

AWWP JOB LIST

NUMBER 5

JANUARY 2007

Thirteen Ways of Looking at the Poetry Manuscript: Some Ideas on Creation and Order

by Jeffrey Levine, Editor-in-Chief of Tupelo Press

Some considerations, a baker's dozen, are offered here by one who reads 3- to- 4,000 manuscripts a year. Admittedly, a good deal of what I say is concrete, generic, and in some cases, "merely" stylistic. Since style is, as ever, informed by matters of taste, you must take into account that these thoughts reflect my own prejudices and preferences, and that I've made no attempt to gather a consensus from other editors. Beyond style, however, other advice here concerns more abstract matters: what makes a book a book? How is the artistic process applied to making a poetry manuscript cohere? What are some useful approaches to the art of transforming individual poems into a transcendent whole?

THE NUTS AND BOLTS

1 Use 11 or 12 point font, Times Roman or other clean serif (Garamond or Palatino, for example), nothing smaller, nothing larger, unless graphic representation is an intrinsic component of your creative process. For example, I usually have more patience with a smaller font size when reading experimental work, or work

that makes thoughtful use of white space. Still, have mercy.

2 Beware the frontispiece poem (that poem of yours that you

3 Use decent quality paper, but don't go overboard. It makes me nuts when I get a manuscript printed on expensive paper. It's wasteful and indulgent.

I am almost always amazed—amazed—by which poems have been taken and which not, and by whom. Nothing could be less relevant to creating a manuscript. If you believe in your poems, and believe they belong in a particular manuscript, then include them and order them according to your own aesthetic judgment. Period.

have elected to place before your numbered pages or before your table of contents). This practice draws far too much attention to a single poem and, in my experience, the selected poem more often than not (80% of the time?) turns out to be one of the weakest poems in the collection. There is simply too much pressure on a poem that not only leads off a manuscript, but also stands alone. Unless it is brilliant.

4 When ordering poems in your manuscript, pay no attention (none!) to which poems have been published (and where), and which poems not. At the conclusion of contests, I often (call me perverse) go back and look at acknowledgment pages. I find that most poets place an inordinate and mistaken reliance on their publishing history in ordering poems (or in deciding to include certain poems). Many of us assume that because a journal editor

(continued on page 18)

Thirteen Ways...*(continued from page 1)*

smiled on a particular poem that it must be better than the poems not taken, or that a poem taken by Poetry or the Paris Review must be better than one taken by a lesser known print or online publication. I am almost always amazed—amazed—by which poems have been taken and which not, and by

Spread all of your poems out on the floor, a floor that does not need to be disturbed, and look at them. Read them. Live with them. See what relationships seem to be developing between the poems. Which poem wants to talk to that poem?

whom. Nothing could be less relevant to creating a manuscript. If you believe in your poems, and believe they belong in a particular manuscript, then include them and order them according to your own aesthetic judgment. Period. If that poem the New Yorker took doesn't work in this particular manuscript, save it for another book.

**THE ZEN
OF THE MANUSCRIPT:**

5 When organizing the manuscript, you are attempting to create nothing less than a work of art. You want to think about what your book is “about,” and include poems that carry that theme or themes, that are somehow related, that “speak” to each other. Also, I find that it's a good idea to bring poems together that are written more or less in the same creative period,

lest they sound as though written by different poets—a different you. By this I don't mean to suggest that a book need be written in any particular time frame, but rather that the book include poems written during a period (a year, two years, five years, whatever) when you are writing in a particular way. Every time we write a poem we announce to the world what we think a poem is. The poems you write when

urging—wittingly or unconsciously—a particular aesthetic are the ones that belong in the same book. Spread all of your poems out on the floor, a floor that does not need to be disturbed, and look at them. Read them. Live with them. See what relationships seem to be developing between the poems. Which poem wants to talk to that poem? Where do you see common images developing, or growing out of each other? In what directions do your various threads lead? What seem to be your concerns as a poet during this period of creativity, and how do they seem to want to group. The process of inclusion and ordering is organic, calculated, thoughtful, instinctual, unconscious, and somewhat Zen. You need time to permit all of those matters and antimatters to work upon you, and upon your poems.

6 Continue to think about each poem according to: mood/tone; dominant images, characters/speaker, setting/season; chronology, and whatever other categories you deem important to your own work. However you organize your collection, keep in mind that you are creating a book, and you cannot really know how the poems interact with each other unless you've done this work. Make multiple copies of each poem, try different orders with duplicate books, and live with them for a while.

7 Make sure the poems that begin your collection establish the voice and credibility of the manuscript. They should introduce the questions, issues, characters, images, and sources of conflict/tension, etc., that concern you and that will be explored in the book. Think about the trajectory of the manuscript: you want to set the reader off on a journey, a path toward some (even if undisclosed) destination, but forget about “arc.” The notion of “arc” is, in my opinion, too willful to be successful in any artistic undertaking. Make the book work, and then let others talk about your “arc.”

8 Just because a poem has been previously published does not mean that you are required to leave it alone. Rethink, re-enter, and if possible, re-vision each poem as if the Paris Review had never taken it.

9 Find an effective title: from the title of a significant poem in your collection, or from a line in one of your poems, or from one of your epigraphs, or something that may not appear verbatim in your collection at all, but somehow signifies, or shapes the manuscript. That said, create about a dozen different titles and live with each for a while. Print out title pages for each possibility, tack them to a bulletin board or the refrigerator, and look at them early and often. Obviously, you'll have ample opportunity to re-title your

Be thoughtful about how your work measures up against what's being written in contemporary circles. Read journals, and if you're going to submit to a literary press, read at least some of what they publish. There is so much joy to be found in revision.

work after a publisher accepts it, but so many titles (of even terrific manuscripts) are so ill thought out or just plain bad (meaning awful) that I find I have to get over that initial adverse reaction in order to give a collection its due.

10 Once you have created an order that you love, think about dividing the book into separate sections. You may or may not elect to go with distinct sections, but this process will encourage you to think even more deeply about your order, and about what makes a book a book. When you see patterns emerging, you might want to go back and think yet again about revision, about further opening up the channels that permit the poems to talk to each other. Yes, this is hard work. We're poets. This is what we do. This is why it's harder than the work of being mortal.

11 Weak poems. You know which ones. Don't "hide" them inside the manuscript. Don't include them. Period.

12 Be thoughtful about how your work measures up against what's being written in contemporary circles. Read journals, and if you're going to submit to a literary press, read at least some of what they publish. There is so much joy to be found in

revision. Be sure not to deny yourself that pleasure over and over again.

13 Other Considerations:

- a) Don't submit work that's been copied so many times that it has inherited smudges or the type has faded;
- b) Try to keep your manuscript in the area of 62-68 pages;
- c) Proofread for spelling and for grammar;
- d) Proofread for big, over-loaded abstractions ("infinity");
- e) Proofread for small, over-loaded abstractions ("dark");
- f) Proofread for adverbs ("carefully") (ye shall consider the adverb a bleepin' abomination);
- g) Proofread for mannerisms (i.e., have you use the word "pale" 20 times? do you tend to sew up your poems with something plangent and orphic? do you tend to begin your poems with a line or two of throat clearing?);
- h) Number only the pages of actual poetry, beginning with the first page of poetry;

i) Do send a cover letter if you like, but never a c.v., and if you do send a cover letter, make sure it's addressed to the intended press and not to some other press (you'd be surprised), and don't address your cover letter to the contest judge (you'd be surprised), and don't say you're in the process of a complete revision and will be sending the revised manuscript in a week or two (you'd be surprised);

j) Don't include dedications and thanks on a contest manuscript—there will be plenty of time for that later;

k) Be judicious about epigraphs—they're just so much hardware unless a poem clearly addresses or, in some way, plays off the epigraph;

l) Beware the epigraphs that you choose to begin the book or to announce different sections. Ask yourself whether they're really important. Are you sure you want your own language to follow Rilke's or Bishop's?

AWP

Jeffrey Levine is the author of two books of poetry, Rumor of Cortez, (Red Hen Press, 2005), and Mortal, Everlasting, winner of the Transcontinental Poetry Award (Pavement Saw Press, 2001). Nine times nominated for a Pushcart Prize, he is a past winner of the Larry Levis Poetry Award from the Missouri Review, the James Hearst Poetry Award from North American Review, the Mississippi Review Poetry Prize, and the Kestrel Poetry Prize. Levine is the Publisher and Editor-in-Chief of Tupelo Press