

Notes on the Definition of Poetry

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[Vanity Fea 26/09/2011](#)

Here follow some notes on the definition of poetry, taking into account not just the formal features of poetic genres, but also the social and artistic contexts in which poetry is written, read, circulated, invoked or used.



It may seem paradoxical that many elements characteristically found in poetry are not strictly definitory or characteristic of poetry, as they may be found in other kinds of writing or other arts. These may be important in a given poem, although they are not exclusive to poetical compositions. (E.g. narrative structure). The specificity often lies in their combination.

According to the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, "A poem is an instance of verbal art, a text set in verse, bound speech. More generally, a poem conveys heightened forms of perception, experience, meaning,, or consciousness in heightened language, i.e. a heightened

mode of discourse" (938).

There is some fuzziness in the concept, therefore: poetry spills over into other artistic modes, and other types of discourse may share elements with poetry. We'll have to consider the existence of more typical or central, and more peripheral or even questionable kinds of poetry.

Typically, poetry is divided into recurrent formal units smaller than the text (verse): lines and stanzas. Verse is an important constituent of poetry, both formally and historically (poetry was necessarily associated to verse until the nineteenth century). Prosody may be primarily aural, or visual (in written poetry), or both.

But already Aristotle said that verse is not enough to define poetry: poetry requires something else. For him, it was the original retelling and the shaping of a story, and the creative use of language. Many after him will emphasize creativity, invention, intensity of feeling...

Then, poetry is too encompassing a term, and it is perhaps more useful to speak of poetical genres with specific conventions, historically situated. E.g. tragedy, odes, sonnets, surrealist poems, imagist poems, prose poems...

A looser sense of "poetic" includes other kinds of texts or artworks:

- Verbal but not artful texts (e.g. rhetorical elements in practical discourse, all the way into 'unofficial' art)
- Artful but not verbal works: 'poetic' elements in other arts, associated with iconic value or intensified experience. "These foreground the act of attention itself, which is the paradigmatic criterion of aesthetic events" (*Princeton* 939).

In the poems most characteristically poetical (especially lyric poetry, in our tradition), speech and meaning are memorably intertwined: the poem is a memorable expression of perceptions, situations or feelings, articulated through words chosen and organized in such a way that their sound, their associations, their rhythm, become part of the experience or perception which is expressed through them. In poetry, "the medium is

the message" —the texture of language is an essential part of the poetical experience, which is what makes it difficult and partly impossible to translate. A poem cannot be adequately summarized, because it is made of the specific words which make it up, not just of an abstract meaning. That is one reason why poems, like other artworks, are "display texts", that is, they are carefully preserved in their original shape and are not expected to be altered in their transmission (although this may happen of course).

Poetry can be defined by its aims (e.g. instruction, delight, or instruction and delight), but there is one primary aim of all poems, which is a claim on the reader's attention, and an attempt to hold it and guide it through the poem—the poem's invitation into its own virtual world, so to speak, which may be instrumental to other ideological or practical aims, e.g. to promote a mode of feeling, a political idea, or to get the poet a pension or a prize.

A poem, then, is an intervention on the reader's consciousness and perception—first of all by fixing the reader's attention upon it, its situation, speaker, objects, attitudes and feelings, characters. Then by shaping these into a small-scale model of the world—therefore, the poem offers itself as a shaping instrument to redefine our perception of the world, and it intervenes indirectly on the way we experience things in the world apart from the poem —in this respect it is similar to other works of art like painting or film.

Each of these two steps may be emphasized: the poem may either focus primarily on itself, the experience intrinsic to poetry—and present itself as quite another world from that of ordinary experience (*reflexive axis*). Or the poem may emphasize its continuity with the world beyond the poem, and its ability to represent or model it, its intervention in the life-world (*mimetic axis*)

In a particular historical context, we should take into account that poetry is what is generally taken to be poetry, and is used as poetry in a given circle. For instance, there is nowadays an explosion of poetic self-publishing in the form of poetical blogs: many of these poems would

probably not be considered "poetical" or even artistic by many critics or writers, but nevertheless they use poetical conventions and are appreciated as poetry by their readers. Both good and bad poetry are criticized and rejected, or appreciated and praised, by some section of the public—which doesn't mean that one should reject ideas of goodness and badness altogether.

Poetry exists to some extent in the poems, but the poems are nothing apart from the ways they are used and read. The same poem may be used or read very differently: for pleasure, or for analysis, to take two extremes. More generally, the text is an expectation of response, and it appeals to a number of conventions and presuppositions. When analysing a poem we should be aware of the different circumstances of its production, circulation and use, as it is only through an understanding of discursive conventions that discourse in general can be understood and used. The fixed text of a poem is only a part of these circumstances and conventions.

Also, poetry changes along with its media. In the remote past, poetry was typically sung by bards or rhapsodes. Then, many genres were developed as reading matter, and poetry became a kind of writing, not a kind of sound or speech. The printing of poems was also influential in the perception and circulation of poetry—a literary canon was created or rather reinforced, and poets wrote with a view to having their poems published in the literary marketplace.

All of these elements survive in some way, and make for diverse and multiple experiences of poetry. And poetry may combine with other art forms: with romances and novels (inserted poetry), drama and songs, musicals and opera, visual arts, video, television and film...

Nowadays we speak of blogs and social networks, in which the readers and the poet can interact directly. The transformation of the written medium through [electronic textuality](#) will have far-reaching consequences for the practice of poetry, but one additional thing about poetry is that it already carries the substance of its history along with it, surviving through many modes and contexts of social communication,

and it is already partly defined by what it has been, while remaining open to future transformations.

References

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García Landa, José Angel. "Notes on the Definition of Poetry." *Vanity Fea* 26 Sept. 2011.

<http://vanityfea.blogspot.com/2011/09/notes-on-definition-of-poetry.html>

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2021

José Angel Valente, *La experiencia abisal*

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