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Between Poetry and Philosophy

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Abstract

Poetry is not philosophy, nor was it meant to be, except on rare, glorious occasions. And only Wittgenstein seems willing to claim that philosophy should be written as poetry. Yet it is difficult to imagine poetry not wanting to impinge on the cultural roles played by at least some philosophy. And some philosophers, like Hegel and Heidegger, want to influence the course of poetic practice. So it seems useful to inquire into the various ways these two disciplines can overlap or complicate one another's modes of inquiry, even if one has no hope of securing abstract definitions for either practice. Those with the appropriate philosophical background, for example, could articulate tensions within a culture's intellectual life as a means of specifying how an author develops emotionally resonant concrete experiences grappling with this environment. One example might be examining how the need to address Humean skepticism helped shape the development of Romantic ways of making constructive imagination inseparable from attentive states of perceptive involvement in the world. Another example might focus on efforts by contemporary poetry to correlate the work performed by ordinary language philosophy with Heideggerean ideals of building and dwelling potentially applicable to the frameworks provided by philosophical grammar.

Keywords: poetry; philosophy; experience; cognition; imaginative framework; door; field; Lauterbach; Hillman

1. Introduction: The Space Between Poetry and Philosophy

There are two basic ways one can organize an essay on philosophy and poetry. One can stress the differences between these practices by concentrating on one as the pursuit of some version of truth and the other as a pursuit of some kind of merger between thinking and feeling. Or one can be more dialectical by stressing how typical conflicts between the disciplines of philosophy and poetry might provide also the best account of their fundamental connections to one another. By casting alternatives in this way, I am virtually forced to speculate on the more challenging task of exploring why such conflicts may be inevitable and so worth building upon. Perhaps each practice must impinge on the other's turf because their traditional approaches to the world lack something the other has. Kevin Hart offers a useful version of this framework when he suggests that "Poetry became open to contemplation not because it became philosophical but because it could not properly be assimilated to philosophy." [1]

I will take up the dialectical approach by using a distinction basic to my book *Imaginative Experience in the Arts* between two kinds of experience, neither satisfying in itself, because each lacks what the other has traditionally emphasized. Philosophy tends to treat experience in terms stressing "experience of" by inviting judgments that subsume the particular into some general category characterizing its possible functions for theory and

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for practical uses. Most philosophers are likely to dwell on a perceptual event by relating features of the event to more general frameworks basic to acts of description. And they approach social events by interpreting them in terms of concepts derived from history or sociology or by practical judgments clarifying the degree of threat they pose or rewards they promise.

In contrast, "experience as" involves attitudes that forego explanation to dwell carefully on how particular qualities emerge and invoke concerns involving a language of values for appreciating these qualities. A perceptual event draws analogies to paintings. And a dramatic social event invites affective involvement in detail, embodying the purposes of the agents and the possible conflicts those purposes entail. Imagine treating the Mona Lisa as instigating memories of someone the observer once knew. Then compare being fascinated by an emerging appreciation of the complexity of her smile and the ways light emerges from it. Or imagine the difference between psychological interpretations of Whitman's claims about himself and seeing those claims as embedded in how we develop what we experience in relation to the poem as a whole.

Conflicts between these practices occur in large part because these contrasts in modes of experience are not adequate for our experiences of aesthetic objects. Philosophers want to claim some version of knowledge that emerges from engaging in what "experience as" offers. And many literary critics want to claim some kind of wisdom that brings emotional concerns into our claims for how literature engages the actual world. I think I can solve this problem by introducing a third term—"experience of experience as." Then we can reflect on experience as developing interactions between these two states, as if the mode of reflection involved negotiating percentages of attention we pay to "of" and to "as." Pure "experience of" is an ideal for science and for philosophy modeled on scientific inquiry. Pure "experience as" would characterize many of our experiences of music.

But even with this synthetic interaction between "of" and "as," accounts of works of art must be careful to avoid claims that this kind of knowledge can be stated in terms that philosophers want to call cognition. Avoiding this temptation requires another distinction, this time between "example of" and "example as." For then we have an entity that counts as knowledge but does not support any discourse about truth. When we know an "example as" we do not subsume the experience into categories, but have in effect constructed relations among details that provide imaginative terms for clarifying and intensifying analogous experiences. Think of the categories used in wine-tasting like "a hint of black cherry mixed with overtones of oleander." "We do not want to subsume the taste of the wine into these categories, but use the categories to define the specificity of this experience of this wine. Similarly, in poetry or in painting, we focus on "example as" in order to deploy philosophical concepts not to explain the work but to help us think about what we feel and feel about what we think. The kind of knowledge produced is the awareness that such thinking and feeling may help us in specifying relevant qualities for other specific experiences in art and in life.

2. The Plan for This Essay

So far, I have been building on the argument of my recent book. Now I will ask this discourse about experience to do some practical theoretical work, helping us to clarify how philosophy and poetry might have productive dialogues about their different ways of addressing the world. Then, as tests of why such claims may matter, I will attend closely to two contemporary poems, stressing both what they accomplish as specific works of art and why they might serve philosophical interests elaborated by Hegel and developed very differently in late Wittgenstein. The central concern becomes how intense responses to works of art help shape our awareness of forms of experience, which can function as aspects

of an expanded grammar derived from Wittgenstein's analysis of how we understand language. Then we can see that certain important poems emphasize their place in a cultural grammar because they exemplify possible uses of a general figure shaped by imagination.

I will argue that there is an important difference between approaches to works of art that try to characterize particular experiences and approaches that stress the ways the experience provides an imaginative activity concerned with establishing a mode of inquiry, inviting multiple ways of exploring emotionally charged reflection. Consider the uses of a door in poetry. A writer can develop significance for a particular door and the emotions associated with it. Or the writer can dwell on the importance of the figure of a door as establishing a range of possible experiences. Or consider another of the examples I will use—the figure of a field. Think of Wordsworth's field of poppies in their lushness. Then consider how Charles Olsen uses the figure of a field as a model of complex interrelationships, inviting a variety of specific kinds of experience.

In the second version of the door and the field, the figures function as potential aspects of grammar for a culture because they give shape and resonance to a variety of possible experiences. Each figure invokes a self-conscious framework, encouraging various engagements with imaginative concerns for how human beings try to elaborate facts so that they involve concerns for values. And each figure elicits possibilities of philosophical interest based on what is displayed rather than what is argued for. By such figures, philosophy and poetry can align in their own distinctive ways with the capacity for imaginative realization to engage us in how such situations in the world can be the source of intense contemplative modes of self-reflection.

3. The Kind of Knowledge Derived from Aesthetic Experience

The basic reason I wrote about experience in the arts was that I thought this way of focusing on art could take aesthetic objects seriously while showing that claims for "cognition" by means of art seem to me likely to underplay the emotional and imaginative intensities with which we become involved. I want both disciplines to appreciate what they gain by deploying a form of knowledge not dependent on generalizing interpretation of the work but dwelling on a particular experience to be remembered in terms of its staging opportunities for participating in how self-consciousness can expand our capacities for feeling and for thinking.

First, I have to offer instances of what I complain about when philosophers and the critics they influence typically talk about literary works. At the most general level, I think there are two sharply opposed models of inquiry subject to analogous problems. In Anglo-American criticism, the most common position deploys some version of the claim that literary work can make available cognitions that can be of philosophical use. The best practitioners, like Robert Pippin, do not argue that literature provides propositions. Instead, he stresses how literary texts afford practical ways of understanding and even directing behaviors. Henry James' *What Maisie Knew* illustrates a young girl's developing an adult state of consciousness, aware of intricate contexts and able to take responsibility for her actions. I have argued before that this claim to knowledge is persuasive, but it fails to account for the emotional price James makes her pay for the choice that follows this level of awareness. This choice determines for her a life in which security is purchased at the cost of a sterile security to which her knowledge seems to condemn her. In effect, Pippin's concern for generalizing wisdom pays insufficient attention to purposive stylistic choices responsible for the integration of reflection and feeling that texts can elicit.[1]

The other now typical philosophical approach to poetry stems from continental ways of adapting concepts from deconstructive thinking to the arts. Giorgio Agamben, for example, stresses ways that poetry can afford resistance to the entire social order governed

by conceptual structures. Poetry seeks to be faithful to unrealized potential embedded in life and realized primarily by metaphor and musicality. Again, this is not false. Yet it seems to bury the specific concerns basic to poetic expression by stressing such general concepts as "life" and "potential."[2] For Agamben, the pursuit of knowledge's cognition is limited by its blindness to life as not only what is given but also what is potential within what is given. But this general critique of knowledge offers its own form of problematic generalization: such theorizing makes the work an "example of" quite general conditions relating to "life," thereby ignoring many of the ways particular works build intensities exemplifying possible relations with the actual world. Despite Agamben's insightful analysis, "Life" in poetry is not usually experienced in itself. Rather, it provides a background for specific experiences involving specific concerns made concrete and vital by a medium and a manner of expression.

4. Experience as Verb and as Noun and Example of vs. Example as

Now we need a conceptual foundation linking imagination to thought and allowing us to specify what poets do to produce ideas about this world, casting it as worth celebrating. I propose that we can at least begin elaborating such a foundation by making two basic distinctions. The first involves deploying a crucial difference between experience considered as a verb and as a noun by borrowing from the German language. "Erlebnis" addresses experience as flow, making it impossible to step into the same river twice. "Erfarhung" can make it impossible not to step into the same river twice because when experience is treated as a noun, it can become isolated for further attention. As Louis O. Mink puts it, an event becomes an experience in this second sense when consciousness regards it as "an object for a higher level of consciousness." The experience as scrutinized becomes John Dewey's "situation" as we try various ways of seeing the experience as significant. If we can recognize how experience can become an object for consciousness of consciousness, then we can concentrate on how it deploys and elicits imaginative engagements with the world. We can see how we come to attribute value to how imagination works within those experiences.

Then, once we have a concrete site for this imaginative engagement in experience, we can borrow Kant's language separating determining judgment from reflexive judgment—now adapted to fundamental differences between "experience of" and "experience as." And now we can develop a general framework for adapting our reflections on experience for various kinds of purposes involving versions of knowing. On the most general level, judgments involve either categorizing particulars or attending to how particular aspects of experience can sponsor a sense of interrelatedness and purposiveness, much like what Wallace Stevens idealized. And we find ourselves returning to my contrasts between "of" and "as"—but now we have to use that distinction to consider how examples provide kinds of knowing.

"Example of" adapts results of thinking in terms of "experience of." In contrast, "example as" makes concrete how we can speak of another kind of knowing that allows us to talk about experience as connecting us to particular features of the work without talk of direct cognition, hence without talk of "determining judgment." My case depends on analyses of the concept of exemplification performed by Nelson Goodman and Richard Wollheim. The distinction between "example of" and "example as" adds to their work a useful way of casting the possible social significance of treating works of art within this framework. As I have already suggested, "example of" embeds a particular experience within the domain of categorical understandings. We ask of the Mona Lisa, who was that lady, or how does it compare or contrast with other Renaissance Portraits. I reserve "example as" for a contrasting task—the effort to take in our thinking about an experience

so that the experience itself or aspects of it become particulars that self-consciousness can deploy as analogies for appreciating value-conferring features of situations that it encounters. We might think of Walter Pater on Mona Lisa's smile or attend to how light operates in the painting as an instructive contrast to other portraits. The work becomes a model for a way of instantiating possible experience.

5. The Importance of Hegel's Concept of "Philosophical Experience" as Context for Invoking Wittgenstein's Thinking About Grammar

Now I need some examples of how poetry develops figures capable of elaborating similar experiences to those developed by philosophical arguments while remaining insistent on basic differences between these practices. Instead of making arguments, many poets interested in philosophy offer other kinds of generalization—based not on argument but on capturing figures of experience that deepen a range of particular imaginative possibilities. This poetic interest in what I call "grammars for processing experience" is best seen as paralleling ambitious philosophical arguments posed by Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. But I use Hegel primarily to establish a way of looking at Wittgenstein's claims about grammatical awareness embedded in cultural life. Here, Heidegger will be my guide because he emphasizes Hegel's insistence on differences between natural and philosophical experience. Addressing natural experience involves assessing the truth value of various specific assertions. But philosophical approaches to experience concentrate on what governs and allows the use of concepts like "truth."

Heidegger claims that Hegel's argument for a distinct philosophical experience depends on separating experience oriented towards self-consciousness from natural consciousness. Natural consciousness can be devoted either to experience focusing on the status of objects or the status of subjects. Most philosophy emphasizes one of those two poles because it is concerned with what Heidegger calls resolving doubts that arise in efforts to describe relations among beings. Philosophical experience, in contrast, focuses on the frameworks that allow self-consciousness a full view of the structures enabling its forms of inquiry.

Here I hope that two quotations from Heidegger's reading of Hegel capture what is at stake in the argument and prepare us for Wittgenstein's very different inquiry into these structures:

> For consciousness is, on the one hand, consciousness of the object and, on the other, consciousness of itself; it is consciousness of what to it is the true, and consciousness of its knowledge of this truth.[3]

Later in his book, Heidegger summarizes Hegel's argument this way:

> True Science is not the study of facts but awareness of what in the mind or Spirit produces the possibility of fact. A fact is only an index of 'truth,' not the possession of it. Science is the subject of the system, not its object ([5] HCE 21).

A full experience of "truth" depends on the mind's recognition of what it brings to the situation so that it can have confidence in its judgments.

Wittgenstein would not speak of "true Science" in his work after the Tractatus, nor would he generalize about kinds of experience. If we want to appreciate Wittgenstein's possible contribution to my argument, we must replace talk of science by talk of "grammar." This gives us the concept in Wittgenstein's later work that parallels Hegel's concern for locating reflexive practices by which we become aware of the frameworks by which we make judgments of all kinds. Wittgenstein did not share either Hegel's fascination with ideal states of self-consciousness or with the dialectical processes shaping such self-consciousness. And while, like Hegel, he claimed that "our investigation is directed not

towards phenomena, but rather. . .toward the possibilities of phenomena."[4] Wittgenstein located those possibilities in quite ordinary grammatical investigations with no claims to those investigations possessing systematic coherence. Even more important for our purposes, Wittgenstein's books devoted to philosophy seem to lack any concern for how the arts might play any role at all in producing frameworks that contribute to grammatical understanding. But, this said, we should not ignore the possibility that Wittgenstein's interest in the work grammar performs in linking meaning to practical uses might prove important for also specifying how the kinds of exemplification provided by the arts might help us understand how imaginative activities connect to the practical world. Once we cast Wittgenstein as a co-conspirator, it is not a huge leap to imagine poets can have a similar concern for imaginative structures within which they develop concrete experiences exploring how valuing might be exemplified within our engaging "experience as".

Consider first Wittgenstein's general comments in Philosophical Investigations on the role of grammar as a cultural force. We can begin with the most Hegelian moment in Wittgenstein: "Essence is expressed in Grammar. . . . Grammar tells us what kind of an object anything is" ([7] PI 371, 373). But in Wittgenstein, there is no talk of essence ultimately abiding in Spirit. "Essence" becomes a property abiding in agents' abilities to negotiate aspects of cultural life: Or, as Wittgenstein puts it, "We may say: it only makes sense for someone to ask what something is called if he already knows how to make use of the name ([7] PI 31):

> A main source of our failure to understand is that we don't have an overview of the use of our words. –Our grammar is deficient in surveyability [Ubersichlichkeit]. A surveyable representation produces precisely that kind of understanding which consists in seeing connections. Hence the importance of finding and inventing intermediate links ([7] PI 122)[5].

Wittgenstein's way of locating these links brings us close to my loosely Hegelian account of how imagination works in art because determining the sense of expressions requires being aware of the cultural foundations shaping our understandings of the use of names. Consider three stages in Wittgenstein's ways of analyzing assertions. The first is practical, involving the testing of assertions. If we want to specify the difference between "the earth has existed for millions of years and the earth has existed for the last five minutes," we must ask: "What observation does this sentence refer to; and what observations would count against it?" ([7] PDF (the last part of *Philosophical Investigations*) 313) One knows the framework of conversation for the first assertion, but the latter sentence simply seems to have no context, making available a use value for it.

The second step is more general, following on the previous analysis. It is our awareness of the grammatical forms culture establishes that allows us to contextualize statements and understand connections between meaning and possible uses ([7] PI 20). Then the third step adapts Wittgenstein's language for dealing with sensations to draw analogies he does not draw to speculating on how poems relate to practical experience:

When one says "He gave a name to his sensation," one forgets that much must be prepared in the language for mere naming to make sense. And if we speak of someone's giving a name to a pain, the grammar of the word "pain" is what has been prepared here; it indicates the post where the new word is stationed ([7] PI 257).

Giving a name is like providing a picture. But the picture will only speak if we then "investigate what the application of the picture looks like" ([7] PI 374).

Now consider the opening lines of Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself":

> I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
> And what I assume you shall assume,

> For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.
>
> I loafe and invite my soul,
> I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass.
>
> My tongue, every atom of my blood, form'd from this soil, this air[6].

Here we have a rough understanding of the meaning of the words. But we are likely to be mystified by the possibility of giving practical force to the expressive process as it emerges. As the poem develops, we see that this is by no means a simple act of self-assertion. Minimally, it wants to affect how the members of an audience see themselves. We know in general that poets often exemplify possible attitudes toward a relation to the world that is not socially acceptable or even intelligible in standard social psychology of the poet's time and perhaps ours. And here the poet insists on treating this attitude as a mode of intensifying a relation to "this soil, this air." Appreciating this connection of ego and soil depends for most of us on giving substance to this attitude by deploying two basic grammatical structures. First, there is Whitman's framing of the assertion as an aspect of the emotional context provided by the entire poem Song of Myself. Poets both rely on cultural grammars and establish within those contexts frameworks of relationship that depend on the maker's producing an object that grounds specific emotional and intellectual registers. Second, we need to recognize how poems both rely on and expand our awareness of the place of cultural forms in our engagement with particular experiences. In this case, grammatical awareness would have to apply, involving the reader in the larger context of Romantic efforts to align self-assertion with heightened attention to details of an evoked landscape. Wordsworth's appreciation of loafing in the grass is one primary cultural factor both invoked and modified by Whitman. Such contexts evoke something like a grammar of figurative expressions, making it possible to specify the distinctive force by which the poem can be of use in the world.

6. On "The Door" by Ann Lauterbach

Here, I have chosen two basic poetic figures or orientations of mind that can allow us to focus on how poets exemplify possible relations between imaginative experiences and the frameworks they also try to exhibit. Such figures are not derived from arguments. Nor do they shape modes of argument. Rather, they are forms for giving shape to experience by which to imagine our access to what may be valued because of the kinds of presences experience makes available. In effect, these forms share with Hegel's philosophical experience the sense that there are frameworks we become conscious of by virtue of participating in how poems shape experience.

First, please consider the figure of the door as an epistemic operator governing what can appear by virtue of different kinds of perspective. Poems can stress what doors open onto, what they close off, and how they provide angles of vision. Such angles of vision can provide thresholds that alter how one sees the world and how or where one sees oneself in the world. At the other pole, there is the figure of the "field," which turns oppositions into a set of active co-presences where relations multiply intensities of perception. The figure of the field matters for philosophy because it provides models of making discriminations and establishing relationships not based on binary oppositions but contingent affordances.

The figure of the door became important to me because of Ann Lauterbach's recent volume of poetry *Door*[7]. Here there are several poems with the title "door," so we almost need to see the door as a figure eliciting a variety of related but not identical imaginative investments. My own fascination with the door as involving grammatical structures began with the dramatic blue block form occupying about two-thirds of the cover and discussed in

the poem "The Blue Door" ([8] pp. 84–89). The angle of the cover makes it simultaneously protrude and recede. Perhaps the image could be a window if there were not the title Door printed alongside it. The title then does the work of a door, and not a window, by having language transform perceptions and determine what can be seen as substantial. This physical image established by language as a door also manages to deepen our awareness of how doors might function as sources of imaginative vitality. There are tonal shifts in the qualities of blue that intimate possibilities of what may lie behind the door. Notice too that the door seems to expand so that it is not simply a rectangle. This expansion seems to me to enact a tension between defensive withdrawal, blocking vision, and an enticing promise not to settle for fixed identity. Do we really want to open a door that may change how we look at what experiences can make possible?

This image also reminds us that opening a door involves a relation to other forces—from how the door changes in appearance to what factors we see as influencing or governing our response. As an artifact, the door frames what we can register as experience, in the process inviting conditions of philosophical self-consciousness. These conditions take on at least three basic imaginative possibilities. (1) As I have already suggested, the figure of the door as an enabling frame offers an invitation to become self-conscious about our becoming involved in how the experience unfolds. (2) The door establishes a locus for gathering and altering relationships among what we see, feel, and think. That locus is best imagined as the result of a maker influencing how the responder takes in aspects of the world. And 3) when the maker's instrument for constructing doors is language (rather than painting images), we are encouraged to see words themselves as having the potential force of doors being opened so that the work can extend the relational force of the elements we manage to take in. Lauterbach says at the end of "The Blue Door":

> Words are like small maggots,
> pulling other words toward them, one by one,
> so the singles gather and as they gather
> attest to an alignment that will become
> meaning. What was it you said about naming?
> It makes a way between unbeing and being,
> the definite flowing into the circulating infinite,
> to the blue door opening the night sky. ([8] p 89)

Let us now look at a complete poem, the last of many poems in the volume entitled *Door*, where Lauterbach activates these principles of attentive response involving the speaker self-consciously in a world become vividly present. The pressing challenge to the reader is how to engage the fact of the poem's lack of dramatic information while insisting on opening the door that will enable engaging a troubling situation. Perhaps it will help negotiate this challenge if we reflect on this statement in one of Lauterbach essays that shares my sense of lyric frameworks making contributions to philosophy: "one of the reasons I am attracted to abstraction is it can absorb the singular into an inclusive plural that does not ask for the specific instance, allowing all the instances to be gathered into a singular." [9] The door opening becomes an invitation to take in the full situation confronting self-consciousness:

> Small Incident, last among closings,
> A singular display confirmed
> not the risky allowance of faith not
> accruing slowly as in a habit
>
> certainly not mere weather, not

choosing a hinge or a lock

entity spreading outward voracious as oil
the collapsed wings trapped

a condition and its picture
what was once shuttered

allowing light in allowing the moment
to resist passage yes

that endowment the image
simple recursive

darkly enfolded—
ancient as night traversing loss

and the abrasion
appeal to be restored ([8] p 91)

Instead of elaborating a particular represented event, the poem makes present an activity of thinking and grappling to find a language adequate to her feelings about something in her past. The door here is a figure for a process of seeking an alternative attitude toward a situation in which she feels trapped because of its power over her memory. That quest takes place by means of a poem that is divided into three sections. The first four stanzas present the feeling of powerlessness; the central stanza offers a generalization that opens a new door; and the final four stanzas define a state of mind presenting a new attitude enabled by the idea of doors opening. In effect, the central stanza offers a door that opens other doors, making it possible to accept the past as past and suggesting alternative paths for a new life. Here, ultimately, it is the sense of conflict that provides the conditions for valuing what doors the poem can open. And it is the objective structure of the poem rather than any specific argument that measures why such doors can matter.

The opening stanzas establish several features of the problem with which the poem must grapple. They indicate that there is a troublesome gap between the small incident that is the source of trouble and the fact that it seems to play a part in a much larger pattern as the "last among closings." This expression suggests that the speaker is not happy with a life that now seems more involved with closings than openings. And once we see an entire life involved, we must examine the general ways the agent is allotting energy and care, especially in the poem's repeated efforts to negate the various strategies that first come to mind. This effort builds to a climax of the fourth stanza, where all the negated possibilities leave only a condition of voracious spreading that traps any possibility of escape from doubt and suffering.

But the figure of the entity spreading like oil turns out to have a positive side because it requires dealing with the small incident in more capacious terms. The central stanza suggests that once we can see the entity as both a picture and a condition (not the picture of a condition), another door opens. The speaking becomes less concentrated on attributing an interpretation to the incident so that it can get beyond defensiveness and open a path to possible acceptance of the past as simply past. And then the poem can make its most suggestive generalizing move. There emerges along with the light a placing of distances between words, as if the affirmation "yes" could be reinforced by allowing independent words to take on additional weight (perhaps as an internal version of enjambment).

This spacing invites us to treat the words as opening doors for reflection, where sight turns out to help mediate new possibilities for relieving suffering. The "incident" becomes an "image." Then, instead of resisting "passage", there emerges an instance of light calling for contemplation. This door does not quite offer any solution. But it substantially shifts the work the poem must perform. The darkness provoking the negations has to be seen as itself a potential for traversing loss because thinking about the situation now offers "an appeal to be restored." Additional spaces between words call attention to a potential liberating power if we pay attention primarily to different ways of giving shape to consciousness.

The opening of the poem tried to conceptualize the incident, thus generating only frustration. But because that frustration leads to a sense of voracious spreading, there may be no alternative to trying out an alternative state of mind. The final four stanzas offer a speaking that seems simply willing to endure the pain as a means of reconciling the self to what it had become, without providing an explanation for it. The task undertaken by the poem is to free the incident from the mind's own voracious need to comprehend it. Then it might let life take its course without honoring these demands of the mind. The door provided by the volume closes, but another opens onto a fresh vision of ways to address troublesome memories.

7. How the Figure of the Field Organizes Consciousness

My final figure is the figure of the field because it establishes relational structures sharply opposed to the pressures of what I call "betweenness."[8] Fields are open spaces defined by virtually infinite possibilities for establishing significant relations among entities and forces. Let me summarize how an unpublished essay by Ann Lauterbach establishes these possibilities and then conclude with a final example, Brenda Hillman's poem "Porcelain Musician in a Child's Bedroom," from her new volume *Still House in the Desert*.

Notice first how a sentence in Lauterbach's prose functions like poetry: "Have you noticed how many correctives, revisions, are circulating in the quiet air like living ghosts? Ghosts come back to life, back to our windows, doors, our memories and our forgettings."[9] The idea of circulation is the crucial point, initially dramatized by the physical condition of the air. Then language itself circulates by multiplying contexts and so supplementing the metaphor of "living ghosts" to bring intelligence within the field of relations. Not content with this level of expansion, the essay adds self-consciousness as an especially important model of filling out the field by turning to possible practical contexts: "Then I decided I did not want to think of my life as a ladder, but as a horizontal field in which weedy words might grow."

This opposition between the figure of the ladder and the horizontal field speaks volumes. The ladder demands continually working on the self in the fashion of Hegel's "I = I," with each modification on the left side changing the equation so that once the subject on the left expresses itself, it adds to the complexity of the elements on the right side of the equation. The right side then presents a new demand for self-consciousness because the subject has to ask what differences the statement might make and what caused it. But for Lauterbach's horizontal field, there is no single perspective facing the constant obligation to produce meaning for what it encounters. That field is open to many perspectives, with even "weedy words" capable of producing relationships that reward attention.

Meanwhile, as I write this sentence, billions of events are transpiring simultaneously, some of which may be found and caught, like fireflies, in the jar of history's various fields.

Now, as an alternative to the imperative to synthesize as a means of creating a ladder effect, each element and each perspective opens further paths for attention. Synthesis is simply a momentary feature of such attention: "The figure is turning simultaneously toward and away, as if in one of those doors that spin inward and outward, as if on an

unanchored carousel." And most importantly, this figure need not be "me." The figure is simply human, "spinning in spacetime." Words take a central role in human experiences of the field "because they have the power to name the situation and so make mind inhabit and influence the paths by which we attach significance to each turn adjusting to "'gather,' 'relation,' 'entangled,' 'play', 'plural', 'various', 'turn'."

Lauterbach summarizes the consequences of this line of thinking for a poet by turning to Emily Dickinson's style of writing: "Percepts and concepts so closely aligned that they merge in a metaphysical triumph, where words cease to name the thing itself, answering the what is, and propose instead increments of apprehension; the nominal 'what' is leaping into a meaning-making economy of unexpected relation." One has to resist how common-sense constructs scenes to allow novelties that expand and intensify them.

8. A Poem That Illustrates the Difference Between Ladder and Field

For a poem that stresses the abstract power of the figure of the field, I will call upon Brenda Hillman's "Porcelain Musician in a Child's Bedroom." This poem offers an intense and intelligent demonstration of how fields for imaginative activity produce multiple paths by which the active mind can escape the pressure of binary oppositions. Here even words themselves function not only as elements of description but also as forces within the fields established by the poem. Words become active and often strange "increments of apprehension" so that apprehension becomes a means of release from what Lauterbach calls "ladder consciousness."

> Who can tell you not to mourn the dust?
> If you want to mourn the dust,
> go right ahead; or the afternoon
> light sending circles to kaolin feet—
> some music taken in, some
> not-music taken in—or
> the Dresdened-Londoned-unknown-by
> history-or-imagination maker who
> made her & died soon after,
> nonliving that outlives
> the living—oops! the critic said
> don't use abstractions—or the six
> carbons from the start of time
> spinning as, not in, ceramic skin,
> the keyboard unchipped as of this
> writing. When the music lessons
> went less well, your mother settled
> for your writing, you could say
> settled like dust on porcelain but
> dust, the noun & verb that is
> a thing & isn't, drifted, its dreamy
> abstract qualities sent
> off with a cloth till nothing
> said you had to or you didn't.[10] [10]

We need first some contextualizing because this poem is one of a series of meditations on objects in the house (now sold), which remind her of her recently deceased mother. The volume is what seems to me an original form of elegy, devoted in part to objects that in effect are all now both things and memorials in the speaker's imagination to a life gone by.

This poem is focused on memories elicited by a porcelain figure of a musician. Like the other poems in the volume, it crosses material things with these memories so that it disrupts any clear distinction between humans and the things that have occupied their interests.

As in Lauterbach, a dramatic situation is in the background as the poem concentrates on developing an attitude toward its many effects on the speaker by entering a field produced by internal dialogue. Dust becomes a key figure because it reminds her of her mother's obsessive and controlling cleanliness, while dust is now what her mother has become, but dust is still present. The poem addresses the problem of how remembering the dust simultaneously helps her mourn her mother and, at the same time, produce a dialogue capable of gaining freedom from her authority. The answer is to compose a field of memories and associations that eventually takes on something close to a power to settle self-consciousness as an analogue to how dust settles yet persists.

The process of composition begins with the advice to go ahead and mourn, then spreads to other possible objects of mourning. Yet these objects also prove fascinating in themselves, expanding the field and complicating it by introducing ways of viewing it other than as a cause for mourning. Crucially, these options do not struggle with the initial object of attention, the figurine. They simply call attention to more expansive fields of relation for perception and for producing linguistic formulations. The field first consists of speculating on the historical origins of such pottery. That in turn involves conditions of individual making, which reconnects to history in terms of recognizing how history is built on limited life spans whose only reality becomes a matter of the kind of memory she is expressing:

> the Dresdened-Londoned-unknown-by-i.e., the porcelain
> history-or-imagination maker who
> her & died soon after,
> nonliving that outlives
> the living—. . .

This is followed by a complaint about abstraction in her poetry, probably a recurrent judgment by her mother. Here what could be taken as self-indulgent and irrelevant instead develops two important features in the poem. The concern stated is evidence of how far memory can range within the field of relations composed by the entire volume, where there are constant reminders of her mother's critical ways, placed beside constant reminders of her expressions of loving care. And this complaint turns from what is remembered to a concrete aspect of the porcelain--but now only in terms of dust over time becoming pure surface rather than an obstruction of the surface. That way of paying attention then weaves memory into these sensuous spaces:

> spinning as, not in, ceramic skin,
> the keyboard unchipped as of this
> writing . . . When the music lessons
> went less well, your mother settled
> for your writing, you could say

Substance becomes surface, evoking the figure of a keyboard, and generating in turn references first to music, then to the mother's character as she settles for attention to the speaker's writing after being dissatisfied by the child's performance at music lessons. Once the mother becomes an active agent, the entire field throbs with psychological investments. Readers can adapt to that shift by recognizing that the concluding sense of freedom from guilt or doubt does not depend on an act of reasoning but on the speaker's participating in the field elicited by memory. The way out of pain depends on finding a way into the fields generated by it:

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settled like dust on porcelain but
dust, the noun & verb that is
a thing & isn't, drifted, its dreamy
abstract qualities sent
off with a cloth till nothing
said you had to or you didn't,—

The simile "like dust" plays a significant role here because it shifts attention from the history of her issues with her mother to the mind working within the relationships being developed. So the poem is now free to reflect on its own contribution to the scene. Thinking of "dust" as "noun & verb" introduces a self-consciousness able to deal with what is no longer a thing but now only exists for memory. Within this memory, the dust can be "sent off with a cloth," a playful assonance that also foregrounds the making within the present tense of reading. That present tense, in turn, forces the recognition that nothing can speak what she needs to hear. Ultimately, the poem can deny the ladder mentality that the mother could not but impose, in favor of at least understanding how binary judgments were not necessary in this or other situations. I wish I could describe why the simplicity of that utterance, shifting from the scene to the self, strikes me as so powerful. But I can only state the wish as one of the effects and affects of my entering this field.

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Notes

1 See chapter 4 of my book *Imaginative Experience in the Arts: Promoting Liberal Education* [2] for my argument with Pippin about the limitations of philosophical discourse about cognition in dealing with literature.

2 For Agamben on poetry, see *The End of the Poem: Studies in Poetics* [3]. For his general philosophical position, see *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* [4].

3 I cite Heidegger's quotation from Hegel in *Hegel's Concept of Experience* ([5] pp. 21, 142). Further citations to this work will be in the main text cited by the initials HCE.

4 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations, revised fourth edition* by P.M.S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte. [6] item90. Future references will be indicated in the main text by PI.

5 G.E.M. Anscombe's translation of Ubersichlicheit as "perspicuous representation" may be less accurate to the German but far more useful for making connections with other works in philosophy." See Anscombe's translation of *Philosophical Investigations* ([7] p. 49).

6 Whitman's opening lines of "Song of Myself".

7 Ann Lauterbach, *Door* [8].

8 This is a good place to say something about "betweenness," a third imaginative framework I had included with my main text. This form offers a set of powerful and varied examples providing imaginative access to possible attitudes useful in grappling with the complex problems life imposes on us. I am elaborating this figure now in a footnote for two reasons, even though the topic is too intricate to allow for an adequate analysis. One reason is that this figure is referred to by the title of this essay, a feature I realized only on completing the argument. And it is relevant as a contrast to the figure of the field. The second reason is that once you notice the force of this figure, it is difficult not to see it as deepening the account of an imaginative grammar that poetry offers philosophy. Readers have always been aware that literary texts need not resolve by tying up the major situations into a resolution satisfying to all the agents involved. The New Critics developed the concept of ambiguity to handle such a lack of resolution. But ambiguity is primarily a semantic concept that is not sufficiently attentive to aspects of intense involvement within this lack of resolution. Betweenness on the other hand is a dramatic figure based on states of imaginative participation. Strether in James' *Ambassadors* can only increasingly see that he must choose between the fascinations of Europe and the duties

he feels tie him to the U.S., and he must give up the possibility of reconciling what he values. And Keats's "This Living Hand" is a stunning example of a sensibility torn between violent anger at mortality and a desperate need for loving attention to the desperation driving that anger. Betweenness offers a way of thinking that elaborates how an experience can evoke contradictory responses, or at least responses where tensions among the feelings and thoughts evoked seem inescapable. Pervading all of these cases is the gulf caused by two basic competing drives in self-consciousness. One is to recognize as a lack and as a failure the inability to provide adequate interpretive language for experiences. The other is the sense basic to all religious experience that the mind is capable of modes of contemplation satisfying precisely because it feels itself embodied in ways not available to our interpretive languages. More generally, "betweenness" frames situations, inviting emotional and intellectual recognition that crucial tensions cannot be resolved. They can only be contemplated so that we can deepen our acceptance of what life often demands of us. Betweenness is a kind of field that intensifies conflict rather than affording multiple paths capable of alleviating the force of inescapably contradictory demands on the agents involved. Such powerlessness is not in the service of skepticism, but affords a stable vision of necessary instability eliciting sympathy but paralyzing any path for resolution by the intellect.

[9] Ann Lauterbach, "This Various Field" (unpublished and unpaginated).

[10] Brenda Hillman, "Porcelain Musician in a Child's Bedroom", from *Still House in the Desert*. Used by permission.

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