**Why Read Poetry?**

By Sarah Gridley, Associate Professor, Department of English, Case Western Reserve University

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 uncomfortably emotional. I don't like stewing around in other peoples' personal-made-public business. Poetry is too self-absorbed.
- Poetry is pretentious and 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 busy composing indignant responses to these objections.

I have been teaching poetry workshops at CWRU for twelve years, and 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 these very objections to poetry, the persistent challenges to its cultural relevancy, that have driven its creativity, and safeguarded its duration.

In preparation for hosting poet, Sarah Kay, and reading her book, *No Matter the Wreckage*, I would like to offer some counterpoints to these objections, and some basic strategies for reading poetry.

Poetry's language 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 these 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 the various oceans of

experience momentarily, memorably voiced against the various pressures of silence—erasure, forgetfulness, suppression, loss, etc. These pressures call up unique kinds of music in poetry. Many of us were taught to translate or paraphrase what a poem "is really trying to say." I would recommend abandoning this "extractive" mentality when it comes to reading poetry. Ask yourself to *undergo* a poem rather than rushing ahead to understand 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 language: ritual song, hymn, spell. Poetic language may be difficult, but it's a difficulty worth experiencing. Poetic language refreshes our sense of how weirdly capacious and precise language can be.

In a lecture she delivered to the Library of Congress this past April, our current poet laureate, Tracy K. Smith, contradicted the presumption that poets are self- absorbed: "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."

Though poetry is often thought of as a form of insistent self-expression, it 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 the late poet, Mark Strand, wrote, "A poem is a place where the condition of beyondness and withinness are made palpable, where to imagine is to feel what it is like to be. 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." And 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."

So while poets might seem a little self-absorbed, poetry is really at its best when it is *counters* self-satisfaction or complacency. One of my favorite statements about poetry comes from the Spanish poet, Antonio Machado: "What the poet is searching for is not the fundamental I but the deep you." In my poetry workshops at CWRU, I like to stress this aspect of poetry. For many people, "relatability" is the mark of a good poem, but I teach that "inhabitability" is the more primary concern in poetry. When a poet gives you a compelling place to be, and interesting work to do in a poem, your sense of relation begins to loosen and expand. Not everything has to relate back to you for you to find it meaningful. You might find yourself saying, "I *can't* relate to this, I've never before experienced or conceived anything like this, but I also can't turn away: this poem is enacting a region of being that was previously unknown to me, and it's giving me tasks I feel compelled to undertake." I call this the "inter-subjective" region of poetry. Belonging to no one in particular, it solicits each of us through our joint attention to perception, language, and form.

In my workshops, I like to ask students whether poetry's perceived detachment from practical reality is a virtue, or a vice. 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 and laws, 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 in less recognizable forms than contracts and laws. Percy Shelley called poets "the unacknowledged legislators of the world," and Wallace Stevens called poets "priests of the invisible." In this sense, poetry makes nothing—or what most people would disregard as nothing—happen in such a way that we recognize it *as* something. As Auden writes in the same poem, poetry "survives/ in the valley of its making."

Why does poetry survive? Think about this as you read poetry this summer. How is poetry's uselessness useful? Why is its difficulty necessary? Ask people in your life if they read poetry—and why. Ask them what their favorite poems are, and if they have any memorized, "by heart." Try *undergoing* poetry before you try to understand it. In poetry, we don't call the voice of a poem a narrator, we call it the speaker. When reading a poem, begin by asking yourself the following questions. Who is speaking? To whom is the speaker speaking? What is context from which the speaker breaks out of silence to speak? Consider the kind of silence that precedes and succeeds the poem. What kind of pressure does it exert on the speaker? In poetry, we speak of stanzas rather than paragraphs when talking about organization. Remember that the word *stanza* 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, as if the poem were built or sculpted so that you might encounter it, you'll stay closer to this aim of undergoing. Move through the poem and let it move through you. If you find poetry boring, stay with that boredom, see where it takes you. 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." And if you find poetry confusing, remember Robert Frost's idea that a poem's task is not to *resolve* confusion—but to *clarify* it. 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 am so excited that a book of poetry was selected as the common reading experience this year. I hope *No Matter the Wreckage* will give you lots to think about, and perhaps inspire you to write your own poems. Below are 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

Poetry Out Loud