

What We Talk About When We Talk About Poetry

1

When seen from a distance or just casually glanced at, poetry appears to be a substantive and singular thing. But when looked at more closely and attentively, this apparent unity dissolves: all that seemed solid melts into the air. As evidenced by the failure of all attempts at a comprehensive definition, we use the word “poetry” to refer to many different things. There is a nebulous family resemblance among these different things. But their attributes and aims are so distinct that it’s hard to believe they are all “poetry” in the same sense.

Former British prime minister Margaret Thatcher once famously declared that there is no such thing as society; she was wrong. But there is no such single thing as poetry that does or should do a single thing or set of things. When we say, “This is what poetry is” or “This is what poetry does,” we almost always mean, “This is what the kind of poetry that interests me is” or “This is what the kind of poetry that I like does.” I know what I value in poems, what I want poems to do. But I also know that what I value isn’t the definition of poetry, if only because there are so many poems that do other things, that aim at other goals. They can’t all be dismissed as bad poems. Some of them certainly are; perhaps most are. But that’s because they’re badly done in their own terms, not because they don’t match my definitions. They represent competing ideas of what poems are, of what poetry is. Ted Kooser, Barrett Watten, and, to take a poet from the tradition, Milton hardly seem to inhabit the

same poetic universe at all. And yet all three are “poets,” whatever adjectives one attaches to that noun.

In his piece “The End of History,” which appeared as a post on the Poetry Foundation’s “Harriet Blog” and was thus, perhaps, intended to be ephemeral, visual artist turned poet Kenny Goldsmith observes that “surveying the field, it appears to me to be wide open. Compared to the art world where, after Duchamp, anything can be art, there’s a sense . . . in [the] poetry world—even within more innovative camps—that certain things are poetry and that certain things are not. Coming from the art world, this strikes me as an untenable & unsustainable stance, both aesthetically and historically and one that is bound to implode [at] any moment.”

2

The conundrum of the nature of poetry is not a new confusion. To adapt queer theorist David Halperin’s words to a completely different context, the definitional incoherence at the core of the modern notion of poetry is a sign of its historical evolution. These days, when we think of poetry, we think primarily of the lyric in its various permutations. Historically, however, different genres of poems have been recognized, each performing a different function. Beginning with the classical triad of lyric, narrative or epic, and dramatic poetry, these types have proliferated over the ages into lyric poems, narrative poems, epic poems, philosophical poems, didactic poems, satirical poems, meditative poems, elegies, etc. The categories often overlap, but one would not fault a satirical poem for being insufficiently elegiac.

To take only classical examples, *The Iliad* (an epic narrative), the Homeric Hymns, Pindar’s panegyrics to the winners of athletic competitions, Sappho’s love lyrics, and Lucretius’s *De rerum natura* (“The Nature of Things,” a didactic treatise on the nature of the physical and metaphysical universe) don’t operate by the same principles. The range of possible poems has increased exponentially since then. As poet-blogger Gary Sullivan points out, “Poetry is not a single species. . . . [It] has an incredible number of not just forms (sonnet, pantoum, villanelle, sestina),

but whole systems of values and concerns. There is language-centered writing, visual poetry (or ‘vispo’), confessional poetry, flarf, procedural poetry, surrealism, lyrical poetry, epic poetry, spoken word, and so on.”

In sharp contrast to such a capacious conception of poetry is talk-poet David Antin’s famous assertion that “if Robert Lowell is a poet then I don’t want to be a poet,” not to mention the at-least-two-centuries-old quest among Western poets to find or define the distinction between poetry and prose, to achieve the zero degree of difference between poetry and prose by means of, most prominently, the prose poem, but also the abandonment of such markers of the “poetic” as rhyme, meter, figurative language, and the foregrounding of the poem’s aural and oral elements.

In critic Virginia Jackson’s words, “The notion that poetry is or ever was one genre is the primary symptom of the lyricization of poetry [the historical transformation of many varied poetic genres into the single abstraction of the post-Romantic lyric]: the songs, riddles, epigrams, sonnets, epitaphs, *blazons*, lieder, elegies, marches, dialogues, conceits, ballads, epistles, hymns, odes, eclogues, and monodramas considered lyric in the Western tradition before the early nineteenth century were not lyric in the same sense as the poetry that we think of as lyric. The fact that we think of almost all poetry as lyric is the secondary symptom of lyricization. When the stipulative functions of particular genres are collapsed into one big idea of poems as lyrics, then the only function poems can perform in our culture is to become individual or communal ideals. Such ideals might bind particular groups or sub-cultures (in slams, for example, or avant-garde blogs, or poetry cafés, or salons, or university, library, and museum reading series [not to mention some of the poetic movements Sullivan mentions above]), but the more ideally lyric poems and poetry culture have become, the fewer actual poetic genres address readers in specific ways. That ratio is responsible for our twenty-first-century sense that poetry is all-important and at the same time already in its afterlife” (183).

The word “lyric” derives from the word “lyre.” Originally a lyric was a poem written to be sung, often to musical accompaniment (this sense is preserved in the use of the word “lyrics” to

refer to the words of a song). Lyric has traditionally been defined by its foregrounding of the musical elements deriving from its origin (rhythmic and sonic patterning), though often the concept of “music” is metaphorical. Now the category of lyric has become a catchall or grab bag for any poem that is not explicitly and exclusively narrative or didactic, or perhaps satirical (humor tends to be excluded from most definitions of the lyric, though irony, subtler and better behaved, is welcome). *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* entry on “Lyric” points out that “much of the confusion in the modern critical usage of ‘lyric’ (i.e. usage after 1550) is due to an overextension of the term to cover a body of poetic writing that has radically altered its nature over the centuries of its development” (714).

“Lyric” uncomfortably accommodates a disparate and often contradictory array of kinds of poems. As *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* puts it, “In contemporary critical usage it may be said that ‘lyric’ is a general, categorical, and nominal term, whereas in the pre-Renaissance sense it was specific, generic, and descriptive” (715). Lyric has tended to slip from a description of a kind of poetry to a prescription for what poetry should be.

3

This piece was originally titled “There’s No Such Thing as Poetry,” a deliberately provocative title. Poet and critic Joan Houlihan asked whether I would still believe that statement if I substituted the word “writing” for the word “poetry.” If one simply means putting symbolic marks on a surface with the intent of communicating something to someone, if only to oneself, or simply of recording something, then certainly there is such a thing as writing. It’s a material and social practice, and readily identifiable. If one means something more second-order than that, by which some things would qualify as “writing” and some things wouldn’t, moving from description to prescription, things get much more complicated.

Given the enormous range of things that can come under the heading of “writing,” from grocery lists to love letters to news-

paper articles to poems to scientific treatises to street signs to warning labels, one could realistically say that there's no such thing as writing, even more so than one could say for poetry. It doesn't follow from that premise that there's no such thing as good or bad writing. One would just have to define that in terms of the function of each kind of writing. Good writing for a nutritional label on a box of breakfast cereal is going to be rather different from good writing for a political speech or for a romance novel.

Any kind of writing can be well or badly written, more or less clear and accurate. Grammatical and factual accuracy, for example, is necessary to any good or effective writing, writing that successfully achieves its aims (though factual accuracy may be counter-indicated if one's intention with a piece of writing is to deceive). Beyond this foundation of communicating accurately on the literal level (making sense in the most basic sense), the different genres of writing, from street signs to poems to instruction manuals to press releases, have different standards of evaluation, depending on their intentions and their uses. As Steven Pinker points out in a discussion of metaphor, "Multiple, partial, and emotionally charged similarities add to the richness of poetry, but they detract from understanding in science" (264). The very ambiguity that renders an instruction manual useless can be the thing we value in a poem, opening it up to multiple interpretations. When you're trying to put together a grill from a set of instructions, semantic polyvalence is the last thing you want to encounter; but in a poem, you may find its absence a flaw, rendering the poem too flat and literal.

4

It would make things more clear, and eliminate much controversy and polemic, if we acknowledged that poetry isn't a singular thing, that there are different kinds of poetry, and that these different kinds have different aims, different audiences, and different effects. Let's see them for the distinct things they are and the distinct things they do. Sometimes one wants to be challenged. At other times one wants to be entertained, or soothed

when one is stressed, or comforted when one is sad. Sometimes one wants to discover something new; sometimes one seeks familiarity. There's no reason to think that poems should fulfill all these different needs, or that they should be expected to do so. On the other hand, there's no reason to think that there aren't legitimately different kinds of poems that differently address different readers' needs and desires, or even the same reader's different needs at different times and in different moods. To refer to another mode of artistic experience, sometimes I want to listen to Wagner and sometimes I want to listen to Webern (to take two extremes of scale); sometimes I want to listen to Joy Division and sometimes I want to listen to Kylie Minogue. No one wants to be challenged all the time. But no one wants to chuckle or be sung to sleep all the time either.

The vast majority of poetry out there doesn't interest me. Much of it I actively dislike. But except in my grumpier moods, I don't begrudge it its right to exist in its own spheres. I just don't want to read it. I don't object to the Rod McKuens and Matty J. Stepaneks of the world. In high school I was very taken with Hugh Prather's *New Age* prattling, which I found in the poetry section of the Macon Mall's Waldenbooks. I don't even mind if Jewel and Ashanti and T-Boz want to write poetry, though it would be nice if Jewel knew what the word "casualty" meant. I had never heard of Jack Prelutsky, whom the Poetry Foundation named as America's first Children's Poet Laureate, but his rhymes about tomatoes and asparagus seem harmless enough, and even somewhat amusing. Such work might as well exist on other planets; those worlds don't impinge on mine.

It angers me when work that I care for is weighed and found wanting not because it fails to live up to its aims but because it doesn't offer the comforting homilies of the *Prairie Home Companion* (which to be fair does sometimes feature interesting poems) or the narrowly defined entertainment value poetic populists demand. It angers me when "intellectual" is used as a pejorative. It angers me when such pseudo-populism is held up as a model of what all poetry should be for all people.

The complaints of those who bemoan contemporary poetry's difficulty and inaccessibility show a real lack of familiarity with contemporary poetry. They needn't like contemporary poetry,

but they should at least describe it accurately. Eliot and Stevens, condemned by many then and now for their “intellectualism,” have been dead for a long time. Except for the fact that they write in free verse, most contemporary American poets proceed as if Modernism never happened. Vernon Shetley, in his book *After the Death of Poetry: Poet and Audience in Contemporary America*, which argues that contemporary poetry needs to be more complex and challenging to capture and hold readers’ interest, quotes Joseph Epstein’s observation that “contemporary poetry has not grown more but less difficult” (3). The Ron Sillimans and Clark Coolidges of the poetry world(s) are far outnumbered by the legions of competent poets writing completely accessible poems about their divorces and their dying grandmothers.

The grumblings of those who bemoan contemporary poetry’s elitism and inaccessibility remind me of the readers Howard Nemerov wrote of many years ago: “They don’t like poetry, even though some of them feel they ought to; and they very naturally want poems to be as easy as possible, in order that there may be no intellectual embarrassment about despising them. These readers get their entire pleasure, not from reading poems, but from wrangling interminably over ‘communication,’ as though each of them lived in his own telephone booth” (“The Difficulty of Difficult Poetry,” *Reflexions* 24).

The problem, in poetry as in our culture in general, is of leveling. Everything is brought down to the lowest common denominator. Some years ago, when I lived in Chicago, I attended a screening of a film biography of the late Martinican Négritude poet Aimé Césaire, a fascinating and challenging poet who also had a rather interesting life. During the question and answer period someone asked, “What does this film have to say to the average black kid on the street corner?” I wondered, “Why does it have to speak to him? Isn’t there enough in our culture that’s addressed to him, that panders, however patronizingly and exploitatively, to him?” And isn’t it insulting to assume that he couldn’t find something interesting and engaging in Césaire if he were given the chance to do so? To assume that the mythical “average person” can’t appreciate anything complex is rank condescension. But in our culture, anything “intellectual,” anything complex or difficult, is not only marginalized but dismissed as

irrelevant or, most damningly, “elitist,” often by members of the socio-economic elite.

5

All good writing, from a political speech to a love letter to a philosophical disquisition to a detective thriller to, yes, even a poem, shares grammatical fluency (one must know the rules of syntax to break them effectively), lexical accuracy (one must know a word’s meaning in order to play with or revise it), particularity and specificity of diction, phrasing, and imagery, and an avoidance of cliché and vagueness. What may work for a song lyric or spoken word poem will probably not work for a poem on the page, bereft of the musical texture, the grain of the performer’s voice, the gestures of performance. But with regard to particularity and some degree of uniqueness, good song lyrics are not different from good poems for the page.

Within the very broad and capacious limits of what might be called good writing, I say let a hundred flowers bloom. That emphatically includes the more exotic and *recherché*, even the off-putting. Not all flowers are beautiful, and not all smell lovely. (Philosopher and art critic Arthur C. Danto has pointed out that some art isn’t meant to be beautiful, and even that some art, given the effect it aims for, shouldn’t be beautiful.) Let there be room for that which doesn’t appeal to the widest possible audience and doesn’t intend to. I have as much a right to my aesthetic pleasures (and challenges: I enjoy reading poetry, but pleasure isn’t the only reason for reading) as Ted Kooser or Dana Gioia does. I refuse to submit poetry, or life in general, to the tyranny of the majority. There are worse things than being unpopular, and just because you’re outnumbered doesn’t mean that you’re wrong.

As a corrective to prevalent misunderstandings and misuses of the term and the idea, anthropologist Marshall Sahlins offers the following clarification: “Cultural relativism is first and last an interpretive [methodological] procedure. It is not the moral argument that any culture or custom is as good as any other, if not better. Relativism is the simple prescription that, in order to

be intelligible, other people's practices and ideals must be placed in their own historical context, understood as positional values in the field of their own cultural relationships rather than appreciated by categorical and moral judgments of our own making. Relativity is the provisional suspension of one's own judgments in order to situate the practices at issue in the historical and cultural order that made them possible. It is in no other way a matter of advocacy" (46).

Just as anthropologists have recognized that there is no such singular and universal thing as "culture," we in the literary world should acknowledge that there is no such unitary thing as "poetry." I call for a poetic relativism modeled on Marshall Sahlins's definition of cultural relativism, which doesn't exclude judgment, but postpones such judgment until the poem has been understood on its own terms. It is only then that one can determine one's position toward those terms, to evaluate whether what was done was done well or badly, and to decide whether it was worth doing at all. Joan Houlihan cogently points out that letting all flowers bloom doesn't preclude the possibility or even the necessity of weeding once they've done so, though this would hardly be the wholesale mowing-down (of poems or of poets) that the allusion to Mao might imply.

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