

DEFINITIONS OF POETRY  
(gathered by Bernadette Rule)

“Poetry is an investigation of the spirit. If a poem you read moves you, something must have happened. Perhaps it told you something you didn’t know (which smacks somewhat of prose); perhaps it told you something you had forgotten you knew (which is closer to poetry). But if it stirred in you an awareness that left your senses glowing...it did its job...it investigated you.”

John V. Hicks, *Side Glances*

“Poetry is the past breaking out in the heart.”

Gary Geddes quoting someone(?)

“The order of all poetry is to approach a state of music wherein the ideas present themselves sensuously & intelligently, & are of no predatory intention.”

Louis Zukofsky, *Prepositions*

“All good writing is like suggestions, while all bad writing is like statements.”

John McGarin

“When a poet’s mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience; the ordinary [person’s] experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary. The latter falls in love or reads Spinoza, & these two experiences have nothing to do with each other, or with the noise of the type-writer or the smell of cooking; in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes.”

T.S. Eliot

“Keep it simple, keep it sexy, keep it sad.”

Mitch Miller, 1950

“Poetry is a pheasant disappearing in the brush.”

Wallace Stevens

“[I began writing about] Nature, I think; birds, bees, spring, fall, all those subjects which are absolute gifts to the person who doesn’t have any interior experience to write about. I think the coming of spring, the stars overhead, the first snowfall, and so on, are gifts for a child, a young poet.”

Sylvia Plath, *The Poet Speaks* (ed., Orr)

“We can never be born enough.”

e.e. cummings, *Selected Poems*

“I am certain of nothing but the holiness of the heart’s affections & the truth of Imagination.”

John Keats

“Successful lyric poems convince us that their essential selves, how the voice is saying whatever it’s saying, is a singularity in the universe: No other poem acts exactly like this one.”

Ken Babstock

“The original meaning of the word prose is to go forward; verse means to turn back. As Northrop Frye puts it, Narrative is words in time and poetry is words in space. Fiction asks where are we headed; while poetry looks at the relationship between words.”

Jeffery Donaldson

“If you compose a poem you start without any authority. If you were a scientist...whatever you said would have the force of an accumulated background of information...but a poet, whatever you’re saying or however you are saying

it, the only authority you have builds from the immediate performance, or it does not build. The moon you are describing is the one you are creating. From the very beginning of your utterance you are creating your own authority. This immediate validation requirement is a constant excitement in writing.”

Wm Stafford, *Writing the Australian Crawl*

“Poetry makes language care because it renders everything intimate....Every poem that works is original. And original has two meanings: it means a return to the origin, the first which engendered everything that followed; and it means that which has never occurred before. In poetry, and in poetry alone, the two senses are united in such a way that they are no longer contradictory.”

John Berger, *And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief As Photos*

“Poems are stop signs that keep us from rushing through our lives.”

Josef Brodsky

“For a long time before it becomes a speaking, Heidegger observes, poetry is only a listening....And when poetry does become speech, it returns to the business of naming with this listening folded inside it....A poem, or poem-in-waiting, contemplates what language can't do: then it does something with language--in homage, or grief, or anger, or praise.”

Don McKay, *Vis a Vis*

“Poetry is stand-up tragedy.”

Paul Vermeersh

“What I did not know when I was very young was that nothing can take the past away; the past grows gradually around one, like a placenta for dying.”

John Berger, *And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos*

“Form in poetry is like the wing of a bird. It does not cause flight to happen, but without it there would be no flight.”

Robert Bringhurst

“Poetry is the best words in the best order.”

Samuel Taylor Coleridge

“Poetry is like fish. If it's fresh it's good.”

Osbert Sitwell

“Poetry is the deification of reality.”

Edith Sitwell

“Poetry is truth in its Sunday clothes.”

Joseph Roux

“Poetry is an echo asking a shadow to dance.”

Carl Sandburg

“Poetry is an act of peace.”

Pablo Neruda

“Poetry is being, not doing.”

e.e. cummings

“Poetry is when the words mean more than the words mean.”

an anonymous Canadian elementary school student

Poetry is like the mystery of the world. It comes from the secret wells; it is a fresh draft from heaven, warmed in earth....

Richard Eberhart