

SECTION II

Advice to Young Poets

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The ultimate consideration of a poet's weight or importance seems to be what the poet has to say and how much he has to say. If the matter is as simple as this, then we would not have much need for poets. If poets have great thoughts and wisdom to impart to the world, philosophers, theologians, historians and even scientists would surely be able to express them more clearly and succinctly. But poets do express them better – on everything in life that is life affirming, from profound wisdom to little instances of it that come from drawing meaning from the experience of having lived. When he is writing, the poet – unlike the philosopher and the others – does not just address the intellect. He attempts to draw the whole participation of the reader – including his mind, emotions, and senses (and maybe some responses deep in the subconscious) – to what he says in the microcosm of his poem. The reader's participation in the poems is whole, and if he is reading properly, acquiescent. In the microcosm of the poem, whatever is said is true. By his critical judgment, the reader can decide from his reading of the poem if he finds the experience trivial or profound, or if he disagrees absolutely with the poet or has come upon some deep wisdom about life. In most cases, judgments are somewhere in between the extremes. So in this sense, a poem's worth depends on what it says. But the matter does not end there. Judgments are never final. Reputations of poets rise and fall and rise again from age to age, depending on the values and cultural temper of each period.

What the foregoing leads up to is a discussion as to what it is that a poet does to make a poem. To draw the full attention of the reader into acquiescence to the words of his poem, he, in effect, creates an aural structure that is mildly incantatory. The reader goes along with the sound of the poem, then along with the sound when it is read, then into its ambience and into its experience. That is verse making, the structure to hold the poetry in it. There are a variety of techniques of doing this. It includes verse forms, rhyme, half rhyme, assonance, end stop, metre (both stressed and unstressed) and so on, but the most basic of all is rhythm. It may be smooth or it may be rough, depending on the nature of the material dealt with in the poem. The overall effect of rhythm is its sense of regularity, giving the unit of poetic meaning a beginning, a rising arc, and

a falling in a return. In other words, the unit takes on the shape of a "tune". Above all, a poem must not stutter or remain flat in stretches for lack of rhythm.

In spite of rhythm being a fundamental characteristic of poetry, we find that it is very common for beginning Anglophone poets in this country to write without giving thought to the fact that their poems are artifacts created not only to be read, but also to be heard. As an artifact in sound, they are constructed to produce their effects differently but essentially in the way spells do. The reading or incantation of a successful poem should draw the attentive listener's emotional assent to its created world of felt meaning within its small space. To create this effect, poems need to have the two basic elements of rhythm (I do not mean strict metre) and cadence to induce receptivity in the listener to what they say – rhythm by its regular pattern and cadence as a recognizable "tune" created from the exploitation of the tonal properties of language. Many of the poems that I have read show scant sign of the poets' awareness of rhythm and cadence.

There are no rules on how to create rhythm in a verse line. The poet just has to use his ear. All that can be said is that the poet composing in English must be very aware of its stresses and the alternation of stressed and unstressed vowels that produces rhythm in a verse line. In more than one or two of the poems I have come across, I find lines clotted up with three consecutive stresses and even four. This chokes up the flow of the verse. More common are poems that are mostly in prose, but which do take off as fluent verse. The poet should also take into account that English is a tonal language, not in the sense that Chinese is tonal. In Chinese, the meaning of a character changes with its tone. In English, however, a vowel rises in to a higher pitch with stress or when it occurs at the end of a question. Meaning does not change. The poet achieves fluency by exploiting this tonal quality. In doing this, the poet is guided by his ear just as a composer relies on his sense of tonality in writing down the succession of notes that make up a melody. In a successful poem, rhythm and cadence work to produce its aural structure. The poet, by this means, finds a distinct voice as it were. Since there no guiding rules for the writing of good verse lines, I can only give examples of what I mean:

(i)

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?

Thou art more lovely and more temperate:

Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,

And summer's lease hath all too short a date;

“Sonnet 18”, William Shakespeare

(ii)

Only teaching on Tuesdays, book-worming

in pajamas fresh from the washer each morning,

I hog a whole house on Boston's

“hardly passionate Marlborough Street,”

“Memories of West Street and Lepke”, Robert Lowell

I chose excerpt (i) as a clear example of what is meant by rhythm and cadence. Rhythm here comes from the regularity of the verse line's iambic feet. Cadence is in the line pairs, with one line followed by an answering line. Rhythm and cadence together create the poem's clear structure in sound reinforced in this instance by rhyme. In modern poetry, rhythm is freer in that the verse line is not made up of a regular number of feet. Rhythm and cadence are bound in balanced phrases that make up the verse line. The four lines in excerpt (ii) makes an arc in sound, rising from "only teaching" to reach "each morning" then descending to end at "Marlborough Street".

If the winners and the other listed poems were to be judged primarily on the basis of whether they succeed as aural structures, there would be too few poems left for consideration. Nevertheless, aural qualities are not set aside as a criterion of choice – the criterion is simply not applied too strictly. The poems chosen are judged mainly by (i) the depth of feeling of the poet for the subject he deals with; (ii) the seriousness and importance of the subject dealt with by the poet; and (iii) the poem's otherwise good lines are not seriously marred by the intrusion of words or phrases that jar with the tone of voice of the poem, or that are vague in meaning, confusing as metaphor, or even make no sense in context. As mentioned above, the winning and short-listed poems must also have the three judges' consensus on their selection.

At the outset of this comment, I have said that the weight or importance of a poem rest on what it says. This is subject to qualifications. The most important of these is the poet's choice of words. The words the poet chooses must carry a tone or a voice that is consonant with what he says what moves him deeply. Tone is the test of the authenticity of the depth and breadth of experience in recall that moves him. It is not possible to teach the development of an ear for tone. This comes from long experience of exposure to poems of all kinds. For the poet, the choice of words is probably the most important skill he should have. For this, he should be someone who loves to be around words. He should be open to their sensuous qualities, how they take on a different feel in association with other words, their cultural and intellectual associations, how they change over the ages, their origins and so on. A poem then is made up of words with the rhythm and cadences not unlike a spell to help the reader suspend his judgment/belief and open himself to the poet's felt thoughts about whatever that moves him (the poet) in his experience of the world. If it is successful, a reader who experiences what it offers will find what the poet has to say to be of interest.

A final word. A poet should not be feeling that he is working in isolation. Writing is a communal (in a benign sense) enterprise. He has contemporaries who are also poets. He should see himself in their work and see himself as part of an enterprise to create work that speaks for his time. He should see his work in relation to others, and in seeing himself as contributing to a community effort should give greater meaning to his own work. He should also know what his predecessors have done and are still doing. He can challenge, resolve to produce entirely new and different poetry in areas they never thought of venturing into, or he can try to continue what they have done or even learn from them. In this way, he contributes to the continued development of a body of poetry that is particular to the country. If this continues down two more generations, a tradition may grow out of it.

Editor's note: This article is based on the comments that Wong Phui Nam gave at the prize-giving ceremony for the Malaysian Poetry Writing Competition 2021, which he served as a judge for.