


Glyn Maxwell
ON POETRY

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A collection of short essays and reflections on poetry from the acclaimed British poet Glyn Maxwell. These essays illustrate Maxwell's poetic philosophy, that the greatest verse arises from a harmony of mind and body, and that poetic forms originate in human necessities – breath, heartbeat, footstep, posture. He speaks of his inspirations, his models, and takes us inside the strange world of the Creative Writing Class, where four young hopefuls grapple with love, sex, cheap wine and hard work. With examples from canonical poets, this is a beautiful, accessible guide to the most ancient and sublime of the realms of literature.

On Poetry Details

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Zoe Mitchell says

I loved this book: clever, witty, moving and most of all inspiring. I'll feel less alone next time I sit down to write because of it. Recommended for anyone with a love of poetry as a writer and a reader and just the book to encourage a few more people to start reading it.

Yeemay says

What a delight to read: a book about poetry that inspires you, invigorates you and makes you laugh out loud. It was like listening to your mad poetry tutor who thankfully has character and a sense of humour. Best of all it made me go back to reread poems I'd not read for years or look for ones I never have. It was beautifully lyrical about the whole business of reading it, writing and imagining it yet unflinching about the work and the discipline to producing those magical forms. Can't wait to reread it and dip in and out again in the future when I come upon a poem that stands up to the scrutiny.

Toby says

The first chapter left me feeling a little ambivalent. Wasn't the author just a little bit too jokey? Trying just that little bit too hard? Was the remainder of this short book going to be read with me biting my tongue at the rather annoying companion and guide?

But no, mid-way through the second chapter I had been won over and this book - part essay, part exploration, part sturdy defence of form and assault on historical amnesia - had me thoroughly in its thrall. Maxwell's style may not be for everyone but I laughed out loud in a few places and loved the final chapter of poetic pandemonium.

Having recently finished the rather worthy (though invaluable) The Poetry Handbook, with its detailed descriptions of trochees, spondees, dactyls etc. this was very much a breath of fresh air, though I'm pleased that I read the text book first as I think Maxwell's sudden changes of direction could have left me behind had I not.

This was one of those rare books of which I was genuinely sorry to reach the end.

secondwomn says

maxwell writes a beautiful book that revels in what makes poetry and what makes a poet. at times, the language gets a bit in the way of language. still, he never loses sight of the thing itself. worth visiting and revisiting.

Carol says

Totally different from anything I learned in school. In seven chapters, Glyn gives us a "modern" guide for writing poetry. Seven chapters on "white" -- "black" -- "form" -- "pulse" -- "chime" -- "space" -- and "time." He, the poet, explores his belief that the greatest verse arises from a harmony of mind and body. "The sound of form in poetry descended from song, molded by breath, is the sound of that creatures yearning to leave a mark. The meter says *tick-tock*. The rhyme says *remember*. The whiteness says *alone*," Maxwell writes.

Liam Guilar says

There are so many books "About" poetry: how to read, how to write, what not to read, what fashions to follow: books that make ludicrous claims for the power of the poem, books to inoculate the idiot reader against the ideological viruses carried by this or that poem. Books about poetry outsell books of poems.

This one is magical. It does not hide the difficulty of writing a good poem or the pleasures of reading a good one. It gives good advice on both, but in a way that credits readers with enough intelligence to think for themselves. If you only read one book About Poetry, I'd recommend this one.

Emily says

What a wonderful book on poetry. Glyn Maxwell is that amazing rarity, a poetic critic of poetry. Love for his subject permeates each page: affection for his students (from the Dickinsonite to the postmodernist); poets like Yeats and Thomas; the white and black of poetry itself.

Maxwell is very interesting in his discussion of form and, of course, time. For him, time is what poetry is about; the line-breaks, the breaths, the shape of the poem on the page. And he's right, really. Poems must be solar, lunar, musical and visual. Deeper, words themselves must "mean right, sound right, look right, fit right" so that "the poem is not only you, it's you and the language. It's not only you and today, it's you and time." I think that's a lovely thought and one I'll strive to hold onto. Because Maxwell is right. What's the point of labelling 'assonance' and 'caesura'? Words will always form a pattern. Each chain of words, each line break and comma, is there for a particular reason. It seems trivial to pick out one instance. A pause is a pause, no matter its form.

Which brings me to another of Maxwell's main points: poetry must have form, even 'free verse'. Now, I've been reading Allen Ginsberg and the Beat poets lately, so I must say I agree. There is a 'pulse' in these poems - they are led by A form, even if it isn't THE form of old. Same with Eliot and modernism: poetry classed as free verse is littered with iambic pentameter and heartbeat. Even the difference of day/ night, Maxwell suggests, is a form (I suppose the very difference between black and white on paper could be seen as a form, but that's probably going too far). TS Eliot argues that you can't cast off 'tradition', but you adapt it. The canon has a certain elasticity in 'tradition': I definitely think this applies to form, and I think Maxwell does too.

(How do you even write poetry with no sense of rhyme or rhythm? My own poetry isn't usually in a specified 'form', but I'm hypersensitive to such things!) Time always passes; poetry is often about the "winged chariot", or even Ned Stowey's cart going "clickety-clack" (of course time can go clickety-clack, if you're a horse!) so why wouldn't you be aware of it on a structural as well as a conceptual level?

It feels like there's so much contained in this little book that I want to go back and reread it to pick up some more. I do think, though, after this reading I'll be much more aware of the "white" against the black and how time works in poetry.

Couple of sidenotes: loved the image of the white space 'eating' song lyrics. Next time someone asks me about the difference between songs and poems, that analogy is coming out to play. Also I loved the creative exercises which I'll experiment with when I have time! (The card game trick and the 'translation game' will fill the next rainy afternoon...) The one single fact that will stay with me from this book, though, is that 'stanza' means 'room' in its original Italian. I'll never think of poetic stanzas the same way again.

Timothy Urban says

If you read this it will elevate you. Like finally having that inspiring English teacher you wish you'd had.

Kevin Lawrence says

Worthy and serious observations about the necessary formal qualities of poetry get buried in a determinedly affable jocular/professorial tone addressing a recurring group of cloying workshop students. I dread the day someone writes a Woolf-like stream-of-conscious novel all exploring the "creative" dynamics of a workshop class. Ugh. The book culminates in a workshop-meets-Rime-of-the-Ancient-Mariner that is already soul-suckingly bad. On the bright side, the author quotes his own play "After Troy" that makes me want to go read it.

Jim Coughenour says

Earlier this week I was reading Knausgaard:

poems never opened themselves to me, and that was because I had no "right" to them: they were not for me... they always said: Who do you think you are, coming in here? That was what Osip Mandelstam's poems said, that was what Ezra Pound's poems said, that was what Gottfried Benn's poems said, that was what Johannes Bobrowski's poems said. You had to earn the right to read them. How? It was simple, you opened a book, read, and if the poems opened themselves up to you, you had the right, if not, you didn't.

I remembered this passage when I picked up Glyn Maxwell's little book a couple days ago. I think he'd probably agree with this severe sentiment.

On Poetry is for people who've struggled to write a poem – a well-crafted poem, I mean, not some simple exudation of sentiment.

The fissure in writing poetry, the chasm between what I believe absolutely and doubt profoundly, is not between the "metrical" (say Frost) and the "musical" (say Pound) – which is a crude reduction of the work of both... the fissure is between having a governing aesthetic *like either* – or having no governing aesthetic at all, which leaves you with nothing but your next thought, or your latest feeling. That's an impulse which waited ninety years to find its true literary form. It's called a blog.

which echoes TS Eliot's dictum "the division between Conservative verse and *vers libre* does not exist, for

there is only good verse, bad verse, and chaos."

I have a small shelf of salutary books on the hard craft of poetry. As instruction goes, Maxwell's is in the middle – not quite as learned as Fenton; not nearly as fun as McLane or Ruefle; not as savage as Logan or as impenetrable as Hill, but in another dimension from most academic or popular criticism. He's best at the beginning, in his exploration of the White of the page and Black of the text and the vital polarity between them. "Songs are strung upon sounds, poems upon silence." But as he finds his way to the end, the book becomes a bit precious, even silly as he coaches imaginary students. His examples are the classic ones – and classics are always worth reading again – but I would have liked to see his analysis applied to poets who've written, say, in the last 70 years. Eliot and his crew can use a rest.

Quibbles aside, I did enjoy being reminded of Osip Mandelstam's "Conversation about Dante," which Maxwell dubs "the most challenging and sublime essay I know on poetry." And he pointed me to what may be the earliest bit of recorded poetry ever, which is both spooky and comical.

Lauren Merkley says

Imbued with the same brevity and beauty of a poem, Maxwell's book gorgeously elevates his readers' understanding and appreciation of the hard-fought craft that is true poesis.

Donald says

This will probably be the best book I read this year. It's fantastic as a polemic, a meditation on teaching, and a celebration of writing and reading poetry. Maxwell does not hide his arguments in jargon or niceties. He comes right out with it: poetry is verse and ought to use meter or rhyme, preferably both. "Prose poetry" is merely prose written by poets. Line break and stanza break are at the heart of poetry. He has a deep love of the English language and its poetic tradition that is infectious and makes me want to grab Donne and Wordsworth from the bookshelf.

Maybe the most interesting part of the book is that Maxwell argues the 'white' of the page is how poems mark time. I found his argument and examples convincing. It makes a lot of sense. He contrasts poetry and songwriting, which uses music to mark time.

I'm predisposed to like this book because I agreed with it before I read it, but I think the book would also be great for someone on the opposite side of these questions.

If you care about poetry at all, you must read it. Then check out the reviews in the NYRB and Poetry for some of the debate it's kicked off.

Karen Douglass says

The style is a bit strange, almost stream of consciousness; my biggest complaint is the heavy emphasis on formal poetry for much of the second half. I understand the historical value for poets to recognize and learn

from the formalists, but I didn't expect this focus, given the relaxed approach to poetry at the opening.

Kirsten says

A writing exercise from Glyn Maxwell:

"Take nine sheets of blank paper and pretend the following things about them:

That the first page is physically hurt by your every word.

That the second page is turned on by every syllable.

That every mark on the third page makes you remember more.

On the fourth, less, like dementia.

That God can only hear you if you're writing on the fifth page.

That only touching the sixth page are you hidden from God.

That every word you write on the seventh prolongs the time from now until the moment you meet the mythical creature known as The One.

That every word you write on the eighth brings that moment closer, yes, but makes your time together shorter.

The ninth page says you have only nine words left in your life.

The nine sheets are nine battlefields. The black will win some, the white will win some, it will be silly as war and bloody as chess. If you get any poems out of it, any lines at all, pin them to your breast. If you get any white sheets, bury them with honours. Remember where you won, remember where you lost. Wonder why."

Lauren says

A lovely series of essays on poetry. Each essay encompasses a particular aspect of poetry: from the black white of the page, to the grouping of words, the form, the spacing. I recommend this to everyone who wishes to learn more about poetry, enjoys reading poetry, and writers as well.
