

Criticism and Poetry

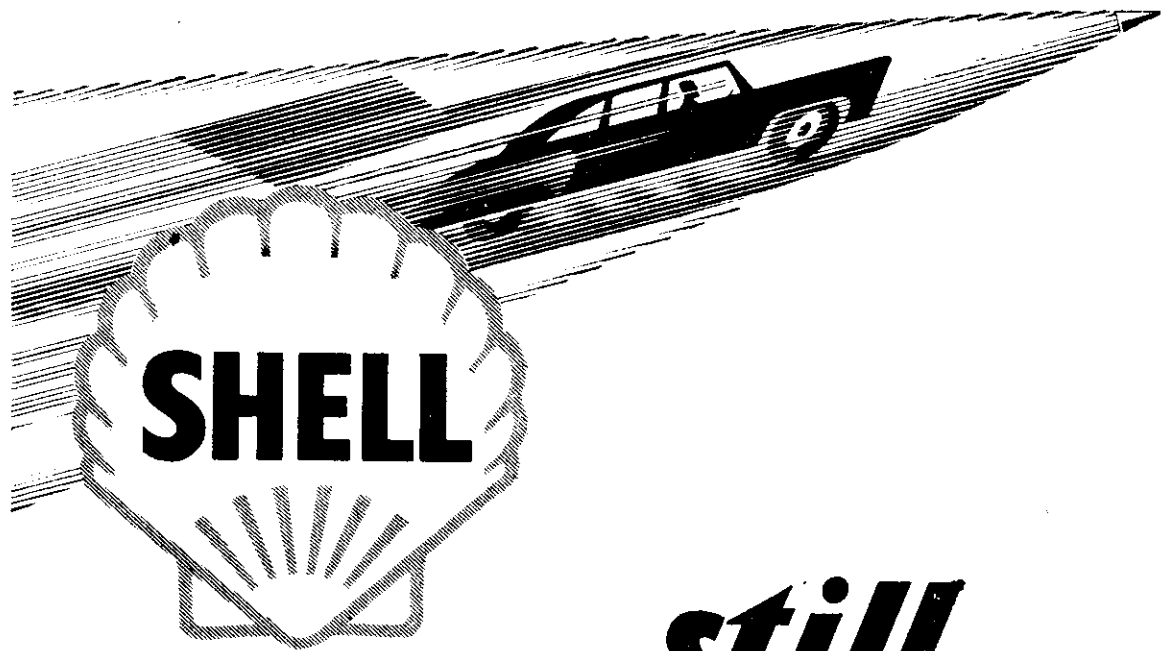
"CORRECT metre is dead metre. In poetry, the rhythm of speech tugs against and combines with the formal pattern; and as with counterpoint in music, much of the readers' enjoyment comes from the intricate contrast and combination." Thus does James K. Baxter, in the first of three talks on poetry, reject the "schoolroom" conception of metre. "In fact," he says, "every second line of Shakespeare and John Donne, and every first line of Milton's later work, departs from the so-called strict metre."

These talks, which are an edited version of Mr. Baxter's Macmillan-Brown lectures delivered at Victoria College last year, will be broadcast from 2YC on Wednesday nights, at 8.18, starting on March 16. They will later be broadcast from the other YC stations. The talks are entitled, "The Criticism of Poetry," "The Creative Mask" and "Symbolism in New Zealand Poetry."

A second "schoolroom" conception rejected by Mr. Baxter as "a great barrier of prejudice" is that of figures of speech. "There is another false god besides Prosody," he says. "It has no feet but instead a hundred heads, like something out of Indian mythology—Simile, Metaphor, Personification, Metonymy, Transferred Epithet—and its name is Poetic Diction."

The fault with this kind of classroom analysis, he says, is not only that it bores many children to a permanent dislike of every kind of verse; but also that it encourages the general assumption, by teacher and pupil, that poetic devices are gratuitous — elaborate mechanisms developed by the perversity of poets, and removed from ordinary speech usage.

In his second talk Mr. Baxter constructs a Petrarchan sonnet. It is entitled, "Sonnet on Mt. Egmont." It begins, "Oh giant! with thy coronet of snows/ And hanging woods about for mantle green/ Clear sounding cataract and dark ravine/ Where night and day the turbulent torrent flows/ . . . " Those readers who, like us, thought this seemed rather a good poem, dignified and understandable, with a properly resounding apostrophe to start with, should listen to Mr. Baxter's comments as he constructs the poem, line by line. It is quite an experience.



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