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PERFECTING THE POEM

FROM T. S. ELIOT TO ROBERT WALLER

I cannot understand the fluency of many poets, or their inclination to write another poem rather than to spend time perfecting the one just written.

— T. S. Eliot, September 21, 1942

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Prefatory Remarks

In many of Eliot's letters, one will find a gem of enlightenment. At times, they may be hilarious, or at least amusing, at other times cruel or profoundly serious.

The above quote from one of his thousands of letters may be taken as flippant or just some snide comment for the benefit of his correspondent, but the act he has pointed out is true, even more so today.

I think most poets have pushed the boundaries with their writing and writing habits, but a massive output is not always the best. Most of what has been written could be classified as rubbish and not worth publishing at all. In fact, it could be highly embarrassing and detrimental to the poet if published. It may even be the death-knell for any possibility of popularity they may hope to achieve.

It is without a doubt that some, or many of those who would call themselves poets (or writers) would force themselves to write every day. There is nothing wrong with this approach, as it can help maintain some enthusiasm for writing; however, extraordinarily little of it is worth publishing for the public. Let us be honest with ourselves, we cannot write the best poetry or prose all the time. As I have stated before, 95% is rubbish, 4% is excellent, and 1% is immortal! Personally, I can attest to writing a lot of rubbish, but I am content with the final 5%.

The greatest problem today is that there is so much rubbish being published as poetry. Even well-known or traditional publishers are publishing worthless poetry purely on the reputation of one who may have produced a few good poems at some stage in their writing career.

There appears to be a fascination or requirement to produce a large body of work. This may be something to aspire to, but most likely, it will not be the case that everything that is written is worthy or of any significance.

The question that is asked in a general way is why poets do not take more time to perfect what they have written. The assumption is that it is perfect on the **first** attempt. I say **attempt**, meaning a draft in any form.

Is it Possible?

Is it possible that the first draft of a poem is perfect? I would think not, and it would not depend on the length. A short poem requires as much attention as a long poem. There may be rare occasions where an initial draft is satisfactory, but it will still need revision.

The problem is most apparent on **Social Media** platforms. With these platforms, it is possible to immediately make any form of writing available to a large audience. Naturally, there are advantages and disadvantages in doing this.

As mentioned before, the advantage is that your work is exposed to a greater audience. The downside to this is that if your work is below standard or the same as everyone else's, your following will be exceptionally low. The more you put out, the less people will take notice.

Let us face it, anyone can put up anything every day, perhaps more than once a day. Flooding the platform with inferior work will never make you successful or well-liked. Eliot's words ring true! Why not spend some time perfecting the current poem before starting another? Why not read your work to see if something can be changed for the better?

Another problem we see with Social Media poetry is the lack of quality. Everything appears to be done in a hurry, and in most, or at least many cases, would not qualify as poetry. Simply dumping your thoughts or feelings into the digital ether is rarely, if ever, a poem. Often, the result is more incoherent prose than poetry.

Of course, several things can be done to check or modify the piece, but this is rarely done. With perhaps a few changes of words, deletion of a line or two, or a change in line break, may turn an inferior piece of work into a magnificent poem. It all depends on how serious you are in professing that you are a poet.

Originality

Some consider their poem a free-flow of thought, but this free-flow does not make it original or necessarily endearing to the reader. A stream of consciousness may be a good start, but it will need revising.

Every poet aims to produce something original. Original does not merely mean something different on a common theme, or writing something from the present era in an earlier structured form. These are **not** original. It is in these formats that we see poetry written every day. Same thing, just a different spin on it.

Nowadays, we find it difficult to be original, and the search for something different has all but ceased. Poets are accepting and content to sit back and imitate others in some manner. The same applies to drama. The only genre that offers any prospect of originality is the novel.

It is no wonder that the popularity of poetry has fallen, possibly so far that it may never recover, and what we see today does not help. Many people are simply looking for something easy and to be noticed. The whole business is a result of digital technology. Other technologies in previous centuries may have caused a similar problem, but many more steps had to be taken before work was published for public scrutiny.

In an era where originality has all but vanished, the least that can be done is to produce higher-quality work and treat the first effort as a draft rather than the final product.

If we consider the likes of Eliot and Pound, we will notice that both produced little poetry compared to their prose. However, what they did produce was original because they were trying to break out of the traditional mold, not entirely, but searching for something different that always repeated the past in English poetry. Sometimes, they would take years before they were happy with their work, which was often achieved through numerous revisions and a rigorous editing process. As a result, they produced something **original**, which had an impact on the poetry of the day and continues to do so today.

Points to Consider

What are some of the things we may look at? We have a few, and you may be surprised at how much of a difference these few things can make. The following considerations are not exhaustive, but may prove useful as a starting point. Some areas for consideration are:

1. Do the words make sense in the context they are used?

Although an excellent vocabulary can be useful (and impressive), it can also create difficulty for the reader. It is common knowledge that some poets and writers will resort to a thesaurus and purposely replace a simple word with a more complex or uncommon one. Whether this improves anything is debatable. Often, a simpler word will suffice, whereas the alternative will distract the reader's attention and understanding of the poem. It becomes more obvious when the rest of the poem does not possess the same or similar usage of vocabulary. The same can be said of the use of archaic words (as opposed to uncommon in contemporary English). They should be used sparingly as they will generally require some explanation of what they mean. Footnotes are not always appropriate in poetry unless for commentary. The other extreme is when the word is completely out of context and is mistakenly being used in place of the correct word.

2. Can any of the line breaks be changed to improve the flow and understanding of the poem, or the rhythm of the poem?

Consideration in changing the length of a verse (line) is more appropriate when not following one of the traditional structured forms. With varying verse lengths, there is more flexibility in expression instead of confining one's idea to a strict length according to a sequence of the same (or similar) metrical feet. The length of the verse is dependent on the mood or emotional expressiveness required. Grammar and punctuation (or lack of) must also be considered. Grammar for the whole thing to make sense, and punctuation to control the rhythm and sense units. This process is closely related to another point later in these suggestions.

3. Are all words and verses necessary? Can superfluous words or verses be removed without altering the meaning of the poem?

It can often occur when there is too much information given to the reader. The poet may want to make sure that the imagery or thought is expressed accurately, but to the reader, it may be repetitious or function as a filler. Whatever the reason, the result is that the reader loses interest.

4. In the case of rime, are you riming on unimportant words? Is there too much enjambment?

Enjambment can be an enemy of rime and comprehension. The purpose of enjambment is to allow the poet a little more scope to bring their ideas and emotions to life. However, once enjambment begins to take over, there is increasing difficulty making sense of these verses. Enjambment can also lessen the effect of rime because the rime no longer becomes as important as it should be. In this case, the rime is merely a suitable (but not important) word to carry into the following verse.

5. Are you being too descriptive? The reader does not require every detail.

This goes together with point three. Attempting to describe an event or emotion in every detail does not allow the reader to use their imagination to create the scene or feeling for themselves. Too many adjectives soon get in the way and may ruin the image the reader has created in their own mind. The reader will not always interpret the poem in the same manner, and the poet must let them relate the situation to something they are familiar with, hence making the poem more relatable.

6. Have you read your poem, listened to it, and felt its rhythm?

This suggestion goes together with point two, or is at least an extension. One method to pick up errors is to read the poem out loud and listen to how it flows and sounds. Sometimes the pure visionary aspect loses the significance of rhythm and sound. What we think is happening may not be so when a voice is given to the poem.

7. Check any alterations.

It is important to check any changes that have been made. There is the possibility that the change is inappropriate. Although this can be time-consuming, it is a vital aspect of revision and editing.

Concluding Thoughts

Now we are not all Eliots and Pounds, and I doubt that there will ever be anyone who comes close today. The problem is that people's tastes have changed over the centuries, and what is presented to us today as poetry has become mainstream and accepted as the norm.

This does not mean that we should stop searching and experimenting with distinctive styles, but this will take a lot of effort to be successful. Are we patient enough? Most likely not, because what we have today is far easier to produce and reproduce. Easy is not always the best, but it is when producing mediocre work.

The reality is that it does not take a great deal of effort to review our work, and the results can be quite startling, likely transforming our work for the better. What we must strive for is something as close as possible to perfection.