FIVE-FINGER EXERCISES

Each of the exercises listed below is designed to improve the student's skill at handling various elements of poetry -- the image, image focality, rhythm, syntax, concision, metaphoric leaping, paralogical modes of thinking, etc. They may not net poems, but many of the strategies can be used again and again when you find you have some obsessive subject matter to write about. Approach each as an experiment; be playful; have fun!

1. Five-Senses Zoom: Long Shot to Extreme Close-up. Using concrete imagery arranged in stanzas according to each predominant sense, begin with visual impressions and move on through sound, smell, touch, and, optionally, taste. Begin with distant sense impressions and zoom toward extreme close-up sensory detail. Try to maintain line and terminal integrity, and delete unnecessary connectives and abstract language; you are experimenting with Imagist technique. Read Pound, W.C.Williams, Levertov, Atwood, the Imagists for guidance on what to do next.

2. Organization From Diffuse to Sharp Concrete Imagery. As above, use stanzaic notation to give form to this one. Begin with diffuse, even abstract language and move gradually toward increasing levels of concreteness and total focality of image; add elements of contrast to ultimate stanzas, and maintain line and terminal integrity throughout.

3. Found Poetry Experiment # 1. Deconstruct a passage of fiction description, using open form prosody. Essentially, you cut all unnecessary connectives from sentences, and realign by clause or phrase, adding or deleting lines as you see fit, until you've got a marginal text you care to re-work; then play around with the text description to create your own scene or anecdote. If the results seem promising, see if you can add metaphor and increase the focality/concreteness of the language; do not be afraid to freely associate images and ideas and graft on new image contexts to the original material; follow the fish where it goes in the sea.

4. Found Poetry Experiment # 2. An interesting variation on the experiment above is to fold two texts in half -- preferably descriptive passages from two very different novels -- novels from different periods of history or different contexts (Romance and Sci-fi, say) -- and butt the half pages together. Next, copy lines from one page to the next, supplying only the necessary ligatures to maintain grammatical continuity between texts (Never mind about logical consistency: this can lead to interesting juxtapositions of image and idea and was, in fact, the basis for the first draft of William Burrough's novel, **The Ticket That Exploded**.).

5. Found Poetry Experiment # 3. Another version of the above is to take a passage of descriptive prose about the length of the desired experimental text you wish to generate and cut it up into syntactic units -- nouns, verbs, phrases, clauses -- and dump these into a paper bag. The idea is to extract these syntactic units willy nilly from the bag and write them down as lines in the order in which you draw them out. You can get some interesting word and image juxtapositions, and some

surreal comic effects from this, particularly if the original text has a recognizable tone and style -- such as that from a passage found in a newspaper: a human interest story or particularly vehement letter to an editor or other piece from the Op-Ed pages of a decent daily. The Surrealists loved this one.

6. **Jean Clone Surrealia # 4**. Why not try the corporate author route and try this with a small group of people? First, find a text and parse it into agreed-upon grammatical units. Next, follow the syntax of the original, but do not let your neighbour see the word or phrase you have written. Pass the paper on, with your part folded over or hidden somehow from the view of the next person; the next person then supplies whatever syntactic unit is next in your
" sentence " -- a verb, or the object of the preposition, say. When you're finished, read the created text aloud and then edit your own version, doing what you see fit to "make sense" of the marginal text you have created.

7. Imitation/ Parody of the Syntax of an Original Poem. A less nonsensical approach is to follow the syntax of an existing poem and make your subject and imagery fit the mold. The obvious thing to try is a parody of the original. Might I suggest a grand text such as a Miltonic sonnet or a fragmented but recognizable lyric by T. S. Eliot? One of my instructors used to refer to the big boy Modernists as T.S. Idiot and Ezra Ounce: it doesn't hurt to introduce an element of sacrilegious behaviour to our appreciation of the Moderns, after all, and parodies can teach one a lot about tone and texture, the creation of emotional lyrics.

8. Paired Blindman's Bluff. One of the best ways I know of to improve your handling of concrete imagery is to force yourself to "see" something familiar in a new light. A good way to do this is to eliminate one of your senses from the panoply of experience. Have your students blindfold their friends and take them on a walk to some sinful pleasure emporium or garden of sensory delights; do not say where you are going, but pick some place with lots of smells or other sensory input. Have the students try to figure out where they have been and write a diary of the experience.

9. Free Association Image Chaining. Pick a familiar object -- a shoe, a pair of gloves, some keys -- and have your students freely associate whatever words, images, or ideas come into their heads for a prescribed period of time. Later, look over the results to see if there aren't closely-linked metaphors or chains of imagery that might provide a leaping off point for a meditation on an object. This methodology is a good warm-up for neosurreal object poems (See Robert Bly's **News of The Universe** anthology for examples). You can often come up with some interesting insights on familiar phenomena if you let your left brain do all the talking for you initially. Good poems are often paralogical. (See the work of Charles Simic and W.S. Merwin.)

10. Word Association Exercise # 1. Take a number of words descriptive of emotion and then attempt to list the objects which might cause these emotions. Perhaps the catalogue might reveal a scene or some obsessive memory from childhood worth exploring. Recall W.C. Williams' poem with the flowers and curtains and immaculate white bed; catalogues can be carefully orchestrated

into imagist poems. It becomes a matter of playing with the metaphorical possibilities of a piece of description and/or playing with open form poetics to channel the lines and strophes.

11. Twelve Most Disgusting Images. That's right: think of twelve -- your hate list. This can be a good way to get at concrete imagery and obsessive material. What you do with it depends a lot on how honest you can be with yourself and how willing you are to explore the tonalities of speech with nasty content. This one's fun though, and can obviously be adapted to Twelve Most Pleasurable Images.

12. Repeated Syntactic Formulae/ Catalogues. Have a look at such famous texts as " Monday's Child." Start off with a similar Adjective-Noun unit or repeated bit of syntax; follow the parallelism for six or seven lines and then vary the last. Many lullabies and primitive chants and ritualistic poems have been written this way.

13. Formulaic Syntax With Set Archetypal Imagery. Write seven sentences the same length, none long. The first three are to begin with the word stone. The second three are not to include the word stone, and the last sentence is to begin again with the word stone. Often fantasy replaces logic when you try this exercise, and you can get some interesting and fresh perspectives on the world of concrete objects and the way we view them.

14. Verse Strophes with Introducers. Write short -- three-line or so -- verse paragraphs, beginning each with the name of a protagonist. Each statement or proposition should be followed by another and the number of lines in each paragraph periodically varied. To begin with, the opening paragraph consists of only two statements and the syntax -- insertions, delays -- is repeated, with variations allowed only in the fourth and fifth paragraph. The final paragraph returns to form.

A variation of this is to let a single letter or nonsense syllable stand for the introducer in each clause.

Another variation involves contrasting short with long paragraphs, and giving only the short paragraphs the repetitive opening. Within the longer paragraphs, however, certain words are made to recur. But, then are two of these. other pattern-making devices should also be used -- again, based on the notion of repeated syntax. The short paragraphs may follow the name of the protagonist on each occasion with a parenthetical statement.

All of these variations use narrative plotting and repeated syntax to give you a sense of form.

15. Playing With Mouth Music. Compose alternately alliterative and assonantal sound clusters -- lines of description with nonsensical combinations of adjectives, verbs, and nouns. Check out Lewis Carroll for inspiration. This is good practice for developing the sensitivity to tone and mood creation.

16. Negative versions. Find a poem that strikes you as compelling or interesting. Write down an antonym for each major part of speech -- nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, phrases, etc.; leave articles and connectives; change prepositions but not conjunctions until you've re-written the entire poem. Then concentrate on any interesting bit of description that results. Alter lines so as to effect meaningful discourse; then add and subtract lines, freely associating plot details or description or further metaphors to see where the piece takes you. It is important to stay loose in this exercise and interpret " opposite" to mean whatever antonyms come to mind, irrespective of consistency or lack of consistency in your choices. Try this with "leaping", associative, or surrealistic poetry, or a recognizable classic.

17. An Experiment With Rhyme. Make a list of rhyming words that seem appropriate to a subject you want to write about, then try to back a poem into the list the way you would back a car into a newly-built garage. Often this exercise reveals obsessive imagery and reveals your pet word hoard; it may also serve to show you the futility of trying to stick with gratuitous rhymes.

A variation is to try this with pararhyme -- words with only a single phoneme of comparable sound; that is, words that only partially sound alike. This variation is actually the more productive of the two exercises, in my experience, as you end up with tight sound clusters without forced rhymes.

18. Dealing With Credible Diction. One way is to construct a poem in dialogue form so that the distinction between the two voices is clearly noticeable. The first voice may be sophisticated -- that of an educated speaker; the second, that of a naive one, for instance. The tension produced helps create dramatic excitement and may also supply something of a poetic plot.

19. More Fun With Diction and Jane. Take an existing poem and alter the diction without changing the meaning -- if you can! Find something grand eloquent and try to tone it down by replacing the existing diction with the vernacular equivalents or simply other words to create your own sentence in the same syntactic mold. The results may not be poetry, but they will teach you how to heighten and lower the tone of a piece of writing to suit an occasion.

20. Fun With Terminals and Lineation. Have a friend write out a poem you do not know as prose, eliminating the line breaks. Let him give it to you as an exercise to read aloud and score; that is, read it, and write out the lines as they seem to fall to your ear. Check your version against the original.

Want more? I recommend you order a copy of Robin Skelton's **The Practice of Poetry** (See Bibliography) and go from there. The book is instructive and full of worthwhile ideas to help you get going on the art of poetry.

Happy writing!