THEORIES AND METHODOLOGIES

Ta'ajjub: A Rationalist Aesthetic

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The inquiry into the nature of beauty as it developed in eighteenth-century German philosophy under the term *aesthetics* theorized the beautiful as a judgment of taste and the senses in contradistinction to cognition and reason. Indeed, the term *aesthetics* was first introduced in 1735 by Alexander Baumgarten from the Greek αισθητικός (*aisthētikós*), meaning "of sense perception," as a counterpart to thought and logic (Guyer 25). Accordingly, the aesthetic object produces a feeling in the perceiver that leads one to deem it beautiful. In classical Arabic culture, aesthetic judgment also depended on an emotional experience that beauty produces in the perceiver. However, the theorization of this experience in Arabic philosophy and literary theory was instead rooted in reason and logic. And it is through an understanding of تعجّب (*taʿajjub*; "wonder"), which is linked with discovery, that the classical Arabic conception of poetic beauty gave rise to a rationalist theory of aesthetics by the eleventh century. Not only does *taʿajjub* represent an alternative way of conceptualizing beauty—one that attributes aesthetic experience to cognition—but the rationalist approach through which *taʿajjub* was theorized also lends it a degree of universality that makes it especially portable beyond Arabic.

It is the notion of wonder—as an experience that not only is provoked by a lack of knowledge of the hidden and inexplicable but also results in a drive toward obtaining that knowledge—that underlies the aesthetic theories developed in the eleventh century by Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā; d. 1037) and ʿAbd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī (d. 1078). While the former developed his aesthetics within philosophy through an understanding of Aristotle's *Poetics* as part of logic, the latter wrote within the field of Arabic grammar and literary theory. Nevertheless, Avicennan rationalism permeates al-Jurjānī's analysis of the poetic. This allows al-Jurjānī to develop a rationalist aesthetic theory that is

rooted in the pleasures of intellectual reasoning and discovery—an aesthetic I describe as one of *taʿajjub*, which is in fact one of several words al-Jurjānī uses to describe the experience of the poetic. After al-Jurjānī, this aesthetic comes to define classical Arabic literary theory for centuries to come.[1]

Classical Arabic lexicons define wonder—عجب (*ʿajab* or *taʿajjub*)—as a reaction of عجب وإنكار (*ʿajab wa-inkār*; "awe and disbelief") experienced as a result of seeing something unexpected, rare, unfamiliar, unusual, mysterious, magnificent, or obscure whose cause is unknown (Ibn Manẓūr). At the same time, *taʿajjub* also triggers a cognitive search for an explanation. The endeavor to document the marvels (*ʿajāʾib*) of the world in encyclopedic works, such as—most famously—Zakariyyā al-Qazwīnī's thirteenth-century عجائب المخلوقات وغرائب الموجودات (*ʿAjāʾib al-makhlūqāt wa-gharāʾib al-mawjūdāt*; *Wonders of Things Created and Oddities of Matters Existent*), was not only motivated by a desire to give the reader the thrill of learning about strange and rare matters, but it was also a call to contemplate the cause behind them: God and the nature of God.[2] *Taʿajjub* entails the intellectual search for the hidden through the visible and for an explanation of the extraordinary, as Fāṭima Mubārak has argued (37–38).[3]

Al-Jurjānī establishes this sense of *taʿajjub* in his influential work entitled أسرار البلاغة (*Asrār al-balāghah*; *The Secrets of Eloquence*), where he observes:[4]

إنّ أُنْس النفوس موقوفٌ على أن تُخرجها مِن خفيٍّ إلى جليٍّ وتأتيها بصريح بعد مكنيٍّ وأن تردَّها في الشيء تُعلَّمها إيّاه إلى شيء آخر هي بشأنه أعلم وثقتُها به في المعرفة أحكم

(108 [9.1])

The pleasure of the soul is based on its being lifted from the hidden to the visible, being presented with the plain after the enigmatic, its being taught an idea through something else which it knows better and more intimately.

According to al-Jurjānī, pleasure in general lies in moving from ignorance to knowledge. Pleasure resulting from beautiful poetry, in turn, likewise arises from an experience of being "lifted from the

hidden to the visible." Because the aesthetic pleasure that al-Jurjānī describes is so tightly bound with an experience of gaining knowledge and discovery, I have argued in my book *Arabic Poetics* that this pleasure is more specifically an experience of wonder in the above sense of *taʿajjub*.

For al-Jurjānī, the main ways of producing this effect in poetry include the use of comparison in its various forms (simile, analogy, and metaphor) and the distancing of meaning through implication or allusion (*kināyah*).[5] One reason a simile is judged to be beautiful, according to al-Jurjānī, is that it has the potential to make an abstract idea more concretely known by comparing it to something tangible, perceptible. As established in logic, concrete things that can be perceived through the external senses give rise to a primary, instinctual kind of knowledge.[6] Such knowledge is easier to grasp than that which requires inference. He explains:

ومعلوم أن العلم الأول أتى النفس أوّلا من طريق الحواسّ والطباع ثم من جهة النظر والرويّة فهو إذن أمسّ بها رحما

(*Asrār* 109 [9.1])

It is known that primary knowledge comes to the soul first through the senses and instinct, then through examination and reflection. It is therefore more closely relatable to the soul.

Following this observation, he argues that comparing an abstract idea to a concrete one will produce an experience of discovery and pleasure:

وإذ نقلتها في الشيء عن المدرك بمَثّله عن المدرك بالعقل المحض وبالفكرة في القلب إلى ما يُدرك بالحواسّ أو يعلَم بالطبع وعلى حد الضرورة فأنت كمن يتوسّل إليها للغريب بالحميم وللجديد الصحبة بالحبيب القديم. فأنت إذن مع الشعر وغير الشعر إذا وقع المعنى في نفسك غير ممثّل ثم مثّله كمن يخبر عن شيء من وراء حجاب ثم يكشف عنه *الحجاب* ويقول: ها هو ذا فأبصره تجده على ما وصفتُ

(109 [9.1]; emphasis added)

When you move the soul, vis-à-vis a thing through its likeness, from the realm of pure intellect and inner thoughts to what is perceived through the senses and learned instinctually and by necessity, you are like one who appeals on behalf of a stranger through an intimate friend and on behalf of a new

acquaintance through an old friend. Hence, when someone places an idea in your mind—whether in the form of poetry or otherwise—first without an analogy then with one, *it is as if he tells you something from behind a veil and then removes it*, saying: There it is! Look at it and you will find that it is as I have described!

Comparing an abstract idea to something that can be immediately grasped through the senses, in other words, has the potential to produce an "aha" moment where "the puzzling snaps into sharp focus and is grasped with pleasure," as Philip Fisher has so aptly put it in his description of the wonder and delight one experiences at the moment of discovery (21).

To illustrate this process of discovery through a tangible likeness, al-Jurjānī discusses the following verse attributed to the early-Islamic-era poet Majnūn Laylā, so called because he was driven mad (*majnūn*) by his love for Laylā:

فَأَصْبَحْتُ مِن لَيْلَى الغَدَاةَ كَقَابِضٍ   عَلَى المَاءِ خَانَتْهُ فُرُوجُ الأَصَابِعِ
(qtd. in *Asrār* 110 [9.1])

By the morning, I became in relation to Layla like one whose fist
was betrayed—when trying to grasp water—by the gaps between his fingers.

In this verse, the poet expresses the unattainability of his beloved Laylā—an abstract notion—by illustrating the idea through a visual analogue. As a result, al-Jurjānī explains, the poet makes it more concretely known. It would be even more effective if the poet were next to a river performing the action as he makes the comparison, al-Jurjānī suggests (113 [9.4]). What renders the image pleasurable is not the act of seeing in and of itself; our pleasure does not stem from an appreciation of the sight of water passing through the gaps between the fingers. Rather, it is the role that visual perception plays in securing our knowledge of an abstract idea and "removing the veil" from it that causes the pleasurable *ta'ajjub* of discovery.

An experience of *ta'ajjub* can also take place when meaning is intentionally obscured and distanced such that the listener must go through a

process of reasoning and inference in order to discover it. Following this logic, al-Jurjānī argues that expression by implication (*kināyah*) or metaphor (*isti'ārah*) is more beautiful than something expressed explicitly or literally:[7]

وقد أجمع الجميع على أن الكناية أبلغ من الإفصاح والتعريض أوقع من التصريح وأن للاستعارة مزية وفضلا وأن المجاز أبدا أبلغ من الحقيقة
(*Dalā'il* 70)

Everyone agrees that implying something is more eloquent than being explicit, insinuating it is better than saying it plainly, metaphor has more distinction and merit, and figurative speech is always more eloquent than literal speech.

This is because an explicit statement is grasped immediately and does not necessitate a process of discovery, whereas grasping secondary ideas that a word or phrase suggests metaphorically or implies indirectly requires a mental process of reasoning and inference and hence of discovery. Metaphor and implication, in other words, help to hide and distance the intended meaning in a way that an explicit statement is not able to do. This gives the listener the opportunity to uncover the meaning and hence to go through a process of moving "from the hidden to the visible," instead of being handed the meaning directly.

A typical example found in classical Arabic sources of implied meaning (كناية; *kināyah*) is the description of someone as كثير رماد القدر ("having abundant ashes under his cauldron"). One must reason that a person who has a lot of ashes under the cauldron cooks a lot; cooking a lot means feeding many people; feeding many people, in turn, implies generosity: ergo, the subject of the *kināyah* is being described as generous. One must go through a process of reasoning to arrive at this conclusion. By pointing to a symptom of the person's generosity (the abundant ashes), the *kināyah* gives the listener a clue from which to deduce the original cause of this attribute. This process of reasoning and discovery is what produces the delights of *ta'ajjub* in the listener; this is what makes the phrase poetic. If one simply stated instead, "He is generous," the

intended meaning would be handed out directly and there would be no process of discovery. The statement would not be poetic.

As later theorists of بلاغة (*balāghah*; "eloquence") explained, an expression is poetic when its intended meaning is an "intellected" one (دلالة عقليّة; *dalālah ʿaqliyyah*) that goes beyond its lexical signification (دلالة وضعيّة; *dalālah waḍʿiyyah*).[8] Intellection takes place when an expression's literal meaning points to another meaning through some association, be it a similarity, as in metaphor, or some other connection, such as implying something by way of referring to one of its symptoms or consequences, as in the example of the *kināyah* above. The link between a word and its lexical meaning, on the other hand, is an arbitrary one set by convention, which one understands simply by knowing a language and which is grasped without a process of inference. Only expressions that require their meaning to be intellected allow for an experience of discovery and hence *taʿajjub*. The thirteenth-century theorist Muḥammad ibn ʿAlī al-Jurjānī (no relation to ʿAbd al-Qāhir) says this perfectly:

> مزية الدلالة العقلية على الوضعية الصرفة . . . أن الدلالة إذا أسندت إلى
> تصرف العقل كان المدلول أوقع في النفس وألذّ في الطبع.
> (249)

> The merit of intellected signification over that which is purely lexical . . . is that when the meaning depends on the handling of the mind, the signified meaning is more striking to the soul, and more pleasing to one's nature.

Thus, expressions that signify their meaning indirectly are more beautiful precisely because they require a process of mental reasoning.

What about metaphors that become so common that they cease to elicit this sort of reasoning and discovery from the audience? one might ask. There are other ways of distancing meaning, defamiliarizing known metaphors, and intensifying the experience of discovery they elicit. One such way is by injecting it with the fantastic or make-believe (تخييل; *takhyīl*). Take the metaphor of rain, for example, which in classical Arabic poetry was synonymous

with generosity. The eighth-century Abbasid poet Abū Nuwās puts a new twist on the hackneyed metaphor in the following verse:

> إنَّ السَّحابَ لَتَسْتَحي إذا نَظَرَتْ   إلى نَداك فقاسَتْهُ بما فيها
> (qtd. in al-Jurjānī, *Asrār* 317 [20.4])

> The clouds would be truly ashamed if they looked at your rain and measured it against their own

By saying إنّ السّحاب لَتستحي ("the clouds would be ashamed"), al-Jurjānī explains, the poet

> يوهمك . . . أن السحاب حيٌّ يعرف ويعقل وأنه يقيس فيضه بفيض كفّ
> الممدوح فيخزى ويخجل
> (*Asrār* 317 [20.4])

> gives you the illusion . . . that the clouds are living, conscious beings, able to reason, and that they measure their bounty against that of the hand of the eulogized person so that they become humiliated and ashamed.

By resorting to the fantastic, the poet develops an unexpected, novel idea out of the hackneyed metaphor of rain. The fantastic in this case also involves a kind of trickery that leads the listener to the main point in a roundabout way: the listener is obliged to make believe that the clouds feel shame in order to arrive—by accepting this false premise—at the notion of generosity which the poet ultimately intends to convey. Al-Jurjānī explains that while the verse in essence employs a mere comparison (the person's generosity is like the rain),

> كُنّي لك عنه وخودعتَ فيه وأُتيت به من طريق الخلابة في مسلك
> السحر ومذهب التخييل
> (316 [20.4])

> it was expressed indirectly, so that you are tricked and enchanted by way of magic and make-believe.

By tapping into the realm of the fantastic, the poet is able to breathe new life into the overused metaphor through the creation of further conditions that distance the intended meaning, which, in turn, make the audience go through an experience of inference, discovery, and hence *taʿajjub*.[9]

If, by employing make-believe, the meaning of the metaphor is distanced through the use of a fantastic idea and its aesthetic effectiveness is thus enhanced, doing the opposite reduces its aesthetic effectiveness (see Harb, *Arabic Poetics* 195). Thus, if you state that "so-and-so's generosity is like the rain" or "is the rain," the meaning requires less inference than if you directly refer to generosity with the metaphor of rain as in the example above.[10] Following this logic, al-Jurjānī says that metaphors are inherently more beautiful than similes because similes, by stating both sides of the comparison, make metaphors explicit and hence more obvious and less wonder-evoking.

However, not all similes work well as metaphors. Only things strongly associated with a particular characteristic can stand in for that characteristic metaphorically (e.g., rain for generosity or a lion for courage). A simile that is based on a less obvious similarity would not work well if redacted as a metaphor. Nevertheless, it can also have a wondrous effect. Here again, beauty arises from the necessity to search for and discover the intended meaning, which in this case is the similarity suggested by the comparison. The less obvious this similarity is, al-Jurjānī argues, the more beautiful the simile. In this regard, he observes:

ومن المركوز في الطبع أن الشيء إذا نيل بعد الطلب له أو الاشتياق إليه
ومعاناة الحنين نحوه كان نيله أحلى وبالمزية أولى
(*Asrār* 126 [9.9])

It is human nature that if something is gained after searching, effort, and yearning, its attainment is more beautiful and pleasurable.

Thus, the greater the effort required to grasp the suggested similarity, the more pleasurable its eventual discovery will be.

One way of rendering a simile puzzling or unexpected and thus requiring of more effort is by finding a similarity in extreme difference or even opposition. The paradoxical nature of such a proposition naturally means that it requires more thought to grasp as opposed to ones based on an assertion of obviously shared characteristics such

as color or shape (see Harb, *Arabic Poetics* 144–47). Al-Jurjānī also relies on two further principles about the nature of knowledge processing to argue for additional ways of rendering a simile strange and less straightforward. First, from the principle that the whole is more easily graspable than particulars, al-Jurjānī argues that

وكلما كان أوغل في التفصيل كانت الحاجة إلى التوقف والتذكّر أكثر
والفقر إلى التأمل والتمهّل أشدّ
(*Asrār* 147 [10.2])

the more something delves into details, the greater is the need to pause and recollect, and the more necessary it is to reflect and slow down.

Second, from the principle that infrequently seen things are less readily accessible in our memory, he argues that rarity also forces one to slow down and contemplate to grasp the meaning of the simile. He observes:

مما يقتضي كون الشيء على الذكر وثبوت صورته في النفس أن يكثر
دورانه على العيون ويدوم تردده في مواقع الأبصار وأن تدركه
الحواسّ في كل وقت أو في أغلب الأوقات. وبالعكس وهو أنّ من سبب
بُعد ذلك الشيء عن أن يقع ذكره بالخاطر وتعرض صورته في النفس
قلة رؤيته وأنّه مما يحس بالفينة بعد الفينة وفي الفرط بعد الفرط وعلى
طريق الندرة.
(151 [10.3])

What makes something immediately accessible in the memory and its image secure in the soul is that it is frequently seen, constantly observed, and sensed all or most of the time. Conversely, the reason something is far from thought and the imagination is the infrequency with which it is seen and that it is sensed only now and then, occasionally, or rarely.

Finding similarity in difference, adding details, and conjuring rare images, therefore, are all ways of making similes unusual, unexpected, and strange, requiring more effort to grasp.[11]

What kinds of things would a scholar in the eleventh-century Islamicate world have perceived as rare? One might rightly assume that a judgment of rarity depends on the cultural and historical context as well as on individual experience. However, al-Jurjānī, true to his rational approach, does not

deny us a logical way of assessing rarity. In this regard, he asks us to compare two similes in terms of the rarity of the thing to which they liken their subject (157 [10.9]). The first is from Dhū l-Rummah (d. AH 117 / 735 CE):

(كَحْلاءُ في بَرَجٍ صَفْراءُ في نَعَجٍ)   كَأَنَّهَا فِضَّةٌ قد مَسَّهَا ذَهَبُ

([She has] kohled wide eyes, a complexion white [with a hint of] yellow)
like silver with a touch of gold

The second is from Abū Ṭālib al-Raqqī (d. after 967):

وَكَأَنَّ أَجرامَ النُّجُومِ لَوامِعاً   دُرَرٌ نُثِرْنَ على بِساطٍ أَزْرَقِ

The shining bodies of the stars were like
pearls strewn on a blue carpet

Al-Jurjānī finds the image to which al-Raqqī compares his subject rarer and hence more beautiful. He explains that this is because

الناس يرون أبدا في الصياغات فضّة قد أجري فيها ذهب وطليت به ولا يكاد يتفق أن يوجد درٌّ قد نُثِر على بساط أزرق

people always see works of silver decorated or painted with gold, while it might never come about that they see pearls strewn on a blue carpet.

A rare thing, therefore, does not have to be strange or puzzling: one can easily imagine pearls strewn on a blue carpet. However, the likelihood of someone's having ever actually seen pearls on a blue carpet, a situation that would probably arise only by accident, is understandably lower than the likelihood of someone's having seen silver jewelry decorated with gold, something that is regularly produced intentionally. Thus, even though it is not difficult to imagine pearls on a blue carpet, it does require one to dig deeper into one's imagination in order to visualize the image and grasp the basis of the comparison, because we might never have seen such a sight in real life. The need to dig deeper into one's imagination, in turn, means that more effort is required to grasp the image. And the more effort one must exert, according to al-Jurjānī, the more pleasing is the eventual discovery.

Regardless of whether one agrees with al-Jurjānī's assessment of the beauty of the verses above, what I have sought to highlight is that his explanations are based on a logical understanding of how the rational mind acquires and retains knowledge. This rationalism is a defining characteristic of post-tenth-century Arabic literary theory and is in line with the general turn to rationalism across disciplines in the eleventh century. This turn was especially pronounced in eastern Iran and central Asia, thriving centers of rationalist philosophy in this post-Avicennan era. It is not surprising that al-Jurjānī, who, as his arabicized name indicates, was from Gurgān on the southeast corner of the Caspian Sea, would have participated in this movement toward rationalism that surrounded him. As Frank Griffel has argued, in contradistinction to theology, philosophy in the Arabic context during this era was understood as transcending faith and religion in its methodology, requiring the rigor of apodictic proofs. As I have tried to show, al-Jurjānī's proofs are likewise well reasoned and not reducible to subjective, culturally dependent judgments. As a result, his theories are accessible to us today without our needing to understand much about the specific literary context within which he was writing. This lends his theories a degree of universality: they need not be limited to the poetic units that were of concern for Arabic culture at the time, such as metaphor and simile, but they are generalizable and have the potential to be applied to other historical and literary contexts, genres, poetic units, and art forms.[12] Furthermore, they represent an alternative understanding and genealogy of the inquiry into aesthetics that can be contrasted with the conception of aesthetic theory that crystalized in eighteenth-century Europe. Both al-Jurjānī and Baumgarten lived in a single "post-Hellenic world," as Alexander Key puts it in his essay in this feature, underlining a shared inheritance across the Mediterranean divide. They both explored the same questions against the backdrop of Greek logic, but they arrived at divergent

answers.[13] I hope to have shown not only the logicality of al-Jurjānī's explanations, but also how the aesthetic experience of *ta'ajjub* itself was premised on rational processes of knowledge acquisition and discovery: the poetic is beautiful because it stimulates the intellect.[14]

NOTES

1. The theories established by al-Jurjānī formed the foundation of what by the thirteenth century would become a standardized علم البلاغة ('ilm al-balāghah; "science of eloquence"; see Harb, "Arabic Literary Theory"). For the purposes of this essay, I focus primarily on al-Jurjānī's works.

2. I adopt Zadeh's beautiful translation of the title of al-Qazwīnī's book of marvels in his recent monograph on the work. See Zadeh also for a discussion of the role of *ta'ajjub* in al-Qazwīnī's work.

3. This notion of wonder as connected at once with the unknown and the desire to know is not unlike that of Aristotle, who famously attributed the beginning of philosophy to wonder (982b12). Likewise, modern scholars have highlighted this Janus-like nature of wonder as a kind of ignorance "that challenges us to dispel it" (Llewelyn 51).

4. A complete English translation of al-Jurjānī's *The Secrets of Eloquence* does not yet exist. I hope to complete one in the coming years. A German translation does exist by Helmut Ritter, and it is Ritter's Arabic edition that I reference in this essay. Besides the page numbers, I include the section numbers Ritter established in his Arabic edition, which correspond to the numbering in his German translation for possible cross-referencing. All translations in this essay are mine.

5. Another important poetic aspect al-Jurjānī discusses at great length but which I will not touch on in this essay is sentence construction (*naẓm*) and the ways in which it can distance meaning to make it less obvious but then ultimately discoverable (see Harb, *Arabic Poetics*, ch. 5).

6. Primary knowledge, gained without an intermediary either intuitively or through the senses or experience, forms the building blocks for further knowledge gained through logical proof and conceptualization (see, e.g., Ibn Sīnā 97–102).

7. *Kināyah* in Arabic sometimes but not always corresponds to *metonymy* in English. See my discussion of this term in *Arabic Poetics*, ch. 4, and in "Form." Noy argues for "periphrasis" as the best translation for *kināyah* (738). Rashwan highlights the importance of using such Arabic literary terms in transliterated form to preserve their integrity and unique, untranslatable meaning. See also Bauer.

8. This terminology describing signification as either *intellected* or *lexical*, which is derived from Arabic philosophy, became the standard way of introducing the branch of the science of *balāghah* ("eloquence"), known as the science of *bayān* ("elucidation" or "expression"), which focused on metaphor, figurative speech more generally, and implication. See Harb, *Arabic Poetics* 185–86.

9. On the aesthetics of make-believe according to al-Jurjānī, see Harb, *Arabic Poetics* 53–58.

10. Al-Jurjānī considers any statement that mentions both sides of the comparison (whether or not a comparative device is used) a simile. Metaphors, on the other hand, are only those expressions that replace the thing being compared completely and refer to it as if it were the very thing to which it was compared (Harb, *Arabic Poetics* 176–78).

11. On these principles of estrangement, see Harb, *Arabic Poetics* 147–52.

12. The extent to which the aesthetic of *ta'ajjub* in poetry applies to the visual arts or music has yet to be fully investigated. For important discussions of wonder in art in the Islamic context, see Saba; Berlekamp.

13. This does not mean that wonder did not play a role in European aesthetics or that similarities between the two traditions do not exist. The eighteenth-century Swiss thinker Johan Jakob Breitinger, for example, developed a conception of wonder that resonates with al-Jurjānī's *ta'ajjub* (see Wankhammer 173–79). Parallels can also be drawn between al-Jurjānī's ideas of estrangement and distancing and the concepts of "ostranenie" (strange-making or defamiliarization) and "de-automization" developed by the Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky in the twentieth century (Erlich 190). The twentieth-century French theorist Michel Riffaterre's idea of "indirection" also shares some affinities with al-Jurjānī's idea of misleading the reader for the sake of a greater ultimate reward. All these instances of parallelism deserve further investigation.

14. This is not to say that other aspects of poetry, such as its sound and musicality, have no part in its aesthetic experience. Most notably, the Arabic notion of *ṭarab*, which Christian Junge explores in his essay in this feature, highlights the experience of sonic pleasure arising specifically from the senses, especially from sound. While the historical relationship between the two concepts has yet to be fully explored, the theories of *ta'ajjub* and *ṭarab* complement each other by detailing two different aspects of the poetic: the intellectual and the sensory.

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