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**A poem is not the words: experience and ontology in the poem**

**Abstract:**

From a classical phenomenological position, this paper focuses on the experience of the poem. Poems can contain non-word experiences that can arise from non-word structures. Object oriented ontology fails to address the experience of the poem as object, confusing the poem with the words. A poem is not words. Words are only a metaphor for the poem. The poem itself is something else. As an act of intentionality the poem itself is transcendental and intersubjective. Drawing on Schmitz' idea of emotions as a collective "atmosphere" that are "poured out spatially" (rather than as a private first-person spaceless experience), I argue that the poem itself is spatial but surfaceless; words are akin to gestures made and experienced in our "felt body". Accepting that the poem is not the words can lead us to new forms of critique.

**Biographical note:**

Monica Carroll is a writer, poet and post-graduate student at the University of Canberra. Her creative work has been widely awarded and anthologised within Australia and abroad. Her research interests include phenomenology, touch, poetics and space.

**Keywords:**

Poetry, ontology, phenomenology, Schmitz

**A poem is not the words: experience and ontology in the poem**

Beneath him is the rock. Large and smooth. Before him is the river. Wide, rippling around its calm crusades. A fragment of a poem rises to meet him —

“Said the river: imagine everything you can imagine, then  
keep on going.

He is amongst. There is sun, shimmer in the eddies, judicious trees, static tussocks. Cicada hum, beating, in moments like a tree-top pulse. Another fragment echoes and dissolves —

“A youngest brother turns seventeen with a click as good as a roar,  
finds the door and is gone.

You listen for that small sound, hear a memory.

—What are? he wonders. What are the fragments of experienced poems that resonate within him? Can he take the words away and still have the poem? Can he remove the meanings? The image too? And the rock holds him. Faithful and warm. There is more to experience.

He reaches into his rucksack and reveals a book to himself. With it, he may perform a brief experiment, to wit, perform a ‘having experience’. He is feeling for the experience of a poem. We seek to share that experience with each other. Yet, as Janicaud notes, we risk dissolving into an empiricism of ‘all-round’ description; we must distinguish literary descriptions from “descriptions governed by a morphological ideal” (2000:93). “In the latter case, the description does not work by chance inspiration, but through the study of a pregnant and significant form” (Janicaud 2000:93). We may consider this a phenomenological description and take time to observe the structures in the poem itself.

‘Poetry’ is the oft discussed matter of importance, and, clearly for sound reason. Gosetti-Ferencei is correct when she notes that “[p]oetry can, in unique ways, express more than can be said in words; it can go beyond the capacity of its own medium, it can signal the transcendence as well as the limits of language itself” (2012:208). The relationship of poetry to a poem is easily assumed. And, that which we say about poetry we naturally apply to the

poem. Yet, 'poetry' is not a sword but the implication of swordness. I cannot be certain I know what poetry is or how poetry can be experienced. To read poetry is to wield a poem. In the end, I may not be able to read 'poetry' at all. A poem is another matter; we can handle a poem and name it object.

He takes another book from his rucksack. He choose a non-fiction book: a piece of philosophy. Let's open this book to a page. We might say, 'The eye falls upon a point, a word, a paragraph.' This we will put aside for another day to study but for now our eye can fall. It falls to a moment that is the start of a paragraph but not the start of the page. We can see that we are already, upon opening, drawn and quartered by the rules of space. We know that we have started at a place that is not the start. We cannot expect this book to grant our wishes for we have broken the first rule of wish-making. Let's read with him...

No one on the point of death seems to feel his spirit retiring intact right out of his body or rising first to his gullet and up through his throat. On the contrary, he feels that it is failing in a particular region which it occupies, just as he is conscious that his other senses are being extinguished each in its own sphere. If our mind were indeed immortal, it would feel rather that it was escaping from confinement and sloughing off its garment like a snake.

Did you read it? Maybe you read the first line or so. Imagine it thus, plucked from two opened pages filled with lines that reach the margins.

You can choose a book from your own library and open with that sense of rule-breaking randomness. What is the next thing we can notice? After breaking and plucking? We have stepped into a maze, perhaps. Having forgotten the location of our entry and the turns we took to arrive here: walled, trapped and lost, grasping this fragment. We can see Proserpine's pout but not her pomegranate. Or, in Rossetti, the way she clutches herself as though she is a stranger tugging at her own wrist.

Yet, this fallen upon fragment is luscious, like the lips, and holds an intrigue. We may wish to mend the broken promise and read on, flip backwards to the first. In no way do we close the book with a full and satiated stomach.

The next choice from his sack is fiction, just for contrast. Read with me, and him,

‘Well, we must wait for the future to show,’ said Mr Bankes, coming in from the terrace.

‘It’s almost too dark to see,’ said Andrew, coming up from the beach.

‘One can hardly tell which is the sea and which is the land,’ said Prue.

‘Do we leave that light burning?’ said Lily as they took their coats off indoors.

‘No,’ said Prue, ‘not if everyone’s in.’

‘Andrew,’ she called back, ‘just put out the light in the hall.’

One by one the lamps were all extinguished, except that...

We can erect a little more of our structure, thrust a little higher after this installation, for this is a differing experience to the first fragment. What can we ascertain after again, rule-breaking, page plucking and eye falling? Unlike Fragment One, we are not in a maze with a spotlight grasp of a gesture; we are much farther removed as if looking at a long ago photograph of people we have never known. Anything unwritten in this fragment, remains unwritten. We can read neither the immaterial nor the non-words that are undoubtedly present if other fictions be our guide. We cannot telescope in the way that is possible with Fragment One. We are in rigor mortis: fixed and dead, too far from the life around us to conceive of possibility and intrigue, for intrigue implies a future. Some things may be graspable from this fragment but is it enough to mend the broken promise?

Fragment Three in his investigation, also from the bag, also random but not fiction or non:  
instead a poem. If you have the vigour, read again with us,

Births

We will never have any memory of dying.

We were so patient

about our being,

noting down

numbers, days,

years and months,

hair, and the mouths we kiss,

and that moment of dying

we let pass without a note—

we leave it to others as memory,

or we leave it simply to water,

to water, to air, to time. . . .

Break, pluck, fall. And then?

I think the first experience of this fragment parallels a breath of fresh air. There is a meadow of space and a confidence that we can accomplish some of what this page asks of us. So, there is, in fact, not an experience of breaking the rules by opening at page thirty-nine. Instead we are met within our measure. The fragment feels possible as a whole. Without close-reading then, we have an experience of unity. In the manner, as described by Husserl on perception, we can see initially the visible face of the poem and simultaneously, co-present,

are the invisible or hidden surfaces of the poem. When, for example, we perceive an object such as a rough red pyramid, to use Husserl's example (1952:38), we can see at least one face of the shape but we fill in the other sides without having seen them as such.

In the experience of this poem, this equates to noting the wide margins of space without knowing the content of any line. We perceive the first line as the flag, marking ownership over the pyramid (or pole) of that below. We grasp the physical structure of this poem, as poem, before any of the immateriality of the poem is known.

This shape aspect of the poem is essential for permitting no other solid rules. If we read the last word in each line, if we scan the punctuation, if we yank at a line from the middle and read that before all others, we have not transgressed a boundary. We will, in this fragment compared to the others, still be reading. The fluid lawless structure of the poem flows as much to experiences of reading as writing. We can read a poem howsoever we choose without being lost and without being excluded from the poem. This is a contrast to the experiences of Fragment One and Two respectively.

A final fragment, another poem, also random,

Floating Trees

a bed is left open to a mirror

a mirror gazes long and hard at a bed

light fingers the house with its own acoustics

one of them writes this down

one has paper ...

The experience, here, in Fragment Four is one of easy slipping. We can slide, like a cool oyster down the throat, into-through-with the shape-line-word-contrast. The experience is of a detaching within one's mind, a foot on the clutch between plate and gear wheel: The Usual,

The Ordinary, is sublimated as secondary as we perceive and become in the intersubjective surfaceless space of the poem.

In this, the poem is not the words. Nor the meanings. Nor the image. The experience of the poem, as an object, is —of being spurred on to emergence in an inside alive space not material— analogous to Rilke’s *Weltinnenraum* but with pulp and velocity.

This argument may seem to mortise with an object-oriented ontology (OOO). Morton (2012), an OOO advocate, attempts an experiential analysis of Gerard Manley Hopkins. Before we study Morton’s words, lets refresh with GMH,

As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;

As tumbled over rim in roundy wells

Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell’s

Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;

Of this Morton says, “‘Tumbled over rim in roundy wells / Stones’ (2-3) are felt and heard before we hear what they have to say for themselves against the walls of the well and in the deep water within” (2012:212). Before we can engage with Morton’s “felt and heard” we must address his “ / ”. Slash, slant, virgule (little twig), used to be a comma, now applied for this.

As advocate of the object, Morton is defenceless against denunciations that his commitment is surface shallow. The object is itself. Morton’s seamless substitution is a poor attempt in stealth of the pen to replace an integral line break with an absence of line break – there is no substitute for space. Morton’s “Tumbled over rim in roundy wells / Stones” is a different poem, a new beast.

Space is not all Morton, the defender of objects, has thoughtlessly surrendered; we cry for the completing knot of “ring”. Maestro Morton has replicated GMH without attention to keeping in tempo for the final phrasing. To bring forth these words one must bring the known phrase to maintain integral objectness. “Tumbled over rim in roundy wells / Stones [*ring*]”.

I prefer, where possible, to let the object feel complete in discussion thus,

...tumbled over rim in roundy wells

Stones ring

will help our analysis of “the way the poem forces us to experience,” as Morton has plonked it (2012:212). We need the space of the poem and the lines as we feel them (we need line-breaks and the word “ring”). We need the object to be recognisably itself for us to experience the object. Morton seems less a defender than destructor of poetry objects. From reading, hearing GMH, Morton describes our experience as “[t]he stone becomes its tumbling, its falling into the well, the moment at which it is thrown over the rim. Then splash...” (2012:212).

And here, at this moment, I want to pause and point out that GMH does not write the ‘splash’, nor do we reach the ‘splash’. The poem, in these line-flows, swings us, falls us, but without impact or end. I can manufacture twice as many words as Morton demonstrating this and that. Showing why “tumbled-over-rim-in-roundy-wells” is not the adjective he describes. Urging that we must unshackle our truths from words.

“A poem’ refers to a sequence of words...” says Stevenson (1957: 330). If we let ‘a poem’ *not* be its words, we are free—we no longer need to be anchored to the same stone cell—following the chain from word to meaning. Or trailing from word to meaning to poet’s mouth to time and place whereupon we always meet wall. These are useful links but a sense of something neglected lingers. The poem itself? And often, do we not have the experience of churning the words over and over but of somehow missing the tickling blush we felt at e e cummings orgasm, or the bloody rush in our heart at Yeats’ Rose of Battle? This is not a fresh lament. So I pose in our ‘having experience’: the poem is not the words.

As an object, not words, we may consider another attendant possibility at this cleft. Stevenson offers a refinement in his analysis of a poem, “‘A poem’ refers to *the meaning of* a sequence of words” (1957:357). “Consider a poem,” Morton suggests, “Its meaning is its future. As some point we will read it and decide on its meaning. Then we reread it and another meaning might emerge” (2012:220). Meaning tends to be the extension of words in the world of overt word-smithing.

Typically, the magical act of words as conveyance is centred on meaning. That is, we are given and give a meaning to each word which then causes other effects. Crudely, the word 'dog' means 'loyal, furry four-footer'. And here, on these shackles, much poetry critique is written. What does Wallace Stevens mean when he says "And the ear is glass, in which the noises pelt" (1966:252)? To answer this question-type, we drawn upon more words until we have that oddly abstracted feeling of having lost the poem altogether. Meaning, then, is not the end result of word conveyance. Meaning may occur-be-made-change but it is far beyond the pattern we agree upon. Meaning is neither the 'goal' of the poem words nor is meaning the miserly meal of a word 'defined'.

Meaning, though, when we observe it in what Lingis (1995) calls, "the world as whole," appears as a reflex action. We tend towards asking, of non-habitual doings, 'what does this mean?' It is much like our tendency to see patterns (another gripe of Morton's, that we see pattern not poem, see 2012:219). Pattern-gleaning is also a reflex and obviously some of our motive in experiencing structured poems is their satisfaction and comfort. A poem is not the meaning, not because meaning can change but because meaning does not capture the experience of the poem itself. The poem is not the words. Thus, the poem is not the meaning.

Heidegger attempts to express the experience of meaning when he describes meaning in poetic language, as *wohnen*, dwelling. "Poetry according to Heidegger 'gathers' things and brings together, how the world, as he puts it, 'worlds'" (Gosetti-Ferencei 2012:196). Imagery, says Gosetti-Ferencei, is the method by which poetic language performs its call to appear. Poetic image is a spontaneous imagining in intuition from an immediate apprehension, comparable to a first impression.

The experience of a poem does involve a first impression. The first glance, often, is what divulges the form 'poem' and 'not-poem.' Poetic language is part of what we read at first impression; the presence of words, the presence of space, in ancient marriage. Imagery is not enough to grasp the experience of the poem yet it may well do for talk of poetry. Imagery is the language of imagination such as space-words are the language of the page. The experience of the poem itself is other than words, meaning and image.

William Gass, in *Habitations of the Word* (1985), says,

I begin ... don't both of us begin? Yet as your eye sweeps over these lines—not like the wind, because not a limb bends or a letter trembles, but rather more simply—as you read do you find me here in your lap like a robe?

“I begin ... don't both of us begin,” he asks (Gass 1985:9). We can answer, “Yes,” but we do not begin where the words begin. We began whilom. An insect, the cicada, lives underground for years feeding on sap from the roots of a tree. The *Magicicada* lives underground for seventeen years. Cicadas, in an apparently unexplainable unison, emerge from the ground and scale the tree from which they fed. As they climb they pause to molt their juvenile exoskeleton, leaving a shell behind as they fly to the tree tops to tettix and click. The cicada begins before it is a cicada. That is not to say it emerges into pre-given structures that forms its being but that it is a cicada continuously. The end of a cicada cannot be death, nor the beginning at any of the multiple individual emergences. We do not need, as Dufrenne notes, to look for “the essence in the grammar of a given corpus but in the *Erlebnis* of the poetic in poems or even in nature...” (1976:110).

To direct oneself towards the abandoned exoskeleton and proclaim, ‘this is the poem,’ is to point to the words and say, ‘there is the cicada.’ There is a bewitchment within the experience of words that make them seem as though they are the object when, in fact, words are a metaphor. That is, words carry over, they transfer from and to. Words, written-read, are an experience of conveyance. In experience, the cicada and poem are in the treetops, one by one creating a deafening din in the height of the heat.

So, while OOO may grant the poem as object, it neglects the offerings of an experience-based occupation to a poem. OOO is not concerned with the first-person/first-object experience of objects. Its concern is with the causality that OOO predetermines for both the object and the relationship between objects. An experience-escorted approach does not favour causality. As such, the OOO occupation with objects “translating” is also peripheral to a phenomenological study of the poem.

The experience of a poem (think back to our earlier oyster of that *Floating Trees* pearl; the bed, the mirror, to write, the paper) does not feel like ‘translating’. We know what ‘bed’ means within and beyond the parameters of meaning. We do not have an experience of

reading the word *fossa* and scrambling back to our days of droning Latin to emerge with the dripping Excalibur. Ah, bed. To read (experience) from Fragment Four,

a bed is left open to a mirror

a mirror gazes long and hard at a bed

is more like a carousel, a movement. ‘Translating’ tells it as a puzzle to be solved with best fits and compromises. To translate first solicits the question, ‘what is this text telling me’ rather than that immediate immersive experience that comes with stepping into the bedroom of this poem fragment.

Despite its fragmentation, this ‘a poem’, like all ‘a poems’ comes to us whole, as a unity. The unity of a poem derives not from the words but from a sense that this experience is whole. To experience the whole is unusual. This is partly the result of intentionality and partly a consequence of the structure of the noetic act. A constitutive aspect of consciousness is our ability to direct attentiveness towards something. We can observe and experience a particular element through the faculty of intentionality. We are accustomed to perspective and aspect: we often do not wonder if the back of the painting holds another painting, or displays the front painting in reverse. These qualities work against an experience of unity.

The poem itself distinctly contains unity. There is not another ‘unseen’ side in a poem (if you clutch for counter-arguments of words and meaning, remember, they were abandoned on the tree-trunk). Many objects of the world cannot be experienced in wholes, only in part. In, *What is a Poem About*, Poteat says, “...let us observe that a poem as a whole transcends its parts not merely in the way, say, that a completed description transcends its parts, but also in the way a self transcends the sum of its own acts” (1957:549). The unity of a poem observes a different logical standing than other objects.

A poem presents as whole and available. Our experience of the poem shares in this unity; there is a sense that this object can be experienced to the full completeness of itself at first appearance and without co-presentation. We may consider then, that the poem is an act of intentionality. This does not refer to the poem as the intentionality artefact of a poet, but the poem as an object itself. We must not collapse into the OOO snare of concern for the

causality of relationships —the poet begets the poem— for that understanding will cordon other possibilities in the experience of the poem. The poem as manifest intentionality is whole and complete within that focal accomplishment.

To return to our word insect, we can see the clutch of critical readers gathered around the clinging empty husk. Consciousness attuned to the shell, they produce words about the casing and make claims about the poem. All the while, overhead, reverberating in thick dimensionality, is the poem itself. The collective song of the poem is complete and whole and there for us to experience with a small curving deviation of consciousness.

We may appeal to a parallel here with Schmitz. A poem is an “atmosphere,” following the description Schmitz applies to emotions. He wants to break the familiar model of the first-person experience. “The realm of experience is dissected by ascribing to each conscious subject a private inner sphere containing their entire experience” (Schmitz 2011:247). In this familiar doctrine you are a material body enshrining an immaterial soul that contains your private inner subjective sphere. In this structure, discrete-you has secretive self-contained-experiences. While Schmitz does ascribe experience to individual conscious subjects, it is not a private experience.

Schmitz challenges the model of first-person as a private inner sphere containing the flow of life. In Schmitz, the realm called “primitive present” is in relationship to our [this] non-primitive present. Non-primitive present equates to what we know as ‘world’. Between the two – from primitive to non – stretch *here, now, being, this, I*. Our tension between freedom and relapse in identity pushes us from one to the other. “...[T]he person, again and again, plunges into the pre-personal life in the primitive present by means of *corporeal communication*” (emphasis added)(Schmitz 2011:253). Intangibles, like emotions, are neither private nor discrete. Instead, immaterial objects are “poured out spatially” into surfaceless space. Simply put, in pain, you cry out. For Schmitz this shatters the misconception of the private inner sphere as your soul/subject cannot contain the crying out.

From this, Schmitz argues that the dimensional flow of the immaterial into space is the impetus that moves Leib. Recall here, Husserl’s celebrated two part structure for describing our bodily experiences. Broadly, Husserl describes two categories of body. Our flesh body, our material solid body, is Körper. Essential to each living Körper is our body that moves and senses: Leib. In stepping back from the “psychologistic-reductionist-introjectionist-

objectification” paradigm of Western thought, Schmitz finds the causality in our bodily movements from the inherently enveloping experience of emotion (2011:247).

We do the same with grasping at poems. Gass provides an example, “As we watch the red rag blow across the street, what are we watching? And as it approaches us, meat now, spurting blood, where is the change taking place? It is taking place the only place it could take place — on the patient page, in among the steadfast words, the metaphors of mind and imagination” (Gass 1985:78). This again is a common understanding of the experience of the poem. We read and inside ourselves, away from others, the poem is breathed imaginary flesh only through our immaterial mind.

Schmitz appeals to an altered but accurate heart. In the surfacelessness, there is an experience of freedom. Pain experiences pour out into surfaceless space. So too does empathy. Both are experiences we have tried to understand from an individuated first-person perspective where, as touched on by Schmitz, such experiences, in their experiencing, reach out beyond the traditional outline of the single isolated person.

It is not only emotions that reach out beyond what are usually considered to be the end of our selves. Our experience of a poem corresponds in several layers. We can see that the abandoned husk, the words and lines, of the poem equate to our flesh body, Körper. This is why the words are not the poem: they are only the flesh of the poem. A cadaver is not the person. Körper is limited by its materiality yet, because it presents to us in a tangible form, we grant it status beyond its reach.

Our Körper belongs to a space containing surfaces: our Leib (or in Schmitz’ terms, “felt body”) belongs to a surfaceless one like music or wind or silence. The greater part of “spontaneous experience” of the world, says Schmitz, is lost to apprehensive attention (2011:247). It is as though we are looking too hard at what we can easily see, the materiality, and are missing the atmosphere.

Through the unity of a poem, through surfacelessness and immaterial Leib, through cicada ring cycles, we may grasp the experience of the poem. The experience of the poem is an experience from and of surfaceless space in atmosphere. As atmosphere we sense rather than see or read. Atmosphere is an intersubjective condition. So, the poem itself is an experience of shared surrounding. Lingis says, “Existence is the movement in our being that casts our being outside of itself,” retelling Heidegger he continues, “outside of itself into

exteriority and remoteness, into the layout of the world...” (1995:144). Lingis says it is “mood” through which we tune into the layout and the layout reverberates in us (1995:150).

There may be, in this exploration, another way we can talk about poetry. If the poem is a unified transcendent object that we read with our felt body, we can build critique accordingly. We can shelve the words, meaning, and images, to develop that enfeebled part of ourselves that understands gesture. We can feel in a poem for the finite here, now, being, this and I.

**His First Remembered Fragment**

At the River Clarion by Mary Oliver

**His Second Remembered Fragment**

Cicada by John Blair

**Fragment One from the Rucksack**

Sensation and Sex by Lucretius

**Fragment Two from the Rucksack**

To the Lighthouse by Virginia Woolf

**Fragment Three from the Rucksack**

Births by Pablo Neruda

**Fragment Four from the Rucksack**

Floating Trees by CD Wright

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