At any street corner

Finuala Dowling helps you sharpen your wit for your next excursion onto the blank page.

It’s not a fashionable thing to say in an age of gravitas, but I believe that wit is the quintessential poetic craft. Though common parlance associates wit with laughter, in the hands of its best practitioners it is an art worthy of astonishment and admiration (laughter too, of course, but a wondering laughter). Brevity, cleverness, memorability, surprise, inventiveness, sharpness, irreverence, erudition, winningness, playfulness: the defining features of wit are the very ones that make for successful poems.

Yet the moment I make this generalisation, I worry. By singling out wit, am I excluding that other great necessity of poetry: feeling? Isn’t it true, as John Berryman put it, that poets are ‘hurt into poetry’?

The answer is, I think, that the truly witty poet (rather than the writer of mere doggerel) feels life’s pain, but anaesthetises it temporarily with irony, absurdity or sheer bravado. The lines we remember and quote so spiritedly — ‘Death be not proud’; ‘Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?’; ‘They fuck you up, your mum and dad’; even ‘When I am an old woman I shall wear purple’ — seem to me to have bubbled to the surface in a moment of dispiritedness, if not dejection.

Perhaps it’s the association of wit with glibness that makes publishers shy of announcing poets loudly as ‘witty’. The word is listed as a second or third quality in blurbs: it’s sure to sell books but clearly isn’t the strongest claim to literary respect: ‘For over fifty years, Charles Simic has been widely celebrated for his brilliant and innovative poetic imagery, his sardonic wit, and a voice all his own’.

Only after sentences praising his originality, elegance and ability to capture the subtle music of consciousness’ are we allowed to read that [Mark] Strand has delighted in reminding us that there is no poet quite like him for a dose of dark wit that turns out to be deep wisdom and self-deprecation. (And what exactly is wit if it isn’t ‘deep wisdom and self-deprecation’? Oh, yes. Wit is only permissible if it’s called something that sounds much more profound.)

Poets themselves have had a better understanding of wit’s value. ‘What oft was thought, but ne’er so well express’d,’ is how Alexander Pope defined ‘spritely wit’. More recently Kay Ryan remarked, ‘I always find the comic more difficult and exacting and more capable of carrying weight than the grave.’ The paradoxes that Ryan points to here — lightness bears weight; amusement is ‘exacting’ — underline the cerebral nature of wit. The load-bearing and breaking strain of wit is best expressed in Castiglione’s word ‘sprezzatura’, apparent effortlessness in the face of great difficulty, the ability to disguise pain with irony.

Wit requires immense intellectual skill and erudition. This sense of wit as a form of intelligence is embedded in the very word itself, which is derived from the Anglo-Saxon ‘geweten’ — to know.

Dorothy Parker’s poem ‘Resumé’ is a prime example of wit at work. As subjects go, suicide is about as serious and dark as one can get, yet Parker’s playfulness begins with the title. She gives us a ‘curriculum vitae’ that consists solely of a litany of possible ways to kill oneself. The seriousness of the subject is completely undercut.