

CHAPTER 2

Poetry as Nourishment: How to Read Like a Poet

Poets as Readers

Giving a poetry reading years ago at a nursing home, I met Sally, a vibrant woman in her early nineties who loved literature. Her eyes were bad and she could no longer read, but she was such a delightful person that people gladly read aloud to her. However, no one in that pre-Internet time had been able to find a copy of what she most wanted to hear: a once-famous poem about a seashell, “The Chambered Nautilus” by Oliver Wendell Holmes.

As a schoolchild in the Midwest at the very beginning of the twentieth century, Sally had been required to memorize this poem along with many others. Now, approaching the end of her life, she remembered enough of “The Chambered Nautilus” to know that she needed to hear that poem again before she died. She asked if I would track down the poem and tape myself reading it, along with any other poems I thought she would enjoy. I will never forget the sheer hunger, the deep need, in her face as she asked me this favor.

The story goes that when Edmund Spenser, author of the epic poem *The Faerie Queene*, whose invocation you read in the last chapter, was buried in the “Poets’ Corner” of Westminster Abbey in London in 1599, poets came to throw roses into his grave. Though the Renaissance was a time when the bonds among poets were particularly lively and essential, the story has survived because it captures something about Spenser: like John Keats, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Elizabeth Bishop, he is known as “a poet’s poet.” There are not many poets’ poets, and they are prized like the fabled alchemical “quintessence”: the essence of essences.

Only other poets can decide who are the poets’ poets. The term implies that poets know best about poetry, and that they read poetry somewhat differently from other people. This chapter will focus on how, in the process of deciding

who are *your* "poet's poets," you will become a better poet yourself. But it is always important to remember, at the same time, how crucial it is for poetry to have readers like Sally who are not poets at all. These pure readers, as I like to call them, play a role in poetry that is just as profound as the poets' role. Pure readers are essential to keep poetry a gift.

In my teens and twenties, doubtless like many young poets, I spent tormented hours reflecting that a poet's path is thankless and, even worse, seemed self-indulgent. What is the use of poetry, after all? The book that finally began to bring me peace of mind was anthropologist Lewis Hyde's cult classic *The Gift*, a brilliant exploration of the role of art in the world. Hyde reminds us that poetry provides value outside of the usual economy of usefulness and exchange, and that this freedom in itself is an essential human function that creates space for meaning in our lives.

To read "The Chambered Nautilus" for Sally, knowing how much it would mean to her and that she would carry it into death, as she was to do just a few months later, was a gift to myself as much as to her. She helped remind me that poetry does matter, to paraphrase the title of a book by Dana Gioia. The last stanza of the poem that Sally remembered after all those years provides a moving way to close, or to lead, a life.

From "The Chambered Nautilus," Oliver Wendell Holmes (1858)

Build thee more stately mansions, O my soul,
 As the swift seasons roll!
 Leave thy low-vaulted past!
 Let each new temple, nobler than the last,
 Shut thee from heaven with a dome more vast,
 Till thou at length art free,
 Leaving thine outgrown shell by life's unresting sea!

Letting a Poem Read You

A question and answer session usually follows my readings at colleges and high schools. There is one question that usually gets asked early on, after a few questions about inspiration or writing habits. A particularly earnest hand waves in the air, and its owner asks: "What advice do you have for aspiring poets?"

There are all kinds of useful tips to offer, from finding a steady day job to keeping a flashlight and notebook by the bed. But the advice I give most often is so simple that a beginning poet might be tempted to ignore it—and so crucial that it is worth all the rest of the advice put together. *Read poetry. And then read more poetry.*

Not only read it, but get so good at reading it that you stop reading it the way you read other kinds of words, and instead begin to savor it like chocolate or wine. Not only read poetry you like, but also read poetry you hate, poetry that bores you, poetry so difficult it drives you crazy, poetry so easy it irritates you, poetry that makes you furious, poetry in languages you don't know, poetry written by the kindergartener down the block, self-published poetry, Pulitzer Prize-winning poetry, rapper poetry, "Immortal Poetry" in classroom anthologies, and long-forgotten poetry in cracked leather bindings on lower shelves in back rooms of junk shops.

Read so much of it that you learn to smell the different varieties of it through the cover of a closed book. Not only read it, but let it read you: read it with the other side of your brain, so that instead of knowing what it means, you will feel how it means; allow its words to unroll at their own pace (not your pace), and to occupy their own space (not your space). Not only read it, but become the dirt its roots can spread out in, the pool table where its balls can ricochet, the room its incense can perfume, the lyre its wind can play the way it plays the branches of a forest (if you recognize the poem from which I borrowed that last metaphor, you're well on your way).

But it's not just the quantity and scope of your reading that matters; "the quality of the attention," to paraphrase Ezra Pound, matters too. Let's say you take this advice seriously, and you've picked up some anthologies of poetry and individual books of poetry, borrowed lots more books of poetry from the library, browsed through the poetry in literary magazines in bookstores, subscribed to one or more of those literary magazines, surfed the innumerable poetry sites on the Web (did you know "poetry" is one of the top five terms people search on the Web?), printed out some of the thousands of poems there, and are well supplied with both classic and contemporary poetry. Now you are sitting there with all this poetry around you, ready to let it play you like a lyre. How do you begin to let a poem echo with its own voice? How do you not simply *read it*, but *let it read you*?

Let's start with the simplest of poems:

"Little Miss Muffet," Mother Goose (seventeenth century)

Little Miss Muffet
Sat on a tuffet
Eating her curds and whey.

Along came a spider
And sat down beside her
And frightened Miss Muffet away.

If you were simply going to read this little verse, you would give your attention to the meanings of the words. You would read it the way you are reading this paragraph of prose, in order to gather the information the words contain. Once you understood the information, you would experience a "been there, done that," feeling, a feeling of "Okay, I've read that. Now what?" You'd feel empty and anxious for something else to do, read, entertain yourself with.

Just as an experiment, read the poem that way. Read it straight through as if you were reading the cooking instructions on a package of spaghetti. Whew! Are you finished? Does your head hurt a little bit? Did you find the poem calling to you the way the seductive Sirens called to Ulysses, when he chained himself to the mast of his ship so he could resist their temptations in *The Odyssey*? If so, you have had a taste of the difference between poetry and prose.

The aspects of this modest poem that were calling you to slow down and enjoy its pleasures, as you dutifully plowed straight through its meaning, are the reason it has survived for hundreds of years. These aspects all involve circling back, entering a space beyond time and outside of time.

When you read a poem with its timeless aspects in mind, you are being far from dutiful. Instead, you are like, let's say, a toddler being taken on a walk by a parent. As you leave the house, your parent is planning to walk to the park, swing you on the swings, go home and make dinner, give you a bath, put you to bed, and answer email. A parent in full parent mode may even be mentally home before you've left the house. You, on the other hand, want to ring the doorbell a few dozen times on the way out, sit down on the bottom step to play with the ants crawling in and out of the little hole where the concrete is broken at the edge, and once you are cajoled into walking again, investigate the acorns scattered a hundred feet up the sidewalk . . . and so on.

The basic difference between toddler mode and parent mode involves time:

the toddler, unlike the parent, is living fully in the present, in a perpetually timeless state of mind. Children respond well to music, and to repetition, so hopefully our hypothetical parent knows that a walking song with a good refrain is one way to finally get moving toward the park. Kids love the repetitions of poetry because its structures are in tune with the timeless part of our minds.

The way to let a poem read you is to respond to it with that timeless part of your mind. Let's try reading *Miss Muffet* as if you are toddling through its two stanzas. Read the poem either out loud or letting yourself "hear" the words inside your mind. Take as long as you want, and let yourself stop whenever you feel like it. This reading aloud is crucial for appreciating poetry.

Little Miss Muffet
Sat on a tuffet
eating her curds and whey.

Along came a spider
and sat down beside her
and frightened Miss Muffet away.

"Muffet" and "tuffet" may be the first thing you notice. It was what made my little daughter laugh when I told her the poem. Before you get to the other rhymes, such as "spider" and "beside her," since you are in toddler mode, you might see how the third line sticks out farther than the first two on the page, and feel how the *t* in "sat" points the way to the *t*'s in "tuffet," which point the way toward the *t* in "eating," and even how the *t* in "eating" and the *d* in "curds" feel similar on your tongue when you say them.

You might also have enjoyed the way the ideas are put together, the way the verb "eating" is separated from the person doing the eating by a line with a funny word in it. By the time you have slowed down enough to unconsciously register all these things about the way the story is told, paradoxically, you might find the images of *Miss Muffet*, the curds and whey, and the spider have become a lot more vivid to you. One secret of the power of poetry is that, when sounds and patterns have slowed you down to timelessness, meanings can come through even more strongly (this vulnerability of timeless minds to impressions is why toddlers can be so strongly affected by movies and other experiences).

The influential scholar Walter Ong describes how, in cultures where poems, stories, and knowledge are passed on orally instead of in writing, people's lives

have a sense of immediacy and directness very different than in our culture. By providing us access into the timeless state of mind, a well-structured poem like "Little Miss Muffet" allows us to experience life in this unmediated way. As literate people, we are used to being the ones who do the "reading" of everything we encounter in our lives: texts, other people, situations. We are used to being the ones who call the shots, set the pace, draw the conclusions—in short, the ones who provide structure to shapeless, raw experience. A poem, on the other hand, is all about structure. A good poem is structured with more richness and complexity than our own experience of the moment we are reading it could probably ever muster. By comparison with such a poem, then, *our* experience is what is shapeless and raw.

Therefore, when we encounter a good poem, we have the opportunity to feel what it is like for once to be not the reader, but the thing read: to have our own experience, as we are reading, shaped and interpreted by the complexities and meanings and interpenetrations of the poem. This is not only an amazing, worthwhile experience in itself: it is key for anyone who is serious about writing poetry and learning to provide such timeless experiences for other readers—because the more we open ourselves to being read by poems, the more sensitive we become to poetry, *even when it is our own words that we are allowing to read us as we write.*

Throughout this book you will be learning skills to help you develop this sensitivity to poetry, so that you will be better able to let poetry, including your own poems, read you. But the three most important steps of the process are not contained in any of the chapters you will read, because they come before any poem you will encounter. Here they are: 1. Slow down. 2. Breathe deeply and clear your mind. 3. Give the poem space to echo in.

If you have read this far, you will know that this process is not at all the same thing as worrying about what the poem means. But if you are in danger of forgetting the difference, you may find this poem helpful:

"Introduction to Poetry," Billy Collins

I ask them to take a poem
and hold it up to the light
like a color slide

or press an ear against its hive.

I say drop a mouse into a poem
and watch him probe his way out,

or walk inside the poem's room
and feel the walls for a light switch.

I want them to waterski
across the surface of a poem
waving at the author's name on the shore.

But all they want to do
is tie the poem to a chair with rope
and torture a confession out of it.

They begin beating it with a hose
to find out what it really means.

Needless to say, while "reading like a poet" may help you to notice all kinds of things you never noticed before about a poem, it is not going to involve you in torturing poetry. If anything, it will take you away from analysis and meaning, at least temporarily, and back into your most direct responses.

Poetry Compost and the Poet's Notebook

Even the most mundane life has poetry in it. If you are now reading this book, you have a rich history of poetic language within you, and part of learning to read as a poet is to wake up that history and let it resonate within your own poems now. When you were such a young child that you were always living in timeless mind, what words did you let echo within you? What phrases did you repeat over and over to yourself, even if you didn't know what they meant? What names, of places, family members, celebrities, or playmates, did you find yourself wanting to hear again and again?

As you grew older, what were the magic spells of words that you carried around with you, the words that you felt had "glamour"? What song lyrics, what sentences from the textbook or blackboard, what fragments of phrases from TV commercials, did you bring into yourself as a link back to timeless mind,