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the Learning Poets

a guide to poetry writing

with examples from the works of students at California State College Bakersfield

Anne Passel

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The learning poets

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a guide to poetry writing

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California State College, Bakersfield

the Learning Poets

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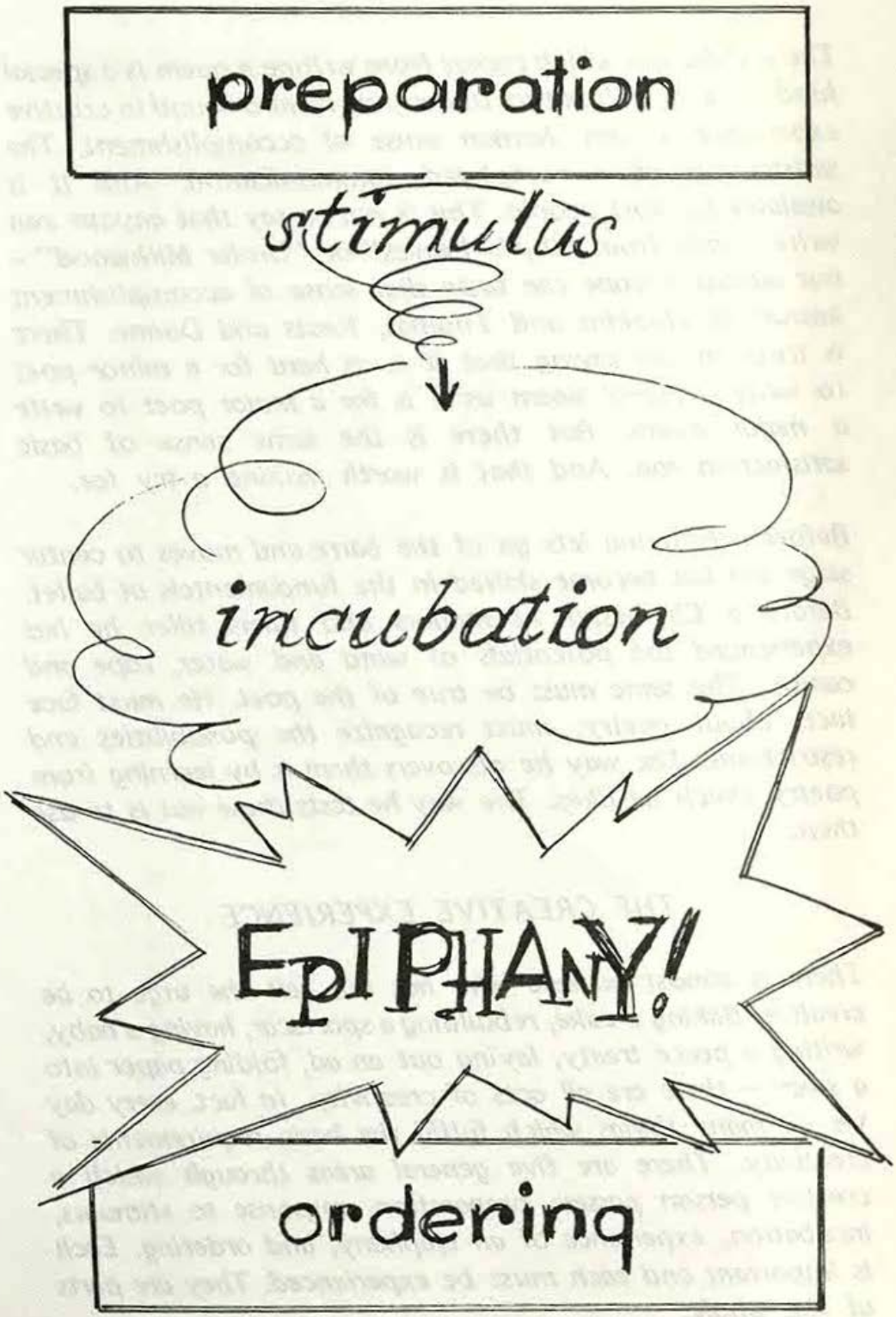
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The satisfaction which comes from writing a poem is a special kind of feeling. It is that underlying reward found in creative experience, a very human sense of accomplishment. The satisfaction of a completed communication. And it is available to most people. This is not to say that anyone can write "Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves" or "Under Milkwood" -- but almost anyone can taste that sense of accomplishment known to Hopkins and Thomas, Keats and Donne. There is truth in the saying that it is as hard for a minor poet to write a minor poem as it is for a major poet to write a major poem. But there is the same sense of basic satisfaction too. And that is worth making a try for.

Before a ballerina lets go of the barre and moves to center stage she has become skilled in the fundamentals of ballet. Before a Chichester up-anchors and turns tiller he has experienced the potentials of wind and water, rope and canvas. The same must be true of the poet. He must face facts about poetry, must recognize the possibilities and restrictions. The way he discovers them is by learning from poetry which he likes. The way he tests these out is to use them.

THE CREATIVE EXPERIENCE

There is almost no one who has not felt the urge to be creative. Baking a cake, rebuilding a sportscar, having a baby, writing a peace treaty, laying out an ad, folding paper into a swan -- these are all acts of creativity. In fact, every day we do many things which fulfill the basic requirements of creativity. There are five general areas through which a creative person passes: preparation, response to stimulus, incubation, experience of an epiphany, and ordering. Each is important and each must be experienced. They are parts of the whole.


preparation
stimulus
incubation
EpIPHANY!
ordering

PREPARATION: We are all training, all preparing, all learning constantly. The poet knows that everything he does becomes a part of the future. His very response to life *is a kind of preparation of poems still to come.*

He is perceptive. His senses are working for him, not merely to protect and inform him, but to refresh and excite him. Simple sense reactions, complex inner relationships, all are stored away in the possibility that he may want to recollect them in moments of tranquility. All men do this. Poets are blessed with an efficient system of recall -- or they have trained themselves to develop the skill over the years.

They also make associations. The inclination toward innovation (often mistaken for the creative process itself) is indulged by the poet. He is not afraid of synaesthesia, nor of a blending of sensuous response.

The poet responds through life situations. The commonplace is extraordinary to him because complacency is missing in his nature. He does not expect each event, each interpersonal relationship, to fit a pattern. Each experience is a new event to him.

He is not only a person who experiences but a person who responds to experiences. He faces his responses squarely, he reacts, uninhibited. Later, he can recall his reaction, can reproduce – synthesize -- that reaction, during a period of recollection.

His ability to remember an emotion, an intuitive response, allows him to control that memory: to fragment it, to expand it, as a prism can break up and enrich a ray of light, as a chord can be augmented and diminished. Time is under control for the poet. He can expand or contract it, linger or delete as he sees fit. His fingers hover over the controls,

as it were. "Instant replay" and "fast forward" are among his decisions.

As he responds to his sense perceptions, the situations he finds himself in, the people he touches, his emotional reactions, so too he reacts to ideas - admitting, considering, reversing, inverting, trying out each idea for its creative potential.

The other half of preparation for the poet concerns his response to poetry. *He must face the fact, first of all, that poetry is eminently a communication and like any message it involves the speaker's attitude toward his audience and his attitude toward his material.*

The listener who hears the poet's message may be: the world at large, those who (according to the poet) need conversion, a sympathetic coterie, a particular individual, or maybe merely the poet's other self. Whether he is addressing the one or the many, the poet must feel this urgency in communication and must relax his disciplinary repressive social being long enough to verbalize the insistent urgings which clamor to be spoken. That is all. If his inner voice speaks unrepressed it will use the proper tone.

And what will it speak of? Of the poet's major concerns, surely. Poetic subject matter is as varied as the world of fact and the world of idea. As long as the poet feels moved to convert, convince, expose, reveal, share, he will be dealing with poetic matter. It is how this revelation is expressed that makes poetry.

Because all poetry has these six attributes, these six testables: an expression of reality, an integral unity, abstraction into imagery, selection of the exact word, an underlying cadence, and sense of sound.

1) Reality -- the moment of truth -- is not to be confused with actuality, which is merely the everyday happening of life. Reality differs for each one of us, but when the poet knows -- suddenly, intuitively, undeniably -- that he has had a glimpse of what is true and right and special, that is his moment of contact with reality. The poet knows that he must share this experience: that is the function of poetry, the destiny of the poet.

2) Organic unity has been defined as that sense of wholeness which leaves out nothing that is essential and includes nothing that should be omitted. Every poem which is successful in its basic purpose will prove this definition. Each word and image add to the primary force to be experienced when one hears the poem. The full experiencing of the poem is the vicarious awakening to the reality known to the poet.

3) Imagery is more than pictorial expression: it is the device by which the poet transfers the vision he has had of reality into a mode of expression acceptable to the reader, the uninitiated, the receiving mind. Imagery is not merely the turned phrase, the charming word cluster: it is the very essence of poetry. It is the simple equation which states that this Known and that Known when combined together and viewed inside-out equal the ponderable Unknown. Image and metaphor, symbol and allusion, all serve to pin-prick the reader into participating in the act of the poem. The closed mind cannot receive poetry. When a reader stirs his own recall, wakens to echoes and harmonics, that is the moment when poetry has succeeded. Poetry must be not vocal but evocative. It must cause the reader's mind to speak to him. And for this reason it cannot speak of actuality, which is only tolerable, but of reality, which is vital. And for this same reason it must speak in a reader-involving idiom: the response-invoking algebra of imagery.

4) The Imagist of the 1910's included in their dictum what poets have always known about poetry, that true poetic language involves using the "right word." How could it be put more simply? As the basic dimension of poetry depends on distillation and condensation we must not be surprised to find that minimal length also involves exactness. A poet knows hundreds of words. He used only a special few. His skill as a craftsman rests on a highly developed sense of selectivity. Emily Dickinson left us a clue as to the complexity of the problem of selection. In forming the symbolic combination of words which would rouse the reader to recapture the idea in her mind she listed her choice of words: in writing "the Bible is an antique Volume" this poet ultimately chose: "Had but the Tale a thrilling *Teller." She made an early choice and a later emendation but before her initial selection of "thrilling" she tried out and rejected the following words: typic - hearty - bonnie - breathless - spacious - tropic - warbling - ardent - friendly - magic - pungent - warbling [sic] - winning - mellow -*[1] *Every poet recognizes this maze, this bewildering decision which must be made among alternatives. The road not taken is as inviting as any other. But for each poem, each fragment, only one decision will be the one which matters. A manuscript with deletions and substitutions might be the definition of a poem.*

Sometimes there is no need for the exhausting revision, the word search, the trying-out of phrases. It is a blessed poem indeed that spills forth in its perfected form. It is a rare one though, rare for the master craftsman or neophyte. And somehow suspect. Often intimacy with the experience, with the immediacy of poetic reaction, will make the working

[1] *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, edited by Thomas H. Johnson, (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1955), p. 1067.

poet overly respectful of his first fresh outpouring. A little space of time, a little objective distance will allow him to see that intellect as well as intuition functions in poetry writing.

5) Poetry is the contemporary descendant of the oral-formulaic family of song. Basically poetry is song. Its appeal is through the ear to the mind or heart or spirit - wherever it is going. Primitive cultures speak in cadenced structure; children love verse, love rhythm and pattern. Response to poetry is intuitive, irresistible for most of us.

Basic rhythmic repetition is one of the identifiable elements of verse. Children learn lists of facts by setting them to song pattern. "Thirty days hath September" we recall, "Here I come. Where from? New orLEENS." I depended on "I before E, except after C" and "First Washington, Adams, Jefferson; James Madison, James Monroe."

Modern poetry has broken free from the intensity of stress in what one of my students -- unconsciously wise -- referred to as "didactic pentameter." But the cadence which serves as the armature for contemporary poetry is not less dependable for being less discernible. What was formerly the flying buttress of poetry – its scansion, its metre and foot – has been replaced by tension and balance, the cantilevered poetics of today.

Cadence: what can we call it? "A rhythmic sequence or flow of sounds in language," Webster tells us. I say we are dealing with counterpoint in modern poetry; with a kind of speech cadence tautly counterbalanced by thought-cadence. Syntax, even rearranged syntax, imposes a rhythm on speech. Thoughts, even fragmented thoughts, result from a natural process. The pattern may be as undetectable as the echoes

and harmonics of association or as hooked-together and interrelated as logical sequence. But both result in a patterned cadence. A perceptive examination of any successful modern poem will reveal other counter-stressing cadences. Imagistic patterns, metaphoric extensions, allusionary inner echoes all set up their own tensions, their own cadences. But for the learning poet it is enough, at first, to become aware of the patterns of speech working in counteraction to the balancing of ideas and thoughts; a woof and a warp, as it were, straining one against and with the other, to create the full fabric of poetry.

6) An ear for sound is basic equipment for the poet. As end-rhyme has lost its hold as the be-all and end-all of the poetic line other uses of sound have been established. A clue for the composition of poetry which sings with the element of beautiful sound is this: echo. The poem which echoes the stressed vowel sound of its key word insists meaning and sound simultaneously. Alliteration is almost unavoidable, and the use of the triplet, that thrice-run bell, seems almost instinctive for the learning poet. But alliteration had its hey-day in Anglo-Saxon times and has been the easy out for poets ever since.

The subtle interweaving of echoes and intonation of vowel sounds - assonance - while as familiar to poets of all time, has become the mark of the twentieth-century poet. The use of internal rhyme becomes a natural associate of the echoed vowel sound. The learning poet will do well to demand that his mot juste *be* juste *in sound as well as meaning.*

A close study of the poetry which appeals most to the poet - that is, in another poet's poetry - will reassure him that sound as well as meaning contribute to his pleasure. And the most efficacious exercise the learning poet may indulge

in - the reading and rereading of poetry which speaks to him of reality. That kind of opening of the mind prepares him to function as a poet.

STIMULUS: The second stage of the creative act involves the poet reacting to a stimulus. Prior to this -- during the period of preparation -- his creative power has been dormant. Now suddenly something wakes him. What can it be?

Frankly, it can be any one of many things. If he is just at the initial point of being a poet, it may be an assignment. "Write a poem," I say in class to the learning poet, and he is shocked, affronted, offended. But when he puts pen to paper he writes. Sometimes, at this first try, it is a very good poem. More often it is a crack in the facade of prose, a tentative outpushing toward new form. But this is the first motion toward poetry.

What else do we know about the stimulus? We can isolate three qualities, three essentials to which it is related. First, immediacy. The experience to be revealed, whether physical, intellectual, or emotional, is one which presses on the poet's consciousness. Next, intensity. The poet is stimulated by a force too importuning to be resisted. And lastly, reality. The poet has a stirring which relates to truth, to reality as he perceives it, and whether conscious, unconscious, or subconscious this stirring urges him to start doing something about what he feels.

The stimulus can be as common as an assignment, as amorphous as an inner stirring, as actual as a scene viewed or a sound heard. It can come as a vague disturbing memory. Its form is not important. But the learning poet must alert himself to respond to whatever stimulus reaches him, must let the poem start to take form within him.

INCUBATION: For when he is reached he reacts and in a way which is undefinable. We call this period "incubation" for want of a better word. The poem is in the process of becoming a poem. At this level no one can help the poet. And during this time very few can understand him.

Sometimes the period is brief -- no longer than it takes to catch the spirit of the thing and transfer a feeling or thought to word and phrase. Sometimes though it is almost interminable. This must be the poet's problem. He may be jotting down word clusters and cadences. He may be sulking and preoccupied. He may, on the other hand, be playing especially good tennis or lecturing coherently. But in any case this period is sacrosanct -- no teacher of learning poets has any business interfering during this time. Nor has anyone else. It is a time unknown and unmeasurable. The poet can deny its existence – but he cannot escape it.

EPIPHANY: Suddenly the poem makes its appearance. Words take the place of intuitive non-verbal response which the poet was feeling.

Once in a while (as in the case of an in-class assignment) there will seem to be no time at all between the stimulus and the epiphany. The learning poet may feel that he has no need for incubation – that he is special, an instant-poet. Occasionally he is right, or partially right. Not all poems result from long submerged incubation. Sometimes an idea seems to catch fire from the stimulating spark and a poem cries out to be recorded at once. Sometimes we do have that special experience -- a kind of veni vini vici. *Actually though, in most cases, the incubation has been taking place in the dark, unnoticed, started by some other stimulus, long since forgotten. The two responses touch and run together ready for release -- and there we have it, the ready poem.*

We know much about this moment when the poem declares itself. Poets like to talk about it because it gives a validity to that blank unfathomable period of incubation they have just survived. They write. They bring into existence the anticipated manifestation. Most poets write when they sense that the moment has come. They use shoe cartons, old envelopes, margins of books. If they are lucky, or provident, they go into an empty room and shut the door. Almost without exception they find pleasure in the act of recording the poem as it comes to them. This is the most rewarding moment of creativity.

With the arrival of the poem in a transmittable form comes that intense desire to have someone read the poem or hear it read aloud. Wise poets can resist this urging until after some sense of order has been imposed on the first rush of words. Most can't resist.

The pleasure of the ephiphany blended with the dark sequence of incubation and the pending cold sobering period of intellectual ordering make up the whole reality of the experiencing of a poem. Pleasure and pain, intake and output, intuitive pouring forth and conscientious ordering: these are the dichotomies of creativity.

ORDERING: The intuitive response as poem is a triumph, and the poet who is pleased by this experience is behaving just as poets ought to behave. But unless he is a practicing poet (and not always then) he is not yet free of his responsibilities toward this poem. By a practicing poet I mean what is almost impossible to find: a poet who practices his art as a musician practices for a concert – long hours, much drudgery, enormous self-discipline. The poet, as we have earlier acknowledged, needs proficiency in several areas: in sensing reality, in involvement in word meaning and in

dealing with cadence and sound. Let him remain intuitive in his awareness of reality, his sense of "message" (here, if at all, we may find evidence of the "natural" poet). But in the other areas he must learn his skill and study to improve it.

Let us acknowledge that the poet is the wielder of words who willingly accepts the basic premise of restriction and limitation. A poem is unified, it is reduced to the essentials, it may even hold itself within the limits of preconceived pattern. The writer who is poet -- not essayist nor treatisist nor author of a twenty-volume series -- this poet then has agreed to brevity and condensation, sometimes almost distillation.

A learning poet will do well to experiment with form. A new version of the same poetic conception will often startle and delight its creator. Sometimes expansion of an idea (but more often a contraction of it) will seem to awaken the poet to a more pertinent self-expression.

All poets experiment with turn of phrase. The rearrangement of syntax, the act of verbing it with nouns or nouning it with verbs, the omission of redundancies, the substitution of feeling for being or being for seeing -- all these moving of ideas through words are part of the poet's exercise in ordering.

As essential as meaning is sound in poetry. The final word choice in a poem must reflect both considerations. Naturally there will be compromise. But whatever experimentations afford best results in blending exact meaning with salubrious sound, these are the experiments the learning poet must go through.

Intuitive poetic response then, tempered by an understanding of the possibilities of form in verse, these are involved in the act of ordering poetry. A poet knows for whom he is writing. This knowledge both results from and influences his selection of language. He knows his reader as he knows his material. They are considered while he is imposing order on his poems.

Unfortunately the poet is aware of his critic too. A wounding experience in the past may make him over-cautious or inhibited. This is one area in which an instructor can help the poet. A zealous guardianship of the poetic ego is essential to the care and feeding of poets. Later, when his proprietary parenthood has been relaxed a little, when this new poem is permitted a life of its own, then an instructor may be brutally frank if that is his nature. But during the creative process, even at this late stage in the process, poets are vulnerable indeed.

Now that the poet has ordered his verse and is satisfied that it reveals what he intended to reveal he does well to breathe a sigh of relief and turn away from the poem to something quite different. His problem is now to become non-protective toward his work. This objectivity is not easily achieved. The passage of time frees the poet, though, and he will sooner or later be able to view his poetry as less than an integral part of himself.

Once this is arrived at, the poem has become a communication – which was, after all, what it was intended for. Now the poet rereads it. Maybe he senses further need for ordering -- a need which can fortunately be postponed until the propitious moment for revision. But perhaps he likes it. Perhaps it conveys that view he had of reality, and conveys it in a way which is succinct and exact, nicely turned in phrase and beautifully musical in sound.

the Learning Poets

FOUR-LINE VERSE

Certain facts of life are inescapable. One is that learning poets write about themselves. Since this is natural and universal it seems to be a good beginning for the learning poet. A workable first assignment for the poet is to write about an immediate experience: something that happened to him today. He is learning, among other things, that we all have moments of truth, moments when we sense reality, and that these revelations are not necessarily connected with the dramatic once-in-a-lifetime events.

This first assignment should be gauged to produce a poem of limited dimension. I like to assign a four-line poem: it gives the learning poet a set of fences to restrict him, a small plot to cultivate. I believe meter and verse pattern should be at his discretion but I like to find a progression or sequence of thought to help him lay out his path across the field.

One such pattern suggests: first line, statement of experience; second, his sense reaction – any sense or combination of senses; third, his emotional reaction; and fourth, his conclusion -- which I urge him to express in an understatement. Since successful poetry must involve the reader in its conclusions, this use of understatement initiates the idea that all definitive formulation of thesis must come from the reader.

An alternate pattern is for a four-liner which progresses thus: first line, vision: what you see; second, position: how the poet is involved; third, action: what he does; fourth, reaction: how he feels.

Because poetry is alive, mutable, protean, this assignment brings forth many kinds of poems. Some are four-liners

because the restriction was forced upon them. Recopied, they are four-phase but three lines long, or six lines long. That matters not at all. What counts is that a learning poet began his learning. He had enough superimposed form to shelter his first efforts, enough suggestion to start his creative process. Any first poem is a good poem by the very fact that it has released a creative flow. Some early writers will use the mask of humor or shock -- no matter. In the next poem, or the one after that, he will begin to write about what really matters to him.

LIFE LEAF

Leisurely looking through the tissue leaf;
The glinting sheen is absorbed by hot-vega-smells.
A damask green network silhouetted by sudden light.
How like me it seems!

J. Guest

THE MOMENT

The decision is made. Now! Or no?
Churning, churning in my being
Heat and cold hold me in sway.
Maybe another day. Decision of Indecision.

C. Ellis

TODAY

The misty rain came silently down,
It touched my face with cool, soft fingers,
My thoughts were turned to quiet times.
These are the times I treasure.

D. J. Gifford

THE RAIN

The rain spatters against misted panes
And sounds like a dance of castanets.
A wet dog tucks his tail
And wanders aimlessly down the alley,
The water flowing along the gutter beside him.
Bleak and forlorn they wander away,
Dog, rain, and life.

P. Leigh-Pink

DAWN

Tailor, rush the loom,
Weave the night anew
Already stars begin to fray
The day is come too soon.

M. Murphy

EXPERIENCE

Confidence in form will lead the learning poet to experimentation, but do not be surprised if all these early works are subjective. Poets talk about themselves -- so do we all. But the poet with an apt touch will turn his poetic revelation into a universal statement. We suffer with him, take joy with him, not so much because we are men of compassion but because his experience calls forth an echo in us. We see ourselves. We see truth. He has admitted us to his glimpse of reality.

FACES

The glass reflects life
and sees nothing.

I walk into a maze of faces--
my own faces--
each different and each confusing the other.
None lifts into the clouds.
None crawls through prehistoric dust.
Occasionally one stands inert,
listening.

P. Hooten

WHY

Wondering why, what is the reason?
Why does emptiness overflow suddenly
like unexpected rain?
Without answers, the spirit refuses
to yield to pain.... and
Writes, there is a season; Hopefully
there is a season.

S. Metzler

LOCK

Like a duck in a cage
And a collared cat
And a land webbed in walls and roads
I share the rage
I share the pain.

M. Murphy

THE DEATH OF A PAINTING

A strange, haunting, not usually questioned
painting of a browned, over-all color,
a painting of a human mother.

They see the surrealistic painting in all its
staunch realism, beauty, and grandeur,
a magnificently painted decoration for the wall.
They love its deep, rich colors for enhancing
the family room and giving their home
that comfortable, "lived-in" look.

I sit here groping for the truth,
a hungry mass inside me turns;
I venture through the timeless depth,
inside the painting I am met
by faces of which I'm afraid.
My thoughts move on the canvas
and I scream with satisfaction as I
fall from it, only to journey back here.

B. Killingsworth

NEW DAY

Frost mornings grow fewer,
And dew is more apt to meet these dawns
Which spill new brilliance.

Shy green pauses, waits
Warm and wet, anxious
To spring out of the world's crannies.

Fresh stirrings
Swell within me
Winter and I shall be going soon.

M. Murphy

LAST NIGHT

Walking home
Violet streetlamps
Shadowed houses.
Violinist crickets play
Against the chirr of rainbirds.
Trickling water from bloated lawns
Slithers down gutter slides.
Drooping willows
Reaching pines
Olfactory sycamore and juniper.
Wind strings the night with orange-blossom tang
Chain-link weaves oleander tapestry
Sterling specks above.

D. Jones

OBSERVATION

The poet moves slowly from a contemplation of his experience to an observation of life around him or life as he imagines it. He tells not only of what he does but what man does. He is still involved, of course, but the objectivity of his stance opens the lens to focus on a larger world. He becomes more musing and less emotional. The highly subjective response is universalized. Now he is part philosopher -- if I may be excused the unpopular label. Often he does not tell the conclusion, only presents the reader with observable facts. He has opened the door of poetry and admitted the reader as one of the major members of the cast.

EYE

Iridescent peacock eye
Kaleidoscopic -- green to blue to purple black;
Freckle-flecked with copper lights
Feather on feather, winking, living;
Silk-screened pools that for beauty exist;
Gaze from a vantage point triumphant
On a plume above the petty bird --
Optic that illuminates
But will never close to sleep
Nor ever see to close upon.

M. Conklin

ON SEEING A BLADE OF GRASS PROTRUDING THROUGH A CRACK

Green blades suspend time.
Unyielding determination prods
The fragile life stalk.

Gray icing frosts the landscape
Covering nature's stage
Smooth and tidy.
But close scrutiny
Divulges the unsolved mystery.
Micro-canyon delicately
Opens for Ceres' child.

J. Guest

WITNESS

Robot firemen roll the hoses
Shifting from foot to foot
They stir the embers
Track down lurking saboteurs.

Silver ladies, dogs on leashes
Neighbors who before were strangers
Chatter now in little clusters,
Shifting from foot to foot.
Eyes avoid the sunken rafters
Blackened ribs and broken members;
Instead they touch forgotten watches
And hurry home.

The show is over.
A dog lifts its leg;
Urine and ashes in the gutter stream.
The sun gives benediction
And snuffs its santuary flame;
Leaving the mourners
To keep the vigil.

M. Conklin

GRIMY CHILDREN

grimy children
run chanting in a street
to discover whatever space that gutters and animals and people cannot fill.

dirty little hands
touch pages of fantasy books,
wistfully imagining homes that are not
brown paper cubes,
until the colors turn
gray bitter or
muck green hate.

that filthy face of the future
who now rules the street with cunning, force,
may never know that when it storms
pines and streams grow –
sandstone erodes into canyon --
nature still persists outside
the urban kingdom of his reign.

and more children covered with ashes and dust
cry mother
when there is none.

apathetic, we send only
our pennies
for food.

but where does the
love
come from?

P. Hooten

ENDING

The leaves
Make a spectacle of dying.
A yearly ritual
For human hearts to revel in.
Death is beautiful.

It is inevitable.
The leaves can't
Turn back.
Their span is spent
In vain continuance
Of beauty.

The sky slips into comatose cloudiness
Dripping down icy tears
To help the leaves let go.
And the last shouts of a river
Echo
Then fade into frozen whispers.
All things must end.

But deep within
There lies a calm
A stillness
Born of waiting
Bridging life and ending
An acceptance of impermanence.

Life is beautiful
Life is dying
And a day ending
Is only a day.

D. Jones

DRESS REHEARSAL FOR SPRING BAND CONCERT AT NORTH HIGH - 1971

Lights grope down on dimmed and empty stage,
Periphery lost in shadow.
Skeleton heron-legs of stands and chairs
Obscure the wooden space.
Participants in the annual rite appear
On a surging, vibrant tide,
And herald the squeak of folding chairs
Protesting the onslaught of pre-Bernsteinian youth.
Over the cacophony of instrument and sound
Go the shouted instructions for light,
Decrees sent heavenward to the disembodied voice
Answering from the catwalk.
A jarring tattoo of snare drum overshadows the flutist,
Head bent low, face concealed by fall of hair,
Mothering her instrument.

The painful high notes of a trumpet,
Straining to reach that one impossible C
After a running start,
Blend curiously with the warm, undulant tones
Of trombone, the player lost in a reverie all his own.
The low, hoarse growl of the organ,
Its pistons being set,
Supports the shrillness of persistent piccolo.
Horn and bass and bell
Sustain the glorious dissonance.
And then, the command for Concert A,
The search, the stop-and-start again,
And finally, the blend.
Instruments held at ready.
The conductor's sweeping glance to check alertness
Reflects the tense, expectant hush of unexploded breath
And uplifted eyes of anticipation, watching
The suspended baton, its tip magnetic,
Ready to pierce the silence.

I. A. Gage

PICNIC

Desperately they thrash in ice-lined plates or
Dangle like bananas, squirming, from hooked chains
All through pie throwing and watermelon eating.

Laughter sounds far away
Behind the noise of heaving abdomens,
Gills gaping after breath.

J. Bidart

IMITATIVE MOTION

Since cadence and movement are basic to poetry, what more fitting subject matter than imitative motion in poetry. A poet attempts to say through the form of his poem just what he says through word-meaning. This is decorum: that the poem should show motion while it tells about it. Use of typography -- spacing of the poem on the page -- here is another poetic device to experiment with. Progression and sequence of idea depict motion. Special sounds, isolated or in combination, add to the feeling. Meter and rhythmic cadence control the reader's response.

PAUSE

body
warmed into dozing dreaminess
rocking easily forward
backward
with a light, lazy breeze --
suspended in serenity.

the soul, retired momentarily from crisis,
pauses
and becomes aware of the presence of forces
beyond hysteria.

P. Hooten

PEACE

Pines
graceful tall
heaven scented
wind whistled
peaceful blown
cloud flaked sky
sit languid
sunny warm
rest relaxed
forget all.
Peace

V. Schilleci

ROCKING

Backward

Forward

Creak
Creak

Arms enfold

Treasure-hold

Bosom nests

Tomorrow rests

Warmth decreed

Mutual need

Infused as one

Eternal son

Backward

Forward

Creak
Creak

J. Guest

WATER SKIING

Nerves tense, alert; muscles tight
Poised, pressing for power flight.
Engines rev; they roar
Snatched from shore
Skimming clear crystal, soaring once more.

Free and easy now; balance and view
Sparkling blue jewel, ski slicing through.
Splaying, swaying
Relish embrace
Wind and the wet caressing the face.

Sliding, gliding, ecstacy!
Breathless, wingless
Ski! Ski! Ski!

N. Muzinich

WATER'S WAY

Tumbling snow stream
slipping falls as young streams do,
racing, spilling, rushing off downhill
as though to be a stream
were not enough.

Growing stream
flat and older,
swelling, slowing,
its anxious pulse under surface
restrained; as though
enough to be a river, here,
too soon to be a sea.

M. Murphy

IMITATIVE SOUND

As verse form can imitate motion, so too words can echo meaning by sounding a special way. The poet who feels that particular appropriateness of reinforcing sound can make his readers aware of his meaning simultaneously on two levels. The more involved the reader, the more successful the poem.

SOCIAL SOUND

sit beside instruments of staccato talk –
move up the sliding scales of social beat.
fiery basses to golden treble
rumbling depths to crescendo heights of mundane conversations,
rhythms perfected by conscious practice of the gift
gregarious.

P. Hooten

SMITHY

The smithy wields in labor love
Clang! the sledge on supple iron.
Clang! Again and then return
To the panting bellow's scorch-like breaths
Until the ore yields glowing red
To the fired fury of whitened coal.
Sweat steaming from his deepened brow
The blacksmith pains to bend, twist, form,
Sweltering, Clang! to be freeborn.

But pallid these uncalloused hands
Now impotently waste away
Unaware of the sledge's throb.
The anvil rests in silent rust
Where boldly sang untempered souls,
And proud those virile echoes rang,
And a smithy forged his off-sprung verse
In virgin iron, white coals, and fire.

M. Murphy

HARMONIC

To mute a drumming memory
Some weep and some work
But when the tears dry
And the working is finished
Through the numbed and tired muscles
Through the deafened tone-sprung fibers
Impulse-fingers tremble
To pluck a nerve –
Reverberate the silenced dream;
An echoed voice that filled the room
Now fills the head –
Sounding, resounding
Distorted, intensified;
Revived harmonic overtones that re-form
That transpose, to strain the idle moments
With the discords
Of a shattered symphony.

M. Conklin

MYTH AND SYMBOL

Poetry moves successfully from the tangible sensuous world into the abstract world of idea. The poet who involves his reader's mind and spirit along with his emotions and memories is fulfilling that poetic requirement that the reader and poet are partners in bringing the poem to life. Poets are people whose words mean more than they say. Poets use a reader's mind and memory, all he has read and thought: what myth suggests and reveals, the overtone and echo which a word evokes, the ambiance and connotation which lurk in a symbol.

A POET

On a mellow evening he teems
with memory of a Templar,
that impressive mettle warding the Tomb,
mauling the imposing infidel.
Then laments the enemy's toll,
that morbid dirt, (that empty knight).

P. Schmitz

WHERE WERE YOU?

Where were you last night
when I called to you in my dreams
begging you to listen,
to help me understand
Reality
that I can no longer believe.
My whole life must be collective confusion
since no one loves freely
without influence from the shadow
and I run in labyrinths chasing and being chased
by myself
in different disguises.

Where were you sometime
whenever it was
before my soul froze
before someone locked me in the descending
circles of knowledge.

Where were you
I must have needed you
but now is too late
I killed myself
down in the concrete wheatfields
I raced through the stalks
until I hit one too many and dying,
laughed

while the field
burned to hell.

P. Hooten

I WANTED TO BE YOUR FRIEND, NOT YOUR LOVER

Blazing sunlight streaked through the heavens
And the green grass gave way to Apollo's rays.
But the sun never set
And the god's caress
Turned the green grass to brown.

K. Cain

MOURNER

life moves slowly, carefully,
around the figure draped in memory,
revering the Spring past.
Ceres, alone,
calls out sadly
but only Wintry murmuring returns,
mournfully echoed.

P. Hooten

IDLE FINGERS

When minutes halt momentarily
And no chore beckons
Minds wander in casual doodling.
A name seeps from idle fingers
Uncensored by conscious thought.

White blank interrupted by
Skinny black scribbles.

Small sand trenches marr surfage
With a lover's mention.

A child's nickname lovingly
Scrawled on a dusty fender.

Revealing scratches expose the heart.
Lay bare the secrets within. But
Empty panic is the horseman
That mounts your hand
When no name comes.

J. Guest

TILLER

Tiller, sower, reaper,
Man with a shovel--
    Loves the land he works
    As child never loved mother--
This ground you've caressed season
To season with plow and spade
And now stabbed with sign on stake.
The suffering all yours,
Figure in the field,
Your voice breaks on pricing,
Chokes on the black words.

J. Bidart

PREDICAMENT OF URSA MAJOR

One day, O Callisto, you will return to earth
By a fall more deadly than jealous love
that forced your exile to the night watch.

The Word so long foretold will not fail,
Your hapless sojourn will close in woe,
A cry will meet the crash that flings you low.

And in your stead? A blank.
The sky will be rolled back like a scroll
Revealing your stricken descent, O Callisto.

C. Ellis

THE JOURNEY

Unconscious journey begins in boredom.
Collective creative energies brew
Simmering incubation boils
Forth to adventure.

Small dark persona
Travels unnoticed in
Ordinary regular garb.
Gathering thoughts
Arranged, deranged in
The compact valise
Religiously clutched
To the journeyer's side.

Sudden emergency springs
From the darkened shadow.
A startling epiphany
For the passive traveler.
The latch unsnaps
And a new clad Hero
Emerges to fight
The phantom battle.

J. Guest

FORMAL VERSE PATTERN

Applying the discipline of form to the profusion of thought becomes both irresistible and desirable for the poet. What fascinates us about chess can astound us in poetry. I believe that every poet should let himself be tempted into experimentation with form. To invent a form is an achievement. Further, to accept the preconceived form has its own rewards: to write a sonnet, a successfully achieved sonnet, is to ally oneself with a host of poets over the ages. Restriction and limitation on the surface lead to exploration of depth and height. But beyond the level of challenge there is more to intrigue us about the intricacies of form. Verse pattern is a further expansion and involvement with pattern in general. It is a ramification of the sequence and overlapping of ideas, the tension of cadence, the echo of sound. It is the very essence of poetry.

THE ARTS

dance
Lanquid limbs lingering long
Motion like lotion smoothly rolls on
Or sharp concise with movement precise.

portraiture
Smooth strokes swiftly spread
A liquid pigment thread
Across the faceless canvas.

J. Guenther

VISION OF PEARL PRYNNE

In a claret frock glimmering gold,
To the airy rising of your laugh,
Go sprite-footed across the gravestones,
A wild flighty whirlwind path.

Spell the cemetery now,
Heel and toe above the dead,
Lively frolic be your dower,
And a clover crown for you head.

Bright free form,
Child of defiance,
Make merry over the bones
A dance for those who shan't.

J. Bidart

TIRESIAS

Old man, weary worn
Soul-weary from deep ponderings
Where go you this eve?

In the night's moist whisperings
Searching in the shadow's mysteries
What seek you this eve?

Blinded by the lucent sunlight
Eyes turn inward, sense night-wisdom
What prophecy this eve?

Of men, of women both you riddle
Ancient seer cloaked in symbols
Be silent, Sir! Your truth reveals.

M. Conklin

COLOR BOOK

Picture me a color book
With images to fill.
Give everyone a set of paints
And let the colors spill.

Most fragile hues this page has shown
Pink lady pouring tea
And gentle small talk
What soft--frivolity.

Scarlet brazen hussy
Next page the colors spit
Out down right bold defiance
Against convention's lines.

Umber mother image
Nursing amber child
In rich and earthy hues
She warmly fills the page.

This empty page awaits your brush
So color what you see
A bit of this – a dab of that
Your turn to color me.

A. Pope

THE CHILD OF CHANGE

Born wearing television tubes for eyes,
His world is fast and full of light and sound,
Non-verbal, made for him to idolize
The land where instant miracles abound
As electronic mother warms his room
And ersatz father hustles to provide,
So that, emerging from protective womb,
Bewildered by hypocrisy outside,
He draws upon the only world he knows
For weapons of dissent to slay the state,
Provoking turned-on tactics to compose
A Don Quixote drama and create
The giant confrontations to be seen
By millions clustered still before the screen.

J. Anderson

A STUDY IN SOUND

Learning poets who work with me are inured to being badgered about sound. They know what I believe: that every poem is a resonant and integrated sound pattern. We begin this way: the learning poet identifies his key words (and these are not always the words I would have chosen). He establishes in his mind the stressed words throughout the poem and then interweaves a pattern, complex or simplified, which insists a repetition of the vowel sounds of the key words wherever such a repetition reinforces meaning. He sees that no inharmonious vowel sound is isolated in a company of integrated sounds. He experiments too in sound sequence, the moving among sounds which are adjacent but dissimilar.

HIDE-AWAY

Cocoon comforter
Warm, womblike: bearing
Springmaid fantasies; feeding
Pithy nourishment; nurturing
Malignant self-pity.
Flagellate an ulcerated
Oozing wound worn raw
By a coarse hair-cloth sheet
Excrutiating self-wound torture
Till dawn's release.
Scourge to simulate a purging spite
Dispite the malicious pit-viper poison
Pity secretes –
Hollow execrations into the psyche
Of a petty martyr.

M. Conklin

THE DOOR

Rap. Rap.
A hollow rap.
Stiffly, primly erected there
A wooden barrier waits.
Vacant Wasteland behind forever.
Unsecure this step seems.
    Answer, answer.
    Open Sesame.
    Enfold with warm security.

Bang. Bang.
A hollow bang.
Huge, impenetrable
Barricade laughs.
Stiffling confinement closes in
Smothering suggestion.
    Release, release.
    O God, release.
    Inject with open vacancy.

J. Guest

MINT

simile

The taste of mint is like the coolness
of melted snow running in a stream.

It lingers like the painful pleasure
of icy waters memories in a dream.

metaphor

A taste of mint:
The cooling touch
of melted glacial streams;
continuing pain
reluctantly released.

V. Tischbirek

INCENDIARY

Woodsmoke essence
sifting curled through the censered leaves
fragrant herald of the funeral march
past breath enough to trumpet:
"I am growing old."
Sunset fire
raging splendor from the tarnished grass
flagrant spender of autumn's mourning weeds
past desire enough to miser
aging-life exchanged for death.
Ashen consummation
stoic refute of the bankrupt earth
fragment tribute for future juvenescence
past life enough to curse
the whited sepulcher
transubstantiated.

M. Conklin

CYCLE

The wheel goes around,
Takes me up, then downs me,
Circles round, ascends, descends,
While I watch loops and rings
Of my life's things
Spin curved designs before my eyes.
The years and seasons cycle
As I slide a timeline spiral,
Ride out the orbit of my life
And watch its ways unwind.
I see the buds begin to bloom
Then turn to seed to bud again.
From dawn to dusk, and sow to reap,
And wake to sleep, it all comes back
With dust to dust. The sweep revolves
Returning all by faithful currents.
Like spawning salmon, comets in ellipses,
And eclipses, my space and place
And moods and luck
Complete the system charted out,
Arch through patterns,
Echo through the hollowness of time.
The wheel takes me up
Turns me around, and takes me down,
And never breaks its pace,
Never strays, never taints.
Whole and one,
The nowness of changing,
The constant coming of new
Spun from the same wheel of motion,
This rebirth and recurrence
Surrounds me. Such splendorous fulfillment
Is less the bloom I see,
More the blossomings.

M. Murphy

FINALE

Before the sun's invading force
A cold, immobile silence
Counterfeits a sense of peace
That explodes to surrender, sun-burst
Forfeiting to the man-bound day
The calm that with passion cannot co-exist;
For the fire
That wars within a soul
Sears another's prideful wound;
That sparks creation into being
Kindles distruction's hostile flame;
That charges a lover's ecstasy,
Consumes the blood of father and son
Burning across a battlefield;
Until at last, the vulture circles low
To partake of peace on earth, consecrated.

M. Conklin

A STUDY IN IMAGERY

The learning poet who experiments with imagery is enjoying the full pleasure of writing poetry. Imagery is the use of visual reference; yes, and it is a handling of figures of speech, and the interrelationship of these devices with the poet's basic thesis. But it is more besides. Images are the outward and visible signs of the interior meaning of a poem. Images create the ambiance in which ideas prosper. Here are three poems by each of four advanced students of poetry. They have succeeded with imagery in these poems because they have become poets in the truest sense of the word: Not only people who have thoughts and feelings which grow into poetic utterances but because the very shape of their thoughts moves the reader to say – "There. That's right. That's just how I feel. That's how it really is."

SHADOW

Dusky interloper
Lying flat against the dust
The sun's benign transgressor
Stealthily approaches twilight with outstretched arms
And spreads to reunite with night.

M. Conklin

QUEST

When the heart
goes questing a solitary refuge,
wrapped in a warm protective coat,
alone he seeks
a sheltered private place
to burrow deep
and pass
into a dreamless night of days,
within his tomb to hibernate
beyond the dormant frozen waste
and sleep away the memory of other springs,
as if the sense of quickening
to another thaw, would stir
a hurt too recently forgotten
too strong to suffer awakening;
know then, that winter
has come at last to stay.

M. Conklin

CLUE

Green goes glory seeking
To race against a weather's wind
And sport a curling tendril
Twining carefree round a corner.

Golden drifters warn the fleeting racers
To twist the stiffening veins
Closed, before a frosty finish
And choke a sighing breath
Exhausted from the pace.

Red stops the tangled journey
Burns the withered competitors
To ashen heaps;
A token mass to passing youth
When early green was go.

M. Conklin

IN STORAGE

Immortal people
I am one.
Life forever
Stretches
Beckons.

My thoughts
Are never-ending.
Abrupt departures
Cannot touch me.

Indestructible
Active mind.
Dreams become realities.
All important
Being me.

Death an abstraction
Stored in a basement
Of unconscious
Creeps up the stairs to lift the trap door
Quickly tumbled back and
Bolted safely.

J. Guest

HOLLOW

There is a secret place
Within the hollow.

The sturdy bark
Jigsaws in mystery
Surrounding the rounding height.
A thousand gold-clad
Heralds of the seasons
Drift to oblivion.
Fickle branches reach up,
Out, changing directions
With uncertain persistance.
Scheduled alterations
Mark and measure.

But the hollow is a secret.
A retreat, a refuge
The center of the seed.

J. Guest

DESTINATION

The well-tended green rolled on forever.
Granite slabs interrupted abruptly the speckled acre.
Nostril lining damp with heavy air
Slightly obstructing freedom.

The deadened stillness reached up
And gently eased my skirt.
My coat was hanger-clad hooked to the Yew.
The suit coffer was opened and waiting.

I folded up neatly
And packed myself in.

J. Guest

YOSEMITE

1

over mountains gray purple
god fingers curl,
touch magenta granite,
ease warmly into shadows,
caress sinewed, vibrant green,
lift up glistening moon tears.
sunrise.

2

out of the canyon walls
rises the inenvitable determination of Wonder
seeking to endure, to perpetrate.
fingers crawl over solidified barriers,
scratch, dig, penetrate
down
deep
deeper
until liquid life chills, refreshes into certainty.
lush maturity becomes a celebration
of stubborn regeneration.

P. Hooten

NO WHERE

seagulls over a large expanse
of ideas
of emotions
without the security of land.

existence means to dip into the waters,
grab at some form of reinforcement,
then fly into the whirlwind
eternally striving to survive.

the winged mariners persist,
hope unchanged by immensity.
no island rests on the horizon –
no where to gather sustenance,
no where to settle contentedly, unconfused,
without weary fears searching for calm.

P. Hooten

COMPASSION

I wish I could put my hands
into your soul
and take all the hurt out.
I wouldn't even care
if my hands turned
old,
lifeless,
from holding so much of your pain
at once.

but people don't touch
souls
with their hands.

P. Hooten

DRY

The driest dust sags about the garden,
Lighting, gradually, on the slumped and broken stems
Where each browning petal passively wilts away
Until the sun-stretched buds dangle limp and beaten.
My pain is numbed and I am dry
And I no longer hope for rain.

M. Murphy

RESOLVED

I have tried not to see
The brittle brown and rustling leaves
(thinning from the wintery trees),
Wooed away by an ancient wish
That churns them off across my lawn.

Day by day the days fall off
And shiver in the breezy chill,
And fill my thoughts with the changing,
Coaxing me to yield:
To ready the lair
Axe a cord or two
Unfold an extra quilt
Flurry the calendar
Drop another page.

So quick the summers turn
In bursts of sunshine between frosts and snow,
And though I have not tried to see,
I know how sad
How soon
These seasons go.

M. Murphy

POETS

Farmers and soldiers
and five-children mothers
are poets whose days
have rhythm and rhymes
without stanzas
or couplets
or goblets of wine.

Unwritten, unspoken,
unconscioulsy measured,
their patterns
form verses
too quickly to title;
too timeworn to sign.

M. Murphy