

Introduction

Reading is an art, a re-creative art in much the same way as music is an art.
The reader as an artist needs creative ability and technique.

Giles Wilkeson Gray, reporting the views of S. H. Clark

Poems appear not to come naturally to my students or, for that matter, to adult readers still suffering from having been students. If they did, there wouldn't be so many books and courses telling us all what to do with poems and how to do it. These books advise us how to read, understand, interpret, analyze, or appreciate poems, or how to teach others to do these things, and we seek them out because we are not entirely sure what we are supposed to do with all but the most straightforward poems. Certainly, most of us pick poems up and read them without instruction, just as we start a computer program without reading the user's manual or make love without *The Joy of Sex*. But if the students I know—high school students, high school teachers, undergraduates, and graduate students—are at all representative, many of us often feel the way Randy Newman put it some years ago in a song whose title is also its first line:

Maybe I'm doing it wrong.
Maybe I'm doing it wrong.
It just doesn't move me
The way that it should.
Maybe I'm doing it wrong.

A quick look at some ephemeral websites where students seek help with their poetry assignments will find much more urgent expressions of such anxieties. Here's "Zerox," uncorrected, calling for help on English Forums: "I'm horrible when it comes to poems. So, I need to identify figures of speech used in this poem (metaphors, similes, synecdoches, metonymies etc). I've tried to do that but if you see any mistakes or something that I have missed, please let me now." Here's "Anonymous," uncorrected, on the same site: "Hey guys, i was just given an assignment to do a comparative commentary on a poem and an

essay . . . however, i dont understand what the poem is talking about, moreover analysing it! Please help!! I just need help on what do you think the structure and purpose of this poem. . or maybe style of writing?? I DONT UNDERSTAND A BIT!! need help desperately.” Unlike Newman, these students don’t even reach the point of worrying about whether they have been moved as they should be. They are panicked about understanding and answering technical questions about figures and structures and purposes. But here’s another student from the Poetry Forum on eNotes voicing a version of Newman’s anxious lament: “more than anything I hate the fact that, for others, poetry seems to speak directly to their souls, setting hearts and minds on fire, while it leaves me sitting here, uninspired, empty and alienated. . . . It tortured me because I really do WANT to feel what you feel when you read poetry, but I can’t. I think I’m incapable of it. . . . If a person can be tone-deaf, do you think it’s possible to be ‘poetry-blind?’”

Teachers are more circumspect in their online queries and confessions, but here’s a report from the same site that identifies some of them with their students: “But I Hate Poetry! How many times I’ve heard this from students, and sadly, from teachers as well. I once even overheard a teacher saying to his class, ‘I don’t like this either, but we have to do it so let’s just get through it as quickly as possible, okay?’” School on both sides of the desk is where these anxieties and dislikes mainly spawn, but they remain with us long after we have swum downstream, and they surface occasionally from those who are neither assigning nor being assigned poems to read. Singer-songwriter Will Oldham recently declared, for example, in *Poetry* magazine: “The difference between lyrics and poetry is that I don’t understand poetry. I don’t understand biology either. Someone must be there to guide me through the meanings of things. . . . Even recited, words expressively coded and adjacented are like a miracle of phonetics but do not mean what they should. It’s about the structure, but a poem holds nothing up and nothing in. It sits there.” Oldham admits he doesn’t know how to do it. Newman goes on to sing that “There is no book you can read” to teach you how, but of course, as I have already said, there are lots of books, not to mention numerous Web sites, on how to do it right with poems, numerous offers to help understand poems and find the joy of text, and I am offering yet another one here.

I do so because I believe I can improve on the available offerings in two ways. First, I have a new and improved way to name what we do with poems. Second, I have a new and improved definition of what they are. At this point in the book, I’m going to make good on these claims by arguing from common

sense and the experience of language that I share with all educated readers who are not necessarily professional literary critics. In the appendix, I offer a more technical academic argument for the originality and significance of this project that I hope all my readers will want to consider by the time they have finished the book. The academic argument for my approach is not inaccessible, but it would be off-putting for many readers if I started with it, as books aimed only at academics often do. There is nothing to stop my fellow academics from heading there now to read it, if they wish. There will be occasional gestures toward it in some of the chapters that follow.

My first claim, again, is that I have a new and improved way to name what we do with poems. I propose that we “play” them. I use the word with several associations that maintain its active, transitive sense. We play poems as we play pieces of music. We play poems as we play games. We play poems as we play parts in plays. All these things that we play involve objects made by someone and taken up by someone else (let’s say by us) who activates them according to some explicit or implied instructions for the sake of some kind of enjoyment. In undertaking all the activities I have listed, we recognize that we are taking up the object in question as a particular kind of object that invites and enables a particular kind of active response on our part. We see its instructions or rules as guidelines that constitute (as in the rules of games) or constrain (as in stage directions or tempo markings) our performance of those active responses. We accept those rules and guidelines in order to cocreate pleasurable performances that we believe were anticipated in what the maker of the artifact created, but we also recognize that any playing of a piece or a game or a part is a unique performance of it, even if it has much in common with other performances. We play music, games, and parts sometimes alone, sometimes with other players or with teachers, conductors, referees, or directors. We can play all these things as amateurs or professionals, teachers or students, for fun, but also seriously. Sometimes the artifacts that “demand,” as we say, the most serious playing are often also the most rewarding to play. The best of them we enjoy playing again and again. Amateurs admire professionals and study their play; professionals play against or with each other and teach amateurs. Higher levels of play emerge from lower levels with instruction and practice. More extensive and sophisticated repertoires of pieces, parts, or moves develop from simpler and more limited repertoires. We usually expect these kinds of play to expand our capabilities and our experience.

Everything I have said about all these kinds of play applies to playing poems so completely that I do not think it is metaphorical at all to speak of

playing poems. But because we do not normally talk this way about what we do with poems, let me belabor the obvious for a moment. Poems, too, are artificial objects made by someone and taken up by others who activate them in order to enjoy them. We activate them according to one or another set of rules or instructions depending on what we take the rules to be, but the rules are there, as in the other cases I have mentioned, to constitute and constrain an activity that we expect to be enjoyable. We play poems with a sense that we are realizing some purpose of their maker even as we are aware of options in play that make our playing of a poem different from all other playings of it. We play poems by ourselves but also in classes with fellow students and teachers or in reading groups with friends or in public performances. We recognize and honor the differences between professional and amateur players. We don't usually talk of "repertoires" of poems we have played or like to play repeatedly, any more than we talk of "playing" poems, but as soon as we introduce this way of talking, we can easily begin rethinking and redescribing what we do this way. And we hope, at least, that playing them will enrich our experience and enhance our verbal facility.

This way of talking about poems seems so evident that the wonder becomes why we do not talk this way. Why do we have lots of books on how to read or understand, interpret, analyze, criticize, or appreciate poems but none, until now, on how to play them? I am afraid that poems have been hijacked from players by others who have owned them for so long that we take their possession as normal and legitimate. All the owners have important positions in serious social enterprises. All of them have found serious uses for poems that make my proposal to play them sound trivial.

Poems have been hijacked for purposes other than play by ancient grammarians and language teachers, by lawyers, priests, scientists, philosophers, critics, and even politicians, all of whom have shaped the practices of today's literature teachers. This is a formidable array of authorities for me to contend with, and it is a sign that there is something powerful in poems that can call out so many contenders. Some of their claims go back to very early stages in Western cultural development, when Plato saw the power in poems and proposed to contain it. All of them enjoy standing as serious contributors to literacy, lawfulness, spiritual well-being, knowledge, truth, and standards—a formidable phalanx of authorities whose claims I must review.

Grammarians from Roman times have taught reading in general through the reading of poems. They have emphasized construal of sentences, mastery of vocabulary, and identification of figurative departures from literal mean-

ing. For a long post-Roman period up until just before the past century, they taught languages other than those spoken by their students—Greek for the Romans, Latin for Europeans after the fall of Rome—the classical languages of religious or cultural authority. The rules they taught were grammatical rules aimed at assuring correct and accurate understanding of poetic texts. This practice remains basic to playing poems, but it does not itself conceive of playing them or invite us to do so; rather it is a practice that makes us worry that we are doing it wrong. It is no substitute for learning to play poems, though it often has served as one.

Both lawyers and priests have made poems objects of interpretation for the sake of our secular and spiritual well-being. Lawyers (or more often lawyer-like literary scholars) have stressed interpretation of authors' intended meanings on the analogy with the interpretations of laws and actions. What is always at issue in this kind of work is attributing responsibility to the poet for intended meaning or being responsible to the poet's intended meaning. This interpretive practice maintains the author's ownership of the meaning as a kind of property and enforces respect for that property by those who venture into it. It conceives of authors as meaning things to be taken a certain way rather than as making things to be played. A civil order that can determine original and derivative meanings and prohibit improper attributions and interpretations is maintained here by rules designed to protect authors and authorities from irresponsible interpretations rather than to enable and constrain readers to enjoyably play the works they have made.

Priests (and their literary acolytes and analogues) have stressed interpretation that reveals the intentions of the Divine Author, as authoritatively established by them, behind the appearances of texts that do not directly reveal those intentions. Whether those texts are transcended inspired texts like the Old Testament under the dispensation of the New or are humanly authored texts that point beyond themselves to transcendent meanings, priestly interpretations reveal allegorical or symbolic meanings beyond the apparent "surface" or literal meanings. This reading practice maintains the order of consistent doctrine that underwrites the spiritual life of the community; even if the work looks unorthodox on the surface, its meaning conforms to true doctrine when read aright. There is a way to play poems as symbols and allegories or containers of symbols and allegories that is analogous to (and sometimes underwritten by) this religious reading practice. There are poems that appear to have been written, at least in part, to be played by these rules. But there is a widespread practice of reading all poems this way that regularly collapses

fully realized performance of them into a discovery of the figures or doctrines they symbolize or allegorize. Sometimes the doctrines illustrated are religious ones, but the same approach can be used by the devotees of Freud or Marx or DeMan. Though many poems can be played by these rules, the enjoyment of thus playing them is limited to the pleasure of discovering a meaning “behind” them or “deeper” or “higher” or “truer” that puts the script that is in front of us, or on the surface, or on our level, out of play.

An attempt to imitate the authority of scientists has led to the widespread practice of taking poems as objects to be analyzed. “Literary Analysis” is obviously a more acceptable name for an academic course in the modern university, in which science is the dominant model for other enterprises, than “How to Play a Poem.” Poems, it must be granted, are interesting objects to analyze and even to theorize—complex, multivariant, value-laden, historically embedded, generically diverse. Just as music has its musicologists, games their game theorists, and plays their dramaturges, so poems have their “poemologists”—students of the science of poetics (often linguists) or of literary theory (often philosophers) or literary history (frequently philologists). But no one would confuse musicology with musical performance, dramaturgy with dramatic performance, or game theory with game playing. Yet playing poems has no robust practice and institutional recognition in our schools and colleges apart from the academic/scientific study of poems. Poetic creation—the work of academic creative writers—produces poems in the academy, but no separate branch of the curriculum explicitly cultivates a practice of poetic co-creation that would teach how to play poems as we already teach how to play Mozart or Shakespeare. I was going to say that we have no curriculum for learning to play games either, but then I remembered that we teach athletic games from volleyball and badminton to football and basketball within the academic regime. I hope this book helps to open a space where learning to play poems can explicitly take its place in the academy alongside these other kinds of instruction in performance.

Philosophers have often, though not always, had little use for poems. Plato famously put them down, and Aristotle famously redeemed them only in part by making them the objects of a science of poetics. Since the eighteenth century, however, philosophers have made a place for them under the category of the aesthetic. There they have made appreciation, a weakened name for what Immanuel Kant unfortunately called “judgment,” an aesthetic practice with poems that has seen its job as training our taste to recognize and respond appropriately to great and good and not so great and good poems. Recent phi-

losophers have usually left it to critics to cultivate appreciation or judgment in spectators or readers of poems, a practice critics have carried on in earnest. Their criticism has produced canons of great works and refuse piles of not so great ones that have made readers anxious about getting it wrong by liking the ones that should have been tossed out or tossing out the good ones. Having poor taste is as socially fraught as having poor grammar.

Exercising taste situates readers as judges on the sidelines of the performance, like spectators at a play. It leaves it to others to activate the poems and leaves the audience with no other task than to respond aright with applause or awed silence or thumbs down. The actors and the directors and their collaborators figure out how to make the play work, while the audience exercises its judgment. The equivalent with poems has been to leave it to the eloquent and clever teacher or the poet at a reading to perform the poem and make an impression on the audience. What I have in mind in this book is that we each learn to enact the poem for ourselves, to reanimate the dead letter of its text, not necessarily in an oral performance, but in worked-through scenarios for such performances, not for the sake of an external audience's response, but for the pleasure of making the poem do what it can do. I think this activity is close to what Kant meant when he talked about aesthetic play, a term much more congenial to my argument than "judgment." Only those who learn to play poems for themselves will be able to decide whether they would rather leave it to others or whether, as I believe, playing them is even better than looking on to judge and judging is better after playing.

Some might say, and indeed many have said, that learning to read poems is a difficult discipline that few can master. They say that many can have no relation to poems but to learn to appreciate what experts have identified as worthy ones and their important features. But learning to play a poem, I believe, draws on widely shared knowledge and capacities that can be used to some satisfaction even in the early stages of playing. Though this learning would benefit from the long apprenticeship and practice that musicians must submit to in order to play an instrument well, we can enjoy playing poems long before we achieve consummate mastery. More like acting and game playing and singing, it involves even at its early stages and in its unpracticed forms some of the pleasures and benefits that will be enriched and consolidated by reflective practice. Though all we can do is sit in the audience for some kinds of musical performance, which we simply cannot learn to do ourselves, we can learn to play poems, as we can play games or dramatic roles, as active novices. We can, I might add, also learn to be more active in our recognition of what those who

perform for us are doing, even in practices that we cannot learn to perform for ourselves; the amateur player of music enjoys a symphony differently from the audience member who has never played.

In my zeal to answer the aesthetic philosophers and critics who think poems are to be appreciated and criticized, I have digressed from my enumeration of those who have taken poems for purposes other than playing them. But there is one final claimant to consider. Every teacher in the schools and more and more teachers in college recognize that politicians have asserted their authority over the reading of poems by requiring that this reading be tested against explicitly stated standards. Drawn up from the practices of grammarians and interpreters, sometimes by bureaucrats, sometimes by teachers themselves under bureaucratic mandate, these standards and the questions used to evaluate them make students' reading of poems measures of their, their teachers', and their schools' progress and quality. When bulletin boards are covered with butcher paper to hide any clues to answers during the annual testing period, and students hold their number 2 pencils over their test booklets, few students or teachers think of themselves as playing.

I hope you can now see how claims to treat poems as objects of reading and understanding, interpretation, analysis, appreciation, criticism, and standardized testing have held and continue to hold widespread authority to the near exclusion of treating poems as things to play. These other ways of treating poems are all correlated with ideas of what poems are that would be interesting to examine. All of them have their authoritative advocates in the enterprises that have sustained these ways of treating poems. I could argue at length with each of them, but I choose instead to work out a model of what poems are that takes them as something for us to play. You may judge its value from what it lets us make of poems before I argue its theoretical grounds in the appendix.

Poems are, then—my second claim to a fresh approach—*utterances designed and packaged for pleasurable reanimation*. Putting this another way, poems are scripts awaiting their readers' active or imagined re-creation as delivered utterances, scripts that have been artfully made to guide and reward such re-creation. This is not how poems are typically defined. The *Oxford English Dictionary*, for example, defines a poem as “a piece of writing or an oral composition, often characterized by a metrical structure, in which the expression of feelings, ideas, etc., is typically given intensity or flavour by distinctive diction, rhythm, imagery, etc.; a composition in poetry or verse.” Not utterances but compositions, according to this definition, even if they are

oral. As in most definitions, the focus here is on what is expressed through distinctive technical means of expression—what we will later call the signs of design. This definition is passively constructed so that it is not clear who is expressing or giving, but the implied agent would appear to be the poet, who spices up the feelings and ideas with literary devices. Presumably it is readers who will experience the “intensity or flavour” in what the poet has cooked up, but it sounds as if readers will be impressed by the intensity or have the flavor served up to them without their being called to do anything but experience or taste the poem. That the poem might have been designed to guide readers’ active reanimation of it, that those literary devices might be cues to that activity, that the reader’s experience may be the pleasurable activity of playing the poem—these possibilities are not even implied.

It will take some effort in what follows to get past such well-established understandings of what poems are and what we can do with them. Because other ways of doing things with poems are so well-entrenched and for most of us habitual, I will have to combat them as they interfere with the approach I am presenting here. I will need to account for the features of poems that established approaches call attention to and put them in their places within the new perspective I am working out. Some shadow boxing will be inescapable here in a situation filled, as I noted at the outset, with other claimants telling us how to do it right. I will most especially need to distinguish how I am presenting many of the familiar terms and figures in poems from the ways they are usually presented in guides to reading poetry. I will introduce only a few new terms. But almost all the familiar things we have been taught to notice in poems will take on new roles and relations to one another, serve different functions, and come up at different moments in the unfolding of the model I am presenting. Some things usually treated as central will be relegated to the margins if not tossed off the page, and other things usually treated carelessly in passing will receive precise definition and major parts to play. Utterance, the thing placed at the center here, was dismissed as unimportant by Aristotle, the founder of academic poetics, and has shown up only against the odds from time to time over the centuries, while the things he placed at the center, like plot and metaphor, remain major characters in commonplace critical practice but take secondary parts in my playing of poems. Denotation and connotation, standard terms of New Critical formalist analysis, will be forcibly exiled. A few still useful technical terms will be rehabilitated.

I have some reorienting to do, then, and sometimes I will need to shake up settled postures and violently turn heads to make visible what I want my

readers to see. I have regularly found that my students are habituated, even when they encounter new approaches, to returning to seeing what they have learned to see already. If, as I imagine, you, my readers, have taken on some of the same literary critical habits, I may need to apply occasional rhetorical shocks to help you see poems afresh. I will accordingly try my tropes more than once, bring overstatement to my aid, and paint in lurid colors what I am advocating and what I am fighting against. If you want academic decorum and footnotes, please turn to the appendix, but if you would like to learn some new moves and see what you can do with them, don't turn away too quickly. Like my students, you'll have to unlearn some things if you want to try these new ones, and unlearning requires special effort.

It shouldn't be so much work to learn to play poems, you may think, but many games and musical scores and dramatic parts require effort and thought from their players, and we often can practice them without having first to unlearn previous approaches. The active readers I want to cultivate can't just read poems off the page, though some verse asks for no more. They need a fresh orientation to what poems are and how they work, and they need practice activating them. The course I invite you to go through with me will require some work from you as it does from my students, but I believe the rewards will be substantial though not immediate. It's time to begin.