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Poetic Difficulty and Epistemic Authority

On Some Recent Trends in Analytic Philosophy of Poetry[1]

Abstract

Whatever an analytic philosophy of poetry is, one achieves a sense of it by exploring the debates that animate it, which is likely all that constitutes its identity as a field. To give a sense of what is ›analytic‹ about these debates, I explore two topics that enlist poetry to approach issues of general interest in core areas of analytic philosophy: meaning and the self, with particular emphasis on motivating a concept of meaning-as-aboutness. I will suggest that, contrary to common practice, we ought to approach these two debates as implicitly linked, since this helps bring to our attention a matter that should be more central to contemporary philosophy of poetry: a statement of how lyrically-mediated self-images tell us something interesting about the relationship between language and personhood. That is, I outline how these recent debates can help shed light on what philosophers like to call the ›cognitive value‹ of poetry, which is to say, its ability to communicate, through poetic form itself, forms of understanding of the world and human predicament.

1. Introduction

Few distinctions in philosophy are as potentially misleading as that between ›analytic‹ and ›continental‹ philosophy. There are contexts in which it is helpful to invoke this distinction, for instance when one needs to distinguish, in a very broad stroke, the philosophical movements that flourished especially in 20th century Germany, Austria, and France – phenomenology, existentialism, critical theory, and so on – from the style of conceptual analysis and approach to logic, language, mind characteristic of the lineage that runs from Frege through Russell to the early Wittgenstein (cf. Humphries 1999; Glendinning 2006,

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Roholt 2017, and Levi 2023). The latter is certainly analytic, and it was part of a broader movement that is still widely represented in philosophy departments in the Anglophone world, though, note, also in Germany, Austria, and France. When philosophers refer to their work as ›continental‹ or ›analytic‹, they are at least casting an image of themselves as inheritors of some and not others of these movements. But beyond marking the strands of 20th century philosophy one was educated in and is likely to reference in one's work, as well largely superficial differences in style and sensibility, the distinction says remarkably little. It does not, for instance, tell us anything precise about what a philosopher working in either ›tradition‹ is inclined to think about the nature of language, art, mind, or reality. Nor does it cast a clarifying light on the kinds of ethical, political, or aesthetic values one's theories are likely to champion.[2]

All this is to say that offering a statement of recent work in analytic philosophy of poetry, even a highly selective such as this, is a complicated affair. Whatever an analytic philosophy of poetry is, one achieves a sense of it by exploring the debates that animate it, which is likely all that constitutes its identity as a field.[3] To give a sense of what is ›analytic‹ about these debates, I have chosen two topics that enlist poetry to approach issues of general interest in core areas of analytic philosophy: meaning and the self, with particular emphasis on motivating a conception of a characteristic form of poetic meaning as *aboutness*. One of the reasons art of any sort matters to philosophy is because it often challenges our theories to accommodate particularly complex representations of the human situation and radical forms of expression. Lyric poetry is extremely helpful here, since its way of fashioning an image of a lyric I out of language that rarely behaves as our theories of meaning require calls on us to expand our understanding of the nature and limits of meaning itself.

Here I limit myself to motivating a sense of the key questions on which these two debates focus. I will suggest, contrary to common practice, that we ought to approach these debates as implicitly linked, since this brings to our attention a matter that should be more central to contemporary philosophy of poetry: a statement of how lyrically-mediated self-images tell us something general about the relationship between language, personhood, and a world that is presumably external to each of them. That is, I recommend a way of seeing

2 It is true that the relationship between poststructuralism and postwar analytic philosophy was marked by practiced indifference or active hostility, depending on the room; and this is in part responsible for the antagonistic sense of the analytic/continental distinction that will be familiar to most contemporary philosophers and literary theorists. But that is a different story, and it is one that misrepresents the actual mood and landscape of contemporary philosophy risibly.

3 Two volumes that give a good sense of the shape of recent debates in analytic philosophy of poetry are *Philosophy and Poetry: Midwest Studies in Philosophy* (French et al. 2009) and *The Philosophy of Poetry* (Gibson 2015). For a sense of the figures (and representative works) that have helped shape the contemporary debate, see Budd 1996, Eldridge 2008, de Gaynesford 2017, Jollimore 2009, Koethe 2022, John 2013, Lamarque 2009 and 2015, Lepore 2011, McGregor 2014, Ribeiro 2007 and 2009, Simecek 2019, and Zamir 2018. These philosophers tend to engage with a particular set of contemporary Anglophone scholars of poetry, with figures such as Charles Altieri, Derek Attridge, Gerald Bruns, Jonathan Culler, Oren Izenberg, Marjorie Perloff, Susan Stewart, Helen Vendler, Robert Von Hallberg most noticeable among them (this list of course reveals much about the sensibilities and interests of the philosophers of poetry who read these scholars).

how these recent debates shed light on what philosophers like to call the ›cognitive value‹ of poetry, which is to say its ability to communicate, through poetic form itself, forms of understanding of the world and human predicament.

2. The Question of Poetic Meaning

Consider an enticingly vague question that will be familiar to everyone who works on poetry: what is poetic meaning? Always lingering in the background of this question is the problem of the fabled ›difficulty‹ of poetry. This difficulty has to do with poetry's general willingness to lean into opacity, paradox, ambiguity, provisionality, polysemy, polyvocality, and compression (of thought, of meaning, etc.), which often renders meaning in poetic contexts a destination one must struggle to reach. Of course not all poetry will pursue this difficulty intensely or at all, and setting up the problem this way reveals a modernist prejudice in favor of the avant-garde and experimental. But the philosophical issue concerns how poetry can, when it wishes, make this difficulty *productive*. In poetry that pursues it, this difficulty is typically experienced as *elevated* – an expressive and artistic achievement – and it often seeks to provoke a potentially liberatory experience of meaning *in* this difficulty, which is very much unlike our experience of these forms of difficulty in everyday contexts, in which we typically find ourselves attempting to *resolve* rather than exult in the features of language that present a challenge to interpretation. Indeed, poetry has shown that it can establish a portion of its claim to not just rhetorical but epistemic authority *through* this difficulty. That is, poets who make this difficulty productive in an especially successful way accomplish a goal that strikes us as at once artistic and cognitive: they get language just right and, in so doing, get the world right, too (I return to this notion of epistemic authority in the next section). The philosophical problem is, of course, specifying what we mean by ›meaning‹ in such poetic contexts and alongside this fabled difficulty.

We should immediately dismiss two interpretations of the ›what is poetic meaning?‹ question. On a *semantic* interpretation, one might take the question to invite us to explore a distinct kind of meaning that poems generate, a kind that is poetic just as other kinds might be literal, thematic, connotative, or figurative. But it is highly unlikely that poems generate a *sui generis* kind of meaning (see Lamarque 2009; Jollimore 2009; and Gibson 2023); and, at any rate, the question of meaning in poetry is generally regarded to be philosophically interesting because of the *interaction* of a great variety of kinds of meaning and the challenge of working through them in order to articulate the sense and significance of a poem. In working through this, the reader encounters imagistic, metaphoric, affective, prosodic, propositional, aesthetic, symbolic, and, at times, utterly literal varieties of meaning, and no contemporary philosopher (or literary theorist) of note thinks that in addition to these kinds we will find a distinctly poetic species, certainly not one that is uniquely expressive of the meaning of a poem, if such a thing there is.

On a second interpretation, the question might be interpreted *aesthetically* instead of semantically. That is, one might read the question as inviting an exploration of the variety of contexts – everyday as well as poetic – in which natural language achieves a certain degree of ›poeticity‹, with the idea of poetic meaning now rendered as a description of a particular aesthetic employment of language, for instance one that is mellifluous, suggestive, tender, graceful, or whatever collocation of aesthetic predicates one's theory favors (see Kriegel 2023 for such an approach). There might be value in such an approach, but it clearly has little to do with the philosophical problem of meaning *in poems*, which is hardly coextensive with the broader issue of when we experience a use of language – any – as displaying the kinds of aesthetic properties we should be inclined to call, individually or conjunctively, poetic. Many poems, especially since modernism stepped on the scene, will eschew precisely such positively charged aesthetic employments of language, often on ethical, political, or indeed artistic grounds, and this is just one obvious rejoinder to the folly of thinking that the question of poetic meaning is essentially an aesthetic one. The artistic labor of poets such as Rilke, Eliot, Stein, Oppen, Celan, Plath, Ashbery, Larkin – to mention obvious examples from a scattering of modern traditions – is entirely misrepresented if we cast them as luxuriating in language in the manner the aesthetic interpretation of the problem suggests. Surely their lyrics bear an array of aesthetic properties; but the scrutiny of them does not amount to a scrutiny of challenge of understanding their often radical acts of meaning-production. In fact, the aesthetic interpretation of the problem simply ignores meaning *as* a poetic problem.

At this point, a third interpretation of the question becomes attractive, one which does a much better job of capturing the interesting philosophical issue. Call it a *critical* interpretation of the question of poetic meaning (see Gibson 2006 and 2011). On a critical interpretation, we subtly change the initial question from the general one of what poetic meaning consists in to a more focused exploration of the unique ways lyric poems *raise questions of meaning* and call on distinctly critical capacities to answer them. This approach does a much better job than the semantic and aesthetic models of making sense of the so-called difficulty of poetic meaning and its artistic affordances. It offers a critical model of poetic meaning in both an *interpretative* and *constitutive* sense.

In respect to the *interpretive* sense, this approach asserts that when attempting to untangle the questions of meaning a poem raises, we are required to become, in effect, critics who draw upon not (just) linguistic competence as such but a reservoir of skills and tools that are irreducibly critical in nature. This explains a portion of the idea that poetic meaning is difficult in a particularly vexing way, since the competencies one must harness are not cultivated and exercised through our mere exposure to the semantic and pragmatic dimensions of everyday language use. The capacity to exercise them requires acculturation in our critical practices themselves and what they afford: an awareness of the history of poetry, the point of specific poetic movements, the standing projects of given poets, and the assemblage of philosophical, aesthetic, artistic, political, and social concerns that animate all of these. The second sense in which this approach is critical develops this point.

In respect to the *constitutive* sense, the idea is the more interesting and contentious one that the ability of poetry to produce at least some of its characteristic kinds of meaning is co-constituted by the critical practices that arise around our poetic practices, and that it is only by virtue of situating ourselves in these practices that we can experience many poems as fully enriched with meaning (see Gibson 2011, 2016a, and 2017). Just as we might say that my ability to bear moral properties such as ›reprehensible‹, ›trustworthy‹, or ›selfless‹ will involve a story not solely of my individual behavior but, crucially, of those social practices that sustain the sense and application conditions of such terms, the idea here is that to understand how poems come to bear nuanced forms of meaning often requires that we look not only at their semantic and aesthetic surfaces but, additionally, at the much broader culture of poetic production in which poems are produced, read, and interpreted. This culture, in turn, informs perception and imagination such that we can come to *see* in poems what would otherwise remain obscure or wholly unavailable. To use Danto's famous phrase, this critical culture constitutes an »atmosphere of art theory«: a set of inherited ideas that includes not only conceptions of the nature and point of poetry but all those features of social and cultural reality that animate the concerns of poetic production and its criticism at a given juncture in poetry's natural history (Danto 1964, 580). These practices are in part sense-making practices, and the claim is that these practices play an ineliminable role in *realizing* characteristic forms of poetic meaning and thus making them available as possibilities of shared poetic experience. Criticism, in the expansive sense this idea motivates, is that region of the artworld that generates these ideas and this »theory«, and these often function as resources we draw upon when we come to see structured forms of meaning in poems.

This is not at all the silly anti-realist claim that critics rather than poets endow poems with meaning. It is the more ambitious one that our critical practices in part coordinate the relationship between readers and poetry and that this permits poems to bear forms of meaning that typically cannot be gleaned from the manifest face of the texts in which they are delivered, certainly not if taken in isolation from these practices. Of course, poetry predates its criticism, and no one sane would devise a theory that suggests it is the other way around. The claim here is the sensibly historicized one that as poetry evolves, new possibilities of poetic meaning evolve, too. And when we find ourselves with poetic practices that display the varieties of ›difficult‹ meaning explored here, we must have recourse to a conception of criticism that can illuminate the conditions of this meaning's possibility. There is a social dimension to the production of characteristic kinds of poetic meaning that requires readers, authors, and critics to constitute a cultural practice, and it is in part by virtue of access to the »atmosphere« of ideas that this practice generates that we can answer certain of the questions of meaning a poem raises. Let me explain.

We need a more specific term of art than ›meaning‹ to capture this idea, one that is a plausible candidate for the characteristic form of meaning that functions as a destination in our interpretive struggles. A term that has recently become popular in analytic philosophy is that of ›aboutness‹. At its most general, aboutness functions to pick out the shared

subject matter of a great variety of sentences that express their meanings differently yet appear to address a common topic (Yablo 2014). Its point of origin in contemporary aesthetics is Danto's influential attempt to define art in terms of embodied meaning (Danto 2000). There one of his preferred examples is a work of abstract painting – Malevich's *Black Square* (1913) – in which we come to see that a white canvass with but a black square on its surface can still embody meaning, since of it we should be more inclined to say that it is *about* nothing than that it isn't about anything at all (Danto 2000, 132–133). In recent analytic philosophy of art, the notion of aboutness is often used without being fully theorized, though the general feeling is that this is very much on the horizon. The sense of aboutness I wish to motivate can be characterized simply. Critical statements of aboutness articulate the bridge than runs between poems and the regions of actual cultural, political, psychological, and artistic reality that a poem strives to fashion into an object of attention. The idea is that part of what any critic who is concerned with meaning will do is make manifest the patterns of aboutness suggested by a poem, the result of which is typically a statement of how a poem offers its readers an *image of* or *perspective on* the world beyond the poem, at any rate on some region of human interest we take a poem to place before us.[4]

Consider Louis Zukofsky's *Catullus* cycle (1958–1969), which certainly cannot be said to produce surface meaning. Here is his attempt (1969) at #70 of Catullus' original:

> Newly say dickered my love air my own would marry
> me all
> whom but me, none see say Jupiter if she petted.
> Dickered: said my love air could be o could dickered a
> man too
> in wind o wet rapid a scribble reported in water.[5]

If we are inclined to relegate the poem itself to the status of nonsense, we can blame the vulgar part of ourselves that thinks we only have meaning when sentences culminate in well-formed propositions, assertions, description, and other straightforward and pedestrian ways of communicating a sense. As a critic will show with relative ease, Zukofsky's *Catullus* is endowed with a distinct form of *artistic* aboutness, and its anarchic language

4 See Wolf 2023, who makes the idea of an implied world-view essential to the account of »lyrology« he advances. Talk of a poem's implicit or implied perspectives on or images of the world captures essentially the same idea that Wolf's theory is after, and the argument here is that ›statements of aboutness‹ are the precise speech act through which critics make these features of a poem manifest. Dammann, Gibson, and Schellekens (unpublished) attempt to offer a philosophical model for these claims.

5 Zukofsky, 2006, 51. Catullus's original reads (Catullus 1951, 193):
Nulli se dicit mulier mea nubere malle
quam mihi, non si se luppiter ipse petat.
dicit: sed mulier cupido quod dicit amanti,
in vento et rapida scribere oportet aqua.

is not a barrier to but an ingredient of it. In the *Catullus* cycle, Zukofsky ›translates‹ the sequence of vowel sounds and not semantic content of Catulus's original poems, and part of his purpose in doing so is to reveal something about the nature of poetry itself – this is the region of reality on which his Catullus poems wishes to cast a light – by demonstrating that the production of sound and not the linguistic elaboration of an idea or impression is sufficient for the production of poetry. In this way Zukofsky in fact does elaborate an idea, though it is a point expressed not through an act of poetic declaration but in generating a form of aboutness the content of which expresses something important about the role of sound, feeling, and form in poetic experience. In other words, by looking at facts that underwrite the creation of this poem and interests of its author – facts that are made available through our access to critical culture itself – we acquire information that permits us to ascribe a degree of communicative determinacy to a poem that does not, in a perfectly ordinary sense, *say* anything at all. Yet once in possession of a statement of its aboutness, the poem can be experienced as bearing a point, a purpose, and so a kind of *meaning*. Aboutness permits us to capture meaning even when the semantic surface of a poem revels in nonsensicality. And this is why it is always a mark of obliviousness to say of a poem that exults in anarchic language that it *is* nonsense. Unlike everyday nonsense, which we experience as the *absence* of a communicative project, in poetic contexts even nonsensical language can be productive of meaning. In short, even if it is true that a poem's language is nonsensical, it is a category error to claim that the poem is therefore nonsensical.

These statements of aboutness become, again, *internal* to our experience of a poem by structuring our experience of a poem's communicative dimension and opening up to appreciation patterns of meaningfulness in its form that would otherwise remain inaccessible. I ignore here the vexed question of what legitimizes such statement, whether they are defeasible, and whether poems admit of multiple, perhaps contradictory statements of aboutness. Debates on the epistemology and metaphysics of interpretation in the 1980s and 1990s dealt with this, and, if one wishes, they can be rehearsed here. I take it as obvious that critics do articulate aboutness, that readers experience aboutness as internal to a poem, and that statements of aboutness articulate the typically real affairs a poem turns into an object of regard, which can concern everything from philosophical, social, and historical matters to the nature of poetry itself, as Zukofsky makes clear. Critics elicit these statements of aboutness through attention to the elements of a poem that raise questions of meaning, with meaning in this context better understood not as linguistic *signification* but artistic *significance*. Images, actions, formal innovations, modes of enunciation, emotional tenor, styles of address, as well as words, phrases, and sentences raise questions of meaningfulness in this sense, and statements of aboutness are, on this model, their currency of articulation. The important point is, as it was for Danto, that aboutness articulates content in a way that far exceeds what is expressly given to appreciation by an artwork's surface. We can be realists or constructivists or relativists or pluralists – and much else besides –

about aboutness and its ways of ascribing significance and sense to all these elements. The claim here is that *however* one approaches these issues, what I have said gives content to the notion of aboutness whose metaphysical and epistemological status we debate. I favor a realist reading that accepts a healthy pluralism regarding poetic aboutness, but that is neither here nor there for the argument of this paper (see Gibson 2017).

It must be acknowledged that, in many cases, a poem's semantic surface comes very close to articulating itself the forms of aboutness a critic is inclined to ascribe to it, in which case the role of criticism in the production of meaning will obviously be diminished. We see this when a critic claims – to give an obvious example – that Wordsworth's *The World is Too Much with Us* is about *belatedness* and *modernity as disenchantment*, and offers as support the poem's at times straightforwardly philosophical modes of address such as, »Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;— / Little we see in Nature that is ours; / We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!« (Wordsworth 1807, 122). Though note that what makes the poem about these things and not something else is as much an effect of the imagistic force of its figurative elaborations as its philosophical declarations: »This Sea that bares her bosom to the moon; / The winds that will be howling at all hours, /And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers; / For this, for everything, we are out of tune« (see Gibson 2023). As I said above, the issue is the *interaction* of a great many varieties of meaning in a poem, some of which will be linguistic, others more painterly in nature, others still symbolic or connotative. But on this critical model, none of these plays a privileged role, and all are enfranchised as potential sources of aboutness. What we see in excellent examples of poetry criticism is that these statements of aboutness are grounded in properly poetic material: in a poem's figurations, allusions, images, abstractions, cesuras, intertextual references, and syntax. Each work of criticism states in its own terms, indirectly at least, how a poem's ›difficulty‹ is made productive, and statements of aboutness are one way of doing precisely this. In this respect, works of successful criticism *demonstrate* how aboutness is derived from poetic material, and thus the nature of aboutness is declared through examples of actual critical performances. The theory of aboutness is thus best seen as descriptive and not normative, insofar as it is a hypothesis about what critics, on occasion at least, *do*, and not an elaboration of an ideal whose nature can be specified in advance of practice.

3. Difficult Poems and Messy Selves

Peter Lamarque has made a compelling case for the artistic and aesthetic role of difficulty in poetic experience (Lamarque 2015). He avoids the problems of the aesthetic interpretation of poetic meaning by recasting it as a question of, in effect, *value*:

> So […] why do we value the complexity – the difficulty – of (some) poetry when we spurn it elsewhere? The answer at its simplest is: because it is part of the poetry game that in poetry we attend to the finegrainedness of language, its textures, and intricacies, its opacity, in conveying thought-processes, and we find value in the experience it affords, in precedence over the more humdrum norms of communication, such as transparency the imparting of information, and the assumption of paraphrasability. (Lamarque 2015, 36)

In other words, and in the vocabulary just developed, we take satisfaction in the often extraordinary way a poem delivers aboutness through those formal and expressive elements that demand critical investment to be experienced as fully enriched with meaning. The value here is the value of a hard-won encounter that repays our efforts. If a poem raises a question of meaning, experiencing how answers to these questions arise out of the matter of a poem and its mode of presenting aboutness can give rise to an often *sublime* – this is my term and not Lamarque's – experience of the artistic production of meaning. Lamarque helps us to see *when* the notion of the aesthetic should be invoked in our account of poetic meaning-production, and it is to describe the value of the experience thereby afforded. In addition to the sublime, any number of aesthetic predicates may apply here, depending on the poem; and so we have an intuitive foundation for an account of the structure of characteristically aesthetic forms of *immersion* in the poetic creation of meaning.

In conclusion, I want to suggest that this aesthetic account will be incomplete if we cannot say something more substantive about the *content* of these meanings so that we may explain *why* we care about attending to their poetic production. While there are certainly poems that might convey banal meanings fantastically – Frank O'Hara at times strikes me as doing just this – surely in many cases the *cognitive quality* of the meaning matters to our experience. Indeed, if aboutness in part expresses how a poem makes some region of worldly concern internal to our experience of a poem, it is intuitive to think that it is also in part the quality of the conveyed *insight*, crudely put, that we experience as valuable. Something like this is central to Jonathan Culler's claim that lyric poetry is a form of *epideictic* discourse: »public poetic discourse about values in this world rather than a fictional world« (Culler 2015, 119). Culler models the lyric I on a voice that strives to speak on the worldly side of the divide that runs between our world – however we wish to make sense of this idea – and the purely imagined worlds that resolutely fictionalizing theories will insist is all that poetry brings to our attention. The notion of aboutness, as outlined here,

is especially useful for scholars with commitments such as Culler's, since it strives to make an experience of »values in this world« internal to poetic experience. On the assumption that Culler is right, this would appear to be something any theory of poetic meaning should reckon with.

One way to develop this idea is through an account of the experience of *epistemic authority* of voice in poetic difficulty. That is, the lyric I often speaks as though what it has to say matters tremendously *as expressed in this difficulty*, that is, as though characteristic forms of ambiguity, provisionality, and paradox are essential to the quality of the insight we ascribe to a poem. Put differently, we should at least venture a hypothesis as to how this difficulty earns lyric poetry a measure of its claim to getting the world, in some sense, right. And this, I suggest, requires venturing a hypothesis about what Cora Diamond calls »the difficulty of reality« that is fit for lyric poetry (Diamond 2003).

Reality can be difficult in many ways, of course. One way it can be difficult is by being catastrophic, painful, or senseless, and, as we know from Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, *it is because of this* that works of tragedy seem to speak so much more honestly than comedy. On this model, we experience tragedy as an epistemically privileged form of art because it gets the world right, on the assumption that life in fact often does have a tragic structure. Another way reality can be immensely difficult is by virtue of precisely those forms of complexity that lyric poetry is so apt at building into its very form: life, if you will, is itself often deeply ambiguous, paradoxical, and all the rest. Note immediately that the specific feature of reality about which we have philosophical grounds to assert the omnipresence of these difficulties is precisely what lyric poetry frequently explores: the self. Much of philosophy of the self strives to explain of how we make sense of, in Peter Goldie's words, »the mess inside« (Goldie 2011): the muddle of memories, beliefs, passions, desires, wants, and hopes that the I must work through in acts of self-articulation. The suggestion, then, is that the experience of epistemic authority in poetry is at least in part a matter of poetry's capacity to bring the difficulty of *this* dimension of reality to reflective awareness and, in so doing, satisfy our desire see mirrored, in the elements of a poem that give domicile to this difficulty, basic features of selfhood.

Such a concern with subjectivity and its challenges is central to much modern poetry and its criticism. Consider two variations on this familiar theme. John Koethe's account of this flows from his decidedly modernist sense of the anxieties and interests of the strands of romanticism that inform the Eliot-Stevens-Ashbery tradition: lyric poetry that involves, »the enactment of subjectivity, and the affirmation of it against the claims of an objective natural setting which threatens to annihilate it« (Koethe 2023, 73). It is the threat of annihilation that takes on particular significance for Koethe, since it prompts a form of lyric expression that seeks to define the self against this ›objective‹ setting and thereby assert a form of aesthetic and moral freedom from it, an impossible task that he sees as nonetheless central to the experience and dignity of personhood. In a different register, Hannah Vandegrift Eldridge sees in Hölderlin's and Rilke's poetry a picture of the implicit power of lyric voice as,

»a vital place where the powers of language in our form of life are interrogated as possible modes of subject and world orientation«. This yields, she argues, images of the self that arise »tentatively« and that »do not exceed or reject but inhabit finitude« (Eldridge 2015, 3).

Different critics and philosophers will describe the view of the self and its predicaments differently, of course. But a constant theme in both modern poetry and its criticism is precisely the difficulty of reality, interpreted lyrically, as a claim about the challenges and complexities of self-experience and self-constitution. Koethe and Eldridge offer paradigmatic examples of statements of aboutness, though applied to poetic movements. But the logic is clear. As they show, a mark of measured and responsible criticism is that the statements of aboutness it elicits from a poem ascribe to it no more coherence and determinacy than a poem implies is warranted in respect to its subject matter. And we expect informed criticism to make this difficulty productive in its statement of the light a poem casts on human predicament. The experience of epistemic authority in difficult poetry, then, is the experience of an exemplary achievement of voice that expresses just the right amount of sense and meaning and no more with respect to its objects of expressive interest. When a poet gets this just right, it is experienced as not only a cognitive but an ethical achievement: a way of demonstrating respect for, and responsibility to, the rough business of the life of the self.

4. Conclusion

There are other ways poetry can be difficult, and there are surely many poems that interpret the difficulty of reality socially or politically instead of subjectively, among many other possibilities. But the discussion of this paper should suffice to give a sense of how the fabled notion of difficulty of poetic meaning can be linked to a plausible account of the epistemic authority of poetry. What I have not taken up here is the difficult business of asking whether this epistemic authority is, as it were, assumed or *earned*. That is, I have presented it as a feature of our experience of poetry but said nothing about whether it admits of forms of warrant or justification such that it can count as a genuine cognitive *achievement*: an insight that an epistemologist would think counts as a candidate for knowledge. Merely expressing something is a long way from showing it to be true, even from thinking that a reason has been proffered for assessing it *as* true or false. And in the absence of this, the old arguments loom that the poetic mode of presenting reality is, at root, rhetorical and not epistemic. And with this we seem to lose the ability to claim that the value of poetry's handling of the difficulty of reality is a properly *cognitive* form of value. By way of a final suggestion, I will simply assert that part of the value of the critical interpretation of the problem of poetic meaning is that it can be developed to address this. For if criticism in part constitutes our experience of aboutness in poetry, then the rational scaffolding of criticism supports these attributions of aboutness and thereby makes it internal to poetic experience

itself. Critical practices are reason-saturated and argumentative, and if we can show their deliverances of meaning to co-constitute our experience of the interior of poems themselves, then it is simply nonsense to claim that poetry's mode of presenting features of human predicament is purely or merely rhetorical. But that is another argument.

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