

Poetry as a Way of Thinking

by [Carl Nelson](#) (August 2025)



Édouard Manet (Chez Tortoni, 1875)

“In the beginning was the word.” As usual, the Bible, spokesman for the alpha and the omega and everything in between, has both the first and the last word,. Out of nothing, (...with a Big Bang? ...a shout?) our world is created. And what creates it? Poetry!

...for poetry makes nothing happen. –W. H. Auden

Because that is what a word is. Like coffee in the morning, a word is poetry ground on fine. One need only to examine the roots of any word to glean this truth. This is what the word does; it assembles itself from the community of grunts and lisps, seemingly out of nothing. A word takes its meaning from the soil of expression everywhere, rather like a plant which assembles itself from water and air. A word is the roots of an idea made vegetable.

And then from words innumerable rationales are created, narratives are built, justifications are had, philosophies, economies, cities and countries, laws and orders... But as Newtonian mechanics are conducted by atoms fashioned upon the recondite nature of quantum mechanics – so are the Enlightenment and Betham's Utilitarianism and Science, etc. built upon seawater, that is quantum of the mysterious, that is, poetry. We truly live on a floating universe and poetry is here to describe it, the way it drifts and flows and rearranges itself naturally. It's in our blood, or rather, it is our blood and there is no doing without it.

Life "is in the blood." –Leviticus 17:11

But, as with quantum physics, we carry about our daily and professional lives as if poetry doesn't exist. This isn't unusual. We treat many of life's most essential happenings like breathing, heartbeats, health, etc. in the same manner, like the capable homemaker with a fresh smile and a pressed apron while we are at work. Only when we are widowed do we realize that our entire lives were based on a mystery. It's deeply shocking.

Like quantum physics, only specialists (poets) speak of

poetry. Nevertheless, we employ poetry every day—perhaps more often than the wheel—to make our everyday efforts yield success. This thought has preyed upon me over many years, especially as I’ve read eulogies to the dearth of poetry. Granted, the fate of poems themselves are like that of civilizations, either historical or endeavoring to be so. (Oh, to make it within the canon!) Still we build with and upon their rubble.

Personally, I think what has occurred with poetry in the past hundred years with the explosion of free verse mirrors the like appearance of abstract art within this time frame. The “flowery tale” (“Ode to a Grecian Urn” –Keats) has escaped the vase. I think poetry now is treated more as a way of thinking, as opposed to the still, more fixed, cemented, contractual nature of prose.

Our son has followed in his mother’s footsteps and is currently selling copiers in Texas. He loves it. His company has divisions across the Western United States. As a new hire, he was picked out and asked during a companywide online video conference, what he does while out making cold calls when he gets discouraged. He said, “I put on some rap music, and then I call my mother.”

This got a laugh. However, his mom happens to have been quite an exceptional salesperson, (has quite a reputation within this company) and our son and her consult frequently regarding the subtleties of sales, from landing the appointment to looking for opportunity in the leasing documents, to signing the deal and final installation. There are a lot of bumps, possible glitches and hiccups along the way.

For many years, I would assist my wife by telemarketing part time. So the small portion of advice I had to offer our son was to increase the poetry. “What you are basically trying to do is to charm the customer,” I told him. “You need to remember and keep a variety of these charms to tempt the

prospect effectively.” (Add eye of newt!)

Top salespeople characteristically sell the top products. And they sell these top products to qualified prospects. That is, their prospects have both the money and the need. So generally everything is in place for a deal to be made. It's just the negotiation which must occur. And the sales negotiation is getting them to meet with you and to listen. The rest is by default. (“Well, why don't we just finish this paperwork then, and we'll get you set up!”) You have already discerned that a deal is likely in their benefit or you wouldn't be there.

Now there are many aspects to a successful sales pitch. But since I worked the phones, the advice I gave my son dealt mostly with the words. And in this respect a bit of poetry is quite useful. You are not the only copier company out there, and the decision-maker who signs off is characteristically a very busy person. So that they often might object, if you have gotten them on the phone, “Why can't we talk now, while I'm listening?”

In order to discuss matters then, I would need to ask them all sorts of questions regarding their volume, speed, color, network needs, office flow, office sector needs, document security, costs, get a measure for his nature and affinities, etc., etc., etc. And of course thumb through the current contracts on their equipment. But instead I say, “Well, it's like fitting someone for shoes. We have a zillion possibilities on offer in the back room but we need to see our customer to get them the best fit and style available ... Would you be free sometime this coming week for a quick visit?”

Our son has already crafted a verse of his own. He tells the customer that he would like to meet to discuss how they might reduce their printing costs. When the prospect objects again that they haven't the time, he suggests: “If a banker were to call and tell you that by re-financing they could reduce you overall payments by 20%, would you take those few minutes to

hear them out?"

(The appropriate answer would be, "Yes.")

How many times have you been stumped for the right word to put a pin into just exactly what the point is you are trying to make? This is what a word or analogy can do, and why you are searching desperately for it. It can collect all of this ethereal mental knowing into singular focus and solidify it so that it can be worked with great ease and familiarity. The client will like this. So will you. In one fell swoop you have brought them up to conceptual speed and made the both of you equals, ready to proceed further, postponing the plethora of facts for the "beancounters."

One salesman's technique when in the midst of a raft of unsatisfied objections was to chop his hand and to sweep all to the left while saying, "Why don't we just park these questions over to the side here, for just a bit, while we consider this?"

This is another tool in the skill set of what poetry can do.

Poetic thought can gather up a lot of flotsam and jetsam; give it a name and a purpose.

*To see a world in a grain of sand.
And heaven in a wild flower.
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand.
And eternity in an hour. —Blake*

The rhetorical world, on the other hand, is quite labyrinthine and cluttered. It is detailed and you often have to speak very fast to get it all in. You undoubtedly have at some point struggled with the extent of and language used in a binding legal contract. Poetry, on the other hand, takes a measure of

the situation, says “yea,” (or “nay”) and shakes hands. With poetry, it all comes down to ‘honoring one’s word.’

To honor one’s word, is to be a journeyman poet. One must have the word and understand it in order to honor it. People who go back on their word—turn their back on all of civilization. It won’t work. A well-received poem is a handshake. Life is furthered.

Politicians will try to encapsulate their message in a bit of poetry, a nutshell to make the focus of their campaign easy to consume as popcorn. In the 1980 Presidential Debate Ronald Reagan asked, “Are you better off (now) than you were four years ago?” He hands his prospective voter both the tools and the agency to decide.

Personal slurs are a bit of poetic chicanery, but can be tricky, for if they miss the mark they may do more damage to the utterer. When they catch on though, they can be either elevating or devastating. “Honest Abe” had been a legendary moniker for President Abraham Lincoln for many years. The nickname “Slick Willie” followed Bill Clinton from Arkansas to the White House.

Donald Trump has a pretty good touch for the poetic moniker: “Sleepy Joe, Slow Joe, Joe Hiden (Biden)”/ Mini Mike Bloomberg /Low Energy Jeb (Bush)/Ron DeSanctimonious.

“Not long after he was elected, Martin Van Buren had to deal with a collapsing economy. The Panic of 1837 was followed by “a depression of unprecedented severity,” notes the [U.S. Senate Historical Office](#). The president’s critics blamed him for the economic woes—and, to them, he became Martin Van Ruin.” —NPR

A bit of poetry can be quite useful when there is any need for an elastic focus. For the poem naturally focuses a wide flotilla of thought at the same time it incorporates an ambivalence with allows great flexibility for growth. A

mission statement has been archly described as “a long awkward sentence that demonstrates management’s inability to think clearly” (anon). But perhaps you can see what management has been trying (but failing) to do here. Management is basically trying to write poetry, whose clarity is elastic with paradox. Instead they generate rigid contradictions which generate ambiguity. So that rather than an elastic focus moving forward, they inscribe a set of proscribed behaviors setting off in all directions incapacitating forward action. This is what happens in a world without poetry. We have lots of contracts and end up in court. And action becomes punishment.

Poets will famously use a phrase or words to capture a fleeting feeling, such as Keats’ “Ode to a Nightingale,” a poem of such vivid evocation of a basket of natural occurrences that it establishes the boundary of life and dream.

*Past the near meadow, over the still stream,
Up the hill-side; and now 'tis buried deep
In the next valley-glades:
Was it a vision, or a waking dream?
Fled is that music: –Do I wake or sleep?*

What poet has summed things up so well as Shakespeare? “Brevity is the soul of wit,” “Wild goose chase,” “All that glitters is not gold,” “Break the ice,” “All the world’s a stage. And all the men and women merely players.” You can fabricate entire plays from the elasticity of such golden thoughts.

Poetry is holistic and sums things up into a little ball, to be rolled about in the mind and speculated upon.

*Would it have been worthwhile,
To have bitten off the matter with a smile,
To have squeezed the universe into a ball
To roll it towards some overwhelming question*

Which is exactly what the writer of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," T.S. Eliot, does.

Which is what all poetry does, and hence its usefulness. Poetry doesn't argue facts but rather gives us perspectives from which the direction can be seen. And it can be quite useful to design an argument from poetry rather than from rhetoric as people will naturally be more receptive. The brief is quite shortened; while the understanding is like switching on a light.

In fact, an argument edited by poetry can become a joke or a riddle.

*What is the one thing Democrats and Republicans share in
common?
—Our money.*

Like humor, poetry can transcend the dialectic.

Poetry is memorable speech. —W. H. Auden

In fact, it is often more effective to win a point with poetry than with well-ordered argument, as poetry is more memorable—and therefore more transmissible (viral).

Nevertheless, people will need and demand well ordered argument like they want meat in their sandwich. So, like a sandwich, which is the meal held between two slices of bread, similarly is a paragraph by an effective writer often a lot of stuff, held together by two poetic lines.

This use of poetry is in fact so common, that I found this example just by picking up the journal nearest at hand (*The New Criterion*, January 2025) and noting a first paragraph (taking half of the first page) of the first essay I thumbed to, "Siena splendor at the Met" by Karen Wilkin:

Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent,"
*Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote. ... blah, blah. "Every so often we encounter a show so thrilling, so visually sumptuous, and so impressive for its scholarship that the most appropriate response would be to look hard and say nothing". ... blah, blah. "Organized by the Met's Curator in Charge of European Paintings,"... blah, blah, "reassembling important but long-separated works"..." blah, blah, "expands our knowledge of both the trajectory of Early renaissance painting,"... blah, blah, "brings to life...blah, blah, a yeasty moment that ended abruptly when the Black Death reached the city in 1348,"... blah, blah blah! "The Met's exhibition is so brilliant and compelling that **all that's really appropriate as a response is loud applause"**... **"and, pace Wittgenstein, a heartfelt, full-volume "WOW"!***

This is what poetry does. It rakes the leaves of knowledge into a pile from which to assemble a book, or a paragraph, or a basket of toys for later use. By saying, "toys," I haven't to distinguish and list each. Part of the 'charm' is that the customer is saved a slew of mental work and the message is delivered with dispatch.

You want to lace up an argument, a story, or tale in which all of the points tug on all of the eyelets for best closure, then the poetic line is your shoelace.

Tolstoy begins the historic Russian novel, *Anna Karenina*, this way:

Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.

Charles Dickens pens a poetic tryst to the Age foreshadowing all in the forthcoming pages in *A Tale of Two Cities*:

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair.

Through the use of metaphor and analogy the poet gathers the Universe into a web of relationship. It is incredibly grounding. This is probably why poetry is turned to in our most desperate times, like the grief of loss, or the terror of war, when the reality of events has seemingly left us clinging to air. For a poet the air is as filled with metaphor, virtual schools of metaphor as fish in the sea. A man with a poetic sense (like a snorkeler) is never alone, all the while a lot of bereft people are left clinging to their arguments and dry wines and soft cheeses topside.

Poetry, at base, is a wild, useful thing with many medicinal properties, rooted eternally in the human condition. Those who

know where to find it covet it, collect it, and use it profitably. Those who don't – don't do as well.

*Poetry makes nothing happen, but **people die every day** for lack of what is found there.* (William Carlos Williams)

And you know why you might often find the poet in the gutter?

It's because from there you can see the stars better.

Eden

*"But we didn't just eat the apple,
we cooked and fermented it
and woke up with mud
on the one side of our face
and stars on the other."
–Eve's recollection*

I believe it was Aristotle who maintained that the essence of poetry is metaphor.

The book *Uncommon Therapy / The Psychiatric Techniques of Milton H. Erickson MD* by Jay Haley, details and analyses how the psychotherapist Milton Erickson conducted his therapeutics—often resolving his patients issues in short order. He did this by “working in metaphors”. In my understanding, Erickson uncovered the unconscious metaphors his patients were trapped within and incentivized their switching to a better paradigm. They were living in an unhealthy poem, and he incentivized their switching to a healthier one.

For example, a woman patient once said to her therapist, "I'm fond of my husband," and she placed her hand over her mouth while she spoke. The therapist interpreted to her that since she was covering her mouth, she must have some reservations about what she said. He was helping her become aware of her "unconscious" gesture. Erickson would never make such a comment but would accept the woman's gesture as a perfectly valid way of communicating. To translate her message into a different form would be disruptive and discourteous. Worse, it would oversimplify an extraordinarily complex statement. Typically, "insight" interpretations of unconscious communication are absurdly reductionistic, like summarizing a Shakespearean play in a sentence. –Pg.29

Instead, Erikson would work within the metaphor.

As a typical example, if Erickson is dealing with a married couple who have a conflict over sexual relations and would rather not discuss it directly, he will approach the problem metaphorically. He will choose some aspect of their lives that is analogous to sexual relations and change that as a way of changing the sexual behavior. He might, for example, talk to them about having dinner together and draw them out on their preferences. –Pg 27

Now have I said anything here about an appreciation of meter and verse, the variety (or importance) of fixed poetic forms, the uses of rhyme and off-rhyme, or the need for better appreciation of all poetry among the general populace and the thirsty youth, or how to somehow enhance the proliferation of

poetry, facilitate its teaching, reward its practitioners, and honor its being? Federal grants, even?

No, I haven't.

Poetry doesn't need your help! Neither do poets. (Best keep your money.) Poets are bright, determined people who also hold jobs as doctors, bankers, lawyers, insurance agents, soldiers, diplomats, professors, successful novelists, playwrights, spouses... alcoholics! even. People who want to write poetry will, and people who want to read poetry will do that, likewise. Poetry and poets are wild and unencumbered, wanton and mortal and timeless as "the lilies of the field".

Consider that.

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 paused to consider her appraisal that December
meeting.

...whether she were making conversation
or calling me a snitch,
or challenging me on some account,
as if I had walked in and told the woman
I had graduated summa cum laude from Harvard,
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,
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's half brother
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?"

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Carl Nelson's latest book of poetry titled, *Strays, Misfits, Renegades, and Maverick Poems (with additional Verses on Monetizations)*, has just been published. To have a look at this and more of his work please visit [Magic Bean Books](#).

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