

### Poetic Cognition

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### Summary and Keywords

Lyric poems have often been treated as expressions of pure or immediate feeling. “Amaze,” by Adelaide Crapsey, exemplifies the pervasiveness of thought even in a seemingly innocuous trifle. Philosophers and aestheticians have wrestled with the relationship between thought and feeling in poetry. Notable formulations come from Kant, Hegel, and Heidegger, but the most persuasive is from an essay by Herder, “On Knowledge and Sensation in the Human Soul.” The opening of Dante’s *Divine Comedy* and Mallarmé’s sonnet “Le Cygne” illustrate how poems struggle to confront feelings, with the smallest words—connectives, deictics, pronouns—bearing the burden of capturing the movement of the mind in thought. The apodictic language of de Manian deconstruction misses the subtleties, as do quasi-mystical theories of the power of imagery and New Critical faith in the formalized rhetoric of “the poem itself.” “Loving in truth” are the opening words of Sir Philip Sidney’s *Astrophel and Stella*; this first sonnet and the entire cycle instantiate poetic discourse as the unending search amid the byways of truth. In a study of Wallace Stevens, Charles Altieri calls the thinking of poetry “aspectual,” and Stevens’s poem “Metaphors of a Magnifico” presents the basic task of poetic cognition through its satire of the magnifico’s failure to think. “Lyric poetry’s exemption from rationalism,” as one new study puts it, is really an exemption from preemptive assertion in the service of exploring and representing the mind’s coursing.

Keywords: poetics, aesthetic theory, stylistics, Johann Gottfried Herder, Adelaide Crapsey, Dante Alighieri, Stéphane Mallarmé, Sir Philip Sidney, Wallace Stevens

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The poet...nothing affirmeth.

## Prologue

A certain line of modernism seems almost to have been down on poetry. “A poem should not mean / But be,” it begins, and it ends, perhaps, with Paul Fry’s plea for “literature as insignificance.”<sup>1</sup> The line is not altogether modern, as the epigraph from Sir Philip Sidney testifies, but the idea of poetry as pure form devoid of meaning sought validation in the poetic minimalism of the imagists and—eventually—ancestry in neoteric poetry from Callimachus to Emily Dickinson.<sup>2</sup> It reaches its apogee in the sound poems of Christian Mor-

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genstern, Tristan Tzara, Velimir Khlebnikov, and many others. The Russian name for that is *Zaum*—literally, beyond sense. Its sentimental nadir comes perhaps with the cinquains, haiku, and tanka of Adelaide Crapsey, for whom the title “Amaze” was an exaggeration, though not a pun:

I know  
Not these my hands  
And yet I think there was  
A woman like me once had hands  
Like these.

Such know-nothing poems are typically awarded the label “lyrical.” “De la musique avant toute chose,” as Paul Verlaine began his “Art poétique”: music before all else. Here is an entirely representative judgment, taken pretty much at random from a study of Ezra Pound and Catullus: “Pound’s debt to Catullus in these poems consists chiefly in an atmosphere caught from the Roman poet, which resists precise definition. An aspect of the short poems of Pound’s middle period which is particularly Catullan is their ability to reach beyond the simple structures of wit . . . towards a more lyrical and inclusive kind of writing.”<sup>3</sup> Idealism, music, atmosphere, and universality go hand in hand in such aspirations for poetic transcendence.<sup>4</sup>

Still, poems must *do* something. And to stand out from the crowd, it must be something special. All the negations and disclaimers are subject to reversal. Nothing affirming readily turns into affirming nothing; insignificance instills significance. Before turning the corner, “I know / Not” opens with “I know,” and before you know it, Crapsey is there, thinking: “And yet . . .” Even pure sound effects can be calculated and often were, and Crapsey’s denial of knowledge immediately turns itself into an assertion of thought; “Not these my hands” reverses, with only the unpunctuated hesitation of a line break, into “hands/Like these.”

Not knowledge, but thought, is the watchword lurking behind these protestations. Verlaine is especially articulate in his prescriptions: not deadly wit (“la Pointe assassine”) nor color (“Pas la Couleur”) but “Nuance,” not eloquence but sooth rime (“la Rime assagie”). By color Verlaine evidently means overt emotionality, since this very poem does name “bleu” and “Azur”—though by putting “bleu” before its noun (“le bleu fouillis des claires étoiles” [the blue tangle of bright stars]) he treats it as an emotional nuance rather than a determinate shade. It’s a trick pertaining to modality, not to meaning, that can be played in French, not in English; poetry is what doesn’t translate. Other elements in Verlaine’s rhetoric are similarly suggestive. The poem has its moment of violence—“prends l’éloquence et tords-lui son cou!” (take eloquence and wring its neck!)—but the “wring” turns into the ring of verse: “O qui dira les torts de la Rime?” (Oh, who will tell the wrongs of rhyme?, punning on the homophonic “tords”), in a stanza that rhymes to excess. “Que ton vers soit la chose envolée,” he says (may your verse be a fugitive thing), but as a noun an *envolée* is a flight of fancy or of rhetoric. All Verlaine’s contortions—and there are many others—gesture toward the same horizon. Poetry fulfills its role by avoiding direct statement; verse depends on reversals, or less punningly, as will appear at

greater length below, on interruption. Blindness is insight, ignorance is bliss: these formulas are too crude to capture the nuances of poetic turning, but they encircle the movement out of knowledge and into thought that is the essence of poetic cognition.<sup>5</sup> As Sean Pryor has written, “Modern thought does not so much fix these stars in a constellation as set them all spinning yet more quickly.”<sup>6</sup> Minus the qualification “modern,” that is the view expressed in this article.

## Philosophy (German)

“Poetic cognition”: genus and species. Especially since the terms “cognition” and “cognitive” have acquired multiple senses in current academic usage, it is important to define the category noun before turning to its poetic variant. The essential characteristic of cognition lies in giving and taking time. The French terms *connaître* and *connaissance* hint at twinship, “co-birth”; the etymology is false, yet still suggestive for the notion that cognition and its object arise conjointly. The true etymology from *cognoscere* replicates the collaborative aspect in evoking a shared *gnosis*, or act of knowing. In German cognition is *Erkenntnis*. *Kennen* is to know something in the sense of acquaintanceship, and the *er-* prefix implies fulfillment or duration. Cognition is a knowledge codependent with its object: the object must be defined and stable for the acquaintanceship to endure. One helpful recent account puts it in terms of an indispensable interval: “To assume that history exists only in the impermanence of a moment—that the only true time is now—is . . . to ascribe a collectivizing unity to temporality that temporality itself precludes. . . . Cognition depends on the ineradicable historicity of the interval. . . . It is only through persistence that anything can mean.”<sup>7</sup> Cognition takes place in time yet overcomes time; it is born together with the system of objects that are known, and it is shared with other knowers. Otherwise it cannot rise above a transient awareness.

The systematic philosophers of cognition, however, have little to offer about poetry. Among modern poets Kant admired particularly didactic verse: Alexander Pope; James Thomson; and, as Sanford Budick has convincingly argued, John Milton.<sup>8</sup> The last discussion of poetry in Kant’s *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment* honors it in four sentences as the highest of the fine arts, with the ability to “set imagination free,” albeit only “within the limits of a given concept,” and to “link the representation thereof with fullness of thought to which no verbal expression is fully adequate”; that is poetry’s way of “raising itself aesthetically to ideas.”<sup>9</sup> That equivocal celebration belongs to a stance in which poetry is never *Poesie* or *Dichtung* but rather *Dichtkunst*, with the stress on the “art” that gives order and regularity to the freedom of what would otherwise be “mere play”: “in all free arts some constraint or, as it is said, a *mechanism* is requisite, without which the *spirit*, which in art must be *free* and alone animates the work, would have no body whatsoever and would altogether evaporate.”<sup>10</sup> Kant here says that art is not always easy to distinguish from craft or skill, and the thrust is to move the discussion from the essential but incomprehensible flights of genius toward the essential formal stabilization, characterized parenthetically, as if unsurely: “(for instance, in *Dichtkunst*, linguistic correctness

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and richness, and likewise prosody and meter).<sup>11</sup> In accord with his transcendental bent, Kant is thus at best a guide to what poetry shoots for, not what targets it hits.

Hegel's *Aesthetics* probes further. Hegel subdivides *Poesie* into epic, lyric, and dramatic and goes into detail on the subgenres of lyric. He thinks of poetry as song more than as verbal art and takes a position close to Wordsworth's on the effect of verse: "For what the poet aims to arouse in the hearer is the same emotional mood [Gemütsstimmung] that the narrated occurrence puts him into."<sup>12</sup> But as he goes up the scale of history and the developing subgenres to arrive at "lyrical art poetry" (lyrische *Kunstpoesie*), he does turn to thought, and indeed to "philosophical thought."<sup>13</sup> But it's not an easy arrival. Either lyrical poetry encounters Hegel's philosophical thought as an emotional struggle "that in its ferment does violence both to art and to thought," or else "philosophy that is internally calmed as thought" (das in sich als Denken beruhigte Philosophieren) is enabled "to animate [beseelen] its clearly grasped and systematically conducted thoughts with feeling [Empfindung]" while "all the more seeking to conceal its inner unifications, so as to sink all the less into the sober tone of didactic exposition."<sup>14</sup> Even as thus excerpted from a longer and yet more tangled sentence, this last bit is a mouthful. Hegel struggles to reconcile poetry with thought and certainly does not identify a distinctive poetic manner of thinking. Indeed, the poetry he instances at this point is not the lyric song that opened the discussion but that of Friedrich Schiller, a philosophical balladeer whose "Lied von der Glocke" was named a few pages earlier. Hegel's properly "lyrical poet" (namely Goethe) "is driven to express in his song everything that is poetically configured in his feeling [Gemüt] and consciousness," whereas the highest stage of poetry belongs again to Schiller, where the "standpoint" differs from all the subgenres and is "distinguished" by "the majestic basic thought of its content, of which the poet . . . remains the complete master and fills it with his own poetic reflection, . . . with ravishing force . . . , but mostly very simple, yet striking rhythms and rhymes . . ."<sup>15</sup> This is not exactly poetic cognition, but rather the grandeur of thought expressed with the forceful immediacy of verse. But then the long discussion winds up with Goethe on top after all, for his "songs are the most excellent, deepest, and most powerful that we present-day Germans possess."<sup>16</sup> Clearly, Hegel is torn between the inwardness of Goethean lyric and the depth of Schillerian reflective verse, without being able to bring the two ideals together. So he, too, has a conception of thinking in verse that separates verse from thought, though he struggles against the very position that he represents.<sup>17</sup>

Finally, the philosopher who, following these, celebrates the fusion of poetry and thinking is of course Martin Heidegger. Yet a fusion is not a specification. Poetic cognition, as envisioned in this article, must be a distinct form of thought, not an essence. Heidegger was always after essences. His method was paraphrase; his favorite verb was "is," together with the variants and neologisms of the copula that he introduced. "Language in the Poem," the essay that introduced the fixating slogan that "every great poet poetizes out of only one sole poem," oozes the yearning for consummation out of every pore.<sup>18</sup> The ideal is "determination," being "gathered into its essence," coming "home"; "the place" of the poem at the center of Heidegger's essay is "seclusion"; the action of the poem is to "bring the concord of his path into the according revelation of the spoken language."<sup>19</sup> The last

phrase is the most untranslatable; it hinges on the portmanteau word *Verlautbarung*, whose standard meaning is proclamation, but which in this unusual context echoes *Offenbarung* (revelation) as well as the preceding *Wohllaut*, harmony or, as rendered here, concord.<sup>20</sup> The perfection of permanence resounds in any poem, through utterance that trails thought behind it, in a dawning world—or, in Heidegger’s jargon, a worlding—that escapes from anything that might be recognized as activity, engagement, or history.

From the perspective of the present article, all such discussions share the problem that they take poetry to be the handmaiden of philosophy.<sup>21</sup> The expression may be poetic, but the thinking is philosophical. And, after all, who can blame the philosophers for having faith in their own craft? Truths are timeless (even truths about historical phenomena), whereas poetic expression takes time. “Beauty is truth, truth beauty; that is all,” writes the poet, and the philosopher takes it as a totalizing equivalence. So it appears when Ralph Waldo Emerson echoes it in his early pamphlet, *Nature*. “The true philosopher and the true poet are one, and a beauty, which is truth, and a truth, which is beauty, is the aim of both.” Indeed, Emerson rubs it in, for the beauty he envisions is a Platonic “idea” whose “beauty is infinite,” and “the philosopher, not less than the poet, postpones the apparent order and relations of things to the empire of thought.”<sup>22</sup> But poets surely do care about appearance, order, and relationship. In Keats’s expression, the balance tips. “Beauty” grabs the accent onto the first syllable of the line and commands a full foot; and then the second “truth” loses its ictus entirely. In the poetic thought, something happens to equivalence through the force of utterance. What that might be is a subject for critical interpretation, but the rhythm leaves no doubt but that the empire here belongs to the surrounding beauty and not to the enclosed truth. “That is all” is not all; it is the sum only for those “on earth,” not in the infinite beyond. “Empire of thought,” maybe, but if so, then of thought in motion; “the solid seeming block of matter” is not, in Keats’s eyes, “dissolved by a thought” but by a creative utterance.<sup>23</sup>

The believer in poetic cognition, that is, must be something of a vitalist—and not a spiritual or transcendental vitalist either. When philosophy thinks, it stabilizes; when poetry thinks, it moves. For that reason, the official philosophers are less productive for a theory of poetic cognition than Johann Gottfried Herder’s 1788 essay, “Vom Erkennen und Empfinden der menschlichen Seele” (On Cognition and Sensation in the Human Soul).<sup>24</sup> Seven years earlier Herder had written a shorter, closely reasoned essay, “Über den Einfluß der schönen in die höhern Wissenschaften” (On the Influence of the Sciences of Beauty on the Higher Sciences), arguing that the fine arts pave the way to the higher sciences; he says there that they must “precede the higher sciences,” and he calls them “*exercises that form the feeling of humanity in us.*”<sup>25</sup> The later essay is more typically Herderian in crisscrossing the terrain of its topic. It is easier to summarize because it is so repetitive but harder to synthesize because it is effusively unsystematic. But that is the point. You have to use your “sensibility” and read between the lines to see the essay’s aim.

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Herder declares his vitalist premise on the first page of his text, with a paean to “the great spectacle of forces working in nature.”<sup>26</sup> Consequently, while *Erkennen* precedes *Empfinden* in his title, sensation precedes thought in the text. Yet the title captures a real thrust that is reproduced in the concluding praise of religion, whose “knowledge is *living*, . . . an *eternal life*,” with a sequence of terms—evidently meant as an ascending sequence—that echoes the title: “if there is a general *human reason* and *sensation*,” it “lies in religion.”<sup>27</sup> *Empfinden* is first and last. Hence, in a crucial nuance of difference from the earlier essay, “Our thought depends on feeling.”<sup>28</sup>

Poetry is a reference point throughout Herder’s essay. Hence his feeling thought can be considered a version of poetic cognition. But it takes more reading between the lines to establish that equation and to tease out its meaning. For the message hinges on the breadth of the term *Empfinden*. Its initial meaning is sensation, anything felt. The cause of feeling is *Reiz*, but with a more physical edge (*reißen* means “to tear”) than the Latinate *stimulus*. Herder calls *Reiz* a “remarkable phenomenon.” “So small and dark this beginning of the noble faculty that we call *Empfinden* seems, so important must it be, so much is achieved through it . . . , and perhaps our divine powers would not exist were it not seeded by these dark impulses and stimuli.”<sup>29</sup> *Reize* stir not just “sensation” but the wider sense of *Empfinden*, “sentiment.” The folly of enlightenment philosophy (the philosophy of the sunlit world, clear as day, without dark truths) lies in its spurning of the feelings that lurk underneath and within thoughts. “Our bright, clear philosophy shudders most of all at this abyss of dark sentiments, forces, and stimuli.”<sup>30</sup> And its “method is so easy and heartening that it has taken to heart the principle of introducing into philosophy only *deaf* words that no more enable thinking than do the numbers used for computation.”<sup>31</sup> The consequence is inevitable, namely “that we can forever deduce without thinking: a philosophy from which may all the muses protect us!”<sup>32</sup>

Herder devoted essays to various muses. But this essay is concerned with finding more stimulating words than the empiricist philosophers allow, and its dominant muse is poetry. It is an essay of hints and implications, perhaps partly because the truly philosophical poetry that Herder was calling for was only newly being written (for instance by his friend Goethe), or collected (in his own volume of folksongs), or systematically studied (in the just budding science of literary history), with the hermeneutic method that he called for still awaiting development (by Friedrich Schleiermacher in particular) a few decades down the road.<sup>33</sup> So the essay reiterates its message without really elaborating it. Key moments for the remainder of the present discussion are these: (1) “*living reading*” is “divination in the soul of the author”; (2) “we would rather feel [*empfinden*] than know, rather guess on our own and perhaps too much than receive an itemized account”; (3) “genius,” which all men have, albeit some more than others, consists in “*knowledge* and *sensibility*, i.e., inner *life* of *apperception* and *elasticity* of soul”; and (4) “character” is communicated when “soft tones resound that seem as if to come from another world.”<sup>34</sup> The inner life of poetry that is divined by living reading, that is dependent on elasticity of soul, and that is spurred by boldly intuitive guesswork that communicates the character hidden in the soft tones of an utterance: those are the characteristics of poetic cognition

that the remainder of the present article presumes to sketch. At stake is moving utterance, that is, utterance in motion.

## Poetry

Poetic cognition differs from conventionally logical reasoning in both method and substance. The stimulus to poetic cognition tears into the linear surface to dig into character. It is predicated, then, on interruption rather than continuity and, in contrast to formal dialectic, on genius rather than method. It seeks for feeling rather than itemized knowledge, though it has to be added that Herder's term for feeling, *Empfindung*, also means sensation and perception, so that it is properly understood as an inner finding rather than as the more subjective feeling that would be expressed with *Gefühl*. Unlike pure feeling, *Empfindung* is not devoid of substance. But it must respond to undertones. That means, in part, that it operates not just *with* words but *on* words, by pausing over their implications.

*Poesie* is broader than "poetry," to be sure, and one should not imagine poetic cognition limited to verse. The opening of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* offers a quick example of how it works: "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife." The sentence opens a work called "a novel" on its title page, a sufficient invitation to read it as an instance of *Poesie*. Start with "truth," and contaminate it with "truism." What does it mean when a "truth" is subject to acknowledgment rather than demonstration? What is the force of "must"? Of "good"? (The fortunes in this case are in fact not just good, but vast.<sup>35</sup>) Of "want"? The first stage of poetic thinking in this case is speculative; it probes character, and in particular the social character of the judgment's pervasive modal qualifiers. It also probes the character implied in the narrative voice, for what kind of person presents so smug a statement with the bland "it is"? And then, as it emerges that there are many single young men, with or without good fortunes, the question starts to arise: which of them are unhitched, which are unhinged? The novel's second sentence immediately turns social truths into psychological feelings, but the sequel needn't be quoted and discussed here for this very basic illustration of the thought that probes not just what is but what kinds of things are and what makes them that way.

Prose, that is, can certainly be poetic. Still, verse is a natural medium for poetic cognition on account of its multiply interruptive character. While it shares rhetorical elements with poetic prose, it incorporates additional disruptive formal devices: line breaks, phonetic cross-affiliations, rhythm infringing on metrical pattern. The proof instance is King Lear's gratingly anti-metric explosion, "Never, never, never, never, never." Fanny Price, in Austen's *Mansfield Park*, echoes him in prose that conceals a line and a half of metrically faultless blank verse: "Oh! never, never, never! he will never succeed with me."<sup>36</sup> There is intensity in her iambs, even poetic intensity, but not the powerful inner tension that poetic cognition sees in Lear.<sup>37</sup>

For a more extended example, this article offers the opening of *The Divine Comedy*.<sup>38</sup>

Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita  
Mi ritrovai per una selva oscura  
Chè la diritta via era smarrita.  
Ah quanto a dir qual era è cosa dura  
Esta selva selvaggia e aspra e forte,  
Che nel pensier rinnova la paura!  
Tant' è amara che poco è più morte;  
Ma per trattar del ben ch' io vi trovai,  
Dirò de l' altre cose ch' io v 'ho scorte.

Midway in our life's journey, I went astray  
from the straight road and woke to find myself  
alone in a dark wood. How shall I say  
What wood that was! I never saw so drear,  
so rank, so arduous a wilderness!  
Its very memory gives a shape to fear.  
Death could scarce be more bitter than that place!  
But since it came to good, I will recount  
all that I found revealed there by God's grace. (trans. John Ciardi)

The first line of Dante's *Divine Comedy* invokes a commonplace, "the middle of the way of our life." The second line turns to personal experience; literally, "I found myself again." But did he find that he was lost, or did he regain his senses there? (Italian dictionaries give both negative and positive inflections of *ritrovarsi*, and the vague preposition *per*, which approximates "amid," gives less help than would the more definite positioning of *in*.) How disjunct are the first two lines? "The road" is definite, "a wood" indefinite. Does Dante offer himself as Representative Man ("our") or as the bearer of special insight ("I," though the pronoun is merely implied by the verb form and not directly articulated until line 8, where he finds "the good")? The third line is an impersonal passive construction: "the straight way was lost." Had Dante gone astray, or was there no path to follow? The missing conscious agent in this line marks the confusion. Then the emotion grabs hold. The dark wood takes over, with the intensity of the piled-up adjectives and the immediacy of "this." Suddenly the narrator, whether ordinary or gifted, alert or passive, is swept up in the vivid presence of the deictic. The effect is unaccountably lost when John Ciardi and Allen Mandelbaum both translate "esta" with "that" (which in Italian would be "quella"). And then Dante masters the situation. "Thought" (not Ciardi's "memory") enters, at first seized by "fear," but then initiating a one-hundred-canto teaching moment. "Treating of the good that there I found" is not what people do in the throes of violent emotions. Indeed, on the hinge of a modest "but" that obscures the displacement from then to now, from the immediacy of the wood to the retrospective second half of life, Dante turns away from the terror to, in literal translation, "the other things that I there perceived." The repeated "there" is even more inconspicuous than the "but," since it is contracted from its two-syllable prose form "ivi" to a single-syllable "vi" and then elided to a single letter, "v" (and reduced by both these translators to a single "there"). But the inconspicuous pointing into the distance is the decisive moment when Dante begins to get a grip on him-



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self and becomes a sage. A single thing, the “hard thing” that is the wood, had oppressed him in immediate experience; unlike his descendant J. Alfred Prufrock (another stony poet, to judge from his surname), though, time has been granted him “to prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet” so as to be able to discriminate the many things, “the other things,” in the underbrush. Dante’s subdued deictics and discrete “but” keep fear at a distance, as the minute-counting, zombified Prufrock (“I am Lazarus, come from the dead,” he imagines himself saying) cannot do (“And in short, I was afraid”). Dante’s structured rhetoric both reveals and papers over the cognitive effort that is at once logical and emotive—*Erkennen* and *Empfinden*, in Herder’s terms. To be sure, finding “the” good that was “there” isn’t enough to divinize Dante; in *Paradise* he learns God’s nature, which includes, as one of its three stages, the infinitely broader “love of true good, full of joy.”<sup>39</sup> Dante’s initial “there” is not there yet, not yet a truth universally acknowledged nor yet full of joy. But it is on the way.

The grammar of these lines captures not the content of thought but the feel of the thinking process. Logic is by definition a retrospect. One might of course generate a satisfying chain of deduction in the heat of the moment, but there is no assurance until it has been inspected. Narrative fiction is reflective in that way; its elements are ordered. “The turnings intricate of verse” (Wordsworth) open up the spaces between substantive thoughts; they open up, that is, the thinking activity itself. Poetic cognition, as this article understands it, is the verbal projection not of understanding but of the process of coming to understand, and the difficulties of that process.

Consider another deictic, in the first quatrain of Stéphane Mallarmé’s sonnet, “Le Cygne.”

Le vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd’hui  
Va-t-il nous déchirer avec un coup d’aile ivre  
Ce lac dur oublié que hante sous le givre  
Le transparent glacier des vols qui n’ont pas fui!

The virgin, vivacious, and lovely today—  
Will it rend with a blow of its dizzying wing  
This hard lake, forgotten yet haunted beneath  
By the transparent glacier of unreleased flights!<sup>40</sup>

The repeated articles in the first line trumpet the individuality of the day, after the manner of a panegyric. Time is evoked in its unique particularity. Powerful potential is implied when the exclamation point converts the apparent question in the second line into an emphatic assertion. But the nature of its agency remains unclear on account of an ambiguous, grammatically masculine pronoun that the translator must choose to render either with a personified “he” or an impersonally abstract “it.” (For Wallace Fowlie, today is a superhero, “strong and handsome” and tearing the ice “with a drunken flap of his wing.”) The adjectives in the first line constitute a mysterious paradox. Is today the “vivacious” cause for the breakup of the ice, or is the occasion merely “virginal,” not in itself generative? And does the short-form adjective *bel* then commend or condescend? The informal

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future tense of the second line is likewise compatible with either an intention or an unwilling outcome (either, is he going to run for president? or, is it going to rain tomorrow?)—anything but the determinism of a destiny foretold. Any English rendering other than the simple future tense would be impossibly unwieldy, but the hint of intention in “will” betrays the tenor by unambiguously personifying the agency. The terror that emerges later in the sonnet is already implicit here in the ethical dative “nous,” also untranslatable: the implicit victim is not the ice, or the lack, or even the mind that has repressed its demons, but a whole community, and potentially (since the sonnet is named for a species) the entire human race. The immediacy of the reflection then jumps out with “this.” Whatever force is being confronted is not just an abstract today but a here and now for all of “us,” problematic (“hard”), under erasure (“forgotten”), yet inescapable. The vivacious today confronts a hazy past of multiple actions (“givre,” hoar-frost, perhaps laid down by last night’s weather, covers the transparent ice) whose transparency might suggest either immediacy or invisibility. The sense of the quatrain is that the active present might (or does!) release the potential that has been lying suppressed by the passive cumulation of past days weighing on the moment. (Indeed, if one hearkens to the typically Mallarméan “difficult rhyme” that could have punningly motivated the sonnet, the present might even more actively “deliver” the potential.) The exclamation point marks the excitement of suspense. But the poetic cognition lies in the weight of “nous” and “ce,” the small words that inflect the logical meaning with the burden of personal involvement. Yes, the pregnant moment may soar, but how does it impend on “us” in “this” place? Only in terms of the burden can the terror of the sonnet’s subsequent fixation on the swan/sign (*cygne=signe*) be understood.

The smallest words are the hinge that opens up the logic as a psycho-logic, which is something more than a mere psychology or emotion but rather a capture of the movement of the mind in thought. The reader encounters the mystery of agency, the uncertain determinations of identity, the nature of action, the presence of time in numerous guises (overhanging past, impending future, causal or casual presence, singularity and multiplicity), and the focusing of attention from what could be either allegorical generality or experiential specificity (the definite article is used in French for both, in English generally only for the latter) down toward “us” as receivers (humanity in general, a particular group, or even an individual using the academic plural of authority?) and then toward the hammer-blow of “this,” which either is the ice or breaks it to release the haunted realm of imagination. French has no strong stress accent, and its poetry works with syllable counts and caesuras rather than with feet, but it does have weightier and lighter syllables; “dur” is the only adjective of many in the sonnet’s first twelve lines to be placed in the post-nominal position that is standard in French for all but the commonest adjectives that carry the least semantic charge, and “lac dur” is the only such conjuncture of weighty syllables in the poem. The lake’s hardness carries overtones of both endurance and duress, as it does again in the virtually identical imagery of the later “Cantique de Saint Jean.” But there the outcome is epiphanic rather than catastrophic. Yet in fact both outcomes loom as possibilities over both poems. The “Cantique” calls the impact a “frisson,” a word that picks up etymologically on the cold and comes across in English as ei-

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ther a (positive) thrill or a (negative) shudder. The power of the image in both poems lies in the challenge of grasping the antithetical resonances of “dur” (or of “endure” in the “Cantique”) and the range of all the other complex words, while the English translator is forced to decide countless vagaries that enhance the poetic character of the original verse. But the effort of productive thought imposed on the translator yields decisions when the strength of the poem lies in the problematic activity of thinking.

Poetic cognition, in this sense, is reflective; it is the poem’s presentation of the materials and situations in and through and during which thought proceeds. It wouldn’t be right to call it thinking about thought because it is uncertain and groping whereas, conventionally, thought is defined. It is, rather, transcendental in the Kantian sense. Poems convey the motions of the mind that precede and underlie articulation. The flux and the gaps that are distinctive to the freedom of verse are its medium for evoking the mind’s openness. Sidney presumably had something like this in mind with his “nothing affirmeth” and likewise Crapsey with her disjunction (“and yet”) between “I know” and “I think,” especially when her thinking carries over its line breaks the soft conceptual edges and pained awkwardness of “like me” and “like these.” Poetry is lost not only in translation into another language but also in translation into the ideas that result from it.

## Theory (French)

One of Paul de Man’s most often quoted essays, “The Resistance to Theory,” implies similar ideas.<sup>41</sup> Merely “implies” because the essay’s generally underestimated playfulness, from a critic who was at his best when most ironic, leaves its position hard to fix, perhaps even for its author. “Technically correct rhetorical readings may be boring, monotonous, predictable and unpleasant, but they are irrefutable. They are also totalizing (and potentially totalitarian) but . . . they are indeed universals, consistently defective models of language’s impossibility to be a model language.” Poetry’s difficulty in making distinctions distinguishes it from boringly, conventionally modeled language. And de Man recognizes the plight of poetic communication as a cognitive concern, blaming “the equation of rhetoric with psychology rather than with epistemology” for “open[ing] up dreary prospects of pragmatic banality.” “The universal theory of the impossibility of theory” lies in the recognition that thought (here called epistemology) must acknowledge its limits. For that reason, de Man recognizes “tropes, ideologies, etc.” as “form[s] of cognition,” where cognition is his name for the self-recognition of the mind at play, never at rest. Yet this essay, like so much of de Man, falls down by taking itself too sententiously. Apropos of Keats’s *Fall of Hyperion*, de Man writes, “Faced with the ineluctable necessity to come to a decision, no grammatical or logical analysis can help us out.” Such apodictic language codes openness as failure. Hence the essay concludes, “What remains impossible to decide is whether this flourishing is a triumph or a fall.” But the sense of poetic cognition is not determination but re-cognition and acknowledgment of the complex pathways of mental constitutions operative beneath the surface of declarative statements. And at that it triumphs.

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A main line of 20th-century criticism focused on imagery. Its fountainhead was perhaps Carolyn Spurgeon's *Shakespeare's Imagery and What It Tells Us*; its triumphs come from such great critics as G. Wilson Knight and Jean-Pierre Richard. Spurgeon formulates the premise of imagistic reading thus: "In the case of a poet, I suggest it is chiefly through his images that he, to some extent unconsciously, 'gives himself away.'"<sup>42</sup> The impulse is captured in an influential title, Charles Mauron's *Des métaphores obsédantes au mythe personnel: Introduction à la psychocritique*.<sup>43</sup> This understanding of poetry borders on the lyric reading that has been so much debated in the last decade, since both tie poetic meaning to expression of personal feeling. And the depth psychological reading of poetic words sometimes fed and sometimes paralleled an existentialist tradition, in which poetry is (in the Heideggerian phrase) the sounding of silence, expressing a vision or a truth lying beyond perception. A representative instance is the collection of brief essays, *Notes sur la poésie*, by the poet Jean-Claude Renard. Here the depths sounded by the poet are not depths of feeling nor of unconscious drives but of a quasi-religious truth. "Language becomes poetry when, trying to say what cannot find expression differently or be expressed differently, this very impossibility of expression designates—in the interior of mental and linguistic space—a different level from that on which thought and language ordinarily function."<sup>44</sup> And as another essay ("Les mots") says, Renard finds the key to poetic language in ordinary words (in this case *feu* [fire]) used with intensity.<sup>45</sup> These invocations of imagistic or symbolic meanings all share a search for a buried meaning that can be summed up, or whose inaccessibility can be summed up, in a sentence. Paraphrase, either revelatory or aspirational, is the outcome. Even when Renard praises the "play" of language and its "activity" as the poetic vehicle, the tenor remains "the very depth [*profondeur*], density, intensity of what is said."<sup>46</sup> On this understanding, poetry is the opposite of any ordinary conception of thought. "In lodging us beyond identity as beyond contradiction and immediacy [*évidence*], poetic language thus enlarges consciousness, knowledge, and even what we can 'recognize' to the scale of a knowledge that is perpetually unique and perpetually creative."<sup>47</sup> If the force of poetry is attributed to its semantics, then the critic may feel driven to one or another of these mysticisms to account for what is special about it.

But a different account of poetry's subtlety may be proposed, based in syntax and in meaning held at a conceptual distance rather than in force and meaning mystically intuited in hidden depths. And here too, de Man's readings were often on the right path. An illustrative instance appears in the essay "Wordsworth and the Victorians": "The work of Wordsworth is moral or religious only on the level of a surface which it prohibits us from finding. This would become even more manifest if, instead of considering such obviously figural terms as 'face' or 'hangs,' we considered the syntactical and grammatical backbone of Wordsworth's diction, words such as 'even' or 'but' or the ever-recurring 'not' and its many cognates."<sup>48</sup> These little words, the typical nuts and bolts of expression, are the inconspicuous tools of the poet's work. Poetic cognition, as this article defines it, resides not in the fixity of meanings but in their dynamic looseness and in the poet's strategies for adjusting and aligning their parts.

# Criticism (Mostly English)

In treating poetry as thoughtful communication, this article affiliates itself with early 21st-century trends in historical poetics and associated movements; while the critics do not always agree with one another, they all emphasize precise understanding over expressive feeling. At the same time, in highlighting a kind of thinking tuned to indefinites, uncertainties, and fluid meanings, it also partly disengages from them. In common there is a view of poetic language as exact; change a particle and the whole article is cheapened. But that does not need to imply that the world viewed through a poem is itself composed of fixities and definites. Rather, poetry can be seen as a precise lens onto the imperfections and approximations of human existence. Poetry thinks about things and in ways that are inaccessible or puzzling alike to more vernacular and to more formalized thought processes.

Whether following Theodor Adorno like Robert Kaufman, adapting linguistic theory like Derek Attridge in his approach to metrics, or drawing on poetic theories of earlier eras to discriminate verse genres like Yopie Prins and Meredith Martin, leading contemporary critics are committed to more exacting descriptions of the workings of verse. They are resourceful and imaginative scholars whom it is in a sense unfair to characterize by single categories. But unlike the playfulness of what Geoffrey Hartman jokingly called “boa-deconstructors,” these diverse critics do more often incline toward wanting to clarify distinctions so as to settle into significances.<sup>49</sup> While it is dramatic to assert conflict or struggle, the genius of poetic cognition is more genial. A Continental instance of the inclination toward drama is a willfully paradoxical essay by Giorgio Agamben called “The End of the Poem.” Presupposing at the start “that poetry lives only in the tension and difference (and hence also in the virtual interference) between sound and sense, between the semiotic sphere and the semantic sphere,” Agamben proceeds to assert that the ends of poems abandon poetry, since there can be no more tension between meter and meaning where both finish in tandem.<sup>50</sup> But why should difference always imply opposition rather than accommodation?

Tension and difference were already the stock-in-trade of New Criticism. *The Well Wrought Urn* remains revealing both for its enterprise and for its shortcomings. Irony was Cleanth Brooks’s name for tension and difference. Irony can easily be misunderstood as a merely rhetorical device, but Brooks chose the name, he says, as “the most general term that we have for the kind of qualification which the various elements in a context receive from the context” and in particular “for indicating [the] recognition of incongruities.”<sup>51</sup> “Incongruities,” however, is far too innocuous a term for the sublimity of poetry, for the poetic dramatizing of irony “involves, necessarily, ironic shock and wonder.”<sup>52</sup> And again, less melodramatically but to similar effect, Brooks’s “insistence on the element of conflict between attitudes . . . will emphasize further the sense in which poetry is essentially dramatic.”<sup>53</sup> “Poems in which the variety and clash among the elements to be comprehended under a total attitude are sharper” are “higher in the scale” of value, with tragedy as the “highest” because “the clash is at the sharpest.”<sup>54</sup> “Ironic shock . . . is the kind of shock which, one is tempted to say, is almost normal in the greatest poetry.”<sup>55</sup> The last-quoted

sentence is prompted by Wordsworth's Immortality Ode, but Wordsworth, even at his most elevated, disappoints Brooks, because the poem ends not with a vivid "flame" but with "embers" and (presumably, though Brooks doesn't invoke Wordsworth's word) with clouds, producing "some vagueness," "not enriching ambiguities but distracting confusions."<sup>56</sup>

Brooks shares with Agamben the yearning for a big bang at the end of the poem. *The Rape of the Lock* is better, for instance, because "at the end of the poem, the poet addresses his heroine not as a victim, but as a 'murderer.'"<sup>57</sup> But looking for high drama is not the same as finding meaning. On that, Brooks regularly falls short. For him, poems do not mean but are. "The Heresy of Paraphrase," the theoretical essay that concludes the main volume (followed by two appendices) dissolves meaning into structure, and "to refer the structure of the poem to what is finally a paraphrase of the poem is to refer it to something outside the poem."<sup>58</sup> The final appendix, which addresses the topic of the present article, is "The Problem of Belief and the Problem of Cognition." Here Brooks argues against "theories which claim cognition for poetry only at the price of considering it ultimately as distorted and imperfect philosophy."<sup>59</sup> Then he quotes I. A. Richards echoing Archibald Macleish's sentiment: "it is never what a poem says that matters, but what it is."<sup>60</sup> The cognitive element is then—again quoting Richards—"metaphysics approached from a new angle."<sup>61</sup> But that approach turns out to "point the literary critic to a reading of the poem itself—to the fullest realization of the symbolic structure that *is* the poem."<sup>62</sup> Throughout *The Well Wrought Urn*, "the poem itself" is a fetish object, as already in the opening theoretical chapter, "The Language of Paradox," where "the poem itself is the well-wrought urn" and the urn in Shakespeare's "Phoenix and the Turtle" is equally "the poem itself" (the phrase "the poem itself" occurs twenty-five times in the book).<sup>63</sup> In the end, the self-echoing structures of both formalists like Brooks and ideologists like Agamben (at least in *The End of the Poem*) evacuate the processual character of poetry. Brooks judges the difficulties at the end of the "Immortality Ode" as "not enriching ambiguities but distracting confusions."<sup>64</sup> But suppose distraction might itself be regarded as a mode of thought enabling unexpected discoveries and connections? Poetic cognition is not a "problem" but an ongoing discovery, opening insights right to the very end.

The critics who rein in poetic thinking restrict it to a uniform modality: paradox, or tension, or the "one sole poem" of Heideggerian aesthetics. Such critics recognize thought in poetry, and indeed often do so in remarkably perceptive and illuminating ways. But they do not learn thought from poetry. It would be foolish to deny that poetry is often disjunctive and that the formal constraints that traditionally define it lend themselves to the kinds of interruption and counterpointing that sharpen the poetic image. But very often the poetic effect is a blur rather than an irony, an impression that cannot be named by any formalized rhetoric. This is, in particular, what has been called "an experience of evanescent liquidity, of a powerful seduction whose force is present precisely in its transience, in its continuous disappearance and elusiveness, rather than in, say, its symmetry or its balance or its order."<sup>65</sup> Poetic language is often difficult (and has been, in the West, since Pindar), and it as often clouds meaning as communicates it. Poetry does not think

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for us but compels us to think and points the way. Poetic cognition is not the knowledge that poetry possesses but the reflection that it knows how to induce. It leads astray from deduction. The clouds of poetic glory, says Wordsworth, are with us from the start and accompany us at the end.<sup>66</sup> Poetry colors and veils straightforward meaning, and, as Paul Fry has beautifully written, “distraction . . . is nothing other than the principle of differentiation that enables thought.”<sup>67</sup> Of course, *Poesie* extends far beyond verse, but the concentration of poetic effect makes verse the characteristic vehicle for poetic cognition.

Poetic cognition, then, can be understood to designate the resources of thought that are stimulated when the ordinary paths of meaning are interrupted or confused. If only confusion results, then it is unsuccessful poetry—or, potentially, unsuccessful reading. But when thought multiplies, then poetic cognition is underway, raising new questions, opening new lines. “Make it new” can be the motto, provided that “it” is understood to be the perceiving mind. That is the context for one of the matters where Brooks’s program outpaces his practice, marking the lasting importance of his book. “The poet, within limits, has to make up his language as he goes.”<sup>68</sup> And again, according to “the principle of rich indirection” (as Brooks calls it), “as all poets must do, [Herrick] is remaking language.”<sup>69</sup> “Rich indirection” is vague, and the specification that the poetic activity concerns “connotations” and “denotations” wrongly prioritizes semantics over syntactic and other formal resources.<sup>70</sup> But the underlying impulse to prompt readers to think in unexpected ways is the essence of poetic cognition. “Art makes up what is already there, and then the reader has to make it up again too.”<sup>71</sup> By definition, one cannot circumscribe the linguistic and stylistic resources available to poets; for that reason William Wimsatt gave an often overlooked limiting qualifier to the title of an essay that has stimulated discussion for most of a century, “One Relation of Rhyme to Reason.”<sup>72</sup> Poetic cognition is the mind-stretching or even mind-bending necessary to accommodate the complexities that humans encounter when, as happens forever along the “path of our life,” we get sidetracked into the dark wood otherwise known as earthly existence.

## Nothing Affirmeth

“The poet . . . nothing affirmeth.” It’s easy to know what the phrase means; the question is what Sidney could have meant with it. For his sonnet sequence, *Astrophil and Stella*, affirms insistently, even tiresomely, that he loves her.<sup>73</sup> To be sure, one might weasel Sidney out of that inconsistency by claiming that, despite all the biographical correspondences, only Astrophil and not his poet affirms anything.<sup>74</sup> And when sonnet 5 asserts neoplatonic commonplaces framed with “It is most true. . . . It is most true. . . . True. . . . True, and yet true that I must *Stella* love”—well, arguably the poet is not affirming any of these things that he may have believed (though the same sentences, in prose, would affirm them whether or not he actually believed them), but is only invoking them for a poetic purpose. “Vom Erkennen und Empfinden der menschlichen Seele”: these are soul-truths paired with soul-feelings and not distinguishable as affirmative utterances. Perhaps. But then what is Sidney doing with them, writing things that he believed, in a voice difficult to sep-

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arate from his own? (The speaker is in fact never named, and the title is not authorial.) That is exactly the question.

Like much Petrarchan verse, Sidney's sonnets are characterized by flamboyant exhibitions of wit. So, for instance, in sonnet 79: "Sweet kisse, thy sweets I faine would sweetly endite, / Which even of sweetnesses sweetest sweetner art." A little of that goes a long way, and there's a lot of it in *Astrophil and Stella*. So much, indeed, that wit has to be regarded as a topic rather than as a technique. Sidney doesn't use irony; he explores it. The continuing display of flowery or sugared speech (sonnet 55) is balanced by frequent dismissals of rhetorical amplification and, in that sonnet and numerous others, by rejections of "too much wit" (sonnet 34) and of "foolish wit" (sonnet 35). The florid language and volatile moods, "where truth it selfe must speake like flatterie" (sonnet 35), constitute the problem the sonnets constantly try to settle. While there are hints of narrative—passion, a kiss, virtuous rejection—truth remains a mote in Sidney's (or Astrophil's) eye. Were there genuine recognition, the Petrarchan flame would die down to a stable illumination. Cognition takes instead the form of continual struggle to know one's own feelings, the feelings of the love object, and a form of expression adequate to the surging emotions. It is the unattained goal of the sonnets, not their premise. The poet nothing affirmeth.

And yet he writeth. And writeth. And as he writes, he writhes. Another illustration of the cognitive effort of poetry, captured or at least evoked in words whose achievement is avoiding fixity, can be found in the opening sonnet of the sequence.

Loving in truth, and faine in verse my love to show,  
That the deare She might take some pleasure of my paine:  
Pleasure might cause her reade, reading might make her know,  
Knowledge might pitie winne, and pitie grace obtaine,  
I sought fit words to paint the blackest face of woe,  
Studying inventions fine, her wits to entertaine:  
Oft turning others' leaves, to see if thence would flow  
Some fresh and fruitfull showers upon my sunne-burn'd braine.  
But words came halting forth, wanting Invention's stay  
Invention, Nature's child, fled step-dame Studie's blowes,  
And others' feete still seem'd but strangers in my way.  
Thus great with child to speake, and helplesse in my throwes,  
Biting my trewand pen, beating my selfe for spite,  
"Foole," said my Muse to me, "looke in thy heart and write."

Most in evidence here is the play of wit, aiming to fit his words to her entertainment, ransacking models to render intimate feelings, calculating effects like the characteristically Sidneyan scheme climax in the opening quatrain (pleasure to reading to knowledge to pity to grace). Study wins out over invention in these aspects of this poem and of the cycle generally, such as likewise in the strained pun on "leaves." Truth seems left out of the picture, as the agonized poet (or persona) first falls prey to gender alienation ("Thus great with child to speak, and helplesse in my throwes") and then turns masochistic: "beating my selfe for spite." All this is familiar, skillful, hardly worth remarking again, and indeed it leads to the self-rejection of perhaps Sidney's most famous single line: "Foole,"



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said my Muse to me, 'looke in thy heart and write.'" Has all this had any relation to the truth of love, or is it mere theatrics?

Is Sidney (or Astrophil), that is, a lost soul or a glib pretender? Is there a beating heart within, or only folly? That question haunts the cycle, most obviously in another famous close: "Then thinke my deare, that you in me do reed / Of Lover's ruine some sad Tragedie: / I am not I, pitie the tale of me" (sonnet 45). Is "loving in truth" a condition or an oxymoron? The struggle throughout is more to know himself than to know her. Expression bedevils cognition at every point, and especially at the agonized line, "I sought fit words to paint the blackest face of woe." At several moments in the cycle the paradox returns that to paint is to cover up, to display is to distort. This dilemma can hardly be resolved by writing from the heart, because the words of truth found there can only be blank blackness—the "blackest" black. So, for instance, in sonnet 55, where he again seeks her "grace" via the "blacke banner" of his "saddest words," only to decide that the real way to achieve it is to "crie" her name "incessantly." There are, in short, no "fit words." Poets are, as David Hume wittily said, "liars by profession."

The opening sonnet implies as much, repeatedly and in many witty ways. But it says it most poetically and covertly in its first rhyme. Here Sidney reaches beyond wit to the mysteries of cognition that impel the drive toward the witty lie that covers the dark truth. And that drive is the exploration of the inner reaches of the soul constitutive of the thinking—and the feeling—of poetry. That first rhyme is itself concealed. It is not the first marked pair of line ends but the first half-line end, "faine," that rhymes with "paine." There is an inclination initially to read over it, since the first line most naturally divides into three four-syllable units that highlight the thematic words "truth," "verse," and "show," thus emphasizing the medium. But the rhyme with "paine" resets the rhythm to a mid-line caesura in conformity with the norm of the remaining lines and thus highlights the predicate adjective. And that in turn activates a pun, comparable to the ambiguous valence of "paint" (a near rhyme at the midpoint of line 5), for Sidney is haunted by the fear that the expression he fains to convey could be mere feigning.<sup>75</sup> Even when promoted by the metric adjustment, the pun remains dubious, to be sure, but dubiety is built into all the hesitations of the language. The sonnet's gaudy surface is thus multiply ruffled by countercurrents. And that provokes a reflex consideration of the opening. "Loving in truth": how does one recognize true love, in oneself or in anyone else, either in words or in behavior? The cognition in a poem like this—and there are many variants of such subtleties in Sidney's sonnet sequence—is the insight into the complexities of knowing. It is his version of Keats's beauty-truth dilemma or Austen's truth acknowledgment quandary. Why else would the poet or his persona need to add the phrase "in truth," unless the assertion were in principle dubious? "In truth" just rubs it in. Truth never lies very far from troth, requiring trust rather than belief, as in the later line, "Well staid with truth in word and faith of deed" (sonnet 14). Hence Sidney's poet, who "nothing affirmeth, and therefore never lieth," lies in the same bed as Hume's liar by profession: "He citeth not authorities of other histories, but even for his entry calleth the sweet Muses to inspire into him a good invention; in troth, not laboring to tell you what is or is not, but what should or should not be. And therefore though he recount things not true, yet because he telleth

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them not for true he lieth not.”<sup>76</sup> In troth, not in truth. The wiles of poetry undercut affirmations with the cross-currents of exploration, belief, and doubt, making readers—or trying to make them—cognizant of the ruses of both language and emotion, of both *Erkennen* and *Empfinden*, in mirroring and clouding the world. “Poets themselves, though liars by profession, always endeavour to give an air of truth to their fictions; and where that is totally neglected, their performances, however ingenious, will never be able to afford much pleasure.”<sup>77</sup>

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In conclusion this article takes from Charles Altieri’s study of Wallace Stevens the term “aspectual thinking” to name the thinking that is proper to poetry.<sup>78</sup> Altieri’s readings, like this article’s, emphasize the little words that enable thought to shift around the aspects of the world as one encounters it: copulas, negations, pronouns, comparison terms (“as”). Such terms, as he says in particular of negation, help “poetry reclaim the full powers of discursive thinking” from the overly “direct presentation of objects and the feelings they elicit.”<sup>79</sup> “Discursive” rightly departs from the straight-shooting linearity of logical reasoning, for discourse is by nature flexible and thus, precisely, “aspectual” in Altieri’s sense. Poetic cognition, the thinking proper to poetry, is a cast of mind that refuses to take yes for an answer. It holds things open so as to think around its objects, in “cursive,” so to speak (writing with “rounded angles,” according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*).

This article’s final example of a poet thinking is “Metaphors of a Magnifico,” a little-noted early Stevens poem that Altieri considers toward the beginning of his discussion.

Twenty men crossing a bridge,  
Into a village,  
Are twenty men crossing twenty bridges,  
Into twenty villages,  
Or one man  
Crossing a single bridge into a village.

This is old song  
That will not declare itself . . .

Twenty men crossing a bridge,  
Into a village,  
Are  
Twenty men crossing a bridge  
Into a village.

That will not declare itself  
Yet is certain as meaning . . .

The boots of the men clump  
On the boards of the bridge.  
The first white wall of the village

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Rises through fruit-trees.  
Of what was it I was thinking?  
So the meaning escapes.

The first white wall of the village . . .  
The fruit-trees . . .

As Eleanor Cook points out in her brief commentary, crossing a bridge is a metaphor for metaphor.<sup>80</sup> But the crossing takes the poem to too many places: to “fact . . . , distinctive individual experience . . . , and collective experience.”<sup>81</sup> Hence it sings and does not declare. Still, it does discriminate. The revelatory “are” that flows into multiplicity or collectivity in the first stanza is the same word as the “are” in the third stanza yet an entirely different gesture, for the second “are” is isolated and isolating. The copula is capable of discovery and insight but equally liable to impoverishing literalism. “Meaning,” here, is bare fact (Heidegger’s *sein*), whereas “declaration” is insight (with the dynamism of Heidegger’s *wesen*). It takes a village, one says, but sometimes a village is only a village. That lemma is a dilemma that Dante too confronted. “Ah quanto a dir qual era è cosa dura.” Ah, how great the difficulty is of saying how it was: as quantity collides with quality, so the past-tense “era” of fact collides with the present-tense “è” of declaration without so much as a breath between. (“Sight and insight,” as Stevens later wrote, fall “In the area between is and was.”<sup>82</sup>) Stevens’s *magnifico*, in his grandiose posturing, discovers the dilemma—for himself, for us—and collapses. A *magnifico*’s life is too polarized, too class-bound in his condescension to the soldiers clumping (“clomping” or “massing”?) across the metaphor, and with this irony the poet bares the devices that make us human.<sup>83</sup> The “thinking” sputters out in the purely nominal acknowledgment of basic civilization and cultivation. But the failure to think is perfect as an exposé of the basic tasks of poetic cognition. In all their loose joints, poems furnish the tools for exploring the gaps between fact and value, sight and insight, dark forests and hard things, was and is, the bare “are” of mere existence and the lush “are” of imagined potential.

Many early 21st-century theorists of poetry take for granted what a 2018 book calls “lyric poetry’s exemption from rationalism.”<sup>84</sup> But who among us might be at liberty to claim unexempted rationalism? But the claims of reason are, precisely, the challenges to thought. Poetic cognition, the thinking about reason, the thinking about thought, is not the process toward emotion (as the critics cited in note 5 regard it) but the process of contextualizing and construing thought: it bares the devices of cognitive functioning. Poetic cognition is not free from emotion, and the critics who point poetic expression toward feelings are certainly not wrong. But there is another aspect—time-honored, richly theorized, and grounded in semantics and stylistics—that is equally rewarding to pursue. That has been the topic of this article.

## Further Reading

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## Notes:

(1.) Archibald MacLeish, "Ars Poetica"; and Paul Fry, *A Defense of Poetry: Reflections on the Occasion of Writing* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), 31–50. See also Brian McGrath, "Understating Poetry," *New Literary History* 49, no. 3 (Summer 2018): 289–308, for a rich survey of litotes from the Greeks to the present, documenting its presence and asserting its importance but leaving explication for the future: "To learn to read in an understated sort of way would be to learn how not to despise the little there is"; McGrath, "Understating," 305. This article could be understood as a response to his challenge.

(2.) So, for instance, see Susan Howe in *My Emily Dickinson* (New York: New Directions, 2007), xi: “In prose and in poetry she explored the implications of breaking the law just short of breaking off communication with a reader.”

(3.) Peter Davidson, *Ezra Pound and Roman Poetry: A Preliminary Survey* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1995), 58. To be sure, it is hard to recognize Catullus in this assessment. The longer poems in the center of Catullus’s collection are highly learned; his metrics there and in the lyric poems that form the first part of his collection are intricately worked. And most of the lyrics are bitter invective whose poetic character is most readily apparent in the confident handling of the metric complexities, showing him to be a thinker even where the contents show him in the role of a screamer.

(4.) The links of imagism to symbolism are traced in Glenn S. Burne, “Remy de Gourmont and the Aesthetics of Symbolism,” *Comparative Literature Studies* 4, no. 1/2 (1967): 161–175; and Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 173–191. The rhetoric of imagism is radically different from that of impressionism and post-impressionism, yet the aims are similar. So, for instance, Kenner says this about H. D.’s poem “Hermes of the Waves”: “Wherever we turn our attention in the poem we find H. D. thinking through its images, exclusively through them, and presenting no detail not germane to such thinking”; Kenner, *Pound Era*, 176. By the time of Ezra Pound’s *The ABC of Reading* (New York: New Directions, 1987; first published 1934), however, Pound had moved toward a more concrete sense of images, still thinking but with more public context, abandoning the suggestive vagueness exemplified when a two-line poem begins, “So much depends.” When in 1934 Pound writes, “you use a word to throw a visual image on to the reader’s imagination,” he clearly aims at a realized picture, as “a tandem” might “throw the image of a past decade upon the reader’s mental screen” and as Robert Browning’s “‘beauty’ is not applied ornament, but makes the mental image more definite”; Pound, *ABC*, 37, 191. Pound’s view of “imagism,” by this time, rejects “irrelevant particular connotations tangled with a particular group of young people who were writing in 1912”; Pound, *ABC*, 52.

(5.) This seems the right point to insert a declaration that I take poetic cognition to concern the kinds of thinking promoted by verse, rather than the kinds of emotion and apprehension stimulated in readers. That inquiry, whose father figure is the prolific Israeli scholar Reuven Tsur and that is the subject of a different ORE article, has been defined by Peter Verdonk as “the interdisciplinary study of how readers process literary texts” (*The Stylistics of Poetry: Context, Cognition, Discourse, History* [London: Bloomsbury, 2013], 158). A widely cited exemplar is Mutlu Konuk Blasing’s book, *Lyric Poetry: The Pain and Pleasure of Words* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006). According to Blasing, “Poetic language cannot be understood as deviating from or opposing a norm of rational language, because poetic forms clearly accommodate referential use and rational discourse. But they position most complex thought processes and rigorous figurative logic as figures on the ground of processes that are in no way rational”; Blasing, *Lyric Poetry*, 3. By “rational” here, Blasing evidently means ratiocination. But exploration can also be rational. When Blasing calls poetry “an ever-present danger for rational dis-

course” and “a threat to reason” (Blasing, *Lyric Poetry*, 3, 102), it is evident that for her, as for Verdonk, “process” points toward feeling; the present article concerns, instead, poetic processes that point toward the discovery and understanding of complexities.

(6.) Sean Pryor, “Inhuman Words: Philology, Modernism, Poetry,” *Modernism/Modernity* 23, no. 3 (September 2017): 556. A couple of pages later, Pryor writes, “the modern work of art is said to violate the old accepted human values, to scorn the calculation of advantages, and to flout common reason”; Pryor, “Inhuman Words,” 558. Here, though, the reference is not to Pound but to Marx. How early does one have to go before getting out from under modernity?

(7.) Jonathan Crimmins, *The Romantic Historicism to Come* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2018), 11–12.

(8.) Sanford Budick, *Kant and Milton* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

(9.) Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment*, sect. 53, A 215. Kant is cited in standard fashion, using the pagination of the first (A) edition. All uncredited translations are my own.

(10.) Kant, *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment*, sect. 43, A 176; Kant’s emphasis here and Hegel’s and Herder’s in subsequent quotes.

(11.) Kant, *Critique*, A 176.

(12.) Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel, *Ästhetik*, 2 vols., ed. Friedrich Bassenge (Frankfurt: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, n.d.), 2:474.

(13.) Hegel, *Ästhetik*, 2:485.

(14.) Hegel, *Ästhetik*, 2:485.

(15.) Hegel, *Ästhetik*, 2:488, 502.

(16.) Hegel, *Ästhetik*, 2:512.

(17.) Hegel’s wavering between the philosophical Schiller and the lyrical Goethe thus falls short of the unification of poetry and philosophy in the guise of Hegelian speculation that was claimed by Hans-Georg Gadamer; see Gadamer’s *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Continuum, 1989), 453–469; and Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Philosophy and Poetry,” in *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, ed. Robert Bernasconi, trans. Nicholas Walker (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 131–139.

(18.) Martin Heidegger, *Unterwegs zur Sprache* (Pfullingen: Neske, 1959), 37; and Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, trans. Peter D. Hertz (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982), 160. Page numbers are provided here for the published translation, but the versions are rewritten to bring them closer to the German.

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(19.) Heidegger, *Unterwegs*, 45, 52, 70; and Heidegger, *On the Way*, 166–167, 172, 188.

(20.) *Verlautbarung* receives a very brief entry in *Grimms deutsches Wörterbuch* in a technical legal sense. The results from a word search in Google Books are overwhelmingly official; the exceptions seem to be specific to Heideggerian contexts. Evidently Heidegger here intended one of his many creative puns.

(21.) The Heideggerian subordination of poetry to philosophy is adroitly demonstrated in David Nowell Smith, “The Poetry-Verse Distinction Reconsidered,” *Thinking Verse* 1 (2011): 137–160. Among other accounts, Jörg Appelhans’s exhaustive study, *Martin Heideggers ungeschriebene Poetologie* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2002), rests on the persuasive premises that “Heidegger’s interpretation of art arises from his philosophy” and that on that basis Heidegger sought “the recovery of a putative, but lost unison” between them; Appelhans, *Martin Heideggers*, 3, 41. But Appelhans then devotes a section to reviewing Heidegger’s ambivalent and changing accounts of the relationship between poetry and philosophy; Appelhans, *Martin Heideggers*, 44–48. It appears that the lost unity was never truly found. Another thoughtful and thorough study, Ulrike Kuhlmann, *Das Dichten denken* (Berlin: LIT, 2010), finally declares Heidegger “out of his depth” (*überfordert*), surely because she follows Heidegger in posing the problem in absolutes and superlatives as an attempt to combine two reified principles; Kuhlmann, *Das Dichten*, 208. The notion that there could be different kinds of thinking doesn’t enter in.

(22.) Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Selected Writings*, ed. Brooks Atkinson (New York: Random House, 1950), 30–31.

(23.) Emerson, *Selected Writings*, 31.

(24.) Johann Gottfried Herder, *Werke*, ed. Heinrich Düntzer (Berlin: Hempel, n.d.), 17:163–219. Not to be confused with the different essay, “Übers Erkennen und Empfinden in der menschlichen Seele.”

(25.) Herder, *Werke*, 17: 158, 160–61.

(26.) Herder, *Werke*, 17:149.

(27.) Herder, *Werke*, 17:219.

(28.) Herder, *Werke*, 17:195.

(29.) Herder, *Werke*, 17:167.

(30.) Herder, *Werke*, 17:174.

(31.) Herder, *Werke*, 17:174.

(32.) Herder, *Werke*, 17:174.

(33.) A valuable survey of Herder's embryonic theory of interpretation, sketched across a range of his writings, can be found in Forster, Michael, "Johann Gottfried von Herder," 2.4, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2018 Edition).

(34.) Herder, *Werke*, 17:196, 197, 208, 212. "Genius" for Herder still means character and inclination, not a unique ability, though its opacity points toward the newer sense; for an account of the change, see Marshall Brown, "The Poet as Genius," *The Oxford Handbook of British Poetry, 1660–1800*, ed. Jack Lynch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 210–226.

(35.) See Robert Hume's estimate of the fortunes of Austen's characters in Robert Hume, "Money in Jane Austen," *The Review of English Studies* 64, no. 264 (2013): 289–310.

(36.) Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*, ed. James Kinsley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 272.

(37.) An essay by Cynthia Wall about little words and punctuation in 18th-century novels suggests the gap—though it is never absolute—between prose and verse. She writes, for instance, of Samuel Richardson's "powerfully charged visual space . . . not just of dramatic dashes . . . but also of the colon and semi-colon to give the rhythmic soundscape of deliberation, pause, expectation, hesitation, division"; Cynthia Wall, "'The Little Words': The Close Reading of Really Small Things," *The Wordsworth Circle* 47, no. 2–3 (Spring-Summer 2016): 117. The punctuation in published Dante texts is, of course, all editorial and consequently not considered here.

(38.) The Dante example is drawn from Marshall Brown, review of Heather Dubrow, *Deixis in the Early Modern English Lyric: Unsettling Spatial Anchors Like 'Here,' 'This,' 'Come,'* *Modern Philology* 116, no. 3 (February 2019): E171–E176. Dubrow's book is a valuable contribution to the topic of this article. Dante is quoted from *La Divina Commedia*, ed. Charles Grandgent (Boston: D. C. Heath, 1933); *The Inferno*, trans. John Ciardi (New York: New American Library, 1954); and *Inferno*, trans. Allen Mandelbaum (New York: Bantam, 1982).

(39.) *Paradise*, 30.41.

(40.) "The Swan," trans. Barbara Johnson, in Barbara Johnson, *A World of Difference* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 122.

(41.) Paul de Man, "The Resistance to Theory," in *The Resistance to Theory*, by Paul de Man (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 3–20; the quotes come from 17–20.

(42.) Carolyn Spurgeon, *Shakespeare's Imagery and What It Tells Us* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004; originally published 1935), 4.

(43.) Charles Mauron, *Des métaphores obsédantes au mythe personnel: Introduction à la psychocritique* (Paris: Corti, 1963).



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(44.) Jean-Claude Renard, "Langage et poésie," in *Notes sur la poésie*, by Jean-Claude Renard (Paris: Seuil, 1970), 21. Much of the quoted sentence appears again on p. 101, in the essay "Être et écrire," without the mention of thought but adding that the poet's aim, initially, is "to engage existence." Other writers, of course, express related ideas in a Platonic (Mallarmé) or a more secular vein.

(45.) Jean-Claude Renard, "Les mots," in *Notes sur la poésie*, by Jean-Claude Renard (Paris: Seuil, 1970), 36.

(46.) Jean-Claude Renard, "Poésie et réalité," in *Notes sur la poésie*, ed. Jean-Claude Renard (Paris: Seuil, 1970), 60.

(47.) Renard, "Poésie et réalité," 60.

(48.) Paul de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 92.

(49.) Geoffrey Hartman, "Preface," in Harold Bloom, et al., *Deconstruction and Criticism* (New York: Continuum, 1984), ix. Hartman's take on deconstruction privileges rhetoric over logic, complicating understanding over undermining definition. "The word carries with it a certain absence or indeterminacy of meaning. Literary language foregrounds language itself as something not reducible to meaning"; Hartman, "Preface," viii.

(50.) Giorgio Agamben, *The End of the Poem: Studies in Poetics*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 109. The end of the poem, Agamben writes, "is something like a decisive crisis for the poem, a genuine *crise de vers*, in which the poem's very identity is at stake"; Agamben, *The End of the Poem*, 113. "Decisive," "genuine," "very": the American and British critics are generally less melodramatic, but temptations to essentializing of sound and of sense remain. This title essay in Agamben's collection dates from 1995.

(51.) Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (New York: Harcourt, 1968), 209.

(52.) Brooks, *Well Wrought Urn*, 213.

(53.) Brooks, *Well Wrought Urn*, 258.

(54.) Brooks, *Well Wrought Urn*, 256–257.

(55.) Brooks, *Well Wrought Urn*, 144.

(56.) Brooks, *Well Wrought Urn*, 149.

(57.) *The Rape of the Lock*, line 91.

(58.) Brooks, *Well Wrought Urn*, 201.

(59.) Brooks, *Well Wrought Urn*, 261.

(60.) Brooks, *Well Wrought Urn*, 265.

(61.) Brooks, *Well Wrought Urn*, 266.

(62.) Brooks, *Well Wrought Urn*, 266 (italics in original).

(63.) Brooks, *Well Wrought Urn*, 17, 21.

(64.) Brooks, *Well Wrought Urn*, 149.

(65.) Simon Jarvis, "Why Rhyme Pleases," *Thinking Verse* 1 (2011): 35. This quotation is used to stand for a position systematically promoted by this journal as "a general opposition to the semanticisation of meaning"; David Nowell Smith, "Editor's Introduction," *Thinking Verse* 1 (2011): 12.

(66.) See "Ode: Intimations of Immortality": "Trailing clouds of glory do we come / From God, who is our home"; "The Clouds that gather round the setting sun / Do take a sober colouring from an eye / That hath kept watch o'er man's mortality; / Another race hath been, and other palms are won."

(67.) Paul Fry, *The Reach of Criticism: Method and Perception in Literary Theory* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983), 194, in an essay on Walter Benjamin. For a rich archive of distraction as a poetic theme and pursuit, see Anne Stillman, "Distraction Fits," *Thinking Verse* 2 (2012): 27-67.

(68.) Brooks, *Well Wrought Urn*, 9.

(69.) Brooks, *Well Wrought Urn*, 74.

(70.) Brooks, *Well Wrought Urn*, 8.

(71.) Jarvis, "Why Rhyme Pleases," 38.

(72.) William Wimsatt Jr., "One Relation of Rhyme to Reason: Alexander Pope," *Modern Language Quarterly* 5, no. 3 (1944): 323-338. The title is misrepresented by the many instances that Google readily brings up where it is identified as "The Relation . . ." or some such, a notable example appearing in "Close Listening, <http://writing.upenn.edu/epc/authors/bernstein/essays/close-listening.html>," by the prominent poet Charles Bernstein, who calls the essay (in his footnote 23) "On the Relation of Rhyme to Reason." In sentences trimmed from the introductory paragraph when the essay was reprinted in *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1967), 153-166, Wimsatt credits John Crowe Ransom with the view that "poetry is a double performance in which the verse makes concessions to the sense and the sense to the verse . . . , produc[ing] a certain irrelevance or particularity of sense, and further a heterogeneity of structure by which the phonetic effect serves to give texture or thickness to the meaning"; Wimsatt, "One Relation," 323. "Irrelevance" is another term for distraction; perhaps Wimsatt cut these sentences—while making only limited alterations to the

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remainder of the essay—because he felt that with “a certain,” “or,” and “or” he was merely groping for precise expression. But groping is precisely the gesture of poetic cognition.

(73.) Sidney is quoted from William A. Ringler Jr., ed., *The Poems of Sir Philip Sidney* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1962).

(74.) Taking the poetic voice to be the poet’s own is encouraged by a line in Sidney’s fiction: “Whereupon one day determining to find some means to tel (as of a third person) the tale of mine owne love . . .”; Philip Sidney, *The Countesse of Pembrokes Arcadia*, ed. Albert Feuillerat (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1965), 155.

(75.) Might one hear Sidney’s “in verse” as “inverse”? The *Oxford English Dictionary* first cites this lexeme (in the form “inversed”) from 1584, a couple of years after Sidney’s sonnets were presumedly written. But it links to the *Middle English Dictionary*, which offers three instances of “inversed” and one of “inverse” from the first half of the 14th century. Yopie Prins introduced this pun into scholarship on Victorian prosody but without reference to the anxiety of “feigning” that can be sensed in Sidney: see Yopie Prins, “Voice Inverse,” *Victorian Poetry* 42, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 43–59.

(76.) Sir Philip Sidney, *The Defense of Poesy*, ed. Albert S. Cook (Boston: Ginn, 1890), 36.

(77.) David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1961), 110.

(78.) Charles Altieri, *Wallace Stevens and the Demands of Modernism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013), 92. His chap. 4, “Aspectual Thinking” (146–175), elaborates on modes that are specific to Stevens. Frank Doggett, *Stevens’ Poetry of Thought* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1966), is valuable on the intuitive character of thinking in Stevens and to some extent on figuration in the poetry, but it does not address the syntax that structures the intuitions.

(79.) Altieri, *Wallace Stevens*, 95.

(80.) Eleanor Cook, *A Reader’s Guide to Wallace Stevens* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 42; and Eleanor Cook, *Poetry, Word-Play, and Word-War in Wallace Stevens* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 176–178.

(81.) Helen Vendler, *Wallace Stevens: Words Chosen out of Desire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 22.

(82.) Section 12 of “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven,” quoted in this connection in Altieri, *Wallace Stevens*, 171.

(83.) Helen Regueiro, *The Limits of Imagination: Wordsworth, Yeats, and Stevens* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1976), 181. Richard Allen Blessing, *Wallace Stevens’ “Whole Harmonium”* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1970), treats the poem as experiential rather than reflective. “The Magnifico speaks in the present tense; the action of the poem is still going on,” as if the explanatory “are” of the first stanza and the impoverished, declaratory “are” of the third stanza both belonged to a present progressive (\*“Twenty men

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are crossing a bridge”), arriving at “a heightened and intensified sense of the physical world,” which Blessing calls “the heart of the poetic sensibility” but is certainly not the core of Stevens’s “thinking”; Blessing, *Wallace Stevens*, 16, 18–19. More in line with this article’s sense of the poem’s tone is Bart Eeckhout, *Wallace Stevens and the Limits of Reading and Writing* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002), 235–243, which reviews various accounts of the poem, concluding that it “teases us into meditating on the status of metaphors”; Eeckhout, *Wallace Stevens*, 243.

(84.) Seth Perlow, *The Poem Electric: Technology and the American Lyric* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 229. Blasing, *Lyric Poetry*, 50, writes, similarly, “Poetic effects thus entail a delay or disruption of smooth cognitive functioning.” This article agrees about the process but takes a different view of the effect.

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