**Seeing the Verse through the Prose**

*[W]hen we explore the familiar domains of sound, meter, rhyme and line, we must be prepared to explore the variable and open-ended significance of each observation*

*. . . This variability underscores the creativity poets and readers bring to their art.*

*(* Ernie Lepore and Matthew Stone from *Philosophy and the Poetic Imagination)*

Scan any textual Latin passage in your ***Cambridge Latin*** textbook. Select at least one passage from the text that you will fashion into poetic verse as demonstrated in the “Craigslist” ad modeled below and in the example taken from*, post cenam,* pg 110. Provide an interpretation of the passage in which you will first convey the meaning of the original text within the context of the story and then the new or augmented meaning of the poem you have created. Try to connect the reconstructed meaning of your poem to the original story, but also show any new connotations suggested by your poetic rearrangement of the sentences.

Finally, offer an assessment of this experimentation with poetical imagination. Just what is the “exploration of the variable and open-ended significance” of any observation or string of words? Is your poetic reformulation of a text an effective or convincing demonstration of this? Explain.

**Philosophy and the Poetic Imagination**

***By*** [***ERNIE LEPORE***](http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/author/ernie-lepore/) ***and*** [***MATTHEW STONE***](http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/author/matthew-stone/)

Perhaps now more than ever, we spend our days immersed in language. We communicate-talk, write and read-through a burgeoning array of forms and technologies. But most of us rarely stop to think about how language works, or how come we succeed in getting our ideas across in words. It all seems to happen naturally. Poets, novelists, speechwriters or the merely curious sometimes confront these questions, but it is a job that often falls to linguists and philosophers of language.

Here's one striking puzzle: We speak and write with remarkably different aims.  We sometimes try to get clear on the facts, so we can reach agreement on how things are.  But we sometimes try to express ourselves so we can capture the uniqueness of our viewpoint and experiences.  It is the same for listeners: language lets us learn the answers to practical questions, but it also opens us up to novel insights and perspectives.  Simply put, language straddles the chasm between science and art.

A central challenge for philosophy is to explain how language accommodates these two very different kinds of enterprise.  Literary theorists and translators often say that artistic language takes on special meaning (semantics), different from what we ordinarily find.  Cognitive scientists often say instead that the difference comes from our ability to recognize the purposes and goals of speakers who use language in different ways (pragmatics).  We believe, contrary to these received views, that the key differences are to be found in the different ways the audience can engage with language.

In our view, part of what makes language artistic is that we have to explore it actively in order to appreciate it.  We may have to look beneath the surface, and think harder about what images the author has used, who the author purports to be, and even how the language is organized.  These efforts can lead to new insights, new perspectives and new experiences.

Poetry is a form in which this reader engagement is particularly striking and important.  It's a good illustration of the way philosophical work can help awaken us to the richness of the language that surrounds us, even in the seeming cacophony of the digital age.  To develop our ideas further, let's examine a specific case study, one that caught our attention back in January. In an occasional feature in The New York Times, the reporter Alan Feuer presents items from Craigslist's "Missed Connections" posts as "found poetry."  The poems are original ads, "printed verbatim, with only line and stanza breaks added; their titles are the subject headings." There's something frivolous and impertinent about this project.  Poems are no accident: true poets hone their craft over decades and struggle to perfect the execution of each piece.  But, of course, Feuer has selected examples from countless others that do not work as poems.  It is this act of curation that makes the column a celebration of the poetic imagination.

Here's the sample from the "Missed Connections" poetry column that appeared in January:

drunk irish guy to the girl in the red tights on the subway to queens i really hope I did not creep you out… I was so drunk and you were so hot… I wish I could have met you at a different moment and a different place.

**Drunk Irish Guy to the Girl in the Red Tights on the Subway to Queens**

drunk irish guy

to the girl in the red tights

on the subway to queens

i really hope

I did not creep you out…

I was so drunk

and you were so hot…

I wish I could have met you

at a different moment

and a different place.

The original post was artless. Its opening tag offered no more than a third-person description of an encounter, one participant hoping to reach the other.  It continued with an awkward not-quite-apology, a churlishly direct explanation for what was inappropriate behavior, and a hinted invitation for another chance. Read literally, these words make a bad impression; the attitudes that got the guy in trouble when drunk are just as much in evidence when sober.

Feuer, however, offers us a poem.  The linguistic structures identified in rendering the text into verse catch the language subverting itself, letting us see directly deeper forces at play. The lineation (line breaks and placement) breaks up the text using a mix of parsing and end-stopped lines.  End-stopped lines conclude at a sentence boundary.  Parsing lines break up larger sentences into coherent fragments.  The fragmentary "I really hope" or "I wish I could have met you" are broken at the most natural place to pause. The lineation seems simple, but in fact it surprises us with the unexpected parallels it reveals.

Metrically, the opening stanza establishes a consistent pattern of phrasing, where two syllables in each line receive prominent accents. (In the first stanza, *drunk, i* in irish, *girl, tights, sub* in subway, and *queens.*)  The lineation invites us to continue this pattern throughout, and by so doing, "annotates" key words (*hope, I, you*) with an assignment of stress we might not otherwise have given them.

Rhetorically, this lineation highlights the formal analogies that connect the poem's descriptions.  The genre of "Missed Connections" allows great variation in the specificity with which encounters are described, and in how these descriptions are organized.  Here, though, Feuer sets the scene in simple chunks that characterize individuals with just a couple of key attributes.

Formal parallels in the second stanza, in particular, juxtapose inebriation (a generally unattractive state) and attractiveness. The annotating emphasis of the lines confirms the contrast. One suspects that these qualities are more significant in opposition to one another than in the explanation they provide for the Irish guy's advances.  The directness of the alternatives reveals the presence of archetypes: ugliness chastened by an encounter with beauty. We can hear the repeated and emphasized, "different" of the last two lines as an echo of the difference that is the poem's theme (though not the ad's).  It is as if the writer is reworking and revising his wish for difference.

The contrast between the original and its poetic rendition illustrates the distinctive engagement that poetry requires. Imagine the original presented on a smart-phone display with the exact same typographical layout Feuer imposes.  You could read it unselfconsciously for literal meaning; or, struck by its formal structure, you might recognize the deeper implications. Here then we have a minimal pair: a single presentation understood in two ways. Our philosophical claim is that this difference is crucial for any attempt to locate the distinctive experience and insight of poetry within philosophy.  For example, the difference highlights the active role of the reader in developing an interpretation; it shows that poetic effects are not solely a matter of the writer's intentions or the words' meanings, as many theorists suggest.

Most importantly, the example shows that we cannot draw a sharp boundary to distinguish some language as intrinsically poetic.  We can apply our poetic attention to commonplace language, and thereby give that language unexpected depth and importance.  Indeed, poets such as William Carlos Williams purposefully challenge us to extend our sensibilities and find the poetry in everyday language, whenever they construct poems with familiar vocabulary and cadence.

How do we cultivate the poetic imagination?  We must attune ourselves, however we see fit, to the features we notice in a poem, as a prompt to experience its language more deeply.  This search for significance can target any noticeable feature of the poem-regardless of the meaning, if any, the feature might literally encode. We can listen to the sounds and rhythm of the poem. We can feel its syntax and structure. We can even attend to its visual shape and layout before us, as the poet e. e. cummings often invited his readers to do.

However, even when we explore the familiar domains of sound, meter, rhyme and line, we must be prepared to explore the variable and open-ended significance of each observation.  We saw, for example, the different effects of lineation in the Missed Connections poem.  There is no one meaning or effect for parsing lines; for annotating lines; or in juxtaposing the two. What we find in all these cases is just a formal contrast, an echo of further differences, which we can appreciate more deeply only by probing the poem further. This variability underscores the creativity poets and readers bring to their art.

In short, a poem - and artistic language more generally - is open to whatever we find in it.  Whenever we notice that an unexpected formal feature amplifies our experience of a poem in a novel way, we add to our understanding.  All the same, we can still say what makes these interpretive efforts poetic.  They do *not* concern the ordinary significance of form in language.  When we approach language prosaically, our focus is on arbitrary conventions that link words to things in the world and to the contents of thought.  These links allow us to raise questions about what's true, and to coordinate our investigations to find answers.  But poetry exists because we are just as interested in discovering ourselves, and one another, in what we say.  Poetry evokes a special kind of thinking - where we interpret ordinary links between language and world and mind as a kind of diagram of the possibilities of experience.

New technologies can only add to these possibilities.

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**post cenam (Cambridge Latin, pg 110)**

**postquam Caecilius rem explicavit, omnes amici tacebant. mox amici "vale" dixerunt et e villa discesserunt. per viam timide procedebant. nullae stellae lucebant. nulla luna erat in caelo. amici nihil audiverunt, quod viae desertae erant. amici per urbem tacite procedebant, umbram timebant.**

**subito feles ululavit. amici valde timebant. omnes per urbem perterriti ruerunt, quod de vita desperabant. clamorem mirabilem faciebant. multi Pompeiani erant solliciti, quod clamorem audiverunt. Caecilius tamen clamorem non audivit, quod in cubiculo dormiebat.**

After Caecilius explained the situation, all his friends were silent. Soon the friends said, “Good-bye,” and left the house. They were proceeding down the street fearfully. No starts were shining. There wsa no moon in the sky. The friends heard nothing, because the streets were deserted. The friends were advancing silently through the city, because they were afraid of the ghost.

*Suddenly a cat howled. The friends were very afraid. All of them rushed through the city terrified because they were despairing for their lives. They made a remarkable noise. Many Pompeian citizens were worried because they heard the noise. Caecilius, however, did not hear the noise because he was asleep in his bedroom.*

**de vita desperabant.**

per viam procedebant

timide.

nullae stellae lucebant.

nulla luna erat in caelo.

nihil audiverunt,

viae desertae erant.

timebant.

subito feles ululavit.

per urbem perterriti ruerunt

de vita desperabant.