POETIC CRITIQUE

ENCOUNTERS WITH ART AND LITERATURE

Edited by Michel Chaouli, Jan Lietz, Jutta Müller-Tamm,
and Simon Schleusener

Poetic Critique

WeltLiteraturen/
World Literatures

Schriftenreihe der Friedrich Schlegel Graduiertenschule
für literaturwissenschaftliche Studien

Herausgegeben von
Jutta Müller-Tamm, Andrew James Johnston,
Anne Eusterschulte, Susanne Frank und Michael Gamper

Volume 19

Poetic Critique

Encounters with Art and Literature

Edited by
Michel Chaouli, Jan Lietz, Jutta Müller-Tamm,
and Simon Schleusener

DE GRUYTER

Contents

Michel Chaouli, Jan Lietz, Jutta Müller-Tamm, and Simon Schleusener

What Is Poetic Critique?

Poetic critique – is that not an oxymoron? Do these two forms of behavior – the poetic and the critical – not pull in different, even opposite, directions? For many scholars working in the humanities today, they largely do, but that has not always been the case. Friedrich Schlegel, for one, believed that critique worthy of its name must use philology and history not to bury the work, but to renew and intensify it. In his essay "On Goethe's Meister," for example, Schlegel suggests that we need to criticize in and through poetry: The poetic critic, he writes, "will want to represent the representation anew, and form once more what has already been formed; he will add to the work, restore it, shape it afresh" (Schlegel 2003, 281). It is a literary example that motivates him, namely the discussion of the staging of *Hamlet* in Goethe's novel. Still, Schlegel prompts us to envision a mode of critique and of criticism (*Kritik* can mean either) that reflects on the poetic dimension of its own practice. Criticizing here means: rewriting, broadening, amplifying, advancing, vitalizing, valuing, and evaluating the wealth of meaning in literature. Schlegel suggests that only this form of critique – he calls it *poetische Kritik* – stands a chance of responding adequately to a work of art.

This is not a book about Schlegel's concept of criticism, though his name and his ideas haunt many chapters that follow. Rather, his notion of poetic critique serves us as a provocation to rethink and to reimagine what critique and criticism could be today. It is an invitation to examine the possibilities and limitations of such a critique in our encounters with art and literature, especially in view of debates that the practice of critique has recently called forth. We do not hold fast to a definitive meaning of the notion, nor do we have a ready-made idea of which practices would fall under the term and which would not. Yet we do find the time right to experiment with a mode of critical thought and practice that runs counter to the received notion of critique as invariably negative, a mode that dares to bridge the gap supposedly dividing art from critique. More than anything, the concept of poetic critique gives voice to a desire – characteristic of Schlegel's time and of our own – to draw close the realms of literature and art, on the one hand, and of research and critique, on the other, and let them mingle and affect each other.

As we use it, the term poetic critique is an umbrella for the many different ways of crossing the boundaries by which the poetic and the critical have often been held apart. Poetic critique takes on many guises: it can be a mode of thinking, philological practice, poetic process, exercise in immersion, and intellectual challenge. While the essays gathered here approach the concept from many angles and put it to use in a variety of periods and constellations, they have in common a commitment to reflect on how poetic critique might lead to a fresh understanding of the nature and func-

tion of critique. The thread running through the volume is this question: how can the idea of poetic critique shape our own critical practice?

Critique and Postcritique

By no means are we the first to have raised the question of critique. It looms large in a number of recent debates in the humanities.[1] Well before the publication of Rita Felski's influential volume *The Limits of Critique* in 2015, various authors had begun to rethink critical practice, seeking ways of engaging with literature and art in a less 'suspicious,' symptomatic, and antagonistic manner. There have been pleas for "uncritical reading" (cf. Warner 2004), "reparative reading" (cf. Sedgwick 2003), "surface reading" (cf. Best and Marcus 2009), "just reading" (cf. Marcus 2007, 73–108), and "descriptive reading" (cf. Love 2010), to name only a few. Inevitably, these disparate efforts have been diagnosed as signaling yet another 'turn,' this time a postcritical turn. Though their modes of transport and their destinations differ, these approaches do have a common starting point: a dissatisfaction with a form of criticism common since the 1980s, particularly in the Anglo-American context, that focuses on a text's context and gaps, its latent meanings, ideological implications, hidden truths, and repressed content.

Against these practices – associated, for example, with some forms of deconstructive, psychoanalytic, Marxist, feminist, postcolonial, and queer criticism – the models proposed by postcritics seek to be more attentive to a text's manifest content, aesthetic properties, and affective capacities. Their stated goal is to be more affirmative and open-minded towards literary texts and other works of art. This reorientation coincides with the emergence of a number of new, or updated, theoretical models: while critical criticism was geared to schools of thought that Paul Ricœur has called the "school of suspicion" – with its three "masters of suspicion," Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, showing the way (Ricœur 1970, 32–33) – postcritical criticism seeks its theoretical orientation elsewhere: in actor-network theory, the new materialism, object-oriented ontology, affect theory, and ordinary language philosophy.

But while the adherents of these and similar methodologies may see, and appreciate, the dawning of a new postcritical era, others claim that now is precisely the right "time for critique" (cf. Fassin and Harcourt 2019). Some fear that the hard-won practice of examining texts in their historical context and in view of their social conditions and political implications might give way to a quietist aestheticism or formalism, just when critical voices are desperately needed. Then there are disciplinary and methodological debates: Is literary studies falling back into close reading? How does a postcritical approach to literature conceive of the relationship between text

---

1 Cf., among others, the following anthologies: Jaeggi and Wesche 2009, Anker and Felski 2017, Graw and Menke 2019, and Fassin and Harcourt 2019.

and context? And what would be the consequences of redefining this relationship as one of actors and networks? Some of these challenges are raised by essays in this volume. For the rest, the challenges form the background against which the essays unfold their thinking.

Practicing Poetic Critique

While some essays in this volume take their bearings from the above-mentioned new methodologies, others strike out on their own; yet others go back to Ricœur's "school of suspicion," perhaps to go beyond suspicion. Poetic critique, as reflected in this volume, sometimes has affinities with postcritique and sometimes not, yet in no case is it prepared to forsake critique as a whole.

As the editors of this volume, we acknowledge the debates that swirl around us, debates that shape our work and that we, in turn, aim to shape. At the same time, framing our project in terms of the distinction between critique and postcritique risks shortchanging poetic critique, for now we find ourselves faced with a choice: either we are *for* or *against* critique. Yet this frame is too tight and too rigid to hold all that poetic critique can do. What draws us to poetic critique is that it can jumble, even shatter, such schemas. It reveals that critique is sharpest not when it is stripped of all poetry, but, just the opposite, when it makes the vigor of the poetic impulse its own.

Poetic critique highlights the poetic dimensions of every critical act and thus urges us to attend to the ways we engage and respond to art. As the essays assembled here make clear, this is not a question of mere presentation or rhetoric; we are not suggesting putting old wine in new bottles. Attending to the poetry in critique changes both the concept and the practice of critique, and profoundly so. Here, we name just three aspects that show what is at stake.

First, poetic critique loosens the link between critique and judgment. If some of us feel bored by conventional critique, that is because critique can be a predictable affair – and it is most predictable when it dispenses its judgments. Here, once the critical routine is set in motion, it unspools like a mechanical toy. Automatically applying fixed criteria – be they aesthetic, ethical, or political – can make for dreadful reading. Worse, it can make us oblivious to the very experience we typically seek in works of art. Poetic critique changes the game, not because it promotes a lyrical subjectivity or an emotional response. Indeed, Schlegel stresses that it is a "necessary experience when reading a poetic work to give ourselves up entirely to its influence, to let the writer do with us what he will" (Schlegel 2003, 273). But he also insists on the importance of going beyond affective participation and even demands that we "destroy what we adore" (273) to better understand it. Poetic critique is a plea neither for nor against being moved by literature. Rather, its attitude towards art is ambiguous, even paradoxical. "Perhaps then we should judge it, and at the same time re-

frain from judging it," Schlegel writes about the work of art, and right away concedes: "which does not seem to be at all an easy task." (275)

Second, in poetic critique the relationship between work of art and work of criticism is realigned, changing both the idea of criticism and of art and the temporal logic that prevails over them. If we take our bearing once again from Schlegel, we can see that critique is not a belated, supplementary phenomenon that parasitically feeds on the work of art. Rather, true works of art call for critique; they *need* critique. A literary work, Schlegel claims, always surpasses the author's intentions. Because "every great work [...] knows more than it says, and aspires to more than it knows," all criticism, of whatever kind, "makes suppositions and assertions which go beyond the visible work" (281). If Schlegel thus elevates the role of the critic, it is because literary works are meant to be understood differently, and more fully, in future readings, for their meaning emerges only through the interaction with readers. This idea is radicalized by Theodor Adorno. He takes the Romantic idea that the artwork is essentially incomplete (or fragmentary, as Schlegel likes to put it) and gives it a further turn: critique is now seen as an agent of the work's historical becoming. According to Adorno, the truth of works of art, a truth both immanent to them and in excess of them, only unfolds in "interpretation, commentary, and critique" (Adorno 1997, 194). The practice of poetic critique therefore entails a peculiar temporality: reading is a creative engagement with the past and the present, whereas criticism is conceived of as poetic activity that addresses itself to the future.

Third, poetic criticism undercuts the distinction between formalism and its other. Adorno's reading and re-writing of romantic ideas of criticism (as filtered through the work of Walter Benjamin) makes this especially clear: it reminds us that the often-supposed alternative between an attentiveness to the formal properties of a work of art and its so-called critical content is false. Whatever the truth of an artwork may be, it can never exist in isolation from its singular form. It is only through form that art marks a difference to empirical life and becomes art, but it is also only through form that art stands in relation to the social world. Hence, it is in form that art and critique converge: "Form converges with critique. It is that through which artworks prove critical of themselves" (144, translation modified). Poetic critique can take on many forms, but it is not by accident that from Schlegel to our own moment, poetic critics have been drawn to the genre of the essay. For what "essay" (stemming from the French *essai*) implies is a form of writing that allows for precisely the kind of experimentation that an effective convergence between the poetical and the critical typically requires.

Because of these three features, poetic critique is not in a position to prescribe a certain mode of reading – suspicious or uncritical, negative or affirmative – nor is it able to issue programmatic calls for 'how we (shall) read now.' It is too preoccupied with the singularity of the work at hand to do that. It neither entails post- nor anti-critique but seeks to promote a practice of critique characterized by a special atten-

tiveness to the workings of art and literature. It thus implies a reciprocal becoming: as critique becomes poetic, literature and art become critical.[2]

The Philological Laboratory

Most essays published here began as contributions to a conference on "Poetic Critique" that took place in Berlin in June 2019. It was convened by the Philological Laboratory, a collaborative project led by the four editors of this volume. The Laboratory is funded by the Einstein Foundation Berlin and housed in the Friedrich Schlegel Graduate School for Literary Studies at Freie Universität Berlin. At its core, the Philological Laboratory is devoted to examining and exploring the past and future of critique – as a theoretical position, as a practice of speaking and writing, and as an ethos.

This examination and exploration have taken multiple forms. In two semester-long colloquia, we sought to map the complex pedigree of the idea of critique. We did this not as an exercise in intellectual history, but to uncover the poetic potential in a tradition too swiftly identified with a mood of distrust. Several day-long workshops were designed to direct the attention of participants, mostly advanced graduate students in literary studies and related disciplines, from theory to practice, and urge them to experiment with new ways of doing criticism. A third set of events, more public facing, approached the topic from the other side, as it were: here we invited poets, musicians, visual and other artists to reflect on ways that critique enters their thinking and their work.

The Philological Laboratory would not exist without the generosity of the Einstein Foundation Berlin, nor would this volume. We are grateful to the Foundation for the trust it has placed in our project. We are also grateful to the Indiana University Europe Gateway office in Berlin and the Center for International Cooperation of Freie Universität for supporting the conference that led to this volume. The editors also wish to thank the contributors and, for their editorial assistance, Luca Lil Wirth and Elisa Weinkötz. And a particular thanks to the anonymous reviewer of this volume for many valuable insights and suggestions.

---

2 In this respect, there are clear affinities between the concept of poetic critique and a number of contemporary currents that seek to bring art and literature closer together with research and critique. This tendency is most obviously embodied by 'artistic research,' an approach that highlights art's "entanglement with theory" (Busch 2009) and the role of art in the production of knowledge. Cf., for example, Mersch 2015, Busch 2016, and Caduff and Wälchli 2019.

Bibliography

Adorno, Theodor W. *Aesthetic Theory*. Trans. and ed. Robert Hullot-Kentor. London and New York: Continuum, 1997.

Anker, Elizabeth S., and Rita Felski (Eds.). *Critique and Postcritique*. Durham and London: Duke UP, 2017.

Best, Stephen, and Sharon Marcus. "Surface Reading: An Introduction." *Representations* 108.1 (2009): 1–21.

Busch, Kathrin. "Artistic Research and the Poetics of Knowledge." *Art and Research* 2.2 (2009). http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v2n2/pdfs/busch.pdf (14 July 2020).

Busch, Kathrin (Ed.) *Anderes Wissen: Kunstformen der Theorie* (Schriftenreihe der Merz Akademie). Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2016.

Caduff, Corina, and Tan Wälchli (Eds.). *Artistic Research and Literature*. Munich: Fink Verlag, 2019.

Fassin, Didier, and Bernard Harcourt (Eds.). *A Time for Critique*. New York: Columbia UP, 2019.

Felski, Rita. *The Limits of Critique*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2015.

Graw, Isabelle, and Christoph Menke (Eds.). *The Value of Critique: Exploring the Interrelations of Value, Critique, and Artistic Labour*. Frankfurt/M. and New York: Campus Verlag, 2019.

Jaeggi, Rahel, and Tilo Wesche (Eds.). *Was ist Kritik?* Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 2009.

Love, Heather. "Close but not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn." *New Literary History* 41 (2010): 371–391.

Marcus, Sharon. *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2007.

Mersch, Dieter. *Epistemologien des Ästhetischen*. Zurich: Diaphanes, 2015.

Ricœur, Paul. *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1970.

Schlegel, Friedrich. "On Goethe's *Meister*." *Classic and Romantic German Aesthetics*. Ed. J.M. Bernstein. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003. 269–286.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're so Paranoid, You probably Think This Essay Is About You." *Touching Feeling. Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Durham and London: Duke UP, 2003. 123–151.

Warner, Michael. "Uncritical Reading." *Polemic: Critical or Uncritical*. Ed. Jane Gallop. New York: Routledge, 2004. 13–38.

Jennifer Ashton
Why Adding 'Poetic' to 'Critique' Adds Nothing to Critique

The provocation for the June 2019 *Poetic Critique* conference (from which this volume originated) contains a number of propositions: (1) that there is a distinctive mode of critique in literary studies that differs from the discipline's prevailing modes of critique; (2) that what makes this mode special is its 'poetic' approach to its subject matter; and (3) that the approach is sufficiently distinctive to command a special name – 'poetic critique.' And insofar as this special mode is also understood to be one that, as the conference organizers put it, "has failed to gain a firm foothold in literary studies as it transformed itself into an academic discipline," then at least part of what must distinguish "poetic critique" from all those other modes of critique that *have* prevailed is simply that this one has not (Chaouli et al. 2019). These propositions also appear to add up to a hortatory one: that poetic critique should withdraw from the margins and move to the center of what we do. From my standpoint, however, there is little to compel the exhortation, not because I believe there is something wrong with the critical practice just described – certainly not in Friedrich Schlegel's terms – but because arguing for a particular critical practice to prevail seems misplaced when it has never not prevailed.[1] Or to put this another way, I cannot help thinking that the interpretive activity that Schlegel describes – to "present anew what has been presented," "to shape once again what has already been shaped," and thereby to "complete the work" (qtd. in Chaouli et al. 2019) – also represents the unstated ambition of much of the literary criticism that I read, or for that matter, much that I strive to emulate myself (though I will readily admit to being no Schlegel). Indeed, as someone who devotes most of my research to poetry, I can barely imagine producing a compelling reading of any poem – much less show-

---

1 By "never" I mean in the discipline we identify with academic literary interpretation, which covers a relatively short time span in proportion to the much longer period during which the works we understand to count as literature have been produced. As Nicholas Brown points out in his 2013 essay "Close Reading and the Market," (in which Schlegel makes a key appearance – indeed, I am indebted to Brown for calling my attention to a key passage from *The Atheneum Fragments*, which I discuss further below): "Questions about the way we read 'now' are always beside the point, for the reason that the way we read now is the way we have always read – provided we understand that the domain of this 'always' is limited to the rather young 'we' of literary studies as a discipline. [...] To be specific, literature is invented in the aftermath of the Kantian revolution – particularly in the wake of its elevation of aesthetic judgment to a keystone position – at the turn of the nineteenth century, in the circle around Friedrich Schlegel" (Brown 2013, 145–146).

ing someone else how to produce one – without also reshaping and remaking the poem in the process.[2]

For academic critics who also teach, of course, part of our job is to help students see how to perform such labor. An obvious way to do it is simply by example, to which end I sometimes assign my students George Herbert's well-known devotional poem "The Altar" alongside the American scholar Stanley Fish's tour-de-force reading of it in his 1972 book *Self-Consuming Artifacts: The Experience of Seventeenth-Century Literature:*

<div align="center">

A broken A L T A R, Lord, thy servant reares
Made of a heart, and cemented with teares:
Whose parts are as thy hand did frame;
No workman's tool hath touch'd the same.
A H E A R T alone
Is such a stone,
As nothing but
Thy pow'r doth cut.
Wherefore each part
Of my hard heart
Meets in this frame,
To praise thy Name:
That, if I chance to hold my peace,
These stones to praise thee may not cease.
O let thy blessed S A C R I F I C E be mine,
And sanctifie this A L T A R to be thine.

</div>

<div align="center">

(Herbert 1633, 18)

</div>

In Fish's reading, the ingenuity Herbert displays in the poem's meticulously sculpted form must be read as evidence not of the poet's creative powers but of God's. But to feel the force of the divine agency that Herbert designed the poem to promote, the reader must also feel the force of the human agency that it is designed to demote. The reader is able to recognize the latter, Fish argues, by the end of the very first line of the poem, and it is precisely by rearranging the syntax of that line that Fish most clearly shows us what Herbert has done:

> The delaying of the verb momentarily suspends the sense and leaves us uncertain of the relationship of the three noun phrases. Is one subject and the other object? If so, which one, and what of the third? Or are all three (or perhaps two) in apposition to one another? These questions represent syntactic and semantic options which are available, and in their availability, pressuring, until the verb arrives. [...] In its position "reares" [...] unmixes "ALTAR," "servant," and "Lord" by arranging them in syntactical relationships which are also temporal-spatial relation-

---

2 I should make clear here that I am addressing Schlegel's idea of "presenting anew" somewhat loosely, and that I am not trying to suggest that he is somehow inviting the critic to take the place of the poet (or the scholarly analysis to replace the poem). It's the "re" in "reshaping and remaking" that matters for the critical practice that I am arguing is quite prevalent.

ships of cause and effect ("I, thy servant, O Lord, rear this broken altar"). (Fish 1994 [1972], 208–209)

In settling the causal relationship among the three entities in question, the terminal position of the verb, Fish explains, also "reaffirms the claims [...] for the ingenuity of [the poem's] author by specifying 'thy servant' [i.e., the human speaker of the poem] as agent" (209). In other words, while the syntax does indeed establish "thy servant" as the subject who "reares" the "altar," nevertheless the initially unsettled relation among subject and object and the third term, "LORD," also sets the stage for the poem to deliver that third term as the maker of both subject and object. But it is the final couplet of the poem that seals the deal in this transfer of power, which we do not even need Fish to help us grasp if we simply imagine the difference it would make were the lines transposed: "O sanctifie this ALTAR to be thine, / And let thy blessed SACRIFICE be mine." Unlike the syntactical rearrangement that Fish performs, this 'reshaping' is one we can carry out at no cost to the poem's intricate form. But while the meter and the rhyme are in no way affected by reversing the couplet, we can also see that the poem's greatest feat is all but made to disappear in that rearrangement. For "The Altar's" central purpose – to pay homage to God's sovereignty – is only fully achieved when what is "thine" overtakes what is "mine."

Of course, seeing how this is done is one thing and doing it is another. To that end we might examine a related but somewhat different interpretive exercise involving two more recent works of poetry. But Fish's reading of Herbert raises two matters that I want to lay out briefly before turning to that exercise. The analysis Fish performs in *Self-Consuming Artifacts* is also part of the history of a larger theoretical enterprise aimed at identifying the meaning of any given literary work with the constructive activity of the reader and by contrast to the idea that the meaning of the work might inhere in it or exist prior to the reader's activity. Or as Fish would put it a decade later in his well-known essay "How to Recognize a Poem When You See One": "Interpretation is not the art of construing but the art of constructing. Interpreters do not decode poems; they make them" (Fish 1982, 327). My use of Fish here might therefore be read as a way of presenting that theoretical claim – which flew for a time under the banner of so-called 'reader-response theory' – as foundational both to what Schlegel appears to mean by 'poetic critique' and to the kind of remaking that I am arguing we are always doing in our capacity as literary critics. But my argument will show instead why the fantasy of our constructing the poem is not what Schlegel has to mean (much less what is happening) when we "shape again what has already been shaped" (qtd. in Chaouli et al. 2019).

For we might also recall that the very same Schlegel who was interested in the reader's ability to reshape the poem also seemed to believe the very opposite of one of Fish's corollary claims, namely that a poem (or for that matter any object of interpretation) has no inherent "distinguishing features": "acts of recognition," Fish writes, "rather than being triggered by formal characteristics, are their source" (Fish 1982, 326). In other words, for Fish, whatever we might mean when we talk

about interpreting a text, including simply describing the text, what we are really referring to is our construction (and not our construal) of the text. For Schlegel, by contrast, it would appear that *poems themselves* both construe and construct their own interpretations: "In all its descriptions," writes Schlegel in one of the Athenaeum fragments, "[...] poetry should describe itself, and always be simultaneously poetry and the poetry of poetry" (Schlegel 1991 [1798], 51). If poetry can be said to describe itself, it is hard to see how that can happen without the description being in some sense inherent in the poem, and therefore also part and parcel of the poem's "distinguishing features" or "formal characteristics." And it is the relationship between form and meaning implied in Schlegel's suggestion that "poetry should describe itself" that is essential not only to the kind of critique that we as literary scholars cannot help but perform as a matter of course, but also to recognizing the critique that poems themselves perform as the primary object of our study.

Anyone familiar with "How to Recognize a Poem When you See One" may recall that it famously begins with a classroom experiment in which Fish showed his students a list of names on a reading assignment for another class and then instructed them that it was a seventeenth-century poem they were expected to analyze: interpretive labor that, if Fish's description is remotely accurate, the students in proceeding to unearth a trove of clever prosodic devices and literary and biblical allusions were able to perform with spectacular success. I want to turn now to a very different (but also successful) interpretive experiment that I had my own students perform; however, if the point of Fish's experiment was to show that neither a list nor a poem – nor anything else we might call a text – has any inherent formal features, because whatever we see in it is imposed on the poem by our communal act of reading it, the point of my experiment is exactly the opposite. That is, while my students' exercise might seem to bear out both Fish's claim that readers make poems and Schlegel's imperative to "reshape" them, it also bears out Schlegel's other proposition that "poetry should describe itself."

The assignment is one that I gave to a first-year undergraduate class on poetry – the students in which were largely non-literature majors – where one of the works we read was Claudia Rankine's 2014 National Book Award finalist, *Citizen: An American Lyric.* It is worth noting that the reworking of Rankine's poetry that the exercise asks students to do is based on an aspect of *Citizen* that most reviewers and scholars writing about it have commented on, namely Rankine's extensive use of the second-person "you."[3] With few exceptions, the largely prose format of the work is delivered in this second-person voice, as we see in this passage:

> You are rushing to meet a friend in a distant neighborhood of Santa Monica. This friend says, as
> you walk toward her, You are late, you nappy-headed ho. What did you say? you ask, though you

---

3 The poet and novelist Ben Lerner, for example, devotes an extended section of his 2016 book-length essay to an analysis of the effects of Rankine's second-person address on a white reader (Lerner 2016, 69–74).

have heard every word. This person has never before referred to you like this in your presence, never before code-switched in this manner. What did you say? She doesn't, perhaps physically cannot, repeat what she has just said.

Maybe the content of her statement is irrelevant and she only means to signal the stereotype of "black people time" by employing what she perceives to be "black people language." Maybe she is jealous of whoever kept you and wants to suggest you are nothing or everything to her. Maybe she wants to have a belated conversation about Don Imus and the women's basketball team he insulted with this language. You don't know. You don't know what she means. You don't know what response she expects from you nor do you care. For all your previous understandings, suddenly incoherence feels violent. You both experience this cut, which she keeps insisting is a joke, a joke stuck in her throat, and like any other injury, you watch it rupture along its suddenly exposed suture. (Rankine 2014, 41–42)

The predominant referent for the "you" here is clearly the speaker of the poem, whom we also are given to read as black, and more specifically, to identify with the poet herself. This passage is just one of many that combine to depict a subject confronting a relentless barrage of microaggressions by white people, acts that even in the short space of this passage range from the oblivious to the malicious. Moreover, insofar as the "you" mostly refers to the speaker herself, we can see that the second-person voice is serving a first-person point of view. I say "mostly" because the "you" in the question that the speaker asks twice in this passage – "What did you say?", which also acts as a kind of refrain throughout the volume – clearly does not refer to the person asking the question. In this respect, this passage like many others in *Citizen*, also serves as a bold reminder of the second-person pronoun's flexibility of reference. "What did you say?" – which reads simultaneously as the speaker's stunned expression of disbelief at the racial slur and a pained attempt to call the friend out for it – marks this capaciousness even as (or precisely because) we have no trouble seeing that the "you" who provokes the question is distinct from the "you" who asks it. And as a by-product of that same flexibility of reference, what also emerges here – after we are reminded of the notorious 2007 radio broadcast where the American talk-show celebrity Don Imus and his guest used the same racial slur (along with string of others) discussing the Rutgers University women's basketball team's loss in a tight NCAA final against the University of Tennessee – is that the speaker identified with the "you" is not a lone injured subject but one of many who have suffered the effects of an identical verbal violence. The poem also reminds us, in other words, that in strict grammatical usage, the "you," unlike the "I" that it can be used to stand in for (and notwithstanding the kind of poetic license that might enable one, say, to use the first-person singular to "contain multitudes"), can refer either singularly or plurally.

Using the second-person "you" as an equivalent of the first-person "I" is hardly Rankine's invention, of course; it is a speech pattern that has been put to literary use not just by poets but also by fiction writers, and one that occurs in everyday parlance as well. So an obvious question for us as critics, particularly when we consider *Citizen's* subtitle, *An American Lyric*, is what Rankine is trying to accomplish by mobi-

lizing "you" both for its ability to stand in for the more familiar lyric "I" and its ability to shuttle between plural and singular referents. It is a question that, as a teacher of Rankine's book, I also want my students to try to answer. So to help them understand Rankine's decision to make the first-person "you" one of the primary cogs in *Citizen*'s machinery, I gave them an assignment that would help them examine the differences it would make to Rankine's lyric endeavor if the poem were constructed differently and she were to voice it through the genre's more conventional first-person pronoun. The assignment asked students to follow a two-step procedure: Step 1) Choose one of the shorter sections (ideally less than a page long) from Claudia Rankine's *Citizen* and rewrite it, substituting a first-person pronoun wherever a second-person pronoun seems to refer to the speaker, and making any other necessary grammatical changes that follow from the substitution. Step 2) Circle or underline any instances where you're not sure what the right change would be or where it seems the original sense of the passage would be significantly altered or rendered nonsensical by the change from second person to first person.

Here is what the second-person to first-person conversion looks like with the passage discussed above:

> [I am] rushing to meet a friend in a distant neighborhood of Santa Monica. This friend says, as [I] walk toward her, You are late, you nappy-headed ho. What did you say? [I] ask, though [I] have heard every word. This person has never before referred to [me] like this in [my] presence, never before code-switched in this manner. What did you say? She doesn't, perhaps physically cannot, repeat what she has just said.
>
> Maybe the content of her statement is irrelevant and she only means to signal the stereotype of "black people time" by employing what she perceives to be "black people language." Maybe she is jealous of whoever kept [me] and wants to suggest [I am] nothing or everything to her. Maybe she wants to have a belated conversation about Don Imus and the women's basketball team he insulted with this language. [I] don't know. [I] don't know what she means. [I] don't know what response she expects from [me] nor do [I] care. For all [my/our]? previous understandings, suddenly incoherence feels violent. [We] both experience this cut, which she keeps insisting is a joke, a joke stuck in her throat, and like any other injury, [I/we?] watch it rupture along its suddenly exposed suture. (Rankine 2014, 41–42)[4]

Entirely by virtue of the "you"'s first-person capacities, there's very little change in the sense of the situation in the first paragraph except perhaps a sharpening of the lines differentiating the speaker's words from those of the friend. But the conversion also makes clear what the "you" can do that the "I" cannot, which is to cut in two directions at once, offering us the grammatical possibility of the speaker and the friend occupying common ground even as, in the second paragraph, that prospect is made to collapse, as if the pronoun "you" itself were at once both "suture" and "rupture" between them. For this reason, it is also clear why Rankine did not attempt

---

4 I have marked with underscoring those moments in this poem (as well as in another discussed below), where it is unclear which first-person pronoun would offer the most appropriate substitution.

some first-person variation on the friend's comment in this particular section of the work, even though in many of the vignettes in *Citizen*, the white people who are given voice do address the speaker from a first-person point-of-view, as in this short passage:

> Because of your elite status from a year's worth of travel, you have already settled into your window seat on United Airlines, when the girl and her mother arrive at your row. The girl, looking over at you, tells her mother, these are our seats, but this is not what I expected. The mother's response is barely audible – I see, she says. I'll sit in the middle. (12)

But if we return to our translation exercise we can see all the better why giving *Citizen's* black lyric speaker (as opposed to its white ones) a first-person pronoun will not serve, for it is precisely around the moment of the poem that points most explicitly to common ground between its black and white subjects – "you both experience this cut" – that we run up against the real challenges to our translation. That is, while "all your previous understandings" might also point to something the speaker and her friend share in common, the fact that "you" cleaves so undecidably between the singular and the plural when we try to replace the second-person pronoun with the first suggests why we might have trouble settling on either "my" or "our."

The rupture that cuts between the speaker and her friend certainly points to a divide that would rule out "our understandings" as an alternative to "your" in this translation. But it is *Citizen* as a whole that makes a case for why the singular "my," "I," and "me" might be unavailable not just to the speaker in this particular situation, but to any African American citizen who would sing "An American Lyric." Indeed until the very final poem of the book, it is only the white perpetrators of racism who refer to themselves in the first-person singular, while the speaker never uses "I" except in mentioning the pronoun, as in these lines a few pages before the end of the book: "Who do you think you are, saying I to me? // [...] Don't say I if it means so little, / holds the little forming no one / [...] You are injured" (142–143). But even if Rankine has erased the difference between use and mention here by omitting the customary scare quotes in these lines, we as readers have no problem recognizing the difference between these occurrences of "I" and the one that begins *Citizen's* final vignette:

> I can hear the even breathing that creates passages to dreams. And yes, I want to interrupt to tell him her us you me I don't know how to end what doesn't have an ending.
>
> Tell me a story, he says, wrapping his arms around me.
>
> Yesterday, I begin, I was waiting in the car for time to pass. A woman pulled in and started to park her car facing mine. Our eyes met and what passed passed as quickly as the look away. She backed up and parked on the other side of the lot. I could have followed her to worry my question but I had to go, I was expected on court, I grabbed my racket.
>
> The sunrise is slow and cloudy, dragging the light in, but barely.
>
> Did you win? he asks.

It wasn't a match, I say. It was a lesson. (Rankine 2014, 159)

Upon reaching this point in the poem readers are well prepared to grasp the lesson they have been given. If one commonplace of the lyric as a genre has been famously expressed in John Stuart Mill's remark that "All poetry is of the nature of soliloquy" such that "no trace of consciousness that any eyes are upon us must be visible in the work itself" (Mill 1981 [1833], 349), then what Rankine's "American Lyric" teaches us to see is the privilege that attaches to that un-self-conscious first-person standpoint. The highly self-conscious self-description that the poem *Citizen* enacts through its pronouns is a drama of withholding, in which self-description is exactly what is relentlessly denied to the poem's black speaker. We discover in place of the unselfconsciousness of the traditional (read: white) lyric speaker the double-consciousness (to recall W.E.B. Du Bois) of the African American lyric speaker beset by hostile projections.[5] Thus when *Citizen*'s speaker summarizes the effects of this disparity in the phrase "you are injured," we also see what would be needed to redress the injury – a subjectivity unmolested by the projections of others.

In this respect, however, what we might call *Citizen*'s 'poetic critique' of the lyric also maintains the genre's broader contours insofar as in overturning one commonplace – that of the un-self-conscious solitary singer – it upholds another – that of expressing, to recall one of the genre's major Romantic practitioners, the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" (Wordsworth 1988 [1800], 246). But as the African American critic Kenneth Warren has observed, in embracing that commonplace in order to describe the subjective wounds of racial inequality, *Citizen* also actively occludes a different form of injustice, and one that disproportionately affects black Americans – that of economic inequality:

> That is, the young men depicted [as victims of racist acts] elsewhere in *Citizen* appear to us as victims not because (unlike you and me) they cannot afford to purchase – or are otherwise unable to earn – elite status tickets, but rather because they, like you, are on the receiving end of actions and gestures that stem from prejudice, racism, and bias. (Warren 2016)

To show what it can look like to perform the kind of 'poetic critique' that would address the economic violence that Rankine's *Citizen*, whether deliberately or inadvertently, occludes, I want to turn now to another recently published work of poetry, Leslie Kaplan's *Excess – The Factory*. The work was published in French as *L'excès – L'usine in 1987,* but it appeared in English translation only decades later, in 2018, with the Oakland-based press Commune Editions (although as the remainder of this essay will suggest, it is not obvious that the choices made by the translators

---

5 "The Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world – a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others." (Du Bois 2007 [1903], 8)

are all that compatible with the ostensive ideological commitments of the press's name). Like the speaker of *Citizen*, the speaker of the poems in Kaplan's book is also rendered in the second person, and to somewhat similar effect, in that we witness a subject grown increasingly wounded by and weary of the oppressive conditions of daily existence:

> You make cables near the window, cables of different colors. You roll them into coils. Light is there, space is soft. You come, go. Corridors, oblivion.
>
> You make the cables near the window. Extreme tension. The sky, and the cables, this shit. You are seized, gripped by the cables, the sky. There is nothing else.
>
> All space is occupied : all has become waste. Skin is dead. Teeth bite an apple, a sandwich. You absorb. The gaze sticks to everything like a fly.
>
> You work 9 hours, making holes in parts with a machine. You place the part, bring down the lever, take out the part, and raise the lever again. There's paper everywhere.
>
> Time is outside, in things. (Kaplan 2018 [1987], *15*)

Just as with Rankine's poem, because the second-person voice is standing in for a first-person point of view, we can try to gain a clearer sense of the effects of Kaplan's use of "you" here if we see what difference it would make if we reconstruct the poem with the more familiar lyric "I":

> [I] make cables near the window, cables of different colors. [I] roll them into coils. Light is there, space is soft. [I] come, go. Corridors, oblivion.
>
> [I] make the cables near the window. Extreme tension. The sky, and the cables, this shit. [I am] seized, gripped by the cables, the sky. There is nothing else.
>
> All space is occupied : all has become waste. Skin is dead. Teeth bite an apple, a sandwich. [I] absorb. The gaze sticks to everything like a fly.
>
> [I] work 9 hours, making holes in parts with a machine. [I] place the part, bring down the lever, take out the part, and raise the lever again. There's paper everywhere.
>
> Time is outside, in things. (15)

Here although most would probably agree that the first-person voice does not quite work, there are nevertheless fewer disjunctions than in our translation of Rankine. At the same time we can certainly point to the awkward shift from "Teeth bite an apple" to "[I] absorb" in the third verse. Partly by virtue of the lack of an interlocutor like the clueless white friend in Rankine, there are, however, almost no moments here where the substitution of the first person for the second would raise a question about which pronoun to use. Of course, a key difference between Rankine's speaker and the speaker here is that the latter is depicted grappling not with the oppressive effects of systemic racism but instead with those of capitalism. Meanwhile there is no information here that would enable us to ascertain the race or gender of the worker whose point of view Kaplan gives us, even as we receive a great deal of information (especially considering the short length of the poem) about the physical work being per-

formed and its effects on the speaker. Nevertheless, converting this poem has some similar consequences to those we saw with Rankine. For instance, in the strange disembodiment of the teeth that "bite an apple" in the third verse, we are at least invited to *imagine* the teeth belonging to the speaker. At the same time, the jump to first-person perspective in the next line, "I absorb," clearly reinforces the subjective aspects of the poem – we might also say the traditional lyric aspects of it – in ways that the "you" does not. It is as if, in our revision, what would appear to have mattered most to Kaplan would be getting the poem to express this particular individual's subjective experience of this particular labor in this particular factory.

But if we return to the original French, we begin to see a very different picture of the poem's speaker, one that we need to see in order to discover Kaplan's full purpose in so vividly depicting the factory worker's immiseration. Both the translator's choice of "you" and our experiment with "I" actually distort the original poem's aims, and the distortion has everything to do with the fact that the poem is intended less as a critique of the laborer's suffering than as a critique of what causes it, namely capitalism. And in this respect, Kaplan's poems demonstrate the extent to which pursuing such a critique – unlike, say, the critique of racism – precisely requires an impersonal rather than a personal point of view. Hence the pronoun that prevails in Kaplan's French is neither the second-person nor the first-person pronoun, but the impersonal "on":

> On fait des câbles près de la fenêtre. Les câbles ont beaucoup de couleurs, on les enroule en circuits. Il y a de la lumière, l'espace est mou. On va, on vient. Couloirs, oubli.
>
> On fait des câbles près de la fenêtre. Tension extrême. Le ciel, et les câbles, cette merde. On est saisie, tirée par les câbles, le ciel. Il n'y a rien d'autre.
>
> Tout l'espace est occupé : tout est devenu déchet. La peau est morte. Les dents mordent une pomme, un sandwich. On absorbe, le regard se colle à tout comme une mouche.
>
> On travaille neuf heures, on fait des trous dans des pièces avec une machine. On met la pièce, on descend le levier, on sort la pièce, on remonte le levier.
>
> Il y a du papier partout. Le temps est dehors, dans les choses. (*Kaplan 1987,* 13)

Given that there's a perfectly serviceable equivalent of "on" in English, what do we discover when we read this poem in translation again, but this time with the impersonal "one" in place of the personal "you" imposed on it by the Commune Editions translators:

> [One makes] cables near the window, cables of different colors. [One rolls] them into coils. Light is there, space is soft. [One comes, goes.] Corridors, oblivion.
>
> [One makes] the cables near the window. Extreme tension. The sky, and the cables, this shit. [One is] seized, gripped by the cables, the sky. There is nothing else.
>
> All space is occupied : all has become waste. Skin is dead. Teeth bite an apple, a sandwich. [One absorbs.] The gaze sticks to everything like a fly.

[One works] 9 hours, making holes in parts with a machine. [One places] the part, [brings] down the lever, [takes] out the part, and [raises] the lever again. There's paper everywhere.

Time is outside, in things. (Kaplan 2018 [1987], 15)

There is no question here, as with Rankine's *Citizen*, that the speaker is experiencing "powerful feelings," but the effect of Kaplan's impersonal speaker is to make them entirely secondary – by-products of an injustice that is structural, but precisely not in what we mean when we speak, say, of structural racism. Unlike racism, the structure of exploitation under which "one" suffers in Kaplan's *Factory*, the structure that produces the 'excess' or surplus value that is foundational to capitalism, is a structure indifferent to the individual experiences of the laborer on the one hand and the factory owner on the other. As Warren says in the conclusion to his critique of *Citizen*, "What then makes these poems 'good' on their terms is their capacity to keep in the foreground the idea of injustice as a matter of how we feel about each other and how we make each other feel, and to keep our attention away from economic injustice, which is not at all rooted in our feelings toward each other" (Warren 2016). We might then say that what makes Kaplan's poems "'good' on their terms" (to borrow Warren's language) is their ability to imagine the grounds of social change from the standpoint of an impersonal subject. Or to put the point slightly differently, the self-description these poems perform generates a critique of capitalism from the standpoint of no subject at all, a critique we can see all the more clearly in these poems when we see how a re-making of them makes that critique disappear.

Bibliography

Brown, Nicholas. "Close Reading and the Market." *Literary Materialisms*. Eds. Mathias Nilges and Emilio Sauri. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. 145–165.

Chaouli, Michel, Jan Lietz, Jutta Müller-Tamm, and Simon Schleusener. Conference: *Poetic Critique*. https://www.geisteswissenschaften.fu-berlin.de/friedrichschlegel/assoziierte_projekte/Philologisches-Laboratorium/Tagung-Poetic-Critique/index.html (23 December 2019).

Du Bois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk* [1903]. Ed. Brent Hayes Edwards. New York: Library of America, 2007.

Fish, Stanley. *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982.

Fish, Stanley. *Self-Consuming Artifacts: The Experience of Seventeenth-Century Literature* [1972]. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1994.

Herbert, George. *The Temple: Sacred Poems and Private Ejaculations*. Cambridge, UK: Thom. Buck and Roger Daniel, 1633. Early English Books Online Text Creation Partnership, 2011. https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A03058.0001.001/ (24 December 2019).

Kaplan, Leslie. *L'excès – l'usine*. Paris: P.O.L., 1987.

Kaplan, Leslie. *Excess – The Factory* [1987]. Trans. Julie Carr and Jennifer Pap. Oakland, CA: Commune Editions, 2018.

Lerner, Ben. *The Hatred of Poetry*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016.

Mill, John Stuart. "Thoughts on Poetry and Its Varieties" [1833]. *Autobiography and Literary Essays: Volume I.* Eds. John M. Robson and Jack Stillinger. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981. 343–365.

Rankine, Claudia. *Citizen: An American Lyric.* Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf Press, 2014.

Schlegel, Friedrich. "Athenaeum Fragments" [1798]. *Philosophical Fragments.* Trans. Peter Firchow. Foreword Rodolph Gasché. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991. 18–93.

Warren, Kenneth W. "Rankine's Elite Status." *Los Angeles Review of Books* (7 January 2016). https://v2.lareviewofbooks.org/article/reconsidering-claudia-rankines-citizen-an-american-lyric-a-symposium-part-ii/ (23 December 2019).

Wordsworth, William. "Preface to Lyrical Ballads" [1800]. *Lyrical Ballads: The Text of the 1798 Edition with the Additional 1800 Poems and the Prefaces.* Eds. R.L. Brett and A.R. Jones. London: Routledge, 1988 [1963].

Michel Chaouli
Schlegel's Words, Rightly Used

Philological Disarmament

"Poetry," Friedrich Schlegel writes in a fragment, "can only be criticized by poetry" (Schlegel 1991 [1797], 14 – 15). For a while now, I have thought that the line says all one needs to know about poetic criticism, what it is and how to do it, and that it therefore requires neither commentary nor critique. It is clear as day, and yet, like so many of the best aphorisms, this is an enigmatic clarity, which may be why I keep returning to it.[1] I keep failing to find the right way of hearing it and responding to it. If I knew how, then it would stop coming back to me, and before long I could forget it. Criticism thinks of itself as memorializing a work, but if it is done right, then it is a way of overcoming it, of digesting and metabolizing it, and thus of forgetting it.

"Poetry can only be criticized by poetry." It is a plain phrase, yet right away I feel the urge to poke and prod its every part. After all, can I be sure what it means by the word *poetry*, if *poetry* is even the right translation of *Poesie*, or if the first usage of the word denotes the same as the second? As Schlegel uses the term elsewhere, *poetry* is not restricted to a genre such as the lyric nor even to verbal artworks in general, but reaches for the essence of creative making itself, whatever form it might take. Does that hold here? Then there is the word *only:* am I to take literally the assertion that poetry can be criticized by poetry alone and by nothing else? Now I notice the passive voice and find myself asking by whom – by what unnamed agency – it can only be thus criticized? And what of this criticizing? The word itself – *kritisiert* – rankles, as does the idea it evokes: does poetry stand in need of being criticized? These misgivings are further roused by the very next concept the fragment offers: "A judgment of art," it reads, "that itself isn't a work of art [...] has no right of citizenship in the realm of art." "A judgment of art": a phrase I have come across a thousand times, yet only now do I hear how off-key it sounds, how grating it is to join "judgment" to "art." Worse, this "judgment" is apt to give the aimless drift of associations that have been stirred up by "criticize" a Kantian bent. And suddenly all I am able to see in "criticize" is "critique," that prosecutor that summons the accused before the Tribunal of Reason to press them for answers. Before I know it, an air of anxiety has settled over the line, and rather than enjoying the cloudless simplicity that it had once offered, I become restless and turn over each of its words.

---

1 One response to the fragment can be found in my essay "'We Hear That We May Speak': Overtures for Doing Criticism," *Arcadia: International Journal of Literary Culture*, forthcoming. Since I do not start from scratch, some passages from that essay reappear here.

But why such unease? I approach the phrase as though in it I confronted a being that speaks an unintelligible idiom whose meaning requires decipherment, when instead I could begin by crediting its affinity. It is, after all, not very mysterious: "Poetry can only be criticized by poetry." The words show the way, by a stroke of luck more clearly even in the English translation, which begins and ends with "poetry."[2] Poetry is where I set out and where I land, my dwelling and my destination. Though I may not know its dimensions nor the measure of its boundaries, I do not face in it an alien object, but something with which I maintain an unknown intimacy. Often I approach it as though it were an obscure substance to be probed from a distance with the stick of scholarly analysis, but then I forget that I know it from inside, even when its meaning confounds me – forget that its meaning confounds me in the way that poetry does *because* I know it from inside.

Knowing it from inside does not mean that it harbors no mysteries. It means that poetry is not an object to be studied, dissected, and decoded. It is, in fact, no object at all. That, too, is something the line intimates: when poetry encounters poetry, the two do not occupy opposite poles – here I, the reading subject deploying "poetry," there a poetic object that I approach and whose meaning I seek to parse – with critique or criticism coursing between us. If criticism itself is done "*by* poetry," as Schlegel puts it, then poetry is the medium through which I move, not a thing I hold before me. Even the term "medium," recruited to dissolve the dyad of subject and object, will not quite do. It fails to capture the strange affinity that I have with poetry – and it with me – if I am to hear it in the right way. For poetry is not a medium in the sense of a means, not a tool I wield or a channel I select to tune into a special form of communication. Nor is it a medium in the more capacious sense of a setting, the stage of my actions or the stream that carries me away. In either case – whether I hold it or it holds me – it remains alien to me, something I think of as belonging to the world rather than to myself. Yet to do criticism *by* poetry names something more intimate: a form of comportment, a way of doing things.

Hearing That We May Speak

We scholars have been reading this fragment (along with the other fragments, essays, dialogues, and other writings in the archive of "Early Romanticism") as a building block in an intricate theory of literature, when in fact it is a call to action. It presents us not merely with new thoughts, but with a demand. It asks us to "hear, that we may speak," as Emerson says (Emerson 2001 [1837], 60). But do we need to learn how to hear and speak? Do we not do it in our sleep? Of course we do, but that is just the reason Emerson urges a different mode of hearing and speaking. Every day, language passes through me without leaving a ripple. Yet from time to time I come across

---

2 The original reads, "Poesie kann nur durch Poesie kritisiert werden" (Schlegel 1967 [1797], 162).

words, and something happens. The words snap me out of my slumber and suddenly I hear in them a call that demands something of me. No longer do I read to add to my stock of interpretations; I read, rather, to take part in a form of making. I remain vigilant about the ways of seeing – the theories – that the text unveils, yet mainly because it can lead me to new ways of doing. I change my posture and lean forward, ready to learn how these words set in motion something in me, rather than leaning back, content to behold the shape they reveal.

So: I hear Schlegel's word that I might act. The way of acting towards which they guide me is clear. I am to encounter poetry with poetry, to act poetically when coming across poetry, where poetry is not a special category of artful writing (lyrical, complex, sophisticated – what have you), but names ways of making that outstrip utility – call it passionate making. The fragment asks me to face the coming into being of something new not with the aim of fixing its location in a grid of meanings, but rather with a gesture that launches my own ways of making. If criticism names my encounter with the poetic, then a real encounter, and real criticism, must itself be poetic. How do I bring about such an encounter? The fragment does not say. Yet, in whatever way I go about it, my work – criticism – no longer remains the same. It ceases to serve as the mere occasion for assigning praise or blame, nor does it document an arrangement of meanings derived from – or imposed on – a source. Something different happens.

For one thing, something *happens*. In poetic criticism, someone speaks, someone ventures an act of speech – an act *in* speech. Even if it has been uttered before, such a speech act is unheard of. Ideas that have grown flaccid gain fresh vigor, like a muscle that one learns to feel anew. Yet this speaking, though new, emerges not out of thin air, but follows upon another act, this being an act of hearing – hearing this fragment, for example – an act as fragile as the speech to which it gives rise. For to hear "that we may speak," to hear poetically, demands of me to open not my ears alone, but also my self, to allow myself to be exposed to what speaks to me, unshielded by my usual armaments – with effects I cannot foresee. Learning to become vulnerable in this way lies at the core of encountering poetry with poetry.

What changes, then, what is at stake in hearing the fragment, is more than criticism. If I succeed in hearing the poetry in some arrangement of words (just as I might perceive it in a composition of images, sounds, or movements), then they rouse me from the torpor of my habits and bring to consciousness ways of encountering things that had lain dormant. My whole organism comes alive, and as I learn to hear and see and feel anew, fresh possibilities of making sense of the world reveal themselves, which turn out to be just fresh possibilities of making the world. That would change everything.

Second Thoughts

Have we been reading too much into this line? Does it really say that poetry is not an object nor I a subject, that hearing it involves knowing it from inside, that it names a form of intimacy? If so, how and where? These are fair questions. Still, it is irksome that they interrupt our reverie. Was not the idea to keep at bay the unease that our usual modes of reading have taught? Yet here we are, ready to shadowbox with challenges of our own making. And once we start, there is no stopping: behind these questions a hundred others lurk, each ready to take a swing.

When interpretation runs into trouble, we like to place the blame on the 'difficulty' of the object before us (for example, the line by Schlegel), when the real obstacle lies elsewhere. Strange that ease does not come easily to us. Second thoughts molest us before we have come to know the first. But then, why not simply plug up our ears and get on with it? Are we too hidebound? No doubt we are. We know well how to vex each other with textual and historical riddles, but we are at a loss at how to go about hearing the words someone has uttered. The new, we fear, might ask too much of us, so we stick with old tricks.

But this timidity is not only a flaw. It masks another, more significant reason for why skeptical questions hold our attention. If ease were a state that we once possessed, a state we had lost to the agitation that roils our lives, then shutting out questions would be a technique worth trying; it might smooth the waves and return us to stillness. Yet nothing we know from experience or history lends weight to this supposition. There does not seem to be a primitive condition in our childhood, nor in the 'childhood of humanity,' in which human beings enjoy a calm that is then disturbed by psychic and social traffic. Even infants are plagued by disquiet. (They aim to sooth it by dreaming up games such as *fort-da*.) Tranquility, it seems, is something to be attained, not something to be retrieved, since the most strident voices reverberate in our heads. Plugging our ears does not silence them, far from it; it permits them to echo more violently. The lament about first and second thoughts may have it backwards: what are called second thoughts in fact beset us first. We start with a head full of noise, and we manage to get some peace when the quarrelsome voices have lost their edge. It is only then that they teach us something worth knowing.

In attempting to hear Schlegel's fragment or any poetic configuration, we cannot, then, simply shrug off challenges issued by philology, by history, or by critique, hoping to return to a state of mind unmolested by questions, for we never knew such a state. Instead, the way of making we seek is also a way of relating to knowledge – knowledge derived from philology, history, critique and other sources – that, rather than unspooling more and more questions, allows us to find words adequate to our experience. We seek a form of knowledge that allows it to lend shape to this experience.

Self-reference vs. Intensity

How do I know that I am to read the fragment poetically? Who tells me that I must lean in to hear it, that I must know it from inside? The answer is trivial: the text itself does – who else? If we now ask *how* the text tells me, we think we know where to look. When the fragment says that to hear and understand poetry one must hear it and speak about it poetically, there is just a small step to conclude that it speaks not only about poetry as such and in the abstract, but also about itself, about this very line by Friedrich Schlegel. Now we know what to imagine: the fragment's meaning forks in two, one prong raising itself above the other and from that perch speaking about the one below. The image comes easily. For some time, scholars of literature, like interpreters of other arts, have turned our gaze from the world that the artwork evidently shows to the way the artwork reflects on itself: the novel turns out to be about writing, the movie about film making, the painting about painting. When it comes to our fragment, we are all the happier to hold fast to this image because the writings of Friedrich Schlegel, and early Romanticism generally, often use the figure of doubling through self-reflection to describe poetic production, something that readers such as Walter Benjamin have noted.

So at home are we with this figure of self-reflection that it takes time to notice that the fragment does not tell me to read it poetically by splitting itself into fragment and meta-fragment (or fragment to the power of two, as some of the Romantics like to put it). It does not announce itself *as* poetry in the same way that it speaks *about* poetry. We know what goes on when the text speaks about poetry: it deploys concepts and puts them in relation to one another to yield a proposition. It makes an assertion, such as: poetry can only be criticized by poetry. The meaning of the line may be mysterious, but there is no mystery to the fact that it is a proposition about some matter.

What about the other case, when I take the words not to be issuing a statement or a directive about ways of criticizing poetry, but a demand to hear the very words of the fragment as poetry, a demand therefore to hear them poetically? Though spelled in the same letters and composed of the same words, now they do not seem to speak in the same manner as before, and thus solicit a different way of hearing. Like every poetic act, no matter its form or the medium in which it shows itself, the fragment guides me to read it poetically not by splitting itself in two to supply meta-information about itself. It holds up no sign alerting readers that they are entering a poetic zone. There is no *about*, no cleavage between words communicating ideas and words instructing readers that they are to take this communication poetically. In a poetic act, the words bring forth the things by chafing at conventional systems of meaning. They arrive with a tension that shakes off their ordinariness and charges them with an unforeseen intensity. Like an electric surge, this intensity leaps from the words to the things they name and lights them up. The tension is not always easy to notice. Some texts – our fragment is an example – keep their readers so busy with the mys-

teries of the propositions they contain that their poetic intensity takes time to unfold. Their prose works like bait that distracts from their poetry, where poetry and prose do not name genres but degrees of vibrancy: what is conventionally labeled prose at times pulsates with a poetry lacking in much of what is called lyric poetry – open any page by Kleist or Conrad, Nietzsche or Emerson.

The Intense Life of Language

The philosopher Gaston Bachelard may be thinking along these lines when he writes that "poetry puts language in a state of emergence." How to picture this state of emergence? Here is how Bachelard develops the thought:

> The poetic image is an emergence from language, it is always a little above the language of signification. By living the poems we read, we have then the salutary experience of emerging. This, no doubt, is emerging at short range. But these acts of emergence are repeated; poetry puts language in a state of emergence, in which life becomes manifest through its vivacity. (Bachelard 2014 [1957], 11)

The passage begins where we too find ourselves, namely with the mystery at the heart of the poetic image: poetry partakes of language, and yet stands apart from it. To grasp this excess of poetic language over the ordinary language of naming, Bachelard, like so many other thinkers, reaches for a spatial image in which poetry "is always a little *above* the language of signification." Now he has us thinking that language has separated itself into layers, the poetic layer floating atop the signifying layer like oil over water. But then he catches himself, drops the spatial image, and switches to a temporal logic: he asks us to *live* the poems we read, and thus to live the emergence from language. Poetry now does not hover over ordinary language, regarding it from above, but names the metamorphosis of the ordinary. If reading a poem is living a poem, then the poetic emergence from language is not a release from language; it offers no escape into ineffability or wordless ecstasy. This emergence from language, this intensity that shakes language loose from its encrustations, occurs in language. Poetic acts, we now see, rather than splitting language in two, effect a transformation within language – a transformation *of* language *by* language. Which just means that poetry is not something that enters language from outside (thanks to a muse or to genius, for example), nor is it a specially marked region of language, "parasitic" on its "normal" uses, as philosophers of language and linguists often assert.[3] It is, rather, one of the basic things you do with words. It reveals itself as a force that language holds in reserve, allowing it – *com-*

---

3 J.L. Austin, for example, writes apropos of poetry: "There are parasitic uses of language, which are 'not serious,' not the 'full normal use.'" (Austin 1962, 104)

pelling it – to emerge from itself. Hearing the poetic edge in language is hearing language as though it had not been heard before.

We have become accustomed to finding the poetic in clearly marked regions (the book, the classroom, the museum, the theater, and so on), but we recognize that this emergence can come about anywhere. As Schlegel writes in another fragment, poetry "embraces everything that is purely poetic, from the greatest systems of art, containing within themselves still further systems, to the sigh, the kiss that the poetizing child breathes forth in artless song" (Schlegel 1991 [1798], 31). Even if there were a sign alerting me to the presence of poetry – the book cover, for example, might identify its content as "literature" – it can at best serve to sharpen my attention, the way a gallery encourages me to look, but it can never yield the exuberance of feeling "language in a state of emergence."

Has the mystery of poetic speech been lifted? If you are of a scholarly or scientific disposition, then hardly, for then you wish to know what, precisely, propels words beyond their practical utility into the orbit of poetry. What does that force consist of and how does it unfold? You would be in your rights to ask for a catalogue of features that characterize the state of emergence, the better to identify poetry. When Bachelard then offers the thought that "poetry puts language in a state of emergence, in which life becomes manifest through its vivacity," you cannot help but be disappointed. Do we know how life manifests itself in its vivacity any better than we know how language manifests itself in poetry? It seems that one mystery – that of poetry – has been replaced with another – life.

Yet we could also be led to a different insight. Instead of feeling let down by Bachelard's failure at providing an explanation, we might wonder what an explanation of the force of poetry might look like. Are we even in need of explanation? Is poetry? The texture of Bachelard's meditation – the fact that it *has* texture – reveals that I cannot learn to grasp the force of poetic words by launching a theoretical investigation. I come to see, rather, that the account I give of the way I read poetry – the account I give of living it: call it criticism – must itself occur in language that is in a state of emergence. Schlegel's fragment says nothing more than what Bachelard's words show. One way of criticizing poetry by poetry is to say that in the poetic image "life becomes manifest through its vivacity." A scholar or scientist might, in another bout of scruples, insist on a list of features that characterize life (metabolism, reproduction, etc.), which would then be used to judge every case that presents itself. Yet to say that life manifests itself through its vivacity simply means that life can only be known through life, as poetry can also be criticized by poetry. The poetic edge of the phrase lies in the audacity with which it turns on itself.

And there is another turn worth following. Life, we begin to see, is not merely a model for poetry. Poetry showing itself through the intensity of language is not *like* life showing itself through its vivacity. No, the very way life manifests itself through its vivacity comes about in the intensity of poetry. The quickening we feel in poetic intensity *is* a manifestation of life in its vivacity. "These linguistic impulses," Bachelard continues, "which stand out from the ordinary rank of pragmatic language, are

miniatures of the vital impulse" – this being the *élan vital* made famous by Henri Bergson, whose vitalism Bachelard sees everywhere in poetry. The *élan linguistique* is not a sign – a representation, a metaphor – of the *élan vital*, but one of its instances. If we learn to see "language-as-reality," rather than "language-as-instrument," then Bachelard promises that we "would find in poetry numerous documents on the intense life of language" (Bachelard 2014 [1957], 11). Here, then, is another non-definition of poetry: language lived intensely.

What and How

"Language-as-reality": what of this "as"? When we think of words announcing themselves "as poetry," we risk imagining the words appearing *as* something, as though they were engaged in impersonation. But words do not lead a quotidian existence that issues into poetry through an act of masquerade. The conjunction "as" yields another form of doubling, distinct from the self-reflection that Benjamin and others have noted in the Romantic conception of the work of art, yet as likely to lead us off track. It opens a distance between words and poetry just where we want to feel their intimacy. Bachelard, too, seems to be led by this intuition, which is why he speaks of *langage-réalité* and *langage-instrument*, leaving as little daylight between the terms as he can get away with. (The spacing insinuates itself in the English translation.)

If instead of asking how words appear "as poetry," we wonder how they come to speak poetically, then we nudge ourselves the right way. For now, we are more likely to see that poetry is not an object nor a phenomenon, not a being to which I can point. Its center of gravity lies not in a noun, but in an adjective or an adverb. It is not "poetry" we seek, then, but rather the manner – the style – in which a word, a gesture, or a motion comes to make itself felt poetically.

Agreed, but does that bear saying? Do I not already know that I must look to the *how* and not to the *what?* Of course I do, yet strangely this way of knowing seems to maintain its claim on me for only as long as my gaze is fixed on it, and no longer. The instant my mind wanders, the insight, which only moments before had the clarity and cogency of self-evidence, slips into obscurity, and as I lose my grip on it, I reach for the solidity of nouns to steady myself: I talk of "poetry," its features, its history, its influence, its effects, its essence. The habit is hard to break, but at least I come by it honestly, for I have learned it from philosophers and critics, Friedrich Schlegel among them. To be fair, many of them do mention the *how*, but usually the way one recommends a dish for its nutritional benefits. Their duty discharged, they proceed to feast on a rich spread of *whats:* on "poetry," "art," "literature," "the absolute," "the work of art," "the beautiful," "the sublime" – each concoction more elaborate than the next, each requiring years of exacting training to construct and assess.

As so often, the master showing the way is Plato, whose signature skill lies in turning adjectives into nouns. By asking what the beautiful dress, the beautiful

horse, and the beautiful face have in common, with each other and with all other beautiful things, he means to direct our attention from surfaces, which, by his lights, shimmer with illusion, to the essence of things, imagined as resting in a remote region, shielded from change. Plato has the integrity to admit failure – at the end of the *Greater Hippias*, the dialogue devoted to discovering what makes beautiful things beautiful, we find Socrates empty-handed – yet this failure turns out to bear more fruit than most successes do. Now there is something called "beauty" to be accounted for, unseen yet ubiquitous, manifest in countless shapes yet unchanging, an entity filled with metaphysical mysteries in need of examination and explanation, which a long roster of keen minds strive to supply: philosophers, theologians, poets, rhetoricians, historians, psychologists, anthropologists, sociologists, biologists, and many others. (The most recent to try their hand are neuroscientists, as devoted to the laws of beauty as any Platonist, except that they seek to find them etched not in immutable tablets handed down from the realm of ideas, but in the soft tissue of the brain.)

It is true that in Plato's writings "beauty" maintains no especially close link to "poetry" or to "art"; only centuries later will these concepts be woven into a network that in the Western tradition is called aesthetics. Yet when the network emerges, its nodes are understood by aesthetic theorists, even by those who decline to carry the full weight of Plato's philosophy, according to a Platonic model. The perplexity at the heart of poetic experience is made to disappear with an elegant act of metaphysical legerdemain: the poetic force of words is taken to be caused by their "poetry," the *how* by a *what*. (Nietzsche debunks the process by doing what good debunkers do: he shuts out the magician's patter and keeps the eyes fixed on his hands. An expert demonstration of this technique can be observed in the first few pages of his essay "On Truth and Lying in an Extra-Moral Sense.")

The Knot of Experience

The question that led us here was how something – how a configuration of words, sounds, colors, shapes – can come to make itself felt poetically and in turn elicit a poetic reception: how poetry can be criticized by poetry, how it can be heard so that we may speak. We would be barking up the wrong tree (the tree of philosophy and of science) if we sought the answer to this *how* in a *what:* in a technique, a genre, a convention, an essence, an object belonging to the genus "art," or in other such conceptual determinations. The poetic is the *how*. It is how language-reality emerges from language-instrument.

We won't be able to undo the knot at the core of poetic experience, nor would we wish to, for then the experience itself would unravel. Yet we can follow the twists and turns that make up the knot, the better to see what kind of grip the experience has on us. The first twist of the thread seems to pull away from the objective world and into subjectivity. That is because of the sort of thing a poem – which just means: anything

poetic – is. And we know what sort of thing: it is a singular thing. One way the power of the poetic manifests itself, we said, lies in its being singular. But singular in what way? Is the poetic something utterly new, something never before seen or heard? Yes and no. An image, a phrase in a work of reflection (take Bachelard's), the pause an actor makes in delivering a line – when they arrive with poetic intensity, then I am led to think that they have not been invented or written or performed before. But their novelty is not exhausted by the fact that a new phenomenon has appeared on the horizon. A solar eclipse or a stock market crash too may be singular: it may be true that in our lifetimes there has not been an eclipse or a crash quite like *this* one. Yet the event has not thereby become a poetic singularity, and not because eclipses and crashes are not poetic or artistic, but because a poetic singularity cannot appear in a general guise. Acknowledging it is not a matter of scientific verification or collective consensus. This includes a scholar's assurance, backed by historical evidence and formal analysis, that some phenomenon – Schlegel's fragments, say, or Manet's *Olympia* – breaks new ground. The scholar's insight may even persuade me, but unless I make it my own, it is just something I read in a book. The poetic must not only have been *made* singularly, but also *experienced* as having been made singularly – here, now, by me.

What if I miss the poetic force that others have felt in a work, because I am distracted or a dunce? That will be my loss. I may feel shame for having failed where others have succeeded, yet I would be mistaken to conclude that what continues to elude me is something hard and real whose presence could be demonstrated by objective means. The idea that aesthetic experience remains deaf to the force of concepts is not new; it lies at the heart of Kant's aesthetic theory. "If someone reads me his poem or takes me to a play that in the end fails to please my taste," Kant writes, I am moved neither by famous critics trying to sway me nor by rules that supposedly govern a successful work. Quite the contrary:

> I will stop my ears, listen to no reasons and arguments, and would rather believe that those rules of the critics are false or at least that this is not a case for their application than allow that my judgment should be determined by means of *a priori* grounds of proof. (Kant 2000 [1790], 284 – 85)

Coming upon this one image – Immanuel Kant himself plugging up his ears against arguments, an obstinate child shutting out the voice of reason – is fair recompense for the hours spent navigating the long, cheerless corridors of the *Critique of Judgment*.[4] But its drollness should not mislead us about how far-reaching the idea is for the enterprise of criticism. Criticism that operates with "reasons and arguments," Kant is saying, has no authority over aesthetic experience – none. The reasons may

---

4 I exaggerate. One of the wonders of reading Kant is that these corridors can suddenly become the sites of intense joy and illumination. My *Thinking with Kant's Critique of Judgment* (2017) seeks out such moments.

be airtight or specious and the arguments well supported by evidence or not: it makes no difference. By the same token, a piece of scholarship that places a work in a conceptual frame – a historical trajectory, a genre, a philosophical truth, a political program, a social tendency, a technique – can be right only at the cost of crushing what is poetic in a poetic work. Which means that most of what passes for critical scholarship of poetic works (literary studies, art history, film studies, musicology, and so on), whatever else it does that might be of value, misses the poetic core of those works. The thought may seem insurrectionary to professional critics; everyone else knows that if I fail to pick up the poetic force of a work because I am inattentive or tone-deaf, then no amount of formal or historical analysis can make up for my failure, just as little as a meticulous study of the words someone has uttered is able to disclose their seductive or sarcastic overtones.

Following the thread leading into the knot seems to have landed us in the thick of subjectivity. Now it sounds as though the poetic is whatever I say it is. Is that what we are saying? Again, yes and no. We said that acknowledging the force of the poetic cannot happen in general, not in the "we" of science, scholarship, or common opinion. (Another question crowds in: Is the snake devouring its own tail here? The "we" of science and scholarship is being rebuffed by none other than ... "we." Is this sentence not suffering from an acute case of performative contradiction? It would be if all "we"s were created equal and if the "we" speaking here had effaced itself to channel the disembodied voice of science.) To acknowledge the poetic, a sharply contoured "I" is required. This "I" need not be confined to an individual: the audience in a theater, the crowd in a stadium, or, indeed, We the People of the United States, seeking to establish a more perfect Union, can become such an "I."

But the poetic has not thereby become arbitrary. I cannot, led by a flight of fancy, simply declare a thing poetic and be done with it. That is because the experience of poetic singularity – and here is another loop in the knot – is not mine alone, walled off from others by the boundaries of my person, by my particular tastes and distastes. In its very makeup and quite apart from my intentions and my place in the social order, it opens to others and calls on others. Society is woven into it. The experience is social, and essentially so, even if it takes place on a desert island or in the solitude of my skull, yet not social in the sense that it must align itself with the acclaim of others. Its validation lies not in market value or in market share. Nor is it social because it typifies a social position. Poetic experience, even at its most intensely singular, exceeds myself not because sociology has revealed it to be shared with a group or to exhibit a well-defined marker of identity (my class, my nation, my sexuality, my geography, and the rest). It is true that my experience cannot help but emerge from the welter of ways of knowing, feeling, judging, making, acting, speaking, imagining, daydreaming, even hallucinating that have pressed on my life. And how could it? "There is no delirium," Gilles Deleuze has written, "that does not pass through peoples, races, and tribes, and that does not haunt universal history" (Deleuze 1998 [1993], 4). What goes for my feverish reveries also goes for my experience of the poetic. Yet to be haunted by history and to haunt it does not mean that my expe-

rience adds up to the sum total of historical forces and no more. It means, rather, that, having passed through them, it surpasses them. The experience registers the singularity of the poetic just when it lays bare not the commonalities of shared life but the impersonal in my person, the place where an opacity keeps me distant from my quotidian self.

We have been tracking the loops in the knot of poetic experience. Has it brought us anything but more entanglement? Recall how we came upon the knot. We said that encountering the poetic – "criticizing" it, as Schlegel likes to say, hearing it "that we may speak," in Emerson's words – has a shape that differs from my experience of ordinary objects. To hear and feel the poetic impulse – the *élan poétique* – means hearing and feeling things in a way that takes them beyond their ordinary ways of signifying and functioning. Familiar things – words, colors, materials, movements – now have an intensity that jolts them out of known circuits of meaning and into something unknown, something singularly new. That was our first description of the knot. In following the thread that leads into it, we were led from objectivity into subjectivity – from an account of the singularity that would characterize the poetic thing to the singularity with which I receive it. Then we saw how this subjectivity loops back out of the subject and opens to the public.

But we have not gone in one end of the knot only to emerge from the other into the same objective world. Rather, the way my experience of the poetic relates to the thing I encounter and to myself deforms the concepts of objectivity and subjectivity beyond recognition. We are better off without them, since they lend a false familiarity to what is unfamiliar. Kant's notion of "subjective universality" is an attempt at capturing this dimension of poetic experience with received philosophical terms. Its ungainliness acknowledges what Kant's analysis of aesthetic judgment in the *Critique of Judgment* reveals, namely that in these judgments both subjectivity and universality are profoundly altered by the experience. Is a subjectivity "not grounded in any inclination of the subject (nor in any other underlying interest)" (Kant 2000 [1790], 211) still worthy of its name? And what about a universality so toothless that it can only issue demands for assent without means of enforcing it? Kant has zeroed in on a region of experience, flagrant in the encounter with an aesthetic object, where the subject, by reaching a point that exceeds subjectivity, achieves a negative universality. It is the same point Emerson has in view when he says of the poet that "the deeper he dives into his privatest, secretest presentiment, to his wonder he finds this is the most acceptable, most public and universally true" (Emerson 2001 [1837], 64). The knot, then, does not lead us out of the dimness of subjectivity back into the daylight of the objective world, but urges us further into knottiness, a place where I no longer feel my known self, but, to my wonder, find something public and universally true.

Making Freedom

The poetry that Schlegel has in mind, the poetry to be criticized and the poetry criticizing, is not exhausted by markers of genre or convention, we have said, not confined to lyrical or elevated language. It is a more general phenomenon. In one of his lectures, Schlegel describes it as a kind of thinking. "There is [...] a kind of thinking that produces something," he notes. He calls this productive thinking "the making of poetry [*das Dichten*]," which "creates its material itself" (Schlegel 1964 [1804 – 1805], 371). Understood this way, the key characteristic of poetry is not beauty, not truth, not pleasure, nor is it its ability to engage moral or political quandaries, but a creativity in thinking. Creativity must then also be the mark of any form of criticizing that wishes to maintain its citizenship in the realm of art.

But why prize creativity? Why pursue it? What does creativity create? Suppose you heed Schlegel's word and find ways of responding to poetry poetically: what does this response convey? When you learn to hear that you may speak, what do you say? Well, many things. The themes, methods, and goals of criticism practiced in Schlegel's or Emerson's vein are endlessly varied, as are its forms. Your speech may be verbose or terse, highflying or modest. Or it may cease. What you hear may so dumbfound you, that you fall into a stutter or muteness. Yet, however varied content and form may be, your speech – your silence included – is a poetic act. That may not sound like much, but if you manage to perform such an act, then – besides whatever the "content" or the "message" of your act may be – you have enlarged the space of what you allow yourself to say or to do. By venturing something new, you surprise yourself. You do something that you did not know you knew how to do. This bit of extra elbowroom gives you space for new ways of acting (towards others, towards things, and also towards yourself), ways you could not have foreseen.

Now the world has become wider and deeper. This enlargement does not merely augment the known world, but changes its very make-up. For you have done more than to add this one new possibility of speaking and acting stimulated by a solicitation; what has also been introduced is the very possibility of proliferating the possibilities that the world affords. True, the quantum of new wiggle room may be minute and in itself hardly momentous; in the grand scheme of things, how significant could the words be that you utter in response to the fragment? Yet your actions betoken a profound freedom. For with even the humblest poetic act you alter the very texture of the world: it is no longer simply there as the sum total of what presses on you and what must be administered. No longer are you limited to responding to demands issuing from the environment, the way animals do, or the way we imagine animals do. The world turns out not to be exhausted by what is given, but is now immeasurably enlarged to include what it *could* become, and become through your doing. It is true that a poetic act – hence poetic criticism – cannot become a practice; it will never entirely be governed by a theory or shoehorned into a method. There is something in this way of doing that surpasses the capacities and competences of a subject.

Still, poetic making is not counterfeit making, as Western philosophy keeps charging.[5] Its way of making is as real as any action. In poetic acts, the world, and not its semblance, is transformed. In this way, it reveals itself as something you can form. (Or, if you are a Heideggerian, you might just say: it reveals itself.) Even if you manage to vary its shape by only a small degree, bending a corner here and flexing an edge there, you face a world whose physiognomy has softened: what was once an unyielding arrangement of circumstances beyond your reach, you now find to be pliable – something given, yes, but given to be made.

What is more, the freedom to make something of this world – the freedom to say and do what you did not know could be said and done, which is the freedom to make poetically – this freedom has not been ceded to you by some agency, nor does it rest in you as a silent reserve (a "natural endowment") into which you may tap, nor has it fallen to you by chance. Rather, the freedom to speak and act poetically comes about in the very saying and doing. In shaping the world in some way – putting together words or sounds or gestures "in which life becomes manifest through its vivacity" – you make not only some object but also the very freedom needed to make that object. You may not be able to recount the steps exactly, but there is no doubt that it was you who shaped the added elbowroom. This elbowroom was not there all along, a pocket of vacant space of defined dimensions waiting to be occupied, but itself has come into being thanks to an act of poetic making. When you speak poetically in the face of poetry, the freedom you feel in your bones is not the freedom of speech that a sovereign has bestowed on you; if challenged, it would not help holding up a license you have been issued. Speaking poetically brings forth the freedom that entitles this speech. When you surprise yourself, you do so not just with what you say (its propositional content), but with the fact of speaking: before doing it, you didn't know it was permitted or possible.

And that is not all. It can happen that when you manage to hear and to speak – *if* you manage – others hear your words, and hear them that *they* may speak. So you surprise not just yourself, but others too, me perhaps, spurring me to make my own elbowroom, by my own lights and in my own way. My move might in turn rouse others, you for example, to attempt their own moves, and before long the freedom to make the world has spread like a contagion of fresh possibilities.

What communicates itself from utterance to utterance is not a message nor an idea, but a way of relating to the world and to myself, and it is this that provides the sharpest thrill. For only in the actions of others does it begin to dawn on me that I myself have acted, and not because they "reflect back" to me what I have done; if I found in others merely what I knew from myself, I would feel flattered, no more. But what I find is that they have taken my act – my words – in their

---

5 Even Theodor Adorno, as constant an advocate of the aesthetic sphere as one is likely to find among philosophers, considers their "semblance character" to be an essential feature of works of art (Adorno 1997 [1970], 103).

own way rather than in mine, just as I used Schlegel's words for my own purposes rather than his. And if they hear in my words a voice that was alien to myself, then it is in these departures from my own ways that I may see how, when I acted, I too departed from my habitual ways and ventured – or just stumbled – into a new situation. It is in acknowledging what is alien to me in what others have done that I am apt to gain an intimacy with the stranger that I am to myself.

Responding to poetry with poetry; hearing that we may speak; feeling the vivacity of language – these gnomic formulas reveal themselves as ways of reaching for the same idea, embarrassing almost in its plainness: they urge me to say something new, something that might startle me with its newness. And, again, this urgency lies not mainly in the message they carry, in a request or exhortation, but in a language charged with enough intensity that it throws off sparks, which, with luck, kindle poetic acts in those gathered around them. We might put it this way: poetic acts do not just bring forth products, which by convention we call works of art (though who can say where the edges of this group of things run?); they are rather acts that, in bringing forth products, bring forth other poetic acts. And poetic criticism is not a mode of speaking and writing that makes assertions about objects; rather it is a mode of speaking and writing that, in making assertions, engenders more criticism. You know the feeling: you read an essay or just a fragment, and you feel encouraged – no, urged – to sit and write. You write not to play up or play down what you have read, nor to amplify or object, but because something you read – the twist in an idea or an adjective that had no business being there – woke something up in you.

"Books are the best of things, well used; abused, among the worst," Emerson writes in the essay we have been going back to. "What is the right use?" he asks, and provides his own answer: "They are for nothing but to inspire." And just as we are getting comfortable with the thought, reaching for the pencil to mark it, he adds: "I had better never see a book, than to be warped by its attraction clean out of my own orbit, and made a satellite instead of a system" (Emerson 2001 [1837], 59). The pencil hesitates. Are we ready to undersign this last thought? Have we not said that we go to books to lose our way and not to keep to the path? When reading a book, do we know when we are satellite and when system? Do we when *not* reading a book? But now we see that we have let Emerson's line warp us clean of our orbit and put us on a satellite's course, even though he has just told us its right use. We read to be inspired. If that is too mawkish, then we can say instead: we hear so that we may speak. And if that sounds too oracular, then we can say: we read – we look, we listen, we feel – to learn to do things we did not know we could or would or should do. Or just: to act with more freedom.

Bibliography

Adorno, Theodor. *Aesthetic Theory*. Trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor. London: Continuum, 1997 [1970].

Austin, J.L. *How to Do Things with Words*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962.

Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space*. Trans. Maria Jolas. New York: Penguin, 2014 [1957].

Chaouli, Michel. *Thinking with Kant's Critique of Judgment*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017.

Chaouli, Michel. "'We Hear That We May Speak': Overtures for Doing Criticism." *Arcadia: International Journal of Literary Culture*, forthcoming.

Deleuze, Gilles. "Literature and Life." *Essays Critical and Clinical*. Trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco. London: Verso, 1998 [1993].

Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "The American Scholar." *Emerson's Prose and Poetry*. Eds. Joel Porte and Saundra Morris. New York: Norton, 2001 [1837].

Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000 [1790]. [The pagination used is that of the *Akademie* edition, supplied in the margin of this edition.]

Schlegel, Friedrich. *Die Entwicklung der Philosophie in zwölf Büchern* [1804–1805]. *Kritische Friedrich Schlegel Ausgabe* [=KFSA]. Vol. XII. Ed. Jean-Jacques Anstett. Paderborn: Schöningh, 1964.

Schlegel, Friedrich. "Kritische Fragmente" [1797]. *KFSA*. Vol. II. Ed. Hans Eichner. Paderborn: Schöningh, 1967. 147–163.

Schlegel, Friedrich. "Critical Fragments" [1797]. *Philosophical Fragments*. Trans. Peter Firchow. Foreword Rodolph Gasché. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991. 1–16.

Schlegel, Friedrich. "Athenaeum Fragments" [1798]. *Philosophical Fragments*. Trans. Peter Firchow. Foreword Rodolph Gasché. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991. 18–93.

Amit Chaudhuri
Storytelling and Forgetfulness

Years ago, I began to run into the claim that we are all storytellers.[1] Storytelling was evidently a primal communal function for humanity. I was assured that we have been telling each other stories since the beginning of time. I felt a churlish resistance to these proclamations, possibly because one might decide that being human does not mean one should subscribe, without discomfiture, to everything the human race is collectively doing at any given point. Storytelling should not be guaranteed an aura simply because humans have been at it from the beginning of history. Of course, part of my unease emanated from the fact that the 'beginning of history' is even more of a wishful invention than the 'end of history' is. It occurs to me that we probably began to hear 'we are all storytellers,' as an utterance, from the late 1980s and early 90s onwards. From the moment one first heard this utterance, one was told it had been made from the beginning of time. As with various things that happened in the age of globalization, radical shifts in our understanding (of value, for instance) quickly acquired an immemorial air. So, for example, it became increasingly difficult to conceive of a period in history that valued things differently from the way the free market does. Middle-class ideology may have concerned itself with appropriating the universal; the 'now' of the free market appears to have been more preoccupied with recruiting eternity. As a result, the popular-culture term 'all time' gained a new meaning with globalization; like the assertion 'We have always been storytellers,' 'all-time' lists and 'all-time greats' often go back over periods, and are applied to categories (like rock guitarists), that are actually thirty years old.

The disciplinary shifts in the humanities privileging 'storytelling' are too numerous to go into here: I will only give one example. A historian recently told me that she asks her students to liberate themselves from the constraints of their pedagogy by thinking of the novel and behaving like 'storytellers.' As I said to her, this interpretation of the novel of course inadvertently makes imaginative writing, especially fiction, synonymous with storytelling: it is as if looking outside the bounds of scholarly work towards fiction or imaginative prose as a model for loosening constraints must privilege narrative, rather than other aspects of fiction, as being constitutive of the liberations of imaginative writing.

A surfeit of 'We are all storytellers' made me realize that this was not really a primary utterance at all. The primary utterance, if there must be one, is praise or acknowledgement of what makes stories and other things possible: existence; life. By 'life' I mean not what narrative is 'about,' but what lies on narrative's periphery. What the earliest texts seem to do is to attempt to find a language with which to

---

1 This article was first published in the *Los Angeles Review of Books* (September 20, 2019). See here for the online version: https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/storytelling-and-forgetfulness/.

both come to terms with and acknowledge – even celebrate – the contingency of the fact of existence. The story, with the human or anthropomorphized animal at the center, emerges in the aftermath of existence, but, paradoxically, has an air of being recounted and a priori, of already having happened. Existence is neither a priori nor originary; it is a moment of possibility.

In the spirit of investigating whether we were always storytellers, I went back to a canonical text. It is from the first millennium BC: the *Kena Upanishad*. It felt important to go back to it because storytelling has been almost dutifully conflated with non-Western cultures, which themselves are often conflated with orality. Writing and inscription are, on the other hand, an Enlightenment project. Outside the West, in the lap of orality, our mothers and grandmothers have been telling us stories from when we were in the womb. Story, for us, has been an autochthonic method of nutrition. While not denying any of this, it was important to check out a primary text from an incorrigibly storytelling culture. '*Kena*' in the *Kena Upanishad* means 'why,' connected to the whys and wherefores of the universe. This poetic statement is from the brief opening section of this *Upanishad* (note that Brahman is not to be confused with Brahma, Brahmin, or other similar-sounding words):

> Who sends the mind to wander afar? Who first drives life to start on its journey? Who impels us to utter these words? Who is the spirit ['spirit,' as the Sanskritist Heeraman Tiwari pointed out to me, is a Judeo-Christian translation of what he calls, in his translation, an all-pervasive 'element'] behind the eye and the ear? [...] What cannot be spoken with words, but that whereby words are spoken, know that alone to be Brahman.

> What cannot be thought with the mind, but that whereby the mind can think, know that alone to be Brahman the spirit and not what people here adore. What cannot be seen with the eye, but that whereby the eye can see – know that alone to be Brahman. What cannot be heard with the ear, but that whereby the ear can hear; what cannot be withdrawn with breath, but that whereby breath is withdrawn, know that alone to be Brahman. (*The Upanishads* 1965, 51)

This comes across not so much as a narrative of creation as an instance of self-reflexivity that is at once curiously tortured and liberating. Its meaning cannot be paraphrased, but it *can* be rephrased as a series of questions and replies. 'What cannot be thought with the mind? Whatever it is that makes the mind think.' 'What cannot be seen with the eye? Whatever it is that makes the eye see.' It is an account that abjures progression on behalf of the self-reflexive, of the assertion that turns upon itself.

Here is an excerpt from the third section:

> The Brahman once won a victory for the Devas. Through that victory of the Brahman, the Devas became elated. They thought, "This victory is ours. This glory is ours." The Brahman perceived this and appeared before them. They did not know what mysterious form it was.

> They said to Fire: "O Jataveda (All-knowing)! Find out what mysterious spirit this is." He said: "Yes."

He ran towards it and He (Brahman) said to him: "Who art thou?" "I am Agni, I am Jataveda," he (the Fire-god) replied.

Brahman asked: "What power resides in thee?" Agni replied: "I can burn up all whatsoever exists on earth."

Brahman placed a straw before him and said: "Burn this." He (Agni) rushed towards it with all speed, but was not able to burn it. So he returned from there and said (to the Devas): "I was not able to find out what this great mystery is."

Then they said to Vayu (the Air-god): "Vayu! Find out what mystery this is." He said: "Yes."

He ran towards it and He (Brahman) said to him: "Who art thou?" "I am Vayu, I am Matarisva (traveller of Heaven)," he (Vayu) said.

Then the Brahman said: "What power is in thee?" Vayu replied: "I can blow away all whatsoever exists on earth"

Brahman placed a straw before him and said: "Blow this away." He (Vayu) rushed towards it with all speed, but was not able to blow it away. So he returned from there and said (to the Devas): "I was not able to find out what this great mystery is." (52–53)

Although similar in shape and tone to Judeo-Christian parables about miraculous strength, like the one about Samson bringing down the columns, this is really a parable about delicacy. After all, what is at issue here is not moving mountains, but a straw. You do not need strength to move a straw: what is it that you need, then? Delicacy is non-narrative; as with writing a poem, you cannot coerce its workings. Narrative and story by themselves are neither the same thing as, nor a guarantee of, movement; this is what writers, like the mystified Devas, need to learn quickly. Otherwise the straw stays inert.

I never liked reading novels. My growing up was spent consuming comic books and poems. I was eventually drawn to novels through exceptional paragraphs cited in essays: by my late teens, I was probably more likely to read a piece of criticism about a work rather than the work itself. One such paragraph occurs in *A House for Mr. Biswas* by V.S. Naipaul, where Biswas in his early life takes a new job as a sign painter after having been a bus conductor; I encountered it in my early twenties in a critical piece about the book in an anthology on 'commonwealth literature'. Biswas must reproduce the edict, "IDLERS KEEP OUT BY ORDER."

[H]is hand became surer, his strokes bolder, his feeling for letters finer. He thought R and S the most beautiful of Roman letters; no letter could express so many moods as R, without losing its beauty; and what could compare with the swing and rhythm of S? With a brush, large letters were easier than small [...]. (Naipaul 1969, 76)

I was transfixed by this paragraph, and felt it was a shame that I had have to read the novel. I was content, instead, to reread the paragraph endlessly. This is because the paragraph presented me with a possibility. The possibility was the novel. The novel I was presented with was not the telling, the recounting, that I would purportedly have

to read. That act of reading the narrative, the recounting, would, in a sense, diminish the possibility generated by this encounter with the paragraph. Where, then, are we likely to find this moment of possibility in a piece of writing; in, say (since we are talking about storytelling), a work of narrative fiction? To me it seems it resides in the sort of standalone paragraph such as the one I have quoted, which belongs to a story but is also independent of it, in that it seems equally located in an irreducible life and textuality outside that novel as it is in the life narrated and contained within it.

The moment of possibility resides especially in the opening paragraphs of a work of fiction, or any paragraph that has the irresolution, the air of open-endedness and lifelikeness, the lack of recountedness, that opening paragraphs have. The paragraphs in the first page of a novel (sometimes in the second and third pages too) have not been bound yet by the telling, but are opening out on to something. My ambition, always, was to write novels composed entirely of opening paragraphs and then to put them in some kind of order. The order would be a sequence that was partly illusory. Of course, we are experts at creating an illusion of continuity, both as readers and writers, and I believe that if you give somebody a text without any narrative, they will impose continuity on it. My subterranean aim – so subterranean that it is taken me two decades to see what I was up to – was to create an assemblage of opening paragraphs, to expand as much as possible, without introducing a sense of development, the vivid lack of resolution of the first three or four pages.

What kind of text is produced by an artist who does not want the moment of possibility to be closed down by the compulsion or the need to tell? Once you commit to telling, the moment in the opening paragraph is over. We know for a fact that many writers have wonderful opening pages whose magic is sacrificed to higher causes, such as observances to do with the syntax of realism, and the responsibility of portraying the arc of the existence of certain human beings or 'characters': the novelist "must / Become the whole of boredom itself," says W.H. Auden, who was in awe of, and slightly bewildered by, this voluntary taking on of the depiction of social milieu almost as a form of social responsibility (Auden 1962). This loss of the abandon of the opening pages is characteristic of the human compromise, the deep maturity, that the novel represents, when the writer knowingly assents to being shackled by the need for narrative and telling. Naipaul himself is a fundamental example of a writer who sometimes begins with astonishing passages of lifelikeness, but then not so much loses the plot, or loses himself to a plot, but takes on upon himself fetters that are clearly unwanted. Joan Didion recognizes this and expands on the peculiar sensory excitement of the first three pages of Naipaul's *Guerrillas*, which she confesses to compulsively rereading, almost as if the rest of the novel did not really matter (Als 2006). In the novella *In A Free State*, Naipaul translates, with extraordinary vitality in the opening section, an intuition of possibility into a story about a European man and woman who must journey urgently and impulsively out of an African country in the time of a coup (Naipaul 1971). Then, like his two characters, he seems not to know what to do except see the journey through. As the syntax of narrative takes

over, not only does the representation of the journey feel increasingly entrapping, but – as is often the case with Naipaul when he feels unhappy – by most standards morally and politically peculiar, turgid, and alienating.

Something similar happens in his travelogue *An Area of Darkness* (Naipaul 1964). Towards the beginning, a period of waiting is described: the ship, on its way to India, has stopped at the port in Alexandria. Nothing happens; horse-drawn cabs are awaiting fares. Few arrive, and melancholy settles in. This melancholy is a form of excitement, just as the waiting-for-something-to-happen is a kind of energy unmatched by the events later narrated in the book, the actual encounter with India, which is the book's legitimate subject. For Naipaul, as possibility recedes (and possibility, for him, as the chapter on Alexandria shows, has little do with optimism), questionable moral judgement begins to dominate: this is *his* response to the cost of succumbing to narrative propriety – not so much 'becoming the whole of boredom itself,' but an alienated chafing.

A House for Biswas opens with a short prologue, where everything is indeterminate and proleptic. It begins, "Ten weeks before he died, Mr Mohun Biswas, a journalist of Sikkim Street, St James, Port of Spain, was sacked," and then goes on to dwell, for five pages, on Biswas's house, a house that is "flawed" and "irretrievably mortgaged": "during these months of illness and despair he was struck again and again by the wonder of being in his own house, the audacity of it" (Naipaul 1969, 7). We are suspended here, in the prologue, with Mr Biswas, between arrival and departure. Naipaul manages to stay throughout with this sense of the possible, and he does this by constantly returning to Biswas's disbelieving conviction, even at the end of the novel, that the house on Sikkim Street is a house he has just begun to live in: "In the extra space Mr Biswas planted a laburnum tree" (583). In my edition, 583 of 590 pages have gone by when this sentence appears; and yet, despite all that has ensued and is now finished, we are still absorbing the prologue's "wonder" and "audacity" (7) of arrival.

Arrival, like existence, and unlike story, lacks the air of the a priori and the narrated. In *The Enigma of Arrival*, the ship that paused at harbor in *An Area of Darkness* appears again, but this time in a de Chirico painting that gives both its title and its atmosphere of lapsed expectancy to the book. Midway through the novel, the narrator reflects that the painting is about a ship that sailed into a city, and a man who got off at the port and intended to go back, but forgot to: "The antique ship has gone. The traveler has lived out his life" (Naipaul 1987, 92). The inadvertent forgetting of the matter of going back, rather than the creation of a new existence, becomes this person's story, as it does the narrator's. Forgetting and possibility become, then, interchangeable; the life is never really recounted. It – the novel; the painting – does not contain the tale of an immigrant; it represents an attempt at immersion in a beginning, what Naipaul calls 'arrival,' involving an action endlessly postponed, which the narrator encapsulates with the words, "The traveler has lived out his life."

How do we construct a page composed of opening paragraphs? One is reminded, of course, of Walter Benjamin's ambition to write a book composed entirely of quotations. A quotation for him, as in his essays on Franz Kafka, is also a paragraph; for my younger self, for reasons I mentioned earlier, and maybe for my present self too, a paragraph is a quotation. A novel is an assemblage of paragraphs or quotations, which both belong to the narrative and outside it. A quotation in an imaginative work – say, an essay – causes unsettlement. It is there not as evidence, to legitimize a claim, as it might in a scholarly work, but to remind us that the narrator is distracted, that they have made an association, and have been momentarily led from the text to another text outside it. The quote is not wholly present in the narrative; it is partly elsewhere. So the quote does not just further an argument; it leads to an opening up. The paragraph, as I understand it, must have the same sense of not being wholly present that the quotation, in Benjamin's sense, does. When Benjamin speaks of his ambition to write a book composed entirely of quotations, he is speaking of a method of building that brings together units that belong, but also do not wholly belong, to the argument or narrative. A quoted paragraph for him is a stand-alone paragraph, because it comprises a possibility that makes recounting – that is, the rest of the narrative – redundant. If the paragraph is at least doubly located in fiction, then one location lies in fiction's purported task, the recounting of a life; the other lies outside it, in acknowledging what is more powerful than 'story' – the present's contingency.

I have not forgotten that this piece has to do with 'forgetfulness and storytelling,' for which reason I wish to look at the opening section of Kafka's *Metamorphosis* in Michael Hofmann's translation:

> When Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from troubled dreams, he found himself changed into a monstrous cockroach in his bed. He lay on his tough, armoured back, and, raising his head a little, managed to see – sectioned off by little crescent-shaped ridges into segments – the expanse of his arched, brown belly, atop which the coverlet perched, forever on the point of slipping off entirely.
>
> "What's the matter with me?" he thought. It was no dream. There, quietly between the four familiar walls, was his room, a normal human room, if always a little on the small side. Over the table, on which an array of cloth samples was spread out – Samsa was a travelling salesman – hung the picture he had only recently clipped from a magazine, and set in an attractive gilt frame. It was a picture of a lady in a fur hat and stole, sitting bolt upright, holding in the direction of the onlooker a heavy muff into which she had thrust the whole of her forearm.
>
> From there, Gregor's gaze directed itself towards the window, and the drab weather outside – raindrops could be heard plinking against the tin window ledges – made him quite melancholy. "What if I went back to sleep for a while, and forgot about all this nonsense?" he thought, but that proved quite impossible, because he was accustomed to sleeping on his right side, and in his present state he was unable to find that position. [...]
>
> "Oh, my Lord!" he thought. "If only I didn't have to follow such an exhausting profession! On the road, day in, day out. The work is so much more strenuous than it would be in the head office,

and then there's the additional ordeal of travelling, worries about train connections, the irregular, bad meals, new people all the time, no continuity, no affection. Devil take it!" He felt a light itch at the top of his belly [...].

He slid back to his previous position. "All this getting up early," he thought, "is bound to take its effect. There are some other travelling salesmen I could mention who live like harem women. [...] If I didn't have to exercise restraint for the sake of my parents, then I would have quit a long time ago; I would have gone up to the director and told him exactly what I thought of him. He would have fallen off his desk in surprise! That's a peculiar way he has of sitting anyway, up on his desk, and talking down to his staff from on high, making them step up to him very close because he's so hard of hearing [...]." (Kafka 2007, 75 – 76)

What is striking is how both Gregor and the narrator have forgotten what the central predicament and theme are, or are incapable of grasping their centrality. Gregor is more concerned with the difficulty of turning on his side in his present state, a difficulty that impedes his plan to sleep a bit longer; he is made melancholy by the sound of rain; he will soon become aware of the unfairness of train schedules; in the meantime, he is incensed by the memory of his boss's posture. Another writer, a lesser writer, would not have permitted this losing sight, so early on, of the immensity of what has happened. But the liberation of the opening pages of *Metamorphosis* comes from their inability to be absolutely present, their vacillation between being in the story of a man who has become a giant insect and their forgetting of this story and their leakage into something outside it: the matter of living, with its timetables and trains, which is supposed to feed its experiences into the story but also competes with and is unconscious of it.

There is another kind of forgetfulness here: that of objects, or what in literary works we call 'detail'. The picture of the woman "sitting bolt upright"; the gilt frame; the coverlet; the tin window ledges; the rain – these seem not to be fully conscious of being part, as background, of a story of a man who finds he is a giant insect. Their role is not even ironical, as, according to Auden, the role of the animals and humans in Breughel's painting of Icarus's fall into the ocean is: "how everything turns away / Quite leisurely from the disaster" (Auden 2007, 87). In *Metamorphosis*, detail is not so much indifferent to the disaster as it to being in a story about a disaster; its location is both in the story and independent of it. So a narrative with an easily paraphrasable centrality of focus becomes, instead, an example of multiple and dispersed openings out. Its details have their counterpart not in Breughel's *Icarus*, or in realist fiction, or in period or genre cinema, but in Abbas Kiarostami's movies, where non-professionals are often not playing characters but themselves, and are not fully mindful that they are in a larger story. They are in the film and outside it. The same can be said of animals, air, water, and trees in a Tarkovsky film, or in a film like *The New World* by Terence Malick: that all these are non-professional actors unaware of playing the role of the characters 'animal,' 'air,' 'water,' and 'trees' respectively, but are, inadvertently, themselves. They emanate, if you notice them, an innate forgetfulness of the story they are in, as do the paragraphs I have mentioned. In this regard, the details I am discussing are quite unlike those in period or sci-fi films,

where objects, horses, elephants, and things exude, like the protagonist, an aware-
ness at every point of being either in history or in the future, two easily recognizable
categories that embody further modulations on the recounted air of storytelling.

Jean Paul Sartre was intrigued by the idea of the adventure. An adventure, of course,
is another name for story: for children, 'adventure story' is a tautology. Here is Sar-
tre's narrator in *Nausea:*

> [F]or the most banal event to become an adventure you must (and this is enough) begin to re-
> count it. This is what fools people: a man is always a teller of tales, [...] he sees everything that
> happens to him through them; and he tries to live his own life as if you were telling a story. But
> you have to choose: live or tell. (Sartre 1964, 56)

In other words, we do not, cannot, know we are in an adventure or in a story. The
same can be said of history: no one is really aware of living in a historical epoch.
Conversations with people who have participated in historic situations, whether it
is a performance by John Coltrane or the partition of a country, confirm this unknow-
ingness: all they recall is what it was like to be present at that time. But forgetfulness
is absent from historical novels or films, as it is in films about the future; both the
past and future are assembled by bringing together markers of history – turbans,
togas, or forelocks – or the future: spaceships and space. Even space lacks forgetful-
ness in films like *2001: A Space Odyssey*, whose story is already, a priori, being nar-
rated as the 'future.' Space, in Stanley Kubrick's film, becomes a metaphor for the
'homogenous empty time' of history that Benjamin says makes the idea of man's
progress possible: the historicism that imbues our notions of the futuristic and his-
torical is enacted succinctly in the film's opening: an ape from a prehistoric epoch
flings a bone into the air which, ascending in 'homogenous empty time,' becomes
a spaceship.

Yet, both Kubrick in *Barry Lyndon*, and certainly Tarkovsky in historical films like
Andrey Rublov, or in his science fiction-based cinema, *Stalker* and *Solaris*, reject the
notion of the 'adventure.' The 'background' in these movies adheres, on one level, to
what Sartre calls "the most banal event"; for instance, one of the first signals we re-
ceive in *Solaris* of dissonance does not have to do with science fiction appurtenances,
but a horse wandering outside a block of sixties' houses; the second signal, which
also comes early, occurs when a tunnel a man is driving through takes inordinately
long to end: the tunnel, a very recognizable urban feature (this bit, set in Russia, was
apparently shot in Japan, testimony to a certain kind of mid-century urbanization
available in various cultures), seems to loop in upon itself without in any other
way being remarkable. The horses, spaceships, horsemen, and stretches of grass
or space in Tarkovsky's films, and in *Barry Lyndon*, possess not identifiable charac-
teristics that mark them out as futuristic or historical, but a disorganized banality, a
forgetfulness of the role they're playing in the setting. As a result, both the past and

the future are, in these movies, undifferentiated from the non-homogenous present in which we live.

What is the relation between living and telling on the one hand, and between living and writing on the other? The prevalent model for life's relationship to telling is that we live, gather material, and then pour or transform that material experience of living into something that comes out of it: the story we consequently tell.

In my understanding, however, the moment of writing converges with living randomly. There is no decision about transforming into a story material that has been previously experienced or collected; instead, one arrives at a juncture at which there is an unexpected sense of possibility for the writer: I include all of us when I use that word. This sense of possibility comprises what I am calling 'writing,' which need not involve putting pen to paper or sitting down to write an inaugural sentence – as the act is portrayed in Hollywood films, where the 'writer' might be a fictional character or Hemingway or Fitzgerald, poised significantly at the typewriter to start a novel. The physical act of writing, or making that break from life when one sits down to commit oneself to embarking on a work is a reification, a reduction of the actual intimation of a beginning, a possibility that writing actually continually constitutes.

Let me give you an example of what I mean. You are looking at the cover of a book and want to own it, to buy it. You study the cover, transfixed by it, and then you do not read the book. You are transfixed not only because you want to read what is contained within, but because you have begun in a sense to compose or write what is within. The story that is given to you by the book has become secondary to the story you have begun to write. This is the moment of writing. But you have not written anything; you are arrested by what you see on the cover. You buy the book; in fact, you buy many such books, transfixed by them for one reason or another – it could be the jacket or title; it could be your reading, in the bookshop, of the first page – and then you put them on the shelf, as a covert gesture towards the perpetual imminence, the possibility, of writing. Your sense of ownership has to do with owning the story, but the story is not to be reduced by recounting, by telling: the story is always to be a possibility, which is why the books on our bookshelves that we do not read outnumber the books that we do. Our bookshelves are largely made up of books that we do not read. These are our ongoing moments of writing – a self-generated accumulation of writing as possibility.

Bibliography

Als, Hilton. "Joan Didion, The Art of Nonfiction No. 1." *The Paris Review* 176 (Spring 2006). https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/5601/the-art-of-nonfiction-no-1-joan-didion (14 July 2020).

Auden, W.H. "The Novelist." *The Mentor Book of Major American Poets*. Eds. Oscar Williams and
     Edwin Honig. New York: Signet, 1962. 514.
Auden, W.H. "Musée des Beaux Arts." *Selected Poems*. New York: Vintage, 2007.
Kafka, Franz. *Metamorphosis and other stories*. Trans. Michael Hofmann. London: Penguin, 2007.
Naipaul, V.S. *An Area of Darkness*. London: André Deutsch, 1964.
Naipaul, V.S. *A House for Mr Biswas*. London: Penguin, 1969.
Naipaul, V.S. *In A Free State*. London: André Deutsch, 1971.
Naipaul, V.S. *The Enigma of Arrival*. London: Penguin, 1987.
Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Nausea*. New York: New Directions Publishing, 1964.
The Upanishads. Trans. Juan Mascaró. London: Penguin, 1965.

Jeff Dolven
Poetry, Critique, Imitation

Here is an invitation; or, to put it a little more suspiciously, an interpellation:

> Come live with me and be my love,
> And we will all the pleasures prove,
> That valleys, groves, hills, and fields,
> Woods, or steepy mountains yields. (*England's Helicon* 1887, 229)[1]

The words of the passionate shepherd, as he has come to be known, were first print-ed in 1599 in a verse anthology attributed to William Shakespeare and titled *The Pas-sionate Pilgrim*. They had already been sung in a play, Shakespeare's *Merry Wives of Windsor*, two years before, which may have encouraged the *Pilgrim*'s editor in his fraud. (It was no honest mistake: the book is full of other poems Shakespeare didn't write, and would likely rather have died than write.) Much later, in 1653, Izaak Walton's meditative angler heard a milkmaid singing, and got the attribution right, recognizing "that smooth song which was made by Kit. Marlow, now at least fifty years ago" (Walton 2014, 58).[2] In between, the lines were transcribed into countless commonplace books by admiring readers; transcribed, and often al-tered, adapted, reimagined, under various names, or no name at all. In that first printing, and also in the second, the anthology *England's Helicon*, they are followed by a poem in response:

> If all the world and love were young,
> And truth in every Shepherd's tongue,
> These pretty pleasures might me move,
> To live with thee and be thy love. (*England's Helicon* 1887, 231)

In *Pilgrim*, there are only these four lines; in *Helicon*, where Marlowe's name first ap-pears, the printer includes what is now usually given as the full text of both poems, which acquire there the titles under which they have mostly traveled since, "The Pas-sionate Shepherd to His Love" and "The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd." Scholars attribute the second to Sir Walter Raleigh, ten years older than Marlowe, a courtier who had enjoyed, in the course of long service, both high favor and dangerous scorn from Queen Elizabeth. His poem is a counterargument; whether to call it a cri-tique is a question to which I will return. For the moment, I will observe that in mak-

---

1 I quote both poems from *England's Helicon*. For the texts in *The Passionate Pilgrim*, see Shake-speare 2002, 365–366.
2 Walton's transcription includes a sixth stanza added to the second edition which, as his editor Mar-jorie Swann relates, "otherwise survives only in the Thornborough Commonplace Book and a broad-side in the Roxburghe Collection" (Walton 2014, 249–250).

ing his answer, Raleigh follows his original closely: he adopts the form of Marlowe's tetrameter couplets, and he echoes the language, the constellations of words and also phrases, especially "live with me and be my love." His poem is an answer, and also an imitation.

In carrying over such phrases, Raleigh anticipates Schlegel's advice to the poetic critic in the review of *Wilhelm Meister* that has given the present discussion its basic terms:

> The poet and artist [...] will want to represent the representation anew, and form once more what has already been formed; he will add to the work, restore it, shape it afresh. He will only divide the whole into articulated parts and masses [*Glieder und Massen*], not break it down into its original constituents, which in respect of the work are dead things, because their elements are no longer of the same nature as the whole [...]. (Schlegel 2002d, 281; Schlegel 1967, 140)

As I understand Schlegel, a phrase like "poetic critique" can stand for any number of tense antitheses that animate his philosophy – I am not sure we should call them dialectical; probably better to say, as he would, ironic, meaning that each term stands off slightly from the other and sees it from a certain distance, even as they are compounded in a single concept. "Irony is the form of paradox," he claims in his *Critical Fragments*, and adds, with characteristic enthusiasm for the topic, "paradox is everything simultaneously good and great" (Schlegel 2002a, 241).[3] Another such tense pairing is that of part and whole. "In poetry too," he writes in his *Critical Fragments*, "every whole can be a part and every part really a whole" (239). Part and whole are perspectives, and to perceive both simultaneously is to attain to a "clear consciousness of eternal agility, of an infinitely teeming chaos" (Schlegel 2002c, 264). The ironic multiplication of perspectives is an opening onto the infinite. Such claims do not exactly amount to a method, but the *Meister* essay has a practical recommendation for splitting the difference. The poetic critic should divide the whole into "articulated parts and masses." Not, however, all the way down to its original, simplest constituents; into molecules, we might say, but not into atoms. What is at stake is the survival of the original in the text that critiques it. Cut a work into its simples, and you "destroy his living unity" (Schlegel 2002d, 281), which is exactly what the ordinary, scalpel-happy critic habitually does. The poetic critic, by contrast, will work with parts large enough, articulated enough – parts with parts – that the design of the original, the voice, the style, the genius, remains alive and active. In writing *about* the object of his criticism the poetic critic is willing to be *like* it, to admit its principles of organization, its mustering of parts, into his own making.

Perhaps such an account captures something of Walter Raleigh's relation to Christopher Marlowe. But I do not want to read Marlowe and Raleigh from the stand-

---

3 I refrain from calling Schlegel's antitheses dialectical because though the terms provide perspective on each other, and the result is an increasingly comprehensive understanding, that relation does not develop in the specifically historical way that Hegel would describe.

point of Schlegel; my project here is to read Schlegel, and to read us, Schlegel's inheritors, from the standpoint of Marlowe and Raleigh. That will mean taking up that early modern, rhetorical concept of imitation, which is alien to Schlegel's philosophical poetry – alien because imitation is the practice basic to the rhetorical regime that Schlegel's Romanticism rejected; and to some extent, alien to contemporary literary studies, too.[4] Marlowe and Raleigh were exceptionally gifted students under that humanist regime, in the version that prevailed in Elizabeth's England. Both learned, at grammar school and at university, to write an oration like Cicero and to write verse like Horace, or Ovid. To study was always to study models, the practice known as *imitatio*. The analytic technology of rhetorical theory was at their fingertips, but the criteria of success were, first, sounding like your original (not standing back from it, stylistically or analytically), and second, and ultimately, turning the rhetorical freedom such study cultivates to the work of persuasion – whether in academic disputation or, if you found favor there, at court.[5]

So, imitation: this mode of composition after models, pedagogical and makerly: what way of writing, what way of knowing, is it? In a moment, I will return to the passionate shepherd, but let me make some very general proposals first. The most fundamental is from Aristotle, that a human being is an imitative animal, and "learns first by imitation."[6] Imitation is basic to us. Present-day neuroscientists make the point on their own terms, describing the circuit of our mirror neurons, which fire sympathetically when we observe the actions of others, as though we were performing those actions ourselves.[7] To understand, on such accounts, *is* to imitate. This kind

---

4 Stephen Halliwell discusses the "undoubtedly widespread Romantic rejection of mimesis" in *The Aesthetics of Mimesis* (Halliwell 2002, 360); though he gives a subtle account of how the concept was preserved, at the expense of its technical, skilled aspect, distinguishing, as Schegel's brother August Wilhelm did, between "'imitation' [*Nachahmung*] as external 'aping' [*nachäffen*] and, on the other hand, imitation, in a less than transparent formulation, as the adoption or appropriation of the principles of human action" (Halliwell 2002, 361). The classic study of the problem in English poetry is M.H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition*. See also note 8 below.

5 The classic essay on *imitatio* remains G.W. Pigman's "Versions of Imitation in the Renaissance." David Riggs gives an excellent description of what this training meant for schoolboys in *The World of Christopher Marlowe* (Riggs 2004, 25 – 77). See also my own *Scenes of Instruction in Renaissance Romance* (Dolven 2007, 15 – 64).

6 According to Aristotle, imitation is "natural to man from childhood, one of his advantages over the lower animals being this, that he is the most imitative creature in the world, and learns first by imitation" (Aristotle 1984, 1448b5).

7 There is an active scientific debate about the role of mirror neurons in social life, especially their relation to empathetic understanding, but evidence is clear that some neurons fire both in action and when in observing the same action in someone else. Mark Johnson discusses the humanistic possibilities of the idea that "understanding requires simulation" in *The Meaning of the Body* (Johnson 2007, 164). Alfred Gell, in his *Art and Agency*, approaches the same question as an anthropologist.

of understanding – and there is a long, sturdy tradition stretching between Aristotle and the MRI – is not the product of an adjustment of range, as in close or distant reading, analysis or overview.[8] It is an identification, adopting the actions, the behavior of another, discovering the how of it by doing it. Not a question of far and near, but of outside and inside; and so much of the outside is inside, already imitated, already in our bodies, before we begin to reflect upon it. Which is to say that imitation is not always, or even primarily, deliberate. The rhetorical discipline of *imitatio* can therefore be understood as an effort both to exploit and to regulate an imitative appetite for the ways of others. Imitation, in writing, is mediated for the student of rhetoric by the terms of art that crowd the field of rhetoric, but the model, and its charisma, are still foremost. Imitation is a feedback loop, in which the maker is constantly adjusting the made thing according to the criterion of the object, conforming the text she makes to the text she reads. What she makes is an imitation of the maker, too, one made out of herself.

The dangers of such a model of knowledge are obvious enough, in a critical age: is this not a pedagogy of conformity? If imitation requires immersion, absorption, arguably submission, what becomes of critical distance? Is such a thing as critical imitation possible? In making an answer, let me turn back to Marlowe and Raleigh, and then to John Donne, who is one of many poets to continue the little tradition Marlowe started. The original poem is a charming pastoral enticement. It is also, it should be said, already self-skeptical. It piles gift on gift, a generous, rustic copia – but the gifts tend toward manufacture, starting with a bed of roses and a cap of straw and ending up with gold buckles and amber studs. Innocence turns gradually to artifice. The poem has a peculiar double ending, too, bringing the first line back to close the penultimate stanza, then doing it again, as though against some implicit resistance:

> A belt of straw and ivy buds,
> With coral clasps and Amber studs;
> And if these pleasures may thee move,
> Come live with me, and be my love.
>
> The shepherd swains shall dance and sing
> For thy delights each May morning:

"To see (or to know) is to be sensuously filled with what is perceived, yielding to it, mirroring it – and hence imitating it bodily" (Gell 1998, 100).

8 Walter Benjamin is a twentieth-century touchstone, and he takes a long retrospect: the imitative faculty, he argues, is something modernity has eroded; the analytic power to recognize similarity is "nothing but a rudiment of the once powerful compulsion to become similar and to behave mimetically. There is perhaps not a single one of his higher functions in which his mimetic faculty does not play a decisive role" (Benjamin 2004–2006, 2.720). Michael Taussig's *Mimesis and Alterity* is an influential recent account of how "the practice of mimesis in our day" is "inseparable from imaging and thinking itself" (Taussig 1992, 70). I discuss the basis of style in imitation, and its relation to a history of maker's knowledge, in my *Senses of Style* (Dolven 2018, 110–121).

> If these delights thy mind may move,
> Then live with me, and be my love. (*England's Helicon* 1887, 230)

Has she said no, the first time? There is a subtle hardening of his stance from invitation, "if [...] come," to a more strenuous, not to say coercive logic, "if [...] then." In this internal doubling, or tripling, the poem anticipates its successors, returning to that pristine original invitation under increasing suspicion. Is it therefore already self-critical? An instance already of poetic critique? Self-imitation does open up a distance inside the poem, when the reader measures ending against beginning, the difference between imitation and mere repetition. But for a university man like Marlowe, such a subtle show of cynicism, and still subtler threat, would find a ready audience among his sophisticated peers. The poem stands only so far away from itself.

Raleigh's response is closely studious of its model. It tracks Marlowe's list-making, his syntax, the structure of his argument, including the double ending. The work it wants to do, it does from the inside. His intervention – the objection of his nymph – is to point out that the shepherd has forgotten about the passage of time. I have always wondered if Raleigh's nymph does not hear the clock ticking even in Marlowe's first line, "Come live with me and be my love," where the transit from "live" to "love" is almost a conjugation, from present to past, as 'drive' to 'drove,' or even 'tick' to 'tock.' Be that as it may, the imitation makes the problem explicit. Notice the beautiful diminuendo of the fourth stanza:

> Thy gowns, thy shoes, thy beds of roses,
> Thy cap, thy kirtle, and thy posies,
> Soon break, soon wither, soon forgotten,
> In folly ripe, in reason rotten. (231)

Six gifts become three verbs of damage and loss, resolving finally to the two halves of an open-and-shut maxim. It is a wonderfully artful undercutting of Marlowe's seasonless bounty, one that unsettles the more because it accepts so many of the terms of its original. Is this, then, poetic critique? The likenesses are indexes of difference, measured from the inside looking out, rather than the outside looking in. That said, such revenges against the *carpe diem* tradition are their own kind, which Raleigh inhabits as a matter of conventional counter-convention. He inquires somewhat less into the motives of his nymph than Marlowe does of his shepherd.

What then of John Donne? Here is "The Bait," in its entirety:

> Come live with me, and be my love,
> And we will some new pleasures prove
> Of golden sands, and crystal brooks,
> With silken lines and silver hooks.
>
> There will the river whispering run,
> Warmed by thy eyes, more than the Sun;

And there th'enamoured fish will stay,
Begging themselves they may betray.

When thou wilt swim in that live bath,
Each fish which every channel hath,
Will amorously to thee swim,
Gladder to catch thee, than thou him.

If thou to be so seen be'st loth,
By Sun or Moon, thou dark'nest both,
And, if my heart have leave to see,
I need not their light, having thee.

Let others freeze with angling-reeds,
And cut their legs with shells and weeds,
Or treach'rously poor fish beset,
With strangling snare or windowy net.

Let coarse, bold hands from slimy nest
The bedded fish in banks out-wrest,
Or, curious traitors, sleeve-silk flies
Bewitch poor fishes' wand'ring eyes:

For thee, thou need'st no such deceit,
For thou thyself art thine own bait;
That fish that is not caught thereby,
Alas, is wiser far than I. (Donne 2010, 134 – 136)

Donne likely wrote this poem during his miscellaneous years as a personal secretary and minor official in London, in the very late sixteenth, perhaps early seventeenth centuries; he must have seen its predecessors in manuscript, or he read a copy of *England's Helicon.* He takes up Marlowe's opening lines, but already with a small perversity: the modulation from meadow to brookside, and the barb of the silver hook dangling at the end of the last line. (That pun on "line" is active throughout.) The tetrameter and the rhyme scheme are inherited, and handled with equal skill. The catalogue of gifts is inherited, too, but altered, not just, as in Raleigh, negated. Donne's speaker lists not objects, but features of the waterscape flattering to the addressee, how her eyes will warm the cold water, and how the fish will come to pay amorous tribute. (Forsaking their freedom as they come: Donne admires the latitude of a fish, that "every channel hath" in the three-dimensional meadow of deep water; it is this freedom they will give up for her.) If she is reluctant to be seen, fear not, her beauty will so outshine sun and moon that they will be darkened by the contrast, and he will see her by her own radiance. Flattery, flattery, flattery, even as the invitation has shifted, from "come live with me," to "strip and bathe for me." Raleigh's time-lesson has been learned by someone.

But only tacitly. With the fifth stanza, Donne changes tack. (Perhaps because his line of persuasion is not working? – the labile rhetoric of the poem invites us to imagine it as an act of seduction in real time, adapting to its target throughout.) "Let others freeze with angling reeds," he says; let those other fishermen injure themselves in

the chase, deceiving the fish with snares and nets and lures. "For thee, thou need'st no such deceit, / For thou thyself art thine own bait." The passionate fisherman's argument has been pointing toward this moral, if "moral" is the word, as he tangles his own admiration with that of the amorous fish – the fish that correspond with the shepherd's sheep in the original, yes? – and it feels like a natural conclusion, a final act of flattery decorously transposed out of pastoral for sheer variety's sake. But a little tug on those lines draws up the snare. What does it mean, to be your own bait? This woman, to whom he is speaking – she must be a fisherman too, but one who needs no lure, needs no mediation; who need neither labor, nor lie; her beauty perfects her agency. Then again, recall that she is the object of the fishes' attention, too, each fish "Gladder to catch thee, than thou him"; and of course, it is she for whom the speaker is fishing, perhaps with the bait of the poem. If she is the catch, and also her own bait – how is that different from the desirability of the object of desire? Is not beauty always its own bait? Donne's bait and switch, if you like, has dangled the promise of a fisherman's agency before his catch, but the poem catches the flickering light we read by like a fly tied from a silken sleeve.

You could say, in the language of twentieth-century critical theory, that Donne's poem is an exercise in immanent, rather than transcendent, critique; it is involved with the language of its object, used as leverage against itself; it looks for no fulcrum elsewhere. As Adorno puts it, in his essay "Cultural Criticism and Society": "A successful work, according to immanent criticism, is not one which resolves objective contradictions in a spurious harmony, but one which expresses the idea of harmony negatively by embodying the contradictions, pure and uncompromised, in its innermost structure" (Adorno 1997, 31). A good poem, that is, is critical by being complicit. For Adorno, this is true of the object of study (the poem), and it will necessarily be true of the study itself. Donne's study establishes between itself and its predecessors a set of analogies – shepherd to fisherman, sheep to fish, nymph to both; analogies, not to say complicities – in order to examine the contradictions that emerge. There is the collapsing triangulation of the nymph as her own bait; and the more stubborn triangulation with the other fisherman, who are her competitors, or are they his? (At all events they, not she, would seem to be the audience for the mock-abjection of the final lines.) Such ingenious permutations make for a skeptical anatomy of the tradition into which "The Bait" is entered, as a critical intervention of exceptional rigor and determination. The question is, what is the gain of imitation, *imitatio* – of the specific skill by means of which Donne makes his entry?

There is something to be learned from comparison with a much later contribution to the chain of replies, William Carlos Williams' "Raleigh Was Right":

> We cannot go to the country
> for the country will bring us
>   no peace
> What can the small violets tell us

that grow on furry stems in
the long grass among lance-shaped
        leaves?

Though you praise us
and call to mind the poets
who sung of our loveliness
it was long ago!
long ago! when country people
would plow and sow with
flowering minds and pockets
        at ease—
if ever this were true.

Not now. Love itself a flower
with roots in a parched ground.
Empty pockets make empty heads.
Cure it if you can but
do not believe that we can live
today in the country
for the country will bring us
        no peace. (Williams 1991, 2.88 – 2.89)

Williams' poem may be an answer – or a taking sides – but it is no imitation; not rhythmically, not in diction, not even in the "Come live" tag that is the poem's second name.[9] And though its own anti-pastoral sentiments are sympathetic, it stands far enough outside its original that it has little power to critique its tradition. There is no real feeling for what the genre meant, nor how it might have been transmuted, over time, nor for the specificity of Raleigh's response; and though the poem betrays a certain obdurate longing, Williams' speaker acknowledges no complicity, no entanglement. It is historically symptomatic of its own moment – how could it not be – but it does not attempt historical understanding; and if there is some pathos in its rejection of history ("long ago!"), still, the rejection itself is largely successful.

Perhaps Williams' poem is something like an instance in poetry of what for Schlegel would be ordinary critique; the kind of critique Adorno might call transcendental, for standing apart from its object, setting up criteria that are removed, uncompromised. It has resolved its object into primitive parts for analysis that carry with them no risk of contamination. Imitation is an alternative to such transcendental detachment. Still, it is not, in fact, the alternative that Schlegel has to offer, and I

---

9 Though John Beer, who heard me present this paper at the Poetic Critique conference, observed afterward that the lines "but do not believe / that we can live today" reprise Marlowe's live/love conjugation, and that Williams might be taken to be exploring something like the seductions of disenchantment; the speaker is enjoining his own listener to a shared cynicism that the poem wants to expose, rather than endorse. So read, the poem is still no imitation, but takes a critical attitude towards its anti-pastoral attitude (and the title, "Raleigh Was Right," comes to seem calculatedly, exaggeratedly peremptory and defensive).

want to conclude by sharpening that difference, in order to suggest that there is a specific critical power in imitation that is not to be derived from the post-Romantic critical tradition; a distinct version of poetic critique that Schlegel may glimpse, but cannot follow. I said earlier that imitation, as a basic practice, was alien to him. Here he is, in the *Athenaeum Fragments* of the same year, discussing the translation of the Classics.

> 393. In order to translate perfectly from the classics into a modern language, the translator would have to be so expert in his language that, if need be, he could make everything modern; but at the same time he would have to understand antiquity so well that he would be able not just to imitate it but, if necessary, recreate it [*zugleich aber das Antike so verstehn, daß ers nicht bloß nachmachen, sondern allenfalls wiederschaffen könnte*]. (Schlegel 2002b, 257; Schlegel 1967, 239)

That re-creation recalls his sense of the poetic critic's power to "add to the work, restore it, shape it afresh." Translation sounds a good deal like imitation. But it is important that understanding, *verstehen*, and imitation, *nachmachen*, come in that order, both in his sentence, and in the career of the translator.[10] "Where we should exercise to know, we exercise as having known" (Sidney 1973, 112), says Philip Sidney in 1580, in his great *Defense of Poetry*. By exercise, he means imitate, and it is natural to him to think of imitation and translation as modes of coming to know, from which understanding should be derived. That is not how Schlegel thinks, nor is it native to the critical tradition, poetic or otherwise. So, while his poetic critic refuses the detachment of analysis – "Why," he asks, "should we not both breathe in the perfume of a flower and at the same time, entirely absorbed in the observation, contemplate in its infinite ramifications the vein-system of a single leaf?" (Schlegel 2002d, 273) – the perfume and the vein-diagram are both modulations of a receptive sensibility. They are not maker's knowledge, let alone impersonation. They are interdicted from imitation.

But here is Schlegel again, just a year later, in his *Critical Fragments:*

> 55. A really free and cultivated person ought to be able to attune [*stimmen*] himself at will to being philosophical or philological, critical or poetical, historical or rhetorical, ancient or mod-

---

10 Schlegel makes the same point, insisting on the same priority of understanding to imitation, in his *On the Study of Greek Poetry*, which he wrote in 1795: "Only he who thoroughly knows [*ganz kennt*] Greek poetry *can* imitate [*nachahmen*] it" (Schlegel 2001, 77; Schlegel 1979, 331), he says, and again: "One cannot properly imitate [*nicht richtig nachahmen*] Greek poetry as long as one does *not* actually *understand* [*gar nicht versteht*] it" (Schlegel 2001, 84; Schlegel 1979, 347). Schlegel's attitude in that text toward imitation is complicated, but his references to imitation as a technical skill, to "slavishly imitative artists who only imitate the particular" (Schlegel 2001, 58), are unfailingly disparaging. His ideal of imitation is directed not at the work but at the spirit it conveys: the genius does not allow himself "to be restricted by the peculiarity that the outward form, the husk of the universal spirit, may still yet carry with it" (Schlegel 2001, 47). Halliwell discusses this attitude in *The Aesthetics of Mimesis* (Halliwell 2002, 360 – 363).

ern: quite arbitrarily, just as one tunes an instrument, at any time and to any degree. (Schlegel 2002a, 242; Schlegel 1967, 154)

Attunement is not imitation. But there is something in this ideal person of the rhetorician's versatility, the cultivated skill of the imitator, the student who can tune what she makes to the objects of her study. If Schlegel denounces the "countless legions of derivative imitators [*nachahmende Echokünstler*]" (Schlegel 2001, 30; Schlegel 1979, 239) in his own moment, he shares some of the humanists' ideals of attunement. There is a great and, at the present moment, neglected pedagogical power in the exercises that build that capacity; one might say, coopting Schlegel's argument, that imitation, in taking over contiguous words and thoughts, might keep the original alive in the hand and mouth of the student. That is no small thing in itself, at a moment when the humanities are struggling for enrollments. (And when creative writing is thriving.) There is a special critical potential in imitation, too. Donne manipulates lyric structures from the inside, immanently, exposing otherwise invisible contradictions. Imitation has a power to open up the difference from the original as an exemplary contradiction, by its variances, and by its exaggerations, the strategic hypertrophy of the imitator's skill. (Hal Foster has discussed a strain of contemporary art that practices critique by "mimetic exacerbation" [Foster 2017, Ch. 3]; John Donne might find himself in good company there.) And that is a skill that comes only by its practice.

And then again – with all that said, there is, in the provisional self-surrender of the imitator, in that absorbing feedback between maker and model, something that resists assimilation to post-Romantic critique; at least, to that variety of critique that depends for its power on strict difference from its object. It is a resistance that makes imitation a more provocative alternative to such critique than description, say, or surface reading, the critical opposites for which so much contemporary literary argument has reached, in its search for other ways of reading.[11] "Come live with me and be my love" is an ideal test of imitation's powers and its risks, for it is just what we are afraid of: that the poem will interpellate us into its form of life; that in loving it we will lose our ability to think freely, objectively. But to be a truly free and cultivated person – and here, let "cultivated" refer to the practical, learnable skills of poem-making; skills anyone can learn – to be a truly free and cultivated person means you can choose when to imitate, when to step back, and not demand that the contradiction be reconciled in advance.

---

11 It strikes me as a contemporary blind spot that critics discontent with critique as a mode of engagement have not looked to the long pedagogical tradition of imitation; it speaks to the institutional separations between faculties of creative writing and literature. The touchstones for the current debate in the United States are Rita Felski's *The Limits of Critique* (2015), and the series of responses to it published in *PMLA*; also influential has been Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, "Surface Reading: An Introduction" (2009).

Bibliography

Abrams, M.H. *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953.

Adorno, Theodor W. "Cultural Criticism and Society." *Prisms*. Trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997. 17–34.

Aristotle. *The Complete Works of Aristotle*. 2 vols. Ed. Jonathan Barnes. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984.

Benjamin, Walter. "On the Mimetic Faculty." *Selected Writings*. 4 vols. Eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael Jennings. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2004–2006. 720–722.

Best, Stephen, and Sharon Marcus. "Surface Reading: An Introduction." *Representations* 108.1 (2009): 1–21.

Dolven, Jeff. *Scenes of Instruction in Renaissance Romance*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.

Dolven, Jeff. *Senses of Style*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018.

Donne, John. *The Complete Poems of John Donne*. Ed. Robin Robbins. Harlow: Longman, 2010.

England's Helicon. Ed. A.H. Bullen. London: John C. Nimmo, 1887.

Felski, Rita. *The Limits of Critique*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015.

Foster, Hal. *Bad New Days: Art, Criticism, Emergency*. London: Verso, 2017.

Gell, Alfred. *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Halliwell, Stephen. *The Aesthetics of Mimesis*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002.

Johnson, Mark. *The Meaning of the Body*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.

Pigman, G.W. "Versions of Imitation in the Renaissance." *Renaissance Quarterly* 33.1 (1980): 1–32.

Riggs, David. *The World of Christopher Marlowe*. New York: Holt, 2004.

Schlegel, Friedrich. *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe*. Vol. 2. Ed. Hans Eichner. Munich, Paderborn, and Vienna: Schöningh, 1967.

Schlegel, Friedrich. *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe*. Vol. 1. Ed. Ernst Behler. Paderborn, Munich, and Vienna: Schöningh, 1979.

Schlegel, Friedrich. *On the Study of Greek Poetry*. Trans. Stuart Barnett. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2001.

Schlegel, Friedrich. "From 'Critical Fragments' (1779)." *Classical and Romantic German Aesthetics*. Ed. J.M. Bernstein. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002a. 239–245.

Schlegel, Friedrich. "From '*Athenaeum* fragments' (1798)." *Classical and Romantic German Aesthetics*. Ed. J.M. Bernstein. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002b. 246–260.

Schlegel, Friedrich. "From 'Ideas' (1800)." *Classical and Romantic German Aesthetics*. Ed. J.M. Bernstein. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002c. 261–268.

Schlegel, Friedrich. "'On Goethe's *Meister*' (1798)." *Classical and Romantic German Aesthetics*. Ed. J.M. Bernstein. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002d. 269–286.

Shakespeare, William. *The Complete Sonnets and Poems*. Ed. Colin Burrow. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Sidney, Sir Philip. *Miscellaneous Prose of Sir Philip Sidney*. Eds. Katherine Duncan-Jones and Jan van Dorsten. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973.

Taussig, Michael. *Mimesis and Alterity*. London: Routledge, 1992.

Walton, Izaak, and Charles Cotton. *The Compleat Angler*. Ed. Marjorie Swann. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

Williams, William Carlos. *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams*. 2 vols. Ed. Christopher McGowan. New York: New Directions, 1991.

Alexander García Düttmann
"Echo Reconciles"

If one asks: what is poetic critique, or criticism, can one then avoid raising a further question, namely: why should there be such a thing as poetic critique, or criticism, in the first place? Perhaps it is only by trying to answer *this* question, and in so doing echoing the answer to the initial question before it is given, that one will find the grounds on which to provide an idea of poetic critique, or criticism. Only if one can feel the urgency of poetic critique, or criticism, the urgency, the need, perhaps even the necessity, and communicate this feeling to others in a persuasive manner, can one develop a convincing idea of such critique, one that proves less vulnerable to the objections of arbitrariness and abstraction, futility and gratuitousness.

It may be helpful in this context to restrict oneself to the domain of art rather than attempt a universal justification. Indeed one could argue that in the case of art the critique or criticism that elucidates it, or some of its aspects, requires the qualification that the adjective 'poetic' supplies, simply because without it there is a risk of missing something important about art, namely and trivially its resistance to propositional speech or communicative discourse. For as long as there is art and we wish to engage with it, no matter how unlikely its existence may seem or precisely because its existence seems so rather unlikely, what calls for some kind of poetic critique, or criticism, is the enigmatic nature or the enigmaticalness of artworks, that which cannot be rendered intelligible and comprehensible by way of a series of propositions about art, or about the artwork as a given object. In other words, unless one takes art to be enigmatic in a sense to be established, poetic critique will hardly be more than a fanciful endeavor for aesthetes, or a diversion for academics not so keen on being treated as serious professionals.

It is art itself, whose enigmaticalness extends into the unlikeliness of its own existence, it is the artwork as the enigmatic and enigmatically unlikely result of an intentional activity, that generates the need for poetic critique and at the same time suggests what it is that such critique must achieve. Art, a product of the mind and the body and not a fact of nature, to put it in old-fashioned terminology, must appeal to the mind, to spirit, on the basis of its enigmaticalness, which perhaps exceeds the very distinction between art and nature. This appeal gives birth to poetic critique or criticism and begins to clarify its idea.

Poetic critique or criticism must partake in art; it must echo the artwork, by showing the limits and limitations, the insufficiency of propositional speech, or communicative discourse. Of course this demonstration has to be inseparable from the performance itself. To call critique poetic, to say that it must partake in art and its enigmaticalness, means to acknowledge the inseparability of demonstration and performance that is brought about by the artwork itself. It is by performing a poetic critique of art that the limits and limitations, the insufficiency of propositional speech or communicative discourse are highlighted, not by demonstrating them in the ab-

stract or in a merely conceptual manner. Insisting on the performative aspect of poetic critique means that such highlighting cannot take place in propositional speech or communicative discourse. The idea of poetic critique as a critique of art is the idea of a participation in an enigmaticalness that binds together inextricably performance and demonstration, existence and non-existence, as if each echoed the other. Poetic critique does not proceed to solve the riddle so as to relieve the artwork's beholder of the burden enigmaticalness places upon him.

It is the idea of a semblance: in critique demonstration, conceptual elucidation is meant to prevail, and the poetic is supposed to serve it, to serve propositional speech or communicative discourse. In truth, however, the performance of poetic critique renders the demonstration just as enigmatic as it appears to be in the work of art. One may be tempted to assert that this cannot be so in the instance of poetic critique because of its reliance on the concept and the critical powers it bears. Yet is it not often the case that artworks seem bereft of enigmaticalness only because one expects them to stage some subtle or ostentatious mystification which critique is meant to strip away, laying bare what they are all about?

But surely poetic critique's *acknowledgement* of the inextricability of performance and demonstration, existence and non-existence, to be found in art, is not the same as the inextricability itself? It flags a difference that is often considered to indicate a self-reflexivity of art. Art becomes self-reflective when elevated to, or taken up by, poetic critique. Poetic critique awakens art to an awareness of itself, a cognitive awareness that determines, sublates, potentiates it above and beyond its own limits. And if poetic critique is to participate in art when cognizing it, then either art must come to an end, reveal a conceptual nature that eventually allows critique to shed the poetic guise it has to adopt, or it must inscribe itself in a both receptive and productive connectedness, in a continuity of ever higher, more reflected formations that it helps to establish and that will carry art to the absolute.

Yet ultimately enigmaticalness and reflexivity must remain incompatible with each other since nothing truly enigmatic can become aware of itself, grow sufficiently self-aware for cognition to solve the enigma in the course of an absolute, or infinite, reflection. The difference between art and poetic critique – between, on the one hand, the inextricability of performance and demonstration, of existence and non-existence, and, on the other hand, its acknowledgment – is the uncertain difference that lies in an echoing. For it belongs to the definition of an echo that its effect cannot be reduced to passivity, and that its passive and active moments can never be told apart. An echo that does not fool the one who hears its sound or its voice, an echo that is not a reminder of something more powerful, of a reverberating otherness, an echo that does not double the simulacrum it produces, ceases to be an echo. Jacques Derrida, a contemporary master of poetic critique, though perhaps one who would have had reservations about using this expression, repeatedly stresses the otherness of echoing. When referring to the myth or legend of Echo and Narcissus in the *Metamorphoses*, he speaks of echoing as a "junction" (Derrida 2003a, 10; translation A.G.D.) where repetition encounters the "unforeseeable." He also pla-

ces the otherness of echoing at the very core of one's relationship to oneself, as an otherness that complicates the alleged sameness of this relationship, and the narcissism inherent in it (Derrida 2003b, 204; translation A.G.D.).

In the wake of such remarks, one could speculate that the idea of poetic critique entails a similar complication. It affects the work of art's self-sufficiency from within, as it were. For is the work of art not an achievement that seeks to be self-sufficient? If so, then it generates more than just one kind of enigmaticalness, the enigmaticalness of an echoing of performance and demonstration that keeps disrupting its unity and that calls for poetic critique. It does so to the extent that self-sufficiency must always come across as enigmatic.

The otherness of poetic critique is, then, not to be sought in its conceptual scope or in its critical powers, in what its judgement may reveal about the work of art, about its truth or its worth, but in its own undecidable echoing of the undecidability that the artwork's echo establishes between performance and demonstration. Doubtless poetic critique creates its echoing with other means than the work of art. It creates it with the means of concepts that accomplish critical work. In poetic critique, however, the otherness of means remains subservient to the otherness of an undecidable echoing that, as such, must defy conceptuality.

The idea of poetic critique is the idea of an echoing that captures and reproduces an echoing. Performance and demonstration, existence and non-existence keep echoing each other undecidably in the artwork, and it is this strange echoing, the echoing of conflicting tasks – the task of performance and the task of demonstration – and the echoing of nothing – the nothingness of non-existence – that is echoed in poetic critique. As an echoing of an echoing, the idea of poetic critique becomes also perfectly superfluous. Paradoxically, then, poetic critique is all the more superfluous the more the need for it makes itself felt.

It would fade away if the otherness of the artwork's echo, of the echoing of performance and demonstration that produces what is perceived as essentially enigmatic about an artwork, let itself be captured and reproduced. And it would fade away if, conversely, the otherness of poetic critique's echo could not surprise the artwork in its turn. However, such surprise is only to be had if poetic critique admits its superfluousness.

The enigmaticalness of artworks is due to the inextricability of performance and demonstration that resists propositional speech and communicative discourse. It is due to a radical finitude that makes art hover between existence and non-existence, as if its intrinsic reluctance to identification and instrumentalization, its enormous difficulty and disarming simplicity, kept it constantly emerging from, and receding back into, non-existence. But the enigmaticalness of artworks is also due to the need art creates for poetic critique, for participating critically and poetically in the artwork, and to the sensation of shame that must overcome whoever experiences such need, as if touching upon the enigmaticalness of the artwork were a symptom of incontinence, a comportment utterly alien to art. One cannot feel the need for poetic critique without feeling that it is a superfluous and possibly harmful undertak-

ing, an intrusion that will prove unable to participate in the artwork and, as a consequence, will precipitate its destruction. Shame delays the satisfaction of the need for poetic critique but also protects it against a compulsive denial of the fact that, with each creation of an artwork, spirit, *Geist*, accomplishes something, independently of how enigmatic and unlikely this accomplishment may be.

A short passage from Adorno's posthumously published *Aesthetic Theory*[1] can put to the test the idea of poetic critique developed so far, especially since it places some emphasis on the effect of echoing. This passage, the only one in the book in which the author quotes an entire poem and comments upon it, opens with a rejection of the conventional distinction between hermetic and non-hermetic artworks, which is then, with a gesture characteristic of Adorno's thought, reintroduced in a radicalized fashion. The hermeticism of so-called hermetic artworks, artworks that are deemed almost incomprehensible, is only an indication of the enigmaticalness that defines art in general, Adorno states. Hermetic artworks are, comparatively speaking, more comprehensible than artworks that are traditionally and commonly considered to be easily accessible and that under closer scrutiny turn out to be prohibitively intricate. Hidden "behind their galvanized surface" (Adorno 1970, 186), a surface of universally shared opinion that is meant to preserve them, they withdraw into themselves and will not come out again. The echo has stopped resounding. To stress enigmaticalness by creating a purposefully hermetic work of art is an attempt to tame the enigma's intractability. But to conjure it away by relating to a work of art as if it had been understood once and for all is unmistakable evidence of the enigma remaining as intractable as it must be. If, consequently, hermetic art can never attain the same hermeticism to which non-hermetic art aspires, then there is perhaps always something slightly disappointing about it, something that does not quite measure up to art's challenge and worth, something that misses the enigmaticalness of art. Adorno does not say this in so many words, yet his observations on the dynamics of hermetic and non-hermetic art seem to point to such a conclusion.

He then gives a first account of the enigmaticalness of art, of its irreducible though not unvarying hermeticism. It is supposed to result from the transformation concepts undergo when they enter art's domain. Adorno resorts to an example and asks: what happens when Georg Trakl uses the word "sonata" in his poems? His answer to this question is startling because it seems to imply that the transformation the concept of "sonata" undergoes when it enters the domain of art, of poetry, of Trakl's poems, when it ceases to function in "communicative discourse" (187) and begins to contribute to art's constitutive enigmaticalness, is that it is no longer used in the same manner in which it is used in technical musical language. Surely a musicologist's discourse is a rather special instance of "communicative discourse." Surely the word "sonata," as rare as its usage in ordinary speech may be, tends to be em-

---

[1] In the following, I will refer to the page numbers of the German edition of *Ästhetische Theorie*, while using – and from time to time modifying – the English translation (see Adorno 1997, 122 – 124).

ployed in a much vaguer fashion when it is not a specialist who is speaking. In fact, it tends to be employed quite similarly to the manner in which it is used in the poem, so that this example proves a strange one for the linguistic transformation, the transformative "borrowing" of terms art is supposed to accomplish, a "borrowing" that renders enigmatic what seemed comprehensible in the first place. In the poem, Adorno observes, sonata no longer designates an "entity," a "construct," or a "formation" that is "highly articulated, motivically and thematically wrought, and internally dynamic." (186) It no longer designates a musical "entity" whose "unity is a clearly differentiated manifold, with development and recapitulation." Rather the concept turns into an evocative name, as if "sonata" in the poem came much closer to revealing its essence than in the discourse of the musicologist, fulfilling a communicative function rather than fostering the enigmaticalness of art – unless, of course, it is self-evidence that is truly enigmatic in the end. But what transpires from the musical example and also from the other examples given in the text, is that the work of art operates a sort of deactivation of unambiguous or obvious meaning. The semantic force that the usage of the word "sonata" obtains in Trakl's poems derives from the impossibility of saying exactly what it means. It is this force that must be regarded as enigmatic. At times it has a stabilizing effect, creating a powerful "imago" (186), a commemorative or unconscious representation endowed with a certain autonomy that summons, deepens, and intensifies comprehension. But it can also have a destabilizing effect, making meaning in an artwork, and the meaning of the artwork itself, uncertain and ambiguous, ungraspable in terms of a proposition or a constative utterance. Thus, the poetic usage of the copula "is" may draw it near to its own negation despite a negative particle not being added to it. The copula acquires an enigmatic force that stems from the undecidability as to whether it is actually used affirmatively, as a positive "existential judgement." This force produces "pale afterimage[s]" (187) that let the initial meaning turn into its very opposite, or dither between the original and the simulacrum, as if its echo infused it with otherness. Perhaps one could say that it is the force of a trace, a trace that is never a presence or an absence.

Before quoting Mörike's "Mousetrap Rhyme" (*Mausfallen-Sprüchlein*), a poem that is a sort of spell since it acts as a mousetrap, Adorno points out the similarity and the dissimilarity between an artwork and a judgement. He speaks of an analogy: artworks and judgements are similar in that they are both determined by a synthesizing power. While a judgement attributes a predicate to a subject, brings subject and predicate together conceptually, or cognitively, by identifying them, a work of art gathers all its different and heterogeneous elements mimetically so that they can be recognized as belonging to it. Yet works of art do not judge; they do not state something or carry a message that would convey their meaning. They are, as it were, judgements without judgement, judgements that have been deactivated but not erased, judgements that preserve their form and at the same time remain empty. Adorno writes, "[w]hat works of art amount to, that which establishes their unity, cannot be formulated as a judgement, not even as one that they may contain, that they issue explicitly or state in words and sentences" (187; trans. modified). That

critique, art criticism, must be poetic in view of art's enigmaticalness, means, as can be gauged from Adorno's argument about the transformation that elements, linguistic elements, undergo when art appropriates them, that it needs to pay attention to the echoing such appropriation causes. It needs to prolong and reinvent an echoing that can consist in a "yes" reverberating as a "no," or a "no" reverberating as a "yes," without, however, affirmation simply collapsing into negation, or, conversely, negation into affirmation.

The "discursive content" of the "Mousetrap Rhyme" reproduced in the passage on the hermeticism, the enigmaticalness, the transformative force of art, restricts the poem, as Adorno remarks, to a "sadistic identification with what civilized custom has done to animals disdained as parasites" (187, trans. modified). In truth, this content, the meaning of the child's enticing and taunting of the mouse, with whom it wishes to perform a dance after dinner, in the moonlight, a dance in which its old cat is supposed to join, is suspended at the very moment the poem enounces it. So rather than celebrating a ritual of liquidation, the poem is said to denounce it, and to do so by keeping the gist of a deadly ritual, by following its rules and never exiting the "gapless immanence" of the celebration. Subordination does not confirm this "abominable" and "socially conditioned ritual" (188) but transcends it through its unflinching linguistic reflection, or repetition, as if art consisted in turning the "gesture" that takes something for granted against itself. "Sadistic identification" no longer has "the last word" in a poem that seems to be entirely constituted by it, that does not simply refer to a preceding social condition but that creates this condition within itself, performance and demonstration being inseparable though not identical: "Form, which shapes verse into the reverberation of a mythical spell, suspends its disposition" (187).

Yet, having reached this insight into the enigmaticalness of art, the reader of *Aesthetic Theory* may well wonder about two claims that pertain to the argument Adorno puts forward. For could the poem ever produce its echoing effect, could it ever link performance and demonstration in an inextricable and undecidable manner, if it did not partake in "sadistic identification" at all, in the staging of a ritual that does not simply exist outside it, regardless of how much this ritual is "socially conditioned"? Must the force needed to overcome "sadistic identification" not be broached from the identificatory force itself, at least if a logic of repetition, of echoing, is to be at work in the poem Adorno examines? Is there not an irreducible ambiguity to echoing inasmuch as art "borrows" from reality, or better still from "communicative discourse," and thus cannot avoid recreating reality and drawing on "communicative discourse?" And if it is precisely art's abstention from judgement that results in judgement, in an act of holding court and indicting, as Adorno maintains, is one statement not then replaced by another, a statement that contradicts it but a statement nonetheless, no matter how tacit the critical denunciation remains? Does the inverting repetition of statements not submit the echoing effect to "communicative discourse" and reduce art to one of its manifestations, a manifestation bereft of enigmaticalness? Can the blinding "mythical" spell that identification perpetuates, "sadistic identifica-

tion" and the identification distinctive of judgements, ever be broken by a discourse of critique, or negativity?

At the exact juncture in the text where these questions arise for the reader, Adorno inserts a gnomic phrase: "Echo reconciles." (188) How does one read this phrase? How does one listen to it? Can the reconciliatory force that Adorno bestows upon Echo, upon the echoing effect, reconcile the conflict that traverses and disrupts it, the conflict between echoing as standardized, as deceptive, as evidence of a spell, all forms of echoing to be found in the work of the philosopher, and echoing in art, echoing as that which prompts reconciliation, brings consolation, and defines love? "There is no love that is not an echo" (Adorno 1980, 248/217), Adorno writes in his *Minima Moralia*. If one takes echoing to be standardized, deceptive, or evidence of a spell, one will probably hear the gnomic phrase "Echo reconciles" as an apodictic statement, a statement that does not allow for any kind of objection or appeal, hesitation or uncertainty. One will hear it as a statement that does not mean what it says. If, however, one takes echoing to be an effect indistinguishable from a cause and capable of prompting reconciliation, bringing consolation, and defining love, then one will probably here the same phrase differently, as an infinitely discrete, tenuous and receding utterance.

In his reading of Mörike's poem, Adorno recalls the "involuntarily friendly image of child, cat, and mouse dancing, the two animals on their hind legs" (Adorno 1970, 188). Reconciliation lies here in the divergence between what is willed, "sadistic identification," and what is suggested, "friendliness." It is as if the reconciliatory force of echoing, of the echoing that takes place between two images that exist only as and in one single poem, that are the same and yet different, that have both reinforcing and releasing qualities, depended upon a deactivation of the will because reconciliation is not something that can be willfully sought. The reconciliation Echo, or echoing, achieves has nothing to do with a voluntary process. Echo's otherness, the otherness of a noun that might be a proper name, is not the otherness of an intention aiming at reconciliation rather than at identification, whether in the sense of an identification with violence or in the sense of a violent identification of a subject. Adorno's reading of Mörike's poem is a piece of poetic critique inasmuch as the gnomic phrase "Echo reconciles," this phrase whose succinctness functions as an author's signature and whose elliptical reservedness escapes authorship altogether, echoes the echoing of performance and demonstration in the "Mousetrap Rhyme."

Nothing and no one can guarantee that a performative force of reconciliation emerges from the artwork, from its echoing of performance and demonstration, least of all the artist, the author, the poet. Hence it is reconciliation as a performative force that makes art fundamentally enigmatic. The difficulty of poetic critique called forth by the enigmaticalness of art is the difficulty of love that Adorno emphasizes in *Minima Moralia:* "All is over if what one finds for the other [*was man für ihn findet*] no longer reaches him" (Adorno 1980, 248/217). Inasmuch as what love finds to give to the other is always an echo that comes from the other, poetic critique that can no

longer reach the artwork, the artwork's otherness, has lost its feel for the echoing effect, its ability to love. It looks for meanings or messages conveyed by the artwork, ignoring the fact that the artwork has absorbed and transformed them, and that they are not essential but accidental features of art. It misses out on the "infinite" (Adorno 1970, 188) that artworks harbor within themselves, the true "infinity" that Echo and echoing alone disclose.

Bibliography

Adorno, Theodor W. *Ästhetische Theorie*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1970. [English translation: *Aesthetic Theory*. Trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor. London: The Athlone Press, 1997.]

Adorno, Theodor W. *Minima Moralia. Gesammelte Schriften*. Vol. 4. Ed. Rolf Tiedemann. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1980. [English translation: *Minima Moralia*. Trans. E. Jephcott. London: Verso, 1999.]

Derrida, Jacques. *Voyous*. Paris: Galilée, 2003a.

Derrida, Jacques. *Chaque fois unique, la fin du monde*. Paris: Galilée, 2003b.

Jonathan Elmer

On Not Forcing the Question: Criticism and Playing Along

1

Critics are contemptible. How else can we explain the stream of taunts and mockeries directed at them? Critics are, first of all, wannabes: they wish they were artists, but they aren't. This leads to a pervasive envy, captured well in Susan Sontag's summary judgment: "Interpretation is the revenge of the intellectual upon the artist" (Sontag 1990 [1966], 7). Critics wish to share in the glory of the artist, but they don't: "I have been all over the world and I have never seen a statue of a critic." (This gibe is variously attributed to Jean Sibelius or Leonard Bernstein.) The more exorbitant the artistic ambition, it seems, the greater the contempt for those who merely interpret. Gustave Flaubert, a man with ambitions, implies that the creative defect in critics is analogous to the moral defect of spies: people "write criticism because they are unable to be artists, just as a man unfit to bear arms becomes a police spy" (Flaubert 1979, xv). Elsewhere, Flaubert makes his moral point differently: "Criticism occupies the lowest place in the literary hierarchy; as regards form, almost always; and as regards 'moral value,' incontestably. It comes after rhyming games and acrostics, which at least require a certain inventiveness." (xv)

Incompetent, resentful, underhand, policing – such is the standard litany of the critic's faults. In these attacks, the critic is always in a derivative relation to the artist and the artwork; he is a parasite, a kind of tick. This attitude toward critics is neither new nor rare; I certainly could have chosen other examples. What I want to emphasize is the intensity of feeling that animates this current of thought, and the grandiosity of its terms. *A statue for the artist!* Greatness lies with the artist, paltriness with the spying critic. The whole relationship seems colored by very basic, even primitive, experiences and fantasies, as if "His Majesty, the Baby (Artist)" felt constantly hemmed in, controlled, misunderstood, or disciplined by some witnessing or surveilling presence – the critic as a *never* "good-enough" minder.

In any case, that is the direction I want to travel in this essay. I wish to consider the problem of 'poetic critique' as encompassed in this scenario of a creative actor and a witnessing other. The twinning of creator and witness is, in one sense, existential: every human act, creative or otherwise, is born into a world in which others have come before. The witnessing other may enable this creative act, like oxygen helping the spark to flame, or might disable it, a wet blanket thrown over that spark too soon. But as is signaled by my riffing above on psychoanalytic mottos – "His Majesty, the Baby" (Freud) and "good enough mother" (Winnicott) – I also take psychoanalysis to be a privileged discourse for any inquiry into the question of poetic critique. That is

because the work of analysis is always a *joint* production of patient and analyst. What is brought forth through the complex weave of unconscious materials, transference effects, and interpretation is new meaning that is also always old: it is both *poiesis* and critique. The psychoanalytic situation suggests that while the creative and the interpretive are necessarily co-present dimensions, they are not co-incident – just two names for the same thing – nor, for that matter, are they fully separable. I will argue, in fact, that the question of the relation of the creative and the critical, of that which brings newness into the world – *poiesis* – and that which works on what is found in the world, may benefit from not being broached at all.

My warrant for such an approach is the work of psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott. Here is perhaps the best-known statement of his influential ideas about the transitional object, about illusion and play, and the witnessing presence necessary to such play:

> The transitional object and the transitional phenomena start each human being off with what will always be important for them, i.e. a neutral area of experience which will not be challenged. *Of the transitional object it can be said that it is a matter of agreement between us and the baby that we will never ask the question: 'Did you conceive of this or was it presented to you from without?' The important point is that no decision on this point is expected. The question is not to be formulated.* (Winnicott 1991 [1971], 12)

Winnicott remains focused on this "neutral" or "intermediate" (11, 13, 105) area of experience for his entire career. It is, he believes, the very ground of creative "experiencing" (2, 6, 14) in all of life (he often uses this odd gerund to keep our eye on process rather than product). If this passage through the "experiencing" of a zone of "illusion" (3, 11) – the word illusion, we should point out, derives from *in-ludere*, in play; – if this zone is not happily traversed, it is likely the child will have troubles in life, will find it hard to consider life meaningful. These transitional phenomena in which the relation between subjective and objective is not broached are, Winnicott believes, essential for human being in its totality:

> It is assumed here that the task of reality-acceptance is never completed, that no human being is free from the strain of relating inner and outer reality, and that relief from this strain is provided by an intermediate area of experience which is not challenged (arts, religion, etc.). This intermediate area is in direct continuity with the play area of the small child who is 'lost' in play. (13)

The swiftness and the unobtrusiveness with which Winnicott jumps from the minutiae of child analysis to the furthest reaches of "culture" can make it hard to grasp the claim he is making. The child "lost" in play, the child with whom the interpreting other has a tacit agreement not to force certain questions, is in "direct continuity" with *any* grown person participating in the aesthetic and religious dimensions of life. What we learn from child psychoanalysis, in other words, may be fruitfully transposed to analyses of the arts. This is hardly a new idea. Psychoanalysis has never shied away from extending its interpretive domain beyond the consulting room;

Freud himself was very interested in using the tools of psychoanalysis to interpret artists, artworks, and aesthetic experience more generally. But there is something in Winnicott's work – in his style of presentation as much as in the content of his ideas – that is unique in the psychoanalytic canon, and that suggests other lessons than Freud's might be available.

Adam Phillips argues that the "genre of simplicity in which Winnicott writes, a wry version of pastoral, is in fact a kind of elusiveness. But the shrewd ingenuousness of his writing, unprecedented in the psychoanalytic tradition, is consistent with one of his therapeutic aims: to protect the privacy of the self in the making of personal sense and, by the same token, personal non-sense" (Phillips 1988, 14). This seems right, and also complicated: on the one hand, the explanatory reach claimed by Winnicott's idea of this unforced "neutral zone" – "arts, religion, *etc.*" [emphasis mine] – is exorbitant, and Winnicott might thereby be said to display some of the grandiosity I was flagging above. On the other hand, this grandiosity is displayed in such a recessive and "elusive" manner that it is hard to know if one has understood it correctly. Some of this is due to Winnicott's strong predilection for the passive voice: "Of the transitional object *it can be* said"; "The important point is that no decision on this point *is expected*"; "The question *is not to be* formulated." Passivity is so charged for Winnicott that, as Barbara Johnson has remarked, objects themselves are invested with agency so that their own pathos can be registered: the transitional object's "fate is to be gradually allowed to be decathected [...] It is not forgotten and it is not mourned. It loses meaning" (Johnson 2008, 100). When Phillips writes that Winnicott's style "is consistent" with his "therapeutic aim" to "protect the privacy of the self," it is both the patient's self *and his own* that Winnicott has in mind: "The need of the self to be both intelligible and hidden that he found in his patients is reflected in his style." (Phillips 1988, 14)

At the same time, Winnicott's elusiveness, his desire to remain hidden, is curiously vulnerable and exposed.[1] It is this simultaneously recessive and vulnerable posture toward the work of psychoanalytic interpretation that sets Winnicott apart. In one paper, he invokes the proverbial armchair philosopher only to suggest that if the philosopher gets out of his chair and on the floor with the playing child things would look different. Winnicott's elusiveness is deployed from a position on the floor, as it were. Compare this to Freud in his famous analysis of the child's game of *fort-da* in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle.* Doing everything he can to keep a distance from the context of his observation, Freud refers to his grandson drily as a "little boy of one and a half" (Freud 1961 [1920], 8); and perhaps to keep at bay any worries that his family relationship to the child has led him to impute cleverness where there is none, Freud makes clear that the "child was not at all precocious in his intellectual development" (8). How, finally, does Freud come to understand that the "loud, long-drawn-out o-o-o-o" is in fact the word "fort"? He does not tell us; he merely reports

---

[1] On the importance of "self-exposure" in criticism, see Chaouli 2013.

that the child's "mother and the writer of the present account were agreed in think-ing" (9) that it was so. Reading this passage with Winnicott in mind, we might re-mark that here, too, we have a kind of exhibition of hiddenness. But there is a crucial difference: in Freud's case the several layers of recessiveness – an obscured family relation, avoidance of the I, passive voice – are in service to analytic power rather than the kind of "vulnerability" we find in Winnicott. "One day I made an observa-tion that confirmed my view" (9), Freud writes, and goes on to describe the famous play with the spool. "The interpretation of the game then became obvious" (9). Case closed.

Child analysis was never a central concern of Freud's, even as his forays into this practice (think of "Little Hans") foreshadowed important developments in the psy-choanalytic tradition. Winnicott was a pediatrician before he was an analyst, but even if he had not been, he might well have steered toward the interpretation of chil-dren, since the two dominant schools of psychoanalysis in Britain, those of Anna Freud and Melanie Klein, relied so fundamentally on child analysis. Winnicott was a major figure in what has come to be called the "Third Way," along with Marion Mil-ner, Masud Khan, and others. In "Playing: A Theoretical Statement," Winnicott sig-nals his divergence from Klein, in particular: "in so far as she was concerned with play," it was "almost entirely with the use of play" (Winnicott 1991 [1971], 39). She moves too efficiently, Winnicott suggests, from observation to interpretation, as Freud for example moves from the fort-da game to the "obvious" interpretation that this game meant "mastery." The "psychoanalyst has been too busy using play content to look at the playing child," Winnicott writes, "and to write about playing as a thing in itself. It is obvious that I am making a significant distinction between the meanings of the noun 'play' and the verbal noun 'playing.'" (40)

What, exactly, is Winnicott's disagreement with Klein? What's the difference be-tween "play" and "playing"? Klein's clinical acumen was much celebrated, and her innovations in the technique of child analysis were widely influential. It is also true that Klein took an extremely active interpretive posture, something that, from her earliest papers, she argued was necessary:

> As soon as the small patient has given some sort of insight into his complexes – whether through his games or his drawings or phantasies – I consider that interpretation can and should begin. This does not run counter to the well-tried rule that the analyst should wait till the transference is there before he begins interpreting, because with children the transference takes place imme-diately. (Klein 1949 [1932], 47)

With small children, Klein explains, separation between conscious and unconscious behavior is only tenuously in place, with the result that many defenses (such as those inhibiting transference) are not present. At the same time, anxiety is much more dis-abling in many children than in many older patients. This anxiety also calls for early intervention. A girl of three that Klein calls Trude "exhibited [...] much anxiety at her very first coming." Klein tells us that "in such patients prompt interpretation was the

only means of lessening anxiety" (53). Children present special problems calling for swift and vigorous interpretive intervention.

Reading Klein can be a harrowing experience, not only because the clinical material from small children is so often violent and florid, but also because her own interpretive vigilance is so unrelenting. Klein's last publication was a detailed case study of a ten-year-old boy, Richard, whom she treated during the war. Here is a taste of what it is like:

> Richard [...] often feared that a nasty man – a kind of tramp – would come and kidnap Mummy during the night, [...].
>
> *Mrs K.* asked how he thought the tramp would get into Mummy's room.
>
> Richard said (after some resistance) that he might get in through the window: perhaps he would break in.
>
> *Mrs K.* asked if he also wondered whether the tramp would hurt Mummy.
>
> Richard (reluctantly) answered that he thought the man might hurt her, but he, Richard, would go to her rescue.
>
> *Mrs K.* suggested that the tramp who would hurt Mummy at night seemed to him very much like Hitler who frightened Cook in the air-raid and ill-treated the Austrians. Richard knew that Mrs K. was Austrian, and so she too would be ill-treated. At night he might have been afraid that when his parents went to bed something could happen between them with their genitals that would injure Mummy.
>
> Richard looked surprised and frightened. (Klein 1961, 20 – 21)

This exchange comes from the first session. The analysis continues in this vein for another four hundred pages.

At ten years of age, Richard is more verbally fluent than many of Klein's younger patients. But play with toys is as swiftly reduced to its unconscious meaning as Richard's verbal material: "[I]n the first hour," Klein writes of Peter, not quite four years old, "his knocking together of the two carriages and horses had been followed by his remarking that he had got a new little brother. So I continued my interpretation and said: 'You thought to yourself that Daddy and Mummy bumped their thingummies together and that made your brother Fritz be born'" (Klein 1949, 42). Whatever the efficacy of Klein's clinical work – and there seems to be lots of evidence that she helped her young patients very much – her interpretive method cannot help seeming aggressive. There is, in the end, a known code to which fantasies can, and must, be reduced: the code of oedipal feelings, primal scenes, the entire Freudian armory that is unquestioningly invoked even as it is constantly being revised and reshaped by Klein's clinical experience. Toys bumping = thingummies bumping. "In so far as she was concerned with play," Winnicott had remarked about Klein, it was "almost entirely with the use of play" (Winnicott 1991 [1971], 39). The child's use of play, *and hers.* The idea that play, as an act of creativity, would express the "need of the self to

be both intelligible *and hidden* [emphasis mine]" (Phillips 1988, 14), is not a concern of Klein's.

I noted earlier Winnicott's strange preference for "experiencing" where we might expect "experience," and his choice of "playing" over play comes from the same disposition: namely, to avoid relapsing, for as long as feasible, into interpretive abstraction – "play" (abstraction) serves or means "mastery" (abstraction); or, toys bumping means thingummies bumping. But interpretive abstraction can also lead to over-estimation of the objective dimension itself, of the toy, game, or creation, understood as separate from, even if revealing, the secrets of the child. This version of interpretive abstraction loses sight of the mystery of creativity itself: "When psycho-analysis has attempted to tackle the subject of creativity it has to a large extent lost sight of the main theme," Winnicott writes in "Creativity and Its Origins." "It is possible to take Leonardo Da Vinci and make very important and interesting comments on the relationship between his work and certain events that took place in his infancy" (Winnicott 1991 [1971], 69). But:

> It is inevitable that such studies of great men tend to irritate artists and creative people in general. It could be that these studies [...] are irritating because they look as if they are getting somewhere, as if they will soon be able to explain why this man was great and that woman achieved much, but the direction of inquiry is wrong. The main theme is being circumvented, that of the creative impulse itself. The creation stands between the observer and the artist's creativity. (69)

Let me pause here and gather up some threads. I began with the tradition of spleen directed at the critic. Winnicott understands such rage, though he calls it, more mildly, "irritation," and suggests it might be due to interpretation (or what I am also calling criticism) "looking like it is getting somewhere." Interpreters might "get somewhere" by recourse to a code, but also – and this is more strange – by letting "the creation [stand] between the observer and the artist's creativity." Critical methods that over-invest the object in this latter way are in fact over-investing their method, they are eager to "get somewhere," to basically take over control of the playing. But what would it mean to stay focused on the artist's creativity, not ignoring the creations but understanding them as emblems of a process that should be allowed to be ongoing, not swiftly resolved into meaning? This is where Winnicott's insistence on "not forcing the question" becomes his central technical contribution. To force the question – to require an answer to the question of whether this object is made up or found – is, finally, to over-value the object. It is to ossify it to the extent that it becomes an object in the interpreter's own itinerary, like a baton being passed. But if the child or artist has passed the baton, he or she is no longer playing. In worrying about the ontological status of the object, play is suspended, or ruined.

2

I want now to pull the focus out from child analysis to ask some questions about interpretation and aesthetic experience more broadly construed. What Winnicott is so intent upon – not forcing the question, leaving the intermediate space unchallenged, its paradoxes unresolved – can sometimes look familiar, and sometimes strange. Granting for the moment the possibility of "direct" continuity between infantile play and "arts, religion, etc.," we could argue that the tacit compact between creative behavior and its witness (who might now, in our wider focus, be a reader, or theater-goer) *not* to ask certain questions goes by some familiar names: the "suspension of disbelief," for example. Here is Bill Watterson, the creator of the *Calvin and Hobbes* comic strip, on this topic:

> The so-called 'gimmick' of my strip – the two versions of Hobbes – is sometimes misunderstood. I don't think Hobbes as a doll miraculously comes to life when Calvin's around. Neither do I think of Hobbes as the product of Calvin's imagination. The nature of Hobbes's reality doesn't interest me, and each story goes out of its way to avoid resolving the issue. (qtd. in Groensteen 2013 [2011], 129)

This is satisfyingly Winnicottian in its staging: a choice is there – animated stuffed tiger, or imaginary projection? – and that choice is refused. "The nature of Hobbes' reality doesn't interest" Watterson, and if we are reading the strip in a Winnicottian spirit, it won't interest us either. We'd be nincompoops if we worried too much about Hobbes' reality, just as we would be if we worried the problem of Hamlet's reality when we go to the theater. If Watterson was playing with a real child named Calvin, then this readiness not to ask a question would be in service of continued play. Calvin is not real of course, but Watterson's treatment of the Calvin/Hobbes relationship works as if he is, and in any case is in service of keeping the play proceeding, and the strip open-ended: "each story goes out of its way to avoid resolving the issue."

This interest in keeping play proceeding, what Winnicott calls an interest in "playing" rather than merely "play," is one result of not forcing the question. One way in which creator and interpreting witness come together to produce something that we might call "poetic critique," is by understanding the playing involved as part of a process that both precedes and succeeds the objects created and interpreted. There are some kinds of "playing along" that have, strictly speaking, no beginning or ending, merely a series of resting-places and way-stations. Socratic dialogue, a special kind of "play," often has this feeling; and perhaps philosophy, concerned as it is with fundamental problems that hide their origins and ends, has a special closeness to our problem of playing along. (If so, it is not without paradox: not forcing the question by forcing a multitude of questions!) In the intricate final movement of Stanley Cavell's *The Claim of Reason*, there are a few curious pages on dolls. Cavell has been asking questions about identity, about bodies, about our idea that bodies

are living, and so on. He has just finished ruminating on the relationship between a statue and the stone of which it is made. Suddenly, a new theme is introduced:

> A statue has aspects. By walking around it, by the changing light, in your changing mood, the figure can be seen as vulnerable, as indomitable, as in repose, as if in readiness. A doll has occasions. I am thinking of a rag doll. It can be happy or sad, fed or punished. In repose it has aspects, for example it can be seen as sleeping or dead or sun-bathing. But only if you do not know which is true. (Cavell 1979, 401)

The distinction between "aspects" and "occasions" Cavell develops here points to two different kinds of life we are prepared to impute to non-living things. Aspects are, as it were, snapshots of the "life" of the statue, always traceable to *our* changing visions: "the figure *can be seen* [emphasis mine] as vulnerable," etc. "Occasions," by contrast, imply an ongoingness, an insertion of the figure in a history that determines the "truth" that only your *not* knowing would allow you to see the doll as merely a matter of aspects – as "sleeping or dead or sun-bathing." But where does this "truth" beyond aspects come from?

The simple answer is this: "There is only one who knows which is true, the one whose doll it is" (401). We're back at the relation between the one who knows – the child – and the one who wishes to know, the observer, the player-along, here the philosopher. (Of course, in the psychoanalytic version, the child both knows and does not know.) Cavell describes a series of exchanges about the doll between its "owner" – he questions that word too – and the observer. The point of these exchanges is that even if the observer defers – "At some point my say comes to an end. I defer to the one whose doll it is" (402) – the "truth" of the doll's "occasion" is nevertheless a joint production.

> There are criteria in terms of which I settle judgments about the (other's) doll. To know whether a concept applies I have to look – at the doll. I have to determine if I can see it in this way, get that occasion for it to dawn for me. Otherwise I am only humoring the one whose doll it is. Perhaps I am tired, or have a head-ache. I cannot in any case experience the meaning of the words about the doll. The doll seems rags. I still know what a doll is; but at the moment I am doll-blind. (401–402)

The fact that you can know what a doll is and be doll-blind says something about the kind of knowledge we are dealing with. This knowledge of what a doll is does not help us see the doll, does not help us overcome doll-blindness, when it hits. Knowing what a doll is does not help us "enter into its history, achieve the spirit in which concepts of life are applied to it" (403). To "enter into its history," if I understand correctly, is neither to deny the doll – to say it is just rags – nor merely to defer to the one whose doll it is; it is to "get that occasion to dawn for me." Notice here that Cavell is describing a situation in which too restricted a focus on the object – on "what a doll is" – will fail in understanding the reliance of that object on a process, an "occasion," that exceeds it. Getting an "occasion to dawn for me" is a kind of imaginative

investment that is neither "poetic" nor "critical," or rather is both, but neither at the expense of the other.

Such imaginative investment extends the "history" of the doll in the way we might hope sensitive criticism allows its "occasions" to continue their histories. It does not, in any case, make too much of the form, or "reality," of the doll, knowing that its life does not exist there. It does not hijack its history either. Toward the end of these penetrating pages on the "occasions" of the doll's life, Cavell forwards his own unforced question: "What is the doll? (I would like to answer that question because I feel I know everything there is to know about dolls. But I would like not to have to answer it since of course I know absolutely nothing about dolls that others do not know)" (404). Some questions, the answers to which everyone knows but no one knows differently, are better left unanswered. Cavell's method – at once poetic and critical – tacks between the urgency of answering and the urgency of not answering; his genius is in his ability to ask questions for which such tacking is the best response. It is not incidental that child's play – with an other, since there always is an other, one hopefully fending off "doll-blindness" – provides such a powerful occasion to turn away from the too-quick answer in favor of open sailing on a sea of questions. It is child's play, in any case, that here provides Cavell with an "occasion" to exercise and exemplify his unique method of poetic critique, a method for which, as his book's epigraph from Ralph Waldo Emerson has it, "it is not instruction, but provocation, that I can receive from another soul" (iii).

3

The English literary critic William Empson was well acquainted with the contempt in which critics were held: "Critics, as 'barking dogs,' [...] are of two sorts: those who merely relieve themselves against the flower of beauty, and those, less continent, who afterwards scratch it up" (Empson 1947, 9). But he remains unfazed:

> I myself, I must confess, aspire to the second of these classes; unexplained beauty arouses an irritation in me, a sense that this would be a good place to scratch; the reasons that make a line of verse to give pleasure, I believe, are like the reasons for anything else; one can reason about them; and while it may be true that the roots of beauty ought not to be violated, it seems to me very arrogant of the appreciative critic to think that he could do this, if he chose, by a little scratching. (9)

At first blush, the "appreciative" critic, who eschews scratching like a barking dog, might seem more Winnicottian in his interpretive restraint than Empson. But it has never been a question of not asking questions *at all*; Winnicott's concern is with the kind of digging that looks too much "like it is getting somewhere," as if it really were possible to get fully at the root of things (about which Empson is skeptical). Like Cavell, Empson practices poetic critique as a kind of interpretive errancy, getting all kinds of places but perhaps nowhere in particular.

Empson's first book was *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, a work about which one could well ask why it begins where it does or ends where it does. In the Preface to the second 1947 edition of his book, Empson considers some of the criticisms he received after the publication of the first edition. The prevailing mood of the critics seems to have been exasperation. And it is an understandable response: Empson's 'method,' if it is one, is to unspool a variety of meanings from a piece of verse like a peddler unpacking his wares for visual effect; to consider how these shades of meaning might unite to produce the power of the poetry; to briefly admire the array again; and then move on to another example. In reply, Empson focuses his response on one review by James Smith, who had argued that Empson fails miserably in what is the "first business" of the critic, namely "the passing of a judgment on value" (xii). Empson admits that Smith is correct in this charge: "Even in the fuller examples, where I hope I have made clear what I feel about the poem as a whole, I don't try to 'make out a case' for my opinion of its value" (xiii). This is because Empson understands the role of judgment to be not some one-off conclusion or ruling, but rather a structural assumption of the work of interpretation itself: "The judgment indeed comes either earlier or later than the process which I was trying to examine. You think the poem is worth the trouble before you choose to go into it carefully, and you know more about what it is worth when you have done so" (xiii). The judgment of value is implied in the work of interpretation itself, in other words; it both precedes it as the notion that interpretation is worth undertaking right here, with this poem, and extends beyond any delimited act of practical criticism: you then know *more* about "what it is worth," but not perhaps everything.

The question of value judgments gets entangled, through Empson's generous quotation of Smith's negative review, with a version of the Winnicottian question that must not be forced. Winnicott had written that "*it is a matter of agreement between us and the baby that we will never ask the question: 'Did you conceive of this or was it presented to you from without?'*" (Winnicott 1991 [1971], 12) In the present context, we might paraphrase this as follows: "Is this poem a thing in the mind or a thing in the world?" Mr. James Smith has decided in advance how he answers this question, as it regards the ambiguities analyzed by Empson:

> Is the ambiguity referred to that of life – is it a bundle of diverse forces, bound together only by their co-existence? Or is it that of a literary device – of the allusion, conceit, or pun, in one of their more or less conscious forms? If the first, then Mr. Empson's thesis is wholly mistaken; for a poem is not a mere fragment of life; it is a fragment that has been detached, considered, and judged by a mind. A poem is a noumenon rather than a phenomenon. If the second, then at least we can say that Mr. Empson's thesis is exaggerated. (qtd. in Empson 1947, xii)

"A poem is a noumenon rather than a phenomenon," a thing in the mind, detached from the world *by* the mind, which also makes a judgment about it. This is Smith's position. Empson is less sure. He brings up the widely shared position that an artist's judgment about his or her own work "may be wrong" (Empson 1947, xiv).

> As I remember, one of the best-known short poems by Blake is actually crossed out in the note-book which is the only source of it. This has no bearing on any 'conflict' theory; it is only part of the difficulty as to knowing whether a poem is a noumenon or a phenomenon. Critics have long been allowed to say that a poem may be something inspired which meant more than the poet knew. (xiv)

The "difficulty" here is that the poem is *both* a noumenon and a phenomenon, or *neither* only one or the other. It is not *irrelevant* to an interpretation of the poem that Blake crossed it out; it is just that the poem is also a thing in the world, larger and more lasting than Blake's judgment of its merits. Others have come along and judged it quite good, and for them, too, the poem is both noumenon and phenomenon, a fact that makes their "judgment" in Smith's sense just as relevant and just as revisable as Blake's. Practical criticism takes place in the space in which judgments are deferred: "the point I am trying to make is that this final 'judgment' is a thing which must be indefinitely postponed" (xv). After the example from Blake, Empson brings up an exhibition of Constable then showing in which a 'study' that Constable clearly considered inferior to his finished canvas is in fact the more prized work at that moment. "Would Mr. James Smith say that the 'study', which is now more ad-mired than the finished work, was a noumenon or a phenomenon? I do not see any way out of the dilemma which would leave the profound truths he was express-ing much importance for a practical decision" (xv). Profound truths without much importance for the practicalities of interpretation: it is from this perspective that it seems not just desirable, but necessary, to leave a question unbroached and unan-swered, "indefinitely."

I conclude with another snippet from Empson, this one from *Some Versions of Pastoral*, first published in 1935. Adam Phillips had seen Winnicott's approach to an-alytic interpretation as answering the "need of the self to be both intelligible and hid-den" (Phillips 1988, 14). And when he came to describe how that stance toward the self showed up in Winnicott's style, he reached for the "pastoral": "the genre of sim-plicity in which Winnicott writes, a wry version of pastoral, is in fact a kind of elu-siveness. But the shrewd ingenuousness of his writing [...] is consistent with one of his therapeutic aims: to protect the privacy of the self in the making of personal sense and, by the same token, personal non-sense" (14). Interpretation here is the vehicle of an ethics, one seeking understanding but respecting firm limits to it. But what does this have to do with "pastoral"? Empson suggests an answer:

> The feeling that life is essentially inadequate to the human spirit, and yet that a good life must avoid saying so, is naturally at home with most versions of pastoral; in pastoral you take a lim-ited life and pretend it is the full and normal one, and a suggestion that one must do this with all life, because the normal is itself limited, is easily put into the trick though not necessary to its power. Conversely any expression of the idea that all life is limited may be regarded as only a trick of pastoral, perhaps chiefly intended to hold all our attention and sympathy for some lim-ited life, though again this is not necessary to it either on grounds of truth or beauty; in fact the suggestion of pastoral may be only a protection for the idea which must at last be taken alone. The business of interpretation is obviously very complicated. Literary uses of the problem of

free-will and necessity, for example, may be noticed to give curiously bad arguments and I should think get their strength from keeping you in doubt between the two methods. Thus Hardy is fond of showing us an unusually stupid person subjected to very unusually bad luck, and then a moral is drawn, not merely by inference but by solemn assertion, that we are all in the same boat as this person whose story is striking precisely because it is unusual. The effect may be very grand, but to make an otherwise logical reader accept the process must depend on giving him obscure reasons for wishing it so. It is clear at any rate that this grand notion of the inadequacy of life, so various in its means of expression, needs to be counted as a possible territory of the pastoral. (Empson 1974, 114–115)

Reading this extraordinary passage, one cannot help agreeing that "the business of interpretation is obviously very complicated." There are, I think, two intersecting problems or levels: the question of "the inadequacy of life" and the question of how pastoral works. Taking the example of Hardy is perhaps the easiest way in: Hardy's grim texts are pastoral, thinks Empson, because the story of "an unusually stupid person subjected to very unusually bad luck" is somehow made to suggest that "we are all in the same boat as this person whose story is striking precisely because it is unusual." We can see how it works – Empson likes to call it the "trick" of pastoral – but we cannot really say *why* it works: there must be "obscure reasons" in the reader "for wishing it so." And Empson's hunch is that those reasons are obscure, are made to remain obscure, because they touch on the "feeling that life is inadequate to the human spirit," that our own puny, mortal life is hopelessly "limited" with respect to all that our spirit may encompass. We are all living a "limited life" pretending to be "the full and normal one." Pastoral, it turns out, is a tried-and-true method for simultaneously expressing and hiding a self that is both limited and unlimited. Life is "essentially inadequate to the human spirit" but "*a good life must avoid saying so*" [emphasis mine]. It is this circumspection, this essential reserve, that pastoral addresses by offering "reasons" that remain "obscure." Interpretation here proceeds through a syncopation of expression and opacity. The individual both knows and does not say that life is inadequate to his spirit. The pastoral writer both knows, and does not say, that his audience has "obscure reasons for wishing it so." The literary critic both understands and remains puzzled by the "trick" of pastoral. All this succeeds only if certain questions are not forced. A good life must avoid saying certain things. The business of interpretation is obviously very complicated.

Bibliography

Cavell, Stanley. *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1979.

Chaouli, Michel. "Criticism and Style." *New Literary History* 44 (2013): 323–344.

Empson, William. *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. New York: New Directors, 1947 [1930].

Empson, William. *Some Versions of Pastoral*. New York: New Directions, 1974 [1935].

Flaubert, Gustave. *The Letters of Gustave Flaubert, 1830–1857*. Ed. and trans. Francis Steegmuller. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1979.

Freud, Sigmund. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Trans. James Strachey. New York: Norton, 1961 [1920].

Groensteen, Thierry. *Comics and Narration*. Trans. Ann Miller. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013 [2011].

Johnson, Barbara. *Persons and Things*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2008.

Klein, Melanie. *The Psycho-Analysis of Children*. Trans. Alix Strachey. London: Hogarth Press, 1949 [1932].

Klein, Melanie. *Narrative of a Child Analysis: The Conduct of the Psycho-Analysis of Children as seen in the Treatment of a Ten-year-old Boy*. New York: The Free Press, 1961.

Phillips, Adam. *Winnicott*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988.

Sontag, Susan. *Against Interpretation*. New York: Anchor Books, 1990 [1966].

Winnicott, D.W. *Playing and Reality*. London: Routledge, 1991 [1971].

Anne Eusterschulte
La Chambre Poétique

> No, I won't leave the world – I'll enter a
> lunatic asylum and see if the profundity of
> insanity reveals to me the riddles of life.
> (Kierkegaard: Journal 1836 – 1837)

Shadow Plays

What is a *chambre poétique?* First, an allusion to Roland Barthes' *La chambre claire. Notes sur la photographie* and its reference to the *camera lucida.* Let's follow this trace.

A *camera lucida* is an auxiliary instrument for drawing. Using a prism that is attached to a drawing board with a tripod, the artist can sight the object through an eyehole and also see a prismatic projection of the same object directly on the paper. But it is not a purely technical achievement that makes this *divided view* possible. The *camera lucida* is, in a figurative sense, a mediation between an external object of perception, the projected appearance on the paper, the mental imagination, and the somatic recording process. In the gaze, the external object *translates* itself into a pictorial reflection on the object whose appearance the artist's hand captures as an outline.

We remember the myth of the origin of painting: skiagraphy. Pliny reports that the daughter of the sculptor Butades, to capture the image of her beloved, framed his shadow in lines on a wall by the light of a lamp (Plinius Hist. Nat. XXXV 151). The shadow is a testimony of a person, paradoxically, both present and absent, a genuine expression of ephemerality. The draftswoman looks at a faint echo, the shadow, and translates it to another level of presence, the silhouette drawn on the wall. Within the contours, the picture is empty, merely a dark surface like a sheet of paper not yet written on.

For Barthes, the photographic projection of light guarantees a reference that is somehow present in the picture, yet without by any means losing its intangible nature. The object is there – without it there would be no projection – but it is equally absent. Each picture offers a momentary record that extracts something from the flow of time and captures it photo-graphically, i.e., as a light drawing. Photography brings something to light: it is an art of light and shadow, it creates a pictorial sphere of appearances. But what of a human being can be experienced through a picture? In his phenomenological observations on photography, Barthes starts from an experience of loss. It is a sadness (*chagrin*) that is evoked by the image, like a fleeting shad-

ow from another world. The external picture can thus almost evoke a desire, a deep love, or cause pain. It tears open a wound in the self-reflection of the viewer.[1]

The relationship between interior and exterior views, their translation into a projective, poetic room of reflection, and the material representations shall guide us in the following to room situations. In the figurative as well as in the literal sense: to poetic chambers as places of a shadow theater and thus to a specific form of poetic imagery, self-reflection, and criticism.

But can images – those in language, painterly, photographic or performative – communicate something of the inner life of a singular person?

Poetic Shadow Casting

It is Søren Kierkegaard who, using shadow silhouettes (*Skyggerids*), considers the possibility of depicting the interior. There are movements of the soul that take place on the surface: they are written on the face, as we say. For instance, moods such as joy or immediate sadness might be read off the facial features and included in a picture.[2] Kierkegaard, however, is concerned with invisible, existential forces hidden deeply in the abyss of the soul, something which he calls 'reflective sorrow' (*reflekterede Sorg*).[3] The I is aware of this inner sorrow but is unable to completely understand it and therefore constantly struggles with itself. These inner struggles do not manifest themselves to the outside world and remain under cover.

The 'reflective sorrow' is constantly in motion and does not understand the reason for its sadness, and thus wanders around searching. It refuses a direct depictability.[4] This irreducible obscurity is *one* dimension of poetic critique. It is directed against physiognomic character studies that claim to analyze the interior of the soul.

Barthes has emphasized that the evidence of the photographic image, as far as human beings are concerned, is always accompanied by a genuine enigmaticalness, an ambiguous *présence-absence* (Maurice Blanchot). For even if the photographic image certifies the existence of a person, a "croyance fondamentale" (Barthes 1980, 44, 165), some inaccessibility remains nevertheless. And this is where the shadows come into play. What emerges in the representation is a mode of expression

---

1 "I wanted to explore it not as a question (a theme) but as a wound: I see, I feel, hence I notice, I observe, and I think." (Barthes 2006, 8, 30)

2 Kierkegaard knew the *Physiognomic Fragments* of Lavater, who illustrated his studies with silhouettes (see Liessmann 2017, 133).

3 The Danish term *sorg* has a wide range of meanings, including sorrow, grief, worrying about, caring for (*omsorg*), and thus loving attention. We can interpret *sorg* here as an existential restlessness in relation to another person or challenging circumstances of life.

4 "The exterior pallor [*ydre Bleghed*] is, as it were, the interior's good-bye, and thought and imagination [*Tanken og Phantasien*] hurry after the fugitive, which hides in the secret recesses." (Kierkegaard 1988, 169; Kierkegaard 1920, 170)

("air"), or, to put it more accurately, a unique aura[5]: "The air (*air*) is not a schematic, intellectual datum, the way a silhouette is. Nor is the air a simple analogy *(analogie)* [...]. No, the air is that exorbitant thing *(cette chose exorbitante)*, which induces from body to soul – *animula*, little individual soul [...]. Thus the air is the luminous shadow *(L'air est ainsi l'ombre lumineuse)* which accompanies the body; and if the photograph fails to show this air, then the body moves without a shadow," i.e., if the photograph is not able to "supply the transparent soul its bright shadow *(donner à l'âme transparente son ombre claire)*, the subject dies forever" (Barthes 2006, 45, 109 – 110; Barthes 1980, 45, 167 – 170).

Kierkegaard's reflective sorrow is a constant back and forth, like the restless up and down in the smallest of spaces. It is not written on the face but only hints at itself. It gives a wink (*Vink*) or lays a trace (*Spor*). Because of its restlessness it is a constant *becoming* (*bestandig i Vorden*). There is no fixed state that could be labeled with a word and so the reflective sorrow is left to poetic or psychological treatment ("poetiske eller psychologiske Behandling" [Kierkegaard 1920, 173]).

We will follow Kierkegaard's poetic path, which may stand for the reflection on a blind spot of the self, confronting itself with shadows cast by itself. The dynamics of reflective sorrow make an artistic representation impossible. Nevertheless, it is poetic images that by means of spatialization and temporalization lay a trace.

> Like a squirrel in its cage, it turns around in itself, yet not as uniformly as does that animal, but with a continual alternation in the combination of the interior elements of sorrow (*i Combinationen af Sorgens indre Momenter*). [...] Just as the patient in his pain tosses from one side to the other, so reflective sorrow is tossed about in order to find its object and its expression (*Udtryk*). (Kierkegaard 1988, 170; Kierkegaard 1920, 170)

It seems as if this ineffable sadness has closed up within itself and retreated against the outside world into an enclosure, the existence of which only a careful observer would even suspect. Kierkegaard creates poetic images that involve the reflection of the reader, who is quite familiar with such scenarios of the troubled self. The reflective sorrow almost rushes inwards, withdraws into the invisible.

> By withdrawing inward in this way, it finally finds an inclosure (*Indelukke*), an innermost retreat, where it thinks it can remain, and now it begins its uniform movement. Like the pendulum in a clock, it swings back and forth and cannot find rest. It continually begins from the beginning and deliberates anew, interrogates the witnesses, checks and examines the various statements, something it has already done hundreds of times, but it never finished. In the course of time, the uniformity has something anesthetizing about it. Just as [...] the monotonous sound of a man pacing back and forth with measured steps on the floor above [...] and deep within, in its little nook, grief (*Sorg*) lives like a well-guarded prisoner in an underground prison

---

5 In French, *air* (wind, breath) refers also to a look, a facial expression of grace or charisma, and thus to something immaterial, something added, an aura, so to speak (ancient Greek: αὔρα, in the sense of a breath of air), the *je ne sais quoi* in relation to an unmistakable person.

> [...], walking to and fro in his cubbyhole (*Aflukke*), never weary of traveling the long or short road of sorrow. (Kierkegaard 1988, 170–171; Kierkegaard 1920, 171)

This may sound like total seclusion, but this wandering in reflections (*vandre frem og tilbage i Reflexionen*) is poetically expressed in pictures (*Billeder*). Kierkegaard calls them shadow cuts (*Skyggerids*).

On the one hand, these silhouettes are something that comes from the dark side of life; they are, as it were, shadows that lie on the soul, whose dark reasons cannot be expressed in language, like a trauma that appears in shadows in reflection (Kierkegaard 1920, 172–173). On the other hand, these poetic shadow cuts are like outline drawings taken from the depths of the soul, in analogy to material silhouettes, like a scissor cut from black paper. But to bear witness to the subtle interior picture (*det fine indere Billede*) of the soul, the silhouette must first be brought to light. It must become visible in the medium of a projection. Here, the poetic mediation in spatial scenarios of inner movement becomes relevant (Kierkegaard 1920, 174).

> If I pick up a silhouette, I have no impression of it, cannot arrive at an actual conception of it; only when I hold it up toward the wall and do not look at it directly but at what appears on the wall, only then do I see it. So it is also with the picture I want to show here, an interior picture that does not become perceptible until I see through the exterior. (Kierkegaard 1988, 173)

The soul's constant turmoil is transferred into the spatial movement of silhouettes that can be imagined cinematographically, like a shadow theater. We move into a performance. The light of reflection, i.e., the interaction between the poet or the poetic language and the reader stages the shadows and lets them act as if they were alive.

The way of looking and the mediation through light are decisive for the silhouettes in poetic words. Only when they are set in motion and held against the light so as to create a projection on the wall does something become perceptible or at least foreshadowed. This, however, only succeeds for those who have sympathy for the sorrow in its secrecy (*Sympathien nemlig med Sorgens Hemmelighed*), because it indeed lurks about the world in secret (Kierkegaard 1920, 174).

It is dialectical correlations of pictorial expression, external perceptions, and notions of the interior that Kierkegaard addresses, and here the manner of poetic representation and the interpretation of the reader play a constitutive role.

> One walks down the street; one house looks like the other. Only the experienced observer suspects (*prøvede Iagttager ahner*) that in this particular house things are quite otherwise at the midnight hour; then an unhappy person paces about, one who found no rest; he goes up the stairs, and his footsteps echo in the stillness of the night. People pass one another in the street; one person looks just like the next, and the next one is like almost everyone else. Only the experienced observer suspects that deep within that one's head resides a lodger [*Indsidder*] who has nothing to do with the world but lives out his solitary life in quiet home-industry work. (Kierkegaard 1988, 174; Kierkegaard 1920, 175)

The uniformity of the streets, buildings, people – as it were, a typeface of external life and its standardization in an era of urbanization, industrialization – the monotony of life's rhythms, the anonymity of the individual in the masses, the indifference towards one another, and the apparent silence of a night that seems to absorb everything individual, all this is only facade (lat. *facies*), i. e., the outwardly turned face of inner life. For the sympathizers of secrecy, only such messages of the hidden (e)motion deep down become perceptible. If we look at the world with the gaze of poetic sensibility, then what echoes outwardly, i. e., poetic picture-writing, is able to convey tuneful written or pictorial signals from a distance, like a *'tele-graphic message'* ("telegraphisk Esterretning" [Kierkegaard 1920, 175]).

Poetry as telegraphy. These material telegraphies are always also ways of critically reflecting on that which sorrow has forced into its lonely cell.

Kierkegaard's chamber plays of the soul are not simply stagings of inwardness as a retreat from the world in locked rooms. Although Theodor W. Adorno criticizes Kierkegaard's interiors as expressions of an *objectless inwardness*, he also points out a negative aesthetic in Kierkegaard's poetic language (Adorno 1979, 57). As we will see, the chamber scenes are not simply a refuge in the face of a world of social alienation and massification, or an exclusion of real-world events under the illusion that one can withdraw into oneself unaffected by exterior influences. Indeed, the world is always inscribed in the *intérieur*.

We encounter here neither places of longing for intimacy, nor retreats of a bourgeoisie into the shells of privacy (Benjamin), nor enclaves of an inspired artistic existence. However, Kierkegaard plays with all these implications. But broken projective spaces are the result, stagings of tough processes of reflection, overshadowed by fleeting time and the dark voids of the soul. He goes to court with the illusionary stages of the private sphere.

Indirectly, the poetic reflections on the discord of the self are indicators of the conditions of the outside world as experienced. The poetic-philosophical treatment of all the inner staging takes up a literary topos (Becker 1990; Lange 2007; Schürmann 2015; Stiegler 2010) to poetically reformulate and criticize it, not least with a view to romantic approaches. By means of these *translations*, Kierkegaard performs *poetic criticism* in the sense of Schlegel, because "poetry can only be criticized through poetry. An art judgment which is not itself a work of art, either in the material, as a representation of the necessary impression in its becoming, or through a beautiful form, and a liberal tone in the spirit of the old Roman satire, has no civil right at all in the realm of art" (Schlegel 1967 [1797], 162 [fr. 117]).[6]

Let us try to see how the poetic chambers create, as it were, *light-writings* of both a reference to the self and the world, and recall Kierkegaard's *fine indere Billede*, which casts vivid shadows only in poetic representation – not in fixed silhouettes,

---

[6] Throughout the text, all translations of Schlegel's texts are my own.

but by making an appearance in its movement and giving us a glimpse of the inner life of the soul. What is needed is a light that brings the shadow to life by throwing them against the wall. This happens in the medium of poetry.

Emigration of imagination, so that the legs can never come along[7]

Kierkegaard subjects Schlegel's concept of a romantic universal poetry and the aesthetic way of life to rigid criticism. He shares the romantic impetus against the narrow-mindedness and conventions of a philistine bourgeoisie.[8] But he confronts with existential questions the romantic liberation of the poetic spirit and the idealization of an independent practice of freedom. Romantic poetry appears to him as an escape from the world, an "emigration from reality,"[9] and as the illusion of poetic art ascending to a realm of fantastic infinity, thereby losing sight of the ground of reality under the feet of finite life.

Kierkegaard counters such forgetfulness of the self and the world, including a lack of historical awareness, with an ethical paradox. The individual is confronted with existential challenges, struggling with contradictions and the intricacies of freedom, which always bear the risk of failure. This does not mean that the aesthetic approach is obsolete, but it should not simply be a flight of fancy. It has to be transposed into the realm of ethics, i.e., poetical language has to be reconnected with 'real life' in order to fight the constant battle between finitude and infinite possibilities, temporality and eternity. Attempts to suspend these existential tensions by making reference to idealized worlds or the support of philosophical systems[10] appear as deceptions, which do not hold true from the perspective of the "doghouse."[11]

The *leap of faith* promises the only moment of hope for the desperate. For Kierkegaard, we cannot survive the paradox of our fragile, worldly existence without believing in an event of grace, that is, an *a priori* certainty of God and of reconciliation.

---

7 Kierkegaard 1905, 177.

8 Kierkegaard has no primary socio-critical concern. But the invectives against the conventions of the bourgeoisie, the strategies of escape through business and routines, and finally the doctrinaire paralysis of Christianity – all this forms the background of his thematization of the individual that exists in the tension between the finite and the infinite, being confronted with decisions that cannot be met with literary escapades. Implicitly, this is always a critique of socio-historical realities.

9 See Schreiber 2014, 402.

10 This is also directed against Hegel's idea of a "self-reconciliation of the spirit" (Glöckner 1998, 143–144).

11 "A thinker erects a huge building, a system, a system embracing the whole of existence, world history, etc. and if his personal life is considered, to our amazement the appalling and ludicrous discovery is made that he himself does not personally live in this huge, domed palace but in a shed alongside it, or in a doghouse, or at best in the janitor's quarters." (Kierkegaard 2013, 43–44)

Let us consider the leap, beyond theological reassurance: Freedom requires decision-making and has to constantly deal with strong affections, impulses of the will, and agonizing existential doubts. It dwells with all the hesitation and indecision, furnishes itself with the fear of taking guilt upon itself. Can such a dare of life hope for a changeability of the world? What can take the place of reconciliation under the auspices of loss or doubt of transcendental shelter in the 20th century?

Here, what needs to be introduced is Kierkegaard's *poetic telegraphy*, which aims to return to life such indissoluble questions, placing them as actors in a poetic echo chamber.

Hiking on the Wallpaper – *actiones in distans*

In Kierkegaard's diaries, we are taught that the poetic imagination can try to escape from the soul's wearying home. But the effort to leave the gloomy state behind can lead to a loss of self-relationship. The self is not at home with itself; it is almost on the run.

> Between my melancholy and my intimate 'Thou' there lay a whole world of fantasy. The world it is that I have partly exhausted in my pseudonyms. Just like a person who hasn't a happy home spends as much time away from it as possible and would prefer to be rid of it, so my melancholy has kept me away from my own self while I, making discoveries and poetical experiences, traveled through a world of fantasy. [...] [T]hat is how I behaved in melancholy towards possibility. (Kierkegaard 1938, JP, No. 641)

But when poetic imagination tempts us to free the self from grueling emotions and to embark on fantastic journeys, this can cause a feeling of terrible worldlessness.

Yet, while speaking in many tongues, this very self simultaneously discovers and experiences itself poetically. This points us to another dimension of poetry. It is the indirect poetic telegraphs, i. e., the speaking in pseudonyms or divided roles and episodes – elements of Romantic poetry – that become the medium of a poetic critique in voiced shadows.

The poetic polyphony evokes pictorial scenarios which, like a shadow theater, give an inkling of the fine inner image of the soul and the unspeakable sorrow. Like an aesthetic game of hide-and-seek, it brings the reader out of his shell, confronting him with modes of self-deception. Poetry stages self-questioning that does not provide an agenda, but engages a sympathetic reader who knows about the shallows of the soul. The ethical challenge of existence appears on a poetic stage or in a *rehearsal room* of decision (see Feger 2007, 543).

Prototypically, this is played out in *Repetition*, and, here too, the crystallization of poetic criticism is reflected in a room scene.
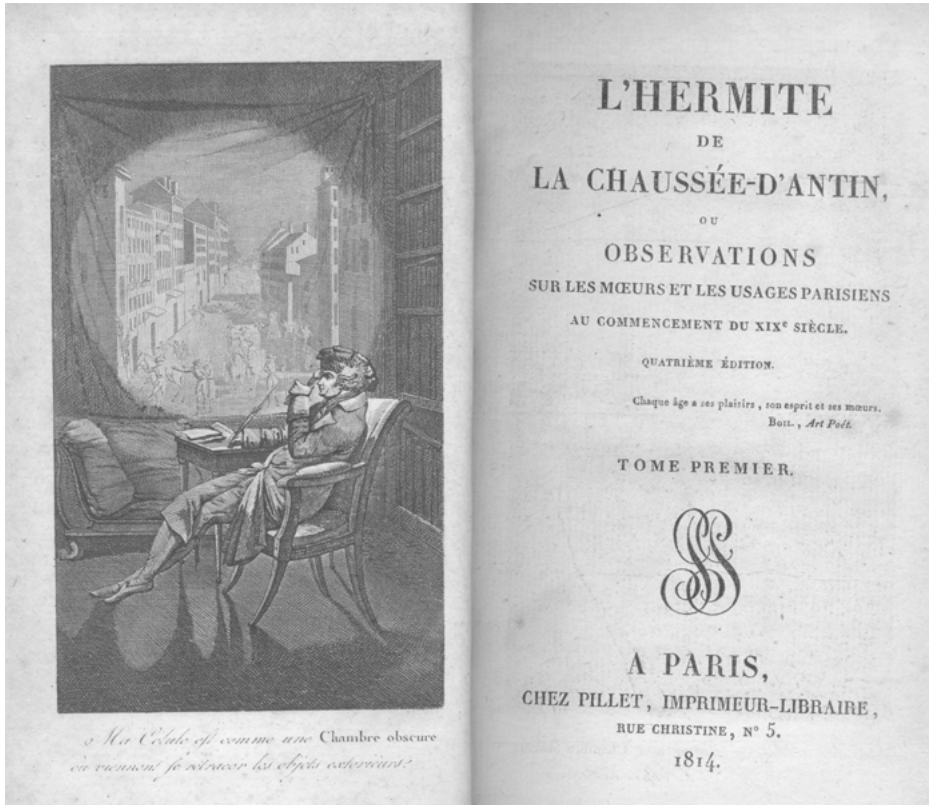
Fig. 1: Etienne de Jouy: L'Hermite de la Chaussée-d'Antin, ou Observations sur les mœurs et les usages parisiens au commencement du XIXe siècle. Paris 1814.
The book's frontispiece shows the scholar in a library, his hand holding the pen on the side table rather casually set up for writing, seated reclined in the armchair, completely concentrated on intently gazing through a lorgnette, which here projects the light of the imagination like a lens onto a curtain that covers the window of the darkroom. The inner event of the imagination is shown in a circle of light, which makes a busy street scene visible. Just as if one could look out through the window, the interior extends perspectively into the imagined exterior space. It is like a cinema situation. Yet, this is not a matter of a fantasy world but of contemplating reality as it is experienced: "My chamber is like a *camera obscura*, in which the external objects can retrace their traces" (*Ma cellule est comme une chambre obscure où viennent se retracer les objets extérieurs*). A paradox draws attention to the way in which inner imagination and perception staged externally are here intertwined: The light of the imagination, which is laid on the curtain like a circular opening, is projected back into the scholar's room, where it creates shadows. Walter Benjamin refers to this title engraving in his *Arcades Project* [*Passagen-Werk*] (see Haug 2017, 42–43).

Let us imagine a traveler returning to a city and staying exactly in the same boarding house and the same room, just as he did on a previous trip. An attempt to repeat a happily remembered experience. Let us say it is Berlin on the Day of Prayer and Repentance and the whole city seems to lie under a thick layer of dust, seeming to bear

witness to ashes to ashes, dust to dust, being thus overshadowed by a grey veil of transience. And now to the room:

> When a fellow has settled himself cosily and comfortably in his quarters, when he has a fixed point (*fast Punkt*) like this from which he can rush out, a safe hiding place to which he can retreat and devour his booty in solitude (*for i Eensomhed at fortære sit Bytte*) – something I especially appreciate, since, like certain beasts of prey, I cannot eat when anyone is looking on – then he familiarizes himself with whatever notable sights there may be in the city. (Kierkegaard 1983, 153)

A carnivore cave of poetic reflection. A starting point to capture booty in the world, to hide and disembowel it. The room may now be the point of departure for taking walks through the city or at least for hearing about it, or a *fixed point* for embarking on imaginary journeys and for only imagining possible experiences. Either way, the self runs away from itself.

In any case, these are scenarios in which the explored possibilities turn out to be a phantasm. They do not become active decisions but remain mere eventualities. The booty will always be captured from reality, depending on the interest or attention with which someone wanders through the streets, hurries, promenades, or strides purposefully. It is the poetic imagination that brings the booty to life. Let us imagine the poetic room like a theater stage of the imagining self, a shadow theater.

It is like in a real theater performance where especially a young person will be enraptured by the magic of the "artificial actuality in order like a double to see and hear himself and to split himself up into every possible variation of himself, and nevertheless in such a way that every variation is still himself" (Kierkegaard 1983, 154). A dissociation and multiplication of the self: While the body rests, the imagination experiences a multitude of facets of the self, which are not only visible but become audible as voiced shadows and sounds (*lydende Skygge*). These may now be mere fantasies, as they come over a young person who, on the threshold of awakening, is dreaming about his personality. Kierkegaard designs a shadow theater in which the ego meets poetic refractions of itself.

> In such a self-vision of the imagination, the individual is not an actual shape but a shadow, or, more correctly, the actual shape is invisibly present and therefore is not satisfied to cast one shadow, but the individual has a variety of shadows (*men Individet har en Mangfoldighed af Skygger*), all of which resemble him and which momentarily have equal status as being himself. (Kierkegaard 1983, 154)

Kierkegaard uses romantic motifs – we may think of the doppelganger in E.T.A. Hoffmann or the shadow of Peter Schlemihl, of night scenes and dream visions. But he focuses on a pre-reflexive, dreamlike consciousness of the self, which stages its possibilities. The consciousness is not yet awake, it wanders between its possibilities. But these possibilities must be given shape and voice so that the dreaming I can become aware of them. "Each of its possibilities is an audible shadow (*Enhver dets Mulighed er derfor en lydende Skygge*)" (Kierkegaard 1983, 155). The dreaming soul is still

hovering over the abyss, not wanting to disentangle the crush of inner voices of fear, lament, anxiety, exuberance, not wanting to decide. And before one knows it, the individual has woken up from this dream state again and the voices of the night fall silent (*Nattestemmerne forstumme*).

If the voices do not fade, then there is another strategy, to flee from the challenge of freedom and to dance in sheer possibilities. "The stage is that kind of setting, and therefore it is particularly suitable for the *Schattenspiel* [shadow play] of the hidden individual (*En saadan Omgivelse er den sceniske, som derfor netop egner sig for det krypte Individs Schattenspiel*)" (Kierkegaard 1983, 156).

Now shadows move onto the stage, acting in different roles, in whose voices the individual rediscovers its own voice, as in a mirror image ("spellbinding") or echo chamber, and perhaps the individual puts itself in the role of a robber captain and goes through wild adventures (156). We are still in the chamber, but the imagination is drawing wider circles, has expanded into a theater space. It is a poetic means of demonstrating the existential questioning of the self and bringing it back into the world from the sleep of reason, which sometimes gives birth to monsters.

What is audibly and visibly staged in dreamlike imaginations of the youthful, childlike consciousness is the foil of a reflection into which the mature consciousness can dive, though not in weightless reverie, but when the soul at a mature age gathers itself in earnest, i. e., concentrates (157). A poetic undergoing of ethical challenges. To experience this, the reflective soul must look at things as if it were a child.[12]

Therefore, the "more mature individuality who satiates himself on the strong food of actuality (*Virkelighedens stærke Føde*)" (158) does not turn to high art, such as painting, in particular, but to everyday art, the picture sheet, proceeding like a child who, in cutting out something concrete, revitalizes with this piece of paper a general existential question with a dizzying intensity. Again, it is about images that set the imagination free, silhouettes or cut-out pictures that come to life instantly and reflect something general in very concrete detail – and in this concreteness reach a depth of questioning that rejects all conventions, something which only the unbiased, and at the same time deeply serious, gaze can do.

> In the days of childhood, we had such enormous categories that they now almost make us dizzy, we clipped out of a piece of paper a man and a woman who were man and woman in general in a more rigorous sense than Adam and Eve were. (Kierkegaard 1983, 158)

---

12 Kierkegaard here also alludes to a romantic motif of childhood, i. e. a sometimes mythologically idealized interpretation of childhood as a pre-rational and supra-rational stage that is characterized by the soul's inclination to dream and miraculous or almost prophetic insights into the future (for instance in Wackenroder or Novalis). But Kierkegaard does not romanticize a retrojected childlike felicity in terms of a mythological *golden age*. Rather, he focuses on the pre-conscious abilities of the child's playful soul, which resurfaces in the psyche of the adult, i. e. a foreboding memory of past suffering or an intuition or sentiment of pain and loss that foreshadow a future.

The cut-out picture's reduction of objects to a very simple, popular form (as in the picture sheets of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries) raises fundamental questions arising from the outlines of these pictures that call up memories or collective worldviews and carry them into the present. It is the gaze of the child that, beyond conventions, uncovers this deep questioning.[13] Perhaps the words from Kierkegaard's *Diapsalmata* now become more lucid.

> My sorrow is my baronial castle, which lies like an eagle's nest high up on the mountain peak among the clouds. No one can take it by storm. From it I swoop down into actuality and snatch my prey, but I do not stay down there. I bring my booty home, and this booty is a picture I weave into the tapestries at my castle. Then I live as one already dead. Everything I have experienced I immerse in a baptism of oblivion unto an eternity of recollection. Everything temporal and fortuitous is forgotten and blotted out. Then I sit like an old gray-haired man, pensive, and explain the pictures in a soft voice, almost whispering, and beside me sits a child, listening, although he remembers everything before I tell it. (Kierkegaard 1988, 42)

This can be read as a poetic procedure that transposes experiences of reality into images that cover the space of consciousness like wallpaper, a sheet of pictures that clad the walls. Whereas early (oriental) wallpapers were woven carpets, and then hand-painted or printed paper coverings of the walls, industrialization (around 1830) introduced a process of printing wallpapers with serial patterns on paper webs. But despite industrial production, connecting points and a certain unevenness in the print always remain visible. The wallpaper is, as it were, a montage. It covers the chamber with paper webs on which ornamental segments join together to form recurring patterns of pictorial writing. These are often stylizations of the floral world, such as abstractions of tendrils and plants. But it is precisely this translation into repetitive patterns that opens up a specific variability of forms for the imagination, that comes alive for the poetic spirit. The eye may follow the seams, can look for breaks and fractures; it knows each particular irregularity and, like a child, brings the patterns to life, sets them in motion, and thereby allows them to grow.

In *Berliner Kindheit*, Walter Benjamin describes how the bed rest prescribed by the doctor leads the fevered child to move from the bed to the interior: "Just as a man in a frenzy sometimes calculates and thinks, just to see: he can still do it, I counted the circles of sunlight that swayed on the ceiling of my room, and I arranged the lozenges of the wallpaper into ever new bundles." (Benjamin 1972, GS IV, 272)

---

13 With reference to the childlike power of imagination in dealing with sheets of pictures, i. e., popular single-sheet prints whose pictorial motifs have been collected, cut out and pasted in, Walter Benjamin highlights the way in which traces of a cultural-historical worldview manifest themselves in simple outlines and break into the present. See Benjamin 1972, GS IV, 280 – 282 ("Das Pult") and 115 ("Unordentliches Kind"). In "Ich packe meine Bibliothek aus" (GS IV, 389 – 390), he emphasizes that the childlike nature of collecting is constitutive for the aged collector, too. Children are able to achieve a renewal of the given: they paint objects, cut them out, take them off, develop a scale of revivifications.

For Kierkegaard, it is about questions of memory and renewal, about breaking out of the regimes of visibility and breaking up experience, which is translated into poetic imaginations. The child and the old man can do this, but all of this is not an internalization that is alien to the world. On the contrary, it starts with the experience of the world, extracts something from the empirical, i.e., focuses on details, reformulates these extracts into literary imagery, and the images learn to walk and pose questions for reflection.

And does this not require a distanced perspective or literary procedures that Kierkegaard calls *actiones in distans?*[14] In these literary forms abstracted (subtracted) from the realm of life, the reader is confronted with challenges that life abandons. The poetic shadow play puts these questions at a reflective distance.

In "Das Fieber," Walter Benjamin tells of the childlike tendency to see everything as if it were coming towards him from far away (Benjamin 1972, GS IV, 269). Silhouettes are projected onto the wall. They only appear lively from a distance. They come towards the self or, like a reflection or vocal echo, come back to it. An *actio in distans* that opens a space for reflection. Thus, it is the child who, in the evening, by the light of a lamp, with the play of its fingers, projects shadow figures on the walls and brings stories to life.

> I used my tranquility and the proximity of the wall I had in my bed to welcome the light with shadowy images. Now all those games that I had let my fingers play came back on the wallpaper. "Instead of being afraid of the shadows of the evening", as says my playbook, "funny children rather use it to have fun." (Benjamin 1972, GS IV, 272)

The bodily gestures and finger plays create a shadow theater, a distanced observation of one's own body and mental movements, which now run across the wallpaper as shadow figures and become the object of observation in the poetic room.[15]

What interests us here is not the childlike play that projects figures onto the walls, but in a figurative sense, the literary process that Kierkegaard develops with the shadow plays.

We are investigating procedures of a *poetic actio in distans*, which does not represent empirical reality, but rather brings it to life *telegraphically*, i.e., in projective narrative forms, figures, and gestures, and allows them to act as shadows in a poetic space, so that the producer, as well as the readers, become spectators and interpreters of the poetic staging.

Did not Schlegel emphasize this invigorating power of poetic criticism?

---

14 Kierkegaard 1988, 311. The *actio in distans* adapts as a literary method a scientific theory of the remote effect of forces (e.g., magnetism, gravity), according to which bodies can trigger an effect, change movement etc. without touching each other (see Tajafuerce 2000 and Blumenberg 2007).
15 Benjamin refers to 'Spielbücher' of the nineteenth century, here Leske 1914. See Brüggemann 2007, 49 – 67.
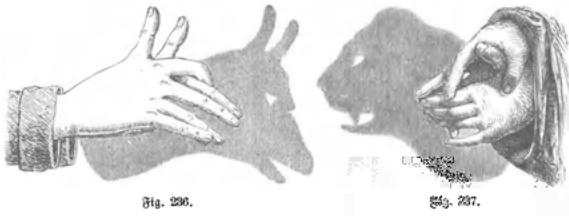
Fig. 2: *Illustriertes Spielbuch für Mädchen.* Ed. Marie Leske (1914), 99 (detail).
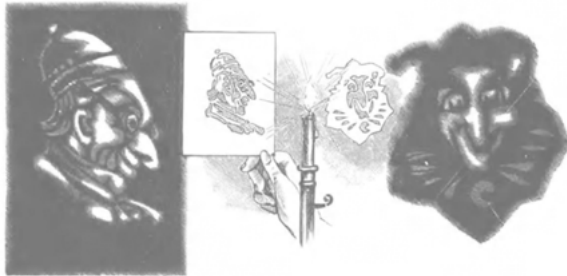
Fig. 3: *Illustriertes Spielbuch für Mädchen.* Ed. Marie Leske (1914), 102 (detail).

On the wings of poetic reflection hovering in the middle

For Friedrich Schlegel, poetic representation articulates not only an aesthetic reference to the world and the self but also a critical reflection on the prerequisites of poetic articulation. The role of the poet and his mode of representation, and, ultimately, the role of the sympathetic reader, are intertwined in a material, artistic language: "every [art and science] that does not find its essence in the words of language has an invisible spirit, and that is poetry" (Schlegel 1967 [1800], 304).[16]

The movement of the poetic spirit, according to this programmatic claim, bears witness to an artistic individual, manifests itself as a mirror of the world, or rather, of the age and its respective spirit, and continually relates itself to the surroundings.

---

16 Concerning language as the prototype of all artistic media, see Chaouli 2004, 138.

Nevertheless, poetry "can hover most between the portrayed and the depicting, free of all real and ideal interest, on the wings of poetic reflection in the middle, potentiating this reflection again and again and multiplying it as in an endless series of mirrors." Here too, poetry is conceived as an optical projection of repetition and variation in multiplication. It is a process that takes place in an interplay not only "from within, but also from without," as a continuous becoming (Schlegel 1967 [1798a], 182 [fr. 116]).

We may recall Kierkegaard's figure of the ceaseless movement of the weary self. The romantic ideal of mediation of all disciplines and the concept of mediating art and life are reversed in a radically existentialist turn of this hovering, which is hence subsequently modeled on the poetic room. It functions as a projection space of iterative reflections and moving image scenes, poetically interweaving inner and outer worlds and thus simultaneously addressing the status of poetry. But while Schlegel is concerned with "indulg[ing] oneself completely to the impression of a poem, letting the artist do with us what he wants," and, above all, with "be[ing] able to abstract from all the individual, to grasp the general in a suspended state," with Kierkegaard it becomes a task not to rely on this high "sense of the universe" or "to be able to rise above our own love and to destroy what we worship in our thoughts" (Schlegel 1967 [1798b], 130–131). Rather, this romantic soaring is to be poetically criticized and reflected in terms of the concrete dizziness of the self in individual everyday life.

Kierkegaard takes up approaches of poetic criticism and turns them against what he considers to be a world-forgotten understanding of poetry. According to Schlegel, poetry as an art can only be critically assessed by poetry itself. Its realm is thus a cosmopolitan one, where citizenship is attained by sympoets and symphilosophers.[17] Poetic critique crucially involves the role of reading or readership, i.e., the participation of a lively and resistant counterpart. It unfolds in a dynamic of interaction and inventions that set in motion a process of becoming. As *poetic poetics* (Schlegel 1967 [1798a], 170 [fr. 28]), it is a critique that is presented in a poetic way. Why? Because "every excellent work, of whatever kind, knows more than it says, and wants more than it knows" (Schlegel 1967 [1798b], 140), thus holding potentials that are unspoken and yet effective as implicit knowledge. In addition, there are those that cannot be gathered by the poet himself and yet are driven by a subliminal will. This requires an engagement with poetic texts that give ample reason for assumptions, interpretations, readings, and ways of understanding. But poetic criticism does not produce meanings in order to state, like "a mere inscription, only what the thing actually is, where it stands and should stand in the world" (Schlegel 1967 [1798b], 140). The poet and artist is at the same time a poetic and critical reader, i.e., 'translator,'

---

17 The synthetic writer creates a counteractive (*entgegenwirkend*) reader (see Schlegel 1967 [1797], 161 [fr. 112]).

philosopher, rhetorician, and philologist. These readings and translations give new life to historical forms of representation and expressions.

Kierkegaard takes up procedures of romantic, poetic criticism, but it is the individual that is to be brought into focus, without abandoning the existing reality. It is necessary to win over the readers as *sympathizers* or symphilosophers and sympoets to lead them to the *intimate stages* of the self by means of indirect aesthetic transmission. These are stagings in which the struggle with reality is poetically articulated.

The reader must have sympathy for sorrow in its secrecy. Then a shadow theater staging the broken self within its worldly circumstances is created. It theatrically reflects existence in a world that cannot be reconciled poetically. But in these refractions – whether in terms of the illusory character of the promises of happiness, or of the stagings of tristesse, desire, or doubt, i.e., in negative aesthetics – a longing is expressed. It refuses any conciliatory tone and thus points dialectically to the unredeemed.[18]

Let us take up this poetology of self-mirroring and critical growth, as well as the demand for a revitalizing language. We enter a reflective, poetological cabinet of mirrors with a wealth of material refractions and turn to interior scenes in various media of poetic image formation to exemplify how they become the site, or *Schauplatz* (Benjamin), of poetic criticism.

"Poems are painted window panes" (J. W. v. Goethe)

We are looking at two paintings by Vilhelm Hammershøi (1864 – 1916), among a large number of interior paintings by the Danish artist. They provide insights into his private rooms in Copenhagen. The chamber scenes are held in color nuances of grey and white, which vary in soft bluish, ochre, and greenish color values. Particular furnishings or objects are given a haptic emphasis in the colors of their material (wood, glass, porcelain). The objects frequently appear entangled in an interplay between light and shadow as well as mirror reflections. The frugality of the indoor situations evokes the atmosphere of an extended period of temporal persistence as well as of a peculiar abandonment. However, the paralysis disappears when the viewer continues to contemplate the paintings. A subtle play of movements becomes evident, reacting to the outside, in momentary shots of the incoming light, which, despite the apparent standstill, points to the passing of time. The interiors manifest themselves as very sparsely furnished, almost empty, but not uninhabited. Often they are deserted like Hammershøi's landscape and cityscape paintings, which are mostly without people.

---

18 See Feger 2007, 543. On the dialectics of the fainting longing, see Adorno 1970, 199.

Fig. 4: Vilhelm Hammershøi, *Interior. "The Four Rooms"*, 1914 (Oil on canvas,33 1/2 × 27 4/5 inch; 85 × 70.5 cm), Ordrupgaard, Kopenhagen

Repeatedly, a female figure can be seen in the interiors, for which the painter's wife often acted as a model, always in a black floor-length dress, her hair tied in a knot, almost like a black silhouette. If we want to speak here of silence, then in the sense of taciturnity, which seems to exclude the hectic noise of the world. In the sparse rooms, traces of everyday life appear with the greatest sobriety.

The outside world appears as sunlight that causes a reverberation of shadows, light projections, and reflections. On many paintings, windows – some of which are shown open, others closed and subdivided – draw attention to the exterior of the interior. Light breaks in through the window crosses or the multiply framed panes; panels of light and crosses of shadow thus fall into the room. But the windows do not afford the gaze a plain view or any clear sight of the vastness of the sky, which is at best seen rather vaguely. If we are able to see what is happening outside the windows at all, this requires, for example, that we look at the window fronts of the opposite facades. Here, no (romantic) view into the open is granted. Rather, framed interior and exterior views intersect as a palimpsest of window crosses or framings in the gaze (fig. 5).

An inner courtyard view: The depiction of windows and framings always carries an allusion to painting or framed pictures, which exhibit themselves (Hemkendreis 2016). Beyond that, windows suggest a threshold or opening between inside and out-

Fig. 5: Vilhelm Hammershøi, *Courtyard. Strandgade 30*, 1899 (Oil on canvas, 65,7 × 47,03 cm), Toldeo Museum of Art. Ohio

side. The series of windows running across a corner here points to something behind it, but the windows do not allow a deeper insight; they indicate shaded rooms or corridors, absorbed in darkness, but there are also light projections that fall into the interior.

Some of the windowpanes remain opaque and reject the spectator's view. Then again, they become mirror surfaces on which architectural elements and a piece of the sky are reflected. A ray of sunlight falls into this courtyard area and hits an open window wing on the first floor. The interweaving of reflections, framings, and architectural elements constitutes a transition area between interior and exterior worlds, reflecting, in both the literal and figurative sense, how exterior and interior areas are seen blending into one another. The courtyard area enclosed by windows becomes itself an interior space, the impression of a sort of 'caged world,' a *Gehäuse-Welt* (Simmel).

Repetitions, series of framing structures, light projections, shadows, and reflections come into view. This blending of framings or openings that do not lead into the open, of reflections and light effects that create projections in the interior through a

window, and of the iteration of structures is impressively staged in *Four Rooms* (fig. 4). We look into a suite of four rooms. They are obviously high-ceiling rooms, but they can only be seen in a cut-off view. A door leaf stands out into the room, the outermost edge of the door touches the edge of the painting and divides the space of the picture. Light is reflected on the door and enters from the left through a window, which is not visible but is hinted at by a light curtain. Behind the door, in its *slipstream*, a small side table can be seen, on which stands an empty bowl with light reflections. Above it on the wall, there is a dark-framed mirror in which a reflection is visible, too, even though it is located in the shadow. It draws the eye into a perspectival depth of space – as if it were reflecting an opposite window, though it seems to mirror the door.

Like a small window in the wall, the mirror creates the impression that it leads outside. It strangely corresponds with what can be seen through the large open door: a suite of rooms. The incidence of light is always accentuated by shading and the prominence of the white lacquered doors. One might also think of mirror cabinets in baroque castles, which work with such optical illusions.

The successive rooms are separated from each other by door frames, thresholds, and differently angled doors. Thick wooden planks draw perspective lines to the last room, but always with slight misalignments, and lead to a dark canapée and a painting on the wall, which is again cut off.

Time and again, it is cut framings that dominate this parkours of iteration and alteration. Already in the room in the foreground, this is pointed to by the opened door. A cut profile on the door leaf draws attention to the back of the door, which, if closed, would fit into a half-height wooden paneling. And the dark-framed mirror also hangs on a framing board. The interlocking of borders and cut framings determines the perception of the suite of rooms. It becomes a cabinet of mirrors or a nesting of rooms.

Hammershøi owned some writings by Kierkegaard.[19] His paintings, like Kierkegaard's room scenes of poetic criticism, involve the viewer in multiple perspectives, operating with iterations, reflections, refractions of light, and situation variations. Let us recall Kierkegaard's *actiones in distans*, i.e., a poetic, image-generating process that lets us envision a spectrum of different situations which are being played through. The impression of the realistic representation is captivating, but the painter operates with compositional shifts and reflections. Objects are varied, figures are placed differently, thus modifying the viewer's perspective of view. Poetic reflection and micrological investigations of reality enter into a dialectical relationship. The room as a private retreat and expression of an attitude towards life is shown in differing compartments and framings, i.e., from prismatically varying perspectives.

Repetition, recurring situations, and, again and again, edgings and framings stand out. Time seems to have come to a standstill in these frames, even when the

---

19 See Alsdorf 2016, 269.

suite of rooms is serially extended, allowing the gaze to wander into the depths of the room, or when the incidence of light refers to an external time determined by the changing position of the sun, or when figures in unchanging poses testify to sequences of former movement. Hammershøi's staging of rooms may be interpreted as poetic reflection chambers, as spaces of painterly poetry and criticism. But at best, they give a hint or lay a trace. Is the world dense and, as it appears, timelessly frozen in the face of the raging monotony of industrial capitalist seriality? Does it deny both the past and the future? As unfathomable as the lines of the room is the "doubling of the room, which appears to be mirrored without being mirrored: like these rooms, all the appearances of history may perhaps resemble each other, as long as they themselves, in bondage to nature, persist in appearances" (Adorno 1979, 69; trans. A.E.).

Is this an implicit critique of a collective consciousness that neglects the past, because everything or the ever new that happens passes, as it were, as a constant repetition? Does the experience of time standing still critically testify to an ahistorical perception of the world of modernity and to the perpetual recurrence of the same, which makes of modernity a Kafkaesque hell of eternity, as Benjamin states, so that the perception of space (or of a room) in which this experience of time is expressed constitutes a transparency of penetration, overlaying and covering? (Benjamin 1982, GS V.2, 676 [S 1,5]; 678–679 [S 2,1]) All this may be alluded to here.

Let us return to another episode of Kierkegaard's *Repetition*, where precisely the impossibility of stealing out of time becomes the object of poetic criticism. And indeed, models of the perception of time here correspond with the representation of a parkours of interiors and suites of rooms.

> One climbs the stairs to the first floor in a gas-illuminated building, opens a little door, and stands in the entry. To the left is a glass door leading to a room. Straight ahead is an anteroom. Beyond are two entirely identical rooms, identically furnished, so that one sees the room double in the mirror. The inner room (*inderste Værelse*) is tastefully illuminated. A candelabra stands on a writing table; a gracefully designed armchair upholstered in a red velvet stands before the desk. The first room is not illuminated. Here the pale light of the moon blends with the strong light from the inner room (*indre Værelse*). Sitting in a chair by the window, one looks out on the great square, sees the shadows of passersby hurrying along the walls (*Forbigaaendes Skygger ile hen over Murene*); everything is transformed into a stage setting (*scenisk Decoration*). A dream world glimmers in the background of the soul. (Kierkegaard 1983, 151–152)

But here, too, the comfort of a retreat concealed in the moonlight is deceptive. The dreamy hope "as if the end of the world had already come" (152),[20] the attempt to approach the world in a dreamily distanced way like a "*scenisk Decoration*," and the endeavor to find distraction in (actual) theater performances prove more and more illusory for the protagonist – and in the end, he wishes to shatter to pieces the backdrops of the bourgeois world and the props of the writing room ("I almost

---

20 This ambiguously alludes to the end of earthly time, that is, in theological terms, the time of fulfillment and redemption, but also the time of final judgment.

smashed it to pieces"). "Half-awake, half-dreaming," the red velvet chair becomes a foreign object in a home that has become uncanny and the chair is thrown forcefully into a corner. "My home had become dismal to me simply because it was a repetition of the wrong kind." The repetition of a romanticized remembrance proves to be just as impossible as the escape into an open future. "There is no repetition at all." (Kierkegaard 1983, 169)

It is again *poetic telegraphs* that Kierkegaard makes literarily effective. For instance, when in *Sickness unto Death* he tells us the story of a murderer, who tries to escape the scene of his crime by train (a sequence of chambers on rails, one might say), but as circumstances dictate, a telegraph is active in one of the cabins and reports that the criminal is on board. Thus, when the wanted man arrives at the next station, he brings the news of his conviction himself.[21] Adorno has referred to this episode as a parable of civilization in the sense of a reality of the court, which dissolves, and at the same time fulfills, deceptive appearances (Adorno 1979, 67–68).

There is no escape from one's personal life. The individual past, as a crystallization point of a collective history, accompanies us every single moment, even when we take a train in order to escape. This is not fatalism, and it does not interest us here in the theological sense of a higher justice or judgment. What it represents, however, is the problematization of a deceptive sense of security. The attempt to escape from the world and from one's own personal and collective history by seeking to settle down in the caves of private comfort fails, because this very historical world is present everywhere and always surrounding us. As Adorno has often stated with regard to cinematic fiction: The scene is speeding towards us like an express train.[22]

As a topos of consciousness or self-awareness – Nietzsche's chamber of consciousness that we never enter but are only able to see through a small gap – a scenic world is revealed in these inward chambers. In them, however, modes of subjection to an overpowering outer world are perpetuated. And this becomes even more insistent in the twentieth century.

All these poetic chambers operate with a language of *furnishing* (*Einrichtung*), which is interwoven with the experience of the social world. Yet, this visual language entails a poetic enigmaticalness, i.e., a poetic criticism that is articulated in paradoxical figures. We do not escape the noise of a threatening outside world by entrenching ourselves. On the contrary, it becomes even louder. Let us *listen* to a passage from Kafka, whose intense, ambiguous involvement with Kierkegaard has been widely discussed.

> Everyone carries a room about inside him. The fact can even be proved by means of the sense of hearing. If someone walks fast and one pricks up one's ears and listens, say in the night, when

---

21 See Müller 1995, 67–75.

22 As Adorno emphasizes with regard to Kafka, aesthetic distance has become impossible – something which is prototypical for modernism. The contemplative comfort of the reader is shattered, because the catastrophic world does not allow for an uninvolved spectator (see Adorno 2009 [NS], IV, 418).

everything round about is quiet, one hears, for instance, the rattling of a mirror not quite firmly fastened to the wall. (Kafka 1991, 1)

A night scene – and we do not know where this supposed encounter between the one hurrying through the night and the one hearing the sounds of a wall mirror in the silence takes place. The poetic staging alludes to an inner self-reflection, a clattering self-reflection which has turned into a discordant state and which is betraying its instability through movement; at the same time, it also alludes to a bourgeois interior with wall mirrors, furniture, and social conventions. Listening to the silence within oneself, to the echo space of the inner telegraphs, may remind us of Kierkegaard's sounding shadows. The world seems locked-out, and yet it echoes in the imaginative space of poetic writing, virtually crowding into consciousness and undermining any possible calm.

The poetic chamber is by no means objectless. In its indifference to world events, it suspends any direct relation to the sphere of empirical activities. It negates purposes of self-preservation belonging to lived routines and thus indirectly reflects upon the (im)possibility of another practice. But this happens in aesthetic idioms of distortion, interruption, deformation. Poetic procedures make us susceptible to being at the mercy of the living world at an aesthetic distance. But this distance requires mobility, paradoxical actions, i.e., *actiones in distans* as a restless back and forth between inside and outside.

The poetic chamber becomes a stage on which the world in its absurd constitution begins to resound. In his reflections on the musical-erotic, Kierkegaard has described the deep layers of the soul's movement as an underlying urge, be it painful or rapturous. This urge ties itself to any everyday experience, is an indicator of the ego's experience of the world, and it requires silence to listen to this interweaving of experience and memory. Can silence, in particular, not bring along an immense volume? Does not the roar of the world sometimes reveal itself through enervating signals or a deafening silence? Will it be the noise of an inner telegraphy, disturbed from the slumber of ignorance? Let us listen to Kafka again:

> It is not necessary for you to leave the house. Stay at your table and listen. Don't even listen, just wait. Don't even wait, be completely quiet and alone. The world will offer itself to you to be unmasked, it can't do otherwise, in raptures it will writhe before you. (Kafka 2012, 200; NSF II 140)[23]

Separated from the individual's restless activity, the historical context and the external social world push themselves even more intensely into the enclave of the ego, infiltrating its inner voices and becoming a crystallization point of critical reflection. As we have already seen and heard: poetic rooms do not offer vantage points for comfortable contemplations. They do not allow us to lean back in pleasurable, uninvolved self-reflection, as in a red velvet armchair. Instead, they draw the reader into a

---

23 See also Kleinwort 2004, 224–225.

maelstrom and do not leave the sympathizer of secrecy alone, but expose him to indissolubility.

Where reality has taken on the character of hostility, rejection, and inhumanity, or the appearance of an irrational totality, a retreat into inwardness is precisely that which cannot guarantee liberation. Rather, it becomes a prison. The chamber scenes discussed earlier make this unmistakably clear with all their features of abandonment, loneliness, rebellion, and the destructive parody of everyday worlds. They also mirror modes of domestication, a subjection of the self to the norms and habits of bourgeois life: indoor situations thus mirror the outdoor world. This also happens in ambivalent stagings. The following scene will perhaps (at first) evoke the impression of happy fantasy journeys under the father's care.[24]

> When at times Johannes asked permission to go out, his request was usually refused; but occasionally his father, by way of compensation, offered to take his hand and go for a walk up and down the floor [...]. They walked through the city gate to the country palace nearby or to the seashore or about the streets – according to Johannes's wish, for his father was capable of everything. While they walked up and down the floor, his father would tell about everything they saw. They greeted the passers-by; the carriages rumbled past, drowning out his father's voice; the pastry woman's fruits were more tempting than ever. [...] If the path was unfamiliar to Johannes, he made associations, while his father's omnipotent imagination was able to fashion everything, to use every childish wish as an ingredient in the drama that was taking place. (Kierkegaard 1985, 120)

This scene has often been read biographically. But the promenade through the room, which transposes structures of the outside world into the illusory world of the inside, can not only be read as a protected flânerie at the father's hand. Kierkegaard's interiors are neither comfortable nor always inviting. It is the aesthetic form – the antagonism of moments, repetitions, and paradoxical situations – that strives against illusionary arrangements and allows for both the experience of life's destructive forces and an awareness of the deceptive illusion of comfortable inwardness. The poetical chamber, i.e., the furniture of aesthetic language, makes these distortions tangible.

> You must push your head through the wall. It is not difficult to push it through because it is made of thin paper. But what is difficult is not to let yourself be deceived by the fact that there is already an extremely deceptive painting on the wall showing you pushing through the wall. It tempts you to say: Don't I push it through all the time? (Kafka 1954, 303)

We take up here only some flashlights from Kafka leading us to a poetic chamber of the late twentieth century. We are now in a video installation by the artist Gary Hill. The audience has to enter a darkened room, a black cube, within which it is confronted with a video projection on one of the walls, a projection that repeatedly pops up

---

24 Implicitly, we can again think here of the entanglement of the imaginative roles of child and aged man. This might prompt us to think about standardized images of reality that are, literally, *cut out* here.

and then disappears again, cut-off, exhibiting only shattered sequences: a cinemato-graphic shadow play. With the flashing light constantly flickering, we can see for a moment a male figure that seems to throw itself against a wall, as if seeking to break through it. At the same time the projected figure on the wall seems to jump against this imaginary borderline time and again, we can listen to the chanting of a poetic text that is just as shattered, as breathlessly flashing as the light reflections – a never-ending loop.

Fig. 6: Gary Hill. Wall Piece, 2000. Single-channel video/sound installation

> A word is worth .001 pictures. To be transfixed is no longer an option. I am in a way blind. I live time through a succession of pictures I've known since when. But it's precisely this *when* that haunts – it eats out the looking cavities and smiles inward like a Cheshire cat. What I might name as "the immediate surroundings" has all but vanished. I have no place. No feet. I've lost the vague idea of limbs. Legs feel more like logs arranged for a fire. I remember a dream of holding the other's heart in my hand; for a moment I live the pulse of another being. [...] This is not me. I'm not accountable. It wasn't thought out. It has no relation to thought. This is that hole that everything must pass through. [...] It burrows itself in, blows up and begins again plural––Points. Cells.[25]

An inversion of the borderlines between inside and outside. Cabin, cell, prison – or blasting cap of language? The paradoxical inside-out and the endless attempt to escape one's shattered self-perception may be seen as a radical staging of poetic criti-cism. We leave the last words to Kafka:

> Der Kampf mit der Zellenwand
>
> —————————————
>
> Unentschieden
> (Kafka, NSF II, 383)[26]

---

25 http://garyhill.com/work/mixed_media_installation/wall-piece.html

26 "The war with the cell wall" – "Undecided" (qtd. in Corngold 2011, 14).

Bibliography

Adorno, Theodor W. *Ästhetische Theorie. Gesammelte Schriften*. Vol. VII. Ed. Rolf Tiedemann, assisted by Gretel Adorno, Susan Buck-Morss, and Klaus Schultz. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1970.

Adorno, Theodor W. *Kierkegaard. Konstruktion des Ästhetischen. Gesammelte Schriften*. Vol. II. Ed. Rolf Tiedemann. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1979.

Adorno, Theodor W. *Nachgelassene Schriften* (NS). Section IV, Vol. 3. *Ästhetik (1958/59)*. Ed. Eberhard Ortland. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 2009.

Alsdorf, Bridget. "Hammershoi's Either/Or." *Critical Inquiry* 42.2 (Winter 2016): 268–305.

Barthes, Roland. *La chambre claire. Note sur la photographie*. Paris: Gallimard, 1980.

Barthes, Roland. *Camera lucida. Reflections on photography*. Trans. Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 2006.

Becker, Claudia. *Zimmer-Kopf-Welten. Motivgeschichte des Intérieurs im 19. Und 20. Jahrhundert*. Munich: Fink, 1990.

Benjamin, Walter. *Kleine Prosa. Baudelaire-Übertragungen. Gesammelte Schriften* (GS). Vol. IV. Ed. Tillmann Rexroth. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1972.

Benjamin, Walter. *Das Passagen-Werk. GS*. Vol. V. Ed. Rolf Tiedemann. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1982.

Blumenberg, Hans. *Theorie der Unbegrifflichkeit*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 2007.

Brüggemann, Heinz. *Walter Benjamin. Über Spiel, Farbe und Phantasie*, Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2007.

Chaouli, Michel. *Das Laboratorium der Poesie. Chemie und Poetik bei Friedrich Schlegel*. Munich et al.: Schöningh, 2004.

Corngold, Stanley. "Special views on Kafka's cages." *Freedom and Confinement in Modernity. Kafka's Cages*. Eds. Kordela A. Kiarina and Dimitris Vardoulakis. New York: Palgrave Macmillian 2011. 9–28.

Glöckner, Dorothea. *Kierkegaards Begriff der Wiederholung. Eine Studie zu seinem Freiheitsverständnis*. Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 1998.

Haug, Steffen. *Benjamins Bilder: Grafik, Malerei und Fotografie in der ‚Passagenarbeit'*. Paderborn: Fink, 2017.

Hemkendreis, Anne. *Die monochromen Interieurbilder Vilhelm Hammershøis*. Paderborn: Fink, 2016.

Kafka, Franz. *Dearest Father. Stories and Other Writings*. Eds. Ernest Kaiser and Eithne Wilkins. New York: Schocken, 1954.

Kafka, Franz. *Nachgelassene Schriften und Fragmente in der Fassung der Handschriften*. Vol. II (NSF II). Ed. Jost Schillemeit. Frankfurt/M.: Fischer, 1992.

Kafka, Franz. *The Blue Octavo Notebooks*. Cambridge, MA: Exact Change, 1991.

Kafka, Franz. *A Hunger Artist and Other Stories*. Trans. Joyce Crick. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2012.

Kierkegaard, Søren. *Enten – Eller*. Kopenhagen: Gyldenrdalske, 1920.

Kierkegaard, Søren. *Kierkegaard's Writings*. Eds. Edna H. Hong and Howard V. Hong. Vol. III/1: *Either/Or* (1988); Vol. VI: *Fear and Trembling/Repetition* (1983); Vol. VII: *Philosophical Fragments* (1985); Vol. XIX: *Sickness Unto Death. A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening* (2013). Princeton, NJ: PUP, 1983–2013.

Kierkegaard, Søren. *The Journals of Soren Kierkegaard* [JP]. Ed and trans. Alexander Dru. New York: Oxford University Press, 1938.

Kleinwort, Malte. *Kafkas Verfahren: Literatur, Individuum und Gesellschaft im Umkreis von Kafkas Briefen an Milena*. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2004.

Leske, Marie. *Illustriertes Spielbuch für Mädchen. Unterhaltende und anregende Belustigungen, Spiel und Beschäftigungen für Körper und Geist, im Zimmer sowie im Freien.* Berlin and Heidelberg: Springer, 1914.

Liessmann, Konrad Paul. "Schattenrisse. Das Tagebuch des Verführers: Im Schatten des Eros." *Sören Kierkegaard: Entweder – Oder* (Klassiker Auslegen 67). Eds. Hermann Deuser and Markus Kleinert. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017. 131 – 150.

Müller, Ernst. "'Der Einsame, der die Fahrt eines Eisenbahnzuges gestört hat.' Wahrnehmungs-, Kommunikations- und Bewegungstechniken bei Kierkegaard." *Wahrnehmung und Geschichte. Markierungen zur Aisthesis materialis.* Eds. Bernhard J. Dotzler and Ernst Müller. Berlin: De Gruyter, 1995. 43–82.

Schlegel, Friedrich. "Kritische Fragmente" [1797]. *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel Ausgabe* (KFSA). Vol. II. Ed. Hans Eichner. Paderborn et al.: Schöningh, 1967. 147 – 163.

Schlegel, Friedrich. "Athenäums-Fragmente" [1798a]. *KFSA*. Vol. II. Ed. Hans Eichner. Paderborn et al.: Schöningh, 1967. 165 – 255.

Schlegel, Friedrich. "Über Goethes Meister" [1798b]. *KFSA*. Vol. II. Ed. Hans Eichner. Paderborn et al.: Schöningh, 1967. 126 – 146.

Schlegel, Friedrich. "Gespräch über die Poesie" [1800]. *KFSA*. Vol. II. Ed. Hans Eichner. Paderborn et al.: Schöningh, 1967. 284 – 362.

Schreiber, Gerhard. *Apriorische Gewissheit. Das Glaubensverständnis des jungen Kierkegaard und seine philosophisch-theologischen Voraussetzungen* (Kierkegaard Studies 30). Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014.

Schürmann, Uta. *Komfortable Wüsten. Das Interieur in der Literatur des europäischen Realismus des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Literatur – Kultur – Geschlecht. Studien zur Literatur- und Kulturgeschichte 65). Vienna: Böhlau, 2015.

Stiegler, Bernd. Reisender *Stillstand. Eine kleine Geschichte des Reisens im und um das Zimmer herum.* Frankfurt/M.: Fischer, 2010.

Tajafuerce, Begonya Saez. "Kierkegaardian seduction, or the aesthetic actio(nes) in distans." *Diacritics* 30.1 (Spring 2000): 78 – 88.

List of figures

Anne-Brigitte Fonsmark, Mickael Wivel, and Henri Loyrette. Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux, 1997. 73. (c) Ordrupgaard, 1997; Réunion des musées nationaux, 1997.

Fig. 6: Gary Hill. *Wall Piece*, 2000. Single-channel video/sound installation. (Film-Still. Photograph: A.E.)

Joshua Kates
The Silence of the Concepts (in Meillassoux's *After Finitude* and Gottlob Frege)

> The confidence that truth can be found
> through thinking is the inevitable precondition for
> all investigating. (Hermann Lotze)

The call for the conference on which the present volume is based invites reflection on poetic critique – on criticism that would also be poetic. Citing Schlegel, it advances the notion that such critique might also be art, that criticism would add its own art to the work of art. Without wishing to disavow this possibility, a book project I have just finished suggests that the relation between criticism and art is a two-way street: not only may criticism be poetic, roughly in Schlegel's sense, but, as Schlegel himself already suggested, literature, including poetry, would already be critical – by which I intend that literature, too, would have a subject matter, be about something, and strive for insight, understanding, or truth, albeit not always on the assertoric terms that usually frame these accomplishments.[1]

To be clear, so changing the equation and reinflecting our conception of what literature and criticism are would not entail that literature ceases to be fanciful and becomes a sequence of veiled assertions or statements; nor, however, has this ever really been true of interpretation, criticism, or thinking. In fact, "the silence of the concepts" names a new view concerning what happens when we read or write any text. On this account, the understanding of what we say, our expressions' meaningfulness and references, comes to pass in an operation that unfolds across time, taking in stretches of discourse necessarily larger than the word and even the isolated sentence. Such an event of understanding is not graspable in terms of any pre-existing frameworks – givens, such as words, language, signifiers, forms, generic rules. Instead, what is at issue in writing and speech – what they have to say, and what they talk about, as well as how they say it – would recur to a single, everywhere identical operation, occupying a heretofore neglected middle ground: a region greater than the word or single sentence, yet smaller than those formations thought to combine discourse and its objects *en bloc*, such as, on some views, genres, or Wittgenstein's language games. To be sure, open-ended habits or practices, informed by what I call traditionalities or historicities, would still shape our expectations when

---

1 For this project, see my *A New Philosophy of Discourse: Language Unbound* (Kates 2020). Moreover, see Yi-Ping Ong's "Poetic Criticism and the Work of Fiction: Goethe, Joyce, and Coetzee" in this volume for a nice exploration of the possibility indicated by Schlegel of literary works commenting on (or "critiquing") other works.

approaching different sorts of discourse, or "talk!," as I term it.[2] Confronting shopping lists, for instance, different uses are anticipated than when regarding the periodic table. Nevertheless, nothing fundamental or structural separates any of these instances; hybrids or variants are always possible, specimens such as "shopping lists of the stars" – shopping lists not thrown away, but preserved, like the periodic table – or Ben Lerner's novel, *10:04*, which is also an exercise in art criticism.

In the present essay, this middle ground will be fleshed out, and what is at stake in it indicated, by using Quentin Meillassoux's work as springboard and provocation. Meillassoux's speculative realism, and other recent initiatives with which it is often allied (such as Graham Harman's, Bruno Latour's or Karen Barad's) share a concern that animates the present work, while being marked by a major difference in how that concern is addressed. An anxiety about science, which may also take the form of a fascination with it, arguably motivates these programs. The resurgence of humanistic (*geisteswissenschaftliche*) practices afforded by the New Criticism, structuralism, poststructuralism, and deconstruction in the post-WWII era having collapsed, what this moment had held at bay – namely, the apparently unparalleled power and authority of modern scientific discourse with its power to reshape existence – now returns to the fore.

The approach I am mapping here, to be clear, also entails the rejection of godlike structures of knowledge, arguably pushing still further that ontological flattening that marks Action Network Theory (ANT) or Barad's work, as well as surface reading, though seemingly not Meillassoux's endeavor.[3] The denial of scientific discourse's exceptionality, however, by no means discredits its claims to truth, which, often, though not always, are compelling when examined in their specificity. Truth's purview is instead broadened and diversified. Truth, on my account, pertains to all talk!, to all discourse, including criticism and literature, as well as political theory, law and, at moments, philosophy. Every discourse, as discourse, speaks, comments, describes, articulates, or in some other manner latches on to something other than itself and articulates something concerning it, albeit on different terms and often with respect to different types of subject matters.

To propose that all discourse touches on the world and may be capable of insight necessitates that all talk!, every discourse, has reference points, topics, and subjects, concerning which it tenders such apprehensions. In respect to this possibility, the present project registers its most significant difference from the ones previously mentioned, although this difference, too, varies in degree. The above-named endeavors, especially when it comes to theorizing their matters of concern, but also more generally, devalue, even while incorporating, a hermeneutic dimension. Their own discourse, both in respect to how they present their subject matter, as well as how

---

2 I prefer the neologism "talk!" to "discourse," since the latter is too associated with the program of expanding language's rule-bound character to language in use, as in "discourse theory" or John Searle's version of speech-act theory.

3 On such "flattening" as a general trend in the contemporary humanities, see Bennett 2010, 254.

that matter takes shape, recurs to a relatively straightforward style of theorizing and argumentation, of which Meillassoux offers perhaps the most extreme example. In contrast to some phases of poststructuralism, the hermeneutic and the theoretical moment come asunder in these works.

By contrast, in the present undertaking, because this middle ground's operation entails the appurtenance of even a single sentence to others in implicit series, it retains *both* insight into some subject matter *and* a hermeneutic axis. The interpretative register, implicitly everywhere at work, but explicitly so in humanistic contexts, is foregrounded in the present instance, though this by no means cancels these or the present undertakings' ability to refer and to render insights or truths. Indeed, in every instance, along with our expressions or related stretches of talk!, ultimately something non-verbal, different from talk!, remains up for grabs, which can come to the fore on different terms than talk! or discourse, in part because terms themselves here are never fixed once and for all nor function in isolation. Instead, both what talk! says and the disclosure of those non-talk!-matters it engages take shape as events, along a continuum of familiarity and novelty, with some topics and some expressions – for example, in certain contexts, "pass the salt" – being more readily parsed than others, such as the first chapter of *Das Kapital*. Yet, all instances remain eventful, both in their production and their reception; their expression and understanding take place on occasions and in contexts and are never preprogrammed nor signify autonomously.

Nevertheless, at this moment, "in walks Quentin," as jazz aficionados might put it, since for Meillassoux and many of his readers any retention of a hermeneutic dimension will seem a version of his great bugbear, "correlationism," the term with which his thinking today is most often associated, albeit for his attack on it. Accordingly, for the remainder of the present discussion what I propose to do is to sketch Meillassoux's positioning in *After Finitude*, with one eye on the thinking of Gottlob Frege, to clarify correlationism both in my own work and in Meillassoux's. So proceeding, I will set out the middle ground here in question, contrasting it with Meillassoux's way of working, while also exemplifying this region's operation in practice. The consequences of this middle ground for literary studies then will be briefly discussed by way of conclusion.

1 The Middle Ground's Lower Bound

The middle ground here conceived operates neither on the great scale of genres nor the more minute one of words. The former, genres and other such totalities that would at once prescribe what talk! says, and the objects it talks about, such as Foucault's *epistemes* or Niklas Luhmann's systems, instantiate the *upper* reach of this middle region. Words, concepts, signs, and other subsentential units, furnish the middle ground's *lower* bound. Neither of these, I am about to suggest, function as their proponents imagine; neither close on themselves and neither can be effectively

traced nor affirmed, as supplying conditions for expression, understanding, and insight. Revealing Meillassoux's thought's limits in light of Frege, and then Frege's theory's own shortcomings, exhibits why this is so, and thus how this middle ground actually takes shape, as well as ultimately how this middle ground avoids correlationism, by dint of the real's role in it. The real as here understood, in turn, grants leeway for literature, criticism, and the other humanities to consort with truth on their own terms.

Why the lower bounds of this middle zone lack closure, and thus why words or signs as such effectively play no role in literary or any other expression and their understanding, may be grasped by examining correlationism itself – the term, or word, or sign "correlationism" – and its fate in Meillassoux's own thinking. As we are about to see, one striking paradox or irony in Meillassoux's writing is that while his specific arguments, of which there are many in *After Finitude*, conform to Aristotle's older syllogistic logic of subject and predicate, Meillassoux's presentation as a whole deviates markedly from this format. His is not an extended deductive exposition even in the very loose style of Kant's first *Critique*. Instead, Meillassoux's aims repeatedly alter, and, with that, what each of his terms say or mean changes, especially "correlationism." What befalls "correlationism," upon its introduction in *After Finitude*, thus itself, perhaps unintentionally, exhibits this middle ground's functioning.

That logic, essentially Aristotle's, to which Meillassoux has recourse, is likely familiar to most. For it, words or terms and their definition are key. This logic's unit, more specifically, is the syllogism, such things as: "All women are mortal; Cleopatra is a woman; Cleopatra is mortal." The crucial moment in this figure of the syllogism, called Barbara – there are others – is the *second* clause, where the grammatical subject Cleopatra turns out to have a property and fall under a predicate, treated universally in the first: here, "being a woman." This second step, the so-called "minor premise," lets the other property and predicate in question, mortality, be transferred on to Cleopatra, thereby arriving at the assertion expressed in the conclusion: "Cleopatra is mortal."

In Aristotelian logic, consequently, terms and their definitions are decisive. What women are; their definition; whether being mortal is part of it; who or what Cleopatra is – all must be clear and previously known for this or any instance of syllogistic reasoning to operate.

Meillassoux, who also proceeds syllogistically or, as it is sometimes put, deductively, early on in *After Finitude* offers the following definition of correlationism. Correlationism consists in the claim that "we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term apart from the other" (Meillassoux 2008, 5). Correlationists assert no being without thinking, no thinking without being. Shortly, at what more this definition aims will become clearer. At the moment, it can be noted that this formulation arguably is already controversial, since it appears to be a version of Parmenides' famous saying about thinking and being,

voein and *einai*, being the same, *to auto.* Yet Meillassoux deems correlationism a specifically modern development.[4]

Meillassoux, in any case, almost immediately transforms this notion in a manner that, though not in line with Aristotle's template, is at least not excluded by Frege's. Frege's logic, it must be underscored, is not syllogistic but propositional. For Frege, the *statement* or assertion – the judgment, not the term – is the unit of expression and of whatever truth it may access. Hence, early on in his career, Frege counseled against seeking definitions and advised instead to look toward the use of words in statements, where alone what the words express may be grasped. This injunction, "never to ask for the meaning of a word in isolation, but only in the context of a proposition," came to be known as Frege's context principle (Frege 1980, x).

Owing to Frege's context principle, concepts, terms, and words begin to slough off their grammatical, but also their ontological and categorial, identities. Concepts are neither properties nor predicates; they cannot be identified with any single word, nor can they even be defined directly or grasped as such. Concepts are essentially incomplete or unsaturated portions of statements and may be identified only by way of their extension: the different objects to which any given concept applies or that the concept "takes."

Frege, more specifically, came to understand concepts as functions, which perform operations on arguments, the objects that fill them in. Their definition by way of their extensions entails that the concept or function, as, for example, expressed by "...is a horse" is identified thanks to all the different instances when "x is a horse" turns out to be true: "Secretariat is a horse," "Bucephalus is a horse," and on so on. Yet, even the workaround just employed is not really satisfactory; a different concept, for Frege, would be expressed in the lyrics from the old TV show *Mr. Ed*, which seems to possess the same verbal schema: "a horse *is a horse*...of course of course." Here "...is a horse," despite possessing what seem to be the same words and format, expresses a *different concept* owing to the different work it performs in the context of the present sentence, namely, that of expressing an identity.

Frege's scheme, it should be noted, harbors the profound possibility that there can be both speech and truth about a given subject matter – "Secretariat is a horse" – without that subject matter, or the terms that capture this truth, being transparent or known in any final way. Talk! in this respect operates in precise contrast to

---

4 Moreover, as so expressed, it actually does not apply to Kant's program in his first *Critique*, though this is Meillassoux's primary instance of this failing (Meillassoux 2008, 4, among others). What Kant calls transcendental knowledge, that is, knowledge of the conditions of genuine empirical knowledge, is itself *a priori*. Hence, for Kant there *can* be knowledge on the part of thinking or reason of *itself*, apart from knowledge of what is. This misprision of Kant, it should be noted, is in line with Meillassoux's understanding of Kant's categories as factical, here later discussed, and his assignment to Kant of what he calls Hume's problem. Kant's categories, though indeed otherwise unexplained, for this same reason cannot be "factical," being *a priori*.

its presentation in Aristotle's logic. For Frege, one can say, "heat is found in bodies," without really knowing what heat is or what a body is, how the two interact, or the precise notions these words purport to express. This fact, as well as the concepts' inability to be directly named, are two ways in which concepts prove to be *silent* in Frege's treatment. Others will emerge, albeit not always in a manner Frege himself would have expected.

Hence, when approached from a Fregean perspective, rather than Meillassoux's *definition* of correlationism being decisive, what Meillassoux *does with this term* in other sentences and parts of his discourse is of primary importance. Moreover, this is fortunate, since Meillassoux's exposition, as already remarked, rings a rather dizzying set of changes on his leading notion. Meillassoux initially highlights correlationism's abandonment of *realism*, of the ability to grasp things, indeed nature, in itself, without filters of any sort – in the wild, so to speak. To be against correlationism, consequently, is to insist that knowledge grasps nature raw, if not necessarily red in tooth and claw.[5] Through a series of steps, Meillassoux's program, however, morphs quite considerably. It turns into the project that his text's subtitle presents: the affirmation or establishment of "the necessity of contingency." Meillassoux's crusade against correlationism culminates in the imputation to nature of a radical and unprecedented style of contingency or chance (yet one somehow still *necessary*) that Meillassoux in part employs set theory to sketch, here being inspired by Alain Badiou.

Neither such contingency nor its necessity, of course, on their face immediately answer to what correlationism as first defined aims at: a radical realism, or nature in the wild, which Meillassoux exemplifies by what he ironically refers to as the "arche-fossil" (Meillassoux 2008, 10).[6] The problem, however, of which Meillassoux himself is aware, is that, as so conceived, his embrace of nature as non-correlated, as in the wild, yet as still known, runs the risk of returning us to that natural light or sovereign reason said to hold sway in the early moderns, such as Descartes, as well as their predecessors.[7] With nature in the wild, being itself absolute, as Meillassoux has it,

---

5 Meillassoux speaks of "a great outdoors" that he fears contemporary philosophy has lost in respect to nature (Meillassoux 2008, 17). Christian Thorne also cites this remark in his "Outward Bound: On Quentin Meillassoux's *After Finitude*" (Thorne 2012, 274). Thorne's concerns and mine at times overlap, though, of course, he makes no reference to Frege nor does he move toward that middle ground ultimately here set forth.

6 The existence of the fossil, according to Meillassoux, embodies a time before human being and before thought (Meillassoux 2008, 14); thereby, the fossil, by his lights, directly refutes the correlationist affirmation of thinking and being's mutual dependence, although neither Kant, who gave an early account of planetary genesis, nor any other philosopher Meillassoux cites, actually doubts the existence of a pre-human past.

7 In fact, Meillassoux initially illustrates the difference between the correlationist and non-correlationist standpoints in terms of Descartes' separation of so-called secondary from primary qualities. The difference between secondary qualities, like taste and color, and primary ones, like extension and shape – the latter being mathematizable, the former not – for Meillassoux exhibits the difference

yet also an object of knowledge, the knower and her knowledge themselves must possess a similarly absolute status. (This problem, by the way, seems to me to affect almost all of the new materialisms insofar as they appeal to metaphysics.) Hence, in Meillassoux's case, the terms on which he initially set forth his project will change; in the place of that initial and ultimately "naïve realism" in respect to nature that he first depicts, Meillassoux, correspondingly, next affirms a *contingency* that invests nature as an object of scientific knowledge (Meillassoux 2008, 27).

As suggested above, a fundamental anxiety about science and its achievements may, then, subtend Meillassoux's program in *After Finitude*, though this worry takes the form of restoring science's absolute authority at almost any cost. Indeed, the high price Meillassoux's endeavor pays may already be plain, since the conundrum he faces initially appears insoluble on the terms that he takes up. Meillassoux, to be clear, will try to *reason* his way out of this impasse, to find in argument, and thus *in reason itself*, a flight from reason's hegemony. Only in this manner can he hope to maintain some approximation of *realism* alongside knowledge in the modern scientific style of laws expressed in mathematical formalisms, without making the capacity for knowing itself absolute.

To balance what would otherwise mark a return to reason's traditional sovereignty and presumption to know the in-itself, Meillassoux, accordingly, asserts a different absolute on the side of *the object:* a supposed absolute randomness, a radical chance or contingency, somehow also still necessary, and also still purportedly compatible with modern scientific knowing.[8] At this moment, moreover, in the service of this first detour or transformation of his project, Meillassoux's Aristotelianism returns full throttle, bringing a number of fairly obvious fallacies in its wake, some of which would be recognized in Aristotle's idiom, though they are much clearer in Frege's. Indeed, to square this circle, to accomplish his embrace of an absolute, wild, object that nevertheless does not reinstate a sovereign reason, Meillassoux turns again to Kant, formerly the poster child for correlationism, now in a positive vein. Meillassoux himself avows a version of Kant's transcendental turn, launched against the early modern vantage point, despite its correlationist tendencies. Specifically, Meillassoux embraces what he calls, anachronistically, and arguably wrongly, a "facticity" that Kant's twelve categories in the first *Critique* purportedly exemplify (Meillassoux 2008, 53–54).

Meillassoux thus returns to Kant, but also to Kant's successors, to mount his argument for radical contingency. Meillassoux would follow both Kant and those ab-

---

between an anthropomorphized and correlationist access to nature, and that tapping into wild nature, nature in itself, that he wants to defend (Meillassoux 2008, 3).

8 It should be noted that Meillassoux himself by his lights never fully accomplishes this task; he never explains how the mathematization of nature and his new contingency are related, why knowledge of such a radically contingent nature should take the form of mathematically expressed laws. After posing this problem at the end of his penultimate chapter (Meillassoux 2008, 111), he recurs to it again on the last page of his work, asserting that it is an issue yet to be resolved (124).

solutists who followed after Kant, the idealists. Like them, Meillassoux will raise an aspect of Kant's thinking to the absolute; Meillassoux's own absolute, however, bears on the object, not the subject. Meillassoux chooses to absolutize the so-called "facticity" of Kant's categories, a facticity which he claims withstands the idealist turn. Facticity, on Meillassoux's view, harbors an otherness, an absolute "absence of reason," one which he assigns, not like Kant, to the understanding, but to its objects (Meillassoux 2008, 53).[9] Fixing on the seemingly unmotivated status of Kant's categories, to which Hegel and the other idealists of course also attended, Meillassoux's aim at this moment, accordingly, becomes to "convert facticity into the real property whereby everything and every world is without reason, and is thereby capable of actually becoming otherwise without reason" (53). In this way, Meillassoux would substitute for the realism earlier sought, now lost sight of in all but name, a novel and entirely speculative, yet somehow still necessary, contingency.

Whatever else may be said about this new aim, where Meillassoux's own discourse only momentarily rests, *reason by itself* clearly is presented as accessing such a radically contingent nature ultimately *devoid of reason*; a world so determined can appear in no actual science, nor even, as we shall soon see, in any actual object. Meillassoux's stance at this moment is in fact still more contorted than it may seem, in that what results from this imputation to nature of a version of a radical facticity, yielding what he himself at one point labels "chaos," even in this form must remain consistent with modern science and its findings (Meillassoux 2008, 63). Accordingly, Meillassoux conjures not only a non-correlationist real, now such solely insofar as it is absolutely contingent; moreover, this absolutely contingent real, this chaos is also non-contradictory, and thus still knowable by modern knowledge.

To square this seeming circle, then, Meillassoux argues both syllogistically and counterfactually, thereby allowing for the fate of concepts, terms, and words in his own exposition to be grasped, and, with that, the sketch of this middle ground's lower bounds to be completed. In particular, Meillassoux claims that were a being *inconsistent* in itself, a contradictory nature, to exist, such a being would be *incapable* of change, and, since unchangeable, it would not be contingent or random. Hence, his chaos, his purportedly wild nature, since it must be alterable, subject to change, must also be consistent, *non-contradictory*. Accordingly, nature can, indeed must both be a chaos *and* consistent, thereby remaining available to scientific inquiry.

The sophistry of this argument, which Meillassoux himself seems to acknowledge at one moment, is perhaps not blindingly self-evident, only owing to its syllogistic form; this form and its implications, in any case, are here finally more of inter-

---

9 "Thought, far from experiencing its intrinsic limits through facticity, experiences rather its knowledge of the absolute through facticity," he writes (Meillassoux 2008, 52).

est than the sophistry as such.[10] As regards the latter, however, it may be quickly noted that it is axiomatic in both Aristotle's and Frege's logic that any and every consequence follows from a contradictory premise (or condition); all outcomes are possible, none prohibited. Thus were nature in contradiction with itself, as Meillassoux posits, it follows that nature so determined could as well not change as that it could. Both consequences are similarly and equally entailed; Meillassoux's argumentation, accordingly, by no means establishes his chaos' necessary consistency.[11]

More importantly, however, is why the type of logic Meillassoux employs may somewhat mask this fallacy. For Frege, rather than being a predicate or a property of some being, existence is always a second-order concept or function. To say something exists is to affirm that some first-order concept possesses at least one object that a given concept ranges over – that the lower order concept in question yields the value true in at least one statement in which it is used. For example, to say a horse exists, for Frege, is to claim that there is at least one true judgement that something, Secretariat or Bucephalus, is a horse. If this is so, that a horse exists is true. On Frege's template, then, before reasoning can occur about what follows from a *contradictory* nature, it would have to be determined whether in the first place there is such a nature, or indeed any contradictory objects, anything answering to "x is a contradictory being."

Not so proceeding, Meillassoux instead argues in a manner that effectively renders him the St. Anselm of contemporary philosophy. In both Anselm and Meillassoux, argument proceeds from definitions, and existence is taken as but one possible predicate among others. For Anselm, God by definition exists, since, owing to God's definition as the most perfect being, the predicate existence cannot be denied to him, existing, after all, being more perfect than non-existing.[12] For Meillassoux, similarly, an object the existence of which is assumed to be possible, thanks to its possessing the predicate "contradictory" could not be changeable, and thus must be consistent with scientific knowledge, its actual existence apparently being simply another predicate it may happen to bear or not. The definition alone in both instances yields conclusions about what *must* be the case, any acquaintance with such entities and their genuine being rendered beside the point.

The lower reaches of the middle ground here in question, then, are reached with this brief survey of the logic of subject, predicate, and existence, in Aristotelian log-

---

10 "Philosophy is the invention of strange forms of argumentation, necessarily bordering on sophistry," Meillassoux at one point states, presumably commenting on his own practice (Meillassoux 2008, 76).

11 In syllogistic logic this can be shown through the disjunctive syllogism; in Frege's, through the conditional, where, if the premise is false, the consequent is always true. In the former, if I say "whales are either mammals or fish," and "if they are fish I will eat them," if the premise embodies a contradiction (whales are fish and whales are mammals), then both my eating them and not eating them follows.

12 For a very different view of Anselm, see Levene 2017, especially chapter five.

ical garb, though their instability in Frege himself has yet to be addressed.[13] Nevertheless, in contrast to Anselm's and Meillassoux's reasoning that begins from terms or names and their meanings, it can now be seen why it matters that Frege approaches concepts through their appearance in entire statements, ultimately giving pride of place to reference or significance (*Bedeutung*), not sense or meaning (*Sinn*) – albeit as becomes clearer below, Frege also, of course, has a doctrine about the latter. Correspondingly, what is, and even what can be said, finally derives from apprehensions of the world – Secretariat is a horse – rather than what is true about the world and our knowledge of such truths deriving from our ideas and notions, as in Meillassoux's treatment of nature or Anselm's speculations on the idea of God. At the lowest level of this middle ground thus stand statements, sentences and the references that in part make up their understanding.

2 The Middle Ground's Upper Bound

Frege's logic thus represents an advance on the Aristotelian one, at least as the latter is employed by Meillassoux; in a Fregean context, the argument Meillassoux makes for the consistency of a radically contingent nature could not be countenanced. Frege himself, however, in his own fashion, attempted to stabilize his logic's lower bound, to fix such references and thus his concepts' identities, through a higher order regimentation of these concepts' objects.[14] By attending to this facet of his project, the limits of the upper reach of this middle ground emerge, and, with them, ultimately the instability of both bounds. Frege's attempt indeed fails; in its wake, it leaves multiple conceptualizations and a promiscuity of references that neither can be fixed once and for all, nor have need of being such in order to operate. Instead, what is being said ("is a horse") ultimately can only be grasped in relation to what is being talked about – Secretariat, this part of a carousel, Mr. Ed – by way of implicit prior histories of talk! and of commerce with things, permitting them, talk! and things, to emerge. Things, talk!, and their history, functioning together, allow all discourse, all talk!, ultimately from poetry to physics, to refer and to mean, with no single aspect ever being stabilized or fixed on its own distinct terms.

---

13 In Aristotle's own thinking, it should be noted, these issues are more complicated, in part owing to his categories, which have a different function than Kant's, and his treatment there and elsewhere of the *upokeimenon* (subject) and the *todi ti* (sometimes translated as the individual), as well as ultimately his handling of the notion of *ousia* (beingness or essence). For the former two, see Aristotle 1962, 15–31.

14 As discussed below, Frege also thought that the senses of sentences or propositions had their inherent stability as senses, or thoughts, as he came to term it. Nevertheless, his attempt to identify concepts by way of their extensions proceeds without calling on this register and thus can be followed out in its own right.

A more profound, because more modern correlationism, it should be noted, underpins Meillassoux's stance in *After Finitude*, in effect identical with that he criticized above, in addition to the more classical correlationism Meillassoux evinces when he reasons his way to his chaotic nature's consistency as just sketched. This second instance of correlationism is critical, since the limits of Frege's thinking appear in it, as well as those of Meillassoux's own. Meillassoux's version of a more modern correlationism ultimately exhibits why no upper bound to discourse or talk! can be maintained, no decisive regimentation of talk! and its subject matters promulgated, now that the fate of the lower, the word or the concept, has begun to appear. Accordingly, its treatment completes the presentation of the middle ground here in question by further depicting the concept's silence.

In the wake of the foregoing, Meillassoux's discussion of nature takes a still more unexpected turn. Not only must that absolute chaos, radically contingent nature, be consistent – non-contradictory enough to be known. Nature must also not *appear* to be *actually changing*, since genuine change would not just damage, but entirely undermine, science's claim to knowledge. Were nature actually to be evident "becoming otherwise without reason," to use Meillassoux's words, obviously no knowledge of nature in itself would be possible, assuming such a turn of events is even conceivable (Meillassoux 2008, 53). Accordingly, to resolve this tension, after arguing for radical chaos's self-consistency, Meillassoux takes another step along his presentation's careening axis; this twist involves fending off what Meillassoux calls Hume's problem, albeit Hume does not make use of this consideration in the manner Meillassoux indicates, and it has nothing to do with Kant, to whom Meillassoux also imputes it.

What Meillassoux dubs "Hume's problem" asserts that were nature contingent this fact must necessarily have revealed itself within a finite time (Meillassoux 2008, 85). Non-lawfulness would have had to become evident in the course of the nearly innumerable experiences of nature had by human beings, based on a probabilistic calculation. Hence, the argument as stated affirms nature's conformity to law.

The supposition that nature's inconsistency, did it exist, would stand forth, is turned round by Meillassoux, then, to accomplish two goals. First, he uses it to exhibit the character of his own notion of contingency, which will be more radical than any randomness probability can calculate. Secondly, Meillassoux turns to Hume's framework to defuse the worry that nature might actually be encountered *as* varying and thereby elude knowledge. Meillassoux, in engaging with Hume's hypothesis, thus will coin a contingency supposedly so radical that, when assigned to nature, the latter has no need, nor even chance, of appearing as contingent at all.

To capture both characteristics of his absolute, which in every other context would seemingly be in tension, Meillassoux turns to Cantor and set theory. Probability, as Meillassoux points out, insofar as it is quantified, clearly makes reference to a totality of possible instances: one out of a hundred, two out of ten thousand and so on – including in the thought experiment upon which Hume and Kant purportedly rely. Accordingly, Meillassoux appeals to Cantor's theorem, specifically as it yields

a transfinite number as the power set – or number of subsets – of the first order infinity of the rationals. Cantor famously showed that the set of the reals so derived (including numbers such as pi, the decimals of which expand without repeating) consists in a higher-order infinity than the infinity of the integers, one that he deemed "transfinite." Meillassoux suggests that the randomness of nature would be of this second, uncountable, non-totalizable order.[15] Nature's contingency thus corresponds not to any possible count, not even the first order *infinite* of the integers, but to the next infinity up, a transfinite infinity, on the order of the real numbers, themselves intrinsically uncountable.

With contingency conceived in this fashion, as answering to the transfinite, it then becomes thoroughly possible, in effect necessary, that the randomness applicable to nature would never appear. Numerous, paradoxical results, after all, can be derived from the transfinite, such as the ability to construct from a single sphere two spheres of the exact same size with nothing missing from either.[16] Natural events for Meillassoux would be similarly transfinitely random, and thus would have nothing missing from their consistent appearances. Their randomness, conceived in terms of the transfinite, would not appear even within the sum of things and events belonging to the knowable spatio-temporal known universe, since the latter is at most countably infinite like the rationals.

Now the most important feature of Meillassoux's argument, in the present context, is that his entire construction hinges on an historical divergence between set theory and Frege's project, in which the limits of Frege's project, as well as set theory's, make themselves felt. That difference also lets Meillassoux's own correlationism, identical to that he otherwise denounces, be grasped.

The ability of set theory, of mathematical logic to build on itself, to spawn these infinities upon infinities of different orders, in the manner Meillassoux exploits, indeed stands in contrast to the fate of Frege's logic and his nascent philosophy of language. As is well-known, Frege's program, his attempt to forge a logical formalism able to generate the totality of modern mathematics with the exception of geometry, ran into what become known as Russell's paradox. In the face of Frege's regimentation of functions, his attempt to move from first to second-order functions and their corresponding extensions, and consistently on up, Russell invented a novel higher-order function, or concept, ranging over lower-order extensions: that of extensions that do not include themselves as members. The extension of this same function would fall under this concept, then, only if it did not fall under it, and vice versa – an outcome obviously not sustainable within a logical deductive system. Though seemingly technical and even contrived, Russell's paradox showed that extensions

---

15 "We will retain the following translation of Cantor's transfinite: the (quantifiable) totality of the thinkable is unthinkable. Accordingly, the strategy for resolving Hume's problem can now be stated" (Meillassoux 2008, 104).
16 For a relatively deep, yet accessible "dive" on this possibility known as the Banach-Tarski paradox, see Kaseorg 2007.

could not always be made into objects, into arguments of other functions, as Frege had supposed, nor could one, then, freely generate new higher-level functions and "move up the ladder," in the way Frege envisioned to lay the basis for his definition of the numbers.[17]

Now what tends not to be recognized in contemporary philosophical appropriations of set theory, in particular Meillassoux's, is that the very same paradox that Frege confronted and failed to resolve, as well as some others, also affected the first versions of set theory that Cantor framed. Russell in fact had studied Cantor's work, and initially established his paradox with an eye to his theory. Moreover, Ernst Zermelo, of Zermelo-Frankel (or ZF, the now standard formalization of set theory), discovered virtually the same issue as Russell in his own examination of Cantor's early writings. Zermelo's axiomatization of set theory, later fine-tuned by Frankel, was thus designed to avoid precisely the same paradoxes to which Frege's logicism fell prey. Though Zermelo's attempt is widely considered successful, nevertheless, to achieve his goals, Zermelo had to pay a price. To avoid the issues Frege and Russell confronted, Zermelo's axiomatization of set theory made it impossible to generate sets in some situations where that possibility intuitively should be available (for example, when all the members in question, originally found in different sets' subsets, fall under a single function, thus disallowing sets, such as Russell's, composed of sets not members of themselves).[18] Similarly, it is impossible in Zermelo's theory to speak of all sets, the set of all sets or the so-called universal set. There is not one function or concept under which *all* set theory's sets fall. Accordingly, the set as such cannot be defined within set theory itself (which was also true of Russell's formalism in his *Principia*, as Gödel noted). Axiomatized set theory indeed by design cannot provide a univocal notion of a set. Instead, its axioms define what counts as a set and what does not by way of the operations that can be performed upon it, remaining silent about what this notion everywhere designates, as well as the original collections, afforded by broader domains of discourse, from which sets are first generated.

With an eye to these stipulations and restrictions, Meillassoux's way of proceeding at the moment he turns to Cantor and set theory is, then, correlationist in his own original sense. In the formalism on which Meillassoux depends, "set" itself has no

---

17 Russell's own revision of Frege's project, in his *Principia Mathematica*, written with Whitehead, used what was called the theory of types to avoid these difficulties – types being assigned to concepts and to value-ranges to restrict them to their own levels. This strategy, in turn, encountered Gödel's proof, based on the *Principia*'s formalism, that both consistency and completeness were never attainable in complexly ordered logical systems, thereby bringing the logicist program in mathematics to its end. Chapter seven of Joan Weiner's *Frege Explained* gives a strong and accessible account of the problems Frege's philosophy of arithmetic encountered (Weiner 2004, 115–126). See also chapters five and six of Hans Sluga's *Frege: The Arguments of the Philosophers* (Sluga 1999, 102–148).

18 This feature follows from Zermelo's Axiom of Separation; for a discussion of it and the following claim, the paradoxes attendant upon the positing of a "universal set," see Hallett 2013.

isolatable semantic value, no single meaning, concept, or function belonging to it. At the same time, nature in itself as purportedly transfinitely contingent can only be spoken about at all thanks to this otherwise empty scheme. The nature Meillassoux has in mind cannot be designated as such apart from this formalization. Accordingly, neither nature (being) nor thought (the set) at this moment have any standing apart from one another. Neither access to radically contingent nature in itself nor to the set as such is available in Meillassoux's account, only to their correlation – in conformity with the definition of correlationism Meillassoux himself initially gives.

Meillassoux at this moment in *After Finitude*, then, practices correlationism exactly as he defines it, something which I would argue is also true of Alain Badiou's work.[19] Accordingly, the question posed of whether correlationism can be imputed to the present paper's stance returns. If Meillassoux cannot avoid correlationism, both of a pre-Kantian variety (as in the first, syllogistic, instance) and a post-Kantian one (as just reviewed), no alternative to some version of this position may exist. At the same time, a different arrangement may perhaps better retain Meillassoux's original commitment to realism than Meillassoux's own thinking, and to this extent no longer deserve the correlationist label.

To sketch this alternative possibility, the limits of Frege's project that have begun to be glimpsed must be further set forth and this middle ground more fully laid bare. The paradox that Frege stumbled over, and that set theory subsequently found ingenious ways to circumvent, shows how this middle region is open-ended on its upper, as well as its lower bound. In fact, neither extreme being possessed of stable, definable elements, the two openings ultimately are one.

Concepts or functions, inherently incomplete and unsaturated, are to be identified for Frege, as has been noted, by their extensions, through all those instances that fall under them, all the arguments that make them true. This confidence, which implies a vertical construction of higher-order functions and value-ranges, cannot be wholly sustained, as has just been witnessed. The inherent instability of functions and concepts, in turn, ripples back on to the statements wherein they operate, ultimately leading to the demand that something other than expression, some thing or worlded subject matter, buttress each sentence's operation.

Statements are all the more unstable, and some sort of worldly factor are thus required to support them, moreover, since statements encounter problems of their own with maintaining their identity as construed by Frege. Frege deems statements closed, complete, and autonomous, as he also does the names found in them. For

---

19 Badiou's *Being and Event*, of course, rests on a sustained appropriation of set theory. That work never appears to me to *aim* at genuinely mathematical, set-theoretical rigor, but to use set-theory instead as a kind of philosophical allegory, as attested by Badiou's unorthodox treatment of the null set, and it is thus correlationist from the ground up. (On the null set, see Badiou 2005, 68 and 90). Ricardo L. Nirenberg and David Nirenberg have, in any case, contested *Being and Event*'s claims to rigor, were it to make them, in their "Badiou's Number: A Critique of Mathematics as Ontology" (Nirenberg and Nirenberg 2011).

Frege, both the statement and the name possess reference (what would make the statement true, and in the case of the name, the object named) and a sense (which Frege later called the "thought"). Frege could treat concepts as he did in part because the statements in which they function are understood in terms of these supposedly autonomous meanings and senses, and thereby viewed, to this extent, as independent.[20]

Statements and names possess self-subsistent ideal senses for Frege, a notion Meillassoux surprisingly at one moment himself credits.[21] This construal, which later is overtaken in analytic philosophy by the attempt simply to formalize the semantics of statements, in both versions ultimately proves unsuccessful, however. For one thing, indexicals, such as "I" or "here" or "now," with their inherent semantic incompleteness, their lack of stable meaning in respect to what they designate, are never able to be entirely subtracted from the equation; no construal of the statement can wholly factor out their operation, especially when it comes to naming and names.[22] "I" or "this" always involves an expression's *context* and thus provides no meanings that can simply be lifted out of it and stand alone, even if there may be rules for generating other sorts of significations (turning "I" into "Josh," for example). In addition, statements may appear in what are called indirect contexts, within reports about a speaker's beliefs or other attitudes. The truth of the latter, however, vary from the truth or falsity of the statement when it stands alone, thus raising the question of how their own semantics are to be understood.

"Johnny believes Flipper is a fish," to take an example, obviously may be true even when "Flipper is a fish" is false. Frege, accordingly, attempts to distinguish references and senses in the two cases. Specifically, he claims that the embedded statement ("Flipper is a fish" appearing in "Johnny believes that Flipper is a fish") has for its *reference* the *meaning* of this same statement when it stands alone. In this case, when embedded, the reference of "Flipper is a fish" is not Flipper and his possible fishiness, but the meaning of the statement that speaks of such. But if this is so, what this statement's own new *meaning* is in this context (what "Flipper is a fish" *means* when it appears in "Johnny believes that Flipper is a fish") seems inexplicable. If its old meaning becomes its new *reference*, what *meaning* can this expression now embedded in the new statement have? Alternatively, if it has *no* meaning, as some commentators suggest that Frege came to believe, how can a statement contain references without meaning, yet still be capable of independently being adjudicated true or false?[23]

---

20 For the relationship between sense, reference, and "thought," see, respectively, Frege 1997a and Frege 1997b.

21 Meillassoux affirms that "generally speaking, statements are ideal insofar as their reality is one of signification" (Meillassoux 2008, 12).

22 On indexicals and these issues more broadly, see Kates 2015.

23 Sluga somewhere suggests that Frege eventually came to believe that they lacked all meaning – how that suggestion would work, however, clearly presents a conundrum (Sluga 1999).

In Frege's account, then, the instability of concepts ultimately combines with the instability of statements, the latter being the contexts in which concepts themselves are found. As a result, statements do not close on themselves, nor can names be assigned fixed senses and references. No regimentation can organize once and for all concepts, extensions, and their various levels. Accordingly, the project of treating what is said, discourse, in separation from its background, from the actual contexts it operates in, including those things and subject matters talked about, cannot itself be maintained. Frege's model at both its upper and its lower reaches frays, yielding a continuum of understanding and insight, wherein not just concepts, but sentences and names must recur to other instances of their use to articulate what they say and mean, in a fashion that also requires attention to the referents in question, to these expressions' subject matters.

Indeed, it follows from Frege's failure that ultimately neither what a statement says nor whether it may be true can be known without acquaintance with other instances of talk!, as well as with what is being talked about, instances which necessarily in part recur to the speaker's and the hearer's history. Once Frege's stipulations cease to hold sway, to understand both what "Flipper is a fish" expresses, as well as whether it is true or false, attention must be paid at once to the fact that it is little Johnny who says it, and to the matter being talked about ("Flipper" in context could be the name of his dog who has just jumped in a fountain), as well as other related expressions ("sushi is fish") and topics (whales, porpoises, tuna, their habits and habitats), yielding not an intentionalism, but a triangulation across differing dimensions, all of which are in motion. In a similar vein, at the present juncture, physicists can identify and generate new subatomic particles on the basis of particle physics' current theorizations, though these theories include problems, the resolution of which may change the contents and character of these observations themselves. Both aspects, what is observed and what is theorized, are correlated with contexts, and hence also with where researchers stand within this discursive middle ground. What Frege would call the concept and the world are both in play, and with them come what is said and what is being talked about and their history.

Leeway, to be clear, remains for truth, ultimately construed as an irruption from elsewhere, since these statements' very articulations, their ability to express anything at all, are deemed impossible in isolation from referents and the world. Hence, no *construction* of what exists by thought or speech is here in question. As a result, the present conception, unlike his own, avoids what Meillassoux calls correlationism, at least to this extent. While no "view from nowhere" here takes hold – that *pre-Kantian* correlationism toward which Meillassoux at times backslides being rejected, indeed owing to understanding's finitude – on the present account things and their determinations can and do meet us from unexpected directions of their own devising. Thinking and being follow different careers, even as they also intersect.

Having arrived at this middle ground, some of its implications for literary studies, finally, may be briefly unfolded. This ground and its corresponding hermeneutic

view of truth (hermeneutic solely in that things' unfoldings and their understanding and expression are always preceded by prior episodes of each), both imply facticity, not in some perhaps fanciful Kantian sense, but in Heidegger's. Facticity indicates that world – understood as a pre-existing nexus of things and understanding – precedes each individual instance of expression and any encounter with specific existents. On existence and existents holistically conceived, a genuinely wild, because never fully apparent, real, in turn, will have already left its mark. Owing to facticity, persons have always already been handed over to a world already there in a way that entails that the finitude of understanding has a supra-finite, or indeed in a different sense than Cantor's, *trans*finite real as its correlate. While thought has always been tethered to a world in Heidegger's holistic and practical sense, a transfinite real – the ultimate reference of what Frege called the true – has also previously left its mark on this arrangement. Facticity thus pertains not just to the individual persons who come upon the scene, but to this entire matrix. The backgrounding thereby afforded, in which the real has always already been taken up, in turn, lets the difference between what is and what is said be maintained, while honoring their mutual yet differing intelligibility, yielding at once a confluence *and* divergence of thought and things.

Facticity, in short, on the present account, enables a (non-naïve) realism.[24] In turn, as so conceived, reality and the real prove capacious enough for literature, literary criticism, the arts, and the humanities to field insights and truths on their own terms. Any final, stable one-to-one correspondence between statements and their subject matters having ceased to be in question, while the statement as such is no longer privileged, multiple modes of expression and their corresponding insights can now be seen to operate. In these instances, too, the real precedes any given articulation, it overflows every context, while also giving itself in them. Accordingly, literature and criticism, as well as the arts and humanistic disciplines can have an eye to their subject matters and pursue their concerns with an aim at some sort of truth, while drawing on their own various traditionalities or historicities, articulating understandings in their specific fashions, albeit these are never determinative in advance of what transpires in any given instance.

Indeed, statements, descriptions, and reports never speak apart from their immersion in larger contexts of utterance and understanding, owing to their appurtenance to the middle ground here in question. Literature, criticism, and the humanities, however, regularly bring just such larger contexts forward and explicitly make them parts of their own talk! The complex dimensionality inherent in this middle ground, which allows for, rather than checking, insight (without feigning to escape its own temporally conditioned existence) in our disciplines explicitly enters into understanding texts, posing problems, disclosing truths, and/or generating new feel-

---

24 Hence on the present view, fossils, to take Meillassoux's example, can be, and also can be *fossils*. That fossils would have existed had human beings not sprung up hundreds of millions of years or even billions of years after their formation, no one actually doubts. The *understanding* that fossils exist, however, would not, of course, itself exist under these same circumstances.

ings and sensibilities. Humanistic instances and their understanding uniquely foreground their own embeddedness and implicit traditionality, though the possibility for this sort of scrutiny inheres in all discourse or talk!

On the present account, inquiry and truth, are not only broadened, then, extended to the arts and humanities, but turn out to be filiated, funiculated, organized in strings, temporal and historical. This middle ground's lack of closure entails that every insight or problem or achievement emerges in a discourse already begun, making possible going back over its articulations, in respect to its subject matters and its expressions.

Accordingly, in question can never be "science," or "nature," but some development (information theory, gene splicing) broached from out of an ultimately temporal aggregate of sayings, texts, and subject matters that can be gone over with an eye to a question and a future understanding. Similarly, what is necessary for the sorts of truths the humanities and literary criticism usually convey are not considerations pertaining to structures and forms (as surface reading and other contemporary critical moments also suggest), nor even networks or zones of interpenetration and indeterminacy.[25] Instead, attention must be paid to the relevant historicities, by way of discursive threads themselves convened on occasion and oriented by situated problems, questions, affects, and other styles of understanding. Literature and criticism and other humanistic disciplines must pursue questions and discoveries (as here concerning the relation of set theory to semantics, or in other instances, evolving types of narration or the formation and understanding of race or gender) by giving due weight to the different traditions of understanding at play in such talk! In these contexts, themselves reconvened with reference to the questions at issue, and thus in their own fashion in part always novel and unprecedented, such problems and subject matters, as well as others, can be explored; only there and then can insights about our situation, and perhaps also at times remedies for it, be discerned.

Inquiry and insight always occur at concrete crossroads, at once both not, and of, the critic's own making. Discovery/invention of this type, moreover, operates alike in poetry and science, philosophy and literary criticism, mathematics and legal scholarship, where researchers at once understand and innovate from within a situation both intellectual and worldly that they must also in part project, owing to their work's ultimately futural orientation. Of course, the view here on offer of such achievements is not necessarily the one found in such sayings themselves: poems, theories, theorems, literary criticism and so on. This middle ground, entailing the historicity of all understanding, nevertheless can be traced at work in all of these and other discursive achievements, and thus the silence of their concepts.

---

25 On surface reading, see Best and Marcus 2009; Latour, of course, is the prime progenitor of actor-network theory, or ANT. For an interrogation of his program, see Kates 2017.

What does all this concretely imply for literature and literary studies, then? Neither the upper nor the lower bound holding, the middle ground here sketched being all there is, in the end, it is fair to say that all speech effectively is literary speech: all talk! involves a new sighting, an attention to some, as in part still undetermined, subject matter, along with inviting, if not always necessitating, an eye to the means and medium of that subject matter's articulation on a given occasion. Otherwise stated, judgement, critique, is poetic; it inevitably involves *poeisis*, a kind of making, not of its subjects, but their understanding. The reverse, however, also is the case. To affirm that all speech is literary, after all, equally implies that none is, that neither literature nor literary criticism ultimately stand apart from any other sort of talk!

Schlegel himself perhaps had in mind a similar collapse of these distinctions when he spoke of poetic critique. At the very least, Schlegel indicates that literary speech may comment on other speech. The context of his remark concerns the capacity of one work (in this case Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*) to speak about another – here Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (a discussion and then production of which is presented in Books III and V respectively of Goethe's novel). For Schlegel, however, unlike in the present instance, such retroactive potentiating of one work by another, ultimately gives access to the aesthetic in its specificity, in its purported difference from the remainder of understanding. It makes available a so-called literary absolute descended from, but not identical to Kant's setting out of the free play of our faculties in his *Critique of Judgement*.

In the present instance, however, aesthetic experience is no more subjective or objective than any other; correspondingly, the distinction between that experience and other sorts, and thus between literature and other discourses is not structural or fundamental in Schlegel's sense nor an alternative one. The difference between literary talk! and other sorts is instead a matter of quantity, pertaining to the degree, not to the kind, of attention paid to how what is said is said and to who is speaking, alongside what is being talked about and the insertion of all three into an ongoing sequence or tradition or historicity.

Accordingly, for the present approach, innovations in media (in lyric poetry, drama, or the novel), which Kant took to be the work of genius, can never be separated from their subject matters. As is readily evident in Thomas Pynchon's early works or in some of Gerhard Richter's paintings, new views of a subject and new means of presenting it mutually enable one another. The medium draws attention to some phase of existence and presents it anew, in Pynchon's and Richter's case this aspect often being an historical occurrence (in fact sometimes the same one, the second world war). In turn, concern with grasping that occurrence or some other subject matter permits innovations to be forged within their respective artistic traditions – as in Richter's blurred paint, or Pynchon's discovering in the molecule responsible for a banana's aroma a new model for his prose.

Poets, literature, the literary and the aesthetic are thus neither the antennae of the race, nor a transcendental clue to human existence and its self-understanding.

They do not accede to a realm apart, whether painted paradise or hell. These discourses and endeavors instead work with the same tools of which the rest of us dispose. This fact has never, nor does now, however, prevent literature and the other arts from unearthing valuable nuggets, providing flashes of illumination at once on what is and how we understand it – insights that critics, thinkers, readers, and society must both potentiate and heed.

Bibliography

Aristotle. *The Categories*. Trans. Harold P. Cook. Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1962.

Badiou, Alain. *Being and Event*. Trans. Oliver Feltham. London: Continuum, 2005.

Bennett, Tony. "Sociology, Aesthetics, Expertise." *New Literary History* 41.2 (Spring 2010): 253–276.

Best, Stephen, and Sharon Marcus. "Surface Reading: An Introduction." *Representations* 108.1 (Fall 2009): 1–21.

Frege, Gottlob. *The Foundations of Arithmetic*. Trans. J.L. Austin. Oxford: Blackwell, 1980.

Frege, Gottlob. "On *Sinn* and *Bedeutung*." *The Frege Reader*. Ed. Michael Beaney. Oxford: Blackwell, 1997a. 151–171.

Frege, Gottlob. "Thought." *The Frege Reader*. Ed. Michael Beaney. Oxford: Blackwell, 1997b. 325–345.

Hallett, Michael. "Zermelo's Axiomatization of Set Theory." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2013). https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/zermelo-set-theory/ (25 September 2019).

Kaseorg, Anders. "The Banach-Tarski Paradox." 18.504 Seminar in Logic (17 May 2007). web.mit.edu/andersk/Public/banach-tarski.pdf (25 September 2019).

Kates, Joshua. "Semantics and Pragmatics and Husserl and Derrida." *Philosophy Compass* 10.12 (December 2015): 828–840.

Kates, Joshua. "Neither a God nor ANT Can Save Us: Latour, Heidegger, Historicity, and Holism." *Paragraph* 40.2 (July 2017): 153–173.

Kates, Joshua. *A New Philosophy of Discourse: Language Unbound*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020.

Levene, Nancy. *Powers of Distinction: On Religion and Modernity*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2017.

Meillassoux, Quentin. *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*. Trans. Ray Brassier. London: Continuum, 2008.

Nirenberg, Ricardo L., and David Nirenberg. "Badiou's Number: A Critique of Mathematics as Ontology." *Critical Inquiry* 37.4 (Summer 2011): 583–614.

Sluga, Hans. *Frege: The Arguments of the Philosophers*. London: Routledge, 1999.

Thorne, Christian. "Outward Bound: On Quentin Meillassoux's *After Finitude*." *Speculations III*. Eds. Michael Austin, Fabio Gironi, Robert Jackson, Paul J. Ennis, and Thomas Gokey. Brooklyn, NY: Punctum Books, 2012. 273–289.

Weiner, Joan. *Frege Explained*. Chicago: Open Court, 2004.

Bettine Menke

Theater as Critical Praxis: Interruption and Citability

In this article, I will reflect on a question that was posed in the announcement of the conference, on which this volume is based ("Poetic critique – is that not an oxymoron?") by shifting (it) to the field of theater, where the intersection between the "poetic" and "critique" takes place in a specific way, and in each of the 'elements' of the question, the poetic and critique. In what follows, I will consider theatrical practice that takes a distance from itself, is divided in itself, and thereby, as the critical reflection on theatrical (re)presentation, interrupts it and allows for "critical stances" (*kritische Stellungnahme*[*n*]) (Benjamin 1939, 538).[1] I will make use of concepts from Walter Benjamin, referring to notions from his essays on Brecht's theater (Benjamin 1931b and 1939), and, where it seems apt or necessary, I will also address Friedrich Schlegel (as well as Benjamin's readings of Schlegel). In reading Benjamin's essay(s) "Was ist das epische Theater?" ("What is Epic Theater?") – one version of which was stopped in print in 1931 and the second of which was published anonymously in 1939[2] – I will focus in particular on the notions of 'gesture,' 'interruption,' and 'citability.'[3] These terms mark central tenets of Benjamin's philosophy, that is to say of his readings, and they have a particular relevance for theater (and not only that of Brecht).

Benjamin explicitly relates what he sees Brecht's theater to achieve to the concept of romantic-ironic self-distancing (of form) and thereby to critique as the (self-)reflection of form in/on itself. Benjamin does this, on the one hand, when he accounts for epic theater's "awareness of being theater" in interrupting its (re)presention with the old phrase: "an actor should reserve for himself the possibility of falling out of character artistically" (Benjamin 1939, 538).[4] Thus, Benjamin brings

---

1 All translations of Benjamin's and of other texts are modified where necessary. Throughout the article, the references usually list the page numbers for both the original edition and for the translation. The first page number refers to the original.
2 In 1931, Walter Benjamin wrote "Was ist das epische Theater? Eine Studie zu Brecht," invited by Siegfried Kracauer to be published in the journal *Frankfurter Zeitung*. It was stopped while being printed by the editor Bernhard Diepold (cf. Benjamin GS II, 1374, 1379–1381; printing proof and document in Wizisla 2017, 71–80). Benjamin wrote a second version, "Was ist das epische Theater?," to be published anonymously in the bimonthly magazine *Maß und Wert* 2/6 (1939).
3 There is some overlap here in wording and ideas with my article "Gesture and Citability: Theater as Critical Praxis" (*Critique: The Stakes of Form*. Eds. Sami Khatib, Holger Kuhn, Oona Lochner, Isabel Mehl, and Beate Söntgen. Berlin: diaphanes, 261–296).
4 "Der Schauspieler soll sich die Möglichkeit vorbehalten, mit Kunst aus der Rolle zu fallen." (Benjamin 1939, 306–307)

---

the concept of *parekbasis* and thereby *the* paradigmatic figure of 'romantic irony' into play, which he, on the other hand, immediately rejects as a flawed analogy for the epic/*gestural* theater.

According to Benjamin's doctoral dissertation, *Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik*, the "critique of a work [*die Kritik des Werkes*] is […] its reflection" (Benjamin 1920, 78/159), which "drives [its form] out of itself" (73/156).[5] This is the case, because the form of the work 'is' self-limitation, and therefore 'is' not, but rather remains bound to what is excluded, what is external to it (Benjamin speaks of the 'contingency' [*Zufälligkeit*] to be excluded). Therefore, in order not to remain 'limited,' it must relate itself to its own constitution and refer to the formlessness from which it has emerged, which it excludes while delimiting itself. Thus, the "criterion" (*Maßstab*) of "immanent critique/criticism" is the "immanent tendency of the work," the reflection of its form on its form(giving) (77/159). "Critique fulfills its task by" "resolving […] the original reflection" of its form (form as "the work's own reflection") "into a higher one and continuing it in this way," since this deferral out of itself always attains form again (73/156).[6] Tieck's comedies are well known as examples of the romantic irony of form.[7] His *Puss in Boots*, to which Benjamin explicitly refers in the second text from 1939, is a case of reflection of the play in/on itself. The play performs what Benjamin refers to as the most 'evident' "technique" of a "play within the play" in *The Origin of the German Trauerspiel*: "the stage itself" "is set up on the stage, or the spectators' space is incorporated within the space of the stage," which mirrors or folds the play and its framework into the occurrences on stage (Benjamin 1928a, 261/69). In this play, the actors, in 'falling out' of character, assert themselves 'beside' the dramatic figures, thereby establishing a duality between actors and dramatic figures.

Parekbasis as gesture, with which a figure on the stage turns away from the dramatic scene, had traditionally been chalked up as a failure of ancient comedy, because it interrupts the dramatic illusion of what is taking place on the stage[8] in addressing the audience. Friedrich Schlegel not only re-evaluated this gesture of speech[9] but also defined romantic irony *tout court* as "a permanent *parekbasis*."[10] The reflection of the play – this is what makes it paradoxical – performs the constitution of what may become presented by means of its delimiting (folded into the play

---

5 "[T]he unity of the single work" is "continually being displaced [from itself] into irony and criticism." (Benjamin 1920, 86/164)

6 "Formal irony […] presents a paradoxical venture: to build on the formation even through demolition [*am Gebilde noch durch Abbruch zu bauen*]" (Benjamin 1920, 87/165).

7 See Benjamin 1920, 84/163; also Benjamin 1939, 538/307; cf. de Man 1996, 178.

8 See de Man 1996, 178, 177–180.

9 See Schlegel 1794 [1979], esp. 30.

10 "Die Ironie ist eine permanente Parekbase" (Schlegel 1797 [1963]: KFSA, XVIII, 85 [Fr. 668]). De Man reformulates this 'permanence' of the *parekbasis* of romantic irony as a self-disruptive turning-away, which can occur or may have occurred anytime, *everywhere*, and *at every moment* (de Man 1996, 178–179).

and its framework)[11] in that it presents the *processes* of constitution, which must continually be carried out as figural separations between that which belongs, between form, between what is 'actually presented,' and the digressions, additions, or marginal occurences, what is merely contingent or not meaningful: without reaching a conclusion and thereby a ground or a separation of form or figure from the formless or (the figure's) ground. In the potentiated (*potenziert*, a concept from early German Romanticism)[12] displacement or transgression of delimited form and its framework in/to play, the limit/border that decides about form becomes always again and still uncertain,[13] becomes always again and still unrecognizable, its contours diffuse in an undecidable manner.

But Benjamin states with unusual clarity that it would be "erroneous" (*irrig*) to recognize the "old Tieckian dramaturgy of reflection" within the Brechtian praxis of theater (Benjamin 1931b, 529/11, cf. 522/4; 1939, 538–539/307). The latter performs the theatrical presentation's taking a distance (from/to itself) in a different way, as its interruption taking place in presentation: as "gestural theatre" (Benjamin 1931b, 521/3).[14] The theatrical presentation's "awareness of being theater" is indeed a theatrical one: manifesting in gestures, its citability, and the interruptions they open up. According to Benjamin, epic theater thereby withdraws itself from 'professional' criticism and contests it and its failed standards.[15] It does so with the distance the play takes from itself, by letting "intervals" into itself, which are to incite the audience to take a "critical stance" (*kritische Stellungnahme*):

> Thus, intervals emerge which rather undermine the illusion of the audience and paralyze its readiness for empathy. These intervals are reserved for the audience's critical stance toward the behavior of the persons and the way they are presented. (Benjamin 1939 [trans. 2006], 306)

> So entstehen Intervalle, die die Illusion des Publikums eher beeinträchtigen. Sie lähmen seine Bereitschaft zur Einfühlung. Diese Intervalle sind seiner kritischen Stellungnahme (zum darge-

---

11 When (limited) form interrupts itself *ironically* and *reflects itself*, it still does not escape what is limited, the conditionality of theater, in the "paradoxical reflection of play and illusiveness" (*paradoxen Reflexion von Spiel und Schein*) (Benjamin 1928a, 261/69).

12 What this potentiation refers to here is an 'irony of irony': the ironizing turning (away) of the representation from and out of itself does not allow something else to be understood as what is (really) meant but rather suspends the decision about the position of speech, its object, and its addressee, in favor of its potential deferrals (cf. Schlegel 1800, KFSA II, 368).

13 In the potentialization of the folding of what presents into what is represented, it is uncertain where the contour between the 'inside' and the 'outside' is: does the puss in boots fall out of his role when he climbs up a tree in fear? Or does the actor fall out of his role into the role of the puss in boots? Or something else? In this falling out of the role, what is shown in Tieck's comedies, according to Szondi, is not the actors but rather the "role," which takes distance from their "dramatic existence" (Szondi 1978, 28–31/68–75).

14 See also Benjamin 1939, 536/305; cf. his drafts "Studien zur Theorie des epischen Theaters" (Benjamin GS II, 1380–1382).

15 The critics have to become aware: "ihren Agentencharakter aufgedeckt und zugleich außer Kurs geraten" (Benjamin 1931b, 527–528/9–10).

stellten Verhalten der Personen und zu der Art, in der es dargestellt wird) vorbehalten. (Benjamin 1939, 538)

Through his acting/playing, the actor has to demonstrate (*in seinem Spiel auszuweisen* [538]) the "intervals" as interruptions let into the theatrical presentation, in the action on the stage, opened up to give the audience space for their "critical stance": in the self-distancing of acting from what is represented and from its own presenting. There is no place for a position of authority, no certain ground for critique (or criticism).[16]

Epic theater, as gestural (*gestisches*) theater is constituted, as Benjamin puts it, by the "Vorstellung des 'Theaterspielens'" (Benjamin 1939, 538/306). What this refers to is not the idea of theater-playing but, roughly, the presentation, or the 'putting on a show' of "'theater-playing'" itself, taking place in the praxis of acting/playing (*schauspielen*). Benjamin accounts for this explicitly with the old phrase for *parekbasis:* "falling out of character artistically/artfully" (538/306–307). As a gesture of speech, *parekbasis* is an *act:* a turning away, an interruption and a suspension. But in Tieck's *Puss in Boots*, this act of turning, interrupting, and addressing the spectators in the theater is contained in a new frame, the play in the theatrical play. Thus, *parekbasis* and the reflection of the theatrical play *inside* the play become dramatic action (again). The interrupting turning away, which drives the form beyond itself, thus is included in "Tieck's old dramaturgy of reflection," which would produce a rather dull satire of the philistines in the theater. But, even in this case, the presentation is not homogeneous and is always only provisional,[17] because it is always again undecidable *what and where* its frame actually is; the distinction between form and its being shifted from/out of itself is, in this manner, always undecidable. In *parekbasis*, in the speakers' turning away from the represented action, out of the contours of the dramatic person and out of the scene of dramatic speech, the speakers address those others who do not belong to the represented action and who, according to Diderot, should be made forgotten by what is represented and by the actors who represent – for the sake of illusion and empathy. Diderot's fictive fourth wall represented the closure or containment of the play in itself. Benjamin refers to this self-containment by speaking of the "pit" (*Graben*) into which the "abyss" (*Abgrund*), "which separates the actors from the audience as the dead from the living," and which "bears the most indelible traces of its sacral origin" (Benjamin 1939, 539/307), had then been transformed, and which thereby becomes obsolete. It is decisive that, according to Benjamin, "[t]he aims of theater (today) ([w]*orum es heute im The-*

---

16 According to Benjamin's "Memorandum" to *Krisis und Kritik* (Benjamin 1930, 619), the journal conceived by Brecht and Benjamin in 1930 and 1931 (with obvious reference to the events of the times), critique cannot "rely on authorities" ([*sich*] *im Ganzen nicht auf Autoritäten stützen*). It is necessary to draw "radical conclusions from the unfoundedness and untenability of authoritiy" (Müller-Schöll 2002, 310). For more on the journal project, see "Konzeptgespräch" (in Wizisla 2017, 102–104).
17 On provisionality and its incompatibility with drama, see Szondi 1978, 26/1986, 68–69.

ater geht) can be defined more precisely in terms of the stage than in terms of a new form of drama" (Benjamin 1931b, 519/1; 1939, 539/307) – thus through its relating otherwise to the stage that has been transformed into a "podium," whereas the ordinary old theater business continues to operate an 'obsolete' "stage apparatus" (Benjamin 1939, 539/307).[18]

Benjamin's reservation that the gesture, the taking distance of the actors in gestural theater, should not "remind" us of *romantic irony* (538/307) is not only an objection against its restrictive performance in terms of Tieck's "old dramaturgy of reflection." In his book on romantic criticism, Benjamin had already pointed out the insufficiency of the romantic concept of critique. As "medial, continuous transposition" of the reflection of form (Benjamin 1920, 70/154), the romantic critique of art that "drives [form] out of itself" (73/156) should be both: "on the one hand, the completion, consummation, and systematization of the work and, on the other hand, its resolution in the absolute" (78/159).[19] If thereby the "unity of the individual work" shall "continually be displaced in irony and criticism/critique," then in this way a continuum of artworks and the "idea" of art is conceived (86/164),[20] without the conflict between the work (of art) and (the idea of) art actually becoming manifest. According to Benjamin – contrary to Friedrich Schlegel – it is not that critique/ criticism should be poetic, but poetic form is ("immanent") *critique/criticism* of itself; critique does not process the "continuity" of the work (of art) and shift in(to) art, but rather sets a caesura. Benjamin invokes the "caesura," the "inexpressive" (*das Ausdruckslose*) as "critical violence," which has to impede and shatter the work's "false totality."[21] And in an explicit revision of the romantic concept of critique/criticism as reanimation – or to quote again Friedrich Schlegel on the poetic critic, who will "add to the work" and "rejuvenate" it (*ergänzen, verjüngern*) (Schlegel 1798, 140/281) – Benjamin, in *The Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, defines critique as the "mortifica-

---

18 "Auf diesem Podium gilt es sich einzurichten. Das ist die Lage. Wie aber vielen Zuständen gegenüber, so hat sich auch bei diesem der Betrieb ihn zu verdecken vorgesetzt, statt ihm Rechnung zu tragen" (Benjamin 1931b, 519/1; Benjamin 1939, 539/307). As Benjamin postulates in "Der Autor als Produzent": No "apparatus of production" (*Produktionsapparat*) should be supplied without changing it or giving it a new function (Benjamin 1934, 691–692/774–775).

19 "[E]inerseits Vollendung, Ergänzung, Systematisierung des Werkes, andererseits seine Auflösung im Absoluten" (Benjamin 1920, 78). "Both of these processes coincide in the end" (Benjamin 1920, 78/ 159). "Formal irony [...] presents a paradoxical venture: to build on the formation even through demolition, to demonstrate in the work itself its relationship to the idea" (*Die formale Ironie* [...] *stellt den paradoxen Versuch dar, am Gebilde noch durch Abbruch zu bauen: im Werke selbst seine Beziehung auf die Idee zu demonstrieren*) (Benjamin 1920, 87/165).

20 See also Benjamin 1920, 87–91/165–167.

21 The conclusion of *Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik* alludes to this with reference to Goethe (Benjamin 1920, 111–115). The work, a concept for which Goethe stands, needs, as Benjamin has it in "Goethes Wahlverwandtschaften," the caesura as the expressionless (*ausdruckslose*) interruption, the "critical violence" that applies to the mistaken mythical supposition of wholeness, that "completes the work, which shatters it into a broken piece [*Stückwerk*], into a fragment of the true world" (Benjamin 1924–1926, 181–182).

tion of works," as which critique takes effect in complicity with the duration in which the works decay and endure as débris.[22]

Benjamin claims that "for all its skills of reflection, the Romantic stage never succeeded in doing justice to the [...] relationship between theory and praxis" (*dem Verhältnis von Theorie und Praxis gerecht zu werden*) (Benjamin 1931b, 529/ 11–12). Tieck – that is Benjamin's reservation – merely demonstrates his being "philosophically savvy" (*seine philosophische Informiertheit*): "the world may ultimately prove to be a theater" (Benjamin 1939, 538/307).[23] In contrast, gestural theater copes with the relation between theory and praxis "with the ongoing setting-apart [*Auseinandersetzung*] of the action which is shown on the stage [*Bühnenvorgang*] and the behavior of showing on the stage [*Bühnenverhalten*]" (Benjamin 1931b, 529/11). Quoting Brecht, Benjamin characterizes the relatedness and division of both actions *in* the play-acting as the actors' "showing a thing" and "showing themselves":

> The actor must show a thing, and he must show himself. He naturally shows the thing by showing himself, and he shows himself by showing the thing. Although these two tasks coincide, they must not coincide to such a point that the contrast (difference) between them disappears. (Brecht, cit. in Benjamin 1931b [trans. 1998], 11)

> Der Schauspieler muß eine Sache zeigen, und er muß sich zeigen. Er zeigt die Sache natürlich, indem er sich zeigt, und er zeigt sich, indem er die Sache zeigt. Obwohl dies zusammenfällt, darf es doch nicht so zusammenfallen, daß der Gegensatz (Unterschied) zwischen diesen beiden Aufgaben verschwindet. (Cit. in Benjamin 1931b, 529) [24]

'Showing a thing' would "coincide" with the actors' 'showing themselves' in playing (as acting) (*Vorspielen*); thus, precisely, the play is split and doubled in itself (*in sich entzweit*): The "ongoing setting-apart of the action which is shown on the stage and the behavior of showing on the stage" (Benjamin 1931b, 529/11) is what constitutes gestural theater. This is taking place *in* theatrical performance, in playing and putting on an act, in the playing's/acting's *practice*, turning it to – im-plicating – *theory*. The text from 1939 continues: "The extent to which artistic and political interests coincide in the epic theater can be easily seen in its mode of playing" (*die Art des Spiels*) (Benjamin 1939, 538/307). This is not (so much) because of its political content, but rather due to precisely the ongoing process of setting-apart: the *Auseinandersetzung in* act-

---

22 See Benjamin 1928a, 357/193. Critique/criticism is a mode of the "living-on of works," where these no longer belong to art, which is "merely a transitional stage of great works." This is analogous to the status of translation in Benjamin's notes on critique/criticism in the context of *Krisis und Kritik* in 1931 (Benjamin GS VI, 174, 170–172). The scope of Benjamin's concept of critique/criticism is thus indicated (see Steiner 2000).

23 See also Benjamin 1931b, 529/11–12. With this, the presupposed givenness of both "world" and "theater" would merely be confirmed. And the counterpart to this (which is merely inverted) is the stage as "'the planks, which mean the world'" (520/2).

24 In the text's second version, see Benjamin 1939, 538/306.

ing/playing (*Vorspielen*), which allows "the one showing – the actor as such – [to be] shown" (Benjamin 1931b, 529/11). Thereby, in epic theater, "the awareness that it is theater" "is incessantly asserted," something which the naturalistic theater must repress in order to "devote itself," *without* being "distracted," to the supposed representation of the supposed real (522/4). And this "awareness" is politically relevant.

This can be argued by referring to Benjamin's essay on "historical drama," written close in time to (and in thematic proximity with) *The Origin of the German Trauerspiel*.[25] Here, Benjamin presents the "historical drama" as a "problem," since it assumes a "meaning of the determinateness" (*Sinn der Determiniertheit*) of the dramatic action, for which the recourse to causality would be insufficient: history can "only" "claim dramatic truth" as "fate"; it must present "history as fate" (Benjamin 1923, 276, 250).[26] But it can only do that as the "play" that drama is. "When the drama of play [*Dramatik des Spiels*] is confronted with historical subject matters, it finds itself compelled to unfold fate as play. It is precisely this cleavage [*Zwiespalt*] that constitutes the 'romantic tragedy'" (260). The play-character, which the "fate" of the "drama of fate" inevitably has (and exhibits), requires the "romantic," that is, "paradoxical reflection of play and semblance [*Spiel und Schein*]" (Benjamin 1928a, 261–262/69). If the "world of fate," or rather, of the "*dramas* of fate" is "closed in itself" (*in sich geschlossen*) (Benjamin 1923, 267; 1928a, 262/71), this world is none other than the *stage*, the "strictly delimited space" of the theater-play (Benjamin 1923, 272): Fate is presented "as play," as the play (*Schauspiel*) and its framings are 'playfully' reflected as a play, mirrored inside of its constitutive delimitations, "minimizing" (*verkleinernd*) and "framing" it (*umrahmend*) (Benjamin 1923, 268–269; 1928a, 262/70).[27] In contrast, when taken seriously, when "fate is postulated as real" (*das Schicksal schlechthin real* [...] *gesetzt* [*werde*]), that is, "only in the bad, unromantic tragedies of fate" (Benjamin 1923, 272), such "historical dramas" that present history "as fate" must fail. Without the exposition of the play that it is – that is to say, without the disruptive entry of theater *into* what is represented – the *play* of fate (which cannot be other than a deliberate assemblage) will be *forgotten* or *repressed*. Thus, "unromantic historical dramas" fall prey to a "realistic" misunderstanding of "fate" or of the necessity of reality (or history).

---

25 In making this reference to Benjamin's *The Origin of the German Trauerspiel* and its contexts, we also recall that, on the one hand, the awkward German baroque *Trauerspiel* (not closed in itself) refers to the coming "most recent experiments in drama" (*neuesten Versuchen*) (Benjamin 1928a, 390/235). And, on the other hand, according to the text's inquiry into the Brechtian theater, this theater emerges from a non-linear tradition, travelling on smuggler's paths and mule's tracks, of a whole disorderly clan (*Sippe*) of anti-dramatic theater forms, to which the baroque *Trauerspiel* belonged (Benjamin 1931b, 523/5). On the relations between Benjamin's texts on epic theater and the *Trauerspiel* (book), see Müller-Schöll 2002, 50–52, 110–112, 139.

26 Here and in what follows, see also B. Menke 2005.

27 It is the "Verkleinerung des Reflektierten" in the play (*im Spiel*) (Benjamin 1928a, 306, 260–262/126, 68–71).

Against the "naturalistic" confusion of the events on the stage with the extra-theatrical world,[28] 'epic theater' precisely does *not* perform without being distracted, but rather, has a "productive awareness" "incessantly" that "it is theater" (Benjamin 1931b, 522/4). In Brecht's theater, "historical incidents" (*Vorgänge*), according to Benjamin citing Brecht (Benjamin 1931b, 525; 1939, 533/303), resist, precisely, the *Dramatik des Spiels* (Benjamin 1923, 260), the dramatic conception of the theatrical play. Since the course they follow is known, they do not preoccupy spectators with comprehendingly following (*Nachvollzug*) the course of action. Therefore, according to Benjamin (but not Brecht), they allow theater "to loosen the [...] joints of the plot [*Fabel*] to the limits of the possible" (*bis an die Grenze des Möglichen*) (Benjamin 1931b, 525/8; 1939, 533/303).[29] Hence, what is "incommensurable" to the plot, what is not along the "lines of expectation" (*Fluchtlinien der Erwartung*) (Benjamin 1931b, 525), is allowed to come to the fore, with its known and presupposed connections being "loosened."[30] Instead of presupposing the given "state (of things)" (*Zustände*) as to be imitated, theater as theater is handled as a *Versuchsanordnung*, that is, as an "experimental disposition" (522/4) which always also refers to its respective framing – where the *Zustände* that may stand "at the end" of the experiment are possible (522/4) – and thereby refers beyond the particular frame and the *Zustände* it reveals too. This kind of theater-playing, then, makes the contingency of theater "productive" – in taking this basic attitude (*Grundhaltung*): "'It can happen in this way or in a completely different way'" ("*Es kann so kommen, aber es kann auch ganz anders kommen*"; quotation marks are Benjamin's) (525/8).[31] "Where someone experiments, there reigns no necessity; rather, possibilities are obtained," states Christoph Menke (2005, 145/117). "At the end," that is, retroactively, or belatedly, what is shown in "the experimental disposition" (*Versuchsanordnung*) may be (re)cognized as the "real state of things" (*die wirklichen Zustände*) (Benjamin 1931b, 522/4). Then not only the events on the stage, but also *die wirklichen Zustände* are cognizable as *not* necessary, that is, as possible otherwise: They could *not be*, or *be different*, and are always accompanied by the shadows of *other* possibilities.[32]

---

28 See Benjamin 1939, 539/307. Benjamin's text from 1931 finds the traces of the interrelation between irony and criticism in Strindberg's histories, which have "paved the way for the gestural theater" (Benjamin 1931b, 526/8).

29 Benjamin's metaphor "wie ein Ballettmeister der Elevin" (Benjamin 1931b, 525; 1939, 533/303) would have to be read as *very* specifically gendered. The Brechtian theory of theater is bound to plot or *Fabel* (cf. Lehmann 2002, 219–237; see also Lehmann 2016, 147–164, esp. 157–159).

30 On the "epic extension" (*Streckung*) of "historical incidents" (*geschichtliche Vorgänge*) "by a particular mode of acting, by placards, and by onstage captions," see Benjamin 1939, 533/303; 1931b, 524–526).

31 See Lehmann 2002, 368.

32 The abandonment of the illusion of the reality of 'how it really was' is decisive for Benjamin's concept of historiography and its relation to its 'subject matters,' which are not to be conceived as pregiven (cf. especially *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*, 1935–1940).

While what constitutes gestural theater is the "presentation of play-acting [*Vorstellung des Theaterspielens*]" (Benjamin 1939, 538/306), this is not to be read as a reference to a (Brechtian) theoretical concept (*Vorstellung*) but rather with respect to the "presentation of playing" *in acting*. What is emphasized is the practice of play-acting,[33] the playing itself – which is doubled and divided in itself and thereby is dependent on and engenders insight. Playing (in) theater (*Vorspielen*) brings "the relation of the performed action to that, which is given as such in the performance," "to expression" (Benjamin 1931b, 529/11),[34] since it unfolds the relation of both as division of both, and at the same time exposes, in both "actions," their non-identity, their difference from themselves. Thus, theater-practice is divided in and from itself: it is never *one*, never identical with itself: it is foreign to itself. Brecht's theater, according to Hans-Thies Lehmann (2002, 231), referred "to a radicalized *self-foreignness*, or an internal otherness, alterity [...] from which Brecht – in theory – always shrinks away in fear."

"[T]he relation of the performed action to the action given in the performance as such" is brought "to expression" (Benjamin 1931b, 529/11) insofar as the relationship between the two is blocked in the *gesture*; thus, they do not collapse into one another. The gesture is not the expression of something that supposedly preceded it;[35] it is not a form of expression, whether involuntarily or historically conventionalized; it contradicts the representational model and asserts itself *as* an act in its *dynamis* intransitively against anything that it would 'carry.'[36] It is an "element" of a stance (*Haltung*) as a halt, an interruption of the courses of events that "retards" them,[37] and sets itself apart, incompatible with any interest in the coherence of action.[38]

In a gesture of casualness, Benjamin highlights the "interruption [as] one of the fundamental procedures of all form-giving," bringing in *citation:* "To cite a text also

---

33 Thereby 'practice' does not apply to the 'real' reality outside of theater as opposed to the illusionary theatrical play. The relation between play and world is put differently by Christoph Menke, who distinguishes the action of playing something to someone [*Handlung des Vorspielens*] from the (concept of) praxis (derived from *prattein*), which is aim-oriented and completes itself in the achievement of the aim (C. Menke 2018, 45; 2005, 123–125, 128–129/98–100, 103–104).

34 "[D]as Verhältnis der aufgeführten Handlung zu derjenigen, die im Aufführen überhaupt gegeben ist, zum Ausdruck zu bringen" (Benjamin 1931b, 529). See Benjamin 1939, 538–539/306–307.

35 Regarding the common understandings of gesture as a sign bound to semantics, see Meyer 2004, 61.

36 See also, very close to Benjamin, Giorgio Agamben, "Notes on Gesture" (Agamben 1993, 133–140/49–54); on gestures becoming intransitive (with reference to Bergson and Barthes), see Meyer 2004, 56–57.

37 See Benjamin 1931b, 521–523/3–5. In the second text: "'one waited until the crowd had laid the sentences on the scale.' In short the play was interrupted." ("'abgewartet wurde, bis die Menge die Sätze auf die Waagschale gelegt hatte.' Kurz das Spiel wurde unterbrochen.") (Benjamin 1939, 535–536/305)

38 "Until now it was missed" that "there might be an even unbridgeable discrepancy between what Brecht's idea of gesture is aiming at and his concept of the plot [*Fabel*]" (Lehmann 2002, 231, also 214–216; Lehmann 2016, 159).

means: to interrupt its context" (Benjamin 1939, 535–536/305).[39] The epic theater, "which is organized by interruption, [is therefore] a citable [theater] in a specific sense" (*das epische Theater, das auf die Unterbrechung gestellt ist, [ist] ein in spezifischem Sinne zitierbares*); not only in the sense of the "citability of its texts," but rather with respect to the "gestures that have their place in the course of the play" (536/305).[40] With gesture, there is no form specified that critique could assume; rather, it is an 'entry of form' and *as entry* it is disruptive, form-*giving*, but not an established form. It is an act of giving that is suspended before its becoming present (as something),[41] not something that could be stated, but *in* the very process held out *before* this. This must also be opposed to concepts of theory as a 'content' to be learned or taught.[42] Thereby the 'position' of theory as such is affected.

Benjamin conceptualizes "the actor's most important accomplishment" to "'make gestures citable'" ["'Gesten zitierbar zu machen'"] by making a stunning comparison: "he must be able to space out his gestures as the typesetter spaces out words [*seine Gebärden muß er sperren können, wie ein Setzer die Worte*]" (Benjamin 1931b, 529/11). Theater is thereby thought of according to the spatial arrangement of letters and the typeface of books.[43] Gestures are not only produced by means of the interruption of an action; rather, they interrupt the course, setting themselves off as an extended – retarding – interruption, like the typesetter, who spaces out words by expanding the spaces between letters into interstices, which in turn separate the letters (from each other) in such a way that the words space out (*sperren*) or block the course of the sentence by inserting intervals in themselves, and setting themselves

---

39 In "Karl Kraus," Benjamin sets the task of "unbinding" the "force" (*Kraft*) in citation: "to expurgate, to destruct, the only [force] that gives hope [*zu reinigen, zu zerstören; die einzige [Kraft], in der noch Hoffnung liegt*]" (Benjamin 1931a, 365); this relates to the status of citation in Benjamin's concept of historiography as expounded in his *Passagenwerk* (Benjamin 1934–1940, 595 [N 113]).

40 At around 1931, Benjamin defined criticism/critique as a mode of *citation* (cf. Benjamin's notations [*Fragmente zur Literaturkritik*], GS VI, 169–171 [Fr. 135 and 136], 161–162, [Fr. 32]).

41 This is how Jacques Derrida conceives of the gift. See Derrida 1992, 12–15, 23–27, 38–42, 100–102, 111–112; see also (referring to Nancy) Lehmann 2002, 367–368.

42 The "relation between theory and practice" refers to the "dialectic that reigns between teaching and learning comportment" (Benjamin 1931b, 529/11–12). "What the *Lehrstück* promises to teach consists not in the transmission of content, but rather in an attitude of experimental action and interpretation [*einer Haltung des versuchenden Selbermachens und -deutens*]" (C. Menke 2005, 145/117). *Lehrstücke*, "Dichtung für Übungszwecke" (Brecht, cited in Müller-Schöll 2002, 325), instead of using the production of *gestures* merely as a means to an end, make them "one" of their "most immediate ends" (Benjamin 1939, 536/305).

43 Benjamin characterizes the baroque mourning plays (*Trauerspiele*) in a similar way: "daß die Situationen nicht allzu oft, dann aber blitzartig wechselten wie der Aspekt des Satzspiegels, wenn man umblättert" (Benjamin 1928a, 361/198). The 'literalization' of theater connects there: "'Auch in die Dramatik ist die Fußnote und das vergleichende Blättern einzuführen'" (Brecht, quoted by Benjamin 1931b, 525/7). Instead of "scenery sets" (*Dekorationen zu Szenen*), surfaces of presentations are assembled: "inscriptions" (*Beschriftungen*), "placards" (*Plakate*), relating to the several "numbers" (*Nummern*) of the program (Benjamin 1931b, 524–525/6–7; 1939, 533/303).

off from it, dissociating it in itself.[44] Gestures are made "citable" insofar as they are spaced out or barred, as a damming-up of the course of action, exposing the "relation" of the "action given in performing" to "the performed action" (Benjamin 1931b, 529/11; 1939, 538–539/306–307). *Gesperrt* and *sperrend:* spaced out, barred, and blocking, they set themselves off as "citable."[45] Conversely they are as such *given* only through their *repetition* or citation, and that means precisely where and insofar as they are not themselves.[46] As Benjamin emphasizes with regard to Brecht's *Mann ist Mann:* "One and the same gesture summons Galy Gay, first to change his clothes, and then to be shot, against the wall" (Benjamin 1931b, 530/12). Set off in the repetition as gesture, that is, as citable, precisely there, where it (always already) will not have been able to be 'one and the same thing,' it interrupts, by referring back and potentially ahead to what is to come (a repetition elsewhere, sometime); it is cit*able* as other (to itself). In Brecht's *Die Maßnahme*, one of his *Lehrstücke*, gestures are cited in a very specific kind of "play within a play,"[47] that is, according to Benjamin, "not only the report from the communists, but through their acting [*Spiel*] also a series of gestures of their comrade whom they acted against [*des Genossen, gegen den sie vorgingen*] are brought before the party tribunal" (Benjamin 1939, 536/305). In the acting/playing of what has happened before the tribunal and before the spectators, one of those who have returned at each time acts/plays (*spielt vor*) the absent one, whom they killed, and for whose effacing they seek a judgement.[48] In this (doubled) *Vorspielen* of *Vorspielen* (playing/acting of playing/acting) – ex-citing, as it were, the dead, the absent one[49] – the actors (as those who returned acting the absent dead, whose 'part' they play) cite his gestures: citing them and making them citable, performing them *as* citable by showing them *as* gestures. 'Making gestures citable' is here the "action performed" itself. The entry to the stage, which in drama must be integrated as a transition *into* the performed dramatic person, (here) is hindered as a problematic – provisional – passage *into* the performance: in these cited ges-

---

44 Benjamin cites Karl Kraus who spaces out in his citation: "die dort im G r a n a t baum saß" (Benjamin 1931a, 363); thereby the citation that calls out of the context is both destroying (the context) and saving (the cited).

45 See also Meyer 2004, 60–61.

46 On the foreignness of the gesture to itself, insofar as it is repeated or lends itself to imitation, see also Henri Bergson: "We [...] become imitable only when we cease to be ourselves. [...] To imitate any one is to bring out the element of automatism he has allowed to creep into his person" (Bergson 1911, 33). The imitative process is cleaved in itself from the beginning (Müller-Schöll 2002, 156).

47 See C. Menke 2005, 146/118.

48 See Lehmann 2002, 256–257, also 264–266; in addition, see Lehmann, "Die Rücknahme der Maßgabe" (Lehmann 2016, 165–180).

49 This is to recall the (rhetorical) figure of the excitation of the absent, of the dead, of the faceless, that is, *prosopopeia*. The "separation of actors and spectators as the dead from the living" (*der Spieler vom Publikum wie die Toten von den Lebendigen*), which has become inoperable (Benjamin 1931b, 519/1; 1939, 539/307), is indeed to be held by the threshold that *Die Maßnahme* folds onto the stage in its playing.

ture-citations – in spacing out these gestures – *otherness*, absence, defacement, prevails.

Here we might recall the (word) *episodion* in its significance for ancient theater. It speaks of the entrance (*Zutritt*) of the protagonists as a stepping-into-the-way, opening up another time-space of the protagonists' speech, disruptively opening the *episodion* of each entry between the choruses' songs and dances. Every stage entry has the character of an interrupting intrusion by a stranger. Benjamin cites this access, which as an interruption gives and sets off episodes,[50] with the entrance of the stranger, who in interrupting a 'situation' brings it to a standstill (*stillstellen*) and in setting it off produces it.

The epic theater that is interested in *Zustände* ("the state of things") instead of the development of actions (*Handlungen*) is *gestural*, because these *Zustände* are *not* available objects which would only have to be represented or imitated; rather, they first had to be "discovered" by being "distanced from the spectator" (Benjamin 1931b, 521–522/4–5; 1939, 533/303). This discovery, in the sense of an alienation of situations, is performed as the "courses" are interrupted and brought to a halt.[51] The sudden appearance of a stranger is the gesture which interrupts the course of things, which inserts the distance of *another regard* and, in effecting a standstill, brings forth "a state" (*einen Zustand*) one runs into:

> The most primitive example: a family scene. Suddenly a stranger enters. The wife had just been about to clench a pillow, in order to throw it to the daughter; the father had just been about to open the window, to call a policeman. In this moment the stranger appears in the door. A 'tableau' – as one called it around 1900. That means: the stranger now runs into a situation: rumpled bedding, open window, ravaged furnishings. But there is a gaze before which even the familiar scenes of bourgeois life do not look much different. (Benjamin 1931b [trans. 1998], 5)

> Das primitivste Beispiel: eine Familienszene. Plötzlich tritt da ein Fremder ein. Die Frau war gerade im Begriff, ein Kopfkissen zu ballen, um es nach der Tochter zu schleudern; der Vater im Begriff, das Fenster zu öffnen, um einen Schupo zu holen. In diesem Augenblick erscheint in der Tür der Fremde. 'Tableau' – wie man um 1900 zu sagen pflegte. Das heißt: der Fremde stößt jetzt auf einen Zustand: zerknülltes Bettzeug, offenes Fenster, verwüstetes Mobiliar. Es gibt aber einen Blick, vor dem auch die gewohnteren Szenen des bürgerlichen Lebens sich nicht viel anders ausnehmen. (Benjamin 1931b, 522)[52]

Thus, a *Zustand* in the moment (*Augenblick*) of the interruption by the sudden entry of a 'spectator' (of sorts) is brought forth to a pause (*Inne-halten*) and thereby ex-

---

50 This is referred to by the "episodic character" of gestural theater, organized and presented by "frameworks" as a disruptive-retarding setting-off of its parts (Benjamin 1931b, 521–523/4–6; 1939, 533–535/303–305).

51 In the original, it says: "Diese Entdeckung (Verfremdung) von Zuständen vollzieht sich mittels der Unterbrechung von Abläufen" (Benjamin 1939, 535/304).

52 In the second text, it says: "verstörte Mienen, offenes Fenster" (Benjamin 1939, 535/305).

posed.[53] Such *Zustände* – in this way 'dicovered' through interruption – may be "cognized" (*erkannt*) by the spectator "as the real state of things (*die wirklichen Zustände*), not [merely *re*cognizing], as in the theater of naturalism, with a smirk, but with amazement" (*nicht, wie auf dem Theater des Naturalismus, mit Süffisance sondern mit Staunen*) (Benjamin 1931b, 522/4).[54] For the *wirklichen Zustände* are cognizable where, and insofar as, they are precisely not available as something to be *rep*resented and cannot be imitated (*nach*geahmt), but insofar as, to use a phrase from Lehmann (Lehmann 2002, 366), they must be pre-mitated (vor-*geahmt*): "at the end, not at the beginning of this experiment" (*Versuch*) (Benjamin 1931b, 522/4), which is carried out tentatively (*probeweise*).[55]

This, on the one hand, makes for the "episodic character" of gestural theater, organized and presented by its framing, a disruptive-retarding setting-off of its parts, exposed as such,[56] that lets us perceive the theatrical presentation – quite contrary to the alleged dramatic coherence of action – as a disjunctive assemblage[57] of dissociated parts or separated "panels."[58] On the other hand, the *Zustände* that might become cognizable "at the end of this experiment" (*Versuch*) as which, according to Benjamin, the theatrical presentation takes place – on trial and revisable (Benjamin 1931b, 522/4)[59] – refer to the otherwise possible: that which is not realized. "Amazement" (*Staunen*), as Benjamin's text from 1931 quotes in an extraordinarily long passage of Brecht, is the effect of the theatrical observance: that "man [*der Mensch*] is not to be recognized completely [*ganz*] or definitely [*endgültig*] but rather is not so easily exhausted, holding and hiding within him many possibilities" [*viele Möglichkeiten in sich Bergendes und Verbergendes*] "is a delighting insight" (*lustvolle Erkenntnis*) (531/13). It is made possible by theater, which deals with "the elements of the real in the sense of an experimental disposition" (*im Sinne einer Versuchsanordnung*)

---

53 It is the gaze of the spectator which brings those entering the stage fleeing to a standstill: "Der Augenblick, da sie Zuschauern sichtbar werden, lässt sie einhalten." (cf. Benjamin 1928b, 72)

54 See also Benjamin 1931b, 531/13; 1939, 535/304).

55 See also Benjamin 1939, 535/305.

56 Regarding the "episodic character of framing [*Umrahmung*]" (Benjamin 1931b, 521–523/4–6; 1939, 5/303–305), compare the baroque choruses or interludes as "bracketings of the action" that is thereby presented as "part of a mere show" (*Bestandstücke einer bloßen Schaustellung*) (Benjamin 1928a, 300–301, 367–369/119, 205–207). This corresponds to the observation that the "episodic theater," "comparable to the images of the film strip," "advances in jolts" (*den Bildern des Filmstreifens vergleichbar, in Stößen vorrückt*); similarly, in the allegorical mourning play, action advanced into the allegorical framing, always altered "in jolts" – through "the intermittent rhythm of continual arrest [*Einhaltens*], sudden reversal [*stoßweisen Umschlagens*], and new freezing [*neuen Erstarrens*]" (373/213).

57 This is characteristic for all the forms of that 'kin' of theater, that counters drama, whose "mule track" (*Pasch- und Schleichpfad*) "today – however unkempt and wild" (*wie struppig und verwildert auch immer*) – emerges in the Brechtian theater (Benjamin 1931b, 523/5).

58 According to Brecht, theater is "a series of panels" (*eine Folge von Tafeln*) (cited in Müller-Scholl 2002, 165).

59 See Benjamin 1939, 535/305. The *Lehrstück* is *revisable* (see 537/306).

(522/4), whose "stance" or tenor is that all that is represented, and all those who are presenting, are possible otherwise or possibly are not (525/7), which is practiced in theater-playing, in an 'acting on trial' or 'in rehearsal.' In this way, theater refers "productively" to itself as a *space of the possible*[60] in which what is presented and the presenters are not given as identical with themselves and are not self-contained – where every tentative or experimental arrangement in which the *wirkliche Zustände* may be (re)cognized retrospectively[61] implies (and this applies both to the events on stage and to reality) an uncountable multitude of *other* "possibilities" (that have not become real) held and hidden in themselves.

Therefore: "Der Zustand, den das epische Theater aufdeckt, ist die Dialektik im Stillstand" ("The state that epic theater uncovers is the dialectic at a standstill"), as Benjamin puts it here for the first time, coining a phrase for theater's interrupting *Stillstellung*, its putting-to-a-halt (Benjamin 1931b, 530/12–13),[62] which he will further develop in his later notations on history and historiography.[63] The "amazement" (*Staunen*) notably emerges from the play of the signifiers between *Staunen* and *Stauen* ("damming-up"), characterized as the "backwards tide" of a "swell in the real flow of life" (*Stauung im realen Lebensfluß*), in the "instant that its flow comes to a standstill" (*im Augenblick, da sein Ablauf zum Stehen kommt*) (531/13),[64] there, where at the same time – in the katachrestic breaking of the metaphors – "the flow of things breaks itself" on the "cliff of amazement" (*Fels des Staunens*), allowing "Being" (*Dasein*) to "spray up high out of the bed of time and, irridescent, in an instant [*Nu*] to stand in emptiness, in order to bed it anew" (531/13).[65] The *dynamis*

---

60 In particular, the *Lehrstück* discovers the "space of the possible" as a "setting free of potential, play, fantasy, provisionality, openness" (Lehmann 2002, 368); see also C. Menke 2005, 145/117–118.
61 Christoph Menke (following Nietzsche) ties imitation (*Nachahmung*) to playing as form-giving out of formlessness, in which the forms, in becoming, again and again dissolve themselves, "meet[ing] the abyss, the emptiness, and the potential of formlessness": in the play, form is the imitated "form of life" (C. Menke 2018, 41) if what is represented finds its form given in reality as that which can be imitated – "the imitation [*Nachahmung*] of another, preceding form" (42). This is, however, just a *retroactive* effect, as is (according to Benjamin) the cognizability of the "real state of things" (*der wirklichen Zustände*).
62 See also Müller-Scholl 2002, 160. "Immanent dialectical behavior is what in the 'state of things' is cleared up in a flash" (*Immanent dialektisches Verhalten ist es, was im Zustand* [...] *blitzartig klargestellt wird*) (Benjamin 1931b, 530/12). Thus, Galy Gay in *Mann ist Mann* is "nothing other than a stage of contradictions, which constitute our society" (530/12). Instead of "forcing open our state of things from the outside" (*von außen her unsre Zustände einzurennen*), Brecht is said to let them "mediated, in a "dialectical way" (*vermittelt, dialektisch*) "criticize one another, play their various elements logically against each other" (526/8).
63 See Benjamin's *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*, 1935–1940, 104, 102–105; see also Benjamin's notations (Benjamin GS I, 1236, 1250); Benjamin 1934–1940, 55, 577–578 (N2a,3; N3,1), 1001.
64 "[D]as Staunen ist diese Rückflut. Die Dialektik im Stillstand ist sein eigentlicher Gegenstand" (Benjamin 1931b, 531).
65 "[...] [lässt] das Dasein aus dem Bett der Zeit hoch aufsprühen und schillernd einen Nu im Leeren stehen, um es neu zu betten." Here there is "no difference between a human life and a word." The

of rupture in the interruption, in the damming-up (*Stauen*) as a broken movement, trembles 'inside' of the *Zustand* brought forth by interrupting and in retarding. The dialectic at a standstill manifests itself "already in gestural elements that underlie every temporal sequence and that one can only improperly call elements" (530/ 12).[66] Indeed, as they are not indivisible elements but are already split and doubled *in* themselves – and thus are *citable* – they are not themselves and not identical with themselves.[67] The force of the form-giving interruption putting to a halt conveys itself to that which it gives, without this attaining any identical givenness.

If gestural theater is characterized by Benjamin as "a way of acting [*spielen*] that directs [the actor] to cognition" (*die ihn* [*den Schauspieler*] *auf Erkenntnis anweist*) (Benjamin 1931b, 528/11), then the latter, being "produced" in the play-acting or the-ater-playing, is nothing one would have already known in advance, or which could simply be stated. But here, cognition is a matter of performing, a matter of opening gestures and breaches that hold open ruptures in the inside, turns and gaps.[68] The actors act "the one thinking (about his *part*)"[69] insofar as, with their distance from both what is represented and "the way in which it is represented," "in their acting" (*in ihrem Spiel*), in its difference from itself, they display the "intervals," which give the spectators occasion (*Anhalt*) to take "critical stances" (*kritische Stellungnahmen*) (Benjamin 1939, 538/306). This takes place *in* theater-playing, which is doubled and split in itself, and which inserts spectatorship into itself and thereby turns actors into spectators, to the effect that spectatorship sees itself being inserted into the acting/

---

broken metaphor continues and transforms the verses cited from Brecht: "Beharre nicht auf der Welle,/Die sich an deinem Fuß bricht, solange er/Im Wasser steht, werden sich/Neue Wellen an ihm brechen." (Benjamin 1931b, 531)

66 The "mother" of "the dialectic at a standstill" – which is Benjamin's rather irritating metaphor – is "not the course of contradictions" but "gesture itself" (Benjamin 1931b, 530/12).

67 Benjamin conceives the "dialectic at a standstill" (*Dialektik im Stillstand*) in the context of the "dialectical image" as the "readable image," for epistemology or, more precisely, the procedures of historiography (Benjamin 1934–1940, 570, 576–578, 591–592). These tie "cognizability" as "readability" to citation, which rips out and makes readable what has been (*das Gewesene*), in its broken bits, cited into the text of the present (595 [N11,3]). What has been 'is' not what one might be used to conceiving as facts (see Benjamin's *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*; see Hamacher 2005). As in a flash, the "readable image," that is, the "historical object," appears in the "now of readability" (*Jetzt der Lesbarkeit*) (Benjamin 1934–1940, 570 [N1,1], 577–578 [N3,1], 591–592 [N9,7]) that must be grasped as the moment (*Augenblick*) of perceptibility of a constellation, that is, in danger of being missed "already in the next moment" (592 [N9,7]). The so-called "image" 'is' the "dialectic at a standstill," "in its interior," a "field of tension" that is polarized into "pre- and post-history by the effects of "actuality" (*Aktualität*) (594– 596 [N10,3; N10a,2; N10a,3; N11,5], 587–588 [N7a,1; N7,7], 577–578).

68 The *Lehrstück* places more weight on "the reality and the occurrence of the act of representation itself" than on the completion of representation and content (Lehmann 2002, 368). This, as an act without completion, contradicts Austin's concept of performatives (see Hamacher 2018).

69 More exactly, Benjamin's text from 1939 claims that the actors should: "[es sich] nicht nehmen lassen, den (über seinen Part) Nachdenkenden vorzumachen" (Benjamin 1939, 538/307).

playing (*Schauspielen*) – as *other*.[70] Distance *to oneself* (and to one's own action [Benjamin 1931b, 521/3]) is taken and given – opened – in and as acting (*Verhalten*) in play-acting (*Schauspielen*), which refers 'critically' to the "actions on the stage" that it shows, but also to itself *as* this showing (*Zeigen*).

Thus, Theater-playing (*Theaterspielen*) is a 'critical practice' not because of something that may be said or meant, but due to its giving of a non-identity – interruption as a gift – through which it becomes theoretical, (potentially) everywhere, by referring everything that is shown elsewhere to an other which it is not, to the fissure or gap that makes it possible and that the gesture holds open.[71] It is a matter of theater *as* critical praxis, as the setting-apart of acting in itself, as a praxis that splits/doubles itself from and in itself,[72] that, *as* the *act* of performing in/as playing, performs an action (allegedly identical with itself) on the stage *as* split/doubled in itself. What is at stake in theater-playing is not a distinction that ends in judgment (as is the case for criticism or critique).[73] Rather, theater-playing is 'critical' *as* performing or as taking place, without instituting any authority that may state or judge, consisting (undecidably) *in* the event or *in* what is coming,[74] where it does not coincide with itself: potentially at any moment, in every place, differing from itself, becoming other. Thus, the behavior or acting *in* "theater-playing," the stance (*Haltung*) toward acting *in* playing, conflicts with instituting such an authority. Theater can be called *critical* because, according to Christoph Menke, with its non-identity it counters the repression of the non-identical,[75] through which alone the supposedly self-contained iden-

---

70 In particular, in the *Lehrstück* "[t]he act of spectating is brought into the play. The actors [*Spieler*] [...] are actors [*Akteure*] and spectators at once and thus, strictly speaking, are acting spectators and spectating actors" (Lehmann 2002, 372). Benjamin puts this the other way around: "Every spectator will be able to become an actor [*Mitspieler*]" (Benjamin 1939, 536/305).

71 This is articulated in the theatrical presentation's relation to the stage, which allows considering "what theater is about today" (Benjamin 1931b, 519/1; 1939, 539/307). While gestural theater is the attempt (*Versuch*) to 'arrange' itself on the "podium" (of the stage), this attempt can only ever be experimental, tentative, provisional. The gesture of form-giving remains in reservation before and against every givenness (even that of reality).

72 If praxis is "reflected and thereby transformed in drama," this opens up "a tension in the inside of praxis": between completion and possibility (C. Menke 2018, 45, 41). But Christoph Menke develops the "paradox" of theater-playing as that of playing (something to someone) (*Vorspielen*) and imitating something.

73 See also C. Menke 2018, 37–38, 48.

74 "'[E]s gibt' [...] ist im Modus des Entstehens da"; "[es] besteht in einem Ankommen" (Lehmann 2002, 368 [with reference to Nancy], 367).

75 "The critique of theater goes against the defense, the immunization of life against the transformation it experiences in the theater." "Theater criticizes [...] the immunization against paradox, and thus against theater; for theater is the implementation of paradox" (C. Menke 2018, 45–46). "Theater brings forth in its bringing-forth of form, and indeed through its paradox, an *other play* and indeed *another life*. This always already happens when there is theater. [...] Theater transforms life (or the world)." (44)

tity and necessity of the world asserts itself as given.[76] Moreover, it can be called 'critical' as it (that is to say, the "reflection [*Nachdenken*] about theater" implied in it) demonstrates "that one can criticize in the name of paradox, decide in the name of undecidability" (C. Menke 2018, 48). Its *halt* is without place, it *comes* from a (non)place of difference – which attains no unity. The theatrical distancing of the presentation and those presenting/acting *from* themselves contests (pretensions to) self-identity and self-containment. It refers the represented action on the stage and the act of performing (suspending it in its becoming) to their margins; refers form to (excluded) *other* possibilities (not having become reality), to the *shadows* of the otherwise-possible, which is excluded in every instance of form-giving, but which accompanies each constituted form. Each 'form,' that is, everything presented (according to Benjamin citing Brecht), thus *birgt* – implicates and holds – the otherwise possible in its interior, being thereby divided and virtualized. The potential being-other of what is provisionally (*probeweise*) cited from the space of the possible partakes in 'what is shown': as its gaps, ambivalences, and ambiguities,[77] in "the trembling of the contours" (*Zittern der Umrisse*),[78] in the shadows of the otherwise possible.

Bibliography

Agamben, Giorgio. "Notes on Gesture." *Infancy and History: The destruction of experience.* London et al.: Verso, 1993, 133–140. Reissue: *Means Without End: Notes on Politics.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000. 49–54.

Benjamin, Walter. *Gesammelte Schriften* [=GS]. Eds. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser et al. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1972–1989. [This edition is referred to by Roman numbers for the volume and Arabic page numbers.]

Benjamin, Walter. "Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik" [1920]. *GS.* Vol. I, 1974. 7–122. Trans.: "The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism." *Selected Writings.* Vol. I. Eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002. 116–200.

Benjamin, Walter. "*El mayor mónstruo, los celos* von Calderon und *Herodes und Mariamne* von Hebbel: Bemerkungen zum Problem des historischen Dramas" [1923]. *GS.* Vol. II, 1977. 246–276. Trans.: "Calderon's *El Mayor Monstruo*, *Los Celos* and Hebbel's *Herodes und*

---

76 Identity 'is' solely through the exclusion, or repression, of difference from itself, of hidden (other) possibilities (which split actions, figures, and worlds in themselves), through excluding and making forgotten the non-form for the sake of the supposedly self-contained, 'finished' form, through the repression of the margins of (other) possibilities which are cut off by the figuration for the sake of the supposedly realized figure.

77 On this point, see Lehmann 2002, 376–378.

78 "[T]he trembling of its contours still reveals from which intimate proximity they have torn themselves in order to become visible" [*das Zittern ihrer Umrisse verrät immer noch, aus welcher innigen Nähe sie sich gerissen haben, um sichtbar zu werden*] (Benjamin 1931b, 525/7). Nägele comments not only on the "spatial difference" and (possible) reversals of foreground and background (Nägele 2005, 113–114; see also Müller-Scholl 2002, 162–164) but also notices this "trembling" to have affected Benjamin's text (Nägele 2005, 114–116).

Mariamne. Comments on the Problem of Historical Drama." *Selected Writings*. Vol. I. Eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002. 363–386.

Benjamin, Walter. "Goethes Wahlverwandtschaften" [1924–1926]. *GS*. Vol. I, 1974. 123–201.

Benjamin, Walter. "Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels" [1928a]. *GS*. Vol. I, 1974. 203–430. Trans.: *The Origin of the German Trauerspiel*. Trans. Howard Eiland. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2019.

Benjamin, Walter. "Einbahnstraße" [1928b]. *Werke und Nachlaß. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*. Vol. VIII. Eds. Detlev Schöttker et al. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 2009.

Benjamin, Walter. "Memorandum zu der Zeitschrift 'Krisis und Kritik'" [1930]. *GS*. Vol. VI, 1985. 619–621.

Benjamin, Walter. "Karl Kraus" [1931a]. *GS*. Vol. II, 1977. 334–367.

Benjamin, Walter. "Was ist das epische Theater? Eine Studie zu Brecht" [1931b]. *GS*. Vol. II, 1977. 519–531. Trans.: "What is the Epic Theater? A Study on Brecht." *Understanding Brecht*. Trans. Anna Bostock. Introd. Stanley Mitchell. London: Verso, 1998. 1–14.

Benjamin, Walter. "Der Autor als Produzent. Ansprache im Institut zum Studium des Faschismus in Paris am 27. April 1934" [1934]. *GS*. Vol. II, 1977. 683–701. Trans.: "The Author as Producer. Address at the Institute for the Study of Fascism, Paris, April 27, 1934." *Selected Writings*. Vol. II.2. Eds. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005. 768–782.

Benjamin, Walter. *Passagenwerk* [1934–1940]. *GS*. Vol. V, 1982.

Benjamin, Walter. "Über den Begriff der Geschichte" [1935–1940]. *Werke und Nachlaß: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*. Vol. XIX. Eds. Christoph Gödde and Henri Lonitz. Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2010.

Benjamin, Walter. "Was ist das epische Theater?" [1939]. *GS*. Vol. II, 1977. 531–539. Trans.: "What is the Epic Theater?" *Selected Writings*. Vol. IV. Eds. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006. 302–309.

Bergson, Henri. *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*. New York et al.: Macmillan, 1911.

de Man, Paul. "The Concept of Irony." *Aesthetic Ideology*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996. 163–184.

Derrida, Jacques. *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992.

Hamacher, Werner. "'Now': Walter Benjamin on Historical Time." Trans. N. Rosenthal. *Walter Benjamin and History*. Ed. Andrew Benjamin. London and New York: Continuum, 2005. 38–68.

Hamacher, Werner. "Das eine Kriterium für das, was geschieht. Aristoteles: *Poetik*. Brecht: 'Kleines Organon'." *Theater als Kritik: Theorie, Geschichte und Praktiken der Ent-Unterwerfung*. Eds. Olivia Ebert, Eva Holling, Nikolaus Müller-Schöll, Philipp Schulte, Bernhard Siebert, and Gerald Siegmund. Bielefeld: transcript, 2018. 19–36.

Lehmann, Hans-Thies. *Das Politische Schreiben. Essays zu Theatertexten; Sophokles, Shakespeare, Kleist, Büchner, Jahnn, Bataille, Brecht, Benjamin, Müller, Schleef*. Berlin: Theater der Zeit, 2002.

Lehmann, Hans-Thies. *Brecht Lesen*. Berlin: Theater der Zeit, 2016.

Menke, Bettine. "Reflexion des Trauer-Spiels. Pedro Calderón de la Barcas El mayor mónstruo, los celos nach Walter Benjamin." *Literatur als Philosophie: Philosophie also Literatur*. Eds. Eva Horn, Bettine Menke and Christoph Menke. Munich: Fink, 2005. 253–280.

Menke, Christoph. *Die Gegenwart der Tragödie: Versuch über Urteil und Spiel*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 2005. Trans. *Tragic play: irony and theater from Sophocles to Beckett*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2009.

Menke, Christoph. "Das Spiel des Theaters und die Veränderung der Welt." *Theater als Kritik: Theorie, Geschichte und Praktiken der Ent-Unterwerfung.* Eds. Olivia Ebert, Eva Holling, Nikolaus Müller-Schöll, Philipp Schulte, Bernhard Siebert, and Gerald Siegmund. Bielefeld: transcript, 2018. 37–48.

Meyer, Petra Maria. "Die Geste als intermediale Vergleichskategorie. Zur Umwertung von Sprachgesten und Gestensprachen zwischen dem 18. und 20. Jahrhundert." *Crossing Media – Theater – Film – Fotographie – Neue Medien.* Eds. Christopher Balme and Markus Moninger. Munich: ePODIUM, 2004. 55–73.

Müller-Schöll, Nikolaus. *Das Theater des "konstruktiven Defaitismus": Lektüren zur Theorie eines Theaters der A-Identität bei Walter Benjamin, Bertolt Brecht und Heiner Müller.* Frankfurt/M. and Basel: Stroemfeld/Nexus, 2002.

Nägele, Rainer. "Trembling Contours: Kierkegaard-Benjamin-Brecht." *Walter Benjamin and History.* Ed. Andrew Benjamin. London and New York: Continuum, 2005. 102–117.

Schlegel, Friedrich. "Vom ästhetischen Werthe der Griechischen Komödie" [1794]. *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe* [=KFSA]. Vol. I. Ed. Ernst Behler. Paderborn et al.: Schöningh, 1979. 19–33.

Schlegel, Friedrich. "Zur Philosophie" [1797]. *KFSA.* Vol. XVIII. Ed. Ernst Behler. Paderborn et al.: Schöningh, 1963. 79–117.

Schlegel, Friedrich. "Über Goethes Meister" [1798]. *KFSA.* Vol. II. Ed. Hans Eichner. Paderborn et al.: Schöningh, 1967. 126–146. Trans.: "On Goethe's *Meister.*" *Classic and Romantic German Aesthetics.* Ed. J.M. Bernstein. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003. 269–286.

Schlegel, Friedrich. "Über die Unverständlichkeit" [1800]. *KFSA.* Vol. II. Ed. Hans Eichner. Paderborn et al.: Schöningh, 1967. 363–372.

Steiner, Uwe. "Kritik." *Benjamins Begriffe.* Eds. Michael Opitz and Erdmut Wizisla. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 2000. 479–523.

Szondi, Peter. "Friedrich Schlegel und die romantische Ironie. Mit einer Beilage über Tiecks Komödien." *Schriften II.* Eds. Jean Bollack et al. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1978. 11–31. Trans.: "Friedrich Schlegel and Romantic Irony, with Some Remarks on Tieck's Comedies." *On Textual Understanding and Other Essays.* Trans. Harvey Mendelsohn. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986. 57–73.

Wizisla, Erdmut (Ed.). *Brecht und Benjamin: Denken in Extremen.* Exhibition catalogue. Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2017.

Walter Benn Michaels
Historicism's Forms: The Aesthetics of Critique

In 1989, in an essay called "The History of the Anecdote: Fiction and Fiction," Joel Fineman undertook an analysis of what he called "The formal operation of the anecdote, understood as a specific literary genre" (Fineman 1989, 50) and thus also of what he called "the characteristic writing practice of the New Historicism – those essays that begin with an anecdote" (64). Fineman's interest was in the way that the foregrounding of the anecdote (his example was Stephen Greenblatt) took up a problem that had been central to historiography since its beginning, in Thucydides, where the problem of how to locate the anecdote – "the narration of a single event" that "uniquely refers to the real" (56) – in some "logic of sequential and transitional necessity" (53) was, he argued, first posed. And the central point of his essay was to assert the aporetic relation between the anecdote's claim on the real and the logic of transition, the way in which the anecdote's opening to "contingency" is, he says, closed off by its opposite, the "transitional necessity" that gives it "historical significance" (53).

Two years later, in the "Theory" chapter of *Postmodernism*, Fredric Jameson also undertook an analysis of what he called not the "writing practice" but the "writing convention" or "aesthetic" (Jameson 1991, 188) of the new historicism and he too focused on the question of transition while saying nothing, however, about the anecdote. For Jameson, the problem in new historicism was not exactly how to get from the anecdote to the larger historical narrative, it was how to construct a relation between literary texts and what he called the analyses of "a dazzling heterogeneity of raw material" ("medicine, gambling, land tenure, masochism, slavery, photography, contracts" etc.) (193) *without* producing such a narrative – without a story about how one thing caused the other or was about the other. And the new historicist aesthetic, in which "Elegance [...] consists in constructing bridge passages between the various concrete analyses, transitions [...] inventive enough to preclude the posing of theoretical or interpretive questions" (188) was its solution to this problem, its way of refusing or avoiding the "theoretical" question of how these analyses were connected.

For the purposes of a volume on poetic critique, my initial interest here is in the idea – taken usefully for granted in both these texts – that a mode of criticism might be said to have an aesthetic. So we do not have to worry about making it poetic, it already (for better or for worse) is. But my more basic interest is in the idea that transition is the formal problem the new historicism is seen to confront or the solution it is seen to deploy. And that interest, I should confess, is in part personal – since it was mainly the question of transitions in my book *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism* that Jameson was interested in and since it seems to me that re-raising that question might help me understand something a few people have

asked me about and that I have asked myself – the relation between the *Gold Standard*'s 1987 account of the work of art as entirely embedded in its culture and having therefore no critical distance from it and *The Beauty of a Social Problem*'s account (in 2015) of art as providing just the kind of opportunity for critical understanding that *The Gold Standard* denied art could or did do (cf. Michaels 1987 and Michaels 2015). And if, with respect just to those two books, this question is at most of limited interest, it has, I think, a more general application. For if, as we have already seen, the new historicism was understood right from the start to have an aesthetic, that aesthetic should also be understood to have a history. And we can very quickly identify what will prove to be one salient aspect of that history by noting that the moment of the new historicism's emergence was the moment also of the emergence of neoliberalism and the take-off point in the U.S. for the new economic inequality. 1968 was the most equal year on record; the Gini coefficient (0 is perfect equality; 1, one household has everything) was .38; by 1983, when the first issue of *Representations* (at the time a kind of founding organ of the new historicism) appeared, it had risen to a little over .41; in 2018, it was .49, the highest ever recorded (so far).

Of course, to characterize the rise in economic inequality as belonging to the history of an aesthetic might in itself seem problematic – just another exercise in the hermeneutics of suspicion which (no doubt because it never existed) has been essential to the rise of postcritique. But there are also more interesting objections. Think of Adorno criticizing Benjamin for his "tendency to relate" – "immediately and perhaps even causally" – some of the "features" of Baudelaire's work "to adjacent features in the social history of his time, preferably economic features" (Adorno 1980, 128–129). What would it mean to "relate" formal features of the new historicist aesthetic (the anecdote, the transition) "immediately" to an adjacent feature of our social history like the redistribution of income upwards that began in the late 70s?

The possibility of answering this question – in "perhaps even causally," I can feel my own as well as Adorno's fear of base and superstructure! – is further complicated by the fact that probably none of the Berkeley new historicists was the slightest bit aware of the supposedly determinative economic event that was taking place. So any account of its relevance to them would have to contend with their ignorance of it. But the interest in trying to raise it again is intensified by the fact that at least one of the formal features, the transition, can be understood, as Jameson had already begun to suggest, as a way of trying *not* to raise it. On his account, nothing is more characteristic of the new historicist aesthetic than juxtapositions of literary features like Frank Norris's McTeague being both a miner and a dentist (two professions intertwined by the fact that the miner takes gold out of the earth to put it into circulation, whereas the dentist takes gold out of circulation to put it into people's mouths) with economic ones like the political battles over whether the U.S. should stick to the gold standard or monetize silver (with its default consensus on the necessity of money with "intrinsic" value as opposed to dollar bills with none). And then with the effort to put both the dentist and the gold-bug into relation with the popularity of trompe l'oeil painting (which seeks to describe representational paintings as, like dollar bills, a form of

deception) and with the fact that Trina McTeague is a miser about whom it is impossible to tell whether her love of money depends upon denying its status as a representation or fetishizing its status as a representation. How can we theorize the connection between *trompe l'oeil* painters and hard money Democrats, much less the connection of any of them to the novel?

The crucial thing for Jameson is what is not said: it is not said (in fact, it is explicitly denied) that the novel is *about* the gold standard and no theory of mediation that might explain how one could connect up the practice of dentistry with the vogue for a certain kind of painting, or pamphlets on free silver to novels that never even mention it is ever proffered. Indeed, as Jameson says, "elegance" consists in *not* providing these things. More generally, there's no account of what makes one historical context more relevant than another to the literary text – which is the problem that Fineman understands the anecdote to deconstruct. Rather the very idea of the relation between text and context seems to be refused and replaced by the effort to produce a criticism in which history figures but precisely not as context, not as a kind of explanatory background. In this criticism there is no background and not much in the way of explanation either – everything is foreground, and is made relevant by the mode of presentation rather than by some theoretical justification.

So, why? What was the attraction of that aesthetic? One answer would be that it works to prove what was widely taken (not least by the new historicists themselves) to be the new historicist point – that all these phenomena are so equally a part of capital's *dispositif* that it makes no sense to select one of them – literature – and confer on it a distinctively oppositional potential. Jameson generously says that when the transitions work, the reader is left with "a sense of breathlessness, of admiration for the brilliance of the performance, but yet bewilderment, at the conclusion of the essay, from which one seems to emerge with empty hands – without ideas and interpretations to carry away with us" (Jameson 1991, 188), a point that in a recent issue of *American Literary History* is put with less charity but equal accuracy by Francesca Sawaya when she refers to *The Gold Standard* in particular as "exasperatingly tautological and deterministic" (Sawaya 2019, 305). The tautology – the dentist is the miser is the trompe l'oeil painter – is what you get instead of the interpretation. On this account, whether you are left breathless or exasperated, what you are being told is that art cannot produce a reflection on capitalism, it can only participate in it (that would be also the determinism).

For Jameson, however, it is the tautological transitions that matter rather than the thesis they are supposed to serve. In fact, he focuses on the aesthetic precisely because he regards the thesis as of secondary interest – it is a pretext for producing the transitions, for motivating "the device" (Jameson 1991, 189). Hence, the question we just asked – what is the attraction of the transitions? – cannot be answered by invoking the argument they are supposed to prove.

How, then, can it be answered? Fineman reads the transition as a problem, not a solution. The appeal of the anecdote is in its ability to "produce the effect of the real" (Fineman 1989, 61) (which is what history demands) but, insofar as the real is iden-

tified with what he calls "the occurrence of contingency" (61), the anecdote disrupts what history *also* demands – a "logic of sequential and transitional necessity" (53). Hence, he thinks, there is a fundamental discrepancy between the "experience of history" (53) as offered by the anecdote and the "estranged distance from the anecdotal real" (63) required by the logic of historicism, and the power of the anecdote is precisely the problem it produces: it *resists* transition – it marks the moment in the constitution of what he calls the "subject of history" (62) that is transcended but not fully subsumable by the "logic" (53) of historicism.

But Jameson's proof text (*The Gold Standard*) invokes the "logic," not the "subject" of its history, and the juxtaposition with Fineman helps us to see that what it was resisting (what made the tautology – this *is* this, as opposed to this *explains* this or this *leads to* this – attractive) was precisely what Fineman valued. Fineman valued the disruption of the relation between text and context because it was in that disruption that the subject's experience of the real emerged – the moment before contingency is subsumed by historical necessity, the moment when you cannot say why this is the right context in which to understand that, why this event is the background that helps us understand this text in the foreground. By contrast, *The Gold Standard* sought not to disrupt the relation between text and context but to iron out the difference between them, so that there would be no foreground or background, which is to say, no position from which some things looked closer and others farther away, which is to say no point of view, which is to say, no subject. If Fineman thought that history's logic condemned you to an "estranged distance from the anecdotal real," what *The Gold Standard* wanted from naturalism's logic was neither distance nor proximity (which after all are both positions of the subject). It wanted not the non-existence but the irrelevance of the subject.

Thus we have two versions of new historicist aesthetics, and although neither is in any way current today, it is not hard to see that Fineman's commitment to the subject – albeit in a domesticated and completely moralized form – has flourished. Indeed, at the heart of what we now call postcritique is a version of that commitment so complete it requires us to treat everything as at least what Latour calls a "quasi-subject" (Latour 2014, 5–6) and hence, in Rita Felski's words, to put "people, animals, texts and things on a similar ontological footing" (Felski 2015, 184) in order to "emphasiz[e] their interdependence" (164) and thus "the agency of both texts and readers" (165). And if, at the root of this ontological egalitarianism is Latour's studied obliviousness to the difference between natural and non-natural signs (to use a Gricean example, the difference between the way the spots on your face mean measles and the way the phonemes "measles" mean measles[1]), its real rele-

---

1 Perhaps studied obliviousness is not quite right, since the main point of Latour's idea of agency is that it is supposed to call into question distinctions like the one between natural and non-natural signs. Sometimes he does this by insisting that meaning is "a property of all agents" (Latour 2014, 13) and thus central to both (which is uncontroversially true: "measles" means measles; spots mean measles); sometimes he does it by suggesting that the "word" "meaning" "be dropped altogeth-

vance for my purpose is not this conceptual confusion in itself but the way the actor-network theory it enables underwrites, for Felski, a model of the social that begins with the "sociology of the individual" and "ways of thinking about individuals" that do not "flatten and reduce them" (Felski 2015, 171–172).

There is a kind of aesthetic at work here too, not so much in the writing perhaps as in the expression of taste – what Felski wants is a world made up of the novel's round characters, those who, in a humanistic version of Fineman's insistence on "contingency," embody what E.M. Forster called "the incalculability of life" (Forster 1956, 78) and what Felski calls "the ever-present possibility of being surprised" (Felski 2019).[2] Thus, for example, as against a "melancholic Marxism" that sees "economic interests" everywhere, she praises what she thinks of as sociology's more Latourian concept of "society" as "highly variegated and differentiated, made up of many kinds of institutions, communities, norms and behaviors." And against what she takes to be too easy a commitment to "the language of structure," she complains that Leavisites did not and Marxist literary critics (all nine of them) do not think about "how structure is to be defined" or "what kind of analytical work it does" (Felski 2019).

But here the very crudest possible analytical work Marxism does – understand society in terms of capital and labor – is of some use. Postcritique's picture of the social is the intersubjective (or, to use one of Felski's preferred terms, the "relational"), which is also the neoliberal picture and is, in fact, its therapy for any members of the working class who might have been made a little melancholic by the rising inequality I mentioned above. The treatment is just to understand that in political economy there really is no such thing as the working class. Indeed, from Foucault's analysis of how the concept of human capital turns the worker into a capitalist (and thus turns his salary into a return on that capital) to the Uber contract that operationalizes Foucault's analysis by turning employees into "independent contractors," a crucial feature of neoliberalism has been its commitment to making the structural – structural instead of relational, instead of intersubjective – antagonism between capital and labor disappear. It thus replaces the problem of structural injustice – exploitation – with an array of individual injustices (as variegated and differentiated as intersectional analysis can make them), but all marching under the banner of discrimination. Theoretical sophistication here consists precisely in infinitely multiply-

---

er" and that we talk instead about "path-building, or order-making, or creation of directions" instead, which relieves us from having "to specify if it is language or objects" we are analyzing and endows "things" with the "dignity of texts" while "elevating" texts "to the ontological status of things" (Latour 1996, 10). But, whichever words we use and whoever gets to be the most dignified, the difference between the spots (which are a symptom) and the word (which is a name) remains. As the fact that using the word does not require us to be sick while having the spots does reminds us.

2 For the complete quote, see Forster 1956, 78: "The test of a round character is whether it is capable of surprising in a convincing way [...]. It has the incalculability of life about it – life within the pages of a book."

ing the number of subject positions any of us might occupy, while at the same time guaranteeing that they are just that – positions of the subject. And the success of this program is demonstrated every time someone insists, for example, that the tension between a class politics and an identity politics is specious because class is an identity too.[3]

Felski herself was an early adopter of class as identity (albeit a "negative" one) in her important (and fun to read) article "Nothing to Declare: Identity, Shame, and the Lower Middle Class" (Felski 2000). Here, her focus "on the psychic as well as the social, semiotics as much as economics" (34) is presented as a methodological rather than an ontological commitment. But actor-network theory would do for literary criticism what intersectionality has done for politics – take the idea of an essentially impersonal structure right out of it. In this respect, it is striking that all the different versions of postcritique especially have it in for Jameson, who keeps seeing not class identity, but class struggle in texts where it does not belong. And it is striking also that what Felski calls "everyday" reading and especially the kind of reading that goes on in the classroom provide her with an alternative model for interpretation as "the coproduction between actors" (12). You do not have to be a very suspicious reader to notice that for university professors teaching our students the relational virtues of what Latour calls "the care for phenomena" – sympathy, empathy, recognition – is redescribable (or really just describable) as teaching the sons and daughters of the upper class the responsibilities appropriate to the beneficiaries of the class system: how to appreciate their agency and use it humanely, how to exercise the privilege of checking their privilege.[4] Obviously, using our privilege humanely is a virtue (the alternative is Trump), but, also obviously, it is a way of living with inequality, not combatting it, of keeping the essential antagonism of class out of the classroom as well as out of the texts we read in that classroom. The point here is not that postcritique is apolitical; it is rather that it is liberal, the professoriat's contribution to making sure that our wealthy students do not understand the system that has made them

---

3 A characteristic instance would be Peter Frase (2014) acknowledging that class is "a structural relation," but only to remind us that it is "*also* an identity." Which is to say, it also "exists in its sociological sense," which means – and here his relief at having made it to neoliberal high ground is almost palpable – that "Classism is a real phenomenon" and that we should combat "classist attitudes."

4 The most recent figures show that 80 % of students from the top quintile of wealth enroll in 4-year institutions, while students from the lowest quintile mainly enroll in two-year community colleges or in for profits; only 28 % find their way to 4-year colleges (see https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2019/05/23/feds-release-broader-data-socioeconomic-status-and-college-enrollment-and-completion). When Felski teaches undergraduate classes at Virginia, two thirds of her students are from the top 20 % (https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/projects/college-mobility/university-of-virginia) (13 March 2020).

wealthy, and that their conception of social justice remains fixed on technologies of individualization: equality of opportunity, meritocracy, social mobility.[5]

Which is not to say that if we return to our original texts and our founding moment, the situation was much different. Actually, from this point of view, the new historicism was already a kind of crucial first step in the wrong direction. Catherine Gallagher (the other new historicist named by Jameson and writing in the same year as Fineman) explicitly and acutely disarticulates new historicism from what Marxism thought of as "the one conflict that counted: class conflict" (Gallagher 1989, 40) and connects it instead to the New Left, which she characterizes as "invoking the principle of individual and group [rather than class] liberation," and which she identifies as emerging out of "the problem of the constitution of the subject" (41) as reformulated in what was increasingly called post-Marxism. And *The Gold Standard* is no exception to this rule: although the word class appears with some frequency in it, the concept of class (much less class struggle) is pretty much absent. In fact, we could say that the thematics of the text – the impossibility or irrelevance of a certain resistance, as embodied in a passage like the following – precisely exemplify its preoccupation with what Gallagher calls "the constitution of modern subjectivity" (46).

> Dreiser didn't so much approve or disapprove of capitalism; he desired pretty women in little tan jackets with mother-of-pearl buttons, and he feared becoming a bum on the streets of New York. These fears and desires were themselves made available by consumer capitalism, partly because a capitalist economy made it possible for lower class women to wear nice clothes and for middle-class men to lose their jobs, but more importantly because the logic of capitalism linked the loss of jobs to a failure of self-representation and linked the desirability of those women to the possibility of mimesis. Carrie is desirable, in this reading, because she herself desires – "to reproduce life," to make herself into a representation. And this insatiable appetite for representation Dreiser identifies with sexual promiscuity, corporate greed, and his own artistic practice. (Michaels 1987, 19)

This is precisely the kind of claim about the inescapability of the market that everyone – including me – thought of as the main new historicist point. And it is not exactly false. As long as you were looking for resistance to capitalism in the subject of capitalism, you were never going to find it. But if we understand the new historicism's aesthetics (the aesthetics of the bridge passage between concrete instances that turns explanation into tautology) as a refusal of text and context, of point of view, and thus of the subject, then we can see that refusal as a placeholder precisely

---

5 One reader of this text helpfully objected that it is unfair to single out postcritique in this way since the same criticism could be made of virtually everything done in the humanities at American universities, or at least everything except Marxist criticism. I agree! (Except that he forgot to include the social sciences.) But I think it is still worth granting a certain pride of place to postcritique, which in its allegiance to the idea that there is "no society" and that social analysis consists above all in "marveling at" and "attend[ing] to" the "ongoing connections, disconnections, and reconnections between countless actors" (and their families?) (Felski 2011, 578) does a much more thorough job of making class structure invisible even than intersectionality.

for the non-intersubjective, non-relational structure of a capitalist society – for the conflict between capital and labor. In other words, class is excluded from the new historicism as a concept but gets into it as a 'writing convention,' and opposition gets into it not as a political position but as an entailment of its conception of 'elegance.' In this respect, we can not only say with Jameson that the polemical claim of the new historicism – the work of art's subsumption by the society it might be thought to critique – is really there just to motivate the device, we can say also that the device (the transitions) negates the motive. The new historicism had demonstrated, Gallagher wrote, that "the things in texts" which oppositional critics had hopefully identified as "subversive" and "destabilizing" were in fact "inscriptions of the formative moments, not the disruptions, of the liberal subject" (Gallagher 1989, 45); the aesthetic of the transition negated this demonstration not exactly by showing that it was mistaken (there was indeed nothing oppositional about the destabilized subject) but by making it irrelevant.

Which is not to say that any of the Berkeley new historicists were politically interesting except insofar as we were early adopters of what today would be called left neoliberalism, and our interest in the history of the liberal subject was itself a component in the making of the neoliberal subject. As I noted above, we had no idea that we were participating in a profound transfer of wealth from the bottom 90 % of the population to the top 10 %; our politics found expression in diversifying the western canon not in organizing a faculty union. And if you think of politics as mainly an expression of class interest, rightly so. We were not the faculty members who would need a union; we would be more the beneficiaries of that transfer of wealth than its victims. So both in its politics and in its intellectual commitment to the history of the subject, the new historicism belonged to that 90 % of the world that, as the joke goes, is perfectly explained by vulgar Marxism.[6]

But in its aesthetics, in its 'writing practice,' not so much. In its literary critical form, vulgar Marxism – the debates over the gold standard made McTeague a dentist – was basically what Adorno condemned as the insufficiently mediated "materialistic determination of cultural traits," and the ambition of the new historicist aesthetic was to avoid the kind of separation between the two that would make the explanation of the one by the other look attractive. But Adorno also thought we could bridge this gap by running the whole thing through the "*total social process*" (Adorno 1980, 129) – italics his, presumably in the spirit of "we absolutely need to do this although we don't quite know how to do it and aren't completely sure what it is."

One way, then, to see the new historicism is as a recognition of the problem Adorno identified, a rejection of his suggestion that it could only be solved by "theory," and the creation instead of an aesthetic designed not exactly to solve it, but to make it go away. That such an effort was bound to fail is obvious, just as the ongoing attraction to the idea that something is indeed explained by juxtaposing (but not de-

---

6 The joke is that sociology is interested only in the remaining 10 %. Hence Felski's "sociology envy."

riving) our literary critical ambitions with (not from) our economic ones is also obvious. Jameson said that *The Gold Standard* differed from "standard New Historicist practice" in its commitment to a "total" (albeit "absent") "system," "the market" (Jameson 1991, 212). Perhaps the relevant point here is just – Jameson's point – that the commitment to totality is the thing that is needed (even when you cannot totally figure out how it works) and that *The Gold Standard's* periodic imagination of this totality as necessarily "asphyxiating" (212) was a kind of sentimentalism.

If that is right, then the new historicist thematic was just the sad version of "there is no alternative" (postcritique would be not exactly the happy but the mindful version), and it is the contradictory relation this thematic had with its aesthetic that makes new historicism interesting. Why? Because by linking the history of the subject to the problem of the transition, new historicism also made it possible to see the replacement of the structural by the intersubjective, the formal by the relational, as a problem, and in this, it was itself, despite its mockery of the subversive and the oppositional, a kind of critique. Even, although none of its practitioners was a Marxist, a kind of Marxist critique, and especially by contrast to the ways in which most of what passes for critique has in fact been as embarrassingly uncritical as postcritique is proudly uncritical.

The title of the conference for which this paper was written and of the book for which it is being revised is *Poetic Critique*. My own way of understanding the "poetic" in that title has not been in terms of generic alternatives (not poetry or fiction or memoir as critique), but in terms of an aesthetic that might be made possible in the genre of literary criticism itself. By aesthetic – following Fineman and Jameson – I have obviously meant something other than a method and also something more than a style, including a prose style. Obviously, I have not meant an aesthetic instead of a politics. But I also do not mean an aesthetic as a politics. Here we can see the very strict limits of poetic critique – a Marxism without Marxists had no political future, and the last half century has made it very clear that a class aesthetic cannot do the work of a class politics.

Bibliography

Adorno, Theodor. "Letters to Walter Benjamin." *Aesthetics and Politics.* With an Afterword by
   Fredric Jameson. London: Verso, 1980. 110–133.
Felski, Rita. "Nothing to Declare: Identity, Shame, and the Lower Middle Class." *PMLA* 115.1
   (2000): 33–45.
Felski, Rita. "'Context Stinks!'" *New Literary History* 42.4 (2011): 573–591.
Felski, Rita. *The Limits of Critique.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015.
Felski, Rita. "My Sociology Envy." *Theory, Culture & Society* (25 July 2019).
   https://www.theoryculturesociety.org/rita-felski-my-sociology-envy/ (11 December 2019).
Fineman, Joel. "The History of the Anecdote: Fiction and Fiction." *The New Historicism.* Ed. Harold
   Avram Veeser. London and New York: Routledge, 1989. 49–76.
Forster, E.M. *Aspects of the Novel.* Orlando: Mariner Books, 1956.

Frase, Peter. "Stay Classy." *Jacobin* (26 June 2014). https://jacobinmag.com/2014/06/stay-classy (5 May 2019).

Gallagher, Catherine. "Marxism and the New Historicism." *The New Historicism*. Ed. Harold Avram Veeser. London and New York: Routledge, 1989. 37–49.

Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke, 1991.

Latour, Bruno. "On actor-network theory. A few clarifications plus more than a few complications." *Soziale Welt* 47.4 (1996).
http://transnationalhistory.net/interconnected/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Latour-Actor-Network-Clarifications.pdf (13 March 2020).

Latour, Bruno. "Agency at the Time of the Anthropocene." *New Literary History* 35 (2014): 1–18.

Michaels, Walter Benn. *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987.

Michaels, Walter Benn. *The Beauty of a Social Problem: Photography, Autonomy, Economy*. London and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015.

Sawaya, Francesca. "Safeguarding the Past: 'Presentist' Historicism." *American Literary History* 31.2 (2019): 301–311.

Yi-Ping Ong

Poetic Criticism and the Work of Fiction: Goethe, Joyce, and Coetzee

It is a hot June day in Dublin, mid-afternoon. A young, would-be, but as yet unknown poet locks horns with his elders in the age-old fight for dominance. More of a skirmish than a flat bid to wrest command from the heads of the pack: this is how they see it. They keep his forays in check with nudges and nips, but otherwise they tolerate him.

We begin in the middle of things. A dust-cloaked office of the National Library. The Director is holding court: "And we have, have we not, those priceless pages of *Wilhelm Meister*. A great poet on a great brother poet" (Joyce 1986, 151). On he drones, dull notes creaking in the dim air, before he is called away by his work. As soon as he leaves, the young poet takes his shot: "Monsieur de la Palice […] was alive fifteen minutes before his death" (151). A jeer like this from a mere underling, no matter how light, will not be let to stand. Instantly a sharp voice cracks back with "elder's gall": "Have you found those six brave medicals […] to write *Paradise Lost* at your dictation? *The Sorrows of Satan* he calls it" (151). This last aside is directed not to the young man, but to a fellow elder. Taking up his cue, the other joins in: "All these questions are purely academic […]. I mean, whether Hamlet is Shakespeare or James I or Essex. […] Art has to reveal to us ideas, formless spiritual essences. […] All the rest is the speculation of schoolboys for schoolboys" (151). The challenge of youth to the authority of the elders is dispatched.

This opening frames the episode of Joyce's *Ulysses* (1918) that is best known for Stephen Dedalus's pyrotechnic and at times bizarrely far-fetched account of how to read Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Many critics take his reading as a veiled guide to how Joyce himself intends *Ulysses* to be read. Falling exactly at the midpoint of the novel, there is no question that the episode is crucial. But if Joyce had wanted to highlight Stephen's theory of art as a key to his own creation, why did he stage it like this – as part of an academic pissing contest?

If we look back, to Goethe's execution of a similar scene in *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1795–1796), and forward, to another scene in Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), we might discover further clues. All three texts exemplify what Schlegel calls, in his essay "On Goethe's *Meister*" (1798), "poetic criticism": a work of art that "come[s] into being when a poet in full possession of his powers contemplates a work of art and represents it in his own" (Schlegel 2003, 281). Schlegel is here describing the sections of *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* between Book 4, chapter 13 and Book 5, chapter 12 that contain Wilhelm's elaboration upon and re-staging of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. These are the same pages of Goethe's novel that Joyce's episode alludes to at its opening – an early hint that Joyce will set his occasion for poetic criticism beside Goethe's. Both texts contain a reading of *Hamlet*. Both feature

Hamlet-like protagonists who represent themselves to others in and through the act of reading Shakespeare's play. Finally, in Coetzee's novel, although the performance of Elizabeth Costello focuses on Kafka's ape and not on the Prince of Denmark, Costello herself is a novelist whose claim to fame lies in her re-writing of Joyce's *Ulysses* from the point of view of Molly Bloom.

How should we read these loosely concatenated texts of poetic criticism? This question is complicated by the fact that, in all three cases, the crucial act that establishes the work as an instance of poetic criticism is carried out by a fictional character. Wilhelm's production of *Hamlet*, Stephen Dedalus's dazzling performance in the library, and Elizabeth Costello's speech on Kafka: all embody Schlegel's claim that "[p]oetic criticism does not act as a mere inscription, and merely say what the thing is" but rather "want[s] to represent the representation anew, and form once more what has already been formed" (Schlegel 2003, 281). These exemplary instances of poetic criticism interpret the texts they represent by re-enacting the dynamics found in these texts. Yet these acts of poetic criticism are not stand-alone works. Each is represented within the compass of a larger narrative, one that stages the making of the character-*qua*-critic as well as the conditions surrounding and inflecting their key performance. Time and time again, the art of poetic criticism accomplishes itself by way of a novelistic form that embeds an act of critical response to another work of art within the narrative of a central figure's life. What do these fictions of the lives of critics tell us about the form and meaning of poetic criticism?

From its origin in "On Goethe's *Meister*," the concept of poetic criticism is intertwined with the attempt to reorient the purpose and meaning of literary criticism. Schlegel's essay marks a seminal turn in Romantic literary history, when the critic breaks free from his traditional role as "a judge who applied neoclassical aesthetic standards, derived most notably from Aristotle and Horace, to the understanding and assessment of a work of art" (Norman 2018, 196). Schlegel – and, after him, Novalis, Schleiermacher, and Tieck – reenvisions the act of criticism as intimately bound up with the self-understanding of the literary work. Criticism amplifies, reflects, and intensifies the self-reflexive understanding that is internal to the individual work of art, and as such it must itself assume a "mode of literary self-knowledge" (204). It must become, in Schlegel's term, poetic. In my interpretation of these texts of poetic criticism, what emerges is a form of criticism as critique: criticism *qua* investigation of the nature and limits of self-reflection. This self-understanding is portrayed in and through the protagonists who engage in acts of literary criticism within the work of fiction. In Goethe, Joyce, and Coetzee, the fictional critic encounters a profound form of self-knowledge that is not solely generative, but also potentially destructive. The act of criticism does not, as Schlegel would have it, merely amplify, reflect, and raise self-understanding to a higher power. It also deflects, avoids, and disavows, defending the critic from the danger and pain that is inherent in knowing him or herself. This ambivalent tension is revelatory not only of the nature of criticism, but also of the structure of fictions that would seek to portray it.

In this essay, I seek to renew our understanding of Schlegel's account of poetic criticism by re-embedding the characterological act of criticism within the more prosaic frame in which it is originally represented. The narratives of Goethe, Joyce, and Coetzee all draw attention to the conditions and motivations that underlie these various performances. Key aspects of the act fall away if we attempt to theorize poetic criticism in isolation from its fictional context. The frame of fiction opens up new questions about why figures such as Wilhelm Meister, Stephen Dedalus, and Elizabeth Costello might seek to interpret and re-enliven literary works. These questions in turn connect the form of poetic criticism with deeper currents and tensions at play in the fictions themselves. They reveal the inner conflicts that animate characterological acts of criticism, and illuminate the power and significance of these acts anew.

1 Goethe

The question of how to describe the instance of poetic criticism within its original fictional context straightaway raises an important problem, namely, how to circumscribe the boundaries of the critical act. Is it limited to the character's own act of interpretation and re-presentation of another work of art? Or is it the text's representation of this act, and if so, does the significance of the act ripple outward to other seemingly unrelated episodes, so that a full consideration of its meaning would require us to trace its implications throughout the novel as a whole? Finally, does the inherently metafictional structure of the act attempt to breach the implicit boundedness of the work, and implicate the reader of the text in a deliberate way? These overarching questions frame the problem at hand. Setting them aside for the time being, however, let us turn to the chief paradigm of poetic criticism in Schlegel's seminal text. At the heart of his discussion lies the extended subplot of *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, comprising over a quarter of the novel, in which the protagonist not only presents extended interpretations of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, but also produces and acts in his own version of the play. Wilhelm is frankly obsessed with Shakespeare's genius, pouring his heart and soul into scrutinizing the intentions of the playwright, the structure of the play, and the inner life of Hamlet. He lives and breathes the play to the point that the reality of everything else in his life falls away. Indeed, it is at this juncture that Wilhelm makes a decisive commitment to devote his life to the theater.

The narrative building up to this climax, however, sheds a somewhat different light on the state of mind in which Wilhelm first encounters *Hamlet*. Shakespeare does not appear in Wilhelm's life by chance. He is planted there by Jarno, an older man upon whom Wilhelm has projected his craving for mentorship and guidance. The novel portrays this yearning for approval and direction as naïve and indiscriminate. Wilhelm desires recognition from just about anyone who presents himself to be better than those around him. When a prince arrives at the baron's castle where

Wilhelm's troupe is performing, Wilhelm immediately seizes the opportunity to ingratiate himself with a potential patron. The scene of their encounter stages an early act of literary criticism that is purely instrumental, deployed solely for the purposes of self-advancement:

> Wilhelm had been advised to praise Racine, the prince's favorite dramatist, when an appropriate opportunity presented itself, and thereby put himself in the prince's good graces. He found such an occasion one afternoon, when he had been summoned to appear with the others, and the prince asked him whether he too had studied the great French dramatists. Wilhelm said that he had. He did not notice that the prince had already turned to speak to someone else, without waiting for an answer. Almost interposing himself, he claimed the prince's attention by declaring that he had indeed a very high opinion of French drama and had read its masterpieces with great appreciation; and he had been delighted to hear that the prince paid great respect to the talents of a man like Racine. "I can well imagine," he went on to say, "that persons of noble station will appreciate an author who portrays so excellently and correctly the circumstances of high social rank." (Goethe 2016, 475)

Here follows a lengthy and fawning monologue on Racine's portrayal of "'the gods of this earth,'" "'kings adored by whole nations, courtiers envied by multitudes'" (476). Wilhelm concludes his paean by noting, "'The report that Racine died of grief because Louis XIV showed his dissatisfaction by no longer looking at him – that to me is the key to all his works. It was impossible for such a talented writer, whose whole life, and his death, depended on the eyes of a king, not to write plays worthy of the admiration of a king – and of a prince'" (476). By this point, needless to say, the prince is no longer looking at Wilhelm. But Wilhelm persists. Interpreting Racine through the lens of his own desperate bid for royal attention, Wilhelm performs his critical admiration of the poet as an act of obsequious flattery to the greatness of his audience, who is in turn cast as the "'prince'" to Wilhelm's "'talented writer.'" The reading of Racine becomes a means of rendering his own self legible to another.

It is at this moment that Jarno, who just so happens to have overheard the entire speech, pulls Wilhelm aside and demands, "'Have you never seen a play by Shakespeare?'" (476) Wilhelm admits that he has not. The playwright's dubious reputation is, he goes on to confess, a reason to keep avoiding him: "'what I have heard about his plays has not made me eager to know more about such strange monstrosities'" (476). Cautioning him not to "'take offense'" at what he reads, but rather to rely on his "'own true judgment,'" Jarno sends him the plays (476).

When Jarno and Wilhelm meet again, Wilhelm hastens to thank him for his role in "providing him with such an experience" (484). Jarno expresses pleasure with himself for his pedagogical insight and with Wilhelm for having the sensibility to appreciate Shakespeare, while Wilhelm expresses his admiration of Shakespeare in ever more effusive and ardent terms, assuring Jarno that he has been as deeply moved by the poet as the older man had hoped.

> "I cannot remember a book, a person, or an event that has affected me as deeply as these wonderful plays that you so kindly brought to my attention. They seem to be the work of some spirit

from heaven that comes down to men and gently makes them more acquainted with themselves. They are not fictions! One seems to be standing before the huge open folios of Fate in which the storm winds of life in all their turbulence are raging, blowing the pages back and forth. I am so astonished by the forcefulness and tenderness, the violence and the control of it all, that I am completely beside myself and long for the time when I will be able to continue reading." (484)

"'Bravo!'" declares Jarno at the end of Wilhelm's speech: "'that's just what I wanted; and the results that I hoped for will not be long in coming'" (484). Both play their roles to perfection: caring yet superior guide, impassioned yet solicitous pupil.

Their exchange sets into sharp relief the lived context of Wilhelm's first response to Shakespeare. Having longed for the favor and esteem of Jarno from the moment he laid eyes on him, he is finally in a position to get the attention he seeks. His success in doing so is confirmed without delay. Jarno, reassured and perhaps flattered by Wilhelm's reaction to his favorite playwright, affirms his mentorship of the young man by making him a promise of future advancement: "'if you are prepared to put your talents and abilities at our service [...] then I would have an opportunity to put you in a position which you will not regret having occupied for a time'" (485). Wilhelm is elated. His dreams of bringing his innermost yearnings to fruition in the world seem at last to be within reach.

Schlegel does not remark upon these details of the narrative frame surrounding Wilhelm's reading of Shakespeare. Insofar as the scene provides one of the most direct articulations of Shakespeare's value and significance within the novel as a whole, however, it bears further scrutiny. By framing Wilhelm's encounter with Shakespeare in light of his relation to Jarno, and furthermore ironizing this encounter by closely juxtaposing it with his praise of Racine to the prince, mundane and banal motives for reading a work of art in a particular way at a particular time are allowed to surface. The human situation of the critic is foregrounded. Wilhelm's reading of Shakespeare appears to emerge as much out of his desperate need for guidance and admiration as it does from any sort of spontaneous, deep, or disinterested love for the work itself. Shakespeare is a means for uniting Jarno and Wilhelm. As soon as Jarno has declared his mentorship of Wilhelm, Shakespeare drops away and the real subject of their discussion emerges: "Wilhelm, extremely grateful for this, now felt in the mood to tell his friend and benefactor his whole life story" (485). Thus Wilhelm's reading of Shakespeare opens inevitably into the life story of Wilhelm, which of course the novel tells better than Wilhelm could ever tell himself.

Why does Goethe's luminous act of poetic criticism congeal around the dull kernel of Wilhelm's personal ambition? Without casting any suspicion on Goethe's use of Shakespeare, which relies on a complex metafictional staging of the relation between mimesis and existence, it is fair to say that Wilhelm's use of Shakespeare in

this initial encounter is somewhat less subtle.[1] Wilhelm appears entirely to believe, or to have convinced himself, in the transformative powers of Shakespearean plays. But if Jarno had asked him to read any number of playwrights, his response would no doubt have been as adulatory. Just as in his previous encounter, in which he "would gladly have gone on talking and proved to the prince that he had read the prince's favorite poet with profit and emotional involvement" (476), so too would he have generated a response to any poet marked as Jarno's favorite in the terms that he thinks Jarno would wish to hear. What might appear as an ardent, spontaneous critical response when taken in isolation is hence revealed by the narrative frame to be highly conditioned by the structural position of the critic.

The trope of self-advancement continues to figure prominently in the scenes that stage Wilhelm's extended commentary on and performance of *Hamlet*. His early identification with the role of Hamlet appears to arise from the same desire to affiliate himself with nobility. In his reconstruction of Hamlet's formative years prior to the death of his father, Wilhelm lays inordinate stress on the marks of Hamlet's aristocracy:

> "This sensitive, noble scion, this flower of kingship, grew up under the immediate influences of majesty; concepts of right and of princely dignity, the sense of what is good and what is seemly, developed in him simultaneously with an awareness of being born into high station. He was a prince, he was born a prince, and he was desirous of ruling so that good men should be unimpeded in the exercise of goodness. Winsome in appearance, courteous by nature, pleasing by temperament, he was fashioned to be a model of youth and a delight for everybody." (500)

The fact that Wilhelm himself desires to achieve and to be regarded in terms of this noble ideal is made clear by the letter that Wilhelm writes to Werner, in the chapter immediately preceding the episodes in which he embarks on the production of *Hamlet* in earnest. In his letter, Wilhelm lays out his view of the differences between the nobleman and the burgher. For the nobleman, the full development and expression of personality is in harmony with the public nature of his role, whereas for the burgher, personal development is deformed by the necessity of developing his talents and knowledge for material profit. Explaining his choice to become an actor, Wilhelm writes to Werner: "'I have an irresistible desire to attain the harmonious development of my personality such as was denied me by my birth [...]. On the stage a cultured human being can appear in the full splendor of his person, just as in the upper classes of society. There, mind and body keep step in all one does, and there I will be able simultaneously to *be* and to *appear* better than anywhere else'" (547–548).[2] The letter elides a crucial fact. The newly inherited fortune that makes Wil-

---

1 For an account of the metafictional significance of Goethe's representation of acting in the production of *Hamlet*, see Pirholt 2012, 46–50.

2 Christian Garve's *Über die notwendigen Grenzen beim Gebrauch schöner Formen* (1792), cited in a footnote of Schiller's 1795 essay *On the Necessary Limits of the Beautiful, especially in the Presentation of Philosophical Truths*, is considered by scholars to have been a probable source for "Goethe's treat-

helm's new career possible derives entirely from the bourgeois labor of his dead father.

This, then, is the context in which Wilhelm pursues his readings and re-staging of *Hamlet*. Believing that inner refinement of spirit and taste will enable him to transcend the bonds of class identity, he cannot admit that he is tied to a profession dependent upon noble patronage, let alone funded by the wealth of a social class that he despises. Wilhelm is in a bind. He cannot be who he wants to be. But he cannot stop himself from wanting to be it. His inner conflict, revolving around issues of self-realization and external determination, in turn inflects his reading of Shakespeare's play. Wilhelm's Hamlet is too pure for actuality, beset by a destiny he cannot control. Like the prince of his imaginative reconstruction, Wilhelm is a vulnerable young man who doesn't quite know how to carve a path for himself in the world. His dependence on others does not square with his aspiration to be an artist, free, transcendent of petty need. What he needs to work out is how to bypass this paradox of his situation – namely, the requirement that, on the one hand, he perform himself as totally free and disengaged from the world (recall Jarno's directions to Wilhelm on how to read Shakespeare: "'you could not employ your time better than by disassociating yourself from everything else and, in the solitude of your own room, peering into the kaleidoscope of this unknown world'" [476]), and that, on the other hand, he simultaneously come to terms with the reality of being conditioned by his fundamental dependency. This paradox, which eventually comes to embody the central conflict of the *Bildungsroman* between striving for autonomy and acceptance of heteronomy, is not here resolved by what Franco Moretti calls the "interiorization of contradiction" (Moretti 1987, 10) but rather by its exteriorization in drama.

Wilhelm's reading of Hamlet's personality discloses a further aspect of his psychology that has not been widely emphasized by previous critics. Wilhelm is often taken to be describing himself when he sets out "'the key to Hamlet's whole behavior'" (Goethe 2016, 518). But what, exactly, is this key? When Wilhelm elucidates the "'fine, pure, noble and highly moral person,'" who "'devoid of that emotional strength that characterizes a hero, goes to pieces beneath a burden that it can neither support nor cast off,'" it is not immediately clear what his own burden might be. Indeed, the burden that he contends with throughout the novel is not presented in the form of any weighty external responsibility towards others, but rather in the knowledge of who he is: a knowledge that he cannot avow without imploding the fragile structure of his very self. As in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the "'oak tree planted in a precious pot which should only have held delicate flowers'" must be controlled, mastered, and overcome by the greater vessel of the work of art that surrounds and contains it, while at the same time exposing via the character life it portrays its own vulnerability to the power and force of what has taken root in it.

---

ment of the role that art and the aesthetic might play in the attempt of the *Bürger* to rise in the socio-cultural scale" (Wilkinson and Willoughby 1968, 103).

The nature of poetic criticism is hence inextricably linked to the nature and limits of the self-understanding that the work of art can tolerate within itself. "'His feeling of insignificance,'" says Wilhelm of Hamlet, "'never leaves him'" (517). The solution that Wilhelm arrives at is embodied in every line of his interpretation and reenactment of *Hamlet*. In the act of re-writing and acting, thus dying, within the play, he solves the dilemma of whether to be Hamlet or Shakespeare by being both. He realizes his childhood dream of being in the play and outside of it at once, splitting his desires for total control and total immersive transport, shielding himself from the compromises and banality of life that the narrative in which he is embedded shows all too readily. Is his attempt at self-deliverance successful? Perhaps that is the wrong question. At the close of Book V, after the all-consuming production of *Hamlet* is staged, a fire breaks out in the house where he is living, an actress dies of a broken heart, and Wilhelm sets off on new adventures.

2 Joyce

Seen in light of the larger narrative frame that surrounds it, it is difficult to understand how Wilhelm's reading of Shakespeare might be attributed to the novel's author in any straightforward way. Yet this was the dominant view throughout the nineteenth century, and it is announced as such in the opening of the library scene of Joyce's *Ulysses*. The episode begins with an unnamed voice uttering the lines we have already quoted: "And we have, have we not, those priceless pages of *Wilhelm Meister*. A great poet on a great brother poet" (Joyce 1986, 151). The speaker who invites us to see Wilhelm as articulating Goethe's own stance on *Hamlet* is significantly not Stephen Dedalus, but rather Thomas Lyster, director of the National Library of Ireland in Dublin between 1895 and 1920. Along with John Eglinton, born William Kirkpatrick Magee and anointed by Yeats as "our one Irish critic," and George William Russell, a "prophet, poet, philosopher, artist, journalist, economic theorist" (Gifford and Seidman 2008, 35) known as AE, his is a voice of established authority throughout the episode. These titans, gatekeepers of Ireland's literary scene, mark their turf with ease. The young poet must be subdued – always with laughter and wit, for a light touch shows mastery – but nonetheless, made to know his place in the hierarchy.

The scene in the library thus reveals that Stephen must deliver his famous interpretation of Shakespeare between the gaps of another conversation, one from which he is left out. His audience is more preoccupied with displaying their own intelligence and bolstering one another's egos than they are with paying heed to a young upstart. Stephen is time and again made conscious of his exclusion. As they natter away about their gatherings – this evening at George Moore's house to celebrate the work of new poets, the Hermetic Society on Thursday – they hardly even notice that he is there, much less wanting to be recognized. They single out others of his generation for praise and advancement, all the while overlooking him:

Young Colum and Starkey. George Roberts is doing the commercial part. Longworth will give it a good puff in the *Express*. O, will he? I liked Colum's *Drover*. Yes, I think he has that queer thing genius. Do you think he has genius really? Yeats admired his line: *As in wild earth a Grecian vase*. Did he? I hope you'll be able to come tonight. Malachi Mulligan is coming too. Moore asked him to bring Haines. (Joyce 1986, 158)

Stephen thinks to himself as he listens to them: "Cordelia. *Cordoglio*. Lir's loneliest daughter" (158). Cordelia, King Lear's dispossessed youngest daughter; *Cordoglio*, Italian for "deep sorrow"; and Fionnuala, daughter of the Irish sea god, Lir, whose place was usurped by his son: this net of allusions places Stephen in a constellation of loss, tragic rivalry, and exclusion (Gifford and Seidman 2008, 215).

Stephen feels that his genius, such as it may be, is unrecognized by his audience. But the scene draws our attention to something else. What is at stake for him in the library is not a purely intellectual need for esteem, but something much more visceral: the need of a pup to be chosen and mentored by the alphas, so as to ensure his survival and the continuance of his progeny. In his case, the offspring are intellectual: "Coffined thoughts around me, in mummycases, embalmed in spice of words. [...] And I heard the voice of that Egyptian highpriest" (Joyce 1986, 159). The walls of the National Library that surround him are a stark reminder of what it means to exist in this world, a literary world into which he wishes to gain entrée. Here each thought that survives is entombed, granted immortality, because real people with egos and institutional power elect to valorize, preserve, and sustain it.

But Stephen is not in favor with the high priests. He is reduced to an attendant, a suppliant, in their temple. He must bow and scrape to beg George Russell to deliver Deasy's letter to the editor of the *Irish Homestead*. He must say his own views "super-politely" (152). He must watch silently as rivals are promoted above him ("They make him welcome" [162], he thinks when his companion and antagonist Buck Mulligan enters). And always, he must offer his submission and deference – "Flatter. Rarely. But flatter," he thinks, as he works a gratifying allusion to Eglinton's work into his speech and watches the older man's face "quick with pleasure, look[] up shybright-ly" (171).

The play within the play, then, is more than a pretext for Stephen to deliver a reading of Shakespeare that sheds light on the novel in which it is implanted. Let us return for a moment to Lyster's characterization of Goethe on Shakespeare at the opening of the chapter: "A great poet on a great brother poet." Stephen argues that for Shakespeare, brothers are rivals and usurpers. Poets are opportunistic sellouts, willing to curry favor with those in power if it might lead to a consolidation of their worldly position. What, then, are great poets?

Stephen's Shakespeare is a man whose late tragedies are fueled by crisis and misery: grief at the loss of his son, bitterness at the unfaithfulness of his wife with his own brother. But he is also a contriver, a chancer, a man without scruples in near single-minded pursuit of social and financial gain. As Stephen puts it, "his

name is dear to him, as dear as the coat and crest he toadied for" (172). The bard, he alleges, is "lead[] astray" by "the sense of property" (168):

> He drew Shylock out of his own long pocket. The son of a maltjobber and moneylender he was himself a cornjobber and moneylender, with ten tods of corn hoarded in the famine riots. [...] He sued a fellowplayer for the price of a few bags of malt and exacted his pound of flesh in interest for every money lent. How else could Aubrey's ostler and callboy get rich quick? All events brought grist to his mill. Shylock chimes with the jewbaiting that followed the hanging and quartering of the queen's leech Lopez [...] *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* with the coming to the throne of a Scotch philosophaster with a turn for witchroasting. The lost armada is his jeer in *Love's Labour Lost*. His pageants, the histories, sail fullbellied on a tide of Mafeking enthusiasm. (168)

The keen instinct that turns his art like a sail in response to the winds of his royal patrons' whims, and every transaction to his own advantage – from whence is this born? Stephen gives no account. The elision is all the more curious, since Shakespeare's biographer George Brandes, who is cited by Stephen throughout the episode, states explicitly that "it was [Shakespeare's] constant ambition to restore the fallen fortunes of his family" (Brandes 1898, 166), after seeing his father imprisoned for debt and stripped of his position as Alderman in his youth (12). According to Brandes, Shakespeare "never for a moment lost sight of Stratford, and [...] had no sooner made a footing for himself in London than he set to work with the definite aim of acquiring land and property in the town from which he had gone forth penniless and humiliated. His father should hold up his head again, and the family honour be re-established" (15).

The missing explanation in Stephen's fiction of Shakespeare is not omitted from Joyce's fiction of Stephen. The young poet's hardships due to his father's financial troubles are detailed in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.[3] His debts to friends and acquaintances are enumerated meticulously throughout *Ulysses*. In this episode alone, he notes the pound lent to him by Russell (Joyce 1986, 155), the two shillings by Fred Ryan (176), and the boots by Mulligan, to whom he owes an additional nine pounds: "His boots are spoiling the shape of my feet" (173), he thinks, looking down midway through this performance. "Buy a pair. Holes in my socks. Handkerchief too" (173). Financial need permeates the performance in the library, which ends not with a discussion of the intellectual or aesthetic merits of the theory but with the elders' ruling that Stephen shall extract neither profit nor fame from it.[4] "I don't see why you should expect payment for it," chides Eglinton, ending their exchange on a note of personal insult: "You are the only contributor to *Dana* who asks for pieces of silver. Then I don't know about the next number. Fred Ryan wants space for an article on economics" (176). If Stephen's performance had been pitched at selling

---

3 For a discussion of the significance of these hardships, see Hepburn Fall 2004–Summer 2006, 197–218.

4 For an extended analysis of the relation between Stephen's debts and his reading of Shakespeare's usury, see Osteen 1995, 214–227.

himself or his theories to this audience, it has clearly flopped – not because of the value of the ideas themselves, but because his reputation as a debtor has removed him from social recognition, just as it removed his own father and Shakespeare's father before him.

Critics rarely draw attention to these aspects of the situation in which Stephen deploys his portrait of Shakespeare. The episode is read primarily as a guide to interpreting *Ulysses* as a work of art in which Joyce places himself as both father and son. The key is presumably given in the climax of Stephen's performance, which brings together his claim that Shakespeare imprints the incidents of his life's drama upon his plays with a quasi-Sabellian view of Trinitarian being. This highly abstract theory of creation holds that the poet, like the divine "Father [who] was Himself His Own Son" (171), sublimates himself above and beyond needing others and ultimately becomes one with himself through this creation: "We walk through ourselves, meeting robbers, ghosts, giants, old men, young men, wives, widows, brothers-in-love, but always meeting ourselves" (175). The fictional frame in which this mystical theory of art is embedded, however, reinscribes Stephen within the earthly tragedy of an alienated, dispossessed figure, even as he asserts his aspirations to rise above his situation through the performance that articulates it. Stephen finds exiled heroes everywhere because he is excluded from the inner circle he dreams of entering. He is not in tune with the intellectual fads of his time. He likes Aristotle and not Plato. He has holes in his socks. Lonely, stricken by poverty-consciousness, he seeks an abstract ghostly father within himself because he cannot connect to his own. His reading of Shakespeare is confirmation of his own orphanhood and alienation, even as it attempts to transcend it.

Stephen's articulation of his theory of creation is immediately preceded by the strangest tangent in his entire performance. Fatherhood, he abruptly declares after noting that Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet* in the months after his father's death, is "founded [...] [u]pon uncertitude, upon unlikelihood" (170). Paternity is but "a legal fiction" (171). There is no paternal correlate to the undeniable physical bond of mother and child – a father only knows himself to be a father by his marriage certificate. Fathers and sons are forever "sundered by a bodily shame" (171), the shame of their disconnection. All sons, in the end, are rivals to and usurpers of their fathers. Stephen's disjointed and obsessive rant culminates in his claim that the fundamental leitmotif of Shakespeare's work is the unfaithful wife who renders her husband's paternity unsure. What connects this sudden digression on paternity, which erupts seemingly out of nothing, and the aforementioned context for his lecture in the library? Protection and survival, once again. No father will protect the child born out of wedlock. But even the rightful heir is separated from the alienation and displacement of the bastard by the avowal of the father. Denying the defenselessness of the child in the face of the father's whim, Stephen seeks to find the means of security and self-creation in his own solipsistic imagination. Publicly, he announces that "[f]atherhood, in the sense of unconscious begetting, is unknown to man"

(170). But inwardly, what he finds unknowable in himself is the fact of his own vulnerability and dependence upon a father who is merely human.

Something that the character does not want to know, to own about themselves: this is the dark seed that unfurls into the flower of poetic criticism in both of these novels. In Joyce and in Goethe, we find a character thinking about a character thinking about a character: a character (Stephen Dedalus) who creates a character (Shakespeare) who creates a character (Hamlet) who stages a play that mirrors his own situation. In each case, as Stephen himself intimates, the creation of character is a strategy to overcome a block. The character within the frame of fiction is under an unacknowledged threat or pressure of existence. He seeks to protect himself and to advance his aims in and through this act of critical reinvention and artistic imagination. Yet within the act there remains a trace of the fatal block: the impossibility – or as we might call it, the necessary fictionality – of overcoming it. The peculiar power and magnetism of these scenes of poetic criticism derives in part from the inner conflict of the character that galvanizes the act of criticism, spurring the character on to generate an ever more elaborately ramified re-presentation of the conflict, and prolonging the energy of grappling with its equivocal consequences. As we shall see in Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello*, the final instance of poetic criticism we shall analyze, this structure of intensification gives rise to a kind of metafictional echo. The character returns ultimately to themselves in the form of the other-self of their invented fiction.

3 Coetzee

In the lecture hall of a small American college, a novelist from Australia mounts the podium and unfolds her notes. Her argument meanders, confusing her listeners. Each gesture is obliquely self-canceling. She declares herself obsessed with the immortality of her books, yet notes that the great libraries of the world that hold them will one day "'crumble and decay'" (Coetzee 2003, 17). She evokes Kafka's ape, whose performance she views as a kind of "'test,'" "'an examination, a viva voce,'" but she denies that she too is a speaking ape before an academy (18). Repeatedly she tests her authority to say what the text of Kafka's "A Report to an Academy" means, and then just as abruptly withdraws it: "'That is not the point of the story, say I, who am, however in no position to dictate what the point of the story is'" (19). By way of conclusion, she expresses her gratitude for the literary award they have bestowed upon her work, and reminds her audience in the very same breath of the fact that she "'will cease to be read and eventually cease to be remembered'" (20). The applause begins, tentative at first, then rising. She smiles, savoring the moment. Just as the dean of the college rises to announce the end of the event, a voice interrupts him: "'Excuse me! [...] Excuse me! I have a question for the speaker. May I address the speaker?'" (20 – 21) The novelist does not respond. "Frostily she gazes into

the distance" (21). The hosts are embarrassed; the would-be questioner, irked. The ceremony ends on a note of awkwardness and discord.

Embedded within the opening episode of J.M. Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello*, this scene stages an act of literary criticism that subverts the intended purpose of the occasion. Indeed, the novel's own chapters are provocatively identified as "Lessons," and several of these "Lessons" (including this one) were read aloud by Coetzee in lieu of conventional lectures at academic institutions. The performance of fictions which themselves stage performed acts of criticism, often via lectures by Elizabeth Costello that explicate literary and philosophical texts, raises several questions: the question of what it means to read a text, of what it means to be instructed by one, and, moreover, of what happens when our desire for instruction is supplanted by a work of fiction.

Although Elizabeth Costello is often taken by critics to be a mouthpiece for her author's views and her lectures read as thinly fictionalized accounts of his own ethical stance, the text itself complicates this interpretation by framing her lectures within a narrative that brings into play other conflicts and energies. Costello's performance of the lecture described above is embedded within a narrative of her visit to Altona College. As is also the case with Lessons 3 and 4 of the novel (delivered by Coetzee on the occasion of the Tanner Lectures at Princeton University, and later published separately as *The Lives of Animals*), the frame narrative surrounding the occasion for her talk is largely focalized through the eyes of her son, John. John is a young professor at a college in Massachusetts. His only reason for accompanying his mother on this trip to collect her prize is, he thinks, "simply to protect her" (30). But is that all?

> He is here with her, out of love. He cannot imagine her getting through this trial without him at her side. He stands by her because he is her son, her loving son. But he is also on the point of becoming – distasteful word – her trainer.
>
> He thinks of her as a seal, an old, tired circus seal. One more time she must heave herself up on to the tub, one more time show that she can balance the ball on her nose. Up to him to coax her, put heart in her, get her through the performance. (3)

It is, in John's mind, a play in several acts: dinner with the jury, an interview, a radio show, an awards ceremony, and an acceptance speech. He is present for all of them as a minor character, albeit as her loving and supportive son. Yet the allusion in this passage to his role as a "trainer" recalls the trainer of Red Peter in Kafka's story. The role is not without its occupational hazards. As Red Peter recalls, his first trainer, driven insane by the spectacle of the ape's self-flagellation, "soon gave up teaching, and had to be carted off to a mental hospital" (Kafka 1993, 292).

Elizabeth Costello begins her speech about Kafka's "Report" by reminding her audience of its poetic form: "'If you know the story, you will remember that it is cast in the form of a monologue, a monologue by an ape. Within this form there is no means for either speaker or audience to be inspected by an outsider's eye'" (Coet-

zee 2003, 18). Her refusal of the would-be interlocuter's question at the end of her speech reminds us that her appearance, too, is staged as a monologue. Kafka, in fact, composes several incomplete draft versions of "A Report to an Academy," in which he experiments with focalizing the narrative from various points of view: the point of view of an anonymous visitor to Red Peter, of an audience member who has just witnessed one of his performances, and of Red Peter's trainer, "an honorary doctor of great universities" (Kafka 2005, 259). All of these spectatorial perspectives on Red Peter – the audience member, the trainer, the visitor – fall away in the final version of "A Report." Red Peter speaks in the first person throughout Kafka's text, in which no other voices are heard.[5]

In contrast, Elizabeth Costello's utterances are staged within a narrative that is focalized largely from the "'outsider's eye'" (Coetzee 2003, 18), furnished in this episode by her son's point of view. His perspective on his mother is notably ambivalent. There is, of course, blind loyalty and gratitude for having been given life, for having been kept alive by his parent when he was at his most vulnerable and dependent. But there are also memories of abandonment, neglect, and rejection:

> For as far back as he can remember, his mother has secluded herself in the mornings to do her writing. No intrusions under any circumstances. He used to think of himself as a misfortunate child, lonely and unloved. When they felt particularly sorry for themselves, he and his sister used to slump outside the locked door and make tiny whining sounds. In time the whining would change to humming or singing, and they would feel better, forgetting their forsakenness. (4)

Like Red Peter's choice to seek a way out of his captivity, Elizabeth Costello's choice to seek transcendence through art, to devote her life to courting the acceptance and applause of the academy, is a choice that involves strategy, performance, and – at least from her own child's point of view – a betrayal of natural bonds. His memories of his mother's working life are colored by pain. Yet he recalls that as he and his sister's lamentations proceed from animal whining to human singing, their anguish abates. What takes the place of pain is voice: voice that proceeds from a kind of loneliness, just as in Kafka's story.[6] This voice even develops until the point that John joins the author within her innermost sanctum. The passage above continues:

> Now the scene has changed. He has grown up. He is no longer outside the door but inside, observing her as she sits, back to the window, confronting, day after day, year after year, while her hair slowly goes from black to grey, the blank page. What doggedness, he thinks! She deserves

---

5 For an extended discussion of the significance of the monologic voice of "A Report," see Ong 2016, 220 – 230.

6 Red Peter describes the utterance of his first words in human language as the moment at which he enters into human society: "And then what a victory it was both for him and for me when one evening in front of a large group of spectators [...] I curtly exclaimed 'Hey!' breaking out in human sounds, plunging into human society with that cry, and feeling its echo, 'Listen, he's talking!' like a kiss over my entire sweat-soaked body." (Kafka 1993, 291)

the medal, no doubt about that, this medal and many more. For valour beyond the call of duty. (4 – 5)

In this change of scene, John places himself beside the writer, his mother, but also in a sense above her, in the position of a judge who can say what she deserves. He has become, in other words, a critic: one who endows her labor with value and significance. The motif repeats throughout the narrative. At her radio show, he watches from "the control booth" (11); he defends her to the critic Susan Moebius, offering his own interpretation of her work; in the airport, he questions his mother, in what is the final interview of the visit, about the meaning of her lecture.

His efforts to understand her are also, as the locus of his perspective in the control booth suggests, attempts to rewrite her from his own point of view: to see her in a way in which she cannot see herself, to *know* her. But why? In his own mind, he has come with her on this visit in order to protect her from the academics, the journalists, and the critics who seek to grasp the secret at the heart of her work. They dissect her utterances, invade her privacy, and continually bait her to reveal her personal opinions and private experiences. Costello herself is adept at evading them: "Her strategy with interviewers is to take control of the exchange, presenting them with blocks of dialogue that have been rehearsed" (9). She controls the highly scripted version of her authorial persona that is available for public consumption. "She can come home with her true self safe," John thinks as they prepare to leave the college, "leaving behind an image, false, like all images" (30).

When the critic Susan Moebius goes so far as to question John in bed about his mother after she seduces him – "*Research:* will that be her name for it afterwards? *Using a secondary source?*" he thinks as they kiss in the hotel elevator (24) – he allows himself to entertain the thought that perhaps his mother's authorial control over her image is an illusion to protect her from the knowledge of what she is "really like":

> What is the truth of his mother? He does not know, and at the deepest level does not want to know. He has opinions of his own, but he will not speak them. *This woman,* he would say if he were to speak, *whose words you hang on as if she were the sibyl, is the same woman who, forty years ago, hid day after day in her bedsitter in Hampstead, crying to herself, crawling out in the evenings into the foggy streets to buy the fish and chips on which she lived, falling asleep in her clothes. She is the same woman who later stormed around the house in Melbourne, hair flying in all directions, screaming at her children, 'You are killing me! You are tearing the flesh from my body!'* (He lay in the dark with his sister afterwards, comforting her while she sobbed; he was seven; it was his first taste of fathering.) *This is the secret world of the oracle. How can you hope to understand her before you know what she is really like?* (30 – 31)

Throughout the episode, John has described himself as his mother's creation ("'Out of her very body I came, caterwauling,'" he declares to Susan, "'[f]lesh of her flesh, blood of her blood'" [28]) and his mother's character (for "[h]e is in her books, or some of them" [5]). In this moment, however, he shows that he too has a certain au-

thorial power: a capacity to produce this other, rival image of his mother. Subverting his mother's image with his own perspective on her, he strips her of "her lady novelist's uniform" (4), her scripted ease, her sphinx-like mystery and invulnerability. The divine author has a mortal body that is exhausted, in need; a body from which flesh can be torn, and in which fear of dying and rage at being consumed by the needs of other bodies resides. Yet this power over his mother, the power to reenvision her, comes at a cost. The sacred myth of mother love (what Stephen Dedalus calls "the only true thing in life" [Joyce 1986, 170]) is destroyed by John's recollections. What emerges in its place is a raging, self-centered, wounded, limited, and neglectful mother. What can she tell John of his own value and importance? Is he waiting faithfully for his mother to finally receive the recognition she craves, so that she can at last turn to him and love him?

The ambivalence of her son's desire – on the one hand, to recognize his mother's vulnerability and need, and, on the other hand, to mask it by presenting her to the world (and even to himself) as a renowned novelist whose sole ambition is immortal fame – suggests that the dynamics underlying the reception of these interpretive performances are equally at stake in their fictional representations. At the end of her visit, John accompanies his mother on the flight home:

> She lies slumped deep in her seat. Her head is sideways, her mouth open. She is snoring faintly. Light flashes from the windows as they bank, the sun setting brilliantly over southern California. He can see up her nostrils, into her mouth, down the back of her throat. And what he cannot see he can imagine: the gullet, pink and ugly, contracting as it swallows, like a python, drawing things down to the pear-shaped belly-sac. He draws away, tightens his own belt, sits up, facing forward. No, he tells himself, that is not where I come from, that is not it. (Coetzee 2003, 33–34)

As their bodies descend, spiraling, to the ground, John's body is momentarily oriented between the western sun to his left and his mother's body to east. The scene recalls Kant's essay "What does it mean to orient oneself in thinking?" (1786), in which the very possibility of cardinal orientation (and hence of the intelligibility of the world to us) is grounded in a felt bodily intuition of the difference between the right and left sides of one's body.

> In the proper meaning of the word, to *orient* oneself means to use a given direction [...] in order to find the others – literally, to find the *sunrise*. Now if I see the sun in the sky and know it is midday, then I know how to find south, west, north, and east. For this, however, I also need the feeling of a difference in my own subject, namely the difference between my right and left hands. I call this a *feeling* because these two sides outwardly display no designatable difference in intuition. If I did not have this faculty of distinguishing, without the need of any difference in the objects, between moving from left to right and right to left and moving in the opposite direction and thereby determining *a priori* a difference in the position of the objects, then in describing a circle I would not know whether west was right or left of the southernmost point of the horizon, or whether I should complete the circle by moving north and east and thus back to the south. Thus even with all the objective data of the sky, I orient myself *geographically* only through a *subjective* ground of differentiation; and if all the constellations, though keeping the same shape and position relative to one another, were one day by a miracle to be reversed

in their direction, so that what was east now became west, no human eye would notice the slightest alteration on the next bright starlit night, and even the astronomer – if he pays attention only to what he sees and not at the same time to what he feels – would inevitably become disoriented. (Kant 1998, 4–5)

Kant's mention of the "astronomer" who "become[s] disoriented" from having lost the feeling of his own body sheds light on the figure of John, an "assistant professor of physics and astronomy," who earlier on in this Lesson loses his sense of orientation when navigating the corridors of the hotel (Coetzee 2003, 60). Now, as he glimpses the body of his own mother beside him, he is disgusted by a vision of the snake-like innards of his origin. He denies what the poet Allen Grossman calls in his reading of Kant's text "the perishing basis of our common life, our corporeal singularity, our physical subject nature, our body as it is the bearer of recognition and intelligibility" (Grossman 2009, 8): the basic form of pre-cognition that is his birthright, and with it the (re)cognition of the embodied condition of his mind.

At the same time, it is not bodily intuition that gives him this vision of his mother, but imagination. To imagine what she is like inside mirrors what an author would do to a character, and indeed what critics have tried to do to Elizabeth Costello throughout her visit in an attempt to understand her works. The scene thus emphasizes a theme that we have seen already to varying degrees in Goethe and Joyce. A character who seeks to interpret a fictional character, to master the work of art in which the fictional character is embedded, is eventually driven to decipher the mystery of the author.[7] Coetzee's text amplifies the mutual entanglement of these different positions, insofar as it takes the form of a novel bearing the same title as the name of its main character, who is a novelist, and whose son bears the same first name as the author of the novel in which he appears as a character. The son becomes a critic of his mother, in whose body he literally came to life, and of her novels, in which he figures as a character; he is, as he thinks in another episode, "written into her books in ways that he sometimes finds painful" (Coetzee 2003, 60). But as the scene on the flight suggests, John's imaginative reconstruction of his mother-and-author's life ends in sudden, involuntary recoil. He is torn between the desire to know his mother and an almost instinctive urge to deny this knowledge. He does not seem to want to acknowledge that knowing Elizabeth Costello amounts, in the last analysis, to knowing himself.

In different ways, each of these texts invite us to understand acts of poetic criticism as bound up with the search for an indirect dialogue, a form of existential self-examination, in which the encounter with another work of art becomes an occasion for reading the self. Every attempt at self-knowledge, however, also belies an attempt to hide or refashion the self. Whereas Schlegel's idea of poetic criticism emphasizes

---

7 Describing the process by which he interpreted *Hamlet*, Wilhelm Meister declares: "'An actor, on the other hand, must be able to account for his praise or disapproval of a play. And how is he to do that if he does not penetrate to the author's mind and intentions?'" (Goethe 2016, 499)

the creative power of the author to reshape and represent a work of art within their own creation, these fictions of poetic criticism cut against a certain ideal of mastery. The disowning or displacement of what belongs to these characters surfaces again and again in each of these scenes. Wilhelm approaches his condition of passivity and ineffectuality through Hamlet, but at the same time lays emphasis on Hamlet's inherent aristocratic identity, burying his own dilemma over how to take on the impossible task of becoming noble. Similarly, Stephen Dedalus reimagines a Shakespeare whose opportunism and ambition matches his own. At the same time, he represses the shame of the son at his father's failure, and the impossibility of knowing himself in the absence of his father. Elizabeth Costello attempts to own her impossible relation to reality by enacting the performance of Kafka's ape, but she leaves out the fundamental motive at the heart of Red Peter's narrative – namely, the adoption of a purely performative identity that drives him nearly insane in order to avoid ending up dead or imprisoned. The inner conflict at play for each character cannot be resolved in the imaginative attempt to revivify another work of art. It must be lived out, not thought out, in each of these character's lives, as other events beyond their control and beyond the domain of their intellectual and artistic efforts become nodes for its refraction, resolution, and reawakening. At the same time, the paradox at the heart of each character's conflict has a dynamic energy that carries throughout the plot, permeating the character system and inflecting events that lie outside any one person's locus of agency. The novel represents what appears to be a conflict that is internal to one character as formative of a whole world: a rival world, in which the conflict and reconciliation of mutually exclusive aims that would otherwise not be legible within the reality surrounding it can be staged.

Many other resonances between these episodes emerge from their juxtaposition. Each of these figures are, in distinct ways, spurred by a sense of loneliness, alienation, and a lack of attunement to the values of the world in which they live. They share a powerful sense of wanting to be known, recognized, valued, and even loved in spite of this alienation. Neither Goethe, Joyce, nor Coetzee attempt to ironize this impulse – on the contrary, it is the force of this longing that brings these characters face to face with the possibility of non-being or meaninglessness when confronting the other, and that gives rise to the concurrent desire for control over how they are to be understood by others. The interplay between the authoritative, disembodied voice of criticism and the emergence of the character's body into a public realm that is conditioned by socioeconomic forces is hence foregrounded in the staging of each of these performances of poetic criticism. What is at stake in these scenes appears to be a very difficult and painful form of self-knowledge that has to be highly protected by the mediation of art – almost as if the more wounding the knowledge, the more layers of protection must be marshaled to bring it into the world. The exposure of vulnerability and lack of control within these narratives is bound up with the dialectical relation between authorial and characterological modes of being, between the one who controls all and suffers nothing and the one who controls nothing and suffers all. This relation in turn highlights the intractable problem of finding a

way to live with powerlessness, contingency, commonness, suffering, and meaninglessness.

Ultimately, however, I am less interested in developing a general theory or account of the significance of poetic criticism than in taking seriously the idea that a conceptual definition might miss the manner of its embodiment within the fictional text. Why do we read these fictions? What, in the end, do we want from them? In staging acts of poetic criticism, Goethe, Joyce, and Coetzee pose the question of what it means to encounter a work of art, of what it means to be a reader. To fully respond to this question, it becomes necessary to create another work of art. This other fiction – a 'poetic' fiction in Schlegel's sense – highlights the tension between three interwoven fields of representation: the work of art that is encountered, the fictional interpretation generated by the character encountering it, and the fictional life of the character in which this encounter is embedded. In the interplay of these representations, the reader is caught. For, as these works of poetic criticism reveal, the ego of the fictional reader/critic both spurs the work of criticism and is the block to understanding the work of art to which the critic is exposed. The narratives in which these acts of criticism are embedded underscore the energies of the critic's ego in enabling and limiting the act of criticism, in part by narrating the conditions under which the fictional critic submits to suffering alongside the character whom they read while simultaneously developing various forms of self-protection to cope with their difficulties in reality. To expose oneself to a work of poetic criticism, then, is to be radically disarmed, undefended against the needs of a fictional character in confronting a work of art. Is this what we desire of art? Of criticism? As Toril Moi puts it, works of art demand acts of acknowledgment that "reveal us: who we take ourselves to be, how we picture our relationship to the other" (Moi 2017, 207) – and, crucially, how we may fail in our attempts to respond to the other. "I write criticism to find out about myself," claims Michel Chaouli, "including about the limits of my cognitive and affective resources" (Chaouli 2013, 333). Intimacy with a work of art involves openness to exposing one's limits in the encounter. The fiction of poetic criticism yields a form in which these attempts and limits meet. In so doing, they give rise to yet another work of art.[8]

Bibliography

Brandes, George. *William Shakespeare: A Critical Study*. Vol. 1. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1898.

Chaouli, Michel. "Criticism and Style." *New Literary History* 44.3 (2013): 323–344.

Coetzee, J.M. *The Lives of Animals*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999.

Coetzee, J.M. *Elizabeth Costello*. New York: Penguin Group, 2003.

Gifford, Don, and Robert J. Seidman. Ulysses *Annotated: Notes for James Joyce's* Ulysses. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008.

Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von. *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship. The Essential Goethe*. Ed. Matthew Bell. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016. 371–749.

Grossman, Allen. "Poetry and Enlightenment (Kant on Orientation, Whitman on the Brooklyn Ferry, Celan on the Meridian)." *True-Love: Essays on Poetry and Valuing*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009. 1–14.

Hepburn, Allan. "*A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and Poverty." *James Joyce Quarterly* 42/43 (No. 1/4: Fall 2004–Summer 2006): 197–218.

Joyce, James. *Ulysses*. Ed. Hans Walter Gabler. New York: Random House, 1986.

Kafka, Franz. "A Report for an Academy." *The Metamorphosis, In the Penal Colony, and Other Stories*. Trans. Joachim Neugroschel. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993. 284–285.

Kafka, Franz. "A Report to an Academy: Two Fragments." *The Complete Short Stories*. Ed. Nahum N. Glatzer. London: Vintage Books, 2005. 259–262.

Kant, Immanuel. "What Does It Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?" *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason and Other Writings*. Trans. and Eds. Allen Wood and Giorgio di Giovanni. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998. 1–14.

Moi, Toril. *Revolution of the Ordinary: Literary Studies after Wittgenstein, Austin, and Cavell*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017.

Moretti, Franco. *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*. Trans. Albert Sbagria. London: Verso, 1987.

Norman, Judith. "Literary Criticism in the Age of Critical Philosophy." *Brill's Companion to German Romantic Philosophy*. Eds. Elizabeth Millán Brusslan and Judith Norman. Leiden: Brill, 2018. 195–216.

Ong, Yi-Ping. "Lectures on Ethics: Kafka and Wittgenstein." *Wittgenstein and Literary Modernism*. Eds. Karen Zumhagen-Yekplé and Michael LeMahieu. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016. 206–230.

Osteen, Mark. *The Economy of Ulysses: Making Both Ends Meet*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1995.

Pirholt, Mattias. *Metamimesis: Imitation in Goethe's* Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre *and Early German Romanticism*. Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2012.

Schlegel, Friedrich. "On Goethe's *Meister*." *Classic and Romantic German Aesthetics*. Ed. J.M. Bernstein. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003. 269–286.

Wilkinson, Elizabeth M., and L.A. Willoughby. "Having and Being, or Bourgeois versus Nobility: Notes for a Chapter on Social and Cultural History or for a Commentary on *Wilhelm Meister*." *German Life and Letters* 22.1 (October 1968): 101–105.

Simon Schleusener

Surface, Distance, Depth: The Text and its Outside

Introduction

In this article, I will refer to the concept of poetic critique rather loosely, and certainly not with any intention to adequately capture what Friedrich Schlegel originally had in mind (cf. Schlegel 2003). While the notion is closely connected with the literary program of early German Romanticism, it is my sense that there is a special allure to it that prompts its reactivation in the context of present-day theory. In particular, the idea of poetic critique appears to me as opening up a sort of 'third space,' or functioning as a 'line of flight,' that counteracts the false alternative that has brought much of the current methodological discussions in cultural and literary studies to an effective dead-end. Indeed, if one follows much of the contemporary debate about 'critique and postcritique' (Anker and Felski 2017), one might get the impression that the choice for practitioners in literary studies is as follows: between, on the one hand, a kind of reading that is steeped in the 'hermeneutics of suspicion' (Ricœur), that is paranoid, symptomatic, judgmental, and overly moralizing, while more or less uninterested in questions of aesthetics, attachment, and form; and, on the other hand, an essentially affirmative or aestheticist reading, devoid of social or political context, that is exclusively interested in the surface of texts, in their formal properties, affective capacities, and enchanting qualities. With regard to this unsatisfactory alternative, the concept of poetic critique represents both a rejection and a displacement along the lines of the famous formula of Melville's Bartleby: "I would prefer not to."[1] For what it suggests, in my understanding, is a very different encounter with art and literature – one that does not see the desire to do justice to the work of art and the goal of exploring historico-political contexts and ideological contents as an irreconcilable either/or choice.[2] In other words, my use of the concept of poetic critique is meant to resist both postcritique's quasi aestheticist refusal to take into account the text's outside *and* the 'anti-poetic' implications of some forms of contemporary political critique.

What this text seeks to do, then, is engage with the current discourse on critique and postcritique and present an alternative. In a nutshell, the essay's goal is to use

---

1 According to Gilles Deleuze, the formula represents neither an affirmation nor a negation, but the "devastating" repudiation of a false choice (cf. Deleuze 1997, 71).
2 What this further entails is the insight that in order to do justice to a literary text, it is equally necessary to do justice to its outside (the famous Derridean *hors-texte*) too. For the idea that the text's outside must be understood as an essential dimension of the text itself, cf. Schleusener 2018a.

the postcritical intervention as an opportunity to think anew about the proper means of engaging, simultaneously, with literature *and* politics, art *and* society. The premise here is that a return to some reductively formalist or aestheticist principle would be an unfortunate regression, but that there are better and worse ways of reading literature critically and politically. In the first chapter, I will explore the theoretical landscape of postcritique, discussing two of the major elements of the sort of 'critique of critique' most boldly represented by Rita Felski (2015): First, the claim that what makes contemporary critique so tiresome and problematic – in other words: what represents its *limits* – is its reliance on the logic and hermeneutics of suspicion. And second, the implicit assertion that what is wrong with critique methodologically is its taking for granted 'abstract totalities' such as society, capitalism, or modes of production – a premise postcritics typically counter by appropriating models that are more descriptive or empiricist, such as Bruno Latour's actor-network theory.

In the second chapter, I will concentrate on the distinction between *symptomatic* and *surface reading* (as drawn by Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus), discussing the theoretical premises of the latter in view of one of postcritique's prime targets, namely Fredric Jameson. As an alternative to both the short-sighted advice to merely focus on the surface of the text itself (and thereby abandon any discussion of its outside) and a strictly allegorical reading (or "rewriting") as suggested by Jameson (cf. Jameson 2002, x), I will draw attention to the work of Siegfried Kracauer and, in particular, his analysis of the 'mass ornament.' While Kracauer thoroughly investigates his subject matter's "surface-level" (Kracauer 1995, 75), he simultaneously pays attention to its socioeconomic context or constellation. Such a reading needs to operate both from up close and from a distance, like a camera repeatedly switching between close-up and long shot. Rather than focusing on the opposition between 'close' and 'deep' analysis (Love 2010) or 'latent' and 'manifest' meaning, this sort of engagement with culture, art, and literature simultaneously aims at *precision* (hence its closeness to the surface of its object) and *distance* – a distance that should neither be confused with Franco Moretti's approach of digital quantification (cf. Moretti 2013) nor with 'critical distance,' in the sense of the critic maintaining her distance in order to keep her hands clean. Instead, to look at a text from a distance here simply means that one chooses a perspective from which it is possible to also perceive its particular outside.

In my third and final chapter, I will demonstrate the effectiveness of the sort of reading outlined with respect to Kracauer in view of a concrete literary example, namely Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*. Here, in distinction to the dominant (allegorical) readings of the book, I pay close attention to what is on the surface of the novel: whales and whaling. What I seek to demonstrate, however, is that this non-allegorical focus on the book's manifest subject matter does precisely not imply an abandonment of the text's outside – its socioeconomic and political context. Instead, I will draw attention to the fact that Melville's treatment of whaling is not just inextricably linked to the book's peculiar, proto-modernist aesthetic form, but also seamlessly involves the reader with questions of political economy and socioeconomic history.

Postcritique's Political Unconscious

There is a structural obstacle that complicates any effort at responding to postcritique critically. For if one rejects postcritical claims regarding the alleged negativity, suspiciousness, self-righteousness, and parasitic nature of critical practice, how can one make sure not to get caught in a performative contradiction and confirm the accusation? As Benjamin Noys puts it:

> This is the difficult spiral in which the critics of anti-critique find themselves. To engage in the critique of anti-critique is to feed and reinforce the claims of anti-critique, which suggests that critique can never escape attachment to what it criticises and ascend to a new joyous, creative, and productive alternative. To continue to engage in critique, especially the critique of anti-critique, is to feel outdated and, sometimes, miserable, two clichés that surround the critic. By definition, the critic is secondary to what they criticise, hence already dated, and dissatisfied with what they criticise, hence miserable. (Noys 2019, 31)

Obviously, this article will not be able to escape this trap. Although its aim is ultimately to present a version of critique that manifests itself as a "productive alternative," there will also be a lot of "miserable" negativity and criticizing. But if, as Eve Sedgwick claims, suspicion and paranoia are contagious (Sedgwick 2003, 127), then this malady neither spares the critic nor the post- or anti-critic. The perfect example here is Felski's *The Limits of Critique*, a book that seems to perform the ultimate contradiction: a sweeping attack on the hermeneutics of suspicion that – how could it be otherwise? – is motivated by suspicion; an anti-dialectical polemic that performs "a negation of a negation" (Felski 2008, 1); a lament about critique's "secondariness" that is itself utterly dependent on "words that come from elsewhere" and "the thinking of others" (Felski 2015, 121–122);[3] a manifesto against the notion of totalization that subsumes Marxism, psychoanalysis, postcolonialism, deconstruction, New Historicism, and much of feminism, Gender Studies, and Queer Theory under a single category; a repudiation of the striving for "a panoramic vision of the social order" (157) that offers a panoramic vision of the theoretical landscape; an approach that rejects the desire to reveal a text's hidden meanings and hidden agendas, yet praises actor-network theory's ability to highlight what lies "hidden among thick blades of grass" (158). In short: a "critique of critique."[4]

To be sure, Felski is well aware of the difficulties of expressing her "dissatisfaction with critique" (192) in the appropriate (postcritical) manner. Claiming that she

---

3 By definition, this obviously applies to *post*critique on the whole, just as it applies to countless other currents in contemporary theory that all use the prefix 'neo-' or 'post-' ('post-postmodernism' being a particularly striking example).

4 Felski of course rejects that label but confirms the difficulty of avoiding it in practice: "As a critic schooled in suspicious reading, I am hardly immune to its charms, yet I have tried, as much as possible, to avoid being drawn into a 'critique of critique.'" (Felski 2015, 192)

has "tried to avoid critiquiness by opting for different shadings of style and tone," she also acknowledges that such an attempt "can have only a partial success," for "in the act of disagreeing with certain ways of thinking, we cannot help being drawn into the negative or oppositional attitude we are trying to avoid" (192). Her book's "questioning of critique" (8) thus appears like a somewhat curious exercise: while at times it reads like an outright rebuttal bluntly denouncing "crrritique's" destructiveness (117–150) or proclaiming that "context stinks!" (151–185), there are other passages in which the whole methodological discussion becomes oddly defensive, suggesting that there is nothing wrong with critical suspicion per se, as long as it is understood to be just one of many 'uses of literature' (Felski 2008). "It is one way of reading and thinking among others: finite, limited, and fallible" (Felski 2015, 192). At a time, then, when others have lamented an "affirmationist consensus" (Noys 2010, ix) in continental theory, and after her own book discusses an enormous array of diverse postcritical currents – from actor-network theory and the new formalism to reading practices like surface reading, just reading, or reparative reading – Felski's manifesto, in its somewhat belated effort to dethrone critique, paradoxically calls for a pluralism that already exists.

This confusing mélange of fervent anti-critical polemic, wide generalization, and rhetorical maneuvering is also expressed in Felski's take on the political. Throughout her book, she argues that postcritical is not uncritical, vehemently denying that "any questioning of critique can only be a reactionary gesture or a conservative conspiracy" (Felski 2015, 8). At the same time, however, *The Limits of Critique* offers practically no hints as to how a postcritical engagement with politics would actually look like.[5] Moreover, what is curiously lacking in the book is any meaningful discussion of the fact that many of the issues Felski raises – like the question of autonomy and form or the role of aesthetic experience – are hardly foreign to the critical tradition per se. This certainly does not mean that she has no point in drawing attention to a routinization of critical maneuvers, claims to moral superiority, or excessive suspicion in some currents of contemporary criticism and theory. But instead of analyzing the concrete conditions of these phenomena, she blames them on 'critique' as a whole, on the tradition's collective affiliation with a generalized version of the hermeneutics of suspicion.[6] While she laments that in contemporary literary studies all value is assigned "to the act of reading and none to the objects read" (Felski 2008, 3), she herself puts all the emphasis on the act of critiquing and none on

---

5 In fact, when the political is mentioned at all, it is typically in the form of passive-aggressive jibes against the banality of political critique. Cf. Felski 2015, 17–18: "Anyone who attends academic talks has learned to expect the inevitable question: 'But what about power?' Perhaps it is time to start asking different questions: 'But what about love?' Or: 'Where is your theory of attachment?'"

6 What should be kept in mind here is that next to Marx and Freud, Ricœur also counts Nietzsche among his "masters of suspicion" (Ricœur 1970, 33), something which complicates Felski's association of critique and the hermeneutics of suspicion with negativity. On the Nietzschean notion of affirmation – his 'affirmation of affirmation' – cf. Deleuze 1983.

the objects of critique. But take, for instance, the recent utilization of some aspects of postmodern and critical theory in the context of rightwing populist ('post-truth') discourse (cf. Schleusener 2018b). Is the key problem of such appropriations really the hermeneutics of suspicion? Or is it the flawed political analysis underlying this methodological choice? Here, Felski's lack of differentiating between various versions of critique – which she transforms into mere cases of a uniformly suspicious hermeneutics, irrespective of whether or not their particular suspiciousness is appropriate – seems to underline the *limits* of her own approach.

In this respect, Felski's perspective differs significantly from that of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, who is often described as a pioneer of postcritique. But Sedgwick's mid-90s 'critique of critique' was not simply directed against routinization and predictability per se. It was also premised on the idea that the problem with a certain kind of critique was its political uselessness in a changed ideological context. For instance, she argues that a Foucauldian genealogy and critique of the welfare state – in the 1980s and 1990s advocated by New Historicists like D.A. Miller – only played into the hands of the neoliberal dismantling of health care coverage and other public services:

> Since the beginning of the tax revolt, the government of the United States [...] has been positively rushing to divest itself of answerability for care to its charges, with no other institutions proposing to fill the gap. This development, however, is the last thing anyone could have expected from reading New Historicist prose, which constitutes a full genealogy of the secular welfare state that peaked in the 1960s and 1970s, along with a watertight proof of why things must become more and more like that forever. (Sedgwick 2003, 141–142)

Sedgwick, then, laments that a critique of 'disciplinary society' comes to nothing (or worse) under neoliberal circumstances, when public welfare as such is increasingly at stake.[7] Along these lines, she also reflects on the relationship between the neoliberalization of American society and the practice of critique, highlighting

> the dreary and routine forms of good dog/bad dog criticism, by which, like good late-capitalist consumers, we persuade ourselves that deciding what we like or don't like about what's happening is the same thing as actually intervening in its production. (Sedgwick 2006, 619)

Or similarly:

> The "subversive or hegemonic?" structure of inquiry requires a wholesale reification of the status quo. One's relation to it becomes reactive, like that of a consumer: accepting or refusing this or that manifestation of it, dramatizing extremes of compulsion and voluntary. (Sedgwick and Frank 1995, 501)

---

7 On this argument, cf. also Zamora and Behrent 2016.

Despite Felski's claim that postcritical is not uncritical, these sorts of contextualiza- tion are entirely absent from *The Limits of Critique.* Indeed, if Sedgwick notes that, in retrospect, certain theories and theoretical attitudes of the late 1980s and 1990s, de- spite their pronounced radicalism, manifest themselves not as resistant to, but, to the contrary, as reflective of the realities of the new neoliberal order, one could justifia- bly argue that this is even more the case with the postcritical turn of the late 2000s. Again, this does not bear upon the (re-)emphasis of aesthetics, form, attachment, and affects per se, but rather involves what, in loose analogy to Jameson, can be called postcritique's 'political unconscious': its seeming indifference to (or non-con- sideration of) the political implications of its discursive positioning.[8]

This concerns not only postcritique's methodological choices and its tendency to sideline history, politics, and economics, but also its narrative of what is problematic about contemporary critique. For one thing, what that narrative misses is the 'great transformation' that occurred in the history of critical thought since around the time of the neoliberal revolution to which Sedgwick draws attention in her essays from the 1990s. While Felski treats Jameson as *the* dominant representative of contemporary critique and symptomatic analysis, what she fails to mention is the significant de- cline of precisely the kind of Marxism Jameson represents in the early 1980s, which saw the rise of poststructuralism and American-style cultural studies, includ- ing disciplines like gender studies, ethnic studies, and queer theory. As many authors have noted, what went along with this development was not only a growing avoid- ance of economic issues in cultural and critical theory, but also a shift from 'struc- ture' to 'identity' (cf. Michaels 2006) and from 'redistribution' to 'recognition' (cf. Fraser 1995).

In the context of the postcritical turn, this development is given a whole new twist. Now, recognition, functioning as the dominant (cultural) currency in a theoret- ical environment that has largely abandoned structural analysis and the concept of social totality, tends to be extended to apply to the non-human realm as well. This is most obvious in the context of posthumanism and the new materialism, for example in the writings of Jane Bennett. While Charles Taylor and others had advocated re- specting the identities of those who are marginalized due to their *cultural difference* (cf. Taylor 1992), Bennett extends this logic, calling on us to also "respect" (Bennett 2010, ix) non-human actors marginalized due to their *ontological difference.* Felski, having at numerous occasions voiced her sympathy for Bennett's ideas,[9] goes in a similar direction. Following Latour and ANT (Felski 2015, 162–172), she places "peo- ple, animals, texts, and things on a similar ontological footing," conceptualizing art works and texts as "non-human actors" that "help to modify states of affairs," "are

---

8 On a related note, cf. also what Foucault has addressed in terms of the 'unthought' (Foucault 1994, 322–328).
9 For instance, Felski is quoted on the back cover of Bennett's *Vibrant Matter*, praising the book as "an invigorating breath of fresh air" (Bennett 2010).

participants in chains of events," and "help shape outcomes and influence actions" (164). What she deems necessary is

> a recognition – long overdue – of the text's status as a coactor: as something that makes a differ- ence, as something that makes things happen. [...] And once we take on board the distinctive agency of art works – rather than their imagined roles as minions of opaque social forces or he- roes of the resistance – we cannot help orienting ourselves differently to the task of criticism. Such a shift is desperately needed if we are to do better justice to what literature does and why such doing matters. (12–13)

Like Bennett, Felski thus attempts to restore to nonhuman actors – texts, in this case – a form of recognition that is lacking in readings in which they are subject "to interrogation" (Felski 2015, 173). The goal is "to do better justice" to texts, which implies that they were treated unjustly in the critical readings of the past. To be sure, justice is always better than injustice – and if Felski means that the reader should pay close attention to what a text says, and what it does by saying it, hardly anyone would disagree. Yet, one may again wonder about the broad generalization here: Should *all* texts simply be applauded for being "coactors"? Or do some, per- haps, deserve to be interrogated? And what about the specific use or function of one's reading: are diagnostic readings by definition unjust, because they link the text to "opaque social forces"? Once again, Felski does not really offer much in terms of a constructive combination of political analysis and 'close' or 'just' reading here.

Yet, in describing texts as coactors that participate "in chains of events," Felski indeed links the text to its outside, suggesting that reading and writing are not just philological activities, but that they are situated in the realm of the social – connect- ed to, and affecting, other actors and actions, events and states of affairs. In terms of its specific concept of the social, however, Felski's network or assemblage model leaves a lot of questions open. One may ask, for instance, *how*, precisely, texts do what they do, and what their specific agency and role is in "what literature does." Another question may concern the role of said "opaque social forces": wouldn't they need to be included in the assemblage too – even if, as Felski suggests, they might be merely "imagined"? Or more generally, is there a way to specifically deter- mine what needs to be included and what doesn't, and how all the assembled actors and coactors (such as authors, readers, critics, writing programs, schools, universi- ties, bookshops, online markets, etc.) relate to each other? Are they all equally influ- ential, or do they differ in impact and strength? And finally, what are the specific cri- teria for determining whether what literature does "matters" and for whether what we say about literature "does justice" to it?

The promise of a network model such as the one used here, for Felski and others, is that it allows the critic "to forgo theoretical shortcuts" (Felski 2015, 158), that is, abstract generalizations or the presupposition of the existence of "opaque social forces" (13). The problem, however, is that the task of completely avoiding such shortcuts is by definition impossible: since it is hardly feasible to include *all* the ac-

tors and coactors involved in a given assemblage, any author – critic as well as post-critic – will necessarily make a selection. In principle, there is no given limit as to what a network may include, since, as Felski explains, nonhuman actors can basically be anything: "Speed bumps, microbes, mugs, baboons, newspapers, unreliable narrators, soap, silk dresses, strawberries, floor plans, telescopes, lists, paintings, can openers" (163). Consequently, a network model that desperately seeks to avoid all shortcuts and selections would simply end up with endless arbitrary enumerations, lists, or catalogues of ontologically diverse, random content. How, then, are the selections being made here? It seems that the more the author refrains from 'theoretical' shortcuts – whose principles could be discussed and refuted – the more he or she will rely on 'phenomenological' ones, that is, individual acts of apperception. Along these lines, Jane Bennett presents an assemblage in her *Vibrant Matter* that includes the following items:

> one large men's black plastic work glove
> one dense mat of oak pollen
> one unblemished dead rat
> one white plastic bottle cap
> one smooth stick of wood
> (Bennett 2010, 4)

From the perspective of a postcritical theory, the advantage of this image (or poetic collage) is certainly its concreteness, its 'close' or 'thick' description of what is concretely given, what is perceived by the subject at a specific point in time and space – in Bennett's case, on "a sunny Tuesday morning on 4 June in the grate over the storm drain to the Chesapeake Bay in front of Sam's Bagels on Cold Spring Lane in Baltimore" (4). From the perspective of a political ecology – which Bennett's approach imagines itself to be – there is, however, something deeply frustrating about the commitment to remain on this empirical surface-level of things, without connecting concrete objects, items, and devices to the 'abstract machines' that are involved in their production, distribution, and consumption. This is precisely what characterizes the ecological politics of Bennett's book as a posthumanist version of the 'politics of recognition': trash, Bennett writes, is not simply "dead stuff" (5) but should be conceptualized as animate or active 'vital matter'; she therefore recommends that we should be more mindful of how we engage with things, matter, objects, junk. What the book does not include, however, is any serious analysis of the causes, conditions, course, and scale of the current ecological crisis – and of an effective politics that would potentially be able to resolve it.

    This draws attention to what, in reference to Felski, we may call *the limits of postcritique*. It appears that these limitations are a general issue in theoretical currents that rely on Latour and ANT – and it is here where the charge of political quietism (cf. Robbins 2017) and compliance with the neoliberal status quo (cf. Michaels in this

volume) can indeed claim some validity.[10] This is not to say that actor-network theory is without merit, especially not since Latour can be credited for reintroducing a version of the (now ubiquitous) concept of materiality into the humanities, at a time when the focus was almost exclusively on discourse, signs, and signification. Nevertheless, it is his deliberately 'flat' topography of the social – which seems to conflate the commitment to an egalitarian ontology with an accurate description of social reality – that often contributes to an oversimplified understanding of systemic asymmetries, political conflict, and the constitution of social regularities.[11] Still, Latour's dismissal of the concept of social totality is a key point of reference in the postcritical discourse: "For Latour [...] there is no historical box and no society, if we mean by this term a bounded totality governed by a predetermined set of structures and functions" (Felski 2015, 157). The idea of totality, however, against which Felski and other postcritics polemicize, had already been defeated with the rise of poststructuralism in the early 1980s. Hence, when Martin Jay wrote *Marxism and Totality* (1984), a wide-ranging account of the diverse history of the concept, he did so "in a tragic or satiric mode" (20), discussing its decline in an epilogue entitled "The Challenge of Post-Structuralism" (510–537). Yet, while some authors related to poststructuralism were careful not to dismiss the notion *tout court*,[12] Latour and his followers made sure to eradicate the last remnants of it, directing their focus exclusively towards concrete (human and nonhuman) actors and assemblages. Now, in a strange echoing of Margaret Thatcher's neoliberal dictum that there's no such thing as society (cf. Latour 2005, 5), to even use fairly familiar 'shortcuts' like capitalism, society, or mode of production comes under suspicion (pun intended). "Like God," writes Latour, "capitalism does not exist" (Latour 1993, 173). And: "It is no longer clear whether there exists [sic] relations that are specific enough to be called 'social' and that could be grouped together in making up a special domain that could function as 'a society'" (Latour 2005, 2).

To be sure, postcritique's all-too-ready adoption of ANT's polemic against the concept of totality may, in the late 2000s, seem a bit like flogging a dead horse. The point in time, however, is significant. For the late 2000s not only saw the rise of postcritique in academic discourse, they were also in many ways informed by the experience of the global financial and economic crisis of 2008. This event – which started with a seemingly isolated depreciation in the American subprime mortgage market that led to the then deepest global economic downturn since the Great

---

10 There are, however, various attempts at adopting aspects of actor-network theory for a left politics. As one example, cf. Mitchell 2013.

11 Cf. Robbins 2017, 374: "Latour's signature example for actor-network theory, and one that Felski repeats, is the modest speed bump. [...] It is the allegory of a social world where all the infractions are minor – where some people may want to drive too fast, but there are no malevolent intentions, there is no collective coercion, there is no systemic injustice."

12 Deleuze, for example, preferred to speak of "nodes of totalization" (Deleuze 1995, 86).

Depression[13] – has evidently contributed to a certain resurgence not only of the concept of totality in critical discourse, but also of the general engagement with economic issues and Marxist theory in some sections of the humanities, including cultural and literary studies.[14] Against this backdrop, it may not require too suspicious a reader to assess the interventions of postcritique – including its adoption of ANT's concept of the social – not just in view of their philological methodology, but also in terms of their political implications.

Close-Up and Long Shot

As another instance of the postcritical turn, I will now focus on Marcus and Best's concept of surface reading – articulated in their introduction to a 2009 special issue of *Representations* – which ties in well with the previously discussed new materialist version of a politics of recognition: the tendency to focus on, and champion, the concretely given (actual actors, objects, and relations) over abstract totalizations or adversarial decryptions. Along these lines, Marcus and Best argue that readers should concentrate on the 'surface' of texts, rather than reading them 'symptomatically' by attempting to uncover their hidden depths and latent meanings:

> [W]e take surface to mean what is evident, perceptible, apprehensible in texts; what is neither hidden nor hiding; what, in the geometrical sense, has length and breadth but no thickness, and therefore covers no depth. A surface is what insists on being looked *at* rather than what we must train ourselves to see *through*. (Best and Marcus 2009, 9)

While Felski has stated that she shares Marcus and Best's reservations about routinized attempts at "deciphering hidden meaning," she claims that the problem of a suspicious hermeneutics is not restricted to symptomatic approaches: "an interest in surfaces does not automatically free us from the straitjacket of suspicion" (Felski 2015, 55–56). Nevertheless, there are obvious overlaps between the two approaches. One of them is the status of Fredric Jameson, who functions, for Marcus and Best as well as for Felski, as the perhaps central antagonist. In Marcus and Best's case, the twenty-fifth anniversary of the publication of *The Political Unconscious* (1981) was in fact constitutive of their idea to devote an entire special issue to the concept of sur-

---

13 It is possible that the current Covid-19 pandemic will have even more severe effects on the world economy. What the two events have in common is that they both reveal how today any incident, however local and seemingly insignificant, is ultimately embedded in the totality of social and economic relations that constitute what Immanuel Wallerstein has conceptualized as the 'world-system' (cf. Wallerstein 2004).

14 On the resurgence of the concept of totality, cf., for example, the perspective of Toscano and Kinkle (2015), whose point of departure is not Hegel's Absolute Spirit or the idea of an unbroken god's-eye-view, but Jameson's notion of 'cognitive mapping' (cf. Jameson 1988).

face reading, thereby seeking to render obsolete the approach attributed to Jameson, symptomatic reading.

Despite the loss in significance of Marxist criticism since at least the 1990s, this choice of Jameson as counterexample is understandable. "Interpretation," writes Jameson, "is here construed as essentially an allegorical act, which consists in rewriting a given text in terms of a particular interpretative master code" (Jameson 2002: x). This programmatic definition – highlighting the necessity of "rewriting" the text's surface in order to reveal its deeper structure or 'political unconscious' – certainly makes Jameson into a key representative of what Marcus and Best conceptualize as symptomatic reading. But their engagement with Jameson appears reductive in that they leave out a key dimension of his idea of interpretation. While they take statements as the one just quoted as normative prescriptions of how the critic *should* engage with literary texts, what they pay less attention to are the more general hermeneutic and philosophical principles on which Jameson's perspective is based. Here, statements as the one referred to are not simply normative, for Jameson's argument is that *any* reading is necessarily based on certain premises – or theoretical preconceptions, codes, filters, selections, values, etc. – which is why the idea of a pure surface reading, from Jameson's perspective, would be flawed from the start. "It should not," he writes,

> be necessary laboriously to argue the position that every form of practice, including the literary-critical kind, implies and presupposes a form of theory; that empiricism, the mirage of an utterly nontheoretical practice, is a contradiction in terms; that even the most formalizing kinds of literary or textual analysis carry a theoretical charge [...]. (Jameson 2002, 43)

One does not have to agree with the details of Jameson's perspective to see that this argument touches a sore spot when it comes to contemporary postcritique. From Bennett's new materialism and Felski's appropriation of Latour's network model to Marcus and Best's surface reading, there is a pronounced reluctance to reveal the theoretical premises that guide one's 'selections.' A similar point is made by Winfried Fluck, who criticizes symptomatic approaches in the style of Jameson – and in particular Jameson's reliance on the Althusserian idea of structural totality – but holds that Marcus and Best's surface approach in no way presents a proper alternative as it is marked by "a stunning hermeneutical naiveté."[15] "The problem of interpretation," Fluck writes,

> is that of selection (which even a 'mere' description has to make) and the principles [...] on which these selections are made. Literary theory is not the opposite to description; it is the attempt to

---

15 According to Fluck, this is most evident in Marcus and Best's treatment of the New Criticism: "In spite of sixty years of scholarship on the New Criticism, the authors seem to be entirely unaware of the fact that the close reading practiced by the New Criticism stood in the service of a particular aesthetic theory which made New Critics register and value certain formal properties and dismiss or ignore others." (Fluck 2014, 57)

clarify what the principles of selection are, no matter whether the interpretive focus lies on the surface or on other levels. (Fluck 2014, 57)

In this respect, Jameson's work has the obvious advantage of displaying a form of self-reflection and transparency that is absent from most postcritical approaches. For instance, when Jameson famously claims, in the first sentence of *The Political Unconscious*, that literary criticism shall 'always historicize' (Jameson 2002, ix), he does so based on a specific concept of history, whose outlines and dimensions he puts up for discussion. This is strikingly different from Marcus and Best, whose own engagement with history seems largely anecdotal. When they argue, for instance, that the idea of surface reading is today an attractive mode of reading "because, at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, so much seems to be on the surface" (Best and Marcus 2009, 2), it appears as if the mere gesture of historicization is retained, but without any actual interest in seriously exploring historical processes. Indeed, well after postmodernism and a generation of scholars focusing on cultural or textual simulacra, and decades after the emergence of literary or artistic movements and techniques such as concrete poetry, the cut-up and fold-in technique, the *nouveaux roman*, pop art, photorealism, and hyperrealism, to hear literary scholars highlight the timeliness of surface reading by claiming – in 2009 – that so much these days "seems to be on the surface" may appear not only belated, but also like a fitting demonstration of the postcritical notion that 'context stinks.'[16]

In any case, what a more serious engagement with the history of the turn to the surface would undoubtedly have revealed is that the phenomenon is in many ways entangled with questions that postcritics typically omit, namely those pertaining to the nexus of culture and economy. In this context, the work of early twentieth-century German authors and cultural critics like Georg Simmel, Werner Sombart, Walter Benjamin, and Siegfried Kracauer is particularly illuminating. For these authors linked their own analytical interest in what Janet Ward has emblematically termed 'Weimar Surfaces' (Ward 2001) to a particular development of capitalism, one that was marked by the shop window's 'flat' aestheticization of commodities. In this early phase of consumer capitalism, many authors felt inclined to combine a phenomenological impulse to 'go back to the things themselves' (Husserl) and examine concrete, everyday surface phenomena with a keen interest in Marxism and historical

---

16 To underpin their argument for surface reading, Marcus and Best mention a number of political examples – like the photos of torture at Abu Ghraib that "immediately circulated on the internet" or "the real-time coverage of Hurricane Katrina" – meant to confirm that demystification as a critical strategy is nowadays "superfluous" (Best and Marcus 2009, 2). While the impact of contemporary media technology is certainly relevant here, to insinuate that because *these* incidents were visible, *everything* is, or that their sheer visibility suggests a particular hermeneutics – namely, surface reading – is an obvious generalization. (In other words, what is *seen* on the surface may still be *unthought*.)

materialism – a tendency that is strikingly absent in the work of most contemporary postcritics.[17]

Turning to a text in which the tendency to combine phenomenology and historical materialism – or surface reading and economic analysis – is especially evident, I will now briefly discuss Siegfried Kracauer's 1927 article on the 'mass ornament.'[18] In this mere 14-page essay, which reads today like an anticipation of Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947), Kracauer outlines a philosophy of history entailing the by now well-known idea that capitalist rationalization facilitates a possible regression from enlightenment to mythology. What is noteworthy, however, is the role Kracauer assigns to surface-level phenomena that risk getting lost in the grand narratives of historiography but are immensely valuable for historical knowledge and understanding. "The position that an epoch occupies in the historical process," Kracauer writes, "can be determined more strikingly from an analysis of its inconspicuous surface-level expressions than from that epoch's judgments about itself" (Kracauer 1995, 75). Along these lines, and somewhat similar to Walter Benjamin's description of modernity from the perspective of the *flâneur*, Kracauer aimed at engaging with his epoch by diagnostically 'reading' its surfaces and, in particular, everyday details, architectural features, and mass cultural phenomena (film, photography, dance, travel, advertising, department stores, hotel lobbies, etc.) that seemingly encapsulate the wider socioeconomic trends and transformations.[19]

In "The Mass Ornament," Kracauer's focus lies on the precision dance routines of showgirl troupes like the Tiller Girls, whose popular revues constituted a central aspect of 1920s entertainment culture. What Kracauer finds significant about the Tiller Girls' chorus lines is how their synchronized movements and collective formation of abstract ornamental patterns resonate with the Taylorist system of industrial production: "The hands in the factory correspond to the legs of the Tiller Girls" (79).[20] According to Kracauer, this analogy between popular mass culture and scientific management is plausible in that the Tiller Girls, too, embody the (Taylorist) principles and logic of instrumental rationality, real abstraction, de-individualization, and a strict division of labor: "These products of American distraction factories are no longer individual girls, but indissoluble girl clusters whose movements are demonstrations of mathematics" (75–76). Hence, comparable to the industrial worker who, under capitalist circumstances, is unable to oversee (and recognize his own role

---

17 Which is not to say that there are no exceptions. Cf., for example, Christopher Nealon's contribution in Marcus and Best's *Representations* issue (Nealon 2009).

18 I would like to thank Tanja Prokić for her helpful comments on Kracauer and 1920s visual culture.

19 Epistemologically speaking, this hermeneutical interest in details and surfaces manifests itself against the backdrop of a reinvigoration – and diversification – of physiognomic thought in the 1920s. With respect to authors like Kracauer and Benjamin, cf. Christians 2000.

20 Before Kracauer, this link had already been highlighted by Fritz Giese, whose work was located at the intersection of industrial psychology and motion study. Cf. especially his book on 'Girl Culture' (Giese 1925).

in) the totality of the production process, the single Tiller girl is unable to behold the mass ornament as a whole and thus recognize her own role in its constitution:

> Although the masses give rise to the ornament, they are not involved in thinking it through. As linear as it may be, there is no line that extends from the small sections of the mass to the entire figure. [...] The more the coherence of the figure is relinquished in favor of mere linearity, the more distant it becomes from the immanent consciousness of those constituting it. (Kracauer 1995, 77)

What, then, is the significance of this analysis from the perspective of the contemporary debate about symptomatic reading and surface reading? On the one hand, Kracauer's position must appear to the postcritic as a typical form of symptomatic reading, with the mass ornament representing merely "the aesthetic reflex of the rationality to which the prevailing economic system aspires" (79). On the other hand, however, Kracauer substantially complicates the distinction between the two kinds of hermeneutics. First off, by stating that "the aesthetic pleasure gained from ornamental mass movements is *legitimate*" (79), his engagement with the Tiller Girls' dance performances can hardly be swept aside as overly negative or suspicious. More important, and different from how Marcus and Best characterize symptomatic reading, Kracauer does not conceptualize the surface as *hiding* anything. To the contrary, what he finds valuable about the mass ornament is precisely its immediate visualization of the socioeconomic constellation. Kracauer thus argues that the mass ornament's "degree of reality is still higher than that of artistic productions which cultivate outdated noble sentiments in obsolete forms" (79):

> The intellectually privileged who, while unwilling to recognize it, are an appendage of the prevailing economic system have not even perceived the mass ornament as a sign of this system. They disavow the phenomenon in order to continue seeking edification at art events that have remained untouched by the reality present in the stadium patterns. The masses who so spontaneously adopted these patterns are superior to their detractors among the educated class to the extent that they at least roughly acknowledge the undisguised facts. The same rationality that controls the bearers of the patterns in real life also governs their submersion in the corporeal. (Kracauer 1995, 85)

This passage underlines the differences between Kracauer's approach and what is typically understood as symptomatic reading. For the mass ornament is not a metaphor or allegory of the economic system; rather, it *is* this system – a miniature version of it. More accurately, it constitutes a section or detail of a constellation in which cultural and economic production are effectively intertwined. To highlight this constellation, Kracauer undoubtedly approaches the surfaces he studies not 'spontaneously,' but based on a number of theoretical premises, among them both Marxist and phenomenological ideas and concepts.[21] Yet, while Kracauer's reliance on context analysis and historical materialism seems to be incompatible with contemporary

---

21 For an introduction to Kracauer's work and its intellectual influences, cf. Koch 2012.

postcritique, his approach also differs from Jameson's insofar as he neither conceives of the mass ornament as an allegory – if we understand by it a literary device that implies some kind of substitution – nor does he engage in an actual 'rewriting.' Rather, to use Kracauer's own film-theoretical vocabulary, what he does is repeatedly switch between long shot and close-up, seeking to understand the mass ornament not as a singular, isolated phenomenon but to also grasp its particular outside: the assemblage or constellation in which it is embedded.[22]

The Living Leviathan

Without wishing to replicate Kracauer's critical method, but along the lines of his impulse to combine (rather than tear apart) surface and context, distance and proximity, I will now engage with an example from literary history, namely Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851).[23] That Melville's novel lends itself to a reading in terms of the notion of poetic critique is not surprising, given that it seems to represent precisely the text Schlegel had in mind when he reflected on the concept in his review of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*. After all, with its fusion of literature and philosophy, its exuberant mix of various narrative formulas, metaphysical ideas, theological insinuations, and literary references, *Moby-Dick* embodies just the kind of intertextual 'critique' performed as part of a literary (i. e. 'poetic') creation Schlegel called for. And just as *Wilhelm Meister* comments on Shakespeare's *Hamlet* – thereby forming "once more what has already been formed" (Schlegel 2003, 281) – Melville's own engagement with Shakespeare's literature (especially in *Moby-Dick*) is a well-established fact.[24]

Given the novel's hypercanonization – especially in the American context, where it has long functioned as a sort of sacred text for the national imaginary – *Moby-Dick* has of course been read and analyzed in all kinds of fashions. And yet, the most influential readings seem to proceed in a symbolic or allegorical manner – with the whale, Ahab, the *Pequod*, etc. serving as symbols, conceptual personae, or metaphors that function as placeholders for something else, while the book's manifest

---

22 Cf. Kracauer 1969, 122: "The macro historian will falsify his subject unless he inserts the close-ups gained by the micro studies – inserts them as integrant elements of his over-all pictures. In consequence, the historian must be in a position freely to move between the macro and micro dimensions." While his books *From Caligari to Hitler* (1947) and *Theory of Film* (1960) give the most detailed account of his engagement with cinema, it is noteworthy that Kracauer frequently uses film-theoretical vocabulary – as demonstrated in the above quote – in his social and historical analyses too.

23 Some of the ideas laid out in this chapter are also discussed in two earlier publications of mine (cf. Schleusener 2011 and Schleusener 2015, 181–233).

24 Cf., for example, Matthiessen's remarks on Shakespeare's influence in his *American Renaissance* (Matthiessen 1968, 369–514).

subject matter (the whale hunt) plays a minor role at best.[25] Against this backdrop, my own reading attempts to take seriously what the novel says on its surface, but without neglecting to examine the text's outside. The aim here is not to pit text against context, nor is it to value content over form, but to demonstrate the impossibility of separating one from the other.[26]

To be sure, academic criticism has taken great pains to establish *Moby-Dick* as an allegorical text so as to divorce it from any sense of the merely entertaining, trivial, exotic, or adventurous – an image that Melville himself sought to get rid of after the publication of his first two novels, the much more financially successful *Typee* and *Omoo.* The notion that the white whale needs to be read as a symbol has been established ever since the 1920s, the period that saw the reappraisal of Melville's oeuvre. For instance, Melville's novel is addressed by D.H. Lawrence in his highly influential *Studies in Classic American Literature.* "Of course," Lawrence writes, "[Moby-Dick] is a symbol. Of what? I doubt if even Melville knew exactly" (Lawrence 1923, 214). Along similar lines, *Moby-Dick* was later approached in Matthiessen's *American Renaissance* and in the context of the myth-and-symbol school, where, against the backdrop of the Cold War, the conflict between Ishmael and Ahab was habitually read as an allegory of the conflict between American freedom and totalitarianism.[27] But even after the revisionist turn and the methodological reorientation of the field (cf. Pease 1994), allegorical and symbolic readings of *Moby-Dick* persisted. For example, Toni Morrison analyzed the novel in the context of American race relations, arguing that the whiteness of the whale needs to be read against the backdrop of the ideology of white supremacy and the racist idealization of whiteness. Consequently, she declares Ahab to be not a "maniacal egocentric" but "the only white male American heroic enough to try to slay the monster that was devouring the world as he knew it" (Morrison 1989, 17).

Morrison's reading of *Moby-Dick* thus differs from older American Studies approaches in that she underlines the importance of race in Melville's writing and in-

---

25 While more could be said about the specific differences between allegory, symbol, and metaphor here – especially in their more complex formulation (Benjamin, Blumenberg, etc.) – such a discussion goes beyond the scope of this essay. My general point is that insofar as *Moby-Dick* can be said to make use of any of these literary devices, it is not based on a logic of substitution but for the sake of intensification.

26 This obviously is not a new idea, dating back at least to Hegel's reflections on "the absolute relation of content and of form" in §133 of his *Encyclopedia* (Hegel 2010, 200). In practice, however, critics and postcritics rarely draw the conclusions that follow from the frequently invoked inseparability of content and form: while old or new formalisms privilege form over content, much of discourse analysis and social or political criticism typically favor content over form.

27 With regard to the exceptionalist context of these readings, Donald Pease has underlined the role of Ishmael as the sole survivor of the novel's catastrophe: "That final cataclysmic image of total destruction motivated Matthiessen and forty years of Cold War critics to turn to Ishmael, who in surviving *must*, the logic would have it, have survived as the principle of America's freedom." (Pease 1989, 144)

verts the relationship between Ishmael and Ahab (now it is Ahab who, due to his readiness to combat the plague of white supremacy, is elevated to the status of American hero). What remains in place, however, is the allegorical framework as such, even though it too undergoes a noticeable revision. As Winfried Fluck has argued, revisionist approaches like Morrison's operate 'metonymically,' while the myth-and-symbol critics of an earlier generation focused on what they understood to be central 'organic' metaphors (the machine in the garden, the errand into the wilderness, etc.) reflective of key facts about American culture. In Morrison's case, however, there "is no 'organic,' metaphoric relation between the whiteness of the whale and the race problem; their 'relation' simply consists of the fact that they are both manifestations of a problem that pervades all of American society." In other words, "racism is everywhere and thus every aspect of the text can, in principle, stand for the whole" (Fluck 2014, 48).

What Fluck's analysis points to is that due to the allegorical (or metonymic) orientation of Morrison's reading, relatively little attention is given to the specificities of *Moby-Dick*'s manifest subject matter. Hence, the equation 'whiteness of the whale' = 'the monster of racism' not only reduces the countless associations offered by Melville on the meaning of whiteness to a single signifier ('race'); it also neglects the 'whaleness' of Moby Dick and the significance of the whale's function as a nonhuman actor (to refer to Latour here for once) for Melville's dismantling of the traditional (Cartesian) subject-object relation, which is reflective of the book's central philosophical concern: that of the elusiveness of human knowledge, the withdrawal of any definitive truth, the impossibility of establishing ultimate facts about life based on mechanist systems of scientific classification. This belief – quite commonly held in the context of dark or gothic romanticism – is in *Moby-Dick* inextricably implicated with the world of whaling: with the narrator's cetological reflections, with his deliberations about the (more or less) 'erroneous' depictions of the whale, and with the human-animal relation in general.

With regard to the whiteness of the whale – as discussed in chapter 42 of the book (Melville 2003, 204–212) – this link between the novel's epistemological skepticism and its situatedness in the world of whaling might at first appear like an all too artificial construct. What distinguishes Moby-Dick from other whales, the readers are told, is his conspicuous white color: a whiteness that inspires Ishmael to forge a burst of associations ranging from reflections on the idea of white innocence to doubts about the adequacy of human cognition, and culminating in a general lament about "the heartless voids and immensities of the universe." Is it, he asks, that

> in essence whiteness is not so much a color as the visible absence of color, and at the same time the concrete of all colors; is it for these reasons that there is such a dumb blankness, full of meaning, in a wide landscape of snows – a colorless, all-color of atheism from which we shrink? And when we [...] proceed further, and consider that the mystical cosmetic which produces every one of her hues, the great principle of light, for ever remains white or colorless in itself, and if operating without medium upon matter, would touch all objects, even tulips and roses, with its own blank tinge – pondering all this, the palsied universe lies before us a leper; and like wilful

travellers in Lapland, who refuse to wear colored and coloring glasses upon their eyes, so the wretched infidel gazes himself blind at the monumental white shroud that wraps all the prospect around him. And of all these things the Albino whale was the symbol. (Melville 2003, 212)

Here, then, Melville himself articulates that Moby-Dick shall be read as a symbol, one that relates to the great 'inversion of light' performed in the above cited passage. From antiquity to the enlightenment, light – as the condition for rendering things visible and drawing them "out of their native darkness" (Deleuze 2008, 63) – was typically associated with knowledge, reason, consciousness, and truth. The white light on which Ishmael reflects, however, is not the light of the enlightenment. Rather, it is an essentially blinding light that obstructs any effort to obtain definitive insights, drawing attention to both the elusiveness of truth and the illusions on which human knowledge and perception are based. All this, Ishmael claims, is symbolized by the whiteness of Moby-Dick. This statement undoubtedly complicates the postcritical commitment to evade allegorical or symbolic readings and stay focused on what is present on the text's surface. For what if a text like *Moby-Dick*, explicitly and on its surface, tells us that the entity that gives it its title shall be taken as a symbol?

Melville's actual employment of symbolic imagery, however, is a specific and oftentimes ambiguous one.[28] Obviously, *Moby-Dick* entails a number of elements that might at first sight lend themselves to an allegorical or symbolic reading. The whale, for instance, is persistently addressed as 'Leviathan,' a highly loaded political symbol that seems to refer to the heroic emblematics of the 'charismatic animal' (cf. Vogl 2007) rather than to the actual living creature. But while Melville is eager to include all such symbolic and allegorical dimensions as part of the polyphonic and multilayered conception of his novel, it would be a mistake to assign their use to a method of substitution. In other words, the whale in *Moby-Dick* is not the substitute for something else; instead, the actual animal is here related to its allegorical meanings in a weird kind of parallelism in which the meticulous, naturalistic description of the whale's massive body, "his mighty swells and undulations" (Melville 2003, 288), is consistently amplified by the mythological meaning of Leviathan as the most powerful creature of the sea. This fusion of naturalistic depiction and symbolic connotation is best highlighted when Ishmael – paradoxically – refers to the whale as "the living Leviathan" (288).

If we thus see the use of allegory and symbolism in *Moby-Dick* not as a form of substitution but as one of intensification, we might also get a different sense of the relationship between Ishmael and Ahab. Although the roles assigned to them differ

---

28 With regard to this ambiguity, cf. another passage that plainly rejects the idea of taking the white whale as an allegory: "So ignorant are most landsmen of some of the plainest and most palpable wonders of the world, that without some hints touching the plain facts, historical and otherwise, of the fishery, they might scout at Moby Dick as a monstrous fable, or still worse and more detestable, a hideous and intolerable allegory." (Melville 2003, 223)

from one interpretation to the next, their relationship is typically characterized as one of strict antagonism. In analogy to the parallelism between the text's manifest content and its use of symbolic imagery, however, one could also speak of a parallelism between Ishmael and Ahab. While Ahab most clearly personifies the trajectory of the actual plot – the 'manifest' hunt for the white whale – Ishmael can be said to articulate the book's 'latent' meaning in his metaphysical reflections about the elusiveness of absolute knowledge and truth. His endeavor, then, can be characterized as a *hunt* too. Yet, while Ahab's hunt is for the actual whale, Ishmael's is a 'hunt for knowledge,' one that is directed toward the whale as an object of science (cetology) and representation (the "monstrous" and "less erroneous" pictures of whales; cf. Melville 2003, 285–293). Different from how the book is typically interpreted, this 'parallel' reading of *Moby-Dick* would thus not differentiate between Ahab's sublime failure and Ishmael's fortunate survival, for both hunts – the epistemological hunt for certainty and knowledge and the physical hunt for the actual whale – are eventually unsuccessful.

Above all, what the parallel reading proposed here would underline is that the whale is certainly not a disposable vehicle merely used to transport a general message or meaning. Indeed, the latent content that *Moby-Dick* is assumed to entail is inextricably connected with the whale, to the effect that any meaning must necessarily 'pass through' the whale, and any effort to reveal the book's 'deeper' significance must follow the whale's own "hidden ways [...] beneath the surface" (Melville 2003, 197–198) and through "the utmost depths" (398) of the sea. For example, the critique of representation articulated in *Moby-Dick* is based on an understanding of the whale as a living creature with certain specific attributes and qualities that render impossible the desire for an adequate depiction. As Ishmael explains:

> Most of the scientific drawings have been taken from the stranded fish; and these are about as correct as a drawing of a wrecked ship, with broken back, would correctly represent the noble animal itself in all its undashed pride of hull and spars. Though elephants have stood for their full-lengths, the living Leviathan has never yet fairly floated himself for his portrait. The living whale, in his full majesty and significance, is only to be seen at sea in unfathomable waters. (288)

This passage underlines that the centrality of the whale in Melville's novel is by no means arbitrary or coincidental, which is why it would be impossible to subtract *Moby-Dick*'s truth or meaning from the subject matter of whales and whaling. The novel's critique of representation, in other words – in the same way as its critique of mechanistic concepts of science – is based on a questioning of the traditional notion of the subject-object relation. According to Melville's novel, to represent or to categorize means, above all, to objectify, to turn the living whale into a "stranded fish" or "wrecked ship." It is therefore precisely Melville's discovery of the whale as a living actor – a quasi-subject possessing a particular form of knowledge and be-

havior[29] – that complicates the traditional understanding of the subject-object relation, which, in Descartes, explicitly relies on an understanding of animals as (equivalent to) machines.[30] Hence, Melville's revision of the subject-object relation, in which the whale is crucially implicated, is constitutive of both *Moby-Dick*'s critique of representation and the book's skepticism towards a certain image of scientific thought.

While this analysis seems to be fairly in line with postcritical principles – in the sense that the attention given to *Moby-Dick*'s situatedness in the world of whaling implies an appreciation of the novel's manifest content or surface level – I will now argue that the focus on whaling will also engage the reader with precisely those aspects postcritics typically seek to omit or relativize, namely history, social context, and political economy. Of course, I do not claim that the novel's narrative is an "allegory of capitalism" (Morrison 1989, 15). What I do claim, however, is that insofar as nineteenth-century whaling is a crucial part of capitalism, this context is necessarily a fundamental aspect of *Moby Dick*'s 'constellation.' Similar to the case of Kracauer's analysis of the mass ornament, one could thus argue that capitalism is simultaneously part of the novel's outside and inside. It constitutes the text's outside but is folded inward, so that Melville's reflections about whaling are simultaneously reflections about capitalism. Again, to grasp this constellation adequately, it is necessary to switch repeatedly from long shot to close-up and vice versa.

Hence, what needs to be kept in mind is that whaling was one of the most advanced capitalist industries of the nineteenth century, especially given the high demand for the valuable whale oil (used for lamps, among other things) before the large-scale use of petroleum initiated the gradual decline of the whaling industry. Despite the romantic notions typically associated with life on the high seas, nineteenth-century whaling in the US was thus "eerily modern [...] in the way it accumulated capital and spread risk. At a time when most of the nation's capital was dispersed in homes and on farms," whaling was "centralized," "technologically innovative," and "organizationally sophisticated" (Saunders 2004). While literature often renders the space of the sea a site of romance and adventure, this other side of the maritime experience – the sea as "a place of business" and "labor" (Jameson 2002, 201) – is an issue in many sea novels too.

To be sure, the tension between 'romance and reification' discussed by Jameson in terms of the sea fiction of Joseph Conrad (194–270) is also a key aspect of *Moby-Dick*. After all, the original reason for the *Pequod*'s voyage is the commercially motivated purpose of delivering whale oil to the "Nantucket market" (Melville 2003,

---

29 In fact, Melville repeatedly describes the knowledge of the whale as surpassing the knowledge of humans. For example, Ishmael suggests "that the Nor' West Passage, so long a problem to man, was never a problem to the whale" (Melville 2003, 198). In this context, cf. also Bühler and Rieger 2006.
30 Cf. Descartes 1998, 31: "[I]f there were such machines having the organs and the shape of a monkey or of some other animal that lacked reason, we would have no way of recognizing that they were not entirely of the same nature as these animals."

177), an endeavor with which Ahab's desire to take revenge on Moby-Dick naturally conflicts. As Deleuze notes, Ahab breaks "the Whalers' law, which says that any healthy whale encountered must be hunted, without choosing one over another" (Deleuze 1997, 79). Above all, what Ahab's singularization of *one specific whale* – Moby-Dick – thereby contradicts, is the capitalist logic of treating whales like a mere natural resource, whose individual parts – blubber, whale bone, sperm oil, or meat – all end up as commodities on the Nantucket market. In *Moby-Dick*, this economic logic of commodification evidently coincides with the sort of objectification highlighted above: the turning of the whale into an object of scientific categorization and representational depiction. Melville's critique of science is thus simultaneously a critique of capitalist reification. As Samuel Otter writes:

> Melville represents the process of cutting into the skin and head of the whale as extraordinarily violent and liquid, violating the integrity of the object and threatening to inundate the observer. He associates knowledge with appropriation, representing the ways in which anatomy enables commodity and the parts of the body become vendible. (Otter 1999, 132)

But the economic context of whaling is not just reflected in *Moby-Dick*'s narrative; it also plays a role in the novel's peculiar form. How so? Being a capitalist industry, whaling of course involves a strict division of labor, a precise timing of the work processes, a complex knowledge and understanding of these processes, and a high degree of self-discipline on the part of captain and crew. Yet, many elements of the novel contradict this tendency, especially regarding the question of temporality. What this alludes to is the *untimeliness* of the whale hunt – its curious situatedness at both the (dominant) center and on the (residual) fringes of nineteenth-century capitalism. For if there is an unexpected calm at sea, there is hardly anything to do on board of the ship but to exchange stories of past adventures (the famous 'seaman's yarn'). In other words, the time on board of the ship is not only the time of labor and capitalist production; it is also the time of 'the storyteller,' as one might assert with reference to Walter Benjamin's essay on the works of Nikolai Leskov. Here, Benjamin makes a sharp distinction between the novel and the "art of storytelling," the latter of which he sees "coming to an end" in the era of modern capitalism (Benjamin 2007, 83). What makes Benjamin's analysis all the more relevant with regard to *Moby-Dick* is that he posits the "trading seaman" (85) as one of the major sources of storytelling.

Moby-Dick, however, complicates Benjamin's distinction. More in line with Bakhtin's conception of the novel, what is characteristic about the book is its baroque heterogeneity and polyphony: the way in which it manifests itself as a proto-modernist novel but also integrates aspects of storytelling, something which becomes especially evident in those episodes where the *Pequod* encounters other ships, such as the *Town-Ho* (cf. Melville 2003, 265–284) and the *Jeroboam* (341–347). Here, the stories of past journeys and adventures essentially interrupt the central plot and thereby contribute to the novel's heterogenous, heterochronic, and polyphonic character.

It can be argued, then, that part of the transgressive charm of *Moby Dick* – the book's multiplicity of voices, genres, narratives, and modes of communication that are only loosely kept together by the central storyline – is related to the untimely element of the whale hunt: the fact that nineteenth-century whaling was both a crucial part of the capitalist economy while simultaneously contradicting some of its central forms of organization and temporality. The whaling vessel is thus not just "the heterotopia *per excellence*" – as Foucault notes about the ship (Foucault 1986, 27) – but is also marked by a peculiar 'heterochronicity': the coexistence of a time of capitalist acceleration (which is also the time of the novel) with a time of boredom and relaxation (which is also the time of storytelling).[31] In this sense, nineteenth-century whaling can be said to manifest an untimely tendency *within* capitalism, representing not so much a romantic flight away from the world as a 'line of flight' within the world, within, that is, the confines of the market.

Conclusion

In the previous chapter, I have sought to present a reading that resonates with the notion of poetic critique in (1) the attempt to bridge the alleged gap between art and criticism (demonstrated here by not so much 'judging' *Moby-Dick* than aiding the book in performing its own version of poetic critique); and (2) the impulse of refusing to separate the poetic and aesthetic from the critical and political. What this implies is the idea that to genuinely do justice to a literary text, it is necessary to do justice to its outside too. Here, I proposed a reading that is attentive to the text's surface and its manifest subject matter while simultaneously seeking to determine its particular constellation. As I have tried to demonstrate, this does not mean caging the text in its historical context – as if history were a "box" (Felski 2015, 154). Rather, what is significant about *Moby-Dick* is the book's untimeliness: the untimely way in which its form is related to mid-nineteenth-century American literature and the world of whaling it depicts was to the era's economic system. Arguably, its untimeliness is also related to why the novel continues to resonate and is time and again reactualized by the readers of a coming generation.[32]

---

31 On "boredom" and "mental relaxation" as conditions of storytelling, cf. Benjamin 2007, 91.
32 This is not to deny the role of the novel's hypercanonization in its ongoing (academic and non-academic) popularity and relevance. It is noteworthy, however, that in American Studies *Moby-Dick* is among the few 'renaissance' texts that have survived the revisionist turn and are read as assiduously among 'old' as among 'new' Americanists (cf. Chase 1962 and Jehlen 1994). More recently, *Moby-Dick* has received much attention in the context of transnational and globalization studies (cf. Tally Jr. 2009 and Cohen 2012).

The untimely, however, is not timelessness.[33] It does not imply a movement 'out of history' (cf. Brown 2001) for it is itself a product of it. Or, as Casarino writes: "The untimely is the temporal register of that which is nonsynchronous with its own history, of that which at once is in history and yet can never completely belong to it" (Casarino 2002, xxxix–xl). Obviously, that *Moby-Dick* continues to be read is not unrelated to the fact that the world the novel depicts, imagines, and anticipates has something in common with 'the world *we* live in,' as C.L.R. James subtitled his own study about Melville in 1953. But this commonality is not to be perceived in terms of a mere resemblance or analogy. Rather, it is a question of 'resonance' (Rosa 2019), of affinities that, however timeless or universal they may appear, are still relatable to historical circumstances. In other words, if Melville's novel continues to resonate in the twenty-first century, this is not least assignable to our own historical moment's version of globalization and rootlessness, transnational commerce and mobility, waning state sovereignty and lawfulness, the commodification of 'nature' and social relations, and precarious labor conditions for a new cohort of 'mariners, renegades, and castaways' (cf. James 1953). In this respect, a "theory of attachment" (Felski 2015, 18), as called for by postcritics like Felski, will remain insufficient if it separates the affective and cognitive aspects of the reading process from their historical conditions (hence Kracauer's insistence on the combination of phenomenology and historical materialism).

The reading I proposed, then, suggests an approach aimed at working out and reactivating the political and historical implications of the text in question, yet without switching to another linguistic or semantic register, and without separating between content and form. Hence, this sort of reading is meant to constitute an alternative to both the ahistoric and descriptivistic tendencies of postcritical readings and Jameson's concept of interpretation as an allegorical rewriting (in the strict sense of the term).

But what, exactly, means 'alternative' here? This is an important point, for it underlines the way in which contemporary critical and postcritical approaches are not so different after all. Under the increasingly economized conditions of higher education and the academy, the production of theory is in some sense bound to the same market logic as is the production of other commodities. More specifically, the products of theory (concepts, turns, readings, approaches) are marked by the same logic of competition, branding, self-fashioning, distinction, acceleration, and planned obsolescence that is characteristic of today's capitalism on the whole. Whatever their particular intellectual merits, the various 'turns' (linguistic, performative, material, postcritical, speculative, descriptive, etc.) that have occurred in recent years are inextricably bound up with this context.[34] Here, what is suggested is that a new meth-

---

33 According to Cesare Casarino, the Nietzschean notion of the untimely represents an alternative to the binary relation between "the myth of the timeless genius" and "the timely writer" who is completely determined by his historical context (Casarino 2002, xxxviii).

34 Cf. Mark Seltzer's pointed discussion of what he refers to as the "turn turn" (Seltzer 2016, 166).

odology will make up for a lack that characterized the previous one. The new theoretical product is then typically presented in such a way as to offer a 'general alternative': an across-the-board method of reading or interpretation that ostensibly works *in any case*, irrespective of the nature of the specific text at hand. Along these lines, and despite the postcritical imperative to be mindful, attentive and 'do justice' to art and literature, what is hardly ever discussed is whether some texts may not deserve to be read critically and suspiciously, while others do not; or that in some cases it may be sufficient to read and 'thickly describe' the surface of a text, while other texts are designed in such a way as to necessitate being read allegorically.

Of course, the fact that I engaged with *Moby-Dick* to exemplify my version of a reading that circumvents the deadlocked binarism between critique and postcritique was based on the assumption that (this sort of) reading and (this sort of) text go well together. Implied in my reading is the general idea that the text should be examined in conjunction with its outside. But apart from this general commitment it is difficult to assume that the reading I proposed works with any text whatever. To be sure, this is not meant as a general call for pluralism and variation, but simply to acknowledge that different kinds of texts require different kinds of readings. Perhaps, then, what a reconsideration of Schlegel's concept of poetic critique – including his understanding of the literary text as demanding to be read "on its own terms" (Schlegel 2003, 275) – might encourage us to do is reflect more thoroughly on how our approach to literature (be it critical or poetic, postcritical or uncritical) is related to our choice of the specific texts and objects we study.

Bibliography

Anker, Elizabeth S., and Rita Felski (Eds.). *Critique and Postcritique*. Durham and London: Duke UP, 2017.

Benjamin, Walter. "The Storyteller. Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov." *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken Books, 2007. 83–109.

Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham and London: Duke UP, 2010.

Best, Stephen, and Sharon Marcus. "Surface Reading: An Introduction." *Representations* 108.1 (2009): 1–21.

Brown, Wendy. *Politics Out of History*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2001.

Bühler, Benjamin, and Stefan Rieger. *Vom Übertier: Ein Bestiarium des Wissens*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 2006.

Casarino, Cesare. *Modernity at Sea: Melville, Marx, Conrad in Crisis*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2002.

Chase, Richard (Ed.). *Melville: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1962.

Christians, Heiko. "Gesicht, Gestalt, Ornament. Überlegungen zum epistemologischen Ort der Physiognomik zwischen Hermeneutik und Mediengeschichte." *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 74 (2000): 84–110.

Cohen, Margaret. *The Novel and the Sea*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2012.

Deleuze, Gilles. *Nietzsche and Philosophy*. New York: Columbia UP, 1983.

Deleuze, Gilles. *Negotiations (1972–1990)*. New York: Columbia UP, 1995.

Deleuze, Gilles. *Essays Critical and Clinical*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997.

Deleuze, Gilles. *Cinema 1: The Movement Image*. London and New York: Continuum, 2008.

Descartes, René. *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1998.

Felski, Rita. *Uses of Literature*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008.

Felski, Rita. *The Limits of Critique*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2015.

Fluck, Winfried. "Surface Readings and Symptomatic Readings: American Studies and the Realities of America." *REAL. Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature* 30: *Towards a Post-Exceptionalist American Studies*. Eds. Winfried Fluck and Donald E. Pease. Tübingen: Narr Verlag, 2014. 41–65.

Foucault, Michel. "Of Other Spaces." *Diacritics* 16.1 (1986): 22–27.

Foucault, Michel. *The Order of Things. An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. New York: Vintage Books, 1994.

Fraser, Nancy. "From Redistribution to Recognition? Dilemmas of Justice in a 'Post-Socialist' Age." *New Left Review* 212 (1995): 68–93.

Giese, Fritz. *Girlkultur. Vergleiche zwischen amerikanischem und europäischem Rhythmus und Lebensgefühl*. Munich: Delphin Verlag, 1925.

Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Basic Outline. Part I: Science of Logic*. New York: Harvard UP, 2010.

James, C.L.R. *Mariners, Renegades and Castaways: The Story of Herman Melville and the World We Live In*. New York (privately printed), 1953.

Jameson, Fredric. "Cognitive Mapping." *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988. 347–357.

Jameson, Fredric. *The Political Unconscious. Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. London and New York: Routledge, 2002.

Jay, Martin. *Marxism and Totality. The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984.

Jehlen, Myra (Ed.). *Herman Melville: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1994.

Koch, Gertrud. *Siegfried Kracauer zur Einführung*. Hamburg: Junius, 2012.

Kracauer, Siegfried. *History. The Last Things Before the Last*. New York: Oxford UP, 1969.

Kracauer, Siegfried. "The Mass Ornament." *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*. Cambridge and London: Harvard UP, 1995. 75–86.

Latour, Bruno. *The Pasteurization of France*. Cambridge and London: Harvard UP, 1993.

Latour, Bruno. *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 2005.

Lawrence, D.H. *Studies in Classic American Literature*. New York: Thomas Seltzer, 1923.

Love, Heather. "Close but not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn." *New Literary History* 41 (2010): 371–391.

Matthiessen, F.O. *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman*. Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 1968.

Melville, Herman. *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale*. London: Penguin, 2003.

Michaels, Walter Benn. *The Trouble with Diversity. How We Learned to Love Identity and Ignore Inequality*. New York: Henry Holt, 2006.

Mitchell, Timothy. *Carbon Democracy. Political Power in the Age of Oil*. London and New York: Verso, 2013.

Moretti, Franco. *Distant Reading*. London and New York: Verso, 2013.

Morrison, Toni. "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature." *Michigan Quarterly Review* 28.1 (Winter 1989): 1–34.

Nealon, Christopher. "Reading on the Left." *Representations* 108.1 (2009): 22–50.

Noys, Benjamin. *The Persistence of the Negative. A Critique of Contemporary Continental Theory.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2010.

Noys, Benjamin. "The Hammer of the Gods: Critique, After All." *The Value of Critique: Exploring the Interrelations of Value, Critique, and Artistic Labour.* Eds. Isabelle Graw and Christoph Menke. Frankfurt/M. and New York: Campus Verlag, 2019. 31–43.

Otter, Samuel. *Melville's Anatomies.* Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1999.

Pease, Donald. "Moby Dick and the Cold War." *The American Renaissance Reconsidered.* Eds. Walter Benn Michaels and Donald Pease. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1989. 113–155.

Pease, Donald. "New Americanists: Revisionist Interventions into the Canon." *Revisionary Interventions into the Americanist Canon.* Ed. Donald E. Pease. Durham and London: Duke UP, 1994. 1–37.

Ricœur, Paul. *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation.* New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1970.

Robbins, Bruce. "Not So Well Attached." *PMLA* 132.2 (2017): 371–376.

Rosa, Hartmut. *Resonance: A Sociology of Our Relationship to the World.* Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019.

Saunders, Laura. "Blubber Capitalism." *Forbes* (11 October 2004). http://www.forbes.com/forbes/2004/1011/096.html (14 June 2020).

Schlegel, Friedrich. "On Goethe's *Meister.*" *Classic and Romantic German Aesthetics.* Ed. J. M. Bernstein. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003. 269–286.

Schleusener, Simon. "Sovereignty at Sea: *Moby Dick* and the Politics of Desire." *REAL: Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature* 27: *States of Emergency – States of Crisis.* Eds. Winfried Fluck, Katharina Motyl, Donald E. Pease, and Christoph Raetzsch. Tübingen: Narr Verlag, 2011. 121–142.

Schleusener, Simon. *Kulturelle Komplexität: Gilles Deleuze und die Kulturtheorie der American Studies.* Bielefeld: transcript, 2015.

Schleusener, Simon. "Das Außerhalb des Textes: Literaturtheorie nach Derrida und Deleuze." (Paper given at the conference *Philologie und Kritik*, Freie Universität Berlin, 22 June 2018 [2018a]). https://www.academia.edu/36915844/Das_Außerhalb_des_Textes_Literaturtheorie_nach_Derrida_und_Deleuze (14 June 2020).

Schleusener, Simon. "Post-Truth Politics: The New Right and the Postmodern Legacy." *Modernities and Modernization in North America.* Eds. Ilka Brasch and Ruth Mayer. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2018b. 353–370.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're so Paranoid, You probably Think This Essay Is About You." *Touching Feeling. Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity.* Durham and London: Duke UP, 2003. 123–151.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. "Queer Performativity: Henry James's The Art of the Novel." *The Novel: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory, 1900–2000.* Ed. Dorothy J. Hale. Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2006. 605–620.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky, and Adam Frank. "Shame in the Cybernetic Fold: Reading Silvan Tomkins." *Critical Inquiry* 21.2 (1995): 496–522.

Seltzer, Mark. *The Official World.* Durham and London: Duke UP, 2016.

Tally Jr., Robert T. *Melville, Mapping and Globalization: Literary Cartography in the American Baroque Writer.* London and New York: Continuum, 2009.

Taylor, Charles. *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition: An Essay.* Princeton: Princeton UP, 1992.

Toscano, Alberto, and Jeff Kinkle. *Cartographies of the Absolute.* Winchester and Washington: Zero Books, 2015.

Vogl, Joseph. "Das charismatische Tier." *Politische Zoologie.* Eds. Anne von der Heiden and Joseph Vogl. Zurich and Berlin: Diaphanes, 2007. 119–130.

Wallerstein, Immanuel. *World-Systems Analysis: An Introduction.* Durham: Duke UP, 2004.

Ward, Janet. *Weimar Surfaces: Urban Visual Culture in 1920s Germany.* Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001.

Zamora, Daniel, and Michael C. Behrent (Eds.). *Foucault and Neoliberalism.* Cambridge and Malden: Polity Press 2016.

Contributors

Jennifer Ashton is Associate Professor of English at the University of Illinois at Chicago. She is the author of *From Modernism to Postmodernism: American Poetry and Theory in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge UP 2005) and the editor of *The Cambridge Companion to American Poetry Since 1945* (2013). Her articles have appeared in numerous edited volumes and in journals such as *ELH*, *ALH*, *Modernism/Modernity*, *Chicago Review*, *Interval(le)s*, and *Nonsite* (of which she is also a founding member of the editorial board).

Michel Chaouli teaches German and comparative literature at Indiana University, Bloomington, and, as Einstein Visiting Fellow, directs the "Philological Laboratory" at Freie Universität Berlin. Mostly, he writes about the ways conceptual thought and poetic work come into contact with one another, forming and deforming each other. He has written about Friedrich Schlegel's experimental writing (*The Laboratory of Poetry*, 2002) and about aesthetic experience (*Thinking with Kant's Critique of Judgment*, 2017). He is at work on a book about poetic criticism.

Amit Chaudhuri is the author of seven novels, the latest of which is *Friend of My Youth*. He is also an essayist, poet, musician, and composer. He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. Awards for his fiction include the Commonwealth Writers Prize, the Los Angeles Times Book Prize for Fiction, and the Indian government's Sahitya Akademi Award. In 2013, he was awarded the first Infosys Prize in the Humanities. In 2017, the government of West Bengal awarded him the Sangeet Samman for his contribution to Indian classical music. He is Professor of Contemporary Literature at the University of East Anglia in the UK.

Jeff Dolven teaches poetry and poetics at Princeton University. He has written three books of criticism, *Scenes of Instruction* (Chicago 2007), *Senses of Style* (Chicago 2018), and the admittedly hasty *Take Care* (Cabinet 2017), as well as essays on a variety of subjects, including Renaissance metrics, Edmund Spenser, Shakespeare's reading, Fairfield Porter, and player pianos. His poems have appeared in magazines and journals in the US and the UK and in a volume, *Speculative Music* (Sarabande 2013). He was the founding director of Princeton's Interdisciplinary Doctoral Program in the Humanities and is an editor at large at *Cabinet* magazine.

Alexander García Düttmann teaches philosophy at Universität der Künste in Berlin. His most recent book publications include *What is Contemporary Art? On Political Ideology* (Konstanz University Press 2017), *Love Machine. The Origin of the Work of Art* (Konstanz University Press 2018), and *In Praise of Youth* (Diaphanes 2021).

Jonathan Elmer is Professor of English at Indiana University, where he is also Director of the College Arts and Humanities Institute. He has published two monographs: *On Lingering and Being Last: Race and Sovereignty in the New World* (2008) and *Reading at the Social Limit: Affect, Mass Culture, and Edgar Allan Poe* (1995). He has also published essays on a wide range of topics, from the rhetoric of pornography to the origins of the cocktail. In 2020, he was the Pforzheimer Fellow in American Literature at the American Council of Leaned Societies.

Anne Eusterschulte is Professor of History of Philosophy at Freie Universität Berlin. Her research areas include intellectual history, aesthetics, and the intersections of philosophy, literature, and the arts. She also works on social philosophy, including medieval and early modern studies, as well as contemporary approaches in the field of critical theory. Among her publications are the volumes *Gratia. Mediale und diskursive Konzeptualisierungen ästhetischer Erfahrung in Mittelalter und Früher Neuzeit* (co-ed., Harrassowitz 2018) and *Theodor W. Adorno: Ästhetische Theorie.*

Klassiker Auslegen (co-ed., De Gruyter, forthcoming). Her current research project focuses on philological practices from a transcultural, comparative perspective.

Joshua Kates is currently Professor of English and an Adjunct Professor of Germanic Studies and of Comparative Literature at Indiana University, Bloomington. He has published widely in the fields of philosophy, literary theory, literary criticism, and historiography. His latest book is *A New Philosophy of Discourse: Language Unbound* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2020).

Jan Lietz is a PhD candidate at the Friedrich Schlegel Graduate School for Literary Studies at Freie Universität Berlin. His PhD project interrogates the notion of 'Haltung' in regard to theories of literary realism, namely in Georg Lukács, Bertolt Brecht, Walter Benjamin, Theodor W. Adorno, and Alexander Kluge. He is a research associate in the project "Das Philologische Laboratorium" and has previously taught at Universität Greifswald.

Bettine Menke is Professor of Comparative Literature at Universität Erfurt. Her research interests include literary theory and theater, deconstruction, scripturality of texts, concepts of media, mediality, and cultural techniques. Recent publications: *Flucht und Szene. Perspektiven und Formen eines Theaters der Fliehenden* (co-ed. with Juliane Vogel, Theater der Zeit 2018); "Writing Out – Gathered Up at a Venture from All Four Corners of the Earth: Jean Paul's Techniques and Operations (on Excerpts)," in: *Cultural Techniques: Assembling Spaces, Texts & Collectives*, de Gruyter 2020. Her current research projects focus on wit and jokes, theater and translation.

Walter Benn Michaels teaches English at UIC. His most recent book is *The Beauty of a Social Problem: Photography, Autonomy, Economy*. His most recent essays have been focused on the relations between theory of action, art and architecture. He is a member of the editorial board of nonsite.org.

Jutta Müller-Tamm is Professor of German Literature (19th century to the present) at Freie Universität Berlin, Director of the Friedrich Schlegel Graduate School of Literary Studies, and host of the "Philological Laboratory." Her research interests include the history of the humanities, the relationship between literature and the sciences, and contemporary literature. Recent publications: *Schreiben als Ereignis. Künste und Kulturen der Schrift* (co-ed., Fink 2018) and *Alexander von Humboldt. Sämtliche Schriften. Bd. 6: 1840–1849* (co-ed., dtv 2019). Her current research project focuses on Berlin as international literary metropolis since the 1960s.

Yi-Ping Ong teaches at Johns Hopkins University where she is Associate Professor of Comparative Thought and Literature. Her book *The Art of Being: Poetics of the Novel and Existentialist Philosophy* (Harvard University Press, 2018) examines issues of authority, freedom, and self-knowledge in realism, bringing together the history and theory of the novel with existentialism. Her current research explores the power of literary form to illuminate structures of moral community and dehumanization in the everyday. Ong is executive co-editor of the *Comparative Literature Issue* of *Modern Language Notes*.

Simon Schleusener is a postdoctoral researcher at the Freie Universität Berlin's Friedrich Schlegel Graduate School of Literary Studies, where he is engaged in the project "Das Philologische Laboratorium." Previously, he has taught at the University of Würzburg and at the John F. Kennedy Institute for North American Studies in Berlin. He is the author of *Kulturelle Komplexität: Gilles Deleuze und die Kulturtheorie der American Studies* (2015) and has worked on topics such as the neoliberal imagination, ecology and the new materialism, affect politics, and rightwing populism. Currently, he is pursuing a postdoctoral project on literature and popular culture in the context of the new capitalism.