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Edited by Dan-Eugen Ratiu and Connell Vaughan

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## Table of Contents

<b>Claire Anscomb</b> <i>Does a Mechanistic Etiology Reduce Artistic Agency?...</i>	1
<b>Emanuele Arielli</b> <i>Aesthetic Opacity</i> .....	15
<b>Zsolt Bátori</b> <i>The Ineffability of Musical Content: Is Verbalisation in Principle Impossible?</i> .....	32
<b>Marta Benenti</b> <i>Expressive Experience and Imagination</i> .....	46
<b>Pía Cordero</b> <i>Towards an Aesthetics of Misalignment. Notes on Husserl's Structural Model of Aesthetic Consciousness</i> .....	73
<b>Koray Değirmenci</b> <i>Photographic Indexicality and Referentiality in the Digital Age</i> .....	89
<b>Stefan Deines</b> <i>On the Plurality of the Arts</i> .....	116
<b>Laura Di Summa-Knoop</b> <i>Aesthetics and Ethics: On the Power of Aesthetic Features</i> .....	128
<b>Benjamin Evans</b> <i>Beginning with Boredom: Jean-Baptiste Du Bos's Approach to the Arts</i> .....	147

<b>Paul Giladi</b> <i>Embodied Meaning and Art as Sense-Making: A Critique of Beiser's Interpretation of the 'End of Art Thesis'</i> .....	160
<b>Lisa Giombini</b> <i>Conserving the Original: Authenticity in Art Restoration</i> .....	183
<b>Moran Godess Riccitelli</b> <i>The Aesthetic Dimension of Moral Faith: On the Connection between Aesthetic Experience and the Moral Proof of God in Immanuel Kant's Third Critique</i> .....	202
<b>Carlo Guareschi</b> <i>Painting and Perception of Nature: Merleau-Ponty's Aesthetical Contribution to the Contemporary Debate on Nature</i> .....	219
<b>Amelia Hruby</b> <i>A Call to Freedom: Schiller's Aesthetic Dimension and the Objectification of Aesthetics</i> .....	234
<b>Xiaoyan Hu</b> <i>The Dialectic of Consciousness and Unconsciousness in Spontaneity of Genius: A Comparison between Classical Chinese Aesthetics and Kantian Ideas</i> .....	246
<b>Einav Katan-Schmid</b> <i>Dancing Metaphors; Creative Thinking within Bodily Movements</i> .....	275
<b>Lev Kreft</b> <i>All About Janez Janša</i> .....	291
<b>Efi Kyprianidou</b> <i>Empathy for the Depicted</i> .....	305
<b>Stefano Marino</b> <i>Ideas Pertaining to a Phenomenological Aesthetics of Fashion and Play : The Contribution of Eugen Fink</i> .....	333
<b>Miloš Miladinov</b> <i>Relation Between Education and Beauty in Plato's Philosophy</i> .....	362
<b>Philip Mills</b> <i>Perspectival Poetics: Poetry After Nietzsche and Wittgenstein</i> .....	375
<b>Alain Patrick Olivier</b> <i>Hegel's Last Lectures on Aesthetics in Berlin 1828/29 and the Contemporary Debates on the End of Art</i> .....	385

<b>Michaela Ott</b>	<i>'Afropolitanism' as an Example of Contemporary Aesthetics</i>	398
<b>Levno Plato</b>	<i>Kant's Ideal of Beauty: as the Symbol of the Morally Good and as a Source of Aesthetic Normativity</i>	412
<b>Carlos Portales</b>	<i>Dissonance and Subjective Dissent in Leibniz's Aesthetics</i>	438
<b>Isabelle Rieusset-Lemarié</b>	<i>Aesthetics as Politics: Kant's Heuristic Insights Beyond Rancière's Ambivalences</i>	453
<b>Matthew Rowe</b>	<i>The Artwork Process and the Theory Spectrum</i>	479
<b>Salvador Rubio Marco</b>	<i>The Cutting Effect: a Contribution to Moderate Contextualism in Aesthetics</i>	500
<b>Marcello Ruta</b>	<i>Horowitz Does Not Repeat Either! Free Improvisation, Repeatability and Normativity</i>	510
<b>Lisa Katharin Schmalzried</b>	<i>"All Grace is Beautiful, but not all that is Beautiful is Grace." A Critical Look at Schiller's View on Human Beauty</i>	533
<b>Judith Siegmund</b>	<i>Purposiveness and Sociality of Artistic Action in the Writings of John Dewey</i>	555
<b>Janne Vanhanen</b>	<i>An Aesthetics of Noise? On the Definition and Experience of Noise in a Musical Context</i>	566
<b>Carlos Vara Sánchez</b>	<i>The Temporality of Aesthetic Entrainment: an Interdisciplinary Approach to Gadamer's Concept of Tarrying</i>	580
<b>Iris Vidmar</b>	<i>A Portrait of the Artist as a Gifted Man: What Lies in the Mind of a Genius?</i>	591
<b>Alberto Voltolini</b>	<i>Contours, Attention and Illusion</i>	615

<b>Weijia Wang</b>	<i>Kant's Mathematical Sublime and Aesthetic Estimation of Extensive Magnitude</i> .....	629
<b>Zhuofei Wang</b>	<i>'Atmosphere' as a Core Concept of Weather Aesthetics</i> .....	654
<b>Franziska Wildt</b>	<i>The Book and its Cover — On the Recognition of Subject and Object in Arthur Danto's Theory of Art and Axel Honneth's Recognition Theory</i> .....	666
<b>Jens Dam Ziska</b>	<i>Pictorial Understanding</i> .....	694

# *Perspectival Poetics: Poetry After Nietzsche and Wittgenstein*

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ABSTRACT. Most philosophies of poetry attempt to define what poetry is, either as a genre or subgenre of literature or as a specific use of language whose characteristics are different from ordinary language. The problem of such essentialist approaches is that poetry, like art in general, seems to defy definition and to always offer counterexamples to the philosopher's definition. In this paper, I therefore shift my attention from attempting to define poetry or its characteristics to understanding what we can learn from its difference from ordinary speech. The etymology of poetry, *poiesis*, brings to the fore the idea that poetry involves a making or a creating. Following ideas from Nietzsche and Wittgenstein, I understand poetry as involving what I call a perspectival poetics. At the heart of this poetics is the task of creating perspectives which reveal new viewpoints on the world. To elaborate this notion, I focus especially on Wittgenstein's idea of 'seeing-as', which can be relevant to poetry by transposing it into 'reading as', and on Nietzsche's perspectivism which brings the idea of creation of perspectives to the fore.

## **1. Introduction**

In comparison to its status in the 18<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, poetry has been rather left aside in contemporary aesthetics, especially on the analytic side. John Gibson notes in his introduction to *The Philosophy of Poetry*: 'Indeed, until very recently one could fairly say that poetry is the last great unexplored frontier in contemporary analytic aesthetics, an ancient and central art we have somehow managed to overlook more or less entirely.' (Gibson, 2016, p. 1) Philosophical studies of poetry have often taken two main directions: either as a search for an ontology in order to define poetry

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as a genre or a subgenre of literature or as a search for the essential characteristics of poetic language, in contrast to ordinary language. These two essentialist searches often encounter problems because poetry – as well as poetic language – seems to defy definition. My aim in this paper is therefore not to define poetry – be it as a genre or in its linguistic characteristics – but to take a wider scope on it and conceptualise what happens in poetry and in our relation to it. I will use poetry in order to elaborate a wider notion of poetics which could describe what is at work not only in poetry but also in many other art forms. In this paper, I however remain focused on poetry, only hinting towards possible ways to broaden the notion here and there. In order to approach what happens in poetry, I rely on one of the same assumptions as many studies of poetry, namely that poetic language functions somewhat differently from ordinary language. Rather than defining this difference in order to categorise poetry or to distinguish between two abstract and distinct entities: ordinary and poetic, I focus on the question: ‘What does this difference reveal?’ or, in an extended version, ‘What can we learn from this difference which is of use not only in poetry but to a wider extent to our relation to language and the world?’ In order to answer these questions, I build on ideas from Nietzsche and Wittgenstein. This paper is divided in two sections: in the first I show that the difference poetry reveals calls for a specific reading which can be developed through Wittgenstein’s idea of ‘seeing-as’: poetry requires to look – or read – from the right perspective; in the second I shift my attention from the reader to the poet or the artist: the idea of poetics is not only to look at something in the right perspective but – according to the etymology *poiesis* – to make or create something, to make or create perspectives. It is therefore that I call it a perspectival poetics.

## **2. Wittgenstein, ‘Seeing-as’, and ‘Reading-as’**

Take the question: “How should poetry be read? What is the correct way of reading it?” If you are talking about blank verse the right way of reading it might be stressing it correctly – you discuss how far you should stress the rhythm and how far you should hide it. A man says it

ought to be read *this* way and reads it to you. You say: “Oh yes. Now it makes sense.” [...] I had an experience with the 18<sup>th</sup> century poet Klopstock. I found that the way to read him was to stress his metre abnormally. Klopstock put U–U (etc.) in front of his poems. When I read his poems in this new way, I said: “Ah-ha, now I know why he did this.” (Wittgenstein, 1966, p. 4)

This quote from the *Lectures on Aesthetics* presents many of the elements I will develop regarding poetry. One important thing is that it acknowledges a difference between reading poetry and reading an ordinary text. Poetry requires from the reader that she stresses the words in a way different from everyday reading. A poem makes sense only once it is read in the right way. We should not understand ‘right way’ as something too specific: there can be multiple right ways to read a poem, more precisely, the right way to read a poem is the one that makes sense for the reader. The meaning of the poem, or the way it makes sense, depends on the reader and how she reads it. It might make sense to read in this way but not in that way. This idea could be called ‘reading-as’, following Wittgenstein’s ‘seeing-as’: a duck-rabbit can be seen as a duck or as a rabbit; a poem can be read as a meaningless series of words or as a meaningful whole. Another interesting aspect from this quote is the reference to Klopstock. Although the reader is free to read the poem as she likes, the poet can indicate how it should be read and Klopstock does so by indicating the rhythm. Reading a poem in one way might not make sense whereas reading it following the instructions does. In that sense, a poem is subject to interpretation. Its meaning varies according to how the readers read it. More than that, it shows a different use of language. Reading a poem and reading a newspaper both involve reading, but not in the same sense. This difference is similar to Wittgenstein’s distinction between seeing and ‘seeing-as’. He acknowledges this distinction between an ordinary and a poetic use of language in remark 160 from *Zettel*: ‘Do not forget that a poem, even though it is composed in the language of information, is not used in the language-game of giving information.’ (Wittgenstein, 1981, p. 27) The poetic language-game, or better the poetic language-games for there are many ways of doing poetry, bring light on different aspects of language,

aspects which are not highlighted in the ordinary communicational practice. In a way, poetry resembles Duchamp's ready-mades: Duchamp takes an everyday object and transforms its meaning by placing it in a different game, in a different context. Similarly, poets take everyday words and transform their meaning. Two examples of poems show this transformation (or transfiguration in Danto's sense) of the everyday. First is an excerpt from William Carlos Williams's poem 'Two Pendants: for the Ears':

2 partridges  
2 Mallard ducks  
a Dungeness crab  
24 hours out  
of the Pacific  
and 2 live-frozen  
trout  
from Denmark

What is more ordinary than a grocery list? The fact that it is written by a poet and presented as a poem brings us, readers, to believe there is something more to it, to read it as a poem. I believe it could work as an autonomous text, but Williams's poem is a bit more complex than that: the grocery list is a part of the poem and is introduced as follows:

Listen, I said, I met a man  
last night told me what he'd brought  
home from the market:

Taken in the wider context of the whole poem, the grocery list appears as a bursting in of the ordinary in the poetic and its place within a poem makes of this all too ordinary grocery list something poetic. What is interesting is not only that the ordinary becomes poetic, but also that the poem stages this ordinary becoming poetic. The context of the poem transforms the ordinary grocery list into a poetic element. Williams comments on his use of a grocery list in *Paterson*: 'If you say "2 partridges, 2 mallard ducks, a

Dungeness crab” – if you treat that rhythmically, ignoring the practical sense, it forms a jagged pattern. It is, to my mind, poetry.’ (Williams, 1963, p. 261) As with Wittgenstein’s remark, the poetic dimension arises from rhythm. In poetry, there always something more than the ordinary meaning, as Williams further comments: ‘In prose, an English word means what it says. In poetry, you’re listening to two things . . . you’re listening to the sense, the common sense of what it says. But it says more. That is the difficulty.’ (Williams, 1963, p. 262) Rhythm is one aspect which can change the perspective on words, another possible one is sound. In the poem ‘The Crate’, Francis Ponge plays for instance on the sound of the word:

Halfway between *cage* (cage) and *cachot* (cell) the French language has *cageot* (crate), a simple openwork case for the transport of those fruits that invariably fall sick over the slightest suffocation. (Ponge, 1972, p. 34)

Describing a very ordinary object, Ponge focuses on the sound of the word and brings other meanings in the word through sound similarities. He then plays with these meanings: ‘fall sick’ and ‘suffocation’ are here related to the idea of the cell and transposed onto the crate. The sound of ordinary words become the playground for the emergence of the poetic. These two examples show ways in which poetry can modify the ordinary or, better, how poetry can arise or appear from within the most ordinary words. An important dimension in this change of meaning is the context in which the word or the object appears. Depending on the context, the meaning changes. In a remark from the second part of the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein interestingly links this idea of context to that of ‘fiction’:

I can imagine some arbitrary cipher – this, 34 for instance, to be a strictly correct letter of some foreign alphabet. Or again, to be a faultily written one, and faulty in this way or that: for example, it might be slapdash, or typical childish awkwardness, or, like the flourishes in an official document. It could deviate from the correctly

written letter in a variety of ways. – And according to the fiction with which I surround it, I can see it in various aspects. And here there is a close kinship with ‘experiencing the meaning of a word’. (Wittgenstein, 2009, p. 221)

To understand an object whose signification is unknown requires some interpretation, and Wittgenstein notes that ‘seeing-as’ has something to do with interpretation, as well as with imagining, knowing, and thinking. The ‘arbitrary cipher’ can be understood or interpreted in various fashions. What is important is that the way in which I see it is related to ‘the fiction with which I surround it’. I have to invent or imagine a fiction in which this cipher makes sense. When I encounter something completely foreign to my knowledge, I need to build a context in which I can understand it. This might be a pragmatic context, finding a possible use to an object, this might be an artistic context, finding conceptual or aesthetic qualities to an object, etc. The lack of context is an obstacle to understanding the object, and therefore requires the invention of a context. Interestingly the word ‘fiction’ translates the German ‘Erdichtung’ which is related to and contains the idea of ‘Dichtung’, of poetry. Following this idea, we could say that the poet creates a context in which a poem can make sense, but it also asks from the reader that she creates or imagines a context in which she can make sense of this poem. This idea is related to ‘experiencing the meaning of a word’ insofar as understanding a word in a Wittgensteinian sense requires understanding its use in the language-game. If the language-game is unknown – or if the use cannot be understood within the ordinary language-game – one might need to search for the appropriate language-game in which this use can make sense. Words have many uses, some of which conflict with the ordinary and therefore require a shift in perspective. In a remark from *Culture and Value*, Wittgenstein uses the example of theatre to explicit this idea of perspective shift:

Let’s imagine a theatre, the curtain goes up & we see someone alone in his room walking up and down, lighting a cigarette, seating himself etc. so that suddenly we are observing a human being from outside in

a way that ordinarily we can never observe ourselves; as if we were watching a chapter from a biography with our own eyes, – surely this would be at once uncanny and wonderful. More wonderful than anything that a playwright could cause to be acted or spoken on the stage. – But then we do see this every day & it makes not the slightest impression on us! True enough, but we do not see it from *that* point of view. [...] The work of art compels us – as one might say – to see it in the right perspective, but without art the object is a piece of nature like any other & the fact that *we* may exalt it through our enthusiasm does not give anyone the right to display it to us. (Wittgenstein, 1998, p. 7)

Once transposed on a stage, the most ordinary actions suddenly become more than that. The stage offers us a perspective which brings light on certain aspects which are not ordinarily caught by our attention. Theatre offers us a context in which we can look at things differently. The same goes for words in poems: a poem gives a context in which we read or hear words differently. If we do not read the poem in the right perspective, it is just a series of words. To return to Williams's lines quoted above, a poem might be a grocery list, but it is more than that: the poet writes a grocery list in order to change our way of reading or seeing it. The same goes for other works of art: if we do not see a work of art in the right perspective, it might just appear as an object among many others. But once we look at it in the right perspective, it makes sense. This is, once again, the example of Duchamp's ready-mades: by placing an ordinary object in a museum or a gallery, Duchamp forces us to look at this object from another perspective. Similarly, poetry forces us to read from a certain perspective and to shift from our ordinary way of seeing things and reading words. This idea of perspective shift can be further developed with some of Nietzsche's ideas which bring to the fore the creative aspect of the poetic.

### **3. Nietzsche, Art, and the Creation of Perspectives**

Only artists, and especially those of the theatre, have given men eyes and ears to see and hear with some pleasure what each man *is* himself,

experiences himself, desires himself; only they have taught us to esteem the hero that is concealed in everyday characters; only they have taught us the art of viewing ourselves as heroes – from a distance and, as it were, simplified and transfigured – the art of staging and watching ourselves. Only in this way can we deal with some base details in ourselves. Without this art we would be nothing but the foreground and live entirely in the spell of that perspective which makes what is closest at hand and most vulgar appear as if it were vast, and reality itself. (Nietzsche, 1974, pp. 132-133)

In this remark from the *Gay Science*, Nietzsche as well uses theatre to exemplify the importance of perspective in understanding our everyday world. Theatre does not only give us a new perspective on the world and ourselves, it also and above all enables us to understand ourselves more than superficially. The ordinary perspective only casts light on ‘what is closest at hand and most vulgar’ and makes it appear as ‘reality itself’. If one has only one limited perspective, one will only see things in a limited way. To borrow the words from poet-rapper Kate Tempest: ‘When all you’ve got is a hammer, everything looks like nails.’ Theatre, and other art forms, makes us take distance from this ordinary perspective, enabling us to change perspective and to view ourselves and the world under a different light. In other words, art gives depth to our lives by multiplying the perspectives from which we can see the world. Returning to poetry, poets give depth to language. The ordinary perspective on language is that it is only a communicational tool and makes us believe that this is language itself. A very simplified version of such a language would be Wittgenstein’s builders’ language-game in the *Philosophical Investigations*. Such a conception of language is only a superficial or primitive understanding of language. Poetry and other literary forms play the role of expanding the scope of language and by doing so of expanding our world. Indeed, Nietzsche brings something more to this idea of perspectivism: the idea of creation. The poet creates perspectives from which we can see the world anew. By creating new words, or new uses for words, the poet might indeed create new things:

This has given me the greatest trouble and still does: to realize that what things *are called* is incomparably more important than what they are. [...] What at first was appearance becomes in the end, almost invariably, the essence and is effective as such. How foolish it would be to suppose that one only needs to point out this origin and this misty shroud of delusion in order to *destroy* the world that counts for real, so-called “*reality*”. We can destroy only as creators. – But let us not forget this either: it is enough to create new names and estimations and probabilities in order to create in the long run new “things.” (Nietzsche, 1974, pp. 121-122)

The counterpoint to creation, however, is destruction and insofar as the poet creates, she must destroy. Creating new uses for words destroy the old uses and therefore new perspectives on the world also destroy the old ones. More precisely, to destroy the old perspectives, those which are superficial, one needs to create new ones. The poet and the artist do so in their domains, but Nietzsche does not limit this to artistic domains: ‘we want to be poets of our life – first of all in the smallest, most everyday matters.’ (Nietzsche, 1974, p. 240) The French poet Guillaume Apollinaire also considers poetry as being a matter of creation and that one can be a poet in any field: ‘It is that poetry and creation are one and the same; only that man can be called poet who invents, who creates insofar as man can create. The poet is he who discovers new joys, even if they are hard to bear. One can be a poet in any field: it is enough that one be adventuresome and pursue new discovery.’ (Apollinaire, 2004, p. 80) The role of the poetic therefore outgrows the limits of poetry understood as a genre or those of art in general: it becomes a way of making sense of the world and of our lives when the ordinary seems meaningless.

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