18

Introduction to Poetry

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In order to gain the greatest benefit from writing and studying poetry on a postgraduate creative writing course, there are number of matters to be borne in mind and acted on. Some of them are perfectly obvious; some may be completely new to you; and some of them have a significance which may not be immediately apparent. They are discussed under various headings below, but what they have in common is the aim of helping you to see your poems not simply in isolation but in relation to the art of poetry as a whole, its practices, history and traditions. The practising poet needs to occupy several roles, among them those of reader, critic, advocate and, perhaps, performer. We read and write poetry for pleasure – a pleasure intensified by knowledge and understanding. The poet studying on a writing course should feel free – no, should feel obliged – to be imaginatively and intellectually gluttonous. You may never have a better opportunity. Enjoy it!

Suggested reading

Eliot, T. S. (1951), 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', Selected Essays, London: Faber.

Herbert W. N. and Matthew Hollis (eds) (2000), *Strong Words: Modern Poets on Modern Poetry*, Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books.

Preminger Alex and T. V. F Brogan (eds) (1993), *The Princeton Encyclopaedia of Poetry and Poetics*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Wandor, Michelene (2003), 'A creative writing manifesto', in Siobhan Holland (ed.), *Creative Writing: A Good Practice Guide*, London: English Subject Centre.

1. Vocation

Only a lunatic or a charlatan would consider poetry as a possible career. It can, however, be a vocation, in the sense of 'a calling', rather than in the present-day sense of an occupation requiring practical training (although writing poetry is, of course, a wholly practical activity). In 1903 the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1876–1925) wrote the first of a series of *Letters to a Young Poet*, addressed to a military cadet, Franz Xaver Kappus, in which he tried to answer the young man's questions about poetry and being a poet. Rilke's first letter includes this very famous passage:

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EBSCO Publishing : eBook Collection (EBSCOhost) - printed on 1/17/2020 10:15 AM via UNIVERSITAET WIEN
AN: 783916 ; Earnshaw, Steven.; The Handbook of Creative Writing
Account: s3700943.main.ehost

> You must seek for whatever it is that obliges you to write . . . You must confess to yourself whether you would truly die if writing were forbidden to you. This above all: ask yourself in the night, in your most silent hour – *Must* I write? If there is an affirmative reply, if you can simply and starkly answer '*I must*' to that grave question, then you will need to construct your life according to that necessity. (Rilke 2000: 174)

Rilke's words are both stirring and intimidating. Who would not aspire, at least with part of themselves, to satisfy that stern central enquiry? One is also tempted to irreverence: for most of his working life Rilke lived like an aristocrat, that is, without having to make a living, which took care of the construction of life. He lived separately from his wife and took a fairly distant interest in his daughter. Many of us have obligations other than poetry, and we would not willingly neglect them. Yet if writing poetry is to matter to us, if it is to stand at the centre of our imaginative lives, we must make a contract with ourselves to keep its importance in view. We must, in fact, have enough selfishness to go on tending and deepening our interest. Poetry is uncompromising. Rather than take second place, it may simply go away. Many of those undertaking writing courses are returning as mature students, often with family responsibilities. To enrol on an MA is an assertion of freedom which may well require a degree of courage. Yet experience shows, even at this stage, how often and how easily students' interests are pushed aside in favour of other claims. One consequence is frustrated literary development, a fragmentary poetic education in which bad habits go unchallenged and important areas of the poetic repertoire remain unexplored. It is sometimes said that poetry suits a crowded life better than fiction, but the grain of truth such statements might contain is often tainted with an inhibiting modesty about the value of the undertaking, and by formal timidity. The poet must find a *modus vivendi*, a time and a place to work with neither infringement nor the sense that poetry is being privileged beyond its 'real' importance. This remains as true for the poet now as it was for the novelist Virginia Woolf when she wrote 'A Room of One's Own' in 1929.

Suggested reading

Rilke, Rainer Maria (2000), *Sonnets to Orpheus and Letters to a Young Poet,* trans. Stephen Cohn, Manchester: Carcanet.

Woolf, Virginia (1998), *A Room of One's Own*, Morag Shiach (ed.), Oxford: Oxford University Press.

2. The status of poetry

In our time poetry has little cultural prestige. As Dana Gioia puts it, the residual respect for poets is like that accorded 'to priests in a town of agnostics' (Gioia 1992: 1). The reasons for this are complex, but among the most important is poetry's accessibility – not to readers but to writers. It is often said that poetry has more writers than readers. It costs nothing to write a poem, but to make a film or stage an opera is an expensive business, beyond the reach of the amateur. The economic accessibility of poetry to participants is, in a sense, one of its problems. Anyone can have a go. The question is: have a go at what? What do the millions of amateur poets consider themselves to be doing? Somewhere among the motives, though perhaps not named as such, is the idea of self-expression. That self-expression is an undeniable good is a tenet of modern orthodoxy, and this is not the place to dispute it. Applied to poetry, however, self-expression becomes problematic when it is assumed to be identical with artistic success.

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The confusion of art with the self is in part an unintended consequence of the late eighteenth- early nineteenth-century Romantic period, when the self of the artist, and his/her interior life, became eminent and urgent matters for poets such as Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats and Shelley. To the uninstructed, to write of what is 'personal' has gone on being the 'real' task of poetry. The border between poetry *as an art* and related but different activities such as diary-keeping and personal testimony, has ever since been breached in the popular mind; there, authenticity, truth to feeling and the fact that these-events-actually-happened-and-not-only-that-but-they-happened-to-me becomes the final court of artistic appeal, beyond the reach of serious critical authority because true (though rarely beautiful).

By this article of faith, poetry is thus bound up with its creator in an especially privileged way. At its crudest, according to this confusion, to slight the poem is to demean its maker, an attitude which invokes discourses of rights, empowerment and identity, whose concerns are not ultimately with art as art but with the esteem due to the self or the group. Much has been written in recent years from the perspectives of ethnic minorities, feminism and sexual preference. Such political preoccupations are of course an inalienable part of poetry. The problem arises (as with any other interest group, white bourgeois males included) when the fact of making oneself heard is viewed as identical with the creation of art – that is, when craft is subordinate to sincerity. To need to state this so baldly indicates the tenacity of the error.

To have something to say is fundamental to poetry, but subject matter is not the same as art.

Suggested reading

Gioia, Dana (1992), *Can Poetry Matter?* St. Paul: Graywolf Press.

O'Brien, Sean (1998), *The Deregulated Muse: Essays on Contemporary British and Irish Poetry*, Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books.

Paterson, Don (2004), 'The dark art of poetry', London: Poetry Book Society, www.poetrybooks.co.uk

3. The poem

It is in the nature of poetry that the attempt to define a poem remains unfinished. The place to begin is by reading Aristotle's *Poetics* (c. 350 BC), after which there is a vast body of description and analysis from which a number of phrases have entered common usage, including 'emotion recollected in tranquillity', 'memorable speech', 'the best words in the best order', 'no ideas but in things,' 'negative capability', 'objective correlative', 'what oft was thought but ne'er so well expressed' and 'imaginary gardens with real toads in them'. As time passes and as needs and interests shift, new possibilities are added to the store of working definitions. The poems written by the New York poet Frank O'Hara (1926–66) would not have been thinkable for John Milton or William Wordsworth; equally, however, all three poets were writing with an intense consciousness of the *medium* in which they were working – as distinct, that is, from the instrumental, prosaic view of language appropriate to a letter from one lawyer to another, or for supplying instructions for the assembly of a flat-pack bookcase (though these language-uses can also be subverted into poetry). In his poem 'Poetry', O'Hara addresses the art itself, attempting to convey both its immediacy and its emerging historical context:

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All this I desire. To
deepen you by my quickness
and delight as if you
were logical and proven,
but still be quiet as if
I were used to you; as if
you would never leave me
and were the inexorable
product of my own time.
(O'Hara 1991: 18)

We can note the conflict from which this poem derives its energy. The poem is an imaginative construction, a set of propositions qualified by the repeated phrase 'as if': the poem is not literally the case, but clearly the poet appears to need to believe that it is and that the poem can bridge the gap between the possible and the actual. And while we note the built-in reservations, we note too that the poem makes present to us possibilities (for example, that 'you would never leave me') even as it seems to deny them. This relationship to fact – which is, to put it mildly, ambiguous – is part of the power of poetry. It appeals to an authority beyond mere literal truthfulness, making present what is not literally there. In the *Poetics* Aristotle drew a distinction between the poet and the historian: 'the one says what has happened, the other the kind of thing that would happen' and goes on: 'For this reason poetry is more philosophical and more serious than history. Poetry tends to express universals, and history particulars' (Aristotle 1996: 16). Poets might want to insist that the way to the universal is through the particular, but otherwise would be pleased to accept this ranking. Sir Philip Sidney in his *Defence of Poetry* (1595) wittily rephrased the poet's privileged condition. The poet he says, cannot lie, since 'he nothing affirmeth, and therefore never lieth . . . Though he recount things not true, yet because he telleth them not for true, he lieth not' (Sidney 1966: 25). Sidney has Plato in mind here: in the *Republic* (written c. 375 BC) the Athenian philosopher (427–347 BC) has Socrates argue that poets must be excluded from the ideal society because they deal in illusions, in imitations (Plato 2003: 335–53). Sidney also suggests that Plato, manifestly far from immune to the pull of art and fiction, was himself a poet (Sidney 1966: 19).

To consider poetry as a power of such an order, capable of unsettling philosophers (and, perhaps more to the point, political rulers) is a useful and heartening corrective to the impression we might gain from the mass of relatively unambitious, frequently and flatly anecdotal poetry to be found in magazines. The misapplied democratising impulse of the times often seems to have shrunk the conception of the poetic to a condition of modesty so extreme as to produce work which is more or less invisible and inaudible. It should be noted that when we speak of modesty we are not speaking of subject matter or length – an epic is not in this respect superior to a brief lyric – but of imaginative compass, the three-dimensional sense of all that is possible for a particular poem to offer through the poet's alertness to image, music, tone and so on. In this sense, a brief, quietly spoken poem such as Edward Thomas's 'Tall Nettles' (Thomas 2004: 111) is an ambitious piece of work, alert to every implication of its material, alert to the power of quietness itself in making the world present to us. A similarly brief poem, William Blake's 'The Sick Rose' (Blake 1997: 216–17), vastly different in tone and address, manages to blend two scales of perception – the cosmically vast, the intimately particular – in a single utterance. Different again is

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Sylvia Plath's 'Ariel', a wonderfully compact dramatic lyric rendering a complex sensuous and emotional experience (Plath 1981: 194).

The Greek root of the word poem – *poiesia* – means *making*, an act dependent on artistry, skill, practice and – let it be said – a capacity not merely for taking endless pains but for enduring perpetual dissatisfaction. Our works, for example the poems we write, serve as our judges and give us the measure of ourselves. The court of poetry can be severe in its sentencing. But any poet worth the name is a recidivist.

Suggested reading

Aristotle (1996), *Poetics*, trans. Malcolm Heath, London: Penguin.
Plato, (2003), *Republic*, trans. Desmond Lee, London: Penguin.
Sidney, Philip (1966), *Defence of Poetry*, Jan van Dorsten ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press.

4. Form

Form, which is discussed in detail in W. N. Herbert's essay in the next chapter, is a term so important in poetry as to seem almost synonymous with it. Like poetry itself, form resists ready definition, but it is useful to think of it as a series of fruitful constraints whose function is both to exclude accidents and to provoke them. Rhyme, rhythm and metre, refrains, the stanza, enjambment, local and extended musical effects, all these will come under the heading of form, but form is also difficult to separate from matters such as sentence structure and rhetorical devices involving balance, contrast, amplification and repetition.

Poetic form can be illuminated by a comparison with prose. The fiction of Henry James (1843–1916), for example, is elaborately formal at both local and structural levels: for James, this organising power, applied to the psychology of his characters – which it's hard to resist calling poetic – is what elevates the novel to the status of art. Poetry carries the organising process a stage further, its thematic motifs not merely shaped by, but *coming to being in* the music of verse. Moreover poetry invites or teases the reader to notice (or at times insists upon) formality in action. Though form often works subtly, it can, equally, be a means of display, and of artistic assertion. Form is a source of authority: the octet, the turn, the sestet and the resolution of a sonnet all enforce the poem's persuasive power. Form is a means of memorability, as playground rhymes and football chants indicate. In pre-literate societies, poems for recital were learned with the aid of mnemonic devices whose traces persist in early written poems such as Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (c.750 BC). Perhaps the first poetic form is the list.

Given that poetry and form are inextricable, the subject creates a surprising degree of unease. Form involves a specific craft skill – the ability to organise words and sounds into patterns of varying complexity – a skill which exists independently of attitude or opinion and cannot simply be supplanted by them. Anthony Hecht puts the matter plainly:

> not a few poets, under the pretext of freeing themselves from the bondage of prosodic and formal considerations, have found . . . a convenient way to avoid the very obvious risks entailed by submission to form and meter: unskilled attempts are instantly to be detected, and on these grounds alone it is literally *safer* to play the poetic role of independent radical. (One such radical has recently affirmed that anyone who observes formal constraints is unambiguously a fascist.) (Hecht 2004: 2)

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The widespread present-day confusion and ignorance about form provide another example of unintended consequence – in this case, derived from early twentieth-century modernism. When Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot and others began to employ free verse or *vers libre* they were attempting to overcome a crisis in English poetry, believing that Romanticism had run into the sand, and that its formal methods had lost their imaginative urgency and become merely habitual and decorative. Pound succinctly approved of Eliot's view of free verse, commenting: 'Eliot has said the thing very well when he said, "No *vers* is *libre* for the man who wants to do a good job"' (Pound 1954:12), that is, that free verse is not an *abandonment* of form but, rather, a *version* of form, an addition to the existing repertoire of formal possibilities. Traditional, newly devised, free – whatever form a poem takes, it must be more than an accident, must be able to give an account of itself, even when, as is to be hoped, its effects exceed the poet's deliberate intent.

Lip-service is often paid to form nowadays. The Japanese *haiku* is widely used 'as a form' in a merely arithmetical sense. More elaborately, creative writing students are often encouraged to write villanelles, though there is perhaps no other form as likely to expose the merely mechanical nature of the exercise, not to mention the banality of the content. Form as exercise is only valuable as part of the continuity of writing, not as the arcane requirement of an imaginary examination board which, once satisfied, can be forgotten. If you want to write villanelles you should study versions of the form such as Auden's 'Miranda's Song' from *The Sea and the Mirror* (Auden 1991: 421) and variations such as William Empson's 'Missing Dates', 'Success' and 'The Teasers' (Empson 2000: 79, 80, 86) before, or perhaps instead of, embarking on your own attempts. Similar reservations apply to the sestina. It is altogether more urgent to be able to master writing in iambic metre, to control a passage of blank verse, to be at ease with ballad form, with couplets, quatrains and sestets, to develop an accurate ear not just for stress and syllable count but for effective combinations of sound, and to understand how free verse alludes, directly or by contrast, to the forms from which it departs. At the same time, as a poet you need to develop an understanding of the powers and consequences of sentence structure, which is certainly as important (even when fragmentary) in poetry as in prose but which, like verse form, is often ignored or uneasily evaded.

Suggested reading

Donaghy, Michael (1999), *Wallflowers: a Lecture with Missing Notes and Additional Heckling*, London: The Poetry Society.

Carper, Thomas and Derek Attridge (2003), *Meter and Meaning*, London: Routledge.

Hecht, Anthony (2004), 'On Rhyme', and 'The Music of Form' in *Melodies Unheard: Essays on the Mysteries of Poetry*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Hollander, John (1981), *Rhyme's Reason: A Guide to English Verse*, New Haven: Yale University Press.

Pound, Ezra (1954), 'A Retrospect' in *Selected Literary Essays*, T. S. Eliot (ed.), London: Faber.

Wainwright, Jeffrey (2004), *Poetry: The Basics*, London: Routledge.

5. Analysing

Diverse experiences and attitudes mean that some of you will be comfortably accustomed to the academic context; others will be returning after long absence; yet others may be coming to the setting for the first time. For a significant proportion of each of these rough groupings,

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along with the students' identification of themselves as writers there comes, in many cases, suspicion and fear of 'academic' approaches, of analysis and reasoned criticism, of a tendency to 'kill' material by 'dissecting' it. If you intend to write poetry seriously you will need to recognise these fears as hindrances to the development of your work, and that they can be outgrown and shed. If it is true that, as Wallace Stevens puts it in 'Man Carrying Thing', 'The poem must resist the intelligence / Almost successfully' (Stevens 1984: 350), the effort and the pleasure of understanding, with all the nuances which the word 'understanding' carries, form a major part of reading poetry. Our love of poems – a love, if we're lucky, which is formed in childhood – may begin in a mixture of fascination, uncertainty and recognition, and a desire to follow this creature further into the wood, to learn its names and its habits. Reading as adults can intensify such pleasures by opening the question of *how* the poem exerts its effect on us. Its meaning is inseparable from its method. Sound effects, rhythm, timing, imagery, sentence structure, figures of speech, allusiveness, and all that comes under the heading of poetic gesture, are all working parts of the poem, and what they work on is the reader. T. S. Eliot was right to attribute to poetry the power to communicate before it is understood (Eliot 1951: 238); the task of the poet-as-reader, though, is to value and enrich that communication by enquiring into its methods – without expecting ever to exhaust the enquiry.

It is not true to say that only poets can write about poetry, but the critical writing and informal observations of poets on their art are often among the most interesting and illuminating, perhaps because they arise from the poets' efforts to clarify or justify their own practice, or to solve problems with which the poetry has presented them. Such writing is historically situated but remains at the core of discussion about poetry. We could go back to Sidney's *Defence of Poetry* and work – very selectively – forward through Johnson's *Lives of the Poets*, Wordsworth's *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*, Keats's letters, Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*, the essays of Eliot, Pound, William Empson and W. H. Auden, Elizabeth Bishop's letters, Randall Jarrell's reviews, the essays of Seamus Heaney and Tom Paulin and many others.

Suggested reading

Scully, James (ed.) (1966), *Modern Poets on Modern Poetry*, London: Collins.
Hamburger, Michael (1970), *The Truth of Poetry*, London: Penguin.

6. Reading

In her crisp and practical 'Creative Writing Manifesto', Michelene Wandor is surely correct to state that one of the primary purposes of undergraduate creative writing courses – and this applies equally to postgraduate courses – is 'to create more hungry readers' (Wandor 2003: 13). For many of you, reading will prove to be the most important and permanently influential part of the course. It is essential for you to read as widely as possible, not simply among contemporary or modern poets but in the whole tradition of poetry in English and in the poetic traditions of other languages too. Clearly, this is not a finite project, but that fact should reduce it neither to a hobby nor an option. Experience indicates that even strongly committed postgraduate students may in fact have read very little and that what they have read is often narrowly confined to the contemporary. There may also be resistance to items of required reading, on the grounds of difficulty, unfamiliarity or alleged 'irrelevance'. These terms have become part of the informal orthodoxy (formerly known as cant) of the age. Before sitting down to write this paragraph, I heard a BBC Radio 4 continuity announcer explaining that the next programme would be about *Macbeth*. My interest turned to gloom

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when she went on to say that the task of the director was 'to make the play relevant and accessible to a modern audience'. How strange that the play had survived 400 years without such assistance. The challenge (and the pleasure, the more intense for being at times hard-won) is to equip ourselves to read poetry, not to adjust poetry to our limitations. As Robert Frost put it, 'A poem is best written in the light of all the other poems ever written. We read A the better to read B (we have to start somewhere; we may get very little out of A). We read B the better to read C, C the better to read D, D the better to go back and get something out of A. Progress is not the aim, but circulation' (Frost 1966: 97).

Suggested reading

Keegan, Paul (ed.) (2005), *The Penguin Book of English Verse,* London: Penguin.

Ferguson, Margaret Mary Jo Salter and John Stallworthy (eds) (1996), *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, New York: F. W. Norton.

Padel, Ruth (2002), *52 Ways of Looking at a Poem,* London: Chatto and Windus.

Ricks, Christopher (ed.) (1999), *The Oxford Book of English Verse,* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

7. Company

Douglas Dunn's poem 'The Friendship of Young Poets' opens: 'There must have been more than just one of us, / But we never met' and adds 'My youth was as private / As the bank at midnight' (Dunn 1986: 38). It is natural to seek the company of the like-minded. Those coming to postgraduate writing courses have often been members of workshops before and now seek a more formal setting in which to develop their work. The university may – in fact, should – also supply new and fruitful informal groupings. As well as sharing a literary passion, most poets need mutual support, acknowledgment and the recognition of their peers. It is worth being careful and demanding about the company you keep. Just as the border between poetry and testimony has been smudged, so in workshops the distinction between criticism and therapy is sometimes lost. There is a fear of giving and receiving offence, and often this is accompanied by a vague, impressionistic way of discussing poems, heavy on affirmation, light on explanatory detail and the examination of technique. Michelene Wandor offers a succinct account of an approach which begins in the classroom but should extend into informal workshops:

> Work to develop a critical vocabulary which outlaws all subjectivist responses: 'I like', 'I dislike', 'I prefer': all distract from the analytical process. Value judgements, if used at all, should be left to the END of the analytical process. I have found that if illuminating and exciting textual analysis takes place, value judgements effectively become unnecessary. This doesn't mean that anything goes; rather, it constantly recreates a notion of the use of 'criticism', as a meaningful analytical process, which leads to understanding why certain approaches to writing work better than others, and thus encourages good practice. Notions such as 'positive' or 'negative' criticism, which accrue as correlatives to premature value judgement, thus also become irrelevant. (Wandor 2003: 14)

If only it were so simple in practice! But Wandor's severe clarity is bracing. She has no time for notions of writing as therapy or comfort, or for cosy mutual support. What she demands, without making it explicit, is that the poet be able to consider the poem as a work separate from the self, with its own life to live. This is, of course, extremely difficult, and the difficulty is by no means confined to novices.

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8. Audience

In fact, the people that students of writing are most keen to meet are not others like themselves, but publishers, agents, producers and anyone else with access to the business. The economics of poetry, as I suggested earlier, are relatively constrained, but the anxiety to publish is at least as powerful among poets as among novelists – perhaps because for most poets publication is likely to have to be its own reward. Writers want readers and audiences, understandably. The problem arises when public readings and publications are assumed to be proof of quality in themselves. In this respect there are districts of poetry which at times resemble the sub-cultural worlds of some kinds of genre fiction or music, existing beyond the reach of general interest or serious critical scrutiny – and intended, indeed, to occupy such a place of safety. It's a free country; people may treat their work as they choose, but the real challenge of finding and addressing an audience is more exacting. Moreover, an indifferent MA in Writing is not infrequently used as a credential for teaching writing, which helps to perpetuate a cycle of mediocrity. Go where the difficulty is – the best magazine, the strenuous workshop, the impossible publisher.

9. Activities

In his essay 'The Poet and the City' W. H. Auden imagined a poetic academy where the students would engage in activities such as learning poetry by heart, the study of ancient and modern languages, translation, parody, cooking, care of a domestic animal and the cultivation of a garden (Auden 1963: 77). The emphasis would be on *doing* what may not come easily, since originality can, in a sense, take care of itself. As indicated earlier, basic forms need to be acquired. For blank verse read Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth; for ballads see the Border Ballads and modern exemplars such as Auden and Louis Simpson; for sonnets you might begin with Don Paterson's anthology *101 Sonnets* (1999). More tailored workshop activities need to produce a friction between habit and challenge – to make you look again at fundamentals such as careful observation and the influence of sentence construction; to enhance your sense of the *dramatic*, three-dimensional possibilities of poetry; to offer specific technical challenges.

1. Just the facts, Ma'am

Read Edwin Morgan's 'Glasgow March 1971' from the sequence 'Instamatic Poems' (Morgan 1996: 217). Attempt a similar brief factual presentation of a single event without commentary. Then read 'Ellingham Suffolk January 1972' (223) from the same sequence and consider how depiction crosses over into suggestion and interpretation. Follow this by reading August Kleinzahler's 'Snow in North Jersey', Carol Ann Duffy's 'Prayer', Douglas Dunn's 'The River Through the City' and Elizabeth Bishop's 'The Bight'. One of the most powerful symbolic properties is *the fact.*

2. The rules

Use postcard reproductions of paintings, photographs, movie posters, wartime propaganda posters, advertisement, etc. Assume that each card contains the equivalent of a movie trailer for an entire world, consistent in every way with what is shown on the

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card. Devise a set of rules – one sentence for each – governing this world. These can be commands, prohibitions and statements of fact. Now write a poem in the first person from the point of view of an inhabitant of this world (that is, write a dramatic monologue). Only one topic is forbidden: you must not specifically refer to the rules. You may prefer to exchange cards and rules with another member of the group. Read Robert Browning, 'My Last Duchess', Philip Larkin, 'Livings' and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's story 'The Yellow Wallpaper'.

3.The Poem Noir

Parody and popular cultural references are significant elements in contemporary poetry. See Alice Notley's 'A California Girlhood' and, for our present purpose, Charles Simic's 'Private Eye'. The aim of this activity is to explore and take possession of a prominent example – the intimately related hardboiled crime novel and Hollywood film noir.

The Poem Noir Manifesto

'To make a movie only takes a girl and a gun'. – Jean-Luc Godard

1. It is alleged that the demands of contemporary life prevent people having time to read – in particular the classics of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century fiction. Students of literature, for example, are often heard to say this.
2. It is alleged that the visible image – film, video, digital art – has displaced the written word in the affections of the world: the triumph of passivity.
3. It is alleged that *film noir* of the 1940s and 1950s is the most *poetic* of film genres because of the unity of form and content on which it depends, and because, too, of the secret artistry of writers, directors and cameramen working in the world of the B movie.
4. It is alleged that of the surviving written genres the crime novel is among the most enduring. Praise of such novels is often framed in approving comparisons with *film noir*.
5. It is alleged by the poet X that the best day's work he ever did was writing the back cover blurb for a paperback reissue of a hardboiled crime novel. There is, he argued, a poetics of the blurb – economy, vocabulary, tone, a particular realm of detail and suggestion – which might assure such work the status of a secret art, a poem read by the many.
6. It is alleged that we must adapt or die.
7. Therefore let us write the secret poem that all the world will read.
8. Let it take the form of a blurb – which is to say a combination of synopsis and evocation.
9. Let it exploit the language and style of *film noir* and the hardboiled crime novel to reclaim the world for poetry.
10. Let this *poem noir* be laid out like a poem (no one will notice).
11. When people read nothing, they will still read blurbs.

Examples of Existing Blurbs

Dashiell Hammett – The Maltese Falcon (1930)
Sam Spade is hired by the fragrant Miss Wonderley to track down her sister, who has eloped with a louse called Floyd Thursby. But Miss Wonderley is in fact the beautiful and treacherous Brigid O'Shaughnessy, and when Spade's partner Miles Archer is shot while on Thursby's trail, Spade finds himself both hunter and hunted: can he track down the jewel-encrusted bird, a treasure worth killing for, before the Fat Man finds him?

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James M. Cain – Double Indemnity (1936)
Walter Huff is an insurance investigator like any other until the day he meets the beautiful and dangerous Phyllis Nirdlinger . . .

Manda Scott - No Good Deed (2002)
Orla McLeod knows too much for her own good. She knows about pain, she knows about guilt and she knows about survival . . . There's no way Orla McLeod's going to let anyone else take care of Jamie Buchanan. Not when Jamie's the sole witness to Tord Svensen committing an act of savagery of the kind that's rapidly turning him into one of the most feared criminals in Europe . . .

Kenneth Fearing – The Big Clock (1946)
George Stroud is a charming, yet amoral executive working for a magazine empire run by Earl Janoth. Stroud embarks on a dangerous affair with Janoth's mistress and when Janoth kills the woman, Stroud is the only witness who can pin him to the crime. The catch is that Janoth does not know that the man he saw in a shadowy street was Stroud – and he gives Stroud the job of tracking down the witness.

James Hadley Chase – You've Got It Coming (1955)
'The world is made up of smart guys who get rich and suckers who stay poor', Harry Griffin tells his girl friend, Glorie. 'I've been a sucker too long, now I'm going to be smart'.

4. Revisions

One of the hardest things to do is to manage the revision of your poems in a sufficiently detached way. There may be parts that, while immensely appealing, should be sacrificed for the greater good. Read A. E. Housman's 'Tell Me Not Here, It Needs Not Saying' and Louis MacNeice's 'Meeting Point'. Argue the case for removing one stanza from each.

5. Restorations

Tone and register are vital features of poetry. To recognise what is apt, to marry art and feeling in the gradient of a poem, to have the sense of imaginative hinterland – a poem will falter if these obligations are not met. Translation, and related activities such as restoration, can help develop our understanding and control of these factors.

Restore the missing parts of this text. It is thought to consist of six three-line stanzas, of which there survive: the first; a fragment of the first line of the second; the second and third lines of the fourth; and the first and second lines of the fifth.

When I see the silver
  Coiling waterways
    Like necklaces detached

From throats
  Please God no
    Calm or oblivion

Will occupy my heart,
  Or close it. Listen . . .

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The original can be found in Christopher Middleton (trans.) (2000), *Faint Harps and Silver Voices: Selected Translations*.

6. *English is a foreign language*

Style is double-edged, offering both authority and entrapment. We sometimes need to go out and come in again. Imagine that English is a foreign language to you, which you must translate into your own tongue. We begin with two medieval examples. N. B. avoid reading any glossary which accompanies the poems.

Example 1
Erthe tok of erthe
  Erthe with wogh;
Erthe other erthe
  To the erthe drogh;
Erthe leyde erthe
  In erthene through;
Tho hevede erthe of erthe
  Erthe ynogh.
      Anonymous, 1300–50

Example 2
Gloria mundi est:
Alse a se flouwende
Als a skiye pasende
Als the sadwe in the undermel
And als the dore turnet on a quell.
      Anonymous, 1300–50

Example 3
Supply a second, decisive stanza for this example:
I am the ancient Apple-Queen,
As once I was so am I now.
For evermore a hope unseen,
Betwixt the blossom and the bough.
      (? 1891)

Example 4
Attempt a translation of William Empson's 'Let it Go'.

(The first two poems can be found in *The Penguin Book of English Verse*, edited by Paul Keegan. Avoid reading the glosses until you have completed the activity. The last two poems can be found in *The Oxford Book of English Verse*, edited by Christopher Ricks, 1999).

7. *Line-breaks*

1. List as many factors influencing line-breaks as you can think of. Then apply your list to the passage from T. S Eliot's 'Burnt Norton' IV, lines 1–10, beginning 'Time and the bell have buried the day'.

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2. Ask a colleague to supply two anonymous pieces – one a free verse poem printed as prose, the other a prose poem. Decide which is the conventionally lineated poem and supply the line-endings.

8. The prose poem

1. Read and discuss the following: Rimbaud, from *Les Illuminations*, xli 'Jeunesse', in French and in parallel translation by Oliver Bernard; Zbigniew Herbert, 'To Take Objects Out', translated by John and Bogdana Carpenter; Francis Ponge, 'La Valise', in French and as translated by John Montague.
2. Write a suite of three prose poems – one about a city, one about a room, one about an object.

9. Sentences

1. The group divides in half.
2. The members of one half each write four lines in iambic pentameter taking the form of a command. At the same time, the members of the other half each write four lines in iambic pentameter in the form of a question.
3. When the pieces are written, the members of each half-group exchange work with the other half-group.
4. On a separate piece of paper, those who wrote the commands each reply to the questions with four lines each of iambic pentameter in the form of a single sentence.
5. On a separate piece of paper, those who wrote the questions each reply to the commands with four lines of iambic pentameter in the form of a single sentence riposte.

10. Ways in

A miscellany of possibilities which may stimulate your work.

1. A recipe
2. Instructions for how to get there
3. The Best Man's speech
4. The verdict of the court
5. Exchanges in the Personal Column
6. Last Will and Testament
7. A Christmas Round Robin
8. A review of a book of poems
9. How to use this equipment
10. Instructions for an original activity at a poetry workshop
11. A manifesto
12. Dear John
13. A curse
14. A prayer
15. This news just in . . .
16. A history of Spengler, Traum and Bubo Ltd

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17. Blankness!
18. Sex Tips for Dead People
19. What I Always Say
20. I wouldn't mind, except
21. Acceptance speech
22. Hagiography
23. Welcome to Xenograd: a guide for visitors
24. Oh, look, darling: lots of giant crabs
25. An epitaph

Suggested reading

Keegan, Paul (2005), *The Penguin Book of English Verse*, London: Penguin.
Ricks, Christopher (1999), *The Oxford Book of English Verse*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Sweeney, Matthew and John Hartley Williams (1996), *Writing Poetry and Getting Published*, London: Hodder.
Twichell, Chase and Robin Behn (2002), *The Practice of Poetry: Writing Exercises by Poets Who Teach*, New York: HarperCollins.

10. Conclusion

1. A poem is not an explanation but an event.
2. Consider language not as a vehicle for transporting meaning but as the place in which meaning is constituted.
3. The literal truthfulness of a poem is not an aesthetic defence of it.
4. Form is not a container. It is a creator.
5. 'Relevance' is a term of use to administrators, not to poets. The 'real world' is frequently mentioned, but its proponents never go there.
6. 'Gesang ist Dasein' – 'Singing is Being' – (Rilke 2000: 18–19)
7. 'I have come up with a proposal as to why poetry seems difficult for readers of literature in general. In prose you can say that your main purpose is *telling*. In poetry it is *making*. A poem is analogous to a painting, a piece of sculpture or a musical composition. Its material is language, and often that language will be almost mosaically fitted together, with words as the pieces of the mosaic. A novel, an essay and a TV sit-com also use words but without the oppressive need to honour them outside their utility in conveying meaning and feeling. These are turbulent waters: poetry is charged with meaning and feeling also, but first it has to satisfy the turbulence of its hope . . . as we write the poem we pitch it both forward into existence and backwards to its need to exist.' (Peter Porter, 'The poet's quarrel with poetry' [Porter 1998: 171–2])

In 'Musée Des Beaux Arts' Auden writes that the ship in Breughel's painting 'The Fall of Icarus' 'Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on' (Auden 1991: 179). Where is there to get to in poetry? Though we may take degrees in writing it, poetry does not consist of a series of qualifications. Nothing of poetry is ever finished: the challenge of writing poetry, of studying it, and of serving it as a reader, extends perpetually, and should be accepted in the light of that fact. In the same way, the pleasures intensify and the discoveries extend without limit.

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