



but is it poetry?

WORDS BY CHARLIE TIDMARSH
VISUALS BY EUNICE CHUNG

What does the word “poetry” mean to you? If you are anything like I was as a freshman in college — or if you (forgivably) aren’t an avid reader of Semiotext(e), or if you simply haven’t sat down quietly with yourself to honestly encounter a good poem in a while — it may mean: wisdom, depth, erudition, Truth. For whatever admixture of complicated cultural reasons, this is the baggage we have burdened poetry with as an art form. When a politician delivers a moving speech that appeals to some deeper register of humanity, one that seems to plumb past the otherwise banal realpolitik conventions of diplomatic addresses, we call the performance “poetic.” We also, perhaps paradoxically, reserve the designation for extreme displays of technical excellence: LeBron James can be poetic, as can Meryl Streep or Daniel Day-Lewis. In the particular case of basketball — which is often said to resemble jazz — the likening to poetry is quite a bit stronger than mere simile to the rhythms of music; “poetic” is our catch-all term for both the elevation and the transcending of artifice, the Sublime, the Rapturous, the Ideal.

These are popular misconceptions, and they set average readers up for frustration. There is nothing essentially wise, inherently superior, or universally true about Poetry capital ‘P’ in the same way that there is nothing inherently spicy in Food. Poetry can be sublime, but probably not with any greater frequency than a novel or a musical performance of comparable artistic ambition

can be, and it can be ironic, contradictory, funny, crude, and purely technical in equal measure. Different poems of course have the effect of wisdom for particular readers, and some poems may perform erudition. Different foods have the effect of spiciness, different movies are scary, the world turns once again on its axle. But for whatever reason we still insist that a great poem is great because it carries a deep meaning that it is our duty to extricate, a prejudice which occludes any given poem’s actual meaning, which is always a unique hybrid of sound, shape, rhythm, image, texture, speed, and, yes, the denotations of the actual words (but only sometimes: see “Jabberwocky” or *Finnegan’s Wake*). For lack of a critical term, it’s a feeling. So the average reader, accustomed this way to ignore enjambment and leap for interpretation, picks up the *Collected Frank O’Hara*, finds no paraphrasable meaning, and re-shelves Poetry in the dusty and austere ivory towers of the popular imagination. The cycle repeats. We mythologize away what we don’t understand.

This divide — the asymmetry between popular understandings of poetry as dealing only in Deep Truths and the actual practice of poetry — has never been so stark in recent memory as it is now in the case of Rupi Kaur, the 26-year-old Canadian poet, who has been consistently setting up and bowling down commercial poetry records for the last three years. Kaur, who has, as of this writing, outsold Homer, read publicly to thousands, posed for selfies with singer Sam Smith, and begun to sell boutique-y embroidered pillowcases, is so explosively successful that her work has dovetailed with her online brand and evolved into something of a global

entrepreneurial juggernaut. @rupikaur_, the Instagram account where this unprecedented career began, is now strategically interspersed with pictures of herself that are tonally similar to her poems — subdued but meaningful, quiet but definitive, stylish, and always starring the poet herself front-and-center. She also uses this platform to sell “canvas art pieces” — white canvases with a select poem in stark black text accompanied by a line illustration. She is never less than fashionable in silk pants or a sari or denim grunge-wear and a backwards hat, and in this self-presentation she acts as a lodestar for (apparently huge) segments of a younger generation (mine) that gleefully equate style with empathy, wisdom, and creative perspective. For this unabashed curation of a unified self-image alone, some critics (notably Rebecca Watts in the *PN Review*) have gone so far as to deem the phenomenon a cult of personality, which seems not only unfair but also willfully ignorant of the authentic reactions to the poet’s writing.

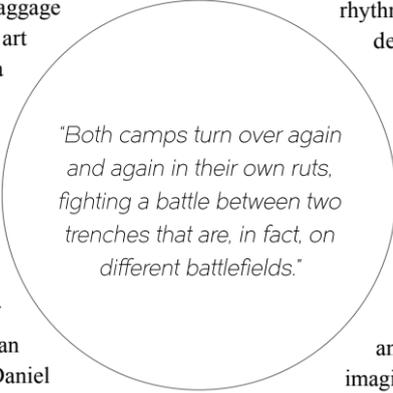
And the Deep Truth in her work? Well, Kaur makes no bones in the truth-peddling department. Her work is notably devoid of humor, consistently sentimental and confessional, highly unselfconscious, and not formally ambitious whatsoever. The truth is in the literal meanings of the literal words, while form is a secondary necessity — after all, it couldn’t be Poetry without line breaks, could it? There is boldness here, to be sure, though the boldness has nothing to do with poetry and everything to do with the immediacy of the emotional conveyance at work. It takes a very bold poet indeed, nowadays, to write a poem and refer to it as communicating “the human condition.” Kaur is bold if nothing else, and here, in a poem entitled “the human condition,” is what she offers us humans in her most recent collection, *the sun and her flowers* (2017):

i long
for you
but you long
for someone else
i deny the one
who wants me
cause i want someone else

-the human condition

Most readers will fail to detect even a wink of irony here because there is none. This is a straight-faced admission, delivered with the same frank vulnerability that has come to characterize Kaur’s entire persona. The poem itself has a subtle sense of musical expansion. There’s a palpable asymmetry, a welcome poetic imbalance: “for someone else” is repeated with difference in “cause i want someone else,” and this refrain is neatly mirrored and amplified. If I were feeling generous, I’d also note that the lowercase “i” is more than a stylistic millennial trifle, and actually serves to dampen the authority and assertive force of its speaker. All good things, to be sure, and all things that belie undeniable poetic intentions. Despite this, you are bound to find underneath her posts a large commentariat saying things like, “That’s a nice thought, but is it poetry?,” or the more direct “This is not poetry!,” an indictment that I myself have been guilty in leveling. Positive comments — the majority — tend towards self-recognition: “this is me rn,” or the elaboration of the theme at hand as it pertains to one’s own life, a kind of communal therapy session.

So it would seem that the jury is still out, in both critical and popular circles. Millions of fans — mostly young women — find truth in (which is to say, relate to) Kaur’s emotional confessions, most often pertaining to



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self-harm, romantic relationships, immigration, and self-and body-acceptance. Popular readers who find none of themselves in these themes are quick to hop on the “not poetry” bandwagon because there is little to like outside of those themes, and both camps turn over again and again in their own ruts, fighting a battle between two trenches that are, in fact, on different battlefields.

I’d like to posit the following for the relevant jury’s consideration: Rupi Kaur does not pose an existential threat to poetry; rather, the fact of her emergence heralds a minor crisis for the field of literary criticism. Already a waning industry, popular literary criticism (the kind of reviewing that takes place outside the “poetry establishment,” which is to say the University, and appears in widely circulated magazines and newspapers) has for its relatively brief existence held as a *raison d’être* the clarification of unobvious meanings. I maintain that this is a hugely important undertaking — poems and novels can be beguiling and entertaining simultaneously, and a good critic not only helps us understand why we are entertained (and in so doing teaches us about ourselves) but also points toward ways of reading a poem that will sharpen the visceral aesthetic experience.

What, for instance, can possibly be said to be the “meaning” of the final three stanzas in Frank O’Hara’s “Morning,” which is similar to Kaur in its sentimentality but worlds removed from her limpid formal constructions:

Last night the stars
were numerous and today
snow is their calling
card I’ll not be cordial

there is nothing that
distracts me music is
only a crossword puzzle

do you know how it is

when you are the only
passenger if there is a
place further from me
I beg you do not go

You might talk about what it means for music to be “only a crossword puzzle,” or you might decipher how snow could possibly be the stars’ “calling card,” but you’d be looking under all the wrong rocks while simultaneously failing to experience the sharp wire-crossings of O’Hara’s imagery and the breathless stumbling of his lines. “Do you know how it is/when you are the only passenger” only makes sense, only lands, if you’ve been sprinting alongside O’Hara as he thinks this way — probably while walking to lunch down Sixth Avenue — and is therefore only meaningful within the realm of experiencing what the form of this poem does to your own brain. If you were to reduce this final stanza down to a single platitude, it might well be indistinguishable from a Kaur poem — I won’t even attempt to say that O’Hara was “wiser” than Rupi Kaur when it comes to love. But good poetry is irreducible. Meaning, here, is something akin to but not totally “the reader’s experience” of thinking in step with O’Hara’s cadence and watching as the sparks of his imagination sizzle and dissipate into the void. Poet and critic David Orr ties a nice bow on this whole “meaning” debacle with characteristic pith: “The meaning of poetry is poetry.”

Kaur has punctured that very tautology, a closed loop which has produced a beautiful tradition of poetry criticism. Each and every one of her poems does not tacitly say that the “meaning of poetry is poetry,” but rather that the meaning of this poem is some quotable, interpersonal truism that it would be decadent or elitist to complicate. It should be no surprise that critics have absolutely nothing to do with her poems. It would appear that their work has already been done for them.

For this reason, most of the critical conversation

about Kaur’s poetry skirts the writing itself and opts for the easier, but no less important, implications that she holds for the economics of the publishing industry, and for the representation of young, non-white female writers in that industry. This makes perfect sense, because it would be quite unthinkable for a critic to apply their skills to a statement like “i long/for you/but you long/for someone else.” And so, for the most part, Kaur is a clay target dummy for the sharp-sworded critics who are rightly accustomed to talk mostly about form and leave emotive content aside; her poetry is immune to conventional poetry criticism precisely because it eschews serious considerations of shape and sound in favor of vulnerability. Poetry criticism has approximately zero tools at its disposal to deal with such frankness, because the frankness is never couched in something that even purports to be more than exactly what it says.

Kaur herself has been vocal about the revolution that is afoot and for which she undoubtedly lit the torches. In an interview with NPR’s Rachel Martin she said, concerning critics of her work, “We have a form of art that is highly, highly traditional — meaning poetry — and then you have this other thing which is new and quite non-traditional, which is of course social media. And so the gatekeepers of these two things are kind of confused at this moment.”

Here, she is only half right. The gatekeepers are certainly confused. As to poetry being “highly, highly traditional” — well, only if that tradition is one of breaking, manipulating, and rearranging past tradition. O’Hara, again, is hugely relevant here. There was nothing about the man or his work that suggested poetry to be a “highly, highly traditional” genre; he was a chronically depressed gay man

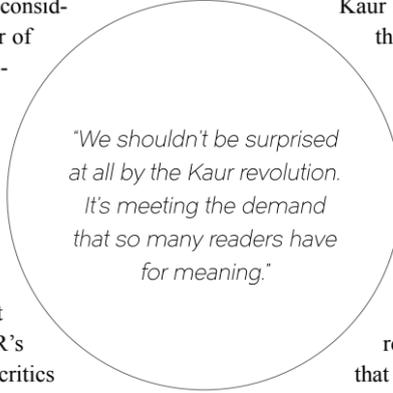
with aspirations to be a painter during the mid-century New York School era who, consequently, smuggled into his poems much of the juxtaposition and jar of the visual artists with whom he was tightly associated and admired. This led him most often to free-verse (by no means traditional) and what is called “stream of consciousness” poetry. O’Hara recognized that the real vulnerability operative in poetry is the laying bare of the rhythms that words take inside a person’s skull, not the application of emotional platitudes to a genre which was not prepared to support the weight.

So we shouldn’t be surprised at all by the Kaur revolution. It’s meeting the demand that so many readers have for meaning.

Imagine that you are the novice poetry reader who, encountering O’Hara for the first time and culturally primed to expect a meaning, could only shrug your shoulders and count yourself yet again as someone who doesn’t “understand” Poetry. Imagine, then, that you pick up *the sun and her flowers* and are finally relieved to find an accessible meaning that has been brought down, like Elijah’s

heavenly flame, from the elites. Imagine, finally, that there was in fact no “meaning” hidden away anywhere, ever, and in all our flustering insecurity we had been ignoring what was right there on the page all along.

It’s too much to ask of poetry that it give us a deep meaning. It’s too much to ask of Kaur’s fans that they suspend their enthusiasm and read some Barthes. It’s too much to say that Kaur doesn’t write poems, and it’s incorrect, too. It should not be too much to ask that we all slow down, take a breath or two, turn the page, and receive what a poem — not Poetry — has to offer. That we all, collectively, get a little more vulnerable. ○



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