Four pieces on poetry
Bart Nooteboom 26 July 2019

402. What poems do[i]   published 22-12-2018

I have written poems all my life, in batches, at intervals. I did not publish but merely filed
them, but recently I started working on them and posting them on two blogs, one in English
and one in Dutch. That made me reflect on what it is that poems do.

In my philosophy, and in my previous career in science, the line running through all my work
is dynamics, change. So one of the questions for me is: what does poetry have to do with that?
Novalis said: 'Poetry is the elevation of man above himself'. How does that work? And how
do poems differ from prose?

There are five differences between poetry and prose.

First, while in prose a line ends at the end of the page, in poetry the line ends earlier, and
either the phrase runs to its end, or it is broken in 'enjambment', to continue on the next line.
The last word on a line jumps out, gets emphasis, and that can be used in the design of the
poem.

Second, lines are grouped in stanza's, of two lines (a couplet), three (triplet), four
(quadruplets), etc. A classic form is the sonnet, with 12 lines, divided over two quadruplets
plus two triplets (the Petrarcan sonnet), or two sextets or three quadruplets, plus a couplet
(Shakespearian sonnet). The Haiku has three lines of 5, then 7, then 5 syllables.

Why such structures? They yield ways to cut up the world that the poem presents. The
Shakespearian sonnet has been associated with a debate: 6 lines thesis, 6 lines antithesis, and a
couplet as resolution. One can also opt for an unbroken series of lines, in a world without
seams.

Third, there is rhythm (meter), a sequences of beats. Classic is the jamb, going te dum, te
dum, te dum, te dum, te dum (with the beat on 'dum'), here five times on a line, called a
pentameter. I have a preference for the tetrameter, with four beats, often used in ballads. The
beat can also be reversed, in the 'trochee': dum te, dum te, dum te, dum te. The beat (dum)
has been associated with the male, the one without beat (te) with the female.

Why meter? It is said to come from the primal existential experience of the heartbeat, with the
primordial experience in the maternal womb, and of the beat of walking, or a trotting or
galloping horse.

Fourth, there is rhyme. There used to be strict forms, some connected to the sonnet. For the
Petrarcan sonnet abba, abba, cdc, cdc, or: abab, cdcd, cfe, fgg. Such orders of rhyme
came to be seen by many as formalistic and constraining. They are, when the need to rhyme
dominates the intended meaning and story. One recommendation is to write up what you want
to say and then try to make it rhyme, but don't when it distorts what you want to say. But
there now is also much 'free verse', with no regard to 'rules' of rhyme or even meter.

Why rhyme? It is pleasing to the ear, establishes order and repetition, but can indeed become
forced and artificial.

Fifth, there is sound, more widely than in rhyme, in alliteration (same consonants) and assonance (same vowels), within lines or across them. Sharing vowels or consonants makes connections between words that can yield surprising associations and extensions or twists of meaning, in new combinations. That happens also with metaphor, where A is seen in terms of B.

Why these connections, by sound and metaphor? This is what poems do: lift, shift or twist meanings, or generate new ones. This helps to halt and redirect thought. Innovation has been characterized as 'novel combinations', and in yielding such novel combinations poetry innovates language.

Poems stand things on their head, generate surprise, novelty, new world views.

431. How words do things   published 13-7-2019

Here I discuss how language enables and constrains action, using Aristotle's multiple causality of action, used several times before in this blog (items 96-100, 289), in application to history, role models, science and policy, and virtues. These are collected in a bundle, available on my website bartnooteboom.nl.

Wittgenstein said that if you want to know the meaning of a word, see how it is used. And what affects its use.

As proposed in his theory of *speech acts* (in the classic 'How to do things with words'), J.L. Austin showed how words can be used not only to express things, or refer to things, but also to create or affect action, in *illocution,* addressing people.

One example is the verdict of a judge. Another is to give orders, to blame, or to express emotion.

Here I want to develop that a bit further with the use of Aristotle's multiple causality of action, with the causalities of actors ('efficient' cause), intention, material, form (method, knowledge, technology), conditions (enabling, constraining), and 'exemplars', models (for guidance, imitation).

Rules and use of language affect who is given the opportunity to speak (efficient cause), affect intentions, give information for action as a material cause, knowledge as a formal cause, the conditions for discussion or dialogue, and give examples of excellent language use.

Taking action, leading a meeting, in 'giving someone the floor', determining who can speak and when, sets the efficient cause. Ordering, as in the army or in any hierarchy, the pursuit of self-interest or some ideal set intentions. Teaching is provision of forms of action, with knowledge, skill, technology. News, education, or funds yield material for thought and action. Stating and implementing law, infrastructure, and communication constitute a conditional cause. Stories of exemplary behaviour, role models, heroes provide an exemplary cause.

In administering law, legal rules and precedent are the conditional and formal causes. Jurisprudence is a material cause. Justice is a final cause. The political setting is a conditional cause, hopefully in a separation of powers, with an independent judiciary.

In political debate, news is a material cause, rhetoric a formal cause, rules of debate a conditional cause, iconic leaders the exemplary cause.

In scientific debate experimental results are a material cause, logic, knowledge, theories, and terminology a formal cause, truth a final cause (one hopes), conferences and publications a conditional cause.

In poetry, rules of rhyme and metre are a formal cause.

Conditional causes enable and constrain the use of language, with rules of grammar, syntax, and pronunciation. These are provided in institutions of schools, libraries, dictionaries, media, etc.

The sentence forms the conditional cause for the words in it, eliciting and constraining their meanings. Words form the material cause in composing a sentence, with sentence meaning being a function of word meaning. Thus there is both 'upward causation' from words to sentences and 'downward causation' from sentences to words.

Sometimes, to get something done, words are not used but ostentation, demonstrating action, with a role model showing how to do things, as in master-apprentice relations, in carpentry, say. That happens, in particular when the knowledge involved is tacit know-how, difficult or impossible to codify. That may, however, be complemented by written instructions, in a manual or handbook.

Here, language and bodily expression go together, and that happens more widely, when linguistic expression is supported by facial expression and bodily moves to support the causal action of language, e.g. in affecting intentions, giving orders, enunciating a judgement, or underscoring a joke.

432. Ontology and poetry   published 20-7-2019

Stephen Dobyns proposed that in poetry 'the word is always less than the thing it is to represent'.[ii] That is true, I think, but so is the reverse: a word is more than the thing it is to represent. But first, let me confirm what Dobyns claimed.

Let me use 'chair' for an example (as I did in earlier discussions of meaning). The word may be intended to refer to a specific chair, and indeed, as Dobyns claimed, that object carries associations that go far beyond what a chair usually means.

Dobyns also proposed that poems cannot be paraphrased, i.e. not all its meanings can be specified.[iii] That also is true, but that applies to all objects.

The claim that objects in general cannot be paraphrased is proposed in 'Object Oriented Ontology' (3O).[iv] An object has an inside, of what it consists of (its physical or linguistic composition), of 'what is in it'. It also has an outside, of 'what it is in'. That includes its

phenomenology, i.e. how it presents itself and is experienced, all its actual or possible uses, what it means to people observing or handling it, or reading it, in case of a poem.

For a chair it would be how it is to sit on or in it, how it is to carry around, where to buy it, etc. Especially this phenomenology is impossible to completely enumerate, since it includes an unending variety of actual and possible experience.

Let me now turn to the opposite of Dobyn's claim: a word is more than the object it is intended to refer to.

Here, as before, I make use of Frege's distinction, in the theory of meaning, between reference, what a word refers to, and sense, how a thing is identified 'as' something, how reference is established. This sense carries a range of associations, arising from past experience with different chairs, and this is partly shared with other people, in common experience, and partly personal, due to experience along one's particular path of life. That range of associations goes far beyond the specific chair that is at issue in any specific reference.

Sense concerns the process of identification, reference is its outcome.

Another of Frege's views is that 'the meaning of a sentence is a function of the meanings of the words in it'. That is true, but here also, the reverse is true as well: the meaning of a word depends on its context, i.e. the sentence, and the action context, it is in, here the poem as a whole.

This connects with another proposition by Dobyns, that a poem should be an event on the page instead of referring to something off the page.[v] The poem is a process of identification, sense making, where the words create the meaning of the poem but also, vice versa, the poem affects the meanings of the words.

But does that not happen everywhere in language? What is special about poetry? Usually, language is discursive, i.e. representing some state of affairs in the world, reporting on something off the page, as Dobyns said. Poems shift meanings, produce new ones, as argued in the preceding item in this blog. They do not report on the wold but are forms of worldmaking. But does not science produce new meanings, new worlds, as well? So how is poetry different from science? Science is engaged more in reference, phenomena, propositions about the world. Poetry is engaged more in sense making, shifting sense or creating new sense, new associations of words.

Back to ontology. Do poems exist, then? Are they objects in the world? A poem does have an inside, of words, with syntax, grammar, meter, sound and rhyme that order them and shape their meanings. Its outside, its phenomenology, is special in that it not only includes what it means to people, how it is read and understood, but also affects meaning elsewhere, beyond the poem, adding to repertoires of sense by which people look at the world, or shifting them.

433. Do poems express meaning or do they produce it? published 27-7-2019

Since about a year, have been writing poems. I have now read three books on poetry: by Stephen Fry, Glyn Maxwell and Stephen Dobyns, all three active poets. In those books, I

came across the old idea that poems are supposed to 'express' some meaning intended by the poet, and that this expression is always imperfect, approximate, never quite covering the intended meaning. For any word in the poem, the rest of the poem helps to convey the intended meaning.

I think that is a misrepresentation. Meanings are not pre-established in the mind of the poet. In writing the poem the meanings of words in it emerge, are produced. The meaning of a word emerges in interaction with the other words, as a function of meter, sound and rhyme. Interestingly, the poets mentioned above did say that one 'writes a poem in order to discover why one is writing it'. The discipline of meter and rhyme serve to prod the poet to consider alternative words, not grab the first word that comes to mind. That yields new avenues of meaning, often quite to the surprise of the poet. The poem as a whole, as it emerges, guides the meaning of the words in it, and may lead the poet to replace them, and change of a single word can change the meaning of the whole. In this way, writing a poem may become a process without end.

Being also a philosopher, I now ask: how, if at all, does this fit with philosophy of language?

Earlier in this blog (item 32), discussing philosophy of meaning, I used, with a twist, Frege's distinction between sense and reference. A meaning is supposed to refer to something, to what the word 'gives'. Frege defined sense as 'the way it is given' ('die Art des Gegebenseins'), by which he meant: the way somethings manifests itself. I changed that into: the way something is identified as something. Sense is the process of identification, reference is its outcome.

 Sense entails a set of associations that one has with a kind of object, say a chair. Some of those will be shared, public, such as its having legs (3 or more), a seat, and possibly (but not necessarily) head- and armrests. Other features are its upholstery, soft or hard, wood, metal, cloth, or leather, colour, and so on. Some of the associations will be personal, connected with the chairs that were significant in one's life. Part of my sense of a chair is grandfather's chair with curved armrests of polished ebony wood and a blue velvet upholstery fastened with buttons. Which features are triggered depends on the context. Odd cases may enter. I used the example, encountered in a newspaper, of someone who had turned a stuffed cow into a chair. For me, seeing a cow may now make me think of chairs.

Poems are not to indicate things that are already given, but engages in sense: plays of sense making, of making and shifting reference, shedding new light on things whereby we see them differently, or see different things.

Different words can have the same reference, but certainly do not have the same sense. The famous example is Shakespeare's (from Romeo and Julia): 'A rose by any other name would smell as sweet' (the intention for Julia was to say that Romeo was the same to her whether or not he carried the name of a rival family). Whatever other name we might choose for a rose, with 'rose' it would share the feature of smell, while having very different other features.

Sense depends on the context. New contexts evoke new associations that may be added to the set of sense, thus making us look differently at an object, and may link it to other words we never associated them with before. That is what poems often do: trigger surprising connections, thus enriching meanings, shifting them or demolishing them. That is also why poems seldom stick to abstractions but play with particulars in specific, surprising contexts, playing with sense, which may cause us to shift or demolish abstractions.

In conclusion: Poets do not necessarily express meanings they intended before undertaking the poem, but in writing the poems discover meanings new to themselves, from the context that emerges in the poem as they write it.

---

[i] This piece is based on a poetry writing course given by Mary-Jane Holmes at Casa Ana, in the Alpujarras, high up in the Sierra Nevada, in Southern Spain, on a book on poetry 'The ode less travelled' by Stephen Fry, and the book 'On poetry' by Glyn Maxwell.

[ii] Stephen Dobyns, 2011, *Next word, better word; The craft of writing poetry,* Palgrave MacMillan, p. 2.

[iii] Ibid., p. 11.

[iv] Graham Harman, 2018, *Object oriented ontology, a new theory of everything,* Penguin.

[v] Dobyns, p. 24.