

Suggestions for Approaching Poetry

These notes are based on what I have learned from various sources, from my education, and from my actual practice of poetry writing.

- Sound is as important as “sense.” The two are wed. Sound may involve rhyme, assonance, and consonance. The poem should be read aloud. Music (repetition, syllabics, variation, formal meters, etc.), are crucial in poetry. Part of the music comes from going with and/or against sentence structure, lines, line breaks and stanzas.
- Even in “free verse,” we want to find some musical quality, so author and reader (upon analysis), can discuss from where that music comes.
- Poetry uses rhetorical devices. These include comparisons/contrasts, similes, metaphors, personification, apostrophe, and various forms of saying what may not be “factual” or literal. Poetry has always been rich in concretion, in image.
- Poetry avoids cliché’—unless it is used for effect. The writer pays attention to etymology, to freshness of diction.
- There may be several levels of awareness and meaning in a poem, but the language must be clear in the sense that we can comprehend what is being said (i.e., there are no author-error confusions much less intentional obscurities). In the great “public tradition” of poetry, the author writes for both the self and for the audience—tries to walk that line. Writing in private journals can be therapeutic and one of the great joys of life, but publishing is a different matter.
- Poetry should give pleasure and knowledge and insight to others (“What are we here for? *Propter chorum*. For the sake of the choir.” –Annie Dillard, quoting, in another context, medieval monasticism.)
- Once the readers’ expectations are aroused by a poem’s opening lines or stanzas she or he or they should find focus (unity, development).
- Over time, the very act of intensive and broad reading of fine poetry can give us useful and interesting insights into this art.

I often speak of individual works as:

“Splendid and memorable”

or

“Good”

or

“Moderately Successful

or

Weak

or

“Not actually a poem”

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