Emancipating the Shackled Bard: A review of *The Ode Less Travelled: Unlocking the Poet Within*, by Stephen Fry

Title: *The Ode Less Travelled: Unlocking the Poet Within*

Author: Stephen Fry

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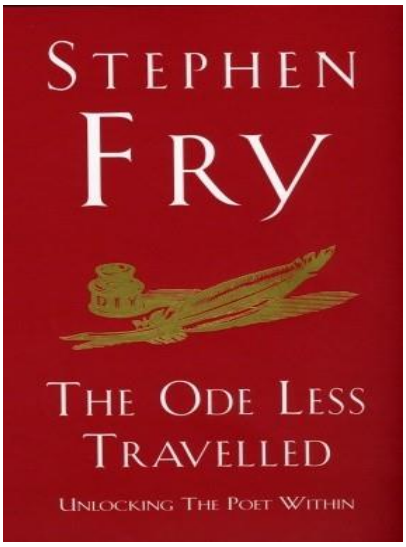

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I don't know what had possessed me to stray into the poetry section of the bookshop. There was never anything interesting there. But since my last visit, maybe the poetic landscape had become less barren. As before, there were quite a few anthologies and "slim volumes," as well as some informative books on writing poetry (meter and rhyme, rhyme and meter), all what one would expect.

But here on a lower shelf is *The Ode Less Travelled*, by Stephen Fry, another book about poetic technique – meter and rhyme, form and diction. Fry is an actor and the host of the BBC's *QI* quiz show and much more, and because I find him an interesting person who is knowledgeable on many topics, it

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Could be worth taking a chance on his knowing a few things about writing poetry, too. On the inside is a list of the books he's had published, some fiction and non-fiction and a few with the actor Hugh Laurie, but all written in . . . prose. Never published a poem in his life. The foreword is even prefaced with a confession that he does write poems, but it was his guilty secret until *The Ode* came out. Things are not looking up.

But let's go back to the cover and see if there's any hope in the subtitle, the place where writers profess their inner urges and deeper ambitions for their books. And this one is "Unlocking the Poet Within."

As the English in polite society are heard to say – "Oh, dear."

No civilized person wants to stop others from "following their dreams," but are we absolutely sure that the poet within should be unlocked? Most of us have probably heard the saying, "There's a novel in everybody – and that's where it should stay." The same may apply to poets. If we want to be safe, shouldn't they go through a background check? Appear before the parole board? At least have their ears tested? And if unlocking their "dreams" is not irresponsible or criminal, is it even possible?

No doubt Fry sincerely does want to help people write better, but I fear he is putting the rest of us at serious risk with this "unlocking" service of his. It's a perilous policy – since he would probably not support setting up a "parole board" in any case, he has to put his trust in his readers and hope that not too many of them have delusions of talent.

There is a hint of an answer to this dilemma near the end, in "Getting Noticed," advice to poets who want to go public:

> The first opinion you should trust, I believe, is your own, so long as it is pitilessly honest. Ask yourself, through your journal or face to face with yourself in a mirror, whether you think what you have written truly deserves a readership or audience. (p. 324)

So Fry seems to believe that some poets can be trusted not to delude themselves, which is a good sign in a writer. What's at question in this passage, though, is the writer's courage and honesty, not his way with words or his position on language, and that is what we really need to know.

Any writer must wonder how good he is, in a fair and unbiased way, so before he goes to unfettering the beast within, it would be advisable to get some guidance from a lion tamer. And one of the most irascible is one of the founders of modern poetry and Modernism, Ezra Pound, who in the 1930s wrote *ABC of Reading* and "How to Read," and whose skill in all types of poetry Fry clearly admires (see pp. 173-174).

A writer has to be a good reader to start with, and for Pound, reading well meant being able to discern which writers, particularly poets, wrote well. He makes many pronouncements and strikes at many targets, too many to bring up here, but he provides a simple yet effective starting point:

> Incompetence will show in the use of too many words.
>
> The reader's first and simplest test of an author will be to look for words that do not function. (*ABC*, p. 63)

If a reader can apply this test, a writer must be able to apply it to his own work, if he is not put off by words like "test," "function," and "incompetence," or "pitilessly honest."

But in the same way that Fry would not want to install a parole board, so Pound would not want to force everyone to read only the writers he approves of. Every reader must ultimately read for his own pleasure, but when the time comes to think about what is *good*, the terms of reference have to be more precise than "He expresses the hopes and fears of his generation." For Pound, what is most important is to look for an electrical charge:

> Literature is language charged with meaning.
>
> Great literature is simply language that is charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree. (*ABC*, p. 28)

The charge is created by three means: "throwing the object (fixed or moving) on to the visual imagination, inducing emotional correlations by the sound and rhythm of the speech, [and] inducing both of the effects by stimulating the associations (intellectual or emotional) that have remained in the receiver's consciousness in relation to the actual words or word groups employed" (*ABC*, p. 63) – that is, in the third one, using words for their exact meanings and for their deeper associations and connotations.

So now, getting back to Fry at last and pulling the threads tight, if readers of *The Ode* think they have something worth unlocking, what we can hope they would ask themselves is this: "Do I care about *images*, *music*, and *sense*? Am I interested in turning a sonnet into a flashlight battery, or a Homeric epic into a nuclear power plant?" The poet is not yet liberated, but this is where he begins to emerge.

And in his personable but unassuming way ("I have tried to make everything accessible without being loopily matey or absurdly simplistic," p. xix), Stephen Fry is here to assist. He has a plan, but first the reader has to take a vow of participation. At the end of the introduction, "How to Read this Book," is an "End User Licence Agreement," in which the reader may agree or disagree to abide by Fry's three rules:

> 1. Take your time.
> 2. Don't be afraid.
> 3. Always have a notebook with you.
>
> (p. xxv)

That is, as he explains earlier, (1) do not rush the reading of the poems, and read them aloud, or at least move your lips; (2) do not let their difficulty put you off; meaning does not have to come all at once in the first or fifth reading, and besides, there will be no exam questions; and (3) there will, however,

be some exercises, so, with a notebook in your hands, you may practice those techniques at any time, and you will be free to "just doodle with words." Fry is clearly interested in more than explaining what the techniques are and giving his favorite specimens. The agreement helps the reader to trust Fry as a guide on this excursion through the poetic fundamentals; the reader can see that Fry understands how difficult it will be, and he cares about the state of the reader's mind as much as he cares about poetry, and wants it to be ready to receive a literary charge.

He candidly admits that there are things he cannot do but is very confident about what he intends to do:

> I cannot teach you how to be a great poet or even a good one. Dammit, I can't teach *myself* that. But I can show you how to have fun with the modes and forms of poetry as they have developed over the years. By the time you have read this book you will be able to write a Petrarchan sonnet, a Sapphic Ode, a ballade, a villanelle and a Spenserian stanza, among many other weird and delightful forms; you will be confident with metre, rhyme and much else besides. (p. xviii)

Not promising the earth is a good omen, and so is the end user agreement. In spite of my first reservations, this is now looking like a very good book for anyone who wants to learn about poetic craft and techniques.

One possible criticism of *The Ode* may be that it does not contain any advice for free-versers, people who play tennis with the net down, as Robert Frost said. Fry admits as much: "If you can do it, good luck to you and farewell, this book is not for you" (p. xviii). But no one is cast into the outer darkness. The first section of the chapter on meter, "How We Speak," for instance, briefly discusses the native elements of English and how its sounds and rhythms differ from other languages:

> Automatic and inborn as language might seem to be, there are still things we need to know about it, elements that are so obvious very few of us even consider them. . . .
>
> Some of what follows may seem so obvious that it will put you in danger of sustaining a nosebleed. Bear with me, nonetheless. We are proceeding from first principles. (p. 1)

And if they are willing to go along with Fry's practice suggestions, free-versers might find a new appreciation for something as basic even as the old *ti-**tum** ti-**tum** ti-**tum** ti-**tum** ti-**tum***. In exercise 2, readers are asked to write a few lines of iambic pentameter, without worrying about style or deep thoughts, only meter; Fry bravely gives a few of his own examples ("I've been and gone and done a stupid thing," "Oh Christ, I hate the way you do your hair, / Except you feel the same about my tie") and hands a blank page over to the reader:

> Your turn now. I'll give you some blank space. It's just in case you've come without a pad. Well, blow me, just look at that line 'it's **just** in **case** you've **come** with**out** a **pad**' – iambic pentameter gets into the system like a germ, as a seasoned Shakespearean actor will tell you. . . .
>
> How did you do? Did you get any feeling that, crude, elementary, nonsensical and bizarre as some of the lines you've written may be, they nonetheless hint at that thing we call poetry? That nothing more but the simplest use of the simplest metre suggested to you a way of expressing thoughts, stories, reflections and passions that ordinary speech or prose could never offer? Above all, that writing in strict metre doesn't result in stiff, formal or old-fashioned English? (pp. 19-20)

Here finally is Fry's method for unlocking the poet within the reader who

cares about images, music, and sense. The reader becomes a writer in small and large steps over the 20 poetry exercises, covering meter, rhyming, and the forms (sestina, sonnet, and so on). Some of them take serious effort, but in each one Fry gives a good jumping-off point for the imagination; the reader gets more than "Write a sonnet on old age." The ballad exercise, for instance, involves finishing "The tale of Danny Wise: / And how his sweet wife Annabelle / Did suck out both his eyes" (p. 200) (one of Fry's home-grown efforts). If the reader/writer has been paying attention, the simple feeling that he got by doing exercise 2 will strengthen, and he will realize that the poet within was never locked up; he just needed some fresh air and exercise, and food for thought.

Although *The Ode Less Travelled* is one of the most informative and enjoyable books on prosody there is, Fry does not intend that it become a classroom textbook. The passages where he takes poems apart word by word are interesting but very detailed, so it would better suit a small and intense group of friends working through it together. Nevertheless, teachers of creative writing could adapt the exercises to what their students are learning.

And if they need an interesting explanation for a meter or a form, Fry has them in plenty. Here for instance is the rare and exotic *molossus*:

> The **tum-tum-tum** has the splendid name *molossus*, like Colossus, and is a foot of three long syllables — — — or, if we were to use it in English poetry, three *stressed* syllables ●●●. Molossus was a town in Epirus known for its huge mastiffs, so perhaps the name of the foot derives from the dog's great bow-wow-wow. (p. 86)

As rare as the molossus may be, he finds some entertaining exhibits in a few lines that W.S. Gilbert wrote for *The Mikado*:

To sit in solemn silence in a **dull dark dock**,
In a pestilential prison, with a **life-long lock**,
Awaiting the sensation of a **short, sharp shock**,
From a cheap and chippy chopper on a **big black block**! (p. 87)

This combination of knowledge and pleasure and seriousness – and his lack of self-importance ("bow-wow-wow" in a book on poetic techniques?) – is found everywhere in the book. Because of the terminology, by no means is it an easy read, but, with Fry's help, once the reader learns the language of the trade, he will probably wonder why he waited so long

References

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