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## Writing off the Subject



I OFTEN make these remarks to a beginning poetry-writing class.

You'll never be a poet until you realize that everything I say today and this quarter is wrong. It may be right for me, but it is wrong for you. Every moment, I am, without wanting or trying to, telling you to write like me. But I hope you learn to write like you. In a sense, I hope I don't teach you how to write but how to teach yourself how to write. At all times keep your crap detector on. If I say something that helps, good. If what I say is of no help, let it go. Don't start arguments. They are futile and take us away from our purpose. As Yeats noted, your important arguments are with yourself. If you don't agree with me, don't listen. Think about something else.

When you start to write, you carry to the page one of two attitudes, though you may not be aware of it. One is that all music must conform to truth. The other, that all truth must conform to music. If you believe the first, you are making your job very difficult, and you are not only limiting the writing of poems to something done only by the very witty and clever, such as Auden, you are weakening the justification for creative-writing programs. So you can take that attitude if you want, but you are jeopardizing my livelihood as well as your chances of writing a good poem.

If the second attitude is right, then I still have a job. Let's

pretend it is right because I need the money. Besides, if you feel truth must conform to music, those of us who find life bewildering and who don't know what things mean, but love the sounds of words enough to fight through draft after draft of a poem, can go on writing—try to stop us.

One mark of a beginner is his impulse to push language around to make it accommodate what he has already conceived to be the truth, or, in some cases, what he has already conceived to be the form. Even Auden, clever enough at times to make music conform to truth, was fond of quoting the woman in the Forster novel who said something like, "How do I know what I think until I see what I've said."

✓ A poem can be said to have two subjects, the initiating or triggering subject, which starts the poem or "causes" the poem to be written, and the real or generated subject, which the poem comes to say or mean, and which is generated or discovered in the poem during the writing. That's not quite right because it suggests that the poet recognizes the real subject. The poet may not be aware of what the real subject is but only have some instinctive feeling that the poem is done.

✓ Young poets find it difficult to free themselves from the initiating subject. The poet puts down the title: "Autumn Rain." He finds two or three good lines about Autumn Rain. Then things start to break down. He cannot find anything more to say about Autumn Rain so he starts making up things, he strains, he goes abstract, he starts telling us the meaning of what he has already said. The mistake he is making, of course, is that he feels obligated to go on talking about Autumn Rain, because that, he feels, is the subject. Well, it isn't the subject. You don't know what the subject is, and the moment you run out of things to say about Autumn Rain start talking about something else. In fact, it's a good idea to talk about something else before you run out of things to say about Autumn Rain.

Don't be afraid to jump ahead. There are a few people who become more interesting the longer they stay on a single subject. But most people are like me, I find. The longer they talk about one subject, the duller they get. Make the subject of the next sentence different from the subject of the sentence

you just put down. Depend on rhythm, tonality, and the music of language to hold things together. It is impossible to write meaningless sequences. In a sense the next thing always belongs. In the world of imagination, all things belong. If you take that on faith, you may be foolish, but foolish like a trout.

Never worry about the reader, what the reader can understand. When you are writing, glance over your shoulder, and you'll find there is no reader. Just you and the page. Feel lonely? Good. Assuming you can write clear English sentences, give up all worry about communication. If you want to communicate, use the telephone.

To write a poem you must have a streak of arrogance—not in real life I hope. In real life try to be nice. It will save you a hell of a lot of trouble and give you more time to write. By arrogance I mean that when you are writing you must assume that the next thing you put down belongs not for reasons of logic, good sense, or narrative development, but because you put it there. You, the same person who said that, also said this. The adhesive force is your way of writing, not sensible connection.

The question is: how to get off the subject, I mean the triggering subject. One way is to use words for the sake of their sounds. Later, I'll demonstrate this idea.

The initiating subject should trigger the imagination as well as the poem. If it doesn't, it may not be a valid subject but only something you feel you should write a poem about. Never write a poem about anything that ought to have a poem written about it, a wise man once told me. Not bad advice but not quite right. The point is, the triggering subject should not carry with it moral or social obligations to feel or claim you feel certain ways. If you feel pressure to say what you know others want to hear and don't have enough devil in you to surprise them, shut up. But the advice is still well taken. Subjects that ought to have poems have a bad habit of wanting lots of other things at the same time. And you provide those things at the expense of your imagination.

I suspect that the true or valid triggering subject is one in which physical characteristics or details correspond to attitudes the poet has toward the world and himself. For me, a small

town that has seen better days often works. Contrary to what reviewers and critics say about my work, I know almost nothing of substance about the places that trigger my poems. Knowing can be a limiting thing. If the population of a town is nineteen but the poem needs the sound seventeen, seventeen is easier to say if you don't know the population. Guessing leaves you more options. Often, a place that starts a poem for me is one I have only glimpsed while passing through. It should make impression enough that I can see things in the town—the water tower, the bank, the last movie announced on the marquee before the theater shut down for good, the closed hotel—long after I've left. Sometimes these are imagined things I find if I go back, but real or imagined, they act as a set of stable knowns that sit outside the poem. They and the town serve as a base of operations for the poem. Sometimes they serve as a stage setting. I would never try to locate a serious poem in a place where physical evidence suggests that the people there find it relatively easy to accept themselves—say the new Hilton.

The poet's relation to the triggering subject should never be as strong as (must be weaker than) his relation to his words. The words should not serve the subject. The subject should serve the words. This may mean violating the facts. For example, if the poem needs the word "black" at some point and the grain elevator is yellow, the grain elevator may have to be black in the poem. You owe reality nothing and the truth about your feelings everything.

Let's take what I think is a lovely little poem, written in 1929 by a fine poet who has been unjustly ignored.

#### *Rattlesnake*

I found him sleepy in the heat  
 And dust of a gopher burrow,  
 Coiled in loose folds upon silence  
 In a pit of the noonday hillside.  
 I saw the wedged bulge  
 Of the head hard as a fist.  
 I remembered his delicate ways:  
 The mouth a cat's mouth yawning.

I crushed him deep in dust,  
 And heard the loud seethe of life  
 In the dead beads of the tail  
 Fade, as wind fades  
 From the wild grain of the hill.\*

I find there's much to be learned about writing from this excellent poem. First I think it demonstrates certain truths that hold for much art. The poem grows from an experience, either real or imagined—I only recently found out that this particular experience was real. The starting point is fixed to give the mind an operating base, and the mind expands from there. Often, if the triggering subject is big (love, death, faith) rather than localized and finite, the mind tends to shrink. Sir Alexander Fleming observed some mold, and a few years later we had a cure for gonorrhea. But what if the British government had told him to find a cure for gonorrhea? He might have worried so much he would not have noticed the mold. Think small. If you have a big mind, that will show itself. If you can't think small, try philosophy or social criticism.

The need for the poem to have been written is evident in the poem. This is a strong example of the notion that all good serious poems are born in obsession. Without this poem the experience would have been neither validated nor completed.

The poem has elements of melodrama. All art that has endured has a quality we call schmaltz or corn. Our reaction against the sentimentality embodied in Victorian and post-Victorian writing was so resolute writers came to believe that the further from sentimentality we got, the truer the art. That was a mistake. As Bill Kittredge, my colleague who teaches fiction writing, has pointed out: if you are not *risking* sentimentality, you are not close to your inner self.

The poem is located in a specific place. You don't know where, but you know the poet knows where. Knowing where you are can be a source of creative stability. If you are in Chicago you can go to Rome. If you ain't no place you can't go nowhere.

\* From Brewster Ghiselin, *Against the Circle* (New York: Dutton, 1946), p. 60. Reprinted with permission of the author.

The snake is killed gratuitously. The study of modern psychology may have helped some of us become better people. We may treat our children better because we have gained some rudimentary notion of cause and effect in behavior. But in art, as seemingly in life, things happen without cause. They just happen. A poem seldom finds room for explanations, motivations, or reason. What if the poem read

Because I knew his poison  
 Was dangerous to children  
 I crushed him deep in dust . . . ?

The poet would be making excuses for himself, and the fierce honesty with which he faces his raw act of murder would be compromised. Nothing in the drama *King Lear* can possibly serve as explanation of the shattering cruelty of Regan and Cornwall when they blind Gloucester. From a writer's standpoint, a good explanation is that Shakespeare knew a lot of creeps walk this earth.

But there's more to be learned from this poem than just artistic principles. They are always suspect anyway, including those I think I find here. Let's move on to the language of the poem.

Generally, in English multisyllabic words have a way of softening the impact of language. With multisyllabic words we can show compassion, tenderness, and tranquillity. With multisyllabic words we become more civilized. In the first four lines of the poem, seven of the twenty-six words, slightly better than one out of four, are two-syllable words. This is a fairly high count unless you are in politics. The snake is sleepy. He presents no threat to the speaker. His dwelling is that of a harmless creature, a gopher. It's almost as if the snake were a derelict, an orphan, a vagabond who sleeps wherever he can. The words "noonday hillside" suggest that the world does not have rigid topography but optional configurations. At 4 P.M. it might not be a hillside at all. We take our identities from our relationships, just as the earth takes its configurations from the time of day, the position of the source of light. This is a warm, fluid world.

With single-syllable words we can show rigidity, honesty, toughness, relentlessness, the world of harm unvarnished. In lines five and six, the snake is seen as a threat, the lines slam home heavy as the fist the poet sees as simile for the head of the snake. But of course, men, not snakes, have fists, and so we might ask: where does the danger really lie here?

The speaker then has a tender memory of the snake in lines seven and eight, and we get two three-syllable words and a long two-syllable word, "yawning." You might note that the poet is receptive to physical similarities of snakes and domestic cats—they look much alike when yawning—just as later he sees and hears the similarity of rattlesnakes to wheat (grain), the way the tail looks like the tassel, the way the rattle sounds like wind in the grain.

In the final five lines the poet kills the snake, faces himself and the moral implications of his act without a flinch or excuse, and we get no multisyllabic words in the entire passage. All single-syllable words, and the gaze is level, the whole being of the speaker honestly laid out, vulnerable on his private moral block. If one acts on the rigid, prejudicial attitudes expressed in lines five and six (which the speaker did), and not on the fluid, tender, humane attitudes expressed in the first four lines and lines seven and eight, then in return one is faced with the fully developed, uncompromising picture of what one has done. Forever.

In this poem the triggering subject remains fully in view until late in the poem, whereas the generated object, what the poem is saying, just begins to show at the end but is nonetheless evident. The snake as such is being left behind, and attitudes about life are starting to form. The single-syllable words in the last five lines relentlessly drive home the conviction that all life is related, and that even if life isn't sacred, we might be better off if we acted as if it were. In this case the poet got off the initiating subject late.

I mentioned that one way of getting off the subject, of freeing yourself from memory if you will, is to use words for the sake of sound. Now I must use four lines from an early poem of mine, simply because I can't verify any other poet's process. I know what mine was at the time. These are the first

four lines of the fourth stanza of an early poem called "At the Stilli's Mouth."

With the Stilli this defeated and the sea  
turned slough by close Camano, how can water die  
with drama, in a final rich cascade,  
a suicide, a victim of terrain, a martyr?

When I was a young poet I set an arbitrary rule that when I made a sound I felt was strong, a sound I liked specially, I'd make a similar sound three to eight syllables later. Of course it would often be a slant rhyme. Why three to eight? Don't ask. You have to be silly to write poems at all.

In this case the word "cascade" fell lovingly on my ear and so, soon after, "suicide." I wasn't smart enough to know that I was saying that my need to see things dramatically was both childish and authentic. But "suicide" was right and led to "victim of terrain" and "martyr," associative notions at least, but also words that sound like other words in the passage, "martyr" like "drama" and "water," "victim" like "final" and "Stilli" (Northwest colloquial for Stilliguamish, the river). Instead of "suicide" I might have hit on "masquerade," but that would have been wrong and I hope I would have known it. I might have simply because "masquerade" sounds *too much* like "cascade," calls attention to itself, and to my ear is less interesting. What I'm trying to tell you is that by doing things like this I was able to get off the subject and write the poem. The fact that "suicide" sounds like "cascade" is infinitely more important than what is being said.

It isn't of course, but if you think about it that way for the next twenty-five years you could be in pretty good shape.