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## THE INSTITUTIONAL DEFINITION OF POETRY: SOME HERETICAL THOUGHTS

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### ABSTRACT

A few contemporary theories of poetry (e.g., Culler, 1975; Fish, 1980) claim that texts do not have any poetic qualities prior to, and independently of, the institutional context in which they are presented. When a text, any text, is printed in verse form, in a book whose subtitle is "Poems," then we start looking for poetic qualities. And what we look for, we are bound to find. In order to challenge this approach, and to argue for a more objective, text-oriented approach to the categorization of texts (Hanaor, 1996; Miall & Kuiken, 1996), I have conducted a test. My test was based on two types of questionnaires, the one in prose form, the other in verse, in which students were asked to identify those texts that were "originally" poems or prose. The results obtained corroborate the assumption that readers have quite definite intuitions about the poetic qualities of texts prior to and independently of the way they are institutionally presented.

When I teach "Introduction to Poetry" at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, I usually present a few important aspects of poetry: dense analogical patterns on the phonetic, structural, and semantic levels of the poetic text (e.g., meter, rhyme, anaphora; semantic parallelism); figurative language (e.g., metaphor, simile, symbol, personification); diverse manifestations of semantic tension (e.g., oxymoron, paradox, irony). A few contemporary theories of poetry challenge the assumptions underlying such a presentation: do all these aspects indeed characterize poetry—thus goes the challenge—or perhaps they are nothing but an

institutionalized set of expectations that we have of a text when this text is presented to us as poetry by the authorized social agents (critics, editors, professors of literature).

This challenge is intimately related to a general emphasis on the social context of artistic activity that has become a predominant paradigm in aesthetic thought (e.g., of philosophers of art like Dickie, 1974). As Duchamp's lavatory seat gains an aesthetic value and evokes aesthetic reactions not because of any inherent aesthetic qualities, but simply because it has been presented to us as an aesthetic object by the authorized social agents (museum curators in this particular case), so is the case with texts that are labeled poetry. Texts do not have any poetic qualities prior to, and independently of, the institutional context in which they are presented. When a text, any text, is printed in truncated lines (i.e., verse form), in a book whose subtitle is "Poems," then we start looking for poetic qualities. And what we look for, we are bound to find.

To demonstrate this point, Culler (1975) took a newspaper piece of prose, set it down on the page as a lyric poem, and performed an excellent poetic reading of that piece. His conclusion is that whereas certain formal poetic patterns (analogies, figures of speech, etc.) are important, their significance "is itself a conventional expectation," and even when these formal patterns are absent, the "crucial factor, which can operate effectively even in the absence of the others, is that of conventional expectation, of the type of attention which poetry receives by virtue of its status within the institution of literature" (p. 164).

Fish (1980) advocates a similar position, albeit more radically. He chose to perform a poetic reading not of "banal journalistic prose," as Culler did, but went a step further and picked up a list of names of authors, part of an assignment that was left on the board in class (by himself, in a different class). By this choice, he underscored his argument that there is no such thing as a text's qualities taken separately from the act of reading, performed by the appropriate "reading community," guided by authoritative, qualified readers (such as himself).

After describing the *tour de force* that he together with his class performed in reading the list of names as a seventeenth century religious poem, he concludes that the accepted idea according to which we recognize a poem as such because it has certain distinguishing features is mistaken: "My students did not proceed from the noting of distinguishing features to the recognition that they were confronted by a poem; rather, it was the act of recognition that came first—they knew in advance that they were dealing with a poem—and the distinguishing features then followed. In other words, acts of recognition, rather than being triggered by formal characteristics, are their source" (p. 326).

Despite their rhetorical charms, these "poetical reading" exercises raise a few troubling questions. In order to better understand these problems, let us take a look at Fish's text:

Jacobs-Rosenbaum

Levin

Thorne

Hayes

Ohman(?) (p. 323)

Putting aside the specific "poetic" interpretative claims made by Fish and his students about this text, the crucial point that I want to make is that when we are faced with this text, our basic, intuitive reaction would be that it is a *bad* poem, if one at all. Fish's "poetical" reading of this sequence of names no doubt demonstrates his ingenuity as an inspired reader of poetry, but it also exposes the fact that this ingenuity is superimposed on a basically non-poetical text. Needless to say, Fish's whole argument is intended to show that the expression "basically non-poetical text" that I have just used is meaningless; that there is no such thing as "poetic" against "non-poetic" texts—independently of the institutional context of presentation and reading.

Let me assume that my intuition concerning the above text is representative, i.e., that most if not all of us share the intuition that Fish's text is basically non-poetical, even if we are told by the authorized social agents of the literary community that it is a poem. How can we corroborate this intuition, and base our objections to certain claims made by the institutional approach on empirical grounds?

Before going on, let me suggest here a distinction between two possible versions of the institutional approach: the weak and the radical. The former may argue that institutional factors (e.g., accepted social practices and modes of presentation, publication, teaching and reading texts) have an impact on the recognition and the ways of reading of texts. I have no quarrel with this weak version, and I think it can be corroborated by different types of evidence. The radical version of the institutional approach (present in Culler, and most evident in Fish) claims that the institutional factors not only have an impact but rather *determine* the recognition, the categorization, and the ways we read and interpret texts.

In order to undermine the radical institutional approach, and to corroborate the hypothesis that the poetic status of a text is not exclusively determined by its institutional form of presentation, and that readers have intuitions and judgements concerning "poetic" and "non-poetic" qualities of texts prior to and independently of their institutional mode of presentation, I decided to conduct an empirical test. On the general theoretical level of discussion, my work here is part of an attempt to defend the idea that literary works should be analyzed and discussed in objective terms, as against relativistic approaches (e.g., see the programmatic statements expressed by Mial and Kuiken, 1996; Tzur, 1992). The attempt to counter "contextual" approaches here is intimately related to Shen's distinction between poetic and non-poetic oxymoron (1987), as well as my own

distinction between poetic and non-poetic simile (1993)—both distinctions are based on structural and semantic considerations, not contextual ones.

On a more specific level, I am following in this study two important works that discuss from an empirical perspective the relations between poetic features of texts and modes of reading and categorizing those texts. Hoffstaedter (1987) opens her discussion with the assumption that poeticity is a product of text processing rather than a property of texts, but the overwhelming majority of her empirical evidence point to the conclusion that poetic textual features play an extremely important role in the way readers respond to texts. And most recently, Hanaor (1996) has persuasively demonstrated that graphic and phonetic poetical features of texts play an extremely important role in readers' categorization of texts (educational or "institutional" factors are, relatively, less significant). Hanaor's excellent article helps, thus, to undermine the radical institutional approach (what Hanaor calls the "radical conventionalist" approach). While Hanaor's experiment is restricted to the analysis of only two textual features (i.e., "poetic" layout and phonetic patterns), I have tried in the following experiment to be more "wholistic," taking into account the effects and the judgments of readers that integrate different aspects of texts: photetic, syntactic, and semantic features and the way these interplay in actual poetic and non-poetic texts.

My test was based on two types of questionnaires in which students were asked to categorize texts as poems or as prose. Each of the questionnaires contained eight different short texts. In the first, the eight pieces were printed in a regular prose layout, as a short paragraph. In the second, the other eight pieces were printed in verse, i.e., in short, truncated lines. In the first questionnaire students were told that four of the eight pieces were originally published as poems and printed as prose paragraphs only for the sake of the test. The students were asked to identify the *four* (and only four) that were originally poems, but were now in a prose layout, and to mark them. Four to five minutes were given for completing the complex assignment of reading the eight pieces, deciding what four were originally poems and marking them (i.e., 30-40 seconds for each segment).

The second questionnaire was a mirror image of the first one. Students were told that four of the eight poems that were presented to them were originally published as prose (prose fiction, newspaper articles, etc.) and they were asked to "uncover" those prose pieces and to mark them.

Note that both questionnaires described the facts faithfully, namely, four pieces in the first questionnaire were indeed published as poems and I deliberately changed their original layout, and four pieces in the second questionnaire were originally published as prose. But, there was also a "tricky" aspect to the questionnaires. When I chose the sixteen pieces, my working hypothesis was that there are prose pieces with poetic qualities as well as prose-like poems, and that these poetic or non-poetic features are detectable irrespective of their formal, institutional mode of presentation. Consequently, I chose (in collaboration with two graduate students) four types of texts for both questionnaires, two of each

type: two prose pieces with prosaic qualities ("prototypically" prose), two poems with poetic qualities ("prototypically" poems), two prose pieces with poetic qualities and two prose-like poems (for the use of the concept of "prototypicality" of texts vis-a-vis generic categories, see my 1991, and my book 1993, pp. 53-68). Note that the last two types are "problematic" cases where there is a discrepancy between the original institutional mode of publication and the text's qualities.

Since I conducted the test in Hebrew, and many nuances of the texts chosen depend on the original Hebrew version, for the sake of this presentation I decided not to provide a translation of the two questionnaires, but rather to find English "analogues" to illustrate the two interesting, "problematic" types of text out of the four possible combinations: a piece of prose with poetic qualities and a prose-like poem. Let us read, first, a text that was published as part of a novel, with the formal layout of prose, but which is undoubtedly rich with poetic qualities—including dense phonetic and syntactical patterns of repetition, intensive emotive element, etc.—the closing lines of the interior monologue of Molly Bloom in Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922/1968):

and the jessamine and geraniums and cactuses and Gibraltar as a girl where I was a Flower of the mountain yes when I put the rose in my hair like the Andalusian girls used or shall I wear a red yes and how he kissed me under the Moorish wall and I thought well as well him as another and then I asked him with my eyes to ask again yes and then he asked me would I yes to say yes my mountain flower and first I put my arms around him yes and drew him down to me so he could feel my breasts all perfume yes and his heart was going like mad and yes I said yes I will Yes (p. 704).

If this text was presented in my first questionnaire, I would expect students to mark it as "originally" poetry. Were it presented in my second questionnaire, in truncated lines, I would expect them to treat it as genuine poetry (not marking it as originally prose).

To illustrate a poem with prose-like qualities—neutral descriptive tone, a basically trivial subject matter, etc.—let us read a few lines from Margaret Atwood's "This is a Photograph of Me," from *The Norton Anthology of Poetry* (1983):

It was taken some time ago.  
At first it seems to be  
a smeared  
print: blurred lines and grey flecks  
blended with the paper

then, as you scan  
it, you see in the left-hand corner  
a thing that is like a branch: part of a tree  
(balsam or spruce) emerging

and, to the right, halfway up  
what ought to be a gentle  
slope, a small frame house. (p. 1373)

In a complementary manner, were this text presented in my first questionnaire (in prose layout), I would predict that it would be treated as "originally" prose, and were it presented in the second questionnaire, I would predict that subjects would mark it as "originally" prose.

By asking the subjects to detect the texts that were "originally" poems (in the first questionnaire) or prose (in the second), I intended to neutralize the effects of the immediate form of presentation: every one of the eight pieces they read could be a "disguised" one, all eight were "suspect." It also seemed an excellent way to activate their intuitions and preconceptions about what constitutes a poetic quality. The strict time limit was a guarantee that these intuitions and preconceptions were not a conscious decision made because of any theoretical stand about "what is a poem."

The subjects consisted of three groups of students of literature. The first, was a group of freshmen. The second, of juniors and seniors, and the third was a small group of graduate students (all together there were thirty six in the first questionnaire, and thirty eight in the second).

Let me present the results of the two questionnaires in the Tables 1 and 2. Then, I will add a few remarks on the way I understand some of the results obtained.

The most clear-cut results were obtained in the first questionnaire. To begin with, there were two prose paragraphs which were originally pieces of prose (No. 2, 5). Almost 100 percent of subjects decided that they were indeed originally prose. Two of the eight pieces (No. 3, 6) that were presented as prose paragraphs were originally poems with conspicuous poetic qualities (e.g., prosodic patterns, high register). These two pieces were identified by most

Table 1. Results of First Questionnaire  
(No. of Subjects: 36)

Piece No. and Description	No. of Markings	Percentage	Prediction
1. Poetic Prose	34	94.4	Be marked
2. Prosaic Prose	0	0	Not be marked
3. Poetic Poetry	34	94.4	Be marked
4. Prosaic Poetry	8	22.2	Not be marked
5. Prosaic Prose	1	2.7	Not be marked
6. Poetic Poetry	29	80.5	Be marked
7. Prosaic Poetry	6	16	Not be marked
8. Poetic Prose	32	88.8	Be marked

Table 2. Results of Second Questionnaire  
(No. of Subjects: 38)

Piece No. and Description	No. of Markings	Percentage	Prediction
1. Prosaic Prose	37	97.3	Be marked
2. Poetic Prose	1	2.6	Not be marked
3. Prosaic Prose	37	97.3	Be marked
4. Poetic Poetry	1	2.6	Not be marked
5. Prosaic Poetry	12	31.5	Be marked
6. Poetic Prose	20	52.6	Not be marked
7. Poetic Poetry	8	18.4	Not be marked
8. Prosaic Poetry	36	94.7	Be marked

readers as originally poems: one piece by 94 percent, the other by 80 percent. Thus, we can conclude that when we have certain conspicuous poetic qualities, especially prosodic patterns (meter, rhyming schemes), they can easily outweigh the immediate layout in which a text is presented. Let us move now to the remaining four pieces, the "tricky" ones where there is a discrepancy between the formal layout and the text's qualities. Two pieces were originally published as prose but had poetic qualities (No. 1, 8). These two were marked by an overwhelming majority of students as texts which were originally poems: one by 94 percent, the other by 89 percent. These results are extremely significant: they indicate that readers can detect poetic qualities independent of the way a text is presented to them and of its original, formal, institutional mode of publication. There were another two "ambiguous" pieces in this questionnaire—originally poems, but with prose-like qualities (No. 4, 7). My expectation was that because of the lack of poetic qualities, the students' inclination would be not to mark them as originally poems. And indeed only 22 percent in one case and 16 percent in the other thought that these two pieces were originally published as poems.

All in all, the results obtained in the first questionnaire corroborated my expectations and my hypothesis with unequivocal figures. Subjects have intuitions about poetic qualities of texts independently of the institutional mode of presentation of these texts, and sometimes even in contrast to this mode. This goes hand in hand with readers' ability to detect and describe texts as "a prose-like poem" or "poetic, lyrical prose."

The results of the second questionnaire also corroborated my basic hypothesis, though somewhat less overwhelmingly. Let me briefly present them. The two poetic poems (No. 4, 7) were identified as such: one by almost 100 percent (only 2.6% marked them as originally prose), the other by 82 percent (only 18.4% marked them as originally prose). The two pieces that were originally pieces of prose, with no poetic qualities (No. 1, 3), were marked as pieces of prose by an

impressive majority of almost 100 percent (97.3% in both). Thus, presenting these two pieces in a verse layout did not alter, not even slightly, the identification of them as texts with no poetic qualities. The two pieces that I chose as poems with prose-like qualities (No. 5, 8) obtained mixed results: one piece (No. 8) was marked by 94 percent of subjects as originally prose—despite its layout, and despite its original mode of publication. The other piece (No. 5), however, was marked by only 31 percent. How to explain this low number? A second look at this supposedly prose-like poem revealed a few poetic qualities (e.g., emotionally charged materials, semantic fragmentation) that I and my assistants overlooked while choosing it for the experiment. As for the two pieces that were originally prose with poetic qualities (No. 2, 6): I predicted that the students would not mark them as originally pieces of prose. For one piece (No. 2) my prediction was fully fulfilled (only 2.6% marked it as prose), in the other piece (No. 6) we had an almost close vote (52.6% as prose).

To summarize the results: in the first questionnaire, my predictions were fulfilled as to all eight pieces; in the second questionnaire, my predictions came true in unequivocal terms in six cases, in one case there was a close vote and in one out of eight only a third of the subjects complied with my prediction. A chi-square analysis was done separately for each table. For Table 1,  $\chi^2$  ( $df = 7$ ,  $N = 36$ ) = 187.29,  $p < 0.01$ , and for Table 2,  $\chi^2$  ( $df = 7$ ,  $N = 38$ ) = 184.76,  $p < 0.01$ . Both values are highly significant (at least  $p < 0.01$ ).

Thus, the readers seem to have quite definite intuitions about the poetic qualities of texts prior to and independently of the way they are institutionally presented to us—contrary to what the radical version of the industrial approach would expect.

The radical institutional approach has some troubling moral implications—it gives too much power to “authorized social agents” and puts restrictions on the individual’s autonomy of judgement (see my article on interpretation, 1993). But even if we set aside moral considerations, I think the radical institutional approach cannot account for the data I have just provided. To change the layout of a text and to look at the effects of such a change may be an amusing and instructive experiment. Advocates of the radical institutional approach (e.g., Culler, 1975; Fish, 1980) are fond of such experiments because they seem to support their claims. I think that when these experiments are made in a cautious and controlled manner, they prove totally different things.

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