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Attuning ourselves to tunes

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ABSTRACT

The below is a transcript (with a small number of footnotes added) for an inaugural lecture given at the University of East Anglia on 28 November 2022. The lecture sought to answer the following questions: why read poems? Why study poetry? This talk argues that poetry constitutes language in its most condensed, but also most enlarged, form: when we read poems, we enliven ourselves to the expressive power of language as a whole, we *attune* ourselves to the language's *tunes*. Through discussions of poems from across history, the talk will explore the different ways that poems 'make sense': that is, generate senses and sensations. In particular, the talk will reflect on the sense of tunes and the tunefulness of sense. A recording of the lecture and ensuing Q&A can be found at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=flU1fuJVUqU

Thank you everyone for coming, and thanks especially to Alison: first, for that kind introduction, and also for all her support over the last five years. As lot of colleagues in this room know, Alison is stepping down as our Head of School next month – I guess the best Christmas present a Head of School can have is for someone to relieve them of that burden! Without her mentorship and encouragement, I doubt I'd be giving this inaugural today.

Now what they don't tell you about becoming professor, is that, along with the pay rise and prestige, it brings on an intellectual mid-life crisis. Because the first question they ask you is: what will you be professor *of*? In other words: what do you *profess*?

It's not necessarily surprising that the word 'professor' has its root in statements of religious faith. After all, universities began as venues for theological learning outside the monasteries. The OED's primary entry of 'professor' comprises 'Senses relating to the declaration of faith, principles, etc.', and the first usage of 'professor' in the academic sense is simply an extension of that: the profession of beliefs not as an expression of faith but of disciplinary authority. As it happens, the word 'professional' has a similar trajectory, from an upholder of a religious vow to a member of the upstanding middle classes. And, of course, you can say the same thing about 'vocation': a word which today has expanded in rather contradictory directions: 'vocational' as career-oriented study; 'vocation' as a job we do out of love rather than simply to earn money. Both profession and vocation can be traced to an initiatory speech

act: vocation as a form of 'voicing', and profession as a statement of belief. In this context, it makes sense to think of the inaugural lecture as analogous to the public taking of holy vows.

I'm an amateur lexicographer at best, so will not overdo these etymological musings. But this history of 'professing' offers a salutary reminder that underpinning one's academic authority, however reasoned and evidenced, lies an article of faith. Not just in the beliefs one holds about one's area of specialism, but a belief *in* that area of specialism: a belief that this stuff has value, that there is here a meaning greater than one's own career progression.

And today, I often wonder what the hell I'm doing, professing literary criticism. When I was choosing what to study at university, back around the turn of the millennium, the stakes didn't seem particularly high. We were living through the so-called 'end of history' that followed the end of the Cold War, a period characterized, at least in the West, by cheap consumer goods, the promise of endless economic growth, and apparent liberal-democratic consensus. At that point, climate change was not yet out of hand, and digital technologies were primarily experienced as a novel means of accessing information and pirated MP3s. And of course, student fees were not the source of anxiety that they are for students today. In such an environment, it seemed easy enough to choose one's degree topic without any considerations either of future employability or for that matter confronting the problems of the world. And so, for reasons of pure intellectual curiosity, I chose to study literature, and in particular, to study poems. Not as a poet, moreover, but as a critic.

Today, as we know, students are turning away from the Humanities subjects at A Level and University, in part because of fears about graduate employment. Now it's worth mentioning that the politicians and journalists who broadcast and, in fact, overstate, these fears did pretty well out of their own Humanities degrees, but it's also entirely reasonable that in times of economic and environmental precarity, studying for pleasure can seem like unjustifiable luxury. But when I ask what the hell I'm doing, professing literary criticism, I'm voicing a different worry.

It's a worry that, in a world of climate emergency, a world where we are contending with the disruptions and transformations wrought by new technologies on everything from the nature of work to our mental well-being to the organization of societies, studying poems seems a bit, well . . . self-indulgent? The world is complex, the challenges enormous, and academics have a social role to play in thinking through these challenges. I don't know if there's anyone here who has been attending all the inaugural lectures this year – other than the UEA Events team, of course, and my thanks to them for organizing this event – but if you are one of those hardy souls, you'll see ample evidence of UEA academics facing up to the most pressing questions of the age. My fellow inductees into the professoriat have touched on such topics as the threats around data privacy, combatting the epidemic in mental illness, achieving net zero . . . and here I am, with a silly pun about tunes.

So what, then, is the article of faith, which might justify, or at least render legible, this professing? Why study poetry at all?

My simple answer: when we study poetry, we attune ourselves to the expressive power of language. We enlarge our linguistic sensorium.

Poetry, even within literary studies, can seem something of a minority interest, and surely the furthest form from any activist engagement with the world; but if our aim is to attune ourselves towards the power of language, then there is no more effective activity than reading poems closely and intensively. Because poetry is language in its most condensed, but also its most enlarged, form. Reading poems, we attune ourselves to the ways in which language *makes sense*.

This vocation of poetry is encapsulated in the famous opening quatrain to William Blake's 'Auguries of Innocence':

To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour

What poetry does, precisely, is release the infinite from within the tiniest nuances of language. We take an individual image, or rhyme, and unlock in it vast latencies of meaning, multiple senses that head off in multiple directions, and awaken modes of thinking and sensing hitherto unavailable. We do not just visualize this 'World', but hear the echo of 'World' in 'Wild' and 'Hold'. We hear the 'word' contained in 'World', and indeed the 'World' that emerges out of the 'word'. We attune our senses to the sense-making power of words.

I'll come back to this, but for now, let me put a little more pressure on the phrase 'language makes sense'. As we all know, the word 'sense' pulls in two apparently opposed directions: to the sensible, as it were, and to the sensorial. Both of these are present in the Latin *sensus*. And many of our colloquial usages of the word 'sense' blend the two. When we say someone has 'good sense', we are alluding to their instincts as well as their intellect; when we say that a being is 'sentient', we endow it not only with sensation but the ability to build cognitions. 'Sensing' is the mode through which we can grasp meanings which by their nature are vague, or oblique, or enigmatic: not muddled thinking, but a thinking attuned to ambivalence and uncertainty.

So when I say that 'language makes sense', I take this phrase in the most literal way imaginable. Language generates, produces, sense – that is, both significations and sensations. The phrase tells us not only that words possess 'sense' but also that language is itself something sensed. We hear words, we see them; phrases can have emotional as well as intellectual effects on us. Poetry is the most compelling way of unlocking this sense-making power precisely because, more than any other form of language, it engages both senses of sense, because it appeals to the sensible and the sensorial at the same time. When other linguistic forms unlock this same power, they touch on the condition of poetry.

In a world where we habitually set up dualities between body and mind, intellect and emotion, the doubleness of 'sense' acts as a healthy corrective. Thinking is not some disembodied, dispassionate process; it is always bound up in sensing, in sensations, just as emotions and physical experience continually engage our thought. The fact that poetry's sense-making involves not the significations of words but their sonic and visual arrangement, makes it a fitting vehicle for exploring the interlacement of the two senses of 'sense'.

But as Blake's lines attest, poems do not only *make sense* but *make senses*. We see *a* World, and *a* Heaven; not *the*. There are multiple worlds, multiple heavens, waiting to be released. Indeed, the world that I make of this poem, the world that this poem opens up for me, will be different to the world that anyone else in this room will make of the poem: the poem's Infinity comprises all these possible readings, and is reducible to none of them.

This is I think one of the unsettling things about studying poems: the multiplicity of senses that poems open up can be thrilling, but also destablizing. When people complain that a poem doesn't make sense, what they're often complaining about is the opposite; not an *absence* of sense but a *surplus*: too much meaning, too many sensory stimuli, proliferating in too many directions, for them to be reduced to a unitary 'sense'. By refusing such reductivism, poems invite us to disburden ourselves of our impoverished reading practices, and rather to release ourselves into the open-ended movements of sense, into multiple ways of sensing.

To read a poem, in this way, means embracing what John Keats termed 'negative capability': 'capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason'.[1] With their lack of fixed referents, their refusal to be resolved into a single paraphrase, poems invite us to experience uncertainty as liberating rather than destabilizing. Or better: to recognize that sensation of being destablized is itself productive. That if you're too stable, you'll never go anywhere.

In these ways, poetry's multiplicity of sense, its constitutive multivalence, stands in stark contrast to the specious forms of certainty that dominate so much of our daily life. It is perhaps one of the reasons that literature in general, and poetry in particular, have been so badly served by the last decade of government education policy, where the openness of poems runs aground against the demands of a so-called 'knowledge-based curriculum'.[2] And of course, we see it every day in public discourse which, on both left and right, routinely proceeds through dogmatic position-taking, where everything is presumed to be known in advance. Poems' thickening, and opening, of sense frustrates all epistemologies and moralisms of unthinking certainty. More than this, given the increased tendency towards arguments that proceed *ad hominem*, poems remind us of the agency of language that operates outside and beyond its authors, its speakers, its readers, the way that senses are at once embedded in a context and yet irreducible to that context . . . an agency that endlessly multiplies positionalities and thwarts any easy position-taking.

This is not to say that a poem's sense-making is a complete free-for-all, that the surplus of senses dissolves into senselessness: the most compelling poems manage to blend an open-ended indeterminacy with rigorous precision. Take, for instance, Anne Carson's 'Gnosticism I', a poem whose interlacement of its, and our, senses is at the heart of its 'sense'. It's a beautiful, strange poem, about getting stuck on the physicality of words and never quite getting out the other side: an experience of disorientation in language but also of intoxication with language:

> Heaven's lips! I dreamed
> of a page in a book containing the word bird and I
> entered *bird*.
> Bird grinds on,
>
> grinds on, thrusting against black. Thrusting
> wings, thrusting again, hard
> banks slap against it either side, that bird was exhausted.
>
> Still, beating, working its way and below in dark woods
> small creatures
> leap. Rip

[1] John Keats, letter to George and Thomas Keats, 22 December 1817. In Hyder Edward Rollins, ed., *The Letters of John Keats vol. I: 1814-1818* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1st edn 1958, revised edn 2012), p. 193.

[2] The term is the one favoured by Nick Gibb, Schools Minister from 2010 to 2012, then again 2015–2021, and once again as of October 2022. See his 2017 speech 'The Importance of Knowledge-Based Education' <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/nick-gibb-the-importance-of-knowledge-based-education> [accessed 28 November 2022]. For a powerful critique of this approach to education and the educational philosophy on which it depends, and its particular dangers for literary study, see Robert Eaglestone, 'Powerful Knowledge, "cultural literacy", and the Study of Literature in Schools', *Impact: Philosophical Perspectives on Education Policy*, 26 (2020), 2–41.

at food with scrawny lips.
Lips at night.
Nothing guiding it, bird beats on, night wetness on it.
A lion looks up.
Smell of adolescence in these creatures, this ordinary
night for them. Astonishment

inside me like a separate person,
sweat-soaked. How to grip.
For some people a bird sings, feathers shine. I just get this *this*.[3]

On first read, the poem is somewhat disorienting: one can't identify a clear narrative, a clear speaker, or even a clear referential context.[4] Nor is it clear initially what it means to have 'entered bird'. There are lines which don't seem to make grammatical sense, and there are individual words that suggest mutually incompatible meanings. For instance, does 'Still' (l. 8) mean not moving, or does it mean continuing (in which case the bird is moving)?

But at the same time, one can sense the eroticism of the poem – the repetitions of 'grinds', 'thrusting', the wetness and sweat of the dream. And one can sense the difference between 'bird' as a referent to the words, and 'bird' as a word, with physical properties (including its rhyme with 'word'): the difference between entering the perspective of the bird in the book, and entering the word itself, so that the movement of the bird, grinding, thrusting, beating, comes to stand for the progress of language. One can sense also that the book, with its pages as 'hard banks', merges with the 'dark woods' that the bird flies through: maybe there's an allusion to the production of paper out of wood here. But at the same time, the 'dark woods' can be read as a metaphor for sleep, with the dream travelling through. And one can also note those other physical properties of words: the way that 'leap' and 'Rip' are then condensed into 'lip', for instance – which reminds us that lips are used for eating but also for speaking and of course for kissing (again, the erotics of producing words).

Thus the poem prepares us – not through a linear narrative, or a clearly defined speaker, but rather through the accumulation of senses and the attunement of our senses – for the otherwise enigmatic final sentence: 'I just get this *this*'. Deictic words like 'this' and 'that' (or 'now', 'here', 'there') only make sense in a clear referential context, where it is clear what they are pointing to: *this* table, *that* chair, and so on. By not naming their referent, deictics point to an outside of language; but in Carson's final line, the 'this' points only to itself, to the pure sensuousness of words. Carson's 'I' is both trapped in language, and released into language.

This poem is such a powerful one not just because it presents the pleasures of sensing words rather than decoding them but also because this is a poem that we can only read it by sensing it: feeling for meanings, attending to the movements of the words, letting the poem's multiple senses coalesce and cohere. In that regard, the poem becomes something like an allegory for the very process of 'making sense'.

And what is crucial here is that sense-making is a participative activity. The poem makes sense only as we make sense of the poem: or, better, make sense *with* the poem. Poems give themselves over to our senses: when we make sense of a poem, we orient ourselves sensibly and sensorially around the poem, we bring the poem to our senses, and in so doing, bring the poem to its senses.

[3] Anne Carson, 'Gnosticism I', in *Decreation: Poetry, Essays, Opera* (New York: Vintage, 2005), p. 87.

[4] For an eloquent account of reading without the crutch of referential markers, see John Wilkinson, 'Is This the Way to Amarillo? Reading Denise Riley's "Lone Star Clattering" with Derek Attridge', *English: Journal of the English Association*, 71:3 (2022), 204–21.

From this, I would like to make three further observations.

i) The poem's meanings do not lie *behind* the poem, but in front of it. There's a tendency to think of a poem's meaning as something inside the poem, only to be discovered by stripping layers off the poem, until eventually we get beneath the surface and reach its underlying 'message', or the author's experience that went in to making it. The most interesting meanings in poems emerge when a poem comes into contact with a reader: they are meanings *released* by the poem, rather than hidden behind them; as readers, we are not seeking to decode the poem to find its hidden meanings, but rather participate in the process of sense-making, and indeed to actualize all the senses the poems make possible. Every reading is both more, and less, than the poem it reads. More, because it opens on to directions only gestured to by the poem; less, because by pursuing a particular direction, others are necessarily closed off.

ii) This means that our primary question, when analysing a poem, is not 'what does the poem mean?' but 'what does the poem do?' Meaning in poetry is not a noun but a verb.[5] What we analyse is not meaning as reference, but meaning as a process – a process of which we are part. This changes the questions we ask of the poem away from authorial intentions towards activities of language, the ways a particular poem sets language to work. Working in a university with so many creative writers disabuses you of the cliché of authors as tormented geniuses or rarefied creative intelligences, and emphasizes that the writer's art lies in the practicalities of crafting language. Writing is a product of craft rather than a transparent representation of the author's person. But this also changes the very notion of *authority*. There is of course a shared root of 'author' and 'authority': yet when we ask the question 'What does the poem do?', we are displacing authority away from the poet: not to transfer it to the critic, but rather to recognize that the primary agency belongs to the language itself.

iii) What we are doing, when we read poems, is *attuning ourselves to tunes*. Each poem asks us to attune ourselves to *its* tunes; but together and cumulatively poems attune us to *language's* tunes. That is, we are learning to listen to the sense-making power of language in its broadest. This isn't specific to poetry: we all know that in daily speech tone of voice, pitch, tempo, shape what we say and what we understand. What is specific to poetry is the condensation and intensity in which these features of sense-making are put on display: in particular, through their segmentation and patterning of language, their creation of linkages and emphases that work against and across prose sense. When we attune ourselves to tunes, we do not merely notice modes of meaning, and agencies of language, that might otherwise have remained inconspicuous. Our attunement to language's tunes transforms the scope of the sayable.

For the remainder of this talk, I'd like to look at some small ways in which poems attune us to their, and by extension language's, tunes. My first example will be one of the most famous lines of verse in the history of English poetry, in what is surely the most famous poem in the English language:

Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,

[5] For a condensed account of this argument, see Derek Attridge, 'The Event of a Poem: Denise Riley's "Lone Star Clattering"', *English: Journal of the English Association*, 71:3 (2022), 195–203.

The line is organized not just around the broader conceit – similarities and differences between the addressee and a summer's day – but also around the specific metaphor of the sun as 'the eye of heaven'. Underpinning the metaphor is its linkage between the sun and the sight: the sun gives light, without which we can't see, but here the sun itself is seeing, an eye which gives sight to all other eyes, both light-giving and sight-giving.

The metaphor opens up further resonances: one might imagine the 'eye' has become 'too hot' because it is looking so intently at the beauty of the poem's addressee, for instance. Or that, if the eye is the mirror of the soul, the sun is the way that heaven communicates to us, the way we see into heaven? And this then points to the dual reference of 'heaven': both the sky and paradise.

And let's not forget the other time that eyes appear in this sonnet: 'So long as men can breathe, or *eyes can see*,/So long lives this, and this gives life to thee'. Here, immortality is figured as sight: not the sight of an individual, but rather a collective sight, whose eyes belong to humanity rather than any single person. Just as does 'heaven', the 'eye' comes to connote a kind of eternity.

Now I'm not saying Shakespeare *meant* all this. Indeed, several of the directions of sense opened up actually run counter to the poem's argument (that thou art more lovely and more temperate than the summer's day). The point is, the poem releases these possible meanings: herein lies its great artistry. In this regard, despite their clear differences in style and technique, Shakespeare's sonnet resembles Carson's 'Gnosticism' poem. Even when there is a stable referent, the sense-making still overruns unitary sense.

This is what I mean by saying that meaning lies in front of, rather than behind, the poem. Once we think of the poem as generating meanings, rather than possessing meaning, reading becomes a participative, open-ended activity. The poem takes us in directions that neither it nor we would have imagined beforehand; and indeed, the reading becomes more than the poem; or rather: in reading, the poem becomes more than itself.

It might seem strange to think of a metaphor as part of language's *tunes*, but let's look in a little more depth at how the metaphor is held together: Some*time* too hot the *eye* of heaven *shines*. The line is structured by an assonance around the diphthong/ai/, which lands on the first, third beat, the fifth beats of line: its beginning, middle, and end. This symmetry gives the line a self-enclosed character, turning in on itself, drawing our attention to that central word: the word which lies at the heart of the metaphor: *eye*.

But might the assonance point to a deeper linkage between the three words vowel: 'time', 'eye', and 'shines'? Of course, the phonemic character of any given word is largely arbitrary, but sonic features such as rhyme, assonance, alliteration, give motivation to these arbitrary sounds. Incidentally, this is particularly the case with assonances or rhymes which are not assimilated into a rhyme scheme, as rhyme schemes naturalize some of these echoes into a pattern.[6]

The linkage of 'time', 'eye', shines', would suggest some kind of transience or instability: the 'eye' of the sun only 'shines' on summer's days, that is, *sometimes*. But the self-enclosed symmetry of the line seems to push back against transience. It is the same at the end as at the beginning, rhyming front and back, and as such it seeks to stand alone as a line, to stand outside the forward progression of the poem. So just as the association of the rhyming words underscores the inevitable passing of time; the rhyme would suspend, or defeat, the passing of time. And this, of course, is the ultimate claim made by the poem in its final lines: that poetry can bestow eternity on mortal beauty. Indeed, 'eternal *lines* to *time*' relies on the very same assonance that we found in 'sometime–eye–shines'.

Incidentally, it's worth noting that the poem's soundworld – that is, its *tunes* – operates in a very different way to that of imitative sound effects such as onomatopoeia, or more broadly

[6] See Roi Tartakovsky, *Surprised by Sound: Rhyme's Inner Workings* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 2021).

what is often called 'verbal mimesis', where, following Alexander Pope's notorious and also rather peculiar phrase, 'The sound must seem an echo of the sense'.[7] Instead, that is, of understanding the meaning of poetic sounds as imitating specific (and pre-existing) significations of words, and coming *after* those significations (an 'echo' is always secondary), we are attending to the ways that the sounds *generate* the poem's senses, by shaping and enlarging its sense-making activity.

As we attune ourselves to the poem's tunes, we open ourselves to new and intensified emotional responses to what language is capable of. Here, as ever, there is no more valuable way of attuning ourselves to a poem than reading it aloud, of using our voices as sounding board for its tunes. We enliven ourselves not only to the sense of tunes but also to the tunefulness of sense.

At this point, I'd like to compare this line from Shakespeare's sonnet to a line from a sonnet of a very different sort: from Terrance Hayes's sequence of *American Sonnets for my Past and Future Assassin*.

> I make you a box of darkness with a bird in its heart.[8]

First here we might hear in 'I make you' an echo of 'making' as the poet's art. The Greek root *Poiesis* initially meant 'making', and found an echo in the *makars* of medieval Scotland. The doubleness of 'make' here reinforces this. It can either be a gift, or a description of the transformative power of language: I give you or I turn you into. In Hayes's poem, 'make' seems to echo 'lock': poetic making as enclosure, I lock you in a sonnet. And here too, what is made is a 'box'. So the sonnet is described as 'part prison,/Part panic closet, a little room in a house set aflame'... 'is part music box, part meat/Grinder': these are but some of the enclosed spaces that give the poem its claustrophobic energy.

This context gives meaning to the 'bird' later in the line, which alliterates with 'box' and might conjure up associations of the 'full-throated ease' of Keats's nightingale, or alternatively, given the enclosed spaces of the poem, the trope of the *caged* bird, whether in John Webster's 'We think caged birds sing, when indeed they cry', or in Maya Angelou's figure of the caged bird that sings of freedom. At this point we might also hear the consonance of 'make' and 'dark', and the assonance of 'dark' and 'heart', the which offers another allusion: Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, a novel which, famously, both excoriates the racial brutality of the colonization of Africa and relies on racialized tropes. And then wonder if the 'bird' is in fact not a songbird, but part of Hayes's pun on 'gym crow'.

The poem is a container, but also paradoxically a source of freedom. The poem's condensation of language does not just lock sense into a sonnet, but also unlocks its senses to open endlessly outwards, and would thus serve as an allegory for the attempt to burst beyond stricture. Refusing a single reading, the poem resists containment; its political thinking proceeds through a sensorial plenitude.

In each of the poems I have discussed, language make sense not just through linear progression, but cumulatively, counter-progressively, diagrammatically, and paragrammatically: poems speak forwards and speak back, turn in on themselves and turn outwards. They hold together by containing these tensions, and also by channelling these tensions and releasing them in different directions. Hopefully my readings have done justice to extraordinary artfulness of these poems as tightly-knit objects; but however tightly-knit they are, their

[7] The line comes from Pope's 'Essay on Criticism'. It is peculiar in part because of *seem* (appearance not being the same as reality), and also because 'echo' implies that sense itself already *sounds*.

[8] Terrance Hayes, *American Sonnets for my Past and Future Assassin* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2018), p. 11.

sense-making constantly overflows their objecthood, releases energies into the world of its readings. In this way, the condition of the poem is always to be more than it is.

But to come back to the anxiety where I started this talk: in what way does this speak to the most pressing questions of our age?

First, I'd argue that when we are attuned to the sense-making activities of language, will develop not just an aesthetic appreciation to the tunefulness of sense but also a critical vigilance to the ways that language can both conceal and reveal, both obfuscate and facilitate. But more than this, it encourages an openness to the sheer plenitude of language, an opening of our linguistic senses.

Poems invite us to read more intensively, more expansively, to sense more intensively, sense more expansively. Poems mean not through presenting choices of either/or, but rather through a logic of both/and. They continually demand that we feel more, think more, feel again, think again. In so doing, they enlarge our sense of the sayable.

There is a politics here: not a politics of position-taking, but rather of the intensification and enlargement of our linguistic sensorium. It is also integral to literature's long-standing vocation to imagine a world lived otherwise, for articulating impossible desires and modes of desiring. By its nature, literature continually plays at the boundaries of the sayable. Perhaps one of the reasons I was drawn to study literature, all those years ago, is because, in the early years of New Labour, which seemed to confirm Thatcher's insistence that there was no alternative, literature offered a world of alternative modes of thinking and sensing.

I am hardly the first person to suggest that the politics of poetry lies less in its content than in its form. The openness and instability which make poems pretty ineffective as political speech acts – are precisely what endow them with political valence. Hayes's poem is indubitably an articulation of a political predicament, and indeed is driven by a compelling moral vision, but in complicating its own positionality, by pluralizing its modes of sense-making, it shifts away from a politics of position-taking and opens on to another politics – one which lies in the enlargement of our linguistic sensorium.

To which I would add one final observation. The openness, and the participative nature, of the poems' sense-making, means that each reading is shaped by its own provisionality: it is but one contribution to an ongoing conversation. This is one more way in which poems ask us to feel more, think more, and think again. To attune ourselves to this open-endedness, to search out complexity, not to resolve it but rather to track the directions it might take us in, necessitates a certain humility of mind that sits ill with the very idea of a disciplinary authority. Instead of professing mastery, I would profess an attunement, or rather, an attuned reading practice.

So here is my profession of faith: in poetry's enlargement of the sensorium of language. Perhaps studying poetry does not speak directly to the world's most urgent questions. But perhaps it speaks, rather, indirectly, and its indirection – or rather, its multidirectionality – is a virtue of its own, asking us to feel more, think more, think again.