

# SCATTERED THOUGHTS ON POETRY

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Poetry is more than more than rhyme and meter, more than words, more than an arbitrary arrangement of lines on the page. Every word in a poem is working hard — each word is at once carrying its current dictionary definition, its vernacular meaning, and all of the associations it has gathered throughout its history.

A poem, a good poem, has no unnecessary words; every word, every line break, every stanza break was sweated over, worked at, and weighed against other possibilities (I've worked on some poems for as long as five years) before a final version is chosen (by final, I don't mean perfect, it's simply a state where any more changes would do more harm than good).

Understand that I am referring to each word as it stands on its own. When the words are welded into phrases, they work even harder, for they must do all the above and carry the meaning of the phrase as well. The phrase must work at conveying its own meaning plus the meaning of the stanza in which it is imbedded. And so on, until the whole poem is built.

Poems are built piece-by-piece, and revised until they are free-standing structures.

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Poetry is not precisely language, any more than a Francis Bacon portrait, for instance, is precisely a person's appearance. Poetry is images. Poetry is at once as barren as desert sand, and as fertile as the soil of river bottoms. Poetry is an echo in the bones.

In order to be affected by a poem, or by any work of art, you must make yourself vulnerable to it. You must let it take the first swing. Some will knock you out with that first punch. Some will leave you gasping. Some will dance on the edges of perception before they hit you with a flurry of combinations.

It can be a frightening experience to have someone's creation rabbit punch you, or slip into your gut cold as a blade. We have our defences up constantly against such invasions. We must in this world of ours, with so many media clamouring for our attention, offering to do all our work, all our thinking and feeling with sound bites and video clips.

But poetry is not as easy as watching or listening to the news. Poetry is not as easy as watching a action movie or a comedy. Poetry is hard. It is not satisfied with less than full attention. If we can't give that, we get very little back. Poetry, like the laws of thermodynamics, gives us nothing for free.

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Form is important. A poem cannot exist without form. But the old forms aren't the only forms. Personally, I do believe the old forms are mostly dead, and that trying to write in them is akin to attempting to reanimate a corpse. If the old forms are dead, what recourse do poets have? They must create new forms. Create.

And what is their raw material? Language. The sound of the language they hear and speak everyday. The language which is the society, the world, in which they live. The world in which we live. This is where their new forms are found. And that world is changing more rapidly every day.

This is reflected in our poetry, in the forms of it. Some forms have an existence the length of a single poem, some the length of a sequence (which seems to be as close as anyone can come to an epic these days), some the length of a book.

You can't build a house without a frame. But there are many forms. And poets need not, should not, be restricted to any one, or even any few — not even the tried and true. Neither should poets dismiss the past; language is the the medium of poetry, and the history of poetry is one long conversation as old as language itself — to ignore this is to talk only to oneself.

Poets use poetic devices to evoke emotions, etc. And yes, rhyme and meter are poetic devices. But they are not the only poetic devices. Many others exist: metaphor, assonance, onomatopoeia, to name just three. A poet has many tools available, and chooses the ones best suited to the poem he is working on.

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I wouldn't say that the spurning of rhyme and meter significantly decrease the chances of producing a good poem, or even a great one. What I would say is that without an awareness and firm grounding in the works of the past, a poet is more likely to become bogged down unnecessarily in territories where trails have already been blazed.

Poetry is an art, and like all art forms, it should not duplicate the past but learn from it, flow from it. What has been done has been done.

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Working to or playing off a form forces the poet to tighten images, makes the poet bear down and say what is meant. Poetry is very much about focusing language; burning it into the page, into the eyes of the reader, the ears of the listener. It is a violent art.

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It is not the ideas which poetry conveys, but the power of poetry to convey ideas which has made poets and poetry feared throughout history. It is still feared. This is why poetry is so often ignored.

Poetry is feared because it uses language subversively. Poetry uses language in an attempt to bypass language. Poetry is a language virus. It enters the eye or the ear, and heads straight for the gut and the groin. It uses the body to alter the way the mind perceives the world. Poetry is beautiful, seductive, and dangerous to the status quo. This is where poetry and art become one.