

Turning Wine into Water

by Rod Jellema

In the study of poems in the schools, this is what's often done. We turn slightly mysterious wine into kitchen tap water. More exactly, because poems are highly distilled, it's the finest Courvoisier cognac, intensified beyond wine, that gets diluted and watered down until it's only water. You know the drill: tell the teacher, in "normal, ordinary" language, what this poem "really says." The students are graded on the quality of their prose, not on their receptivity to artful language. Enjoyment has long since gone out the window.

A high school student from the neighborhood once asked me for some help with the assigned homework for "the poetry unit." The students were asked to select for each day one poem, any poem, from the textbook. They were to write out answers to the same two questions for each poem. The same two questions! *What is the obvious meaning of this poem? What is the hidden meaning of this poem?* Lisa did not know how to proceed. Unlike her teacher, she did not think that poems should have "hidden meanings." Why were poets praised for hiding them? she wondered. Why were students asked to defeat the poets' intentions by finding them?

I cannot quite imagine the innocuous unrealities that these kids were forced to write. Did they have to read them to each other in class? I like to think that some of them like Lisa secretly stole sips of flavors, not quite cognac but wines that range from breeze-light to robust, while cheating on their homework. *Hey, what a cool line!* And I hope they got away with gazing out the window, remembering some tastes.

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Here's another way the wine of poetry gets turned into water, water everywhere. It's the comforting idea that any poem can "mean" whatever it means to me, you, or me. A colleague of mine, a very young instructor at the time, showing off his stuff a little to his freshman English class, took them quickly through a famous little poem by William Carlos Williams:

This is Just to Say

I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the ice box

and which
you were probably
saving
for breakfast

Forgive me
They were delicious
so sweet
and so cold

Here's a short version of what he explained as his students faithfully took notes.

This is a poem, he said, constructed to reveal a tragically unhappy marriage. Williams has to sneak out of the house before breakfast without waking his wife. They are not speaking to each other, so he has to communicate by leaving a note on the icebox. Notice that. And ask this: What kind of a husband has to apologize for eating the plums? Is he actually afraid of her? What's the hurry, wolfing down so slight a breakfast? But mainly it's the little clipped lines that show practiced poetry readers a kind of frozen tightness of speech—it's this that truly reveals the psychological tension in a hopeless marriage.

This is an example of how not to read a poem. The method may serve for reading pop detective fiction, but not poetry. Swampy message-hunting becomes clue-hunting. My students used to allow me one funny little marginal word for their moments of really phony writing: cowplop. We would laugh a little in recognition and move on. This is cowplop.

I shouldn't have to point out how a few biographical facts destroy this little exposition—that Williams, for example, a physician whose office was in the home, used to hurry off to his hospital rounds before coming back for breakfast with his beloved Flossie. But never mind about searching for such details. The poem's the thing. Just read the poem as a poem, as formed language. What makes it work differently from a prose message?

Sound it out as you read it slowly. The line breaks, all of them open and not end-stopped, create the effect of a light, delicate, almost tenuous flow. And yet they suggest the slightest shy hesitation. The poem has Williams' kind of stripped down cleanness, "no ideas but in things," letting the simple words *say*, *plums*, *icebox*, *sweet*, and *cold* do all the work. And *forgive me* is what makes it, so sweetly and intimately, a love poem to Flossie. In a crystal wineglass of crisp chardonnay.

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There's another way to denature rich wine of its complexities, undoing its smack as well as its whispers. Instead of watering it down, you can take it apart, divide it into its components. You can do the same with poetry.

Call it analytic chemistry. You can take your bottle of *Cote d'Rhone* into the lab and lay out the DNA of its grapes, the temperature and soils and year in which it was grown, its percentages of acid and fusel oil, its score on a spectrograph. With poems, you can identify a whole nomenclature of stanza forms, rhyme patterns, metrical feet, and so forth. It all feels to me too much like analyzing a watch. You can lay out the tiny gear wheels, springs, sprockets and balances, and line them up with Rolex or Timex, but now they can't tell you the time.

There are good poets who do this, and with real dedication. Poet Mark Strand, who out there in Utah taught poetry but not workshops, told Grace Cavalieri in an interview,

I don't allow my students to write their own poems. . . . They take criticism hard. I have them spend a whole quarter writing quatrains of different sorts so we have something discrete we can talk about [namely]. . . *metrical solutions and how rhyme schemes work*.

It is I who have supplied the italicized emphasis. Somewhat dazzled. Study metrical solutions for poetry but don't try writing poems? The simile—reading poems is like tasting fine wines—is seriously wounded by this third approach to the teaching of poetry. So let's be done with it. Go back. Go back to sipping.