

## Writeous – by Ray

### Playing With The Net Up.

*“I would as soon write free verse as play tennis with the net down.” ~Robert Frost, 1935*

Last month, we explored the evolution of a piece of ‘poetic’ prose into an actual poem. At one point, we discovered that we were close to a poetic *form* (a haiku), and decided to take that approach. I mentioned this will not always be an available, or attractive, choice.

Personally, although I like ‘form,’ I only partially share Mr. Frost’s position. The modern world is not on his side. There are many poetry competitions that specify, “No rhyming poetry.” There are even more that seem to have tacit prejudices against it. It’s a fact of life.

Although there are innumerable kinds of *formal* poetry, the most common characteristics of poetic *form* are *cadence* and *rhyme*. (By *cadence* I will mean the regular repeating of a rhythmic pattern.) These two tools are historically intertwined with the very definition of *poetry*. The reason is simple. The human mind easily extracts order from chaos, impressing patterns on information.

Poetry goes back to an oral tradition — the passing on of lore — that was common before the general populace could read and write. The fact is, it is far easier to remember things with a regular pattern. (Ask any singer or actor!) Even in general life this is true: “Thirty days has September...” These little ‘hints’ are called *mnemonics*, and they are very useful. So, the ancient *bards* and *troubadours* wrote in regular cadence and rhyme so they could remember their stories.

So why have these two tools fallen so badly out of favor?

One answer is simply *modernism*, the urge to not be ‘old fashioned’ — to find *new* ways of doing things.

But the fact is, these tools are easily abused.

Poetry is, above all, an aesthetic endeavor. A poem should provoke an emotional reaction. It should ‘touch’ us, ‘move’ us. In any art, devices which call attention to *technique* thwart that aim. They provoke the intellect, rather than the heart.

In *formal* poetry the danger constantly exists that the form will become more visible than the message. The very characteristic that formed poetic convention, ensures this: the tendency of the brain to see patterns.

A writer I respect once told me that *regularity* in poetry ‘tires the ear.’ I don’t think this is really the problem. The real problems are *artifice* and *predictability*.

‘Artifice’ is when the need to fit into a form perverts the graceful, natural flow of the language. A line like: “Oh what a joyous day will be, when your beloved face I see,” just *screams*, “LOOK AT ME! I’M A POEM!” Of course it does. Nobody *talks* like that! (At least, not recently.) The adding of extra words or syllables — or the perverting of sentence structure — just to even out meter or to place an easy rhyme at the end of the line is a dead give-away. It takes the reader out of the poem and into the task of writing. It shifts the focus from the message to the messenger.

Predictability is harder to deal with.

“Roses are red; violets are blue. Sugar is sweet, and so are you.” Well, you didn’t have to be Shelly to see that coming, did you? There’s no surprise. No delight.

“Roses are red; violets are blue. Sugar is sweet, and so are your feet.”

OK. It’s not ‘Ozymandias’ — but I’ll bet you smiled.

When regularity leads the reader to keep trying to guess the end of a line it draws attention away from *experiencing* the poem. Worse yet, when the reader is right, it destroys the poet’s authority. “Hell, I can write better than that!”

However, when used skillfully, regularity can delight. The reader’s assumptions are shattered. His expectations are exceeded.

Look at Frost’s Poem, ‘The Road Not Taken’:

*Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,  
And sorry I could not travel both  
And be one traveler, long I stood  
And looked down one as far as I could  
To where it bent in the undergrowth.*

It’s that marvelous, unanticipated fourth line! The heart leaps!

Instead of being a slave to predictability, Frost has used it to sneak under the reader’s defenses. To delight! And isn’t art supposed to do that?

So. The questions remain: “Should I write *formal* poetry? Free verse? Prose poetry? Greeting Cards? Should I just stick to prose? What-the-hell IS a poem, anyhow?!”

A lot of the answers simply have to do with personal taste. Next month, I’ll conclude this three-part discussion of poetry with my thoughts on this. It will be a nice way to close out the year. □