

How Poems Teach Us To Think

Gertrude Reif Hughes

The twentieth-century poet, Marianne Moore, began her poem called "Poetry" with the line, "I too dislike it." Her disarming opener implies that many people dislike poetry and I think they do. It is intimidating and off-putting to be confronted with a poem that is hard to understand, as many poems are. Perversely enough, when you do finally perceive a poem's meaning, you find that you can't convey it to anyone else except by repeating the poem, because poems tend to elude restatement and translation. All this unpleasantness can be useful, however. By resisting our understanding poems make us pay attention to how we make sense of things; by resisting paraphrase, they force us to acknowledge the nature of their originality.

In trying to understand an obscure poem we have to loosen some of our habitual responses. Riddles are an extreme example. They baffle on purpose, using disguise in order to reveal, so they offer a telling instance of how poems teach us to think.

The verb, to riddle, comes from the same root as the verb, to read. A riddle is a reading, an interpretation, of its topic. A riddle reads the world, particularly ordinary things and events, finding their meaning, declaring that they *have* meaning.

Riddles present the world as a design and a communication. A riddle makes a familiar subject sufficiently unfamiliar to disguise it. At the same time, the disguise must amount to a description that readers will ultimately recognize as apt.

A good way to discover how a riddle works is to try composing one. When you try writing a riddle, you soon learn that the best topics tend to lend themselves to paradoxical treatment—a candle that glows continuously though it decreases in bulk; a pencil or a chalk with a similar dynamic of more-and-less for the riddle maker to exploit; a swing that takes you forward as far as it takes you back; a drum that sings when it is beaten. To write a riddle, or solve a new one, you have to find the extraordinary elements of ordinary things and events, as in this riddle about a chick in the egg:

Mine was the strangest birth under the sun;
I left the womb, yet life had not begun;
Entered the world, and yet was seen by none.¹

Working our way toward the answer—"a chick in the egg"—we have to ask what is strange about this birth. More or less consciously, we find ourselves wondering exactly what qualifies as a "strange" birth and what as a normal one. Birth entails some

sort of emergence into a fuller life. If the emerging creature's life somehow fails to integrate with the new environment it is a "strange" birth. By presenting the laying of an egg from the unhatched chick's point of view, instead of from the hen's, the riddle prompts such reflections.

Here is another riddle to consider. Notice yourself playing with its contradictions, imagining the unknown object's actions and properties, fitting yourself into the various situations the lines suggest to you, discarding one answer when a better one occurs to you.

Unequal in degree, alike in size,
We make our flight, ascending toward the skies,
And rise with those who by our help can rise.

Riddling requires one to cast a fresh glance at the phenomenal world. That's why composing and guessing riddles helps to enliven our power to perceive the supposedly unreal worlds based on other than physical laws. When I learn that "stairs" is the answer to the riddle above, I can bring fresh perceptions as well as fresh ideas to the ordinary object, "stairs." I perhaps experience more keenly their verticality and their service to me, a wingless, earthbound creature. The line about equality and degree may make me ponder various moral issues to do with rank and merit, or with the different scales that measure them. This riddle, like the others, makes me a reader of the world around me and makes parts of the world around me eloquent.

"All truths wait in all things," said Walt Whitman.² Riddles alert us to this fact. By presenting familiar objects in a new light they teach us to loosen what we consider to be physical from what we consider to be spiritual. When we compose or guess riddles like these, our sensing and sense-making activities function with that keener intensity and larger receptivity that is sometimes called "imagination."

In puzzling over a riddle, we often encounter exceptions that make us notice some of our assumptions and expectations. Not that we then have to abandon them, just notice them afresh, as in this riddle:

I bite when bitten; but because I lack
For teeth, no biter scruples to attack,
And many bite me to be bitten back.

These lines present a double paradox: a biter who has no teeth and a group, "many," who seem to crave being bitten. Most people trying to guess this one reason from the toothlessness or ponder the desire to be bitten. Whichever paradox they focus on, they come to the same conclusion—that some other sort of biting than mastication must be meant. From there it doesn't much matter whether they guess "chili pepper," "Tabasco sauce," or the riddle's actual answer, which is "onion."

If you consult a dictionary, you will find "onion" defined as "a bulbous plant (*allium cepa*) cultivated worldwide as a vegetable."³ Which is more precise, the dictionary definition or the riddle? The dictionary definition is able to exclude wrong answers like "chili" and "Tabasco sauce." In that sense it is more precise than the riddle. The riddle, however, is more precise about the onion's taste, or, to be exact, about an experience of the taste. It suggests complexities that the dictionary definition ignores.

The definition and the riddle have opposite ways of identifying the onion. The one thing the riddle omits—the name—is the main thing the dictionary gives. The one thing the definition must specify—a name—is the one thing the riddle must keep secret. The riddle calls attention to the phenomenal onion, which is the very aspect of the onion that is least appropriate for the dictionary.

Riddles make a problem out of meaning. That is exactly what the obscurity of poetry in general does. Like poems, riddles remind us that a label doesn't always convey a thing's full identity and mode of existence. Labels omit the ensouled qualities, the living elements that become important in interaction with other living, ensouled elements, especially human beings. Playing with riddles highlights these elements; habitual responses neglect them. Baffling texts loosen our automatic perceptions, call forth more imaginative ones, and make

us use these imaginative powers not for fantasy but for acts of understanding.

If the process of struggling with a difficult poem's obscurity expands our ability to think fresh meanings, then coming to an understanding of the poem teaches us something else: Meaning occurs in a context; it is more relational than referential. A poem's meanings are not, strictly speaking, in its words. Rather, its words are in its meaning. No matter how beautiful and apt, the words of a poem are only the expression of an inspiration. The inspiration is the source that generates them.

Because meaning is inspired, not assigned, synonyms and translations are always only approximate. The endings of short, simple poems demonstrate this relational and embedded quality of meaning best. Typically, the ending of a narrative is the very part that shouldn't be divulged. He dies in the end. They get married. The butler did it. Hearing the end of a story could ruin it for someone who hasn't read it yet. Poems differ from novels and stories in this regard. Hearing the final line of a poem before you've read the whole will not reveal what its effect will be when you read it later in context. In fact, until you hear it in context, the last line will sound flat and uninteresting; then once you've heard the whole poem it becomes richly suggestive.

Here is the last line of a poem by Langston Hughes called "Island": "Take me there." Nothing very remarkable in those three monosyllables. True, the words make up a command or maybe a plea; there's a speaker and someone spoken to. But it would be hard to squeeze much more significance from them. In context, however, they become very expressive:

Island
Wave of sorrow,
Do not drown me now:
I see the island
Still ahead somehow.
I see the island
And its sands are fair:

Wave of sorrow,
Take me there.⁴

In their proper place, the final words belong to an emotional scene in which sorrow threatens to drown someone who desperately wants to escape painful feelings and arrive at the "island" of the title. How powerful the three monosyllables, "take me there," become when they work to reverse all that desperation at the last minute. You expect the feared "wave of sorrow" to overwhelm the speaker, but suddenly it becomes a potential means of deliverance, and as you read the poem you get a kind of boost. Possibilities open up.

Between first line and last, a process has taken its course. The significance of the "wave of sorrow" has changed radically. At first it had meant, that-which-I-regret-and-can't-stand; now it means that-which-can-restore-me-to-well-being. A big change for three monosyllables to register. Outside the poem, the same monosyllables lack this rich specificity, and knowing what each of them means in isolation from this context would never produce this particular understanding in you.

Surprisingly the particular meaning conferred by the context does not constitute a limit. Instead of limiting the meaning of those last three words, the context—the poem—make it *both* more particular *and* fuller, richer, more complex. Again, as with meaning in a context. The poem confers meaning on its words by enhancing a group of possible understandings rather than by ruling some out as definitions do. And just as with riddles, what the poem teaches about meaning is not unique to poems; it is just more visible there. Both in poems and in other utterances, meaning works by individuation not by exclusion. Poems introduce us to this phenomenon. From working with it in poems, we get to know its ways and we become schooled in the art of a more dynamic thinking.

The final line of a short poem by Lucille Clifton (b. 1935) called "buffalo war" illustrates the workings of relational meaning in its own way. "[B]uffalo war" is the last in a sequence of equally brief poems narrated alternately by "tyrone" and "willie b," who are two members of a street gang

called “the buffalo” and both of whom seem to be speaking this last poem in the series. Out of context, the final line, “everybody dying,” conveys even less than “take me there” does, but heard in its right place it is packed with meaning:

buffalo war

war over
everybody gone home
nobody dead
everybody dying.⁵

The last line cancels the previous one. It is good news that “nobody died,” but it’s terrible news that in this war “everybody” is dying, especially, of course, the young gang members. The soldiers in the buffalo war are dying as well as killing and they are dying as much when they’ve “gone home” as in the street. These meanings aren’t in the words but in the relationships among them.

It is not enough to know the dictionary meanings of each word in an utterance; the expressiveness of the utterance is created by the interaction of the words, as the look of a face is created by the interrelationships among its features. Though this is true of all utterances, it is most easily experienced in poems. Poetry reveals the secret that meaning builds by means of individuation, rather than by being assigned and fixed. A single word can yield a vast range of meanings just as a color or a musical tone can serve an infinite variety of effects even though each color or tone has its own very specific character. We tend to assume that specificity excludes, but—as every artist knows—specificity does not narrow; it generates. Meaning develops; it dawns; and though it is dynamic, it need not be imprecise.

Certainly the full content of a poem matters. Those final lines don’t merely underscore what would otherwise already be complete. Rather, as meaning builds so does sheer intelligibility. Typically, fewer and fewer words can convey more and more, just as a couple who have been together a long time can communicate across the heads of a large crowd by signs imperceptible to the others.

But, someone could object, how can you call these meanings? They are subjective interpretations. Yours might be different from mine and both of them from what the author intended. After all, meanings are what we can all agree upon, they are objective, whereas these interpretations can’t be shared. They can’t even be restated or translated.

The complaint that interpretations are merely subjective assumes that meanings are equivalents for other meanings. The complaint is based on a correspondence theory of validation, which says that meanings can be checked against equivalents. It also assumes, unwittingly, the existence of some authoritative version other than the one at hand. “What Shakespeare is trying to say here,” we begin; and then we catch ourselves. Shakespeare’s words already say what he is “trying to say.” It is we who are trying to understand. Our paraphrase of a passage may help us to understand it, but our restatement cannot substitute for the original or improve on it.

In poems, a single word is loaded with meanings that are vitally supported by other elements, like where it is placed in the line and in the whole poem, or how it rhymes or otherwise resonates with other words in the poem. Trying to paraphrase a poem makes you more keenly conscious of the untranslatable parts and better able to experience the fullness of their meaning. When “take me there” becomes saturated with significance, or when “everybody dying” gives insights into Tyrone’s and Willie’s consciousness of their own situation, I am not understanding dictionary definitions, I am understanding an interaction. In fact I am participating in an interactive process—the process that inspired the poem and made these words suggest these meanings, as each person’s facial features cohere into that person’s individual visage. A word by word translation of a poem (or any utterance, really) is like one of those composite drawings of a suspected criminal that the police make on the basis of what various witnesses describe. It lacks the coherence of the suspect’s actual face.

The integrating force of any expressive composition comes from the inspiration that first generated it.

That is its “original.”⁶ To reproduce the poem you can’t just substitute equivalents for its parts, no matter how skillful a translator you may be. The poem’s words in a given language come from an inspiring source. Reproduce the inspiration and you can reproduce the poem, or utterance, and you can do so in any language that you have sufficiently mastered.

A poem’s untranslatability points to its inspiring source. Readers who get stuck in arguments about an alleged subjectivity fail to notice this mystery, and so its workings elude them. Actually, however, when you experience the fullness of a poem’s meaning in all its suggestiveness, you are participating at least to some extent in the poem’s originating inspiration. If composing and solving riddles schools our imagination, the experience of untranslatable meanings schools us in the ways of inspiration.

Because the paraphrase of a poem will never be an adequate substitute for the poem itself, you cannot treat a poem like a code to be cracked. It will not work to try to dismantle it like a bomb, or melt it as though it were a snowball with a rock inside. The untranslatability of poetry makes it seem elusive, but though poems elude restatement, they do not resist understanding by other means. In fact poems teach an understanding—intuitive understanding—that reveals how dynamic a phenomenon meaning really is and how spiritual.

No amount of physical sensation conveys meaning by itself. Concrete examples drawn from physically experienced reality can be very effective, but only when the relevant ideas cohere with the sensations do the sensations make sense. You can point repeatedly to a tree while saying “tree” to me each time, but until I intuit that you don’t mean your pointing finger or that branch or that cloud behind the tree, I just won’t get it. The classic example of this intuitive process is Helen Keller’s comprehension of “water” when her teacher spelled the touch-language into her palm while water streamed across it. Until she jumped to the connection, the sensations did not cohere into a word, a meaning, a communication for her. When she did make the intuitive leap it was not a leap of

faith but of knowledge. She leapt to understanding. At that moment, Helen Keller consciously experienced an idea. Through her apprehension of the idea-name (not the label), “water,” she experienced not just “this touch equals this sensation” but communicability, intelligibility, language.⁷

We come to understanding, and it to us. Acts of understanding have a quality of encounter. They feel like a mysterious, intimate meeting. “Jove nods to Jove” as Emerson put it in “The Over-Soul.” “Plain heart seeing into plain heart” was how the Chinese Taoist, Sun Bu-er said it.⁸ In temporal terms, such meetings have a quality of suddenness; in spatial terms, the intuitive leap of knowledge usually takes place across some boundary, particularly one that seems unpassable because it is not ordinarily traversed.

Poems often cross deeply entrenched boundaries, like those between inner and outer or the living and the dead, and the crossings typically yield some kind of revelation. For this reason, poems have much to teach us if we want to become capable of concrete experience in the spiritual as in the material. The first step is to realize that it’s already happening. Not just in meditation, but any time that we come to understanding, we make this kind of connection. We bridge a chasm by means of what we unfold out of ourselves. The gesture is like that of Walt Whitman’s “Noiseless Patient Spider,” which, finding itself on a brink, sends out its delicate thread until it finds holding ground:

A noiseless patient spider,
I mark’d where on a little promontory it stood
isolated,
Mark’d how, to explore the vacant vast
surrounding,
It launch’d forth filament, filament, filament,
out of itself,
Ever unreeling them, ever tirelessly speeding
them.

[In the next lines, the poem compares the spider to a musing, inquiring mind:]

And you O my soul where you stand,
 Surrounded, detached, in measureless oceans
 of space,
 Ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing,
 seeking the spheres to connect them,
 Till the bridge you will need be form'd, till
 the ductile anchor hold,
 Till the gossamer thread you fling catch
 somewhere, o my soul.⁹

Whenever we come to understanding, we cross a border and so, in a sense, erase that border—or, at any rate, discover its permeability. In crossing, we discover that we ourselves make and unmake the boundaries we perceive. Like Whitman's spider-soul, we seek in order to connect and our connecting fulfills the searching. Poems characteristically invite readers to participate in such inquiring and fulfilling connections. Because their border-crossing leaps of knowledge bring understanding, poems exemplify the subtly intuitive character of thinking.

The intuitive nature of understanding is easy to miss but crucial to acknowledge for anyone who wants to practice the fullest possible kind of thinking, and poems offer a variety of opportunities to develop it. Both the next two poems have the inner structure of a border-crossing, though they are very different in every other way. The first is a quick sketch of a landscape while the second is a sort of invocation. In the first, William Carlos Williams creates an intersection between land and sea, where insights result from seeing each in the light of the other. In the second, Joy Harjo makes an inner world of soul and an outer world of nature interpenetrate to become a prayer. In both poems the crossovers make the interacting elements enhance one another while they still remain distinct. Here is Williams's "Flowers by the Sea":

Flowers by the Sea

When over the flowery, sharp pasture's
 edge, unseen, the salt ocean
 lifts its form—chicory and daisies
 tied, released, seem hardly flowers alone
 but color and the movement—or the shape
 perhaps—of restlessness, whereas

the sea is circled and sways
 peacefully upon its plantlike stem.¹⁰

Looking across the field at the ocean waves in the distance, the person speaking the poem feels a heightened sense of the flowers' restlessness, though they are of course rooted in the earth. At the same time the speaker experiences the moving sea as though it is a big round blossom swaying gently on its stem. Responding to Williams's emphasis on the restlessness of the wild flowers, some readers feel that ordinary wayside flowers like chicory and the traditionally innocent daisy may be wilder than one had thought. Other readers come away bemused by the whimsical idea of the ocean as a huge swaying plant, and pondering in what kind of ground its umbilical stem could be anchored. Whatever its particular effects on individual readers, the poem's mixed categories stimulate fresh, insight-bringing connections between human consciousness and the kingdoms and elements of nature. Without making any claims to be upheld or refuted, the poem presents these revelatory connections as an event in consciousness, a moment of perception experienced as an act of knowing.

Revelation is all around us. It is up to us to notice it, and only our enhanced, fully enlivened thinking powers can. "Not 'Revelation'—'tis—that waits,/ But our unfurnish'd eyes—" wrote Emily Dickinson.¹¹ It is as though she were answering Walt Whitman's "All truths wait in all things" with a call to take an active part in meeting those waiting truths. To answer such a call, we need the kinds of enhanced powers of apprehension that poems teach.

By example and invitation, poems rouse human thinking powers from their limited, impoverished lazy state to full vigor. Poems teach us to think the way they work, connecting us across what we may take to be unbridgeable divides with worlds where we may not realize that we belong. Joy Harjo's "Eagle Poem" invokes such connections by describing them. Let her poem-prayer stand as a closing example of how poems teach us to think:

Eagle Poem

To pray you open your whole self
 To sky, to earth, to sun, to moon
 To one whole voice that is you.
 And know there is more
 That you can't see, can't hear,
 Steadily growing, and in languages
 That aren't always sound but other
 Circles of motion.
 Like eagle that Sunday morning
 Over Salt River. Circled in blue sky
 In wind, swept our hearts clean
 With sacred wings.
 We see you, see ourselves and know
 That we must take the utmost care
 And kindness in all things.
 Breathe in, knowing we are made of
 All this, and breathe, knowing
 We are truly blessed because we
 Were born, and die soon within a
 True circle of motion,
 Like eagle rounding out the morning
 Inside us.
 We pray that it will be done
 In beauty.
 In beauty.¹²

¹ This riddle and the next two are from "Eight Riddles from Symphosius," trans. Richard Wilbur, in *The Poems of Richard Wilbur*. New York: Harcourt Brace and World, 1963, p.25-26.

² Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself," Section 30, in *Leaves of Grass*. Comprehensive Reader's Edition, Harld W. Blodgett and Sculley Bradley, eds. New York: New York Unversity Press, 1965, p.28-89.

³ *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, Third Edition.

⁴ Langston Hughes, "Island," in *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*. Arnold Rampersad, ed. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994, p.376.

⁵ Lucille Clifton, "buffalo war," in *good woman: poems and a memoir, 1969-1980*. Brockport, New York: BOA Editions, Ltd., 1987, p.46.

⁶ See Michael Lipson's "Translator's Introduction," in Rudolf Steiner, *Intuitive Thinking As A Spiritual Path: A Philosophy of Freedom*. Hudson, N.Y.: Anthroposophic Press, 1995, [vii]-xii.

⁷ In Chapter Nine of his variously titled work on the philosophy of freedom (see note 6 above), Rudolf Steiner classically describes such intuitions as "the conscious experience, within what is purely spiritual, of a purely spiritual content" p.136-137.

⁸ In Jane Hirshfield, ed., *Women in Praise of the Sacred: 43 Centuries of Spiritual Poetry by Women*. New York: Harper Collins, 1994, p.73-74.

⁹ Walt Whitman, "A Noiseless Patient Spider," in *Leaves of Grass*. Comprehensive Reader's Edition, Harold W. Blodgett and Sculley Bradley, eds. New York: New York University Press, 1965, p.28-29.

¹⁰ William Carlos Williams, "Flowers by the Sea" in *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*. Second Edition, Richard Ellmann and Robert O'Clair, eds. New York: W.W. Norton Company, 1988, p.321.

¹¹ Emily Dickinson, *Complete Poems*. Thomas H. Johnson, ed. Boston: Little Brown, 1955, Poem #685.

¹² Joy Harjo, "Eagle Poem," in *In Mad Love and War*. Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1990, p.65.

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