

How to Write a Poem

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How to Write a Poem

Wolfgang Iser

John Redmond

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Introduction

What is poetry? This seems like a good place to start. There is a word, ‘poetry’, so there must be – must there not? – something to which that word refers. When we sit down to write a poem we may think, *now, before I go any further I need to have a clear picture of what poetry is*. And once we have formed that picture, we may think, naturally enough, that any poem we construct should conform to it. While this line of thinking may seem clear and good, I think that it is misguided. I suggest that the question *What is poetry?* is an unhelpful one, especially for writers, and that there are two reasons for this. First, the question tempts us to think it has a definitive answer – it hasn’t. Second, and more dangerously, it tempts us to think that it is but a step from knowing what poetry *really* is to writing real poetry.

A founding assumption of this book is that, far from being helpful, many popular ways of thinking about poetry are tremendous handicaps. By way of alternative, this book will encourage readers to focus on the promise and opportunity of the blank page. To focus on the *possibility* of writing poems I believe it is helpful to use definitions of poetry which are not couched in the present tense. Hence I want to set aside the distracting question of *what poetry is* and to replace it with two more helpful and more exciting questions: *what might poetry be?* And *what has poetry been?* For to think about poetry in terms of the future places an emphasis on *opportunity*, affirms that a poem may take a shape not assumed before, may not behave as other poems have behaved. To think about poetry in terms of the past places an emphasis on *exploration*, affirms that we can learn from the opportunities which previous poems have exploited. Both ways of thinking support another assumption of this book: that rather than turning our experiments

with writing towards some definition of what poetry 'is', we do better to turn what we write towards the experiment of our lives.

Modern life is highly bureaucratized. We spend much of our lives conforming to structures – often very rigid ones – from traffic-lights to tax-codes, from 'move along' to 'mind the gap'. We may spend little of our time changing structures and even less of our time devising new ones. Bullied so often and so successfully, we may come to think of poetry as one more master to obey. We may ask ourselves, in deference to the poetic tradition, what exactly are the rules to be followed? To what principles must I submit? We may think of a career in poetry as dependent on a set of qualifications to be obtained, an exam to be passed, after suitable immersion in, and diligent adherence to, the Poetry Rulebook. It is easy to give structure too much respect, just as it is tempting to make ourselves comfortable with a new thing by squeezing it into an old set of structures. But to do this is to get things exactly the wrong way around. Rather than explore a life for its structure, we do better, as the American philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson observed, to explore a structure for its life. Of course, to have a rulebook to read, a form to follow, a structure to observe, would make life easier. Rules are reassuring. Even experienced writers, when they produce something fresh and new, may be guilty of asking themselves, as if by reference to an imaginary rulebook, *yes, this is good but is it poetry?* It is hard not to seek reassurance, but there is no way to be reassured. For poetry does not have a nature.

To form a poem is to experiment with being, in other words, to have a personality. There is no final way to separate the activity of writing poetry from the kind of people we are, or want to be. The literary critic Randall Jarrell once compared the experience of reading the *Collected Poems* of Wallace Stevens to setting a man down on Mars and asking him to explore it. Similarly, any good poem should make us feel like explorers of a new planet, setting out on a momentous adventure. It should provoke us to ask 'Where am I?', 'What am I doing here?', 'Where might I be going next?' As much as possible, a good poem will try to maintain the openness, the sense of possibility, which every reader feels when they open a book for the first time. To write a poem is to create, or even to become, a new form of life. But that life will only be new when it has moved to separate itself from the formulae of poets, academics, and other literary commentators. Well known for rewriting his own poems, W. B. Yeats was clear what this process meant for his personality:

The friends that have it I do wrong
When ever I remake a song,
Should know what issue is at stake:
It is myself that I remake.¹

To experiment with the literary future is also to explore the literary past. To think about what poetry *has been* is to recognize that new relationships arise out of old. To have a sense of what a poem might become we need to explore what different poems, at different times, became. We look at the past not in order to discover what is written in the 'Poetry Rulebook', but to make the whole idea of a Rulebook seem foolish. I want the reader to think about poetry's past always with respect to its future, in the spirit of Winston Churchill's remark, 'the further back I look, the further forward I can see'.

What poetry might be is up for grabs. There is nothing inevitable about what poems written in twenty years' time will look like. There is no ultimate venue where poetry is booked to appear. Therefore, the design of this book seeks to free potential writers from preconceived ideas of what is literary, what is properly poetic. It has been said that a writer is one who teaches their mind to misbehave. Readers of this book are encouraged, literally and metaphorically, to look at the world upside down, to have minds which misbehave. At the same time, I do not want to suggest that this is bound to be an easy process. To look at the world upside down may be disturbing. As the poet Paul Celan dryly observed, 'the man who walks on his head sees the sky below, as an abyss'.²

As will become clear, this book endorses a relational way of thinking about poetry. To put it another way, this book sees any poem, and the practice of writing poetry, as a continually rewoven set of relationships. My attachment to this view and my belief in its significance requires some explanation. New writers are often intimidated, puzzled, and in many ways put off, by poetry. Why? I think this is substantially because many of the popular ideas about poetry which are currently in circulation are deeply misleading and come between the writer and what they might write. So my attachment to a relational way of thinking about poetry is at once corrective and suggestive. Let me begin by focusing on three ways of thinking which I think unnecessarily burden writers old and new. These are (1) the set of ideas, mostly popular, which would like to mark poetry off as a radically separate activity; (2) the desire to read poetry in terms of absolutes

which exist outside the poem, to which any poem is supposedly attached; (3) the desire to isolate something essential inside the poem which would justify its existence. What all of these ideas have in common is a desire to think about poetry in non-relational terms. After tackling these ideas, I will move on to offering my own relativistic account of writing poetry and explain the layout of the various chapters.

Most popular notions of poetry are derived from the period when poetry last had a wide general audience and real cultural sway: the nineteenth century. Say the word ‘poet’ to most people and the first person they are likely to think about is a Romantic poet, probably Wordsworth, Byron or Keats. Owing to a peculiar range of factors, which I do not intend to go into here, Romantic poetry of the nineteenth century, in recoil from scientific rationalism and the dehumanizing forms of social organization which followed the Industrial Revolution, conceived of poetry as a radically separate sphere of activity. According to the mythology which the Romantic poets cultivated, and which continues to have widespread general influence, the true poet is a creature regularly visited by something called ‘Inspiration’, the visits being especially frequent when the poet is in close proximity to ‘Nature’. This image of the poet is much like the one described at the end of Coleridge’s ‘Kubla Khan’:

And all should cry, Beware! Beware!
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!
Weave a circle round him thrice,
And close your eyes with holy dread,
For he on honeydew hath fed,
And drunk the milk of Paradise.

While this way of thinking about the figure of the poet is colourful – and that, after all, is why it is popular – it has a number of undesirable consequences. At heart it makes a misleading distinction between poetry and other things we make, from shoes to ships, from choral symphonies to computer games. We would not dream of describing an architect who has designed a beautiful house with the kind of language which Coleridge uses. Just as the image of the architect as a wild-eyed loon is an unnecessary mystification, so too with the image of the poet. Usually when a poet is asked – as they are often asked – from where do they draw their ‘inspiration’, the question assumes the validity of the nineteenth-century model. The problem with this assumption is that it overlooks the importance of

work, unglamorous work which any good poet undertakes in various forms: observation, experiment, the creation of patterns of mind. Successful poems are, in general, not only the products of numerous drafts, they are also the products of deliberately cultivated habits of being (in this sense they are dependent on personality, which is after all a habit of being). Inspiration is just a colourful metaphor which we might now do better to discard. Even the word 'creativity' owes something to the influence of the nineteenth-century model. Although it is widely used in universities, most writers I suspect are uncomfortable with the phrase, 'Creative Writing'. Here is what Miroslav Holub, the great Czech poet (and leading immunologist), has to say about the term:

I must state that I have never felt anything like creativity and, even if I had, I would not be caught dead admitting it. For me, 'creativity' is too luxurious a word, too richly coloured. What I know is the will for and the enjoyment of new things, and these are identical in science and art. I think scientific and artistic activities do not exclude one another, no matter how different their techniques are. It is all about energy or steam, all about transformations of energy.³

Rather than use a term like 'creativity', it might be better to use a term like 'design' and to think of poets as 'poetry designers'. 'Design' is a word which does not make us think of a marked-off, rarefied form of activity and, above all, the term has not lost its associations with hard work. The word 'creative' may make the writer seem like a Creator in an unreal sense, someone who is making something out of nothing, bringing something into existence where before there had only been a vacuum.

We are, in general, too apt to picture the writer as an isolated individual, and writing as a solitary activity. Certainly, for many stages of composition a writer is indeed on their own. Yet just as I think it is helpful to think of the poem as a web which is spun out of old webs so I think it better to conceive of writing as an act on behalf of a community, or – better – a series of interlocking communities. By writing we make a series of contracts: with past and present users of the English language, with the peer community which supports and criticizes our work, with publishers, editors and reviewers, and eventually with those readers we will never hear from or see.

In popular mythology, poetry is associated with misty absolutes – Freedom, Beauty, Truth, Soul, Inspiration. Sometimes poetry is turned into

‘Poetry’ and is given an honorary place alongside these exotic creatures. Why do these absolutes hold such sway? Essentially, because it is hard to think of poetry – or anything else we love – as mortal. To compensate for the vulnerability of the things we love, we bathe them in a glow of permanence. The kind of fixity we look for has been characterized by William James:

Something to support the finite many, to tie it to, to unify and anchor it. Something unexposed to accident, something eternal and unalterable. The mutable in experience must be founded on immutability . . . This is the resting deep. We live upon the stormy surface; but with this our anchor holds, for it grapples rocky bottom. This is Wordsworth’s ‘central peace subsisting at the heart of endless agitation’ . . . This is Reality with the big R, reality that makes the timeless claim, reality to which defeat can’t happen.⁴

When we talk about ‘the timeless spirit of Poetry’, we invoke a reality to which defeat can’t happen. This book takes the view that, if there is a ‘reality to which defeat can’t happen’, then it has nothing to do with poetry. There is a wise African proverb which says that a person is a person through persons. In the same way an object is an object through objects, and a poem is a poem through poems. Any fragment of our experience can only be measured by reference to other fragments. As the American thinker Richard Rorty puts it, ‘only about the relative is there anything to say’.⁵

As many writers will admit, probably the single best piece of advice to give a prospective author is to *show* rather than *tell* (this piece of advice is well known but that does not stop it from being good). Here is a brief illustration: Let us say we want to describe a character, called Bill, who is ugly. We can simply tell the reader that ‘Bill is ugly.’ But we could also *show* the reader that this is so with a description, for example, ‘Bill has a face like a disappointed bulldog.’ Now why should it be that showing works better than telling? Because showing is intensely relational while telling is not. When we show, we set in motion a potentially boundless set of relationships; when we tell we reduce the new to the old, to familiar types.

Absolutes like Truth, Beauty and Freedom (or for that matter Deceit, Ugliness and Slavery) swallow everything that is new and living. What can we say, for example, about the abstraction ‘Love’? If we mean by it some absolute quality, or an intrinsic property, then we say nothing. If we love someone then the emotion must be performed in a concrete way – we shed tears or buy flowers or embrace. In the absence of such acts, whatever we

mean by 'Love' will be invisible to others and an illusion to ourselves. By contrast everything that is genuinely new and living is an event and every event is a new relationship: the cat drops in my lap, the arrow strikes the target, the cuckoo flies the nest. And whatever is new in language is a new event in language. Think, for example, what happens when we bring together two words that are not used to each other's company. When we put donkey beside orange; octopus beside mirror; and windmill beside flamingo – we release a new energy. We experience a donkey in a different way when we think of it 'via' an orange and vice versa. Famously, the nineteenth-century French writer Lautreamont compared beauty to 'the chance encounter, on a dissecting table, of an umbrella and a sewing-machine'. Nothing like the same kind of tension is generated by placing the horse beside, or even before, the cart. On the other hand, we might release more imaginative energy if we place the horse *on top* of the cart.

Just as we often handicap ourselves by trying to yoke a particular poem to some overarching idea of what poetry is, so we may try to nail a poem down to something we pretend is inside it: its meaning. These manoeuvres are inner and outer manifestations of the same impulse, a desire to secure the poem to some permanent structure, to take away its fragile set of dependencies. As sparks fly up when flint meets rock, so meanings fly up when reader meets poem. Sparks are contained neither by flint nor by rocks but arise from their relationship. In the same way, meanings are contained neither by the reader nor by the poem but arise from their relationship. To adapt a phrase of the German philosopher Lichtenberg's, if an ass peers into a poem, you can't expect an apostle to look out. Poems do not *contain* meanings. There is nothing beneath, behind or inside a poem, just as there is nothing beneath, behind or inside the universe. There is no way to explain, justify or approve of a poem merely by reference to its meaning. As the literary critic Richard Poirier has put it, every reading experience is a struggle between what the reader wants to make of the book and what the book wants to make of the reader. When a poem, or any other art-work, is successful it is because it makes us 'better' (that is to say, it stimulates an experience which makes us more interesting, more nuanced, more many-sided, more flexible), not because of the rightness or nobility or bravery of its imagined meaning. Poems, like other experiences, may turn out to be good or bad but they cannot be right or wrong. Of course, we are inclined to believe that poems *do* have meanings because of the unfortunate ways we transmit poetry in our culture. Our first encounters with

poetry are often at school and, in the end, school boils down to providing answers (or meanings) in response to exam questions. But the meaning of *Paradise Lost* is not *York Notes to Paradise Lost* (if such a thing exists). *Paradise Lost* does not have a meaning.

I want to turn from these ways of thinking about poetry which I think are unhelpful to ways I consider helpful. I want to start with the biggest picture first, the place which poetry occupies in human culture. Granted that poetry is about changing relationships which have already existed, what can we say about the kind of newness which I have already spoken about? What does it mean to talk about the promise and opportunity of the blank page? If poetry is necessarily related to its past, how can we find useful ways of thinking about what it might become in the future?

Emerson said that a man is never more himself than when he is getting out of his idea of himself. Now this may sound obscure, but the commonsense meaning of Emerson's suggestion is that we are most human when we are most open to change and, conversely, that we are least human when in the grip of habit or tradition, when we try to close down the possibilities of change. I want to sketch out a few ideas for how we might think of poetry with respect to the rest of our lives, offer some metaphors for how we might usefully think about newness, and in the process demystify a little what we are doing when we write a poem. John Lennon was once asked why the Beatles, in the mid-1960s, had embraced sitars, drugs and mysticism. By way of answer he said, 'Some people wanted us to be a bunch of mop-tops forever singing "I Feel Fine".' A writer who keeps repeating themselves is in the position of a pop-star always singing the same song. As W. H. Auden put it, as far as experimentalism goes, there are two issues: 'Every work of a writer should be a first step, but this will be a false step unless, whether or not he realize it at the time, it is also a further step.'⁶ In cooking, to follow the advice of an expert closely – so closely that one reproduces their work exactly – may be a triumph. In poetry, it is a disaster. Successful poets produce their own recipes, and only use them once.

Let us think about writing poetry in the context of the general human desire for newness. What is it that makes us different from the animals? Why are we no longer huddling in caves or living up trees? Emerson believed that it was our desire to *go beyond ourselves* which truly distinguishes us from the animal. When our human ancestors were in caves, they presumably had, as gorillas and chimpanzees have, what is necessary to live, to get by. But our ancestors wanted something more, to go beyond the merely