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Thoughts on Poetry

Alexandra B. Gustafson

The College of Wooster, agustafson16@wooster.edu

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THOUGHTS ON POETRY

Alexandra B. Gustafson

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements of Senior Independent Study

Advisor: Ronald E. Hustwit

Department of Philosophy
The College of Wooster
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Abstract

The subject of this three-part project is *poetry*. More specifically, the project is a collection of thoughts about poetry, the language of poetry, and poetry-as-philosophy.

In its introductory section can be found a description of two competing accounts of language: referent theory, and meaning-is-use. While the latter seems a more complete picture on the whole, or so I assert, one must wonder: does it account for all the ways we use language? Specifically, can it account for the language of our main subject—poetry?

I assert not. In this vein, the second part of the project attempts to do what I claim should not be done by asking three questions of the language of poetry; namely, whether or not the sentences in poetry are statements, whether or not they can be bearers of truth-value, and whether or not they are meaningful. The chapter concludes with the claim that to ask these questions is to misunderstand the nature of poetry. Instead of asking these questions of poetry, I suggest that we might instead ask ourselves if perhaps we aren't mistaken about what these sorts of questions may accomplish—and not just in connection with poetry.

In the project's third section, I ask, "When it comes to philosophy, is it possible that our current methodology does not actually serve the purpose it was designed for? Or could it be that this purpose is itself misguided?" In this chapter I assert the latter and consider an alternate methodology, affirming that we should think of poetry *as philosophy*. The project concludes with an appendix that attempts to demonstrate the practice of, "Showing, Not Saying."

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Thoughts on Poetry
Chapter One: Language and Information-Giving

*43. For a large class of cases--though not for all--in which we employ the word **meaning** it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language game.¹*

This has baffled me for years. What baffled me was the “though not for all” which comes to: For another class of cases not. Now what classes are those? I think it must be so for words in poetry...poetry, one might say, is off the ground, a flight from Earth, from particular need and circumstance. It belongs, one might say, to an altogether different species. Winged words.²

Abstract: In the first part of this three-part project can be found a description of two competing accounts of language: referent theory, and meaning-is-use. While the latter seems a more complete picture on the whole, one must wonder: does it account for all the ways we use language? Specifically, can it account for the language of our main subject—poetry?

1. A Beginning

Our journey together is going to be a strange one – this I’ll readily admit. On it, there are two things I will occasionally ask of you: to imagine, and to walk with me. I believe these are the flour and eggs of good philosophy, and hope you’re not opposed to humouring me in this. If you are doubting already, however, then I’m afraid that this journey will be wasted on you – read no further. If, however, you can now picture yourself sitting in the back of a noisy classroom, the round, rich scent of your daily coffee warming your tired mind, then, “Welcome.” This is for you.

For you, I begin with a story:

¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Translated by G. E. M. Anscombe,

² O.K. Bouwsma, “1968 Notes” In *Notes on Wittgenstein’s Philosophy, 1965-1975*.

Buzzing circles of student doctors poured over anatomical charts while the specimens brought into the lab rustled and chirped. Someone to the left of me sharpened his gleaming silver scalpel conspicuously – he admired its bright edge over his steaming coffee and stale morning muffin. My eyes were not on the well-worn chart in front of me, nor my blade, but were trained on the instructing surgeon as she too prepared her tools—gently, lovingly—under the glaring fluorescent lights. Something about this day felt different, despite the familiar stink of fresh formaldehyde that filled my nostrils, the sharp stench replacing the comforting warmth of my daily dark roast. Called to order, the lecture hushed. The room, as usual, was filled with silence, coffee, and formaldehyde – and yet, something was different.

The surgeon took her place at the front of the room: “There is much to learn from close and careful analysis.” She articulated each word carefully, her bright teeth hissing over each ‘s’, “It is my great hope that, someday soon, the truth will be discovered thanks to what we have practiced here.” As was customary (they told us, “necessary”), the specimens were being distributed still live, and mine was handed over just as the surgeon concluded her speech.

A small, red-breasted bird was placed on the gleaming surface in front of me – it preened its clipped wings, pausing to cock its head in my direction. Its bright black eyes seemed to regard me, and the creature made a hesitating little hop in my direction. It seemed to be considering—what exactly, I couldn’t say—I leaned in closer, and it seemed to lean toward me... before suddenly breaking into a shrill song.

The unexpected noise so startled me that I scraped my chair backward with a painful, grating sound that caused a head to whirl around in the row in front of me, a quizzical eyebrow thrown in my direction. Clearing my throat around something suddenly stuck there, I broke eye contact with the bird as its song continued to burst forth in an impressive soprano. With a cough that was half embarrassment, half something else, I shuffled through my papers, glaring at the songbird as it trilled with increasing insistence. I remarked aloud about the nature of the tune and quickly scribbled something across my lab report – the head hesitatingly turned back around.

The melody echoed throughout the room and I cleared my throat again, a curious sensation stinging the corners of my eyes as they darted from the unknowing creature, down to my lab report, and back to the front of the classroom. The surgeon, who had begun the lecture, raised her voice over the disruption and demonstrated with a swift, elegant motion how to most efficiently end the lives in front of us. The buzzing started up again as her motions were mimicked with varying precision; while some thrusts went deep and other cuts just scraped the surface, each one effectively drained the life out of its startled target. As I took my scalpel roughly in hand, my eyes swept hesitatingly back to the songbird, which

had not yet ceased to sing. The small black eyes peered intently into mine, and I knew that I could be a surgeon no more. Never was one.

The creature singing in my hands, I burst from the back of the lecture room where a truly gruesome scene was now taking place. My feet pounded the linoleum of the hallway as together we fled through pair after pair of heavy double-doors before hurdling out into the sunlight. I spread wide my fingers: “You are free!” I cried. But the bird did not fly.

Why did the bird not fly? Not because its wings had been clipped, as the story describes, but because it was not, in fact, a bird at all. The story I’ve told you is not a lie, but neither is it exactly true. You see, it uses language in a particular way. It is a kind of riddle: a *metaphor*, an extended one, which compares something that is “not a bird at all” to a bird. This something that is like a bird, but is not a bird, is *poetry*.

2. Language and Information-Giving

“What could this mean?”

From time to time I will imagine you saying things like, “What could this mean?” I imagine that I’m anticipating your reaction, though at times I’m likely to be wrong. Much of this project will be getting things wrong, but I think there’s something about that that’s right. So, “What could this mean?” I imagine you saying. You will learn as you get to know me that it is not in my nature to give explanations of things like metaphors, however, in order for you to understand why this is the case, I feel I must do so now. “A metaphor is most basically described as an instance of figurative language wherein one thing is likened to another.” This is a particular kind of answer.

There was a time not so long ago when I was a particular kind of student, doing a particular kind of work. The assumption behind this work was something like this: language contains information. This is hardly deniable – language contains information.

What kind of information it contains and how precisely this information is conveyed, however, aren't such certainties.

There are those that think this way: language is composed of *statements*. Statements (sometimes also referred to as *propositions*) are sentences that represent states of affairs in the world. In this representational theory, statements give information about the actual world, representing it either as it actually *is*, or as it *is not*. Statements are said to do this in a particular sort of way; namely, through the conjoining of a subject with a predicate. The *subject*, either a proper noun or a descriptive phrase, is assumed to name something in the world. The *predicate*, or what is said of the subject, either represents the subject as it is actually found—in which case it says something *true*—or represents it otherwise—in which case the statement proposes a *false* picture. All statements may therefore be evaluated as being either true or false, and only statements, in their potential to be true or false representations of the world, are meaningful.

This is a compelling explanation, particularly when we consider how it is most of us learn to use language:

1. Cum ipsi (majores homines) appellabant rem aliquam, et cum secundum eam vocem corpus ad aliquid movebant, videbam, et tenebam hoc ab eis vocari rem illam, quod sonabant, cum eam vellent ostendere. Hoc autem eos velle ex motu corporis aperiebatur: tamquam verbis naturalibus omnium gentium, quae fiunt vultu et nutu oculorum, ceterorumque membrorum actu, et sonitu vocis indicante affectionem animi in petendis, habendis, rejiciendis, fugiendisve rebus. Ita verba in variis sententiis locis suis posita, et crebro audita, quarum rerum signa essent, paulatim colligebam, measque jam voluntates, edomito in eis signis ore, per haec enuntiabam.³

³ “When grown-ups named some object and at the same time turned towards it, I perceived this, and I grasped that the thing was signified by the sound they uttered, since they meant to point *it* out. This, however, I gathered from their gestures, the natural language of all peoples, the language that by means of facial expression and the play of eyes, of the movements

Applied to written language in particular, it would seem to be the case that any statement in a passage, article, or poem, then, may be analyzed in regards to its representational potential for truth and falsity, its meaning thus interpreted. Thinking this way, the critic of language becomes a surgeon, carefully carving up sentences and dissecting their parts in order to obtain information. Why should I—should anyone—take issue with this picture? Well, there are those who believe that language isn't separable from *how* it is used. Says Wittgenstein of the above theory of language:

3. Augustine, we might say, does describe a system of communication; only not everything that we call language is this system. And one has to say this in many cases where the question arises "Is this an appropriate description or not?" The answer is: "Yes, it is appropriate, but only for this narrowly circumscribed region, not for the whole of what you were claiming to describe."⁴

And of meaning as *use*:

43. For a large class of cases--though not for all--in which we employ the word **meaning** it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language game.⁵

If what Wittgenstein says is correct, the statements in a novel, then, cannot be stripped from the work and stretched across the operating table. Instead, the sentences must be analyzed in their context: who said it, and to whom? For what purpose, and in what place? In this way, language becomes something dependent on language-speakers.

of the limbs and the tone of voice, indicates the affections of the soul when it desires, or clings to, or rejects, or recoils from, something. In this way, little by little, I learnt to understand what things the words, which I heard uttered in their respective places in various sentences, signified. And once I got my tongue around these signs, I used them to express my wishes." St. Augustine in Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, Translated by G. E. M. Anscombe, New York: Macmillan Company, 1959, Aphorism 1.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

Suddenly our talk of statements becomes an incomplete picture as we consider all the other ways that linguistic acts are performed. Language contains, not just a potential for representation, but a wealth of potential information expressed through particular use. Language is a living creature, or perhaps many living creatures, and therefore ought to be studied live:

23. But how many kinds of sentence are there? Say assertion, question, and command? –There are *countless* kinds: countless different kinds of use of what we call “symbols”, “words”, “sentences”. And this multiplicity is not something fixed, given once for all; but new types of languages, new language-games, as we may say, come into existence, and others become obsolete and forgotten. (We can get a *rough picture* of this from the changes in mathematics.)

Here the term “language-game” is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life.

Review the multiplicity of language-games in the following examples, and in others:

Giving orders, and obeying them—

Describing the appearance of an object, or giving its measurements—

Constructing an object from a description (a drawing)—

Reporting an event—

Speculating about an event—

Forming and testing a hypothesis—

Presenting the results of an experiment in tables and diagrams—

...

—It is interesting to compare the multiplicity of the tools in language and of the ways they are used, the multiplicity of words and sentence, with what logicians have said about the structure of language. (Including the author of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.)⁶

⁶ Ibid.

If one wishes to gain knowledge about the nature and ways of a wild creature, one ought not kill it, stretch it across a table, and then throw it into a jar of brine; what is gained in this way is not at all what was meant to be attained, but something else entirely. If you wish to know the nature of an animal, would you not be better off to observe it in its natural habitat? To describe its motions, perhaps to paint its portrait? As says Wittgenstein, “Here one can only *describe* and say: this is what human life is like”.⁷ Thinking this way, the critic of language becomes a zoologist.

There are other creatures of language, however, that are not to be studied even in this way. Again, as says Wittgenstein, “For a large class of cases--*though not for all...*” It seems to me that one of these creatures, these not-for-all cases, is poetry. The metaphor explained (the riddle answered): our songbird is poetry. Though the above list of language-games is by no means complete, we might notice that poetry does not appear on it—nor would its addition be proper. “Why do you say this?” It has to do with the fact that poetry, by its very nature, is not information-giving. In order to explain what I mean by this, it is necessary to first say more about our subject.

3. What is Poetry? (Where Definitions Cannot Be Given)

What is poetry? More urgently, *what is it to ask, “What is poetry?”* This might seem a strange question, but it is the very strangeness of the question that makes our asking it imperative. It seems to me that a distinction ought to be drawn, for there are two things someone could mean by such a question: first, they may be wondering about *form*. In asking, “What is poetry?” they may be asking about the structure of a poem – the

⁷ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Translated by G. E. M. Anscombe, New York: Macmillan Company, 1959, Aphorism 121.

necessary rhythm and number of lines. Must a poem be about nature, must it rhyme? What is it that makes a thing a poem instead of something else? It may alternatively be that someone is wondering about a poem's *function*: "What is it that a poem does?" Does a poem describe? Does a poem have to mean something? Does a poem reveal truth? Regardless, to ask, "What is poetry?" is to expect an answer. Never mind the kind of answer given—is an answer in either of these two scenarios warranted? Let us consider (considering is not unlike imagining):

In answer to the first case, it seems to me that someone may try to give a definition. This may seem proper, for surely there are some things that we call poems and some things that we don't. The great difficulty in giving an answer here, however, is that poems don't seem to have one common form. What definition could be given that would include both *The Iliad* and *Hamlet*? I wonder, what definition could encompass both Matsuo Basho's "Autumn Moonlight"⁸ and Ogden Nash's "The Panther"⁹; Beethoven's *Für Elise*, snow falling in the lamplight, and the word repeated: '*blackberry*'? This is a strange list, and another incomplete one—it seems to me that 'poem' may properly denote a great number of (surprising) things—does it also seem this way to you?

Still, someone may try. They would only have to open up a dictionary to claim it could be done. However, though it may be possible to give a list of characteristics that some or even many of these works share, it seems to me that these characteristics should not (indeed, *cannot*) be taken as necessary or sufficient conditions; though 'poetry' may

⁸ "Autumn moonlight—/a worm digs silently/into the chestnut." Matsuo Basho, "Autumn Moonlight," Translated by Robert Hass, *Poetry.net*, STANDS4 LLC, 2016. Web. 1 Feb. 2016.

⁹ "The panther is like a leopard,/Except it hasn't been peppered./Should you behold a panther crouch,/Prepare to say Ouch./Better yet, if called by a panther,/Don't anther." Ogden Nash, "The Panther," *Poetry Foundation*, Web. 1 Feb. 2016.

be looked up in a dictionary, to read the entry is not to learn what *poetry* is, or what poems *are*. Nevertheless, many have attempted to define poetry:

Poetry is literature written in meter; verse.¹⁰

Poetry is an art form in which human language is used for its aesthetic qualities in addition to, or instead of, its notional and semantic content.¹¹

Poetry is writing that formulates a concentrated imaginative awareness of experience in language chosen and arranged to create a specific emotional response through meaning, sound, and rhythm.¹²

Poetry is a literary work in which special intensity is given to the expression of feelings and ideas by the use of distinctive style and rhythm; poems collectively or as a genre of literature.¹³

Which of these definitions is best? Should they be combined? It does not matter, for regardless, I am quite sure that one could always find another sort of poem and ask, “Yes, but what about *this*?” When it comes to form, then, it seems to me that a definite answer to our question might not be proper.¹⁴ If a definite answer is not warranted in this first case, what about in the second?

¹⁰ The Free Dictionary by Farlex, Farlex, Inc. 2003-2016. Web. 8 Mar. 2016.

¹¹ Poetry.org, “What is Poetry?” 2005. Web. 3 Mar. 2016.

¹² Merriam-Webster, Web. 28 Feb. 2016.

¹³ Oxford Dictionaries, Web. 28 Feb. 2016.

¹⁴ There are those that have realized the absurdity of asking for a definition of poetry—most of them, unsurprisingly, poets. The “definitions” they give are of a different kind—sometimes paradoxical, often flippant, and nearly always poems in their own right—and are for this reason not considered here.

In order to answer the question of function, one would have to enter into a particular kind of investigation: how is one to determine what it is a poem does? It seems to me that this investigator would likely turn to a discussion of poetry as language.

To do this, however, would be to assume that the language inside of a poem operates in the same way as language does outside of it – it would be to take for granted that poetry is a language-game. What if it is not?

While one must understand the multiplicity of uses a word has outside of a poem to understand it inside of one, once placed inside a poem, a word undergoes a departure from its associated language-game(s). A word is no longer a particular piece on a particular board, but becomes all the pieces in one, divorced from all boards. A word in a poem contains all its earthly uses, but is itself a flight from earth. This is part of the magic of a poem: that like Wittgenstein’s “duck-rabbit” the words in a poem seem to change depending on how you look at them. This is why I said before that poetry is not in the business of information-giving.

It seems to me, then, that while a straightforward investigation of a poem’s language may lead to answers, these answers are liable to reveal very little—or nothing at all—about poetry and what it really is. Note that what I have not said is this: any answer in this second case is also not warranted. How this can be I will soon demonstrate. Indeed, the rest of this project will be devoted to this second version of the question, “What is poetry?”

“How do we begin?”

With unlearning. Here is what I propose: that we begin with what poetry *is not* before we ask ourselves what it *is*. The next section of this project will, therefore, be a

“traditional” investigation of the language of poetry – together you and I will take on characters engaged in something I claim we should not do, for the purpose of discovering first-hand how the language of poetry is different from ordinary language. It will require your patience and your imagination, but if you choose to walk with me you may unlearn many falsehoods that have long been thought of as truths. From there, we will change our characters once more and attempt something entirely different.

Our journey together is going to be a strange one, this I’ll admit. What the rest of this journey will look like, however, I dare not yet say. Instead I ask for your imagination, and if you’ve given it to me, then I hope you’ll now imagine my extended hand:

“Please, walk with me.”

Thoughts on Poetry
Chapter Two: The Language of Poetry

*One must start out with error and covert it into truth.
That is, one must reveal the source of error, otherwise,
hearing the truth won't do any good. The truth cannot force
its way in when something else is occupying its place.*¹⁵

*My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who
understands me finally recognizes them as senseless, when he
has climbed out through them, on them, over them. (He must
so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed
up on it.)*¹⁶

Abstract: When it comes to the language of poetry, there are three fundamental questions that we may be tempted to ask; namely, whether or not the sentences in poetry are statements, whether or not they can be bearers of truth-value, and whether or not they are meaningful. To ask these questions, however, is to misunderstand the nature of poetry. Instead of asking these questions of poetry, we might instead ask ourselves if perhaps we aren't mistaken about what these sorts of questions may accomplish.

1. What Can Be Said

Following from what I said before, it occurs to me that there are two sorts of people who might be motivated to give an account of the language of poetry: one such person may have a great love for the intricacies of language, and, finding poetic language at once strange and enchanting, may have a great desire to study its mysteries. I imagine this investigator nestled snugly into his American leather armchair by the dusty firelight, an ancient volume propped open in one hand.

¹⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein, "Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough," In *Philosophical Investigations, 1912-1951*, edited by James Carl Klagge and Alfred Nordmann. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993.

¹⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, London: Kegan Paul, 1922, 6.54.

Our second character, I imagine, rather wishes that poetry would either just explain itself or disappear altogether. He tears at his hair and paces across the room before throwing himself onto a threadbare sofa – “What does it mean? What does it *mean!*” – quite dramatic of him, really. It further strikes me that I am not sure which of these represents the Philosopher and which the Poet.

Regardless of which *I* am and which *you* are, here we find ourselves. Imagine that we sit together in either of the rooms above (I won’t tell which one I chose if you won’t). What is there to be said about poetry? About the *language* of poetry? It would seem that we start with at least this assumption: that there is something about it that makes it peculiar, that makes it different from ordinary speech. We might begin, therefore, by asking ourselves in what ways that may be.

If you’re in a mind to play along, you might now imagine yourself leaning back, fingertips pressed together in patient expectancy. I make the following suggestion – it seems to me that, when we ordinarily speak of language, there are three questions that we are in the habit of asking. They are: (1) whether or not speakers use language to make statements, (2) whether or not the sentences speakers utter can be bearers of truth-value, and (3) whether or not those sentences are meaningful.

“Why these questions, and what do they have in common?”

An answer like this is sometimes given: statements are the most essential part of language; they represent states of affairs in the world and may therefore be evaluated as either true or false; only statements, in their potential for truth or falsity, are meaningful. Refraining from commenting on this characterization, let us ask these questions of poetry and see what they reveal, beginning with the first:

2. Does Poetry Make Statements?

Language, as we ordinarily use it, is composed at least partially of statements. These are collections of words arranged according to the rules of grammar that come together to declare the relevant content in such a way that they may be evaluated as being either true or false. Regarding how precisely this content is expressed, talk of words as ‘signs’ tends to follow: words, as signs, signify or refer to something. This may be a material something which belongs to the world of mice and men, or it may be an immaterial, abstract something like an emotion, or a mathematical equation (both of which belong to strange other-worlds, indeed).

These words, these nouns and verbs, must be woven together by means of various copulas, this being a critical part of how they come to be statements. Words alone, after all, though they may denote objects in this or the next world, can hardly be said to express much at all if not joined together in the appropriate way as they are uttered.

Now, when these statements are then understood in the context in which they are spoken, it is only then that they come to express what I have called the relevant content, which no doubt calls to mind other words like ‘intended’ or ‘intention’. That is correct, for what these statements express is the specific intention of their speaker – the listener understands the statements as representative of this intention, and it is then that the listener knows what to make of the utterance and what is being asked of him (for he is being called on to do something, you know). This game of intend and interpret has rules specific to the circumstances of what is spoken, and so, in this way, language participants operate with a very particular shared understanding.¹⁷

¹⁷ A distinction is sometimes drawn here between what a word refers to and its *sense*. Further talk of sense, or a word’s intension, however, we will save for our discussion of meaning.

An example of a statement might therefore be something like, “My teacup is empty,” spoken in the context of me to you in one of the above drawing rooms – whichever you chose. ‘My’ designates ownership and the relationship between the cup and me; ‘teacup’ designates the cup itself; we may evaluate how my statement corresponds to the actual state of affairs in order to say something about truth or falsity; and so on. What is most important is that the utterance and the context, understood together, supply for you how you ought to interpret what my statement as a whole means. For example, it may be the case that I am asking simply for your acknowledgement of the empty teacup, or it may be that I am actually requesting my cup be refilled, since you are topping off your own, anyway. Regardless, this is the way that we understand such utterances as these – these statements – within their place in the world.

I wonder, however, what we would we say about a sentence like:

anyone lived in a pretty how town
(with up so floating many bells down)
spring summer autumn winter
he sang his didn't he danced his did.¹⁸

I'll let you in on this much: the sentence comes from a poem. Poems, we will come to see, play by a different set of rules than the kinds we see governing ordinary exchanges in language.

This particular sentence does not follow the rules governing statements in a few, instantly noticeable ways: first, it does not lay flat as a good sentence ought to, but is broken up into four lines – the sentence falls off at the ends, and then stacks itself one line upon another! It does not contain capital letters where it ought to, nor does it contain

¹⁸ e.e. Cummings, "anyone lived in a pretty how town," In *Complete Poems 1904-1962*, edited by George J. Firmage. Liveright Publishing Corporation, 1926.

proper punctuation. These are structural differences, but there are differences in denotation as well: to what could ‘how town’, ‘many bells’, or ‘his didn’t’ refer? To what could *any* of it refer?

“But surely the words refer to *something*? How, otherwise, could we understand them to mean anything?”

One sort of answer is this: If we insist that the words must refer in order to mean, we would have to admit that they refer to things that do not exist in our world, for as we know, there is no actual, one thing that ‘how town’ designates. “What is it to say that a word refers to something that does not exist in our world?”

Let’s speculate: If the words in the poem refer to something, but that something does not exist in *our* world, perhaps the words refer to *another* world. Perhaps, if the poem is speaking of a ‘how town’, it is the case that these and the other words of the poem denote objects in a fictional other-world. Perhaps this world exists in the imagination, created from impressions of the real world – you could imagine someone saying this.

“This example,” I picture you interjecting, “is a very particular instance of poetry – surely not all poems speak of such nonsensical things as ‘how towns’; surely some sentences in poetry refer just as sentences outside of it do – to things that we do find in *our* world, as you say.”

Exploring this thought, let’s look at the sentences below:

To the trackless forest wild,
To the loneliest abode;
O! the heart is reconciled,
That has felt oppression’s load!
The desert place is bright,
The wilderness is fair,

If hope but shed her light, -
If freedom be but there.¹⁹

“This poem,” you might say, having turned to it quite by accident in some dusty text,²⁰

“This poem speaks of the forest. Does ‘*forest*’ not refer to a thing in our world?”

These sentences (and sentences like them) appear as though they refer. If someone were to try to look for what is doing the denoting, however, one would quickly see that ‘forest’ is not being used as a proper name, but rather that the phrase ‘the trackless forest wild’ is a descriptive phrase to be understood as a whole. This creates a difficulty. For if I asked you to go find ‘the trackless forest wild’ it may be the case that you could find an example of something like it – at least you could find yourself in a forest and claim that it was, “quite trackless, quite trackless indeed,” but still, how are we to know if this is *the* forest of McLachlan? Quite simply, it would not be – it could not be.

You could conceive of someone saying: We can *imagine* the trackless wild, even if we cannot find it. We could imagine the loneliest place, the wilderness fair. Perhaps it is the case that what these words refer to is an idea, just as the ‘how town’ was. If you still do not like this talk of words referring to ideal places, perhaps you could instead be sympathetic to an answer like this:

‘The trackless forest wild’ of the poem does not refer to any place, real or imaginary. Rather, it refers to the *impression given by a place*. It is the essence of a place, the feel of a place, the mood of a place that the words in the poem refer to.

¹⁹ Alexander McLachlan, “O! come to the greenwood shade,” in *The Penguin Book of Canadian Verse*, Edited by Ralph Gustafson, Revised ed. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1967. 42.

²⁰ And it would have to be quite by accident, for the book you’ve picked up is a collection of Canadian poetry.

If you find this compelling, you might agree that ‘the loneliest abode’, then, does not designate a particular cabin high in the mountains, nor does it designate a hypothetical abode that we could imagine (I’ve imagined it as a cabin high in the woods...as you can see), but instead denotes the feeling of absolute loneliness, or the immensity of the silence found in a forest. Perhaps it is an experience that the words refer to; perhaps the statements in poetry are expressions of experiences. Let’s consider:

I switch it on: the Master Switch in the whirring, ticking, smoke-filled factory of my body. The machine lurches and grinds as warning sirens flash fire-red through the choking, charcoal smog.

—did they
make it to

you?

Radar blips and shadowed sightings, the wings of birds, and words carefully carved, “But still, there is always a way”. Though foreign and forlorn, the cry is raised: There is always a way.

The metal groans as a gear somewhere gives, and the machine comes alive with a clanging hallelujah that echoes and emerges despite the efforts of the Override Valve. From my chest it’s all waves, Hallelujah, and Save My Soul.

And the world
is white.²¹

How should we understand the above sentences? “A gear somewhere gives,” it says. Again we see that, if we were asked to find ‘the gear’, we would instead find ourselves in a pickle. Likewise, ‘the machine’ – what machine?

If we understand the poem to be speaking of imaginary things, then we could try again to imagine the machine, as we did earlier with the loneliest place. Someone might say: reading the poem again, however, we see that the machine may not actually be a

²¹ A.B. Gustafson, “The Machine.”

machine. If we imagined a machine, we would have missed the point; this poem is speaking *metaphorically*.²²

“What if we continued with our talk of impressions?” “And the world is white,” concludes the poem. If the words within the statement refer to neither the real world nor an imaginary one, then perhaps they refer to the experience of a white world. But what is the experience of a white world? What does a white world feel like? Are we to think of literal whiteness? Do we know how to evaluate whether this statement is true or false, or whether or not we have interpreted it correctly? Alas, what looked so promising before becomes a difficult container to fit poetry into.

Stepping back from the problem of reference, here is another thought someone might have: perhaps our difficulty is stemming from looking at individual sentences within the poem. Without worrying about the implications, let’s ask, “Does the poem as a whole make a statement?”

“Reading the poem again, we could give a statement about it.” We could give a summary of the poem. Is this the same thing as saying that the poem makes a statement? “It, as a whole, leaves a particular impression.” Is a poem reducible to a single impression? Why not simply write one word, ‘*bad!*’ and be done with it?

At this point we likely both resemble the man in the second room, regardless of who or what we decided we were at the beginning of our inquiry. We are no closer to deciding whether or not poetry refers, and if it does, how it does this. Where are we to look for these statements if this other question cannot be answered?

²² I told you before that it was not in my nature to give explanations of things like metaphors, and now I find myself presented with the opportunity to tell you why this is so: to explain the metaphor is to translate a sentence in a poem into the language of information-giving, turning the sentence into something that it is not—namely, a statement (or more likely, several statements). I will spend more time soon expanding on my reasons for this aversion.

I regret that I have led you on, my friend. I will now do something rather strange and say: *Do not look for statements.*

“What do you say?”

If what one is trying to do is *understand* poetry, one should not look for statements. When faced with a poem, one should not look for references or referents and where they may or may not lie. In fact, to engage in the above is to misunderstand poetry entirely, productive though such a discussion may appear to be (there is a type of person who desires nothing more than answers).

Let me explain: The rules of poetic language are actually very different from those that we are used to. The first rule, it seems to me, is just that: “Do not look for statements.” What the language of poetry invites us to do is simply this: to engage with it as poetry and to see it as what it is, not to look past it. The difference is in *focus*. What our attention ought to be drawn to is the awe of the language itself – nothing else. The poem, simply put, *states* nothing.

Thus, there is no use asking whether or not poetry makes statements. Instead, what we might say of the poem (if we had to say something) is this: it simply *is*. The poem, if it can be said to be doing anything, is *being*. You may not yet see what I mean - can someone learn how to read a poem? This I am not sure, but I am sure that you can unlearn what you have learned before (I am, of course, speaking of our three questions), and in the unlearning the greatest damage is undone.

I will therefore repeat that the first rule is this:

1. Do not look for statements.

“That seems to leave us in a rough spot, indeed, for what more can we say about poetry then? It was said before that only statements can be evaluated as either true or false, and that only in their potential for truth or falsity can they be said to mean! If we are not to look for statements, what can be said about truth? What can be said about meaning?” I say that the second and third rules of poetry are:

2. Do not look for truth.

3. Do not look for meaning.

“I begin to suspect that you chose not to be the Philosopher, but to be the Poet!” I tell you that I am both, and that they are one and the same. To say more now, however, would take us into the final portion of this project too soon, and for this reason I hesitate to confide more.

After all, all that we have learned before takes time to unlearn. For this reason I will proceed carefully and slowly that we may unlearn together—my unlearning has taken much time; even now I fight the old ways. Let’s remove ourselves from the rooms I described in the introduction, for a false picture did I paint of both philosophers and poets, a false dichotomy between philosophy and poetry. The poet-philosopher is most comfortable without walls around her, so let’s take our conversation outside. The crisp air, the molten leaves – imagine you and me picking our way through autumn trees.

I’ve given the rules that we may keep them in mind. What is the next question that we have been taught to ask? Let’s walk on:

3. Can Poetry Be True?

“What should we say about the question of truth?”

If we are not to look for statements, talking about truth seems an impossibility, at least insofar as we understand it in relation to statements. It appears, then, that we are faced with two options: either we must find a new way to think about truth in poetic language, or we must not look for truth at all – let’s not walk too quickly, though.

I said before that statements are collections of words arranged according to the rules of grammar, which come together *to declare the relevant content in such a way that they may be evaluated as being either true or false*. By this, it is sometimes meant that either the statement represents what it speaks of as it actually is, in which case the statement is true, or it does not, in which case it is false. An example of this might therefore be demonstrated with an evaluation of the statement, “The reader of this essay is imagining himself or herself walking with me.” If it is the case that you, the reader in question, is doing just this, then the statement is true. If you are not, then the statement is false. Simple enough.

“Yes. All this talk of true and false does hinge on the evaluation of statements. If we are not to look for statements in poetry, as you say, or say that the poem is a statement in and of itself, how do you suggest we talk about truth in connection with a poem?”

Well, we could think of truth in other ways.

A move like this could be made: we could say that the sentences in a poem are true if they represent what the poet truly believes. Regarding our latest example, we would say, “It is true that, ‘From [the poet’s] chest it’s all waves, Hallelujah, and Save My Soul,’ if the poet believes it to be true.” This would imply that the poet is the source of truth, and that a poet must believe what they write (or else the poem is false, or, we might even say, a lie).

In what way must the poet believe what they write? Must the author of the above poem believe literally that waves are coming from her chest? We want to say no, or we would be inclined to say that all poets are delusional - perhaps we're inclined to say that, anyway. No, when we say that a poet must believe what they write, we think we're talking about something like good faith, or authenticity. A poet must represent themselves honestly in their work. Speaking this way, we begin to shift from talking about statements or sentences as bearers of truth and instead locate the truth within the poem, taken as a whole.

Saying that a poet must represent themselves honestly with their poem is one way to talk about an entire poem as the bearer of truth. Another way to do this, still speaking of truth as authenticity, is to say conversely that the poem must faithfully represent what the poet intended it to represent, and if it does, then it can be said to be true.

For every poem, then, should we be asking ourselves either, "Is the poet represented faithfully in the poem?" or "Is this poem what the poet intended it to be?" There are buildings full of people in colleges around the world devoted to this question, and what a many lonesome hours must be spent there. How many such people languish away wondering about the minds of long-dead men and women, trying to see through the words in front of them? Trying to see through the dank earth and into mouldy caskets. Even if we have the good fortune to be reading a poem by a live poet, asking about the author's intention directs our focus far, far away.

I'll show you what I mean – hold this paper out in front of you. Look at the words, and their shape, and the whiteness of the negative space around them. Then – and you'll have to wait till you've read the rest of my directions – shift your gaze to just

behind the paper, to the wall, or to the glazed-over eyes of your colleague. What does doing so tell you about these words?

“Alright then, truth shouldn’t be looked for behind the poem. You’ve much to say about shifting focus; is it into the poem that you want us to look next?”

Yes. There is a second way we could think of truth, and that involves looking inside of the poem. It involves thinking of *non-logical truth*.

The great trouble with this approach is that non-logical truth falls within the realm of the ineffable. While ineffability is not misplaced in connection with poetry, to try and say more about the nature of this truth would be a grave error indeed.²³ Which is why I will not say more now. Instead, I say that we would be better off not looking for any sort of truth in poetry at all.

This is not to say that poetry does not say anything true, but rather that the search for truth will not bring truth (perhaps the truth lies in the understanding). I quote:

A person travels for many days to the Himalayas to seek the word of an Indian holy man meditating in an isolated cave. Tired from his journey, but eager and expectant that his quest is about to reach fulfillment, he asks the sage, “What is the meaning of life?” After a long pause, the sage opens his eyes and says, “Life is a fountain.” “What do you mean life is a fountain?” barks the questioner. “I have just traveled thousands of miles to hear your words, and all you have to tell me is that? That’s ridiculous.” The sage then looks up from the floor of the cave and says, “You mean it’s not a fountain?” In a variant of the story, he replies, “So it’s not a fountain.”²⁴

²³ I say this because non-logical truths are, at “best”, not able to be captured adequately by a single (or possibly even multiple) proposition(s); at “worst”, they cannot (and therefore should not) be put into words at all.

²⁴ Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations*, Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1981. 571.

This is how it is with all non-logical truths. “Then you hold that there are truths in poetry?” Perhaps, perhaps not. That is all I will say—perhaps, perhaps not. Whether there is or is not this kind of truth to be found, I repeat that it is a mistake to *look* for it. The second rule of poetry is, then:

2. Do not look for truth.

I am imagining that we’ve been stopped in front of a stream for some time now, and have been speaking in low voices, our breaths falling from us as we stare out at the spaces in between the branches. We stand with our hands in our pockets, our noses and chins frosty with our escaped breath. You are silent for some time before you murmur, “Because to do so is to misunderstand poetry, you will say.” If you are still playing along, I hope you will imagine yourself saying this; what I mean to do is un-teach, and to be un-taught you must imagine.

“Because to do so is to misunderstand poetry, you will say.” Yes. The *point* of a poem is not to suggest truths, just as neither is it the point of a poem to mean:

A poem should be equal to:
Not true.

For all the history of grief
An empty doorway and a maple leaf.

For love
The leaning grasses and two lights above the sea—

A poem should not mean
But be.²⁵

This is another road we ought to go down as long as you don’t mind doubling back – the day is not yet gone and we’ve nowhere to be. Are you imagining us carrying on?

²⁵Archibald MacLeish, "Ars Poetica," In *Collected Poems 1917-1982*, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1985.

4. Does Poetry Mean?

“A Poem should not mean/But be.” Just because it is not the point of a poem to mean does not mean (I dodge your sharp glance) that there are not those who will still search meaning in a poem. There are those that try, and some of them begin in this way: In order to discover whether or not poetry means, we might first ask ourselves how it is possible to mean. In order to do so we must ask: what do we mean by ‘mean’?

Initially, it strikes me that we use ‘mean’ in connection with language in two different ways: *denotation* and *connotation*. Concerning the former, we might well remember all our talk of signs and referring. Regarding the latter, we are usually speaking of the sense of the word, or of its intension, as I mentioned so briefly before.

We have said that denotation has no home inside of a poem; it is not correct to look for references or referents in connection with poetry. What more are we to say about denotation, then? Perhaps more, but it would be a fruitless endeavour – this much I hope I have un-taught at least in part. Therefore, let us consider what a word or sentence in a poem may connote as we again practice shifting our focus inward.

When he told me he loved me, he said it with an inhale,
As though he could breathe the words back in.

I saw those words in his eyes,
Reflections of cigarette-like smoke
Disappearing back into the black hole
Of his open lips in half-time.²⁶

That’s a curious image, speaking while breathing in. Anyone who has tried it knows how impossible (or undignified if managed) it is to do such a thing. Perhaps in thinking this, however, we take the words too literally, and are slipping back into recalling the actions,

²⁶ A.B. Gustafson, “Inhale.”

etc. that they denote. This type of language, perhaps, should not be understood literally, but metaphorically.

If this is the case, what can we say about how the words mean?

This is one way: though the words in the poem, literally interpreted, *say* one thing, we should take them (together, in a sentence) to *mean* another. If this is the case, then the poet is doing something curious indeed when they write, and interpreting a poem becomes something of a puzzle. We must look past the words of the poem and suppose what they could mean—we must make guesses and put forth theories. How are we to guess what someone means when they do not say what they mean? How are we to know if we have guessed *correctly*?

We could think of this language is like this: the connotation of one word is meant to affect how another word is understood; in a metaphorical phrase we should think of one word in light of another. For example: “I saw those words in his eyes,/ reflections of cigarette-like smoke.” If this phrase is understood metaphorically then we should do something like think of ‘words’ as though they had the intension of ‘smoke’ – in this case the words become something floating, dark, reflected. The connotation of the latter part of the phrase is transported and applied to the former, and in this way we see that there is a transplantation of senses occurring.

‘Mean’ as a transplantation of senses – as promising as the above explanation may sound to some, I must ask: is this how we use ‘mean’ in our every-day usage of the word? I am, of course, thinking of Wittgenstein here; perhaps this is the point in our exploration where we might “try on” meaning-is-use by thinking of the ways that we ordinarily use ‘mean’ in connection with ‘poem’ or ‘poetry’.

“What does this poem mean?”

When we use ‘mean’ in this way, it is as though we are asking for a summary. We want an explanation of the poem and what it intends to convey as a whole. We expect that there is some message contained within, and we want to know what it is. We want a straight-forward answer. While it may seem to be the case that an explanation of this sort can elucidate the hidden features of a poem, this is not so. Imagine asking someone, “What does this poem mean?” and having them tell you about the intricacies of the allusions and the symbolism contained within. “Ah,” you say, “I understand the poem better now,” but you do not. You understand the words spoken by your ‘translator’; your understanding of the poem, if it has changed at all, has lessened. You have understood the poem as though it was, or was part of, a language-game.

“What was this poem meant for?”

Here we are speaking of an artist’s intention and returning our focus to the poet. What was her purpose in writing this piece – what did she want us to understand? What did she wish it to convey? This use of ‘mean’ is like the above use of ‘mean’ in that, when we speak this way, we are asking for a statement in plain language. The words of the poem have been lost on us.

“This poem means that, somewhere, there is a poet,” or perhaps, “His giving me a poem means that he cares for me.”

When we speak in this way we speak of the poem only “in passing,” as it were. While this is no doubt a way to use ‘mean’ in connection with a poem, it tells us next to nothing about the poem itself. These phrases mention the poem only as it is a

consequence of something else, and in this way remove the poem to the corner of our vision.

“This poem means something to me. This poem is meaningful.”

Ah, and in a few, short utterances we have returned to the Land of the Ineffable. Tell me, how am I to explain what “When he told me he loved me, he said it with an inhale,/As though he could breathe the words back in,” *means* to me? What sort of sentence would you have me put together and offer up to you, what poor sacrifice would you have me make to those would-be gods, precision and certainty? I do not speak their language and they are no gods of mine. What would you have me say about:

All the new thinking is about loss.
In this it resembles all the old thinking.
The idea, for example, that each particular erases
the luminous clarity of a general idea. That the clown-
faced woodpecker probing the dead sculpted trunk
of that black birch is, by his presence,
some tragic falling off from a first world
of undivided light. Or the other notion that,
because there is in this world no one thing
to which the bramble of *blackberry* corresponds,
a word is elegy to what it signifies.²⁷

What would *you* tell me about what this poem means to *you*? You may guess what I will say about that – you should not try, and I would not ask you to. *Meaning* and *meaningfulness* are like Truth. When we read a poem, there may be something about it that strikes us to our core. There is something that makes us give pause, and after the pause, we feel we must read the poem again – and again, and again. We want to live inside of it, but find that we already do – we look inside the poem and we are already there. As you can see, talk of meaning and meaningfulness has a tendency to turn into poetry (“*Perhaps, perhaps not*”). Returning to the question, what kind of statement could

²⁷ Robert Hass, "Meditation at Lagunitas," In *Praise*, Harper Collins Publishers, 1979.

I give you about what this poem means to me? “*This poem means something to me.*”
“What?” “*I don’t know.*”

If pressed, that is the most I would say. That is proper, that “I don’t know.” It says both that I am not sure and that, even if I was, I would not know how to say it. I would have to read the poem to you and look at you hard, and hope that you knew. This sort of meaning is not sought, but simply found or not found — “*Perhaps, perhaps not.*” This is why I say,

3. Do not look for meaning.

By this time it is dusk and the setting sun has burned the leaves down to small, glowing embers. They shoot stars like sparks into the sky. I am imagining that you and I are walking quietly away from the wild place and back through town, back to the warm, closed room in which we began. My mind is elsewhere – in that bramble of blackberry – and yours is imagining, thinking about what it is to unlearn, wondering how much there is to unlearn.

5. What Cannot Be Said (Can Be Shown)

We have returned to our study or our library (I can’t recall now what it was described as in the beginning of this essay); we sit with the leather and the ancient volumes and the luminescent bulbs around us. We are warm and dry. Everything is as we have left it, but we are not the same. We have brought with us something of the wild.

If we are not to look for statements, truth, or meaning, what is left to be said of a poem? Surely, there are questions that one may ask – we know that better than most. Does it not seem likely, however, that any investigation you can think of in connection with poetry, I will caution you not to pursue?

“Why, when one has read a poem, must he say something?”²⁸

This may seem a rather strange thing for someone to say who has just spent so many pages on poetry. But what I have meant to do is show you what is *actually* strange; to surprise you; to show you the bricks so that you might question how and why the room was built. Of what is our study made? For what purpose have we built this? I imagine you know that I think we should not be here; we should be in the wild. From the same poem I most recently showed you:

We talked about it late last night and in the voice
of my friend, there was a thin wire of grief, a tone
almost querulous. After a while I understood that,
talking this way, everything dissolves: *justice,*
pine, hair, woman, you and *I*. There was a woman
I made love to and I remembered how, holding
her small shoulders in my hands sometimes,
I felt a violent wonder at her presence
like a thirst for salt, for my childhood river
with its island willows, silly music from the pleasure boat,
muddy places where we caught the little orange-silver fish
called *pumpkinseed*. It hardly had to do with her.
Longing, we say, because desire is full
of endless distances. I must have been the same to her.
But I remember so much, the way her hands dismantled bread,
the thing her father said that hurt her, what
she dreamed. There are moments when the body is as numinous
as words, days that are the good flesh continuing.
Such tenderness, those afternoons and evenings,
saying *blackberry, blackberry, blackberry*.²⁹

I will not and cannot explain what the poem means, whether or not it contains statements, or how we may evaluate it for truth. I can only show what I have shown. Can someone be taught how to think of a poem? They can unlearn what they have previously

²⁸ O.K. Bouwsma, "Poetry Becomes Truth." In *Toward a New Sensibility: Essays of O.K. Bouwsma*, edited by J. L. Craft and Ronald E. Hustwit. Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1982.

²⁹ Robert Hass, "Meditation at Lagunitas," In *Praise*, Harper Collins Publishers, 1979.

been taught. Can someone be taught how to read a poem? I do not know, but they can be asked to read it again. Regarding all similar questions, all I will say is, “*Blackberry, blackberry, blackberry.*”

This is to say, “There are some things that cannot be said.” What cannot be said, however, may yet be shown. “Such as...what?” Now *there* is an excellent question.

Thoughts on Poetry
Chapter Three: Poetry Becomes Philosophy, Philosophy Becomes Poetry³⁰

What is a question?” –Is it the statement that I do not know such-and-such, or the statement that I wish the other person would tell me...? Or is it the description of my mental state of uncertainty? –And is the cry “Help!” such a description?³¹

[It’s] colors we can’t quite see...It’s about anger and the sound a hollow container makes.³²

Abstract: Just as before, when we asked ourselves if perhaps we weren’t mistaken about what our current investigative approach might accomplish in connection with poetry, we must now ask ourselves the same question in a larger context. When it comes to philosophy, is it possible that our current methodology does not actually serve the purpose it was designed for? Or could it be that this purpose is itself misguided? In this chapter I assert the latter and consider an alternate methodology by asking, “*Can poetry be philosophy?*”

1. The Question

Questions – there’s the place we should begin again.

I should forewarn you that the particular path I now invite you to follow me down has been long neglected and is mightily overgrown. Overgrown, and full of dangers should we stray too far. We will stray, though – like Carroll’s Alice, we must stray: “Of what is our study made?” This is something I asked you before. So come now, my friend: “For what purpose have we built this?”

³⁰ This title I owe to Dr. Ronald E. Hustwit, my mentor, who gave to me as a present the work of his own mentor, Bouwsma, from whom I borrow the words: “The title of what I am about to read I owe to a colleague. He gave it to me as a present.” O.K. Bouwsma, “Poetry Becomes Truth,” In *Toward a New Sensibility: Essays of O.K. Bouwsma*, edited by J. L. Craft and Ronald E. Hustwit. Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1982.

³¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Translated by G. E. M. Anscombe, New York: Macmillan Company, 1959. Aphorism 24.

³² Benjamin Abercrombie, in conversation with the author, February 6, 2016.

Some will say that philosophy is the discovery of the truth. Or they will not say it outright, but this is what they practice.

You know me well enough now to know that I'm terribly prone to imagining (fatally so, some may say). Imagine with me, then, a possible world wherein certainty is the aim (we may not have to use very much imagination after all; if we are Alice, then this is Wonderland). Within this world, it is thought of questions that they are asked in order to be answered, which is a fearful mistake. A fearfully common mistake, I might add. Within this possible world it is often asked, "What is a question?" "It is the type of utterance made to illicit an answer," is the reply, and twice with one sentence a grave error has been made. And it is a grave error. I believe whole-heartedly that each time the above occurs, the question, the very idea of a question, the very purpose of questioning, has been extraordinarily misunderstood.

The purpose of philosophy was once proposed to be the investigation of the expression, "What is being?" You'll notice that I've used 'expression' and not 'question', which may seem another rather strange thing – how full of them I am!

As delicately as possible, I say that this is because "What is being?" does not so much *ask* what being is as it expresses wonderment in the face of being. With each instance of this expression we pronounce the marvel, awe, and terror of finding ourselves alive in the world. "How wonderful," we cry, "how wonderful and dreadful is it all!" Our question, "What is being?" is actually an expression of the curious, flickering light we find inside ourselves, crying out against the terrible, roaring winds of All Else.

You would not be wrong if the words I have just spoken sounded to you very much like:

“How wonderful,” we cry—
“How wonderful and dreadful is it all!”

Our questions are the expressions
of the curious, flickering light we find
inside ourselves,
crying out against the terrible, roaring winds
of All Else.

No, you would not be wrong. For what other sort of language could preserve the mystery and strangeness of being? I put this question to you: if the expression of the wonder of being is the proper goal of philosophy, and the language of wonder is poetry, could it be that what poetry *is*, is philosophy?

2. On What Cannot Be Said (Poetry Becomes Philosophy)

Let’s consider:

We said before that poetry is not in the business of giving information as other language is, and for this reason it is not subject to the same kind of analysis as ordinary language – this we have together discovered. As such, poetry succeeds where other language fails; namely in maintaining the proper mystery of the question, “What is being?”

“What is this proper mystery, and how is it, exactly, that poetry successfully preserves it?”

Regarding the mystery: there is something about being, about *finding ourselves in the world*, that is notoriously difficult to put to words. “Notoriously difficult – why should this be so?”

Some believe that it needn’t be. To come up with a theory of being: that has been the goal of philosophy for thousands of years. “Of what is ‘being’ made? What sorts of

things ‘are’? Of what is experience made? What is ‘experience’? What is experienceable?”

These questions—whatever they are, however they are asked, however we come to understand them—are merely preludes to answers. And indeed, answers are given. Theories are made (“What makes for a good theory of “being”?). The one question that is not asked: “Is an answer warranted?”

If an answer is not warranted, then why are answers so often given? Well, to think that there is no answer to the question...why, how would we stand it? In the grand scheme of it all, where then would we stand? How would we know? All the answers—what would become of them—of us?

If these questions ring of existential anxiety it is because they are grappling with both the immensity and finitude of our being in the world. Still, answers are continually both sought and given. Why should this present such a problem?

The difficulty with answering questions that are actually expressions of wonder is similar to the difficulty we encountered earlier, in our discussion of giving answers in regards to questions about the language of poetry. In giving answers to questions regarding being, we are neglecting being altogether; we attempt to center our focus on being as we search behind it, next to it, under it.

You’ll have expected this, my Alice: to ask these questions of being (expecting an answer) is to misunderstand what being is. It is not separable, explainable – we can neither focus on nor shift our focus from it. We can be, and be amazed at our being, and that is right. That is all a part of what being is. Being becomes wonder, wonder becomes being.

“What then, are we to go about wondering, wandering through the maze, marveling at the roses? Where does poetry come into that – why is it that *poetry* is ‘the language of being’?”

Poetry *is* the essential wonder expressed in the question. Or rather, it is and it is not – it may be or it may not be. Within a poem is contained an immensity and a finitude; within a poem is nothing of the sort; frankly, I don’t know what a poem contains. “[It’s] colors we can’t quite see...It’s about anger and the sound a hollow container makes.”³³

I said before that poetry, if it can be said to be *doing* anything, is being. It simply *is*. Poetry is the exploration of the question without the hindrance of information-giving. Poetry, the creature in the shadows, the pit in the bottom of your stomach, says of being (and is itself something like):

I’ve never known much
about science ‘cept I
like the sounds it makes, the
pictures it creates. Like
‘fission’ and like ‘fusion’,
‘compound’ and ‘solution’.

The beauty of ‘contusion’, the
purples, red, and blues and the
darkness of ‘dark matter’
come together in a pattern, a
painter’s smock all splattered, the
stars at night all scattered,

circling and expanding,
commanding, reprimanding – a
voice made of light, in a
pulsing, quaking, night. And
we are made of stars, of
Pluto and of Mars. We are

³³ I’m again grateful to Ben Abercrombie, a marvelous poet—and philosopher, though he doesn’t yet know it—for this beautiful line.

pounding, writhing vessels,
bursting, spewing blood cells
tearing into ourselves, a
strange science after all – not
quite science at all. No,
not quite science at all.³⁴

“What does all this mean?” I hardly know. Why do you ask me, “What does all this mean?” If you want an answer, then: the language of poetry, by its very essence (as not information-giving), is able to explore being without asserting what being is or isn’t like. This is what I meant when I said that poetry maintains proper mystery. *Blackberry, blackberry, blackberry*, I’ll then add, with a sheepish grin. A wolfish grin? “So it’s not a fountain.”

3. Interlude: The Philosopher, the Poet

We’ll pause here – there’s a break in the maze and I was never one to wander until lost (this is a lie). As you rest in the soft grass I confess this to you, “this is a lie,” and make another confession:

What I said before about the goal of philosophy was perhaps unfair. I characterized philosophy in a particular sort of way that was perhaps more of a caricature than a true portrait. This was done with the same purpose as one might draw a caricature – the features that are most prominent are exaggerated in order to make their strangeness plain.

You might well remember my earlier characterizations of the philosopher and the poet from the previous chapter. “Which is the philosopher, and which the poet?” I said. “I say that they are neither, and that they are one and the same.” I am thinking along these lines now.

³⁴ A.B. Gustafson, “Strange Science.”

Who is the philosopher? It seems to me that, above all, he is a lover of wisdom. The philosopher's aim in discovering the truth (if this is his aim) is to see things as they really are, and perhaps to eventually represent this truth to the world that they too may see. Who is the poet? The poet sees at night that which is only seen by day. She is a lover of the strange and the ordinary, and recognizes each in the other. Perhaps this is the same as saying that the poet is a lover of wisdom; perhaps it is not.

If it is, then might it be that the philosopher and the poet can be one and the same? Might it be that what philosophers love is in poetry? Not just in poetry – but *is* poetry?

A final confession: I would be lying again, my friend, if I told you that I knew the path from here. This pause is here so that I might catch my breath before plunging blindly on. What follows is the most difficult part of my project, and for that reason in particular I've stopped us both here and now. The following section is what gives the project its name – they are my thoughts, fragmented and imperfect, tracing the path where I think that I can see it. The great trouble with what-cannot-be-said is...just that.

4. On What Can Be Shown (Philosophy Becomes Poetry)

To see at night that which is only seen by day. How strange...

Poetry has an uncanny ability to reveal strangeness. It can take as its subject what is most common and show it in a new light. Poetry uncovers the extraordinary in that which seems to us to be the most ordinary aspects of life—is this a kind of wisdom?

It seems to me that, in this way, a poem is a little like a photograph...

Like a still-frame, a poem captures a moment of being and spreads it out in front of us. In the snapshot nothing is asserted to be true or false, nothing is meant. The poem is being suspended in time, held in front of us like a photograph. In the stillness of the

moment the wonder of our existence is made apparent where it was not before, as snippets of life are delicately extracted from the stream of being in the world.

A moment of being suspended in time. Wonder eternal...

We dove into the creek as children
And came up weighed down
Heavier somehow
In the water's lesser gravity
That night the sun set on a changed world
Remember how we cried when I left?
How I cried that night we got so high?
And when we came down I felt a change
I felt
Heavier somehow
So I held you close
(I held you down)³⁵

Similarly, poetry takes as its subject what is most plain and shows how it is beautiful. The ability to find beauty in anything, even that which is most plain or most ugly—is this a kind of wisdom?

I am reminded here of music...

A poem is not just a thing read, but also sometimes a thing spoken. A poem naturally has a rhythm, but it also has a melody. The words of the poem are the notes, and the speaker's voice becomes an instrument – these two combined lend the poem a musicality unique to where and when it is played, and by whom. A poem has many lives.

There is something beautiful about language that is so often lost in the search for truth or meaning. Something beautiful about the tone and timbre of a human voice, even as it speaks of what is plain or ugly. In the ordinary words there are trills and chirps; in the tremble of a human voice is contained the immensity and the finitude.

³⁵ A.B. Gustafson, "That Summer."

Even when speaking words that sound harsh with all their consonants, or with a voice that betrays pain with each tremor, beauty can be found.

This morning I woke from a dream
That a parasite
Was making its way through my sole
And my heel.

Frantic fingers groped against skin
But it continued, unheeding
Gnawing through my soft flesh
Burrowing into that, my one
Most sensitive place

My estranged father flew to me—it was for him I cried—
Bit by bit he dug out the thing
Carving through sections of my flesh
His surgeon's hands soon sopping with gore

But the great length was so entangled
With the tendons and sinews
That he could not tell where it ended and I began
He continued the excavation
Though I screamed that it was not the parasite
But that it was me, still
He pursued his dark mission single-mindedly.

I awoke to a pounding pulse

The anguish was still there, so real
That in the hazy morning light
I could almost make out his shape
Folding the dusty sunbeams
Into empty, twisting shadows

I snatched off the covers
That I might inspect the offending foot
Finding my sole empty
I thought to call my father—

I placed my hand where his had been
The warmth of the sun
Was the warmth of his fingers
Or the warmth of blood
I remembered studying those hands as a child—

I would imitate the smooth, stern lines his pen would make
I modeled my letters after his own.

But I did not call.³⁶

Conversely, poetry has a way of discovering what is darkest or most unpleasant in
that which at first seems to us to be most beautiful. Is this too a kind of wisdom?

with his sweat he baptized my neck
traitorous shivers dripping, dripping, dripping
down my spine
his panting breath was hot and wet
his mouth treacherous, beckoning
fingertips turned into claws
pressing into throat, sliding over jaw
tangled and pulling chin over shoulder—
his eyes were those of a cornered beast
frenzied mouths met
the panic rose up like bile in my throat
his kiss, not human, aimed to devour
I bit down hard, metallic red filling my mouth
Fear and loathing clouded his animal eyes
I bared my teeth in a foaming, crimson snarl—
*we're both predators, baby
and this is kill or be killed*³⁷

All of this, it seems to me, has to do with what can be shown – with strangeness.
Seeing at night that which is only seen by day. It has something to do with white roses
painted red...

All strangeness, all mystery. As our journey draws to a close and I lead you back
to the rabbit hole you so accidentally fell down (for me, there is no leaving), there is one
thing left to be said: “How are we to understand it all?”

³⁶ A.B. Gustafson, “Parasites of the Sole.”

³⁷ A.B. Gustafson, “where, wolf?”

5. An Ending

To understand a poem is something like this: A wry smile and a nod. Says Wittgenstein in regards to music and understanding, “You could say too that in so far as people understand it, they “resonate” in harmony with it, respond to it. You might say: the work of art does not aim to convey something else, just itself.”

Though Wittgenstein speaks of a piece of music, or of art, I can’t help but think that it is the same with a poem. What is it to understand a poem? It is to resonate in harmony with it. It is not to produce a proposition in response. To understand a poem is not to be able to give a summary of it, nor to be able to replace one sentence in a poem with another (if poetry is like music, one cannot change the notes and still call it the same song), nor really to say anything at all (“Why, when one has read a poem, must he say something?”³⁸).

Now, what is it to understand poetry in general? Perhaps it is something similar. Understanding poetry requires imagination, an inclination to wander, and a good deal of patience. To understand poetry is to allow it to reverberate, and for you yourself to resonate. To understand poetry is to hear the notes and the chord all at once, and to place yourself harmoniously in and among them.

That is a poem, then, and that is poetry. Our last question—how are we to understand this? *This*, said in so many words and pages?

Here is what I have to say about that: You may take it or leave it – ideally you will do something of both. I cannot help but feel that the words are poor and grasping, but

³⁸ O.K. Bouwsma, "Poetry Becomes Truth." In *Toward a New Sensibility: Essays of O.K. Bouwsma*, edited by J. L. Craft and Ronald E. Hustwit, 271. Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1982.

their goal has been to uncover a strangeness and a mystery. What you do with them now is up to you – as for me, there is so much more to unlearn. About poetry, there is infinitely more to say, though very little of it is proper to say. That which is proper, I can hardly now do justice. Unlearning takes time.

What, then? Then I must part with you, my friend, who has humoured me this long, with your imagining and your walking, though our parting won't be for forever. No, not for very long. But until what cannot be said can be shown.

Appendix

I was once told that the great dream of the poet is to express thoughts without words. Whether that be the case or no, it has become my dream.

I wrestled often with the goal of this project, feeling particularly toward its end like I was saying too much, or trying to say what shouldn't and couldn't be said. In the final weeks I would become increasingly frustrated, man-handling the words in the final section, trying to make them do what they weren't made to do. Eventually, I realized that I had to let them go—they are not ready and perhaps neither am I. There is, at times, too much said here, and also a great deal left unsaid (or rather, unshown). This is what it is to unlearn.

Therefore I add this appendix as a different sort of attempt to describe what it is that cannot be said, by, instead of saying, *showing*.

The Machine

The letters I wrote never made it far past my fingers. I drew a picture of you, folded it into an airplane, and made a wish as the wind took it away instead—

I wake up to the whitewashed walls of my little white apartment and take my little white pills. White ceiling, white fan, white mug of dark black coffee.

—tell me, did it make it to you?

Paper-plane wishes and large-frame glasses, letters that end with hanging sentences—
I set sail corked, glass bottles across eddying waves. Inside, these hand-scrawled notes to
Please, Save My Soul—

I switch it on: the Master Switch in the whirring, ticking, smoke-filled factory of
my body. The machine lurches and grinds as warning sirens flash fire-red through
the choking, charcoal smog.

—did they make it to you?

Radar blips and shadowed sightings, the wings of birds, and words carefully carved, “But
still, there is always a way”. Though foreign and forlorn, the cry is raised: There is
always a way.

The metal groans as a gear somewhere gives, and the machine comes alive with a
clanging hallelujah that echoes and emerges despite the efforts of the Override
Valve. From my chest its all waves, Hallelujah, and Save My Soul.

And the world is
white.

Inhale

When he told me he loved me, he said it with an inhale,
As though he could breathe
the words back in.

I saw those words in his eyes,
reflections of cigarette-like smoke
disappearing back
into the black hole
of his open lips in half-time.

That black abyss, shuddering, flapping,
reminded me of a reel of film being re-wound
before counting back down to nothing
but scratches and dust—no,
less than nothing—projected nothing.

In his eyes I saw my lips smile and part,
a glint of fangs that sunk in deep
before blowing back, with a biting kiss,
I love you too.

Strange Science

I've never known much
about science 'cept I
like the sounds it makes, the
pictures it creates. Like
'fission' and like 'fusion',
'compound' and 'solution'.

The beauty of 'contusion', the
purples, red, and blues and the
darkness of 'dark matter'
come together in a pattern, a
painter's smock all splattered, the
stars at night all scattered,

circling and expanding,
commanding, reprimanding – a
voice made of light, in a
pulsing, quaking, night. And
we are made of stars, of
Pluto and of Mars. We are

pounding, writhing vessels,
bursting, spewing blood cells
tearing into ourselves, a
strange science after all – not
quite science at all. No,
not quite science at all.

That Summer

We dove into the creek as children
And came up weighed down
Heavier somehow
In the water's lesser gravity
That night the sun set on a changed world
Remember how we cried when I left?
How I cried that night we got so high?
And when we came down I felt a change
I felt
Heavier somehow
So I held you close
(I held you down)

Parasites of the Sole

This morning I woke from a dream
That a parasite
Was making its way through my sole
And my heel.

Frantic fingers groped against skin
But it continued, unheeding
Gnawing through my soft flesh
Burrowing into that, my one
Most sensitive place

My estranged father flew to me—it was for him I cried—
Bit by bit he dug out the thing
Carving through sections of my flesh
His surgeon's hands soon sopping with gore

But the great length was so entangled
With the tendons and sinews
That he could not tell where it ended and I began
He continued the excavation
Though I screamed that it was not the parasite
But that it was me, still
He pursued his dark mission single-mindedly.

I awoke to a pounding pulse

The anguish was still there, so real
That in the hazy morning light
I could almost make out his shape
Folding the dusty sunbeams
Into empty, twisting shadows

I snatched off the covers
That I might inspect the offending foot
Finding my sole empty
I thought to call my father—

I placed my hand where his had been
The warmth of the sun
Was the warmth of his fingers
Or the warmth of blood
I remembered studying those hands as a child—
I would imitate the smooth, stern lines his pen would make
I modeled my letters after his own.

But I did not call.

where, wolf?

with his sweat he baptized my neck
traitorous shivers dripping, dripping, dripping
down my spine
his panting breath was hot and wet
his mouth treacherous, beckoning

fingertips turned into claws
pressing into throat, sliding over jaw
tangled and pulling chin over shoulder—
his eyes were those of a cornered beast
frenzied mouths met
the panic rose up like bile in my throat
his kiss, not human, aimed to devour
I bit down hard, metallic red filling my mouth
Fear and loathing clouded his animal eyes
I bared my teeth in a foaming, crimson snarl—
we're both predators, baby
and this is kill or be killed

I don't, no.

Break easy, my love—
Break the dawn and shake the rust
Break my bones and breathe the dust
Break your rules and slake your lust
You try to take it slow
To not go where I can't go
“Sometimes I wonder if you love me at all”
I don't know, I don't know, I don't know
Break the “have to,” break the “must”
Break my promise, break your trust
Break your heart. Break it just—so:
I don't know. I don't know. I don't know.

Strange

Sailing ships and pleated planes
These are the ways I try and reach you

My clumsy tongue trips over the words my fingers deftly fold
A strange, stark substitute for a language long lost
Or never learned

Tender, delicate shapes pour from these ten tongues
In the form of lines and creases

A harsh breath from your lungs could rend them
Send them spinning into piles of crushed, sculpted white

Heaped around a wire waste-basket

I am tongue tied
Our wires stay crossed

Sand and the Sea

Last night I had the dream that I haven't had in a long time
My teeth fell out, one by one
Just the sound of cracking porcelain
I cupped my hands and caught them while they poured
Out between my fingers, turning into sand

As the granules swallowed me whole
I choked on the broken pieces of the things
That haunt me while I am awake
Like,

What kind of a woman am I?
What kind of daughter
And sister
And lover am I
When the words I speak
Are cut by teeth
That turn into grains that seep
Through the cracks in my fingers and the floorboards when I sleep?

I extracted the shards and they crumbled to dust
That I built into mountains and castles
Caressing the mounds into something
Shaped a little more like something I could keep

And that was enough
When I awoke it was with peace, because I felt
That the dream was a good one
That

These cutting teeth
They still speak of belief
And loss
And love
And all that is True in this life

I may sleep tonight not knowing who I am
Or what the dream means

But I'll know how it feels to hold you at night
I'll know the bluest waters come after the blackest storms
That the tide of love overflows and over-pours
Seeping still through dusty floorboards

For such is life
And so it will be
Though what that means I can't say
And what I'm made of, I can't say
Be it sand, or sea

There isn't much else I can say I know
Because there isn't much that we can know
So I'll sleep tonight not knowing who I am
Or what the dream means

But I'll know love.

But I'll know, love.

Can one be taught how to read a poem? They can be asked to read it again.

Can one be taught how to understand a poem? Perhaps I could read the poem to you and
look at you hard, and hope that you knew.

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