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Mary Oliver

A Poetry Handbook

A PROSE GUIDE TO UNDERSTANDING
AND WRITING POETRY

A Poetry Handbook

MARY OLIVER

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Contents

INTRODUCTION

1

GETTING READY

7

READING POEMS

10

IMITATION

13

SOUND

19

MORE DEVICES OF SOUND

29

THE LINE

35

SOME GIVEN FORMS

58

VERSE THAT IS FREE

67

DICTION, TONE, VOICE

76

IMAGERY

92

REVISION

109

WORKSHOPS AND SOLITUDE

112

CONCLUSION

119

Permissions Acknowledgments

123

Index

127

The temple bell stops—
but the sound keeps coming
out of the flowers.

Bashō (1644–94)

(translated by Robert Bly)

Introduction

EVERYONE KNOWS THAT POETS are born and not made in school. This is true also of painters, sculptors, and musicians. Something that is essential can't be taught; it can only be given, or earned, or formulated in a manner too mysterious to be picked apart and re-designed for the next person.

Still, painters, sculptors, and musicians require a lively acquaintance with the history of their particular field and with past as well as current theories and techniques. And the same is true of poets. Whatever can't be taught, there is a great deal that can, and must, be learned.

This book is about the things that can be learned. It is about matters of craft, primarily. It is about the part of the poem that is a written document, as opposed to a mystical document, which of course the poem is also.

It has always seemed to me curious that the instruction of poetry has followed a path different from the courses of study intended to develop talent in the field of music or the visual arts, where a step-by-step learning process is usual, and accepted as necessary. In an art class, for example, every student may be told to make a drawing of a live model, or a vase of flowers, or three potatoes for that matter. Afterward, the instructor may examine and talk about the various efforts. Everyone in the class recognizes that the intention is not to accomplish a bona fide act of creation, but is an example of what must necessarily come first—exercise.

Is anyone worried that creativity may be stifled as a result of such exercise? Not at all. There is, rather, a certainty that dialogue between instructor and student will shed light on any number of questions about technique, and give knowledge (power) that will open the doors of process. It is craft, after all, that carries an individual's ideas to the far edge of familiar territory.

The student who wishes to write a poem, however, is nicely encouraged to go ahead and do so, and, having written it, is furthermore likely to be encouraged to do another along the same lines. Quickly, then, the student falls into a *manner* of writing, which is not a style but only a chance thing, vaguely felt and not understood, or even, probably, intended. Continuing in this way, the writer never explores or tries out other options. After four or five poems, he or she is already in a rut, having developed a way of writing without ever having the organized opportunity to investigate and try other styles and techniques. Soon enough, when the writer's material

requires a change of tone, or some complex and precise maneuver, the writer has no idea how to proceed, the poem fails, and the writer is frustrated.

Perhaps sometime you will have an idea for a piece of music, you may actually “hear” it in the privacy of your mind—and you will realize how impossible it would be to write it down, lacking, as most of us do, the particular and specialized knowledge of musical notation. Why should our expectation about a poem be any different? It too is specialized, and particular.

Poems must, of course, be written in emotional freedom. Moreover, poems are not language but the content of the language. And yet, how can the content be separated from the poem’s fluid and breathing body? A poem that is composed without the sweet and correct formalities of language, which are what sets it apart from the dailiness of ordinary writing, is doomed. It will not fly. It will be raucous and sloppy—the work of an amateur.

This is why, when I teach a poetry workshop, I remove for a while the responsibility of writing poems, and order up exercises dealing with craft. Since every class is different, the assignments, of course, differ too. Any instructor who agrees with the idea can easily think of suitable and helpful exercises. So can the students themselves.

When each workshop member is at the same time dealing with the same technique, and is focusing as well on the same assigned subject matter, these exercises also are of great help in making any gathering of writers into an attentive and interacting class. Each writer quickly

becomes interested in, and learns from, the work of the other members.

A poet's interest in craft never fades, of course. This book is not meant to be more than a beginning—but it is meant to be a good beginning. Many instructors, for whatever reasons, feel that their “professional” criticism (i.e., opinion) of a student's work is what is called for. This book is written in cheerful disagreement with that feeling. It is written in an effort to give the student a variety of technical skills—that is, options. It is written to empower the beginning writer who stands between two marvelous and complex things—an experience (or an idea or a feeling), and the urge to tell about it in the best possible conjunction of words.

As a room may be lighted by only a few dazzling paintings of the world's many, so these pages are illuminated by a handful of wonderful poems. It is a gesture only. There is no way to include half of what I would like to include—not enough money to pay for them, not enough paper to print them! Anyone who uses this handbook is expected to be reading poems also, intensely and repeatedly, from anthologies. Or, even better, from the authors' own volumes.

A Poetry Handbook was written with writers of poetry most vividly in my mind; their needs and problems and increase have most directly been my concerns. But I am hopeful that readers of poetry will feel welcome here, too, and will gain from these chapters an insight into the thoughtful machinery of the poem, as well as

some possibly useful ideas about its history, and, if you please, some idea also of the long work and intense effort that goes into the making of a poem. The final three chapters are especially directed toward issues important to the writer of poems, but here too the reader of poems is heartily welcome.

Throughout the book I have used the following phrases interchangeably: the student, the beginning writer, the writer.

Getting Ready

IF ROMEO AND JULIET had made appointments to meet, in the moonlight-swept orchard, in all the peril and sweetness of conspiracy, and then more often than not failed to meet—one or the other lagging, or afraid, or busy elsewhere—there would have been no romance, no passion, none of the drama for which we remember and celebrate them. Writing a poem is not so different—it is a kind of possible love affair between something like the heart (that courageous but also shy factory of emotion) and the learned skills of the conscious mind. They make appointments with each other, and keep them, and something begins to happen. Or, they make appointments with each other but are casual and often fail to keep them: count on it, nothing happens.

The part of the psyche that works in concert with consciousness and supplies a necessary part of the poem—the heat of a star as opposed to the shape of a star, let us say—exists in a mysterious, unmapped zone:

not unconscious, not subconscious, but *cautious*. It learns quickly what sort of courtship it is going to be. Say you promise to be at your desk in the evenings, from seven to nine. It waits, it watches. If you are reliably there, it begins to show itself—soon it begins to arrive when you do. But if you are only there sometimes and are frequently late or inattentive, it will appear fleetingly, or it will not appear at all.

Why should it? It can wait. It can stay silent a lifetime. Who knows anyway what it is, that wild, silky part of ourselves without which no poem can live? But we do know this: if it is going to enter into a passionate relationship and speak what is in its own portion of your mind, the other responsible and purposeful part of you had better be a Romeo. It doesn't matter if risk is somewhere close by—risk is always hovering somewhere. But it won't involve itself with anything less than a perfect seriousness.

For the would-be writer of poems, this is the first and most essential thing to understand. It comes before everything, even technique.

Various ambitions—to complete the poem, to see it in print, to enjoy the gratification of someone's comment about it—serve in some measure as incentives to the writer's work. Though each of these is reasonable, each is a threat to that other ambition of the poet, which is to write as well as Keats, or Yeats, or Williams—or whoever it was who scribbled onto a page a few lines whose force the reader once felt and has never forgotten. Every poet's ambition should be to write as well. Anything else is only a flirtation.

And, never before have there been so many opportunities to be a poet publicly and quickly, thus achieving the easier goals. Magazines are everywhere, and there are literally hundreds of poetry workshops. There is, as never before, company for those who like to talk about and write poems.

None of this is bad. But very little of it can do more than start you on your way to the real, unimaginably difficult goal of writing *memorably*. *That* work is done slowly and in solitude, and it is as improbable as carrying water in a sieve.

A final observation. Poetry is a river; many voices travel in it; poem after poem moves along in the exciting crests and falls of the river waves. None is timeless; each arrives in an historical context; almost everything, in the end, passes. But the desire to make a poem, and the world's willingness to receive it—indeed the world's need of it—these never pass.

If it is *all* poetry, and not just one's own accomplishment, that carries one from this green and mortal world—that lifts the latch and gives a glimpse into a greater paradise—then perhaps one has the sensibility: a gratitude apart from authorship, a fervor and desire beyond the margins of the self.

Reading Poems

MANY OF MY STUDENTS would spend almost all of their time writing and very little of it reading the poems of other poets, if they and not I were setting the assignments. Sometimes I don't blame them. There are so many poets!

But, to write well it is entirely necessary to read widely and deeply. Good poems are the best teachers. Perhaps they are the only teachers. I would go so far as to say that, if one must make a choice between reading or taking part in a workshop, one should read.

Of course, looking through books of poems to find one's particular instructors and mentors takes considerable time. Here are two things you might remember when you go into a bookstore or library and begin looking into the hundreds of books.

Time—a few centuries here or there—means very little in the world of poems. The Latin poets, the Vic-

torian poets, the Black Mountain poets—they all left us poems that are of abiding interest. The subjects that stir the heart are not so many, after all, and they do not change. Styles change, and the historical backgrounds change, but these are only peripheral matters.

In looking for poems and poets, don't dwell on the boundaries of style, or time, or even of countries and cultures. Think of yourself rather as one member of a single, recognizable tribe. Expect to understand poems of other eras and other cultures. Expect to feel intimate with the distant voice. The differences you will find between *then* and *now* are interesting. They are not profound.

Remember also that there is more poetry being written and published these days than anyone could possibly keep up with. Students who consider it necessary to keep abreast of current publications will never have time to become acquainted with the voices of the past. Believe me, and don't try. Or, at least, don't give up the time that you need to get acquainted with Christopher Smart, or Li Po, or Machado.

But perhaps you would argue that, since you want to be a *contemporary* poet, you do not want to be too much under the influence of what is old, attaching to the term the idea that old is old hat—out-of-date. You imagine you should surround yourself with the modern only. It is an error. The truly contemporary creative force is something that is built out of the past, but with a difference.

Most of what calls itself contemporary is built, whether it knows it or not, out of a desire to be *liked*.

It is created in imitation of what already exists and is already admired. There is, in other words, nothing new about it. To be contemporary is to rise through the stack of the past, like the fire through the mountain. Only a heat so deeply and intelligently born can carry a new idea into the air.

“Mary Oliver would probably never admit to anything so grandiose as an effort to connect the conscious mind and the heart (that’s what she says *poetry* can do), but that is exactly what she accomplishes in this stunning little handbook.”—*Los Angeles Times*

With passion, wit, and good common sense, the celebrated poet Mary Oliver tells of the basic ways a poem is built—meter and rhyme, form and diction, sound and sense. She talks of iambs and trochees, couplets and sonnets, and how *and why* this should matter to anyone writing or reading poetry. Drawing on poems from Robert Frost, Elizabeth Bishop, and others, Oliver imparts an extraordinary amount of information in a remarkably short space.

“This book is not meant to be more than a beginning—but it is meant to be a good beginning. It is about matters of craft, primarily. It is about the part of the poem that is a written document, as opposed to a mystical document, which of course the poem is also. . . . For poems are not words, after all, but fires for the cold, ropes let down to the lost, something as necessary as bread in the pockets of the hungry. Yes, indeed.”



MARY OLIVER, one of the most popular and widely honored poets in the U.S., has won the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize. She has conducted poetry workshops at many colleges and universities. A longtime resident of Provincetown, Massachusetts, she also holds the Catharine Osborn Foster Chair for Distinguished Teaching at Bennington College.

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