

Three Essays On 'Potty' and 'Unprincipled' Professorial Poetics

(2) *'How doth the Rosen Crocodile'...*

An Assessment of Michael Rosen's Book *What Is Poetry?*

I

Introduction

Michael Rosen is a man with a very amusing, entertaining and thoughtful way with words, and he brings a lot of fun to many people, young and old. He is very successful at stimulating the imagination of children. However, his recent book, *What Is Poetry?* (Walker books, 2016) is a very bad one.

'Poetry' is a subject that is still thought important enough to be made a part of the National Curriculum for Primary Schools; but the teaching of it is something that many of the teachers themselves do not find easy. This is in no doubt in large part because nobody seems to be quite sure anymore quite what 'poetry' *is*.

Mr Rosen is unable to help in this matter. Indeed, he would seem to seek to entrench the absence of definition and certainty in this regard. He is happily prepared to abandon the search that his book's title leads us to expect that he might seriously engage in, in favour of a fatuous declaration that:

A poem is a poem if the writer and the reader agree it's a poem.

In its 'easy' style, Mr Rosen's cheerfully presented book seems to be aimed at about the ten-year-old level. However, it makes broader claims. It is, according to its cover,

The only guide to poetry children and teachers will ever need.

However, teachers and children would be well advised to avoid a book which gives a distorted and corrupted idea of the true nature of English poetry.

This is a book that makes no attempt to describe the craft principles of metre and versification that have informed and defined poetry for centuries. The terms 'verse', 'metre' and 'prose' are not to be found in the book's **'Index'**, and hardly appear in its text. Mr Rosen is a *cheat*.

Further, when he deals with that other essential craft principle of poetry, 'rhythm', he does so in such an inadequate, confused and indeed bizarre way, that he renders the term – as he uses it – invalid by reasons of ambiguity.

In this, and in his other attempts to give any reasonable technical basis to his prosodical treatise, he is in the main partial, evasive and muddled – and sometimes, it would seem, *unbalanced*.

His book is a disgrace, and it should be withdrawn from publication.

II

A Shorter Review of the Book *What Is Poetry?*

This book describes itself as ‘The only guide to poetry children and teachers will ever need’. This claim, for a book that is apparently aimed at children of about ten, is absurd. In fact the book proves to be a dangerously misleading publication. This is because, firstly, the way in which Mr Rosen presents an answer to his question ‘**What Is Poetry?**’ is partial and fundamentally flawed; and because, secondly, he proves to be in many ways incompetent in matters of poetics and prosody. This book is a disgrace.

Before any demonstration is made of the book’s capacity to seriously misdirect unwary readers of any age in matters of poetry and poetics, an extended proposal will be made. It may be submitted that any book making the extraordinary claim to be ‘the only guide to poetry children and teachers will ever need’ might be expected to say something along these lines:

That the craft of poetry is at least thirteen hundred years old;
that this craft was originally one of making *metrical verses* which had sustained and consistent *rhythms*;
that the verses of any piece of poetry relate to each other as members of a metrical ‘set’ or sets;
that other formal patterning devices were used, first that of so-called ‘*alliteration*’ (or ‘head-rhyme’), and then of *end-rhyme*;
and that such formal, technical characteristics are what principally distinguished *poems* from pieces of *prose*.

Such a perspective on the craft of poetry can be simply and interestingly provided for children, as for adults.

Mr Rosen does not attempt any such explication. Indeed, his book is fundamentally flawed and false because it does not anywhere deal directly with matters of *versification*: the terms ‘verse’, ‘metre’ and ‘prose’ *do not appear in his ‘Index’ or in the text*. He makes no attempt to give an answer to his question ‘**What Is Poetry?**’ by providing even a minimal description of the original craft principles of verse-making – formal techniques which may still be used to pleasurable effect in the shaping of poems.

The mode of Mr Rosen’s discourse in this book is one that brings about what may be broadly termed a ‘muddle’. However, it is worse than that. His failure to define the terms ‘poetry’ and ‘poem’ in an historical and technical way will leave his readers to a crucial extent *uninformed*. They will not then be able to see how he proceeds into a dissertation that is evasive and critically distorted and which leads to a *deformed* account of the nature of poetry and poems.

This is how he begins. In his Introduction he writes:

This book talks about how to read, write and listen to poetry. In the first chapter, I’ll start by simply asking, “What is poetry?” I don’t think I’ll be answering that, though!
(page 6)

Then this is how he begins his first chapter, **'What is Poetry?'**:

A poem is a poem if the writer and the reader agree it's a poem. But people don't always agree, and when they argue about it, they try to find some special things about poetry that you can't find in other kinds of writing. They say things like:

- a poem has to **rhyme**, or should have a particular **rhythm**;
- a poem should have **metaphors** and **similes** (I'll be talking about these later on);
- a poem should say something beautiful in an especially beautiful way;
- a poem should say something that surprises us;
- a poem should say something in a memorable way.

One problem with this is that it's quite easy to find other kinds of writing that do some or all of these things; proverbs, riddles, jokes, plays, songs, holy writing and speeches. And another problem is that plenty of people have written what *they* say are poems but which have no rhymes or particular rhythms, metaphors or similes, or special, beautiful language.

So answering the question "What is poetry?" is not easy. One way round it is to ask another question: "What can poetry DO?"

So I've chosen some pieces of writing that writers and readers agree are poems and I'm going to think about what they DO and what I'm doing in my mind as I read them.

(pages 9, 10)

Mr Rosen has told us that he will not be answering his leading question, **'What Is Poetry?'** We need to watch carefully as he realises the bizarre and rather nasty 'joke' that he is playing on his readers, with its disarming question mark, because his disgraceful and insidious purpose with this book is to embed the fatuous assertion that:

A poem is a poem if the writer and reader agree it's a poem.

He draws up a series of suggestions as to what might be 'special things about poetry'. He attributes these possible distinguishing characteristics of poetry to unknown or unnamed 'people'. In this way he achieves a sort of 'impartiality' for himself. It is these 'people' who thus omit to consider the terms 'verse' and 'metre' as possible 'special things about poetry' and who fail to make any distinction between 'poetry' and 'prose'. Thus Mr Rosen 'impartially allows' the removal of some of the most fundamental terms that it is necessary to bring to bear in any attempt to answer the question, **'What Is Poetry?'** This is perfidious.

The first in the series of 'special things' presents 'rhyme' and 'rhythm', which seems to indicate some readiness to engage in basic, technical discussion of versification. This 'readiness' proves illusory. The next in the series concerns 'figures of speech'. The simple objection here is that such figures of speech as 'metaphors' and 'similes' are only *general* literary elements or devices – though they may be particularly prevalent in 'poetry'. As to the three other entries in the series, these are of increasingly weak literary generality.

Mr Rosen answers any such reservations as we might have by as it were agreeing with them. He dismisses this series of 'special things' *in toto* by raising two 'problems' – both of them presented in his own 'voice'. These 'problems' solve the one 'problem' of having to give some sort of 'definition' of 'poetry', of what might be its particular and fundamental literary qualities.

Both of the 'problems' he presents are essentially spurious as demonstrations in poetics, in that, as has been pointed out, a full discussion of the matters in hand has been stultified because crucial terms have been excluded from the debate. However, both 'problems' prove false on other, more limited considerations.

(Of course, the term 'problem', as Mr Rosen has used it, is a bit of a 'problem' in itself, and is best set aside. What he is saying is that there are two possible *refutations* of the whole attempt – as he has presented it – 'to find some special things about poetry'.)

In his first 'refutation', then, he takes as it were a 'punt gun' to 'sitting ducks' – and 'plastic' ones, at that. Of course, he is right about the spurious nature of most of the 'special things about poetry' that he has 'set up' as the objections of these other 'people'. However, his 'refutation' is in one obvious respect false: matters of 'rhyme' and 'rhythm' are *not* 'plastic'. If any piece of those 'other kinds of writing' that he instances (without examples) were to have a rhyme scheme and a formal rhythmic verse structure, that piece would reasonably prove to be a 'poem': 'riddles', or 'jokes', for instance, may be in poetic form – as joking limericks always are.

Mr Rosen's second 'refutation' is weak, silly, and indeed meaningless; but it will nevertheless 'carry' many unwary readers with it. The 'plenty of people' who, as both writers *and* readers now, are declaring pieces of writing to be 'poems' without reference to any sort of proof in poetics, may simply be laughed at. However, this is not a laughing matter. Mr Rosen is of course one of those self-declaring 'poets'; and in the course of these barely more than two hundred words he has laid a horrible trap for unwary readers, whether children or teachers: he has arrived at an apparently reasonable endorsement of his original, absurd proposition that:

A poem is a poem if the writer and the reader agree it's a poem.

This is *nonsense*. It is *cheating*. It is 'fakery'. Mr Rosen's procedures in this discourse are *perverse*; and they are *perverting* of sound, logical processes. They are *corrupt*.

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If the above analysis of what is a fraudulent process of argument and exegesis is not thought sufficient indication of Mr Rosen's unworthiness as a teacher and leader in matters of poetry, a demonstration of his ineptitude in prosodical matters may make the case.

There is one term used in the technical analysis of poetry of which he *does* make much use in this book, that of 'rhythm'. However he uses the term in such an inconsistent and muddled way as to produce dangerous absurdities.

As a first instance, we may consider his response to a poem by R.L.Stevenson, 'From

a Railway Carriage'. This is the first half of the poem:

**Faster than fairies, faster than witches,
Bridges and houses, hedges and ditches;
And charging along like troops in a battle,
All through the meadows the horses and cattle:
All of the sights of the hill and the plain
Fly as thick as driving rain;
And ever again, in the wink of an eye,
Painted stations whistle by.**

Mr Rosen suggests that there is 'something strange going on' in the sixth verse (which he calls a 'line'), and that it

'doesn't fit the rhythm';

and his conclusion is that:

'it sounds to me like a train when it slows down'.

To call this finding 'potty' would be too kind: it is preposterous: it contradicts the descriptive terms of the whole poem; and it fails to recognise the consistent, even, four beat rhythmic nature of the verses. Examination of the eighth verse of the poem 'gives the lie' to Mr Rosen's nonsense. The verse has the same disposition of syllables and stresses as does the sixth; yet it (together with the seventh verse) describes the steady, rapid progress of the train.

Chronic absurdity of a different but related kind – in that it concerns the rhythmic nature of poetry – is provided by Mr Rosen in his penultimate chapter, '**Some Technical Points about Poems**'. In a cursory consideration of metrical matters he names one '**foot**', the '**iamb**'. He has this to say of other, unnamed 'feet':

There are many kinds of rhythmic feet: "Humpty Dumpty", for example, goes "**TUM**-tee, **TUM**-tee". "Catapult" goes "**TUM-TUM**-tee". "Football" goes "**TUM-TUM**". And "happily" goes "**TUM**-tee-tee". The **TUM** bit is called a **stress**, which marks out where a beat comes in a line.

Each of these different kinds of foot has a name. But I can't promise you that knowing what they are or what they are called will help you write good poems. They are quite handy if a musician asks you to write some lyrics, but most people can just feel a rhythm without knowing anything technical about it.

(page 176)

To suggest that the word ‘catapult’ might take two such ‘stresses’ or ‘beats’, in such a way as to represent the obscure ancient Greek ‘foot’, the ‘antibacchius’, or that the word ‘football’ might reasonably take two ‘stresses’ or ‘beats’ so as to represent a ‘spondee’, is *fatuous*.

A final example of such distorting fatuity in Mr Rosen’s handling of matters to do with ‘rhythm’ comes from the same chapter, where he speaks of the limerick:

In limericks the rhythm changes part-way through. You
have two three-foot lines, followed by two two-foot
lines, finishing with one three-foot line.

(page 178)

This is nonsense. As with Stevenson’s poem above, *the limerick has a consistent rhythmic mode*. To confuse matters of ‘*metre*’ with matters of ‘*rhythm*’, as he does here, is an example of the disgraceful ‘muddling and messing’ that we find throughout this book.

Mr Rosen can write very entertainingly for children, and for adults. He can be a very pleasing ‘clown’. However, close reading of this book leads to the conclusion that the ‘muddling and messing’ is *to the deliberate purpose of encouraging an ignorance in children and teachers alike of the simple, fundamental, formal and ‘musicalistic’ nature of the true historical craft of poetry*. This is a more sinister matter.

Mr Rosen is a cheat and a ‘charlatan’. This dangerous book should be withdrawn from print and from circulation.

Michael George Gibson
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‘How Doth the Rosen Crocodile’

*How doth the Rosen Crocodile
Improve his shining tail,
And pour the waters of the Nile
On every glittering scale
How cheerfully he seems to grin,
How neatly spreads his claws,
And welcomes little children in
With gently smiling jaws!*

(With apologies, and thanks, to Lewis Carroll.)

(Lewis Carroll’s poem ‘How Doth The Little Crocodile’ is one that Mr Rosen introduces towards the end of his book. He presents it as part of a tendentious explanation of what he calls ‘**allusion**’ – without remarking in any way upon the poem’s formal qualities as rhythmic verse.)