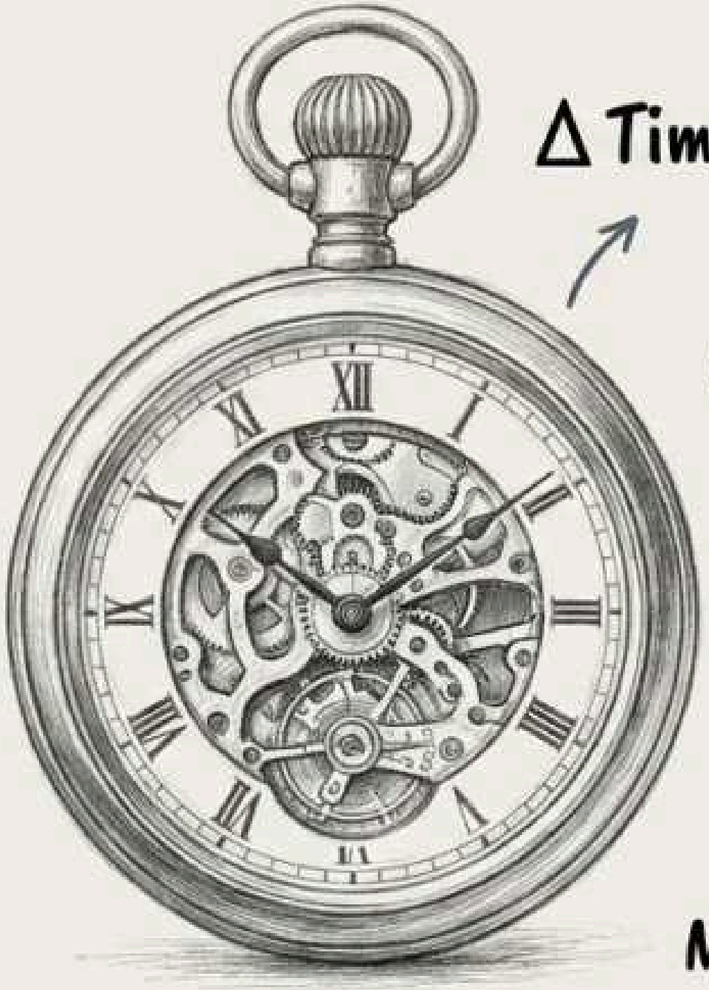
The First Rule: Deceleration

¶ 1.1



Δ Time $\propto$ Depth of Meaning

Macro / Pleasure

↓ Aloud

Micro / Line-by-Line

Not a News Report:

↳ Do not skim a poem for facts. Poems pack immense meaning into minimal space.

The 3-Pass Method:

- ☑ 1. Read once for pleasure.
- ☑ 2. Read again aloud.
- ☑ 3. Read slowly, line by line, noticing every single word.

The Insight:

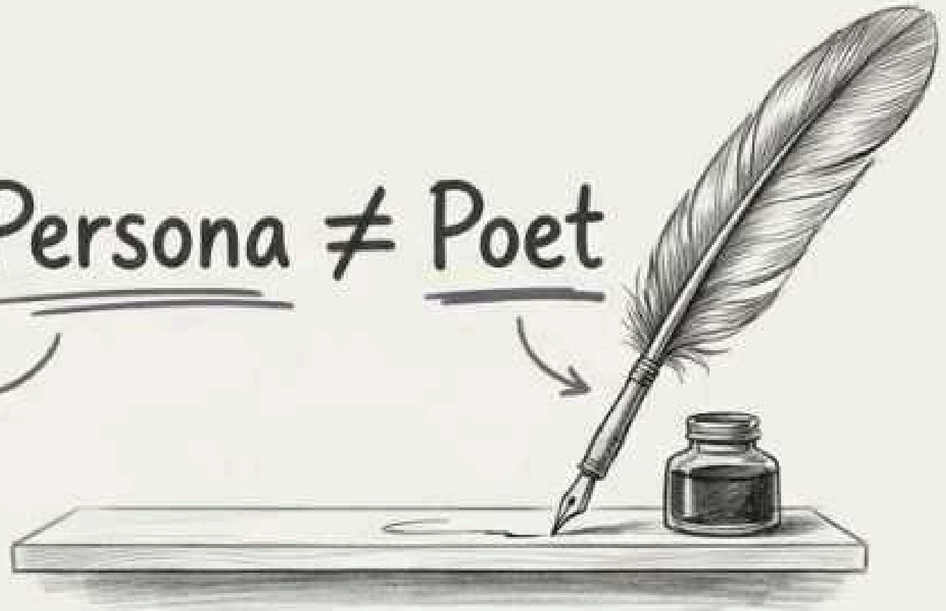
Poetry demands and exclusively rewards deliberate rereading.

Speaker vs. Poet

¶ 1.2



Persona ≠ Poet



The Persona

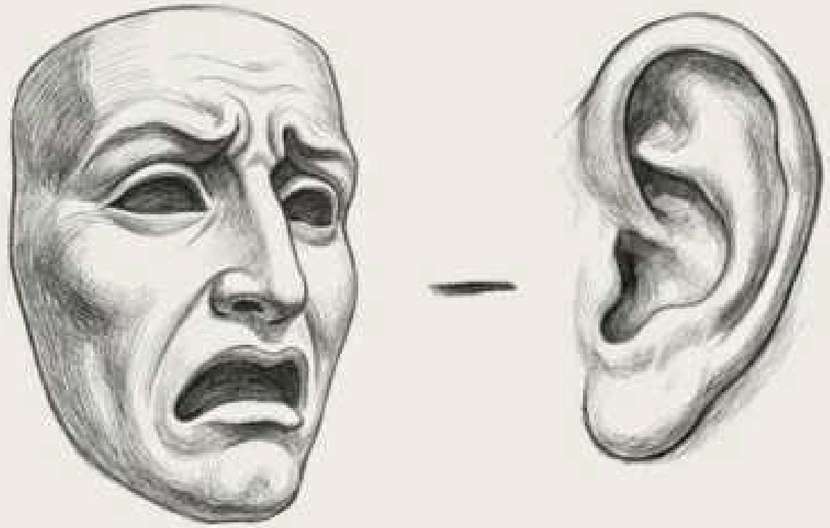
The voice speaking within the poem. It may align closely with the poet or be an entirely invented character.

Case Study: Robert Browning's My Last Duchess (1842)

- The Persona: A Duke showing a portrait of his late wife, unintentionally revealing he had her killed.
- The Reality: Browning himself was not confessing to a murder. ✕

The Dramatic Monologue

¶ 1.3



What is Meant – What is Said = Dramatic Irony

Step 1: The Form

Spoken entirely by an invented character.

Step 2: The Listener

Often completely silent, yet crucial to the dynamic.

Step 3: The Art of the Unintentional

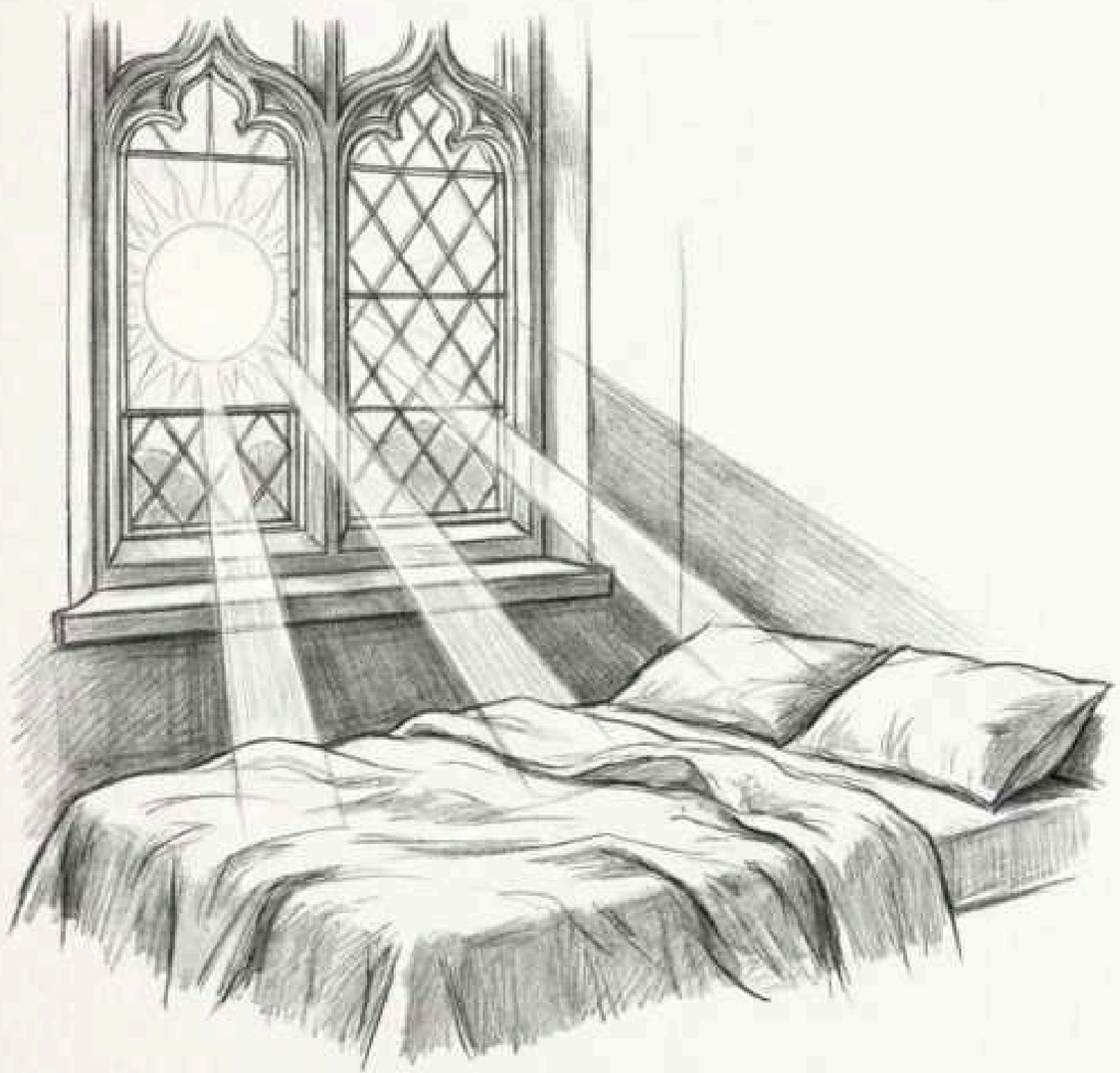
The character reveals truths they do not fully grasp themselves.

Step 4: The Result

Readers perceive a wider reality than the speaker, creating the gap known as dramatic irony.

Establishing the Situation

¶ 1.4



The Diagnostic Checklist

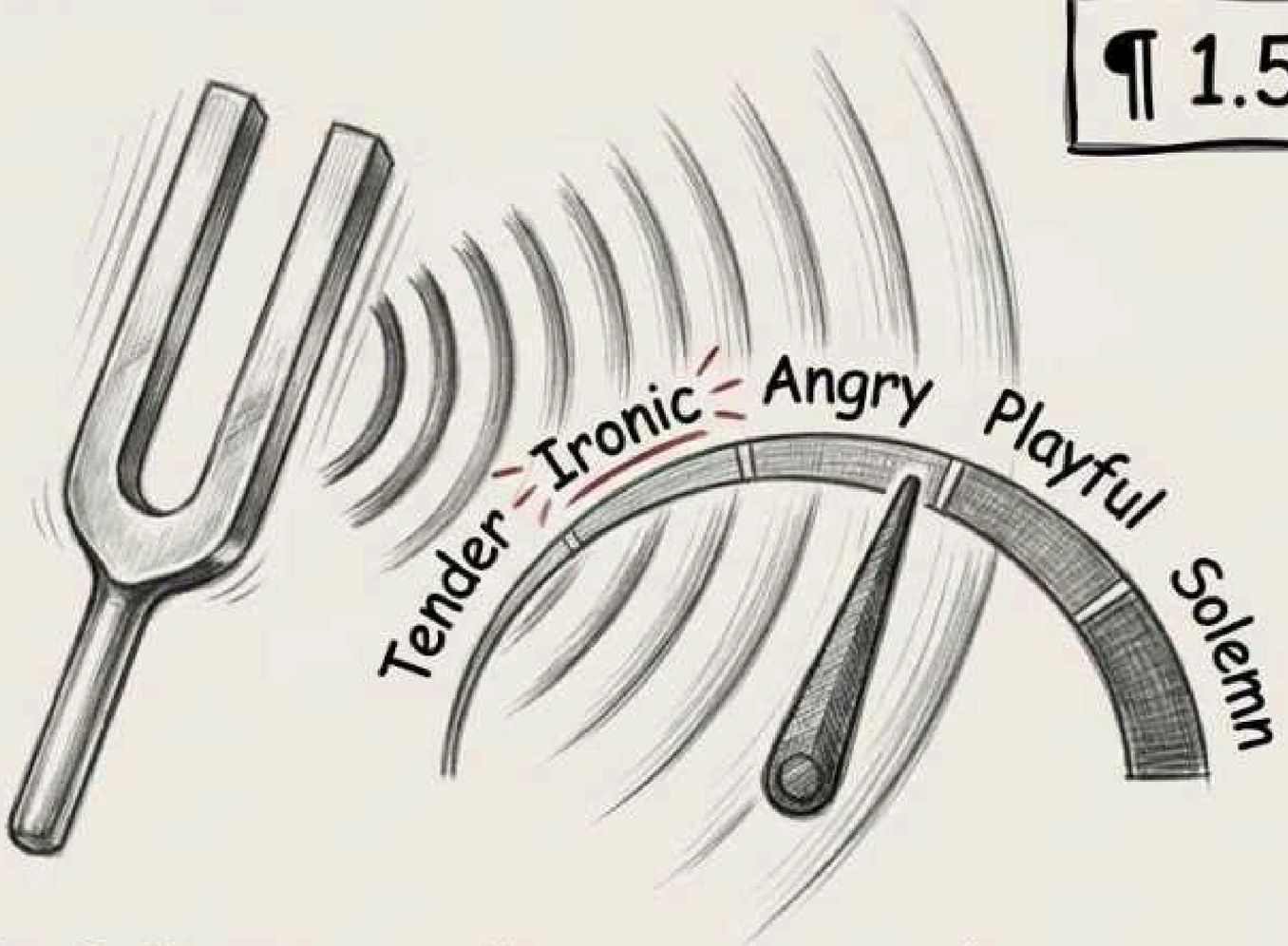
- ☐ Who is speaking?
- ☐ To whom are they speaking?
- ☐ Where are they?
- ☐ When is it taking place?
- ☐ What has just happened?

Application: In John Donne's early 17th-century poem *The Sun Rising*, knowing the situation—**two lovers in bed at dawn**—allows us to decode the speaker's playful defiance when he scolds the sun as a "busy old fool."

Calibrating Tone

¶ 1.5

- **Definition:** The speaker's attitude toward the subject and the reader.
- **The Mechanisms:** Conveyed not just by words, but by rhythm and what is explicitly left unsaid. (Multiple tones can exist simultaneously).



The Ultimate Pitfall: **Misreading tone**—such as **mistaking irony for sincerity**—is the most common way to **completely misinterpret** a poem.

Diction: The Architecture of Choice

¶ 1.6

Elevated / Abstract	Plain / Concrete
Latin-derived (perambulate)	Anglo-Saxon (walk)
Abstract ideas (beauty)	Tangible objects (rose)



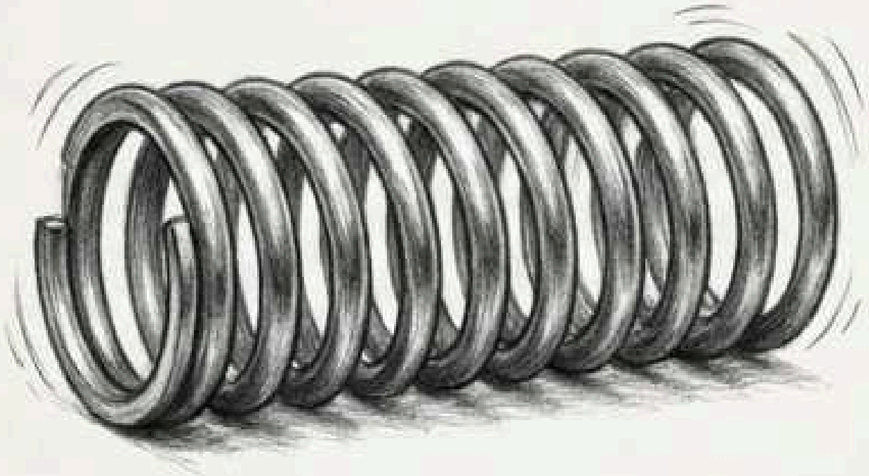
ROSE

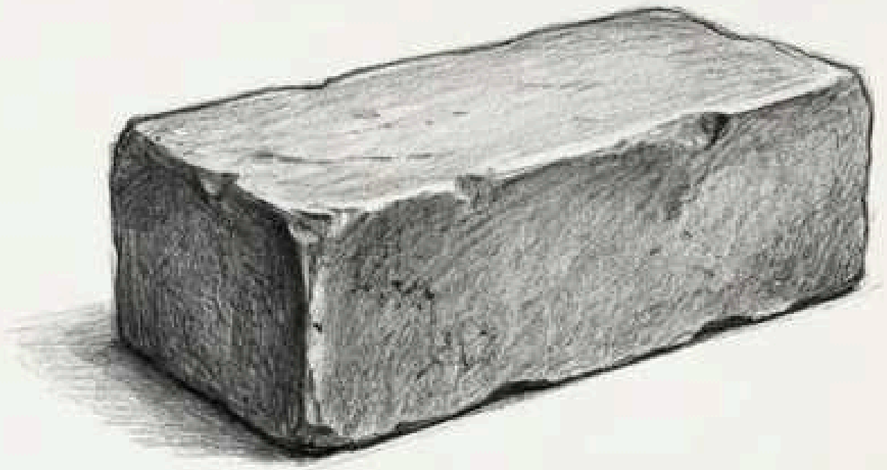
The Impact: Every single choice irreversibly alters the poem's tone and texture. A single unexpected word can pivot the entire emotional weight of the piece.

Syntax: The Engine of Tension

¶ 1.7

$\sum$ (Words) → Sentence Architecture





Stretching: Pulling one continuous sentence across multiple lines to build unbearable tension.

Inversion: Flipping normal word order to force a rhyme or create sudden emphasis.

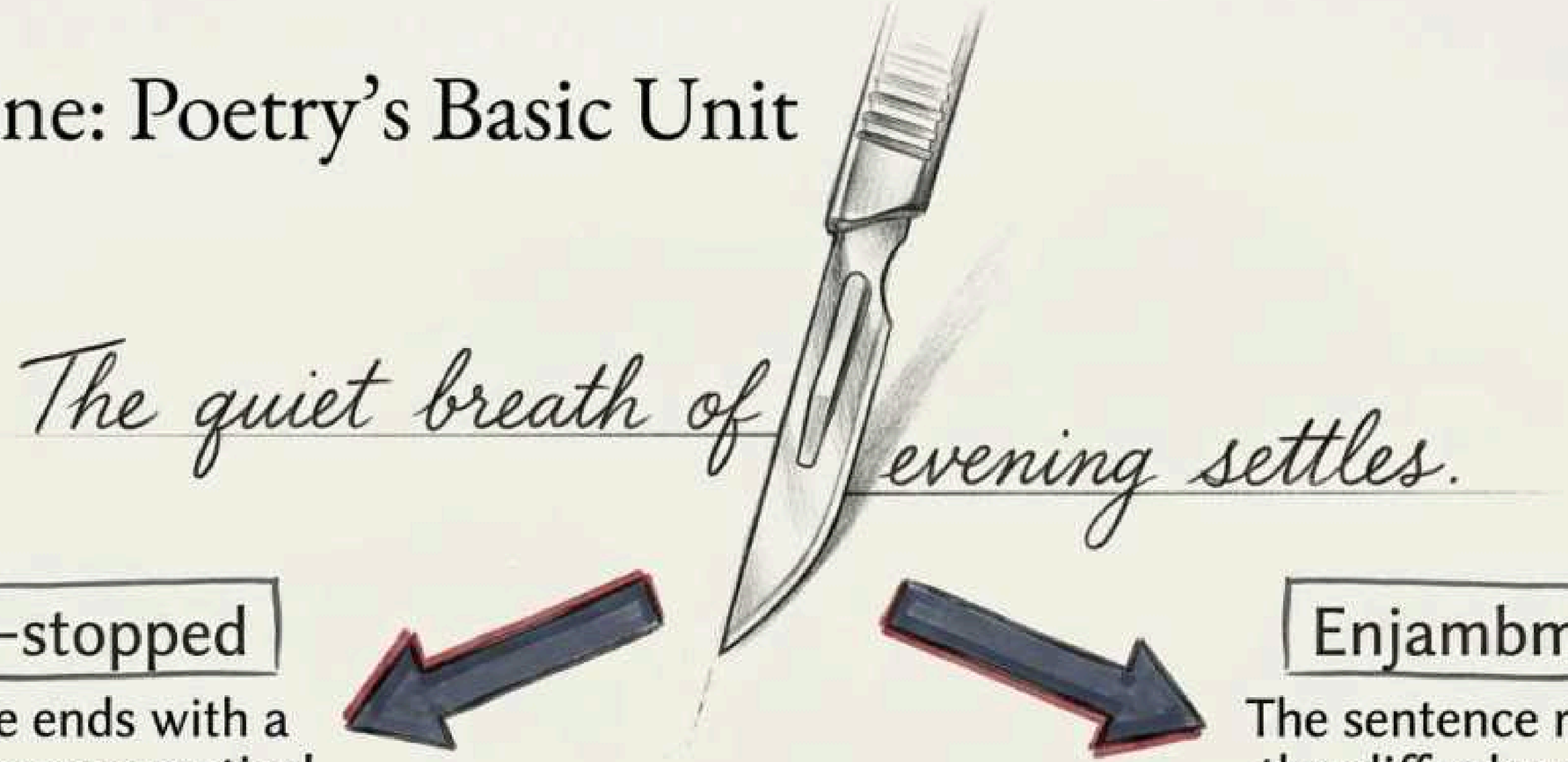
Long & Winding Sentence:
Meditative, breathless, sprawling...

SHORT SENTENCE: Blunt. Final.

Rule: Pay strict attention to where sentences begin and end in relation to the poetic lines.

The Line: Poetry's Basic Unit

¶ 1.8



End-stopped

The line ends with a definitive grammatical pause.

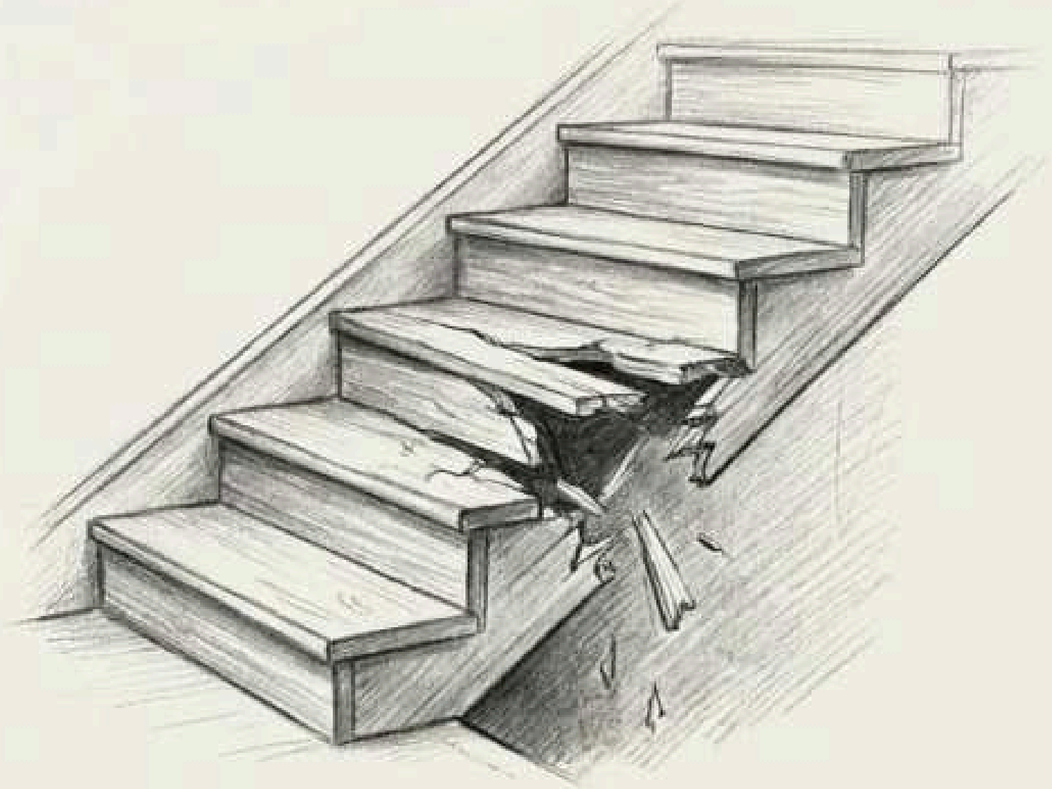
Enjambment

The sentence rushes past the cliff-edge of the line without stopping.

- The line is the fundamental boundary distinguishing poetry from prose on the page.
- A break creates a micro-pause, assigning maximum weight to the last word of a line and the first word of the next.

The Mechanics of Enjambment

¶ 1.9



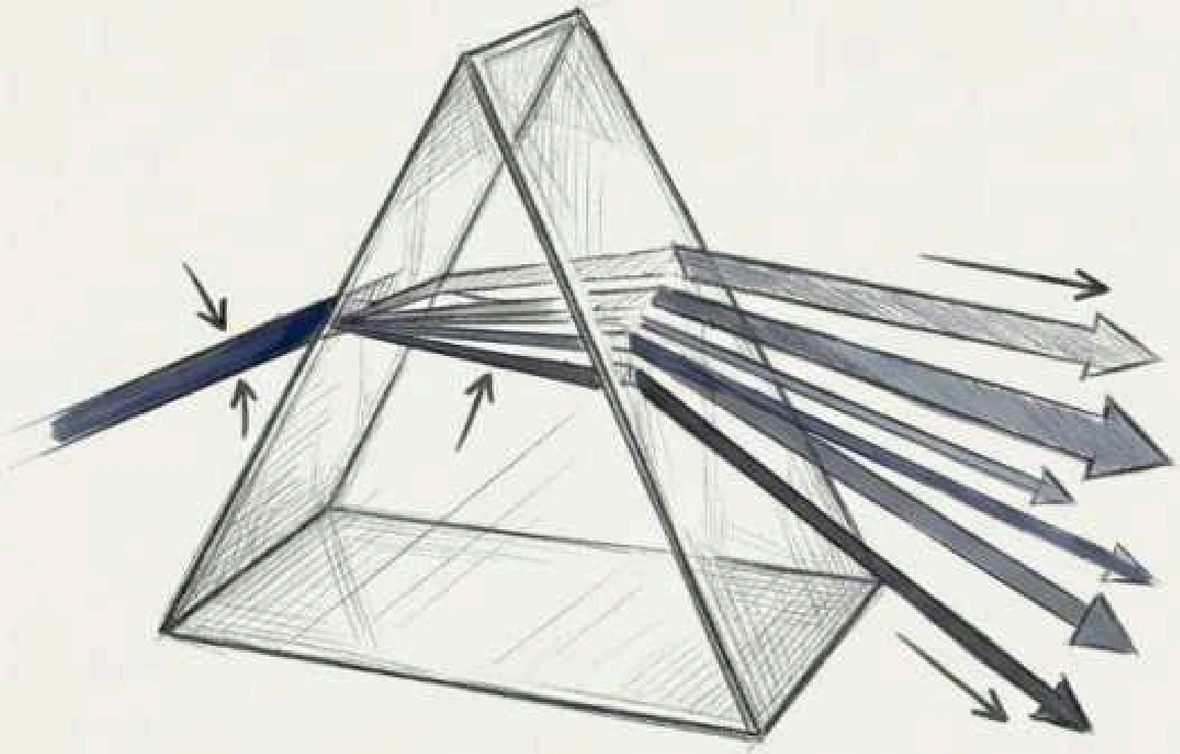
The Process of Surprise

1. **Pause:** Reader hits the line's end.
2. **Expectation:** A temporary meaning is formed in the mind.
3. **Revision:** The turn of the next line continues the sentence and aggressively changes the meaning.

The Effect: Poets exploit this momentary structural suspense to generate double meanings, surprise, and unsettle the reader.

Embracing Ambiguity

¶ 1.10



1 Word = n Meanings

1. The Empson Framework

Critic William Empson's Seven Types of Ambiguity (1930) proved that unresolved meanings create depth. Ambiguity is the core source of poetry's richness, not a flaw.

2. The Techniques

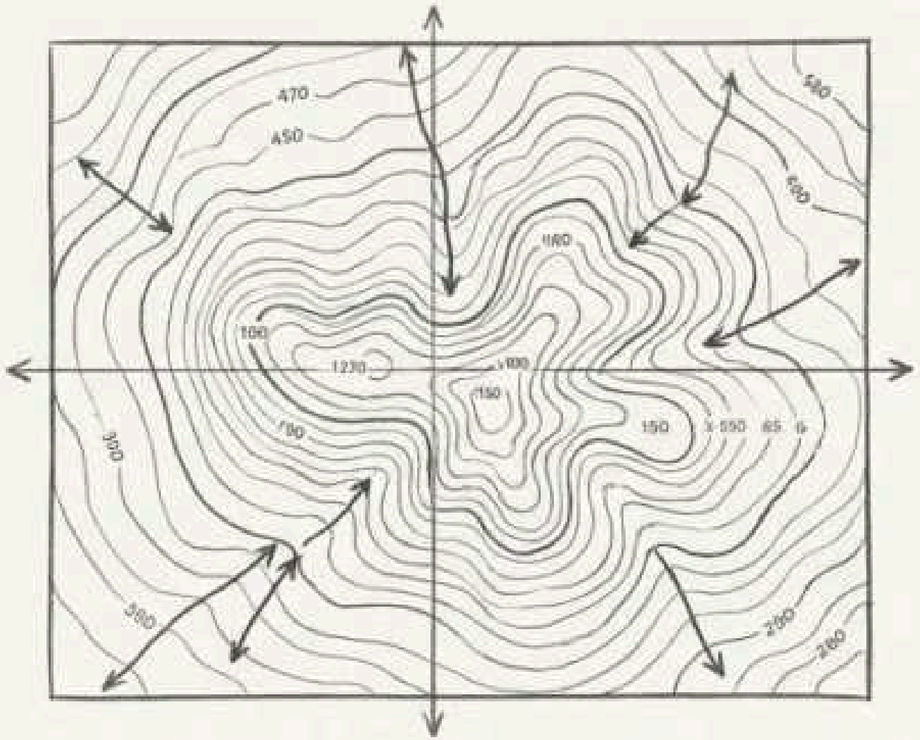
- Puns & double meanings.
- Uncertain or sliding grammar.

3. The Reader's Job

Do not choose one meaning. You are invited to hold several conflicting readings in your mind simultaneously.

The Limits of Paraphrase

¶ 1.11



Map ≠ Territory



The Utility

Restating a poem in plain prose is an excellent first step to grasp literal sense.

The Heresy

Critic Cleanth Brooks warned against the "heresy of paraphrase." A poem's meaning is NOT a disposable message that can be extracted from its shell.

The Reality

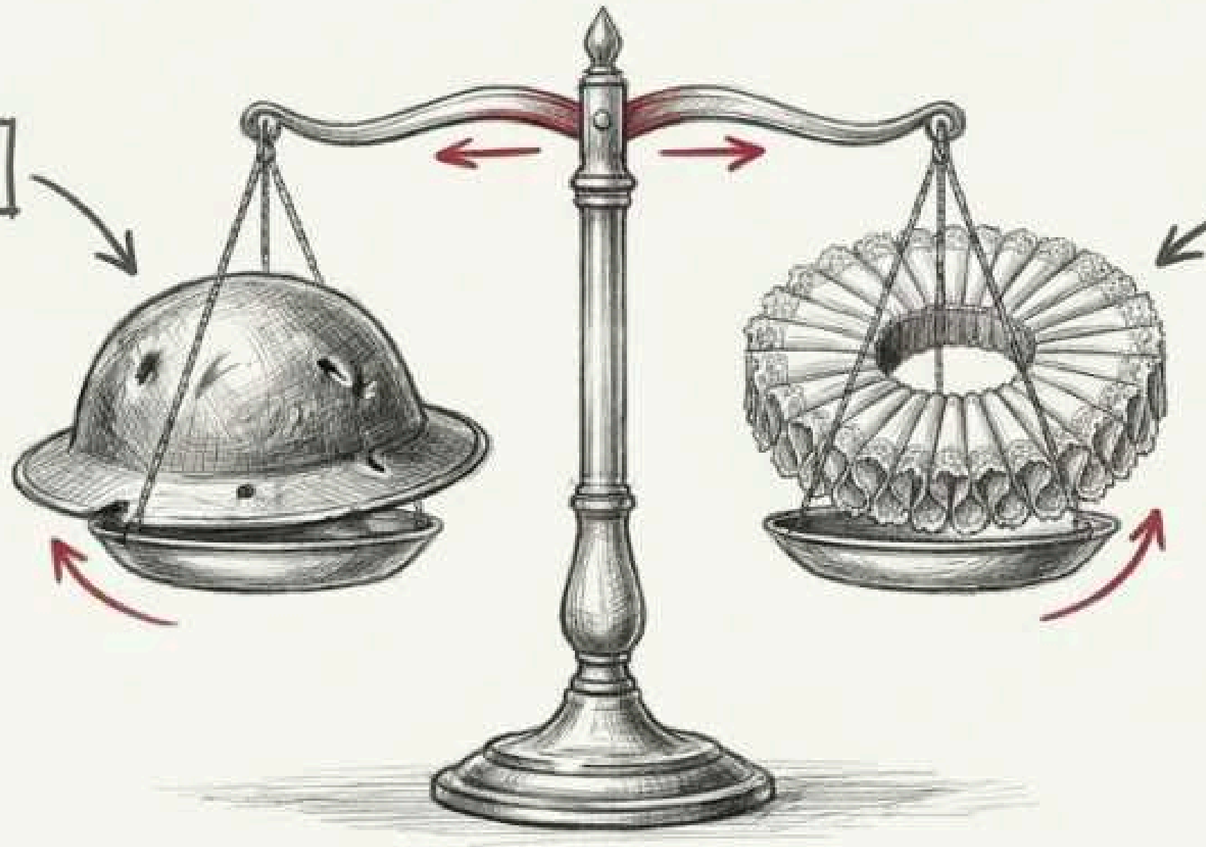
The meaning lives inextricably within the specific words, sounds, and structural form. Paraphrase is merely the map; the poem itself is the territory.

The Role of Context

¶ 1.12

The Value of History:

Biography deepens interpretation. Knowing Wilfred Owen fought and died in WWI transforms his war poetry.



The Value of Convention:

Knowing Elizabethan love conventions reveals when Shakespeare is mocking them.

The Critical Debate: How heavily should history and biography guide our reading?

The Ultimate Standard: A truly great poem remains functional and devastating even for readers entirely ignorant of its author.

A Method for Close Reading

¶ 1.13

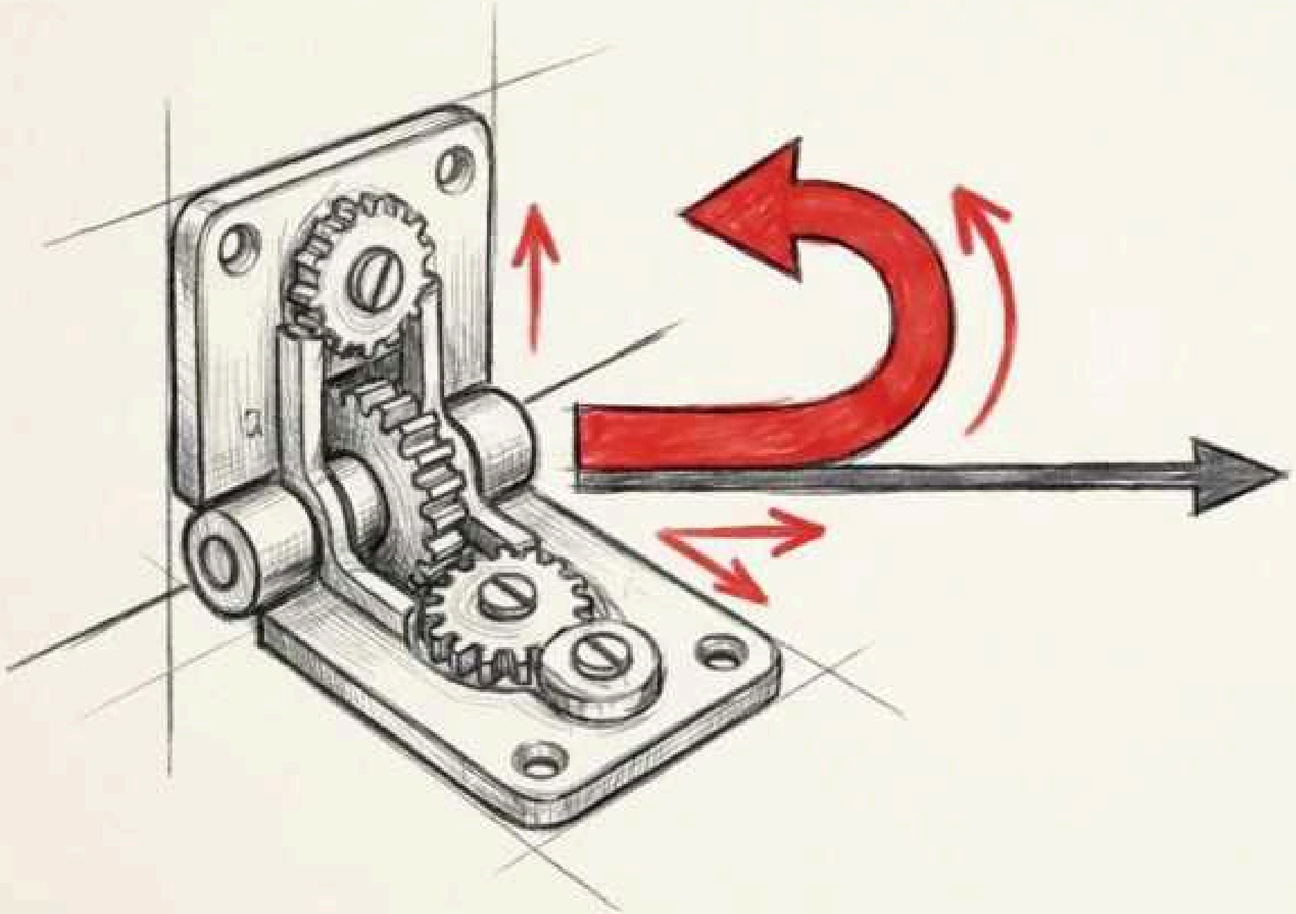
Surface

1. **Literal Sense:** What is actually happening?
2. **Speaker & Situation:** Who is speaking, where, and with what tone?
3. **Language:** Analyze diction, syntax, and line breaks.
4. **Acoustics:** Sound and rhythm (Focus of Lecture 2).
5. **Imagery:** Figures of speech and metaphor.
6. **Structure:** How does the poem move and turn?
7. **Synthesis:** What does it mean, and precisely how does it mean it?

Depth

¶ 1.14

The Volta (The Turn)



Definition:

The precise, localized moment the thought violently shifts direction.

Common Architectural Shifts:

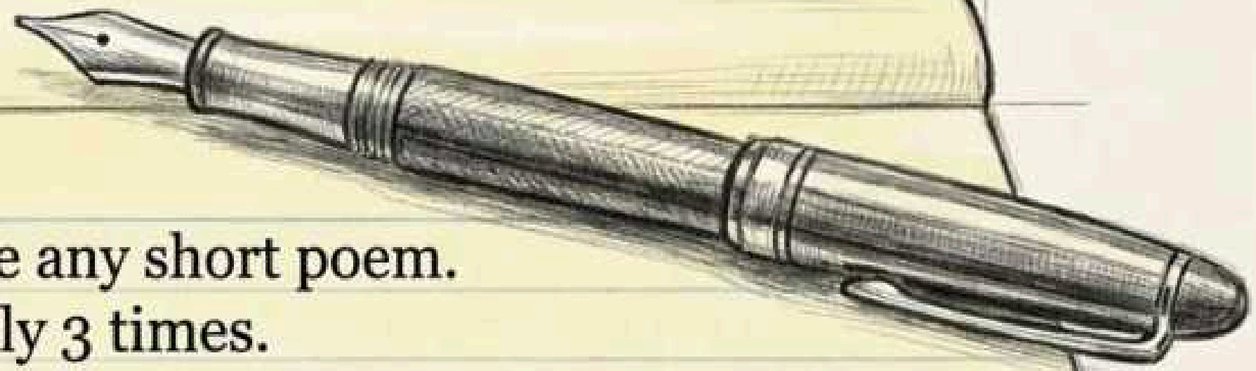
Question → Answer
Despair → Hope
Description → Reflection

The Function:

Finding the turn is the key that unlocks the poem's logic. It occurs at a fixed point in sonnets (Lecture 4), but exists in almost all poetic forms.

Application: The 3-Sentence Exercise

¶ 1.15



The Action: Choose any short poem.
Read it aloud exactly 3 times.

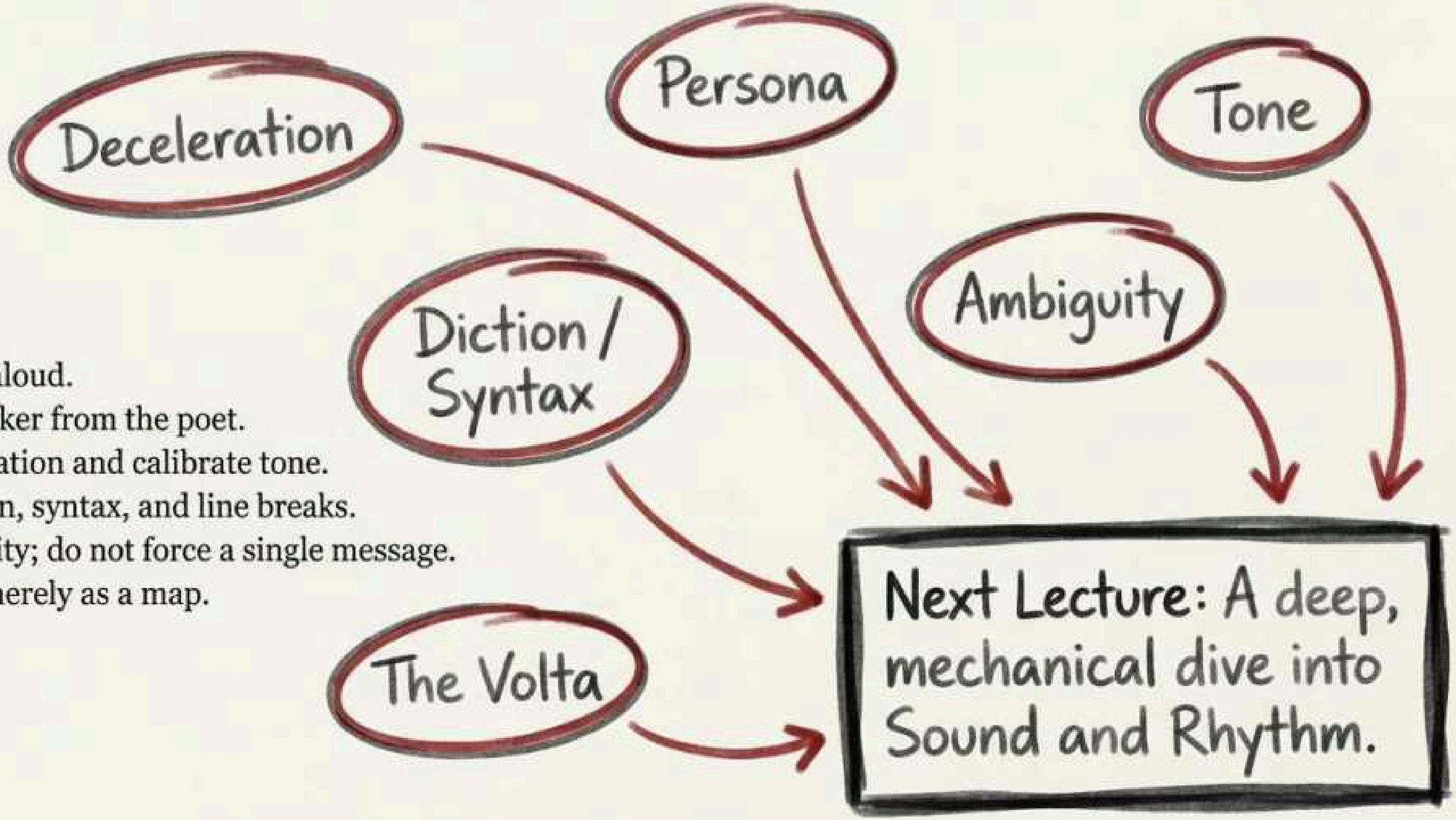
The Deliverable: Write exactly three sentences:

1. One sentence explaining what it literally says.
2. One sentence identifying the speaker and the tone.
3. One sentence isolating the single word or line break that surprises you most.

The Result: The physical act of slowing down will reveal hidden architectures you would otherwise miss.

Synthesis & Next Steps

¶ 1.16



- Read slowly and aloud.
- Separate the speaker from the poet.
- Establish the situation and calibrate tone.
- Interrogate diction, syntax, and line breaks.
- Welcome ambiguity; do not force a single message.
- Use paraphrase merely as a map.
- Locate the turn.