

Physics and poetry revisited

In his editorial “Physics and poetry” (PHYSICS TODAY, April 2022, page 8), Charles Day states that he found “barely a handful” of poems related to physical phenomena in the online poem collection of the Poetry Foundation. He might have had better luck looking in 19th-century sources.

We are the editors of the MIT website the Net Advance of Physics, which includes a section called “Watchers of the Moon”¹ (an allusion to the famous paintings by Caspar David Friedrich). It is an anthology of science-themed poetry from the (very) long 19th century, which we define as 1750–1925. The lower limit is arbitrary; the upper limit has to do with copyright law. The section features poems by the usual suspects (William Wordsworth, Edgar Allan Poe, and so on), but

also by obscure and forgotten writers. The quality, it need hardly be said, spans a similarly broad range.

We have also included the verse of James Clerk Maxwell and other literarily inclined scientists. We suspect our page “The One of Time, of Space the Three: The Collected Poems of Sir William Rowan Hamilton” might be of particular interest to physicists and mathematicians. Because of our linguistic limitations, “Watchers of the Moon” presently includes only poetry in English (with a few translations); we would welcome suggestions for 19th-century poems from other cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

Reference

1. The Net Advance of Physics Retro, “Watchers of the Moon: Poetry and Mathematical Physics in the Long Nineteenth

Century,” <https://web.mit.edu/redingtn/www/netadv/SPpoetry.html>.

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In his April 2022 editorial (page 8), Charles Day opens with a quote from Paul Dirac: “The aim of science is to make difficult things understandable in a simpler way; the aim of poetry is to state simple things in an incomprehensible way. The two are incompatible.” As a poet with a bachelor’s in applied math, I find Dirac’s comment to be clever but misguided.

Doubtless many poets would say that physics makes the simple incomprehensible. Comprehension is a function of training, and mathematical formulation remains baffling to many. Meanwhile, we should always be suspicious of the Dunning–Kruger effect when judging others’ fields as dealing with especially simple matters, particularly when we can see that we do not understand the results.

Poets have diverse aims, not primarily obfuscatory. Some poets explore the limits of language, seeking to say that which is unsayable in everyday speech—a task tackled elegantly by quantum formalism in a domain for which our vernacular has not evolved. The very syntax of human language obscures fundamental understanding of the “really real world” beyond the prosaic and the mesoscale.

Dirac was 13 years old when the poet Hugo Ball presented his “Dada Manifesto” (1916) in pursuit of “poems that are meant to dispense with conventional language.” Such “experimental poetry” may reveal aspects of how language functions or how the brain constructs meaning. Poetic diction may be deliberately dissociated from lyric expression to examine language distinct from confounding factors of sentiment (see, for example, the Language poets of the 1960s and



TWO MEN CONTEMPLATING THE MOON, by Caspar David Friedrich, oil on canvas (1819), Dresden State Art Collections/public domain.