Notes Toward Critiquing Poems  
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1. Form and structure: we first inquire as to whether the poem is written in an identifiable traditional form, or whether it is written in an "organic" (see Denise Levertov's essay included in The Poet in the World) or a form of the poet's own invention or devising. All poems acquire form, are formal, ask formal questions. Is the poem stanzaic, stichic, or written in verse paragraphs (sometimes referred to as strophes, from the Gr.). Does the poem's structure make a certain argument? Is the structure dramatic? Lyric? Is the form or structure foregrounded?

2. Music: is the poem "verse"? Is it metered and rhymed? How and where does the base meter vary and are these variations appropriately significant or meaningful? How does the meter "make its meaning"? Are the rhymed words meaningful beyond the sound echoes? Are the rhyming words otherwise significantly linked (the true sign of rhyme mastery). If the poem is not metered verse, is it written in syllabics or accentual syllabics? Again, one must consider the variations and their meaning. Finally, is the poem "free-verse"? Is the line of significance? Is the poem written in a prose line or in prose form? How does this form contribute meaning to the poem? Is there off rhyme, occasional rhyme or internal rhyme? What are the patterns of consonance, assonance and alliteration and what do these patterns mean in the poem?

3. Voice: is there a creative subjectivity centered in the poem? A singular voice? Is a voice established in the poem? Is voice a presence? Is this voice in first-person, implied first-person, second-person, implied second-person, third-person? Is the voice multiple or fragmented? Does the voice shift from first to second? Second to third? Are there further shifts or a pattern of shifts? Do these shifts contribute to the meaning of the poem? What is the register of the voice? Is it personal and intimate, personal and distanced, formal and distanced, formal and intimate? Where does the poet position him/herself with respect to any apparent, titular or occasional subject? Where does the poet position him/herself with respect to subtextual subjects, themes, questions or concerns?
4. Vision: Forgiving the oracularity of this metaphorical way of opening the question, we must inquire as to the nature of the poet's subjectivity in the poem, and perhaps the ways in which the poet's "vision" or philosophical position, or linguistic interest, or musical inclination, moves from poem to poem through the poet's work. One's vision may be understood as one's preferred orientation. Vision might be philosophical, cognitive, epistemological, sensory, devotional, contemplative, excursive, monumental, domestic. It may also be allied with the vision of certain periods: Romantic, Modernist. If theological, it may be transcendental or immanentist, and it may be allied with a particular religious faith. "Vision" is perhaps a misleading term, as it does presuppose "one who sees," which assumes a certain view of subjectivity which perhaps should no longer be assumed. Let us think of this rather as "position" or "language" or "mind"—any number of terms might be appropriate, as long as we understand that by this we are concerned with what the language of the poem concerns itself.

5. Trope: In this we are concerned with the structure and movement of "meaning." The master tropes, metaphor, synecdoche and metonymy have been with us for twenty-five centuries. Poets are often either predominantly metaphorical in their language or predominantly metonymous. The latter is favored more contemporarily, beginning with such poets as Elizabeth Bishop, and certainly is the preferred mode of the more experimental poets, and those who are inclined toward the non-hierarchical, multiplicit, fragmented and indeterminate. The metaphorical includes figures of comparison, whether explicit or implied. Allegory is a story doubly told, that is, one story is told which refers at every point, on a symbolic level, to another story. Metaphor is central to allegory. In lyric-narrative, non-allegorical poetry, metaphor functions as an equation. If the equation is extended beyond the simple comparison, that is, if the metaphor works in a number of different want simultaneously, it is referred to as a "conceit," which is an older spelling of "concept." The subject of a metaphor is its "tenor," that which is talked about, pointed toward (pointing is another topic, that of deictics). The object of the metaphor is its "vehicle," or trope, that which serves as the comparison. In "love is a rose," (oh forgive this hackneyed example), "love" is the tenor and "rose" is the "vehicle." The tenor might be an abstract noun, as in "love," (or truth, life, justice, etc.). The tenor
might also be a concrete noun (chair, house, street). An "anchored abstraction" occurs when a tenor which is an abstract noun is "anchored" by a vehicle which is concrete, i.e. "justice is a knife in the wind." In analyzing metaphor, it is also important to consider both denotative and connotative meanings (the former referring to the primary meaning, or dictionary meaning of a word, the latter to ancillary or secondary or associative meanings). The context of the word (its place in the line, phrase or sentence) will often help us to determine the denotative or connotative meaning. To suggest that there are overtones in the poem, allows for contextual connotations. One might also think of the overtones as the implied meanings. We cite the poem for obscurity if we find unanchored abstractions, which mean whatever one wishes them to mean. Unanchored abstractions are not metaphors, because it is impossible to discern vehicle from tenor. We might discuss a poem as inclusive or exclusive, depending on whether the poet limits or extends the possibilities for metaphorical interpretation (neither term is here pejoratively used). A symbol is a concrete noun which represents an abstraction. An emblem is a commonly accepted symbol. [The foregoing is amplified in Lewis Turco's The New Book of Forms, from which the classical definitions of the preceding terms come.] While this manner of figural language is still serviceable to poets writing lyric poetry particularly within the Romanticism and Modernist traditions, it has rather been abandoned by poets for whom the metaphor-making act presumes a centered, authorial, singular subject. These poets tend to favor the metonymic mode. It is quite telling that Mr. Turco does not have an entry for metonymy. Metonymy is a trope which allows the designation of one thing by the name of something belonging to or participating in the same whole. According to Bernard Dupriez, classical rhetoricians listed a variety of metonymies:...cause for effect, divine cause, active cause, passive cause, objective cause, physical cause and abstract cause. Dupriez provides the following examples, in order: Bacchus for wine, a Virgil for a work of Virgil, from his eloquent pen for 'in his eloquent way,' a marble Diana for a marble statue of Diana, his star for his destiny, her many kindnesses for her many acts resulting from kindness. There are also: instrument for user, effect for cause, container for contained, place for thing associated with it, sign for thing associated with it, physical for moral phenomena, master for subject, appropriate things for persons. In order, Dupriez provides these
examples: *the second violin* for the second violinist, *to swallow death* for “to drink the hemlock,” *take a glass* (for container for contained), *the accords proposed by London/Paris/The White House*, *the throne, sceptre or crown* for royal authority, *you gotta have heart*, *St. Clair* for the lake under her patronage, *graybeards* for old men. When a proper name is one of the terms in the metonymy, it is called *antonomasia*. Most metonymy is defined through logical or semic analysis (the analysis of signs). But it is possible simply to think about the choice of *lexeme* (word), and its appropriate placement, to imply precisely, widely, luminously and significantly all that is “missing.”

6. Description: we often speak of a poem’s “vivid description,” without attending to the problem of what “description” actually entails. We no longer think of the addition of simple adjectives and adverbs adequate to our understanding of description (“pretty girl” no longer suffices). More specific terms might be helpful: *hypotiposis* refers to the description of “real things” or objects as they are perceived to be real in the world; *pragmatographia* is the description of actions, often human, but also actions of deities, animals and the natural world; *topographia* is description of place; *chronographia* is description of time, temporality, passing seasons; *prosopographia* is the description of a person one has never known, imaginative portraiture; *enigma* is obscure description; icon is word portraiture; *neologisms* are coined words; *epithetic compounds* are comprised of two descriptive words made one; *oxymoron* is the combining of words that seem mutually exclusive, but make new meaning when joined. Description is very often not most affective when it serves no other work in the poem than to provide information.

7. Ambiguity: one cannot properly address a poem without considering its ambiguities, as best articulated by William Empson (Seven Types of Ambiguity). “First type ambiguities arise when a detail is effective in several ways at once, e.g., by comparisons with several points of likeness, antitheses with several points of difference, “comparative” adjectives, subdued metaphors, and extra meanings suggested by rhythm. Second type a. arise when two or more alternative meanings are fully resolved into one. Third type a. arise when two apparently unconnected meanings are given simultaneously. Fourth type a. arise when the alternative meanings combine to make clear a complicated state of mind in the
author. Fifth type a. arise when [there is] a fortunate confusion, as when the author is discovering his idea in the act of writing...or not holding it all at once. Sixth type a. arise when what is said is contradictory or irrelevant and the reader is forced to invent interpretations. [This, in fact, is obscurity, not ambiguity]. For the note: I disagree, in that I do believe that it may be obscurity, but may also constitute a form of ambiguity. Seventh type a. [occur when there is] full contradiction, marking a division in the author’s mind.” When the critique refers to “a richness of ambiguity,” this is a positive term, referring to the richness of simultaneous meanings, collisions or resolutions of meanings.

8. Style: this is an elusive term, referring variously to the mode in which a work is written, its signature, (the ways in which one discerns that this is distinctly a poem by a one particular poet and not another), and all things having to do with that constellation of qualities which merge variously and uniquely in each poet. There are certain terms, however, which one identifies as particularly “stylistic.” One can write, for example, in a paratactic or hierotactic “style.” Parataxis is, simple, accrua—the poem proceeds numerically or sequentially, often using only “and” to link elements (it is the style of the Bible). Hierotactic style is subordinative: the poet orders his/her terms, language, etc. In other words, a “hierarchy” of meaning is established. One can also refer to styles as discursive, interrogative, declamatory, oracular, conversational, etc.

Note for workshops: Only when one has truly read a poem, deeply and inquiringly of the above concerns, can one begin to suggest ways in which the poem fails, or ways in which the poem is not yet realized. Criticism of poetry is best provided in the context of one’s expectations. One does not very helpfully suggest deleting a word or a line. One provides an argument, based on one’s poetic assumptions, which are illuminated as part of the critical response. “The last line limits too severely the interpretative possibilities of the poem, rendering an otherwise inclusive poem exclusive, and depriving the closure of the ambiguity achieved in the penultimate line.”

Critiquing/workshopping/discussion/considering poems.