In Good Morning, America, Carl Sandburg offers 38 definitions of poetry. Here are some of them:

Poetry is an art practiced with the terribly plastic material of human language.

Poetry is the journal of a sea animal living on land, wanting to fly the air.

Poetry is a fossil rock-print of a fin and a wing, with an illegible oath between.

Poetry is a search for syllables to shoot at the barriers of the unknown and the unknowable.

Poetry is a type-font design for an alphabet of fun, hate, love, death.

Poetry is a sliver of the moon lost in the belly of a golden frog.

Poetry is a mystic, sensuous mathematics of fire, smoke-stacks, waffles, pansies, people, and purple sunsets.

Poetry, what Sandburg called “the capture of a picture, a song, or a flair, in a deliberate prism of words,” comes in every language (Sandburg, 1970). It doesn’t matter, of course, whether the language is spoken or signed. Both American Sign Language (ASL) and English offer a full domain of material from which users craft poems. The crafting occurs in remarkably similar ways. A comparison of two poems—one an excerpt from the English of the 1920s, the other from the ASL of the 1990s—provides insight into this assertion. The two poems are “The Hollow Men,” by T. S. Eliot, and [UNDERSTAND] by Nathie Marbury.

As one looks at the poems, it becomes clear, even through the cloudy lens of a sign gloss, that every element necessary for poetic expression is present in both works. Eliot’s words move in stirring rhythm, exactly as do Marbury’s signs. Both poems make use of rhythm, symmetry, and repetition. Both poems make use of onomatopoeia. Both poems burst out of and reconstruct their harmony with a confounding and concluding cry of dissonance. Both poems encompass metaphor.

Here’s Eliot:

We are the hollow men
We are the stuffed men
leaning together
headpiece full of straw. Alas!

Here’s Marbury:

[ME
YOU
WALK
TALK
DISCUSS
DISAGREE
ARGUE
TALK MUST
UNDERSTAND?]
Marbury and "[UNDERSTAND]"

People familiar with ASL will immediately recognize the predominant handshape in Marbury’s poem is that of the extended forefinger (sometimes referred to as “I-handshape”). This shape begins the poem and immediately establishes its symmetry and mood. [ME] [YOU] begins the poet, pointing first directly at, then directly away from, herself.

If Marbury had wanted to underline similarity or connectedness between herself and the other individual, she could have chosen a different sign—the upside down K handshape [WE—ME AND YOU]—moving it back and forth between the poet and the person she is addressing. But that is not the intent. We are talking opposites here. Marbury sets up a situation of conflict and tension in the first line.

Then the same handshape becomes two-handed and symmetrical [WALK] and then asymmetrical [TALK, ARGUE, DISAGREE]. In fact only twice in the poem does the handshape vary. In both cases when this happens, the finger retracts into an X handshape, the first time to express the imperative [MUST] and finally at the end of the poem where it retracts and then reextends [UNDERSTAND].

Throughout the poem, Marbury establishes grammar and elaborates mood with facial expression. As each sign in the poem is constituted by variants of a single handshape, Marbury has a built-in cohesion from which she structures symmetry and establishes tension. Her medium is space and vision.

Eliot and “The Hollow Men”

Eliot, building in a language that is primarily auditory, uses alliteration and rhyme for the same purpose. Just as Marbury holds a handshape, he holds a sound. The primary sound is that of “ses”—the sound of snakes, selfishness, and sighs—repeated four times, in “stuff,” “straw,” “headpiece,” and “alas.”

Both poets build on the structural symmetry they’ve established only to confound it with a burst of dissonance. Eliot begins with consecutive lines that sound almost the same, except for diametrically opposed adjectives, “We are the hollow men/We are the stuffed men.” Here the similarity is a masquerade; the echoing syllables convey opposite meanings.

The last word—“alas”—gives the poem its meaning. We (men) may be hollow, stuffed, and unable to stand without the support of each other, but we know enough to recognize our own condition and lament it.

Seeing Onomatopoeia

Onomatopoeia traditionally means words that sound like what they mean. The clearest examples are “crash,” “boom,” and “hiss.” A word like “whisper” might be considered an example, too—it’s hard to boom out that short “i” and wispy “s.” Eliot’s concluding word, functioning almost as punctuation, might be considered an example, too. It takes only a little imagination to hear the sound of a sigh in “alas.”

It takes even less imagination to conceive onomatopoeia visually. Visual onomatopoeia is mime of course, gestures that look like what they represent. Sometimes linguists call these signs “iconic,” but it is not unusual for linguists and poets to use different terms for the same twist of language. Poets use the language to make something (poems); linguists use it to describe something (itself).

Marbury uses her face and body not only for grammar, but also to visually represent the emotions. Her face shows her feelings about her relationship to the other person. Especially in the last line [UNDERSTAND?!], her facial expression combines questioning, pain, anger, urgency, and will—and gives the poem meaning.

Metaphor

Metaphors—what Marianne Moore called “toads in the garden of poetry”—are present in both verses. For Eliot, the most obvious example is his use of the word “headpiece,” an old-fashioned compound that means wig. In the poem, it also means “head” or “mind,” brutally equating the stuff of our intelligence with false hairs, sticking right out of hollow (and stuffed) necks. Some people may argue that a grander metaphor is also at work, especially in the larger poem from which this verse is excerpted. In “The Hollow Men,” rhyme and
rhythm, broken off passages, and even vain attempts to pray represent the inevitable march of a species (our own, of course) in and through "death’s other kingdom."

Marbury’s metaphor is implicit in her extended forefinger. One of the primary meanings of this hands-hape is neither captured by the gloss nor necessarily teased into consciousness as it is signed. The meaning is of course “person,” i.e., that which does the talking, arguing, disagreeing, and understanding, that which is the you and me. So the whole poem is a reminder that communicating is a uniquely human endeavor, need, and sometimes failing.

Poetry: Explosive in Any Language

“I know it’s poetry if it makes my head explode,” Emily Dickinson is reported to have said. While the primary medium of ASL is space and sight and that of English (despite its secondary form in writing) is time and hearing, both languages have this “explosive capacity.” Both languages structure it through symmetry, repetition, rhythm. If one permits a word coined for sound to be drafted into a visual plane, both have onomato-poeia. And both exploit metaphor.

Of course poetry is something that those who advocate exclusive use of Signed English, or Morse code, or any other visual representation of a language that is foremost auditory, might find problematic in classes of deaf children. Without full access to a language, full appreciation may be impossible. Poetry, most translators agree, is almost always at least partially imprisoned in the language of its creation.

Although Marbury’s poetry has not been published, several videotapes of poetry in ASL are available. ASL Poetry: Selected Works of Clayton Valli, published by DawnSignPress, includes Valli’s work presented by children with analysis by host Lon Kuntz. Also highly recommended by Marbury are the Poetry in Motion series with poets Patrick Graybill, Clayton Valli, and Debbie Rennie, published by Sign Media, and The Treasure, by Ella Mae Lentz, distributed by DawnSignPress.

So teachers might want to begin discussions of poetry by inviting poets such as Marbury to their classrooms, or by showing videotapes of the work of Valli, Lentz, or other ASL poets. Then bring on Eliot and Sandburg.

References


