

Collision.
Lepore on the Question
of Poetic Aboutness

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Abstract

Poems, according to Ernie Lepore, are partly about their own articulations. This is a provocative proposal that deserves examination. I offer such treatment here and examine Lepore's proposal sympathetically, defending the bulk of it, or a view very much like it, from a pointed critique by Peter Lamarque. Together with my own critical commentary, I suggest ways of developing the account further, then explore some of its implications for our general understanding of literature.

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Lepore on the Question of Poetic Aboutness

Among recent attempts to subject poetry to philosophical analysis, the one I find most significant has been given not by a literary theorist or philosopher of art but by a philosopher of language: Ernie Lepore.¹ Poems, according to Lepore, are partly about their own articulations. This is a provocative proposal that deserves examination, and I offer such treatment here. I examine the proposal sympathetically, defending the bulk of it, or a view very much like it, from a pointed critique by Peter Lamarque. Along with my own critical commentary, I suggest ways to develop this account further, ending with some remarks on what this account implies about our general understanding of literature.

I assume consensus on what counts as a poem or poetic language use without denying that it would be difficult to specify what it is that qualifies or disqualifies a linguistic expression as verse. That itself would be a worthwhile task, but it is not mine. Toward the end, however, a few of my remarks, somewhat indirectly, will bear on the question of what distinguishes poetry from prose.

Lepore's proposal is meant to account for the "heresy of paraphrase thesis," specifically, as he expresses it, that "Poetry cannot be paraphrased (or translated)."² The point is not that it is impossible to paraphrase poems, or that it is senseless, or that it has no place in literary interpretation. As Peter Kivy observes, if we have an appropriately modest criterion of success, paraphrasing poems is not at all problematic, as no sensible paraphraser aims "to provide an alternative way of experiencing the poem."³ A judicious paraphrasing can firm up our grasp of a poem, helping to orient us in a conceptual and emotional landscape that the original leaves less than sufficiently clear. The point is, rather, that it is a mistake to consider the paraphrased version as preserving all that is poetically significant in the original or as an equally effective articulation that may be substituted for the original without doing it any disservice. Even worse than this equal-footing view is taking the meaning of the poem simply to *be* the paraphrase, as if the purpose of poetic engagement were precisely to find just the right paraphrase, the poem counting as an obstacle, an imperfect articulation or mere coded form of the meaning sought, the paraphrased form being a clearer therefore superior articulation. Paraphrases may be better or worse, more or less helpful in engaging poetry; but except in the case of a language class exercise, they do not constitute the *point* of reading poetry.

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The first part of Lepore's account considers poems to be *hyperintensional* contexts, "linguistic environments in which replacing an expression with its synonym changes meaning."⁴ As we cannot substitute synonyms in the hyperintensional context of quotation, so too, Lepore says, do we find synonym substitution in poems to be unsupportable. To illustrate, he asks us to consider a stanza from Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner":

And through the drifts the snowy clifts
Did send a dismal sheen:
Nor shapes of men nor beasts we ken—
The ice was all between.⁵

We cannot substitute the ostensible synonym 'luster' for 'sheen' here, since this works "to break the bind between the lines and thereby alters the poem itself."⁶

Lepore then offers the second part of his proposal: that "a poem is partly constituted by its own articulation."⁷ It is this articulate aboutness that accounts for poetic hyperintensionality, and it is such hyperintensionality that accounts for the heresy of paraphrase thesis.

On Lamarque's appraisal, "Lepore's suggestion is ingenious and, if correct, has the merit of taking some of the mystery out of the semantics of poetry."⁸ Despite such praise, however, he is skeptical: "is it true that poems are even partially *about* their own articulation? That seems doubtful in itself, quite apart from the fact that it doesn't explain their value."⁹ For Lamarque, what a poem is about, rather, "is its finegrained content identified by ... but not equivalent to, its particular mode of articulation."¹⁰

Suppose that 'lonely' and 'lonesome' are synonyms and we substitute 'lonesome' for 'lonely' in Wordsworth's "I wandered lonely as a cloud / That floats on high o'er vales and hills."¹¹ On Lepore's view, even without "breaking the bind," this still would have resulted in a different poem, one partly about the word 'lonesome' instead of the word 'lonely.' But for Lamarque it would then be about the finegrained content identified by 'lonesome' but not by 'lonely.' Lamarque's *finegrained content* can perhaps be sliced thicker or thinner than Lepore's *articulation*, yet one presumes their thickness would be the same. However, if these views turn out to be extensionally equivalent, it is difficult to see how the difference between them makes any difference. Poetry may not be *all* "about the

language,” though it still seems crucially to be partly *about* the language! Poetic salience *becomes* poetic semantics.

We should note that hyperintensionality is often taken as attaching to those contexts in which synonyms cannot be substituted *salva veritate*. In what sense do we *fail to preserve truth* in the Coleridge stanza by substituting ‘luster’ for ‘sheen’? None whatsoever: the snowy cliffs sent forth a dismal sheen if and only if they sent forth a dismal luster. We do lose poetic effect, but this is a failure of substitution *salva pulchritudine*, not *salva veritate*. Lepore leaves unstated this crucial difference between the hyperintensionality of quotation and what he wants to call the hyperintensionality of poetry, and Lamarque fails to take it up. But what hangs in the balance is the very meaning of ‘meaning’ itself: whether words can implicitly be *part of* rather than merely *indicating* subtleties of meaning. We should note, though, that both Lepore and Lamarque depart from the Anglo-American analytic tradition in appreciating how meaning can be finer-grained than both truth and even synonymy.

Poetic hyperintensionality seems mysterious when construed as different from ordinary quotation. Since ordinary hyperintensionality occurs via quotation and mention, we might think of poetry as *either* implicitly self-quotational or as using words in a way that implicitly mentions them or certain of their properties. I distinguish quotation from mention in that quotation refers to word tokens (i.e., things said or written on an occasion) while mention designates word types (i.e., general properties). In this sense, the internal quotation marks of the sentence ‘Bob said “bachelor”’ are to be distinguished from the internal quotation marks (or *mention* marks?) of ‘The word “bachelor” begins with “b”’. But even if we deny this distinction any importance, what follows may be interpreted as applying jointly to both rather than respectively to each.

Are there reasons to think that poetry is inherently if implicitly self-quotational? Perhaps surprisingly, yes. Consider for instance the oral tradition in which a poet announces their subject with ‘*I sing...*’, no less in e.e. cummings’ “i sing of Olaf glad and big” from *W {ViVa}* than in Virgil’s “I sing of arms and the man” from the *Aeneid*.¹² Such cases are plausibly self-quotational, though not all poems are explicitly so framed. Still, given the important role of such conventions in the history of poetry – and giving the genetic fallacy, we hope, sufficiently wide berth – this originally explicit practice may continue to shape how poems generally ought to be interpreted, even if such ancient residue tends to lie dormant in most printed and spoken

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verse.¹³ Similarly, we might interpret poetry as having an implicit indexical component, holding the meaning of a poem to fragment into different *occasions* of encounter during creation, recitation, or reading. On this view there is no poem *in abstracto* except as a recipe for such occasions; thus poetry is framed as an inherently performing art whose significance is to be found only through such encounters. Another possibility is to view poems as implicitly mentioning the words or word properties they involve: poetic use as mention. This may be Lepore's preferred approach.¹⁴ Consider my motivation for beginning a collection of poems with this meta-poetic definition: "*poetry / is language / masquerading / as itself.*"¹⁵ Altogether we seem to have no fewer than three decent candidates for a mechanism underlying articulate aboutness.

As one final consideration in further developing Lepore's theory, if we grant that poems are partly about their articulations (e.g., the *words* of "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner") and not just their apparent subjects (e.g., the *story* of "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner"), one may ask *to what extent* this is so. The wise if perhaps disheartening answer is: it depends, presumably on such factors as the type or genre of poetry, the degree of formalism, and the idiosyncratic or stylistic focus of the poet in question. For instance, narrative poems such as epics must focus more on plot than do lyric poems in which narrative is not even necessarily present. The more formalist a poem's leanings, likewise, the more attention will be paid to the articulate properties of language rather than to more standard referential and other uses. More pointedly, when a Mallarmé or an e.e. cummings lays a poem out on the page, everything from the spacing to the typeface may be deemed part of the poem's articulated meaning. Such poems may or may not be partly about ostensible subjects as well, but when they are they are given correspondingly less emphasis.

This suggests a conception of relative aboutness in poetry lying on a continuum between poles of language use that are, in turn, purely about the ostensible subject (i.e., prose) and purely about the articulation itself (i.e., mention), with poetry in between, with some degree of articulate emphasis and a complementary degree of subject emphasis. More emphasis on articulation will correspond to less emphasis on the ostensible subject and vice versa. This continuum view has vital implications. First, the heresy of paraphrase thesis might not apply with equal strength to all, or even *to all*, poetry, some of which intuitively allows for variorum without loss of poetic identity.¹⁶ Second, we may come to consider not just poetry but language in general as lying on such a continuum of relative aboutness. The difference

between poetry and prose, then, becomes one of degree – prose as tending *less* toward rhythmic stress, and so on, with some prose writers being, for their stylistics, almost poets. This would apply, statistically, to the *classes* of poetic and prosaic texts rather than helping us decide, say, whether a given text belongs to one or the other category. Just as prose poetry so distinguishes itself from other verse, some prose, for its poetic qualities, stands apart from the prosaic. Even as we blur the distinction between poetry and prose, it is in such articulate subtleties that we find the joints and joys of verse.

Yet questions remain. What determines a poem's degree of articulate aboutness: poet's intention, the poem itself, or reader response? What is the underlying mechanism: quotational, indexical, or use-as-mention? How much articulate aboutness, if any, does poetry require? If it is not articulate aboutness, or hyperintensionality, or the heresy of paraphrase, much less rhyme or rhythm, that marks something as poetry, what if anything does? Are we at the mercy of some arbitrary convention, or – equally unprincipled and mercurial – some tyrannous artworld faction, “The Republic of Verse”? These questions need answers, since ultimately what is at stake is the very meaning of ‘meaning’ itself.¹⁷

Notes

- 1 Ernie Lepore, "The Heresy of Paraphrase: When the Medium Really Is the Message," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 33 (2009), 177–197; Lepore, "Poetry, Medium and Message," *New York Times*, July 31, 2011, accessed October 7, 2017, <https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/07/31/beyond-translation/>.
- 2 Lepore, "Heresy of Paraphrase," 177. 'Heresy of paraphrase' is a phrase apparently coined by Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (London: Methuen, 1947), 192.
- 3 Peter Kivy, "On the Unity of Form and Content," in *Philosophies of Arts: An Essay in Differences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 104, 105.
- 4 Lepore, "Heresy of Paraphrase," 195.
- 5 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," in *The Major Works*, ed. H.J. Jackson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000 [1817]), 50.
- 6 Lepore, "Heresy of Paraphrase," 195.
- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 Peter Lamarque, "Semantic Finegrainedness and Poetic Value," in *The Philosophy of Poetry*, ed. John Gibson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 26.
- 9 *Ibid.*, original emphasis.
- 10 *Ibid.* See also Peter Lamarque, "The Elusiveness of Poetic Meaning," *Ratio* 22, no. 4 (2009), 398–420.
- 11 William Wordsworth, "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud," in *The Pocket Book of Verse*, ed. M. Edmund Speare (New York: Pocket Books, 1940 [1815]), 91.
- 12 e.e. cummings, "i sing of Olaf glad and big," in *100 Selected Poems* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1959), 37.

- 13 See Anna Christina Soy Ribiero, “The Spoken and the Written: An Ontology of Poems,” in *The Philosophy of Poetry*, ed. John Gibson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 140.
- 14 Indeed, he likens poetry to “other forms of mentioning”: Lepore, “Poetry, Medium and Message,” pars. 16, 19.
- 15 Jason Holt, “Definition,” in *Inversed* (Tucson: Anaphora Literary, 2014), 13, original emphasis.
- 16 Ribiero, “The Spoken and the Written,” 137–138.
- 17 Earlier versions of this essay were presented at the Canadian Philosophical Association at Ryerson University and the Poetry and Philosophy conference at Memorial University (Grenfell Campus). Thanks to participants at those conferences and two anonymous reviewers for helpful comments.

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