

Living Language: What Is a Poem Good For?

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*The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.
(Ludwig Wittgenstein, 1974, p. 68)*

*I found no contradiction between poetry and revolution: they
were two facets of the same movement, two wings of the same
passion. (Octavio Paz, 1999, p. 33)*

*Want a different ethic? Tell a different story. (Thomas King,
2003, p. 164)*

Walter Brueggemann (2001) claims that “human transformative activity depends upon a transformed imagination” (pp. xx). Brueggemann calls for a prophetic imagination that will “nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us” (p. 3). According to Brueggemann, prophetic imagination “is concerned with matters political and social, but it is as intensely concerned with matters linguistic (how we say things) and epistemological (how we know what we know)” (p. 21). Brueggemann then spins the intriguing phrase

“prophetic imagination” into the resonant phrase “poetic imagination” which he argues “is the last way left in which to challenge and conflict the dominant reality” (p. 40). In much of my writing and pedagogy, I am seeking to recognize with Brueggemann “how singularly words, speech, language, and phrase shape consciousness and define reality” (p. 64). Poetry is an act of transformation and an art of transformation because poetry is always minding and mining the possibilities of language and discourse for translating the stories we live by and in and among (to name just a few of the more than fifty prepositional possibilities that exist in the English language alone). I agree with Jay Parini (2008) that “poets write in the line of prophecy, and their work teaches us how to live” (p. xiv). As a poet I do not wish to engage in a kind of apologetics or defense that revels in the ideologically sanctioned idolization of certain privileged forms of rational and analytical and expository argument. Instead, I engage in testimony, in witness, in presenting poetry and prose that linger with a language educator’s delight in the revelry of words. I agree with bell hooks (2003) that “the struggle to transform education” is a struggle “to find a new language of spirit” (p. 183). For me, that new language is expressed in poetry. And as I continue to dwell in these times of conflict where chaos often seems to run rampantly and rule ruthlessly, I am reminded of James Hillman’s (1999) wisdom that “the aesthetic imagination is the primary mode of knowing the cosmos, and aesthetic language the most fitting way to formulate the world” (p. 184). I linger artfully in these times of conflict by seeking an ethics that is fired in the heart of aesthetics. Too often, ethics is understood as *morals*, construed in binary oppositions of right and wrong behaviour, good and bad character, high and low status. With a similarly simplistic disposition, English teachers often ask students to state the moral of the poem, but the heart of aesthetics refuses binary oppositions, simple judgments, and epigrammatic solutions. Instead, the heart of aesthetics pulses with questions, curiosity, openness, and

imagination. Above all, the heart of aesthetics is devoted to a lively hopefulness.

Gregory Orr (2002) thinks that we have lost touch with the value and purpose of poetry in our contemporary culture, and, therefore, he is concerned that “we have lost contact with essential aspects of our own emotional and spiritual lives” (p. 1). I take Orr’s concern seriously for many reasons. As a poet, I often wonder if anybody besides other poets really care about poetry. And as an educator, I often worry about the influence of schools, curricula, and teachers in shaping the literacy experiences of learners. And as a language and literacy researcher with a focus on poetic inquiry, I often wander in the magical places of the alphabet, with a wand in hand, ready to spell possibilities for new ways of seeing and knowing. I take Helen Sword’s (2012) advice, literally and figuratively: “stretch your mind by stretching your writing” (p. 175). In turn, I invite the writing to stretch me, all of me, from a to z (at least a to z, always hopeful for other adventures, too, even beyond z).

I no longer ask, Is this a good poem?

I ask, What is this poem good for?

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I’ve Only Just Begun

Exemplary being is purely linguistic being.

Giorgio Agamben

an author’s angst the authority of assessment

aesthetic appreciation affective attention angina

being well well-being being ill bell ringing

biology biography boring into the bog breath

composition disposition exposition imposition supposition
a cursor's cursory cliché like a curse or circus costly

dancing with dandy determination dodging doubt
ding dong doing dogged dodderly dodgeball doggerel

emergent epiphanies earth's empathy extra envy
entertain enter rain enter terrain ex-pensive

fluid fluency flittering flattering fragments fusion
flim flam film flan flap flat flaw flax flay flow flux fear

galactic grief galloping guilt galvanic garrulous gabfest
gentrified generic cisgendered genuflecting gender

hear heart hearkens heard herd hard heartrending hearsay
hegemonic head-banging headwinds hopeful healing

inner work inner tube indeterminate ironic I's & eyes
ideologically interpellated imposters infidels

jocular jabbing and jabbering joyous jabberwocky
jogging jolting joints jagged jouncing jouissance

keynote keystone keyword keypad keyhole

keen knights knotted knowing kenotic kenning

line of discipline longing to belong liminal limits
leprechaun's lexicon littered letters literally literate

making magic manipulated marionettes mine meaning
mourning in the morning mumbled moving moments

notions of nonsense nocturnal no-see-ums nodding
naïve narcissistic namedropping no narcotic narcolepsy

om on omen onset omer onside omit onstage open onslaught
onto onerous onus of onomasiology of ontologies

ping pong pondering ponderous paradoxical pensées
phonological phenomemological paradigmatic patterns

qi qat qanat qigong quack quag quaint quake quick queue
quantified quality qualified quantity quiet queen quizzes

routines rituals rhythms romantic robots rote roles
rapid rapt rupture rapture racing ratiocinative raptors

soap sold soup soul soak soil soar soon sook silk soot suit
sap sop sum sup sub sue sun sew sob sit sat sin sic sag

textile textual texture tectonic tensile tactile tension

temporarily temporal tribulation talismanic tabulation

uttering muttering stuttering buttering shuttering puttering
ubiquitous ululation using ukuleles usually undermines us

vivacious voluptuous vocalisms vivify versions of vocation
vicarious virtues on vacation with virtuous virtuosos on violins

with woe I now know how to bow wow toe to toe with my foe Joe
wordsmiths in wordsearches worthy words well-being

x-axis xanthene xanthoma xenobiotics xenogamy xerographic
xebec xeric xeriscape xystus xylophonist xenophobe xenophile

yabber yammer yapper yatter yellor yawner yelper yee-haw
yoo-hoo yacker yawner yearner yodeler yogi young you

zealous zilch zillion zany zappy zinger zygote zigzagging
zebra finch zebra mule zebra mussel zebra plant zebra spider

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I begin with a poem because poetry invites me to breathe, to resonate with the rhythms of diction and syntax and grammar, to attend to language as full of mystery and wonder. As a language and literacy educator, I am committed to exploring the intersections between creative practice and critical pedagogy, and creative pedagogy and critical practice. I want to linger in the spaces of binary oppositions in order to build bridges like metaphors from one vertex to another, even in the

midst of one vortex through another. I always want vorticular whirling and swirling that deconstructs the binary by attending to the combinatory. In this kind of linguistic and poetic aesthetic, as Hillman (1999) recommends, “language would be creatively imagined to equal the imagination of the creation” (p. 170). I admire Hillman’s focus on imagination, not in order to deny the value of many other kinds of discourse—analytical, logical, expository, scientific—but in order to acknowledge with Richard E. Miller (2005) that we need opportunities to “speak, read, and write in a wider range of discursive contexts” (pp. 140-141). I hold fast to Brueggemann’s claim (2001) that “imagination is indeed a legitimate way of knowing” (p. x) because imagination is the nation that I most readily imagine dwelling in. The tuition I seek for living with rhythmic measure in the world is fired with an intuition that assumes that words are wild with insight, with ways for seeing and knowing the world. Like Orr (2002) much of my writing “is speculative and meant to be suggestive rather than definitive” (p. 8).

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Muddling Mystery

the terror of the desire to know

Ernst Bloch

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we are wearing out
like a shag carpet
wearing out our welcome
your patience

we are hearing less
and less
we are tearing more
we are terror-stricken

*

because love is
indefinable,
poets are always
seeking to define it,
to sew together a quilt
of sturdy semantics

*

from the doctoral exam room
I can see a tall alder
through cracks in the blinds
and I want to climb
the tree and look back
through the cracks
at myself sitting here
writing notes
about wanting to be
out there, not here,
except I'm no longer sure
where here or there is

*

You have not made my life easy, she said.
No, I said. Was I supposed to?
What would easy look like?

*

on the patio in the endless summer
I am glued to a Rubbermaid chair

Cindy is a firecracker
Lou knows is going to explode

my wife watches everybody
through an apricot wine cooler

I touch my forehead
with a chilled beer mug

like a bullfrog in a bog
I watch with periscope eyes

I can still taste the strain like
the skin of a boil before lancing

the world has grown heavy,
heaves with weary weight

not even Atlas could hold up the earth,
draped in sackcloth and ashes

still the alders grow more transparent
as light inside the leaves seeps out

to dispel shadows everywhere,
a marbled swirl of grays written in light

I want to hold the words but
like worms bent only on escape

my words slip away, always
seek places they have never been

and in the long summer, embrace
you and me with a long longing

*

stung by me's
so I am swollen
and can't see
the other

*

without knowing where
I was going (but still not
concerned I didn't know)
I packed everything
I thought I might need
(a toothbrush with a pen
on one end) jumped

in the CRV (purchased
months ago, a long plan
to go) turned the ignition
released the parking brake
checked rear-view mirrors
adjusted heat and defrost
attached the seatbelt
slid some Tom Waits
in the CD player (hopes
for other music after
hearing Barbra Streisand
or somebody like her
for days on commutes
to the office) and backed
out into the cul-de-sac
intent on travelling to
unknown places
but just circled back
on a twisted strip
I can't escape even if
I want to, or knew where
I was going or not going

*

I write poetry as a way of confounding foundations and fundamentals. I am always seeking the fun in fundamentals, even fundamentalism. On the one hand, I write poetry as a way of recording and interrogating memories and emotions and hopes, especially with close attention to the autobiographical and subjective journey that often conflates the pronoun *I* with the person known on a birth certificate and Canadian passport as Carleton Derek Leggo and with the person who is currently sitting at a

computer in a well-appointed study in an attractively decorated townhouse in Richmond, British Columbia on a June afternoon. On the other hand, I also write poetry as a way of calling out to others, not unlike a poetic astronomer or cinematic futurist who sends signals into the stratosphere, hydrosphere, and geosphere, and far beyond, always seeking spheres of communal and communicative interest, never sure if anybody is waiting and listening, never sure if anybody even exists. As Lorri Neilsen Glenn (2011) understands, “to write poetry ... is to enter a long, never-ending conversation” (p. 108), and I think a conversation riddled with silence. Poetry speaks languages that are not necessarily readily translatable, languages filled with riddles, oxymorons, litotes, paradoxes, hyperbole, all the devices of discourse that can be overlooked in efforts to tame the wildness of language.

In poetry I seek to “surrender to mystery” and to “refuse the constraints of language” (Domanski, 2002, p. 255). In all my writing I am compelled by desire, an abiding eagerness for communication, connection, comprehension, cognition, and coherence. I do not naively expect to satisfy my desire. I cannot even imagine, for example, what it would be like to arrive at a place of coherence. Like a donut, I am glad for the hole that denies a false sense of a unified whole. I live with desire because the experience of lack and absence, the experience of wanting (without even knowing the object of the wanting) leads to more questioning and more questing. Like a jester the poet is a quester, always refusing answers, certainties, truths, in order to keep the conversation open to multiple interpretations.

As David Geoffrey Smith (2006) suggests, “Hermes’s most special gift may be the art of breaking through the codes of dogmatic interpretation to show a better, freer, more comprehensive way” (p. 115), but while agreeing with Smith, I do not want to promote the notion that the “more comprehensive way” is readily available. The poet does not want to seize comprehension like a police officer apprehends a perpetrator. And the

poet does not want to offer a comprehensive insurance that will cover all risks and contingencies in a collision. And the poet does not want to pretend to a command of a complex body of knowledge like an overstuffed storage locker filled with out-of-date volumes of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Instead, the poet seeks to grasp the tenuous, tentative, tangled, tensile threads of questions, unraveling with tantalizing possibilities for analysis (always seeking to recall the etymology of analysis that includes notions and connotations and denotations of unloosing, loosening, releasing, breaking up, unfastening, setting free, as in loosing a ship from its moorings).

I continue to offer poetry because like Jane Hirshfield (1997) claims, poetry offers “new spiritual and emotional and ethical understandings, new ways of seeing” (p. 79). Of course, this kind of claim can be taken up in innovative and inventive ways (perhaps beyond counting), but I especially like Daphne Marlatt’s notion (2008) that a poem is “a series of openings” (p. 152). Similarly, John Barton (2008) explains that “while fixed in language, the poem itself is unstable and mutable, open to multiplying and perhaps contradictory interpretations” (p. 8). I write poetry because poetry honours the fragmentary, and my life always feels like it is full of shards, slivers, snippets, and splinters, reflecting, refracting, and inflecting experiences of past, present, and future. The lasting lesson of poetry is that linguistically (and autobiographically) the rhyme that informs theme is never definitive, but always infinitive. So, as Jean Baudrillard (1997) notes, “doubtless the final state of thought is disorder, rambling, the fragment and extravagance” (p. 118). I am always looking for Baudrillard’s “hermeneutic window from which to hurl yourself beyond meaning” (p. 101) because I agree with Baudrillard’s claim that “fragmentary writing is, ultimately, democratic writing. Each fragment enjoys an equal distinction.... Each ... has its hour of glory” (p. 8). In writing *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging* Dionne Brand (2001) explains how she collected fragments, “disparate and

sometimes only related by sound or intuition, vision or aesthetic" (p. 19).

This is why (and how) I write poetry.

I no longer ask, Is this a good poem?

I ask, What is this poem good for?

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Loose Goose

Incantation is the most primitive (and powerful) of linguistic forms.

Gregory Orr

What is a good poem?

boo coo doo foo goo hoo joo koo loo

 moo noo poo

qoo roo soo too voo woo xoo you zoo

like gin

a poem sneaks up on you, haunting and hunting

What is a poem good for?

loose goose boost coucous doozy fooball

 whose noose kazoo moose

ruse rouse souse tousle youse woozy zoo

like fog

a poem plays in the spaces of silence

What is a good poem?

dope mope dope dome moped doped
 pom mop pom mop pom mop
pop pop open nope hope rope

like a drunk
a poem asks, do egrets have regrets?

What is a poem good for?

rote vote mote tote note wrote
peddling pedagogy pedaling pedagogy
boat coat goat afloat poet quote

like a cymbal
a poem spells out shards of unspoken notes

*

I continue with a poem because, like Orr (2002a), when I write I feel that the words are “*creating* a world, not describing a preexisting one” (p. 144). In my writing I am always exploring possibilities, figuratively swinging like Tarzan or Spiderman between knowing and not knowing, writing figures and shapes in the air like a succession of music notes that call out a song that enchants and haunts. A poem translates the possibility of a pattern like a ladder from here to there. I agree with Orr (2002) that “each of us needs a sense of order, a sense that some patterns or enduring principles are at work in our lives” (p. 16), or at least I agree that some of us need a sense of order (I never feel comfortable or confident in making assumptions about what others need, especially when the assumptions are unabashedly generalizing), or at least I agree that I need a sense of order (tidy desks, well-organized offices, carefully

constructed routines). So, I write poetry as a creative way to lay down words in shapes, designs, and structures that encourage me to know the cosmos in chaos and the chaos in cosmos, a chiasmus of turning and returning, like furrows in a farm field, a process of verse and re-verse that exposes the chimeric chasm between chaos and cosmos. I am pursuing Helen Sword's (2012) three ideals for stylish academic writing: "communication, craft, and creativity" (p. 173).

I ask again and again, What is a poem good for?, not because I expect to convince anyone (perhaps not even myself), but because I am compelled to testimony. I am a spiritual seeker who has seen the shadow of a divine verb like a divining rod that is always searching, sometimes twitching, in response to the phantom or real presence of water hidden in subterranean places that are faraway and near. Like Donald Hall (2004) recommends, "subjectivity itself is textual" (p. 128). So, I am always asking "Who am I?" In asking the question in poetry, I acknowledge how we are "*subject* to discourse, not simply *subjects through* discourse with the ability to turn around, contemplate, and rework our subjectivity at will" (Hall, 2004, p. 127). We write ourselves and we are written, even when we know language is "notoriously unreliable and unfixed/unfixable" (Hall, 2004, p. 81). While holding fast to notions of the undecideability and slipperiness of language and discourse for understanding the identities of the *I* I claim and the *I* you claim, I still also hold fast to Hall's (2004) hopeful conviction that "the text of the self offers a particularly important entry point into discussions of the textuality of culture and human social interaction" (p. 78). Like Paula M. Salvio's (2007) observation about how Anne Sexton as a writer and teacher "worked to articulate a more expansive form of personal narrative, one that stressed, albeit intuitively, that language is a medium through which the self is at once composed and decentered" (p. 88). In order to decenter, we need to first acknowledge a center. I regard each of my poems as a center, etymologically related to the Greek *kentron*, or the

sharp, stationary point of a pair of geometric compasses. There is no single center, but we do see and know and understand from a specific center or centers, and we need to take the measure of these centers. In this way, I regard each poem as a center that provides a location for speculation and locution, an aesthetic and imaginative stance (even an instance) for circling, spiraling, perhaps like a Spirograph. So, I agree with Hirshfield's (1997) helpful reminder that "circumambulating their subject is the way poems know" (p. 117). I am always eager in poetry to amble (as well as ramble and scramble), fired with ambulatory and circumambulatory energies for wandering and wondering.

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*

Heron

We are involved now in a profound failure of imagination.

Wendell Berry

the world is falling apart
and my response is to write
another poem about
the heron I saw this morning
while walking the dyke beside
the Fraser River when perhaps
I should write about salmon
daily disappearing, or hiding,
or Japanese-Canadians
who once fished here but
learned with war they were

more Japanese than Canadian
even if they were born in
Steveston, British Columbia,
and know as much about Japan
as the rest of us who grew up
on Hollywood war films,
or I should write about urban
sprawl or agrarian disaster
or untreated sewage or the earth
quake that will one day wash
all Lulu Island into the Gulf
of Georgia like a memory
too proud for itself, but no
I write again about the heron
standing still in the river
as if I know anything at all
about herons, since taught
forever by Walt Disney
to anthropomorphize wildness,
I imagine countless stories
for the heron, but know
only the heron's otherness
and utter disregard for me
watching it like a creature
with nothing better to do
while the world falls apart
and I write another poem
about the heron I saw
standing alone in the grass
on the edge of the river
waiting for a fish or a bug

minding its own business

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