

## POETIC THICKNESS

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The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that the experience of a poem *qua* poem is an experience of *poetic thickness*, i.e. an experience in which poetic form and poetic content are inseparable. I present a critical analysis of A.C. Bradley's "Poetry for Poetry's Sake" lecture in §1, indicating both the strengths and weaknesses of his conception of resonant meaning. §2 draws on subsequent work by I.A. Richards and Peter Lamarque to advance my account of the relationship in question, poetic thickness, understood as a demand made of a poem rather than a property discovered therein. In §§3-6 I discuss four objections to form-content unity from Peter Kivy: perfect circularity, ubiquitous unity, the sugar-coated pill tradition, and the defence from tradition. I show that all these objections fail against poetic thickness. I conclude that the experience of a poem *qua* poem is indeed an experience of thickness, and that poetic thickness is therefore a necessary condition of poetry.

### 1. Resonant Meaning

Bradley's inaugural address at Oxford was intended to convince his audience of poetic autonomy, the view that the experience of a poem is valuable in itself regardless of any instrumental value it may possess. He does not argue for the *final* value of poetry, but simply assumes that the poetic experience is 'an end in itself, worth having on its own account, has an intrinsic value',<sup>1</sup> before attempting to answer three objections:

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<sup>1</sup> "Poetry for Poetry's Sake," in A.C. Bradley, *Oxford Lectures on Poetry* (London: MacMillan, 1959 [1909]), 3-34. In my opinion, Bradley conflates two distinctions in value: between *final* and *instrumental* value on the one hand (valuable in itself versus valuable as a means to an end); and *intrinsic* and *extrinsic* on the other (non-

- (i) autonomy is a commitment to aestheticism;<sup>2</sup>
- (ii) autonomy severs poetry from life;<sup>3</sup> and
- (iii) autonomy is a commitment to formalism.<sup>4</sup>

The argument for form-content unity is part of Bradley's attempt to distinguish autonomy from formalism, which he conceives as the view that all poetic value lies in the form of a poem and that its content is irrelevant – that poetry is in fact 'form for form's sake'.<sup>5</sup> Bradley attempts to show that an autonomist is not committed to formalism, and he does this by arguing against two 'heresies',<sup>6</sup> one which assigns poetic value exclusively to form, and the other which assigns poetic value exclusively to content. If he can prove that the value of the poem lies in the form *and* the content, then he will have distinguished his position from the formal heresy – hence the argument for form-content unity.

Bradley is unclear about the precise relationship he has in mind, and even suggests identity:

- (i) 'And this identity of content and form, you will say, is no accident;'<sup>7</sup>
- (ii) 'This unity has, if you like, various "aspects" or "sides," but they are not factors or parts; if you try to examine one, you find it is also the other.'<sup>8</sup>

He does not appear to mean "identical" in the philosophical sense of indiscernible identicals, however: prior to the mention of identity in (i), he notes that form and content 'are one' in the experience of a poem, but not in the analysis or critique thereof.<sup>9</sup> If the relation was one of strict identity for Bradley, then form and content would be identical in both the experience

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relationally valuable versus relationally valuable). Understood in these terms, poetic autonomy is a statement of the final value of poetry.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 5-6.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 6-7.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 7-25.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

and analysis of a poem. Kivy characterises Bradley's relation as follows: 'inseparability',<sup>10</sup> 'indistinguishable',<sup>11</sup> 'the thesis of form-content identity',<sup>12</sup> 'the form-content identity assumption',<sup>13</sup> 'the assumption of form-content unity',<sup>14</sup> 'indissolubility',<sup>15</sup> and 'total fusion of form with content'.<sup>16</sup> Kivy favours "identity", but he is arguing against Bradley and identity is the easiest target for his critique. Richards is highly critical of the term, maintaining that talk of identity has resulted in 'mystery and obscurity' regarding the relationship,<sup>17</sup> and I am inclined to agree.

Lamarque reads Bradley more charitably, characterising the relation as being 'that neither can be specified or identified independently of the other. In this sense form and content are united, indivisible and mutually dependent.'<sup>18</sup> I take the evidence Bradley offers to support a relation of *inseparability*, such that once form (or content) is separated from the work (the form-content unity), it is no longer identical with the form (or content) in that work. This relation – as distinct from both identity and indistinguishability – is consistent with Katherine Thomson-Jones' work on form and content, and Bradley's approach can be further categorised in terms of her taxonomy. Thomson-Jones divides accounts of form-content unity in art into three categories: container, functional, and semantic. The first describes the relation between *organising* and *organised* elements in a work, the second describes form in terms of the function of a work, and the third 'describes content as the meaning of a work, or what it is about, and form as the mode of presentation or expression – the way meaning is

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<sup>10</sup> *Philosophies of Arts: An Essay in Differences* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 85; "Paraphrasing Poetry (For Profit and Pleasure)," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 69, 367-377: 370.

<sup>11</sup> *Philosophies of Arts*, 84.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>13</sup> "Paraphrasing Poetry," 369.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 368.

<sup>15</sup> *Philosophies of Arts*, 87.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 86; "Appendix: Paraphrasing Poetry," in Peter Kivy, *Once-Told Tales: An Essay in Literary Aesthetics* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 165-189: 165.

<sup>17</sup> *Practical Criticism: A Study of Literary Judgment* (London: Routledge, 1978 [1929]), 233.

<sup>18</sup> "The Elusiveness of Poetic Meaning," *Ratio* 22, 398-420: 409.

made manifest.’<sup>19</sup> Bradley’s form-content inseparability is a semantic account of the relation and poetic thickness will follow suit.

One of Bradley’s most important premises is only made explicit towards the middle of his lecture, but should be kept in mind at the outset: the poem *is* the poetic experience, i.e. the reader’s experience of the poem.<sup>20</sup> His argument begins with a clarification, distinguishing the *subject* from the other elements of content. The subject of a poem is what it is about in a sense which is both general and informed. The example Bradley provides is *Paradise Lost*, which has the Fall of Man as its subject. The Fall is a non-specific description of what the poem is about, and is informed because one has to know something of religious doctrine in order to comprehend the subject. The opposite of the subject is not the form of the poem, but the poem itself because the subject is not exclusive to the poem: many poems and even different works of art can share the same subject. The Fall, for example, is also the subject of the painting on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, the sculpture on the west façade of Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris, and the *Book of Genesis*; the subject could furthermore be communicated by any method, including non-artistic ones such as a newspaper report or textbook. Given that the subject is external to the poem,<sup>21</sup> Bradley states: ‘it is surely obvious that the poetic value cannot lie in the subject, but lies entirely in its opposite, the poem.’<sup>22</sup>

The second antithesis is form versus content, and both sides of this antithesis exist within the poem.<sup>23</sup> Lamarque explains the relation as follows: content is ‘*the-subject-as-realised-in-the-*

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<sup>19</sup> “Inseparable Insight: Reconciling Cognitivism and Formalism in Aesthetics,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 63 (2005), 375-384: 377.

<sup>20</sup> “Poetry for Poetry’s Sake,” 15.

<sup>21</sup> The subject is external to the poem in that it is shared by other poems, art forms, and methods of communication; but it is also internal in that it is part of the content of the poem.

<sup>22</sup> “Poetry for Poetry’s Sake,” 9-10.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

*poem*' and form '*the-mode-of-realisation-of-the-subject-in-the-poem*'.<sup>24</sup> The content of *Paradise Lost* is the characters and events as portrayed *in the poem*, and although they are similar to the characters and events in the story of The Fall, they are not identical. Satan, for example, in *Paradise Lost* is not identical with his counterparts in C.S. Lewis' *Perelandra*, the *Qu'ran*, or the *Book of Mormon*. Bradley then claims that the heresies he has identified will either both be false or nonsensical.<sup>25</sup> If subject is confused with content and the fallacious antithesis form-subject established, then both heresies will be false because they rely on something which is external to the poem. If form is *the-mode-of-realisation-of-the-subject-as-realised-in-the-poem* and content *the-subject-in-the-poem*, then the heresies both:

imply that there are in a poem two parts, factors, or components, a substance and a form; and that you can conceive of them distinctly and separately, so that when you are speaking of the one you are not speaking of the other. [...] But really in a poem, apart from defects, there are no such factors or components; and therefore it is strictly nonsense to ask in which of them the value lies.<sup>26</sup>

Bradley appeals to the imaginative experience of the poem and holds that when one is reading a work, one does not appreciate the sound of the words and the meaning of the words separately. His most convincing analogy is the experience of a smile: one does not understand the lines on a person's face and the feeling they express separately.<sup>27</sup> One can conceive of the two as distinct later on, when recalling someone's smile, but to do so is to analyse two aspects of a single experience in isolation, an isolation which alters the aspects under consideration. One can similarly dissect the unity of form and content after experiencing the poem, analysing form or content in isolation, but this isolation takes place in

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<sup>24</sup> "Elusiveness of Poetic Meaning," 407.

<sup>25</sup> "Poetry for Poetry's Sake," 13-14.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

the mind of the critic – it is not in the poem.<sup>28</sup> And if one makes a value judgement based on something external to the poem, then – whether one finds the value in isolated form or isolated content – one’s claim will be false (as with the form-subject antithesis above).<sup>29</sup> The poem is the poetic experience and this cannot be achieved by re-combining what one has dissected, only by re-experiencing the poem. In poetry ‘the meaning and the sounds are one: there is, if I may put it so, a resonant meaning, or a meaning resonance.’<sup>30</sup> The poem is the experience of the poem and the experience of the poem is the experience of *resonant meaning*.

## 2. Poetic Thickness

Resonant meaning lies at the core of Bradley’s argument for form-content inseparability, but aside from the brief analogy with a smile he offers little explanation of the concept. This is perhaps understandable given the context of the lecture, but nonetheless requires extrapolation if it is to convince. Richards explains the phenomenon Bradley describes as follows: ‘the effect of a word as a sound cannot be separated from its contemporaneous other effects. They become inextricably mingled at once.’<sup>31</sup> He holds that it is impossible to dissociate the formal features of a poem, such as rhythm and metre, from the sense and expression of its content.<sup>32</sup> The evaluation of a poem’s rhythm cannot be made without considering the meaning of the words<sup>33</sup> because the rhythm one ascribes to a poem is in part a function of one’s *apprehension of the meaning* of the words in the poem.<sup>34</sup> The sounds – the

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 14. I shall employ the former term exclusively in future.

<sup>31</sup> *Principles of Literary Criticism* (London: Kegan, Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1930 [1924]), 136.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 227.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 231.

*inherent rhythm* – operate in conjunction with sense and feeling, producing the poetic experience, which is an experience of *ascribed rhythm*.<sup>35</sup>

Richards demonstrates this by comparing phrases with identical sound but different meanings. He contrasts ‘Deep into a gloomy grot’ with ‘Peep into a roomy cot’, stating that the ‘ascribed rhythm, the movement of the words, trivial though it be in both cases, is different’.<sup>36</sup> Although the sound is (almost) identical, the rhythm differs due to the meaning of the words. He employs the following lines to show that poetic value cannot lie in form alone, but they serve as an example of the difference between inherent rhythm and ascribed rhythm:

J. Drootan-Sussting Benn

Mill-down Leduren N.

Telamba-taras oderwainto wearing

Awersey zet bidreen

Ownd istellester sween

Lithabian tweet ablissood owdswown stiering

Apleven aswetsen sestinal

Yintomen I adaits afurf I galas Ball.<sup>37</sup>

This, Richards believes, is as much a masterpiece of inherent rhythm as stanza XV of Milton’s “On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity”:<sup>38</sup>

Yea Truth, and Justice then

Will down return to men,

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 233.

<sup>36</sup> *Practical Criticism*, 231.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 232.

<sup>38</sup> *The Poems of Mr. John Milton* (London: Humphrey Moseley, 1645), 7-8.

Th' enameld *Arras* of the Rainbow wearing,  
 And Mercy set between,  
 Thron'd in Celestiall sheen,  
 With radiant feet the tissued clouds down steering,  
 And Heav'n as at som festivall,  
 Will open wide the Gates of her high Palace Hall.

Inherent rhythm (form) combines with meaning (content) to produce ascribed rhythm (form-content inseparability). If inherent rhythm could be isolated, then the above two verses would have a similar poetic value. If meaning could be isolated, then a poem and a paraphrase of the poem would have a similar poetic value. Both of these claims are false, and Richards proposes a reciprocal relationship between sound, rhythm, and metre on one hand and sense, meaning, and feeling on the other which is completely compatible with Bradley.

Further evidence for Richards' ascribed rhythm can be found in an observation by Martin Heidegger on the everyday experience of sound:

What we "first" hear is never noises or complexes of sounds, but the creaking wagon, the motor-cycle. We hear the column on the march, the north wind, the woodpecker tapping, the fire crackling. It requires a very artificial and complicated frame of mind to "hear" a "pure noise."<sup>39</sup>

I do not wish to contribute to the contemporary debate on nonconceptual mental content,<sup>40</sup> but Heidegger is correct in that one usually hears sounds experienced as the *sound-of*

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<sup>39</sup> *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), §34: 163-164.

<sup>40</sup> The debate concerns whether mental states require conceptual content in order to represent the world. Those who argue that concepts are required – and Heidegger does not, despite the implication of the above quote – include: John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994); Bill Brewer, *Perception and Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); and Alva Noë, "Thought and experience," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 36 (1999): 257-265. Arguments for nonconceptual content have been made by: Gareth Evans, *The Varieties of Reference* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982); Christopher Peacocke, *A*



something rather than *noise*. On the rare occasions when one hears first a noise and then discovers its source, the transition from noise to sound-of draws attention to the difference Richards proposes between inherent rhythm and ascribed rhythm. Take, for example, the experience of a supersonic jet passing overhead: one hears, first, a loud noise whose origin is often difficult to ascertain due to the difference in the speeds of light and sound; when the aircraft is spotted and the source confirmed, the experience of the sound – no longer noise, but the sound-of a jet – changes, albeit subtly. The actual sound hasn't changed, but the identification of the noise as a sound-of alters the aural experience. Similarly, the pure noise of inherent rhythm is affected by the apprehension of the meaning of the words such that the poetic experience is the experience of the sound-of words-with-meaning.<sup>41</sup>

Richards holds that the relation between rhythm and meaning is reciprocal and Angela Leighton provides an example of the former affecting the latter in her discussion of James Cousins' description of Yeats' method of composition. Cousins recalls Yeats murmuring sound sequences for periods of up to three hours at a time, and Leighton maintains that Yeats 'would start with the rhythm, and through its repetition, "trial and alteration", would find words to match.'<sup>42</sup> Iambic feet were thus of paramount – even obsessive – importance to him. Leighton draws attention to the frequency of representations of human and animal feet in his poems and suggests that Yeats' poetry is 'projecting the sound of its own rhythm as a

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*Study of Concepts* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992); and Michael Tye, *Ten Problems of Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995).

<sup>41</sup> This observation is restricted to the apprehension of the denotation of the words – 'understanding the language of a poem' for John Gibson. Gibson contrasts understanding the language with understanding the poem and makes a convincing case for poetic meaning as both latent and twofold. A discussion of how poetic meaning affects inherent rhythm is beyond the scope of my inquiry, but the greater complexity of meaning is likely to offer more rather than less evidence for poetic thickness. *Poetic meaning* is of course notoriously elusive and Gibson begins his exposition by identifying the philosophical problem posed by the term itself. See: "The Question of Poetic Meaning," *Nonsite 4* (2011), accessed 29 August 2013, <http://nonsite.org/article/the-question-of-poetic-meaning>.

<sup>42</sup> *On Form: Poetry, Aestheticism, and the Legacy of a Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007 [2008]), 158-159.

kind of content.<sup>43</sup> I find Leighton's claim both intriguing and compelling, but the manner in which rhythm affects meaning is opaque and Solomon Fishman criticises Richards in particular and structuralist poetics in general for failing to provide an explanation.<sup>44</sup> Patrick Suppes sketches a neuroscientific account of how rhythm enhances associative meaning in poetry that draws attention to significance of rhythm in the activities of humans and animals. Interestingly, in the light of Leighton's commentary on Yeats, these activities include walking and running as well as breathing and the beating of the heart.<sup>45</sup> I prefer Anna Christina Ribeiro's simpler account, where formal devices augment understanding by inviting the comparison and contrast of words with a similar sound which are presented in particular patterns.<sup>46</sup> I do not intend to answer the question of how rhythm and meaning exert reciprocal influences upon each other in poetry. It is sufficient for my purpose to note that there is strong evidence for the existence of this reciprocity even if there is an absence of a consensus as to the mechanism – or *mechanisms* – by which it operates.

Bradley maintains that the form-content distinction is useful and even necessary to the analysis and criticism of poetry – as long as the critic realises that he is extracting the form or the content from the poem and therefore discussing something which is external to the poem.<sup>47</sup> Both Bradley and Richards admit that there are times when form and content can, however, be separated in the experience of the poem, as opposed to in criticism. Bradley holds that separation occurs in poetry which is not: free from defects,<sup>48</sup> 'true',<sup>49</sup> 'quintessential',<sup>50</sup> or 'pure'.<sup>51</sup> Form-content inseparability is actually a benchmark or

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<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

<sup>44</sup> "Meaning and Structure in Poetry," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 14 (1956), 453-461: 456.

<sup>45</sup> "Rhythm and Meaning in Poetry," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy XXXIII* (2009), 159-166: 161.

<sup>46</sup> "Toward a Philosophy of Poetry," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy XXXIII* (2009), 61-77: 72-73.

<sup>47</sup> "Poetry for Poetry's Sake," 16.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

criterion for great poetry as opposed to the merely good, mediocre, or bad because form and content can be separated even in ‘good poetry’, and Shakespeare’s work evinces this flaw.<sup>52</sup>

If *P* is a poem, and form-content inseparability holds for *P*, then *P* is a great poem. Where inseparability holds for a poem one will not be able to paraphrase it, and this inability to admit of paraphrase also identifies great poetry:

When poetry answers to its idea and is purely or almost purely poetic, we find the degree of purity attained may be tested by the degree in which we feel it hopeless to convey the effect of a poem or passage in any form but its own. Where the notion of doing so is simply ludicrous, you have quintessential poetry.<sup>53</sup>

Richards restricts form-content inseparability to *good* poetry, implying that the relation will differ for mediocre or bad poetry. Regarding metrical form, he writes:

But it cannot be judged apart from the sense and feeling of the words out of which it is composed nor apart from the precise order in which that whole of sense and feeling builds itself up. The movement or plot of the word-by-word development of the poem, as a structure of the intellect and emotions, is always, in good poetry, in the closest possible relation to the movement of the metre, not only giving it its tempo, but even distorting it, sometimes violently. Readers who take up a poem as though it were a bicycle, spot its metre, and pedal off on it regardless of where it is going, will naturally, if it is a good poem, get into trouble. For only a due awareness of its sense and feeling will bring its departures from the pattern metre into a coherent, satisfying whole.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 22-23. I shall not defend the relationship Bradley envisages between pure poetry and paraphrase in this paper.

<sup>54</sup> *Practical Criticism*, 230.

A consequence of ascribed rhythm is thus that form is not something which can be experienced in isolation from content in a good poem.

Lamarque offers insight into form-content inseparability as a poetic criterion, noting first that Bradley's central concern is poetic *value*,<sup>55</sup> and then that:

Reading a poem *as poetry* demands the assumption of form-content unity. The indivisibility of form and content is not something that is *discovered* in works – more in this, less in that, not in this one at all – it is something that the practice of reading poetry *imposes* on a work.<sup>56</sup>

Form-content inseparability is not therefore an objective feature of a text, but an imputed feature arising from a particular kind of attention paid to a work.<sup>57</sup> Lamarque's emphasis recalls Northrop Frye on Blake:

“Every poem must necessarily be a perfect unity,” says Blake: this, as the wording implies is not a statement of fact about all existing poems, but a statement of the hypothesis which every reader adopts in first trying to comprehend even the most chaotic poem ever written.<sup>58</sup>

The reconceptualisation of form-content inseparability as a demand imposed by the reader does not mean that every text or work will meet the demand: some works will reward this particular type of interest, others will not. Whether one refers to the former category as *true*, *quintessential*, *pure*, or *good* poetry – or just *poetry* – will depend upon whether “poetry” is used as a descriptive or evaluative term. My preference is for the latter, in which case form-content inseparability is a necessary condition for poetry *simpliciter*; if “poetry” is employed

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<sup>55</sup> “Elusiveness of Poetic Meaning,” 403.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 411.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 415-416.

<sup>58</sup> *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays by Northrop Frye* (Princeton: University Press, 1957), 77.

as a descriptive term, then form-content inseparability will be a necessary condition for a sub-category of paradigmatic poetry. The terminology used is not particularly important; what is significant for my argument is: (i) Bradley's identification of resonant meaning as a criterion of – or necessary condition for – poetry, and (ii) Lamarque's emphasis on that criterion as a demand (which may or may not be met) rather than a discovery. Henceforth, I shall combine the conceptions of Bradley, Richards, and Lamarque to argue for my own version of form-content inseparability in poetry:

*Poetic Thickness*: the inseparability of poetic form and poetic content in the experience of a work of poetry such that neither form nor content can be isolated without loss of work identity. Poetic thickness is a demand which is satisfied by a work rather than a property of a text, and is characteristic of poetry such that if a work is a work of poetry, it will reward the demand for poetic thickness.

### 3. Perfect Circularity

**3.1.** Kivy has mounted the most sustained attack on form-content inseparability, arguing first against Bradley, and then against two defences of him, one by Kelly Dean Jolley<sup>59</sup> and the other by Lamarque.<sup>60</sup> Kivy begins his critique of Bradley by noting that form-content inseparability is meant to apply to all of the arts<sup>61</sup> and states his intention to demonstrate that the inseparability thesis is false for literature and the visual arts, because form can be separated from content; and for music, because absolute music has no content.<sup>62</sup> I shall consider only his argument against inseparability for poetry, and restrict my focus to his most telling criticisms, the first of which is that Bradley submits no evidence for form-content

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<sup>59</sup> Kelly Dean Jolley, "(Kivy on) The Form-Content Identity Thesis," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 48 (2008), 193-204.

<sup>60</sup> "Elusiveness of Poetic Meaning".

<sup>61</sup> *Philosophies of Arts*, 85.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

inseparability, merely defining poetry in terms of it, i.e. his argument for inseparability is circular.

Kivy observes, with accuracy, that Bradley is making a normative claim about the correct manner in which to read poetry, and asks:

How do we know when we are properly experiencing a poem, experiencing it “as poetically as we can”? Why, when we are experiencing form and content as fused. And why should we think that is the only proper way of experiencing the poem, the way that is “as poetically as we can”? Because, in a word, the form-content identity thesis is true – which is to say, we have moved in a perfect circle.<sup>63</sup>

According to Kivy, Bradley’s argument for form-content inseparability is:

- P<sub>1</sub> The poem is the experience of the poem.
- P<sub>2</sub> The experience of the poem is (properly) the experience form-content inseparability.
- C<sub>1</sub> Therefore form and content are inseparable in a poem.

The argument can be rearranged as follows to define a poem:

- P<sub>1</sub>\* The poem is the experience of the poem.
- P<sub>2</sub>\* Form and content are inseparable in a (proper) poetic experience.
- C<sub>1</sub>\* Therefore the poem is the experience of form-content inseparability.

Kivy’s accusation of perfect circularity appears accurate. Circularity aside, he is unimpressed with Bradley’s definition:

until someone comes along to convince me that any *single* way of reading poetry is *the only echt* way of reading it, qua poetry, I will continue to take *echt* poetry reading practice to be just those many ways in which competent readers do indeed read

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<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

poetry.<sup>64</sup>

**3.2.** There is evidence to suggest that Bradley regards form-content inseparability as a necessary *and* sufficient condition for poetry, but I deliberately restricted poetic thickness to the former in §2.<sup>65</sup> If one ignores Bradley's apparent definition of poetry in terms of form-content inseparability, the following argument for form-content inseparability can be extracted from his lecture:

- P<sub>1</sub>     The experience of a poem is an experience of form-content inseparability, i.e. resonant meaning.
- P<sub>2</sub>     The isolation of the poem's form or the poem's content alters the resonant meaning (and therefore the experience of the poem).
- C<sub>1</sub>     Therefore form and content cannot be separated in a poem.

The problem with *this* argument is not that it is circular, but that it is largely unsubstantiated in the lecture. Bradley provides evidence for P<sub>1</sub> – I noted the smile analogy in §1 – but not P<sub>2</sub>. If Bradley's claim is to convince, it must be embellished, and this is precisely what I have done in §2, by recourse to Richards' notion of ascribed rhythm, the example of *On the Morning of Christ's Nativity* and Heidegger's distinction between sound and noise. Kivy is correct to criticise Bradley's argument, which is either circular or ambiguous, but his objection does not succeed against the above argument or against my account of poetic thickness.

#### 4. Ubiquitous Unity

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<sup>64</sup> "Paraphrasing Poetry," 374.

<sup>65</sup> This is a third point of agreement with Thomson-Jones: we both present (i) a semantic account of (ii) form-content inseparability (iii) as a necessary condition of a category of art. I do not, however, endorse Thomson-Jones' claims about the cognitivist implications of form-content inseparability.

4.1. Following from the perfect circularity criticism, Kivy maintains that Bradley's strong thesis of form-content unity fails to describe the actual experience of a poem, which is more accurately described by his own moderate thesis:

Sometimes we experience the medium and the message as one rather than two objects of attention; sometimes we are not aware of the medium and the message but only the medium-and-message, undifferentiated. But sometimes, too, our attention flits rapidly back and forth from one to the other or concentrates for a while on one rather than the other.<sup>66</sup>

Kivy holds that Bradley cannot accept this moderate thesis because it extends to all linguistic expression and thus fails to distinguish poetry. He notes that when one reads a newspaper and textbook one must experience the message (content) through the medium (form). There is, he claims, a better argument for form-content unity in these non-poetic and non-literary cases because one is concerned with the message to the extent that the form becomes transparent: this constitutes a perfect fusion of form and content, unlike poetry and literature where the medium and message both demand attention.<sup>67</sup> He concludes:

So it appears that, far from the experience of form-content fusion being exclusive to poetry, it is linguistically ubiquitous and more prevalent in nonpoetic forms to boot. The form-content identity thesis for poetry again comes to nought.<sup>68</sup>

Kivy has replaced Bradley's thesis with his own because he believes that the former is inaccurate, but he leaves himself open to the following defence: Bradley would simply reject the moderate thesis and therefore the objection that form-content is ubiquitous. A more telling objection to Bradley is to examine the linguistic ubiquity of the *strong* thesis in terms of Kivy's *perfect fusion of form and content*. Bradley offers (ii) as a paraphrase of (i):

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<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 110-111.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*



- (i) ““To be or not to be, that is the question.””<sup>69</sup>
- (ii) ““What is just now occupying my attention is the comparative disadvantages of continuing to live or putting an end to myself.””<sup>70</sup>

When I read (i) I attend to both the content of the statement and its form; I take pleasure in the combination of *what* Hamlet says with *how* he says it. When I read (ii) as a paraphrase I attend to content alone: Hamlet is contemplating suicide. Kivy’s claim that the medium is transparent holds for (ii) but not (i), and his proposal that perfect fusion is more prevalent in non-poetic language appears to have some force.

**4.2.** I have two objections to Kivy’s ubiquity claim; the first is a minor point, the second more serious. In §3, I noted that Kivy rejects form-content unity across the arts due to absolute music, which he regards as having no content.<sup>71</sup> Subsequently, he cites newspapers and textbooks as paradigmatic examples of form-content fusion because the form is transparent such that one penetrates straight to the message without attending to the medium.<sup>72</sup> I think there is an inconsistency in the way in which these examples are used. If one accepts that content-free absolute music is a counter-example to form-content unity, why should textbooks not be regarded in a similar manner, i.e. as texts which have content, but no form? The textbooks with which Kivy is concerned certainly lack artistic or literary form – that is why they are transparent. In order to maintain consistency, Kivy should either accept that the absence of form (transparency) in textbooks and lack of content (“reflectivity”, perhaps) in absolute music are both counter-examples to form-content unity, or take both textbooks and

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<sup>69</sup> “Poetry for Poetry’s Sake,” 20.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> Kivy makes no claims about literary works of art without content so I do not consider his statement about absolute music an objection to poetic thickness. It is nonetheless worth noting Thomson-Jones’ argument that the existence of art without content – meaningless works in the semantic account – is insufficient to refute her thesis of form-content inseparability (“Reconciling Cognitivism and Formalism in Aesthetics,” 378).

<sup>72</sup> I do not actually approve of identifying the form-content distinction with the medium-message distinction as the latter oversimplifies the former, but I employ Kivy’s terminology in order to make my objection more pertinent.

absolute music as examples of form-content fusion. I concede that Kivy may be able to avoid this criticism by differentiating between absolute music artworks and non-artistic textbooks, but there remains an apparent contradiction in his approaches.

The claim that a newspaper or textbook is a (perfect) fusion of form and content is deeply problematic. The paraphrase of Shakespeare above is not an example of form-content fusion, but an employment of language which fails to reward attention to its form.<sup>73</sup> The value of the paraphrase lies in its content. The line from Shakespeare is an example of form-content unity because Hamlet's soliloquy rewards attention to both the form and the content of the language employed. In many linguistic expressions which are not literary, there is likely to be little reward in attending to the form of the utterance. Kivy admits this when discussing newspapers and textbooks:

The medium is "transparent" to me. Of course, I must *experience* the medium to get the message. But just because I do not pay particular attention to it, it is perfectly fused with its meaning. It is quite different with poetry, and literary language in general, just because the medium is thick, interesting, and so, far more frequently, the object of my attention: attention-getting in fact.<sup>74</sup>

Kivy is associating unity with *transparency* instead of *opacity*. In his own terms, *thin* media are non-literary and transparent, and *thick* media literary and opaque. If thin media are transparent, there is nothing to unify – and this lends weight to my previous objection, because absolute music is not a perfect unity of form and content, it is an absence of content.<sup>75</sup> Similarly, a thin medium is one where form is not attention-getting, such that there

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<sup>73</sup> Given the conception of poetic thickness I have advanced, the paraphrase is not an example of non-poetic language, but an example where the typical reader does not demand form-content inseparability. I shall, however, continue to respond to Kivy on his own terms.

<sup>74</sup> *Philosophies of Arts*, 111. I have derived my description of form-content inseparability as "thickness" from this passage in Kivy.

<sup>75</sup> Assuming, of course, that one accepts that absolute music has no content.

is no form to unify with content. In contrast, *Hamlet* is instantiated in a thick medium, which is opaque, and this opacity is constituted by the combination of attention-getting form and attention-getting content. Kivy's claim that form-content inseparability is ubiquitous is therefore erroneous.

## 5. The Sugar-Coated Pill Tradition

**5.1.** One of Kivy's objections to the ineffability of poetic meaning which Bradley<sup>76</sup> describes is to offer a pair of counter-examples in Lucretius' *De rerum natura* and Parmenides' *Way of Truth*. He states of these two didactic works that:

for the Greeks and Romans it was as natural to convey philosophical and "scientific" results at the cutting edge in poetry as it is natural for us to convey the former in learned journals and the latter in mathematics.<sup>77</sup>

Lucretius, Kivy claims, wrote his poem to communicate his philosophical and scientific doctrine, i.e. precisely for the purpose of having its didactic content separated from its poetic form. Part of this content had already been expressed in non-poetic form by Lucretius,<sup>78</sup> and readers who learned from his work could paraphrase its content without alteration of meaning. Kivy quotes Lucretius' theory of poetry as explicated in the *De rerum natura*,<sup>79</sup> where the poet compares the presentation of his "harsh doctrine" in poetic form to a doctor administering wormwood to a child by sweetening it with honey.<sup>80</sup> Kivy states:

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<sup>76</sup> "Poetry for Poetry's Sake," 26-27.

<sup>77</sup> *Philosophies of Arts*, 87.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>79</sup> Kivy quotes from Book I, lines 936-550 and notes that Lucretius repeats himself almost to the word in Book IV, lines 1-25.

<sup>80</sup> *Philosophies of Arts*, 89.

Lucretius had a clear concept of what he was doing, shared by his contemporaries, that was generalizable to at least a large part of the poetic enterprise and might justly be termed the “sugar-coated pill” theory.<sup>81</sup>

Kivy thus establishes *De rerum natura* as a counter-example to Bradley because the work is both: (i) a poem and (ii) a case where the content can be separated from form without the loss of identity. The didactic nature of the poem is important for Kivy; as it was designed to convey philosophical and scientific knowledge, the propositional content which is extracted from the poem is the *same* content that appears in the poem.<sup>82</sup>

5.2. Lamarque’s response to Kivy’s counter-examples is worth quoting in full:

The reason that *De rerum natura* is not a counterexample to form-content unity is simply that our interest in that poem characteristically is not *as a poem*; the versification, as Lucretius himself admits, is extraneous to what is of interest in the work. Were we to read the work as a poem we would indeed assume form-content indivisibility and seek out what Bradley calls the “poetic experience”. Then it would not just be the subject – Epicureanism – that concerns us, even the subject-as-conceived-by-Lucretius, which could no doubt be paraphrased or rewritten, but *the-subject-as-realised-in-the-poem*, which rests on a unique “mode of realisation”.<sup>83</sup>

He notes that one should not regard the verse form as an invitation to read the work as poetry.

Supporting evidence is found in other sources, for example from Nigel Fabb, who explains that verse is simply the division of text into lines and has no necessary connection to poetry.<sup>84</sup>

One may read Lucretius’ work *qua* philosophy *or qua* poetry; if the latter, then one demands form-content inseparability and attends to the experience of poetic thickness. Given

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<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>82</sup> It would be pointless to use poetic form to make philosophy and science more palatable if the paraphrased content differed from the poetic content.

<sup>83</sup> “Elusiveness of Poetic Meaning,” 411.

<sup>84</sup> “Why is Verse Poetry?” *PN Review* 36 (2009), 52-57: 52.

Lucretius' stated intent, it seems likely – for the very reasons Kivy describes – that reading *De rerum natura* as a poem will be less rewarding than attending to it as a philosophical treatise.

## 6. The Defence from Tradition

**6.1.** Kivy has a second point which is essential in his reply to Lamarque and related to the sugar-coated pill tradition objection. He maintains that Lamarque is mounting a defence of Bradley from tradition in this passage:

Am I not defining the practice of reading poetry in terms of form-content unity and then saying that anything not conforming to the practice is not poetry, or not reading as poetry? But the charge of arbitrariness or mere stipulation won't stick. I haven't invented the practice of reading poetry – it is of ancient lineage (the inter-relation of 'thought' and 'diction' in Aristotle's account of tragedy is but one example).<sup>85</sup>

Kivy then identifies three types of tradition-defences explained in terms of the following practices:

- (i) The tradition of serving bitter herbs at a Seder.<sup>86</sup>
- (ii) The tradition of driving on the left-hand side of the road in the UK.<sup>87</sup>
- (iii) A Polynesian tradition of scattering lotus blossoms in the ocean at a particular time of year to appease a particular deity.<sup>88</sup>

Kivy claims that Lamarque cannot be referring to (i) because the tradition has an explanation (the bitter herbs are a reminder of the bitter suffering of the Israelites in Egypt) where Lamarque is using the tradition *as* an explanation. Nor can he be referring to (ii) because the

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<sup>85</sup> "Elusiveness of Poetic Meaning," 412.

<sup>86</sup> "Paraphrasing Poetry," 368-369.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 369.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

choice to drive on the left is arbitrary and, given that the rest of the world drives on the right, should perhaps be abandoned. Lamarque's tradition-defence is therefore of the third type, and (iii) 'absolutely depends upon there being an *unbroken* tradition'.<sup>89</sup>

Kivy believes that the historical evidence is contrary to any such unbroken tradition of experiencing poetry as a unity of form and content. The evidence he offers includes Plato, Lucretius, Horace, and Pope, and he attributes Lamarque's error to his Romantic sentiments.<sup>90</sup> I do not have space to discuss all the poets he mentions, but his comments on Plato are instructive. Kivy conceives of Plato's antagonism towards tragic poetry in terms of a separation of form and content.<sup>91</sup> A convincing account can be constructed for both Plato's moral and epistemic objections:<sup>92</sup> poetry corrupts because its appealing form disguises its immoral content, and it misleads because its persuasive form beguiles audiences into believing that they are being addressed by experts in content. Both objections offer evidence against an unbroken tradition of reading poetry as unity of form and content because they focus on the interaction of two *separate* elements of the work. Plato's criticisms are consistent with Lucretius' sugar-coated pill theory, although for Plato the pill is poisonous rather than curative.

**6.2.** Kivy claims that the type of tradition to which Lamarque appeals to justify the practice of reading poetry as a unity of form and content requires complete continuity. In his example, he asks an anthropologist why the Polynesians can't use apple blossoms instead of lotus

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<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 370-371.

<sup>91</sup> *Philosophies of Arts*, 89-91.

<sup>92</sup> For an example of the former objection, see: *Republic*, trans. G.M.A. Grube & C.D.C. Reeve, in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 595b3-6. For an example of the latter objection, see: *Apology*, trans. G.M.A. Grube & C.D.C. Reeve, in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 22b4-c6.

blossoms in their ritual. The reply is that the use of apple blossoms would constitute a different tradition.<sup>93</sup> To be clear about the parallel Kivy is proposing:

- (i) Q<sub>1</sub>: Why do Polynesians scatter lotus blossoms in the ocean?  
 A<sub>1</sub>: The practice is a tradition.  
 Q<sub>2</sub>: Why can't they use apple blossoms instead?  
 A<sub>2</sub>: Because that is a different practice and would initiate a new tradition.
- (ii) Q<sub>1</sub>\*: Why do we demand form-content unity of poetry?  
 A<sub>1</sub>\*: The practice is a tradition.  
 Q<sub>2</sub>\*: Why can't we read poetry as a sugar-coated pill?  
 A<sub>2</sub>\*: Because that is a different practice and would initiate a new tradition.

I simply fail to see why either practice requires the *unbroken* tradition upon which Kivy is so insistent. If Polynesians in Pago Pago continued to use lotus blossoms, but those in Auckland switched to more readily-available apple blossoms, one might say either that the tradition had evolved in Auckland or that it had been replaced by a new tradition. The choice of which of the two descriptions of the same event to employ does not appear to be especially important. If, after a hundred years of using apple blossoms, the New Zealanders switched back to lotus blossoms one might say that the tradition had either evolved again or that they had reverted back to an earlier tradition. The dialogue I have set out in (i) above would be the same in Pago Pago or Auckland because the tradition explains the practice in both cases, even if it has been interrupted and renewed.

The tradition-defence is invoked by Lamarque in order to escape the charge of arbitrariness, however, so the following pair of questions would be more pertinent:

- (i) Why should Polynesians scatter lotus blossoms in the ocean?

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<sup>93</sup> "Paraphrasing Poetry," 369.

(ii) Why should we demand form-content unity of poetry?

Lamarque's answer to (ii) consists of two parts, one explicit and one implicit. The explicit part is that the practice is, as he notes, of ancient lineage, stretching at least as far back as Aristotle. The implicit part is that this practice has value – *had* value and *continues* to *have* value. The value of the practice also shows why the Polynesian example is a poor one. If I received A<sub>1</sub> in response to Q<sub>1</sub> my next question would probably be: *But they are all atheists or Christians now, so why do they continue the pagan tradition?* The answer is likely to be something along the following lines: *The original purpose of the ritual was to appease the Polynesian god, but it has persisted because it is now considered valuable in other ways.*<sup>94</sup> The appeal to tradition in the Polynesian example implies that the practice has value. Practices which do not have value fall into Kivy's second category of tradition, which are completely arbitrary, like the decision to drive on either the left or right side of the road. Lamarque appeals to the history of the tradition as evidence in support of its value, as a supplement to Bradley's thesis, but the practice is not dependent upon either the length or continuity of the tradition – they are only relevant as an indication of its value. If Kivy's objection to Lamarque is to convince, he must show what is *wrong* with that tradition. Kivy makes no such demonstration, nor is he likely to given his pluralistic approach to the practice of reading poetry, quoted in §3, as *just those many ways in which competent readers do indeed read poetry.*

My conclusion is that while Bradley's conception of form-content inseparability in poetry is correct, he fails to present a compelling argument in favour thereof. I embellished Bradley's resonant meaning with Richards' notion of ascribed rhythm and Lamarque's reconception of form-content inseparability as a demand rather than a discovery in order to advance poetic

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<sup>94</sup> Such as maintaining family and community relations or being recognised as finally valuable.



thickness as characteristic of poetic experience. I then considered all four of the objections Kivy levels against Bradley and Lamarque as objections to my thesis of poetic thickness. In each case I demonstrated that the objection failed. Until a more convincing critique of form-content inseparability is forthcoming, I therefore take poetic thickness to be both the experience of a poem *qua* poem and a necessary condition of poetry.