New directions for the Philosophy of Poetry

Karen Simecek (University of Warwick)

Abstract

This article will introduce readers to current debates in the philosophy of poetry. This includes discussion on the need for a philosophy of poetry as distinct from a philosophy of literature, the (in)compatibility of poetry and philosophy, poetic meaning and interpretation, and poetry in relation to affect, emotion and expressiveness, which opens up discussion of wider forms of poetry from spoken word to sign-language poetry. The article ends with suggestions for future directions of research in the philosophy of poetry. I argue that as the philosophy of poetry is gaining interest, the previous debates that presuppose an understanding of poetry as taking form on the page and as having fixed aboutness ought to be abandoned in favour of an understanding of a poem in the affective space, with issues of reception, interpretation, distribution and performance in play.

Keywords: philosophy of poetry; philosophy of literature; expressiveness; affectivity; performance.

1. Introduction: A need for a philosophy of poetry

> *"When people say that poetry is a luxury, or an opinion, or for the middle classes, or that it shouldn't be read at school because it is irrelevant, or any of the strange and stupid things that are said about poetry and its place in our lives, I suspect that the people doing the saying have had things pretty easy. A tough life needs a tough language – and that is what poetry is … It isn't a hiding place, it's a finding place."*
> Jeanette Winterson

Over the last decade, there's been a growing interest in poetry in analytic aesthetics.[1] Yet, poetry is still largely overlooked in the field, which has allowed other literary forms, most notably the novel, to take centre stage. The limited attention to poetry has resulted in a narrowing of views about the nature of literature and the role it plays in our lives. For instance, in recent debates about the moral value of literature, the focus is often on a particular mode of engagement that arises from reading works of narrative fiction. However, different literary works demand different kinds of engagement. Acknowledging this diversity has the potential to open up new ways of understanding the nature and value of literature and other works of art that make use of poetic devices, structures and modes of engagement.

To highlight the difference between reading poetry and reading prose fiction, consider what's going on when we read a novel like J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*. An important feature of our understanding of the novel is an awareness of the narrative and the characters embedded in that narrative: we are trying to understand what happens to the main character David Lurie and his relationships to other characters in light of the events of the plot. From this appreciation of David and the representation of this character, we reflect on what this might be expressing about human life more generally in terms of the work's thematic content. However, this looks to be a very different mode of engagement from how we read some works of poetry, particularly those associated with the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E tradition and other kinds of modern poetry.

By turning our attention away from novels—in particular, realist novels and, perhaps, other narrative forms such as epic poetry—to lyric poetry, we can explore alternative ways of approaching a literary text, which may give us different results about the nature and value of literature. When reading in the "poetic mode," our engagement is governed by the precise language of the work, which includes our responsiveness to *how* that language is used.[2] We focus on the words, what they mean, how they mean (which includes their aural and aesthetic qualities) and how they connect to produce a meaningful experience of encountering language in a particular unified form.[3] This is different to a mode of reading ("the narrative mode") that is governed primarily by characters and a narrative to be engaged with imaginatively, where the focus is on imagining one or more characters in a sequence of

---

[1] See for instance the collection of essays *The Philosophy of Poetry* (2015) and the special edition on "Poetry and Philosophy" of *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* (2009).

[2] See Ribeiro (2013) for more on this point.

[3] Angela Leighton (2009b) places great emphasis on hearing (whether actual or imagined) in engaging with poetry. Similarly, Robert Pinsky (1998) talks of poetry as ultimately something to be heard. See also Joan Shelley Rubin, *Songs of Ourselves: The Uses of Poetry in America* (2007).

some sort.[4] There may be characters and narrative in a work of lyric poetry but our aim in reading in the poetic mode is not to dwell in the imaginative experience of some fictional world. Instead, reading in the poetic mode invites the reader to consider the communicative act of the work, which may involve some degree of imaginative engagement but this is in relation to the words and their related images. Put more simply, reading in the poetic mode is to engage with the use of language and the perspective it embodies, that is, a perspective we are invited to share in.[5] That's not to say such a poetic and perspectival mode of engagement is not supported by other literary works. Rather, a focus on poetry can help us to see such a mode of engagement more clearly in other kinds of works of art.

2. *Leaving Behind the Ancient Quarrel*

When philosophers do consider poetry, it's often not on its own terms but in terms of what poetry can offer, if anything, in the service of philosophy. Such an approach is motivated by discussion of whether philosophy is a distinct mode of writing or whether it is possible to have philosophy through poetry, particularly in light of those who express their philosophical works in verse (e.g. Xenophanes, Parmenides, Empedocles, Lucretius, Pope and Rumi).[6] The thought is that works of philosophy draw on word-meaning and literary devices to communicate philosophical ideas, arguments and theories, and so the philosophical text appears to be well within the canon of literature. However, this way of thinking about the relationship between philosophy and literature leads to the question of the extent to which such literary devices are useful in communicating philosophy and helping philosophy to achieve its aims.

In the *Republic,* Plato expressed serious concerns with the role of poetry and the poets in communicating truth and pursuit of knowledge. In his discussion, he reflects on the role of poetry in ancient society and ultimately banishes the poets from his ideal state. Plato's Socrates argues that poetry is at odds with the pursuit of truth and knowledge (which is philosophy's primary goal), since

---

[4] Of course, there may be works that call for a combination of these modes of reading in order to engage with the entire work, but for simplicity's sake, I will just focus on those works that clearly demonstrate the call for a poetic mode of reading.

[5] See M. de Gaynesford, "Geoffrey Hill and Performative Utterance" (2013); this view of literature as inviting focus on language use is in contrast to Kendal Walton's imaginative engagement view as set out in his *Mimesis as Make-believe* (1990). For more on the perspective nature of poetry and what is meant by 'perspective', see Simecek (2015).

[6] Halliwell (2010) offers an excellent overview of the relationship between poetry and philosophy in the ancient world.

its function is merely to stir the emotions and provide pleasure. Here Plato refers to the "ancient quarrel between poetry and philosophy" (607 b-c), which has offered a neat puzzle for the philosopher of poetry to solve in defending the value of poetry, i.e. to what extent is poetic insight a form of philosophical knowledge? To what extent do poetic devices help or hinder development and communication of philosophical knowledge?[7]

Peter Lamarque's discussion of the relationship between poetry and philosophy accommodates the view that both might be a mode of literary writing but in response to the "ancient quarrel" he argues that the two modes of expression are at odds (and so he attempts to defuse the ancient quarrel by arguing that they are of different kinds and therefore incommensurable). Although the two modes of expression might both be characterised as works of literature (albeit not *mere* literature), they are distinct modes within that broad category. The fundamental difference, on Lamarque's view, is that poetry is primarily concerned with feeling and lived experience, whereas, philosophy is primarily concerned with truth and knowledge. He argues: "Philosophical conclusions do not arise out of personal response to particularity" (2009a, 49), and goes on to say

> To read poetry (of any kind) *as poetry* is to adopt a certain attitude of mind, a receptiveness, among other things, to fine-grained expression, the salience of perspective, and the play of images. Reading philosophy as philosophy encourages different expectations and invites different kinds of appraisal. (2009a, 51-52)

According to Lamarque, not only is there a difference in the approach to thought that writing poetry and philosophy demand, but there is also a difference in modes of reception that each call for.[8] He argues that we can read a work in different ways (as a work of poetry or a work of philosophy), and such modes of reading come with their own expectations in what one is reading for and how to approach the text one is reading.[9] Lamarque's view makes the unity of form and content crucial in

---

[7] Ribeiro (2016) offers a useful critical discussion of historical philosophical attitudes to poetry.

[8] Lepore and Stone (2016) also view poetry and philosophy as demanding different engagement from the reader: "the form of a poem matters in a special way … [Poems] are about their own articulation because poems ask to be understood *poetically*, so that the interpreter looks at their articulations for insights into their meaning" (p. 328).

[9] This particular point was criticised by Simon Jarvis (2012) who argues that we do not read in different modes but, in my view, his argument stems from a misinterpretation of Lamarque's point. Lamarque is arguing that we could shape the words of Pope, for instance, into something that no longer resembles verse, reading it flatly, and without attention to the design, yet still be able to understand the philosophical arguments it expresses. But where form is significant (and the reader is not ignorant of how to read poetry), Jarvis is right that we can only read poetry as poetry. I do not think Lamarque would deny this. If we tried to read other works of poetry in a different mode from reading as poetry, they may well end up incoherent and meaningless.

performing the function of engaging the reader emotionally and intellectually since his own view emphasises the importance of attending to the "mode of presentation" and the experience of the poem. He writes, "A good reader attends not to some content beyond or behind the mode of presentation but to the mode of presentation itself, to the fact that what is being said is being said in this way" (Lamarque, 2009b, 416). Attention to the "mode of presentation" engages us in an experience of language.

Lamarque's approach is to show that poetry and philosophy are incompatible by appealing to the relationship between content and form. In the case of philosophy, it is often argued that content must be separable from form; in poetry, form and content are inseparable.[10] However, such discussions of poetry as content in form assumes that poetry is the kind of thing that can have "content" in the first place and therefore presupposes a view of poetry as an object. Although this idea of content in form neatly explains the non-paraphrasability of poetry (i.e. that any substitution of words or alteration of the form will change the meaning), it doesn't do justice to the use of language that poetry invokes, which is open and public to some degree. For instance, poems that afford multiple interpretations and offer ambiguity in meaning are often celebrated in virtue of these features. Considering poetry in the service of philosophy skews understanding of poetry as something that has (or ought to have) a message or fixed content in the first instance, and what we are thereby trying to assess is whether this content is philosophical. For instance, we become concerned with assessing poetry for whether it is sufficiently abstract, general and rational, and such considerations fail to pay attention to the experience the work affords (one of the key aspects identified by Lamarque).[11]

A more promising line of inquiry seeks to understand *how* poetry and philosophy *might* connect. For example, Ribeiro argues that what poetry can do is reveal the potentialities of language for expressing thought and feeling, which is essential to the aims of philosophy. She argues, "[poetry] shows us what can be thought and felt in ways we may not have thought or felt before, but now discover, or in ways that we may have, and now recognize and find felicitously expressed. Poetry thereby enlarges our own potentialities for thought, feeling, and expression" (2016, 103). On this

---

Lamarque is merely pointing out that *some* works can be read in different modes, not that this is true in *all* cases.

[10] See AC Bradley 1963; McGregor 2014; Lamarque 2009b as examples of those primarily concerned with form-content unity

[11] See Eldridge (2010) for a good discussion of truth in poetry that is sympathetic to this view.

view, poetry does not have mere instrumental value but it is through poetry's value as poetry that it can make such a contribution to thought and knowledge.

Eileen John's work on poetry is also motivated by the question of whether we can think through poetry and what it might mean to do so. John's approach might eventually address the issue of philosophical poetry but her starting point is more neutral and therefore open to seeking to make sense of how poetry works. In her article, "Poetry and Directions for Thought" (2013), she argues that poetry can aid in the expression of thought, in particular, a *process* of thought. Such an approach opens up poetry to a broader understanding of philosophy; here philosophy is not assumed to be characterised in terms of sets of philosophical arguments embedded in particular traditions, but a way of experiencing and interpreting the world in which we live, in other words, as a form of thinking. Rather than assessing poetry's potential to offer a conclusion supported by an argument, we can instead assess poetry's potential to reveal a way of thinking and offer its reader the experience of such a process of thought.

John Koethe makes a similar point in his article, "Poetry and Thought" (2001), in which he highlights the affective dimension of such a thought process. He argues that to really experience a way of thinking it is not sufficient to entertain the purely cognitive content but to embody the dynamics and rhythms of that way of thinking: "the conceptual role of poetry is not so much a propositional as a performative one. There are certain topics and themes—here, the nature of the self and the conception of the transcendental subject —that are properly philosophical, but whose consideration requires resources not readily available to philosophy, resources involving movements of thought and exercises of the imagination that lie at the very heart of poetry" (11). The experience of engaging with poetry triggers a mode of reflective thinking that can enhance philosophical inquiry where standard modes of philosophical thinking are limited. Elsewhere, he argues that "What the poem tries to do is not to persuade the reader of the truth of those thoughts, but to get him, so to speak, to enter into them" (2009, 58). Koethe sees the reader and poet as sharing an experience of thought rather than the poet's voice trying to persuade the reader. In inviting this shared experience, poetry may be able to work alongside philosophy in developing understanding of self and world rather than merely working in the service of philosophy.

Likewise, M. W. Rowe (1996) argues that poetry offers the potential to come to know what it is like to have a particular experience, not merely to have the same general experience as the writer but to have access to what it is like to experience the thoughts expressed by the work in relation to some

experience. Rowe argues that readers do not merely receive the words of the poem in *that* form, they participate in bringing those thoughts to life through the formation of images. He writes, "The knowledge that we derive from literature is not propositional information but knowledge of what some experience is like, and it is internally related to pleasure because the writer can only prompt us to have an experience, the experience itself must be the spontaneous product of our own imaginations" (3). In accessing such knowledge of another's experience, readers of poetry form images rather than images being given to them in the poem. What this offers us is an experience of what it is like to think *those* particular thoughts expressed in the work with all that thinking involves, e.g. the thought-content, the emotional response, mood, rhythms and connections of thought. We are, according to Rowe, in a position to take up the perspective of the writer in thinking those thoughts. I take it that Rowe thinks that it isn't that we share in the experience the writer actually had but rather an "idealisation" or construction of an experience; the poem offers an experience of a process of thought in context, including the rich affectivity of cognition.

3. Interpretation and poetry's resistance to meaning

The study of poetry is not an isolated field of inquiry; it weaves in and out of other areas of philosophy. In some cases, philosophers make use of concepts, distinctions and definitions from other areas of philosophy to illuminate poetry. In other cases, philosophers might use poetry to act as a problem case to test theories of meaning, language, truth, emotion and expression. Whether an event or an object, poetry makes use of language and consequently, philosophical reflections on poetry overlap with considerations from the philosophy of language. Poetry is an important source of hard cases for the philosopher of language in particular, with its heightened use of poetic language that shows up in everyday examples of meaning and communication such as metaphor, symbolism and affectivity of language including rhythm, rhyme and alliteration that shape meaning and interpretation.

One issue for philosophers of language is the way in which a poem can be said to have aboutness but fails to be reduced to a singular interpretation. As John Gibson puts it "[poetry] tends to hold out meaning as a promise, as a destination rather than a point of departure, and this distinguishes hugely from most other uses of language, where the goal is usually to wear meaning on the sleeve" (2015, 8).[12] Although we might see such opacity of meaning to be something shared by all great

---

[12] See also Gibson 2011

works of literature, the novel and short story rely on narrative structures to deliver its open-ended meaning, where what's up for grabs is one's interpretation of thematic content rather than aboutness in the first place. Poetry relies on other meaning-making structures that come from imagery, images, interconnections, etc. that bring the work together as a whole and form its perspectival structure.[13]

Discussions of form-content unity also show up in discussions of how poems mean, with content delivering what the poem means and form being the mode of that delivery. However, as discussed above, it's not clear to what extent focus on form and content for meaning in poetry is the right way to go. In his discussion of form-content unity in poetry, McGregor states that "The poem is the experience of the poem and the experience of the poem is the experience of resonant meaning" (McGregor, 2014, 52), which suggests that we should be thinking of the experience of reception as being "meaningful" rather than there being some finegrained meaning contained in the work.

An emerging line of thought in literary studies, inspired by continental philosophical reflections on poetry (e.g. Heidegger; Derrida), is to focus more on the *event* of poetry and to connect this with the idea of "performance space." Works of poetry contain cues or signs to aid the reader in forging connections and discovering meaning for themselves; the experience itself is meaningful. Because the reader is involved in creating meaning through their experience and interpretation of the work, the meaning has more weight and significance for the reader. Particularly, it is because the reader must consider the possible associations and connections together with their own responses in making sense of the work; crucially, it makes sense to *that* reader. This involvement of the reader is what sustains the reader's interest in the work: "A literary text must therefore be conceived in such a way that it will engage the reader's imagination in the task of working things out for himself, for reading is only a pleasure when it is active and creative" (Iser, 1972, 280). Engaging the reader in the construction of meaning allows the reader to be creative and active by forging connections, evoking the imagination and in grasping at meaning through the thematic concepts the reader brings to the work.

Following a similar line of the playfulness of engaging with poetry, Sherri Irvin (2015) presents a convincing case for rejecting such need to find meaning in poetry, even the finegrained and context sensitive meaning that Lamarque and McGregor are concerned with. In her essay, she talks about the meaning of what she terms "unreadable poems," i.e. those that seem to resist straightforward grasp of meaning, taking Christina Mengert's "*" as her case study. We might need an appreciation

---

[13] For more on the way in which perspective shows up in poetry, see Camp 2009, Jollimore 2009, and Simecek 2015.

of the aims of a work in order to evaluate it, but this doesn't seem to require grasp of meaning. The form of the work is still important, for it provides a "structure of sounds [that] has been carefully designed" (92) and ultimately, it is taking such formal aspects of the work as constraints of one's interpretation that is available to intersubjective appraisal. Such an interpretation must "*make sense* of why the parts have been assembled in this way, not merely *enumerate* what the parts are and how they have been assembled" (97). What Irvin goes on to argue is that we come to appreciate a poem's aims in an experiential way, which resists attempts to grasp a poem's "aboutness." Although Irvin seems to suggest such resistance to meaning is only found in what she calls "unreadable" poems, the way to take such case studies is not as the exceptions but as exemplars of how poetry works and why it does something different to the novel:

> Appreciating an unreadable poem requires a willingness to consider it on its own terms, and to take seriously the possibility that it has a purpose that is defined by its idiosyncratic elements, including its refusal of conventional meaning. Reading in this way may lead us not to an articulable semantic meaning that we can attribute to the text, but instead to an experience that has semantic, rhythmic, and non-cognitive elements. (106)

Perhaps the "readability" of other works of poetry is an illusion. We might think we can grasp their aboutness but good poetry is much more than this; it offers up an experience of meaning-making and interpretation and in doing so resists straightforward analysis of content in form. As Malcolm Budd writes: "what matters in poetry is the imaginative experience you undergo in reading the poem, not merely the thoughts expressed by the words of the poem; and it is constitutive of this imaginative experience that it consists in an awareness of the words as arranged in the poem" (1995, 83). Furthermore, in reading poetry "we do not discover a meaning: we engage in discovering" (Leighton 2009, 171). When we engage in reading poetry, we are not trying simply to extract some propositions that we can assess as true or false, there is value in the experience we have of reading, listening or watching a performance. Poetry opens up a space to do something with the words, that is, to engage in an active "discovering" rather than trying to unpack some singular meaning (see Simecek and Ellis 2017). Such understanding of meaning in relation to poetry enables a richer understanding of the artform and begins to chart the way to explaining why we value poetry as distinct from other literary forms.

4. Expression, emotion and embodiment

An alternative to the question of how form and content are related is to consider what a poem does in terms of expression, affect and voice. Wordsworth famously describes poetry as the "overflow of powerful emotions" and it has been a long-held belief that poetry is intimately connected with the emotions. As Ribeiro writes: "despite the melancholy that teems from countless lyric poems past and present (it being understood that not all lyric poetry is sad), we often greatly enjoy, and deeply value, reading or listening to them. We would not want our world to be without sad poetry; we think it is the better for having it" (2013, 187). It seems that one of the things we look to poetry for is a form of expression and a space for affective response alongside cognitive engagement.

In what way does poetry "express" emotion? What might our emotional experiences of poetry show us? In answer to these questions, Stecker argues that "Lyric poetry tends to consist, in large part, in the 'articulation' of the intentional aspects of an emotional state—the beliefs, desires, perceptions, and so on that are partly constitutive of or accompany such a state" (2001, 86). We might then think of the poem as expressing emotions indirectly, i.e., the reader of the poem is offered all the data from which to infer the emotional state. On this view, the poem does not aim to trigger a particular emotional experience in the reader but is offering a common framework or perspective (the beliefs, desires, perceptions) that one can then respond emotionally to. This relationship between the emotional experience of the work and the expression of emotion in the work opens up space for the reader to evaluate the perspective on offer in the poem differently to what the author had in mind.

The perspective of the poem offers a structured experience through which we can come to understand how our emotional responses arise and what the underlying framework consists of; from this we can see that emotions need not be embedded in narrative structures but are fundamentally perspectival (Simecek 2015). The insight on offer is to see how significance is configured in a network of beliefs, desires and perceptions that might give rise to a particular emotional state, whilst having the experience of responding to the articulation of that set of beliefs, desires and perceptions from their own individual perspective with one's own sense of significance intact.

Ribeiro (2013) takes a different approach to the question of what reading poetry might offer its reader; she argues that there is a clear use-value in the crafted articulation of emotion on offer in the encounter with a poem. Whereas above, I emphasised the way in which poetry might offer us

the opportunity to see one's emotional response as distinct from that expressed in the poem, here Ribeiro is highlighting the value when we come to identify with the emotions expressed in the poem. The articulation of a set of beliefs, desires and perceptions can be valuable in helping one to deal with difficult and complex emotions in daily life. Rather than revealing the structures that underpin our emotions, it helps us to make sense of our own emotional experiences by trying on that perspective from the inside.

To illustrate her point, Ribeiro draws on the example of Dylan Thomas' villanelle "Do not go gently," she argues that this represents an offering of expression that a reader can take up as if one's own, which can support one's emotional life. Rather than needing to unpick the network of belief, desire and perception, we are able to adopt the perspective as a package within the emotional state. Ribeiro calls this "poetic appropriation," which is understood as being "where we take a poet's words as if they were our own" (187).[14] She goes on to argue "By virtue of being written in the first person and thereby promoting a personal engagement akin to identification with the thoughts and emotions expressed in the work, sad lyric poetry has a therapeutic value that helps explain the satisfaction we take in it" (187). This kind of appropriation could explain the mechanism by which sad poetry induces an emotional state in its reader, i.e. by something like empathetic engagement with the work. Relating to the words as if they are one's own will trigger us to make certain connections with our own thoughts and experiences, and thereby trigger an emotional response. This state encourages us to take the words seriously and attend to them carefully. The state induced by this will increase our focus and encourage us to look for possible meanings in the work because we are concerned with what the experience of the work means and how to make sense of it, which gives rise to a rich and fulfilling experience of reading the work.

However, lyric poetry makes great use of first-person and second-person address, not only to express some belief, perception or emotion, but to express with some directional force, i.e. from one person to another in such a way that may resist identification with the voice of the poem. Use of the first-person sets up the relationship of poetic persona to reader as hearer of the words spoken, and may allow the reader to embody the "I" of the poem.[15] However, where poetry makes use of the second person, the reader is placed in a relationship distinct from the voice of the poem, which necessarily resists "poetic appropriation" (Simecek *forthcoming*). From this, we can see that poetry is not a case of flat expression but is something that can assert spatial relationships and unfold in the

---

[14] See Walton (2015) for more on this.
[15] See M. de Gaynesford (2017) for a detailed discussion of first-person use in poetry.

space between poem and reader, listener or audience. Consequently, the meaning and expression of the work is modified by the relationship established between the poetic persona and the recipient (whether reader or audience). Such awareness of the different forms of expression involved in poetry points to the importance of the affective space that a poem opens up, which may be a shared, intimate space but equally it could be one in which the reader, listener or audience are left with a sense of being distinct from the poetic voice.

An understanding of poetry as an event, which unfolds in affective spaces is better equipped to include the diverse range of poetry, in particular, sign-language poetry. Poetry is often closely associated with spoken-word but it need not be restricted to the *spoken* word; all that's needed is language and communication. Sign-language poetry has an important role to play in investigating the expressive aspects of poetry in performance. Embodiment is central to understanding sign-language poetry in which language and body are inseparable. Paul Scott's "Tree" and "Five Senses" are both good examples of how poetic structures can be given embodied form with their use of metaphor, repetition and rhythm, making both works easily recognisable as poetry. Take for example, the use of symmetry in Scott's "Five Senses." In this poem, he uses his hand to gesture at balance even when it is not contributing directly to the meaning, thereby offering a useful illustration of how the cognitive and affective aspects of the poem (and performance) work together, with the affective aspects not merely offering the form but affecting the meaning-making space created for the audience:

> A certain balance can be maintained in signed poems even when one of the hands is not actively involved in signing anything new. One hand holds the final part of the sign while the other hand articulates a new sign. This maintenance of a sign on the non-dominant hand while the dominant hand signs something new is not exceptional in everyday signing. It is a way to create units of meaning that are more closely related than signs that are articulated in simple sequences. However, in poetry it allows the poet to keep both hands in the poetic frame and maintain the balanced use of space, even if the signs are not otherwise symmetrical. On top of this aesthetic discipline of keeping balance, maintaining the presence of the non-dominant hand can increase the effectiveness of the visual images that are being created. (Sutton-Spence and Kaneko, 2007, 288)

The physical symmetry supports a conceptual connection, thereby visibly making connections between symbol, meaning and expression. The poetry performance also highlights what it is to "hear" another's voice through language and what it is to truly attend to another's expression. As poet, David Constantine writes

> … a poem's first line (whether or not it was the first composed) is the signal that something is beginning that concerns you. You are being asked to make, as the poem itself does, "a new effort of attention." The opening line is your admission into the space, the pause, the silence of concentration that is the reading or listening to the poem. And for the poet it is in a kindred space, pause, and silence that the poem later to be read or listened to first materializes.[20]

This feature of the poetic frame that demands a special kind of attention from the reader, listener or audience is common to all poetry. It is this call to attention that marks out the use of language in poetry as distinct from how it shows up in the everyday.

5. Future directions

In any study of an art form, we must not neglect its cultural role, value and significance. Standardly, philosophers have focused on poetry in its written form, yet there is a growing trend in engaging with poetry as performed, whether online (e.g. YouTube, Instagram and specialist websites), in the live performance (at poetry events and Slam competitions) or through recitation. This raises two important developments for inquiry into poetry: 1. Poetry in the physical performance space and 2. Poetry in the digital world. A turn away from a view of poetry as potentially something that has content in form and towards a view of poetry as a performative artform, where meaning is made in the affective space of the work (whether in the private reading or in the public performance), allows for issues around reception and distribution to come to the fore.

Another key issue for the philosophy of poetry is the ongoing need to offer a definition of poetry (Ribeiro 2009). There have been some attempts in the literature to offer such a definition, e.g. Pierce's (2003) family resemblance view. Ribeiro (2007) herself has also offered a definition, arguing that a key characteristic of poetry is repetition, which she connects with authorial intention to contribute to the tradition and practice of poetry. Ribeiro's definition gets us a long way in

understanding what unifies works of poetry, but this is by no means the complete picture; her definition serves as a good foundation to build are more nuanced view. For instance, reflecting on the case of sign-language poetry, we might want to argue that we recognise this as poetry by its use of symmetry, the nature of the poetic space, or by considering seriously the issue of when a poem is complete.

Given the broad range of works that we recognise as poetry, it is clear that the definitional project does not consist of a straightforward task of conceptual analysis to determine features that are standard and contra-standard for the artform. Furthermore, there is disagreement on what the thing we are talking about is in the first place. Different results emerge depending on whether one is prioritising the written word in poetry or focusing more on the experience of reading the words aloud or hearing them performed. For instance, viewing poetry as primarily a 'speaking' of language and performance of words leads to an understanding of the poem as something that unfolds in time and space as an event (see Leslie Hill, *forthcoming*) rather than an object which is separable from our experience of encountering the language and mode of expression of the poetic work. Ribeiro (2015) also offers an important discussion on the ontology of poetry, which deserves greater attention in helping to chart our way through an understanding of what kinds of entities poetic works are, i.e. to what extent are they concrete or abstract entities. Ribeiro's answer is to understand this in term of artistic practice. By taking poetic practices (creation, performance, distribution and reception) as the core focus enables an openness about whether poetry is an object or event, and instead seeks to look at the *doing* of poetry in the making and sharing of the artform.

Bibliography

Bradley, A C. (1963). Poetry for Poetry's Sake. In *Oxford Lectures on Poetry*. London: Macmillan.

Budd, M. (1995). *The Values of Art: Pictures, Poetry and Music*. London: Penguin.

Camp, E. (2009). Two Varieties of Literary Imagination: Metaphor, Fiction, and Thought Experiments. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 33, 107–130.

Constantine, D. (2013). *Poetry: The Literary Agenda*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Eldridge, R. (2010). Truth in poetry: particulars and universals. In G. Hagberg and W. Jost (eds.), *A Companion to the Philosophy of Literature* (pp. 385-398). Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

French, P. A., H. K. Wettstein and E. LePore (eds.) (2009). *Philosophy and Poetry: Midwest Studies in Philosophy 33*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

de Gaynesford, M. (2011). How Not To Do Things With Words: J. L. Austin on Poetry. *British Journal of Aesthetics* 51 (1), 31-49.

de Gaynesford, M. (2017). *The Rift in the Lute: Attuning Poetry and Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Gibson, J. (2011). The Question of Poetic Meaning. *Nonsite* 4. Retrieved from: http://nonsite.org/article/the-question-of-poetic-meaning

Gibson, J. (2015). Introduction: The Place of Poetry in Contemporary Aesthetics. In *The Philosophy of Poetry* (pp. 1-16). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Halliwell, S. (2010). Ancient Beginnings. In G. Hagberg and W. Jost (eds) *A Companion to the Philosophy of Literature* (pp. 3-12). MA, Malden: Wiley-Blackwell.

Hill, L. (forthcoming). On the Persistence of Hedgehogs. In R. Ghosh (ed.) *Philosophy and Poetry: A Continental Perspective*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Irvin, S. (2015). Unreadable poems and how they mean. In J. Gibson (ed.) *The Philosophy of Poetry* (pp. 88-110). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Iser, W. (1972). The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach. *New Literary History* 3 (2), 279-299.

Jarvis, S. (2012). Bedlam or Parnassus: The Verse Idea. *Metaphilosophy* 43 (1-2), 71-81.

John, E. (2013). Poetry and Directions for Thought. *Philosophy and Literature* 37 (2), 451-471.

Jollimore, T. (2009). "Like a picture or a Bump on the head": Vision, cognition, and the language of poetry. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 33, 131–158.

Koethe, J. (2001). Thought and Poetry. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 25 (1), 5-11.

Koethe, J. (2009). Poetry and truth. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 33 (1), 53-60.

Lamarque, P. (2009a). Poetry and abstract thought. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 33 (1), 37-52.

Lamarque, P. (2009b). The elusiveness of poetic meaning. *Ratio* 22 (4), 398-420.

Leighton, A. (2009a). About about: On poetry and paraphrase. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 33 (1), 167-176.

Leighton, A. (2009b). On "the Hearing Ear": Some sonnets of the Rossettis. *Victorian Poetry* 47 (3), 505-516.

Lepore, E. and M. Stone (2016). Poetic Imagination. In N. Carroll and J. Gibson (eds) *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Literature* (pp. 323-333). New York and London: Routledge

McGregor, R. (2014). Poetic Thickness. *British Journal of Aesthetics* 54 (1), 49-64.

Pierce, Robert B. (2003). Defining "poetry". *Philosophy and Literature* 27 (1), 151-163.

Pinsky, R. (1998) *The Sounds of Poetry: A Brief Guide.* New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux inc.

Ribeiro, A. C. (2007). Intending to repeat: A definition of poetry. *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 65 (2), 189–201.

Ribeiro, A. C. (2009). Toward a Philosophy of Poetry. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 33, 61-77.

Ribeiro, A. C. (2013). Heavenly Hurt: The Joy and Value of Sad Poetry. In J. Levinson (ed.) *Suffering Art Gladly: The Paradox of Negative Emotions in Art* (pp. 186-206). Basingstoke: Palgrave-Macmillan.

Ribeiro, A.C. (2015). The Spoken and the Written: An Ontology of Poems. In J. Gibson (ed.) *The Philosophy of Poetry* (pp. 127-148)*.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Ribeiro, A.C. (2016). Poetry. In N. Carroll and J. Gibson (eds) *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Literature* (pp. 97-106). New York and London: Routledge

Rowe, M. W. (1996). Poetry and abstraction. *British Journal of Aesthetics* 36 (1), 1-15.

Rubin, J. S. (2007) *Songs of Ourselves: The Uses of Poetry in America*. Cambridge, MA and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Sutton-Spence, R. and M. Kaneko. (2007). Symmetry in Sign Language Poetry. *Sign Language Studies*, 7 (3), 284-318.

Simecek, K. (forthcoming). Cultivating Intimacy: the use of the second person in lyric poetry. *Philosophy and Literature*

Simecek, K. (2015) Beyond Narrative: Poetry, Emotion and the Perspectival View. *British Journal of Aesthetics* 55 (4), 497-513.

Simecek, K. and V. Ellis (2017). The Uses of Poetry: Renewing an Educational Understanding of a Language Art. *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 51 (1), 98-114.

Stecker, R. (2001). Expressiveness and expression in music and poetry. *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism,* 59 (1), 85-96.

Walton, K. (1990). *Mimesis as Make-believe: on the foundation of the representational arts.* Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press.

Walton, K. (2015). Thoughtwriting – in poetry and music. In *In Other Shoes: Music, Metaphor, Empathy, Existence* (pp. 54-74). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Wordsworth, W. (1802) 'Preface' to the *Lyrical Ballads, with Pastoral and Other Poems*. London: T.N. Longman and O. Rees.