Defining metapoetry is not an easy matter. It seems that, at some point, all poetry has to be metapoetic. Isn’t poetry language stretched to its farthest limits; language forced to face its inner workings at every moment? Nevertheless, there are still critics and scholars who set out to find metapoetic poems, or rather poems that are more openly and almost obsessively concerned with poetry. These are usually more abstract than figurative; in them the dividing line between poetry and criticism is blurred. In such cases, there is no poetic device behind which the poet hides his preoccupation with poetry, but it is rather very clear that “poetry is the subject of the poem.”

Dorothy Baker uses the adjective “self-reflexive” to describe poetry that “mirrors and examines itself.” She explains that this term is an adaptation of Alfred Weber’s German Poetologische Lyrik, which is the “distinct form of lyric poetry” created when “the poet addresses subjects such as the nature of his craft, the function of the poet and the essences of the creative act within his poetry.” Most scholars, such as Baker here, assert that poetic introspection and self-consciousness have always been an unavoidable dimension of the poet’s experience. Horace’s De Arte Poetica is a very early example of how a poet can sometimes play the role of the critic or the theorizer and place his own art under scrutiny. Ars Poetica, the genre of poetry that is concerned with

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1 For instance, the poetry of Wallace Stevens is often the subject of studies focusing on abstraction, metapoiesis, and self-consciousness. See Albert Gelpi, ed., Wallace Stevens: The Poetics of Modernism (London: Cambridge University Press, 1985). Similarly, Audrey Rodgers employs inter-arts theory and studies the works of T. S. Eliot, Hart Crane, Roethke, and William Carlos Williams in order to show how other forms of art, such as dance in particular, are used as tools that enable the poet to talk about poetry in his poems. See Audrey Rodgers, The Universal Drum: Dance Imagery in the Poetry of Eliot, Crane, Roethke, and Williams (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1979). Also, Aida Azouqa refers to the works of William B. Yeats, Wallace Stevens, and Maria Tvestaeva and considers them three major western composers of metapoetry. She speaks of their influence on the modernist Arab poet al-Bayāṭī. See Aida Azouqa, “Metapoetry between East and West: ‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Bayāṭī and the Western Composers of Metapoetry—a Study of Analogies,” Journal of Arabic Literature 39 (2008): 38–71.


3 Ibid.
the nature of poetry and the craft of writing it and which can be traced back
to Aristotle and Horace, has given rise to many works in which poets reflect
upon and examine their art. However, what Dorothy Baker is describing as
self-reflexive poetry is not merely “versed criticism,” as Wellek has described
the classical Ars Poetica. It is a new form of poetic self-questioning which both
Baker and Wellek associate with modern poetry. Baker calls it self-reflexive
poetry, and Wellek before her had used the term “metapoetry” to distinguish
this modern questioning from the didactic discursive Ars Poetica of earlier
periods. What makes the metapoetry of the modern period distinct is that
it rises from a questioning of the status and role of the poet in the modern
world. Baker explains that “there is a special emphasis on such introspection in
modern poetry when the poet attempts to articulate his artistic commitment
within an un-lyrical world.”

When the poet is no longer in sync with the world
around him, when his status and role in society are no longer clearly delin-
eated, his self-examination and self-reflection lose their general didactic qual-
ity and gain urgency. The process of poetic introspection here becomes a quest
for self-definition. Baker goes on to note that although scrutiny is a “common
feature of self-reflexive poetry throughout history, nineteenth and twentieth
century poetry alone is characterized by the ironic self-image of the poet and
the self-deprecating poetic personae that the artist himself creates.” This irony
and self-deprecation arise from the poet’s more urgent need to justify himself
and his craft. It is no longer possible to merely write poetry. It has become nec-
essary to justify the very act of writing and all the formal and artistic choices
involved in it. The situation is rather acute in the case of modern Arabic poetry
of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Modern Arab poets were struggling
not only to “express artistic commitment in an un-lyrical world” as Baker puts
it, but also to form new artistic commitments and undo others in the conscious
effort to negotiate a new poetic identity.

Baker agrees with Wellek’s association of metapoetry or self-reflexive poetry
with the self-questioning that modern poets experience more acutely than
their predecessors. The Romantic period marks the transition from theory in
poetry (Theorie im Gedicht), examples of which we can trace back to Horace

4 Rene Wellek describes the genre of Ars Poetica as versified criticism. “The oldest incursion
of criticism into poetry, or, if you prefer the oldest alliance between criticism and poetry,
is versified criticism: Horace’s De Arte Poetica and, since the Renaissance, Vida’s Poetica,
Boileau’s Art Poétique, and, of course Pope’s Essay on Criticism.” Rene Wellek, Discriminations:
5 Baker, Mythic Masks, 3.
6 Ibid., 4.