

Scrawls, Misspeakings, Struggle and Surprise: What Makes Things “Poetic”?

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This past October I finally got around to watching Jim Jarmusch’s *Paterson*, which stars Adam Driver as a bus-driving poet. For years I’ve been a fan of Jarmusch, as well as an on-and-off poet and an amateur filmmaker— perhaps I avoided the film for so many months because I thought it might hit too close to home. Then I discovered I could watch it for free with my Amazon Prime account.

Jarmusch’s portrayal of a talented, overly-modest poet named Paterson (who not-so-coincidentally lives in Paterson, NJ, stomping ground of William Carlos Williams, among others) is an earnest attempt to reconcile the internal roiling of a writer’s mind with the necessarily external perspective of narrative film. A film about poetry can’t help but indulge in a bit of cliché, yet *Paterson*’s nods to the culture and tradition of poetry are deliberate and thought-provoking, even at their most tongue-in-cheek. Towards the end of the film, the protagonist gazes out at one of the city’s famous waterfalls, accompanied by a poet from Japan, a stranger who has just made his acquaintance. They make conversation in polite, halting English.

“Are you a poet?” inquires the foreigner.

“No,” lies Paterson, “I’m a bus driver...just a bus driver...”

“Ah...this very...*poetic*...”

The Japanese poet senses a kindred spirit in Paterson, whom he suspects is hiding his true passion. He implies that to be “poetic” is to live a double life: to redeem the drudgery of working life with clever, incisive meditation, and Jarmusch affirms this notion with the double-meaning of his protagonist’s name, along with a not-too-subtle motif of twins and doubles that pervades the film. This conception of “poetic” life— of burning the candle at both ends— is not new, but a romantic ideal that most prolific poets of this generation don’t subscribe to, having degrees from M.F.A. programs and days spent as teachers and professors of creative writing— a full time job, with its own salary

schedule and tax code. Yet old chestnuts don't crack so easily: in workshops with other lovers of verse, it is easy to gush and gush about what poetry is and isn't, why it works and when it doesn't, whether "the trance" is a real thing, that sacred writers' stride when everything clicks into place. "It's so obviously the most miraculous thing to do," Louise Glück utters in a *Poet's View* YouTube video I watched religiously as an undergrad at the University of Virginia. "I have to remind myself that not everyone in the world wants to be a poet..."

Glück's observation is profound because it is such a genuine glimpse into a poet's psyche: I literally can't function without trying to put words together— there are people that don't even *want* to do this?? It also explains why poetry is so famously insular, and widely seen as opaque. Imagine meeting a die-hard Red Sox fan at a bar, and in conversation revealing that you don't know what "RBI" stands for. He probably won't try to talk with you about baseball (if at all). Poetry's paradox is that it is the least broadly popular art form, yet will forever dictate our understanding of what other art forms should strive for— from history painting to hip hop. "Ut pictura poesis"— as is painting, so is poetry— Horace famously penned in 19 B.C.; "rarely does American cinema even address this kind of character, let alone with such *poetic* grace" film critic A.A. Dowd wrote of *Moonlight*, last year's universally-praised Best Picture winner. Throughout my relatively young life I've suffered through more than one Tupac vs. Biggie arguments; without fail, someone mutters, "well, Tupac was definitely more *poetic*..."

Hence, I implore: what does it mean to be poetic, anyhow?

The romantic ideal of a double-life that Adam Driver deftly navigates in *Paterson* is but one interpretation of a fraught, thorny cultural concept. Even in our most common applications of "poetic," a pesky ambiguity exists. Consider the contradictory expressions, "poetic license" and "poetic justice." The former is a deviation from convention and fact for the purposes of an embellishment— as when Donald Trump bemoaned the "rusted-out factories scattered like tombstones" in his stone-and-bone

inaugural address. “Poetic justice,” on the other hand, describes an occurrence that—given the facts of the matter— is deliciously apropos: like when Donald Trump’s gross embellishments of his own popularity were immediately countered by the largest public protest in American history.

“Poetic” is— perhaps necessarily— complicated: at once it means willfully abstract, devastatingly appropriate, existentially schizophrenic, and when applied to language—set against the decidedly uninspired associations of “prosaic”— simply fine, or better. No other word in its family takes on such a multiplicity of connotations: musical, cinematic, painterly— all can be tossed at a subject with a fairly predictable and agreeable effect. Who would flinch at the languid prose of Toni Morrison referred to as “musical,” or the terse scenes of Cormac McCarthy’s novels deemed “cinematic”? With her ingenious framing and brilliant palettes, the films of Lynne Ramsay are exceptionally “painterly.” A “dramatic” person tries to transform petty disagreements into sagas of unrest, worthy of rapt attention— while there is more to each art form than their corresponding modifiers imply, it is tough to balk at these accepted implications.

On the other hand, “poetic” is a very un-poetic descriptor: being so elusive and vague, it’s an awful adjective, especially given the millennia of human endeavor to find just the right word for that strange, inspired feeling. “The seizure of the poet’s imagination becomes the weird beginnings of a poem,” the poet and critic David Biespiel once wrote. “It’s just a feeling, a consciousness, an absence of words, a loss for words.” Poetry emerges from confusion, from a struggle to match words to the complex nuance of lived experience. Few have written more eloquently on the conflict between word and world than the late Tomas Tranströmer, whose book-length poem *Baltics* is a testament to the elasticity of verse when faced with subjects that refuse to bend to form. One would be hard-pressed to find a more direct account of a poet’s struggle than this passage:

Sometimes you wake up at night
and quickly throw some words down
on the nearest paper, on the margin of a newspaper
(the words glowing with meaning!)
but in the morning: the same words don’t say anything anymore, scrawls,
misspeakings.

Or fragments of a great nightly style that dragged past?

Perhaps more than other artists, poets like to write about themselves, and more specifically, their craft. And even more specifically, when their craft isn't working out. Compare Tranströmer's stanza to these lines from Carl Phillips' "A Clap of Thunder":

And then my hands found,
classically,
my brow,
the usual pose adopted for

disbelief when one believes
that one has failed, has

failed one's art.

Or these, from "One Love" by Nas:

So I be ghost from my projects—
I take my pen and pad for the weekend,
Hittin' L's while I'm sleepin';
A two-day stay, you may say
I need the time alone
To relax my dome— no phone, left the 9 at home.

The ultimate triumph of the poetic process is to overcome this imaginative aphasia and produce something that...well, to produce *something*. And the struggle is real.

Anyone who has attempted to write poetry knows that 90% of the time you are staring at your laptop screen, knowing that something is off. If there is an aspect of a poet's life that *Paterson* does not quite capture, it is that its titular poet never crosses anything out. In one scene the camera holds on an empty page for a few seconds— but then the words spill out, uninterrupted. The reason for this is obvious, though: too much footage of staring and scribbling and frantic erasure would make an already quiet and ponderous movie a total snooze. Instead, Jarmusch opts to revel in the quotidian space between revelations, Paterson's finished poems rhythmically cast on-screen and read aloud, catalyzing a narrative that otherwise offers little in the way of conventional

conflict. Through this cadence, we celebrate the ultimate triumph of poetry: those moments when the tedium and anguish are resolved, and art creeps out. “Each time I write a draft of a new poem, it feels like a huge victory. Whenever I finish one, I genuinely don't know if I'll be able to write another again,” wrote my friend and fellow poet Natasha Oladokun, on Facebook. A successful poem is a surprise, even to its maker— but a surprise that feels perfect, and that wouldn't have been possible without the hours of quibbling. Here are the final stanzas of “Clap of Thunder”:

You will have seen how a sudden
wind shakes down
from the tree twice picked-over

still some last, lingering fruit, gone
ignored, or unsuspected.
Just so. – I began writing.

“‘Fool,’ said my muse to me, ‘look in thy heart, and write,’” concludes the first entry of Sir Philip Sidney's epic sonnet sequence *Astrophil and Stella*. “Write it!” demands Elizabeth Bishop's much-anthologized villanelle, “One Art.” It's a thing.

The miracle that Louise Glück spoke of in hushed, holy tones is the imagination's ability to take what is familiar or unremarkable and make it surprising, make it new. After the Japanese poet tells Paterson that his life is “very poetic,” he clarifies: “Yes. This could be a poem by William Carlos Williams!” Being a bus driver in New Jersey is not *inherently* poetic— yet, it *could be* a poem, it *could be* poetic, provided that driving a bus is not the only meaningful thing Paterson does. What makes a bus driver/poet more “poetic” than, say, a creative writing instructor/poet is that the former's capacity to make art is decidedly more surprising than the latter's.

However, in spite of all the analysis and musing and round-table discussion you can throw at what it means to be “poetic,” hearing a film or a painting or a graphic novel described as such probably won't help you understand or appreciate or enjoy it more than

you already would. No matter how many times I've been told that Tupac is "more poetic" than Biggie, I still find myself queuing up *Ready to Die* when I need my 90's rap fix.

Ultimately, the most vital element of poetry is the potential to transform struggle into surprise. This miracle does not discriminate between light and heavy, whimsical or mournful, and frees what is deemed traditionally "poetic" from its most confining connotation: that of abject seriousness. Of course, poets themselves are historically guilty of perpetuating this stereotype: "The Poet makes himself into a seer by a long, involved, and logical derangement of all the senses. Every kind of love, of suffering, of madness; he searches himself; he exhausts every possible poison so that only essence remains."

If coconut La Croix is a poison, then perhaps Arthur Rimbaud's famous hyperbole has applied to my efforts as a poet after all. But I prefer this more lenient definition from W.H. Auden, no slouch in the serious poem department either: "Poetry might be defined as the clear expression of mixed feelings." Anyone who grew up on Shel Silverstein or Lewis Carroll— and those of us who have graduated to the snarky, lyrical rants of Eileen Myles or the hip wit of Terrance Hayes— know that those feelings are often humorous, or perverse, or downright silly. While a serious, beautiful film like *Moonlight* will cause critics like A.O. Scott to call it "a poem written in light, music, and vivid human faces" and make hazy comparisons between director Barry Jenkin's vision and Hart Crane's, a brilliant slapstick like David Wain's *Wanderlust* does not evoke the same response. But comedy can be just as poetic as anything: poets are always on the hunt for good metaphors and "triggering towns" that their imaginations can transport and transform through verse, just as comedians mine their worlds for premises, launching pads for jokes. No scene in a movie makes me laugh harder than when Paul Rudd stares down a hallway mirror, desperately improvising pick-up lines: "I'm gonna *pop off* a piece of my *dick*...I'm *fixins'* to *fuck ya*" (the scene is easy to find on YouTube). Rudd's improvised tirade is basically an excuse to show off an amazing redneck impression, and it gleefully explodes what is otherwise a tense crossroads in the plot (his character's anxiety over getting laid). We all have had the grueling— and occasionally miraculous— experience of scrambling for clever things to say before a potential lover, and Rudd's

absurd candor would not be so shocking and hilarious if it weren't for the universal awkwardness of the scenario. As Wallace Stevens said, "a poet looks at the world the way a man looks at a woman."

Midway through *Paterson*, the protagonist sits next to a young girl (and fellow poet) and together they wait on her mother. "Do you ever drive one of those...*accordion* buses?" she asks. "*Articulated*," he corrects— as though she needed to be corrected.

No matter how serious or silly, a poem always requires finding the right words. Although I'm never one to endorse censorship, I wouldn't mind if we stopped using the word "poetic" altogether. It simply means too much and too little at once; if anything can be poetic, nothing *ought* to be. Ultimately, the project of poetry— and of all art, really— is to surprise, to disarm, to make something from nothing, and after doing this for a long time we should recognize that there are always better words, better descriptions and similes, better forms of praise. And anyone who has made a lot of bad art and some good (or at least, better) knows that sometimes it takes more than words to spell out the difference.

During my last year as an undergrad, I took a sculpture to a former professor, the filmmaker Kevin Everson, who always had a curt, fresh, and funny response to bad art. The piece was a bulletin board I mocked up with underexposed photos and all kinds of painterly scratches, scores, and holes. "Well, I mean, it's gotta look *interesting*..." he began, as I quickly realized how stupid and ugly this chewed-up corkboard was. "This, this, and this...yeah, it's *art*." He jabbed his finger across the plane. "But you want *arrrrrrrrrt*," he said, mellifluously twisting his upturned palm like someone searching for words.

To a budding poet, he made a lot of sense.