A Poetry Handbook

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Introduction

Everyone knows that poets are born and not made in school. This is true also of painters, sculptors, and musicians. Something that is essential can't be taught; it can only be given, or earned, or formulated in a manner too mysterious to be picked apart and redesigned for the next person.

Still, painters, sculptors, and musicians require a lively acquaintance with the history of their particular field and with past as well as current theories and techniques. And the same is true of poets. Whatever can't be taught, there is a great deal that can, and must, be learned.

This book is about the things that can be learned. It is about matters of craft, primarily. It is about the part of the poem that is a written document, as opposed to a mystical document, which of course the poem is also.

It has always seemed to me curious that the instruction of poetry has followed a path different from the courses of study intended to develop talent in the field of music or the visual arts, where a step-by-step learning process is usual, and accepted as necessary. In an art class, for example, every student may be told to make a drawing of a live model, or a vase of flowers, or three potatoes for that matter. Afterward, the instructor may examine and talk about the various efforts. Everyone in the class recognizes that the intention is not to accomplish a bona fide act of creation, but is an example of what must necessarily come first—exercise.

Is anyone worried that creativity may be stifled as a result of such exercise? Not at all. There is, rather, a certainty that dialogue between instructor and student will shed light on any number of questions about technique, and give knowledge (power) that will open the doors of process. It is craft, after all, that carries an individual's ideas to the far edge of familiar territory.

The student who wishes to write a poem, however, is nicely encouraged to go ahead and do so, and, having written it, is furthermore likely to be encouraged to do another along the same lines. Quickly, then, the student falls into a *manner* of writing, which is not a style but only a chance thing, vaguely felt and not understood, or even, probably, intended. Continuing in this way, the writer never explores or tries out other options. After four or five poems, he or she is already in a rut, having developed a way of writing without ever having the organized opportunity to investigate and try other styles and techniques. Soon enough, when the writer's material

requires a change of tone, or some complex and precise maneuver, the writer has no idea how to proceed, the poem fails, and the writer is frustrated.

Perhaps sometime you will have an idea for a piece of music, you may actually "hear" it in the privacy of your mind—and you will realize how impossible it would be to write it down, lacking, as most of us do, the particular and specialized knowledge of musical notation. Why should our expectation about a poem be any different? It too is specialized, and particular.

Poems must, of course, be written in emotional freedom. Moreover, poems are not language but the content of the language. And yet, how can the content be separated from the poem's fluid and breathing body? A poem that is composed without the sweet and correct formalities of language, which are what sets it apart from the dailiness of ordinary writing, is doomed. It will not fly. It will be raucous and sloppy—the work of an amateur.

This is why, when I teach a poetry workshop, I remove for a while the responsibility of writing poems, and order up exercises dealing with craft. Since every class is different, the assignments, of course, differ too. Any instructor who agrees with the idea can easily think of suitable and helpful exercises. So can the students themselves.

When each workshop member is at the same time dealing with the same technique, and is focusing as well on the same assigned subject matter, these exercises also are of great help in making any gathering of writers into an attentive and interacting class. Each writer quickly

becomes interested in, and learns from, the work of the other members.

A poet's interest in craft never fades, of course. This book is not meant to be more than a beginning—but it is meant to be a good beginning. Many instructors, for whatever reasons, feel that their "professional" criticism (i.e., opinion) of a student's work is what is called for. This book is written in cheerful disagreement with that feeling. It is written in an effort to give the student a variety of technical skills—that is, options. It is written to empower the beginning writer who stands between two marvelous and complex things—an experience (or an idea or a feeling), and the urge to tell about it in the best possible conjunction of words.

As a room may be lighted by only a few dazzling paintings of the world's many, so these pages are illuminated by a handful of wonderful poems. It is a gesture only. There is no way to include half of what I would like to include—not enough money to pay for them, not enough paper to print them! Anyone who uses this handbook is expected to be reading poems also, intensely and repeatedly, from anthologies. Or, even better, from the authors' own volumes.

A Poetry Handbook was written with writers of poetry most vividly in my mind; their needs and problems and increase have most directly been my concerns. But I am hopeful that readers of poetry will feel welcome here, too, and will gain from these chapters an insight into the thoughtful machinery of the poem, as well as

some possibly useful ideas about its history, and, if you please, some idea also of the long work and intense effort that goes into the making of a poem. The final three chapters are especially directed toward issues important to the writer of poems, but here too the reader of poems is heartily welcome.

Throughout the book I have used the following phrases interchangeably: the student, the beginning writer, the writer.

Getting Ready

If ROMEO AND JULIET had made appointments to meet, in the moonlight-swept orchard, in all the peril and sweetness of conspiracy, and then more often than not failed to meet—one or the other lagging, or afraid, or busy elsewhere—there would have been no romance, no passion, none of the drama for which we remember and celebrate them. Writing a poem is not so different—it is a kind of possible love affair between something like the heart (that courageous but also shy factory of emotion) and the learned skills of the conscious mind. They make appointments with each other, and keep them, and something begins to happen. Or, they make appointments with each other but are casual and often fail to keep them: count on it, nothing happens.

The part of the psyche that works in concert with consciousness and supplies a necessary part of the poem—the heat of a star as opposed to the shape of a star, let us say—exists in a mysterious, unmapped zone:

not unconscious, not subconscious, but *cautious*. It learns quickly what sort of courtship it is going to be. Say you promise to be at your desk in the evenings, from seven to nine. It waits, it watches. If you are reliably there, it begins to show itself—soon it begins to arrive when you do. But if you are only there sometimes and are frequently late or inattentive, it will appear fleetingly, or it will not appear at all.

Why should it? It can wait. It can stay silent a lifetime. Who knows anyway what it is, that wild, silky part of ourselves without which no poem can live? But we do know this: if it is going to enter into a passionate relationship and speak what is in its own portion of your mind, the other responsible and purposeful part of you had better be a Romeo. It doesn't matter if risk is somewhere close by—risk is always hovering somewhere. But it won't involve itself with anything less than a perfect seriousness.

For the would-be writer of poems, this is the first and most essential thing to understand. It comes before everything, even technique.

Various ambitions—to complete the poem, to see it in print, to enjoy the gratification of someone's comment about it—serve in some measure as incentives to the writer's work. Though each of these is reasonable, each is a threat to that other ambition of the poet, which is to write as well as Keats, or Yeats, or Williams—or whoever it was who scribbled onto a page a few lines whose force the reader once felt and has never forgotten. Every poet's ambition should be to write as well. Anything else is only a flirtation.

And, never before have there been so many opportunities to be a poet publicly and quickly, thus achieving the easier goals. Magazines are everywhere, and there are literally hundreds of poetry workshops. There is, as never before, company for those who like to talk about and write poems.

None of this is bad. But very little of it can do more than start you on your way to the real, unimaginably difficult goal of writing *memorably*. *That* work is done slowly and in solitude, and it is as improbable as carrying water in a sieve.

A final observation. Poetry is a river; many voices travel in it; poem after poem moves along in the exciting crests and falls of the river waves. None is timeless; each arrives in an historical context; almost everything, in the end, passes. But the desire to make a poem, and the world's willingness to receive it—indeed the world's need of it—these never pass.

If it is *all* poetry, and not just one's own accomplishment, that carries one from this green and mortal world—that lifts the latch and gives a glimpse into a greater paradise—then perhaps one has the sensibility: a gratitude apart from authorship, a fervor and desire beyond the margins of the self.

Reading Poems

MANY OF MY STUDENTS would spend almost all of their time writing and very little of it reading the poems of other poets, if they and not I were setting the assignments. Sometimes I don't blame them. There are so many poets!

But, to write well it is entirely necessary to read widely and deeply. Good poems are the best teachers. Perhaps they are the only teachers. I would go so far as to say that, if one must make a choice between reading or taking part in a workshop, one should read.

Of course, looking through books of poems to find one's particular instructors and mentors takes considerable time. Here are two things you might remember when you go into a bookstore or library and begin looking into the hundreds of books.

Time—a few centuries here or there—means very little in the world of poems. The Latin poets, the Vic-

torian poets, the Black Mountain poets—they all left us poems that are of abiding interest. The subjects that stir the heart are not so many, after all, and they do not change. Styles change, and the historical backgrounds change, but these are only peripheral matters.

In looking for poems and poets, don't dwell on the boundaries of style, or time, or even of countries and cultures. Think of yourself rather as one member of a single, recognizable tribe. Expect to understand poems of other eras and other cultures. Expect to feel intimate with the distant voice. The differences you will find between *then* and *now* are interesting. They are not profound.

Remember also that there is more poetry being written and published these days than anyone could possibly keep up with. Students who consider it necessary to keep abreast of current publications will never have time to become acquainted with the voices of the past. Believe me, and don't try. Or, at least, don't give up the time that you need to get acquainted with Christopher Smart, or Li Po, or Machado.

But perhaps you would argue that, since you want to be a *contemporary* poet, you do not want to be too much under the influence of what is old, attaching to the term the idea that old is old hat—out-of-date. You imagine you should surround yourself with the modern only. It is an error. The truly contemporary creative force is something that is built out of the past, but with a difference.

Most of what calls itself contemporary is built, whether it knows it or not, out of a desire to be *liked*.

It is created in imitation of what already exists and is already admired. There is, in other words, nothing new about it. To be contemporary is to rise through the stack of the past, like the fire through the mountain. Only a heat so deeply and intelligently born can carry a new idea into the air.

Imitation

YOU WOULD LEARN very little in this world if you were not allowed to imitate. And to repeat your imitations until some solid grounding in the skill was achieved and the slight but wonderful difference—that made you *you* and no one else—could assert itself. Every child is encouraged to imitate. But in the world of writing it is originality that is sought out, and praised, while imitation is the sin of sins.

Too bad. I think if imitation were encouraged much would be learned well that is now learned partially and haphazardly. Before we can be poets, we must practice; imitation is a very good way of investigating the real thing.

The profits are many, the perils few. A student may find it difficult to drop an imitated style if that style is followed intensely and for a long period. This is not likely to happen, however, when a writer moves from one style or voice to another.

When we have learned how to do something well, in the world generally, we say it has become "second nature" to us. Many are the second natures that have taken up residence inside us, from the way Aunt Sally threads a needle to the way Uncle Elmer votes. It demands, finally, a thrust of our own imagination—a force, a new idea—to make sure that we do not *merely* copy, but inherit, and proceed from what we have learned. A poet develops his or her own style slowly, over a long period of working and thinking—thinking about other styles, among other things. Imitation fades as a poet's own style—that is, the poet's own determined goals set out in the technical apparatus that will best achieve those goals—begins to be embraced.

Poetry of the Past

The poems of the past, however, present a singular and sometimes insurmountable problem. You can guess what it is: metrics.

Poems written with rhyme and in a fairly strict metrical pattern, which feel strange and even "unnatural" to us, were not so strange to our grandparents. They heard such poems in their childhood—poems by Whittier, Poe, Kipling, Longfellow, Tennyson—poems by that bard of the nursery, Mother Goose. In their literary efforts, imitating what they had heard, they wrote poems in meter and rhyme. It came, you might say, naturally.

On the other hand, we who did not enjoy such early experiences with meter and rhyme have to study prosody as though it were a foreign language. It does not come to us naturally. We too write our early poems in imi-

tation of the first poems we heard. More often than not, they have a flush left margin, and an image or two. They do not have a metrical design.

Acquaintance with the main body of English poetry is absolutely essential—it is clearly the whole cake, while what has been written in the last hundred years or so, without meter, is no more than an icing. And, indeed, I do not really mean an acquaintanceship—I mean an engrossed and able affinity with metrical verse. To be without this felt sensitivity to a poem as a *structure of lines and rhythmic energy and repetitive sound** is to be forever less equipped, less deft than the poet who dreams of making a new thing can afford to be. Free verse, after all, developed from metrical verse. And they are not so very different. One is strictly patterned; one is not. But both employ choice of line-length, occasional enjambment, heavy and light stresses, etc.

Of course I don't suggest a return to metrical verse. Neither do I mean to suggest that the contemporary poem is any less difficult or complex than poems of the past. Nor am I advocating, necessarily, that students begin the remedy by writing metrical verse. I would like to. But it would be a defeating way to begin. The affinity is that strong with what we grow up with, the lack of affinity that powerful with what we do not. Now and again a fortunate student may discover an aptitude for

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*Such a lack of affinity should worry English departments as well as creative writing departments, I think. How much of the poem's effect is missed by students who are not really familiar with metrics and the other devices of construction? The poem is always a blending of statement and form, which is intentional and meant to be clarifying. But this is not generally reckoned with.

metrical verse. But most students will simply struggle beyond the fair return of their time and effort.

Conventionally, English and American literature are studied chronologically—according to historical passage—and without doubt this is the best way, as central motivations and ideas, moving from one to another, should be thought about in consecutive order. But this chronology is not so necessary for the creative writing student—and, in fact, the presentation of metrical verse *first* is often so off-putting that it is worthwhile letting it rest on the tracks. There is much to be said for the idea of reading, talking about, and imitating contemporary—and I mean *congenial* contemporary—poems first, and then, later, as students become more confident, ambitious, and sophisticated, suggesting that they move on to (or back to) the difficult patterns of metrical verse.

Every poem contains within itself an essential difference from ordinary language, no matter how similar to conversational language it may seem at first to be. Call it formality, compression, originality, imagination—whatever it is, it is essential, and it is enough for students to think about without, in addition, tending to metrics. One wants the student to understand, and hopefully soon, that the space between daily language and literature is neither terribly deep nor wide, but it does contain a vital difference—of intent and intensity. In order to keep one's eyes on this central and abiding difference, the student must not get lost, either in structure or statement, but must be able to manage both. And language, as one naturally knows language, is the medium that will be quick and living—the serviceable

clay of one's thoughts. And *not* what is, essentially, a new language.

Poetry of the Present

Modern poetry—that is to say, poems written in some sort of "free" form—does not put us off in the way of metrical poems. The writing of these poems seems like something we can do. The idiosyncratic and changeable form allows us to imagine that we can "imitate" it successfully: there are no apparent rules about it that we don't know and therefore cannot hope to use correctly. The familiarity of the language itself—not very different from the language that we use daily—gives confidence.* Also, many of the poems are short—if it is going to be difficult to write the poem, at least it can be done quickly!

Such confidence is helpful and will encourage students to plunge in rather than hang back. That's good. One learns by thinking about writing, and by talking about writing—but primarily through writing.

Imitating such poems is an excellent way to realize that they are not very similar after all, but contain differences that are constant, subtle, intense, and radiantly interesting. Let students try to imitate the spare

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*Of course not all contemporary poets use language in this fairly accessible way. I am thinking of—and like to use as models—such poets as Robert Frost, Richard Eberhart, Theodore Roethke, Gwendolyn Brooks, Robert Hayden, Elizabeth Bishop, William Stafford, James Wright, John Haines, Denise Levertov, Donald Hall, Maxine Kumin, Lucille Clifton. This is by no means a complete list.

tenderness of a John Haines poem. Let them try the long cadences of Whitman, with their wonderful wrist-grip on physical delight and spiritual curiosity. Let them try to imitate Elizabeth Bishop, with her discerning and luminous eye. Let them attempt the fiery eruption of Robert Hayden or Linda Hogan, or the biting wisdom of Lucille Clifton. Let them imitate and imitate—and learn and learn.

Once again, one of the practices of visual arts students comes to mind as I write this: who has not seen a young painter in a museum intently copying a Vermeer, or a van Gogh, and believing himself on the way to learning something valuable?

Emotional freedom, the integrity and special quality of one's own work—these are not first things, but final things. Only the patient and diligent, as well as the inspired, get there.

Sound

TO MAKE A POEM, we must make sounds. Not random sounds, but chosen sounds.

How much does it matter what kinds of sounds we make? How do we choose what sounds to make?

"Go!" does not sound like "Stop!" Also, in some way, the words do not *feel* the same. "Hurry up!" does not sound or feel like its opposite, "Slow down!" "Hurry up!" rustles with activity, leaps to its final punch. "Slow down!" pours from the tongue, as flat as two plates. Sounds differ. Sounds matter. "No ideas but in things," said William Carlos Williams. And, for our purposes here, no things but in the sounds of the words representing them. A "rock" is not a "stone."

But, why is a rock not a stone?