

The Poetic Imagination
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In this talk, we would like to make some remarks on the poetic imagination – by which we mean, the specific kind of interpretive engagement that poetry demands from its audience. To a first approximation, a poem invites us to interrogate the diverse and particular relationships of form and meaning that it manifests, and to allow our efforts to prompt new or unexpected insights. In §1, we draw on discussions from a variety of critics to describe in more detail the interpretive engagement we have in mind.

In exploring this interpretive engagement, our goal is to clarify the status of poetry in a broader account of speakers' knowledge of language and their linguistic practices. This is the topic of §2. In particular, by articulating a clearer account of the poetic imagination, we can better defend two claims that we have made in our recent work (Lepore 2009, Lepore and Stone 2010). First, poetry is like quotation in that both poems and quotations privilege and problematize linguistic form in relationship to meaning. This is the argument of Lepore (2009). Second, when we understand an utterance as “poetic” in a special way, we may draw distinctive insights from our interpretive efforts, but these special insights should not be understood as the contents of any level of linguistic meaning—not even a “pragmatic” level of meaning concerned with propositions that go beyond conventional meaning but the speaker obviously intends to communicate anyway. We're fond of Martin Amis's statement to this effect in *London Fields*: “... it seems to me to go against common sense to ask what the poet is ‘trying to say’. The poem isn't a code for something easily understood. The *poem* is what he is trying to say.” Lepore and Stone (2010) develop an analogous characterization of the

insights prompted by figurative language, including metaphoric and ironic utterances. Poetry is full of figurative language, of course, but there is also plenty of poetry that eschews it, including many of the poems we consider in this talk. All are poems: indeed, we suggest, all reward the poetic imagination.

The significance of our proposal—as the quote from Amis foreshadows—is to help reconcile what critics say about poetry with what philosophers and cognitive scientists say about language. Most importantly, our proposal makes clear how poets could use conventional forms with public, rule-governed meanings, but, by inviting the audience to engage in a distinctive way with their art, prompt insights that make their works untranslatable and even unparaphrasable. We conclude in §3 by exploring these more general implications of our view.

§1.

Every few months, *New York Times* writer Alan Feuer presents the found poetry of craigslist missed connection posts. The poems are original ads, “printed verbatim, with only line and stanza breaks added; their titles are the subject headings.”

There’s something frivolous and impertinent about this project. Poems are no accident: true poets hone their craft over decades and struggle to perfect the execution of each piece. But, of course, Feuer has selected his examples from countless others that do not work as poems. It is this act of curation that makes Feuer’s column a celebration of the poetic imagination. We can approach anything as poetry. No matter what text we direct it to, that interpretive effort is sometimes satisfying in just the way artists aim for.

Here’s an example from Feuer’s latest column (1/21/12).

Drunk Irish Guy to the Girl in the Red Tights on the Subway to Queens

drunk irish guy	1
to the girl in the red tights	2
on the subway to queens	3
i really hope	4
I did not creep you out...	5
I was so drunk	6
and you were so hot...	7
I wish I could have met you	8
at a different moment	9
and a different place.	10

We've chosen this "poem" because it is short, and because we thought we could do some critical justice to the working of its poetic effects. The original post is admittedly obnoxious, but that actually seems to make Feuer's ironic reworking more powerful and more transparent.

In its original prose, the post is quite direct. The opening tag offers a third-person description of the particulars of an encounter; the author writes as one of the participants, hoping to reach the other. The note continues with an awkward not-quite-apology for any distress the author may have caused, a churlishly direct explanation for what we presume was the author's inappropriate behavior, and a hinted invitation for another chance. If these words were written authentically and unreflectively, just for their literal meaning, they would make a rather bad impression. Truth be told, the attitudes that got this guy in trouble when drunk seem just as much in evidence when he is sober.

But what Feuer gives us is not the original prose: he gives us a poem. The linguistic structures that Feuer points out to us, in rendering the text in verse, catch the drunk guy's language subverting itself, and let us see more directly the deeper forces at play in this missed connection. Feuer's lineation breaks the text up using a mix of parsing and end-stopped lines (Cunningham 1976; Longenbach 2008 p. 55ff). End-stopped lines conclude at a sentence boundary. Lines 3, 5, 7 and 10 are end-stopped. Parsing lines break up larger sentences into constituents or other coherent fragments. Most of the remaining lines of the poem are, in fact, prototypical phrases of linguistic syntax. Even the fragmentary lines '*I really hope*' or '*I wish I could have met you*', which introduce incomplete sentences, seem to be broken at the most natural place to pause in the flow of speaking. In this sense, their syntax is not a surprise.

The surprise of Feuer's lineation comes from the unexpected parallels it reveals, and forces us to appreciate. Metrically, the opening stanza establishes a consistent pattern of phrasing for the poem, where two syllables in each line get prominent accents. (In the first stanza, they're *drunk*, *i* in *irish*, *girl*, *red*, *sub* in *subway*, and *queens*.) The lineation invites us to continue this pattern throughout the poem, and in so doing "annotates" key words (*hope*, *I*, *you*) with a fluent assignment of stress we might not otherwise have given them (we follow Longenbach 2008 in the idea that the formal organization of poetry can annotate its linguistic structure and thereby inform our intuitions).

Rhetorically, the lineation highlights the formal analogies that connect the poem's descriptions. The genre of "missed connections" allows great variation in the specificity with which participants and their encounters are described, and in how these descriptions are organized. Here, though, the scene is set in simple chunks that characterize

individuals just with a couple key attributes. The lineation invites us to consider the significance of this uniformity. It is as though we are in a world of archetypes.

Formal parallels in the second stanza, meanwhile, juxtapose the writer's inebriation and his addressee's attractiveness. The annotating emphasis of the lines confirms the contrast. One suspects that perhaps these qualities are more significant in their opposition to one another than in the explanation they provide for the author's advances. The directness of the alternatives perhaps returns us to the presence of the archetypes: this is ugliness, chastened by an encounter with beauty.

We can now hear the repeated, and emphasized, '*different*' of the last two lines as an echo of the difference that is the poem's theme (though not the ad's). It is as though the writer is reworking and revising his wish for difference. Is he finally groping towards the realization that he himself is what must change?

The contrast we have drawn between the original version of this Craigslist post and its rendition as a poem illustrates the distinctive engagement that poetry requires of its audience. We can go further. Imagine the text presented on a screen, perhaps in a narrow chat window or an iPhone display. The text happens to assume the same typographical layout Feuer imposes on it.¹ You might happen to read the text unselfconsciously just for its literal meaning, implicitly attributing its layout to the constraints of the device. Or you might be struck by the formal structure in the presentation of the text, and find yourself, prompted by that structure, noticing deeper implications. In short, it might seem like poetry to you, or it might not.

¹ There are interesting parallels to the scholarly debate as to whether Dickinson intended her poems to be typeset in full metrical lines or in the fragmentary lineation of her manuscripts (Longenbach 2008, pp77ff).

Here then is a minimal pair: the same utterance, understood two different ways, as a function of two different interpretive practices we have at our disposal. Our claim in this talk is that the difference between these interpretive practices is a crucial principle for any attempt to locate the distinctive experience and insight of poetry within the philosophy of language. Note, however, that we do not suppose, in distinguishing between these two interpretive practices, that the poetic is necessarily a matter of the poet's intention or the reader's conscious understanding. Indeed, we think part of the power of poetry is that it can work on us in ways that the poet does not specifically intend, or in ways we try to resist as readers.

In our discussion thus far, we have framed the poetic imagination, in part, as a search for significance in the formal organization of the poem itself – in what we will call the articulation of the poem (Lepore 2009). Such an approach has long been advocated by both poets and critics alike. One dimension of a poem's articulation is of course its sound. To suggest, with Pope, in his *Sound and Sense*, that “[t]he sound [of a poem] must seem the echo of the sense” is to open up new possibilities to listen for insights into a poem's meaning. For example, assonance and alliteration give a poem a distinctive and noteworthy aural profile, which can resonate with its theme. Pope illustrates:

But when loud surges lash the sounding shore,
The hoarse, rough verse should like the torrent roar;

Here the conspicuous repetitions of fricatives and liquids invite the hearer to compare the sounds of the poem to the howling and crashing of stormy seas. The meter of a poem can set its tempo in evocative ways also, as Pope shows vividly:

When Ajax strives some rock's vast weight to throw,
The line too labors, and the words move slow;

The accented monosyllables at the end of this couplet occupy a succession of feet in an otherwise iambic meter, and demand to be read with a correspondingly increased weight, mirroring what the line itself says. Similarly, we saw in Feuer's craigstlist poem how line and meter can expose important connections by annotating emphasis and bringing linguistic structures into new formal relationships. (We will see below that line and meter can also undermine the formal relationships in a poem that might otherwise command our attention.)

Much the same is true, for example, of rhyme. In *Sound and Sense*, the rhyme scheme cements the formal structure of the poem. Each couplet opens by presenting some poetic image and concludes with a corresponding description of the language through which the poet works. The two lines rhyme: a literal repetition of sound that transposes the poet's metaphor of 'sound echoing sense' onto the very organization of the poem. (Again, other rhyme schemes can undermine the formal structures we otherwise find; Longenbach 2008 cites Marianne Moore's work as a case in point.)

There is good reason to think that poetic forms privilege the same linguistic structures that natural language grammar appeals to. For example, the categories of repeated sound that govern such specific poetic forms as slant rhymes or alliterative verse align with words' phonological structure as established by the rules of language (Kiparsky 1974). Variation in meter likewise builds on the underlying structures that are independently needed to organize utterances grammatically into balanced prosodic units (Kiparsky 1977). But any conspicuous feature of the organization of a poem is ripe for

interpretation – even the visual shape of a written poem and its layout on the page. E.E.

Cummings's 'l(a' evokes the possibilities:

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The orthography here invites comparisons between the visual form of the poem and its meaning: how is the vertical descent of the leaf mirrored in the shape of the poem, in the fragmentary sounds of the individual lines, in the relationships of sound across pairs of lines, in the very shape of the letter 's'? Should we perhaps read the letter 'l' as a proxy for its doppelgänger, the number '1'? Linguists normally assume that written language is such a late development that the architecture of the language faculty can offer no principles that distinctively apply to it. The devices E. E. Cummings delights in exhibiting the potential to engage the poetic imagination through pure formal invention.

Moreover, the insights that poets can suggest through the formal organization of language are as varied and open-ended as experience itself. In his study of the poetic line, for example, Longenbach (2008) cites the thrill of a parsing line that makes a dramatic break with previous enjambment, as in the second verse below:

To a Poor Old Woman

munching a plum on
the street a paper bag
of them in her hand

They taste good to her
They taste good
to her. They taste
good to her

William Carlos Williams opens his poem here with a series of fragments that stretch awkwardly across lines but run together within them – then continues the second stanza with a simple sentence, parsed by the line into its appropriate syntax. We can make sense of the formal progression as an echo of the speaker’s thinking: in response to a tableau that at first seems incoherent and difficult, an unexpectedly sharp and clear judgment surfaces. The resumption of annotating lines later in the verse creates a new kind of interpretive pressure. The words create a pattern of repetition, and the lines disrupt it, inviting us to read and respond differently to this key idea. The play of emphasis suggests the slow unfolding of the moment in the speaker’s consciousness – we have a sense of the speaker’s rumination, of perceptions crystallizing in their details or shifting in their significance. The back-and-forth of line, here, with its opposed formal choices linked in different ways to the broader patterns of structure and meaning, underscores the creativity that poets and their readers must bring to their art, even when they appeal to the familiar principles of sound, meter, rhyme and line. There is no one meaning or effect for parsing lines; no one meaning or effect for annotating lines; no one meaning or effect which we find in juxtaposing the two. What we find in all cases, Longenbach argues, is simply that there is a formal contrast, which compels us to probe the poem for further

differences. We must attune ourselves, however we see fit, to the particular formal dynamics we find, as a possible echo of a poet's sense.

Indeed, a virtue of critical projects such as Longenbach's is that they guide this effort. They help us to hear the diverse principles that can organize a poem and so help us to clue into (and to articulate) the interpretive explorations a poem affords. The effect is expansive, rather than corrective. The poem is open to whatever we find in it.

Whenever we notice some unexpected formal feature, and it amplifies our experience of the poem in some evocative and harmonious new way, we have added to our understanding.

All the same, we can also say what makes these interpretive efforts poetic. They do not concern the ordinary, fundamental and prosaic significance of form in language. Language, of course, is governed by arbitrary conventions that link words and expressions to things in the world and the contents of our thoughts. When we bring our poetic imagination to the formal organization of language, we take these connections for granted, and go beyond them.

§2.

We are not critics; others are better positioned than we are to chart the reaches of the poetic imagination. We argue, however, that even as philosophers we need to appreciate the basic nature of poetic practice. Readers' engagement with poetry involves an open-ended process of exploring the articulation of a poem for deeper insights into its meaning. Our philosophical conclusions depend on this characterization. We offer two case studies in this section.

§2.1

First, the form of a poem matters in a special way. As we put it in Lepore (2009), poems are *about* their own articulation. They are about their own articulation because poems ask to be understood poetically, so that the interpreter looks at their articulation for insights into their meaning.

Lepore (2009) compares poetry to quotation in this respect. Let us return to Pope. Suppose we change a word here –

But when loud surges lash the sounding shore,
The hoarse, rough verse should like the torrent boom;

Let's imagine that Pope had written 'boom' instead of 'roar'. Semantically, both expressions characterize the sound of the storm as a succession of loud, resonant and ominous tones. But the new version offers different raw materials to the poetic imagination. The prosody of the poem changes – the consistent 'or' of 'torrent' and 'roar' is now the alternating pulse of 'torrent' and 'boom'. In the new version, the poet's rhyme has also vanished. These formal differences matter – not just to the meaning of the poem but to its interpretation. The imagery is changed not just to the extent that 'roars' and 'booms' can be different noises but also to the extent the poet invites us to use the words themselves as sonic images that depict the storm. And without the rhyme to underpin the formal link between its two lines, the couplet loses the compelling symmetry of sound and sense that is so crucial to Pope's imaginative demonstration.

Quotation offers a striking analogy in the sensitivity to form that it demands of interpreters. With (1) and (2), we make different claims.

1. Kim and Sandy said they heard the torrent "roar".

2. Kim and Sandy said they heard the torrent “boom”.

No matter how similar the meanings are of *roar* and *boom*, in (1) we say Kim and Sandy used the word *roar* to describe the torrent, and in (2) we say they used the word *boom*.

The form itself becomes part of what we say.

Quotation is also an apt analogy in the diverse ways it can target linguistic articulation. Horn (1985, 1992) shows that quotation can target linguistic performances not only for what they mean, but also for their connotations of register, as in (3), for their morphological structure, as in (4), or even their prosodic realization, as in (5).

3. Grandma isn't 'feeling lousy', Johnny, she's indisposed. (Horn 1985, 20b)

4. I didn't trap 'two mongeese', I trapped two mongooses. (Horn 1992, 7c)

5. He didn't call 'the [POLis]', he called the [poLIS]. (Horn 1992, 7b)

We readily understand that the speaker of such examples makes claims not just about the words somebody used, considered as linguistic types (the phrase *feeling lousy*, the word *police*, the plural of the word *mongoose*), but about the specific way somebody articulated those words, in a particular setting with a particular form and particular sounds. Since quotation can do this, it should not be surprising that poetry might also invite its audience to attend to any and all of the many dimensions of utterance articulation.

Although we see a clear parallel between poetry and quotation, we do not suggest that poetry is just a kind of quotation, or that quotation explains the special significance of poetic art. We can put Pope's lines in quotes:

“the hoarse rough verse should like the torrent roar”

But we get only a lame reminder that Pope wrote certain words. We already knew that. The poetry, we have suggested, lies not in the words themselves so much as they way we approach them as readers.

In summary, quotation exhibits a linguistic articulation, and attributes that articulation to a certain speaker. Poetry exhibits a linguistic articulation, and prompts a particular imaginative engagement with it. These are different practices. But they do share a broad sensitivity to the organization of linguistic form as performed and realized in the articulation of specific utterances. When we want a model for the poetic impulse, which finds new significance in the very workings of language itself, it makes sense to start with quotation.

§2.2

Poetry brings insights. Here's a case in point. We were recently reacquainted with Shakespeare's 64th sonnet, through the work of AI researcher Jerry Hobbs (2010). Shakespeare begins the poem with twelve lines that ostentatiously exhibit the compelling pull of the dismal certainty of the human condition: all things must pass. But Shakespeare concludes the poem with a twist:

This thought is as a death, which cannot choose
But weep to have that which it fears to lose.

This couplet is a rebuke – and just as sharp in its force as the preceding ruminations are vivid. Of course, we have our present joys at the mercy of the awful flow of time, and we cannot forget how fleeting they are. But it is absurd to wallow in despair; we should instead savor what we have all the more deeply.

You can read any number of statements of this idea in prose. But Shakespeare's poetry makes it art. His verses, in their rhymes and rhythms, in their parallels and oppositions, make dark thoughts of ruin as seductive and enveloping as any gothic fantasy. Then he snaps you out of it, in the sudden jumble of his conclusion. *Weep to have what you love? What nonsense!* Exactly. But that's where you just were. Longenbach (2008, p. 119), describing Yeats, puts it this way: "The phrase sounds as if it comes out of nowhere, as if the poem is discovering itself at the precise moment we are reading it."

Our view is that process is essential to poetic insight. There are no shortcuts. The poet proffers his words. You read them, take their articulation as potentially significant, and explore the possibilities. The insights you find may be richly developed, or inchoate and murky; they may be sharp and definitive, or suggestive and ambiguous. Whatever is the case, there is something special about the way the poem brought you there. The poem's insights are not, we would say, a matter of meaning, as we normally think of it in the philosophy of language. Meaning is transparent; it does not depend on process in this way.

The model of meaning we have in mind is the model of inquiry. It's most associated with the work of Robert Stalnaker (for example, his 1977), but many other philosophers have shaped our understanding (including, among others, Kripke 1972; Putnam 1975; Lewis 1969 and 1979; and Davidson 1979). Meaning, on this view, is a tool we use to reach agreement on matters of interest to us. Through meaning, we associate linguistic units with objects and properties in the world (Kripke 1972, Putnam 1975). We assemble linguistic units into sentences that express propositions, describing ways the world could

be (Stalnaker 1978). And we seek the truth. We ask whether propositions are true, we make claims by asserting propositions; we contest these claims by raising further questions or offering counterarguments. Perhaps, as a result, we have to refine our understanding of what we can talk about and how we name it (Peter Ludlow's ongoing project on the dynamic lexicon stresses the importance of this dynamic; the example of Pluto below is his). Perhaps, we agree to disagree. But in the ideal case – indeed, we suspect, in the usual case – we arrive at a deeper shared understanding of what the world is like.

Inquiry is possible only if meanings are transparently compositional and systematic. We want to settle a particular proposition, say: is Pluto a planet? We must proceed deliberately, to break this proposition down into its parts, regiment the meanings at play, and resolve the issues involved. We first agree on what Pluto is – that object, orbiting the sun at a certain distance. We then agree on what planets are – massive objects that have become round through the force of their own gravity, and which have cleared substantially smaller debris from the circuit of their orbit. Now we assess the evidence: does that object, Pluto, have that property, Planethood. Astronomers have reviewed the evidence. The answer is no.

The process of inquiry is a process of regimentation. It asks us to link words directly with the world; to make distinctions naturally, usefully and consistently; to articulate standards for setting boundary cases; and, thereby, to develop a shared fix on the questions under discussion and the ways we might resolve them.

Contrast this with the poetic imagination, as we have characterized it. It is expansive, open-ended and dynamic. We are prompted to new insights as we read a

poem more deeply, as we notice more about its form and content. These insights are inseparable from our unfolding awareness of how the poem exploits its linguistic articulation to suggest at different points in its organization different ways of listening, seeing and thinking about its subject matter.²

Imagine pursuing inquiry through meanings that were expansive, open-ended and dynamic in this way. Each time we approached the matter at hand, we would have to reassess its significance and implications before we could proceed. Indeed, we would have to feel our understanding unfold in time, rehearsing the articulation through which the ideas were first framed to reconnect with the meaning of our experience. We would have to take into account our new, deeper understanding – and start afresh. We do exactly this, when we re-enter the world of a poem. But this is not a kind of engagement that leads to crisp progress in settling claims and reaching agreement. Inquiry demands a certain conception of meaning, providing shared propositions that we can make precise and grasp in their entirety, as prerequisites and presuppositions of our discussions. Poetic insights do not establish this kind of meaning.

This is not a judgment of the value of poetry, in our view, nor is it an argument that the significance of poetry is an unfathomable mystery. It is rather an acknowledgment of the limits of language. On our view, we have many ways of engaging with imagery, which lead to distinctive insights. The poetic imagination is only one. Metaphor is another, the imaginative effort to find insights into one thing by thinking of it as another.

² Ludlow's view that the lexicon is dynamic entails that meanings evolve over the course of inquiry, becoming sharper or better aligned with the natural distinctions in the world. This is different from the dynamic experience we associate with poetic insight, which is inherently situated in and unfolds over time. The difference is roughly whether types of meaning allow for change (Ludlow) or individual tokens incorporate change (poetry).

So is the ironic engagement where we find insights by reflecting on the kind of speaker who would have taken a particular utterance as suitable for his purposes. To say that these processes bring insights is *not* to say that they create special meanings. There are insights prompted by metaphor, in our view, but no metaphorical meanings; there are insights prompted by irony, in our view, but no ironic meanings; and there are insights prompted by poetry, in our view, but no poetic meanings either. Meanings play a special role, and insights are different. Insights are expansive and open-ended, in a way that meanings cannot be.

§3.

Perhaps one of the most striking challenges for reconciling the philosophy of language with critical analysis of poetry is the Heresy of Paraphrase. In its strong form, we put the doctrine this way:

6. Substituting into a poem any expression for any of its synonyms—extant or invented—or even a grammatical transformation of its constituent expressions need not achieve successful translation or paraphrase—no matter how broadly these practices are construed. (Lepore 2009, 185-186)

The doctrine, widely advocated by the New Critics among others, gains wide support from sympathetic reading of poetry, the practice of criticism, and common sense.

The normal understanding is that the Heresy of Paraphrase is a linguistic fact about the meaning of poetry. We endorse this idea. But sometimes, the idea is spelled out in a very problematic way. Words get new meanings in the context of their working in a poem—special meanings that somehow incorporate the sensuous feel that is the trigger

for the poetic imagination. On the face of it, this represents a problematic break with semantic innocence. Where do these new meanings come from? Why are they present in these utterances, and not in others? How is it that we learn these special meanings, or understand them as speakers? Think again of inquiry: surely one of the preconditions of our communicative practices—asking precise questions, exploring possible answers, and agreeing on how the world is—is that our words have stable and consistent meanings.

Indeed, there's clearly too much freedom in the idea that poetry creates new meanings for words. If we're right that the interpretation of a poem is expansive and open-ended, then a poem can prompt new insights each time we read it. Are we not then forced to the conclusion that each time we read a poem, the poem has a new meaning? Even repeating a poem will fall foul of the heresy of paraphrase. We cannot even guarantee that "They taste good to her" in William Carlos Williams's poem can be paraphrased by "They taste good to her". No critic has ever wanted to go so far.

At the same time, we are sympathetic to the doctrine in (6). Poems do seem to make sound a matter of meaning. Something crucial goes missing in the attempt to paraphrase or translate a poem, not just aesthetic beauty or the elusive connotations and associations of words. Our view has the advantage of making sense of this idea.

Presenting a poem, we have suggested, is a special kind of linguistic practice. It is to submit the linguistic articulation of the poem to the poetic imagination. The point of this practice is the experience and insight that come from exploring the linguistic articulation of the poem in tandem with the poem's meaning.

Such practices do not make meaning, we have argued. But, just as surely, they are an intimate and indispensable part of the architecture of language. We would no more

expect a language without poetry than a language without assertion. A speaker who contributes an assertion makes a move with a distinctive status at the interface of the semantics and pragmatics of language. Just so, a speaker who contributes poetry makes a move with a distinctive status at the interface of semantics and pragmatics. The move presents its form in a special way, and invites a special kind of imaginative engagement. It is about its articulation. Thus part of the formal linguistic representation of the meaning of the utterance—part of the ‘context change potential’ of the utterance, part of the speaker reference—is its articulation itself. That meaning is tied to the articulation of the utterance, not to the context. But no utterance with a different articulation can have that meaning.

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