



'The sound must seem an echo to the sense': Meaning Making in Poetry and Exhibits

by Eugene Dillenburg

Eugene Dillenburg is a Lead Exhibit Developer at The Shedd Aquarium, Chicago. He's been reading poetry for 20 years and developing exhibits for 10, which explains a lot. You can reach him at EDillenburg@SheddAquarium.org. The poems cited in this article, and many others, can be read at <http://www.eMule.com>.

Poetry is a powerful medium for making meaning, and suggests ways to make exhibits more meaningful as well.

Exhibition is like no other medium. An amalgamation of art and architecture, photography and film, prose forms and performance art, it's none of these things, and it is all of them. Yet despite their very different forms and characteristics, each of these media strives towards the same goal: to communicate a meaning.

At first glance one might think there would be little similarity between poetry and museum exhibition, aside from the poverty of their respective practitioners. (And the fact that both deal with entities that "grow vaster than empires and more slow.") What may exhibit professionals gain by thinking like a poet?

Poetry has always been recognized as a powerful medium for meaning making; Coleridge described poetry as "the best words in the best order." One might equally define an exhibit as the best objects, or the best experiences, or the best ideas in the best order. Designers take as much care creating sightlines and spaces, and curators as much in choosing objects, as a writer spends on selecting words. And for the same reason—to get the effect precisely right. Thus, understanding how poetry makes meaning can help us understand how to make exhibits more effective.

Words

The most apparent parallels between exhibitry and poetry are in label text. Poetry is the most condensed form of language there is; it strives to carry the maximum amount of meaning in the fewest possible words. Label writers, knowing that visitors read shorter labels more frequently and more thoroughly, likewise must express complex ideas in a few simple words. Poetry is also ancient, its roots stretching back to the oral traditions of pre-literate civilization. Thus, it is meant to be read aloud—like a label. And it must be understood and remembered after a single hearing—again, like a label. Thus it comes as no surprise that leading label experts—Beverly Serrell, Judy Rand, et. al.—frequently invoke poetic devices, though often under other names:

"Writing labels to be read aloud" requires a sensitivity to meter, the pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables in a sentence. Too many of either is hard to read. Consider the way the rhythm of lyric poetry helps the lines flow along naturally, and defines where they stop. (Some 85% of Emily Dickinson's poems can be sung to the tune of "The Yellow Rose of Texas"—not that she was a great Mitch Miller fan, but because both were written in iambic quadrameter.) Meter can also impart a light-and-breezy or heavy-and-ponderous feeling to your writing, whichever may be appropriate.

The advice to "enliven" labels generally promotes the careful use of figurative language (pun, paradox, personification, etc.) and echo (rhyme, assonance, consonance, alliteration). Figurative language amplifies the meaning of individual words. By saying one thing while implying another, each word has double impact. "Sound effects" like rhyme and echo amplify the meaning of the entire work by grabbing the readers' attention. Because they link lines and words together, they make the poem feel inevitable and "right." And the single most important aspect of poetry, word choice, is also the most crucial in label writing. Every word must be carefully weighed for both its denotative and connotative meanings. In a good poem, as in a good label, not one word can be changed without in some way altering the meaning. Consider how different Eliot's "The Wasteland" would feel if he had described April as the "meanest" or "nastiest" month, instead of the "cruellest." Label writers must make the same choices: does a predator "capture" its prey? "Trap"? "Devour"? Or simply "eat"? As Twain said, "The difference between the right word and the almost-right word is the difference between lightning and a lightning bug."



Arrange your work so that every part of it supports your meaning.

Imagery

Imagery is the life's-blood of poetry. Those little pieces of the real world give the reader's imagination something to grab hold of and react to as the poem weaves its meaning around them. (Label writers too are enjoined to use visual language to describe important features the visitor can see in the object before them.) By the same token, objects are often considered the backbone of the museum, the defining characteristic that sets us apart from other endeavors. And just as a poem uses imagery in different ways, we may also think of exhibits as employing their objects towards different ends as well.

Imagery comes in three flavors: properties, metaphors, and symbols. Properties are what they are and no more. The "vast and trunkless legs of stone" in Shelley's "Ozymandias" are just that—pieces of a broken statue. Metaphors are images used as comparisons, but not literally present. When Sandburg writes, "the fog comes on little cat feet," he's drawing an analogy. And symbols are both: present in the scene, yet also representing something else. Frost's "The Road Not Taken" concretely describes two roads diverging in a yellow wood, while simultaneously representing the role of choice in one's life.

Exhibits use objects in these same three ways. Properties are probably the most common. (And bear in mind that in poetics, "prop" does not carry the connotation of "fake" or "reproduction" that it often has in exhibitry.) The object is presented and described for what it is. No further meaning is implied. Indeed, museums sometimes take pains to avoid attributing meaning to objects, lest we do a disservice to the object, or impose our own prejudices on the trusting visitor.

Object-as-metaphor is less common, but not unknown. Many interactive devices operate metaphorically, with one activity or experience describing another. A zoo or natural history museum may explain the function of bird beaks through a series of pliers, tweezers, and other tools. An anthropological exhibit may display modern hunting or gardening equipment next to their equivalents from other cultures. In each case, the contemporary Western tool is not intended as an object for study, but rather as a familiar description of the artifact or specimen.

Object-as-symbol is perhaps the least common. That's understandable—symbolism is difficult to pull off successfully. But it's a shame too, because when done properly, symbolism can be extraordinarily moving. You will occasionally see, at the entrance to a gallery or in some other prominent place, a single item pulled out of the exhibit context and presented as an "icon." These objects stand on their own, but also represent broader ideas and messages, and thus gain a certain power from operating on two planes at once.

Unfortunately, many museum professionals view this as a problem, rather than an opportunity. We're often paralyzed by the idea that no single object can represent a comprehensive subject like "Mammals of Africa" or "Cultures of Ancient Mexico." But I fear we expect too much of ourselves and of our symbols. Frost's road was just one road, but it was also every road. Indeed, that's the point. We need to give our visitors credit. They handle the symbolism in language every day; we can trust them with symbolism in objects.

Theme and Countertheme

Every piece of communication, from Hamlet to the Ramayana to an e-mail, has a theme, a message it's trying to get across. But artists have long known that a second theme running counter to the main current can bring out subtle nuances of meaning, and in the end underscore the importance of the main message.

The classic example in poetry is the English sonnet, in which the first fourteen lines elaborate a single theme, and the last two veer off in a new direction. Rather than distracting from the message, the contrast actually makes it stand out more clearly. Consider Shakespeare's "My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun." He goes on at length about how his wife doesn't deserve the excesses of the Elizabethan love poem. Then he hits us with the switcheroo: "And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare/As any she belied with false compare."

Countertheme is fairly underused in museum exhibits. The focus on communicating a main message sometimes leads us to eliminate any diversion. Now, I'm as devoted a disciple of the Big Idea school of exhibit development as any. But a countertheme can do wonders for getting that big idea across.

Countertheme does pop up, perhaps unconsciously, in many exhibit texts. Think of all the two-paragraph labels you've read who's second stanzas begin with "but." "This animal is well-adapted to its environment, but it's nevertheless endangered." "This culture never developed agriculture, but they made use of hundreds of wild plants." These are forms of countertheme, with the contrast providing a fuller, richer story than either theme alone.

Incorporating countertheme into an exhibit as a whole is considerably trickier. This is partly due to the nature of exhibits: it's easier to develop multiple themes in linear media where the audience experiences the entire work, and in a set sequence. Exhibits professionals can make neither of those assumptions.

Another problem is that countertheme often requires repetition. In his famous villanelle "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night," Dylan Thomas repeats verse structures



and entire lines to compare how different men face mortality. An exhibit that returned to the same touchstone ideas or objects could examine these from different perspectives. Repetition can illustrate how people from different eras have hidden similarities, or how similar artists differ in important ways. Unfortunately, so many exhibits have such immense themes (“History of Our State,” “20th Century Art”) and such small budgets that we can’t say everything we need to once, let alone twice.

Some exhibits have successfully used countertheme. *Life Over Time* at The Field Museum presents the fossil evidence for evolution, and explains the biological mechanisms of evolution, in alternating rooms with very different feels. *Africa* at the same institution spends about 10,000 square feet celebrating the people of that continent, then, sonnet-like, hits you with 1,000 square feet of slavery in America at the end, ultimately showing how Africans and their culture adapted and survived.

Abstraction

Several years ago on the teen soap opera “Beverly Hills 90210,” Brenda’s English professor asked her to analyze “To His Coy Mistress.” A recent incident of date-rape was much on everyone’s mind, and Brenda interpreted Marvell’s exquisite love poem as the pleadings of frat boy who doesn’t realize that “no means no.” The professor encouraged Brenda to support her argument with lines from the poem, and asked the class to comment. On the show, this of course led to a heated debate on sexual politics. But the lesson the professor tried to impart was that a good poem has many valid meanings; that’s a big part of what makes it a good poem. It lets us in, and allows us to make our own interpretation. “A poem should not mean/but be” argued Archibald Macleish in his *Ars Poetica*—if it spells everything out, there’s nothing for the reader to relate to his own experience. Better for the poem, by its mere existence, to resonate with the reader’s soul. Abstraction is an essential ingredient in poetry.

Good advice for trying to convey a subjective, emotional truth. But most museums see their interpretive exhibits as vehicles of communication, not self-expression. Their aim is to teach, to impart knowledge, to clear up misconceptions. As such, ambiguity is anathema, and multiple interpretations a sign of failure, not of strength. But as another poet said, it ain’t necessarily so. A visitor viewing a dinosaur skeleton may be impressed by its sheer size; another may imagine the terror of the living beast; a third might ponder the immense stretches of time separating our species; a fourth may marvel at the majesty of creation; etc. All of these reactions are possible, and they’re all perfectly valid, even if they have nothing to do with the exhibit’s main message of evolutionary theory.

I strongly believe it’s the job—even the responsibility—of exhibits to present their information as clearly and unambiguously (and as engagingly) as possible. I would therefore argue that the exhibit label, the voice of the institution, though it may employ poetic devices, cannot itself be a poem open to divergent readings.

Rather, the exhibit and the objects are the poem, and the label’s role is more akin to the English professor: focusing the visitors’ eyes on those details which inform the institution’s reading, while at the same time accepting, even encouraging our guests’ own interpretations. Visitors are more receptive to our ideas if we are also receptive to theirs; better yet, if we can incorporate their understanding into our message.

Programs can be developed and docents trained to facilitate this kind of shared meaning-making. Labels of course cannot change to respond to every visitor. But front-end evaluation can alert us to how a subject resonates with our audience, and what kinds of interpretations are likely. Labels can then address these interpretations in strategic locations. Accepted and validated, the visitors’ meaning can be folded into our own.

For example, I’m currently developing an exhibit about the coral reef ecosystem. When asked what came to mind when they thought of coral, a certain percentage of visitors free-associated to Pacific Islands and World War II. Of course, the war has nothing to do with our ecosystem story. But a photo or two of a sunken battleship, now encrusted with coral, will validate the experiences of those guests, and make them receptive to messages such as “coral grows on solid surfaces;” “coral grows slowly (more than 60 years later you can still see the ship);” and “the reef can recover from significant damage.”

Poetry is not a panacea. It can’t do everything. Poetry is almost singularly useless at conveying factual information—which is, of course, the one thing educational exhibits most want to do. But our visitors also have social and emotional needs, and poetry speaks to these more directly and more powerfully than any other medium yet devised. As Alexander Pope said, “The sound must seem an echo to the sense.” Form follows function; the medium is the message—all are saying the same thing: arrange your work so that every part of it supports your meaning, because you never know which part of it someone is going to pick up on.

Brenda is in our galleries right now, reading our labels, viewing our objects, and making what sense of them she can. If we wish her to come away with our intended meaning, we need to address her agenda as well as our own. A poetic approach—to labels, to design, to the entire exhibit—can help us do this.

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