

Hearing Meaning and Poetry: An Interview with Angela Leighton

I. Poetry without a Message

Karen Simecek: In your recent paper, ‘About About: On Poetry and Paraphrase’¹, you discuss the nature of meaning in poetry and the idea of paraphrase. Poetry’s resistance to paraphrase suggests the importance of the non-cognitive features of the work, such as the form, the white space, the sounds, rhymes, rhythms, and so on. What is the significance of these formal features in our experience of the work?

Angela Leighton: They are hugely important; in fact they are what makes poetry *poetry*. But I’m not sure that they’re ‘non-cognitive’! Certainly, these formal features are all busy at work when we read, calling for our attention, often setting one sense against another. The first thing we notice is what a poem looks like to the eye: how long it is, how short the lines are, how it straggles on the page or sits compactly in stanzas. Then we need the ear to hear it, performing the spaces as pauses as we read. And of course rhyme and rhythm also play to the ear, letting us hear the alternative logic of sounds: rhymes which chime across differences of meaning, or the beat which registers the tempo. Then, there’s the hand too. Just as the formal layout is part of what we understand in a poem, so too is the feel of it, the thickness of the pages, the size of the volume. Because we read poems more slowly than prose, and we go back (with luck!) to re-read, there’s time to touch a poem. Poetry backtracks, echoes itself, rarely yields its sense on a first read, so we feel it as a precious object in the hand, to be turned over and over. Yet far from being ‘non-cognitive’, I suggest that these different senses: eye, ear and hand, are what the understanding works with when we read verse.

KS: So would you say that there is some kind of meaning-creating process when these different senses come together?

AL: Yes, I think there is, although there’s also a meaning-*de-creating* process. The poem challenges our expectations of meaning, because there are several avenues by which meaning arrives. There’s not only the narrative-grammatical logic of the words, and the visual appearance which tells us something, and the sound effects of rhyme, refrain and echo, but all those at work together. So perhaps we should think of the poem as confusing, even de-creating meaning, in order to build it up again, differently.

¹ Leighton (2009) *Midwest Studies In Philosophy*, 33: 167–176.

KS: What does this mean for the idea that we are able to grasp the meaning of a poem? Could you explain what you mean by the kind of meaning that comes from noises— what is it?

AL: It's interesting how the very way we use language becomes part of the problem, here. We've got this word 'meaning', which is a noun, an abstract thing, and therefore we use terms like 'grasp the meaning', as if with one's hand, getting hold of something and there it is, you've got it! As if meaning were a tactile object to be caught. But if we change the question, we might get closer to what poetry is up to. So rather than asking, *what is the meaning that I can grasp?* we might ask: *how does this poem try to make meaning?* where the emphasis falls on *trying* to make. The meaning is not a given, the end of a process, an object we might seize and hold; it's something that is being constructed as we search for it. So not only the poem, but we, the reader, might be making meaning as we try to understand.

As for 'the kind of meaning that comes from noises' – well, that's the meaning we find in nursery rhymes, remember? 'Hickory dickory dock / The mouse ran up the clock.' Hickory dickory has no meaning in itself—at least not much—but in relation to what follows, it starts to make meaning: it's the sound of the mouse's scampering feet perhaps, or it's the ticking of the clock, something going unstoppably on: hickory dickory, like time itself. Most nursery rhymes do it: 'Higgledy, piggley, my fat hen', 'Ba ba black sheep', 'Hey diddle diddle, / The cat and the fiddle'— as if giving us the tune first, the basic notation of the poem, in rhythmic, nearly meaningless words. Then the meaning starts to be added, in retrospect. But the literal meaning, if there is one, always sounds a bit accidental, random, compared with the sureness of the beat: 'Hickory dickory.' Well, all poems retain a bit of that first noise-meaning, the singing memorability of the sounds which refuses to be translated, or paraphrased, into usable (adult) sense.

KS: In your essay you suggest that in appreciation and interpretation of poetry we must see the poem as doing something meaningful, which we, as readers, can engage with, rather than being about something (as conveying a message or content). This reminds me of the last lines of the first poem in your new collection, *The Messages*²:

It is for *this*, or *this*, a careless blessing:
words, by the way (no message) . . . cold pressing.

What can we gain from reading, appreciating and interpreting poetry if there are no messages?

AL: Ah, I suppose, that although there may be '(no message)', there might still be plenty of 'messages'. That poem, which is simply called 'A Poem', is mulling over its own status. In the end it's about the way poems rebuff the need for a message. We'd like an answer, a key that gives us an explanation, a helpful motto of some kind which sums it all up. But actually, I think what a poem must do, is give us only

² Leighton (2012).

so much—enough to encourage us to go back and read it again, and then again, because there's never an end-point, never the moment when we can say 'oh I get it, that's what it's *about*'. 'A Poem' may only be about the look of olive oil being poured out in sunlight. But I hope there's also something else: something that intrigues, tantalizes, draws us in. If it doesn't ever yield its full 'message', it still offers a kind of nudge towards a sense of messages.

KS: Do you think the experience of reading such poems can affect the way we think, despite the fact that it's only 'a kind of nudge'? Is poetry philosophical?

AL: That's quite a difficult question. And it a little bit depends on where you're coming from. In so far as philosophy is the study of how we think, then perhaps poetry is *essentially* philosophical, because it's always challenging, questioning, undermining how we think, or how we expect to think. And yet, it's interesting to remember how much philosophy, as a discipline, has ignored poetry. I wonder if poetry offers *so much* of a challenge to the way that philosophers use language that they don't want to look at it too much?

Just to generalise hugely, it seems to me that much philosophical writing today is packed with abstract nouns, and its theoretical moves tend to be from one abstract noun to another. Those nouns are the real counters of thought—not the verbs, or the prepositions that string the nouns together. The fact that it's so noun-based means that it encourages us to think that meaning is about objects, substantive things, that can be put in some kind of order. Now, by contrast, poetry is less full of abstract nouns (more likely to be full of olive oil!)—and nouns in general are not given more priority than, say, verbs or adjectives. A poet like Wallace Stevens is an exception. He *seems* to be a very philosophical poet because he loves abstract nouns, and uses them everywhere. 'It must be abstract', he declares in several places. However, when you start to decode a Stevens poem you find that it won't actually translate into a piece of philosophy, because it doesn't give you a sensible order of thought which can be paraphrased and passed on. And then, it's interesting to see how those abstract nouns are modified by other parts of speech. For example, there's a poem titled 'Of Modern Poetry' which begins with the lines: 'The poem of the mind in the act of finding/ What will suffice'. You'd think this was a philosophical statement about 'the mind', and about what the mind is looking for through language. But then you notice that the word Stevens focuses on is not the noun, 'the mind', but the participle, 'in the act of finding'. It's the 'finding' that carries the burden of the sentence. Instead of giving us the object that 'will suffice', whatever that is, the lines dwell on the act of looking for it. By the end of the poem we are none the wiser as to how the mind thinks--there has been nothing very tangible to think *about*—certainly nothing sufficient. But there has been a lot of finding.

Now it may be that contemporary philosophy hasn't quite yet caught up with the whole question of poetry. But it's starting to. I know there are some new collections of essays on 'Philosophy and Poetry', one from OUP next year, which will probably be tackling this whole neglected area. We should remember, of course, that some philosophers are *nearly* poets – not quite, but nearly! I see, or hear, glimpses of poetry when I read, say, Wittgenstein, or Nietzsche, or Stanley Cavell even—

philosophers who enjoy those statements which ring and provoke, but don't ever quite add up.

So I guess my answer to the question is that poetry, yes, is deeply philosophical in the sense of being about how we think, how we make meaning. But whether poetry is usable for philosophers, I'm not sure. For in order to understand poetry you have to change the kind of language you're using. There is a sense in which philosophical discourse has, over the ages, become so set into a subject-verb-object pattern, with abstract nouns dictating the nature of the object, that it's not easy for it to discuss poetry. For poetry works, less with concepts than with words, their sound, shape and meaning all playing together. It doesn't translate readily into propositions of any kind.

II. Literary Criticism and Writing Poetry

KS: Has your academic writing affected the way you write poetry, or the way you see yourself as a poet?

AL: That's an interesting question. I think, on the whole, that writing poetry is a quite separate activity from writing literary criticism. It comes out of another part of the brain, or perhaps not out of the brain at all, but from some other bit of the nervous system: guts or spine, as well as the ears.

When I first started to write verse, I didn't tell anyone what I was doing, and even when I started to publish, I somehow assumed that the readership for my poetry was elsewhere, outside the university--and that never the two would meet. For a time, I think that was largely the case. It was only quite a bit later, and after the publication of *Sea Level*³, that I realised this was no longer true. I think the turning point came when I was writing my critical book, *On Form*⁴. I became aware that I wanted to write a different kind of criticism--I was bored of the traditional monograph, and was trying to write in a new voice, an exploratory, less certain one. Perhaps I wanted to try out a kind of criticism which was *finding* thought, *en route*, rather than accounting for it as a finished process. I think that was the point when I began to realise that my criticism and poetry were edging a little closer together. *On Form* was written more freely, less linear-ly, than my previous criticism—it steered clear of conclusions or summings up, but let the ideas develop by the way.

But I still think they are different activities and must not tread too much on each others' toes. The brainwork required for criticism follows certain routes of narrative, explanation, intelligibility. Poetry, on the other hand, takes us into scarily uncharted worlds, where there are no preconceived guidelines, no clear directions, and no knowing where any poem might end.

³ Leighton (2007).

⁴ Leighton (2007).

KS: It's interesting what you have said about writing *On Form*, and I guess it could be thought of as an ideal mode of inquiry: to be writing in order to discover something through writing; that the way to get closer to some truth or knowledge is by freeing yourself up, letting the message emerge from the thinking and writing process itself.

AL: That does fit with how the book came to be ... well, formed. I was writing essays here and there on nineteenth-century aestheticism, and that's what I thought the book was about. It was only at a certain point--and it must have been quite late in the process--that I realised that the word 'form' was crucial. It was underlying much of what I was saying, and actually it was the puzzle at the heart of the book. I'm still not sure I know exactly what form is. It's one of those words that's fascinating precisely because it's so open, so full of competing, sometimes opposite senses, and yet so necessary to the act of writing. It was as if I was writing to discover something, rather than, having discovered it, just writing it up. But it was also a word which constantly threw into relief the 'form' in which I myself was writing: the essay form, the critical book form, the forms of my own sentences. I think I only *started* to answer those questions--questions which perhaps need to be asked of literary criticism itself. That's still a subject to be tackled ...

KS: Just to return to your experience of writing poetry: do you have a fixed idea about what you want your poetry to do?

AL: I might have an idea, even a 'fixed idea', of what I want a poem to do, but the poem itself doesn't necessarily want to do it! It's as if the poem has its own notion of the way it wants to go. In 'The Messages', for instance, the poems tend to be quite stanzaic and regular. That took me by surprise. I kept trying to push the form out, trying to write in a more free-form way, experimental and flowing, but it wouldn't work. The poems kept coming back to a sort of necessary regular rhythm, to stanzas in rhyme or half-rhyme, to a kind of symmetry and balance. So yes, I had a 'fixed idea', but it didn't work. That's the kind of thing that can happen. It's as if the poem has a mind of its own, and you're in a complicated sort of negotiation with that other mind—a kind of dialogue, even a quarrel with it.

So, no—ideally not a 'fixed idea'—nor do you want the poem to be fixed for the reader. The poem should be a capacious kind of object into which lots of different readers can fit, or shift about. It must be roomy – and that means not holding too fixedly to your own experience, or your own voice. I would never, for instance, give a poem stress marks. I'm happy for the stress to fall differently for different readers, or for different occasions of reading. Once the poem is written, it belongs to others, to be made sense of by them, or to be open enough to accommodate the senses others want to bring.

So it's a funny business, this knowing and not knowing, when you write. I suppose there has to be a kind of emotional energy or impetus behind a poem--an emotional

anxiety that needs working out. But in that working out, the poet also learns to be flexible towards what actually emerges--or sometimes refuses to emerge.

III. Poetry and Music

KS: At the beginning of your collection of critical essays on Anne Stevenson⁵, you begin with her poem ‘Making Poetry’. The poem starts with the words: ‘You have to inhabit poetry / if you want to make it’. The idea of inhabiting poetry stuck me as being more than just about the language of poetry; it’s also that in making poetry you need to appreciate the quality of the words you use and your relationship with words, the way they sound and feel to you. So, how important do you think listening to, attending to, the quality of words is, when writing poetry?

AL: I think a lot of poetry starts and ends with listening. Writing involves a lot of very passive waiting for something to come along—and that waiting might best be described as a kind of listening. A poem can start with a phrase or a rhythm. Many poets have described how they caught the idea for a poem from a rhythm--most famously Paul Valéry, who writes about being out for a walk when a rhythm came to him. He had no words, no idea what it was about, no emotional purpose even, but there was the rhythm. But that, too, is a matter of listening—his ears had to be open. Such listening work then goes on and on, because as you start to jot down words, phrases, lines, and the thing slowly comes together, you’re still listening to hear what the poem might be up to.

So although, as we have said quite often today, we’re not talking about meaning in any objective sense of the word, there *is* a sense in which poetry is also concerned with meanings. There *is* an aboutness about it. It can’t be just sound-effects, just music to the ear. That’s one of the dangers of the allure of sound. There are poets who write too musically, too purely mellifluously. I’m thinking of someone like Swinburne, who can carry you far on the sounds and rhythms of his words, but who thus overrides the reader’s thinking capacity. There must be a struggle against music too – otherwise, well, it’s music, not poetry. Poetry needs a thinking quality as well, and needs to bring the reader into a kind of thinking.

KS: So would you say that it is about trying to set up an experience for your reader where they are being carried along to a degree, but they are having to think about what the words mean as well? So with some poets you end up just going ‘tum-ti-tum’ all the way to the end, enjoying the sound, but with no need to do that re-reading you were talking about earlier.

⁵ Leighton (2010).

AL: Yes. Neither the tum-ti-tum poem, which is all sound effects, nor the let-me-tell-you-a-personal-anecdote poem, which merely recounts an experience, is really a fully formed poem. I suppose, to take listening a step further, what you want a poem to do is to set the reader listening in their turn. You want to transfer your own listening energy to another--almost as if listening were a kind of transference, from writer to reader. And for that, there must be something mysterious in the poem, something not quite fathomable, not quite ... translatable out of itself.

KS: So both poet and reader encounter the same object of experience?

AL: Not necessarily the same, but connected. There's a wonderful poem that, in a way, says all of this: Walter de la Mare's 'The Listeners':

"Is there anybody there?" said the Traveller,
Knocking on the moonlit door.

The whole poem is about that knock, and how the house gives back no answer, how there's no-one there; and yet, at the end, the profound silence releases something: 'a host of phantom listeners'. The Traveller listens, and we the reader listen, and then we become aware of listening to listening. De la Mare might be describing the relationship between poet and reader, both listening for something—which might be nothing more than a knock. 'Knock knock, who's there?' The poem of course! So the poem becomes the place where poet and reader both strain to listen, rather than the place where they 'encounter the same object'.

KS: Some of your poems have been set to music. Is there something different in experiencing a poem in a public space, either set to music or at a poetry reading, than when reading silently to oneself?

AL: Well of course, a musical setting of a poem is quite different from the poem on the page. Mostly, when we read poetry, we read silently to ourselves—silently, yet hearing it in our heads. A poem sung to music by a trained singer is a very different kind of sound, with its own rhythms and accents and intonations. It may sound quite unlike speech – think of Christina Rossetti's 'In the bleak mid-winter' in the setting by Holst. On the other hand, a poem doesn't come with an exact notation as to how it should be read. And the silent reader is a singer or performer too, who can choose how to pronounce the words, how to emphasise the rhythm, how to accent this or that syllable. The poem is never a closed form; it's an open possibility, lending itself to each new reading, each new readerly interpretation. A reading out loud, or a musical setting, fixes the poem in the voice of one particular singer or speaker—and so loses something of the poem's many-voicedness--it loses that sense of ongoing collaboration between poet and reader.

KS: Yes I think that idea of collaboration is quite important. It takes us full circle to what we were saying at the beginning: that poetry is a way of thinking, rather than of getting to a particular thought. But also, you seem to be suggesting that this might be a collaborative thinking? a 'thinking together'?

AL: Yes, that's nice. And with it comes the possibility that the reader might reject the poem. It's interesting how passionately people feel about poetry, when they think they don't understand it, when the poem isn't lending itself to their ears or voices. It's a kind of anger, as if the poem should have transferred better. And it's a reminder of how we appropriate a poem when we read; we want it to work, to speak for us. And this is as it should be. In a way, it's part of our freedom, as readers, to take or reject. When it works, the reader has joined in the thinking-feeling production of meaning that poetry always wants to be.

Interviewee

Professor Angela Leighton is a Senior Research Fellow at Trinity College, Cambridge. She is both a literary critic and a poet. She is primarily interested in poetry of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but also in nineteenth-century aestheticism and its continuing legacy in the twentieth, in particular the work of Woolf, Yeats, Stevens, Bishop, Plath and W.S. Graham. She is the author of several books including *Shelley and the Sublime* (1984), *Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (1986), *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart* (1992), *On Form: Poetry, Aestheticism, and the Legacy of a Word* (2007) and she has edited a collection of essays *Voyages Over Voices: Critical Essays on Anne Stevenson* (2010). Her poems have appeared in many magazines in Britain and America and she has published three collections of poetry: *A Cold Spell* (2000), *Sea Level* (2007) and most recently *The Messages* (2012), which is now available from Shoestring Press.

Interviewer

Karen Simecek is currently studying for a PhD in Philosophy and Literature at the University of Warwick. Her thesis focuses on the experience of reading poetry and its potential to contribute to philosophical inquiry.