

Introduction: What Makes Poetry Poetry and Why Are We So Afraid of It?

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“AVANT-GARDE TOILET PAPER,” I hear a student mutter as this poem by the Canadian poet bp nichol (1944–88) flashes up on the screen. My “Writing About Literature” class has just spent a month happily and gamely discussing short stories, but on the day we are to start the poetry unit, the mood has changed. Why is this poem immediately dismissed as flushable? Why does everybody look so anxious? What’s so scary about poetry?

I put the question to my students, ask them why they think so many people get nervous about poetry. Here are a few of their answers: “There are so many hidden meanings.” “Sometimes I feel like the author is tricking me.” “Writers never just come out and say what they mean.” “There’s no one clear meaning.” For these students, prose is a more reliable communicator. They know how to read the sentences and get meaning from them.

Poetic language, apparently, is getting in the way.

How does poetic language differ from the language of prose? You are probably already familiar with a number of features of poetic language, and know how to name them, using terms such as **ALLITERATION**, **METAPHOR**, **CHIASMUS** (if you don’t know that last one, you soon will—it’s a fun one!). In truth, such deviations from bald

declarative prose characterize all literary language, whether in poetry, fiction or drama. Poetry, however, lies at the far end of the spectrum, rich with language that doesn't behave in familiar ways.

In daily life we encounter lots of language that aims to communicate something to us unambiguously: explanations in textbooks, news articles, medication instructions, product user guides. We don't even notice language in these cases; we consume the messages as if the language were a transparent window onto what we want to know. Continuing with this analogy, we can think of poetic language as a kind of stained glass window. It's not a swift and invisible portal to meaning. It's now an object in itself that we have become aware of, and as we look at it from different angles, and look through the different colours of glass, what we see through it shifts. The meaning is not simply out there, "hidden" by the coloured glass. Instead, meaning is shaped in multiple ways by its medium.

One of the ways most poetry differs from prose is through **LINEATION**. While the right hand margin determines where this line of type will end, poets make conscious choices about where to terminate lines. In prose, the primary unit of composition is the sentence, its placement on the page of no consequence. In poetry, the principal unit is the line, so that placement of words on the page, the organization of words and space, is significant. The shape of a poem, like the stained glass window, is visible and contributes to meaning. If the lineation of poetry begins to move us into an awareness of language as visible material on the page, bp Nichol's poem above insists on that awareness, its success dependent on our willingness to pay attention to how his letters are oriented in space. If we trace the word "poet" to its roots, we find the Greek *poiein* (to make), and further back the Indo European *kwei* (to pile up, to build). Nichol's work reminds us that a poem is a made thing, an object composed of the stuff of language. The piled up letters are making meaning, not hiding it; they are the way of meaning, not in its way. Nichol's poem, entitled "Blues," is an example of **CONCRETE POETRY**, a genre of poetry that foregrounds the material resources (visual and aural) of language. I start with this poem because it illustrates so clearly what makes poetry poetry; in poetic language, form matters and is inextricably entwined with content.

Let's read Nichol's poem. At that prospect a student nervous about

poetry might be balking already. Clearly “reading” this poem will not be anything like “reading” a story. The American poet Charles Bernstein offers this advice to anxious poetry readers: “Don’t let the poem intimidate you! Often the difficult poem will provoke you, but this may be its way of getting your attention” (5). The first thing we can do, then, is relax and try to reshape our emotional response to the unfamiliarity of the text. If a poem “provokes,” if it is provocative to us, that could mean it irritates, challenges us; but we could also see the provocative poem as enticing, stimulating. It’s all right to enter some unknown territory, to read something you don’t know how to read; when it comes to poetry, nobody has all-encompassing mastery. In the end you’ll find that the oddities, the questions, the ambiguities, the surprises, the provocations are the very qualities of poetry that enable you to enjoy a lifelong relationship with it. So, “Blues” has our attention. Now what?

The first thing we might do is look at the poem as an object. bp Nichol was interested in blurring boundaries between the arts. The arrangement of letters and words in this work invites us to move beyond our habitual left-to-right reading strategy and engage it as we would visual art. Looking at the poem for a while reveals its symmetry: the diagonal row of e’s acts as a mirror, an axis of reflection. The reflected image is composed of the letters l, o, and v, presented in a font that highlights their elemental shapes (circle, line, chevron) and renders each of them symmetrical. One way to look at the overall shape is as two arrows meeting in the middle of that central square. At the same time that our eyes are registering these visual patterns, we can’t help but read the word “love.” A cluster of ideas and associations—love, Cupid’s arrows, mirroring—begins to accrue as we build meaning in this poem.

Because of the symmetry of the poem, the ‘word’ that appears as often as “love,” both horizontally and vertically, is “evol.” What is “evol”? Perhaps it is a word fragment, the beginning of ‘evolve’; love is, after all, the engine of evolution! But we can also sound out “evol” and hear ‘evil,’ remembering that the title of the poem is “Blues.” The musical genre of Blues gives us compelling songs infused with lament, often about the dark side of love. The musical title encourages us to think further about the sounds in this poem. The “oooo”s and

the “eeeeeeee” might express the pleasure of love, the pain of love or, as we hear so often in Blues music, both.

You might find yourself constructing a little narrative out of this constellation of letters: somebody has perhaps been jilted by a lover, and is eeeeeing and oooooing over lost delights. It’s interesting that we so often gravitate toward story, even when considering a poem such as “Blues,” which looks nothing like a story. Remember my students, who had no trouble tackling the fiction unit of my class. Some theorists have suggested that a storytelling drive has evolved in humans, so that we tend to communicate, express ourselves, and even think in a narrative mode. Jonathan Gottschall argues that we think in stories because it “allows us to experience our lives as coherent, orderly and meaningful. It is what makes life more than blooming, buzzing confusion” (102). So why not declare that the “hidden meaning” of “Blues” is a tale of thwarted passion? Or why not translate the poem into a simple sentence, such as ‘Love has its ups and downs’ or, to pursue another interpretation, ‘One person’s love is another person’s evil’? We might even note the name “eve” in there, evoking the familiar biblical tale of Eve’s discovery of evil in the garden of Eden. But although poetry often features elements of story—the most famous early poems in Western culture, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, are narrative—if we invoke again the idea of a spectrum of literary language, poetry lies at one end, working in all kinds of modes other than story. Our engagement with “Blues,” for example, deals with shape, sound, mood, patterns, associations. The poem is full of “blooming” and “buzzing” that confounds and delights and invites you to look and listen.

The meanings are piling up. “Poetry is always unbearable in terms of the tension it creates in meaning” (10). So says the famous Québécoise poet Nicole Brossard. Given that she has published dozens of books, the “unbearable” for her must be a positive; the multiplicity and ambiguity of meaning in poetry is not to be borne lightly, because it is formidable, explosive, inexhaustible. We shouldn’t feel pressure to reduce the poem to a simple summarizing sentence because it really can’t be done. Not only would such a statement exclude alternate meanings, but to attempt it would be to commit what is called the **HERESY OF PARAPHRASE**. This term was coined by mid-century literary critic Cleanth Brooks, who argued that a poem is an experience, like

music or dance; the unique features of poetic language, the form of the poem, constitute its power. There's no putting a poem in a nutshell.

We are accustomed to moving our eyes left to right as we consume written material, leaving words behind once we've read them. "Blues" compels our eyes to move diagonally, back and forth, up and down, near and far; there are all manner of ways to take in and make sense of the patterns. By keeping our eyes active on the page, the poem inspires a kind of meditation. It's a meditation on love, but also on language itself. That is, we do not normally interact so intimately with the letters of our alphabet; the result is that we begin to look at something familiar as if we've never encountered it before. l, o, v, and e are suddenly like characters in a foreign language, their physical contours apparent to us. The letters might seem imbued with the magic they carried when we first learned them as children. "Blues" sparks up the relationship with language that started when we were in diapers. But why should your relationship with the letter e matter?

The eighteenth-century poet Alexander Pope argued that poetic language gives us "What oft was Thought, but ne'er so well Express" (298); his view was that ideally poetry can communicate with unprecedented vividness the contents of our minds. The Romantic poets went further, suggesting that poetic language could actually create new thought, bring about original ideas. In his essay "A Defence of Poetry," the Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley calls poetry "the root and blossom of all other systems of thought" (38), a force which can produce "forms of opinion and action never before conceived" (25). It's this notion that language creates knowledge and shapes world-views that points to the reason your relationship with the letter e matters.

Since linguistic anthropologist Benjamin Lee Whorf proposed, in the early twentieth century, that the differences among cultures were in part determined by their respective languages, there has been an active conversation about how languages might shape our realities. If you speak more than one language, you might already be familiar with the sensation of having a slightly different worldview, feeling like a slightly different person, depending on which idiom you're using. More than a millennium before the **SAPIR-WHORF HYPOTHESIS**, the medieval ruler Charlemagne noted that, "to have a second language is

to have a second soul.” If language contours the way we think, then, all the language coming at you every day—advertising, news broadcasts, articles, books—is shaping who you are and how you see the world. If poetry can ignite an awareness of letters and words in you, a more active relationship with this powerful stuff that is language, then perhaps you can be more conscious about that shaping, become a more critical thinker about your world as you participate in it as a citizen. One of bp Nichol’s fellow concrete poets, Bill Bissett, said of their practice, “We really believed if we freed the word we could help free people” (*bp: pushing*). This philosophy recalls Shelley’s famous claim that “poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world” (“Defence” 46). Thanks to avant-garde toilet paper, you might see and hear more acutely the cultural messages (for example, about “love” and “evil”) affecting your life, and you might even feel empowered to intervene in the words/worlds around you.

So, in addition to offering aesthetic delight and windows on (not to mention contributions to) history, philosophy, culture, etc., poetry can change the world—not a bad reason to stick with it. Oddly, sometimes you’ll hear critics say that concrete poetry, the genre that facilitates the most intimate connection between you and your language, is not really poetry at all. The *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* claims that most concrete poems “have little claim to the status of poetry” (67). You might also hear that **PROSE POEMS**, poems made of sentences and often dispensing with lineation, don’t qualify. The prose poem has gained increasing prominence over the last century, and masterworks of the genre have been produced by poets such as Gertrude Stein, Allen Ginsberg, Lyn Hejinian, Daphne Marlatt, Fred Wah, Anne Carson, and Ron Silliman. Yet some critics will say, “the very notion of a ‘prose poem’ is oxymoronic” (Furniss and Bath 64). (An **OXY MORON**, by the way, is a figure of speech which links irreconcilable parts, or contradictory terms, such as ‘cold sun’). I’m with the poets on this one. If bp Nichol says it’s a poem, let’s call it a poem. And if Nobel-prize laureate Seamus Heaney says, as he does in the epigraph to this book, that he’s “still not sure” what poetry is, I’m not about to insist on any fast definitions.

You probably have this book in your hand because poetry is such a mysterious, fugitive, shifting, befuddling, multifaceted, and

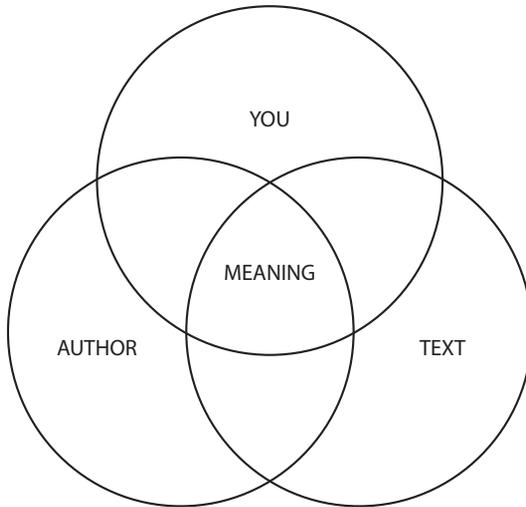
indefinable thing. Reading *How to Read (and Write About) Poetry* won't evacuate poetry of its complexity, but I hope the book will change how you feel about that complexity. Through discussion of a number of great poems from various periods, this book will introduce you to literary terms, genres, poetic movements, cultural histories, reading strategies, etc., not with an aim to grant you mastery over the unmasterable, but to equip you to join the ongoing critical conversations about poetry.

I'd like to end this introduction with a final attempt to jettison the idea of "hidden meanings" by talking about where meaning is. There's even a diagram.

Students often think of meaning as residing in the mind of the author; if only we could raise Gertrude Stein from the dead, we could find out what she really meant by "Rose is a rose is a rose"! The problem with authors is, as any interview with an author will show, they themselves keep changing their minds about poems. Writers grow and evolve, and develop new relationships with the words appearing in their work. Even if you could interview the author as he or she was writing the poem, neither you nor that author would have access to the subconscious forces contributing to the creative project. When it comes to poems written by "Anonymous," we don't have a hope of getting information from the source; yet such poems don't lack meaning. It's interesting to hear what authors have to say about their compositional methods, and about what a work means to them, but it's only one piece of the puzzle.

You are the most important piece. How you respond to the tensions and music and images and themes of a poem will constitute the heart of any analysis you offer. If you've ever taken part in a class discussion of a poem, you know that there will be as many readings of it as there are individuals in the room. Your reception of the language is active, is meaning-making, just as the author's production of it was. What's more, with your historical hindsight, you will be able to note forces at work in a poem that authors from the past, steeped in their own culture, may not even have been fully conscious of. And your unique life experiences (all you've read, thought, seen, learned, felt) ensure that the chord struck between you and the poem will be unique, and a valuable addition to the conversation.

A caution! I'm not saying the poem can mean anything you want it to mean. If you start arguing that "Blues" is about kangaroos, I'm going to be skeptical. Which brings us to the other location of meaning, the obvious one: the text. The text is not doing much if it remains filed away on a shelf—it needs your reading to activate meaning—but we need to attend very carefully to what's on the page. If you want to argue for the kangaroo interpretation, you'll have to show me where those kangaroos are. The best analytical discussions are creative, surprising, and intrepid, but they are also always grounded in evidence from the text. Otherwise you leave the poem behind.



Above is the Venn diagram showing us where meaning is. You are always an important part of developing a poem's meaning. There it is, right out in the open, not hidden at all.