

Article

The Alchemy of Words: How Poetry Heals the Mind and Soul

Muhammad Sohail Abbas ^{1,2} 

¹ CAS Key Laboratory of Nanosystems and Hierarchical Fabrication, CAS Center for Excellence in Nanoscience, National Center for Nanoscience and Technology, Beijing 100190, China

² Department of Chemistry, University of Malakand, Chakdara 18800, Pakistan

* Correspondence: gul.rao85@gmail.com

Received: 10 April 2025; **Revised:** 30 May 2025; **Accepted:** 7 June 2025; **Published:** 13 June 2025

Abstract: Poetry is not only an attractive and illusional bunch of words, it is an effective power that can heal broken hearts, sooth despairing souls, bring smile on a gloomy face and ignite flame of emotion that can lead to conversion of one's dream into practical reality. This article explores the transformative power of poetry as a form of healing, blending ancient wisdom with modern scientific insights. Rooted in historical traditions, poetry has long been recognized as a therapeutic tool, capable of mending the heart and soul. Through a deep dive into both the science of poetry and its emotional alchemy, the article highlights how poetry rewires the brain, stimulates emotional processing, and fosters healing. By examining poetic techniques such as metaphor, rhythm, and imagery, we reveal how poetry creates emotional resonance and activates neural pathways that promote psychological well-being. Additionally, the article explores contemporary developments in poetic medicine, such as AI-driven poetry therapy, EEG studies on poetic trance states, and the rise of global movements like poetry pharmacies and community healing workshops. As a result, this article advocates for the continued integration of poetry into therapeutic practices, showing its potential to transform lives and enhance mental health in both individual and collective settings.

Keywords: Poetic Medicine; Emotional Alchemy; Neuroscience of Poetry; AI Poetry Therapy; Community Healing Workshops; Poetry Pharmacies

1. Introduction: The Transformative Power of Poetry

کلام بهانه است، اصل آن چیز دیگر است

Kalam bahāna ast, asl ān chīz dīgar ast

(Words are a pretext, the essence is something beyond.)—Rumi.

Since the first shaman chanted verses to heal the sick, poetry has been humanity's silent healer, a force that mends fractures of the heart and soul, way before science even knew how to name them. There are times in a human life when prose fails, when grief is too dense for explanation, when joy is too volatile for structure, when pain coils inward and language splinters. It is precisely in these liminal moments that poetry emerges, not as ornament, but as a kind of psychic alchemy. It transforms the raw ore of experience, suffering, love, exile, and ecstasy into gold that can be borne, shared, and even celebrated [1,2]. The great Sufi sage Rumi, whose words still set souls ablaze eight centuries later, understood poetry as divine alchemy:

اصل سخن نیست، که پیوند دل است

Asl-e sukhan nīst, ke peyvand-e del ast

(There is no reality of the words, but mending/connecting hearts.)—Rumi

At a point, he captures poetry's paradox—it is at once fragile and eternal, a vessel for truths too vast for ordinary speech [3].

من بندہ قرآنم اگر چہ پارہ جامم

Man banda-ye Qur'ānam agar che pāra-ye jāmam

(I am the servant of the Quran, even if I am but a shard of the cup.)"

Here, in the East, the visionary philosopher and the Poet of the East, Sir Muhammad Iqbal echoed this truth with thunderous clarity [4]:

خرد من گوید کہ من رہ نبرم

Khirad man gūyad ke man rah na-baram

عشق گوید کہ آن سو باید شد

Ishq gūyad ke ān sū bāyad shud

(Reason whispers, 'I cannot find the way.'

Love replies, 'You must journey beyond.')

For Iqbal, poetry was the language of *ishq* (sacred passion), a bridge between the finite and infinite. His *ghazals* did not merely describe transcendence; they enacted it, proving verse could dissolve the boundary between wound and wisdom. He did not see poetry as an escape, but as an awakening:

خودی کو کر بلند اتنا کہ ہر تقدیر سے پہلے

خدا بندے سے خود پوچھے، بتا، تیری رضا کیا ہے؟

Khūdī ko kar buland itnā ke har taqdīr se pehle

Khudā bande se khud pūchhe, batā terī razā kyā hai?

(Raise thyself to such heights, that even fate, before granting destiny, Asks of thee, 'What is thy desire?')

For Iqbal, poetry was not mere beauty; it was a technology of the self, a divine instrument for resurrecting crushed identities and colonised souls. In its rhythm and imagery, poetry rewrites the self not as a victim of fate, but as a co-author of its future [5].

Western poets, too, have borne witness to this power. Pablo Neruda confessed: "Poetry arrived in search of me. I suppose it was never acquired, but it saved me". In the meantime, Emily Dickinson extracted the medicinal essence of poetry into one line: "If I read a book and it makes my whole body cold so that no fire can warm me, I know that is poetry."

This ancient observation is corroborated by modern neuroscience in its terms. fMRI scans have shown that poetic language indeed lights up different brain circuits, or neural networks, than those that are involved in normal speech or prose. Metaphor, rhyme and cadence exercises the emotional centres in the brain and also heightens memory consolidation, empathy and emotional control. What, in other words, Rumi knew spiritually, science is beginning to demonstrate structurally. nor is this linguistic intoxication, when it is not escapism, usually lacking in profound psychological medicine [6].

In an era of political instability, epidemic levels of mental illness, and spiritual homelessness, the question is no longer whether or not poetry is therapeutic, but how, and to what extent [7]. As Audre Lorde declared, "Poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence." To write or read poetry is not a retreat, it is a return: to the body, the breath, the wound, and, ultimately, to meaning. This article is a caravan through time and terrain. Here we explore how Rumi's *Mathnawi* was recited in medieval hospitals to calm fevered minds. And why does the brain process Hafez's verses differently than prose? We stand at a crossroads where ancient intuition meets modern empiricism [7,8].

As Hafez wrote: "با قلب خود ہمنوا شو تا بشنوی آواز حق"

Bā qalb-e khod hamnavā shou tā beshnavi āvāz-e haq

(Tune your heart's ear, and you'll hear the voice of Truth.)"

Poetry, we argue, is not ornament; it is the oxygen which keeps the soul of an individual and society alive.

2. The Science of Poetry: How the Brain Processes Verse

"When you do things from your soul, you feel a river moving in you, a joy."—Rumi

Poetry is more than an artistic indulgence; it is a biological encounter with beauty. While poets have long intuited the healing power of verse, modern neuroscience now affirms what mystics like Rumi and Iqbal perceived centuries ago: language, when charged with rhythm and metaphor, transforms the brain, and through the brain,

the heart. Poetry is thus not only a mirror of the soul but also a resonant frequency of the mind, tuned to awaken, soothe, and reconfigure the psyche [9].

2.1. Neurological Resonance: Metaphor, Rhythm, and the Poetic Brain

Functional MRI (fMRI) studies have revealed that the brain processes poetry differently from prose. Poetry activates the default mode network, associated with introspection, memory retrieval, and emotional processing. A study by Zeman et al. [10] found that readers of poetry experience brain activity similar to those who are in deep meditation or religious contemplation.

Whereas prose moves in straight lines, poetry spirals. It loops and circles with metaphor, syntax, and sound, engaging both hemispheres of the brain: the left hemisphere parses structure and grammar, while the right hemisphere processes rhythm, imagery, and emotional valence.

Metaphor, the lifeblood of poetry, bridges cognition and sensation. When we read a line such as, “*His voice was a cracked bell in winter air*,” we are not merely decoding meaning, we are simulating experience. Brain scans show that sensory metaphors activate corresponding sensory cortices: tactile metaphors stimulate touch centers; visual metaphors light up the occipital lobe. This suggests that metaphoric language invites us to inhabit the poet’s reality rather than simply observe it.

And rhythm, the ancient heartbeat of verse, entrains the brain itself. Poetic meter can synchronise neural oscillations, promoting a meditative, regulated state of mind. This is one reason sacred texts like the Quran, Vedas, and Psalms are composed in measured, melodic cadence [10].

As Rumi writes:

اصل سخن نیست، کہ پیوند دل است “

هر چه بگویم، تو را پا دل است

Asl-e sukhan nist, ke peyvand-e del ast

Har che begūyam, to rā bā del ast

(There is no reality of the words, but connecting hearts;

Whatever I speak to you, it is from the heart to the heart.)

2.2. The Dopamine Effect: Pleasure in Pattern and Surprise

Poetry doesn’t just console, it pleases, and this pleasure has a neurochemical basis. Rhythmic verse and patterned rhyme stimulate the release of dopamine, the brain’s “reward” neurotransmitter. This is the same system that lights up when we eat something delicious, hear music we love, or fall in love.

Psychologist Keith Oatley explains that aesthetic pleasure in poetry arises from pattern recognition followed by creative disruption. The mind anticipates a rhyme or a beat, and when that anticipation is met or subtly subverted, a burst of neurological satisfaction follows. This pleasure is heightened when the language is emotionally loaded, giving the reader a sense of catharsis and revelation.

This phenomenon explains why poetry becomes instinctively sought during births, funerals, revolutions, and weddings, times when the soul seeks ritual, rhythm, and the sacred order of sound. In the precise architecture of a sonnet or a ghazal, we find the heartbeat of coherence amid chaos [11].

Iqbal, who understood rhythm not merely as a literary device but a spiritual discipline, writes:

نوا پیرا ہو اے بلبل کہ ہو تیرے ترنم سے

کبوتر کے تن نازک میں شاہین کا جگر پیدا

Nawā pīrā ho ai bulbul, ke ho tere tarannum se

Kabūtar ke tan-e nāzuk meñ shāhīn kā jigar paidā

Sing, O nightingale, such a song that by your melody,

The fragile breast of a dove may gain the heart of a falcon.

Here, meter becomes not mere ornament, but transformative energy, poetry as internal alchemy, reshaping weakness into courage, sorrow into resolve.

2.3. Mirror Neurons and Empathy: Feeling Through the Poetic Other

One of the most profound discoveries of modern neuroscience is the existence of mirror neurons, cells that fire both when we act and when we observe someone else perform it. These neurons underpin our capacity for empathy, allowing us to feel what others feel as though it were our own experience [12].

Poetry powerfully activates this system. A well-crafted line doesn't merely tell us *what* the poet feels, it lets us feel with them. As we read, we enter the intimate spaces of grief, longing, joy, and transformation. The poet's metaphor becomes a shared emotional territory.

This phenomenon, called empathic transportation, is especially pronounced in first-person lyric poetry, where the boundary between speaker and reader blurs. The neural resonance of such poems may explain their efficacy in trauma therapy, grief counselling, and emotional resilience training [13].

Iqbal captures this merging of self and other in his verse:

ہزاروں سال نرگس اپنی بے نوری پہ روتی ہے

بڑی مشکل سے ہوتا ہے چمن میں دیدہ ور پیدا

Hazāron sāl nargis apnī be-nūrī pe rotī hai

Barī mushkil se hotā hai chaman meñ dīda-war paidā

For thousands of years the narcissus weeps for lack of light;

It is with great difficulty that a seer is born in the garden.

The image of the weeping flower becomes a collective lament through a single metaphor, personal longing becomes universal yearning.

What the mystics wrote in flame, the scientists now trace in synapse. Poetry is not merely beautiful; it is biologically powerful. It recruits language centers, emotional circuits, memory vaults, and motor simulation systems, orchestrating a full-sensory engagement that transforms the inner life of the reader.

It regulates emotion, stimulates pleasure, invites empathy, and opens the gates to self-reflection. Through metaphor, it creates symbolic coherence; through rhythm, it returns us to the breath; through empathy, it dissolves the illusion of isolation.

Poetry is not just what the brain understands, it is what the soul recognizes. As we now journey into how verse transmutes pain into gold, let us remember that the mind responds to structure, but the heart listens for resonance [14].

3. Poetry as Emotional Alchemy: Turning Pain into Art

"Be like the sun for grace and mercy. Be like the night to cover others' faults. Be like running water for generosity... Be like death for rage and anger. Be like the Earth, humble for the dust of others' feet."

— مولانا جلال الدین رومی (Rumi)

Poetry is the crucible where pain is not merely expressed, it is transformed. As if by alchemical fire, raw human anguish enters the furnace of language and emerges altered, cooled into shape, refined in beauty, rendered bearable, even sacred. Across cultures and centuries, poetry has served this mysterious function: to make suffering speak, and in speaking, to transcend it [15].

3.1. Catharsis Theory Revisited: Aristotle's *Poetics* Meets Modern Trauma Studies

In *Poetics*, Aristotle coined the term "catharsis" the purgation of pity and fear through dramatic representation. Tragedy, he maintained, was not depressing, but uplifting, since it addresses the spectator with suffering in an organized, aesthetic way. This observation continues to form a central part not just in literary criticism but in modern psychology and trauma theory.

Contemporary trauma research has re-established what was previously known, that trauma is not linguistically encoded it is stored somatically, in the body/limbic brain. Raw trauma cannot be verbalized, and instead may manifest again as flashbacks, anxiety, or dissociation. Trauma expert Bessel van der Kolk writes that, to heal, it is not enough to talk but to re-story, to make order out of the chaotic memory.

In this instance, poetry has furnished a particularly apposite conveyance: the brevity, metaphor and rhythm of her poems soft-peddle the indescribable and supply a containment, a revelation. A poem does not need complete disclosure or logical linearity. It allows fragmentation, silence, and symbol. This gives it the perfection of being used on people whose narratives resist time or mental coherence.

The poet is then a sort of alchemist-scribe who does what philosopher Paul Ricoeur termed the "hermeneutics of the self"-exploring the inner world in the furnace of language, as it were [16].

3.2. Case Studies: War Poets, Survivor Poets, and the Rise of Therapeutic Writing

In the depths of the human experience, poets have always descended; and not only to testify to the suffering, but also to recover voice, power and significance.

3.2.1. Wilfred Owen: The Scars of War in Verse

Wilfred Owen was a soldier in World War I, and he had seen the horrors that no philosophy could explain. But his poetry concentrated that horror into memorable verses:

“My friend, thou wouldst not thus with such countless relish / Unto the children that were fain of some despairing fame, / The old Falsehood: Dulce et decorum est / Pro patria mori.”

This was a popular wartime phrase, translated as It is sweet and right to die for your country, which Owen dismantles with irony and bitterness. His poem turns into a protest and a eulogy, turning trauma into testimony. Poetry has played this dual role of saying the unsayable and testifying on behalf of the dead to many veterans.

3.2.2. Maya Angelou: From Silence to Song

Maya Angelou, a survivor of childhood sexual trauma, famously fell into a five-year silence. She later wrote:

“There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you.”

Her poetry became the language of that once-imprisoned voice:

“You may trod me in the very dirt / But still, like dust, I’ll rise.”

Here, trauma is not denied, it is transfigured. Angelou’s voice is not merely personal; it becomes archetypal, speaking for the wounded, the silenced, the historically erased. This transmutation, from violated body to resounding voice, is the alchemy at the heart of poetic healing.

3.2.3. Contemporary Therapeutic Writing

Today, poetry therapy is a recognized practice. In hospitals, prisons, refugee camps, and counseling sessions, individuals are invited to write the unspeakable. These exercises are not judged on literary merit but emotional authenticity. Even broken lines, half-formed thoughts, and wordless metaphors become emotional scaffolding for recovery.

One therapist working with trauma survivors wrote: *“Poetry doesn’t fix what happened. But it gives people back the sense that they are more than what happened.”*

Indeed, to write is to reclaim authorship over story, over identity, over fate [17,18].

3.3. The Sublime in Healing: How Beauty in Verse Counteracts Despair

Beauty does not erase pain. But in poetry, beauty gives pain a shape, a structure that allows for contemplation, dignity, and transformation. This is the essence of the sublime, that which overwhelms yet uplifts, terrifies yet transfixes.

Philosopher Edmund Burke distinguished the beautiful from the sublime: beauty soothes; the sublime shatters and enlarges. Great poetry often balances these two forces, holding unbearable truths in a vessel of grace.

As Iqbal writes:

ستاروں سے آگے جہاں اور بھی ہیں

ابھی عشق کے امتحان اور بھی ہیں

Sitāroñ se āge jahāñ aur bhī haiñ

Abhī ‘ishq ke imtiḥāñ aur bhī haiñ

Beyond the stars are yet more worlds,

And many more trials of love remain.

This verse, emerging from the turbulence of colonial oppression and spiritual seeking, does not deny suffering, it sublimates it. It offers the wounded soul a cosmology beyond the wound, an invitation to transcendence through struggle.

Thus, poetry offers not escape, but elevation. The very act of shaping sorrow into a stanza restores the self’s capacity to imagine a future [4].

4. The Poet as Healer: From Ancient Shamans to Modern Therapists

"The wound is the place where the Light enters you."

مولانا جلال‌الدین رومی (Rumi)

زخم آنجاست که نور وارد میشود

Zakhm ānjāst ke nūr vāred mī-shavad

From prehistoric chants whispered into firelight to contemporary therapy rooms in trauma clinics, poetry has always carried the sacred task of healing. The poet, in this lineage, is more than a wordsmith—he or she is a vessel, a listener, a ritual-maker, entrusted with the translation of silence into speech, pain into form, and isolation into connection. This section traces the ancestral roots of poetic healing, its therapeutic formalization in modern psychology, and the growing body of clinical evidence affirming what shamans and mystics knew long before the scientific method: that poetry can mend what logic alone cannot touch [19].

4.1. Historical Roots: Oracle Poets, Bardic Traditions, and Mystic Verse

Even before there was a name like mental health, human society looked to poets and prophets during their spiritual or emotional imbalances. These people-shamans, bards, mystics-employed rhythm, chant, and verse not merely to tell myth, but to reinstate meaning in situations of disjunction [20].

4.1.1. Oracle Poets & Shamans

In many indigenous cultures, the shaman was both a healer and a poet, accessing liminal states through trance, dreams, and language. Their poems were not composed; they were received utterances from the unseen world meant to guide, console, or reweave the social and psychic fabric.

Whether through the Vedic hymns of ancient India or the drum-fueled chants of West African griots, sound and story were medicine. These performances often invoked metaphorical journeys through darkness, death, and rebirth structures mirrored today in trauma healing [21].

4.1.2. Bardic Traditions

The Celtic and Nordic cultures relied on bards and skalds who created verse to commemorate battles, settle tribal conflicts, and to praise the dead. Their poetry also maintained group memory and, in many cases, took a judicial or reconciliatory purpose. Ancient Ireland took satire by a bard so seriously because it was thought to be capable of bringing sickness or bad fortune upon its target, showing just how strongly the somatic power of words was believed to reside.

Mystic Poets: Hafiz, Kabir, and the Language of Ecstasy

The South Asian and Persian mystic poets changed personal pain into devotional poetry and combined the language of the soul with the desire of the flesh. Their poems continue to comprise the staple of spiritual and emotional comfort to millions.

گفت آن یار کز او گشت سر دار بلند

جرم‌ش این بود که اسرار هویدا میکرد

Goft ān yār ke az ū gasht sar-e dār boland / Jurmash īn būd ke asrār-e hoveydā mī-kard

Said the friend whose head rose high on the gallows:

My only crime was revealing divine secrets. حافظ (Hafiz)

And from कबीर (Kabir), the weaver-saint of India:

जो तो प्रीम खेलन का चाव, सिर धरि तलिये गली मेरी आव

Jo to prem khelan kā chāv, sir dhar taliye galī merī āv

If you desire to play the game of love,

Come to my lane with your head in your hands.

The suffering in such lines is not senseless anymore - it is sacrosanct. The poet turns into a mentor via existential flame and shows not the way to avoid pain, but the way to transform it into transcendence [22,23].

4.2. Bibliotherapy and Poetry Therapy: Certified Practices in Psychology

Nowadays, the ancient sense that poetry is therapeutic has been developed into actual therapeutic practices: bibliotherapy and poetry therapy. They are evidence-based practices comprising the use of literature in psychological treatment with certified practitioners conducting reading as well as writing of poetic texts to promote mental wellness [24,25].

4.2.1. Bibliotherapy

Bibliotherapy is the facilitated reading (especially of fiction and poetry) in order to achieve insight, reflection and emotional catharsis. It now finds use in a broad assortment of locales: cancer wards and bereavement groups, schools, eldercare facilities and prisons. Poetry reading in progress can be a way to open conversations concerning fear, loss, desire, and hope, as well as by people who are not at all skilled at expressing what they feel clinically.

4.2.2. Poetry Therapy

Poetry therapy takes this a step further and involves the clients in creating their poetic pieces, usually with the assistance of some guided prompting which may tap into memory, metaphor or silent sorrow. The process facilitates cognitive restructuring, emotion management, and narrative integration, which are central objectives in trauma recovery.

Started in the U.S. in the 1960s, the National Association for Poetry Therapy (NAPT) is an organization that certifies poetry therapists who have trained in both psychology and the practice of literature. These therapists usually collaborate with psychiatrists, as well as social workers, particularly in groups at risk of PTSD, grief, or chronic illness.

It destroys the silence when a person reads a poem which describes their pain, as poet-therapist John Fox writes. But once they write one, it takes the charm away [26].

4.3. Testimonials and Clinical Evidence: Poetry in PTSD, Depression, and Grief Counselling

A growing body of research supports what practitioners have long observed: poetry helps people heal. Clinical studies have demonstrated that reading and writing poetry can:

- Reduce symptoms of depression and anxiety
- Improve emotional self-awareness and articulation
- Enhance resilience and meaning-making after trauma
- Lower physiological stress markers (such as cortisol levels)

In one study published in *Arts in Psychotherapy*, cancer patients who participated in poetry therapy reported enhanced emotional expression and existential comfort. Another study involving war veterans found that poetry writing helped process combat trauma when traditional talk therapy had failed.

Patients often describe the experience not only as therapeutic, but transformative:

"I came into this group shattered. I leave knowing I still have all the pieces, and now I have words to fit them together." PTSD patient in a poetry therapy group.

Grief counselors report that writing elegiac or commemorative poetry restores continuity between the living and the dead, allowing mourners to speak to, and for, their loved ones.

The therapeutic magic lies not just in writing, but in writing beautifully. For in shaping the raw, the chaotic, and the unbearable into something elegant, we do not only survive—we reclaim artistry from our affliction.

Across millennia and modalities, the poet has remained a bearer of medicine—sometimes draped in ritual, sometimes in credentials, but always armed with the same tools: rhythm, image, and truth. From Hafiz's ecstatic surrender to the trained poetry therapist's gentle prompt, the poet-healer offers us a return to ourselves.

In an age dominated by clinical language and pharmaceutical models, poetry reminds us that the human spirit is not merely a system to be regulated, but a mystery to be witnessed. And often, it is the poem—fragile, fierce, luminous—that witnesses us best [27].

5. The Ritual of Writing: How Crafting Poetry Rewires the Mind

Writing poetry is not merely an aesthetic exercise, it is a ritual of integration, a neural and emotional choreography that helps the writer wrest coherence from chaos. In times of inner fragmentation, the act of putting pen to paper becomes an act of reclamation, of self, of story, of sanity. The poem, like a prayer, emerges not to please others, but to summon wholeness.

This section explores how the very process of crafting verse alters the brain's architecture, reshapes memory, and quiets the noise of anxiety, rendering poetry not just an output of emotion but a tool for inner recalibration.

5.1. The Expressive Writing Paradigm: Structuring Chaos into Meaning

In the 1980s, social psychologist James Pennebaker pioneered what would become one of the most robust findings in psychological research: that writing about emotional upheaval for as little as 15 minutes a day can lead to measurable improvements in physical and mental health. This is now known as the Expressive Writing Paradigm.

Participants in Pennebaker's studies who wrote about deeply personal experiences, not just what happened, but how it felt, showed:

- Reduced visits to doctors
- Stronger immune function
- Improved mood and reduced symptoms of depression and PTSD
- Increased working memory and cognitive clarity

What makes poetry uniquely powerful in this domain is that it imposes structure, compression, and pattern onto the unprocessed experience. In poetry, pain cannot sprawl; it must concentrate, distill, shape itself into form. Line breaks, stanzas, and metaphor all demand choice, forcing the writer to translate chaos into intelligibility.

Rather than spiraling through repetition or rumination, the writer gains perspective—shaping the storm rather than drowning in it.

As poet Gregory Orr, a survivor of trauma, writes:

"Poetry is the language we use when we have no language left."

5.2. Metaphor & Cognitive Reframing: How Poetry Reshapes Personal Narratives

Metaphor is more than ornament; it is transformation. It allows the writer to reimagine reality, to say what cannot be said directly, and in doing so, access emotional truths buried beneath consciousness.

Cognitive psychology refers to this as cognitive reframing, the ability to alter one's perception of events by shifting the mental framework through which they are interpreted. Poetry, rich in figurative language, does this naturally and artfully.

Consider a trauma survivor who writes:

"My grief is a locked room / But I've found the window."

This metaphor reframes grief, not as a sealed fate, but as a space with the possibility of exit, of light. The process of metaphor-making externalizes emotion, allowing it to be studied, manipulated, and softened. The act of describing a feeling metaphorically gives the brain a way to process it indirectly, with safety and symbolic distance.

Moreover, metaphors allow dual perception, a wound can be both a scar and a constellation, both a cage and a chrysalis. This duality opens space for healing without denial, sorrow without surrender.

As Rumi writes:

این درد و رنج من نه ز داغ است و سوختن

بل درد آن بُود که ندانم علاج چیست

Īn dard o ranj-e man na ze dāgh ast o sūkhtan

Bal dard ān bovad ke nadānam 'elāj chīst

This pain and sorrow are not from fire or wound

The true pain is not knowing the cure.

Through metaphor, the poet *names* the wound, but also begins, line by line, to *imagine the cure* [3,28–30].

5.3. Mindfulness in Meter: The Meditative Quality of Poetic Composition

Writing poetry, particularly in traditional forms (sonnets, ghazals, haiku), is not a frantic act of venting but a discipline of presence. The writer must pay attention to each syllable, each pause, and each image. This meticulous attentiveness fosters a state akin to mindfulness meditation, a slowing down of thought, a tuning in to breath, sound, and sensation.

Neurological studies on mindfulness have shown that such states reduce amygdala activation (associated with stress and fear), increase prefrontal cortex activity (associated with regulation and reflection), and promote gamma brainwaves, which correlate with insight and integration.

In poetic composition, the writer enters a flow state, a timeless zone where the self softens, and awareness becomes rhythmic, embodied, and spacious.

Iqbal, whose philosophical poetry was also a meditative exercise in metaphysical presence, once wrote:

خودی کا سر نہاں لا الہ الا اللہ

خودی ہے تیغ، فساں لا الہ الا اللہ

Khudī kā sir-e nihān: lā ilāha illā Allāh

Khudī hai tegh, fasān: lā ilāha illā Allāh

The hidden essence of self is: "There is no god but God."

The self is a blade; its whetstone is the same declaration.

In crafting such verse, the poet does not merely express devotion, he sharpens his inner being. The rhythm becomes a spiritual cadence, the repetition a breath prayer, the form a temple in which the psyche is renewed.

Whether sacred or secular, poetic composition becomes a ritual of alignment, with self, with truth, and with the ineffable.

To write poetry is to enter a sacred laboratory of consciousness. It is where the unspoken finds voice, the fragmented finds form, and the turbulent finds tempo. It is not catharsis alone, it is cognitive reconstruction, emotional reframing, and neural entrainment. The page becomes a mirror, a map, and sometimes, a memorial.

In writing verse, we do not merely unburden the soul, we reshape the soul's terrain.

As the poet Rainer Maria Rilke once whispered to a young writer in need:

"Go into yourself. Search for the reason that bids you write."

For many, that reason is not art or ambition. It is survival. And it is in the ritual of writing that we begin, word by word, to come alive again [4,31].

6. The Limits & Dangers: When Poetry Isn't Enough

"You were born with wings, why prefer to crawl through life?"

— مولانا جلال‌الدین رومی (Rumi)

تو را برای پریدن زادہاند، چرا خزیدن را میگزینی؟

To rā barā-ye parīdan zāde-and, cherā khazīdan rā mīguzīnī?

Yet even wings, however divine, do not negate gravity.

As powerful as poetry is capable of illuminating the psyche, soothing grief, and revealing hidden truths, it is not a panacea. There are moments when language falters, when the verse that once healed begins to harm, when metaphor loses its capacity to carry meaning, and when silence, not sonnet, is the truest response. To explore the healing power of poetry fully, we must also acknowledge its ethical limits, psychological risks, and cultural complexities.

Poetry is medicine, yes, but like all medicine, it can be misused, misread, or mistaken for a cure it cannot deliver [32,33].

6.1. The "Dark Muse" Problem: Can Poetry Romanticize Suffering?

There is a long and complex tradition of the suffering artist, the tortured poet whose pain is elevated into beauty, and whose tragedy becomes almost mythic. While such figures—from Sylvia Plath to John Berryman, have produced extraordinary verse, their lives also testify to the peril of romanticizing mental anguish.

When pain becomes aestheticized without healing, poetry can risk becoming a kind of seduction by suffering, a place to dwell, but not to depart from. The "dark muse" whispers that one must bleed to be brilliant, that despair

is a form of depth, that destruction is somehow divine.

This is particularly dangerous for vulnerable individuals, especially adolescents, who may imitate confessional poetics as identity formation, mistaking performative suffering for self-understanding. It raises the unsettling question:

Is the poem a ladder out of the abyss, or just a prettier place to fall?

As poet Anne Sexton once warned in her own diaries:

"I write poems to keep from dying. But I also write poems to die by."

Thus, poetry must be engaged not only with passion, but with conscious discernment. Beauty does not always mean health. And a powerful poem is not always a healing one.

6.2. Ethical Boundaries in Therapy: When Professional Intervention is Necessary

Although the use of poetry therapy has been an extremely powerful instrument in the field of mental health practices, poetry therapy could be used in instances where it is not adequate, or even dangerous, to apply alone. Trauma writing, when not correctly guided, may re-traumatize. Uncontained, unguided, and un-followed-up deep emotional excavation can be more overwhelming than healing.

When this happens, the assistance of a psychotherapist or trauma expert or psychiatric support system is required. A poem can bring the wound to the surface, but the pathology of the wound might have to be dealt with in clinical care.

Moreover, the ethical aspects are doubtful when poetry therapy is practised by a person who lacks the appropriate psychological education. Language is free, but its use in therapeutic situations ought to be under responsibility. A strong metaphor can open, and it can also de-stabilize. The ethical poetry therapist refers to when to express and when not to express.

Think of the example of patients experiencing psychosis, dissociation, or suicidal thoughts: poetic inquiry without a clinically established frame can make their state worse instead of alleviating it.

As Rilke so wisely wrote:

Write not love poems. Say what you know to be true. Even though it may be hush-hush.

There are occasions when the most loving thing to do is nothing: silence and professional care [34–36].

6.3. Cultural & Linguistic Barriers: Accessibility of Poetic Healing

Poetry is worldwide in power, but not always in practice. The therapeutic power of verse depends on one's access to language, literacy, and cultural resonance. For those whose native language is undervalued, or whose poetic traditions are unrecognized in dominant therapeutic models, poetry therapy can feel foreign or exclusive.

Western psychological models often privilege certain literary canons, Shakespeare, Dickinson, Whitman, while neglecting oral traditions, indigenous chants, or non-literate forms of poetic expression. This creates a barrier of belonging for many individuals, especially from marginalized or colonized communities.

Furthermore, not all cultures regard emotional disclosure as healthy. In some societies, the poetic restraint of silence or symbolic allusion is valued more than confession. Imposing a Western confessional model on such individuals can feel invasive or inappropriate.

To be truly inclusive, poetic healing must be multilingual, multi-form, and culturally attuned. It must honor the Haiku and the Hikayat, the Ghazal and the Gospel, the lullaby, the lament, and the legend.

Poetry is a powerful force, but like fire, it must be approached with respect, humility, and care. It can warm or consume, illuminate or deceive. It can point toward healing, but it cannot always deliver it. To elevate poetry as medicine is not to make it magic. It is to recognize that even the most luminous verse must sometimes yield to silence, science, or another's hands.

Poetry is enough, until it isn't. And knowing that the boundary is not failure. It is wisdom.

In the next section, we'll explore how the future of poetic healing may be expanding through technology, community rituals, and global movements, but always with this truth intact: the soul is not a problem to be solved, but a song to be heard carefully [37].

7. The Future of Poetic Medicine

The future of poetic medicine is intersectional, between technology and neuroscience and community-based healing practices. With the field growing further, there are several thrilling possibilities ahead as the boundaries of what poetry as a therapeutic device is capable of are tested. In this case, we will discuss some of the main trends in the future of poetic medicine, including AI and algorithmic poetry therapy, neuroscience progress, and the rising power of the worldwide community healing movements.

7.1. AI & Algorithmic Poetry Therapy: Can Bots Write Healing Verse?

AI poetry is a highly developing idea, as poetic lines are composed with the help of algorithms. Such tools as GPT-4, for instance, have already shown a remarkable capability of creating text in different forms and styles of poetry. Within poetic medicine, AI may provide individualised poems, addressed to the emotional state, mental health requirements or treatment objectives of a person.

Algorithmic poetry as a means of healing might place AI systems that examine tendencies in speech, written text, or tone of voice of a patient and generate poetry that they identify with. This treatment might be especially successful with individuals who have difficulties expressing their feelings yet are inclined toward the influential nature of poetry. AI may transform into an instrument of generating so-called emotionally intelligent poems, the ones designed with a purpose of promoting self-reflection, providing solace, or stimulating an emotional release. Personalization opportunities are huge, with the AI being able to accommodate various forms of healing, including the cathartic and the meditative.

But the question is, will both be able to create genuinely therapeutic poetry? Although AI can generate linguistically sophisticated poems, others claim that a poem gets its emotional richness, its therapeutic value, through lived experience and human perception. We just don't know whether a machine, lacking any emotional experience of its own, can produce poetry which speaks to people on a human level. Nevertheless, in spite of all those anxieties, AI-generated poetry may turn out to be a useful tool in therapy, especially when it is used along with human assistance or supervision [38,39].

7.2. Neuroscientific Frontiers: EEG Studies on Poetic Trance States

Neuroscience has been investigating the effects of poetry on the brain, especially in regards to experiences of so-called poetic trance, which is a popular way of referring to the various altered states of consciousness that poetry is capable of bringing about. Such trance-like states are believed to have healing effects, as they enable the person to reach a deeper level of emotions and thoughts, which are normally unavailable in the waking state.

Leading research in this field is the EEG studies (electroencephalogram), which involve measuring the electrical activity of the brain when people have poetic experiences. Now researchers can trace the way the brain reacts to reading, writing or listening to poetry. According to EEG readings, there are particular brainwave patterns, including theta waves (associated with deep relaxation and creativity) and alpha waves (associated with calm focus). These studies have demonstrated that as people read or listen to poetry, especially emotion evoking or charged poetry, their brains might fall into a very relaxed but extremely open state.

The poetic medicine implications are enormous. In case poetry is capable of triggering neuroplastic state, i.e., the state in which the brain is more susceptible to changes, it can become an effective instrument of mental health recovery, trauma recovery, and emotional control. By gaining a more thorough comprehension of the way certain poetic devices (rhyme, rhythm, metaphor) affect the brain, clinicians might be able to develop therapeutic interventions that take advantage of this knowledge. As an example, a therapeutic session may consist of poetry aimed at stimulating specific brainwave activity that may facilitate relaxation, emotion discharge, or thought reconstruction.

Furthermore, neurofeedback may be applied together with poetic therapy, when people get information about their brain activity in real-time while working with poetry. This would aid in their self-control of emotional conditions and enhance therapy results [40].

7.3. Global Movements: Poetry Pharmacies, Community Healing Workshops

Poetry pharmacies are an international emerging trend, especially in such countries as France and the UK, where poems are being offered as medicine by the so-called "poets". It comes down to the notion that some poems

can have a therapeutic effect, reduce emotional suffering, and heal mental health. Poetry in this case is not merely an art, but a form of healing.

The concept behind poetry pharmacies is that certain poems, similarly to certain drugs, can be therapeutic based on the need of the person. That could be a poem about anxiety, depression, grief, or inspiration, but in any case, the curated poetry is incorporated into a bigger holistic healing plan. These poetry prescriptions can be either written or verbal, and they might even contain therapeutic directions about how to interact with the poem (by reading it aloud, memorizing it, or contemplating upon it deeply, etc.).

In Poetry pharmacies parallel, there is also an increased interest in community-healing workshops, in which poetry is taking a central position in group therapy. The workshops can include collective writing of poetry, storytelling, and performance, and provide an opportunity to participants to express themselves creatively, as well as to relate and bind with others and digest the common experience. Poetry and song have been employed in most indigenous and folk cultures as a form of communal medicine and are being reclaimed in contemporary environments.

These international trends are a democratization of poetic medicine, an increase in its availability, and integration into general healing practices. The community healing workshops create the feeling of belonging and shared experience, which is essential to emotional and psychological healing. The unified strength of words and creativity in such places can become an influential agent of social and emotional recovery, which builds communal resiliency during a crisis.

The future of poetic medicine is so bright, and it is powered by developments in the spheres of AI, neuroscience, and community-based healing practices. AI poetry therapy could be personally healing, and EEG studies can allow us to comprehend how poetry may cause such strong effects on brain activity leading to improving emotional mood. Meanwhile, poetic pharmacies and community healing workshops are global movements that show that poetry is increasingly being recognised as an accessible and valid form of medicine, facilitating wellness and social bonding at the global level.

Poetic medicine will probably take its place in the mental health field as the field keeps developing, combining tradition and innovation in the name of soul and mind healing [41–43].

8. Conclusions

The Eternal Elixir of Language

As we journey through the history and science of poetic medicine, we uncover its profound capacity to heal, both ancient and modern. Poetry, as explored in this article, is not merely an art form; it is a transformative tool for the mind and soul. Rooted in age-old traditions, it has continually adapted, offering solace, reflection, and resilience in the face of suffering. From Rumi's divine alchemy to contemporary therapeutic practices, poetry bridges the gap between the seen and unseen, the spoken and unspoken, bringing coherence to chaos and light to darkness.

In a world where mental health struggles continue to escalate, poetry remains one of humanity's oldest yet most accessible forms of healing. Through its intricate use of rhythm, metaphor, and emotion, poetry rewires the brain, calms the spirit, and connects us to the depths of our being. The scientific studies now validating its therapeutic power are no surprise to those who have long recognized its healing potential. Poetry does not just soothe; it reconstructs, reframes, and reawakens, providing individuals with the tools to navigate their most difficult experiences with grace.

Looking to the future, the intersection of technology, neuroscience, and community-based healing promises to expand the scope of poetic medicine even further. AI and algorithmic poetry therapy has the potential to be personalized in its healing, and current neurological studies show how profound and long-lasting the effect of poetry can be on brain activity. Meanwhile, such global initiatives as poetry pharmacies and community workshops present supportive and open spaces of community healing.

Nevertheless, like any effective instrument, poetic medicine should be used with care and judgment. It is not a magic bullet, and situations when silence, professional intervention, or any other type of therapy is a priority exist. Still, poetry is an immortal magic elixir, an alive language, which talks to the heart, cures a bruised heart, and provides an opportunity to lose oneself, become strong and reborn. We turn to poetry in the teeth of adversity, not only to survive, but also to flourish, to connect and to touch the transcendent. Thus, poetry continues to be the

sacred vessel that carries us through life's challenges, ever ready to transform our pain into art and our wounds into wisdom.

Funding

This work received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement

Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement

Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement

Data will be provided on a reasonable request.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

1. Gioia, T. *Healing Songs*; Duke University Press: Durham, NC, USA, 2006.
2. Anand, M. *The Art of Everyday Ecstasy: The Seven Tantric Keys for Bringing Passion, Spirit, and Joy into Every Part of Your Life*; BoD—Books on Demand: Norderstedt, Germany, 1999.
3. Schimmel, A. *Rumi's World: The Life and Works of the Greatest Sufi Poet*; Shambhala Publications: Boston, MA, USA, 2001.
4. Iqbal, Z.M. *Iqbal: Poet, Philosopher, and His Place in World Literature*; Xlibris Corporation: Bloomington, IN, USA, 2015.
5. Mir, M. *Iqbal, Poet and Thinker*; Iqbal Academy Pakistan: Lahore, Pakistan, 2006.
6. Trimble, M.R. *The Soul in the Brain: The Cerebral Basis of Language, Art, and Belief*; Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore, MD, USA, 2007.
7. Goldman, H.H.; Morrissey, J.P. The alchemy of mental health policy: homelessness and the fourth cycle of reform. *Am. J. Public Health* **1985**, *75*, 727–731.
8. Rūmī, J.A. *Rumi and Islam: Selections from His Stories, Poems, and Discourses, Annotated & Explained*; SkyLight Paths Publishing: Woodstock, VT, USA, 2004.
9. Masaeli, M.; Sneller, R. *Responses of Mysticism to Religious Terrorism: Sufism and Beyond*; Gompel & Svacina: Antwerp, Belgium, 2020.
10. Zeman, A.; Milton, F.; Smith, A.; et al. By heart: an fMRI study of brain activation by poetry and prose. *J. Conscious. Stud.* **2013**, *20*, 132–158.
11. Bugeja, M.J. Why we stop reading poetry. *Engl. J.* **1992**, *81*, 32–42.
12. Hickok, G. *The Myth of Mirror Neurons: The Real Neuroscience of Communication and Cognition*; W.W. Norton & Company: New York, NY, USA, 2014.
13. Perelman, B. *The Marginalization of Poetry: Language Writing and Literary History*; Princeton University Press: Princeton, NJ, USA, 1996.
14. Guite, M. *Love, Remember: 40 Poems of Loss, Lament and Hope*; Canterbury Press: Norwich, UK, 2017.
15. Ferguson, P.S. The merits, mercy and grace of Jesus Christ. *Relig. Educ.* **2011**, *12*, 6.
16. Francis, T.P. Understanding the concept of catharsis in Aristotle. *AMAMIHE J. Appl. Philos.* **2020**, *18*.
17. Blumenfeld, E.R. Poetry of witness, survivor silence, and the healing use of the poetic. *J. Poetry Ther.* **2011**, *24*, 71–78.
18. Angelou, M. There Is No Greater Agony Than Bearing an Untold Story Inside You. Available online: [Facebook](#) (accessed on 21 March 2025).
19. Wright, L. *The Silent Soul Cries Out: The Healing Power of Poetry for Trauma Sufferers*; PhD Thesis, The Union Institute: Cincinnati, OH, USA, 2005.

20. Dietrich, B.C. Oracles and divine inspiration. *Kernos* **1990**, 3.
21. Ellis, L. Trickster: Shaman of the liminal. *Stud. Am. Indian Lit.* **1993**, 55–68.
22. Grove, J. The Contest of Verse-Making in Old Norse-Icelandic Skaldic Poetry; PhD Thesis, University of Toronto: Toronto, ON, Canada, 2007.
23. Baranauskienė, R. Celtic and Scandinavian Language and Cultural Contacts during the Viking Age; PhD Thesis, Vilnius University: Vilnius, Lithuania, 2012.
24. Peterkin, A.; Grewal, S. Bibliotherapy: the therapeutic use of fiction and poetry in mental health. *Int. J. Person Cent. Med.* **2017**, 7, 175.
25. Stanley, N.; Stanley, L.; Nguyen, K. Evaluating the use of biblio-poetry therapy to improve resilience in undergraduates. *J. Poetry Ther.* **2024**, 1–3.
26. Mazza, N. *Poetry Therapy: Theory and Practice*; Routledge: New York, NY, USA, 2016.
27. Carroll, R. Finding the words to say it: The healing power of poetry. *Evid. Based Complement. Altern. Med.* **2005**, 2, 161–172.
28. Aviram, A.F. *Telling Rhythm: Body and Meaning in Poetry*; University of Michigan Press: Ann Arbor, MI, USA, 1994.
29. Darr, R.A. Rumi and individuality. *Mawlana Rumi Rev.* **2014**, 5, 73–87.
30. De Groot, R. Rumi and the abyss of longing. *Mawlana Rumi Rev.* **2011**, 2, 61–93.
31. Majeed, J. *Muhammad Iqbal: Islam, Aesthetics and Postcolonialism*; Routledge India: New Delhi, India, 2020.
32. Santorelli, S. *Heal Thy Self: Lessons on Mindfulness in Medicine*; Harmony: New York, NY, USA, 2000.
33. Gottlieb, R.S. *Spirituality: What It Is and Why It Matters*; Oxford University Press: Oxford, UK, **2013**.
34. Davis, C.S.; Crane, J.L. *End of Life Communication: Stories from the Dead Zone*; Routledge: New York, NY, USA, 2019.
35. Rilke, R.M. *Rilke on Love and Other Difficulties: Translations and Considerations*; W.W. Norton & Company: New York, NY, USA, 1975.
36. Rilke, R.M. *The Poet's Guide to Life: The Wisdom of Rilke*; Random House: New York, NY, USA, 2005.
37. Hayati, D. A comparative study of love, culture and religion in Haiku and Ghazal. *Rupkatha J. Interdiscip. Stud. Humanit.* **2011**, 3, 689–700.
38. Shalevska, E. The digital laureate: Examining AI-generated poetry. *RATE Issues* **2024**, 31.
39. Pretorius, J. Personal poetry therapy for depression by the chatbot and image creator. *J. Poetry Ther.* **2024**, 1–6.
40. Gosseries, O.; Marie, N.; Lafon, Y.; et al. Exploration of trance states: phenomenology, brain correlates, and clinical applications. *Curr. Opin. Behav. Sci.* **2024**, 58, 101400.
41. Welsch, J.T. *The Selling and Self-Regulation of Contemporary Poetry*; Anthem Press: London, UK, 2020.
42. Bleakley, A.; Neilson, S. *Poetry in the Clinic: Towards a Lyrical Medicine*; Routledge: London, UK, 2021.
43. Baldick, C. *The Modern Movement*; Oxford University Press: Oxford, UK, 2004.



Copyright © 2025 by the author(s). Published by UK Scientific Publishing Limited. This is an open access article under the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Publisher's Note: The views, opinions, and information presented in all publications are the sole responsibility of the respective authors and contributors, and do not necessarily reflect the views of UK Scientific Publishing Limited and/or its editors. UK Scientific Publishing Limited and/or its editors hereby disclaim any liability for any harm or damage to individuals or property arising from the implementation of ideas, methods, instructions, or products mentioned in the content.