



It is worth, having just discussed free verse, to at least nod in the general direction of prose poetry. This is a really grey area as far as I'm concerned, but I'd be remiss if I didn't at least mention it to you. Prose

poetry is just what it says on the tin. It is poetry that is

written as prose. It has pronounced rhythm, rhyme, imagery -- all the things that you have been putting into your own poems, but without the line breaks. Therefore you end up with a poem that looks like an ordinary paragraph.

By way of example, we can look to Basho (remember him?) and this passage from Narrow Road to the Deep North:

"Days and months are travellers of eternity. So are the years that pass by. Those who steer a boat across the sea, or drive a horse over the earth till they succumb to the weight of years, spend every minute of their lives travelling. There are a great number of ancients, too, who died on the road. I myself have been tempted for a long time by the cloud-moving wind -- filled with a strong desire to wander."

This is a nice example of prose poetry, although Basho wouldn't have thought of it in those terms. Another, far more self-conscious,

example, comes to us courtesy of Oscar Wilde.

### The Disciple

“When Narcissus died the pool of his pleasure changed from a cup of sweet waters into a cup of salt tears, and the Oreads came weeping through the woodland that they might sing to the pool and give it comfort.

“And when they saw that the pool had changed from a cup of sweet waters into a cup of salt tears, they loosened the green tresses of their hair and cried to the pool and said, ‘We do not wonder that you should mourn in this manner for Narcissus, so beautiful was he.’

“‘But was Narcissus beautiful?’ said the pool.

“‘Who should know that better than you?’ answered the Oreads. ‘Us did he ever pass by, but you he sought for, and would lie on your banks and look down at you, and in the mirror of your waters he would mirror his own beauty.’

“And the pool answered, ‘But I love Narcissus because, as he lay on my banks and looked down at me, in the mirror of his eyes I saw ever my own beauty mirrored.’”

Personally, I just don't get it. We could sit here and debate till the cows come home whether this constitutes a poem or just a nicely-written bit of prose. The fact remains that prose poetry is a recognised art form and a difficult one, because to write it you must skirt the very boundaries of what poetry is. Your lines will have a rhythmic rise and

fall, chosen sounds will echo throughout. But then again, some of the best prose includes those features.

I tried my hand at it and am still no closer to a true understanding of the form. Here are some early examples of my work -- all of dubious merit which will either guide or mislead you in your quest to learn. For better or for worse, here they are:

Florence, December 1985

The night was bitter and the wind whipped through the alley, stirring up some of the snow that lay at my feet. I shivered, buttoned up my collar and hurried to Florie's house. She stood holding the door open for me, a lightly hunched figure with greying hair and animated eyes.

There was always something about Florie's eyes, even though they were giving her trouble and looked a little tired. There was a gleam that spoke of life and fun, a light that people often lose when they grow old.

And I thought, this is it. This is what I want -- that life, that spark. Strong enough to shine through the milky clouds of cataracts, like the light in her window shines through wisps of snow.

April 1993

A battered, ancient box from a corner of the attic, hidden behind old toys, Christmas decorations, and books. It is full of photographs -- black and white images of ancestors -- none of them named, none of them dated. The immortality of the photograph has condemned them to an odd obscurity -- the nameless face, the meaningless image of people standing and smiling for the camera.

But there is one that calls and calls and needs no scribbled notes. I see a handsome family: a mother and father, straight-backed, in their stiff collars and scratchy-looking clothes. Propped between them, a baby girl in white lace, her features delicate, her eyes glassy. She does not fidget or squirm, but sits in the still obedience of death ... for this ... the one testament to her existence, picked out in sepia's earthen tones. She was here. She was here.

In her eyes, no expression. A doll's eyes. But there, in the face of the mother, an eternal grief that even now pricks at the corners of my eyes and I mourn for ancestors long dead.

I remember that day, cleaning out the attic and finding that photo. I was seriously creeped out by it -- so much so that I found I had to say something about it in order to be able to let it go. Hence, the poem. You see, poetry (in whatever form you choose to write it) is a healthy pursuit. It is an outlet for what ails and disturbs us, it allows us to give words and shape to our pain, to laugh at life and ourselves, to record

events and ask questions. All in all it is one kickin' method of communication. But in order to make it really effective, you must choose your words wisely. To this end, let us dig once more into our tool box...

Word choice. Now listen (and I cannot stress this enough) word choice is really, really, really important. Really, really. If your poetry runs on for several hundred pages, then no, you probably don't need to agonise over every word you use.



But when your poem is a haiku or a sonnet with a handful of lines, then you can't afford to waste space on the wrong words. But how do you make your choice? What are the questions you need to ask yourself as you write?

**1. Do your words fit in with the structure of the poem? When writing tetractys do they fit in with the syllable count? When writing blank verse, do they fit in with the iambic rhythm? In Ballads, do they rhyme?** That is all very basic. However, the English language is so rich and colourful that it has a lot more to offer your poetry than just rhyme and accented syllables.

**2. Are you falling into the hyperbole trap? Is your language flowery, exaggerated, or pretentious?** As we have already discussed, hyperbole has its place, particularly if you are being ironic or funny. But in most cases, it sounds fake and will kill any real feeling or truth in

a poem. Be yourself. If the words do not sound like you, they will ring false to your readers.

**3. What about the sound of the words? Does it fit in with your subject?** By this, I'm not simply referring to rhyme, but to what is sometimes called "the colour" of words. For instance, take the word "harsh." Say it out loud. It sounds like what it is -- hard and sharp and abrasive. What about "smooth"? -- even the sound of the word has a glassy surface to it. What about fluffy and shriek and moan and snap and mumble? Each of them sounds like the things they describe.

To expand on this a bit, let's say that I wanted to write a few lines about someone I hate. Unless I'm wickedly sarcastic, positive words like glimmer, soft, cheer and pretty really don't fit either in meaning or in sound. Words like vile, putrid, venomous and monster would. Take these lines from For "A.":

Oh, you side of stale mutton wrapped in youthful skirts,  
Painted, perfumed and strutting  
Spouting poison and rumour  
And sniping words with a witch's cackle.

Read those lines again out loud. In particular the repetition of the hissing "s", the sharp "t" and "k" sounds, the spitting "p's" all underscore the general venom of the passage. Likewise, here is a poem about someone I love:

I watch you sleep --  
And try to place the smoothness of your cheek,  
And the gentle rise and fall of breath  
Somewhere in my mind where I can always find it  
And remember the soft warmth

Of a moment by your cradle.

Here the mood is quiet and peaceful, reinforced by the repeated “th” of smoothness, breath, and warmth, the “uh” of slumber and somewhere, the hush of the word “soft”. See what I mean?

Back in school, Mrs. Schwimmer set us an exercise to write “Words with Personality”. Now seems like a good time to share it with you. I’ll give you the list we came up with in class and then you can add to it.

Gentle Words

- Feather
- Soft
- Fluff
- Breeze
- Pure

Angry Words

- Slap
- Smack
- Spite
- Hate
- Kill

Strange Words

- Weird
- Bizarre
- Wonky
- Askew
- Discombobulated

Hard Words

- Rock
- Hit
- Boot
- Stick
- Rap

Gross Words

- Putrid
- Pus
- Bile
- Ooze
- Slimy

Bright Words

- Glow
- Sparkle
- Shimmer
- Glitter
- Twinkle

What we were beginning to play with, although we didn’t know it at the time, was onomatopoeia (pronounced, onno-mat-e-pee-a) -- a snazzy little literary device where the words sound like the thing they’re describing. For instance, take the word “buzz” – it sounds like what it is: the low and steady humming of bees. That is onomatopoeia in its simplest form. The sound of the word suggests or echoes its

meaning.

There are plenty of other simple examples such as “snap”, “snip”, “slam”, “slap”, “gag”, “whisk,” etc., etc., etc. But onomatopoeia really gets interesting when you use the sound of a whole poetic line to evoke an image or feeling. Take lines 1-5 of Wilfred Owen’s World War I poem, “Dulce Et Decorum Est”:

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,  
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,  
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs  
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.  
Men marched asleep.

Here is a great example of the use of consonance or repeating consonant sounds throughout the line. Read it aloud. The repetition of “b” and “k” sounds dramatically slows down the line, stressing how hard and painfully slow their exhausted march from the battlefield was. I particularly like the line: “Men marched asleep.” It is a simple but very poignant statement. The alliterative “m” and the equal stress placed on the first two words evoke the slow monotony of the march. Repeated “m” sounds bog you down a bit when you read them out loud, just as the soldiers were bogged down by the mud or “sludge” of the track.

By way of another example, we could look at “Dream-Love” by Christina Rossetti:

Young Love lies dreaming  
Till summer days are gone,--  
Dreaming and drowsing  
Away to perfect sleep:



He sees the beauty  
    Sun hath not looked upon,  
And tastes the fountain  
    Unutterably deep.

It is a quiet, drowsy verse, slowed down by the alliterative “d” of dreaming, days and drowsing. The quiet purr of “perfect” and the repeating “uh” sound of young, love, summer, sun, upon, unutterably – all words that moan sleepily through the lines. The effect is peaceful and quite beautiful.

You get the picture. Now you try. Write a few lines about the following subjects. Use the sounds of the words themselves to set the pace and the feel of the line:

- Sleep
- A Storm
- Riding Either on a Horse or a Train

**4. Do your words have the right connotation?** Each word has an explicit dictionary definition -- a meaning that seems quite clear. Connotation is an implied additional meaning that effects how the word is used.

Don't worry, it's not as confusing as it sounds. Take the word “run” for example. To run is defined as “to travel rapidly on foot at a speed which is faster than walking.” That is all very simple. Equally so is the fact that there are other words that share that same definition. Pick up any thesaurus and you'll be treated to a list of synonyms or words that mean the same thing. I looked up “run” in my Thesaurus and was given this list of equivalent words: bolt, career, dart, dash, gallop, hasten, hie, hurry, scurry, jog, scamper, and abscond. There are

dozens more but you get the picture. So each of these words means “to run”.

Now let’s create a scene where you are shopping on the high street. A gigantic, evil-looking space ship descends over Marks and Spenser’s and starts zapping people with its deadly ray guns. You turn to your friend and scream, “Jog for your life!” or how about “Abscond for your life!” Gallop? Hie? The word gallop works great when talking about a horse and “jog” is swell when you are getting fit, but when you are about to be vaporised, run is what you do. “Run for your life!” Much better. So how come words that mean the same thing can’t be used interchangeably? The answer is that they have different connotations or shades of meaning. It is worth paying attention to these differences in meaning when you chose words for your poetry -- or, indeed, when you are being attacked by aliens. If you tell your friend, “Hie for your life” -- he will pause, wondering what the heck you’re talking about and probably end up as a smudge of vaporised ash on the ground. If you choose the wrong word for your poem, the effects will not be this catastrophic, but it won’t sound right and will probably confuse the reader.

**5. What about imagery?** Imagery uses language to bring an idea into sharper focus through a variety of methods. They are:

- Metaphor -- Referring to something in terms of something else, as in Shakespeare’s “All the world’s a stage.”
- Simile -- An explicit comparison. Look for the word “as” (Cool as a cucumber) or “like” (for instance when Charlie Brown says: “Life is like an ice-cream cone -- you have to lick it one day at a time.”)
- Symbolism -- The use of a symbol to deepen the meaning. If I were to say, “He wears his heart on his sleeve,” not only am I saying

that his feelings are obvious to everybody, but I am using a symbol to suggest a deeper history. You see, in the age of chivalry, knights would often battle in tournaments with some token from their lady (a handkerchief, perhaps) pinned to their sleeve. It was a very public display of loyalty and affection. Likewise, if I refer to someone's problems as the "cross she must bear", not only am I referring to the difficulty of her situation, but I am evoking an image of Christ dragging his own cross -- an image of pain and sacrifice and selflessness.

Imagery evokes either an idea (like the world being a stage and the people being actors in life's drama) or a sensation (something you can taste, touch, see, hear or smell). It can be used as a "one-off" within a poem or made to run through the entire work. But most of all, it adheres to that crucial rule: SHOW, DON'T TELL. Poetry speaks to us through images that show, not through explanations that tell. For instance, let's say that I was going to write about a shark attack. One way to do it is to tell you what happened:

On 7 May 1959, Shirley O'Neill and her boyfriend, Albert Kogler, went swimming off Baker's Beach in San Francisco, California. It was a beautiful, hot day. The pair swam out about forty meters from shore and stopped, treading water and talking in the shadow of the Golden Gate Bridge. They were about to start for shore when a great white shark attacked Kogler. Shirley mustered up her courage and swam to his aid. In the 20 minutes that it took for her to tow him back to the beach, the shark struck Kogler again and again. He died later in hospital.

That is a very accurate account of the event. It is akin to something you

might read in a newspaper. But how much more do you understand it, if I write it like this:

So far away the shore --  
So far away the safe and golden sands.  
So far away the time  
When you told me that you're mine  
And I held you  
Without blood upon my hands.

Only this remains --  
Time and reason swiftly drown  
In rough seas of churning, foaming red.  
Salt water in my throat,  
And a flash of grey and white,  
And a siren's call --  
But you're already dead.

I say every prayer I know  
And I hold you close -- but oh,  
You're another empty shell upon the beach.  
You're so far away from me  
And through salty tears I see  
You are, now and forever, out of reach.

Again, it's not exactly Shakespeare. But the verse has a bit of kick to it. I tried to make it concrete -- to evoke the taste, the sight, and the sounds of that moment, coupled with her anguish at watching him die. Admittedly, this poem does not give as much pure information as the paragraph I wrote. Instead, it seeks to offer you the emotional and sensual truth of that moment which is, in my view, more important and more interesting than a bland recital of who, what, where, when and

how. And you can do it too. Just make sure that your images are specific. If they are too general, you lose the sharpness of the image and its punch.

Anyway, these are all tools in your box that can help you add lots of different levels of meaning to your poetry, making it deeper and more complex. There is the rhythm and rhyme you choose. There is the sound of the words themselves and how you use them to reinforce the mood of the poem. There are the specific connotations of your words and how they influence the meaning of your lines. And there is the imagery you employ and all the information that lies beneath it. Layer upon layer of significance can be found within one great line of poetry. Impressive, isn't it? To show you what I mean, here's the man himself:

#### Shakespeare's Sonnet 116

Let me not to the marriage of true minds  
Admit impediments; love is not love  
Which alters when it alteration finds,  
Or bends with the remover to remove:  
O, no, it is an ever-fixed mark,  
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;  
It is the star to every wand'ring bark,  
Whose worth's unknown, although his highth be taken.  
Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks  
Within his bending sickle's compass come;  
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,  
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.  
If this be error and upon me proved,  
I never writ, nor no man ever loved.

Layer One: this sonnet is by Shakespeare and that immediately

gives us information. When we discussed Shakespearean sonnets, I told you that the rhyme scheme is abab cdcd efef gg and the above example conforms to that. I also told you that Shakespeare “divides the lines into three quatrains (groups of four lines each), rounded off with a two-line couplet. Often the first eight lines present a problem or situation which is resolved in the last six. The turning point between problem and resolution often occurs in line 9 and is known as the volta. Ah, but here, there is a difference. Here, there is no volta, no turning point in line nine, no problem presented in the first eight lines that needs to be resolved in the last six. Each quatrain simply provides a different image to further flesh out Shakespeare’s idea of love. So why veer from the pattern? Why not present a question that needs answering? Shakespeare tells us why in the first two lines: “Let me not to the marriage of true minds/ Admit impediments”. He is not going to allow any obstacle or confusion to enter into this. He is going to tell you what love is and, you can be darn sure, he knows what he’s talking about. He is, indeed, quite adamant on the subject in a way that quashes all questions, problems, impediments and arguments. So there.

Layer Two: The first quatrain introduces the idea of love not only as marriage, but as a union of minds. When Shakespeare says that he will not admit “impediments” he is, in fact, echoing part of the marriage service in which the priest asks the congregation: “If any of you know reason or just impediment why these two people should not be joined in matrimony, speak now or forever hold your peace”.

Layer Three: With the idea of marriage firmly established, he supplies another image to further clarify and reinforce his message. He tells us in the second quatrain that love is “an ever-fixed mark” – a star. This star can look down on all our problems and “tempests” (or storms)

and not be shaken by them. No, it remains fixed and constant, guiding every wandering “bark” or ship (basically guiding the lovers on their voyage through life). And like any star, it shines forever.

Layer Four: In the third quatrain, he expands upon this idea of “forever.” He tells us that love is not enslaved by time, although people will age and die. When Shakespeare comments that “rosy lips and cheeks/ Within his bending sickle’s compass come,” he likens time to death and the Reaper with his sickle or scythe. The circular sweep of the scythe (indicated by the word “compass”) that drains first the youth and then the life from those rosy cheeks is reminiscent of a clock’s hands relentlessly circling its face. No, love does not fall prey to brief hours, weeks or years.

Layer Five: And finally, the coup de grace, the couplet. Here he says: “If this be error and upon me proved, / I never writ, nor no man ever loved.” Basically he’s saying: “my being wrong is about as likely as me never writing a poem (incidentally, I’ve written 154 sonnets, thank you) or men having never gone doolally over some chick (yeah, THAT’S never happened).” You’ve got to love a guy with confidence.

Layer Six: The colour or sounds of his language underscore the meaning of the words he uses. Take, for instance, the consonant repetition of “m” in me, marriage, mind, admit, and impediments. This gives a gentle, moaning quality to the lines and suggests that he might be whispering these words into someone’s ear. Contrast this to the harder “k” sounds that he uses to describe the ravages of time: “bending sickle’s compass come.” There is a cutting quality to the language, which ties in nicely with the scythe imagery of the sickle. This is immediately followed by the alliterative use of “b” in bending, brief, and “but bears it out” -- a boldness to the line that echoes the

boldness and defiance he expresses.

You begin to see what I mean: it is wonderful how very rich in meaning a good poem can be. But, I can hear you say, does it have to be? Does good poetry have to be deep and profound and (dare I say it?) a little stuffy? Good heavens no -- as you will see in the next article when we tackle the art of parody.