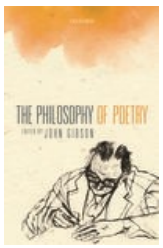

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CHAPTER

9 Ethical Estrangement: Pictures, Poetry, and Epistemic Value

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Abstract

This chapter explores the cognitive and moral significance of the kind of imaginative experience poetry offers. It identifies two forms of imaginative experience that are especially important to poetry: 'experiencing-as' and 'experience-taking'. Experiencing-as is 'inherently first-personal, embodied, and phenomenologically characterized' while in experience-taking one 'takes the perspective of another, simulating some aspect or aspects of his psychology as if they were his own'. Through a sensitive and probing reading of Paul Celan's Psalm, the chapter shows the role these two forms of experience play in producing the unique form of ethical and epistemic value poetry can bear. The chapter's argument for this has important implications for our understanding of the poetic imagination and nature of our experience of meaning in poetic contexts.

Keywords: experiencing-as, experience-takings, ethical estrangement, metaphor, painting

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I Experiencing in Pictures

My principal topic is poetry, but I begin with fiction and visual art: a fictional account of a fictional painting by a fictional artist. The account is from a passage in Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* in which Anna's lover, Count Vronsky, contemplates a portrait of her painted by Mihailov, an artist famed for his talent and insight:

> By the fifth sitting, [Mihailov's] portrait struck everybody, especially Vronsky, by its accurate likeness as well as its particular beauty. It was strange how Mihailov could have discovered that peculiar beauty. 'One must know her and love her as I have done to understand that sweet spiritual expression of hers', Vronsky thought, though it was only through this portrait that he himself had

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> discovered it. But the expression was so true that it seemed to him and others that they had always known it.[1]

Tolstoy here identifies two significant responses commonly elicited by works of representational art: what I will follow others in calling 'experiencing-as' and 'experience-taking'. The first refers to our direct, non-inferential perception of an object (in this case a portrait) as possessing some feature or property, a feature or property that enters into the content of the experience itself. Experiencing-as is an ubiquitous feature of everyday perception: we experience objects as belonging to a type or kind—e.g. we see a piece of fruit as an
p. 184 apple or hear a distant sound ↳ as the blare of a trumpet—or experience them as having certain properties (the apple as red and large, the trumpet as loud and off-key). It is also a feature of pictorial experience, as when Vronsky sees Mihailov's painting as a portrait of Anna (or sees Anna 'in' the portrait, as an Anna-depiction). Experiencing-as, however, is not just another label for perception-based belief: to experience an object as being a certain way is distinct from judging it to be that way. We may even experience some x as F—say, a ventriloquist's puppet as speaking—without judging it to be so. Experiencing-as (in contrast to believing that x is F) is a distinctively experiential response in the sense that it is inherently first-personal, embodied, and phenomenologically characterized.

So described, experiencing-as, like perceptual experience more generally, is not confined to the five senses, even if it often occurs by way of them: affective responses such as emotions, moods, and motivational dispositions are also embodied, first-personal, and phenomenologically characterized. Thus one may experience—indeed, one may see—a gesture as threatening or friendly, although these are not themselves sensible properties. In this sense, it is natural to say that we directly perceive evaluative properties as well as natural ones: in Tolstoy's account, for instance, Vronsky *sees* Anna's image as bearing a certain expression manifesting a certain quality—that 'sweet spiritual expression of hers'. He detects this quality by way of a complex of perceptions—principally, by way of a visual and affective responses—but what he sees is not itself a sense-specific property such as a colour or flavour or musical pitch. It is an evaluative property.

Experiencing-as is also distinct from mere imagining or conceiving: Vronsky does not look at Mihailov's portrait and then find himself imagining that Anna has certain inner qualities. Rather, he directly perceives those qualities in and through his visual experience of the portrait. Consider an analogy suggested by Christopher Peacocke: the familiar child's game of finding objects hidden in a drawn image. We do not praise the child for imagining that the drawing somewhere depicts this or that object; the aim is to perceptually discover it—to see it. What we imagine is largely subject to the will; what we perceive
p. 185 something to be is (largely) not.[2] ↳

In Tolstoy's passage, the kind of experiencing-as in question is 'literal': it is not a matter of conceiving of a thing as something that it (literally) is not. Vronsky just sees Anna's image as, literally, bearing a certain expression manifesting certain qualities. Experiencing-as in other cases may be metaphorical (or metaphorically metaphorical, since the notion of metaphor strictly describes a linguistic device). In metaphorical experiencing-as we not only experience the represented object in a certain way, but in doing so we conceive of it as something it literally is not. For instance, Casper David Friedrich's well-known *Solitary Tree*—a painting of a single, winter-blackened tree in a barren landscape—often is experienced metaphorically as depicting an isolated, desolate person. In this case, the kind of experiencing-as Friedrich's painting elicits is guided by a conceptual shift: the viewer still sees a tree depiction, but metaphorically reconceptualizes it. The tree is personified, and its literal properties of being isolated, lifeless, and exposed are transposed to counterparts in the realm of human psychology. Vronsky, by contrast, does not conceive of Anna's image as anything other than an image of Anna herself. Not all experiencing-as targeting a work of art is metaphorical.

Tolstoy's specific example of experiencing-as highlights some common characteristics of what it is to directly perceive something as having a certain non-sensible property. One characteristic is that the

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features of which we thus become aware are often inherently evaluative ones to which we react with a positive or negative sentiment, where the class of properties includes not only moral but aesthetic and emotional ones.[3] Vronsky does not just discover *that Anna wears this characteristic expression*. Rather, he discovers its sweet, transcendent quality; the sensitivity of Mihailov's portrait makes him aware of the characteristic expression *as* a reflecting these aspects of Anna's nature, and these aspects strike Vronsky as having special value. Moreover, Tolstoi's passage signals that the property or quality to which a successful p. 186 work of art calls our attention may be one that had previously escaped our notice. Vronsky ↳ wonders at how Mihailov could have 'discovered' Anna's peculiar beauty, but of course it is Vronsky, too, who discovers it through his portrait. Mihailov's portrait illuminates a dimension of Anna's character that was always there before him, but which he had previously failed to notice, and he feels that what he had missed was not an incidental detail, but a deep and defining feature, essential to her nature.

A second significant response to which Tolstoi's passage calls attention is the phenomenon of 'experience-taking', as it is now sometimes called.[4] In experience-taking, one assumes the perspective of another, simulating some aspect or aspects of his psychology as if they were one's own—his relevant perceptions, affective responses, and thoughts. Experience-taking is closely related to what psychologists call perspective-taking. Neither phrase is well defined in the empirical literature, and different authors elucidate them with reference to different psychological characteristics. However, it is now common to distinguish the former as a specifically non-deliberative process, occurring by way of non-cognitive, subpersonal processes that are directed by conscious intention or will.[5] Perspective-taking, by contrast, is a deliberative, theoretical exercise in which one's project is to 'work out' the psychological states of another by various conscious strategies, for instance, by reasoning about the causes and consequences of his circumstances, or by reflecting on his motives and desires. Perspective-taking in this sense may proceed entirely from an impersonal point of view: it need not involve any first-personal engagement *in* the target perspective. Experience-taking, by contrast, exploits first-personal experiencing-as, and is essentially p. 187 simulative: it involves adopting, to varying degrees, ↳ the other's perceptual, affective, and motivational orientations. Vronsky arguably engages in experience-taking when he wonders how Mihailov could have detected Anna's 'peculiar beauty'. His answer to that question is to imaginatively conceive of Mihailov's experience as if it were his own: 'One must know her and love her as I have done', Vronsky observes, 'to understand that . . . expression . . . ' This episode aptly illustrates the close relationship between experiencing-as and experience-taking: the latter requires a reflective step beyond experiencing-as, but they do not occur independently, for the latter is a causally necessary condition of the former. How Vronsky first-personally experiences Anna's expression in Mihailov's portrait provides the particular *content* of Mihailov's psychology that interests him, and it is by experiencing Anna as he does that he 'takes on' Mihailov's experience as his own. It is through the direct, non-conceptual experience-as which Mihailov's portrait elicits that his first-personal perspective is constructed as one who 'knows and loves' Anna as Vronsky does.

The experience-taking that ensues on Vronsky's part is, of course, quite trivial and transitory; it does not cut very deep and is far from Vronsky's principal interest in Anna's portrait. (Indeed, its transitoriness—and the swiftness with which it leads Vronsky back to thoughts centred flatteringly on himself—is one of the subtle ways in which Tolstoy signals to the reader his irrepressible vanity.) In general, however, experience-taking and the experiencing-as on which it depends constitute a significant dimension of the value we attach to great works of art. Like Mihailov's portrait, they nudge us to experience their subjects in unfamiliar and interesting ways, and in so doing they sometimes move us to adopt a different experiential point of view.

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II Poetic Experience

I turn now to poetry. Experiencing-as and experience-taking are commonly associated with poetry; a successful poem can introduce us to novel ways of thinking and responding to its subject, engaging us with the first-personal phenomenology of persons other than ourselves, in circumstances other than our own. Moreover, poems are often described as if they achieved this in same way as do pictures. The visual image is never left far behind in our analyses and interpetations of poetry, and this association is ↳ built into the very terms in which we describe poetic language. We commonly refer to poetic constructions as linguistic *images*, and the term 'figurative' derives from our association of certain uses of words with the 'rendering of figures'. Are these traditional associations mere metaphors for metaphors, an attempt to explain an essentially conceptual process on analogy with experiential, perceptual ones? I suspect not. More probably, they reflect an underlying isomorphism in the actual psychological structures constitutive of understanding poetic discourse and visual perception. Certainly, interpreting and understanding such discourse very often seems to elicit an array of non-inferential, first-personal, phenomenologically characterized responses. The public *meanings* of words are not, of course, decided by subjective images and other contingent responses in the minds of those who use them. Nonetheless, it is undeniable that such images and responses do occur, and they play an important role in how we actually interpret both everyday and literary utterances. Philosophical theories of meaning in the analytic tradition have almost exclusively focused on issues of public meaning—of stable, context-independent semantic content. Such theories have also dominated analyses of figurative language, focusing on the semantic relations of figurative utterances to literal propositions and paraphrases. Whatever its merits, this approach stands to overlook some of the most distinctive and valuable characteristics of our experience of poetry; in particular, it stands to misrepresent the *epistemic* value of poetry—the value it has as a way of informing our beliefs. Poetic language is of course seldom the best medium for representing impersonal, mind-independent facts. That is a task better left to a privileged set of null-context, literal propositions, the meaning of which will be set out by a truth-conditional semantics of one kind or another. But such facts do not exhaust the possible objects of knowledge, and representing them does not exhaust the possible uses of language. We sometimes also want to know how the facts are experienced by others, and accurately to describe how we experience them ourselves.

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Poetry has long been employed in service of these epistemic aims. In this context the imagistic aspects of poetic language play an indispensable role, for poems, like pictures, provoke perceptual (or, in the case of mental imagery, quasi-perceptual) responses that reorient our first-personal experience of their subjects. Moreover, those responses—like Vronsky's response to Anna's portrait—often include specifically evaluative perceptions. In everyday practice, poetry often affords us ↳ access to alternative evaluative perceptions by means of a process structurally similar to that afforded by (some) works of visual art—processes of experiencing-as and experience-taking.

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A proper appreciation of this structural similarity helps to explain part of the epistemic value we accord certain poems. A poem can enable us to understand its subject from a particular subjective, experiential point of view by eliciting affective, perceptual and cognitive responses appropriate to that perspective. In the case of poems concerned with experiences remote from our own, the perspective offered may be quite alien to us, prompting (or even compelling) us to regard the poetic subject in ways that are not only unfamiliar but contrary to our previous experience and our considered judgement. This need not count as an epistemic defect, however. For one possible aim of a poem—indeed, an actual aim of a great many poems—is precisely to reveal what it is like to occupy an unusual or anomalous first-personal point of view, and to show how the world appears as from that point of view. Poetry is a classic medium of subjectivity, and part of its wonder lies in its capacity to render public even the most radically private and remote aspects of our inner lives.

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In what follows, my principal aim is not to defend but to illustrate these claims. In section III, I attempt to identify and conceptualize one particular, and particularly elusive, evaluative point of view—what psychologists sometimes refer to as evaluative detachment, and what I label 'ethical estrangement'. Ethical estrangement is an identifiable psychological type in general terms, but its subjective phenomenology is notoriously difficult to represent and communicate. This is in part because it is an evaluative point of view we have good reason to resist, and are inclined to perceive as pathological. Section IV turns to a poem expressive of ethical estrangement: Paul Celan's *Psalm. Psalm* exemplifies several of the strategies by which a poem, like a work of visual art, can occasion direct experiencing-as and experience-taking, provoking the reader to attend to new features of its subject by moving him to experience certain familiar phenomena as possessing radically different evaluative properties. I argue that, in *Psalm*, Celan compels his reader to adopt a distinctive—and for most of us quite remote—evaluative perspective, inviting us to instantiate various of the first-personal perceptions, emotions, and thoughts constitutive of ethical estrangement. Section V returns to the contributions of poetic experiencing-as and experience-taking to evaluative knowledge.

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III Ethical Estrangement

> Whoever has succumbed to torture can no longer feel at home in the world. The shame of destruction cannot be erased. Trust in the world which already collapsed in part at the first blow, but in the end, under torture, fully, will not be regained. That one's fellow man was experienced as the 'anti-man' remains in the tortured person . . . It blocks the view into a world in which the principle of hope rules. One who was martyred is a defenseless prisoner of fear. It is fear that henceforth reigns over him. Fear—and also what is called resentment.[6]

Jean Améry's *At the Mind's Limits* is an attempt to articulate, in a mix of narrative and philosophical terms, the more persisting psychological effects of the author's imprisonment and torture under the Nazi regime. The most profound of these effects is what Améry refers to as 'loss of trust in the world' (or 'loss of confidence' in the world).[7] In the course of his essay, he attempts to spell out how that loss of trust was caused, and in what it consists.

The trust to which Améry refers is his confidence in the world of ordinary, human relationships—the social world of personal interactions with our fellow men. He observes that these interactions are normally guided by a kind of unwritten social contract, in accordance with which we engage with one another against a background of shared assumptions and expectations. This common background allows us to navigate a course through the social world that is relatively stable and predictable. It is the basis of interpersonal cooperation, and Améry compares its operation to the unreflective trust we normally invest in the most basic frameworks of experience and thought. 'Trust in the world includes all sorts of things', he writes, 'the irrational and logically unjustifiable belief in absolute causality perhaps, or the likewise blind belief in the validity of the inductive inference'.[8] Trust in causality or in the laws of inference are essential, of course, if we are to successfully navigate the material world. The trust that Améry lost at Auschwitz, he says, was similarly essential, permitting him to negotiate a successful and sustainable course through the social world: the trust that 'the other person will spare me— . . . that he will respect my physical, and with it my metaphysical being'.[9] ↳

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Améry's traumatic experiences of torture and abuse, he says, left him guided no longer by basic human principles of mutual respect, but by fear and resentment—fear of future harms and resentment of past ones. 'You do not observe dehumanized man committing his deeds and misdeeds without having all of your notions of inherent human dignity placed in doubt', he writes. 'We emerged . . . robbed, emptied out, disoriented—and it was a long time before we were able even to learn the ordinary language of freedom. Still today . . . we speak it with discomfort and without real trust in its validity.'[10] Améry's loss of trust in his

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dealings with others is a vivid instance of detachment from his established ethical point of view—his 'ethical estrangement', as I shall call it. Ethical estrangement is a distinctive psychological condition in which the basic framework of a person's evaluative worldview has been radically undermined. It is not just a matter of one's moral (and other evaluative) judgements and choices *changing* in non-standard ways—of revising or altering certain evaluative commitments—although it includes that. Specifically, ethical estrangement is characterized by three defining features: the level at which the evaluative changes are effected, their transitional and negating logic, and their multi-dimensional psychological scope. I discuss each in turn.

First, ethical estrangement occurs not just when this or that particular evaluation deviates from some recognized norms, but when one's *fundamental* evaluative framework deviates from such norms. This framework consists of both one's basic beliefs—one's standing assumptions and expectations—and the repertoire of constitutive concepts central to one's thought and discourse about value (in Améry's case, concepts such as 'human dignity'). In ethical estrangement, these familiar and foundational basic beliefs and concepts cease to guide one's judgements and practical reasoning. The estranged subject's normative practice does not deviate merely at a first-order level of particular evaluations, affecting how or to what he applies this or that concept; rather, it deviates at a second-order level, such that the commitments and the concepts that regulate and are constitutive of shared normative practices are, if not abandoned, at least no
p. 192 longer functioning in their standard roles. His ethical judgements, ↳ memories, imaginings, and practical reasoning come to be regulated by different, non-standard commitments which cannot be expressed, or easily expressed, in a standard conceptual repertoire. Améry, for instance, describes himself as no longer expecting human relations to be governed by general principles of reciprocity and justice; he lost his 'certainty that by reason of written or unwritten social contracts the other person [would] respect [his] physical, and with it [his] metaphysical being'.[11] This commitment stood previously as a 'certainty' in the sense that it had functioned as a pre-reflective assumption. That is, Améry had previously supposed that personal relations would be guided by a presumption of respect, in the sense that this supposition had been a background condition of his day-to-day interactions; it was never doubted because it was never seriously questioned. As Améry observes, such expectations regulate our everyday lives in indefinitely many ways. The pedestrian expects that she will not be wilfully run down by a whimsical motorist—and that if she is, passers-by will help; the woman guiding her small child through a crowd expects that no one will wilfully trample him underfoot—and if someone did, others would intervene; the man who seeks medical help from a surgeon trusts that he will not turn his knife against him—and that if he did, someone would attempt to stop him. And so forth. A world in which these conditions manifestly go unsatisfied (as they did in Améry's during the war) is one governed by a different form of life. It is a world in which it is no longer possible to say what many of our canonical, action-regulating concepts mean—concepts such as 'respect' and 'dignity', and even the collective sensibility we gesture at with the term 'humanity'. I think that this must be part of what Améry had in mind when he commented that, for the longer-term prisoners at Auschwitz, intellectual thought 'nullified itself when at almost every step it ran into its uncrossable borders. The axes of its traditional frames of reference then shattered. Beauty: that was an illusion. Knowledge: that turned out to be a game with ideas.'[12]

The second distinguishing feature of ethical estrangement is that it is, precisely, a matter of undergoing a
p. 193 transition or change: it names a condition *to* which one has moved *from* some previous one. As Améry ↳ describes this transition in his own case, it was a departure from a condition of relative psychological coherence and commonality with others, in which his everyday evaluative intuitions made sense to his fellow men, even if they were not always in agreement. The position he later occupied, by contrast, was one of isolation and mutual incomprehension. In this respect, ethical estrangement has the structure of more ordinary instances of estrangement in intimate personal relationships: one can only be 'estranged' from someone with whom one has been on close terms. It is one thing to be an excluded outsider; it is another to

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be an outsider who was once an insider, and who now recognizes (from without) the disparities not only between himself and others, but between his present and past selves.

Thirdly, ethical estrangement operates across and affects multiple dimensions of a person's relations: while it may be caused by a rupture in a single relationship, it ramifies into indefinitely many others, including one's relation to one's past and future self. This can be true even in the case of a more commonplace personal betrayal by a trusted intimate—a spouse, a sibling, or a colleague. Such betrayals threaten not only to disrupt one's standing assumptions and expectations of that particular person; they can affect one's assessment of the possibility of trust itself, and hence can estrange one from other relationships which similarly turn on such trust as a basis. Thus when Améry describes how his view of humanity was altered by the abuses he both witnessed and suffered, he makes it clear that this follows in part from realizing that his tormentor might be any ordinary man:

> [A]mazingly, it dawns on one that the fellows not only have leather coats and pistols, but also faces: not 'Gestapo faces' with twisted noses, hypertrophied chins, pockmarks, and knife scars, as might appear in a book, but rather faces like anyone else's. Plain, ordinary faces.[13]

Across another dimension, ethical estrangement provokes a reassessment of oneself: it is one thing to remember episodes from the past in which one's role is that of, say, friend and helpmate, and another to remember the same episodes with oneself now cast in the role of dupe, victim, or unwitting prey. In this p. 194 respect, the estranged subject's current self-conception becomes discontinuous with his previous one; the ↳ temporal continuity of his own identity has been disrupted. By the same token, ethical estrangement alters one's future possibilities, both in terms of one's expectations of others and in terms of who one can be: the future person, whose choices are now informed by his experience of betrayal, is someone whose relations will be guided by due caution, at best, and sceptical distrust at worst. His future self, too, is estranged from the person he once was.

The phenomenon of ethical estrangement is not, of course, something particular to victims of genocide. In less radical forms, its occurrence is all too commonplace: it can be the lot of the abused child, of the jilted life-long spouse, of the abandoned elderly parent, and the traumatized soldier, as much as the victim of systematic, physical violence. Its essence is the displacement of evaluative faith by evaluative scepticism, occasioned by an experience of profound betrayal. Saying this much, however, does little to convey what it is like to be so betrayed, or to live with such estrangement. Améry's essay is an attempt to describe the psychological trajectory of his own estrangement and the consequent effects on his everyday experience. It does this by relating the historical facts and offering a largely theoretical account of how his beliefs were altered by them. Améry was, after all, an essayist and philosopher; his project is to impose some theoretical sense on the profound transformations of his inner life and the world around him. It is noteworthy in this context that, in a similar effort, Améry also published a philosophical essay on suicide—shortly before taking his own life.

As impressive as Améry's essay is, it does not so much leave the reader with the feeling that he understands what Améry experienced as with the conviction that he could *never* truly understand it. The first-personal phenomenology of ethical estrangement remains opaque and intractable; while one cannot but feel horror at what Améry suffered, and compassion for his despair, these attitudes constitute sympathetic distance more than empathic complicity. The reader is not brought to experience others as did Améry, nor to partake in that experience by internalizing his point of view. In this respect, the title of Améry's essay—*At the Mind's Limit*—may be thought appropriate not only to what Améry endured when incarcerated, but what he continued to endure as a survivor: the isolation imposed by the limits of our intelligibility to one another.

Can anything more be achieved? Where literal description fails in this way, can the devices of art do any p. 195 better? Several theorists, most ↳ famously Adorno, have insisted that there can be no adequate or morally

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appropriate artistic response to such horrific events—that they should be regarded as literally 'unspeakable'. But this is, I aver, to underestimate the peculiar resources of artistic uses of language—and of poetry in particular—as a way of giving public form to the more remote reaches of human experience. It is also to neglect one of the oldest, and in some ways the noblest, urges to create art: the urge to give voice to one's inner life precisely when one finds oneself most removed and isolated from a *common* framework of human experience—when one's subjective condition divorces one from ordinary, daily commerce with others. (We most hope to be heard when we are least likely to be understood.) What is required is a medium of expression that—like the visual image—affords others some first-personal acquaintance with the perceptions, attitudes, and emotions constitutive of the alien point of view. Visual art, I observed earlier, sometimes achieves this by effecting a reorientation of perspective at the experiential level, subjecting the viewer's perceptions (including his emotions) to the authority of the artist's point of view. It is tempting to speculate that only those art forms which compel direct sensory responses could achieve this end, and that mere words will always fail. Poetry, however, arguably occupies a psychological terrain somewhere between perception and conception; its association with imagery is not merely metaphorical. In particular, when a poem's target subject is itself an experiential point of view, poetic language can be used not so much to describe that subject as to *construct* it out of the reader's own repertoire of responses—a repertoire of non-inferential, first-personal experience. To see this, and to assess the prospects of poetry's success in this domain, I turn to an attempt to give poetic voice to ethical estrangement.

IV Celan's *Psalm*

Paul Celan is best known for poems that arise from and address his experience of Nazi oppression. Along with Primo Levi and Jean Améry, he is widely regarded as a pre-eminent literary voice of the Nazi genocide and of the moral fractures it left in European society, and in the lives of its survivors. Like several other survivor authors, Celan repeatedly returned to these concerns in his writings. Also like them, he eventually p. 196 took his own life. ↳

Celan's mature poetry is, broadly speaking, imagist in style: exceptionally spare, vivid, and elusive. That is part of its distinctiveness. But what sets certain of Celan's poems apart for many readers is not so much their formal artistry as their exceptional depth.[14] Critics and lay readers alike aver that Celan, perhaps more than any other writer, succeeded in doing justice to the unimaginable strangeness of life for European Jewry (and many other Europeans) during, and long after, the years of Nazi Germany's dominance.

Celan published a collection titled *Die Niemandsrose* in 1963. The collection does not feature a clearly discernible, connecting thread as such, and the references in the poems it gathers together range widely across Celan's personal history. John Felsteiner, Celan's biographer, says that *Die Niemandsrose* as a whole presents the reader with a problem of 'poetic intelligibility', not least because of the numerous allusions to specific places, people, and events of private biographical import to Celan. This problem is complicated by Celan's references to obscure literary and biblical sources, including plays on words in Yiddish, Latin, and German. Hence many of the poems in *Die Niemandsrose* remain bewildering and impenetrable to even the most dedicated reader. At the same time, the collection as whole, especially on rereading, yields a vivid cumulative effect through its consistent *affective* tone—a tone of wistfulness and longing, of occasional hopes restrained by regretful and sometimes resentful reminiscences of what is past. This is achieved partly through Celan's images, but also through his syntax and his many backward-looking references, creating a sombre mood of remembrance, sometimes bitter and sometimes tender, reaching back towards what once was, but now is lost.

Die Niemandsrose is also more directly drawn together by the poems' repeated invocations of absence and loss of one kind or another, with multiple references to blindness (loss of sight), madness (loss of reason),

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babbling (loss of the power of speech), and death (loss of life), as well as the uncountable human losses associated with the Shoah. One prominent reference to absence running through the collection occurs indirectly through the use—often an ironic use—of religious vocabulary, visual images, sacred traditions, and even verbal rhythms echoing the rhythms of familiar prayers. (This is a strategy that characterizes p. 197 many ↳ of Celan's post-war poems, including his renowned *Todesfugue*.) Overall, this collection is perhaps where Celan most clearly and profoundly expresses the negative transition from a safe and secure pre-war worldview underwritten by faith, tradition, and divine benevolence to a nihilistic one of moral and spiritual chaos. These are, in a phrase, poems of evaluative estrangement.

Among them, Celan's 'Psalm' is perhaps the plainest and most desolate:

> No one moulds us again out of earth and clay,
> No one conjures our dust.
> No one.
>
> Praised be your name, No one.
> For your sake
> We shall flower.
> Towards
> You.
>
> A nothing
> We were, are, shall
> Remain, flowering:
> The nothing—, the
> No one's rose.
>
> With
> Our pistil soul-bright,
> With our stamen heaven-ravaged,
> Our corolla red
> With the crimson word which we sang
> Over, O over
> the thorn.[15]

Few readers familiar with the rhythm and imagery of the biblical Psalms, whether Jewish or Christian, can fail to feel here the sting of Celan's mockery. *Psalm* voices the bitterness of the once-faithful, themselves now mocked by the indifference, even the brutality, of an absent god. The soothing pastoral imagery of the p. 198 Twenty-Third Psalm ('The Lord is my ↳ Shepherd . . . ') hovers in the background throughout, reminding us that the speaker is not led beside still waters nor invited to lie down in green pastures; his soul is not being restored. Far from dwelling 'in the house of the lord forever', he will not be reborn at all. No future paradises await the dead, for all that exists is earth and clay and dust, and the God that will surely resurrect us and reshape us out of those lifeless materials is, precisely, No One.

As *Psalm* moves to the second and third stanzas, we hear that humanity, far from being an object of divine love, endowed with immortality, is nature's short-lived decoration, a beautiful amusement for the divine No one, flowering towards nothing, to no point or purpose, and for the 'sake of' nothing. Like the cherished rose, a human being is a bright, beautiful, and magical thing—but he is not thereby protected and loved: he is 'No one's rose'. Indeed, the rose's life-generating and reproductive characteristic—the 'pistil', 'stamen', and 'soft corolla'—are at once the sources and subjects of brutal violence ('heaven-ravaged') and coloured by blood, stained by the 'crimson word' which we once sang—the prayers and psalms of our spiritual

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traditions. In the absurd and demonic world of No one's rose, the only object of our prayers can be the thorn: that part of ourselves promising injury and death to those who dare to touch us.

Whatever the detail of one's reading of Celan's poem, its wider import is incontestable: it offers the form of a prayer with a message denying both the point and propriety of prayer and rhythmic song, but using the structure of both. By his interweaving of contradictory form and content, Celan succeeds in moving the reader at an immediate and pre-reflective, experiential level: the bitterness and emptiness of the abandoned believer is not only represented semantically, but conveyed viscerally. Celan achieves something rather remarkable in this respect, for 'Psalm' offers a striking *expression* (rather than a theoretical statement) of embittered nihilism: it succeeds in offering the reader an episodic experience of what it would be like, from within, to exist under the spectre of such nihilism oneself, and to find that one's only existing forms of spiritual expression—including the expression of spiritual rage—arise from and belong to the very world that one has left behind.[16] It does this in part by recollecting experiential details of the background
p. 199 within which our more familiar values have arisen, excavating and exploiting the symbols, ↳ rhythms, rituals, and vocabulary that make up the fabric of our everyday, normative point of view—a fabric that is typically invisible to us until it unravels. Celan's poem thus delivers to the responsive reader the many dimensions of experience—emotional, perceptual, cognitive—with which its language is associated. In this way Celan circumvents the *semantic* limitations of the words assembled and exploits their ability to call forth experiences in the form of imaginings, memories, desires, and the emotions and moods these evoke. Moreover, by adopting the voice of a prayer, Celan moves the reader to follow the poem's course of thought from *within* the perspective of the supplicant—a perspective of private, first-personal address, making it natural for him to conceive of the words as his own. Put in psychological terms, the reader is led to introject or internalize the experiential locus from which they are delivered, that is, to experience prayer as, inter alia, a bitter accusation, and to experience himself as the estranged subject who so prays.[17]

Like Améry, Celan's narrator's evaluative framework has not merely altered in particulars, but at its foundations: the estrangement it describes is foundational. Also like Améry, the new framework it introduces is one defined by what it is not—by the transition from a traditional conception of a benevolent god to his absence. (This is not the voice of mere atheism, but the expression of an active loss of faith.) Finally, Celan's estrangement echoes Améry's in permeating his understanding of all past and future relations: not only the narrator, but all humanity is defined by the futile suffering it portends. By effecting these various dimensions of how the ethically estranged subject experiences himself and others, *Psalm* makes it possible for us to glimpse what it would be to enact this evaluative point of view. The device of speaking as one estranged from and inveighing against the very origin and arbiter of all value—a divine authority known, at least by reputation, to virtually everyone—makes it almost impossible for the reader not to experience, first-personally, at least some echoes of the absurdity, the fear, the moral confusion, and
p. 200 the bitter loss suffered by the survivor. ↳

For all that, Celan's poem does not deliver a theory of value (or disvalue), as Améry's essay at times attempts to do. The epistemic merits of the poem are not those of a second-order meta-ethics. It is one thing to adduce reasons for a set of meta-ethical commitments; that is the task of a philosophical metaphysics of morals. It is another to *occupy* a given meta-ethical perspective, and to manifest in a way that affords that possibility to the reader. *Psalm* speaks first-personally, from the contradictory position of a man who finds himself compelled to continue his traditional rituals of prayer, even while his message denies his god's existence; it is the position of a survivor of faith, living on in a world that is both familiar and wholly transformed. Of course, one might attempt to construct an ideal, complete paraphrase of Celan's poem, setting out in literal terms all that can be recovered of its theoretical content, and this construction might have meta-ethical content. It might even constitute something like an ad hoc meta-ethical thesis. But however faithful it might be to the poem's semantic content, it would deliver little or none of what we

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value in the poem itself: it would not convey what it is to experience oneself and others *as* ethically estranged, let alone move one to take up that point of view.[18]

Outside of the context of the philosophy of language, it is just such an elaboration that we refer to as 'poetic meaning'—*not* a paraphrase of 'stand-alone' semantic content. Analyses of the settled meanings of the poem's words will not go the distance. In a successful interpretation (and even in my own amateur reading of the poem) what is elaborated typically strays very far from what can be recovered from the words alone; it is rather an exercise in recovering the experiential effects of those words—the direct, non-optional, and largely pre-reflective first-personal attitudes and motivations they elicit, compelling one to experience oneself *as* profoundly estranged. Of course, if the reader does not know the literal meaning of the words at all he will fail even to get that far; but it does not follow that this necessary condition of understanding the poem is also a sufficient one. A grasp of literal semantic content is nearer to an *occasioning* condition, p. 201 setting off a psychological sequence which goes ↳ far beyond what may be found in the words themselves, provoking in the subject an array of responses—memories, emotions, imaginings, and the rest. *Psalm*'s success as a poem consists in part in the fact that those responses so naturally and vividly mirror the character of the extraordinary perspective that is its subject. It is in this sense that the poem does its work in a psychological terrain between perception and linguistic conception. As in a visual image, its form embodies its content.

V Poetry, Perception, and Epistemic Value

Does this account of the import of *Psalm* relegate it to a play of imagination—a mere affective and perceptual provocation with no cognitive merit?[19] Are questions of truth or falsity irrelevant to the value of Celan's work? That would be so if we took no interest in whether what we grasp through the poem corresponds to the way the world is. But surely we *do* have that interest. Indeed, one motivation for the foregoing discussion of *Psalm* was to gain a better understanding of the all-too-real phenomenon of ethical estrangement, and it matters whether the poem succeeds or fails in delivering that. Celan's work, like that of many other poets, is typically regarded as an attempt on an important truth, in some sense of the word. This much is included in the attitudes we bring to bear in reading such poems: we evaluate them in part as informing or misleading us, as a process of discovery or a source of illusion.

Similarly, we often regard works of visual art as being true or false, despite the fact that a visual image, as p. 202 such, makes no assertion which could be properly so assessed. Is such talk at best too casual, and at worst ↳ misguided? Recall Tolstoy's fictional portrait of Anna. We have no difficulty understanding what Tolstoy means when he tells us that the expression captured by Mihailov was 'so true that seemed to [Vronsky] and others that they had always known it'. What is 'true' here, moreover, is not just a matter of *depictive* accuracy. Rather, it is that those who view Anna's portrait judge that its subject—Anna—really does bear the expression it exhibits, and that that expression really does manifest the evaluative properties (the sweetness and spirituality) that Mihailov shows it to have. It is not uncommon for us to evaluate artworks in this way—to evaluate them with respect to their specifically epistemic merit, as informing us of properties or qualities their subjects actually possess. Indeed, among the works we typically think of as masterpieces such valuations are very common: Michelangelo's *Pieta*, Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar,* Rembrandt's *Self-Portrait* of 1659, and Eliot's *The Wasteland* all lead us to notice new (or previously obscured) evaluative features of their subjects, and the esteem in which we hold them is owed in no small part to this effect. Works that do not do this may, of course, be esteemed for other reasons. But it is noteworthy how few such appear in our catalogues of artistic masterpieces.

In the case of visual artworks, it is tempting to say that part of their epistemic merit derives from the evaluative *perceptions* they elicit; the phrase is recommended by fact that vision is a paradigmatically

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perceptual, non-inferential mode of presentation. It is also recommended more generally by the structure of experiencing-as, where this is non-inferential, first-personal, and phenomenologically characterized. I noted earlier that, when we experience a work (or its represented subject) as having this or that valenced property, we typically experience this in and through the artwork, as a property it presents—not just as some subjective response we have *to* it. The values detected present themselves with an immediacy and directness characteristic of perception, and as non-optional, indifferent to our preferences or whims. Once Vronsky has experienced Anna's expression in the portrait as sweet and spiritual, it will be difficult if not impossible for him to see it any other way. (If ever there were a case for speaking literally of the perception of evaluativeproperties, it is here.) Nonetheless, such a perception need not compel a judgement that the subject actually does possess that property: Vronsky—in a variation on Tolstoy's novel—might have judged p. 203 that, whilst Mihailov's rendering of Anna captured a characteristic ↳ expression, and that whilst *in the portrait* it manifested a sweet spirituality, in Anna herself it was a manifestation of feminine cunning and practised, disingenuous charm. Perceiving that a work presents its subject *as* being thus and so is one thing; assessing the work as accurate or veridical is another. A well-wrought picture or sculpture can prompt an evaluative perception that the viewer's judgement actively resists. This is one source of the traditional worry—and the long-standing philosophical objection—that artworks, like people, can seduce and deceive as much as enlighten us. Think of the power of a hostile newspaper caricature of someone you admire; however contrary to your beliefs its intent may be, it is impossible not to *see* in it the vices it depicts its subject as having. Experience is compelling, but cannot always be trusted. This is part of what we mean when we say that any artwork, including a poem, is true or untrue, even while it offers no truth-apt claims at all: we mean that it leads towards or away from such claims.

Likewise, in assessing the value of Celan's *Psalm* we may bring to bear different interests. One interest is in simply entertaining the experiential perspective it affords and the evaluative perceptions that it comprises. Another interest concerns whether that perspective correctly represents an independently identified state of the world—in the present case, the psychological condition of ethical estrangement. If it does, this is at least one way in which it possesses epistemic value. But how is its veracity to be decided? It may seem that we have only intuitions to guide us. However, with Améry's account in view we can avail ourselves of a less arbitrary procedure, alternately comparing the theoretically identified features of ethical estrangement with the first-personal ones elicited by the poem. This will be something like a process of reflective equilibrium, in which we look for relations of fit between these two ways of elucidating the phenomenon in question. Ethical estrangement, as I characterized it in Améry's case, was distinguished by three features: it involved an evaluative change at a foundational, second-order level; those changes constituted a negating transition (they consisted in an estrangement *from* Améry's former evaluative convictions); and they were multi-dimensional in their psychological structure, affecting Améry's relations to others as well as to his past and future self. Of course, this characterization of ethical estrangement is in part stipulative, p. 204 delineating a theoretical term of art. The delineation is not an arbitrary one, however: it is directly ↳ led by Améry's account detailing the causes and consequences of his personal history. Further, it reflects the character and structure of an attuned reader's responses to Celan's *Psalm*, as these have been sketched here. To this extent, the reader who takes himself to have learned something of importance from Celan's poetic evocation of the survivor's psychology need not be merely giving voice to personal intuitions and sentiments. He may justly claim that it is true to its target, and value it for rendering more perspicuous events of which, today, most of us can only dimly conceive. These judgements are backed by good reasons, and are an apt testimony to both the complexity and of moral experience and to the power of poetic language.

Notes

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1 L. Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*. London: Everyman's edn, 1939, ii. 40.

2 I owe this example and the next (Friedrich's *Solitary Tree*) to Christopher Peacocke. See his 'The Perception of Music: Sources of Significance', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 49/3 (July 2009): 257–75. I say that what we perceive is 'largely' not subject to the will; exceptions include willed shifts between alternative perceptions of dual aspect figures (e.g. the duck-rabbit).

3 For instance, we see the ballet dancer's gracefulness—a positively valued aesthetic feature—even though gracefulness is not itself a sensory feature in the way that redness or sourness or loudness are.

4 See G. F. Kaufman and L. K. Libby, 'Changing Beliefs and Behaviour through Experience-Taking', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 103/1 (2012): 1–19.

5 See Kaufman and Libby, 'Changing Beliefs'. Kaufman and Libby emphasize that, in experience-taking, the distinction between the subject and a target other is mitigated not by a conscious, willed exercise of conceiving of the other's circumstances, but by a non-deliberative process of 'taking up' the other's experiential point of view: 'Although [Experiencing-taking] shares with . . . [perspective-taking] a focus on the identity merger that can occur between self and other, experience-taking . . . does not rely on orienting the other as a target for scrutiny or comparison but rather entails the spontaneous replacement of self with other' (p. 2). Kaufman and Libby's attempt to distinguish experience-taking and perspective-taking remains unsatisfactory, and fails to specify the several distinct criteria identifying each. However, the idea that the former process is distinct from the latter in being unwilled, subpersonal, non-cognitive, and non-deliberative is both helpful and correct.

6 Jean Améry, *At the Mind's Limits*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980, 40.

7 Améry, *At the Mind's Limits*, 28.

8 Améry, *At the Mind's Limits*, 28.

9 Améry, *At the Mind's Limits*, 28.

10 Améry, *At the Mind's Limits*, 20.

11 Améry, At the Mind's Limits, 40.

12 Améry, *At the Mind's Limits*, 19.

13 Améry, *At the Mind's Limits*, 25.

14 I use the term 'depth' for want of a better one; it does not say much, in itself, besides 'psychological importance', but I mean for it to bear greater weight than that.

15 'Psalm' by Paul Celan, from *Poems of Paul Celan*, tr. Michael Hamburger. Translation copyright © 1972, 2002 by Michael Hamburger. Reprinted by permission of Persea Books, Inc., New York. All rights reserved.

16 Celan wrote throughout his life in German, which was at once his most natural poetic language and the despised language of his oppressors.

17 See Kaufman and Libby, 'Changing Beliefs'. In one of the researchers' series of studies on experience-taking, subjects were given similar narrative passages stated in the first-person and in the third-person voices, and then tested for levels of experiential identification with the narrator. As the researchers (and common sense) predicted, narratives in the first person elicited significantly higher levels of experience-taking.

18 'Perception' does not here mean sensory perception as in vision and hearing, but nor is it a mere figure of speech. I use it broadly to refer to any phenomenologically characterized state in which one is non-inferentially aware of some attended object or property by way of an embodied response to it; emotions are perceptions in this sense of the term.

19 I refer to contemporary non-cognitivist accounts of figurative language, and of metaphor in particular. The most familiar defence of this view is by Donald Davidson in 'What Metaphors Mean', *Critical Inquiry*, 5/1 (autumn 1978): 31–47. Davidson holds that metaphors and other figures possess no epistemic value, because they have no semantic content other than their literal content: there is no such thing as 'figurative meaning'. Richard Rorty's conception of metaphor follows Davidson's, in spirit if not in letter, comparing the way metaphors engage us to the way we enjoy (semantically empty) birdsongs. See Richard Rorty. 'Hesse and Davidson on Metaphor', *Aristotelian Society*, suppl. vol. 61 (1987): 283–96. More recently, similarly motivated arguments are rehearsed in part II of James Grant's *The Critical Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). All of these theorists are driven, albeit from different perspectives, by their commitment to context-independent conceptions of semantic content. For a review of non-cognitivism and objections to that central commitment, see A. E. Denham, *Metaphor and Moral Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

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