

Why Read Poetry?

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Let's start with reasons why poetry isn't, typically, at the top of peoples' reading lists:

- The language of poetry takes too much time to decipher. Why don't poets just say what they mean in straightforward prose?
- Poetry is frustrating. How do you know if you are reading poetry the right way? Who's to say *what* a poem means?
- Poetry is too disconnected from reality. I don't have time for something that has no practical application to the world.
- Poetry is too self-absorbed. I don't like stewing around in other peoples' feelings.
- Poetry is too rarified. It doesn't speak to common, everyday experience.
- Poetry is boring. I'd rather be doing something more active/interactive.

These are a few reasons why people shy away from poetry, politely ignore it, or even spurn it. You might like to add some of your own reasons to this list. Or you might be a poetry enthusiast who reads a lot of poetry, and writes it, too, in which case, you may be seasoned at addressing these common objections to poetry.

I have been teaching poetry workshops at CWRU for twelve years. I have studied and written poetry for thirty years. In my experience, objections to poetry never go away, and shouldn't. All of these reasons for not reading poetry are well founded. They have haunted poets for centuries, and with good reason. Like all forms of life, poetry has had to evolve in order to survive. Paradoxically, it is these very objections to poetry, the persistent challenges to its cultural relevancy, that have driven its creativity, and safeguarded its duration.

Admittedly, poetry can be difficult. A poem's diction might be unfamiliar, or even if its diction is plain, its syntax, or word order, might be puzzling. Most poems (unless they are prose poems) have "turned" lines. *Verse* comes from the Latin verb, *vertere*, to turn, and was originally conceived through a farming metaphor. The poetic line follows the practice of plowing one direction, turning the plow, and plowing the other. Poetic lines are both continuous and discontinuous: they put pressure on the shape and integrity of sentences.

Why all this difficulty and circumvention, you might ask? In prose, clarity and concision are considered virtues. Why are poets exempt from accepted writing guidelines? Relative to the forms of language we find in prose, the language of poetry submits itself more fully to the disciplining pressure of silence. In good poems, we feel the threat of what is unsayable and unsaid. We feel varieties of experience being voiced against various pressures of silence—erasure, forgetfulness, suppression, loss, etc. These pressures call up unique kinds of poetic music. In poems, we encounter forms of speech that both assert and surrender the possibility of lasting presence.

Though poetry is usually thought of as a form of self-expression, it often bears a very curious relationship to selfhood. The French poet, Arthur Rimbaud, pointed to the self-displacements of poetry with a statement that deliberately upended grammatical rules: *Je est un autre* (I “is” an other). As poet, Mark Strand, wrote, “A poem is a place where the condition of beyondness and withinness are made palpable...It allows us to have the life we are denied because we are too busy living. Even more paradoxically, a poem permits us to live in ourselves as if we were just out of reach of ourselves.” You might recall how, in “Song of Myself,” Walt Whitman does more to atomize the boundaries of selfhood than to essentialize them: “I depart as air, I shake my white locks at the runaway sun,/I effuse my flesh in eddies, and drift in lacy jags.//I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,/If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles.”

Our current poet laureate, Tracy K. Smith, recently contradicted the idea that poets must be self-absorbed in a lecture she gave to the Library of Congress last April: “I am operating on the notion that poetry can save me from disappearing into the narrow version of myself I may be tempted to resort to when I feel lazy or defeated, or when my greedy ego takes over...One of poetry’s great effects, through its emphasis upon feeling, association, music and image—things we recognize and respond to even before we understand why—is to guide us toward the part of ourselves so deeply buried that it borders upon the collective.”

Smith’s description of poetry’s rigorous, self-transcending task calls to mind lines from Antonio Machado (English translation by Robert Bly):

No es el yo fundamental
eso que busca el poeta,
sino el tú esencial

What the poet is searching for
is not the fundamental I
but the deep you

When a poet gives me a compelling place to be, and interesting work to do in a poem, my sense of relation begins to loosen and expand. Not everything has to relate back to me for me to find it meaningful. I might find myself saying, “I *can’t* relate to this, I’ve never before experienced or conceived anything like this, but I *can’t* turn away. This poem may be enacting a region of being that was previously unknown to me, even alien to me, but it’s giving me tasks I feel compelled to undertake.”

Many of us were taught to paraphrase what a poem “is really trying to say.” I recommend suspending an extractive mentality when it comes to reading poetry. Try to *undergo* a poem before rushing ahead to get something *out* of it. T.S. Eliot captured an important truth about poetry when he said that “genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood.” As an ancient form of communication, poetry reaches back to our very earliest orientations to expression: ritual song, dance, hymn, spell.

Poetic language refreshes our sense of how weirdly capacious and precise language can be. It slows us down, emphasizing the interdependency of concrete and abstract language, the productive tension that exists between words igniting immediate sensory perception, and words turning us toward more conceptual fields of thought. By carefully attending to the voiced intersections of perception and conception, you are already doing most of the work a poem is

asking you to do. My teacher, Patricia Goedicke, used to call this “feeling thinkingly, and thinking feelingly.”

Is poetry’s perceived detachment from practical reality a virtue, or a vice? That is something I am always asking students in my poetry workshops. In his elegy for William Butler Yeats, W.H. Auden wrote, “...poetry makes nothing happen: it survives/In the valley of its own making where executives/Would never want to tamper...” Advertising is a form of language that might “make something happen,” as might political propaganda. If, unlike contracts, laws, or ad campaigns, poetic language “makes nothing happen”—is that a failing? Must all our language be utilitarian and persuasive, or might we conserve “useless” regions of language precisely because they are speculative rather than coercive?

Many poets will argue that poetry *does* make something happen, albeit gradually. Percy Shelley called poets “the unacknowledged legislators of the world,” and Wallace Stevens, “priests of the invisible.” Poetry makes nothing—or what most people would disregard as nothing—happen in such a way that we might begin to recognize it as something. In the same poem Auden says “poetry makes nothing happen,” he says it “survives/ in the valley of its making.”

Why do you think poetry survives? Is there something human beings need from poems that they can’t seem to find anywhere else? Maybe ask some people in your life if they read poetry—why, or why not. Ask them what their favorite poems are, and if they have any memorized. Try memorizing a poem yourself, starting with a short one like this, by A.R. Ammons:

Small Song

The reeds give way
to the wind

and give
the wind away

If you think poetry is not sufficiently interactive, it might help to remember that the word *stanza* (a grouping of poetic lines) means “room” in Italian. Imagine yourself walking through a series of rooms when you progress through the parts of a poem. Poetry is fundamentally an art of *making*—from the Greek verb, *poiein*, to make or create. If you can keep in mind this physical sense of language, you’ll have a keener experience of moving through the poem, and letting it move through you.

If you find poetry confusing, remember Robert Frost’s idea that a poem’s task is not to *resolve* confusion—but to *clarify* it. If you find poetry boring, stay with that boredom, see where it takes you. It’s easy to supplant boredom by engaging with some form of electronic distraction. Try unplugging for a while. My poet friend, G.C. Waldrep, recently wrote to me, “One beauty of poetry, for me, is that since its advent in my life I have never been bored. Poetry means never being bored again. Among other things.”

Lastly, if you think poetry is too pretentious, too detached from everyday reality, I hope you will enjoy following haiku by 18th century Japanese poet, Yosa Buson (translation by Robert Hass):

Fallen petals of the red plum—
they seem to be burning

on the clods of horse shit.

I was delighted to learn that a book of poetry was selected as the common reading experience this year. I hope *No Matter the Wreckage* by Sarah Kay will give you lots to think about, perhaps inspiring you to write your own poems. The English department at CWRU offers a [creative writing minor](#), and there are two student organizations on campus you might like to explore: [The Case Reserve Review](#), an undergraduate photographic and literary journal; and [Writers Writing Words](#), a club for students interested in sharing creative writing in an extracurricular setting.

On the next page, you'll find a number of online poetry resources to supplement your common reading should you choose to explore them. Enjoy the wonderful gifts of summer. I look forward to meeting you this fall!

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ONLINE POETRY RESOURCES:

[Reading a Poem: 20 Strategies](#) (Mark Yakich, *The Atlantic*)

[Understanding Poetry is More Straightforward Than You Think](#) (Matthew Zapruder, *The New York Times*)

[Staying Human: Poetry in the Ages of Technology](#) (Tracy K. Smith, *The Washington Post*)

[Got Poetry?](#) (Jim Holt, *The New York Times Book Review*)

[Poetry International](#)

[Modern Poetry in Translation](#)

[Academy of American Poets](#) (you can sign up here to receive their "poem-a-day" feature)

[Poetry Foundation](#)

[Poetry Society of America](#)

[Poetry Daily](#)

[Moving Poems: The Best Poetry Videos on the Web](#)

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