

Poetic Craft: Selection & Syntax

Alignable webinar, 17 October 2021

First question: what is poetry?

I was wondering the other day if we could offer a useful definition. Though I've been practicing poetry, writing and reading it, for some years now, I would be hard pressed to define it for us all.

So I consulted dictionary.com and found this definition:

Poetry, the art of rhythmical composition, written or spoken, for exciting pleasure by beautiful, imaginative, or elevated thoughts.

Wow! Rhythm, first of all. To be poets and poetry readers, we need a sense of rhythm. Plenty of popular songs have rhythm, for sure, for example, the Gershwin brothers' "I Got Rhythm" (1930):

I got rhythm, I got music,
I got my man, who could ask for anything more?
I got daisies in green pastures.
I got my man, who could ask for anything more?

And rap has rhythm in abundance, is rhythm as well as rhyme, devices that excite pleasure for sure in most people. They're devices we might call pre-linguistic, pre-logical, bodily.

How is pleasure excited in poetry?

- Beauty
- Imagination
- Elevation

I'm not sure "thoughts" is the right word, or comprehensive word, in this definition. After all, we all have images that come to us in dreams or daydreams. Are these thoughts? Or bodily emotions or byproducts? They're certainly not always logical thoughts. (A few months ago, I awoke one morning, or half awoke, in reverie with the crazy phrase "improbable ground of essence" running through my head. I jumped up, jotted it down, looked it up, and found via Google not too much. What I thought, in groggy sleep, was profound was no more than "philosophical twaddle," I was to write in a finished poem that took shape over the course of a month or two, "Aristotle / and his *to ti en einai* (*Metaphysics*, VII, 7)")

I was straining for elevated thoughts ... and came down to the “bedrock” of “wife’s soft / round rump rising with her breathing.” Not much elevation here, I suppose, if plenty of imagination and some beauty too.

If beauty is rare, then imagination is everywhere in pop culture. It’s in kids’ mouths as they try out language, in Crayons as they doodle on paper or, the gods forbid, on your wall. Imagination excites pleasure for sure. And if beauty and high thoughts are achieved, or strained at, aimed for, all the better.

Second question for this talk, and the more important question: how do we write good poetry, those of us who call ourselves poet or imagine we have a poetic calling?

Via poetic craft or craftsmanship, I would answer.

We may or may not think of ourselves as craftsmen or -women. As ingenious or crafty persons. But poetry without craft is like that ugly thing that commercial interests reduce writers to all the time — “content providers.” Ooh, that makes me mad. That makes me jump up and down like Yosemite Sam, tear my hat and my beard, stomp the earth. If I provide you content, Monsieur Moneybags, I shall not provide it without form. In fact, content is cheap, and anyone can provide it, anyone who subscribes to your policies. But only self-respecting, reflective writers, including poets, know how to provide it in the right form.

It’s also true that just about anyone can pour his heart out in song. Most likely, this pouring out will result in wretched song (complaint, lament, self-pity). The wretched song will be CON-tent, and the provider, and his equally unconscious consumer, will be conTENT with it. Go to various amateur poetry groups online, and you will see content without form.

After all, lots of people think poetry is inspiration. It’s freedom ... from all containing forces. Isn’t that why we were liberated into free verse in the later 19th century and the 20th? To free us from such difficulties as meter and rhyme?

Church hymn meter

If you’ve tried writing poetry, you may or may not have tried using meter and rhyme, even here in the 21st century. Meter and rhyme are the stock-in-trade of 100 years ago or more, as in so many church hymns, for example, “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,” which reads better in Luther’s German:

Ein' feste Burg ist unser Gott,
ein' gute Wehr und Waffen;

er hilft uns frei aus aller Not,
die uns jetzt hat betroffen.¹

The hymn was written about 1529 in iambic meter, a rising two-foot rhythm: da DAH, da DAH, da DAH, da DAH.

Lines one and three have four such beats; lines two and four just three beats (and an extra unstressed syllable).

The rhyme scheme is ABAB ... though note that lines 1 and 3 employ a full rhyme, while lines 2 and 4 are off rhymes or slanted rhymes: in other words, *Waffen* does not rhyme with something like *betraffen* (not a German word), nor does *betroffen* get the nonexistent *Woffen*. The crafty poet avoids rhymes that are too simple and too easy, the kind we hear in most church hymns, it could be, and certainly in most popular music.

When you use rhyme and produce a sense of difficulty overcome, that's art. When you rhyme the same old words (light, bright, night, sight), that's a drag, what Chaucer's host in *The Canterbury Tales*, over 600 years ago, badmouthed as it came out of the mouth of one of his fellow travelers: "Thy drasty [nasty] rhyming," he said, "is not worth a turd."

Of course, notions of rhythm and rhyme change over the years. Luther's hymn makes memorable use of rhythm and rhyme. And when Emily Dickinson came along, about 350 years later, she used church hymns as models too and turned them to more secular uses. Consider this little poem, "[The Bustle in a House](#)."

The Bustle in a House
The Morning after Death
Is solemnest of industries
Enacted upon Earth –

The Sweeping up the Heart
And putting Love away
We shall not want to use again
Until Eternity –

Like Luther's hymn, this too is iambic, a rising two-syllable foot. But it's largely trimeter: lines 1, 2, and 4 are three beats, that is, not four: da DAH, da DAH, da DAH. Only line 3 adds a fourth beat.

¹ Rough English translation would be: A mighty fortress is our God, / a good weapon and defense; / he frees us from every sort of need / that has overtaken us."

The rhyme scheme is simpler than Luther's, and more modern, you might say: ABCB. That is, lines 2 and 4 rhyme with each other, but 1 and 3 do not. (There's only one rhyme per stanza.) And the rhymes, as in Luther, are off rhymes, not full. "Death" doesn't rhyme with "breath" (too easy), nor does "away" rhyme with "stay" or "hurray" or "delay." It rhymes, or off-rhymes, with "Eternity," which is the full poignant point of the poem. Death brings us to Eternity, but separates us from the people we have loved. They're frankly, brutally, to put it in terms of America's commercial culture, of no use.

Now look at Dickinson's word selection, wow! There's no fat here. All the words work toward the end: words from a simple, domestic vocabulary combine to produce the most profound emotional experience. An emotion that's controlled, as Dickinson expresses and expunges emotion at the same time. She's saying hard bitter truths, shedding no easy sentimental tears about death. We all know it happens. No invocation of the cross and the lily could stop that. She invokes what everyone knows and believes, especially women, the domestic arts or industries.

Dickinson is a Christian poet, of course. A poet of faith. And yet a revolutionary poet who takes no prisoners, including dogma and sentiment, and lays everything on the line.

Consider another of her funereal poems, "I Heard a Fly Buzz When I Died." This famous poem is domestic, not religious; immediate, not abstract; human, not divine:

I heard a Fly buzz - when I died -
 The Stillness in the Room
 Was like the Stillness in the Air -
 Between the Heaves of Storm -

The Eyes around - had wrung them dry -
 And Breaths were gathering firm
 For that last Onset - when the King
 Be witnessed - in the Room -

I willed my Keepsakes - Signed away
 What portion of me be
 Assignable - and then it was
 There interposed a Fly -

With Blue - uncertain - stumbling Buzz -
 Between the light - and me -
 And then the Windows failed - and then

I could not see to see -

Moving right along

About 130 years after Dickinson's poems were published, which was not till after her death ... after Walt Whitman and *Leaves of Grass*; after WW I, WW II, Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan, January 6, and hundreds of other social and political atrocities, it doesn't make much sense to write poetry just as our forebears did, however well they did it.

Sure, a few poets, called the [New Formalists](#), continue to use meter and rhyme and other devices that might seem throwbacks to most of us today.

And a lot of very amateur poets use meter and rhyme because they don't know there's anything else — as if poetry had stalled or gone into hiding at the end of the 19th century.

But I'm talking about serious, accomplished poetry that's being written now, in the 2020s, and makes use of craft, or formal devices, in new ways.

To put it most simply, craft is a method of working out our ideas. Our ideas, or hunches, or emotions, or inspirations may come in a flash, but it's not likely that if they end there they will amount to much.

First inspiration, then perspiration. First madness, then method. First vision, then revision.

Designing and building

In the building trades, there's a construction method called design-build. Let's say you have a large and complex building that will take eight months to build. For budgetary, scheduling, and other reasons, however, you don't wait four or five months to do the design, and only then start building. Even when the designers and architects are working on their vision, you clear the ground and grade it, you put in infrastructure like plumbing and electricity, you lay the foundation.

So too as a poet you may well design and build simultaneously. Sure, you get your first vision of design in a flash. Maybe it comes in a dream. Or in a talk with a friend or a therapist. Or in a line you hear in a movie or a play.

You jot down the line, a few lines, the outline of a vision. Maybe you've jumped out of bed and rushed to the computer or a notebook to jot these things down. How exciting they are. And you put them down, and then, and then. Well, then not much. Not for the while. The vision may be for now just a flash in the pan.

Inspiration

After all, this first flash, or inspiration, may be primarily an emotional or excitable experience.

It may well be a message from the body to the soul (whatever the soul is, and who knows?). But this message goes only so far for most of us, as we're not Wolfgang Amadeus ("beloved by God") Mozart, who is said rarely to have needed revising what he wrote.

Whatever its source, however, vision is one thing, re-vision another

Which means that we poets too must train ourselves to step back and see things for what they are — our own first thoughts. We have to step back and acknowledge, comparing these lines with lines that came before, by other, better poets, that they're not the cat's pajamas just yet. Promising, perhaps, but certainly not there yet.

Those who have eyes to see, in other words, let them see. Let them acknowledge that they are not the king or queen of the mountain just yet. That they have miles to go before they sleep.

I've seen lots of amateurs pour forth poems on Facebook, and other web sites, that are painfully amateurish. And do so not just because they're amateur and haven't studied anything, but because they're willfully blind and proud also.

I'm sorry. Poetry is no business for weaklings.

Once we put down our words, we are naked, are we not, exposed to the light of day, and daylight may be harsh.

The functions of criticism

If we want only praise not blame, balm and soft sighing, let's run to mom.

If we want encouragement for what works, and constructive consideration of how to change what might not work, let's bow our heads and admit we're not there yet.

If a critic comes our way and says, "I knew Robert Frost, and you, sir, are no Robert Frost," let's take the vanity plates off our roadster for a while, shall we, and go back to driving school ... to Robert Frost, W.C. Williams, Marianne Moore, Rita Dove, Jo McDougall, or, from other countries and cultures, the likes of Derek Walcott and Wislawa Szymborska.

Of course, most critics did not know Robert Frost. And many critics may not be well instructed themselves. But if a person of good will and intelligence and reading habits tells you that your

poem does not make sense in specific ways, A, B, and C, why not bite your tongue, listen, take a few notes, and then consider at your leisure whether he or she may not be right after all?

I belong to a couple of writers' groups and know it's always tempting to answer the critic immediately, suggesting he or she is off the mark. But, again, modesty and intelligence suggest we squelch our vanity and wait before we decide for sure if the criticism has merit or not.

So how do we get away from ourselves?

To become good critics of our own work, we must achieve a proper distance, which entails training ourselves to see what we think is good in poetry in general.

We must work to get away from the purely emotional, narcissistic, indulgent self.

We do this by reading the good stuff, the great stuff, to see how the Big Ones did it. We learn discipline by becoming disciples of the masters.

We don't simply copy them, of course. Some of them belong to ages past. (Shakespeare's not a bad model, yes? Or Donne, or Pope, or the Brownings (Robert and Elizabeth).

But we'd do better to model ourselves after poets more our own age, or in our own age. We read them and absorb their magic. And may write a poem or so in their manner.

In my first book, *Transitions: Early Poems, 1979–1989*, I pay homage to one of the poets I liked best when I was an undergrad at the University of Minnesota, [Robert Creeley](#). I saw Creeley read there a couple of times, and the second time, once he was done, I asked him to sign one of his books for me. At any rate, I memorialize this instant in a poem called "Dedication" that I wrote in Creeley's manner and yet my own voice. It ends like this:

I approached the man,
a book of his words
in hand given by a fellow
sophomore (who'd scribbled

there, "Fond friend, may
poetry remain our citadel"),
and looking direct at the pirate's
patch² asked him if he wouldn't

² Creeley was blind in one eye and sometimes wore a patch over it.

be so good as to bestow
a small favor. Chuckling,
he said yes, why not, of
course, and before he

inscribed his dedication
("For the only
friend this is — with
pleasure Robert

Creeley") bent
down and kissed
the naked nape
of my neck.

I love Creeley's minimalist unrhymed quatrains; his quirky, jumpy rhythms; and his colloquial diction. He gave a shape to speech and thought that was lacking in poetic circles in his day, especially academic poetry. He gave a place in poetry for the everyday.

Selection: what stays in and what goes out?

Creeley knew, after much trial and error, the kind of things he wanted to put in his poems and leave there ... and the kind of stuff he didn't. I suspect that much of the stuff he tossed out was the stuffy, precious, academic poetry he might have had to read as a kid or schoolboy. Or was surrounded with, in the 1950s and 1960s, say, in the literary journals.

This is not true, he might have said, after looking at a first draft. This is not right. This is not how a person like me thinks and feels.

So he tossed out the precious, the pedantic. He narrowed the poetic line to something minimalist, immediate, and personal. He found a way to make it work for him — and countless admiring readers too.

No doubt Creeley read [the Modernists](#), the revolutionary and often difficult poets of the early 20th century, people like T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Marianne Moore, Wallace Stevens. They were wonderful, influential, and, yes, difficult. You would do well to have a college degree if you read them. To know a few foreign languages. And to appreciate puzzles.

But the early Modernist way simply didn't work for Creeley. He took their measure, cinched it up till it was tight and right for him, and began producing poems in his own voice.

On the Internet you can find any number of poems, by eager but amateur poets, that need a lot of compression and cleaning up. The words simply don't add up to much. They're flaccid. They lack weight and drama and dignity.

Consider this poem I found somewhere on Facebook called "[What Do I Have Left](#)":

What do I have left
empty words scattered across blind space
images of yet another dream, forgotten
I link these thoughts yet nothing remains
the death of a poem daily resounds,
heavily in my mind
we don't know each other but we still share
all these hopes fragmented by distance
and the past echoes a call, a sound
asking for truths, for answers
while I am lost momentarily,
in delicious failed metaphors,
limply hanging, in darkened gardens of night

If you click [this link here](#), it will take you to a little exercise in compression. As you see above, the poem is pretty verbose, pretty rough, but it does have a few promising lines and images. Read the poem and then do the exercise via the link.

My idea here is pretty simple. Put the rough draft, of your own poem or someone else's, on the left side of the page. Then talk to the poem. Scratch out bad lines or ideas in the original. On the right side, enter your own ideas, or guesses; play with the words on the page, the sounds they make, the suggestions. Throw out everything that's unoriginal, flabby, uninspired. Just playing with words will release more words, more ideas, connections that didn't come to mind at first.

What words are weak in the first draft? What words are strong, in context? What words are not doing any work? Boot them out. Brainstorm.

If you're a poet, you need to play with words. You need to enroll in Sandbox 101. Grab the pail and the shovel. Toss the sand around. All those individual grains of sand. Have fun. And work out the poem's problems.

[Syntax, the way we arrange words in sentences](#)

Syntax is simply the arrangement of words in any given language. In English, it's usually subject/verb/object, of course. Other languages may have different arrangements. In English, if we're read enough, and/or heard enough, we know how to arrange words in short sentences, medium sentences, long sentences, and we know how to control sentences of any length. We

probably don't want to write sentences of unvarying length. But if we use and control sentences of all lengths, our poetry gains in variety and power; in fact, it may grow to mastery.

Again, let me use a poem of my own from the recent volume as an example. "Reverie," which I've foreshadowed above, tells a brief tale of being woken by a string of words, a phrase, that seems to be a revelation from another world. Note that the word strings here are long, but in fact there is literally only one sentence in the whole poem, right at the start ("Dawnhead" to "*essence*"), and everything else is sentence fragments.

Reverie

For Jennifer

Dawnhead flashes *improbable ground*
of essence. Then thunder. Then leap
from bed to computer only to find
philosophical twaddle: Aristotle
and his *to ti en einai* (*Metaphysics*, VII, 7),
that whereby a thing is what it is,
fundamental ground of the soul,
whatever the soul is and who knows?

Return to bedrock, then, wife's soft
round rump rising with her breathing:
content, for the time being, all we have:
pull duvet up, pat ground of essence softly,
softly murmuring *love, love, love*.

After lines 1-2, the poem is fragments: “Then thunder. Then leap / from bed to computer,” etc. Once woken out of sleep, the speaker hears thunder, sprints to his computer, Googles the phrase he has woken with and thinks is of such grand importance. But all he can find is all Greek to him, “philosophical twaddle” from Aristotle, whose philosophical treatises are abstract and, for most of us earthlings, all but unknowable.

The soul? The hell with that. In stanza 2, the speaker returns to bed and finds there something far more real, his wife’s rump, her breathing, the duvet they share. He pulls it up and pats what’s for him the only ground of essence he may ever know, that physicality that, we see in the last line, is tantamount to the only abstraction that matters, love.

The poem is based, in fact, on parallel syntax, phrases that pile up, one behind the other, and are pretty easy to get the sense of: first, a phrase in the brain; then thunder; then a rush to the computer, where the speaker finds something he can’t understand. Then a return from soul, or the idea of soul, to body, from incomprehension to contentment, the warmth of sleeping beside someone he loves.

But if you’re looking for an anti-love poem, or a poem of darkness about love, how about the American poet [Louise Glück](#), who won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2020?

Anniversary

I said you could snuggle. That doesn’t mean
your cold feet all over my dick.

Someone should teach you how to act in bed.
What I think is you should
keep your extremities to yourself.

Look what you did—
you made the cat move.

But I didn’t want your hand there.
I wanted your hand here.

You should pay attention to my feet.
You should picture them
the next time you see a hot fifteen year old.
Because there’s a lot more where those feet come from.

Plain, even crude, language. A threat of violence that the crude, straight, colloquial language seems more than capable of delivering. Propulsive parallelism, so it's easy to follow the train of thought.

It's an honest poem. And funny in a bleak way. If we have to be honest about love, we have to admit there are more than enough moments like this in just about any bed or any relationship. There's more than one person, one organ in any shared bed, one mode of desire. And Glück acts out a rhythmically propulsive way to get the point across, to teach the point and make it stick.

Enough said, at any rate, for now. About love and not-love. Poetry professional and amateur. Content and form or craft.

If you yourself write poetry, I can only hope these brief remarks are of some use to you. If you have comments or questions, please record them at www.youngzeck.com or email me at gregzeck@gmail.com.

* * *