

Barbara Guest

A Reason for Poetics

*For all his purple, the purple bird must have
Notes for his comfort that he may repeat
Through the gross tedium of being rare.*
—Wallace Stevens

The Infancy of Poetics

The poem begins in silence.

Poetic Codes

A pull in both directions between the physical reality of place and the metaphysics of space. This pull will build up a tension within the poem giving a view of the poem from both the interior and the exterior.

Ideally a poem will be both mysterious (incunabula, driftwood of the unconscious), and organic (secular) at the same time. If the tension becomes irregular, like a heartbeat, then a series of questions enters the poem. What is now happening? What does the poem, itself, consider to be its probabilities? The poem needs to take care not to flounder, or become rigid, or to come to such a halt the reader hangs over a sudden cliff. It is noticeable that a poem has a secret grip of its own, separate from its creator.

The poem is quite willing to forget its begetter and take off in its own direction. It likes to be known as spontaneous. Some poets then become firm and send out admonitory hints. Others become anxious. A few become pleased with the trickster and want to adopt it. There are moments when mistaken imageries can lead in interesting directions. Poets even try to charm the poem. We have all taken these positions.

The conflict between a poet and the poem creates an atmosphere of mystery. When this mystery is penetrated, when the dark reaches of the poem succumb and shine with a clarity projected by the mental lamp of the reader, then an experience called *illumination* takes place. This is the most beautiful experience literature can present us with, and more precious for being extremely rare, arrived at through concentration, through meditation of the

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poem, through those faculties we often associate with a religious experience, as indeed it is. The reader is converted to the poem. (Invisible magic also passes between poet and reader.)

Mystery, with its element of surprise and, better word, audacity. At once unexpected dramas have entered the poem. The search for its originating mystery now becomes an adventure. Poet and reader perform together on a highwire strung on a platform between their separated selves. Now an applause for the shared vigilance.

The usefulness of the tension set up in a poem is to arrange its dimensions. The poem stretches, looking outwardly and inwardly, thus obtaining a plasticity that the flat, the basic words—what we call the language of a poem—demands and, further, depends upon. This cannot be achieved through language alone, but arrives from tensions placed on the poem's structure: variability of meter, fleeting moods of expression, trebled sound.

Each poet owns a private language. The poet relies on the pitch within the ear. The ear is also a private affair, and so is pitch. Much poetry betrays a tin ear. There is also trouble in possessing perfect pitch, which can lead to an obsessive need to listen to it. Like ravens quothing. But this is not a common trouble. Pitch and ear are the servants of language and cannot make their living anywhere else, even by escapades. Language can lead to trouble when words are selected solely for their sound, and meaning is then forced to hurry along after, trying to catch up. Sometimes it is necessary to dispense with a word, or rather to be cautious, when it intrudes upon form.

The structure of the poem should create an embrasure inside of which language is seated in watchful docility, like the unicorn. Poems develop a terrible possessiveness toward their language because they admire the decoration of their structure.

The Poetics of Survival

Poetry sometimes develops a grayness; the light can never get in. The surface is smudgy. Cézanne was irritated by this murkiness in painting and complained "the contour eludes me."

How splendid when a poem is both prospective and introspective, obeying tensions within itself until a classic plasticity is reached.

I have little regard for poems of mine which have become votives of obsolete

reactions. These poems appear to have no conscience, and worse, are passionless.

There is nothing fearsome about the chrome attic. There are more mad poets out on the lawn. And very few wear cloud trousers.

I wish the Emperor's new clothes were less a visual phenomenon and more poetry's plaintive sigh.

And then there is saving laughter. I don't mean by "laughter" what is known as "comic relief." That seems to me to be part of a philosophical argument surrounding questions such as "why did Shakespeare, or Meredith bring in such and such a character?" My laughter is bittersweet and brings us closer to irony, the mole of poetry. Irony is a coagulant of pain when the subject of the poem (the interior meaning) begins to draw blood. Robust poets, it seems to me, too seldom acknowledge this weapon against poetry's sores, the most suppurating of which is sentimentality.

Mandelstam once wrote of "sound spilling into fingers." That could be the noise of a poem when it experiences an ecstasy of recognition.

To keep the poem alive after its many varnishings.

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Frank O'Hara

Personism: A Manifesto

Everything is in the poems, but at the risk of sounding like the poor wealthy man's Allen Ginsberg I will write to you because I just heard that one of my fellow poets thinks that a poem of mine that can't be got at one reading is because I was confused too. Now, come on. I don't believe in god, so I don't have to make elaborately sounded structures. I hate Vachel Lindsay, always have. I don't even like rhythm, assonance, all that stuff. You just go on your nerve. If someone's chasing you down the street with a knife you just run, you don't turn around and shout, "Give it up! I was a track star for Mineola Prep."

That's for the writing poems part. As for their reception, suppose you're in love and someone's mistreating (*mal aimé*) you, you don't say, "Hey, you can't hurt me this way, I care!" you just let all the different bodies fall where they may, and they always do may after a few months. But that's not why you fell in love in the first place, just to hang onto life, so you have to take your chances and try to avoid being logical. Pain always produces logic, which is very bad for you.

I'm not saying that I don't have practically the most lofty ideas of anyone writing today, but what difference does that make? they're just ideas. The only good thing about it is that when I get lofty enough I've stopped thinking and that's when refreshment arrives.

But how can you really care if anybody gets it, or gets what it means, or if it improves them. Improves them for what? for death? Why hurry them along? Too many poets act like a middle-aged mother trying to get her kids to eat too much cooked meat, and potatoes with drippings (tears). I don't give a damn whether they eat or not. Forced feeding leads to excessive thinness (*effete*). Nobody should experience anything they don't need to, if they don't need poetry bully for them, I like the movies too. And after all, only Whitman and Crane and Williams, of the American poets, are better than the movies. As for measure and other technical apparatus, that's just common sense: if you're going to buy a pair of pants you want them to be tight enough so everyone will want to go to bed with you. There's nothing metaphysical about it. Unless, of course, you flatter yourself into thinking that what you're experiencing is "yearning."

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