Poetry isn't merely a more beautiful way to communicate ideas or experiences or feelings: prose, after all, does that, and can be just as beautiful as poetry too. I noticed there were, of course, ideas in poetry, but they always seemed just out of reach, somehow both important and also in a way not, or at least not *most* important. Focusing just on those ideas, and trying to say what a poem was "really" about, always felt reductive, as if whatever was most important was being left behind in the act of explanation itself. Poetry seemed to be more about something else, something like creating a different sort of mood, or mental space, or way of thinking.

Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote, "Do not forget that a poem, although it is composed in the language of information, is not used in the language-game of giving information." If not to give information, what is the language of poetry for? What does it do that is different than prose? And why, as readers and writers, do we return to it, and preserve it?

The concept of genre—a defined category of writing, like poetry or novels or plays—isn't currently fashionable. Many people find such categories too restrictive and fussy. Much of the energy of contemporary literature is in crossing and mixing various genres in single pieces of writing. Yet when it comes to poetry, it can help 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, intuitive 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; journalism communicates information; essays engage in that hard-to-categorize effort to explore, however loosely, a certain 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, what they are for. Why are they so confusing? What are we supposed to be looking for? And what is the point of rhyme, of form, of metaphor, of imagery? Is it somehow to decorate or make more appealing some kind of message of 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 Abstract Thought": "A poem is really a kind of machine for producing the poetic state of mind by means of words." Valéry's description has always seemed to me to be as close as anyone has gotten to describing what poems can do:

> *If the term* machine *shocks you, if my mechanical comparison seems crude, please notice that while the composition of even a very short poem may absorb years, the action of the poem on the reader will take only a few minutes. In a few minutes the reader will receive his shock from discoveries, connections, glimmers of expression that have been accumulated during months of research, waiting, patience, and impatience.*

The poem makes poetry happen in the mind of the reader or listener. It happens first to the poet, and in the course of writing, the poet eventually makes something, a little machine, one that for the reader produces discoveries, connections, glimmers of expression. Whatever it does it can do again and 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 while awake, a higher,

more aware, more open, more sensitive condition of consciousness. The poem makes this happen for us by placing our mind as we read or listen in consonance with the associations being made 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 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?"

I like this answer too because, like Valéry's definition, it distinguishes poetry from other forms of writing not by any particular formal quality—like rhyme, or line breaks, or musicality, or the use of imagery or metaphor—but by its *effect*. Her definition is functional and empirical, passionate and subjective: I know poetry, say Dickinson and Valéry, 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 a reader. It happens through leaps of association. And it happens as the poem explores and 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 slippages. They also give space for its physicality—the way it sounds, looks, feels in the mouth—to itself make meaning. And poems also remind us of something we almost always take for granted: the miraculous, tenuous ability of language to connect us to each other and the world around us.The elusive, quicksilver, provisional nature of language is by necessity suppressed

in ordinary conversation, as well as in most other writing. What makes a poem different from any other use of language is that it remains the sole place designed *expressly* to make 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 dormant in the nature of language itself. Poems are where contradictions and possibilities of the material of this meaning-making system are *deliberately* brought forth and celebrated, ultimately undistracted by any other overriding purpose.

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

Poetry takes this inherent limitation of the material of language—that words are imprecise in their relation to whatever it is they all-too-imperfectly denote—and turns it into a place of communion. Remarkably, impossibly, miraculously, we somehow manage to communicate and mean despite the imperfect instrument of language. In this way, the provisional, tenuous, exciting, fragile, imperfect, yet intensely pleasurable relationship of a poem to language, and to meaning, could be said to be a kind of metaphor for our own relation to language, the world, and each other. There can be both sadness and joy in this recognition of the human condition. It could be said the relationship of poems to what we intuit but can never fully say makes them like prayer, that unending effort to bring someone closer to the divine, without pretending the divine could ever be fully known or understood.

When we are attentive to the language of poetry, to the words we see before us in the poem, we start to get a glimmer of the actuality, the paradox and complexity and uncertainty, that lies behind the way we usually perceive 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 fully be pursued when the writer is not *ultimately* preoccupied with any other task, like storytelling or explaining or convincing or 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 let them go. Every true poem is marked, somewhere, by that freedom. And that choice to be ready to reject all other purposes, in favor of the possibilities of language freed from utility, is when the writer becomes a poet.

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LITERALISTS OF THE IMAGINATION

MARIANNE MOORE'S "POETRY," WHICH APPEARED IN HER FIRST book, published in 1921, begins in a way that may cause frustrated readers to nod in agreement:

> I, too, dislike it: there are things that are important beyond all
> this fiddle.
> Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one
> discovers in
> it after all, a place for the genuine.

In its original 1921 version, the poem goes on for several more stanzas. Over the course of Moore's life she kept in various versions shortening it, until the entire poem ultimately consisted only of the lines above, although in her *Complete Poems*, published late

in her life, she also printed the original version in the notes at the end of the book, so in the end we have both.

The short version is amusing, but the longer one is far more interesting. In it, Moore writes that the things in poetry are important "not because a / high-sounding interpretation can be put upon them but because they are / useful," and that "we do not admire what we cannot understand." At the end of the poem, she writes that we will not "have" poetry until

> . . . the poets among us can be
> 'literalists of
> the imagination'—above
> insolence and triviality and can present
>
> for inspection, "imaginary gardens with real toads in them"

Moore's comparison of a poem to a beautiful, imagined place that contains real things, even ones we sometimes think of as ordinary and ugly, feels accurate to me. To be a literalist (as a poet but also as a reader) with the words in a poem, not to treat them as symbols or codes but to take them for what they are, is what draws us into true strangeness.

Moore's imaginary garden is the world the poem builds, the place where we as readers in our imaginations can go. This garden can be a pretty ordinary place. Or it can be fantastical and otherworldly, like Coleridge's gardens full of incense-bearing trees, in his poem "Kubla Khan." Or maybe there is no recognizable, physical place at all in the poem, which can be more of an abstract space we can go to, in order to think differently, and imagine. Regardless, reading the words literally is how we move into the garden where, as Wallace Stevens writes, we find ourselves "more truly and more strange."

Despite what you might have heard in school, with certain very limited exceptions, poets do not generally deliberately hide meaning, or write one word and really mean another. The stakes are (or should be) too high. Yet so many of us have been taught to read poetry as if its words mean something other than what they actually say.

In this version of poetry, poems are designed to communicate messages, albeit in a confusing way. Everything that is in the poem—metaphors, similes, imagery, sounds, line breaks, and so on—is decorative, that is, placed on top of the message or meaning of the poem. The student's job is to discover that meaning, and to repeat the central (often banal) message or theme back to the teacher, or in the exam. Bonus points are given for showing how poetic elements enhance this message.

Why this should be, and what the point of all this is, is never addressed or explained. It seems this attitude about poetry and poetic language is widespread. I recently read a quote from the makar (an enviable Scottish term for poet laureate) of Glasgow, the evocatively named Liz Lochhead, who said: "The way poetry is taught at the moment is absolutely appalling . . . They teach poetry as a problem, rather than a joy, and that's disgraceful. . . . It's clear that even teachers think poetry is a code. I have been asked by a boy, who e-mailed me once: 'when you wrote that poem about the bull, what did you really want to say?' His education had allowed him to get the misapprehension that a poem is a code trying to get a message across."

In rare cases (such as poems written in times of political oppression, or in particular eras when poetry had agreed-upon symbolic conventions), words in a poem can stand for something specific that is deliberately withheld or hidden. But these are isolated exceptions, and a little historical context and guidance can bring us into these poems as readers.

Regardless of how plainspoken or strange, how realistic or elusive or symbolic or metaphoric the poem is, in order to have any meaningful experience with it at all, the reader must first read very carefully and closely, and think about what the words mean. A good dictionary is almost always all that is necessary.

To be clear, I am not saying that I think all good poetry should be simple. Nor am I saying that poems mean what they say *only* in the most literal sense. I am saying that any meaningful experience with poetry *begins* with first reading literally, more literally than we do any other kind of writing.

If this seems simplistic or too obvious a point to make, trust me, it is not. I have seen time and again, as a teacher and as a poet, that even advanced students, even many poets, do not think to read poetry this way.

So many people assume what is difficult about poetry is that its meaning is hidden, to be uncovered. Yes, reading poetry is difficult, in that it requires some concentration, and slowing down, just as it would to read anything else unfamiliar. But the true difficulty—and reward—of poetry is in reading what is actually on the page carefully, and allowing one's imagination to adjust to the strangeness of what is there. Poetry has different secrets, ones that may be more difficult to accept than to discover.

THE PORTAL TO THE STRANGE IS THE LITERAL. AS A TEACHER, I have found that regardless of how open or resistant my literature students initially are to poetry, all the big progress comes when they start getting literal with the words on the page. I usually ask them, before we even begin talking about what the poem "means," to go to the library to investigate a word in the poem, to find out as much as they can about it. I ask them to use whatever resources they can, including the *Oxford English Dictionary* and anything

else, to figure out what the word would have meant at the time for the poet.

They come back with many exciting facts, some of which are not relevant to the meaning of the poem. But the exercise of getting as deeply into the words as possible has the effect of showing them that this is the way into a poem, and that meaning and possibility come from that act, and not from some search for an interpretation someone else already made of the poem, that they have to figure out to get a good grade. My students start to feel a direct, powerful relation to poetry, one that can happen outside the classroom, without an intermediary. They remember that poetry is written in their language, and that all of us can be liberated into our own independent lives as readers.

It turns out that a close attention to definitions and etymologies can be a portal to the power of poetry. This is why, more than a professor or some other priest of literature, a necessary companion for reading poetry is a dictionary.

Mahmoud Darwish wrote: "Extreme clarity is a mystery." Many poets, however, confuse being deliberately obscure with the deeper mystery of poetry. Because we are told that poetry is inherently "difficult," and that by its very nature it somehow makes meaning by hiding meaning, our first efforts at poetry often naturally reflect this.

Good poets do not deliberately complicate something just to make it harder for a reader to understand. Unfortunately, young readers, and young poets too, are taught to think this is exactly what poets do. This has, in turn, created certain habits in the writing of contemporary poetry. Bad information about poetry in, bad poetry out, a kind of a poetic obscurity feedback loop. It often takes poets a long time to unlearn this. Some never do. They continue to write in this way, deliberately obscure and esoteric,

because it is a shortcut to being mysterious. The so-called effect of their poems relies on hidden meaning, keeping something away from the reader.

I have also come to see that, in addition to pernicious instruction, there might be certain psychological aspects contributing to the impulse younger poets have to keep their meanings hidden. Some fear feeling exposed. Others are afraid of being seen as banal, or stylistically derivative, or uninteresting, or stupid. These are, of course, more or less the fears of all writers, young and old. I don't know what writers of stories and novels and essays eventually discover for themselves, but I can say that sooner or later poets figure out there are no new ideas, only the same old ones, and also that nobody who loves poetry reads it to be impressed, but to experience and feel and understand in ways only poetry can conjure.

I am sympathetic to young poets who feel a strong impulse to disguise what they are saying. Early in my life as a poet, I had trouble being direct. I was intensely attracted to poets who used clear, simple, elemental language, but also felt somehow that saying something simple and direct, or telling a little story, or being anecdotal or narrative in any way, wasn't "really" writing poetry. I felt self-conscious, and as if I needed to demonstrate my talent and ability with the art in every line. It took me a long time to get over this feeling, and it was only when I did that I started to write poetry that was any good.

I'm sure also I was afraid of inhabiting whoever I was as a poet. I was afraid to be judged. What if I was open about who I was as a poet, and it wasn't any good? What if people thought I was untalented, or mistaken about my vocation? Those fears are naturally very strong in many young artists, and it's really hard not to succumb to them by making art that is clever or formally

imitates complex and intellectually challenging work. It's a kind of self-protection.

I see this a lot in the work of my students. Often, unconsciously, they will do something at the beginning of their poems that demonstrates, according to whatever terms they have, that they are poets. It's as if they are presenting their poetic qualifications (licenses?) for inspection at the front door of the poem. Some of them, for instance, will do something really weird and disruptive with syntax. Others will throw in a bunch of images and metaphors, right away, before we even know what the poem is about. There is often recalcitrance about giving basic information about what is going on, where we are, who is speaking, et cetera, as if to do so would be to "ruin" whatever is poetic about the poem. But that sort of superficial introduction of confusion is not how great poetry is made, nor how we are brought closer to what is most difficult to say.

IT IS OFTEN RIGHT AROUND THIS POINT—AFTER I HAVE SAID that poetry is not a secret code, and that it is not written to be deliberately elusive or obscure—that people say: Okay, but what about modern poetry?

T. S. Eliot's long, fragmented, allusive *The Waste Land*, published in 1922, is often brought up as a prime example of the difficulty of modern poetry. Many of us remember being intimidated by this poem, which seems to be a minefield of historical and cultural references, and of confusing, uncontextualized voices in different registers and even languages. It is indeed a difficult poem for most of us to grasp without some kind of context, or guidance.

Eliot and many of his fellow Modernists believed in setting a very high standard for intelligent reading, and thought of them-

selves as preservers and saviors of a culture in decline. For this reason, they wrote in a deliberately difficult, elusive, and allusive style. Eliot's peer William Carlos Williams presciently saw the potentially dangerous appeal this type of poetry would have, writing that Eliot's poem was "the great catastrophe of our letters . . . the blast of Eliot's genius which gave the poem back to the academics." He could see that certain teachers would gravitate toward High Modernist poems, and use those poems to appoint themselves members of a priestly caste, the keepers of esoteric knowledge.

What can be problematic about a modern poem like *The Waste Land* is not its difficulties per se. It is how the difficulties it presents—such as a reference to an obscure historical event or literary work or something mythological, an unattributed quotation in a foreign language, syntactical weirdness, an esoteric word—can create a great penumbra of imagined difficulty and mystification throughout the whole poem, one that shadows everything, even the simplest and most direct statements. *Everything* about the poem seems difficult to us. We begin to think even straightforward things cannot be what they seem. For many readers who have encountered modern poetry in school, this shadow of difficulty seems to extend, just as Williams warned, to cover all poetry.

Before the beginning of *The Waste Land* there is a short epigraph in both Latin *and* Greek, a quote about an ancient Greek oracle known as the Sybil, from *The Satyricon* by Petronius. Despite what we might have been told by scholars and teachers, our ultimate understanding of the poem does not depend upon this immediate demand for erudition. Yet this demand can be so intimidating and destabilizing that it establishes a certain mentality about reading poetry, such that when the poem itself begins, we might not notice that it is written in plain English that anyone can read:

April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.
Winter kept us warm, covering
Earth in forgetful snow, feeding
A little life with dried tubers.

Think for a moment if this were written in prose. Would you find it confusing? Maybe a bit elusive—what is the point, why is he telling us this?—but not mystifying. There is not a single complicated word in the passage.

The poem begins with an odd, subjective assertion: "April is the cruellest month." Why? Things are starting to come alive again. Our expectations are low in winter: we are just trying to survive. In spring, big things start to happen, "Memory and desire." The "Dull roots" are starting to come to life again, because of the spring rain. The poem talks about the month like it's a person, asserting that it is somehow responsible for "breeding" these flowers—lilacs—out of the dead land. The elements of time—April and winter—are personified, and switch their usual roles, April becoming something cruel and terrible, because it starts to make us aware of some things we might have forgotten: memory and desire.

The brief close reading I just demonstrated of that passage above required no special knowledge, only attention. The meaning of the poem resides on the page, and is available to an attentive reader.

Could there also be a symbolic significance to some of the elements in the passage above? Yes, absolutely, Do we *need* to research April, lilacs, dull roots, spring rain, to "get" the poem? I