

what lovely words might also mean

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This book marks roughly the 10-year anniversary of the *First International Symposium on Poetic Inquiry*. Poetic Inquiry now facilitates the research interests of hundreds of emerging and established scholars across a variety of disciplines. It is both a method of undertaking research and a means of relating the data of research in a way that is germane to rethinking both how we do research and how we mobilize knowledge and share our findings. From a scholarly point of view, these are exciting times: this rethinking is long overdue. What makes Poetic inquiry so useful is its capaciousness of expression, for it allows into an otherwise hardpan discourse the soft, moist, and fertile ground of imagination for both the scholar and the reader. It admits to the fallibility of a singular expression of truths about something—poetry's capaciousness comes from the inherent polyvalence poetic expression, to see in many directions at once through the multiple lenses of language. At its best, Poetic Inquiry bootstraps comprehension of a research topic, it energizes inquiry, and challenges how we come to knowledge and what we think we know, undercutting disciplinary, discursive norms. The further an inquiry goes, the more surprises we encounter; compare this to other research practices, which might be expected to do the opposite, to become predictable. Prediction is foretelling, and we cannot entirely expel the notion that if we want to remain open to discovery in any particular field, the language we use to communicate and investigate a subject might have a big influence in the knowledge we generate about it. If the language used in our work is unduly generic and predictable, it might just be that our research will also turn out to be generic and predictable. It's the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis (Hoijer, 1954), the idea that language and thought are in a determinate relationship, all over again.

Despite its recent resurgence, Poetic Inquiry is obviously an ancient method of understanding the world. The earliest texts, cosmologies of earth, and universe inscribed in stone, bear traces of ancestral voices breathing poems to know why and how we come to be here. But as a scholarly practice, underscoring the poet's journey among the academies, the first use I can find of the term Poetic Inquiry comes from a literary magazine, an editor's book review published in 1921, Volume 60 of *The Bookman* journal. This seminal use in print is worth considering:

Of writing for "love of lovely words" the book holds little, but something of that great spirit of poetic inquiry that was Milton's and Browning's there undoubtedly is. (p. 60)

It should be noted, first of all, that the reviewer is referencing a novel, not a book of poetry. Hence, there is implication in the embedded Robert Louis Stevenson quotation that the "*the love of lovely words*" is a more basic form of poetic research, but the great spirit of poetic inquiry may visit more universal and eternal subject matter which was the domain of poets such as Milton and Browning. A *Child's Garden of Verses* with its verdant branches and great towers was a place where people could go to learn about the world

through imagination's amorous embrace with language. This garden, where love of lovely words is basic research to the poetic inquirer, still exists, even today in a world inundated with computers. However, the spirit of poetic inquiry, fulfilled by this love of words, can aspire to grow a tree of knowledge. So it is that poets meet the academy on different paths—as agrarians, as mystics, as magical adepts working with the energies of texts to discover the hidden jewels of non-literal comprehension. This path of inquiry thus takes the poet from the garden into applied and practical uses of the love of words.

Figure 0.1 [Image Goes Here]



Google Ngram showing case insensitive instances of "poetic inquiry": 1900–2008

We can assume that from early on in the 20th century poetic inquiry was seen as a means to go through and beyond the love of lovely words to grapple with and understand the world more keenly. If this understanding revealed truths difficult to behold, then perhaps this is why. If one reviews the use of Poetic Inquiry in the millions of books scanned by Google's Ngram Viewer visualization software (see Figure 0.1), the first spike in use occurs only after the Second World War in the late 1940s, initially in 1948, again in a book review, titled *The Poet with Wounds* about Harry Brown's *Fourth Elegy: The Poet Compared to an Unsuccessful General* written by literary critic and poet Hayden Carruth (1948, p. 217), who praises Brown for "*considerably enlarg[ing] the range of his poetic inquiry beyond that shown in his earlier lyrics.*" Thus, poetic inquiry is understood as the act of writing poetry with greater purpose and intent than solely for self-expression. From *The Bookman's* reviewer to Carruth, more than a quarter century has passed, much of the world is in post-war shock, and the notion that writing poetry can serve research purposes parallel to but ostensibly other than the production of verse has germinated.

Use of the term "poetic inquiry" in publications fluctuates thereafter but remains a feature of literary critical and social scientific discourse throughout the twentieth century, with the greatest spike in use occurring during in the 1950s. Over the period of ten years after Carruth's 1948

review, poetic inquiry began to signify the coming together of both a scientific and an emotive quest to find truth in and through poetic expression. Abrams (1958) provides the following justification for the vision of poetic inquiry as seeing and seeking truths beyond a polemic that separates rational and emotive methods.

The persistently defensive situation of criticism, and its standard procedure of combating charges against poetry by asserting their contraries, has forced it into an either-or, all-or-none choice that breeds dilemmas: Either language is scientific or it is purely emotive; either a poem corresponds to this world or it is a self-sufficient world all its own; either all beliefs are relevant to reading poetry, or all beliefs must be suspended. What we obviously need is the ability to make more distinctions and finer discriminations; and perhaps these will follow if we substitute for concepts developed mainly as polemical weapons a positive view designed specifically for poetic inquiry and analysis. (pp. 123-124, emphasis added)

The vision unfolded in this viewpoint is that language need not divide the inquirer in love with lovely words from the inquirer who faces dilemmas through words and seeks difficult truths: Words that are not singularly solipsistic and emotive, but serve as a vehicle for understanding about people and playing a more-than-aesthetic role for writer and reader. Abrams (1958) positions this methodological design centrally within the social sciences: "*Suppose, then, that we set out from the observation that a poem is about people . . . their perceptions, thought, and actions so as to enhance their inherent interest and whatever effects the poem undertakes to achieve*" (p. 124). At this point in its genealogy, scholars are *doing* poetic inquiry, through the production of poems as a way of knowing and mobilizing knowledge. But with such an unconstrained approach, leaving the method of achieving "*whatever effects the poem undertakes*" completely open, the purposes and practices of poetic inquiry are necessarily as diverse as the practitioners. And besides, this comes to be poetic inquiry's greatest strength as a research method in a quest for understanding that can adapt to changes in physical, social and psychic environments. The notion of poetic inquiry as a field of research in social sciences continued to stimulate scholars for 50 years, at which point Poetic Inquiry, as a method, comes of age as a capitalized compound noun. This second peak in the frequency of the use of this term, by a magnitude greater than any before, occurs around 2008, a time full of uncertainty, when technology had completely transformed both personal communications and public research practices. Perhaps uncertainty is the catalyst that turns attention to poetry as a way to find what we missed with our other discursive approaches to understanding.

In 2003 when I left my life as a poet, secondary school teacher, gallery director, musician and media producer to begin my graduate studies, I did not see the full potential cross-over of these fields of endeavour. Nonetheless, I tried to make some connections. I was in a faculty of Education, so I studied the effect of literature on language acquisition. Then I strayed into many aspects of literacy and carried out ethnographic studies on my own displaced artist community's attempt to retain relational bonds online when our gallery spaces were closed through predevelopment evictions. I still wrote poetry, made art and performed, but I kept the creative side of my work apart and distinct from my academic work. Like many others, I became

increasingly aware that unique insights from my research were visible through language, and that it was my generative play with those lovely words that allowed for the brightest illuminations and most enjoyable times I had with the textual data I had gathered. Finally, I had a complete change of academic heart. Under the pioneering influence of Carl Leggo, the direction of my doctoral studies turned about face: poetry moved from the periphery of my activities to the centre of my scholarship, where it has remained, returning me to a life of living poetically with lovely words giving me inspiration and guidance on the ecstatic journey of research-worth-doing. I had the great fortune a couple years later to have my proposal for the 1st International Symposium of Poetic Inquiry accepted. This was a momentous time, a literary movement of sorts was brewing from within the academy. Something of the Great Spirit of Poetic Inquiry entered the ivory towers and spread from there out through communities and gardens, prisons and hospitals, cameras and computers, bodies and minds, destabilizing and reinventing discursive forms and practices of scholarship in the social sciences. It continues to gather momentum as poetic inquirers from around the world have been busily publishing, striving to understand the benefits of poetic effects in the realms of education, social work, health, ecology, sociology, mythology, technology, systems theory, history, geography, and so on. Many, if not all of the authors in this book would have similar stories to tell, finding in poetry the vital ingredient for a life well lived in the service of humanity and our greater understanding.

References

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