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Education and the Demands of Literature Texts: Poetic Meaning*

If a poem itself does not communicate what it means, what can a teacher do for it? It is perfectly proper and customary for a writer to refuse to discuss the meanings of what he or she has written; if the writing itself has not failed, the meanings are already there for the sensitive reader to grasp. The question then becomes a matter for the sensitivity of the reader. Schiralli has written previously in this Journal on the topic of training those aesthetic sensibilities that too many people assume are either by nature given or withheld. Using certain ideas of Ezra Pound's he explores here the directions in which students' attention may be drawn so that they may grasp those elusive meanings in sounds, images, and implications which poetry often brings into play.

However violent disputes about poetry may sometimes be, there is one point on which most habitual readers of it will enthusiastically agree: that the meaning of poetry often defies literal explication. A poem, a pertinent slogan goes, means more than it says. And before this belief is discounted as a bit of poetic fancy itself, it can be noted that even so thoroughly unfanciful a philosopher as A. J. Ayer reserves in his *Language, Truth and Logic* a special place for poetic meaning outside the otherwise unmerciful constraints of the verifiability criterion.[1]

Leaning heavily upon certain key insights of Ezra Pound into the special meaning of poetry, this essay will explore the plausibility and educational implications of the view that there is a gulf between a poem and its paraphrase. Successful readers of poetry will be seen to transcend with skill the "semantic differential" between poetic and literal meaning. Viewing poetic appreciation thus as a skill will also help in developing pedagogical strategies for making students more proficient readers of poetry.

Ezra Pound observed in 1913 that in attempting to think systematically about poetry, one is at a serious disadvantage:

> . . . all the words that one would use in writing about these things are the vague words of daily speech . . .

Hence, urges Pound:

> . . . it is nearly impossible to write with scientific preciseness about 'prose and verse' unless one writes a complete treatise on the 'art of writing', defining each word as one would define the terms in a treatise on chemistry. And on this account all essays about 'poetry' are usually not only dull but inaccurate and wholly useless.[2].

Poetry, verse and prose

Part of the vagueness of ordinary usage that Pound complained about centres on a conflation of "verse" with "poetry" and an apposition of "poetry" to "prose." Consider, for example, the following four specimens:

A. Roses are red,
Violets are blue,
Sugar is sweet,
And you are too.

B. Woodshadows floated silently by through the morning peace from the stairhead seaward where he gazed. Inshore and farther out the mirror of water whitened, spurned by lightshod hurrying feet. White breast of the dim sea. The twining stresses, two by two. A hand plucking the harpstrings merging their twining chords. Wavewhite wedded words shimmering on the dim tide.[3]

C. The Protestant Reformation destroyed the unity of the Christian faith and replaced it with national churches organized under the authority of the state. Where the old church survived it was forced to compromise and to share its authority with the state.[4]

D. Where, like a pillow on a bed,
   A pregnant bank swelled up, to rest
The violet's reclining head,
   Sat we two, one another's best...[5]

If "verse" and "poetry" are taken as virtually the same, we have no *conceptual* grounds for distinguishing specimens D from A. And if verse and poetry are opposed to "prose," then specimens B and C are not examples of conceptually distinct categories. Yet one *wants* to say (and the appeal here is to the general intuition of experienced readers of poetry) that B has much more in common with D than does A, and moreover that B and C have little in common. B and D *are* poetry, while A is not. And while B and C are indeed prose, B is *also* poetry.

Pound shows us a way out of this dilemma: if we think of poetry as a condition of language (rather than a genre of literature roughly of the same sort as verse), then we can comfortably include B as an instance of poetry. We can also intelligently say of things like A that "There is very little poetry in this verse." Such a view of poetry would also further our understanding of "found poetry" — those snatches of conversation, for example, overheard by chance in the most "unpoetic" of contexts, that reverberate in our recollection; or the way a line or two in a straightforward newspaper story capture our attention; or indeed the verbal "gems" children unknowingly let out. There is *something* about the language of such snatches that strikes us as poetic even though they are far removed from the domain of "verse" or even of "poems."

Pound urged that the distinguishing feature of those pieces of language which we would consider "poetry" is that they are more "highly charged" with meaning. Poetry will, therefore, be considered here as a condition of language. To say that "X is poetic" will mean that "the meaning of X is not reducible to the literal purport of X" (where X is some piece of language). Pound will also prove of great assistance in providing an account of the source of this additional meaning.

Ezra Pound, pedagogue

The genesis of Pound's thinking about poetic meaning is a fascinating one, particularly from an educational point of view. Pound's major motivation for understanding poetry derived from what T. S. Eliot rightly called a "passionate" desire to teach.[6] Pound was eager to teach both writers, how to write better, and readers, how better to appreciate what they read. Pound's pedagogical influence on writers such as T. S. Eliot and W. B. Yeats is well-documented, particularly since the publication of Valerie Eliot's edition of the *Waste Land* manuscript complete with Pound's "editorial" changes and comments. It is not too much to say, upon perusing this volume, that if Eliot wrote the poetry, then certainly Pound made the poem.

Pound's passion for teaching the art of writing was equalled by his desire to make us all better readers. Thus his two theoretical excursions, "How to Read" and *The ABC of Reading,* involved Pound in an attempt to represent poetic meaning in terms accessible to the common reader as well as to the experienced writer. Pound's method was simply to reflect on, and to attempt to understand, the sources of his own satisfaction with poetic expression. Pound did not, at least during that period of his life in which his categories of poetic meaning were developed, have any axe to grind other than understanding the richness of experience to be had with poetry, and the rather messianic impulse to increase others' appreciation of that richness through the improvement of writers and the education of readers. In his investigations into the meaning of poetry, Pound urged that if we "chuck out the classifications which apply to the outer shape of the work, or to its occasion, and if we look at what actually happens . . . we will

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find that language is charged or energized in various manners."[7]

Two of the ways in which language might be energized first appeared in a rough distinction between "lyric" and "imagiste" poetry in a paper Pound published in 1915 called "Imagisme and England."[8] In Pound's 1929 essay "How to Read,"[9] these rough conceptions were refined to *melopoeia,* or that sort of poetry in which language is charged with musical properties that carry its communicative potential over and beyond its literal purport, and *phanopoeia,* in which the language serves to cast expressive images on the visual imagination. In this article Pound also formally added his newest insight about poetry, that is, *logopoeia,* that kind of poetry in which words were deliberately manipulated to achieve extra-literal semantic effects.

The three categories taken together represent a cogent solution to the problem of poetic meaning. In poetic expression language may "mean more than it literally says" because in addition to whatever literal purport the language might have (and in some very successful nonsense verse the literal purport may be virtually nil) it also has *expressive* purport. Words are also "word-sounds," and as sounds in sequence may acquire expressive meanings in music, so too in poetry word-sounds may provide an independent source of meaning. Sometimes the expressive meaning will mingle with the literal purport, as in Eliot's lovely "Preludes." At other times, as is the case with Lewis Carroll's "They told me you had been to her," the rich expressive meaning has little to do with what the words are *saying.*

Visual images can likewise have expressive meaning. Pound's phanopoeia shows us that language, like paint, can be used to "make pictures." The images that language may present to the visual imagination, that we see in the mind's eye, may be expressive in the same way that a painting is expressive. Here too the meaning of the "word-pictures" may well surpass the literal meaning of the language. The language of a poem such as H. D.'s "Pear Tree," for instance, which succeeds because of its imagic vitality, is on the literal level quite plainly and precisely descriptive. The poem succeeds not because we could easily draw the images given in the poem, but rather that in becoming aware of the images presented through the language we can consider the expressive qualities of those images.

As the logopoeia — what Pound called "the dance of intellect among the words" — presents a rather unique set of characteristics, consideration of this third category of poetic meaning will be deferred until we have explored melopoeia and phanopoeia in some detail.

Melopoeia

The music with which Pound was concerned and which is the stuff of melopoeia is not reducible to, nor derived from, any formal meter. If anything a

meter "skilfully used *can* display a deal of variety,"[10] but it can only display. It can give a secondary, formal quality to language, but the real music must be in the tonal and quantitative properties of word-sounds as distinct phonological sequences. Meter, as it were, sits on top of the music and sometimes gives it a more clearly articulated form. A poem, noted Pound, need not "rely on its music, but if it does rely on its music, that music must be such as will delight the expert."[11]

Pound's later injunction (1913) "to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in the sequence of a metronome"[12] is an injunction that we not confuse the container with the thing contained. Once freed from the arbitrary and often harmful restriction of formal meter, the poet might pay more attention to the primary musicality of his words. Toward the end of becoming sensitive to this music, Pound suggests that the young poet

> . . . fill his mind with the finest cadences he can discover, preferably in a foreign language, so that the meaning of the words may be less likely to divert his attention from the movement; e.g. Saxon charms, Hebridean Folk Songs, the verse of Dante . . . Let him dissect the lyrics of Goethe coldly into their component sound values, syllables long and short, stresses and unstresses, into vowels and consonants.[13]

Phanopoeia

To distinguish phanopoeia from imagism or literary modernism is to distinguish a univerally applicable category of poetic meaning from the style of a particular school. Much of imagist technique is, of course, phanopoetical, but whereas many imagist poets were willing to settle for less than the emotional and intellectual complex that the doctrine of the image necessitates, the phanopoetical image *must* present such a complex.

After working on Fenollosa's rough translations of Li Po (the "Rihaku" of *Cathay*), the expressiveness of the seventh-century master's images caused Pound to become increasingly discontented with the coldness and emotional neutrality that was transforming imagism to "Amygism" to a kind of eviscerated aestheticism. In commenting by letter on some of Iris Barry's poems, Pound complains:

> Some of the things seem to be "just imagistic," neither better nor worse than a lot of other Imagistic stuff that gets into print.[14]

In diagnosing the malady and prescribing the cure, Pound was penetrating to the essence of the distinction between what he would later call phanopoeia and imagism:

> I think you might get a certain edge or cut of sensuousness, passion, whatever you like to call it, and which would relieve the very gentle sort of

'impressionism-imagisme'... which is quite nice as it is, but not different from a poem I received last week.[15]

This "cut of sensuousness," this expression of perceptible emotion and complex feeling *in an image* is what marks the Pound of *Cathay,* poems like "The River Merchant's Wife," and "The Jewel Stairs' Grievance." It is also to be seen in Pound's other verse. Consider, for example, the imagic meaning of "In A Station of the Metro":

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

The expressive meaning of this poem lies in the interpenetration of two images. The title and the first line present the first image: faces set against the darkness of a subway station. Subway faces suggestive of nameless technological men going hurriedly in all directions are pressed closely in the first image, but they do not touch. A very sterile picture. The first image, however, is transformed through the mediate word "apparition" into a richly sensuous (and sensual) image of flower petals darkly beautiful against a wet, black bough. The emotional edge of this poem — the tension between technology and nature expressed in this imagic complex — marks the most successful instances of phanopoeia.

Logopoeia

I have referred to Pound's categories of phanopoeia and melopoeia as "word-pictures" and "word-sounds" respectively. Pound's third category, logopoeia, is the domain of "word-play." Pound defined logopoeia as "the dance of the intellect among words." Logopoeia, he continues:

... employs words not only for their direct meaning, but it takes count in a special way of habits of usage, of the context we *expect* to find with the word, its usual concomitants, of its known acceptances, and of ironical play. It holds the aesthetic content which is peculiarly the domain of verbal manifestation, and cannot possibly be contained in plastic or in music.[16]

This last category of Pound's is perhaps the most fascinating component of poetic meaning that Pound delimited. Pound's continuous drive to *understand* what "actually happens" in poetry coupled with the inability of melopoeia and phanopoeia to explain those genuine successes of poetic expression that did *not* depend upon sound or image led to his articulation of this category.

The "extra" meaning of logopoetical expression is, as Pound claimed, of a peculiarly verbal kind. Recall that the source of poetic meaning of melopoeia and phanopoeia is the expressive meaning of music and visual art. Hence this meaning *is* in principle containable "in plastic or in music." The source of this meaning is more or less (sometimes even wholly) independent of the literal purport. Other critics of note have pointed to the independent meanings of sound and imagic values in poetry. In John Crowe Ransom's 1941 essay, "Wanted: An

Ontological Critic," the notion is expressed in terms of "Indeterminate Meaning":

> IM stands for . . . that part of the final meaning which took shape . . . under metrical compulsion; it may be represented by the poem's residue of meaning which does not go into logical paraphrase.[17]

Likewise Eliot's "Dante" essay makes the case for an objective "poetic emotion" that is present in genuine poetry, enabling it to communicate even if its words are not literally understood.[18] And as concerns phanopoeia as an independent source of meaning, Cleanth Brooks writes, of genuine poetic images, that "in the context of the poem they become a symbol heavily charged with meanings which no dictionary can be expected to give."[19]

Metaphor, ambiguity and disjointed context

Such assertions can be understood within the Poundian position on melopoeia and phanopoeia. But what of the peculiarly *verbal* domain of logopoeia? Unfortunately, apart from the definition given above, Pound did not provide very much in the way of further elaboration. There are, however, several forms of logopoeia or word-play that may be distinguished. The first is metaphor. One is aware of metaphor in verbal expression whenever one is prompted to consider some A in terms ordinarily associated with some B, where A and B are the two "terms" of the metaphor. This deliberate confusion in frames of reference may be explicit, as in the case of simile, or implicit in (1) some juxtaposition of terms, or (2) some literally false assertion of identity or predication. In considering a metaphor we become aware of an unexpected and previously unrecognized familiarity with the A term — we are forced to see and understand A in a new but (ironically) familiar way — insofar as the respects in which A is analogous to B are brought sharply into focus. If the metaphor is good, the A term will be embedded in a nexus of apparently alien associations that, upon reflection, do succeed in illuminating pertinent facets of the A term. That is, the B term provides a stimulus and a framework for the exploration of the familiar; it startles us into keener awareness of A's nature. A good metaphor — like the following from May Swenson's "Snow in New York" — takes hold of the attention and will not let it go: "eggs, corn muffins, bleeding triangles of pie."

A second form of logopoeia is ambiguity. William Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity* offers a multifaceted typology of the sorts of ambiguity operative in poetic expression, although Empson's conception of ambiguity is quite broad, including, as it does, metaphorical and analogical expression. Ambiguity in the sense used here involves a general sensitivity to different though equally plausible syntactic or semantic possibilities, such that one is aware of ambiguity as an instance of poetic expression when one considers alternative meanings of the

same piece of language and is alert to the possible interrelationships among them. Such alternative meanings may be plainly semantic (as in the case of a pun or a "double-entendre"), or syntactic. Syntactic ambiguity involves a piece of language which may be meaningful under more than one syntactic structure. For example: in the middle of a Chinese poem called "Climbing High In Autumn," in which the poet becomes increasingly aware of seasonal (and personal) desolation as he climbs upward, occurs the line, "The river only persists." Syntactically, this can make sense in two ways: "The river only persists, i.e., it does not surge," or "The river only persists, i.e., everything else has given up." The syntactic ambiguity of this line is especially rich, as either meaning alone would make for an excellent line of poetry; having them both as possibilities between which our attention reverberates results in an experience which is — and there is no better way to put it than Pound's — more highly charged.

While metaphor and ambiguity are much discussed in criticism, the third and final kind of logopoeia — what may be called "disjointed context" — has not received systematic attention. Philosophers and sociologists have taught us in different ways that there are a multitude of different *linguistic activities,* each one governed by different rules, that people typically engage in; chatting, gossiping, bargaining, conversing, praying, etc., would be examples. Whenever we encounter language being used in accord with the rules of some contextually *inappropriate* linguistic activity, we have an instance of disjointed context. Disjointed context has been used to excellent effect among modernist writers like Eliot, Joyce, and Pound himself. Pound's "Ballad of the Goddly Fere" or any of the individual chapter "techniques of Joyce's *Ulysses* would be good examples.

In *The Waste Land's* second section (A Game of Chess), Eliot deliberately casts a symbolic portrayal of sterility and death in the form and style of sordid pub-gossip. The easy-going cadences of the story of Lil and Albert, the alternation of grave matters (the abortion) and silly matters (the hot gammon) all uttered in the same unfeeling tone combine to create a depraved, tense counterpoint to the chords of desolation and despair sounded throughout the poem.

The three categories of logopoeia sketched above are not intended to represent an exhaustive account or word-play in poetry. But they, taken together with melopoeia and phenopoeia, do represent an attempt to develop the outlines of a systematic account of poetic meaning — an attempt to represent coherently and plausibly the sort of conceptual grasp implicit in the skilful poetry reader's awareness of poetic meaning.

Teaching poetry for melopoeia

This essay has argued that an important ingredient of poetic meaning is the sound-value of words and phrases. Appreciating the melopoetical aspects of language has two broad requirements. First, if one is to be in a position to con-

sider the melopoetical aspects of language, then he must have some (inchoate, developing, or sophisticated) sensitivity to the aesthetically relevant aspects of sounds in sequence. Second, he must also be *exposed* to melopoetical aspects. Important implications for instructional methods and curriculum planning follow from each requirement.

If the second condition is to be met then ways must be found to expose students to the sound of poetry. If a poem succeeds primarily or in part because of its music, then that music must be "played." In such a poem, the text stands to the poetry as a musical score is related to a performance. While the score can communicate music silently to the experienced musician, for most music lovers (even those who can read music) the music can only be appreciated in performance. Such is also the case with melopoeia — it must (except for those very few with great poetic sophistication) be heard, it must be read aloud.

Some teachers read wonderfully. Many other do not. If a teacher reads well and comfortably, then our "play the music" criterion may be easily met. If a teacher cannot, however, from lack of training or talent, there are still ways of accommodating this condition. The best method is to use recorded versions of poems. There are libraries of verse housed in long-playing records, including dozens of volumes of poets reading their own works. It may not be the case that every melopoetically interesting poem exists in a good, recorded version, but for every such poem absent, there is another poem recorded in several excellent and distinctive "readings." Even though there are abundant opportunities and means, however, very often nothing is done along these lines. It is nothing short of a disgrace that most students pass through *years* of poetry "appreciation" lessons without once ever having been exposed to a decent reading of a poem. Dylan Thomas' readings of poetry, for example, can force open even the most backward and reluctant of ears.

Most often in poetry lessons a perfunctory nod is given to the sound of a poem by having it read once, stammeringly, by a red-faced child who was "called on" by the teacher to do so. The remainder of the period is usually given over to devising a paraphrase of what the poet meant (taken quite literally) and the various devices, figures of speech, techniques, and so on, with which he "decorated" his compressed message. Such treatment is fit for greeting cards but not for poetry. To sum up: if a poem depends upon its music, then that music must be played before it can be heard. Playing it, however, will not guarantee that it *will* be heard. Thus we return to the first condition.

The first necessary condition for the appreciation of melopoeia, that of having some sensitivity to the aesthetically relevant aspects of sounds in sequence, has important ramifications for curriculum planning which also lead away from an exclusive dependence upon the printed text in poetry instruction. One cannot hope to develop an adequate appreciation of poetry in isolation from the other arts. It might be very important, for instance, to begin with some recorded *music*

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with which to develop some sensitivity to the aesthetically relevant aspects of auditory phenomena, before or while trying to develop students' ability to appreciate melopoeia.

These comments would be equally applicable (with the obvious adjustments) to the problem of teaching poems that depend importantly on imagic meaning. For without the sensitivity to aesthetically relevant aspects of visual phenomena one stands little chance of bringing students to appreciate phanopoetical expression. Teachers of poetry should, therefore, feel free to explore music and visual art in their classes as a means of developing students' sensitivity to melopoeia and phanopoeia. The best solution, perhaps, would be to move toward thoroughly integrated programs of *aesthetic* education.

Inasmuch as the special meanings of poetry require that the student come to attend to language in special, extraordinary ways, it is desirable to develop strategies for directing student attention. Questions such as:

"Listen to this!"
"Picture this in your mind's eye!"
"What can this mean here?"

can be most helpful in this regard. These are, of course, paradigmatic "pointers" that arise from Pound's categories of melopoeia, phanopoeia, and logopoeia. As paradigms, however, they can only provide general guidelines for teachers to use in specific educational activities. What will count as an effective pointer will often depend importantly upon the background experience of the class. Oftentimes, for instance, effective pointers will involve the use of metaphor to bridge the gap between what there is to perceive (dependent upon observational categories that the learner does not yet have) and what the learner already knows.[20] Here the first term of the pedagogical metaphor will be the new observational category and the second term will be some familiar, analogically-related concept. The analogical bridge provides a "foothold" into the unfamiliar conceptual territory. In such analogical teaching just what will work as a good teaching metaphor cannot be prescribed independent of context.

Literary texts present demands upon readers. We have seen that, in the case of poetry, readers must be able to attend to language in special ways. They must possess skilful strategies for extracting the meanings conveyed by word-sounds, word-pictures and word-play.

NOTES

1. A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (New York: Dover, 1952), pp. 44-45.
2. Ezra Pound, "The Serious Artist," in *Literary Essays,* ed. by T. S. Eliot (New York: New Directions, 1968), pp. 49-50.
3. James Joyce, *Ulysses* (New York: Ransom House, 1961), p. 9.

4. W. K. Ferguson, "Toward the Modern State," in *The Renaissance: Six Essays* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), p. 27.
5. John Donne, from "The Ecstasy."
6. T. S. Eliot, ed., *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions, 1968), p. xii.
7. Ezra Pound, "How to Read," in *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound, op. cit.,* p. 25.
8. Ezra Pound, "Imagisme and England: A Vindication and an Anthology," *T. P.'s Weekly* 25 (February 29, 1915), p. 185.
9. Pound, *Essays,* pp. 15-40.
10. Pound, *Letters,* p. 77.
11. Pound, *Essays,* p. 5.
12. *Ibid.,* p. 3.
13. *Ibid.,* p. 5.
14. Pound, *Letters,* p. 76.
15. *Ibid.,* p. 77.
16. Pound, *Essays,* p. 25.
17. John Crowe Random, "Wanted: An Ontological Critic," in *Beating the Bushes: Selected Essays* 1951-70 (New York: New Directions, 1972), p. 17.
18. T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1964), p. 200.
19. Cleanth Brooks, "What Does Poetry Communicate," in *The Well Wrought Urn* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1947), p. 73.
20. See Thomas F. Green, *The Activities of Teaching* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971), pp. 56-63.