

THE DENSE AND THE TRANSPARENT: RECONCILING OPPOSITES

Ronald de Sousa

In one of the plays of Jean Anouilh, a character remarks that since the works of “primitive” or “naïf” painters sometimes fetch the highest prices, it would seem only fair to accord some value to the opinions of primitive and naïve critics. I did passionately want to be a poet when I was a child, but no production of mine ever strayed very far from the very limited and certainly dated dialectic between the ironic and the sentimental. I am now only an occasional and always a highly prejudiced reader of poetry, and I am, in particular, almost completely unable to see the point of much of what is currently published as poetry.

That one confession out of the way, what follows is another, in which I tell how I lost my grip on a cherished conviction.

First, to explain that conviction and its charm. I had long thought it obvious that philosophy and poetry are perfect antagonists. That view stemmed not from the sorts of reasons adduced by Plato in his self-refuting rhetorical excesses about art's deficient degree of reality. Assuming, as Plato did, that art is meant to represent something, a work will not only evoke its subject but also draw attention to its own concrete reality as paint, or as shaped bronze, or as plot and character on the stage. In that way, works of art present both something else and themselves, and so have more, not less reality, than what they represent. In any case, Plato's reasons were disingenuous. Although he made it look as if the contrast between them was about the priority of truth over appearance, it was really more about the purposes served by the devices exploited both by himself and by the poets. The emotional power of Plato's great myths is not really different in kind from the emotional power of the rhetoric he despised. The difference lies in the doctrines they were used to sell.

If what follows is as much a narrative of my changes of mind as a sustained argument, perhaps this is not inappropriate, insofar as it constitutes a partial repudiation of the conception of philosophy that values argument above all.

Two factors might encourage the view that poetry and philosophy are antagonists. One rests on a consideration of the ideal use of language in each domain. The second relates to the standards we intuitively appeal to when we ascribe *truth* to a philosophical thesis or a passage of poetry, or say of either that we find it “compelling”. The connection between the two will, I hope, emerge as I proceed. I begin with a sketch of the first contrast.

Poetry welcomes polysemy, metaphor, allusion – in short, everything likely to concentrate the greatest load of meaning into as few words as possible. I shall refer to this quality as *density*. By contrast, analytic philosophy aims to make things plain: its use of language is intent on purifying language of ambiguity in the pursuit of the explicit and the transparent. Transparency in this sense is the antagonist of density. My own adoption of the ideal of transparency was undoubtedly influenced by something philosophy teachers like me often tell our nervous students: it's not agreement with this or that view that counts, but the clarity and quality of your arguments. So proclaims no less a master than Robert Nozick: “A philosopher's seriousness is judged by the quality of his arguments.” (Nozick 1981, 4). After a lifetime of reading and writing philosophy, however, I am unable to evade the embarrassing fact that arguments seldom convince anyone of anything non-trivial, and hardly ever settle anything of philosophical importance. A bold new hypothesis recently propounded by Mercier and Sperber (2011) holds that reasoning is an evolutionary adaptation geared to persuading rather than to establishing the truth. That is supposed to explain why our arguments are often so bad at guiding us to the discovery of truth; but it hardly explains why arguments so seldom do persuade. What they fail to persuade of, is the straightforward truth of a philosophical thesis or claim. This might be a clue that the straightforward truth of a proposition is not, contrary to appearances, the sole aim of philosophical discourse. And since it probably seems obvious to anyone that poetry does not aim to establish the

simple truth of any propositions, philosophical or otherwise, it might also suggest that poetry and philosophy are not as far apart as the bald statement of their antagonism implies.

Independently of that thought, I have found myself, for several decades now, describing philosophy to undergraduates as aiming (among other things) to change our vision, in the broadest sense of that word. My favourite way of illustrating this involves a “doodle”: a simple circle with two short line segments sticking out of it on opposite sides. When given the appropriate caption, almost anyone can *see it as* “a Mexican on a bicycle seen from on top.” I find two lessons in this example. First, it affords a compelling yet simple counterexample to the widely accepted doctrine, first propounded by Jerry Fodor, that our perceptual systems are “informationally encapsulated” (Fodor 1983). Fodor's claim is often supported with an allusion to the well-known Muller-Lyer illusion (though I prefer the less familiar but much more captivating McGurk effect¹). Both illusions illustrate the fact that what we perceive can remain remarkably impervious to what we know. But the Mexican doodle shows that this claim must be qualified, because words affect experience in non-standard ways. Priming phenomena, for example, affect our behaviour and our emotional responses without even having been the object of awareness.² The mechanisms of these effects are mysterious and probably akin to some of the ways poetry works on us. Second, the doodle is a metaphorical illustration of the way that philosophy, when it works as it should, can change our vision of life. The way it does so depends on language, but philosophical discourse typically provides arguments rather than captions.

This suggests a conception of philosophy as aspiring not to lock in true beliefs, but to provide a fresh overall vision. Much classical philosophy is friendly to that view. Plato, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, and many others, can plausibly be thought to aim at inducing in their audience a more fitting vision of human nature and its place in the universe.

¹ See [<http://tinyurl.com/cvygnpa>] for a short BBC documentary explaining this effect, in which the same actual sound is heard as “ba” or as “fa”, depending on the sight of the speaker's mouth as it is uttered.

²See, for example, a number of experiments by John Bargh (1996; Bargh and Ferguson 2000).

The foregoing sketch should be enough to indicate the main lines of my argument in what follows. It is time to explain the antagonism between philosophy and poetry as I originally conceived it. But first, a surprising parallel needs to be noted, namely that *both poetry and philosophy are reluctantly bound to language*.

I gotta use words when I talk to you (but I wish I didn't)

One might describe a piece of music, landscape, or plastic art as “poetic”, but these uses are metaphorical, or *poetic*, and are therefore best eschewed while trying to elucidate what that term might mean. Poetry in the literal sense can hardly do without language, though it has often been enhanced by music. Indeed, it has sometimes aspired to the condition of music. Witness Verlaine:

“De la musique avant toute chose/ . . . / Tout le reste est littérature.”³

Poetry's music-envy might be regarded as a wish to return to the womb, if scholars are right in surmising that early poetry was sung or chanted rather than spoken or read. In several poetic traditions and styles, there is an affinity between poetry and spells, incantations, and prayer:

May she be granted beauty, and yet not
Beauty to make a stranger's eye distraught
Or hers before the looking glass...⁴

The ineffable is sometimes posited as the ultimate unattainable but guiding ideal of poetry. This is sometimes expressed in the prescription that what is at the core of a poem, its true “meaning”, should never be made explicit but only be suggested. According to Nico Frijda and Louise Sundararajan, this is an essential part of Chinese poetics. They quote the following example, in which the emphasis is on the enhancement of poetic experience by “savoring” (*pin wei*), allowing the experience to mean much more than is being said. Such experiences

³ “[poetry should be] music, above all else..... All else is but literature.” Paul Verlaine, “Art Poétique”. From *Jadis et Naguère* (1884).

⁴ “Prayer for my daughter”, in (Yeats 1996, 188)

occur under attitudes of detachment and restraint, their experience involves reflexive second-order awareness, they result from and contain extensive elaboration of appraisal of the eliciting events that may invest the events with meanings far beyond their immediately given aspects, and they include virtual states of action readiness rather than states that manifest in overt acts or suppressed action impulses (Frijda and Sundararajan 2007, 227).

A similar idea is embodied in the Japanese concept of *yugen*. The Stanford Encyclopedia entry on Japanese aesthetics characterizes it as instantiating “a general feature of East-Asian culture, which favors allusiveness over explicitness and completeness.” (Parkes 2011) .

In Indian theory, too, suggestiveness or “*dhvani*” is central to poetry. As Keith Oatley describes it:

Dhvani is what the words do not explicitly say. Sometimes, as if to emphasise the point, it can be the opposite of what the words say. Lalita Pandit (1996) offers an example from Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*. The eeriness of the play is created beginning with the witches who hail Macbeth and say that he will become king, apparently joyous tidings. But what the witches’ appearance implies and what their words suggest, but do not say, is the opposite. Macbeth’s will is propelling him towards a region of evil and anguish (Oatley 2006, 27), quoting (Pandit 1996).

Insofar as poetry pursues the ineffable, then, poetry's bond to language is reluctant. Since common sense would normally take poetry to be “about” language rather in the way that painting is “about” paint (the more self-consciously so as one progresses from primitive representational art to modern more abstract styles), that is paradoxical. But it is not eccentric. And it illustrates an aspect of the density of poetic language, in that the more is suggested by language without being explicitly said, the richer is the experience of meaning evoked by that use of language.

There is an obvious similarity with philosophy here in the reliance on language to transcend language. The philosophical tradition, beginning before Plato, does not lack examples of esoteric doctrines, secret unwritten teachings that could be comprehended only by devotees of a practice. Still, philosophy is evidently a mode of *discourse*: it is as difficult to conceive of a work of philosophy without language as it is to think of a work of poetry that altogether does without language. Difficult, but perhaps not altogether impossible: after all, as John Cage has shown with his “4'33” ” for solo piano, (in which the pianist is instructed not to play any notes for the piece's entire three movements totaling four minutes and thirty three seconds), one can even conceive of music without sound – though it must be conceded that as a genre, silent music is likely to suffer from a certain monotony. Similarly, then, we might take as either a poetic or a philosophical statement the silence of the sage. It was reported that “the Buddha has not uttered a single word from the time of enlightenment to the time of his death.” (Masson 1977, 12). The silence could be described as expressing, if perhaps not exactly paraphrasing, the proposition, *After enlightenment, there is nothing to say.*

Just as silence constitutes a sort of limiting ideal of music, then, conveying something beyond words seems to be a limiting ideal for both poetry and philosophy. That is the reason for qualifying as reluctant the commitment of both to language.

That attitude may carry a trace of philosophy and poetry's common origins. The founding texts of the Judeo-Christian, of the Chinese, and of Indian traditions are frequently expressions of world views, with religious and metaphysical implications that have traditionally been classed as philosophical.⁵ Often, if not invariably, they were expressed in poetic forms. The explicit blending of philosophy and poetry survives in Lucretius's sophisticated and pointedly anti-religious philosophical poem, *De Rerum Natura*. Doubtless many would want to include Dante's and Milton's great poems as both philosophical and poetic. But while historians of philosophy still take

⁵Some philosophers have found it frustrating that what they know as “analytic philosophy” still carries the same name as those ancient forms of “wisdom”. One has gone so far as to propose that we give up the name *Philosophy* entirely, replacing it with ‘Ontical Science’. (McGinn 2012).

Lucretius seriously, it would be unusual in an analytic philosophy course to assign Dante or Milton. Poetry and philosophy, like science and religion, may have the very same ultimate source; but each has drawn apart from the other in quest of its own singular relationship to – or compromise with – language. In the case of philosophy, the feeling that language constrains or shackles us reflects the ambition to understand the world at the deepest level. While that may be a self-serving formulation philosophers will be eager to endorse, it is sometimes buttressed by the idea, less congenial to analytic philosophers, that language hints at some more primal, non-linguistic experience of reality.

However overblown philosophy's ambition may seem, one must at least grant that it begs the question to assume that philosophical tasks can be accomplished *only* in the medium of language, or, for that matter, that any properly philosophical task can be accomplished with language *at all*. How reasonable that assumption is, depends on one's stance regarding an important bifurcation in philosophy. On the one hand, the philosophical tradition has been associated with wisdom, and with the pursuit of insight into the nature of the human condition. On the other hand, it has been associated with a *method* which puts *argument* at the centre of its pursuit of truth. In this latter perspective, the central enterprise is a pursuit of *truth*, and philosophical truth is pretty much defined as what can be made, from the raw material of experience, by reason and argument. We can't argue without language. Philosophy remains essentially tied to language, at least in its “analytic” incarnation.

In the next section, I will give a reason for thinking that while silence might conceivably be a limiting case of poetic speech, it could never count as even a limiting condition of philosophical speech. The reason for this lies in the characteristic which, in my view, or at least in the view that I am about to moul out partly free of in this essay, demands that we regard philosophical and poetic language as opposite extremes on a continuum of what I will call *density* of language.

Density, and the meanings of ‘meaning’.

Anna Christina Ribeiro has argued that three features are, if not necessary and sufficient to define a poem, at least “broadly typical”:

- (1) most poems are lyric poems written in the first person;
- (2) most poems are formal; indeed, most are highly formal; and
- (3) most poems use figurative language—metaphors, similes, imagery, and so on, to a greater, often much greater, extent than other literary forms (Ribeiro 2009, 66).

I shall return to (1) in a moment. (2) partly explains why it is better, when learning a new language, to read and memorize poetry than prose. Given their formal characteristics, poems are easier to learn by heart, which means you have big chunks learned at one go and pleasure too. But there is more to it, and that additional factor is not quite exhausted by Ribeiro's reference to tropes. Spending an hour on a page of good poetry is more rewarding than spending an hour on a page of good prose. As a direct function of the density of poetic meaning, there is more to savour on each page, and savouring is best done slowly.

My intuition that poetry and philosophy are antagonists, then, was driven by the thought that poetry strives for density, while philosophy aspires to transparency, which is equivalent to the lowest possible density. But what exactly do these terms mean?

Density is in part the result of the sort of “suggestiveness” praised in the theories of poetry I have cited, for wherever something is suggested, it is present without taking up space. This ideal is not confined to the East. Western poetry also commonly strives to evoke something beyond prose, and even beyond words. These lines of Wordsworth express this well:

A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man. (Wordsworth, “Tintern Abbey”)

In their feeling of reaching for something beyond what can be described, these lines seem to me in tune with what, according to Jeff Masson, “many Sanskrit critics consider ...to be the most beautiful poem in the Sanskrit language”:

even the man who is happy
glimpses something
or a hair of sound touches him
And his heart overflows with a longing
he does not recognize
then it must be that he is remembering
in a place out of reach
shapes he has loved
in a life before this the print of them still there in him waiting.
(Merwin and Masson 1977, 33).

At the same time as the quest for something beyond language, there is often an emphasis on the concrete particular. We can find it in Wallace Stevens's “Blue Guitar”, for example:

the man replied things as they are
are changed upon the blue guitar
And they said then, “but play, you must,
a tune beyond us, yet ourselves.” (Stevens 1964, 165)

and Simon Critchley comments: “Such is the whole enigma of modern poetry: to say something “beyond us, yet ourselves”. (Critchley 2005, 53). But it applies more broadly than just to modern poetry, as attested by the following lines from another Sanskrit poem:

a poet should learn with his eyes
the forms of leaves
you should know how to make
people laugh when they are together
he should get to see
what they are really like
you should know about oceans and mountains
in themselves
and the sun and the moon and the stars
his mind should enter into the season
he should go
among many people
in many places and learn their languages⁶

⁶ Translated by W S. Merwin from the *Kavikanthabharana* vv. 10 and 11, ed. by Pandit Dhundhiraja Sastri (Masson 1985, 5–6).

So at one level this notion of density seems to come from the power of poetic language to evoke more than they say. But I think the notion of density can be explained more clearly and schematically, in terms of more mundane conceptions of meaning.

I have in mind the essentially structuralist notion that meaning is a matter of potential contrasts. It is an ancient idea, of which the germ is already present in the medieval slogan (itself ultimately traceable to Parmenides) that “every predication is a negation”. It is basic to the structural linguistics inaugurated by de Saussure (de Saussure 1966), and it is neatly expressed in Paul Ziff’s book, *Semantic Analysis* (Ziff 1964), which defines the meaning of a word as *the set of contrastive sets in each member of that word’s distributive set*:

The significance of what is said depends on what is not said. The utterance actually uttered stands in contrast with and takes its shape from what is not but could without deviation be uttered. The fact that ‘excellent’, ‘splendid’ and the like are available and yet not employed serves to determine the significance of ‘That is a good painting’ (Ziff 1960, 147).

Here is a simple application of this idea. What is the meaning of the word ‘cat’? The first part of the answer is given by the set of frames it can fit into: its distributive set. Members of that set include *The ___ is on the mat; What a nice tabby ___; It’s raining ___s and dogs*; etc. The second part of the answer is given by specifying, for any member of the previous set, what else could go into the same frame: *The BIKE is on the mat; The DOG is on the mat; The TURD is on the mat*. But it does not include *The THOUGHT is on the mat*, or *The GONE is on the mat*.

To be a little more realistic about how the word affects us, however, we need to weight every member of a set with a probability. ‘Time’ and ‘monkey’ could both appear in the context *What’s the best ___?*. But the former is very much more probable. That measure of probability is doubtless correlated with the strength of the association between the frame and its alternative fillers. These associations, in turn, can be thought of as an aura of connotation, and the richer they are, the more dense the meaning of the passage that includes them.

Notice that this approach to meaning doesn't necessarily say anything about what is *true*; the criterion of membership in a set may be only that the set be somehow acceptable, or as Ziff cryptically writes, “nondeviant”. The question of what counts as deviant is highlighted by Chomsky's famous example of a syntactically acceptable but semantically deviant sentence: *Colourless green ideas sleep furiously*. That last sentence, however, might not strike us as deviant if we thought it had been composed by a surrealist poet, or perhaps by John Ashbery.

Here we come to a major cleavage between the philosopher's and what I will refer to as the poet's conception of meaning. In one of the master texts of analytic philosophy, Gottlob Frege distinguishes two objective properties of meaningful units: reference (the actual object or class of objects designated by an expression), and sense (the set of specifications that allow us to identify the reference). Both are contrasted with “colouring and shading”, which “are not objective, and must be evoked by each hearer or reader according to the hints of the poet or the speaker.” (Frege 1980, 55). Subjective colouring and shading, or connotations, are not pertinent to the determination of truth value, but are of crucial importance in the context of both rhetoric and therapy. Given that distinction, the question arises as to whether those connotations should be regarded as part of meaning.

Analytic philosophers have taken a firm stand for the negative. Donald Davidson, for example, insisted that the meaning of any linguistic unit just *is* no more and no less than its contribution to the *truth conditions* of any sentence in which it figures (Davidson 1978) (Davidson 1982 [1967]). But for the poet, any difference that makes a difference contributes to meaning in the broad sense, even if the difference it makes doesn't affect truth conditions. This could be merely a difference in sound, between two synonyms, as between “Greek” and “Hellene”, making no difference to the truth value of any sentence containing them..⁷

⁷Unless they appeared in indirect speech, in which case almost any difference can annul synonymy. A paper by Benson Mates (1952) sparked a lengthy correspondence in *Analysis* (ably summarised yet perhaps not wholly resolved by Tyler Burge (1978)) about whether, given the synonymy of ‘Greek’ and ‘Hellene’, anyone could doubt that whoever believed that whoever is a Greek is a Hellene, while not doubting that whoever is a Greek is a Greek. If the answer is that

This shows that the contrasts involved in contrastive sets must be defined in terms of what can make a relevant difference. But relevant to what? Grant (quibbling aside) that (1) and (2) below have the same truth conditions:

(1) The raven is still sitting without moving on top of the white bust of Athena, just above the door of my room. And his eyes look like those of a devil having a dream. And the lamp's light behind him casts a shadow on the floor, and my soul is lying there and will not be lifted ever again from that position floating on the ground.

(2) And the raven, never flitting, still is sitting, still is sitting
On the pallid bust of Pallas just above my chamber door;
And his eyes have all the seeming of a demon's that is dreaming,
And the lamp-light o'er him streaming throws his shadow on the floor;
And my soul from out that shadow that lies floating on the floor
Shall be lifted - nevermore!

If only differences of truth conditions count, alliteration, rhyme and rhythm make no relevant difference, and (1) and (2) will not differ in meaning. For the poet, on the contrary, those features are crucial.

Why do they do it?

Although the creative process is mysterious and protean, we can be fairly confident that the impulse most likely to issue in a poem will differ from the process of writing a philosophy essay. A philosopher will start with a thesis, or at least hope to end up with one. Poets are liable to say that they first heard a certain rhythm, an assonance or an image. A thought too trivial to express in prose seems irresistibly to shape itself into verse. At other times, a form might offer a challenge, giving rise to a conscious intention to write a sonnet, or a ballad, or a limerick. Occasional poems, *poèmes de circonstance*, generally pass for one of the lowest forms of verse, as puns are often held

someone could, then it seems *any* difference even between strict synonyms could in *some* contexts of indirect discourse make a difference in truth value.

to be the lowest form of wit. Still, many poems remain close to occasional verse, as an impulse to give form, or merely draw attention, to some particular thing, something that doesn't need to be argued or established. Many lyrical poems are of this sort. Think, for example, of Byron's "So we'll go no more a roving / By the light of the moon / Though the heart be still as loving / and the moon be still as bright." Lyrical poetry as a genre is a kind of elevated occasional poetry. It is intended to be taken by the reader as having some universal import, but also seems focused on a specific type of situation. This is true not only of romantic lyrics. It applies to many Shakespeare sonnets, and to Donne's or Marvell's erotic poetry such as "On going to bed", or "To his Coy Mistress". As Ribeiro has noted, "The personal mode of expression invites a personal mode of engagement with the content of the work, so personal indeed that the ideal engagement involves identification, on the part of the listener or reader, with the impressions, thoughts, or feelings expressed in the work, something evinced in the phenomenon of appropriation." (Ribeiro 2009, 73).

How then, in these cases, do the results turn out to be poems rather than something else? Why are they not an essay, or descriptive fiction? Prose poems raise the question most acutely. As Ribeiro observes, the prose poem is a peculiarly French invention, and although it appears to be a form that "cannot decide what it wants to be", there is never the slightest doubt, when reading a prose poem by Baudelaire, Rimbaud or Francis Ponge, about its being a poem and nothing else. Take the brief "*chosiste*" poem, *Le cageot*, a favourite piece by Francis Ponge:

À mi-chemin de la cage au cachot la langue française a cageot, simple caissette à claire-voie vouée au transport de ces fruits qui de la moindre suffocation font à coup sûr une maladie. Agencé de façon qu'au terme de son usage il puisse être brisé sans effort, il ne sert pas deux fois. Ainsi dure-t-il moins encore que les denrées fondantes ou nuageuses qu'il enferme. A tous les coins de rues qui aboutissent aux halles, il luit alors de l'éclat sans vanité du bois blanc. Tout neuf encore, et légèrement ahuri d'être dans une pose maladroite à la voirie jeté sans retour, cet objet est en somme des plus sympathiques - sur le sort duquel il convient toutefois de ne s'appesantir longuement (Ponge 1942).⁸

⁸ "Midway between *cage* and *cachot*, a dungeon, the French language has *cageot*, a simple open-slatted crate designed for the transport of the sort of fruit that is sure to sicken at the slightest hint of suffocation. Constructed so as to be easily destroyed after use, it never serves twice. Thus it lasts not even as long as the melting or ethereal delicacies it encloses. Thus, at the corners of every

On the surface, this is in fact a simple description. It could be an “essay” of the sort that English schoolchildren used to be asked to compose for oral presentation in “just a minute”, as in the classic BBC game show of that name. But Ponge's piece, which holds easily within the minute when read aloud, is clearly a poem. Why? In part it is because it stresses the sensual quality of language, as an impasto painting might stress the relish of paint, starting and ending with meta-level observations that frame its scrupulous descriptive core. The first is a comment on the sound of the word for a light produce crate, and it is the word that is first described as being “midway” between cage (cage) and cachot (dungeon). As a sort of pun, it is thus literally untranslatable. The striking difference between the effect of the English paraphrase and the direct enjoyment of the original vividly illustrates one of the contrasts between philosophy and poetry. Much the same is true of the awkward phrasing in the first clause of the last sentence, which conveys just the feeling that it comically ascribes to the produce crate. The last thought is also a meta-level comment, this time about the very idea of dwelling on the thought of produce crates. In between, there is much discreet subterranean play with traditional “poetic” themes such as death and passion, with the suggestion of the “sickness unto death” that fruity flesh is heir to; the virginal character of its “gleaming white wood”; and the enduring theme of evanescence. In short, “Le cageot” confirms Ribeiro's claim that we don't confuse prose poems with real prose.

Does “Le cageot” make a philosophical point? In a sense, it does. But at the risk of seeming wantonly paradoxical, the philosophical point it makes is due precisely to its being perfectly anti-philosophical. Philosophy is abstract and general. As Peter Lamarque (2009) has pointed out,

street leading to the market, it gleams with the unassuming lustre of white pine. Still brand new and somewhat aghast and awkward at being dumped irretrievably on the public thoroughfare, this is really a most appealing object—on whose fate, however, it would not do to dwell too long.” [My translation.]

poetry too necessarily makes use of abstraction, simply by dint of using language. Ponge's prose poem is concerned with a very specific concrete object of no significance at all. The philosophical point it makes is about the importance of the unimportant particular.

Like the focus on the particular, the emphasis on the personal in lyric poetry brings it paradoxically closer to philosophy. That is because the rhetorical power of poetry immediately confronts me, the reader, with the question of whether or not the vision conveyed is one that I can appropriate. Take, for example, two short poems by Fernando Pessoa. One is quoted and translated by Anna Christina Ribeiro and reads:

I love everything that was,
Everything that no longer is,
The ache that no longer hurts,
The old and erroneous faith,
The yesterday that left pain,
The one that left joy
Just because it was, and flew away
And today is already another day.
(Ribeiro 2009, 67)⁹

Here, Pessoa expresses the idea that pastness is of value in itself. This could be one definition of the emotion of nostalgia, or perhaps *saudade*, the national emotion of the Portuguese. But when it is put this bluntly my own inclination is to resist. Pastness is not a value. So while I apprehend the thought and appreciate it, I ask myself whether or not I can *endorse* it. In the end, it is part of my experience of the poem that I do not. As a philosopher, it then occurs to me that I might want to *argue* about it, that I might want to confront it with a different view of nostalgia, such as that elaborated by Scott Howard, who argues that nostalgia is about transience, and the longing for some specific quality in the past, not about pastness as such (Howard 2012). I want, in short, to bring it into the realm of what is *true* or *not true*, rather than leaving it in the realm of what

⁹ Eu amo tudo o que foi, / Tudo o que já não é, / A dor que já me não dói, / A antiga e errônea fé,
O ontem que dor deixou, / O que deixou alegria / Só porque foi, e voou / E hoje é já outro dia.
(retrieved from
<http://www.luso-poemas.net/modules/news03/article.php?storyid=558#ixzz1x1akzxou>)

is merely *experienced*. When confronted with the Pessoa poem, I transition more or less gently, from the experiential mode to a mode of judgment.

My second example from Pessoa is about the importance of being ridiculous. The poem goes (in part) like this:

all love letters are
ridiculous .
They would not be love letters if they were not
ridiculous.
I too have written love letters in my time,
like all the others
they were ridiculous
love letters – if there is love --- must be
ridiculous

But in the end,
It's only those that have never written
love letters
who are
ridiculous¹⁰

Here again, I seem to be invited to endorse or to reject a certain vision of how I should be. And in this case I say Yes, I want to write ridiculous love letters; I would feel ridiculous not to let myself be ridiculous. And I can even buttress my endorsement with a recent article in a serious journal, showing experimentally that self-deception inhibits humour (Lynch and Trivers 2012). Laughter, particularly at oneself, is inimical to self-deception. And since self-deception is an unprepossessing trait, the determination to allow oneself to be ridiculous is an ideal worth emulating – a better way to be human. The fact that humour is not a traditional Aristotelian virtue illustrates the subtlety of poetry's philosophical force. Humour presupposes a number of appraisals of what matters and what doesn't matter in human life; in that respect, it is linked to traditional virtues such as modesty, a sense of proportion, and a sense of the importance of seeing the

¹⁰The poem published under Pessoa's "heteronym" Alvaro de Campos is widely anthologized. This extract came from <http://www.citador.pt/poemas/todas-as-cartas-de-amor-sao-ridiculas-alvaro-de-camposbrbhetero-nimo-de-fernando-pessoa>http://www.releituras.com/fpessoa_cartas.asp. The translation is mine.

unimportance of things transient even as they are savoured. Such traits have been the subject of praise, aspiration and meditation on the part of people traditionally called philosophers. But it would be pedantic, not to say bizarre, to insist on dragging all of this into one's appreciation of Pessoa's poem. The vision here is much more specific, much closer to the model of the "occasional poem" sparked by a particular moment in which someone reflects on the risk of being thought ridiculous for daring to write a love letter.

Both the poet's method of work and the reader's intended response are marked by the personal character of lyric poetry. But this is precisely what brings them back, in the end, to an unexpected reconciliation with philosophy. To explain this, I first return to the notion of density.

The excesses of density

To be sure, the notion of density fits some kinds of poetry better than others. It reaches an extreme level in surrealist poetry. But it can go further. In much of John Ashbery's poetry, for example, there is a dreamlike disconnection between the elements found in any particular sequence of words in a randomly chosen poem. In a fascinating interview with A. Poulin (1981), Ashbery expresses surprise that anyone has trouble understanding his poetry. "It seems to me that the poetry is what's there and there are no hidden meanings or references to other things beyond what most of us know."(Poulin 244) And again: "it doesn't particularly matter about the experience; the movement of experiencing is what I'm trying to get down. Most of my poems are about the experience of experience". This sounds good, but does nothing to mitigate the baffling character of many of Ashbery's poems. In terms of the formula I derived from Paul Ziff, what seems to be happening in Ashbery's poetry is that words are deliberately located in highly improbable contexts. This should enrich their potential for meaning; but it does so only in a technical sense, derived from the mathematical or "Shannon" theory of information. In that sense, a sequence of digits or letters carries maximum information if it is completely random. The reason is that information is inversely related to probability: the least probable event adds the most to your

existing store of belief. But it is not informative in the common understanding of that term, which requires new information to be not only unexpected but *interesting*.

Stylistic Progress

A high degree of unpredictability due to randomness is not in general likely to make things particularly interesting to creatures looking for human significance. Nevertheless, it is, by definition, something that is likely to arouse surprise. That is at the root of an intriguing investigation. On the basis of computerised analysis of changes in word usage, Colin Martindale undertook to explain the course of changes in poetry (among other arts) from Chaucer to Larkin. His two basic variables are “arousal potential” and “primordial content.” The former includes “complexity, surprisingness, incongruity, ambiguity, and variability.” These, in turn, are operationalised with measures of “polarity (a measure of semantic intensity or strikingness)”, mean word length, potential for ambiguity in words used, and three different coefficient of variation: in word frequency, word length, and phrase length (Martindale 1990, 121–2). He divided the period in question (from 1290 to 1949) into 33 successive twenty-year periods. The impressive graphs that resulted seem to support his general “evolutionary theory of artistic change”, which posits successive waves, separated by radical changes of style, in which there is a steady rise in both arousal potential and primordial content. Periodically, those two parameters reach a peak (which gets steadily higher over the long haul), until they are reset at a lower level, when the quest for novelty is temporarily satisfied by stylistic innovation instead of further escalation of arousal and primordial content.

Martindale's conception of primordial content derives from the psychoanalytic concept of “primary process thought”. In its contrast with “secondarily process cognition”, which is “abstract, logical, and reality oriented... the thought of everyday waking reality... concerned with problem solving, logical deduction and induction, and so on”, primary process thinking is “free associative, concrete, irrational, and autistic. It is the thought of dreams and reveries.” (Martindale, 56).

Nowadays, philosophers with an interest in cognitive science are more likely to think of the distinction between the two systems of “dual processing theory.” Daniel Kahneman's recent intellectual autobiography has recast half a century of his research in terms of this dual processing perspective (Kahneman 2011). But it is not the same distinction, insofar as “System 1” of modern dual processing theory consists in extremely efficient mechanisms for dealing with the real world. Freudian primary process thinking, by contrast, ignores the limitations of actual reality as well as being innocent of logic and language (Freud 1911). We need to make room for a kind of thinking more dreamlike, driven by associations, emotions and wishes, a type of consciousness uncommitted either to practical ends or logical process. Such states would recall those described above by Frijda and Sundararajan. Rather than being purposive, they would include, at most, “virtual states of action readiness rather than states that manifest in overt acts or suppressed action impulses.” (Frijda and Sundararajan 2007, 227). This contrasts not only with secondary process thinking which, of course, includes all the manifest content of analytic philosophy, but also with “system 1” processing as it is understood by most dual process theorists. If we are to believe recently published reports indicating that we are more creative when tired out and less likely to solve hard problems (Wietha and Zack 2011), states of unguided daydreaming may indeed be shown to have particular importance for creativity.¹¹

Martindale's research – anathema though it be to literary theorists – does seem to provide empirical evidence that a progressive pursuit of incongruity in poetry affects the choice of words, themes and syntax in different periods, and also of a poet's production in the course of a single life. It illustrates one aspect of the sort of density that a certain conception of philosophy generally strives to avoid.

Reconciliation?

¹¹I am indebted to Zachary Irving for drawing my attention to the importance of such “wandering states” of the mind.

My argument so far may seem to ignore examples of poems that are incontrovertibly intended to convey a philosophical idea. I have already mentioned Peter Lamarque's observation about the inevitability of abstract content in any genre of which the medium is language. John Koethe (1984) has given a number of examples, including these two, respectively from Wallace Stevens and from TS Eliot, of overtly philosophical lines of poetry:

Death is the mother of beauty, mystical,
Within whose burning bosom we devise
Our earthly mothers waiting, sleeplessly.¹²

There are three conditions which often look alike
Yet differ completely, flourish in the same hedgerow:
Attachment to self and to things and to persons, detachment
From self and from things and from persons; and, growing
between them, indifference
Which resembles the others as death resembles life,
Being between two lives . . .¹³

But here is the large difference, which appears particularly clear from the point of view of the reader. In neither of these cases am I, as reader, seriously tempted to *argue*, as I would if I were to receive it as philosophy: Why are our earthly mothers waiting “sleeplessly”? Our mothers are either dead or alive, and if alive, then why are they “in the bosom of death”? Well, it's a trope, of course. But could it be right or wrong?

Koethe seeks to disarm such naïvely impertinent queries by noting the difference between truth and truthfulness; the latter is what matters here, and it would be uncouth to confuse them. The truth of a poem, I would be happy to concede, is akin to the truths of an emotion. Elsewhere, I have argued that the sense of truth appropriate to emotions is a “generic” one, differing in two ways from the specific kind of truth ascribed by standard semantics to propositions. First, the sort of generic truth that can be ascribed to an emotion admits of degrees; secondly, it is relative, in every case, to standards specific to the emotion in question.¹⁴ Similarly, what we are asked to endorse in

¹² “Sunday Morning”, in (Stevens 1964, 68–9)

¹³ From “Little Gidding”, in (Eliot 1968, 55).

¹⁴ For more on this conception of generic truth, see (de Sousa 2011, 55–6)

a poem is not some universally valid truth, but a picture of a certain kind that is convincing in its own terms, while we are contemplating the poem. To a large extent, the truth we are invited to endorse is a local one, fitting standards that are set by the poem itself.¹⁵

One of Koethe's own example will serve to make the point. He quotes, from not quite accurate memory, a sentence from Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*: “What is love but the heart grown conscious of separation in time and space?”¹⁶ and comments:

I had that familiar feeling of assenting to a striking insight we often experience in reading great literature (“How true!”), but then it occurred me that the same feeling of assent could also be prompted by the near negation of that sentence, “What is love but the heart grown unconscious of separation in time and space?” While the latter is more banal than, and not strictly the negation of, the former, clearly the two observations are in tension with one another (Koethe 2009, 55).

Actually I was brought up to believe that this feature defines a Profound Truth quite generally: a Profound Truth is one of which the negation is also a Profound Truth. There's nothing especially poetic about this, but on the standard philosophical criteria of univocal meaning as truth conditions, profound truths are indeed defective as philosophical pronouncements. As the philosopher-poet Leonard Cohen has put it, however, “here is a crack in everything; that's how the light gets in.”¹⁷ Although irritating to the analytic philosopher, profound truths are not always devoid of insight.

I have stressed two contrasts in the foregoing reflections. One is that poetry pursues meaning density, while philosophy eschews it. The other is that what passes for truth in philosophy

¹⁵I am side-stepping a large literature on the question of what “truth” might mean when applied to literature. For an enlightening approach to this problem, focusing on fiction rather than poetry, see (Gibson 2007).

¹⁶The original is “l'amour, c'est l'espace et le temps rendus sensibles au coeur” (Proust 1966, vol. 3, p. 385), which actually says nothing explicitly about separation. It is better rendered as “love is time and space rendered perceptible to the heart”.

¹⁷Leonard Cohen, “Anthem”.

is more strictly tied to propositions as truth-bearers, capable of being sufficiently insulated from their context of origin to be held true universally. Unsurprisingly, given the quasi-biological diversity of what has been called poetry, I have had to make a number of concessions along the way. None of the claims I have made is nomologically valid either about philosophy or about poetry. But as a picture of how things stand in philosophy in comparison to poetry, I remain convinced of the truthfulness, if not of the truth, of a conception of poetry as aspiring to meaning density, and as susceptible of generic rather than conventional truth. At the same time, I have found much to weaken the case for pure transparency as an invariable demand of philosophy.

Note, incidentally, that the cultivation of transparency does not preclude the pleasures of style. One has only to think of some of philosophy's famous sentences to remember that some philosophers can still write. Consider just two examples:

“Good sense is the best distributed thing in the world, for everyone thinks himself to be so well endowed with it that even those who are the most difficult to please in everything else never deem themselves to need any more of it than they already have.”

”The incorrectness of rendering 'Ctesias is hunting unicorns' in the fashion:

$(\exists x)(x \text{ is a unicorn} \cdot \text{Ctesias is hunting } x)$

is conveniently attested by the nonexistence of unicorns, but is not due simply to that zoological lacuna.”

Neither of these fine sentences, however, allows the slightest doubt as to its unique meaning. And if they did admit of anything more distracting than a shade of irony, each of their authors would regard that as a defect. So in some philosophy, at least, the demand for transparency seems well established. Nevertheless, this doesn't hold true for all those who would regard themselves as doing philosophy. More importantly, insofar as it seems incontrovertible that the aims of philosophy legitimately include a new vision, a “re-gestalt” of the world, I must concede the potential for a convergence.

Most of what I have said to soften the antagonism between poetry and philosophy has been designed to bring poetry closer to philosophy. Something more should be said about the convergence as it might be seen from the other side. A spirited defense of the claim of “lyrical” uses of language to be incorporated into the language of philosophy itself has been made by Jan Zwicky – a musician, poet and philosopher (Zwicky 1995; 2003). In a recent summary describing her two books, Zwicky writes: “the line constituted by my remarks is only one of many: there is a second, parallel, text composed of excerpts from other authors, excerpts from musical compositions, photographs, mathematical proofs, etc. That second text, in combination with my own, attempts to trace a multi-dimensional polyphonic structure.” (Zwicky 2013 forthcoming)

She goes on to distinguish analytic from lyric philosophy in two ways:

To read analytic thought sympathetically is to be favourably disposed towards the presupposition that meaning is essentially a linguistic phenomenon although, in any given case, the exact words may not matter. The reading of lyric compositions presupposes that, in significant ways, meaning exists prior to and independently of language – but that if language is to bear its trace, the choice of words must be exact. (Zwicky 2013, 2).

If we read “lyric compositions” as referring to poetry, it is not contentious that “the choice of words must be exact.” But it is puzzling to find this claim tied to the idea that meaning “exists prior to and independently of language”. For if language strains, as we have seen many poets feel, to express something that is beyond the reach of words, there is no reason to believe that just one form of words will qualify. If none really succeeds, several might come equally close. On the other hand, if one takes all meaning to be linguistic – or more modestly, if our best chance of constructing a clear conception of meaning is to take linguistic meaning as a paradigm – I don't see why it would follow that the choice of words “may not matter”. I would expect precisely the reverse. The compromises required in “translations” of poetic texts afford an obvious illustration: to convey the meaning of a text in another language, there are sure to be several alternatives, precisely because none might be quite right. Insofar no extra-linguistic source of meaning exist, there

will be no true synonyms. Surely it is when language is all there is, when words are not intended to transpose anything from some non-linguistic reality, that “exact words” will matter supremely.

Nevertheless, Zwicky seems right in suggesting that an aim of philosophy is to effect a change of vision. Since that formula fits the aim of much poetry, the original contrast I drew between philosophy and poetry is all the weaker. Nevertheless, I balk at regarding philosophy as so inclusive as to encompass every approach to what we might broadly call “understanding”, including not only poetry but music, art and mathematics. For while every discipline, from science to poetry (and perhaps even, if tolerance is indulged to the point of laxity, religion) contributes to understanding in the broadest sense, it seems confusing to call it all philosophy.

There remains, furthermore, a crucial difference in the role of truth, and the kind of truth that we expect in philosophy and in poetry. We apply the word ‘compelling’ both to a philosophical argument and to a poem (or even a few lines of poetry). But what we mean when we say a poem is compelling is not the same as what we mean when we say an argument is compelling.¹⁸ Even in the most philosophical of poems, we don't apply the standards of conviction that prevail when assessing a philosophical text. A philosophical poem might be presenting a new way of seeing things, as in the examples of the two Pessoa poems; or it might even present itself as an argument, like those slightly annoying early Sonnets in which Shakespeare is *arguing* that his friend should have a child. But in either case, the kind of truth we are looking for is quite different from the kind of truth we look for in philosophy. Even when a philosophical text is not one of those that relies entirely on argument, we find it compelling only if it leads us to believe its conclusion to be *true*, or the picture it presents to be the *right* picture of how things stand in a very general way. By contrast, to find an argument or a position taken in a poem incredible does not necessarily remove its virtue as a “compelling” presentation of a certain sort of *possible* way to be.

¹⁸ Robert Nozick once offered a third alternative definition of a compelling argument: “if the person refuses to accept the conclusion, *he dies*.” (Nozick 1981, 4).

Because a poem is most likely rooted, as Ribeiro suggested, in a personal experience, a poem doesn't need to claim universality to ring true or be truthful.

In sum, I now see my original conviction that poetry and philosophy are inherently polar opposites in their relation to language as simplistic. In its modest and limited way, I regard this as a “vision” of the relation of philosophy and poetry. It is not poetic; it is philosophical; and I was led to it by a mix of arguments and animadversions, of which this is the last.

References

- Bargh, J. A., & Ferguson, M. L. (2000). Beyond behaviorism: On the automaticity of higher mental processes. *Psychological Bulletin*, 126, 925-945.
- Bargh, J. A., Chen, M., & Burrows, L. (1996, Aug). Automaticity of social behavior: Direct effects of trait construct and stereotype activation on action. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 71(2), 230-244.
- Burge, T. (1978). Belief and Synonymy. *Journal of Philosophy*, 75(3), 119-138.
- Critchley, S. (2005). *Things merely are: Philosophy in the poetry of Wallace Stevens*. London: Routledge.
- Davidson, D. (1978). What metaphors mean. *Critical Inquiry*, 5, 31-47.
- Davidson, D. (1982 [1967]). Truth and meaning. In *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (pp. 17-42). Oxford: Oxford University Press, Clarendon.
- de Saussure, F. (1966). *Course in general linguistics* (C. Bally & A. Sechehaye, eds, A. Reidlinger, Collaborator, W. Baskin, Trans.). New York: McGraw-Hill.
- de Sousa, R. (2011). *Emotional Truth*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Eliot, T. S. (1968). *Four Quartets*. Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace.
- Fodor, J. (1983). *The Modularity of Mind*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, A Bradford book.
- Frege, G. (1980). On sense and reference. *Mind*, 65(259), 51-78
- Freud, S. (1911). Formulations on the two principles of mental functioning. In *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works* (pp. 213-226). London: Hogarth Press.

- Frijda, N., & Sundararajan, L. (2007). Emotion Refinement: A Theory Inspired by Chinese Poetics. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 2(3), 227-241.
- Gibson, J. (2007). *Fiction and the Weave of Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Howard, S. A. (2012). Lyrical Emotions and Sentimentality. *Philosophical Quarterly*, In press, online doi: 10.1111/j.1467-9213.2012.00072.x
- Kahneman, D. (2011). *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. (D. Kahneman, P. Slovic, & A. Tversky). New York; Toronto: Farrar, Straus and Giroux; Doubleday Canada.
- Koethe, J. (1984). *The Late Wisconsin Spring*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton Univ. Press.
- Koethe, J. (2009). Poetry and Truth. *Mid-West Studies in Philosophy*, 33, 53-60.
- Lamarque, P. (2009). Poetry and Abstract Thought. *Mid-West Studies in Philosophy*, 33, 37-52.
- Lynch, R. L., & Trivers, R. F. (2012). Laughter Inhibits Self-Deception. *Journal of Personality and Individual Differences*, in press. doi: 10.1016/j.paid.2012.02.017
- Martindale, C. (1990). *The Clockwork Muse: The predictability of artistic change*. New York: Basic Books.
- Masson, J. M. (1977). Introduction. In W. Merwin & J. M. Masson (Trans.), *The Peacock's Egg: Love Poems from Ancient India* (pp. 1-35). San Francisco: North Point Press.
- Masson, J. M. (1985). *The Assault on Truth: Freud's Suppression of the Seduction Theory*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin.
- Mates, B. (1952). Synonymy. In B. Linsky (ed.), *Semantics and the Philosophy of Language* (pp. 111-136). Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

- McGinn, C. (2012, March 4). Philosophy by Another Name. *New York Times*. Retrieved from
<http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/03/04/philosophy-by-another-name/>
- Mercier, H., & Sperber, D. (2011). Why do Humans Reason? Arguments for an Argumentative Theory. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 34(2), 57-74.
- Merwin, W., & Masson, J. M. (1977). *The Peacock's Egg: Love Poems from Ancient India*. San Francisco: North Point Press.
- Nozick, R. (1981). *Philosophical Explanations*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Oatley, K. (2006). Simulation of Substance and Shadow: Inner Emotions and Outer Behavior in Shakespeare's Psychology of Character. *College Literature*, 33(1), 15-33.
- Pandit, L. (1996, February). Dhvani and the 'Full Word': Suggestion and signification from Abhinavagupta to Jaques Lacan. *College Literature*, 23(1), 142-63.
- Parkes, G. (2011). Japanese Aesthetics. In E. N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.
(<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2011/entries/japanese-aesthetics>)
- Ponge, F. (1942). *Le parti pris des choses*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Ponge, F. (1995). *The Nature of Things*. (L. Fahnestock). Red Dust Publishers.
- Poulin Jr, A. (1981). The Experience of Experience: A Conversation With John Ashbery. *Michigan Quarterly Review*, 20(3), 241-255.
- Proust, M. (1966). *A la recherche du temps perdu*. Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade.

- Ribeiro, A. C. (2009). Towards a Philosophy of Poetry. *Midwestern Studies in Philosophy*, 33, 61-77.
- Stevens, W. (1964). *The Collected Poems*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Wietha, M. B., & Zack, R., T. (2011). Time of Day Effects on Problem Solving: When Non-Optimal is Optimal. *Thinking and Reasoning*, 17(4), 387-401.
- Yeats, W. B. (. B. (1996). *The collected poems*. (R. J. Finneran, Ed.). New York: Scribner.
- Ziff, P. (1960). *Semantic Analysis*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Zwicky, J. (1995). *Lyric Philosophy*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Zwicky, J. (2003). *Wisdom and Metaphor*. Kentville, N.S.: Gaspereau Press.
- Zwicky, J. (2013 forthcoming). What is Lyric Philosophy? *Common Knowledge*.