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I.3 Poetic Language

Poeticity, quality of difference, and perception

One of the central ideas of twentieth-century literary theory was defining poetic language by its quality of difference. The concept of *literariness* or *poeticity* was introduced by Russian Formalism. It denotes the specific qualities of literary language, which is distinct from the habitual language of ordinary communication due to its *aesthetics of estrangement*. In this understanding, literary language defamiliarizes and disrupts perception and foregrounds the materiality of the text. Due to its intensified use of poetic language, poetry is sometimes considered to be “literature in its rarest, its quintessential form” (Harrington 2009, 269). The Presidential Address inauguration ceremony in the U.S. is a good example of this, where “the mere presence of a poem signals a move into a different, oftentimes idealized, communicative register that, while it is perhaps part of the everyday and not immune from commodification, is nonetheless separate from the quotidian” (Bean and Chasar 2011, 6). For instance, when poet Amanda Gorman solemnly recited the lines: “We’ve learned that quiet isn’t always peace | And the norms and notions of what ‘just is’ | Isn’t always justice” (2021, n.p.) from her presidential poem “The Hill We Climb” at Joe Biden’s inauguration in January 2021, the slant rhyme of “just is” with “justice” made the audience “stumble” and pay particular attention to the latter term. In her live performance at the National Mall, the inaugural poet further underlined this wordplay through elegant hand gestures and her differentiated intonation, in particular, by using gestural quotation marks before and after “just is,” and then slightly hesitating during and making a dramatic pause after “justice,” a term of central relevance to the American constitution.

Literary language, and particularly that of poetry, can differ from everyday language on three levels: First, it may exhibit different uses of linguistic signs (pragmatics); second, it may change and extend their modes of signification (semantics); and third, it may contain deviations from the usual ways in which words are combined and ordered (syntax) (cf. Saße 1980, 698). However, the quality of difference is not an essential feature of poetic language – a lack of linguistic adornment or literary devices could be perceived as “poetic” as well, in that it defies genre expectations and consequently deautomatizes the recognition of aesthetic norms – Jurij Lotman introduced the notion of the “minus device” to describe such cases (1977, 65). Hence, a text can have poeticity attributed to it “if it establishes a relationship that would not exist without this deviation” from such norms (Fricke 1981, 101; trans. CB; see also Hansen-Löve 2021, 286) – regardless of

whether it makes excessive use of poetic stylistic devices or none at all. At the same time, elements of poetic language can also be found in non-literary contexts. For instance, they are rather commonplace in advertising. Alienated proverbs displayed on trash bins in Hamburg, urging inhabitants to make use of them, serve as an example here: The pedestrian's attention is attracted by what Roman Jakobson called the "palpability of signs" (1960, 356). The unexpected language play on trash bins – changing idiomatic phrases such as *selten so wohl gefühlt* [rarely felt so well] to *selten so wohl gefüllt* [rarely filled so well] – is an example of how poetic language may work in everyday contexts.

According to Jakobson, language contains six functions of varying dominance. The → I.2 POETIC FUNCTION focuses on "the message for its own sake" (Jakobson 1960, 356) – that is, on the materiality of signs in such a way that "the word is felt as a word, and not a mere representation of the object being named" (Jakobson 1987, 378). Jakobson's main argument is that poeticity "is not a supplementation of discourse with rhetorical adornment but a total re-evaluation of the discourse and of all its components whatsoever" (1960, 377). Its central aim, palpability, is achieved by means of self-referential language (→ I.4 POETOLOGICAL POETRY), generated through emphasis: "The function of poetic language consists in the maximum of [sic!] foregrounding of the utterance. [. . .] the more an act is [. . .] foregrounded, the more completely conscious does it become" (Mukařovský 2007, 19). Foregrounding oral or written literary language leads to an awareness of the sounds, words, literary tropes, and other poetic devices used. In the digital age, poetic deviation is sometimes reinforced through technology (→ II.4 RECORDED AND AUDIOLITERARY POETRY). Jörg Piringer's digital sound poem "Die deutsche Sprache" (1999), for instance, presents an artificial speaker uttering the dissected vowels of the title words as well as those of further statements on the German language, cut into small, rhythmical sound units in order to simultaneously foreground and alienate the content as well as the materiality of the language itself. These kinds of accidental creations, neologisms, and artificial languages were explored by Dadaism and Russian Futurism in the early twentieth century and by the neo-avant-gardes of the 1960s (see Schaffner 2005).

Lucy Alford claims that "poetic attention is unique and in some ways primary to aesthetic attention in general" because, "by virtue of its form," the poem "transfigures that attention into a distinct and dynamic attentional mode" (2020, 14). Although she speaks of form here, it is the language use described above that leads to this intensified awareness: "Poetic language enables a heightening and concentration of the attention through the reduction and restriction of language so that within the pressurized space of the poem each word must work hard, hold a lot, and becomes a thick concentration of itself" (Alford 2020, 36). Empirical studies have confirmed such genre-specific reading

strategies for poetry (see Blohm et al. 2020): Through “disfluency effects,” poetic diction “increases the cognitive complexity of grammatical and semantical processing during comprehension” (Menninghaus and Blohm 2020, 705), which slows down and prolongs reception when compared to, for instance, prose. The poeticity of poetry is thus achieved through the qualities of difference in poetic language and the ways in which they are made perceptible.

Excess structuring and poetic thickness

Poetry employs a wide variety of formal and stylistic devices. The language it uses is dense and characterized by the repetition of leitmotifs and purposeful variations. In particular, equivalences and parallelistic elements create coherence and “multilayered patterns of recurrence,” such as “varied repetitions of the syntax and/or semantics of entire lines” as well as “recurrences at lower, sound-related levels of linguistic organizations, such as meter, rhyme, alliteration, and assonance” (Menninghaus and Blohm 2020, 706, 708). Non-linguistic elements (see Fabb 2010) like versification, strophic organization, and enjambement also contribute to poeticity, giving rise to caesuras and accentuations (→ I.8 VERSE, STANZA, AND VERSIFICATION; I.9 RHYME, METER, AND RHYTHM). In addition, poetry is characterized by “tonal peculiarities (onomatopoeia), deformations of word form, unusual word order (inversions), and much more” (Burdorf 2015, 21). Contemporary spoken-word performances and sound poetry enhance these features by means of their oral presentation (→ II.2 LIVE ORAL POETRY), for instance, by combining beatboxing with verse, as in the performances by spoken-word poet Dalibor Markovič (cf. Dürr and Keylin 2024, 242–243), or by incessantly iterating single words or sounds (cf. Matter 2024, 156–169).

Such devices of “complicating form” (Shklovsky 1990 [1917], 6) make poetic language “intransparent,” thus hindering “absorbing” modes of reading (Bernstein 1987, 19, 41) and listening that are commonplace in the reception of everyday language – that is, reception modes focusing on the content and information given. An “antiabsorptive formal effect” on the level of the written text may, for instance, be created through “highly disruptive punctuation & obscure or elusive allusions” (Bernstein 1987, 19). Again, it is the quality of difference that is emphasized:

The specific technique of poetry is, in particular, activating primary and secondary linguistic forms (phonetic and rhythmic prosodic forms, grammar – that is, morphological and lexical semantic forms – as well as phraseology, tropes and figures of speech), uncovering them, making them productive, densifying them, reshaping, and exhibiting them. (Helmstetter 1995, 30; trans. Benthien et al. 2019, 115)

Poeticity is evoked through the intensified use of a poem's linguistic material. The shaping of primary and secondary linguistic forms results in density and complexity. A brief example of such poetic density is a haiku by Richard Wright:

The creeping shadow
Of a gigantic oak tree
Jumps over the wall. (Wright 2012, 179)

The poem opens with an eerie, perplexing image that is seemingly deciphered in the second verse, only to be both completed and re-mystified in the third, since “jumping over a wall” is a sudden, intense form of movement that is more likely to be attributed to humans or animals than to trees and their shadows (the same holds true for the verb “to creep”). The reader of the haiku likewise has to “jump” in their reading back to the first line in order to understand the last. The brevity of the haiku form and its structure of three verses of five, seven, and five syllables is used here to capture a dynamic single image or “flash of thought.”

As this example also shows, all the components of a poem are “intertwined,” forming “multiple interrelationships” (Mukařovský 2007, 21); which is, of course, more evident in longer poems. In fact, lyric poetry can be defined by this very notion of interconnectedness: “The specific characteristic of a poetic text is that it significantly increases the number of structural *levels* of speech, which make it possible to establish complex relationships between those structural *elements*” (Helmstetter 1995, 30; trans. Benthien et al. 2019, 115). Rudolf Helmstetter implicitly refers to Jürgen Link's notion of lyric poetry as the paradigm of “excessively structured” literary texts:

That which seems to constitute the “tone” [*Stimmung*] in poetry is based on the fact that the way poetic texts are constituted tends to layer plural levels of meaning on top of each other, i.e., multiple partial structures in the manner of a multi-vocal musical movement. In this way, a synthetic texture is created that we will call excess structuring. (Link 1977, 245; trans. Benthien et al. 2019, 115)

Link's notion of excess structuring corresponds both to Viktor Shklovsky's device of complicating form and Jakobson's concept of the poetic function (→ I.2 POETIC FUNCTION). Excess structuring is not an aim in itself or merely used to distinguish poetry from other genres (or natural language from artistic language); rather, it has a concrete function:

A complicated artistic structure, created from the material of language, allows us to transmit a volume of information too great to be transmitted by an elementary, strictly linguistic structure. It follows that the information (content) given can neither exist nor be transmitted outside this artistic structure. (Lotman 1977, 10–11)

Monika Rinck's "Ritterspiele" may serve as an example. In this poem, the lyrical subject is depicted as many disparate things and beings, including a larva, a brand, a female employee, sent off ("Angestellte, Losgeschickte"), a cloudburst, a ratchet, and – quite enigmatically – "als Wesen, das sich immer freikaufen muss und dem dies niemals gelingt" [as a being that always has to buy itself free and never succeeds]. This bizarre assortment culminates in: "Das Ich als Fabrik, als zaghafte Zeugin der zittrigen Schönrednerei. Als *Master* | *of Zusammenfassung*" (Rinck 2018, 25). Here, the subject manifests itself as a "factory," as a female "timid witness to a quivering blandishment [or whitewashing]," as well as a – grammatically masculine – "*master of summary*." The formula "zaghafte Zeugin der zittrigen Schönrednerei" is a nearly perfect pentameter dactyl, strongly alliterating on the letter "z," and is, in its reference to adorned language ("Schönrednerei"), poetological as well (→ I.4 POETOLOGICAL POETRY).

In poetry, linguistic elements are connected not by syntax alone but also by various other layers, to the effect that "[e]quivalence is promoted to the constitutive device of the sequence" (Jakobson 1960, 358). Words and images are "related to each other not only syntagmatically, by contiguity, but also paradigmatically, i. a. as they are related to other words that could be substituted for them" (Berry 2012, 1056; see also Lotman 1977, Ch. 5). In the Rinck example, it is ostentatious alliteration that comes into play as a further, paradigmatic level of linking words to each other. The poet seems to have chosen the words due to their acoustic correspondence alone, as their combination seems artificial and even puzzling.

Charles Bernstein and Rafe McGregor independently developed the notion of *poetic thickness*. From Bernstein's perspective, the density of a poetic composition emerges in the interaction between the poem and the reader:

The thickness of writing between
the reader & the poem is constitutive for the poem
of its visibility & for the reader
of the outer limit of his or her absorption
in the poem. It is not an obstacle
between them, it is their means
of communication. (1987, 64)

McGregor defines "poetic thickness" as "the inseparability of poetic form and poetic content in the experience of a work of poetry such that neither form nor content can be isolated without loss of work identity" (2014, 56). Both authors emphasize the act of reception – the latter speaks of "experience" and refers to Peter Lamarque's claim that "[r]eading a poem as *poetry* demands the assumption of form-content unity" not given in a text but as "something that the practice of reading poetry *imposes* on a work" (2009, 411).

Even though these theorists assume the primacy of the experiential dimension of poetic language, it may also be a feature of poetry writing in itself – as demonstrated by, for instance, the trend in contemporary poetics toward amalgamating linguistic domains and realms of knowledge. This is also evident in Rinck’s poem: “The defining figure of thought in new poetry is [. . .]: to defy supposed opposites, to transcend them. [. . .] Put into words, it would be something like ‘experimental experiential poetry’ and ‘post-pop avant-garde’ at the same time” (Metz 2018, 27; trans. CB). Christian Metz illustrates the poetics of contemporary (German language) poetry with this triad, combining previous poetic innovations like the *Erlebnislyrik* [experiential poetry] of the Goethe era with the literary avant-gardes of the early twentieth century and recent pop literature. Thus, the recognition of aesthetic norms is deautomatized once again due to unexpected stylistic combinations.

Daniel Falb’s poetry book *Orchidee und Technofossil* [Orchid and techno fossil] is another good example of this trend – and a poetic examination of man-made climate change in the Anthropocene. One of the long poems is “Svalbard Paem” (“Paem” as a play on *poem*), the title being a kind of embodiment of poetry (cf. Falb 2018, 9–29). Its polyphonic first-person subject is, among others, the Svalbard Seed Vault on the island of Spitsbergen, a project of the Global Crop Diversity Trust for long-term storage. In a highly contemporary and meta-reflexive manner, the question of species preservation is linked to that of language conservation. The third “Tael” of the poem – a play on the English noun *tale* and the German noun *Teil* [part], thus also referring to the aesthetic strategy of combining genres – curiously looks back from the present to poetry of the “now,” which needs to be stored somewhere in order to survive, just like the seeds of dying plants: as a kind of “gene code” of a bygone era, a “language fossil,” and an obsolete technology. Falb brings together the complex languages of the natural sciences, botany, linguistics, and digital technology, creating a dense, new form of poetic diction while simultaneously defying genre expectations on multiple levels.

Ambiguity and polysemy

In a poem by Christóbal Bianchi, the lyrical subject perceives rain in the garden as well as “las flores de la pluma” [flowers that spring from the pen/feather] as a metaphor for the words and verse that they “whisper” to the lyrical addressee and that are figuratively carried by the wind (2011, 69). The speaker seems to view natural phenomena – wind, rain, flowers, feathers – as media and makes use of their semantic ambiguity as well. In the literary tradition, the language of

poetry is characterized by its heightened imagery and linguistic complexity, created by the use of rhetorical figures and tropes (cf. Rohowski 2012, 423–425). Although poets still apply such rhetorical means – as the example of Bianchi’s metaphor “las flores de la pluma” shows – their relevance, at least in German and Anglophone poetry, has diminished in comparison to that of classical texts. This is particularly evident when it comes to tropes that encompass entire poems, such as allegory. Contemporary writers quote or ironically allude to these tropes by making intertextual references to earlier works, but they seldom produce allegorical or symbolic poems. Even though the use of such literary imagery is an important area of poetic language study when it comes to classical poetry, it has less relevance in the present, as evidenced by the fact that there is hardly any current research on this topic. It is therefore unnecessary to list figures and tropes here (relevant articles can be found, e.g., in the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*). Rather, it makes sense to briefly address approaches to the characteristics of contemporary poetic language. There are two areas in particular: First, the use of ambiguous, polysemous language, which, in the “global age,” often goes hand in hand with multilingualism and code-switching (cf. Ramazani 2020, Ch. 9; → III.6 MULTILINGUALISM RESEARCH); second, poetic meaning created by kinetic writing or oral performance. Ambiguity as an “intrinsic [. . .] feature of poetry” (Jakobson 1960, 370–371) is “valued [. . .] positively as a source of richness rather than imprecision” (Ramos 2012, 44).

Cia Rinne’s *archives zaroum* (2008) was an online project developed together with visual artist Christian Yde Frostholm. It is a good example of ambiguity created through kinetic script and multilingualism. It was based on Rinne’s poetry book *zaroum* (2001) and was presented until recently on the platform Afsnit P. Here, the multiplication of structural layers created both by linguistic means and visual design already present in Rinne’s book was further enhanced through the layout of the webpage and its moving script and letters. The digital work constantly shifted between engaging viewers by requiring them to take certain actions – e.g., clicking on words – and enforcing their passivity by presenting surprising and unexpected *kinetic text* (see Knowles 2015): Letters, syllables, or words that continued to move on their own after the viewer had activated them. This translation of concrete poetry into the digital realm was motivated by the dominant aspect of this work: its multilingualism. It was often possible to pronounce words in different ways depending on the choice of language, creating ambiguity and alienation – for instance, in a slowly unfolding wordplay reminiscent of nonsense-poetry: “i am what i am what i ami a mia mi ami a miami amen.” Some of the words were presented in more than one language – and because they were all written in lowercase letters and remained “mute,” they were polysemic. In contrast to verbal speech, script does not dissolve this ambiguity.

José Olivarez' book poem "Gentefication" is an example of multilingualism and code-switching in contemporary poetic language. Its opening lines are:

I plant a grain of sand in the new-organic-juice spot
 in el barrio. Soon, donkeys shit big stinky shits
 on carrot containers. our tíos y tías smoking cigarettes
 & taking up all the plugs. the grain of sand grows
 into a cactus & mi Abuelita Jacinta is back
 with the living. she's kicking the juicers out
 of her kitchen & making masa [. . .]. (Olivarez 2018, 64)

Olivarez's grotesque imagery of a giant cactus growing out of (imaginary) sand "planted" by the annoyed lyrical subject in front of a hipster bar in Chicago ("El Barrio" refers to Chicago's Mexican neighborhood, Little Village), and his portrayal of a plucky grandma chasing away its customers, is permeated by offensive bilingualisms containing colloquial and familiar Spanish terms. The poem creates the impression of a huge "we," subverting all efforts to get rid of those "stinky" Mexican-Americans and their stereotypical animal in favor of a clean, healthy, and overpriced organic store. The ironic title "Gentefication" – instead of gentrification – alludes to the goal of the resident "people" (*gente* in Spanish) to reclaim their neighborhood. This example shows how languages, sociolects, colloquialisms, and the uncommon use of ampersands create a contemporary poetic idiom that articulates protest by means of disruption.

These two final examples demonstrate, on the one hand, how poetry employs ambiguous and polysemic language as a poetic device, creating a "palpability of signs" and "foregrounding" the words and sounds themselves, reinforced at times by kinetic script. On the other hand, they illustrate how, today, this is often achieved by means of multilingualism and code-switching, which not only lead to self-reflexive poetic language games, like in *archives zaroum*, but are also used, as in "Gentefication," with a political agenda (→ III.5 POSTCOLONIAL STUDIES), and which can be viewed in a similar way to rap or spoken-word poetry (→ II.2 LIVE ORAL POETRY). Such new forms of excess structuring and poetic thickness also require the slowing-down of reception and a process of decoding linguistic signs. Thus, the theories of poeticity and poetic language that were developed in the twentieth century are still relevant when it comes to addressing poetry in the digital age.

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