

Toward a Philosophy of Poetry

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I. POETRY'S FALL FROM GRACE

Poetry has enjoyed a stellar history since the beginnings of philosophy, and one arguably unmatched by any other art form. No lesser figures than Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Hegel, and Schopenhauer devoted serious thought to it. Plato's exclusion of poetry from his ideal city was philosophy's greatest backhanded compliment to the power of the poetic art. Most, if not all, other philosophers looked favorably upon poetry, perhaps none so much as the German Idealists. Kant's assessment of poetry in his *Critique of Judgment* epitomizes the high regard in which the poetic art was once held by philosophers:

Among all the arts *poetry* holds the highest rank. (It owes its origin almost entirely to genius and is least open to guidance by precept or examples.) It expands the mind: for it sets the imagination free, and offers us, among the unlimited variety of possible forms that harmonize with a given concept, . . . that form which links the exhibition of the concept with a wealth of thought to which no linguistic expression is completely adequate, and so poetry rises aesthetically to ideas. Poetry fortifies the mind: for it lets the mind feel its ability—free, spontaneous, and independent of natural determination—to contemplate and judge phenomenal nature as having aspects that nature does not on its own offer in experience either to sense or

to the understanding, and hence poetry lets the mind feel its ability on behalf of and, as it were, as a schema of the supersensible.¹

For similar reasons, Hegel also placed poetry at the top of his hierarchy of the arts;² even for Schopenhauer, tragic poetry stands second only to music: an art form that, as an immediate copy of the Will itself, belongs in a different category altogether, so that tragic poetry (if not poetry in general) remains at the top of what Schopenhauer calls the representational arts.³

Given such a distinguished history, it is perhaps surprising to find that philosophers of art in the analytic tradition that emerged at the turn of the last century have not been very interested in poetry lately. Since the 1970s, there has been a steady decline in philosophical interest in poetry and a concomitant trend in the philosophy of literature to treat poetry together with novels and other forms of literary prose, so that what is said about one literary form is presumed to apply to the others. The *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* (hereafter referred to as *JAAC*) is an excellent thermometer of the interest in poetry in the analytic philosophy tradition. Since its inception in 1942, the *JAAC* has published about 135 articles on some aspect of poetry or poetics. Of these, 82 were published in the 1950s and 1960s, that is, about sixty percent of the total.⁴ The 1970s still saw about twenty-nine articles on poetry or on some poet's work (with William Blake the sure winner among philosophers), so together those three decades account for eighty-two percent of all articles on poetry the journal has published to date. In the 1980s the *JAAC* published only nine articles on poetry; in the 1990s, three.

Frequently, also, work on topics that *prima facie* seem most intimately connected with poetry—as with the flurry of essays on metaphor in the 1970s and 1980s (many of them published in *Critical Inquiry*⁵)—even when they draw on poems for their examples, do not treat these as topics pertaining to poetry in particular but to literature or even art in general—and, in the case of metaphor, as is appropriate, to language as a whole. The most explicit acknowledgement, if not endorsement, of this attitude—which I will call a “generalist” attitude to literature—is perhaps to be found in the opening sentences of the entry on poetry in the *Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics*:

Not surprisingly, the philosophical issues that arise in connection with poetry as a form of art in almost all cases are not specific to it, but relevant to the understanding and evaluation of literature (and indeed other forms of art)

1. *Critique of Judgment*, trans. W. S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987 [1790]), §53, 327 [Ak.].
2. *Hegel's Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), vols. I (especially 82–90) and II (esp. Chapter III).
3. *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E. F. J. Payne (New York: Dover Publications, 1958), vols. I (especially §51) and II (especially §36).
4. The numbers are the result of keyword searches on “poetry,” “poem,” “poetic,” “form,” and “prosody” (in full text) in the *JAAC* at <http://www.jstor.org>, as well as a review of the tables of contents of all *JAAC* issues from 1942 to 1962. It perhaps goes without saying that the numbers are considerably lower in the general philosophy journals.
5. *Critical Inquiry* 5:1, 1978.

more generally; an obvious example is that of the nature of metaphor. Thus it is far from clear that there is a “philosophy of poetry” in anything like the sense in which there is a “philosophy of literature” and a “philosophy of criticism.”⁶

One would be rash to expect such a trend to be without its reasons. So what I will do in what follows is, first, outline what I see as some of the reasons analytic philosophers⁷ have come to view poetry in this light. I will then argue that the generalist attitude overlooks much that is of philosophical significance about poetry. In particular, I will focus on the three aspects of poetry that most markedly distinguish it from other forms of literature, namely, the “personal” aspect (as I will call it), the formal aspect, and the figurative aspect. Close scrutiny of these three dimensions will reveal that there are aspects of poetry whose study are best not subsumed under the study of literature in general.

II. REASONS FOR THE NEGLECT

One could point to several reasons why poetry has not been much discussed by analytic aestheticians of late. I will note four of them. The first concerns in particular the current dearth of philosophical articles on poetry, while the remaining ones are about the pervasive generalist attitude toward literature.

Perhaps the main reason poetry is not widely discussed in philosophy publications today is to be found in academic specialization and the proliferation of academic journals. It was far more common only a few decades ago for scholars in departments other than philosophy to publish in journals such as the *JAAC*. Indeed, a look at the articles on poetry from the first three decades of the *JAAC*'s publication shows that many of the *Journal*'s regular contributors of articles concerned with the literary arts used to issue from English and Comparative Literature departments. Perhaps it became professionally less appealing to non-philosophers to publish in journals such as the *JAAC* and the *British Journal of Aesthetics*⁸ once journals in their home disciplines were of a sufficient number to accommodate the supply of articles being produced. Whatever the reasons, the fact that many of the *JAAC*'s articles on literature were being written by non-philosophers unfortunately only shows philosophers' lack of interest in poetry to be even more pervasive and long-standing than it appears at first.

As for the generalist attitude that emphasizes the commonalities between poetry and other verbal art forms to the neglect of their differences, we would do well to look to the history of literature itself for its possible basis. Literature emerged as poetry (or rather, as verse) and forms such as the novel are rather

6. Alex Neill, “Poetry,” *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics*, ed. Jerrold Levinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 605.

7. I will not concern myself with the interest in poetry in the Continental philosophy tradition.

8. The other two main journals in the field, *Philosophy and Literature* and *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, remain interdisciplinary in this way.

recent arrivals that owe their existence in no small part to the invention of the printing press. Consider, for example, this ancient Sumerian poem, dating back to 2025 BC:

Bridegroom, dear to my heart,
 Goodly is your beauty, honeysweet,
 Lion, dear to my heart,
 Goodly is your beauty, honeysweet.⁹

In part because, for much of our history, what was said could not be easily recorded and had to be memorized, the use of various kinds of patterned repetition was essential to the preservation and dissemination of works. Thus the early oral poets created and relied on metrical schemes, formulaic phrases, and many other mnemonic devices that promoted aesthetic effects even as they aided memory. Indeed, the aesthetic and mnemonic properties of poetic devices are inextricably linked, if we can rely on the empirical assumption that what follows a pattern is more pleasing to the ear as well as more easily retained and recalled.¹⁰ This is particularly evident in the example above, where only a single word is changed in the second couplet of the stanza (whether also an intentional poetic effect, or merely an aid to a particularly bad memory, we cannot know). Now, when we move a few millennia to the seventeenth century, we begin to find passages such as the following:

In the greatest heat of this hurly-burly, it came into Don Quixote's head that he was certainly involved in the disorder and confusion of King Agramant's camp; and calling out with a voice that shook the whole house, "Hold, valorous Knights," said he, "all hold your furious hands, sheath all your swords, let none presume to strike on pain of death, but hear me speak." The loud and monstrous voice surprised everybody into obedience, and the Don proceeded: I told you before, gentlemen, that this castle was enchanted, and that some legion of devils did inhabit it: now let your own eyes confirm my words . . .¹¹

We still find some repetition in the form of parallelism in this passage (the clauses in the imperative, for instance), but nothing like the highly patterned structure that we find in, say, the *Epic of Gilgamesh* or the *Iliad*. In sum, the contemporary generalist attitude to literature, evinced most obviously in the widespread use of the terms "poetry" and "literature" interchangeably in philosophical works, may in

9. "To the Royal Bridegroom." In James W. Johnson, "Lyric." *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Alex Preminger and Terry V. F. Brogan (New York: MJF Books, 1993), 715.

10. For arguments in support of this assumption, see my "Relevance Theory and Poetic Effects" (in preparation).

11. Miguel de Cervantes, *The Life and Achievements of the Renowned Don Quixote de la Mancha*. Ozell's revision of Peter Motteux's translation (New York: Modern Library, 1930), 390.

part be explained by the fact that, for the greater part of literary history, poetry and literature were indeed the same art form.

However, while this may go some way toward explaining the generalist attitude, it evidently does not justify it. Once we have other forms of literature, such as the novel, it makes little sense to use the term “poetry” to refer to them, except perhaps metaphorically (“This novel is pure poetry!”). Although with the novel literature largely let go of the musical element, poetry has retained its “musicality,” arguably to this day, even with so-called “free” verse. So while poetry may often emulate music, and prose literature often emulates poetry,¹² these three art forms belong in a historical continuum that nevertheless has marked categorical discontinuities.¹³ One may interject at this point by noting the existence of the “prose poem,” a poetic form that, French-born, cannot decide what it wants to be. Its nationality notwithstanding, the prose poem is still a poem, with specific characteristics (such as linguistic patterning) that keep it squarely within the poetry category. More importantly, prose poems are *intended* as such, and not as short stories or essays, with which, incidentally, they do not tend to be confused. Knowledge—even specialized knowledge—about one of these art forms may well leave the knower in the dark regarding the characteristics and conventions of the other two. In other words, knowledge about, or expertise in, one of these art forms does not entail knowledge about or expertise in the others. Likewise, being a good or even talented practitioner of one of these art forms does not translate into being an able practitioner of either of the other two—more often than not, good lyric poets are not good novelists, and vice versa.

One trend in philosophy in general and another in aesthetics in particular may also contribute to the explanation of this trend. The general interest in language—particularly in issues of meaning and truth—that marked the last century manifested itself in philosophy of literature as an interest in figures of speech. Poetry, as is known, makes use both of sound *schemes*, such as rhyme, alliteration, and meter, and of *tropes*, or figures of speech, such as metaphor, simile, and metonymy. Even if it is in literature, and especially in poetry, that the meanings of words are “stretched to their limit,” the use of metaphors and other figures of speech is part of our everyday use of language. Since these figures are not in the exclusive domain of poets but are the prerogative of all speakers of a language, they are not, of themselves, a differentiating characteristic among the literary arts. The focus on tropes, as opposed to schemes, can thus be seen as another contributing factor to the generalist approach to literature. The neglect of the formal aspects of poetry may thus be considered another reason why philosophers have treated poetry as perhaps no more than the most striking in a continuum of verbal art forms rather than a literary kind deserving of separate study.

12. It is interesting that, when such emulation occurs, we find that the art form is “at its best,” as evinced in these often made comments: “the best prose literature is as good as poetry”; “the best poetry is like music.” What, then, is the best music as good as? I leave the answer to Schopenhauer and his followers.

13. I offer a definition of poetry that seeks to account for these differences in “Intending to Repeat: A Definition of Poetry,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 65:2 (Spring 2007).

Finally, the issue that helped launch analytic aesthetics in the 1950s—the search for a general definition of art—is reflected in the same search for commonalities among the literary arts. Even while Morris Weitz despaired of finding an essential feature to explain all the arts in his famous “The Role of Theory in Aesthetics,”¹⁴ by doing so he instigated a search for this holy grail, and he is practically alone in holding that no common essence of art can be found, even if it is widely agreed that he was right that such an essence would not be an *intrinsic* feature of artworks.¹⁵ So the generalist trend in philosophy of literature is in keeping also with traditional analytic aesthetics and philosophy of art. It was more important to find what was common to all literary arts, and to the arts in general, than to find what was peculiar to each of them.

These are some of the possible reasons behind the current neglect of poetry and the concomitant generalist attitude to literature. These are evidently empirical observations; no argument was ever given to treat poetry together with novels, essays, and so on. It was simply the working assumption that they ought to be treated together. All the reasons outlined here notwithstanding, in my view what is interesting about poetry is not what it has in common with other literary and art forms, but rather what sets it apart. Three characteristics in particular stand out as distinctive of most poems (considered as the set of all poems in all cultures rather than only contemporary poems in, say, the Western tradition): (1) most poems are lyric poems written in the first person; (2) most poems are formal; indeed, most are highly formal; and (3) most poems use figurative language—metaphors, similes, imagery, and so on, to a greater, often much greater, extent than other literary forms. These characteristics, although not exclusive of poems, are nevertheless decidedly typical of them, in a way that they are not typical of literary essays, short stories, or novels. It therefore behooves the philosopher of art to look further into them, and to consider what consequences they may have for the philosophy of literature in particular and for questions and debates in esthetics and the philosophy of art in general. I will here confine myself to an elucidation of these three features of poetry and to an explanation of why I think they warrant dedicated philosophical attention.

III. THE PERSONAL DIMENSION OF POETRY: IDENTIFICATION AND APPROPRIATION

One of the first things one notices about the majority of existing poems is that they are written in the first person. All of Shakespeare’s 154 sonnets, for instance, are written in the first person, and seventy-five of them indicate as much in the very

14. *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 15:1 (1956), 27–35.

15. Berys Gaut has recently sought to revive Weitz’s family resemblance view by offering a “cluster” account of art in “‘Art’ as a Cluster Concept” (*Theories of Art*, ed. Noël Carroll [Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000]) and in “The Cluster Account of Art Defended” (*British Journal of Aesthetics* 45 (2005), 273–88), a view that has been criticized by Robert Stecker in “Is it Reasonable to Attempt to Define Art?” (*Theories of Art*, 45–64), Thomas Adajian in “On the Cluster Account of Art,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 43:4 (2003): 379–85, and Stephen Davies in *Philosophical Perspectives on Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), chapter 2.

first line by means of words such as “I,” “my” or “mine.” Such an early indication of first-person expression occurs frequently in poems, as seen in these examples:

Always dear to me was this lonely hill,
 And this hedge, which from me so great a part
 Of the farthest horizon excludes the gaze.
 But as I sit and watch, I invent in my mind
 endless spaces beyond, and superhuman
 silences, and profoundest quiet;
 wherefore my heart
 almost loses itself in fear. And as I hear the wind
 rustle through these plants, I compare
 that infinite silence to this voice:
 and I recall to mind eternity,
 And the dead seasons, and the one present
 And alive, and the sound of it. So in this
 Immensity my thinking drowns:
 And sweet to me is shipwreck in this sea.

—Giacomo Leopardi, “The Infinite”¹⁶

I love everything that was,
 Everything that no longer is,
 The ache that no longer hurts,
 The old and erroneous faith,
 The yesterday that left pain,
 The one that left joy
 Just because it was, and flew away
 And today’s already another day.

—Fernando Pessoa, “I Love Everything That Was”¹⁷

Who, if I cried out, would hear me among the angelic
 orders? And even if one of them pressed me
 suddenly to his heart: I’d be consumed
 in his stronger existence. For beauty is nothing
 but the beginning of terror, which we can just barely endure,
 and we stand in awe of it as it coolly disdains
 to destroy us. Every angel is terrifying.

—Rainer Maria Rilke, “The First Elegy” (excerpt)¹⁸

16. Translation by Mike Towler (with my adaptation on the last line). Retrieved November 5, 2007, from <http://www.tcm.phy.cam.ac.uk/~mdt26/poems/leopardi2.html>.

17. “Eu amo tudo o que foi,/Tudo o que já não é./A dor que já me não dói./A antiga e errônea fé,/O ontem que dor deixou./O que deixou alegria/Só porque foi, e voou/E hoje é já outro dia.” *Fernando Pessoa: Obra Poética*. Terceira edição (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Nova Aguilar S.A., 2001), 543; my translation from the Portuguese.

18. *Duino Elegies*. Bilingual edition, trans. Edward Snow (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2000), 5.

Being written in the first person is one of the chief characteristics of the lyric or “song-poetry,” as opposed to the dramatic or “action-poetry” and the epic or “tale-poetry.” In dramatic poetry, we have characters speaking in their own voice, and in the epic we have a narrator. Reference to oneself occurs in the epic, but typically only when the poetic persona asks the Muse to speak through him to convey the story well. The poet then proceeds to tell what someone else did, and what occurred to him and others, not what he or his poetic persona did, thought, or felt.

Yet even when plays were written in verse, and verse epics were written at all (Derek Walcott’s *Omeros* is one rare contemporary exception), first-person, lyric poems constituted the bulk of poetic production.¹⁹ This may in part be explained by at least two reasons. First, the production of both epic and drama involves a more long-term and complex process compared with the production of typically short, one-theme lyrics. Second, the heroes that are the usual fare of epic works are few and far between, whereas lyric poems, insofar as they generally concern the personal experience of anyone, king or commoner, enjoy a much greater abundance of material. Moreover, whereas narrative and drama have other artistic tools available to them, such as variations in narrative temporal structure (a story can be told backwards, for instance), there is not much left for lyric poetry once you take away versification. In a way, the lyric seems inherently to call for verse, for linguistic manipulation, insofar as that is part of the process of making *art* out of expressing one’s thoughts and feelings.

Nothing in principle appears to prevent either drama or epic from being written in the first person. Homer could have written from the perspectives of Achilles or Odysseus, and Sophocles from that of Oedipus, throughout. They did not, however, and neither did, or do, the majority of writers of plays and narratives. Even when they do, as in Joan Didion’s stage version of *The Year of Magical Thinking* and Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*, for instance, the enactment and the storytelling are interspersed with first-term expression. This suggests an inherent connection between what is expressed and the mode of its expression. Where thoughts and feelings are the object, first-person expression is the natural mode; where instead we have actions and events, enactment or third-person narrative are most appropriate. Aristotle pointed these connections out as empirical observations about the kinds of poetry in existence in his time.²⁰ Just as it is more difficult to convey psychological depth in action than it is in narrative (as many adaptations of novels to the movie screen have shown), it is harder to express personal thoughts, feelings, or impressions in the third person than in the first; the third-person account creates distance, whereas the first-person account creates a direct immediacy. I will return to this characteristic of lyric poetry presently.

I will leave aside for the moment the interesting questions of why the first-person lyric should be the prevalent mode of poetic expression, and why it should hold on to expression in more or less formal verse, when other forms of literature

19. Johnson, op. cit., 715.

20. See his *Poetics in Rhetoric and Poetics*, trans. W. Rhys Roberts and Ingram Bywater, introduction by Friedrich Solmsen (New York: The Modern Library, 1954).

have largely let go of that, and when mnemonic needs clearly no longer constitute a pressure towards formalization. (Although historically it was often the case that plays would be written partly or wholly in verse, today it is rare to find plays that are poetic in this sense. A similar fate has befallen the epic; story-telling is now done in prose in novels, novellas, short stories, memoirs and other types of literary non-fiction.) I wish instead to focus on *how* the first-person mode of poetry (I will now use “poetry” to refer to what we may, in light of these considerations, consider poetry *par excellence*, i.e. lyric poetry) affects how we experience poems.

My first claim here is that to the *first-person expression* on the part of the poet or poetic persona there corresponds a counterpart *personal engagement* on the part of the reader or hearer. What, precisely, does that mean? How and why does it occur? Does it affect our experience of poems in a way that differentiates it from our appreciation of other forms of literature? I will now offer a brief phenomenology of reading first-person lyric poetry in order to answer the first two questions, which I hope will also provide sufficient reason to answer the third question in the positive.

Consider Yehuda Amichai’s “Pity, We Were a Good Invention”:

They amputated
Your thighs from my waist.
For me they are always
Surgeons. All of them.

They dismantled us
One from another. For me they are engineers.
Pity. We were a good and loving

Invention: an airplane made of man and woman,
Wings and all:
We soared a bit from the earth,
We flew a bit.²¹

When listening to or reading a poem, we begin by hearing someone else’s voice, by attending to what the poetic persona might have to share with us. Without presuming to account for *all* poetry reading experiences, I submit that, typically, by the end of the poem we have come to identify with that voice. I do not mean by this that we suddenly come to think that we *are* the poet, or that we are the *writers* of the poem. I mean an identification in the sense that we feel that we *could* have written those words (if only we had the talent to express ourselves as well), because they express something that we, too, feel or have felt, think or have thought, and sometimes even thoughts and feelings we never realized we had but that now, seeing them expressed, we find resonating with something within ourselves. Our experience of lyric poems is therefore peculiarly *personal*: we either assume the role of the speaker in the poem, or of the one who is spoken to. This makes the reading of poems very immediate and subjective; we are not being told a story,

21. Yehuda Amichai: *A Life of Poetry. 1948–1994*, trans. Benjamin and Barbara Harshaw (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1994), 101.

objectively, of what happened to whom and how *they* felt, but instead a very personal account of how *one* felt, in a way that invites us to recognize similar feelings or experiences or thoughts in ourselves. It is almost as if the poet were telling us: “This is how I feel or think; do you recognize this in you? Do you feel this way too?” Our identification consists in a recognition of similar thoughts, feelings or impressions within. The subjectivity in the way the work is written thus promotes a subjective, personal engagement with that work.

Evidence that identification is a central characteristic of our engagement with poems may be found in the common practice of “appropriation,” where we use poems written by others to express our own ideas or feelings—something we cannot as easily do with a novel, essay or play.²² We may “appropriate” an e. e. cummings poem to tell someone how much we lust for them, or an Edna St. Vincent Millay one to express how little lust means. We may “steal” a Shakespeare sonnet to read to our beloved during a wedding ceremony, and an Allen Ginsberg poem to express our political views. There is nothing extraordinary in this widespread practice. In the lyric poem there is an implicit, perhaps even implied, invitation to the reader to identify with the poetic persona. When we highlight a poem in a book, for instance, this is done typically not only because we enjoy the way it sounds, or what it objectively relates, even if we may enjoy both of these things a great deal—in general, selection of a favorite is evidence of identification with a message, a mood, a feeling, or an event and how it was experienced. This is not a typical occurrence with the novel or the literary essay (although of course it may happen with them too)—rather there we enjoy the story and the way it is told, even if we also may find that it conveys a message we find significant.

The power of a poem as a work of art is, to a large extent, a direct consequence of its ability to engage us at this personal level. Whenever we do not identify with, and feel uncompelled to appropriate a poem, this will have immediate consequences for our evaluation of the poem in question; generally, whenever a negative evaluation occurs, it is precisely because the poem has failed to engage us at the expected level of identification: it has left us cold. One may wonder why this level of engagement should be expected. I think this is, again, because the use of the first person pronoun invites and encourages that identification; it promotes our taking that voice as our own. When we read it out loud, we are uttering that “I” and that “me” as if they were self-referential; it is as if we are trying those words on “for size.” The “I” encourages us to take the poetic persona’s perspective much as, in films, point-of-view shots encourage us to take the perspective of the protagonist. And here too, failure on the part of the film-maker to place the camera in the right spot so as to promote that perspective-taking will result in the viewer’s failure to engage in the right manner, and consequently affect the artistic evaluation of the work.

It is certainly true that appropriation may occur with other art forms as well. We sometimes use songs to express our feelings for someone; some couples have a “theme song” in real life, some fictional couples have theme songs in movies or

22. Quite coincidentally, in a recent paper delivered at Texas Tech University in October 2008, Kendall Walton expresses similar ideas about our mode of engagement with lyric poetry. See his “Poets as Thoughtwriters; Music without Personae” (manuscript in progress).

soap operas. There are, of course, many similarities between songs and lyric poems, which were originally chanted, and maintain their musical dimension in formal devices. The practice is not, however, typical of other art forms—although we obviously may, we do not usually “appropriate” sculptures, paintings, installations, or symphonies in the sense used here; the same goes for essays, novels, and plays. The manner in which works of art in those categories are made neither promotes identification and appropriation nor necessarily discourages it; works in those forms simply do not as a rule have an identifiable “I” that can be “tried on for size” as part and parcel of our engagement with and appreciation of it. Even if they did, however, and even if appropriation were typical of our engagement with them, this would not gainsay its occurrence in our engagement with lyric poetry, or its centrality in that engagement.

One may also object that we may, and often do, enjoy poems for their form only: for the way they sound, no appropriation required. This is certainly true also, and I think the following is a good example of it:

I caught this morning morning's minion, king-
 dom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in his riding
 Of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding
 High there, how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing
 In his ecstasy! then off, off forth on swing,
 As a skate's heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend: the hurl and gliding
 Rebuffed the big wind. My heart in hiding
 Stirred for a bird,—the achieve of; the mastery of the thing!

Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume, here
 Buckle! AND the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion
 Times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier!

No wonder of it: shéer plóid makes plough down sillion
 Shine, and blue-bleak embers, ah my dear,
 Fall, gall themselves, and gash gold-vermilion.

—Gerard Manley Hopkins, “The Windhover”²³

It is hard to tell, on first hearing, what the lines of Hopkins' poem mean at even a basic level, before we even begin to make out what message the poem as a whole may be conveying. However, the sound of the words—the numerous alliterations (six on the second line alone), assonances, and end rhymes all contribute to an incredible sonic furor that wins us over before we have the slightest idea as to what is being said.

This appreciation of sound and form alone, true of our appreciation of poetry though it may be, still does not detract from the claim that we *also* frequently appreciate poetry for how well it engages our own thoughts and feelings, and that we identify with and appropriate poems, and that, when we do, this contributes to

23. *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, 4th ed., ed. Margaret Ferguson, Mary Jo Salter, and Jon Stallworthy (New York: Norton, 1996), 1062–63.

our positive evaluation of the poem as a literary work of art. Just as importantly, appropriation rarely happens in virtue of form alone. We do not identify with particularly effective uses of the iambic pentameter, even if we may enjoy sounding a particular instance of it out loud for sonic reasons alone.

In sum: that poetry is principally written in the first person (either an implicit or an explicit one) has immediate consequences for how we experience poems, and this in turn for how we evaluate them. The personal mode of expression invites a personal mode of engagement with the content of the work, so personal indeed that the ideal engagement involves identification, on the part of the listener or reader, with the impressions, thoughts, or feelings expressed in the work, something evinced in the phenomenon of appropriation. While appropriation may occur with other art forms, the practice is not widespread in any other art form except the song lyric, which shares historical roots and structural similarities with the lyric poem. Finally, subjective (though not necessarily critical or scholarly) evaluation of the quality of a poem is in part dependent on the level of identification resultant from one's engagement with the work, where the greater the potentiality for "appropriation," the greater the likelihood of subjective appreciation of the work. *Mutatis mutandis*, the less one is able to identify with a poem (and consequently potentially to "appropriate" it for personal use), the less one is likely to appreciate its qualities, no matter how critically acclaimed the work may be.

IV. THE FORMAL DIMENSION OF POETRY: COGNITIVE AND AESTHETIC EFFECTS

The second characteristic central to most poetry I wish to consider is its pervasive use of formal poetic devices. These include meter, rhyme, alliteration, stanza form, and several others, all of them involving recurrence of either abstract patterns (such as the foot) or concrete sounds (such as assonance). Historically, as is well known, these methods of patterning served the mnemonic needs of oral cultures. Nevertheless, then as now (when mnemonic power is no longer a need), these formal devices serve two inextricably, if mysteriously, related functions: (1) they contribute to how we understand what is being said; and (2) they create a rhythm and beat that tends to be pleasing to the ear. Which comes first I do not know. Is the rhythm pleasant because it helps us memorize, or does it help us memorize because it is pleasant? This is perhaps a question for evolutionary psychologists and phonologists, though I will venture the guess that the pleasure arises out of the cognitive function—somewhat analogously with the way pleasure arises out of the sexual function: would we still be here as a species if we did not enjoy it? In fact, I think the pleasure that arises out of patterned linguistic repetition helps us not only memorize, but also cognize what is being said. In other words, formal devices such as meter and rhyme schemes help us understand what is being said in a poem as well as remember the words which make it up, although they will help us memorize even if we do not understand what is being conveyed. This is smart engineering, I think. If I remember the words, I can always call them to mind again, and continue the process of unraveling the message; if I understood it the first time

around, I can call the message to mind again. But understanding without the ability to remember is a one-time thing that is considerably less useful.

The idea that linguistic repetition *helps* us understand what is said in poems might seem obvious and banal, but it actually flies in the face of the currently dominant theory of communication in pragmatics. According to the “relevance” theory of Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, repetition is something unusual in linguistic communication and for that reason it is a cognitive hurdle rather than a facilitator. That is, since in everyday communication people do not usually repeat words, or sounds as in rhyme and alliteration, whenever they do, that will slow down the communicative process, because we will have to stop and think what reason they might have had to do so. The communicative assumption behind this attitude is that speakers will utter only what is *relevant* to their communicative goals (hence the name of the theory), and so we must figure out why they thought repeating something was relevant to what they had to say. This greater effort on our part, Sperber and Wilson claim, should result in greater cognitive rewards, which they cash out in terms of greater contextual effects (although it is not clear quite how to cash *this* out).²⁴

It should be clear from this very brief exposition of relevance theory that their relevance principle should *also* support the claim that repetition is a cognitive facilitator, especially in poetry. This is because, by creating certain patterns, the poet is already implicitly telling us to pay attention to them, and so is expediting the comprehension process rather than slowing it down. For instance, by placing two words that sound alike at the end of two adjacent lines, the poet is inviting us to compare and contrast them. This is precisely what happens in this stanza of Ezra Pound’s *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*:

The “age demanded” chiefly a mould in plaster,
Made with no loss of time.
A prose kinema, not, not assuredly, alabaster
Or the “sculpture” of rhyme.²⁵

“Plaster” and “alabaster” are obviously contrasted here, and their contrast is masterfully explained by Paul Fussell:

Plaster and alabaster are total opposites as materials for plastic art: plaster is squeezed or molded into some predetermined shape; it often mimics some other material—most often stone—and it is conspicuously fragile and impermanent. Alabaster, on the other hand, must be worked from the outside: it must be incised, and incision implies a sharpness in both the cutting tool and the intelligence that commands it. The shape of a figure cut in alabaster cannot be wholly predetermined, for it will depend in part on the unique

24. *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995).

25. Excerpt quoted and discussed in Paul Fussell, *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979), 110.

texture of the stone. And finally, no one works in alabaster without some aspirations toward permanence.²⁶

Fussell's idea here is that the placement of the similar-sounding words in parallel position suggests a semantic similarity, but then we see that the actual words themselves are opposites, and the effect is one of irony. The same occurs with the expressions "no loss of time" and "'sculpture' of rhyme." So I think Sperber and Wilson are right that repetition in such cases gives us greater cognitive rewards and contextual effects, but the repetition devices themselves are the cognitive facilitators and knowledge promoters; they automatically indicate that there is something to look for, something to be worked out.

In addition to that, repetition devices can also create *affective* contextual effects, that is, effects that engender a mood, and that are not purely cognitive. Sperber and Wilson claim that "what look like non-propositional effects associated with the expression of attitudes, feelings and states of mind can be approached in terms of the notion of weak implicature."²⁷ This in effect reduces affective states to cognitive ones, where cognitive states are always associated with particular propositions. But this strikes me as excessively reductionist, and not phenomenologically accurate. Consider the following two lines:

Alone, alone, all all alone,
Alone on a wide, wide sea.²⁸

These lines from Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, it seems to me, do a marvellous job of expressing melancholy by replicating the back and forth, rocking motion of being on a boat out at sea, and also by expressing the vastness of the sea itself. Only four little words,²⁹ most of them repeated, and one already imagines oneself looking out into the distant sea, sadly feeling the ultimate loneliness of life. Even if there are particular propositions associated with this affective state, this does not mean that the affective state reduces to, or is identical with, those propositions.

The verse aspect of poetry, then, has consequences for how we cognize poems. Insofar as most poetry is dense with such formal poetic devices, reflection on the contribution of these devices to the work's properties, message, etc., and to our experience of them constitutes another reason why poetry is philosophically interesting apart from other literary forms, which do not, as a rule, make the pervasive use of such patterning schemes that we find in lyric poetry.

26. *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form*, 110–11.

27. *Relevance Theory*, 222.

28. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, Part IV.

29. Not counting "on" and "a."

V. THE FIGURATIVE DIMENSION OF POETRY: ABSTRACT THOUGHT AND THE SEARCH FOR MEANING

The third and final aspect of poetry that deserves our attention is the use of figurative language. Most poetry makes abundant use of imagery, metaphors, similes, metonymies, and many other kinds of tropes. Indeed, attempts have often been made to define poetry precisely on the basis of this marked feature of poems. As is the case with the examples already given, the following poems strikingly manifest this feature:

Fate is a cruel
and proficient potter,
my friend. Forcibly
spinning the wheel
of anxiety, he lifts misfortune
like a cutting tool. Now,
having kneaded my heart
like a clump of clay,
he lays it on his
wheel and gives a spin.
What he intends to produce
I cannot tell.

—Vidya, “Fate is a cruel and proficient potter”³⁰

In the Spring the quince and the
Pomegranate bloom in the
Sacred park of the Maidens
And the vine tendril curls in
The shade of the downy vine leaf.
But for me Love never sleeps.
He scorches me like a blaze
Of lightning and he shakes me
To the roots like a storm out of
Thrace, and he overwhelms my heart
With black frenzy and seasickness.

—Ibycus, “In Spring the Quince”³¹

My thoughts with regard to the figurative aspect of poetic language are twofold. First, I think that figurative language of its own accord leads us to abstract thought, to consider the meanings of the tropes we are presented with. Second, the ineffability of much of that imagery, metaphors, similes, and so on is largely responsible

30. Vidya was a 7th-century Indian poet. *World Poetry: An Anthology of Verse from Antiquity to Our Time*, ed. Katharine Washburn and John S. Major (New York: Norton, 1998), 222–23. Translated from the Sanskrit by Edwin Gerow and Peter Dent.

31. Ibycus was a 7th-century BC Greek poet. *World Poetry: An Anthology of Verse from Antiquity to Our Time*, 96. Translated from the Greek by Kenneth Rexroth.

for a widespread view of poetry as something at once mysterious and important, difficult and profound; as something that, with the proper understanding, will reveal truths about life and the human condition. We come to poetry *expecting meaning*, in a grand sense of that word; we accordingly look for it.

With respect to the first claim, it has been argued that it is rather the conventions of reading, that is, certain socio-cultural norms we learn by virtue of growing up and being part of a certain environment, that lead us to read poems in a certain way—a way that promotes abstract thinking.³² Without downplaying the role that conventions play in our encounters with literature, I think this cannot be the whole story. It seems to me that, were one to encounter a poem such as one of these for the first time, unaware of any conventions of reading, the metaphors, the imagery, would *of themselves* promote a search for meaning merely by virtue of being unusual ideas. Thinking of destiny as a potter—a cruel and proficient one, no less—is an image at once novel and fitting. I don't need to know how one does, or ought to, approach these things called “poems” in order to be led to think reflectively about this idea. The image of its own leads me to the idea.

This in turn connects with my second claim. The claim that fate is a cruel and proficient potter is a rather grand claim about life in general. In Vidya's worldview, I am merely a piece of clay in the hands of a power I cannot control: a power that does not seem to have anything other than aesthetic goals when choosing what to make of me. And sometimes, indeed, we do feel thus helpless, and not altogether in control of our destinies. Lyric poetry seems to be the kind of art form that best addresses itself to us as individuals that seek such grand explanations of life, that is, as meaning-seeking subjects in the profound, not just the semantic, sense of that word.

This is not to say that we do not seek meaning when engaging with other art forms. Clearly, we may look for messages in a painting, in a musical piece, in a narrative (whether in a novel, a theatrical piece, or a film), and we often do. However, we may just as well simply enjoy a painting for its visual qualities, without wondering what they might mean. We may likewise simply enjoy a musical work for how it makes us feel, for the mood it promotes in us. Finally, we may seek in a story no more than entertainment. When we read, or listen to a poem, however, we invariably (rather than sometimes or even often) *look* for a meaning, and indeed a profound meaning: a meaning that should tell us something about life. This may occur when we engage with other art forms, and even with other literary forms. But it is not an expectation we bring to our engagement with them as a rule (if and when we are already familiar with the relevant artistic conventions), nor, typically, a consequence of that engagement that occurs by virtue of the manner in which the work is written (i.e., with the pervasive use of tropes). It is true that poems may not satisfy our expectations in that regard, and that not all metaphors and similes will always work their magic; however, that failure on the part of either the poet or the reader does not gainsay the fact that such are our default expectations, and such are the typical consequences of poetic imagery.

32. See Peter Lamarque and Stein H. Olsen, *Truth, Fiction and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

VI. CONCLUSION

Poetry has had to compete with other art forms from early on for our artistic and philosophical attention—architecture, sculpture, painting, theatre, and even music, once these art forms came apart. Within literature, it had to contend with the drama and the epic, as well as with rhetorical discourses and philosophical essays and dialogues, and eventually with the novel, the short story, and the literary essay. To these were added photography, film, and installations. These more novel art forms rightly usurped the attention of philosophers, especially as the cognitive sciences developed. Nevertheless, and as I hope to have shown, poetry (lyric poetry in particular) deserves more attention than has been devoted to it lately. It deserves attention of its own, and not just hidden under the umbrella of “literature,” because it differs from other forms of literature in being paradigmatically written in the first person, in its pervasive use of formal poetic devices, and as an art form that addresses itself *directly* to us as *meaning-seeking subjects* in a way that is arguably not *as* central to the experience of any of the other art forms. Dedicated attention to it is long overdue, and I think we have only to gain by remedying this oversight. I hope to have here taken a step, however small, in that direction.³³

33. This is a barely recognizable descendant of a paper presented in the Cognitive Poetics panel I organized for the 2004 Annual Meeting of the American Society for Aesthetics in Houston, TX. I thank my panelists there for their contributions: Nigel Fabb, Kristin Hanson, and especially Alex Neill, for his insightful comments on the work of all panelists. Jerrold Levinson also deserves my gratitude for reading a much later version. Finally, thanks are due to the audiences at Trinity University and at the Texas Tech University Department of Classics and Modern Languages and Literatures, where a paper strikingly similar to this one was delivered in February 2009, and to Andrew Kania and Julian Perez (respectively) for inviting me to speak.