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THE QUESTION OF POETIC MEANING

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“I really would like to know what it is you do to
‘magnetize’ your
poetry, where the curious reader, always a bit puzzled,
comes
back for a clearer insight.”
—John Ashbery, ‘The Tomb of Stuart Merrill’

I. Introduction

Poetry has not fared well in contemporary philosophical aesthetics.¹ While there have been a few heroic attempts to correct this,² in recent years philosophers of art have published more on gardening and comics than on poetry; and one should note that of late philosophers have not published all that much on gardening and comics. The situation is not unlike what we would have if we found that our colleagues in Philosophy of Science had failed to consider physics or that those in Ancient Philosophy had somehow overlooked Socrates. Whatever the reason for the philosophical avoidance of poetry, the result is an embarrassingly conspicuous omission in the philosophy of art’s coverage of its own field.

What I would like to do here is explore one respect in which philosophy, especially the philosophy of language, has much to learn about the nature and possibilities of meaning from poets and critics. If each of the arts is associated with a set of defining philosophical problems — in the novel, say, the problem of fiction, in painting that of depiction, in music the expression of emotion, and so on — then among poetry's defining problems is the problem of meaning. At any rate, if one is speaking about modern lyric poetry, as I shall be, this is surely among the most interesting problems, since for over the past two hundred years — roughly when poetic romanticism was born³ — each subsequent generation of poets has found itself increasingly happier to linger near the line that separates sense from nonsense, at least as philosophers and linguists, if not always poets and critics, conceive this line.⁴

The problem, as it shall interest me here, is the following. Poetry is, according to a deep-rooted view, the communicative art *par excellence*: poems are vehicles of communication, among much else, of course. They *speak* to us, and this is among the chief reasons we value them, contrary to what recalcitrant formalists might tell us. And the philosophical puzzle is that poems very often do none of the things philosophers tend to think language *must* do if it is to bear meaning. Indeed in a great amount of modern poetry — especially poetry of the modernist sort that, as the tired joke has it, likes to say 'go to hell' to the reader — we often find an extraordinary communicative act carried out in language that strikes us, initially at least, as inscrutable, in fact language we would dismiss as meaningless if we were to encounter it outside the context of a work of art. How can this be? That is, how can a use of language at once strike us as a powerful and effective form of communication and yet renounce the very resources we employ when endowing words with meaning in virtually all other linguistic contexts? Simon Blackburn has said, with admirable understatement, that no one 'would claim that the study of metaphor has been one of analytic philosophy's brighter achievements.'⁵ If philosophy still struggles to understand how sentences like 'Juliet is the sun' can be true, bear meaning, or simply convey a thought, one has an acute sense of how limited its resources must be when confronting a poem like T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* or Wallace Stevens' 'New England Verses'. What I shall do here is offer a few suggestions concerning how philosophy might develop these resources. I won't be offering anything like a new theory of meaning, even of poetic meaning. But I will try to show in a general way how we might try to reconcile the communicative

force of poetry with the unconventionality and sheer inventiveness of its language. My concern is to try to make sense of a certain power poetry has — this power to communicate when, from the linguistic point of view, one should not be able to — and, like any power, a poet of course enjoys a certain amount of freedom to exercise it or not. But if the power I identify is not omnipresent in poetry, I do hope to show that a discussion of it reveals a few general features of how poems communicate, and that the uniqueness of the kind of meaning they can bear should be of more interest to the philosophy of language and of art.

To be perversely clear, I should emphasize that in setting up the problem this way I am not assuming that there is such a thing as *the* meaning of a poem, contained, as it were, in a poem in all of its fullness regardless of whether anyone actually reads the poem. Nor am I assuming that poems bear the same species of meaning sentences do, or that meaning in poetry consists in the making of a kind of claim or statement, the offering up of discrete bits of information, and so on. My curiosity is much more basic than all of this, and it can perhaps best be put in terms of what I find to be a baffling yet extraordinary skill all good critics possess. It is the critic's ability *to make meaningful* a poem that delights in its attack on sense and syntax, indeed whose surface seems positively opaque from the linguistic point of view. And I am interested in this act of making meaningful in an altogether basic sense: what must a critic *first* do with language of the especially difficult poetic sort so much as to get it to appear to speak? What happens when she rolls up her sleeves and gets to work beating sense out of that which at first blush appears madly and proudly senseless? I won't have much to say about the fully articulate statements of meaning a critic attributes to a poem and its various lines, though a study of the sort I offer here will naturally lead in this direction.⁶ I find the initial act of attributing meaningfulness of the most minimal sort astonishing enough, and that is what I shall concern myself with here.

II. Hearing Meaning & Hearing a Question of Meaning<

I will develop my discussion of poetic meaning with constant reference to metaphor, but let me say immediately that I will nowhere suggest that poetic meaning is just a kind of metaphoric meaning (the fact that we can find poems without metaphors should make one skeptical of the very idea). What I dwell on in this section is the fact that poems and metaphors tend to *raise a question of meaning* in very different ways, and seeing this will help us

understand more clearly what the problem of poetic meaning amounts to. According to a common conceit in the philosophy of language, metaphor represents the 'dark side' of language, the furthest point we will reach if we set out in search of the final outposts of meaningfulness.⁷ There is something to this, but we will be much more likely to find a poem than a metaphor when we reach the end of the line, and it is important to see why.

There are (at least) two respects in which we experience meaning in poetry in a way that is considerably more complex than is the standard experience of meaning in metaphor. In common cases: (i) poetic meaning is experienced as *latent*, that is, there is frequently and importantly a felt gap between understanding the language of a poem and understanding the poem itself; and (ii) we experience poems as having a *twofoldness of communicative content*, that is, as speaking and so producing meaning on two distinct levels. I'll discuss each in turn.

Latency vs Immediacy. When we offer a metaphor in standard conversational contexts, we do so with the hope of bringing to clarity the point we are pursuing, by forging, say, a shared framework of thought and feeling in respect to whatever it is we are trying to get others to understand as we do. For example, assume you are having drinks with friends from work and you are all struggling, in a playful way, to pinpoint exactly what makes a certain colleague so unlovable. After a number of abortive attempts, you say, 'I've got it! Bill is Brooklyn without the charm'. Your friends laugh and nod in satisfied agreement, convinced just as you are that this is pretty much exactly what Bill is. In uttering this metaphor in this context, you expect that any member of your linguistic community with a reasonable amount of experience of her own culture will get it, and that she will get it in a way she surely would not have had you said that your colleague is Montreal or Savannah without the charm (for one, the metaphor will no longer be ironic if we replace Brooklyn with a city of fabled charm). And, more importantly, you expected, and indeed found, that listeners grasped the meaning, the point, of the metaphor *immediately*,⁸ without the aid of any (measurable) act of interpretation: they got it, and their getting it was effortless.⁹

In this respect, if metaphors raise a question of meaning, then it is usually a purely philosophical question. If we are familiar with the terms of a metaphor (Bill, Brooklyn, and charm), then we shall hear the meaning of the metaphor simply upon hearing the metaphor

itself. If certain philosophers and linguists skeptical of the idea of metaphoric meaning are correct, this sense will be mistaken. But we nonetheless do have the impression that a successful metaphor achieves a kind of immediate expressive perfection. The philosophical problem is how this can be — how can we hear not only meaning but a kind a truth or aptness in metaphors, when on the whole they are literally, and wildly, false? — not whether metaphors can really provoke this experience of meaning in the listener (they obviously can).

Poems are usually very unlike metaphors in this respect. Consider two. Neither is much longer than a standard metaphor — this is why I have chosen them — but each offers a very different kind of encounter with meaning:

Who put canned laughter
 Into my crucifixion scene?
 —Charles Simic, 'The Voice at 3:00 A. M.'¹⁰

and

Between one flower plucked and the other given
 the inexpressible nothing
 —Giuseppe Ungaretti, 'Eternity'¹¹

[Tra un fiore colto e l'altro donato
 l'inesprimibile nulla
 'Eterno']

Note that the problem here is not quite with the meaning of the *language* of the poems. Their language is, in a sense, perfectly clear. But if the language of these poems is clear, the meaning of these poems is not. I assume that we take these poems to be trying to *say* something, but that we do not grasp what it is they are saying in any sort of immediate or pre-reflective way, certainly if we have no previous rapport with them. Of course we have much to work with in our attempt to render them meaningful, for example the striking images these poems conjure up: of a laugh-track playing behind an act of martyrdom; of a great expanse of emptiness stretching between two objects (or acts) of simple beauty. Indeed, we can detect a kind of thematic kindredness in these poems and to that extent a kind of shared communicative purpose: though one is more playful than the other, they each seem to be trying to say something

about life, and it doesn't seem to be especially pleasant or optimistic. But all of this seems to be of the order of suggestion. It hardly seems to be descriptive of anything we should be inclined to call their meaning.

In this respect, the meaning of a poem, contrary to that of a metaphor, is standardly experienced as a kind of *problem*. It is a sign of poetic success if a poem demands to be studied before it can be understood; it is generally a sign of failure if a metaphor must be: metaphors, like jokes, are an embarrassment to the speaker when no one gets them. Even a young student reading Catullus count the ways he loves Lesbia knows that Catullus' poetry might be about more than what it 'says' — despite his poetry's apparent simplicity and obviousness — and that his professor will expect him to be aware of this possibility when interpreting the poem. In other words, even if we experience the meaning of a poem as immediate, we also know to be skeptical of our experience. The point this brings home is that we frequently do not, strictly speaking, *hear* the meaning of a poem so much as we hear a poem as *occasioning a question of meaning*, a question we devote ourselves to answering if we are to make sense of the encounter with meaning a poem initiates. In the context of poetry, we usually take meaning to be a destination and not a point of departure.

Twofoldness of Content. Consider the following. Critics may, and in fact once did, debate whether the line 'Do I dare to eat a peach' in T.S. Eliot's 'Prufrock' ought to be read as an expression of sexual desire or as an acknowledgement that the speaker has dentures.¹² And a critic might reasonably suggest that before we can understand Eliot's poem, we must understand this metaphor — what 'to eat a peach' means in this context — and all the others like it we find in the poem. For if we haven't understood what the various lines of a poem mean, surely there will be a hole in our understanding of the poem itself. But note that if we illuminate the meaning of this metaphor, and indeed the meaning of every line of the poem, we still would not take ourselves to have thereby illuminated *the meaning of the poem*. For it would still be perfectly legitimate for one to say, 'I see that this is what all these lines mean, but what does the *poem* mean?'¹³ And we can ask this because we know that the meaning of a poem, unlike the meaning of a metaphor, is not a kind of *sentence* meaning at all, and so casting in relief the semantic content of every line of a poem can still leave us in utter darkness about the meaning of the poem itself.

Language in poetic contexts has the tendency to be doubly productive of meaning, and this distinguishes it in an important way from ordinary ('standard') uses of language, including metaphoric uses. If I sent you an email with clear and precise instructions on how to arrive at the funeral of a childhood friend, it would be plain weird to say of it, 'I see, but what does this email *mean*?' But if I sent you a poem with the very same content, it would not only be appropriate but expected. My poem will likely turn out to be a bad poem, but that is immaterial. What is important is to see that simply putting language in the context of a poem occasions this unique, and further, question of meaning. In ordinary contexts, the meaning of an utterance is just the content it conveys. Things get complicated once we begin to consider irony, metaphor, and the like, in which the speaker seems to say one thing yet mean another.¹⁴ But even here there is but one communicated content, and coming to grasp it is a matter of distinguishing 'what is said' from 'what is conveyed' (if I say that 'James is a train wreck' you will not think I am telling you that James is the name of a train that has been in a terrible accident but that it is the name of a person whose life bears a striking resemblance to one). But the double content of a poem is a doubleness of communicative content: the meaning of the lines that constitute the poem and the meaning of the poem itself. Each is important, and each asks to be understood, appreciated, and the competent critic will arrive at an (at least) implicit sense of how they interlock if she is to make sense of a poem. This further meaning is what is often called *work* meaning, and it is a kind of meaning artworks, but few other things under the sun, bear. As a kind of work meaning, it is meaning that accrues to the poetic object itself, and it is almost always irreducible to any feature of its linguistic or semantic surface.

I can now say something precise about what the problem of poetic meaning amounts to, at least as it shall concern me here. What we need to understand is what we *do* with a poem so that we can come to hear it as fully enriched with meaning, as saying something, anything. What underwrites the skill of a critic such that she can fill this gap between the first encounter with a poem and the first experience of its meaning? What aspect of a poem and its language generates *work* meaning, and how? And, perhaps most importantly, how do we hear a question of meaning rather than nonsense or simply nothing in poetry marked by latency? In the case of apt metaphors and well-formed literal sentences (in one's tongue), it is *because* we hear meaning in a stretch of language that we take it to

be communicating, to be *saying* something. If we remove this direct and immediate encounter with meaning, then exactly what occasions a question of meaning in the first place?

III. Imagination & Meaning

If we are to offer a plausible account of how we come to hear poetry as enriched with meaning, we need to cast some light on what *kind* of meaning we are talking about here. Part of the problem is that there is a picture of poetic meaning we need to find a way around, a picture that is oddly hard to escape, however obviously silly it is. Put simply, on this picture, when we attempt to understand a poem we set out in search of a kind of master-proposition or über-statement the content of which is equivalent to the meaning of poem. To find the meaning of a poem, on this picture, is to expose in the poem an implicit claim, point, declaration — a linguistic item of some sort — to the effect that *I mean this!* And the particular ‘this’ a poem means has the function of unraveling the mysteries of meaning the poem occasions in the reader. What gives this picture its intuitive force is the habit of thinking that meaning is always essentially (i) linguistic, and (ii) propositional. Though poems often have lines that bear these sorts of meaning, I think that *poetic* meaning is ultimately neither. Of course, whatever a poem means will bear important links to whatever its language means — it would be madness to deny this. But the way forward, I’ll suggest, is to look beyond a poem’s language and towards something this language creates, something fundamentally imaginative and not linguistic. Let me explain.

I mentioned above that not only poems but works of art in general can bear a unique kind of meaning, what we call work meaning. It is a general mystery in aesthetics how artworks can bear this sort of meaning (how, for example, do non-linguistic art forms such as painting, music, and dance strike us, at least at times, as bearing communicative content?) and each of the arts presents a unique way of encountering this problem. In all forms of literature — poetry, prose, and drama — the very basic problem of work meaning is the following. Since literary works are creatures of language, we are clearly talking about a linguistic object when we ascribe meaning to them. But it is no ordinary sort of meaning, for it is not descriptive of any feature of the language of a work, surely not of anything a work actually says. To say that *As I Lay Dying* as a work is about, and hence meaningful in respect to, ephemerality and the impossible implications of the passage from existence to inexistence — at least

in the mind of one attempting to make sense of the burden of death — is manifestly *not* to describe some content conveyed by any of Faulkner's sentences, as though for this to be a legitimate statement of the book's meaning it must amount to a claim to be found on the surface of Faulkner's creation. But then of what, exactly, are statements of work meaning descriptive? Precisely *where* do we encounter work meaning, if not in the language of the text?

We have fairly well-developed resources for explaining how works of prose fiction can do this. In the case of standard sorts of works of fiction (think of garden-variety realist novels), work meaning is arrived at by exploring the content not quite of a work's language but of the *world* it creates, what we commonly call a *fictional* world. And virtually every theory of the 'world-generating' capacity of works of fiction link this power to a certain imaginative activity. Just consider any of the dominant make-believe, simulation, or possible-world theories of fiction, all of which cast the language of literature as having an essentially *creational* function. Language in the context of literature functions not, or not just, to 'convey a content' but to conjure up a world, and it is a world we can encounter only if we read the language of a work as specifying a kind of imaginative stance to take towards its content, texturing in this respect a sense of fictional space for our appreciative and critical exploration. And note that worlds and what we might find in them bear a kind of meaning, though surely not of the sort words and sentences bear. When applied to a world and all that we find in it, meaning is a matter of *significance* and not *signification*. It is not meaning in a semantic sense but *meaningfulness* as the phenomenon of bearing of *value*, *import*, and *consequence*, and it is brought to light when we attempt to articulate how and why a work's presentation of character and circumstance *matters* for creatures such as ourselves. It is here that we find the *vision*, in a quite literal sense, of a work, and without a consideration of this we'll find ourselves shamefully mum when called upon to say what a work might mean. The point is, through our imaginative involvement with literary works, we give ourselves access to a much broader range of meaning, significance, and aboutness, meaning that we will miss entirely to if we take a purely, or merely, 'linguistic' stance towards a work of literature.¹⁵

There is an obvious sense in which work meaning is *interpretation-dependent*. We can, if we wish, read many novels 'naively', that is, as simply about fictional people going about their fictional business (though good luck reading Joyce, Faulkner, or Beckett 'naively'), in

which case we shut ourselves off from the full encounter with meaning a work can offer us. But to treat a novel as a *work*, and not merely as a *fictional story*, is to attempt to interpret it and hence to bring to light the kinds of meaning only *a work* can bear. And if meaning in modern lyric poetry is more challenging than in common kinds of novels, it is largely because poetry offers fewer occasions to be read naively. Indeed, without interpretation, without some conception of work meaning, one often cannot begin to make sense of the language of much modernist poetry, of what it is even 'saying'. One always mentions John Ashbery here. Consider the opening lines of one of his more recent poems:

Not the smoothness, not the insane clocks on the
square,
the scent of manure in the municipal parterre,
Not the fabrics, the sullen mockery of Tweety Bird,
Not the fresh troops that needed freshening up. If it
occurred
in real time, that was OK, and if it was time in a novel,
that was okay, too. From palace and hovel
the great parade flooded avenue and byway
and turnip fields became just another highway.
[...]
—John Ashbery, 'A Worldly Country'¹⁶

Note the faint, playful echo of the heroic couplet, the poetic form of high subject matters and hence of poems in which content, and so meaning, matters. And indeed we find in his poem the stuff of those great, high subjects: images of time, the State, warfare, social class, but mixed in with Tweety Bird and a barrage of negations without any mention at all of what subject(s) of the negations might be. This, of course, makes it rather difficult to determine what the poem is saying at even the most basic semantic level, and so we set out in the hopes of finding an interpretation that will allow us to articulate what the poem is even *about*.

Now much lyric poetry is not fictional or even narrative-based: much lyric poetry tells no story, properly so-called. And without a story, indeed without the presence of fiction, one does not have the basic ingredients for making a *fictional world*, the very currency of communication in the case of most prose literature. Thus it may initially appear puzzling how this account of work meaning could possibly apply to poetry. But what is important for our purposes is

not the notion of fiction but the role of *the imagination* in generating work meaning. And poems obviously offer much to the imagination. Even in a poem as proudly incoherent as Ashbery's, we have a striking clash of *images*, of *objects* placed in a violently contradictory imaginative space. And if one is, like Ashbery, a product of postwar New York, then what better way could there be to convey to the reader the exhilarating but profoundly disconcerting nature of the experience of Manhattan than this, a city in which a municipal building sophisticated enough to have 'parterre' may very well stand under the (likely illuminated) 'sullen mockery of Tweety Bird'? Isn't that precisely the experience of walking from the Upper Eastside to Midtown? And to negate these images, as Ashbery does, is to ask us to imagine saying No, at a rather cosmic level, to all of this (while, still, of course, celebrating it, as New Yorkers inevitably do). Now this may be a pithy interpretation, and a very thin sort of meaning. And it is very unlikely that Ashbery or any of his better critics would be pleased with such a reading, insisting as they often do that he explores not cities but subjectivities.¹⁷ But I've only just begun. The point is, we are beginning to see that approaching the poem in terms of the imaginative space it creates allows us to get a poem that would otherwise seem incapable of speech to begin to communicate. This is the capacity, the genius really, we find implicit in the activity of a talented critic, though surely the talented critic will go on to elicit more refined forms of meaning from the poem than I have here.

This reveals something important about why we do not experience poems whose language strikes us as nonsensical *as nonsense*, and seeing this will help rid us of the terrible and simplistic habit of regarding entire expanses of modern poetry as turncoats to meaning and confederates of the irrational just because their language is anarchic.¹⁸ We find nonsense in a linguistic unit that is hopelessly ill-formed (so-called semantic nonsense: 'I baptized at you and then mathematics') or whose utterance bears no logical relation to any item in its communicative environment (so-called contextual nonsense: 'I'll have a beer and a sandwich,' said not to a waiter but to a student who has asked a question in class).¹⁹ It may be the case that the poems of Simic and Ashbery produce sentences that are nonsensical in either of these ways; but since the meaning that most matters is *work* meaning, this alone is not sufficient to produce a nonsensical *poem*. In fact, if we are being precise, sentences, but not images, can be nonsensical. Images can clash, disconcert, confuse, startle, even freak us out a bit. And that can be their point, the very

thing that generates their communicative content. But images and imaginings are not, strictly speaking, ever experienced as *nonsensical*, and thus our experience of poems with nonsensical language is not thereby an experience of nonsensical *works*. Even if a poem is shot through with nonsensical language, once we pass, as we must, from the linguistic space of a poem to the imaginative space it creates, we pass into a realm that is potentially rich in meaning.

What we have when we first turn to a poem is an uninterpreted mass of images. And it is the sense that these images are pregnant with potential significance that explains why we hear a question of meaning rather than nothing or nonsense in a poem of even the most semantically rebellious sort. As with novels, we must *do* something with the poem if we are to make available its meaning. And this will take the form of engaging with the content of a poem imaginatively and not merely linguistically. It is ultimately the assuming of an imaginative stance that allows us to begin to experience a poem as enriched with meaning of the poetically interesting sort, even when the language of the poem appears to rejoice in its assault on sense and syntax.

IV. Meaningful Objects

Philosophers are often tempted by the idea that metaphors mean whatever they do partly by virtue of figuration, of the images they create,²⁰ which are virtually always experienced as contradictory or impossible on some level (Bill can't possibly *be* Brooklyn, with or without the charm). Thus locating the communicative content of poetry partly in the kind of imaginative experience it provokes, as I have, is not an unexpected move; nor does the chaos of the imaginings some modernist poetry offers present a unique problem for the idea that they can bear meaning; if metaphors can get away with it, poems should be able to, too. But more needs to be said to bring to clarity the point I have been pursuing. Specifically, I need to give shape to this provisional idea of an 'imaginative space' I am developing here and what it means to say that it is productive of meaning. To do so, I will again turn to a consideration of metaphor, with the hope that what I find here will cast light on poetry, too.

Consider a metaphor that enjoyed fifteen minutes of fame during the 2008 US presidential election. It was said that a certain candidate was 'a penis in desperate need of Viagra' —though the metaphor is not as clever as it would like to be, it adds something to know that it was said of Sarah Palin and not John McCain. This metaphor clearly

offers much to the imagination. But the question is exactly what is it we are imagining when we hear it, or when we hear any metaphor for that matter? If we understand this metaphor, surely it is not because we *literally* imagine a person *as* a penis, nor, for that matter, as the sun, a bulldozer, or an island, to mention other metaphors philosophers like to discuss. What would it be to imagine this? I suppose it would be to think of a penis or the sun but just with human eyes, and perhaps a mouth and nose. This is hardly helpful, and at any rate it gets us closer to cartoon than to a meaning. Nor does it help to weaken it and imagine the person not *as* but merely *like* these objects, as the ‘hidden simile’ account of metaphor would have it. ‘Like’ in which respect, exactly, for surely a word is owed concerning the nature of similarity? Like the sun, Juliet is *radiant*? Like the troubled penis, Palin is *impotent*? But these too are metaphors, so we’ve moved no further ahead. To this extent, the making explicit of the putative hidden term of the simile has the risible effect of just adding another metaphor to the figurative mess we are trying to clean up. And if we try to take the metaphor out and look for *literal* respects in which Juliet and Palin are ‘like’ these objects, we are back to the problem of imagining the sun with a human face, but now just with something *like* a human face. This is thoroughly unhelpful.

A very useful idea here is the notion of *semantic descent*.²¹ Put as simply as possible, semantic *ascent*, as Quine introduced the notion, is what we do when we move from a linguistic item to a claim about a linguistic item (‘James is a train wreck’ to “James is a train wreck’ is true”). At each step of ascent we move farther away from the world and deeper into language about language. Semantic descent, however, goes in the opposite direction. Instead of looking for higher-order linguistic or metalinguistic items, in semantic descent we rather try to get *below* language, as it were, to a consideration of the *things*, the *objects* that language is about. That is, in semantic descent we cast off the linguistic at just the right moment and allow a bit of the world to frame our thought of the subject of a metaphor. Thus in ‘Juliet is the sun’, *the sun* — the very object — figures in our sense of the metaphor, in effect functioning to *qualify* Juliet. And the sun (just as a train wreck, a penis, Brooklyn, and other objects of metaphor) bears a kind of meaning for us, but it is clearly not linguistic in nature. It consists in the set of associations, connotations, resonances, values, and so on that any object that matters in our form of life will have. The sun has meaning of the irreducibly cultural sort, and in the sense of significance and not signification;

and it has this meaning insofar as we find it beautiful, productive of life, and generally an all around essential and essentially good bit of the cosmos.²² Of course, a community of vampires would find it horrible, and this is why 'Juliet is the sun' would have been an insult rather than praise had Dracula written *Romeo & Juliet*. This should make it clear that semantic descent, in my usage, is descent from the linguistic to the cultural. More descent than this — say to a sense of something like 'objects in themselves' quite apart from the sense they have in a form of life — will make communication of the sort I am interested in here all but impossible.

To imagine the sun is to imagine it as an object charged with a kind of aesthetic, cultural, and moral significance. And in hearing a metaphor such as 'Juliet is the sun', we place our thought of Juliet within the imaginative space created by the thought of the sun. Our experience of the metaphor need not resolve into a *coherent* image of, or claim about, Juliet if it is to convey.²³ It is both unnecessary and unhelpful to hear the metaphor as *claiming* that 'Juliet is (precisely) thus and such' or as asking us to imagine Juliet (literally or metaphorically) *as* the sun. It is enough to place her in the imaginative space created by the image of the sun and allow her to linger there for a moment, framing our thought of her in productive and, ultimately, meaningful ways.

It is in this respect that we find that poems and metaphors are most closely related in the family of meaning. What Simic does in writing 'Who put canned laughter/into my crucifixion scene' is not altogether unlike what Shakespeare did with 'Juliet is the sun.' In the case of Simic's poem, we allow the image of our crucifixion accompanied by an impersonal, ridiculous laugh-track to frame how we think of our lives, just as in the case of Ashbery we allow the violent clash of images of high and low culture — and much else besides — to act as a stage upon which we rehearse thoughts of our world and the mayhem of experience it offers. And one needn't consult only modernist oddities to see this. To come to hear Wordsworth's poetry as about more than just pleasant leas and lovely trees, to come to hear it as a reflection on, as critics sometimes like to put it, 'the problematic condition of the modern subject,' it is enough to allow his poetic re-enchantments of nature to offer us what the real world never quite delivers, an imaginative space that puts us in touch with what we've lost, in this way telling us both what we need and casting aspersions on modern culture for making it unavailable to us.

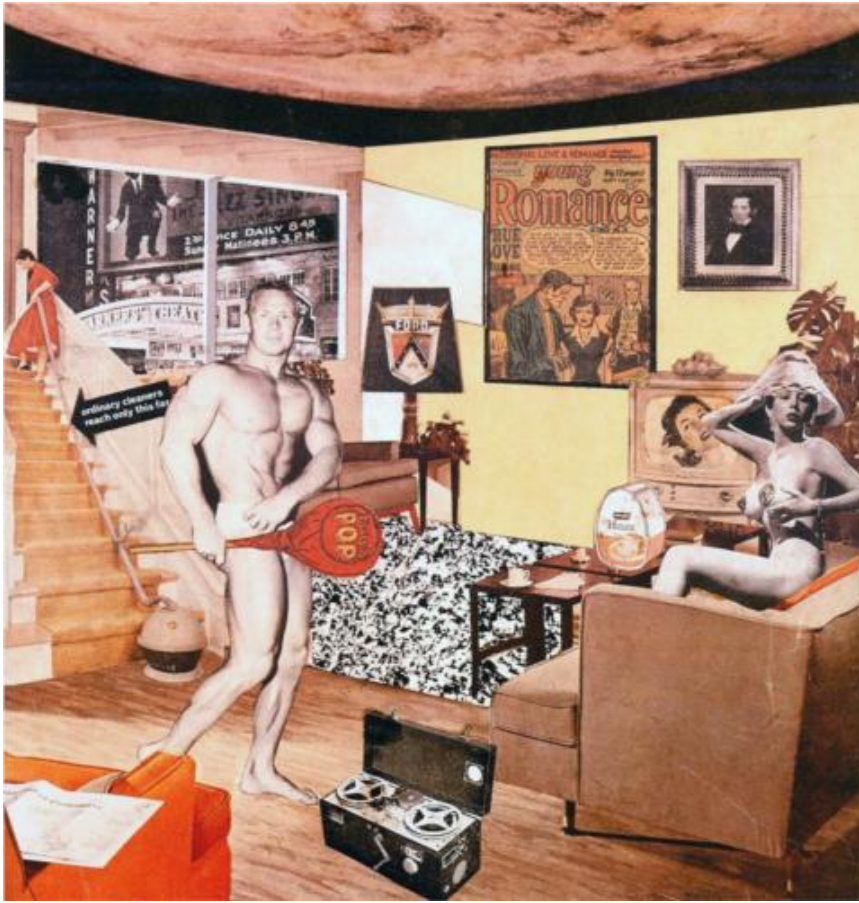
To attempt to see metaphors and poems as at least partly communicating imagistically — by virtue of the ‘objects’, in the most general sense, they bring to view — is in a respect to emphasize the *painterly* dimension of these otherwise linguistic creatures. And if it seems odd to say that objects and not just sentences, images and not just assertions, can convey, consider the following, explicitly painterly form of communication, which I hope shall bring my point home.

Assume I wish to convey to you why I am so unhappy, despite my smart job in a smart city, smart friends who adore me, and so on. I could simply list for you properties that I truly bear, for example, that I am forty-two, unfulfilled, alienated, and so on. But besides being tedious this is also a rather ineffective way of expressing what I wish to express, given the alternatives. So I opt for a bit of helpful figuration and instead offer a much more succinct kind of communication. Imagine that I say to you that ‘*this* is what I have always wanted my life to be like,’ pointing to:



Edouard Manet, Still Life with Melon and Peaches. c. 1866

And then after a moment’s pause I say, ‘but unfortunately, *this* is the life I actually have,’ indicating the following:



Richard Hamilton, Just What Is It That Makes Today's Home So Different, So Appealing? (1956)

This is as good an example of semantic descent as one could hope for. In an obvious and literal sense, a worldly object — the painting I indicate — contributes to the meaning of what I have said. What I have in effect done here is given you a subject of thought — my life — and two radically different *modes* or *frameworks*²⁴ with which to conceive it: for thinking about and so ultimately coming to understand it. The descriptive thickness of my communicative act resides in how successful these images are not in telling you *what* to think about my life but *how* to think about it. You now know, for example, that I have a romantic streak, that I'd prefer a simpler life in a simpler place, and that I have somehow managed to fill my life with campy, superficial crap. Or so I feel. But what makes this form of communication especially rich is not that it allows us to derive 'true descriptions' of my life, though it does make a bit of this possible. It is rather a matter of how each work offers a very precise environment of thought and feeling into which we can place an otherwise formless, indeterminate conception of a life. By putting these objects in a certain relationship with a subject — my life — I charge their aesthetic features with a kind of moral significance: they now come to represent 'ways of being in the world'; that is, they

represent a life as tethered to very different kinds of value and forms of possible experience.

In a sense, every poem has a subject for which the poem itself functions as a framework of thought and feeling, much as the paintings in my example do. In some poetry the subject is explicit: Lesbia and love in Catullus, for example. But in a great expanse of modern poetry, however, the subject is implicit, at best suggested and so only half visible, and criticism is in part the struggle to find it and bring it to full view. Even of poems that seem to say what they mean and mean what they say, we know to search for their unmentioned subject, as we do when we read Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan' as ultimately about the nature of poetic creation and not just strange happenings in Xanadu, even though the poem only explicitly talks about the latter. And if latency is characteristic of our experience the meaning of a poem, it is not because it takes so long to unearth its hidden meaning. The idea of 'hidden' meanings can be dangerously misleading, suggesting as it tends to the idea of a master-proposition upon which critics converge when they've unraveled the mystery of a poem. We frequently experience poetic meaning as a far-off destination not because the meaning of a poem is so deeply hidden in its language but because the kind of communicative act in which a poem engages is extraordinarily complex, beginning with language and words but then soon passing from this into a richly, and at times bizarrely, textured imaginative space, the exploration of which is potentially interminable. This is why we do not believe in the existence of interpretations of poems to which nothing more can be added, that say *everything* that can be said about a poem. Poems, and artworks more generally, strike us as always saying 'I mean more than that' in the face of even our best interpretations and most competent critics.

All this should make clear that while I do wish to emphasize the communicative role of images in metaphors and poems, I am in no way attempting to reanimate that old body of theory that equates the meaning of a metaphor with a *single* image or picture, one that 'shows' a metaphor's meaning. This is why I enlist the notion of an imaginative space and not of an image to explain the mechanics of communication here, since the former is much broader and more accommodating than the latter. Among other things, an imaginative space can tolerate the presence of a *number* of images and objects, and it can also acknowledge the contradiction and at times incoherence of the imaginings metaphors and poems often produce,

something a single-image theory of figurative communication will find very difficult. At any rate, while the philosopher of language may be forgiven for entertaining the idea that metaphors produce *an* image in which their meaning, in some way, resides, it is clearly silliness to think that *poems* generate a single, solitary image in virtue of which they convey. Perhaps some do, but it is too much to think that poems that communicate imagistically always do so by resolving, in some mysterious way, into a single image. Part of the motivation for introducing the notion of an imaginative space is to avoid the problems invited by the single-image theory without abandoning the sensible idea that images nonetheless are a standard currency of communication in poetry, and indeed in figurative language more generally.

As I said above, the full generation of poetic meaning — that is, of the densely wrought patterns of significance and sense a talented critic will attribute to a poem — will require much more than the minimal activity of making-meaningful I am considering in this paper. This is to admit that if we approach a poem armed simply with our imaginations, we'll barely get any further than I did with Ashbery, and this is not very far at all. But an account of how we get from the minimal meaningfulness I have explored here to the richness of criticism shouldn't be very hard to devise, though it is beyond the scope of this paper. Critics, educated and experienced as they sometimes are, are usually members of a rather complicated form of life, a practice in which one can participate only once one has mastered everything that goes into what Arthur Danto calls the 'atmosphere of theory'²⁵ in which artworks are created, interpreted, and consumed. This background of ideas will include a general sense of the poetic projects that define a tradition, the ideas of culture, art, and philosophy that inform it, a sense of a particular poet's standing interests, past works, and so on. All of this is part of what guides, constrains, and informs a critic's imagination and its ability to elicit from a poem all that it means but about which it may say virtually nothing, just as we saw it does in the case of modern subjects in Wordsworth and poetic creation in Coleridge. And it is this surrounding culture of ideas, history and criticism that reveals what critics know well and the rest of us too little, and so why a critic's imaginative engagement with a poem is often so much more productive than is the amateur's, despite the latter's enthusiasm and good intentions. What I have tried to identify here is the necessity of the form of imaginative engagement I have outlined, and of how this casts light on how we take the first, and perhaps just the first, step in

the process of making a poem meaningful. Of course it requires considerable time, work, and often the aid of a fine critic, to move successfully from this first shimmer of sense to the experience of a poem as fully enriched with meaning. The story of this is the story of nothing less than the interpretive enterprise itself, the products of which are works of criticism, and my arguments in this paper concern just the first moment in this grand affair. But I do hope that some of what I have said brings to light possibilities for thinking about these further matters.

VI. Conclusion

By way of a conclusion, I'll assert, without argumentation, that our experience of much poetry, modernist or otherwise, bears the mark of the problems I have addressed here, though usually not nearly as completely and proudly as, say, Ashbery's poetry does. Yet even if there are poems that do not strike us as problematic as those I have discussed here, we do find these the basic problems lurking somewhere, behind some line, in virtually every modern poem, and a great many premodern. At any rate, it would be silly to claim that the poets I have used to set up my argument are *exceptions* to the rule of how we experience meaning in poetry. What would the rule be to which these are exceptions? That poems are generally composed of clear, literal language? That the meaning of most poems is transparent and immediately available to anyone who reads them? It is hard to say this with a straight face. All one needs to grant me is that poets of the sort I have explored represent a kind of limit-case, and that in coming to understand what happens at this borderline, we'll be able to throw light on what happens when poems approach it to whatever extent they do, that is, when they strike us as communicating in excess of whatever their 'language' means, and partly by virtue of the kind of imaginative space they open up to appreciation.²⁶

NOTES

¹. This is certainly true of Anglophone philosophy of art; and while our Continental brethren have done much better at keeping poetry in view, even there the habit is usually to speak of 'the poetic' in the rather loose Heideggerian sense, as an exemplary form of artistic 'revealing'. See Anna Christina Ribeiro (2007) for a discussion of the avoidance of poetry in analytic philosophy of art and aesthetics. It is worth noting that there are recent signs that analytic *philosophy of language* is beginning to take a serious look at poetry, and this might create a space for analytic aestheticians to rediscover poetry. For example, a recent volume of *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* (edited by Ernie Lepore and published in October 2009) is dedicated to poetry.

². When I speak of efforts to correct this, I have in mind philosophers whose work either

straddles the analytic/continental divide or who have carved out a unique space apart from these two traditions, for example ‘new’ Wittgensteinians, pragmatists, etc. Figures such as Stanley Cavell and Richard Eldridge come to mind, as does Simon Critchley’s work on Wallace Stevens (see Critchley, 2005).

3. The dates commonly given for the birth of poetic romanticism are quite arbitrary, though if one is concerned with English romantic poetry, 1798 is good place to start, as this is when Wordsworth and Coleridge published *Lyrical Ballads*. There was poetry properly called romantic before this — Blake, for example, published *Songs of Innocence* in 1789 — but this would be the point at which English poetry became generally conscious of being part of what we now call the romantic movement.

4. Certain ‘new’ Wittgensteinian philosophers are pleased to call (most) poetry nonsensical, and intend this as kind of compliment (see, for example, Rupert Read, 2007). The poetic darling of these philosophers is commonly Wallace Stevens. I’ll assert without argumentation that this is unfair to both Wittgenstein and Stevens. Another sort of philosopher is pleased to link the question of whether a poem is meaningful to the question of the meaningfulness of its language, which is much closer to the philosophical picture I am attacking here. This sort of philosopher tends use John Ashbery as an indication of a poet who has abandoned meaning (see, for example, Troy Jollimore, 2009). For reasons I give below, I think this too is misguided, and it is worth noting that Ashbery himself would find such a claim unfair to his poetic projects, insisting as he has that much of his work is *about* — and hence meaningful in respect to — something, for example ‘the experience of experience’ (as quoted in Poulin, 1981, 245).

5. Simon Blackburn (1984), 180.

6. To say the same thing, this is *not* a paper on interpretation, though I do think that the problems I explore should be seen as groundwork for a satisfying account of the interpretation.

7. For example, in William Lycan’s state-of-the-art of introduction to the philosophy of language, the final section is entitled The Dark Side and is on metaphor (no mention of poetry). See Lycan (2008), 173-176.

8. Samuel Guttenplan gets at the same idea when he speaks of *transparency* as one of the three ‘truths’ of metaphor: ‘When Romeo says that Juliet is the sun we are no more brought up short by this than if he had said, for example, ‘I love Juliet’, or ‘Juliet is standing on the balcony’. As is well known, speakers of a language simply do hear its sentences as meaningful [...] It is this immediate ‘getting’, whether of a sentence in a familiar language or a scene, that I call transparency, and my claim is that it is just as true of metaphors as it is of those utterances we regard as unproblematically literal.’ (Guttenplan, 2005, 21)

9. If our comprehension of metaphors is standardly experienced as immediate, our attempts to isolate and render their meaning in literal, even propositional, terms almost never is. But note that this concerns our ability to *explain* metaphoric meaning, and it is a different issue from the one I am explaining here: our impression that *we grasp* metaphoric meaning immediately. Metaphors are philosophically funky because while we usually take ourselves to experience their meanings immediately, we very rarely think we that we can come up with adequate statements or descriptions of their meaning. This is one way of putting the problem of paraphrase, in respect to both metaphors and artworks.

10. In Simic (1999), 3.

11. In Ungaretti (2002), 4-5.

12. T.S. Eliot, ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’, in Eliot (1991), 7.

13. I do not wish to imply work meaning is something like the cumulative effect of line meaning, or that line meaning is even primary to work meaning. Indeed, and as I argue below in my discussion of John Ashbery’s ‘A Worldly Country’, there are cases in which we can arrive at a sense of line meaning only once we have a sense of work meaning, that is, once we

already have a grasp of the point of the poetic work itself and what it is trying to convey. I thank Rob Chodat for pointing out to me the need to be clear about this, and about the need to acknowledge the complexity of how the parts and the whole of a literary work interact to produce meaning. I acknowledge this complexity gradually in this essay, and here the story is only half told.

¹⁴ As Elisabeth Camp notes, metaphors do enjoy a kind of twofoldness, and the point I am putting on offer is simply that it is not a twofoldness of communicative content. As she says, 'We are simultaneously aware of both the focal subject (me, Bill) and the representing frame (Anna, bulldozers), as distinct entities. But this awareness of their distinctness doesn't just not undermine, it often heightens, the richness of their imaginative interaction. Further, just as with pictorial seeing, the two components are united into a single cognitive state, of thinking of the one entity *through* our conception or characterization of the other' (Camp, 2009, 113). With this in mind, one might say that twofoldness in metaphor typically functions to produce a single communicative content, the *one* meaning a metaphor bears; in poetry has the function of producing two distinct levels at which a poem means, conveys.

¹⁵ My talk of imaginative spaces should not be taken to be descriptive of something the reader consciously conjures up in the private cinema of his mind. Indeed it is not a psychological claim at all. That we enter into a kind of imaginative space when appreciating and discussing literature is made manifest by the extraordinary capacity of critical discourse to ascribe to literary works forms of meaning that are in utter excess of their linguistic meaning, of anything their words actually *say*. In this sense, justification for talk of an imaginative space is given by nature of critical discourse itself, and without some such notion a great many of the claims of criticism will appear mysterious, gratuitous, or unintelligible.

¹⁶ In Ashbery (2007), 1.

¹⁷ See, for example, Charles Altieri (1984, 132-164), John Koethe (2000, 67-89), and Helen Vendler (2005, 57-78).

¹⁸ I do not doubt of course that there is such a thing as 'nonsense poetry', nor do I think that talk of various poets embracing 'irrationalism' are misguided. What I do not think, and for the reasons I am outlining here, is that any of this implies we ought to abandon all talk of meaning when speaking of the irrationalist or nonsensical tendencies of modern poetry.

¹⁹ For a helpful discussion of this, see Alison Rieke (1992), 6-8.

²⁰ See Richard Moran (1997), Elizabeth Camp (2009) and Troy Jollimore (2009).

²¹ See Samuel Guttenplan (2005), chapter 4. I am entirely indebted to Guttenplan for the idea of semantic descent, though I make no claim to employing the idea exactly as he does.

²² This should make it clear that I am only asking for descent from the linguistic to the cultural. More descent than this — say to a sense of something like 'objects in themselves' quite apart from the sense they have in a form of life — will make communication of the sort I am interested in here all but impossible.

²³ It is worth confessing that my idea of an imitative space will not allow us to get to those very fine-grained and precise meanings some philosophers think metaphors, at least on occasion, can convey. I am skeptical that we get quite this level of precision from metaphors, but if one is sympathetic to the idea, then one will rightly think that my account of an imaginative space won't help us explain it. At any rate, I am not trying to offer an adequate theory of metaphoric meaning in this paper. All I wish to say is my reflections on semantic descent and imaginative spaces show us how we can initially experience a metaphor as communicating, and no doubt more needs to be added to the story to explain how we arrive at the more refined, complex, and exact meanings we perhaps at times experience in a metaphor.

²⁴ See Camp (2009) for an interesting discussion of metaphor, fiction, and frameworks of thought.

²⁵ See Danto (1964).

²⁶ Earlier versions of this paper were read at the University of Southampton for the annual meeting of the British Wittgenstein Society, the University of Parma, the University of Tampere, and at Boston University for the wonderful “No Quarrel: Literature and Philosophy Today” conference. I am grateful to Avery Kolers, Nancy Potter, Bernie Rhie, and especially Rob Chodat and Oren Izenberg for their helpful criticisms and suggestions. I would also like to thank Alan Golding for bringing to my attention the Ashbery line with which I begin the paper.

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