Observations On Poetry
with an analysis of a poem by William Butler Yeats

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a. Why it is so difficult for us today to properly read the poetry of the past?
b. Example: WB Yeats great poem "Adam's Curse"

From the 17th century up until well into the 19th, higher education in Western Europe and the US was:

1. **Restricted to the castes that could use it. Before the 17th century this was exclusively the clergy, (even DaVinci did not have a proper school education) but with the growth of science, the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution, this came to include the engineers, the doctors, lawyers, teachers, and other professionals.**
2. **Education was largely "humanistic" rather than "scientific". It was only in the 19th century that the growth of scientific knowledge forced institutions of higher education to establish prerequisites in**

the sciences, and only in the 20th that scientific education took up so much time, money and resources that the humanities drifted into the ambiguous area of "extra-curricular activities".

This humanistic education was centered on Letters, while Letters was centered on Latin and, to a lesser extent, Greek. Education was needed for the minister, the diplomat, the politician, the scrivener (a highly respected profession before the invention of the typewriter) the lawyer and the teacher, and most of the activity in these professions involves some kind of rhetorical and oratorical proficiency.

The point I'm getting at is this: the study of Latin involved the study of poetry in Latin. This poetry was studied, memorized, translated, imitated. The linguistic subconscious of the entire educated public, those who read and those who wrote poetry, was saturated in Latin verse. And Latin verse is written in quantitative meters, rather than stress meters.

Here is a classic example of a line by Virgil, written in quantitative meter:

Armă vĭ | rumquĕ că | nō, Troi | ae quī | prīmŭs ăb | ōrīs
("I sing of arms and the man, who first from the shores of Troy...")

It was inevitable that, although poetry in English is, officially, written in metric feet determined by stresses (*When I' do count' the clock' that tells' the time'*…), that both poets and their readers would have in their permanent literary background, the patterns of long and short syllables imbibed from many years (perhaps too many years) of study of Latin and Greek verse.

Therefore, all poetry in English up to the 20th century, must be read *with both metric stress and quantitative stress in mind*! Yet, in our own times the schools, in which the basic content of education has been shifted from Letters to Science, persist in teaching the erroneous notion that in the reading of poetry, one need only pay attention to stress meters.

The real situation is as follows: in so-called "iambic" or

"trochaic" or "dithyrambic" verse, the regular steady meter is given by the pattern of stresses; *yet there is an equally strong "irregular meter"*, that sometimes becomes just as regular, which is based on the Latinate inheritance of quantitative verse.

Once one trains oneself to read poetry, say from the 14th century onwards, *with attention to both metrical systems*, much of what was obscure becomes clear, much of what was dull becomes very beautiful, and the language begins to "sing", that is, one hears melodies emerge from the lines akin to those of music itself.

This erroneous view of the proper reading and scanning of poetry is to be found everywhere. Here, for example, is a quote from the Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms:

> ***"…quantitative verse [is] verse in which the metre is based on the principle of quantity (i.e. the duration of a syllable's sound), and in which the basic metrical unit, the foot, is composed of syllables classified either as 'long' or as 'short'. This metrical system is found in Greek and Latin, as well as in Arabic and some other languages, but does not apply to English verse, which uses patterns of stress rather than quantitatively measured syllables and feet."***

The reality is that verse in English (and many other European languages) is structured *both* by a regular stress metre *and* an irregular quantitative meter. Unless one learns to read lines of verse in both metric systems, one is missing out on much of the delight and the messages of the art of poetry.

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With this introduction, I turn to a discussion of the poem "Adam's Curse" by William Butler Yeats:

Adam's Curse

We sat together at one summer's end,
That beautiful mild woman, your close friend,
And you and I, and talked of poetry.
I said, "A line will take us hours maybe;
Yet if it does not seem a moment's thought,
Our stitching and unstitching has been naught.

Better go down upon your marrow-bones
And scrub a kitchen pavement, or break stones
Like an old pauper, in all kinds of weather;
For to articulate sweet sounds together
Is to work harder than all these, and yet
Be thought an idler by the noisy set
Of bankers, schoolmasters, and clergymen
The martyrs call the world."

And thereupon
That beautiful mild woman for whose sake
There's many a one shall find out all heartache
On finding that her voice is sweet and low
Replied, "To be born woman is to know --
Although they do not talk of it at school --
That we must labour to be beautiful."

I said, "It's certain there is no fine thing
Since Adam's fall but needs much labouring.
There have been lovers who thought love should be
So much compounded of high courtesy
That they would sigh and quote with learned looks
precedents out of beautiful old books;
Yet now it seems an idle trade enough."

We sat grown quiet at the name of love;
We saw the last embers of daylight die,
And in the trembling blue-green of the sky
A moon, worn as if it had been a shell
Washed by time's waters as they rose and fell
About the stars and broke in days and years.

I had a thought for no one's but your ears:
That you were beautiful, and that I strove
To love you in the old high way of love;
That it had all seemed happy, and yet we'd grown
As weary-hearted as that hollow moon

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The poem speaks of the transience of all things. As I will argue at the end of this discussion, there are actually 8 levels of metaphors of transcience in the poem:

Proceeding by line and stanza:

(1) ***"We sat together at one summer's end***
That ...."
3 "at " sounds in a row may be merely as coincidence or an accident, but given the stature of Yeats, one could also assume that he did it deliberately, and that is serves to emphasis the word "That" in the second line. This of course is often used in music, when the 3 fold repetition of a theme gives rhetorical emphasis.

(2) The time of year mentioned in the first line,"summers end", moving to fall (Fall) already brings up the association with Adam's Curse. The autumnal equinox is the strongest transition in terms of weather, and signifies better than anything else, the universality of decay

(3) The "close friend" must be younger than the woman being

addressed by the poet. After all, she is still beautiful, while the person he's talking too has only a faded beauty. Some interpreters claim that the woman being addressed is Maud Gonne, and the "close friend" her sister. However, such autobiographical references are irrelevant to the interpretation of the poem.

(4) Stanza 2 is a harsh indictment of the modern world, given over to industrialism and exploitation, in which everything is judged by its monetary value. It has many "short" syllables, designed to highlight the lack of continuity or generosity of our own age.

Such as this line:

….And scrub a kitchen pavement, or break stones…

The next line refers, I think, to 19th century Irish history:

…or break stones
Like an old pauper, in all kinds of weather;

The "old paupers" who "broke stones" is a direct reference to the so-called "make-work" projects floated by the British government during the Irish Famine, based on the notion that even people dying of famine had to do some that could be called "work" to merit the

emergency food rations they received from the government. This cruel and hopeless farce is well describe in Ceil Woodham-Smith's classic study "The Great Hunger" . Such proposals, based on the principles of "laissez-faire", are the kind that would come from the minds of the class of bankers, clergymen and schoolmasters that Yeats derides in the rest of the stanza.

(5) Stanza 3

The long, deep vowels return in this key stanza, bringing together all the themes of beauty, work (Adam's Curse) , transience, poetry

(6) The following line throbs like a lovely alto voice:

"On finding that her voice is sweet and low"

(7) ***"Although they do not talk of it at school"***

Another dig at the 'school-masters', of course. A more neutral interpretation is that the quest for knowledge consists of the search for invariant *quantities* in the real world, mass, length, money. Poetry is preoccupied with its features of illusion and transience.

And one can also see a deeper meaning in that, though a woman must labor to be beautiful, even that labor is in vain under the impact of "Time's waters", which erase all things created by human effort, as well as all beautiful things that arise spontaneously from nature. This is the full reach of "Adam's Curse"!

(8) Stanza 4

This speaks of "poetry" and "true love" as they must have existed in an imagined Middle Ages, or the age of the Druids. In that dreamed of world, the poet was not deemed an idler at all, but so esteemed that lovers would

"Quote with learned looks
Precedents out of beautiful old books"

(9) Stanza 5. This is filled with a kind of rapturous beauty of natural description

(10) *"We sat, grown quiet at the name of love"* **Twilight has come, both in their conversation, and in the sky, as they sit watching a gorgeous twilight fall over the land.**

(11) ***"We saw the last embers of daylight die"*** **Followed by the great metaphor:**

" And in the trembling blue-green of the sky
A moon, worn as if it had been a shell
Washed by time's waters as they rose and fell
About the stars and broke in days and years."

The imagery suggest crying, and, despite our sophisticated revulsion against sentimentality, we are invited to cry in the next 3 lines, in which we learn the the beauty and glory of the full moon was 'washed by Time's waters" and reduced to a "hollow shell ."

(12) Stanza 6 is the one that most gives credence to the notion that the woman being addressed is Maud Gonne. The speaker lets her know that he has loved her all his life, that he still loves her, but that in growing old, they have both been "washed by Time's waters" , and become old, faded, world-weary, indeed just like the hollow moon (listen to the long vowels in that musical combination "hollow moon" ! In fact, compare these two extremely musical lines:

A moon, worn as if it had been a shell

……

As weary-hearted as that hollow moon)

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There are at least 8 related sets of contrasts

(1) An imagined courtly love of the Middle Ages <–> Modern cheap, tawdry love, as espoused by bankers, etc., and other hypocrites

(2) The esteem given to the poet in the golden age <–> The contempt for the poet as "idler"

(3) The full moon <–> The shell of the moon

(4) The ardent love of Yeats for Maud Gonne as a young man <–> The worn, world-weary attachment of today

(5) The Summer's end <–> the Fall's beginning, with its double-meaning

(6) An imagined earlier Ireland, a rich land <–> a land brought to its "marrow bones" by the Irish Famine

(7) The Garden of Eden <–> The Fall of Adam and Eve. The

"curse" whereby those things given freely must now be earned through toil, and constantly washed away by "Time's Waters"

(8) The transition from late afternoon to twilight

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