Why do the images in poetry have such oomph? (more baby steps in aesthetics)

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Imaginary gardens with real toads in them
Marianne Moore

Careful! Even moonlit dewdrops,
If you’re lured to watch,
Are a wall before the truth.
Sogyo

Praise him with lyre and harp.
Praise him with drums and dancing.
Psalm 150:3-4

To the Reader: Welcome!

# 1  I want to begin by welcoming the reader into this essay and
by thanking him or her for the attention he or she is about to give to
what I have written here.

I have subtitled this essay “more baby steps” because it is actually
a sequel to another one that this journal was kind enough to publish
some years ago. I had hoped, of course, to have more to offer the
reader by now than just baby steps. Unfortunately, though, that seems
not to be the case. But if the reader is the sort of person who is amused
by home movies of toddlers --- smiling, wobbly, triumphant, falling
--- then he or she is most welcome to read on.
Introduction: the nature of the poetic image --- or, Blake's tiger and Macleish's window --- or, be careful, it bites.

#2 The images in poetry are more than mere analogies or illustrations. As a first example, let's look at Blake's poem about the tiger:

The Tiger

Tiger! Tiger! Burning bright
In the forests of the night
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

In what distant deeps or skies
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand dare seize the fire?

And what shoulder, and what art,
Could twist the sinews of thy heart?
And when thy dread heart began to beat,
What dread hand forged thy dread feet?

What the hammer? What the chain?
In what furnace was thy brain?
What the anvil? What dread grasp
Dare its deadly terrors clasp?

When the stars threw down their spears,
And watered heaven with their tears,
Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the lamb make thee?

Tiger! Tiger! Burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?
Now the tiger is obviously an example of, or an analogy for, the fierceness and violence contained in God's creation. Yet the tiger is also somehow more than that. The tiger is not only an analogy, but also somehow real. I do not want to speak for the reader, but I know that when I read Blake I always feel as if the tiger itself comes, albeit for the briefest of moments, rippling across the page, fleet and terrible. I can see, in my mind's eye, the startling yellow of its coat, its massive head, the breath coming from its nostrils in puffs of cloud, and so on.

Not only is the tiger more real than a mere analogy could ever be, but it is also more, and more mysteriously, symbolic. As a mere analogy, the tiger would stand for fierceness or violence, and that would be the end of it. Yet I cannot read Blake's poem without feeling that the tiger somehow stands for more than this, that it somehow points beyond its "official meaning". Of course, I can't quite say just what this "more" or "beyond" is, but every time I read the poem I feel that it is there. I am even beginning to think that it is this more or beyond --- this indefinable more or beyond --- that makes the tiger so interesting. To put it a little bit paradoxically, what makes an analogy an analogy is that we know what it stands for, while what makes a symbol a symbol is that we don't. The tiger draws along with it, as it might draw along the creepers or ivy that have wound about its paws, tendrils of mystery.

#3 But tigers are a bit too dangerous to keep around for very long, and so maybe I'll let this one stalk back into the undergrowth, and move on to another (tamer and safer) example. There is nothing special about these examples, by the way. I think that practically every poem contains such images, i.e., images that are both too real and too symbolic to be mere analogies. So I think I could have chosen practically any poem as a second example. But the poem I actually did choose was Archibald Macleish's "Ars Poetica". I chose this poem because I have always liked it, and because I will be talking about it in a later section and so it seemed a good idea to quote it now as a way of saving space later. I should, however, advise the reader that I will later be disagreeing with the theory of poetry that Macleish puts forward in this poem. Despite this disagreement, though, I think the images in his poem are still good examples of what I am trying to talk about here, i.e., good examples of how poetry can take a very simple image, very sketchily expressed, and, like magic, make it seem both very real and

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very symbolic. Here, anyway, is Macleish’s poem:

_Ars Poetica_

A poem should be palpable and mute
As a globed fruit,

Dumb
As old medallions to the thumb,

Silent as the sleeve worn stone
Of casement ledges where the moss has grown ---

A poem should be wordless
As the flight of birds.

A poem should be motionless in time
As the moon climbs,

Releasing, as the moon releases
Twig by twig the night entangled trees,

Leaving, as the moon behind the winter leaves,
Memory by memory the mind ---

A poem should be motionless in time
As the moon climbs.

A poem should be equal to:
Not true.

For all the history of grief
An empty doorway and a maple leaf.

For love
The leaning grasses and two lights above the sea
A poem should not mean
But be.

I do not know about the reader’s reactions, but, for myself at least, many of the images in this poem have always been like Blake’s tiger --- both very real and indefinably symbolic. Among my personal favorites are the sleeve worn casement ledges, and so I have decided to focus in on just them. Since these casement ledges are the third in a series of very similar analogies, one might expect the whole thing to have become obvious and trite and a little bit boring by then. One might expect the casement ledges to have become, as it were, old hat. Interestingly, though, just the opposite happens. The casement ledges detach themselves from the whole analogy business and become, well, casement ledges. They stop being just a literary trope and become real objects with all the detail that real objects have. Every time I read the poem I find my mind examining the casement ledges closely. Somewhere in the back reaches of my imagination, I find myself noticing the smooth white sheen on top, dimpled here and there by small pits or nicks of a darker color; noticing, too, the cracks in the mortar between the stones and the green of the moss growing on the outside of the ledge; noticing, even, the iron frame and the hinges from which the window is hung, and, of course, the window itself, three-quarters open, with its many small panes in their metal runnels. I am just beginning to turn and look outside through the window into the light of the field or garden beyond, when the image changes, and I am pulled, by the impatient itinerary of the poem, away from the window and out of my reverie.

Not only do the casement ledges point away from their analogical meaning and toward a greater and greater concretion and reality, but they also point toward the symbolization of a hard to name “something more”. I think it’s pretty clear that this moment at the window somehow stands for more than just the non-significance of poetry. To fumble after this “something more”, we might say that there is something about the world --- about its solidity and its suppressed anticipation of speech --- that becomes half incarnate in this red sandstone with its smooth patina and small nicks. Or maybe this “something more” has to do with the situation of someone at an open window in the summer time, who, instead of looking out, examines --- in a mood
of who knows what melancholy — the stones of the window frame and the moss that is growing there. Or maybe it has to do with still something else. I must admit that I can not put my finger on just what it is. But for me at least this is not all that unusual. So many of the symbols in poetry seem to me to be like this, i.e., expressive of some vast something I can not quite seem to name. Besides not being all that unusual, this situation does not seem to be all that bad either. The elusiveness and indefinability are actually an advantage in a way, for they give the image a feeling of depth. What is depth, after all, but a half opacity, a pool at the bottom of which we can just barely glimpse something that we cannot quite make out?

#4 In any case, I think I've talked about this enough, and so let me try to state, in a more straightforward way, the topic of this essay. What I will try to do is to explain how these tricks are done, i.e., what the linguistic mechanisms are which enable poetry to achieve these effects. How, first of all, does poetry get the image to leave the realm of mere analogy and become so real? How, secondly, does poetry get the image to point beyond its official meaning to some sort of vast but indefinable "more"?

Methodological note: psychoanalytic explanations—or, why is Archibald squeezing that fruit?

#5 Here is a first, and I think an obviously correct, answer: poetic images are powerful because they are (or at least often are) psychoanalytic symbols. Both tigers and fire, for example, have an unconscious resonance and symbolize something like passion or potency. This unconscious resonance goes a long way to explaining why Blake's tiger is such a striking image. The images in Macleish's poem are examples too. Both fruit (especially fruit one is allowed to palpate), and window frames (moss covered) are feminine sexual symbols. Money or old medallions, on the other hand, are a symbol of potency. Macleish's poem, moreover, subtly puts its reader in the position of touching all these sexually symbolic things ("palpable", "to the thumb", "sleeve worn"). Then comes the stanza about birds in flight --- birds being a slang term for women, and flight being a standard dream symbol for the sexual act. I don't know whether their psychoanalytic significance fully accounts for the power of
these images --- I suspect, in fact, that it does not --- but it clearly is important. Such a reiteration of sexual symbols, after all, could hardly fail to have an impact.

#6 But although I really like such psychoanalytic interpretations, I have decided not to pursue them any further. Recently I have begun having ideas of a completely different kind. And it is these other ideas which --- for better or worse --- I have decided to follow out here. I thought it was important, however, to at least mention the ideas of psychoanalysis before setting off on a wild goose chase of my own, as they do provide one of the most important reasons why the images in poetry are so gripping.

Acknowledgements

#7 Allow me to stop for a moment and thank those people whose conversation has helped me with these ideas. First of all, I would like to thank Christian Martin with whom I have been talking about topics like this for the last five years. Much of the essay that follows is really just a continuation of my conversations with him --- a desperate attempt to get the last word in, actually. I would also like to thank: Richard Capobianco, Agnes Curry, Ryan Dobran, Virginia Krause, Angelli Tugado, and Robert Vigliotti. I have learned important things from my conversations with each of them. Finally, I would like to thank, in a special way, Philip Devine and Celia Wolf-Devine for their intellectual companionship and constant support.

Outline

#8 Sections one and two will attempt to answer the first question about why the poetic image comes across as so concrete and real. Section three will be a short interlude that discusses a current theory of interpretation. Section four will then attempt to answer the second question about why the poetic image seems so richly, but indefinably, symbolic.
Section one: the obsession with meta-narrative—or, my friend Christian and the piano teacher—or, how to handle moray eels

#9 I hope the reader won’t mind if I start off tangentially, with a conversation I had with my friend, Christian Martin, a few weeks ago. We were talking about a French movie we had both seen recently, entitled The Piano Teacher. The movie portrays an affair between a piano teacher (a middle aged woman) and one of her students (a younger man). Their affair is not a happy one. The piano teacher is interested in sadomasochism and tries to get her student involved in this sort of activity. This confuses him and he resists for a while, but then he gets angry and hurts her pretty badly --- he rapes her actually. In the final scene, she waits for him at the entrance to a concert, apparently hoping to restart the affair, but he is completely cold to her. She then cuts herself with a knife, though not deeply, and the movie ends.

When I talked to Christian about this movie, he said that it was “missing something”. It did not do anything new and exciting from a technical point of view. It did not provide trenchant psychological or sociological analyses. It did not try to grab the viewer’s sympathies or make its characters especially likeable. It did not even pander by presenting the sadomasochism in a titillating or salacious way. It was, Christian said, somehow flat.

I found myself agreeing with everything Christian was saying. But this was also one of those rare occasions when I saw a way to get my friend at a rhetorical disadvantage, and so I hid away the fact that I agreed and began to tease him instead. The movie, I pointed out, told the story of an important event in the lives of its characters. So why, I asked Christian, should he be dissatisfied with it --- a story just as a story? Why was he looking for some sort of meta-purpose (some sort of formal experimentation or psychological analysis or whatever) to spice the story up? Was not the story of failed love, rape, and psychological collapse already gripping enough on its own? Why should the lives and sufferings of other human beings be uninteresting to him and unworthy of his attention unless those lives were being used to make some sort of ulterior point?

Teasing Christian this way was fun for a while, although I soon had to admit to him that my reaction to the movie had actually been
the same as his --- that I was, apparently, every bit as heartless, and as addicted to meta-purposes, as he was. It was at this point that we became a little more serious and tried to work out some sort of explanation as to why the movie had seemed so flat to us.

#10 A quick note about the terminology. A moment ago I used the word “meta-purposes” without any explanation (sorry about that). To explain it now, a meta-purpose is anything besides the story itself; so psychological analysis, formal experimentation, pandering, etc. would all be examples of meta-purposes. A meta-purpose, to put it differently, is any of the larger frameworks the story itself is designed to fit into.

#11 The first thing Christian and I decided was that we human beings are, in fact, addicted to meta-purposes. We want things to have a meaning, and the sort of meaning we understand best is a meaning that is based on meta-purposes. Simply put, we like to interpret things in terms of our general frameworks. For example, we might interpret a movie by using our favorite psychological framework to analyze the motivations of its characters. Or we might use a moral framework to sort the characters out into good guys and bad guys. Or we might use our cultural framework to interpret the movie by comparing it to how the “standard romance” is supposed to go (Is the boy forceful and the girl sweet? Do they struggle against obstacles but finally come together in the end?). All I am doing from a terminological point of view is substituting the pretentious word “meta-purposes” for the more ordinary word “frameworks”. What I am saying is that we like having such frameworks around, and are not comfortable with a movie (or text or situation) unless we can find some framework or meta-purpose to fit it into.

#12 With this idea in place, I would like to restate the puzzle and then try to solve it. The puzzle is that all these meta-purposes seem like they should be obscuring the story itself. All the interpretations, in other words, seem like they should be covering up the story just as a story. Hence it would seem like the way to see the story itself more clearly would be to remove all these meta-purposes, thereby letting the story itself shine through. But the puzzling thing is that just the opposite actually happens. If our experience of the movie is any guide, when the meta-purposes are removed, the story does not shine through, but lays there flat and lifeless.
Christian and I tried to solve this puzzle not in terms of the meta-purposes themselves, but in terms of our need or hunger for them. When a movie fails to provide any meta-purposes, this hunger remains unsatisfied, and we therefore enter a state of deficit and craving. In this state we search desperately for a meta-purpose. But since the story as story is not a meta-purpose, we simply pass it over. We can not stop to look at anything else until our craving for a meta-purpose is satisfied.

This is like the condition of an alcoholic who, in his desperate craving for drink, goes frantically in search of a liquor store that is still open. The point of the analogy is that, because of his desperate search, the alcoholic will simply overlook the concrete details of whatever street he happens to be on. He will not notice the small bushes struggling to grow by the side of the road, or the interesting shape of that tree over there to the right, or the color of the pebbles that have washed into the gutter. Now it was this same sort of not noticing that we experienced while we were watching the movie. The question that kept going off in our heads was “What’s the point of this?” But, in looking and looking for that point, we simply overlooked the actual concrete story in front of us.

This whole thing reaches another stage -- but another stage of the same thing -- when it becomes apparent that no meta-purpose is likely to be forthcoming. It will then be feelings of frustration and grievance that fill the mind, keeping it so occupied that it won’t really notice the story itself. The moment when the alcoholic discovers that the liquor store is closed is not likely to be a moment of open-minded observation of the world around him. We experienced something like this when we began complaining to ourselves that “this movie has no point.” Once we let this complaint fill our minds, it was, of course, impossible to attend to the story itself.

#13 The converse also appears to be true, i.e., that slathering a story in meta-purposes will make that story shine through even more clearly. What I said in the last section was that as long as a person is hungry, all he or she will be able to think about is food. What I am saying now is that the solution to this is easy: stuff the person with food and he or she will then be satisfied, no longer obsessing, and so able to think about other things. It is the well fed guest who will pause for a moment to examine, in a leisurely way, the crystal glass, holding it up to the light and twirling it slowly so as to see more clearly the details
of its cut work.

It even seems true that the more food, the better. Just an appetizer or two might not be enough to satisfy the hunger, and so might not be enough to set the mind free to think of other things. A lavish spread seems called for. I have often heard it said that understatement is best. But from the point of view we have now attained, this adage no longer seems as true to me as it once did. It actually seems, in fact, that overstating the meta-purposes might be best, as this would be most likely to satisfy the viewer’s hunger and so set the viewer’s mind free to focus on the story itself.

For example, one recent afternoon, while on holiday from school on account of a giant snowstorm, I decided that a little daytime TV (soap operas, what else?) would be the most appropriate way to celebrate. What was interesting was that these soap operas were both chock full of meta-purposes and yet at the same time very vivid and real. As far as the meta-purposes went, there were more of them than you could shake a stick at. There were stock characters, cliché situations, incessant moralizing, pop-psychology, and I don’t know what all else. Yet the stories, far from being obscured by all this, were completely fascinating and real. I followed with rapt attention as the characters cried and schemed and argued and loved and hated their way from one cliché situation to the next. I was mesmerized by the actors’ expressions which seemed so real as to be almost truth itself. Moreover, I think there was a connection between these two things, i.e., between the excess of meta-purposes and the vivid reality which the story attained. It was the fact that the larger framework of interpretation was so set as to be downright trite that allowed me to focus so wholeheartedly on the stories and expressions.

What is especially striking is that, although I knew just how hokey all these meta-purposes were, this didn’t seem to make any difference. I was still completely engrossed by the stories I was seeing. But the explanation Christian and I worked out can explain this too. To recur to the previous analogy, a man who is stuffed full of unhealthy fast food is still stuffed full, and so still at leisure to examine the details of the pattern on the glass he is drinking from.

#14 Let me close with a slightly more unusual analogy. I was once told by a Pacific islander what to do if, while diving on the coral reef, I
reached my hand where I should not have reached it, and it got bitten by an eel. The proper reaction, he said, would not be to pull away. The eel's teeth are curved inwards and so pulling away would only make them catch on my hand and tear it to ribbons. I was, rather, supposed to shove my hand still further down the eel's throat. Too much hand, my friend assured me, would make the eel choke and open its mouth, thus releasing me. The same thing appears to be true with stories and meta-purposes: it appears that we need to have so many meta-purposes that the eel gags on them and so chokes out the story itself.

Section two: how the poetic image becomes concrete—or, Blake's tiger comes back and devours a meta-purpose

#15 I think that poetry works in a similar way. I think that it, too, releases the concrete image by the method of overfeeding our desire for meta-purposes. The poem, in other words, takes care of us at the meta-level, thus relieving us of the need to search for meta-purposes, and so freeing us to focus in on the concrete image.

This is, by the way, not the whole of the theory I am going to put forward here, but only the first part of it. It is the part that is designed to explain why, when reading a poem, our attention will crystallize around the images in it, giving those images a detailed and multifaceted life. The other part of the theory is something I will postpone until section four. That is the part that is designed to explain why the images of a poem become such profound and ambiguous symbols.

We need, of course, to shift our terminology a little bit when we move from movies to poetry. On the one hand, corresponding to what I was calling the story itself, there is what I will now be calling the image. By this I mean the particular concrete image: the tiger, the window ledge, etc. On the other hand, corresponding to what I was calling meta-purposes, there is what I will now be calling the meta-level. This is just an aggregate name I will use to lump together all the different larger structures of the poem: the rhythm, the rhyme, the meaning, the logical pattern of argument, the sequence of the narrative, the philosophical content, etc. --- basically everything that is not an image. Given this change in terminology, though, my thesis is still basically the same. I think it is an over-satisfaction on the meta-level which frees us to experience the concrete image. Poetry, to put it
another way, is also an exercise in choking the eel. What I would like to do next is to offer a series of evidences in support of this thesis.

#16 The first is the example of Macleish's poem itself. I should alert the reader that I am planning to interpret this poem in a way that runs counter to Macleish's own statements about what poetry should be. Macleish's actual poetic practice is, it seems to me, different (and better) than the theory of poetry he is stating in this poem. Macleish tells us that a poem "should not mean but be". Yet his own poem belies this statement, for he gives each of his images a very clear meaning, a meaning that he is, moreover, careful to state in a very explicit way. The first set of images are all designed to tell us that poetry should be, in a sense, inexpressive, and Macleish states this point explicitly with the words "mute", "dumb", "silent" and "wordless". The image in the middle of the poem about the moon rising and illuminating the tree branches is, the poem itself tells us, an analogy for how poetry should illuminate our mind and our memories. The last images are examples of how poetry should use concrete symbols to represent emotions, and Macleish once again states this point directly when he tells us that poetry "should be equal to not true". There are, moreover, not just these statements about what each of the individual images mean, but the poem as a whole is so filled with meaning that it is almost as much a philosophical statement as it is a poem. Macleish says that his images attain a concrete reality precisely because they lack meaning. Yet, as we have just seen, they are actually saturated with meaning. What we need, therefore, is not Macleish's own theory of poetry, but a theory like the one I am suggesting here --- a theory which says that it is an excess of meaning, not the absence of it, that releases the being of the image.

#17 I get very different experiences reading a poem the first and the second time. On my first time through, I am a bit at sea and more or less just groping around trying to figure out what the poem means. I do not have enough mental space to really let the images resonate in my mind and so become vivid and real to me. On my second time through, since I will by then have developed a better understanding of what the poem means, I do have the mental space to let the images resonate. I have a sufficient space of attention to let them come to life. This time through, therefore, the images do become vivid and real to me. Which all goes to show, I think, just the sort of connection
between meaning and image that I am proposing here.

#18 A similar phenomenon can be found in Shakespeare's sonnet number one hundred and sixteen.

# 116

Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments. Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove:
O, no! it is an ever-fixed mark,
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
It is the star to every wandering bark,
Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.

Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle's compass come;
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.
   If this be error and upon me proved,
   I never writ, nor no man ever loved.

What is relevant for us in Shakespeare's technique is that he spends the first stanza telling us in a straightforward and explicit way what the meaning is. It is only once he has done this that he then unleashes the images in the next two stanzas. This might seem odd at first. We are trained to think that poetry is supposed to be subtle, and yet here Shakespeare begins by literally hitting us over the head with the meaning he intends to convey. Yet if the theory I am proposing is correct, this is not odd at all but entirely reasonable. The theory says that it is precisely by making its meaning clear that a poem is able to unleash its images. Why not, then, simply make the meaning clear right at the start?

There are, moreover, other poems that do exactly the same thing. For example, Gerard Manley Hopkins's poem "Pied Beauty" begins with the line "Glory be to God for dappled things" and then goes on to simply list a whole bunch of dappled things. Here, too, the meaning is stated straight out right in the beginning, with the images to follow.
Walt Whitman's poem, the one that begins "I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear", works the same way: it too is a brief statement of theme followed by a long list of examples.

#19 My next argument is an argument that I have decided to call "soap opera please". What I want to say here is that the meta-levels of many classical poems are actually predictable, trite, and full of clichés. Shakespeare's sonnet is a good example. Its overall theme is as cliché as it comes: real love lasts. Its tone is melodramatic in the extreme. Its rhyme and meter are totally prescribed and predictable. Its logical structure is straight out of a course in Freshman Composition: main point in stanza one, two illustrations in stanzas two and three, quick conclusion in the couplet. Its sub-themes are as old as ancient Greece: life is an uncertain voyage; love is a star we aspire to; time is a sort of fate or doom; love and death are somehow intertwined. I don't, in sum, see anything here which isn't well worn to the point of being worn out.

The question is how such a trite meta-level could be the setting for images of such undeniable power. It would seem that such a meta-level should not be helping the images along, but should, rather, be drowning them in a sea of treacle and cliché. Yet Shakespeare's clichés actually do help the images along. Why is this so? A first answer is that Shakespeare's sonnet actually works very much like the soap opera we talked about in the last section. Just as in the soap opera, the triteness of Shakespeare's meta-level sets the mind completely at its ease. We are not comfortable until we know how everything fits together, which means that we are very comfortable here where everything fits together in such obvious ways. Just as in the soap opera, this comfort then turns out to be a big advantage. Once we are this comfortable, we are free to pay attention to the images themselves. We can dwell on them and fill them out in our imagination --- with the result that we end up imagining the images into solidity, i.e., into a multifacetedness that makes them seem real.

#20 Besides this first answer, though, I think there is also a second one. This second answer is not something I talked about before because, if truth be known, it is not something I thought of before. I therefore hope that the reader will forgive me if, just having thought of something new, I simply toss it in at this point. The new idea is this: the clichés in Shakespeare's meta-level have the effect of releasing a sort of free floating emotion, and this emotion has a tendency to coalesce
around the images, thus investing them with an urgency and warmth that makes them seem real. To put it a little more cynically, the clichés give off a sort of hype, and it is this hype which we mistakenly take to be a life and force dwelling within the images themselves.

The release of emotion has two aspects. On the one hand, the mind gets lulled to sleep by a meta-level that is comforting and requires no mental effort. This leaves us without a mental censor to block or suppress the release of emotion. On the other hand, we have this release of emotion itself --- a release of emotion that is fairly stereotypical. To take a first example, the regular rhyme and meter insure that, at least when it comes to the poem’s sound, everything is totally predictable and there will be no surprises. The mind can therefore simply follow along without having to think or worry. But not only do the rhyme and meter pacify the mind like this, but they also produce a sense of heightened emotion in much the same way as song does, or men working in unison, or soldiers marching. The grandiloquent tone has the same two effects. This is not a tone that is designed to awaken us to critical reflection, but a tone designed to just sweep us along in the gorgeous flow of its eloquence. At the same time it is sweeping us along, though, this tone is also building up a certain noble or ardent or even martial emotion. We ride, entranced, upon a torrent of fire. The clichéd themes have the same effects too. They are ideal for keeping the mind quiet precisely because they are clichés. There’s nothing like the obvious, the true and the well-worn for producing mental sleep. But at the same time that they quiet the mind, these clichés also amplify the emotions. Each of the clichés has a stereotypical connection to certain emotional responses, and so the mere mention of the cliché will release those emotions, thus flooding the poem with all sorts of ardor. For example, the lines “Love’s not time’s fool, though rosy lips and cheeks within his boding sickle’s compass come” touch on the cliché connection between young love and death. This cliché then touches off a double response of “how true” (mental pacification) and “how touching” (emotional amplification).

The next step is simple: all the emotion that has been released will have to focus itself somewhere, and a lot of it seems to focus itself on the images. The wandering bark, the star unshaken by tempests, the maiden cut down by time, the young man fighting valiantly on the cliff’s edge --- they all attract to themselves that range of ardent,
tender, martial, noble feelings with which the poem is suffused. It is as if the emotion precipitates out of the poem and crystallizes around the images. All this crystallized emotion is one of the things that make the images seem so real.

This emotional effect is another way in which poetry functions like a soap opera. Or, to change the metaphor for a moment, this emotional effect functions a little bit like propaganda does. We have seen that the poem uses a well-worn and mentally pacifying thought pattern, that it releases a range of stereotypical and ardent emotions, and that it then crystallizes these emotions around the symbols offered to them. This certainly looks like just the sort of mechanism that propaganda uses. I realize that this comparison to propaganda might sound strange or even perverse. But, if the reader is not convinced, I would ask him or her to try something. I would ask him or her to try reading the poem as if he or she were a fascist dictator trying to whip a crowd up into a passionate and unthinking frenzy. He or she should wait a moment for the crowd to quiet, and then rumble out the words, “Let me not to the marriage of true minds admit impediments.” Then he or she should pause, and, sensing that something in the crowd is beginning to rumble too, begin to gesticulate forcibly and almost shout the words, “Love is not love which alters when it alteration finds or bends with the remover to remove”. He or she should pause to let the crowd howl its execration at the alterers and removers. Then, in a voice still more frantic with intensity, he or she should begin in with, “O, no! it is an ever fixed mark...” And so on. If the reader’s experience of this is anything like mine, he or she will find that the poem, except perhaps for a phrase here or there, reads remarkably well as a propaganda speech.

That’s the end of what I have to say about Shakespeare, soap operas and propaganda. What I will do next is to perform a sort of scientific experiment. I will take a poem and excise the meta-level from it, while leaving the images still in place. The point of this is to see what will happen to the images when the surrounding meta-level is removed. If the theory I am proposing here is correct, the images should lose their reality and strength. In a moment we will see if this really does occur. The poem I have chosen to experiment on is William Carlos Williams’s “The Red Wheel Barrow”.

The Red Wheel Barrow

BUDHI 3 — 2006
So much depends
Upon

A red wheel
Barrow

Glazed with rain
Water

Beside the white
Chickens.

At first sight, this poem might seem to be an image only, i.e., an image and no meta-level. So this poem might seem to contradict what I have been saying about how a meta-level is needed in order to release the image. But this is only how it seems. For I think a closer look will show that there actually is a meta-level in this poem, and that this meta-level is playing an important role in helping the image become real.

Perhaps the most obvious aspect of the meta-level is the phrase “So much depends upon”. This is clearly part of the meta-level and not the image since it is conveying no information about the image. Yet what’s interesting is how important this seemingly irrelevant phrase is to the being of the image which follows. For if we rewrite the poem in a way that deletes this phrase, I think we’ll see that the image somehow gets drained of life. Here’s how it would be:

The Red Wheel Barrow (#2)

A red wheel
Barrow

Glazed with rain
Water

Beside the white
Chickens.
I don’t know about the reader, but for me at least, in this new version the wheel barrow has somehow gotten less red, the rain drops less iridescent, and the chickens a lot less noisy and not so interesting. Therefore it does seem, just as a matter of experimental fact, that the meta-level is making the image more real. For when we decrease the meta-level we also decrease the reality of the image --- which is just what the theory I am proposing would predict.

But perhaps we should look into this result a little more closely. For how could this phrase, which tells us nothing about the image, nonetheless be so crucial in making the image seem real?

What I want to suggest is that this phrase is so crucial because it provides a meaning for the image. The phrase tells us that the humble details of life have a special import. We can then read the image as an exemplification of this import. Or, to put it in a slightly different way, this phrase intimates a philosophy, a philosophy of what we might call “the importance of the little things”. What the poem does is to fit the image into this philosophy. This meaning then helps the image in just the way I have been talking about. When we know the meaning, we are satisfied and therefore able to focus on the image. Without the meaning, though, we are left unsatisfied, distracted by the question of what the poem means, and therefore unable to focus on the image. I think we can actually feel these two different things happening as we read the two different versions. At least for me, in version # 2 the dissatisfaction and restlessness are almost palpable, whereas in version # 1 I feel myself settling, somehow contented, into the image.

In addition, I think this phrase also releases an emotion or gives off a hype. In this way, Williams’s poem functions much like Shakespeare’s sonnet. The difference is in the emotion released. While Shakespeare’s poem released heroic emotions, Williams’s poem releases a vague piety. The importance of the little things has, it seems to me, become a fond article of modern belief, and Williams’s poem is designed to tap into the vague pious feelings associated with that belief. But other than this difference in the emotions released, the two poems function in the same way: once the emotion is released, it is then crystallized around the image, making that image seem warmer and more alive.

What is, once again, so amazing about this is how the ability of the meta-level to foster an image does not seem to depend on the quality of that meta-level. Let’s be blunt: the meta-level in this poem (i.e. the
phrase "So much depends upon") is really just a piece of preachy and pious pap --- and vague preachy pious pap at that. Yet this meta-level is at the heart of a poem that has become a modern classic for the vividness of the image it contains. But though this situation might at first seem paradoxical or even contradictory, it is, upon the theory I am proposing here, actually easy to explain. There is nothing (at least in certain moods) quite so satisfying as vague preachy pious pap, and so nothing quite so well suited to releasing the images in a poem.

#22 Another aspect of the meta-level is the organization into stanzas. The simplest and most obvious thing that the stanza structure does is to produce a verbal familiarity or comfort. We know to expect phrases of a certain size, arranged in a certain way.

What's more, the stanza structure also introduces a very subtle metaphysic. The fact that there are three separate stanzas turns the image into a series of strophes and anti-strophes --- one strophe or anti-strophe for each of the main objects: wheelbarrow, rain water and chickens. The structure inside the stanzas also has an effect: it overweights the nouns by giving them the entire second line of each stanza, thereby putting the nouns on a sort of verbal pedestal. The overall result of all this is that the wheelbarrow and rainwater and chickens appear to be declaiming to one other, each making sure to emphasize what its name or nature is. Of course this noun-based and declamatory metaphysic is present subliminally rather than consciously, but I think it is indeed present, functioning as a kind of framework into which each of the images neatly fits.

I think this stanza structure is actually important to the reality of the image. To test this, let's take the stanzas away and see what happens to the image. Here is the poem without stanzas:

The Red Wheel Barrow (#3)

So much depends upon a red wheel barrow, glazed with rain water, beside the white chickens.

In this version # 3, the image appears a good bit flatter. The chickens, somehow, just don't seem to be clucking like they used to, and the raindrops no longer seem to be reflecting anything profound. This wasn't even a complete test: for although version # 3 does take
away the stanzas, it still keeps the poem’s antiphonal structure, with the nouns at the end of each phrase. Let’s see what happens if we rewrite the poem to take away this aspect of the meta-level too. Here’s the best I was able to do:

The Red Wheel Barrow (#4)

So much depends upon a wheel barrow, red and rain-glazed,
and on the white chickens who are beside it.

The image in this version #4 is, to my ears, flatter still and further attenuated. In terms of its actual content, the image is still the same image as in the original poem. But without the meta-level, the image just can not manage to seem real.

#23 I want to perform still one more experiment before I close this section. But first a brief word about methodology. The philosophy of science tells us that one of the best ways to support a theory is to use that theory to make a surprising prediction, and then to show that this surprising prediction is actually true. For example, Einstein’s theory of relativity predicted that light could be bent by gravity. When astronomers were able to show that this surprising thing did in fact happen, Einstein’s theory was powerfully confirmed. This is, to use an analogy from childhood, the “Look, Ma, no hands!” method of proving oneself.

The theory I am proposing makes a surprising prediction too. It predicts that the meta-level and the image do not need to be connected or related in order for the meta-level to make the image more real. To put it bluntly: the meta-level can have nothing special to do with the image and yet still be effective in enhancing that image. I think this is surprising because I think we ordinarily suppose that a poem needs to be more unified than this. I know that I at least had always thought that the different parts of a poem needed to be tightly connected. But not if the theory I am proposing here is correct. According to this theory, the meta-level does not actually affect the image in any sort of direct way. All the meta-level does is to feed the meta-level hunger in the reader, making him or her satisfied and therefore attentive. But for this purpose any meta-level --- even a meta-level totally disconnected
from the image --- would seem to do.

This strange prediction actually seems true for William's poem. The meta-level in this poem appears to have no special connection to the image. To begin with, the phrase "so much depends upon" doesn't seem to have anything special to do with wheelbarrows, rainwater or chickens. This same phrase could, it seems, be just as appropriately applied to a zillion other objects. Moreover, there is no connection between this meta-level phrase and the image for the very simple reason that the poem does not provide one. There is no explanation nor any other sort of bridge to take us from the phrase "so much depends upon" to the image which follows it. The phrase and the image are simply thrown out there, one after the other, with no connection between.

The same lack of connection is also true of the stanza structure. The visual separation of the words on the page seems clearly irrelevant to the image. The antiphonal structure actually seems to be going in the opposite direction from the image. The image puts all three objects --- the wheel barrow, the rain water, and the chickens --- into combination and interaction, into a sort of concrescence. But the antiphonal structure, on the other hand, separates these objects and makes them not so much interact as declaim to each other from a distance. So it seems to me that this antiphonal structure and the image are not just unrelated, but actually anti-related.

Moreover, I think I have found a way to confirm that the image and the meta-level in Williams's poem are, indeed, unrelated to each other. What I will do is show that we can change the one while leaving the other the same and still get a poem that works. I will show, in other words, that Williams's meta-level can work with a whole series of different images, and that his image can work with a whole series of different meta-levels. The more we can change things like this, the more likely it is that there is nothing special connecting any one of these images or meta-levels to another. This sort of interchangeability, in other words, is pretty good evidence that we really do have distinct components.

Let me start by altering the image. What is interesting --- and in an odd way frightening --- is that we can take practically any image, fit it into Williams's meta-level, and get a poem that works. All we need to do is mimic the antiphonal stanza structure, put the words "so much
depends upon" in front, and (presto) there it is. I amused myself with this yesterday morning, creating poems out of the various things I saw as I was washing up and having breakfast. I was staying at my friends' house, and my favorite poem is the one I made up while having tea on their back porch, looking out into the yard. Here it is:

The Children's Swing Set

So much depends
upon

The morning
sunlight,

Still dappled with
shadow,

Falling on the children's
swing set.

It's not quite Williams of course; it lacks that final touch of genius to make it perfect. But what's remarkable is how close to right it is, i.e., how much can be obtained by simply taking a random image and slotting it into Williams's meta-level pattern.

Let me next alter the meta-level while keeping the image the same. Here it will not be possible to perform a complete experiment since the only part of the meta-level that will be easy to change is the first phrase. But at least when it comes to this part, it is possible to change the meta-level without thereby affecting the reality of the image to follow. Here is one example:

The Red Wheel Barrow (#5)

How patiently
it sits,

A red wheel
barrow
Glazed with rain
water

Beside the white
chickens.

There are all sorts of other possibilities too. The first phrase can also be replaced by, “I am sure Christ is homesick for” or “How like lost love is” or “As a model of the sacred life accept” etc. A perfectly good poem seems to result each time --- or, to be more precise in terms of our topic here, each time the meta-level seems to be sufficient to release the being of the image.

To sum up: because the image and the meta-level can be thus varied independently of each other, it seems as if there really is no special relation between them --- which confirms the surprising prediction we made at the start of this little section.

#24 Before I leave this topic, I would like to talk about a possible objection. I have been saying that poetry works by satisfying us at the meta-level. But what about all those modern poems where the meta-level is paradoxical, hard to follow, tricky, or unclear? These poems would, it seems, fail to provide any meta-level satisfaction. How could they satisfy at the level of meaning when we can not even tell what their meaning is? Moreover, the theory I have been proposing claims that meta-level satisfaction is the key to images which seem real. Hence this theory would imply that modern poetry, with its unsatisfying meta-levels, could not contain any vivid images. But isn’t this implication obviously false? Doesn’t the theory I am proposing have a huge problem here?

In response to this objection, I would argue that such modern poems do in fact provide a meta-level satisfaction, although of a slightly different sort than we’ve talked about so far. They provide the reader a chance to play with (and to ruminate upon) some unusual or paradoxical formulations. As a first illustration, I would like to look back at the lines in Macleish’s poem which go “a poem should be motionless in time as the moon climbs.” Now this is actually a nonsensical statement: how could the moon be motionless (in time or otherwise) as it is climbing up into the sky? But though it’s
nonsensical, this statement provides the reader a chance to ruminate
on the nature of time and to feel that he or she is getting in touch with
some sort of deep ontological paradox, a paradox according to which
time somehow remains motionless even as it flows. What I want to say
here is that these ruminations, and this feeling of being in touch with a
secret profundity, are actually very satisfying. Hence, this sort of poem
actually does fit the (satisfaction based) theory I have been proposing
here. To use an analogy: this sort of modern poem is not really, at
the meta-level, like a blank piece of paper. That would indeed be so
unsatisfying as to produce the sorts of reactions that Christian and I
had to the movie. Rather than this, the meta-levels of such poems are
a little like crossword puzzles to be worked out. For certain personality
types at least, crossword puzzles can actually be very satisfying. Or
maybe it would be better to compare the meta-levels of these poems
to incantations chanted in an ancient language that is only partially
understood. The attempt to follow along after such words of secret
power can also be a satisfying experience.

But let me quote a few lines from another poem by Williams as a
second illustration of this, i.e., as a second illustration of how meta-level
statements that do not make literal sense can still provide satisfaction
as we ruminate on what profound insights are hidden beneath their
paradoxical surfaces. The poem I want to quote from is called “The
Sun”. In this poem, Williams begins by describing the beach and the
ocean on a summer’s day. Then he tells us (I have reformatted and
repunctuated these lines): “Relax, relent --- the sun has climbed, the
sand is drying. Lie by the broken boat --- the eel grass bends and is
released again.” Then comes the part I want to talk about:

    ... Go down, go
down past knowledge

  shelly lace ---
among the rot
of children
screaming

  their delight ---
logged
in the penetrable
nothingness

whose heavy body
opens
to their leaps
without a wound ---

I want, first of all, to talk about the part where Williams tells us to "go down beyond knowledge". Although I have no idea exactly where I am supposed to go, nor how I am supposed to get there, nor what precisely "beyond knowledge" might mean, nor what clues the shelly lace might hold to any of this, I nonetheless find these lines very satisfying. I let myself think that there is some profound meaning here which I am just beginning to catch onto. I play with the thought that there is something about the hiss of the waves, or their gurgle as they retreat through the rocks, that contains a statement and message more important than all the speculations of philosophy. Whether this is actually true or not, the point here is that it is satisfying, and so Williams's poem, despite its lack of a clear meaning, is nonetheless providing a meta-level satisfaction.

The last part about the penetrable nothingness which opens without a wound is satisfying in a similar way. Once again, I cannot make logical sense of this. But once again I have the feeling that I am being let into some deep secret about the nature of space, i.e., about the nature of that nothingness in which everything is lodged. Though I can't quite understand it, I still find it satisfying to have this secret whispered in my ear, and satisfying also to turn it over and over in my mind, feeling constantly the charm of its profundity.

The ultimate point: because it is satisfying in these ways, the meta-level of this poem will be able to start off the process my theory has been describing. The mind, satisfied because it has some meta-level puzzles and paradoxes to play with, can sit contentedly back on the beach and watch the waves roll in as the children play and shout.

#25 But that's probably enough. I actually drafted still more arguments for this section, but I fear I have more than overdone it already. There has always seemed to me to be something comical, something ridiculous even, in the way philosophers will pile up proof
after proof of their ideas. I suspect that I have been playing the role of the man in the clown suit for several pages now. So let me close this part of the paper here, with apologies to the reader for being so long winded.

Section three: interlude: against interpretation—or, the irresponsibility of beauty

#26 In a moment I will move on to the second main topic of this paper, the one about the indefinable symbolism of the poetic image. Before I do that, though, I would like to indulge in some reflections of a general nature. More specifically, I would like to talk about a theory of reading that my friend Christian has been telling me about. Reading, he tells me, is actually a process of making meaning. It is not a process of simply receiving a meaning ready-made from the text. The text will, of course, provide a series of materials or clues. But these are not yet a meaning. These materials and clues must be combined and interpreted for a meaning to be built up. This process of building up a meaning is a creative process on the part of the reader.

Because it is creative in this way, reading is actually very much like writing. Moreover, this creativity means that reading (again like writing) involves a certain responsibility. Since the reader is the one creating meaning, it is the reader who is responsible for whatever meaning gets created.

Of course, some texts impose (or try to impose) a single meaning on the reader. But these are bad texts --- ideological or moralistic or preachy. The good text is open and plural. The good text is an invitation to the reader to begin making a meaning of his or her own. The good text is, in this sense, an invitation to freedom.

#27 I must admit that I was convinced by this for the longest time. The idea itself is so plausible and Christian can be so persuasive. Even now I will concede that this theory might well be true for literature in general. But I no longer believe it is true for poetry. It no longer seems to me that, in poetry, the basic building blocks (the images) are given, and that, using these, the reader then creates a higher level meaning. It seems, rather, the other way around. In poetry the meaning is given, and, using it, the reader then creates the basic building blocks (i.e. the images). Poetry, in a sense, is language in reverse.
#28 I think this is borne out in an obvious way by the majority of poems I talked about in the last section. Shakespeare's sonnet, for example, does not require much interpretation since it literally shouts out its meaning at us. But what does happen is that, satiated by this meaning, we begin to imagine the images in a detail that goes well beyond the actual statements of the poem itself. The reader of the poem, in other words, is passive in regard to the overall meaning of the poem, but wildly creative in regard to the details. This is also borne out, though perhaps in a more subtle way, by the sort of paradoxical modern poems we talked about most recently. It is tempting to think that, because of their unclarity, such poems are in especial need of interpretation. Here more than anywhere, it seems that the reader must act creatively to resolve the unclarities and to produce a meaning. But though it is tempting to think this, I do not think it is actually true. I do not think the reader of such a poem needs to resolve its meta-level and produce a meaning. I do not think these poems need to be interpreted. Of course, the reader will probably play around with the meta-level a little bit --- will probably play at interpreting it. This is, after all, one of the opportunities and satisfactions that such a poem offers. But I do not think the reader has to go beyond playing and actually produce a successful interpretation in order for the poem to work. As I argued earlier, the satisfactions in such poems are that they offer a sort of endless puzzle and seem to whisper an incomprehensible secret. But both of these satisfactions are available even if the reader never succeeds in interpreting the poem and achieving a meaning. In fact, it would seem that these satisfactions are only available because the reader can't interpret the poem, can't achieve a meaning. In a way, I simply want to state the obvious: such poems were obviously not written in order to be interpreted --- which explains why, try as we might, we never seem able to interpret them.

Perhaps a specific example would be useful. Let's go back to the ending of Williams's poem, "the Sun". Now I do not think that, in order to get this poem to work, we need to figure out some sort of metaphysics which would let us understand what Williams means when he talks about space as a penetrable nothingness which opens without a wound. We need neither interpret these lines nor create a meaning for them. We can just leave these lines as uninterpreted, and so as mysteriously appealing, as ever. This, anyhow, is how I deal with
(how I enjoy) this poem. I just let my mind luxuriate in Williams’s incomprehensible description of space. I have never figured out what these lines mean. But their profound and incomprehensible feel is, in itself, enough to satisfy. Then in this satisfaction I naturally turn my gaze outward to watch the children whom I now see so vividly as they leap, splashing, into the waves.

#29 But let me come back to the “standard” case where the poem simply tells us what its meaning is, and let me talk about an analogy which will, I hope, illustrate what I am trying to say about this standard case. At this moment --- this is the analogy --- I am looking at a tiny print of a Guiseppe Ribera painting which is tacked above the office desk. The painting is called “The Holy Family with Saints Anne and Catherine of Sienna”; it is the one which is hanging in the Metropolitan Museum in New York. Now its meaning is already given. We already know who these people are and what their story is. We already know that they represent an ideal of holiness. We already know what importance their lives have in the history of salvation. All of these “already knowns” function as an already given meaning we can use to interpret what we are seeing. For example, when St. Joseph looks protectively out from the background of this painting, we do not need to think in order to interpret his look. Centuries of Christian preaching have already taught us that St. Joseph was the ideally supportive husband and father, content to remain quietly in the background as the drama of salvation is played out by his wife and her son. Hence we automatically interpret the look on St. Joseph’s face in terms of this already given meaning. This, anyway, has always been my experience. I have looked at the painting itself and at the print many times, but I do not think I have ever had the experience of creating its meaning for myself. Its meaning has always been this already given one. What I did create for myself, though, was a more and more intense focus on this face, this look, this gesture, the blue of these robes, the flower held so delicately in the aged fingers of Saint Anne, and so on. Since I already knew what it meant, I did not have to worry about its interpretation, but could relax and let its details come alive in my imagination.

Poetry (or at least classical or “standard” poetry) works like Ribera’s painting. It is the meaning which is given by the poem, and it is the image which is created by the reader. Reading a poem is not a process
of interpretation. The interpretation is already given. What the reader does is to find, blooming at a level beneath the interpretation, a world of concrete images. What is the responsibility of the reader then? Well, it seems to me that the reader's responsibility is less like that of the philosopher who must construct some sort of overall interpretation or meaning, and more like that of the gardener who must tend to his or her flowers. For a gardener doesn't try to make the flowers meaningful, but only plentiful and bright.

One last note. I am not saying that the interpretation is a sort of recipe or formula which tells us how to create the concrete world. The interpretation is not connected to the image in such a direct way. Rather, the interpretation is a sort of food or drink, and its function is to satiate the gods of the meta-level so that, once they are satiated and begin to sleep, the world can begin to bloom in the space created by their satisfied and benign neglect.

Section four: how the poetic image becomes so richly and indefinably symbolic—or, what the sinews?—or, the uncontrolled tendrils of illusion

#30 I started off this essay with two questions. The first question was how the images in poetry come to seem so real. I am finished talking about that question now. The second question was how the images in poetry come to seem so richly, but indefinably, symbolic. I will now start talking about this second question. To illustrate this question, let us go back to Blake. His tiger stands, in an obvious way, for the violence that exists in God's creation. But the tiger also seems to somehow stand for more than this --- a large, vague, but nonetheless important more. What the second question is asking is where exactly this more is coming from.

#31 The key, I think, is that a poem creates connections between the image and a whole series of other items. It will create connections to other concrete items (stars, ships, hammers, anvils), to what we might call larger events (industry, war), to ontological abstractions (time, space, motion), and even to that flow of time internal to the poem itself (languid, urgent, nervous). It is these connections that make the image into a symbol that is rich, mysterious, powerful and deep.
Rich: In a typical case, these connections will be multiple and varied. A poem will, for example, connect the image to items A, B, C, D, E, F, G. And because it is connected to such a long list of different things, the image will have a symbolism that is rich.

Mysterious: The items that the image is connected to --- the A, B, C, D, E, F, G --- will usually be heterogeneous in nature. This will make the symbolism difficult to comprehend. An image that stands for one type of thing has a reference that is clear. But an image that stands for more than one type of thing has a reference that is unclear and hard to understand. Its meaning becomes obscure because, paradoxically, it means too much. Its meaning becomes, as it were, lost in its own vastness.

Powerful: An image that connects itself to a large range of different things is performing quite a trick. Hence it comes to appear as if it possessed some sort of magic. An image capable of summing up large swaths of the world must, after all, be an image of secret and mysterious powers. There is always about the poetic image, then, a bit of that aura which surrounds a necromancer or an angel.

Deep: The images in poetry usually have a double structure. On one level, the image is usually an analogy. Here the image stands for some one thing in a way that is clear and logical and easy to understand. On a second level, though, the image is not an analogy but the sort of broader symbol I have just talked about. Here the symbol isn’t clear and logical, but, rather, mysterious and complex. The combination of these two levels then gives the symbol a sort of internal depth. The clarity of the analogical meaning will seem to be on top, and the mysterious complex symbolism will seem to be beneath it, as a sort of background. Or, to change the metaphor, we see the brightness of the analogical meaning blossoming atop the dark and tangled undergrowth of this other symbolism.

#32 Here is an analogy. Sometimes there is an object which we have experienced in a variety of contexts that are emotionally important to us. In this case, the object is liable to become symbolic of those contexts. If those contexts are heterogeneous, then we will get the sort of complex and indefinable symbol that I am talking about here.

For me, the steps of the Metropolitan Museum in New York are like this. I have climbed those steps with friends, roommates, girlfriends,
and, many times, alone. I have sat on those steps and drank coffee, eaten donuts, read The Times, watched the people, smoked cigars, and admired the architecture of the Goethe House which is just across the street. I have met out of town friends on those steps. Once, on a winter evening of great happiness, I looked up at those steps as I walked along the concrete border of one of the fountains which are just to each side, balancing myself by holding out my arms like a child.

The result of all these experiences is that the steps now have a powerful symbolic value in my mind. But it is a symbolic value that is made up of so many elements that it is no longer clear just what is being symbolized. If I stop and analyze, I can trace out some of the elements that go to make up this symbolic value; the steps represent to me: friendship, love, loneliness, a snack in the afternoon sun, a view of Central Park East, a winter evening of special happiness, and so on. But usually when these steps come to mind I don't separate out the different elements in this way, but just experience these steps as somehow symbolic of that great and bewildering mixture of things which were, for me, my years in New York.

Poetic images also work like this. They also work by getting themselves connected to a whole mixture of elements. This is how they achieve a symbolism that is multifaceted and therefore hard to pin down.

Of course, the steps also have a straightforward analogical meaning; they represent art and the art museum. But this straightforward analogical meaning is set into the background of all the other symbolic meanings we have just talked about. This is important because it gives the analogical meaning a depth it would not otherwise have; the steps no longer represent just art, but art in relation to friendship, love, loneliness, donuts eaten in the sun, the joys of people-watching, and so on.

#33 A curious feature of the example about the steps is that the steps are getting their symbolic value from outside themselves, i.e., from the contexts in which my experience places them. There is nothing intrinsic in the steps themselves that makes them a particularly apt symbol for love or loneliness or donuts or anything else on the list. Rather, this is a symbolism that is constructed in a very extrinsic way; certain things happened on those steps, things which really had nothing to do with those steps, and that is all. Yet this very extrinsic
relation is enough to produce a symbolism which has, at least for me, a
power that is almost palpable.

I think we will find the same curious feature in poetic symbolism
too. Of course, poetic symbols are sometimes of the intrinsic variety.
The psychoanalytic symbols I mentioned a long time ago are a case
in point. The globed fruit, for example, is a sexual symbol in terms
of its shape and its role in giving birth to new plants. But in addition
to these intrinsic cases, there are also a lot of other cases where poetic
symbols are extrinsic, like the steps. For, like the steps, the poetic
image is also able to accumulate symbolic value from outside itself,
i.e., not in terms of what it looks or acts like, nor in terms of what it is
psycho-analytically related to, but simply because the poem puts it into
an extrinsic connection to something else. I would not, before I began
writing this essay, have imagined this to be possible. But I am now
convinced that, unlikely as it might seem, it is actually true. An image
can accumulate symbolic power simply by accumulating references to
a lot of other things, even things which are unrelated to it.

#34 Let us look at a couple of actual examples. As a first example,
I would like to return to Blake’s poem about the tiger, which I quote
once again here:

The Tiger

Tiger! Tiger! Burning bright
In the forests of the night
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

In what distant deeps or skies
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand dare seize the fire?

And what shoulder, and what art,
Could twist the sinews of thy heart?
And when thy dread heart began to beat,
What dread hand forged thy dread feet?
What the hammer? What the chain?
In what furnace was thy brain?
What the anvil? What dread grasp
Dare its deadly terrors clasp?

When the stars threw down their spears,
And watered heaven with their tears,
Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the lamb make thee?

Tiger! Tiger! Burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?

I think this poem exhibits the mechanisms I have been talking about. Throughout the poem, the tiger increases in symbolic depth and force, and it does so by accumulating an increasing number of allusions or references. In the first stanza, the tiger is linked to fire ("burning bright") and to the mysteriousness of the jungle ("in the forests of the night"). It is also linked to beauty (through the classical connection between symmetry and beauty). In the second stanza, the tiger gets linked to the Promethean myth (the "he" seems to be a Prometheus-like figure who steals the sacred fire and places it in the tiger's soul). In the third and fourth stanzas, the tiger gets linked to the force and violence of human industry and to a series of tools used in that industry ("twist", "forged", "hammer", "chain", "furnace", "anvil"). In the fifth stanza, the tiger gets linked to hunting or warfare (the stars are abandoning their weapons and beginning to pray because the tiger has proved too fierce to fight against). It is this set of allusions that makes the tiger such a large and potent symbol. His muscles now ripple not just with his own force alone, but with the accumulated force of fire, the jungle, beauty, Prometheus, industry, tools of all kinds, hunting and warfare. This is also what makes the tiger such a mysterious symbol. Since he does not stand for just one thing, he can not be understood as a simple one to one analogy. He is, rather, somehow --- but how? --- all these other things at once. Of course, the tiger is also an analogy, standing for the violence in God's creation. I don't want to deny this obvious fact. But I do want to insist that this
analogy is not the only thing, and may not even be the main thing. What makes the tiger work as a symbol is that it is not restricted to just this anallogical meaning, but also contains, as a sort of background, all the other meanings we have just talked about. This is what, it seems to me, gives the tiger its symbolic depth.

Besides what I have said so far, I think the tiger becomes symbolic at still another (and more subtle) level. The meter and rhyme of this poem create a certain sort of time --- a time that is trochaic: pulsing and urgent. There is a kind of insistence to the time of this poem; it is a time that almost pushes us forward as we read. What the poem does is to imbed the tiger into this sort of time to the point where time and tiger become connected. This makes the tiger into what we might call an ontological symbol; he is no longer just one object in time, but he has, at least symbolically, become the terrible and inexorable pulse of time itself.

#35 I think something similar is true for Macleish's poem as well. Let me re-quote it:

_Ars Poetica_

A poem should be palpable and mute
As a globed fruit,

Dumb
As old medallions to the thumb,

Silent as the sleeve worn stone
Of casement ledges where the moss has grown ---

A poem should be wordless
As the flight of birds.

A poem should be motionless in time
As the moon climbs,

Releasing, as the moon releases
Twig by twig the night entangled trees,
Leaving, as the moon behind the winter leaves,
Memory by memory the mind ---

A poem should be motionless in time
As the moon climbs.

A poem should be equal to:
Not true.

For all the history of grief
An empty doorway and a maple leaf.

For love
The leaning grasses and two lights above the sea---

A poem should not mean
But be.

This poem also works by the accumulation of allusions. Macleish takes poetry --- or more precisely “a poem” --- and, in one way or another, connects it to: fruit, coins, window ledges, birds, the moon, tree branches, winter, memories, the mind, grief, love, an empty doorway, a leaf, grasses in the wind, and lights above the ocean. What is the purpose of all these allusions? Well, at first they might look like they are supposed to be clarifications or illustrations. They might look like they are supposed to help convey the meaning of the poem. But I think a closer look will reveal that this isn’t really the case. To begin with, the meaning in this poem is conveyed not by the images themselves, but by the direct statements which Macleish attaches to those images. In the first few stanzas, for example, Macleish’s ideas about the nature of poetry are not really conveyed to us by the images of fruit, coins, window ledges, and birds, but by the adjectives “mute”, “dumb”, “silent”, and “wordless”. Far from the images being able to convey what Macleish means, he has to come out and simply tell us. This is true throughout the poem: the meaning is consistently carried by direct statements and not by the images. Besides, I don’t see how these images could be particularly useful as clarifications or illustrations anyway. There doesn’t seem to be any special connection between Macleish’s
images and the statements they are allegedly illustrating. Let's take the first image, i.e., the image of the globed fruit, as an example. Now it is of course true that I have never heard a piece of fruit (globed or otherwise) speak to me. But are fruit somehow especially mute? Are they quieter, for example, than lace doilies, aspirin tablets, marigolds, lug nuts, or stones lying on the ocean floor? I think this is true of all of Macleish's images: none of them seems especially illustrative of what they are supposed to be illustrating. But if it's not clarification or illustration, what then is the purpose of all these allusions? If they're not helping to convey the meaning, what then is the role of the fruit, coins, window ledges, etc.?

Well, I think their role is to increase the symbolic value of that protagonist Macleish is naming "a poem". With each object Macleish connects it to, "a poem" becomes symbolically a little bit richer. Piece by piece, "a poem" is gradually getting connected to --- is gradually coming to comprehend --- all the different objects of the world. In these terms, the quantity and heterogeneity of the allusions are clear advantages. The quantity makes the symbol vaster. The heterogeneity makes the symbol multifaceted and harder to define. This quantity and heterogeneity, in other words, make poetry into the huge and indecipherable cipher of the world. This explains the impact of Macleish's poem. For besides putting forward a pretty dubious theory about poetry, Macleish is also doing something else --- something much more profound. He is turning poetry into the master symbol, into the one sign that comprehends all things. He is making "a poem" into a word of total knowledge --- into a word of that final gnosis which has (and here Macleish is at last accurate) always been described as beyond rationality and meaning.

#36 But I should stop for a moment because there is something I have dropped by the wayside. In the introduction, I promised to explain the symbolism of the casement ledges, but all I have actually been talking about is the symbolism of "a poem". Let us take a second or two, then, to go back and talk about these casement ledges. Now all the different images in this poem form a single symbolic system. They are all parts of that one vast symbol which "a poem" is becoming. This means, I think, that each of the individual images is getting its symbolic value from the system as a whole. The reason why the casement ledges seem like such a vast and mysterious symbol, in other words, is that
they are participating in that vast and mysterious symbol which poetry (or "a poem") becomes.

#37 But let me come back to the symbolism of "a poem". What I want to say next is that, just like Blake, Macleish also operates with a sort of ontological symbolism. This occurs in the central stanzas, i.e., the stanzas that begin and end with Macleish talking about how "a poem should be motionless in time as the moon climbs". In these stanzas "a poem" gets connected to some basic ontological categories: time, motion, memory, mind. Hence, "a poem" comes to symbolize not just a series of concrete items (fruit, medallions, windows, and so on) but also the basic structures of the world.

An interesting feature of these connections is how paradoxical they are. As far as I can tell, these stanzas are more or less impossible. It all sounds smooth enough on the surface, but, just beneath the surface, things get crazy. To begin with, it seems impossible for the moon to be motionless at the same time as it is climbing. How, moreover, does the moon, by climbing into the sky, leave the winter behind? Do the seasons change as it ascends?

This is not to imply that these paradoxes are some sort of defect. Far from it. These paradoxes actually have a key role to play in how Macleish constructs his symbolism. What Macleish is doing at this point is connecting poetry to some basic ontological categories: time, motion, memory, and mind. To simply mention poetry in relation to these categories would be to already form some weak connection between them. But when that mention is a paradoxical one, the connection becomes much stronger. The paradox has the effect of engraving the connection deeply into the mind. It's a little bit like the Sam Adams commercial where the woman pokes a mascara brush into her eye. This is such a crazy thing that it really makes an impression, and so the viewer is left, forever afterwards, with a connection in his or her mind between this particular brand of beer and this particularly gruesome form of accident. Macleish's paradoxes work in the same way. They too are crazy things, and so they too really make an impression. They too leave in the reader's mind, forever afterwards, a connection between, for example, poetry and the motionlessness of time.

#38 These paradoxes also have a connection to that idea of final gnosis which I talked about earlier. The final gnosis has always been described as being beyond logic, or, what comes to the same thing,
described in seemingly illogical terms. For example, in Heraclitus we hear that opposites coincide and that, to take just one instance, the way up is the way down. In the Tao Te Ching we hear that the strongest action is inaction. We get parallels to this sort of thing in Macleish’s statements about the moon rising while remaining motionless, and making the seasons change in a single night’s ascent. By linking poetry to these paradoxes, then, Macleish is also turning poetry into a symbol of this paradoxical final gnosis. “A poem” becomes, in a way, the symbol of God.

#39 Shakespeare’s sonnet also works by accumulating connections. Let me re-quote it:

#### # 116

Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments. Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove:
O, no! it is an ever-fixed mark,
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
It is the star to every wandering bark,
Whose worth’s unknown, although his height be taken.
Love’s not Time’s fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle’s compass come;
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.
   If this be error and upon me proved,
   I never writ, nor no man ever loved.

The master symbol in this poem is love, and Shakespeare builds up the force behind this symbol by connecting it to a range of heterogeneous things: to stars, to ships at sea, to indelible marks, to time and eternity, to doom, to unyielding combat. Just like in the other examples, it is this range of heterogeneous reference that gives love its vast and mysterious symbolic power. The poem makes love seem so potent because it makes love seem like not just love, but like all these other things too.
The last section of Williams's poem "The Sun" also works the same way. Let me quote it again:

Go down, go
down past knowledge

shelly lace ---
among the rot
of children
screaming

their delight ---
logged
in the penetrable
nothingness

whose heavy body
opens
to their leaps
without a wound ---

The symbols here are the children screaming their delight, and what the poem does is connect these children to a series of mysteries: to the mystery of what we might find if we go down past knowledge, to the mystery of why shelly lace is connected to this knowledge, to the mystery of how space can have a heavy body, and to the mystery of how it can open that body with such casual tranquility to take in the children playing on the shore. The effect of this, of course, is that the children end up containing these mysteries and so become much deeper than just a bunch of little tykes playing in the waves.

#40 Christian once told me that he thought we should analyze not just the works of genius, but simple everyday texts as well. In these everyday texts, he said, we would be able to see the mechanisms of language functioning in their most usual and typical way. In this spirit, then, let's look for a moment at a familiar little rhyme from childhood.

Roses are red,
Violets are blue,
Sugar is sweet,
And so are you.

The same thing seems to be going on here as was going on in Blake, Macleish, Shakespeare and Williams. The “you” of this poem is achieving a certain symbolic wealth and mystery by being connected to roses, violets and sugar --- and, for that matter, to red and blue and sweet. Of course in this case we also have analogical meanings in terms of the conventional connection of women to flowers and to sweetness. But these analogical meanings are so trite that they can not be responsible for that dollop of symbolic force which this little rhyme actually seems to have. Hence it seems that this symbolic force must be coming, once again, from how various pieces of the world get taken up and connected with the “you”. This “you” is so attractive and so mysterious because she is no longer just herself but is for us now also color and flower and food and sweetness.

It’s also surprising how well, even in such a simplistic context, this method of connection seems to work. Except for the trite analogies, there seems to be nothing in this poem except these connections. Yet they seem able, almost without assistance, to invest the “you” with depth and charm. I don’t know about the reader, but at least for me there has always been something about this little poem that has sort of worked. Ever since the first grade it has been making the “you” of the poem seem magically attractive. All it takes is the mention of sugar and roses and violets, and there she is, sweetly and verdantly and mysteriously alive. Poetry, it seems, is a very simple trick.

The limits of this study—or, the frog and the courthouse scene

#41 I recently got a letter from a friend who told me that philosophers should make a more regular practice of self-critique. I will therefore now abuse myself a little by admitting that there are a variety of poems that do not fit into my theory (imagine that!).

A first example would be Basho’s famous poem about the frog. Here it is in Lucien Stryk’ translation:
Old pond,
Leap --- splash ---
A frog.

It's not just haiku poems either. Interestingly enough, many of Catullus's poems are also outside the limits of my theory. Here is an example in Charles Martin's translation:

The courthouse mob scene: I led all the laughter
just now, when someone who had heard my Calvus
neatly expose Vatinius the gangster
threw up his hands & cried in admiration,
"Great gods, this little pecker's sure persuasive!"

The first point is that neither the frog nor Calvus seems to be accumulating symbolic meanings in the way that the tiger or "a poem" or love or "you" did. There just isn't the same sort of repeated reference to a whole variety of things. The second point is that there doesn't seem to be an emphasis on the meta-level in these poems either. Hence they don't fit into that other part of my theory which talked about meta-level satisfaction. These poems seem (alas alas) to evade my theories completely.

I could, of course, try to make myself feel better by saying something about how it's only natural that poems in different traditions would construct their symbols in different ways. Why shouldn't there be as many different ways to construct a symbol as there are, for example, ways to build a house or paint a face? But such a response would, of course, still be admitting that my theory is an incomplete one. It would, moreover, be overlooking the fact that these two translations, despite the fact that they are translations, nonetheless still work as perfectly good poems in English --- poems which evade my theories entirely.

**Conclusion: the bread and the knife**

#42 In conclusion, I would like to talk about a poem in which the mechanisms I have been talking about are especially visible because the poet is playing around with them in an ironical way. The poem is called "Litany", and it was written by Billy Collins. Here it is:
Litany

You are the bread and the knife,
The crystal goblet and the wine.
Jacques Crickillon

You are the bread and the knife,
the crystal goblet and the wine.
You are the dew on the morning grass,
and the burning wheel of the sun.
You are the white apron of the baker
and the marsh birds suddenly in flight.

However, you are not the wind in the orchard,
the plums on the counter,
or the house of cards.
And you are certainly not the pine scented air.
There is no way you are the pine scented air.

It is possible that you are the fish under the bridge,
maybe even the pigeon on the general’s head,
but you are not even close
to being the field of cornflowers at dusk.

And a quick look in the mirror will show
that you are neither the boots in the corner
nor the boat asleep in its boathouse.

It might interest you to know,
speaking of the plentiful imagery of the world,
that I am the sound of the rain on the roof.

I also happen to be the shooting star,
the evening paper blowing down an alley,
and the basket of chestnuts on the kitchen table.

I am also the moon in the trees
and the blind woman’s teacup.
But don’t worry, I am not the bread and the knife.
You are still the bread and the knife.
You will always be the bread and the knife,
not to mention the crystal goblet and --- somehow ---
the wine.

The poem begins by employing, in a serious voice, all the different mechanisms I have been talking about here. It starts with a clichéd theme, i.e., the theme where all the different objects of the world come to represent the beloved person. This clichéd theme is not subtly hinted at but stated straight out in the epigraph. Far from enervating the images to follow, though, this clichéd theme actually serves to release them, making them seem very vivid and real. I’m talking now about the images in the first stanza where Collins still seems to be serious. In contrast, I find that the images in the later stanzas, where Collins is playing around and where this clichéd theme is no longer operative, don’t seem nearly so real. I don’t, in my imagination, pay enough attention to them to make them seem real. I think the reason for this is that all my mental space is taken up by wondering what the %#!& Collins is up to (and by laughing).

But to come back to the first stanza, it also has a certain amount of that emotional hype I talked about in connection with Shakespeare’s sonnet and Williams’s poem about the wheelbarrow. The images of the bread and knife and wine release a stereotypical emotion (of affection for hearth and home) which emotion makes these images seem warm and alive. To some extent, I think the other images Collins has chosen here --- the baker’s apron, the morning dew, the burning sun, etc. --- also have such emotional resonances, and so also become warm and alive. This emotion, moreover, collects not just around the images themselves, but some of it also collects around Collins’s beloved (the “you”), thereby endowing her also with warmth and life.

This whole list of comparisons also endows the “you” with a vast symbolic power. She now comes to represent bread and wine and knife and dew and sun and the baker’s apron and birds in flight. Just like Macleish’s “a poem” she comes to represent all the objects of the world. It is also interesting to note how extrinsic some of these symbols are. Perhaps the bread and knife and wine have some intrinsic connection
to women given the fact that women have traditionally been the ones to prepare and serve meals. Perhaps the birds in flight could be construed as a psycho-analytic symbol for sexuality. But the other images don't seem to have any intrinsic connection to women at all. Yet merely by mentioning them together in the magic context of the poem, Collins is able to almost effortlessly make the woman become symbolic of these extrinsic things.

Collins then pulls the rug out from under our feet. In the middle stanzas, as he tells her what she is not symbolic of and also what symbols are reserved for himself, he mocks the mechanisms he had just been using. The humor in the poem comes from the fact that the mechanisms which, a moment ago, were producing their magical effects of vividness and profundity, are now exposed for the arbitrary imposters that they are.

In his mockery, Collins is exploiting two features of these mechanisms. First, he is exploiting the fact that the meta-level (here the clichéd meanings) and the images don't need to have any real connection. Secondly, he is exploiting the fact that poetic symbols are often built on extrinsic connections only. It is these two facts that allow him to vary his images so facilely and arbitrarily, asserting that more or less anything is symbolic of whichever person he feels like saying it is symbolic of. The first fact has the effect of cutting the image loose from any sort of higher level meaning. The second fact has the effect of cutting it loose from any sort of intrinsic, and therefore pre-defined, symbolic value. Hence there is nothing to stop the arbitrary image choice. To put this the other way around, Collins is using the wild and arbitrary images as a way of revealing what was actually true of poetry all along, i.e., that poetry simply is not as tightly connected as we usually imagine, but contains images which have no real connection to what they mean and symbols constructed in completely extrinsic ways.

But then, irony of ironies, in the last couple of lines Collins returns to a serious use of those same mechanisms that he had just mocked. And miracle of miracles, those mechanisms are powerful enough that they immediately begin to work again, and the poem ends by engraving its image of the bread and knife and wine forcibly on our minds, and by providing the woman with a symbolism that is --- somehow --- profound.
To the reader: goodbye

#43 I would like, finally, to bid the reader good bye, and to thank him or her for being kind and patient enough to read this essay all the way to the end.