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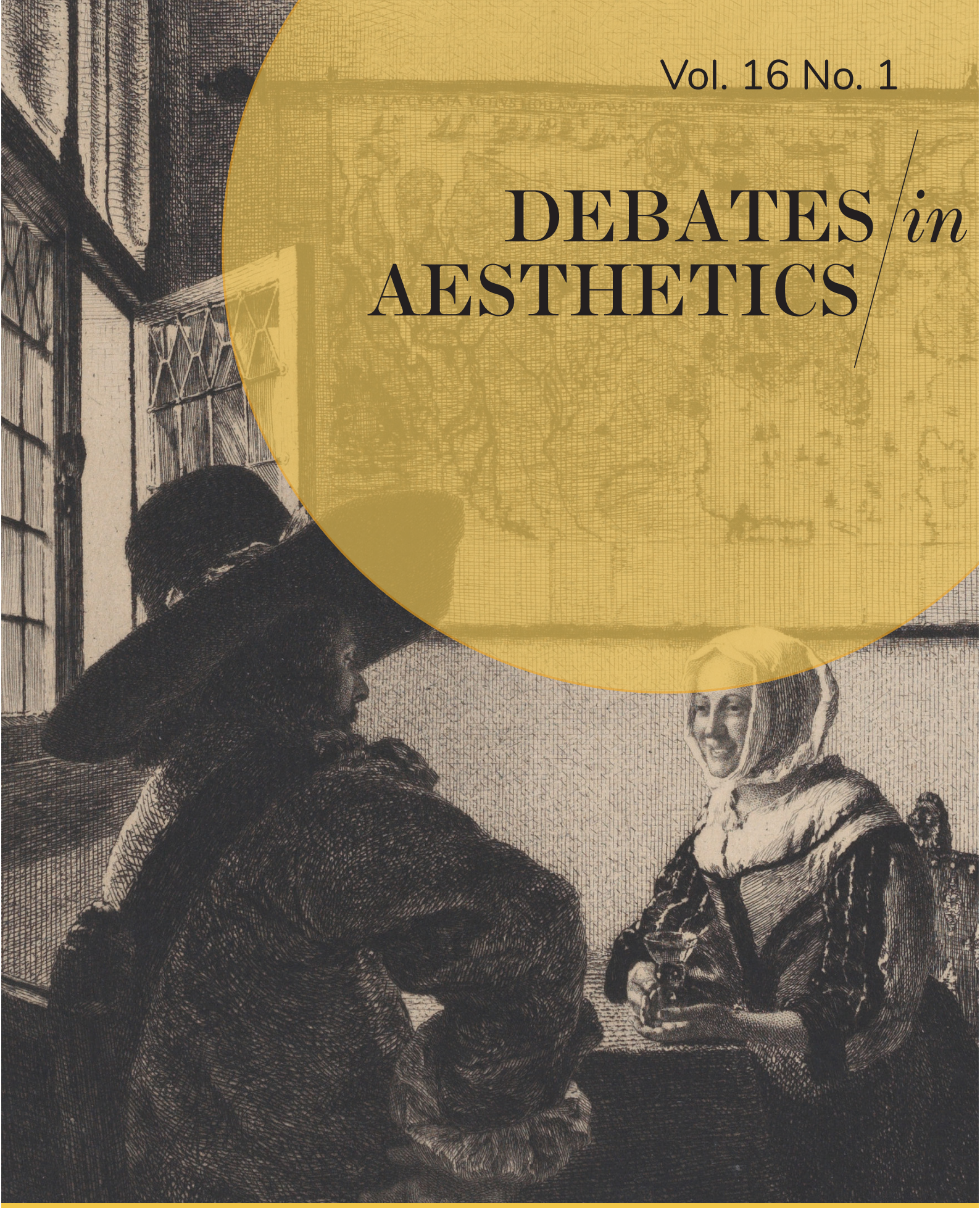

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FICTION, POETRY AND TRANSLATION
A CRITIQUE OF OPACITY

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This essay will criticize Peter Lamarque's claim in The Opacity of Narrative that reading for 'opacity' is the way to read literature as literature. I will summarize the idea of 'opacity' and consider the plausibility of this claim through an examination of Lamarque's related comments on translation. The argument for 'opacity', although it insists on the importance of attention to a work's form in the apprehension of its content, involves, at the same time, a certain obliviousness to form, indicated in the first instance by an unpersuasive conflation of lyric poetry and prose fiction. Through a comparison of opposing approaches to the translation of a novel written in verse, and an analysis of why the translation of poetry is generally understood to be more challenging than the translation of prose, I will argue that reading for 'opacity' does not adequately capture what it means to read literature as literature.

1 Opacity

What is opacity? In the first essay of *The Opacity of Narrative*, 'Opacity, Fiction and Narratives of the Self', Peter Lamarque provides an initial characterization, claiming that opacity is a "prominent feature" of "literary fictional" narratives:

> In the literary fictional case, the events and characters that make up the content are *constituted* by the modes of their presentation in the narrative. Their identity is determined by the narrative itself such that they are not merely contingently but essentially connected to the descriptions that characterise them. (Lamarque 2014, 3)

A novel's events and characters exist in the precise words and sentences written by its author. It is not possible to describe the events and characters of a novel in different ways or to consider them from other perspectives. The narrative descriptions are not "a window through which an independently existing (fictional) world is observed" but "an opaque glass, painted, as it were, with figures seen not *through* it but *in* it" (Ibid.).

2 Two Related Kinds of Opacity

By way of W.V.O. Quine, Gottlob Frege and Roger Scruton, Lamarque describes two parallel ways in which opacity might occur: referential and representational opacity. Referential opacity is the idea that "in certain contexts names or singular descriptions do not act in a 'purely referential' or 'transparent' manner" (Ibid., 4). In an opaque sentence, substituting synonyms or "co-extensional terms" alters the content. In a transparent sentence, content is not dependent on a specific wording. The same content can be accessed in different ways. Opacity can also occur in visual forms. Representational opacity depends on a contrast between photography and painting. In a painting "the way an object

is depicted *matters* as much as mere denotation" (Ibid., 8). Lamarque quotes Scruton's claim that a painting "is *itself* the object of interest and irreplaceable by the thing depicted" and that, therefore, the "interest is not in representation for the sake of its subject but in representation for its own sake" (Ibid., 8).

3 Transparency, Opacity and Art

In a transparent sentence, depiction, or narrative the aim is to communicate or present the subject clearly and the subject itself is the proper focus of interest whereas in an opaque sentence, depiction, or narrative the particular way in which the subject is presented is the primary focus of interest. The content of a transparent sentence is 'coarse' because it is not tied to a particular composition of words. Transparent sentences are interchangeable. The content of an opaque sentence is 'fine-grained' as it is tied to a particular composition of words. Opaque sentences are singular. A sentence, depiction, or narrative may be both transparent and opaque, may have both a 'coarse' and a 'fine-grained' content, depending on the interest that is taken in it. The claim that a work of art is opaque is, in essence, the claim that the work's salient content is 'fine-grained'. It is singular: tied inextricably to form and inseparable from it.

4 Opacity, Fiction and Literature

A narrative, on this account, is the simple notion of a story: "the representation of two or more events, real or imaginary, from a point of view, with some degree of structure and connectedness" (Ibid., 1). Lamarque's particular focus is on "narratives that aspire to be *works of art*: narratives that we call 'literature'" (Ibid., 2). Although on this view literature includes some works of non-fiction, the intention is to examine literary fiction: "it is the combination of their literary and their fictional qualities that is of special interest" (Ibid.). However, while the initial characterization of opacity is presented in terms of imagined or invented events and characters, the first example used to demonstrate

opacity is a poem, *The Darkling Thrush* by Thomas Hardy (Ibid., 3). The events and characters of this narrative are not "constituted" by their "modes of presentation" in the way that might be claimed of those of Hardy's novels and so the choice is initially puzzling. But Lamarque gives a reason: "[n]arratives in poetry provide clear examples of the phenomenon." (Ibid.) Therefore, although Lamarque's stated interest is literary fiction, the phenomenon of opacity is not specific to fictional narratives. It is, rather, argued to be a phenomenon of all literature. The argument for opacity is an argument about how literature should be read when it is read as literature.

5 Reading a Novel as a Poem

The claim that *The Darkling Thrush* provides an example of the phenomenon of opacity amounts to the observation that its formal qualities—its texture, vocabulary, metre, rhyme scheme, sibilance, and alliteration—are all crucial in creating its salient content:

> To bring to mind the requisite images, these epithets must play an essential, not merely contingent, role. It is not as if other ways of capturing the scene would be just as effective, for the scene itself derives its very identity (including its mood and character) through these exact lines. (Ibid., 4)

The claim is persuasive enough with respect to this poem. Hardy uses a distinctive poetic diction. The poem has a musical rhythm and a regular rhyme scheme. It is easy to agree that substituting a synonym—such as 'feathers' for 'plume'—would corrupt the poem. But while this suggests something about the indissoluble form-content identity of poetry, or, more precisely, of this particularly dense and lyrical poem, what does it indicate about fiction or literature more broadly?

In the eighth essay of the collection, 'Thought, Opacity and the Values of Literature', using another Thomas Hardy poem, *After the Burial*, as his

example, Lamarque observes that in the context of poetry "the thought that form and content are somehow intimately connected is a commonplace of the literary community" (Ibid., 152) and that this is "sometimes explained in terms of unparaphraseability" (Ibid., 154). A poem can however, as Lamarque observes, always be paraphrased. The real issue is that "it is not a matter of indifference if a reader reads the poem or a paraphrase":

> Part of the reason for this is that if one is taking an interest in the poem *as a poem*, then one should be receptive to the overall *experience* that the poem affords, and that experience is partially determined by the very words and structures themselves. There is always more to a poem than just a core meaning that could be expressed in other ways. (Ibid.)

A poem "never just makes a statement in which *what* is stated is indifferent to *how* it is stated" (Ibid.). The mention of indifference connects to an earlier formulation of opacity: "Opacity occurs when the narrative is not indifferent to how the items are identified or characterised." (Ibid., 6) Poetry might therefore be thought to provide clear examples of the phenomenon of opacity because it is in poetry that the resources of a language are often most fully exploited. But Lamarque claims that a lyric poem and a prose novel are alike in this respect:

> It might be thought that form-content indivisibility is a peculiarity of poetry in which fine-grained attention to language is integral to the kind of experience that poetry offers, and for which it is valued. But narrative opacity also shows how form helps determine content in prose narrative. In a literary novel, it is not a matter of indifference how scenes are depicted, as if *the very same* scenes might have been described in any other manner. (Ibid., 154)

The claim is that a prose novel, if it is literature, if it aspires to be a work of art, will possess a form-content indivisibility similar to that of a lyric poem. As an example, Lamarque highlights Dickens' use of the word 'peep' in *Bleak House*:

> A single word in so long of a novel might seem of marginal significance—and thus easily substitutable—but the lesson from narrative opacity is that there is a standing assumption that the form of narration *counts* in the characterisation of content. The word "peep", in this example, is not accidental; it has a function and salience in the narrative: it connects scenes, it holds nuances ("childish inquisitiveness"), it contributes to an atmosphere ("a partial and fragmented view of things"). Part of the pleasure of reading Dickens is savouring his use of language; the distinctive features of his characterisation and scene depiction are determined by their precise linguistic delineation. In that sense, form and content are indivisible even in novelistic narrative. Part of the pleasure of reading Dickens is savouring his use of language; the distinctive features of his characterisation and scene depiction are determined by their precise linguistic delineation. In that sense, form and content are indivisible even in novelistic narrative. (Ibid., 155)

But is the word 'peep' in *Bleak House* as essential as the word 'plume' in *The Darkling Thrush*? Changing the word in the novel wouldn't cause issues with the scansion, nor would it disrupt a rhyme scheme. To substitute a synonym— 'peek' or 'glimpse'—would be a subtler alteration than 'feathers' for 'plume'. Lamarque asserts that form and content are indivisible in a novel just as they are in a poem, and then he seems to demur: "[p]erhaps," he considers, "all the vital meaning in a literary narrative could indeed be preserved through such (small, intermittent)

substitutions"—but, even if true, "the idea that this might somehow licence rewording of literary works is absurd at many levels" because "changes, even preserving sense, would be unacceptable and undermine work identity" (Ibid, 154-155).

This comment seems to ignore the role of first readers and editors. Rather than undermining a work's identity, their suggestions, alterations, substitutions, and cuts arguably strengthen it, or at least aim to. There are famous examples in both poetry and prose: Ezra Pound and *The Waste Land*; Gordon Lish and Raymond Carver's short stories. Furthermore, poems and novels seem to have divergent exigencies, pressures, and preoccupations. That poets and novelists tend to use language in quite different ways is suggested by the fact that few writers excel in both forms. Hardy is a rare exception. But it is not necessary to insist on this, nor to argue for a hard distinction between poetry and prose, so much as to recognise that the argument for strict form-content indivisibility is very persuasive when attributed to certain literary narratives and much less persuasive when applied to others. In fact, Lamarque himself recognises this when he states that narratives in poetry provide "clear examples" of the phenomenon of opacity. His ultimate claim, however, is that transparency and opacity should be seen as forms of attention a reader pays to a work rather than as properties of certain narratives or as "intrinsic qualities of a text":

> We can read (or interpret) a narrative transparently or opaquely relative to the interest we bring to it and the kind of attention we give to its linguistic form. (Ibid., 11-12)

Poems and novels can be paraphrased, and they are always transparent in this sense, but no paraphrase of a literary work is equivalent to the original because of the importance attached to the "precise fineness of expression in identifying the work's content":

> Relative to certain interests ("what happens in the novel"), a good plot summary has the "same content" as the novel itself. Of course, relative to other interests ("the literary qualities of the novel") the plot summary is not substitutable and its content is not the same. (Ibid., 12)

Reading transparently, a paraphrase is equivalent to the original work. Reading opaquely, a paraphrase is not equivalent. And reading opaquely is reading the work as literature.

6 Opacity as Attention

The swerve to present opacity as a kind of interest or attention that a reader elects to pay to certain narratives when reading them as literature, rather than as a property that certain narratives possess and which compels and rewards this kind of attention, makes the claim of opacity seem rather tenuous. If the phenomenon of opacity is more evident in certain narratives than others, then reading for opacity is surely a more appropriate reading strategy in these cases. But if reading for opacity is a mode of attention that a reader elects to pay to a narrative, the attempt to establish a connection between opacity and literature fails unless there is a further claim about *how* precisely narratives aspire to be literature or works of art. And, indeed, Lamarque argues that there is a "substantial connection" between opacity and literature precisely because the "value of literature" is "deeply involved with the intricacies of linguistic artifice":

> The form in which a literary work is constructed is not a merely contingent fact about it; it is absolutely essential to both its identity and its value as literature. (Ibid., 13)

The argument for opacity is therefore based on a formalist preconception that the value of literature is found in its formal features, in the language used to create it, and, consequently, it exhibits circular reasoning.

If genuinely considering the question of the value of literature, it is not sufficient to assert that form is "absolutely essential". Instead, we should ask: Is a work's value as literature always and principally dependent on its formal qualities, on its precise wording?

7 Two Kinds of Reader

The weakness of the argument is perhaps revealed by Lamarque's brief comments on translation. Translation, he claims, is a "special case of paraphrasability" and:

> The ambivalent attitude that readers have towards translations of literary fictional narratives reflects the view we have taken about the interest-relativity of narrative content. For some, a good translation is indeed substitutable for the original such that to have read the translation counts as having read the work itself. For others, however good a translation, it is never substitutable without loss. Those in the former camp are satisfied that a fairly stringent criterion of "sameness of meaning" will preserve the content that needs to be preserved. Their interest in the narrative as, in effect, propositional content will be served if propositional meaning is retained. Those in the latter camp make even stricter demands of narrative content. Propositional meaning matters, as do far more fine-grained aspects underlying the precise way that meaning is conveyed, including nuance, connotation, tone, character and so on. Their reading maximises opacity. (Ibid., 12)

Lamarque characterizes two supposedly prominent attitudes to literary translation that reflect the two perspectives that can be taken on the question of whether or not a paraphrase preserves salient content: readers who are interested primarily in plot or "what happens in the

novel"—propositional or 'coarse' content—will be satisfied that a good translation is substitutable for the original whereas those interested in this content but, moreover, in the "literary qualities of the novel"—'fine-grained' content—will have an ambivalent attitude towards translation. The latter kind of reader reads for opacity and therefore reads literature as literature. Such readers have an interest in the "intricacies of linguistic artifice", in the more nuanced and subtle experiential content of the work and its significance, in addition to and beyond the propositional meaning of the words.

8 Translation and Value

Is this an adequate characterisation of translation and of readers' attitudes to it? In all works of literature, form and content are in productive interplay — but translation is quite unlike paraphrase in that it aims to capture not just the meaning or sense of the original, but also its salient formal qualities. Competent, sensitive, or 'serious' readers, when considering the question of whether a translation is a good substitute for its original, will surely have a nuanced understanding that is based on the narrative in question and the competence of the translator, rather than an unqualified ambivalence. Significantly, as poet and translator Martha Collins observes in the introduction to *Into English* (Collins and Prufer 2017), poetry presents a distinctive challenge to translators. Part of the reason for this may be that poets tend to use language in a more 'opaque' way than novelists. That is, they might select words as much or more for their material qualities as for their meaning. A poet might use the sounds of words—their first letters, stresses, vowels, syllables, and endings—to create a notable pattern of metre, rhyme and rhythm, and the etymology of words, their synonyms, homophones, associations, and nuances may be as significant to the poem as what they denote. This creates a synergy between form and content. Novels too may pose different levels of challenge to translators. Novelist and translator Tim Parks, for example, notes the "current enthusiasm for the practice of

literary translation" and the "frequent claims" that translations have captured the originals, but he argues that "some literary styles remain elusive in translation" (Parks 2019, 17). Such literary styles might be characterised as opaque or as inviting opaque readings.

A translator, like an editor, critic, or 'serious' reader, pays attention to language and to meaning, to form and content, and to their interaction. She interprets the work and makes judgements about what is significant and what incidental. The fact that some works of literature exploit the resources of the language they are written in to the extent that they are considered 'untranslatable', or translatable only with significant loss, while others can be translated with comparative ease, suggests that the value of literature is not, in all cases, "deeply involved with the intricacies of linguistic artifice", as Lamarque claims, and also suggests that form and content are not always so "essentially connected" as he insists. The content that is inevitably lost or altered in translation is significant for certain works of literature and much less or hardly significant for others. In the translation of prose it is generally more possible to capture both the salient formal features and the precise meaning of the original work, and therefore it is more likely that a good translation can be considered a good substitute.

8.1 Eugene Onegin

Alexander Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* provides an interesting and instructive example of the tensions at play in this discussion as it is, unconventionally, a novel written in verse; notably the 'Onegin' stanza—fourteen lines of iambic tetrameter that end in a repeating pattern of both masculine and feminine rhymes. David Bethea remarks that "capturing *Eugene Onegin* in English has come to represent something like the 'three minute mile' of translating skill":

> The question is not whether the barrier—that is, a precise English substitute, in *all* respects, of Pushkin's Russian—can

> be reached, but how close one can come, given the obstacles. (Bethea 1984, 112)

When it is impossible to capture both, should the translator preserve the verse form at the expense of meaning and sense, or capture meaning and sense at the expense of the verse form? The answer depends on what the translator chooses to prioritise and therefore on what is perceived to be more essential to the literary work and its value as literature. Walter Arndt's translation, published in 1963, prioritises form. The first stanza reads:

> Now that he is in grave condition
> My uncle, decorous old prune,
> Has earned himself my recognition;
> What could have been more opportune?
> May his idea inspire others;
> But what a bore, I ask you, brothers,
> To tend a patient night and day
> And venture not a step away:
> Is there hypocrisy more glaring
> Than to amuse one all but dead,
> Shake up the pillow for his head,
> Dose him with melancholy bearing,
> And think behind a stifled cough:
> 'When will the Devil haul you off?' (Pushkin 1963, 5)

Vladimir Nabokov, contemptuous of this approach, argues that Arndt's version corrupts the meaning of the original to an unacceptable degree. "Passive readers" perhaps might derive "a casual illusion of sense".

> A sympathetic reader, especially one who does not consult the original, may find in Mr. Arndt's version more or less sus-

> tained stretches of lulling poetastry and specious sense; but anybody with less benevolence and more knowledge will see how patchy the passable really is. (Nabokov 1964)

Nabokov accuses Arndt of a "chancrous metaphor", "meretricious" and "burlesque rhymes", "crippled clichés", "mongrel idioms", "vulgarisms", and "stale slang" (Ibid.), although he acknowledges the difficulty of the task and in fact claims that to "reproduce the rhymes, and yet translate the entire poem literally" is "mathematically impossible" (Pushkin 2018, xxvii). Nabokov's own translation, published in 1964, prioritises "completeness of meaning" above "every formal element including the iambic rhythm, whenever its retention hindered fidelity" as well as "elegance, euphony, clarity, good taste, modern usage, and even grammar" (Ibid., xxviii).

> My uncle has most honest principles:
> when taken ill in earnest,
> he has made one respect him
> and nothing better could invent.
> To others his example is a lesson,
> but, good God, what a bore,
> to sit by a sick man both day and night,
> without moving a step away!
> What base perfidiousness
> the half-alive one to amuse,
> adjust for him the pillows,
> sadly present the medicine,
> sigh—and think inwardly
> when will the devil take you? (Pushkin 2018, 1)

Nabokov acknowledges that the work "loses its bloom" but nonetheless considers the project of "literal" translation worthwhile and preferable

to the alternative of "paraphrastic" translation. Nabokov also produced an extensive commentary to help English readers understand *Eugene Onegin's* exact contextual meaning.

To some degree, the dispute between Arndt and Nabokov reflects the two kinds of reader that Lamarque has identified, one focussed on formal qualities and the other on propositional meaning, but the divergence occurs not because of 'strict' or 'loose' demands on narrative content, but because of the distinctive challenge *Eugene Onegin* presents and which compels a translator to choose between a translation strategy that prioritises form and one that prioritises meaning. Nabokov's approach is certainly unconventional. Despite his derision, "paraphrastic" translations of *Eugene Onegin* continue to appear—each one attempting again to preserve both the precise meaning and the formal aspects of the Russian in English[1]—and this common approach of translators indicates support for the notion that the experiential or aesthetic content of the verse is generally considered to be of more importance than its precise sense. But Nabokov's position compels deeper reflection on the extent to which it is accurate to consider propositional content 'coarse' and experiential content 'fine-grained'. His protests highlight, perhaps surprisingly because he is known as a stylist, that a reader interested primarily in the sensuous or experiential qualities of the language is just as much a 'passive' reader as one who is principally interested in the plot. Furthermore, *what* the language is being used to say, to the extent that this is separable from *how* it is said in the exact words of the original, is of such significance that, on Nabokov's view, *Eugene Onegin* remains of interest and value as literature even when stripped to a large extent of its 'literary' qualities. Both Arndt and Nabokov surely agree on the importance of the original work's sense as much as its cadence. The disagreement arises over which ought to be prioritised when it is impossible to preserve both. The practice of

1 These include translations by Charles Johnston (1975), James E. Falen (1995) and Stanley Mitchell (2008).

producing prose translations of narrative poems, particularly of ancient works, highlights the significance of 'propositional meaning' to the value of literature and also suggests that there is more to reading literature as literature than reading for opacity.

9 Conclusion

As Lamarque acknowledges, the 'referential opacity' characterised by Quine can occur "in discourse of any kind" (Lamarque 2014, 5). Translator and writer William Weaver notes that "literary or writerly language is much easier to translate than dialect and popular speech" (Weaver 2003), which indicates that form and content may be just as indissolubly connected in vernacular as they are in verse. Opacity therefore doesn't seem to be so much a phenomenon of literature but of language in certain occurrences or uses. Lamarque instead insists that:

> We do not discover that certain fine writing is unparaphrasable, but we insist that no paraphrase of a literary work is substitutable for the original because of the importance we attach to that precise fineness of expression in identifying the work's content. We read for opacity. (Lamarque 2014, 12)

But it is important not to conflate "literary" or "fine" writing with 'literature'. These are not equivalent terms, as Lamarque elsewhere observes, and for certain narratives: "Other reasons altogether qualify the writing as literature or as art." (Ibid., 175) Different works, surely, require readings with different emphases. Certain works may be valued principally for their "precise linguistic delineation" or "precise fineness of expression", but if literature is a supple and expansive category—one that includes lyric poetry and free verse, everyday speech and formal registers, dense narratives in which language occludes propositional content and lucid narratives written in simple sentences—then it is necessary to consider each work and its value *as literature* in its singularity. To eluci-

date the significance and value of literature as literature, it is necessary to consider what these "other reasons" might be.

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