

How does poetry change?

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When you read poetry from different ages, you notice that language changes. Old English needs almost as much study as a foreign language. Middle English is fairly easy to pick up for a contemporary speaker. Shakespearean language is closer still to our language, but it still takes some work.

However, styles also change. From metered and rhymed forms to free verse and beyond. And world views change. The world talked about in Shakespeare's day is so different from our own.

But, also, ideas of what poetry is and what it can do, change. So much contemporary poetry would make no sense whatever to people from previous ages. Because it is disjunctive. Because it is visual. Because it is somewhat random. Because it might bear little relation to a spoken voice. Because it's partly in computer code. Because it's interactive. Because it's algorithmic. Because it's kinetic. Because it seems to talk about doing the laundry. And so on.

How did poetry go to these places, they might wonder. The answer is that poetry goes where language goes.

In cultures where there is no writing, they have orally transmitted poetry. What it means to know a lot about poetry, in such a culture, is to have memorized a lot of poetry and, when the memory fails a little bit, be able to fill in the blanks. Whereas, in our culture, what it means to know a lot about poetry is not only to have read a lot of poetry from a lot of cultures and ages, but to have read what critics and scholars have had to say about it.

Poetry changes not only as language changes, but as technologies of language change. The introduction of writing into a culture changes its poetry radically, eventually. To be able to sense a spoken voice in writing is a wonderful thing. But it isn't absolutely necessary for writing, and some very good writers have severed their poetry from the spoken voice rather strongly. And, in writing, there is a visual dimension to the writing. Also, writing makes it so we don't have to memorize the poetry. We can look it up.

And that changes our cognitive relationship with poetry profoundly. It no longer has to be musical because it no longer needs to be memorized. Writing opens thought to extended and even convoluted relations between clauses, manageable only via editing, that would be literally unthinkable without writing. Writing changes language from something that necessarily contains memory aids, mnemonics such as rhythm and rhyme, musicality, into a more abstract, multi-purpose, less musical thing. Relatedly, writing opens thought

to extended sequences of reasoning that would be literally unthinkable without writing because writing frees us from having to form all our thoughts in the relatively narrow structures of memorizable language. Just like writing opens mathematics to extended sequences of reasoning that would be literally unthinkable without writing.

Media have deep consequences on art and thought. Poetry goes where language goes. And, in the computer age—if we're still there and not in the age of climate change—language goes with image; language goes with sound; language goes with mixtures of text, image, sound, and interactivity. Language goes with cinema. Poetry becomes multimedial, intermedial. It isn't simply a matter anymore of words on a page, or even words spoken. The poetry of image becomes fused with the poetry of words. The poetry of performance becomes fused with the poetry of the inscription. “Poetry in motion” is not simply a figure of speech, a metaphor. Motion is now a transcription, a writing in cinema and, as such, its language is poetry of cinema.

Some of my favorite contemporary poets, such as Gregory Whitehead, aren't even known to be producing poetry. But he is. And we are. Poetry is not necessarily about words on a page. Poetry is where our intensest engagements with language play out. Intensest. Deepest. Most engaged with what it means to be a thinking, feeling, literate person now.

Until this last year, when I published a couple of books, I could not even apply to the Canada Council as a poet because my output has been a web site, not books. Maybe I still can't, cuz I published them myself. But, even if they let me, the jury would still be composed of people who don't think what I'm doing is poetry or significant poetry. So, you know, that's that. Fuck them. Onward and upward.

Poetry is also broadening. I mean that there are more types of poetry that wouldn't have been considered to even be poetry at all, not long ago. There are videogames that are poems such as my piece Arteroids or Jason Nelson's poem/games. More recently, there's my piece Aleph Null 3.0, which is a tool for creating images and animations, an anthology of dynamic never-the-same-twice, remixable, kinetic poetry featuring work by 20 visual poets, and a work of software art in itself. Aleph Null isn't a poem in itself, but it's in interesting relation to poetry. 'Electronic literature', 'digital poetry', 'computer poetry' and other terms are used to describe works where the computer is crucial as medium. But poetry is also expanding in other ways, such as conceptual poetry, which doesn't necessarily have anything to do with computers.

And then there's work by poets editing genes. Kind of grotesque and playing Gawd, a kind of rich man's divinely entitled poetry, at this point, but certainly different. And this sort of work highlights how poetry's engagement with language is broadening into other types of languages. Is DNA code or language? How about JavaScript; is it code or language? Well, it's language, but not 'natural language', which is a term widely used to describe languages spoken by people. Is DNA and/or JavaScript poetry the DNA/JavaScript itself or what it creates? Or both? Or it's in the relation between them?

Poetry changes not only as natural language changes but also as our ideas of what language is broaden and change. In computer science, a language is simply a set of strings. The mathematical/computational properties of sets of strings is basically what the study of computer science is all about. Computer science is all about language, in that sense. Our intense engagements with machine languages (computer languages) are central to the whole man-machine conflict/drama/story. We learn about ourselves as well as about machines, through it.

Similarly, the 'language' ribosomes are programmed with in how they 'read' DNA and

what they do with it is not a language people speak, but that whole machine language is crucial to how we and other creatures are reproduced, healed, coded, and so on. We learn so much about ourselves and other living creatures in the study of that machine language. Our engagement with that language is intense, profound. Poetry can hardly avoid hanging around it. Poetry sneaks out at night just for that sort of encounter.

As the contexts of our profoundest, intensest engagements with language multiply and transform, sometimes out of all recognition of what poetry once was, 'poetry' gets a bit like the term 'visual art', which has a very broad meaning to encompass all the types of visual art that exist and multiply. Similarly, our intensest and most profound engagements with language are multiplying as we deal ever more deeply with the machinic in ourselves and in language. 'Poetry' needs to be as broad as 'visual art' to encompass the range of current practice and poential.

This broadening of poetry is the result of poetry going where language goes. In the digital, text, image, sound, video, etc are all coded as 1's and 0's. The barriers between them, consequently, are not what they used to be. Hard to put video in the pages of a book, but not in the digital.

Also, writers and writing are closer to the digital than visual artists, in a sense. Computers are all about texts all the way down to the programming. To program is to write. Also, writers generally publish. Rather than, for instance, show in a gallery. Writers are more invested in the web than are visual artists cuz writers publish, mainly.

The future of poetry, broadened, looks good. The future of poetry, narrowed, doesn't. Poetry has to go where language goes. That's what keeps it alive. Poetry is forever dying in one area and being reborn in new ones.

Not that the book and the poemy poem will die out anytime soon. But they won't continue to have the lion's share of all the resources. The activities of poetry, such as publications, performances, grants, and so on, will privilege other types of poetry, and other types of publication of it, as much as the poemy poem in print. Web sites will be recognized as achievements on the same order as the book, for instance. And types of eLit will receive as much attention as poemy poems in print.

Assuming there's still a civilization to care about poetry, which, at the moment, seems to be up in the air. As I write this, the air here in Vancouver, in August 2018, is toxic from wildfires. Dave Ayre remarked that it's like living inside a cigarette. The leader of British Columbia is describing this as "the new normal" at this time of year, which sounds like something the frog that gets slowly boiled might say, sometime before boiling. The local Orcas are dying of starvation from not enough salmon. The salmon are dying from overfishing, disease from fish farms, and eco-system changes from global warming. And environmental conditions are getting worse, not better. Bob Dylan said "The future is uncertain and the end is always near." It used to be that only the mentally ill religious zealots shouting about the end of the world on the streetcorners were the apocalypsians. Now we're all wondering.

What can poetry and poets do about it? Acknowledge where we are. Speak up for the real leaders. Speak against the oily, rich world-destroyers. Bring on the green revolution. And the art of green. Find the real poetry in our plight and our future. Internalize philosophies of the sustainable, the renewable, that which has a future in nourishing life rather than guaranteeing death. Getting the feel for that in language, in the language of poetry and song.