

Thanks ... for the...

Messier Object M23, an open cluster, 40ly across, and
and directly above our heads...
and whose light if you can see it left it 2150ly away

and the dumbbell nebula, about 1.44ly across
1360ly away

1. The ineffable is that which can't be described.

I should point out the obvious here.
I'm right here with a microphone.
And I plan to describe. With words.
I'm not going to dance. Or mime.

I might gesture.
I will probably point.

And I would also be remiss if I didn't explain that I'm speaking as poet tonight, more than as a scholar.

This isn't to say that this lecture won't avail myself of the categorization, analysis, scrutiny, reference, history by which scholars judge themselves...

But it is to say that my end may not be the scholar's end. My aim perhaps not the scholar's aim. Perhaps because my target is not the scholar's target.

In other words, I'm going to talk about poetry and ineffability. I'm a poet; you've given me a microphone. I hope someone warned you.

2. Every word implies each word it is not.

The way that each shape implies every other shape.

For by shape we mean the thing interrupting space.

And by a word we mean the thing interrupting continuity.
what kind of continuity?

continuity of apparent perception
fluidity of apprehension

To break into parcel. From one to many by virtue of the first.

Does a word add information to a scene?

or break a scene into bits?

small cultural bits – imaginative bits – bits of perception – of integers of social significance

we move from analog to digital as we move into the word

What is color? The thing that comes with shape.
though I admit this is beside the point

What's a word? The thing that comes with a world
well, our world anyway,
our cultured, inherited world

But what's a world?

the thing that comes with consciousness
here I am agreeing with contemporary German philosopher Thomas Metzinger
that consciousness is having a world, or, more precisely, it's having the appearance of one

3. Just what do we mean by describe?

again: Just what do we mean by describe?

4A. Just as you can sit around a table and collectively eat but you can't cross-nourish, that is, the food I eat at our shared table will not nourish your body, in just this way, we can sit around and talk or listen together –

but to take in a word, you do it alone. I can't consume it for you. And the word is not destroyed by your consumption of it. There are some who say, though, that you become consumed by it and by the world that comes with its perspective. And if not consumed, then developed by it. Unlike food, which takes on your shape, the word causes you to adopt its own form.

4B. In fact a word is only a word when it becomes dis- and re-embodied, that is when a dog looks at the newspaper, there are no words there. If the world suddenly lost all of its humans, there would be no words.

If you wanted to kill a word, how would you do it?

We could take a word we wished to kill and grab it when it's not looking – while it's at burger king – and hustle it out, wrap it in a rug and stuff it in the trunk... drive the truck over a cliff and hope no one notices the word has disappeared from the lexicon

Can you round up every instance and reference and substitute synonyms?
what if the synonyms are really too close to the original word, that is,
what if the concept itself is the problem...

Or to put the question a different way,
if we engraved a word onto a stone
and the stone were discovered in 2 million years by a human --

long after English has been lost to history
and some human finds the stone
and brings it to a university where the scholars
find it intriguing but ultimately indecipherable
<<remember this is 2 million years from now>>
is it still a word?
does it retain its wordness as long as we have hope someone might decipher it,
someone might see the sign not just as a sign but as the sign
and how would they know when they got it right?
without thousands of comparative texts to gauge nuance and usage?

what if the scholars find a rock and determine that on it is a word amazingly carved into it, creating a kind of relief, a word for which they have no understanding? until it is, much later, deciphered? and what if actually what they thought was a word was simply a turd?

does the word then lose its wordness, become a decorative etching, when we give up hope? or is it always a word, waiting to be rediscovered?

what about when there are no more humans? is the word carved into the stone a word?

oh, and the word on the stone - what should it be?
stone? no. word? no.
ineffable? sure. that's a good word.

whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent

4c

What is clarity?
Can clarity ever obscure?
Does revealing a truth ever obscure another?
Hitler was a cute baby too.
We speak to each other and to ourselves in a shorthand's shorthand.

5. Ok more questions

- a. donald Rumsfeld?

reprise: just what do we mean by describe?

- b. why should we assume the world is describable?
 - convenience?
 - habit?
 - experience?
- c. what's the source of the best descriptions?
- d. a satisfactory description
 - an accurate description
 - a reasonable description
 - a full description of the events
 - a possible description
 - a working description
 - a working definition
 - a dictionary definition
 - a street definition
 - the venn diagram of all definitions
 - the venn diagram of all descriptions
 - and
 - all the things outside it

e

all the things destroyed by description

and all the descriptions that destroy what they describe:

the movie version of the book

the moment you tried to articulate your displeasure with your mate and only made
him mad

trying to figure out why you hate your waiter, though he's very nice and efficient and
clean

the legal definition of anything

all the descriptions destroyed by things

all the things we could have described but did not because they happen not to be

unending description

all the words that have an origin outside of material experience

like, um

hmmmm: chair? um... sky? heaven? soul?

f

To what end is a good description?

is a bad description still a description?

what about an inaccurate description?

Why, just look at that: that dog is a cat.

(@ 7 min v14)

I mean that cat is a dog.

The room was filled with nothing.

In the beginning was the word, and the word was a worm.

What is the minimum criteria to describe?
is repeatability needed?
isn't it both necessary and impossible?

What about pointing at something?
And, that is, what about pointing at the wrong thing?

6. THIS MAY SEEM LIKE AN ASIDE BUT IT ISN'T

I wonder how many of you have kept up on the controversy surrounding the word “literally.”

Recently, some writers (on Salon and elsewhere) have been complaining about the definition in Merriam-Webster of the word “literally.” One definition for literally now is “in effect: virtually.” In other words, the word “literally” sometimes means “figuratively.” In other words, it’s ok to say “It literally rained cats and dogs.” It’s even ok with the dictionary.

The controversy is, as you probably have guessed – or already were aware – that we think of literally as meaning “actually.” And This is BIG DEAL for a lot of writers. Writers who like to be precise and who think of using the word “literally” for emphasis degrades our language by eroding the borders between distinctions. Of course, Merriam-Webster says they simply define the words as they see them used. If, for example, James Joyce uses “literally” to mean “figuratively” – and he does -- then, they figure, and I wholeheartedly agree, that they’d better enter that usage – that definition – into their big book.

They add a note saying:

Since some people take sense 2 <<virtually>> to be the opposite of sense 1 <<actually>>, it has been frequently criticized as a misuse. Instead, the use is pure hyperbole intended to gain emphasis, but it often appears in contexts where no additional emphasis is necessary.

I find all this very interesting, but I can think of very few examples where I would get the meaning confused. In a recent Facebook spat with a former bandmate about this, he said he found the defition dismaying and he said it makes the following sentence too confusing: “I laughed so hard I literally shit myself.” And I suggested that any confusion about that sentence derives mostly from the people he hangs out with.

You see, the curious thing to me about this hubbub is not that the word literally can be used to mean its supposed opposite. I mean, that’s kinda cool: it joins an elite club of words called contronyms: cleave, fix (think pet), continue (think official meeting), or dust (think crops, think dining room)

But what's interesting to me about all this arguing and wringing of hands is something different. Let's think about this word "literally." The word "literally" at its root does not come from a reference to the real or from referencing the actual. Originally the word literal referred to a reference to scripture, to the Bible. That's right, as we can see from the form of the word, at its root literal is a word about words. It refers to the wordness of a thing.

So why, then, hasn't "literal" meant "of or relating to the use of a word" – that is, why do we use a word about words to mean actual.

It probably stems from the Biblical use. But then so too might our treatment of words.

In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God.

In my thinking, a literal thing is a thing that happens in words. If it happened literally it happened within words.

When did we decide that our words were actual?

How closely we hold this notion that THE WORD is ITS THING, how often we confuse them.

Our thinking depends on it.

Perhaps our sanity too.

Allow me to continue to interrupt our mutual sanity such as it is for a bit.

when you look up a word in the dictionary, are you looking up to see a record of how the word is used or are you looking up to see what THIS THING is?

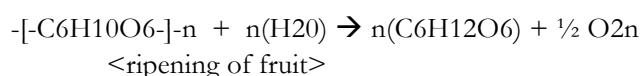
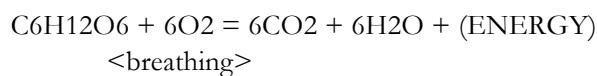
It's too bad that our words don't have a one-to-one relationship to the world.

Or, I think that's what the scientist, the analytical philosopher would say.

But the poet might say it's a lucky break.

But maybe she would say it's a break but it's not from luck at all.

7.



8.

LET'S GET TO SOME POEMS, SHALL WE?

I stepped from Plank to Plank
A slow and cautious way
The Stars about my Head I felt
About my Feet the Sea.

I knew not but the next
Would be my final inch –
This gave me that precarious Gait
Some call Experience.

(@14 min)

I heard a Fly Buzz – when I died
The Stillness in the Room
Was like the Stillness in the Air –
Between the Heaves of Storm –

The Eyes around – had wrung them dry –
And Breaths were gathering firm
For that last Onset – when the King
Be witnessed – in the Room –

I willed my Keepsakes – Signed away
What portion of me be
Assignable – and then it was
There interposed a Fly –

With Blue – uncertain stumbling Buzz—
Between the light – and me –
And then the Windows failed – and then
I could not see to see –

The Brain—is wider than the Sky—
For—put them side by side—
The one the other will contain
With ease —and You—beside—

The Brain is deeper than the sea—
For—hold them—Blue to Blue
The one the other will absorb—
As Sponges—Buckets—do—

The Brain is just the weight of God—
For—Heft them—Pound for Pound
And they will differ—if they do—
As Syllable from Sound—

These poems are here to establish some lineage.
I'm intentionally using poems you may know.
I'm intentionally using poems written before 1953.

I do have a point I'm making, and I think the point I'm making, as I'm making it is more strongly made when I use work that is familiar, or at least, canonical.

BLAKE

Tyger Tyger Burning Bright
In deep forests of the night
what immortal hand or eye
could frame thy fearful symmetry

STEVENS – The Rabbit as the King of Ghosts

<NEED TO PROOFREAD/CROSSCHECK SOURCE FOR ACCURACY>

The difficulty to think at the end of day,
When the shapeless shadow covers the sun
And nothing is left except light on your fur?

There was the cat slopping its milk all day,
Fat cat, red tongue, green mind, white milk
And August the most peaceful month.

To be, in the grass, in the peacefulest time,
Without that monument of cat,
The cat forgotten on the moon;

And to feel that the light is a rabbit-light
In which everything is meant for you
And nothing need be explained;

Then there is nothing to think of. It comes of itself;
And east rushes west and west rushes down,
No matter. The grass is full

And full of yourself. The trees around are for you,
The whole of the wideness of night is for you,
A self that touches all edges,

You become a self that fills the four corners of night.
The red cat hides away in the fur-light
And there you are humped high, humped up,

You are humped higher and higher, black as stone?
You sit with your head like a carving in space
And the little green cat is a bug in the grass.

(from "Harmonium," 1923)

9.

ONCE MORE: the ineffable is that which is indescribable.
just what do we mean by describe?

and now I'm confused are we talking about words or talking about the world when we talk about description?

There are those, who, to put it simply say that if we call a thing ineffable, we have removed it from the very category into which we were trying to place it.

We've described it as undescribable.

In fact, to simply name a thing – to refer to a thing – is to give a description.

If you have effectively communicated – even within yourself – that a thing is a thing, you have created a description, minimal perhaps, but there is a delineation made. A thing pointed to.

This renders all things not ineffable, but, well effable, if you'll pardon my French.

I would like to say that with this view:
Everything is effed as soon as it is named, or just before it even gets a name.

If you say a thing is ineffable, it therefore is not.

As a matter of fact, if we say a thing is a thing, it can't be ineffable. We've supplied a description. If the it can be an it, it's been effed. Any mutual pointing at a thing separates it from its background and that is a description.

So this renders the ineffable to a peculiar place.

Are we simply saying that only things that remain outside of perception can be ineffable? Not just beyond language but beyond apprehension (perception)?

And as a thing is effed, what does that look like?

As I wake and take in a world and gather a thought about the world eventually to speak, at what point did I minimally describe any part of my world?

Are the only things ineffable all the things that have never been thought of?
Which, if we think about it, could either be a hell of a lot of things (if we as a species are not very busy thinking of what really is) or could be very few things with all the billions of thoughts we are all having.

I wonder if anyone else is thinking of the mental states of all 7 billion human inhabitants of the planet right now?

Did I – Did we just eff them all? The entire mental contents of the planet by giving it a name?

Perhaps I can describe everything by simply saying “everything.”

Or what if I say “everything that is” and “everything outside that previous description”

Everything I can think of and everything I can’t.

But this is not satisfying. To call this description seems somehow wrong.

I mean, I’d better love you too much to say how much I love you. If I don’t, would You still call it love? If I can actually count and elucidate the precise ways? If it becomes a finite list.

But what about a poet? Doesn’t the poet describe the love adequately? Isn’t that why we love a poem?
Because it gets it right?

But then again:

this chair is so much a chair that I can not really say how chairy it is.
OMG. This is such a chairy chair.

it has such chairy legs and a chairy back

though I can think of a chairier chair – one that was really more like a true chair

oh but wait

it has four legs, yes, but are those really chair legs or just acting like chair legs
because they’ve been subsumed by the matrix that exists in proximity to the chair

why this one is hardly a chair at all

it’s just pieces of wood assembled to look like a chair.

if I found these parts dissembled in a desert would I think chair?

ok yes probably

but what if it were ground into wood shards?

and then made into sheets of particle board?

and then made into an object to sit on with four legs?

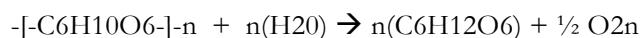
and then would it be more of a chair or less of a chair?

but now that I look at it again – why it could hardly be chairier.

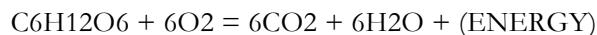
I love this chair.

10.

A moment ago, I read some scientific formulae



That is the ripening of fruit



And this is breathing

Are these descriptions?

Are they accurate?

Instead of sitting down and focusing on my breathing, as one does in meditation, in contemplative prayer, does this formula, this description, somehow suffice instead?

11.

So if we say that to name a thing is to render it described and therefore describable, and if everything we call ineffable isn't by virtue of having called it such, the only place left to look for the ineffable, if we are foolish enough to think it exists is in all the things that haven't been called ineffable, to look for the ineffable where it would never be suspected, to look only at the things adequately described to look at things that are over-described.

we must use description to upend description.

The best way to avoid spontaneous combustion is to light everything on fire.

this is called poetry.

12.

The point I think I want to make is that every description, every pointing to, that we consider adequate is not only contingent on our context and on our expectations for the mode of description we think appropriate for the moment, but it is also about our ability to stop our curiosity.

The poet is saying that even pointing, even scientific description summation, is a kind of error.

The adequate description allowing the emotional response of familiarity to soothe us with and into a fiction.

It's about taking in, like a meal, something that feels like it describes an essence. The problem is that essence is fiction. Essence is our way of summarizing, of valuing, of reducing.

Description is about curiosity and the satisfaction thereof.

a good description is a dismissal

a way to relieve the mind of its burden so it can go about helping the body find food, shelter, and sex...

A rose by any other name is a sunrise.

The way the day unfurls and exposes itself. The way the world does.

What is at stake in our descriptions?

A commitment to perspective, to the affirmation of our suspicions perhaps.
How does a new idea come about, then.

should I say breathing is an involuntary muscle exercise?
should I say I can feel your breath on my cheek?

Cause and effect, too, is something we carry.

Thirteen ways of looking at a blackbird.

Oh thin men of Haddam
Why do you imagine golden birds?
Do you not see how the blackbird
Walks around the feet
Of the women about you?

Four and twenty blackbirds
baked in a pie.

The most mystical experience is always the one right now.

To describe it is to destroy it.

13.

But what about poetry?
What about the poets?

Isn't the poet driving you towards satisfaction?
There's the trope of the sigh in the poetry reading – isn't that what the poet wants? (@25min)

Emily Dickinson herself said, though, not that she was looking for a sigh of relief
but for the feeling that the top of her head had blown off...

Am I just espousing a Humean view?
Or a Kantian one, since it admits science a place?

Am I saying that there's a kind of language of being, of something at hand emotionally?

I am saying that these poets are at once 1. trying to eff the previously ineffed.
They are creating a repeatable description of a heretofore unknown experience --
Using words to create and I am admitting that that creation comes of a kind of description. It becomes a
description of itself and it refers to the world and it refers to the world within a social context full of
contingent and constructed meanings. yes all that.

AND I am saying that poems of a particular kind 2. through various tropes – sometimes through direct
reference and sometimes through slant usage – and sometimes through odd capitalization – are shifting the
linguistic ground we stand on – ground that we take as actual when it is merely literal. the words we use to
explain everything to ourselves these words are shifted

Some might wonder if what I'm saying is new. I wonder that too. Am I simply saying that poets "make it
new" in that modernist mantra? No, I don't think so. Making it new is about adjusting description to a new
context. As would be "shift our perspective," although shifting perspective, also thinking cubism here, is
perhaps closer. But to get nearer to what I'm trying to say I want to observe that in this case the word
perspective is metaphorical, I mean something more peculiar than an angle on an object, more encompassing
than world-view or ethos, and I mean to observe that when one shifts from "perspective" to "perspective"
that in the shifting there is a disorientation, as if stepping down the street one realizes that between the
pavement panels, that each crack opens to a different world – a glimpse of a sun or of a face or of a chasm
for a moment showing through the cracks in the language.

to realize for a moment that we are the proverbial wile e. coyote who has run so fast and so hard onto an
imaginary road that he is suspended in mid-air only by his imagination – this is our reliance on our world knit
of words... when we briefly see that, like matter, the world of words is made mostly of empty space...

we, of course, are caught by another net of words when we drop down towards the far distant floor of the
canyon.... though I don't doubt there are those who plumb the depths... vipassana... who perhaps find that
there is no floor who just enjoy the endless falling – skydiving into a void...

These poems want it both ways: to put into words that which cannot be put into words (and thereby eff the ineffable) but to retain the mystery (and thereby hold that the description is not just incomplete but somehow false)

To satisfy the emotion with description without ending the hunger, without feeling like the question has been answered... heighten mystery while describing truly...

It's a description that hollows out the definition so there's a hole in the middle...

includes methods aimed at their poetic strategy to undermine our faith in language – in the ability of words to reference the world

and perhaps this is part of what all good writing does
it redefines, it shifts linguistic boundaries
it builds a boat made mostly of holes

14

But with all of this, we haven't yet addressed a key issue.

What about this opposition between description and wonder?
Is it necessary? inevitable?

Haven't we all experienced the sensation of knowing how an illusion is made – how a magic trick is done – that the wonder of it fades? The mystery is gone.

Does an adequate description, when we encounter it, not only overwhelm our wonder but reveal the wonder as a kind of ignorance, a naivete?

There's a kind of art criticism that focuses on technique, and now there are fields of research dedicated to the brain's reaction to art, to metaphor. Don't these threaten to deflate our very meaning?

You can poke a brain and elicit a memory.

There is a sense in which knowing the historical traditions of the story of Jesus can undermine one's faith in it. Jesus seems less magical – or perhaps merely magical or merely literary – to some when they study the literary precedents for the stories that precede the one about the Nazarene.

Does the description of the magic trick reveal that the ineffable is a flawed idea, that wonder is some kind of category error?

Um. No.

In the end, wonder is about vastness, and description does not have to deny vastness – what denies vastness is our own mental models... we allow description to stand in for the experience of the real thing – we have to

in order to function – but we accept that as fact rather than as metaphor – we accept it as actual rather than literal...

the poets know that just zooming in or zooming out changes everything, renders description inadequate, shifts the laws by which we calculate: Newtonian to quantum mechanics...

so

though cause and effect should always be held in strange relation

and though much of the world can be encountered with adequate description

the vastness and our relation to it are always present

so science is not an error

and neither is wonder

15

The world is so much bigger than you

and yet

whatever evidence there was for a world without you, you have now destroyed

to use a word is to place one's self inside a model of the world

the poet who sees this as a problem builds of the world a little snow globe

a safe place to stand back and observe the confusing world

and asks you to come into the cozy house inside for a cup of cocoa

and then hurls it, with the both of you inside, across the room, across the sky>>

Look out.

There are poets are out there in the world,

Swinging their arms wide, even their fingers are outstretched

They are using a net to catch the air.

----END----

FOR Q&A

mutually arising

analysis of Dickinson...

Prep with

newer poems there are so many
older examples – look at Wordsworth etc

TOTALISM – hegel/lacan istic views –

suggesting that these are real

think about them the way you would in some kind of survey course

you could step inside each view for a bit

and they might alter your view for a while

and maybe in the long run

but after class, most days, you return to your prior mode...

even if you integrate some of the thinking

you end up in a mode of your own

I think lacanistically you can't get out of that

the problem (also with marx?) is that new ideas can't then come from anywhere...

problem for marx because what's the point in advocating for anything
deterministic

I'm not saying that so much as I am saying: see look at that model I just described

holding it, stepping inside it

and when I step outside it, I am still in something mediated by language

and the interesting part is what happens as you step between

and recognizing that you can't rest between

you always rest within a kind of fiction

These poets – and I'm not claiming here that all poetry does is to challenge our personal dependence on a literal theory of reference – I'm simply saying that this is a tradition in poetry that not only comes after (as Marjorie Perloff has written expertly about) but also predates, in a way predicts, Wittgenstein's philosophical investigations posthumously published in 1953 who, by the way said ... all philosophy should be a kind of poetry...

<POETS AS SUGGESTING PHIL. INVESTIGATIONS' LANGUAGE "PROBLEMS" ARE NOT ONE OF CATEGORY BUT ONE OF MATERIAL...?>

1429

We shun because we prize her Face
Lest sight's ineffable disgrace
Our Adoration stain

<WERE WE ACTUALLY TO SEE WE WOULD NO LONGER SEE SOMETHING LOFTY?>>

so I'm not simply discussing the williams/stevens divide – not just the description versus creation

Am I simply advocating for a kind of ignorance? Am I siding with an anti-science view of Whitman?

WHEN I heard the learn'd astronomer;
When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns before me;
When I was shown the charts and the diagrams, to add, divide, and measure them;
When I, sitting, heard the astronomer, where he lectured with much applause in the lecture-room,
How soon, unaccountable, I became tired and sick; 5
Till rising and gliding out, I wander'd off by myself,
In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time,
Look'd up in perfect silence at the stars.

Do not the successes of medicine, of physics, suggest that describability ultimately is real, wins the day?

Doesn't the precision there imply that our relationship to the world, even though mediated largely by words, is a real one? Is not only discoverable but conquerable?

Doesn't this suggest that when we are feeling in a poetic mode, we are simply allowing ourselves to wash in a warm bath of feel-good as-yet-undiscoveredness, in ignorance?

ASLO: ATLANTIC ARTICLE by computational biologist against the OkCupid book
yes we have predictive models – but these when they are accurate are so complex that they require
our whole non-calculating selves to comprehend...

godel