



UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI

This document is downloaded from
HELDA - The Digital Repository of
University of Helsinki.

Title	The Haven of Difficult Discourse
Author(s)	Bamberger, W. C.
Editor(s)	Bottà, Giacomo; Härmänmaa, Marja
Citation	Language and the Scientific Imagination : Proceedings of the 11th Conference of the International Society for the Study of European Ideas (ISSEI), 28 July – 2 August 2008 at the Language Centre, University of Helsinki, Finland. https://blogs.helsinki.fi/issei2008 . ISBN 978-952-10-6118-9.
Date	2010
URL	http://hdl.handle.net/10138/15299

HELSINGIN YLIOPISTO
HELSINGFORS UNIVERSITET
UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI

HELDA - The Digital Repository of University of Helsinki - Terms and User Rights

By using HELDA - The Digital Repository of University of Helsinki you are bound by the following Terms & Conditions. Please read them carefully.

I have read and I understand the following statement:

All material supplied via HELDA is protected by copyright and other intellectual property rights, and duplication or sale of all or part of any of the repository collections is not permitted, except that material may be duplicated by you for your research use or educational purposes in electronic or print form. You must obtain permission for any other use. Electronic or print copies may not be offered, whether for sale or otherwise to anyone who is not an authorised user.



The Haven of Difficult Discourse

Science was once the poor relation of art. For example, Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, in their recent *Objectivity*, detail how a knowledgeable, empathetic artist's rendition of a plant was considered more desirable, truer to nature, than a photograph of the same plant for decades after photography's invention. The idea of "objectivity," science and photography's badge of authority, was not highly thought of, as it, by definition, removed all human experience and knowledge. What it took, in the end, for objectivity to move ahead to become the discourse of science was for "knower and knowledge [to be] pried apart, so that, for example, the alchemist's failure to transmute base metals into gold could no longer be blamed on an impure soul."¹

But alchemy didn't wither and die when the knower and the known parted ways. It took up with art, where questions of the knower's soul, as well as the soul of what is known, remain important, and where the base metal of experience can be transmuted into the finest sort of gold—that which anthropologist Michael Taussig has called "congealed amazement?"²

A difficult alchemical example: In a letter written in prison, the legendary Marxist revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg wrote of looking out her cell window in Berlin and seeing Romanian water buffalos being beaten until they bled. Luxemburg's death came when

she was struck in the head with a rifle butt, shot and thrown, bloody, into a canal by German soldiers. Paul Celan found poetry in these terrible events. In response, he wrote “*Solve*” and “*Coagula*.” These words, as poet Anne Carson reminds us in her *Economy of the Unlost*, are alchemical terms. The first names the process of the dissolution of primary material; the second refers to the process wherein the elements recombine in another, novel, form.³ Celan’s first poem describes a splintering, of Easter and more; the second, Luxemburg’s death. Carson, herself a brilliant poet, points out that in addition to the horror of the events Celan put into solution to write these two poems, by *coagula* he has also described a terrible transmutation that does not have much in common with the noble process of alchemists who “healed” base metals into gold. Alchemical changes seem always to have been positive, never involving degradation except as an intermediate stage in a happier process.⁴

If Carson is correct, alchemy was and is better than science—which has had more than its fair share of degrading and unhappy processes. And if we take alchemy as a metaphor for the into-art process, art is justified in its long-time claim to be uplifting, a happier process than science. Art could even claim to be teleological: if the end result of every process is positive, then “ideas run through art” are steadily changing for the better.

These two alchemical poems are one with the rest of Celan’s work—because they are fragmentary, polysemic, allusive, bristling with compound-neologisms. And in that they don’t belong to objective discourse. (One of the places where science and art still intersect is in that they both show how a relentless drive toward perfection will eventually

approach an idiolect.) And they are very much a part of the post WWII turn to difficult discourse. (Writing in France, Celan was in fact very near its epicenter.) Because something art/alchemy has done as it has separated itself from science is to increase the level of difficulty in the presentation of the ideas. Can this increased difficulty truly be a mark of a process that is “happier?” I believe the answer is yes—in fact, the more difficult the work of art, the more alchemical, the happier—but we can see this only if we are willing to admit to ourselves what is being made happier. It is not ourselves.

To that end, I want to clarify what I meant when I wrote above that Celan’s poems are a difficult example. It is because they illustrate how Celan isn’t the only, and perhaps isn’t even *a*, knower in the creation of the poems. Celan, a Romanian who lived in France but wrote in German, famously worried that the German language had been permanently maimed “after Auschwitz.” His work is alchemical in that he was trying to simultaneously “heal” the German language and himself. George Steiner, in his “On Difficulty” refers to one of Celan’s poems as an example of a poem where “It is not so much the poet who speaks, but language itself: *die Sprache spricht*. The authentic, immensely rare poem is one in which ‘the Being of language’ finds unimpeded lodging, in which the poet is not a *persona*, a subjectivity ‘ruling over language,’ but an ‘openness to,’ a supreme listener to, the genius of speech.”⁵ But why, we might ask, would the Being of language choose to speak in such difficult terms?

Novelist/essayist Samuel R. Delany was once asked about the uses of difficult discourse. A few excerpts from his answer:

[I]n difficult discourse, understanding spreads more slowly. There's a greater gap between those who *do* understand the ideas and those with no idea at all what those ideas are about. Simple language, on the other hand, tends to produce a circle of people who understand and another circle around them who misunderstand, with no very clear distinction between. [Simple discourse] tends to blend understanding and misunderstanding into a hopeless mass and mess, so that, over a given period, ideas put in simple language lose their strength and precision relatively quickly, even when they are important ideas. . . .

Difficult discourse delays popularization of truly important ideas until unpopular thinkers can become deeply familiar with the work, and can form a slowly growing group that, when popularizations *do* begin their inevitable distortions, is there to critique those distortions and alert people to the problems inherent in them.

In short, you can reasonably argue that, in a social field *that privileges simple language*, to choose difficult discourse inaugurates a critical process, a stabilizing process, and a preservative process that works to criticize and stabilize important ideas for the good of the ideas themselves.⁶

And here is my answer to the question of what is receiving the benefit in the “happy process” of alchemy-in-art, the knower in the reuniting of knowing and knower: *the ideas themselves*.

This idea about ideas is nothing new. It can be found expressed, with varying shades of meaning and to varying degrees of seriousness, across all disciplines. Josef Dietzgen, tanner-turned-Socialist theorist admired by thinkers ranging from Karl Marx to Walter Benjamin to Ben Watson, wrote of his *The Nature of Human Brain-Work*, “[The] contents of this little work are not an individual product, but a *historical growth*. In writing it, I feel myself, if I may use the mystic phrase, only as an organ of the idea.”⁷

Philosopher-turned-novelist Michel Tournier insists that philosophical systems are not the creation of philosophers: “Obviously not. Since the more coherent is always the cause of the less coherent, a philosophical system with its matchless coherence is the cause of everything and the effect of nothing. The philosopher is nothing more than the detritus that the system drops into the empirical world as it is being created. . . .”⁸

Many an artist has said, in all apparent seriousness, that a story, a painting, a musical phrase was not chosen by them, but “chose me.” Guy Davenport, referring to his unpacking of the “geography of the imagination” in Grant Wood’s *American Gothic*, betrays no sign of tongue-in-cheek or of speaking metaphorically when he writes,

Art knows things *for* the artist. Hugh [Kenner] and I have had words about that. He felt that I overdid my Grant Wood iconography, because Wood wasn't aware of what I was showing. Of course he wasn't.⁹

But the art knew: the ideas reached out, veiled, *solve*, to Wood, and from Wood, revealed, *coagula*, by Davenport. What he doesn't say but certainly knew, was that there are certainly more ideas in solution in the paintings than he mentions, or by which he could be reached. We, the viewers, readers, audience of a work of art, are never conscious of all the ideas packed into those works. But, do we even *need* to be conscious of ideas to be able to tap into them? With Davenport, I believe the answer is no. And I further believe it's better if we aren't so conscious.

An easy alchemical example: We believe that an author's psychology and biography are available to us in whatever characters emerge on the page; we believe, too, that an artist's personality is available to us in his or her brushstroke—or lack of brushstrokes, for that matter. English-born, American-resident painter Trevor Winkfield applies his paint in coats, smoothes out all brushstrokes, strives to produce a decal-slim surface. This is so different from most other painters that we feel it must tell us *something*, even if we cannot articulate what that something might be.¹⁰

If we believe there is so much veiled information packed into the surface of a painting, how much more can we believe of the images themselves? Winkfield's work is a good place to look for an answer, as they are made up of recognizable elements not

traditionally organized. They are assembled from what strike Winkfield as associated images—hands, faces, bottle, figures made up of human and non-human parts, labels from boxes of Chinese candy—as the artist follows a trail of associations only he has: a visual idiolect. Viewing the paintings, we move from delight and puzzlement at their colorful (seeming) disorder, very quickly to “What does this mean?” Because we sense they mean *something*. John Ashbery: “Something is regulating everything and placing its parts in the proper relation to each other, but that thing is unknown: a blank, though a fundamental one.” And Jed Perl feels there is “something ineffably English about the resulting combination of fantasy and precision. . . .”¹¹ I would suggest that “English” be read as the “primary material” of Winkfield’s life. And “precision” be read as just that. Winkfield is, in ways it doesn’t bother him that he doesn’t understand, disarticulating his primary material (“*Solve*”!) and bringing it together again (“*Coagula*”!) as something else. If he or we “understood” everything, the paintings would not be as effective. Because understanding is another kind of association, one idea socializing with another, a process for all practical purposes identical with that of metaphor, and metaphors alter both sides of their equation: knowing an idea “is like” something else changes both the idea and the something else. (Popularization, the move outward from difficult discourse, is this kind of socialization, as well, and so effects a change in the original *isolato*, the primary idea.) If we cannot finally “understand” a Winkfield or other difficult art, contemplating such compels us to something happier: standoff-ish ideas lead us to the hosting of new ideas—even if we can’t articulate them. This is art at its best: a hermetic circle that drops new ideas into the empirical world through its viewers as well as its

creator. And this happens because the ideas have found a haven in the difficult visual discourse of the paintings.

Looking at Winkfield's art, whether or not we know there are Kekulé's-snakes style circuits underlying them, we certainly—with the same sense that perceives emotions in brushstrokes—understand that the ideas he had while he was planning his painting have become potentials waiting for another freeing. Following Whitehead, American painter-turned-perceptual-theorist Adelbert Ames, Jr. felt that our perceptions, including our perceptions of objects, were only prognoses for future actions: or, in other words, what we see is what we mean to do about it. Such significances, ideas we might pick up and act upon, are impacted in what we naively call objects. They reside there, hidden, until we give our attention to them. It is as if for our convenience we created “objects” as shorthand forms of reference which, if the behavioral situation demands, we can elaborate into the fuller significances.¹²

Or, to return to Hugh Kenner in a register different from the one above, “Any object in space is a memory system.”¹³ This applies equally to a painting and to the chemical formulae that result in the paints and turpentine an artist uses. But anyone can learn a formula and make vermilion; only the ideas that dropped Winkfield the artist into the world can make the “congealed amazement” of a Winkfield painting. Vermillion can offer only a chemical idea that is finished, static. A Winkfield, or any other work of art, offers impacted ideas that can be unpacked and made “happier.”

This is why alchemy chose to stay with art when science deliberately emptied itself of human values. Scientific ideas are, through their repeatability, socialized into inert states, while ideas in art are alive and have the potential for growth every time the art is experienced.

What remains is to explain why I say the “ideas themselves” act in their own interest, how they seek the haven of difficult discourses from Jacques Derrida to Jasper Johns.

A first step might be a simple pragmatic approach, one suggested by the differences between science and art I have detailed. An ideal scientific theory would logically and volitionally exhaust its ideas, leaving beautifully constructed dead ends; a degrading and unhappy process for the ideas so treated.¹⁴ But the pursuit of ideas in art—if it is truly art and not, for example, propaganda or the hybrid of art and science we call “craft”—is not logical, not repeatable (an “exact copy” of a work of art gathers quite a different set of ideas), and not meant to be exhaustive—quite the opposite. Art is not achieved through the artist’s volition, in any strict sense of the word. It is, to generalize Steiner’s comment, where ideas “find unimpeded lodging,” where there is “an openness to . . . the genius of ideas.” Because, beyond the limits of the artist’s volition, ideas are there, in *solve*. So *if* ideas are sentient they would prefer art. And if they’re not put there by the artist’s volition, by the Pragmatist principle of “If it looks, acts and sounds like a [insert noun], call it a [insert noun],” ideas can be said to be sentient.

But there is more, within the question of how we know that anyone or anything other than ourselves is sentient. Some Buddhist ideas help here, those that assert that any creature (and, the same belief holds, a “creature” can be completely mental in nature) whose survival strategies and actions appear to be motivated by the avoidance of suffering should be assumed to be sentient. I have tried to suggest the alchemical strategies of ideas, tried to illustrate how their actions move them out of harm’s way behind difficult discourses. But it may be as simple as comparing the actions of ideas to the only sentience we know—our own. My own view of mind is that suggested by Ames and other Process Philosophers, a view that does not deny there is a reality, only that we can have no direct experience or knowledge of it. All that we can know, all the information that comes in through our perceptions, are prognoses for future actions: all our knowledge is gathered in support of furthering our ends, of surviving conflict, of achieving happiness. What I have tried to describe above, all we can perceive of the actions of ideas, gives the appearance of ideas having survival strategies, and of trying to avoid suffering, that is, avoiding the degrading exhaustions of science in favor of the alchemical happiness of art—including the language art of difficult discourse.

If ideas’ evidence for sentience is indistinguishable our own, then either ideas are sentient or we have no way of knowing if we are. More simply put, they are as sentient as we are. As I have said, this is not a new idea, and more importantly it is—I would point out in support—a difficult idea, as well.

W. C. Bamberger

Box 350

Whitmore Lake, MI 48189

USA

Wbamberger@hotmail.com

¹ Daston and Galison. *Objectivity* (New York: Zone Books, 2007), 39.

² Michael Taussig. *My Cocaine Museum* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 84.

³ Celan had named himself through such a process: he rearranged the letters of his family name, “Antschel,” treated this anagram as if it were in the International Phonetic Alphabet, and it was this pronunciation he spelled as “Celan”.

⁴ Anne Carson. *Economy of the Unlost* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 99.

⁵ George Steiner. “On Difficulty,” *On Difficulty and Other Essays* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 46.

⁶ Samuel R. Delany. “The Kenneth James Interview,” *Silent Interviews: On Language, Race, Sex, Science Fiction, and Some Comics* (Hanover and London: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 240, 241.

⁷ Josef Dietzgen. *The Positive Outcome of Philosophy* (trans. W. W. Craik), (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Company, 1928), 70.

⁸ Michel Tournier. *The Wind Spirit* (trans. Arthur Goldhammer) (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), 129.

⁹ W. C. Bamberger (ed.). *Guy Davenport and James Laughlin: Selected Letters* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Co., 2007), 21. See also the title essay in Guy Davenport, *The Geography of the Imagination* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1981), 3–15.

¹⁰ In a November, 2007 video interview, Winkfield talks about some of his working processes, and says that not even he knows why he does some things. Posted at billmaynes.com.

¹¹ Both quotations from *Trevor Winkfield's Pageant* (West Stockbridge, MA: Hard Press, 1997), unpag.

¹² Adelbert Ames, Jr. "Reconsideration of the Origin and Nature of Perception in Situations Involving Only Inorganic Phenomena," in Sidney Ratner (ed.) *Vision and Action* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 262.

¹³ Hugh Kenner. *The Pound Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 31.

¹⁴ This ideal is never completely realized, of course. Even in science, ideas are not completely exhausted.