

Seven Types of Accuracy · *Richard Moore*

IN THE BEGINNING there were Seven Types of Ambiguity, and these mated with the sweet compliant earth and begat the Seven Heavens of modern poetry. And poetry, we all know, is radically different from prose. Prose? The sort of language epitomized, say, by a theorem in geometry. Exact scientific language. Civilized artificial language, removed from our primitive roots. Poetry, as Gary Snyder tells us, goes back to the Paleolithic. Prose only goes back to Plato.

Isn't this a rather unlikely affinity: between symbolists, sophisticated creatures like Mallarmé and Rimbaud, on the one hand, and hairy hunters of extinct species of bison on the other? Not at all. For both, poetry is magic: it arises not from the calmly thinking mind, but from the deep, irrational, image-making side of man's being. From the other lobe, as the physiologists say. And therefore poetry—true poetry—is by its very nature deeply ambiguous and inexact about ordinary things. Even as William Empson's brilliantly titled book fades from memory, poetry continues to advance on the course that it helped chart—until at last, in some poets at least (and in their attendant critics), ambiguity and poetry seem to have become synonymous. If some of us plain-spoken chaps find this a little frustrating sometimes, clearly the fault is ours.

One way to take issue with these prevailing notions has been to announce one's distaste for the Paleolithic—both the higher Paleolithic and the lower. It—they—were stages, beastly levels, that we have fortunately outgrown. We can then let poetry, modern poetry, begin whenever we wish. That's the advantage of such a position. The disadvantage is that it may concede too much at the outset to the opposition. After all, there very likely *were* poets in the Paleolithic; and if they were as good as the artists who left those marvelous paintings on cave walls, they were very good poets indeed. Veritable Homers maybe.

And there are poets among peoples still at that stage—the “hunting and gathering,” pre-agricultural stage—today. There is, for example, the author (the dreamer?) of the Pygmies' Elephant Hunting Song—the Pygmies of what was once the Belgian Congo. They may not be there any more; but when they were there—for the thousands of years they were there—they used to kill elephants with spears. The tribe would gather around an enormous stray from the herd and distract him with a lot of noise. Then before the befuddled beast became enraged, the

hunter would dart underneath, thrust his spear directly upwards into the elephant's heart, and run away again quick, before the mountain of flesh fell on top of him. Plucky little fellow! Good aim too—and a remarkably exact knowledge of elephant anatomy: to hit the vital organ with the first thrust, producing a dead elephant instead of a maimed tribe.

Then they would move the village to the carcass (since that was easier than moving the carcass to the village) and for a week or two everyone would loll around, roasting and eating elephant meat and celebrating the elephant hunter. Hence the song. "Elephant hunter, take your spear," should be its refrain, I think. I'm not sure because the version I have seen reached English through several other languages and said "bow." That must be a mistranslation. I don't think Pygmies used bows, which would be less useful beneath an elephant. In any case the poem seems full of a sense of the awe and grandeur of the task to be undertaken.

On the weeping forest, under the wing of the evening,
The night, all black, has gone to rest happy;
In the sky the stars have fled trembling,
Fireflies which shine vaguely and put out their lights;
On high the moon is dark, its white light is put out.
The spirits are wandering.
Elephant hunter, take your bow!
Elephant hunter, take your bow!

In the frightened forest the tree sleeps, the leaves are dead,
The monkeys have closed their eyes, hanging from branches on high.
The antelopes slip past with silent steps,
Eat the fresh grass, prick their ears attentively,
Lift their heads and listen frightened.
The cicada is silent and stops his grinding song.
Elephant hunter, take your bow!

In the forest lashed by the great rain,
Father elephant walks heavily, *baou, baou,*
Careless, without fear, sure of his strength,
Father elephant, whom no one can vanquish;
Among the trees which he breaks he stops and starts again.
He eats, roars, overturns trees and seeks his mate.
Father elephant, you have been heard from afar.
Elephant hunter, take your bow!

In the forest where no one passes but you,
Hunter, lift up your heart, leap, and walk.
Meat is in front of you, the huge piece of meat,
The meat which walks like a hill,
The meat which makes glad the heart,
The meat that will roast on the hearth,
The meat into which the teeth sink,
The fine red meat and the blood that is drunk smoking.
Elephant hunger, take your bow!¹

The language of the poem seems clear and exact, not at all ambiguous. But after all that translating, how could one be sure?

Is there any such primitive poetry in our own language and tradition? Anglo-Saxon? Another language! Chaucer? A sophisticated court poet, mostly ironically, a kind of secular Nun's Priest. There was a popular poetry in his day, and as he lets us know in "The Tale of Sir Thopas," it was wretched stuff. But in the next century, apparently, that folksy impulse came to a wonderful fruition in the far north: in the ballads. Let us examine one closely for what it may reveal about the roots of our poetic language. There are kings, nobles, and court ladies here too, but the point of view, the source of vision, is usually elsewhere, and in these poems we come, I think, as close to the primitive source of our poetry as we are likely ever to get. Let us examine the most famous one of all:

SIR PATRICK SPENS

The king sits in Dumferling toune,
Drinking the blude-reid wine:
"O whar will I get guid sailor,
To sail this schip of mine?"

1. *Primitive Song*, C.M. Bowra (1962). Bowra introduces the song thus: But let me recite you the Gabon Pygmies' "Elephant Hunting Song." The Pygmies haven't discovered the wheel yet. They don't know anything about planting something in the Spring and having it come up yummy and edible in Autumn. They don't domesticate animals either—only the dog, who helps out in hunting and gets part of the loot. They leave nature alone. They don't control it, plant it, plough it, emasculate it, own it, fight wars about it, have laborers and executives and toadies and sycophants in connections with it. They only go out and try to tear off a piece of it when they are hungry, and of course, it is no joke for a 4 1/2 ft. Pygmy to kill an elephant with a stone-tipped spear. And this is what they sing to each other before they are going to try it.

Up and spak an eldern knicht,
Sat at the kings richt kne:
“Sir Patrick Spens is the best sailor,
That sails upon the se.”

The king has written a braid letter,
And signd it wi’ his hand;
And sent it to Sir Patrick Spens,
Was walking on the sand.

The first line that Sir Patrick red,
A loud lauch lauched he:
The next line that Sir Patrick red,
The teir blinded his ee.

“O wha is this has don this deid.
This ill deid don to me;
To send me out this time o’ the yeir,
To sail upon the se?

“Mak haste, mak haste, my mirry men all,
Our guid schip sails the morne.”
“O say na sae, my master deir,
For I feir a deadlie storme.

“Late, late yestreen I saw the new moone
Wi’ the auld moone in hir arme;
And I feir, I feir, my deir master,
That we will cum to harme.”

O our Scots nobles wer richt laith
To weet their cork-heild shoone;
Bot lang owre a’ the play wer playd,
Thair hats they swam aboone.

O lang, lang, may thair ladies sit
Wi’ thair fans into their hand,
Or eir they se Sir Patrick Spens
Cum sailing to the land.

O lang, lang, may the ladies stand,
Wi' thair gold kems in their hair,
Waiting for thair ain deir lords,
For they'll se thame na mair.

Haf owre, haf owre to Aberdour,
It's fiftie fadom deip,
And thair lies guid Sir Patrick Spens
Wi' the Scots lords at his feit.

Is this poem overfamiliar? Is everyone tired of it? The Overfamiliar Object has a way of becoming the Unknown Object: one glances at it, sure of what is is, then looks away impatiently, and so it escapes us. It's there: forget about it! But how did it get there? Why does it haunt us—this one—Sir Patrick? It's about honor and true worth and doing your duty and being the best man—better even sometimes than those above you in social status. That's why the Scots nobles are all at Sir Patrick's feet at the end. He's above them—which means symbolically that he's a better man than they are because in full knowledge of the danger he did as his king commanded without complaint. Of course, that idea of doing your duty regardless is unpleasant nowadays (we think of those fellows who dutifully fired the ovens at Auschwitz and Treblinka), but one point, at least, is clear: with that ending it is a symbolical poem. A symbolist poem! The point is proved.

Yes—except for one consideration. We have said nothing about why the poem haunts us. Surely it does. Surely it has some kind of remarkable quality to have lasted so long in our anthologies—and in this version, not in that of Sir Walter Scott with the shipwreck described. It can't be just "historical considerations" that keep it there when plenty of other historical items would have served as well. Our hearts and minds tell us quite simply—and mysteriously—that this poem is remarkable. But if we take it as a poem of symbols, then the mystery only deepens. That inversion of the social order at the end is too crude and obvious to account for much of anything—even if it does seem to overthrow an unpalatable system of ethics.

So we are going to have to reserve judgment and look more carefully. Our examination will show something of the poem's power and genius. We shall see how we sometimes carelessly misread it in our impatience to get to the symbols, and we shall find, I think, something a good deal more commonplace, and more interesting, than ambiguity.

The poem gives us an extremely condensed and laconic story that moves rather abruptly from vivid detail to vivid detail. New stanzas plunge us without warning into new scenes. In the original performance as song, the music would have provided transitions, and the whole effect was probably smoother. By the second line the mood has been set: no poem beginning with “blood-red wine” is going to end happily. And with this phrase too, we are in a different world of poetry: the aural world. For “blude-reid,” evidently a standard epithet for wine, is found elsewhere in the ballads—just as virtually every adjective-noun combination in Homer is also found elsewhere in Homer. But this may well be the richest use of the phrase. The king’s authority (his royal blood) and his power (he can shed blood) are both suggested, and the effect is not decorative but structural: the overwhelming presence of the king—the sacred king—is what makes the action of the poem comprehensible.

And it helps us to solve the first riddle—for the poem, as we shall see, poses a succession of riddles, and in so doing, more deeply establishes its antiquity: the riddle form was a favorite as far back as King Alfred’s day. The first riddle is, What was in the king’s letter to Sir Patrick? In their influential textbook for college freshmen, Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren remark on Sir Patrick’s reaction to the letter, “At first he laughs in astonishment at the notion that he is to make an expedition at this dangerous time of year, but at the next moment ‘the teir blind[s] his ee’ when he realizes that this is no joke but a serious command.” We are to imagine that Sir Patrick opens a letter from this blood-red-wine-drinking king—“a broad letter,” that is, a big proper one with all the seals, ribbons, and frills, signed by the king’s own hand—and assumes as his very first thought that it is all a big joke. Imagine, reader, how you would feel, opening and reading the first lines of an unexpected personal letter to you from the President of the United States. No, such a reaction is not to be believed. And besides, the poem explicitly excludes it. The letter does not say one thing; it says two things. At the first thing—“line”—Sir Patrick laughs, and at the second he weeps. Clearly the second is the order to sail. What is the first? The poem has already told us: in the second stanza, the words of the “eldern knight”—

Sir Patrick Spens is the best sailor,
That sails upon the se.

Sooner or later as we contemplate the poem, it will occur to us that the king would have repeated those words as a preamble to his order; and with this realization, Sir Patrick's laugh in response to them becomes beautifully precise: "A loud lauch lauched he." It is the gleeful, proud laugh of a man who has been justly praised by the great and the powerful. Again the effect is structural. It is that laugh which, in an almost physical way beyond any idea of duty, hooks Sir Patrick. He cannot accept and value the praise without accepting and valuing the praiser—and obeying the command.

Some general observations are in order at this point. First, this "primitive" poem has completely and gloriously established itself in our perceptions after only sixteen lines, not by being ambiguous, but by being breathtakingly precise. It is as accurate as a fine definition in mathematics—and as inspired. Second, the *way* in which it establishes its meaning is perhaps as significant as the meaning itself. We are given facts—data: the knight said this, the king wrote a letter, Sir Patrick laughed, wept—and left to find for ourselves the hypothesis which explains them. And the facts given are such that only one hypothesis is possible. It isn't just unfolding centuries of great poetry that are latent in this poem. Scientific method—and scientific faith—are prefigured in it as well: the faith that there is a necessary and sufficient theory to explain every set of facts and that, therefore, empirical method will succeed. Third and finally, there is a school of criticism gaining prominence which asserts that poems change meaning as they are handed down through generations to different audiences. Each new community of readers is free to find in a poem more-or-less what it wishes to find. *More-or-less*: obviously there are limits. When some future generation decides that Milton's *Lycidas* is a recipe for meatloaf, then we may safely conclude that Western Civilization has come to an end. This doctrine of variable interpretation is a corollary to the idea that the fundamental property of poetry is ambiguity. Of course, changed circumstances can suggest new meanings, which may or may not have been implied in the original poem—as when Thomas Hardy's puckish perversities, a generation or two later, take on the aspect of prophecy—but this matter of the king's letter shows us how strict the limits can be. The precise character of Sir Patrick's laugh will remain substantially unchanged, one feels, to the end of English Literature. Even if a whole generation of readers misinterprets it, its true nature will eventually rise and assert itself.

The solution of this first riddle clarifies the following stanza, in which

Sir Patrick speaks of “this ill deid don to me.” He cannot be conjecturing “that some enemy has recommended him to the king’s attention,” as Brooks and Warren suggest. To suppose that the eldern knight understands the danger and would blithely consign the nobles of the Scottish Court to their possible destruction in order to fulfill a vendetta against one miserable sea captain is absurd, and it would render Sir Patrick absurd to imagine that he entertained such a thought. Our hero is being ironic: Somebody—he wonders who—has praised him to the king—normally a *good* deed. The reversal of value—this is the first of several in the poem—makes us realize how quickly things go wrong when there is stupidity in high places. The eldern knight is a recognizable modern type. He is the good committee member. He eagerly answers the chairman’s question, demonstrating his usefulness and his wide knowledge, but he would never dream of questioning the chairman’s premises. His imagination cannot get beyond the committee to the reality with which the committee is supposed to deal. He is like the critic who can see in poetry only poetry, not the life that the poetry exists to illuminate.

I have mentioned the gaps between stanzas that make the poem seem abrupt to the reader and, to a lesser extent, to the listener. The poet uses even these to great effect, most strikingly the one that comes in the middle of Sir Patrick’s six-line speech. The captain turns to his men, and there is no hint of his doubt in his words to them. The abrupt juxtaposition produces a fine—and chilling—counterpoint between the spoken heartiness and the unspoken anguish and gives great depth to Sir Patrick’s character, which is then defined in yet a new way in the sailor’s response.

What distinguishes Sir Patrick, as Brooks and Warren remark, is his ability to see clearly. The king, the nobles, and their ladies see dimly, if at all, because they are removed from the realities of the sea. But the seamen who are below Sir Patrick and even closer to those realities also lack clarity of vision. They see that a storm is coming, but for the wrong reason—an omen (and in so doing, incidentally, provide the poem with that stock element of tragedy). The sailor’s image of the new moon with the “auld moone” (its dark side dimly aglow with earthshine) “in hir arme” is perhaps the most brilliant of the poem, but it suggests a mood of hysteria. One can be too deeply immersed in experience as well as too far removed from it, the poem seems to say.

The next stanza,

O our Scots nobles wer richt laith
To weet their cork-heild shoone;
Bot lang owre a' the play wer playd,
Thair hats they swam aboone,

presents us with another riddle. We glimpse the nobles—passengers evidently—coming on board and then we are told obliquely that there was a shipwreck. But what actually is going on? Is there a deliberate confusion in the syntax to echo the confusion of the storm? Perhaps so. But then, what has become of our precision? Every editor that I have encountered takes “they” in the last line of this quatrain to refer to “hats.” The nobles were drowned, and their hats were left floating above. (After all, haven’t we all seen something like that in a movie?) But we may also take “they” to refer to “cork-heild shoone,” so that the line means, “their shoes floated above their hats.” The buoyancy of cork thrusts this possibility into our awareness, and the irony becomes exquisite. The nobles were fussy about getting their fancy shoes wet, but their shoes swam better than they, better even than their bejewelled and gold-braided hats. With this reading (surely the correct one, since it is so much more meaningful) we have another inversion of values—a darkly comic turning upside down in anticipation of the poem’s final image.

One wonders why there should be so much repetition in the next two stanzas—in this poem where so far not a word has been wasted. The obvious answer is that the repetition suggests the length of the ladies’ wait and their growing sense of bereavement. But that would hardly seem enough for an artist of our poet’s calibre. And indeed there are other things going on as well. The two quatrains illustrate one of the central principles of art while they are at it: that tensions must be significant and that they must be resolved. A surprise creates tension, and the words “Sir Patrick Spens” come as a surprise in the first of these stanzas. For whom were the ladies waiting? Their lords, of course. Then why does our poet complicate matters by saying at first that they were waiting for Sir Patrick? Are we to suspect that the sly old salt, like D.H. Lawrence’s gardener, has been sleeping around at court? Will some future generation of critics decide to read the poem in this way? I hope not. To hear the familiar name in that unfamiliar context reminds us that everything now depends on the captain. The ladies are waiting for Sir Patrick because, if he doesn’t get home, no one will.

So the tension created is significant; and the mournful repetition of the idea of waiting in the next stanza is *required* for its resolution: the lords must finally appear in their rightful places. Again the effect is elegantly contrapuntal. At least two things are being done very gracefully at the same time.

I feel inclined to assert at this point that this principle of tension and release has been and continues to be far more important in poetry than ambiguity. It corresponds to Aristotle's insistence that plot, structure—not character, words, or scenery (imagery)—is the essential element in tragedy (poetry). Then why is so little said about it in modern criticism? Several reasons suggest themselves. There has been a general tendency in twentieth century art to make formerly decorative elements perform a structural function—as tone color in music, surface texture in painting, and purely verbal effects in poetry. Then too, there is the obvious fact that tension and release are the stock in trade of movies, pop novels, and the nightly goon shows on TV. Surely poetry ought to have nothing to do with *that*. The fact that in popular art of this kind the tensions are meaningless and the resolutions bogus does not seem to appeal to anyone as an opportunity for poetry to perfect such devices. And here the unreconstructed philistine, the ignorant cynic, will remark that such things are always very difficult to manage and that modern poetry, as it is mass produced in workshops, literary magazines, and attention-getting movements, does not thrive on difficulty.

The last stanza of our poem shows us a poet with his audience completely under his spell.

Haf owre, haf owre to Aberdour,
It's fiftie fadom deip. . . .

Where else in poetry does so simple a statement evoke so much with such exactitude? The poet merely tells us the depth of the ocean at a certain point, and we think—we know—that's where the voyagers are. But like a good percussionist returning to the beat, the poet must resolve even that little tension: He reassures us, "And thair lies guid Sir Patrick Spens," before leaving us with one last tension to resolve for ourselves—"Wi' the Scots lords at his feit."

This brings us to a fundamental point about poetry and about the reading of poetry: To see this line right away as symbolic (as an expression of Sir Patrick's true superiority) is to *ignore almost all of its force as*

poetry. We see that simple intellectual relationship and close the book satisfied—unaware that the poem has left us with yet another riddle to solve. What were the nobles *doing* in their last moments that would account for their arrangement in death at Sir Patrick's feet? As always with this incredible poet there is one, and only one, exact answer. They had realized finally that, not just their cork-heeled shoes, but they themselves were going to drown, and they had flocked around Sir Patrick, who had other things to think about, and were begging him to save them. How infinitely more powerful this concrete image of a low and cowardly death—which the poem has not forced on us, but has subtly induced us to conjure for ourselves—than any mere symbol could ever be!

This, then, is primitive poetry—or as close to it as we are likely to get. I would like to believe that the Pygmies' Elephant Hunting Song has something of the grandeur, profundity and power of *Sir Patrick Spens*, but it is unlikely that I will ever know enough Pygmy to find out. The truly primitive remains a perpetual presence lost to us forever and resurrectable only now and then by a bold and inspired conjecture. The primitive is like Sir Patrick and the nobles on the ocean floor: we cannot see them, but the poet can; and it is his mission to help us see them too.

What, then, do we see? When we of the Western World began our search for the primitive—began it, say, in earnest at the end of the Eighteenth Century, urged by our growing unease with the scientific, mathematical, industrial world we were building for ourselves—we thought we would find something opposite to that dreary and artificial rationality. We thought we would find the quintessentially poetic, the pure unquantified, the ultimate purple passage, hovering, soft and infinitely gentle, in the ambiguous mists. We found the ballads—fragments of that lost world—and carefully collected them. But if this reading of *Sir Patrick Spens* is valid, we have in them a poetry so ruthlessly exact that our own best experts, misled by the basic premise of their search, often misread it. The misleading premise is that there is a separation possible between poetry and prose, intuition and reason, art and science. In the primitive world, it would seem, there is, above all, unity. All the faculties, all the aspects and talents of man are one, and they work, they play, together.

I would like to think that there is something of our own poetry's destiny in this. One day, perhaps, emboldened by the strength and art of ballads like *Sir Patrick Spens*, our poetry will begin a new search, away

from the specializations that divide us and toward the unity that makes a living society possible.²

2. The paragraph about the nobles' cork-heeled shoes freely quotes my note in *The Explicator*, Vol. 37, No. 3, Spring 1979, pp. 6-7.