Introduction

Situating poetry as a genre and genre recognition as sociocultural learning

No definition of poetry is entirely satisfactory, but a first attempt at situating poetry as a distinct kind of writing and speaking can be made using the idea of genres as a categorisation. Usually, when we encounter a text, we recognise it as of a particular and familiar kind, as belonging to a distinct genre or category, for example as a newspaper article, a blog, an insurance policy, or a recipe. For these widely divergent text types, serving different integrated purposes, we have developed (from exposure and schooling) a mental scheme of what to expect. We adjust our reading accordingly. This familiarity with the functions and conventions of the numerous textual genres that we encounter in day-to-day life is very much a result of our socialisation in the culture(s) to which we belong (Verdonk, 2002: 11). We consult a cookbook and an insurance policy for quite different purposes and with quite different expectations; different again are our purposes and expectations in reading or listening to a poem. But if communicative purpose – rather than simply recurring linguistic patterns – is finally a better basis for deciding genre membership, then the ‘socio-communicative context’ has to be taken into consideration (Busse, 2014: 109ff). This remains the case even if defining communicative purpose is subjective, and if the sociocommunicative context – for example the discourse community that uses a particular genre of texts – shifts in time and with change of place. A broad consequence, however, is that the genre of poetry continues to change, just as the nature of the poems deemed central or peripheral to the genre continues to change. The conditions of poetry production and reception in, for example, London have changed sufficiently in the past forty years that Kate Tempest is today hailed as a leading young poet, while two generations ago she might have been classified instead as a performance artist. One must exercise caution in any broad or notionally permanent claims about poetic forms or purposes.

These facts create difficulties for any attempt at a statement of ‘poetics’, if by this term one aims at a specification of the necessary, or typical, or sufficient features for a spoken or written text to qualify as a poem – for it is arguable that poetry is a linguistic activity that is intended to be the least genre-bound of activities, even though it remains a distinct genre. Every characterisation needs to be qualified by a ‘usually’ at the very least, including mention of the feature deemed applicable to most literature: fictionality. True, many poems
seem intent on immersing the reader in the seemingly ‘safe’ domain of the fictional and imaginary – but plenty of other poems prompt similarly complex thought and response with regard to real-world people, events, settings, and experiences.

**Some typical features of poems**

It is with the prototypicality notion in mind that I list some of the elements regularly found in greater concentration in poems than in non-poems (see also Verdonk, 2013: 119–20). Many of these are of special interest to the present authors, since they are instanced by linguistic expression.

A poem typically:

- makes no direct reference to the world of phenomena, but provides a representation of it;
- exploits ambiguity, polysemy, and elusiveness of intent or evaluative stance;
- is enriched by an attention to rhythm and meter;
- reflects care in its use of ‘connective phonological tissue’ among and across its lines;
- is sensitive to effects that draw on traditions of spatial arrangement into lines and stanzas (in most other kinds of writing, the line is not a semantic and prosodic unit at all, but is purely pragmatic and meaning-insensitive);
- is exceptionally careful in its deployment of semantic ‘enrichments’, such as imagery and figurative language, which may mean that metaphor is used sparingly – and there is far less ‘routine’ metaphor in a poem than, for example, in sports journalism;
- carries deliberate patterning and parallelism on all levels of linguistic organisation – that is, sounds, vocabulary, grammar, or syntax;
- reveals foregrounding – that is, deviant patterns on all of these linguistic levels;
- exploits intertextuality – that is, indirect allusions to other texts;
- is enhanced by its potential for oral performance – that is, reading a poem aloud makes it more vivid and memorable;
- is creative in its use of language; and
- gives aesthetic pleasure.

Some of these features can be elaborated upon, as follows.

- A poem must be spoken.
- It should be both (comparatively) difficult and memorable.
- Thus it must be challenging.
- It may give pleasure, but it may also give pain; either way, the text may furnish the reader with catharsis, therapy, stimulation, food for thought, consolation, or advice.

In particular, I wish to emphasise the aural essence of poetry: its fundamental spoken-ness and heard-ness. If cognitive embodiment theory has a particular relevance to poetry (see, for example, Gibbs, 1994; Stockwell, 2002), we should be able to say that just as running, dancing, and many sports encourage us to exploit the natural potential of our legs to the full, but within rule-governed forms, so poetry and song are practices in which we are encouraged to exploit the natural potential of our voices to the full. One difference between these related ‘macro’-cultural genres is that poetry elevates language, used in combination with rhythm and intonation, while song elevates melody, in its combination with rhythm and (if present)
language. But it would be close to absurd to say that one can experience a song by close silent examination of the written song music, and it is not much less absurd to say that one can experience a poem simply by silent reading of the written text.

Prototypicality, scripts, and schemas are aids to the recognising and categorising that facilitates human interaction and coordination generally. We interact with others and engage with the world in a more ‘chunked’ and ‘pre-sorted’ way, with less minute and continuous analysis than we might otherwise suppose. Familiarity breeds content, for most of us in many situations. Categorisation, prototypicality, and schemata all combine to establish normal readings of situations, or rapid understandings of normal actions and states. The relevance of this to poetics and stylistics is that categories and schemas enable us to project a situational ‘grounding’ for a poem, in relation to which a foreground of whatever seems to us exceptional in the text becomes the more noticeable.

Prototypology and subgenres of poetry

The list of typical characteristics of texts classified as poetry is only a start, not least because, at a subgeneric level, there are many formally distinct types of poem, with their own features of poetry as prototypical of this genre. However, because this category shows a great variety of prototypes, many of these characteristics may be found in diverse subgenres such as sonnet, ode, villanelle, sestina, blank verse, free verse, lyric, ballad, haiku, limerick, nursery rhyme, comic verse, doggerel, etc. This shows again that categories have a graded membership, or degrees of ‘match’ between instances or groups of instances (on the one hand) and the prototype, and that (on the other) they have indeterminate borders.

On poetry, poetics, and creativity

Poetry and creativity

There is no getting to the bottom of literary creativity; each of these terms is much too fluid and multifaceted to submit to simple definition. Accordingly, what follows is no more than the most selective and partial discussion. It reflects an interest in whatever creativity we can find in a poem; what I have to say about ‘poetics’ is oriented towards this preoccupation. As is widely recognised (see, for example, discussion in Greene et al., 2012), the words ‘poetics’ and ‘poetry’ can be traced to a cluster of ancient Greek terms: poieis, meaning ‘making’; poiema, meaning ‘a thing made, a work’; poieis, meaning ‘a maker (poet)’; and poieike (technê), meaning ‘the making (art/technique), (poetics)’. Accordingly, ‘poetics’ now standardly denotes the resources and techniques by means of which literature is created, or the description and study of those techniques (a similar ambiguity attaches to the word ‘grammar’). So my aim is to present a brief sample of technique description relevant to the writing of poetry. What I will discuss are one or two of the many techniques or principles that, arguably, contribute to the kinds of creativity found in some of the most admired and anthologised poems (in process of canonisation) written in English in the mid-twentieth century. My focus poem is Elizabeth Bishop’s ‘At the Fishhouses’ (see Appendix); I urge you to read it now.

As I have suggested elsewhere (Toolan, 2012), I believe that there is some danger of ‘creative’ having become such a semantically vague epithet that it cannot contribute to an attempt at systematic theory or analysis. Someone’s mode of dress is found to be amusingly
different and is called ‘creative’, or two ordinarily unrelated flavours are unexpectedly combined in a recipe and are called ‘creative’: the examples can be multiplied. There is a useful discussion of ‘creativity’ in Pope and Swann (2011) that historicises the term, noting the fascinating shifts over time in the meaning of creativity’s lexical collocates – ‘innovation’, ‘inspiration’, ‘imagination’, ‘originality’, ‘genius’, ‘invention’ – but which veers away from a definition. It inclines towards the view that creativity is as widespread and everyday as culture itself, and that many people (a far larger constituency than an ‘elect’ of literati) routinely demonstrate their linguistic cleverness and proficiency in the wordplay, figurative language, and narrative skills to be found in their everyday conversational interaction. Ergo, there is no distinct creativity in literary language: the latter is on a continuum, or multiple continua – depending on the kind of inventiveness, memorability, etc., that one wishes to measure – with non-literary language.

All of these points are reasonable – but a few important factors may need renewed emphasis. One is that it is perfectly possible to dismiss the idea of a special creativity in ‘literary language’ while subscribing to the view that a special creativity is to be found in literature. That creativity certainly will not consist in the appropriate use of distinctively ‘literary’ vocabulary, although I would hesitate to declare that there are no words that we mentally ‘tag’ as literary. Arguably, there is some such vocabulary – but no poet would deploy it unknowingly or without awareness of the scope for irony. Thus, in Kathleen Jamie’s poem ‘Water Day’, we may notice her use of the word ‘blithe’ in ‘its blithe career’, or, in the same poem, the word ‘oracular’, and wonder if these are not somehow subcategorised for ‘poetry writing’ in the well-read person’s lexicon. But if we ‘know’ that these words are from a poetic register, Jamie knows that we know (her poem makes fun of ‘heavy weather’, romanticised interpretations of irrigation practices). Likewise, when, in Heaney’s poems, we find words such as ‘crepuscular’ or ‘quicken’, alongside other favourites of his that one could not claim were notionally reserved for literary or elevated use, such as ‘earth’ and ‘ground’, we understand that such dialectal selectivity is anything but unaware.

Another consideration to mention is that putting the puns, similes, and skilled storytelling of everyday interaction on a continuum with Joyce and Shakespeare has its linguistic and other justifications – but it could encourage an insensitivity to the exceptionality of a Joyce or a Shakespeare, and a failure to appreciate the multidimensional importance of their texts (so different in degree as to approximate difference in kind), by comparison with everyday texts. Objections to claims about the exceptional art apparent in a Shakespeare or Stevens poem often take the form of complaints that those singling out such poets are reactionary, hieratic, elitist, exclusivist, dupes of the nexus wherein dwells the literary establishment, with its academic and publishing phalanxes. But such objections rarely go to the heart of the matter. Quite possibly, versions of each of Shakespeare’s or Stevens’ linguistic ingenuities taken separately may be found in the passing conversational sallies or breakfast cereal advertisements of innumerable uncelebrated contemporaries. But poetry must be recognised as a distinct genre (sitting within a family of genres: literature), with its own distinct characteristics and contractual arrangements with its users, just as genre theory extends to every other communicational practice. It is the total speech act of the poem in the total speech situation that, finally, we are assessing, and this assessment has to consider writers’ and readers’ purposes.

Stylisticians have taught themselves to resist a naïve assumption that genres, including the genre of poetry (or a superordinate genre of literature), can be defined by the language that they use. Genres are staged and socially ratified activity types, designed to meet interactants’ purposes and expectations, and it is those that define a particular genre more
than the distinctiveness of the language used. So if tax documents are peppered with one kind of English, while legal documents are characterised by another distinct kind of English, still we cannot claim that the distinctive vocabularies and grammar ‘make’ the genres; likewise in the case of poetry, in which the language is exceptionally carefully chosen, but is not in itself special language. Any language can be used for literary purposes and no language can be identified, qua language, as intrinsically literary, or powerful, or beautiful, or emotive. Even the most piss-weak words, in the right context, can be perfectly suited to the purpose, including ‘piss’ and ‘weak’.

I will argue that one of the distinctive characteristics of poetry – at least, of the kind that I will treat one poem by Elizabeth Bishop as an exemplary instance – is that, proportionately, it aims to generate more new thoughts or imaginings (more surprises, or unforeseen ideas) in more recipients (in more times, and more places), while itself taking up less time and less space than all other verbal genres. To do this, a modern poem has to be exceptionally creative, exceptionally fit for an emerging purpose, and, along the way, typically and in comparison with other genres of writing or speaking, it puts a tremendous strain on the coherence requirements of a text. By a text’s ‘coherence requirements’, I mean its conveying to the reader of a sense of thematic integration – of a centre that holds or an arc that is unbroken – while also treating of a single topic in depth and from many perspectives. Thus the poem aims to express, or more usually to evoke or implicate, within the small scope of 1 or 2 minutes’ worth of spoken language, as much difference and also as much similarity as it can muster, with regard to some topic – any topic! – that has caught and held the poet’s attention. Repetition is one of its core resources in that effort.

Fitness for emerging purpose

The creativity in poems that is my focus of attention must be more than a saying that is new and different. At the same time, the semantic link between ‘creation’ and ‘creative’ may need reconsideration, especially since the focus here is on poetry. We should not be content with assuming that ‘creation’ is simply synonymous with ‘making’. If it were, then it would also be synonymous with poesis, and all poems (being ‘makings’ or ‘made things’) would be creations or have creativity inherently and the word ‘creative’ would here be redundant. But this does not accord with our experience, which is that writing a poem does not guarantee that it will display much creativity – and indeed we will judge plenty of poems to carry rather slight creativity (most of the poems that I have ever written, for example). If there is creativity in poetry, it may involve making, and newness and difference, but it entails something other than these characteristics.

Indeed, at first glance, poetics and form might appear to be the antithesis of creativity, if they are regarded as an inventory of ‘do’s and ‘don’t’s in the writing of poems, for example the formal requirements of the Petrarchan sonnet, sestina, or villanelle as restraints on creativity. They give scant encouragement to the poet who, in the interests of radical novelty, decides to have his or her lines rhyme at the beginning or in the middle only.

The creativity in poems need not display radical novelty or difference in all respects. Thoroughgoing newness or difference could render a poem uninterpretable to its target audience and compromise its claims to creativity. Forms and tradition are resources, to be redeployed in the new circumstances of today, so a principle of ‘fitness for purpose’ must be a key characteristic of poetic creativity, alongside the usual ideas of – to a degree – newness and difference. But a key proviso is this: the ‘purpose’ for which a poem or other literary work strikes us as exceptionally well fitted is often (always?) one of which the reader is not fully
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aware prior to encountering the poem itself. In a previous essay, I suggested that ‘[c]reativity becomes our term for the happy fitness of some new solution to a new or emergent problem, something we had not fully recognised was a problem’ (Toolan, 2012: 18) – so it is an attribute conferred on something after the event, and there is neither recipe nor rules for being creative other than ‘don’t just follow the rules’. And even the word ‘purpose’ is not quite right, being too instrumental and suggestive of a burden to be lightened (see Hospers, 1985: 252): a creative poem addresses an emergent purpose more than it solves an emergent ‘problem’. And a further condition may be added: we should stipulate that the purpose to which we judge the high-creativity poem to be an exceptionally suited treatment must be a significant one – not invariably serious, tragic, or deep, but significant. Significant in its playful levity if this suits. Sometimes what, for one person, is a significant theme is, for another person, triviality; such cases cannot be ignored. But there seems also to be abundant consensus as to significance of topic, even – as is often the case – where this is approached obliquely in a poem, which initially seems to be only about a skunk or a sandpiper. Other more specific desiderata, beyond ‘fitness for new or newly configured significant purpose’, include ingenuity, good design, with a power to move the reader/hearer and to stimulate, disturb, or reinforce their thoughts, rather than leaving him or her unmoved and unreflecting.

We approach a poem that is new to us a bit like the way in which the Lilliputians inspected Gulliver’s watch: here was a complex, ingenious, machine, performing fascinating movements for a purpose that they struggled to comprehend, but mostly misjudged – although not without some shafts of satirical insight (‘he assured us . . . he seldom did anything without consulting it . . . called it his oracle’). An extreme example, perhaps and too literally mechanistic, since the emerging purposes for which a poem seems in all of the circumstances to be an exceptionally good fit are not practical and instrumental like those of a watch, but ideational and emotional. If a poem is a tool, it is a tool with which we can think and feel, rather than bend the world to our needs, and the particulars of the thinking and feeling that it fosters dawn on us only gradually.

Critical issues and topics

The (primitive?) origins of poetry: Rhythm and repetition

In terms of aesthetics (what we judge to be pleasing or beautiful) and of cognition (the gaining of knowledge and understanding through thought and bodily experience), rhythm and repetition may be regarded as the foundational elements of poetry. Rhythm is rooted in our first sensory impression when we are floating in our mother’s womb and hear the rhythmic beats of her heart. Indeed, mental awareness of rhythm is one of our most fundamental cognitive capacities, which, in the evolution of the human species, almost undoubtedly came before our power of speech (Cureton, 1993: 71). It is therefore generally assumed that poetry primarily originates in the rhythms of the chants, songs, and liturgical rites of primitive oral cultures (Parini, 2008: 103–4).

Rhythm appears to be closely related to repetition, in as much that the latter is the regular recurrence of certain elements that, in themselves, create the opportunity for rhythm. Putting it differently, a rhythmic flow is accomplished by repetition just as, for instance, by the waves beating on the beach, or birdsong. Rhythm is chronologically regulated repetition.

Other everyday bodily rhythms or everyday things done rhythmically include breathing in and out, our heartbeat and pulse, blinking (more regular than we think), walking, running, swimming, dancing, chewing, cutting food, wiping and polishing, clapping, shaving,
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brushing hair, and cleaning teeth. Experiencing these rhythmic repetitions is part of what it is and means to be a body – and they are nearly universal among humans. In all of these, much of the time, there is a regular recurrence of an action or process, whether perceived or not as such by its source. Where it is perceived, the rhythmic repetition can come to seem a distinct source of structure and sense, adding to the meaning of the whole activity: you make a point of brushing your hair, and of doing so with thirty strokes, and may come to experience the activity as falling into two parts, the brushing and the strokes. Some of us remember being told off in childhood for wolfing down our food and being instructed to chew each mouthful a dozen times.

For me, repetition is the superordinate and more general category, while rhythm is a subordinate, more focused, more locally instrumental one. For rhythm, you have to have repetition plus something else: regularity of recurrence. For repetition, you need recurrence only, making it more basic. Many of the actions listed above can be repeated without achieving or creating a rhythm: you can walk along, changing your speed and length of stride, even disrupting the left–right alternation, so that there is no clear rhythm. But doing so is difficult, atypical, even quite disturbing in its unnaturalness. The rhythmic is often easier and more natural than the arhythmic.

Why should rhythmic repetition be so important to us? Because it marks time, that old father who will outlive us all: the ageless agent of our ageing. Time itself is abstract and intangible – but we know it operates upon us unceasingly, as surely as the turning of the earth brings us daily nearer the sun and then away from it.

Repetition, rhythm, and recurrence overlap considerably, and to this triad can be added parallelism, pattern, and equivalence. Pattern and parallelism are nothing but repetitions of particular kinds. For Leech (1969: 66), parallelism involves some variation or difference within a frame of recurrence or identity; thus, at the beginning of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony, a familiar four-note phrase ‘repeats’ with differences – differences of pitch and of the duration of the final note. A century earlier, Gerard Manley Hopkins (1959 [1865]: 84) declared that the artifice of poetry ‘reduces itself to the principle of parallelism’, an observation that was cited by Jakobson (1960) and evidently congenial to him: he equally cites with approval Hopkins’s defining of verse as ‘speech wholly or partially repeating the same figure of sound’ (Jakobson, 1981 [1960]: 28). Later, Jakobson (1981 [1960]: 28) describes rhyme as only a particular case of the general problem of poetry, ‘namely parallelism’, proceeding to quote Hopkins at length (see now also Frog, 2014). Jakobson (1981 [1960]: 42) is equally confident of the power of selective and strategic semantic repetition: ‘In poetry not only the phonological sequence but, in the same way, any sequence of semantic units strives to build an equation. Similarity superimposed on contiguity imparts to poetry its thoroughgoing symbolic, multiplex, polysemantic essence . . .’

Elaborating on these ideas about rhythm and repetition, cognitive linguists argue that our innate habit to structure objects or events according to symmetrical patterns is, in fact, a projection of our embodied understanding of all of the symmetries to be found in the natural, as well as the artificial, world around us (Jackendoff, 1994). For example, in the myriad intricate patterns in flora and fauna (read Blake’s ‘The Tyger’!), and in architecture, music, and – last, but not least – in poetry.

Creativity and lexical repetition

In a previous essay on the subject (Toolan, 2012), I proposed that specifically lexical repetition was, perhaps paradoxically, an important form of creativity in poems, but only under
certain conditions. Long-distance verbal repetition (for example in lines 2, 22, and 42 of a 48-line poem) is often a powerful means of promoting cohesion and unity in a poem, almost imperceptibly (on a first reading, the two repetitions may not be noticed as such); absolutely adjacent full repetition (‘break, break, break’; ‘And there I shut her wild wild eyes’; ‘put out the light and then put out the light’, etc.) can be even more effective, but in a different, highly localised way (unless, as in the Tennyson poem, the triple phrase is repeated much later in the poem, so that local intensity is married to a poem-wide function for the phrase). What are usually disfavoured (and criticised as ‘uncreative’) are adjacent repetitions-by-paraphrase (of the kind to be found everywhere in the jobbing compositions of the great bad Scottish poet William McGonagall). This is one reason why Tennyson, Keats, and Shakespeare, respectively, did not write the following immortal lines:

Break, smash, crash, / On thy cold gray stones, O Sea!
And there I shut her wild mad eyes;
Put out the light and then snuff out the flame.

A demonstration

In fact, after (and only after) our students have sufficiently familiarised themselves with a poem to sense the impact of the lexical repetitions therein, it is a useful, further sensitising – and amusing – exercise to ask them to replace any lexical repeats by their best effort at a near-synonymous alternative. Consider the too-famous early Seamus Heaney poem (‘done’ by a generation of British 16-year-olds during their first public exams), ‘Digging’. With that word as poem title, each subsequent use of that word within the poem is, of course, a repeat. In order to appreciate what Heaney’s repeats contribute, one can try to replace the first two repeated uses (here italicised) in the early lines of the poem (a third use comes fifteen lines later):

3 Under my window, a clean rasping sound
4 When the spade sinks into gravelly ground:
5 My father, digging. I look down
6 Till his straining rump among the flowerbeds
7 Bends low, comes up twenty years away
8 Stooping in rhythm through potato drills
9 Where he was digging.

One can present a student (or any reader) with the whole poem, including its title, except that the three subsequent uses of ‘digging’ are replaced by blank spaces, and ask the reader to choose, for each of the gaps, words that are (a) suitable, (b) not already used in the poem, and (c) different from each other. (They need not even be told that the removed recurring original word is digging.)

What words can replace ‘digging’, in lines 5 and 9? ‘My father, toiling . . . Where he was burrowing’? ‘Excavating’, ‘gardening’, ‘shovelling’, ‘grubbing’, or ‘rootling’?! Every alternative seems ludicrous, ponderous, inept, utterly unfit for the purpose, given the sense and co-text in relation to which these choices must function. It is the evident aptness for the poem’s purposes that makes Heaney’s choices, the judicious repeating of ‘digging’, moments of creativity.

Immediate or adjacent reformulatory repetition always risk being breaches of the Gricean preferences concerning quantity and manner: a second (or subsequent) reformulation
promises further informativity (as per the *quantity* maxim), as the justification for not being as brief (the *manner* maxim) as the text otherwise would be. Where the addressee or recipient cannot derive such ideational or empathetic supplement, the adjacent reformulations may attract criticism, as instances of redundancy, prolixity, and the ‘unpoetic’ (as I argued, in Toolan, 2012, with respect to McGonagall’s poems). By contrast, the manner and quantity breaches carried by adjacent *full* repeats are, of course, not hidden at all, but exceptionally overt, and invite the implicature that some further meaning or feeling should be derived, by way of justification. And, in suitably prepared context, it is remarkable how often such full repetitions are judged to be communicative of implicatures much less securely conveyed or invited were the text not to repeat in the way decided upon.

**Current contribution: The poetics of repetition**

But now, if we turn to a wonderful poet such as Elizabeth Bishop (whom I have been reading with undergraduates at the time of writing), we find poems that seem to put attempted stylistic generalisations about lexical repetition under interesting pressure. Bishop seems untroubled by using full repetitions in non-immediate, but close, proximity, in ways that by the lights of a different poetics might be regarded as casual, slack, and tending to dissipate the intensity of the design. Consider ‘At the Fishhouses’, for example. Assuming (as I do) that this is a great poem, can we clarify the poetics of repetition so that it values the practice of poets like Bishop?

In broad structure, the poem comprises two long sections and a short middle section, with a strong sense of development from the extended ‘factual’, almost journalistic, description of a set scene, to a much deeper sequence of concluding observations. But midway through the first and descriptive long section come these lines:

21 The big fish tubs are completely lined
22 with layers of beautiful herring scales
23 and the wheelbarrows are similarly plastered
24 with creamy iridescent coats of mail,
25 with small iridescent flies crawling on them.

Here there is not only the repetition of ‘iridescent’ within a line, but also the triple line-initial use of ‘with’ (the use of ‘and’ in the third line is not semantically radically distinct from ‘with’), two of these functioning in the near-synonymous ‘lined with’ and ‘plastered with’. There are also several words here that – as Bishop undoubtedly recognised – verge on the redundant or the unnecessary, and in other hands (such as McGonagall’s) would surely earn censure: ‘completely’, ‘beautiful’, ‘similarly’, and ‘small’. Bishop will have known that she could, alternatively, have written as follows:

The big fish tubs are lined
with layers of herring scales
and the wheelbarrows are plastered
with creamy iridescent coats of mail,
with iridescent flies crawling on them.

The question is why she did not. The amended version, without the allegedly near-redundant or low-informativity words, is rhythmically marred by comparison with the original and its
approximation to four main beats per line; so there is a form-based argument against this specific revision. But the larger and simpler justification for Bishop’s near-redundancies in these lines is that they are a best choice (and a brave one, risking censure of the kind rehearsed here), given what may be claimed to be the gradually emerging ultimate purpose of the poem. That purpose is to lead us from extensively descriptive contemplation of a highly particularised setting, a convergence of particulars, to an idea and an atmosphere that is profoundly abstract and, to use one of Bishop’s own words, absolute: the flowing away of knowledge and history. But before all of this, the long first section is deliberately prosaic, and almost devoid of metaphor or abstraction, unless you regard the use of ‘silver’ to describe the herring scales as metaphorical (it is not: they ‘look’ silver), or see figurative mileage in the description of the ancient capstan as bearing ‘some melancholy stains, like dried blood, where the ironwork has rusted’. But it is the atmosphere of restrained, closely observant factuality and the reassurance to any reader/listener that such placid description conveys that are uppermost throughout the first section, and its relaxed lexical repetitions are instrumental in establishing that atmosphere.

While the first section is all close observation of the here and now – of the tangible, grasable, and concrete described in its permanence with reassuring clarity – the equally long second section advances to an ending that recognises historical knowledge as always moving away from us, with nothing fixed or comforting. The ultimate purpose of the poem really starts to come into focus only at the beginning of the second section:

47 Cold dark deep and absolutely clear,
48 element bearable to no mortal,
49 to fish and to seals...

Even here, the speaker has not really resorted to abstraction or metaphor, but they are clearly beginning to speak about wider or deeper phenomena than the ‘sequins’ coating the old fisherman’s vest, the wheelbarrows and the slope, and the black old knife of line 39 (sic: not an old black knife), whose blade is almost worn away. And even this first venture towards the unbearable and the absolute is veered away from at once: we are distracted by a bit of business, a bit of whimsy, about a seal that is ‘interested in music’ and a fellow ‘believer in total immersion’: Baptist hymns for him! What an elegant way of conveying ‘no rush’ – no forcing of the poem along a path according to an agenda, towards a predictable outcome.

The encounter with the seal extends to eleven lines, before line 47 is repeated verbatim as line 60, but now with the subject of these predicates made explicit:

60 Cold dark deep and absolutely clear,
61 the clear gray icy water.

A simple concordancing of the poem’s vocabulary reveals that the most frequent (thus most repeated) lexical item in the entire poem – thus excluding the grammatical words and focusing on what Louw and Milojkovic (2014: 264), refer to as ‘quasi-propositional variables’ – is ‘water’, used seven times. This is closely followed by ‘stones’ (six instances) and ‘dark’ (five). What do these obsessive repeatings signify, aesthetically? Consider ‘stones’: entirely absent from the first section and first mentioned in the brief transition section, ‘stones’ occurs five times in remarkably close succession – at lines 66, 68, 69, 70, and 75. In part, it functions like a tolling bell, but also contributes to a kind of polyphony of sound and meaning equivalences with associated items that are also used repeatedly and
in ordered sequence in these lines: ‘bones’, and ‘burn’ or ‘burns’. The pattern of repetitions implicates – rather than explicates – that to put your hand in this inhumanly cold water is to feel your bones to be stones, ones so cold that they burn, producing the almost alchemical ‘dark gray flame’. (Not only are such outlandish suggestions protected from our disbelief by remaining covert and implicit rather than open and explicit, they are also hedged modally and counterfactually, by a clause-initial ‘as if’.)

**Stylistic iconicity**

The lexical repetitions at the very end of the poem arguably work similarly, with individual instances of repetition mutating in the course of their reiteration into new terms, so that equivalence induces the emergence of disturbing new meanings. The semantic or phonological partial repeating is extensive here (consider, for example, ‘bitter’, ‘briny’, and ‘burn’), but the most important pattern involves the interweaving of ‘drawn (from)’, ‘derived (from)’, ‘flowing’ and ‘drawn’, ‘flowing’ and ‘flown’. As used in philosophical discourse, several of these items are already partially synonymous, but their proximate use in the final four lines creates a powerful blending effect. ‘Drawn’ features in lines 80 and 82; ‘flowing’ features in lines 82 and 83. So line 82 is prominent as the site at which both repeated words appear, in the phrase ‘flowing and drawn’. If you blend or merge ‘flowing’ and ‘drawn’, the most natural – sequence-preserving – blend that you derive is the poem’s last word, ‘flown’. (Less ‘naturally’, you can derive ‘drawing’ or ‘drowning’.) The effectiveness of the poem-final ‘flown’, as an inflected repeat of the immediately preceding ‘flowing’ and a repetition-blend of the phrase from the previous line, relates to its iconicity. By ‘stylistic iconicity’, I refer to that impression of exceptional ‘embodiment’ of a sign’s meaning in its materiality, such that the communication seems to be a more direct and natural enactment of the meaning than the arbitrary and symbolic signification that we ordinarily look for in language (Fischer, 2014; Leech, 2008: 114–15, 149–50).

To claim that language is being used iconically is to claim that, to some degree, the form embodies the meaning; linguistic iconicity is at work when the form evokes the meaning because it resembles (visually or aurally) the thing meant. As such, in (rare) cases of what we might call ‘absolute iconicity’, an addressee should be able to grasp the meaning without prior knowledge of the language in which it is carried. Now, iconicity in poetry will be rarely if ever of this kind; rather, it is a relative support or enabler of meanings in large part conveyed symbolically. And Leech and Short’s (2007: 195) warning against using iconicity claims to foist ‘private and whimsical responses’ on literary texts certainly needs to be attended to; still, it is also Geoffrey Leech (1969, 2008) who, over many years, recognised the importance of iconicity to poetics and stylistics. Iconicity forges a link, via technique or poetics, between ‘fitness for specific emerging purpose or theme’ and repetition. In these final lines of ‘At the Fishhouses’, I suggest, the content concerns knowledge (which must mean human knowledge, which by extension means ‘being human’, the quality of human life). The poem describes knowledge being extracted or delivered, taken out of these utterly inhuman elements, water and rock, and released into something that flows on, unstopably and therefore impermanently, like a swimmer taken out to sea or over a waterfall by infinitely greater powers. And some of this meaning is arguably enacted in the language of the description, which repeats and modulates as succeeding words are drawn out of their predecessors by a seemingly parallel remorseless flow.

By the close of the poem, we have been shown how ‘drawing’ and ‘flowing’ move on to become ‘flown’, and despite this being a partial repetition of the previous words ‘flowing’,...
“drawing”, etc., and therefore in principle the less surprising, still it is surprising and disturbing as used here, partly for reasons of grammar and collocation. The water/knowledge is, we are told, dark, utterly free, drawn from the hard mouth and the rocky breasts, and flowing – and all of these predicates, for all of their vivid figurativeness, are collocationally natural. It is not unnatural to describe water and knowledge, for example, as flowing, but it is quite unnatural and arresting to describe them as ‘flown’. This is deliberate unidiomaticity. The past (not passive) participle ‘flown’, used without complement, typically collocates with birds or chicks (or figurative counterparts, such as the young adults of a family). Far more numerous are the corpus instances of perfective ‘flown’ with human subject (‘he had flown to Maputo during the Commonwealth summit’), or passive ‘flown’ (‘Cars and drivers were then flown to India’). As a brief check in the British National Corpus (BNC) confirms, ‘water’, ‘river’, ‘tide’, etc., never usually collocate as subject with ‘(have/is/are) flown’. There is a grammatical conflation or crossover here from the verb ‘to flow’, to the verb ‘to fly’. For grammatical consistency, use of a single verb, the final three words should be either ‘flowing and flowed’, or ‘flying and flown’.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have aimed to situate poetry as ‘different in kind’ from other uses of language, in so far as we can identify an array of typical (but not defining or necessary) genre characteristics of poetry; otherwise, I argued, poetry, and the creativity found in poetry, chiefly differ in degree from other kinds of speaking and writing. I then sought to suggest that some progress can be made in pinpointing the creativity or poetics of poems if the analysis integrates or brings into alignment three factors in particular:

- the poem’s fitness for an unforeseen, but emerging, purpose (what the reader decides the poem is ultimately about);
- the poem’s deployment of implicature-generating repetition, especially lexical repetition and para-repetition; and
- the poem’s iconicity effects – those moments in the text when the meaning seems embodied in the language and not merely symbolically represented by it.

A poem (such as ‘At the Fishhouses’) that hits all three of these buttons, and in particular has moments at which the text seems to speak to all three factors at the same time, stands a good chance of also being celebrated for its ‘literary creativity’. So these three factors seem to be among the most crucial in a description of the poetics of (modernist) poems.

**Future directions**

Given the deliberately restricted focus of interest of this chapter, the research methods are similarly restricted. Chief of these is a searching for, and an annotating of, every kind of lexical repetition or ‘para-repetition’ that one can find in a text. That is really the primary task and, with regard to poems, the ‘what is said’ and the ‘what is reiterated’ are inevitably more noticeable than those things unsaid in a poem. But the latter can also be coherently approached, in a controlled way, using ideas from Hoey and Louw (see below). Both involve probings not of lexical repetition as such, but of the collocations, the co-occurring words or structures, that tend to accompany particular words or phrases. These theorists ask us
in effect, in relation to the ‘deviant’ or marked uses of language and phraseology found in poems, to ponder what natural or normal phrasing or construction has not been ‘repeated’, ratified by normal use, in the poem under scrutiny.

In a series of publications, but most explicitly in Hoey (2005), Michael Hoey has argued that fluent language-users are primed to expect the occurrence of a particular word or phrase to be accompanied by its usual co-textual partners – that is, that there is a degree of predictability in the multiword chunks of language in use, and that we draw benefit from this predictability. By the same token, we notice, as unnatural or authorially motivated, any jarring uses of words flanked by utterly atypical collocates. Hoey relates this to primed or entrenched uses – typical uses alongside typical collocates, in typical positions in just this genre of texts and not those.

Louw (2010, for example) takes a ‘striking’ formulation, at some key point in a poem such as its opening or ‘turn’ or conclusion, and tells us that we must compare and contrast the usual phraseology or semantic prosody with the usually atypical semantic thrust of the instance found in the poem. There is arguably a Bakhtinian dual-voiced principle embedded in Louw’s approach, which will take a phrase such as that at the opening of Yeats’ ‘Sailing to Byzantium’, ‘That is no country for old men’, replace all its referentially rich words with wildcards (thus That is no * for * *), and then search in an appropriate corpus for all verbal strings that exactly match this seven-word string (for example ‘That is no reason for you to’, ‘That is no fun for the police’, etc.). What Louw claims to find is that there is often a ‘normal’ or typical semantic profile, confirmed by the corpus evidence, with which the meaning of the phrase as used in the poem is interestingly at odds. Subliminally, we are aware of the typical meaning and cannot help but ‘hear’ this clashing with the contrasting meaning attempted in the poem (hence I suggest a kind of Bakhtinian clash of voices). The Louw method and theory is not unproblematic, but it is an interesting attempt to explore one kind of syntagmatic intertextuality, using modern corpus linguistic resources.

Related topics

cognitive stylistics; creativity and discourse analysis; creativity in response; language, creativity, and cognition; literariness; literary stylistics and creativity

Note

1 I am greatly indebted to Professor Peter Verdonk (University of Amsterdam) for many observations, references, and lines of argument that I have incorporated into this chapter, particularly concerning poetics and cognitive categorisation. In a few places, with his kind consent, I have retained his wording.

Further reading


This highly original (and not always uncontroversial) study raises priming and collocation to the status of a foundational feature of language in use. It argues that fluent users (of a written language, especially) rely on innumerable known and expected patterns in the use of particular words at the level of phrasing, grammar, and siting with the paragraph and within the whole text, and even in relation to genre. Lexical priming is thus, for Hoey, a big part of a fluent speaker’s background linguistic knowledge – a background against which literary creativity becomes noticeable.

It is well worth turning to this beautifully written and classic contribution to the stylistics of poetry, which provides a masterly overview of many aspects of the language of poetry that have attracted further study in more recent decades. Some chapter titles reflect standard topics – foregrounding, patterns of sound, meter, figurative language – while others are remarkably prescient – verbal repetition and implications of context.


This volume comprises Leech’s uncollected stylistics articles, spanning forty years of reflection on language and literature – always illuminating, thoughtful, and balanced in his judgements, and often touching on themes taken up in the present chapter.


This dense, but stimulating, paper, cast in the form of a dialogue between its authors, demonstrates Louw’s corpus-based method at work in a process that he believes uncovers the underlying prosody or subtext that importantly inflects many of the crucial lines of modern poems.


This essay is an excellent exemplar of the newest stylistics, drawing on corpus evidence and cognitive linguistic ideas, while working towards an original proposal about what the literary-critical terms ‘atmosphere’, ‘tone’, and ‘ambience’ mean and amount to, in the analytical terms of stylistics. Texts from Heaney, Keats, and John Fowles are discussed.


This is a useful collection of stylistic analyses from different scholars using a range of theories in the linguistic description and interpretation of specific poems by major twentieth-century poets.


This can be read as a companion volume to Leech (1969) above: the four terms of its subtitle are deftly attended to in wide-ranging analytical commentaries on major poems by Owen, Auden, Heaney, Larkin, and Hughes, which draws into the discussion such important influences as classical rhetoric, ekphrasis, and the varieties of emotive and cognitive response that poems may elicit from different readers.

References


Appendix

‘At the Fishhouses’, Elizabeth Bishop

1 Although it is a cold evening,
2 down by one of the fishhouses
3 an old man sits netting,
4 his net, in the gloaming almost invisible,
5 a dark purple-brown,
6 and his shuttle worn and polished.
7 The air smells so strong of codfish
8 it makes one’s nose run and one’s eyes water.
9 The five fishhouses have steeply peaked roofs
10 and narrow, cleated gangplanks slant up
11 to storerooms in the gables
12 for the wheelbarrows to be pushed up and down on.
13 All is silver: the heavy surface of the sea,
14 swelling slowly as if considering spilling over,
15 is opaque, but the silver of the benches,
16 the lobster pots, and masts, scattered
17 among the wild jagged rocks,
18 is of an apparent translucence
19 like the small old buildings with an emerald moss
20 growing on their shoreward walls.
21 The big fish tubs are completely lined
22 with layers of beautiful herring scales
23 and the wheelbarrows are similarly plastered
24 with creamy iridescent coats of mail,
25 with small iridescent flies crawling on them.
26 Up on the little slope behind the houses,
set in the sparse bright sprinkle of grass,
is an ancient wooden capstan,
cracked, with two long bleached handles
and some melancholy stains, like dried blood,
where the ironwork has rusted.
The old man accepts a Lucky Strike.
He was a friend of my grandfather.
We talk of the decline in the population
and of codfish and herring
while he waits for a herring boat to come in.
There are sequins on his vest and on his thumb.
He has scraped the scales, the principal beauty,
from unnumbered fish with that black old knife,
the blade of which is almost worn away.

Down at the water’s edge, at the place
where they haul up the boats, up the long ramp
descending into the water, thin silver
tree trunks are laid horizontally
across the gray stones, down and down
at intervals of four or five feet.

Cold dark deep and absolutely clear,
element bearable to no mortal,
to fish and to seals. . . One seal particularly
I have seen here evening after evening.
He was curious about me. He was interested in music;
like me a believer in total immersion,
so I used to sing him Baptist hymns.
I also sang ‘A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.’
He stood up in the water and regarded me
steadily, moving his head a little.
Then he would disappear, then suddenly emerge
almost in the same spot, with a sort of shrug
as if it were against his better judgment.
Cold dark deep and absolutely clear,
the clear gray icy water. . . Back, behind us,
the dignified tall firs begin.
Bluish, associating with their shadows,
a million Christmas trees stand
waiting for Christmas. The water seems suspended
above the rounded gray and blue-gray stones.
I have seen it over and over, the same sea, the same,
slightly, indifferently swinging above the stones,
icily free above the stones,
above the stones and then the world.
If you should dip your hand in,
your wrist would ache immediately,
73 your bones would begin to ache and your hand would burn
74 as if the water were a transmutation of fire
75 that feeds on stones and burns with a dark gray flame.
76 If you tasted it, it would first taste bitter,
77 then briny, then surely burn your tongue.
78 It is like what we imagine knowledge to be:
79 dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free,
80 drawn from the cold hard mouth
81 of the world, derived from the rocky breasts
82 forever, flowing and drawn, and since
83 our knowledge is historical, flowing, and flown.