

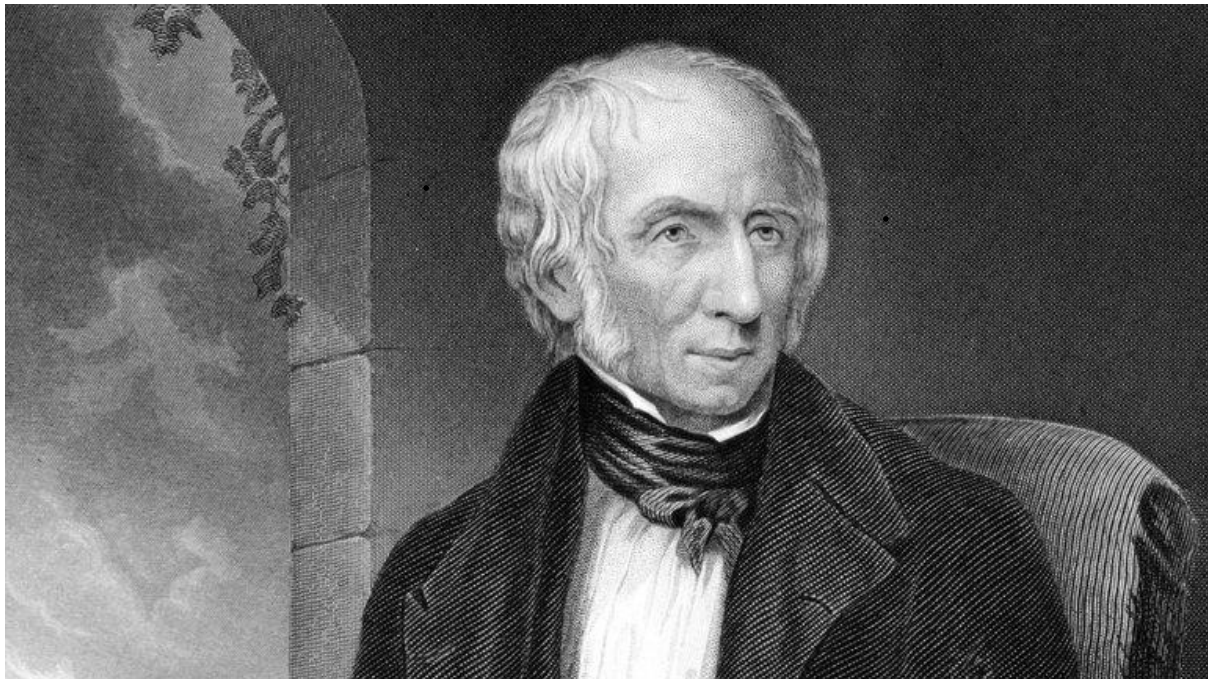


10-Minute Talks: Poetry as Experience

By Professor Derek Attridge FBA

In this talk, Professor Derek Attridge FBA addresses the question: “What is a poem’s mode of existence?” Using a poem by William Wordsworth as an example, he argues that poems are not fixed lines of words but human experiences of language and the power of language.

This talk is available to watch on [YouTube](#)



The following transcript was developed using speech recognition software and human transcribers. Although all care has been taken to check, proofread and correct the transcript, it may contain errors.

Professor Derek Attridge FBA [00:00:06] What is a poem's mode of existence? Let's take one of Wordsworth's well-known Lucy poems. An evocation of the grief felt at the unexpected death of a loved woman.

"A slumber did my spirit seal;
I had no human fears;
She seemed a thing that could not feel
the touch of earthly years.

No motion, has she now, no force;
She neither hears nor sees;
Rolled round in earth's diurnal course,
With rocks, and stones, and trees."

Does this poem exist as the printed sequence of words on the page from which I've just read it out, or in a book that you might take down from a shelf? Is it the sounding of those words that you have just heard or that you might hear in a recording? Or does it enjoy some ideal existence that every visible or audible manifestation of these words alludes to, a type of which this is a token, to use philosophical language?

Habitual use of the word "poem" has elements of all these conceptions. But if I say I enjoy Wordsworth's Lucy poems, I'm referring not just to the words as they appear or heard, but to my experience of them. If I comment that Tennyson's poetry leaves me cold, although I would never say such a thing, I'm probably summing up several experiences.

These experiences are temporal in nature and involve the intellect, the emotions and the body. Words on the page or screen, let's call them as material objects, texts, need to be experienced as a particular kind of event before they become in the fullest sense of the term, poems. Even sound waves travelling through the air remain purely physical phenomena if they're not received by a human ear or brain.

A computer could presumably be programmed to distinguish spoken poems from other utterances and perhaps to register in some way their emotional content, but the day hasn't yet arrived when a machine is able to experience poems as poems.

The poem is a human event, repeatable – though never exactly the same in its repetitions – rather than a fixed material object, or even an ideal one. So our poem is reborn, so to speak, each time it's experienced. All these experiences are related, but they vary across time and across groups and individuals.

By contrast, the text is fixed up to a point at any rate, since even the printed or spoken text may have variations. And if we bring translations into the picture, we find the same poem appearing in a different language to be experienced by a new set of readers and hearers.

But is there anything, it might be asked, that distinguishes the particular category of the poem from the more general category of literature? Isn't any literary work an event that

occurs when an appropriate text, inert on the page or in the air, is read or listened to in a certain way?

[00:03:40] Well, poetry, like prose, fiction and drama, can exploit any of the powers of which language is capable, whether to appal, to hearten, to intrigue, to browbeat, to stir, to excite, to disappoint. The list is endless. What poetry uniquely does, however, is to achieve this emotional and intellectual intensity. In part by harnessing the particular effectiveness that language possesses by virtue of its physical properties – its sounds, its silences, its rhythms, its syntactic sequences, its movement through time.

Meaning in a poem is something that happens. It's not a conceptual entity or a piece of the world being pointed out. Language is manifold. Powers are made even stronger in this way, and linguistic acts are given even greater emotional resonance. The poem, therefore, is a real time event, and if one doesn't read it in real time, aloud or in a mental representation of speech, one may be reading it as a literary work of some kind, but not as a poem.

To experience a poem as a poem, therefore, is not to treat it as an event only of meaning, but as an event of and in language, with language understood as a material medium as well as a semantic resource. And because this experience is a response to the materiality of language, the physical body is necessarily involved.

Even a silent reading in which the words are mentally articulated will make use of slight muscular movements. In 2004, Nassau was reported to be investigating methods of communicating silently by tracking the neural signals sent to the musculature during this kind of subvocal articulation.

The conditions under which poetry can be experienced are highly varied. I can attend a public reading, hear a poem on the radio, read silently or aloud from the printed page, or recite some lines of verse from memory. And what I derive from the experience can include knowledge of the past, moral advice, insight into a writer's life, psychological truths, and much more.

But when a text in verse is enjoyed purely for the information or moral truth that it conveys, and there's no lack of evidence that this has happened from the very beginnings of composition in verse, it's not being experienced as a poem. Poetry has been read for many other purposes, too. It has, for instance, consoled mourners, injured opponents, contributed to social cohesion, reinforced the authority of rulers, and stiffened hearts before battle.

My research into the way European poetry – or the cultural practice we now call poetry – was performed and experienced across the two and a half millennia, from audiences who listened to the lyre-playing singers of ancient Greece to the readers who eagerly devoured Shakespeare's sexy poems, suggests that whatever other functions poetry served its power always resided, in part in the special pleasure to be gained from the creative handling of language, its meanings, its associations, its sounds, its rhythms.

The poem of Wordsworth's I read a few minutes ago, which is known by its first line, "A Slumber did my Spirit Steal", is an account of something happening in the world, but we don't understand it or respond to it as we would a friend's description of this same event.

[00:07:27] The emotion we experience is not identical to the grief that the speaker of the poem feels. Nor is it an invitation to empathise with Wordsworth, who may or may not have had the feelings evoked in these lines. Biographers have been unable to discover any event

in Wordsworth's life to which this poem might refer. He may well have been trying to imagine what a lover would feel at such a moment. After all, imagining what other people would feel in certain situations is what writers of poems, plays and novels are constantly doing.

To experience this text as a poem is to let it unfold in real time, allowing the play of meanings to develop as the rhythms carry the voice and the mind onward, and the rhymes produce a series of expectations and resolutions. It's to respond to the complex staging of emotions as those meanings emerge and to enjoy and admire the remarkable economy with which the writer has captured a profound feeling of grief and loss.

Of course, as I've suggested, every reader, or listener, will experience in their own way. Some of those experiences will be alive to more of its intensities than others, depending on personal histories, stores of knowledge and individual preferences. An important function of literary criticism, whether of the academic sort, or the conversation over a cup of tea, is to enable the sharing and enriching of these experiences.

I'll end by reading the lines once more. I hope you'll find listening to them again provides an experience that's not simply that of understanding a text, but one that brings a poem into existence as an event of language that freshly illuminates the shared human world.

"A slumber did my spirit seal;
I had no human fears;
She seemed a thing that could not feel
the touch of earthly years.

No motion, has she now; no force
She neither hears nor sees;
Rolled round in earth's diurnal course,
With rocks and stones and trees."

In [The British Academy 10-Minute Talks](#), leading professors explain the latest thinking in the humanities and social sciences in just 10 minutes.

For future events, visit our [website](#)

Subscribe to our [email newsletter](#)