

What Makes a Poem?

by [David Solway](#) (December 2018)



Which Poet?, C. Lind, 1957

Life doesn't rhyme, which is why poetry often will—or at least, did. Life doesn't run on metric principles, which is why poetry often will—or at least, did. Poetic order in its own small way is an antidote to the muddle and disarray of ordinary human experience. It satisfies the need for clarity, beauty, symmetry and meaning, gifts which the world does not readily provide.

One of the major mantras of the modern poetic climate is that poetry should reflect actual life—or as the feminists like to say, “lived experience”—which is why modern poetry often seems disordered, random, arbitrary and lacking any sense of final purpose or eschatological closure, as most famously in the oeuvre of John Ashbery or Charles Bernstein, among a numberless host of inflated reputations in the modern pantheon. This is what is loosely called “free verse,” a term which is thought to have originated in the early 1900s with Ezra Pound and his Imagist colleagues, although it is a literal translation of the French *vers libre* popularized in the 19th Century and has an extensive empirical history.

Robert Frost wittily adopted a sports metaphor to claim that writing free verse is like playing tennis without a net. Sport does not reflect everyday life since it is constrained by stringent rules, operates in a confined or clearly demarcated space, and leads to definitive conclusions, that is, it is a tightly structured, intentional realm within a larger free-flowing and anarchic world. Such is an aspect of its charm, as it is of games in general, artificial constructs defined by rules and goals. The same is true of poetry (as it is of literature and art in general). Poetry resembles sports events and games in its structure but does not stop when the whistle blows or the board is put away. Its import continues into the future, giving pleasure by reshuffling the disparate components of experience into ordered sequences and aiming for perfection of form. It resists erosion. It is meant to last.

This is not to designate free verse a dull, prosaic substitute for rule-based poetic form. Far from it. *Authentic free verse is never free*. It subsumes many of the settled poetic devices, protocols and elements in a subliminal way: internal rhyme or half-rhyme, assonance and alliteration, and melodic cadence

that is not strictly metrical but is nonetheless clearly distinguishable from common speech and prose rhythms. Like form poetry, a good free verse poem incubates an acoustic resonance. Ted Berrigan writes in Poem 160 of his *Selected* “The world’s furious song flows through my costume”—but the world’s furious song is precisely what the poem organizes, makes coherent, *melodizes*, so that we can sing it.

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Poetry, then,—genuine poetry—does not merely echo, mirror or imitate life. It is neither an effigy nor a replica. Nor, as novelty theories in the boutique of poetic practices hold, does genuine poetry mimic its own composition, like a postmodern snake biting its own tail. This is only the latest freak in a misguided effort to appear cutting-edge. The compulsion to “make it new” does not necessarily make it good. Despite the reigning hype that some poets hold dear, serious poetry is never “experimental,” collage-driven, aleatory, duplicative, computer generated or Flarfist, or a mere congeries of mechanical gimmicks assembled according to some opaque “method” of composition. This is not to say that it cannot be innovative, only that there are *limits* established within the bounds of communication. After all, if poetry is ever to flourish, even minimally, it should appeal not only to the specialist or sophisticate but to the proverbial common or educated reader.

It is worth repeating if only to counter the market conception of current poetical thought. Poetry comments, meditates,

broods and speculates on life. It is a meta-discipline whose proper function is not mimetic, but deliberative, memorial, playful, celebratory or elegiac. A genuine poem is, of course, part of life—it exists in the world—but it is also separate from life in the sense that it is not an *image* of experience or a reflection of theory but a formal object that inhabits its own dimension above the daily flux of inchoate happening. One notes the Greek word for a poem, *ποίημα* (poiema), “thing made or crafted.” It is something that stands on its own, yet remains accessible, as something to be used in the conduct of everyday life. It is both interesting *sui generis* and relevant *extra ipsum*. As Kei Miller’s Cartographer says, “I never get involved/with the muddy affairs of land./Too much passion unsteadies the hand”—which paradoxically does not prevent finding “foot by weary foot...the measure that exists in everything.”

One might also note that the good poem, whether formal or free, will also occasionally feature a crucial mnemonic endowment, namely, the aphoristic line or phrase which leaps off the page and into the mind. “Fools rush in where angels fear to tread.” “A thing of beauty is a joy forever.” “I have measured out my life with coffee spoons.” “Nobody, not even the rain, has such small hands.” Who can forget such ringing locutions? They bring a quality of permanence that lives on the synapse, bestowing the poem with preceptual force.

Cadence, aphorism and essential structural elements help to render a poem “sincere.” One thinks of a popular etymology of the word—“without wax” from the Latin *sine cere*. According to this hypothesis, sculptors and craftsmen used hot wax to seal and conceal flaws in their work; thus any such artifact without wax was considered whole and honest. A sincere poem would be one in which every word, indeed every syllable, is

scrupulously vetted. There are no gaps, no fillers, no verbal epoxy. I recall fellow-poet Peter Van Toorn scoring nearly a hundred manuscript pages until he came up with the right word-choice and syllable count for the line of verse he was agonizing over.

In my own early apprenticeship, after having written haphazardly in the Canadian way as a young wannabe, I ceased publishing for five years in order to trace my route through the poetic canon from the Anglo-Saxon era to the modern period, trying my hand at every traditional poetic form until I felt sufficiently "sincere" to allow myself the trial of free verse, which, as noted, is never free but constrained by rule, precedent and criteria of accomplishment. I tried to illustrate the nature of this probationary exercise in a short lyric treating of two representative exemplars: the austere formalism of Emily Dickinson and the sprawling afflatus of Walt Whitman.

Apologia

I understand the times are cool
to all that discipline
men of the introspective school
were once accomplished in.

Epigrammatic Frenchmen say,
if temperate or staid,

that '*reculer pour mieux sauter*'

explains the retrograde.

I study that austerity

the profligate assault,

for I must fast with Emily

before I feast with Walt.

I also realized the necessity of rejecting the wrong and choosing the right mentors. I was nineteen when I received a characteristic lower-case complimentary postcard from my hero at the time, e.e. cummings. I then attempted to write like him and went poetically broke. It took years to recover. I was in my twenties when I received a glowing letter from Canadian icon Al Purdy, praising my early, callow free verse chapbooks. Realizing that Purdy was the master of flatline poetry, I knew then with sudden clarity that I had to stop writing and alter my entire poetic *weltanschauung*. That was the moment I decided to embark upon my novitiate.

Real poets, I began to understand, are recognizable in at least four ways: they have something reasonably important or meaningful to say, they can say it in pleasurable, original and lively language, they have a thorough knowledge of the Western and often of other traditions, and they display a distinctive prosodic itch. Thus I steeped myself in the work of Greek poets like Constantine Cavafy, George Seferis and Angelos Sikelianos, and in that of poets from my own tradition such as W.B. Yeats, James Merrill and particularly Richard Wilbur, who became a treasured correspondent and a sort of

father-figure. And although I relate to these revered preceptors in the Bloomian mode of the anxiety of influence, they represented in my estimation the right choice to make in a self-indulgent and degenerate age. To paraphrase Yeats from *The Municipal Gallery Revisited*, it was my good fortune that I had such mentors.

Archibald MacLeish famously wrote that a poem “should not mean/But be.” *Ars Poetica* is a very beautiful poem that violates its own didactic conclusions, since it not only *is* but quite emphatically *means* as well. Indeed, MacLeish seems to suggest that a poem can mean by being metaphorically refractive, by implication, by being figuratively “equal to” rather than “true” in the literal sense. It is “motionless in time/As the moon climbs.” In effect a poem means by being its own lunar self, cold and remote, while exerting a kind of tidal influence on the world.

A poem, then, may be influential in the sphere of the quotidian although it is a unique phenomenon abiding by its own autonomous and self-contained rules. In other words, it is both in and out of the world.

Works cited:

[*The Selected Poems of Ted Berrigan*](#)

[*The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion*](#)

[*Archibald MacLeish: Collected Poems*](#)

David Solway is a Canadian poet and essayist. His most recent volume of poetry, *The Herb Garden*, appeared in spring 2018 with Guernica Editions. A partly autobiographical prose manifesto, *Reflections on Music, Poetry & Politics*, was released by Shomron Press in spring 2016. A CD of his original songs, *Blood Guitar and Other Tales*, appeared in 2016. Solway's current projects include work on a second CD, *The Book of Love*, with his pianist wife Janice Fiamengo and writing for the major American political sites such as *PJ Media*, *American Thinker* and *WorldNetDaily*.

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