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“To Think Exactly And Courageously”: Poetry, Ingeborg Bachmann’s Poetics, And Her Bohemia Poem

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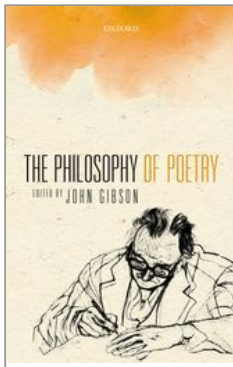
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The Philosophy of Poetry

John Gibson

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“To Think Exactly and Courageously”

Poetry, Ingeborg Bachmann’s Poetics, and her Bohemia Poem

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Abstract and Keywords

This chapter demonstrates the importance of close reading and criticism to the philosophy of poetry. Its reading of Ingeborg Bachman’s ‘Böhmen liegt am Meer’ explores the extent to which the poem is exemplary of the distinctive achievements of lyric poetry. The poem provides an object study in how the lyric allows the human voice to pursue, and at times acquire, expressive freedom. The various sonic, affective, rhythmic, figurative, and expressive devices of poetry account for why its products are not merely lovely aesthetic objects but exemplary of the ‘imaginative economy of human life’. What lyric that aspires to this status shows us is the unique claim poetry has to providing what Stendhal called the *promesse de bonheur*.

Keywords: intersubjective fluency, overdetermination, expressivity, plenipotentiary, bordering effects

I

Poetry, when distinctly successful, involves a special use of language. This special use of language aims at the achievement of seeing, or holistic insight, or getting the sense of things. The relevant seeing, insight, or sense-getting is to be distinguished from simply understanding a message that might be communicated otherwise and from simply grasping that things are observably thus-and-so, independently of the specific invitations and guidances of imagination and attention that successful poetic language embodies. The enabling of this imaginative insight via language is a defining aim of poetic practice—epic, lyric, or dramatic—whether or not every unusual or metaphoric

or distinctly formally organized string of words that is reasonably presented as poetry achieves it. Hence poetic practice undertakes to make available to its audiences not just subject-independent material quiddities, but rather things as they matter to and for human subjects, in ways that may be surprising, perplexing, terrifying, funny, and so on, as may be. Clarification of exactly how this specific subject matter *is* surprising or perplexing or terrifying or funny, and so on, is a primary aim in view for both writers and readers. **(p.233)**

The practice of using language to invite and guide imaginative attention to what matters to and for human subjects developed historically out of song, where words are used simultaneously to convey a message and, along with rhythm and melody, to hold attention to the sound surface, hence to keep the auditors involved both in the story or information presented and in how it is presented. But poetry broke free of song by focusing on objects, events, and persons that presented difficulties to and for human feeling and by using devices of figuration such as metaphor, allusion, irony, allegory, simile, and so on more consistently and emphatically than popular strophic song does. Paraphrase can be a useful instrument for exploring the significance to a human subject that a poem is trying to convey; but when a poem is distinctly successful, the paraphrase will always fail to capture the exact way in which these words, arranged in just this way, specifically invite and guide imaginative and emotional attention.

There is wide agreement among both literary scholars and philosophers about the great bulk of this summary characterization.¹ Thus Angela Leighton remarks that “sound effects, densities of language, [and] strangeness of syntax . . . hold the key to the work. . . . [The form of the poem] makes it fit for a different kind of seeing-knowing, . . . a kind of knowing which is an imaginative attitude rather than an accumulation of known things.”² Peter McDonald describes the successful poem as “a drama of form: the ways in which metre—the rhythms of lines, the comings and goings of sound, the demands and revelations of rhyme—perform their own transformations on the writing self,”³ as well **(p.234)** as, presumably, on the attentive audience. Elisabeth Camp characterizes a poem “as encompassing more than just collections of propositions represented in a certain modality and assigned to certain functional ‘boxes.’ Those contents are also structured, explained, and colored in intuitive, holistic ways” by metaphors that “help us to see more clearly how things might really be and how we should act in the world.”⁴ Troy Jollimore describes the poem as the bearer of “a metaphorical meaning [that] must be something that cannot be precisely paraphrased, that is, expressed in a proposition or set of propositions in a way that leaves no uncaptured remainder, [and that can] give a person a special sort of *insight* into the world.”⁵ According to Richard Moran, an “image-making quality [that invites and guides seeing and experiencing] is what lies behind both the force and the unparaphrasability of poetic metaphor,”⁶ while Richard Wollheim holds that “the

aim of . . . linguistic . . . metaphor is to set what is metaphorized in a new light. Juliet, religion, the body—we see whatever it is afresh.”⁷

This convergence of views about the nature of the distinctively successful poem is striking, and it gives us some reason to think that we know what poetry, as distinct from ordinary prose, is, at least in its central cases and what poetry centrally aims to achieve. Where ordinary prose communicates a fact that might be grasped independently of specific linguistic formulation, in poetry the linguistic formulation is essential to the insight. (This formulation leaves room for the fact that the extraordinary prose of the novel and short story, say, are also forms of poetic composition, along with epic, lyric, and dramatic poetry, even if they are more continuously vernacular and their distance from song is instead established by extended narrative, allegory, diction, and dialogue more than by metaphor.⁸) But what this characterization of **(p.235)** poetry does not yet explain is *why* a practice of cultivating insight and imaginative involvement in and through attention to intensively figured linguistic forms might have developed. What interests or needs does such a practice serve? And exactly how do figuration, rhythm, and imaginative engagement in interaction with each other serve them?

It is possible that these questions have a miscellany of unrelated answers and no particular one. That is, there may just be lots of things available that it is interesting and important enough to attend to imaginatively and emotionally, via figuration, and there may be lots of particular devices of form and figuration for doing so. By taking them to respond to manifoldly diverse initiating particulars, this thought would account at least for the significant variety of poetic forms, from ode, villanelle, and blank verse to pastoral to ballad, sonnet, and sestina, among many others.

But while there is some truth in this thought—initiating particulars do matter; and poets may write for a wide miscellany of reasons, not only for the sake of clarification of perplexities—it also somewhat underplays the role of linguistic formulation in achieving imaginative insight and poetic vision by suggesting that engagement with the particular comes first, while finding the words to express that engagement comes second. While this can happen often enough, it is also false to the working habits of many poets, perhaps of most successful poets at some moments. Instead of beginning only with an object of, say, visual attention, they also *begin* with phrases or sounds, with the ear that has heard and internalized scraps of linguistic formulation and figuration that are then already at work within visual attention. (The visual attentions of painters to their subjects are similarly shaped by already existing painterly forms and achievements that they have internalized. Painters visit museums and studios in order to enter into a practice of imaginative attention that they inhabit or that inhabits them, not just to pick up devices for rendering what they already know they want to render.⁹ Likewise for poets reading other poets.) As Helen Vendler

puts it, “In justice to the poets we must call what they do, *in the process of conceiving and completing the finished poem*, an intricate form of thinking, even if it means expanding **(p.236)** our idea of what thinking is,”¹⁰ where the process often involves words entering into imaginative attention, not just coming after it.

Second, in casting the poem as an after-the-fact expression of an imaginative engagement already achieved, the thought that poems begin with particulars alone, rather than also within practices of formulation, further underdescribes the work that poetic formulation often and centrally does. To return to the passage cited from Peter McDonald, the “drama of form . . . perform[s] transformations on the writing self.” There is a kind of unburdening of confused, unclarified emotion and incoherence of thought, which unburdening is achieved essentially in and through the poetic formulation.¹¹ Hence, as Adorno poignantly puts it, “form has its substance . . . in suffering;”¹² the search for form arises in perplexity and incoherence, and it is concluded, if it is concluded successfully, not by finding an already formed instrument, like a hammer that might be used for driving a variety of nails or for other purposes, but by finding just these words that ease the burden of perplexity. This accounts for the sense that some poets have, and that many poets have at certain moments, of being possessed by the words as they are developing, rather than clearly picking out a tool from a toolbox. Coming to find oneself in possession of, or being possessed by, the right words can be the unburdening achievement of fullness of imaginative and emotional attention, as though before finding these words one had been caught not only in perplexity, but in dullness and failure of attention. The successful poem embodies and enacts—is—a fully realized act of attention. It stands as an emblem of the possibility of fully achieved utterance and action as such, as if prior to this achievement one had not been (fully) an attentive human subject at all, but only a dull cipher of convention.¹³ **(p.237)**

II

When we accept the fact that the practice of poetry is oriented around exemplary cases, where not every object that it is reasonable to call a poem will display the features of high achievement that are present in central cases, we can move beyond summary generalities only by focusing in some detail on the imaginative work of attention done by and in particular poems. So much the better, too, if a poem on which we focus is itself the product of a major theorist of poetry with explicit training in philosophy, where the poem and the philosophical theory illuminate one another.

Among more or less contemporary poets, Ingeborg Bachmann (1926–73) developed a theoretical conception of poetry and of the interests it serves as powerfully as anyone, both as a philosopher and as a poet. Bachmann completed a Ph.D. in philosophy at the University of Vienna in 1949, with a dissertation that systematically criticized Heidegger’s efforts to develop a systematic

(*wissenschaftlich*) and complete account of human experience. Drawing on Wittgenstein, Bachmann argued against Heidegger that fundamental human experiences of perplexity, anxiety, unclarity, failure of orientation, and so on are part of life, but they take place in moments of intermittent, occasioned surprise, and they can be captured, if at all, only partially and in the languages of art, preeminently poetry, not in systematic theory.

The fundamental experiences with which existential philosophy is concerned really are somehow living in human beings, and they press toward statement. But they are not rationally systematizable, and attempts at a rational system will always be condemned to fail. . . . The need for expression of this other realm of actuality, which withdraws itself from fixation by any systematizing existential philosophy, is approached, however, to an incomparably higher degree by art, with its manifold possibilities.¹⁴

As a text that resists doctrinal fixation and that is concerned with fugitive experiences of meaningfulness and absence of meaning rather than with material realities external to the subject, the poem is hence more the record and enactment of a developing, emotion- and attitude-infused **(p.238)** encounter than it is a direct statement about things. As Peter Beicken usefully puts it, for Bachmann “the presentation of truth in writing consists in a being underway, a direction-giving, a permanent designing, and as a result also a self-actualizing,”¹⁵ not in either the statement or the expression of something already known or felt distinctly prior to the process of writing.

In Bachmann’s particular case, the need to get underway, find a direction, and move toward a more sustainable subjectivity is overwhelmingly marked by a sense of pain or loss, omnipresent, but not yet registered. In her 1959 poetological speech upon receiving the radio play prize of the Austrian Blind War Veterans for her *The Good God of Manhattan*, she ascribes a need for coming to terms with not-yet-registered pain to human beings in general, at least under current conditions of life.

For we all want to come to see. And that clandestine pain makes us for the first time open to experience and especially to the truth. We say very simply and correctly, when we enter into this clear, aching condition, in which the pain becomes fruitful: my eyes have been opened. We say this not because we have perceived a thing or an incident externally, but rather because we have grasped what we otherwise could not see. And this is what art should accomplish: that for us, in this sense, our eyes are opened.¹⁶

Crucially, however, this opening of the eyes that art should accomplish is accomplished *only* by means of art, which is hence more than an instrument for

transmitting something already grasped. The language of poetry must itself make something happen. Poetry is neither a matter centrally of pleasing formal intricacies nor of transmission of a message, but rather of an understanding that is itself both achieved and transmitted essentially through the form of the particular poem. Insight and form come together, or not at all. As Bachmann puts it in her 1959–60 *Frankfurt Lectures* on poetics,

Actuality will always be encountered just there, where, with a new language, an ethically recognizing jolt takes place, and not where one tries simply to make the language new in itself, as if the language itself could drive home the knowledge **(p.239)** and could proclaim the experience that one had never had. On one who merely busies himself with language just in order that it feel novel, language itself soon takes revenge and unmask every intention. A new language must have a new gait, and it has this new gait only when a new spirit retains and preserves it.¹⁷

The result of Bachmann’s pursuit in poetic practice of a new way of seeing, motivated by pain and a felt sense of lack of orientation in the face of historical, social, and personal circumstances, and bound up with an attempt to generate a new language in and through which something is to happen, is a powerful balance of and competition between a wounded subjectivity and a subjectivity coming to vision and voice. Each poem is an experiment in both seeing and voicing, as the speaking subject attempts to work its way out of pain and perplexity and into fuller clarity, self-possession, and attention to the poem’s topic. As Beicken puts it, the development of a Bachmann poem is typically marked by

two chief tendencies. The first brings forward the poetic evidence, the exemplary showing of the injurious effects of history on the human subject and on the sphere of life that is essential to him. The other tendency refuses to remain with the evidence of vulnerability, but instead unfolds an inexhaustibly self-expressing vision of a breakthrough of the negatively existent, a breakthrough that corresponds to the wish to outrun the limits of what can actually be experienced.

The poem is then the enactment and the record of a movement—a something happening—that arises out of holding these two tendencies in tension with one another: an engaging with perplexing, injurious actuality, and an envisioning of a more meaningful, emotionally and intellectually coherent life otherwise. When this movement is especially well developed, then neither tendency is sacrificed to the other. Both escapist utopianism and simple documentation of the horrific must be avoided. Instead what takes place is a modulation between these two tendencies each coming into expression, until a controlled balance of attention to painful actuality and continuing longing for life otherwise is achieved.

The speaking poetic subject is itself shaped by and within this modulating movement between these two tendencies, rather than controlling it from outside. Hence it acts as what Irmela von der Lühe aptly characterizes as a “participant in [a] process of the loss of self-certainty (p.240) (*Ich-Gewißheit*)”¹⁸ that takes place both historically and in the poetic work that both responds to and is situated within that history. As Bachmann characterizes it in her *Frankfurt Lectures*, the poetic I is now an “I without guarantee (*Ich ohne Gewähr*)” in any immediate self-certainties of thought or feeling, an I that must be “read off” its own formulations (*ein abgelesenes Ich*) rather than something that controls them out of clear thought and feeling in advance of utterance or inscription.¹⁹ In the face of the horrors and perplexities of the modern world—immediately those of Austria during and after World War II, but more broadly those of modernity as such, understood (as in Hofmannsthal’s “Lord Chandos Letter” and Musil’s *The Man Without Qualities*: two significant influences on Bachmann) as a scene of the loss of possibilities of coherent and stable identity, the poetic I is unmoored from any clear self-presence. As von der Lühe puts it, for Bachmann “what was once pronounced with a claim to the greatest possible authenticity, what was once when pronounced an indicator of an unchallengeable identity, of an unbroken self-consciousness—this guarantee that was once articulated by means of the personal pronoun ‘I’ is gone.”²⁰ Surrounded by social opacity and flux, without anchors for thought and feeling, the I is itself destabilized. In a 1953 radio play, Bachmann has the character called The Critic praise the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* for his “intellectual honesty and awe in the face of an actuality that has withdrawn from human understanding.”²¹ In her own voice, she remarks that “A walk around the corner is enough to make one insane. The world has become a sickness.”²² As a result, nothing can be taken for granted—not how conditions will develop, not one’s own thoughts and feelings, and not any way of life that might afford satisfactions and embody meaningfulness. Without givens in external conditions, thoughts and feelings, or modes of life, we must, (p.241) as Bachmann puts it, “incessantly justify ourselves and everything that we do, desire, and think; life as we have lived it for millennia is nothing that can be taken for granted (*nichts Selbstverständliches*).”²³

And yet, despite her sense of pains and opacity, both contemporary Austrian and more generally modern, Bachmann holds fast to the convictions “that our power (*Kraft*) reaches further than our unhappiness, that one, though robbed of much, still knows how to raise oneself up (*sich zu erheben weiß*).”²⁴ The key to this movement aimed at re-establishing and stabilizing the speaking subject and its modes of attention and involvement is “to think exactly and courageously,”²⁵ that is, not to give in to cliché, journalistic representation, or wallowing in muddles of feeling, but instead to embrace attentiveness and openness, so that one both lets something happen to oneself amidst chaos, perplexity, pain, and dullness and finds oneself coming to words that fitly achieve and enact the dawning of stabler

attention. The poetic “I” is, as von der Lühe puts it, initially rhetorized, medialized, and formalized: emptied out, as it were, into a loss of clarity and self-presence as a result of modern practices of technologization and fragmentarily particularized communication. But this emptied out I also bears within it a dream of greater and stabler self-unity and a power of beginning to actualize this dream in the achievement of fuller attentiveness, against the sways of medialization, by means of poetic language.²⁶ “At the end of the lectures,” we then find, in von der Lühe’s formulation, “not resignation or a fashionable confession of an in principle loss of meaning, but rather a hope that repeatedly shines through all skepticism, an expression of the inability to give up, of a holding fast, along with all the doubts about language with which it is bound up, to the possibility of the I *through* language and *through* poetry.”²⁷

The result is that the “I without guarantee,” as it develops itself in poetry by means of language, functions “as a placeholder for the human (p.242) voice,”²⁸ itself here understood as a metonym for more fully achieved and stabilized subjectivity.²⁹ Though it involves within daily actuality “a peculiar, strange way of existing, asocial, solitary, and cursed,”³⁰ the life of a poetizing human subject moving into such fuller subjectivity, by means of poetic language, in relation to existing conditions stands in turn as a metonym of human attentiveness and human life as such, above the levels of cliché and animal reactivity. “I speak; therefore I am.”³¹ In order to raise oneself up to fuller subjectivity by means of poetic development, what is required is a “thinking-with (*Mitdenken*) of despair and of hope.”³² Insofar as this poetic development can take place, we are not condemned to be ciphers of the conditions that surround us. We can, by means of poetic composition, make a move in relation to the actual. “In the interplay of the impossible and the possible, we expand our possibilities.”³³

(p.243) III

“Böhmen liegt am Meer” / “Bohemia Lies By the Sea” is one of Bachmann’s last poems. Written in 1964, it was first published in November 1968, after the Prague Spring uprising in 1968, ended by the arrival in Prague of Soviet tanks on August 15. It addresses social conditions abstractly, whether those of the Soviet invasion, of the post-war Austrian economic recovery and silences about the war, of fascism during and after the war, or of all these all at once as symptoms of modernity; and, like most of Bachmann’s best lyrics—and arguably like the strongest lyrics in general—it addresses the nature, function, and value of lyric vision and accomplishment in relation to social conditions, paradigmatically in its rehearsals of what its poetic speaking will do or is unable to do, has suffered and will continue to suffer, in virtue of the possession but difficult exercise of poetic powers. Here is the poem in its entirety.

Böhmen liegt am Meer

Sind hierorts Häuser grün, tret ich noch in ein Haus.

Sind hier die Brücken heil, geh ich auf gutem Grund.

Ist Liebesmüh in alle Zeit verloren, verlier ich sie hier gern.

Bin ich's nicht, ist es einer, der ist so gut wie ich.

Grenzt hier ein Wort an mich, so laß ich's grenzen.
Liegt Böhmen noch am Meer, glaub ich den Meeren wieder.
Und glaub ich noch ans Meer, so hoffe ich auf Land.
Bin ich's, so ist's ein jeder, der soviel ist wie ich.
Ich will nichts mehr für mich. Ich will zugrunde gehen.

Zugrund—das heißt zum Meer, dort find ich Böhmen wieder.
Zugrund gerichtet, wach ich ruhig auf.
Von Grund auf weiß ich jetzt, und ich bin unverloren.

Kommt her, ihr Böhmen alle, Seefahrer, Hafenhuren und Schiffe
unverankert. Wollt ihr nicht böhmisch sein, Illyrer, Veroneser
und Venezianer alle. Spielt die Komödien, die lachen machen

Und die zum Weinen sind. Und irrt euch hundertmal,
wie ich mich irrte und Proben nie bestand,
doch hab ich sie bestanden, ein um das andre Mal.

Wie Böhmen sie bestand und eines schönen Tags
ans Meer begradigt wurde und jetzt am Wasser liegt.

(p.244)

Ich grenz noch an ein Wort und an ein andres Land,
Ich grenz, wie wenig auch, an alles immer mehr,
ein Böhme, ein Vagrant, der nichts hat, den nichts hält,
begabt nur noch, vom Meer, das strittig ist, Land meiner
Wahl zu sehen.

Bohemia Lies By the Sea

If houses here are green, I'll step inside a house.
If bridges here are sound, I'll walk on solid ground.
If love's labour's lost in every age, I'd gladly lose it here.

If it's not me, it's one who is as good as me.

If a word here borders on me, I'll let it border.
If Bohemia still lies by the sea, I'll believe in the sea again.
And believing in the sea, thus I can hope for land.

If it's me, then it's anyone, for he's as worthy as me.
I want nothing more for myself. I want to go under.

Under—that means the sea, there I'll find Bohemia again.
From my grave, I wake in peace.
From deep down I know now, and I'm not lost.

Come here all you Bohemians, seafarers, dock whores, and ships

unanchored. Don't you want to be Bohemians, all you Illyrians,
Veronese and Venetians. Play the comedies that make us laugh

until we cry. And err a hundred times,
as I erred and never withstood the trials,
though I did withstand them time after time.

As Bohemia withstood them and one fine day
was released to the sea and now lies by water.

I still border on a word and on another land,
I border, like little else, on everything more and more,

a Bohemian, a wandering minstrel, who has nothing, who
is held by nothing, gifted only at seeing, by a doubtful sea,
the land of my choice.³⁴

(p.245)

Bohemia, of course, does not lie by the sea, since it is entirely surrounded by Germany, Austria, and Moravia-Silesia. The title refers to the stage directions to Act 3, Scene 3, of Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*: “Bohemia: a desert country near the sea.” Hence it invokes a counterfactual, imagined place of magical rescue, since Bohemia in *The Winter's Tale* is the place where Perdita, the daughter of King Leontes of Sicily, is refound. (Leontes, falsely suspecting his wife Hermione of adultery, had ordered the infant to be put to death; the shepherd Antigonus, charged with this task, after being visited on ship by a vision of the now dead Hermione, has followed her instructions and left Perdita to death by exposure on the coast of Bohemia, where she is then found and raised by an itinerant, elderly shepherd.) Bohemia by the sea is then, one might say, the imagined place where things are set right, where violence is undone, misunderstandings are overcome, and meaningful life is achieved. And the question of this poem is then what this place might mean, and how if it at all it might be entered, by one who is a Bohemian, a vagrant, and who wishes to find Bohemia again—a place where things make sense. The poem is hence thematically structured by what Peter Horst Neumann aptly calls “a yearning for salvation” (*eine Erlösungs-Sehnsucht*)³⁵ in the face of a troubled and fallen actuality.

Metrically, the poem is carefully organized to balance and hold in tension a regular, highly formal meter—the alexandrine or iambic hexameter—with both slight deviations from this and a smaller number of lines that are more prose-like. (The English translation captures some but not all of this metrical ordering.) As Horst Neumann puts it, “the alexandrine is written into the poem as a principle of order, but through the breaking of this norm the language swings into the open.”³⁶ The effect of this breaking free of the alexandrine is, however, less liberation than a loss of intensity and control of voice. It as though the poem were continually establishing a gait and then stumbling away from it,

as though poetic vision were being successfully all but naturally housed in achieved unity of form, only repeatedly then to founder almost instantaneously **(p.246)** back into the prosaic. Hence the poem mirrors metrically the thematics of salvation or magical recovery into fuller meaningfulness (a gait established), glimpsed and achieved for a moment, but always again lost.

More specifically, lines 1, 2, 7, 9, 16, 19, 21, and 22 (a third of the 24 complete lines of the poem) are perfect alexandrines, each with a caesura in the exact middle of the line. Lines 5, 6, 8, 10, 12, 17, 18, 20, another third of the poem) are almost alexandrines, with a syllable either missing or added either at the end of the line or just before the caesura. Here the effect is one of slight stumbling or unsettling, while the overall sense of the meter is maintained. Line 11 is an iambic pentameter—a compression of metric intensity from the alexandrine hexameters. Lines 3, 4, lines 13, 14, 15, and lines 23, 24, 25 are then distinctively prosaic and colloquial, not metrically organized. They enact a stepping back of the speaking subject from immersion in the songlike development of the meter (already itself fraying in the imperfect alexandrines), as though the subject were both not able to go on with them and were thrown into distantiated reflectiveness on what just has, or hasn't, been accomplished metrically and visionarily. The four sets of strongly marked non-alexandrines—the prosaic 3-4, 13-15, and 23-5, plus the iambic pentameter 11—invite special attention as metacommentaries on the achievements and limits of poetic vision and poetic form.

Lines 3 and 4 initiate this metacommentary. “If it’s not me” who has entered into a house, walked on solid ground, and gladly lost love, then “it’s one who is as good as me.” Perdita, or Shakespeare, or the speaking subject living in the poem imaginatively and outside daily actuality, has made meaning somehow, and that can matter for an empirical I within daily actuality. The other “I”s may suffice, at least for a few lines or moments, to establish movement, entry into a house, and love. As a result, after this first interrupting reflection in lines 3 and 4, the rhythm reasserts itself, with some stumbling, in lines 5-10. But the desire of the subject that is caught up in this metrical development is a desire for a life otherwise and sustained within this movement, not a desire for ordinary life, ego-identity, and violent social differentiation within the fallen actual. Hence it is, for an actually living, socially situated subject, a desire for release or death, a *Sehnsucht nach dem Tod*: to find Bohemia again, at the sea, would be, like Hölderlin’s Empedocles, to go under, to be directed to collapse or ruin (“Zugrund gerichtet”).

In the compressed, iambic pentameter line 11, the speaking subject awakes or reawakens abruptly and in a way that fractures the rhythm, **(p.247)** and yet also calmly or in peace (“ruhig”) from this desire and its partial or fleeting fulfillment in the rhythms of the poem and into actual empirical identity. From deep down, from the bottom or fundament of things (“Von Grund auf”) the

nature of the desire that motivates poetry is recognized, accepted, survived, and remembered or held in consciousness. “I know now and I’m not lost.”

The second prosaic interjection in lines 13–15 is then an oratorical call, from the standpoint of the surviving, existing, empirical subject who remembers, to others to join in coping with the pains of actuality by playing, by living unanchored, as Bohemians, in at least temporary withdrawal or escape from socially compelled seriousness and socially anchored identity. Such refuges—now marked as intermittent—will not be wholly redemptive. Crying will come, and error, and, with luck and persistence, survival: tests or challenges (“Proben”) may be withstood, and imagination and the counterfactual (“Böhmen/Bohemia”) may survive, stand, even if one is not quite sure how, by moving, as the speaker of this poem moves, into and then again out of poetic organization and metrical movement.

What remains is then a speaker or subject who, like Bohemia, borders or touches on another word or land—another, more meaningful, less troubled, way of living and feeling—without being able actually quite to enter it, like Moses who died on Mount Pisgah, on the east bank of the Jordan, overlooking the promised land of Canaan, but without being able to enter it,³⁷ Bordering on a word, the poetic subject is able to form and sustain itself in the perfect alexandrines of lines 21 and 22, but only as a wanderer, seer, and borderer on another land of choice, and the last three lines 23–25 stumble back into prose and into the distantiated recognition of this fact of actual, empirical identity and of the impossibility of living within imagination unfreighted by actuality’s difficulties.

The “noch”—“yet,” “still,” “nevertheless”—that occurs five times in the poem, toward the beginning in lines 1, 6, and 7, then again at the end, lines 21 and 24, is a marker of having been able to make enough of a **(p.248)** movement, but only fleetingly, and only just enough: a marker of having arrived fleetingly at achieved vision and poetic formation, but also of having been unable to enter and live wholly within poetically formed life.³⁸ This “noch” qualifies the verb forms—“enter” or “step inside;” “lies” (for Bohemia); “believe;” “border;” and “gifted” or “talented” (“begabt”)—that describe relations to the meaningful, the imaginative, the poetically formed, and to counterfactual life otherwise. The speaker almost, or still, or yet, or nonetheless has such relations, but they are too weak in the face of the ways of actuality to yield any standing redemption. Prose and distantiated reflection return to undo poetic formation, as the poem drifts off toward its end, leaving the speaker with only a sense of having been able to see life otherwise and been able to formulate it poetically for a moment, for a few lines, but without having been able to enter it or live within it.

IV

What, then, has been achieved in “*Böhmen liegt am Meer*, its achievement exemplary of the possibilities of achievement in lyric poetry more generally? Crucially, the poem is both the expression and the enactment of a multiply overdetermined and repeated experience of suffering, in particular of a failure to live in the world with others in reciprocity and mutual intersubjective fluency. It registers an experience of being blocked in fulfilling a desire for reciprocity and intersubjective fluency, together with an imagining of life otherwise, an imagining that expresses that fundamental desire half-fulfilled. And equally crucially, it registers a sense that this desire persists as unfulfilled, or as at best partly fulfilled in and through the work itself, as a placeholder for life otherwise. Thus it offers us not an opportunity to know ourselves in the way we might know the dispositions of measurable empirical objects in space, but rather an opportunity to acknowledge a shared condition as enacted and expressed.³⁹ Stendhal’s conception of art as a *promesse de (p.249) bonheur* and Adorno’s conception of art as a plenipotentiary of a future praxis come to mind (art and beauty as placeholders for and anticipations of more meaningful life)—marked elegiacally by a sense of always only bordering on the realization of any such anticipation, promise, or practice. Or as Kant describes the workings of poetic imagination in §49 of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, “On the faculties of mind which constitute genius,”

The imagination (as a productive cognitive faculty) is, namely, very powerful in creating, as it were, another nature, out of the material which the actual one gives it. We entertain ourselves with it [this other nature] when experience seems too mundane to us; we transform the latter [actual nature], no doubt always in accordance with analogous laws, but also in accordance with principles that lie higher in reason (and which are every bit as natural to us as those in accordance with which the understanding apprehends empirical nature); in this we feel our freedom from the law of association (which applies to the empirical use of that faculty), in accordance with which material can certainly be lent to us by nature, but can yet be reworked by us into something entirely different, namely into that which steps beyond nature.⁴⁰

That the pains of the material and social actual—in all its varieties—are enough to prompt imaginings of life otherwise, that human subjects have powers to form materials, whether of words or of life, poetically, so as to sustain more meaningful life, even if only momentarily, and that human subjects can recognize and accept this fate of always only bordering on another land of choice—all this is more than enough to give lyric poetry, in all its textual densities, in all its devices of figuration and attention and rhythmically controlled movement, an enduring place in the imaginative economy of human life, if we but enter into its modes of development. What would it be to live as a human subject without a desire for life otherwise, without the exercise and development of poetic

practices that articulate this desire, and without recognition of their limits and hence of the standing force of desire and imagination? Poetry is a face of the human.⁴¹

Notes:

(¹) While I cite here only contemporary literary scholars and philosophers, the conception of poetry that they are urging is shared by, among others, both Wordsworth, in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* and Hegel, in the *Lectures on Aesthetics*, and this conception is arguably most fully and adequately worked out by them. For useful summaries of their views, see, on Wordsworth, Richard Eldridge, *Literature, Life, and Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), ch. 4, “Attention, Expressive Power, and Interest in Life: Wordsworth’s ‘Tintern Abbey,’ ” and, on Hegel, Eldridge, “The Work of Literary Imagination: Hegel, Rilke, and What Writers Do,” *Journal of Literary Theory*, 3/1 (2009): 1–17.

(²) Angela Leighton, *On Form: Poetry, Aestheticism, and the Legacy of a Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 265, 26–7, 27.

(³) Peter McDonald, “‘Beside Himself’: Robert Lowell’s *Collected Poems*,” *Poetry Review* 93 (2003–4): 64; cited in Leighton, *On Form*, 24.

(⁴) Elisabeth Camp, “Two Varieties of Literary Imagination,” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 33 (2009): 128, 129.

(⁵) Troy Jollimore, “Vision, Cognition, and the Language of Poetry,” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 33 (2009): 138.

(⁶) Richard Moran, “Metaphor, Image, and Force,” *Critical Inquiry*, 16 (autumn 1989): 90. Cited in Jollimore, “Vision, Cognition, and the Language of Poetry,” 146.

(⁷) Richard Wollheim, *Painting as an Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 307. Cited in Jollimore, “Vision, Cognition, and the Language of Poetry,” 146–7.

(⁸) See Eldridge, “The Question of Truth in Literature: *Die poetische Auffassung der Welt*,” in Garry L. Hagberg (ed.), *The Ethical Content of Literature: Character, Identity, Perception* (forthcoming), for an account, derived from Hegel, of poetic imagination at work in the novel.

(⁹) For useful development of this thought, explicating Clive Bell on significant form as not only a property of canvases, but also a means of imaginative attention that develops within a painterly tradition, see Thomas M. McLaughlin, “Clive Bell’s Aesthetic: Tradition and Significant Form,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 35/4 (1977), 433–43.

⁽¹⁰⁾ Helen Vendler, *Poets Thinking: Pope, Whitman, Dickinson, Yeats* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 119; emphasis added.

⁽¹¹⁾ For an extended development of this idea, with central reference to Wordsworth, Collingwood, and Spinoza, see Eldridge, *Literature, Life, and Modernity*.

⁽¹²⁾ T. W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, tr. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 260.

⁽¹³⁾ For developments of this idea see, in addition to the writers mentioned in n. 11, Charles Altieri, *The Art of Twentieth Century American Poetry: Modernism and After* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006) and *The Particulars of Rapture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003); Stanley Cavell, “Music Discomposed,” in Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, updated edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 180–212; and Timothy Gould, “The Names of Action,” in Eldridge (ed.), *Stanley Cavell* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 48–78.

⁽¹⁴⁾ Ingeborg Bachmann, *Die kritische Aufnahme der Existentialphilosophie Martin Heideggers* (The Critical Reception of Martin Heidegger’s Existential Philosophy) (1948), ed. Robert Pichl (Munich: Piper, 1985), 129, 130; my translation.

⁽¹⁵⁾ Peter Beicken, *Ingeborg Bachmann* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1988), 155–6; my translation.

⁽¹⁶⁾ Bachmann, “Die Wahrheit ist dem Menschen zumutbar,” in Bachmann, *Werke*, iv, ed. Christine Koschel, Inge von Weidenbaum, and Clemens Münster (Munich: Piper, 1993), 275; my translation. The title of this speech is all but untranslatable, with “zumutbar” embracing all of “reasonable for,” “accessible to,” and “entitled to.”

⁽¹⁷⁾ Bachmann, *Frankfurter Vorlesungen: Probleme zeitgenössischer Dichtung—I: Fragen und Scheinfragen*, in Bachmann, *Werke*, iv. 192; my translation.

⁽¹⁸⁾ Irmela von der Lühe, “‘Ich ohne Gewähr’: Ingeborg Bachmanns Frankfurter Vorlesungen zur Poetik,” in Christine Koschel and Inge von Weidenbaum (eds), *Kein objektives Urteil—nur ein lebendiges: Texte Zum Werk von Ingeborg Bachmann* (Munich: Piper, 1989), 577; my translation.

⁽¹⁹⁾ Bachmann, *Frankfurter Vorlesungen—III Das schreibende Ich*, in *Werke*, iv. 217–18; my translation.

⁽²⁰⁾ Von der Lühe, “‘Ich ohne Gewähr,’” p. 577; my translation.

(²¹) Bachmann, “Sagbares und Unsagbares—Die Philosophie Ludwig Wittgensteins,” in *Werke*, iv. 125; my translation.

(²²) Bachmann, “Jede Jugend ist die dümmste [Entwurf],” in *Werke*, iv. 334; my translation.

(²³) Bachmann, “Auf das Opfer darf keiner sich berufen’ [Entwurf],” in *Werke*, iv. 335; my translation.

(²⁴) Bachmann, “Die Wahrheit ist dem Menschen zumutbar,” in *Werke*, iv. 277; my translation.

(²⁵) Bachmann, “Ins tausendjährige Reich,” in *Werke*, iv. 28; my translation.

(²⁶) Von der Lühe, “ ‘Ich ohne Gewähr,’ ” 578; my translation.

(²⁷) Von der Lühe, “ ‘Ich ohne Gewähr,’ ” 586–7; my translation; emphases added.

(²⁸) Bachmann, *Frankfurter Vorlesungen III: Das schreibende Ich*, in *Werke*, iv. 237; my translation.

(²⁹) In a useful survey of the development of various forms of speaking personae in Bachmann’s oeuvre, Amy Kepple Strawser charts a development from (i) a voice speaking as a member of a collective “we” in relation to immediate historical conditions, to (ii) a “cosmic I” concerned with questions of death, existence, and nature, to (iii) a male persona, to (iv) an unspecified “you,” to (v) the marked subjective I of the author. Strawser argues further that “the discovery of her subjective voice contributed to Bachmann’s desertion of the lyric form” in favor of the novel. Her “growing awareness of herself as a woman writer” blocked her ability to speak lyrically, with, as it were, ontological exemplarity in relation to existing conditions. (“The Development and Ultimate Cessation of Ingeborg Bachmann’s Lyric Voice,” in Gudrun Brokoph-Mauch (ed.), *Thunder Rumbling at my Heels: Tracing Ingeborg Bachmann* (Riverside, CA: Ariadne Press, 1998), 186). (Bachmann gave up writing poetry altogether in 1967.) This seems right, but it may be wondered which of these authorial voices—the cosmic-ontological-lyrical or the markedly personal, social, particularized, female, novelistic—enables Bachmann to develop her greatest artistic powers. Perhaps courting an ontological voice is a requirement for successful lyric.

(³⁰) Bachmann, “Rede zur Verleihung des Anton-Wildgans-Preises,” in *Werke*, iv. 294; my translation.

(³¹) Bachmann, *Das schreibende Ich*, in *Werke*, iv. 225; my translation.

(³²) Bachmann, *Frankfurter Vorlesungen I: Fragen und Scheinfragen*, in *Werke*, iv. 183; my translation. Von der Lühe usefully notes that the preposition in this passage is “von” (of), not “an” (about) (Von der Lühe, “ ‘Ich ohne Gewähr,’ ” 583).

The task is to think in, through, and by means of these moods, in relation to the objects that prompt them and the possibilities of language that develop in relation to them, not to describe these moods from outside them.

(³³) Bachmann, “Die Wahrheit ist dem Menschen zumutbar,” in *Werke*, iv. 276; my translation.

(³⁴) Ingeborg Bachmann, “Böhmen liegt am Meer” / “Bohemia lies by the Sea,” tr. Peter Filkins, from *Darkness Spoken: The Collected Poems of Ingeborg Bachmann*. Copyright © 1978, 2000 by Piper Verlag GmbH, Munich. Translation copyright © 2006 by Peter Filkins. Reprinted with the permission of The Permissions Company, Inc. on behalf of Zephyr Press, <www.zephyrpress.org>.

(³⁵) Peter Horst Neumann, “Ingeborg Bachmann’s Böhmisches Manifest,” in Koschel and von Weidenbaum, *Kein objektives Urteil*, 387.

(³⁶) Neumann, “Ingeborg Bachmann’s Böhmisches Manifest,” 384; my translation.

(³⁷) Erich Fried, “‘Ich grenz noch an ein Wort und an ein andres Land’: Zu Ingeborg Bachmanns Böhmen-Gedicht,” in Koschel and von Weidenbaum, *Kein objektives Urteil*, 392, notes the parallel to Moses. See Deuteronomy 32: 48–34: 5, especially 33: 52, where the Lord says to Moses, “Yet thou shalt see the land before thee; but thou shalt not go thither unto the land which I give the children of Israel” (Authorized King James Version, ed. Robert Carroll and Stephen Pickett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 260).

(³⁸) Fried notes the occurrence of these five “nochs” and argues that they indicate the co-presence and intermixing of a resistance (“ein Sich-Sträuben”) and surrender to death and a movement within which one has no place as a subject (“ein Zugrundegehen”). “Ich grenz noch,” 393.

(³⁹) For an important discussion of acknowledgment as a central cognitive aim of literary practice, see John Gibson, *Fiction and the Weave of Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 102–20.

(⁴⁰) Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of the Power of Judgment*, tr. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 5: 314, p. 192; translation slightly modified; Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974), A190–1, B194–5, p. 250.

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