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Dear Phil--

What a question. Here's one for you--who does the dreaming? Are we talking about the actual nighttime or daydreams that poets (and mathematicians) have; out of which poems are sometimes made, though usually transformed in some way? Or does "the dreams of poetry" refer to the wishes/needs/goals which the poet "dreams" his or her poems will fulfill?

Poets start from a "real" place: dream, imagination, memory, sensory perceptions, involvement with language. Theoretical "dreams of poetry" are more in the province of the literary critic than of the poet. Having said that, here are some "dreams" that poets seem to have, and which critics love to identify:

1) To stop time. Poetry as a defense against death, creating a timeless artifact to hold on to, wherein things coalesce and make sense. Read Yeats' "Sailing to Byzantium," his construct there of a "gold enamelled bird" which is

"....set upon a golden bough to sing
To lords and ladies of Byzantium
Of what is past, or passing, or to come."

(Read this poem anyway, if you never have. It's terrific.)

2) To create order out of continual, overwhelming sensory and intellectual input. (See Wallace Stevens' "The Idea of Order at Key West" and Denise Levertov's "O Taste and See.")...

I begin to realize, Phil, that the only way to talk about the "dreams of poetry" is to quote from real, live poems. The Stevens' poem, which begins, "She sang beyond the genius of the sea," is concerned with the colossal dream/task of the poet: "The maker's rage to order words of the sea."

As for the Levertov poem, "O Taste and See" (from Psalm 34, verse 8--I looked it up, that's early training for you!), she says that phrase incorporates

"....all that lives
to the imagination's tongue,

grief, mercy, language,
tangerine, weather, to
breathe them, bite,
savor, chew, swallow, transform

into our flesh our
deaths, crossing the street, plum, quince,
living in the orchard and being

hungry, and plucking
the fruit."

3) To articulate the unuttered. The poet dreams of a kind of union with language in which the flow of words is both freely "given" and, at the same time, manipulated in some inextricable, personal way. There is a flow between poet and words as between muscle and nerve. It is an organic relationship: feedback, strengthening. The dream here is to do with words what a choreographer does with bodies.

At the end of his long poem, "Among School Children," Yeats says:

"O chestnut-tree, great-rooted blossomer,
Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?
O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
How can we know the dancer from the dance?"

The nature of the language used will depend upon the poet. It can range from the extreme long lines and extreme language of Allen Ginsburg's "Howl", which begins:

"I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness,
starving hysterical naked,
dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking
for an angry fix,
angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection
to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night,
who poverty and tatters and hollow-eyed and high sat up smoking
in the supernatural darkness of cold-water flats floating
across the tops of cities contemplating jazz,
who....."

to the small, hesitant lines of his good friend, Robert Creeley, one of whose poems I quote in full:

THE LANGUAGE

Locate I
love you some-
where in

teeth and
eyes, bite
it but

take care not
to hurt, you
want so

much so
little. Words
say everything.

I
love you
again,

then what
is emptiness
for. To

fill, fill!
I heard words
and words full

of holes
aching. Speech
is a mouth.

4) To name that which has not yet been named. (This is closely related to the preceding "dreams.") All poets do this. They name, often by analogy. The movement is often from acute sensory perception to some other place... Sometimes there is synesthesia, a melding and interchange of the senses.

Here are the last three stanzas of Theodore Roethke's poem, "Infirmity:"

"A mind too active is no mind at all;
The deep eye sees the shimmer on the stone;
The eternal seeks, and finds, the temporal,
The change from dark to light of the slow moon,
Dead to myself, and all I hold most dear,
I move beyond the reach of wind and fire.

Deep in the greens of summer sing the lives
I've come to love. A vireo whets its bill.
The great day balances upon the leaves;
My ears still hear the bird when all is still;
My soul is still my soul, and still the Son,
And knowing this, I am not yet undone.

Things without hands take hands: there is no choice--
Eternity's not easily come by.
When opposites come suddenly into place,
I teach my eyes to hear, my ears to see
How body from spirit slowly does unwind
Until we are pure spirit in the end."

5) To celebrate the unique event, as vs. the replicable, which all sciences look for. Metaphor makes the unique comprehensible. Archibald MacLeish in "Ars Poetica" says:

"A poem should be equal to:
Not true

For all the history of grief
An empty doorway and a maple leaf..."

6) To acknowledge and utilize the power of ambiguity. This is in contradistinction to your Mathematics Dreams #2 and #4: as vs. "indubitability"--ambiguity; as vs. your version of "oracularity", the poet's. The Sybil at Delphi couched her oracles in words whose meaning was often ambiguous. Understanding involved unriddling, "flashing" onto the answer by applying the full range of intellection, intuition, feeling.

Poets value the multiple meanings of a word, an image, a whole poem.

7) To show so well that there is no need to tell. This is, perhaps, a 20th century dream. It was articulated by William Carlos Williams as "no ideas but in things." He breaks his own rule to tell about it in

A SORT OF SONG

Let the snake wait under
his weed
and the writing
be of words, slow and quick, sharp
to strike, quiet to wait,
sleepless.

--through metaphor to reconcile
the people and the stones.
Compose. (No ideas
but in things) Invent!
Saxifrage is my flower that splits
the rocks.

T.S. Eliot called this sort of use of a concrete thing "the objective correlative." He used it a lot; all of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" shows, rather than tells, complex personal feelings.

8) To create a common language.--See Adrienne Rich's new book, 'The Dream Of A Common Language.' This parallels your Mathematics Dream #1--but the dream here is to create a language applicable to all feelings as vs. all intellectual situations. In "Origins and History of Consciousness" she says:

No one lives in this room
without confronting the whiteness of the wall
behind the poems, planks of books,
photographs of dead heroines.
Without contemplating last and late
the true nature of poetry. The drive
to connect. The dream of a common language.

I have listed these "dreams" in no significant order. Looking at them and at the poems I picked to exemplify them, they seem very oral. I guess poets are, almost by definition. What are mathematicians?

Enough already!

Cheers,

(Greenette)

PS. Do you really want to use some of this? In the Scientific American, of all places? Okay, if it seems appropriate -- just let me know?