

Rachel Blau DuPlessis*

What is poetry today?

Poetry Today

Today poetry travels very fast — I am thinking of the internet as the glyph of this shocking availability. We have many access points and the privilege and challenges of filtering the “too much” and the “too fast.” We can read and hear many types of poetry (even if we know that some people and poets are unspeaking and unspoken, perhaps under-valued). Thus we have the odd individual pleasure of being one thread in a network and sometimes in snarl of voices, knotted separately and knotted together. This is a responsibility and strange pressure. The speed of poetry-travel now might convince us to recognize multiplicities of networks (of networks!), but the fact of rich languages (word by word), work by work might convince us, in resistant response, to try slow reading in fast times. So an aspect of poetry today would be acceleration and resistance at the same time.

Another is the cultural abundance and drive to be heard and understood, creating many intersecting networks, allowing a person inside one nation to acknowledge and seek poets (and vibrant language users) across the oddity of borders. This internationalist or cosmopolitan drive is inflected with specificities and localisms in an odd balancing of contradictory forces. Thus we experience the interplay between the particular and the universal that drives texts in their didactic generosity. Texts and the fascination of other cultures compel a reader to try to understand work in another language, to make soundings in of the poetry of the past, to read translations and even sometimes to learn other languages. This universal particularism may drive a reader-writer to commit to poetics other than their small plot or remit, and to revel in it on every basis from curiosity, to annoyance, to admiration and respect, to wonder. And then perhaps to mix your yearning with theirs so new-old poetics emerge in the continual pulse of poesis, this wanting to know, and wanting to be making. You are one thread in the unrolling paper-fabric of this thinking and feeling, singing, saying and unsettling use of words.

To show an icon of my appreciation of this yearning for knowledges and cultural mixage, I collaged a mailing envelope from a friend in Singapore. As a surprise, she had suddenly sent me retellings of some classics of Hindu poetry: a summation of multiple Ramayanas and a retelling of the Mahabharata. Let this collage, almost a pure ready-made in

Defining Poetry

These sentences are from my “Statement on Poetics: Pleasures, Polemics, Practices, Stakes.” *Inciting Poetics: Thinking and Writing Poetry*. Jeanne Heuving and Tyrone Williams, eds. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2019: 13-37. This excerpt tries to define poetry in general.

Poetry is a language practice conducted in line segments (or in other intentional segments) to make an artifact culturally/conventionally able to be seen as a poem. Such a work is hyper-saturated with its own evocativeness. Poetry can be defined as saturated segmentivities in social-sensuous language.

(Quick addendum on performance, spoken word, rap, slam poetries-segmentivity is also highly marked in these modes. Even if a work is “un-written” (totally improv), it will show rhythmic segmentivity, often interlinked with gesture and rhyme.)

Poetry is that form of writing in segments (lines, mainly, sometimes sentences, but also fragments visually strewn on a page) that allows and encourages the largest possible place for excess of meanings and implications to enter any given word or phrase. Poetry is hyper-saturated because of the multiplicity of filiated, but not completely speakable, impacts. Something is extra, a remainder, an escapee, a concatenation of mixage. In poetry, language does not simply produce meaning — it is jiggered to prolong meaning. For instance, language may offer the pleasures of pitch and tune, of formal precision and its syntactic realization. The prolongation may be felt as an opening out of time, of space, or of both. This reverberating impact cannot be totally pinned down; indeed, such impacts may differ from reader to reader, person to person.

The conservation of matter does not apply to language.

This also shows that a detail – any detail – is far more than a little thing sitting on the surface of a text. Poetry concerns the depth and breadth of the detail.

The detail — the intransigent meaningful little — is also what ethics faces. The little specks of matter who should not be blown up — us. Poetry as the history of dust. This is why, in the popular imagination, one can find sentimental poems taken as the whole of poetry and the evocation of consoling sentiment taken as the goal of poetry. Thus observations like “not a sparrow falls” (without the knowledge of God, and so forth) are, baseline, what people mean by poetry and what they want from it. Sentimental appreciations of beauty, hope and caring in “verse” are a coarsened version of the importance of the intransigent detail—including the generativity of language detail – to the poetic text.

I mean my argument here to parallel an observation that I made a few years ago. When the general public is asked “what is poetry,” people often say “it rhymes.” This is not silly or simplistic or reductive, though it is incomplete: the statement points (if innocently) to the central importance of the line segment to poetry. Rhyme is simply one specific tactic for indicating line segment. Rhyme also creates a web of relationships that

link and cross the lines and thereby bind the poem to itself. Similarly to indicate that poetry is about the meaningfulness of the tiny in the “eyes of God” (or something like this) is an innocent/pious way of pointing to the detail.

Intricate bottomless tangibility — That’s a description, in poetics, of the poem. Even if a poem is very short and very small, it has the potential to show *intricate bottomless tangibility*, a vast extent on the surface — this is because of the depth and breadth of the detail and its prolongation in sound, rhythm, and the pulse of the poem.

NOTE

* The work of Rachel Blau DuPlessis includes the notable long poem *Drafts* (1986-2012), and various collections of collage poems. Her *Selected Poems, 1980-2020* was published by CHAX Press in 2022. Her most recent critical book is *A Long Essay on the Long Poem* from the University of Alabama Press, 2023. In addition, DuPlessis has written extensively in books and essays on gender, poetry, and poetics.