The Synesthetic Lens: A New Approach to Reading Poetry

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Abstract

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There are two types of people who can have a synesthetic experience: those who are synesthetes and thus possess the inherent perceptual phenomena to experience one sense as another; and non-synesthetes who can still demonstrate highly metaphoric thinking, which allows them to blend different senses in their art. In poetry specifically, we often read and experience what Downey calls literary synesthesia, where a poet formulates metaphors which feel like a real synesthetic experience. As a synesthete myself, I explore the effects my synesthesia has on my experiences with reading and writing poetry, and later discuss my method of applying a synesthetic "lens" to the reading and writing process. This method allows me to read and enjoy certain 20th and 21st century poets, who are often misunderstood or dismissed as too confusing to be meaningful or enjoyable. Furthermore, I will discuss the poem's—any poem's—ability to be perceived and experienced as a synesthetic object, even if the poem in question does not demonstrate any

obvious synesthetic metaphor. Any reader of poetry, synesthete or not, could apply a lens of synesthesia to any word, poem, or piece of art, and experience the piece through more senses than before.

In his book *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, Daniel Kahneman asked readers for the first words they think of when they hear the word "DAY." Most people, as Kahneman cites, immediately think of words that make associative sense, like "sunny" or "long" (52), but what I immediately think of are not words at all. Instead, I am suddenly overwhelmed with the taste of strawberry and banana fruit salad. If I am allowed to "chew" on the word "DAY" for just a moment or two, the word tastes like that fruit salad every time. This is a classic symptom of a lexical-gustatory synesthete.

All my life, just about every word I come across—especially semantically heavy parts of speech like nouns, adjectives, and verbs—I associate with an arbitrary food taste. Some associations, I admit, are less arbitrary than others: "banana" tastes like banana, "coffee" like coffee. Other words (often non-food words) are less logical: "shoe" tastes like lukewarm ice cream cake, "mug" like prunes (though not the verb, but the noun. The verb "mug" tastes like unsweetened oatmeal), "tome" like rust, "verily" like tart juice, and "lamp" like hard-boiled eggs.

When someone hears about synesthesia for the first time, it's sometimes tempting to search for a quick-and-easy explanation—some understandable reason why synesthetes associate colors with music, shapes with taste, or in my case, words with food. Some people in my life have tried to explain my synesthesia as logically as they can: perhaps, at age three, I sat on my parents' living room floor eating pudding when I learned the word "mirror," so now "mirror" always tastes like pudding. But this explanation only goes so far, for even as I learn new words, they eventually come along with a taste. Words I learn in French, for example, have different tastes than their English counterparts. "Homme" is a thin, crispy chip while "man" is chocolate. "Fille" is a crunchy wheat while "girl" is milk. "Femme" is an orange, squishy, creamy jell-o,

while “woman” tastes like coffee. Such differences might mean that synesthesia does not indicate a direct correlation between semantics and taste, but a mix of semantics, sound, appearance, and even context.

Though many speculate about the reason synesthesia occurs, most evidence points to simple neurological differences. It’s possible that during a pre-memory age I’ve made at least some of these associations, and they’ve been ingrained in me ever since (Cytowick 12).

Unsurprisingly, my ability to taste words is at least partly responsible for my strange relationship with words and literature. Even before I was conscious of it, synesthesia affected my taste in books. At age five or six I remember loving all of Dr. Seuss’s books except for one: *The Foot Book*, which always gave me the taste of tangy mush. I remember having such a strong association between the title *The Foot Book* and the taste of tangy mush that I couldn’t even bear to have the book in my room, among all my better-tasting books. I happily bequeathed *The Foot Book* to a younger brother.

The image of a young child throwing out a Dr. Seuss book because of the way it tastes might sound dramatic and illogical to some non-synesthetes. But everyone—synesthete or not—can at least understand the experience of liking and disliking things because of the sensations those things conjure. For everyone, there are good sights and smells just as there are bad ones. Simply reading about a food one doesn’t like might inspire the reader to push the book away. The difference between the synesthete and the non-synesthete, then, is how the senses associate with a trigger. For the non-synesthete, many sensations can occur at the same time, but they appear because of an object or idea’s intended sensation. This is called a multisensory effect, rather than a synesthetic effect. For example, a candle that smells like pine might be pleasurable to a non-synesthete simply because it smells nice and produces a lovely golden glow. In the

synesthete's case, they can still smell that pine, but that pine smell may cause an association with the color pink, rather than the more common colors associated with such a candle, like green or gold. Whether or not the pine/pink smell/color association is enjoyable depends on the synesthete's individual tastes and preferences.

Despite synesthetes' often visceral experiences with certain smells, words, or sounds, it's not likely that synesthesia has much real effect on their everyday lives. Their perceptions come about so naturally that sometimes they don't always fully realize such a cognitive experience is happening (Cytowick 49). It can be so benign, in fact, that synesthesia doesn't really affect one's ability to become smarter or more interesting (Cytowick 14). However, depending on the type of synesthesia one has, it *can* dramatically affect their choices, feelings, opinions, and tastes in people and things. This is true for my experience with literature, as well. I'm drawn to particular poets and practically repelled by others, seemingly at the whim of my synesthesia. In certain poems I'll show in this paper, I try, through words, to imitate, and sometimes induce, my synesthetic experience in a way my readers can access.

Synesthesia has also shaped how I understand, enjoy, and experience particular poets and poems. It's taught me the difference between *understanding* and *enjoying* a piece of art, and how these two different—yet often misunderstood and even equated—experiences can lead a reader to judge a poem too harshly and too quickly.

It's apparent to me that when the artist pulls the right strings, anyone experiencing that art, regardless of their synesthetic status, can apply an artificial synesthetic lens on their reading or viewing experience, which hopefully will allow the person to better absorb and embody the work of art without the overwhelm of interpretation.

Before I move on to discussing poetry, I wish to remind all readers that my experiences are completely individualized and likely do not represent what other synesthetes' realities look like. This individuality of the synesthetic experience is the main reason this topic is so challenging to discuss objectively. Even if two synesthetes have the same type of synesthesia, there's no likelihood they will make the same associations. Individuality is also the reason I will not go too far into the scientific literature studying other synesthetes like Nabokov, Messiean, Van Gogh, or MW. There are numerous sources discussing their subjective experience, so here I will not reiterate the points made in their auto/biographies. Rather, I plan to use scientific and critical texts that I find are useful in explaining my personal synesthetic experiences with reading and writing poetry. I am not a neuroscientist, scientific writer, or researcher, so I can't claim objectivities based on my subjective reality.

Reading Consequences

Despite the synesthete's unique perceptual abilities, most of their lives don't seem to be constantly interrupted by apparently random sensations. In my experience, reading a book quickly or seeing words I see regularly (like a sign or logo whooshing by) are skimmed over. I don't take the time to really taste them. For many of us, including myself, synesthesia is a similar experience to breathing: it's automatic and we don't really notice it's there unless we take a moment to notice (or chew on) the words. Some synesthetes, however, experience cross-sensations with such power that they have to be very careful not to get overwhelmed by the everyday world. They find they must arm themselves with particular safeguards, in case they perceive something too intense or sensual to be processed correctly (Cytowick 54).

Perceiving color in sound or taste with words, for example, can intensely affect one's taste (sometimes literally, like in my case) in literature, art, and even people, with their

synesthetic perceptions acting as the only internal logic that's able to explain their like or dislike. In most cases, the synesthete's perceptions tend to be harmless, and can often enhance the experience at hand. I often know very quickly if a poem or a collection is not going to taste good, based on the first few lines or pages. Generally, what I taste is an indicator of my inability to enjoy the poem at that moment. This intuitive like or dislike has affected my own writing, too, and has effectively ruled out ways of writing that I otherwise might have engaged with if I didn't taste words so strongly as I write them.

I've learned, however, to not chuck away bad-tasting poems or books as quickly as I used to as a child. I am also able to adjust my taste with longer exposure to the poems and words. I used to hate "Meditation at Lagunitas" because at first, several of the words in that arrangement gave me the taste of very hard, small seeds. It wasn't pleasant at first. Now, I love the poem after rereading it: even though it tastes the same, my personal preferences have changed, just as they can with real food.

Before I get into my own poems, though, I'll point out a few poems that I believe are actually enhanced because of my synesthetic perceptions. It's easy to speak about my bad experiences, but actually, most poems I read become more enjoyable as I continue tasting the words.

The way I determine if I am enjoying a poet is at first an unconscious process, but as I continue to read, I find that the best poems involve both the enjoyment and understanding of a poem. These two criteria, however, do not necessarily involve my active interpretation of the poem. In fact, two of the three of the poets I showcase in this essay are notoriously uninterpretable and oblique, resulting in the surface-level reading experience having almost no narrative or thread that allows the reader to grasp whole concepts, emotions, or characters. When

reading their poems, therefore, I give the poem the benefit of the doubt by reading it through the first time without working to interpret the words too closely. For me, the work of interpretation interferes with the taste, so I try my best to refrain until a second or third read. Poems with less narrative and less demand for interpretation therefore tend to be more enjoyable for me.

John Ashbery, for example, is constantly elusive with theme and narrative. Even after you get used to his work and find poems with more "hand-holds," you come to expect nebulosity, evasion, and random turns in tone or image. In particular collections like *Hotel Lautréamont,* Ashbery's titles, for example, almost never have anything to do with the body of the poem, and the first line of a stanza will likely be completely divorced from the last. For instance, one of my favorite stanzas in the poem "The Large Studio" reads as so:

> "Today I squeezed a few more drops of color
> hoping to blot you out, your face I mean, and then this
> extraordinarily tall caller asked if this was something I usually did.
> Do I work against the plait often?
> And sure, his boots were the right size. I replaced
> my little brush and with it the thought of your coming
> to absent me after duet and bougainvillea had chimed.
> The answer was a nut" (Ashbery, *Hotel Lautréamont* 7).

This stanza supplies little for readers to situate themselves. We know this poem likely takes place in a large studio, and the speaker is trying to forget someone, to blot them out. There is likely a person, the tall caller, and there seems to be a timeline of sorts: first the blotting, then the caller, then the replacing of the brush with the thought of arrival. But even though this poem seems to be about loss, there is little emotion revealed, and the reader is not exposed to *why* the

speaker wishes to blot “you” out. And then there are lines like “Do I work against the plait often?” and “The answer was a nut” that still leave me confused; it’s lines like these that I think could turn some readers off completely to the rest of the poem. If you look above at my assessment of this poem, there’s very little I can say with certainty. I used language like “likely” and “seems” because I’m not sure I could ever be sure about my own beliefs about such a poem. Therefore, this passage, whether intended by the poet or not, is a constant question of, “but what does it mean?” Such a question, I find, often interferes with a reader’s assessment of the poem’s qualities.

Even the constant “you” in the poem is elusive. Costello argues that Ashbery often forces a distance between the reader and poet, noting “the artist’s yearning and failure to escape the confines of his medium to reach the reader’s present. There’s no guarantee that ‘you’ is just one person, or even who they are. It might be intentional that we cannot truly access this work in the way that we may access other poems, because we cannot ‘reach the reader’s present’” (494).

So why is this confusing and elusive passage one of my favorite stanzas in this poem? It all goes back to my practice of giving a poem the benefit of the doubt. With a poem like this, my enjoyment has little to do with interpretation; in fact, the act of interpreting these lines too closely seems to defeat the purpose of the poem. The lines seem to want to be skimmed, to be looked over very quickly, just sampled, but not gorged on. The poem, with all its quiet words and brushings-off, is meant to be heard in a room next to the one you’re in now. As Frost says, “The best place to get the abstract sound of sense is from voices behind a door that cuts off the words.” (59) A reading of this Ashbery poem, therefore, means I must locate where my other senses are, and gain meaning from something other than a search for an interpretable narrative.

As a synesthete, this practice of "senses first, interpretation second" is automatic and natural. I am able to taste the words easily enough, and that is when the meaning-making occurs for me. This is a wholly different experience of the idea of meaning-making than we might expect from more straightforward poets, who tend to present poems that drive forward with more narrative and structure.

If I were to completely rewrite this section of the poem using only my synesthetic "taste" associations, the first few lines would read:

> "Fritos with cheese I lemoned a grass blob melon of color
> wheating to plum you out, your egg I mean, and then this
> minty tall caller asked if this was something I usually did."

Not all words—especially vague or "unimportant" words have a distinct taste for me; most of them taste vaguely of something flavorless, but they do have a mouthfeel. However, their taste isn't significant enough to note. As you might have noticed, too: everything stayed grammatically correct for all readers' sakes. Hopefully most readers can see the delights in this buffet of taste (as well as color and texture; there's a distinct palette of different yellows and greens combined with a deep plum) involved in these few lines.

Another reason why I've personally been so attracted to Ashbery is his ability to make unfamiliar associations, just as a synesthete might. Though there is no evidence of his being a synesthete himself (he often doesn't even make direct synesthetic correlations like colored hearing or tasted words; he doesn't participate in what Downey would call "literary synesthesia" (490)), his poems, instead, offer a glimpse for all readers into experiencing strange associations, similar to synesthesia. His speakers often make seemingly random perceptions in passing, as if nothing is strange or out of the ordinary. Somehow, though, these random perceptions are

presented as significant and meaningful. The synesthete, too, places weight on their perceptions, and often enjoys the original sense because of it. Some of Ashbery's work, therefore, almost imitates the joy and pleasure in the synesthete's alternate reality.

To be clear, I don't mean to say that all of Ashbery's work is intentionally obscure or completely agreeable to the synesthetic reader. I find many of his poems quite understandable and interpretable, in the traditional sense. I will say, though, that he has a tendency to lead you on, tricking you with half-meanings, without much true meaning, in the end.

This tendency of Ashbery's was probably the gateway into my enjoyment of another strange poet: Gertrude Stein. Stein also brands herself as an obscure, oblique, or otherwise uninterpretable poet. Her poem ROASTBEEF is an example of this. The title, for example, does not participate in cluing in the reader of the poem's content. It sits above the poem, and at first glance, its purpose seems to exist to confuse the reader, rather than providing direct meaning. The meaning instead exists in the way the word-rhythms and arrangements provide the reader's body with something to sense. In this excerpt from her poem ROASTBEEF, I have no idea what she is actually saying, but I do *feel* it: I get some delightful rhythms, and even wise and interesting statements that seem to have some meaning, on some plane:

> "All the time that there is use there is use and any time there is a surface there is a surface, and every time there is an exception there is an exception and every time there is a division there is a dividing. Any time there is a surface there is a surface and every time there is a suggestion there is a suggestion and every time there is silence there is silence and every time that is languid there is that there then and not oftener, not always, surrounded and singular and simple and the same and the surface and the circle and the

shine and the succor and the white and the same and the better and the red and the same and the centre and the yellow and the tender and the better, and altogether" (21).

Like Ashbery, one of the challenges in reading Stein's work is working to refrain from close-reading. Like I said before, most readers of poetry, I think, are conditioned to immediately close-read a poem. If the poem does not pass the close-read test (for example, if it cannot be interpreted into some sort of meaning via the form, line breaks, rhyme, rhythm, or any other involved craft element), they might be tempted to deem it dull or imperfect. Her work, I believe, is uninterpretable for the most part if we try to close-read the craft and content objectively. The farthest I've gotten with *understanding* a Stein poem is the connected images and puns in "A Long Dress." Still, even after reading this poem tens or hundreds of times, there are still no tangible characters, traditional symbols, coherent themes, or understandable arguments. If there is any direct meaning in her poems, it would still take a significant portion of time unraveling it, and then convincing the rest of her readership that she *meant* something there. There is craft to pay attention to, but not much to analyze in a traditional sense. Her uninterpretableness, then, is what makes Stein's poems so delightful to my synesthetic tendencies, since I can often simply close my close-reading system and sense the poem through taste.

Among my three favorite poets, Carl Phillips's body of work is often the easiest to interpret. Unlike the poems I've featured by Ashbery and Stein, I feel as if Phillips wishes the reader to take meaning from his poems in a more traditional sense. For example, in "But Waves, They Scatter,"

"From beneath the ice field, longing looks up at the lovers
who—variously meandering, stalling or not, fucking
or not—guess nothing of him. Torturer sometimes. Known

also to have been a savior eventually, hard passage to a life
worth the hardness. You would think longing lived in a space
warmer than an ice field, you would think so. Tragedies are
happening everywhere in the world, beside things that aren't
technically tragedies, though they include suffering, pain, death
in its more humiliating versions, to remind that some of us
will be less spared, and some will not. Up through the ice field,
longing watches the lovers who, in turn, look down, or away,
laughing. Each time, they miss the ice field for the flowers that,
despite the cold, somehow grow there: distraction's the bluer
and more abundant flower, black at the edges. Joy is the other" (Phillips 55).

From the beginning, there is a lot more to understand about this poem. We quickly see the concept of longing as a character in the poem. This idea exists throughout the poem and from the first line, the reader knows to search for this concept throughout. We see concrete images like the lovers in the ice field, who have many actions and experiences within the view of the speaker, which illustrate the kind of tragic longing the speaker is reflecting upon. We understand that the speaker is concerned with tragedy and pain as they view this scene. All of these poetic elements play a part in understanding the poem. But once I'm done close-reading, I want to note my personal sensory experience.

As a reader yourself, regardless of your synesthetic status, ask yourself the following questions: is Phillips's poem blue, soft, eggy-tasting or rosy-smelling? What specific, personal memories did the poem trigger? What sort of personality does the word "humiliating" have? Is it

a young boy who enjoys talking back to his parents, or a female divorcée who feels angry at the world?

Though I truly enjoy reading poetry because of my unique sensory experience, my synesthesia has likely contributed to one of my biggest faults as a reader of poetry: skimming. When there are many great-tasting words altogether in a poem, I am tempted to stop there and believe there is no need to go back and actually figure out what the poem means. This has made me wonder about the parts of the brain that I employ to experience synesthesia, versus the employment of interpretation. According to Kahneman, we have an inherent ability to be primed to associate. This is to do with the "System 1" part of the brain, the part that allows us to live on autopilot without worrying about life's technicalities or details. "System 2," on the other hand, is a more careful, deliberate, and difficult process, likely employed during close-reading and analyzing (20). To me, synesthetic reading and close-reading are clearly separate: my synesthetic brain is what provides surface-level coherence and sensation; it feels similar to the way I read fiction. Gaining meaning from the senses does not require much effort, since it is what I experience in my daily life. On the other hand, analysis of a poem needs my System 2, which works hard to see more deeply into the work the poem is doing. In my own reading experience, I need both systems to keep me engaged and intellectually stimulated.

As Haase says, perceiving is inherently subjective. "Perception is not possible without an entity that acts on the sense organs and the organs themselves. This means that perception is not 'objective' in the sense commonly used, which is outside of the observer" (39). Obviously, it's not only synesthetes who looked at the above poems with a subjective eye. But how often do we consider such subjectivity, as both readers and writers? As a poet, I try to address the challenge of subjectivity: to be aware of the different perceivers who might experience my work, and to

accept that they will see my poems differently from others, perhaps even dislike them. I also try to think of the synesthetes who read my poems: what colors are they hearing? What words are they tasting? What are the personalities of each word or letter? The most difficult question, though, is what sort of words can I employ that will satisfy the interpretations and senses of as many people as possible?

Before we leave these great poems and move on to my own, I want to look at one more John Ashbery poem—one that, I hope, will allow all readers to see my own personal synesthetic experience with his poems. In "On His Reluctance to Take Down the Christmas Ornaments," one of the quietest, yet most visceral lines is, "Silence in the vandalized vomitorium." (*Poetry* 4) This line, without my own personal synesthetic associations, is already so packed with interest, abstraction, and confusion, yet it is still somehow so delightful. The best part for me, though, is what I taste. The word "silence," in my experience, tastes like salt and pepper, so the word actually "seasoned" the rest of the words in that line. A line like this is something I aspire to write: to have inherently interesting and attractive sentences, but to write them so strangely that they inspire a satisfying amount of confusion, and perhaps a little synesthesia.

Writing Consequences

In this section, I wish to discuss more details of my experience as a synesthete writer: how my poems are received by readers, and what I wish to express in my writing. Being a synesthete has affected a few of my overall "writing goals."

My poetry goals are, at the moment, twofold. Some poems fall into the first category, and others in the second. At some point, I hope to somehow combine these two goals, while at the same time being able to explain what exactly that combined goal is, and how to achieve it. At the

moment, I am unsure of how these two goals can be combined, and it's part of my poetic practice to better understand how to do it. For now, I can reasonably achieve two separate goals.

My first goal is to make the poem a "palatable mood" for all my readers. These sorts of poems include "Housekeeping," "Cursive," and "Flock," which are poems that often use literary synesthesia (and other poetic craft tactics like internal rhyme, alliteration, and enjambment to further the reading experience and meaning-making), but don't completely embody the synesthetic experience as I do. These poems are not purely imitative of my life—rather, they are reflective, narrative, and sometimes confessional. In these poems, I do my best to create enough of a narrative to pull readers in, and I resist the urge to stretch out the poems more as I might with other poems. They often evoke a life I wish I lived: one full of the poet's reflective powers and understanding of the deep, deep world; they, however, are not indicative of my experience as Anna Ciummo. They are, therefore, performative. From what I've heard from others, though, this type of poem is often my best-received by readers. However, these poems are usually the ones I like least among my personal collection.

Here is "Housekeeping," one of these "palatable mood" poems.

Last night, after a drink,
you said you'd never be okay
with *just this world*, and,
as always with any splay
of words that adjusts me,
then fulfills me too far, I'm not
sure what you mean. Memory
is the kind elegy, a charm

to revel in, to repeat until rendered

meaningless. And if I'm lucky

I'll find its pieces again

when sweeping. A shining pin

among the slates of dust.

Even then though, as I prick

myself picking it up, it's hard

to remember what myself

might be. But to see me

seeing you—sucking

at the gnat of blood troubling

my thumb—well that

would be a whole different story.

In this poem I was concerned, first and foremost, with the overall mood it evokes. The speaker, I decided, should be disjointed and derealized in many ways: thinking both into the past and the future, considering the melancholy of simply understanding the meaninglessness of time, especially after one thinks about it too hard. Reality, for the speaker, is just one more thing to mourn for. The contrast to this mindset later on, is brought about by the metaphorical pin, which represents memory. The final sentence is speculative: the speaker has again fallen into their trap of wondering about the future, and then shakes it off at the end with "well that / would be a whole different story." The speaker here is not myself, though she is adjacent to me and experiences the world in a different way than I might. This is one of the experiments of such poems: I do my best to make sure the speaker is *not* me, but a depersonalized version who has

her own voice and flip-flops between realities. I do this because it's a way, I've found, to create a mood for the poem. This mood is sometimes the mood I'm in, and the mood I think many readers can understand and interpret.

Like most of my poems, there are no overt literary synesthesia moments in this poem. There are absolutely associated sensations ("splay of words," and "gnat of blood"), where I attempted to somehow enhance a simple concept or image through a new avenue of feeling. However, the speaker is not meant to have synesthetic perceptions, or, if she does, she does not reflect on such associations in the poem. Neither does the poem expect the reader to make synesthetic associations. Regardless, I believe my synesthesia played a role in this poem anyway. I still wrote this poem in a way that tastes nice. "Okay" tastes like Oreos, "splay" tastes like syrup, "revel" like strawberries, and so on. In my subjective experience, this poem is very sweet—almost too sweet for my preferences. From the start, I had a vague understanding that many of those words had a similar taste profile, so I wouldn't try and put in a word like "razor" which tastes like celery, or "drift," which tastes like powdery yeast. My synesthetic perceptions almost automatically rule out certain words once I've decided on the first few.

One of the reasons I'm so attracted to certain poets is because the words Ashbery, Stein, and Phillips use tend to have a harmonious tasting palette that I enjoy, just as I've attempted in "Housekeeping." Though my synesthetic associations are arbitrary, poetry is one way that I think there might be some sort of connection or explanation for *why* I taste what I do with particular words.

I want to return for a moment to what I mentioned at the beginning earlier: *enjoying* and *understanding* both play a role in my ability to love a poem or not. Often when I read a bad-tasting poem, my enjoyment isn't there, while my understanding is. I think my readers often have

the opposite experience with my own work: it can be an enjoyable experience to read and "feel" the poems, but the understanding isn't there because of my resistance to traditional narratives and themes. Therefore I think my "palatable mood" poems please readers better than some of my other work: they contain an element of understanding that gives them some sort of access to the poem that I don't otherwise offer.

My second poetic goal, which I hope to someday find a way to meld with the first, is almost the opposite of creating a "palatable mood." This goal, in this case, is to completely imitate and embody my experience as a synesthete through the sound of sense, to practice mimesis. Some examples of these poems are "Continental Breakfast," "Hourglasses," and "For Form's Sake." They sound a bit more Steinian or Ashberian, are less image-heavy, and focus much more on sentence tone and the materiality of each word, rather than on a more common poetic element, like image or theme. These poems are the ones I personally enjoy reading and writing the most because they provide only me with the palatable mood that I personally experience. I am proud of these poems, because they best reflect my experience and prove my ability to stay true to myself as a poet. I also find that I employ a different part of my brain when writing these poems. The words for them often come to me completely fully formed, because I already hear the sort of rhythm I wish the poem to have in my head. All I need to do is write down the words that taste best, and which best fit the music. The downside to writing this type of poetry is that such poems are not always reader-friendly. They have almost no narrative, and focus (if you could even call it that) on subjects that elude, morph, or blur as one reads.

One way I've tried to make my synesthetic experience more real for my readers is through "induced synesthesia." According to Casini, "we all have some synesthetic linking, and we all experience one type or another of potentially involuntary synesthetic perception" (2). She

goes on to explain that "it is possible to design synesthetic experiences across different sensory modalities in highly artificial, technologically mediated environments capable of stimulating in the observer/user a cross-modal, embodied behavior and learning" (4-5). Such direct embodied behavior may not be exactly possible through the written word alone, but Casini's assertion that simulating some sort of synesthesia in a non-synesthete through art is appealing to me. One way I've tried to do this is through my poem, "Spectacle," where the speaker has a synesthetic experience of associating the color green with calm memories and love. Seeing color in feeling is not a type of synesthesia I have, but I thought it would be a helpful type of synesthesia for readers, as it can feel like a more natural metaphor for a poem.

It's a goal of mine to write more poems from the perspective of a synesthete who is experiencing synesthesia, because through metaphor, it allows all readers, synesthete or not, to access them through the synesthete's apparent metaphor-making. It is through induced synesthesia that I hope readers can access a new type of poetic embodiment. As a poet I often attempt to reconstruct, through words, my experience as a synesthete, and through artificially induced synesthesia, so that any reader—synesthete or not—should be able to access the full "mood" of my poems.

The best way for me to develop and improve my writing is to show it to others and hear their reactions. In the past, I would often present a poem to a reader for feedback and experience an almost word-for-word conversation. The most common questions I'd get would be about the meaning of the poem and my strange word choices. It was only after I improved on these comments, trial-and-error style, that I started writing poems that sounded like myself, and that are enjoyable for the reader, from beginning to end, without the mental clutter of wondering what was going on. It is important to me that my poems are not always directly interpretable,

since that is what best reflects my own reality. The important thing for me to do, then, is to make sure this uninterpretableness doesn't interfere with the joy of the sound and shape of the language.

Negative reactions to my poetry are not wrong. I am aware that my poems are not for everyone, and that each reader is different and will therefore have a different experience with my work than myself and other poetry peers might. In fact, as I said, negative or critical reactions to my poetry have helped me understand what I wish my readers to experience, which I then "test," trial-and-error style, in a workshop.

As of now, I feel I must have these two goals for my poetry in order to provide decent reading for my readers, while also staying true to myself and writing the poems I want to. It's a difficult terrain to navigate: who to write for? Myself or my readers? Currently, it's both, but it depends on the poem. I hope to change that someday by figuring out how to write a poem that will satisfy the both of us.

The Interpretive and synesthetic Lenses

Now that I've discussed a variety of poems, I wish to further discuss the Reader's experience when consuming strange, uninterpretable poetry. Obviously, all readers of poetry arrive at that poem looking for some sort of meaning: a perfect (though not always successful) blend of content and craft that creates intense meaning and emotion. Of course, all readers approach the poem in a slightly different way, depending on their own personal context. Balla explains that "Each word is surrounded by a semantic field (semantic field theory), which provides it with the possibility of generating meaning. Semiotic studies show that this meaning vividly increases the effect of the collage to suggest additional semantic ramifications, symbolic by nature" (111). Words have meaning only through context, and so do poems, I think. Through

their own context, the reader has a different experience. Such subjectivity is often a hoop the poet must jump through, since the reader has the power to close the poetry collection and move on to another one, if their subjective experience isn't a good one.

Context is, then, the first thing the reader brings to the table. One's own subjectivity is, to an extent, uncontrollable. A person's ability to enjoy a poem—regardless of their ability to be conscious of such bias—is informed by context. This is perhaps why trigger warnings are important for some poems, because of the reader's inability to erase their own trauma, their own context. Perhaps, though, the reader can adjust their context with time. This personal subjectivity is inherent in all of us, including in synesthetes. Synesthetic context is the synesthete's inherent ability to bring their synesthesia into the poem, regardless of the poet's intention. When I read Phillips, for example, I cannot help but read the taste of marinara sauce into the word "humiliating," though I'm sure Phillips did not mean for me to do that. It is harder for me, therefore, to apply strict close-reading onto Phillips's poems than it might be for non-synesthete readers, whose instinct it might be to simply interpret, before tasting a word.

The context that one brings to the poem can be thought of as a certain "lens" that one cannot take off. The poem's words and form, like the real world, are the only objective facts provided, and it is up to the person seeing and reading to experience it subjectively. Such a lens can apply to the reading of any literature, but as poetry tends to behave the most dubiously of all genres, it often helps a reader of poetry to employ a lens of some kind, allowing them to better understand it.

One may also choose to apply another lens onto their reading. Many critics, for example, may choose to apply a feminist, queer, or environmentalist lens to a text that may or may not have originally been written to accommodate such a lens. However, such lenses can allow

readers to experience a text beyond its literal meaning, and to gain understanding based on the piece's implications or assumptions. It's possible for the reader to take such a reading too far, but often it can reinvigorate a text based on the reader's particular interests and knowledge.

In most contexts, it seems that the reader engages with a poem using a particular lens: what I call the *interpretive lens.* This is a lens that works to find narrative, thematic, imagistic, or other kinds of coherence to the poem. The lens acts as a poem context-finder, which allows the reader to understand the poem in the most coherent way possible. This is also a common way new students of poetry read and critique: if the poem is uninterpretable—in other words, if it has no narrative, imagistic, thematic, or other kind of coherence—then it cannot be enjoyed and is deemed a faulty piece. This interpretive lens, I think, is the most natural way of reading any piece of literature, let alone poetry, because humans automatically search for it. We are constantly looking for a way to explain oddities.

There are other ways, however, of reading a poem. For example, one may choose to apply the *synesthetic lens* to their reading. As you've read, through synesthesia I sometimes have a different way of reading and experiencing poetry. Only during the third or fourth read do I actually attempt to interpret the poem, because on my first few tries I'm feeling what is happening, and tasting the words. This is natural to me because tasting words provides a level of coherence for me, and I sometimes don't feel the need to interpret further because I've already experienced some incredible sensations.

This is now my challenge to the reader: try and apply the synesthetic lens to your reading next time. Imagine what the word "feather" tastes like, or what musical tone it takes on. It might feel unnatural to most at first, to practically force the feeling of a new sensation when it seemingly has nothing to do with the words' actual meanings. It's possible, though, that

experiencing synesthesia isn't necessarily restricted to "true," neurological synesthetes: a type of cultural synesthesia, according to Casini, can occur in just about anyone, if exposed to multisensory art which can artificially induce synesthesia in the viewer (13). It's important to note, though, that a multisensory experience is not the same thing as synesthesia, though the two are often confused. It can be easiest for us to equate the two, assuming that if a thing both *feels* and *smells*, for example, then experiencing that thing is synesthetic.

Regardless, the multisensory experience might allow a non-synesthete to better understand the synesthetic experience, and to access poems in a different way. It's absolutely possible to at least entertain or mimic arbitrary associations as synesthetes do, bringing about a sort of induced synesthesia that allows the non-synesthete to "feel" multiple senses as synesthetes do.

Of course, even the application of a synesthetic lens to a reading of poetry will not be everyone's preference. I can definitely see many people reading this paper and scrapping the idea wholeheartedly, and that is fine with me. I think, however, that the synesthetic lens is a method of reading that can allow one to diversify their reading experience, and arrive at the poem with a more expansive view. And even if the synesthetic experience does not seem to "do anything" for you doesn't mean nothing happened. You may have learned something more intangible; sometimes we do not realize what a poem taught us until years later, and some continue to teach us the more we read it.

It's important to remember that just because a poem cannot be interpreted by the reader doesn't automatically mean it is a bad poem. In fact, the poem's ability to keep us wondering might just be an indicator of its quality and genius. We can read poetry that isn't "meant for us" and still be challenged by it, we can still learn from it if we decide to do so.

Conclusion

It is unsurprising that synesthetes often turn to the arts in order to express their experiences. Some of us find our cross-sensations meaningful and even spiritual, since synesthesia allows us to feel something beyond a basic, objective reality. This is why it is often so difficult to speak about one's synesthesia—it feels both strange and relieving to explain one's everyday experience, because the interested party is listening so intently. At the same time, it seems so silly or matter-of-fact to say it aloud. Art, therefore, is often a better medium of expressing synesthesia because a multimodal medium like poetry inherently involves multiple senses.

Because their experiences are so individual, sometimes the challenge in the synesthete's artistic practice is to properly represent their realities, while at the same time letting viewers and readers experience the same view, via the art. Because of their apparently arbitrary cross-perceptual sensations, synesthetic art can often feel strange, incomprehensible, or unnatural. However, this shouldn't diminish the importance of their work.

Since learning about my perceptive experience and writing in harmony with it, I understand that my poems cannot possibly be for everyone, or even most people. It is now a goal of mine to diversify my poems as much as possible, because I am starting to notice that much of my work sounds very similar, or always circles back to the same theme. My synesthesia allows me to continue seeing the world in fresh, new ways, and I hope more readers of poetry will do their best to embody a synesthete's reality, since the sensory experience can provide them with a deeper understanding of art, and therefore the world.

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