White Rose Research Online

eprints@whiterose.ac.uk
https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk
Universities of Leeds, Sheffield and York

Deposited via The University of Sheffield.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:
https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/id/eprint/245994/

Version: Published Version

Article:
Hilberg, E. (2025) Poetry and the assets of precarity: understanding aesthetic politics as a quest for intensity in precarious meanings. Global Studies Quarterly, 5 (3). ksaf084. ISSN: 2634-3797

https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksaf084

Reuse
This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs (CC BY-NC-ND) licence. This licence only allows you to download this work and share it with others as long as you credit the authors, but you can't change the article in any way or use it commercially. More information and the full terms of the licence here: https://creativecommons.org/licenses/

Takedown
If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing eprints@whiterose.ac.uk including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.

UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS
University of Sheffield
UNIVERSITY of York

Global Studies Quarterly (2026) **5**, ksaf084

Poetry and the Assets of Precarity: Understanding Aesthetic Politics as a Quest for Intensity in Precarious Meanings

Eva Hilberg*
University of Sheffield, UK

The political dimension of poetry is a relatively recent discovery in the field of International Relations (IR). While the "aesthetic turn" led to a new appreciation of the relevance of poetry, there still remains a question of where exactly, and precisely how, politics can emerge from poetry. Does a poem need to be about a political subject in order to count as political, or can there be other forms of political expression that develop on another level of engagement with this type of text? This article approaches this question on a conceptual level with a main focus on M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!* (2008). It argues that by using language in unusual, minor ways, the placement of letters, spaces, and words can unsettle meaning and create conceptual openings in a process of aesthetic discovery with its own political effects. This poetic practise is then re-interpreted as a means of deterritorialization by a minor literature (Deleuze and Guattari 1983), in which intensities act as a guiding sensation of aesthetic expression. In this type of writing, everything is political, as shown in examples of poems that are otherwise considered "unpolitical." This reading unlocks an understanding of poetic expression as an essentially liminal practice that always contains an unsettling moment of challenge—but also shows that the politics of this process are open-ended, and can escape authorial direction. The paper puts forward a conception of poetry as a political experience of precarious meaning, which adds a deeper appreciation of poetic devices to IR scholarship.

La dimensión política de la poesía es un descubrimiento relativamente reciente en el campo de las Relaciones Internacionales (RRII). Si bien es verdad el «giro hacia lo estético» provocó una nueva apreciación de la relevancia de la poesía, todavía nos hacemos la pregunta con respecto a dónde y cómo, exactamente, puede surgir la política de la poesía. ¿Es necesario que un poema trate explícitamente sobre un tema político para que pueda considerarse como político?, ¿o existen otras formas de expresión política que se desarrollan en otro nivel de compromiso con este tipo de texto? Este artículo aborda esta cuestión a nivel conceptual, centrándose, principalmente, en el poema «Zong!» de Marlene NourbeSe Philip (2008). El artículo argumenta que, al usar el lenguaje de maneras inusuales y minimalistas, la colocación de letras, espacios y palabras puede desestabilizar el significado y crear aperturas conceptuales dentro de un proceso de descubrimiento estético que tendría sus propios efectos políticos. Existe una literatura menor (Deleuze y Guattari, 1983), que reinterpreta esta práctica poética como un medio de desterritorialización, en la que las intensidades actúan como una sensación rectora de la expresión estética. En este tipo de escritura, todo se considera político, como se muestra en varios ejemplos de poemas que, de otro modo, se considerarían «apolíticos». Esta lectura desbloquea una comprensión de la expresión poética como una práctica esencialmente liminal, que siempre contiene un momento inquietante de desafío, pero que también demuestra que la política de este proceso tiene un final abierto y que puede escapar a la dirección autoral. El artículo propone una concepción de la poesía como una experiencia política de significado precario, lo que agrega una apreciación más profunda de los dispositivos poéticos para el campo académico de las RRII.

La dimension politique de la poésie correspond à une découverte relativement récente dans le domaine des relations internationales (RI). Bien que le « tournant esthétique » ait débouché sur une nouvelle appréciation de la pertinence de la poésie, subsiste la question de savoir où exactement, et précisément comment, le politique transparaît dans la poésie. Un poème doit-il traiter d'un sujet politique pour être considéré comme politique, ou peut-il y avoir d'autres formes d'expression politique qui apparaissent lorsque l'on interagit à un autre niveau avec ce type de texte ? Cet article traite de cette question à un niveau conceptuel, en se concentrant principalement sur « Zong! » de Marlene NourbeSe Philip (2008). Il affirme qu'en employant la langue de façons inhabituelles et mineures, le placement des lettres, espaces et mots peut perturber le sens et créer des ouvertures conceptuelles dans un processus de découverte esthétique qui possède ses propres effets politiques. Cette pratique poétique se voit réinterprétée comme un moyen de déterritorialisation par une littérature mineure (Deleuze et Guattari 1983), dans laquelle les intensités font office de sensations qui guident l'expression esthétique. Dans ce type d'écrit, tout est politique, comme le montrent des exemples de poèmes qui seraient sinon considérés comme « apolitiques ». Cette lecture donne accès à une compréhension de l'expression poétique en tant que pratique fondamentalement liminale, qui contient toujours un moment perturbateur, de défi. Elle montre aussi que ce processus est ouvert d'un point de vue des opinions politiques, et peut échapper à l'orientation de l'auteur. L'article propose une conception de la poésie en tant qu'expérience politique d'un sens précaire, qui approfondit notre appréciation des outils poétiques en recherche en RI.

*Corresponding author: University of Sheffield, UK. Email: e.hilberg@sheffield.ac.uk
Hilberg, Eva (2026) Poetry and the Assets of Precarity: Understanding Aesthetic Politics as a Quest for Intensity in Precarious Meanings. *Global Studies Quarterly*, https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksaf084
© The Author(s) 2026. Published by Oxford University Press on behalf of the International Studies Association. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs licence (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/), which permits non-commercial reproduction and distribution of the work, in any medium, provided the original work is not altered or transformed in any way, and that the work is properly cited. For commercial re-use, please contact reprints@oup.com for reprints and translation rights for reprints. All other permissions can be obtained through our RightsLink service via the Permissions link on the article page on our site-for further information please contact journals.permissions@oup.com

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/isagsq/article/5/3/ksaf084/8817298 by Richard Simpson user on 29 September 2026

Over the past two decades, poetry and other aesthetics have become a recognized area of study within the field of International Relations (IR). In this aesthetic turn, prominent contributions have for instance drawn attention to the difference between mimetic and representational approaches to the study of political contents, and their significance in revealing political ways of seeing and making sense of the world around us (Bleiker 2001a; see also Hozić 2017; Steele 2017). Arguing that "aesthetic insight recognizes that the inevitable difference between the represented and its representation is the very location of politics" (Bleiker 2001a, 510), Bleiker pointed out that this turn contains a deeper ontological statement "about the nature of politics and its actors and about our knowledge of them. Who does what and what counts for knowledge and why?" (Bleiker 2017, 262). The way in which these important questions emerge from aesthetic interventions remains however removed at a distance in these appreciations—stating only that aesthetic politics "is about the ability to step back, reflect and see, hear and sense political conflict and dilemmas in new ways" (Ibid., 261). But where, and how, do aesthetic practices manage to evoke such a profound response? This essay argues that in the case of poetry, an aesthetic politics is literally inscribed onto the space of the page, contained in the distribution of letters and lines, and in the administration of the blank space around it. In the gaps between these elements (or indeed punctuations, if we follow Shapiro 2019), a politics of uncertainty of meaning is allowed to emerge that can unsettle dominant readings and conceptions, if successful. This political dimension of engagement is not primarily contained in the representational content or the "subject" of the poem, but in the creation of a precarious or liminal space of meaning that contains an aesthetic (and political) experience of exploration.

Consider the following—why is there such a difference in import between a statement such as an "aesthetic insight recognizes that the inevitable difference between the represented and its representation is the very location of politics" (Bleiker 2001a, 510), and a sequence such as this one taken from M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong! #4 (2008)*?

this is

not was

or

should be

this be

not

should be

(…)

Credit: Excerpt reproduced from *Zong!* by M. NourbeSe Philip, first published by Wesleyan University Press, © 2008. Reproduced with kind permission of M. NourbeSe Philip. © M. NourbeSe Philip (2025), all rights reserved. Permission for re-use should be sought from the rights-holder.

The first is written in an abstract, scholarly way—much the same as I am employing here now, trying to capture a great variety of contents and meanings in a generalized statement—and the second is something almost confusingly specific in nature, with truncated, simple words rendered alien by their presentation. Both statements seek to make similar points, as far as it is possible to compare these very different moments—the vastness of the gap between what is and what we think should be, and the violence contained in the distance between the two. It seeks to render visible the politics of this remove, one by pointing out the gap, the other by literally showing it in the distance between letters. Amongst the lines of the poem, we can see a new space emerge, yet never quite settle—as we move on, the meaning disintegrates in its parts, held together only momentarily in our minds by the rhythm of the interpolation contained in the spacing. On the page, the gap remains ultimately unbridged, and—as Bleiker's statement pointed out—conceptually, it shall remain so. But a poem can give a fleeting idea of the moment in which there is the potential to bridge this distance, and a sensory experience of this divide. Crucially, this amounts to more than a politics of representation, but rather entails an element of emergence and exploration that remains politically open-ended.

This aesthetic level of engagement contains a precarious politics, often deployed most effectively by those placed in situations of profound precarity with first-hand experience of what it means to lead lives on the margins. Deleuze and Guattari sought to capture the political potential of such writing in their concept of a minor literature, which is formed by a minority writing in a majority language. Here, the use of "language is affected with a high coefficient of deterritorialization" brought about by "strange and minor uses" (Deleuze and Guattari 1986, 16f.). The resulting process of deterritorialization contains a fundamental and pervasive political challenge to majority uses of language, built into aesthetic expressions in different ways, from intonation to diction and imagery. Importantly, the affective vehicle for these means is the introduction of *intensities*, which Deleuze and Guattari trace in their analysis of Kafka's work. This essay argues that the distribution of intensities can also be seen as the driver of poetical exploration, giving rise to political effects through achieving a particular "distribution of the sensible" (Rancière 2013), understood as a distribution of affects which can be apprehended by the senses.

In addition to already existing analyses of aesthetics in the field of IR, the following seeks to refine our understanding of the way in which politics enter into and emanate from these forms of expression—especially in the case of written poetry. There are, of course, a wide variety of poetic forms, written and spoken, containing different ways of expressing thoughts and experiences from vastly different perspectives, using an extensive range of aesthetic devices. This article brings together several examples that may not conventionally be thought of as "political"—but this is the point: even if the topic of the poem is not overtly political, aesthetic devices can still give rise to political content. This is about the *how* of aesthetic politics, the way it looks and the way it sounds, and its employment of precarity understood as a liminality of meaning. The connection between precarity and liminality is here formed by an exploration of uncertainty as both a hinderance and also a moment of liberation, enabling new meanings to arise from a place that has been rendered unreliable by either real-world experience or conceptual composition—or both. The article points out that there are different levels of political engagement contained in a poem—some are directly representational, while others are explorations of sensibilities, for instance in visual or

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/isagsq/article/5/3/ksaf084/8817298 by Richard Simpson user on 29 September 2026

musical form. This exploratory process generates intensities of experience, which affect the delivery of the representational content of the poem in different and not always intentional ways. A conceptualization of their operation can however clarify the subversive potential contained in the creative process, and give a clearer appreciation of the sometimes surprising power that rests within it.

The following seeks to unravel the operation of intensities to generate these effects in several steps: First of all, relying on Hölderlin's elegy *Brod und Wein*, it establishes poetry as a longstanding project of liminality—or even double liminality, when it is being written from a position of precarity itself. Next, the article looks more closely into recent conceptualizations of the connection between poetics and politics, and then goes on to connect these with longstanding philosophical debates about the politics of aesthetics. Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's (1986) concept of a minor literature, the article then argues that part of the political challenge contained in written poetry is being generated by a distribution of intensities across the page. This "distribution of the sensible" (Rancière 2013) is then reinterpreted as a political act of exploration, in which intensities give rise to meaning that emerges conceptually prior to authorial intention. Here then rests the implication of this reading for an understanding of the politics of poetry—beside representational content, poetics also contain a sensory experience with political content. This political engagement is however conceptually open-ended, and can develop in unexpected and unintended ways, as a concluding discussion of M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!* shows.

Double Liminality: What Use Are Poets in Precarious Times?

Words can be a challenge—in more ways than one. They can contradict directly, spell out different stories, and challenge consensus head-on, whether written, spoken, or collected. They can silence and un-silence, erase experiences, and resurrect them once again—either on purpose or even unwittingly. When written from a position of precarity, words can distil direct and indirect types of challenge in an aesthetics that is itself engaged in challenging the limits of language. Poetry as an undertaking is liminal per se, in that it "is occupied with frontiers of consciousness beyond which words fail, though meanings still exist" (Eliot 1979, 30). This is a liminality that pushes the act of communication to its limits, in a political move that unsettles meaning but can also allow for altered realities to emerge, creating new meaning. This moment of uncertainty is however fundamentally undetermined in outcome, as it can give rise to both desired outcomes and also to unexpected reversals, as its political import rests in an essential precarity that can be harnessed but ultimately not contained. Its force derives from a conceptual, ontological precarity that can emerge on the page, and can resurrect meaning from a presumed position of abjection (see for instance Vij 2019). Seen from this perspective, precarity understood as liminality of meaning can operate as an asset that creates openings for alterity and even the emergence of shared social values such as empathy.[1] Philip finds that this communal value can arise "[i]n caring for this thing—language—that makes us beings who are human, in caring for the lowly comma or period, for the syllable or phoneme, for where they're placed, we begin, I think—I hope—to care for others." (Metres 2021)

This liminality is not a new phenomenon in any way. The connection between precarity and poetry is a long-established trope, going back to the struggling artist and the renunciation of the world by the poet. Johann Christian Friedrich Hölderlin (1770–1843), for instance, posed the question of the connection between the two most directly in his elegy *Brod und Wein*, asking quite literally: "wozu Dichter in dürftiger Zeit?" (What use are poets in times of need/precarious times?). Hölderlin is often considered one of the first truly "modern" poets, in a departure from classic song traditions and clearly structured lyrical forms. In his lifetime he often struggled, living out the majority of his adult life isolated in a tower in Freiburg. Precarity thus suffused both his life and his work, and likely also set it apart from others.

Heidegger provides an in-depth thematic reading of *Brod und Wein*, pointing out that this poem is concerned with the practice of poetry at the times of fundamental change, as one way of life recedes, and another emerges, or a new age (i.e., modernity) begins. In a close reading of the text, he argues that this change marks the time that has turned away from the Gods, and constitutes the night of the world—during which it is the task of the poet to "follow with song on the traces of fleeing Gods," to speak "what is holy" (Heidegger 1950, 251). This provides a rapturous appraisal of poetic potential, in which Heidegger emphasizes the interplay between thinking and poetry that was a source of fascination and inspiration throughout his life, finding in poetry "a critique of subjectivity as forgetfulness of Being in favor of thinking" (Gosetti-Ferencei 2022, 61). To Heidegger, "poetry is the foundation of *being* through the word" (quoted after de Campos and Tolman 1982, 169), and in this exercise, "[the] poeticized in the essential poetic word is not invented by but overcomes the poet," "thus [making it] evident that language itself is a revealing" (Gosetti-Ferencei 2022, 64 and 65). Language is thus reinterpreted as the trace that allows poets to intuit what was left by fleeing Gods—but Heidegger's reading of the results of this process remains primarily focused on content and language. In the following, I will instead focus on a poem's aesthetic devices that can produce changing layers of meaning that emerge from the placement of words. This is part of a process of creating conceptual openings in which the agency of the poet is enacted and unsettled by aesthetic devices, not all of which are under deliberate control of the poet. In a way, it is this process that overcomes the poet and allows for meaning to emerge.

But where are these aesthetic devices at work in Hölderlin's poem? Heidegger prominently discusses the meaning of poetry especially with regards to this passage:

[1]This unifying propensity of ontological precarity is emphasized strongly by Judith Butler (2004), but contested by Vij (2019), who points to qualitative differences in the experience of precarity in different contexts. My reading here does not seek to resolve this contest, but rather points to the way in which poetic engagements can create an opening for individuated instances of empathy that momentarily bridge the gap between different specificities. These instances can enable an affective change, which will mostly remain ephemeral—but can also give rise to wider epistemic critique. In some cases, this isolated affective change can even give rise to something more, creating the conditions of possibility for collective expressions of dissent and/or solidarity as political contestation.

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/isagsq/article/5/3/ksaf084/8817298 by Richard Simpson user on 29 September 2026

Aber Freund! wir kommen zu spät. Zwar leben die Götter,
Aber über dem Haupt droben in anderer Welt.
Endlos wirken sie da und scheinens wenig zu achten,
Ob wir leben, so sehr schonen die Himmlischen uns.
Denn nicht immer vermag ein schwaches Gefäß sie zu fassen,
Nur zu Zeiten erträgt göttliche Fülle der Mensch.
Traum von ihnen ist drauf das Leben. Aber das Irrsaal
Hilft, wie Schlummer und stark machet die Noth und die Nacht,
Biß daß Helden genug in der ehernen Wiege gewachsen,
Herzen an Kraft, wie sonst, ähnlich den Himmlischen sind.
Donnernd kommen sie drauf. Indessen dünket mir öfters
Besser zu schlafen, wie so ohne Genossen zu seyn,
So zu harren und was zu thun indeß und zu sagen,
Weiß ich nicht und wozu Dichter in dürftiger Zeit?
Aber sie sind, sagst du, wie des Weingotts heilige Priester,
Welche von Lande zu Land zogen in heiliger Nacht.

But my friend, we have come too late. Though the gods are living,
Over our heads they live, up in a different world.
Endlessly there they act and, such is their kind wish to spare us,
Little they seem to care whether we live or do not.
For not always a frail, a delicate vessel can hold them,
Only at times can our kind bear the full impact of gods.
Ever after our life is dream about them. But frenzy,
Wandering, helps, like sleep; Night and distress make us strong
Till in that cradle of steel heroes enough have been fostered,
Hearts in strength can match heavenly strength as before.
Thundering then they come. But meanwhile too often I think it's
Better to sleep than to be friendless as we are, alone,
Always waiting, and what to do or to say in the meantime
I don't know, and who wants poets at all in lean years?
But they are, you say, like those holy ones, priests of the wine-god
Who in holy Night roamed from one place to the next.

Fig.1

Credit: Excerpt reproduced from *Brod und Wein* by Friedrich Hölderlin, first published 1800–1804. Translation by Michael Hamburger, in *Friedrich Hölderlin, Selected Poems and Fragments*, first published by Anvil Press Poetry © 1994. Reproduced with permission of Carcanet Press. © Carcanet (2025), all rights reserved. Permission for re-use should be sought from the rights-holder.

This excerpt is stanza 7 of an elegy that encompasses 9 stanzas in total. These are modeled on couplets (distichions), which in a classic elegiac form should come to a total of 81—in this stanza, however, they only make 80. Some argue that this is an oversight, others see intention (Franz 2013, 223). The "faulty" stanza No. 7 falls short—just as the poet on the pursuit of a fleeing God. Here, we may see a first alignment of aesthetics and representational content, which focuses on the shortcomings of human endeavor and/or understanding.

Hölderlin introduces precarity in different ways in this haunted verse, but only at second glance. It contains two different representations of precarity: the direct thematic representation of precarity, here framed as a question about the connection between poetry and precarity (discussed in detail in Heidegger's analysis), but also a sensory aesthetic experience of precarious meaning by means for instance of a line break between "madness/helps" (Irrsaal/Hilft). This is a startling break that has been sadly eliminated in translation—but which is an aesthetic representation of the potentiality and break of "madness." As the excerpts above show, the line break of the original (Irrsaal/Hilft) has been lost in its English version, and madness (or confusion) has been translated as "frenzy." The loss of aesthetic devices in favor of meaning is one of the challenges of discussing poetry in translation (Reynolds 2013), but the result in this case almost has a comparable effect of opening out and then subverting meaning across the blank space at the end of a line. Frenzy exists here virtually unchecked (except for an unfortunate comma), unfolding its menace for an immeasurable moment, until the next line curtails this potential in the next word in quite a radical moment of contrast in the original.

A close reading shows that at first, the poem is about doubt, and directly questions the relevance of poetry at times of precarity, with Hölderlin literally stating "I do not know" what to say when faced with the power of eternity. At a closer look, however, the earlier break between "Irrsaal" and "hilft" opens up a turning point or "reversal," as Aristotle terms it with regards to an action or plot (Aristotle 2020, 14). This turn softly undermines the stark powers of Gods, and should be read like this:

The madness (PAUSE) helps (PAUSE) –

These inflections are forced onto the sentence by means of aesthetic devices, such as a line break that allows madness to grow in power across the open space, and then overturns its meaning in the next word, followed by a comma that is only a visual means of forcing pause. This is an aesthetic way of generating an intensity that ensures affect in a representation of the conflicted potential of "madness," something with which Hölderlin was intimately acquainted.

This break leaves charged white space that contains a multitude of possible meanings. Its potentialities reverberate through the poem's space, and are charged with a quality that is entirely aesthetic—and fundamentally political. This quality, I argue, is best conceptualized as an intensity that emanates from a precarious aesthetics—akin to that deterritorializing effect of the use of language in a minor literature described by Deleuze and Guattari (1986). The politics of this specific break are essentially open and creative, as the space literally opens for interpretation, but they also contain a powerful moment of challenge: the connection between madness/helps effectively deterritorializes and unsettles the usual meaning of madness.

Poetics and Politics

But *where*, precisely, *on the page* do the aesthetics of poetry give rise to this political dimension? What differentiates a written prose text from a "poem"—what even is a poem—and how can we conceptually evaluate this political dimension for the study of this field of rather surreptitious politics? Histories of forced displacement and exploitation are reworked in a wide range of recent poetry collections, such as for instance Philip's *'Zong!'*(2008), Layli Long Soldier's "*Whereas*" (2017), Roger Robinsons *'A Portable Paradise'* (2019), or Kei Miller's 'The cartographer maps the road to Zion' (Miller 2014). The political relevance of these traditions and renewal have been studied in the "aesthetic turn" within IR (Bleiker 2009; Edkins et al. 2021), and also especially within decolonial studies (Shilliam 2012; Odysseos 2019). Critical Theory in a wider sense has longer studied the connection between politics and poetics, for instance in the work of Philip and Aimé Césaire and his "challenge to the object-based ontology of Western thought"

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/isagsq/article/5/3/ksaf084/8817298 by Richard Simpson user on 29 September 2026

(Allen-Paisant 2021, 2022, 583). There is also a rich philosophical tradition discussing the connection of aesthetics and politics (Rancière 2013; Adorno et al. 2020), which seeks to comprehend the subversive element contained in poetics, arguably already detectable as far back as for instance in the high middle ages, when Walther von der Vogelweide's "menacing [. . .] undertone [. . .] [showed] that the poet is not politically powerless despite being economically dependent." (Enzensberger 1963, 117).[2]

Lately, a growing body of work in IR has turned to study different aesthetics, and the way in which politics are being inscribed, represented, and resisted here (amongst others, see Bleiker 2009; Shapiro 2012; Hozić 2017). Poetry features as part of this political turn towards aesthetics (see especially Bleiker 2009; Odysseos 2017, 2019), but is not often at the heart of conceptual analyses (Shapiro 2018, 2019). There has been in-depth consideration of the conceptually illimitable potential of challenge to hegemonic structures of meaning contained in poetic revolt (Odysseos 2019), and detailed analyses of the political effect of different poets (Bleiker 1999a, 1999b, 2000, 2001b, Bleiker and Hundt 2010), and also conceptual engagement with the stylistic devices that are at work within the wider field of aesthetics (Shapiro 2019). Where it comes to poetry, this attention to style and aesthetic method has however not (yet) been fully replicated. This article seeks to address this gap by expanding on existing work, and focuses especially on the ways in which poetry can include a political engagement that is based on an open-ended process of exploration driven by intensities of sensation generated by the distribution of letters and words across the page. This process places the affective experience of words first, and intentionality second, making the resulting political content a product of sensory emergence.

Within IR, Bleiker's most prominent focus[3] is on poetry amongst others as an unexplored empirics, looking at the content and effects of poetry, with the aim to showcase "the growing recognition that aesthetic sources, such as poetry, photography, music, and film, can offer important insight into the nature and meaning of international events" (Bleiker 2009, 186). His ground-breaking *Aesthetics in World Politics* explores a range of different poetic representations of international events and their rendition in poetry in order to "reclaim the political value of the aesthetic" that "[. . ..] engenders a significant shift away from a model of thought that equates knowledge with the mimetic recognition of external appearances towards an approach that generates a more diverse but also more direct encounter with the political [. . ..] across different faculties, including sensibility, imagination, and reason [. . ..]" (Ibid., 19f.) In this, he mostly thinks of aesthetic devices as "amplifiers" that can add "a different dimension to our understanding of the political" (Ibid., 11), but overall his (and others') work has thematically unlocked and successfully paved the way for a broader appreciation of aesthetics within the field of IR.

In contrast, Shapiro's emphasis on punctuation marks a turn of attention toward the political effects of the methods of aesthetics. He points to the use of *aesthetic breaks* in several forms of art, where moments of punctuation intervene, understood broadly as "practices of intelligibility with rhythmic pacing that defers definite closure, encourages critical reflection, and enables a rethinking of community coherence" (Shapiro 2019, 3). This appraisal gives a sense of the scale of "a politics of aesthetics that can capture the political implications of catastrophic events" (Shapiro 2018, 2). Yet, poetry's different aesthetic devices and their ways of unsettling meaning and creating liminal challenges have not yet been fully appreciated in these considerations, which instead turn to film, music, architecture, and literature in general. This article seeks to further add to this exploration by narrowing the focus on the ways in which aesthetic affect is set to work within poetry, in the process differentiating between different modes of political engagement that do not always remain aligned.

There are, of course, clear and direct methods of political representation and challenge contained in poetry, in statements that aim to unsettle established meaning and thus reveal gaps for an emergence of difference. This informational or representational content of the poem—the thing that the poem is "about"—is however not the only level of political engagement contained in poetics. Instead this article points out that there is an aesthetic and affective level of engagement underlying (and fundamentally enabling) the more direct political effect of poetry, and this aesthetic interaction can create, amplify, or even undermine the poem's intended strategies of representation. Immanuel Kant, for instance, pointed to this dual character of poetry, which he regarded "as the highest of the fine arts precisely because of its capacity to employ representational content in the expression of what he calls 'aesthetic ideas'" (Shelley 2022). In an act of imagination that employs both ideas and intuition, "the poet attempts to sensibly present two different kinds of inner sense, those being the affects and the ideas of reason for which no intuition is adequate, like eternity or the law." (Penny 2008, 381) There is thus representational content in each poem—a knowledge-based type of content—and also aesthetic content, which is affective and much harder to define. Enzensberger goes as far as declaring that "the political aspect of poetics has to be immanent" to its expressions, but does not locate this precisely, except for a clue left in Plato's *Politeia*, where music is found to be a vehicle for subversion to enter language (Enzensberger 1963, 127 and 134). This classical concept of music contains rhythm and metric figures, tone and phrasing, all of which are also elements of poetry (Ibid., 134)—even more so in Césaire's conception of poetry as a form of possession with "emphasis on sound, on rhythm, on poetry as embodiment of the vital force of nature" (Allen-Paisant 2022, 584). I argue that a clearer understanding of the effects of poetry's different artistic devices can highlight the role of aesthetic liminality in poetry, and poetic aesthetics in precarity, where a moment of double-liminality can produce political statements with effectively uncontainable power (for a conceptualization of this power see also Odysseos 2019).

This understanding of aesthetics encompasses the music (broadly understood) and the "feel" of a poem, an affective dimension that is contained for instance in the sounds of words, and their physical enunciation. Different languages here contain something "magical" (Munday 2016, 260), that forms elements of a "pure language" that emerges from their

[2]Translation author's own. Original: "Der drohende, um nicht zu sagen: erpresserische Unterton gewisser Strophen besagt noch mehr: nämlich, daß der Dichter, seiner ökonomischen Abhängigkeit zum Trotz, politisch durchaus nicht ohnmächtig war."

[3]This article focuses mostly on Bleiker's conceptualization of aesthetic politics, as his work is arguably most central to this field. However, this does not mean to single out his work, but much rather sees it as representative of the wider field. Here, many look predominantly at the ways in which aesthetics are being put to work in the political and economic arena and can become sites of contestation (for instance Steele 2010; Davies 2012; Belfrage and Gammon 2017). Other analyses of the politics of aesthetics emphasized for instance the process of abstraction as central to both theory and art (Sylvester 2016), and the "art of losing" in creating a shared vulnerability (Choi 2017)—but they do not go further conceptually in assessing how these processes go about creating political meaning on the page in the case of poetry.

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/isagsq/article/5/3/ksaf084/8817298 by Richard Simpson user on 29 September 2026

harmonization (Benjamin 2015, 34), or systems of surreptitious meaning—built on devices and effects such as what Paterson terms "connotative halos" of words and sounds (Paterson 2007, 76). In discussing the difficult topic of the translation of poetry from one language to another, Paterson points out that "the *operation* of lyric is wholly dependent on hopelessly, irredeemably tongue-specific phonosemantic coincidence," which means "the more we work to unify the music in the target language, the more the surface-sense of the lyric-bound original must shift" (Ibid., 77, emphasis in original). The music of language and the content of the poem are thus not one and the same experience, but are two different elements that need to be brought together in a successful instance of poetry. When this succeeds, these different levels of representation are working in concert akin to "a fruit and its skin" (Benjamin 2015, 34). They still, however, constitute separate avenues of political engagement.

Reconceptualizing Poetry as a Minor Literature

A closer look at the way in which poetry lays its politics out on the page can show several ways of creating an aesthetic liminality that is essentially political. Deleuze and Guattari highlighted the nature of this challenge in their concept of a "deterritorialization" contained in a minor literature (Deleuze and Guattari 1983), in which political effects emanate from written words arranged in particular and potentially unusual ways or idioms, giving rise to a unique distribution of intensities. When applied to poetry, this concept can comprehend poetics to be based on an aesthetic liminality that operates as a constant means of challenge to settled meaning via the creation of intensities across the white space of the page. Poetry can thus be understood as a kind of constantly minor literature, which renders meaning unstable both through means of direct representation, and most importantly also by means of aesthetic charges of intensity (for instance achieved by means of punctuation, but also in other ways, as the discussion below will show). Arguably, in its best instances, this *other* level of politics can engage the reader in an affective experience of (ontological) precarity. It is however elusive and essentially open-ended, and thus never entirely under the control of the poet. Affective intensities are built for instance on sensations such as desire, intrigue, danger, and revelation—to the audience and to the poet alike. Their creative potential and essential openness are at the foundation of poetic aesthetics, and contains a political moment of challenge.

The source of this challenge can be grasped by unraveling the concept of a minor literature, which refers to a very specific way of using language: "A minor literature is not the literature of a minor language but the literature a minority makes in a major language." (Ibid., 16) Its most prominent example is the writing of Prague's Jewish writers in German, especially that of Franz Kafka, which expressed "the impossibility of writing other than in German: the irreducible distance that Prague's Jews feel from primitive Czech territoriality" (Ibid.). In this double-bind, a minority takes hold of a majority language and adapts it to its purposes, with a significant political effect: "Minor literature is completely different: because it exists in a narrow space, every individual matter is immediately plugged into the political," meaning that for instance Kafka's work on father–son relations is not "an Oedipal fantasy but a political program" (Ibid.). What is important here is that this allows a closer understanding of the way in which intensities can create political meaning, namely through a process of deterritorialization: "The three characteristics of minor literature are the deterritorialization of the language, the connection of the individual and the political, the collective arrangement of utterance." (Ibid., 18) This moment of deterritorialization by means of minor literature entails an unsettling process of *becoming* (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 106), of the emergence of alternative meaning. Kafka's work shows how this connects to "a continuum of intensities" (Kafka, cited after Deleuze and Guattari 1983, 32) where intensities reveal themselves to be one of the hidden assets of precarity.

But what do Deleuze and Guattari mean by intensities? Intensity conventionally understood is a relational concept, which however does not diminish with use or loss of volume—for instance in the case of relative temperature. In their analysis of Kafka's work, Deleuze and Guattari discuss a wide variety of devices that introduce friction or an increase in energy, for instance "the crossing of a barrier, a rising or a falling, a bending or an erecting, an accent on a word" (Deleuze and Guattari 1986, 22). Examples include the crossing of a threshold that leads to an unexpected and inexplicably linked location; the progression from a bent head to a straightened head with all its implications of resistance and beginning (Ibid., 5); and also sound—for "[i]n sound, intensity alone matters [. . .]," especially monotone sound:"[a]s long as there is form, there is still reterritorialization, even in music" (Ibid., 6). In the minor use of German in Prague, these intensities also especially include:

> "the incorrect use of prepositions; the abuse of the pronominal; the employment of malleable verbs […]; the multiplication and succession of adverbs; the use of pain-filled connotations; the importance of the accent as a tension internal to the word; and the distribution of consonants and vowels as part of an internal discordance." (Ibid., 23)

These are all devices that can be traced in writing, and they contain a political challenge to the majority language—and its claim to representativeness. The aim of deterritorialization is the creation of liminality, to create a moment in which "[l]anguage stops being representative in order to now move toward its extremities or its limits" (Ibid.). These devices are used across all manner of aesthetics, but they can be found especially in the written word.

Intensities can thus introduce different breaks in ways that transcend the "classic" definitions and distinguishing characteristics of poetry. Aristotle's foundational text on poetics gives the most basic principles of poetry as imitation and harmony, which are determined by the "instinct[s] of our nature" and pleasant to us (Aristotle 2020, 6). In this, classical poetics aim at representing different characters and actions, rather than at fundamentally transforming them—but they also contain an element of challenge, as Aristotle's conception of the difference between the historian and the poet shows: "one relates what has happened, the other what may happen" (Ibid., 13). Breaks in this harmony are the place where the potential for disruptive imagination and deterritorialization in the sense of Deleuze and Guattari can emerge. Rancière envisages this revolutionary potential especially in art that emerged after the Renaissance, and later in the reconceptualization of the visible in an "anti-representative purity" of the flatness of the page, which also contains a moment of radical democracy between different words and concepts and readers (Rancière 2013, 11). This is linked to the emergence of liberty after the French Revolution, which "has at its condition of possibility a new political experiment of the sensory [. . .]" (Rancière 2004, 13). Here, sensory impression has an immediacy that no longer needs any intermediary for interpretation—instead, "the way in which utterance makes itself present [. . .] imposes the recognition of immediate meaning in the sensory." (Ibid., 14) This egalitarian process of recognition represents a grounding, or "terri-

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/isagsq/article/5/3/ksaf084/8817298 by Richard Simpson user on 29 September 2026

torialization" (Ibid., 13) in the senses—in an apparent contradiction of Deleuze and Guattari's emphasis on deterritorialization. Rancière however focused on the turn that enabled the conditions of possibility for modern poetry to emerge in the first place—as "a political experiment of the sensory" (Ibid., 14). This context emphasizes the immediacy of sensory experience, and understands aesthetics as a "distribution of the sensible," referring to "the system of self-evident facts of sense perception [. . .]" that give rise to sensibilities, and insight into the relationalities between perception and the things that are being perceived. (Rancière 2013, 7). It is thus directly anti-representational, and rather reconceptualizes poetry as a process of political experience in which other challenges can then take place.

In this emphasis on the sensory, the flat page is a paradigm of visibility, imbued with existing distributions of power, which can however also be challenged by for instance graphic capabilities and iconographies, or the poem's typography—anything that connects different mediums (Ibid., 10 and 11). These devices introduce an "aesthetic break" that allows meaning to emerge. Within IR, this notion has been taken up by Michael Shapiro in his analysis of its use in the creation of alternative political imaginaries in different fields of art, including architecture, music, film, and literature. He draws on Rancière's conceptualization to highlight aesthetic punctuations broadly understood as interventions on "practices of intelligibility with rhythmic pacing that defers definitive closure, encourages critical reflection, and enables a rethinking of community coherence." (Shapiro 2019, 3) His account is based on several theories of the way in which punctuation works on the experience of language, or how visual punctuation methods can structure visual media—Adorno for instance saw this as a musical quality based on "different weights of strong and weak phrasings" (Ibid.)—a turn of phrase that already evokes the notion of intensity albeit without actually naming it outright.[4] Shapiro's discussion of different types of aesthetic breaks in different artforms does not go into great detail where it comes to poetry, however, he draws attention to the use of blank spaces in the work of Stéphane Mallarmé, used as a device to slow down the reader, and other ways of forcing what he terms "re-punctuations" that disrupt dominant meaning, such as for instance Samuel Beckett's practice of writing in a second language (Ibid., 5). These practices, he argues, "summon, shape, and render visible and voluble oppositional communities of sense" by creating different temporalities of perception in a clash that "precipitate another duration, a negotiation process in which new interactions and alternative sense-making possibilities emerge." (Ibid., 1; also Shapiro 2018).

Applying these insights to the analysis of poetry can show how the arrangement of words on a page give rise to political effect, as part of a sensory experience of intensities. Intensities operate on the level of surprise, question and response, intrigue, and open-ended mystery, which pull the eye's movement through the process of perception, which is an act of physical sensation and exploration on a basic level. An example of this manipulation of sensations can be found in the experience of Marianne Moore's employ of tension. Her work is not usually considered "political" as such, but its aesthetics contain moments of unsettlement that challenge boundaries. Moore's use of aesthetic devices often works on the level of the line, which "insidiously [keeps] extending its reach well over the limits assigned to it by the layout of the poem, and repeatedly [flirts] with that other margin, the right edge of the page, dangerously paralleling the freer run of the prose sentence and threatening to dissolve into its unpoetic other." (Clavier 2021, 3) In her often-revised poem *Poetry*, she uses several surreptitious aesthetic decisions that heighten and direct the experience of reading and thinking through the poem (Moore 1921, 22). Differing line lengths, and staggered line indents suggest a progression that falters on unusual line endings (..in; . . . and; the halting effect of the comma after "hand"). This can be uncomfortable: the decision to leave a line "hanging" can give rise to a sense of (mildly) disjointed confusion that almost immediately prompts a re-reading to ascertain whether meaning has been lost. This unsettlement is balanced by a very subtle scheme of echoing sounds (or "subtly discordant harmonies"; Monroe 1922, 214; Clavier 2021), which adds to changed or forced emphases that move back and forth between run-on sentences and stark punctuation. In *Poetry*, these interruptions serve to draw attention to the tensions inherent in the concept of "poetry," emphasizing two stated qualities: rawness and genuineness. These are the "raw" material, that is, the words and the sensation (not the content) of poetry. The passage hints at a conflict between rawness and that which is "genuine," setting up a tension between subjective emotion and honesty, the result of which necessarily remains always a step away from settled truth.

Poems thus contain an aesthetic politics that operates on a general level of unsettled meaning for instance between emotion and honesty. This unsettled meaning has a political effect, as for instance Moore's poem *Poetry* clearly demands something in defiance of others, in a fundamental position of opposition. It does so by means of aesthetic devices, by placing unsettling line breaks that leave you guessing and searching for meaning or insight. I argue that the resulting tensions show poetry's characteristic as precarious speech both in content and also in terms of aesthetics, that is, the intensity generated by means of aesthetic decisions. This sensation drives poetry and has political effect, as shown in the reported historic example of a Politburo's direct intervention in a poem's punctuation, ordering the poet to return full-stops and commas to his texts "in the name of state reason" (Enzensberger 1963, 135).[5] Aesthetic breaks can be positively dangerous.

The Quest for Intensities as a Political Act of Exploration

This understanding of the different levels of political engagement contained in aesthetics needs to be added to current analyses within the field of IR. For instance, Bleiker so far thinks of aesthetic devices as "amplifiers," which add "a different dimension to our understanding of the political" (Bleiker 2009, 11)—but how they achieve this difference and what it may be remains unclear. In other places he also notes the inherent "ambiguity of poetry" but argues that its "lasting political contribution lies above all in its function as a critical historical memory" (Bleiker 2001b, 185). With regards to Celan's work (and also to Akhmatova's), he maintains an emphasis on these being essentially "unpolitical" poets—which however succeed in writing strongly political poetry. These politics are sometimes located in the overt topic of the poem (for instance war or the Holocaust), even when the immediate historical context may remain obscure or generalized. Bleiker's contribution to approaching poetry's political relevance goes far in unlocking their space of "radical critique"

[4] Shapiro also notes Deleuze and Guattari's concept of a Minor Literature, and the political dimension of the practice of writing in a second language, but he does not elaborate on this any further in the context of punctuation.

[5] This political challenge resides in the "core of poetic process" that evades official control (Enzensberger 1963, 134).

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/isagsq/article/5/3/ksaf084/8817298 by Richard Simpson user on 29 September 2026

(Ibid., 181) as a site of meaningful investigation and engagement for study, especially in the field of IR—but it does not go far enough.

Yet what, precisely, is the kind of political content of this aesthetic level of engagement? Some of the poems mentioned so far are clearly not taken to be political in the conventional sense, however there is still something political taking place within the poem itself. So far, the article emphasized the ways in which practices of deterritorialization unsettle meaning and commonly understood concepts of the sensible (to stay with Rancière), in a sense, rendering them precarious. It argued that the connection between precarity and poetry thus is not only conditioned by the context in which the poet writes. It is, rather, built on an inherent liminality, arising from different devices that can, for instance, be understood as essentially political as part of a minor literature. Visual aesthetics could build on choices such as colorscheme, perspective, abstraction, or focus—to name but a few. In the case of poetry, there is the oft-mentioned relation between the white and the black space, the dark and the light, and the page and the word—the choices of where to place a line break, how to lay out the text on the page, all of these are separate aesthetic choices in support of (and often previous to) the content (a detailed overview of poetic devices can be found in Graham 2000, 124 ff.). The following section delves further into the process that brings together these elements, and puts them to work in deliberate way, in order to create the impact and the appeal of a particular piece of work—for better or worse, as not all political content will inevitably be revolutionary. It argues that a written poem is the result of a creative act that explores vagaries and meanings on an undetermined and open-ended level of engagement. This process is inherently political, as meanings are probed and overturned, unsettled and revealed (see also Nassar 2025; de Oliveira and Oliveira 2025.; Zille 2025; Malik 2025, all in this issue). But—as the following shows—the result is never entirely deliberate, rather it oscillates between intention and its unexpected overspill, which can give rise to artistic appeal, or rather is potentially at the source of it. The aesthetic break thus can take a text into uncharted territory in its challenge of the "commonsensical delineation of what can be seen, said and thought" (Bleiker 2009, 9)—guided, as I argue here, by an experiential exploration of intensities.

This kind of political content is a politics of experience, rather than representation of knowledge. Here, the political is not limited to political topics or issues, and lies not only in the memorialization of otherwise mundane lives in which the private is political, but there is another politics at work that is part of the process of writing and reading. It emerges conceptually on the level of language and thus conceptually takes place before the overt political content of a poem. Instead of amplifiers, these devices are thus better understood as creators of charges or emphases that can lead to the emergence of meanings and messages. The reason for this rests in the process of writing a poem, which is written partly on the level of intended meaning, famously told "slant" (as Emily Dickinson puts it in her poem *Tell all the truth but tell it slant*, No. 1129; Dickinson 2016, 506), which renders this meaning deeply unreliable. It is however also written using the medium of language arranged on a page, and this assemblage brings its own worlds of meaning and decision-making, importing and suggesting alternative ways of understanding a particular topic. This process can contribute a political dimension to the work, which may or may not run concurrently with its aim. As the following shows, writers are often painfully aware of the vagaries and mysteries of this process, which takes place before meaning can even take shape. I argue that it contains a surreptitious level of politics, guided by artistic judgments made on the basis of intensity.

Dancing, singing, writing, and painting (amongst others)—any of these aesthetic expressions deal in intensities and their most effective distribution (see also on slam poetry de Oliveira and Oliveira 2025, in this issue). They contain an instinctual type of knowledge that eludes clear and reasoned definition, but all the same, their perception can make things move, sometimes more, sometimes less. In the case of writing poetry, intensities are a central and transformative part of a process that leads from the selection of words to moments of revelation that go beyond the writer's original intention. In this way, writing becomes more than an act of communication of knowledge, but is the physical manifestation of a creative process that can produce surprises seemingly out of nowhere. T.S. Eliot describes this moment of emergence that can lead to "something larger than its author's conscious purpose, and something remote from its origins" (quoted after Austin 2018, Loc. 267). In his description of this process, intensity plays a crucial role—but it is the intensity of the process, not the grandeur of the statements of the poem that matter, as Eliot points out in his 1919 essay *Tradition and the Individual Talent*: "it is not the "greatness," the intensity, of the emotions, the components, but the intensity of the artistic process, the pressure, so to speak, under which the fusion takes place, that counts." (Eliot 2014a, 109) He terms the result of this process to be a "new art emotion," which exceeds the inevitably more simplistic individual emotions of the writer who acts as a sort of conduit or "catalyst" for these emotions that are fundamentally impersonal, or "an escape from personality." (Ibid., 111) Somewhat cryptically, he ends his essay with an exhortation for the poet to "[surrender] himself wholly to the work to be done," and in this, "he is not likely to know what is to be done unless he lives in what is not merely the present, but the present moment of the past, unless he is conscious, not of what is dead, but of what is already living." (Ibid., 112) This is not a million miles away from Allen-Paisant's exhortation that "[o]ne must release the spirits in language to reveal things, to allow things to come to the surface" (Allen-Paisant 2021, 86). This process contains an appreciation of the histories that combine in the present, the dependencies and vagaries that were at work in creating each moment of what we experience, and a certain bit of surrender to their mystery.

Poets often emphasize this link between the aesthetics of poetry and an absence of direct deliberation from their work, traveling instead on other (hidden) avenues of perception and expression. W.H. Auden points to the sequence in which writing produces meaning: "Language is the mother, not the handmaiden, of thought; words will tell you things you never thought or felt before." (Schott 1970, 54) Auden's meaning is here not just one of direct representation of different types of meaning—it rather goes to essence of the creative process of writing, where the potentialities contained within words contain unexpected discovery for the writer as much as the reader. Language, in a way, contains the knowledge of many centuries of living, and at points some of this concentrates into a pattern that can lead to new insights and new connections to be drawn. In engaging with the hidden knowledge in language, poets embark on an act of open-ended discovery, which in turn can produce the type of insights Bleiker already mentions: they

"reveal the grey shades of domination and resistance, how social change can emerge from questioning linguistically entrenched ideas, assumptions and social practices" (Bleiker 1999a, 662).

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/isagsq/article/5/3/ksaf084/8817298 by Richard Simpson user on 29 September 2026

Intensity is often mentioned as part of this process—usually slightly differently according to the worldview of each poet. Keats for instance emphasizes: "The excellence of every art is its intensity, capable of making all disagreeables evaporate from their being in close relationship with Beauty and Truth" (Keats 2002, 60). Beauty in poetry is a relative term, as even terror contains a beauty, or sublime quality (Moten and Tsang 2017, for the politics of the sublime see Shapiro 2018)—and the confrontation of different conflicting emotions can produce its own unsettling intensity of effect, as Eliot points out in his previously mentioned essay. In another essay Eliot further explicates this relation between beauty and content: "Words are perhaps the hardest medium of all material of art. One must simultaneously express visual beauty, beauty of sound, and communicate a grammatical statement." (Eliot 2014b, 634) But this discussion of beauty is only ever an aside, as such a magnificent concept itself does not in fact contain a lot of intensity per se. As quite another type of writer states "I'm not very concerned with beauty or perfection. I don't care for the great centuries. All I care about is life, struggle, intensity." (Emile Zola, quoted for instance in Lathbury 2009, 74)

A perception of intensities is instrumental in an aesthetic process of revelation that precedes the emergence of meaning. In a conversation with John Hyde Preston in 1934/35, Gertrude Stein emphasizes the primacy of the writing process over any conceptual plans on the part of the writer, advising him to write

"without thinking of the result in terms of a result, but think of the writing in terms of discovery, which is to say that creation must take place between the pen and the paper, not before in a thought or afterwards in a recasting. Yes, before in a thought, but not in careful thinking. It will come if it is there and if you will let it come, and if you have anything you will get a sudden creative recognition. You won't know how it was, even what it is, but it will be creation if it came out of the pen and out of you and not out of an architectural drawing of the thing you are doing." (quoted after Meyer 2001, xv)

Deliberate thinking and intentionality are playing a relatively minor role in this process, and there are other forces at work, as Marilynne Robinson points out

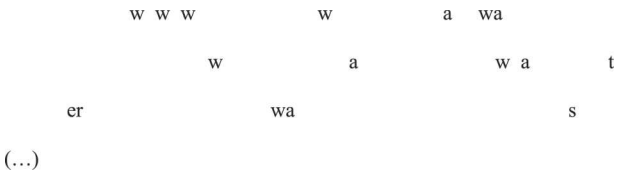
"Writing should always be exploratory. There shouldn't be the assumption that you know ahead of time what you want to express. When you enter into the dance with language, you'll begin to find that there's something before, or behind, or more absolute than the thing you thought you wanted to express. And as you work, other kinds of meaning emerge than what you might have expected. It's like wrestling with the angel: On the one hand you feel the constraints of what can be said, but on the other hand you feel the infinite potential. There's nothing more interesting than language and the problem of trying to bend it to your will, which you can never quite do. You can only find what it contains, which is always a surprise." (M. Robinson 2017)

Beauty, terror, truth, and surprise—all of these concepts are markers of an intensity of impression gained by creative exploration. Moten thinks of these registers as the scale or "spans" of art, going from lightness to density, from cosmological to very small (Moten and Tsang 2017, 339)—all relational qualities, of which intensity is the measure of difference. Aesthetic engagement with language can thus be thought of as a creative process that sees other kinds of meaning emerge from the potentialities of words, not writerly intention. On some level this can be likened to the hunt for fleeing Gods—on another, it needs to be understood as an essentially political exploration of the limits of meaning.

Conclusion

Let us now return to the example at the beginning. What exactly makes Philip's *Zong!* a political engagement? On the one hand, the entire book-length sequence of poems is an "elegiac counter-narrative" (Khan 2015, 6) of the 1781 Zong massacre that took place when a slave transporter decided to jettison a third of its "cargo" to conserve food and water, and later filed an insurance claim for their loss of profit. Philip takes the resulting legal cases as a point of departure—much like Layli Long Soldier's *Whereas* does from an Oglala Lakota perspective on the congressional apology and resolution to the native peoples of the United States (Soldier 2017). Philip's poem is clearly dealing with a political topic, and this is being directly represented in different ways throughout the book, for instance by naming individual names along the bottom of each page, clearly visualizing the individual human elements contained and disguised in larger concepts such as "slavery." But what makes the overall treatment more impactful than an academic account of the same topic? This article argued that there is another level of engagement underlying the "facts," making the reading of *Zong!* more of an experience than a telling—in fact, Philip reiterates again and again that "[t]here is no telling this story [. . .]" (Philip 2008, 189), "this story must be told by not telling—there is a mystery here—the mystery of evil [. . .]" (Ibid., 190). The exploration of this mystery is the driving force behind the work, and is reflected in its aesthetic devices that ultimately explore the intensities of evil.

Water is everywhere in *Zong!*. Water and rhythm. The water seeps in between the lines, and sometimes becomes all of them, in its elements it threatens to submerge all meaning, for instance in the beginning lines from *Zong! #1*:



(…)

Credit: Excerpt reproduced from *Zong!* by M. NourbeSe Philip, first published by Wesleyan University Press, © 2008. Reproduced with kind permission of M. NourbeSe Philip. © M. NourbeSe Philip (2025), all rights reserved. Permission for re-use should be sought from the rights-holder.

There are different types of form employed in the book, picking up on the strictures and conventions of legal processes. In a reflective essay accompanying the collection, Philip remarks on the similarities between law and poetry: "Law and poetry both share an inexorable concern with language—the 'right' use of the 'right' words, phrases, or even marks of punctuation; precision of expression is the goal shared by both." (Ibid., 191) These legal cases are being put to work as a "word store [. . .] in the belief that the story of these African men, women, and children thrown overboard in an attempt to collect insurance monies [. . .] is locked in this text" (Ibid.). But in order to release this story, Philip "mutilate[s], [. . .] murder[s] the text, literally cut[s] it into pieces [. . .]" (Ibid., 193), and then something happens:

"When I start spacing out the words, there is something happening in the eye tracking the words across the page, working to pull the page and larger 'meaning' together – the eye trying to order what cannot be ordered, trying

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/isagsq/article/5/3/ksaf084/8817298 by Richard Simpson user on 29 September 2026

to 'make sense' of something, which is what it must have been like trying to understand what was happening on board the Zong […]" (Ibid., 192)

This is a fundamentally sensory and also a dangerous use of aesthetics—it unsettles completely and can leave the reader lost. It intentionally does not convey a pleasant reading experience, much rather the opposite, as it is a struggle to even read the sheer amount of letters that make up for instance the elements of the word water. There is so much more on the page than the eye can take in. This amount of repetition and disjuncture contains its own intensity, which can feel overwhelming. It is a representation of water, but also an experience of its effects, and this experience has a political effect separate to the overt political issues contained in the poem.

But these aesthetic effects are not clear cut. On the one hand, they convey the sensation of drowning on the Middle Passage to the Americas, but on the other they also risk eliding that meaning. The inescapable surrender to the elements contains the end of all meaning, and the oblivion of death. In this, the poem brings about a sensory experience of precarity understood as liminality, and the tensions contained in this state of almost-belonging and radical exposure. It is the unresolved content of this state and its unsettling effects that mark the difference in import that a poem can have in giving something of an experience of disintegration. It is however also a risky endeavor, as these aesthetic intensities can overwhelm the reader and overshadow the actual intended topic of the poem. This is the double-edged political effect of a moment of aesthetic deterritorialization, which poetry both evokes and has to navigate at the limits of meaning. In its most successful moments, the result can literally change what we see, and can create a space that then allows us to question what we thought we knew.

Conceptually, at this point of deterritorialization, we are entering a state of ontological insecurity even on the level of the individual letter. We can no longer be sure what it means. Is it a wrinkle on the water or is it a "W"—we do not know. This moment, however, is not just about abjection or a surrender to the inevitable—it also has the potential of creating something coming close to a shared understanding of what it means to be so precariously placed that your entire life is expendable. The onslaught of letters is a sensory experience—and the poem here becomes a vehicle of communicating the uncommunicable. It is a revealing of what words like cargo can mean—in directly affective ways. It is a meditation on the mechanisms of evil—using methods, such as mutilation and dismemberment as part of a process that seeks to fight back, using language in a new, yet minor, way. This is where, on the level of letters and words, a form of empathy can emerge, as Philip's statement argued at the beginning of this essay—and this means empathy as a sensation of equality, not as a form of knowledge gained in reading. This understanding can add a deeper appreciation of aesthetic devices to IR scholarship, and can give a clearer idea of the source of their politics: a sensation of the limitless precarity of living, interspersed by brief moments of revelation.

Acknowledgments

This paper has benefitted enormously from the collegiate and intellectually stimulating environment of several linked workshops and roundtables on the topic of *Precarity: Poetic and Aesthetic Explorations*, both online and also at several conferences such as ISA 2023 in Montréal. Further detailed comments and thoughtful suggestions came from Louiza Odysseos, Ritu Vij, and Simon Waldman. I would also like to thank M. NourbeSe Philip, Carcanet Press, and all other rights holders for very graciously giving permission for the reproduction of their materials in this article.

References

ADORNO, THEODOR, WALTER BENJAMIN, ERNST BLOCH, BERTOLT BRECHT, GEORG LUKÁCS, AND FREDRIC JAMESON. 2020. *Aesthetics and Politics*. Brooklyn: Verso Books.

ALLEN-PAISANT, JASON. 2021. "Silence, Sound, Ceremony: The Poetry of NourbeSe Philip." *The Poetry Review* 111: 78–87.

ALLEN-PAISANT, JASON. 2022. "Thinking with Spirits, or Dwelling and Knowing in the Work of Aimé Césaire." *French Studies* 76: 576–90. https://doi.org/10.1093/fs/knac198.

ARISTOTLE. 2020. *Poetics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

AUSTIN, DAVID. 2018. *Dread Poetry and Freedom: Linton Kwesi Johnson and the Unfinished Revolution*. London: Pluto Press.

BELFRAGE, CLAES, AND EARL GAMMON. 2017. "Aesthetic International Political Economy." *Millennium* 45: 223–32. https://doi.org/10.1177/0305829816684256.

BENJAMIN, WALTER. 2015. *Illuminations*. London: The Bodley Head Ltd.

BLEIKER, ROLAND. 1999a. "'Give It the Shade': Paul Celan and the Politics of Apolitical Poetry." *Political Studies* 47: 661–76. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9248.00223.

BLEIKER, ROLAND. 1999b. "Pablo Neruda and the Struggle for Political Memory." *Third World Quarterly* 20: 1129–42. https://doi.org/10.1080/01436599913325.

BLEIKER, ROLAND. 2000. "Stroll through the Wall: Everyday Poetics of Cold War Politics." *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 25: 391–408. https://doi.org/10.1177/030437540002500313.

BLEIKER, ROLAND. 2001a. "The Aesthetic Turn in International Political Theory." *Millennium* 30: 509–33. https://doi.org/10.1177/03058298010300031001.

BLEIKER, ROLAND. 2001b. "Anna Akhmatova's Search for Political Light." *Peace Review* 13: 181–86. https://doi.org/10.1080/10402650120060346.

BLEIKER, ROLAND. 2009. *Aesthetics and World Politics*. Rethinking Peace and Conflict Studies. Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230244375.

BLEIKER, ROLAND. 2017. "In Search of Thinking Space: Reflections on the Aesthetic Turn in International Political Theory." *Millennium* 45: 258–64. https://doi.org/10.1177/0305829816684262.

BLEIKER, ROLAND, AND DAVID HUNDT. 2010. "Ko Un and the Poetics of Postcolonial Identity." *Global Society : Journal of Interdisciplinary International Relations* 24: 331–49. https://doi.org/10.1080/13600826.2010.485557.

BUTLER, JUDITH. 2004. *Precarious Life: the Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso.

CHOI, SHINE. 2017. "The Art of Losing (In) the International." *Millennium* 45: 241–48. https://doi.org/10.1177/0305829816684260.

CLAVIER, AURORE. 2021. "'Cut Prose'? The Sentence and the Line in Marianne Moore's Poetry." *Transatlantica. Revue d'études Américaines. American Studies Journal* 1: 1–16. https://doi.org/10.4000/TRANSATLANTICA.16994.

DAVIES, MATT. 2012. "The Aesthetics of the Financial Crisis: Work, Culture, and Politics." *Alternatives* 37: 317–30. https://doi.org/10.1177/0304375412465039.

DE CAMPOS, AUGUSTO, AND JON M. TOLMAN. 1982. "The Concrete Coin of Speech." *Poetics Today* 3: 167–76. https://doi.org/10.2307/1772396.

DELEUZE, GILLES, AND FÉLIX GUATTARI. 1983. "What Is a Minor Literature?" *Mississippi Review* 11: 13–33.

DELEUZE, GILLES, AND FÉLIX GUATTARI. 1986. "Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature." In *Theory and History of Literature*. Vol. 30. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

DELEUZE, GILLES, AND FÉLIX GUATTARI. 1987. *A Thousand Plateaus—Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. London, New York: Continuum.

DE OLIVEIRA, VINICIUS TAVARES, AND JESSICA S. OLIVEIRA. 2025. "Pedagogies, Poetics, and Politics: Knowledge Cultivation from and through Slam Poetry in Brazil." *Global Studies Quarterly* 5: ksaf076.

DICKINSON, EMILY. 2016. *The Complete Poems*. London: Faber and Faber.

EDKINS, JENNY, JULIO CÉSAR DÍAZ CALDERÓN, AIDA A. HOZIĆ, HIMADEEP MUPPIDI, NAEEM INAYATULLAH, OLIVIA RUTAZIBWA, AND ROBBIE SHILLIAM. 2021. "Tales of Entanglement." *Millennium* 49: 604–26. https://doi.org/10.1177/03058298211034918.

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/isagsq/article/5/3/ksaf084/8817298 by Richard Simpson user on 29 September 2026

Eliot, T. S. 1979. *On Poetry and Poets*. London: Faber and Faber.

Eliot, T. S. 2014a. *The Complete Prose of T.S.Eliot. Volume 2, The Perfect Critic, 1919-1926 /[Electronic Resource]*. The critical edition. Baltimore: Project Muse.

Eliot, T. S. 2014b. *The Complete Prose of T.S.Eliot. Volume 1, Apprentice Years, 1905-1918 /[Electronic Resource]*. The critical edition. Baltimore: Project Muse.

Enzensberger, Hans Magnus. 1963. *Einzelheiten II: Poesie und Politik*. Edition Suhrkamp 87. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

Franz, Michael. 2013. "Wolfram Groddeck, Hölderlins Elegie,Brod und Wein' Oder,Die Nacht.'" *Arbitrium* 31: 221–25. https://doi.org/10.1515/arb-2013-0051.

Gosetti-Ferencei, Jennifer Anna. 2022. *Heidegger, Hölderlin, and the Subject of Poetic Language: toward a New Poetics of Dasein. Heidegger, Hölderlin, and the Subject of Poetic Language*. Fordham University Press. https://doi.org/10.1515/9780823291700.

Graham, Gordon. 2000. *Philosophy of the Arts: An Introduction to Aesthetics*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge.

Heidegger, Martin. 1950. "Wozu Dichter?" In *Holzwege*, 248–320. Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann.

Hozić, Aida A. 2017. "Introduction: The Aesthetic Turn at 15 (Legacies, Limits and Prospects)." *Millennium* 45: 201–5. https://doi.org/10.1177/0305829816684253.

Keats, John. 2002. *Selected Letters of John Keats*. Rev. ed. Ebook Central. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Khan, Almas. 2015. "Poetic Justice: Slavery, Law, and the (Anti-)Elegiac Form in M. NourbeSe Philip's Zong." *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 2: 5–32. https://doi.org/10.1017/pli.2014.22.

Lathbury, Roger. 2009. *Realism and Regionalism, 1860–1910*. Coimbatore: Infobase Publishing.

Malik, Shiera. 2025"A Meditation on Poetics." *Global Studies Quarterly 5* 5: ksaf074. https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksaf074.

Metres, Philip. 2021. *Poetry as Untelling: A Conversation with M. NourbeSe Philip*. Norman: World Literature Today. https://www.worldliteraturetoday.org/blog/interviews/poetry-untelling-conversation-m-nourbese-philip-philip-metres. Date accessed 22 August 2023.

Meyer, Steven. 2001. *Irresistible Dictation: Gertrude Stein and the Correlations of Writing and Science*. Writing Science. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Miller, Kei. 2014. *The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion*. Manchester: Carcanet.

Monroe, Harriet. 1922. "A Symposium on Marianne Moore." *Poetry* 19. 208–16.

Moore, Marianne. 1921. *Poems*. London: The Egoist Press.

Moten, Fred, and Wu Tsang. 2017. "All Terror, All Beauty: Wu Tsang and Fred Moten in Conversation." In *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, edited by R. Gossett, E. A. Stanley and J. Burton, 339–48. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Munday, Jeremy. 2016. *Introducing Translation Studies: Theories and Applications*. 4th ed. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315691862.

Nassar, Aya. 2025. "'Giving up the Idea of Home': Ambivalent Geographies, Geopoetics and Resisting Capture in the Cities of the Middle East." *Global Studies Quarterly* 5: ksaf075. July 2025, https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksaf075.

Odysseos, Louiza. 2017. "Prolegomena to any Future Decolonial Ethics: Coloniality, Poetics and 'Being Human as Praxis'." *Millennium* 45: 447–72. https://doi.org/10.1177/0305829817704503.

Odysseos, Louiza. 2019. "Stolen Life's Poetic Revolt." *Millennium* 47: 341–72. https://doi.org/10.1177/0305829819860199.

Paterson, Don. 2007. *Orpheus: A Version of Rilke's Die Sonette an Orpheus*. London: Faber and Faber.

Penny, Laura. 2008. "The Highest of all the Arts: Kant and Poetry." *Philosophy and Literature* 32: 373–84. https://doi.org/10.1353/phl.0.0023.

Philip, M. NourbeSe. 2008. *Zong!* Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press.

Rancière, Jacques. 2004. *The Flesh of Words: The Politics of Writing*. Atopia. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Rancière, Jacques. 2013. *The Politics of Aesthetics*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.

Reynolds, Matthew. 2013. *The Poetry of Translation: From Chaucer & Petrarch to Homer & Logue*. Oxford: University Press.

Robinson, Marilynne. 2017. "Marilynne Robinson on Finding the Right Word." *The New York Times*, September 22, 2017. https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/22/books/review/marilynne-robinson-on-finding-the-right-word.html.

Robinson, Roger. 2019. *A Portable Paradise*. Leeds: Peepal Tree.

Schott, Webster. 1970. "Autumn for the 'Age of Anxiety'." Life Magazine, January 30, 1970.

Shapiro, Michael J. 2012. *Studies in Trans-Disciplinary Method: After the Aesthetic Turn*. London: Taylor & Francis Group. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203101506.

Shapiro, Michael J. 2018. *The Political Sublime*. Thought in the Act. Durham: Duke University Press.

Shapiro, Michael J. 2019. *Punctuations: How the Arts Think the Political*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Shelley, James. 2022. "The Concept of the Aesthetic." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by E. N. Zalta, Stanford: Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University. https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2022/entries/aesthetic-concept/. Date accessed 18 February 2023.

Shilliam, Robbie. 2012. "Civilization and the Poetics of Slavery." *Thesis Eleven* 108: 99–117. https://doi.org/10.1177/0725513611433765.

Soldier, Layli Long. 2017. *Whereas: Poems*. Minneapolis: Gray Wolf Press.

Steele, Brent J. 2010. *Defacing Power: The Aesthetics of Insecurity in Global Politics*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/oxford/detail.action?docID=3414961.

Steele, Brent J. 2017. "Recognising, and Realising, the Promise of the Aesthetic Turn." *Millennium* 45: 206–13. https://doi.org/10.1177/0305829816684254.

Sylvester, Christine. 2016. "Art, Abstraction, and International Relations—ChristineSylvester 2001." *Millennium* 30: 535–54. https://doi.org/10.1177/03058298010300031101.

Vij, Ritu. 2019. "The Global Subject of Precarity." *Globalizations* 16: 506–24. https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2019.1600287.

Zille, Tulio R. B. 2025. "'The River Was My Teacher' Poetics and Relationality in the Aftermath of Development." *Global Studies Quarterly* 5: July 2025, ksaf080. https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksaf080.

Hilberg, Eva (2026) Poetry and the Assets of Precarity: Understanding Aesthetic Politics as a Quest for Intensity in Precarious Meanings. *Global Studies Quarterly*, https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksaf084

© The Author(s) 2026. Published by Oxford University Press on behalf of the International Studies Association. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs licence (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/), which permits non-commercial reproduction and distribution of the work, in any medium, provided the original work is not altered or transformed in any way, and that the work is properly cited. For commercial re-use, please contact reprints@oup.com for reprints and translation rights for reprints. All other permissions can be obtained through our RightsLink service via the Permissions link on the article page on our site-for further information please contact journals.permissions@oup.com

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/isagsq/article/5/3/ksaf084/8817298 by Richard Simpson user on 29 September 2026