

“Pocket full of seeds”: A Review of *Experiencing Poetry: A Guidebook to Psychopoetics*, by Willie van Peer and Anna Chesnokova, London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2023, pp. xiv+236, \$110,00 (hardback), ISBN: 9781350248014.

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On February 23, 2023, an article published in *The New Yorker*¹ warned about the threats that have been looming over Departments of English in the US. The author provides evidence that enrollment in the Humanities is plummeting in educational institutions in the US and, I would add, in many different parts of the world. Today, the market has been favouring STEM (acronym for Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) rather than Humanities students, who find themselves jobless after they graduate. In this article, the acknowledged literary scholar Stephen Greenblatt is quoted as having said that Literature Departments should do more with TV than with canonical texts. In fact, according to the article, it is now possible to receive a degree in English from Harvard without taking a single course in poetry. To make matters worse, ChatGPT is now seen as a potential instrument that may replace college essays and creative writing.

Actually, the loss of prestige of Humanities Departments, especially of literature courses, is not new. It was already noticed by John M. Ellis (1997), Robert Scholes (1998), and Tzvetan Todorov (2009), among others. Years ago surveys such as *Reading at Risk* (Bradshaw, 2004) already signaled a crisis in reading and, despite *Reading on the Rise* (National Endowment for the Arts, 2009) later reporting an increase in adult reading, there has not been an increase in students’ enrolment in the Humanities. Lack of interest

¹ Nathan Heller’s “The End of the English Manor.”

in literature courses has not relented.² So, at a time when Humanities Departments are on the wane, when even experienced readers waste too much of their precious time on social media, the publication of a book entitled *Experiencing Poetry: A Guidebook to Psychopoetics* could seem rather anachronistic. But, this is not the case, as we will soon see.

On the shelf, this volume may lead the prospective reader to consider whether it is yet another academic publication on the theoretical framework of poetry. Its sophisticated black cover and its subtitle may anticipate that reading will require hours of deep concentration and reflection needed to grasp the complex issues it will be dealing with. However, the book captivates us from the first line and surprises us at each new paragraph. The authors practice what they preach. Not meant for “highbrow aesthetes only, for intellectuals or ivory tower academics” (van Peer and Chesnokova 101), it is mostly aimed at making literary devices familiar to undergraduates or novices, including those in STEM-related programs. In fact, it could be used across the curriculum. It really feels like “a friend, a relative, or a teacher explains something to you” (101), in this case, the art of poetry and the theory that it involves. The book may also fascinate seasoned scholars who might be curious about the remarkable and unique links the authors make and how they manage to turn complex considerations into simple explanations.

Experiencing Poetry is simple indeed but far from simplistic. It owes much to the tradition of reader-response studies and it would be more than welcome if, for instance, references were made to forerunners such as Louise Rosenblatt and to her argument that literature “provides a *living through*, not simply *knowledge about*” (Rosenblatt 38; italics in the original) creative productions, and that the teacher should create “a situation favourable to a vital experience of literature” (58). *Experiencing Poetry* aims at developing an evidence-based psychopoetics, that is, how one can account for the experience of reading poetry. The authors take an empirical perspective, “one based on independent data, controllable observations and evidence” (van Peer and Chesnokova 82), going against what they suggest are stereotypical discussions in literary courses where critics try to find out “whether Pushkin smoked” (83) rather than providing students with tools to understand the workings of texts. Engaging with poetry, the authors argue, goes beyond hermeneutic interpretations. It requires mastery of stylistic procedures and strategies as well as evidence-based methods borrowed from social sciences that may account for the experience. This is how they pave the way towards a psychopoetics.

The authors never lose sight of their target audience. Aimed primarily at students, the book offers guideposts such as keywords at the beginning of each chapter, a summary of the core issues at the end of each, a glossary, ancillary resources with samples of questionnaires, and further reading if one would like to expand one’s knowledge of the subject. As they address 21st century undergraduates, for instance, they weave a web of

² For a review, see Fialho et al.

links between the most popular manifestations such as a football anthem and a song from the Beatles to show how the structures they are based on are similar to those in canonical poetry. In this section, for instance, they explain how the magic of poetry is embodied by quoting Dylan Thomas (1914–1953): “Poetry is what in a poem makes you laugh, cry, prickle, be silent, makes your toe nails twinkle, makes you want to do this or that or nothing, makes you know that you are alone in the unknown world, that your bliss and suffering is forever shared and forever all your own” (56). A light and flowing style, almost like a casual conversation, pervades the book [for instance, “Wait! Do not run away: you may find out how close it is to present-day concerns” (2); or “Let us put the serious matters away for a while and play a game. Yes, we are not joking” (5)]. This is where the challenge lies: to grasp the attention of young and inexperienced students willing to understand the workings of poetry and, at the same time, have a good time.

To make the journey enjoyable, the writers provide an excellent Companion³ which invites the reader to pause the reading and experience live shows, poetry readings, etc. As the authors explain, “we position poetry where it belongs: in the real world, in the social sphere, embedded in a live performance, vibrant with music, and making use of modern technology” (19). The chapters and the Companion do provide a wealth of links between different artistic manifestations – mostly concentrated on music (from folk and popular manifestations to classic music) – and poetry.

The book’s originality is also reflected in the chapter titles, built on the parallel formula ‘POETRY IS X.’ Chapter 1 (“Poetry is Structure”) opens with the most difficult question, that is, what poetry is. After some considerations, the authors settle on the definition that the closer the text is to being short, having typical formal qualities (meter, rhyme, etc.), presenting layers of meaning, and emphasizing emotional aspects, the closer it is to poetry. No mention is made of how far prose can be poetic, though. To prove their point, the authors take a seemingly simple poem as a sample for providing the basic principles of poetic form. They provide a stylistic analysis to show how the chosen form leads to contextualized meaning and relate it to other art productions, in this case, a song by Franz Schubert (1797–1828). Then, they associate these with an English ballad, recreating the sound patterns and emphasizing the emotions that render the experience vivid to the reader. The chapter brings up the distinction between high and low forms of art, arguing for a continuum instead of a dichotomy between these productions. However, it is not too clear how the connection between the enjoyment of art and the distinction between high and low culture is made. The chapter ends with a justification for a “psychopoetics,” namely “the study of the psychological experience of literature and, more specifically, of poetry in its various aspects and meanings” (1).

³ For the Companion, please visit <https://www.bloomsburyonlineresources.com/experiencing-poetry/resources-by-chapter>.

In Chapter 2 (“Poetry is Madness”), basic elements of statistics for the Humanities are gradually presented (for instance, the notions of significance, generalizability, valence, sample, graphs) so as to make them quite understandable to novices. In this chapter, as in all the others, the authors aim at reaching out to an international readership, providing an intercultural and historical perspective which goes beyond a Eurocentric view. To this purpose, they take the bold step of providing a variety of languages other than English, a decision to be commended, but which may raise problems. For instance, in this chapter, they associate the Portuguese singer Mariza (1973–...) and her interpretation of the fado “Loucura” with the characters of Ophelia and Lear to explain the theme of madness that pervades poetry throughout times. Based on the lyrics in Portuguese, they explain why Mariza seems to have gone mad. However, what she actually says is that she is aware it is madness to insist on singing the fado. It does not imply that she considers herself to be mad. There is a difference between “her position as an outsider, trapped in madness” (29) or “of someone who declares herself mad” (177), and what happens to the Shakespearean characters. In Mariza’s case, madness is a figure of speech, not a mental health problem. Elsewhere, the authors refer to “her endless weeping (*chorai, chorai*) (177). However, it is not Mariza who is weeping. “Chorai” is in the imperative mood. She is actually addressing “poets of my country” and asking them, not us, for help. Having said that, these few setbacks do not invalidate the excellent experiment they offer the readers on page 20: “Are you ready? Then listen again to Mariza, and give your response to the ten emotions— (1) your feelings while watching, and (2) the feelings you think the singer experienced. You may do so during, but also after the performance. Then pause.” Having the readers go through their own experience, they then ask them to compare their data with those obtained in previous studies.

In Chapter 3 (“Poetry is Prettiness”), the authors provide basic elements in poetics such as the notion of literariness, foregrounding, repetition, and parallelism, and Roman Jakobson’s principle of equivalence is explained in the most direct and objective terms. Each example is analysed stylistically in detail, from prayers to political speeches to poems, to show how readers are affected by foregrounding. Examples of figures of speech such as chiasmus and anaphora are discussed, Popperian falsification is introduced and further notions of statistics are added, more specifically Likert scales, Anova tests, *p*-value, and factor analysis. These are illustrated in a research experiment intended to falsify the theory of parallelism. More links are made between poems and music as they show how Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–1791) composed *Das Veilchen* (K. 476) building on Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s (1749–1832) poem, and they associate both with the *Heidenröslein* folk song presented in Chapter 1.

With the intention of having the reader feel the effects of foregrounding, at the beginning of Chapter 4 (“Poetry is Surprise”) the authors offer an upside-down photograph of themselves, the picture of a house also built upside down and an actor performing part of Leo Tolstoy’s (1828–1910) monologue in which a horse questions the meaning of the words “my” and “mine.” After discussing these experiences, the notion of

foregrounding and deviation are presented followed by a discussion of avant-garde art and Vladimir Mayakovsky's (1893–1930) poems. The concepts of hypothesis and probability are also introduced here.

Chapter 5 (“Poetry is Revelation”) illustrates and discusses epiphany. Here the authors show how moments of epiphany can be better gauged using qualitative methods. They provide an analysis of one of John Keats's (1795–1821) sonnets where the poet reveals his awe when reading George Chapman's (1559–1634) translation of Homer and how the beauty of poetry was revealed to him. This is followed by the description of a research to find out students' own responses to this poem. Continuing their line of associations, the authors link Keats's epiphany to Paul the Apostle's on the road to Damascus.

In Chapter 6 (“Poetry is Power”), the authors show how poetry “conjures up before our mental eye the processes of suffering and healing, leading to readers' enlightenment and emotional relief” (119). Mentioning bibliotherapy and making available to the reader the relevant and powerful TED-UCLA talk (“Shakespeare in Shackles: The Transformative Power of Literature”), the authors provide evidence that poetry may indeed alleviate suffering. A very impactful discussion is the one provided after the reader is invited to view the video clip of a game called “World of Warships.”

Chapter 7 follows by arguing for the timelessness of art (“Poetry is Persistence”). Here, the Epic of Gilgamesh, written on clay tablets in cuneiform script in Sumerian is used as evidence that some themes do travel in time. Their point is that there are themes that persist over time and over geographic areas. From oral African tradition to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, to William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for the theme of animism and transformation, to the theme of forbidden love in a medieval French romance in verse, in Arthurian romances, to the contemporary film version of Camelot, all lead to the question of what these themes tell us about human psychology and the workings of societies. They refer to studies which conclude that “themes in popular literature relate to economic and social/political events of a society” (149).

Breaking the pattern established by the previous chapters, Chapter 8 aims to familiarize readers with methods that will enable them to study psychopoetics. Step by step they describe how an experimental research can be designed and carried out. Looking at a real experiment, they show how qualitative and quantitative methods may be combined. They also stimulate cooperation and exchange in carrying out research illustrating such a joint venture with the REDES project, an international project where junior researchers worked together and published their results widely.⁴

To conclude the book, Chapter 9 (“Toward a General Theory of Psychopoetics”) discusses various studies on the effects of narrative and offers fifteen strands in poetic

⁴ See, for instance, Zyngier et al.; Viana et al.; Van Peer et al.; Chesnokova et al., “Long-term Research Assessing in the Humanities”; and Chesnokova et al., “Learning through Research.”

experiences or possible hypotheses that still await empirical evidence for validation. Among them is the assumption that the reader embodies the experience, that poems have universal values and concerns, that, differently from narratives, poetry involves an aura of sincerity and authenticity, and that it has a soothing effect. Emphasizing the salutary effects of literature, the authors show how necessary literature is for the individual's overall well-being. However, research still needs to be done to validate these arguments that poetry carries emotions and that reading literature has effects which can be accounted for. In their words, "The efforts to elucidate these effects of poetry could be called a theory of psychopoetics. But does such a theory exist? No. Not yet" (175).

In one word, the book is highly original and creative: from the structure, the choice of vast materials from different fields of art, all producing new links that intrigue the reader and challenge canonical approaches to the subject matter. One can imagine the pleasure the authors themselves experienced while writing the book. And the readers are invited to share it. Plutarch's words "elements of the emotional, the surprising, and the unexpected" (77) can be applied to the experience of reading *Experiencing Poetry: A Guidebook to Psychopoetics*. At a time when individuals are expressing themselves through social media, when the figure of the solitary reader holding a book by the fire or in a hammock belongs to the past, this book succeeds in offering 21st-century students a most enjoyable and entertaining journey into poems, stylistics, and statistics.

The book ends with a poem by Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892–1950) to illustrate how some themes are universal and remain throughout the times. They ask us to "enjoy the way it tells one of the oldest stories of humanity to us, some 4,000 years later" (150). Indeed, *Experiencing Poetry: A Guidebook to Psychopoetics* is a "pocket full of seeds" (150). There is much to be planted, promising a new beginning to evidence-based studies of poetry.

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