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ORIGINAL ESSAYS

The Machine of Poetry

by Matthew Zapruder, August 15, 2017 8:45 AM



When I was first starting to write poetry in my early 20s, I didn't really understand much about it. I had been an English major in college, nor had I read much American poetry. So I felt simultaneously thrilled, delighted, and confused. I felt sure there was meaning there, somewhere. I could feel it. But I also often doubted myself and felt like I was looking in the wrong place, or missing what was really important.

At that time, I had the vague impression that poets used poetic language and techniques to express their thoughts or ideas in a more beautiful, complex, or compressed way than prose. That is, that there was something about the level of language — its beauty, complexity, or heightened qualities — that gave a piece the status of poetry, and distinguished it from prose.

The more poetry I read and wrote, the more clearly I saw that there was really no such thing as "poetic language." The words in poems are for the most part the same as those we find everywhere else. The power of poetry comes primarily from the reanimation and reactivation of the language that we recognize and

I noticed that there were, of course, ideas in poetry, but they always seemed just out of reach, some important and also in a way not, or at least not *most* important. Focusing just on those ideas, and trying to figure out what a poem was “really” about, always felt reductive, as if whatever was most important was being reduced to the act of explanation. Poetry seemed to be about something else, something like creating a different mood, or mental space, or way of thinking.

*I know poetry, say Dickinson and Valéry, because of how it makes me feel
what it does to me.*

[Ludwig Wittgenstein](#) wrote, “Do not forget that a poem, although it is composed in the language of poetry, is not used in the language-game of giving information.” Poetry isn’t merely a more beautiful way to communicate ideas, experiences, or feelings; prose, after all, does that, and can be just as beautiful as poetry, too.

If not to give information, what is the language of poetry for? What does it do that is different from prose? Why, as readers and writers, do we return to and preserve it?

The concept of genre — a defined category of writing like poetry, novels, or plays — isn’t currently very useful. Many people find such categories too restrictive and fussy. Much of the energy of contemporary literature is spent crossing and mixing various genres in single pieces of writing. Yet when it comes to poetry, it can be useful to think about genre in a more isolated way, at least temporarily, because the question of genre is really a question of purpose: Why did the writer choose a certain type of writing, and how does that choice affect how we should read the work before us?

We don’t usually need to think about *why* we are reading something. Usually, we have an immediate sense of what it is for, and therefore how to read it. Without needing to be told, we understand the difference between reading a novel and reading the newspaper. We know we should be looking for something different in each of those experiences. Stories and novels create characters and situations and tell stories; journals communicate information; essays engage in that hard-to-categorize effort to explore, however loosely, an idea; editorials and sermons tell us what we should and should not do, and believe; and so on.

No one can seem to tell us why poems are written, or what they are for. Why are they so confusing

we supposed to be looking for? And what is the point of rhyme, of form, of metaphor, of imagery? Is it to decorate or make more appealing some kind of message in the poem? What is the purpose of poetry?

When I am asked such questions, I think of what [Paul Valéry](#) (1871–1945) wrote in “Poetry and Art and Thought”: “A poem is really a kind of machine for producing the poetic state of mind by means of which the description has always seemed to me to be as close as anyone has gotten to describing what poetry is.”

If the term machine shocks you, if my mechanical comparison seems crude, please notice that the composition of even a very short poem may absorb years, the action of the poem on the reader only a few minutes. In a few minutes the reader will receive his shock from discoveries, glimmers of expression that have been accumulated during months of research, waiting, and impatience. The poem makes poetry happen in the mind of the reader or listener. It happens to the poet, and in the course of writing, the poet eventually makes something, a little machine, out of which the reader produces discoveries, connections, glimmers of expression. Whatever it does it can do again, as many times as we need it.

The “poetic state of mind” that poetry makes happen could be described as something close to dreaming, a higher, more aware, more open, more sensitive condition of consciousness. The poem makes poetry happen for us by placing our mind, as we read or listen, in consonance with the associations being evoked by the poem — its “discoveries, connections, glimmers of expression.”

In a letter, [Emily Dickinson](#) wrote, “If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can warm that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry. The only way I know it. Is there any other way?”

I like this answer, too, because like Valéry’s definition, it distinguishes poetry from other forms of writing by any particular formal quality — like rhyme, line breaks, or musicality, or the use of imagery or metaphor — by its *effect*. Her definition is functional and empirical, passionate and subjective: I know poetry, says Dickinson, because of how it makes me feel, what it does to me.

How poetry creates the poetic state of mind in a reader is the central question of this book. It happens through the form of the poem, which guides the mind of the reader. It happens through leaps of association and metaphor. It happens as the poem explores, activates, and plays with the nature of language itself.

Poems exist to create a space for the possibilities of language as material. That is what distinguishes them from all other forms of writing. Poems allow language its inherent provisionality, uncertainty, and slippage.

give space for its physicality itself — the way it sounds, looks, feels in the mouth — to make mean poems also remind us of something we almost always take for granted: the miraculous, tenuous at language to connect us to each other and the world around us. The elusive, quicksilver, provisiona language is by necessity suppressed in ordinary conversation, as well as in most other writing. Wh poem different from any other use of language is that it remains the sole place designed *expressly* available those connections that are hidden when language is being used for another purpose.

Language waits to be released in poetry. Poetry enacts the possibilities and powers that lie dormar of language itself. Poems are where the contradictions and possibilities of the material of this near system are *deliberately* brought forth and celebrated, not distracted by any other overriding purpos

Unlike other forms of writing, poetry takes as its primary task to insist, depend upon, and celebrate relation of the word to what it represents. In following what is beautiful and uncertain in language, v truth that is beyond our ability to articulate when we are attempting to “use” language to convey our stories.

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Poetry takes this inherent limitation of the material of language — that words are imprecise in their whatever it is they all-too-imperfectly denote — and turns it into a place of communion. Remarkably miraculously, we somehow manage to communicate and mean despite the imperfect instrument of this way, the provisional, tenuous, exciting, fragile, imperfect, yet intensely pleasurable relationship language and to meaning could be said to be a kind of metaphor for our own relation to language, f each other.

There can be both sadness and joy in this recognition of the human condition. It could be said that relationship of poems to what we intuit, but can never fully say, makes them like prayer — that une bring someone closer to the divine, without pretending that the divine could ever be fully known or i

When we are attentive to the language of poetry, to the words we see before us in the poem, we st

glimmer of the actuality, the paradox, complexity, and uncertainty that lie behind the way we usually see the world. Words and ideas can loosen and break free for a moment, so we can experience them anew.

The power of the activated material of language in poetry can only be pursued fully when the writer is not *ultimately* preoccupied with any other task, like storytelling, explaining, convincing, describing, or anything else. In their poems, poets do those things, but only as long as it suits them. A poet is always ready to go. Every true poem is marked, somewhere, by that freedom. And in making that choice to be read for other purposes, in favor of the possibilities of language freed from utility, is when the writer becomes

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Matthew Zapruder is the author of four collections of poetry. His poetry, essays, and translations have appeared in publications including *The New Yorker*, *The Paris Review*, *Tin House*, and *The Believer*. An associate professor in the Saint Mary's College of California MFA program and English department, he is also a frequent contributor to *Wave Books* and, from 2016-17, was the editor of the poetry page of the *New York Times*. He lives in Oakland, California, with his wife and son. [Why Poetry](#) is his most recent book.

ORIGINAL ESSAYS

A Little Book on Form

by [Robert Hass](#), April 3, 2017 12:52 PM

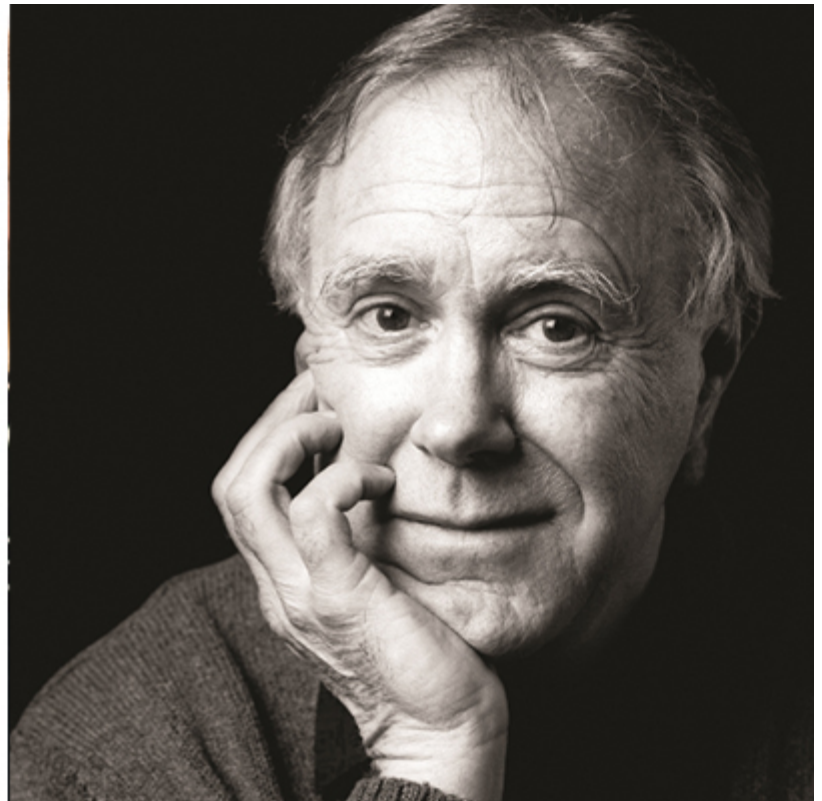
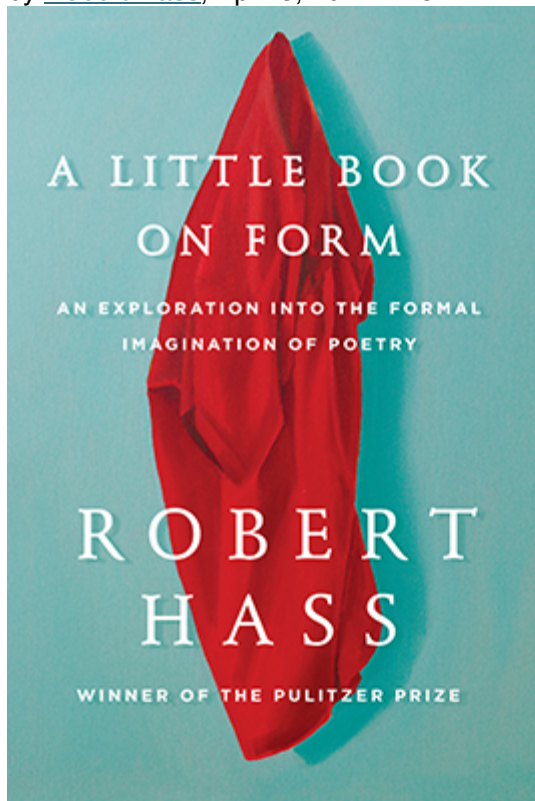


Photo credit: Margaretta K. Mitchell

A Little Book on Form came about because I was asked one fall to teach a class at the University of Iowa's Writers Workshop on form in poetry. It made sense, of course, that at such a place there would be a course not in the history of poetry or the theory of poetry or on particular poets or periods or styles — American women modernists, French surrealism, poets of the Harlem Renaissance — but about the craft.

Still. Form? What exactly was meant by form? I looked at books. They all seemed to be about rules for how to make a sonnet, or other more unusual forms, the sestina which was a kind of intricate early Italian song form that involved ending every line of a poem in six stanzas with the same six words, which would have seemed like teaching beginning yoga students to do a handstand. I knew there had to be some other way of thinking and talking about form.

I remembered vaguely having read a book in college by a philosopher named Susanne Langer called **Feeling and Form**. A lot of it was about listening to music and I didn't remember its argument in any detail, but I remembered that the main idea was that a lot of our knowledge of the world, or our way of seeing and understanding the world, came about because we humans are pattern-discerning and symbol-making creatures at the core of our being. You hear a tune, that is, a sequence of notes, but not just a sequence of notes; at some point it seems complete — then it's a tune. And there was a certain sensation that went with it. We didn't necessarily describe it as knowledge but it was far more apt to stay with us in memory than a random sequence of sound not patterned in such a way as to give the sensation of shapeliness or completeness would. That was how you could tell you'd experienced a form and it had added to the store of forms you were carrying around in your head — and not just the head — rhythms, even visual rhythms, also occur in the body; they set us dancing. The tune could be playful and antic or it could be somber. It had given you a vocabulary for feeling the shape of things as you moved through the world.

That thought seemed a place to start. And around that time, because I had to address this idea in relation to poetry, I found myself thinking about sentences and their miraculous presence in our lives on an early morning in summer, the fall course still a ways off. My children and their children were visiting. I was up early, sitting at the kitchen table, drinking coffee and reading the paper. My eldest grandson appeared, in

pajamas, still squinting from sleep, and climbed onto my lap. I read him the comics for a while and — he had just begun to string together whole sentences — he said, “Grandpa, when my mom and dad get up, if they decide to go to the bakery, you can come too.” There are very artful croissants and muffins in the bakery in the little town nearby. Not only did he have dependent and main clauses down pat, he had a conditional, that he was using to enlist me as an ally in his plan. The sentence, as it unwound, wound its way to sugar. And wasn’t that rhythmic conclusion perfect? “You can come, too.” [Robert Frost](#) used it in one of his early poems:

*I’m going out to clean the pasture spring;
I’ll only stop to rake the leaves away
(And wait to watch the water clear, I may):
I shan’t be gone long — You come too.*

“You come too,” though, as I hear it, is a bit more peremptory, or born of a more urgent prompting. “You can come too” — *dah-de-dah-dah* — feels radiant with hope.

So I thought it was definitely a kind of radiance I was tracking, and that it had to do in poetry with the sentence and probably the relation between the sentence and the line. There was another book I’d read by a woman named Miriam Lindstrom called *Children’s Art*, and I remembered a delicious sentence about children starting to draw. “The first power of art,” she’d written, “is the power of being a cause.” It made me almost remember, or at least imagine as if I were remembering, making a single line with a red crayon on one of those pieces of coarse absorbent paper they gave us in kindergarten.

What an achievement! I thought about lines of poetry that seemed radiant to me. There’s a line by [John Donne](#), the 17th-century priest, about falling in love:

I wonder, by my troth, what we did till we loved!

I thought it got exactly the surprise of it. And I loved the next line, too.

Were we not weaned till then?

Later in his life, when he was a bishop, he wrote a poem complaining about complexity:

Is all good structure in a winding stair?

And thinking of memorable tunes, I thought of [Hamlet](#)'s soliloquy, the line practically everybody who reads English knows:

To be or not to be? That is the question.

Lines that stick in the mind — the exuberant irreverence of [Allen Ginsberg](#) in the Cold War years:

America, I'm putting my queer shoulder to the wheel.

Or [Langston Hughes](#) in Harlem in the Depression years, listening, he wrote,

To the boogie-woogie rhythm of a dream deferred.

So that began to seem an exciting way to proceed, starting with a single line, or two lines, or four, trying to understand how rhythm, pattern, play, made tunes. I thought about a four-line poem by [William Blake](#), the great and eccentric Romantic visionary. Memorable four-line poems, outside nursery rhymes, are actually fairly rare in English. This is one of them:

*What is it men in women do require?
The lineaments of gratified desire.*

*What is it women do in men require?
The lineaments of gratified desire.*

For starters, the parallelism gives pleasure; it is a syntactical parallelism. And so does the small variation in the structure — the moving around of the verb to fit the bounce of the meter is a little celebration of difference. And the rhymes of course make an emphatic repetition. We count those, too — the long i of *require*, the long i in *gratified*, and the long i of *desire*, and then the repetition of the pattern in the next stanza. This small, ordinary act of pattern-noticing is a pleasure, and so is the other simple form: ask a question, get an answer.

There's also a sweet little [Irving Berlin](#) lyric, two lines, that just leaves a question hanging:

*What'll I do, if you are far away
And I am blue, what'll I do?*

That song from my parent's generation was in my head and I found myself noticing the sound play. The first phrase, *What'll I do*, has a particular rhythm, stressed syllable, unstressed syllable, unstressed syllable, stressed syllable. I've heard it called a cradle, because, marked, it looks like one: / _ _ /, and it's so common to the rhythm of English speech that it functions — counting paired stressed and unstressed syllables as “feet” the way prosodists do — as a two-foot rhythmic unit, a particular small dance the language makes. *Chiasmus* is the Greek name the same prosodists use for the crossing pattern —

A B
B A

— in the Berlin lyric. The winsomeness and humor of it has to do with the mix of the rhyme — *do, you, blue, do* — and the truncation in the pattern, the skipping lilt in the cradle — *what'll I do* — then three, slow, rising iambs — *And you, are far, away* and then the shorter two iambs, *And I, am blue*, and then the lilt of the cradle again. And the sense of distance created by the assonance and rhyme of *are far* — the human imagination making such expressive complexity in the simplest forms.

So at that point I had more or less solved for myself the problem of how to proceed. I made handouts for the class on the idea of one line, and then of two lines, of three and four. It was these handouts that became the little book on form. In the class I also asked the students to present ideas about form from others arts and crafts. One student taught us all to waltz. Another, earning his way as a pastry chef, demonstrated the construction of an apple galette. Another analyzed the structure of a computer program. We were suddenly on the scent, tracking down the shapes of a very deep magic.

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Robert Hass received both a Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award for his 2007 book of poems, [Time and Materials](#). He served as Poet Laureate of the United States

from 1995 to 1997. His new book is entitled [**A Little Book on Form: An Exploration in the Formal Imagination of Poetry.**](#)