

Poetry: The Missing Link?

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1. The poetic experience as a physical event

It seems at least paradoxical that a poetic experience can occur in the absence of a complete or even partial understanding of a poem. This is all the more puzzling in view of the fact that it is especially poetry that is associated with meaningfulness. This paradox has been commented on before, both by critics and by students of literature. Writing about the opaque poetry of Lucebert, who counts among the greatest of Dutch 20th century poets, a critic notes: 'reading this poetry, one has the rare experience to enjoy something without understanding it at all' (Middag 1989). Another critic's judgement sounds similar: 'The poetry of Lucebert is enjoyable without being understandable' (van Deel 1989). In his famous Dante-essay T.S. Eliot summarized this phenomenon as follows: 'Genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood' (Eliot 1951: 238). Eliot does not speak of verbal beauty but claims that words have associations, and that the group of words IN association have associations. Eliot doesn't mention the role of sound and rhythm in this context either. His associations of Dante's Italian words, however, are difficult to imagine without taking into account the prosodic layer in poetry.

Not long ago I heard a program on a Friesian poet on the radio, one of whose poems was read aloud. A participant of the program said that although he didn't understand one word of it, he enjoyed it very much and wanted to hear some more. This appreciation is not unlike Phil Roberts' remark that 'Shakespeare survives his death not so much because his plays make such marvelous spectacles or because their plots are so fascinating as because his lines SOUND so good - and because, until recently, every reader of Shakespeare would above all LISTEN to him' (Roberts 2000: 14). We should realize that Shakespeare was almost as difficult for past readers as he is for us now. The poetic experience hinted on here is a distinctively physical one; this physical aspect of poetry is validated by the testimony of many poets that a poem is initially conceived in terms of rhythm, or in the words of Seamus Heaney: 'Poetry is bodily activity. I feel the line when I look at it, there's a musculature there. It is a kinetic action, not just an eye movement' (quoted in Williamson 1999). Also quite well known are the memoirs of Nadezhda Mandelstam, where she describes how her husband wrote poems: in the initial phase, there was always babbling, a rhythmic uttering of meaningless sounds (Mandelstam 1974). Paul Valéry talks about 'an empty structure ended as stimulus to the most conscious work' (Valéry 1958: 111). When discussing the process of writing, the Dutch poet Piet Gerbrandy notes: 'The rhythmic structure creates the poem, without it nothing happens in my mind' (De Vos 1999). There are numerous examples like these. Obviously, up until the 19th century and in the view of many 20th century poets meaning in poetry is

not felt to be primary. To put it in the words of Dylan Thomas: 'Meaning can look after itself' (quoted in Ferris 1978: 134). Paul Valéry might give those who find this statement too categorical an acceptable alternative: 'The living pendulum that has swung from SOUND to SENSE swings back to its felt point of departure, as though the very sense which is present to your mind can find no other outlet of expression, no other answer, than the very music which gave birth to it' (Valéry 1958: 72).

Goethe said that poetry is not meant for the eye: 'freilich ist die Poesie nicht für das Auge bestimmt' (Goethe [1816/1817] 1953: 179), implying that poetry was a thing for the ear. In mainstream poetry interpretation of the 20th century, however, poetry has become WORDS ON THE PAGE. This evolution is due to the enormous influence of New Criticism, a post World War I school of Anglo-American literary critical theory that insisted on the independence of the poem as a unit of meaning. The primary technique employed in the New Critical approach is a close analytic reading of a poem as a text (cf. the classics Richards 1929, Brooks & Warren 1938, Brooks 1947, and Wellek & Warren 1956). The language of poetry was claimed to differ qualitatively from the language of science or philosophy, but to convey equally valid meanings. Emphasis was laid on the connotative and associative values of words and on the multiple functions of figurative language (cf. Empson 1930). New Criticism condemned critical practices such as the intentional and affective fallacies (Wimsatt & Beardsley 1954). The affective fallacy - the misconception that arises from judging a poem by the emotional effect it produces on the reader - is especially interesting for our purposes.

As New Criticism regarded a literary work in terms of an autotelic entity, it opposed any practice that considers the effects of literature on the reader. Taking the physical pleasure caused by sound and rhythm into account was perhaps the worst among the possible fallacies. Any New Critic would therefore have rejected Emily Dickinson's criterion to distinguish genuine poetry in one of her letters to her would-be mentor T.W. Higginson: 'If I read a book it makes my whole body so cold no fire ever can warm me, I know THAT is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry. These are the only ways I know it' (Dickinson 1958: II, 473-474). Or the one by Edgar Allan Poe stated in his *The Poetic Principle*: 'I need scarcely observe that a poem deserves its title only inasmuch as it excites, by elevating the soul. The value of the poem is in the ratio of this elevating excitement' (Poe [1850] 1982: 889). Of course, features like sound and rhythm were recognized, but they would only be taken into account in so far as they were iconically motivated, i.e. prosodic features had to be integrated in the semantic layer of the poem (cf. Bronzwaer 1990). Alexander Pope's famous statement: 'The sound must seem an echo to the Sense' (Pope [1711] 1970: ii, 162) could be considered the central thought on the function of sound and rhythm in poetry - not only in New Criticism but also in almost every theory on poetry in the 20th century, in which poetry is viewed first and foremost as a special kind of knowledge. The kind of poetry New Criticism studied was that of what we roughly know as the symbolist tradition, in which a poem is considered to be trying to defy the arbitrariness of the sign or to escape from it. In symbolist poetry, the relationship between form and meaning is no

longer based on convention, but there is a strong tendency towards natural resemblance: 'Language in a healthy state presents the object, is so close to the object that the two are identified' (Eliot 1951: 327). Understandably, this kind of poetry suited the New Critics very well. Moreover, since symbolistic poetry is still at the center of the Western poetic canon, even now the method of the New Critics seems the proper and sensible - if not the only sensible way - to approach poetry. An approach that could be summarized as 'reading for meaning'.

One of the goals of New Criticism was to establish a respectable academic tradition of literary studies. The danger of an impressionistic approach to poetry obviously threatened the respectability of such an academic discipline. The affective fallacy was perhaps the greatest danger of all. Still, a highly influential poet-philosopher like Paul Valéry - himself an exponent of the symbolist movement and highly respected by many of the New Critics - argued that poetry could be characterized as the oscillation between sound and rhythm on the one hand and the sense of the poem on the other, thus stressing the SUGGESTION of meaning rather than its ESTABLISHMENT. Speaking of Swinburne's poetical language T.S. Eliot characterized its semantics as 'a hallucination of meaning' (Eliot 1951: 327). Simon Vestdijk noted in the margins of his influential post-symbolistic poetics *De glanzende kiemcel (The Sparkling Germ)* that rhythm can establish a sense of beauty and independently evoke a particular mood in the reader. Vestdijk immediately added, though, that this phenomenon is unreliable and that nothing can be said about it (Vestdijk 1950: 51-52). For Stefan Themerson this phenomenon was so threatening to his idea of poetry that he made a half-serious plea for 'semantic poetry' in order to abolish prosodic effects (Themerson 1975). Jacques Derrida's argument that poetry does not really belong to the realm of literature - which he conceives of as the praxis of modern language philosophy - precisely because of its physical, rather than its cognitive nature, is to be taken more serious (Derrida 1992: 40-41; cf. Derrida 1984 & 1991). Finally, Northrop Frye in his monumental *Anatomy of Criticism* simply states that the basic constituents of poetry are BABBLE and DOODLE, going back to CHARM and RIDDLE (Frye 1957: 275-281). In Frye's view, poems babble, they foreground prosodic features of language - such as sound and rhythm - and by doing so produce charm. Take for instance Richard Lovelace's (1618-58) fifteen-line lyric, *La Bella Bona Roba*:

I cannot tell, who loves the skeleton
Of a poor marmoset; nought but boan, boan;
Give me a nakednesse, with her cloath's on.

Such, whose white-sattin upper coat of skin,
Cut upon velvet rich incarnadin,
Has yet a body (and of flesh) within.

Sure, it is meant good husbandry in men,
Who do incorporate with aery leane,
T' repair their sides, and get their ribb agen.

Hard hap unto that huntsman, that decrees
Fat joys for all his swet, when as he sees,
After his 'say, nought but his keepers fees.

Then, Love, I beg, when next thou tak'st thy bow,
Thy angry shafts, and dost heart-chasing go,
Passe RASCALL DEARE, strike me the largest doe.

Poems doodle or riddle the reader or listener too of course. What is Lovelace's poem about? 'Contingent difficulties swarm,' George Steiner writes in his commentary on this piece of lyric: 'Once we know that a BELLA BONA ROBA is Caroline argot, very likely of Venetian provenance, for a WHORE, much falls into place' (Steiner 1978: 30). Still there is a lot left the reader is puzzled by.

The foregrounding of prosodic features and repetition is very prominent in nursery rhymes, such as:

Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall
All the King's horses and all the King's men
Couldn't put Humpty Dumpty together again

and:

Rain, rain, go away
Come again another day.

and of course in dipping or counting out rhymes, the pleasure of which frequently lies solely in rhythm. These rhymes are believed to have derived from old Celtic numbers, which are still used for counting sheep, fish, stitches in knitting etc. in some parts of England:

Eena, meena, mina, moe

or:

Hickory Dickory Dock

The rhythmical pattern and the rhyme scheme determine the organization of these pieces of language and seem to discourage an inquiry into its semantics. Poetry thus has its own principles and rules which in ordinary language are secondary and which give pleasure, physical pleasure. There seems no need at all to ask about meaning. Or to put it in other words: it is impossible or beside the point to describe the relation between semantic and non-semantic dimensions in iconic terms. Where it IS possible, as in a high-symbolist poem, the EFFECT of the poem's rhythms on the reader also goes well beyond any iconic relation.

2. The scandal of poetry

If we accept that meaningless rhythm and sound structures underlie poetry and tend to overrule the semantic layer in the act of reading a poem aloud, the question arises whether poetry in this view is language at all, to put it in the sharpest possible terms. In *Het schandaal van de poëzie* (*The Scandal of Poetry*), I have sketched a possible explanation of the non-semantic, physical aspect of the poetic experience, starting from the central hypothesis that – in terms of evolution – poetry as a sort of missing link takes up a position between age-old rituals and natural languages (De Roder 1999, 2001). Building both on ideas from Staal's extensive investigations into the structure of Vedic rituals (Staal 1983, 1989) and on Chomsky's autonomous syntax (see Chomsky 1988 for one of the best overviews), I want to argue that the building blocks and mechanisms of natural language – of which I take recursion and transformation to be fundamental interacting principles – are a further development of the meaningless utterances that form part of rituals (both the rhythmic sound sequences and the often complex ritual gestures and dances). Rituals are meaningless in the sense that they are pure acts: only the correct performance of the acts counts, not their supposed reference. As the formal building blocks and principles underlying rituals turned out to be useful for communication, natural language could evolve, which is a wonderful example of EXAPTATION in the sense of Stephen Jay Gould (Gould & Lewontin 1979, Gould & Vrba 1982). This scenario also offers an interesting account for the observation that natural language is less suited for communication than generally assumed, since syntax distorts the relation between form and meaning: the same meaning can be expressed by different syntactic structures. Optimal communication presumes a one-to-one correspondence between form and meaning, as in logic. Creating an artificial language based on natural language would therefore be inconceivable (this is one of the reasons why flawless automatic translation is an impossibility).

One of my hypotheses is that the rhythmic layer of poetry, the prosody of poetry, like syntactic structure, is an empty pattern, going back to the structural principles of ritual. Rhythmic patterns in poetry are thus instances of pure acts in the ritual sense, and as a consequence poetry is a form of language use in which the ritual basis of language is experienced. The poetic experience is a reflection of the physical sensation associated with ritual; this effect was secondary in rituals, but has become primary in poetry, another example of exaptation. According to Staal, this may also explain why even now age-old rituals are still being performed, though not very frequently: because of their pleasant and calming effect. This calls to mind Gerrit Komrij's remark that whenever he feels down, mumbling a poem by Cornelis Crul may be 'more comforting than Prozac' (Komrij 1998: 22, my translation). But also the perhaps somewhat obscure remark of Rutger Kopland that 'the world of the human body houses language' starts to make sense in this context (Kopland 1998: 99, my translation).

This first exploration of the ritual substrate of poetry raises a number of

interrelated questions, one of which is whether generally rejected and mostly 19th century theories regarding the evolution of natural language, of which Jespersen's seminal *Language* gives a convenient overview, need to be reconsidered. These theories have rather fanciful names like the TA-TA-theory, the DING-DONG theory, the POOH-POOH theory, and BOW-WOW theory. For our purposes the so-called YO-HE-HO theory is of particular interest: 'Under any strong muscular effort it is a relief to the system to let breath come out strongly and repeatedly, and by that process to let the vocal cords vibrate in different ways; when primitive acts were performed in common, they would, therefore, naturally be accompanied with some sounds which would come to be associated with the idea of the act performed and stand as a name for it' (Jespersen 1922: 415). So this theory argues that the origin of language had to be sought in singing during physical labor (which at the same time reminds us of Liana Millu, who recited Dante and Homer during hard physical labor in Auschwitz-Birkenau). In turn, the YO-HE-HO theory calls to mind Jespersen's own theory. He was convinced that expressive (not communicative) reasons motivated the emergence of language: 'Language was born in the courting days of mankind; the first utterances of speech I fancy to myself like something between the nightly love-lyrics of puss upon the tiles and the melodious love-songs of the nightingale' (Jespersen 1922: 434). Speaking of animal sounds: some utterances in the Vedic ritual reminded Staal of sounds of birds and even of frogs (the BOW-WOW theory, by the way, stated that language originates from the imitation of natural sounds, in an onomatopoeic sense) and it were bird sounds that were heard by Octavio Paz in the 'speaking in tongues' by the shamans of Puebla (Paz 1987).

Charles Darwin's TA-TA-theory, which states that the vocal organs tried to imitate bodily actions or gestures of the hand, is one of a group of theories in which a mixture of gestures and sounds is supposed to be the beginning of natural language. This mixture is often characterized as primitive. In Vedic ritual, however, we have seen that sounds and gestures are integrated in highly complex structures, from which a ritual grammar could be derived. Darwin didn't take his own theory very seriously. But it is in the modern motor theory of language origin, that Darwin's hypothesis seems to be granted a second life: it claims that the structures of language (phonological, lexical and syntactic) were derived from and modeled on the pre-existing complex neural systems which had evolved for the control of body movement (cf. the pioneering work by Robin Allott 1989). The work by Giamoco Rizzolatti et al. on mirror neurons suggests that a mirror system for gesture recognition exists in humans and includes Broca's area. They hold that 'human language evolved from a basic mechanism that was not originally related to communication: the capacity to recognise actions' (Rizzolatti & Arbib 1998: 193; see also Arbib & Rizzolatti 1997 and Rizzolatti 1999). Whatever the outcome in the future, these experiments have established a strong link between speech and action representation. At the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics in Nijmegen a group of researchers under the direction of Stephen Levinson studies the role of gesture accompanying language use (see also recent work by Frick-Horbury & Guttentag 1998).

Against the background of language primitivism and the origin of

language, the question arises to what extent my position depends on an autonomous perspective on syntax. In other words: to what extent will a functionalist perspective on language affect my hypothesis (cf. Bultinck 2000)? This is all the more pressing since generative linguists in general do not seem to have taken much note of Staal's work. An exception to this is Jan Koster (especially in his inaugural address at the University of Groningen: *Doelloze structuren, Empty Structures*), whose research into the universal nature of recursive patterns has led him to look at human artifacts, not just at syntactic patterns. The discussion between formalists and functionalists crucially bears on the question regarding the origin of language: has language developed through adaptation (Pinker 1994), or is language an example of exaptation in the sense of Stephen Jay Gould (Gould 1987); needless to say that the ritualistic view on the origin of language supports the latter hypothesis. Lerdahl & Jackendoff's (1983) attempt to develop a generative theory of tonal music fits in with this perspective on language origin quite well: both musical and poetic structures reflect a ritualistic origin, as the building blocks of musical structure exhibit a resemblance to ritual structure.

In an unpublished lecture given at the presentation of *Het schandaal van de poëzie*, Marco Haverkort suggested that some of the book's ideas are related to central concepts from evolutionary psychology. I myself am rather critical regarding the ambitions of this undertaking, in the sense Jerry Fodor is, especially with respect to art, music, and literature (Fodor 1998). However, according to Haverkort, the cognitively oriented and interdisciplinary approach that I'm hinting at in my essay might herald in a new era in the study of literature. From the perspective of the cognitive neurosciences it would be very interesting to measure electro-physiological activity of the brain while subjects read poetry, in order to determine to what extent this process differs from normal language comprehension processes. With respect to art and music, research in this direction is already well underway. The *Journal of Consciousness Studies* recently even devoted a special issue to this topic (Goguen 1999; see also Zeki 1999). If the poetic is indeed a biological category, as I suggest, the question comes up to what extent the poetic experience is a module in Jerry Fodor's sense (Fodor 1983). A number of characteristics that hold for modules, also seem to hold for the poetic experience: the effects are automatic, as we already noticed with reference to Lucebert's poetry; we do not have access to intermediary representations of our ability to enjoy poetry. The possibly modular nature of our poetic abilities still requires a lot of research, though (see De Roder & Haverkort, in preparation).

3. Ritual, recursion, grooming, and gossiping

In *Het schandaal van de poëzie* I suggested that some poetry from Latin America has a ritualistic superstratum, whereas Western European poetry has a ritualistic substratum; in other words, European poetry is much more 'textualized', in the sense of being first and foremost 'words on the page', reading here is a reading for meaning, whereas Latin American poetry makes

a much more exuberant use of sound and rhythm (the ‘speaking in tongues’ by the shamans in Puebla that Octavio Paz discusses could be of some relevance in this context). The textualization of European poetry, on the other hand, may be explained in terms of the fact that European societies never had rituals characterized by pure acts. The religious meaning of Catholic liturgical rituals for instance is as important as the fact that they should be executed correctly. Religion in Western Europe can therefore be said to be characterized by orthODOXY instead of orthoPRAXY (the Greek term for THE RIGHT ACT). Crucial in Vedic rituals and other East-Asian rituals is what is to be done according to ritual rules, not what is to be believed, thought, said or wished for.

In order to validate the above hypothesis, a number of (unsolved) questions need to be answered: what is the relation between oral poetry and its roots in ritual, as opposed to the more Western poetry, as exemplified by, for instance, Borges in Latin America. Another related issue is whether our perspective on poetry from Latin America is much too Western (in this context, the role of Western translators is also interesting). A comparison of Latin America with Japan, a society in which rituals in the sense of Staal are still performed, also suggests itself. It is thus not surprising that the haiku can only be satisfactorily described within a ritualistic framework; it is probably even one of the very few forms of poetry that can be understood as pure act. A comparative study of different genres and forms of poetry from the perspective of their ritualistic nature is indispensable to be able to validate my hypotheses. Let us not forget that in our Western view, although we are willing to recognize the texts anthologized by Jerome Rothenberg in *Shaking the Pumpkin* as being indeed a form of poetry, we simply do not take into account a Fox SWEATBATH poem in our ideas on poetry:

A gi ya ni a gi yan ni i
 A gi ya ni a gi yan ni i
 A gi ya ni a gi yan ni i
 A gi ya ni a gi ya ni
 Sky
 A gi ya ni A gi yan ni i
 A gi ya ni A gi yan ni i
 A gi ya ni

(Rothenberg 1972: 341)

These syllables without meaning, these prosodic structures, succeeded periodically by a content word like Sky is exactly the same as we find in Vedic mantras. We know of mantras consisting only of meaningless prosodic structures, like:

kâ hvâ hvâ hvâ hvâ hvâ
 phal phal phal phal phal
 hau hau hau hau hau
 bham bham...

(Staal 1983: passim)

comparable to Navajo sound poems like this one:

Óhohohó héhehe héya héya
Óhohohó héhehe héya héya
Éo ládo éo ládo éo ládo nasé
Hówani how owów owé
Éo ládo éo ládo éo ládo nasé
Hówani how owów owé

(Rothenberg 1972: 339)

And there are Vedic mantras alternating between these structures and words organized in a kind of formula:

Fire Light Light Fire
Indra Light Light Indra
Sun Light Light Sun

(Staal 1983: passim)

comparable (though probably not in its religious sense) to so-called Navajo CORRESPONDENCES, like this one:

Black
Darkness
Black Wind
Yellow Squash

(Rothenberg 1972: 309)

Could it be that poetry gives us a perfect argument for the hypothesis that prosody precedes or facilitates syntax in language (this would be in conflict with models of speech production like the one in Levelt 1989 but in line with the one in Jackendoff 1997). In any case, there is a clear development in the history of Vedic ritual from mantras of the first kind to mantras of the second type, from empty sound patterns to a prototype of poetry as a prototype of language. Only if we acknowledge the fact that there is more to poetry than the Western European tradition is giving us, we might begin to see that poetry is deeply connected to the ritualistic phase in human development, perhaps even more than to its language phase.

But why did humans develop ritual in the first place? Robin Dunbar suggested that the evolution of large groups in human lineage depended on a more efficient method of establishing and maintaining social structure and cohesion than grooming, which we find in primate groups (Dunbar 1996). In Dunbar's view, language fulfilled this requirement. At the same time, this

social function of language explains why verbal communication still consists to a very large extent of gossiping. But there is a problem. What has the explosive growth of the human brain in a relatively short period of time - at least in evolutionary terms - got to do with gossiping and language? In my view, Dunbar misses one link: the ritualistic phase between grooming and gossiping, between elementary ritual behavior and natural language. Although primates know rituals too, they lack the enormous complexity of human rituals (which in some instances take two weeks to perform). So memorizing the endless sequences of a Vedic ritual required not only a greater memory capacity, but a kind of algorithm, which could structure these sequences. In the ritualistic phase the human brain developed this capacity to produce and comprehend recursive and transformational structures. Only if we postulate a ritualistic phase in the evolution of language we can understand that animals won't ever be able to learn human language. Apart from constraints such as a physically different vocal tract, the main reason lies in a different brain. Neither primates nor any other animal are able to comprehend recursive structures. What makes us human is recursion and thus: language. But language would not be necessary to make this fundamental distinction between humans and animals. The difference lies in the complexity of their rituals.

The most exciting prospect is that the outcome of this project will provide independent support for the genetic, not mimetic nature of poetry. The fact that recent research discovered that our sense of rhythm and music is to be located in the same area of the brain as aspects of language processing (the area commonly known as Broca area) is just one argument that supports this idea (Platel 1997). All this might seem somewhat speculative, but as Edgar Allan Poe said that only poetry that excites him is good poetry, in my view the same holds for the STUDY of poetry.

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