

Obscurity in Poetry

by John C. Goodman

After the Norman invasion of England under William the Conqueror in 1066 and the subsequent reigns of the Plantagenet Kings, French culture – and poetry – dominated English culture. The French introduced classical meters and end-rhymes into England. Old English poetry did not use end rhymes, but relied on fore-rhymes, since Old English was rich in words beginning with similar sounding syllables, arranged alliterative in four-beat lines. The adaptation to end-rhyme and meter proved to be very challenging for the English.

The metrical feet of French poetry were designed for long and short syllables of equal stress, a system adapted from classical Greece. In French and other Romance languages, each syllable has the same stress, while in English there are stressed, semi-stressed, and unstressed syllables. The long and short syllables of the metrical feet were replaced by the English stressed and unstressed syllables, but the large vague area of the semi-stressed syllable was left unresolved with the result that most English formal poetry incorporates variant feet.

Also, French depends on word endings for meanings and so abounds with rhyme. Almost any regular verb in French will rhyme with any the other regular verb. English, in comparison, is very poor in end-rhyme. The English poets were faced with the task of shoehorning the English language into the French forms – and later into other continental forms, such as the Italian sonnet. Shakespeare was able to modify the Petrarchan sonnet to make it slightly easier to write in English, giving us the Shakespearean sonnet.

The twisting and torturing of English to make it fit the foreign forms sometimes resulted in twisted and tortured meanings. Often, normal syntax had to be inverted in order to end a line on a rhyming word. In *To Rosamond*, Geoffrey Chaucer writes, “And like ruby been your cheekes rounde.” The normal syntax is contorted to force ‘rounde’ to the end of the line to complete the rhyme with the next line. The syntax of poetry became convoluted and complex, often obscuring the meaning of the verse.

One of the standard forms in Old English poetry was the riddle poem. As after-dinner entertainment, the inhabitants of the great hall would recite elaborate riddle poems for the others to solve. The riddles resorted to enigmatic, imagistic and highly metaphorical language, as in this 10th century description of the moon in the sky from the *Exeter Book*,

“It hoped, by deceit / And daring and art, to set an harbour / There in that soaring castle.”

In addition, the alliterative form of Old English verse encouraged metaphorical or euphemistic language. For example, if ‘the sea’ didn’t alliterate with the other words in the line, a euphemism would be found, such as ‘the whale’s road,’ a technique called kenning. Similarly, a ship might be referred to as an ‘oar steed’ or a battle as a ‘storm of spears.’ While adopting French forms, the English bards retained this colourful and figurative language, as when Shakespeare describes the moon shining on water in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, as, “when Phoebe doth behold / Her silver visage in the watery glass...”

English poetry continued to grow in complexity to the point that John Dryden, writing in the late 17th century, complained of the obscurity of John Donne’s poetry. John Donne and the Metaphysical Poets, writing around the turn of the 17th century, used complex extended metaphors in ways that almost harken back to the Old English riddle poem.

After that, clarity and consistency of narrative voice began to be stressed in poetry, even though poets continued to jump through hoops to contort the language into metrical rhyming forms. Up until the early 20th century, poetry remained principally narrative and poets, for the most part, made an attempt to write clearly with a consistent voice. The Modernists of the early part of the 20th century largely abandoned narrative and relied on other techniques in the construction of their works, creating a form of indirect associative communication rather than straight-forward story-telling, a form that owes a lot to the dream associations of the earlier French Symbolists and Surrealists.

There was divisive reaction to the perceived obscurity of the Modernist approach and poetry largely returned to the narrative groove. Even later iconoclastic poets such as Allen Ginsberg and Charles Bukowski wrote mostly in a straightforward narrative form. But the lure of non-narrative, associative poetry remained strong and resurfaced in the Post-Modernism of the late 20th century. Again, reactions were extremely divisive leading some poets to retreat into what they considered real poetry, the poetry of rhyme and meter, and establish the New Formalism. The majority of poets went on writing in the established free verse narrative vein while the avant-garde continued to experiment with language, form and meaning.

Obscurity has long been an issue in English poetry. Obscurity in poetry may be unintentional, as when John Milton writes in *On Shakespeare*:

Then thou, our fancy itself bereaving,

Dost make us marble with too much conceiving.

or intentional, as in *r-e-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r* by E.E. Cummings:

rea(be)rran(com)gi(e)ngly
,grasshopper;

Rather than dismissing non-narrative poetry because it is difficult to understand, a productive approach is to try and discern the writer's underlying poetic and ask why a poet would want to write something abstruse in the first place. Language is what we use to communicate, so why would anyone intentionally write something incomprehensible?

The answer has a lot to do with the way our minds work. Our minds are constantly attempting to knit the world together and the tool the mind uses to structure reality is association. Our minds are associative engines continually binding our fragmented experiences together into a unified whole. Where there is no association between discrete events, the mind will supply one. Imagine an athlete who wins a competition while wearing a certain shirt. The next competition, engaged while wearing a different shirt, is lost. The athlete then forms an association between winning and the first shirt, the shirt becomes 'lucky' and the athlete won't compete without it.

There is no connection between winning and wearing a certain shirt, but the association is formed by the mind of the competitor. The mind doesn't care if it is true or not, as long as it makes for a workable framework within which to order experience. Associations which are not supported by physical connections we call belief or faith or superstition or conspiracy theories. Even though they may not be supported by experience or fact, they make the world understandable. So powerful is the associative function of our minds that we often find patterns in random elements. It is a recognized psychological phenomenon that, shown a page of dots, a subject will perceive them in coherent groups. The perception of patterns in random stimuli is called apophenia.

Western culture has championed reason as the most important human faculty, but rational linear logic is only one form of association. We also make non-linear connections between objects and events based on emotions, symbolism, apophenia, intuition and imagination. Around the turn of the 20th century, Freud demonstrated that irrational emotional associations could be created through conditioning. A trauma experienced in childhood could manifest as a neurosis in an adult – the trauma conditioned the emotional response. Ivan Pavlov showed that physical reactions could be conditioned as well when he demonstrated how ringing a dinner bell caused dogs to

salivate in anticipation of being fed. There is no physical or logical connection between the bell and the food, but the dogs had been taught to form an association. Most of our thoughts and deeds and attitudes are the result of social and cultural conditioning.

These revelations had profound existential implications: how can we be free if our thoughts, actions and responses are determined by our conditioning? Are we mere automatons forced to perform pre-programmed routines?

One artistic reaction to this psychological trap was Dada which sought to disrupt conditioned responses through the introduction of the random and unexpected. Surrealism followed soon after with the incorporation of images from the only place where we are free from our conditioning: the natural symbolic language of dreams. If our lives – and even our creativity – are directed by uncontrollable subconscious forces, why not give up the illusion of conscious control entirely and go straight to the source, the subconscious mind? For the Surrealists, psychic events are just as meaningful as physical events and the subconscious is a viable source of both experience and artistic subject matter. Symbolism, as found in dreams, is the natural, innate language of the psyche. That we symbolize before we can talk as evidenced by a child too young to speak who has already formed an attachment to a blanket or stuffed toy – the object is a symbol of security. We have to be taught to speak, but we don't have to be taught how to symbolize.

What is interesting about Surrealist writing is that it is nearly always narrative and syntactical. It uses the conventional meaning structure of language to present startling, and often fun, cascades of images.

As the 20th century progressed, the random elements of Dada and the unconditioned associations of the Surrealists were subjected to various textual and syntactical experiments. Because our minds are so strongly pattern-structured, it is virtually impossible for us to create anything truly random. Everything we imagine has hidden, obscure, conditioned psychic connections.

Besides randomization and dream images, another method of overcoming conditioning and exposing hidden connections is through the disruption of conventional language. The disjunctive language of the Modernists shows how using ordinary words in radical syntax gives us a deeper understanding of the ways in which language conveys meaning. Even though a passage may not make what we would normally call sense, the choice and progression of the words creates an impression or feeling sense of the meaning. Our shared reality is known only through language – as we cannot read minds, the only way we can know someone else's thoughts, feelings or experiences is if

they tell us by communicating through language. By breaking down and regrouping conditioned associations, we can share our experiences in new ways.

Marcel Duchamp dramatically demonstrated this in 1917 when he exhibited a urinal in an art gallery under the title *Fountain*. The lesson is clear: change the context, change the meaning. A urinal in a washroom is a utilitarian object, but in a gallery it is a work of art – the meaning of a thing is defined by its context. This type of shift in meaning-context is something we encounter in our everyday lives: a horseshoe on the hoof of a horse conveys one meaning, while a horseshoe nailed above a doorway will suggest a very different meaning. The object is the same, but its meaning is influenced by the milieu in which it is found. Or suppose someone finds out that a trusted friend has been spreading lies; the whole past relationship will be cast in a new light and understood in a new way. Because of the shifts in perception and perspective brought about by that one revelation, the world is irrevocably changed.

We can see this type of meaning-shift in action in the opening line of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*:

April is the cruellest month...

April, usually associated with the joyful renewal of spring, is described as cruel – and not just cruel but *cruellest*, implying that the other months are cruel as well, just not quite as bad as April. The arresting modifier puts a whole different perspective on our perception of the seasons. With one word, Eliot has changed the way we view reality.

These attempts to reframe the elements of our world by putting them into altered contexts and wringing new meaning from the mundane, helping us to experience the world in a new way, provide an approach to the obscurity of modern poetry. Obscurity is usually associated with our more avant-garde, or experimental, or innovative poets. It is these writers who are forging the way into the future. If writers do embrace rampant esotericisms and nonsense, randomly trawling through information-processing textbooks to generate poems using three goldfish, the I Ching and a 1956 telephone book from Mombasa – as some critics have disparagingly claimed avant-garde writers do – who is to say that it is not poetry? Who is to say that a 1956 Mombasa telephone directory is less valid as source of inspiration than any other text or any other experience? The exploration into unusual uses of language is not so confusing when viewed in the context of the history of poetry.

As far back as the 18th century, philosophers such as David Hume and Immanuel Kant were showing us that what we call reality is not entirely discovered through experience,

but is largely a construct of the psyche. In addition, the existential philosophers of the early 20th century showed us that there is no meaning, logic or reason outside the human mind – the world is absurd, irrational, chaotic. Things are meaningless apart from the meaning we give them; things are random apart from the order we give them. If poetry is absurd, it is merely a mirror of our reality.

Today's avant-garde, which grew out of this colourful history of philosophy, psychology and artistic expression, continues to experiment with language, form and meaning. Not all the experimental poetry of today will stand the test of time. Much of it will be forgotten. But just because an experiment may not have a lasting effect does not mean that it is not worth pursuing. The truth is that we have no idea what will be considered important in the future. Writing disdained in its day is sometimes revered by later generations: Emily Dickinson is a case in point.

The important thing to remember when approaching avant-garde poetry is that it is intentional: the poets are writing in a non-linear style on purpose. And they are not simply trying to be clever or arty, they are sincerely attempting to push the limits of language. Language is often cut up, twisted and wrung – stretched to the extremes of its frayed edges and beyond to explore how far language can be manipulated and still express something meaningful. Every art-form comes up against the limits of its medium and how artists find ways around those limitations to use the medium for new expression is a defining feature of art.

Academic and publisher Robert Lecker describes it this way in *Dr. Delicious, Memoirs of a life in CanLit* (Montreal: Véhicule Press, 2006), "This...convinced me that the best art was really about the problem of being itself. Both Browning and Huysmans, in very different ways, had focused on the inadequacy of art to express what could only be expressed by art. They returned relentlessly to this problem, always coming back to the insufficiency of art to solve the problem they had wanted to address by creating art in the first place. This struck me as a crucial means of determining false art from true. False art was painting, or fiction, or poetry, or music, that remained unaware of the inadequacies and problems raised by its own form. True art was tortured by those inadequacies and problems, and what made it interesting was the strategies the artist developed to deal with them."

All the significant poetry in the history of English literature was written to a poetic. A poetic is a philosophy about language and how language can be utilized in a unique way to convey the poet's unique point of view. A poetic is the set of guidelines or parameters or restraints or constraints that direct the writer's intention. Some of the poetic movements that have shaped, and continue to shape, English literature are

Metaphysical Poetry, Romantic Poetry, Modernism, Beat Poetry, Projective Verse and L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry.

Each poetic is a self-contained schema. A poem created within that structure is meaningful within that frame – and it doesn't have to be meaningful in other frames. The constraints of Romantic poetry don't apply to Beat poetry. This is one of the basic problems with appreciating avant-garde works, that they are often approached with preconceived notions about what a poem should be and about what makes a good poem that are based on older poetics.

There is no one poetic that characterizes all avant-garde poetry. Not all our innovative poets can be said to be attempting to write beyond their conditioning, or exploring the limits of language, or trying to reconstruct language to say things that cannot be said with conventional forms. Some experimental poets stay close to the surrealist tradition and relate bizarre tales in largely narrative, syntactical format. For others, the disruption and disorientation of the language is the message, expressing a sense of alienation by making us feel like strangers in our own culture – a dysfunctional world represented in dysfunctional language. Some intentionally blur the demarcations between the various elements of experience, overlapping inner and outer worlds. Some break their experiences down into basic components and reorder them in new ways. Others use random elements, text symbols rather than words, or invented languages to test the ability of language to convey meaning. Some use surprising juxtapositions of images in an attempt to bypass the critical mind and speak directly to the subconscious. And others provoke alternative perspectives on our shared reality through oblique, lateral, non-linear links rather than direct statement.

With so much variety of personal expression, how do we know when a poem is any good or not? By what standards do we judge it? How do we know we are not being duped into thinking something is great writing when it was really created by chimpanzees clattering away on broken typewriters?

Poetry cannot be judged as 'good' or 'bad' based on its perceived clarity or obscurity. There is no absolute definition by which we can judge poetry as 'good' or 'bad'. Poetry isn't something objective to be found in the world like rocks or trees, poetry is invented by people. The only guide we have for judging poetry is tradition, how others have defined poetry in the past – and it is a changing tradition, constantly in flux. What we consider to be the great poetry of the twentieth century probably wouldn't have been considered poetry at all in the sixteenth century.

Poetry, whether experimental or formal, is either successful or unsuccessful in so far as it expresses the author's poetic, how well it communicates its context, and how insightful, dynamic or unique that context is. Even if random elements are incorporated into a piece, those random elements were consciously added by the writer. The random, the nonsensical, is intended in the work. The random, therefore, becomes purposeful within the context of the artwork; the nonsense becomes meaningful. What is important is not only what the writer presents to us, but the associations between the poetic elements that form in the reader's mind. The reader is invited to create meaningful connections between random shards.

A simple example of this can be seen in Ezra Pound's poem *In a Station of the Metro*:

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough.

Pound could have written something like,
These faces in the crowd,
like petals on a wet, black bough.

but he deliberately left out the conjunction *like* that would normally link the two images together. Conventional syntax is disrupted. The effect of this disjunctive language is to leave the discovery of the connection between the images in the poem to the mind of the reader. Instead of the poet telling us that the faces are like petals, he simply presents the two incongruent pictures, two seemingly random fragments of experience, and lets us make the association for ourselves. Pound was working to a poetic, or a philosophy about how language communicates, in which the subverted syntax of disjunctive language could be used to convey meaning.

Eliot and Pound were writing a hundred years ago, but experimentation with poetic language is still lively today. Today's avant-garde writers are building on the basic questions about poetry that other writers have asked in the past: is a poem written without rhyme or meter still a poem? Is it possible to write a poem without conventional punctuation and syntax? Can a poem without a unifying narration or central subject be called a poem? If a poem has no core meaning, is it still a poem? Can a poem be made entirely out of letter forms or glyphs rather than words? Can a poem be taken beyond the limits of the page?

Our experimental poets are not abandoning tradition so much as developing what has gone before. Innovative poets often use the traditional tropes and techniques of simile, metaphor, alliteration, assonance and allusion combined with disjunction, dissociation,

radical syntax, idiosyncratic punctuation, abstraction, fragmentation, parataxis, collage and other devices that explore the non-linear processes of the mind, the unconscious processes which provide the emotional, symbolic, apophenial, intuitive and imaginative connections between things.

This is what makes art so exciting and challenging. It is always straining at the limits of what is acceptable, what the materials are capable of expressing, and taking the materials beyond their limitations to present something entirely new and unexpected. Artists are constantly redefining what art is.

Poets are continually coming up against the limits of language. We immediately encounter the limits of language when we try to talk about nothing.

Yesterday, upon the stair,
I met a man who wasn't there
He wasn't there again today
I wish, I wish he'd go away...

This rhyme by Hughes Meanes illustrates the difficulty we have in talking about what is not. Oscar Wilde played on it as well when he wrote, "I love talking about nothing; it's the only thing I know anything about." Our language is structured to talk about things, about objects; the only way our language allows us to talk about non-things is to treat them like things. Emotions, colours, sensations, absences, qualities, attributes, space, time, all have to be treated like objects. A vast part of our experience of the world doesn't exist objectively. How do we talk about a thing that is not a thing? Can we write unobjectively? How do we objectify an feeling?

This is one of the challenges of language that writers have struggled with since the earliest English poetry. In the Old English poem *A Woman's Message*, we find, "This song of journeys into sorrow / Is mine. I sing it. I alone..." A journey, a physical movement from one place to another, is used to describe a non-physical, emotional investigation into feelings of sorrow and loneliness. The description of what isn't in terms of what is, of making the language speak beyond itself, is one of the basic challenges of the English language. The approaches writers have taken to solve this, and other problems of language, have determined what we call poetry.

The limits of the language keep changing from age to age as our experiences as a society change, and what we have to express about those experiences undergoes change. What was important in one age diminishes while what is important in the next grows and needs to be expressed in new language. Obscurity is redefined in each era; what is

judged obscure is a product of the age. John Donne, William Wordsworth, Walt Whitman, T.S. Eliot were radicals in their day, writing about things that had never been written about before and in ways that had not been imagined before – and were all subjected to harsh criticism. But because they are now part of the accepted canon, we forget how innovative they were within the context of their own age.

Poets are continually changing the scope and definition of poetry. Art thrives on change because the world is constantly changing and art must change with it. In order to keep art dynamic and interesting, artists are always pushing the boundaries of their craft; utilizing new materials or old materials in new ways; depicting new subject matter; presenting new ideas, new forms and new means of expression. The obscurity brings increased clarity.

The history of poetry isn't simply a history of great writing; it is a history of poetics, a history of the ideas of what poetry is and the execution of those ideas in verse. It becomes the history of innovation and iconoclasm, a history of the overcoming of the limits of language, a history of expressing the inexpressible – of communicating what the language was not designed to communicate.

Today's poetic experiments are a natural progression from what has gone before. Eventually, some of the techniques developed by today's experimental writers will become more widely used and accepted as legitimate poetic devices. Free verse is an example of this process: fiercely resisted when it was introduced, in time it became the dominant form of the twentieth century. We would not have free verse today if it had not been championed by the avant-garde poets of the past.

Poetry is defined by the people who create it, publish it and read it. Obscurity is in the eye of the beholder. Where the experiments of our age will lead is unknown, but the experimentation is necessary to prepare the way for what is yet to come. It is impossible to lay down rules for where the imagination will go. But we can be sure that poetry will always bring order to the chaos through bringing chaos to the order.

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