

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)

elling 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 un-gainliness 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 Sandra 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.