

# **Poetry and the Law of Unintended Consequences**

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## Poetry and the Law of Unintended Consequences

For poetry makes nothing happen; it survives  
In the valley of its making where executives  
Would never want to tamper, flows on south  
From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,  
Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives,  
A way of happening, a mouth.

From "In Memory of W.B. Yeats"

W.H. Auden, writing on the death of Yeats in 1939, described poetry as something like a lone wolf in the wilderness, remote from "the importance and noise of tomorrow//When the brokers are roaring like beasts on the floor of the Bourse..." Poets have always seen their art this way: Aware of its differentness ("Poetry seeks out and consumes the otherness in matter, for in all poetry there is an otherness."). Resigned to its outsider status ("To be a poet is to be attached to life by a different set of hooks."). But never doubting its importance ("Beyond the reach of a poem and its ending is the call of a North never quite true.").

Such views and attitudes (those last three quotes are from something I wrote a dozen years ago) have given poetry a Ptolemaic perspective of its place in the universe. When that ancient Greco-Roman astronomer mapped the heavens he placed the earth at the center of the cosmos, with the sun and planets revolving around it. In a similar manner poetry places Man, or humanity, at the center of the universe, with poetry as the portal through which he perceives that universe. External realities are a firmament arranged around it according to their relevance to the human condition and to their usefulness to poetry. This is logical. If the mission of science is to discover objective truth about the physical universe, the mission of poetry is to discover subjective truth about the interior universe of human experience.

This evening I will look at look at poetry with a more Copernican perspective. Copernicus, who came along 1500 hundred years after Ptolemy, established the model we know today: the sun at the center of the

solar system, and the earth merely one of numerous planets revolving around it. My thought experiment is to think of poetry as not at the self-referential center of a universe—mankind perceiving the universe through the portal of poetry—but as one among many disciplines that accomplish that work. I would ask if poetry might learn something about itself from these other disciplines, especially from new ways of thinking that have arisen in the natural sciences, as well as the social sciences. Is the evolution of an art subject to the same principles as the evolution of a species? Can Darwin's Theory of Natural Selection help us better to understand how poetry proceeds from one kind of writing to another; how some poetic movements prove, like species in nature, to be cul de sacs while others prosper and advance the art form? Can more recent scientific theories, such as Chaos Theory and Contingent Evolution, and, from the social sciences, Creative Destruction and the Law of Unintended Consequences, help us to understand how poetry has evolved over a history that goes back to man's discovery of speech? My contention will be that these shoes seem to fit, and the answer to these questions may be Yes.

In saying this I should be clear about my claims. I will not assert a complete parallelism between the evolution of poetry and evolution in nature, but rather will look for illuminating similarities. Nor do I view poetry the art form as a species having a life cycle that is independent of the life cycle of our own species. Poetry in the broad sense is a continuous condition of our existence, like eating or breathing, and I believe it will continue to be written as long as our species endures. Rather I will look at the movements and schools within poetry that have come and gone over its history, and consider whether and to what extent they have life cycles like that of a species in nature.

Asking poetry and science to sit in the same room for this experiment has its risks. From your college days you may recall C.P. Snow's little book, *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution*, in which he famously lamented the gulf between scientists and "literary intellectuals." In Snow's experience the scientists would echo Auden, that poetry survives in the valley of its making where scientists would never want to tamper. And the poets, according to Snow, were illiterate in the Second Law of Thermodynamics. Tonight you may see that gulf in action. If what follows sounds like an English major attempting to apply arcane scientific theories to a subject for which they were not intended, that's because that is what it is. (If there's any mischief in my talk tonight it's in the title, since what I'm about would

certainly be an unintended consequence of these theories in the eyes of their discoverers.) I am a humanist by temperament and poet by practice, not a scientist and certainly no advanced mathematician. So I undertake these remarks with deference to those who may find them blissfully naive.

### Poetry and *The Origin of Species*

In *The Origin of Species* Darwin defined success in a species in terms of survival and reproduction. A species is successful if its individuals survive until they propagate, and the species thereby endures. Outwardly, at least, a successful school or movement in poetry must meet the same criteria. To pick two, Romanticism and Modernism each had its founders (Wordsworth and Coleridge; Pound and Eliot). The works of those founders propagated through generations of later poets who were influenced by them, and through expanding readerships. And each movement was dominant for a century or more. In Darwin's terms Romanticism and Modernism were successful species of poetry.

If species in nature encounter drastic changes to their habitat, Natural Selection holds that some will adapt and survive while others die out. When that asteroid struck the earth 65 million years ago the dinosaurs were unable to adapt to a radically altered planet. But the Great Extinction, which included three-quarters of all then-living plant and animal species, gave an insignificant mammal—the Jurassic Shrew—the chance to occupy through its diverse descendants the vacated ecological niches, and so to inherit the earth—or at least the dinosaur's portion of it. It's the same for poetry. When an existing school of poetry can no longer adapt to and express the new realities it encounters, it is superseded. In 1912 Rupert Brooke was writing a genteel Edwardian poetry:

...oh! yet  
*Stands the Church clock at ten to three?*  
*And is there honey still for tea?*

Conclusion of "The Old Vicarage, Grantchester"

A few years later Wilfred Owen was writing the horrors of trench warfare in WWI:

*Gas! Gas! Quick, boys!—An ecstasy of fumbling,  
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;  
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling,  
And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime...  
If in some smothering dreams you too could pace  
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,  
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face...  
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood  
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs...  
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest  
To children ardent for some desperate glory,  
The old lie: Dulce et decorum est  
Pro patria mori.*

From “Dulce Et Decorum Est”

(Those last lines translate: “Sweet and fitting it is to die for one’s country.”)

Wallace Stevens, the major Modernist poet, saw early on that it takes new art to capture new reality:

*They said, “You have a blue guitar,  
You do not play things as they are.”*

*The man replied, “Things as they are  
Are changed upon the blue guitar.”*

*And they said then, “But play, you must,  
A tune beyond us, yet ourselves,*

*A tune upon the blue guitar  
Of things exactly as they are.”*

From “The Man With the Blue Guitar”

### Poetry and Creative Destruction

If evolution in poetry shares at least one governing principle with the evolution of species in nature—the need to adapt to a changed environment or a new reality—can the same be said of poetry and the social sciences? In

the field of economics the concept of Creative Destruction had its origins in the 19th century with Karl Marx, but developed its modern meaning in the work of the economist Josef Schumpeter. Although not a rigorous theory like Darwin's, the central idea in Creative Destruction is that it is in the nature of capitalism and free markets to destroy and reconfigure previous economic orders. With the entrepreneur often the agent of change (think Edwin Land and the Polaroid camera, or Steve Jobs and the iPhone), new industries continually arise and supersede or partially supplant old ones. The evolutions of the railroads and the steel industry in the United States have been studied from this point of view. But the creative destruction we are living through right now is the digital revolution. The decline and transformation of the traditional newspaper business, which was started decades ago by radio and television, have been dramatically accelerated by the advent of online journalism. Digitally-delivered news is continuous, delivered more quickly, and cheaper to buy than a newspaper. Cable news can also bundle and expand a given story with live interviews, video coverage, and simultaneous commentary from experts, none of which was available from the newspaper that was once thrown daily at your family's front porch.

Creative Destruction is also present in the way that poetry renews itself. A new issue of *Poetry*, which is a monthly magazine, typically attracts many letters to the editor. Some subscribers read those first because they are so lively and entertaining. The letter writers can wax rapturous or humorous; they can also despair, deplore, rebut, denounce and dismiss. (One sees that poetry is too important to be polite about.) But beyond the fun, you can see in the letters a kind of contending or competition similar to the struggle for survival among diverse species. That contentiousness—poets will argue about anything regarding poetry—is the Creative Destruction out of which the poetry of tomorrow will arise from the poetry of today.

T.S. Eliot saw this from a more patrician point of view, although it was still Creative Destruction. In a *Paris Review* interview he was asked about his early poems:

Q. Did you feel, possibly, that you were writing against something, more than from any model? Against the poet laureate perhaps?

A. No, no, no. I don't think one was constantly trying to reject things, but just trying to find out what was right for oneself. One really ignored poet laureates as such, the Robert Bridges. I don't think good poetry can be produced in a kind of political attempt to overthrow some existing form. I think it just supersedes. People find a way in which they can say something. "I can't say it that way, what way can I find that will do?" One didn't really *bother* about the existing modes.

In the same way the digital media did not set out to demolish print media. The Internet pioneers simply saw an opportunity to put the news online, and in pursuit of that created a new industry. Eliot the Modernist and Steve Jobs the Entrepreneur drew their water from the same well. Each saw a better way to do something, and their vision supplanted the previous order. For Eliot the previous order was the poetry written up through Longfellow and Robert Bridges. And his poem *The Waste Land* was the Jurassic Shrew whose descendants replaced the dinosaurs. For Jobs the previous order was that black boxy object in your home called a telephone.

### Poetry, Chaos Theory, and Contingent Evolution

Earlier in these remarks I asked what poetry might learn about itself from *new* ways of thinking in the natural sciences, and mentioned Chaos Theory and the Theory of Contingent Evolution. Stephen Jay Gould was a powerful advocate for Contingent Evolution, which posits the nonrecurring nature of the evolution of life on earth. The thought experiment that Gould proposed: If we rewind the tape of evolution backwards and replay it, would life evolve in the same way or in some very different manner? His book *Wonderful Life* is named in tribute to the Frank Capra movie *It's a Wonderful Life*. In the movie George Bailey, played by Jimmy Stewart, is about to jump from a bridge and wishes out loud that he had never been born. His guardian angel intervenes and shows Bailey how different life in Bedford Falls would have been had he never been born. For Gould this neatly illustrates how a random event—the world with or without George Bailey—can have an outsized impact on the course of subsequent events. Gould's answer to his own question: If the "evolutionary tape" were to be rewound by half a billion years and played again, human life would not be inevitable, or even likely. In fact, even if it were replayed a million times, man would not be expected again. Gould takes the Tree of Life (the traditional metaphor showing the evolution of life as a progress from the

first single cells up to Man as its highest, most advanced form), and replaces it with a Shrub of Life, having numberless branches all with the potential to predominate. Gould concludes that Man is “a wildly improbable evolutionary event.” Under his theory of Contingent Evolution, there is nothing inevitable—or even probable—about man.

Gould’s theory was hotly challenged when it appeared and is still vigorously debated by evolutionary scientists, so it cannot be called “settled science.” But we can usefully ask if there is something like Contingent Evolution in the arts. The question is salient for poetry (as for any art) because poetry has always viewed its history in terms of individual poets—as a succession of George Baileys, if you will. *The Oxford Anthology of English Poetry* is organized around the “great poets” in our literature: Chaucer, Shakespeare and so on through the pantheon. The way poetry looks at its history may be seen as an example or an application of the Great Man theory of history. Formulated by Thomas Carlyle in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Great Man theory held that history is largely determined by the impact of “great men,” or heroes. As Carlyle put it, “The history of the world is but the biography of great men.” He supported his theory with studies of, among others, Muhammad, Shakespeare, Luther, Rousseau and Napoleon. Applied to poetry, the Great Men would be the poets in the Oxford Anthology.

Although the Great Man theory fell out of favor with historians after WWII, it is still widespread in popular thinking. Poetry continues to understand its history as a compilation of the best *individual* poets and their poetries. And why not? What can be a more unique artifact of human experience than a work of art? Poems are not a commodity, not interchangeable. Someone’s poem cannot be written by anyone else. Today we can look back on a century of Modernism as a coherent whole. Eliot and the other early Modernists are now anthologized as our “Modern Classics.” We can trace their influence on successive generations of poets down through the 20<sup>th</sup> century in—to pick one source—successive issues of *Poetry* magazine. Every important poet in the canon of American poetry from that century can be found in its pages. With the passage of time this poetry began to cohere into a body of literature; critical consensus treated it as the literary record of its era. Bear with me, then, if I say that Chaos Theory and Gould’s Theory of Contingent Evolution suggest that there was nothing whatever inevitable about Modernism or, more broadly, the evolution of our poetry into what it is today.



What if the blind Milton was a George Bailey who got his wish and had never been born? In what different ways would poetry have evolved without his influence? What if Wilfred Owen, the greatest of the WWI poets, had not been killed by a shell the week before the Armistice in 1918? Had he lived another 50 years, what would his influence have become on the subsequent course of poetry?

Chaos Theory, sometimes called “the butterfly effect,” holds that initial, small random events can have an outsized influence on future outcomes. The nickname comes from the whimsical idea that a butterfly can flap its wings in some distant place, and several weeks later cause a hurricane. It has been applied to everything from cloud formation to the number of planets in our solar system. Applying the Chaos Theory to poetry, we can ask what would have happened if Pound and Eliot had not immediately hit it off when they met in 1914? What if they had taken an active dislike to each other and never collaborated? Under Chaos Theory their failure to get along, had that happened, would count as a small, random event. But without their literary partnership Pound’s editorial genius would not have come to bear on Eliot’s work and we would not have his immensely influential poem “The Waste Land.” (Eliot dedicated the poem to Pound as *il miglior fabbro*, a line from Dante meaning “the better craftsman.”) Instead we would have a decidedly more quixotic piece of work called “He Do the Police in Different Voices,” which was the title of the sprawling, experimental manuscript that Eliot gave to Pound. On a grander scale, if the two world wars had not occurred, would Existentialism have emerged as the enabling philosophy of Modernism? Or what if WWII did occur, but the Axis powers had not been defeated? Would poetry have evolved less as a celebration of the individual and more as a handmaiden to the state? (Think less Whitman, more Wagner.) At one level this “What if?” is a parlor game better enjoyed with a glass of port. But Chaos Theory and the Theory of Contingent Evolution supply another context for how poetry can think about its history and evolution.

### Poetry and the Law of Unintended Consequences

I’ll close these remarks with a look at poetry and the Law of Unintended Consequences. This law, which is not so much a “law” as an observation of how things work out, became popular in the 20<sup>th</sup> century social sciences. It asserts that any intervention in a complex system will have consequences unforeseen by its sponsors. There are many examples of this, but my

favorite comes from the Falkland Islands War between Argentina and the U.K. Minefields were laid on the islands during combat operations in the 1980s, and were never recovered. To this day people cannot walk in those minefields—but the feet of birds are too light to trigger the mines. The Unintended Consequence? The minefields have become de facto bird sanctuaries.

I can imagine one example of an Unintended Consequence that relates to poetry. Coincident with the rise of higher education in this country—a college education becoming after WWII an established part of the American dream—Modernism took poetry away from the newspaper-reading public, the popular audiences that had grown up on Longfellow in the previous century, and into the college classroom. The symbiotic relationship that developed between academic-based literary critics and the Modernist poets served both well. The difficulties of reading Modernist poetry needed specialists to interpret it, and the literary critics needed something more challenging to interpret than:

Under a spreading chestnut-tree  
The village smithy stands;  
The smith, a mighty man is he,  
With large and sinewy hands;  
And the muscles of his brawny arms  
Are strong as iron bands.

His hair is crisp, and black, and long,  
His face is like the tan;  
His brow is wet with honest sweat,  
He earns what'er he can,  
And looks the whole world in the face,  
For he owes not any man.

From Longfellow's "The Village Blacksmith"

Those of you who were once "English Lit." majors will recall the names I.A. Richards, F.R. Leavis, and Cleanth Brooks as readily as you recall the Modernist poets and novelists into whose mysteries these exegetes initiated the undergraduate masses. As Modernism mutated into varieties of Post Modernism through the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, contemporary poetry continued to find its readers not in the newspapers but in the college

classroom. With the Law of Unintended Consequences in mind one may ask: Would Modernist literature ever have prevailed, would it have superseded Tennyson and Longfellow as the new order, without the G.I. Bill to create generations of captive audiences, those legions of English Lit. majors for whom it was assigned reading? Is Modernist literature, at least in this country, an unintended consequence of the G.I. Bill?

### Connections & Conclusions

Looking at these five theories as a group I am struck that, even though they were selected randomly, they seem to have connections among themselves. Creative Destruction could find a home in Darwin's Theory of Natural Selection. The idea that new orders arise and displace the old ones is an idea common to both. And Gould's Contingent Evolution can be seen as an application of Chaos Theory. Both derive from the view that small random events can have outsized impact on future events; that small changes in initial conditions can lead to drastically different outcomes. Likewise The Law of Unintended Consequences seems to be a variation on or application of Chaos Theory: Events or actions, not just small and random but also large purposive interventions, can result in unforeseen consequences. For our thought experiment this evening Chaos Theory also serves as a kind of umbrella theory or parent theory.

In a 1994 article in *Scientific American* Gould described the impact of science on human self-perception in this way:

Sigmund Freud often remarked that great revolutions in the history of science have but one common, and ironic, feature: they knock human arrogance off one pedestal after another of our previous conviction about our own self-importance. In Freud's three examples, Copernicus moved our home from center to periphery, Darwin then relegated us to "descent from an animal world"; and, finally (in one of the least modest statements of intellectual history, says Gould), Freud himself discovered the unconscious and exploded the myth of a fully rational mind.

I see Gould's point but it creates a quandary for poetry (and for all the arts), whose sole business is to put the self on a pedestal, not to knock it off that pedestal. Nor do I agree with his characterization because to discover and express what it means to be human, which is the purpose of art, is not a

matter of arrogance and self-importance. In a major way art finds meaning in human life. I would like to think that these five theories we have discussed tonight can lead poetry to some new ways to think about and understand its *past*: Why poetry traveled the roads that it did, instead of others, and how it came to where it is today. In that role perhaps the men of science are the advance men for poets.

But understanding better how poetry evolved is one thing, and explaining where it will go from here is another. “Chaos Theory,” someone wrote, “is the science of surprises, of the nonlinear and unpredictable.” The theory, now widely accepted, seeks to prove mathematically that there is a category of events that are not linear and therefore not predictable no matter how perfect and complete the information you start with. That recognition acknowledges a formal home for poetry in the cosmos. Like long-term weather forecasting and the stock market, poetry defies prediction. In that thought I take great comfort. What a dreary future ours would be if the course of poetry were linear and could be plotted before it happens. If Chaos Theory is the science of surprises, poetry is the art of surprises. Poetry is the animal that always escapes. Reading it one finds it one of the last legitimate sources of magic in human experience.