

The Atlantic, 11/14 “Reading a Poem: 20 Strategies” by Mark Yakich

At one time or another, when face-to-face with a poem, most everyone has been perplexed. The experience of reading a poem itself is as likely to turn us off, intellectually or emotionally, as it is to move us. Unless patronized by celebrities, set to music, accompanied by visuals, or penned by our own children, poems do a terrible job of marketing themselves. All those ragged lines and affected white spaces make them appear as though they should be treated only as pieces of solemn art. *Look but don't get too close, and definitely don't touch.*

But what if the fine art of reading poetry isn't so fine after all? What if the predicament about poems is precisely our well-intentioned but ill-fitting dispositions toward reading them?

Here are 20 modest proposals toward rethinking the act of reading a poem.

1. Dispel the notion that reading poetry is going to dramatically change your life. Your life is continually changing; most of the time you're simply too busy to pay enough attention to it. Poems ask you to pay attention—that's all.
2. When you read a poem, especially a poem *not* meant to be a “spoken word” poem, always read it out loud. (Never mind what they said in grammar school—to subvocalize so that you won't bother your peers.) Your ear will pick up more than your head will allow. That is, the ear will tell the mind what to think.
3. Try to meet a poem on its terms not yours. If you have to “relate” to a poem in order to understand it, you aren't reading it sufficiently. In other words, don't try to fit the poem into your life. Try to see what world the poem creates. Then, if you are lucky, its world will help you re-see your own.
4. Whether or not you are conscious of it, you are always looking for an excuse to stop reading a poem and move on to another poem or to do something else entirely. Resist this urge as much as possible. Think of it as a Buddhist regards a pesky mosquito. The mosquito, like the poem, may be irritating, but it's not going to kill you to brave it for a little while longer.
5. People will tell you there are two kinds of poems: the “accessible poem” whose intent and meaning are easy to appreciate, and the “obscure poem” whose intent and meaning are difficult to appreciate. It's up to you how hard you want to work.
6. If you don't know a word, look it up or die.
7. A poem cannot be paraphrased. In fact, a poem's greatest potential lies in the opposite of paraphrase: ambiguity. Ambiguity is at the center of what is it to be a human being. We really have no idea what's going to happen from moment to moment, but we have to act as if we do.
8. A poem has no hidden meaning, only “meanings” you've not yet realized are right in front of you. Discerning subtleties takes practice. Reading poetry is a convention like anything else. And you learn the rules of it like anything else—e.g., driving a car or baking a cake.
9. As hard as it sounds, separate the poet from the speaker of the poem. A poet always wears a mask (persona) even if she isn't trying to wear a mask, and so to equate poet and speaker denies the poem any imaginative force that lies outside of her lived life.

10. When you come across something that appears “ironic,” make sure it’s not simply the speaker’s sarcasm or your own disbelief.

11. “Reading for pleasure” implies there’s “reading for displeasure” or “reading for pain.” All reading should be pleasurable: Like sex, it pleases to a greater or lesser degree, but pleasure ultimately isn’t the only point.

12. A poem can feel like a locked safe in which the combination is hidden inside. In other words, it’s okay if you don’t understand a poem. Sometimes it takes dozens of readings to come to the slightest understanding. And sometimes understanding never comes. It’s the same with being alive: Wonder and confusion mostly prevail.

13. Perform marginalia. Reading without writing in the margins is like walking without moving your arms. You can do it and still reach your destination, but it’ll always feel like you’re missing something essential about the activity.

14. There is nothing really lost in reading a poem. If you don’t understand the poem, you lose little time or energy. On the contrary, there is potentially much to gain—a new thought, an old thought seen anew, or simply a moment separated from all the other highly structured moments of your time.

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15. Poetry depends on pattern and variation—even non-linear, non-narrative, anti-poetic poetry. By perceiving patterns and variations on those patterns, your brain will attempt to make order out of apparent chaos. “Glockenspiel,” “tadpole,” and “justice” have ostensibly nothing to do with each other, and yet your brain immediately tries to piece them together simply because they are there for the apprehending.

16. As your ability to read poems improves, so will your ability to read the news, novels, legal briefs, advertisements, etc. A Starbucks poster a few years ago read: *Friends are like snowflakes...each one is unique.* How true. But isn’t snow also cold and ephemeral? Let’s hope our friends are not.

17. Reading poetry is not only about reading poetry. Its alleged hermetic stylizations of syntax and diction can enhance your awareness of the world, even those things that don’t deal directly in words. A dress, a building, a night sky—all involve systems of pattern-recognition and extrapolation.

18. The very best way to read a poem is perhaps to be young, intelligent, and slightly drunk. There is no doubt, however, that reading poems in old age cultivates a desire to have read more poems in youth.

19. Someday, when all your material possessions will seem to have shed their utility and just become obstacles to the toilet, poems will still hold their value. They are rooms that take up such little room. A memorized poem, or a line or two, becomes part internal jewelry and part life-saving skill, like knowing how to put a mugger in an arm-lock or the best way to cut open a mango without slicing your hand.

20. Reading a good poem doesn’t give you something to talk about. It silences you. Reading a great poem pushes further. It prepares you for the silence that perplexes us all: death.