

17th March 2023

Assistance

“Our wants are various, and nobody has been found able to acquire even the necessities without the aid of other people.”

Anders Chydenius, *The National Gain* (1765)

In *Old School*, a 2003 novel by Tobias Wolff, students of English literature are arguing about the merits of the poetry of Robert Frost. An American poet from the early half of the 20th century, lauded for his realistic depictions of rural life and his use of colloquial language, Frost was visiting their school to talk about his poetry. One of the students sums up his criticisms of Frost by saying: “I mean, he’s still using *rhyme* ... Rhyme is bullshit. When I see a rhyme in a poem, I know I’m being lied to.”

Harsh words for the work of an excellent poet. And while I don’t want to enter into the relative merits of rhyming poetry or blank verse here, I do want to complain about those high-minded people who feel it is *de rigueur* to seek assistance in finding appropriate rhymes when they’re needed. The common criticism is the use of “the rhyming dictionary”.

Rhyming dictionaries have been around for centuries. They can be traced back to Chinese writing around 600 AD. *Manipulus Vocabulorum*, written by schoolteacher, Peter Levins, appeared in 1570 as a reference book for English-speaking poets, and a host of contemporary rhyming dictionaries have appeared since. There’s even a recent *Advanced Rhyming Dictionary for Rappers and Poets*, co-written by Adam Shuffle-T Woolard (a popular UK “battle-rapper”, so I’m told!) They’re accessible on-line now too – and here’s someone who utilises them regularly.

I don’t know which of the poets whose verse inspires me have used a rhyming dictionary. If they haven’t, then fine. I applaud them for that. But if they *have* one and turn to it for assistance when required, then I applaud them all the more. If their poetry can be more inspiring *because* they’ve sought assistance, then aren’t we all the beneficiaries of that?

Nobody can “acquire even the necessities without the aid of other people.” We can’t do everything, all the time, by ourselves. Let’s be humble, and wise enough, to look for assistance when it’s needed, *and* be gracious enough to offer assistance when it’s sought.

A prayer for today

I’m honest enough to seek help. I need assistance! Now, let me use it well. Amen