

Poetry and the Possibility of Paraphrase

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ABSTRACT

Why is there a long-standing debate about paraphrase in poetry? Everyone agrees that paraphrase can be useful; everyone agrees that paraphrase is no substitute for the poem itself. What is there to disagree about? Perhaps this: whether paraphrase can specify *everything* that counts as a contribution to the meaning of a poem. There are, we say, two ways to take the question; on one way of taking it, the answer is that paraphrase cannot. Does this entail that there is meaning mysteriously locked in a poem, meaning that cannot be represented in any way other than via the poem itself? If that were so it would have profound implications for poetry's capacity to convey insight. We suggest reasons for thinking that the entailment does not hold. Throughout, we connect the traditional debate over paraphrase, which has largely been conducted within the fields of philosophy and literary theory, with recent empirically oriented thinking about the communicability of meaning, represented by work in pragmatics. We end with a suggestion about what is to count as belonging to meaning, and what as merely among the things that determine meaning.

What is at stake when people debate the heresy of paraphrase? That paraphrase is sometimes useful? No one denies that. That a paraphrase may substitute for the poem itself? It certainly can, given the right preferences. If I am indifferent between a raven and a writing desk the one will substitute for the other. In that sense, anything can substitute for anything. But for someone who wants to experience the poem—and that is the relevant preference in this context—the paraphrase will not do. Surely no one has claimed otherwise.¹

We think there is a debate to be had. It concerns whether there are elements of meaning which can be expressed only through the poem; poetic contents, that is, which are unparaphrasable. In philosophy and literary criticism, this idea has traditionally been presented as a thesis of the “unity of form and content”: the idea that in poetry form and content, what is said and how it is said, are one, and that, consequently, there is no way to convey the content of a poem or passage in any form other than its own.² As Peter Lamarque puts it, “relative to an interest in poetry as poetry, there can essentially only be one way in which a work's content can be expressed: content-identity is lost under any different form” (2009, 410–11). Those who hold views of this kind may not think that *all* the meaning of a poem resists paraphrase; Cleanth Brooks, the inventor of the phrase “the heresy of paraphrase,” thought that paraphrase has its uses, but that “the paraphrase is not the real core of meaning which constitutes the essence of the poem” (1970 [1947], 197), suggesting that there is always some bit of meaning which resists paraphrase. We call this idea *the incompleteness of paraphrase*, or *IP*; we shall see that it comes in two versions: a true but innocuous version and a threatening version that is, according to us, false.³ We say this hesitantly, aware that a number of unclarity stand in the way of resolving the issue in a satisfactory way. One of the things we will do is illustrate these difficulties.

This is a debate with some significance for our thinking about what poetry can teach us. If there are things that can be meaningfully conveyed only in the way the poet said them, the poet and the poem gain an epistemic status denied to other kinds of discourse, notably science and philosophy. Conversely, as Peter Kivy points out, “If the content of the poem could be paraphrased, then that paraphrase would inevitably fall into one of the categories of human knowledge populated by resident

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authorities who perform would outrank the poet in expertise” (1997, 91).⁴ It is also a debate that, we will argue, needs to move beyond traditional claims from literary theorists and philosophers about the inseparability of form and meaning to encompass recent work in the theory of communication. We consider some of that work in Sections II and III of this article.

I. WHAT IS A PARAPHRASE?

We take a paraphrase to be any attempt to convey the meaning or part of the meaning of a poem. This way of understanding paraphrase has two important implications. First, a paraphrase need not be successful, wholly or even in part; a paraphrase may fail completely to elucidate a poem’s meaning. Not all paraphrases are good; some are terrible. Secondly, a paraphrase is not a set of propositions or sentences but is the intentional production or utterance of certain sentences which may (or may not) encode certain propositions. Like any utterance, a paraphrase has the capacity to communicate meaning which is not encoded; what is uttered may need pragmatic enrichment before it expresses anything truth conditional, and it may carry implicatures. This will be important later.

Paraphrase aims to specify meaning. One problem, then, is the difficulty of saying what, in general, counts as meaning in poetry and what as something else; this problem will dog our inquiry throughout. Poems generally have meaning in the minimal sense of being composed of meaningful words. But paraphrase is not usually thought of as the project of explaining the meanings of the poem’s words, though it might occasionally explain an unusual or invented word. Here we give some examples which indicate the variety of ways one may contribute to the project of paraphrasing a poem (we do not endorse or reject any of the examples; they are merely illustrative):

1. The narrative of Elizabeth Barrett’s *Aurora Leigh* ends with Aurora and Romney united.
2. “Great Tom” in Anthony Thwaite’s poem *At High Table* refers to the bell of Tom Tower, Christchurch.
3. The words of *At High Table* are spoken by a fictional Oxford don in the middle of the nineteenth century.
4. In “*Hope*” is *the Thing with Feathers* Dickinson tells us that hope is ever present in the human heart.
5. In *Corinna’s going a-Maying* Herrick stresses “the clash between the Christian and pagan world views; or, rather, while celebrating the pagan view, he refuses to suppress references to the Christian” (Brooks 1970 [1947], 69).

The order of these remarks corresponds roughly to what we may think of as their obviousness; by the time we get to (5) the paraphraser is doing real work, and not everyone will agree with the result. We count them all as contributions to paraphrase: they are attempts to identify some part of what the poem means, even in cases where the rest of us feel we know it already.⁵ We can also see from this small set of examples that there is no one logical form or speech act register for the utterances in a paraphrase. Some of the examples given may be understood as straightforward assertions: the paraphraser asserts that, in *Aurora Leigh*, Aurora and Romney are united at last, that “Great Tom” in *At High Table* refers to the bell, that Herrick’s poem stresses a clash between the Christian and pagan world views. But the last of these might be better framed as a suggestion rather than a confident assertion—see below on “the meaning of the poem.” This way we get complex relations between nested operators: the paraphraser may assert that the poet asserts that such and such, or suggest the same, or suggest that the poet suggests . . . , and so on. Further variants of (5) would attribute the thought, asserted or not, to a dramatic speaker, or to an implied author and not to the poet. Utterances in many registers, some of them embedding contents attributed to many kinds of agents, are all capable of taking their places in paraphrase. Paraphrastic utterances are of many kinds, and we do not presume to set general limits on what counts as a contribution to paraphrase.

Does all this unclarity mean there is no point in having the debate we are embarked on? No. One function of debate is to encourage moves towards clarity. Hilbert claimed that we could replace the idea of mathematical truth with the idea of proof in a formal system, without having a clear conception of what would count as such a proof. The debate that followed showed that Hilbert was wrong, a

result that depended on Church, Gödel, and Turing defining proof in terms of computable functions. No doubt the debate over paraphrase will never achieve this level of precision. But progress is not impossible.

We said that a paraphrase is an attempt to convey the meaning of a poem. In that case it seems a successful paraphrase can be relied on as a source of knowledge about meaning. But in fact, so the objection goes, few paraphrases—if any—can be relied on in the way we often do rely on testimony. It would rarely be appropriate to treat a paraphrase as having settled the question what, if anything, the poem means; poetic meaning is too contested and value-laden a notion for that. This is a limitation on testimony familiar from other areas where dispute is rife but hard to resolve.⁶ If you wonder whether there are moral truths or whether eating meat is wrong, you should not settle on a view simply because you heard a philosopher say “yes to both questions”—though their saying it might be relevant to your inquiry. In like manner you should not treat a paraphrase in the way you would treat directions to the nearest garage. Still, you might reasonably treat a poetic paraphrase as a basis for further inquiries, going back to the poem to see how far it accords with your own efforts at interpretation—efforts which are aided by having the paraphrase in front of you, but which might also result in your thinking the paraphrase in some way deficient. Ideally, all this would go on until you arrived at a to-some-extent adequate understanding of the poem, informed but certainly not dictated by the paraphrase. Treating the paraphrase in this provisional, distanced way is sensible even (perhaps especially) if the paraphrase is your own attempt at saying what the poem means. The fact, if it is one, that paraphrase does not rise to the status of acceptable testimony does not show paraphrase to be useless for elucidating the poem’s meaning.

One more general issue needs to be confronted before we get to the central question of whether the limits on poetic paraphrase imply that poetic meanings is ever available only from within the poem itself. We need to ask whether it is even legitimate to speak of “the meaning of the poem.” After all, poems are multiply interpretable—so the history of criticism teaches us—and it is surely a realist fantasy to suppose that the problem here is merely epistemic, that there is always a uniquely correct interpretation, and the difficulty is that we do not easily come to know what that is. We do not, on the other hand, have to adopt a critical nihilism which refuses to recognize gradations of quality in interpretation. Borrowing an idea from set theory, let us say that a reading of a poem is *maximal* when no reading is better than it.⁷ There may then be many maximal readings of a poem, none of which is better than the others; some of these maximal readings may be better than other (nonmaximal) readings and some may be incommensurable with other readings (maximal or not). A maximal paraphrase is one that goes with a maximal reading, so there is space for many maximal paraphrases. Things might be more complicated than this. In a spirit of critical pluralism, it may be said that there are not merely many maximal readings but many maximal criteria for deciding what a maximal reading is. In that case we have many classes of maximal readings of poems: one class consists of all the readings that are maximal by criterion C_1 , and so on. That does not invalidate the idea of a maximal paraphrase; it just means there will be plenty of them.⁸

It is consistent with this pluralism about paraphrase to suppose that often there are attributions of meaning which will belong to *any* maximal reading, by *any* maximal criterion. Could it ever be right to adopt a reading of *Aurora Leigh* according to which Aurora and Romney are not united at the end? We acknowledge a strong inclination to say no. If you do not like this example, we leave you to find other cases where something that may be said about a poem’s meaning is nonnegotiable. If you think everything is up for grabs and there is no claim about a poem’s meaning that cannot be reasonably controverted, that will not conflict with anything else we say here.

This relatively uncontroversial form of pluralism about meaning is consistent with the denial of a blanket projectivism about meaning according to which meaning is conferred on the work by the act of interpretation. As Peter Lamarque says, there is a distinction, vague no doubt and hard to draw in particular cases, between paraphrase and “finding new ways of reflecting on [the poem’s] imagery or themes, ... [and] encouraging other readers to expand their own imaginative response” (2020, 86).⁹ An analogy may be helpful. There may be no one best way to climb a mountain. What the mountain offers is a set of affordances for climbing—handholds and the like. Given the overall structure of affordances there may be some good ways to climb with some equally good, some bad ways, and some combinations of affordances that do not enable any climb at all. The affordances are there, independ-

ent of agents who may or may not take advantage of them. Think of the meanings made available by the poem as interpretive affordances. They are there independent of the interpreter, in the way that objects have their colors whether anyone sees them or not. But, as with colors on a dispositional view, the concept of poetic meaning is the concept of something available to a suitably placed interpreter.

II. THE LIMITS OF PARAPHRASE

It is time to confront the idea of *the incompleteness of paraphrase (IP)*. It is an idea subject to one of those scope ambiguities loved by philosophers:

- IP_{weak} : No paraphrase can express everything that belongs to the meaning of the poem;
 IP_{strong} : Something that belongs to the meaning of a poem cannot be expressed in any paraphrase.

It is consistent with IP_{weak} to say that whatever is left out of one paraphrase may be included in another; that nothing is absolutely unparaphrasable. IP_{strong} denies that; it says there are aspects of a poem's meaning that no paraphrase can capture.¹⁰ We favor IP_{weak} and are inclined to disbelieve IP_{strong} . Accepting IP_{weak} means that we agree with some of what is claimed by those who follow Bradley and Brooks in thinking there is a heresy of paraphrase. We agree that no paraphrase will ever express *all* the meaning of the poem.

To see this, return to an earlier point: a paraphrase is not an abstract set of propositions but the upshot of a communicative act. Acts of communication, we know, carry with them implicatures: meanings not encoded in or entailed by what is said but created by the very act of communicating. We also assume that there are "explicatures," or pragmatically motivated additions that make explicit what is said, as with "I've had breakfast [today]" and "The wound will take [a significant amount of] time to heal."¹¹ It is natural to think that the function of a paraphrase is to make the meaning of a poem explicit. Elisabeth Camp says,

an adequate paraphrase must state that content in a literal and explicit fashion. This means, I think, that the paraphrase should consist of a sentence whose semantic content is the same as the content of the speaker's intended speech act; it should enable an otherwise linguistically competent speaker to understand the original utterance's content simply in virtue of understanding the meanings of the paraphrasing sentence's constituent terms and their mode of combination. (2006, 2)¹²

In that case a complete paraphrase would make explicit all the meaning of the poem. In our view such an ambition cannot be achieved and anyway would not be desirable given a reasonable account of the aims of paraphrase. Consider this line from T. S. Eliot: "Lady, three white leopards sat under a juniper tree in the cool of the day." How would one provide a fully explicit statement of what is meant here? To achieve strict completeness, many things would need to be said: that the leopards are under the tree in the sense of "within the shade offered by the tree" rather than in the sense of "within the ground below the tree"; that the leopards and the tree are not suspended in mid-air, with the leopards at a lower elevation than the tree; that the whiteness of the leopards is a property of their externally visible fur rather than their internal organs; that there are *exactly* three leopards under the tree and not eighty-seven (a situation in which it certainly would be true that there were three). We claim that a competent reader will implicitly assume these things to be part of what is meant and would, if the question came up, agree that the leopards are above ground, that there are just three of them under the tree and that it is their fur that is white. The poem is not seen as ambiguous on these points—to our knowledge no commentator has raised the question whether the leopards are under ground and, given the importance of ambiguity in poetic interpretation, they surely would have if they thought that the poem was ambiguous on this question.¹³ However we do not expect or want a paraphrase to state these things explicitly. It is not merely that stating them explicitly would be unnecessary; doing so would distort the meaning of the poem because it would create further implicatures that would be misleading and undermine the effectiveness of the paraphrase. Saying that there were exactly three leopards makes salient the possibility that there might have been four, five, or eighty-seven, when the poem itself does nothing to make that salient—imagine asking someone how many children they

have and hearing the answer “I have exactly two children.” Saying that the leopards were not under the ground would suggest that in the world of the poem leopards are sometimes found in this position—again a distracting thought. The lesson is that complete explicitness is not only tedious and impractical but destructive of the enterprise of paraphrase.

It does not follow, however, that there is meaning in the poem that cannot be represented in words other than those of the poem. We have no difficulty in saying explicitly (as we are saying now) that there were exactly three leopards under the tree and that they were in the shade of the tree rather than under the ground next to the tree. We cannot say all of this without going on at such length that the paraphrase would become unsurveyable to a human consciousness or without, as indicated, creating unwanted meanings. But that is a problem for IP_{strong} and not for IP_{weak} . Our view has the advantage of acknowledging the real limits of paraphrase when it comes to the elucidation of meaning, without falling into the mysterious sounding doctrine that some meanings are locked in a single, poetic form of words.

The difference between IP_{weak} and IP_{strong} parallels a familiar distinction in the philosophy of mathematics. It is sometimes said that Gödel showed that there are unprovable truths of arithmetic. He did not. He showed that any axiom system meeting certain formal conditions would always leave some truth of arithmetic unprovable. And what is unprovable in one system may be provable in another (add the statement in question to the axioms).¹⁴ Beyond this, the similarities between poetry and mathematical proof are, unsurprisingly, rather sparse. Gödel’s result, as we have seen, depended on a precise specification of “mechanical provability” for which there is no parallel in the literature on paraphrase. Here is an illustration of how that lack of precision limits our inquiry.

Someone might argue that our position is incoherent. We admit that there is nothing in a poem’s meaning which cannot be paraphrased, that is, expressed in words other than those of the poem. So, anything, M_p , that belongs to the meaning of a poem can be expressed in some paraphrase, P_i . Now conjoin all these P_i s and you have one big paraphrase which captures all the poem’s meaning. So IP_{weak} with which we agree, is false. But this argument depends on treating meanings and paraphrases of them as mathematically well-defined entities subject to closure under Boolean operations. In fact, no one has anything intelligent to say about the conditions under which the union of two paraphrases constitutes a paraphrase. Is infinite summation allowed?¹⁵ The idea of an infinitely long paraphrase is completely unhelpful from the point of view of anyone wanting to understand how poetic interpretation actually works. To avoid disappearing into some realm beyond that of practical criticism we have to think of paraphrase as constrained by ordinary but hard to regiment expectations of surveyability, intelligibility, and plain, downright helpfulness. Developing an algebra of paraphrase will not contribute to this. Better, we think, to simply grant the truth of IP_{weak} and then to show that granting it need not lead to mysterianism about poetic meaning.

Before moving on we note that the argument of this section depends on the assumption that the kind of pragmatic inference we apply in the case of ordinary communicative utterances applies also in the case of poetry.¹⁶ While philosophically inclined literary scholars such as new critics and deconstructionists have sought to insist on the independence of poetic meaning from the context of utterance (sometimes urging this as a truth about all meaning) it is in fact common in interpretive circles to speak of what is communicated in a poem. Tom Paulin, examining Larkin’s *The Whitsun Weddings*, says “Larkin communicates both disappointment—the ‘sense of falling’—and a swelling sense of fertility and alert purpose, with more than a hint of tears.”¹⁷ And according to Brooks,

It is not that the poem communicates nothing. Precisely the contrary. The poem communicates so much and communicates it so richly and with such delicate qualifications that the thing communicated is mauled and distorted if we attempt to convey it by any vehicle less subtle than that of the poem itself. (1970 [1947], 72–3)

We do not, however, assume that there is no difference between poetry and ordinary informative utterance when it comes to the operation of pragmatic inference. For one thing, much poetry falls into the fictional, or at least the “non-assertive” category, and cannot be interpreted in any straightforward way against Grice’s maxim of quality (“say only what you believe to be true”). For present purposes all we are committed to is the following: (1) there is meaning in poetry which is not explicitly stated; (2)

some of that meaning is arrived at by making a judgement about what an utterance of the words of the poem, in the context in which they were uttered, would reasonably be intended to convey. The need for assumptions such as these is evident even when we consider cases of relatively “plain speaking” in poetry. Our parentheses represent unproblematic silent explications and interpolations within these lines from Stevie Smith’s *I Remember*:

It was wartime, and [some thousands of feet] overhead
 The Germans [their bombers] were making a particularly heavy [in weight of bombs dropped]
 [bombing] raid on Hampstead.
 Harry, do they [the German bombers] ever collide [while in the sky]?”

These are boring and pointless interpolations certainly (to which we could add more), but someone who did not understand the poem’s meaning as conforming to them would be interpreting it in a very eccentric way.

III. PRAGMATICS, METAPHOR AND THE LIMITS OF MEANING

The previous section brought pragmatics into the picture with its talk of “implicatures” and “pragmatic enrichment.” We will now see how arguments from pragmatics might be used to make a case for our inability to capture certain meaningful contents in words other than those of the poem itself. But before considering the arguments here it is as well to make a clarification. It may happen (we will suppose) that the words of a poem, or some of them, literally express, or better represent, some part of the poem’s meaning. It is harder than one might think to find examples that strictly meet this condition, given the way the words of a poem (like the words of any other utterance) usually rely on the reader silently adding content, as with the toy explication for “*I Remember*” above. Still, many will say that “The Germans were making a particularly heavy raid on Hampstead” has a thoroughly paraphrasable meaning that merely requires some trivial explication, and it would not in our view be a good tactical move for the opponent of paraphrase to make their case by disputing this.¹⁸ A more productive debate is likely to ensue when we consider aspects of poetic meaning that cannot plausibly be thought of as being literally represented in the words and sentences of the poem. And there are plenty of such meanings, it being common ground that poems express much more than their words encode, even on a liberal interpretation of *encode* that allows for the kind of reader-driven enrichment we find in those lines from Stevie Smith’s poem. A poem may be fairly said to express the thought that life is meaningless even though one would not find anything in the words of the poem that encodes this thought. It is that sort of “reading beyond the code” that we consider here.

The first pragmatics-inspired claim we need to consider is that, most of the time, what is communicated by a word uttered in context is not its lexicalized meaning, but something more fine-grained and nuanced, an *ad hoc* concept, which the hearer constructs by means of a quick on line adjustment.¹⁹ If at the restaurant customers complain that “The steak is raw,” their interlocutor fluently and appropriately understands them as saying that the steak is RAW*, where RAW* is not the lexicalized concept associated with the word “raw” but a newly-formed *ad hoc* concept whose content is, roughly, “So grossly undercooked as to be virtually inedible.” “Roughly” is important here, because *ad hoc* concepts, being fine-tuned to their unique context of utterance, are said to be unparaphrasable. As Robyn Carston puts it:

On the basis of the paraphrases often provided in the R[elevance]-T[heoretic] literature for *ad hoc* concepts, it might look as if they are being construed as decompositional; for example, DANCE* has been glossed as ‘dance in an intense, focussed, lively way,’ TIRED* as ‘tired to the extent that one does not want to go out,’ RAW* as ‘so grossly undercooked as to be virtually inedible,’ and so on. But the idea behind this is that *ad hoc* concepts are, generally, *ineffable*, in the sense that, as well as not being lexicalised, *there isn’t a linguistic phrase that fully encodes them either*, and the paraphrases are intended as just a rough indication to aid readers in understanding what we have in mind in particular cases. (2010a, 165; final emphasis added)

It is evident from this that the uses examined by relevance theorists are usually ordinary, unpoetic uses of language. Things are likely to be more resistant to articulation with more creative and idiosyncratic

expressions of the kind that we find in poetry. Here is what Deirdre Wilson and Dan Sperber conclude with regards to a “creative” metaphor in Sandburg’s *Fog*: (“The fog comes / on little cat feet”):

It is not part of the explicit content of the poem that the fog comes silently, or smoothly, or stealthy. Rather, what is part of the explicit content is that the fog comes ON-LITTLE-CAT-FEET*. And what is this concept? It is the concept of a property *that is difficult or impossible to define* ... How is this *ad hoc* concept ON-LITTLE-CAT-FEET* arrived at? By taking the poet to be attributing to the coming of the fog that property which contextually implies the very ideas suggested by the phrase ‘little cat feet.’ (2012, 122; emphasis added)

The idea that a poem may express meanings which are beyond the reach of verbal expression is therefore not foreign to serious linguistics. Is it correct? The issue is complex, and it is wise, once again, not to be dogmatic in this area. But it is worth considering other options before we accept this view. As Wilson and Sperber’s example directly above suggests, the standout evidence for this is metaphor, and metaphors with any life in them are frequently said to have a meaning which goes “beyond expression.” We think that two different—albeit related—features of linguistic communication are at stake here. Meaning might be beyond verbal expression because it is *inexhaustible* or because it is *elusive*.²⁰ We consider these ideas in turn.

Before turning to them we note that, for relevance theorists, the construction of *ad hoc* concepts happens with “almost every word” (Wilson and Carston 2007, 231). If this is true, the incompleteness of paraphrase would not be limited to poetry, but would be a quite general feature of linguistic communication, possessed, to a certain degree, by even the most mundane utterances. It may be that poetry, by frequently displaying novel combinations of words, makes the phenomenon more obvious. But anyone who relies on this argument for their claim that poetic paraphrase is incomplete will have to agree that this is true, perhaps less obviously, for every other form of utterance. This point is important because believers in the heresy of paraphrase have generally written as if they are pointing to something distinctive about poetry and its language. The argument we are considering here would not, even if they were sound, support that view. We return at the end to the question what, if anything, sets poetry apart.

III.A. Inexhaustibility

The inexhaustibility of metaphor is expressed by Stanley Cavell:

[In uttering “Juliet is the sun”] Romeo means that Juliet is the warmth of his world; that his day begins with her; that only in her nourishment can he grow. And his declaration suggests that the moon, which other lovers use as emblems of their love, is merely her reflected light, and dead in comparison; and so on. ... The ‘and so on’ which ends my example of paraphrase is significant. It registers what William Empson calls the ‘pregnancy’ of metaphors, the burgeoning of meaning in them. (1976, 78–9)²¹

We need to ask what exactly is implied by the “and so on” in Cavell’s statement. Is the idea that there are infinitely many things that might legitimately be mentioned in this excavation or elaboration of meaning? We doubt that this is plausible or even intended; it seems more likely that what is forcing the interpreter to say at some point “and so on” are such factors as:

- (a) One can never be confident that a further meaning will not be found;
- (b) There is indeterminacy in what can plausibly be attributed to the metaphor and so there may be unresolvable disputes about what is meant.

Both these things could be true without supporting a doctrine of incompleteness. We may be unsure that a further meaning cannot be found, but if one is found there is no reason to think it cannot be expressed in words (indeed, how else would it be found?). There may be no answer to the question whether certain candidate meanings really are meanings of the metaphor in question, but there is no reason to think that any candidate meaning is unattainable.²² Indeed, even the (implausible) view that

metaphors have literally infinite meanings does not imply that any of them are inexpressible in language, since finite languages have infinite representational resources. There are infinitely many natural numbers but each one has a finite numerical expression.

A similar point can be made in response to the worry, registered earlier, that a paraphrase cannot convert everything that would otherwise count as implicated material into explicit utterance, for the attempt to do so creates new, unwanted implicatures. We can grant that paraphrase will always depend on implicated content without supposing that this content is inexpressible outside the poem itself. The problem is not that it could not be made explicit, but that making it explicit would generate other implicated and unwanted meanings. We also grant that too much meaning is associated with what is said for it to be included in a single paraphrase, and certainly too much to be included in a paraphrase of manageable length. As John Searle (1978) pointed out, “Bring me a burger” is understood implicitly to rule out endless ways that would constitute bringing it to me: encased in concrete, delivered to my home next year, dropped on me from the ceiling. But no one of these illegitimate ways lacks an adequate expression in language.

III.B. Elusiveness

The idea here is that there are contributions to meaning that cannot be expressed in words, not because of the vastness or the vagueness of their extent but because they are simply things that defy verbal expression. Wilson and Carston (2019), speaking against the background of the relevance theoretic approach to meaning and communication, discuss what they label “non-propositional effects” which they characterize as follows, contrasting them with the Gricean idea of speaker’s or utterer’s meaning, considered as something determinately propositional:

1. Different audiences paraphrase them in rather different ways;
2. No finite paraphrase captures all their nuances;
3. They are often described as “open-ended”;
4. They typically involve the activation of perceptual, emotional or sensorimotor mechanisms.²³

The first three on the list we have already considered: the fact that different audiences paraphrase remarks in different ways (very typical in the case of poetry) does not prevent any proposed understanding of what is communicated from being paraphrased—as indeed their way of putting it indicates; the fact that all the nuances of meaning cannot be captured in a finite (or surveyable?) paraphrase does not, as we have argued, show that any one nuance is unparaphrasable; open-endedness is consistent with any further candidate being paraphrasable.

Their fourth item—the activation of perceptual, emotional or sensorimotor mechanisms—requires a different response. The idea here is that, as well as serving to bring to the attention of an audience (to “make manifest”) a certain propositional content, an utterance may be designed to generate emotional and imagistic responses, with the latter encompassing visual, auditory, motoric, and perhaps other modalities.²⁴ If we regard these “non-propositional effects” as aspects of a more inclusive account of poetic meaning it will follow immediately that paraphrase cannot capture all that a poem means. Should we do that?

It must be granted, of course, that it is vitally important to an understanding of poetry that we give some account of the ways in which engagement with a poem achieves these nonpropositional outcomes.²⁵ Wilfred Owen’s line “Move him into the sun” would not be so powerful if it did not provoke an imagined experience of bearing the dead weight of a human body. That poetry does these things is one reason why the paraphrase is no substitute for the poem. But if everything that we experience in a poem is to be counted as meaning it follows trivially that paraphrase will never capture it all and there is no debate to be had. If we are to retain recognizable contours of the traditional debate over paraphrase, we shall have somewhere to distinguish between aspects of an utterance which are constitutive of its meaning, and aspects that, though they may suggest or even determine meaning, are not themselves elements of meaning. We suggest that these emotional and imagistic “poetic effects” be counted among the determinants of meaning. One of Brooks’s concerns about paraphrase was that to paraphrase is to ignore the overall effect of the poem:

whatever statement we may seize upon as incorporating the “meaning” of the poem, immediately the imagery and the rhythm seem to set up tensions with it, warping and twisting it, qualifying and revising it. (1970 [1947], 197)

In a similar vein, Peter Lamarque says that paraphrase encourages us to ignore “the salience of verbal texture—sound, rhythm, rhyme” (2020, 88). It would be wrong, certainly, in coming to a view about a poem’s meaning, to ignore imagery and rhythm. But the solution is simple: do not ignore them. Meaning on the one hand and “imagery and rhythm” on the other are not to be the subjects of parallel but independent investigation. In order to correctly grasp the meaning of the poem the reader will need to engage imagistically, emotionally, and in other corporeal ways with the poem.²⁶ The images, emotions, and feelings of bodily tension and release, rhythm and resonance, rhyme and sound texture, will all make a difference to our judgement of the poem’s overall tone, and hence to the provision of a good account of its meaning; they may, for example, suggest a new sense of purpose in a poem’s final lines (recall Paulin on *The Whitsun Weddings*). The things on Wilson and Carston’s list, overlapping with Brooks’s own, contribute to meaning in the sense that a sensitive reader’s understanding of meaning will be modulated by their experience of them; they are *determinants* of meaning.²⁷ But our inclination is to say this: they do not contribute to meaning in the way that the concepts represented in a sentence do. They are not *constituents* of the meaning of the sentence.²⁸

One might take the view that we have done no more than rearrange the labels on things. You want to insist that there are no ineffable meanings? It is simple: rule out things which look dangerously ineffable by declaring them not to belong to meaning. We are aware that our proposal needs further support and that other plausible pathways might lead to a different conclusion. But there is nothing *ad hoc* about insisting on a distinction between what an utterance means and those aspects of the utterance that help us determine what it means. Indeed, the meaning conveyed by an utterance is often entirely distinct from the meaning of the sentence used to convey it, as with Cavell’s reading of “Juliet is the sun.” That reading depends on the words uttered; if the words had been different Cavell’s paraphrase would be different also. The boundary between what determines meaning and what constitutes it has to go somewhere. Our placing of that distinction puts imagistic, emotional and sensorimotor effects on the meaning-determining side of the line. Is that the wrong place to put it?

Once again, we have no killer argument to offer. But it is worth noting that things Carston has said seem to support our placement. She has elsewhere made out a strong case for the role of imagery in the reception of poetry, and what she says would apply equally to emotional feeling and to sensorimotor experience.²⁹ Imagery, she says, “plays the role of prompting thoughts, including hypotheses about intended contextual implications.” (Carston 2010b, 314). Thought is prompted by many things—sights, sounds, smells—that hardly count as meaning. She goes: on “mental images are not available via language in the same way as mental concepts are, and perhaps they are ... not carriers of utterance content. Rather, they are components of the mental context within which communicated contents are recovered” (316). She suggests that the activation of imagery may count as “perlocutionary” in the same way that our being moved or repelled by an utterance does; that if “the speaker/writer does not (perhaps cannot) *communicatively intend* images or their objects, she may, nevertheless, have images in her own mind [and] ... intend, albeit noncommunicatively, that among the effects of her utterance on her audience will be the entertaining of images similar to her own” (316). This seems to recognize a meaning-constituting/meaning-determining distinction and to place imagery on the same side as the one we put it on.

IV. CONCLUSION

In thinking about the value of paraphrase in helping us understand and appreciate poetry there is much we should avoid arguing about. Certainly, paraphrase has a use, though a limited one. Certainly, the paraphrase will not substitute for the poem if a poem is what you want. The question we have focused on is this: are the limitations of paraphrase such that they require us to recognize a kind of meaning possessed by a poem which is incapable of expression in other ways? This paper has been an attempt to see what is required in order to make out a case for answering “No” to this question. As we have emphasized, we are not committed to this answer and believe that there is too much unresolved

for anyone to be confident that it is right. But it is the answer to which we are naturally drawn, as others may be. What we have proposed is a pathway to the negative answer which shows some promise; it depends on distinguishing between strong and weak versions of the idea that poetic meaning is not capturable in paraphrase and recognizing that the weaker version is all we need. It then depends—more controversially we think—on setting a boundary between that which is constitutive of meaning and that which merely contributes to the determination of meaning. Further work may show that the boundary we suggest is well motivated, or that some other placement of it is correct, where that other placement may well be inconsistent with the negative answer we favor. It may also turn out that there are rival ways to explicate the idea of poetic meaning between which no principled choice is possible, where one supports the negative answer and one does not. In that case the best we can say is that “taking the question one way the answer is No, taking it the other, the answer is Yes.” It may even turn out that there is no principled way to distinguish what is determinative of meaning from what is constitutive of it, and the question lapses.

Finally, all we have said seems to leave us with no answer to a pressing question: what is distinctive about poetry? Not, it seems, the impossibility of paraphrase; meaning in poetry is just like meaning in any other use of language. What marks out poetry (to the extent that it is marked out) is not the meanings it traffics in but the kind of achievement it represents. To express a meaning is part of what the poet does, but poetic achievement is the expression of meaning *via a certain choice of words*, a choice that also determines those nonpropositional effects that Wilson, Carston, and others speak of. It is like the achievement of the archer, whose efforts we admire not merely because the arrow hits the target—that could be done up close and by hand—but because the arrow hits it as the result of a performance that exhibits characteristically archer-ish skill. To judge the poem is to judge the performance that is the poet’s construction of just those words. No change of words, and hence no paraphrase, preserves what was achieved. Ernie Lepore has argued that we can understand what is wrong with paraphrase only when we realize that “To grasp the poem requires a recognition that it’s partly about its own articulation” (2009, 196). We disagree: poems are not *about* their own ordering of words—not always or even usually.³⁰ But to judge, to appreciate, to enjoy a poem is to enjoy the achievement that this articulation represents. Paraphrase may give us the meaning, but it will not give us the achievement.

This does not give us a sharp boundary between poetry and everything else—a good thing, since poetry is not sharply divided from everything else. We may enjoy, admire and judge any utterance for the achievement its ordering of words represents. But poetry is at the top end of the spectrum; to think of something as poetry is immediately to focus on how meaning is achieved through word choice. Reading a paraphrase, however meticulously meaning-preserving, does not allow us to do that.³¹

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END NOTES

- 1 As Peter Kivy says, "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" (Kivy 1997, 105).
- 2 Bradley ([1909] 1959, especially 3–34), is the *locus classicus* here. More recently, the thesis has been championed by Lamarque (2009 and 2015). See also McGregor (2014), and Hulatt (2016).
- 3 In an earlier version we used the term "ineffability," following the usage of Moran (for whom the ineffability of poetic metaphor is "the essential inability to capture this dimension in words other than those of the specific metaphor itself" (1999, 257)). But the word certainly has stronger connotations of inexpressibility and is best avoided (thanks here to a referee).
- 4 Angela Leighton celebrates what she takes to be the epistemic gains of unparaphrasable poetry when considering George Herbert's "Prayer": "I still don't know what 'Reversed thunder' is, but the constantly renewed attention of not knowing may be a better form of knowledge than any number of finished explanations" (2009, 174).
- 5 It may be that "paraphrase" has other, narrower meanings for some and there may indeed be purposes for which a narrower conception is appropriate. Our purpose is to understand the extent to which a poem's meaning can be expressed in ways other than through the poem itself and our broad understanding suites that purpose.
- 6 On the possibility of testimony in moral matters see for example Hills (2009). Hills argues that moral testimony cannot convey *understanding*.
- 7 We are grateful to an anonymous referee here.
- 8 Note that there are two kinds of incommensurability at work here: (1) two maximal paraphrases of a given poem may be such that neither is better than or equal to the other by a given criterion of goodness; (2) two paraphrases of a given poem may be such that one is maximal by criterion A and not maximal by criterion B, with the reverse holding for the other. Neither kind of incommensurability entails the other.
- 9 Lamarque calls this second activity "interpretation" and says that "interpretation is quite different from paraphrase as normally understood" (2020, 81). But it seems to us that in its ordinary signification, "interpretation" includes the act of paraphrase. We cannot interpret what we do not understand.
- 10 This is not a new idea; Beardsley expressed it sixty years ago when he said, "even if we can seldom, in practice, paraphrase *all* of a given poem, we can nevertheless paraphrase *any* of it that we wish to paraphrase" ([1958] 1981, 436).

- 11 See [Sperber and Wilson \(1995, 182\)](#). The distinction between implicatures and explicatures is disputed. The points we make here will not depend on settling this debate.
- 12 Camp's argument against the paraphrasability of metaphors with "demonstrative" content depends on this assumption. We do not have space here to respond to Camp's subtle and complex argument for that; see especially pp.12–20 of her paper.
- 13 Might someone examine the poem very closely and argue in some coherent way that there are things said elsewhere in it that do support the idea that, for example, there is a forth leopard present? While this seems unlikely, we cannot rule out any such move a priori. We accept that any one of the examples we gave of this kind of implicit content—and any examples that anyone could give—might, in certain circumstances, be contested in ways that actually shed light on the poem's meaning. The point of the examples we gave was not to hold them up as irrefutable instances of poetic meaning but to illustrate that there always will be implicit content of some kind in a poem where the effect of making that content explicit would be to distort the poem's meaning.
- 14 Or consider the fallacy: Everything has a cause, so there is a cause of everything.
- 15 We do return to the issue of the potential or actual infinitude of meaning in poetry below: see Section III.A.
- 16 An anonymous referee raised this question.
- 17 *London Review of Books*, 21 October 2010.
- 18 We are granting quite a lot here. For example it would have to be assumed that "heavy raid" is here a case of polysemy (compare "heavy bomb") which has been conventionalised rather than a case of metaphor. For opposing views on the role of convention in polysemy see [Carston \(2021\)](#) and [Devitt \(2021\)](#).
- 19 Lamarque argues that attention to poetry requires that meanings be discriminated in a maximally fine-grained way and that "no theory of meaning seems able to accommodate this kind of fine-grainedness" (2009, 416). But Lamarque does not give an argument to show that the language of poetry and the language of paraphrase differ in their capacity for fine-grained expression. Nor do we think that one can be given, for the language of the one is the language of the other. And why can we not attend to paraphrase with the same discriminatory power that we attend to poetry?
- 20 As [Camp \(2006, 6\)](#), quoting [Hills 1997, 121](#)) notices, most metaphorical paraphrases "live on intimate terms with qualifiers like 'roughly' and 'and so on.'" "Roughly" and "and so on" seem closely allied to these two features of (metaphorical) meaning: elusiveness and inexhaustibility respectively.
- 21 See also Davidson: "when we try to say what a metaphor 'means', we soon realize there is no end to what we want to mention" (1984, 263).
- 22 See the discussion in [Camp \(2006, 8\)](#), reflecting on some remarks by Max Black.
- 23 [Wilson and Carston \(2019, 32\)](#). As [Moran \(1999\)](#) points out, there are accounts of propositions according to which images and other non-linguistic entities carry propositional content. 'Non-verbal' might be a better term than 'non-propositional.' Thanks here to a referee.
- 24 In a similar vein, Peter Lamarque notes that "the experience sought in poetry—and inevitably the focus turns to lyric poetry—is multifaceted: affective, cognitive, imaginative, and also visceral" (2020, 85). [Mitchell Green \(2017\)](#) emphasises the essential role of images for some metaphors.
- 25 Empirical work on the bodily effects of poetry are at an early stage. See for example [Wassiliwizky et al. \(2017\)](#).
- 26 Our claim here parallels one made by Camp against Black concerning the role of perspective in metaphor: "Perspectives' are indeed cognitive, in the sense of being *tools* for thinking, but they are not themselves thoughts. Thus, while Black is correct both that a literal paraphrase lacks the same insight as the original, and that this is a significant cognitive loss, this does not impugn the paraphrase's own adequacy" (2006, 9).
- 27 There is an ambiguity in the idea of a determinant of meaning. One might think that what determines the meaning of an utterance is simply the speaker's communicative intention, and that the things we are calling "determinants of meaning" are of merely evidential significance. Alternatively one may opt for a concept of "achieved meaning" which corresponds to "the most reasonable conclusion concerning the speaker's intention the hearer can draw in the circumstances." One might seek victory for one or other side in this debate, or instead regard them as two useful but non-equivalent concepts of meaning. For our purposes you may choose either of those options.
- 28 Friends of paraphrase, we suggest, should say that form and content are disunited—they are separate things—but should not say that the one has no effect on the other. As Kivy says, "There is nothing inconsistent in thinking both that there is an interrelation between the thought and diction in a poem and that a poem can be paraphrased" (2011, 369).
- 29 Indeed, in the context of a discussion of poetry we can think of sensory motor experience as a modality of imagery ("motor imagery"). Emotions are often said to have a cognitive component being partly constituted by certain thoughts. What is at issue here is the role of a non-cognitive component, hence our reference to "emotional feelings."
- 30 Here we agree with [Lamarque \(2015, 26\)](#).
- 31 We are grateful to Peter Lamarque and two anonymous referees for detailed and careful comments, to Deirdre Wilson for discussion, and also to the editors for their suggestions. Work on this paper was supported by a grant from the Leverhulme Trust for work on the project "Learning from Fiction" (RPG-2017-365).