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PAINTERLY ASPIRATIONS IN POETRY

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1 Introduction

Poetry is, no doubt, a literary art, yet it has always encroached upon the territory of the other arts. Poetry aspires to the status of music, exploiting meter and the prosodic features of language to create verses with rhythmic, sonic, and melodic structures. It is for something like this reason that Friedrich Nietzsche declares poetry to depend "utterly on the spirit of music, music itself" (Nietzsche, 1999; 36), and Edgar Allen Poe defines it as the "rhythmical creation of beauty" (Poe, 2006; 576. See also Ribeiro, 2007). And poems are, of course, often animated by intense painterly ambitions, using poetic language to conjure up a kind of *picture*, and not merely a description, of its subject matter. Writing on poetry from antiquity through the Renaissance never tires of asserting this. Simonides of Ceos casts poetry as "painting that speaks" (Plutarch, 1992; 157), Horace famously insists that *ut pictura poesis* (Horace, 1989; 70), and Leonardo da Vince pronounces poetry to be "painting that is felt rather than seen" (da Vinci, 2008; 201).

It is the apparent affinity between poetry and painting that will occupy me here. While in modernity scholars are on the whole much less willing to invoke the poetry-as-painting model literally or uncritically, a key feature of it is still with us. A hint as to what this key feature is taken to be comes in the name of one of modernism's iconic poetic movements: Imagism. As Robert von Hallberg puts it, images "are constitutive, not ornamental, of thought, in modernist poetic doctrine" (Hallberg, 2008; 112). The kernel of presumed truth in the old model is that poetry and painting are aligned in respect to the essential role *images* play in each. Stronger still, the idea that remains is that the imagistic dimension of poetry is essential to how poems "think" and so *communicate*, and that matters are much the same in regard to how paintings "think" and produce meaning.
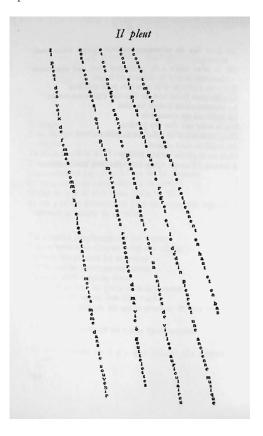
Yet just what are we asserting when we claim that poems yield images and make of them objects of aesthetic regard and critical scrutiny? Images in what sense, exactly? The point of this chapter is to outline a way of thinking about these questions and a strategy for answering them. We will see that we need a theory of the image that is fit for poetry and thus that contrasts in significant ways with the kinds of image that paintings produce. This should hardly come as a surprise. But in conclusion, I will suggest that what we stand to learn about how poems harness images for expressing thought and generating meaning promises to tell us something interesting about how paintings do, too. In the end, philosophers of poetry and painting alike need an account of how images become freighted with thought, feeling, and aboutness. This is because it is

by offering an image of a particular sort that poets and painters establish that all-important link between art and life, and this, we will see, is one of the chief ways each is able to endow their works with basic forms of critical, epistemic, and culture significance.

2 Verbal Images

Note immediately that we can find entirely literal respects in which poems produce images in such a manner that they effectively function as paintings in words. Guillaume Apollinaire's 1918 "Il Pleut" is one such example[1]:

Here we have a poem that is itself a visual image. But while it is an image made of words, none of the aesthetic, semantic, symbolic, and prosodic dimensions of the poem's language are implicated in the creation of this image, though surely they contribute to the overall effect of the poem. The mere arrangement of words in whitespace suffices to craft this image, and all that is needed in order to understand how Apollinaire pulled this off is whatever the theory of depiction offers us for making sense of how any visual representation does.

This helps us to see what our question amounts to. In asking what a poetic image is, we are at least trying to understand a kind of *verbal* image, not a visual one, any rate not a literally visual one.[2] Whatever else a poetic image might be, we expect it to be constituted not just of words but through what these words say and the particular manner they say it. We thus need to understand the kinds of images that are in some manner present *in* a poem's language and manufactured by properly *poetic* machinery. We do not yet know what this machinery is, but it should be clear that we will not correct this ignorance by finding poems that one can frame and hang on a wall.

Better, but just slightly so, would be to look to ekphrastic poems for a model. In its most literal application, *ekphrasis* names a classical rhetorical exercise in which students were asked to write a poem that "calls out" or "proclaims" a work from a different artistic medium, say by composing a lyric that strives to capture the essence of particular statue. More broadly, it can designate any attempt to offer a poetic representation of an object of non-negligible aesthetic and artistic value, for instance, Homer's description of Achilles's shield in the *Iliad*. In modern poetics, we have an ekphrastic poem whenever we attempt, if you will, to put a painting to poetry, and the connection between a poem and an indicated painting becomes paramount. Contemporary examples would be Anne Sexton's "The Starry Night" (1981) or Wislawa Szymborska's "Two Monkeys by Brueghel" (1993), though the list is long indeed.

It is true that in ekphrastic poems we often find properly poetic *verbal* images, but the idea of ekphrasis, taken in its standard usage in poetics, is still too narrow to capture what we are after. The label demands nothing especially *imagistic* from the poem that wishes to be ekphrastic; it just requires that a poem be *about* an image found outside the poem. The practice, especially in its modern sense, also makes the connection between poems and particular paintings too intimate, for the obvious reason that we have poems which produce images, perhaps even painterly ones, but that do not strive to represent a given painting at all.

What is needed is an account of verbal imagery and the conditions under which it becomes recognizably poetic, not an account of how poems can successfully function *as* paintings or come to be *about* them. And to put matters this way is to make it clear that we are in the realm of another, much broader and more pervasive, dimension of language, a power perhaps most perfectly exercised in poetry but certainly found elsewhere. In his discussion of verbal icons, W. J. T. Mitchell puts the issues in these terms: "Figurative language [...] is what we ordinarily mean when we talk about verbal imagery. The phrase, 'verbal imagery,' in other words, seems to be a metaphor for metaphor itself!" (Mitchell 2013; 21). In short, what we need to explore is how the imagistic dimension of poetry relies on the figurative manipulation of words and exploits their metaphoric potential.

Caution is required here. We haven't said anything informative or interesting if we simply describe this power of poetry to produce verbal images as "metaphoric." "Metaphor" gestures in the general direction of many disparate non-literal uses of language, and a good number of those uses will have little to do with the production of poetic verbal imagery. For example, dead metaphors likely demand nothing of the imagination and so, as we will see, do not require the kind of *seeing-as* that calls on words to produce an image over and above a determinate semantic content. And there may be metaphors that are very much alive that nonetheless do not require us to consider anything picture-like in order to grasp their import (for these and related issues, see Camp, 2006; Stern, 2000; Wearing, 2006). The immensely tired but still living "Juliet is the Sun" might be one such example. Whatever "sun" means in this context, it has not yet settled into a conventional sense, as, say, "embattled" has when used to describe a certain philosopher's status in the profession. It also isn't clear that readers need to *picture* Juliet this way or that to get Romeo's point, given the sheer familiarity of both the metaphor and the drama, as well as its appearance in virtually every philosophical discussion of metaphor since the 1940s. The kinds of metaphor that matter to my argument cannot count on established usage to lead the mind to meaning, and this is to be expected, since we are trying to understand the intensely creative language of poetry, which often takes great pride in producing meanings that are in utter excess of established linguistic usage.

One more word of caution. In work on figurative language, one finds frequent reference to the class of metaphors, similes, and analogies that are "poetic" and so are to be contrasted with the "low-energy" or prosaic metaphors of the unambitious everyday sort (Davies, 1982; 80). In these debates, the designation "poetic" describes a metaphor as something like *elaborate*, *aesthetically charged*, and *admirably creative* (see Reimer and Camp, 2008). Asking you to think of someone as "a

bulldozer" is not poetic in this sense. But when T.S. Eliot writes of an "evening spread out against the sky/Like a patient etherized upon a table," we have a figurative deployment of language that aspires to the status of "poeticity," as it once would have been put ("The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," 1910). Yet Eliot's lines achieve this status in part because of the extraordinary way they *picture* their object, creating an anxious image of evening as still much as one is when put under just before an invasive surgery. We won't learn much about this imagistic power of poetry if we just consider the mellifluousness and tensed juxtapositions of really, really good metaphors. What in part gives the poetry to a poetic image is that it enables an aesthetically heightened form of *attention to an object*—an imaginative corollary to perceptual attention—wrought with words but that creates something in excess of what words do in their mundane conversational contexts. It is this verbally created "object" and its poetic power that we need to explore, quite in addition to the merely aesthetic features of the language through which it is created. It is this creative power of metaphor that helps us to see something important about poetry and its presumably painterly dimension.

3 Imagistic Meaning

We need to understand a particular power of metaphor that brings to clarity a particular power of poetry, namely, that in certain contexts poetry conveys thought and produces meaning by virtue of verbal imagery. In this section, I will attempt to make the idea seem intuitive, using two case studies that highlight different aspects of these powers. Both cases are admittedly fanciful but, I hope, instructive nonetheless.

In each case, assume, I approach a conversation with you with the goal of getting you to see some state of affairs more or less as I do, and I take you to begin the exchange with no firm grasp of the matter at all. That is, you are unfamiliar with the subject of discussion and I need to find a way to provide you with an object of understanding. My labor, assume, is one of devising an effective manner of forming an image—note how natural the term feels here—of what I wish you to see as I do.

Case 1

You are a guest at my university. My colleague Wes, I tell you, is a particular kind of jerk and you really must avoid him at the dinner tonight. You ask me, "what kind jerk, exactly?" and I begin to fumble around for words, producing, in the process, a mess of true descriptions. I tell you that despite being widely despised, he has a certain "*je ne sais quoi*" and is often the center of attention; that he regularly insinuates salacious things about faculty who challenge him; that he speaks in a soft, smoky voice, which gives a false impression of depth and intimacy; that he draws people to him only to reveal who he really is once trust has been established; that he has a motorcycle; that he takes great delight in the spontaneous creation of chaos, always finding ingenious ways to set colleagues against one another on the spot. I could keep going, but I sense that I've told you a lot without saying much at all, and at any rate I haven't made my point. So in an attempt to bring it all home, I say, "imagine a kind of Miles Davis of malice. That's Wes!" Finding that a tad purple, I try again: "Wes is the Iago of the Philosophy Department." "Regardless," I say, "I'm trying to tell you that when it comes to bad behavior, he's an extraordinary improviser."

Assume that both of my metaphors are apt, given who Wes is and who Miles Davis and Iago were. It is arguable that my two metaphors state no truths, provide no facts-of-the-matter, in addition to those given in the initial true descriptions. But they are hardly gratuitous linguistic embellishments. Each metaphor provides a radically different way of *organizing* those disjointed truths: the metaphors make them *cohere* in determinate ways. They open up new ways of seeing Wes, since each metaphor calls on us not just to describe him one way or another but enlists the

imagination in an act of seeing-as (see Wollheim, 1980; 147–150), namely, e.g., *as* Miles Davis, at least in respect to the performance of evil. The effect of this is that of *orientating* you in thought and feeling to Wes in a specific, and specifically imaginative, manner. Through this, a nuanced *purchase* on him, and not merely a set of properties he truly possesses, is articulated and shared. The metaphors make the descriptions hang together in a particular manner, and, in so doing, offer an image of how I take Wes to hang together as a person.

In a fantastically apt phrase, Troy Jollimore calls the kind of orientation a metaphor achieves a "cognitive grasp," with the notion of a grasp "conceived holistically rather than as a set of discrete, atomistic propositions," and this is a fine way of describing how my metaphors of Wes stand in relation to the true descriptions they structure and bring to a point (Jollimore, 2009; 142). Elizabeth Camp describes this as metaphor's power to prompt an imaginative *perspective* on a subject, by "imposing a complex structure of relative prominence on them, so that some features stick out in our minds while others fade into the background, and by making some features especially central to explaining others," which explains how the metaphors of Wes yield distinctive purchases on Wes (Camp, 2009). Regardless of whether we opt to call the organizational work these metaphors do "orientations," "cognitive grasps," "perspectives," or "purchases," one thing is very clear: they each offer a different way of *making sense* of Wes. They each provide a different way of *thinking* about him, of making him *meaningful* to you, and of presenting him as a precise *object of understanding*. And this gives us an intuitive and earthbound sense of what it means to say that an image "thinks" and "communicates" by virtue of its status as an image.

If the language in my example is shorn of imagery—if I say "Wes devises evil schemes with stunning quickness" and leave out the Miles Davisness or Iagoness of how he does so—I provide facts about a person but not a picture of the person to whom these facts apply. In this case, there is a hole at the very the center of your conception of the subject of our discussion. We might even think that these two images, Wes-as-Miles-Davis or Wes-as-Iago, would be much more accurately captured with a literal picture than a literal statement, in part because the metaphors ascribe a certain look and feel to him, and an artistic gesture rather than a description is better suited for capturing such things. It is also because of the picture-like quality of the verbal image that we can explain the intrusion of the aesthetic in the metaphor: of language intended to color and stylize thought. It works upon the sound of words, plays upon suggestion, commonplaces, and sets of associations (of Miles Davis, Iago, jazz culture, *Othello,* false friends, etc.) and places the object, Wes, at a particular point in the space of value, though good luck stating exactly and literally what that point is. Verbal images do to speak at that level of specificity (see Kulvicki, 2014; 155–172). This is one point at which the analogy with visual pictures ends, since verbal images lack entirely the kind of perceptual detail of a visual image. This is why it would not only be silly but a category error to ask whether Wes-as-Iago should be imagined as dressed in contemporary urban or Venetian clothing *circa* 1603.

One final point. It is often thought that metaphors are a disruption of literal language. Perhaps, but as the above makes clear, metaphors often *coopt* the literal language that went before it—language that is not itself contained in the grammatic relationship a metaphor establishes between subject and predicate—and gives it a role to play in its imaginative enterprise. Some of the predicates in my clumsy descriptions of Wes rely on dead, or at least sleeping, metaphors, and the others are straightforwardly literal. But the metaphors awaken an imagistic force in them. The invocation of Miles Davis enlivens prior uses of "smoky," "improviser," "soft," and perhaps even "*je ne sais quoi,*" given Davis's genius at creating musical atmospheres that defy affective description. When I enlist the image of Iago, "spontaneous" is given a different force, since Iago, in his way, was an also immensely successful improviser of malice; and it gives an imaginative charge to terms like "set against," "insinuate," and "false impression," certainly to those who know his story. In fact, *even certain of the straightforwardly literal descriptions are given an essentially imagistic function*. On

any charitable interpretation of my true descriptions, "has a motorcycle" functions not to convey a proposition about Wes so much as to *picture* him and his obnoxiousness in a particular way. If one does not assume this, the inclusion of "has a motorcycle" in the exchange is gratuitous, since the information it conveys would be entirely beside the point. In this respect, the whole of my communicative act is reshaped by the metaphor, precisely because it is all is implicated in the creation of a verbal image of Wes and so endows the entire exchange with a recognizably imagistic dimension.

Poetry makes great use of this power to endow language, metaphoric or otherwise, with an imagistic function. A painting, because visual, can furnish its images with extraordinary determinacy *internally*. It can simply depict what it wishes us to see. Metaphors and poetic verbal images, owing to the condensation of thought typical of each, usually cannot, so this coopting of surrounding swaths of literal language as a way of achieving determinacy becomes paramount (see John, 2013; Lamarque, 2009 & 2015). William Wordsworth was a great practitioner of this. Consider his sonnet "The World is Too Much with Us" (1802) and note how he passes seamlessly from philosophical registers to figurative ones that embody, in straightforwardly verbal images, the sense of his various claims about the poverty of experience in modernity:

> The world is too much with us; late and soon,
> Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;—
> Little we see in Nature that is ours;
> We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!
> This Sea that bares her bosom to the moon;
> The winds that will be howling at all hours,
> And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;
> For this, for everything, we are out of tune;
> It moves us not. Great God! I'd rather be
> A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;
> So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
> Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;
> Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;
> Or hear old Triton blow his wreathèd horn.[3]

It is crucial to see that the entire poem functions as a verbal image, since its images of the sea flirting with the moon, the sleeping flowers, pagans, and Proteus subsume and make cohere the philosophical declarations about alienation, belatedness, and the atrophy of our distinctly human "powers." What we might call the "total verbal image" of the poem refers not to the manner in which various lines of a poem metaphorically picture their grammatical subjects ("getting and spending" as a "sordid boon," etc.) but to how the whole of poem itself pictures *its* subject: our world and our place in it. Thus as with my mundane examples of Wes, the various images in Wordsworth's poem charge the entire poem with an imagistic function, and indeed the poem itself becomes an image of us, at any rate of the various ways of being "us" that it wishes to condemn. The poem in a sense thereby achieves the determinacy of a painting through its coopting of all of its language, literal included, in its elaboration of an image, verbal at its core, of an enchanted world that is now lost to us. Again, this is not a kind of *perceptual* determinacy, and it is to commit a category error to expect this. It is a kind of determinacy of content and aboutness: of the degree of thought and feeling that an image is able to convey about its subject.

Case 2

After some 25 years since university, you've found me on the internet. You send a few emails that reestablish a sense of connection, and then you begin to test boundaries. After successfully probing me for information about my job and the like, you ask me about my romantic life. Since we're on

email, I opt to enlist an image to convey my response, but I am undecided as to exactly what I want to reveal. I first write, "At the moment it is a bit like this," and insert the following image:

I then think twice and decide that I'd rather render the truth more optimistically. I replace the initial image with:

And then I decide that I want to change the sense of my response entirely so as to ensure no further intrusion:

In these examples, an actual image functions as a grammatical object: a proper picture is used as a predicate that completes the thought of a sentence and is therefore responsible for enriching it with meaning.[4] But the images do so in a distinctive manner, not quite by telling you *what* but *how* to think about my romantic life. The first image asks you to view it as a catastrophe; the second as put on hold while I happily attend to other matters; and the third, very unlike the others, tells you how to think not about my life but your prying. Dull and wildly broad "truths" are conveyed, too: that I'm single, and that it is tragic, or fabulous, or none of your business. But it is *how* these images open up and structure ways of thinking about my life that is of primary importance here, and this, rather than any discrete truths these perspectives make available to you, is where the basic cognitive and communicative action takes places.

It would be a mistake to say that the second and third images communicate more about their subject (my life) simply because they provide more language. It is true that they have more words than the first sign, but the words play no more of a role in detailing thought here than the straightforwardly aesthetic—one could just as easily say formal—features of the images. The chains in the first image, the cheery garishness of the second, and the stern font of the third, all bear as much of the burden of meaning-production as the "for the season" of second and the vulgarity of the third do. The point is, in each of these cases, the aesthetic-visual elements are charged with giving an otherwise null conception of my romantic life a determinate shape and color, and they are charged with just as much, indeed likely much more, of the communicative labor than the linguistic elements are. They produce "thought" through the ways in which they color and shape a sense of the subject. In fact, we could remove all the language except for "closed" and virtually the same perspectives on my romantic life would be achieved.

The philosopher of language who wishes to make absolutely everything hang on the provision of propositional forms of understanding might rejoin that these images will ultimately be propositionally structured when made into a proper object of thought and understanding. We can grant this and even that understanding and meaning in these cases are not constitutionally opposed to propositional modes of articulation. The relevant question for our argument is whether it is a proposition *or something else* that coveys the insight and acts as the primary object of cognitive attention here. The answer is clearly that in these cases it is an image and its aesthetic and formal features that have this function. In their natural state, they are formally organized pictures, not propositionally structured statements. Meaning of this sort is a matter of import: of significance and not signification (see Gibson, 2011; 2016). It is what we hit upon when we elaborate, again, how an image organizes thought and leads it to fairly precise destinations such that we can say what the image is "about," that is, what the *point* of an image like that, presented in this context, might reasonably be taken to be.

It is not a stretch to say that the role "Miles Davis" or "Iago" played in my verbal images in Case 1 have essentially the same function as these literal pictures in Case 2: that of completing a thought about an indicated subject. The visual images of my romantic life fill in the blanks in a different way from the verbal images in respect to Wes' life. But I am still drawing upon the set of commonplaces associated with a notoriously difficult jazz icon, insipid holiday signage, a decrepit space chained off from public, an infamous villain, and so on. And this leads to an important point: I could have just as well provided an actual painting or an actual poem to the play the role these images did, plugging in, say, Picasso's *Guernica* (1937) or T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) to articulate a purchase on my romantic life. One would have demanded a greater investment of time to get its point across, but that is neither here nor there for my argument.

Both of the cases explored in this section show that whether an image is verbal or visual should make precisely no difference as to whether it can "think," establish relationships of aboutness, and so produce meaning, even understanding. A verbal image is, in effect, an assemblage of words that

are organized such that an act of imaginative seeing-as is made possible and, with it, a form of attention to a subject that amounts a manner of *figuring*—here ordinary language permits us to say *picturing*—it. A poem or metaphor can be painterly in this sense, then: they can "think" through an image and establish relationships of aboutness accordingly, as a painting would, though it of course uses verbal rather than visual means to achieve this effect. We can also see that verbal images are creatures of language that often strive, perhaps impossibly, to get beyond language, since they often seek to establish an essentially non-semantic and irreducibly imaginative form of attention to those worldly things that language is about: Miles Davis, a pleasant lea, even a motorcycle (See Guttenplan, 2008). Even Iago, Proteus, and the other fictions enlisted in the above examples are effectively given *real* status, insofar as the words that make them present to the mind render them as an actual frame through which we picture some real feature of human concern, for instance, Wes, my personal life, or the presumed disaster of experience in modernity.

4 Conclusion

Here is the general point I think we can take from all of this. It isn't quite that a poem or a painting has a figurative content (or meaning) that gets the world right or wrong, no more than my metaphors and my odd images do. It is rather that they can structure and give form—essentially the form of the artwork itself—to how we think about some feature of the world such that a new sense is ascribed to it. Much as I can come to see a friend as Iago, I can also see the world through the lens, imagistic at root, of a poem or painting. And this is often precisely the point of a poem, as the example of Wordsworth makes clear: it yields an image of that messy thing called "life" in addition to the fictions and figurations that populate its lines and stanzas.

To make this move is to admit that the relationship between a poetic image of the world and the world itself is ultimately metaphorical. But this is no loss. As Arthur Danto says, in his typically vague but endearing fashion, "an artwork becomes a metaphor for life, and life is transfigured" (Danto, 1981, 172; see also Camp 2016). This capacity of a poem or painting to become an image of "life" and thus to offer a metaphorical transformation, if not of the thing itself, then of our cognitive grasp of it, is central to how poetry and painting intervene in our cognitive, ethical, and affective relationship to the word. Ultimately, it is this ability of the whole of a poem itself to come to function as an image of life that explains the point of commonality with painting. For unless a mere faithful portrait or landscape, a painting too pictures the world beyond it in an essentially figurative manner. Much of the critical potential of poetry and painting consists in this and thus so does much of its ethical, cognitive, and social significance (see Gibson, 2019). It is how they come to be *about* the world beyond the work and make of it an object not just of attention but scrutiny.[5]

Notes

1 https://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2012/inventingabstraction/?work=17, accessed November 20th, 2020.

2 Verbal images of course may be "visualized" through an effort of the sensory imagination and the production of mental imagery of a particular sort. Since my focus is on *verbal* images, in which the content of the image is presumably contained in a public use of language, I ignore the debate on the nature of mental imagery. I have no doubt that this debate has much to tell us about how we *entertain* verbal images in poetry and metaphor, though the matter is beyond the scope of this chapter. For discussion, see Arcangeli (2019), Gregory (2016), and Stokes (2019).

3 https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45564/the-world-is-too-much-with-us, accessed November 20th, 2020.

4 For this idea and way of framing it, I am indebted to Guttenberg (2005 & 2008). These styles of example are his. I discuss this in much greater detail in Gibson (2011).

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