

What Is Poetry?

The thinking of representation has been troubled, to say the least, at least since Monet's "Impression Sunrise," (1872) and for very good reasons. The implicit arrogance in realism—a practice that assumes the world can be represented by one person from one point of view—lost favour as the destructive implications of the Cartesian power relation implicit in it became more and more obvious. Artists and writers felt the earthquake first. It rippled through their work, decentering the human, unsettling and overthrowing the empire of forms that was the foundation of formal aestheticism. The artist's recognition that the canvas was a 2-D surface, not a window, that colour could stand on its own without having to represent something, that the object could be broken down and refigured, freed her imagination to engage her unprecedented experience of the world with whatever invention worked best in the struggle toward adequate form. "Form" and "content" are just two aspects of the singular experience of meaning. Since novelty is the essence of Creation, the world must be met on its own terms, compositional form must arise adequate to the measure of that novelty rather than forced into some preexisting form within the empire of forms. It must live.

Writing begins with a sense of language as material, as medium, no less so than paint is for a painter, with all the complexity that implies. That means the sounding of words, their phonic rhythmic vibration, is just as important, if not more so, than their denotative meaning. It means that syntax, especially, with its insistence, as Isabelle Stengers points out, on specifying who acts or causes, who is acted on or caused, must be resisted, deformed, abandoned in order to reimagine the world and our relation to it.

Like paint, syntax can be composed into whatever forms the poet invents to address a particular moment. Given that our particular moments are deeply influenced by syntax and the proper ordering of subject and object, to break with standard syntax is to disrupt automatic perception and insist on

meaning at a higher and lower level. It is to shake the sistrum, that ancient ritual instrument—one wire each for earth, water, air, and fire—used to arouse the elements from their slumber and summon the Goddess to presence. A particular moment is an immense and disturbing thing, full of joy and horror, the distant and the near, the beautiful and the hideous, the visible and the invisible, what Robert Duncan called What Is. And a poem is a sistrum animating our experience, activating our imagination to encounter What Is in its uncontainable, unrepresentable majesty. To think that language can simply represent it is to guarantee a predictable outcome, a settled world view that maintains the predatory categories, as Stengers calls them, that continually resituate us within the world of the Given.

*Poetry differs from other arts in that its material (words, sentences) includes a dimension of denotative meaning and syntactic order that the poet must work with even as she resists its call to define the world. The mission of poetry, its particular power, is to transport us through and beyond the denotative Given into the Taken. Words can get us there but only if they are composed antithetically to the settled and expected patterns associated with representation. Words are first and foremost sound, noise. As Chaucer somewhat vulgarly put it, “Soun is noght but air ybroken, / And every speche that is spoken, / Loud or privee, foul or fair, / In his substaunce is but air; / For as flaumbe is but lighted smoke, / Right so soun is air ybroke.” He was being a bit provocative, since *air ybroken* is also a fart. Meaning adheres to that noise in multiple modes and the poet’s power is her ability to mobilize them, to make the sounding resonate with unfamiliar meaningful experience. Language is the house of meaning. Meaning, elusive and complex, mingled, mongrelized, relational, lives in language, and as with all life, refuses to be pigeonholed. The poet is always walking a line along the edge, chaos on one side and order on the other, slipping back and forth over the border with wings on her heels, writing a world that emerges in her words, in the intricate, rhythmic sounding of creation.*

—Michael Boughn, 2024 Writer-in-Residence, Green Cube Gallery.