

Apprehensions, Those Rhetoricians of the Sea

by [Carl Nelson](#) (July 2022)



Kahle Bäume, Häuser und Bildstock, Egon Schiele, 1907

Poems, then, are our situation. Think of my life as a big mass of kelp tossed up by the depths.—Angus Ming, poet

When I put on the hat of a poet, the words come with apprehensions. A poet is necessarily a linguistic paranoid as any thought needing verbalization breeds its difficulties. “If anything can go wrong, it will.” Murphy’s Law is as valid throughout the lexicon as it is throughout the Universe. You’re opening a door into your head, you know. So many

fricatives, glottals and unbidden sounds cram the verbal cauliflower. Syllables collect like Rorschach tests. Phrases draw parallels and interdict. Rhyme is guilt by association. Rhythm has a relentless if specious logic, one beat leading inexorably to the next, like a public prosecutor. Is a poem a reality or a verbal conspiracy theory, or one in the same? And would that be bad? It would seem important – well, at least interesting – to know. Apprehension is an opportunity with risk. And poetry is an apprehensive idiom. Hysterics roam its sentences. Its anxious phrases glide down highly neurotic corridors like sensitized seers through dim castle interiors.

What's the point of writing a poem? I believe we write them because we think them. Our brains are as busy as an old midtown Manhattan street. Prose struts like the patricians of the outer, business world, passing by in their carriages with matched steeds, clippety-clopp, as commerce to the whole affair. And poetry, full of its cross-town traffic, houses the street life of our minds: the ragamuffin, snitch, peddler, cutpurse. Prose is the learned citizen consul of our speech, a rhetorician who awakes "bright eyed and bushy tailed", and as "opposite of a poet as is an opinionated man" – Yeats. Poetry, meanwhile, shuffles about in rather a fugue state – or dawdles on the edge of the bed, yawning, at a late hour. It is prose that is upwardly mobile, whereas poets find the words "upwardly mobile" infinitely questionable, somewhat laughable.

Perhaps poems are a bit bored by the narrow linguistic view of prose. As is noted in Christopher Ormell's essay, "A Logic of Transient Reality Dawns," in this May's issue of *New English Review* when speaking about mathematical abstractions: "Their objects lack the rich, open-ended back-stories needed if they are to be classified as 'real.'" For a poet the word is more like a found object at the beach than a tool; more a doorway into a past existence than a foothold in this one. Poets are institutionally traditional. All of their words have history; all of their relationships have 'baggage.'

In the sub textual world we stand before the bar suspected of so many things simply by being privileged to testify. Isn't it more likely a tangled web that we'll weave, even if we wouldn't overtly deceive? Apprehension lurks within the words and among the pauses. The little flashing knives of inflection are out and about, too. But you won't know it till subsequently, when you are brought up before the tribunal and indicted. As they say, "you never see it coming."

Poems are rough places like jails, and even those 'proseurs' may have been doing time in more of a poem than they would prefer! Caught in the mortal coil, we humans don't really know the solution we're in, floating on a loosely bound raft of sounds like clapping coconuts, which is the mental device by which we float along the surface of what little we tentatively understand as 'life'.

"Poems, then, are our situation". And if you've read this far, you deserve more.

All there is to writing is having ideas. –Robert Frost

Poems are idea heavy. Poetry is full of the primordial goo. Prose crawled out of the sea of poetry on small finny legs, then began to run and swing (metrically) from trees and finally to parade about in frock coats flourishing silver tipped canes.

Poets get their thrills not from the stuff of this world, but by the ideas it manifests. Perhaps even the same idea, over and over, reiterating one thought in all of its manifestations. Sort of like God, I'd suppose. "In the beginning was the word." Perhaps creation is a neurosis. Does God create the same humans, over and over, while expecting a different outcome? Do poets?

Poems are the rhetoric of the sea: undulating, rising,

falling, quivering, spraying, slapping, outlining the shoreline of some furthest land and home to every sort of creature and vegetation. We have favorite poems we re-visit again and again to ponder, just as we do favorite vistas. Watching the waves break, the surf pound and the rollers undulate is like watching our thoughts bob along that long line of verse – that frontier of consciousness – where the off-rhyme echoes the wave splash before, leaving the same frothy afterglow and sense of time vanishing only to recapitulate.

Cosmeticians Slosh by With Useful Materials

Shipwrecked sailors, all of us, everyone!
Shying from the tattooed cadence of the cannibals.
Imagining their volcanic peaks ... rising ahead like twin
teats.
There in the distance! There in the weather!
Covered with ferny growth
and the hypnotic drawing of the heart valves.
And like patterns in the vegetation,
entwined like syllables are:
Painted faces. Darkened eyes. Striped cheeks.
Hair and earlobes laced with objects of fetish
...part the leaves...
jabbering, gesturing, as if victims of a failed
language.

Varicolored soots are smeared around the eyes like mallards.
Flotillas of fingers rise with lipsticks like marsh birds.
Their lips purse, yawn, clamp together,
as they search the faces of small mirrors;
indignant brows extended for flight.

Poetry is that same new thing, over and over. (Okay, a bit like puffing Mary Jane.) And why is this because?

If God himself had not willed REPETITION, the world would never have come into existence. He would either have followed the light plans of hope; or he would have recalled it all and conserved it as a recollection. This he did not do, therefore the world endures, and it endures for the fact that it is a repetition.—Kierkegaard

So it's important that poets exist and that they recapitulate, so that the "world endures". All life comes from the oceans, as it were.

But poets are not gods. Poets are more like Elmer's glue. We wander about with our sticky sounds echoing, rhyming, syncopating... creating a web of sounds, words, phrases, lines, verse – like kids with construction paper and scissors. We really aren't that much good at focused criticism – or narrative thought. And if we wield it, no one much understands. "That's just the way he gets at times," is a common remit heard. Though poets might act like grandees, poetry itself is small talk; that conversational quirk some find so hard to acquire or follow. The only thing prose-like worldly/opinionated/violent/political poetry generally dominates are the awards. And there you get such a messy glue of violent poetisms as could be the working definition of frustration. You ever run across one of those old glue pots with brushes stuck in like those found on the dusty shelf in an abandoned crafts room? It's a sculpture of obsolescence. This is how old disgruntled poetry ends up. Not appealing in the least. And a lot of old crank poets and poeticisms end up

entombed like that.

But moving on to the more practical...

There's a lot more to poetry than what is printed on the page. It drifts out of every word spoken like a vapor. Poetry offers many practical tools. For example, say you are in a dull conversation at a cocktail party. Perhaps a clutch of people feel like a ball and chain and you consider a move. You scan the possibilities at the bar and consider the gambit of removing yourself briefly to "refresh my drink" (and talk up that blonde). Perhaps you offer to get something for one of the quieter people (but who used a lovely word especially well) in the clutch, who offers more opportunity. Maybe you remove yourself to take a call. But there's an easier path which poetry offers. It's rather like fishing with a bait and bobber. Toss out a metaphor.

At the Literary Society

"Metaphor is a tool which, when handled adroitly, can break the spell in which the quotidian encases most people." –Francois Qzueille

After confessing to being a poet,
the sovereign matron in red with a sparkling diamond
snowflake broach pronounced,
"Oh, so you'll probably write a poem about us?"
I appraised her.

...whether she were making conversation
or calling me a snitch,
or challenging me on some account,
when she asked me where I was published...
followed by a frosty pause.

Metaphor can sometimes tempt the Grady Grinds from
their stalls,
like a handful of oats, for a brisk trot around the
quotidian.
Sometimes poetry or its base metal, allusion,
can tempt a conversation from its habitual
recapitulations
of the daily slog,
a fellow's medical odyssey, a replay of
accomplishments,
or a tedious description of how to arrive at an exact
location,
if you were to pass so and so's house who graduated
with your half sister
from a school which is no longer there, but is now ...
Nothing like a provocative metaphor to shock
one of those hay burners to a gallop!

So I said, "Ma'am,
you strike me as a flaring candle
lighting my path.
Could you show me to the wine?"

Like the old clay pot in Keats poem, "Ode to a Grecian Urn,"
often boorish people—insensate as crockery—don't realize they
have it within themselves to be more interesting: "Thou still
unravish'd bride of quietness / Thou foster child of silence
and slow time." Metaphor can assist. "A rose by any other name
would smell as sweet," with the added benefit of entirely
changing the discussion. And here a poet might think of
themselves as a good Samaritan stopping by the side of a
conversation to help fix the flat.

For example, one day I was speaking with one of the
warehousemen (an ugly, quietly shrewd, heavyset palooka) at
the business. It was a "and how's your day going" time-killing

exchange of words of two people waiting for 4:30. As my playwriting teacher used to say, "We need to get this thing up into the air."

So because boredom tends to prick my nature, I began tossing up metaphors to his statements. He would continue in the mundane and factual and I would hazard that it reminded me of something else metaphorically related. This is how poems are built, so it was just me proceeding at my real work during a slack period in the day job. He'd say something and I'd translate it with an analogy... causing the conversation to travel from pillar to post while the fellow began having to leave off the warehouse chatter and bring in more personal experiences to feed the flow, re-build or to shore-up the narrative. When I happened upon an allusion to sand, or something of the sort, he looked at me suspiciously. "How did you know I was a Navy Seal?"

(You coulda knocked me over with a feather.)

I shrugged.

He went on to highlight events of his enlistment—he couldn't say where, but—spent "everywhere there was sand." And I learned about this Seal's basic training.

You never know what people have in them! Like old clay pots, you may have to re-imagine the outside to reach the inside.

Poets sell fasteners. We're gluey with words. We glue people to others, to nature, to their culture. We fasten thoughts to other thoughts and just about everything around. We mix and match. We're almost cupids! If you want to connect with someone, flirt, converse, make yourself a part of their personal story – you can use a little poetry. (Disclaimer: You might get attached to a lipsticked pig. It's a dim bar we labor in.) A poet starts out talking with someone over something – but it isn't quite working – and think, 'let me just poke around here with a few metaphors.' Metaphors seed a

conversation. They are like a hollow finding its banks; a jigsaw puzzle piece finding its fit, a fire finding its fuel.

Poetry dances about, and can go better or worse depending upon the partner. For example, one day I was making my sales calls and I called on this accountant a second time.

"Why are you bothering me again?" He asked.

It's hard to tell at times whether people meant what they said or whether they were just blowing you off, I reflected. Though it didn't really matter; I'd call back anyway.

"You said that you would call me back within the week," I replied.

"Well, I'm not interested," he said gruffly.

Pause.

"I don't believe you," I said.

He didn't laugh.

Come on, roll it around a bit..

"So why aren't you interested, now?"

Playing with words and their thoughts can be a lot like sticking your hand down a hole. You might find gold. You might find a badger. You must stay loose. Anyone with a hint of poetry within them realizes how quickly reason can be turned or upended, status upended, tradition upended, whole civilizations upended. There's the "quick and the dead" rule, and a little wisdom can speed you up.

At base our language is nailed together in a fragile collaboration of syllables and silence. Earth makes our basements, but what underscores the upper floors except the integrity of the floor joists and planks, held in customary positions by all those hidden nails? If something came along

which only prized the nails where would we be? Pioneers used to burn an old dwelling down to sift the ashes for the prized nails before moving West to the build the new. Newer Italys are built from the stones of past Romes. Whole languages are built upon the word remnants of their past and the word contributions of others.

All we have as civilization could crumble at any time with the whiff of an urge for the novel, to see what's just over that next thought, around the bend of a page. And now with the click of a mouse who nations can crumble under a virus. How to quench that urge to make a difference? To be an agent of change! Or to just complete a doctoral thesis and land a plum university post. Speed, stature and the competitive instinct are aphrodisiacs. Our undoing is bedfellows with our procreation.

Civilization is hideously fragile... there's not much between us and the Horrors underneath, just about a coat of varnish, -C. P. Snow

Consider the gossamer web of affections and tradition that bind neighbors, which are not unlike the recondite rules and traditions of usage which bind letters and syllables into words and thought. What if there were to happen on the scene overnight a solution dissolving all of this, dissolving cultural memory; eliminating it as if it were a stain with the end result of all of us spouting babble while hunting for connection. What if we all a'woke'? We would look like the undead with arms out reaching for fresh brains to chew. What if? What if? What if? ... we only had a narrative? Give us another forbidden narrative to de-thrown and eat! Yum, yum.

I've four separate neighbors convicted of felonies; who have done hard time and another complicit in a felony with a spouse

in prison. (He's never getting out.) That's a lot of timber to join.

They've done hard time, but then, we do poetry. Our neighborhood has homosexuals, a couple old bachelors, and the woman who figuratively lives in a shoe with eight children, all schooled somehow (I'm hoping) who I rarely see. We've minorities, seniors and women and men living by themselves. Owners and renters, and some have pets or children and some don't. One collects stamps, has Civil War money, signs all over his yard and gets in banned on Twitter. But we all get along quietly (even the 'haters') and when we bump occasionally, no one is screaming, or violent, or bent on firebombing my home. The kids more or less behave themselves, they're friendly even, want to pet my dog, and their parents usually wave. Our neighborhood is something like the language; it works – if you don't push it too far, and keep to the rules, and go slowly enough to let the poetry thrive. Speed selection seems essential.

It is so easy to overwhelm the cherished silence. And all of poetry is really the silence. The words are simply its walls; it's containers.

Words are all over the place strutting back and forth pounding their chests and knocking up against one another, getting jealous. But the space between words is often where the truth peeks through; in that time it takes for small gestures and incidental motions.

With enough space between words a whole room might light up. You see this often in the theatre. The inflections come out with little knives and flowers. All of the other words back off, and imagination begins to peek out: silent, secretive, higgledy-piggledy, like children at Christmas. The characters stare and then move in a perplexing dance, like kangaroos adjusting.

And what creates and feeds this silence? It's poetry! That glue, that brake, those apprehensions.

It's that bumpy road, that wheel block, that skip in the recording which impedes "the cold, relentless, insatiable, furious spirit of commerce." (– Valerie Martin). Poetry is the obdurate reality which co-signs for the wear and tear of civilization.

"Poetry makes nothing happen." –W. H. Auden

Beckett understood a post modern absurdity, the absurdity of the Progressive's aspirations. And that nothing was the needed thing to see 'happen', to animate. As in his first and last lines of his play, *Waiting for Godot*:

"Well, shall we go. / Yes, let's go. / (They do not move)."

This is what poetry can do. It's the contemplative pushing back. It's Balboa looking for gold and finding the Pacific. So that currently, with the gold taken off the table for a bit, the stressed-out moderns now sit and stare, following crashing wave after wave provoking a religious litany, a vacation, getaway prayer.

[Table of Contents](#)

Carl Nelson has just finished a book of memoirs and poetry celebrating his current area of Appalachia titled *Become Remarkable*. To see this and more of his work, please visit [Magic Bean Books](#).

Follow NER on Twitter [@NERIconoclast](#)