



## Robin Behn

**The Practice of Poetry**  
**ISBN13: 9780062730244**

### The Rewrite as Assignment

I have never found poetry-writing assignments very useful, unless they can somehow be construed as involuntary, unless they can somehow be made to meet the already established needs of the words themselves through the agency of a first draft. That way, unlike the typical assignment set-up, one is not dealing with a blank page of whole cloth. As for the terror of the original blank page itself: that is a test of whether one should be writing at all. Rewriting, therefore, is, to my mind, the best assignment. Rewriting establishes the palimpsest and permits you to stay in touch with the first cause of the poem, regardless of the number of erasures, writings-over, transformations: the first impulse is the secret that will be revealed the more it is concealed through rewrite.

Some poets, like the young Keats, are impatient and their genius is the degree to which the first cause becomes the ultimate, finished assignment – and how quickly. It is not so much that the odes are written in a brilliant hurry but that they are rewritten and sublayered immediately: they feel crowded with perfectibility. Some poets, like Yeats, age with their poems, and the rewrite becomes the assignment of contemporaneity – changing the poem to make it better is to make it current, more alive, which may be more an obsession of longevity than a desire for immortality. Some poets, like Auden, rewrite reductively, so that the assignment becomes politicized, the art of the agenda.

D.H. Lawrence simply writes another whole version: a kind of paralleling as rewriting. This is obvious in the poems, but it is also true of the novels: something like seven versions of *The Rainbow*, four of *Women in Love*.

Pound's version of *The Waste Land* is rewriting as recovery. Eliot's original is the found text, Pound's "rewrite" is the discovered text --

Sometimes it feels you must be two writers: the one who originate the text and the one who discovers it into its achieved version.

And this is true whether you are rearranging and adding stanzas or simply changing a word. When Stevens rearranges "Sunday Morning" from its original appearance in *Poetry* in 1915 by moving his second stanza to the last and replacing its position with two new stanzas he transforms the poem completely. When Yeats, in "Among School Children," exchanges the word mass for mess in his famous image of Maud Gonne's aging face – "Hollow of cheek as though it drank the wind / And took a \_\_\_\_\_ of shadows for its meat" – the total imagination of the poem is affected, not just the local moment. Mess is the palimpsest word written over the erasure of mass; mass was Yeat's way of getting to rewrite: it was his assignment.

I am leery of the tricks meant to help fill the first emptiness of the page since the emptiness is always part of the subject -- or should be. The silence out of which a poem comes is part of its power, just as the words written are inditements and indictments of what is possible.