

## Diction, Tone, Voice

"WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE!" you say to someone who has just expressed himself with the help of slang or an expletive. What you really mean is "Watch your diction!" *Diction* means word choice.

The overall effect of the diction of a piece of writing, in addition to other elements, such as choice of subject, imagery, design of the poem, etc., is called *tone*.

The term *voice* is used to identify the agency or agent who is speaking through the poem, apart from those passages that are actual dialogue. This voice, or speaker of the poem, is often called the *persona*.

### The Contemporary Poem

For a poet, and indeed for any writer, diction has several components—the *sound* of the word; the *accuracy* of the word; and its *connotation*—the atmosphere, let us say, that is created by word choice.

Matters of sound were discussed in an earlier chapter. And we hardly need to dwell on the requirement of accuracy in the language of the poem, I hope! Which gives us leave to turn directly to the third factor, connotation.

As I have indicated, the body of poetry from which American poetry developed carried with it a sense of formality, of *difference* from the ordinary world. Metrical construction was part of it. An *intended* formality was another part of it.

Much of contemporary poetry—though by no means all of it—is written in a diction that almost belies that it was formally composed: its general tone is one of natural and friendly intimacy; the language is not noticeably different from ordinary language. You find words that are neither pretentious nor especially formal. They try to make the poem clear and accessible.

And you find the words of the poems placed in a rather uncomplicated order—rather the way you use words yourself, in fact. You find a style that is neither elaborate, nor prepossessing, nor self-conscious, nor rhetorical. You find that most of the poems are gatherings of words, in good order, in *simple* order, plain and appealing.

Very likely the mood that develops between you and such poems is one of confidence, even intimacy. You feel that the poems might have been written to you. They are not unlike letters you might have received from a good friend.

This tone of intimacy, of course, didn't just happen. It happened because the writer intended for it to happen. And while this is by no means the only kind of

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"i am accused of tending to the past . . ."

LUCILLE CLIFTON

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i am accused of tending to the past  
as if i made it,  
as if i sculpted it  
with my own hands. i did not.  
this past was waiting for me  
when i came,  
a monstrous unnamed baby,  
and i with my mother's itch  
took it to breast  
and named it  
History.  
she is more human now,  
learning language every day,  
remembering faces, names and dates.  
when she is strong enough to travel  
on her own, beware, she will.

poetry being written by contemporary poets, it is certainly one of the major styles, arguably *the* main style. Inside this poem of plain speech, the poet has moved, with great skill and all deliberate speed, from the role of "professor" to the role of fellow-citizen, neighbor, and friend.

And so there exists a definite sense of a *person*, a perfectly *knowable* person, behind the poem. In truth, it often seems that part of the poem's *raison d'être* is precisely to give us information about the writer—whether or not these facts are actual—even sometimes to tell the reader the most intimate details of the writer's life.

I don't suggest here that such a style of writing is either good or bad, only that it exists—that it is a common style of our time. It is the kind of poem the beginning writer is very likely to read, and thus to imitate.

I do suggest that there are two very possible consequences of this "knowable" person behind the poem. It may well be this sense of the poet—previously a rather mysterious and removed figure—as an ordinary, "knowable" person that has encouraged so many people to hope that they too can write poems. This new concept of the poet is invitational, and the spirit of our times is participatory, after all.

Also, I have wondered if the availability of this poem "format"—the poem as a candid and revelatory document—wasn't a timely encouragement to people to speak out about their personal and community life, to reveal themselves, as it were. I am speaking of women writers, and Afro-American writers, and Native Amer-

ican writers, for example, whose poems are often eloquent and powerful disclosures of gender or ethnic truths. I don't mean that this is all there is to it by any means; any innovation in a literary field must take fire from many sparks in the societal atmosphere. But it is a curious and even a marvelous fact: just at a time when these voices passionately wished to speak out, there was a poem-style that, in terms of apparatus and mood, was suitable for the purpose, and so seemingly plain and simple that it could, and I believe did, encourage many people who would never have attempted more formal verse.

This kind of contemporary poem has been shaped and reshaped in particular ways by many poets. And the finest of these poems brim from the particular, the regional, the personal, and become—as all successful poems must—"parables" that say something finally about our own lives, as well as the lives of their authors. Additionally, though so much in these poems is informal, the poems "work"; they slip from the instance and become the exemplum of the general; they glow with unmistakable universal meaning. Design, tone, passion—they are doing their good work here, too.

#### "Negative Capability"

Negative capability is not a contemporary concept, but a phrase originating with Keats. His idea was, simply but momentously, that the poet should be a kind of negative force—that only by remaining himself negative, or in some way empty, is the poet able to fill himself with an understanding of, or sympathy for, or empathy

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#### Workday

LINDA HOGAN

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I go to work  
though there are those who were missing today  
from their homes.  
I ride the bus  
and I do not think of children without food  
or how my sisters are chained to prison beds.

I go to the university  
and out for lunch  
and listen to the higher-ups  
tell me all they have read  
about Indians  
and how to analyze this poem.  
They know us  
better than we know ourselves.

I ride the bus home  
and sit behind the driver.  
We talk about the weather  
and not enough exercise.  
I don't mention Victor Jara's mutilated hands  
or men next door  
in exile  
or my own family's grief over the lost child.

When I get off the bus  
I look back at the light in the windows  
and the heads bent  
and how the women are all alone

in each seat  
 framed in the windows  
 and the men are coming home,  
 then I see them walking on the Avenue,  
 the beautiful feet,  
 the perfect legs  
 even with their spider veins,  
 the broken knees  
 with pins in them,  
 the thighs with their cravings,  
 the pelvis  
 and small back  
 with its soft down,  
 the shoulders which bend forward  
 and forward and forward  
 to protect the heart from pain.

with, the subject of his poem. Here is a passage (from a letter to his brothers)\* in which he discusses it:

"it struck me, what quality went to form a Man  
 of Achievement especially in Literature & which  
 Shakespeare possessed so enormously—I mean  
*Negative Capability*, that is when a man is  
 capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries,  
 doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact  
 & reason— . . ."

And he goes on,

"Coleridge, for instance, would let go by a fine  
 isolated verisimilitude caught from the Pene-  
 tralium of mystery, from being incapable of re-  
 maining content with half knowledge. This  
 pursued through Volumes would perhaps take  
 us no further than this, that with a great poet  
 the sense of Beauty overcomes every other con-  
 sideration, or rather obliterates all considera-  
 tion."

Keats elsewhere writes of "taking part" in the life of the  
 sparrow pecking crumbs at his window. "A Poet is  
 the most unpoetical of any thing in existence," he  
 says in still another letter, "because he has no Identity—he is continually in for—and filling some other

\**The Letters of John Keats*, edited by Hyder Edward Rollins (Cambridge:  
 Harvard University Press, 1958), Volume 1, p. 193.

Body— . . .”<sup>\*</sup> Neither was Keats bothered by the categories of animate and inanimate: his friend Richard Woodhouse records that Keats claimed he could “conceive of a billiard Ball that it may have a sense of delight from its own roundness, smoothness & very volubility & the rapidity of its motion.”<sup>†</sup>

Now, as then, the concept of negative capability goes to the heart of the matter—the “mere” diction of the poem, in any age, is the vehicle that holds, then transfers from the page to the reader an absolutely essential quality of real feeling. Poetry cannot happen without it; and no one has talked about it more usefully and marvelously than Keats; his commentary is as up-to-date as a sunrise.

### Poems by Type

#### *The Lyric Poem*

The poem most popular today is the fairly brief lyric poem. By fairly brief I mean to sixty lines or so, and probably shorter. A glance into any current anthology will quickly show how many poems of this type and length are being written, compared with poems of great length, or extreme brevity.

This lyric poem is brief, concentrated, has usually no more than a single subject and focus and no more than a single voice, and is more likely to employ a simple and natural rather than an intricate or composed mu-

<sup>\*</sup>*Ibid.* Letter to Richard Woodhouse, October 27, 1818.

<sup>†</sup>*Ibid.* Letter from Richard Woodhouse to John Taylor, about October 27, 1818.

sicality. It is not unlike a simple coiled spring, waiting to release its energy in a few clear phrases.

#### *The Narrative Poem*

The narrative poem is generally longer than the lyric poem, and its tone is without such a tightly coiled force. It is discursive, it pauses for moments of humor and slowly unfolding description. It sets an easy and readable pace, and helps us to enjoy sequential events. At times, in the lyric poem, we feel we are in a vortex; when we listen to the narrative poem, we are comfortable. Engaged, and at times entranced, we could listen for hours. We do not love anything more deeply than we love a story—narrative is at the center of all literature.

Whittier's *Snowbound* is a narrative poem. So is Keats's *The Eve of St. Agnes*, Walter de la Mare's *The Listener*, and Robert Penn Warren's *The Ballad of Billie Potts*.

#### *The Longer Poem*

No one writes epic poems now. But poets do write long poems, ambitious poems, with a central idea, digressions, and often different voices. Generally speaking, such poems contain many kinds of writing, according to the subject of the passage and the author's inclination. Such poems include many of the great works of our century: Williams's *Paterson*, MacLeish's *Conquistador*, R. P. Warren's *Audubon: A Vision*, Hart Crane's *The Bridge*, T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, for example.

Very long poems are not necessarily epic poems.

The epic poem requires a dignified theme, organic unity, and an orderly progress of the action,\* with a heroic figure or figures. *Beowulf* is an epic poem; so are the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

### *The Prose Poem*

The prose poem is too recent a form to have developed a tradition, and so definitions are hard to come by. What you see on the page is a fairly short block of type—a paragraph or two, rarely more than a page. It looks like prose. Perhaps it has characters, perhaps not. Often, it is pure description. It usually does have the same sense of difference from worldly or sequential time that one feels in a poem. And it does certainly ask to be read with the same concentration, and allowance for the fanciful and the experimental, that we give to the poem.

Because the prose poem is brief—or perhaps just because it is something other than a poem—it seems more often than not to have at its center a situation rather than a narrative. Nothing much *happens*, that is, except this: through particularly fresh and intense writing, something happens to the reader—one's felt response to the "situation" of the prose poem grows fresh and intense also.

What is especially fascinating about prose poems is the problem of making the language work *without the musicality of the line*. The syntax found in prose poems is often particularly exquisite, combining power and

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\*So said Aristotle.

grace. In fact, the prose of prose poems is often a real advertisement for the simple power and endless nuance of the English language.

Writers interested in this form should turn first to the prose poems of Charles Baudelaire and Arthur Rimbaud. James Wright and Robert Bly both published prose poems during the seventies, and even earlier. The number of poets who now at least occasionally write and publish prose poems is large, and growing larger.

### **Inappropriate Language**

Because every poem is a new creation and because the creative force often makes sweet use of the most unlikely apparatus, it is not always possible, or wise, to set down absolutely firm rules. Yet this can certainly be said: in almost any poem certain practices are appropriate, certain practices are inappropriate.

### *Poetic Diction*

Poetic diction is language in which all freshness is gone, from which credibility has long vanished, in which "the edge is off." The actual forming of the world of the poem, in the imagination, can't happen when poetic diction is used because the words or images are, simply, out of electricity. They are no longer functional words or images—instead they merely serve as points of reference to tell us what kind of thing is meant. They are stand-ins for a real thing that is not there. When we hear them we don't respond: we only go through the old gestures of an accustomed response. And nothing

kills a poem more quickly—for the poem, if it works at all, works as a statement that is experienced by the imagination, eliciting real rather than conditioned responses.

The language of poetic diction is romantic and its images come from the natural world. Patches of woods are “bowers”; fields are “emerald carpets”; trees are Druids or statesmen perhaps; the moonlight is a river; birds are members of a choir; the sun is the eye of heaven; and the sea is a briny bed. And so forth. It is a collection of real clunkers. It is language that is stale, mirthful when it does not mean to be, and empty. Avoid it.

### *The Cliché*

The cliché works in poems as it works in any kind of writing—badly. Do not use the cliché in a poem unless, perhaps, you are writing a poem about the cliché.

### *Inversion*

*Inversion*—changing the normal word order—is usually thought of as a bad thing. Of course it isn't, necessarily. When it is a useful change, we admire it. When it doesn't work, it stands out imprudently, it feels “out of whack,” contorted, and we want things put back into their usual order—subject/predicate, subject/predicate.

Bad inversion occurs primarily in metrical verse, and especially in rhymed metrical verse, where it becomes instantly apparent why the sentence has been shifted

about—so that the poet could employ the only rhyme he could think of.

But inversion takes place in free verse too. And always, just as when one exchanges an iambic foot for a trochaic foot, the inverted line calls attention to itself.

If you do not want a particular line to be especially noticed, if you are not striving for a specific emphasis when you manipulate the sentence, it is a good idea to question why you are doing what you are doing, and whether you should. Good inversion is wonderful. Good inversion is difficult to achieve. Bad inversion is never wonderful and rarely difficult to achieve.

### *Informational Language*

There is a kind of language that is clearly unsuitable when one is writing a poem. I call it informational language. It is the language one would use if one were writing a paragraph on how to operate a can opener. It is a language that means to be crisp and accurate. Its words are exact. They do not ever desire to throw two shadows. The language is cold. It does not reach for any territory beyond the functional.

### *Appropriate Language*

#### *Syntax*

Proper syntax never hurt anyone. Correct grammar and forceful, graceful syntax give the poem a vigor that it has to have. Just as the ellipsis, which is trying to imply a weighty “something” that has not been said but that

the poet wants felt, is a construct of weakness, so too is the dangling phrase. The phrase with no verb—no action and no placement—is more apt to sink the ship than to float it.

Every adjective and adverb is worth five cents. Every verb is worth fifty cents.

#### *Variety Versus Habits*

Effective writing varies its ingredients.

I once was given a poem in which all nouns, verbs, and even adjectives were doubled. Every one of them. This kind of writing points to one thing only—a bad habit that has not yet been discovered. One of the real values of the workshop is the possibility that someone will notice one's lackluster, monotonous, and persistent habits, and point them out. If you do not think this is one of the most important things you can do for yourself, or beg someone to do for you, think again.

#### *The Simple or the Complicated*

From time to time I have heard students complain that the advice of their elders is always the same—that they should write simply, freshly, and clearly—while at the same time many of the poems used as models are highly organized, complicated, and difficult. It is true. The reasoning is as follows: (1) The beginning writer should learn to construct the poem simply, freshly, and clearly, and then (2) the beginning writer will no longer be a beginning writer and can go on to more complicated, highly organized, and difficult work.

#### *A Note of Caution*

Finally, let me return to the important caution with which I ended a previous chapter: language is a vibrant, malleable, living material. In the writing of the poem, nothing, if it is done well and works to the desired effect, is wrong. This is true concerning all matters of technique, and it is true also concerning diction and tone and voice. We have momentous examples from poems themselves, and the good guidance of fine writers, and our own common good sense. We can know a lot. And still, no doubt, there are rash and wonderful ideas brewing somewhere; there are many surprises yet to come.