

## TEACHING THE ART OF POETRY

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### ON POETRY COMPETITIONS

by George Szirtes

#### POETRY COMPETITIONS

The first stage in judging poetry competitions is to take out those poems that have no chance of winning. If you are thinking of entering a competition you might consider the following points. They are by no means everything but they are important.

#### PRESENTATION

There is no hard and fast rule about presentation: after all it isn't the presentation the judges are reading but the poem. Nevertheless, it is unusual to find handwritten poems among the winners. Poems with pictures and decorative borders are hardly ever good. I don't think I have in all the years of judging found a good one. It is the same with poems in enormous or fancy typefaces. Don't do it.

#### VERSIFICATION

Listen out for rhythmic subtlety, avoid corny rhymes that closely follow each other. There is nothing wrong – often there is something very powerful – in a core rhythm on which to build or around which to build. Poetry is repetition without boredom. Same with rhymes – use end rhymes that land lightly on the ear, possibly through being separated by a few other lines; end rhymes in which the syntax carries over the line so the rhyme doesn't thump; internal rhymes – all these can be very effective. Regular sized stanzas structured like paragraphs can help. But there are dull and thumping ways of using these poetic units, and there are organic, supple ways. Long thin lines that straggle down the page need to be so for a reason. Line endings are generally matters of fine judgment. Be brave with set forms. Break rules.

#### IDEAS AND FEELINGS

Describing a feeling, or giving instances of a feeling is not enough. A feeling isn't something that pre-exists and then has to be fitted into a poem. In the good poem the feeling is there at the start only as a hunch that is then developed through the poem, so a new, stranger, more surprising feeling stares back at you at the end. Same with ideas: follow the Ariadne thread of the idea through the windings of the imagination sniffing out for a distant hint of fresh air. You would be surprised where you emerge out of the labyrinth. You have to be surprised. The judges have to be surprised.

#### IMAGERY

Images need space to breathe, or, if they shift quickly, they require a certain reliable momentum to get moving. Everything counts. If, say, a fig tree appears near the beginning, it may require space to establish itself or it might turn into something else. It may very well meet a bowler hat or a sewing machine along the way, but we will not forget a fig tree was there. Images are like the cast of a play. No one comes on stage without a dramatic role.

#### AURAILITY

The lines is a mouth dance in which the mouth alters shape and the sounds move around. Listen out for restricted flat sounds hanging round in bunches. Split them up. A poem should be a sensuous experience. Half the sense is in the sound. And vice versa.

#### STRUCTURE

Never completely close the open box of the poem. Almost close it. We don't need punch lines.

George Szirtes is a former judge of the Poetry Society's National Poetry Competition. Details of this year's NPC are at <http://www.poetrysociety.org.uk/content/competitions/npc>

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