

## ON POETRY

A.L. Hendricks

No one has yet satisfactorily defined Poetry, or Poets. Many have come close and I will give some examples later. However, I wish to state at the outset that I contend that nobody is ever really *entitled* to be called a poet. Those of us who have been blessed with the gift of being able to compose words into a form that is recognisably *not* prose, in the sense that Monsieur Jourdain in Molière's *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* recognised it, may sometimes write a composition that others (and occasionally the writer) do describe as a Poem. But the writer (we cannot escape that label for it is exact) is only fairly described as a poet when he or she is actually writing a poem. The rest of the time the person is alternately a listener, a taxi-driver, a dreamer, a businessman, a waitress, teacher, drunkard or nun, or whatever the usual state of his/her activities.

When I am working (and it is *work*) on a poem you may call me a poet, but I won't hear you for the work is totally absorbing. Call me a writer anytime, and I shall have to plead guilty. Now for some views on the art and craft, it is both, of poetry. In an astonishingly accurate assessment the American writer e.e. cummings published a statement, part of which reads:

"A poet is somebody who feels, and who expresses his feelings through words. This may sound easy. It isn't.

A lot of people think or believe or know they feel - but that's thinking or believing or knowing not feeling. And poetry is feeling - not knowing or believing or thinking. Almost anybody can learn to think or believe or know, but not a single human being can be taught to feel. Why? Because whenever you think or you believe you know, you're a lot of other people but the moment you feel, you're nobody-but-yourself.

To be nobody-but-yourself - in a world which is doing its best, night and day, to make you everybody else - means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight, and never stop fighting.

As for expressing nobody-but-yourself in words, that means working just a little harder than anybody who isn't a poet can possibly imagine...

And so my advice to all young people who wish to become poets is: do something easy, like learning how to

blow up the world - unless you're not only willing but glad to feel and work and fight till you die."

I concur with that.

A Polish writer, Kazimierz Wierzynski recognises what many of us do: that we are simply instruments and that there is a being who is composing through us:

"Who is standing behind me I don't know but I know he is there,

What he is saying I don't know, but I repeat after him,  
I don't hear the words, but I am able to write them down  
And this is so important that I ask no questions."

The German, R.M. Rilke in his *Briefe an einen jungen Dichter* wrote from Paris in 1903:

"describe your sorrows and aspirations, passing thoughts and faith in some kind of beauty - describe all that with loving, quiet, humble, sincerity and use, to express yourself, the objects of your environment, the images of your dreams and the substance of your memories... And if from turning toward the inner world, from this submersion in your own world verses come, then you will not think of asking anyone if they are good verses... A work of art is good if it has originated in necessity, in that nature of its origin lies the judgement of it: there is no other."

One can go on and on. The point is that many writers who have composed poems, (note the word *composed*) want to try and explain what they have done. The American, Leo Rosten with remarkable insight points out:

"A writer writes not because he is educated but because he is driven by the need to communicate. Behind the need to communicate is the need to share. Behind the need to share is the terrible and remorseless need to be understood. Writing is an internal dialogue in which one part of the writer's self tries to make itself understood by another."

Now that I have given some idea of the subject, I offer some examples of my own work:

## IRRETRIEVABLE BREAKDOWN

Whatever intimacy we may share,  
However wedded we confess to be,  
There must be limits; we are not a pair  
Though close. You shall be you. I shall be me.

And yet I have to sleep with you, it's said;  
It seems since time began this has been so.  
You speak my thought. I dream inside your head.  
Your blood, your breath, your heart are mine I know.

But much as we enjoy this bond, this love,  
It cannot last forever; no such has.  
So, when you weak and worthless clearly prove  
And we must go our different ways because  
We're bound to part; indeed one has to die;  
Flesh! You shall be the mortal one. Not I.

## ESTHWAITE WATER

From Ravenglass to Wreay each onyx lake  
Is held a jewel ringed by cloistered trees;  
Yet all are tranquil tideless land-lipped seas  
Upon whose shores no strident combers break.  
It opens wide, this unastonished land  
Accustomed to accept the stranger's eyes,  
To tell how stone and water glide and rise  
And mingle at the tarn's beach where we stand.  
We sense their silent music on a strand  
Of ragged sedge; nearby, calm cattle sleep  
Not minding whether fells are cold or steep,  
Embraced by love assured, and firm, and planned.  
All Nature's poems made by perfect mind  
Are clearly wrought; nor are they left unsigned.

You will have noticed that those two are sonnets. Although I do write free verse and blank verse, I like to try writing in the strict forms. It is a good discipline. Hard work, but rewarding in two ways: first, there is a tremendous sense of exhilaration in completing a work in a prescribed form; second, the lessons one learns from using such forms enable one to write better, much better, in free verse

and blank verse. All disciplines enable the practitioner to become more adept. The next two of my compositions are villanelles.

### **VILLANELLE OF THE YEAR'S END**

To an English lady; from a Jamaican, December 1983.

This is the year's end; cold winds blow.  
your fields burn frost-white; mine blaze red.  
I have Poinsettia; you have snow.

The rich Poinsettia-colours flow  
As if from heart's flood they had bled.  
This is the year's end; cold winds blow.

From warm, sweet roots Poinsettias grow.  
To clear bright Springs ice-frosts have led.  
I have Poinsettia; you have snow.

What comes to bloom is what we sow;  
Is not love due to whom we wed?  
This is the year's end; cold winds blow.

What use has storm when flame burns low?  
What warmth the nightmare single bed?  
I have Poinsettia; you have snow.

Four thousand miles of sea I know  
Do not outdeep the tears we shed.  
this is the year's end; cold winds blow.  
I have Poinsettia; you have snow.

### **VILLANELLE OF RISK**

Nothing will be the same again.  
The moment gone cannot return.  
But risk stays constant: joy? or pain?

Dark turns to light; sun blots up rain.  
In change lies beauty, we discern.  
Nothing will be the same again.

To reach its full, the moon must wane.  
To rise from ash, Phoenix must burn.  
But risk stays constant: joy? or pain?

Faith based on myth? Is all hope vain?  
Did Jesus die that Christ be born?  
Nothing will be the same again.

If loss is hurt; and profit, bane,  
What then must be my chief concern?  
The risk stays constant: joy? or pain?

If I shall clean, must I first stain?  
To grasp one creed, first all creeds spurn?  
Nothing will be the same again.

And what is left if none remain?  
The voiceless ashes in an urn?  
The risk stays constant: joy? or pain?

This world is neither mad, nor sane;  
It teaches lessons: glad, and stern.  
Nothing will be the same again,  
But risk stays constant: joy? or pain?

At this stage I would like to quote myself in prose; rather better than Jourdain's I hope! This statement is included in a survey of *The State of Poetry* published by the influential and respected English poetry magazine *AGENDA*.

"Much of current English verse is not only undistinguished but indistinguishable. How many editors or reviewers, or poets for that matter, can identify the work of most contemporary poets by their individual voice, technique and philosophy? Could they pick them out from an anonymous batch of submissions? It is possible to read a great many journals of high repute, and the volumes of new poetry referred to warmly by the reviewers in those journals, over a period of several months without finding a single poem that one wishes to re-read or remember. Why does so little verse today commend itself to memory? Probably because very little of it is either meaningful or

musical. Swinburne is not meaningful, but he is musical. Eliot is not musical, but his work is charged with deep meaning; Shakespeare is full of sense and music."

The English art critic and essayist Walter Pater, in his *The Renaissance*, in the piece on Giorgione, writes:

"All art constantly aspires to the condition of music."

With this I wholly agree.

In a review I wrote for *AGENDA*, on the translations by Peter Jay of Gerard de Nerval's *Les Chimères*:

"the music of English is quite different from the music of French"

and

"Poetry depends to an enormous degree upon the essential music of the language it is written in."

I point out too that:

"T.S.Eliot, of course recognised this, and when he wanted to use de Nerval's music to relieve the final stanza of *The Waste Land* he chose the second line of "El Desdichado": 'Le prince d'Aquitaine à la tour abolie.'"

I also said in my essay:

"Among the arts Literature suffers from unique disadvantages: it uses Language which is common to all and so everyone presumes that it must therefore be understandable; and it is subject to translation. No other art is "explainable" in its own medium. One is readily sympathetic to de Nerval's own statement about *Les Chimères* that they 'would lose their charm by being explained, supposing that were possible'."

Whether or not my work is musical, and makes sense, I leave you to judge, but I think that the following certainly 'aspires to the condition of music'. I wrote it many years ago.

## **ALWAYS I SHALL ADORE**

Always and always and always I shall adore  
The sea-surge of your hips against the eager shore  
Of my dark body, the way your supple limbs  
Move upon mine as rhythmic passion swims  
Throughout our blood, your rapid heart, your breath  
So fast you seem to near some wild ecstatic death,  
And when in parallel fierce ecstasy I enter  
You, the small moan that you utter.

So I believe does this one which I wrote fairly recently:

## **BLOSSOMS AT THE EDGE OF DARK**

The concept  
That beyond the worlds we know  
Across that black of undiscovered sky  
Some different enigmatic range may lie,  
Calls deep and strong  
Through seasons long  
And slow.

Not more of stars  
Nor patterns to be seen,  
Not sills of time  
Through which some shape may lean:  
But unknown music  
That has not been heard,  
Unspoken prayer of the simple word.

Outside my window  
Reach three gallows-trees;  
Beyond the city-roofs their outstretched hands  
Point out toward unbounded, shoreless lands  
Where, eloquent, spring strange soliloquies.  
This night  
I watch those sign-posts  
Cold and stark

That ask:

What blossoms at the edge of dark?

It has a fair claim to being musical for when it appeared in *The Christian Science Monitor*, the American composer of music, Leo Collins, wrote to me and asked if he could set it to music, and he has made a lovely hymn-anthem out of it!

My friends will tell you that they would laugh if I were described as a religious person. Be that as it may, I consider myself to be deeply religious although I do not adhere to any orthodoxy; and I pay homage constantly to the One Creator who has very benevolently used me as a vessel for some creative work. That I am not a pure or efficient vessel is not The Creator's fault. It is my own for not being receptive enough.

Now here is a poem I adapted from St. John Perse's French:

### **HORSE OF MY DREAMS**

A rendering of "Eloges" 2, from the French of Saint-John Perse  
(For my children Sally and Joshua)

I loved a horse  
Horse of my dreams!  
He looked piercingly at me  
From under his forelock.

The live holes of his nostrils  
Were beautiful to see  
With each live hole of his great eyes rounding out above.

When he had been galloping he sweated,  
He shone!  
And I would have dented little moons  
Into his flanks  
With my childish knees.

O I loved a horse  
Horse of my dreams!  
And sometimes (for an animal knows better what exalts us)  
My horse, nostrils blowing,  
Would raise up his golden head



All furrowed with a network of fine veins,  
To praise the Creator.

You will notice, please, that in line 15 I point out, following Perse, that sometimes animals are more percipient than we are.

Here is another horse-poem:

**NOT IMPATIENTLY, BUT CONFIDENTLY**  
(For Joppa, Boaz, & Toccata)

Dawn horses are a veil of vapour,  
Fresh-dung steam,  
Nostril-mist,  
The pale haze of sun-rise air.

Already they anticipate the morning  
Welcoming it  
With  
A swish of tails  
Tentative tap-dance of hooves  
A politely gentle whinnying.

Already with sensitive soft noses they can sniff  
Aromas arising from buckets  
Already savour the belly-filling breakfast;  
Already they hear a music in their heads  
The much-crunch-munch-crunch  
Of barley, bran, nuts and beet.

Therefore  
They wait  
Not impatiently, but confidently.

Great almond eyes  
Shine steadfastly  
On the door they know  
Will open;  
Quivering velvet ears  
Tune accurately  
To the latch they know

Will snick.

I love animals of all kinds, all creatures great and small. Here  
are two poems about birds; one dead, the other alive:

### **THE FEATHERS**

(For Michaela)

On our early morning walk  
learning about each other,  
my three-year old and I

discover a dead bird;  
her first, so she must know  
when it will wake and fly.

Now, it can't; the feathers are dead,  
but the bird's in God's care.  
Did He dead the feathers? leave them to dry  
off that blood in the sun?  
Wouldn't this one like to have breakfast?  
Go back up in the sky

with all the other sparrows?  
Where is God's care? Will we  
fall on the ground, die?

There's no construing the hieroglyphs of Death,  
It has no grammar for the living.  
Faced with it though, one has to try.

I tell what I hope is true,  
making it simple. She's not alarmed  
head nodding acceptance. Yet her cry

bleeds across the blank of wind  
like the call of some small bird:  
But why Papa? Why? Papa why?

**JOHN CROW (1)**

(For Nic, Dido and Sue)

Some time, meck sport, young bwoy down a'Dungle (2)  
Ketch john-crow, dem enarmous black bird  
Dat fly all aroun', gliding all angle,  
So beautiful an' happy-looking; out for dem food.

Once dey is tempt down wit' some little t'ing  
Dese Bushas (3) of Sky come clumsy and shame!  
Jus, hang down dem gargeous black wing  
Drag in de dust like dem is lame.

Lawd! how dis bird him so stupid and feeble,  
So ugly! W'en up dere he was gran'!  
On a' de bwoy stone him wit' pebble;  
Nix' one mock how him stagger 'pon lan'.

Poet, man, is like dis Busha of Sky  
Who ride hurricane, an' laugh after shot-gun;  
Upon Earth dey scorn him, so easy fe' tie-  
Him mighty wing' prevent him from run.

(After "L'Albatros" by Charles Baudelaire)

## Glossary

1. A type of turkey-vulture so known in Jamaica.
2. A slum area near the Kingstown garbage-dump, portmanteau word "Dung" and "Jungle".
3. Boss.

The second of those two has been described by the Hungarian/English writer, George Szirtes, as "one of the finest of all adaptations of Baudelaire". I am happy about that.

I am interested in adapting or rendering the work of great writers in received English, but particularly into Jamaican, my own native tongue, although French is my "mother tongue" and I have written verse in French and rendered many French poems into English, a language in which I manage quite well! I have not yet attempted to do anything with Spanish or Italian, but I hope to some day. Here is a rendering into Jamaican from the Greek poet, Constantine Cavafy

## THE WEST INDIES AS ITHACA

W'en yu go look fa West Indies, gal an' bwoy,  
Walk good,  
Yu gwine travel a lang, lang time,

Yu gwine see plenty  
Learn plenty.

Slaverism!  
Colonialism!  
De goddam Caribbean!  
Doan 'fraid fa dem  
Dem to have no powah  
Ef yu t'ink right  
Ef yu believe right  
Ef yu keep up yu spirit an' yu bahdy.

Slaverism!  
Colonialism!  
De goddam Caribbean!  
Yu won' even see dem  
Unless yu believe inna Duppy an' Zombie  
And' dream 'bout all dat kin' a' sinting  
An' yu heart trimble.

Pray Gahd, gal and bwoy', dat yu travel lang  
Pray fa lang, lang daylight  
So yu can go inna harbah yu never know before  
So yu can stop inna place  
W'ere yu get coral-bead, red-snapper, and Khus-Khus grass.  
Go Nort' America,  
South America,  
Panama  
Costa Rica  
Learn all dem have to teach,  
But remember West Indies all de time  
Fa oona job is to reach one day.  
Doan' bahda hurry yuself d'ough,  
Bettah yu travel fa year an' year  
To reach at las' w'en yu old  
And have inna yu head

All yu learn pan de way  
Widouten yu expec anyt'ing from West Indies.

West Indies give yu de journey;  
Ef is wasn' fa West Indies  
Yu nevah even start!

Das all de west Indies have to offer.  
An' w'en yu fin' it poor, an' stupid, an' so-so,  
West Indies nah fool yu:

Yu see so much  
Yu learn so much  
Yu unnerstan' wa all Nation mean.

\*\*\*\*\*

Finally, I try to understand the Gospels for I believe that Jesus of Nazareth is the best guide for humans. These are some of the verses I have composed about Jesus.

### **MUMMA YET VIRGIN**

Ah write 'bout a Virgin,  
Nobahdy like she:  
Choose King a King  
Har baby to be.

Him come so quiaht  
W'ere him Mumma was  
Like dew by de paht,  
Like dew 'pan de grass  
Him come so quiaht  
To him Mumma place,  
Like dew by de paht  
Like tear 'pan har face.

Him come so quiaht  
D'ere him Mumma lay  
Like dew by de paht  
Like dew before day.

Mumma yet Virgin  
Nobahdy like she;  
Only such Woman  
Could Gahd Mumma be.

(An adaptation into Jamaican of the 15th Century Carol by an anonymous writer)

## A MAN ALONE

There are fuller powers than we had earlier known  
when the muscled leap declared our adulthood,  
when debate was a gauntlet thrown,  
caught up, then tossed in our triumphant mood.  
Searching latterly through the patient years' scope  
we see a man, thrust upward by a high endeavour,  
carve a design where massive strength dare not hope  
to climb, gain peaks impregnable to the clever.

Eyes clear, careful, we see a man alone, against the sky,  
sending rare words upon the air with quiet breath;

see how the learned and fierce choose him to crucify  
while he at last frees them, and all, from death

Forever!

## THE SECOND ADVENT

Ask it now. We are at the beginning!  
Later there will be no need for asking.

Ask the bland, impenetrable words for a Rosetta stone.  
A book, a film, a microphone  
may not inform. The indiscriminate language  
has brought us again to bondage,  
become a Babel, built sleek, grim towers  
inarticulate,  
signalling across a million wordless miles, disconsolate.

Though we speak with a thousand words

or yet a thousand thousand  
we may not understand,  
for communication  
is not comprehension;  
the quiet glance,  
eyes' riposte,  
may mean more than tongues' utterance.

O stand within a width of silence,  
speak no word, o do not speak!  
Let the inaudible  
surge freely against the unhindered sense  
to flood the immediate aural shore with voiceless music;  
speak no word, o do not speak!

Expect Him then  
upon no noise, with no rich thunder  
of the tongue splendidly to arrive,  
no lip  
to break the seal of comprehension,  
particles of this soundless air to bruise;

it is not needful.

There is no better way for me to end this essay than to quote from *Hope Against Hope* by Nadezhdah Mandelstam, the widow of the great poet:

"As many poets have said, Akhmatova in 'Poem without a Hero' and Mandelstam among them, a poem begins with a musical phrase ringing insistently in the ears; at first inchoate, it later takes on a precise form, though still without words. I sometimes saw Mandelstam trying to get rid of this kind of 'hum', to brush it off and escape from it. He would toss his head as though it could be shaken out like a drop of water that gets into your ear when bathing. But it was always louder than any noise, radio or conversation in the same room.

At some point words formed behind the musical phrase, and then the lips began to move... The 'hum' sometimes came to Mandelstam in his sleep, but he could never remember it on waking. I have a feeling that verse exists before it is composed. (Mandelstam never talked of 'wri-

ting' verse, only of 'composing' it and then copying it out). The whole process of composition is one of straining to catch and record something compounded of harmony and sense as it is relayed from an unknown source and gradually forms itself into words."

If I have been of some service to those who are learning about the art and craft to which I am dedicated, I shall be very grateful.