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# THE PHILOSOPHY OF POETRY

EDITED BY JOHN GIBSON



# The Philosophy of Poetry

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John Gibson

**OXFORD**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Great Clarendon Street, Oxford, OX2 6DP,  
United Kingdom

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First Edition published in 2015

Impression: 1

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Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press  
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Data available

Library of Congress Control Number: 2014955302

ISBN 978-0-19-960367-1

Printed and bound by  
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

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# Introduction

## The Place of Poetry in Contemporary Aesthetics

*John Gibson*

The title of this volume is *The Philosophy of Poetry*, and if one is unaware of the state of contemporary analytic philosophy of literature, it might seem immodest. When I told a colleague from a department of English about this project, he commented that the title could only work in a discipline as arrogant and cantankerous as Philosophy. I hope few will agree with my colleague's view of our field, but in one respect his opinion was clearly misinformed. He appeared to think that the volume looks at the mass of existing philosophical work on poetry and pronounces it to be in need of a corrective, one which the contributors gathered here heroically produce. The mistake is ironic in the proper sense of the term. Those who work in the philosophy of literature will know that such boastfulness is not possible since no such mass of work exists. Indeed, until *very* recently one could fairly say that poetry is the last great unexplored frontier in contemporary analytic aesthetics, an ancient and central art we have somehow managed to overlook more or less entirely.<sup>1</sup> The title of this volume, then, should be

<sup>1</sup> One must here emphasize "analytic" aesthetics because our colleagues in continental aesthetics have a better record with poetry. A fuller version of the story of analytic philosophy of literature's avoidance of poetry would acknowledge that others have tried to bring poetry to its attention. I ignore, for example, all that Richard Eldridge has done on behalf of re-enfranchising poetry. But he is not properly seen as "analytic": his work straddles the boundary between Anglophone and continental aesthetics and is better seen as trying to open up a novel approach to art than as working within one of its established traditions. Eldridge edited *Beyond Representation: Philosophy and Poetic Imagination* (1996), and the

read not as braggadocio but as declaring poetry an object of interest for contemporary aesthetics.

I said that “until very recently” one could speak of an avoidance of poetry in contemporary analytic aesthetics. The watershed moment was in 2009, when Ernie Lepore guest-edited an issue of *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* dedicated exclusively to poetry.<sup>2</sup> In the same year *Ratio* published a special issue on the philosophy of literature with two articles dedicated to poetry.<sup>3</sup> Suddenly there was a small foundation of high-quality work on poetry, and since then a handful of excellent articles on poetry has appeared in *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, *British Journal of Philosophy*, and *Philosophy and Literature*, the journals where the best work in literary aesthetics tends to end up. What has been especially exciting to witness is the kind of philosopher who is drawn to poetry. It is not surprising that luminaries in the philosophy of literature such as Peter Lamarque, Kendall Walton, Richard Eldridge, and Peter Kivy have recently written on poetry (and that in figures such as Anna Christina Ribeiro we see that there are emerging leaders who work almost exclusively on poetry).<sup>4</sup> What is surprising, and what bodes well for the future of the philosophy of poetry, is the number of philosophers who primarily work on mind, language, the self, and ethics who have also taken an interest in the philosophy of poetry. Ernie Lepore is an obvious example, but Elisabeth Camp, Maximilian De Gaynesford, Joseph Stern, John Koethe, Patrick Suppes, and Troy Jollimore are also worth noting.<sup>5</sup> In other words, we suddenly find ourselves with work on poetry and an exciting list of philosophers who have been producing it. What is needed now is a book that organizes and presents contemporary aesthetics’ burgeoning interest in poetry in such a way that the shape of a distinct and coherent field may appear: a sense of key issues, of standing quarrels, of centers of argumentative gravity, of new puzzles and paradoxes,

volume has played an important role in creating an alternative to (analytic) philosophy of literature in which is poetry is central.

<sup>2</sup> See *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 33/1 (2009). <sup>3</sup> *Ratio*, 22/4 (2009).

<sup>4</sup> See e.g. Eldridge (2001), Ribeiro (2007), Lamarque (2009), Walton (2011), and Kivy (2011). One should add to this list Rowe (2011), John (2013), and McGregor (2014). It is also worth noting that much of Robert Stecker’s work on interpretation is unique in that it focuses on poetry as well as the novel.

<sup>5</sup> All of these authors published on poetry (among elsewhere) in the 2009 issues of either *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* or *Ratio*. See e.g. Lepore (2009), Camp (2009), de Gaynesford (2009), Koethe (2009), Stern (2009), Suppes (2009), and Jollimore (2009).

of people who must be read and positions that must be dealt with. This is the intention behind *The Philosophy of Poetry*.

The chapters of this volume offer an overview of, and so an introduction to, the philosophy of poetry, and thus there is little reason for the Introduction to do so, too. Instead of surveying developing debates in the field, I will try to provide a point of entry to them. I will address my points primarily to the reader new to poetry who needs to be alerted to some of the basic assumptions and views about the history of poetry that inform the chapters here, especially modern poetry, with which the majority of contributors concern themselves. My primary audience is the philosopher of art who needs to understand why her field should take a serious interest in poetry, though my hope is that what I say to her will also be helpful to the philosopher *in genere* who needs to hear why poetry should matter to philosophy at large.

I suspect the philosopher of art already agrees with the spirit of this call to enfranchise poetry in the philosophy of literature. Poetry, obviously, will be a chapter in the story of philosophy of literature. After many years in the woods, the philosophy of art has now made its way back near the mainstream of philosophy, and the philosophy of literature has done so, unsurprisingly, by working on issues adjacent to those in philosophy of language, metaphysics, epistemology, and philosophy of mind. Examples are the marquee debates on interpretation, emotion, imagination, fictional reference, truth in fiction, literary cognitivism, and narrative (if narrative seems the odd duck here, consider its importance to contemporary debates in the philosophy of the self), and the novel has been the literary form of choice for these discussions. No shame here, but it is time to branch out. Indeed, in recent years philosophers of literature have begun to pay serious attention to drama, autobiography, even the graphic novel. The philosophy of poetry should be seen as part of this general turn to the regions of literary production still awaiting our attention.

Philosophers of art of virtually any stripe should find poetry deserving of much more central status in contemporary aesthetics. I will provide a few examples of philosophical challenges poetry offers the philosophy of art, but it is not just the problems poetry raises that make it so interesting. It is that poetry, to a remarkable degree, embodies aspects of the various arts and so a discussion of it will naturally draw upon the interests of almost any philosopher concerned with art. According to an ancient myth, poetry is the mother of the arts: from its rhyme and meter music is born, from its

power to conjure up and communicate by way of striking images painting arises, and from its narratological and imaginative dimensions we get stories and the work of fiction. This myth might have things the wrong way round—poetry as a distinct, self-aware art form perhaps came about largely by cannibalizing older, more basic arts (it will be for the art historian to tell us)—but nonetheless we see in much poetry a fusing of elements of many of the arts, comics and gardening perhaps excluded. Whatever one thinks of the myth, it suffices to give one a sense of the extent to which poetry can act as a philosophical hub at which the interests of philosophers of literature, music, and the visual arts can come together and mingle in unexpected and fruitful ways. Other art forms also embody the basic arts in one way or another. Just think of dance or opera. But poetry, a linguistic creature with intense painterly and musical aspirations, does so in unique ways and thus deserves the philosopher of art's full attention.

It is true that there is a certain kind of philosopher of literature who is hostile both to the modern poem and to philosophers who write about it. And since the majority of recent work on poetry concerns itself with twentieth-century poetry, this sentiment needs to be addressed. If one attends enough conferences one will know the sort: the philosopher who sees the value of all modern poetry as summed up, say, in the most blatantly nonsensical line of a weak John Ashbery poem. One should not mince words here: opinions of this sort reveal a huge, and risible, misunderstanding of a philosopher of art's basic professional responsibilities. Whether or not we like poetry of any sort is, strictly speaking, beside the point. Our job is not, or not just, to write about the art we adore. As philosophers of art, it is to make sense of the art world. And poetry is a long-standing and privileged member of that world. Imagine if a philosopher of science tried to justify ignoring physics because he found it difficult, odd, or self-important. Happily, however, those who write on modern poetry do seem to like it very much, and most people, philosophers included, can be made to love it a little, too.

It is worth belaboring this point. Analytic philosophy of literature has produced much work it can be very proud of—research on the nature of fiction is arguably the shinning example—but from a certain vantage-point our work is bound to seem conservative and far behind the work done by our peers in philosophy of music, visual art, even film. Our colleagues who labor in these fields write about Bach, Caravaggio, and Eisenstein, but they also have something to say about atonal music,

action painting, cinematic surrealism, and conceptual art. In other words, they have largely done their duty in following their preferred art through its various historical manifestations and up to the present. It is for this reason that they can get away with claiming that they have provided philosophical documentation of their chosen art form *tout court* (a gap here and there notwithstanding). Not so for the philosophy of literature, which has on the whole ignored not just literary modernism but virtually all forms of the avant-garde that have defined the significant literary movements of the past one hundred plus years. If literature had vanished entirely as an artistic practice in the 1880s, it would have little visible effect on the kind of work we produce. A Jane Austen novel, even a Sherlock Holmes story (from which our field seems to draw roughly a third of its examples), could suffice to stage almost all the points we make about fiction, interpretation, ontology, and the nature of our emotional engagement with literature. It may be true that James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* or Sylvia Plath's "Daddy" are less than ideal for exploring, say, the metaphysics of fictional worlds, and so philosophers of literature may be excused for focusing on kinds of literature that are better suited for their projects. But the field as a whole pays a great price for this: we can claim no comprehensiveness in our treatment of our field, and to genuine scholars of literature we can seem dabblers. It is on this point that the contributors to this volume are entitled to vaunt: this is the first volume in which analytic philosophers of literature take the modernist, the avant-garde, and the experimental seriously. It takes seriously much else, too. But that is the point: the authors move from Milton to Paul Celan, Wordsworth to Wallace Stevens, and much else in between. The volume as a whole provides a very good reason to think that it will be the philosopher of poetry who will help literary aesthetics attain the expansiveness and openness our friends in other areas of analytic aesthetics have already achieved.

In one sense it is little surprise that many philosophers of art stopped reading poetry. Presumably they stopped taking an interest in poetry at the same time the vast majority of humans did, namely, at some point in the 1910s when modernism reached out across the arts and made them "difficult." Now lest someone draw a silly conclusion, of course there were difficult poems before there were difficult modern poems. The issue is rather how explicit and productive this difficulty becomes in poetry in the wake of, to give a sampling of poets from different traditions, W. B. Yeats,

Rainer Maria Rilke,<sup>6</sup> Guillaume Apollinaire, and, of course, T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound.<sup>7</sup> Modernists such as Pound implored poets to “make it new”<sup>8</sup> and T. S. Eliot urged that in our age poetry “must be *difficult*,”<sup>9</sup> and the vast majority of poets listened while many casual readers of poetry apparently moved on. Some believe that modernism ended in the 1950s, some believe it has never left us, but since its inception this fabled “difficulty” has stayed with us in one form or another, regardless of whether modernism has as well. For the ocular proof, one need only look at the poetry published in recent issues of *The Paris Review*, *The Kenyon Review*, *Tar River Poetry*, *Poetry*, *The Wolf*, and the many other little or big literary magazines that seek out and showcase new poetry. It is an astonishing, and heartening, thing that such magazines still flourish.

Now explaining just what modernism is and precisely what this difficulty consists in is not something one is advised to attempt in a thousand words or less. But a few words are in order, since this difficulty is so frequently referenced in the following chapters and the reader new to poetry will wish to have a sense of what all this amounts to.<sup>10</sup> The following way of putting it has the virtue of providing the right initial idea, though it is incomplete and should be jettisoned once one knows one’s way around modern poetry. Here is the idea: in the wake of modernism poetry can no longer be read naively. Let me explain.

“Naive” here is not meant in an entirely derogatory sense. To say that an artwork of any sort can be appreciated naively is to say that attending only to its surface will repay a non-negligible degree of aesthetic interest. To

<sup>6</sup> In the case of both Rilke and Yeats, it would be their later works that have a claim to being modernist, and their poetic careers reflect in miniature the passage from nineteenth-century romanticism to twentieth-century modernism.

<sup>7</sup> However we define poetic modernism—this is no easy task—most scholars acknowledge it is underfoot well before the early 1900s. The birth of poetic modernism is often attributed to the French symbolist poets, and the crucial event is usually thought to be the publication in 1857 of Charles Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du mal*.

<sup>8</sup> This is the title of Pound (1934). <sup>9</sup> Eliot (1975, 65).

<sup>10</sup> The reader who wants more than I offer here might consult some of the following studies. For a general overview of the lyric, see Susan Stewart (2009). For studies of modern, largely British and American, poetry, see Pinsky (1976), Altieri (1984), Golding (1995), and Izenberg (2011). Leighton (2007) offers an excellent discussion of how to navigate the aesthetic and philosophical concerns of prominent lines of modern poetry. To read Vendler (2005) and Bernstein (2011) is to see two very different ways of approaching the modern poem that are emblematic of two very different contemporary critical sensibilities and practices. For a popular work on the difficult modern poem, see Orr (2011).

appreciate a literary work of art naively is to find that one can take pleasure in it without concerning oneself with, for example, questions of the artistic project that underwrites a work, the significance of its form, the more clandestine forms of meaning and aboutness it bears, and so on. The great realist novel is a master of providing such surfaces, surfaces that often open up on to an interior of immense complexity. The reader who searches out this complexity will of course attend to the surface, too. But the naive reader may remain there, reading, say, Henry James's *The American* as just a well-told tale of an expatriate in Paris who unfortunately falls in love with a member of the aristocracy, ignoring along the way all of James's grander pursuits in the novel. There is nothing wrong with an artwork that bears a surface that can be appreciated naively. Indeed, bearing such a surface is a tried and true way of forging that crucial initial bond between audience and work. The great romantic poets of the nineteenth century mastered this in their own way, though at this point much pressure was already beginning to be placed on the reader who approaches poetry too naively. Nevertheless, to read, say, Wordsworth's "The World is Too much With Us" naively would be to read it as a series of mellifluous lines about sleeping flowers and pleasant leas which cumulatively and fairly straightforwardly yield a point to the effect that modern life alienates us from nature. In calling this "naive" there is no implication that the content of my naive reading is wholly unfaithful to the poem or misleads us as to what Wordsworth was really trying to say through it. The surface offers a preliminary encounter with, as it were, meaning and beauty; and what happens in the classroom or in a good work of criticism is that this initial encounter is treated as the first rung of a ladder we are expected to climb if we are to achieve a view of the poem's complexity and so of its full aesthetic and cultural significance. No insult to the surface of the poem is implied, just that the serious reader shall wish to move beyond it at a certain point and that in doing so she will entitle herself to claim that she has fully experienced the poem *as a poem* and not just as a pretty expression of a deep-sounding idea.

Whatever else poetic modernism is, it abandons to a great extent just about everything that makes naive reading possible, and herein lies much of its fabled difficulty. The terms that abound in this volume are *compression*, *density*, *abstraction*, and *opacity*, and all are sophisticated ways of marking the basic idea that in the wake of modernism much poetry turns against the standard practice of offering even the semblance of accessible



surfaces. We often find a play of images couched in language that revels in its assault on our linguistic and communicative expectations, and frequently we are not even offered an *apparent* preliminary encounter with meaning. Now when speaking of “meaning” in the context of poetry, one likely should not have in mind what a philosophers such as Frege or Davidson mean by “meaning.” When speaking of poetry the concept of meaning is used broadly to indicate *whatever* it is that endows a poem with aboutness, with communicative content, with a point: with the capacity, perhaps despite everything, to speak to the reader. And one way of putting what all the talk of density, compression, opacity, and the like gesture towards is the remarkable extent to which we experience meaning as *latent* in so much poetry of the last one hundred years. It tends to hold out meaning as a promise, as a destination rather than a point of departure,<sup>11</sup> and this distinguishes it hugely from most other uses of language, where the goal is usually to wear meaning on the sleeve. To achieve even minimal understanding of much modernist poetry, we very frequently must treat a poem not merely as an object of aesthetic interest but, before this is even possible, as an object of *scrutiny*, which is one thing naive reading will not tolerate. Finally, we find explicit hostility to what may be described as the “narrativising tendencies” of naive reading.<sup>12</sup> It is true that lyric poetry, the dominant form of modern poetry, has always had a hesitant relationship with narrative. But one of the basic habits of naive reading is to approach a poem as always *implying* a narrative, and so as calling on the reader to unearth the story it suggests, and this has a very nasty habit of occluding the more radical, and artistically significant, manners in which poetry can engage with thought, feeling, and life. A lyric can dazzle us simply by exercising its expressive or formal powers, and it need not be expressing a story or have the form of a narrative if it is to so dazzle. These narrativizing tendencies might always be a nuisance when approaching lyric poetry, but the modern lyric often seems to be engaged in a holy war against them, and thus it refuses to let the naive reader employ one of his most basic strategies for approaching literary content of any form.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> We may never reach the promised destination, but that is another story.

<sup>12</sup> My notion of narrativizing tendencies is heavily indebted to Peter Goldie’s discussion of “fictionalizing tendencies” in Goldie (2012, 150–2).

<sup>13</sup> One important difference between the ways an analytic and continental philosopher of literature are inclined to talk about modernist art can be seen here. I’ve made the

Compare a poem that makes concessions to the naive reader to one that clearly does not.

Emily Dickinson, “Hope is the thing with feathers” (1865, approx.):

“Hope” is the thing with feathers  
 That perches in the soul  
 And sings the tune without the words  
 And never stops—at all  
  
 And sweetest—in the Gale—is heard  
 And sore must be the storm  
 That could abash the little Bird  
 That kept so many warm  
  
 I’ve heard it in the chilliest land  
 And on the strangest Sea  
 Yet—never—in Extremity,  
 It asked a crumb—of me.<sup>14</sup>

Wallace Stevens, first stanza of “Sunday Morning” (1915):

Complacencies of the peignoir, and late  
 Coffee and oranges in a sunny chair,  
 And the green freedom of a cockatoo  
 Upon a rug mingle to dissipate  
 The holy hush of ancient sacrifice.  
 She dreams a little, and she feels the dark  
 Encroachment of that old catastrophe,  
 As a calm darkens among water-lights.  
 The pungent oranges and bright, green wings  
 Seem things in some procession of the dead,  
 Winding across wide water, without sound.  
 The day is like wide water, without sound,  
 Stilled for the passing of her dreaming feet  
 Over the seas, to silent Palestine,  
 Dominion of the blood and sepulchre.<sup>15</sup>

story fundamentally one of meaning whereas for the continental philosophy it would be essentially made a matter of politics. One should suspect that a satisfying account would address both aspects, since they are clearly intertwined (one cannot e.g. explain the difficulty of Celan’s language without also, at some point, speaking of the Shoah).

<sup>14</sup> Dickinson (1999, 140). The poem was published posthumously and is assumed to have been written in the mid-1860s.

<sup>15</sup> Stevens (2005, 66–7).

I take it there is no question who the modernist is and which poem is more accessible to naive reading. Both Dickinson and Stevens are, in their own ways, exceptional poets, and one would be very unjust to Dickinson to treat hers as an example of guileless romanticism, just in case the reader thinks a value judgment is implied here. But we do see a marked difference, and Stevens is emblematic of a basic form of difficulty one finds in the modernist poem. The nature of the difficulty will change greatly as one moves between, say, Gertrude Stein, Louis Zukofsky, and W. H. Auden. But what I have said should suffice to provide the reader new to poetry with a general sense of what one has in mind when talking about this difficulty.

However radical modernism can at first appear, many (though not all) critics will urge something like a continuity thesis according to which modernism, while surely offering many formal innovations, is on the whole better seen not as breaking entirely with poetry's past so much as finding new, properly *poetic* grounds for inheriting it. Whether or not the continuity thesis holds will likely depend on the poet one is considering. But some version of the continuity thesis surely applies to many modernists, Eliot, Stevens, and even Ashbery included. Think of it in the following terms: in stripping away all that is essential to naive reading, the modernist poet brings us closer to what poetry has really always been.<sup>16</sup> The loss of a surface that can be read naively thus turns out to be no loss to poetry of any genuine sort at all.<sup>17</sup> Consider the old idea that absolute music can train one how to appreciate the *aesthetically relevant* features of music, which the presence of lyric can pollute. In a similar spirit, one might claim that the difficult modern poem gives us that, and only that, which has ever mattered to poetry and thus that through the modern poem we learn something important about how to read poetry in general.

All of this allows me to say very succinctly how poetry presents literary aesthetics with important new philosophical challenges. The point

<sup>16</sup> I ignore what the question of in what, precisely, this core of poeticity common to poems before and after modernism will consist in. This is, expectedly, the point on which the continuity thesis is pressed.

<sup>17</sup> The introduction to Izenberg (2011), "Person, Poetry, and Personhood," offers an excellent overview of competing avant-garde and traditionalist interpretations of poetic modernism.

should be obvious. It turns out that at least one of things the modern poem strips away is the very thing with which contemporary philosophy of literature is essentially concerned. And if a version of the continuity thesis holds, this means that many of our popular theories in the philosophy of literature are at best only awkwardly suited for making sense of poetry of almost any sort. What I hope this discussion of the modern poem motivates is a sense of that we have an entire region of literary art that will call on us to revise and rethink much of what we say when we speak about literature. To have a sense of this, one first must acknowledge how essential the notion of a *fictional narrative* is to so much of our research and indeed to our basic sense of the philosophical problems literature raises. Then one need only ask what happens to our sense of these problems once the notion of a fictional narrative is rendered inapplicable or made of at best secondary importance? One might argue that all poetry is fictional, though there are powerful reasons to be skeptical of this. But no sound argument looms that they are all *fictional narratives*. So what happens, for example, to our theories of imagination, tailored as they are to illuminate the forms of make-believe and pretence that allow us to immerse ourselves in a fictional story? What happens to our theories of the nature of our emotional responses to literature, occasioned as they largely are by the problem of explaining how we can emote over fictional events unfolding in essentially narrative time? More broadly, what happens to our theories of the meaning and interpretation of literary language when we look at an art that seems content to communicate figuratively, imagistically, symbolically, perhaps even prosodically or formally, that is, to communicate *poetically*?<sup>18</sup> My claim is not that poetry will force us to abandon all of our previous work; but since this work is so linked to an interest in fictional narratives and guided by a broadly novelistic conception of literature, our theories will have to be expanded, modified, and made to respect the unique ways in which poetry engages imagination, emotion, and meaning.

There is much more one could say here, and one should expect the list of problems poetry raises for philosophy to extend well beyond the handful of examples just given. But it is best to let the chapters of this volume offer specific details about the ways in which poetry presents

<sup>18</sup> I explore this in Gibson (2011).

unique problems for the philosophy of literature and beyond. While I hope to have said enough to spark the reader's interest, it is the contributors to this volume who provide the richest examples of why poetry matters to philosophy.

The volume opens with Peter Lamarque's probing and wide-ranging "Semantic Finegrainedness and Poetic Value." Though the business of the chapter is to articulate and defend a novel thesis, along the way it offers a fine overview of many basic issues in the philosophy of poetry, particularly those concerning meaning. Lamarque explores a general puzzle about lyric poetry, especially, though not exclusively, the modern short lyric. The often extraordinary linguistic compression of much lyric poetry make these poems, to say the least, resistant to understanding. Why do we value art that pushes language to such extremes? Lamarque's response to this builds on the idea that in poetry we are concerned not just with content but with a "subject-realised-in-just-this-way," and this reveals the extent to which *expression* is the chief object of poetic appreciation and critical scrutiny. Understanding this aright sheds light on long-standing debates concerning the so-called heresy of paraphrase, the supposed identity of poetic form and content, and the idea that poetry bears a uniquely *poetic* brand of meaning.

Ronald de Sousa's "The Dense and the Transparent: Reconciling Opposites" uses a discussion of linguistic density to revisit the ancient feud between poetry and philosophy. The poet embraces suggestion, symbolism, polysemy, and metaphor, and this places the poet's preferred use of language at a pole almost exactly opposite the philosopher's, which privileges clarity of expression, modestly in delivery, and writing that has an apparent subject or point. But there are powerful reasons for thinking that the difference between the creative labor of poet and philosopher is not nearly as pronounced as we might think. Each, de Sousa shows, is concerned with truth, each aims at providing fresh vision, and each has an essential but surprisingly hesitant relationship to language.

Jesse Prinz and Eric Mandelbaum's "Poetic Opacity: How to Paint Things with Words" offers a new framework for approaching the notions of linguistic density and compression so central to discussions of the nature of poetic language. For Prinz and Mandelbaum, semantic density and like features of poetic language turn out to be forms of poetic *opacity*. Indeed, the particular forms of opacity that poetry is apt to produce are the "the mark of the poetic," its distinguishing feature and that

upon which a definition, such as poetry will admit of, can be constructed. The chapter identifies various forms of poetic opacity and explains their interrelation and aesthetic significance. Prinz and Mandelbaum conclude by drawing a striking analogy between our experience of poetic opacity and Richard Wollheim's notion of the "twofoldness" of representational painting.

With Sherri Irvin's "Unreadable Poems and How They Mean" we turn to a demonstration of how a poem whose language is evidently senseless can nonetheless bear rich forms of meaning and aboutness. In this way it shows that even poems that rejoice in their attack on sense and syntax cannot so easily be dismissed as nonsense and so impervious to understanding. Interpretation is the primary tool for overcoming the often powerfully felt gap between a reader's understanding and a poem's meaning, and Irvin documents the various techniques we enlist to get a poem that appears meaningless to begin to speak. The meanings we ascribe to poems are not mere subjective projections; they turn out to be, in standard cases, open to intersubjective appraisal and so are publicly available. If this is so, popular ideas that much contemporary avant-garde poetry is meaningless or so "private" as to be inscrutable are bunk.

Simon Blackburn's "Can an Analytic Philosopher Read Poetry?" offers a tongue-in-cheek indictment of analytic philosophy for providing us with philosophical resources too impoverished to be capable of making sense of the poetic use of language and its significance in human life. The contemporary philosopher's Fregean inheritance, concerned as it is with truth and reference—poems can appear to have neither—make it very difficult to acknowledge the philosophical, moral, and cultural value of the poet's labor. Blackburn shows that the matter is not as bleak as it seems, but there are concerns dear to many philosophers that reveal them to have a radically different set of expectations about language than the poet does (he offers the current debate on semantic vagueness as one example of this). In respect to the ancient feud, Blackburn ultimately concludes that it is the poet's sensitivity to language that has the greater claim to being "our best guide to who we are, and even to where we ought to be heading."

In "The Spoken and the Written: An Ontology of Poems," Anna Christina Soy Ribeiro situates the discussion of poetry firmly in contemporary metaphysics, and her chapter offers an excellent sense of the extent to which poetry can raise pressing and unique problems for the ontology of literary works. Unlike, say, the modern novel, poetry is both

a written and a *spoken* art, and Ribeiro sets herself the task of offering an ontology of poetic works that respects the diversity of poetic practices old and new. Poems, Ribeiro argues, are abstract artifacts whose existence is essentially dependent on culturally and historically situated practices. These practices are, in the broadest sense, either *inscription-based* or *declamation-based*, and this helps us to acknowledge the role of both textuality and orality in diverse poetic traditions. The upshot of Ribeiro's theory is that philosophers are hugely mistaken to think that one can offer a generic ontology of literary works. The various literary arts each require their own metaphysical attention.

In Roger Scruton's "Poetry and Truth" we turn to a discussion of the notion of poetic truth. Is the form of truth poetry is apt to explore a kind of propositional or discursive truth? Is it a matter of a poem providing a "true representation" of reality? Scruton sees poetry's particular way with truth as more fundamental than any of these traditional conceptions of truth can allow. Poetry does not earn its claim to truth by mirroring an external world or by stating discrete, correct, "facts" about it. Scruton argues that poetry is concerned with truth as a kind of revelation, an "unconcealing" of aspects of existence that lie hidden from us in our everyday encounters with the world. Poetry, for Scruton, *transforms* those aspects of reality it so presents, bestowing value upon them and infusing them with new forms of meaning. In this respect, in poetry we find a genuinely *creative* interest in truth.

In "Poetry's Knowing: So What Do We Know?" Angela Leighton offers an account of knowledge suitable for the poet, whose interest in knowledge is often very different from the philosopher's. The grammar of the phrase "poetic knowing" is important, since the continuous present emphasizes that the poet tends to treat knowledge as a "tentative, unfinished journey, a foray into poetry's difficult thickets of meaning." Leighton's essay reveals the different kinds of cognitive interest we can take in the affairs of life, and she compares philosophical and poetic works to highlight how the forms of writing and thinking distinctive of each open up or preclude ways of knowing. This chapter does not take a side in the ancient quarrel, but it does offer powerful reasons against thinking that the descendants of Socrates have a greater claim to the pursuit of knowledge than those of Sappho.

Alison Denham's "Ethical Estrangement: Pictures, Poetry, and Epistemic Value" explores the cognitive and moral significance of the kind

of imaginative experience poetry offers. She identifies two forms of imaginative experience that are especially important to poetry: “experiencing-as” and “experience-taking.” Experiencing-as is “inherently first-personal, embodied, and phenomenologically characterized,” while in experience-taking one “takes the perspective of another, simulating some aspect or aspects of his psychology as if they were his own.” Through a sensitive and probing reading of Paul Celan’s *Psalm*, Denham shows the role these two forms of experience play in producing the unique form of ethical and epistemic value poetry can bear. Denham’s argument for this has important implications for our understanding of the poetic imagination and nature of our experience of meaning in poetic contexts.

With the concluding two chapters we see the importance of close reading. In “The Inner Paradise” Tzachi Zamir turns attention away from the lyric and to the epic poem, using *Paradise Lost* to structure a discussion of the philosophical and epistemic value of poetry. Zamir calls into question the habit of explaining the relationship between philosophy and literature in terms of a “compensatory” thesis according to which literature is able to bring to perfection and so complete the forms of understanding philosophy pursues. Zamir argues that literature is often hostile to the compensatory thesis, and he offers a close reading of *Paradise Lost* to demonstrate that poetry’s pursuit of insight, even knowledge, often takes a distinctly aesthetic and literary, rather than philosophical, form. It is not a completion of the philosopher’s project but a distinctly poetic manner of pursuing and articulating knowledge. In this respect, there is a unique form of poetic knowledge, and we should not expect philosophy to take us very far in coming to possess it.

The volume concludes with Richard Eldridge’s “‘To Think Exactly and Courageously’: Poetry, Ingeborg Bachmann’s Poetics, and her Bohemia Poem.” His reading of Ingeborg Bachman’s “Böhmen liegt am Meer” explores the extent to which the poem is exemplary of the distinctive achievements of lyric poetry. The poem provides an object study in how the lyric allows the human voice to pursue, and at times acquire, expressive freedom. The various sonic, affective, rhythmic, figurative, and expressive devices of poetry account for why its products are not merely lovely aesthetic objects but exemplary of the “imaginative economy of human life.” What lyric that aspires to this status shows us is the unique claim poetry has to providing what Stendhal called the *promesse de bonheur*.



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an insuperable problem once we are clear on a ‘criterion of success’.<sup>9</sup> We must not, he insists, set such a criterion unreasonably high, so high in fact that it couldn’t possibly be fulfilled. Significantly, he suggests that one such criterion is too high and unfulfillable, namely that paraphrase capture the *experience* that the poem affords.

No one who sets out to say in prose the content of what a poem says in poetic form intends as the goal of the task to provide an alternative way of experiencing the poem. And to fault the interpreter for failing to do what is not the point of interpretation in the first place is plain nonsense.<sup>10</sup>

Three brief preliminary comments on this.<sup>11</sup> The first is that Kivy is readily conceding that there is indeed a relevant experience uniquely associated with the poem yet, on his view, it is not to be identified with the poem’s content, nor in any essential way connected to interpretation. The second is that Kivy is associating paraphrase with interpretation, as if the goal of interpretation is to paraphrase a poem’s meaning. That assumption needs to be challenged for it is far from clear that a good interpretation of a poem seeks simply to say in other words what the poem itself says. Poetic interpretation, I suggest, is better conceived as a way of encouraging, enhancing or developing precisely the experience a poem affords, as described in our discussion of the Experiential thesis. The third point is that Kivy, in setting apart paraphrasable content, on the one hand, and experience, on the other, is falling into just that dualism that Cleanth Brooks, who coined the expression Heresy of Paraphrase, warned against: a dualism between some kind of ‘statement’ that the poem makes and the eloquence, or beauty, or clarity with which it does so.<sup>12</sup> In fact Brooks is quite happy to concede just the kinds of loose paraphrase that Kivy defends: ‘the point is . . . not that we cannot describe adequately enough for many purposes what the poem in general is “about” and what the general effect of the poem is’. Indeed he allows that ‘[w]e can very properly use paraphrases as pointers and as short-hand references’ as long

<sup>9</sup> Peter Kivy, ‘On the Unity of Form and Content’, in *Philosophies of Arts: An Essay in Differences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 104.

<sup>10</sup> Kivy, ‘On the Unity of Form and Content’, 105.

<sup>11</sup> For further discussion, see Peter Lamarque, ‘The Elusiveness of Poetic Meaning’, *Ratio*, 22/4 (2009), 398–420.

<sup>12</sup> Cleanth Brooks, ‘The Heresy of Paraphrase’ (1947), in *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (London: Methuen, 1968), 160.

as ‘we know what we are doing and that we see plainly that the paraphrase is not the real core of meaning which constitutes the essence of the poem’.<sup>13</sup> That so-called ‘essence’, for Brooks, resides only in the total ‘structure’ of the poem and cannot itself be captured in other formulations.

Philosophers of language are rightly wary of claims of unparaphrasability. The thought that there could be only one way in which something could be said goes against basic principles of semantics, including what Ernie Lepore (after Donald Davidson) has called ‘semantic innocence’, the idea, at its simplest, that ‘what an (unambiguous) word means it means everywhere it occurs’.<sup>14</sup> The Heresy of Paraphrase violates semantic innocence to the extent it holds, as Lepore puts it, that ‘what the words of a poem mean is contingent upon where in a poem they occur’.<sup>15</sup> Lepore, however, ingeniously offers a defence of the Heresy of Paraphrase while retaining semantic innocence. To do so he introduces the idea of *hyperintensionality*, which claims there are ‘linguistic environments in which replacing an expression with its synonym changes meaning’. The prime example in natural language is quotation. Lepore illustrates this as follows:

‘bachelor’ is the first word in ‘bachelors are unmarried men’  
 ‘unmarried man’ is the first word in ‘bachelors are unmarried men’

The former is true, the latter false, yet ‘bachelor’ and ‘unmarried man’ are synonymous. He goes on:

Likewise, try replacing ‘sheen’ with ‘luster’ in Coleridge’s poem *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1797):

And through the drifts the snowy cliffs  
 Did send a dismal sheen;  
 Nor shapes of men nor beasts we ken  
 The ice was all between.

The change sufficiently alters the rhythm and rhyme to break the bind between the lines, and thereby alters the poem itself. Since synonym substitution in a

<sup>13</sup> Brooks, ‘Heresy of Paraphrase’, 160.

<sup>14</sup> Ernie Lepore, ‘The Heresy of Paraphrase’, *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 33 (2009), 181.

<sup>15</sup> Lepore, ‘Heresy of Paraphrase’, 182.

poetry being explained through a theory of metaphor? The idea that metaphor is inexhaustible might be true in some cases but the nature of, and constraints on, that inexhaustibility, if relevant here, will only be determined in the light of some wider conception of poetry and its aims. As for the Davidsonian account of metaphor, it might seem in principle promising in the context of poetry if only for its focus away from meaning and its admission of non-propositional elements in responses to metaphor. However, there is an unruliness in relying exclusively on unconstrained effects which is not true to the kind of normative experiences demanded by poetry.

So what remains of the Heresy of Paraphrase thesis? At one level the resistance of poetry to paraphrase follows simply from the thought that it matters in poetry, more so than in other forms of language use, exactly how something is expressed. The form of expression is not distinct from what is expressed, a point we shall return to. The idea that there might be some other way of saying precisely what the poem says contradicts the very nature of poetry, which is to draw attention to, give salience to, its modes of expression. That is the truth behind the hyper-intensionality view.

The Form-Content Unity thesis, that the form of a poem is indivisible from its content, expands on, but is not identical to, the Heresy of Paraphrase thesis. The latter might be true but not the former. Resistance to paraphrase, in a milder version, might be judged just a contingent fact about the complexity of poetic language; the less complex a poem the more open it is to paraphrase. But if form-content unity is true then unparaphrasability is not contingent but necessary for if paraphrase captures content, and content is indivisible from form, then form too must be retained. That is hyperintensionality again. A. C. Bradley rarely mentions paraphrase but argues explicitly for form-content unity: 'this identity of content and form . . . is no accident; it is of the essence of poetry in so far as it is poetry'.<sup>19</sup>

Clearly to assess the Form-Content Unity thesis the ideas of 'form' and 'content' must themselves be clarified. That in itself is not straightforward given the multiple ways the terms are used. However, it is fairly clear what kinds of features count as formal in poetry: rhyme, metre, rhythm, alliteration, repetition, etc. The 'etc' might be difficult to cash in but some preliminary points about indivisibility can still be maintained. One is

<sup>19</sup> Bradley, 'Poetry for Poetry's Sake', 15.

that form-content unity in poetry is holistic: the content of the whole is indivisible from the form of the whole. But (holistic) form-content unity does not imply that for any individual formal feature it is legitimate to ask what feature of content it is equivalent to, even if a rough and ready account might be available for the contribution made to the whole by each of the parts. Also it would be wrong to think of 'form' in the relevant sense just as the sum of individual formal features. Form-content unity is stronger than that in insisting that the total surface configuration of a poem is indivisible from its total content. This is more like what Brooks means by 'structure'. Total content, whatever that might mean, is in a sense supervenient on the structural base.

The idea of 'content' is equally problematic. In the light of the Experiential thesis it should not automatically be identified with meaning. Perhaps better is to think of it in terms of 'aboutness', while recognizing that aboutness is interest-relative.<sup>20</sup> Specifications of what a poem is 'about' come in degrees of finegrainedness according to the interests served in making the specification. In some contexts it might be enough to say of Giles Goodland's poem that it is about waves or the ocean or a day out at the sea or a hypothesis about eyes and sea water. But these descriptions do not do justice to finegrained content. Ultimately the most finegrained specification of the content—the 'total' content—is that which incorporates the precise form in which the content is presented: in other words the poem itself. This level of finegrainedness is anticipated in hyperintensionality and in the Heresy of Paraphrase. The interest served at this level is an interest in the poem, as Bradley would say, 'for its own sake'. It is at this level, but only here, that content becomes indivisible from form.

Form-Content Unity now takes on a different complexion. It need not be thought a merely contingent fact about (some) poems that their content is indivisible from their form. Form-content identity is not something that one discovers in a poem but rather something one *demand*s of a poem when bringing to it a certain kind of interest: an interest in the poem for its own sake. This is not to deny other kinds of interest in a poem which might focus on more abstracted features of content or indeed form. One might, for example, be interested in commonalities across poems, perhaps metrical or thematic similarities.

<sup>20</sup> This idea is also developed in Lamarque, 'Elusiveness of Poetic Meaning'.