

WHAT, THEN, IS POETRY?

The works you just read certainly vary in subject and structure. How, then, can we tell if something is poetry? The nature of poetry has always been problematic, a mystery—one that has led poets, readers, critics, and scholars to fashion their own solutions and definitions:

If I read a book [and] it makes my whole body so cold no fire ever can warm me I know *that* is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know *that* is poetry. These are the only way I know it. Is there any other way.
—EMILY DICKINSON

Choose one word and say it over
and over, till it builds a fire inside your mouth.
—NAOMI SHIHAB NYE

If a line of poetry strays into my memory, my skin bristles . . . [and] a shiver [goes] down [my] spine.
—A. E. HOUSMAN

Poetry is the orphan of silence. Maternal silence. That in you which belongs to the Universe. The mother's voice calls its name at dusk over the roofs of the world. Whoever hears it, turns towards his ancestral home.
—CHARLES SIMIC

[Poetry] looks in some fresh way for the energy in the moment, and tries to translate that through language onto the page—not as words, simply, but as something. . . . Poems show us what's right in front of us—in a way that surprises and engages.
—ALBERTO RÍOS

A poem is a statement in language about a human experience; since language is conceptual in its nature, this statement will be more or less rational or at least apprehensible in rational terms. . . . Poetry is written in verse: verse is exceptionally rhythmical language. . . . Rhythm is expressive of emotion, and the language of verse makes possible a more precise rendition of emotion, a more precise relationship of emotion to rational content, than would otherwise be possible.
—YVOR WINTERS

Poetry is a composition of words set to music. Most other definitions of it are indefensible, or metaphysical.
—EZRA POUND

Sources for the definitions listed above: Dickinson—*The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press, 1958), pp. 473–74; Nye—"How Palestinians Keep Warm," *Red Suitcase* (Brockport, N.Y.: BOA Editions, 1994), p. 26; Housman—*The Name and Nature of Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1933), p. 46; Simic—statement in *The New Naked Poetry*, eds. Stephen Berg and Robert Mezey (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1976), p. 406; Ríos—personal communication; Winters—*Forms of Discovery* ([Chicago]: Alan Swallow, 1967), p. xvii; Pound—"Vers Libre and Arnold Dolmetsch," *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. T. S. Eliot ([Norfolk, Conn.]: New Directions, 1954), p. 437.

The essence of poetry remains elusive and open to a range of definitions. It seems to transcend or escape all attempts to pin it down. We hope this book will not remove the mystery, but preserve it. What the book will do is introduce you to the formal elements that make up a poem, in various combinations, and offer a variety of poems to read. The aim is that as you read you will discover the pleasures and values of poetry even if, or even though, poetry itself is inexplicable. *SVO?*

Poets have explored the mystery of poetry. A few years ago, Heather McHugh visited Italy with several other American poets. Near the end of their time there, some of the Americans went with a group of Italian poets from Rome to Fano, to see the city and meet with dignitaries. At dinner, on their last evening in Italy, they began, almost inevitably, to discuss the nature of poetry. McHugh, perhaps almost as inevitably, wrote a poem about the experience. As you read her account, catching (like the participants) more or less of the host's response to the question, reflect on what the last two lines suggest and how you react to them. At least at first, read the poem as if someone were telling you an anecdote or story about an experience. Sit back and just listen to the speaker, almost listening in a matter-of-fact manner. Don't try to "figure anything out." Just follow along. The poem looks long, but it's simply as long as almost any clearly told anecdote.

HEATHER MCHUGH (b. 1948)

What He Thought (1994)

for *Fabbio Doplicher*

We were supposed to do a job in Italy
and, full of our feeling for
ourselves (our sense of being
Poets from America) we went
from Rome to Fano, met
the mayor, mulled
a couple matters over (what's
cheap date, they asked us; what's
flat drink). Among Italian literati

we could recognize our counterparts:
the academic, the apologist,
the arrogant, the amorous,
the brazen and the glib—and there was one

administrator (the conservative), in suit
of regulation gray, who like a good tour guide
with measured pace and uninflected tone narrated
sights and histories the hired van hauled us past.
Of all, he was most politic and least poetic,
so it seemed. Our last few days in Rome

(when all but three of the New World Bards had flown)
I found a book of poems this
unprepossessing one had written: it was there
in the *pensione* room (a room he'd recommended)
where it must have been abandoned by
the German visitor (was there a bus of *them*?)
to whom he had inscribed and dated it a month before.
I couldn't read Italian, either, so I put the book
back into the wardrobe's dark. We last Americans

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were due to leave tomorrow. For our parting evening then
our host chose something in a family restaurant, and there
we sat and chatted, sat and chewed,
till, sensible it was our last
big chance to be poetic, make
our mark, one of us asked

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"What's poetry?"

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Is it the fruits and vegetables and
marketplace of Campo dei Fiori, or
the statue there?" Because I was

the glib one, I identified the answer
instantly, I didn't have to think—"The truth
is both, it's both," I blurted out. But that
was easy. That was easiest to say. What followed
taught me something about difficulty,
for our underestimated host spoke out,
all of a sudden, with a rising passion, and he said:

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The statue represents Giordano Bruno,
brought to be burned in the public square
because of his offense against
authority, which is to say
the Church. His crime was his belief
the universe does not revolve around
the human being: God is no
fixed point or central government, but rather is
poured in waves through all things. All things
move. "If God is not the soul itself, He is
the soul of the soul of the world." Such was
his heresy. The day they brought him
forth to die, they feared he might
incite the crowd (the man was famous
for his eloquence). And so his captors
placed upon his face
an iron mask, in which

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he could not speak. That's
how they burned him. That is how
he died: without a word, in front
of everyone.

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And poetry—

(we'd all

put down our forks by now, to listen to
the man in gray; he went on
softly)—

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poetry is what

he thought, but did not say.

Consider carefully what their host said about Giordano Bruno. What does it suggest when the host says, "poetry is what / he thought, but did not say"? What does it indicate about poetry? Where does it leave you in your thinking about what poetry is?