

KANT ON THE COGNITIVE VALUE OF POETRY

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It is natural to interpret Kant's claim that the poet, while playing "with ideas", provides "nourishment to the understanding" (KU § 51, AA 05: 321) as an attribution of cognitive value to poetry². Given that he ascribes to poetry "the highest rank of all" among the arts (KU § 53, AA 05:326), it is also natural to assume that having that value contributes to the high artistic value of works of poetry. That Kant really endorsed this view would appear to be disputable, however, since he explicitly claims that art "has the reflecting power of judgment [...] as its standard" (KU § 43, AA 05: 306) and that, both in nature and art, "*that is beautiful which pleases in the mere judging* (neither in sensation nor through a concept)" (KU § 44, AA 05: 306).³ His conception of aesthetics (oriented towards the non-cognitive judgment of taste and its predicate of beauty) and the assumption that beauty "is nothing by itself, without relation to the feeling of the subject" (KU § 9, AA 05: 218), and that it "properly concern[s] merely form" (KU § 13, AA 05: 223) may have prevented him from assigning a role to cognitive values in promoting the overall aesthetic value of works of poetry. In this paper, I will argue that Kant should have been less decided on this, all the more so because the poetic verses he discusses in the *Critique of the Power of Judgement* are cases where aesthetic value and cognitive value relate to one another – or at least this is what I aim to show.

The paper proceeds as follows. After offering preliminary remarks aimed at clarifying the question at issue, I will sketch the conception of poetry presented by Kant in the third *Critique*, supplemented with remarks from his lectures on anthropology. I will then focus on his comments on verses by Friedrich II. These comments are pivotal to my argument, since they allow me to show that these verses actually convey a kind of cognition – the cognition that we now call 'perspectival knowledge'. Kant does not use the term 'knowledge' in this context. After all, he was a propositionalist, and perspectival knowledge – or better, the aspect of it at issue in the lines he quotes – is essentially non-propositional. In speaking of knowledge, I will go beyond the letter of Kant's text and perhaps also depart from his view. However, in doing so I am simply taking advantage of conceptual resources that are implied by what he says on poetry.

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A final clarification: although Kant speaks in general terms, I prefer to read the thesis that poetry has cognitive value not as a general claim but as amounting to the statement that some poetic works convey knowledge. As for the kind of knowledge at issue, Kant's examples, as I have said, suggest that it is perspectival knowledge. Although this is not the only kind of knowledge that may be at issue, what Kant says about poetry is of help for understanding that this knowledge is to be distinguished from scientific or philosophical knowledge in part because the relation between text and knowledge is not that of communication or information, but of *Darstellung* or presentation.⁴ Poetic knowledge – if I may use this expression – is conveyed less through a propositional *saying* than through a demonstrative *showing*.

1. POETRY AND AESTHETIC COGNITIVISM

Before I deal with Kant's conception of poetry, some clarifications are in order. His claim does not concern the possible cognitive value of poetry or art in general. Kant likely would not have denied that one can learn something about human psychology or behaviour by reading a novel, a drama or a comedy, given that he himself viewed novels and plays as *Hilfsmittel* for anthropology. In fact, he claims that, although novels and plays are based not on experience and truth but on fiction (*Erdichtung*) and that it therefore seems that nothing can be learned from them about human beings, they may nevertheless be of help, as the main features of the characters are extrapolated from the observation of real human behaviour. In this regard, he is thinking about works by Samuel Richardson and Molière (cf. Anthr, Vorrede, 07: 121). Therefore, what is controversial with regard to Kant's view is not whether art can have cognitive value but whether that value contributes to a work's *artistic* value. This is because Kant emphasizes the exclusive relevance of the formal features of artworks for our appreciation of them as beautiful and insists that the aesthetic evaluation of a work is not cognitive in nature (cf. KU §§ 1 and 15).

Kant clearly acknowledges that part of the significance that beauty and art have for us depends on their relation to central interests of reason (cf. KU §§ 42, 52, 59), but he seems to draw a clear distinction between aesthetic value and other kinds of value, such as cognitive and moral value. It is therefore natural to read his claim that “beautiful art must be free” and that the mind, in contemplating it, “must feel itself to be satisfied and stimulated [...] without looking beyond to another end” (KU § 51, AA 05: 321) as meaning that a work, insofar as it is created *as* art, cannot have any further end beyond the pleasure of reflection: this pleasure is the standard of art.

Put differently, Kant seems to locate the value of a work *as* art – let us call it its intrinsic value – in the value of the experience of pleasure that is intimately bound up with it and to link this experience to the intrinsic properties of the work, which are primarily formal properties such as structure and composition. As we have seen, this does not mean that a work cannot have cognitive value, but such value would be extrinsic to the work, if anything a beneficial consequence of experiencing it, rather than part of its intrinsic value.⁵ Poetry puts this view under pressure since a cognitive effect seems to be built into Kant's very definition of poetry

and, above all, since there can be cases where not only are both aesthetic and cognitive value present, but the latter is present *in virtue* of the former, at times even increasing a work's aesthetic value. As I have said, this is what I hope to show in my analysis of Kant's comments on certain verses. First, however, let us turn to his definition of poetry.

1.1 THE DEFINITION OF POETRY

In his tentative classification of the beautiful arts,⁶ Kant locates poetry, together with rhetoric, within the “arts of speech”. Rhetoric, he claims, “is the art of conducting a business (*Geschäft*) of the understanding as a free play of the imagination; poetry that of carrying out a free play of the imagination as a business of the understanding”. Shifting from the art to the artist, Kant then adds: “the orator [...] announces a matter of business and carries it out as if it were merely a play with ideas in order to entertain the audience. The poet announces merely an entertaining play with ideas, and yet as much results for the understanding as if he had merely had the intention of carrying on its business” (KU § 51, AA 05: 320-321).

Interestingly, even though Kant acknowledges the formal differences between poetry and rhetoric (in particular, poetry's use of verse [cf. V-Anth/Mron, AA 25: 1282; cf. also V-Anth/Mensch, AA 25: 992; Anth § 71, AA 07, 248]), he does not distinguish between them on this basis, instead focusing on the different aims they pursue. The orator “announces a matter of business”; his aim, one can conjecture, is to instruct, to produce some sort of belief, but in order to entertain the audience he carries it out “as if it were merely a play with ideas”. By contrast, the poet aims at “a mere play with ideas, but accomplishes something that is worthy of business, namely providing nourishment to the understanding in play, and giving life to its concepts through the imagination” (KU § 51, AA 05: 321).

These last expressions are rather intriguing. The claim that the poet aims to provide nourishment to the understanding in play seems to echo Horace's famous claim in his *Ars poetica*: “*Omne tulit punctum, qui miscuit utile dulci, Lectorem delectando pariterque monendo*” (342-343). Horace was imagining a competition between different kinds of poetry. In fact, immediately before the line just quoted, he writes: “*Aut prodesse volunt aut delectare poetae aut simul et iucunda et idonea dicere vitae*” (335-337). Assuming that this categorization is not evaluative, the “*Omne tulit punctum*” sentence could be read as Horace's answer to the question “What is the best option?”. He is suggesting that, given these three options, the best choice is that which does both things, i.e., a blend of practical advice and beautiful writing. Kant's view seems to be slightly different. He does not assume that poetry should pursue both aims, namely to instruct and to entertain. Rather, he claims that the poet aims at one thing, that is, a mere play with ideas, but in doing so she also achieves something else, namely providing nourishment to the understanding, offering content on which to reflect.

Kant clearly acknowledges that poetry can have cognitive benefits but seems to consider these a side effect: the poet's aim is not a cognitive one, but through her work the interests of the understanding are also pursued. Therefore, it seems that the more obvious way to construct poetry's cognitive value is to think of it as external to aesthetic value, as a sort of beneficial side

effect. Nevertheless, some passages from his lectures on anthropology seem to point towards a closer connection between aesthetic and cognitive value. In the *Menschenkunde* (WS 1781/82), for example, we read that the understanding “must be [...] secretly and unnoticedly instructed” by a poem, for otherwise the poem will not be appreciated; if the understanding is not present, then even though our senses are entertained, the poem will be “insipid and tasteless (*fade und unschmackhaft*)” (V-Anth/Mensch, AA 25: 986-987).

Tellingly, we also encounter a reformulation of the dictum from the first *Critique* to the effect that “[i]ntuitions without thoughts yield no knowledge, but thoughts without intuition are reflections without a subject, therefore both of them must be united (*Ananschauen ohne Gedanken giebt keine Erkennyniß, aber Gedanken ohne Anschauung sind Betrachtungen ohne Stoff, daher muß beides vereinigt werden*)” (V-Anth/Mensch, AA 25: 987). The suggestion is that intuitions and thoughts must be combined; however, it is also pointed out that “one of them must shine out (*hervorleuchten*)”, that is, “the main thing must be placed in one of them”. Either the understanding or the imagination must set the end; since in poetry the most important thing is to engage the imagination, the understanding must always “come along (*hinzukommen*)”, if only incidentally (*nebenbei*). The point is then exemplified as follows: “when the poet adorns (*ausschmückt*) a whole succession of thoughts with images (*Bildern*), the beautiful must immediately shine, but the understanding must only come later (*hinterher kommen*) and the thought must not immediately shine through (*hervorscheinen*), but only in the aftertaste” (V-Anth/Mensch, AA 25: 987-988; see also Anth § 71, AA 07: 246).

This passage is slightly ambiguous. On the one hand, it seems to attribute to images a mere decorative function, but on the other it hints at the presence of thought in them, as if thought contents were conveyed through them. While playing with the imagination, the poet affects the understanding by means of concepts and thereby “improves and enlivens (*cultiviert und belebt*) it”. What is beautiful, we read in the notes from a course dated 1788/89, must at the same time be a “strengthening (*Stärkung*) of our concepts” (V-Anth/Busolt, AA 25: 1465-1466).

In the third *Critique*, these views are rephrased. As we have seen, Kant claims that the poet aims at “a mere play with ideas” but accomplishes something that is beneficial for the understanding, giving “life” to its concepts through the imagination. The sensible, intuitive element evoked in the lecture notes is now traced back to the aesthetic ideas, as the ideas with which the poet plays.

2. POETRY, AESTHETIC IDEAS, AND SPIRIT

As is well known, Kant calls the representations of the imagination that artists find for the presentation (*Darstellung*) of the concept they have in mind ‘aesthetic ideas’. Presumably, ‘concept’ refers here not only to the particular object that the artist wants to realize – say, a portrait, an epic poem, a sonata etc. – but also either to the subject that the artist wants to present or to the theme she will deal with by presenting that subject. I think that a more natural reading is to take ‘concept’ as referring to the subject that the artist wants to present

through the medium of her art. In any case, the important point is that aesthetic ideas do not offer a mere exemplification of the concept. They concord with the concept with which they are associated, but beyond this they provide, as Kant writes, “unsought extensive undeveloped material for the understanding” (KU § 49, AA 05: 317).

On this intuitive richness rests the distinctive feature of these representations of the imagination, namely their occasioning “much thinking though without it being possible for any determinate thought, i.e., concept, to be adequate to” them. It is not that no determinate thought is occasioned by this intuitive material, but rather that no determinate thought is adequate to it or can exhaust it, i.e. make it completely distinct (KU § 49, AA 05: 314).⁷

In itself, that an intuition – and an aesthetic idea is an internal intuition – is not completely grasped through concepts may not be surprising given the categorical difference between intuition and concept, which makes it impossible to translate intuitions through concepts, and above all to capture through concepts the phenomenal aspect of intuitions.⁸ However, Kant seems to hint at the particular richness or fullness of these ideas. On one occasion, he describes them as ideas “which are fantastic and yet at the same time rich in thought” (KU § 47, AA 05: 309). It is as if the intuitional content to which the concept is related somehow were increased or made more dense by the imagination. He describes this richness by saying that the intuition “aesthetically enlarges the concept itself in an unbounded way” (KU § 49, AA 05: 315), with the result that it “stimulates so much thinking that it can never be grasped in a determinate concept”. Here, Kant claims, the imagination “is creative, and sets the faculty of intellectual ideas (reason) into motion, that is, at the instigation of a representation it gives more to think about than can be grasped and made distinct in it (although it does, to be sure, belong to the concept of the object)” (KU § 49, AA 05: 315).

Presumably, this is why we are not frustrated by our incapacity to exhaustively grasp aesthetic ideas but are somehow invited to persist in our attempts to bring their content under concepts. There is something that makes them interesting⁹. Kant emphasizes the pleasing side of this effort, claiming that the fact that we cannot make an aesthetic idea fully intelligible “allows the addition to a concept of much that is unnameable, the feeling of which animates the cognitive faculties and combines spirit with the mere letter of language” (KU § 49, AA 05: 316). Rather paradoxically, that spirit is combined with the latter depends on the fact that the content of a representation of the imagination cannot be fully attained by language (cf. KU § 49, AA 05: 314), cannot be encapsulated by the ‘letter’. Kant’s idea that the poet can give “life” to concepts is connected to this combination, which has its source in the expressive talent that he calls ‘spirit’ and that he views as a necessary condition of art, beyond mere accordance with taste.

2.1 THE SPIRIT AND THE LETTER

The use of the terms ‘spirit’ and ‘letter’ in the passage just quoted is revealing. The background to Kant’s claim is likely the well-known Pauline distinction between letter and spirit – “the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (2 Cor 3, 6; see also Rm 2, 29 and 7, 6). This

Pauline trope is multifaceted, but the aspect that is most relevant here is the suggestion of a meaning ('spirit') that exceeds the surface sense of a text and therefore prompts (hermeneutical) reflection.¹⁰ Kant seems to have in mind this prompting of thought when he speaks of the addition to a concept of much that is unnameable, the feeling of which "combines spirit with the mere letter of language". He inflects the Pauline idea of the life-giving Spirit in aesthetic terms and explains that this "animating principle in the mind" operates through aesthetic ideas.

It is indicative of the importance of this principle that, when Kant sums up his conception of genius, he emphasizes that genius consists on the one hand in the capacity to find ideas for a given concept and on the other in "hitting upon the *expression* for these, through which the subjective disposition of the mind that is thereby produced, as an accompaniment of a concept, can be communicated to others". Kant then adds that the talent of hitting upon the *expression* for aesthetic ideas

is really that which is called spirit, for to express what is unnameable in the mental state in the case of a certain representation and to make it universally communicable, whether the expression consist in language, or painting, or in plastic art – that requires a faculty for apprehending the rapidly passing play of the imagination and unifying it into a concept (which for that very reason is original and at the same time discloses a new rule, which could not have been deduced from any antecedent principles or examples), which can be communicated without the constraint of rules.

Kant connects spirit to two crucial features of genius, namely originality and exemplarity, that is, the features in virtue of which its products are such that while no determinate rule can be given for them – thereof their originality – they can nonetheless serve as models (cf. KU § 46, AA 05: 308), i.e., as a rule for emulation (cf. KU § 49, AA 05: 318). Spirit seems to be the faculty of apprehending the play of imagination that yields an aesthetic idea and unifying it into a concept. That this concept, as Kant claims, can be communicated "without the constraint of rules" may be another way of saying that in our encounter with a work of genius our cognitive powers, namely "*imagination* for the composition of the manifold of intuition and *understanding* for the unity of the concept that unifies the representations", are harmonized without a determinate concept's "restrict[ing] them to a particular rule of cognition" (KU § 9, AA 05: 217). In other words, no rule determines our intuition according to a determinate concept. This does not mean that nothing is communicated, since a concept is, after all, communicated. Rather, this suggests that no determinate meaning is communicated in the sense that what is communicated, though related to a rule, remains open.

I will not comment further on this part of the passage. As for the first part, I will simply note that the disposition of mind that Kant is thinking of is presumably just that play of the cognitive powers that is required for knowledge in general, on which, according to him, pleasure in the beautiful rests. He describes it as "unnameable", I suppose, because it is a subjective condition of knowledge and therefore, so to speak, upstream with regard to our use of concepts. As I have said, what I hope to show is that there can be cases in which the apprehension of the aesthetic idea expressed by a work not only puts the mind in the harmonic disposition required for knowledge in general but also produces a kind of knowledge, that is, cases in which cognitive value is present within aesthetic value.

First, however, I want to say something about an intriguing passage in which Kant explains why, among the arts, he attributes “the highest rank of all” to poetry.

3. POETRY AND TRUTH

The passage at issue may initially seem to speak against what I want to argue for, because it seems to reiterate the view that poetry can have cognitive value as a side effect. However, it also provides us with the occasion to bring into focus how Kant conceives of the relationship between poetry and truth. This is an important aspect of his view, and it is also relevant to my point. Let us look at the text. Poetry, Kant claims,

expands the mind by setting the imagination free and presenting, within the limits of a given concept and among the unbounded manifold of forms possibly agreeing with it, the one that connects its presentation with a fullness of thought to which no linguistic expression is fully adequate, and thus elevates itself aesthetically to the level of ideas. It strengthens the mind by letting it feel its capacity to consider and judge of nature, as appearance, freely, self-actively, and independently of determination by nature, in accordance with points of view that nature does not present by itself in experience either for sense or for the understanding, and thus to use it for the sake of and as it were as the schema of the supersensible. It plays with the illusion which it produces at will, yet without thereby being deceitful; for it itself declares its occupation to be mere play, which can nevertheless be purposively employed by the understanding for its own business. (KU § 53, AA 05: 326-327)¹¹

Kant puts forward three reasons for poetry’s high standing. The first is phrased in a way that retraces the description of aesthetic ideas. The second recalls and expands on Kant’s explanation that these representations of the imagination or “inner intuition” are called ‘ideas’

on the one hand because they at least strive toward something lying beyond the bounds of experience, and thus seek to approximate a presentation of concepts of reason (of intellectual ideas), which gives them the appearance of an objective reality; on the other hand, and indeed principally, because no concept can be fully adequate to them [...]. (KU § 49, AA 05: 314)

Both points show that Kant sees the value of poetry as rooted in its particular connection to aesthetic ideas, which is no surprise given his claim that “the faculty of aesthetic ideas can reveal itself in its full measure” in the art of poetry (KU § 49, AA 05: 314).

The third reason mentioned by Kant should be read against the background of his distinction between poetry and rhetoric, understood as the deceptive “art of persuasion” (KU § 53, AA 05: 327). Kant recalls that poetry produces representations that, while perhaps untrue, are not falsehoods.

The distinction between ‘untrue’ and ‘false’ is related to that between illusion and deception (*Betrug*). Illusion, we read in the notes from one of Kant’s lectures on anthropology, is an appearance that does not deceive but may please (V-Anth/Pillau, AA 25: 745 [WS 1777/78]) and that remains after it has been revealed, whereas a (fraudulent) deception disappears when it is unmasked. Furthermore, while in the case of illusion “we often do not want to know the truth”,¹² in the case of deception “we do indeed want to know the truth, but are not always acquainted with it”. “We often want illusion, but never deception” (cf. V-Anth/Mron, AA 25: 1253 [WS 1784/85]). On the basis of this distinction, Kant suggests that there

is a difference between fictionalizing (*dichten*) in lying and in poetry. The poet goes along with the convention that he is supposed to tell us untruths, but this is a completely different type of untruth than that of the liar or the deceiver (cf. V-Anth/Parow, AA 25: 322 [WS 1772/73]). Poetry does not claim to be true nor to assert, and therefore the poet is cleared of the accusation of lying. Poetry, we read in the *Anthropologie Mrongovius*, “does not trick, for its aim is directed not at the understanding but at entertainment, and in the case of poetry I even want to be tricked” (V-Anth/Mron, AA 25: 1279). Poets do not lie, because they do not assert.

Kant here identifies crucial elements of fictionality that allow us to distinguish lies from fictions, namely the author’s intention and the way a literary text is received. In fact, the claim that poetry is not directed at the understanding can be read as meaning that it is not produced with the aim of having the audience believe what it says; rather, the intention is for the audience to represent what the poem says in their imagination. This way of saying something is what we now call a *fictive utterance*. When we read in the lecture that “in the case of poetry I even want to be tricked”, this seems to be an acknowledgment that such utterances exist because there is a social framework of conventions that makes them possible. Within this framework, an author can write with the intention of having the reader take in her text without believing in the truth of what is said.

This is why, in addition to distinguishing between illusion and deception, Kant can also point to the difference between poetic untruth and error: “In poetic representations, cognitions (*Erkenntnisse*) are untrue (*unwahr*) but are not errors, for one knows that they are untrue”. An error is “set in opposition to truth as a contrary”, for it is not “a mere lack of cognition and of truth, but a hindrance to these as well”, like a space in the soul that is filled up with “erroneous cognitions” (V-Anth/Mron, AA 25: 1224). Since poetic representations do not aim at truth, they do not occupy, as it were, a space in the cognitive storehouse of the mind; they do not belong to it and therefore are not an obstacle to knowledge. On the contrary, as Kant claims, the mere play of poetry can be purposively employed by the understanding for its own business, which is knowledge, because that play harmonizes the powers of cognition as required for cognition in general.

All these observations suggest that, when considering the relation between poetry and cognition, Kant is focused on propositional knowledge and on the concept of truth. As we will see, however, in identifying knowledge with propositional knowledge, he does not appreciate a cognitive possibility that his own comments on Friedrich’s verses seem to imply.

4. AESTHETIC ATTRIBUTES AND PERSPECTIVAL KNOWLEDGE

In § 49, to illustrate his conception of aesthetic ideas, Kant quotes the following verses, attributed to Friedrich II of Prussia:

“Let us depart from life without grumbling and without regretting anything, leaving the world behind us replete with good deeds. Thus does the sun, after it has completed its daily course, still spread a gentle light across the heavens; and the last rays that it sends forth into the sky are its last sighs for the well-being of the world”. (KU § 49, AA 05: 315-316)

Commenting on these lines, he then underscores how “the great king”

animates his idea of reason of a cosmopolitan disposition even at the end of life by means of an attribute that the imagination (in the recollection of everything agreeable in a beautiful summer day, drawn to a close, which a bright evening calls to mind) associates with that representation, and which arouses a multitude of sensations and supplementary representations for which no expression is found. (KU § 49, AA 05: 316)

As we have seen, in Kant’s view, an aesthetic idea that, while seeking to approximate a presentation of an idea of reason, really serves “only to animate the mind by opening up for it the prospect of an immeasurable field of related representations” (KU § 49, AA 05: 315). In the passage just quoted, the ‘animation’ is transferred from the mind to a content of the mind as an idea of reason. Furthermore, the animating function is attributed to an aesthetic attribute, thereby recalling that what yields an aesthetic idea is just an attribute that does not constitute the presentation of a given concept itself but expresses only “the implications connected with it and its affinity with others” and thus represents something “which gives the imagination cause to spread itself over a multitude of related (*verwandten*) representations, which let one think more than one can express in a concept determined by words” (KU § 49, AA 05: 315).

The animation of the poetic speaker’s idea of reason of a cosmopolitan disposition even at the end of life is the result of this imaginative spreading over a multitude of related (*verwandten*) representations. If we look at what the poet actually does, however, it is not misleading to say that, at base, he offers a way to apprehend an aspect of life. The quoted verses are the closing lines of a poem in the title of which it is claimed that it is an imitation of the third book of Lucretius’ *De rerum natura*, a book that deals with fear of death.¹³ Kant seems to suggest that by associating the attitude the virtuous person holds at the end of his life with a sunset on a beautiful day, the poetic speaker invites the reader to imaginatively adopt a way of thinking about this event; he suggests what we might call a “frame” for it that Kant seems to consider both apt and aesthetically pleasurable as a way of characterizing the (focal) subject.¹⁴

The king’s verses may not seem particularly original or inspiring to us; the context in which they are quoted, however, suggests that Kant may have had a different opinion. We are in a section devoted to the concept of genius, and Kant has just stated that poetry derives “the spirit” that animates its works “solely from the aesthetic attributes of the objects, which [...] give the imagination an impetus to think more, although in an undeveloped way, than can be comprehended in a concept, and hence in a determinate linguistic expression” (KU § 49, AA 05: 315).

Kant thus seems to assume that part of the value of these verses depends on the experiential and emotional responses that the framing situation (a sunset on a beautiful summer’s day) evokes and causes us to transfer to the focal subject – a wealth of thoughts and feelings that, while not fully determined by the poem, are “adequate to what it expresses”.¹⁵ If this is the case, then Kant is making a good point here, as in many cases the value of a poem consists, at least in part, in the value of following the thought process that it initiates by offering a perspective on its subject,¹⁶ which also means that that value is not separate from our trying to say what the poem shows, that is, from our trying to determine predicatively the aesthetic presentation of

the poem's theme, even if its connotative richness, its meaningfulness, cannot be conceptually exhausted. I think that this is part of what Kant calls the "animation" of a concept by means of a representation of the imagination.¹⁷

Kant seems to have chosen his example from the repertoire of didactic poetry, a genre that is particularly apt for explaining the relevance of aesthetic ideas, as in that genre the use of images is important for conveying and illustrating abstract content. Friedrich's verses offer us a way of apprehending the theme they deal with. However, it should also be noted that they invite us to adopt that way of apprehending, and in this sense they work as a catalyst for widening the reader's horizon, her relation to herself and the world, and the way in which she perceives, thinks about, and reacts emotionally to an aspect of life. If we read the expression 'subjective perspective' as meaning the way in which one directs oneself toward the world, that is, what one considers important, how one relates to others, etc., we might claim that these verses bring to light aspects of a basic attitude towards the world. Therefore, I would suggest that they promote what we might call 'perspectival knowledge', or, more precisely, knowledge of an experiential aspect that marks the subjective character of human experience as an experience that is always from a point of view.

I admit that this conclusion is open to debate. First, we might question whether Friedrich's verses convey a non-propositional kind of knowledge or, in particular given that they likely belong to the genre of didactic poetry, whether we should look at them as a type of non-propositional forms of communication of knowledge, that is, practical knowledge conveyed via a series of images. This distinction is important, but I will leave the question open.

Second, the use of the term 'knowledge' in the expression 'perspectival knowledge' could be disputed. I have already expressed my doubt that Kant would have been happy to speak of knowledge in this case, since he seems to identify knowledge with propositional knowledge. He prudently claims that aesthetic ideas are indirectly applied to cognition (*zu Erkenntnissen*) (cf. KU § 49, AA 05: 317), but I think that the fact that a poem initiates in readers or listeners a reflective process that makes them explicitly aware of aspects or implications of concepts (or of experiences) that they formerly knew (or grasped) in a more unarticulated way could be considered a cognitive achievement, even if of a non-propositional kind. By associating the abstract concept of reason of a cosmopolitan attitude held at the end of life with the intuition of a sunset on a beautiful summer's day, Friedrich's verses have the capacity to make me think and feel about an aspect of virtuous life in a way that improves my comprehension of it. After all, our understanding of the idea of a virtuous life inevitably has limits that derive from the way in which our concepts and experience make it available to us; part of the meaning of that idea may be left unelaborated.¹⁸ Thus, it might well be that I have never thought about the attitude that the virtuous person would hold when faced with the end of her life. If the king's verses make me feel and think about it as a virtuous person would see it, this should count as an improvement of my understanding of a virtuous life, and if it is, I think that the concept of knowledge should be widened to include non-propositional knowledge (of which perspectival knowledge is a case).

Thus far I have used the term ‘knowledge’ in a rather generic reference to our contemporary notion of knowledge. Kant has a quite specific notion of knowledge (*Wissen*) that he disjuncts from that of cognition (*Erkenntnis*) and this makes it possible to rephrase my point in more Kantian terms, using the word ‘cognition’ instead of ‘knowledge’. As Marcus Willaschek and Eric Watkins have shown, cognition, which in the basic kind of case is “a mental state through which we are aware of the existence and (some of the) general features of objects”, cannot be equated with knowledge, “since it is not an assent” – in Kant’s term a *Fürwahrhalten* – and does not require justification.¹⁹

In the so-called *Jäsche Logik* Kant distinguishes seven “degrees of cognition”, the second of which is “to represent something with consciousness, or *to perceive*”, while the fourth, that stands out from the other insofar as it is labeled ‘to cognize (*cognoscere*)’, is described as “to be acquainted with something with consciousness”, where to be acquainted with something (*noscere*) means “to represent something in comparison with other things, both as to *sameness* and as to *difference*” (LJ, AA 09: 64-65).

In the so-called *Stufenleiter* passage of the first *Critique*, Kant introduces a slightly different conception of cognition. Here, having defined ‘perception’ as a “representation with consciousness”, he describes as cognition (*cognitio*) “an objective perception”, which is “either an intuition or a concept (*intuitus vel conceptus*). The former is immediately related to the object and is singular; the latter is mediate, by means of a mark, which can be common to several things” (A 320/B 376-377).

According to this passage, a cognition is any conscious representation that is “objective”, namely related to an object either immediately or mediately. A narrower conception of cognition is introduced prior to the Transcendental Deduction of the Categories. Kant writes: “there are two conditions under which alone the cognition of an object is possible: first, *intuition*, through which it is given, but only as appearance; second, *concept*, through which an object is thought that corresponds to this intuition” (A 92/B 125).

Maybe in a loose sense, the poetic example that I have discussed satisfies the two conditions that Willaschek and Watkins call “a *givenness*-condition” and a “*thought*-condition”.²⁰ Admittedly, one can have some doubts in particular about the givenness-condition. In its most general sense ‘givenness’ seems to mean “that an object is made available to the mind so that one can be aware of the existence of the object and (at least of) its features”.²¹ The paradigmatic case of givenness is that in which an empirical object is represented in empirical intuition. However, I think that we can apply this condition in a more relaxed way, e.g., making room for the possibility of an encounter with the object not only through our senses, but also through imagination, which would allow a kind of ‘object’ such as a particular attitude of another person to be given to us.²²

There would be another advantage in conceiving of the cognitive benefits of poetry in terms of (Kantian) cognition instead of knowledge. It concerns the issue of truth. Propositional knowledge is assessed in terms of truth and falsity, where truth is conceived of as correspondence with reality. Yet truth and falsity are properties of propositions and seem to be out of place in the

case of non-propositional knowledge or better of non-conceptual representational content.²³ But they do not seem to be at issue with regard to Kantian cognition as well, since Kant does not seem to draw “any explicit connection between cognition in the narrow sense and truth”.²⁴ In speaking of perspectival cognition instead of perspectival knowledge we would preserve the sense of contact with reality that we connect to knowledge, while making inappropriate the question about the truth-criteria for this cognition. Obviously, this does not mean that we have no criteria for evaluating this contact.

Let us go back to Friedrich's verses to clarify this point. They present what it would be like to leave the world the way a virtuous person would, how such an event might be lived from the position of such a person; that is, they try to convey cognition of the emotional quality of that point of view. If truth and falsity are out of place in cases like this but they nevertheless involve contact with an aspect of reality, one way to assess this contact may be in terms of the appropriateness of the cognition conveyed by the text, by which I mean the extent to which the presentation of the situation goes well, such that it becomes accessible to others through imagination.²⁵ If the presentation of the ‘object’ is accurate enough to allow reference to it and to make it available to one's mind, then cognition results from it.

This brings us to an important point about Kant's poetic example, that is, the central role played by the imagination. The imagination is involved not only in finding the aesthetic attribute that gives the aesthetic idea but also, this time on the part of the reader, in making present the experience suggested by the verses – for example the peacefulness, the absence of fear with which a person who is conscious of having done her duty can depart from life. By associating this human situation with a sunset on a beautiful summer's day, the text suggests a type of experience that the reader should complete and reproduce through the imagination, through her background knowledge and her stock of experiences. This makes it possible to present this experience in its liveliness. To be sure, to imaginatively present to oneself an experience that the text makes accessible is not to live it.²⁶ On this imaginative basis, one cannot claim knowledge by acquaintance. Nevertheless, in the “multitude of sensations and supplementary representations” evoked by the aesthetic attribute there is epistemic value, because through them one is put in contact with a subjective aspect of reality that may not have been cognized to one before or of which one was not aware.

To sum up, given that Kant quotes Friedrich's verses in a section devoted to genius and to describing a talent of the imagination, he presumably viewed them as aesthetically valuable. However, it seems possible to view them as epistemically valuable as well; by making an experience accessible, they offer a possibly new way of looking at a decisive moment in life. Crucially, they do this in a way that is peculiar to poetry, namely, through an aesthetic attribute. Therefore, it does not seem misleading to suppose that their aesthetic value fosters their cognitive value, and vice versa.²⁷ After all, the more I engage in the process of thinking and feeling occasioned by the aesthetic attribute, the more my mind is animated, and the more deeply I access an ethical perspective on life.

5. ON POETIC MEANING AND PROSODY

Before concluding, I would like to add something regarding Kant's conception of poetry. Friedrich's verses help to illuminate an important aspect of poetry that is implied in what I have just said. I'm thinking of the fact that the meaning of a poem cannot be reduced to sentence meaning: poetry (often) communicates meaning figuratively, imaginatively. Also for this reason we tend to say that poetry indirectly *shows* more than it directly *says*. Kant was well aware of this feature of poetry, given his conception of the poet as a "painter of ideas". In the third *Critique*, this view, which echoes the ancient *topos* that assimilates poetry and painting, is not directly stated. Explaining the pictorial arts as involving "the expression of ideas in sensible intuition", Kant adds in brackets: "not through representations of the mere imagination, which are evoked through words" (KU § 51, AA 05: 321-322). As the preceding paragraphs deal with the arts of speech, this remark can reasonably be taken as referring to them.²⁸ If this is correct, then Kant is assuming that in poetry words function as a sort of trigger of inner representations of the imagination, conjuring meaning-rich images that evoke thoughts and feelings and that promote a search for meaning which, to use Kant's words, "sets the faculty of intellectual ideas (reason) into motion" (KU § 49, AA 05: 315). Of course, the activation of the imagination does not imply that it generates mental images. Understanding a poem may involve generating images, but it does not depend on it. However, Kant seems to assume that the images evoked by the words of a poem are bearers of poetic meaning.

While the evocation of intuitions through words is important, Kant does not overlook the fact that poetry also has musical features. If only in passing, I wish to recall that Kant was fully aware of the role of prosody. In fact, he claims that each poem requires two things, namely "syllabic meter (*Sylbenmaas*)" – that is, the dynamic relation between sounds, through which poetry imitates music – and "rhyme (*Reim*)".²⁹ On his view, rhyme and rhythm make poetry (at least insofar as it is read aloud) similar to music.³⁰ Thus, the art to which he attributes "the highest rank of all" and whose value does not lie in its perceptual properties alone may also offer the "enjoyment" of music, that is, of the art that, more than any other, "moves the mind in more manifold and, though only temporarily, in deeper ways" (KU § 53, AA 05: 328).³¹

This suggests two things. The first is that, in the case of poetry, both the transitive and the intransitive use of the term 'expression' play a role. Kant could therefore subscribe to Angela Leighton's claim that "a poem expresses something [...] and at the same time [...] is expressive, as if with musical dynamic".³² The second thing that is suggested by this consideration of the musical aspect of poetry is that this aspect, no less than the "ideas" both "fantastic" and "rich in thought" evoked by the words of a poem, may impinge on the nature of the thought process that a poem can prompt. What I mean is that this process, rather than being one of logical connection, may be one of affinity of representations and, to use Leighton's words, "of sound and syntax, rhythm and accent, of sense sparked by the collocation and connotation of words".³³ If, as Kant is reported to have said, "rhyme is a melody" and gives verses more interconnection (V-Anth/Mron, AA 25: 1282), then it contributes, as melody does in music, to expressing "the aesthetic ideas of a coherent whole of an unutterable fullness of thought" (KU § 49, AA 05: 329). In other words, it may be part of what gives a poem its aesthetic value

and perhaps, moving the mind “in deeper ways”, its capacity to make a subjective experience accessible.

6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

As noted at the beginning of this paper, according to Kant’s view the question is not whether poetry can be used as a source of information or can convey cognitive content. The question is whether having this value contributes to its value *qua* art. Kant claims nothing of the sort. However, his conception permits a cautiously affirmative answer to the question, given that the source of the aesthetic value of a work, namely the aesthetic ideas it expresses, may also be the source of possible cognitive content. Kant describes the mental disposition effected by an aesthetic idea in terms akin to those he uses to describe the state of mind on which taking pleasure in the beautiful rests (cf. KU §12, AA 05: 222 and § 49, AA 05: 313), and this allows him to equate beauty with the expression of aesthetic ideas (cf. KU § 51, AA 05: 320). However, as I hope to have shown by considering Friedrich’s verses, there are cases in which the pleasure in the beautiful rests on the mental activity of making present the experience the verses are about.

In cases like this, for a work to strike us as beautiful is for it to make available a wealth of thoughts and feelings that convey a form of cognition – not propositional knowledge, but that imaginative thought³⁴ that puts us in contact with, or engages us in reflection on, aspects of reality that would otherwise remain hidden. Does this cognitive value affect aesthetic value? Does it contribute to the value of the work *qua* art? I would very tentatively claim that it does, but also insofar as this involvement in the imaginative presentation of an experience is precisely that fuller engagement in the activity of the mind that Kant considers the source of the pleasure offered by poetry.

Abstract: It is natural to interpret Kant’s claim that the poet, while playing “with ideas”, provides “nourishment to the understanding” (KU § 51, AA 05: 321) as an attribution of cognitive value to poetry. Given that he ascribes to poetry “the highest rank of all” among the arts (KU § 53, AA 05:326), it is also natural to assume that having that value contributes to the high artistic value of works of poetry. However, that Kant really endorsed this view would appear to be disputable, on the one hand because he explicitly claims that both in nature and art, “that is beautiful which pleases in the mere judging (neither in sensation nor through a concept)” (KU § 44, AA 05: 306), and this may have prevented him from assigning a role to cognitive values in promoting the overall aesthetic value of works of poetry; on the other hand, because he maintains that “an *aesthetic idea* cannot become a cognition, because it is an *intuition* (of the imagination) for which a concept can never be found adequate” (KU § 57 Anm. I, AA 05: 342).

In this paper, it will be argued that Kant should have been less decided on this, all the more so because the poetic examples that he discusses seem to be cases where aesthetic value and cognitive value relate to one another. In particular, Kant’s comments on verses by Friedrich II show that poetry can convey a kind of cognition – in the case in question, the cognition that we now call ‘perspectival knowledge’. In the paper, the thesis that poetry has cognitive value is not presented as a general claim but as amounting to the statement that some poetic works can convey knowledge and this contributes to their overall value. As for the kind of knowledge at issue, what Kant says about poetry is of help for understanding that this knowledge is to be distinguished from scientific or philosophical knowledge in part because the relation between text and knowledge is not that of communication or information, but of *Darstellung* or presentation. Poetic knowledge – if it is allowed to use this expression – is conveyed less through a propositional saying than through a demonstrative showing.

Keywords: Kant, poetry, aesthetic ideas, knowledge, artistic value.

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NOTAS / NOTES

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² Kant's works are quoted according to the usual abbreviations. References to the *Critique of Pure Reason* are given to the A and/ or B texts; in all the other cases they are to the Akademie-Ausgabe page numbers. Translations are from *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant* (general editors: Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood).

³ This latter claim suggests that Kant partly advocated an essentialist conception of artistic value, namely the view that artistic value is a unitary kind of value – the kind of value that he summed up in the expression "pleasure of reflection" (ibid.) – and that this value is shared by all works that are valued as art across all artforms. I say "partly" because an essentialist would also claim that the value at issue is unique to art, while Kant, although he distinguishes between the beauty of nature as "a beautiful thing" and the beauty of art as "a beautiful representation of a thing" (KU § 48, AA 05: 311), thinks that in both cases beauty is attributed to the object on account of its form.

⁴ I owe this point to Gabriel 2015, p. 131.

⁵ I have here adapted to Kant an argument borrowed from Lamarque 2009, p. 265.

⁶ On Kant's division of the arts, see Mathisen 2008.

⁷ What risks going unnoticed in this way of explaining things is that insofar as we try to conceptualize what is intuitively given, cognition is brought about, or, to use Kant's expression with regard to poetry, "food" is given for thought. It is worth recalling that Kant's claim is that an aesthetic idea is a representation of the imagination "that occasions much thinking though without it being possible for any determinate thought, i.e., *concept*, to be adequate to it, which, consequently, no language fully attains or can make intelligible" (KU § 49, AA 05: 314). One cannot rule out the possibility that, as a result of the effort of making an aesthetic idea intelligible, one might also arrive at propositions that are capable of truth. In or through the process of thought occasioned by it, a truth can be discovered or communicated. This is a possibility that I do not pursue here.

⁸ A part of a concept is a note (*Merkmal*) of a concept ('living being' is a note of the concept 'human being'; it is more general and therefore more comprehensive than the concept of which it is a note; in fact, 'living being' contains all other living beings besides human beings). By contrast, a part of an intuition is a real part of an intuition. As Gottfried Gabriel points out, while concepts are subject to the logic of super- and subordination, intuitions are subject to the logic of part and whole (cf. Gabriel 2015, p. 103).

⁹ I use 'interesting' in a loose sense. However, as Alessandro Nannini has shown, the term had a rather precise meaning in coeval philosophy. The capacity of something to stimulate much thinking represented the aesthetic ground of the interesting (cfr. Nannini 2022, pp. 93-151).

¹⁰ On this see Fiddes and Bader (ed. by), 2013.

¹¹ A further reason for the high ranking of poetry could be the following. When introducing the principle of his division of the arts, Kant observes that "only the combination" of words, gesture and tone "constitutes the speaker's complete communication. For thought, intuition, and sensation are thereby conveyed to the other simultaneously and united" (KU § 51, AA 05: 320). As we will see, poetic language also has figurative and musical features. Therefore, poetry can come close to complete communication on the part of the (poetic) speaker. In *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (1798), Kant points out that poetry wins the prize "over rhetoric" because it is "at the same time music (singable) and tone; a sound that is pleasant in itself, which mere speech is not". But, he adds, "poetry wins the prize [...] over every other beautiful art" because "poets also speak to the understanding [...]. A good poem is the most penetrating means of enlivening the mind" (Anth § 71, AA 07: 247).

¹² "From poets I want only entertainment; but whether the thing is true or not does not concern me" (V-Anth/Mron, AA 25: 1281).

¹³ As is recalled in the editorial notes of the English translation of the third *Critique*, the lines quoted by Kant (in German) are the conclusion of Friedrich's poem *Au Maréchal Keith, Imitation du troisième livre de Lucrèce: "Sur les vaines terreurs de la mort et les frayeurs d'une autre vie"*. The original reads: "Oui, finissons sans trouble, et mourons sans regrets, / En laissant l'Univers comblé de nos bienfaits. / Ainsi l'Astre du jour, au bout de sa carrière, / Répand sur l'horizon une douce lumière, / Et les derniers rayons qu'il darde dans les air/Sont les derniers soupirs qu'il donne à l'Univers" (Kant 2000, p. 382).

¹⁴ I am here applying concepts and terms suggested by Camp 2009, pp. 110-111, 118.

¹⁵ Angela Breitenbach uses this expression when referring to art in general (see Breitenbach 2020, p. 74).

¹⁶ Lamarque 2015, p. 31 makes this point.

¹⁷ Kant also quotes the following lines by the poet Johann Philipp Lorenz Withof: "The sun streamed forth, as tranquillity streams from virtue". In this case, he wants to show the opposite, namely that "even an intellectual concept can serve as the attribute of a representation of sense, and so animate the latter by means of the idea of the supersensible", but it can do this, he adds, "only insofar as the aesthetic, which is subjectively attached to the consciousness of the latter, is used to this end". What Kant claims is that thinking of the rising sun in light of the idea of tranquillity streaming from virtue makes the former representation more lively, but only if we use the "aesthetic", which is subjectively attached to consciousness of the supersensible, namely the "multitude of sublime and calming feelings" that consciousness of virtue, "when one puts oneself, even if only in thought, in the place of a virtuous person, spreads in the mind" (KU § 49, AA 05: 316). If I'm not wrong, on Kant's view the poet offers a particularly vivid image of the rising sun by suggesting that one sees it in a way that is similar to the rising of inner peace from consciousness of virtue, namely by spreading over the natural scene the feelings that accompany consciousness of virtue.

¹⁸ In general, when we try to describe what it is like to grasp a particular moral value or moral attitude, and what follows from it, we can arrive at detailed descriptions, but the corresponding perspective, and the experience of living according to that value or that attitude, is not to be equated with these descriptions. Descriptions are doomed to be gappy at least for two reasons: first, because the phenomenon may be richer than the description; second, because a description, although accurate, is not equivalent to the phenomenon.

¹⁹ Willaschek and Watkins 2020, pp. 3196-3197. According to Willaschek and Watkins for Kant knowledge is "a kind of assent, or taking to be true, and that assent must be based on an objective ground, since knowledge is a mental act that requires justification. In addition, the kind of justification the assent is based on must be such that it guarantees truth" (ivi, p. 3208).

²⁰ Both conditions are mirrored in the passage from the *Menschenkunde* that I have quoted in the first section of the paper, where it is stated that both intuitions and thoughts must be combined in poetry.

²¹ Willaschek and Watkins 2020, p. 3200.

²² Kant himself somehow relaxes the givenness-condition, when, as Willaschek and Watkins note, he allows objects such as mathematical objects and empirical objects, like magnetic matter, that we cannot perceive, to be given (cf. Willaschek and Watkins 2020, p. 3202).

²³ It is also worth recalling that the term ‘truth’ may be out of place in literature in general, since literature aims not to represent reality but to shape a new reality that includes imagination. As we have seen, Kant endorses this view. For Kant, literature does just what the imagination “as a productive cognitive faculty” does – namely it creates “as it were, another nature, out of the material which the real one gives it” (KU § 49, AA 05: 314). When a fictional work presents the world from a particular point of view, structuring it according to a different model in which, e.g., certain qualities and nuances are given prominence, it is engaged in a similar operation. On a very small scale, this is also what Friedrich’s verses do. On Kant’s concept of creative imagination, see Matherne 2016 and Zöller 2019.

²⁴ Willaschek and Watkins 2020, p. 3202.

²⁵ I here follow Gabriel 2015, pp. 130-140, and Vendrell Ferran 2018, p. 217.

²⁶ That this presentation does not amount to the production of a real presence is emphasized by Gabriel 2015, p. 137 and Vendrell Ferran 2018, p. 213. The poetic presentation of feelings or moods is rather different from causally arousing them. It is a fictionally making-present that enables reflection and that can make these mental states understandable.

²⁷ Whereas, according to Kant, the verses by Friedrich II invite us to imagine a situation which, by arousing a multitude of sensations and supplementary representations, animates an idea of reason, those by Withof involve a different use of the imagination, namely imaginatively putting oneself “in the place of a virtuous person” (KU § 49, AA 05: 316). In this case, the reader is invited to broaden her experiential horizon, imagining the perspective of a virtuous person and then assuming it, that is, taking up her internal point of view, under the particular aspect of the feeling it arouses – or, in Kant’s words, under the aspect of “the aesthetic, which is subjectively attached to the consciousness” of an intellectual concept (KU § 49, AA 05: 316). This feeling is then spread over the sense representation to animate it.

²⁸ In the *Anthropology*, Kant claims that “the painter of ideas alone is the master of beautiful art” (Anth § 71, AA 07: 248), and in the *Anthropologie* Busolt (WS 1788/89) the poet is described as trying to find images “to approximate more and more the concepts of the understanding” (V-Anth/Busolt, AA 25: 1446). This approximation is presented as a perfection (*Vollkommenheit*) that greatly helps the understanding: examples and intuitions enliven concepts, giving them force and clarity, and can thereby make them interesting (cf. V-Anth/Busolt, AA 25: 1444). To be sure, “aesthetic distinctness through examples” may improve “understandability”, but it is “of a completely different kind than distinctness through concepts as marks”; “examples are simply not marks and do not belong to the concept as parts but, as intuitions, to the use of the concept” (Log, AA 9: 62). It is worth recalling that one of the reasons why Kant admires Milton is that the latter always strove to provide intuitions. When he claims in the third *Critique* that the poet “ventures to make sensible rational ideas of invisible beings, the kingdom of the blessed, the kingdom of hell, eternity, creation, etc.” (KU § 49, AA 05: 314), he is presumably thinking of Milton, whom he considered a genius and associated with Shakespeare: “Milton, Shakespeare are geniuses” (V-Anth/Busolt, AA 25: 1497).

²⁹ Kant was perfectly aware that the quantity of syllables is less determined in modern languages, and this contributed to the importance given to rhyme: “Rhyme is a melody, but only in the West”, where it is now “indispensable[.] for we have no orderly prosody, but instead can arbitrarily use various words. Hence rhyme serves to give our verses more interconnection. Rhyme also helps the memory”. However, Kant acknowledged that it is also possible to compose (*dichten*) without rhyme and “syllabic measure”, as in “poetic prose” (V-Anth/Mron, AA 25: 1282; cf. also V-Anth/Mensch, AA 25: 992; Anth § 71, AA 07, 248).

³⁰ He also suggests that the “art of tone (*Tonkunst*)” may “very naturally be united with” poetry (KU § 53, AA 05: 328).

³¹ As already noted, that musicality contributes to the aesthetic value of poetry is claimed in Anth § 71, AA 07: 247.

³² Leighton 2015, p. 174.

³³ Ivi, p. 178.

³⁴ I borrow the expression ‘imaginative thought’ from John 2007, p. 229.

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