



Essay in Blueprints
Harriet Monroe Institute/ Poetry Foundation
Chicago, 2011

The Flywheel

On the relationship between poetry and its audience

1.

It was the sound of a poem that made me fall in love with poetry once and for all. I wasn't in my living room, I wasn't next to a reading lamp, nor did I have a book on my lap. The poet himself wasn't even reading out his poem, but his translator, standing at a lectern on stage in a small auditorium.

In 1992, I was working for a cultural organization in Rotterdam. As I prepared for a poetry evening, I placed the lectern next to the mike, focused the light and put a carafe of water on a small table. Next I directed the audience inside and when the first reader came on, I made sure that he was properly lit, that the door was closed, the audience quietly seated and that his voice was audible from the beginning.

The poem went as follows:

Alone this summer morning on the deserted wharf,
I look towards the bar, I look toward the Indefinite,
I look and I am glad to see
The tiny black figure of an incoming steamer.

And continued:

I look at the far-off steamer with great independence of mind,
And in me a flywheel slowly starts spinning.

[this translation by Richard Zenith]

Reaching this strophe, I completely forgot about the lights, the chairs, the audience. I understood little of what I was hearing but felt how deep inside me, first slowly and creaking with unfamiliarity, but quite soon proudly revolving along with the waves, currents and tempests of 'Maritime Ode' by Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa, my own flywheel was set in motion. From the first revolution onwards, I was convinced that it would never stop. I was sold.

Eleven years later I became the director of a festival, which was famous around the world because for years it had been providing a stage for the greatest voices in poetry: the Poetry International Festival in Rotterdam.

Each year, around thirty poets from all four corners of the globe are invited for a week long to read from their own poetry and listen to that of others. For forty years, a broad and varied audience has attended the festival in search of emotion, enlightenment, experience, meaning and mystification. For forty years, Rotterdam has been the crossroads of international poetry, a platform on which cultures, languages, voices and thoughts meet.

2.

An artist invites a famous poet to come and see a work inspired by one of the latter's poems. 'See,' he says, 'your poem is about this and that and so I've represented it like this.' 'My poem isn't about that at all,' the poet says, to which the artist exclaims indignantly, 'keep your hands off my poem!'

Modern poetry has a difficult relationship with the general public. It seems to have an image problem. It is a long time since poetry was a way of spreading news to the next tribe or displaying

the technical and linguistic ingenuity of the versifier. Over the centuries, it has tended to distance itself from the prevailing religious, political and/or social issues of the day, and seems only to accept itself or language as a theme. The public sees language as a medium of communication, and if language no longer communicates, but confuses or disturbs, it leads to anxiety and irritation.

Nevertheless, poetry won't leave the public alone. T.S. Eliot once said that a good poem communicates before the words are understood. This comment seems to have been unconsciously embraced by the majority: the notion of the 'poetic' is frequently used to indicate beautiful things that people don't understand: incomprehensible passages in Andrei Tarkovsky's films, non-linear texts in James Joyce's prose, the apparently structureless passages in Messiaen's piano compositions, or Wassily Kandinsky's inexplicable formal experiments.

The general public follows poetry from a distance. Just when the European audience seems to get used to a modern, often difficult, often inaccessible poetry, riddled with ingenious references, metaphors and library shelves full of interpretations, a new frontline of poets shift the helm, overturning the audience's role once again. 'No metaphor/ will enter here' the poets cry (1). It says what it says, things are what they are. They extinguish meaning and the sensation of language remains. The message to the public is that 'the meaning of a poem is no longer inherent to the text but constructed by the reader herself'. (2)

A worldwide, linear evolution in poetry doesn't exist. In every country and in every culture developments take their own independent course. While postmodernism raises its head in Europe, politically engaged poetry prevails in Africa and South America. When a new generation of European poets require more engagement and political awareness from poetry, Africa and South America's poetry becomes more language-focused. Every country, every culture knows a centuries-old poetic tradition which is carried along on waves, washes up on the beach, and then back.

The Poetry International Festival displays all these currents. The festival doesn't subscribe to a particular poetics and is fully autonomous in its choices. It doesn't have any political, social or ideological obligations. All year round, the festival searches worldwide for autonomous quality in poetry from the different currents and trends and puts it together on stage for an audience. An audience that, just like poetry itself, is carried along on the waves.

Since 2008, Poetry International Festival has invited the public to come in without buying tickets in advance. You can pay afterwards, the amount you pay is based on your own evaluation. A young

poetry fan who for years hadn't dared to come to the festival, was encouraged to visit by this campaign. 'I've always thought it would go over my head,' she said on her way in. 'I find poetry so difficult and I'm worried I won't understand it.' I saw her again afterwards. 'The problem was just in my head,' she told me. 'I've had a wonderful evening. I understand now that I don't need to understand everything.'

3.

Fifteen minutes after the start of the evening program, a man left the auditorium. I asked him whether it was that bad. Oh, of course not, he said. 'I come to Poetry International Festival every year, and every year I hope to discover poetry that will last me a whole year. Sometimes I don't, other times only at the end of the festival week. But now, on the first day, the first poet, bull's eye! I'm going to buy all his books and plunge into them for the coming year. Marvelous. To listen to other poets now would be needlessly confusing. The festival has been more than a success for me. Thanks, and see you next year!'

The Poetry International Festival in Rotterdam lives on the power of spoken poetry. For years the subtitle of the festival has been 'The Voice of the Poet'. In the 1970s and 1980s this mainly indicated the political voice: the poet was a revolutionary, he lent his voice to the repressed. The political message seemed more important than the quality of the poem.

In the 1990s, politics lost its power as a theme and made space for the autonomous quality of individual poetry. The focus on the poet's voice remained, but it had a different role: as a guide to the contents. More than another's interpretation of a poem, a poet's voice is the best guide imaginable to lead you into a poem. Not the voice that before or after the performance of a poem elaborately explains the origination and meaning of the poem, but the voice which knows how to balance tension and contemplation, which places commas in places you don't see them on paper, which draws out the meaning of blank spaces and which brings to life the dialogues and voices of all the people, objects, events and thoughts contained in the poem.

In many international festivals the poet's performance is followed by a reading of the translation. Generally this is delivered in a rather flat, business-like way because the translator doesn't want to imitate the way the poet has read. With this construction, the audience can indeed fully enjoy the sound of the often unfamiliar language, but doesn't get the direct association. By projecting the translation behind the poet as he reads, so that the words and lines appear at the same tempo as the

original is spoken, the audience experiences the poet directly and in all its completeness: it immediately understands why the poet sings, bows, bellows, hisses, whispers, quotes or acts. It experiences the role of every tonal change, of every hesitation, every dynamic that the poet brings to his performance.

This necessitates, of course, a poet who is capable of reading his poems well, which certainly isn't the case for all of them. The ideal poetry ambassador is the poet as performer, rising up from the paper and distinguishing herself for the audience within a theatrical context. 'Theatre,' Federico Garcia Lorca once said, 'is Poetry standing up.'

4.

After one program I met a couple who had been faithfully attending the festival for years. A love of poetry had once brought them together and still connected them. For years they'd shared and worshipped the same poets and poems and gone to all the poetry evenings together. For the first time in their lives they were having an enormous row: he thought that evening's poetry the best he'd ever heard, she found it dreadful. I walked on, satisfied.

Our country has seventeen million inhabitants and around 750 still living, serious poets who have published at least one collection with a renowned publishing house. The average poetry collection in the Netherlands had a print run of between 800 and 1,000 copies. A large number of these disappear to the publisher, the press, the critics, libraries and archives, colleagues, family members and friends. Part of what's left disappears under the author's bed, the rest seeks out a path to readers via the bookshops. After around 150 have been sold, the surplus is remaindered.

Is no attention paid to poetry then? Nothing is less true. There has rarely been so much energy in Poetryland as in recent years. 'Poetry' was one of the most searched for words on the internet in 2009. The annual Poetry Day reaches tens of thousands of people with hundreds of programs in theatres, libraries, bookshops and schools. Every self-respecting city in the Netherlands has a poet-in-residence ('*stadsdichter*' - official city poet) and not long ago, twenty thousand people voted for the new Poet Laureate; the election dominated the media for weeks. Theatres organize Poetry Slams, poets perform along with musicians from the best orchestras, dance companies and theatre groups; they are chosen as sidekicks on the most popular television chat shows.

There may be very few volumes sold, but poetry finds its way to an audience. And that audience? They don't want a book on their lap, they are looking for an experience.

The essence of an evening at the Poetry International Festival is composed of the voice of a poet, the poem and its translation. For years people have been coming to Rotterdam to listen to the poets. These specific, concentrated and intense cultural experiences are becoming rarer. Because the cerebral cortex at the back of the human brain, the area which governs perception, has evolved enormously in wake of the digital revolution, a compulsion to serve all of the audience's senses has arisen. Each program maker who brings literature into the contemporary theatre must reflect on the form in which he does this. By now, the Netherlands is acquainted with every form possible in this area. It can deliver interesting combinations, which can strengthen, deepen and even rejuvenate the reception of poetry – combinations with music, theatre, dance, digital poetry, debates, interviews, even competitions.

Unfortunately these possibilities tempt many program makers to pull out all the stops in order to respond to the demand for experiences. The balance is lost when content loses out to form. A flood of text, image and sound fragments cast over the reading poet from all directions, poets hoisted into theatrical costumes or presented in box outfits standing on soapboxes amongst the audience. And meanwhile the bar stays open and nibbles are passed around.

People often think that they'll attract a young audience with this kind of circus. It's not only not true but it's also an insult to that young audience. Recently a young writer, tired of all the bells and whistles in Poetryland, set up the series 'Nur Literatur' in Rotterdam (3), in which he placed nothing more than the poet and their poetry on the stage. The programs are now enjoying a sizeable, young audience.

A good poem by a poet who is capable of bringing his work into the limelight contains all the sensations that are necessary for the requisite public experience. It's a challenge to the program maker just as much as to the audience to remain focused on content.

5.

A poetry teacher asked a student what he was reading. 'Nothing,' the student answered. 'But if you only write poetry and never read it, you'll never develop,' the teacher said in astonishment. 'No man,' the student responded candidly, 'I've only got two hours a week for

poetry and it takes me all that time to write.’ Despite this, the student had the ambition to become a great poet.

As previously mentioned, the Netherlands has a population of seventeen million. A million write poetry from time to time. At least half of them aspires to a career in poetry but only a handful end up in the circuit of poetry workshops and creative writing courses. Thanks to poets such as Lord Byron and Arthur Rimbaud, one of the most persistent fallacies in Europe is that you need to study very, very hard to become a musician, dancer or actor but you don’t become a poet, you are born one. Poetry, many think, alas, cannot be learned.

Actually poetry can be learned, mainly through reading, reading, discussing it, and reading some more. The earlier the better. It is extremely important to bring children into contact with existing poetry from an early age. The concentration on language which contact with poetry affords them, helps them for the rest of their lives. But it’s important not to go down on your knees to the children and only offer them poetry on their level. Good guidance, which doesn’t explain but raises questions and different suggestions, which doesn’t interpret but stimulates independent thought, is the flywheel that sets a young generation on course, just like my own experience when I heard ‘Maritime Ode’.

International poets also face an audience of twelve year-olds at Poetry International Festival. The children listen to the poets, a presenter guides them through the translations, interviews the poet, translations his comments, the questions and the answers of the poet. The poets don’t often look forward to this confrontation because they didn’t have children in mind when they were writing. Yet after it’s over I often get to hear, ‘That was the most attentive and intelligent audience I’ve ever had. They understand it better than anyone!’

If for adults poetry only really comes to life when they struggle with a poem or a stanza for days, weeks, months in their beds, at their work or at the supermarket check out, then this is equally true for children and young adults. One critic I know (4) once wrote that poems which lead to complete puzzlement are not interesting. But it’s wonderful to sniff around a poem, to turn around the words, the lines, meanings, forms, images, the mystery, to ponder on the language, to give it personal interpretations, to re-read it, to wait for sudden insights...

‘Poetry’, a poet once said, ‘is waiting next to the word.’ (5)

6.

From 2012 onwards you'll be able to find poems by every important international poet in their original language and in any other desired language. In most cases, you'll also be able to call up sound and/or video recordings of the poet reading the poem.

The above paragraph is part of a dream, which I voiced during the opening of the fortieth Poetry International Festival on June 12th 2009. This dream is close to becoming reality.

In 2003, the first Dutch Poet Laureate exclaimed that poetry had finally found its ideal partner in the internet.(6) Since 2000 Poetry International has been providing English translations of the festival on the internet. A large network of editors from more than 50 countries offers on HYPERLINK "<http://www.poetryinternational.org>" www.poetryinternational.org a three-monthly digital magazine full of poetry, translations, essays and news. The website has more than 4,000 visitors a day, includes 850 poets with more than 5,800 poems in their original language, and 4,100 English translations. After each new edition of the magazine has been published, the material from the previous issue becomes part of a large digital archive. The base of this archive comprises of the sound recordings and translations of each of the 2,000 poets who have read at the festival. For the last ten years, this base has been regularly supplemented with material from the magazines. A goldmine is currently being opened up to a broad, international audience.

Alongside Poetry International, a great many other international organizations are opening up their poetry archives. Lyrikline in Berlin, the Poetry Archives in London, the Poetry Library in Edinburgh and The Poetry Foundation in Chicago are important examples. The moment all these organizations are prepared to leapfrog the language, technical and rights hurdles and throw open all the windows and doors of their websites, the wonderful possibility will arise of joining together to make all of this available to a worldwide audience. An audience that that will get to experience the emotion of the opening sounds of Walt Whitman's 'Song of Myself', scratched out onto a wax cylinder by Edison himself; that loses itself in the stirring voice of Joseph Brodsky, and feels proud when its favorite poet still stands up in Spanish, Swahili or Chinese.

The digitalization of international poetry in word, sound and image is no danger, but a great binding force between poetry and the public. The unique possibility of being able to directly access the poem, its translation and the poet reading out his work, guarantee curiosity, enthusiasm, fascination and further enquiry. A nice adjunct to all the digital activity is the simultaneous growth of the number of visitors to poetry websites and the number of festival visitors. Meanwhile, festivals such

as Poetry International and the Scottish Stanza Festival have started live-streaming their events so that audiences from Sydney to Lima can watch along too. Sister festivals have sprung up, such as last year in Antwerp, where the local audience watched projections from the Poetry International Festival on a large white screen.

My flywheel for poetry was brought into motion by a reading, by a poem that grabbed hold of me before I could process it. It brought me not just a great love of poetry, but also an enormous compulsion to share it with others. I became convinced that a poet on stage, a poem on the internet or an inspiring teacher can set a broad public's flywheel in motion. I'm also convinced of the unbelievable enrichment this will offer it.

Translated by Michele Hutchison

Sources

1. Hans Favery, 'No Metaphor' ('Geen metafoor'), De Bezige Bij, 1968
2. Yves T'Sjoen, *de Gouddelver*, Lanoo/Atlas 2005.
3. The young writer is Ernest van der Kwast; the name means 'Only Literature' in German.
4. Piet Gerbrandy, *Een Steeneik op de rotsen*, Meulenhoff, 2003
5. Erwin Mortier, Hollands Dagblad, *NRC*, 2008
6. Gerrit Komrij, presentation of the National Library website, March 4th 2003