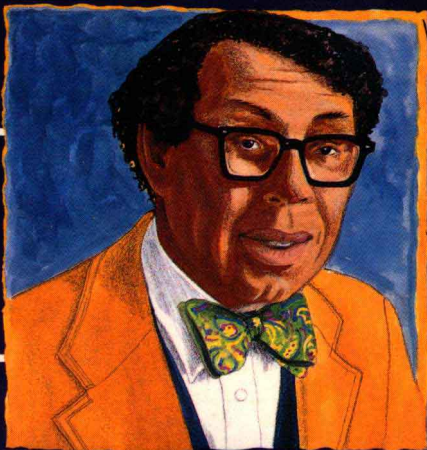
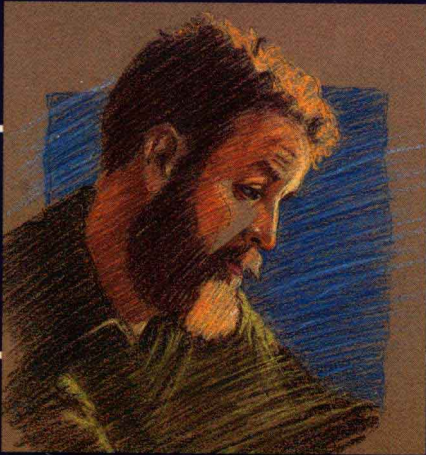


POETRY BY DOING

New Approaches to Reading, Writing,
and Appreciating Poetry

Patricia Osborn



Poetry by Doing

*New Approaches to Reading, Writing,
and Appreciating Poetry*

Patricia Osborn



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About the artist of the chapter opening illustrations

Ethlyn Panzironi, the artist who created the original abstract watercolor paintings that appear at the beginning of each chapter, is well-recognized in the United States and abroad for oil painting and stained glass artwork. She studied formally at The National Academy of Design, New York City, and received her B.F.A. from Mundelein College. She has exhibited extensively in the United States. Her paintings are in numerous private collections, both in the United States and Italy. Ms. Panzironi is professionally associated with her family's studio, the Botti Studio of Architectural Arts, Inc., in Evanston, Illinois, creators of stained glasswork for churches and buildings.

Introduction

As you begin *Poetry by Doing*, get ready to play an active role. There's much more to poetry than passing your eyes over words.

Among other things, you'll be

- sharpening your powers of observation
- focusing in closely on key details
- experimenting with words and ideas
- drawing comparisons
- posing questions and testing your answers
- making connections
- developing the habits of sound reasoning
- experiencing what poetry is all about
by thinking it through for yourself
- writing some poetry yourself

The more you get involved, the more you'll gain. You'll discover poetry is about everything that matters to people . . . home and distant places, sports and war, loneliness and laughter and love. And, through learning by doing, you'll acquire skills and habits that can help you with everything you read. You will come in contact with the world of ideas and discover a self that's awaiting you in poetry.

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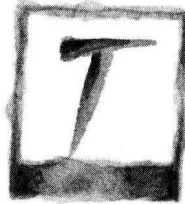
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CHAPTER ONE

Seeing the Picture Within the Word



True or False: 1. One picture is worth a thousand words. 2. A poem can speak volumes. Like

most broad claims, both statements are true in some ways and false in others. True, a picture can show details that would take many words to describe. Yet it's also true that just one word can provide you with even more ideas than a picture does.

Think of the words that you use most often and know the best. Chances are that you haven't looked up any of them in the dictionary. You haven't had to because you know them perfectly well:

kitchen, street, ice, tree, wheel

You can bring any of these words onto the "computer screen" of your mind and not only know exactly what they mean but also picture many details about them and recall your feelings toward them. In fact, these words may call up so many ideas that you'd have a hard time explaining all of them.

Take the word *school*, for example.

Can you picture the outside of the buildings you've attended? The hallways? The lockers? What about the classrooms? What details can you picture? In what ways are all the classrooms alike, yet different? What feelings does the word *school* bring to mind? Being bored? Nervous? Eager to leave? Glad to be with friends? A whole mixture of associations?

Here's how a dictionary defines the word:

school (skül), n. 1. an institution for teaching persons under college age. 2. an institution or academic department for teaching in a particular field. . . . 7. any place, situation, etc., that instructs or indoctrinates. . . .

Compared to the word that you know from experience, the dictionary definition of *school* sounds flat, dull, and inadequate. And, of course, it is. So the word that you know, complete with its pictures and feelings, is the one that's really alive, and that's what poetry is based on.

Poets choose words with the idea that people who speak the same language will have pretty much the same pictures, feelings, and associations they have. Poems, like jokes, take advantage of the fact that one word can be crammed with ideas. Because poetry and humor rely on your knowing how much one word can say, both are often hard to grasp for someone just learning the language.

When you become an alert reader of poetry, you will realize that reading requires more than just passing your eyes across lines of type. It takes mental exercise and active thinking, which will pay off in increased understanding, not only of poetry but of everything you read.

The Visual Impact of Words

Mexican poet José Juan Tablada has written a series of short poems that are much like snapshots—each captures a picture of an animal. Before you read these poetic snapshots, try to picture the creatures in your mind. How would you describe a tortoise, a monkey, a toad, or a dragonfly?

What do you “see” when you think of a tortoise? Do you picture . . . a clumsy-looking creature, a kind of turtle, with a thick, greyish-green shell, shaped like a platter or a soldier's helmet? Legs, tail, and head jutting out like crumpled rubber tubes? Beady, bulgy, sleepy eyes?

What about a tortoise in motion? Do you see it dragging itself heavily and slowly along, waving its long neck back and forth like a rod, pulling itself tight into its shell?

Choose three of the following. Jot down words and phrases that describe your mental picture of each animal.

- | | | |
|------------|----------|--------------|
| 1. peacock | 2. toad | 3. dragonfly |
| 4. monkey | 5. hippo | 6. chameleon |

As you read the following poems, see how your image of each creature fits into the scene.

Images

Although he never stirs from home
the tortoise, like a load of furniture,
jolts down the path.

* * *

The tiny monkey looks at me . . .
He would like to tell me something
that escapes his mind!

* * *

Lumps of mud, the toads
along the shady path
hop . . .

* * *

The dragonfly strives patiently
to fasten its transparent cross
to the bare and trembling bough.

—José Juan Tablada
(Trans. Samuel Beckett)

T H I N K I N G I T T H R O U G H

1. Notice how much you help fill in the pictures. Why doesn't a tortoise ever "stir from home"? How is it like "a load of furniture"?
2. Why does a tortoise look as if it "jolts" when it moves?
3. In what ways does Tablada's poetic snapshot of a monkey fit your mental image? What aspect of a monkey's expression might make it look this way?
4. How does describing toads as "lumps of mud" fit your picture of them? By setting the word *hop* off by itself, what does the poet help you to see?
5. Why does a dragonfly seem to have a "transparent cross"? What qualities of a dragonfly's motion makes the description accurate?

Getting the Right Word

Because José Juan Tablada is Mexican, “Images” were written first in Spanish. An Irish writer, Samuel Beckett, translated them into English.

Translating is not easy. It requires coming as close as possible to the poet’s meaning. The translator must try to keep the effect of the original language, while making the poem sound completely natural in its translated version.

Here is Tablada’s poem about a peacock in Spanish, followed by two different versions in English. Compare the choices of words in the translations, and decide which you find most effective. You might prefer some choices from one translation and some from the other.

The Peacock (*Pavo Real: The Royal Turkey*)

Pavo real, largo fulgor,
por el gallinero demócrata
pasas como una procesión . . .

—José Juan Tablada

Peacock, drawn out shimmer,
you pass like a procession
through the democratic henyard . . .

(Trans. Hardie St. Martin)

Peacock, splendor extended,
through the democratic chickencoop
you pass like a procession . . .

THINKING IT THROUGH

1. What words in the translations are similar in spelling and meaning to words in the original version?
 2. In one translation, what lines are in different order from the Spanish original?
-