Bucolics by Maurice Manning

*Bucolics* was published to wide critical acclaim. The poems in this collection read like psalms or prayers that sometimes complain, sometimes praise, often question. The speaker is unidentified but is clearly someone from a bygone era who lives close to the land and who calls out to a God-figure he calls “Boss.” Folksy, playful, soulful, and idiomatic, these verses celebrate the natural world and our place in it.

Selected by the Poet Laureate of Grand Rapids and the Poet Laureate Committee.

**About the Author:** A former student of Wendell Berry, Maurice Manning lives (and works) on a farm in Kentucky. He is also an academic, teaching creative writing and literature at Transylvania University in Lexington. His books of poetry have earned him a host of honors, including The Yale Series of Younger Poets Award (given to a poet under the age of 40 for a first book) and the Hanes Poetry Award from the Fellowship of Southern Writers. His volume *The Common Man* was a finalist for the 2011 Pulitzer Prize.

**Questions for Discussion**

1. Who is Boss and what do we know about him? In what ways is Boss like or unlike God?

2. What is the speaker’s relationship to Boss and where is it revealed in the poems? Does that relationship evolve?

3. What is the effect created by the lack of punctuation in the poems? Does this absence of periods, commas, and question marks make the poems easier to read or more difficult? Are you more engaged as a reader or less so?

**Three Poems that Deserve a Second Look**

V, LV, & LXXVIII

**More About Maurice Manning**


An interview on the Poetry Foundation website: [http://bit.ly/1tDKxCm](http://bit.ly/1tDKxCm)
Rules of Thumb for Reading Poetry

Some people love poetry; some people are intimidated by it. In order for the reading of poems to be more accessible, less intimidating, here are some rules of thumb to keep in mind.

1. A poem is like a teabag; if you want the flavor you have to let it steep. That means we can take our time when we approach poetry. A good rule of thumb is to read a poem slowly, repeatedly, and meditatively.

2. Don’t worry if not all poems inspire you. Think of an art museum; you don’t necessarily stop and linger with every piece but only with the ones that make a connection. At first, you may not be able to articulate why a particular painting or sculpture holds your attention; it is only after spending time with it that you begin to put into words what it is that attracts you. So when reading a collection of poetry, focus on those poems that resonate with you.

3. Poetry is different from prose in that it does not necessarily deliver its message in a straightforward way and yet it is still expressive. By way of analogy, think of a symphony. When we listen to a symphony, we enjoy the music without necessarily knowing what it means. The same can be said of poetry. There are ways in which a poem speaks to us that are beyond the semantic sense, beyond what can be easily paraphrased. There may be, for example, a musical pattern to the poem that is more compelling than any interpretation, as in William Blake’s “The Tyger.” Tyger, tyger, burning bright,/ In the forests of the night;/ What immortal hand or eye,/ Could frame thy fearful symmetry? By reading a poem like this out loud, we can better appreciate the rhythm and rhymes that we might miss when we read it silently to ourselves.

4. Poems often communicate through images. Images, by evoking the senses, can make us feel things the poet wants us to feel. Often these can be quite complicated emotions. When Robert Burns says, “My love is like a red, red rose,” this is a very appealing image, and its meaning may appear to be obvious. But when we ask ourselves in what way his love is like a red, red rose, we begin to recognize the richness of the metaphor. We could think of the rose being very red and vibrant, just as love has a certain vitality to it. We could also consider the rose to be delicate or fragile, that even though it is for the moment suffused with color and fragrance these may not be very long lasting; is Burns suggesting that there’s a transience to love that is wonderful while one is in it but regrettably this love (all love) must fade? Burns may even be hinting that since roses have thorns love also can have a sharp edge to it that brings pain. So that in this simple image the poet may be conveying many meanings, wonderful meanings, at once.

5. Poetry is a performance where language plays. Poets play with words, their resemblances, their nuances. Poets want us to celebrate, as they do, the relationship of one word to another, one sound to another, as in “One fish, two fish, red fish, blue fish.” This phrasing from Dr. Seuss reminds us that maneuvers in a poem are not only clever and entertaining, they’re also very deliberate, so that we can enjoy the intelligence in the design of a poem, whether it be a child’s rhyme like this one or a more mature poetic expression. When we ask ourselves why a poet arranges her words in a specific way or what purpose she has in choosing the language she uses in her poem, we are opening ourselves up to the universe she has created.

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