Definition: **poetry** from *Philip's Encyclopedia*

Literary medium that employs the line as its formal unit, and in which the sound, rhythm and meaning of words are all equally important. Until the modern introduction of the concept of free verse, poetry was characteristically written in regular lines with carefully structured metres, often with rhymes. See also literature; prose

Summary Article: **poetry**

from *Blackwell Companions to Philosophy: A Companion to Aesthetics*

One of the most ancient art forms, poetry, like other art forms, finds its roots embedded in activities that are not necessarily associated with art today, most notably religious rituals. Still, even while poetry is now commonly enjoyed for its own sake, many poems continue to be made for specific life events: weddings, funerals, presidential swearing-in ceremonies, anniversaries, and so on. Their connection to such events may call into question the *art* status of some poems; indeed, definitions of poetry (as is the case with definitions of art in general) must provide an account that establishes the art status of poems while still acknowledging that some poems may be parasitic upon human activities and events that have no intrinsically *artistic* goals. Questions of this sort already presuppose a notion of art that divorces artworks from those activities and events and establishes art-making as an endeavor in its own right, one that by definition is independent from any other goals and that, were it to be mixed with other activities or goals, would have its art status threatened. However, just as a notion of art that denied art status to (say) the Vietnam Memorial in Washington DC in virtue of its serving a function beyond the purely artistic would be seriously defective, so a definition of poetry that denied poetry status to W. H. Auden's *Funeral Blues* would be anemic at best. The intention to write a poem, therefore, is the intention to fit one's work into a tradition, one in which, as happens to be the case, poems are written for various occasions. Likewise, the poetic tradition is one in which various formal means have been employed (alliteration, meter, rhyme schemes, etc.); a “transparent” poetic intention (i.e., one in which the poet is aware of the character of her intention) would therefore involve responding to the formal dimension of the tradition in various ways (see Ribeiro 2007).

It has been argued that most, if not all, philosophical issues that arise with respect to poetry are rather pertinent to literature in general, so that a “philosophy of poetry” is not needed beyond a philosophy of literature and criticism (Neill 2003). There are at least two problems with a philosophy of literature that subscribes to this view. The first is that what it amounts to in practice is, frequently, an undue focus on a particular literary genre, at the expense of other forms that may have little to do with it beyond sharing a medium in language. Typically, the philosopher of literature today is a reader of novels, with little to no knowledge about the history of poetry or of the formal devices that are its bread and butter. Despite best intentions, then, the philosophy suffers in virtue of the assumption that what works for one works for all. Nevertheless, one could still claim that there is no need for a philosophy of poetry in addition to a philosophy of literature – that is, so long as philosophers of literature are sufficiently well informed about the various literary arts. However, here the second problem rears its head. For while it may be true for some issues that one philosophy of literature fits all, some facts about poetry suggest that we might do better by compartmentalizing. These include: (1) formal schemes; (2) figurative language (tropes); (3) the first-person perspective of most poetry; and (4) the

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oral origins of poetry.

Perhaps the most obvious difference between poems and novels, short stories, essays, and plays is that in poetry the use of formal schemes is pervasive. The use of poetic schemes such as meter, rhyme schemes, alliteration, and parallelism is not a typical feature of the novel or the essay. Accordingly, attention to those devices, and to how, and how well, they might be employed by the author, is not a feature of the literary criticism of novels or essays. The presence of formal schemes also has consequences for how readers or listeners comprehend and experience poems. Theories in pragmatics that seek to explain linguistic choices in the process of communication sometimes see the formalization found in poems as cognitive hurdles readers must surpass in order to arrive at a poetic message (see Sperber & Wilson 1995). However, it is just as plausible to see rhyme schemes, for instance, as cognitive facilitators, insofar as they may encourage readers or listeners to draw semantic connections between phonetically similar words. Be that as it may, questions regarding the effects of formal schemes on the cognition and experience of literary works arise with special urgency in poetry; even prose poems and so-called “free” verse make extensive use of poetic schemes. The same cannot be said regarding prose works such as novels and essays.

A second aspect of poetry central to the art form is its use of tropes such as metaphor, simile, metonymy, and many others. The flourishing of philosophy of language in the twentieth century, with its general focus on issues of meaning and truth, led to a plethora of articles on metaphor in the 1970s and 1980s; today, developments in cognitive science are again bringing the issue to the fore. It is certainly true that metaphor (and figurative language in general) is not the exclusive domain of poets; people use tropes in everyday conversation frequently. It is also true, nevertheless, that the most challenging tropes – the most novel and frequently also the most difficult to parse – are typically found in poems. While the question of metaphor in general is an issue for philosophy of language, it is a question why tropes should pervade poetry to the extent that they do. One answer focuses on tropes as a poetic medium (and one may see schemes as a poetic medium as well; both tropes and schemes being ways in which language can be used). That is, tropes such as metaphors encourage the reader to see things differently, thus promoting a search for meaning within the work, and of a poetic message. While this may seem obvious, such an idea contrasts with the view that it is something external to the poem, namely the conventions of reading, that foster in readers a search for poetic meaning and poetic message (see Lamarque & Olsen 1994). While reading conventions may help explain why, once familiar with poems, readers may be more inclined to read them in certain ways, they cannot explain why on a first encounter with poetry one may have a meaning– or message-seeking attitude. In such cases, something internal to the poem must be doing the work: poetic metaphors, similes, etc. challenge readers' typical semantic associations, and thereby force an entertainment of novel ones and of what significance they may have.

Most poetry has been and continues to be lyric poetry (rather than narrative or dramatic), and the lyric poem is almost invariably written in the first person. All of Shakespeare's sonnets, for instance, are written in the first person, and most of them explicitly indicate as much in the first or second line. That lyric poetry is principally written in the first person (either implicitly or explicitly) has immediate consequences for how we experience poems, and in turn for how we evaluate them. This personal mode of expression invites a personal mode of engagement with the content of the work such that the ideal engagement often involves some level of identification, on the part of the listener or reader, with the impressions, thoughts, or feelings expressed in the work. The “I” of the lyric encourages our
taking the poetic voice as our own, much as point-of-view shots in films put us in the perspective of
the protagonist. Evidence that identification is a central characteristic of our engagement with poems
may be found in the common practice of “appropriation,” where we borrow poems written by others
to express our own ideas or feelings. While appropriation may occur with other art forms, the practice
is not widespread in any other art form except the song lyric, which shares historical roots and
structural similarities with the lyric poem. Finally, subjective (though not necessarily critical or scholarly)
evaluation of the quality of a poem is in part dependent upon the level of identification resultant from
one’s engagement with the work, where the greater the potentiality for “appropriation,” the greater
the likelihood of subjective appreciation of the work. Mutatis mutandis, the less one is able to identify
with a poem (and consequently potentially to “appropriate” it for personal use), the less one may be
able to appreciate its qualities, no matter how critically acclaimed the work may be.

Finally, the ontology of literature has suffered because of insufficient attention to the particularities of
the poetic tradition. Poetry has its origins in oral cultures, and scholars have long noted that in oral
traditions the texts of literary works are considerably more fluid than they have been since the
invention of the printing press. An ontology that is to account for this aspect of early literature as well
as for literature created since the early modern period must consequently be responsive to the
varieties of strictures on what makes a literary work. Literary works created within the context of oral
traditions do not rely on written texts and so do not adhere to a strict word-by-word text type in the
way that is common in modern literature. Rather, criteria such as story theme and metrical structure
individuate works in those contexts. Moreover, in such contexts works are instantiated in their
enunciations rather than, as has been claimed, in the text copies that are our usual means of access to
those works today.

Other questions that have commanded the attention of philosophers relate to the truth value of poetic
statements: can the propositions found in poems be said to be true, especially when they are made by
means of metaphors (“Juliet is the sun”)? Much has been made of this question (see Budd 1995). On
the one hand, it may plausibly be thought that the value of a poem may at least in part depend on the
truth of the beliefs expressed in it, and, on the other, it may be objected that the manner of
expression is what gives a poem its value as a poem, especially insofar as beliefs should be true or
false independently of how they are expressed, and could accordingly at least in principle be expressed
otherwise (this too has been contested, most famously in Brooks 1947). This issue, while not peculiar
to poetry alone, emerges most pointedly in poems, and especially lyric poems since the modern
period, inasmuch as the stability of texts enabled by printing has led to a certain “idolization” of the
text, where these words and punctuation in this specific order make up a given poem, and any
alteration would violate its integrity as an instance of the work. It is unlikely that there would have been
a heresy of paraphrase for the rhapsodes of antiquity; what was important was not whether Zeus
indeed had wide brows or the thought could be expressed differently, but whether the epithet fit the
meter on a given line.

These considerations may not warrant a philosophy of poetry segmented from a more general
philosophy of literature. They show nevertheless that a substantive philosophy of literature demands
attention to the various particularities and histories of literary practices, and that the attention
demanded by poetry is sui generis among the literary arts.

See also drama; literature; cognitive value of art; criticism; expression; metaphor.

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