

Funny Things Happen on the Way to the Forms

By Rod Jellema

Many years ago I was invited to ply my trade at a weekend poetry festival celebrating “The Limits and Shape of Language.” Right down my alley—but a few hours before I was due at the lectern, I discovered that the theme had been changed. Only one word was different, a change that suggests what’s sadly wrong in our culture’s dealings with poetry. Somehow it was decided that we could better spend the weekend thinking about “The Limits and Shape of Meaning.” Not language; meaning.

I wondered then, and still do, if all this fuss about meanings in poems isn’t a capitulation to ordinary dullness. Prescribed, prosaic, computable *meaning* bumps off elastic, exploratory, mysterious, active *language*.

I spoke anyway then, and will write now, mostly about *language*. The switch in words gave me occasion to kick meaning around. So consider this: what sets the limits on language? Isn’t it precisely an insistence on meaning that tries to limit the language of poems? The conscious intellect rises to its unmetrical feet like a stern schoolmarm, a ruffle of lace at its neck and copper ruler in hand, to demand “understanding.” That right away limits the poem to what the unaided intellect can understand, which isn’t much. As imagination has already been sent to the principal’s office for correction, the expectation that there should be a merely logical meaning fences poems in, forbids them to go out of the yard.

But poems are wanderers, seekers. They mean to stream very far out of the schoolyard. The “new criticism” of almost a century ago tried brilliantly to open our ears to the life within poems (“A poem should not mean / But be”), but that lesson has slowly faded. Out of this predicament come thousands of tin-eared teachers and reviewers and pundits who work up their own prose re-statements of “meanings” instead of catching, enjoying, and sharing the direct and unmediated experience of poetry. So we get millions of students, and later readers, who are baffled by poems whose “meanings” they can’t decipher, analyze, puzzle out, or solve. And these are all the wrong verbs. It’s like training generations of diners to look for fortune-cookie messages while they ignore the Peking duck.

Speaking of meat: T. S. Eliot says that the poet brings meaning into the poem the way the burglar brings a nice piece of meat: to keep the dog quiet so he (burglar, poet) can get on with his work.

Whatever else the poet’s work is, it’s shaping language that rides beyond the limits of understanding or meaning. Poetry is addressed not just to the intellect but to the whole human being: nerve endings, the five senses, psychological associations, dream images, knowledge of history, spiritual awareness, mythic memory—the poet is tapping into what

exists alive (though sometimes dozing) in all of us. To restate a poem's meaning in workaday prose is as impossible and as useless as restating the meaning of a violin concerto or a jazz riff or an Expressionist painting. All art makes for us, concretely, what we don't quite know how to say. That's what art is for.

So poets take ordinary words, like handfuls of dust or clay, and shape them. That's where this piece started: "the limits and *shape* of language." Back in the middle ages, at the starting-line for English poetry, Anglo-Saxon poets were known as *scops*, meaning "shapers." And that's still what poets do. They make words crystallize themselves into a unified whole. But funny things happen on the way to the forms. The poem, like an improvised jazz solo, embodies and discovers its vision simultaneously. The "meaning" slowly and unobtrusively finds itself and grows in a self-generating process of metrical pulse and variation, building with sound patterns, leaps of association, collages, overtones, breaks in voice, undertones, and juxtapositions. Process, not obedience. Cohesion. Which is why poems are not difficult.

Of course, many poems—perhaps most of our truly great poems—are initially challenging. They work and grow at unplumbed depths of human awareness and reveal themselves only after multiple readings. I just want to suggest that wringing out great lines for meanings which become prose restatements misses their greatness. You're exchanging silver skates for wooden clogs.

A little research into a poem's vocabulary can help. But opening yourself wide to the resources the poet has used in the process will advance the poem's revelation beyond any paraphrase. Read poems as poems. You don't need, as a guide into Yeats, his philosophical tome *A Vision*; no need for Eliot's eccentric, unnecessary notes to *The Waste Land*, either. You might try instead a more pleasurable aid—listening to poets reading their own work aloud, either on recordings or in public venues. You get to experience how words move beyond their prose denotations.

Once outside the yard, you'll notice, poetry can move anywhere from the plains of Troy to a child's grave to a bus depot to the moon. But the boundaries for "getting" a poem give way to our seeing and hearing the living process that shapes the words—looking not for what a poem says but for what it makes, not for *what* the poem means but for *how* it means. That's where the pleasure lies. There is an undercurrent of pressure pushing from inside the form as it tells you more than can be said. And any reader can enter the how of a poem by simply following the poet's footprints into the snow-white light that the poem has become.