

# Tabularity: Poetic Structure in Shelley, Agamben, Badiou, and Husserl

William Watkin  
(Brunel University London)

## Abstract:

The recent history of the intense relationship between philosophy and poetry has concentrated on the *poiesis* of poetic language. *Poiesis* is the truth-revealing nature of poetic materiality and linguistic singularity. The ‘truth’ it reveals is that truth itself, as expressed by philosophy, is under erasure in a manner that cannot be expressed philosophically, and so must instead be performed poetically. At the same time, however, what has been neglected is the manner by which material *poiesis*, for example lineation, is located within a wider poetic structure. If a poem disrupts what Badiou calls *dianoia*, at the local or linear level, it constructs meanings at the ‘global’ level in the form of its structure. So that while poems may be gifted with truth-revealing *poiesis*, they are also dominated by truth-developing structures. So far a philosophical interaction with these structures is lacking. This article will consider the philosophical nature of a poem’s structure as a means of generating local and global poetic meanings through a development of what will be called poetry’s tabularity. Using Shelley’s ‘Ode to the West Wind’, it will consider the work of Agamben, Badiou and Husserl in relation to how meaning is generated across the poetic, two-dimensional or tabular field.

## Keywords:

Mine is a story of failure. Some years ago, I tasked myself with investigating the recent history of the intense relationship between poetry and philosophy, which concerned itself primarily with the term *poiesis*. *Poiesis* – Greek origin of the term poetry – captures for many modern thinkers the materiality of poetry, its inability to think, and its truth-revealing

functions due to these two qualities (Watkin 2010: 69–86).<sup>1</sup> These ideas commenced with the work of Martin Heidegger when he declared that the very purpose of philosophy, ontology or the Being of all beings, could not be executed from within philosophical discourse. In that, for him, Being was in withdrawal, and access to it was a matter of a certain kind of language – philosophical, linear, deductive, logical, rational expression was insufficient for the task of ontological excavation. Instead, he turned to poetry as a different kind of language relation that could reveal and perform truths about Being without having to argue, prove, deduce, conclude from premises.<sup>2</sup> This idea that poetry’s debility, its incapacity to think, could be the source of its strength, became very influential for both philosophy and how philosophy came to treat poetry in the last century.<sup>3</sup>

Inspired by Heidegger, Alain Badiou, for example, trudges back to Plato’s enforced division between making and connecting, from which he banished poetry and invented academic philosophy, to suggest a foundational dialectic between philosophy, or *dianoia*, and *poiesis*. Badiou defines *dianoia* as prose, discourse, philosophy, mathematics: the ability to connect ideas and produce a stable state. In contrast, he describes *poiesis* as poetry, invention, interruption: the ability to make or give material form to ideas. Reproducing a fundamental yet correlating division between philosophy and poetry, Badiou states in his essay ‘What is a Poem?’ that *Dianoia* can arrive at new ideas, whereas *poiesis* has no new ideas *per se*, but it can enact the new (Badiou 2005: 16–27). On this reading, poetry can have a central role in the thinking of Being and Event, but only if it concedes that it cannot, itself, think. As Badiou says, ‘*Dianoia* is the thought that traverses, the thought that links and deduces. The poem itself is affirmation and delectation – it does not traverse, it dwells on the threshold’ (Badiou 2005: 17).

We have covered the cognitive qualities of *poiesis*, or rather its lack of them, but what about its much-vaunted materiality? For the Greeks, Heidegger argues, *poiesis* meant the

bringing to presence of something through artificial means such that a truth is revealed through the process or awareness of the process of making. *Poiesis*, then, is a self-conscious interaction with materiality and making that reveals a truth. For Heidegger, the truth of *poiesis* is not in the poem itself, but is due to one's experience of poetic language such that it provides an opening onto a truth in need of special linguistic powers to conjure it into being as a presenced absence. Which is another way of saying that all poems are odes, for that is the ancient purpose of the ode, to bring to presence the absence gods through invocation and apostrophe.

Over time I came to abandon my study of *poiesis*, powerful though it appeared to be as an answer to the enigma of the relationship between poetics and thinking, an apostasy promoted to a large degree by the realisation that what has been neglected by philosophy is the manner by which material *poiesis* is located within a wider poetic structure of meaning. If a poem disrupts what Badiou calls *dianoia* at the local or linear level, say through enjambement as Agamben argues,<sup>4</sup> it still constructs meanings at the 'global' level in the form of its structure. While poems may be gifted with truth-revealing *poiesis*, they are also dominated by truth-developing structures. In fact, what I am proposing is that poetry is not reducible to *poiesis* because in its structural dimensions across space and time – what I am calling its tabularity – it certainly can think. Let's take Shelley's 'Ode to the West Wind' as our archetype in this regard.

Shelley's Ode certainly possesses *poiesis*. As our analysis will go on to show, it conjures up a truth, radical language can bring about political change, and gives it material expression by performing this idea through imagery rather than arguing it through logic. Also, the mode of materiality is such that the making of the poem is itself truth-revealing because the poem is both about the power of language, and an exemplar of that power in action. The poem, in other words, is not just telling you something true about words, but

showing you something true about them, as well as doing something truthful in its showing through language. Yet it is also a poem with an argument. The argument goes like this: if I were like the West Wind, I would be able to do what the wind does and this would give me certain powers that I would use politically through wind-similar speech acts. It is clear that the poem says something that does not just dwell on a threshold, as Badiou says, but that also traverses the threshold between saying and meaning something. Let's walk this traversal a stretch, ignoring, for now, the rather strange markings I have used to besmirch Shelley's eternal masterpiece:

Oh wild west wind, thou breath of autumn's being;  
Thou from whose unseen presence the leaves dead  
Are driven, like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing,

Yellow, and black, and pale, and hectic red,  
Pestilence-stricken multitudes; oh thou  
Who chariotest to their dark wintry bed

The winged seeds, where they lie cold and low,  
Each like a corpse within its grave, until  
*Thine azure sister of the spring shall blow*

*Her clarion o'er the dreaming earth, and fill  
(Driving sweet buds like flocks to feed in air)  
With living hues and odours plain and hill –*

**Wild spirit, which art moving everywhere,  
Destroyer and preserver, hear, oh hear!** (Shelley, 'Ode to the West Wind' in   
2012: 1131–2)

In the opening lines of the work we are immediately plunged into the apostrophic impulse of the ode form. The wind, which is immaterial, must be given material form. To do this the poet rationally associates the wind with autumn, the West Wind being a typical feature of autumn. He then also adds in a degree of *poiesis* here, where the wind can be seen as the Being of autumn if one personifies it and calls it breath. The combination of wind and

autumn allows the poet to give the wind an empirically observable presence: you can ‘see’ where the wind is by the movement of the dead leaves falling from the trees. That these leaves are called ‘ghosts’ and the wind an ‘enchanter’ is not fanciful. The leaves are dead, so rationally the associative term ‘ghosts’ is apposite, and the enchantment here is literally true – an ode is a magical spell after all, an incantatory speech act that brings to presence something that is absent. Yet the leaves are not just there to give presence to the wind as absent Being, which would be a classically Heideggerian conception of *poiesis*, they also add empirical presence to the wind both in terms of their colours and their multitudinous particularity. This is backed up in terms of semiotics by the use of caesurae in line 4 separating out words to make them materially resemble leaves. When Shelley then calls leaves ‘pestilence-stricken multitudes’ he is still factually correct since they are struck by a kind of disease and there are a lot of them.

My description of the first two stanzas is clearly *dianoic*, traversal, linear; all the things *poiesis* is not. One proposition follows from another in a kind of argumentative description, as we can see even more clearly in the third stanza. The concentration on articulate leaves allows the poet, associatively, to think of other particulate things, in this first instance seeds. Yes, as leaves fall, so do seeds, which are carried by the wind for many tree species. And these seeds will sprout in spring, which means that one can think of them as cognitively related to buds, which are also particulate, pertain to trees, and have a life-cycle that relates them to seeds. In fact, we can now present the whole first part of the poem in terms of its argumentative traversal, but as we do so, we immediately find that poetic arguments are never simply linear, moving forward, but trans-linear, moving forward whilst also moving backward and, for the record, vice versa.

What we can observe in Shelley’s poem is a four-part, rationally deductive argument, but one that only works if you admit to a form of thinking that perhaps is not to be found in

traditional philosophy: image association via cataphora and anaphora. The premise of the opening lines is about making invisible things visible through particularity. The underlined argument concerns the same theme but focuses this time on seeds, which when buried in soil experience a death that prefigures life. This is the first example of cataphoric protention, or projecting forward. Cataphora and anaphora are the repetition of words that substitute for other words carrying the same referent. For example, using ‘he’ or ‘she’ instead of the protagonist’s name in a novel for the sake of brevity, or, in a poem, using different names for the same thing for aesthetic or semantic reasons. Anaphora or retention is the most common of the two: it starts with the name of the object, so you know where you are, and then creates different means of indicating the same object as the work progresses. Poetry is especially rich in terms of anaphoric creation. Cataphora, or protention, is rarer because you start by knowing something about the object, but not what the object is, for example famously in the opening lines of *Paradise Lost*. I will come to an explanation of protention and retention in due course, but for now just think of them as expectation and recollection. Cataphora is protensive – you know something’s coming but you don’t know what. Anaphora is retensive, it reminds you of what you have already been speaking about. Here, then, habituated readers of poetry exercise cataphoric protention, knowing that if a poem speaks of seeds in a seasonal context in relation to death, then it is likely to speak of their rebirth later. Indeed, this is the whole point of the first section of the poem.

We now have, in italics, what I call the two-wind dialectic. The spring wind is like the autumn wind, the buds are like leaves and seeds, only this time they are alive. The cataphoric protention of the seeds is now fulfilled by anaphoric retention: it is indeed true that the poet is going to use the cyclicity of nature to create a dialectic of winds. Finally, we have a bold summary, or conclusion, as all good arguments should possess: the wind is mobile, ubiquitous and dialectic. Remember our initial proposition: ‘if I could be like the wind, I

could possess its qualities'? Well, we now have a list of what qualities Shelley covets: dynamism, power, and conflict. But even this traditional conclusion from premises, the basis of all rational deduction, relies on cataphoric, protensive qualities because it is not until line 43 that the initial proposition I am basing my reading on is actually declared: 'If I were a dead leaf thou mightiest bear; / If I were a swift cloud to fly with thee; / A wave to pant beneath thy power, and share / The impulse of this strength'.

At this later point in section 4 of the poem, the poet is both saying that he wants to be like the wind, as well as actually summing up, using here anaphoric retention, the three image worlds that he has just established for the wind over the preceding three sections. The first is that of leaves, which we have already looked at, then that of the sky, and finally a beautiful evocation of the Mediterranean Sea. From 1.43 on the poet uses anaphoric shorthand for certain qualities explored in greater depth in the first three sections, so that later in section 4 when he says 'a wave, a leaf, a cloud' what he is actually saying is as receptive to your power as water is, as **part**iculate and tied to life cycles as a leaf, and as sublime as a storm in the sky.

Yet although this is true, it doesn't **cl**atter my contention that the poem also has a meaningful, argumentative structure. For example, we can actually present the whole poem using standard, logical notation. Here is the poem's extensional argument: If X is Y and Z is X then Z is Y. Or as Shelley prefers:

If I were a dead leaf though mightest bear;  
If I were a swift cloud to fly with thee;  
A wave to pant beneath thy power, and share

The impulse of thy strength, only less free  
Than thou, oh uncontrollable! (Wu 2012: 1133)

Shelley's rational deductive argument is that if the wind (X) carries dead leaves towards rebirth (Y), and Shelley (Z) is like the wind (X), then Shelley (Z) can carry dead leaves

towards rebirth (Y). Or, if Shelley is like the wind, then Shelley must have the same predicates as the wind. But this is not true in any way that can be proven in the real world. Even if the poet resembles the wind, this does not mean he can control leaves, cleave oceans or create storms. At this point our rational argument breaks down if we take it to be an argument about the actual world, but this does not mean it is not an argument about *a* world as the final, powerful lines of invocation show:

Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is:  
What if my leaves are falling like its own!  
The tumult of thy mighty harmonies

Will take from both a deep, autumnal tone,  
Sweet though in sadness. Be thou, Spirit fierce,  
My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!

Drive my dead thoughts over the universe  
Like wither'd leaves to quicken a new birth!  
And, by the incantation of this verse,

Scatter, as from an unextinguish'd hearth  
Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!  
Be through my lips to unawaken'd earth (Wu 2012: 1133-4)

As can be seen from these famous lines, we are bound within an ode-world and such a world has its own rules pertaining to that of the ode that are ancient, coherent and, at the time, well-known. An ode allows one to make manifest something that is immaterial, inexistent or not-present using language: the apostrophe. As we said, it is the archetypal mode of *poiesis*. It is logical, then, that the poet's ontological relation with the wind should not be one of similarity due to predicate sharing, but of ontological identity. The poet has the power to manifest the wind, so now he has the privilege of becoming the wind. Now that Shelley is the wind, Shelley's world merges with the wind's, only this time Shelley's world, which is the human

world, takes precedence over that of the wind or the natural world. The final cataphoric protention then comes in to play here.

Remember that the poem gave the wind breath early on so we could think of it as being like us, and linked it to the movement of leaves so we could literally see it. Now that breath becomes the poet's breath, the wind becomes the power of poetry. And those particulate leaves, those sick multitudes, become the poor and oppressed of the world. The dead ground full of seeds is now a death-hearth full of sparks, seeds that have the chance to be reborn. These particles become verbal units, so that the words on the poet's breath are as leaves and seeds on the wind. This means that just as dead seeds in the ground can bear the potential of rebirth, so too can Shelley's words spark a revolutionary rebirth: 'The trumpet of prophecy! Oh wind / If winter comes, can spring be far behind?' (Wu 2012: 1134). It is worth noting that prophecy is the final act of cataphoric protention. At the precise moment in the poem when you have to go back to the very beginning of the work and then trace forward everything in its structural argument to accept the premise at the end, that premise asks that you simultaneously project forward to what will happen once you have accepted this argument in a few moment's time.

Of course, you could argue it is a silly argument, based on the manifestation of something immaterial, a number of imagistic associations, and a false identity: a poet's breath cannot be the same as the wind so it cannot take the power of the wind and turn it into political reality. My answer to this is simple: Donald Trump. It is clearly the case that the words of a politician, revolutionary or dictator, can do precisely what Shelley asks of them, and perhaps the only failure of the poem is that Shelley doesn't need the wind to prove the effects of rhetoric. But then again, of course, he does need the wind because *poiesis* is performative and so is rhetoric. It doesn't prove truths, it makes things happen due to the perception of truths, which may be false. It is not enough for Shelley to say language can

have a political power to equal that of natural forces – he needs to make this happen for his audience to feel its truth, rise up, and act! We could back this up with reference to Shelley’s ‘The Mask of Anarchy’ for those who may doubt this assertion. You might ask for more proof of poetry’s *dianoic* power, but even if I could prove this there remains a fundamental difference, I believe, between *dianoic* thought and what we might as well call *dianoic poiesis*. This difference is what I call the tabular nature of poetic thinking and how it errs from the linear nature of philosophical deduction. Philosophers do recall earlier elements and predict arguments to come, but *dianoia* is essentially traversal, it goes forward, it does not go back. A entails B. A and B entail C. The three together disallow D but entail E and so on. All philosophical reasoning starts with this basic *epoché*, the bracketing off of all extraneous elements until one arrives at the smallest possible number of elements which are apodictic, tautological. Once empirically, intuitively, or phenomenologically based, you then move forward from that, creating relations between elements to form what is called a structure, preserving truth as you do so. That’s philosophy.

In contrast, poetic structure as a mode of thinking does not just move forwards, it moves backwards as well, often at the same time, or moves backwards so as to move forwards and so on as we saw. Yet for me this is not quite enough to prove that poetic thinking exists, that it is different from philosophy, and that it can be said to be truthful or at least meaningful. Is there any difference in remembering at the end of the poem the imagery that got you to the end so that you can make counter-intuitive and yet truthful statements such as ‘Be thou me, impetuous one!’, and remembering at the end of an argument the steps that led there? Well, yes, I think there is. But to capture that difference we need to realise that the truth of poetic structure lies not just in its rational, relational qualities. These are important because they allow us to see that poetry can think logically, *dianoically*, using empirical observations, intuitions and so on, but they are not the end-point of poetic structure. The back

and forth linearity of poetic thinking has to be appreciated not only in terms of its semantic power, but also as regards its semiotic, for, as *poiesis* showed us, poetry reveals truths through its use of language. If we could combine the poietic *aletheia* of linguistic performative functions with this other element, that poets do build *dianoic* structures, then I think we could make great claims for poetry being a kind of thinking. To do this we should look at how the protensive-retensive structural mode of poetry depends on lineation, how this differs from linearity, indeed how it in fact creates a tabularity.

But before one begins to tackle what I am calling tabularity, one must contend with poetic linearity. This is because the interchange between lines in a poem is the basis of the shift from linearity to tabularity, so that a two-dimensional field-view of a poem, which is what I am now cataphorically defining as tabularity, is necessarily constructed from the units that are distributed across that field, those units being the lines of the poem. Giorgio Agamben goes so far as to define all poetry in terms of lineation: ‘poetry lives only in the tension and difference (and hence also the virtual interference) between sound and sense, between the semiotic and the semantic sphere’ (Agamben 1999: 109). Agamben’s contention is that, historically, the definition of poetry has been dialectically counter posed against the form that does not demonstrate a tension between sound and sense, namely philosophical prose. So that poetry is defined not just in terms of its *poiesis* but, after Plato and Heidegger and in agreement with Badiou, this *poiesis* cannot think in the way *dianoia* or the semantic does.

There are several locations in a poem where there is a tension between the materiality of the poem, sound, and its quest for meaning, sense: rhyme, metre and imagery all spring to mind. But for Agamben this tension can only subsist between poetic lines due to lineation. He explains:

No definition of verse is perfectly satisfying unless it asserts an identity for poetry against prose through the possibility of *enjambement*. Quantity, rhythm, and the number of syllables – all elements that can equally well occur in prose – do not, from this standpoint, provide sufficient criteria. But we shall call poetry the discourse in which it is possible to set a metrical limit against a syntactic one.... Prose is the discourse in which this is impossible (Agamben 1999: 39).

Reaffirming our central point, we can see that poetry as such must always be defined as possessing a quality that prose does not. Poetry, then, is in fact defined as not-prose, *poiesis* as not *dianoia* and, Agamben argues, this can only be demonstrated at the level of the artificially truncated line. The poetic line is truncated due to enjambement, and enjambement makes no sense without syllabic metrics which form its origins. And so, yes, enjambement is that which clearly differentiates poetry from prose.

What Agamben is arguing is that poetry is defined by syllabically restricted and measured lines which must come to an end after the same approximate duration of literally the exact number of syllables. Let's say ten here, and assume we are talking of iambic pentameter. When this happens, physiology, punctuation, visual design, convention, metaphysics, and artistry combine to demand that you pause there. Yet often the 'idea' expressed, the meaning or semantic content, goes beyond the confines of ten syllable packages, which in any case are not conceptual containers: ideas never come in a designated number of syllables. When this happens, a tension is formed between the line as the semiotic unit of the poem, and the sentence as the semantic. According to Agamben, in the poem this is resolved in favour of the semiotic at the end of lines and in favour of semantics using caesura, usually in the middle of lines or, in that final deathly terminal caesura, at the end of the poem. Rhyme is another good example of this tension especially in English, a rhyme intolerant language, which presents multitudinous instances where the choice of a word at the end of the line occurs first because it sounds right, and then because it is right. The location

of words in a line contravening grammar, or the choice of one word over another because it scans better or sounds better are other examples.

Agamben asserts that *poiesis* is found in poetry because the semiotic reveals that if truth depends on language, then only a linguistic form that reveals the truth of language as such can be true. And the only linguistic form that allows one to see language as it is, in terms of its pure materiality in tensile relation to its meaning, is poetry. But if you hold that truth is reducible to language, how can you express the truth of that language in language? According to Russell's paradox, Gödel's incompleteness theorems, and the early work of Jacques Derrida, you can't. But you can perform and thus reveal the truth of language by showing that there is a tension between what language says, semantic and *dianoic* truth, and what it is and can do, semiotic, *poietic* truth.

Lineation draws a more detailed portrait of how poetic structure works. Poetic meaning is not just composed at the global, abstract level, but also at the local, linear level. Poetry proceeds *dianoically*, and returns or pretends semiotically, at the end of each and every one of its lines. Thus, the anaphoric-cataphoric function of global structure, which perhaps one finds in philosophy as well, is repeated at the local level in a manner that is certainly not to be found in philosophical prose, which is, after all, linear prose. Paradoxically the linearity of *dianoic* deduction is the result of the fact that materially prose is a-linear – it has no lines only one single line-flow – whereas the tabular forward and backward and up and down of *poietic* thought is non-linear precisely because of its linearity.

How can we capture the linearity-dependant, semiotic-semantic interchange of the tabularity of poetic structure? Agamben gives it a go when he calls it the metrical-musical element of verse, which is 'a place of memory and a repetition. The verse (*versus*, from *verto*, the act of turning, to return, as opposed to *prorsus*, to proceed directly, as in prose) signals for a reader that these words have always already come to be, that they will return again...'

(Agamben 1991: 78). I have termed it the protensive-retensive, anaphoric-cataphoric matrix of poetic recursion, that both determines the semiotic nature of poetic structure, its tabularity, and the relation of this tabularity to the way poetry ‘thinks’ about the basis of all truth, namely language (Watkin 2010: 135–65). In later work Agamben uses the phrase ‘cruciform retrogradation’ (Agamben 2005: 82), which he unearths in medieval scholarship discussing twelfth-century Italian prosody. The phrase is perhaps a little off-putting but it captures beautifully the dynamism and dimensionality of how poetic meaning is constructed across a linearity of forward and backward momentum, more complex than deduction but still only one-dimensional. And how the linear design of prosody also means this retrogradation creates a cross formation: forward is down a line, backward is up a line. Meaning all forward-backward reading is, by definition, due to linearity, down and up.

We have, finally, a definition of poetic tabular structure: when you read poetry, you must read forward and backwards to find the semantic hiding in the semiotic, and when you do so you must also go down a line and up a line, or down several and up two stanzas. This process could be called metrical-musical, or protensive-retensive anaphoric-cataphoric matrix, or cruciform retrogradation. I am proposing we adopt the term tabularity.

To get a better sense of how cruciform retrogradation operates at the linear level let’s return to that multi-caesuric paratactic list of mono-syllabic words we mentioned earlier:

Yellow, and black, and pale, and hectic red,  
Pestilence-stricken multitudes; oh thou  
Who chariotest to their dark wintry bed

The winged seeds, where they lie cold and low,  
Each like a corpse within its grave, until  
Thine azure sister of the spring shall blow

Her clarion o’er the dreaming earth, and fill  
(Driving sweet buds like flocks to feed in air)  
With living hues and odours plain and hill –

Wild spirit, which art moving everywhere,  
Destroyer and preserver, hear, oh hear! (Wu 2012: 1132)

The monosyllabic opening line of course highlights what follows: complex polysyllabic metrical units, enjambements that traverse not just lines but stanzas, puns on ending and cessation such as ‘bed’ and ‘low’ contrasting with references to mobility and flux such as ‘flow’ so that we can fetch up on what I call the sub-clausal caesura. We are forced to suspend judgement on ‘fill’, which remains semantically empty, then endure a ten-syllable caesura (caesuras are usually void syllabic), before filling in the meaning of ‘fill’ – here how the spring wind does not carry particulate forms, but engenders and encourages them through a kind of radiation. This then folds back into that sub-clausal caesura, so that we can see that the spring wind’s plenitude is of a conceptual order, it is not full of bits, but full of the warmth that can bring about fecundity. Finally, reflect on how this interchange between particulate caesuric lines and plenary enjambments emulates the two-wind dialectic: dead leaves carried on the autumn wind, new life born due to the spring wind. So yes, the truth of the argument here, two wind theory, is to be found not just in the structural development of the ideas through objects, their predicates and relations, but also through the push and pull of the enjambements, the interposing of caesuras, use of end-word puns, the shift in syllabic complexity, a debate on different kinds of plenitude, and rhyme. All of which allows the verse to both say and perform its argument.

Striving to capture in language the two-dimensional semantic-semiotic structure of a poem, which is the key to its ability to perform truths, yes, but also to rationally deduce them as well, has been tricky. To project us forward a little here, consider the tabular diagrammatic representation of how all these elements work together [figure 1]. What I hope this image shows is that meaning in a poem must be hunted across a two-dimensional semantic complex. There is *dianoic*, linear argument, but the truths and functions of that argument are not

pursued in a linear fashion but cataphorically and anaphorically or, as we shall term it from now on, protensively and retensively. This forward and backward movement is not unique to poetry but it is pronounced in poetry. What *is* unique to poetry, however, is the semiotic demand that interrupts and supersedes at key moments deductive thought, even retrograde deductive thought that does, for the record, exist, such that the linear progress of meaning in a line when it becomes say retentive – you need to go back to stanza 1 to find out how leaves can become buds, or sparks, or eventually words – demands that you not only go back, but also up. Only poetry, with its combination of *dianoia*, *poiesis* and line-breaks does this, so we can say all poetic meaning is tabular and, if you insist, the definition of poetry is that poetry is tabular and prose isn't. Poetry then *can* think, but it does so in a tabular fashion.

But poems don't have to be written down, do they? So concentrating on their visual form on a page is rather specious, isn't it? In addition, it will not have escaped your attention that everything we have spoken about refers to the actual experience of reading a poem, and this experience is as much temporal as it is spatial. You may also have noticed the repeated use of the terms protention and retention and that I have been a tad protensive and cataphoric up to this point in not fully defining them. Well, now that we face something of an argumentative crisis, it is perhaps time to define the terms protensive and retensive because of their ability to capture the experience a consciousness has of reading poetry that is both spatial and temporal. In other words, after Edmund Husserl's great but incomplete project, let's construct a phenomenology of reading around our consciousness of time. For yes, the terms protention and retention come from the work of Heidegger's great teacher, Husserl, who, as the father of phenomenology, tried to capture in his work *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time* (Husserl 1991) the experience of a consciousness as it has meaningful intentions towards the world, especially in time.

Husserl argues that we experience time through our intentional focus on objects of time. All such experience of time is in the now, which is of course always famously slipping away into the past, and perpetually open to the future. To capture our experience of the now, here the now of reading or listening to poetry, we need to come to terms with the paradoxes this usually entails. Husserl deals with this by extending and deepening our experience of the now. Take melody, a favourite example. You can experience a melody as a temporal object, listening to it, but you also experience its temporality *as* an object as well, something like ‘this is a melody and it is extending in time’. The fact that melody is not just made up of isolated notes, but notes that are part of a successive relational sequence, means you can recall the previous notes in the melody, and expect or even predict the following notes. When a melody is over, and a new one commences, you can then also reflect on the melody as a temporally completed item, realising where it began and ended, and you can recognise it if it returns later. So when you experience a melody you experience the notes in time, but you also experience an extended now that is composed of hearing notes, sensing them falling away, and being open to new notes. You don’t just experience the notes in time, you have a temporal experience of the notes across a breadth of time (Husserl 1991: 223–33).

This leads to Husserl’s theory of the triple intentionality of time (Husserl 1991: 235–6). Time is only meaningful to a consciousness that has meaningful intentional interactions towards it. Think of intention as basically paying conscious attention to something. That intention focuses on objects in time, notes here, as they appear, as they are falling away, and as they may arrive, all at the same time. This simultaneity of temporal objects is however always in a sequential order of the now, fringed by falling away, or retention, and opening up, or protention. So, melody is an extended now. This kind of localised, now-based memory, retaining a string or bundle of temporal objects in a stretched now, is what Husserl calls primary memory or sometimes retention, you might also call it duration. Primary memory is

the presentation of time to you as you experience it. Once you move on to a new experience of time or new objects, when you recall the melody sequence again, that recollection is secondary memory, or what we tend just to call memory. This secondary memory represents an earlier experience of time that presented itself to you. That said, it can be a component of a new presentation of melody later in the symphony so that secondary memory can then become a part of primary memory.<sup>5</sup>

A melody then is a temporal object, which you experience as having length, breadth or duration. This duration is made up of a simultaneity of objects, let's say notes A, B, and C. These are experienced in the now as part of the same duration. Yet they must be experienced sequentially as well, so A must be before B, which is before C. Finally, a consciousness of this melody must also be gifted with a modification of the sequence, which is basically saying: 'Oh yes, this is a melodic sequence, it began with A, I am in B, oh that is now C, will there be a D, I imagine it will end with E'.

Husserl, William James, and Bergson, all philosophers of the flow and durational thickness of time, famously use melody as a primary example of temporal duration. But do poems have melody? Melody is a sequence of notes in music that the listener also perceives as a single harmonic entity. Melodies occur within larger musical structures such as symphonies. Melodies recur in symphonic music in moderated form, they can also be the basis of the construction of new melodies, or interact with other repeated melodies and so on. It is clear from this description that the process of melody exists in poetry and is basically how I described the construction of meaning in Shelley's 'Ode', so why don't we have a word for it? It is not strictly accurate to call it 'melody' because the recurrence we are thinking is not purely semiotic as it also involves meaning. The repetition of metre, the rhythms of enjambement and rhyme, do not quite accord with our definition of melody.

Localised assonance and alliteration might approach melodic elements but they do not have the same power or prominence for poetry as melody does for music.

What is melodic is Shelley's use of imagery. The wind is a melody, a motif that recurs made up of sequential elements that are pleasing and clearly form a unit. The leaves are a melody, they form a conceptual cohesion in terms of imagistic presentation coupled with semiotic effects, and again we are conscious of them as a conceptual unit, often made conscious of this by semiotic modes of stressing or bracketing. As we read about the leaves, naturally the words follow in sequence, we need to retain the previous words and we expect certain other words. But this is true of all reading. So are we saying every phrase or sentence read is a melody? No, because melody is a meaningful, semiotic unit that can also recur. A melody is an experience of reading that has localised cohesion, a sense of falling away and openness, a closure into a single unit, and the potential to recur and still be melodic in the same way. As the leaves recur later in the poem, and as the wind recurs. Melody also requires that material or semiotic elements dictate the meaning of the unit, and its recurrence later: the metricalisation of the leaves into *poietic* being, the long drawn out vowels of the word, what *leaves* might rhyme with, the imagistic associations of the leaves, the caesuric presentation of the leaves in line 4, the enjambed flow of the leaves across the wind, and so on.

The meaningful motifs of Shelley's poem – the wind and the leaves on the wind, and the particularity of the leaves, that combined allow for buds and eventually words – seem to accord with the idea of melody. But we don't call it melody in poetry. We don't have a word for it in fact, a word that combines the sequential, meaningful progress of words, with their self-conscious material music, that is retensive and protensive, and which also combines sequentiality with simultaneous spatiality. As we don't have a word for this I am proposing that we call it tabularity or structural tabularity.

Time to 'retend' what tabularity is composed of. First, poems do have meaningful, conceptual sequential thinking. They are *dianoic* and we will call this *dianoic* capacity their structure. Yet their *dianoia* does not proceed solely from logical deduction but also traverses through imagistic and other forms of poetic logic. These logics are internally consistent, axiomatically stable, and they are mostly testable against empirical realities or intuitions. Yet there is another component to them. They are also *poietic* or semiotic. They have a sequential argumentative side at the global level, but a material performative side at the local. Indeed, the movement from one part of the argument to the next might depend on a retentive semiotic rather than a forward moving semantic element.

The semiotic allows us to appreciate the ontological possibility of poetry as truth-revealing or *poietic* in that it reveals meanings about truth's metaphysical impossibility and its dependence on language. It also allows us to appreciate that the semiotic element of the poem adds a tabular quality to the poetic meaning that we contend is lacking in rational deduction, or is in any case non-essential. *Poetic* meaning then takes place sequentially at the structural level, and semiotically at the tabular level, for example in the tensile interchanges between sound and sense at the end of lines. This spatial tabularity then leads us to a temporal tabularity as well. The anaphoric and cataphoric forward and backward motion of poetic meaning, requires that one experience reading imagery, say, in terms of retention and protention. This is true in terms of semiotics (rhyme for example) but also in terms of semantics – the compound of wind, breath, leaves, and death is a single melodic feature which I am experiencing in a temporal duration which has limits.

But we are not yet done. In later life Husserl, struggling with the circularity of a consciousness of time when consciousness is time, is forced to split time consciousness in two, revealing one more aspect of temporal tabularity. There is, he realises, a neutral, ever flowing absolute conscious foundation because consciousness is in fact time *per se*. You are

always conscious and so are always conscious in time. Then there is your consciousness towards specific temporal objects: this music, that poem, and so on. Both levels have triple intentionality – nowness, retention, and protention – but they work differently. Consciousness of an actual time object, here recurrent imagery or notes, is different from an abstract quality-less consciousness of tones in time in general. Retention in absolute flow is just retention of the elapsed nature and openness of temporal conscious flow in general. Yet because all intention is intention towards something, all flow must have had a conscious temporal object. When you retain consciousness of time as such, you retain the flow of time and the flow of a time object as different from each other. This allows you access to the ‘retention of retention’ (Husserl 1991: 86), or an experience of duration as both duration as such in general and the duration of your experience of duration as a temporal object.

Absolute, abstract retention consciousness is ongoing and so undeniably linear. But the cuts into the consciousness through our intention towards actual temporal objects are not. Husserl calls temporal flow *per se* ‘horizontal intentionality’ (Husserl 1991: 391), and consciousness of retention of the elapsed phases of the experienced temporal object ‘transverse intentionality’ (Husserl 1991: 392). In other words, as you hear music or read poetry, you cut into the flow of time. This flow is purely linear so when you re-read Shelley you don’t actually re-read him, you read him anew, with, however, the retention of the experience that you once read him before. When you do this, you become aware of temporal subtleties such as retained nowness and retentive protensions of time *per se* through an interaction with a specific work of art that makes you do that. This means that the temporal structure of poetry is a diagonalisation of the linearity of ongoing time due to an intention towards meaning in an actual poem. This last-minute change of mind on Husserl’s part allows us finally to say that poetry is tabular in its temporality, because it has a diagonal spatial component which cuts across the linear flow of time consciousness just as line-breaks

do in poetry. Perhaps this is the real *aletheia* of *poiesis*, that all Being is temporal in a transversal mode.

Now we can really say that poetic meaning is located in its tabularity. It is tabular in its spatiality, based on a tension between its sequential and interruptive semiotic linearity. It is tabular in its conceptual argumentation in that it relies on both sequential and associative, anaphoric, and cataphoric modes of thinking meaning. And finally, it is tabular in its transversal, spatialised temporality, if you can say that, in that its two-dimensional mode of making meaning needs the temporal structure of retention and protention to function. You read, you recall as you read, you predict as you read, you re-read, you read back a few lines, you read up one line to remember the phrase before the line break, you read the first stanza again and then the last stanza again. All these readings occur in time consciousness in its absolutely linear, yet melodic or durational mode, but they also occur in a transversal, tabular manner that folds the sequential melodies of poetic meaning back on themselves, throws them forward, extends or reduces or thickens them as your experience of the time of reading becomes the experience of the time of reading a poem as a meaningful mode of thought. So, finally, we can close on our cataphoric opening and say that it may be that poetry cannot think *traversally*, like philosophy, but it can think *transversally*, by combining the traversal forward movement of *dianoia*, with the threshold dwelling of *poiesis*. We can thus conclude by saying that all poetry is defined by the diagonality of its spatial and temporal tabularity.

Oh yes, my protended failure, do you recall? Simply this: if poetry is both spatially and temporally tabular, then it can't be tabular, as tabularity is two-dimensional and time is a third dimension. So, in fact, poetry isn't tabular, it's cubic.

## Endnotes

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- <sup>1</sup> The arguments here are based on my detailed readings of Heidegger in Watkin 2010.
- <sup>2</sup> Most famously in the essays collected in *Poetry Language Thought* (Heidegger 1971) and *On the Way to Language* (Heidegger 1982). However, my work is also informed by the lesser-read works on Hölderlin (Heidegger 1996; 2000).
- <sup>3</sup> This idea actually originated in Hegel's *Aesthetics*, a point made clear by Jean-Luc Nancy's essay 'Why Are There Several Arts and Not Just One' (Nancy 1994) and my reading of this conversation with Hegel (Watkin 2012).
- <sup>4</sup> See Agamben's essay 'The End of the Poem' (Agamben 1999: 109-18).
- <sup>5</sup> See John Barnett Hough's influential reading of Husserl's primary and secondary memory (Husserl 1991: xxxviii-xlv).