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Return of the Beautiful Poems

Robert Wood · Wednesday, February 14th, 2018

All of us from time to time encounter a beautiful poem. Sometimes it is the poem of a teacher or someone we know, and sometimes it is a poem we have found in the archive. The beautiful poem has created pleasure for both poets and readers for many years, even though they can be hard to find in our contemporary age. Teachers who study beautiful poems often trace the absence of these poems to the early years of the twentieth century, when a great deal of alienation, upset and rupture precipitated the outbreak of 1912, one of the best-known oppressions of the beautiful.

But while these teachers have offered detailed aesthetic discussions of this absence, and while there is a great deal of philosophical speculation and literary theory about beautiful poetry, there are few practical guides for handling it in the present time. Together, we will explore some ways to make your experience with the beautiful poem more rewarding by exploring some strategies for embracing these poems no matter how much shame professors at university made you feel for loving them.

You may be asking yourself, how did I get interested in this topic? Let me be frank about my situation. I am the author of, and frequently searching for, beautiful poems. But, professors taught me that I should prefer the difficult poem. I had to learn, for my self, that beauty is nothing to be ashamed of, that I am not a fool for looking for this. Because of my experience, I have a strong desire to help other students, readers and poets who like beautiful poems. By sharing my experience of more than twenty years of working with beautiful poems, I think I can save you both time and heartache. I may even be able to convince you that some of the most beautiful poems you encounter can provide very enriching life experiences – if you understand how to approach them.

But first we must address the question – Are you reading a beautiful poem? How can you tell? Here is a handy checklist of five key questions that can help you to answer these questions:

1. Do you appreciate the poem?
2. Do you find the poem's vocabulary and syntax pleasurable?
3. Are you often reminded of the poem?
4. Does the poem make you feel happy or intelligent as a reader?
5. Is your imagination being affected by the poem?

If you answered ‘yes’ to any of these questions, you are probably dealing with a beautiful poem. Many readers when they first encounter a beautiful poem say to themselves, “Is this real?” The first reaction they often have is to think that this is something that needs to be shared. So the first step in dealing with the beautiful poem is to recognize that you can spread the word. You do not have to be alone!

The second reaction of many beautiful poem readers is pleasure. They ask themselves, “What am I doing to make this poem seem so beautiful?” So the second step in dealing with the beautiful poem is to recognize that you are responsible for the feeling it gives you, that you are doing the work so that it can make you calm and happy.

The writers of beautiful poems face similar questions as readers, but for them the questions can be even more pressing. Often a poet will ask themselves: “Why did my poem turn out like this? Why isn’t it difficult?” Like readers of beautiful poems, these poets must first come to terms with the fact that theirs is a common problem, shared by many other authors. And they must come to terms with the fact that it is not their fault that their poems are easier to understand than others, but that some poems just turn out that way.

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Beautiful poems are normal. They are not conservative, anachronistic, or dull. Well-credentialed experts may have suggested that “something must be wrong” with the poem. So let’s get a new perspective. Beautiful is very different from wrong. In today’s climate, a decreasing number of poems are labelled “beautiful,” so this is an important distinction to keep in mind. Beautiful poems have been with us as long as poetry.

Beautiful poems are like this because of their innate makeup. And that makeup is their constructed style. They are not like this because of something you as readers have done to them. It’s not your fault.

Beautiful poems are hard to find. Of course you already know this, but if you keep it in mind, then you are able to regain your balance as a reader. Don’t let the other poets intimidate you! Often the beautiful poem will surprise you, but this may be its way of capturing your attention. Sometimes, if you give your full attention to the poem, you will remember how good surprise parties actually are.

Beautiful poems can become popular. This is something that any reader or writer of beautiful poems must face squarely. There is no way about it. But just because a poem is popular doesn’t mean it has no value! Popular poems can still have meaningful readings and, after all, may not always be shallow. Even if scholars never critique the poem, it can still be special to you as a reader. Maybe the poem’s popularity will even create space around you and the public. After all, you have an ability to have an intimate relation with the poem and, from this strength, you can help create a community.

Once you have gotten beyond shaming yourself as a reader looking for beauty or blaming the poem for being beautiful, you can start to focus on the relationships it creates. The problem you are having with the poem may suggest that there is a problem with the relation between you and the poetry world. Working through the issues that arise as part of this can be a valuable learning experience. Forgetting about beauty is not the solution! Learning to cope with a beautiful reading of a beautiful poem will often be more fulfilling than putting beauty under the bed, only to have the

monsters under there jump out at you when you finally get around to moving out.

Readers of beautiful poems also need to be aware of the tendency to exalt the difficult poem. Keep in mind that a poem may be difficult because it is saying too much, is trying to be smart. And while this may make for sophisticated reading at first, it may mask problems that will turn up later. No poem is ever really beauty-free. Sometimes working out your relationship with the poem is the best thing for a long-term aesthetic experience and opens up the possibilities for many future encounters with beauty.

I hope that this approach to the beautiful poem will alleviate the frustration so many readers feel when they are ashamed of their desire for this experience. Reading poems, like other life experiences, is not always as simple as it may seem to be from the outside, as when we see other readers hunched pensively over chapbooks of contemporary experts. Very often this picture of scholarly labour is not the whole story; even these readers may have gone through beautiful experiences with poems when they first encountered them. As my mother would often say, if you plant tamarind seeds you shouldn't expect mangos.

**With thanks to Charles Bernstein.*

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