

Introduction

Two questions sit intertwined at the heart of a volume entitled *The Value of Poetry*. Does poetry have value? What are the particular kinds of value that poetry has, has had, or might have? This book presumes an answer to the first and concentrates on sorting through the second. Poetry of course has value. That value is not universal, but it is transhistorical: poets and poetry have been important parts of every human culture that we know about, although what those terms designated and what roles poets and poetry played vary from culture to culture and from historical period to historical period. For thousands of years, certain kinds of speech, song, chant, and text have been described by the cultures from which they emerged as “poetry,” and many of them have had immense importance within those cultures and well afterwards. Some of the most vital, the most moving, and the most lasting notions that have occurred to humans have been articulated and held in poems. Whether in oral performances, circulated manuscripts, or published books, poems have mattered quite a lot to quite a few, and poetry has functioned in manifold ways within its specific landscape – as a mode of historical memory, as a repository for a culture’s myths and stories, as a means of political intervention and social mediation, as an aspect of ritual and religious practice, as a form of ceremonial discourse, and as a medium of individual expression and subjective construction. Not all of these functions have been active at all moments or in all cultures, and, as a broad generalization, poets in premodern societies tended to have a much more robust and rangy place than do modern poets.¹ However, even as we understand that the

¹ For several influential and wide-reaching accounts of poets and poetry in early periods, see Emily Thornbury, *Becoming a Poet in Anglo-Saxon England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); M. L. West, *Indo-European Poetry and Myth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Gregory Nagy, *Poetry as Performance: Homer and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Morton W. Bloomfield and Charles W. Dunn, *The Role of the Poet in Early*

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place and force of poetry shifts significantly depending on where and when we look, and even if we understand that poetry designates a relatively small literary and artistic sphere within the totality of contemporary cultural practices, it is incontrovertible that poetry's importance has been ubiquitous. Poems marble civilizations.

For a number of reasons, my own account in this book has a much more limited purview than the previous sentences might suggest, one of whose limitations I am all too well aware. *The Value of Poetry* can't pretend or dare to be a comprehensive account of poetry across the globe and throughout time, nor can it help being a book written, primarily, about English-language poetry for an English-language audience. Thus, it is largely a book about poetry's value in the contemporary Anglophone world: I aim to show how poetry matters and what poems in particular offer in the present and might offer in the future. In large part, this is a concession to my own abilities and areas of knowledge. But there are additional reasons for this aspect of the volume. *The Value of Poetry* aims to speak of and to the present and so draws its materials from its own surround. While there are occasional forays into poetry from earlier periods and while I place my account within a much longer history of poetic practices and traditions, my argument rests on and revolves around a particular body and understanding of poetry: English-language poetry since the early nineteenth century. While I often use the simple term "poetry" to designate my topic rather than more unwieldy literary-historical terms ("modern Anglophone poetry" or "nineteenth- and twentieth-century poetry in English"), it should be understood that such a seemingly universal term is much more specific in practice. My use of the term "poetry" throughout is primarily a stylistic convenience, and certainly not an assumption that my account is comprehensive and holds good for all poetry, in all languages, from all times. I wish that I could write that book.

At the same time, this book is not intended as a survey of or all-inclusive argument about contemporary poetry in English. Because

Societies (Woodbridge, Suffolk: D. S. Brewer, 1989); and Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, ed. Stephen Mitchell and Gregory Nagy (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000 [1960]).

my intention is to demonstrate both what poems afford to readers and how readers might approach contemporary poems, I tend to concentrate on a small handful of texts in each chapter, and while I hope that the total array of poems on which I focus is seen to be interestingly diverse, I did not aim for that array to be representative of contemporary Anglophone poetry in all of its shapes and styles. Some of the poems that I land on are by poets who are canonical or on their way to becoming so, but others are written by poets who are earlier in their careers or who have only gained notice in a quite particular corner of the poetry world. In addition, it is probably worth mentioning that just as my argument about poetry's value recognizes that poetry has been held to be important everywhere and at all times and also that it hasn't always or everywhere been valued for the same reasons or fulfilled the same roles, so does my focus on contemporary poetry proceed from the notion that poems are neither entirely hooked to nor free from their historical conditions. Instead, they often appear as formal switch points between diachronic and synchronic perspectives, attentive to and enmeshed in the terms of their world, but also poised to reassess or reimagine those terms. At a practical level, this means that while my argument about the significance of poetry draws from contemporary examples, it does not account for contemporary poetry in a strictly literary-historicist way, and it does envision that at least some of the interpretive strategies and claims that I make throughout are seen to be portable – or at least generative – for poetry from other periods and traditions. Finally, this book is primarily concerned with poems, rather than poets. There is a long tradition of defending or explaining poets as particular sorts of individuals – in the Romantic and post-Romantic context especially – or by rebutting that notion (in modernist arguments about impersonality, for example). *The Value of Poetry* is much less interested in the value of poets than it is in the value of poems, and so it does not argue for poetry as a particular sort of vocation, but for the significance of a poem as a nexus of writerly practice, textual occurrence, and readerly activity.²

² Although my own volume has a tremendously different approach and intended audience than does Stephanie Burt's *Don't Read Poetry: A Book about How to Read Poems* (New York: Basic Books, 2019), we both privilege the particular

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We might give this nexus a name: form. Although it is an overstatement, it isn't very much of one to suggest that nearly every interesting question about poetry has to do with form, and I will spend a bit of time here previewing the approach to form that shapes this book.³ I am not overly invested in advancing anything like an airtight definition of poetry: if the history of poetry has suggested anything, it is that no single definition of or homogeneous standard for poetry can possibly account for the varieties of significant poetry, even within a single literary-historical period or linguistic tradition. However, it is probably safe to suggest that – at minimum – poetry names a practice and art of shaping language, and my sense of the term “form” gathers the different aspects of this shaping: the compositional activities, assumptions, and implications that are involved in the shaping; the nature and structure of the shape that results; and the ways that a poem is realized within the processes of reception. Any notion of form that doesn't include these nodes will likely become thin in practice, unable to account for the complex and processual dynamics involved in what we must think of capaciously as a poem's making. As Lyn Hejinian points out in “The Rejection of Closure” (1983), “form is not a fixture but an activity.”⁴

At the heart of a poem's activity is its bearing toward its materials – words, phrases, sentences. Poetry makes language chimerical. A poet uses our basic system of communication and signification as, simultaneously, artistic material. In a poem, words function both as words – those transparent and shared ciphers that lead on to referents and concepts – and as artistic stuff – more opaque, denser, less

textures of poems over poetry or poets. Indeed, it is clear that the unstated positive imperative that goes along with Burt's negative mantra – “Don't Read Poetry” – is “Read Poems.”

³ Nearly all of the texts referenced in this book spend time on form, but for several influential reconsiderations, see Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015); Denise Gigante, *Life: Organic Form and Romanticism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009); Angela Leighton, *On Form: Poetry, Aestheticism, and the Legacy of a Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); and Susan Wolfson, *Formal Charges: The Shaping of Poetry in British Romanticism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997).

⁴ Lyn Hejinian, “The Rejection of Closure,” in *The Language of Inquiry* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), 40–58, at 47.

amenable to quick transfer. If language is our common means for conceptualizing the world and our experience in and of it, and for communicating aspects of that experience to others (informing, expressing, describing, explaining, stating, questioning – all the things that language does), then poetry is certainly involved in many of those activities, but it isn't principally interested in conveying information or communicating in a straightforward sense. By way of rhythm, sound, rhyme, figuration, rhetoric, genre, and diction, poems aim to activate the entire bodies of words and their combinations. The good poem asks its reader to look closely at the configuration of words that constitute it rather than to see straight through them to their denotations. This density is the source both of poetry's pleasure and its difficulty, and I devote Chapter 1 to expanding on the implications and significance of this claim. We think of poets as "creative writers," but poets do not "create" the materials with which they work, nor do they fundamentally transform their materials as a sculptor does stone. Poems don't result from acts of creation, but from those of combination, arrangement, and assembly – poetry is often a practice of foraging, tinkering, meddling, melding, and suturing. And poets work with open source material. The words that poets use keep their usual, agreed-upon semantic and denotative freight when they are brought into a poem, even as they gain a certain density or viscosity that is generally not granted to them – or, not actively noticed – when they occur in the run of everyday use. The features of words that typically would be passed over as we tune in to their literal meaning – that is, their phonological and morphological structures, their etymologies, their figural and idiomatic propensities, their consonantal and vocalic patterns – are all turned to use. In poems, words become both enlivened and estranged.

Poems thus take on a peculiar sort of materiality. The specific verbal arrangement of a poem is inextricable from its content in a way that isn't the case for many kinds of prose, which lend themselves more easily to rephrase or paraphrase. And so, like a sculpture or painting, a poem is often granted a certain kind of objecthood: a "well wrought urn" or a "machine made out of words," to cite just two of the more well-known instances, by, respectively, Cleanth

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Brooks and William Carlos Williams.⁵ A poem's form is, most straightforwardly, the particular words that comprise it in the particular order and pattern in which they appear. At the same time, however, the materiality that we often attribute to poems is peculiar because it is largely immaterial. A poem is strangely free from any single material occurrence of it. When reading a poem – whether online, in a thin volume, or in an anthology – few readers are troubled by the fact that the text is a replica of a replica of a replica, and so on. A poem keeps its verbal body even as it mutates from format to format, from font to font, and from edition to edition; it is “particular” in that it is only and precisely the words that constitute it (leaving room for variants and alternate versions), but it doesn't exclusively inhere in any specific instance of itself. The “original” of a poem, unlike a painting or sculpture, isn't necessarily a more privileged aesthetic object than any other accurate textual manifestation of it. To be sure, an original manuscript by the poet often has immense scholarly and economic value, and different editions and versions of poems often exist and are differently meaningful, but a reader of Keats' “To Autumn” in its original manuscript has no better *interpretive* “claim” on the poem than does one who reads it on a photocopy's photocopy. Broadly speaking, both have read the same poem. In most cases, the differences that might obtain between a poem's manuscript or typescript and the text of that poem as it appears in the poet's published volume or a later edition are less significant than their fundamental convergence. This is perhaps to belabor the obvious, but it does seem an important aspect of poetry's aesthetic value: a poem isn't attached to any specific manifestation of itself. Any aura that it might have is, paradoxically but crucially, already abstracted: its materiality is imagined.

At the same time that poems might partake, though strangely, of some of the aesthetic features that we more readily associate with the visual arts, they also share with music and dance (as well as with

⁵ Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (New York: Harvest Books, 1947); and Williams Carlos Williams, “Author's Introduction to *The Wedge*” [1944], in *Selected Essays of William Carlos Williams* (New York: New Directions Books, 1969 [1954]), 255–257, at 256.

other literary forms) a temporal structure. A poem unfolds in time, both as a compositional arrangement and also as something like a score for a performance by a voice (even if that voice is the subvocal one of a silent reader). However, the “time” of a poem is indeterminate as compared to that of a musical performance, and compared to a musical score a poetic text, while typically affording and encouraging a vocalization, is much less dependent on the formalized conditions of performance in order to be fully realized. In “The Defence of Poesy” (1595), Sir Philip Sidney catches something of poetry’s complex commitments: “Poesy therefore is an art of imitation, for so Aristotle termeth it in the word *mimesis* – that is to say, a representing, counterfeiting, or figuring forth.” Sidney goes on to describe a poem as “a speaking picture,” and this sense of simultaneous verbal *mimesis* and verbal performance remains central to the work of poetry.⁶ A poem is both artifact and happening, and central to our understanding of poems is some kind of account of how they move or proceed. A sonnet, for instance, is both a shape and a path: it provides a notional template that embeds its own formal history and includes both a series of already-established alternative maneuvers and the possibility of crafting new variations. It offers a particular procedure, a set of conventions that have traditionally been linked to that procedure, and the space for both compositional freedom and moments of happenstance and accident – spaces in which the text might be revealed immanently, rather than generated as a function of its chosen design.

A sonnet, then, might be thought of as a conventional form, a procedural form, and a revealed form all at once. And many poems develop according to such hybrid or mixed models, tacking between the procedure or set of conventions to which they have committed themselves and the impulse for invention, play, and deviation. Some poems that I’ll highlight in this volume proceed according to no recognizable or easily describable form, generating their structure as they go – freely, haphazardly, or according to a pattern of intention

⁶ Sir Philip Sidney, “The Defence of Poesy,” in Katherine Duncan-Jones, ed., *Sir Philip Sidney: The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008 [1989]), 212–251, at 217.

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known only to the writer. Others rely wholly or nearly so on a particular compositional rule or procedure, whether a conventional form or genre or a *sui generis* process or concept. Certain compositional choices might be front-loaded – the source of a poem’s language (as in found poetry), the principle of its ordering (say, via the alphabet), its metrical patterning, the number of lines or stanzas it contains – while others might be left to disclose themselves as the poem develops. At times a poem might proceed along familiar lines – narrative, catalog, description, meditative reflection – maintaining normative modes of discursive coherence. While at others it might proceed paratactically or according to an inscrutable logic that doesn’t seem to cohere into continuous units of sense or significance, such that we are able to hold the poem together only by positing a centripetal force to balance its centrifugal textual energies. We have terms to describe such seemingly unruly poems – such as collage or montage – but we often motivate our interest in them by framing them as the contemplation or thinking-in-language of a person: what knits such a poem together is our attribution of a subject intending it. Thus, in addition to describing the perceptible shapes that a poem takes, the only sometimes evident compositional logic behind those shapes, and the principles and patterns by which those shapes develop, form also gives us a way to think about these shapes and movements within a structure of intention, or at least a way to impel a poem’s particulars, especially when those particulars are disjunct or inscrutable.

This brings us to the complicated matter of poetry’s relation to expression and subjectivity, a topic that I’ll focus on more fully in Chapters 2 and 3, but which I’ll introduce here. One line of thought, and one that has tended to dominate since the early nineteenth century, is that a poem is the emanation of a subject. A poem, as John Stuart Mill has put it, is overheard thought, “feeling confessing itself to itself in moments of solitude.”⁷ A poem, then, isn’t primarily a mimetic representation, as Sidney’s Aristotelian view has it, but an expressive representation of a person’s (and, implicitly for Mill, the

⁷ John Stuart Mill, “Thoughts on Poetry and its Varieties” [1833/1859], in *Dissertations and Discussions: Political, Philosophical, and Historical* (Boston, MA: W. V. Spencer, 1864), vol. 1, 89–120, at 97.

author's) thoughts, feelings, emotions, or beliefs. Modernist poetics rewired, rather than wholly abandoned, this tenet of Romanticism. As T. S. Eliot notes in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919), "the emotion of art is impersonal."⁸ It isn't that poems don't offer emotions, but rather that the emotions they offer are not those of the poet. A poem constructs, in its phrasings, rhythms, images, and figures, an "objective correlative" – a textual object that correlates emotions and patterns them via poetry's shaping forces.⁹ In both the Romanticism of Mill and the modernism of Eliot the poem is framed as the delineation of an affective and intellectual experience – a thinking-and-feeling-in-words – however much the two accounts differ in so many other respects. Part of the force of such a poem is that it successfully feigns immediacy; it is not only the recounting of an experience, but the in-process enactment of one.

Central to these enactments is the idea of lyric poetry as what Paul de Man described (and deconstructed) as "the instance of represented voice."¹⁰ If we often imagine poetry as being about a self of some sort, then it is a self that speaks. Poems can catch the shapes of experience and acts of speech – the structure of a feeling, the branching course of a thought, the many-minded play of a mind, an emotion's uncertain curve – and embed these shapes in a bundle of language that is, in some fashion, poised toward the future and addressed to another.

The notion that a poem has a "voice" is a fiction – there's no body or self threaded into the page, just inky (or digitized) marks – but it is a remarkably enduring one. Even in a postmodern, poststructural, post-enlightenment, post-humanist context, we still abide the thought that poems construct voices. Speaking to other people, speaking to animals, speaking to gods, speaking to themselves, speaking to

⁸ T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent" [1919], in Anthony Cuda and Ronald Schuchard, *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition: The Perfect Critic, 1919–1926* (Baltimore, MD and London: Johns Hopkins University Press and Faber and Faber, 2014), 105–114, at 112.

⁹ T. S. Eliot, "Hamlet" [1919], in Anthony Cuda and Ronald Schuchard, *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition: The Perfect Critic, 1919–1926* (Baltimore, MD and London: Johns Hopkins University Press and Faber and Faber, 2014), 122–128, at 125.

¹⁰ Paul de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 261.

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no one and nothing. And so one of the core ideas underlying our notion of poetry, and of lyric poetry especially, is that of address.¹¹ Poems are often construed as confected acts of speech, as potentially vocalizable, but poems as we have them tend to be written: their vocalization is always disjointed, at odds with whatever we might understand to be their original voicing (itself another kind of fiction). In a too prototypically Derridean fashion, poems are estranged from their origin. The chimerical quality of poetry, then, also inheres in its incessant ventriloquizing of a voice that has no source.

Vital to such textual performances is the play of pronouns. A love poem like Prufrock's doesn't simply describe or recount his vexed thought or his wavering feeling – it acts them out in the “real time” form of an address. Of course, such immediacy is radically mediated. Unlike a real-life scenario, deictics have nowhere, or too many places, to attach; unlike a play (or a movie or television show), terms like “us,” “you,” and “I” aren't connected to characters with actual bodies (or filmed or digitized ones); and unlike a novel, those shifters don't function within the established logic of a diegetic space. Like all of its pronouns, a poem's “I” is also chimerical – a fissile amalgam of writer, speaker, and reader that is built to be unmade. The idea of vocal performance that underlies lyric's constitutive fiction, along with the concomitant construction of a virtual diegesis within which that voice speaks, must be understood as a recessive shadow play that produces both readerly uncertainty and readerly involvement. One is caught between the familiarity of one's own voice speaking (silently or otherwise) and one's own mind reading a poem and, so, being called into it (as “I” or as “you,” “here” and “now”), and the knowledge that such a call is provisional, fictional, and something of a ruse. Even the simplest present tense verbs become compound and multivalent. “I walk through the long schoolroom questioning” is neither statement nor update nor reminiscence nor

¹¹ On speech acts, voice, and address in lyric, see Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), esp. 109–131 and 186–243; David Nowell Smith, *On Voice in Poetry: The Work of Animation* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); and William Waters, *Poetry's Touch: On Lyric Address* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003).