POETIC TRUTH **Adrian Pilkington**

Introduction

Here I address the question: is there such a thing as poetic truth and, if so, how might one characterise it? Certainly, if there is such a thing, it is quite different from what is generally understood by truth. Camus is alleged to have said: 'Fiction is the lie through which we tell the truth'. Changing 'fiction' to 'poetry', my answer to the question should involve a response to this statement by Camus. I will begin by making brief reference to some of Heidegger's remarks on modern poetry, in terms of his definition of truth as **unconcealment**. The "philosophy of poetry" I will outline here takes note of some of what Heidegger says, but develops from – and, in key respects, develops **away** from - what he has to say.

My account of poetry depends on the notion of **attitudinal qualia,** which I will need to characterise, before returning to the question of truth. Mention of the word **qualia is** immediately problematic, at least from the perspective of standard propositional theories of truth. Attempts **have been** made in pragmatics and philosophy of language to account for poetic effects in purely propositional terms. I reject these, and this is why I need a broader definition of truth.

I will refer to two well-known 20th century poems, Robert Frost's 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening' and Philip Larkin's 'Churchgoing', to illustrate various points.

Heidegger on poetry and truth

Heidegger's 'The Essence of Truth' challenges the idea that propositional theories of truth, such as the correspondence theory, provide **the** theory of truth. There is a rich discussion in this book and elsewhere. I will just extract a couple of ideas/points that I can use here.

He points to uses of the word 'truth' in examples such as 'true friend' and 'true gold', where 'true' has nothing to do with correspondence of proposition to state of affairs. Here's another example, which has clearer relevance to my argument. A friend, talking about a concert of Bach's cello suites, described it as technically good but not inspired, not properly **true** to Bach. They were the right notes, in the right order. Two performances can be true to Bach in that sense, but not in another. One way of putting this would be to draw a distinction between **true to the letter** and **true to the spirit**.

In asking whether the word truth is perhaps an ambiguous word, he seeks inspiration from the etymology of the Greek word 'aletheia', which he translates as Unverborgenheit, or unconcealment. Unconcealment, a notion worked on and adapted over the years, he takes to be the original, 'primordial' meaning of truth. Propositional truth is just one kind of unconcealment, making mutually manifest, or

bringing to salience, a state of affairs in the world, but there are unconcealments that don't work in terms of propositional truth and poetry provides one clear example.

Heidegger moves, in his thinking about Art, from his so-called 'Greek paradigm' to his 'modern paradigm' view. In the former, where he talks, for example, about the Greek temple, Homer and Sophocles, great art created truth, in the sense that it revealed/unconcealed a culture to itself, giving a community, a sense of identity, a sense of ontological rootedness. The Greek temple was a home for the gods; it connects us to another world. This contrasted with later (more decadent, more superficial) art, particularly post-Enlightenment, which reduced Art to aesthetics, sensual pleasure (artists as 'pastry cooks'). Art as Truth is replaced by Art as Beauty, in particular senses of these terms. Influenced by his reading of Holderlin, however, he comes round to the idea that there is a value in certain modern art -he focusses mainly on poetry and painting - which points to, or reveals glimpses of, the 'holy', as he puts it, glimpses of the transcendental, to a truth not obviously or normally perceivable. Many 'religious' terms have been used to explain this idea in modern poetry. 'Epiphany' is one, popularised by Joyce and described by him in 'Stephen Hero' as a 'spiritual manifestation'. Epiphanies can be seen as capturing or unconcealing truth. The question is: how do they do this and what kind of truth is it?

Heidegger is interested in what 'modern' poetry can tell us about language. In his discussion of Stefan George's 'The Word', for example, he focusses on the idea that poetic truth cannot easily, if at all, be captured accurately in language. The poet's 'intolerable wrestle with words' (Eliot's phrase), is a struggle which we non-poets do not normally experience as we normally avoid talking about experiences, or, insofar as we do, only in vague and cliché terms. The idea of literature's struggle with language has been expressed nicely by Calvino: 'The struggle of literature is in fact a struggle to escape from the confines of language; it stretches out from the utmost limits of what can be said; what stirs literature is the call and attraction of what is not in the dictionary'. There are no (adequate) words because poets need to capture a truth that lies concealed beyond the conceptual and propositional.

Turning briefly to the poems. Larkin's poem's narrator experiences an epiphany, a sense of the sacred (in his case as an atheist). There is a truth waiting to be experienced/unconcealed in the church, which comes to the poet suddenly and unexpectedly. Likewise for Frost and the woods in which he stops. The poem's narrator experiences a moment of enchantment in and with the woods, which his horse doesn't share. The horse can't see the wood for the trees, in this special sense of enchanted wood. The horse sees the trees, as Larkin's boorish philistine narrator sees 'the brass and stuff up at the holy end' in the church; they look at what is there, wonder why they are there, and experience, in Heidegger's terms, **Beings in their hiddenness.** But the poems' narrators then come to have an experience of something 'holy' that is unconcealed, revealed. They **look into** rather than **look at**, discovering the subject in the object, unconcealing a truth that is normally well hidden.

Attitudinal qualia

Heidegger seems to suggest that truth uncovered by poetry involves the non-propositional. I will argue that that is indeed the case. I need to use expressions and words such as 'what it is like' and 'qualia' and explain how I'm using them. Then I need to say something about the broader notion of truth needed to account for the non-propositional that poetry communicates.

Poets, critics and philosophers have long emphasised the notion of poetry as disclosure, as breaking through or away from habitual ways of encountering the world to 'unconceal' what is truly there. One of the Russian formalists, Victor Shklovsky, summed this up with his notion of ostranenie, making strange: 'Habitualisation devours work, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war … And art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar', to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged … A work is created 'artistically' so that its perception is impeded and the greatest possible effect is produced through the slowness of perception'.

Recent pragmatics/philosophy of language, particularly relevance theory, has developed a view of poetic effects, in poetic metaphors, for example, as typically communicating a wide array of weak implicatures. Conventional metaphors, by contrast, typically communicate one or two implicatures strongly. 'Juliet is the sun' would take assumptions stored in the encyclopaedic entry attached to the concept SUN and apply them to Juliet; the implicatures are weak in the sense that the actual range of the implicatures and the confidence we can have in them as intended is uncertain. 'John is a pig', by contrast, wouldn't go far beyond 'John is greedy' and we would be fairly confident that this was intended. Because the implicatures are weak, this approach to poetic effects can account for relative ineffability and heresy of paraphrase, which all good approaches have to do. So, in the case of relevance theory, it is propositions all the way down, allowing interpretation in terms of standard propositional theories of truth.

This is an interesting theory but, in my view, implausible. It is frequently difficult to specify what the implicatures might be. And it fails to explain the power and precision of poetic effects. Shakespeare – through Angus – uses a poetic metaphor to evoke Macbeth's sense of guilt: 'Now does he feel his secret murders sticking to his hands'. This is much more powerful and precise than if he had said: 'Now Macbeth feels very guilty'.) Relevance theory claims that affective effects are merely 'apparent'. It is convenient to explain poetic effects in terms of weak implicature for the theory, which deals in propositional forms, but it is unnecessarily reductive. Fodor speaks of

the tendency to conflate what he calls **intentional** (beliefs/desires) and **conscious** (perceptions, feelings) mental states: 'It has been pretty clear since Freud, that our pre-theoretical, 'folk' taxonomy of mental states conflates two quite different natural kinds: the intrinsically intentional ones, of which beliefs and desires, and the like are paradigms, and the intrinsically conscious ones, of which sensations, feelings and the like are paradigms'. Relevance theory can be said to reduce the intrinsically conscious to the intrinsically intentional in not taking non-propositional effects seriously.

Knowledge of what it is like (conscious/non-propositional/first-person perspective knowledge) can be contrasted with **knowledge that** (intentional/propositional/third-person knowledge), as Nagel argues. And a different kind of knowledge involves a different kind of truth. Jackson's famous thought experiment supports the idea that qualia represent a type of knowledge: knowing what it is like to see red is different from knowing facts about the colour red. There is a tendency to think of qualia primarily in terms of perceptions and sensations (what it is like to see red, smell coffee, feel cramp in one's leg). But George Rey also discusses '**emotional qualia':** knowing what it is like to feel anger, disgust, joy, etc. He writes of 'just plain 'feelings of', for example, fear, embarrassment, affection, hope, joy'.

It has been frequently argued that poems typically express emotion. Langer's response to Carnap's doing so argued that we contemplate the feelings expressed, which are particularly worthy of contemplation. Larkin talks about an 'emotional concept' being the inspiration for a poem: [The composition of a poem] 'consists of three stages; the first is when a man becomes obsessed with an emotional concept to such a degree that he is compelled to do something about it. What he does is the second stage, namely, construct a verbal device that will reproduce his emotional concept in anyone who cares to read it, anywhere, anytime. The third stage is the recurrent situation of people in different times and places setting off the device and recreating in themselves what the poet felt when he wrote it'. This is finely expressed, although we are dealing neither with a concept nor emotion. What I suggest instead is that poems express attitudes (attitudes to woods or country churches, for example). Emotions respond to sets of circumstances; attitudes involve a relationship with people, places and things, a relationship which might inspire emotions. A paradigmatic attitude is love, which is not an emotion because: Mary can love John but at this moment be angry with him, or she can love him, but at this moment not be feeling any emotion. There is something it is like to love or be in love, but that what-it-is-likeness/qualitative dimension is infinitely richer, subtler, more nuanced (and, therefore, ineffable) than any emotional qualia can be. One can write a novel of over 3000 pages focussing, to a large extent, on what it is like to love (A la Recherche du Temps Perdu) but not one of similar length focussing on anger or disgust. Attitudinal qualia in poetry are typically, or potentially, infinitely more multi-faceted and more fine-grained, than emotional qualia would be. They are worthy of (deep) contemplation, as Langer notes.

If we want an example of fine-grained perceptual qualia, we can refer to wine-tasting. The reason there's a philosophy of wine and not of orange juice is partly because there are so many tastes and textures in a fine wine. If one does a wine course, one focuses to a large extent on viniculture and viticulture (knowledge that). But one also does a fair bit of tasting, which requires a different form of attention and knowledge. The surprising thing is that one can learn to recognise more in the wine by repeatedly focussing on the taste, giving one's attention to the what-it-is-likeness of the taste. There is potentially so much more to notice and relish and contemplate in the wine, even though it is difficult to give one's focussed attention to it and impossible to talk sensibly about the taste. One can have a relationship with a wine, but not with an orange juice. The body scan in mindfulness meditation offers a further example: the sensations are there in the body: it's a question of allowing oneself to focus our attention on them. I would argue that the same can be said for affective qualia. The affective states are there, linking us to the external world: the problem is focussing upon them sufficiently and then articulating them (a problem addressed by Marcel towards the end of the Combray section of 'Swann's Way').

The word epiphany is often used for revelation in poetry. Epiphanies can come in different shapes and sizes. Chapell distinguishes 'aha' and 'wow' epiphanies. An everyday intellectual puzzle 'aha' might come from solving a cryptic crossword puzzle clue. At a very different level Archimedes steps out of a bath, Newton dodges a falling apple, and both say 'aha'! An everyday 'wow' might come from smelling and tasting an (Italian) coffee. At a very different level, Larkin and Frost experience their rarer epiphanies, the ones that Heidegger used the word 'holy' to describe. They seem to come from somewhere else, a transcendental realm, in a way that is deeply mysterious to the poet himself.

Larkin and Eliot don't use the word 'epiphany', and certainly not the term 'attitudinal qualia', but what they say can be said to endorse this view. Eliot writes that the experience communicated by a poem 'may be the result of a fusion of feelings so numerous, and ultimately so obscure in their origins, that even if there be communication of them, the poet may be hardly aware of what he is communicating; and what is there to be communicated was not in existence before the poem was completed'. Elsewhere he writes of images that can be used by a poet being 'charged with emotion' (intending, I would argue, 'charged with attitudinal qualia'): '… what gives certain imagery its intensity … is its saturation … with feelings too obscure for the authors even to know quite what they were … it comes from the whole of his sensitive life since early childhood. Why, for all of us, out of all that we have heard, seen, felt, in a lifetime, do certain images recur charged with emotion, rather than others? … An old woman on a German mountain path, six ruffians seen through an open window playing cards at night in a small French railway junction where there is a water-mill: such memories may have symbolic value, but of what we cannot tell, for they come to represent the depths into which we cannot peer'. The epiphany's origin is obscure and it is difficult to capture verbally because it is non-propositional and

fine-grained and multi-faceted and mysterious (not crude and one-dimensional). It affects one more profoundly.

Larkin's poem contains thoughts and narrative, expressed propositionally. But the narrative is trivial and the thoughts shallow, or not properly developed. A man cycles up to a country church, takes off his bicycle clips, wanders in, looks around taking in aspects of the church architecture, notices 'the brass and stuff up at the holy end', and then leaves, having placed an Irish sixpence in the collection box. It is not the story or ideas that make this a great poem. It is the central epiphany (around the lines: a serious house on serious earth this is), which evokes a 'spiritual manifestation'. Similarly with the Frost poem. A man enters a snowy wood, stops, looks around and is enchanted enough to pause and ponder. He sees the wood as lovely, dark and deep in a way his horse can't. His horse is confused. After a moment he rides on to his next place of business. In both cases the poet/narrator has an epiphany, a glimpse, in Heidegger's terms, of the holy. The woods are lovely, dark and deep. A serious place on serious earth this is. These are to be fleshed out (non-propositionally) by contexts provided by the poems. Fine-grained and multi-faceted affective conscious mental states are not merely **referred to** (as propositions refer to states of affairs) but are **evoked** (we share the rich affective experience). We are used to thinking of truth in terms of reference; thinking of it in terms of evocation is necessary here. Let me illustrate this point succinctly with reference to a **local poetic effect.**

Once I am sure there's nothing going on
I step inside letting the door thud shut.

In these lines, which open Larkin's poem, the metrical variation, with 3 strongly stressed monosyllabic words after 2 weak stresses, together with the assonance, allows the reader to experience the thudding. The lines do not only refer propositionally to an event; they also evoke a qualitative state: we hear the thudding of the door, and then perhaps feel some awkwardness and embarrassment. This is what poetry does. Clive James claims that Larkin 'could hear the fizz when light hits the window'. This is an instance of perceptual qualia, which, like all good poets, Larkin is particularly sensitive to. The central epiphany of the poem concerns the 'serious place on serious earth'. The church and the earth on which it stands cannot literally be serious. Rather than this 'making strange' leading to a wide range of weak implicatures, with propositions being communicated, however, I would suggest that non-propositional conscious states are evoked as in the perceptual qualia example, but affectively, and in a much richer (and more mysterious) way. The main aim of these poems is to **evoke** a rich epiphanic experience, as accurately, as truthfully, as possible.

Conclusion

Poetic truth, then, involves an unconcealing by giving attention to and contemplating attitudinal qualia of a particularly rich kind. Doing this involves seeing beyond a habitually recognised truth, where habitualisation (as Shklovsky points out) involves seeing things through a conceptual lens, which is something we naturally and automatically do. To return to an anecdote mentioned at the beginning, being true to the spirit of Bach can be seen in terms of capturing the qualitative dimension more accurately. To return to the Camus equation, one might agree with Camus, adding that what is not true propositionally may well be true non-propositionally. Poets wrestle with words in order to capture a kind of truth, characterizable in terms of attitudinal qualia. Larkin claimed that his duty to the experience (his 'emotional concept') outweighed even his duty to the reader. He worked through 21 pages of drafts of Churchgoing for the best part of 3 months in order to evoke this particular experience as accurately and truthfully as possible.

Perhaps this is the kind of truth by unconcealment that Heidegger spent so much of his time – and Being – trying to articulate.