Thoughts and Theories about Poetry

The first thing to understand about poetry is that it comes to you from outside you, in books or in words, but that for it to live, something from within you must come to it and meet it and complete it. Your response with your own mind and body and memory and emotions gives a poem its ability to work its magic; if you give to it, it will give to you, and give plenty. — James Dickey

Poetry is often regarded as a mystery, and in some respects it is one. No one is quite sure where poetry comes from, no one is quite sure exactly what it is, and no one knows, really, how anyone is able to write it. — Kenneth Koch

Writing a poem is one of the ways to love the world...Surely, if I didn’t love the world, I wouldn’t bother to write. — Stephen Dobyns

The lyric poem seeks to mesmerize time. It crosses frontiers and outwits the temporal. It seeks to defy death, coming to disturb and console you. — Edward Hirsch

These songs are not meant to be understood, you understand / They are only meant to terrify & comfort. — John Berryman

Poetry is the language in which man explores his own amazement. — Christopher Fry

Dismiss whatever insults your own soul and your very flesh shall be a great poem. — Walt Whitman, 1855

Poetry is what happens when nothing else can. — Charles Bukowski

I believe with all my heart that it’s a virtue to show our appreciation for readers by writing with kindness, generosity, and humility toward them. — Ted Kooser

The aim of the poet and the poetry is finally to be of service, to ply the effort of the individual work into the larger work of the community as a whole. — Seamus Heaney

The novel is born of disillusionment; the poem, of despair. — Jose Bergamin

Poetry, by showing us that other human beings can feel exactly as we do, educates our sense of empathy and teaches us to live in a society. — Stephen Dobyns

My life began to change. I began to develop a feeling of intimacy with the world around me, an umbilical connection to other minds, other voices, other hearts. It was as if I were being given a map of the soul, an emotional history of the world. — Dorianne Laux

Art always penetrates the particular fissures in one’s psychic life. — Stephen Greenblatt

It’s served as a vessel for my joy and a tonic for my grief. — Claire Sykes

It’s all right to be a little lost when reading poems. It’s not necessary to understand everything. It’s important not to lose a sense of the unknown. Poems don’t always give themselves all at once. — Tess Gallagher

The only thing that can save the world is the reclaiming of the awareness of the world. That’s what poetry does. — Allen Ginsberg

Genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood. — T.S. Eliot, 1920

Poetry heals the wounds inflicted by reason. — Novalis

Attentiveness is the natural prayer of the soul. — Malebranche

Ink runs from the corners of my mouth / There is no happiness like mine. / I have been eating poetry. — Mark Strand
I begin to explain that sometimes poetry doesn’t strike / us solely at the cerebral level, that we respond to it in a more / intuitive way— to its music, its nuance, its cadence & sound— / or to its shape on the page, the white negative space. — Gary Blankenburg

You do not even have to leave your room. Remain sitting at your table and listen. Do not even listen, simply wait. Do not even wait, remain still and solitary. The world will freely offer itself to you unasked. It has no choice. It will roll in ecstasy at your feet. — Kafka

Our real poems are already in us / and all we can do is dig. / We can work for years and never find them / or miss them when they stare us in the face. — Jonathan Galassi

If we take the idea of a poetic language seriously, it can be defined first as a language in which the sound of the words is raised to an importance equal to that of their meaning, and also equal to the importance of grammar and syntax. In ordinary language, the sound of the words is useful almost exclusively in order to identify it and distinguish it from other words. In poetry it’s importance is much greater. Poets think how they want something to sound as much as they think of what they want to say, and in fact it’s often impossible to distinguish one form the other. — Kenneth Koch

Everything one invents is true, you may be perfectly sure of that. Poetry is as precise as geometry. — Gustave Flaubert

Poetry is language at its most distilled and most powerful. — Rita Dove

I was reading the dictionary. I thought it was a poem about everything. — Steven Wright

When it comes to atoms, language can be used only as in poetry. The poet, too, is not nearly so concerned with describing facts as with creating images. — Niels Bohr

For me, poetry is a situation - a state of being, a way of facing life and facing history. — Tahar Ben Jelloun

A poem is what the reader lives through under the guidance of the text and experiences as relevant to the text. — Louise Rosenblatt

A lot of people argue that poetry is "difficult" or that it has no real value for children's future. That's just not true. If you think poetry isn't important to your students, you are not listening to them. — Dorothea Lasky

Poetry is a container of words filled tight with wisdom. — Dana Goia, as said to Harold Schneider

That's the gift of poetry—it shapes an endless conversation about the most important things in life.—Caroline Kennedy

“I believed that I wanted to be a poet, but deep down I just wanted to be a poem” — Jaime Gil de Bieda

“Poets are like early Christians, hiding in caves and hoping you'll last, hoping you won't get crucified or worse.” — Matthew Dickman

"Poems are impractical telephones, prone to mishearing, distortion, but...a means to the truth." — Matthea Harvey

“We associate skeletons with death, but bones generate life, abundantly, prolifically. The femurs, the ribs, the sternum, and other bones we see dry and white after death, in life harbor the marrow that produces billions of new blood cells daily, a bright red river gushing forth from bone. The process is called "hematopoiesis," from the ancient Greek words for blood and for making. Poetry comes from the same word, poiesis, and it belies Plato's argument that art is only imitation. Our word for poetry is their word for all the making in the world, of chairs, of houses, of bombs, of books, of blood, of gods. Making a poem is like making a chair; a poem is as real as a chair and sometimes more useful.” — Rebecca Sonit, 72, Faraway Nearby

“...instead of poems being about experiences I am getting poems that are experiences, that contribute to my knowledge and my emotional life even while they reflect and assimilate it.” — Adrienne Rich