The practice of ‘unseen close reading’ is still taught at school and university as the main way to cope with short poems. The practice seems to invite reverence for poems, building a mystique of invulnerability about the poet (who produces ‘the best words in the best order’, and all that), and inviting us to contemplate, when what we need to do is to intervene. The white space around a poem on the page is quasi-sacramental, like the space between priest and people at a church service: it’s a kind of barrier between word and world.

The method recommended here involves taking back this space and talking back to the poem. It involves writing on the poem, substituting words, dividing the poem up - doing things with it fact. In this way we try to make connections between ourselves and the poem - to read ourselves back into it, so that it becomes a part of ourselves.

All this will perhaps help us to re-appropriate poetry, refusing it its status as the revered verbal icon in the inner temple of literature. The ‘method’ described here is a way of ‘negotiating’ with a poem, and it should provide you with plenty to say in circumstances where you are expected to write analysis or commentary (perhaps as part of an essay or exam, or in preparation for a seminar).

Steps one and three focus on parts of the poem: steps two and four focus on aspects of the whole poem. So this alternating method (close in/stand back, close in/stand back) helps you to avoid the common mistake of writing just about extracted bits of the poem and never thinking about the poem as a whole.

The four steps are:

- Read through the poem two or three times, then circle the word or phrase which is for you the strangest or most surprising in the poem. This word/phrase is the focal point of your view of the poem: look across the poem for other words/phrases that seem related to it: circle them too and link them to your focal word/phrase. Try the experiment of changing the focal word or phrase to one which you would initially consider less surprising. How is the overall effect now changed?

  Later you can ask why the focal word stands out: it may have unexpected content, or tone; it may be combined in a surprising way with other words; it may be part of a phrase in which the words are unusually ordered
• Poems have ‘stages and phases’. There will be initial, expository, or ‘scene-setting’ lines, then a ‘development’ of some kind (probably the longest section), then a concluding part (which may double back, or break off from the logic of the development, or transpose what had been merely literal and one-dimensional into something more complex). Mark the phases on the poem (e.g. with cross-page dotted lines).

This helps you to look for an overall structure, to see the poem as meanings unfolding, moving, going back, etc, (in contrast to the first stage which focuses on single words). There may be different ways of phasing the poem according to different ways of reading it: it may ‘phase’ one way if seen as primarily literal and another if seen as primarily figurative, but identifying parts gives us a strong sense of familiarity, ‘ownership’, even.

• No poem is easy all the way through. Every poem has a ‘crux’, or ‘nub’, or ‘node’ or ‘vortex’: this is a section of some complexity, from which we tend to look away. Find the bit in the poem which has this ‘ardent obliquity’ (J. H. Prynne’s term, meaning, more-or-less, passionate indirectness): box it in on the page: spend some time with it: write about it in the margin: talk back to it: ‘brain-storm’ it: free-associate round it.

Difficulty in poetry often indicates the presence of thematic significance: facing up to this part of a poem is a cure for poetry phobia. Don’t worry, the other side of this coin is that no poem is difficult all the way through.

• Poems have patterns. Identify some in the poem and find a way of marking them. Having identified a pattern, look for a point where the pattern is broken. Breaks in a pattern are always significant.

Patterns can be made out of almost any aspect of a poem: obvious examples are: line length, stanza length, rhyme, rhythm, type of vocabulary, angle of view. Lines or verses which are longer or shorter than the rest: words which are more formal or more colloquial than most others in the poem, an observation which stands out as cruder, or more reverent than most others in the poem - all these will almost certainly indicate significant points in the poem.