A Way of Happening:
Poetry and Its Resistance to Paraphrase

by

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Chapter One: If You Found a Poem, Would You Know It?

Many of the problems involving the paraphrase of poetry originate from a failure to understand what characterizes a "poem." I therefore wish to provide some criteria for distinguishing a poem from other uses of language (such as sermons, messages, songs, short stories, speeches, eulogies, psalms, critiques, riddles, lectures, etc.).

I will begin by placing a few constraints on my use of the term "poem." The poems (or poetry, as the plural will frequently appear throughout this paper) for consideration are any poems written in English after the 1390's (beginning with Geoffrey Chaucer's **Canterbury Tales**). Although the argument can probably be extended to poetry of other languages and of earlier periods, this endeavor is best served by limitations.

This working definition strives for descriptive flexibility. In almost all of English literature of the period covered, poetry has exhibited some, if not all, of the following characteristics. I have devised and arranged these characteristics in the hope that they will help a reader locate that thing with which this thesis is concerned, a poem, and perhaps distinguish it from other verbal constructs. Certainly, many characteristics may be shared among these other forms of writing, but I hope the reader will begin to see that which makes the poem a poem. I should also add that there are verbal hybrids, constructions whose character lies somewhere between poetry and non-poetry. The application of this argument to such cases I must leave to the reader's judgement.

1. Verbal Medium

A poem is a verbal (spoken, or, as is more often the case, written) conceit. Here, a conceit is taken to mean a linguistic creation of grammatically clear sentences whose particular words and particular syntax demand attention. Although the term is sometimes applied in praise of non-verbal phenomena ("he is poetry in motion"), and even in praise of other verbal constructions ("his speeches are poetry"), these expressions are metaphorical and are not predications.

1.1. Cognate Sound Formulation[1]

Like other verbal creations, a poem relies on systematic patterning at word-level. The words chosen and their arrangement in syntactic patterns can often have great influence on a hearer or reader, and many authors deliberately manipulate their writings at the word-level. But unlike other linguistic constructions, a poem also relies on patterni :g at the sub-word, or sound, level.

By means of identical or closely-related consonant and vowel pronunciations (what I will call cognates; that is, phonemes formed in the same locale or region of the mouth), there occurs a repetition of oral activity that is sensually pleasing (like the goo-gooing of a baby). In some cases, sound-level manipulation facilitates memorization. In others, the sound-patterns have an onomatopoetic (in a loose sense of the word) effect; the sounds relate to the meaning of the phrases, sentences, and lines of the poem, thus distinguishing the poem from others of a similar subject or theme. This technique of cognate sound

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1 Based on observations in Kenneth Burke's Philosophy of Literary Form (pp.369-78).

formulation serves as the basis for many poetic devices (often set in patterns by means of acrostic constructions; see 2.1).

At base, cognate sound formulation is simply "local association" (repeating consonants or vowels related by pronunciation-site-- cognates, as I have called them-- within one or two complete breaths. Notice the repetition of /k/, /s/, /z/, /I/, /p/, and /b/ in the following lines: "Call the roller of big cigars,/ The muscular one, and bid him whip/ In kitchen cups concupiscent curds."[2]). The repetition may be more precisely restricted to assonance (vowel repetition, often at the start of the word, as in

> You pierce a sequin with a needle.
> You slide it down single-knotted thread
> until it lies with all the others in
> a puzzle of brightness. Then another and another one[3].

); alliteration (repetition of, often initial, consonant sounds, as in "the silken, sad, uncertain rustling of each purple curtain"[4]); and end-rhyme ("Know then thyself, presume not God to scan,/ The proper study of mankind is man"[5]).

The following charts outline the relation of phoneme-formation sites in the mouth of an English-speaker. Although I do not intend to create an interpretive theory at sound-level, it is interesting to see how certain sounds are closely related, some distantly, by their place of formation in the mouth. There is always *some* response to the manipulation of pronunciation-sites by a poet, whether his manipulation is deliberate or intuitive or

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[2] Wallace Stevens, "The Emperor of Ice-Cream, lines 1-3.

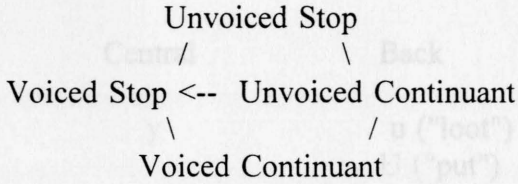
[3] Eavan Boland, "We Were Neutral In the War," lines 9-12.

[4] Edgar Allan Poe, "The Raven," line 13.

[5] Alexander Pope, "Essay on Man," Epistle II, lines 1-2.

accidental. The effects of such manipulation often give an individual poem its unique character, but some poems rely less on sound than on other devices, as will be shown.

We may construct charts of relations between stops and continuants based on the findings of Jacob Grimm and Karl Verner (read in a clockwise direction unless otherwise indicated):



In particular:

Labials	Dentals	Velars
p	t	k
b <-- f	d <-- th ("thing")	g <--- h
v	th ("then")	x[6]

We may also construct an outline of the pronunciation-sites of all English consonants (in the case of two entries, the left is unvoiced, the right is voiced):

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[6] No equivalent in contemporary English. Closest equivalent in the German *nicht*.

	Labial	Dental	Alveolar	Palatal	Velar
Stop	p b		t d		k g
Continuant	f v	<th>[7]	s z	sh zh	h
Affricate			ch jh		
Glide	w			j	
Liquid			l	r	
Nasal	m		n		ng

as well as the outline for vowel pronunciation known as the "Vowel Triangle":

	Front	Central	Back
High	i ("feet")	y	u ("loot")
	I ("pit")		U ("put")
Mid	e ("fate")		o ("throat")
	E ("bed")	^ ("uh")	O ("law")
Low	ae ("ash")		a ("father")

Of course, finer details of these models are debatable, but they at least provide an anatomical map to the sites of sound-production. Given that repetition of sounds in fact creates a response in the reader or hearer, these models offer insight into the relations necessary for satisfying a reader at sound-level, the sort of relations which the poet employs to create an intended effect.[8]

1.1.1. Acrostics

Acrostics are a method of patterning consonant sounds (perhaps identical, perhaps cognates) effective at a local level ("perchance to dream"[9]) and at an extended level ("A

[7] Voiced and unvoiced, as in "then" and "thing."

[8] These diagrams appear in W. F. Bolton's A Living Language.

[9] William Shakespeare, Hamlet, III.i.64.

damsel with a dulcimer"[10]). The consonant order in one word is repeated and/or varied in a subsequent word. Among the variations: simple repetition ("She walks in beauty, like the night/ Of cloudless climes and starry skies"[11]); inversion ("Leaf-mold, manure, lime, piled against slippery planks"[12]); and augmentation/ diminution (adding/ subtracting vowels before consonants, as in "a slim/ and delicate/ ship, filled/ with white flowers"[13]).

2. Linear Immutability

Verse is set in lines which cannot be altered in the transcription of the poem's text (see Appendix: Prose Poems). We will hereafter speak of a poem as lineated.

2.1. Syntactic Deployment

Because poetry is lineated, one simultaneously reads the sentences of the poem and the individual lines (the phrases or sentences formed by line-breaks). This simultaneous reading between the syntactic meaning of the line and the sentence creates tension between the respective meanings or emphasizes their harmony (Yeats' "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death" demonstrates this: "I know that I shall meet my fate/ Somewhere among the clouds above"[14]. The abstract, quasi-religious truth is made startlingly concrete by the speaker's circumstances: he is a pilot in war). Line-breaks are used for varying effects.

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[10] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Kubla Khan," line 37.
[11] Lord Byron, "She Walks in Beauty," lines 1-2.
[12] Theodore Roethke, "Root Cellar," line 9.
[13] Mary Oliver, "The Swan," lines 3-6.
[14] lines 1-2.

3. Syllabic Counting

We may be particularly taxonomic and point out that each line always bears a syllabic count. The observation can be after the fact; free verse certainly has a count, but it is not necessarily predetermined by the poet. Certain syllabic counts, however, are used by the poet as a limiting medium, arousing particular responses in the reader. For example, a bare syllable count may be prescribed for each line, as occurs in Marianne Moore's "The Fish" (the title forming the first line):

The Fish

wade
through black jade.
  Of the crow-blue mussel shells, one keeps
  adjusting the ash heaps;
    opening and shutting itself like

an
injured fan.
  The barnacles which encrust the side
  of the wave, cannot hide
    there for the submerged shafts of the

sun...

and there appears a 1-3-9-6-8 pattern (the fifth line may be debated, but it appears as 8 syllables through the rest of the poem, and since Moore was a New Yorker, we may expect "opening" to register 2 syllabic beats). Or there may be a prescriptive count of stressed syllables, more often than not in one of several agreed upon stress patterns (meter). In the following familiar stanza, notice the perfect regularity of iambic tetrameter (four feet of unstressed-stressed syllables):

The woods are lovely, dark, and deep
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.[15]

4. Metaphor

Metaphor is a device by means of which one thing is thought of or viewed as another thing. Associations offer new insight into the previously unseen connections between meanings of the words themselves (collusion), or create new meanings for the words within the poem's text (collision)[16]. Consider the following lines:

The real house became a boarding school.
Under the ballroom ceiling's allegory
Someone at last may actually be allowed
To learn something; or, from my window, cool
With the unstiflement of the entire story,
Watch a red setter stretch and sink in cloud[17].

5. Immutable Diction

The unique words of a poem, and their particular placement in the poem, cannot be altered or added to while reading without corrupting the poem itself. Thus, we say of the diction of a poem that it is immutable.

The New Princeton Handbook of Poetic Terms equates 'diction' with 'lexis,' relying on the latter term because of its neutral associations. I replace 'lexis' with

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[15] Robert Frost, "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," lines 13-16.

[16] "Collusion" and "collision" are terms coined by Karsten Harries in his essay "Metaphor and Transcendence," in the collection On Metaphor.

[17] James Merrill, "The Broken Home," lines 93-98.

'diction' because of the latter's familiarity, and offer the following passages as illustrations of how the term 'diction' will considered for the remainder of the essay:

> The primary rule for thinking about [diction] is that words in a poem always exist in relation, never in isolation: 'there are no bad words or good words; there are only words in bad or good places'.... Otherwise, classifying [diction] can be a barren exercise, just as concentrating on isolated words can be barren for a beginning poet. Consistency within the chosen area of [diction] is necessary for a well-made poem....

> Some useful categories for studying [diction] may be drawn from the OED... where vocabulary is classified as follows: (1) *Identification*, including usual spelling, pronunciation, grammatical part of speech, whether specialized, and status (e.g. rare, obsolete, archaic, colloquial, dialectical); (2) *Morphology*, including etymology, and subsequent word-formation, including cognates in other languages; (3) *Signification*, which builds on other dictionaries and quotations....[18]

The immutability of diction is a much disputed characteristic of poetry, one whose necessity I shall attempt to demonstrate. Though listed here as one of the identifying characteristics of a poem, it may be excluded from initial attempts to identify a poem; the earlier characteristics will suffice for identification. I add one last disclaimer: every one of the preceding characteristics can be used in other verbal creations. It is the peculiar province of poetry that, to some extent, all of these characteristics are deliberately employed in the poem's creation. However, since this immutability (of diction and line) is at the heart of the argument against paraphrase, I should turn to some contrary examples first.

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[18] p.152.

Chapter Two: On Paraphrasing Poetry

> "An element of the experience of [a] poem is what we call its *plain sense*, that part of its total meaning which can be summarized in prose... We may call this plain sense the skeleton of the experience. The skeleton has an important function in any structure: it holds the other parts together. And it is by understanding the skeleton that we understand the general shape of the structure."[19]

This passage presents a particular method of reading poetry, a *paraphrastic method*, one which would facilitate the reading of difficult passages for both interpretation of the poem and discussion of the poem's technical elements. The method is wide-spread, judging from its frequent restatement in books on poetry appreciation. I take the paraphrase of a poem to be the substitution of synonymous terms in a sentence of poetry, along with a possible syntactical rearrangement and an elimination of line-breaks, whereby meaning is retained. In the process of paraphrase, words and sentences not directly related to the meaning may in turn be deleted. Once paraphrased, one may begin any of a number of studies on the poem.

Here I should caution the reader: I do not intend to propose a subsequent theory of interpretation or of prosody analysis. Rather, I wish to investigate the use of paraphrase as a standard method of reading poetry, as a means for preparing the poem, in the reader's mind, for interpretation and analysis.

The paraphrastic method of reading is a commonly accepted method of clarifying difficult passages in a poem, one which students of English learn early on. I will cite

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[19] Wright Thomas and Stuart Gerry Brown, Reading Poems, p. 744.

several examples of its use, some authentic, some fabricated, to which one may refer in the later discussion:

I. A professor asks a student what Thomas Hardy means in the last stanza of the first section of "In Tenebris":

> Black is night's cope;
> But death will not appal
> One who, past doubtings all,
> Waits in unhope.[20]

She replies, "Someone who does not raise his expectations or hopes in life cannot be horrified by the ultimate disappointment of death." A second student objects to this reading of the Hardy stanza. She claims he means that "One who has suffered greatly can suffer no more. He will not try to escape life, but will live on in an emotional state, perhaps suspended, perhaps strengthened, beyond ordinary humanity."

II In The Pilgrim's Progress and "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," John Bunyan and Samuel Taylor Coleridge include paraphrastic glosses of their poems in the margins[21]. Bunyan writes[22],

> *Prudence discourses him* Then Prudence thought good to ask him a few questions, and desired his answer to them.

In "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," Coleridge writes[23],

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[20] Lines 21-24.

[21] Coleridge added his glosses in the 1828 edition of the poem (the first edition, dated 1798, was published without them). His inclusion of the marginal glosses may have be done in parody of the use of similar glosses in editions of the Bible. At times, these paraphrases are so off the mark as to be almost unrelated to the text of the poem.

[22] The Pilgrim's Progress, p.94

[23] Lines 139-141.

The shipmates, in their sore distress, would fain throw the whole guilt on the ancient Mariner: in sign whereof they hang the dead sea-bird round his neck.

Ah! well a day! what evil looks
Had I from old and young!
Instead of the cross, the Albatross
About my neck was hung.

III. The paraphrases of English poetry in the lectures of Lafcadio Hearn.

IV. The many manuals of poetry appreciation which encourage the use of prose paraphrase to assist the determination of meaning and the enjoyment of prosody's effects.

There exists no standard for the application of paraphrase to poetry; that is, a reader cannot consult an accepted list of criteria for judging the circumstances when clarification requires paraphrase, nor can he check his method of paraphrase against an accepted standard. But many readers in fact make use of paraphrase in order to understand poetry. They employ a loose and free procedure (substitute synonymous terms, reduce lines, alter syntax, whereby meaning is thought to be retained), and they usually know when and where to paraphrase (poems whose sense is unclear or where an interpretive difficulty is encountered). I will try to outline a general method of poetic paraphrase, but before doing so, I wish to clarify certain governing assumptions that have made paraphrase so widely-accepted a manner of reading.

A paraphrase of poetry assumes:

1. A poem is a verbal construct made up of prosodic devices and a meaning or content (the "plain sense" of the thing).

1.1. Prosodic devices work in conjunction with meaning to produce an aesthetic or emotive effect. As Ogden and Richards write, "The emotive use of words is a more simple matter [than their symbolic use], it is the use of words to express or excite feelings and attitudes"[24].

1.2. We take prosody, or versification, to stand for the whole of variations in lineation, cognate sound production, and syllabic counting (see chapter 1). Prosody is a science of verse forms and poetic meters; that which is prosodic exhibits some of these variations (as opposed to that which is prosaic, or not written in verse form).

1.2.1. Some prosodic devices are sound-level manipulations which produce sensual responses.

1.2.1.1. These prosodic devices, much like the sounds of music[25], are not easily discussed in terms of propositional language.

1.2.1.2. Sound-level prosodic devices can be discussed in terms of non-propositional language (i.e. technically, expressively, metaphorically, etc.). One may say "This is iambic pentameter" or "That is a beautiful rhyme" or "That stanza is very like the flight of swans: slow and stately"[26].

1.2.2. Some prosodic devices work at sight-level, specifically lineation. Because a reader reads one line at a time, these devices can alter the syntactical meaning of the sentence delineated and rendered as a prose sentence ("the turn of a line-break").

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[24] The Meaning of Meaning, p.149.

[25] Philosophical Investigations, #78.

[26] Onomatopoeia, which in the strict sense is the use of words which imitate the sounds or things to which they refer, can be discussed in quasi-propositional terms, however. One may say, "this sounds like the call of a goose" or "this word is the sound of a bell." Of course, different poets may hear and transcribe the same sound differently.

2. A poem has a meaning.

2.1. The meaning of a poem is the emotive or aesthetic effect the poem intends. The meaning may be stated in an analysis which does not itself affect the reader.

2.2. Prosodic devices need a framework of meaning for their effect.

2.2.1. Meaning must be known before investigating the effects of prosody.

2.2.2. Without a clear meaning to affect, prosody is either incidental sound or sculpting of the visual text (that is, meaningless prosody is not considered a part of language).

As an aid to interpretation, paraphrase is thought to enable one to rephrase the difficult language of poetry prosaically, thus simplifying complexities and reducing ambiguities. It enables the reader to see clearly the intention of the poet, thereby providing a paradigm against which one may test the effects of the versification. In fact, it has been put this way:

> The [paraphraser] of a poem should aim at making his prose statement a finished one. It should not only be correct and clear but also right in tone-- such a statement as the poet might have written had he chosen to use prose[27].

Here it might be useful to introduce the notion of *semantic implication*. When reading a poem, a reader will frequently encounter difficulties in fashioning a coherent sense of the subject, message, or intent of the poem. These difficulties arise from complexities in

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[27] An Introduction to the Study of Poetry, p.34.

the language of the poem, from the peculiar relation of the particular words or syntax to the subject/message/intent of the poem, obscuring their relation to the poem as a unified whole. Faced with such difficulties, a reader looks for ways of recasting the troubling portion of the poem in language or terms more clearly understood. He seeks to resolve the difficulties, to refashion them in such a way that they are implied by the subject/message/intent of the poem. The passage having been clarified, the reader can reread and make sense of the poem. We can outline the process of recasting the poem:

1. W_1 (a word or word-formation) or S_1 (a syntactical form) is not understood by the reader.

1.1. W_1/S_1 is undefined for/ unknown to the reader.

1.2. W_1/S_1 is ambiguous for the reader.

1.2.1. The reader cannot decide between two or more meanings that satisfy the artistic conditions of W_1/S_1.

1.3. W_1/S_1 is not implied (does not follow from the rest of the poem).

1.3.1. Given the style (diction or 'lexis') or the particular subject/message/intent of the poem, W_1/S_1 does not fit in the range of semantic expectations (metaphor).

1.3.2. There is a logical juncture, an omission, which obscures the reader's understanding of the connection between the subject/message/intent of the poem and W_1/S_1 (ellipsis).

2. Aspects of the subject/message/intent of the poem satisfy the artistic conditions of W_1/S_1.

2.1. The aspects of the subject/message/intent of the poem which satisfy the artistic conditions of W_1/S_1 can be known.

2.2. W_1/S_1 may be satisfied by the same artistic conditions as other word/syntax structures, W_x/S_x.

3. If W_1/S_1 is satisfied by the same artistic conditions as W_x/S_x, then W_x/S_x is an adequate substitution for/ paraphrase of W_1/S_1.

By artistic conditions (of a poem), I mean the features of reality or aesthetic impressions or emotions that give words or syntactical arrangements their comprehensible and necessary place in the uniform subject/message/intent of the poem. Because the artistic conditions that satisfy a given case may also satisfy a number of other cases, substitution of cases may occur if what is sought is an understandable relation between artistic conditions. Of course, cases satisfied by the same artistic conditions may also be satisfied by differing artistic conditions; one may thus have radical variations between paraphrases. The paraphrase of a poem takes this into account, referring to its limited effectiveness as a guide in reading a poem; ultimately, paraphrase would claim, the reader must return to the original poem (though equipped with a better sense of its meaning)[28].

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[28] I wish to avoid a significant philosophical problem here, the problem of the reality of the work of art. One may ask here if reality satisfies the artistic conditions of the poem, or if one must refer to another set of artistic conditions, independent of reality and inherent to the poem, when paraphrasing. That is, if Hamlet says, "My tables-- meet it is I set it down/ That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain" (Hamlet, I.v.107-108), has Laurence Olivier, dressed as Hamlet and speaking his lines, himself made this assertion? For the present, I wish to permit this notion of artistic conditions the freedom to range over both 'realities'.

Chapter Three: The Problems of Paraphrase

A poem may be read without recourse to paraphrase. Quite often, a reader makes sense of the poem: he recognizes its message, effectively visualizes imagery, or feels an emotional reaction, to name a few realizations. Some poetry is just that clear. But a reader may encounter difficult passages in the poem-- a phrase, a sentence, a couple of lines. Many students of English poetry are instructed in school or through texts to paraphrase the passage which clouds their reading of the poem. Given a version clarified by paraphrase, one may then read the poem, interpret, and consider its prosodic devices. If this is the case, then what sort of thing is a poem that a reader could paraphrase it for clarification?

This question can only be approached by first considering another: what is it that paraphrase renders into prose? Paraphrase offers a reader something more easily understandable than the original text; it takes a difficult passage and transforms it into a readable form. What paraphrase purports to render into prose, what it attempts to preserve from original to translation, is the meaning of the poem. Based on the qualities of an average poetic paraphrase, a picture of the essence of a poem (according to paraphrase) begins to arise. An average poetic paraphrase consists of a prosaic refashioning of a passage of a poem, whether of a description or of a message or of an emotional or aesthetic response which the poet intended to provoke in the reader. Paraphrase cannot replace the passage it has refashioned, nor is it intended as anything more than a temporary substitute for the original. Instead, paraphrase would help the reader know how the poem should be understood. In most examples of poetic paraphrase,

the prosodic elements (lineation, peculiar word choice and syntax, and sound devices, for instance) do not contribute to the poem's meaning; they are the elements lost in translation. There remains a core meaning to a poem, to poetic language, upon which the other elements of the poem depend.

From paraphrase to paraphrase, one finds agreements and disagreements between readers about the core meaning of the poem. Why is this the case? The reader, it seems, needs this meaning in order to consider, appreciate, and enjoy the dependent elements of the poem; therefore, the meaning should be an essence which the reader can grasp unequivocally. One may allow for better and worse efforts at paraphrase, but when there exists a genuine disagreement about the meaning of a (passage of a) poem to be paraphrased, the autonomy of meaning is jeopardized. For paraphrase to operate effectively, one must assume that the poet has written the poem with a clear, central meaning. If not, these disagreements appear to be based on differences of interpretation, and paraphrase may no longer be seen as an objective translation. As it is, one cannot fully know if disagreements between paraphrases arise from the failed efforts of paraphrasers, or if disagreements appear as such because it is wrongly believed that paraphrase reproduces meaning objectively. For paraphrase to remain an effective method of reading, one must assume the former. And here another characteristic of poetry (necessary for the effective operation of paraphrase) comes clear: that the author of the poem has a definite meaning in mind for the poem.

Questions of objectivity aside, it should be surprising that a reader, baffled by a poem's meaning, would know what to look for (the meaning) and where to look for it,

in order to fashion a paraphrase of it (the meaning) satisfactory to his understanding. But this is not surprising if one assumes that a reader of poetry has acquaintance with some concept of meaning. Given familiarity with that concept of meaning, one could locate the poem's meaning based on its apparent similarity to other known meanings. Once located, one could search for synonymous expressions (satisfied by the same artistic conditions) and paraphrase the passage.

A reader may paraphrase a poem because he reads poetry according to agreed-upon conventions. That is, he knows what to look for in a poem. Even when confronted with new, apparently unconventional poems, he relies on convention to classify these divergent writings as such, then works to redefine the conventions according to the newly-introduced differences. The paraphrastic method asserts that when one reads a poem, one puts on 'poetry-reading eyes,' those conventions which enable one to search out that which must be preserved across paraphrase.

It may be that one begins reading with certain expectations or assumptions about the particular poem, expectations that help disclose the boundaries of meaning in the poem and later enable it to be paraphrased. Assumptions may be made about form; for instance, the reader may know that alternating lines of rhyming hexameter and pentameter form an elegiac couplet, and he will be inclined to read a poem of this form with certain expectations (that someone or something passed away will be lamented, etc.). Consider these lines, variations on the traditional elegiac couplet, from Thom Gunn's "Elegy on the Dust":

Each colourless hard grain is now distinct,

In no way to its neighbour linked,
Yet from wind's unpremeditated labours
It drifts in concord with its neighbours.
Perfect community in its behaviour.
It yields to what it sought, a saviour:
Scattered and gathered, irregularly blown,
Now sheltered by a ridge or stone,
Now lifted on strong upper winds, and hurled
In endless hurry round the world[29].

In a way, form guides the reader to the content, so that he can see the effects of form on content. The reader may also assume some contentual influence from the period in which the poem was written; for example, the Romantics are considered nature poets. The reader may expect to find something in the poem's content based on the poet himself; since John Donne was religiously minded, his poems about physical love may be considered expressions of divine ecstasy. Or assumptions may be made about poetry in general: poetry is emotional, so one should look for emotionally-charged language, etc.

Such assumptions enable the reader to draw conclusions about the content of the poem: what it is, where it is, how to paraphrase it. It appears that one needs to acquire a volume of information about the poem prior to reading and paraphrase. But can a poem be read and paraphrased without the reader having all of this information? One is inclined to say, yes, a poem can be read without so much information, but the reader needs some information for guidance. Therefore, it is necessary to discover what expectations are necessary for reading and paraphrase, and whether or not the expectations of paraphrase limit its effectiveness.

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[29] Lines 45-54.

The necessary expectations appear when one considers how a reader locates difficult passages and identifies the unclear meanings that paraphrase will represent. A difficult passage is one in which a word, phrase, sentence, or set of lines disturbs a single, unified reading of the poem. This disturbance confuses the reader, fails his expectations, and conceals the meaning. When this occurs, the reader searches out the confusing passage, then considers it prosaically-- that is, delineated (although break-marks may be inserted, these do not convey the sense of the poem or the poetic passage as a visual work of art). Subsequently he searches out the meaning, referring to already-known formulations of poetic meaning in order to make an adequate comparison. Given the comparison, the reader knows what must be preserved in translation, and he may begin substituting terms capable of rendering a synonymous meaning (see chapter 2).

Thus, to paraphrase a poem, one must first locate and identify the poem's meaning in order to know what should be preserved from original to paraphrase. Location and identification do not result in understanding, however. If a reader finds the bounds of a poem's meaning (this is, perhaps, to have a sense of what the meaning is not and what it might be), paraphrase will be the final act of clear reading.

There now appears a picture of the nature of a poem based on the assumptions necessary for paraphrase to be an effective and necessary tool in reading poetry. A poem contains a meaning which is what the author wishes to convey (whether a message or an emotional response or a description or any other). The meaning is not itself meaningful without the elements of prosody to heighten and strengthen it, but meaning necessarily precedes all other elements in reading. A reader may use the meaning in a prosaic form

as an aid to comprehension and interpretation, and he may witness the effects of prosody in the medium of the meaning. Paraphrase elicits meaning from the text of the poem.

Earlier in this essay (chapter 1), I asserted that a poem possesses an immutable quality. A poem is made up of particular words arranged in a particular order broken in particular places into lines. These particulars are not altered in the transcription of the poem; they are, in fact, the essential qualities of poetry. The paraphrastic method claims that a poem, like a statement, refers to a set of artistic conditions (chapter 2); the same set of artistic conditions may be satisfied by a variety of statements. If the artistic conditions are crucial to the reader, then diction, syntax, and lineation can only cursorily be related to the poem's meaning. Yet it is for the poem's particular diction, syntax, and lineation that one reads the poem, and these features are what distinguishes the poem from not only other forms of writing, but from other poems. But according to paraphrase, a puzzled reader must first alter the confusing poem before he can begin to understand it. How can this contrariness be resolved?

As I stated before, one may construct a picture of the essence of a poem from the assumptions and expectations implicit in paraphrase. According to this picture of the essence of a poem, a reader can discover in the poem a definite distinction between its form and its content. Paraphrase uncovers the content of the poem so that the reader may first understand the meaning, then witness its development and sublimation by means of the versification (the form) of the poem. But this is not the case with the nature of poetry. No writer selects a completed meaning or content, to which he adds formal variations; nor does he compose in the opposite direction, though some would say it is

so. Support for a paraphrastic method of reading reduces poetry, or poetic language, to a form of information-bearing or emotion-producing statement, and as Wittgenstein writes, "We predicate of the thing what lies in the manner of representing it"[30]. Paraphrase succeeds as a method of reading only because it makes the poem into something which can be paraphrased; in truth, paraphrase is a failed and corruptive method for reading and clarifying poetry.

In a similar note, Stanley Fish has argued that we not only read conventionally, but have conventions for predicating of a work of art that it is a work of art. Against the view that the poem is itself a work independent (autonomous) of its reader, he claims that the reader imparts poetic qualities to a piece of writing by reading the work *as a poem.* As members of an interpretive community, he claims, we decide whether or not a piece of writing is a poem based on certain conventions of identification. Subsequently, we apply another set of agreed upon conventions for reading and interpreting the poem. He says,

> ...acts of recognition, rather than being triggered by formal characteristics, are their source. It is not that the presence of poetic qualities compels a certain kind of attention but that the paying of a certain kind of attention results in the emergence of poetic qualities.[31]

and later,

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[30] Philosophical Investigations, #104.

[31] Is There a Text in This Class?, p.326.

> It was almost as if they were following a recipe-- if it's a poem do this, if it's a poem, see it that way-- and indeed definitions of poetry *are* recipes, for by directing readers as to what to look for in a poem, they instruct them in ways of looking that will produce what they expect to see.... Skilled reading is usually thought to be a matter of discerning what is there, but... it is a matter of knowing how to *produce* what can thereafter be said to be there.[32]

Now one must be careful with Fish's comments. He runs a great risk of enabling one to designate *all writing* as poetry if one decides to see it as such. A poem has some autonomy-- a careful reader, not knowing it as a poem, will detect in a poem an immutable quality that distinguishes it from other forms of writing. But Fish does reveal the powerful effects of predication, and if one substitutes "paraphrase" for "acts of recognition" or "skilled reading," his statements provide a model for how paraphrase falsifies when used as an aid to understanding a poem.

Fish supports an earlier view, one which still stands in light of these recent revelations. One reads according to conventions. But by conventions, I do not mean the sort of assumptions and expectations about *poetry* which mislead purveyors of paraphrase into thinking about a poem along the lines of form and content. Fish claims that the conventions of reading poetry are culturally-derived, the most basic of which is that we are a reading people who appreciate craftsmanship. But his conventions apply mostly to the actual reading of poetry, not to poetry itself (the poetry that is read). If there are such conventions, in the sense of expectations, there is another convention, that of unconventionality, which affords poetry a remarkable range of variety. One who is

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[32] Ibid., p 327.

unaware of these poetic conventions (or perhaps knowing them and acting in defiance) will often be frustrated by poetry and find it difficult reading. Failing to understand that the conventions relate more to the reading of the poem than to the poetry itself, he may mistakenly attempt to classify poetry in categories. He will try to show how poetry fits into a single conception of language. He understands other categories of this language, and tries to rephrase the poem or poetic language in terms of those familiar categories. The paraphraser alters the material with which he works. Though the paraphrased meaning now makes sense in terms of the single conception of language under which he has classified it, the sense paraphrase affords is one which is commonplace, pedestrian. So the reader remembers the prosody which he has discarded in the paraphrase, claims that the propositional language is nothing without this, and sets up a musical counterpoint. Of course, he experiences a peculiar distaste when reading poetry-- he believes at heart that poems are composed of fairly plain, rudimentary ideas, and that they rely on tricks of the ear and eye for their effect. Ultimately he decides that reading poetry really isn't worth the trouble.

I might ask this reader why a poet would seek to obscure meanings with the complications of prosody, the very meanings which, according to an earlier assumption of paraphrase, prosody requires for its effective existence. What becomes clear here is the need to discover the source of predicating poetic difficulties as such.

If the assumptions about poetry which are used to guide paraphrase are wrong (the earlier picture of the essence of a poem), what will come of the paraphrase? One might do well to refer back to Martin Heidegger's discussion of the distinction between things

ready-to-hand and things present-at-hand, and how one alters the thing by considering it as a subject for consideration and not as the thing which it is.

> That with which our everyday dealings proximally dwell is not the tools themselves. On the contrary, that with which we concern ourselves primarily is the work-- that which is to be produced at the time; and this is accordingly ready-to-hand too. The work bears with it that referential totality within which the equipment is encountered.[33]

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[33] Being and Time, p.99.

Chapter Four: The Challenge of Reading Poetry

When one reads a poem, it is often a challenge to understand. Particular passages may confuse the reader, and a difficult passage will prevent the reader from experiencing the poem's full effect. Most readers of English poetry have been taught to paraphrase such passages with synonymous terms to facilitate reading. If the language is familiar, the reader will better understand the poem or passage of a poem. But, as was shown, paraphrase cannot be considered an appropriate aid to reading. It essentially corrupts the poem by representing the poetic text as a unity of two dissimilar halves, form and content.

In paraphrase, content maintains priority over form in the process of reading a poem. This priority mistakenly arises when one assumes that a poem bears an essential poetic meaning separable from the language in which it is expressed; that the poem's language simply bears the meaning; and that the poem's prosodic devices will be nonsense without knowledge of the meaning. Thus readers often become quite wrapped up in making sense of a poem. Habituated to analyzing (eliciting) the meaning of other verbal constructions (such as messages, written statements, orders, directions, assertions, etc.), they may mistake a poem for one of the verbal constructs on which one practices such analysis. A paraphrastic method assimilates poetry into this group of verbal creations, ignoring certain remarkable, distinctive features that exclude poetry from this kind of analysis.

Two such features have been mentioned already: immutable diction and immutable lineation, to which we shall presently return. Reader misconceptions arise from two other oversights: failure to consider how a poem is written and ignorance of the unique

circumstances (circumstances meaning the unique set of conditions met and satisfied by the reader) of reading a poem. Clarifying the first confusion, of how a poem is written, eliminates problems concerning the form/ content distinction. Next, as the inappropriate and appropriate circumstances of reading a poem are noted, a method of reading poetry begins to form.

Paraphrase necessarily assumes a form/ content division in order that there be a meaning or intent to the poem which can be extracted from the formal contents. Although a paraphrastic method cannot deny the prominence of the poem over the paraphrase, the value the method places on the paraphrase as a guide to understanding can be misleading. As has been shown, a paraphrase dissolves the poem's language to reveal its meaning, but this dissolution contradicts what were earlier presented (chapter 1) as essential qualities for a poem, immutable lineation and immutable diction. How are the two reconciled? Paraphrase accepts the sacrifice, explaining that the reader can reread the poem for its prosodic qualities after understanding has been secured by means of paraphrase. But is a poem, after all, a meaning draped in the ornaments of language?

No, it is not. Consider a paraphrased passage. It is inevitably commonplace and unimpressive. The paraphrastic method reduces the poem to an aesthetic object with a plain core meaning, when, in truth, the poem is a profound work of art. And paraphrase first errs by considering the material or medium of a poem-- language-- dissolvable or expendable or ornamental in the service of meaning. As Heidegger points out,

> To be sure, 'that' it [the work of art] is made is a property also of all equipment that is available and in use. But this 'that' does not

become prominent in the equipment; it disappears in usefulness[34].

Equipment, or non-art, may be characterized by the disappearance of its quality of craftedness during its employment (as one forgets the fountain-pen when writing). On the other hand, the language of poetry does not disappear, but rather calls attention to itself as something crafted. The poet W. H. Auden understood this penetrating difference when he wrote, in "In Memory of W. B. Yeats,"

> For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives
> In the valley of its making where executives
> Would never want to tamper, flows on south
> From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,
> Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives,
> A way of happening, a mouth[35].

To this idea, Heidegger adds that "...even the much-vaunted aesthetic experience cannot get around the thingly aspects of the work"[36]. Paraphrase corrupts the artistic significance of a poem: that it is for no equipmental use, but is a thing made from a material or medium, specifically language. A poem calls attention to itself as a work in language, as a linguistic creation. Heidegger asserts that this aspect of the poem, its being-made, is of more or at least equal importance to a reader than any meaning the poem could hope to convey.

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[34] "The Origin of the Work of Art" from Poetry, Language, Thought, p.65.

[35] lines 36-41.

[36] "The Origin of the Work of Art" from Poetry, Language, Thought, p.19.

Poetic versification consistently calls into view aspects or capabilities of language that might be overlooked in everyday discourse. Prosodic devices along with the richness of diction and syntax remind the reader of the broad and motley potency for creation in language. A poem not only reminds the reader of language's scope, it offers itself as an example of that scope. As the poet T. S. Eliot wrote,

> The music of a word is, so to speak, at a point of intersection: it arises from its relation first to the words immediately preceding and following it, and indefinitely to the rest of its context; and from another relation, that is of its immediate meaning in that context to all the other meanings which it has had in other contexts, to its greater or less wealth of association[37].

Eliot speaks of the play between the connotative and denotative aspects of language. When reading a poem, one must consider the relationship of words and sentences in the poem to each other. What the words denote literally may parallel or contrast in varying ways with what the words connote. The denotation is the word's lexical meaning; the connotation calls to mind the historied use and appearance of the words and sentences in literature. The poet selects each according to some purpose, and he expects the reader to examine the choices made in composing the poem. What is there, what is not there, and the choices governing the two, are as crucial as any meaning the reader can make from the poem.

The poem's language, in its composition, alerts the reader to its particular use as an artistic medium which the poet has used to create a work of art. A poem not only

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[37] "The Music of Poetry," from On Poetry and Poets, pp. 32-33.

demonstrates a poet's skill as a craftsman, it reminds the reader of the startling fact that he is a language-using creature, that language possesses a remarkable capacity for use, and that individual humans can use this capacity creatively. Heidegger claims, "It is due to art's poetic nature that, in the midst of what is, art breaks open an open place, in whose openness everything is other than usual"[38]. Poetry recharges the reader's language, alerting him to its scope and capacity, and to the marvel that he and another have so mastered it that one can create with it, the other appreciate the creation. To paraphrase is to alter the language of the poem, and thus to make the difference between a poem and other verbal constructions too slight. Paraphrase alters the material of the artwork, the medium to which the attention of the craftsman has been paid, and thus makes the poem a work of art no longer.

No poet selects the specific form and content of his poem before he writes it. Certainly there are formal and contentual considerations before one composes a poem: whether or not to use a particular poetic form (a sonnet, or a sestina, etc., or free verse); whether to use meter, or rhyme; what narrative perspective to take; and what to write about. But a poet makes numerous changes to the poem as he writes and revises, so that form alters content, content form. The poet may break a strict rhyme scheme for a word which makes the sense of phrasing clearer, or he may rhyme two lines to emphasize their importance in an otherwise rhymeless poem. The overlapping relationship between formal and contentual matters would be misrepresented if it were considered in terms of a strict

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[38] "The Origin of the Work of Art" from Poetry, Language, Thought, p.72.

division between form and content, the one not affecting the other. This is not to say, though, that one cannot discuss formal and contentual matters in a poem, only that they should not be spoken of independent of the whole.

In a way, the paraphrastic method prevents a reader from reading the poem as if it had been composed by a poet. As a result, the reader fails to recognize and experience the crafting that the poet executes. Paraphrase not only prevents the reader from participating in the work of art, it prevents him from recognizing his place in a community of language-users, a recognition sparked by his relation to the poet as a speaker of language. The philosopher Ted Cohen writes of community and metaphor,

> There is a unique way in which the maker and the appreciator of a metaphor are drawn closer to one another. Three aspects are involved: 1) the speaker issues a kind of concealed invitation; 2) the hearer expends a special effort to accept the invitation; and 3) this transaction constitutes the acknowledgement of a community. All three are involved in any communication, but in ordinary literal discourse their involvement is so pervasive and routine that they go unremarked. The use of metaphor throws them into relief, and there is a point to that[39].

Substitute "poem" and "poetry" for the two instances of "metaphor" in this passage, and one gains a clear outline of the manner in which a work of art establishes a relationship between craftsman and appreciator. A poem demands the reader's participation, and such participation inevitably draws the reader closer to the poet, not necessarily personally, but closer to the poet as a poet, as an artistic craftsman of language. Arthur Danto writes

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39 "Metaphor and the Culitvation of Metaphor" from On Metaphor, p.6.

about the power of literature to transform aspects of the ordinary, everyday world and reinvest them with a sense of marvel. If one takes his remarks as they apply to poetry, a poem reminds its reader of his relationship to a linguistic community through his relationship to the poem (and thus, through the poet):

> It [literature] is a mirror less in passively returning an image than in transforming the self-consciousness of the reader who in virtue of identifying with the image recognizes what he is. Literature is in this sense transfigurative, and in a way which cuts across the distinction between fiction and truth[40].

In terms of the transformative power of poetry, the French poet and essayist Paul Valery wrote that "Poetry can be recognized by this property, that it tends to get itself reproduced in its own form: it stimulates us to reconstruct it identically"[41]. Poetry aims to encourage the poetic sentiment in its readers. It transforms the reader, alerting him to what seems ordinary and natural, that humans are speakers of a natural language, and representing that fact in such a way that it becomes surprising and marvellous. One may understand how this transformation occurs by studying Valery's comment more closely. Poetry fills its readers with the desire to compose. As a reader, one must struggle with the poem to make sense of it without giving in to paraphrase. One must read it as a form of writing unlike any other. If readers are filled with the desire to compose poetry, where before they may not have so desired to compose, they must have learned something about writing poetry and have been caught up in the desire to write it. They have been

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[40] The Transformation of the Commonplace, p.156.

[41] "Poetry and Abstract Thought" from The Art of Poetry, p.72.

instructed by the poem by the manner in which they read it. Thus, to read a poem appropriately, one must read it as a poet would write it.

When reading poetry, one assumes a particular paradigm of use for the language in the poem. A word or sentence may be used in some new way, revitalizing the word, or it may revive a use that has fallen out of favor. The word or sentence may contrast with customary use, reminding the reader of the diversity of language as well as broadening his own concept of the word. Because of the focus on language in the poem, one cannot dissolve it by means of paraphrase to extract a meaning; rather, one must give up this customary manner of reading and learn another. A reader detects the focus of language in the particular attention paid to the formal characteristics of the poem, as opposed to other forms of writing, such as messages, orders, critiques, etc. Lineation and peculiar diction (which calls attention to itself over and against alternative possibilities) evince this focus. Similarly, the difficulty most readers have reading a poem for the first time should alert them to this deliberate obscurity or concealedness. A meaning may come out of the paraphrase, but the pedestrian nature of the meaning, and the resistance of the poem to such an easy interpretation, should alert the reader to the falsity of a paraphrase.

How can one be attendant to the poem? Part of the experience of reading a poem is noticing that one is reading poetry. Paraphrase takes the poem out of the context of authentic poetry reading, and some significant characteristics of a poem are the peculiar circumstances of its being read. One may listen to a poem read out loud, experiencing the qualities of the reader's voice and using the voice's nuances, inflections, accents--

emphases-- to assemble an individual reader's understanding and expression of understanding the poem to add to one's own understanding. Or one may read the poem alone, out loud or silently, becoming familiar with its sounds in one's own voice, looking at the poem as something written on a page and investigating the poet's visual manipulations. However one hears or reads a poem, it demands repeated readings so that the hearer or reader can become familiar with its words and design.

One need not memorize in order to read a poem. But the repeated readings, vocal or silent, decrease the reader's surprise and puzzlement at the presence of a particular word, phrase, sentence, or line-break. Prosodic patterning helps familiarize the reader with the poem in the way of music and fine art, which leave memorable sounds or sights which the admirer can use later to recognize the particular work. In this way, versification, the uncommonness of which often creates confusion or obscurity for a reader, also provides him a means for remembering and an indication of how to read the poem.

Here we may introduce a notion of *artistic implication.* A reader seeks familiarity with the poem, knowledge of the word order and word-meaning in such a way that one is no longer surprised by the particular syntax or ignorant of the word's lexical meaning. Such familiarity comes from repeated readings and from learning the meaning of the words of the poem to consider in what sense of the words the poet uses them. This familiarity is a result of a devotion to the work of the poem, a devotion one manages not by treating the poem as another type of writing, but by giving up customary methods reading for one less well known, even researching the poem when necessary.

As one gains familiarity with the poem, it can be considered, not only as a finished piece of work, but as an artistic composition written in stages. That is, one can imagine and consider alternatives to what the poet has written-- different words and sentences, images, themes, subjects, meters. One must sometimes accommodate such recreations with the writing of the time, and thus must learn about the poet's particular period of literature in order to imagine what possible uses of language could have been expected of him. At other times, one discovers an artistic sense that so changes language that the influence of the poet's period seems not so strong, and one may then study the style of a highly innovative writer. Having recreated various alternatives, one may infer what decisions the poet made to place these particular words in their particular places. The inferred process of such decision-making gives insight into the poet's artistic sensibilities, and offers the reader a true sense of the poet's style and perspective. Thus, what the poet chooses not to write is almost as important as what the poet chooses to write.

As the reader acquires this renewed perspective, he may begin to question the poem. Rather than ask for a simple statement of its meaning (which hopelessly denigrates the complexity of the poem), he might ask why the poet chose this particular form, or subject, or theme. If he encounters a difficulty in reading, he searches out lexical meanings, makes sense of complicated syntax, and asks how the particular words or syntax contribute to and determine what he reads. He researches unknown references for clarification, trying to familiarize himself with the period of time from which the poet writes: what historical, social, literary events may have figured into the poet's life when he wrote the poem; which contemporary sensibilities the reader possesses which the poet

may or may not have possessed; which past sensibilities the reader lacks; etc. And most importantly, the reader tries to understand how the poet speaks to an audience of his own contemporaries and to an audience of future readers. In these ways, the reader participates in the world of the poem, suspending his own ways of reading to join in a relationship with the poem (and the poet), revitalizing his own sense of the world, whereby nothing is changed, but nothing remains the same.

> For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives
> In the valley of its making where executives
> Would never want to tamper, flows on south
> From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,
> Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives,
> A way of happening, a mouth[42].

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42 lines 36-41.

Chapter Five: A Reading of Seamus Heaney's "Thatcher"

Having offered the reader a general method suitable for clarifying difficult passages in a poem, it remains to apply the method in an exegetical reading of a poem. Many of the following prescriptions for reading are specific to this poem, and though they are not necessarily suitable for other readings, much may be gleaned from them. A broad body of literature such as "poetry" necessitates a general method of reading for the sake of flexibility, but one may begin to see in the following a way of applying the general method to specific instances.

The poem under consideration, "Thatcher," is an early poem of Seamus Heaney, a contemporary Irish poet. The poem is notable for its sound qualities and skillful use of lineation.

Thatcher

Bespoke for weeks, he turned up some morning
Unexpectedly, his bicycle slung
With a light ladder and a bag of knives.
He eyed the old rigging, poked at the eaves,

Opened and handled sheaves of lashed wheat-straw.
Next, the bundled rods: hazel and willow
Were flicked for weight, twisted in case they'd snap.
It seemed he spent the morning warming up:

Then fixed the ladder, laid out well-honed blades
And snipped at straw and sharpened ends of rods
That, bent in two, made a white-pronged staple
For pinning down his world, handful by handful.

Couchant for days on sods above the rafters,
He shaved and flushed the butts, stitched all together
Into a sloped honeycomb, a stubble patch,
And left them gaping at his Midas touch[43].

One should read this poem four times, out loud the first three times, silently the last. During the first reading, the reader should ignore line-breaks and read according to punctuation alone; this is the *first rhetorical reading*. If it is unclear where the grammatical accent falls in the phrasing, he should continue to read through the passage, not returning to repeat and reaccent the sentence as he reads. For the second reading, he should make a brief, deliberate pause at the end of each line (while still reading according to the punctuation of each line); this reading is the *verse reading*. Again, if the phrasing accent is unclear, one should continue to read through the passage and not repeat the phrase. The third reading is another *rhetorical reading*, but this time, the reader should repeat difficult passages until the proper accents fall into place. The last time, one should read the poem silently, pausing (breaking) and accenting where it seems necessary; this reading is the *silent* or *intuitive reading*.

The order of the following remarks does not rank their importance or aesthetic value, nor does it necessarily chart the order in which one responds to aspects of the poem. Because I respond to the poem's sound before its syntax or other elements, I have chosen to remark first on sound patterning, though another reader might respond in a different order. The arrangement of sections in this chapter should accommodate differing

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[43] New Selected Poems, p. 10.

responses, allowing each reader to skip to those aspects of the poem in the order in which he responds. Also, any references to "the poem" refer to "Thatcher."

1. Sound-Patterning

As one reads the poem repeatedly, its sounds become clear as deliberate patternings. Careful attention to the sounds reveals their onomatopoetic (in a loose sense of the word) effect on the poem. The sounds relate directly to the meaning of the phrases, sentences, and lines, thus individualizing the poem.

1.1. End Rhymes

One notices the *aabb* rhyme scheme of the poem early on, though the rhymes of the first two stanzas are either off-rhymes (nearly rhyming) or eye-rhymes (rhyming on the page). 'Morning' and 'slung' do not rhyme exactly because the former is a disyllabic /Ing/, the latter a monosyllabic /^ng/. 'Knives' and 'eaves,' 'wheat-straw' and 'willow' are eye-rhymes; their spellings suggest a rhyme, though their phonemes do not rhyme. 'Snap' and 'up' are similarly off-set by their different vowel sounds. This pattern of off- and eye-rhyming raises the reader's expectations for a true rhyme without fulfilling them; thus, the first two stanzas seem incomplete and idling, much like the thatcher and his delayed work.

In the last two stanzas, the rhymes sound truer. The final /dz/ of 'blades' and 'rods,' /^l/ of 'staple' and 'handful,' /^r/ of 'rafters' and 'together,' and /ch/ of 'touch' and 'patch' satisfy the reader's rhyme-expectations, and thus the last two stanzas, in which

the thatcher begins and completes his roofing, take on a sound of fulfillment (and Heaney's paralleling the syllabic count of the rhyme words-- no disyllabics are paired with monosyllabics-- contributes to this fulfillment).

1.1.1. Internal Rhymes

The poem's internal rhymes (rhymes not based on line-breaks) vary in effect. 'Eaves' and 'sheaves' suggest a bond between the roofing; one part of the roof, the eaves, rhymes with the thatching material, that which is bound in sheaves; the rhyme foreshadows what the thatcher will repair. 'Handled' and 'bundled' helps the reader visualize the thatcher preparing bundles of thatch by hand. 'Morning' and 'warming' suggests the thatcher prepares for work as if he were an athlete, needing a good sweat before thatching. The rhyme also suggests that he literally warms up-- the morning cold warms as time passes and the temperature rises. Thus the thatcher is made to be a rather lackadaisical worker.

'Sharpened' and 'ends' present a syntactical difficulty which must be resolved before their rhyme can be considered (though a fuller investigation of syntax will come later). Apparently, the thatcher sharpened (active verb) the ends of rods, but if this were the case, there would have been commas after "blades" and "straw," and the initial "And" of line 10 would have been deleted. Thus, one must assume that "sharpened" functions as a participle modifying "ends." The rhyme not only specifies where the rod is sharp, but emphasizes the sharpness, making it profoundly noticeable. 'Handful by handful'

not only rhymes but repeats, and the reader imagines the thatcher's slow, methodical climb up the face of the roof.

1.2. Alliteration

The repeated initial consonants of 'light' and 'ladder,' 'bicycle' and 'bag,' 'seemed' and 'spent,' 'snipped' and 'straw' emphasize the relations between these words. The important quality of the ladder is its lightness; the bag is on the bicycle, nowhere else; by all appearances, he seems to have spent the morning in preparation; and he specifically snips the straw.

The poem does not rely on frontal assonance, but, as will be shown in the following section, it makes strong use of internal assonance.

1.3. Phonemic Relations

The internal sound-patterns of the poem remain to be investigated. The reader should pay attention to the local relations, the phonemes which are repeated within one or two breaths of each other. But he should also notice the overall sound of the poem, focusing on the phonemes most regularly heard.

The heavy use of nasals (/n/ and /ng/) and sibilance (/s/ and /z/) afford the poem a busy, humming sound, the sound of a man working, and the sound goes well with the depiction of a roof-thatcher. The poem employs the range of vowel sounds, no one or two vowels entirely dominant. But the reader will notice how important long and short vowels are to the action of the second and fourth stanzas, as will be shown.

The second stanza is absorbed in detailing the thatcher's materials and his preparation for work. The repetition of consonants, including final /d/ and /dz/, and the general lengthening of vowels (there are more long vowels here than in any other stanza), enforces the sense that he performs numerous time-consuming, repetitious jobs. The thatcher becomes a character who idles. But in the fourth stanza, where the thatcher completes his roofing, the long vowels work to a different end. Fewer in number than in the second stanza, the long vowels accent the care and time he devotes to his work, but they don't weigh down the stanza. His idleness changes into careful craftsmanship, the quality of care emphasized by the time elapsed in the pronunciation of the long vowels.

2. Syntactic Pacing

The poem's success also relies on its careful pacing. Seamus Heaney is known for his poetic economy; he uses his words to perform several functions in the poem, thus composing a poem which does not linger on its lines, but moves along quickly and smoothly, inviting later consideration.

2.1. Verbal Constructions

Heaney's use of copula ellipsis (removing forms of the verb 'to be') and participial phrases (adjectives formed on a verb stem) pressures the main verbs to carry the poem, for they focus the action. The main verb is the verb in the predicate of an independent or dependent clause, the former verb the basis and support for the latter. These main verbs ('turned up eyed,' 'poked,' 'opened,' 'handled,' 'were flicked,' '(were) twisted,'

'seemed,' 'spent,' 'fixed,' 'laid,' 'snipped,' 'made,' 'shaved,' 'flushed,' 'stitched,' 'left') are almost all *actions* on which the rest of the clause depends; thus the poem becomes a scene of activity. The participles ('Bespoke,' 'slung,' 'lashed,' 'bundled,' 'warming,' 'well-honed,' 'sharpened,' 'bent,' 'pinning'[44], 'couchant'[45], 'gaping') function as activity-modifiers. Although participles are adjectives and modify nouns (rather than predicating some state or performing some activity, as a verb does) their formation on a verb stem suggests the modified nouns have had some sort of activity (previously) enacted on them. Someone must have spoken of the thatcher before he came; someone must have bundled the sheaves; to be lying on the roof, the thatcher must have stretched out. The participles give a sense of numerous earlier preparations, of total activity, in contrast to the thatcher's apparent idleness.

2.2. Conjunctive Series

Heaney also quickens the poem's pace by eliding from a number of predicates the same subject (after its first mention). Similarly, he connects several objects in a series by means of the conjunction 'and' or by off-setting them with commas. The thatcher's bicycle bears "a light ladder and a bag of knives," while he "eyed the old rigging, poked at the eaves,/ Opened and handled sheaves...." These elisions and conjunctions compress the poem, forcing the reader to recognize relations between a series of objects or actions.

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[44] Actually a gerund, or verbal noun.

[45] From the French *se coucher*, to sleep. The participial construction in French would be *couchant* and here is used in the sense of 'lying down' or 'stretched out.'

3. Peculiar Language

As mentioned before, Seamus Heaney is an Irish poet, and many of his poems contain scenes and local words of Ireland. The title "Thatcher" immediately announces to the reader that the significant figure of the poem will be an Irish roof-thatcher (thatch being a common roofing material for rural Irish homes). The reader should accommodate Heaney's occasional provinciality and not be put off by unclear references, for such references provide much of the poem's charm. One delights in the simultaneous foreignness and familiarity of the scene, and Heaney's word-choice authenticates the setting. However, it remains the reader's duty to search out unfamiliar words to become better acquainted with the poem.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, 'thatch,' 'rafters,' 'couchant,' and 'sods,' the words in the poem whose use in Irish differs from or is unfamiliar to American English, mean:

Couchant: 1. Lying down; couching: *esp.* of an animal... (Often with allusion to the heraldic use).

Rafters: 1. One of the beams which give slope and form to a roof, and bear, directly or indirectly, the outer covering of slates, tiles, thatch, etc.

Sods: 2. *Sc.* and *north.* In pl., two pieces of turf used as a substitute for a saddle or pack saddle. Hence, a rough kind of saddle made of cloth, canvas, etc., and stuffed with straw. Freq. *a pair of sods.*

Thatch: 1. Material used in thatching; straw or similar material with which rods are covered; particularly *b.* that actually forming a rod, the thatching.

4. ...thatch-peg, -pin, -prick, a stick sharpened at one end to fasten down thatch.

Thatching: 3. ...thatching-rod, a long flexible rod laid on the thatch to hold it down, and tied or pinned to the framework of the roof...

Heaney's description of thatch and the thatching process could confuse readers unfamiliar with such roofing; a little research corrects such confusion. Thatched roofs are made from layered bundles of long rods or branches that are pinned to rafters by large wooden staples. Oil paintings of thatchers often depict the carpenters seated on a small, bench-like saddles (the 'seds') or laying bundle after bundle of thatch over the gaping squares formed by the cross-laid rafters.

4. Lineation

"Thatcher" makes careful use of line-breaks, as the rhetorical and verse readings will demonstrate. The frequent enjambment (running or splitting a phrase or clause over two lines) quickens the reading pace, for one wishes to complete the phrase and must hurry back over the lines to do this. Notice the effects of the enjambment on the poem.

1-2 "he turned up some morning/ Unexpectedly"

The adverb (a verbal intensifier) appears on the line beneath the verb it modifies. Something unexpected is not anticipated; the appearance of the adverb a line down from the complete phrase of line one surprises the reader, emphasizing the sense that the event (the thatcher's arrival) is not anticipated. In addition, the line-break introduces some ironic humor into the poem. One whose arrival is spoken of for weeks does not turn up

'unexpectedly,' but the fact that the thatcher surprises the expectant affords the setting, rural Ireland, the sort of atmosphere in which such (magical) surprises could occur.

2-3 "his bicycle slung/ With a light ladder and a bag of knives"

The objects of the subject and predicate appear later, a line beneath. The reader first encounters the thatcher riding his bicycle, and the objects with which the bicycle is loaded appear later, as if the thatcher were approaching from a distance.

6-7 "Next, the bundled rods: hazel and willow/ Were flicked for weight..."

"Hazel and willow" fulfill the punctuation's (the colon) demands for a list of the specific types of rods, then proceed to act as the (passive) subject in the following clause. It is as if the reader is shown the rods first, as objects, before they are used in the thatching process. Here one witnesses Heaney's skillful economy of words.

9-10 "laid out well-honed blades/ And snipped at straw..."

One imagines the thatcher slowly and carefully laying out the sharp knives before going to work on the thatch. The reader's eyes must travel back across the page before the thatcher picks up the knives for cutting, and the travel back suggests a lapse of time.

10-11 "ends of rods/ That bent in two, made a white-pronged staple"

Line 10 completes one activity, the thatcher's snipping the straw and rods. In line 11, the action picks up again when the rods are bent to fashion the staple. The line-break suggests a chronological sequence of work.

11-12 "staple/ For pinning down his world"

The break at line 11 again suggests a sequence of work. Only after the staple is fashioned can the thatcher begin to use it to pin down the bundles while he thatches.

14-15 "stitched all together/ Into a sloped honeycomb"

The line-break implies an elapsed time before the completion of his work, and it also raises the reader's anticipation of the finished product, which the thatcher (or Heaney) delivers in the next line.

Having brought the effects of sound, diction, syntax, and lineation to the reader's attention, I leave the poem to interpretation. In closing, I might remark that almost any poem (or work of art) about craftsmen or craftsmanship is necessarily self-referential, though one runs a great risk of reducing all such poems to simple commentaries on artistic creation. Still, "Thatcher" offers an interesting insight into the nature of poetic creation.

A thatcher arrives at a rural, probably isolated, house. He has been expected for weeks, and he has probably come late, but he still arrives unexpectedly, like some mysterious guest. He idles all morning long, but his idling is dynamic; he actively prepares for work, and his preparations themselves become a necessary part of the labor.

Later he begins to work, and his efforts do not seem laborious, but luxuriant; it is as if he is hardly working at all. But before the homeowners know it, the thatcher has refurnished the roof, returning the dwelling to its original warm and water-proof state without altering the frame of the house. The thatcher leaves them awing at the pure mastery of his work and at the effortlessness that comes with such mastery.

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