

Why poetical manuscripts?

by Roy Davids

When I grew up, anything but a verbal culture was scarcely an option (not that I resisted it). Music and Art were not mainstream subjects at school -- Music was only available through an extra-curricular society, and neither it nor Art was muscular enough for most boys' schools in those days. Also, the availability of anything but the printed word was generally very limited. Reflecting recently on my schooldays, when English Literature was among my main subjects, I realised that while Shakespeare was the sole obligatory author, my teachers chose just one work in prose (*Gulliver's Travels*) for our study, otherwise only poetry (and for us everything ended at Wordsworth). So there has always been a subliminal predisposition towards poetry 'imposed' on me. Once History became the main study for me, I convinced myself, with all the grand certainty of youth, that fiction was a distraction with the danger of confusing fact and invention.

Deeper than this 'environmental imposition', however, I was instinctively moved by the musicality in poems, and had a fondness for words and their sounds, enhanced, I rather think, by a predilection for saying them 'aloud' in my head (or actually out loud when on my own) rather than developing the ability, later acquired, to take in chunks of prose at a glance. Prose was also, of course, the work-horse in our lives - what we used for essays; anything I did for myself, so much as there then was, tended to be in verse. As time went on poetry loosened its grip, my own practice of it being only occasionally revived, and when I came back to it was perhaps partly through working on manuscripts, including drafts, in my job, influenced no doubt by the special interest in poetry and poetical manuscripts of Peter Croft, one mentor (though both of us were somewhat resistant of the role). Renewed interest also came through the many poets I have been fortunate to meet, some of whom became close friends. In their company, poetry (with drinks) was the swirl of conversation in which I frequently found myself. My friend Ted Hughes's death hurt me back into poetry - the writing of it again - and it has since become my prime medium of personal expression.

Fundamentally, though, I have never doubted that poetry is, as Somerset Maugham said, 'the Crown of Literature,' adding: 'It is its end and aim. It is the sublimist activity of the human mind...The writer of prose can only step aside when the poet passes.' Housman, observed, more prosaically, that it is 'generally esteemed the highest form of literature.' Poetry truly represents for me 'the most physical embodiment of the language' (Edward Lucie-Smith).

Until relatively recently post-mediaeval manuscripts as a whole have been pretty much the poor relation to printed books in the antiquarian world. I bought my first poetical manuscripts in the early 1970s partly through being so shocked that they were very much cheaper than ordinary first editions, and, almost more incomprehensibly to me, than books inscribed by their authors with four or five words in prose, a situation which time and supply and demand have done less to reverse than some observers might think. An early lesson in collecting I have never forgotten was given to me by another of my mentors in the trade, Arthur Freeman, of the scholar booksellers [Ted] Hofmann and Freeman, who passed on the light-headed wisdom: 'Never buy anything that you can afford'.

In the introduction to the catalogue of Part II of my collection in 2011, I sought to explain the attractions and the importance of manuscripts in general, and why they are worthy of collection. I will not repeat here all that I said, but limit myself rather to poetical ones alone.

Of all the post-mediaeval manuscripts that are (or were) reasonably available to individual not only institutional collectors, poetical manuscripts are the ones that in themselves are 'the works of art', the desired products of artistic endeavor, in literature. For this reason alone,

they are also, for me, the most magical. Printing may disseminate the work, but it already exists in the manuscript. As Philip Larkin said: 'This is the paper he wrote on, these are the words as he wrote them, emerging for the first time in this particular miraculous combination.' Larkin was writing of all literary manuscripts, but it is most perfectly true of poetical ones.

Manuscripts of novels and plays are generally too bulky for the lone collector and only rarely do manuscripts of any real literary significance in imaginative prose become available at all: most are already in libraries. The relative brevity of poetical manuscripts in itself makes them more collectable, and manageable. Anyway, a few leaves of a novel make an unsatisfactory amputated thing.

Letters are, in the main, means of communication, though sometimes they can aspire to be or attain an art form in their own terms. But they are only rarely of the imagination and, at their very best, like some letters of Keats, achieve their greatness by disguising that they are in effect written in the same cadences and with the artifice of the poet. A collection of letters as an art form would be very subjective and difficult to achieve.

Besides being 'works of art' in themselves, poetical manuscripts very often preserve reconsidered readings in the cancellations, deletions, corrections, rewritings, interlinear interpolations and the like at various stages of drafting. These can catch the poet in the workshop, at the anvil; pause the sparks, so to speak, as in a photograph. They can reveal the creative processes of the artist, transfix inspiration or reflection as they occur, in many ways like preliminary drawings and sketches ('Le dessin est la probité de l'art' -- Ingres). The nature of poetry itself, with its precision, concentration and fastidiousness, its demands of appropriateness, its subtleties and nuances, and its honour of the truth, lends a degree of significance to any alterations, within its modest frame, that can rarely be matched in imaginative prose works. The proper placing of a comma in a poem can have a volcanic impact on meaning, music and rhythm; its misplacing can smother the whole enterprise.

Being able to observe these creative processes in progress put poetical drafts among the unclaimed wonders of the world -- perhaps because they capture exceptional human beings in their most noble, most godlike, role -- they are for me (given my interest in poetry) the greatest of them all. If man and his achievements are likewise at the centre of your cosmic drama, this needs no further explanation. Such drafts are relics, sacred, holy in their way. To observe Keats (lot 254), for example, in the process of composition, watching the cut and thrust of artistic choices and the revelations of his unconscious mind at play, or experience sheer wonder at the times when the autopilot seemed to take over and changes were not needed at all, is to have a window into his soul. It is, as I said in the introduction to Part II, 'a numinous experience. In some degree, it is an act of worship.' Each is a living record in the creative life of its writer. Keats, who also wrote (in *The Fall of Hyperion*) of 'this warm scribe my hand', doesn't need me to make his, or our, point(s):

This living hand, now warm and capable
Of earnest grasping, would, if it were cold
And in the icy silence of the tomb,
So haunt thy days and chill thy dreaming nights
That thou wouldst wish thine own heart dry of blood
So in my veins red life might stream again,
And thou be conscience-calm'd - see here it is -
I hold it towards you.

Speaking again of all literary manuscripts, but it is most true of poetical ones, Philip Larkin noted that they 'have two kinds of value: what might be called the magical value and the meaningful value.' Poetical drafts can be vital to a full understanding of the poet's real

meaning. In the extrapolation of such remarkable qualities of drafts, Ted Hughes has been more perceptive and eloquent than any, having as he did the finest example to work on: the manuscripts of Sylvia Plath's poem 'Sheep in Fog' (see lots 372-273 for these manuscripts and for the drafts of his essay). 'What these drafts reveal is more than the working out of a famous poem,' he said, 'They reveal what is essentially a parallel body of poetry. They are a transparent exposure of the poetic operations to which the finished work is -- well what is it? In one sense, that final version conceals all these operations. It exploits them. But having seen these drafts, we do not respect the poem less. We understand it far better, because we have learned the peculiar meanings of the hieroglyphs. These drafts are not an accidental adjunct to the poem, they are a complementary revelation, a log-book of its real meanings.' Dana Gioia added, succinctly: 'Seeing what a poet cut out often helps clarify what was left in.'

Poems create pleasing patterns on the page; they are the visual as well as the musical works of the art of literature. They add, therefore, to the existential and tactile qualities that I enumerated in my earlier introduction (Part II). Gioia notes that 'a fair copy usually displays the author's finest hand', often an art form in itself, many chosen for illustration in 'English Handwriting' (*S.P.E. Tract XIII*) and the like. For those steeped in the visual attributes of cursive scripts, an author's handwriting is a pictograph of the man. It seems to bear -- as well as to be -- his mark. Final versions present him sallying forth, putting his best foot forward; they are the finished pictures in oils, so to speak. And, of course, as will be seen in examples in the present collection, what seem to be final or fair versions can turn out to be merely earlier (resting) stages in the journey (Morris, Auden, Elizabeth Barrett Browning for instance), and some poets continue the compositional process even beyond the poem in print. Not checking the text of your poetical manuscript against the printed version might mean a revelation of wonder missed.

Finally (a characteristic they of course share with all manuscripts), poetical ones usually take pole position as the ultimate authority in the chain of evidence for a text, and, whatever their status in the evolution of the work, are always worthy of consideration in all aspects of textual scholarship. Also, for reasons already suggested, the role of manuscripts tends to be significantly more important and telling for poetry than for prose.

POETICAL MANUSCRIPTS ARE NOW RARE ON THE MARKET AND IN PRIVATE HANDS. Looking at this collection it would perhaps be possible to think that poetical manuscripts are abundantly available for collectors. But I have been collecting them for forty years and have swept up all that I could at any time afford (often even when, sensibly, I should not have). Also, through friendships, I have often acquired modern pieces at source. Checking, as I have done for this catalogue against *American Book Prices Current*, valiantly maintained and developed over the years by Kathy Leab, reveals how scarce poetical manuscripts in English actually are on the market. It should also be remembered that while I had competitors for individual poets, I believe that I have been the only private person collecting them across the board after Edward Spencer (and they were just an element in his collection, based on his conception of general quality and what he inherited). It would now be impossible for the present collection to be even approximately replicated, though I hope that people will take the present opportunity to build collections of manuscripts that include them or to collect them on bases different from that of universal inclusion of poets writing in the English language which has informed my search. Let it not be forgotten, too, that every time a writer's archive or papers enter an institution (*en bloc* or singly), as most do, the main sources of supply are staunched for the collector. As will be seen from notes in the catalogue a great number of British authors' manuscripts are in America, particularly of the Romantics and modern poets, and most known poetical manuscripts that survive are already in institutional holdings. This is evidenced in the monumental listings of the *Index of English Literary Manuscripts* produced by Mansell Publishing Limited in the 1980s and 1990s: only a relatively few items listed in those volumes remain in private hands or noted as location

unknown. For the twentieth century see *Location Register of Twentieth Century Literary Manuscripts and Letters*, 2 volumes, 1988 (which only records institutional holdings).

On the other hand, I am pleased to say, that there are only a few much regretted gaps in the present collection I ever thought I might have had any expectation or hope of filling. They are Elizabeth Bishop (but nothing of hers has ever come on the market), Wilfred Owen (only one in all the years since the Siegfried Sassoon Sale in 1975 and then beyond my means when Lew David Feldman ['LDF'] was sweeping all before him), and Shelley (always beyond my means). I am also sorry not to have secured a manuscript by Matthew Arnold. My wish for a serious poem by Housman was only realised last year (lot 228) - two drafts that I had missed three times before -- through an auctioneer (elsewhere) reopening the lot after it had been knocked down to me and my number announced; through my own illness that took my eye off any other concerns; and through the death of my appointed agent as he was travelling to the sale to bid on my behalf. But I got it in the end.

Anything before the eighteenth century is virtually unobtainable. Of some like Shakespeare (unless you are prepared to take an imaginative, unscientific, leap in the case of 'The Boke of Sir Thomas More' in the British Library), Spenser, Drayton, Marlowe, Cotton, Vaughan and Marvell nothing exists at all. Of a good number, only one poetical manuscript in English remains (for instance Sidney, Herbert, Herrick, Donne, Dryden and Carew). For them and almost all the rest of the same period, virtually everything has long been incarcerated in institutions and nothing at all has appeared on the market. Such rarities, if they ever appear, are resolutely corralled by institutions backed by government grants and alumnal gifts or bought by very rich collectors and therefore never realistically possible. Some even in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are exceptionally scarce: thus Dr Johnson (only one four-line fragment in English in forty years at auction), Goldsmith (only one or perhaps two poetical manuscripts in the same period, bought by a Rothschild), Swift (nothing at all, and had there been another Rothschild would have denied it to me), Shelley (only five in forty years, in the 1970s and 1980s -- always to Pforzheimer I believe), and a few others.

I take it as some measure of my real achievement that, while I have autograph manuscripts for only seven of the last sixteen of the poets (beginning with Allan Ramsey) represented in the first volume of Peter Croft's *Autograph Poetry in the English Language*, I do have them for almost three-quarters of the poets represented in volume two (beginning with Bloomfield). Except for Poe, Shelley, Emily Brontë, Arnold and Owen, I have pieces by all the important poets he included and of many more than he had; for some odd reason, he finished with Dylan Thomas. He had no Rosenberg, Charlotte Brontë, Larkin, Robert Lowell, Elizabeth Bishop, Hughes, Plath or Heaney for instance. Of eighteenth-century poets that I have, but Croft did not represent, are Garrick, Mason, Sheridan, Horace Walpole, Edward Young, and a few lesser poets.

It should be remembered, too, that the manuscripts in Peter Croft's book were almost exclusively from institutional holdings; his was not a personal collection. Also, Croft accepted a few whose only real qualification for inclusion seemed to be that manuscripts by them existed (thus Thomas Sackville, John Lilliat, William Cavendish, William Strode, Thomas Stanley, Nathaniel Wanley, and William Walsh).

For those who would like to read further on matters in this introduction, four works are essential: A.E. Housman, 'The Name and Nature of Poetry' in *A.E. Housman: Collected Poems & Selected Prose*, edited by Christopher Ricks, 1988; Ted Hughes, 'Sylvia Plath: The Evolution of "Sheep in Fog"' in *Winter Pollen*, 1994; Dana Gioia, 'The Magical Value of Manuscripts' in *The Hand of the Poet*, edited by Rodney Phillips, 1997; and Peter Croft, *Autograph Poetry in the English Language*, 2 volumes, 1973. Otherwise, the observations on poetry in the following extracts will, it is hoped, stimulate reflection on these remarkable works of art, and increase affection for them -- that is, for these miracles, poetical manuscripts.

Observations about Poetry and Poets.

... every phrase
And sentence that is right (where every word is at home,
Taking its place to support the others,
The word neither diffident nor ostentatious,
An easy commerce of the old and the new,
The common word exact without vulgarity,
The formal word precise but not pedantic,
The complete consort dancing together)
Every phrase and every sentence is an end and a beginning,
Every poem an epitaph... (T.S. Eliot)

I have two or three times in my life composed from the wish rather than the impulse, but I never succeeded to any purpose. (Robert Burns)

The real work is done by some unseen collaborator. (Robert Louis Stevenson)

The best lines come from the management. (John Betjeman)

Auditory imagination...the feeling for syllable and rhythm, penetrating far below the conscious levels of thought and feeling, invigorating every word; sinking to the most primitive and forgotten, returning to the origin and bringing something back...fusing the most ancient and most civilized mentalities. (T.S. Eliot)

All poetry is to me a matter of sound...It is the tune I am interested in. (Robert Frost)

A poem is a little journey of discovery. (Robert Frost)

[A great poem] goes beyond its [own] geography. (Andrew Motion)

Poetry is a way of taking life by the throat. (Robert Frost)

Poetry is tears on the shoulders of the world. (Boris Pasternak)

Poetry is the voice and spirit of imagination. (Ted Hughes)

Poetry is language in orbit. (Seamus Heaney)

The first task of the poet...is to learn how to entwine his or her hands so that the whistle comes out right. (Seamus Heaney)

Poetry is saying ordinary things in an extraordinary way. (Louis MacNeice)

Poetry is not an assertion of truth but the making of that truth more fully real to us. (T S Eliot)

A poem begins as a lump in the throat. (Robert Frost)

Poetry is memorable speech. (W.H. Auden)

No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader. No surprise in the writer, no surprise in the reader. (Robert Frost)

Speech delighted with its own music. (Edward Thomas)

Poetry: the best words in the best order. (S.T. Coleridge)

A poet must leave traces of his passage, not proof. (Rene Char)

There is no competition between poems. (T S Eliot)

All poetry is a reproduction of the tones of actual speech. (Robert Frost)

To be a poet is a condition not a profession. (Robert Graves)

Public profile perverts poetry from passion to Profession. (Roy Davids)

A poet can survive everything but a misprint. (Oscar Wilde)

Imaginary gardens with real toads in them. (Marianne Moore)

Poetry is nobody's business except the poet's, and everybody else can fuck off. (Philip Larkin)

Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world. (Percy Bysshe Shelley)

I hate all Boets and Bainters. (George II)

Poetry is an echo, asking a shadow to dance. (Carl Sandburg)

Poetry is the only possible way of saying anything that is worth saying at all. (Arthur Machen)

Genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood. (T.S. Eliot)

Poetry is like reaching out, into yourself, and bringing back part of the Emperor's flaming pearl. (Roy Davids)

Poetry gives most pleasure when only generally and not perfectly understood. (S.T. Coleridge)

Meaning is of the intellect, poetry is not. (A.E. Housman)

It begins in delight and ends in wisdom. (Robert Frost)

Poetry is emotion put into measure. (Thomas Hardy)

A poem is never finished, only abandoned. (Paul Valery)

If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can ever warm me, I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry. These are the only ways I know it. (Emily Dickinson)

Poetry is the language in which man explores his own amazement. (Christopher Fry)

Poetry is the spontaneous outflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origins from emotion

recollected in tranquillity. (William Wordsworth)

Experience has taught me, when I am shaving of a morning, to keep watch over my thoughts, because, if a line of poetry strays into my memory, my skin bristles so that the razor ceases to act. This particular symptom is accompanied by a shiver down the spine. (A.E. Housman)

Poetry is man's rebellion against being what he is. (James Branch Cabell)

Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things. (T. S. Eliot)

Poetry is a phantom script telling how rainbows are made and why they go away. (Carl Sandburg)

When the Lord rained bread from heaven so that man did eat angels' food, and the children of Israel saw upon the face of the wilderness a small round thing, as small as a hoar frost on the ground, they did not call it quails: they rose to the occasion and said to one another 'it is manna.' (A.E. Housman)

Poetry is a mirror which makes beautiful that which is distorted. (Percy Bysshe Shelley)

Poetry is thoughts that breathe, and words that burn. (Thomas Gray)

Poetry is the art of uniting pleasure with truth. (Samuel Johnson)

Like a piece of ice on a hot stove the poem must ride on its own melting. (Robert Frost)

Poetry is to prose like dancing is to walking. (John Wain)

Poetry should...strike the reader as a wording of his own highest thoughts, and appear almost a remembrance. (John Keats)

Poetry is like fish: if it's fresh, it's good; if it's stale, it's bad; if you're not certain, try it on the cat. (Osbert Sitwell)

Most people ignore most poetry because most poetry ignores most people. (Adrian Mitchell)

I think that to transfuse emotion -- not to transfuse thought but to set up in the reader's sense a vibration corresponding to what was felt by the writer -- is the peculiar function of poetry. (A.E. Housman)

If coal is the fuel of language and silver its best prose, poetry is its gold and diamonds. (Roy Davids)

I have never put a toothbrush in a poem. (Sylvia Plath).

Poetry is the synthesis of hyacinths and biscuits. (Carl Sandburg)

Most good poetry comes from the hurt side. (Ted Hughes in conversation)

A poem is a pheasant. (Wallace Stevens).

Poetry is a pheasant disappearing into a wood. (Wallace Stevens)

If it doesn't look easy, you aren't working hard enough. (Fred Astaire, on dancing)

Portraits

Portraits have become something of a trademark of mine, privately and in my former business. I sold nearly 300 in Part I and something like 200 in Part II, and in both catalogues I attempted to unravel their significance. I will repeat here only a few sentences of what I have previously said about portraiture. The prime focus of the portraits here is the sitters, chosen because they are poets. To me portraits have always seemed a vital adjunct, a form of visual biography, essential for a full comprehension of the personality and the work. Aquinas said that man cannot understand without images, and modern science has shown that about half the cortex of the brain is related to vision. The face is the prime mark of identity; without it our sense is fragmented, ill-defined, dehumanised. We need the human reference or the work remains something of an abstraction. Also, their presence in the collection makes for a more lively presentation.

Here, in this part, is the final group of portraits that I have amassed, mostly photographs, and largely acquired directly from the photographers themselves [SEE END OF CATALOGUE FOR THEM]. Few will, I am sure, disagree that they make a fine display. Perhaps it is true that if photographers bring out the best in poets, poets bring out the best in photographers. Walt Whitman, who was a great advocate of photography, and himself among the most photographed literary figures of his day, had some interesting *aperçus* about the medium: 'I find,' he wrote, 'I often like the photographs better than the oils -- they are perhaps mechanical, but they are honest. The artists add and deduct: the artists fool with nature...I think I like the best photographs best.' He would often comment about how photography was part of an emerging democratic art, how its commonness, cheapness, and ease were displacing the refined image of art implicit in portrait painting. 'I think the painter has much to do to go ahead of the best photographs', he thought, and that photographs have 'the knack of catching life on the run, in a flash, as it shifted, moved, evolved.' A gallery of photographs of the famous, he added, 'would be the best history, a history from which there could be no appeal.' Julian Barnes says that vintage photographs of authors give him the feeling of 'authentic context.'

The Sale

Of all the areas in which I have collected, none has maintained its fascination as long as poetical manuscripts. To part with it, with them, will seem incomprehensible to many. But having collected about everything that I could afford, as well as much that I should not have afforded, I feel I have achieved something so remarkable that I should share it with others and to register it in a catalogue. I shall take away my memories and the catalogue which once again Bonhams has allowed me to write myself, subject, of course, to their in-house scrutiny and approval. I have done for the collection what I can do for it. But, being man-

made, it is not an entity that has any compelling cohesion in itself and nor would any institution be able to guarantee its regular or permanent display. Libraries will purchase what they want or need (and many of the best things will doubtless go to them), but much of what is here will, I hope, go to those fellow collectors for whom, as I once wrote, 'desire is purer than necessity'.

Roy Davids, 2013.

ROY DAVIDS was educated at Seaford College and Queen Mary College, London University, where he specialised in Sicilian and Byzantine history. After teaching, historical research, working on the History of Parliament Trust writing short biographies of sixteenth-century Members of Parliament and for the scholar-booksellers [Ted] Hofmann and [Arthur] Freeman, he joined Sotheby's in 1970 as a cataloguer of post-Mediaeval manuscripts, headed the Department from 1975 and also headed the Book Department from 1982 to 1994. He was chief auctioneer and negotiator for the departments 1975-1994. His personal assistant there for twelve and a half years was Julie Donaghy née Armstrong. He was additionally Marketing Director and Head of Publications, Director of Communications and Company Strategist at Sotheby's. He ran his own dealership in manuscripts and portraits of writers, artists and musicians from 1994 to 2006. He catalogued and usually negotiated the sales by private treaty, mostly after leaving Sotheby's, of the papers and archives of Sir Winston Churchill, Ted Hughes, Sylvia Plath, John Osborne, Edna O'Brien, George MacBeth, John Linnell, Siegfried Sassoon, Douglas Dunn, Peter Redgrove, the Strachey papers owned by the Strachey Trust, John Wyndham, Tom Paulin, Julian Barnes, Alan Sillitoe and a number of series of letters by Ted Hughes. He was the leading expert witness in the Washington trial concerning the papers of President Richard Nixon and provided opinions and arguments on the valuation and case relating to the Zapruder film of the assassination of President Kennedy. He has personally collected portraits (sold at Bonhams as *Creative Encounters* in 2005, prose manuscripts with portraits (sold at Bonhams in 2011), poetical manuscripts with portraits (the present collection), porcelain, English and European bronzes, the works of Christopher Dresser, as well as Arts and Crafts and Gothic Revival furniture, metalwork and porcelain. He is author (with Dominic Jellinek) of *Provenance: Collectors, Dealers and Scholars in the Field of Chinese Ceramics in Britain and America*, 2011 (c. 500 pages, 1,064 biographies with full introduction and appendices). He published a pamphlet of poems under the title *White Noise* in 2006 and two full poetical collections entitled *The Double-Ended Key* and *The Haseleys and Their Abouts*, both in 2011. He has also written a number of articles on Ted Hughes (see earth-moon a Ted Hughes website) and on manuscripts, portraits, the book world and related subjects. He is currently a retired member of the ABA and a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries.