

Lesson Seven:

Poetry is Concrete

This is important. It needs stressing inasmuch as many people, especially those who are just beginning to write, seem to take a long time to grasp it. Some never succeed. Once grasped it can, like anything else, be gently and fruitfully subverted, delicately undermined; but it is a tenet you ignore at great risk to your reader's involvement and your ability to move him or make him understand.

Not every great poem is built only on concrete images, certainly, but that does not invalidate the proposition; there are things that great poets do that we lesser mortals should beware of doing until we, like them, have a sure and firm technique in at least three places: under our belts, at our fingertips and in our bones.

We have already agreed, I hope, that poetry is not vague, does not waft or gush, is not (in the layman's sense of the word) 'poetic'. This quality of concreteness is one of the things that will prevent it from falling into that trap.

Poetry is rooted in *things*. In objects, people, places; the tangible, the daily, the real. That which you can touch, taste, smell, hear and see. It is floating around some vast echo-chamber of abstraction, some quasi-spiritual realm of pure feeling, a bloodless, anaemic world of concepts and ideas. If you want to see how deadening and unattractive such abstractions can be, just have a glance through 'The Oxford Book of Mystical Verse'. No, poetry is not all about The Soul. Not in so many words.

Why do so many people imagine that it is? Why is it one of the commonest reasons for a poem being off-target? I think it may stem from the way in which we analyse poetry and then take the result for the method. We are back again to the question of 'subject' versus 'theme'. At school we read a poem with our teachers in class and then the teachers, bless them, say 'Now, what is **Wilfred Owen** http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wilfred_Owen saying in this poem?' We give the reply 'He is saying how terrible war is, miss,' and we get ten out of ten and rush off to double chemistry or the tuck-shop.

And we're sort of right but we're also quite wrong. What Owen is *saying* is 'Look at this man hanging on the barbed wire' or 'Look at this man vomiting mustard gas' and he gives us a vivid and disgusting picture. What we then do is go on to make the inference that any war that can produce such an image is terrible. It's a perfectly fair inference, but we mustn't mistake that for what Owen is *saying*. He does not speak in such abstractions and he would be less of a poet if he did.

Death, Love, Nature, War, Sorrow, Joy, Decay, Spring, Desire, Autumn; all these themes are huge, abstract nouns. And, yes, they have become and will become the theme of countless poems. But to be understood, to be proved upon our pulses, they have to be given concrete form.

I don't want to hear about Death. Not as such. The word itself is too big to have any meaning; I want to hear about the raw new earth in the graveyard; the pain of seeing photographs of that face we will never see again; the tone of voice that isn't there any longer and never will be. Concrete details. Then I'll understand a bit more. I already have plenty of vague thoughts about the subject.

I don't want to hear about Love. I want to know about Anthea or Lucasta; her touch, her skin, the rustle of her clothes, her breath spidering on a cheek.

I don't want abstractions and exclamations about how terrible war is; I want to hear about *this* young mother killed by *this* bomb on *this* night. I will draw my own conclusions; I don't want them drawn for me. I don't want to be told what to think. And this too is an important point. The more you let the reader work — well, the more you *make* readers work — and the more you involve their own memories and imagination rather than spoonfeed him or her with meanings and inferences, the stronger the poem will be.

When Craig Raine describes the dreadful vacancy at the end of a love-affair, he doesn't give us sorrowing hearts and tears and sighs and pain; he is far more true to the actual experience, the dreadful ordinariness that accompanies the

world-shattering, the concrete detail that speaks far more strongly than an abstract summary of his feelings:

*In the cafeteria
We watched how drops on marble tabletops
Are joined to trembling drops
By nervous fingers...*

Let us draw our own conclusions, abstract ones if those are what we want. Beware of using in your poems what we used to call 'emotive' words: words such as *terrible*, *lovely* and *beautiful*. They are otiose and, worse, manipulative unless they are oxymorons (apparent contradictions) as in Yeats's phrase 'A terrible beauty'. To use them is a bit like laughing at your own jokes: it's cheating and it's counterproductive. Instead, show us the picture as truthfully and as clearly as you can but then leave us to say 'Oh, how terrible' or 'Oh, how beautiful'.

Here is a 'trick' that will improve any poem at a stroke. The real muscle of a poem resides in its nouns and verbs. The stronger they are, the more precise they are, the more power the poem will have.

When you have completed a poem or have got it to a useful first draft stage, go back through it and strike out every adjective and every adverb. Don't rest content to see it like that but write it out again word by word in this new form and look at the difference. It will be at least 40% better than it was. But there will be some adjectives that you will really need; they will be the defining adjectives (a *broken* plate is different from a mere plate; a *Latin* name is different from a mere name—these are defining adjectives and are, very often, derived from verbs) not descriptive ones. Those defining adjectives you may now put back. You may then find (if you have written a strictly formal poem) that you have to do a bit more juggling with rhythms and possibly rhymes, but it will be worth the effort. There is no place for fillers in a poem: every mark you make on your paper should be to good effect.

More than five hundred years ago Chaucer's Pardoner told us that poetry should be concrete:

Lewed peple loven tales olde ...

Your man-in-the-street likes a good story. Why did Jesus Christ—and you'll see the force of this question whether you believe in him or not—why did he teach almost entirely in stories and parables? Stories which, my friends who have studied Hebrew and Aramaic tell me, were intensely rhythmical; more like poems than prose? Because the concrete connects with us and our own observations and memories, gives us something to grasp, proves the philosophy on our pulses, has the potential to remain with us for a lifetime.

Sir Philip Sidney <http://www.luminarium.org/renlit/sidney.htm> in his *Apology for Poetry* tells us that the poet

*'coupleth the general notion with the particular example.
The poet beginneth not with obscure definitions ...
With a tale, forsooth, he cometh unto you: with a tale
which holdeth children from play, and old men from the
chimney corner.'*

Now the word 'tale' is susceptible of all sorts of interpretations; but however you want to interpret it, it is something rooted in the real world of objects and happenings and observable phenomena, so I think we can apply it to the concrete images of a poem — real things and real people rather than Sidney's 'obscure definitions'.

Some Exercises

- Go through the poems you have written and look at your notebook too. How concrete is your writing? Can you improve any vaguenesses you find by removing abstractions and using real things, real people?
- Maybe in your writing you found the word 'trees' or 'flowers' or 'a young girl'. Have you really seen them and allowed us to? What difference does it make if you substitute 'beeches' or 'oaks' or 'silver birches' for those 'trees'? Or if, instead of 'flowers', you say 'dandelions' or 'hollyhocks' or 'wallflowers'? There's an immense difference in the way I respond to those names. Could your 'young girl' be Elizabeth or Sharon?
- Look for concrete detail in the anthologies and collections you read. Why are they better than an abstraction or a generalisation? Look for abstractions too and see why they are there; whether they are good and necessary or bad and improvable.
- Try writing in a different voice. Have a character (real or fictional) speak your poem: what is known as a dramatic monologue. You may find this liberates you from some of your habits of phraseology and approach. It certainly ought to change your vocabulary. For examples of dramatic monologues try **Browning's** <http://www.poetryarchive.org/poetryarchive/singlePoet.do?poetId=1545> *Andrea del Sarto* and *My Last Duchess*, or **W. S. Graham's** http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/W._S._Graham *Johann Joachim Quantz's Five Lessons*.