**READING POETRY, by Kenneth Koch and Kate Farrell**

The experience you get from reading poetry is not exactly like any other. Sometimes poetry gives the impression of saying more than words can say. This mysterious-seeming effect is caused by the fact that in poetry words are used in a way that is different from the way words are usually used. Poetry is art, and so has a different purpose from that of the regular way of talking and writing, and has a different effect.

Most of the difficulties that people have in reading poetry come from their not understanding this. It is easier to understand using a rock to make sculpture, or sound to make music, than it is to understand using words to make poetry. Words already have meanings and ways of being put together to get something across. So, when you read words, it is natural to expect the ordinary kind of intellectual sense that you are used to, a kind of sense you don’t expect, for instance, when you listen to music. Once you understand what poetry is and how it is different from other writing, it won’t seem to you so confusing and difficult.

Usually when you talk or write, you start with an idea, then try to express it in words and in a style that will make it clear to the people you are talking or writing to. Sometimes that’s easy. You say, “I would like a glass of water.” Sometimes it’s hard. Talking about strong or complicated feelings –about being in love, for instance, or feeling sad—you may end up with a feeling that you haven’t really said what you meant, that there isn’t any way to put what you feel into words. The more personal the thing that you want to say, and the more particular it is to your own way of thinking and feeling and seeing things, the less likely it is that you can express it with the ordinary way of talking.

Suppose you decide to find a way of talking in which you can express perfectly your own sense of things, your thoughts or way of seeing, or your own particular experience. And that it becomes more important to you to get those things right than to make sure somebody else understands them. Suppose you want to get an experience into words so that it is permanently there, as it would be in a painting—so that every time you read what you wrote, you reexperienced it. Suppose you want to say something so that it is right and beautiful—the way music is right and beautiful—even though you may not understand exactly why. Or suppose words excite you—the way stone excites a sculptor—and inspire you to use them in a new way. And that for these or other reasons you like writing because of the way it makes you think or because of what it helps you to understand. These are some of the reasons poets write poetry.

It doesn’t make sense to read poetry the way you read a newspaper article. It is good, in general, to read a poem with the kind of freedom, openness and sensitive attentiveness to your own thoughts and feelings that you have when you write a poem yourself or when you listen to a friend talking, or when you hear music. You understand the meaning of the words in the poem with your intellect, but you also respond to the poem with a part of your intelligence that includes your feelings and imagination and experience.

You can like a poem before you understand it, and be moved by it, and in fact, that is a sign that you’re starting to understand it, that you’re reading the poem in a good way. Being moved by a poem—laughing or feeling sad or full of longing—or being excited by it, or feeling (maybe you don’t know why) the “rightness” of the poem is a serious part of reading and liking poetry. You may find what you read to be beautiful, or be reminded of places and times, or find in it another way to look at things. All this can help you to understand the poem because it brings it closer to you, makes it a part of your experience. And the better you understand a good poem, the more you’ll like it.

The best way to begin is by reading the poem several times to get used to the style. After you get a sense of the whole poem, there are some things you can do to help yourself understand anything that’s unclear—if anything still is unclear, which often it won’t be. There may be a word or two you don’t understand, or a reference to a person or a place that you’re not familiar with. These you can look up in a dictionary or encyclopedia or ask someone about. There may be a sentence that’s so long it’s hard to follow, or a sentence that’s left incomplete; words may be in an unusual order, or a sentence may be hard to see because it’s divided into different lines. For these problems, just go through the poem slowly, seeing where the different sentences begin and end. If you understand part of a poem and not another part, try to use what you do understand to help you see what the rest means.

If the poem still seems hard to you, it may be because you’re looking for something that isn’t there. You may think that the poem makes a point, that it comes to some conclusion about life in general, when the point may only be to get into that poem the look of a locust tree in the early spring. Or you may be looking for a hidden meaning that isn’t there. The suggestiveness of poetry often makes people think there is one specific hidden meaning. There isn’t one. A good poem means just what is says, and it suggests what it suggests. The search for deep meanings behind what is said is usually painful and unrewarding. Poems don’t usually have hidden meanings. One main trouble with finding such meanings when they’re not really there is that they end up hiding what really is there. One of Wallace Stevens’s poems begins

The houses are haunted

By white nightgowns.

He means, in fact, as you realize after you read the poem a few times and get to know it, that people are wearing conservative white night clothes which make them look like ghosts. It’s a witty way of making fun of them for being so conservative and dull. If you start off looking for hidden meanings, however, you may never know this. You may start thinking of a supernatural phenomenon, of real ghosts, maybe even of Lazarus and his rising from the grave, and you’ll lose the poem completely. It’s like looking for the real meaning behind a sailboat race on the bay. You’d probably miss the beauty and excitement of the boats, the water, the sky, the day. Remember (writing poems of your own will help you to know it) that poets are not big, dark, heavy personages dwelling in clouds of mystery, but people like yourself who are doing what they like to do and do well. Writing poetry isn’t any more mysterious than what a dancer or a singer or a painter does. If a poet writes well, what he says is to be found in the words that are actually there, almost always in the commonest meanings.

Sometimes, too, people make the mistake of analyzing the poem word by word before they’ve got an idea of what the whole poem is like. This seems scholarly and scientific but is as misleading as analyzing each of a person’s words in a conversation before you know who he is and what he is talking about. Better than starting right in to analyze according to some already existing idea is to think of how the poem is affecting you, think of your own responses to it. Also, when first reading a poem, you don’t have to be concerned with its technique, with how it is made –that is to say, its rhyme, its meter, its imagery, and so on. That can be interesting to talk or write about later, but when you’re first reading a poem you don’t need to do it.

Even when they don’t know much about poetry, people sometimes have strong ideas about what poetry ought to be like. This can keep them from enjoying all the different ways poetry can be. If you read poetry expecting it to be always the same, you will be confused. It is an art, like music or painting, with all kinds of possible variations.

Everything you like about a poem will be enhanced, and what you understand of it will be increased, by reading other poems by the same poet. As you get used to a poet’s style and so on, you can hear everything in his poems more clearly. If you don’t feel intimidated, understanding or figuring things out can be enjoyable in itself. Think of the rather pleasant process of figuring out a part of town you’ve never been in or an interesting person you’ve just met.

Reading poetry is not a completely passive pleasure, as is sitting in the sun or watching television. It is more like the pleasure you get from playing tennis or listening to music. There is a difference between what you feel the first time you play tennis and the fiftieth time. Or between the first time you go to a concert and later on, when you know more about the music and are used to concerts. Poetry is like that. The more you know about it and the more you read it, the more at ease you’ll feel with it, the better you’ll get at reading it, and the more you’ll like it. When you read a poem, the poet’s experience becomes, in a way, your own, so you see things and think things you wouldn’t see and think otherwise. It’s something like traveling—seeing new places, hearing things talked about in new ways, getting ideas of other possibilities. It can change you a little and add to what you know and are.

**Kenneth Koch** ([27 February](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/February_27) [1925](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1925) – [6 July](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/July_6) [2002](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2002)) was an [American](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States) poet, playwright, and professor, active from the 1950s until his death at age 77. He was a prominent poet of the [New York School](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_York_School) of poetry, a loose group of poets including [Frank O'Hara](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frank_O%27Hara) and [John Ashbery](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Ashbery) that eschewed contemporary introspective poetry in favor of an exuberant, cosmopolitan style that drew major inspiration from travel, painting, and music.