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## [Robert Heinlein](#)

By Farah Mendlesohn

A major new critical study of the writings of a giant of the SF genre by a Hugo award-winning critic and historian.

**Thursday, 28 September 2017**

# National Poetry Day – Remembering Rhysling, the blind singer of the spaceways

It's national poetry day today so let's remember the blind poet Rhysling, the blind singer of the spaceways.

Rhysling was an engineer on the Earth Mars run. Blinded in an attempt to repair the ship's engines, he becomes a tramp, taking advantage of the right of spacemen to free passage. His story is told in "The Green Hills of Earth" (1947)

### Extract from Chapter 3.

"The Green Hills of Earth" is one of Heinlein's masterpieces: great, grand opera, beautifully paced, slow and cumulative, it depends on the counter of sublime poetry and imagery with scandalous verse for at least part of its sentimental affect. Rhysling the Blind Poet is, to a degree, the tart with the heart of gold. But the real movement is the sense that while Rhysling has been thrown away by the company. He himself has remained loyal to the company's *task*, to take people safely across the stars. As he sings and works, the importance of his role as both engineer and poet are enmeshed.

As with "Requiem" the story begins with a poem, but this time it is the words of the poet himself:

*I pray for one last landing  
On the globe that gave me birth;  
Let me rest my eyes on the fleecy skies  
And the cool, green hills of Earth.*

The story is told through intimacy between author and reader—let me tell you the *real* story—a story of unmasking, in that the poetry of the famous singer is to be removed, in order to relate the warts and all, in that the portrait of Rhysling, done of the company, is shown for hagiography:

[it] shows a figure of high tragedy, a solemn mouth, sightless eyes concealed by black silk bandage. He was never solemn! His mouth was always open, singing, grinning, drinking, or eating. The bandage was any rag, usually dirty. After he lost his sight he was less neat about his person (PTT, 306).

Yet the purpose of the author is not only to draw attention to the gap between the “true” story and the hagiography, but to something far more interesting the contrast between the job done and the job felt. The romance of the spaceways is in reality the hard and dangerous life of the sailor: “Half the ships that went further than Luna never came back.” “The others trusted the skills of the captain to get them down safely; jetmen knew that skill was useless against the blind and fitful devils chained inside their rocket motors” (306). Captains have an analytical, unromantic relationship to their job. Jetmen dig beneath the viscera to find the hidden, the unpredictable and the intimate. “Jetmen don’t wait; that’s why they are jetmen” (307). When an emergency happens, Rhysling reacts to the thing felt and Heinlein uses very physical imagery to depict this: “A jetman had to know his power room the way your tongue knows the inside of your mouth” (307). But Rhysling is left blind by an event depicted prosaically: “There was light—the emergency circuit—but not for him. The blue radio-active glow was the last thing his optic nerve ever responded to” (PTT, 308). In the prosaic is the sentiment.

Once blind, the narrator author introduces a new element, the poetry of contrast between what the singer poet *knew* and what was true. The change in perception affects his life and increasingly places the emphasis on the audible whether the sound of a woman’s voice or the sound of the jets so that the sound of words drive the songs in the way music once did and the assonance of the *Jet Song* reflects their sound (and produces what is effectively a shanty):

*Hear the jets!  
Hear them snarl at your back  
When you’re stretched on the rack;  
Feel your ribs clamp your chest,  
Feel your neck grind its rest.  
Feel the pain in your ship  
Feel her rise!  
Feel her drive!  
Straining steel, come alive,  
On her jets! (309)*

Not quite synesthesia, the doggerel is clearly *visceral* linking the bones and blood of the jetman to the steel bones and fuel of the rockets.<sup>[SEP]</sup> The final song is dictated across the intercom as he tries to find the links to reinstall the blown damping plates and is a version of a song he has been working on before.

*Let me breathe unrationed air again  
Where there’s no lack or dearth  
Let the sweet fresh breezes heal me  
As they rove around the girth  
Of our lovely mother planet,  
Of the cool green hills of earth [...]*

*We rot in the molds of Venus,  
We retch at her tainted breath.  
Foul are her flooded jungles,  
Crawling with unclean death.*

*We’ve tried each spinning space mote  
And reckoned it’s true worth:  
Take us back again to the homes of men  
On the cool, green hills of Earth.*

In the ellipses Rhysling has catalogued the Solar System: “harsh bright light of Luna”, “Saturn’s rainbow rings”, “the frozen night of Titan”. The entirety is an exercise in antithesis, the joy and sublime in the solar system is undercut by the aching ring of homesickness. The story ends with one last piece of mundane romance that locates the sentiment where Heinlein ultimately believes it belongs, in a man just doing his job. Or in this case, two jobs.

The ship was safe now and ready to limp home shy one jet. As for himself, Rhysling was not so sure. That “sunburn” seemed sharp, he thought.... He went on with the business of flushing the air out through the valve... While he did this he sent one more last chorus... (314)

[In honour of Rhysling the Science Fiction Poetry Society gives an award each year](#)

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## Comments



Jennifer Anstey says:

Nitpicking here. Passive (just above Extract) should be passage. Otherwise, great. Proofreading is such a pain but with auto-correct zealously working you never know what it will come up with. Looking forward to the book.

posted 28th September 2017



Farah Mendlesohn says:

Ha! Thank you. The book is completely uncopy-edited right now. When I realised it was national poetry day I just seized the opportunity.

I promise you I have a fantastic copy editor just itching to get her hands on the ms.

posted 28th September 2017



Nancy Lebovitz says:

One more thing I like about the story-- Heinlein realized that if you have ships and spacers, you also have space law, and opportunities to work the law in ways that weren't intended.

posted 28th September 2017

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