



Part I



SYNOPSIS

On Writing Without an Idea	2
Toward a Definition of Poetry	4
On the Distinction Between Obedience and Conformity	6
Some Terms You Should Know	9
Toward a Different Kind of Workshop	14
Hendiladys	17
Some Rhetorical Devices	19
Facebook Header Prose Poem Octet	21
Poetry and Expression	23
Pastoral, Anti-Pastoral, Counter-Pastoral, Eco-Poetry, and Nature	25
On Poetry and Song	28

1.1 On Writing Without an Idea

I don't usually have an idea in mind when I begin to write. Today, a student looked at me and said: "you haven't been writing lately, have you?" She was right; at least I have not written poetry. It made me angry that she was right, then oddly comforted because the jig was up and I realized that I didn't feel much like writing. I felt like watching people catch fish on a winter pier while I wore a long camel's hair coat and kept my hands in my pockets. I always thought that one of the few reasons I wanted to be tall was because tall people look better in camel's hair coats. I wanted to look attractively gaunt. Seagulls hovered overhead as fisherman threw their remaining bait to them. This desire to be on a fishing pier in winter first came to me as I watched a couple of herring gulls up here in Binghamton, swooping and gulling forth above the Barnes and Noble parking lot. The day was that sort of neutral gray, when if it were ten degrees colder, snow might fall. It made me lonely for the ocean. It made me want to wear a camel's hair jacket, and dig my hands deep into my pockets, and watch gulls slash and dive for torn pieces of airborne clam. How do you explain something like that? As Pessoa said, the personal is not the human. We must make a bridge.

But I don't want to make a bridge. I don't want a greater ontology to standing in a Barnes and Noble parking lot watching herring gulls, when if it was ten degrees colder, it might snow. I once had a camel's hair coat, and I left it on a school visit during one of those days when the weather couldn't make up its mind. It was cold. It was hot. In the tradition of schools, they put the heat on full blast as it warmed. I was teaching fifth graders to write poems, to play the guitar, to live large. We were making progress. I forgot my coat. I forgot my gloves. I was home getting ready for bed before I remembered that I'd left my prized coat seventy miles south on the New Jersey Parkway. I never went back to retrieve it. I kept thinking perhaps someone my size might find it, and start wearing it. He might take better care of it and cherish it not as an idea, but as a coat. Since then, this imaginary short man haunts my consciousness. He walks out of the sea late at night, his coat perfectly dry. He has a beautiful Zippo lighter and roams through the universe, lighting the cigarettes of willowy femme fatales. He speaks both French and Norwegian. He's the complete package.

This is how my mind works. It needs to drift in order to write. It needs aimlessness, the sort of frittering away of time most people associate with sloth. Improvisation is vital to structure. Without it, structure is too "received." Even in the purposely "received" structure of fixed forms (sonnet, sestina, that sort of thing) the thought must seem fluid, unforced. To have an "idea" for a poem is already to "receive" a structure that might make the actual poem impossible to write. So, when people tell me they have no ideas for a poem, I never believe them. They are lying. They have plenty of ideas. That's the trouble. The idea for a poem competes with the poem. Or worse, the idea of writing a poem competes with the poem. They stand frozen before the prospect of writing a poem. It stuns them into being blocked.

Sometimes better structures come to us while we are screwing around. For example, in the fall of 2008, the stock market crashed. I was not much concerned since I have never had enough money to invest in stock. I felt terrible that venerable businesses went under. I felt worse that other firms were going to plunder what was left, get a bail out from the government, then loan the bail out money back to that same government at three percent interest. It seemed like a crime syndicate scam. I thought of a woman I once saw denied welfare because she had five dollars in a savings account. I just figured Kenneth Burke was right: in terrible times, a man ought to write decent sentences.

So I was sitting around in my bedroom, looking out the window, thinking about how my mother used to take my hands and make them do patty cake. I thought of how the nun made us clap out the accents of syllables in second grade. For some reason, they were

enthusiastic about the accentual qualities of English. I wrote “clap out love’s syllables.” Then I wrote: “stock markets fall.” I did not know what the hell the two had to do with each other, but it was in iambic pentameter (thanks to the nuns) so I continued:

Clap out love’s syllables. Stock markets fall.
The gravity of apples and of gold
has nothing on the way our bodies sprawl
and touch the accent of what we two now hold
both tensed and tendered. Touching, we disdain
all commerce, and all wantonness seems blessed.

So I got this far, and I realized I was going to write a love sonnet using terms from finance, old and new—“tendered” for example. I continued:

We grope and cop at leisure. We remain
stable in our instability.

To remain stable in instability seemed something devoutly to be wished for at the time, and I liked that I got nine syllables into such a short line, an acatalectic line to make up for the extra syllable of line four. It took place at the Volta, the turn, so I thought things were going well. But what was I going to do next? The sentences moved against the lines, muting the rhymes somewhat. I was happy that gold and hold were a noun and verb because I heard the ghost of John Crowe Ransom telling me it is always good if one of the rhyme words is a noun and the other is a verb. I was feeling so good about it that I wrote:

And this is good, and this is good. We kiss
all nipple and thigh pleased, we descend
to where no share, no bonding gone amiss
can cheat us of a happy dividend.

So I was having fun with the word bonding, and the word dividend. I was using banker’s language in a love poem without implying prostitution. I was being playful, but now I had to write the concluding couplet, and I always hated that part of sonnets—too much like an essay. I’m not good at sewing things up. I’d prefer for them to just scab over, but my knowledge of sonnet form told me I had to recapitulate the pertinent ideas. The main point seemed to be that things fell, but it did not interfere with the love making of the couple who, because they have “fallen” cannot fall. So I went with the obvious:

Stocks fall, leaves, fall, we fall, yet, falling, praise
the fields of lust on which our bodies graze.

I should have said the “banks” of lust, but I kept changing my mind, and I’m lazy, so I left fields. I wanted lust to be a good thing. I wanted to redeem the lust for life and love from the lust that made stock markets fall. By drifting, I had stumbled upon a sonnet in which I used the words of commerce and banking to speak of love. I was happy. I later thought I chose “fields” for its relation to fall and falling—the “f” sounds. I looked it over and said “instability” at the turn did not rhyme with remain. It was accidental genius. I was in full sonnet mode and I would have rhymed, but John Donne’s ghost of oxymoron was upon me, and I said: *good*. It’s good that the rhyme does not pay off here.

So this is how I wrote a sonnet—by accident, but also by having read hundreds of sonnets, and by knowing the traditions of courtly word play, and by having had nuns who made us clap out syllables obsessively.

A student must learn to let his mind leap among disparate things in order to get at structure, for structure is nothing less than pattern recognition—not the grooves you preordain when you have an idea, but the grooves you discover as you move through the drift of your own mind’s tendencies, and trust that if you let mind drift, then pause a bit, you’ll start to see a pattern emerge.

And I even drifted at the beginning of this essay. I trusted that my loneliness for the sea, and fantasy about a camel's hair coat would produce some sort of structure or metaphor I could hang onto. And now I leave, pretending I am Frank Sinatra with that jacket draped over my back. A final suggestion: spend the week just jotting down random thoughts. Don't try to control them or self-edit. All thoughts are silly, and unoriginal—including Plato's. It's how they are used and structured afterwards. Write them down and don't get in their way. Then take whatever you know, and recognize patterns in the drift. Make some poems out of that.

1.2 Toward a Definition of Poetry

For some, poetry is about relevance and identity. For others it's about beauty in the form of things well said, or written in a heightened way so that they sound "poetic." Still for others, poetry is feeling given rhythm and rhythm given feeling. Wordsworth said, "Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings. It takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility." Let us think about Wordsworth's statement for a moment:

First, contemporary neurologists now know that "feeling and emotion" are not exact equivalents. Emotions lie at a very basic level: seeking, lusting, caring, grieving/panic, raging, playing, fearing are the baseline primal emotions we all experience while feelings are a sort of duet between emotion and thought. We consciously decide what we "feel." A person might walk into a room, and our hands sweat, our heart pumps wildly, we want both to flee and fall down at the same time. This might be panic/fear, but it is later interpreted by us as a sign of romantic attraction. In the feeling of love all the baseline emotions might participate. So armed with this knowledge, let's really look at what Wordsworth is saying:

To begin, the first sentence seems to be somewhat contradicted by the second. Spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings does not seem to fit "recollected in tranquility." But Wordsworth had a point. And he had his point a good 200 years before the neurologists backed him up. Emotions are shaped into "feelings." This shaping action is a kind of interpretation and ritualizing of the emotion. In short, the writing of feelings has to be shaped by distance, by calm, by selection—by what Wordsworth called tranquility. But before this can happen, a poet should experience life on an emotional level, beyond mere reason or ideas—a sort of necessary unknowing or stupidity. The word stupidity originally connoted being stupefied, knocked out of one's senses, and moved beyond words. So for Wordsworth, the poet must first be made stupid to enter the sublime (he saw the sublime as being rendered awe struck and senseless) and then, only in the calm later, the poet would arrange words and convert that wordless emotion into a verbal ritual of feeling. Wordsworth thought poetry should be written in that language closest to every day speech—not mere chit-chat, but speech as in meaningful expression, sensible and understood by all. In a sense, he is the most dominant poet of the last 200 years because he took his friend Coleridge's invention of the conversational poem (A sort of inner soliloquy bereft of a play) and made it the chief form of his poetics—to think and feel aloud, to talk to one's inner self while, at the same time, setting the language in such a way that the reader could overhear you and be so moved by what you had experienced. Coleridge himself grew bored with this sort of poetry, and he was not as smitten with plain speech as was Wordsworth. He writes, in defining poetry:

"A poem (therefore) is the species of composition, which is opposed to works of science, by proposing for its *immediate* object pleasure, not truth; and from all other species (having *this* object in common with it) it is discriminated by proposing to itself such delight from the *whole*, as is compatible with a distinct gratification from each component *part*."

So Coleridge claims pleasure rather than truth is the first aim of poetry—and that a poem can be enjoyed both as a whole compatible with a gratification from each part (say

a line, or a terrific image, or something that sounds impressive within the body of the poem—a part that gets “snaps”).

Poe wrote: “I would define, in brief, the poetry of words as the rhythmical creation of beauty.”

None of these definitions are ultimate, and they can be mixed and matched and added to or subtracted from. For the purpose of this class, I am going to emphasize the following parameters for a poem:

Poesis, the word from which poetry derives, meant “to make.” It was a verb, not a noun. Some Greeks believed (Plato puts this belief in Socrates’ mouth) that poetry was “received” language rather than deliberate—that the poet, either through divine inspiration or some trance induced state, spoke in a sublime way. Socrates said: “I decided that it was not wisdom that enabled poets to write their poetry, but a kind of instinct or inspiration such as you find in seers and prophets who deliver all their sublime messages without knowing in the least what they mean.”

Poetry in this respect was considered a sort of beautiful gibberish which by dint of divine afflatus, got at truth sometimes much more quickly and insightfully than philosophy, but unlike philosophy, had no real methodology or rational steps toward truth or wisdom, and so could not be trusted (Plato thought poets ought not to be allowed in the ideal republic). This idea of the poet as prophet and seer probably was the major reason rhymes, incantations, special rhythms, and all sorts of memetic devices became part of poetry—language as magic spell, as a conjuring. What was said was no more important than how it was said—they were one, and to say the thing in another way was to break the spell and destroy the value of the poem. This leads to another definition of poetry as: “that act of language which must be committed exactly as it is and cannot be paraphrased without losing its overall value.”

So for our purpose, poetry will be a verb: A thing made out of words. There are “rules” outside each poem to which a poem might be held accountable. These are inorganic rules. What I mean by inorganic is that they are imposed from without—by taste, by convention, by requirements of a set form, by tradition, or by the whims of a teacher, editor, or publisher. An example of rules that are inorganic to the poem:

- A sonnet must have 14 lines and a Volta (turn) between the seventh and ninth line. It must be written in iambic pentameter.
- A poem must make sense in order to move a reader. If the language is too difficult, the reader will be alienated, and so the language must be simple.
- The poem must rhyme or the poem must be free verse.
- The poem should have no adverbs.
- The poem should have no overused images: no moon, stars, oceans, tears, angels, fire, etc.

I could go on, but there are all rules that might exist before the poem is even written. Rules like this can ruin you, or if taken with a free spirit, they could give you the structure you need to feel challenged and inventive. It’s up to you. Now for organic rules:

Every poem from its first line implies rules. These may be followed or broken but they exist within the very body of the poem. Take the opening line of “Howl”:

I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness,
starving hysterical naked,

Note the line is so long that part of it is indented, so this implies the poem is going to be written in long lines with lots of indentations (and sure enough that’s pretty much what happens). Next, the poem says “minds” rather than persons. How can you see a mind? This is a figurative device known as metonymy where a part stands in for the whole, but

that part is the most distinct aspect of the whole. Supposedly these minds are “starving hysterical naked.” If one had a certain form of aphasia or a hyper literal sense of language, one might see a human brain jumping about. This ought to tip us off that the poem will be full of hyperbole and figurative language. And so, in the first line all sort of little laws peculiar to the poem are taking shape. Whether you know it or not, the same sort of invention is taking place in your own poems. So our first assignment.

Assignment

1. Define what poetry is to you.
2. Either choose a poem or write a poem you believe exemplifies this definition.
3. Look at a poem you wrote in the past and discover both its inorganic and organic rules. Perhaps you wrote it in rhyme because you consider rhyme to be one of the prime distinctions of poetry. That would be an inorganic rule. Perhaps the rhymes were not exact. Perhaps they were half rhymes, or off-rhymes, or maybe there was a place in the poem where forcing a rhyme (obeying the law outside the poem) ruined the effect of the poem. Write a one page analysis of the poem. Mention any tendencies the poem has and see if you know why: short lines, long lines, lots of metaphor, hardly any metaphor, narrative, no narrative.
4. See if you can revise the poem where you think it disobeyed its own organic form. See if you can change the poem and fool around with its structure to create a different effect.

Finally, poesis did not just mean to make, but implied to make in such a way that the making “transforms and continues” the world. In short it is the made thing added—what has been added to the world and what helps transform it through those additions. Auden said “poetry makes nothing happen.” What do you think? Here’s what the poet Dylan Thomas wrote:

“A good poem is a contribution to reality. The world is never the same once a good poem has been added to it. A good poem helps to change the shape of the universe, helps to extend everyone’s knowledge of himself and the world around.”

1.3 On the Distinction Between Obedience and Conformity

Every fall, when I was young, a large flock of starlings and assorted brown-headed cow birds used to come and visit a deserted lot near my house. I liked nothing better than to run among them, and listen to the collective soughing swoop of their wings as they lit out for the trees. It was best if the sky was full of brooding cumuli. It was best if the wind was trying to rip the brown leaves from the pin oaks.

I don’t know why this made me feel so happy. When those birds no longer showed up the next year, it was a short but real grief that overcame me, and I would go to the lot in order to feel my grief more keenly. Since the birds were no longer present, my grief over their absence sufficed.

Wildness: to spin, to run amuck, to go shouting into the sea ... all this unbridled sense of motion has something to do with obedience. In the world beyond mere social order, obedience takes the place of conformity. There is a cycle of seasons, a rising and ooze of sap, a motion of tides, a curl of carrot leaf and wave, and all this grand motion obeys. It is not disobedient. Disobedience only exists where the laws have already built the scaffold of conformity from which preachers admonish, and on which sinners hang.

A year or two later, I had found an old, slightly water logged copy of *King Lear*, and I read it with much confusion but with far more delight in its loud cacophony of sounds. I liked saying the words aloud in a very pretentious voice:

“Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! Rage!
 Blow!
 You cataracts and hurricanes, spout
 till you have drenched our steeples, drown’d the
 cocks!
 You sulphurous and thought—executing fires,
 Vaunt—couriers to oak cleaving thunderbolts,
 singe my white head! And thou, all-shaking-thunder
 Strike flat the thick rotundity o’ the world!
 Crack nature’s moulds, all germents spil at once,
 That make ingrateful man!”

The birds came back, and instead of running among them, I shouted this speech of mad Lear as loudly as I could. They scattered! The second time I did it, they scattered less. On the third try, they just kept grazing on the seeds and grasses and ignored me. The birds understood the first and second delivery as a threat not much different than running among them, but by my third performance, they knew it was no real threat—just some crazy kid in a field shouting. Still, I realized the sounds in this language obeyed some real violence—the violence of wind, and storm, and anger. The words were not imitating nature. They were not mimicking a large mammal rushing at a flock, but they contained some of the same energy and violence as that force. Rather than holding the mirror up to nature, they were using some of the mechanisms of the dynamics of cacophony. If I had delivered them in a whisper, not one bird would have flown away.

As far as the difference between conformity and obedience goes, we can submit that Cordelia obeys, whereas the Regan and Goneril conform. Obedience in the realm of the social construct can cause us to be misunderstood, even censored. To obey the organic truth underlying principles is much more dangerous than conforming to their outward resemblance. Many great writers pay a price, not for being disobedient, but for being obedient to some necessity beyond mere conforming. To be a non-conformist in this sense means to obey the deeper truth, and risk being mistaken as a rebel. Nothing is more perverse to the status quo than true obedience. Goodness does not need the status quo. Evil and mediocrity insist upon it.

Some of the worst conformists I know practice a sort of intentional disobedience. They have no more idea of the underlying principles of the laws they break than the conformist who never thinks of going against the status quo. They break laws for the sake of breaking laws. They too, like the conformists, are incapable of knowing anything but the letter of the law. In their case, they hate the letter, but do not know the spirit. A saint is always a scandal, always a destructive force in relation to the status quo because a saint obeys in such a true sense that he or she is liberated from the status quo. The saint cannot be tamed by law. Law exists because saints are in short supply.

Rather than telling students not to rhyme or have meter, rather than telling students to write free verse, ask them: what do you think are some of the reasons people rhyme and employ meter? If you work hard at this, you might get:

1. Because it’s fun, and like magic—like a spell (spells, nursery rhymes, all manner of conjuring).
2. Because rhyme and meter takes human speech out of its ordinary ruts (ceremony, or the love of pattern).
3. Because it is a great device for remembering (the reason for rhymed adages and proverbs).

4. Because rhyme and meter can order strong emotions and passions so that they are portable, so that they can control the free underneath (Elizabeth Bishop's "One Art").

Then you can ask what might be some of the reasons a poem does not rhyme or have a regular meter:

1. Because the poet wishes to explore subjects beyond the mere sonic semblance of rhyme and meter—in their natural, less contrived movements from one thought to another, without struggling to shape thought to a regular pattern or force a rhyme.
2. Because the poet wishes to explore the very "normality and strangeness" of regular speech patterns, of people just thinking or speaking. In short, not a lack of pattern, not randomness, but the complexity of irregular speech rhythms.
3. Because the printing press was invented, and prose became the dominant force, and the mimetic need for rhyme and regular meter was no longer so urgent.
4. Because free verse can step outside prevailing patterns, and enter the stream of consciousness in which the writing is seemingly of the moment, without poetic conceits of rhyme and meter.

All these are legitimate reasons why one might choose either to write in rhyme and meter or free verse. You can also mention other mimetic devices beyond rhyme and meter that free verse has maintained, but in lesser volume:

alliteration, anaphora, rhythmic listing, enumeration, hyperbole, metaphor, understatement, overstatement.

Once you parse out why one might choose one over the other, you can eliminate conventions, and get at underlying principles:

1. Both metered/ rhymed verse and free verse must have a sense of rhythm yet an occasional relief from pattern in order to be effective. Variety is intrinsic to free verse. In rhymed and metered verse, variety is the exception to the rule that keeps the rule honest. In free verse, any prolonged pattern is the exception that keeps the free verse honest (or endangers it). But both conventions rely on variety and pattern. It's a matter of emphasis (one places pattern above variety, the other variety over pattern), but both variety and pattern show up. Bad rhyme sounds "sing-songy." Bad free verse seems to have no real pulse or sense of ceremony. It may as well be prose (and not very good prose). This does not rule out the flat as a value. Intentional flatness, maintained as the law of a poem, is a rhythm of sorts. If it is intentional, then you ask: what is the purpose of the flatness? Some poets are masters of flatness—of that which is so seemingly mundane that its whole poetic effect relies on denying the usual "poetic" effects of poetry: Haiku, imagism, objectivism, dead pan, all rely on not seeming to try at too hard to be poetic. But this is not a universal law. It is a convention. It is as much a convention as rhyme and meter. It is not the spirit; it is the letter of a certain convention.

So a teacher must avoid teaching conventions as universal laws. If not, the student will become as blind as the teacher and adhere to a rule without ever considering why it is a rule. By the same token, a teacher who insists the students experiment and go hog wild is also in danger of limiting the student to the letter, and not the spirit. Novelty for its own sake does not an original poem make. It might provide temporary relief from convention, but when it is made a convention in its own right, it ceases to have value as anything more than a convention: "hello, I am rebel. I do nothing conventional, and I don't like anyone who does things conventionally. That, my dear, is my convention. Love me!" (God, help us). All conventions must be tested. All diversions must be tested. If I ran after those birds

a hundred times, they would have scattered on the next run. Why? Because a large body moving at them with arms waving is certainly a threat. If they ignore me, they will run the risk of ignoring the dog or cat that comes and eats them. But a boy yelling King Lear is absent of some of the exact mechanisms of a predator. We must teach our students to reinvent the wheel over and over again, to go back to origins, and test them. Most importantly, a teacher must question his or her self. Do I like this poem because it is good, or because it affirms my ideas? Do I dislike this poem because it is bad, or because it is not *my kind* of good? Ethics in this sense are much rarer than rules of thumb. Rules of thumb were invented for those who have no intrinsic sense of ethics.

I want students to be obedient—fiercely obedient. I don't want them to conform. When a true Cordelia enters my classroom, I know, because initially I am annoyed. Such a creature refutes my laziness. When a conformist enters my classroom as a professional naysayer, I feel sad. How can I teach someone who conforms, but who can never obey? It is like a child who sees a field of birds, and does not run among them or even feel tempted. Someone has taught that child not to be a child. Someone has killed King Lear.

Assignments

- First write a story/poem about waiting behind an old lady in a checkout line. Let most of the thoughts occur inside the head of the speaker waiting. Consider these titles. They might help:
 1. And she did everything but die
 2. Growing old in a checkout line
 3. Why I shop on line
 4. The young Girl at the register
 5. Why me?
 6. Eternity in the local Wegman's
- Consider a time when you or someone you know was a true friend, but the other person fell for the flattery and false praise of someone else. Write it in the form of a verse letter to the friend.
- Write a poem from the view point of one of Cordelia's sisters.
- Go to a field or a lonely place on campus at a time of day when few are likely to be there and shout a poem out loud—a poem or any kind of literature you love. If you can't bring yourself to do this, write a one page essay on why you couldn't bring yourself to do it. If you do manage to recite the poem, write a single page narrative of where, when and how it felt.

1.4 Some Terms You Should Know

Accent: the stressed syllables or words (if one word) in a line of metrical poetry. In free verse, accent also matters because it can provide emphasis, or slow or speed up the reading of the line.

Adynaton: A particular type of hyperbole which means an appeal to the impossible. You encounter it a lot in old love poems: “Till all the seas gang dry (gang meaning run dry, and we know that's pretty much impossible).” “Till the rivers run up stream” is another example. Here's a modern one from a Tom Wait's song: “I'd shoot the moon for you!” Adynaton is

used heavily in courtly love poetry, in seduction, in pick-up lines, and in forms of pledges and oaths. One is lying all for the sake of some higher truth—laying it on thick. “I could light a room off my child’s smile” would be an example of adynaton.

Alliteration: Identical consonants that appear one after the other or in close proximity. Anglo Saxon verse (early English poetry) was written in alliterative rather than rhymed lines with many rules for when the same consonant sounds might be evoked in the line (usually at a pause in the middle of the line).

Allusion: Allusions can be literary or cultural. If you say: “Eating that Chocolate bar was the jump the shark moment for her diet” you are alluding to a term in television in which a show goes into sudden ratings decline (based on when Fonzie “jumped the shark” in the television show “Happy Days”). This allusion might be obscure, so most people use idiomatic or already familiar allusions: “Eating chocolate was her Waterloo.” Eating Chocolate was her downfall.” Eating that bar of chocolate was the moment when a little voice inside her announced: “your thinner waistline has left the building.” IN the poem Paunch: “A third rate Prospero at best” is an example of an allusion.

Anaphora: repeating a word or phrase at the beginning of each line or stanza (See Whitman’s “When I Heard the Learned Astronomer,” or any legal document full of “whereof”). Anaphora can create a sense of rhetorical power, and pomp. Like most repetition, it gives a sense of language being spoken out loud. It’s an ancient rhetorical device and is used in speeches (Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech). Many free verse poets who see their work as page bound seldom use anaphora but many great poems employ this device.. Look up Robert Haydn’s poem Frederick Douglas on google. Look up many of Ginsberg’s poems. Anaphora is best used to make something sound memorable and oratorical. It helps emphasize and make a speech memorable. To see how it can be used wrongly, take Robert Haydn’s “Those Winter Sundays” and just for experiment’s sake add some of the anaphora from his Frederick Douglas poem. You will soon find the technique which is successful in one poem is a disaster in the other.

Anthimeria: Substituting one part of speech for another. Turning what is usually a noun into a verb or turning a verb into a noun. “Windex your heart, remove the smudge he left.” Windex is normally a noun. In common every day speech we “Fed Ex the message.”

Apostrophe: (apostrophic or elegiac address): addressing the dead, the immaterial, the abstract and/or a principle that is absent, missing or unable to reply. Apostrophe is common in elegies. Very often, the poet will start out speaking of the person in third person, and then, at the emotional climax of the poem, switch to direct address (Examples: Elegy For Jane, My Student Thrown by a Horse, by Theodore Roethke, also Maria Mazziotti Gillan’s poem Arturo). When Paul Simon sings, “Where have you gone Joe DiMaggio” in the song “Mrs. Robinson,” he’s using apostrophe. When Wordsworth directly addresses Milton, he is doing the same. Poets claim the right to address the dead, to conjure them up. It’s one of the distinguishing features of poetic license.

Assonance: using the same vowel sounds in a line or throughout a poem to create a sort of near rhyme: Beat with meeting, or caper with bay.

Attitude: When a poem has a strong sense of voice, the poem is permeated with the speaker’s attitude. The attitude could be hopeful, cynical, tongue-in-cheek, ironic, ditzy, macabre, playful forthright, rollicking, somber, and so forth, but it seems to pervade the poem through the poet’s rhythms, word choice, and treatment of subject matter. It’s important to consider attitude before judging a poem.

Ballads: a ballad usually tells a tragic or romantic tale of lovers, lost causes, feuds, or battles and is often sung. Comic ballads take the same subjects and make them farcical. In strict terms the English ballad was written in a rough pattern of eight syllables followed by 6 syllables called eights and sixes. This meter was iambic tetrameter followed by iambic trimeter (four stress line followed by 3 stress line). Most of the genuine ballads only followed this pattern roughly, and hundreds don't follow it at all. This is also known as common meter or measure. Emily Dickinson uses it in its hymn meter form:

Because I could not stop for death
 death kindly stopped for me.
 The carriage held but just ourselves.
 And immortality.

The stresses are more important than the exact amount of syllables, but, usually the second and fourth line of the quatrain is rhymed and a stressed foot shorter than the 1st and second line. Folk ballads are not so exact.

Bard: A bard is a little different from a poet. Sometimes the term is used mockingly by snobs to denote a poet who writes in the beat or spoken word tradition, who represents the common man or a local tradition. Bardic poetry tends to have more ties to the oral tradition and to music.

Cacophony: consonant and vowel sounds that create harsh, hard, forceful, or unpleasant effects: hard Cs, Ps, As as in Bad, Ts and SH sounds can create the hissing, cacking, slurring, cursing effect of cacophony. It can be used well to imply anger, outrage, confusion or chaos, or to give an idea of the speaker as uncouth or vulgar.

Cantos: extended sections, almost chapters of epic or book length poems (See Dante and Pound).

Caesura: A pause, break, created in a line of poetry. Much earlier English poetry had caesuras in the middle of every line. A comma, period, colon, or a gap will create a caesura. It's like a rest stop in music. Example of a medial caesura:

I went to sea; you've gone to hell it seems.
 I sailed the world. You capsized with your dreams.

Another example: Hey/how's your mom?
 Not bad/and yours?
 Dead/ Last year/ Car accident.
 At least it was quick/right?
 She was trapped. Took three hours. Bled to death.
 Damn/I'm sorry.
 Me, too.

Caesuras happen all the time in regular speech, in very different places. Knowing pauses can help a poet write more rhythmically varied free verse, give his work a sense of accurate and distinctive pacing. Grammar is like a traffic cop for the speed of phrases and meaning of lines, and caesuras can create some amazing effects, especially when coupled with enjambments, but more on that later. It's a general theory that the more complex and good a poet, the more varied are his or her pauses. Milton has radical caesuras just about anywhere in the line. Bad poets are often slaves to consistency and the predictable.

Consonance: a special type of alliteration in which the consonant sounds occur both at stressed and unstressed place in the line, and often with far more intensity. But there is also consonantal rhyme, akin to slant or near rhyme. The vowel sounds are different but everything else is the same:

Cape, and cop, swing, and swag, shut and shot, etc. Assonantal rhyme would be where the vowel sounds were the same, but the consonants differed: Sight and bike, bad and ram, and so on. Many poems are full of consonance and assonance. Many poets do it instinctively.

Dadaist poetry: poems that appear irrational, arbitrary, without a set meaning or structure, often darkly comic, or affecting a mood of insanity and derangement, sometimes very lyrical but in a way that resembles the fevered utterances of someone speaking gibberish Dada poem:

Idyll—Anton Febrile

Listen to the penguins.
 What eloquent bird droppings!
 And the ball point pen you brought me for Christmas?
 How odd that it has ended up in the
 femoral artery of Vanessa.
 Stars speak Yiddish in the Northern sky.
 What else would they speak?
 Everywhere the native tongue of potatoes
 is being questioned. A loose lip
 has been spotted in Peking.
 I have torn myself on the nail of
 Heraclitus. What do you do with your
 ostriches? Do you beat them when they're
 unruly? I have a dagger in my wallet.
 I pulled it out and the whole family
 came tumbling over my library card.
 What books should I release from prison?
 Remember me among the tulips and the asters.

Dada is hardly ever pure. It's an influence, a pervasive force in post-modernist experimental poetry—partly linked to surreality and language poetry as well as cut-ups, automatic writing and so on. Its point is to explore the accidental, the random, the disordered, to create a “derangement of the senses” as Rimbaud had suggested. It disrespects priority and category. It can be very playful and it also infuriates some poets. Like the Dadaist painters. Found poems, poems made out of newspapers or ads, erasures in which a poet takes a text or already existing poem and erases parts of it ... all of this has been influenced by Dada. As an influence over art, Dada has been a major aspect. As an actual movement, it did not last.

Didactic poetry: a poem that teaches a lesson, gives a moral, suggests a way of living, offers wisdom, or is preachy is said to be didactic many poets see the word as 100 percent pejorative and avoid being didactic at all costs, but much of the poetry written before the 20th century, and even some of the political and eco-poetry of the 20th and 21st century is didactic.

Ekphrasitic poetry: this term has come to mean poems about paintings or photos or other works of art, but originally it meant any poem with a detailed and vivid study of a scene or object.

Elegy: a remembrance, tribute, or a lament over some loss. Traditional elegy has many formal requirements. Modern Elegy can take many forms, but is usually a poem mourning the death or celebrating the life of someone. Auden's “Elegy for Yeats,” Roethke's “Elegy for Jane, my Student thrown by a Horse,” are examples of 20th century elegies.

Enjambed and end stopped lines: An enjambed line carries the sense of what is being said into the next line:

So she
stood there
gawking at us.
What do you think she saw?

The last line is end stopped, a phrase complete in its own right. The other lines are enjambed.

End stopped:

I took a trip to Texas.
It was in the early spring.
We frolicked down in Austin.
We met a cowboy king.

Enjambed:

Let's not get all upset and
break our teeth against the stones of
angry words.

Much contemporary verse enjambs not only in lines but in stanzas.

Epigram/Epitaph: An epitaph is a subspecies of epigram peculiar to graves and memorials: Here lies is often the beginning. Some are comic:

Here lies poor kind John Kazuba
suffocated by a tuba.

Famous epitaphs include that which is written on the grave of Yeats. Epigrams are not so much concerned with death as with saying something pithy, sharp, or wise in a very short span:

Exuberance is beauty—Blake.

The road to excess leads to the palace of wisdom—Blake

Life is a king sized bed with twin sized sheets—my grandmother.

Aphorism, proverbs, adages all share a common ground with epigrams.

Epithalamion: a marriage poem, a poem celebrating marriage festivities, or the moments just after being married.

Epic: A narrative poem of enormous scope dealing with high import, told in a grand style. A mock epic is a poem about something insignificant or trite blown out of proportion ("The Rape of the Lock" is a prime example). Modern epics may include such long poems as "Paterson," Pound's "Cantos," or Merrill's "The Light at Sandover," but these are not epics in the most technical sense.

Lyric poem: Without a story, but often with a sense of euphony, dependent on the eloquence, beauty or power of its lines. Lyric poetry once meant strictly poems to be sung. Now it can mean everything from heightened speech that creates a sense of decoration or plain, even drab speech that creates a sense of ritual and focuses on an image or impression.

Narrative Poetry: Five different kinds:

A long or longish poem told in form and meter with characters. (“Rime of the Ancient Mariner”)

A poem that tells a short slice of life incident and has a speaker identified in the first person (I) Sort of a brief memoir poem.

A lyrical narrative: not so much a story as what Coleridge called the conversational poem in which a poet recalls a scene, reflects on an emotion, or remembers an incident but in language which strives to achieve the sublime, the metaphysical, or to affect an overall mood beyond the incidents related. A good example would be Coleridge’s “Frost at Midnight.” Another would be Robert Frost’s “Stopping by Woods on a snowy Evening” or Ginsberg’s “A Supermarket in California.” Mathew Arnold’s “Dover Beach” and the Love song of J. Alfred Prufrock also qualify.

A comic narrative: a poem in which the speaker is self-denigrating or clueless, or relates a comic or embarrassing moment in his or her life.

Non-linear or disjointed narrative: The narrative keeps moving from one things to another without ever becoming fully developed or sensible. This is a form of narrative made famous by John Ashbery, especially in his longer poems.

Historical Narrative: A narrative that covers an important even in public or personal history.

Epistolary narrative: A narrative written in the form of a letter or an exchange of letters.

Assignment

Choose three of these terms and combine them in a poem.

Assignment

- Write a narrative poem in the first person (I), then second (you), then third (he, she, or it). See what you might change and emphasize depending on address.
- Write a poem using cacophony to amplify the meaning.
- Write a poem using assonantal and consonantal rhymes.
- Try writing a series of epigrams or epitaphs.

Good luck.

1.5 Toward a Different Kind of Workshop

Poets are limited if they read nothing but their own poetry and spend the rest of their time reading novels, or thrillers. Most of my beginning students have never purchased a book of poems. They wish to write poetry, but they do not wish to read it. They read fantasy fiction mostly. So the first thing I do is give them books, a couple hundred or so, none of which are fantasy, and then I tell them to send me an email, quote an excerpt from the book, and riff off of it. I then riff back, and very often, my prompt for them arises from the email they’ve written, or the excerpt they’ve quoted. This accomplishes four goals:

1. They are now in a relationship to a book of poems, and adding a sort of ongoing marginalia to it.

2. Their reading life and their writing life are being connected, in however arbitrary a way. They develop a definite sense of both the poems and themselves, and, often, discoveries are made,
3. I am revitalizing the epistolary tradition, and taking email out of its fearful function as a less easy than cell text form of sending soundbytes of information. I want to incite the student's own mind and introduce the student to discourse with someone for whom poetry matters.
4. I am making myself respond to a student in a class of 20 as if it were an independent study, keeping myself sharp, and very often, I write poems back, or discover a new way into a text through a student's perspective on it. So it is a great way to help me remain an artist as well as a teacher. I am also defeating snobbery. I am treating the student as a peer who is entering into a relationship with me in terms of the text. I do not trust *tabula rasa* learning, but students have often known little else. Many tend to resist any process they are not familiar with. No one is more conservative than a student, and I have found graduate students to be the worst of all in this respect because they are already turning into teachers. Some people attracted to teaching tend to be structuralists. They privilege the lesson plan over discourse and conversation. They are heavily vested in control and concrete "objectives" rather than discourse, or the digression that might prove useful, even life changing. They have been rewarded all their lives for being well organized and so their courses are often about the structure rather than the subject. To me a poetry class has to be open to fortuitous accident and discovery.

I also do not trust the current fad for group learning since I believe it does not promote relational give and take, but further distances the students from his or her own mind by fitting his or her personality to a group dynamic that may not do anything except allow that student to be the same old introvert/extrovert, follower/director he or she has always been. It is further proof of Durkheim's contention that the main purpose of education is to make students "conform to a norm."

To me, all group learning is close to corporatism. I am not against group dynamics, but I find that they reward certain students unfairly, and punish others who may be talented, but who lack certain social skills. A group dynamic is a given. You're going to have a class, and four of the 20 students are going to be doing sixty percent of the class participation and there will be a group dynamic whether you want one or not. When you put them in groups, someone will assert his or her authority, and someone will feel like a pariah, and someone will be the chief minion of the assertive group. They'll act like a couple. I have no time for power couples in my class. I want to create an oasis for students who have never been on the good side of any power structure, and I want to create a challenge for those who use groups to maintain their power or sense of comfort. Some group dynamics just work, and others, no matter how good the prompts or how inspiring the teacher, fall flat. I prefer not to let my class ride on "group dynamics." Here's the truth: some students will hide. Others will want to draw attention to themselves. Still others will be contrary because they like being contrary. A lot of energy is wasted, and for what? So we can find out what we already know? So and so is anti-social, and this one never shuts up, and that one needs everything to be structured to a great degree. Well, I think we have gone too far in this direction, so I create an air of informality in my class, but I'll be damned if I preside over three or four groups that are everything I despise about human primate behavior. I am against the present love of group learning. Forget the Borg.

Anyway, I digress ... don't use a common text book. I give each student a book of contemporary poetry—at random. They write in to me two or three times a week, quoting a poem, or excerpt, telling me what they liked, hated, or learned from the poem. Very often I have never read the book I gave them, or have only read a few poems from it—so I am likely to be responding, not from knowledge of the book, but from past experience

of poetry which allows me to make leaps between texts, to suggest other poets in the same style, to come at the material in a fresh, conversational way. I am not the expert teacher here, but the experienced learner, the one who has a love for poetry and gets excited by weird things like grammatical ambiguity, or how the poet used the weather to suggest a mood. A student might give me an excerpt in which a poet is brooding and the landscape is brooding with him. I call this pastoral narcissism. I send them Thomas Hardy's "To a Darkling Thrush." I gush about my love for this poem. I ask a question: Did you ever get annoyed at a beautiful day because you were in a horrible mood, sad and depressed, and the sunlight, the happy faces of couples strolling through a park, the blue of the sky seemed to mock your mood? I say: how hard is it to make a beautiful sunny day the back drop for a despairing consciousness? Can it be pulled off? You pull it off? Maybe you can use the line, "it's a sunny day" as a sort of repeated phrase, after which you describe one terrible feeling or calamity after another. Use it for a prompts: It's a sunny day and... So they are each reading an actual book of poems—almost always by contemporary poets, and, meanwhile, I am bringing in poems. I might use Whitman's "When Lilacs Last by the Door Yard Bloomed" as a way to talk about how to create image patterns in a longer poem. Whitman keeps bringing back the Lilacs, the Mockingbird, and the drooping star in the west, and he exploits every possibility of these three figures: symbolic, metaphorical, concrete, the way composers might use motifs in a sonata. I may bring in a sonata by Beethoven and show how recapitulation is used in longer works of music, but also in poetry.

As for commenting on their work, I hate, hate going around and around commenting on student's poems. I have features instead, and I do not give the class the work ahead of time. I want them to be responsive in the here and now. I give half the class a written copy of the poem, and the other half listens. I then put the poem up on a screen. You can catch things about rhythm and overall mood from listening much better than having only the physical poem before you. You can also catch things by having the text you can't get from merely listening. I want both. Very often, if a student likes a poem, he or she will ask the writer for a copy. This is high praise indeed, and builds artistic affinity based on something other than forced group dynamics. I will sometimes have a copy of the poem before me, and sometimes, I too, will be only listening. I model listening for them. I have trained myself to edit while I listen. I train a few of the students every semester in this skill simply by modeling it. I will have the student read the poem once through. Then on a second read, I will stop him or her at certain points, make a comment, and let the reader continue. If the student is a poor reader of his or her work, I will read it aloud a third time. You'd be amazed what a student learns about his or her own poem by hearing it read by someone else—by actually hearing the poem come back at him. I will tell them to write down the spoken comments on their text. As for the written comments in class, these are handed in to the student at the end of class. I tell the class to listen to how I edit a poem because it may relate to their work as well. Every student will have two or three features before the semester is over which amounts to the same thing as a normal workshop. In the meantime, they will have read a book of poems all the way through, lived with it intimately, learned something about their own aesthetics, and the amount of writing they will have done—both poetry and prose will be four or five times the usual amount for a class. Goals I have for a beginning poet:

1. To find out if they truly like poetry, or only write it to "express" themselves.
2. Find out what their aesthetics are, the limits of their aesthetics, and how these may be expanded.
3. Learn to be responsive to language both as written and performed text.
4. Gain exposure to major poems without having to take a lecture class.
5. Have a learning experience with their own minds and with the teacher far more concentrated than is usually possible in a class that consists of lecture, papers, and exam.

6. Learn to write daily, rather than waiting for the last minute. This means they are not feeling they are doing a lot of work, but are, in fact, doing far more. In short I try to instill a deliberate daily habit of art. Journals help. So do art experiences other than writing poetry: a concert, an art exhibit, a play can all hone the student's work and inspire.

A writing workshop should also return literature to the study of the text as art since so many literary courses now use the text as pretext for theory and anthropology. Once in a while it is a relief to look at the artistry of a line rather than had its social relevance. My job is to teach the students to read like writers: what can I take from this poem? How can I surpass what this writer is doing?

My most mundane goal: that they will know more about poetry than they did when they entered the class, and just as importantly, that they will have learned something about themselves as conscious artists.

Assignments

1. Do you agree with most of the point in this essay or do you take issue with them? If you are someone who needs structure and organization, please write an essay defending them, giving your definition of structure, and showing how organization has helped you become more creative.
2. If you are a fan of group learning, please rebut the essay. Find experts to back you up and suggest how it can be superior to individual learning objectives.
3. Write your own "towards a different kind of work shop" essay. Give your philosophy on poetry and how you would teach it.

1.6 Hendiladys: One Idea Understood Through Two (or "and" as That Which Both Joins and Separates)

I'm going to put the next few terms under the larger sweep of *synecdoche*, a word that is dangerous to delve into since theorists and language experts, in their mania to confine, have proven themselves enemies of. Synecdoche, in its Greek form, is an amazingly useful and valuable term. It pretty much means "It's understood." And we can break "it's understood" down into three or four classes:

1. It's understood that the part means the whole (the arm of the state).
2. It's understood that the whole means the part (the state called today and said I owe them my first child).
3. It's understood that its not to be taken in a hyperbolic way, although said in a hyperbolic way: "She's a wreck."
This third one is so close to metaphor that you could call it that if you wanted to be a jerk wad, but it's a shabby metaphor, that in this conversational situation, works much better than a well polished metaphor: "She is a graceful sloop splintered upon the merciless waves of misfortune." (Yeah, right).
4. It's understood in terms of object, time, space, emotional condition, even though it may not be a time, a space, an emotional condition.
Here is an example: That guy's a player. Doesn't she know she's eight years past her expiration date? "

More or less, synecdochic speech and all its sub forms are understood even though it's either not said except in part, or said in a whole that means a part, or... well, you get it. It's all the speech around things: inference, metaphor but not exactly, half-said things, things said wholly that don't mean the half. In the Greek, it's a beautiful word that pretty much tells us what the linguists, experts, and rhetoricians refuse to admit: language is often a hopeless (thank God) matter of "almosts" that fail to be 100 percent accurate, and are therefore understood far better and fruitfully than they would be if we insisted on too much exactitude,

My own theory on language as to what is hard wired (I don't believe in the neat distinctions between learned and hard wired behaviors, and believe most behaviors are some hybrid ration of the two) : as with math, where there is a center for the brain that controls precise calculation (2 plus 2 equals 4) and an a related yet independent area that controls approximations (2 plus 2 equals 3 or 4 or 5, but never 4, 344), we will find that language also has such a split. Children go through a stage where all non-human animals are called by one animal. This is "good enough," just as it is good enough in some parts of the world to denote all color by red, black, and white, but snow has as many as forty types (the Crayola deluxe denotation of snow). Depending on what part of your brain is more developed or more dominant, not only over all, but at any given moment, and in any situational context you will be moved toward precision or toward "good enough," towards information/denotation based language or more figurative utterance.

Now, the greater our love of data, facts, and information becomes, the more our society fancies denotative/informational speech: rigorous nomenclatures exclusive to a certain field (the jargon of post-modernist theory), information, or "just the facts Mam" unencumbered by any rhetoric or emotionally charged utterance. As Kenneth Burke (my hero) said in *Counter Statement*: The hypertrophy of information leads to the atrophy of form."

Here's the weird thing: as the scientific stress on information moved us away from figurative writing, we became more and more obsessed with metaphors precisely because their usefulness within a realm of error confounds science and fascinates us. It is kind of hilarious to hear scientists and theorists speak of metaphor, because very often they do it in a step- by-step, uber-empirical way that smacks of high functioning Asperger's. No one can ruin metaphor and the joys of metaphor (but not the joys of comedy) more than academics obsessed with metaphor. There is a good reason they are obsessed with metaphor: they don't "get it" really, and they want to. They fail to realize that it is not to be gotten, and is gotten by not getting it. It is the "almost" the "understood" part of the brain lighting up, that part which never calls for precision without ecstasy, or for ecstasy without precision (an almost, that is just so).

So what does any of this have to do with Hendiladys? Well Hendiladys is the "understood" through the conjunctive. It can be sonic, intellectual, emotional, or sensational relation. When it is intuitive relation, it usually exists in the realm of the surreal or the comical. It is, in this instance, a "blasphemy against the expected that gives pleasure. I like to think of Hendiladys as "handy ladies." I must have a cockney gene somewhere. Anyway, examples:

All Sound and fury (emotive, or figurative)
Of Mice and men (both categorical and sonic)
God and world (conceptual)

As I said in posts before, the wonderful word "and" both joins and separates. I see it as the chief relational in the English language. It both yokes and sunders. It is the ultimate melding of dialectic with aporia. It is the one word I would write a musical for!

Love and death (it is understood these two go together because of usage, but what does love really have to do with death)?

Suppose I say:

"Love and little men picking their noses at a bus stop while discussing Proust."
This is what I call comic Hendiladys. It is used in many postmodernist, surreal

structures. It is “wrong” for the purpose of disrupting categories. I can even get rid of the word “and.” I can write:

“It was a day for true love. We all realized it. Men stood at the bus stop, picking their noses while discussing Proust.”

Believe me; that is at the heart of postmodernist structures: to emphasize the “disconnect” of “and,” very often for the sake of either a deeper connection, or as a critical disavowing of connection, for the comic energy of the incongruous. This aesthetic if disconnects destroys understood and agreed upon priority, but, if it is done for comedy, it affirms an order by disobeying it. Also, new orders are made by destroying the old, I also believe there is an r d

“Well here she comes: all Janet and fury, signifying something.” (Spoken by a girl who hated Janet).

Assignment

Look up Hendiladys. Play with things that have never been joined by an “and”: “Despair and beefy truck drivers masturbating at a rest stop.” Remove the “and,” and tell the narrative as I did above. Good luck. Create a series of incongruous things joined by “and” and then remove the h and add sentence structure.

A footnote: Someone like Andy Warhol was able to have such great power because he was Dadaist—not ironic. When Andy Warhol said: “I just adore a really good murder,” he was aping the innocent lack of social cues peculiar to Marilyn Monroe. Read his diaries. He was not innocent, but he understood the power of disconnects ad the obvious like no one else. Absolute literalism is irony made conspicuous by its absence.

1.7 Some Rhetorical Devices

Many poets employ the following terms without ever knowing their names, and that seems to work, but I like knowing the names of things. There’s something thrilling and wise ass to me about going through the world, saying: “Oh look! A Eurasian tree sparrow!” At age six, I fell in love with a girl because she would say things like: “isn’t the planet Venus lovely tonight? Look, Joseph, it is rising over the Chivas Regal billboard sign across the street!” Who wouldn’t love a girl who talked like that? I guess a lot of people might find her a trifle pedantic, but the pedantry of never being allowed to know anything gets on my nerves. It’s as if everyone were being stingy and saving it up for a test or waiting for me to make a mistake so that they could hammer me over the head with my own ignorance. This little girl was generous, and her bestowing of information seemed forthright. She taught me birds, and planets, and little facts about rivers that ran backwards. I loved her. So it is in memory of her, forever lost in the murky waters of my past, that I post rhetorical devices for the next two or three posts, hoping someday, a person reading these might turn to their companion and say: “Oh look James, a stunning example of chiasmus!”

Anadiplosis

I love this name. I think of it as “Anna Di Plosis,” a stunning old woman from Florence who knows how to hold her scotch (in her herbal tea). Anadiplosis pretty much means to begin

the next phrase as you ended the previous. It could be one word, or a couple words. I'll give you an example:

Wind roused waves,
 waves tousled and torn
 torn from all thought and all humor.
 Humor me if you will:
 kiss the bright hem of my garment,
 garment of silk, and inlaid pearls,
 pearls milk white as your foam,
 foam that has carried the stars,
 and will carry them back,
 back where all pearls are born.
 Kiss the gold sandaled feet of Deirdre,
 Deirdre, of the sorrows
 this pearl tossed into the sea.

Now even though this poem has no regular meter, it sounds metered. In point of fact, it sounds like something more than meter, and that something more is what I call “invocative pulse.” Whitman has invocative pulse beyond any American poet. Invocative pulse is born from rhetorical devices such as Anaphora, enumeration, apostrophic address, and, in this case, anadiplosis. Invocative pulse functions in both poetry and prose that is meant to give a sense of speechifying—not casual speech, but the speech of orators and bards. When the modernists came along, they purged poetry of more than just regular meter and rhyme. They took away most other rhetorical devices as well. Ginsberg, following along the line of Whitman, made popular again the act of speechifying. To many ears raised on modernist and postmodernist free verse, deeply invocative poetry sounds overblown and tacky, but, to many ears longing to hear something out of ordinary journalistic speech, the free verse written bereft of all rhetorical devices sounds flat and drab: to those who hunger for sound, a poem stripped of all such devices is neither poetry nor even well varied prose.

No poet escapes rhetoric entirely. I see rhetoric (persuasion by ear) as a sort of ongoing address to the sea, to posterity, even when it's being used to address a rotary club. Such poems have a sense of ritual. We might call it eloquence. Sounding appeals to us through more than mere information. Consider Kenneth Burke's definition of form, and modifying it somewhat: “The building of and fulfillment of a desire in an audience or reader beyond mere information.”

These devices were a vital part of the oral tradition, and one can still hear their echoes in speeches and legal documents. Used in moderation, they don't have to sound high-brow. And that is your first mission: write a short prose piece or poem that uses anadiplosis. Examples:

Forget It (A Blow to the Head)

So, like she clocks her brother Igor upside the head with this enormous cabbage? Cabbages can be lethal, man. Man, the poor dude goes down for the count, I mean he's out, and starts foaming at the mouth—mouth, full of drool and blood, no shit, and she's standing over him like the queen of Sheba... hey, what time is it? It better not be nine dude. Dude, If it's nine, I'm in trouble. Forget it. I'm done for.

Certainly not eloquent, but it can help render this idiot's character just by the way it sounds, and here, the anadiplosis just seems part and parcel of his poverty of speech.

There are other rhetorical devices employed in the first example: personification, apostrophic address (talking to something that does not usually talk back: like the dead, or the sea, or America, or a microwave). Alliteration figures into the poem: wind/ waves, tousled/torn. Anadiplosis could also be considered identical rhyme (rhyming look with

look). I want to call rhymes that take place at the end and the beginning of lines Anadiplosis rhyme. Example:

Diving into the Sea

I dove into the sea,
me, who never swam.
Damn it was cold.
Old men ogled my breasts.
Bits of sea weed got caught in my hair.
There is no way I'll do that again.
Amen.

I guess the point of this beyond giving you some names is to demonstrate that there are hundreds of ways to create invocative pulse beyond rhyme and meter. Most of the devices of rhetoric are sonic, rhythmic, mimetic, and usually, all three. They originated in a time when words were heard rather than read. Usually, when a poet declares that he writes poems that are meant to be read on the page, and only on the page, what he really is telling me is that he hates “sounding.” In a sense, he has been won over to the rhetoric of silence and has a pure streak, but even punctuation “sounds.” It is meant to control and vary the speed at which we read. Even the white space is deeply rhetorical, whether we admit it or not. A period is a call to a full stop. A comma is a lesser pause. All this belongs to rhetoric since it is about pulse, the persuasion of varied or regular pulse. If you want to escape all rhetoric, you are out of luck. Poets who hate their poems leaving the page often read in as flat and uninteresting a tone as possible. Often, very arrogant haters of poetry read aloud will ignore their own punctuation and just read through the periods, commas, or white space. This is childish, and stingy, and is based on no aesthetic merit save meanness and hatred of sounding. Of course, too much rhetorical might can make people angry, but violent “on the page” poets (I love calling them violent) are not being honest. The reader will impose a rhythm as he reads where none exists. If not finding any rhetorical devices, the reader will usually create them, even if you are poet of the page, and nothing but the page (so help me God) it is good for you to know the devices of rhetoric, if only to avoid them.

Assignment

Write a poem using apostrophic address, anadiplosis, and alliteration. Then take the poem and strip them of all these devices. Good luck.

1.8 Facebook Header Prose Poem Octet

Here's a quick exercise: use your Facebook header to write a prose poem octet. Each header must stand on its own, like an excerpt from a larger work, yet the whole must somehow adhere. In my case, I began with only the words “let us” in mind, and took it from there. I find Facebook headers a wonderful way of editing and whittling down the words. You have only 125 figures per header. It should be done in such a way that if the reader should read it backwards on Facebook, he'll still get the gist. If he should read only one of the 8 headers, it should be enjoyable in and of itself. I find it a good tool to teach microfiction and prose poetry. Two years ago, I wrote a vampire novel in Facebook headers. It was fun.

This one was written with a lilt and I read it aloud with my mother's Irish accent.

Octet (Prose poem full of Stars)

1

Let us be familiar and warm, and enjoy the pictures of relatives from Northern climes: an old lady kneeling proudly before an enormous cabbage, an old man, with a rakish hat, standing next to a goat—he and the goat the only surviving inhabitants of an island village off the coast of Mayo—six teeth. Six stars in the sky.

2

And suppose the priest says: “let us pray” which is what they do after the Eucharist is had, and the people return to pews, and the cup is washed, and perhaps the organist is thinking how she flubbed the Bach chorale and should retire. She has good legs. Even at seventy. The priest is not praying. He is thinking about that enormous cabbage.

3

Everyone is old here, and soon one night, when the octogenarian with the goat takes his boat toward the mainland, he will die in its hold, and the oars will remain in their oar locks, and he will drift under Pegasus, which the first girl who ever let him touch her, showed him one night: the winged horse! “Touch me,” she said, as easy as tra-la-la.

4

A young girl who is sick of the nasty smells of her grandmother, is on the roof of their house, counting the shingles. The first star has risen in the west. She does not know Sean Nos. She knows Lady Gaga. A star will receive any song. It is not picky. The heart is as vulgar as a man wiping his ass with a cool round stone. Shit stones the Romans called them. That’s how they did it in those days. Tra-la-la.

5

She can see the boat bobbing in the rising moon’s glitter, which throws down its terraced light—like an old musical extravaganza! Look at that moon! It is not as pretty as her ass. She can hear the springs of her cousin’s mattress going. Is he thinking of her as he whacks away? Oh harlot hour! When he comes, all will grow as quiet as the sea.

6

She thinks of the afterwards. What would it be like to have an afterwards? Would she lie still enough for it, and suffer to be held, gripped like a bone china in the iron hand of her granny? The boat has no rower. The roof has three hundred and fourteen shingles. The cousin has ceased his wankering. Let us pray!

7

In the boat without a rower there is always a dead man. The dead are vast on the sea. A thousand boats with a thousand lanterns! She sees it wash ashore in the moonlight. Pegasus will rise. Nothing is still, not even the dead. Her hands go to her breasts. Rosin Dubh is the old song. She has a pretty voice, but prefers to sing: “Caught in a Bad Romance.” Her grandmother stinks. ‘Tis a shame.

8

The old man who had a goat has washed ashore. The granny who stinks was

his first. The sea was his last. The priest wants to transfer to Limerick. The girl doesn't know what she wants, but too many people are willing to guess. When her granny hears of the death, she will grip the tea kettle tighter. Great God in your heaven, have mercy on us. Have mercy on us, who know nothing, who know all.

1.9 Poetry and Expression

Dust of Snow, Robert Frost

The way a crow
Shook down on me
The dust of snow
From a hemlock tree

Has given my heart
A change of mood
And saved some part
Of a day I had rued.

A student, choosing to write a two page paper on this poem, quoted a critical authority who had managed, by the magic of naivete, to turn it into a comment on racism. The crow is not described as black, and this, apparently, is Frost's way of saying that such stereotypes are evil. Now how this interpretation could exist is beyond me, but what could the teacher say to the student? The critic is stretching her own agenda beyond all proper bounds? Well, I wasn't the teacher, so I told him that. I said: "experts can be stupid too you know... especially when they are trying to shove everything into their own theory, even if it does not fit." The kid went on for two pages about racism and Frost's remarkable foresight given that he had lived in a lily white section of New England. His essay never quoted the poem. We can go any number of ways; some of them might even include the actual poem, but what of it? If we know something about the literary tradition pertaining to crows, we can see the crow as a trickster, an intelligent creature who likes to cut the unsuspecting down to size. In a sense, even a sane interpretation of this poem is a distortion of it. Even if we go all Cleanthe Brooks, and stick strictly to the poem at hand, as if nothing else by Frost existed, as if historical context and the life of the poet did not matter, we would still offer only a distortion. Interpretation is distortion. Some distortions are useful. They make sense. They offer a new way of entering the poem—of understanding and enjoying it. Others make us shake our heads in dismay, but all interpretations are digressions and re-writings of the text. It is unavoidable. And this is what a poet should keep in mind: when we have an "idea" for a poem, a desire to do something or express something in a poem, the poem must win over the idea or both will be lost. An idea for a poem is always a competing poem. So, instead of just editing our poems after the first draft, we should do a close reading. And it is sometimes helpful to refer to ourselves as "the poet." What is the poet trying to do here, and why, and how? What is his agenda? I am going to take a poem I admire by one of my students, Melissa Liebl, and model this method of first revision:

No title (I hate that but I like the poem)

She lifts her
sharp collar bones
in a shrug
the rain so hard

the spaces between
 form cups
 and fill
 I lean toward
 the edge of her body
 to sip
 and one sweet
 sigh
 and turn
 defers me to
 the air

So what can we say about the poem at first glance? It is short, and thin, never more than five words per line. This might be considered the law peculiar to this poem. The longest line is five words. Given the rules the poem implies, is five too long? I rewrite the poem, shortening the five word line just to see what happens. I look at it visually and decide the poet is justified in having that five word line, because otherwise, the poem is too funnel shaped. So why so short, and so thin? Rereading it, I think: it's a single action, a brief moment, and it would not make sense to have the poem any longer or fatter than it is. I comb through my thinning memory bank and think of two poems by Williams: "Fine Work with Pitch and Copper" and "The Locust Tree in Flower" (second version). Ok, the single gesture, the sense of a small and intimate moment justifies the choice of line and proportion. Good.

Now, I ask myself: what is the sonic action of the poem? Experience has taught me that a writer often goes wrong in a poem in terms of lineation and sonics before any other failing. So I investigate the sounds. Ah, two sibilants (s) one in initial and the other in terminal position! One has the h added to create the "sh" sound. Only the first vowel sound is pronounced—high "e," the highest pitched vowel in the language. So "she" is the star in sonic as well as narrative terms. The "i" in "lifts" and the "e" in "her" are muted. There's a labial in the "l" of "lifts." So, in terms of sound, the chief action so far is muted vowels, and sibilants, as well as a labial. This creates softness, euphony, a sense of the delicate—as much as what she says. The meaning is also in the sound! Will this be the case once more in the next couple lines?

Yes! Here's comes "sharp" (sh again), here comes "l" in the medial position (collar), but note: there's now a hard "c," and the ominous arrival of plosives: "p" in "sharp," and "b" in "bones." The vowels have also gone a little violent here with the two "ar" and the one "oh" sounds. There is a subtle form of what I call ghost rhyme going on. At the sonic level, a lot is happening. Let us continue:

Following this trail of sounds we find out that "s" and "sh" are the stars, with a brief but memorable cameo appearance of plosives, and the lowest vowel sound in the English language: "uh." "In a shrug." "H" also figures in all its many guises. The question is why?

Here's a nice conjecture: if there is a turn in the poem, I bet the "s" and "sh" sounds go away, and if there is a return or climax, I bet they show up again. One more thing about the plosives: this is hard rain. It no doubt "pelts." Now, let's see if the s sounds disappear:

Wallah! They indeed do. In the middle section of the poem, for three and a half lines, there are no further "s" sounds until the word "sip." Fricatives appear in "form" and "find." Also, dentals show up in the "t" and "d" sounds.: Sip, sweet, sigh, and then for the very last lines, our hero, the "s" sound is gone forever, replaced by the rise of the dentals in "sweet," "turns," "defers," and "to." If we reduced the poem to only its "s" sounds in initials position we'd get: "She sharp shrug spaces sip sweet sigh." Turn that into two sentences: "She sharply shrugs. Spaces sip sweet sighs". The "s" sounds alone almost carry the tale. So I say: this writer, however unconsciously, was moving through the sonic as well as the narrative fairytale of her poem. The ghost rhymes and effects are so subtle, no one but a

nut job like me might notice them, but this is the pleasure of poetry when you stop paying attention to only what the poem means.

Now, onto the grammar: the poem has no punctuation. To me punctuation controls the speed at which beauty moves through the room. If there is no punctuation, two questions must be asked: are the lines well enough constructed and lucid enough using only the white space to justify no punctuation? Question two: if there is a grammatical ambiguity created by the lack of punctuation, does that ambiguity lend a greater possible meaning to the poem, and is it justified by the law of greater complexity (rather than mere confusion)? Is the writer conscious of the effect? So I put punctuation in: “She lifts her sharp collar bones in a shrug, the rain so hard the spaces between form cups and fill.” A nun would kill me for that sentence, because if read in terms of grammar, the spaces could refer to the rain or the collar bones. How would you “fix” that? “She lifts her sharp collar bones in a shrug, the rain so hard, the spaces between her collar bones form cups and fill.” Too wordy. Definitely, this is not prose, and in spite of the ambiguity, I’d let it stand as is. This is a complex sentence with the greater part of its length given to the dependent clause. The lineation and white space, by breaking the parts up, actually helps rather than hinders, and so it is justified. Now the next sentence is compound: “I lean toward her body to sip, and one sweet sigh and turn defers me to the air.” The “and” is a beautiful pivot here. Because, in the poem, there is no punctuation, I initially thought the speaker of the poem was turning and sighing, which in emotional terms, she is, but it is the object of her attempted sip who turns and sighs. This is nice. This is using uncertainty to best advantage. Ok. Finally, possible objections to the poem:

There are vulgar readers who will ignore all these virtues and say: *so what?* What’s the ontology of the poem? The ontology is rejection, but a rejection so soft and nuanced that it is also an unforgettable gesture. The speaker’s action is also an impulse, a reflex of the moment. The use of the verb “defer” gives both the hint of rejection and the sense of a course diverted, not a final rejection. Wonderful! If she had written “leaves,” instead of “defers,” I too might be tempted to say: “Nice poem, but so what?” Delicacy, if it be truly there, defeats philosophy, and thwarts despair. We do not ask the ontology of a swallow swooping at dusk. So, I give this student an A; and now my **assignments**:

Assignments

1. Go over one of your poems the way I just went over this. See what you might discover that you didn’t realize.
2. Decide that a certain number of sounds will be threaded through your poem. Let their appearance and disappearance mimic a turn or change of meaning.
3. Read “Fine Work with Pitch and Copper,” and “The Locust Tree in Flower.” Try to render a single moment, bereft of punctuation, but in such a way that the white space and the ambiguity will increase the possible meanings.
4. Go and read some favorite poems, and forget the meaning for a moment. Enter them through sound, through detail. Then return to meaning and meditate on how closely sound shadows sense. Good luck.

1.10 Pastoral, Anti-Pastoral, Counter-Pastoral, Eco-Poetry, and Nature

Much of poetry before the last hundred years was influenced by the pastoral tradition. Many of the poets had grown up on farms or in small rural towns and they wrote in the tradition of the romantics, the Latin and Greek poets, the garden and animal obsessed

English. Poems sought poetic inspiration from poetic vista: mountain, rivers, caves, the wild and untouched wilderness, certain flowers (the rose being a seemingly tireless standby), birds, and so forth. With Wordsworth's lament concerning the ravages of the industrial revolution Eco-poetry may be said to have begun. The poet John Clare who was a peasant and farm worker wrote true nature poems—not modeled on poems of Latin and Greek antiquity, but on close observation and knowledge. His poem, "The Badger" might still be used effectively to discuss man's cruelty. To read the poets back in the days, you might get the impression they spent a lot of their time haying, mowing, plowing the back forty, walking among wild flowers, fishing and so on. Poets are liars to an extent. They may have dabbled in these pursuits, but for the most part, they did not do them for a life time or for a living. Frost was a farmer for a few years, but he was a bad farmer—not all that adept at making a go of it. What he truly became was a great poet of the New England rural life. He made this local world universal by capturing the precise feeling and rhythms of its people. Local—place. To a certain extent all good poems of place are nature, pastoral, anti-pastoral, or eco-poetry, even those written with the suburbs for backdrop. The weird thing is the poets have often left the suburbs up to the novelists. If you read contemporary poetry, you'll find place dominated by rural scenes or by urban life. The suburbs seem almost the opposite of "poetic." People don't know what to say about them except there is no center, often no real neighborhood, and everything is pretty or a compromise between the country and urban sprawl. In the 20 years I've been teaching poetry, I think I've encountered maybe six good poems of place about the suburbs, and that's from a group of students who are overwhelmingly suburban. When I get city kids, they write about their neighborhoods, often as troubled, but not always. They seemed heavily tied to a sense of place. Most Americans grow up in the "burbs." The place they really inhabit is the mall, the internet, the pop culture. Most of these are virtual/artificial environments. So let's parse out these different kinds of poems:

Pastoral Poetry

Pastoral poetry: in antiquity, among the Latin Poets, pastoral poetry imagined some perfect realm of piping shepherds and romantic idylls. There were whole collections of poetry dedicated to the joys of country living where beautiful fields and woods abounded. This tradition became so pervasive, especially when it was revived by the Renaissance, that Elizabethans both imitated and mocked it. Many of Shakespeare's comedies of courtship are pastorals, or, to an extent, anti-pastorals. Young men and women leave the social constructs of the town, or court and venture into the fields and wild places where conventions may be turned topsy-turvy, and values either reversed or re-affirmed through farce. A student could write an anti-pastoral by making a poem about a trip to the shore. He or she could write it in such a way that makes a travesty out of expectations. The poem could be called "The Perfect Vacation." You might begin it:

"The perfect vacation began with a less than perfect "haircut": and go from there, describing what went wrong. Of course, you might want to be truly pastoral in which case, there are several formulas:

The person stuck in the city who dreams of going to the country, the shore, the mountains and living the simple life (Lake Isle of Innisfree by Yeats).

A poet waxing wise about the seasons, farming, the best times to plant (See Hesiod's "Works and Days," Virgil's "Georgics," or for that matter, many of the poems of contemporary poet Wendell Berry).

The person lamenting about the loss of some past in which he or she was happy. Nostalgia for some lost paradise, albeit a personal one.

A social comedy of manners in which everyone goes to the country or summer house, and a lot of long lingering truths are exposed (A Little Night Music).

A poem that's just a pleasant idyll, a poem praising a natural setting (Wordsworth's poems about the Lake Country).

Here's a sort of loose list of works you can read to get some sense of pastoral:

- Herbert Spencer's *The Shepheard's calendar* (tough going unless you love early English poetry)
- You can read many of contemporary poet Mary Oliver's poems as pastorals: Just read "The Wild Geese" and you'll see she concentrates on their beauty and majesty and never mentions that they dump feces in lakes, and attack unsuspecting joggers.
- Keats' "Ode To A Nightingale" is a great pastoral poem based on a great anti-pastoral by Sir Philip Sidney entitled "The Nightingale." Anti-pastorals either mock the pastoral tradition, depict nature as a dark and fearful place that must be tamed, or seek to debunk people's notions of the easy and simple life in the wilds of Arcadia. (William Carlos Williams, speaking against pastorals and utopias said: "Raleigh was right: you cannot go to the country for the country shall give you no peace." Many survival stories are anti-pastorals.

Anti-Pastorals

Many anti-pastorals exist in relation and reaction to pastoral poetry. Anti-pastorals are often highly critical of poets pretending to be farmers, or the idea that the life of a shepherd is easy. Anti-pastorals tend to either rebut the idyllic presentations of classical pastoral poems, or to show nature and people as adversarial or as far more complex and troubled than the nostalgic and idealized depictions of pastoral tradition. Many William Carlos Williams's poems are anti-pastorals. He did not write about the city so much as he did about the sort of bedraggled but energetic remnants of nature that still existed in the boon docks and at the edges of city. He wrote about the railroad yards and blighted ash heaps where things still grew and flowered in spring. Anti-Pastoral seeks to be realistic—to love or observe nature, warts and all.

Counter-Pastoral

This is a rather "nit-picky" term which defines poetry that celebrates urban life: cities, streets, cars, bars, jazz, high society, and so on. It ought to be called urban-pastoral because, just like pastoral poetry, it idealizes the city, makes urban life romantic and thrilling. Frank O'Hara is somewhat of an urban pastoral poet.

Nature Poetry

Nature poetry does not completely fit the mold of pastoral or anti-pastoral. I would define it as close observation, an accuracy of perception that a poet can achieve only by deep knowledge or true engagement with something in the natural world. This tradition, almost the verbal equivalent of still lives in painting, seeks to be accurate in terms of detail and essence. Unlike the pastoral, it is not a poetry of escape or idolizing. Unlike anti-pastoral, it does not react against the need for escape or idealization. What good nature poetry does is succeed in being accurate. Rilke's animal poems, Elizabeth Bishop's poems "The Fish" and "The Moose," James Schuyler's flower poems are all examples of poems which vividly and accurately depict natural phenomena. These poems fit the original definition of ekphrastic poetry which is the vivid and detailed description of a scene. Now, ekphrastic means almost strictly poems based on painting, but, originally, it meant a detailed depiction of

a scene. Most good nature poetry which is neither idealized or revisionist is grounded in accuracy of perception.

Eco-Poetry

In some respect Gary Snyder's work, "Turtle Island" was a seminal start to eco-poetics, but the term eco-poetry has been claimed and quartered off by scholars and academics and is being narrowed to a formula even as I speak. Eco-poetics decenters humans from prime of place in the natural world. Eco-poetics views people as part of the eco-systems they inhabit rather than removed from them, seeks to make us aware of how to live sustainable and responsibly in world where all things are interdependent. Eco-poetics also attacks or laments the deprivations of nature and is far more overtly political. It seeks to dispel anthropocentric views of the ecological world. To a degree, some aspects of eco-poetics might privilege other organisms over man, so that they become anti-anthropocentric. In this respect, humans are always culprits and critters are always victims. There are many levels of eco-lit and some of them are not purist, but all eco-poetry seeks to expose the destruction of nature, and our need to exist within rather than above our environment.

So, Let's Come Up with Some Assignments

1. Read Mary Oliver's "The Wild Geese" and then write your own far from ideal encounter with geese. Call it: "Honk" or "Whoever you Are." Have fun. We'll study this poem in class and see how it contradicts itself. Oliver says you don't have to be good, and then she spends the rest of the poem coming up with a new value system the reader has to live up to. Think about it.
2. Write a poem in which six young folks go out to the nature preserve. They consume mushrooms. You can write this as a pastoral or anti-pastoral. Look at some of the poems I will give you about idylls in the country. Look at paintings of pastoral scenes.
3. Buy a flower that intrigues you. Place it somewhere in your room, spend three days observing it. Try to write about the flower in detail. Write about your roommate's reaction to it.
4. Write a poem about attending a function where everyone is wearing hemp and blonde guys have dreads and the whole thing is centered among a sort of eco-fashion. Look at the sincerity or hypocrisy of the group.
5. Write a poem called "The Food Co-op." Go from there.
6. Think about a favorite spot in your yard as a kid, a secret place, a beloved tree, write about its loss or how, when you went back, it seems utterly different.
7. Read Maria Mazziotti's Gillan's poem "Watching the Pelicans Die." See how she blends an eco-disaster with a personal loss. Try to create your own poem where the personal is juxtaposed with the ecological.
8. Write a poem from the point of view of a flower. Make it a specific kind of flower.

Good Luck.

1.11 On Poetry and Song

Poetry, for many centuries, was spoken or sung to musical accompaniment. Usually, the epic narrative poems were most likely chanted, and half-sung, half-spoken over the

playing of a lyre or some instrument that combined both strings and percussive effects. Lyrical poems were often sung as songs over the lyre (the word “lyrics” comes from Lyre). Many Chinese poems have directives with the title (to be sung to the tune of). We may not know the tunes. They may be lost to history, but poetry has always belonged to an extra-cognitive realm where left brained speech and right brained sense of pattern, music and flow converge. Poems have gotten away from music for centuries, but, as they move away, the song lyric remains easily the most popular form of verse. It is almost never remembered without its tune. The tune cues the memory of the words and the words seem to cue the next turn in the melody. In this sense, poetry is always a duet between meaning and rhythm, word-sense and word-music.

Many students who have read very few contemporary poems, are writing song lyrics without rhyme. Their free verse sentiments seem to tend towards the same subject matter as songs: heartbreak, love, lost love, issues of the day, and so on. If they have not read and absorbed modern poetry, then their free verse songs will inhabit some murky middle that achieves neither a good free verse poem nor a good song. In the first, they’ll include the kind of clichés that only work if you have a great beat and tune. In the second, where’s the tune for a bunch of free verse words with no discernible pattern? How can the tune structure the words more efficiently so that the meaning and mood is more effective? We don’t need much brain science, but a little is interesting and doesn’t hurt: language is processed differently by the right brain than the left, which is why people who stutter when they speak, often don’t stutter at all when they sing. The left brain controls more of the cognitive language functions (not all, but the majority); the right brain leans more towards repetitive patterns, long term memory, structure, and music. In certain stroke victims whose speech has been impaired it was found that singing helped improve the aphasia they suffered. There is even a choir in Australia comprised of stroke victims who can’t speak, but who can sing song lyrics beautifully. The brain, like a great poem, has many redundant systems, back-ups in case another part is damaged, and the brain also has division of labor—but not to an extreme degree.

Because our culture is not accustomed to looking silly or embarrassing itself, we shy away from singing our words. We may sing only among friends, or by ourselves, or when we are under the influence. Some of us might be so hateful of our own voices that we refuse to sing at all. But I have found singing free verse lines to be very useful. Just hearing the lines in a meandering melody, singing them, and getting caught on words that don’t fit well can be a marvelous editing skill. So this is an **assignment** I often do:

Assignment

1. Take one of your free verse poems and start singing it. You can sing/talk if you want. Do this a few times until you start seeing a melodic pattern emerge, then cut out any words that won’t fit that pattern. Do not rhyme the words. When you get the poem to the point where it can be sung or chanted—half sung/half spoken rather easily, write this new version down and read it both to yourself and then out loud? What was gained? What was lost? Were a few ideas or points you wanted to make lost? Did the poem gain in terms of flow?
2. Look up “phatic” speech, things people say to each other when they’re just being social in an automatic way. Make a poem out of phatic exchange. Make it in such a way that two people could perform the poem, and even begin singing it as a sort of recitative.
3. Speak to a friend normally, face to face. Have your phone on record. Don’t say anything. Then get the friend to agree to text you sitting or standing where before you were speaking face to face. How does the language change? Is the friend you speak out loud to exactly the same as the one who texts? Write a

poem using various texts you've sent and received. Add or subtract in order to shape it into a poem.

4. Write a poem while listening to a favorite piece of music. Read it out loud without the music, then read it again to the music, being careful to pause at places where you think the music needs silence. Read the poem as if it was another instrument in the piece. What then do you throw out? What do you repeat?