Every trade, every art and craft has a language of its own which the practitioner proudly learns and often pretends he does not know. For the poet this language is prosody. If a steel worker balanced on a girder seventy stories above the city calls to his mate for a rivet and instead is tossed a trendle, the mistake may be fatal. The vocabulary of a craft may seem secret, almost hieratic, but it binds the artist to his art. The poet's dictionary when available, because they are always going out of date, supplies the neophyte with all the poetic options he can use. Any poet, history tells us, who defects from the prosody, unless he supplies a new one, does so at his peril.

But the poet's dictionary is more than a glossary. It is also an anthology, a garland of expertly chosen illustrations, without which the dictionary would be dry bread. These illustrations are some ancient and famous, some from other languages, some modern, some contemporary, most of them touchstones of one variety or other, the jewels in the crown, real or paste, as the case may be. It has been the experience of this writer that it was a forgotten poet's dictionary which started him writing poetry. In later years when he was himself a teacher of poetry he tried to get this long out-of-print book back into publication, and failing this compiled one of his own, a prosody handbook which served several generations of students. A new poet's dictionary is indispensable.

The twilight of the 20th century is given to prodigies, a little noticed one of which is the phenomenon of simultaneous prosodies. It has never happened before that all prosodies, ancient, modern and experimental are exercised at the same time in the same place. Such a situation can be viewed as simple chaos or as a historical first. These multifarious prosodies are mostly mutually exclusive but nevertheless coexist and are united if at all only in the poet's dictionary. In this bewildering museum of forms, or zoo, the poet makes his way. Only those of the most consummate skill and virtuosity can possibly encompass these diverse prosodies (Auden, for example) from the most lofty and sacred to the popular to the craft of advertising to even the pornographic. But it is a rare poet who aspires to this conquest of completeness. Most poets in maturity are happy to limit their craftsmanship to the single voice that they have developed over the years (Robert Frost, for example). It is this voice that is the identification card of the poet. No greater compliment can be paid to the poet than this kind of recognition, as when one says of a newly found anonymous poem -- "That is a Roethke poem" or "This is a Hopkins." It is no exaggeration to say that the creation of one's particular "voice" in poetry is the final goal of the poet or artist of any category. Any person of moderate education can tell a Frank Lloyd Wright building, a Bernini fountain, a Degas painting, a Hayden quartet, a Chekhov short story, a Faulkner novel from other works of architecture, sculpture, painting, music or fiction. The distinctive voice however does not necessarily confer a qualitative superiority on the work. The poems of Joyce Kilmer or Eugene Field or for that matter much of Edna St. Vincent Millay or Archibald MacLeish use the distinctive voice to no advantage. It is interesting that the recent "discovery" of a couple of suppositious songs of Shakespeare was laughed out of court by the majority of Shakespeare scholars and general readers of the Bard. The benchmark of Shakespeare was simply not there.

Everyone knows that the ancient name poet means maker or author. To make means to fabricate or put together. What are the materials, the materia poetica, which the poet uses? Consult the poet's dictionary. But note that these materials are largely immaterial, spiritual, psychological, that they do not require stone, earth, wood, pigment or iron, but only words fabricated together. The poet is aware of a deep gulf between the actual dictionary, such as the masterpiece of the Oxford English Dictionary, and the poet's dictionary which begins where the actual dictionary leaves off. Words in the Actual are sometimes referred to as frozen metaphor. It is true that the Actual puts a stop to language where the poet's dictionary gives the go sign. In poetry the word thaws and begins to move. It begins to move in all directions like a miniature hurricane or a whirling atom. It picks up temperatures and atomspheres. Some poets call poetry language in a state of crisis. It certainly is that but it is the kind of crisis that involves all the emotions and ends in elevation, purification and catharsis. Poetry is one of the transcendant forms of magic.

Talk of the mystical properties of poetry date from the beginnings of human memory. Though inexplicable, this can be explained on a rational level of understanding: poetry is not rational. On the prosodic level the poet's dictionary reveals language as dance and flight, flight as soaring aloft and flight as escape. The common graphic symbol of poetry is the winged horse. The epic poet's invocation to the Muse is always a prayer of release and escape from the gravitational anchor of the mundane. The line between poetry and prayer is so fine as to be invisible.

The Muse-goddess is the governor of poets. William Carlos Williams said, it is the woman in me that writes poetry. Macho society always denigrates poetry -- a metonomy for all the arts -- as effeminate, when it fact poetry is asexual. Attention to the Muse, consciousness of the Muse, address to the Muse are the seed of poetry.

And the composition of poetry is a hod-carrying sweat. To master such a trade one would do well to have at one's elbow the manual and guidebook of the poet's dictionary.

Karl Shapiro

Foreword to THE POET'S DICTIONARY: A Handbook of Prosody and Poetic Devices by William Packard; Harper & Row; 1989