

POETIC
SPONTANEITY
BEYOND
CONTEXT OF
MEANING

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“Just what the ‘truest philosophy’ is, is a matter of some dispute. But critics of this school do not lack definite, not to say dogmatic, convictions on this point. [...] they are ready to pronounce *ex cathedra* judgments, because they are committed to some conception of the relation of man to the universe that flourished in some past epoch. They regard its restoration as essential to the redemption of society from its present evil state. Fundamentally, their criticisms are moral recipes.”

John Dewey (1934, 319)

Dewey's reply to T.S. Elliot's "the truest philosophy is the best material for the greatest poet" surgically exposes an ethical claim on the work of art. There is every sense in making the ethical claim that the work is genuine, a *true* work of art, to the degree that it is *about* life. Advanced as a critique to modern experiment in making, this *aboutness* became the underlying core of the arguments for understanding making in terms of poiesis [techne as phronesis]. Heidegger in "The Origin of the Work of Art", in confronting the Hegelian prophecy about the end of art, asks similarly whether modern art represents truth or not; "truth that is decisive for our historical existence." (1971, 700)

Genuine work, the work of art, is always in touch with things. However embedded in the world in an order of things, it still moves beyond this order in the way it orders its own elements, in the way it constructs itself. In its self-referential autonomy, a kind of projective singularity, the genuine work radically ripples the webs of possible meanings, the order of things upon which it builds its own world in its own thingness here and now. Genuine work is about life, however to bind that life before the work to some existential conditions, to reduce life to significances from some contingent historical practice, before work's own attempt to constructive dialogue in making our reality, terminates the value of making itself as a mediating capacity. Life in this instance before the work cancels out the work.

Grassi's understanding of the notion of 'work', as it articulates on the agency of human creativity and the possibility of communication beyond known significances in the making of a common world, has an ontological value: "Inventive and metaphorical activity lies at the basis of work, be it material or intellectual effort through which we strengthen our existence." (1980, 99) Not so far removed from Kant's synthetic apriori judgments (1781), Grassi underlines "the concepts through which we come to understand and 'grasp' each situation come from our ingenious, metaphorical, fantastic capacities that convey meanings in the concrete situation with which we are confronted." (1980, 100) We live in the spontaneity of

concrete situations and there are always new constellations of phenomena *to be in touch with*. The immediacy of here and now, in an openness to the thing in front of us, requires new syntheses of imagination. Synthetic, because a newness emerges, and *almost* apriori, because we apprehend it in its systemic unity, its self-referential autonomy only through which the newness emerges in all its otherness, the spontaneous act of imagination cannot be explained on the basis of some general acquired through traditions and language. Our web of meanings is always under construction in a self-reflexive response to new events, things that happen to us if we are attentive, in an openness to the world; it is always in the making through our acts of making sense, sometimes even blindly.

The view that our *true* knowledge of the world and ourselves is in constant change and formation, always in the making, in the living body of language is also Gadamer's main thesis in *Truth and Method* (1960). Beyond the metaphorical flexibility of language, there is an original act of seeing in particular situations which initiates expressions into the familiarity of language that also transforms the general of the language by the addition of a new particular. Meaning changes through original acts of seeing. Reminiscent of Heidegger's *aletheia*, in an instance of *phronesis*, something shows itself in its somethingness.

However, because these acts of new seeing require established contexts of meaning [the moment of 'prejudice', 'fore-judgment' in Gadamer], his notion of concept formation in moments of genuine understanding of a particular cannot explain the spontaneity of the work: because, genuine work is disruptive: it does away with contexts of meaning; it rewrites them in its own language. Encountered with prejudice, the work is mute. It only comes to speak when prejudice is suspended, when any context of possible meaning to initiate the hermeneutic circle is dropped away from the fragile formulations of perception.

This is the moment of poetry in genuine work. Above and beyond the general metaphoricity of language, the poetic utterance cannot be subsumed under a general significance: it is not within an established context of meaning, thus the formulations of perception are fragile. To *understand* the poetic utterance, you need to recite it endlessly. Transcending the contexts of meaning, the poetic utterance stays with its intentional object. *What is said*, is only possible within the poetic utterance as a singular projection of reverberations (reverberations of contexts of meaning) in and of itself. The genuine work is its own context of meaning.

If the poetic act is getting hold of a particular meaning within its own rule, then its conception depends again on an original seeing, but this time, because it is spontaneous, it is without a context of meaning prior to its own utterance. Even if the general metaphoricity of

language and poetry issue from the same ground of participation beyond language – that of a layer of experience prior to language, the possibility of poetry shows that our imaginative capacities to see and apprehend things are beyond the significances of language or the contexts of meaning that are constantly formed in effective traditions.

If the general metaphoricity of language can be explained by judgments of phronesis, as done by Gadamer, as fusion of a new particular and an old conception, ‘the fusion of horizons’ as he calls it, the moment of poetry can only be explained by judgments of taste which are more like Gestalt switches in our experience. Our perception shifts in a sudden moment of illumination of a wholeness that emerges in the work, a spontaneous unity binds imagination. And it is important to see the continuity between these two senses of judgment of a particular. The meaningfulness of life in concrete situations depends upon our ability to make sense of new particulars. If meaningfulness of life lies in genuine acts of encounter with what is seen, perceived, experienced, in an openness to the world in its otherness, each such moment of being in touch with things is an act of phronesis, and each involves a certain imaginative ordering of phenomena beyond known generals. Utterance of a new sentence, and its possibility of being understood by others, is dependent upon seeing the new occasion in its otherness, which, even if within the possibilities of the language, is still a new phenomenon that is ordered into a new significance. The difference between the new phenomenon and old meaning is bridged by a synthetic act of imagination.

But we also know that in the experience of poetry, there is no such old conception that the poetic utterance transforms. Poetic utterance says what it says beyond any such context of meaning, and it still *makes sense to us*, as we see its intention in the reverberations of its images, even if we cannot *know* it beyond the moment of its utterance in poetry. The poetic act liquefies the contexts of meaning in the language and brings forth a new spontaneity, emerging meaning, even through bizarre operations on the known phenomena. It is this spontaneous emergence of new meaning in poetic utterance that shows us the layer of first-person phenomenal experience on which we can pass judgments beyond acts of phronesis, beyond contexts of meaning. Such judgments, through which poetry makes sense, relate to lived experience directly beyond the known significances and are products of imagination - spontaneity of mind that enable new seeings, new relations. These judgments are sharable in principle to the degree that we share our experiences in common language.

This level of lived experience is what Dewey sees as the ground of aesthetic experience; and far from being a private act of pleasure as it is mostly deemed by its critics, aesthetic experience emerges from a common ground of relating to the world beyond reified significances

- 1 "Kant rightly characterizes such taste as *sensus communis* or common sense. Taste is communicative; it represents something that we all possess to a greater or lesser degree. It is clearly meaningless to talk about a purely individual and subjective taste in the field of aesthetics. To this extent it is to Kant that we owe our initial understanding of the validity of aesthetic claims, even though nothing is subsumed under the concept of a purpose." (Gadamer 1986, 19)

and contexts of meanings in effective traditions. This level of lived experience is also the ground of genuine work that is a participatory act of an agent, as the unity of subject and object beyond what is already done, said, and experienced in the making of culture.

If phronesis is an imaginative judgment, it is also always within a given context of meaning with its own articulated forms. Judgment of taste, as understood both by Kant (1790) and Gadamer (1986), is phronesis without an established context of meaning,¹ where a particular spatio-temporal unity can be judged on its own terms as bearing its own rule in itself. Such a particular condition becomes its own context of meaning in its uniqueness beyond established contexts of significances. If everyday life is a context of phronesis in the making of the work, the making itself, as construction of formal structures, in the object that is experienced, involves judgments of taste as we do not have a context of generals for spatio-temporal forms as would be the case in a dictionary of forms, a vocabulary of elements, a stylistic system, an iconographical system, a language of types, etc. both in the sense of vernacular and classical. A kind of memory, of course, is involved in construction of formal structures, but judgment of taste in the aesthetic experience already contains that moment of memory as one of its conditions. The ground of memory in aesthetic experience is not the retrospection of known significances in certain contexts of meaning but a more liquefied field of experiences – not all of which are explicitly available in the consciousness as articulate significances. It is not about the order of things but about the way we order things in space and time, in our first-person phenomenal experience.

Thus, to conceive making of the work on the model of phronesis without establishing the double aspect of its simultaneous thinking of life in the making of the object would be establishing unified contexts of meaning prior to work: *what is proper to do in the moment of the object*, the properness of life in one of its representations. Genuine work demands its place in the dialogue of culture by negating the givenness of contexts of meaning from above. It disrupts prior perceptions. The moment of properness in the work is not the properness of life before the object but the properness of life as it emerges in the actual experience of the object. One has to see the work's claim on its own. Whether this experience is going to hold in one's self as to the unity of her/his overall web of meanings or not is a different kind of judgment that falls into the moral-practical realm and cannot account for the meaningfulness of the object as it is in front of us.

Understanding the genuine work, the work of art, as a cultural agent beyond a model of language as representation (also beyond any non-linguistic system as all forms of signification, representation, suppose a structural field of signification on the model of language,

- 2 "When egotism is not made the measure of reality and value, we are citizens of this vast world beyond ourselves, and any intense realization of its presence with and in us brings a peculiarly satisfying sense of unity in itself and with ourselves" (Dewey 1934, 195).

which is a web of generals) requires understanding the moment of judgment of taste in its construction. The thinking of life in the making of the object requires precise calibrations of spatio-temporal intentions that are only accessible to judgments of taste. The unity of the object as we hold it as an aesthetic nuance [fragile formations of perception] in its experience is the product of judgment of taste. What it says emerges because of this aesthetic nuance, as this aesthetic nuance.

Any thinking of the work on the model of language has to accept something like a dictionary of elements - forms, types - where the work becomes a cryptic entity (try to *see* a word and imagine the possibilities of understanding its meaning by just looking at it) that can only refer to other works. Our relation to work as a constructed form is not like words that would be the case if we knew them on the basis of other forms (dictionary). The genuine work, in the way it orders its own elements, in the way it constructs itself, does not *represent* meaning, it *performs* meaning spatio-temporally by organizing first-person experience. And our first-person experience is not an effective tradition that can be reduced to the model of hermeneutic commerce on the model of language where all seeing is reduced to seeing particulars under known significances.

Re: *There is every sense in making the ethical claim that the work is genuine, a true work of art, to the degree that it is about life.* And every genuine work is about life, but just what that life prior to work is cannot be the moment of the work in the making of our reality. Reducing that life to some existential conditions, to some set of significances from some historical practice, cancels out the agency of the work as a constructive instance in the dialogue of culture. Binding the work's claim to meaning to a condition of life prior to itself also forgets a larger sense of participation in the human dialogue beyond the moral-practical exigencies sedimented in life forms through languages and traditions. Reified forms of consciousness as such, in contrast to their enabling role in the hermeneutic circle, may cancel out the work before it makes its claim, thus missing the real ethical dimension of aesthetic experience as openness to the other.² Beyond the narrow definition of the fusion of horizons in the hermeneutic moment in effective traditions, the very possibility of disruptive Gestalt switches in the experience of genuine work, the work of art, indicates a broader horizon of 'I and Thou' freed from the existential hinge of shared worlds.

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