Poetry and Voice
Poetry and Voice: A Book of Essays

Edited by Stephanie Norgate

Assistant Editor Ellie Piddington
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acknowledgements</th>
<th>viii</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Foreword</td>
<td>xi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helen Dunmore</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephanie Norgate</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Part I: The Music of Poetry, the Voices of Childhood and Old Age**

Chapter One | 8
Poetry: “The Music of Being Human”
Sarah Wardle

Chapter Two | 17
“Like a Fiend Hid in a Cloud”: Finding a Voice to Write about Childhood
Vicki Feaver

Chapter Three | 38
Something Like The Sea: Thinking Through My Father’s Aphasia
Philip Gross

Chapter Four | 51
Voices Echo, Fade, Remain
Stephanie Norgate

**Part II: Voicing the Demotic, the Legendary, the Spontaneous and the Euphoric**

Chapter Five | 62
“Well, Let Me Tell You Now”: The Dramatic Monologue
of *The World’s Wife*
Olga Holownia
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Six</td>
<td>Simon Armitage’s Voices</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ian Gregson</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seven</td>
<td>Kolatkar’s Spontaneity</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Vidyan Ravinthiran</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eight</td>
<td>The Voice of Euphoria in John Ashbery’s Poetry</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Vasilis Papageorgiou</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three</td>
<td>Part III: Transitory Voices: The Creation and Representation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>of Poetic Voice through the Pressure of War, Migration, Exile</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and Bilinguality</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nine</td>
<td>The Marketplace of Voices</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Waqas Khwaja</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ten</td>
<td>Dragica Rajčić: Writing Women and War in the Margins</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Laurel Cohen-Pfister</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eleven</td>
<td>Reclaiming Lost Stars: Contemporary Female Voices from Bosnia</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tatjana Bijeli</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twelve</td>
<td>Forgetting the Crow: Bilinguality and Poetic Voice</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jane Griffiths</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four</td>
<td>Part IV: Giving Voice to Place: Suburbia, Gardens and Wilderness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thirteen</td>
<td>“Finding a Voice where they Found a Vision”: Eavan Boland’s</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Postcolonial Vocalisation of Suburbia</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rose Atfield</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fourteen</td>
<td>The Language of Flowers? “Voice” in the Garden</td>
<td>187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lesley Saunders</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter Fifteen ........................................................................................................ 210
Translating Wilderness: Negative Ecopoetics and the Poetry of Don McKay
Hugh Dunkerley

Part V: Beyond the Single Voice: Inner and Outer Voices of Poetry

Chapter Sixteen ........................................................................................................ 222
“Last Least of Her Voices”: The Voice of Poetry
Michael Wilson

Chapter Seventeen .................................................................................................... 235
A Choir of Trees: Discovering the “Voice” of a Poetry Collection
David Swann

Afterword ............................................................................................................... 247

Contributors.......................................................................................................... 251
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FOREWORD

HELEN DUNMORE, FRSL

With our first breath we cry, announcing ourselves to the world in a moment that thrills, reassures and at the same time cuts to the heart. It’s an outpouring of no apparent artistry, yet it is perfectly tuned to express the baby’s utter helplessness, and the power of its presence. What did not exist as a separate being, now exists and makes its own demand on the world’s understanding.

Poetry, tuned to the measures and emphases of breath, is at once the most elemental, even rawly primitive of art forms, and the most complex. It sits within human language and yet its lilts, measures, refrains and stresses are shared with music rather than with prose. It can borrow the apparent liquid simplicity of birdsong, or share with an operatic aria the power to short-circuit analysis and caress the ear into understanding. But music, unlike poetry, makes itself out of uncommon things. Off-stage, no-one picks up a violin to order the shopping, or dumps a lover in tonic sol-fa. Poetry has no Stradivarii: its instrument is the stuff we talk half to death. It is happy to use every weary word in the language. How much can “love” or “daffodil” be made to do? What about “blog” or “brake fluid”?

Poetic voice can be a baffling concept. How is such a voice developed, and how can it be recognised? Like the concept of the Muse, the concept of poetic voice is hard to grasp except in moments and fragments. Perhaps, instead, it’s possible to consider poetic voices, some freely heard, others stifled or incomplete in their utterance. Each poet has his or her own linguistic register, as well as rhythm, and these are probably more vital in forming the absolute distinctiveness of the poet than is the more obvious question of a poet’s material. We hear the register and rhythm, the aural fingerprint of the poet, before we consider the matter of what is being said. We also trace resemblances. Like Robert Browning, Simon Armitage and Carol Ann Duffy have honed their technique to create illusions of the vernacular. The dazzlingly fragmented precision of Philip Gross’s voice has something to do with both T.S. Eliot and Geoffrey Hill. As readers and listeners, we are forever picking up echoes, and delighting in the cross-weave of voice textures.
The Poetry and Voice conference which gave rise to this book was a rare opportunity to listen to a host of poetic and academic voices, and to listen with an attention which was as sensuous as it was intellectual. Some speakers were poets, some academics, and many were both. Over the weekend, voice after voice disclosed itself. Some poets read new work for the first time, not yet sure of the sounds it might make or the echoes these might raise in those who heard it. Others spoke of their explorations into the understanding of voices: the voices of migration, of bilingualism, of mythical creatures given the salty voice of the everyday; of translation and impersonation; of war, suppression and the fragmenting of cultures. Above all, there was the sense of poetic voice as something that is not a given, but that has to venture into becoming itself. Not only does each poet discover a voice, but each poem seeks to expose a layer of that voice by giving to a leaf, a broken bicycle, tears on a human face, a hole in the road or a bacon sandwich its complete, riveted attention. This book reflects that intensity and sense of raw, new worlds being fused into form.

Philip Gross and Stephanie Norgate, in their chapters, discuss the extremities of language, and how experience can be voiced when there is almost no voice left. Philip Gross gave the conference his first reading of a remarkable sequence of poems, which later formed part of his collection *Deep Field*. These poems study many kinds of migration, as the poet’s refugee father travels from eloquent multi-linguism into aphasia. It suggests that language itself is a migration out of the darkness of non-being, a process rather than a finished thing, and one which always has it within itself to unravel. This is a poetry of gaps and silences, voiced with a rare blend of intellectual rigour and emotional depth, and the poet’s own reflections on his practice are rewardingly meditative. Stephanie Norgate’s poem ‘a perfect example of a paralysed larynx’, first led her to organise this conference. Her concerns with voice and echo go back to her studies of Ovid, and are brilliantly engaged here with what voice becomes, once the power to speak has begun to be stripped from it. Her father’s treatment for cancer caused damage to the muscle of the larynx; his voice, “hoarse and quiet”, “resonant” of the wood he worked with all his life, fading away to other listeners, but not to his close family. Her discussion illuminates the ways in which her poetry talks to Ovid, while searching for a language to match the unvoiced elements of grief.

The stifling of poetic voice, and the ways that poetry finds around this, is a recurring theme in this book. Silence is as crucial to the development of a voice as negative space to the drawing of a line. Vicki Feaver writes of the inhibitions that silenced her when she tried to write about childhood, her struggle and “finding the voice that transforms the powerless and
vulnerable child into a powerful poet.” In ‘The Marketplace of Voices’, Waqas Khwaja discusses a distortion of poetic voices through colonialism, the partition of India and Pakistan, and the choice of English and Urdu as the official languages of Pakistan. Through his own decision to search for direction in “the sub-continental oral traditions of poetry and storytelling” there comes a re-connection with a host of enthralling voices.

The cry of a newborn baby soon melts into babble. The babble, the raw material of vocalisation, is shaped with extraordinary speed. The possibility of being a Mandarin or Inuit speaker emerges or withers as the speaking voice is shaped by the imperatives of the particular language that surrounds it. In order to gain language, the individual voice has to discard universality. Often it will fail to communicate: there will be risk and effort, but no illumination. But poetry, crafted and formed as it is, shaped as it is to the word music of one language, keeps within it that first inbreath and the moment when the voice uncrumples into its first raking cry.
INTRODUCTION

STEPHANIE NORGATE

Publishers talk of poets “finding their voice”; critics talk of poets who have a particular, recognisable voice. In this, I don’t think they mean simply the metrical rhythm or form that poets use, nor are they referring to solipsism. Rather there is the sense of something particular to that poet that is identifiable in the poem. At the international Poetry and Voice conference (University of Chichester, 2010), David Constantine talked of “voice being the unique DNA of a poem”. Poets themselves tend to think of finding a voice as liberating, a kind of permission to continue with greater confidence after a sloughing off of juvenilia.

Carol Ann Duffy’s reading at the conference showed her imaginative scope in deploying a variety of voices—playful—tragic—alienated—mythic, while maintaining a sense of her own particular poetic voice. And as Stephen Hawking shows, it isn’t only those with the usual command of a physical voice who own a voice which represents an inner life, thought and identity.

At the time of writing, the Education Secretary has proposed that the learning of poetry by heart become obligatory in schools. This may display a heartening belief in the powers of poetry to educate, stimulate and involve the child in the delights of language, though it sits oddly with cuts to the arts that could reduce printed poetry’s existence. Despite the controversies and questions stirred by the proposal, behind it is an awareness of poetry as a voice, that the repetition of the work aloud somehow deepens the understanding, that the child will “own” the memorised poem by another poet and will be able to voice it in their mind or rather “in their heart”. The memorising of poetry is equated with an emotional experience; it is learnt “by heart”, suggesting beat and rhythm perhaps, but also long lasting affection and passion for the poem. The voice of poetry then, whether recited, read aloud or growing into existence has never been more topical. The contributed essays suggest, however, that poetic voices, like languages themselves, cannot be forced on others (Pinter, Mountain Language, 2012) but must discover how to communicate
in their own emotional grammar, their own rhythms and tones, developed through friction and engagement with the world around them.

In order to identify more clearly the imaginative territory under discussion, it is worth saying that this book is not about performance poetry or methods of recitation, topical and perennially important though these performative areas are in our rich contemporary period of readings, poetry slams and dramatisations. These activities are the life blood of the poetic community, a part of poetry’s energetic existence that continues to draw writers together to listen to and be inspired by each others’ voices. Many studies of performance poetry and poetry in performance (together with accompanying CDs) exist already, and this book cannot encompass all the aspects of voice in poetry, as its remit is already broad.

A book on poetry and voice could have been about so many aspects of poetry, but what emerged from the essays submitted was a concern with the theme of voice and how it is pressured into existence. The essays contributed here mark out voice as something we read as well as hear, as something formed by poets in the “domain” of their poem (Patterson, *Poetry Review*, 2010) The contributors explore the challenges of forming certain poetic voices, voices of a culture or a repressed culture, voices formed by transience, by wandering, by picking up the fragments of other voices, tones, and experiences. They ask whether voice is inevitably political, or lyrical, formed by issues of upbringing, class and gender or forced in certain directions by the circumstances of its world, of the language it has acquired.

The contributors are poets and critics, many are both, and many of them have worked in education, teaching literature, literary criticism or creative writing or all three aspects of the discipline. In the past, creative writing and literary criticism and theory have often been posited as opposites within literature departments in universities. Here, they are seen as symbiotic strands of the same subject. Poets write about their own processes using a different discourse to that of critics writing about other poets. Given the theme, I believe this variety of tone and style is an experiment to be celebrated, an opening up to differing kinds of voices and explorations of poetry.

These essays consider the formation of poetic voice in various manifestations, moving through a lively and full consideration of the music of poetry by Sarah Wardle and its relation to the rhythms of being human, to Vicki Feaver finding a voice for childhood and Philip Gross exploring his process in voicing the complex experience of his father’s aphasia in old age. Feaver gives a tantalising sense of the voice of childhood being discovered, lost and rediscovered, in a process that draws
Poetry and Voice: A Book of Essays

on reading, imagination, memory and an engagement with narrative detail. Philip Gross explores the need to create a conversation between father and son, when the father is losing or has lost his voice. Feaver and Gross offer us rare insights into the subtlety of the poet’s thinking and the complexity of personal history as they find the right language, shape and imagery to represent voices with richly imaginative care. Both, at different points, use the word “stoppered”, showing perhaps that obstacles to speech and poetry are also an integral part of finding a voice.

The ventriloquising or dramatising of voices in the dramatic monologue employs voice in quite a different mode. Two other major British poets, Carol Ann Duffy and Simon Armitage are well known for their sophisticated, multi-layered dramatic monologues; Olga Holownia and Ian Gregson examine the way these monologues create fragments of the zeitgeist and challenge the status quo, often by using humour and subverting the expected and conventional. Holownia examines Duffy’s “double-voicedness”; her use of fragments, interruptions and subversions, showing how Duffy’s many voices provide the reader with the multi-faceted voice of The World’s Wife. Gregson examines the off-centre, dialogic use of voice in Armitage’s work showing how Armitage employs multiple contemporary voices to represent the fragmentation and complexity of the flawed contemporary world. Gregson’s discussion includes work on Armitage’s film poems and the paradoxes of striving for authenticity while using dramatised voices.

Voices of course express mood and tone, are sound waves that resonate and then disappear, yet poetry is finely formed, drafted, shaped. Vidyan Ravinthiran considers this paradox in his essay on the Indian poet Arun Kolatkar’s spontaneous voice when writing in English. How quickly can a poet respond to the fast changing environment of modern India while maintaining an exciting sense of spontaneity in his voice and also writing work which is finely honed? Ravinthiran notes how Kolatkar’s “sketchy, free form style” captures moments of fast paced change in passionate reinventions of the usual aesthetics, while subverting postcolonial expectations.

American poet John Ashbery is well known for his voiced trains of thoughts, sentences meandering through levels of experience and possibly multiple address. Vasilis Papageorgiou playfully considers the byways and evasions of John Ashbery through both anecdote and discussion. He shows how Ashbery responds to the momentary. And he demonstrates the lightness, yet power of Ashbery’s wandering periodic address that tunes itself to the voice of the streets, the consciousness of the times, through the shifting associations of an exploratory mind.
In the act of giving voice, appropriations may take place and some of the poets and critics represented here are concerned not to replicate in poetry the colonisation of war over territory and language. Waqas Khwaja explores the voices of migration through the invention of a Kashmiri refugee at the time of the partition of India. Khwaja’s comprehensive and sensitive essay develops the challenging moral considerations of trying to catch the fragments of voices forced to travel through migration and history, through legend and language in the Indian sub-continent. Khwaja is acutely conscious of the postcolonial experience and the danger in, but importance of, expressing migratory experience without hubris or easy assumptions.

For some poets the extremities of war push their poetic identities in unexpected directions. These voices somehow survive while under a dominant culture that, either personally or politically, is somewhat alien to freedom of poetic expression. Yet these voices still resonate in new settings and in new languages or modes of expression. Laurel Cohen-Pfister discusses the work of Dragica Rajčić, a Croatian poet in exile, “impelled to write by trauma and war”. What happens when there is a need to write in another less familiar language in your adopted country? What happens when the pressures of violence force you away from your own language? Rajčić’s poetry explores, in work that travels beyond a conventional grammar, the experiences of war and of domestic violence, a voice pressured into existence and surviving in a new language.

There needs to be a place of publication for multiple voices to be heard, voices perhaps disrupted by conflict, finding a space again for poetry after war. Tatjana Bijelić, also in the wake of the 1990s Yugoslavian wars, considers the space allowed for female voices in Bosnia. She challenges traditional assumptions about whose voice should be heard, and her essay seeks to recognise and reinstate the voices of Ex-Yu women poets.

Bilinguality is itself a new form of voicing, a new way of enabling the bilingual speaker to see beyond the thinking or perception given voice by one particular language. In a witty essay on her own processes, Jane Griffiths develops an awareness about the uncertain nature of language for the bilingual speaker, where there is always another voice behind the voice being used, where a voiced statement and a powerful image can both embody and yet deny the fluidity of poetic thinking.

Certain places are associated traditionally with certain voices. The poet always conjures with their physical space and in the past these spaces have given rise to dialects that inform and shape the poet’s voice. But the traditional expectations of place can also be restricting; Rose Atfield
explores the voice of suburbia in Eavan Boland’s work which leads to a consideration of women’s voices, the connection between apparently gendered or marginal spaces and the external value placed on women’s poetic voices historically and traditionally. As Eavan Boland reclaims the visionary for women’s everyday lives, and shows how their history is as significant as the lives of male poets in the bardic tradition, suburbia too reclaims its place in the shared enterprise of our lives.

Romantic poets have always responded to place as a subject of their own growing consciousness. In ecopoetics, the poet endeavours to work without anthropomorphising or colonising the voice of nature. Hugh Dunkerley looks at the work of Canadian poet Don McKay and the way he avoids simplistic human voicing when writing of the wilderness. Lesley Saunders reflects on her own poetic processes during a writing residency in a college garden. Saunders considers the challenges of giving voice to a place, a historic garden constructed artfully over time, and inhabited by the lost girls and voices of the past. These meditative pieces connect the place to voice and give voice to place in a post-Romantic age.

Finally, two writers ask in entirely different ways how a collection of voices can go beyond the individual. Michael Wilson speculates on whether the voice of individual lyric poetry accesses some wider poetic supervoice. Does poetry make known some universal voice beyond the writer’s control? For David Swann, the question is how to recognise the voice of a whole poetry collection when it is formed from the experience of prisoners, experiences gleaned from his writer’s residency in a prison. The poet generously invites us into his process as he pursues the holistic voice of his varied collection. We join him in a search for the ghost of D.H. Lawrence in New Mexico, as he unexpectedly finds the clues, the combinant metaphors and imagery that make the voice of the whole.

These essays all give unusual insights into process and effects, and show how the forming of a poetic voice is something of a journey, carries something of the flâneur’s observational power, together with an openness to the currents of the world which are somehow picked up by the poet’s listening ear and represented whether in the lyric, the dramatic monologue or other modes, as voices that need to be heard. There would certainly be room for other editors to further the critical and creative discussions in themed volumes or journals on poetry and voice. Meanwhile this book with its unusual combination of creative and critical essays draws together the voices of poets and critics from various cultures as they speak, listen, read and hear.
Works Cited

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PART I

THE MUSIC OF POETRY, THE VOICES
OF CHILDHOOD AND OLD AGE
CHAPTER ONE

POETRY:

“THE MUSIC OF BEING HUMAN”

SARAH WARDLE

When Carol Ann Duffy called poetry “the music of being human” (2010), she was referring to the way in which poetry can transmit humanity through a peculiarly human medium and genre. That we share common categories of experience, whatever individual highs and lows befall us, and that poetry often discloses these, whether through confessional, or impersonal, truths, is one reason which prompts consumers of poetry to read and students to analyse it. Indeed, evolutionary scientists explain literature as a means of sharing and handing down wisdom necessary for life and which increases survival: the canon could be said to explain the wisdom of the tribe. To say poetry is the music of being human may also refer to a poetical quality, spirit, or feeling, found not only in poetry itself and other arts, but also in nature. This last sense of poetry in nature presumably springs from the idea of God as Creator, or “poet” in the Greek sense of “maker”, derived from poieo, “I make”. There is also a sense in which defining poetry as the music of being human refers to the act of expression of what it is to be human.

But let’s think again about music and why poetry, compared with other literary practice, might be particularly suited to conveying the experience of being human. Like music, poetry has rhythm, repetition, counterpoint, harmony, pitch, sometimes a metrical beat, sometimes rhyme—and pauses and silence. It has onomatopoeia, alliteration, assonance and sibilance. It can be written and read legato, or staccato, lente, or fortissimo, or con duolo. Like music, it can convey mood and associations and even cause corresponding moods within us. If we think further, we might add that humans are primed for music and musical measures, whether perceived instrumentally or through the score of poetry, given the nature of human beings with their heartbeats, pulse rates and intakes and outtakes of breath in the time it takes to read a line of iambic pentameter. Or again, think of
the rhythm one enjoys when one goes for a walk, when one gets into the
swing of one’s stride (and I for one often silently recite lines I have
written, or else might find a song that has lodged in my brain coming to
mind). Or think of the rhythm of sex, its baseline beat and crescendo.
Moreover, we have evolved within a musical and poetic universe, one in
which we appreciate not only human music, but also birdsong, the breath
of the sea as it washes ashore, the rush of a river, of wind, rain and storm,
the roll of thunder, singing of a stream—a universe which obeys the
movements of the seasons, the tides, night and day.
Poetry is a heightened and concise form of language which is halfway
between music and painting, being both auditory and visual. The words
are symbolic and convey meaning and emotion not only through the
moods and associations of their music, but also through their reference
points as signifiers. In this sense poetry may be the music of being human
to a greater extent than music by itself is, that is because it encapsulates
not only the language of music, which is common to some other species,
such as birds, in situations of love, communication and alarm, but also
verbal human language itself. Unlike prose, whether the prose of fiction
and drama, or more prosaic prose of professional discourse (like this
essay), or of emails and correspondence, poetry contains an attention to
detail and conciseness, to the moods and effects being transmitted and
evoked, in which every word works and counts. Artistic attention to detail
is certainly involved in music and visual art, yet because poetry uses
verbal language to evoke musical and visual meanings in our senses and
imagination, of the three it is best suited to expressing and recording what
it is to be human.
Music and poetry both catch and hold our attention. The Russian
Formalist, Victor Shklovsky, developed the concept of “defamiliarization
([1917] 1965), by which he meant the way poetry challenges our
automatic perceptions and forces us to notice its words. He thought that
poetry and art were designed to attract and hold our attention, and were
important in redressing the balance between form and content. Coleridge
notices something similar, when he writes that poetry possesses “the
property of exciting a more continuous and equal attention than the
language of prose aims at, whether colloquial or written” ([1817] 1979,
11). He also described Wordsworth’s aim in *Lyrical Ballads* as being to
remove the “film of familiarity” from everyday objects (Preminger and
Brogan, 1993, 833). The idea of art awakening our attention and of the
artist as particularly alert is seen in Baudelaire’s essay, ‘The Painter of
Modern Life’, where he likens an artist to a convalescent and to a child,
because “The child sees everything as a novelty; the child is always
“drunk” (Baudelaire, 1972, 398). A common figure of speech in poetry is metaphor, which forces us to see the world in precisely such a new way. Eliot argued that there is a “degree of heterogeneity compelled into unity by the operation of the poet’s mind” (Preminger and Brogan, 1993, 833). Indeed the poetry of the late 1970s Martian school, in the form of Craig Raine and Christopher Reid, made metaphor and new ways of seeing its defining features.

Another way in which poetry forces us to take notice is through its often distinctive form, its intense language accompanied by metre and rhyme, or blank verse, or by free-verse line-endings. But does this itself necessarily mark it off as poetry? Culler quotes a poem without attributing it to Frost (it is in fact ‘The Secret Sits’):

We dance round in a ring and suppose,
But the Secret sits in the middle and knows,

and then points out that it matters where you come across it:

If this sentence is printed on a slip in a Chinese fortune cookie, you may well take it as an unusually enigmatic fortune. (1997, 21)

In another context we might view such a couplet as a riddle, or an advertising jingle, but we might conclude it was poetry because of its form, its rhyme and metrical language. Similarly, the distinctive line-endings of free verse set it apart. Prose, it can be argued, is when all the lines except perhaps the last reach the right hand margin. Poetry, apart from prose poems, is when the lines fall short. However, Culler shows that we could re-write what is not poetry in a similar layout:

Thus the opening sentence of a book of philosophy, W.O. Quine’s From a Logical Point of View, might conceivably be a poem:

A curious thing
about the ontological problem is its simplicity.

Set down in this way on a page, surrounded by intimidating margins of silence, this sentence can attract a certain kind of attention that we might call literary: an interest in the words, their relations to one another, and their implications, and particularly an interest in how what is said relates to the way it is said. (22-3)
One may observe that the poetry of this chopped-up prose would be even more effective if the break came after “is”. Culler implies that a poetic layout is not sufficient for poetry, but needs to be accompanied by poetic language and by a relation of form and content. This point has particular reference to twentieth-century innovations in poetic form. Avant-garde movements from Modernism to Language poetry have challenged our concept of poetic form. But just as in traditional poetry, the new styles—with their disrupted patterns, rhythms and disjointed language—have often mirrored the meaning.

Wittgenstein notices the relation of form and meaning, when he writes:

Can anything be more remarkable than this, that the rhythm of a sentence should be important for exact understanding of it?

(Anscombe and von Wright, 1980, 190c.)

Yeats in his essay, ‘The Symbolism of Poetry’ discusses how emotion is dependent on form, where an emotion in a poem is evoked “which cannot be evoked by any other arrangement of colours and sounds and forms” ([1900] Lodge 1972, 30). Towards the end he states:

nor would it be any longer possible for anybody to deny the importance of form, in all its kinds, for although you can expound an opinion, or describe a thing, when your words are not quite well chosen, you cannot give a body to something that moves beyond the senses, unless your words are as subtle, as complex, as full of mysterious life, as the body of a flower or of a woman. (34)

The New Critics, like the Russian Formalists, also reasserted the indivisibility of form and content. Eliot too notices how form and content, and sound and meaning are inextricably bound up with each other, when he writes:

My purpose here is to insist that a ‘musical poem’ is a poem which has a musical pattern of sound and a musical pattern of the secondary meanings of the words which compose it, and that these two patterns are indissoluble and one. ([1942] 1957, 33)

Housman also believes that a poem’s meaning is inseparable from the whole:

Is there such a thing as pure unmingled poetry, poetry independent of meaning? Even when poetry has a meaning, as it usually has, it may be inadvisable to draw it out. ‘Poetry gives most pleasure’ said Coleridge
‘when only generally and not perfectly understood’; and perfect understanding will sometimes almost extinguish pleasure. (1933, 37)

In other words, it is as if poetry were salt water, and when we heat it in an attempt to separate the salt, or meaning, poetry’s nebulous gases float away. On the other hand, Empson defends the quest for meaning, criticising the view:

that you are liable to destroy the poem if its meaning is discovered, that it is important to preserve one’s innocence about the meaning of verses, that one must use sensibility, and as little intelligence as possible...People suspect analysis, often rightly, as the refuge of the emotionally sterile, but that is only to say that analysis is often done badly. ([1930] Lodge, 1972, 30)

Empson influenced the New Critics with his practice of close analysis. Though they believed in the unity of form and content, this did not stop them attempting to analyse the meaning of poems. Fry, on the other hand, argues that meaning is extrinsic to a poem, and that only sound, rhyme and metre are a poem’s intrinsic properties. He reported to his friend Bell that he had composed a “poem” which sounded similar to Milton’s ode ‘On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity’, but which consisted of “deliberate gibberish—a collection of sounds so far as possible without meaning”, and claimed that his composition possessed “all, or almost all, the merits of the original” (Bell [1956], Hanfling, 1992, 61-2). The same idea could be illustrated by Edward Lear’s nonsense poems. However, these are an exception to the rule that poetry generally involves both form and content, or sound and music. As Pope says, “The sound must seem an echo to the sense” (Crozier, 1995, 76). On the other hand, though sound is often stressed in poetry, we should not forget the importance of silence. Eliot recognised this when he emphasised how silence is a poetic ingredient which complements and completes the form and rhythm of a sentence, writing that “Words, after speech, reach / Into the silence”, and that “Only by the form, the pattern, / Can words or music reach / The stillness” (1974, 181-182).

A poem, like music, or visual art, can be seen both as the artist’s expression, and as a code for triggering response in the reader, viewer, or listener. Psychological explanations of emotion, imagination, pleasure, rhythm, rhyme and so on, underpin many of the historical theories of poetry. Readers and writers of poetry seem to be hedonists, seeking a reward of pleasure. They may enjoy rhythms which echo the human heart or speech, and intense language may arouse their attention and satisfy
Poetry: “The Music of Being Human”

impulses for novelty and complexity. Poetry may be enjoyable because it is one way of exercising sensory and mental capacities, which in turn benefits the brain. Because reading and writing poetry are solitary activities, those who engage in them may be introverts, substituting the written for the spoken word. Alternatively, friendship groups centred round workshops and readings may add a social motive for the pastime of poetry. The confessional nature of much poetry may mean that readers treat it as a form of gossip, especially amongst the small network of living poets. The poet, himself, may identify two separate drives: that of writing for the pleasure of self-expression, and that of publishing, perhaps in the hope of eliciting approval from peers, or elders, or as an act of communication. Poetry, like all art, may act like the peacock’s tail, rendering a person more attractive. A display of wit, for instance, might signal intelligence and indicate evolutionary fitness. On the other hand, poetry might be an outlet for a poet’s abnormal personality and be indicative of ill health. Poetry may aid the poet’s self-analysis, or be cathartic, and thus be a form of learning through play, as in childhood. The reader may also find poetry a form of learning, since, as in all literature, he is presented with hypothetical scenarios which he may one day encounter in his own life, or which may help him seek solutions to other situations through reasoning. From a collective point of view poetry, like much art, may benefit society as a whole by evoking moral and aesthetic feelings and values, which in turn promote social cohesion.

As noted, when Boswell asked, “Sir, what is poetry?”, Johnson replied, “Why Sir, it is much easier to say what it is not. We all know what light is; but it is not easy to tell what it is” (Boswell, 1992, 653). But with the help of science we can now tell what light is, so that perhaps we should apply science to poetry. It is possible that with hindsight a future critic might regard a psychological and scientific approach as culturally relative, typical of our twenty-first century, reductionist age. But if the history of poetic theory is bound up with the history of ideas, surely it deserves a new chapter, in which genes, evolution and the human brain feature? In examining brain processes when reading and writing poetry, we might encounter a problem: that the same areas, cells and chemicals, x, y and z in the brain, might also be activated during the creation of other artistic, or pleasurable, enterprises. There might be considerable overlap with painting and music, with philosophy, drama and prose, even with silent thought, or conversation. To isolate poetic areas from those of general thought, or speech, would probably be the biggest problem faced, if a neuroscientist were ever to try to isolate the physical microchips involved in making poetry. And then there is the fact that all brains are
individual, with cell connections which have evolved in unique ways, owing to people’s unique interactions with their environments. This would raise a particularly difficult problem for the scientist, if he were to try to pinpoint which memories in which cells were generating the inspiration behind a particular lyric poem.

With the present state of knowledge, in the infancy of neuroscience, we should look to poets themselves to test our theory. For example, consider Larkin’s ‘Statement’, where he says:

I write poems to preserve things I have seen/thought/felt (if I may so indicate a composite and complex experience) both for myself and for others, though I feel that my prime responsibility is to the experience itself, which I am trying to keep from oblivion for its own sake. Why I should do this I have no idea, but I think the impulse to preserve lies at the bottom of all art. (1983, 79)

From this passage we would expect a scientist to find that memory cells, the visual area, and the part of the brain responsible for the emotions would be particularly developed in a poet, and would show up on a scan taken during the process of composition—perhaps on scans taken during reading and listening too. A further link is between those parts of the brain activated by poetry and those activated by music. I have firsthand research on this. As is evidenced in the opening poem of my third book, *A Knowable World*, “I kept speaking poems I had written / to myself” (Wardle, 2009, 9), when I underwent an M.R.I. scan (not least to calm myself during the loud noise of the scanning procedure), and the research scientist at the Hammersmith Hospital told me the scan showed that areas of the brain activated by music had shown up.

When I asked the poet Lotte Kramer recently why she felt it was that she wrote in form, she replied, “It’s instinctive.” Michael Longley said much the same in a radio interview:

I write my poems out in long-hand and I think, ‘My God. This is going to be a marvellous bit of Frank O’Hara/Raymond Carver free splodge.’ Then I go to the typewriter and it’s the same old squares-and-oblongs (as Auden says). So I can’t help it. It’s obviously in my genetic make-up, that poems are for me, still a little too tidy. (Wilmer, 1994, 115)

But Longley also refers to the way form can be freeing, rather than constraining, quoting Yeats’ reply on being asked where he got his ideas from: “Looking for the next rhyme” (Wilmer, 1994, 115). With the emphasis on poetry in performance nowadays, refreshed attention is being given to the auditory and musical properties of poetry, which after all grew
out of an oral tradition before it ever met the page, which can estrange a reader from a poem’s music. In a piece on his book, *The Asylum Dance*, John Burnside wrote of the auditory nature of his poetry:

If anything could have served, for me, as a reminder that poetry is a shared practice, arising out of the exchange, inspired by the pauses in conversation and the sounds and silences of habitat, it was the writing of this book, where so much arose from the relationship between the making of a poem and the act of listening, not only to other humans, but—in a hopelessly clumsy way—to the land and the water and the air. Or not so much a relationship, perhaps, as a continuity: I have come to feel that the poems I write are not so much made, or composed (by me), as heard. (Brown and Paterson, 2003, 23)

Don Paterson has stated that “Poetry is the music of consciousness” (Herbert and Hollis, 2000, 284). In Carol Ann Duffy’s poem, ‘Prayer’ (1994, 127), the consciousness of everyday overheard sounds equates to moments of stillness and moral and spiritual thought, transmitted through the musicality of a sonnet. It is a psalm for our times. So much of poetry depends, not just on metaphor, simile and new ways of seeing, but on such auditory epiphanies. To analyse poetry, what it is, how it works and what it is for, does not unweave the rainbow, nor silence “the music of being human”.

**Works Cited**


