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A pragmatic view of the poetic function of language

Abstract: In this paper, I try to expatiate on the poetic function of language on the basis of considerations by Jakobson and Waugh. I try to bring in the consideration that pragmatics plays an important role in elucidating the poetic function of language. Contextualism allows us to interpret a poem: referents must be fixed or need not be fixed due to the requirements of the discourse; citations are brought in through pragmatic ways; polyphony is achieved by taking into account the context of previous analyses of a poetic text; the vicinity of a certain word, or concept or line is likely to affect the interpretation of a certain expression; the poetic text can take different forms, from graffiti to discourse at the market place, to discourse between lovers. All these forms of poetic text would not exist if the notion of poetry did not include the idea of semantic/pragmatic compression which is matched, in interpretation, by expansions.

> A poem is to a certain degree decontextualized: it is a system of systems which is more self-contained than referential discourse. One could say that the poem provides its own "universe of discourse." The orientation of the poem upon itself as a message-sign has the effect of making more of a break between the poem and its context than in referential discourse and results in a relative self-sufficiency for the poetic text … But a poem does not exist in a vacuum: it is part of a general historic-cultural context and indeed depends on that context for its interpretation. Nor is it sealed off from a literary context.
> – Waugh (1980: 72)

1 On the poetic function of language

Jakobson insisted much on the idea that poetics should be part of the study of language: "Poetics deals with problems of verbal structure, just as the analysis of painting is concerned with pictorial structure. Since linguistics is the global science

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of verbal structure, poetics may be regarded as an integral part of linguistics" (Jakobson 1960).

There may be a lot of truth in what Jakobson says. However, formal linguists are often busy denying what Jakobson takes for granted, in other words, that language serves functions different from that of articulating and expressing human thought. Thus, programmatic statements like the one above, to be functioning, ought to be explained in detail. (But I am not saying that Jakobson does not make his effort elsewhere, as he is well known for his reflections on the functions of language; see also Allan 2020.[1]) A step towards explaining such concepts is revealed through the following excerpt: "Insistence on keeping poetics apart from linguistics is warranted only when the field of linguistics appears to be illicitly restricted, for example when the sentence is viewed by some linguists as the highest analyzable construction" (Jakobson 1960).

A point that is not made by Jakobson or other linguists of a functional persuasion is that the poetic function of language – which I think everyone ought to take for granted – is something that cannot serve any function whatsoever outside a theory of communication. Why should human beings think through poetry? Poetry deals with the kind of embellishments that only make sense when we want to communicate thoughts to others and want to show their importance, want them to be remembered, and want them to function within a general act of persuasion. If language only served to vocalize and articulate thoughts, the poetic function of language would be dispensable. Although the issue of thinking aloud or thinking silently has never been deepened sufficiently from the point of view of linguistics (for example, could there be pragmatic implicatures due to the Gricean maxims in thought?[2]), it is reasonable to accept that the essence of poetry, when one dispenses with the notion of communication, is missing. A poet is always a poet for someone else, by whom he wants to be considered in high regard. We will see many cases in which the poetic function is subordinated to some other function (argumentation, for example; in any case Jakobson was right in not wanting to identify the poetic function with poetry proper, although he had to agree that poetry was the most pertinent area where the poetic function could be applied). But even as an independent function, poetry and

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1 Allan (2020) says the following. Meanings given for Latin 'communicate' are

"share; share/divide with/out; receive/take a share of; receive; join with; communicate, discuss, impart; make common cause; take common counsel, consult," which is more or less identical with the meanings of current English 'communicate.' Communication is the act of conveying a message from one entity (or set of entities) to another through the use of semiotic phenomena such as signs, symbols, and various kinds of biosemiotic data. (Allan 2020)

2 See Douven (2010) on the pragmatics of belief.

the poetic message would not survive outside culture, as they exist through culture and serve to propagate it (while language is propagated through use, poetic production is propagated by conscious efforts to transmit the poetic texts to the next generations, through citations and finally through critical discussions). Surely, even a solitary thought may be indebted to culture – we may have borrowed many of the presuppositions which illuminate the meaning of the utterance/thought. However, I do not see how it could propagate culture. In the same way as language has sedimented, after a group of people have recognized the importance and salience of certain words, a culture has sedimented as a heritage of values and linguistic habits and artistic creations (including poems) have been propagated by salient individuals of a certain social group. There is a close relationship between artistic creation, specifically, poetry and culture. Culture needs to be propagated to survive – and this cannot be done in solitary thoughts, but only through communication. The same is also true of the propagation of language, which, leaving aside those structures which are presumed to be universal, is a set of words, choices, syntactic combinations, presuppositions, figurative practices. The propagation of language needs the unfolding of real communication among real speakers, to take place, in such a way as to contribute to culture. Analogously, the propagation of poetry requires acts of communication. It is not enough to write a poem on a stone in a wood. The poem needs to be embedded in social activities to be noted and remembered. This notion is something which has been ignored or undervalued by linguists and literary critics. Critics are satisfied that a poem belongs to a book (an anthology or a collection of poems) and seem to lose track of the fact that a poem is a "pragmeme," an act of communication (Mey 2001), which requires a social context and which aims to modify such a context adding something of its own, nourishing the soul of readers and making it capable of being reactive to what is going on around them in terms of social and historical events.

Despite Jakobson's genial insights, only a handful of articles on the poetic function can be found within linguistics – an indication that general linguists have, since the inception of the subject, been busy with something else. Chomsky (2013) thought that linguistic competence was a window on the mind – hence linguistics, in his view, is part of the theory of mind. Since the advent of Chomskyan linguistics, with the exception of conversational analysis, studied within sociology, and sociolinguistics, as contrasted with theoretical linguistics, not much has been made of the theory of performance, the rediscovery of which is at the heart of societal pragmatics, as Mey (2001) calls that section of linguistics that has to do with the liberation of man from the limits that prevent him from being realized in full. Critical discourse analysis specifically takes up the most difficult tasks of Mey's agenda (see Catalano and Waugh 2020). What is central, in this brand of linguistics, is that language is not only a way that allows human beings to express themselves (an idea that Jakobson

1960 attributes to Sapir, according to whom, on the whole "ideation reigns supreme in language"), but is a means that allows human beings to construct society, including the laws that determine and regulate social interaction and behavior, and, among other things, allows human beings to oppress others or to liberate themselves from social oppression. To give an example, the chapter on slurs is a chapter of a societally inspired linguistics that is busy studying the ways some social groups use language to oppress and dominate others (Bianchi 2014 and the literature therein cited) and the ways in which other social groups attempt to liberate themselves from these forms of oppression and deliberate linguistic segregation, by fighting back (linguistically or non-linguistically). Language, in other words, is a form of communication that allows us to have effects on society, including the propagation of cultural values, laws, and norms from one generation to the next.

Why should poetics be part of linguistics, according to Jakobson? Presumably, Jakobson has the intuition that poetry and language intersect, in so far as their most important functions are social. The poetic function should be studied in connection with the conative function (language serves the purpose of getting others to do things), because the best way to persuade others to do things for us is to choose words that best express a certain concept, that can have an imaginative impact on the hearer, that help her remember what is going on, etc. Jakobson was well aware that the poetic function could not be studied *per se*, in isolation from other forms of behavior (see Capone's 2018 work on pragmemes at the marketplace). This is due to the fact that most verbal messages are multifunctional: "they usually fulfil a variety of functions, which are integrated one with another in a hierarchical fashion with one function being predominant" (Waugh 1978, 1980: 58). The embedding of one function in another may require some form of indirection. A poem may be an incitement to do something, but the conative function may be mediated by what the poem causes, that is to say critical meditation. In other words, some specific effects may be caused by more general effects. Politicians know this well, and this may be a reason why they relegate Education to a very small portion of the national budget. Poetry is an artistic activity that encourages freedom of expression, a critical stance to society, reflection, intellectual autonomy, rather than acquiescence, and all these perlocutionary effects are *not* put up with by a political system that aims at conformity. Usually, all systems in which an authoritarian mode of political leadership prevails thrive because of the failure of previous governments to regulate and support education properly. Trumpism could thrive only because under Obama not enough was done to strengthen the educational system.

Usually, the poetic function of language is defined as that function in which a speaker directs attention to the language he uses, to the text as used, rather than to the message. (See Todorov 1978 on the idea that the poetic function comprises the focus within the verbal message on the verbal message itself, that is to say, on the

language used.) According to this view, we would have texts in which their speakers communicate things about the world and texts that specifically address the issue of form, where form prevails as the main message conveyed. To provide a useful example, take a model who poses for photos and exhibits her dress. She does not wear that dress with the purpose of covering her body, protecting herself from cold or rain, but with the purpose of exhibiting that dress, of showing it. The relationship between function and form work much in the same way for the poetic function of language. Such a reduction of the poetic function to issues of form is not really acceptable. In the same way as a sentence like "Colorless green ideas sleep furiously" (Chomsky 1957: 15) seems to be a bad sentence of English because we do not understand what a speaker can mean by it, a rhythmic sentence that looks like a poetic verse could never be part of a poem *unless* the speaker and the hearers can attribute a meaning and a function to it. While to a certain extent a sentence like "Colorless green ideas sleep furiously" could be recuperated if one recognizes in it a certain intention (of a poetic kind), we might obtain a sentence which has a certain rhythm but no sense by combining words at random, e.g., "trains 2, 4, 3, explains," but we would certainly not want to say that such verses constitute a poem. (Of course, there are all sorts of ways to recuperate the meaning of a verse by contextualizing it, but if all attempts fail, then we should candidly admit that the verse was meaningless both in the sense of having no locutionary meaning and of having no illocutionary meaning.) It would be much better to try to unify the poetic and the expressive or emotive function (the latter term is used by Jacobson for poetry, while I would use the former), as all devices in a verse are subordinated to the expressive/emotive function. The poet through a (lyric) poem speaks about his/her mind, his/her internal feelings and mental states in a way which is not easily available through daily conversation. This plane of the poetic function can and has been called "defamiliarization" (Kraxenberger 2014: 14),[3] based on the awareness that we should consider poetry as structurally deviant from prosaic language and everyday discourse, due to its function and to its form, including various textual devices. While everyday discourse is about reference and description of the reality outside the human mind, poetic discourse integrates emotive and perceptive aspects within the communication process (see Kraxenberger 2014: 14–15). A certain degree of indirectness serves to define the poetic function, because otherwise there would be no difference

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3 Actually, we hear discussions of defamiliarization for the first time, in Wordsworth's Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, when he specifies the role which has to be played by Coleridge in his poems. "Defamiliarization" can be seen as a consequence (or one of the consequences) of Jakobson's Principle of equivalence, according to which "the poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection to the axis of combination," a mechanism summed up by Widdowson (1975: 57) in the following ways: the poetic function uses the resources of the code to combine what is kept separate and separate what is combined.

between the poetic and the expressive function. The expressive/emotive function can be exercised both in poems and in daily conversation, but the poetic function is more restricted in its contexts of use. We may tentatively say that the poetic function is that function that is exercised through language when one attempts to communicate feelings, states of mind and attitudes through a language that is attentive to form and is characterized by a certain degree of indirection and compression. Jakobson would probably take issue with this, as he spots several poetic effects in the ways we normally use language for daily purpose, such as the practice of placing an NP that is heavier (longer) last in a sequence (coordination, for example) in order to obtain certain rhythmic effects. Jakobson also discusses paronomasia, as in "The horrible Harry," where the selection of "horrible," rather than a different synonym, on the paradigmatic plane, is determined by certain expected sound effects. We may agree that these "poetic effects" can be seen in language use, but they are not so central as they are in poems. The poetic function partially overlaps with the expressive/emotive function but has more specific hallmarks. Why not say, then, that the poetic function is part of the expressive/emotive function? The purpose of the expressive function is to look inside, to bring to light the interiority of a person shown in his or her interaction with the world and with nature. (As Auden 1996 [1938]: 470 says, the "primary function of poetry, as of all arts, is to make us more aware of ourselves and the world," see Kraxenberger 2014: 10.) But the poetic function can also be aimed at outside objects and historical facts, in order to show the attitudes of the speaker (epic poems, for examples, are not solely about feelings and states of mind; they are mainly about events). The difference from prosaic language is that the speaker colors his texts and attitudes through words that have a high emotive impact on the hearer. The relationship between the text and the fact it refers to can be very indirect and tenuous and, in some cases, ought to be recognized by the hearer (the case of allusions). Reference may be replaced with allusion and predication may be altered in all sorts of ways, through metaphorical language. The general effect is that the hearer has to guess both what is being talked about and what is being said of what is being talked about. The degree of implicitness in poetic texts greatly exceeds the one we find in daily texts. I am not saying that daily texts do not require implicatures and explicatures (Carston 2002); even legal texts that are devised to be as explicit and precise as possible impinge on implicit propositions that are to be patiently recovered by readers, who have to eliminate ambiguities by choosing the most rational interpretative path (Capone 2013a). But in poetry, the dimension of implicitness comes together with deliberate compression, that renders the poem cryptic and open to subjective interpretations. The function of compression is to lead to greater processing costs, which have to be matched by contextual effects. This creates a greater impact on readers, who are required to be more active and to participate in the creation of the text (a case of polyphony, the text being contributed by more than one

voice). Whereas in daily discourse, the intentions of the speaker are to be recovered and communication is really successful only when this happens, in poetry the speaker's and the reader's intentions are allowed to diverge even considerably. The text, following Umberto Eco, is considered "open." The text may be seen as an assembly of disparate voices, interpretations by readers counting as well, and adding something to the texture of the poem. We may consider the *Divine Comedy* by Dante the result of juxtaposing or of integrating the critical discussions of Dante scholars in a harmonic edifice. The interpretation is not open in the sense that anything goes, but in the sense that there is a process of cumulative interpretation. Polyphony is achieved like in an orchestra of instruments and voices, where there is an utmost degree of integration and harmony among the players and the voices.

So far, we have agreed with Jakobson that the focus of the poem is the message (and not only the form of the message), that is to say the way we relate form to content. This relationship can be improved through reflection, pondering, inventiveness and through figurative uses of language. The attention to form makes sure that the message is remembered, sometimes for decades ("The Infinite" by Leopardi, for example, which has exercised the memory of thousands of Italian students and which is usually remembered by heart with relatively small expenditure cost). Of course, rhythmic patterns also aid in the enterprise of learning long epic poems by heart, as such epic poems, especially at the time of Homer or of the anonymous author of *Beowulf*, only had an oral tradition, but they do so only through the interplay with figures of speech, images that had a high emotive impact on hearers.

Going back to the idea that in poetry the focus is on the message and not on the form (only), this allows some symmetry to exist among all the functions of language. Take for example the referential function, which is contrasted with the poetic function. Different though it may be from the poetic function, it is a relationship between form and content. Such a relationship would be entirely missing in the case of poetry if we adopted, for example, the view by Todorov, according to which the poetic function only concerns form. And asymmetry would result. Why should some functions be about content while others not? Presumably the functions of language are categorized through the kind of content they are meant to convey.

Of course, the poetic function can be subordinated to other functions. I can use a rhyme in the course of a TV advertisement, or I can use a poem for filibustering purposes in a parliamentary debate, I can use a poem as an example in a conference, I can use poems for the purpose of teaching language to small children (learning by heart the days of the months of the year, for example). This does not mean, according to Jakobson, that the poetic text does not have hallmarks of its own, such as rhythm, rhymes, alliterations, assonances, parallels, contrasts, and figurative language.

According to Jakobson a poem is a generative structure, such that, given the introduction of a certain word, we are given expectations about what is to follow.

This is due to the fact that the verse is based on equivalence relations: we have parallels in meter among verses of the same poem, patterns of assonance, patterns of alliteration, patterns of rhyme. Of course, there may be a certain degree of exaggeration in his claim that, given the introduction of a word, we know what is to follow. The syntagmatic and the paradigmatic planes intersect at every possible syntactic node and what is inserted may be determined by equivalence relations; yet, the insertion of words on the paradigmatic plane follows free choices (otherwise, everything would be determined from the beginning). But all this, literary critics know very well – leaving aside the linguistic terminology in which these considerations are cast. What is less well known is Jakobson's view that, while in referential discourse, we are normally focused on the relationship between the word and the referent, in the case of poems we are more focused on the relationship between words and words. This will be clearer, when we discuss the case of contextualism. The proximity of words may very well serve to delimit meanings further, to restrict what can be meant (or to broaden it). The very existence of figurative language, furthermore, ensures that a word will stand for other words. Take, for example, the Anglo-Saxon "sea-swan," which stands for 'ship', according to David Daiches (1960). This is clearly a figurative case where a level of metaphor is being used, this time, in a fairly restrictive way (in many other cases the meanings of metaphors cannot be easily circumscribed). This may have become a dead metaphor but it started as a metaphor.

2 Poetic language versus prose

As Genette (1995: 240–241) says, the prosaic utterance aims at "mimetic expressiveness," while the poetic utterance, by contrast, is characterized by higher autonomy, less related to its content and, therefore, "less transparent and more perceptible as an object." Needless to say, then, that for authors like Jakobson, "poetic self-referentiality therefore further supports the important difference between poetic language and prosaic language use: poetry's independence of practical language function" (Kraxenberger 2014: 12), even if at times the poetic function is subordinated to other language functions.

One of the hallmarks of poetic discourse is that, like all fictional discourse, it bears no guarantee that reference should be interpreted (fixed) according to the rules of ordinary discourse. In ordinary discourse, the name "John" is used only if both the speaker and the hearer can fix the reference of the name by adopting a rule of use according to which in a certain context C, the name "X" is used (should be used) in order to refer to X. In other words, the speaker and the hearer or hearers have in the past heard the name used in order to refer to x and, even if they did not witness

the event of giving the name "X" to X, they assume that through a referential chain, language users show deference to such an initial use by assuming that it took place (McDowell 1998). Every language user who used the name "X" to refer to X shows deference to uses by other speakers that are causally linked, through a chain of other users, to the original event in which participants having the appropriate status and appropriate conditions established a rule of use according to which the name "X" is associated with X. These are standard conditions for uses of names within circles of friends and relatives. But fictional names and uses of names in poems are beyond such rules. First of all, the presuppositions for the use of proper names need not be satisfied, since the hearer in hearing the name "X" need not know the referent that is associated with "X." Speaker's meaning, in other words, becomes sufficiently detached from hearer's or reader's meaning. The hearer/reader only needs to know that, when she hears/reads the name "X," there is an X the speaker is referring to, but does not know which X. Of course, after reading a poem, literary critics may be busy establishing referents for such uses and the informed hearer (or audience) may become aware that "X" was used to refer to X, knowing which referent was associated with "X." However, in many cases a name may be used in a fictional way, not to refer to anybody in particular, but to refer a particular poetic creation. This is more or less what happens in the long poem by Leopardi entitled "A Silvia." "Silvia" actually refers to Teresa, but even Teresa need not constitute the referent of the name, since Teresa is both described and transfigured. There is (in the idea associated with this name) a mixture of qualities that are real and the result of invention. Soon the event of her death is transformed into a general reason for complaining about destiny. In poems, even innocent words like "I" and "You" need different rules for interpretation. "You" need not refer to the addressee of the poem, but may refer to a person with whom the poet has an imaginary, implicit dialogue (thus, "you" may be used to designate a character of the poem). The reader of the poem is in the position of someone who is witnessing a conversation and learns all there is to learn about the speakers through such a conversation. (This is more or less what is described by Goffman 1981 in his analysis of radio talk, with the difference that the people addressed by the speaker in radio talk are real, while the ratified addressee of a poem may not be alive at all or real; and sometimes it also happens that the addressee shifts continuously between the people present at the talk and those who listen through the radio.) The speaker in the poem (the lyrical "I") need not coincide with the person of the poet. Some imaginary qualities may be assigned to her or him as well. As a person who transmits some wisdom to the world, the "I" is a fictional character that acquires some of the features of universality which in general make a poem great. Thus, readers are encouraged to forget that the poem originated from this particular author. A poem is great if some universal audience is moved by it; if, despite all differences in culture and values, all readers are able to appreciate it and

find a resonance between their soul and the poem, the message is really universal. Although the poet may be male, he may represent the "I" of the poem as "female." In other words, the "I" refers to some fictional person (morphology in languages like Italian may be an indication of this intended transformation whose purpose is to render the "I" more fictional than it would otherwise be). The deictic use of pronominals, for obvious reasons, cannot be really successful in the context of a poem, because the poem is normally removed from a situation of discourse which is presupposed by both the speaker and the hearer (Waugh 1980). They do not share a space or a time, and thus there is no point in demonstrating a certain object by the use of a demonstrative like "That man" (here actually a complex demonstrative use). Of course, the poet can make an effort to construct a shared context, in which case uses of demonstrative can be legitimized. The referents, however, are only evoked through such demonstrative uses, they are not really referred to.

There is one type of ordinary discourse that resembles the poetic one. When a teacher writes a sentence on the blackboard with the purpose of illustrating a grammatical rule, the hearers involved (the participants) know well that they should not look for referents in seeing names used under these circumstances. "Mary" in such contexts becomes inert, in that it does not trigger a search for the referent, because the students know well that the teacher did not have a referent in mind (Capone 2020a). These are cases of sentences that do not raise to the status of assertions. The illocutionary act is to explain a grammatical rule by demonstrating the way the rule produces sentences/examples. This is a case in which the illocutionary point is not associated with the use of a sentence, but with the use of a number of sentences. It is a language game, if we want to use terminology by Wittgenstein. In such a language game, the rules for names may be different from those of ordinary discourse. Sometimes the names are merely invented, but such uses must coexist with uses of names that follow the normal use. Faced with a sentence like "Mary likes Aristotle," "Mary" need not trigger a search for the referent, while "Aristotle" does and still refers to the well-known Greek philosopher. A mixed language game may occur in poems as well. Some referents are imaginary, while others are real enough.

I raised the issue whether verses are a form of assertion. In the case of the linguistic examples on the blackboard, the sentences never surge to the status of assertion, presumably because the names do not trigger a search for the referent. They are only linguistic examples, used to illustrate a certain point of grammar. But what about sentences in poems, that is verses? Are they assertions or not? That may very well depend on how much information we have. Certain names may work like proper names, others do not. Certain verses are factual, others are not. In a poem like "Elegy written in a country churchyard," by Thomas Gray, some verses refer to real historical facts and battles, transfigured though they are, given that the point of the poem is to draw a moral lesson from those facts.

Some village-Hampden, that with dauntless breast
    The little tyrant of his fields withstood;
Some mute inglorious Milton here may rest,
    Some Cromwell guiltless of his country's blood.

Th'applause of list'ning senates to command,
    The threats of pain and ruin to despise,
To scatter plenty o'er a smiling land,
    And read their hist'ry in a nation's eyes,

Their lot forbade: nor circumscrib'd alone
    Their growing virtues, but their crimes confin'd;
Forbade to wade through slaughter to a throne,
    And shut the gates of mercy on mankind.

A poem is not a piece of discourse where we can use fixed rules for its interpretation, but stanza by stanza, we know where we are and how to make sense of the verses. Contextual clues come to our aid in understanding whether a verse is factual and can amount to an assertion. What is interesting about the verses above is that clues tell us when we are dealing with the assertoric function, but other clues also tell us how to modulate the assertion in an ironic way ("Some Cromwell guiltless of his country's blood").

Language should be flexible enough to allow these mixed games or pragmemes called "poems"; in other words, it must make room for the poetic function, but must also allow us to distinguish it from other functions (in the discourse above the historian seems to prevail over the poet). The poetic function requires structural elements that exist even in non-poetic discourse. However, in such cases daily discourse is so different from normal uses of language that its structural elements can be said to have been borrowed from the poetic function of language.

3 Contextualized language uses

We all recognize that human languages require several levels of contextualism for the interpretation of their uses (as we have seen in the case above of the "Elegy" by Gray). Pronominals normally require to be contextualized, for their interpretation, either through anaphora (grammatical and textual anaphora) or through some demonstrative gestures that point to the reference. Conversational implicatures, furthermore, can be heavily contextualized, as they require a certain degree of knowledge of the context so that we can have access to speakers' intentions. However, there is the theoretical possibility that we can use language explicitly in order to project unequivocal intentions. Admittedly, these cases are rare, but they exist.

Normally, contextualization allows us to save time (eminent people like Horn have spoken of the speaker's economy), to be indirect in our requests and statements (thus, escaping responsibility), allows us to rescue infelicitous or extravagant uses (explicatures), allows us to get rid of messages that seem to be blatantly false or logically absurd (explicatures), allow us to settle on the intentions of the law-makers in interpreting the law (explicatures), etc. The case of poetry is quite paradoxical. On the one hand, we need heavy doses of contextualism to make sense of verses that otherwise would be cryptic, too compressed, expressed through sloppy syntax; on the other hand, poetry aims at universality. The beauty of a poetic verse is that it can strike a chord in the hearts of all people belonging to all cultures. Poetry, to some extent, escapes the boundaries of cultures. Why are Montale or Coleridge great? They are great because they can address universal themes and express them through verses that are memorable and that strike the hearts of the readers.

Which are the elements that require heavy contextualization is a poem? Certainly metaphors, especially the non-standardized ones (those metaphoric uses that have not accrued to the langue). As an example of non-standardized metaphor, I usually provide students with the following example:

(1)   Mary is the oceanic wave that expands and expands and caresses all of us with her velvet voice.

Of course, here we have several levels of metaphoric meanings as some of these levels are embedded in a level further up on the plane of interpretation. When we have complex metaphors like these, we must start interpretation work within the lower levels and then reach the superior level or levels (a kind of compositionality of explicature reconstruction). The general point I would like to make is that metaphors like these have no guarantee that they will be interpreted in standard ways; each of the readers has to bring his personal story in the interpretation of these multiple metaphors. The resulting interpretations are always different – but of course, they can be compared and, at the end, we may opt for a synthesis of all these interpretations available. Metaphors always require what Kecskes (2013a, 2013b) calls the egocentric dimension of interpretation.

Consider the following stanza from Montale's "The lemon trees":

> Vedi, in questi silenzi in cui le cose
> s'abbandonano e sembrano vicine
> a tradire il loro ultimo segreto,
> talora ci si aspetta
> di scoprire uno sbaglio di Natura,
> il punto morto del mondo, l'anello che non tiene,
> il filo da disbrogliare che finalmente ci metta
> nel mezzo di una verità.

Lo sguardo fruga d'intorno,
la mente indaga accorda disunisce
nel profumo che dilaga
quando il giorno piú languisce.
Sono i silenzi in cui si vede
in ogni ombra umana che si allontana
qualche disturbata Divinità.

('You realize that in silences
things yield and almost betray
their ultimate secrets.
At times, one half expects
to discover an error in Nature,
the still point of reality,
the missing link that will not hold,
the thread we cannot untangle
in order to get at the truth.
You look around. Your mind seeks,
makes harmonies, falls apart
in the perfume, expands
when the day wearies away.
There are silences in which one watches
in every fading human shadow
something divine let go.')
https://poets.org/poem/lemon-trees

The translation is clearly not literal and, thus, it does not help much. However, it is certain that when we reach *uno sbaglio di Natura, il punto morto del mondo, l'anello che non tiene, il filo da disbrogliare*, we are not sure what the poet is referring to. Which is the mistake made by Nature? Is it the fact that people, regardless of the fact that they live in a wonderful place like that exemplified by the lemon trees, die in the end? The expression *Il punto morto del mondo* can clarify the rest of poem a bit if it refers to a point of the world that has died. *L'anello che non tiene* ('the ring that does not hold') may be an allusion to life which is imperfect because of death (it is as if we got stuck to life through a ring [or chain] that keeps us connected with something permanent such as the body). This may be the context that allows us to interpret the verses *sono i silenzi in cui si vede in ogni ombra umana che si allontana qualche disturbata divinità.* The human souls that depart may be those of the dead. *Qualche disturbata divinità* may refer to God's attitude. He is merely disturbed by such departures. He does not fix this problem. Now, I do not want to say that this is the only possible or the best interpretation of these lines, but only that they require heavy doses of contextualization. Sometimes we should contextualize a poem through the poet's life and his manuscripts (this is what is done with Leopardi) or the historical

context, sometimes we should contextualize certain lines in the light of literary citations. I will say more on literary citations later.

4 Literary citations

Literary citations create a level of intertextuality. More than one voice merge in making text and in spreading a message. The use of multiple voices creates a dimension of *universality* – it is not the voice of the author but that of humanity that speaks; and the readers are asked to decipher the text intended as a stratification of voices. Readers are more or less in the role of archaeologists, who to dig into the text and see how the text lives in different ages, comparing the context of events occurring now and the context of past events (or the contexts of the past). This interplay of contexts, texts and sedimentations creates an effect of multiple comments. Each text and context comments on the other texts and takes us one stage further in the understanding of the poem. Quotation marks are normally missing in poems, as they do in oral conversations. They must be reconstructed and the best way to do so is to start from background knowledge (pragmatics plays a pervasive role in this as stated by Capone 2013b). If we know that a text belongs to a prior poem, then we are entitled to add inverted commas and obtain the effect of quotation (quotation normally introduces opacity, as one is not free to replace a word with a synonym, when inverted commas are added, but it is unclear that this is applicable to the poetic text when inverted commas are missing). This procedure, as can be easily seen, is thoroughly pragmatic. Speaker intentions prevail and the readers must reconstruct those intentions with the best tools they have available – fragments of memories of past poems. Of course, it remains to be said that such techniques presuppose different effects on readers, as readers range from those who can easily have mnemonic access to the texts cited (and compare them with the citing texts), to those who are not experts on poetry and fail to see the citations and to make comparisons. The comparison usually recognizes the meaning of the cited text in the context of the poem (as well as the cultural and historical context). Consider the following quotation from Alda Merini:

> Ho conosciuto Gerico,
> ho avuto anch'io la mia Palestina,
> le mura del manicomio
> erano le mura di Gerico
> e una pozza di acqua infettata
> ci ha battezzati tutti.

('I have known Jericho,
I have had my Palestine,
The walls of the madhouse,
they were Jericho's walls
and a pool of infected water
baptized us all.')

E con l'acqua di pozzanghere infette
('and with the water of infected pools')
ci lavammo di fretta le mani,
('we washed our hands in a hurry')
che assai erano sporche
('which were very dirty')
tra la polvere e le insopportabili mosche,
('between the dust and the unbearable flies')
ti diedi un battesimo d'acquasanta
('I gave you a baptism of holy water')
(Capone 2020c from "Quando le stelle si staccano dal cielo")

The latter poem clearly quotes the former. But the quotation is not literal. In fact, it is split into two verses. Furthermore, an inanimate object is the subject of the cited text in Merini's poem, while an animate object is the subject of the quoting text. The contexts are also different. Merini's poem is about the madhouse, in which the poetess spent much of her life. The infected water probably refers to the fact that people considered the mental ill infective. The latter poem is not about the madhouse. The poet represents the desire for cleanliness and purification; this cannot be achieved by using the infected water, which stands for something like the original sin. It is only through the baptism that this desire can be filled. Then, when the author says that, with that water, he gave the lover a baptism of holy water, he somehow refers to a process of purification. The water is purified through the baptism. And the addressee is purified through baptism. When Alda Merini uses the words "baptized us all," she may even refer to a process of initiation, she becomes a person who is mentally ill among people who are mentally ill. Thus, the cited text and the citing texts may have very different interpretations – the former text may present a figurative language which is missing in the citing text. The citing text, somehow, comments on the cited text. It is a liberation poem and its emancipatory effect seems to pervade the condition described in the former text. After all, Christ came to help and rescue the poor. Of course, more can be said about these mirroring effects, but, surely, they ought to be studied in connection with many texts and a full paper ought to derive from these considerations one day.

The issue of quotation takes us to the issue of polyphony. While linguists usually work with a notion of intention (or intentions) which is linked to the individual, since Volosinov (1986), certain linguists have been busy showing that the text has a

polyphonic structure and that speakers are not solely responsible for it. Hearers take responsibility as well, as they can correct, modify, query, object. Quotations and indirect reports (see Capone 2016, 2020b) may have appeared to some to be the best way to prove that this polyphony issue exists. Of course, the text (especially the poetic one) must be seen as a kind of sedimentary rock, to which different voices have contributed. Each voice lives independently of one another. Yet, allusions to previous texts may provide a context of interpretation. The voice of the author is one among many and encapsulates other voices explicitly and implicitly. Some poets take pleasure in quoting without using quotation marks, sure that readers will not come to the conclusion that they appropriated other poets' verses and that they will play the same game of polyphony. Sometimes they quote with quotation marks, without however citing the quoted poet, being sure that the readers will identify them. No poets quote explicitly by attributing verses to others.

The poetic text, however, certainly includes the voices of the hearers/readers who fill the lacunae or spaces voluntarily left by the authors when using cryptic language and an exaggerated degree of compression. As Eco (1976) used to say, texts, and in particular poetic texts, are "open." The intentions attributed to the speaker/poet may be in competition with those the speaker may have had. So, which count more?

5 Poetry and communication

It is one of the misconceptions about poetry that it has no place in ordinary communication (although Jakobson was aware that the poetic function could be subordinated to other functions). Poetic texts are to be studied or read silently, or at most they are made to be recited aloud among circles of people who are devoted to poetry or to be the objects of conferences, where they are cited and then dissected, so to say. At school, poetic texts are studied with the guidance of teachers, who are themselves guided by what literary critics have said about them. "Momigliano says …," "Pagliaro says," "Giacalone says," the teacher used to say, after learning by heart what these people said. This method of studying poems, although it shows deference to tradition and to what knowledgeable people have said about poetic texts, leaves little space for discussion and personal analysis. After all, following Umberto Eco, poetic texts should be considered *open* and disparate readers ought to be able to find different things in them, as they bring their egocentric experience to bear on the texts (see Kecskes 2013a on egocentrism and interpretation). In reading a poem, there is always a tension between the authorial intentions and what readers are able to see in it, given their personal experience. Personal experience surely is the first guidance to reading a poem. I said previously, for example, that the infected pools

in the poem "La fine del peccato" are used for the purpose of cleaning (in a non-literal way). My experience was determinant in adding a level of interpretation to the poem by Alda Merini and then to the poem "La fine del peccato." We can never be sure that the interpretations of various readers will have something in common, however, in discussing the poem, given different personal experiences, a deeper level of interpretation can be reached.

In any case, I want to set aside the persuasion that poems are there to be read aloud among groups of readers, whether classmates or readers who meet on a more voluntary basis. As we have said repeatedly, the poetic function may be subordinated to selling goods at the marketplace (see Capone 2018). In Sicily, especially in the past, vendors used to shout and invented stories to persuade their customers to buy their products. The poetic function (in particular, the use of rhythm, rhymes, alliteration, metaphors, hyperbolic language, etc.) in these cases is not autonomous but has to be seen in its auxiliary function: vendors who try to gather huge crowds of customers who listen to what they have to say and can be persuaded to buy goods. We have many of the formal markers of poetry: rhythm, rhymes, inversion, parallelism, contrast, metaphors, etc. These rudimentary poets have learned to make poetry through exposure to experience, certainly not through books or school training. This kind of language promotes inventiveness, as contrasted with the acquiescence by ordinary speakers to rules of use (leaving aside genial people like Shakespeare who invented a new language out of a very simple one). In poetic texts, we are certainly not the slaves of conventions and rules of use. Poets and their analogues in more practical areas of discourse want to deliver products that are new, not only in so far as they re-combine ordinary language uses, but also in so far as they create objects that did not exist previously.

Another case, where the poetic text works as a communicative event is within the context of courting. Lovers may well write poems and give them to each other as a sign of their love. Of course, they take the opportunity to talk about what is of great importance to them, they express their feelings and emotions. The emotive function is uppermost in such exchanges of poems. Unlike the poetic texts of the marketplace, where the focus was on attracting people and advertising, here the focus is on the self and on the other. The participants are mostly busy talking about their own emotions and the other as well is transfigured through emotions, rather than being merely described. Consider for example the following fragment from a poem taken from "Quando le stelle si staccano dal cielo."

E tu che ora mi guardi
('And you who are now watching me')
rannicchiata sul mio divano,
('lying crouched on my sofa')

in questo angolo di mondo che ormai è tuo,
('in this corner of the world which is now yours')
con aria interrogativa,
('with an interrogative expression')
per capire cosa ci riserva il futuro,
('to understand what the future has in store for us')
sappi che anche io sono stato intrappolato
('you should know that I too was entrapped')
nei tuoi occhi troppo chiari, troppo azzurri,
('in your eyes, which are too clear, too azure')
ove saltavano i pesci
('where the fish used to jump')
e giocavano i delfini
('and the dolphins played')
e la vita sembrava scivolare
('and life seemed to slide')
verso una meta sconosciuta.
('towards an unknown destiny').

The poet here has two intentions. Talking with his lover and talking with his readers. The readers are in the position of over-hearers (I would use the term over-readers, if it was familiar through the literature). The other-than-self is obviously transfigured. She is not described in realistic ways, but in ways that, though personal and emotive, give us a hint as to her real way of behaving. We may very well use the term *hyper-realistic* to allude to the fact that though the person is described in a subjective way and through a level of figurative meaning, the ultimate effect is that of offering readers a more faithful description of reality than the one we would otherwise obtain through ordinary prose.

Similar effects can be seen in the graffiti on the palaces' walls in Italy, where a lover can express his love for a girl by writing verses. Graffiti would presumably require an essay, but we cannot get into this issue. Songs can also be seen as popular forms of poetry, but in one case a singer/author reached the glory of the Nobel prize. Songs would also deserve another essay, as they can be recycled to express what a lover feels for a girl or boy, without explicitly saying that. This form of indirect communication should not be ignored. In this way, a lover can tell me that she loves me without directly saying that. It is enough to dedicate a song to me. And the text of the poem may say what the lover is not able to say, without actually saying it. Suppose you have been dedicated a poem/song like Marco Masini's "Nel mondo dei sogni."[4]

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4 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OZ0vKdZjqP8 (accessed 3 January 2023).

You would certainly start asking what purpose this dedication served, and then at one point you may find resemblances between the lyrical "I" and the person who dedicated you the song/poem. And at a later point you will find messages that are intended for you: apologies, expressive, declarations of love, etc.

6 Compression and pragmatics

Most of our readers would agree that the poetic text is one where the poet tries to say things with maximal economy. A poetic text, especially during the hermetic period in Italy, reached an unprecedented level of compression. Consider the following poem, entitled "Soldati" by Ungaretti (2016):

> Soldati ('Soldiers')
> Si sta come d'autunno
> sugli alberi
> le foglie.
> ('One stays like leaves
> On the trees
> In Autumn'.)

The experience of the war (World War I) is rendered through the metaphor of the Autumn leaves, which are about to drop by thousands and, at the same time, form a carpet on which we tread when we walk producing disturbing noises. The poem is extremely compressed, but we can reach its ultimate meaning through *decompression*, by using pragmatic means. Metaphors are the keys to interpretation, but this metaphoric level can only be triggered once certain clues are activated. In fact, if we were to omit the title "Soldiers," we would get stuck in choosing an interpretation based on the right metaphoric meaning. The poem might well acquire, this way, a more generic meaning, being a metaphor for the passing of time. Instead, in this poem, the impersonal use of the verb *si sta* ('one stays') seems to point to a physical state, as well as to a psychological one: one has the feeling of being in a very provisional state. The poem is also enriched by an implicit contrast. Whereas the leaves fall due to a natural course of events, the soldiers fall from the branches of the trees because of an unnatural cause. Another implicit contrast is that, while the leaves are one with the branch on which they sit, the soldiers can at most stay on the branch, they are not part of it, and, thus, are likely to fall off. Expanding a poem is a question of patience and time, as readers need to contextualize it, need to choose those words that could work as intended clues to determine and select interpretation (e.g., the title "Soldiers"), and they are like archaeologists who need to dig deeper and deeper: the more context they bring to the interpretation of the poem, the richer its

interpretation becomes. They need not only confine themselves to the boundaries of this single poem, by they must compare it with all other poems that show a connection with it, either because we know that the author read them or because of the presence of literary citations.

7 Poems as pragmemes

Since we were children, when asked by a teacher to learn and then recite a poem by heart, we had a precise feeling of engaging in a separate activity, which could be integrated to some extent in overall activities, such as the lesson. However, while the teacher was, overall, responsible for the lesson, the child was perceived to be responsible for learning the poem by heart and reciting it to the audience of the class. A proper act of performing (a performance) was what was being done. However related to the class activities, the performance "reciting a poem" was a different activity. Goffman's category of footing (Goffman 1981) comes to our aid. The child was clearly not the author of the message and was not the principal (the person responsible for the words and the thoughts expressed). The audience did not expect the child to communicate directly to them, although it could be accepted that the child was indirectly communicating to them. The boundaries between the different activities were also evident enough and some prefatory brackets could also be introduced to introduce the poem and the actor. The literary critic who discusses poetry (or a poem), may do so in a different context. He is not reciting, but quoting, and he is not only quoting, but he or she is also commenting on the poem, its cultural context, the poet's biography as a natural context for interpretation, literary genres, etc. The teacher who reads a poem to his class, is not necessarily reciting (or engaging in a performance), he is not necessarily quoting, but he is dissecting a poem, after reading it. He shows the poem as a prerequisite to literary dissection. The lover who writes a poem on the wall of a building (graffiti) may be the author and principal of his poem, although only those who witness the event know who the author and the principal are, while the remainder of the readers do not even know which girl is being addressed, why and by whom. We know that there is an author and a principal, who lives nearby, but we need not know who. This looks like the situation of universal poetry – poetry that escapes the boundaries of time, place, and purpose. Perhaps after some years, the author may forget that he authored this poem on the wall and starts interpreting it like any other reader, without being able to bring in sufficient context to see what is contingent (especially the situation that gave rise to it). While a pragmeme (Allan et al. 2017; Capone 2005; Mey 2001) is a situated language use, a poem looks like a message in the bottle. We open the bottle and start interpreting it, as we can. The situation which initially situated it has been lost, but now

the message is situated in the context of the readers. Universal poetry is the kind of poetry which still makes sense when detached from the situation in which it was originated and still is a pragmeme in so far as the readers try to reconstruct the speaker's intentions, albeit not on the basis of the original context, but on the basis of what they know about their world. It is as if the author made an effort to insulate the poem from his own context, knowing that in years to come, this could never be reconstructed, and imagining what direction the interpretation could take without access to that context. This is not imagining what the future context can be like, given that the future is unpredictable and history could take many directions; this is like imagining what the poem would be like without having any context in mind.

8 On the universality of poetry

We often say that the best poems have a universal appeal. Surely, everyone agrees that when we read Dante, Shakespeare, Leopardi, Carducci, Keats, Coleridge, Montale, etc., we go through experiences that are very pleasurable and memorable. Such poems and verses exercise a lot of influence on us readers, they get stuck in our memories, and those words have greater chances to survive than their competitors. Poets are perhaps the only people who can have a powerful influence on language and its propagation. We agree that the best poems have a universal appeal, but can we really say what it consists of, how that appeal is constructed? It seems that at the heart of the best poems is the attempt by their authors to use the best possible means of expression for what they want to say. Thus, given that a certain notion is expressible through expressions a, b, c, d, the author will select the expression that will have a greater impact on the reader, that has greater chances to be remembered by heart, the one which has more expressive potential (if a is chosen, than a should express more than b, c or d). Figurative language plays an important role, because notions that are expressed through suitable felicitous images are more likely to attract attention and to be remembered. In the same way as poems can use a figurative plane, advertisements can make leverage on it to convey notions in a felicitous way, that is by attracting attention, making sure they are remembered, and establishing connections between one notion and another. Consider the advertisements on Daikin air conditioners, where there is a focus on leisure time and butterflies. The air produced by these conditioners is so pure that butterflies can thrive in it; thus, TV viewers are invited to try Daikin conditioners. The success of the commercial is proportional to the success of the images used. Such images attract attention, can no longer be wiped out of one's memory and establish connections with other notions (e.g., pure air).

Consider the end of the poem "Vicolo" by Quasimodo:

> Vicolo: una croce di case
> che si chiamano piano,
> e non sanno ch' è paura
> di restare sole nel buio.

> ('This alley: a cross of houses
> That call one another softly
> And they do not know that it is fear
> To stay alone in the darkness'; my translation.)

When the author utters "a cross of houses," we may, on the one hand, evoke the urban landscapes of certain parts of old cities, with intersecting and small alleys; on the other hand, we may have access to the concept "cross" and its associated connections with sorrow, weeping, despair, but also salvation; the fear of remaining alone in the darkness is compensated by the solace which this Christian concept brings with it. Figurative language adds deeper interpretation levels.

Going back to the presumed universality of poetry's appeal, this has to do with form, but also with content. To say that form is everything in a poem is like wanting to propose that we can construct beautiful lines made out of rhythmic structures dispensing with meaning structures altogether. The problem for the poet is not only how to invent beautiful rhythms and rhymes, but to give content an expressive shape. Poems remain impressed, because the contents are universal and the words used to express them are the best that anyone at all could use to express those contents, making their impact deep and making sure that they are remembered for generations. The right image of the poet is that of a person who struggles with form and content and must find the most suitable form to express a certain content. He is someone who searches for the best possible words, given the content s/he wants to express. Of course, the context could not exist without the form, but surely the poet has the freedom to construct a poem in which combinations of words create a unique effect, in which words have influence on what follows and meanings can be enriched further in a contextual way. The poet has conventional and unconventional resources. Very often his structures are elliptical, cryptic, and they have to be completed through integration with other words that co-occur in the poem. While the resources a poet inherits from convention are limited, the resources s/he can use by adopting pragmatic principles are infinite. Modulations a la Recanati (2004) find in poetry the best domain for their applications. In his poem "Vento a Tindari," when Quasimodo says *Amaro pane a rompere* ('bitter bread to break'), he is certainly not saying that bread is hard to break, that the task of eating is difficult and hard, but he is presumably referring to the existential condition of (us) human beings, who have to

suffer to bring home some food. Now the metonymic broadening of "bread" does not have the effect of providing a certain and fixed referent for bread; for bread, for the poet and his readers, can mean anything that is essential to human life, from food to spiritual needs. There may be a latitude in the broadening of the meaning of this word, which may be induced by the word "bitter" and by the word *rompere*. Now, the fact that a word may have some latitude, in interpretation, and one that is intended by the author, is important in making a poem universal, because it will appeal to a greater number of people. Universality also consists in the resonance between the verse and the readers. A universal verse is one that is touching, but why is it touching? Presumably because the condition it addresses is one that is experienced by most, perhaps all people. The poem "Vento a Tindari" after a central part dealing with the poet's exile and existential anguish, ends with the poet's friends waking him up from his meditations, scared that he might fall down the slope into the sea. The final verses are:

> E io fingo timore a chi non sa ('And I dissimulate fear to those who do not know')
> che vento profondo mi ha cercato ('What a deep wind has searched me').

Here the poet establishes a contrast between the fear he was supposed to have (being so close to the slope, he could be afraid of falling down the slope) and the state of anxiety brought about by the previous meditations. Such meditations are summed up by the thought/presupposition that a deep wind has searched him. While Shelley used the image of the wind for the prophetic message of the poet and its transmission and propagation, here for Quasimodo, the deep wind (as clarified with the collocation with "deep") is the wind of introspection. The wind also has the ability to push Quasimodo down the slope, either physically or through the intervention of some psychic state. I prefer the latter interpretation. As he wakes up from his mediations, the poet understands that he was about to fall down the slope due to utmost depression. This verse in which the poet says *E io fingo timore a chi non sa/che vento profondo mi ha cercato* has a claim to universality, because it deals with an existential condition that many people experience (isolation, for example) but also because of the formal means used which have a deep resonance on our minds.

As Jakobson says, a poem is always embedded in certain conventions, in certain historical contexts, and although it cannot often make use of the situational context to establish reference, its own structure becomes the context of interpretation (rhymes, for example, have the function of focusing on parallels or contrasts of meaning). However, all those who have really appreciated poetry, notice that there must be a reason why certain authors have a universal appeal. What is their greatness made out of? We certainly ought to distinguish between rhetoric and poetry. Rhetoric also has the ambition of providing rules for choosing words that can

be best have an argumentative impact on hearers. However, its purpose is related to contingent matters. Truth is not important for rhetoric. Truth in poetry does not amount to being faithful to well-known facts that are external. What is external matters relatively. The facts a poem must be true of are internal states of mind that respond to universal situations. The readers may recognize in the poets' solutions to their puzzles their own responses and this phenomenon, we may call "reverberations." What matters most for linguists is that in presumed cases of poems that claim to universality, forms are carefully selected so as to best represent the human condition they speak of. It is this perfect match between form and contents that characterizes all excellent poetry.

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