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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 *markar* (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

don't think so. If we do such further investigation, we may discover further resonances, either in Eliot's process (what consciously or less so made him choose these particular objects for the poem, or what he might have been thinking, which is interesting, if ancillary) or in the ways that the elements of the poem interact that might not be obvious at first reading. These speculations and resonances can deepen and even complicate our initial readings. But the central and most important experience of even this difficult poem begins with our own readings, in an encounter with our common language.

IN MY OWN EXPERIENCES LEARNING TO READ POETRY, I HAD TO get used to slowing myself down, and being attentive to every word. This was, and is, challenging for me. I have a tendency to want to race through things, to get to the point or the end, to find out who the murderer was or what the key points are. But you can't read poetry that way. Reading poetry has the salutary effect on me of *forcing* me to read, and think, at a different pace than the rest of my life demands.

Sometimes, when we read poems that seem difficult, we assume they are written in a coded way. Yet even where the words of poetry are used mostly musically and intuitively, the literal meaning of words is always an essential part of the effect. The whole power of the poem, its unparaphrasable mystery, depends entirely on the actual meanings of words.

Surrealist Paul Éluard's barely translatable 1929 poem "La terre est bleue," "The Earth Is Blue," begins:

*La terre est bleue comme une orange
Jamais une erreur les mots ne mentent pas
Ils ne vous donnent plus à chanter
Au tour des baisers de s'entendre*

Which, in my literal translation, reads:

The earth is blue like an orange
Never an error words don't lie
They don't let you sing anymore
It's the turn of kisses to hear each other

How can something be blue like an orange? Does an orange (the fruit) have a kind of quality of blueness that has nothing to do with its color, something more abstract? Does that quality somehow resemble the way the whole earth is blue? It's a bit maddening and also exhilarating.

The effect of this Surrealist poem depends on the way it takes very seriously the impact of that gorgeous, disorienting first line. "Never an error words don't lie / They don't let you sing anymore." Éluard seems to be saying that it is only when words lie, or when they make errors, that they allow you to sing. Paradoxically, this idea is only available to someone who reads the meaning of the line carefully, who assumes that the words in the poem are not lying, at least not individually. Maybe the necessary lie or error is something more conceptual, having to do with the larger statement he has made about the color of the earth, a kind of true lie, a correct error.

Éluard knows that he has glimpsed, if only for a moment, something essential, a truth that is gone. Now he is left only with the response to an unspoken, probably internal objection to the first line: no, it is not an error to say it, words don't lie, I insist, the earth really is blue like an orange. And the third line, to me at least, feels like a reproach, either to the doubting listener (words don't lie, they don't let *you* sing anymore, because you won't let them) or maybe to Éluard himself, who has lost that fleeting moment of insight.

The very first words radioed back on April 12, 1961, by the very first person to orbit the earth, cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin, were “The earth is blue . . . how wonderful. It is amazing.” Éluard’s pre-scient line, which seems to anticipate by thirty years the experience of seeing the earth from space, reminds me of the English romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley’s contention in his essay “A Defence of Poetry” (written in 1821) that poets are seers, and act as “mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present.”

“*La terre est bleue comme une orange*,” “The earth is blue like an orange,” is a line written primarily to produce an effect in us, rather than to communicate information. But producing the effect at all depends on us taking in the elements of the line—“earth,” “blue,” “like,” “orange”—as words, understanding what they mean, and feeling how the meanings of those words in new combinations rearrange our consciousness.