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INQUIRER

Thank you for submitting your work to The Inquirer magazine. After examining it carefully, we've decided, with regret, that we won't be able to use it.

We do appreciate having had the chance to consider your work, however, and we hope that you will keep us in mind in the future.

Sincerely,

The editors

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THE POETIC STRATA

A truly fine poem works on more than one level and direction. Besides the main course, there are small complimentary undercurrents and flavors. There are also tiny fillips which, like tangy carroway seeds can be leisurely savored between two teeth totally apart from the whole. The double entendre often provides a way to use extra seasoning without being heavy handed. The above use of "main course" is more of a double entendre than a pun since it is not humorous and much subtler.

Forget the fact that the double entendre commonly refers to a seemingly innocent remark with a dirty flipside. (It's pronounced doo-blahn-TAHN-dre or dooble-ahn-TAHN-dre, by the way, and sometimes written with a hyphen.) In the context of this exploration, it's simply a word or phrase that carries double or even triple meanings. It's not a matter of saying one thing and meaning another; it's saying one thing PLUS another with great economy. Used skillfully, such a heavy duty tool adds impact to a poem.

I was a painter before becoming a poet, and for me the two disciplines are closely related. Both painting and poetry are distillation. Every poet knows that too much verbiage turns his work to prose. So how can we keep things lithe and still say everything that needs to be said? That's where the double entendre may be valuable. It can be an idiom or an entire sentence.

Many poets construct a poem by putting down everything that comes to mind about their subject, sometimes several pages of notes. Then they pick out the solid kernels and cut off the fat still clinging

to these. It's a tough job; one poet's excess may be another's entree. However, any poem will usually improve in ratio to what you trim. Resist saying too much because it "sounds poetic." Resist repetition. Ernest Hemmingway put it this way: "The test of a good book is how much good stuff you can throw away." It's equally true of a poem. When I first read his recipe I wanted to cry: "But if it's good why do you have to get rid of it?" Later, a well-known artist critiqued one of my paintings in a juried show. "If you'd just left out that one element," she said, "you'd have won a ribbon." She was pointing at a corner of my work: "Unfortunately, it's the best brush performance in the whole piece, but it overpowers your subject and ruins everything." What a painful thing to hear! I knew that section was good painting so I got carried away at the expense of the whole. Then I realized how often I'd done the same thing in poems, and gained new respect for Mr. Hemingway's advice. I saved the painting by cropping. The same was true for some of the poems. Incidentally, keep your cuttings. Sometimes they'll root as whole new poems.

Without getting into the tiresome debate of whether a poem must have meaning, I'll simply say that I believe a poem must convey something, if only confusion, frustration, alienation. Whether readers are interested is another matter. Even avant-garde and experimental poetry must have something with which the reader can make contact— a stair tread, however small, if he is going to pursue it. Again the similarity to visual art is great.

A perfect double entendre, having established a stair tread, can also call up totally different imagery, sometimes readily and consciously, sometimes subliminally, without additional words. That's especially advantageous when you're working within limits of rhyme

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and meter. But whatever the form, one of the lingering pleasures of a well wrought poem is the discovery of new and deeper shades and different views at the second and third reading. It may not be the same thing to each reader or even what the writer intended. Part of the magic of poetry is its plasticity. It shouldn't be so intractable that it won't allow the reader to wrap it around himself or at least give his own feelings breathing space. This is what makes a reader follow a poem to the end and return to it.

Some things seem too flatly mundane for the poet to state, still they are necessary to the skeleton. If such problems can be suggested in some osmotic way, they strengthen without disconcerting. There's a poem of mine where someone (written in first person) dives in a lake to free a boat that's bound by an infestation of water hyacinths. I don't want to have to point out that the swimmer feels threatened and claustrophobic. My last line is: "And I, slave to light and lungs, must fight myself free." It covers the above and lends a note of panic. But the poem is about the "inverted black forest" of roots, etc. and the eerie hypnotic sway and beauty of the underwater world— which affects some swimmers with a compulsion to stay down too long. In this light the accent shifts: "I must fight <u>myself</u> free." The title, THE INTERLOPERS, also serves to suggest that not only are the plants trying to possess the alien territory, but so, briefly, is the diver.

The new light, whatever its angle and source, should never be glaring. It should flicker seductively, luring the reader into wider reaches of his own imagination. All poetic devices (rhyme is an important example) should be so naturally integrated into the poem that they tend to disappear.

In another poem I wanted to establish that there is a large

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crowd at a friend's funeral and everyone is dutifully reciting in hushed tones all the usual pap about how wonderful and sweet the deceased was. But I don't want to use up precious white space with all that prose. So the scene was distilled to: "This maudlin mumbling mass/ their sentiment a sentence!" The word "mass" conveys the jam of people and also the ceremony of last rites as well as secular ritual. The next line does several things: It heaps scorn on those who don't realize that genuine caring can't be expressed in a trite sentence, and that their vapidity is not only insulting to the deceased but amounts to a sentence imposed, a poor reward for a good life. It further suggests that their superficiality reduces that good life to nothing more than a sentence, dismisses it with a sentence.

One of Lisa Grenelle's early poems expresses a young soldier's fear in battle with a line: "His courage ran down into his boot." Anyone who has experienced terror knows that feeling of emptying as all your mettle melts and pours out through your soles leaving your legs weak and your feet like lead. But, as she verified, she is being very literal as well: This unseasoned kid was so frightened that he urinated. Can you think of a better way to say all that in a poem ?

There are also times when you may want to refer to something very obscure. You know better than to let it disrupt your main thrust and you certainly can't stop to explain it. A double entendre may work. This one is about a former prisoner lying in the dark thinking of his past, staring up at shadows: "the bias bars sinister on the ceiling." It's an apt description of what he sees and it perpetuates the mood. But there's another meaning, an her-

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aldic meaning. On coats of arms, the bar sinister, a dark diagonal band, is the sign of bastardy. Not knowing this bit of esoterica doesn't alter my poem or trip the reader, but it's there for those who will to catch.

In your quest for more expression you may choose a foreign phrase, a pun, slang, dialect or onomatopoeia. Whatever you use, the practice of exploring all aspects of the words you put into a poem is the important thing. Before deciding if you want to add this device to your system, do some experimenting with the double entendre technique. And remember that like any offer of help or any presentation of information, its value depends on how much <u>you</u> get with it.