

## Revision, Revision, Revision in Writing Poetry

By John D. Call

It's hard to get it all right or even alright the first time! Thus was revision created. An understanding of revision is found (as it so often is) within the word itself. A revision is a re-visioning of the poem – a seeing it again with the suggestion that this second or third or fourth revision is more insightful than the one preceding it.

Revision is the process of seeing the poem again with the advantage of experiencing it as a whole. Like the face of the full moon shows its topography even to the naked eye, so the poem when “completed” shows its geography more clearly, and you can determine if it holds together – if the “mountains and craters” together make strong, coherent images giving life to the poem.

Sometimes revision involves rewriting the whole poem, sometimes a change of words or a comma, added or removed. And there is no statute of limitations on revision. Because all things are always changing, it is fair to say that we never bring the same self to a poem twice, so we can see in revision number two things we couldn't see in number one, and so on. I often have five or six, and sometimes more, draft revisions. In her book, [A Poetry Handbook: A Prose Guide to Understanding and Writing Poetry](#), the poet Mary Oliver says she herself will “...revise through forty or fifty drafts of a poem...” (Oliver, p. 111).

Often it's helpful to set the “completed” poem aside for a day or two, then return to it with eyes that have taken in a few other things beside the poem since you last looked at it. The brain “reset” from the numbing familiarity of the poem seems more objective and more sensitive to weak spots in punctuation, syntax, images, figures of speech, etc.

Ted Kooser, former Poet Laureate of the United States, in his book entitled [The Poetry Home Repair Manual: Practical Advice for Beginning Poets](#), says that “Revision, and I mean extensive revision, is the key to transforming a mediocre poem into a work that can touch and even alter a reader's heart. It's the biggest part of the poet's job description,” (Kooser p. 16). Kooser also states, “It's been my preference to revise toward clarity and freshness...” (Kooser, p. 16). To this I would only add, revision also toward simplicity and brevity.

Finally, Kooser suggests something I've found extremely helpful in revision work. Ask someone to read your poem to you aloud “cold turkey” and be aware of “trouble spots” which are candidates for revision. Trouble spots may be in rhythm, use of unfamiliar vocabulary, faulty punctuation, rhymes not holding up, etc. (Kooser, p. 150).

I'll end with a metaphor that helps me understand the revision process. Picture a potter at the wheel. Beneath the potter's sensitive hands upon the wheel the clay waits. The pot she is making goes through many an addition and many a taking away, a changing of form here and a formation of a new part there. A poet is a potter altering again and again that which lies before her – adding to, taking from, as the poem beneath her hands slowly takes shape, becoming a vessel in which will be carried the poet's gift to the world.

Now, go revise something!

