itself in that way. I have seen more than once a sudden flowering of capacities in every kind of activity come by a rapid opening of the consciousness, so that one who laboured long without the least success to express himself in rhythm becomes a master of poetic language and cadences almost in a day. Poetry is a question of the right concentrated silence or seeking somewhere in the mind with the right openness to the Word that is trying to express itself—for the Word is there ready to descend in those inner planes where all artistic forms take birth, but it is the transmitting mind that must change and become a perfect channel and not an obstacle.

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How can rhythm be explained? It is a matter of the ear, not of the intellect. Of course there are the technical elements, but you say you do not understand yet about them. But it is not a matter of technique only; — the same outer technique can produce successful or unsuccessful rhythms (live or dead rhythms). One has to learn to distinguish by the ear, and the difficulty for you is to get the right sense of the cadences of the English language. That is not easy, for it has many outer and inner elements.

8 September 1938

Rhythmical Overtones and Undertones

I was speaking of rhythmical overtones and undertones. That is to say, there is a metrical rhythm which belongs to the skilful use of metre — any good poet can manage that; but besides that there is a music which rises up out of this rhythm or a music that underlies it, carries it as it were as the movement of the water carries the movement of a boat. They can both exist together in the same line; but it is more a matter of the inner than the outer ear and I am afraid I can’t define farther. To go into the subject would mean a long essay. But to give examples

Journeys end in lovers’ meeting,
Every wise man’s son doth know,

is excellent metrical rhythm, but there are no overtones and undertones. In

Golden lads and girls all must
As chimney-sweepers come to dust

there is a beginning of undertone, but no overtone, while the “Take, O take those lips away” (the whole lyric) is all overtones. Again

Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears;
I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him

has admirable rhythm, but there are no overtones or undertones. But
In maiden meditation fancy-free
has beautiful running undertones, while
In the deep backward and abyss of Time
is all overtones, and
Absent thee from felicity awhile
And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain
is all overtones and undertones together. I don’t suppose this will make you much wiser, but it is all I can do for you at present.

11 May 1937

Rhythm and Significance

You seem to suggest that significance does not matter and need not enter into the account in judging or feeling poetry! Rhythm and word music are indispensable, but are not the whole of poetry. For instance lines like these —

In the human heart of Heligoland
A hunger wakes for the silver sea;
For waving the might of his magical wand
God sits on his throne in eternity,

have plenty of rhythm and word music — a surrealist might pass it, but I certainly would not. Your suggestion that my seeing the inner truth behind a line magnifies it to me, i.e. gives a false value to me which it does not really have as poetry, may or may not be correct. But, certainly, the significance and feeling suggested and borne home by the words and rhythm are in my view a capital part of the value of poetry. Shakespeare’s lines

Absent thee from felicity awhile
And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain,

have a skilful and consummate rhythm and word combination, but this gets its full value as the perfect embodiment of a profound and moving significance, the expression in a few words of
English metre is simple; on the contrary it is the management of the rhythm that makes a more difficult demand on the writer.

— 5 May 1937

\footnote{This is an abbreviated and lightly revised version of a letter published in full on pages 496–97 — Ed.}