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 yeller 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
*
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

* 

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 fundaments, 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 rheme 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?

* Loos 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 foozball
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

References


