



Most of the poetry written today, however, is neither visionary nor useful. It does little to enhance our lives, prompt us to love the language, entice us to commit phrases to memory, or shed light upon obscurity. It tends to read mainly like a private reverie on the nature of insignificance or like a versified [blook](#) which, even if the poet is sincere, resembles a version of fake news: the rendering of a thought or event that has no relation to our actual experience and that fails to respect what I like to call “the rules of the transcript,” precepts that govern substantive reporting on what often goes unnoticed and that strikes us as true, meaningful or relevant.

The language of poetry should reverberate in the imagination. It is a unique form of expression, cadenced, precise, compelling, registering as beautiful even if the subject is not. This is not to say that poetry should be florid, magniloquent or ornate; as Ezra Pound deposes in his [“A Few Don’ts,”](#) “Use either no ornament or good ornament,” that is, language which does not detract from the poem’s momentum or treat the page as a catwalk for strutting its verbiage. In addition, good poems or parts thereof should be potentially memorable, by which I don’t mean memorisable in toto, but that lines and passages are memory-friendly. They sum up aspects of one’s experience, are recitable, and useful, too, in the sense that they are portable. We carry them subliminally and find they can give point and concision to our responses to the world.

This, I discovered, is now a minority opinion, something like a dissenting legal brief. I recall the astonishment I felt when I was poet-in-residence at a Canadian university and taught a mixed undergraduate/graduate Creative Writing class as part of my departmental duties. Almost none of my students had read much poetry, apart from the fashionable drivel of Frank O’Hara, Charles Olson, John Ashbery and Al Purdy, poetry that oscillates between the irredeemably prosaic and the

proudly indecipherable. ("Clarity is the real risk in poetry," says Billy Collins in [Poetry 180: A Turning Back to Poetry](#), by which he means not flatness of diction but accessibility). Some had a passing acquaintance with Robert Lowell's [Life Studies](#), a volume which accelerated the drift toward confessional banality. Of the classics, they were sublimely ignorant. When I reeled off the names of poets I expected them to be familiar with, at least in passing, and asked them to recite just a few lines from one or another—Donne, Marvell, Pope, Wordsworth, Keats, Whitman, Browning, Hopkins, Yeats, Frost, Larkin, Wilbur, Layton—I was met with blank stares.

Their referential range extended almost exclusively to their poetry-writing friends, their contemporaries and near-contemporaries, a fallow field in which to harvest a crop of edible verse. When I recommended that the best way to learn their trade, to become poets, would be to go back to the Anglo-Saxons and work their way up to the present, experimenting with every form and genre native to the English-language literary tradition—no matter how "archaic" they might regard these—until one acquired a degree of disciplinary competence, my students would grow distinctly nervous, even rebellious. After all, wouldn't their undeniable gifts, burnished by a little practice and a couple of Creative Writing seminars, more than suffice?

Politely suppressing my skepticism, I would then steer them to W.H. Auden's Foreword to Joseph Brodsky's [Selected Poems](#): "One demands two things of a poem. Firstly, it must be a well-made verbal object that does honor to the language in which it is written. Secondly, it must say something significant about a reality common to us all, but perceived from a unique perspective." I was tilting at windmills.

Picking up one or two foreign languages, I suggested, would also be helpful to them as poets, in at least two ways: seeing how language influences thinking, and renewing the sense of surprise in how one's own language works, its singular

capacities for expression, its idiomatic playfulness and its substratum of lexical roots to be exploited for meaning. To take one example from a myriad: When Milton in Book II of [Paradise Lost](#) has his Beelzebub refer to earth's new inhabitants as "puny," he was not only thinking of mankind as paltry but of the French *puis né*, "later born," created after the angels and the world. Clearly, knowledge of the language, its borrowings and tributaries, expands creative opportunities. This is what Montreal poet and critic Carmine Starnino in an important [article](#) on translation sees as an "invigorating surplus," as "shadowy accents from a large palette of foreign vernaculars."

Similarly, familiarity with the history of poetry—its origins, its varieties, its metrics and techniques, its multiple prosodies, its formative theories, and the work of one's major predecessors—is indispensable, assuming one is serious about one's poetic compulsions. The [anxiety of influence](#), in Harold Bloom's coinage, is a beneficial aspect of composition, forcing the poet to deal with his or her "strong" and intimidating precursors in the struggle to achieve an independent voice and presence. Ancestry is an essential part of identity.

As with any other complex discipline—consider painting and music—learning what came before and interiorizing the rules, intricacies and possibilities of the craft represents a pretty tall order, one which few of us can wholly fulfill. Excellent poets do not always produce first-rate work. Good poets can write bad poems. But the desire to achieve true mastery is an ambition to be respected, the effort to hitch one's wagon to a star, as Emerson urged in his timeless essay [American Civilization](#). Unfortunately, the material I regularly receive from publishing houses and poetry journals, consisting of work from first-timers as well as celebrities in the field, has served only to confirm my jaundiced view of the state of the art, which is not state of the art.

One wonders why these bearers of an ectopic muse bother to write, except from a conviction of their own pre-eminence as sensitive souls endowed by nature with special talents. My folders bulge with these supposedly luminous productions, very few of which, to cite Auden from the Introduction to [The Poet's Tongue](#), exemplify "memorable speech [that] must move our emotions or excite our intellect," or even the attempt thereat. Of course, Auden also wrote in his [elegy](#) for W.B. Yeats that "poetry makes nothing happen"—which it plainly does or can or he would not have penned these lines.

Perhaps all is not lost. Despite the clamor and desiccation of the age, there is still a minim of excellent poets, some well-known, others laboring in the shadows, who can "[fit audience find, though few.](#)" For such lovers of the craft, despite the evil days upon which it has fallen, poetry at its best remains part, so to speak, of one's mental equipment, a verbal and perspectival implement that assists in one's transactions with the world. It is, as I've said, useful. It is like reading that one brings along, to adapt Carl Sandburg's "[Limited](#)," on our train journey to Omaha and beyond, not only to pass the time but, in this case, to enrich our reflections.

To cite some of my own vade mecums, instances of what poetry can do when it is not diced prose, selfie-type indulgence or featureless prattle, and how it can exert a kind of foveal influence on experience, sharpening one's perception of meditative detail and lending lustre and modulus to one's conversation:

"Then it is wisdom, as it seems to me,/ To make a virtue of necessity" (Geoffrey Chaucer, "[The Knight's Tale](#)"—an adage Shakespeare pilfered in [Two Gentlemen of Verona](#))