

The Poetic as an Aesthetic Category

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Abstract :: Poems are not the only things we sometimes call poetic. We experience as poetic also prose passages, as well as films, music, visual art, and even occurrences in daily life. But what is it exactly for something to be poetic in this wider sense? Discussion of the poetic in this sense are virtually nonexistent in the extant analytic literature. The aim of this paper is to get a start on trying to come to grips with this phenomenon – the poetic as an aesthetic category that outruns poetry as an art form. It proposes an initial sketch of an account in terms of the fittingness of certain affective reactions to artworks and other things, reactions featuring notably elements of tenderness and elevation.

1. Introduction: Two Sense of “Poetry”

The question

(Q) What is poetry?

is among the perennial questions of aesthetics, and the first on the agenda of the philosophy of poetry. Aristotle opens his *Poetics* with it, as does Peter Lamarque his recent “What Is the Philosophy of Poetry?” (Lamarque 2017). The question is typically heard as concerned with the demarcation of poetry as an art form. It is natural to think of the poem as a type of artwork, and the question is what separates this type from others. In this form, Q comes down to this:

(Q1) What makes something a *poem*?

But this is not the *only* way to hear Q. In his youthful article “What Is Poetry?,” J. S. Mill wrote:

That, however, the word *poetry* does import something quite peculiar in its nature, something which may exist in what is called prose as well as in verse, something which does not even require the instrument of words, but can speak through those other audible symbols called musical sounds, and even through the visible ones, which are the language of sculpture, painting, and architecture; all this, as we believe, is and must be felt, though perhaps indistinctly, by all upon whom poetry in any of its shapes produces any impression beyond that of tickling the ear. To the mind, poetry is either nothing, or it is the better part of all art whatever, and of real life too... (Mill 1833: 60)

Mill appears to be concerned with the phenomenon of *the poetic*, as an aesthetic category that outruns the poem and may be found in a variety of art forms and even daily life. The noun that corresponds to the adjective 'poetic' is of course 'poetry,' and so Mill hears Q as

(Q2) What makes something *poetic*?

One may reasonably expect some intimate connection between what makes something a poem and what makes something poetic. Still, Q1 and Q2 are conceptually distinct questions: what makes something a poem and what makes something poetic in the sense Mill has in mind is presumably not the same thing. Moreover, as Mill notes, many things are poetic which are not poems; and conversely, in the sense in which music and painting can be poetic, many poems are not poetic – bad poems, certainly, but also many very good poems, which are good because they excel along some other aesthetic dimension.

The noun 'poetry,' then, has two quite distinct meanings: one names a genre of artistic production, *the poem*; the other, a quality that some objects or events exhibit, *the poetic*. To keep track of this distinction, I will use 'poetry₁' for the former and 'poetry₂' for the latter. By and large, discussions of Q in the philosophy of literature have focused on the former. Three recent opinionated overviews of the philosophy of poetry, each thoughtful and engaging in its own way, make no mention of the poetic in this sense: Karen Simecek's (2019) "New Directions for the Philosophy of Poetry," Lamarque's (2017) "What Is the Philosophy of Poetry?," and John Gibson's (2015) "The Place of Poetry in Contemporary Aesthetics." The same is true of earlier pieces in this genre, including the most brilliant (e.g., Neill 2003, Ribeiro 2009). As a consequence of this neglect, our understanding of the nature of the poetic remains essentially at a pre-theoretic, intuitive level. It is this paper's aim to try to come to grips with *the poetic* as an aesthetic category that potentially outruns poetry as an artform.

Why should we bother with this notion of the poetic? There are several reasons. First, the poetic in this sense has fascinated many poets, as we will see in the next section. Secondly, it is a concept used with some consistency by scholars of literature and art (see, e.g., Eshel 2020 for a recent example). Just as an important part of the mandate of the philosopher of science is to elucidate and help precisify notions central to the work of

working scientists, it is an important part of the mandate of the philosopher of art to elucidate and help precisify notions central to the work of art historians and art critics. But thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, the poetic, as an aesthetic category intimately connected to but distinct from poetry₁, is arguably one of the aesthetic categories most central to our everyday aesthetic engagement with the world. To many, Mill is right when he says that the poetic “is the better part of all art whatever, and of real life too.” It would be useful to start a discussion of what this esthetic category might actually amount to.

2. The Poem and the Poetic: Three Possible Approaches

Before starting, though, it might be worthwhile to get clear on the *possible* dependence relations between the poem and the poetic. For several *types* of conceptual connection may be envisaged between poetry₁ and poetry₂ (the poem and the poetic).

It is natural, I think, to suspect that the concept of the poetic is somehow derivative upon the concept of a poem. In its most generic form, the idea would be that something is poetic if it relates in the right way to what happens in poems. Included in this outlook is the thought that there is some independent way for us to grasp what makes something a poem – independent, that is, of our grasp of what makes something poetic. We may capture this outlook, in its most generic form, through the following conjunction of theses:

(P1) For any x , x is a poem iff x is φ &

(P2) There is a relation R , such that for any x , x is poetic iff x bears R to poems,

where φ is a condition the meeting of which makes something a poem and R is whatever relation something must bear to poems to qualify as poetic. An extremely simplistic version of P1 & P2 might be: x is poetic just if x *resembles* a poem (here R = resemblance) and x is a poem just if x is set in verse (i.e., φ = being set in verse). More sophisticated versions of P1 & P2 would involve more nuanced accounts of what makes something a poem and how something must relate to poems to qualify as poetic (i.e., more sophisticated accounts of φ and R).

As natural as this approach may be, one could also propose – perfectly coherently, and quite poetically! – that the world is full of poetry₂, and that the task of poetry₁ is to capture and reproduce poetry₂ in language. Listen to Emerson:

For poetry was all written before time was, and whenever we are so finely organized that we can penetrate into that region where the air is music, we hear those primal warblings, and attempt to write them down, but we lose ever and anon a word, or a verse, and

substitute something of our own, and thus miswrite the poem. The men of more delicate ear write down these cadences more faithfully, and these transcripts, though imperfect, become the songs of the nations. (Emerson 1844: 219)

In a similar vein, and seven years earlier, Victor Hugo writes in the introduction to his poetry collection *Les voix intérieures* (“The inner voices”) that poetry₁ is “the intimate echo and the secret incantation [*chant*] that responds in us to the incantation that is outside of us” (1837: 3). In this approach, our understanding of the poem is derivative upon our understanding of the poetic. The generic formulation might be:

(P3) For any x , x is poetic iff x is ψ &

(P4) There is a relation R^* , such that for any x , x is a poem iff x bears R^* to the poetic,

where ψ and R^* play theoretically parallel roles to those of φ and R above.

A third possibility is that neither the poem nor the poetic enjoys conceptual primacy over the other. This comes in two varieties. In one, each notion is graspable independently of the other. Generically:

(P1) For any x , x is a poem iff x is φ &

(P3) For any x , x is poetic iff x is ψ ,

where φ and ψ are logically independent conditions. The other option is that the poem and the poetic are somehow conceptually *inter*-dependent, with neither being intelligible in separation from the other. Generically:

(P2) There is a relation R , such that for any x , x is poetic iff x bears R to poems &

(P4) There is a relation R^* , such that for any x , x is a poem iff x bears R^* to the poetic.

Opponents will say this is circular; proponents will say it presents a framework where two notions are co-understood as part of a single conceptual package deal.

We may call the conjunction of P1 & P2 the “poem-first approach,” the conjunction of P3 & P4 “poeticness-first,” and consider the two other options versions of a “no-priority view.” The poem-first view may seem most plausible *antedecently*, but what I will argue is that there is actually an independent way to home in on the poetic – independent, that is, of our understanding of the poem as an artform.

3. The Poetic: Some Methodological Preliminaries

It is hard to deny, of course, that there exists *a* use of the adjective ‘poetic’ that *just* means something like “to do with poetry₁.” It is this sense of ‘poetic’ that we use, for instance, when we say that there is greater poetic skill in Homer than in Hesiod, or that “The Waste Land” ushered in a new poetic style.¹ This use of ‘poetic’ is *immediately* parasitic, if you will, on the notion of a poem. But this use of ‘poetic’ by definition does not apply to novels, sculptures, and other works of art.

There is also a related use of ‘poetic’ in which we call a piece of writing poetic when it exemplifies a certain type of aesthetic excellence *qua writing*, and in particular when the kind of aesthetic excellence it exemplifies is the kind exemplified most characteristically in poems. When Russell or Quine uses simile or alliteration, entirely gratuitously for philosophical purposes but very compellingly otherwise, we are moved to call their writing poetic. We do so, I surmise, because in these instances we encounter creativity in the use of language reminiscent of the poet’s distinctive skill. This sense of ‘poetic’ does extend beyond the sphere of poetry₁, since it can show up even in non-fiction writing; but, being as it is tied to writing *qua writing*, it does *not* extend to music, the visual arts, or daily life.

And yet there is certainly *a* use of the adjective ‘poetic’ that does apply this widely. This is the sense of ‘poetic’ that Mill and Emerson have in mind, and which may in principle characterize an occurrence from virtually any artistic genre and beyond. In Natsume Sōseki’s 1906 novel *Kusamakura*, the poetic even becomes an attribute of a *life*, as the narrator ardently seeks a *poetic way of living*. My question is what the poetic in this wider sense amounts to.²

What exactly are we saying, then, when we say that a prose passage, a scene from a film, or a painting – in short, something other than a poem – is “poetic”? And how should we go about addressing this question?

At one level, the right method need not be very different from that we use elsewhere in philosophy. We start with a bank of unquestionable instances of F and ask what they all have in common that non-Fs lack. In other words, we start with an uncontroversial core fragment of the *extension* of “F” and try to work our way to a hypothesis about the *intension* of “F” that is “extensionally adequate” (i.e., returns intuitive results in specific cases).

At the same time, the word ‘poetic,’ even when used in this wider sense that encompasses the non-linguistic, is used in such a textured and varied way, and mingles the descriptive and the normative so subtly, that there is little hope this standard method will yield unequivocal results (of the sort it does for ‘bachelor’). The phenomenon itself seems to be too ephemeral and multifaceted to invite a single account that covers all and only its instances. We have to accept from the outset that there is probably a plurality of (partially overlapping?) aesthetic properties that ‘the poetic’ may legitimately be used to pick out. Philosophers like clear and distinct ideas – clear in that their intrinsic nature is

transparent, distinct in that their extrinsic difference from other ideas is manifest. But the idea of the poetic may simply refuse to conform: it may involve unclarity and indistinctness that a systematic theory cannot legislate away.

In such circumstances, I think it is more judicious for an inquiry into the poetic to start not with an ambition to nail down the one true nature of the poetic, but rather with the hope of delineating at least one useful notion of the poetic, picking out at least one important phenomenon in the area. This would allow us to devise a specific concept of the poetic which *is* clear and distinct; which concept might then serve as substitute, in some contexts, for our vaguer and more ephemeral concept of the poetic. Here the project is not so much one of pure conceptual analysis – nor of pure conceptual engineering – but of a mixture that yields a concept *continuous* with our highly valuable though unclear and indistinct folk concept of the poetic, but potentially more useful to aesthetic inquiry in virtue of being clear and distinct.

With this in mind, what I propose to do is to discuss three items which (i) are not poems but (ii) strike me as clearly poetic – that is, three items that constitute poetry₂ but not poetry₁ – and try to articulate, on the basis of this discussion, a tentative account of one salient aesthetic property ‘the poetic’ picks out. Now, three is not very much, and so our account can only be tentative. A more substantial inquiry would consider more systematically dozens of examples from myriad genres and disciplines. What we can hope to accomplish here is much more limited, but may yet serve, first, to *model* the type of inquiry needed, and second, to *start the discussion* on the phenomenon of the poetic in analytic aesthetics.

4. Three Examples

Fernando Pessoa was first and foremost a poet, but tried his hand in many genres of writing (including philosophy!). The most unusual, perhaps, is a planned semi-imaginary “factless autobiography,” to be titled *Livro do Desassossego* (“*Book of Disquiet*”): a collation of fragments capturing, and creating, a certain mood reflective of a highly original approach to life and reality, which many subsequent readers have found soothing in its embrace of the pointlessness of everything. Pessoa published in his lifetime about a dozen of these fragments, but upon his death another 450-odd were found in a trunk in his room, marked “L. do D.” (for *Livro do Desassossego*). The fragments are all in prose, and range from one line to 3-4 pages, with a typical fragment running about four paragraphs long. Many are extremely poetic. For instance:

The buyers of useless things are wiser than commonly supposed – they buy little dreams. They become children in the act of acquisition. When people with money succumb to the charms of those useless little objects, they possess them with the joy of a child gathering sea shells on the beach – the image that best expresses the child’s happiness. He gathers shells on the beach! No two are ever alike for a child. He falls asleep with the two prettiest ones in his hand, and when they’re lost or taken from him . . . he weeps like a God robbed of a just-created universe. (Pessoa 1982: 252)

I hope you too experience this passage as poetic. Several elements seem to contribute to its poetry². There is the intricate inventiveness of the basic thought: my own instinct is a harsh anti-consumerist judgment of these bourgeois “buyers of useless things” – not Pessoa’s tender, accepting, beauty-excavating sensibility. Then there is the powerful imagery Pessoa uses to breathe life into his thought, in particular the tender image of the innocent child sleeping with beloved sea shells in his hand in a state of un-self-conscious completeness. And there is the uplifting analogy between the trivial acquisitions of the shell-collecting child and the universe-creating God in a state of tumult, which gives moment to the entire passage.

These are superficial remarks, and much more could be added to them. But in the interest of expediency let us move to *The Red Balloon*, a 1956 French film written and directed by Albert Lamorisse that runs about 35 minutes long. It opens with a schoolboy who finds a bright red balloon on the way to school. About 9 minutes into the film, we realize that the balloon has agency and awareness, when a maid releases it out the window, but the balloon, rather than floating off, returns to the boy’s window and goes back into the apartment. A friendship of sorts forms between the two, featuring playfulness and loyalty. Toward the film’s end, a group of envious bullies try to hurt the boy and his balloon. Eventually the balloon is hit by a rock, deflates, and pops under a bully’s boot. Whereupon, all over Paris, dozens of bright-colored balloons leave their owners and head toward the site of the crime, to coddle and console the boy. The film ends with the boy lifted by the balloons, which (“who”?) transport him over Paris’ characteristic gray roovescape, presumably to a better realm free of envy, aggression, and malice.



Figure 1. Closing Scene of *The Red Balloon*

Formally, the scene's poetic force lies in the contrast between the heavy grayness of 1950s Paris and the multicolored sparkle of the rising balloons. But the image is so powerful also because it embodies the thought of a parallel reality, into which fantasy transports the boy, where no earthly aggression or malice could hurt him. Here too an innocent child is invoked, and moreover a child soul-aching in the aftermath of losing a playful and loyal friend to a brutish mass of aggressors. This background induces a tenderness in us against the background of which the child's literal uplifting is so effective.

Finally, let us consider poetry₂ as it shows up even in motionless visual art. Consider Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*:

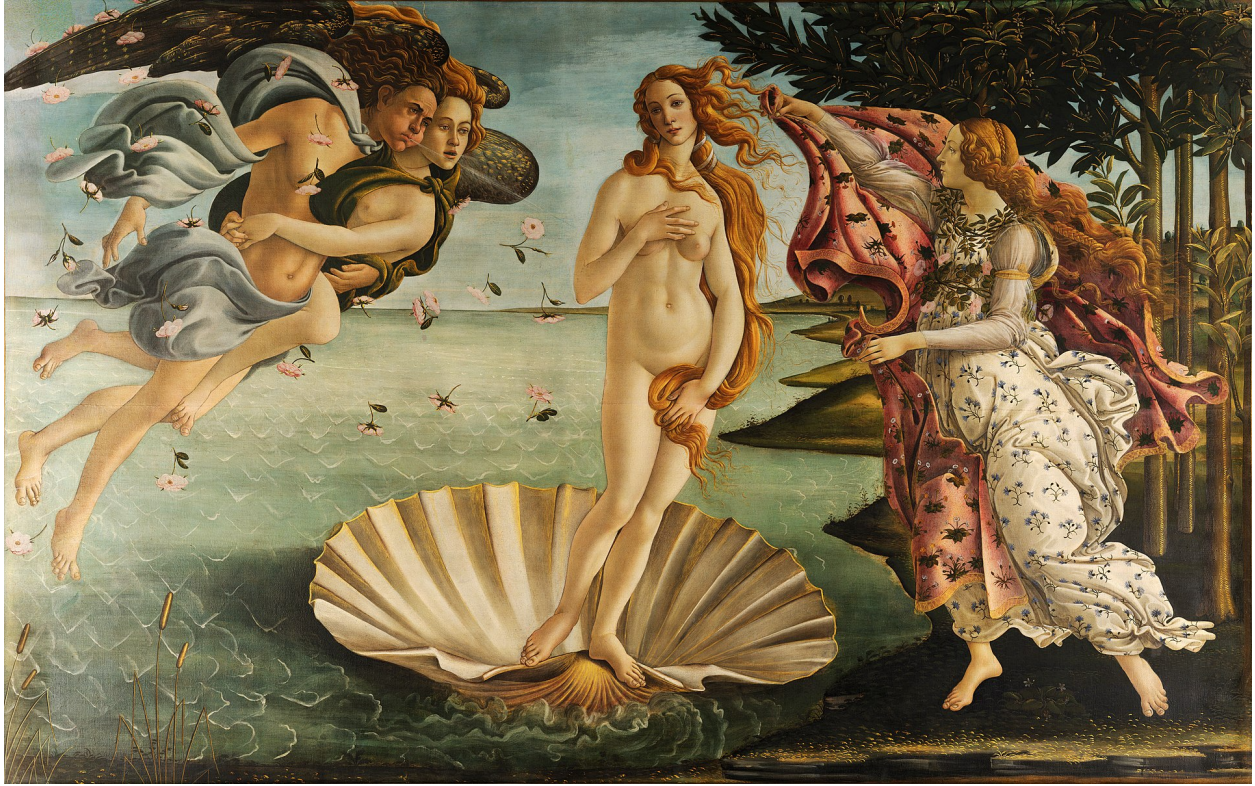


Figure 2. *The Birth of Venus*

The painting's real-life dimensions are impressive, and the exquisite color composition, careful spatial constitution, as well as the striking effect of the outsized shell, all contribute directly to the painting's poetic quality. But to my mind, Botticelli's main poetic device, here as elsewhere, is the complete openness and tranquility he invests Venus with – the tender openness and vulnerability in her eyes and right hand. In this *The Birth of Venus* is representative of many Botticelli paintings, for instance the roughly contemporaneous (mid-1480s) *Portrait of a Youth*:



Figure 3. Detail from *The Birth of Venus* and *Portrait of a Youth*

In both figures we see a kind of infinite tenderness, an extraordinary and disarming openness essentially unfamiliar from everyday life. There is a cognitive (and affective!) dissonance in the fact that the faces are painted realistically but the expressions therein painted are *unrealistic*, inasmuch as we do not come in contact, in the course of daily life, with faces of such transcendent tenderness or open vulnerability. Botticelli makes us realize, however unconsciously, that these *are* possible human expressions – that this level of openness (and the underlying virtue that makes it possible) *is* possible for us, since it can be depicted realistically.³ In the case of *The Birth of Venus*, there is the extra element that her unshakable inner tranquility shines forth despite the energetic forces swirling about her. The wind that the wind god Zephyr blows on her is strong enough to toss her hair and tilt her entire body off center, but fails to perturb in the least the slightest of her facial muscles.

5. An Initial-Sketch Account of the Poetic

What can we glean from such non-poem manifestations of the poetic? What if anything do they have in common? Without any pretense to exhaustiveness, I will enumerate four characteristics that seem to me central.

A particularly central characteristic of the poetic coming through in the above artworks is the element of *tenderness*. What we experience as poetic softens us and puts us in an open and emotional, sometimes vulnerable, state of mind. The images of the sleeping child clasping sea shells and the schoolboy carried away by a protective pride of balloons inspire such tenderness, as do, much more directly, Botticelli's Venus and youth. It is hard to imagine experiencing something as poetic without feeling any tenderness in reaction to it. We can perhaps imagine making the purely intellectual *judgment* that something is poetic without being overtaken by a feeling of tenderness. But it is harder to imagine viscerally *experiencing* poetry₂ in something without feeling the least tenderness toward some aspect of it. Certainly it would not be a *paradigmatic* experience of the poetic that did not feature any felt tenderness whatsoever.

Another central feature of our experience of the poetic is the sense of *elevation* it involves, the way it steers us away from petty and vain vexations, rescues us – for a time – from the banality of the ordinary, and sends us in a loftier, more transcendent direction. This feature is responsible for the spiritual note we find in the poetic. The image of the schoolboy aloft, leaving the world of gray concreteness behind, embodies this notion perfectly. But Pessoa's invocation of a universe-creating weeping god, and the *saintly* character of Botticelli's figures, attempt to implement, it seems to me, the same elevation beyond the familiar and the mundane. The poetic is by its nature precisely what is *not* familiar and mundane – though a good artist/author will often find its *seeds* in the mundane.

A simpler and less distinctive feature is that what we experience as poetic *delights us*. It is hard to imagine seeing poetry₂ in *The Red Balloon* without feeling delighted. Two remarks must be made immediately, though, about the kind of delight involved here. First, this kind of delight can be experienced in conjunction with more uncomfortable feelings, including straight-up sadness. Why and how this kind of aesthetic experience is possible, mixing a certain type of aesthetic delight with sadness, is a long-running debate in aesthetics, often under the banner of the "paradox of tragedy." It is not our task here to resolve the complicated issues involved; I only register that this kind of aesthetic delight appears to be implicated in our experience of the poetic. Secondly, even bracketing the melancholic tinge that can characterize aesthetic delight, this is not the kind of delight we

feel when we get a grant or a job offer, which has to do with the fulfilment of one of our goals or desires. It is a delight provoked directly by the poetic object and independently of our standing goals and desires. This is what has sometimes been characterized as “disinterested” delight, even if the exact sense in which aesthetic delight is (or at least appears) disinterested remains somewhat elusive.

For something to strike us as poetic, then, it must delight, inspire tenderness, and elevate. But in addition, it typically does this through a specially inventive perspective on things, an endogenous and original take that catches us by surprise or provokes in us a kind of Gestalt shift whereby we come to see something in a new and fresh light. What is poetic is *unexpected*, and the experience of the poetic involves a phenomenology of *surprise*. In Pessoa, we see this in the way he makes us see (and feel) afresh what otherwise might strike us as the obnoxious consumerist practices of the bored bourgeoisie. *The Red Balloon* makes us feel the magical vibrancy of the inanimate world that only the pre-civilized child can still experience uncritically. And in Botticelli, the realization that Venus’ extraordinary openness *is* within our psychological repertoire involves a kind of Gestalt shift that makes us see in a new light nothing less than the potentialities of human nature.

This, then, is the initial sketch of the poetic I offer: the poetic is that which, when correctly experienced, induces in us a complex experience that blends tenderness and elevation in aesthetic delight and a surprising perspective on something. Delight and surprise are common to many of our aesthetic experiences, however, and so it is the elements of tenderness and elevation that are most distinctive of the poetic, and their compresence, in particular, is the core of the experience of the poetic.

This initial sketch focuses on our *experience* of the poetic. It is important not to confuse our experience of the poetic with the poetic itself. What we call poetic in the first instance are *artworks*, and objects or events more generally, *not* our experiences of them. And it is possible (a) for something which *should* induce in us this kind of experience to fail to do so, and (b) for something which does *not* merit being experienced this way to nonetheless be. We may still detect, however, a certain equivalency between the poetic and that toward which it is *fitting* to experience the kind of aesthetic emotion I have tried to describe. So, to a first approximation, I propose:

- (IS) For any x , x is poetic just if it is fitting to react to x with an experience comprising (i) a feeling of tenderness, (ii) a sense of elevation, (iii) aesthetic delight, and (iv) an element of surprise (often a fresh way of seeing something).

“IS” stands for *initial sketch*: I am very much open to the possibility – nay, likelihood – that further features of the poetic, perhaps particularly subtle, may be teased out through fuller analysis; and one of the four elements I have pointed out may turn out to be typical without quite being *necessary* or *constitutive* of the poetic. Nonetheless, my suggestion is that it is in

this affective neighborhood, if you will, that we are likely to find an adequate portrait of our experience of the poetic.

6. Consequences, Comparisons, Challenges

It is a noteworthy – and, I think, an *attractive* – feature of IS that it casts the poetic as in some sense an *evaluative* category. Delight, tenderness, and elevation are all things we value, and an elevating tender delight, inventively unlocked, would be something we would *very much* value. If the poetic is that which is responsible for this kind of experience, and toward which this experience is *fitting*, then the poetic is clearly valuable (*aesthetically* valuable, given that the relevant experience is an *aesthetic* experience). I consider this an *attractive* consequence because it seems independently plausible that poetry₂ is an evaluative category. Intuitively, to say that *x* is poetic is not *only* to describe *x*, but also and perhaps mainly to *praise x* (and praise it *aesthetically*).

It may also be an attractive feature of IS that it gives a fitting-attitude account of the poetic. This would be attractive if we have good reasons to embrace a fitting-attitude account of aesthetic value in general; for then it would simply apply the general framework to one particular aesthetic value, the poetic. I have argued in favor of a fitting-attitude approach to aesthetic value elsewhere (Kriegel forthcoming), so for me this is indeed an attractive feature.

Another consequence of IS is that not all poems are poetic. Many poems simply do not induce the relevant experience in us, even when experienced correctly. This is particularly true of modernist poetry₁, where highly intellectual meta-literary and meta-linguistic themes are often central. I consider this too an attractive consequence, because it seems independently and pre-theoretically correct that many poems are not poetic in the sense that intrigued Mill and Emerson. In fact, contemporary poets I have talked to about the concept of the poetic have tended to react defensively, sensing the threat of constraints on their art they do not wish to endorse.

A third consequence concerns the question of conceptual priority between poetry₁ and poetry₂. Our initial-sketch account of the poetic, proceeding as it does without mention of *the poem*, effectively offers a specific *independent* condition ψ the satisfaction of which qualifies any *x* as poetic – independent, that is, of our grasp on what makes something a poem. In doing this, it fulfills a promise “made” by P3 above, and thereby undermines the “poem-first” approach to the relationship between the poem and the poetic (which consisted in the conjunction of P1 & P2). This leaves open, however, two possible views.

One is the “poeticness-first” approach, consisting of P3 & P4, according to which the notion of the poem is parasitic on the notion of the poetic (as in Emerson’s outlook). The other is the version of the “no priority” view consisting of P1 & P3, which characterizes the poem and the poetic in mutual independence. The choice between these two options would have to be taken up in future work.

A final consequence worth noting is that on this account, there is likely to be partial overlap between the poetic and the sublime, as the latter too tends to induce (fittingly) feelings of elevation. But the overlap is only partial. For one thing, the feeling of tenderness is not distinctively characteristic of our encounter with the sublime. More importantly, the sublime also tends to induce in us feelings of our smallness and insignificance. This is a recurrent theme in discussions of the sublime, a theme captured nicely by Schopenhauer (1818: 205) when he writes that in the encounter with the sublime, “we feel ourselves . . . like drops in the ocean, dwindling and dissolving into nothing.” In a more recent discussion, Rachel Zuckert (2003: 220) writes that “the initial feeling of the sublime is an uncomprehending awe, which . . . ‘lowers’ or humbles us.” But these feelings of humbling and personal insignificance are not part of our experience of the poetic – not in the sense that the opposite is true, but in the sense that the experience of the poetic is simply silent on such matters.

I have noted at the opening that contemporary aesthetics has failed to address the poetic as a self-standing aesthetic category. In my research, I have found one exception to this, which lies however outside Anglophone analytic philosophy. This is Chapter 5 of the French philosopher Robert Blanché’s (1979) posthumous book *Des catégories esthétiques* (“Of the aesthetic categories”), which is titled “*Le poétique*.”⁴ After noting at the opening that “just as the beautiful propagates from the visual arts to music and poetry, a poetic charm can be found in such-and-such a painting, or such-and-such spectacle of nature” (1979: 73), Blanché goes on to isolate what he considers the three central features of the poetic. The first is the ineffability of the poetic, its way of eluding literal description, which did not feature in our initial-sketch account. (Perhaps it should in the full-blown account!) But consider Blanché’s second and third features:

Then, the relationship to sentiment, to inner life, to subjectivity: the word “intimate” keeps coming up stubbornly. Finally, a disorientation which is a liberation, a rupture with what the vulgar consider real: escaping the materiality of the world, the prosaicness of daily life... [T]here is also escape in the direction of the higher, an access to a superior world, an opening toward a super-terrestrial reality. (Blanché 1979: 77)

I hope it is clear how Blanché’s third characteristic converges with our focus on the sense of elevation in the experience of the poetic; but Blanché’s second cited characteristic, of intimate turn into one’s own inner sentimental life, also seems to echo our focus on the feeling of tenderness. We are here in a definite “affective neighborhood,” and the fact that

Blanché found himself in the same neighborhood our own inquiry led us to confirm, I would suggest, that there is something to be found in this neighborhood.

It might be objected that our account of the poetic fails to capture instances of fierce or harsh poeticness, such as we find, perhaps, in Quentin Tarantino dialogues. Now, at one level, I think it is important to remind ourselves that the notion of the poetic we are interested in is not just a property of writing or text, but one that potentially outruns poetry¹. We mentioned in §3 that we also sometimes describe particularly creative writing as poetic, and it seems to me that it is in *this* sense that Quentin Tarantino dialogues are poetic; they are not poetic in the sense that Botticelli's figures are, for instance. They are not poetic, more generally, in the way that something other than writing can be.

At the same time, there are certainly instances in which the poetic emerges in the midst of harsh or fierce reality. This is something that social-realist cinema excelled at. In Satyajit Ray's early films – certainly the Apu trilogy, but also later female-protagonist masterpieces such as *Mahanagar* and *Charulata* – we encounter many moments of fine poetry² in the midst of material difficulty and oppressed feelings. Still, however, it seems to me that when the poetic emerges in this context, it is precisely because a certain tenderness and elevation are induced in us, and the harsh background in fact serves primarily to heighten these feelings, as though setting them in vivid relief.

Another possible concern with our initial-sketch account (IS) is that, as formulated, IS seems to treat (i)–(iv) as severally necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for the experience fitting for the poetic. But our remarks about the relative unclarity and indistinctness of the concept of the poetic should inspire skepticism that the concept has such clearly delineated contours; surely it involves an element of vagueness that a correct analysis should bring out.

This concern, too, seems spot-on. I propose that we speak to it by treating (i)–(iv), not quite as constituting necessary and sufficient conditions, but rather as forming a *cluster*, whereby (a) any experience that exhibited, say, any three among (i)–(iv) would qualify as an experience of the poetic; (b) an experience that exhibited all four among (i)–(iv) would count as a *paradigmatic* or *prototypical* experience of the poetic; and (c) at least *some* experiences that exhibited certain combinations of just two among (i)–(iv) might fall into a “gray area” in which *there is no fact of the matter* as to whether it is or is not an experience of the poetic. If we adopt this cluster approach, IS might be upgraded into something along the following lines:

(IS⁺) For any *x*, *x* is poetic just if it is fitting to react to *x* with an experience comprising *at least three among* (i) a feeling of tenderness, (ii) a sense of elevation, (iii) aesthetic delight, and (iv) an element of surprise (often a fresh way of seeing something).

In general, C is a cluster concept when there is a (potentially sizable) collection of elements E_1, \dots, E_n , such that for any x , x qualifies as a C just if x exhibits sufficiently many among E_1, \dots, E_n . It is a feature of such concepts that they allow, on one side, for a gray area in which there is no fact of the matter as to whether some x is C, and on the other side, for a special status for some items as *prototypically* C. Again, given our above remarks on the pre-theoretic vagueness of the poetic, it is only to be expected that these formal features will characterize the poetic, with some things qualifying as prototypically poetic, some as non-prototypically poetic, some as definitely not poetic, and some as falling in a gray area in-between.

7. Conclusion: The Poetic as a Neglected Aesthetic Category

Sibley was famously wont to produce lengthy lists of aesthetic adjectives, by way of illustrating the great variety of aesthetic evaluations we routinely engage in. Perhaps his most cited passage is this one from “Aesthetic Concepts” (Sibley 1959):

Aesthetic terms span a great range of types... Their almost endless variety is adequately displayed in the following list: unified, balanced, integrated, lifeless, serene, sombre, dynamic, powerful, vivid, delicate, moving, trite, sentimental, tragic. (Sibley 1959: 421)

I have counted a total of 55 aesthetic adjectives listed just in “Aesthetic Concepts.” But somehow ‘poetic’ did not make the cut, and it goes unmentioned in the other list-invoking Sibley articles I have read (Sibley 1965, 1974). Sibley inaugurated a venerable tradition of aesthetic-adjective-listing in contemporary aesthetics (see Levinson 1994, 2005 among many others), but nowhere have I managed to find the term ‘poetic’ mentioned – a curious oversight, given Mill’s not unreasonable claim that poetry² is “the better part of all art whatever, and of real life too.”

This paper has been, first and foremost, an invitation to analytic aesthetics to get to grips with the phenomenon of the poetic. I have offered an initial sketch of what the poetic might amount to, characterizing the poetic as that toward which it is fitting to respond emotionally with an experience blending tenderness and elevation with aesthetic delight and a sense of surprise. There is much more to say on the topic, I suspect; my initial-sketch account is meant to *open* the inquiry into the poetic rather than conclude it.⁵

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¹ I am not interested here in the merit of these first-order assertions; they merely illustrate one use of the adjective 'poetic'.

² This wider notion of the poetic may still turn out to be parasitic on prior understanding of poetry₁, but it would have to be so much more circuitously – the conceptual dependence would have to be more opaque, not the kind that 'poetic' wears on its sleeves, so to speak, when used in the sense of "to do with poetry₁."

³ It is worth stressing that Botticelli *can* paint convincingly a tense face (see, e.g., *St. Augustine in His Study*), as well as inner calm arising from cold determination more than open vulnerability (see, e.g., *Fortitude*). Such paintings, however compelling in their own right, do not invite the qualification *poetic*.

⁴ Blanché was primarily a philosopher of science with a focus on logic and mathematics, who authored an important book on axiomatization methods in mathematics (Blanché 1955). But apparently it was always his main desire to devote himself to aesthetics (Blanché 1979: i).

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