

BOOK REVIEW

Willie van Peer & Anna Chesnokova. *Experiencing Poetry: A Guidebook to Psychopoetics*. Willie van Peer & Anna Chesnokova. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023. 236 pp. US. \$ 33.25 Pbk. ISBN 978-1-3502-4802-1

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The scientific study of poetry takes as its object of inquiry the idea of literariness, to then narrow down the scope of the research to the category of literature that distinguishes itself from prose. *Experiencing Poetry* goes further, taking a cognitive science approach, by attending to one aspect of this line of study: the psychological processes that underly the composition and the experience of readers/listeners of verbal art. The systematic analysis of texts leads investigators to the task of designing empirical studies, that sample and measure the responses of human participants. The chapters present a number of interesting methodological approaches that the authors themselves have implemented. They ask, can the hypotheses from textual analysis be confirmed or disfavored by the evidence? Some readers, beyond the subscribers of this journal, who at first might express unease or objection will soon take note that neither the book nor the larger field has any interest in recommending to poets how or what to compose, but rather in better understanding one of the most important domains of human language ability.¹ As with all kinds of linguistic experience and ability, the evidence from direct and indirect assessment will show how, in the experiencing of poetry, language interfaces with other faculties of the mind.

A central theme of the book focuses on the musical properties of poetic language. That everywhere historically (and probably evolutionarily), among all cultural lineages, poetry in the tonality of the voice was primary, for thousands of years, before the transcription and composition of poems in writing. The primacy of verbal art in the popular culture of the time, prior to literacy, accounts for its ancient origin tied to music. Given evidence of the universality of poetic language, and its apparently spontaneous emergence in young children in response to simple exposure, the authors present the hypothesis of an innate sensibility for the

1. The reference (p.198) to Lévi-Strauss and Jakobson's study of Baudelaire's "Les Chats" brings to memory a representative critique (Wieseltier, 2013) of the linguistic analysis of poetry. The essay reveals a deep hostility in mainstream humanities towards inquiry into or appreciation of art from the point of view of better understanding it.

artistic patterning of language in its foremost and overarching device: parallelism. Presented at the same time as what can be taken provisionally as a defining property of poetic use of language, the chapters devote much attention to examples of the various kinds.

Parallelism, in this study, is repetition applied to creative language use, word (and nonword)-play, “repetition with variation.” The parallel patterns can take the form of “partial repetition” that may be barely noticed on a first hearing or are explicitly recurring. The repeating feature is introduced and perceived: as purely sound pattern (consonants, vowels, tones, syllables and rhythmic pattern), at the grammatical pattern level (morphology and syntax), or in the special (poetry-specific, non-prosaic) patterning of meaning. In contrast to conversational exchange or non-poetic text/discourse, verbal art repetition is marked in a way that departs from everyday language use for typical communicative purpose. Repetition (parallelism), in its many presentations, is the predominant kind of marking, or foregrounding. Marking takes, for example, the form of rhythmic timing and the use of other devices that effect a kind of estrangement: disruption, surprise, suspension, slowing. The delay or retardation results in a de-automatization of information processing, a hindering of the expected.

In general, beyond the literary realm, the provoking of estrangement is linked to the intimately subjective in the initiation of affective states (Chapter 4, “Poetry Is Surprise”). The experience of “surprise” in fact is one of affect, involving a special apprehension, often a subtle sensation, linked to the unexpected. Now, in the sonorous patterns associated with the themes of the poem, the psychological processes of emotional reaction come forward in ways that are specific to poetry. Exactly how this sensibility is activated in poetic genres in particular (i.e. different from how it is activated in prose) is the research question the authors challenge us to think about. One avenue we might take would be to deepen the inquiry into what defines specifically poetic literariness. A strong candidate, as the authors suggest, is the relationship or overlap with musicality. An example from the first chapter (p. 10), of an analogy, discusses the effect of the change of key in tonal systems, called modulation. The poetry-music relationship is a major theme of the book for a reason. The relevant lines of research evidence might come to support the view that the essential feature of parallelism in poetry shares a common origin with the homologous parallelism of musical structures.

The centrality of sound pattern is reemphasized in the examples of the experience of poetry in which the language of the poet and the audience do not match (i.e., no understanding of meaning by listeners). A widely reported cross-cultural phenomenon in the research literature – first called to our attention by Shklovsky (1916/1985) – it has no counterpart in the realm of prose. Typically, when recited, “poetry travels” with the capability of crossing language boundaries

(p.173). Implicitly, the authors ask us to account for this peculiar kind of sensibility, to then apply it to the more typical condition of common language between poet and listener. The question alludes to the problem of defining properties.



The authoritative study on the relationship between the relevant interacting cognitive networks is Lerdahl (2003). Poetry is analyzed as music, verse as song, where linguistic structure and musical structure share component domains. The implementation of a (tonal, for example) pitch space, tonal melody, is “optional” in poetry. That is, poems can be either sung or recited, as in spoken word. Pointedly, Chapter 2 and subsequent references throughout the book incorporate the analysis of singing into the scientific study of poetic language. As the examples make clear, no exclusion of sung verses obtains historically, long after the advent of writing and, crucially, into the present day. As it is fully compatible with the overall framework of *Experiencing Poetry*, a second edition should briefly summarize the findings of the poetry-as-music analysis.

Chapter 7 follows up on this topic with a discussion of verbal art in popular culture, from its high point in the field research of Milman Parry and Albert Lord, carried forward to the modern day. The formalists of the Moscow Linguistic Circle and their St. Petersburg colleagues understood the theoretical importance of the oral tradition, in part as an inheritance of the work of nineteenth-century folklorists. In virtually all cases, the predominant venue is the *recited* poem, or the verse that is set to, or accompanied by, music. This aspect of performance is most notable in some genres popular among young people today. Here, perhaps the most important contribution of *Experiencing Poetry* is the recovery, one among a few other recent attempts, of the legacy of the work of the Russian formalists, beginning in Chapter 3. Years ago, an essay by Octavio Paz (1956) prominently offered a similar review and assessment. The possible motivations within the humanities for the neglect, even persistent misunderstanding, of this historical antecedent, tentative and short-lived as it turned out to be, will be interesting to study and explain. Recent trends in academia, including now beyond the humanities, make the discussion timely.

Returning to the theme of parallelism, and the problem of defining properties, the Russian formalists appeared to insist on the question of what precisely sets poetic forms apart from all prosaic discourse, including (we will assume for argument’s sake) from the prosaic narrative of literature. In like manner, for the purposes of this discussion, van Peer and Chesnokova would not favor extending the term “poetic” widely (metaphorically) as in common usage. In addition, most importantly, they would probably resist extending it to creative writing, for example, that is manifestly prosaic. This is actually not an easy question but is one that the book poses for careful consideration; see the reference to a recent study (p.127) that sought to differentiate between the processing of aesthetic and non-

aesthetic literary texts. The concluding chapter on the prospects for a general theory of psychopoetics recaps the theme about what makes the experience of poetry exceptional, distinctive from a point of view of psychological science.

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