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Philosophy and Literature, Volume 40, Number 1, April 2016, pp. 309-314  
(Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press  
DOI: [10.1353/phl.2016.0007](https://doi.org/10.1353/phl.2016.0007)



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## Critical Exchange

ON *THE PHILOSOPHY OF POETRY*, ED. JOHN GIBSON

by A. J. NICKERSON

*T*HE *PHILOSOPHY OF POETRY*. “Of” intimates something more than copular coexistence. This could be the systematic and propositional attempt to define what poetry *is*, subjecting poetry to philosophical investigation with its distinctive questions and processes of inquiry. As a literary critic, however, I heard the title *The Philosophy of Poetry* as an assertion of poetry’s discursive, cognitive value: it suggests there are varieties of philosophic thought, of which one might be the *poetic* organization of understanding. Between these inversions there are less exclusive (and less partisan) ways of imagining the relationship. The philosophy of poetry could be the attitude it assumes toward the world—its disinterested revelation of truth, or ruminating consideration of it, or resistance to its pressures. It could be the Aristotelian virtue of practical poetic commitment to propriety, discipline, and truthfulness. Or, following Heidegger, it could be poetry’s metaphysical work of measuring man’s existence in the world.

One might expect (I did) this ambiguous coordination to be a strategic move to reconfigure the relation of philosophy and poetry through attention to the subtleties of their coexistence and interference. In practice, however, this volume is oriented away from the idiosyncratic particulars of poetry and toward establishing the philosophy of literature

as a subset of philosophy, using poetry to correct the earlier prose-heavy studies and so “attain the expansiveness and openness our friends in other areas of analytic aesthetics have already achieved.”<sup>1</sup> The book presupposes analytic philosophy to be the basic and proper model of enquiry. Ten of the twelve essays are by members of philosophy faculties: John Gibson, Peter Lamarque, Ronald de Sousa, Jesse Prinz and Eric Mandelbaum, Sherri Irvin, Simon Blackburn, Anna Christina Soy Ribeiro, Roger Scruton, Alison Denham, and Richard Eldridge. Only Angela Leighton and Tzachi Zamir represent the literature department. They draw on a few philosophers (Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Wollheim) and repeatedly cite other contributors (Richard Eldridge’s *Beyond Representation: Philosophy and the Poetic Imagination*, Peter Lamarque’s *The Philosophy of Literature*).

This in-house—or rather, in-faculty—execution of a project that is necessarily cross-disciplinary is symptomatic of a low view of what literary criticism and literature might contribute to philosophy. This finds expression in the volume’s confessed reluctance to engage with poetry. De Sousa—at once pleased and saddened by his antipathy but typical in it—describes how he once “did passionately want to be a poet” but is now “only an occasional and always a highly prejudiced reader of poetry” (p. 37). Irvin in her essay on “unreadable poems” laments having to “consort with so many unfriendly poems” (p. 92). On the occasions when poems are included, choice seems circumscribed by a limited and popular acquaintance with poetry—Wallace Stevens, T. S. Eliot, and “The Red Wheelbarrow.”

Unsurprisingly, this inattention to poetry corresponds to a clumsiness in handling texts. This is evident in the apparently hasty editing of the volume, which is riddled with misspellings, lacunae, and ugly footnoting. The literary critic will also find it evident in some crude oversimplifications about literary history (Lamarque’s discussion of “supposed commonplaces about poetry”) and poetic effect (Prinz and Mandelbaum: “Rossetti uses rhyme and repetition to create a sense of rhythm” [p. 72]).

This hampers the project of an analytic critique of poetry. Prinz and Mandelbaum’s essay “Poetic Opacity: How to Paint Things with Words” is a badly spliced and uneven composition. It is also desperately limited in its appreciation of poetic effect: we are told “the form of a poem is *heightened*,” “enjambment *heightens* the reader’s attention,” “bodily imagery . . . *heightens* the readers’ attention to sensation,” and “perceptual idioms . . . *heighten* the sensual feel” (pp. 79–81; my italics). This

*heightening* argues for an intensification of attention without observing the intricately differentiated phenomena, or explaining how or why these compositional aspects have this effect on our interest and engagement, or why they direct our embodied, subjective awareness of poetic experience. Consequently, this impoverished lexicon constrains the degree of refinement possible in aesthetic evaluation and, therefore, in the analytic study of poetry.

At this point the literary critic will ask why these philosophers have not consulted the work on the philosophy of poetry already sitting on the shelves of literature departments. Indeed, one could offer an alternative select bibliography reflecting the busy contemporary discussion among literary critics about the relationship between knowledge and poetry. Key contributions would include: Clive Scott's *The Poetics of French Verse* (among many things, an exemplary investigation into the phenomenology and meaningfulness of reading poetry); Derek Attridge's *The Singularity of Literature* (unusually concentrating a discussion of the philosophy of literature around poetry rather than prose); Michael Wood's *Literature and the Taste of Knowledge*; Simon Jarvis's *Wordsworth's Philosophic Song*; Angela Leighton's *On Form: Poetry, Aestheticism, and the Legacy of a Word*; Peter McDonald's *Sound Intentions*; and Ewan Jones's *Coleridge and the Philosophy of Poetic Form*. These volumes are concerned with philosophy's project of defining poetry but also entertain the possibility of poetry-as-philosophy.

But before the literary critic joins Gibson's colleague from the literature department in condemning philosophy as "arrogant and cantankerous" (p. 1) in its assumption of the entire field of the philosophy of poetry, it is chastening to consider why this philosophical investigation so consistently disregards the contribution of literary criticism. Literary criticism is neither poetry nor philosophy, yet—frequently in crisis over its own disciplinary identity—it veers between one and the other, emulating their practices and, too often, doing neither well. Sometimes literary discussions of a poem's meaning are in effect a staggered reading aloud of the poem on the page, the chapter animating in slow motion the poem's own activity. What sets out to find an exactly nuanced understanding of the poem becomes a deictic referral to the poem to explain itself. On other occasions literary criticism pines for the confidence of philosophy and adopts a more "philosophical" approach. Unfortunately, the philosophers literary critics favor (Stanley Cavell, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault) are those largely disregarded within the philosophy department. Literary criticism becomes a weak form of pseudophilosophy

or an oddly inarticulate way of talking about poetry that cannot extract its argument from its subject—in either case, it seems an invalid mode of inquiry to the philosopher.

While the works mentioned above represent accomplished discussions of the question, these methodological bifurcations remain evident. Indeed, the two literary critics included in *The Philosophy of Poetry*—Leighton and Zamir—represent the polarities of literary-critical practice. Leighton (like McDonald) puts the extragrammatical playfulness of poetic language—punning, rhyming, deliberate overliteralism and overemphasis, metaphor, and stylish syntactical formations—to use in the creation of an argument about the nature of poetic knowing. Conversely, Zamir (like Jarvis and Scott) is more philosophically inclined, articulating the meaningfulness of poetry with technical precision and in robust dialogue with philosophic thought. The difficulty of writing about poetry in a way that is sympathetic to its subtleties and particularities—moving away from the abstractions of philosophy, yet without simply replicating the poetic construction of meaning—is ultimately the difficulty of resolving the ongoing identity crisis of literary criticism, of finding and maintaining its disciplinary distinctives and practices.

But while an unintended virtue of this collection is that it forces the literary critic to reflect on his or her professional habits, it also explicitly demands a reconsideration of philosophical practice. The first four essays are concerned with the “difficulty” of poetry. Perhaps to a philosopher new to poetry (for whom the collection is intended) these will be a useful introduction to some theoretical problems, but to a regular reader of poetry the volume becomes most challenging and engaging when Simon Blackburn asks, “Can an analytic philosopher read poetry?” It asks *how* an analytic philosopher can read poetry—whether they have the skills, knowledge, patience, and sympathy to do so (some of these essays suggest that the answer is “No”). But it also asks, more quietly, whether he can do so without compromising himself *as* an analytic philosopher.

In some ways the essays dodge the question. Whether it was the result of briefing or coincidence, these essays consistently focus on “the modernist, the avant-garde, and the experimental” (p. 5). Gibson’s introduction argues that in the modern, difficult poem, “the loss of a surface [narrative, expressive, imagistic] that can be read naively thus turns out to be no loss to poetry” (p. 10): this “pure” poetry, free from the poetical clutter of previous centuries, facilitates the most direct and strenuous investigation of the philosophy of poetry. But this misguidedly assumes that the sensuous form of the poem (meter, rhythm, sound,

rhyme, stanza form, and so on) is irrelevant to its truthfulness. Modern, difficult poetry is indeed more hospitable to this philosophical project to discover repeatable, translatable meanings in its apparently lesser interest in sensuous form; it does not follow, however, that its meaningfulness actually can be discovered through the methods of analytic aesthetics. Ironically, it is the poetry absent from this collection, implicitly deemed “easy” (Tennyson, say, or Swinburne) because of its foregrounding of nonsemantic forms of expression, that presents the greatest challenge to the philosopher to establish *what* poetry means and *how* it articulates that meaning in a specifically *poetic way*.

Again, in philosophy’s clumsiness and oversimplifications there is a yet greater warning for the literary critic. Much current literary criticism centers on the *cognitive* character of poetry in relation to its phenomenological and sensuous aspects. This attempts to defend the aesthetic’s contribution to human life, the significance of nonsemantic forms in our perception of the world, by articulating it in terms accessible to philosophy. But it risks compromising the *literariness* of its investigation and overlooking categories of poetic value unavailable within a philosophical framework.

The best essays in the volume—the most subtle and stylish, the most sensitive to the competing demands of philosophy and poetry—endeavor to find a sympathetic way of articulating the contribution of poetry to our understanding of the world. It is notable that while they come from very different authors (Scruton the philosopher, Leighton the literary critic/poet, Zamir the literary philosopher) and handle very different material (Heidegger, Henry James, *Paradise Lost*) they each conclude that poetry *refreshes* knowledge. Scruton’s excellent essay, “Poetry and Truth,” understands truth “as revelation, as the unconcealing of what is, in our instrumental and scientific ways of dealing with the world, hidden from us” (p. 154). For Scruton, poetry gives understanding of the world through its disclosure of what is ever present but unseen. Crucially, poetic “truth” is not the final proposition that can be made about this new world but the process of revelation itself, the gradual attaining of a true vision. Leighton argues for a similarly present-continuous idea of poetic “knowing,” imagined as explicitly and playfully antagonistic to philosophy, demanding that it “include process and replay, wonder and unknowing, seeing and listening” in its definition of knowledge (p. 178).

Zamir’s essay on the epistemology of *Paradise Lost* provides a nice companion piece. It attempts to formulate the exact nature of poetic antagonism toward philosophy and explores how philosophy responds

to this challenge. His compelling conclusion is that philosophy's encounter with poetry accentuates disciplinary distinctives rather than initiating interdisciplinarity. This is not because the project of writing a "philosophy of poetry" fails, but because it reveals the precise, totalizing, and incompatible claims that each makes about its particular schema. Moreover, the interference of philosophy and poetry foregrounds what each discipline fails to account for and hence the need for a more thoroughgoing engagement with the other discipline in order to refine and defend their distinctive project.

As such, this collection confirms Zamir's intuitions about what happens when philosophy encounters poetry. The philosophy-heavy content of *The Philosophy of Poetry* exposes the weaknesses of the philosophical project: clumsiness with the small things of poetry, insensitivity to sensuous forms of knowledge, commonplaces substituted for attention, a lexicon that facilitates abstraction but results in foreshortened aesthetic evaluation. But literary criticism's absence is symptomatic of an even greater need to develop and defend its own disciplinary identity: at stake is our ability to recognize, value, and sympathetically articulate the various ways in which poetic expression enriches our participation in the world.

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*This work was supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, grant no. AH/L503897/1.*

1. John Gibson, ed., *The Philosophy of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 5. All subsequent references to this volume are given as page numbers in the text.