

Dos and Don'ts for Reading (and Writing) Poetry

The best writers of poetry
read poetry.
The best humans
live poetry.
—Anonymous

**Poetry presents the thing in
order to convey the feeling.
It should be precise about the
thing and reticent about the feeling.**
—Wei T' Ai

READING POEMS: SOME SIMPLE DO'S AND DON'TS

DO

Remember that analysis is a joy because it will open up the complexities and depths of the poem's language. Take your reading slowly after the first scan, dwell on the words, speak them aloud (sing or shout them if you want), even when you do not understand them all. Make the poem your own. There are as many ways of reading a poem as there are people.

DO

Keep your reading open-ended. Poems work through double meanings, ambiguities, puns, verbal play. Attend to these and follow their implications through. Poems don't use language in a utilitarian way. Be prepared to tolerate ambiguity and uncertainty and to see that these may themselves be part of the poem's meaning. Trust your instincts.

DO

Look for patterns as a way into a poem. Not what is said but how it is said is the important thing to bear in mind. There are all kinds of ways of forming patterns in a poem – rhyme, repetitions of sound, parallels of construction, echo. Look at the use of verbs, adjectives, think of the effect of short or many-syllabled words. Think of the images and metaphoric implications of the language.

DO

When in doubt take a small piece of the text – two or three lines – and look at them in every way possible. When you grasp a small part of the text the rest will come clearer. Read, re-read, and read again – and again.

DON'T rush!!

DON'T be too anxious to read for a single, ultimate meaning. Poems don't close on a meaning, they open it up.

DON'T make lists of technical terms (eg of the anapaestic metre or the number of similes) as a substitute for finding out what the patterning of a poem is *doing*. The formal patterns will lead you somewhere if you let them.

DON'T be content with a single reading!

Do look at pauses and verbs' loc'n. in rel'n to them

meaning → pattern ; pattern → meaning

THE RHETORIC OF ROMANTIC POETRY - A CHECKLIST

PATTERNING DEVICES

All or most poems, whenever they were written, use the recurrent patterning devices of rhyme, rhythm, imagery, and diction. But they occur differently in every poem. When you look at these, be careful not to check them off mechanically in an external way. In a Romantic poem these features often depend on a complex or ambiguous sentence structure. What follows is a very brief list of features of language to look out for. But it is inevitably simplified, since poetic writing is the most subtle of any form of writing.

GENDER

One proviso I would make is that as far as I can see women poets are sometimes slightly more conservative in their language than male poets, often relying on eighteenth-century poetic diction, with its personifications, archaisms, and use of general words denoting broad categories rather than specific sense impression. At least, at first sight this is so, though when you look searchingly at their rhetoric you will find great experimentation within these conventions.

ROMANTIC PATTERNING

SYNTAX

I will start with **syntax and sentence structure**, since this is the key to poetic language of this period. You will often find that long, fluid, **ambiguous** sentences occur in 19thC poems, or, a version of the same thing, tight, laconic units whose meaning could go in a number of directions. This may happen even in a restricted form like the sonnet. Romantic poetry produces a language of *process*, a language that shows us change, re-vision, transformation, in the act of happening. It restructures experience, whether this is psychological, visual or conceptual experience, and asks questions about this process. Therefore an ambiguous syntax, registering change and the possibility of more than one way of connecting things, is a supple form. A syntax with two logics builds re-thinking into its form. Two examples:

... *and connect / The landscape with the quiet of the sky.* (Wordsworth, 'Tintern Abbey')

Here 'I' could be the subject of connect or 'these steep and lofty cliffs'. In one case the perceiving subject actively relates a perhaps unquiet and vertiginous landscape to a calmer, non-material sphere, the sky. If the cliffs are doing the connecting - and they could perfectly well form the subject of this sentence as well - they are marking out a boundary between themselves and the air. Wordsworth is making the syntax actively explore the landscape here, making it explore both psychological and visual connections, maybe asking about the 'connection' between them. Lots more to say ... look how the line break momentarily severs our connection with one line and another, reinforcing the idea of 'connect'.

Still the loud death drum ... (Anna Barbauld, 'Eighteen Hundred and Eleven')

Some of you pointed out that Barbauld's first line for a moment hovers between a statement and an order, an imperative. The line is caught between ordering the war to

cease and recognising that it is continuing. Thus the issue of unequal empowerment is built into the first line. Again, you might think of the extraordinary alternative meanings of Blake's Proverbs of Hell.

DICTION AND REPETITION

This is closely related to a **changing pattern of repetition of vocabulary and related word groups**. This shifting repetition tends not to restate but to change or modify meaning by occurring in different, transmuted forms: consider 'Tintern Abbey's' *'thoughts of more deep seclusion, and the quiet of the sky*, that reappear in the second paragraph in different forms, *an eye made quiet, the deep power of joy*. Or consider the different contexts in which the word *power* reappears in Joanna Baillie's The Martyr. Words and epithets will change their forms, from nouns, to adjectives, to verbs, and back. Even if repeated forms remain the same you will often notice some fractional changes registered through what has taken place **between** the repetitions.

VERBS AND PARTICLES

Because the movement of Romantic poetry is so insistently temporal, two parts of speech are particularly important and worth attending to closely. These are the mobilisers of sentences, **verbs**, and the **small relational elements and particles** such as **in, at, on, along, between** and so on. We looked at Letitia Landon's extraordinary use of verbs in the first stanza of 'Calypso', for instance: *Years, years, have pass'd away, / Since to yonder fated bay / Did the hero come. / Years, years have pass'd the while / Since he left the lovely isle . . .* We noted not only the pun on death in *have pass'd away*, but also that these words modify the two later verbs, *did come*, and *left*, asserting that years have passed both *since* Odysseus arrived in the island and *since* he left - *since* he died, indeed. Thus the verbs open up for us aeons of time in which the small episode of his meeting with Calypso is a vanishing point, a gap in the syntax. You will notice that Landon also repeats that little relational word, *since*, and makes it do a lot of work: in a sense it is a different *since*, a different temporal moment, each time it occurs. For one *since* refers to the moment when Odysseus arrived, the second to the time when he left. Another more startling use of relational words is in 'Tintern Abbey': *These beauteous forms . . . Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart*. One would expect these particles to be the other way round. But the unconventional formulation suggests that the experience of form is actually physically incorporated in the body and blood stream - *felt in* - and that this experience is a *moving* experience in many senses - *felt along* the heart, the source of emotion. The peculiar use of these particles makes one ask questions: is form organic in this way? Or in the final paragraph of 'Arabella Stuart' Hemans writes *of her whose days / Went out in dreams of thee*. This is ambiguous, reading as **either** 'whose days were obliterated in dreams of thee' **or**, more constructively, creatively, 'whose days were projected/ expanded/ enlarged in dreams of thee'. Through the whole poem the speaker can never decide between these meanings of her 'dream' of the lost lover.

IMAGERY AND ANALOGY

Finally, this self-reflexive language of **multiple meanings** is particularly active in the formation of **imagery, analogy, metaphor, simile**. It is not always easy (or

necessary?) to distinguish these. Here the image or comparison often becomes a **structural** analogy, an expanded comparison moving through the poem and actually ordering and re-ordering its thought processes. Think of the governing metaphor of the river Arve in 'Mont Blanc' that *flows through the mind*. Or consider the metaphor of rolling and flow that emerges in Hemans's 'Joan of Arc in Rheims': *rolled, billows, flowing, Swelled out like rushing waters, floated, streaming*. But remember that these structural metaphors can be used differently. In Shelley's case the Arve cuts a passage through the poem, bringing together the speculations that its flow generates. In Hemans's case the recurrent metaphor of flow relates to many different entities, and holds them apart rather than bringing them together, forcing us to ask questions about the relations, to begin with, between the power of hierarchical religion whose music 'rolled' from the cathedral and the silent 'billows' of the crowd outside who are excluded from the ceremony. 'Billows', after all, help sound to 'roll'. This power needs them.

OTHER FORM-MAKING ELEMENTS

Do look closely at all these features as they interact with stress, rhythm, rhyme and line breaks. I have not said much about these features because each individual poem uses them so freely and inventively.

AND THE SUBLIME AND THE BEAUTIFUL?

Remember that linguistic and rhetorical forms cannot always be pressed into the service of a dominating idea. Sometimes this language is just what it is. Having said this, I cautiously guess that this language of flux and process, a language often in movement that re-structures and revalues itself as it goes along, is peculiarly suited to the movement of hesitancy or 'check', as Kant calls it, followed by the rethinking of experience that the confrontation with the sublime (or baffling power) can produce. This language produces breaks as well as continuities. It can destabilise as much as it flows and coalesces. You will remember Priestley's remark that the indeterminacy of meaning, or a hesitation between two meanings, is related to the sublime.

Nevertheless, some people have responded uneasily to the will to continuity and the merging and coalescence of multiple meanings (as they see it) in this rhetoric, one syntax as it were fusing with another. They detect a suspect attempt to make language 'organic', with proliferating meanings, like something growing. And they point out that language is not 'natural', not like the 'flow' of a river.

This is an argument that needs to be taken seriously. In my view the inherent ambiguity of Romantic language forces the reader in to an **active** attempt to understand and **question** precisely what is going on semantically and syntactically in terms of the language of the poem. This language is indirectly political not because it can destabilise and deconstruct but because it forces the reader to interrogate and question its meanings.

Awful Poems

The Missing of You Hurts

O you who were there all the time
to show how much you truly cared,
so that I knew you'd evermore be true,
and gladden my heart like the sun-kissed clime

But left me like the tide that goes out
and we can never stop it or get it repaired,
You are the only one I care so much about
and yet where is to be found another like you
when I look within myself or even out?
I often cry thinking of you know who,
and your last goodbye
And yet it is indeed to me a huge question mark why

you left me here to feel this way
like I am dead inside
making it the one and only happy day
where I can see your sweet hazel eyes and face.

So I wish you would come back to me
and the two of us wander the beach, happy and free,
for you know I still carry you in my heart
no matter even if you did that day depart.

Had enough? One trouble with this love poem is that it could have been said more effectively in a sentence of ordinary prose. It is an example of telling us the feelings instead of showing us the scene that conveys the feelings. To make matters worse, the sentiments

are expressed almost entirely in dull, commonplace language. "You truly cared," "you'd evermore be true," and "sun-kissed clime" are pretty pedestrian and awful attempts at poetic language.

And perhaps most damaging of all is the fact that so many of the clauses and sentences are awkwardly constructed. The title itself is written in garbled English. "When I look within myself or even out" is anything but graceful English. Awkward writing is awkward writing whether in prose or verse.

1. *Avoiding Trite Language* The author is using a language made up almost entirely of clichés—stock phrases and conventional tags that quickly convince a reader that the poet thinks superficially, has no intention of revealing real emotions and experiences, and has little ability to use language with either precision or originality. Trite expressions such as "You are the only one I care so much about," "gladdened my heart," "I am dead inside," "the one and only," and "I still carry you in my heart," will make this verse heavy going for the unfortunate reader. Remember, the writer's job is to wake us up, not put us to sleep!

2. *Rhyme at Any Cost* Another problem is the rhyme. For the sake of finding a rhyme word, the author is willing to say almost anything, however silly or nonsensical. The idea of getting the tide "repaired" is ridiculous. The word was only used so that our poet could have a rhyme with "cared." "Where is to be found another like you/ when I look within myself or even out" is another example of nonsense. What on earth could it mean to find another person like one's lost lover by looking inside oneself?

~~Abandoning all sense for the sake of a rhyme is a sure sign of a versifier who imagines that poetry is a lot of foolish, nothing that sound pretty. If that's your ambition you would be better off becoming a political speech writer, where a talent for high-flown rhetoric, clichés, and pomposity might earn you a decent living.~~ Rhyme used well can charm the reader, but good poets don't sacrifice real insight or graceful phrasing to come up with rhymes. Sloppily used, rhyme can be fatally destructive to a poet's intentions, for it makes serious feelings sound foolish and inauthentic.

3. *Avoiding Archaic Words and Poetic Inversions* The word "evermore," which the poet must have imagined made line three more poetic, is archaic and its use here renders the line so artificial that it destroys rather than enhances any impact the statement might have had. The word "clime" in line four is also archaic. The phrase "Within myself or

even out" and the attempt at a poetic inversion of syntax (changing the normal order of words in a phrase) in the final line, "if you did that day depart," are similarly artificial and unintentionally comic in their attempts to sound poetic. Far from being more genuinely poetic, such phrases have just the opposite effect: they create bathos and insincerity where the poet wants genuine feeling and believable expression. Throughout, the poet has chosen an easy, soppy, prettified language of the sort that people (who don't read poetry) sometimes imagine is quintessentially poetic.

So another rule of thumb—and one of fundamental importance: *don't try to sound poetical! It will just end up making your poem sound silly.*

4. Sentimentality: Emotional Slither Self-pitying declarations of grief and gushy declarations of love will probably sound boring whether in verse or prose. The writer of our model poem is either unwilling or unable to tell us anything more interesting or true about the loss of his beloved or his emotional response to that loss than that he feels badly and wants her back. It is all generic, vague and superficial when what the reader wants is a believable voice creating believable portraits and scenes. How much more effective it would have been for the author to present us with a scene that conveyed his confusion and sorrow in such a way that we could see it and feel it for ourselves.

The less you talk *about* emotions in general terms, the better. The more you describe events that *arouse* emotions, the more effective your writing will be. To say "When my sister told us she was gay it was a wrenching moment for all of us" is less effective than to say—as Deborah Harding has done in "How I Knew Harold"—"Around 1972 my sister tells me and my parents she's gay. Dad says it's unnatural and they start arguing. I keep quiet. Mom goes to the kitchen to make sundaes." That one word, "sundaes," eloquently conveys the mother's desperate and pathetic attempt to hold on to the illusion of innocence while the narrator's silence is a no less poignant indication of her state of shock and anguish. Having been given these details, we can sense the grief, distress and confusion of that moment for ourselves.

5. Honesty Sometimes poets are seduced by current fashion, conventional expectations, or their own language and inventiveness into asserting things which, although they may sound clever or provocative, they don't really believe. It is a danger to be guarded against. In the introduction to his *Selected Poems*, the American poet Robinson Jeffers wrote:

Another formative principle came to me from a phrase of Nietzsche's: "The poets? The poets lie too much." I was nineteen when the phrase stuck in my mind; a dozen years passed before it worked effectively, and I decided not to tell lies in verse. Not to feign any emotion that I did not feel; not to pretend to believe in optimism or pessimism, or un-versible progress; not to say anything because it was popular, or generally accepted, or fashionable in intellectual circles, unless I myself believed it; and not to believe easily. These negatives limit the field; I am not recommending them but for my own occasions.

Here's another problematic poem for your inspection:

Atlic Revelation

Minerva, anguished goddess of tormented years!
 Before the darkened altar of my soul's quiescent solitude
 twined my childish hand around the dusty magic
 of that puissant knight.
 But sharing treasure leads, I learned too late,
 to slapping atavistic violence.
 Grabbed from my trembling hands into her own,
 resuscitated memories unflinched her eyes.
 My aging face even today replays
 the inarticulate response, and reddens still
 from the unreconcilable and suicidal past.

1

The author is probably under the misapprehension that poets must not say anything clearly for fear of having their poetic license revoked. To describe the language of this piece of verse as vague, confused, and utterly indecipherable would not be overstating the case. Confusion and suspense are *not* the same thing. The more you confuse the readers, the less likely they'll be to remain interested in what you are trying to relate. Advised by a workshop of friendly critics to clarify the narrative, the poet might have come up with a second version:

The Picture

She was as saddened as a boatless winter lake
 when all of it had taken place.
 The darkened attic of that ancient house
 was where I played alone and where I found
 that dusty, cobwebbed oil-painted portrait.
 Maybe not the pirate's chest of gold
 I had longed to find up there

2

in that mysterious upper room—my secret playground, but something nonetheless distinctly magical, this painted figure of a handsome man with his old-fashioned mustache and brown eyes. As swift as Hermes and excited as a frog in rain I brought it down to show my mom who at the time was in the kitchen singing to herself and baking those thick chocolate brownies that I used to love. But nothing could prepare me for the dreadful nightmare of the moment when she saw what I had carried down. She grabbed it from my trembling hands and tore it up and slapped me as hard as the slap of water must have crossed the doomed Titanic's broken hull. Astonished (I was innocent at twelve) it's hardly a surprise that I didn't understand that picture was a portrait of my dad who had killed himself some three months before I had been born. How was I to know that I had done something wrong? I cried myself to sleep that night, and even now I still remember that sad time.

Although the author has managed to get his story told, more or less, it has been drained of all drama and immediacy. We get the fact that a boy has discovered an oil portrait of his father in the attic and is slapped by his distraught mother, but the scene never comes to life. It seems confused in its telling, filled with arbitrary figures of speech that add nothing, and awkwardly expressed.

Adjectives Notice that many of the nouns in both of these versions are preceded by an adjective—no doubt to add color and texture to the writing. The attic is darkened, the house ancient, the treasure cobwebbed, the painting dusty, and so on. There is nothing wrong with the occasional use of adjectives, but be careful of relying on them too heavily. Overused, they tend to weaken phrases rather than strengthening them.

Inappropriate Imagery Nor do the images seem particularly appropriate. Though a "boatless winter lake" might, in another context, effectively suggest isolation and sadness, nothing in this poem has anything to do with water or boats. The images of the Titanic and the frog in rain are similarly inappropriate. Those images of water, boats, and frogs

might be useful in a poem about a fishing village in the rainy season, or about a boy whose father was lost at sea, but here they are out of place.

The Misuse of Allusions and Mythology Inexperienced poets love exotic words and the Greek gods, imagining that such decorative elements add poetic luster to their writing. If you have nothing that genuinely requires the presence of Minerva or Hermes, do not drag them into your poems. Let those poor old retired gods rest in peace.

Clarity, Simplicity and Directness Had the poet been asked to write a new draft in half the words, sticking to the core of the story he wished to tell, and to tell it more straightforwardly, the poem would no doubt have improved. Had he been encouraged to tell his story in a way that would grab the reader's attention from the beginning, it would have helped considerably. The poem that follows tells the same story—the one buried beneath all the verbiage of the previous effort. It was written by one of America's outstanding poets, Stanley Kunitz. Notice with what dispatch and effectiveness the poet gets his story told, how well focused it is, how clear, simple, and moving:

The Portrait

My mother never forgave my father
for killing himself,
especially at such an awkward time
and in a public park

that spring
when I was waiting to be born.

She locked his name
in her deepest cabinet
and would not let him out,
though I could hear him thumping.
When I came down from the attic
with the pastel portrait in my hand
of a long-lipped stranger
with a brave moustache
and deep brown level eyes,
she ripped it into shreds
without a single word
and slapped me hard.
In my sixty-fourth year
I can feel my cheek
still burning.

—Stanley Kunitz

Stanley Kunitz tells his story in fewer than half the number of words

Exercise—Critiquing a Poem

Here is an early draft of a poem by a student learning his craft. It has many of the faults we discussed in the poems "The Missing of You Hurts," "Arctic Revelation," and "The Picture." Read the poem critically and think about what is keeping it from being effective. What problems do you find with individual lines and phrases? Be as specific in your criticisms as you can be. Then follow the directions given below.

Tracks of the Wandering Mind

I want sometimes naught but to weep
As standing by the trestle deep
I long to follow that railroad train
To a realm of dream that's free of pain.
What an urge I have to stray somewhere
On a train that's bigger than a bear
which climbs up toward old mountain peaks
And watch the sea for days and weeks.
A train to some vast tropic isle
Where swaying beauty makes me smile.
But the trains of reality just skitter off
And my city home where pollution does cough
Doesn't let me see the pyramids
Or drink till dawn with memory's kids,
Or ride off to the Orient
To get away from this discontent.
But today something inside me went through a shift
And gave my spirits that needed lift,
And I bid adieu to my dreams of escape
while the train roared through like a ghostly shape.

1. Circle the archaic word in the opening line.
2. Circle a phrase in line two that seems artificial because it is inverted in a way that is unnatural to modern English.
3. What is silly about line six? Why do you think the poet wrote that line?
4. Circle two phrases near the end of the poem that seem stale.
5. Rewrite the first sentence (the first four lines) in graceful English.

Exercise—Creating Images and Scenes that Convey Emotions

Here are five statements that tell us what someone was feeling. Replace them with brief descriptions that convey rather than state the emotions. You will have to invent specific situations, five little scenes moments that a reader can visualize. For example, the phrase "I felt so happy" might be replaced with "I grinned despite myself and rushed to greet him."

1. She felt very sad.
2. That summer at camp he missed his mother.
3. The letter confused her.
4. He felt angry.
5. She begged him to stay.

Poem 9: A Rewrite

Go back to a poem you have already written or have been trying to write, one that you can now see has one or more of the failings that we have been discussing in this chapter—or other problems that you have become aware of. Rewrite the poem to get rid of its shortcomings. If you have to start from the beginning and simply discard the old version, that's okay. Sometimes just saving one or two lines or a good image or an excellent phrase—or nothing but the idea and starting from scratch—will be easier and more effective than repairing a poem with serious flaws. On the other hand, you might not feel that your poem needs so radical a re-visioning.

If you have not done so in the original version, be sure to present to your readers a vivid scene—a specific moment in time that tells your story for you.

