

Poetry – an Endangered Species? An interview with Jennifer K. Phillips

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A leading representative of contemporary *concrete poetry*, Jennifer K. Phillips, born in New Zealand and resident in Australia, is also a digital artist, songwriter, teacher and webmaster. The reader may be puzzled by her artistic interests going into such divergent directions, yet this fusion of different forms of art and creative media seems to be increasingly descriptive of the artistic behaviour of the present day. Jennifer Phillips herself admits that:

The exploration of image triggering and message transmission as an artistic form of communication can cause a blurring of the boundaries between poetry and art, if we can say that they in fact do have boundaries. We have created words to say this, such as word art, concrete poetry, visual poetry, pattern poetry, animated poetry, visual riddles and puzzle poetry. (“What is Poetry Becoming?”)

A.Z.: When did you first discover your love for poetry ?

J.K.P.: I think the word side of poetry was a gradual building that took place in my life whereas I think I was born with a love of imagery. My love for poetry cannot be pinpointed to one instance. It is better understood as being part of the development of all the forms of writing and art in my life beginning with the many books that my parents read to me. I was introduced to poetry before I knew it as an art form or what it was called. Although I loved listening to stories it was the pictures that caught my attention to begin with, more than the rhythm and rhyme of the words.

We travelled a lot when I was young and on our many car trips we played rhyming and other word games. We laughed as we looked at car license plates and made funny words from them. I noticed that you came across my initials JKL when you said the alphabet and I thought that was clever, but I think it may have been a present that triggered my curiosity and passion for the juxtapositioning of words. I was about eight when a boy friend gave me a little china deer and a card that said, “A wee deer for a dear”. This astounded, delighted and inspired me to think of other interesting things about words and word patterns such as, “A plain plane”.

As soon as I could write, I began writing stories and plays and put on little concerts using what I had written. I read poems that other people had written as part of the performances but it wasn't until I was 12 years old that I wrote my first poem as a poem. It was part of a class exercise. I loved it. I remember being surprised that it was so easy and so much fun and that the activity was called “Poetry”. I had seen and read poems in a range of situations before but somehow I hadn't attached the label “Poetry” to them.

Family friends came round for a meal about that time and when they heard that I was going to be a writer when I grew up, they wanted to read some of my work. After reading some they said that I should get my work published. I asked them how and where. They suggested I start with the children's section of the Evening Post newspaper. I took their advice and everything I sent to them was published. Praise whatever form it takes can trigger a love response. I think it did in me.

A.Z.: When trying to give a definition for *concrete poetry*, where would you place the emphasis: on *concrete* or on *poetry*?

J.K.P.: If I placed the emphasis on the word “concrete” someone might think I was talking about a “hard road” if you get my pun! Concrete is the type of clothing the poetry wears. It is a branch of the poet tree (poetry) so emphasis depends on where and to whom the concept is defined. Somewhere in the definition the concept of concrete would need to be distinguished from other forms of poetry.

A.Z.: Do you have a certain audience in mind when you create your poems?

J.K.P.: Some of the poems I have created were for specific audiences and situations; others have been revelations or interesting discoveries about a particular juxtaposition or shape of the words. I create because I can more often than because I am considering a particular audience. I did however create a range of motivational

poems to motivate my art students and I did speak in poetic form in some of the chat rooms I went to when I first discovered the Internet. I played with the pattern of the letters and words that others “spoke” and had a lot of fun. I called myself Silvrwing. The missing e was not a typo. I was in a philosophy chat room!

Someone asked me where I came from and I typed, “Silvrwing flies on the wind of words, she dwells in a land of flightless birds”. Someone praised me for the way my words could be taken many ways and I replied with “Silvrwing bow”, which also had a double meaning and some thought that it was an example of my typoetics. Should it have been “Silvrwing bows”? The missing s was a typo but I liked it better the way it came out. As a response I wrote “*Rosetted By the Bow*”

Rosetted By the Bow

Love bowed to one so low pointing out her bow (Oh). Should she not congee (Bow and leave) for the honour goes to three, the greatest to her Beau who tooled her with this bow (Oh).

Where typos are made To shelter a typo maid Where invitation clicks To talk to a lady chick Love can be seen.....

I’ll leave it there. It was a bit of fun on the run!

It was a Christian leader who gave me the idea of putting my poems into a book, which I did and another Christian leader encouraged me to keep on publishing books. My four books contain poems that I hope will appeal to people generally, regardless of the label they attach to their own belief system or the things they like and dislike. The songs (musical poems) my books contain are less mobile across the many possible audiences. They came from the relationship and audience I have with God. God and I are always my first audience. I often ask Him for help if I am writing for a specific audience. For the beginning of my second book I wrote an explanatory poem. I was thinking of my husband and all those who think that poetry has to rhyme, when I wrote it:

Do you think that ‘good’ poetry rhymes? ‘Good’ poetry speaks. It may be just a word but it opens doors sometimes like a snail moving a seed growing sometimes like a volcano erupting a machete slashing. It clothes the unseen makes visible hidden things and publishes that which is silent.

Rhyme is a style like the fashion of clothes sometimes ‘In’ and sometimes ‘Out’.

I have clothed some of the ideas in rhymes especially for those of you who think rhymes are ‘In’. Whether its ‘In’ or ‘Out’ may you find the snippets of truth in this clothing store and share their treasure.

A.Z.: In the article “What is Poetry becoming?” you wrote: “In visual poetry, the juxtaposition of letters, sound and shapes may be played with. The synergy of these words, letters and shapes trigger images, sounds and messages that can be called the art of the poet....making more from the sum of the parts in a visual communication.” Do you mean to say that concrete poetry is in the first place a visual aesthetic experience, or can we talk of such things as meaning/message to the same extent?

J.K.P.: We bring or attach meaning to everything we see including the label of “meaningless”. To be called “concrete” a poem must have some visual feature that may not be communicated if the poem is read or performed. The visual experience whether we attach aesthetic value to it or not is the first connection we make with the poem, but the aspect of “synergy” was what I meant to convey in what I said. Synergy is the key to poetry and the synergy of what is seen visually is the key to concrete poetry. For instance the words love and bridge by themselves have meaning and may even have a message if we meditate upon them. The depth of meaning we give these two words depends on our interpretation and the complexity of the experience we have in relation to the words, but if we place them visually together as I have in the following example, they communicate a lot more than if you just heard the two words. I have become the director of thoughts, causing them to go somewhere near what I am thinking about. This poem contains one word and one image but the synergy of both produces the poetry. The message the image produces is part of that synergy.



from my book "In Their Likeness"

(1995) [Can be viewed at: www.geocities.com/visualpoetry_au/vpoem19.html]

A.Z.: Can concrete poetry, also, be attributed to social and political involvement? Could you maybe mention some of your own poetry in this respect?

J.K.P.: Yes Aprilia, poetry can be a powerful political and social comment or changing tool. My concrete poem "Exhausted" is a social comment designed with the following message in mind: Some of the social ailments that we have today could be minimized if we were not so busy, if we allowed ourselves the time to reflect and rest. In this "instant coffee" age we tend to rush into things, grab the 'quick fix' solution and end up exhausted instead of satisfied.

exhausted

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exhausted

[citwings.com/poetry_Exhausted.html]

I wrote "Solomon's Gift" which has a poem within the poem, after talking with a member of a royal household. It was politically motivated. It was written rather quickly and is not my best but I hoped that the message about what we do with our power and it's effects would be seen and that it would trigger reflection.

SOLOMON'S GIFT The dawn of man saw the dusk of war I want what you have forever more **dusk** A world-time of loss propoganded as gain nations reflecting the desire of Cain scything the harvest of fear killing the gift of care **fear** Solomon's gift was a crown happiness all around for high rank and low he shared his wealth **a crown** A king with the reign/reigns/rains of peace and the earth with itching ears But who will share their gifts the crown of care **to wear** Dusk, fear, a crown to wear or happiness a crown to share? ©2008

A.Z.: What has been the impact of the electronic age on creativity in general and on creative writing in particular?

J.K.P.: It has given us more tools, methods and environments in which to communicate. It has made it possible to communicate multimedia experiences with a wider audience. It has opened the door for opportunities for us to be influenced by others from all over the world very quickly. It has enabled some people with disabilities to communicate and be communicated with more effectively. The electronic age has improved accessibility in many ways. To give an example: in the past being able to make an animation was limited to a very small community in the movie making field, who had the wealth to own or use such tools. Now anyone with internet access and the inclination can make an animation using free online tools. Perhaps the effects of the electronic age on creative writing can be summed up in the words speed, interactivity, accessibility and control. One of the specific things that the electronic age has done for me is eased my frustration. I no longer have to write out my poem many times in order to correct the typos. I can use the "spell check" feature of my software....I should use it more often! I like the control that the electronic age has given us all as well. We don't need to be so reliant on others for the production and publication of what we create. We can self publish very quickly..... and let us not forget that it has enabled knowledge to increase. This makes research more accessible and so creative writing can be more historically authentic or believable.

A.Z.: A prerogative for worldwide reception of poetry is translatability. Is the new sort of poetry, especially *concrete poetry*, still translatable?

J.K.P.: Words are culturally anchored. They make the sharing of experience possible and meaningful. But we have trouble even defining words in our own language so translating into another language has its difficulties. For example the word "*Education*" is a multiconceptual word. The word evokes a spectrum of images ranging from institutional labels to philosophical ideologies and signifies a range of activities as diverse as the people engaged in them, or mentioning them. For some to be called "Educational" the activity must result in some form of worthwhile personal change and to others it must have some form of intrinsic worth and choice. The term is also used to cover any activity in a building or institution that is labelled "educational". Education seems to range from being whatever anyone likes to call it, to what the political power of the day enforces! The conglomeration and accumulation of opinions and beliefs does not easily produce a consensus as to what "education" actually is, but we all think we "know" what we are talking about when we use the word.

I am teaching myself Hebrew at the moment and I think that all languages can be translated. A lot however can be gained and lost in the translation. Some languages lack the variety of words to convey the nuances of meaning from another culture and colloquiums cannot be translated word for word, but require contextual understandings.

The difficulties in translating any language are similar to those that affect the translation of concrete poetry. Bringing meaning to images has similar problems to those you encounter with words. For example, religious literacy is needed to understand the symbolism in much of what we call the "great art" that has been created by past masters.

Another difficulty is that the meaning of words and images can change over time. For example the meaning of gladness is probably no longer triggered by the word "*Gay*" and an image of a plane might have triggered thoughts of strange birds to one of our ancestors if they had a vision of one. It might trigger thoughts of fear and danger to an indigenous tribe living simply with little experience of such things. In my concrete poem *Love*, those who have heard of the song "*Bridge over troubled waters*" may bring a different meaning to the image of the bridge. The concrete poet as a director of thoughts has less control when the poem is shared in the world wide arena.

You may only peak Into my world. The subjectivity of words helps and hinders One perspective.

(From my poem "*Perspective*")

What do you think Aprilia? You are a translator. What are the main problems you encounter when you translate concrete poetry?

A.Z.: Does tradition still play a role in this new creative era ?

J.K.P.: Nothing is created in a vacuum. Traditions are a part of what has preceded our creativity, they are a part of the “nothing” that “is new under the sun”. They enable us to bring meaning to what is new. I may have been the first person to coin the term “typoetics” or to publish such a poem, but typos and poetry existed before my “typoetic poetry”. We would not be able to bring meaning to the word poetry or typo if there was no tradition of poetry and typing to precede the word. For example, rhyme may be viewed like the fashion of clothes, sometimes “In” and sometimes “Out” but when I think of my own poetry, its effectiveness is dependent upon whether I have used the best “clothing” to convey the message. If the message is enhanced by the rhyme then I have done well, if it detracts from the message then I should have changed the clothing. I feel the same way about art. The medium affects the meaning and therefore the message that it conveys. Without traditions how would we classify what we do?

A.Z.: Are you familiar with the *steampunk* movement?

J.K.P.: One of the online digital art communities I belong to has *steampunk* as the theme for their latest art challenge, which involves choosing a traditional myth or legend and reinterpreting it using elements of gears, springs, brass and steam power. I may have time to work on something for this challenge (<http://features.cgsociety.org/challenge>). In art I enjoy ‘clothing’ shapes with textures not usually associated with the shape. From what I understand of steampunk, they have a fascination and inclination to do this too but seem to be limited to one period in history. I on the other hand am not enamoured by one period of history. I like to create parabolic images, show likenesses and use images synergetically, for example “Canberra Ice-cream”. The image in the shape of an ice-cream shows the similarities that the dry land has with the dry ice-cream cone. The rain clouds that we love because of the drought are like a cool refreshing ice-cream, and ballooning is like the lolly on top. It is something extra special and all this is seen from a balcony view. We like a room with a view and this is the view we like to see – rain clouds to water the dry earth!



[This can be viewed at citwings.com/art.html]

I do enjoy many of the “kings, castles and Lord of the manor” stories that are set in the Victorian era and enjoy some of the modern fantasy movies. I love the elegance of some of the clothing too! However I have no desire to live in a Victorian type society that values class distinctions. I love the level “playing field”, the equality that I find valued and practiced by Australians. I may have been influenced by the gaming industry to enjoy the way beauty, adventure and mystery are portrayed in some recent movies, but I think the timeless qualities of the stories is what I and others enjoy about them. I have always liked super realistic imagery and symbolism also appeals to me. I like a story that has a moral and I like a poem that gives me something. Life is too short to be wasted on things that do not add value. I hate having my eyes and ears raped. I think the aim of some of the artists today is to shock. I have been shocked and I prefer the romanticism of love to explicit sexual or violent imagery or sound. I can appreciate how clever some works of this nature are but it is something I would rather avoid.

I am working towards an integration of message and media. I want my art works to be a product of my own uniqueness rather than someone else’s, but that doesn’t mean that I completely disregard existing poetry styles. I have played with a range of poetic forms and grabbed words that famous poets have used in the past to trigger present thoughts. The poem I wrote called “Paradise” has some examples of this, hinting at Milton and Tennyson: If you seek to find this treasure then Paradise will wind her wisdom arms around you to keep you both entwined. Even after googling I haven’t seen enough poetry classified as *streampunk* to say much more. If any of my poetry earns the brand it was not because I planned it that way.

A.Z.: There are poets, critics and others who say that *concrete poetry* and *poetry* in general is in a phase of decline. The leading American poet, critic and educator Dana Gioia, for instance, in his much debated article “Can Poetry Matter?” (*The Atlantic Monthly*, 1991) maintains that poetry has increasingly become the specialized occupation of a few relatively small and isolated groups. Do you agree to that?

J.K.P.: Am I a prophet....? I am not a statistician. Poetry as “Occupation” probably did belong to a few in the past. The number of people earning enough money to say that it is their “occupation” as opposed to being preoccupied with it may be proportionately similar to the time when poetry was first published in books after the invention of the printing press. I don’t have any statistical evidence to make a judgement. I can say that poetry has been increasing. Just look at the number of poetry books available now, but then the number of people in the world has also been increasing so it is a difficult thing to assess.

We have greater means of storing or “saving” poetry and it is easier to publish it now. It is certainly more accessible because of the internet and the groups no longer need to be isolated. Poetry sites are increasing but so is the number of other sites. In 1991 when Dana Gioia’s article was published, the internet was not the vehicle it is now so it would be interesting to see if he still stands by his prediction. I think animated and interactive poetry is in its infancy, although I haven’t seen much of it that I would class as animated concrete or visual poetry. It tends to be animation without the emphasis on the poetic arrangement of words.

In this proliferation of poetry, poetry that astounds, amazes or adds significant value to our lives has and may always be a “specialised occupation”. At least now these gems can be shared easily via email forwarding for example. The more memorable poets we have, the harder it is to remember them all. Schools certainly had less choice when it came to memorable poets from which to choose in the past.

I have noticed that many cities now have regular poetry sharing events and “poetry slams” seem to be very popular. A similar proportion of poetry groups may have been around in the past. It just may be that our technologies have made them more visible, changing our perception of what is really happening.

I have many ideas of how I can use the “poetic clothing” of animation and interaction to share my messages. When I made my first animated poem in 2001, I had to format it as a gif file and so it lost a lot of the information in the file conversion, but now most browsers read a “Flash” format so I have more freedom to create a wider range of electronically translatable concrete poems and more people have the means to see them. If I have many

poems within me yet to be shared, other poets must too. Therefore in the future I can see much more poetry being published.



[This image can be accessed at: www.poyema.com/wisdom.html]

A.Z.: What can we do for poetry to survive as an essential act of creation?

J.K.P.: get to know the “creator”..... ♪ (lots of smiles). I hope you don't mind my smile here! Share it...share the best of it enthusiastically. If poetry is an act of destruction, avoid it, unless it makes way for further acts of creation.

A.Z.: You are a very cooperative person, always ready to assist young people in their creative endeavour. What advice do you have for young poets?

J.K.P.: Make time for poetry. I think a lot of the things I said in my article “How to promote your art” which can be accessed at citwings.com/art_promotion.html apply to poetry. Try substituting the word poetry for art and don't just read the article. Do what I suggest.