Poem as/and Palimpsest: Hermeneutic Phenomenology and/as Poetic Inquiry

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Abstract
Concerned with meaning-making and uncovering what the experience is like, hermeneutic phenomenology offers a way to understand shared, interconnected and embodied human existence. Poetry and poetic inquiry provide a powerful way to present nuanced, rich understandings, allowing space for play and ambiguity, revealing fresh and surprising ways of thinking about phenomena. Hermeneutic phenomenology often turns to the poetic for a suitably evocative language capable of bringing forth the richness and nearness of lived experience. Poetic inquiry, in turn, draws its nourishment from the foundational roots of hermeneutic phenomenology; however, this is often less obvious to the neophyte researcher. The paper provides an introduction to phenomenology and hermeneutics, showing how these qualitative approaches lend themselves to each other, and makes explicit a philosophical foundation for poetic inquiry. Whilst methodological frameworks provide vital scaffolding for researchers, they can become rigid; poetry can help researchers flex outside and around more established ways of thinking and writing. Together, hermeneutic phenomenology and poetic inquiry unsettle and disrupt familiar ways of doing, being and seeing our world, allowing the unexpected to emerge and bringing forth new potential understandings.

Keywords
hermeneutic phenomenology, poetic inquiry, poetry, mixed methods

Qualitative researchers use poetry in their work precisely because of its slipperiness and ambiguity, precision and distinctiveness, its joyfulness and playfulness (Faulkner, 2020, p. 12).

Introduction

...We want to touch
the mystery of this place, even as the mind’s eye squints
for a glimpse of deeper meanings sequestered in time
and cultural distance, some of which seem to be murmured
in the eclipse of stones at dusk and dawn. But the magic
does not reside in the stones themselves. It is embedded in
the reading, the immersion of self in place...
...Poets who would see this clearly
must chase the beams gently...
...The experience steps us
into another reality and with all the power of ritual turns
day to dream, taking us out of ourselves – about how we have been
and where we think we used to be – a kind of mythopoetic
archaeology.

(Brady, 2005, p. 980, p. 980)

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Hermeneutic phenomenology is a qualitative research methodology that has grown from the traditions of hermeneutics and phenomenological philosophy. Starting from the premise that our most basic experience of the world is already full of meaning, it seeks ‘to touch the mystery of this place’, looking for ‘a glimpse of deeper meanings sequestered in time and cultural distance’ (Brady, 2005). We are enmeshed in that world and experience it as meaningful because that world exists prior to any of our attempts to understand, explain or account for it. In research terms, the purpose of hermeneutic phenomenology can be thought about as bringing to light the meaning of that lived experience, allowing us to reflect on it. It attempts to describe phenomena before theory and abstraction. Such an attempt is always tentative and never complete.

The first author (Emma) drew on the thinking of Hans-Georg Gadamer [1900–2002] in her doctoral thesis, a hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry, and used Gadamer’s writings to illuminate a philosophical foundation for poetic inquiry. Hermeneutic phenomenology and poetic inquiry were revealed as intimately linked through a methodological approach combining the two approaches to research. This paper draws on the found poems created by the first author in her doctoral thesis (Green, 2020) to illuminate methodology and to explore the relationship between hermeneutic phenomenology and poetic inquiry. A found poem is created from existing literature through taking words and phrases and rearranging them to form a new composition (Butler-Kisber, 2002; Prendergast, 2006). The found poems presented in this paper attempt to attend to craft and aesthetics (for an excellent discussion see Faulkner, 2016; 2020; Fernández-Giménez, 2019; Piirto, 2016) and so in this regard sometimes extend themselves around and beyond the original text. Where such additions make more poetic and aesthetic sense these are noted as ‘fusion’ poems, this is also a reference to (Gadamer, 2013) fusion of horizons which points to perception and coming to an understanding but also how one is changed by one’s engagement with something previously alien.

On Being Bound to One Another
On being bound
In the reciprocations
of language
and life
consider
we are
bound
to each other

As inextricably relational beings, we are, each of us, bound to the other. In seeking understanding, one is bound to the one with whom one enters a conversation. One is bound to the one whom one desires to say something to, the one whom we want to understand and be understood by. The one with whom we wish to deepen relationship and build community. What Gadamer’s work made possible was the recognition that this is brought about through our embeddedness in language and symbols.

Davey (1991) has argued that Gadamer was almost certainly influenced by Heidegger’s assertion that ‘the being of anything that is resides in the word… language is the house of being’ (1971, p. 63). For Gadamer, 2013, since language and symbol are the basis of thought, there can be no understanding without language, indeed, there would be no world without language. The world is world because it comes in-to/through language. Thus, Gadamer wrote that language ‘has its real being only in the fact that the world is presented in it’ (Gadamer, 2013, p. 459). The two, language and world, are inextricably bound together in a hermeneutic circle because our ‘being-in-the-world is primordially linguistic’ (Gadamer, 2013, p. 459). This recognises the creative power of language to call forth the world, such as the biblical pronouncement, ‘let there be light’. We are called forth into existence by language. Language convokes us into being and ‘[w]hat the word evokes is there’ (Gadamer, 1986, p. 113).

A Brief History of Phenomenology

Phenomenology as a philosophy can be traced back to the early beginnings of philosophy as a discipline but was catalysed by the work of Edmund Husserl [1859–1938] who suggested that we are always, already in the world and that our experience of the world is the only thing about which we can be certain (Husserl, 1999). Husserl urged that we begin with our experiences, expressed in his oft-quoted insistence on returning to the things themselves, rather than relying on abstractions or theories to explain those things.

In the early 20th Century, Husserlian phenomenology dominated continental philosophy. Husserl developed his phenomenology from his teacher, Brentano, who used the term phenomenology to indicate a descriptive psychology. In phenomenology, Husserl saw the opportunity for the study of both objectivity and subjectivity. His search was for a pure phenomenology that would provide a universal foundation for science and philosophy (Scruton, 1995). Husserl was critical of psychology’s attempts to apply the methods of the natural sciences to human beings given that human beings do not just react to stimuli but have their own perceptions of events that influence those reactions (Jones, 1975). For Husserl, phenomenology provided a way to study the ‘pre-given’ world of pure experience, before theory and abstraction. Immersion in this pre-reflexive world, before categorization or conceptualization, allowed opportunity to study those things which are often taken for granted or dismissed as common sense, thus providing a way to uncover new and/or forgotten meanings and penetrate more deeply into ‘reality’ (Husserl, 1999). Central to Husserlian thought is the notion that the philosopher (or researcher) must bracket their assumptions and pre-
suppositions, in order to attempt to directly grasp the phenomena. This is the process of phenomenological reduction or ‘bracketing’ (Jones, 1975; Polkinghorne, 1983).

Other philosophers, notably Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Sartre and Levinas challenged and expanded Husserl’s ideas, developing and extending the philosophical understandings of hermeneutic phenomenology. The ontological turn shifted the concept of human understanding from intellectual exercise to existential concern. In particular, Heidegger’s [1889–1976] work helped transform understanding, moving away from conceptualisation and explanation to constitute the fundamental structure of Dasein (there/being) (2008). Heidegger, originally a student of Husserl, was concerned with a hermeneutics of facticity (2008). This is the hermeneutical situation in which we find ourselves, ‘the concrete, pregiven world in which and by which we are formed, with all of its difficulties and impasses’ (Caputo, 2000, p. 42). This ontological turn and the inextricability of being from situatedness, along with Heidegger’s contribution to the development of phenomenological thought in this regard, is now widely recognised (Laverty, 2003).

Following Heidegger, Gadamer’s work subtly shifted the Heideggerian focus on being toward a focus on language and the other, with whom we find ourselves in conversation or dialogue. This other is no longer merely an object for the subject, but ‘someone to whom we are bound in the reciprocations of language and life’ (Gadamer, 1994, p. xi). For Gadamer ‘understanding is no method but rather a form of community among those who understand each other’ (1994, p. xi). Gadamer conceived of this as a new dimension, not merely another field of inquiry, but as constituting the ‘praxis of life itself’ (1994, p. xi). It was Gadamer who highlighted the absolute inextricability of interpretation and understanding, which is, ‘the original character of the being of human life itself’ (Gadamer, 2013, p. 230).

Phenomenology transitioned then from philosophical endeavour to methodological approach in the mid-1950s when an eclectic group of educators, doctors, psychologists and psychiatrists in the Netherlands adopted phenomenology as a research methodology. Rather than using phenomenology as a philosophical approach they were interested in the application of phenomenology as a way of understanding human experience (van Manen, 1990).

**A Brief Introduction to Hermeneutics**

The word hermeneutic derives from the Greek, _hēménēnēnô_, meaning ‘to interpret’. Hermeneutics has a long tradition of interpreting religious and sacred texts that can be traced back to pre-Christian times (Laverty, 2003). As early as the fourth Century, theological scholars such as St Augustine used the term _ars hermeneutica_ to indicate the art of interpreting canonical texts (Grondin, 1994). In a contemporary sense, hermeneutics represents an arm of continental philosophy dealing with interpretation and the inherent linguistic and historical context in which we find ourselves (Grondin, 1994).

Very simply hermeneutics could be described as ‘the discipline that deals with principles of interpretation’ (Kaiser & Silva, 1994, p. 15). Within Continental philosophy, the discipline of hermeneutics has been developing over the last two centuries, notably through the work of Schleiermacher (in a theological context), Dilthey (in a historical context) and Heidegger (in terms of ontology) but it was Gadamer who would focus on language and turn hermeneutics back to the task of interpreting philosophical tradition (Silverman, 1991) and human experience. Gadamerian hermeneutics provides for a way of being in the world that is concerned with making meaning, of ‘trying to understand one’s self and others in a common world’ (Schuster, 2013, p. 12). The question is of _how_ we orient ourselves _toward one another_ as we attempt to come to understanding. Whilst we may share a common world it is also true that we see the world _we see_ (and experience the world _we experience_) because of how we are shaped by our world. This is Gadamer’s notion of prejudice or fore-understanding. It requires the hermeneutic phenomenologist to examine their own understandings, in order that they might gain insight into how they orient towards the other.

When I approach a text, artwork, poem or transcript (or rather am addressed by it), I immediately want to begin to make sense of it. To do this, I must summon my own thoughts in response to the material. The thoughts and ideas evoked by the text now mingle with my pre-existing ideas and a meaning-making process has begun. In this sense all understanding begins with interpretation. The process of _coming to an understanding_ is inextricably connected with language. Gadamer, 2013 suggested that ‘everything experienced [Erlebte] is experienced through oneself [selbsterlebtes]’ (p. 60). What is experienced ‘belongs to the unity of this self and thereby contains a distinctive and irreplaceable relation to the whole of this one life’ (Gadamer, 2013, p. 60; emphasis mine). The translation of _Erlebte_ from the German is ‘experienced’, the past tense of the verb, and _selbsterlebtes_ translates as personal experience. In other words, my experiences are not meaningful simply because I lived through them and experienced them, rather that which is experienced as meaningful is made so by the ‘reflective glance’ (Schutz, 1972 p. 71). It is this reflective glance that constitutes meaning. The reflective glance is comprised of the pre-understandings which constitute this ‘oneself’. Thus, hermeneutic phenomenology attempts to bring light to and reflect on the meanings of these experiences.

- Making meaning
- being in the world
- hermeneutically
- making meaning of our existence
- embodied
lives
shared with others.
Start with experiencing,
always.
Otherwise,
there would be nothing to understand.
Openness to otherness
an invitation togetherness
reciprocity
I must risk myself

A Philosophical Foundation for Poetic Inquiry
Hermeneutic phenomenology is concerned with meaning-making and uncovering what is the nature lived experience. As a research methodology, it offers a way to understand embedded, interconnected and embodied existence. Often the researcher engaging with hermeneutic phenomenology will turn to poetry to language the lived experience in ways that are both rich and evocative (for example; Hunter, 2008; Rajabali, 2014; Stephenson et al., 2018; Tasker et al., 2014; van Manen, 1990). This is because poetry provides a powerful way to present deep, nuanced understandings, allowing space for play and ambiguity, revealing fresh and surprising ‘ways in’ to phenomena.

In a review of the use of poetry in the social sciences, Prendergast (2009) points to hermeneutics and phenomenology as philosophical foundations for poetic inquiry without explicitly explaining this relationship. The relationship is only hinted at implicit in references to language, understanding, and the conditions in which understanding and relationships occur. Prendergast quotes phenomenologist Wolff, ‘[t]he power of the poem is that it seizes the poet, and thus the listener or reader, by virtue of its sedimentedness… [a] poem thus is palimpsest with sedimented language shining through’ (Wolff, in Prendergast, 2009, p. 559).

Shining language is an idea that comes to us from Gadamer (1986). Sedimented suggests something that was visible, at the fore, is now hidden, covered over, transferred from its place of origin or perhaps settled through the passage of time. If there is sediment there is a sinking down or settling; a movement from visible and surface to hidden and obscured. What shines through then is a fragment, or perhaps a remnant, that calls to us from beneath the immediately observable surface.

Poems hide. In our shoes
they are sleeping. They are the shadows
drifting across our ceilings the moment
before we wake up. What we have to do

is live in a way that let’s us find them.
((Shihab-Nye, 1994), p. 70)

What shines hints at the riches below, calling us to investigate further, to disturb and unsettle the surface. The poem might allow us to grasp something ‘the moment before we wake up’ (Shihab-Nye, 1994). For Gadamer the poem brings to life words that had previously seemed used up or worn out, such that we see them and experience them afresh (Gadamer, 1986). Poetic inquiry might then be as palimpsest, over-laid onto the philosophical foundation of hermeneutic phenomenology, traces of which shine through.

That Which Shines
Shining is related to beauty, radiance and appearance (the German scheinen, meaning shining, also means ‘to appear’). (Gadamer, 2013) spoke of das Einleuchtende (the illuminating) and also einleuchten (what is evident, revealed or ‘shining in’, p. 501). ‘To shine means to shine on something, and so to make that on which the light falls appear’ (Gadamer, 2013, p. 498). The notion of shining is useful to the poetic inquirer and hermeneutic phenomenologist because it suggests both illumination and what is illuminated, pointing to a revealing dialectical process through which we attempt to understand what is unsettled and newly surfaced. As one applies one’s attention and thinking to the phenomenon, there is a revealing. The light of the word is focused onto the text’s dark, more obscure, surface.

What shines might be that which allows us a glimpse of the phenomenon, in the poetic moment this is allowing something from the interior of one life to be surfaced, lifted up from its former sedimentedness, and therefore able to be known by another. Dove (1994) described poetry as ‘the art of making the interior life of one individual available to others’ (p. 25). This not only illuminates something essential about the capaciousness of poetry, but also the way in which poetic inquiry fits beautifully with the purpose of hermeneutic phenomenology.

Revealing and Disclosing
dls‘kleuz/
verb.
To disclose,
or
to be in the process of bringing to light. To make secret information known. To lay bare. Something once hidden revealed.4
Gadamer (1986) described language as disclosing. Disclose means to uncover, expose to view, allow to be seen, reveal, show, lay bare and bring to light. The idea of bringing to light is that movement from darkness or obscurity to a revealing; allowing that which was hidden to be seen. This relates to sedimentedness from the Old French, desclorer, meaning to break open, unlock or reveal (Harper, 2020). The poem or poetical thinking (Freeman, 2016) reveals something that prose might leave obscured. As Gadamer (1986) suggested, the event of the poetic word discloses an ‘infinity of unspoken meaning’ (p. 427) suggesting that poetry and poetic inquiry open up an infinity of possibility.

For Gadamer, the world presents itself through language and the power of language is in how it calls forth things from their concealment (Tate, 2016). This was especially evident for Gadamer in the poetic word (Tate, 2016). Language discloses, revealing that which would otherwise be obscure to us. Imagine if we did not have words to make sense of and cohere our world. We would be as perpetual infants, in wonderment perhaps, but unable to grasp reality. For Gadamer, language discloses reality, revealing it as it summons it (Gadamer, 1986). Poetry represents a particular aspect of language. One might remain relatively unaware of how everyday language functions to disclose the world, but, for Gadamer, it is in poetry that we see language at work ‘in the process of disclosing’ (Vessey, 2010, p. 170). This is why Gadamer (1986) said that ‘poetic language stands out as the highest fulfilment of that revealing which is the achievement of all speech’ (p. 112). Gadamer (1986) explained that the poetic word speaks for itself, unable to be captured in prose. The poem’s meaning is its own. The poem creates something in our imagination. We do not seek verification as to whether a poem is true. For each of us the image summoned will be different but no less real or true. Thus, poetic language is not fulfilled by anything beyond itself. It is ‘self-fulfilling… in that it bears witness to itself’ (Gadamer, 1986, p. 110). The poem allows us to experience ‘nearness’ (Gadamer, 1986, p. 114) and the ‘truth of poetry consists in creating a hold upon nearness’ (p. 113). As Tate (2016), interpreting Gadamer, has suggested, ‘it is through language that we have a world in which we feel at home, it is in poetry that we experience its abiding nearness’ (p. 182). Poetry, poetic language and poetical thinking then have a special relationship with hermeneutic phenomenology which seeks to surface the nearness of the world.

The poetic word brings the world, and thereby the other, closer, helping understanding, of ourselves and the world in which we live (Kockelmans, 1987).

**Secret Life of Poems**

The poem awakens
in words
that had seemed
used up, worn out.

In language the world
presents itself
and tells us of ourselves.5

Freeman (2016) has suggested that poetical thinking aims to ‘reveal experience as it is experienced, not as it is thought’ (p. 75). Poetical thinking then is well matched with hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry. This kind of thinking ‘reaches beyond a search for knowledge or meaning into the sensual, afferent and efferent, difficult-to-grasp, or to put into words, experiential world’ (Freeman, 2016, p. 73). For Henriksson and Saevi (2009) this becomes ‘an event in sound’ (p. 35) and language that is to reveal or bring light to the meanings of lived experience must resound with a phenomenological sensibility. Poetry and poetic inquiry open up infinite possibilities for seeing and knowing that are particularly useful in the revealing of lived experience.

**Sedimentedness, Unconcealment and Truth**

Whilst emphasising our embeddedness in language, Gadamer made a special case for the language of poetry. For Gadamer, the poetic renew words that had seemed worn out, presenting us with access to a secret life, revealing what had been obscured and unlike everyday language that hides in its taken-for-grantedness. It is something we do without thinking, whilst everyday language might reveal and disclose, calling the world into being, it is, at the same time, self-concealing or perhaps self-forgetting (Gadamer, 2013). Again, Gadamer draws on Heidegger who wrote, ‘poetry proper is never merely a higher mode (melos) of everyday language. It is rather the reverse: everyday language is a forgotten and therefore used-up poem, from which there hardly resounds a call any longer’ (Heidegger et al., 1971, p. 208).

For Gadamer, what is brought forth through the language of the poem stands before us in the ‘openness of its unconcealment’ (Tate, 2016, p. 157). This idea of unconcealment comes to us from Aletheia, Greek goddess of the spirit of truth. In Greek philosophy, the word ‘aletheia’ represents truth or disclosure. Gadamer’s use of aletheia has been translated as ‘openness’ (Nicholas Walker’s translation in Relevance of the Beautiful, 1986, p. 108) and ‘disclosure’ (Joel Weinsheimer’s translation in Truth and Method, Gadamer, 2013, p. 494). Drawing on Heidegger’s notion of ‘unconcealedness’, Gadamer, 2013 brings our attention to the relationship between truth and shining. Since shining means ‘to make that which the light falls upon appear’” shining requires something to shine upon (p. 498). This speaks to something essential at the heart of both hermeneutic phenomenology and poetic inquiry. There is an intention
to tentatively dwell with the things we are trying to shine a light upon that we might reveal them, even as they are concealed from us in their sedimented everydayness. Whilst the notion of truth might be unpopular in the post-modern world, the poem provides for nuance and ambiguity, surfacing myriad truths from their sedimentedness. Rather than nailing down truth, poetic ‘language is dynamic and energetic…open[ing] up possibilities for understanding our lives and experiences and relations’ (Leggo, 2005, p. 178).

It is relevant here to mention aesthetics. There is a happening of the work (art work, poem, text and so on) that occurs inside the reader or viewer and hermeneutics puts forth that this happening is ontological (Palmer, 1969). It is an eventing of the disclosure of truth (Palmer, 1969). Language for Gadamer is ‘a medium where I and world meet, or rather, manifest their original belonging together’ (Gadamer, 2013, p. 474), in this way poetry embodies something essential to all language. Language is a type of coming-into-being that reveals the unity of truth and beauty and thus relates to aesthetics.

**Poetry is/as the Human Voice**

Burch (1990) claims that we define ourselves, or bring ourselves to be, through the processes of ‘remembrance, narration and inscription, recovering and re-enacting’ (p. 134). In bringing ourselves to be, I find myself thinking of an interview with the poet Elizabeth Alexander and the idea of needing words to reach each other across the void (Tippet, 2011).

> Poetry (here I hear myself loudest)
> 
> is the human voice,
> 
> and are we not of interest to each other?

(Alexander, 2005)

Both the poem (Ars poetica #100: I believe) and Alexander’s thoughts on how, without language, we are ‘each unto ourselves’ (Tippet, 2011, n.p.) evokes a sense of how language mediates understanding. It is language that does the work of reaching across the void. We would be isolated, unable to understand, without it since language, thought and understanding are inextricably linked and underpin all forms of communication. This echoes Gadamer’s sense of our embeddedness in language, how dependent we are on language for our being-in-the-world and the ways in which we are bound together in understanding as community because of this.

What is to be said

Finite possibilities,

oriented toward the infinite.

Realisation of meaning.

In words we

express what is unsaid

are at home

All this, beautiful utterance,

is found

tide-revealing,

relationship to being,

an infinity of unspoken meaning.

**Enlivening Imagination**

Poetical thinking keeps ‘understanding in flow’, expanding and challenging the imagination, ‘creating what is not yet thought possible’ (Freeman, 2016, p. 86). Todres and Galvin (2008) highlighted the interrelationship of poetry and phenomenology, pointing to the embodied nature of both and suggesting that embodied interpretation touches ‘both head and heart’ (p. 568). Poetry has a remarkable ability to both condense meaning, to distil something essential; at the same time, creating a spaciousness of possibility for thinking and feeling. For Gadamer (1986), the truth in the poetic word is in that it is self-fulfilling. He gave the example of directing someone to look out of the window at a house. Most can follow the instruction and determine for themselves whether there is indeed a house there or not. But the poet who summons a house for us calls into being a house for each of us. The image of the house is real and alive in our imagination, unique to the imaginer. We do not question the ‘truth’ of the poem, or the poet’s purpose (Gadamer, 1986). In this way, the poem’s meaning is its own, calling forth or convoking the image that shines in our thinking.

Parts of us, namely our imaginations, might then be reawakened by the poetic; ‘momentarily made aware, a need both emotional and physical, that can for a moment be affirmed there’ (Rich, 2003, p. 12). This reawakening is to ‘a new kind of being-in-the-world’ (Prendergast, 2015, p. 6), to ‘an embodied response’ (Fitzpatrick & Fitzpatrick, 2021, p. 4).

Leggo (2005) reminds us that the poem invites us to be still, ‘to remember to breathe, to hear and see and know with the heart’ (p. 177). In this way, the poet (and I would argue the hermeneutic phenomenologist) needs to ‘enter imaginatively into the lived experiences of others’ (Leggo, 2005, p. 180). For Leggo, the poet (and the hermeneutic phenomenologist), must attend ‘sensuously, inquisitively and meditatively to the world’ (p. 186).
Poetry Touches Us Where We Live

Laurel Richardson (1997) commented that ‘[l]ived experience is lived in a body, and poetic representation can touch us where we live, in our bodies’ (p. 143). What better way then to bring forth phenomenological experience, to make it come alive so that it might be shared and understood? Poetry speaks to the body and to our embodied natures.

Flesh and Blood

Flow of blood
breath, breathing, breath-giving,
heart’s measure.
Living world
that inspirts hope, even
in the midst of each
days’ tangled messiness

What is surfaced, lifted up out of its sedimentedness and illuminated is that ‘intractable psychic cave system that runs through the bodies of all humans’ (Grünbein, 2010, pp. 90). The light making these new places and spaces visible is the light of hermeneutic phenomenology; however, poetic inquiry provides the ‘resourceful imagination audaciously pushing forward into still unsecured galleries… expanding the confines of our shared imaginaries’ (Grünbein, 2010, pp. 91).

An Opening Up

Poetry evokes a felt response. Hermeneutic phenomenological research seeks to engender an ‘experience of resonance’ (Tasker et al., 2014, p. 5) in the reader, potentially alerting them to their own experience and perhaps ‘sensitising them to thoughts and issues not previously considered’ (p. 5). As well as the layers of meaning evoked, there are the layers of meaning we bring (our fore-understandings or prejudices). These fuse with what the poem summons in us. Poetical thinking expands and challenges the imagination (Freeman, 2016) and, as such, new potential understandings unfold as we allow the poetic to work on, and in, us.

The poem excerpt below is included here to show the poem, and poetic inquiry at work, in the process of disclosing (Green, 2020). The poem, produced in the course of the first author’s doctoral thesis, was comprised from interview transcript material from multiple participants. This represents a choral poem (Green, 2020) such that it brings together a chorus of voices, revealing contradiction and harmony and allowing the potential meanings of women’s experiences of looking and being looked at to surface.

Chorus: Looking at Others

Let go of trying to attain perfect
the skin and the body
such a beautiful piece of machinery
the real models
curvy ones, fuller figures
relax something in me.
We’re celebrating real women.
Only, I forget it’s not real.
I should go to the gym today.
I forget,
looking at fashion images,
plastering this unrealistic body
tapping insecurities
perfectionistic drive
staring out from flawless photos
that ignite a wanting.
I forget the photoshopping,
have to remind myself
she’s been touched up.
Those images aren’t real
the smooth and shapely
stay young at all costs.
I should go to the gym today.
The fashion industry demands
dictating desirable
the way to be noticed
the way to
good enough
and inspiration is an interesting thing.
Collarbones
create a sense of motivation
spark an I-should-go-to-the-gym-today
an I’d-like-to-have-that-body.
Looking at fashion images
there’s a not-good feeling
a self-loathing kind of feeling
an envy.
Sense of impossibility,
stay young at all costs,
see the woman’s collarbones?
I forget it’s not real.
They’re all beautifully formed,
I forget.

(Green, 2020)

Poetic inquiry opens up infinite possibilities for researcher, participants and readers (see for example Brady, 2005; Faulkner, 2020; Leggo, 1999, 2012; Prendergast et al., 2009; Sameshima et al., 2018). For the researcher, poetic inquiry and the use of poetry in qualitative research more broadly, opens up new and unexpected ways of seeing and engaging with the data, yielding ‘new and important insights’ (Butler-Kisber, 2002, p. 235). Found poetry, particularly, can be a way of representing something that might otherwise pass unnoticed (Butler-Kisber, 2002). Poetical thinking and writing can open up a phenomenon in new and revealing ways making it a suitable medium through which to develop a hermeneutic phenomenological sensibility that brings lived experience closer. Holding that language is both disclosive and speculative, poetical thinking and poetic inquiry provides a way into the phenomenon under investigation.

Like Caputo (1987), I will end with an invitation to opening. He writes, ‘it can claim here only to end, not to conclude. We do not aim at a conclusion but an opening. We do not seek a closure but an opening up’ (p. 294).

Acknowledgement
The primary author wishes to acknowledge the support of the other authors who acted as supervisors for the primary author’s doctoral thesis.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests
The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding
The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: Funding might be sought from Auckland University of Technology for any costs associated with publication.

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Notes
2. Fusion poem drawn from Gadamer’s opening comments to Jean Grondin’s (1994) Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics.
3. Fusion poem drawn from Schuster (2013)
4. Fusion poem drawn from Google search for ‘disclose’ (February 2019)
5. Fusion poem drawn from Gadamer (1975/2013, p. 466)
6. Fusion poem drawn from Gadamer’s (1975/2013) discussion of the poetic word (p. 485–486); and from an alternative translation of the same text (cited in Davy, 2013, p. 93, p. 93)
7. Found poem drawn from Leggo (2005, p. 188)

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