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Poetic Opacity

How to Paint Things with Words

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I Looking for the Essence of Poetry

Analytic aesthetics, like analytic philosophy more broadly, has had an appetite for definitions. Textbooks and syllabi give disproportionate space to the question, "What is art?" It is no surprise, then, that analytic philosophers of poetry might ask, "What is poetry?" and we will follow suit. Our goal is to say something about the nature of poetry—something general enough that might capture a unifying feature of items that fall in the extension of that term. To contemporary readers, this might sound like a quaint, or perhaps even hopeless, endeavor. "Haven't we moved past the days of definitions?" To address this anxiety, we will begin with some general remarks about why it's not completely hopeless to search for a properly constrained search for the essence of poetry. We will then move on to our proposed analysis. To anticipate, we will argue that poetry has a characteristic form of opacity—a form that distinguishes it from other kinds of writing, and forges an analogy with painting.

The gripe about definitions is not merely an expression of boredom: been there, done that. There are substantive worries about definability here. These worries were most influentially instilled by Wittgenstein, who got generations of philosophers in a tither about "games"—a term, he claimed, has no set of individually necessary conditions (nor any unifying or fixed set of sufficient conditions). This did not go unnoticed in aesthetics. Within an eye-blink of the *Philosophical Investigations*, several talented authors expressed skepticism about defining art (Ziff 1953; Weitz,1956; Kennick 1958). No set of features unified art, they said, and

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offering such a list would belie the "open texture" of the category: art is about innovation, not essence. The crusade against definitions continued in semantics and psycholinguistics (Fodor et al. 1980), before it was subsequently taken up by cognitive psychologists inspired by Wittgenstein (see Smith and Medin 1981), who showed that people classify things using features that are statistically typical and salient, but not necessary; such features are called "prototypes." In a similar spirit, post-Wittgensteinians have proposed "cluster" theories of art (Gaut 2000; Dean 2003). Gaut's cluster theory is inspired by Wittgenstein's account of proper names, and Dean's is inspired by prototype theory in psychology. Contemporary critics of cluster theories sometimes note that concepts that are *understood* by means of clusters of features may nevertheless refer to categories that have unifying essences, which can be discovered by natural science. But this response to skepticism about definitions—which replaces mentally represented definitions with scientifically discoverable ones—will offer little solace to would-be definers of art. It would be highly contentious to suggest that art is a natural kind. Likewise, one might think, for poetry.

We summarize these initial concerns by presenting three claims that seem to jointly exclude anything like a defining analysis of poetry:

(1) There are no definitions in the head, except perhaps for some "nominal concepts," as technical terms, whose definitions are stipulated.

(2) There are definitions out there to be empirically discovered in the world, but only for natural kind concepts.

(3) Poetry is neither a nominal kind nor a natural kind.

It seems to follow that there is no definition of poetry in the offing.

All this might make one a bit queasy about asking, "What is poetry?" But we think that this question can be pursued without trepidation or embarrassment, much less an upset stomach. The trio of premises ignores that poetry may have a definition (or an essence—we will use the terms interchangeably) that is neither in the head nor out of the head. This is no plea for paraconsistency. Rather, we think that the idea that a definition must either be in the head or empirically discoverable *à la* natural kinds offers a false dichotomy and excludes a possibility. The trio of premises entails that there is no definition of poetry mentally represented in the mind, or waiting for science to discover it in the world. But between these two alternatives, there is a third: one can construct a definition of poetry by systematizing our classification procedures. Presumably, we use a

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variety of different features to recognize something as a poem, such as rhyme, repetition, line breaks, and metaphor. None of these features is necessary, so they can be said to comprise something like a prototype. But they may share something in common—not a natural property, like a chemical microstructure, but rather something that we humans, as the inventers of poetry, have tried to cultivate with this art form. Perhaps the features in the prototype have something like a common end. If so, then even if we have a disjunctive set of features we look for in deciding whether something is a poem, it would still turn out that all of these coalesce around a unifying property, which is implicit in our classification procedures, not explicit. This would constitute a definition of poetry, but not one that is in the head or in the world, as the dichotomy forces us to assume, but rather in the practice of making, classifying, and listening to poems. In what follows, I will try to make good on this possibility by advancing a specific proposal.

II The Mark of the Poetic

1 Three Forms of Opacity

We will approach our account in stages. The basic strategy is to try to identify a "mark of the poetic"—some feature that poetry has across a range of styles and forms. A hint about this mark, we think, comes from the fact that a lot of people detest poetry. On the face of it, that is very strange. It wouldn't make sense to hate many other aspects of language. It would be bizarre to declare a hatred for paragraphs or dependent clauses. It is also unusual to hate specific uses to which language is put: like speeches, or stories, or essays. Poetry meets with greater resistance than these things. The question is, why? One possible answer is that people resist poetry, because poetry resists them. Consider the second and third stanzas of Wallace Stevens's "Bantams in Pine-Woods"

> Damned universal cock, as if the sun
> Was blackamoor to bear your blazing tail.
>
> Fat! Fat! Fat! Fat! I am the personal.
> Your world is you. I am my world[1]

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[1] The full poem can be read at the website of the Academy of American Poets: <http://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/bantams-pine-woods>.

What could the meaning of a poem with such lines be? It has one, but it's not readily evident. As this example illustrates, poetry, in comparison to conventional prose, can be a challenge to read. The poem resists easy interpretation because the allusions in it are hard to detect without serious background knowledge. The "Pine-Woods" referred to in the title alert the reader that Stevens is addressing Emerson, by way of Emerson's essay "The Poet" (Emerson 1903), where they serve as the pastoral setting for the poet to find universal truths (D'Avanzo 1977). The poem is filled with the intricacies of sound, fat with alliterations, assonance, and consonance. These sounds can delight, but also distract the reader. Even the seasoned reader of poetry can be perplexed by this short work. Without knowing an essay of Emerson's, and some background of Stevens, the revolutionary tone of the poem is lost. Stevens is railing against the robust canonical tradition in poetry ("Fat! Fat! Fat! Fat!"), and announcing that he is to follow Whitman in creating a truly American poetry (Bloom 1980). Stevens is announcing that the true American poet will break with tradition.

Although this is an exceptional poem, it displays many of the qualities that make reading poetry so difficult for so many. Poetry can be flowery, obscure, metaphorical, rich with allusion, ambiguous in narrative voice, and constructed in metric schemes that depart away from ordinary linguistic usage. In a word, these things tend to make poems seem *opaque*. We take this as our starting place.

We think poetry is actually opaque in at least four different, but interconnected ways. By presenting these in turn, we can approach our analysis in a series of steps. The first form of opacity was just mentioned: poems are often difficult to read. They do not wear their meaning on their sleeves; they take extra effort. The second form of opacity is a property that falls under that term in the philosophy of language. A linguistic production (such as an utterance of a sentence) is said to be opaque when it is subject to substitution failures. Such substitution failures are sometimes understood epistemically: one can know or grasp a sentence stated in its original form without knowing or grasping a sentence which has been replaced with some synonymous or co-referential terms. Epistemic substitution failures become semantic (failures of substitution *salva veritate*), when an epistemically opaque sentence is placed in an opaque content, such as the that-clause of a *de dicto* propositional attitude report. This is true of poetry, we want to

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suggest, but there is also a further form of opacity, which is even more important.

Poetic productions, like sentences in general, are epistemically opaque, in that substituting synonyms can change comprehension. But the standard truth test—embedding in an attitude report—seems out of place with poetry, since it is odd to report beliefs using poetic language. Consider Romeo's claim that, "Juliet is the Sun." From this we can infer that, "Romeo believes that Juliet is the Sun." This fails substitutivity *salva veritate*: Romeo doesn't believe that Juliet is the star around which Earth orbits. The example shows the applicability of the truth test, but note how odd it is to say, "Romeo believes that Juliet is the Sun." It's not just odd because it's a metaphor. Generally, we attribute metaphors within belief reports without much hesitation (e.g. Jane believes that there was a collapse in the price of housing, that we shouldn't go down that road again, that what comes around goes around, etc.). But consider the oddity of saying, "Juliet believes that that which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet." We don't conventionally ascribe beliefs in iambs. More to the point, the standard truth test distracts away from a third form of opacity that may be crucial for understanding the nature of poetry. Suppose we substitute "the Sun" in Romeo's belief report with a phrase that he would understand, "the brightest celestial body as seen from Earth." Here we might preserve comprehension and truth, but something else is lost. We lose the forceful simplicity of his original words, and the forthright feelings they express in the context in which they are embedded. We also lose the meter and the sound of the poem (cf. Frost (1925) who says, in poetry, "The tone-of voice element is the unbroken flow on which [other senses] are carried along like sticks and leaves and flowers"). Putting aside the truth test, which uses attitude reports, there is a further sense in which verbal substitution would alter a poetic work. Changing a line in a poem is a bit like changing a line in a painting: it alters artistic content, not just semantic content, if semantic content is affected at all.[2] Call this "aesthetic opacity."

Aesthetic opacity goes beyond the kind of identity change that would take place if one substituted a synonym in ordinary speech. There one

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[2] Note what would happen if one substitutes "overweight" (or "mildly obese", or "portly" or some such) for "fat" in the Stevens poem. Such a switch would do irreparable harm to the poem's artistic content.

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would end up with a different sentence type, but any aesthetic altera-
tion that ensued would be accidental. Ordinary sentences do not vie
for aesthetic assessment. With aesthetic objects, such as sentences in
a poem, an alteration in form can impact aesthetic worth. Since aes-
thetic objects do vie for aesthetic assessment, such impact amounts to
a change in both the identity of the work (which is also true of ordinary
sentences), and what might be called its aesthetic identity, which are
the features of the work that are used in making aesthetic assessments.
Ordinary sentences may have aesthetic properties, but they lack aes-
thetic identity at least in a teleological sense: they do not have the ordi-
nary function of being aesthetically evaluated. Thus, a paraphrase of
an ordinary sentence may stand in for the original without violating
any aesthetic rule on preservation of form. One might say that para-
phrase does not diminish the value of the original. But paraphrasing
a poem alters its original value. This is also why poetic translation is,
in some sense, impossible. We tolerate translations because they are
necessary for comprehension across monolingual populations, but we
recognize that translations inevitably lose something that was essential
to the aesthetic role played by the original. We don't regard translations
as different works from the originals, but perhaps we should think of
them as such, or as representations of originals, rather than as tokens of
the same aesthetic type. Translations of ordinary sentences can retain
aesthetic type identity for the trivial reason that ordinary sentences are
not typed aesthetically. Except for extreme cases where aesthetic fea-
tures become unignorably salient, we tend to ignore this dimension of
ordinary sentence. Ignoring the aesthetic features of a poem, in con-
trast, would be, to put it lightly, an error.

The three forms of opacity that we have introduced so far are all true
of poetry, but none qualify as a mark of the poetic, since all are also true
of other kinds of discourse. Being challenging to read (the first kind of
opacity) is true of technical prose, such as philosophy; semantic opacity
is true of all sentences in *de dicto* attitude contexts; and aesthetic opacity
is true of any writing that has aesthetic pretensions—a same-language
paraphrase of a novel would qualify as a different work. To find the mark
of the poetic, we must move beyond the constructs thus far introduced
but, we now want to suggest, there is a construct in the vicinity that might
deliver what we need.

2 *Poetic Opacity*

The three forms of opacity thus far adduced normally arise independently. The obscurity of technical writing derives from the use of jargon and the need for background knowledge. The semantic opacity of ordinary sentences derives from the existence of a gap between reference and cognitive significance. When ascribing attitudes *de dicto*, we aim to comment not just on what fact a person has before her mind, but her way of thinking about that fact, which can be intimated, at least in some cases, by the choice of words. Aesthetic opacity stems from our conventions for individuating artworks. As Goodman (1968) observes, every form of art comes with implicit norms for tolerable variation. With artworks that allow for multiples (such as musical performances or prints), there are conditions on what can be a token of the same type. One can play Bach's *Mass in B Minor* on modern instruments, but one can't change the melodies; a group of any number of musicians with any type of instruments can play Terry Riley's *In C*, replaying each musical phrase any number of times, but it wouldn't count as a rendition of *In C* if one didn't play the phrases on the score (or didn't play it in the key of C for that matter); one can reprint a Goya etching on modern paper, but one can't increase the size and regard it as a token of the same print, as opposed to a mere reproduction. With literature fonts and even spellings can be tinkered with, but wordings cannot be. To account for these norms, one would have to delve into the histories of these different art forms.

Though normally orthogonal, these forms of opacity may be more closely related in poetry than they are in other forms of writing. To begin with, consider why poetry is opaque in the sense of being obscure or difficult. An obvious answer is that poets typically choose words (and word orderings) very carefully. In poetry words are objects of attention in their own right, independent of what they express. To achieve this end, poets often avoid using words or phrases that are so familiar as to be habitual. For ordinary forms of address, listeners ignore the words (and semantically unimportant changes in word orderings) and move straight away, as it were, to what those words express. Poetic norms greatly differ from other communicative practices. Compare: did we just write that the norms of poetry greatly differ from other communicative practices or that the norms of poetry differ greatly from other communicative

practices or that poetic norms greatly differ from other communicative practices? The difference in word ordering matters little here as long as the content was properly conveyed; since each construction conveyed the same idea, substituting one in for the other doesn't matter one whit. The situation is drastically different in poetry. Changing word order can erase the emotional impact of a line (to say nothing of its aesthetic quality, meter, and rhyme scheme). The famed standalone couplet from Eliot's "The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock" ("In the room women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo") would be mortally wounded if we changed it to a synonymous construction: "The women come and go in the room / Talking of Michelangelo."

Words, in non-poetic contexts, are like windows that aim for transparency, delivering the world without interference. In communicative contexts clarity is king. Poetic words are usually intentionally chosen to resist this kind of transparency—they are supposed to be noticed en route to the world (assuming the world is to come up at all). Thus, the difficulty or obscurity of poetry typically derives from this intentional effort to introduce a verbal filter between mind and world.

Next consider semantic opacity. Ordinary sentences are semantically opaque in that they resist substitution *salva veritate* in intentional contexts. It is sometimes pointed out that opacity of this kind is an unfortunate feature of language or human psychology. One might expect that an ideal language would have no co-referential terms, so that so-called Frege cases (never mind Mates cases) would not arise. Kripke (1979) argues that Frege cases can arise even for tokens of the same word type, suggesting that the problem is not with language, but arises because of a regrettable gap between linguistic meaning and a speaker's understanding. Fodor (1994) goes so far as to say that people who fail to realize that co-referring terms co-refer are irrational, and should be excluded from ordinary psychology. On these accounts, semantic opacity is a bad feature, which we are stuck with but would be better off without. For the poet, almost the opposite is true. The fact that there are different ways to express the same thing is crucial for poetry.[3] For the poet, the precise word choice, even

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[3] This idealization is not meant to imply that the goal of poetry is to express the same exact semantic content with different modes of presentation. Rather, the idea is that poets play with the ability of expressing quite similar ideas through vastly different constructions.

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among (putative) synonyms, matters a great deal. The task of the poet is not to use words that would, under ideal circumstance, collapse the gulf between mode of presentation and reference. It would be absurd to say that an ideal *poetic* language would have no co-referring terms. The mode of presentation is tremendously important. The medium may not always be the message, but it's certainly not orthogonal to the poet's artistic endeavor. Thus, semantic opacity in poetry is linked to the same ambition that underlies the first form of opacity. Poets are interested in ways of expressing things, not just in what gets expressed.

Turn finally to aesthetic opacity. This, we said, stems from the conventions associated with different art forms. In the case of poetry, we can ask, why do the words typically matter even though the font (almost always[4]) does not? The answer is that poets conventionally select words and word placement (such as line breaks) with utmost care. It is a central aspect of their creative process. Words are not arbitrary, or even just instrumental, in a typical poem. They are a locus of aesthetic choice—part of what a poet might revise and revise again while keeping other aspects fixed. Indeed, it might be said that there are many poems with more or less the same content, but presumably none with the same word forms.[5] Words are central to the art of poetic writing. Why? It's because of the nature of the poet's task. Poets are not just presenting facts, nor even fictions. They present contents in a specific way, and the way of presenting is supposed to be a dimension on which their work is evaluated. The words are not just ladders to be kicked away once readers have arrived at understanding.[6] The words are supposed to be primary objects of the reader's attention.

These three forms of opacity, then, can be said to be integral to the aims of poetry, and integral for roughly the same reason. Each is integral because poetry is characteristically a form of writing in which words are intended to be noticed as objects unto themselves—they are

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[4] We say "almost always" because some concrete poets make font choice part of their art, and font choice affects the aesthetic experience of reading any poem. This is one reason why it can be less satisfying to read poems in the drab typefaces used by some digital reading devices.

[5] Furthermore, some poems may just repeat the same content in each verse, with the difference in word forms supplying the difference in aesthetic content from verse to verse (see e.g. Stevens's "13 Ways of Looking at a Blackbird").

[6] Sometimes the goal is less doxastic than "understanding" implies; a certain emotional reaction is often the desired end of the words' effects.

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no longer just mere vessels for delivering content but are an integral constituent in their own right. Words are a veil through which content is delivered—a veil that is (or is at least intended to be) salient to the reader. Notice that this is another form of opacity. We will call it poetic opacity. To a first approximation, we will say that text is poetically opaque if the author intentionally constructs it in such a way that readers' attention is drawn to the words used and not just to what those words represent.

Poetic opacity is one of the most strikingly obvious features of poetry. To see this, we need only consider some of the most standard poetic devices. Here are a few instructive lines from Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market":

> She dropped a tear more rare than pearl,
> Then sucked their fruit globes fair or red:
> Sweeter than honey from the rock,
> Stronger than man-rejoicing wine,
> Clearer than water flowed that juice;
> She never tasted such before,
> How should it cloy with length of use?
> She sucked and sucked and sucked the more
> Fruits which that unknown orchard bore,
> She sucked until her lips were sore;

Here Rossetti uses rhyme and repetition to create a sense of rhythm. She also uses meter (iambic tetrameter), but mixes it up with three trochees for emphasis. These devices ensure that we pay attention to form, and not just content, though the two also interact: the poem sounds like a nursery rhyme but concerns adult themes about sexuality, which creates a sense of dissonance.

In the twentieth century, meter went out of vogue, but formal experimentation increased. Consider this familiar passage from e. e. cummings:

> —the best gesture of my brain is less than
> your eyelids' flutter which says
>
> we are for each other: then
> laugh, leaning back in my arms
> for life's not a paragraph

The mere presence of line breaks introduces poetic opacity, but cummings goes much farther. Every line is enjambed,[7] including an ambiguous break (the word "then" first looks like it modifies "we are for each other" but is actually a temporal adverb modifying "laugh"), and there is a confounding stanza break after "says." There is also internal rhyme ("laugh" and "paragraph"), alliteration ("laugh, leaning"), consonance ("best" and "just"; "flutter" and "each other"), word-play ("than" and "then"), and metaphor (the final line). Other twentieth-century poets create lines that are hard to parse syntactically. Here's one from John Berryman, "Dream Song 14": "Life, friends, is boring." Correlatively, Surrealists and Dadaists create poems that are semantically anomalous. Tzara's *Chanson Dada* instructs readers thus, "drink some bird's milk / wash your sweets." Throughout the centuries, poets have also made use of unusual words or unexpected imagery; here's a couplet from Amy Lowell's "The Taxi": "I call out for you against the jutted stars / And shout into the ridges of the wind." On the face of it, these poetic devices have little in common. One might wonder why they are all called "poetic." Our answer is that they are all instruments of poetic opacity. They all draw attention to the text.

Poetic opacity also makes sense of the fact that poetry can take on some startlingly unusual forms. Consider concrete poems. Here is one of Apollinaire's calligrammes, taken from his poem "2e Canonnier Conducteur":

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J' E N T E N D S  C H A
L                          N
E                          TER 'l'oiseau
B                          E
E L O I S E A U  R A P A C
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The poem translates: "I hear the bird singing / the beautiful bird of prey." The phrasing is colloquial (notwithstanding the chilling irony), but the physical form of the poem forces readers to focus on the words in new ways. The two phrases must be read in different directions (left to right, and then top to bottom, and right again), and then they converge at their

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[7] Here's a creative (if cloying) use of hyphenated enjambment from Willard Espy's, "The unrhymable word: orange": "The four eng- / Ineers / wore orange / brassiers."

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tail ends. The convergence forces the words for singing and for prey to converge on common letters, and the overall shape of the poem is designed to resemble a cannon shell. This invites readers to read "bird" as a euphemism for a cannon shot, flying overhead. Concrete poems were popular among modernists (such as Morgenstern and Marinetti) and post-modernists (such as Susan Howe), but they actually instantiate a feature quite universal in poetry: tactics for making words and positioning impossible to ignore. One might ask, why are there concrete poems and not concrete novels? Answer: manipulating the physical arrangements of words on a page makes them poetically opaque. We can't ignore words that have been unusually configured.

Also consider nonsense poems. Nonsense words lend themselves to poetry precisely because they block the move to content, and draw attention to themselves. Here is an excerpt from Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven's "Klink—Hratzvenga (Deathwail)":

> Arr—karr—
> Arrkarr—barr
> Karrarr—barr—
> Arr—
> Arrkarr—
> Mardar
> Mar—dóórde—dar—

Like an abstract painting, form trumps content here, though the term "Deathwail" in the title tips us off that this is a chant of mourning, penned after the author's husband committed suicide. The use of meaningless words, dashes, consonance, and line breaks forces us to ineluctably and ostentatiously attend to the form of this poem, even if we also care about the content which it expresses.

Notice that though concrete poems and nonsense poems are recent inventions, we easily recognize them as poems. Poetic opacity can help explain this, and it allows us to imagine new poetic devices, such as poems written using words that all have the same number of letters. Poetic opacity can also explain why we find poetry in things that are also named using different terms. Limericks, some prayers, and song lyrics all qualify and they are all poetically opaque. Rhyme, rigidly fixed forms, and musical setting make the words in each of these categories poetically opaque.

Poetic opacity may even shed some light on content-based poetic devices, such as metaphor and metonymy. Though strictly speaking, these do not depend on form, the fact that poets depart from literal meanings forces readers to regard familiar words in new ways, and this may draw attention to the words themselves. We have already seen metaphors from Shakespeare and Apollinaire, and examples are pervasive. Here's another from Dylan Thomas: "Your mouth, my love, the thistle in the kiss?" This conveys the dark side of love by forcing readers to reconstrue kissing in a negative light. This reconstrual is based on content, but Thomas also makes sure to highlight form: he uses iambic pentameter, rhymes "kiss" with "*this*tle," and ends on a question mark, calling his key term into focus through punctuation and lifting intonation. The result is a kind of doubling of experience in which the conventional meaning of kiss comes through, but the context calls that meaning into question and thus forces readers to grapple with the word itself.

These examples suggest that many of the staggeringly varied techniques used in poetry may have a common consequence. They force readers to pay more attention than they ordinarily would to words and word arrangements. Many uses of language aspire for transparency. Newspaper articles, email messages, clothing catalogues, instruction manuals, and even literary novels, are usually in the business of transmitting information clearly, so they avoid techniques that create a verbal barrier between reader and meaning. Poems do the opposite. They deliver meanings and often use poetic devices to do so, but those devices also make form more salient and important than it is elsewhere, and thus impose a form of attention that operates at two levels: form and content. This is what it means to be poetically opaque.

3   Twofold Reading

The concept of poetic opacity relates to the idea of twofoldness, which Wollheim (1980) develops in his theory of painting. For Wollheim representational paintings afford a kind of double seeing: viewers see both what they represent and how they represent. Viewers see paint and painted. It is central to most traditions of painting that there be a distinctive style. In the modern period artists took this in highly individualistic directions, developing styles unique to each creator. When we view paintings, we pay special attention to how paintings look, and we praise

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painters not just for what they paint, but for how they paint—the latter often being more important.

Poetic opacity is not (or need not be) visual, so it is not exactly the same as twofoldness, but it is probably a kindred concept. Both poets and painters want us to notice their choice of forms, even when content is also important. Indeed, this is a common theme in the arts. Dance, for instance, or vocal music, can have both content and form, but form is a primary focus of attention. Thus, poetic opacity may be related to what makes poetry like other forms of art, especially like painting, where form and content have historically both been vitally important (in dance and music, content has more frequently been absent). We can think of the poet as someone who paints with words. She presents contents using words that have characteristics, including style, that make them objects of our attention.

Notice that other forms of prose do not characteristically have poetic opacity. Ordinary speech and even much story telling have far more to do with content than form. People may notice form, but the primary intention is typically to deliver content—to inject it, one might say, into the mind. We would not deny that this is sometimes done in a colorful way in order to make the ideas stick (note the metaphor, "inject"), and we often praise story-tellers for great writing. We think great writing and colorful turns of phrase can be distinguished from poetic opacity, however. Colorful wording is often used to accent non-poetic discourse, but it is neither integral to nor pervasive in non-poetic discourse. Indeed, one might say, it adds poetic accent, suggesting that non-poetic writing can have poetic elements, even though it is not poetic throughout. As for "great writing" outside the poetic context, we might say it is great when we pay attention to it, but it normally allows one to read and understand it without immediately noticing its eminence, or at least without doing so all of the time. Great writing is there to be seen when we step back and look at word forms. Or, in some cases, it does not depend on word forms, but instead on inventive narrative techniques, engaging characteriza-tion, carefully constructed imagery, and so on. With poetry, words and phrases almost function as a barrier to content—pervasive and impossi-ble to ignore. One might even say that poetic words distract—it is harder to immediately grasp the basic word meanings because of the cognitive load brought on from the poetic presentation. But whereas poetic words distract, prose words deliver. Of course, some bad writing also distracts,

but unintentionally. Poets distract us intentionally with their words. We will consider some apparent counter-examples below, but for now we want to suggest that the intentional introduction of pervasive poetic opacity is characteristic of poetry, and not other forms of writing.

If poetic opacity distinguishes poems from other forms of writing, it may be a mark of the poetic. The similarity to twofoldness, however, raises the worry that poetic opacity doesn't adequately distinguish poetry from painting, or other arts. But this worry can be quickly dismissed, since poetic opacity derives from words, and twofoldness derives from styles of painting. There may also be a difference in the temporal qualities of the two forms of twofold phenomenology. In his early formulations of twofoldness, Wollheim (1980) supposed that form and content alternate, like the two aspects of an ambiguous figure, when we look at painting. He later revised this proposal to claim that the two aspects, form and content, are experienced simultaneously (Wollheim 1990). Neither seems exactly right when it comes to the two aspects of poetic reading. When poems are difficult to interpret, form may present itself prior to content, and independent of it. This counts against simultaneity. Once meaning is ascertained, we do not alternate back and forth, because it is hard to experience the meaning without keeping the words in view. At that point, there may indeed be a simultaneous experience of form and content, but, as already noted, that need not occur right away. In the case of noise poems or poems that are incomprehensible, it may never occur. But there is, nevertheless, a deep similarity between Wollheim's concept of two-foldness and the duality entailed by poetic opacity, a similarity that goes beyond the fact that both involve form and content. Wollheim's concept of twofoldness is introduced in a discussion of "seeing-in," which refers to the phenomenonology of seeing the meaning of a representational painting. Seeing-in contrasts with ordinary seeing, in that the later is, in some sense, transparent; it doesn't require seeing anything other than the object. For Wollheim, some forms of hyper-realistic art, such as *trompe l'œil*, are also transparent in this way. But art that is not generates illusions of reality that tend to evoke twofoldness. In such cases, we see the work itself, and we see something "in" the work. Poetic opacity invites a similar analysis. We see meaning in poems. This is not literally seeing-in, because it is not visual, but, as with painting, it is a kind of indirect disclosure. Where ordinary seeing gives us objects transparently, reading ordinary prose does the same with respect to meaning. Poetic opacity, when poems

are meaningful, involves a process of finding meaning in the work. Thus we think reading poems may be a twofold process in a way that relates to the kind of twofoldness that Wollheim introduced.

The fact that both poetry and painting evoke experiences that can be described as twofold may help to explain why they are often co-classified as belonging to the system of we know as the arts. We don't mean to deny that the system of the arts is a historical construct. Kristeller (1951, 1952) and Shiner (2001) point out that painting is not even included as an art in early taxonomies. For the ancients, poetry was king and plastic arts were more associated with craft. But one might wonder why painting came to be included among the arts, and one partial answer may involve this dimension of similarity with poetry. We have described poems as word paintings, but equally painting might have come to be seen as visual poems—a possibility we won't pursue here.

In summary, we think that poetic opacity may be a mark of the poetic. Perhaps there are other marks, but poetic opacity may even prove to be *the* mark of poetry. It is quite extraordinary to discover that this one construct can subsume so many dramatically different devices, styles, and forms. It explains why blank verse sonnets hang together with nursery rhymes and punk rock lyrics, and why metaphysical conceits belong in the same category as acrostics. There is a dizzying and perhaps open-ended range of ways we can achieve poetic opacity, and that range seems to coincide remarkably well with the range of things we consider to be poems or poetic. Poetic opacity is a unifying feature of a highly diverse art form.

III Objections and Replies

1 Against the Necessity of Poetic Opacity

A skeptical reader might object that poetic opacity is not a necessary condition for something to be classified as poetry. For example, the Imagists made it part of their credo to not include any "unnecessary" words and traditional meters (Pound 1958). One might think that the crux of Imagism is to present an image as clearly as possible, with no unnecessary words to obscure the readers' attention from the objects. On this reading the words themselves are otiose, and are only there to convey the image as clearly as possible to the reader.

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We are unmoved by such an objection. No doubt, many Imagists prided themselves on using an economy of words. However, the words used were important in and of themselves, and not just for supplying the reader with the referent. Picking particular poems out and using them as one-off examples will make for a difficult dialectic, but the discussion runs the risks of an impotent abstractness without examining some poems. Thus, we will hesitatingly discuss some very canonical poems in the hope that they serve as instructive exemplars of their genre.

Take, for example, perhaps the most famous Imagist poem, Ezra Pound's "In a Station of the Metro":

> The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
> Petals on a wet, black bough.

The use of "apparition" is important to the poem and would-be synonyms would not suffice. If all that Pound was trying to convey was a certain scene, any near-synonym should do. However, "apparition" is irreplaceable in the text. Much ink has been spilled on the use of "apparition"; indeed one critic has called it "the single word which lifts the couplet from bald statement to poetry" (Bevilaqua 1971). The word creates a sound to be doubled in the first syllable of the second line. Its connotations create a feeling of the otherworldliness, and this feeling is then used as a set-up for the clash delivered in the second line. Moreover, as Bevilaqua notes, "apparition" can be interpreted as (and perhaps was intended as) a false cognate. In French "apparition" sometimes conveys a meaning of how something appears upon its first being seen. (The reading is enhanced by the fact that Pound wrote the poem while in France and its subject is a French subway; moreover, the immediacy of the perception would be in line with the influence haikus and, in particular, their use of clashing images had on Pound).

Imagist poems may at first appear to be a challenge for the poetic opacity view, but we think it in fact helps to display our point. The more stripped down the words are, the more stark they become; the poet's choice of words becomes that much more severe when a single wrong word would stick out. An economy of usage demands that the author choose her words carefully, which in turn makes the reader that much more aware of the words. Likewise, the form of a poem is heightened as the poem's length decreases. This can be observed in William Carlos Williams's famous Imagist poem "The

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Red Wheelbarrow."[8] The first line, "so much depends / upon", calls the readers' attention to the potential gravity of the poem, and acts as a contrast to the seemingly mundane subject of the poem. The use of "glazed" in the third stanza, "glazed with rain / water", brings up associations with the other art forms, particularly painting. This is not accidental: Williams is presenting the poem almost as an example of twofoldness: Williams wants to reader to form the image of the wheelbarrow, but not at the expense of the form of words. The structure of the poem acts as part of its meaning, presenting the wheelbarrow in its component parts. The use of enjambment heightens the readers' attention to the component parts of the objects to be formed in mental imagery. One encounters "wheel" before being able to complete "wheelbarrow"; likewise, one reads "rain" before encountering "water." Note how there are no hyphens in the line, so that the reader cannot suspect that the image of the object is not yet completed. This use of enjambment turns the readers' attention to the particularities of the object, but it also forces the reader to encounter the words as a surprise in themselves.

The reader may protest that Imagist poems are too stripped down to use for the objector's purpose. If so, prose poems may be a better place to look for counterexamples to opacity as a necessary condition. After all, many prose poems are there to convey a specific message. One of the most famous prose poems, Carolyn Forche's "The Colonel," is particularly politicized, letting the reader catch a glimpse of the atrocities that were occurring in late 1970s El Salvador. The poem isn't written in any canonical poetic style; rather, it is just presented as a journalistic paragraph. In fact, that was the intent of the poet: Forche claims that she wrote it as a diarist memoir—it was a reminder of the encounter that she could use for journalistic purposes (Haba 1995). Yet for all that it still strikes readers as poetry. We submit that this is the case because the work contains poetic opacity. For example, the poem is rife with the use of bodily imagery, which heightens the readers' attention to sensation. The poem begins by offhandedly mentioning the relative mundanities of everyday gustatory experience: coffee, sugar, dinner, mangoes, salt, and bread. This sets the reader up for the shock of equating the truly startling

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[8] The full poem can be read at the website of the Academy of American Poets: <http://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/red-wheelbarrow>.

desiccated ears with ordinary dried peach halves. Forche needn't (and probably didn't consciously) use perceptual verbs ("What you heard is true") and tropes ("My friend said to me with his eyes") but the word choices aid the readers' identification of the piece as a poem. Moreover, the individual sentences of the poem tend to be anapestic. Were this merely a journalistic piece, then switching out (e.g.) the perceptual verbs for synonyms wouldn't change the meaning nor the work's identity—an editor could do so without even informing the author and yet it would still be the author's work. However, any such change to "The Colonel" and the identity of the piece would be destroyed. It's part of its essence that it uses perceptual idioms to heighten the sensual feel and changing the diction would change the poem (and probably destroy the anapests).

2 *Against the Sufficiency of Poetic Opacity*

Other readers may object that poetic opacity does not suffice for a text to be categorized as a poem. Great prose and oration can also appear to be so specifically worded that attention is drawn to the form as much as the content. If poetic opacity is the mark of the poetic, then how can the identity of these other non-poetic texts also crucially depend on word choice? To use a concrete example, let's return to Emerson's essay "The Poet".

The poet's habit of living should be set on a key so low that the common influences should delight him. His cheerfulness should be the gift of the sunlight; the air should suffice for his inspiration, and he should be tipsy with water. That spirit which suffices quiet hearts, which seems to come forth to such from every dry knoll of sere grass, from every pine stump and half-imbedded stone on which the dull March sun shines, comes forth to the poor and hungry. . . . If thou fill thy brain with Boston and New York, with fashion and covetousness . . . with wine and French coffee, thou shalt find no radiant wisdom in the lonely waste of the pine woods. (1903)

This essay is identifiable as an essay though it is rife with poetic imagery. It may strike one as more oratorical than essay-like. Similarly, great novels can have long passages that read poetically. However, as we have mentioned, such colorful wording is used as accent in a larger work. Great novels are often rife with poetic passages, but they are also rife with the prosaic. We submit that in the places where word choice is of the utmost importance, in places where the novelists are drawing attention to the specific words themselves, the reader will interpret the text as having poetic elements. Were a novel, or say a speech, to only consist of such

elements, the work would cease to be one that fit neatly in any genre—it would strike the reader as being e.g. both a speech and a poem.[9]

It is important to see what we are and are not claiming. Non-poetic writing may indeed contain poetic elements by employing poetic opacity. Our claim is that, if the work itself is infused poetic opacity throughout, then it will strike the reader as poetry and in fact be poetry. For comparison, imagine someone writing a conventional novel without noteworthy writing and declaring that it was a poem. This would surely meet with resistance. On the other hand it would clue readers into how the work should be read. To read a novel as if it were poetry would involve paying special attention to words, treating them as if they were a decorative barrier interposed between mind and meaning. This would be hard to do with an ordinary novel, of course. Our point is that the mere mandate to view something with poetic regard involves a shift in reading style—a shift to the surface, as it were. In poems, as opposed to conventional novels, the work itself usually contains elements that force this kind of reading upon the reader.

The opponent of our proposal may also object to sufficiency by focusing on less artistic endeavors, such as logos and taglines. It is difficult to deny that the typography used in consumer product logos is designed to get our attention. Likewise for taglines. They are supposed to catchy and attention-grabbing, and advertisers take special care to pick just the right words.

Nevertheless, we persist in thinking that poetic opacity separates poetry from these other modes. Doubtlessly, word choice and logo design is of great import to marketers. These items do vie for our attention. But it is unlikely that advertisers want taglines and logos to be the primary objects of focus, much less barriers between consumers and what that the items represent. The words in taglines are often evocative, but they are rarely distracting. Rather they serve to instill positive beliefs as attitudes

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[9]   No doubt there may be such works that are generally classified as novels, but appear to have as much poetic opacity as, say, narrative poems. Perhaps some of the works of Michael Ondaatje (e.g. *Coming through Slaughter*), Marilyn Robinson (e.g. *Housekeeping*), Don Delillo (e.g. *Ratner's Star*), or Paul Harding (e.g. *Tinkers*) seem to fall in this class. We haven't the space to examine any of these authors' individual works in detail, but suffice to say that we have two options with these putative problem cases: either we need to show how the opacity inherent in these works is secondary to the works (either in purpose or in fact) or we need to argue that these works shouldn't be so neatly categorized as novels *tout court*.

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about products. Logos are often eye-catching, but there is a difference between noticing a graphic design and allocating attention to a word. Poets impress us by their choice of words; designers impress by visual appeal.

One might still worry that our characterization of poetic opacity is too inclusive: there are many devices that draw attention to words that are not considered poetic. Consider quotations, italics, puns, or dictionary definitions, to name a few. Each of these uses of language makes words into objects of focus in some way. Given our informal characterization of poetic opacity, it might seem to follow that each of these is poetically opaque, and, thus, each qualifies as a kind of poem.

We think this is a serious objection at it suggests that much work is still needed to refine the concept of poetic opacity so it can be distinguished from other uses of language that draw attention to words. Fortunately, we think there are four differences between poetic opacity and what is found in these other phenomena. First, there are differences in what can be called primary aims or primary functional roles. The primary role of quotation is, typically, to inform readers exactly what someone said. The primary role of italics is to emphasize a single word or phrase within a larger linguistic context. The primary role of a pun is to amuse by exploiting the fact that the same word form can have different meanings. The primary role of a dictionary definition is to convey the normal usages (and sometimes even meanings) of a word. All these things draw attention to words, but in very different ways and toward different ends. Crucially, none of them has opacity as their ultimate goal. They draw attention to words, but they do so as a means to some other end. Italics make words salient, but their ultimate goal is to emphasize a concept. A good definition informs readers how to understand a word, so it will not be as opaque in the future. A quotation gets at what was said, but normally what interests readers is the meaning conveyed or proposition expressed, not the exact words. Notice that quotations are rarely seen as untranslatable, while poems are, and when quotations are difficult to translate that is because some words lack cross-linguistic synonyms, not because the actual form of the words is so important. Puns resist translation for similar reasons, but they too are not intended to introduce a formal veil blocking smooth passage to content. Poems, by contrast, aim at this kind of opacity. Those who engage in writing poems explicitly or implicitly engage in a practice that involves assembling words that will

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interpose themselves. Poetic opacity is not just a matter of drawing attention words, but doing so as a primary end.

This brings us to another difference, which can be expressed in terms of the phenomenology of twofoldness. We've granted that the other phenomena under consideration engender experiences that have two aspects: form and content. But the poetic variant of twofoldness is not simply a matter of experiencing two things at once. As with painting, it is a kind of seeing-in. We keep the words in view and try to find meaning in them, if there is meaning to be found. Dictionary definitions involve a quest for meaning, of course, but nothing like seeing-in. We don't discover meaning *in* the defined word, but rather learn the meaning from the definition and then assign it to the defined word. There can be a quest for meaning in reading quotations, especially if they are obscure, but here interpretation is not a twofold experience. We try to restate the content of an obscure quote, and once we have found one the original quote is dispensable; it serves only as evidence that this content came from a certain source. With puns and italics, there is nothing like seeing-in.

Third, in these other cases, the words that become salient are situated in contexts that are otherwise comparatively transparent. In a dictionary definition there is a single word whose form is salient, but the words in the definition are not, if the definition is understood. In a pun, again, there is normally one salient word, and the rest is not. Italics emphasize a word or phrase, but the surrounding sentence is transparent. Quotes can make whole sentences salient, but they are embedded in texts whose non-quoted sentences are intended to be transparent by comparison.

Fourth, poems are aesthetic objects. They are the kind of things about which aesthetic assessment is appropriate. Moreover, the language chosen by a poet is generally one of the central loci of evaluation, often the main locus. So, poetic writing is writing that brings words into attention in a way that we characteristically evaluate aesthetically. Consequently, the phenomenology of verbal salience differs from the other phenomena under consideration. Our experience of the words in a poem intermingles with aesthetic engagement. This may include the application of aesthetic norms, and feelings of appreciation. This suggests that poetic opacity is best understood as something more than mere salience. It might be better described as aesthetic salience. Salience of forms for aesthetic scrutiny. Aesthetic opacity makes words and their arrangements

candidates for aesthetic assessment as a matter of course, unlike ordinary definitions, italics, quotations, and puns.

This last point about aesthetics brings us to a final sufficiency objection. If aesthetic capacity is a matter of bringing words into a position of salience that invites aesthetic evaluation, what are we to say about words that appear in paintings? Juan Gris, for example, has several cubist still life paintings that include a newspaper masthead, with the words "Le Journal." In pop art, Andy Warhol painted consumer packages with words on them, and Roy Lichtenstein painted comic-book portraits replete with word balloons containing dialogue. Conceptualists, such as Lawrence Wiener and Joseph Kosuth, painted words and phrases as a central part of their practice, in an effort to abandon the standard subject matter of painting and move towards an art based on ideas. The words in these paintings seem to satisfy our characterization of poetic opacity. They draw attention to words in a way that invites aesthetic assessment.

In response, we will simply point out a familiar fact about paintings that contain linguistic elements. In most cases, these paintings are best described as depicting words, rather than containing works. Cubist newspapers and pop icons are representations of real-world objects that happen to have words printed on them (newspapers, packages, comic-books). Thus, the opacity here is just the ordinary kind of twofoldness associated with painting. We are aware of a form (the painting of a word) and what that form represents (a word out there in the world). With conceptual art, things are a little different. Conceptualists might be said to use words in their work, rather than depicting words. To that extent, however, they do not want these words to be opaque in any sense. Conceptual art often opposes formalism, and intentionally involves the production of works that lack formal aesthetic properties. In this case, it is not the form of the words that matters, but the ideas that they express.

This brings us to our conclusion. We have been arguing that a mark of the poetic, perhaps the mark, is poetic opacity. In poems there are two foci for attention: what is represented and how it is represented. The form of a poem is salient and central to its aesthetic value, and the experience of content characteristically involves seeing (or more accurately interpreting) something in that form while keeping the form in view. In these respects, poetry is much like painting. Poems paint with words. But we also drew some contrasts with painting. Poetic opacity may be unique to poetry. It distinguishes poetry from other uses of

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language and other arts. Our goal here has been programmatic and the concept of poetic opacity would, no doubt, benefit from further exploration and refinement. We are content to conclude that poetic opacity deserves its place in a discussion of poetry's essential features. It offers an explanation of why so many different techniques and devices are all recognized as belong to a single class. All these devices introduce a duality into our experience of language, a duality that forestalls the habitual leap from word to world, keeping both in view.

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