

# Mental Imagery and Poetry

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## ABSTRACT

Poetry evokes mental imagery in its readers. But how is mental imagery precisely related to poetry? This article provides a systematic treatment. It clarifies two roles of mental imagery in relation to poetry—as an effect generated by poetry and as an efficient means for understanding and appreciating poetry. The article also relates mental imagery to the discussion on the ‘heresy of paraphrase’. It argues against the orthodox view that the imagistic effects of poetry cannot be captured by prosaic paraphrase, but points to features of poetry that can shape aspects of mental imagery that are liable to be lost in paraphrase.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Mental imagery is familiar to our everyday lives. Consider the following experiences: having a tune stuck in one’s head; daydreaming about the sweet taste of papaya; recalling seeing a loved one’s face. These are instances of what philosophers and psychologists call “mental imagery.” Recent literature on mental imagery has demonstrated the usefulness of the notion as having great potential to shed light on different phenomena in various areas of philosophy (see [Nanay 2021a](#) for a survey). In philosophy of mind, mental imagery has been used to explain a number of mental phenomena, including pain ([Nanay 2017](#)), synesthesia ([Nanay 2021b](#)), and implicit bias ([Nanay 2021c](#)). In philosophy of art, there is discussion on the role of mental imagery in relation to fiction ([Stokes 2019](#)), including imaginative resistance when engaging with fiction ([Tooming 2018](#)). In philosophy of language, the notion of mental imagery has been used to explain phenomena associated with the processing of polysemous words ([Liu 2022](#)). This article is an application of the notion of mental imagery to the discussion on poetry, combining elements from both philosophy of mind and philosophy of language.

Poetry evokes mental imagery in its readers. T. E. Hulme (1924, 134) called the language of poetry a “visual concrete one”—it makes the reader “continuously see a physical thing.” One might extend Hulme’s remarks beyond the visual case and make the generalization that the language of poetry is “a sensual one,” making the reader not only “see a physical thing,” but also “hear,” “smell,” “taste,” or “touch” physical things. In appreciating Gerard Manley Hopkins’s poem “I am Like a Slip of Comet,” one is likely to visualize the comet described by the poet. Emily Dickinson’s “I Felt a Funeral, in My Brain” is likely to evoke in an attentive reader mental imagery of various features of a funeral, through which the reader is then able to latch onto the overwhelming feeling of loss and despair that Dickinson articulates via the imagery of a funeral.

While mental imagery is closely related to poetry, the precise relation between the two has not received systematic philosophical treatment. Such a discussion is important for two reasons. First, it seems that mental imagery aids our understanding of poetry and augments our appreciation for it. But how it does so requires careful articulation. Second, mental imagery is also relevant to the so-called “heresy of paraphrase,” the thesis that poetry cannot be paraphrased (e.g., [Brooks 1947](#); [Currie and Frascaroli 2021](#); [Kivy 1997](#); [Lepore 2009](#)). It is commonly thought that the imagistic effects of a poem cannot be captured by the poem’s prosaic paraphrase. Whether this is true is subject to scrutiny.

This article provides a systematic account of mental imagery in relation to poetry. Corresponding to the two aforementioned issues, the article sets out to achieve two goals. First, it clarifies two crucial roles of mental imagery in relation to poetry—as a powerful effect generated by poetry and as an efficient means for understanding and appreciating poetry. Second, the article relates mental imagery to the discussion on poetry’s resistance to paraphrase. I put forward a nuanced view: while I question the common consensus that the mental imagery associated with a poem cannot be captured by the poem’s paraphrase, I argue that there are aspects of mental imagery shaped by features of poetry that are liable to be lost in paraphrases that are not attentive to these poetic features.

The structure of the article is as follows. Section II clarifies the notion of mental imagery and its two important roles with respect to poetry. Section III relates mental imagery to the discussion on the heresy of paraphrase and argues against the orthodox view that imagistic effects of poetry cannot be captured by prosaic paraphrase. Section IV considers how features of poetry may shape aspects of mental imagery that are liable to be lost in paraphrase. Section V concludes the article.

## II. TWO ROLES OF MENTAL IMAGERY

In this section, I clarify the notion of mental imagery and distinguish it from the two senses of ‘imagery’ commonly used in literary criticism (Section II.A). I elaborate on the two important roles that mental imagery plays in relation to poetry, namely, as an effect generated by a poem and as an efficient means for understanding and appreciating a poem (Section II.B).

### II.A. Mental Imagery vs. Imagery

In this article, the notion of mental imagery is understood in line with how psychologists standardly use the term. It refers to “representations of sensory information without direct external stimulus” (Pearson et al. 2015). This is also how philosophers often understand the term. For instance, Nanay concurs with this formulation and defines mental imagery as “perceptual processing that is not triggered by corresponding sensory stimulation in a given sense modality” (Nanay 2018, 127).<sup>1</sup> While this definition allows room for mental imagery to be unconscious (see also Pearson et al. 2015), in discussing the role of mental imagery in relation to poetry, I shall focus on mental imagery that is *conscious*, which forms part of our overall phenomenology of reading poetry.<sup>2</sup>

Mental imagery used in this philosophical-psychological sense needs to be clearly distinguished from what is also called ‘imagery’ in literary criticism (see Perkins and Kosslyn 1983). In the latter field, the term ‘imagery’ is used in at least two senses. It can mean the use of sensory language, that is, descriptions of sensory objects. It can also mean the representation of one thing (the “target”) as another (the “source”), such that metaphor, simile, and personification are types of imagery (Oliver 1994, 92). The two critical senses of imagery are closely related—imagery in the second sense often appeals to sensory objects as the source domain to make sense of a represented target domain that the poet aims to articulate.

While the two critical senses of *imagery* are features of language, *mental imagery* is a perceptual state of a subject. Although *mental imagery* should not be confused with *imagery*, it is worth pointing out that they are clearly related. Plausibly, it is imagery in a poem, in both senses, that is responsible for mental imagery in the audience. Consider the first stanza of Robert Browning’s “Meeting at Night”:

The grey sea and the long black land;  
And the yellow half-moon large and low;  
And the startled little waves that leap  
In fiery ringlets from their sleep,  
As I gain the cove with pushing prow,  
And quench its speed i’ the slushy sand.

The poem, written in the period of Browning’s courtship with Elizabeth Barrett, describes the poem’s speaker’s journey to meet his lover. From the colors and shapes of the sea, land, and moon to the motion of the waves and the texture of the sand, the stanza is filled with sensory descriptions, that is, imagery in the first critical sense. In terms of imagery in the second critical sense, in lines 3–4 waves

are represented as ringlets and personified as having been startled from their sleep.<sup>3</sup> In reading such imagery, the reader is likely to have conscious mental imagery, visualizing the things in the night scene described by the poem.

For the rest of the article, I shall only be concerned with mental imagery rather than imagery.

## II.B. Two Roles

In this section, I elaborate on how mental imagery is crucial to poetry in two respects: it constitutes a powerful effect and serves as an efficient means for understanding and appreciation. While these two roles of mental imagery have been noted in the wider literature with respect to comprehending novel language (Carston 2010; Currie and Frascaroli 2021; Green 2017),<sup>4</sup> it is worth considering each in turn in the context of poetry.

Poetry generates various kinds of effects (e.g., cognitive, emotional, somatic) which make the experience of reading poetry interesting and powerful. Mental imagery constitutes a class of such effects. Consider Edgar Allan Poe's poem "The Bells," in which the word "bells" repeats sixty-two times. Commenting on the poem, Ernie Lepore writes: "It's generally acknowledged that the line 'From the bells bells bells bells/Bells bells bells!' *brings to mind, or elicits* the clamoring of myriad church bells. Most commentators deny you can convey this in prose without these particular words" (2009, 179–80). Although the word "bells" itself is not an onomatopoeia, the repetition of it constitutes a case of onomatopoeia. The structure pertaining to the sounds of repeating the same word, that is, "bells bells bells bells/Bells bells bells," resembles the structure of bells ringing, where the same sound repeats itself. As a result, the line brings to mind, as Lepore notes, auditory imagery of "the clamoring of myriad church bells." For Lepore and most commentators, such auditory imagery cannot be conveyed by prose. This is an issue I return to in Section III.

Consider also Wilfred Owen's poem "Futility," written in World War I, about a dead soldier. Commenting on its first line, Gregory Currie and Jacopo Frascaroli write: "Wilfred Owen's line 'Move him into the sun' would not be so powerful if it did not provoke an imagined experience of bearing the dead weight of a human body" (2021, 435). Conscious mental imagery shares content with counterpart perceptual experience triggered by external stimuli. There is also a phenomenal similarity—the phenomenal character of imagining bearing the weight of a dead human body is similar to the phenomenal character of actually carrying such a body (see Nanay 2015). The latter experience can be incredibly powerful because it can stir up emotions and thoughts in the experiencer, and it does so, presumably, in virtue of the experiencer's awareness of what the experience is about and how it feels to him or her. So, insofar as the corresponding mental imagery is similar to the actual experience in terms of content and phenomenology, it seems plausible to think that mental imagery can have similar effects, thus making the experience of reading a poem a powerful one. Mental imagery allows the reader to quasi-experience the scene described in the poem. This quasi-experience can then afford the reader the various emotions and thoughts that the counterpart veridical experience can trigger.

Mental imagery is not merely an effect of poetry, however; in some cases, it can also serve as an efficient means for understanding and appreciating poetry. To fully understand a poem requires not only comprehending the literal meaning of the poem, but also latching onto the poet's intention, appreciating her choice of words, and seeing the aptness of the poem in capturing its subject matter. I argue that the construction of conscious mental imagery often serves as an efficient means of facilitating this kind of deeper understanding and appreciation of poetry.<sup>5</sup>

To illustrate this, we shall consider Ezra Pound's famous fourteen-word poem "In a Station of a Metro":

The apparition of these faces in the crowd:  
Petals on a wet, black bough.

What is particularly interesting is the relationship between the two lines. Pound (1914) calls this metaphor-like comparison "super-position," where one idea is set up on top of another. Pound describes his experience of seeing beautiful faces in a Paris metro station but being unable to find words that are "worthy, or as lovely as that sudden emotion." The comparison between faces in a metro station and petals on a wet, black bough, which Pound eventually found, is particularly apt on two levels.

On one level, various elements in the source domain (second line) are nicely mapped onto the target domain (first line), for example, petals map onto faces; the fragile and transitory character of the petals corresponds to the apparitional character of the faces; the shape of a bough maps onto the shape of the crowd; dampness and darkness of the bough corresponds to the dark background of the metro. On another and more important level, the comparison brings to the surface the particular feeling Pound had in the Paris metro station when encountering the faces. Commenting on the poem, Pound wrote:

I dare say it is meaningless unless one has drifted into a certain vein of thought. In a poem of this sort one is trying to record the precise instant when a thing outward and objective transforms itself, or darts into a thing inward and subjective. (1914, 467)

It is the particular thought or sentiment—something “inward and subjective”—aroused by seeing “these faces in the crowd”—something “outward and objective”—that Pound wishes to articulate through the imagery of “petals on a wet, black bough” in the hope that his readers will also experience it. To understand and appreciate the poem crucially involves understanding the aptness and purpose of Pound’s comparison on these two levels, that is, on the first level, grasping the similarities between the two relevant domains, and on the second level, latching onto the sentiment conveyed by Pound. I argue that mental imagery efficiently facilitates such understanding. To do so, I compare two kinds of reader.

Consider a reader (call her ‘R’) who has conscious mental imagery of what the lines describe. In relation to the first line, R is likely to visualize a crowd standing on a long platform or on an escalator in a metro station where the faces in the crowd have an apparitional character. In relation to the second line, R is likely to visualize petals scattered across a wet, black bough. Now, these two images share phenomenal similarities. Crucially, the scattered faces stand out in the long strip of a crowd in a similar way that delicate petals stand out against the black bough. Just as the imagined petals are likely to convey a fleeting and insignificant character against the background, so are the apparition-like faces in the crowd. Such mental imagery presents phenomenal resemblances that facilitate the imager to map elements from one image (e.g., petals, bough, darkness of the bough) to the other (e.g., faces, crowd, darkness of the metro) and from the source domain (second line) to the target domain (first line). In this way, the two mental images provide a direct and effective means through which R is able to appreciate the aptness of Pound’s comparison on the aforementioned first level.

The situation seems remarkably different if our reader, in an attempt to appreciate the cross-domain similarities, only draws on her background knowledge of faces in a crowded metro station and petals on a damp, black bough. Call this reader ‘R\*’. Like the rest of us, R\* would have many beliefs about the things associated with the two lines, for example, faces, metro stations, petals, boughs. R\* would have various beliefs about metro stations, which are likely to include how they operate and when they are likely to be crowded. R\* might have beliefs about the people using metro stations including how their faces might look in a crowd. R\* is also likely to have many beliefs about petals, perhaps including their colors, sizes, structures, and functions in pollination. Such beliefs go beyond how these things phenomenologically appear. Given such a vast amount of background knowledge, it would seem tremendously difficult for R\* to rely on non-imagistic conceptual means alone to compare the two domains in order to uncover the relevant cross-domain similarities, that is, to understand and appreciate Pound’s comparison on the aforementioned first level. The situation is particularly bad for R\* because the cross-domain similarities intended by Pound clearly seem to be grounded in how the two things at issue appear. This is not to say that R\* cannot work out the similarities, but that she cannot do so in an efficient way.

Similar difficulties arise for R\* with respect to understanding Pound’s comparison on the second level, that is, grasping the particular pleasant sentiment of seeing faces in a metro station that Pound intended to convey. Again, it may be possible for R\* to achieve this by contemplating petals on the wet, black bough through non-imagistic conceptual means and then work out what sentiment Pound intended to convey in relation to the first line. How R\* can achieve this is far from clear. Beliefs to do with petals being beautiful and delicate are pertinent here, but it is doubtful that R\* can hone in on these beliefs in an efficient manner. It is also unclear how entertaining such beliefs about petals in an abstract manner can eventually arouse in R\* a pleasant sentiment close enough to what Pound intended to convey.

In contrast, things seem to be easier for our reader R who relies on mental imagery. Consider an actual experience of seeing petals on a wet, black bough. It seems plausible to think that such a visual experience can instill in the experiencer a certain delicate sentiment or affective attitude toward the scene. I take it that, for an attentive perceiver, having a pleasant feeling is a common reaction to contemplating the sight of beautiful petals. Again, insofar as corresponding mental imagery is similar in terms of content and phenomenal character, hence sharing similar causal profiles, it can have a similar emotional impact. With this sentiment or attitude, R can re-experience the mental image associated with the first line, perhaps projecting the beauty and delicacy of the imagined petals onto the imagined faces in the crowd. As a result, R's experience of imagining seeing faces in a metro station is reorganized and cast in a new light (Davies 1983, 75–6). Such an experience may give rise to or perhaps is imbued with the same kind of “lovely” and “sudden” emotion Pound had upon seeing faces in that Paris metro. In this way, we may say that the reader is able to experience or at least gain a purchase on the emotion intended by Pound, which he tries to convey through the second line. More generally, to quote Carston, “by staying with the literal meaning and the images it evokes we may come, at least partially, to understand how the world looks and feels to the poet in his exalted state of mind” (2010, 311).

So, unlike R\*, R has an efficient method for understanding Pound's comparison. By activating relevant mental images, R can promptly figure out the relevant cross-domain similarities, grasp the particular feeling intended by the poet, and ultimately gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of the poem.

In this section, we saw that mental imagery has two crucial roles to play with respect to poetry—it constitutes a poetic effect and serves as an efficient means for understanding and appreciation. Neither role is unique to poetry. Fiction can also generate imagistic effects (Stokes 2019) and mental imagery can also aid understanding of metaphors embedded in prose (Carston 2010; Green 2017). Although these features of mental imagery are not exclusive to poetry, they make the experience of reading poetry rich, powerful, and worth pursuing.

### III. MENTAL IMAGERY AND THE HERESY OF PARAPHRASE

This and the next sections relate mental imagery to the discussion on the heresy of paraphrase in the philosophy of poetry. It is usually thought that imagistic effects of a poem cannot be captured by its paraphrase. This has already been touched on in Section II.B in the passage quoted from Lepore (2009, 179–80). In this section, I argue against this widely-held view. In the next section, I show that there are nevertheless aspects of mental imagery shaped by features of poetry that are liable to be lost in paraphrases that are not attentive to these features.

According to the so-called “heresy of paraphrase” thesis, poetry cannot be paraphrased (Brooks 1947; Lamarque 2009; Lepore 2009). To paraphrase a poem is to express its meaning or content in a different way, usually in the style of prose and usually for achieving greater clarity. Whether the thesis is plausible depends on what is to be included in the meaning of a poem. If it is understood in a restrictive sense to include only the propositions expressed by the poem, then it is far from clear that the thesis is true (see Currie and Frascaroli 2021). But if it is understood in an inclusive sense to include all experiential aspects of reading poetry, then the thesis is obviously true (see Currie and Frascaroli 2021; Kivy 1997). The experience of reading a poem is different from that of reading its paraphrase. The two experiences differ in sonic aspects—a poem's rhythms and rhymes are lost in paraphrase. In addition, it is often thought that the two experiences differ in imagistic and emotional aspects—a poem evokes mental imagery and emotional responses that cannot be captured by its paraphrase in the form of prose. Given the scope of this article, in discussing poetry's paraphrasability I set aside the contentious issue of what precisely counts as part of the meaning of a poem. I also set aside emotional aspects of poetry. I primarily focus on its imagistic aspects and the issue of whether it is true that the latter cannot be captured by paraphrase.

The idea that the imagistic aspects of poetry resist prosaic paraphrase is certainly the orthodox view in the literature and has been noted by various theorists (see Brooks 1947, 197; Currie and Frascaroli 2021, 435; Lepore 2009, 179–80). In their recent article, Currie and Frascaroli contend that if imagined experiences evoked by poetry are included in the meaning of a poem, then “paraphrase cannot

capture all that a poem means” (2021, 435). For theorists like Currie and Frascaroli, the fact that poetry generates mental imagery is a key reason why “paraphrase is no substitute for the poem” (435).

Nevertheless, it is not clear why mental imagery associated with a poem cannot be captured by the poem’s paraphrase. Perhaps, the thought here is that in order for a poem’s paraphrase to capture the poem’s imagistic effects, we would need to, so to speak, *translate* the latter into propositional content. But the worry here is that mental imagery, to quote Donald Davidson, “is not propositional in character” and “[w]ords are the wrong currency to exchange for a picture” (1978, 47). Making a similar point, Lepore, in the context of discussing mental imagery, writes: “It is neither surprising nor interesting to be told something ... *non-propositional* ... is lost in paraphrase or translation” (2009, 185). Underlying this statement seems to be the thought that mental imagery is non-propositional whereas paraphrase is propositional and the two are thus not interchangeable.

However, there is yet another way for a poem’s paraphrase to capture the poem’s imagistic effects, that is, not by *translating* mental imagery into propositional content, but by *evoking* the same mental imagery as associated with the poem.<sup>6</sup> On this picture, although Poe’s line “From the bells bells bells bells/Bells bells bells” evokes an auditory imagery of bells clamoring in the reader, such imagistic effects can be recreated and evoked by a suitable paraphrase of the line.

Indeed, the language of prose can be extremely imagistic. That is, prose can also evoke mental imagery of what is described. Take, for instance, Leo Tolstoy’s novel *The Cossacks*, about a young nobleman becoming accustomed to military life in the Caucasus, and consider the following passage:

These myriads of insects [mosquitoes] were so well suited to that monstrously lavish wild vegetation, these multitudes of birds and beasts which filled the forest, this dark foliage, this hot scented air, these runlets filled with turbid water which everywhere soaked through from the Terek and gurgled here and there under the overhanging leaves, that the very thing which had at first seemed to him dreadful and intolerable now seemed pleasant. (1994, 90)

This passage, which is a single long sentence, is filled with vivid sensory descriptions. The multiple clauses give the reader an overwhelming feeling of one sensory experience followed by another and then another. Such a passage is likely to evoke conscious mental imagery in an absorbed and attentive reader. If prose like this evokes mental imagery, it seems puzzling to say that a prosaic paraphrase of a poem cannot.

Here one might respond that paraphrasing poetry is not the same as writing a novel. A paraphrase is usually more matter-of-fact and less florid. However, such prose can equally evoke mental imagery. Consider the staging instructions of Arnold Schönberg’s music drama *Die glückliche Hand* (*The Lucky Hand*):

The stage is almost completely dark. In front lies the man, his face on the floor. On his back sits a cat-like mythical creature (hyena with bat-like large wings) that seems to have bitten into his neck. The stage opening is very small, and somewhat round (a flat arch). The background is finished with dark purple velvet. In it are small hatches from which green-lit faces peer: six men, six women. The lighting is very dim. Of the faces, almost only the eyes are clearly visible. Everything else is covered with delicate reddish veils, which are also somewhat illuminated by the green light. (1917)

In reading the passage above, one is likely to visualize the content described by the language and form a picture of the intended stage design. If completely matter of fact passages like this evoke mental imagery, it again seems puzzling to say that a prosaic paraphrase of a poem cannot. Indeed, consider how one might paraphrase the first four lines from the first stanza of Browning’s poem that we saw in Section II.A:

There is a grey sea in front of a long black strip of land, and the half-moon is yellow, large, and low in the sky. Reflecting the moon’s fiery color, the little waves in the sea surge abruptly like the ringlets of a woman startled from her sleep.

Just as Schönberg’s staging instructions can easily invoke mental imagery, so can the above paraphrase.

The orthodox view that paraphrase leaves out the imagistic effects of poetry is further problematized by empirical literature on language processing. Recent discussions in psycholinguistics have demonstrated that processing ordinary, literal language frequently involves perceptual-motor simulations (e.g., Barsalou 2008; Bergen 2012, 2015; Zwaan 2003, 2009; Zwaan and Madden 2005)—in many situations, “we understand language by simulating in our minds what it would be like to experience the things that the language describes” (Bergen 2012, 13). Simulation in this context refers to “the reenactment of perceptual, motor, and introspective states acquired during experience with the world, body, and mind” (Barsalou 2008, 618). Perceptual simulation, which is the reenactment of perceptual states without perceptual stimuli, is equivalent to mental imagery. On this simulation view of language processing, our perceptions of the world lay down interconnected experiential traces in memory, reflecting the interconnectedness or co-occurrence of things in the environment. These traces can then be retrieved and used in the processing of words and sentences. For instance, there is abundant behavioral evidence that language users activate visual imagery of various features of the objects described in language, including object’s orientations (Stanfield and Zwaan 2001), shapes (Zwaan et al. 2002), spatial relations (Zwaan and Yaxley 2003), motions (Zwaan et al. 2004), and colors (Richter and Zwaan 2009).

Now, if language processing frequently involves mental imagery, then it is no surprise that mental imagery is involved in reading poetry, which is full of sensory language. It also means that mental imagery is involved in reading prose. Consequently, a poem and its prosaic paraphrase may activate the same mental imagery in a reader. Just as Poe’s line “From the bells bells bells bells/Bells bells bells” can activate the auditory imagery of bells ringing, so can the sentence “The bells are clamoring continuously,” if the reader is sufficiently engaged.

It is also no adequate response to insist that poetry activates *conscious* mental imagery and the mental imagery that prose activates is *unconscious*. As we saw, the aforementioned examples of prose certainly seem to evoke conscious mental imagery, and many instances of mental imagery associated with prose processing are indeed accessible to consciousness (Bergen 2012, 14). It may be that due to the prevalence of unfamiliar metaphors and novel uses of language, poetry demands more attention and more deliberate, pragmatic processing from the reader and, as a result, activates conscious mental imagery more frequently than prose (see Carston 2010, 314). But this need not commit us to the strong claim that prosaic paraphrase of a poem cannot in principle activate the same conscious mental imagery associated with the poem in an attentive reader.

In this section, I have suggested an alternative way for a poem’s prosaic paraphrase to capture the poem’s imagistic effect, that is, by evoking the same mental imagery. Using examples of prose and appealing to psycholinguistic literature on language processing, I show that poetry is not unique in its capacity to evoke mental imagery when compared to prose or prosaic paraphrase. As a result, it would seem puzzling to insist that no suitable paraphrase of a poem can activate the same mental imagery that is involved in reading the poem itself. Nevertheless, as I argue in the next section, certain features of poetry can shape aspects of mental imagery that are liable to be lost in paraphrases that are not attentive to these poetic features.

#### IV. MENTAL IMAGERY, GRANULARITY AND PERSPECTIVE

The precise content and phenomenal character of mental imagery activated by a sentence depends on not only the semantic content of the words used, but also grammatical features of the sentence (see Bergen 2012, chap. 5–6). For instance, research has shown that sentences in the progressive tense (e.g., “John is closing the drawer”) allow greater activation of mental imagery of the described event compared to sentences in the perfect tense (e.g., “John has closed drawer”), which tend to prompt language-users to activate mental imagery of the end state of an event (Bergen and Wheeler 2010). Whereas the semantic contents of words determine what is simulated or imagined, grammatical features of a sentence can modulate what part of some mental imagery to focus on, what perspective to take (first-person vs. third-person), as well as the level of detail with respect to its components (Bergen 2012, 118).

A good poem, in addition to clever choice of words, also has interesting grammatical and phonological features, and some of these features may determine the character of the mental imagery

activated by reading the poem. If these features are not preserved or compensated for in the poem's paraphrase, then even though the paraphrase can activate mental imagery, the latter would differ in content and phenomenal character from the mental imagery generated by the poem. This is not to say that no paraphrase can activate the same imagery. A suitable paraphrase of a poem can aim to put more emphasis on the relevant imagery-shaping features of the poem, though this may involve difficulties in practice.

In the rest of this section, I discuss two aspects of mental imagery—granularity and perspective—that are shaped by features of poetry and liable to be lost in paraphrases that are not attentive to relevant poetic features.

#### IV.A. Granularity

The first aspect of mental imagery I address concerns its granularity or level of detail, which may be shaped by the poem's syntax as well as phonological features such as stress pattern. Consider again the first four lines from Browning's "Meeting at Night":

The grey sea and the long black land;  
And the yellow half-moon large and low;  
And the startled little waves that leap  
In fiery ringlets from their sleep,

Rather than using complete sentences, Browning names the objects (e.g., sea, land, moon, waves) that compose a night scene. Processing a complete sentence usually demands language users to adjust and update their mental imagery and to create a coherent 'picture' of what is described by the sentence (see [Bergen 2012](#), chap. 6; [Liu 2022](#)). Consider the following sentence, which may serve as a paraphrase of the first two lines from Browning:

There is a grey sea in front of a long black strip of land, and the half-moon is yellow, large, and low in the sky.

The mental imagery corresponding to the content of the sentence is likely to be a coherent night scene that contains all the mentioned objects. In contrast, direct mention of objects, for example, "grey sea," "long black land," "yellow half-moon" in Browning's manner, seems to guide the reader's attention immediately onto the named objects and their properties. As a result, the reader is likely to construct a sequence of mental images (e.g., of a grey sea, of a long black land, etc.) with the named objects as focal entities, instead of a single mental image encompassing multiple entities. [Nanay \(2015\)](#) has argued that in the case of mental imagery, just as in the case of perception where the perceptual stimuli are present, attention makes the attended property more determinate. The resulting mental imagery evoked by the two lines, in comparison to its paraphrase, is much more focused, determinate, and vivid with respect to the objects mentioned.

The stress pattern of the verses might also play a role with respect to the granularity of the imagined experience. Browning's poem is loosely written in iambic tetrameter, where each line contains four iambs, and an iamb contains two syllables with the stress falling on the second syllable. Though subject to empirical scrutiny, it is plausible that words that are stressed may augment attention on the content of the words and lead to stronger activation of mental imagery. Take, for instance, Browning's second line, "And the yellow half-moon large and low," which plausibly has the following stress pattern, using the Trager-Smith notation, where four levels of stress are indicated: primary stress (´), secondary stress (^), tertiary stress (˘), and least stress (˘), and the end of a foot is represented with a bar (|):

˘ ˘ ^ | ˘ ^ | ˘ ´ | ˘ ´ |  
And the yellow half-moon large and low

The primary stresses of the verse fall on "large" and "low," which may direct attention to mental imagery pertaining to the size of the moon and its position in the sky. In the third line, the first syllable



of “startled” is given a heavier stress compared to the first syllable of “little.” As a result, the motion of the imagined waves may be emphasized over their size. That is, in visualizing, the audience is likely to focus more on the sudden motion of the waves rather than their size. In appreciating poetry, one naturally attends to phonological features such as stress patterns. This differs from appreciating prose, where less attention is given to the phonological aspects of the writing. If such features can shape the granularity or level of detail of the mental imagery evoked by poetry, then this may be lost in prosaic paraphrases that fail to preserve these phonological features.

#### IV.B. Perspective

The second aspect of mental imagery I address concerns its perspective, which is plausibly shaped by the grammatical person in the poem. Research on simulation in language processing shows that grammatical persons modulate the perspective that language users take when simulating what a sentence describes. Language users tend to take a third-person observer perspective when comprehending sentences in the third-person (e.g., “He is slicing a tomato”); they tend to take a first-person participant perspective, identifying themselves with the person who is speaking, if the sentence uses the first person ‘I’ and contextual information about the ‘I’ is kept to a minimum (e.g., “I am slicing a tomato”) (Brunyé et al. 2009; see also Bergen 2012, 110–14). In the former case, one would take a perspective of seeing the action being carried out (i.e., slicing a tomato) as an observer; in the latter case, one is likely to take a top-down perspective on the action. Nevertheless, when the language users are supplied with detailed contextual information about the ‘I,’ they tend to take an observer rather than a participant perspective.

Many poems, in particular dramatic monologues, are written in first-person perspective and supply minimal information about the poem’s speaker. Consider once again Browning’s “Meeting at Night.” The word ‘I’ appears in the fifth line—“As I gain the cove with pushing prow”—of the first stanza. Little is said about the speaker. The second stanza continues in the present tense, describing the speaker’s journey to see his lover from a first-person perspective:

Then a mile of warm sea-scented beach;  
 Three fields to cross till a farm appears;  
 A tap at the pane, the quick sharp scratch  
 And blue spurt of a lighted match,  
 And a voice less loud, thro’ its joys and fears,  
 Than the two hearts beating each to each!

In simulating the things described by the poem, the reader might very well take a first-person perspective on the speaker’s journey. In this way, the poem offers an immersive experience to its reader.

In contrast, paraphrase is often, though it need not be, written in the third person. This is no surprise since a key role of paraphrase is to aid understanding and appreciation of the poem, including explaining the poet’s intentions. Consider the following examples of paraphrase from Currie and Frascaroli:

The narrative of Elizabeth Barrett’s *Aurora Leigh* ends with Aurora and Romney united.  
 “Great Tom” in Anthony Thwaite’s poem *At High Table* refers to the bell of Tom Tower [Christ Church, Oxford].  
 ... In “*Hope*” is the *Thing with Feathers* Dickinson tells us that hope is ever present in the human heart.  
 (2021, 429)

All these examples of paraphrase are written in the third person. Similarly, one might paraphrase Browning’s second stanza as follows: “In the second stanza, Browning describes the speaker’s journey on land. The speaker walks a mile on the warm beach, which smelled like the sea. After three fields, he sees a farm. He then taps on the window.” While such detailed paraphrase is full of sensory description and hence likely to activate mental imagery in the audience, the audience might nevertheless take a third-person perspective of observing someone else going on a journey to see their lover. In this case, while the paraphrase can activate mental imagery, the first-person participant perspective of the imagined experience associated with reading the poem is lost in reading the paraphrase.

Note that while features of a poem can shape aspects of the mental imagery that are liable to be lost in paraphrase, this is not to say that no suitable paraphrase having the same mental imagery can be found. For instance, in paraphrasing, one can pay special attention to the perspective in the poem and preserve the same grammatical person, for example, paraphrasing Browning's poem in the first person rather than the third person. Alternatively, one can compensate for imagery-shaping features in poetry using alternative means, for example, using the word 'repeatedly' in paraphrasing Poe's line "From the bells bells bells bells/Bells bells bells"; or using short sentences—"There is a grey sea. There is a land that is long and black"—to augment attention on the objects mentioned in paraphrasing Browning's lines. Although we need not commit to the view that no suitable paraphrase of a poem can in principle activate the same mental imagery as the poem, finding such a paraphrase is by no means easy in all cases. Furthermore, tailoring a paraphrase to have the same imagistic effects as the poem seems to be a misguided task for the paraphraser. After all, the main purpose of paraphrase is not to create the same effects, but to clarify and aid appreciation of the poem.

## V. CONCLUSION

In this article, I have provided a systematic account for understanding mental imagery in relation to poetry. I clarified two roles of mental imagery in reading poetry. It is a powerful response to poetry and an efficient means for understanding and appreciating poetry. I also argued against the orthodox view that mental imagery evoked by poetry cannot be captured by prosaic paraphrase. But this does not mean that it is always easy to find suitable paraphrases that have the same imagistic effects as the corresponding poems. While poetry is no more special than prose in its potential to activate mental imagery, certain features of poetry can shape aspects of mental imagery that are liable to be lost in paraphrases that are not attentive to these poetic features.<sup>7</sup>

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## END NOTES

- 1 There are nevertheless alternative views of mental imagery. The view I adopt in this article, on which mental imagery is a kind of perceptual state, is known as strong perceptualism. According to weak perceptualism (e.g., Martin 2002), mental imagery is a representation of a perceptual state. For a critical discussion on perceptualism about mental imagery, see Cavendon-Taylor (2021), which also mentions non-perceptualist views, including the views that mental imagery is a cognitive state, that it is a merely sensational state, and that it is a sui generis state. Proponents of non-perceptualist views can nevertheless agree that mental imagery and perceptual states are similar in terms of content and phenomenology. Whether or not one adopts perceptualism about mental imagery should not affect the arguments in the article.
- 2 Note that with reference to the heresy of paraphrase, theorists are presumably primarily concerned with conscious mental imagery and whether imagistic phenomenology associated with reading poetry can be preserved in paraphrase. Some theorists in fact use the term "mental imagery" to refer only to a conscious phenomenon (see Bergen 2012, 14, 42; Carston 2018; Wilson and Carston 2019).
- 3 Also, lines 5–6 can arguably be read as a sexual metaphor (see McNally 1967).
- 4 For instance, Carston (2010, 300), in the context of discussing metaphors, notes that conscious mental images "are not only non-propositional effects of metaphor comprehension, but also, at least in some instances, vehicles used in the recovery of propositional effects."
- 5 Relatedly, Green (2017) argues that there are metaphors whose comprehension requires conscious mental imagery. Green calls these "image-demanding metaphors," in contrast to "image-permitting metaphors" whose comprehension does not require conscious mental imagery.
- 6 Why has this suggestion escaped theorists? Perhaps, underpinning the orthodox view that the imagistic effects of a poem cannot be captured by its paraphrase is a prejudice, shared by theorists like T. E. Hulme (1924, 134), that poetry is uniquely suited to evoke mental imagery. This view, as I go on to argue, is mistaken.
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