

whether it looks like the last poem you read by the same poet or even a poem by another poet. All of these are good qualities to notice, and they may lead you to a better understanding of the poem in the end.

But sooner or later, you're going to have to read the poem, word by word. To begin, read the poem aloud. Read it more than once. Listen to your voice, to the sounds the words make. Do you notice any special effects? Do any of the words rhyme? Is there a cluster of sounds that seem the same or similar? Is there a section of the poem that seems to have a rhythm that's distinct from the rest of the poem? Don't worry about why the poem might use these effects. The first step is to hear what's going on. If you find your own voice distracting, have a friend read the poem to you.

That said, it can still be uncomfortable to read aloud or to make more than one pass through a poem. Some of this attitude comes from the misconception that we should understand a poem after we first read it, while some stems from sheer embarrassment. Where could I possibly go to read aloud? What if my friends hear me?

The Line

What determines where a line stops in poetry? There is, of course, more than one answer to this question. Lines are often determined by meaning, sound and rhythm, breath, or **typography**. Poets may use several of these elements at the same time. Some poems are **metrical** in a strict sense. But what if the lines aren't metrical? What if the lines are irregular?

The relationship between meaning, sound, and movement intended by the poet is sometimes hard to recognize, but there is an interplay between the grammar of a line, the breath of a line, and the way lines are broken out in the poem—this is called *lineation*. For example, lines that end with punctuation, called *end-stopped lines*, are fairly simple. In that case, the punctuation and the lineation, and perhaps even breathing, coincide to make the reading familiar and even predictable. But lines that are not end-stopped present different challenges for readers because they either end with an incomplete phrase or sentence or they break before the first punctuation mark is reached. The most natural approach is to pay strict attention to the grammar and punctuation. Reading to the end of a phrase or sentence, even if it carries over one or several lines, is the best way to retain the grammatical sense of a poem.

But lineation introduces another variable that some poets use to their advantage. Robert Creeley is perhaps best known for breaking lines across expected grammatical pauses. This technique often introduces secondary meaning, sometimes in ironic contrast with the actual meaning of the complete grammatical phrase. Consider these lines from Creeley's poem "The Language":

Locate I
love you some-
where in

teeth and
eyes, bite
it but

Reading the lines as written, as opposed to their grammatical relationship, yields some strange meanings. "Locate I" seems to indicate a search for identity, and indeed it may, but the next line, which continues with "love you some-," seems to make a diminishing statement about a relationship. On its own, "eyes bite" is very disturbing.

Hearing Creeley read his poems can often be **disquieting**, because he pauses at the end of each line, and these pauses create a kind of tension or counterpoint in relation to the poem's sentence structure. His halting, hesitant, breathless style is immediately recognizable, and it presents writers with new ideas about meaning, purely through lineation. But many poets who break lines disregarding grammatical units do so only for visual irony, something that may be lost in performance. Among metrical, free verse, and even experimental poets of today, there are those who do not interrupt grammatical sense when reading a poem aloud as much as they interrupt it in

the poem's typography. What to do as a reader? Try a variety of methods. It's fun to "Creeleyize" any poem, just to hear what the lineation is doing. But if the results seem to detract from the poem's impact, in terms of its imagery or concept, drop the literal treatment of line breaks and read for grammar or visual image. Reading a poem several ways allows you to see further into the poem simply through repetition....

Remember that the use of these techniques, in any combination, pushes the words of the poem beyond their literal meanings. If you find more in a poem than the words alone convey, then something larger is at work, making the poem more than the sum of its parts....

Talking Back to a Poem

It would be convenient if there were a short list of universal questions, ones that could be used anytime with any poem. In the absence of such a list, here are a few general questions that you might ask when approaching a poem for the first time:

- Who is the speaker?
- What circumstances gave rise to the poem?
- What situation is presented?
- Who or what is the audience?
- What is the tone?
- What form, if any, does the poem take?
- How is form related to content?
- Is sound an important, active element of the poem?
- Does the poem spring from an identifiable historical moment?
- Does the poem speak from a specific culture?
- Does the poem have its own vernacular?
- Does the poem use imagery to achieve a particular effect?
- What kind of figurative language, if any, does the poem use?
- If the poem is a question, what is the answer?
- If the poem is an answer, what is the question?
- What does the title suggest?
- Does the poem use unusual words or use words in an unusual way?

You can fall back on these questions as needed, but experience suggests that since each poem is unique, such questions will not go the necessary distance. In many instances, knowing who the speaker is may not yield any useful information. There may be no identifiable occasion that inspired the poem. But poems do offer clues about where to start. Asking questions about the observable features of a poem will help you find a way in....

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