

From Zeotrope June 28, 2006 on What is Poetry Today

(1) Please describe for me, and others, what constitutes a poem these days? I am in dire need to know.

Questioner

(2) You ask the question I have never been able to answer. I have no idea what a poem is, except: 1) it is the sum of all its parts and 2) I know it when I read it. A poem is not necessarily 1) rhyme, 2) meter, 3) metaphor or 4) imagery. And yet a poem can be all of those things or any combination of those things and others. A poem is not the poet. A poem transcends the poet. It stands there naked in all its precious parts, all its passion, all its astounding word choices, and the reader, the one right reader finds it and calls it lovingly "Poem." Most poets write ten good poems in their lifetime, I'm told. Others realistically hope for one. Good question.

Person A

(3) There are two views of this question: the practical and the technical. First, let us look at the practical view:

A poem is what poetry readers like to read.

Yes, I realize that this is self-defining, but it makes the point that if what we write doesn't find a readership it really doesn't matter what it is. And what is a "poetry reader"? Believe it or not, this is cause for some debate between factions. Both groups agree that a poetry reader is someone who, strictly for pleasure, reads *or would read* a lot of poetry by different poets. Thus, it isn't a circle of family, friends or peers reading our poetry critically. The controversy revolves around this central question: "Why write poetry for those who don't currently read it?"

If this question seems rhetorical then the audience for poetry is extremely small, limited largely to fellow poets among those who subscribe to poetry journals, buy volumes of poetry or, perhaps, are frequent visitors to webzines.

Others answer the question with: "Because we want to recapture poetry's lost readership!"

A century ago poetry appeared in virtually every magazine and newspaper. Within a week of its publication a poem might be cited in Parliament, Congress, dinner parties and speeches. What happened since then? How did poetry lose its readership? The answer, quite simply, is that the definitions of poets and readers diverged in the early 20th Century. Ask your pharmacist, doctor, lawyer or accountant--educated people who would have read poetry a century ago but do not do so now--what constitutes a poem and they will mention meter and rhyme among its attributes. Few modern poets will agree. That five of the six best-known poems of the 20th Century are in strict meter and rhyme does nothing to convince many modern poets to re-examine their approach.

The technical aspects of what constitutes a poem are far less controversial. As Don Paterson says: “**A poem is just a little machine for remembering itself.**” What tools does the poet use to effect this? Among other things we might expect: sonics (e.g. alliteration, consonance, assonance, hard and soft sounds, etc.), imagery, enjambment, original language, trope, metaphor, simile, the three "ty's" (i.e. brevity, clarity and subtlety), storyline, rhythm (yes, even for free verse) and, perhaps, form, meter and rhyme.

How difficult is it to produce a poem? If, as newcomers, we study the art diligently, read thousands of poems and are unusually talented we might expect to produce our first actual poem in about five years. Frankly, though, a decade is a far more realistic expectation.

How rare are good poems--poems that might warrant preservation for future generations of readers? In my years on Zoetrope I have seen two, but that is two more than I have encountered on any other venue except the Gazebo (where I have seen four). I could cite passages from them as illustrative examples if you'd like but that may be beyond the scope of your question.

Person B

(4) A highly subjective and controversial topic, if I ever saw one.

A poem was originally a set of word shapes that evoked a strong feeling - some call these magical spells - and according to Jorge Luis Borges, the poets became holy by this act, and had to be put to death.

The reason real poetry exists is so we remember certain flashes and ideas, not always in some set order.

Poetry is the daughter of Dance and Puppetry - a slight, stubborn figure with piercing blue eyes and an inconvenient sense of justice.

All of the above is true.

I am a diabolical liar.

This was not a poem.

Person C

(5) You have received learned responses to what poetry is. Sometimes it is easier to define something as elusive as this by stating what it is not or what it must have. Frost said something like a poem is what is lost in its translation, or Dickinson, who recognized one when it blew the top of her head off. I think many (if not virtually all) notable poets have written an *ars poetica* in an attempt to define poetry. I like what Billy Collins writes, it seems to echo Frost's sentiment:

An Introduction to Poetry

I ask them to take a poem
and hold it up to the light
like a color slide

or press an ear against its hive.

I say drop a mouse into a poem
and watch him probe his way out,

or walk inside the poem's room
and feel the walls for a light switch.

I want them to waterski
across the surface of a poem
waving at the author's name on the shore.

But all they want to do
is tie the poem to a chair with rope
and torture a confession out of it.

They begin beating it with a hose
to find out what it really means.

But the question you asked is not simply what is poetry, the answer to which I might add the following. It must have emotional impact, a necessary, but insufficient condition, and it must have an economy of words. (Poe said if it is longer than what could be read in a few minutes, it's too long. Then in irony he writes a 150-page prose poem). The literary devices that Person B mentioned must be ubiquitous. Yet, the mere presence of emotion, imagery, and metaphor may not make a poem. A poem, in my opinion, must also have something to say (perhaps about the human condition, a political statement, an ironic twist, etc.), and saying it in a fresh way (and this embraces the form of the poem as well). I think it was Kooser who said it (or perhaps he was paraphrasing someone else) that a poem is not just something you want to say, but something that must be said. A profound message will rarely be the product, but subtle insights into life (death) are some of the gems of poetry.

Now, let me try to answer the question that you asked, what is poetry THESE DAYS. Well, that's a bit easier to answer because many might try to convince you that a poem is what is. It is self-defining. It has its own meaning and is divorced from the poet, or some other gibberish like that (I guess you can tell that I don't care much for the postmodernism school of thought. Contemporary poetry is about this movement and not what the word sounds like. It sounds like the current day or something contemporaneous.

The famous poet, James Tate uses much of "he said...she said" in some of his poetry. No disrespect intended, but I have a hard time calling dialog like this poetry- but what do I know? I haven't won the Pulitzer.

I don't know if we have helped you or confused you. Poetry is too elusive to define because its very nature is to express the inexpressible. Besides the good advice of read, read, read implied by Collin and others, I will add, write, write, write. Much of it will be doggerel, but that's how we mine the craft for that gem. You'll know it when you find it because it will move you every time you read it, especially a year later.

Cordially,

John

John Charles Mannone

(6) What an insightful post! Thanks, John.

Person A

(7) John, I have printed out your response to the question "what is poetry today?" and I wonder if you would allow me to share it. I facilitate a workshop and participate in a second workshop. Your post would serve as insight and stimulate discussion and, hopefully, some individual introspection. Your name would appear on any copy, of course, should you allow me to use your words. Thanks. Great post!

Person A