

What is Poetry?

(Anthony W. Johnson, J.O.E. Donner Professor of English Language and Literature,
Åbo Akademi University, Interviewed by FM Marita Airakorpi)

Airakorpi: So, Anthony, ‘What is Poetry?’

Johnson: Of course, it can be a great many things. ‘The most proper words in their proper places’, as the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge would say. ‘Language speaking to itself’: as a disciple of pure poetry, such as Mallarmé might have argued. Or a way for cultures without writing to remember their past, their laws, or their religion: as many anthropologists would note: reminding us of the contrast between prose and verse, and the importance of rhyme and strong rhythm, incantation and song, proverbs and sayings in the creation and preservation of our cultural values. Poetry may even be, as the philosopher Alain Badiou has maintained, a special form of truth – a special take on knowledge and life – which complements other forms of truth and knowing: such as mathematics.¹ I would disagree with none of this. But for me, at any rate, one of its central meanings also comes from etymology. ‘Poetry’, that is to say, derives from the Greek work *poiein*, which simply means: ‘to make’.

Airakorpi: What, then, does Poetry ‘make’?

Johnson: My first answer to this would be: *connections*. Connections between the subjective lives within ourselves and the so-called objectivity of what is ‘out there’, coming to our senses from external ‘reality’. When human beings use a sound to connect their inner experience with the outside world – a bridge, if you like, between the inner and the outer – then language is created. (As when Adam in the Bible named the world around him.) In this sense the word itself – the *logos* – and, in fact *all words at the moment of their creation*, could be considered to be poems. It is within this primal world of poeticized language that much of the philosophy of Martin Heidegger dwells. And it is to this world that he frequently tries to return.² The question of whether language can become a bridge in a similar way to other animals is a difficult one. After all, there *is* bird song, not to mention the music of the whales.³ And monkeys make noises which seem to have generally understood meanings within their communities: like one sound which seems to mean: ‘Run for the trees!’

Such sounds are, obviously enough, communications, even though they are less clear in their reference than our words tend to be. For this reason, it seems interesting that the Finnish word for *poem*, ‘*runo*’, seems to have its origins in an indo-European word which meant ‘to roar’ or ‘mumble’, or ‘chant’: all of them implying some sort of communication (even if we don’t quite know what it means). What

¹ See, for instance; *Specimens of the Table Talk of the Late Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. H. N. Coleridge (London: John Murray, 1835), vol. II, p. 214; and Chapter 18 – ‘Language, Thought, Poetry’ – in Alain Badiou, *Theoretical Writings*, ed. and tr. R. Brassier and A. Toscano (New York: Continuum, [2004] 2007), pp. 239-248.

² See, for instance, the essays in *Poetry, Language, Truth*, tr. A. Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971).

³ I am thinking here particularly of Dario Martinelli’s challenging doctoral thesis, *How Musical is a Whale? Towards a Theory of Zoömusicology* (Helsinki: Hakapaino, 2002).

many recent etymologists have agreed, however, drawing evidence from the Gothic word *runa*, at least, is that the sort of communication in question may be some kind of counsel or advice (even if of a mysterious or secretive variety).⁴

Airakorpi: So the poem in this sense seems to be some sort of secret advice?

Johnson: Yes, I would say so. And when it loses its secrecy, *runa* becomes altogether something more gossipy, more prose-like: in English, *rumour* (Latin: *rumor*). But that is another story.

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Airakorpi: So you are saying that the roots of poetry are in sound, and that this sound connects our inner thoughts with the world?

Johnson: Yes.

Airakorpi: Does this mean that there is a close connection between poetry and music?

Johnson: Yes, indeed, though I am tempted to think that, as our vocal sounds come from within to create meaning in the outer world, so music, too, works in the other direction. That is to say, it tends to come into us from the outside world. And hearing the incoming resonances of nature – the song of the birds, the scream of monkeys, the boom of whales etc. – we frequently copy them, mirroring the sounds outside. However, because our speech organs and those we use for producing song are one and the same, *when we return music to the world through our voices it is transformed: intermingled with the language which lies at the heart of poetry.*

Airakorpi: And this is why *lyrics* (especially when accompanied by music) often move us in emotional as well as logical ways?

Johnson: Exactly. At the very centre of our use of language to construct a world around us is this bond between poetry and music. Behind our naming of things, and the affinities we feel between things. It is no surprise, then, that in the ancient world the singing of poems – whether in the Orphic and Homeric hymns, or the chorus of Greek tragedy – could be felt to carry such a deeply spiritual resonance. Or, for that matter, that Saint John – perhaps the most poetic of the apostles – could open his Gospel with an act of poetic making which is synonymous with the *logos* itself: ‘In the beginning was the Word’.

Airakorpi: I take your point. But rather than following the path into religion here, I think I would prefer it – in the time we have left at our disposal – if we could return more explicitly to the relation between poetry and philosophy.

Johnson: O.K.

Airakorpi: When you started to mention the language and music of Greek drama, were you thinking of Nietzsche’s *Birth of Tragedy*?

Johnson: I was.

Airakorpi: And when you mentioned the ‘bond between poetry and music’ at the heart of our linguistic endeavour to construct a world, were you thinking of Plato’s *Timaeus*?

Johnson: I’m afraid to say that I was.

⁴ For these discussions, see Bernard Mees, ‘The etymology of *rune*’, in *Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur* 4/136 (2014): 527-37.

Airakorpi: O.K. could you remind me, then, of the relevance of the poem as a bridge – or as a ‘making’ – to the philosophy of the Ancients?

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Johnson: Glad to oblige, although I think that I should stress from the outset that I have no pretensions to being a philosopher. I *can* say, however, that as a student of poetry (and especially, of the poem as a ‘thing made’), I was very much impressed by Plato’s account of the creation of the universe in the *Timaeus*. Not least, because of the way in which it treated the idea of the *logos*: placing the relation between music, mathematics, and poetry at the centre of its worldview. For in that dialogue, as you will remember, the creation of the universe is entirely rational. That is to say (as is also made explicit through the commentary on the *Timaeus* offered in the *De musica* attributed to the philosopher Plutarch), it is constructed by the simple Pythagorean ratios of 2:1, 3:2, 4:3 etc, which also make up the musical scale.⁵ The theory behind this is that these proportions really do reflect the mathematics of resonance in the real world.⁶

Now, because *logos* in Greek means ‘*ratio*’ as well as ‘*word*’, within Plato’s thinking (at this stage in his career), the whole universe can be seen to resonate in the same way as music does. As he puts it in the *Timaeus*: ‘The body of the heaven is visible, but the soul invisible and endowed with reason and harmony, being the best creation of the best of intelligible and eternal things’ (37c). This may be why, too, Socrates mentions that military men have to learn philosophy, music and poetry as part of their training (18). Within such a scheme, it is hardly surprising that Plato’s poetic ‘making’ lines up the harmonies of the universe – joining all things in a common resonance. Equally, it is hardly surprising that architects such as Vitruvius in the Classical world or Palladio in the Renaissance tended to construct their buildings according to the same musical proportions. Or that dancers, likewise, used Pythagorean proportions to structure their steps and the larger geometrical shapes of their dance patterns. Or, for that matter, that early modern poets called their poetic lines ‘numbers’, and bundles of verses ‘*stanzas*’ (that is, in Italian, ‘rooms’), and even sometimes (as in several cases by Ben Jonson), constructed their poems like buildings: resonating in this way with architecture, music, dance, and, indeed, the harmony of the known universe.⁷

Airakorpi: Fair enough. You are saying that, for some philosophers at least, there was a rationality in the construction of a universe which was poetic and harmonic at the same time. But isn’t there something missing here? What in this model has become of those irrational elements of the bridge made by poetry between inner existence and the outside world?

Johnson: An excellent question. Clearly (as far as I understand it anyway), the Greeks knew that the system of rational numbers depended on the

⁵ On this, see (for instance), *Three Volumes Annotated by Inigo Jones: Vasari’s ‘Lives’ (1568), Plutarch’s ‘Moralia’ (1614), Plato’s ‘Republic’ (1554)*, ed. with an introduction, Anthony W. Johnson (Åbo: Åbo Akademi University Press, 1997), especially, pp. xxxiv-xlviii, and 33-74.

⁶ Or, at least, would have done in the Universe known to Plato and the Pythagoreans. [Johnson illustrated his point here by playing examples of these harmonic ratios on the violin.]

⁷ This tradition is discussed at length in Anthony W. Johnson, *Ben Jonson: Poetry and Architecture* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).

existence of irrational numbers (such as the square root of two). In fact, for the Greeks, an irrational number was called ‘*a-logos*’ (literally, *not* the *logos*). Hence they were able to argue that irrational numbers (precisely because they were *a-logos*) were not actual numbers, since they could never be resolved. Moreover, because *alogos* also meant ‘not a word’, it signified something ‘not to be spoken’: a secret. Allegedly, it was on these grounds that the Pythagoreans killed Hippasos of Metapontum when he spilled the beans about the discovery of irrational numbers and announced their paradoxical existence to the world. And it may have been for this reason that the continuing history of irrational numbers became a history of silence.

Airakorpi: If the *logos* as a structuring principle can apply to at least some sorts of poetry, can the idea of *alogos* apply to poetry, too? And, if so, in what ways?

Johnson: Actually, I have reason to believe that, on occasion, it can. Certainly, there seem to be cases in court entertainments of the seventeenth century where the point marking the square root of two in the entire length of the poem is marked by a pause, or silence.⁸ More generally, too, it is perhaps worth noting that such writing can be made out of ‘the silence round all poetry’, as Tony Harrison put it, rather than just the noise and bustle of language itself.⁹ It is an aesthetic embraced by those masters of twentieth-century dramatic verse, Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter.

Written poetry can, of course, also be read in silence. In fact, there is another etymological tradition in which the Scandinavian and English *rune* as an inscribed marking (*riimukirjain* in Finnish) is related to the idea of a poetic ‘making’: the spelling out of letters – or *spell-craeft* as it was called in Old English – being also a semi-magical way of linking the language of the inner mind with things in the outside world. (Literally, binding by spells.) For silent readers, perhaps, the poetic bridges being built are frequently visual rather than aural: unspoken connections between the word and the sign.

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Airakorpi: Our time is running out here, though I realize that we have hardly touched on the huge variety of poetic ‘makings’ that are available in the world. Or even issues, such as the difference between poetry and prose.

Johnson: I couldn’t agree more – although on that last topic I *did* happen to hear the poet John Agard saying on the radio yesterday that when poetry becomes too familiar, it tends to fade into prose. However, even then, as he pointed out, the process can be reversed. For poetry is not only a way of sounding, or a way of writing. It is also – as the philosopher Gaston Bachelard has demonstrated so convincingly – a way of seeing: a way

⁸ See, for instance, Anthony W. Johnson, ‘Music, Religious Experience and Transcendence in Ben Jonson’s *Masque of Beautie*: A Case Study in Collaborative Form’, in *Voicing the Ineffable: Musical Representations of Religious Experience*, ed. Siglind Bruhn (Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press, 2002), pp. 71-96 (especially pp. 87-8); as well as his article ‘Urban(e) Visualization and Early Modern Drama: Ben Jonson’s “Spectral Cities”’, *NJES: Nordic Journal of English Studies* 17/1 (2018): 26-73 (especially p. 61).

⁹ See Tony Harrison’s Sonnet ‘On Not Being Milton’ in his collection, *From The School of Eloquence* (London: Rex Collings, 1978).

of imagining, visualizing, or even dreaming the world.¹⁰ Because of this, even the mundanity of the familiar can be reversed by what Agard calls the ‘eternal retransfiguration’ of seeing things poetically anew. Building, we might say, new bridges between our perceptions and the outside world. Finding new harmonies. Reinvesting those old familiar connections with a new influx of love.

Airakorpi: Didn’t you once write a poem on that subject?

Johnson: Actually, I did. And could close on it as a general bridge into the next stage of our meeting – which comprises a set of poetico-philosophical readings by Kirsi Lehto, Irja Tiikkainen, Reijo Virtanen and Timo Leinonen:

[‘*Below the Bridge Below*’]

Below
the bridge
below,
the stream is aching
for its counterpart:
as if water
could rise and slow
back on itself as
a self-created
waterfall
(which, of course,
it is).

In standing there,
I, too,
in standing there
am aching for a waterfall:
as if evaporation
were a human option
and smoothed, like love, across
an ecstasy of edges.
could find below
the bridge below
its never-ending course.¹¹

¹⁰ See, for instance, Gaston Bachelard, *On Poetic Imagination and Reverie*, tr. Colette Gaudin (Dallas Texas: Spring Publications, 1987).

¹¹ Anthony W. Johnson, *Aurora Resurgens*, ed. C. Elias (Roskilde: Eyecorner Press, 2011), p. 172.