

# How Can My Poem Be True?

## Using Poetic Inquiry to Explore the Meaning and Value of Poetic Fictions

John L. Hoben

Volume 6, Number 2, 2021

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1081989ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18432/ari29569>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

University of Alberta

ISSN

2371-3771 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Hoben, J. (2021). How Can My Poem Be True? Using Poetic Inquiry to Explore the Meaning and Value of Poetic Fictions. *Art/Research International*, 6(2), 369–388. <https://doi.org/10.18432/ari29569>

Article abstract

How can a poem be true? This autoethnographic study uses poetic inquiry to explore the boundaries between fiction and reality within poetic experience. A series of poems composed during, and about, the current COVID-19 pandemic, provides a means of understanding the experience of having one's everyday reality overturned by crisis. A central theme of the author's poems and accompanying reflections is how art can be used to explore psychological experiences, such as melancholia and depression, and, in turn how the experience of suffering can be used to facilitate artistic expression. Using poetic inquiry, the author examines the complex interplay between speaker and authorial intention, fiction and truth, text and the performance of writing, reading, and poetic interpretation.

© John L. Hoben, 2021



This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

**é**rudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>



---

## HOW CAN MY POEM BE TRUE? USING POETIC INQUIRY TO EXPLORE THE MEANING AND VALUE OF POETIC FICTIONS

---

John L. Hoben

Faculty of Education, Memorial University

[jlhoben@mun.ca](mailto:jlhoben@mun.ca)

**John Hoben, PhD** is an Assistant Professor in Memorial University's Faculty of Education. A former practicing lawyer and poet, John researches how poetry and narrative can be used to provide insights about writing, culture, and identity.

**Abstract:** How can a poem be true? This autoethnographic study uses poetic inquiry to explore the boundaries between fiction and reality within poetic experience. A series of poems composed during, and about, the current COVID-19 pandemic, provides a means of understanding the experience of having one's everyday reality overturned by crisis. A central theme of the author's poems and accompanying reflections is how art can be used to explore psychological experiences, such as melancholia and depression, and, in turn how the experience of suffering can be used to facilitate artistic expression. Using poetic inquiry, the author examines the complex interplay between speaker and authorial intention, fiction and truth, text and the performance of writing, reading, and poetic interpretation.

**Keywords:** poetic inquiry; poetry; autoethnography; life-history; art-based research

What does poetry have to do with truth? As the late Carl Leggo (1991) once said, “I do not ask the question in order to answer the question; I ask the question, again and again, in order to know the question” (p. 113). None of us live in a single undifferentiated world, that can be neatly divided between the real and the imaginary, just as the worlds of written expression can no longer be neatly bifurcated into fictional and non-fictional realms. Indeed, academics have invented new terms to describe some of these overlapping spaces where competing narratives shift, fade, and spring into the foreground, syncopated with the alternating currents of lived experience: creative non-fiction, biographical fiction, literary non-fiction, lyric essay, to name just a few, are all examples of how conventional genres are being blended to create new spaces for reflection. Fortunately, there has been a growing willingness to experiment with research methods, and to combine various research techniques to allow for new insights, particularly by using arts-based approaches (Faulkner, 2018; Watson, 2020).

Yet, where does the poetic figure into this changing landscape of academic genres? From a stylistic and theoretical perspective, the current project is grounded in poetic inquiry and the desire to demonstrate that from an author’s perspective, it is often very much difficult to ascertain what is real and “imaginary” within a poem. At times, the more a poem engages the fantastic, the uncanny, or the unfamiliar, the closer it may come to some unexpressed inner psychological “truth” that the poet has felt but not yet expressed (Dobson, 2010). As others have noted, poetic inquiry is distinct because it combines metaphorical and narrative elements, especially in its autoethnographic forms.

By drawing on poetry and literature related to the nature, form, and function of poetic inquiry (Colby & Bodily, 2018; Dobson, 2010; Maarhuis & Sameshima, 2016), specific poems about the current pandemic are used to illustrate how the dynamic interplay between the fictive and real within poetry can provide consolation and allow us to shape more authentic ways of being. Poetry offers a means of accessing other realms of experience, that are as equally real and undifferentiated as any other reality that we can use words to describe or conjure (Leggo, 2010), even in a modern world that has itself become uncanny, barely recognizable, perhaps itself a fictionalized mirror for our own anemic modern souls. When faced with the discomfiting reality of a world suddenly and irrevocably closed off to us, what can we learn by attending to lives reimagined through the mediating power of poetic truth?

## **Methodology: The Lyrical and Analytical Faces of Poetic Inquiry**

Poetic inquiry is a creative research method which uses poetry and critical reflection to explore personal and social themes (Faulkner, 2018; Prendergast, 2009).

Poems become both a means of expression and a source of research “data” (Dobson, 2010). As Sean Wiebe (2015) has said, “Common to poetic inquirers is a sensitivity to the ways traditional qualitative analysis can systematize and simplify, oftentimes generating theories and practices that are out of kilter with our intuitive experiences of being in the world” (p. 152). As a qualitative method, poetic inquiry focuses on the rich, lived experiences of the researcher and how individuals make sense of, and learn from, poetic experience (Wiebe & Snowber, 2011). This research methodology combines the intimacy and authenticity of the poetic form that may also have narrative as well as lyrical elements. Poetic inquirers aim to undertake research that is expressive, meaningful, and that provides insight into the complex intersections of language, experience, and identity (Faulkner, 2018; Leggo, 2010).

As some scholars have noted, often poetry is used as a research method without classifying it as poetic inquiry and it may even be written in the mode of a critical personal narrative where poems are used to provide insight into the author’s own experiences (Prendergast, 2009; Wiebe, 2015). Despite this, much of poetic inquiry relies on the interpretative act as a creative process that begins and ends in the relationship between self and text. This tension between instrumentality and world-making is one that is evident in a research process that is meant to coalesce textual meanings but often within the context of the writer’s own life (Dobson, 2010; Wiebe & Snowber, 2011). Although the researcher chooses to tell one story or to provide one interpretation from the many different horizons of possibility created by the poetic text, few of us would maintain that this is the only possible story or the one “true” version of events. In this sense, poetic inquiry, as a synthesis of narrative, poetic, and critical discourse, relies on a sophisticated balance between the metaphorical and experimental nature of language and the more limited, but, nonetheless open-ended, horizons afforded by interpretation (Burford, 2018). As such, then, the research genre allows for a particular kind of world-making where “creative” or fictional world creation blends with the scholarly academic genre of critique that analyzes the world projected by a specific text (Maarhuis & Sameshima, 2016; Quinn-Hall, 2016).

However, it is also important to note that neither theory nor research can fully contain poetry. As Leggo (2008) notes, “Poetry prevails against hermeneutic exhaustion, hermeneutic consumption, hermeneutic closure, hermeneutic certainty...A poem is a textual event, an ‘act of literature,’ an experience of spelling and spells” (p. 167). Poetic inquiry is more than either a collection of poems, or a textual analysis, since the method involves a dialectical interplay between both of these elements, as a means of developing a novel realization, or even, a new way of noticing the world. The intention to communicate an insight is never fully determinative, both because of the polysemantic nature of language, including academic analysis, and the metaphorical playful nature of poetry itself. This symbolic surplus does not represent a failure of

method, but rather it serves as a source of creative insight that will help to expand the future interpretative horizons of both author and reader alike (Colby & Bodily, 2018). In describing my method, consequently, I feel it is important to point out my belief that it is somewhat disingenuous—and perhaps even a little dangerous—to pretend that method isn't slippery, or that it can fully control everything that develops from the creative process. We lose something, I maintain, by doing that to our most earnest conversations about poems.

Due to the importance of artistic expression and context, some scholars have urged us to take a teleological approach to the method, one that puts voice, poetry, and the poetic at the center of the process, rather than having the research method jar or otherwise do violence to the text by stretching its raw feeling, its guiding aesthetic, and the author's central insights beyond all recognition (Wiebe, 2015). At the same time, poetic inquirers also want to let the poem stand on its own without trying to fully close off its possible meanings, since as Prendergast (2009) points out, the importance of trying to "articulate a methodology for poetic inquiry is to position it as an artistic practice carried out within a research framework that cannot and must not diminish the critical/aesthetic qualities of these kinds of poems as poetry" (p. 549). In other words, poetry and the beauty of poetic expression are integral to the method and its capacity to resonate with the reader (Leggo, 2005; 2010). My own methodological stance is one informed by this belief and it represents an insistence in avoiding the temptation to use method to impose a kind of false closure on the questions that arise from act of writing and reading poems. Like Leggo (2005), I believe that beautiful and surprising things can emerge from the messiness and the untamed energy of the creative act, and for this reason I have attempted to let the poems have their way, no matter how uncomfortable or perplexed this may have made me feel. In the spirit of the poet-scholars who have been fundamental in shaping the development of poetic inquiry to date, I invite the reader to do the same. Deference to poetry can, and should be, an integral part of the process of poetic inquiry.

### **"Findings": Poems for Pandemics**

Understandably many poets are reluctant to assign a fixed meaning to poems. What is the meaning of a life? Of a place? Or a single lived moment? It is true that as humans we are hard wired to give events and symbols meaning. It is also true that these meanings are always multiple, always in flux (Wiebe & Snowber, 2011). However, if we see a poem as an event that the poet has lived through then it should embody those experiential truths and will hopefully resonate with the reader's own experiences (Leggo, 2005; 2010). In this sense, poems can help us to be startled out of our everyday existence in a manner akin to the speaker in Seamus Heaney's "Postscript,"

who is driving through County Clare in the fall and suddenly has a rush of poetic insight. Suddenly, Heaney writes, there is a moment where, “You are neither here nor there, A hurry through which known and strange things pass/As big soft buffetings come at the car sideways/And catch the heart off guard and blow it open” (1996, p. 82). This type of opening up of the subject to new experiences is one of the central purposes and strengths of poetry.

In similar fashion, the poems that follow grew out of my reflections on the intersection between the imaginary and the real within poetic experience. I thought the theme of fiction posed some unique challenges and difficulties within the poetic context, and this tension brought me to explore just how my poems intersected with my own life. Could a poem be at once “true” and imaginary? In what sense? The quarantine brought an additional element to this investigation, both because it was something that had an immediate impact on our lives, and because it did not seem fully tangible or visible. In some ways the pandemic was really a force of nature that jarred our modern ways of living into a new, unfamiliar mode. In many respects, I began to realize that there was a natural dimension to the pandemic but also an uncanny aspect since it mirrored our culture’s disconnect with nature, as well as the steady fragmentation of social experience.

Although we are often careful to recount the technical aspects of method that lie at the heart of poetic inquiry, these tell us little about how the writer crafts the poems themselves. I chose a topic that was at the center of my life and tried to open myself up to experiencing the poetic moment. To make sense of it all, I read poems, but I also did something that I do not often do, even as an avid poetry reader: I listened to poems read aloud by poets, and I even watched them read their work through the miracle of modern technology. I heard the poems of Anne Sexton, Phillip Levine, Seamus Heaney, and Maya Angelou, the sound of their voices becoming a part of the fabric of their poetry, like musicians or dancers skillfully braiding body, voice, and aesthetic together in rhythm. Hearing the poets’ voices was a powerful reminder that they had lived on the other side of the printed page, the other side of winter, perhaps, even though at the time I wrote these poems, it was not yet fully spring. In the space of these ruminations three poems took shape, within the space of approximately four weeks. I wrote my reflections immediately after writing each poem in order to try and capture the elusive thread that connected the poem to my life and to compare the mind-space of the speaker with my own. After I had completed these reflections, I began the process of looking for experiences, feelings, and ideas that were consistent across the poems. Always mindful of the importance of attending to the poetic moment, I recognized that the poems embodied the following themes: i) poetry as a vehicle of metaphoric and/or symbolic truth; ii) poetry as a creation-space for other possible worlds; and, iii) poetry’s capacity to reveal and convey psychological truths through symbolic language.

## The Strange Animal of Metaphor: Poetry and the Symbolic Language of Truth

Poems teach us truths through the symbolic language of metaphor (Wiebe & Snowber, 2011). But who or what belongs to the world of the poem? Perhaps poet Kim Dower (2013) put it best when she asked, “Did Robert Frost really stop by the woods on a snowy evening? Did Billy Collins actively visit his parents’ graves to ask them what they thought of his new glasses? Who started the rumor that poems are autobiographical?” (para. 1). Dower rightly notes the distance between the poet and “speaker” in any poem and the desire of poets to create poems that evoke intense emotional responses from their speakers, or in her words, “[W]e want you to see your lives in our poems” (para. 7). Poetry can have both lyrical and narrative elements, but, more importantly it is a product of an experimental rather than an instrumental use of language and as such it has the ability to project worlds and to expand our language.

I wrote “Lessons in Winter” one afternoon just as I had started to edit a book chapter that was due the following day. I had just come downstairs to my basement study while my children were outside playing and suddenly I was struck by this strange thought that the whole world was hibernating through the global pandemic that raged all around us. This idea of a big, dark, slumbering bear somehow caught hold of me, so I sat down and started to transcribe a series of images, trying as I did to find sounds that matched the idea of a winter slumber in a way that evoked a strong undercurrent of menace and power. Only later did I discover that bears can actually give birth while hibernating, a fact that reminded me that there is a fascinating, compelling, non-human world around us full of hidden or untold stories—an idea that filled me with a kind of awe and reverence, at the dignity, power, and irrevocable momentum of the natural world.

### ***Lessons in Winter***

*The world sleeps like a  
bear. Deep below  
the mangled hub  
of frozen fields and trees;*

*Deep beneath  
the sound of  
schoolchildren laughing, of  
crowded bars, and noisy streets,*

*where no songbirds sing;  
Old rivers that  
run cold and sweet  
like an icy knife  
through the forest's black heart.*

*No one hears how  
the low rumble of her  
breathing, thrums.  
Nature. Winter.  
The festering sore.  
There is no longer any  
center.*

*The stars,  
under the chalky moon's  
frost-ringed belly:  
a low hanging  
bough pulled low by  
iridescent berries.*

*What bear could  
ever dream  
of winter?*

*Strange harvest  
for she who now remembers  
green fields, she sauntered  
across, like a black lion once,  
even then heavy; And now  
her new children born,  
only these remain:  
The blankness,  
the harsh  
resurrection of time, marred by  
the deep pang of  
unending winter.*

I really have no definite interpretation of the end of the poem. In a way it reminds me of the late Carl Leggo's (2008) notion of "astonishing silence" (p. 166) that he writes of when he describes his poetic vocation. Envisioning oneself as another (Ricoeur,



1992) can be transformative, but it can also fill us with dread. Much as the speaker is not sure if the bear and her cubs will emerge safely after winter, we are not always sure how we will emerge when we are confronted with poetry's deep and difficult truths. Like the bear, we too must live in a world bound by the rhythms of time as we are continually propelled into an uncertain future replete with suffering. True alterity is terrifying to a "wounded" or "shattered" *cogito* (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 11) that is, if nothing else, aware of the potential for it to be completely dismantled by any encounter that might precipitate radical change. The "feel" of the poem and my experience of this aesthetic moment was very real and moreover one that offered both catharsis and consolation. The poem is meant to reflect my melancholy and my ambivalence surrounding the current pandemic, especially the deflating feeling that the only way through this might be to go through the proverbial motions in a way that at times verges on the unconscious.

The realization that so much was happening underneath everyday reality was an idea that made me recognize how poems could gesture at stories that were often unknown, perhaps even, to an extent unknowable. But could the unknowable have meaning? As Leggo (1991) once said, "There are many ways to know the world, and the world can only be known in many ways, and, even then, only ever known a little" (p. 114). Perhaps this is what an encounter with the collective unconscious (Jung, 1968) or a non-human consciousness can bring: a deep far-reaching change in ourselves without the comforting assurances offered by possession or mastery. This type of aporia is perhaps why the poem unsettles me. We do not know if everything will be right, nor are we at the center of this story: in fact, in many ways we are peripheral to it. Nature is worthy of reverence and has its own meaning independent of our human frames of existence, even though it is also a world that is often obscured by "the culture/nature binary prevalent in post-Enlightenment thinking" (Smartt Guillion, 2014, p. 418).

What will the world look like after the pandemic is over? Does something even more dark and powerful await us on the other side of winter? This contrast between the vibrant life of the world and its potential menace is one that is meant to underpin the tension that lies at the heart of the poem. The truth is we don't know, can never know, and to suggest otherwise is mere illusion. But our power resides in our ability to survive and to take solace in symbols and words that capture our imagination and our feelings through art, creating in the process perhaps other versions of our selves waiting to be resurrected or awakened from slumber. In this sense, this poem articulated the truth of my own predicament in the midst of the pandemic, and what I saw as the troubling state of the world.

## **More than a Footnote: Poetry Allows us to see Other Possible Worlds**

Sometimes poetry is just pointing, gesturing towards something that we struggle to apprehend but that we feel deep down through the very soles of our feet (Leggo, 2005). Although poetry can be beautiful, sometimes it is simply the meeting space for some unexpected jarring juxtaposition, since everyday life is like that, an incongruous mixture of the prosaic and the sublime, and most days, if we are honest, the former. Fantasy in this sense can only take us so far; we have to work poetry into the palms of our hands, like an old scar or a callus that comes from the hard labor of the poetic craft. We have to sit with it—the longing and frustrating of writing poetry—the tensions and contradictions of poetic experience, and to keep faith despite the insistence of puritanical rationalists that everything wild must be tamed or at the very least pared back. Where method would have us treat people and their experiences like elementary particles or integers, it should prompt us to remind ourselves of the irreducible complexity that lends so much richness to the poetic act. This is where many poets, myself included, often break faith since it is hard to find the beauty and the dignity in everyday existence. A courageous few do not, like Phillip Levine (1994), who in his poem “The Simple Truth” writes:

Can you taste  
 what I'm saying? It is onions or potatoes, a pinch  
 of simple salt, the wealth of melting butter, it is obvious,  
 it stays in the back of your throat like a truth  
 you never uttered because the time was always wrong,  
 it stays there for the rest of your life, unspoken,  
 made of that dirt we call earth, the metal we call salt,  
 in a form we have no words for, and you live on it. (p. 60)

In the pandemic's early days, I often felt like the intricate web of living circuitry that connected me to the outside world had been broken, meaning that my writing too seemed to belong more to the world of fantasy and further and further away from the beating pulse of things. Reviewing copyedits and fixing references seems strangely out of place at this time. But paradoxically writing also offered a way back, a way of working through this tectonic fracture in the familiar consensus “reality” that now seemed to irrevocably belong to the past.

I wrote “Footnotes” to try and come to terms with my feelings about the pandemic, since I was also aware that in many ways I was struggling emotionally to process just how much our world had changed. So, as the poem's author, I am reminded of how so much of poetic experience involves the imaginary and possible, but not yet actual. I really did watch and read about past plagues and was amazed by how terrible and destructive those events in human history had been. This was why I decided to call my poem “Footnotes”: it was an allusion to the fact that our individual

lives are such a minor part of the grand scale and sweep of world history, but also to the fact that they are all we have—so, in a sense, they are at once nothing and everything. After the pandemic came and everything closed, our family left very few footprints outside even though the deep snow was around us everywhere, perhaps giving rise to the image of the snow globe and the tiny plastic people trapped inside; small, but also at the center of things. Watching forces far larger than themselves, but still having a context, within which they are at once observers and the observed. In this way, I tried to bring out a sense that human life despite its precariousness is also something magical and achingly beautiful. Hope always seems to find a way to entice us into believing that the mind, the soul, the spirit, the imagination, whatever you want to call it, can pass between the boundaries of the snow globe and this world, maybe even into the world of poems and dreams.

### **Footnotes**

*This is really nothing.  
I say to myself  
over and over, like a  
mad bird in a brass cage.*

*I even try to take comfort in the  
arcane footnotes to  
our sad existence:  
seven thousand people a week  
died in 17<sup>th</sup> Century London,  
even an Emperor in Antonine Rome;  
Galen ran for the hills.  
made excuses,  
said a god had told  
him to stay home.*

*Some drunken Atlas  
has taken  
our world,  
like a cheap snow globe and  
turned it upside down. We can only see  
as far as the thin plastic dome  
the plastic bits floats eerily  
down in a paean to fluid physics. Maybe like  
Pepys I will bury some books and cheese in  
the backyard,*

*grin and take a selfie,  
when the children aren't around;*

*Tanned college kids at wild beach  
parties, pantomiming  
Parisian plague balls, people  
falling down to die on the street,  
straight without inflexion, such composure; I imagine  
myself curled up into a fetal position  
feverishly ranting about  
cosmic injustice.*

*But, rant all you want,  
no matter who is around the table,  
when you're all in you are all in,  
and then the last card is down  
and you're done.*

*Is there a poem that  
can survive beneath the thin  
white sheet?  
Or will it rise just to  
bounce with a thud  
against some impenetrable  
cosmic dome?*

*On cue,  
the plastic villagers  
come out from their  
little houses  
turning their backs  
on the blood-red crosses  
painted neatly  
across their front doors. "There is nothing to worry  
about sweetie". I parrot those words, to my  
eight-year-old daughter.*

*And in our dreams,  
through the long night,  
a white  
whirlwind comes.*

A poet is a person who is in the business of saying that one thing is another thing, and hopefully the associations that she makes will be unusual, unexpected, or might resonate with the audience in some way. Like Wiebe (2015), “I wonder how a fierce, tender, and mischievous engagement with the worldliness of our lives might allow us to reshape it and make something new—we might call this learning—we might call it poetry” (p. 153). I am trying here to be mischievous by turning the footnote on its head, to put the peripheral at the center and the center at the periphery though the talismanic object of the snow globe that becomes a metaphor for the speaker’s life. But the uncertainty of this strange narrative turn does not cancel out the speaker’s fierce love or his tenderness towards his daughter; these remain despite the ominous whirlwind that threatens to cancel out, or cover over their precarious existence. The poem, I hoped, was a kind of agnostic prayer to the unseen saving graces that are always with us, deep in our hearts, despite the terror brought by the wind that carries the blinding snow.

As Quinn Hall (2016) puts it, “Language can imprison us with a ‘truth,’ deliver us to one ‘true’ story we tell and tell again to the demise and horror of the ones who don’t know the story or don’t care about the story or don’t agree with the story” (p. 119). Perhaps this is the fate of the villagers trapped inside my metaphorical snow globe, or perhaps it is our own fate, when we remain too self-assured and smug within our modern world-view. The poetic form provides a means of accessing something on the other side of our experience, not a way of sealing over experience. We have to be careful not to get trapped inside that snow globe, like our little plastic lifeless observers, and poems can remind us of the dangers of doing just that. Since poetry is so open-textured, a poem is a space where one thing can always become another thing, where, through the power of image and metaphor, we can make new experiences, that can seem as vivid and tangible as our experiences within the everyday world (Faulkner, 2018).

## **Infection by Degrees: Poetry’s Capacity to Reveal and Convey Psychological Truth**

Poems can be true in the sense that they embody profound psychological realities (Dobson, 2010; Leggo, 2010). Camus (1991) knew all too well the meaninglessness of disease and death even as he gave his fictional plague artistic form and meaning. A physical plague does its work in secret. It is indifferent. It never sleeps. It is a kind of hidden force that moves throughout the world and tries to rob us of life, of meaning, of hope. It is both a mechanism and a metaphor for death. But pandemics also remind us that the state of being free of infection is almost a kind of enviable purity. You either have the plague or you don’t—there is no in-between. Anne Sexton (1999)

writes of love and death as “an infection” and this metaphor spoke to me as a powerful symbol for not only the world’s current crisis, but also my own persistent depression. How do we derive meaning from human suffering? The pandemic forces us to ask ourselves what art can do with the stark threat of death and disease that in the modern first world we seem to have forgotten exists. Will we turn towards darkness, towards fear violence and repression, or will we recover and find a world that is more open and caring?

*Partus* is a Latin word, that means birth, offspring, or delivery (Morwood, 2005). What follows is a poem is about my lifelong struggle with depression, another form of sickness, one that, like the current pandemic, is often invisible in many respects. The title of the poem is meant to reference the powerful feelings are something that the sufferer must give birth to over and over again. The intensity of these feelings are often very difficult for others to understand and in some respects they are not “real” for those around the person who is suffering. I wanted my poem to express the feeling of being torn between two different worlds: one of life and hope and another of darkness and suffering, even as poetic language created a third world, where most of the time I lived, a world lit by the refractive interplay of these two powerful competing magnetic nodes.

### ***Partus***

*It is always a matter of degrees.  
There is the kind of sick  
where people want to give you a hug  
and lend you a copy of Oprah’s latest Book Club pick, maybe  
tell you something witty Dr. Phil said.*

*Then there is the kind of sick  
that is like a red cross on your door  
a covered pockmark on your breast,  
the kind where you don’t recognize yourself  
where you yourself become a type of fiction, a stranger  
to your body – an old golem or sad familiar,  
living in the strange land of  
The rabid. The diseased. And the dead.*

*Exiled. Forsaken. The black flowers—  
raw and clinging,  
that sprout up from  
the ragged foothills of your bed.  
Your mouth betrays you.*

*Your body betrays you. Where are the  
hidden hands and strings?*

*There is no lion to tame,  
no perched falcon to alight;  
No cursed shadow  
to run from the light;  
Is this real or  
something someone  
imagined long ago? A hazy vision of  
some abandoned quiet place,  
where all alone,  
I pine for you;  
a dark fence  
that cordons  
off my heart.*

*Everything is under water; shadows  
rolling in the distance:  
I can hear the children dancing,  
like mad fairies;  
the sullen waves hold  
a sad séance; here where so many  
frozen smiles  
conjure me,  
a distant echo,  
as the cold tide turns,  
and something in the  
fathomless deep,  
holds out, in hallowed grief,  
its loving  
endless arms.*

The poem is meant to evoke the theme of a dark muse, with a great deal of power, a kind of dark energy that is barely containable. The poem is an attempt to explain the dynamics of depression as they relate to the artistic process. Although the poem attempts to evoke the ambivalence and uncertainty that is connected with the moment of artistic passion, the fact that the speaker is still listening and creating is a testament that the mad dance can go on. In contrast to the glib platitudes referenced in the opening stanzas, this is as real and authentic as it gets for the speaker. He is

continually going through the process of dying and surfacing into the world of mixed shadows and light, a world where nothing is entirely real or unreal.

The speaker in the poem does not say if his sickness is contagious, but, nonetheless, he remains distant in his suffering. In this sense, there is a parallel drawn between the poetic muse, suffering, and physical illness or infection. These connections are not surprising perhaps because a pandemic has many mythic and archetypical resonances. Plague, contamination, poisoning, these are all tropes deeply engrained in our consciousness, and which therefore work on us in a way that can never be completely understood through rational analysis—it requires that we take recourse to symbolic language. Poetic inquiry, or as Leggo (1991) described it, “poetic rumination” (p. 116), offers us a particularly powerful tool to understand the uncanny, often surreal experience that is visited upon us through the symbolic disruption of the pandemic narrative that has profound implications for both the world and for ourselves.

### **A Return to Poetic Innocence? Stealing the Secrets of Sleeping Bears, Enchanted Snow Globes, and Mad Fairies**

Truth in a poem consists in the whole of a life, a life lived in intersection with other lives, stories, cultures, and a shared language that lets us make sense of texts and events through acts of interpretation (Faulkner, 2018; Leggo, 2010). Symbols and metaphors are not secondary to our understanding of the world, but they are fundamental to the process of world-making that underlies all attempts at artistic interpretation. In our modern world we place little stock in the literal meaning of myths and the great stories and poems of the past, meaning that we have lost touch with the full power of their symbolic meaning. At this point it is often the case that the reader will dismiss myth and symbolism as primitive and irrational. However, Ricoeur (1967) says, this is a great mistake. He argues that it is possible to experience a “second naiveté” informed by a critical understanding of the text, its authors, and the world behind the text as a means of breaking open new meanings and new truths that we can experience as immediate, vital, and powerful (p. 351). This second naiveté allows us to combine critical awareness with the symbolic power of the myth, an aspect of which can only be understood in terms of other symbols and worldviews. This interpretative process involves cracking open the myths in order to let symbolic meaning and language operate on a new imaginative level that will eventually lead to new meanings that are more germane to the reader’s world (Ricoeur, 1967).

Poetry, because it operates through metaphor and symbolic language, cannot be fully reduced to rational analysis (Colby & Bodily, 2018). Not only does poetry draw on



mythic language and symbols, but it is also a vehicle by which these myths and symbols can be reinvigorated through modern eyes. Poems, like myths, are symbolic texts, and as such it is important to bear in mind the tension that they evoke between analytical and imaginary discursive modes. It is entirely possible to read poems solely for their emotive response, which is fine, but it is also entirely possible that by doing so we miss other meanings, just as we can likewise simply skip over the text on our way to a predetermined interpretative end. Experiencing the text in the aesthetic moment means that we do not impose our critical presuppositions on it. We want to both trouble and be troubled (or astonished) by the text, we want the text to remain open to us as a text that can change both ourselves and the world (Colby & Bodily, 2018). Poems then, can be true in the sense that poetry helps us to understand the way in which we as humans are continually striving to interpret events and texts to create and find meaning, and in doing so we remake the world and ourselves (Dobson, 2010; Faulkner, 2018). Poetic truth is a process, an invention, an invitation, an event, and a message encoded and recollected in the language of symbols, myths, and narratives, that together comprise the intricate fabric of selves-in-the-world.

### **The Problem is the Answer: Poetic Re-Imaginations of Identity**

We rarely sit long enough with a question or believe in the power of questions to sustain us over the course of a lifetime (Leggo, 2005). How is one thing more real than another? Although we make these types of judgements every day, upon closer examination it is an immensely profound question. Poetry is never something outside of experience, but it is always lived as an experience by writer and reader alike. There is no neutral observing point from which we can stand and examine whether our poem corresponds to some external truth since both text and subject are comprised of language and both the act of writing and the act of interpretation are exercises in world making that implicate, define, and redefine the self. Although texts never fully reflect the communicative intent of the author, they do reflect the culture and historical era in which they are produced, just as the act of reading requires an interpretative integration of the cultural and historical horizon of the world of the reader with the world of the text (Gadamer, 2006). So too, I recognize the flaws in my poems are also a part of the poetry of you and me—we recognize our imperfections and welcome them instead of abandoning those acts, like writing and reading poetry, that make being alive a thing of solace and beauty. We fashion our poems as we fashion ourselves, imperfectly, but, we hope, authentically, out of the thrumming heart of the lived moment.

My poem can be true then, if it resonates with me and with the reader, and if it allows me to notice the world and myself in a different way, hopefully one that is more life affirming, meaningful—and yes—beautiful. This also entails a degree of sincerity on

the part of the author and the reader, even when the author is being playful and means to problematize or experiment with language. And finally, a poem is true when it echoes some aspect of our shared experiences, even if those overlapping world-horizons are simply a point of departure for new ways of imagining the world. Poetry, in this sense, takes form at the boundary between self and other, formed from human experience that arises from an embodied will that acts upon the world and is acted upon by others (Ricoeur, 1991; 1992). As a practice of meaning-making it is concerned not with faithfulness of representation but with playing with the unending movement of the self in the world from the actual towards the possible.

Writing from the midst of the current crisis of representation, it is important to remember that the relationship between the poet's authorial voice and the speaker is by no means clear. However, by writing poetry and about the process of writing, drawing on the thoughts of others on these themes, poetic inquirers hope to create new forms of diffraction, new ways of seeing and being. By examining the worlds in front of, behind, and within the text, we dare to create works that are problematic (Colby & Bodily, 2018). In the words of Prendergast (2009), "creating poetic inquiry is a performative act, revealing researcher/participants as both masked and unmasked, costumed and bared, liars and truth-tellers, actors and audience, offstage and onstage in the creation of research" (p. 547). In the current state of crisis, poetry, with its strange mix of fiction, reality, image, metaphor, emotion, and the imaginary can allow us to access our individual and collective psyches in ways that allow us to venture far beyond our solitary cloistered existence. In the midst of isolation, we enter the rich depths of the self, and in doing so we echo those old myths of symbolic sacrifice, death—and, too, we must remember—things being reborn.

## REFERENCES

---

- Burford, J. (2018). Sketching possibilities: Poetry and politically-engaged academic practice. *Art/Research International: A Transdisciplinary Journal*, 3(1), 229–246. <https://doi.org/10.18432/ari29261>
- Camus, A. (1991). *The plague*. Vintage Books.
- Colby, S.R., Bodily, B.H. (2018). Poetic possibilities: Exploring texts with Ricoeur's hermeneutics. *International Review of Qualitative Research*, 11(2), 162-177. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1525/irqr.2018.11.2.162>
- Dobson, M.L. (2010). The poetics of self-study: Getting to the heart of the matter. *LEARNING Landscapes*, 4(1), 131-142. <https://doi.org/10.36510/learnland.v4i1.367>
- Dower, K. (2013). Poetry as fiction. *Publishers Weekly*, 260(36). <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/columns-and-blogs/soapbox/article/59014-poetry-as-fiction.html>
- Faulkner, S. (2018). Poetic inquiry: Poetry as/in/for social research. In P. Leavy (Ed.). *Handbook of arts-based research* (pp. 208-230). The Guilford Press.
- Gadamer, H.G. (2006). *Truth and method* (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition), J. Weinsheimer and D.G. Marshall, Trans.). Continuum.
- Heaney, S. (1996). *The spirit level*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Jung, C. (1968). *Man and his symbols*. Dell Publishing.
- Leggo, C. (1991). Research as poetic rumination: Twenty-six ways of listening to light. *The Journal of Educational Thought*, 33(2), 113-133. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23767362>
- Leggo, C. (2005). Pedagogy of the heart: Ruminations on living poetically. *Journal of Educational Thought*, 39(2), 175-195. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23767223>
- Leggo, C. (2008). Astonishing silence: Knowing in poetry. In J.G. Knowles & A.L. Cole (Eds), *Handbook of the arts in qualitative research* (pp. 165-174). Sage.

- Leggo, C. (2010). Lifewriting: A poet's cautionary tale. *LEARNing Landscapes*, 4(1), 67-84. <https://doi.org/10.36510/learnland.v4i1.363>
- Levine, P. (1994). *The simple truth*. Knopf Doubleday.
- Maarhuis, P., & Sameshima, P. (2016). Materializing the punctum. In K. Galvin & M. Prendergast (Eds.). *Poetic inquiry II: Seeing, caring, understanding: Using poetry as and for inquiry* (pp. 279-302). Brill.
- Morwood, J. (2005). *Pocket Oxford Latin dictionary*. Oxford University Press.
- Prendergast, M. (2009). "Poem Is What?" Poetic inquiry in qualitative social science research. *International Review of Qualitative Research*, 1(4), 541-568. <https://doi.org/10.1525/irqr.2009.1.4.541>
- Quinn-Hall, C. (2016). Poetics in a capacious landscape (pp. 107-133). In K. Galvin & M. Prendergast (Eds.). *Poetic inquiry II: Seeing, caring, understanding: Using poetry as and for inquiry* (pp. 107-133). Brill.
- Ricoeur, P. (1991). Poetry and possibility. In M.J. Valdés (Ed.), *A Ricoeur reader: Reflection and the imagination* (pp. 448-462). University of Toronto Press.
- Ricoeur, P. (1992). *Oneself as another* (K. Blamey, Trans.). The University of Chicago Press. (Original Work published 1990).
- Ricoeur, P. (1967). *The symbolism of evil* (E. Buchanan, Trans.). Beacon Press. (Original work published 1967).
- Sexton, A. (1999). Wanting to Die. *The Complete Poems* (pp. 142-143). Houghton Mifflin.
- Smartt Gullion, J. (2019). Pathology: A diffractive encounter of machine/body. *Art/Research International: A Transdisciplinary Journal*, 4(1), 312-321. <https://doi.org/10.18432/ari29404>
- Smartt Guillon, J. (2014). This toxic material: A poetic (re)presentation of cancer/ environment assemblages, *International Review of Qualitative Research*, 7(4), 401-420. <https://doi.org/10.1525/irqr.2014.7.4.401>

- Watson, A. (2020). Methods braiding: A technique for arts-based and mixed-methods research. *Sociological Research Online*, 25(1), 66-83. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1360780419849437>
- Wiebe, S. (2015). Poetic inquiry: A fierce, tender, and mischievous relationship with lived experience. *Language and Literacy*, 17(3), 152-163. <https://doi.org/10.20360/G2VP4N>
- Wiebe, S., & Snowber, C. (2011). The visceral imagination: A fertile space for non-textual knowing. *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, 27(2), 101-113. <https://journal.jctonline.org/index.php/jct/article/view/352>