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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 Ricoeur'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.

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