

# ***On the (Seeming) Incompatibility Between Poetry and Philosophical Inquiry***

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ABSTRACT. Poetry as a mode of philosophizing can reasonably be considered a failure when making the following moves: from the experientially particular to general content (by means of abstract thought); from ordinary pre-reflective thinking (a contingent thought someone happened to have) to philosophically rigorous thought (which is rationally grounded); from domestic conceptions (connections of thought made by individual readers) to public conceptions (why these connections are relevant to our general, collective understanding). These problems arise when trying to meet the three main requirements of philosophical inquiry; generality, rationality, and justification. In order to show that the thinking involved in reading a poem is akin to the thinking involved in philosophical inquiry, poetry must make the right kind of moves in thought and meet these fundamental philosophical demands. In this article, I offer a defence of the view that poetry can make a significant and valuable contribution to philosophical inquiry when faced with these three problems.

## ***1. Introduction***

The reason often given for rejecting the view that poetry can make a valuable and significant contribution to philosophical inquiry is that poetry fails to meet the fundamental demands of generality, rationality and justification.

This worry about poetry is motivated by a particular view of philosophical inquiry, such as that offered by Anthony Quinton: "Philosophy is rationally critical thinking, of a more or less systematic kind about the general nature of the world (metaphysics or theory of existence), the justification of belief (epistemology or theory of knowledge), and the conduct of life (ethics or theory of value)" (Quinton, 1995, p. 666). On a standard

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model, philosophical inquiry is taken to be primarily concerned with abstract thought (about ideas) as opposed to concrete thought (about things) in order to achieve its project of establishing general truths about the nature of the world and human life through the articulation of general propositions, through critical thinking, rationality and justification.

But poetry, on the other hand, is often characterised as being the product of an ‘overflow of feeling’ both expressing subjective experience and giving rise to a subjective experience for the reader as they respond to the content together with the mode of presentation. The heightened sensory experience of the reader is achieved through the use of images and aesthetic features of the poem to express feelings. On this view, the experience of reading poetry does not offer the appropriate quality of thought for philosophical inquiry. Poetry seems more concerned with fineness of detail invoking our imaginative and emotional faculties thus supposedly moving us further away from general, reasoned and justified thought. Lamarque comments: “Meaning in poetry is fine-grained and context-sensitive to a degree that is not exhibited or demanded elsewhere” (Lamarque, 2009a, p. 415).

In this paper I will discuss three challenges for the view that poetry can contribute to philosophical inquiry and show how these issues arise from the philosophical demands of generality, rationality and justification. It is only by getting clearer about the problem that we can hope to find a positive account of poetry as philosophy.

## ***2. From Abstract Thought to Philosophically General Content***

The first problem is that poetry does not appear to involve a suitable level of abstract thought. Where philosophy seeks to establish truths or knowledge about the general nature of *x* by thinking abstractly about *x*, poetry seems instead to focus on the experientially particular features of an *x*, asking the reader to imagine some *x* and consider that *x* in a particular way. To illustrate, consider the following poem by Keith Douglas:

How to kill  
Under the parabola of a ball,

a child turning into a man,  
I looked into the air too long.  
The ball fell in my hand, it sang  
in the closed fist: Open Open  
Behold a gift designed to kill.

Now in my dial of glass appears  
the soldier who is going to die.  
He smiles, and moves about in ways  
his mother knows, habits of his.  
The wires touch his face: I cry  
NOW. Death, like a familiar, hears

and look, has made a man of dust  
of a man of flesh. This sorcery  
I do. Being damned, I am amused  
to see the centre of love diffused  
and the wave of love travel into vacancy.  
How easy it is to make a ghost.

The weightless mosquito touches  
her tiny shadow on the stone,  
and with how like, how infinite  
a lightness, man and shadow meet.  
They fuse. A shadow is a man  
when the mosquito death approaches.

Here we are presented with a sniper shooting a soldier and we are asked to consider this sniper's response to the killing of that soldier, focusing on

his experiences and how he perceives the killing. The poem seems to require us to imagine the shooting of the soldier from the perspective of the sniper and to consider the features of this image as described. Consider in particular the final stanza which asks us to see the soldier he shoots in a particular way: Here we are being asked to see the death of the soldier as the fusion of a man with a bullet, which serves to affect how we are to perceive the killing. We are also responding to the mode of presentation of the poem, how the poetic features (such as rhyme, rhythm and metre) make us feel and the associations this suggests to us. The quality of thought involved in reading the poem is sensory, experientially rich and perspectival.

Mark Rowe sums up the problem as follows: “The reason most commonly adduced for supposing that poetry cannot deal with abstractions is the belief that poetry should summon up mental images of the things it describes. As abstract thought is, by its very nature, unimageable, it cannot therefore have a place in poetry” (Rowe, 1996, p. 1). And equally summoning the emotions seems bound to subjective experience, since I respond emotionally to the way the poem strikes me.

There appears to be something essentially non-abstract in reading poetry because attention to and appreciation of the mode of presentation is involved in our engagement with the poem. Therefore, poetry seems to offer a different quality of thought from the abstract thinking required by philosophical inquiry. To put it another way, the worry is that the poetic experience encourages us to dwell on particulars, especially sensory particulars (eg. images of particular things) and this seems to be in tension with the kind of abstract thinking required for philosophical inquiry. Lamarque writes: “In each case abstract thought is associated with the opposite of the items [involved in reading poetry]: not sensuous and emotional but cerebral and rational; not personal and subjective but impersonal and universal; not imagistic and metaphorical but intellectual and literal; not particular and concrete but general and abstract” (Lamarque, 2009b, p. 38). If this is right, then it seems that poetry is not akin to philosophical inquiry.

Of course, it would be a mischaracterisation of both philosophy and poetry to say that philosophy deals only in abstract thinking to establish some general content and that poetry does not involve any abstract thinking at all. However, when we talk of philosophical inquiry being concerned

with generality and abstractions we do not mean this in a trivial way, as Lamarque notes, every description involves general content: “There can be no description without generality and no poetry without description. So poetry, like any discursive writing, cannot avoid the general even in its search for the particular” (Lamarque, 2009b, p. 40). The crucial difference for Lamarque is of degree and focus; philosophical inquiry is focused on establishing some general truth although it may appeal to particulars in its project, whereas poetry appears focused on the particular and uses abstract thought to enhance our way of perceiving that thing, which does not appear to offer any insight into the nature of that x. He wants to show that although general content is involved in the poem it is not functioning in a fully abstract way: priority is given to the particular. We are asked to perceive the sniper’s shooting of the soldier in a particular way but does that offer us an insight into the nature of killing? Even if it does offer us some insight, Lamarque would maintain that the poem functions to describe some experience and the general thoughts that emerge enhance this experience.

However, there is an assumption at the heart of Lamarque’s argument, which is that the only route to establishing philosophically-worthy content is via abstract thought. It is this point that I think can be challenged. The issue is not really with whether abstract thinking is involved but moreover whether we are able to get at philosophically general content through the kind of thinking involved in reading poetry. In order to show that poetry is able to make the philosophical link between experientially particular and general content, we must show that poetry is focused on establishing (in the right kind of way) something of suitable level of generality rather than only being concerned with enhancing our perception of things perspectivaly.

The poem uses non-abstract thought to get to general content in the form of themes and thematic concepts. Themes are ideas and thoughts of a general nature which organise and unify the content of the reading experience, drawing binding relations between elements of the poem. Lamarque and Olsen argue that theme is not merely a universal feature of literary works but an essential feature of any literary work (see Lamarque and Olsen, 1994, pp. 411-17). And so considering the importance of themes in understanding and appreciating poetry shows how general content emerges

through reading poetry.

In reading the poem 'How to Kill' general ideas and concepts emerge concerning the nature of killing in war (which is indicated by the title); this poem is telling us what is required in order to kill at war and we are trying to grasp this though the experientially particular. We are also considering the general idea of a soldier<sup>1</sup>. When I am considering the sniper's response in the poem I am considering whether he meets my understanding of what a soldier is and whether he meets my expectations of how one ought to behave in war. So although the poem offers the reader a vivid image of the shooting of a soldier, it appears that this experience somehow enables the reader to consider the poem on a thematic level. And such themes are not merely 'contingent by-products' of the reading experience because these general ideas are required in order to make sense of the poem as a coherent and consistent whole.

Themes will be general in nature. In trying to sort out thematic relevance when reading poetry necessarily involves reflection on the subjective experience, on the mode of presentation and our responses (including imaginative and emotional). In this way we can see how general thoughts can emerge from non-abstract thinking. The reading experience involves coherence in the form of themes. What these general thoughts are that make sense of this poem are not stated explicitly – the reader is required to allow the emergence of general content in the way they make sense of the poem. We can sometimes experience non-abstract thinking (that has a subjective quality and is perspectively anchored) but the content is perfectly general<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> One may worry that this concept is not of the same level of generality as our other philosophical concepts but a concept such as soldier has normative commitments embedded in its meaning, standards which reflect our core values concerning human life. As the concept soldier is related to concepts such as war, killing and good, which seem to be more like the usual concern of philosophical inquiry, what we come to see in our use of the concept soldier will have bearing on these other concepts.

<sup>2</sup> This idea is suggested by Aristotle: "A universal is the sort of thing that a certain kind of person may well say or do in accordance with probability or necessity – this is what poetry aims at, although it assigns names [to the people]. A particular is what Alcibiades did or what he suffered" (ix, 3.2.3, p. 12). See also David Davies who interprets Aristotle as saying that something general can be gained from reading works of literature through non-abstract thinking, by engaging with the characters in a fiction: "literary

So it seems the worry here is not to do with whether poetry deals in abstractions but how a poem establishes the connection between the experientially particular and general content (its themes). Is this move sufficiently reasoned and rational? This brings us to the second problem.

### **3. *Beyond Ordinary Thinking to Philosophically Rigorous Thought***

Philosophical inquiry demands rational and rigorous thought. But poetry seems to involve ordinary thinking, appealing to our everyday pre-reflective concepts in our understanding of the poem (and grasping of its themes) and appears to be affected by how the content of the poem strikes us through the reading experience.

The poem does not involve logically valid reasoning in order to establish its themes. We do not infer or deduce something about the nature of killing at war from the description of the sniper. There is not a logical relation established or an argument offered in such description. The worry is that this general content emerges in virtue of the reader trying to make sense of the poem; the reader is not trying to make sense of the nature of killing in war but of the meaning of the poem. So the relationship between the experientially particular and theme does not appear to be the kind of relationship established in rigorous philosophical inquiry. Lamarque expresses this worry as follows: “poetry doesn’t characteristically defend its philosophical themes by argument. If we think of the themes as philosophical propositions inviting truth-appraisal then the process by which they are arrived at can readily come to seem insidious. They emerge out of particularities giving shape to subject detail but the particularities are images and fictions of an essentially perspectival nature” (Lamarque, 2009b, p. 51).

However, we might concede that the connection between the experientially particular and general is not logically valid but this does not mean that we have to give up on thinking it is rational. Zamir takes this kind of line, arguing that some questions of philosophy can only be investigated

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fiction may be viewed as providing readers with an understanding of general principles. The narrated events may explicitly or implicitly exemplify and make salient to the reader general principles – moral, metaphysical, psychological, for example – which govern the unfolding of events in the real world” (Davies, 2007, p. 145).

using rational but nonvalid means. He writes: "Drawing an inference from an example is not valid in the traditional sense: the impossibility of accepting a conjunction of the premises coupled with a negation of the conclusion. Accepting the need for nonvalid yet rational argumentation of this kind stems from the recognition that many of the beliefs relevant to philosophical reasoning are, for the most part, contingent" (Zamir, 2007, pp. 8-9).

Zamir argues that you cannot infer a general conclusion validly from an example and they cannot, therefore, be used to form valid arguments. You can't conclude everything from an example and so it is a matter of judgment what is the most significant, relevant and rational aspects to draw on: "Literature's capacity to trigger the imagination and/or the emotions creates sensitive judgments and an enhanced sense of what matters" (Zamir, 2007, p. 24).

The philosophical questions Zamir has in mind are those which are concerned with understanding aspects of human experience, such as issues concerning morality, where he emphasises our everyday moral reasoning and moral education. Zamir gives the examples of love and parenting which he argues 'do not lend themselves to rigorous justification' (Zamir, 2007, p. 11), yet there are more and less rational ways of investigating the nature of love and parenting. These examples suggest that rationality cannot be reduced to logical validity.

Some of our concepts are value-laden; they have standards embedded in them which have been established by the community of language users who have agreed a standard which determines firstly when it is appropriate to apply such a concept and secondly once applied, whether x has met these expectations. The concept soldier is value-laden in the sense that in order for someone to count as a soldier they have to meet certain standards, standards we appeal to in applying the concept to someone and assessing the appropriateness of their behaviour, actions, beliefs, commitments.

The claim I wish to make is that when reading certain works of poetry we are given access to the structures of our concepts and the standards embedded in them. Only then are we in a position to evaluate those standards which guide our moral judgements, for we cannot evaluate what is not explicit.

The primary philosophical function of the reading experience is to reveal the underlying structures of our thoughts including the standards and values embedded in our concepts. Charles Taylor argues, some concepts “can be explicated only by reference to a subject who experiences his world in a certain way” (Taylor, 1985, p. 53), that is, as a person for whom things matter. ‘How to Kill’ helps us to explicate the concept of a soldier, which can only be explicated by reference to a subject who endorses standards implicit in the meaning of that concept. It is for these concepts where the experience of reading poetry can facilitate such explication of the norms implicit in them because the values embedded are only meaningful in reference to how that thing figures in our lives as people.

The norms implicit in some of our concepts and the resulting expectations which we use to form our moral judgments are contingent; they have these values because of the way those things figure in our lives, we could have different norms implicit in these concepts if our lives had evolved in different conditions with different needs. Bringing these norms into focus and evaluating them is not something which we can do through valid reasoning because of the contingency of the relevant beliefs. We cannot use such beliefs as universal premises, so we cannot form valid arguments.

Also, misunderstandings or failing to notice incompatibilities resulting from the standards embedded in our concepts may be compatible with having made the right connections but not appreciating their significance and implications when applied to the world and real life situations. For example, I may have an adequate grasp of the concept soldier, having made the connections with war, killing, attack and defence. But without applying the concept myself to a situation and having an experiential grip on the beliefs and moral commitments involved, I may not be aware of the significance of what I expect of a soldier.

In order to illustrate how the poem helps us to forge explicit awareness of the standards embedded in our concept soldier, I will focus on the use of enjambment of ‘I cry/NOW’. We read and understand the words ‘I cry’ and respond instantly, forming an interpretation. These words alone suggest that his ‘cry’ is expressing distress and indicating a degree of compassion for the soldier who he is about to shoot. This interpretation is reinforced by the very human description of ‘He smiles, and moves about in ways / his mother knows, habits of his’ and the tenderness evoked by

the touching of the wires against his face.

Yet when we read 'NOW' on the next line, the words 'I cry' become extended to 'I cry NOW', changing the meaning of 'cry' from distress to a command with urgency, removing what we took to be expression of emotion. This change in meaning negates the reading of the previous line, leaving us, the readers, feeling confused and our expectations of behaviour exposed. The response to the words 'I cry' sets up an expectation of compassion, focusing our attention on the human aspect of the soldier who is about to be shot and therefore expecting the sniper to respond in a similar way. But these expectations are not met when we read on to the word 'NOW'. This causes emotional recoil, making us aware that our expectations of how one ought to respond to the killing have not been met. The effect of the enjambment is a switching of focus from the role of the soldier to the killing of a man. Reading on in the poem we must try to make sense of these two elements the soldier and the killing, which the rest of the poem is concerned with bringing together.

I must make sense of this as a unified whole, which places the demand on me as the reader to bring together my appreciation of the role of the soldier and the act of killing. But it is my emotional response that makes me unable to do this in the way that the sniper does, I cannot accept his evaluative scheme and I am left feeling disgusted at his response. This shifting focus draws together my commitments relating to how one ought to respond to killing a human and then what I expect of the soldier as a consequence of the connection between these concepts. But through my aesthetic engagement with the poem I come to recognise the perspective of the sniper and the demands of being a soldier at war and how he ought to respond to the killing of the 'enemy' soldier. By connecting these concepts from both directions in this way, the poem then reveals a tension; on the one hand I think he has not responded as he ought to but on the other I see the necessity of his response. This tension causes me to feel dissatisfied with my concept of a soldier, since I am left unsure of how to evaluate his actions, including his response to the killing.

However, could this tension have emerged through rational valid means? Considering the values embedded in the concept soldier via rational and valid means would establish wrong results (even though it correctly establishes the connections to other concepts, beliefs, etc), recommending that

we ought to talk and think about soldiers in a way that is incompatible with commitments and beliefs that we are not in fact willing or able (meaningfully) to give up. Therefore, such inquiry will have failed to interfere with how we talk and think and failed to offer workable recommendations. So in the case of the sniper, I may be able to reflect on what I think is required of a soldier and may establish through rational argumentative thinking that in order for a soldier to defend he must be prepared to kill and continue killing. But as we have seen through our engagement with the poem we can come to recognise a tension between standards which are embedded in the meaning of a soldier at war, a tension between how one ought to respond to the killing of another person and how one needs to respond in order to continue performing the required role in war.

“A nonvalid yet rational move is being embedded within an aesthetic context that facilitates forming beliefs regarding contingent claims—that is, claims that cannot be rigorously established through argumentative procedures alone” (Zamir, 2007, p. 149). Instead of thinking of the aesthetic context of the poem facilitating the forming of beliefs, we can think of the aesthetic context as facilitating explicit awareness of the structures of concepts, bringing to the fore the significance of the values embedded in them. So those commitments and beliefs which are pushing our intuitions and emotions need a different treatment; these are the commitments which our moral theories try to accommodate not seek to change. The way the poem facilitates articulation of these standards embedded in our concepts appears to be rational yet nonvalid.

#### ***4. From the Context of the Poem to Our General Understanding***

So far we have seen that poetry does make the move from the experientially particular to general content in a sufficiently rational way. However, there is still an important piece missing from the experience of reading poetry in order for it to count as a mode of philosophizing: Philosophical inquiry requires justification. Without effective justification we cannot move beyond the context of the poem and our individual subjective experience to something which will be important to general public understanding and of universal concern. Justification is required to bridge the

gap from the thoughts and interpretation of the individual reader to public understanding (with shareable reasons).

In order to discuss the issue of justification, more needs to be said about what kind of philosophical project poetry can contribute to. I want to draw on Neil Cooper's work on understanding and philosophical inquiry. He writes: "Philosophy must interfere both with the ordinary use of language and with the actual structure of our concepts and thought. For it can make recommendations about how we should structure our thought and how we should talk and think" (Cooper, 1991, p. 172). In other words, the philosophical project can be thought as one which affects our general understanding. We are not merely wanting to interfere with how an individual thinks because this supposes that we have already worked out the standards for our conceptual understanding; it can only be an issue for the individual if (as a community of language users) we are in a position to say that they have misunderstood and not met the standards of understanding required. In such inquiry we are aiming to make recommendations about what we ought to mean or how we ought to think of things in order to truly reflect on the nature of the world and/or our normative demands (the meanings reflect our values). On this view of philosophy we can see that general ordinary thought can be the thing at issue, that is, the thing we want to challenge, clarify, and provide justification for. This problem is concerned with the move from the domestic understanding of the individual (which consists of both experientially particular and abstract thought) to general public understanding.

The issue for poetry is that it seems the connection between the experientially particular and theme is restricted to the way the content of the poem strikes us during the reading experience. Although established through rational and self-critical thinking, the relevant connections are only forged because of the structure of the poem (as we saw in the use of enjambment in the poem) and it seems this does not extend beyond the experience of reading the poem (and therefore affecting the structure of our thoughts). For example, I might read 'How to Kill' and see a connection between the killing described in the poem and the general nature of killing in war but I see this connection because of the experiential network on offer in the poem. But this connection from the experientially particular to the theme of killing in war only holds in the poem; my re-

sponses are responses to the way this theme is presented in the poem. So one might think the problem with poetry is that it does not establish suitable justification for the connections made and therefore cannot interfere with general public understanding.

I now want to briefly sketch a solution to this problem, suggesting how the experience of reading does provide suitable justification. For philosophical understanding we must have a robust grasp of concepts, in other words, we must establish a deep enough grasp that we (as a community of language users) use the concept consistently and coherently with full appreciation of the values involved. In order to assess whether we do in fact have such robust grasp we must reflect on whether we are individually satisfied with the public concept. This may seem primarily like a private project but it still has implications for the public conception because it provides us with the explicit awareness of the structure of the public concept which has caused the domestic problem, giving us the terms and resources on which to evaluate the public conception.

Reading the poem 'How to Kill' causes me to feel dissatisfied with the concept of a soldier, since I am left unsure of how to evaluate the sniper's actions, particularly his response to the killing; if he meets the requirements of a soldier, he fails to meet the standard in terms of his response to the killing.

This does not just represent dissatisfaction with my own concept but with the public concept that I use to make sense of the poem. The tension in my conceptual networks does not represent a tension between beliefs that only I hold but with those publicly held beliefs that connect the concept soldier with killing. So the domestic problem becomes a problem for the public concept because we must satisfy ourselves with the meaning of such concepts. We cannot rely on an expert to resolve this tension because the norms embedded in the concept have been established by the community of language users of which we, individually, are apart of. The burden then falls on us as individuals to acknowledge this tension at the heart of our public use of soldier.

What we are aiming at in order to achieve such satisfaction is explicit awareness of the structures of our understandings of aspects of human life. Having explicit awareness of the structures of our individual conceptions puts us in an (epistemically) privileged position because once the struc-

tures that shape our concepts are made explicit we are then in a position to evaluate the structures and norms embedded in our concepts.

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