

## The Functions of Poetry

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It may seem that only someone with a crassly utilitarian view of poetry could talk of its “functions,” as if it were a building material or a piece of machinery. Yet the arguments over the merits of poems and poetic schools and trends, the complaints about the way it is taught and not taught, read and not read, suggest that those engaged in the process have quite different kinds of poems in mind, and are reading poems for quite different reasons, under different conditions. It may be useful, therefore, to view poetry, at least provisionally, less as an art than as a means to an end.

Looked at as an empirical phenomenon, not an ideal concept, poetry reveals functions that are various and overlapping. We fondly acknowledge the positive functions. Poetry can entertain or amuse, we say. It can offer an unexpected insight or a sharp observation. It can move. At moments of crisis or loss, or at times of rejoicing, it can offer consolation, comfort, or a decisive way of fixing the meaning and importance of the event. It can serve as a vehicle for meditation. With its power to stay in the mind, it can provide mental reference and emotional assurance over many years or decades.

All these functions are sources of value for individuals. But not all the functions are positive, even in poems acknowledged to be excellent. Consider the response of Czeslaw Milosz to Philip Larkin’s “Aubade,” his appalled contemplation of inevitable death and one of the icons of twentieth-century English poetry: “[T]he poem leaves me not only dissatisfied but indignant,” Milosz wrote, “and I wonder why myself.” Seamus Heaney cites this objection and expands:

“Aubade” does not go over to the side of the adversary. But its argument does add weight to the negative side of the scale and tip the balance definitely in favour of chemical law and mortal decline. . . . For all its heartbreaking truths and beauties, “Aubade” reneges on what Yeats called the “spiritual intellect’s great work.”

So we must conclude that among poetry’s functions, at least in recent times, is that of disturbing, provoking, and causing dissent. In a medium acknowledged to have unique emotional power, it could hardly be otherwise.

In addition to what we might call artistic functions, there are also social ones. Because the poetry of a period has typical subjects and favored styles, it can serve as a marker of the tastes of its era. Indeed, at any moment in history, certain poems, and the communal response to them, can be taken as a social definition of a sane and desirable attitude toward experience. If Whitman’s work evokes widespread approval, then culture and civilization are nudged in a certain direction. If it evokes yawns, derision, or disdain, they are nudged in another. From the debates among two or more camps that have differing responses to Whitman (and to various other figures), something like a social consensus is formed, though always an uneasy one, subject to change. More on this later.

If we ask of any of poetry's functions, "For whom does it serve this function?" the futility of much critical debate becomes evident. For even if we could agree on a set of functions that a "good" poem should fulfill, we very likely could not agree on the persons, or types of person, who should be affected. If a poem ought to move, and it moves you but does not move me (or, worse, moves you to tears but moves me to laughter), and if this happens repeatedly, then it is likely that you and I will not choose the same anthologies, and if we have some regard for each other we will avoid the subject of poetry in our conversation.

Moreover, preferred functions change, depending on the readers of poems and the times. Poems in the eighteenth century were frequently vehicles of social and political satire; today that function is much less common. In our time people who regard a poem primarily as a performance piece, a script for declamation, will respond enthusiastically to compositions that would cause a professor of literature, sitting alone under his reading lamp, to turn the page in haste. Poems prized in our own day (in some circles at least) for their distortion of syntax or their resistance to rational understanding would have been universally condemned for those same qualities at other times in history because such functions were considered illegitimate.

Indeed, many traditional functions of poetry have their anti-functions:

to communicate	—	to obfuscate
to give pleasure	—	to provoke and disturb
to include most readers	—	to exclude most readers
to celebrate balance	—	to celebrate excess

That such opposites can coexist among the scattered and diverse audience for contemporary poetry may be an indication either of a sophisticated and broad-minded readership or of the isolation and mutual antagonism of readers largely untouched by (or unable to coalesce around) a common literary tradition.

Nevertheless, observing what functions a poem fulfills allows us to better understand what we are doing when we evaluate it, to be clear about the point and meaning of our judgment. It also allows us to account for shifts in taste: as readers broaden or narrow what they will accept as a poem's primary object, or its primary means of expression, we say that fashion or judgment has changed; but more precisely what has changed is an expectation: a poem is now expected to perform a new function, and perhaps expected not to perform an old one.

*Function* is thus an instrumental concept. It implies an agent, a means, and an object. In this case the poet is the agent, the poem is the means, and the object – the one acted on – is the reader. There must be some alignment among these three for the poem to "work": the poet must have an intention that the poem must convey to a reader who is disposed to receive it. The notion of "function" thus implies a negotiation between writer and reader, one not without effort on both sides, as represented by W.C. Williams:

I wanted to write a poem  
that you would understand.  
For what good is it to me  
if you can't understand it?  
But you got to try hard.

*January Morning, Suite XV*

The likelihood of misalignment between the expectations of readers and writers opens up the need for a negotiator or arbitrator between the two: an editor. Editors wield an ambiguous power. By their claim to embody and represent the tastes and expectations of thousands of readers better than those readers could themselves express them, they arrogate insight they do not truly possess. Yet by enforcing standards above the lowest common denominator, they assure readers that most of what they will encounter in a publication has passed through at least some critical screening. As no one understands better than an editor who has waded through thousands of discouraging submissions, this is an invaluable service, no less so even though, in their inevitable bias toward the known and their numbness induced by repeated encounters with the strange and the dull, they can hardly help rejecting some worthy work and accepting some that is unworthy.

In periods of transition, as the functions of poetry are being challenged and redefined, the role of the editor becomes problematic. If at a given time people feel a poem's primary function is to offer insight and to delight, but some writers choose instead to unnerve and mystify, the editor must decide whether enough readers will "get it." If they will not, can they be persuaded to try? Thus some journals – and their editors – fall, as the perceived functions of poetry shift, while others, perhaps aimed from the start at a different and more eccentric audience, rise.

Viewing poetry as an instrument in a dialogue between writer and reader takes some of the mystery out of this process. It puts a human face on art, allowing us to see it as both subjective – that is, a matter of individual preferences negotiated between the parties – and outside our control, since large social and cultural movements, often only dimly understood by the participants, determine which functions will gain favor, and when.

Plenty of mystery remains. Seeing a poem as having a function is not likely to make poems any easier to write, though it may help to explain why a particular poem was anthologized while another was not, why one reputation rose while another fell, why a style is embraced that a few years before was shunned – or vice versa. Even when art is attended by painstaking craft, its wellsprings remain unfathomable; but the behavior of writers and readers, as they bandy these still unexplained tokens between them, is part of a perennial human comedy that can amuse and instruct.

If poetry serves and fulfills all these functions – social, psychological, and spiritual – then why is it so widely ignored and even disdained? One might answer that it isn't. In various forms – popular song including "folk" and rap, limericks and other light verse, rallying cries of street demonstrations, naïve compositions for birthdays and other special occasions – rhythmic language thrives.

Yes (the devil's advocate responds), but these are "low" forms of speech, not what we mean when we speak of poetry.

Well, then, at somewhat higher levels there are poetry slams and innumerable readings in bookstores and coffeehouses.

But (he objects) most of these "poems" are unskillful and immature, especially those offered in the obligatory "open mike" events that accompany "featured" readings and are arguably the only reason most people attend readings in the first place. (Why is this, when symphony concerts are not obliged to offer karaoke afterwards?) Such events are not "art" poetry, a point made by a letter-writer to *Poetry* magazine, who takes the editor to task for allowing reviewers to give "incredible credence to spoken word, slam, and rap artists, with the implication that their creations are on a par with what is commonly known as poetry." Yet very few people read the latter sort of poetry. Why?

For one thing, "art" or "high" poetry is still recovering from a serious deformation foisted upon it early in the twentieth century, when it was deprived of the very qualities – rhythm and rime – that made it adhere to memory, and at the same time required by the aesthetics of the age to be incomprehensible to all but a small coterie. For another, at peak intellectual levels, most forms of art are appreciated only by a small minority; numbers are not a guide to virtue. (But neither is the inverse true: a minuscule audience is not a sign of anointment.) For a third thing, new art that is genuinely innovative is rarely grasped with enthusiasm on the first encounter. Even perceptive people of generous disposition (including literary editors) must often come back several times to a new composition before they can fully take it in – and therefore the audience for a work that breaks new ground is almost sure to be small at first. It may grow with time; the work may eventually come to be recognized as a monument. But even so it is unlikely ever to command a wide readership.

And by contemplating these exclusions we come to see, paradoxically, that a principal function of poetry – and of all art – is reassurance. "Our" poetry imparts the comforting sense that we are on familiar ground, that we have the perceptual tools to make sense of what we are encountering. Even artistic rebels need this sense, and that is why they select their own societies, and often their own rules, which they adhere to with the same fierce, unquestioning loyalty as the man who recites "The Cremation of Sam McGee" at social gatherings. If it is good to be reassured that one is on familiar ground, it is still better to know that that ground is beyond the reach of most others – that one is in an intellectual gated community, at home but set apart.

Perhaps a better figure is the medieval walled city. For these literary enclaves are in intermittent warfare, sending forth champions and sometimes whole armies to do battle with neighboring principalities. It is a situation we must learn to live with. Out of these battles, protracted, messy, inconclusive, emerges something that for lack of a better term we call our civilization.