Alexander García Düttmann

“Echo Reconciles”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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