

POETICALLY SPEAKING

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THE POET'S VOICE

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How many times have I said this? Ha! Be yourself, and do not try to be someone else. I mention this in my essay **Charging Poetry with Meaning**, but I will elaborate further in what follows.

There are many people who would like to write poetry. Unfortunately, there are far too many who think they already do. Most of these do not have a good grasp of the basics of formal verse and prefer to make excuses for their ignorance.

When writing structured or metrical verse, there are several stages of development. The would-be or hopeful poet will find themselves at most stages. They may be aware of their position, or they may be oblivious until pointed out. In an analogous manner, these stages may apply to many areas of writing. I will outline the various stages and consider them in more detail where appropriate.

STAGE 1: BEGINNING

This is by far the most common stage at which a poet entering formal verse will find themselves. This when they are writing something like something else they have read or heard before. I will say that there is nothing wrong with this position for the beginner.

STAGE 2: INTERMEDIATE TO ADVANCED

This stage is like the first. I find that the poet will use many of the techniques, formulas or styles of other poets to their advantage. There is a clear sign of their skill. On occasions they will add a little flair to their work as their knowledge and skill grows.

STAGE 3: NEAR "PERFECTION"

This is where we want to be! To be able to create something. Something different and unique. It may still rely on other techniques and styles. As such, the whole progresses into something original. It demonstrates an improvement of style and individuality.

IN MORE DETAIL

These stages are the diluters, inventors and masters. Ezra Pound referred to these three classifications of poets in his work.¹

Now these three stages allow me to explain what I mean by the poet's voice, and how it develops. The main point in all this is that you need to find your own voice. Your natural and comfortable way of writing and expressing yourself. Every poet will have some distinguishing feature about the way they write. What might be yours?

It is the first stage that I wish to consider in more detail. As I stated earlier, it is this stage from which most will embark upon their journey in formal verse. But, as Pound acknowledges, it is also the stage from which many will never leave.

The inclination is to write or experiment with something we are already be familiar with. This is a natural tendency of one starting out in anything. Some characteristics of this stage in poetry are:

- Copying, mirroring or imitation.
- There are elements of rime and line length, but there is a struggle with meter. Rhythm is inconsistent due to the conflict of metrical accent and speech stress.
- Writing with a natural rhythm.

Studying past masters and attempting to replicate their style is admirable. It is not a place where we want to remain to better our poetic skill. Bear in mind that imitation is common and has been an active pursuit participated in by many of the greats. Yet many hopeful poets will persist in trying to impersonate another poet, their hero one might say. They assume that if they can copy another poet's style, then it will be successful for them. But, much to their surprise, their demise will be forthcoming.

You see it is not the style or form that the poet writes in that is important. Copying the form may give something that looks like it, but it will lack everything else. There will be no body, no feeling apart from that of falseness. All is dull, boring and seems to lumber along with no direction. Reason? Because you are not that particular poet. What works for one will rarely work for another with the same effect. This is what I mean by finding your own voice or being yourself.

Imitations may be brilliant, but more likely poor, almost dreadful. The fact is that is it not their natural style, and to an extent forced. Good for learning but little else. I will admit that in rare instances, some poets pull it off quite well. They may be well suited to the style. Would it not be more exhilarating to gain recognition for your own skills? Not for reproducing another's?

Imitation is what the diluter is notorious for. Flooding the market with lookalikes resulting in a gradual decline of quality. Why? Because they have gotten away with it! The only demonstration of skill is in the copying. You do not want to be here! Seasoned poets will find you out. If not already, they will at least be observing your progress. Beware the critic when they find you out!

Not all beginners will become diluters. Those with a passion will leave this stage after much study and practice.

¹ Ezra Pound, *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound, A Retrospect*

Some beginners will have a natural rhythm to their work. This is very pleasing, but it can become quite droll when there is no effort to make it better or to capitalize on their natural ability. This is pure laziness and being content with what may become a mediocre performance.

Those who remain in the first stage may do so due to:

- Laziness or lacking the passion in study or poetry itself.
- Being content with their work serving only as a pastime.

More sinister reasons are:

- Pursuing the pretense that they are (like) someone or something they are not.
- Manipulating lines, techniques, or entire pieces to have them appear as their own.

Those belonging to the second stage are more creative. We may associate them with inventors. This is where they use and experiment with techniques. Using these techniques, they make the effort to strengthen their own writing style.

Reading their work, it is clear that the imitation and copying has ceased. They are beginning to stamp their ownership on what they produce. Some characteristics from their view might be:

- They struggle less to make and work lines.
- An obvious flow has developed, and the jerkiness of rhythm lost (for the better).
- There is a sign of development, if not evolution of the poet.

The butterfly has emerged! We no longer have the regurgitative nonsense. A sweet melody, a songbird's voice is emerging from the darkness and lighting the path for the reader.

I would say that this is where we will find most note-worthy poets, and successful ones at that! There is a vast range within this stage. Yet, it serves little to create subdivisions.

Those rarities in the third stage we may call the masters and are at the peak of creative outpourings. What was only thought to be possible has materialized in the work of these poets. One reads it, and it is something to behold! It becomes immortal, meaning no-one else could have written it (in the most positive sense).

This is where we would like to be as a poet, and it is possible! I may admit that natural talent goes a long way, but not raw talent. Raw talent needs taming and shaped else it will become mediocre. Exposing raw talent to inappropriate influences is detrimental to the poet. Raw talent can also be short-lived. Recall the 'one-hit-wonder'. Yet, natural talent is something else and emanates from will and passion. The desire, the want, the necessity to live and breathe poetry. To get those lines down, else go mad.²

Natural talent needs guidance and kept under a critical eye. There should be no acceptance of the norm or influences to their attitude toward poetry.

² cf. Lord Byron, **Letter to Thomas Moore**, January 2, 1821, "If I do not write to empty my mind, I go mad."

INDIVIDUALITY

The poet's voice is not a singular entity. It is as individual as you and I. No two poets have the same voice, it is an impossibility. But, there still remain those who think they can fool their audience. The reader and listener are not so ignorant! Hence never assume or treat them as such.

There is a great variation in ability. Your voice will reflect your stage of development. As such, there can be no point in attempting deception.

To produce excellent formal verse requires study and dedication. There must be no concern for formulas or ridiculous fancies. Your voice must come without effort and then honed to perfection as far as it is possible.

Originality comes later. It is without a doubt, that in the initial stages of development help comes from the past masters. It is important to continue to delve into the intricacies of verse. Always adopt or create new ways to work with your words.