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Beyond Representation: Philosophy And Poetic Imagination

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Introduction: from representation to *poiesis*

RICHARD ELDRIDGE

I

Twice upon a time, in both the seventeenth to eighteenth centuries and again in the twentieth-century heydays of logical atomism and logical positivism, the task of philosophy – so Richard Rorty¹ and Ian Hacking² have reminded us – was to provide a critical theory of representations of the world. By sorting representations – mental or linguistic, as may be – into the accurate and well-founded vs. the inaccurate and ill-founded, different cultural practices might be submitted to critical judgment. This is possible insofar as “culture is,” in Rorty’s words, “the assemblage of claims to knowledge,”³ or perhaps, more weakly, in so far as cultural practices as various as preparing food, making paintings, building houses, and telling stories about ancestors all presuppose claims to knowledge. If the representations or knowledge-claims that a given bit of culture either is or presupposes are themselves in good order, then that bit of culture is itself well-founded; if not, then not. If *that* – foxglove – is *in fact* a poisonous plant, then (given a desire to avoid the poisonous) one ought not to eat it; if *mass* is in fact an essential property of physical objects, then one will do best to understand how physical bodies will move under certain conditions by, among other things, weighing them. Out of a critical theory of representations, philosophy, it was hoped, would derive a critical theory of culture.

As Rorty, Hacking, and numerous other writers on the death of epistemology have suggested, however, this project has also twice foundered on a dilemma. What is the status of the intended theory of representations itself? Either it is simply taken for granted that this theory of representations itself represents representations correctly and that the privileged set of first-order representations of the world

that it favors is likewise accurate, in which case it is dogmatic and uncritical; or this theory of representations is itself taken to be in need of some guarantor of its accuracy and of the accuracy of the first-order representations that it favors, in which case an infinite regress ensues and the theory fails to provide a basis for assessing culture and cultural practices. In Hegel's trenchant image, if reality "is supposed to be brought nearer to us through this instrument [a theory of representations together with a set of favored, first-order representations], without anything in it being altered, like a bird caught by a lime-twig, it [reality] would surely laugh our little ruse to scorn, if it were not with us, in and for itself, all along, and of its own volition."⁴

Not only does the effort to construct a critical theory of representations founder between dogmatism and skepticism, it also arguably both reposes on inconsistent assumptions and misrepresents human interests. Developing a line of argument that he sees as realized in various ways in the writings of Kant, Hegel, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, and Merleau-Ponty, Charles Taylor has claimed that the epistemological project of constructing a critical theory of representations rests on an incoherent picture of the single human knower as primitively and self-sufficiently a subject or bearer of representational states. Within the epistemological project, Taylor writes, the state of having a representation in mind (whether mental or linguistic) is conceived of as "an ultimately incoherent amalgam of two features: (a) these states (the ideas) are self-enclosed, in the sense that they can be accurately identified and described in abstraction from the 'outside' world ... and (b) they nevertheless point toward and represent things in that world."⁵ Only if both (a) and (b) are true does the project of stepping back from all presuppositions and commitments, and thence reflectively *testing* representations for their accuracy, make any sense. Yet the amalgam is incoherent. To the extent that representations do present or point to things in the world, they are – arguably – shapes or sound patterns or images that are themselves in use in the world. Moreover, the interests that human beings have in using representations to form judgments may well be much wider than cognitive interests alone, and may be interests the pursuit of which is effectively undermined by taking cognitive interests to be of paramount importance. By attempting to stand back from all presuppositions and commitments, in the cognitive interest of identifying unprejudiced and well-founded representations, we may not only get nowhere: we may also distort and repress genuine but less

obviously cognitive interests that we do have – interests in justice or freedom, say. In this way, as Hegel observes, “fear of error [within the epistemological project] reveals itself rather as fear of the truth [as truthful living and the satisfaction of genuine interests].”⁶

One way out of this impasse faced by representationalist epistemologies is to consider representations *not* as self-standing, reality-related packets in either mind or language, but instead as markers or signifiers in use in a population. In this way it becomes possible to connect the uses of representations or signifiers with other actions in practice that are carried out in the pursuit of other interests. Thinking, or entertaining representations in mind, and using linguistic representations in speaking and writing then become subsets of the many things that human beings do in pursuing many and various interests. Thought and language-use are reset within wider frameworks of human practical life.

Depending, however, on what wider interests human beings are taken to have and on how these wider frameworks of practical life are taken to be set, this way of thinking about representations can yield wildly different stances on human life and thought. Are there any interests that are simply given, and, if so, how? Or are all interests predominantly set by local and personal facticity, without deeper constraints? Are human subjects capable of an adequate and clear consciousness of their interests, however they are set? Or do these interests, bound up with the possibilities of life that culture affords, remain always in part opaque to reflective intelligence? Different answers to these questions will yield radically different ways of moving beyond Cartesian representationalism. Three broad kinds of anti-Cartesian stances have been especially prominent of late.

(1) *Naturalism*: It might be held that certain human interests – pre-eminently those in food, clothing, shelter, freedom from pain and misery, and so on – are simply given biologically. Human action is dominated by these interests that are given naturally, and by other, later interests (for example, in nurturing pride, in decoration) that grow out of these earlier ones according to natural patterns of growth and development. Theorists of thought, language, and action as different from one another as Noam Chomsky, W. V. O. Quine, Bernard Williams, J. L. Mackie, and E. O. Wilson all hold views of this kind, differing only about which specific interests are first given naturally and about the mental or neural mechanisms through which those interests are implemented and developed. Behind our lives

with representations, it is suggested, lie our lives as evolved, biological systems within a larger system of physical nature.

(2) *Linguistic idealism*: It might be held that nothing governs our actions, thoughts, and uses of language beside our own creations. Concepts such as *rightness*, *piety*, *goodness*, *honor*, *efficiency*, and *duty*, that human agents have typically, but variously, used to describe and assess courses of action, are not built into the order of nature, either in our brains or as part of reality. The fact that these concepts vary widely in how they sort actions, without having a common core, suggests that nothing but our own creativity as it plays itself out in linguistic-social life lies behind them. As Rorty observes, defending this view, “the notions of criteria and choice (including that of ‘arbitrary choice’) are no longer in point when it comes to changes from one language game to another. Europe did not *decide* to accept the idiom of Romantic poetry, or of socialist politics, or of Galilean mechanics. That sort of shift was no more an act of will than it was a result of argument. Rather, Europe gradually lost the habit of using certain words and gradually acquired the habit of using others.”⁷ It may not be that our words causally create electrons or geological formations. But our words may be responsible for dividing things up into the categories under which we take them to fall in the course of pursuing our interests (themselves thus created). Behind this life of language lies no punctual, individual, cognizing subject, no given order of nature, and no God. Our complex, conflicting, and always evolving habits of usage themselves determine how we classify and identify things – how we represent them to ourselves – in ways that are then not under the control of either reality or individual knowledge and will. Views of this kind have been prominent in strains of recent literary theory that have been influenced by Saussure’s claims (themselves detached from Saussure’s program of generating a semantic science of how conventional connections between signifiers and signifieds are laid down) about the arbitrariness of the signifier. As Catherine Belsey puts it, the thought is that “the world, which otherwise without signification would be experienced as a continuum, is divided up by language into entities which readily come to be experienced as essentially different.”⁸

(3) *Cultural materialism*: Partly making use of post-Saussurean hostility to kinds written into the order of nature, but partly in disappointment with idealism and in pursuit of the thought that *something*, but not nature, must constrain human actions and the

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development of systems of representations (what would it be to “experience the world as a continuum” anyway? – the thought makes little sense), the thought arises that human acting, thinking, and language-using are constrained or determined by sociological configurations of power. Moving from Saussure to Marx, Foucault, and Althusser (often by way of Freud and Lacan), the thought is that human beings live out their lives, and take up courses of thought and action, within social frameworks. These social frameworks are above all frameworks of opposition and domination. In any known or imaginable form of social life, certain rights and privileges are somehow allotted differentially to members of opposed groups. Women may not inherit property, while men can. Owners of the instruments of production may “steal” embodied labor through the mechanisms of capitalist production, while wage-workers cannot. Gays may be diagnosed as mentally ill and subjected to courses of medical treatment, while heterosexuals are regarded as normal and healthy. These kinds of divisions – determined socially and historically, not by physical or biological nature alone – affect how people think about themselves and their courses of action. The systems of representations that people use to think about themselves and their lives thus reflect their positions within one or another framework of social antagonisms. No one thing – not nature, not consciousness and will, not a history of technological development, not God – stands behind the development of social frameworks that embody domination. Rather, power is fluidly manifested in all social structures, without source and without a possibility of cure. As Foucault puts it,

Power’s condition of possibility, or in any case the viewpoint which permits one to understand its exercise, and which also makes it possible to use its mechanisms as a grid of intelligibility of the social order, must not be set in the primary existence of a central point, in a unique source of sovereignty from which secondary and descendent forms would emanate; it is the moving substrate of force relations which, by virtue of their inequality, constantly engender states of power, but the latter are always local and unstable. The omnipresence of power: not because it has the privilege of consolidating everything under its invincible unity, but because it is produced from one moment to the next, at every point, or rather in every relation from one point to another. Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere. And “Power,” insofar as it is permanent, repetitious, inert, and self-reproducing, is simply the over-all effect that emerges from all these mobilities, the concatenation that rests on each of them and seeks in turn to arrest their movement.⁹

Against Cartesian conceptions of a punctual subject, self-sufficiently sorting through its representations for reliability one by one, each of these stances has considerable charm and power. Surely it is right to see human action, thought, and language-use arising within a natural framework; surely language evolves, often in ways that are unpredictable by appeal to either natural processes or individual will; surely the presence of changing varieties of domination in social life is an historical fact that is of significance for how we act, think, and use language. But each position also suffers from two limitations. Within each stance a metaphysical scheme is dogmatically assumed. Either the ultimate authority of nature over the formation of thoughts and desires and social life is taken for granted, or idealism is embraced, or power is cast as an ineliminable, but in principle uncentered, unintelligible, and unassessable metaphysical fact. Moreover, against the force of these metaphysical assumptions, no morality of aspiration is articulable. In each case, the governing way of thinking about action, thought, and language forces us toward *explaining* how in fact human beings act, think, and use language, without articulating how they might do these things better than they do now. No routes toward partial, further rational independence and social freedom are either discerned or discernible. The very ideas of rational independence under norms and of social freedom become nearly unintelligible. Thinking of our systems of representations, and of our lives with them, as somehow *determined* – by nature, by nothing, or by power, as may be – we then alternate between (inconsistent) reversions to Cartesian voluntarism and clarity in choice, ecstatic embraces of a post-modern sublime, of what Lyotard calls “the unrepresentable in presentation itself, that which denies itself the solace of good forms,”¹⁰ and submission to natural or cultural fate.

And this, we may think, cannot be right. Perhaps our lives and thoughts and expressions are not our own as punctual, clairvoyant, Cartesian, originative subjects, either actually or potentially. But can it be that behind our lives and thoughts and expressions there is only either physical-biological nature, or nothing, or power? Can we simply know one of these metaphysical stances to be true? Or is it rather that all at once, as beings who possess cognitive interests, moral interests, and natural endowments, and who are set within cultural matrices of both interest and domination, we nonetheless dimly but actively refigure our representations and rearticulate our interests?

To think about the human subject in this way, as departing from multiple natural and cultural interests and endowments, thence actively to refigure representations and effectively to rearticulate interests, is to conceive of the human subject as a subject of and within *poiesis*.¹¹ As Plato and Aristotle use the term, *poiesis* is the name for any activity of making, as opposed to *theoria* (observing, theorizing) or *praxis* (acting, doing). More narrowly, it specifically means the making of any *imitative representation* (*mimesis*), no matter whether in prose or verse or painting or music (as a *mimesis* of emotions).¹² So used, *poiesis* is not solely the making of something that is merely fictional or unreal, since a *mimesis* or imitative representation presents aspects of things that are. As Paul Shorey usefully remarks, "Imitation means for [Plato and Aristotle] not only the portrayal or description of visible and tangible things, but more especially the communication of a mood or feeling, hence the (to a modern) paradox that music is the most imitative of the arts."¹³

Poetic imitation is distinguished from the construction of a *logos* (definition or account) through *theoria* in the interests of knowledge or science (*episteme*). Thus the metaphysical-biological account of man as a rational animal will be a part of *episteme* and a product of *theoria*, not a poetic imitation. But poetic imitation is the means of representing appearances, moods, characters, human moral and political interests, and actions and their meanings, among many other things. These are, we might say, things that are *portrayed* by us in our speech – figurations of how things appear to us, of what our interests are, of what our actions mean – not things that are captured by us in the course of our scientific theorizing about nature. They are representations of subjects, their characters, their interests, and their possible stances in culture that are made by subjects and that in turn help to make them, insofar as they make available certain routes of self-construal and of action and identity in culture. Such figurations will be, in Plato's and Aristotle's terminology, *poetic representations*, *mimemata* that are products of *poiesis*, and they are far from insignificant for human life, far from idle objects of aesthetic delectation.

The forming of poetic imitations, hence engaging in the activity of *poiesis*, is arguably central to the life of any human subject. We articulate and evince our characters in our actions, and we respond continuously to our senses of the characters of others. We articulate our interests – things that are not simply given in the order of physical nature, in material culture, or by personal situation and individual will – as we envision courses of action and character

formation that are fulfilling for us. These articulations of interests and of possibilities of action and identity are the vehicles of our cultures' various lives in us and of our lives in cultures, in such a way that it is a mistake to think of these articulations as either simply given, simply discovered, simply invented, or simply willed. As products of *poiesis*, these articulations both *represent* subjects and their interests, and yet also fail to do so: as products of imaginative power calling to ways of cultural life not yet in being, they allude to an ongoing and unmasterable historicity of human life. We appear to ourselves and to one another under certain roles, within plots of character development and of the pursuit of interest that we inhabit. We appear to ourselves and to one another, multiply and variously, as sons or daughters, as members of certain political parties, as bearers of certain tastes or interests in the arts, as lovers and co-workers, consumers and laborers, bosses and correspondents.

These roles are in conflict with one another in the culture, and so also in us, we who multiply inhabit them. Being a daughter, a painter, a boss, and a politically engaged citizen calls for casts of mind and ways of thinking about actions and their meanings that are not easily reconciled with one another. The tensions or oppositions here are so great that many recent writers – aware of the proliferation of cultural roles and of the antagonisms that lie between such roles – have begun to doubt whether there is any unity to the subject at all, to doubt whether there is any locus of rational freedom within the subject that embraces and organizes how one participates in the multiple roles one occupies. Perhaps the subject is a nothing, particularly if there is no self-present punctual subject, able effectively on its own to pursue cognitive interests that are central to any other interests it also has.

And yet we seem to wish effectively to integrate our various roles with one another as coherent and complementary expressions of our humanity and free personality. *We appear to ourselves* as having various interests and desires and characters, as caring about various things and occupying various social roles, and we wish to achieve coherence and integrity in freely and reasonably bearing these multiple cares and concerns, whose coherence and integrity are readily, and painfully, felt to be lacking. Or, as Hegel remarks in characterizing the sort of self-consciousness that comes with having a propositional, judgmental consciousness, wherein *one takes oneself* to be following rules in judging the contents of experience:

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The antithesis of [consciousness'] appearance and its truth has, however, for its essence only the truth, viz. the unity of self-consciousness with itself; this unity must become essential to self-consciousness, i.e. self-consciousness is *Desire* in general. In this sphere [of self-consciousness as involving an effort to achieve its coherence, integrity, and unity] self-consciousness exhibits itself as the movement in which this antithesis is removed, and the identity of itself with itself becomes explicit for it [German: *wird*: becomes or comes about].¹⁴

For Hegel, the overcoming of the antithesis between self-consciousness' housing in multiple roles, on the one hand, and its unity to be achieved, on the other hand, involves at least the development of a fully coherent culture, within which subjects will *recognize* or *acknowledge* one another's rational humanity and free personality as they are expressed in roles that are no longer brutally at odds with one another. It is in and through these recognitions or acknowledgments that are won from those with whom one shares a coherent culture of rational freedom that one's own unity of self-consciousness is achieved. "Self-consciousness exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it so exists for another; that is, it exists only in being acknowledged [*es ist nur als ein Anerkanntes*: it is only as an object of recognition] ... The detailed exposition of the Notion of this spiritual unity in its duplication will present us with the process of Recognition [*Anerkennung*]."¹⁵

Even for Hegel, however, no substance or agency that is external to human subjectivity guarantees that the achievement of a unified self-consciousness in and through a coherent culture of rational freedom will come off. To suppose there is some such substance or agency would be dogmatically to assume a cosmological-metaphysical stance, in advance of a critical examination of human subjectivity and its always emerging possibilities of development. Though Hegel himself looked forward to the imminent inauguration of a coherent culture of freedom, whose structural institutions and predominant modes of activity he undertook to describe, there is nonetheless, in his thinking, nothing external to our own collective, divided subjectivities and their efforts that is to bring such a culture about. *Geist* or Spirit is, for Hegel, fully immanent within human subjectivities in their natural and cultural situations, somewhat in the way in which a personality is immanent in the ways in which one takes an interest in, and responds to, things. A personality just is certain patterns of shifting interest and responsiveness, partly latent and partly actual in consciousness, not a separate something that is behind them. Just so, for Hegel, with *Geist* or Spirit and

human subjectivities, together with their possibilities of development, in their cultural and natural situations. The extent to which the lack of any substance external to human subjectivities might, contrary to Hegel's optimism, leave these subjectivities ever at odds with one another and internally divided, without fully unified self-consciousness, is perhaps a topic that is best left to us to dwell on, as we consider our own possibilities of development, just as various of Hegel's precursors and contemporaries did.

Strikingly, in rejecting the existence of any substance or agency external to our collective, partially unified, partially divided subjectivities – in rejecting dogmatic reliance on a metaphysical cosmology – Hegel is in fact taking up a line of thought that is already powerfully developed by Kant. Kant tells us that the law of duty – the law which commands the formation of a rational-moral culture of freedom as an earthly kingdom of ends, within which reciprocal respect and recognition, and with them lived rational self-consciousness, are achieved in daily routines – has no basis other than free human personality itself, in its present, and persisting, partial unity and partial self-dividedness.

Duty! Thou sublime and mighty name that dost embrace nothing charming or insinuating but requirest submission and yet seekest not to move the will by threatening aught that would arouse natural aversion or terror, but only holdest forth a law which of itself finds entrance into the mind and yet gains reluctant reverence (though not always obedience) – a law before which all inclinations are dumb even though they secretly work against it: what origin is there worthy of thee, and where is to be found the root of thy noble descent which proudly rejects all kinship with the inclinations and from which to be descended is the indispensable condition of the only worth which men can give themselves?

It cannot be less than something which elevates man above himself as a part of the world of sense, something which connects him with an order of things which only the understanding can think and which has under it the entire world of sense, including the empirically determinable existence of man in time, and the whole system of all ends which is alone suitable to such unconditional practical laws as the moral. It is nothing else than personality, i.e., the freedom and independence from the mechanism of nature regarded as a capacity of a being which is subject to special laws (pure practical laws given by its own reason), so that the person as belonging to the world of sense is subject to his own personality so far as he belongs to the intelligible world.¹⁶

One way to sum up the thought that we are thus elevated by our free personalities – in their partial unities and in their struggles to submit inclinations to the law of freedom – above the world of sense, the

thought that we are able to articulate and envision, albeit in specific ways, impersonal ideals of free activity and ways of pursuing of them, is to say that human subjects are subjects in and through *poiesis*.

It is just this sense of the human subject as a subject in and through *poiesis* that has been decisive for literary and poetic practice, now regarded *not* as the production of idle amusements, *not* as controlled by the movements of material nature, *not* as arbitrarily conventional, and *not* as reflecting only brute external realities of power, but instead as a practice in and through which possibilities of free human cultural activity are recalled, envisioned, and criticized. In their groundbreaking *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy sum up the Kantian sense of the human subject as a subject in and through *poiesis* that has been decisive for serious literary practice, now regarded as that into which philosophical thinking about our possibilities of development necessarily migrates. Kant rejects the existence of intellectual intuition, but retains a sense of the human subject as dimly capable of rational self-consciousness and self-legislated free action, out of its own resources. What results is a sense of the human subject as bearing, intensely, the problem of forming its own rational unity in and through the forming of a rational culture. As Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy put it,

The first and foremost result [of Kant's transcendental Aesthetic or theory of sensibility in the *Critique of Pure Reason*] is that there is no *intuitus originarius*. Whether it was situated as *arche* or as *telos*, within the divine or within the human (as either pure intellectual self-consciousness in Descartes or pure empirical sensibility in Hume), what had heretofore ensured the philosophical itself disappears. As a result, all that remains of the subject is the "I" as an "empty form" (a pure logical necessity, said Kant; a grammatical exigency, Nietzsche will say) that "accompanies my representations." This is so because the form of time, which is the "form of the internal sense," permits no *substantial* presentation. As is well known, the Kantian "cogito" is empty.

... This weakening of the subject is accompanied by an apparently compensatory "promotion" of the *moral subject* which, as we know, launches a variety of philosophical "careers." ... As a moral subject, in sum, the subject recovers none of its substance. Quite to the contrary, the question of its unity, and thus of its very "being-subject," is brought to a pitch of high tension.

... [One result of this conception of the subject is] the infinite character of the process of human *Bildung* (with which Kant, in the eighteenth century, departing radically from the *Aufklärung*, represents the first view of history that refers its *telos* to infinity).¹⁷

The subject is caught up in this movement of infinite *Bildung*, in continually seeking to become unified and free, in and for itself and in and for others. So conceived, the subject is both more than an interference point set up by intersecting waves of cultural discourse and less than free and transparent to itself, in bearing the problem of achieving a not yet existent situated freedom.

Our subjectivity, as the locus of a project of freedom and a power of poetically forming and critically assessing new visions of new cultural routines, of itself commits us to this movement of *Bildung*. Human subjectivity *is* free activity partially coming to be, in forming a partially unified self-consciousness, its connected representations, and the cultural routines in which it is to find itself. The movement of poetic *Bildung* here is deeper than, or logically prior to, any epistemological testing of already formed representations for correspondence to reality or for coherence. It is a movement that is, for us, not optional, but rather one we are always already caught within. As Robert Pippin cogently remarks,

Kant attempts to show that in all empirical experience, or representation of objects, and in all intentional activity, there simply are, necessarily, spontaneously self-legislated rules or conditions, that human awareness and action is spontaneously self-determining, whether recognized as such or not. On this reading, the Kantian “revolution” is not, at least not originally or primarily, something we reject or join as a practical matter and so . . . does not involve (again, at least not originally) getting the unenlightened to start doing something or acting differently. The first step is to realize what has been involved all along in thinking, judging, and acting.¹⁹

The problem that human subjectivity bears, and is, is, one might say, a problem simultaneously of the remembrance (overcoming repression and oppression), release, and perfection of its latent rational spontaneity or freedom, in and along with others.

The products of such poetic, self-forming, self-shaping, efforts in *Bildung* will naturally display a certain performativism, a certain literariness or writerliness, freed from dogmatic or uncriticized constraints of correspondence and coherence. Instead of testing self-standing representations for their reliability, subjects here imaginatively remake their representations and themselves. The theoretical, spectatorial standpoint is supplanted by engaged, conditioned activities of poetic making and remaking, in which subject and object are inextricably caught in play. Inherited languages are infused with exoticisms so as to introduce new powers of cultural formation. The textual forms of the ongoing, poetico-critical refiguration of the

subject and culture shift away from the closed treatise and toward more occasional, improvisatory, open, and uncontrolled forms – the fragment, the poem under continual revision, the polyphonic novel, and critical readings of other texts. Sometimes there will be what Kant called a “prevailing mood ... of weariness and complete *indifferentism*,”¹⁹ or alternatively a certain lingering in the agonies of not yet unified subjectivity, a lingering that will sometimes appear politically quietistic and excessively self-absorbed. Sometimes there will be the ecstasies of responsiveness to the not yet presentable becoming present in culture and in oneself. *Indifferentism*, subjective *agonism*, and openness to sublimities here present themselves as alternating moods and modalities of attention. Acts of *poiesis*, carried out under these alternations, here aim at being what Kant called “the origin, or at least the foreplay, of an approaching Recreation-Rebirth and Enlightenment of themselves [der Ursprung, wenigstens das Vorspiel einer nahen Umschaffung und Aufklärung derselben²⁰]” – where the foreplay (das Vorspiel) of this Recreation of the subject and culture lasts a long time.

In and through this performative movement of *poiesis* aiming at the *Bildung* simultaneously of human subjectivity and culture, there will be also always a movement of remembrance or recollection (*anamnesis*, *Erinnerung*; not *mneme*, *Gedächtnis*, not the personal recall of events one has experienced), a kind of recollection of the powers and possibilities of a unified self-consciousness that has already been partly achieved, and of a culture that is already partly expressive of freedom. Backward-looking moments of meditative recollection will sit alongside, chasten, and contest forward-looking moments of the unleashing of spontaneity in new directions. The subject will try to recall or recapture a partial *Bildung* and self-integration and also to unbind itself, to overcome dogmatic captivity by anything that is given.

Poiesis so conceived is obviously an incoherent, unstable, self-cancelling, and inconclusive form of subject activity. It will present resistances to any immediately moralizing form of interpretation or appropriation, and in doing so it will frustrate formulized receptions. But, despite its frustrating and inconclusive character, it is a kind of thinking – a scrutiny of our dim possibilities of freedom in culture and of self-unity – that we may do ill to do without. As Adorno says about what he calls *open thinking*:

The uncompromisingly critical thinker, who neither subordinates his

conscience nor permits himself to be terrorized into action, is in truth the one who does not give up ... Open thinking points beyond itself. For its part, such thinking takes a position as a figuration of praxis which is more closely related to a praxis truly involved in change than is a position of mere obedience for the sake of praxis.²¹

Not only, moreover, might we do ill to do without *poiesis* or open thinking so conceived, it is also the case – if the Kantian–Hegelian conception of the human subject as inherently a subject of and in *poiesis* is right: and how are we to tell, except by entering into its projects? – that *poiesis* is something we can do without only at the price of the self-stultification and self-repression of our inherent powers, of our very nature as subjects.

II

Each of the essays that are collected here moves broadly in the orbit of the Kantian–Hegelian conception of the human subject as a subject of and in *poiesis*. They track various modes – often themselves involving gender, class position, and national tradition – of the uncovering and exercise of human poetic powers creatively to envision a just and free culture, drawing on, but also against the grain of, forms of cultural life that are already in place. At the same time, these essays follow out moments of self-interrogation and self-criticism in the uncovering and exercise of poetic powers, moments in which the very sense that one possesses these powers is blocked by an awareness of the force of antagonisms in culture, present and foreseeable. In each essay there is a pronounced emphasis on the priority of the process of the continual refiguration (blending discovery or acknowledgment with construction, in ways that are not readily parted) of subjects and their cultures over the completed and substantial nature of the subjects and the cultures that are thus refigured. A sense of independence and nascent autonomy continuously competes with a sense of incompleteness, fragility, and self-dividedness. This is true both of the protagonists that are presented or implied in the writings that these essays take up and, curiously, of these essays themselves, so the writers of these essays participate in just the agonistic logic of always refigurative self-consciousness that they are undertaking to describe.

In chapter 2 “Confession and forgiveness: Hegel’s poetics of action,” J. M. Bernstein elaborates Hegel’s view of the self’s ongoing refiguration of itself, blending acknowledgment and projection. It is

in and through action, where action essentially involves the taking up and (at least sometimes) the conscientious recasting of norms, that we are what we are. "It is," Hegel tells us, "the linguistically actualized expressive dimension of action which is the means whereby the self comes both to reveal and to take a stand upon itself as a conscientious agent." Since there is in human action an essential moment or dimension of taking a stand upon oneself and against existing norms, it follows that human action as such is inherently evil. Hence it inherently defeats the subject's efforts to secure full, stable, and universal recognition of its expressive power and full, self-recollective, self-identity. It always partly unmakes what it would otherwise make. "Each act through which we would affirm ourselves dispossesses us of the self we are and want to be."

As a result, for Hegel, transgression and the failures both of full self-closure in self-recollection and of the perfection of human community are neither accidental nor surpassable, but rather part of the structure of human life. "Transgression is not the denial of a positive norm but the creation of a breach, rent, tear or wound in the body of united life (that, of course, exists in part through the continual activities of rending and tearing) – which is what positive norms are and represent if they but knew themselves aright." Existing as human subjects only within this thus always torn, always reforming body of united life, the only modalities of action through which we might achieve such moments of recognition, self-recollection, and community with others as we are capable of are the modalities of confession and forgiveness. Confession "is attempting to establish the common" by allowing it to declare itself in oneself; forgiveness lifts action out of the cycle of particular self-assertion and revenge in which otherwise it would remain caught. But because forgiveness, too, "is a performative act of recognition," it too bears the stain of transgressive self-assertiveness that marks all human action. "Forgiveness must express my particularity as well as renouncing it." Together, then, confession and forgiveness are "categorical modalities of all actions that provide them with their spiritual shape." One result of this shape of all human action is that we must be open to the work of mourning, as opposed to the vengeful denials and resentments of melancholia, as we are aware of those, both living and dead, with whom we have achieved partial (albeit only partial: there is no "uncontaminated universality") reciprocal recognition. Within "contaminated universality" there will be, for us, only vengefulness and violence, internal and external, in the

absence of confession and forgiveness – the modalities of action under which alone “united life” is possible.

Charles Altieri takes up the Hegelian thematics of action as inherently involving *poiesis*, confession, and forgiveness in chapter 3, “The values of articulation: aesthetics after the aesthetic ideology.” Altieri begins from a certain dissatisfaction both with what he calls “the aesthetic ideology” – the view that art is a phenomenon essentially of aesthetic pleasure – and with recent efforts to overturn that aesthetic ideology in favor of a conception of the work of art as primarily a political instrument. Without denying either the pleasures or the political instrumentality of art, Altieri nonetheless finds both these stances to be rooted in modernity’s rejection of the abilities of art and poetry to serve as vehicles of truth. As Adorno and Horkheimer notoriously observe in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, “To the Enlightenment, that which does not reduce to numbers, and ultimately to the one, becomes illusion; modern positivism writes it off as literature.”²² Once legitimate truth-seeking is seen as the preserve solely of the sciences, art and poetry are immediately reduced either to the status of providers of gratuitous, *belle-lettristic* pleasures or to instrumentalities of power. (Bernstein powerfully characterizes and criticizes modernity’s reductions of art’s significances in his *The Fate of Art*, and he points to Kant, together with Heidegger, Adorno, and Derrida, as gesturing towards ways of reconceiving and recovering those significances.²³)

Instead of accepting these reductions, which now present themselves as mirror-images of one another, of art to either the aesthetic or the political, Altieri suggests that we might better revert to a pre-modern conception of the powers of art – the view of Longinus that sees the work of art as carrying out a “work of articulation” that makes routes of expressive power available to us. (In developing this suggestion, Altieri is powerfully extending the lines of thinking of his collection of essays *Canons and Consequences: Reflections on the Ethical Force of Imaginative Ideals*.²⁴) Unlike a *measurement* or *reproduction* of something that is already in existence, an *articulation*, as Altieri develops the term to describe the work and product of *poiesis*, involves a movement from potentiality to actuality, a work of forming and testing the subject and its commitments. Articulation partially, but only partially, resolves the “inchoate pressures” of multiple desires within specific settings by affording them modes of release, expression, and development. When the work of poetic articulation is carried out well, as Altieri suggests it is in Yeats’

“Leda and the Swan” and in Shakespeare’s *Othello*, then the poet may be seen to be arriving at witness to our cultural failures, to historical traumas, and to the brutalities of power, but in arriving at this witness also to be bearing an affirmative power of judgment and of the vision of something different. Altieri acknowledges that there is a certain danger that thus thinking of poets as exemplary strong articulators of judgment, vision, and routes of expression and desire will itself be received as a “reactionary fantasy” that worships art while leaving regnant political powers in place. In embracing this danger, however, Altieri intimates that it is only by accepting certain models of strong articulation, witness, and poetic vision – models that might provoke us to our own originalities – that we might hope to lead our lives as fallen subjects in culture and in political life affirmatively. “Participation in how another mind makes use of language . . . carries a significant model of our own freedom” to be achieved in our own expressive acts.

Arthur C. Danto has been a powerful and prominent critic of the Cartesian conception of the human subject as a punctual processor of representations, themselves taken to stand in a problematic relation to some external thing that causes them in us. Urging a variant of the argument that Charles Taylor has elicited out of Hegel, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, and Merleau-Ponty, Danto has argued that just to the extent that we can identify anything as a representation at all, we are thereby committed to accepting the thought that there is a real world apart from our representations, perhaps even a world of which we are a part.²⁵ In place of the Cartesian conception of the human subject and of the primacy of cognitive interests in the life of the subject, Danto has elaborated, in both his philosophical and his critical writings on art, a conception of the human subject as coming to its distinctively representational consciousness and self-consciousness only in and through its formed social world, to which it then reacts.²⁶ The work of the artist, Danto writes, is that of “inventing modes of embodying meanings she or he may share with communities of very large circumference . . . [M]eanings more or less come from the world in which the artist lives.”²⁷

In chapter 4, “In their own voice: philosophical writing and actual experience,” Danto takes up philosophically the ontology and the practical ethics of the production of philosophy itself. Most “star-philosophers,” Danto notes (and surely this category includes pre-eminently himself, who possesses an extraordinarily distinctive, lapidary style), “have pretty distinct voices.” Does it follow from this

fact that their writings are products of merely personal, or perhaps situated historical-personal, voice or style and vision? Embracing this thought, Danto suggests, “vaporizes philosophical writing into poetry” – an unhappy result – in so far as a concern for standing truth, truth that survives changes in fashion, is lost.

That the traditional philosophical pursuit of standing truth can be sustained is evident, Danto argues, in the writings of Wittgenstein and Cavell. While these are two of the most writerly, most idiosyncratic, philosophical intelligences who have ever lived, and while much of the substance of their thinking is pre-eminently conveyed in their respective styles, there are nonetheless some theses that can be abstracted from their writings. Whether accepting limits is a good thing, as Wittgenstein urges, or whether as Cavell claims “all selves are sided,” are matters that can be argued about. A concern for truth, not just for voice, informs their quite stylized writings, and as readers we must bring our own concern for truth to bear on the claims that they urge on us.

But, while this is true, it is also true that not any thought can be expressed in any voice. Certain voices and styles, themselves partly personal and partly historically situated and generated, make certain regions or aspects of truth available to us. In pursuing a neutral, impersonal style for the formulation of theses, what Danto calls “bottom line philosophy” – surely thinking of the routinized academic performances that compose much so-called professional philosophy, analytic and Continental alike – is “abstract and distorted and surrealistic.” “We really do experience the world and life as gendered beings” and as otherwise specifically historically situated beings, “which means that the suppression of our facticities means a distorted representation of the world, the world according to Nobody.” Instead of being anonymously professional and neutral, or written by Nobody, the work of “creative philosophers ... carries what they have written and what they hope to write as the aura of a total vision.” It is impossible here not to think of the aura of the total vision of Danto’s writing as itself providing us a certain persuasive articulation (in Altieri’s terms) or poetic representation of how we might bring our personal-historical styles and experiences into fruitful engagement with our concern for truth. As simultaneously a writer and a philosopher, Danto hopes, it seems, both to engage us with his own writerly voice and also to say something true, in a standing way, about the importance and possibility of blending voice with truth-telling.

Introduction: from representation to poiesis

Chapters 5 and 6 as it were split this suggestion, taking up respectively the sides of the object of our characterizations and the subject who does the characterizing. In chapter 5, "Poetry and truth-conditions," Samuel Fleischacker takes up the topic of how things are present to us at all. In trying to make sense of our world, we are, he notes, caught within "the general human situation of being limited creatures who must always live beyond their limitations." Surprising things can happen, in the arts, in the sciences, in politics, and in daily life. Jackson Pollock produces a drip painting, or the position and velocity of an electron turn out to be unmeasurable simultaneously, and we do not know what to say. Nor are we at ease with this. When some bit of experience thus challenges our concepts and our capacities to make sense, then we construe that experience as presenting a problem for us. Fleischacker persuasively analogizes our need to make new sense of surprising experiences to our need to arrive at a judgment about whether a contract may be enforced in various kinds of unforeseen and largely unforeseeable circumstances. Something must be said, a verdict must be reached, but what, and how?

Here, Fleischacker suggests, is where poetry comes in, and is hence part of our normal equipment in responding to our worlds. In such unforeseen and unforeseeable circumstances, what is needed are creative judgments, employing indeterminate, not yet fully worked out, concepts with indeterminate truth-conditions – the kind of indeterminate concept that Kant says "beauty" is. Poetry helps to provide us with such concepts, with new, indeterminate ways of looking at new things that can help to support creative, reflective judgments of our experiences and lead us toward new ways of making sense. (In chapter 8, I similarly elaborate how art, in Kant's terms, "bodies forth to sense" certain indeterminate ideals.) "Poetry," Fleischacker claims, "thrives ... at these margins ... concentrates on, and derives its power from ... the fact that we must always project our commitments beyond what, strictly, we know." Crucially, however, and in acceptance of something like Danto's thoughts about the possibility of philosophical truth, this is not quite the simpler Rortyan thought that, in Shelley's terms, "poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world,"²⁸ for the work of poetry is not prior to and independent of, but rather in its turn also presupposes, the works of science and of ordinary, "literal" assertion. "Poetry and science make each other possible"; we must embrace "both the determinacy of concepts of truth and their vulnerability to

revision.” In their dialectical interaction, poetry and science jointly serve as open, self-correcting vehicles of the continual representing to us of the world.

Azade Seyhan takes up this theme of the continual, open-ended, self-correcting representing to us of the world under certain forms of attention to it in chapter 6, “Fractal contours: chaos and system in the Romantic fragment.” Suppose, in the wake of Kant, we reject dogmatism and strong forms of metaphysical and epistemological realism, so that there is no certain method for limning the ultimate structures of reality and for defending one’s characterizations of what is ultimate. But suppose also that we retain a sense of our critical powers and possibilities, rather than accepting the Humean views that nature, of which we are a part, is too strong for principle and that our condition is whimsical. What forms of attention and expression, Seyhan asks, will then be appropriate for subjects thus situated, who retain powerful expressive aspirations but yet cannot stably and securely grasp the ultimate under a method? How can standing openness and a self-correcting character come to inhabit our forms of attention and expression themselves?

Seyhan suggests that the Romantic fragment, particularly as it was theorized and developed by Friedrich Schlegel, presents a persuasive answer to these questions. “The fractured reality of the world” – at the very least a world resistant to ultimate metaphysical characterization – “found its coincidental form of expression in the fragment.” Its value as a form lies in its disseminating power, its provocativeness, its presentation of continuing energies of transformation in both the subject and the world that do not arrive at *stasis*. “Fragments are symbolic markers of a ‘chaotic’ progression that strives toward the cognition of an ‘infinite reality.’ Their open resistances to redemptive attempts at final restorations of unity and harmony embody an impetus for self-transformation.” The Romantic fragment manifests a tendency toward irony, incomprehensibility, and the enactment of a sense of sublime powers never able to be housed. Yet it functions less as a simple embrace of disorder and chaos than as vehicle for coming to terms with always changing new orders of possibility in our cultural lives. “The fragment, then, mediates between system and systemlessness, attempts to function as a critical instrument for the review of apperceptual regimes, and renegotiates the status of the poetic in the anatomy of philosophical discourse.” It presents its author, and implicitly presents human subjects in general, as always cast

on routes of self-revision, partly of their own making, and always containing unanticipatable turnings.

In chapter 7, “The mind’s horizon,” Stanley Bates likewise takes up the theme of the continuously self-revising character of the human subject, likewise beginning from the Kantian “problematic of the subject unrepresentable to itself” enunciated by Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy. When one reviews Kant’s sometime attempts to gesture toward an ultimate, noumenal reality that is never present to us in distinct existents or in our representations of them – the only objective representations we are able to form – then one discovers that there are “internal strains” that trouble this attempt. “From what perspective could one be in a position to say what Kant says in these passages . . . We seem to be both within and beyond our own experience, simultaneously.” A similar internal strain, Bates argues, also troubles Hegel’s efforts to combine a conception of human subjects as always acculturated, acculturating self-revising subjects with the claim that we have arrived as human subjects at Absolute Knowledge that includes our full and final knowledge of ourselves.

Once we trace out the internal strains that trouble these Kantian and Hegelian efforts to characterize our position once and for all, while yet acknowledging our lack of direct and unmediated contact with anything ultimate, then we can see, Bates suggests, that our position as subjects in nature and culture, as well as how to enact that position, is always a problem for us. Awareness of this forces certain themes on us:

(1) the idea that reason is not the most fundamental mode of human being in the world but that something else, variously characterized as practice, doing, passion, feeling, etc., is, (2) the idea that there is a kind of division in the self, so that one may not know oneself fully (an idea something like that of the unconscious), (3) the idea that the individual self is not a given entity, but a goal to be sought in a process, potentially progressive, in which the self constitutes itself . . . (4) the idea that certain experiences, which might be described as moments when the self-as-it-would-be transcends the self-as-it-is, provide intimations of the directionality of this process – and that these experiences fit comfortably under the rubric of the sublime, (5) the fact that many of the subsequent authors who express these themes do so, not in traditional (Descartes to Hegel) philosophical forms, but in other literary genres – essays, fictions, parables, polemics, pseudo-scriptures, etc.

Bates then concludes by tracing “the dialectic of exaltation and ordinariness, and the possibility of finding exaltation in ordinariness” that is played out in Emerson’s essays. What emerges there is that “the moments of exalted awareness” that are achievable

“cannot be sustained.” Hence we bear a kind of “double consciousness” of ourselves and our possibilities, as we are caught, in “relations of self-succession” between moments of exaltation, self-collection, integrity, and at-homeness, on the one hand, and moments of doubt, despair, self-dispersion, and alienation, on the other.

Following Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, both Bates and Seyhan suggest that this kind of double consciousness, emerging out of the reception of Kant, has massively informed much of the most commanding literary and philosophical work of the last two centuries, including at least the English and American Romantics, Kierkegaard, Marx, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida, and poets of the American sublime such as Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams, among many others. In “Kant, Hölderlin, and the Experience of Longing,” I undertake to track this sort of double consciousness as it manifests itself in the texts of both Kant and Hölderlin. Each of them enacts, I claim, “a sense of the human person as caught between an aspiration toward the ideal and the standing defeat of that aspiration.” Focusing in particular on Kant’s historical essays, where his conception of the perfection of the subject toward the always deferred full articulation and release of its rational capacities in lived, historical time is worked out, and on Hölderlin’s “Dichterberuf,” “The Poet’s Vocation,” I argue in chapter 8, “Kant, Hölderlin, and the experience of longing,” that a sense of one’s own identity and power is internally related to one’s sense of the possibilities of a culture of affirmative moral freedom. Hence the standing deferral of the achievement of such a culture, while its call for us remains present, throws one’s own identity and integrity, perhaps one’s very sanity, into question. Whether elegiac consciousness of moral freedom never quite coming to realization can itself sustain a kind of measured, always shifting, self-integrity and sense of cultural possibilities (rather than madness), therein motivating confession and a sense of shared identity (as Bernstein describes them) and gratitude (rather than revenge), presents itself here as an always open, and perhaps unavoidable, question.

Michael Fischer hopes for a culture that, while imperfect and suffused with antagonisms, is also informed by gratitude and a sense of shared, affirmative possibilities. In chapter 9, “Wordsworth and the reception of poetry,” he suggests that Wordsworth’s conception of his poetry and his own poetic practice can help to nurture this hope. In a pluralist age of multiple cultures, and of antagonisms

within all cultures, it is rightly easy to distrust ethico-political universals and claims to culture-transcendent rationality. But it is equally hard to see how to inherit, revise, and share a culture affirmatively in the absence of a common articulate conception of what is worthwhile.

Here, Fischer, suggests, is where Wordsworth can help us. He is a universalist – he seeks guiding ethico-politico-religious conceptions for himself and for others – but he is not a transcendent or dogmatic universalist. He seeks not to impose his judgments on others, but instead to lead readers to decide for themselves, along his tracks, what is worthwhile. He seeks “to affect readers without coercing them.” This leads Wordsworth, in his poetic practice, to solicit others to sing with him, as he seeks to articulate “conditional or provisional universals.” “He wants readers to tap in themselves the imaginative energy that he himself has employed in writing the poem.”

Because, however, Wordsworth has no independent metaphysical conception of the nature and proper objects of imaginative energy, hence no rationally demonstrable standards for its appropriate exercise (apart from whatever fitfully shows itself in that exercise itself), an enormous anxiety about the inheritability of his work, and beyond that about “the transmissibility of culture itself” results. “Will readers – many of whom will be quite different from me – exercise their imaginative energies along my routes, with anything like my provisional results?” Wordsworth wonders, agonizes. Two ways of responding to that anxious, self-interrogative wonder then present themselves. One might foreclose it through violence, seeking to force the agreement of others with one’s valuations, as Robespierre did, or as Wordsworth is tempted to do in fantasizing that he might himself murder Robespierre. Or instead one might write, continuing therein to articulate conditional universals and to acknowledge the doubts that inevitably attach to doing so (thus bearing the kind of double consciousness that Bates describes and that I see in Kant and Hölderlin). “Though Wordsworth feels the allure of the violence he is contemplating, he rejects this option, turning instead to writing.” The provisional articulations of values (in Altieri’s sense) that then result from his writing are a way of continuing the traditional philosophical dream of substituting reason for violence in human relations, but now a poetic, nondogmatic reason – the very sort of reasoned but poetic pursuit of valuations, Fischer suggests, that also informs the best present feminist criticism, theory, and pedagogic practice.

In chapter 10, “Self-consciousness, social guilt, and Romantic poetry: Coleridge’s *Ancient Mariner* and Wordsworth’s *Old Pedlar*,” Kenneth Johnston likewise scrutinizes how Wordsworth and Coleridge bear a double consciousness both of their identities as subjects and of cultural possibilities. By the end of 1797, both Wordsworth and Coleridge bear a “profoundly troubled commitment to the cause of human possibility, democratically defined.” Each of them had for a time identified himself as a subject with the advancement of the democratic promise of the French Revolution. Here Johnston reminds us how powerful the association is between democratic ideals and Enlightenment conceptions of human subjects as individual bearers of representations. As the promise of the French revolution collapses into terror, however, Coleridge and Wordsworth find themselves forced to reconsider both their conceptions of themselves and their senses of the nature of the human subject generally. Direct political action by individuals, alone or massed, based on their representations of the world no longer seems a promising route toward freedom. But withdrawal from all action seems to acquiesce in the rule of the powers that be and to forego any sense of oneself as a self-forming subject, potentially effective in historical time.

Johnston characterizes the strategy at which Coleridge and Wordsworth then arrive – that of becoming a poet “radically”: that is, with a new sense of oneself, one’s commitments, complicities, and interests – as involving first bearing a sense of guilt and second trying to define oneself as one who goes on nonetheless in bearing that sense, principally by writing it out so that others may find themselves in it. (Here Johnston echoes Bernstein on the logic of confession and forgiveness as a vehicle for finding and forming a shared identity.) Their writing involves not the purveying of a doctrine, but rather “efforts at self-definition” of how one can be both guilty (for one’s impotences) and yet an affirmative human subject.

These efforts are evident first of all in the story-tellings on the parts of the *Ancient Mariner* and the *Old Pedlar*. But the guilts that they bear (the Mariner for killing the albatross; the *Old Pedlar* for doing nothing in the face of Margaret’s decline) and seek to acknowledge are in turn both figurations, and provocations, of guilt in their auditors (the *Wedding Guest* and the young Poet – for being themselves transfixed by stories and caught within their own stories, rather than attentive to material suffering). The guilt that all these figures thus share in turn figures the guilts that Coleridge and Wordsworth themselves bear for the failures of their own political

involvements, aspirations, and commitments. In acknowledging these guilts through their story-tellers, who then provoke a like sense of guilt in their auditors, Coleridge and Wordsworth provoke a similar acknowledgment of guilt in us, *their* readers. Such acknowledgments (confessions in Bernstein's sense) of failures and guilts are a central modality of such self-understanding and expiation as there can be. "Each [Coleridge and Wordsworth] thus presents not a metaphysical explanation for human suffering, but a metapoetical situation that literally *articulates* the need for constant telling (including revising) of tales of human suffering." In this telling and revising, one, along with others, as an active human subject who bears responsibilities and guilts (rather than being in possession of political self-sufficiencies) – persists, Johnston suggests, as a bearer of a quasi-secularized version of original sin. Recognizing that one is a subject of this kind – as these poems prompt us to do – is, Johnston argues, less the path of political quietism than it is the way to any sense of human life, political or otherwise, that is worthy of the name.

Each of the contributions so far has dwelt on a conception of the human subject as divided within itself. Human subjects have been cast as bearing a double consciousness of aspirations and their defeat. They are seen as possessing a partly accomplished power to transform culture, but also as suffering guilt over failures of attention and responsiveness. Is this sort of sense of the human subject simply parcelled out among all of us, so that any poet, possessed of and enacting enough self-consciousness, might speak for us, might express a shared sense of subjectivity? Or does it make a difference to the sense one has of oneself as a subject that one is a woman? "What is it," Christine Battersby asks, in chapter 11, "Her blood and his mirror: Mary Coleridge, Luce Irigaray, and the female self," "to write as a woman?"

Here Battersby finds that there are indeed some important specificities to the female subject position. It is not that there is an ahistorical feminine style – involving, say, gentleness and emotional attunement – into which woman writers naturally fall. To think this, Battersby argues, is to essentialize away history and its possibilities of alternative subject positions. But there is nonetheless a specifically female, not feminine, subject position that is evident in the poetry of Mary Elizabeth Coleridge and the theoretical writings of Luce Irigaray. This female subject position is specifically historically allotted to members of the female sex, who are forced by their sex

(itself partly a constructed, partly a given category, involving – Battersby suggests – an interfusion of metaphysics and history) to react against a specific literary and philosophical tradition.

Traditionally, Battersby argues, in male-dominated philosophy and letters, one became an accomplished, exemplary, fully self-conscious human subjectivity – a genius – by becoming an androgynous or feminized male. (Here Battersby draws on her powerful analysis of gendered Romantic genius in her *Gender and Genius: Towards a Feminist Aesthetics*.²⁹) Occupying this position is evidently impossible for women. Both Mary Elizabeth Coleridge and Luce Irigaray note “their own incapacity as female to occupy that subject position,” and they seek therefore to “reconstruct a female subject position.” While they cannot take up the modes of the bearing of affirmative, expressive power that have been typical in our culture, they nonetheless refuse to abandon the pursuit of expressiveness and a sense of oneself as a subject who bears power in and through culture.

Caught between the appeal of their literary-philosophical tradition in offering models of cultural power, on the one hand, and that tradition’s specific rejection of them as female subjects, on the other, Coleridge and Irigaray enact a specific awareness of their “indeterminate desire” and of their “incompleteness” and “woundedness,” as they find themselves unable to enter into the routes of transcendence of the given that our culture has traditionally held open for some. “The female poet,” Battersby writes, “retains the horror of the flesh whilst simultaneously blocking traditional models of transcendence.” Coleridge “seems entirely caught up with the paradoxes and the contraries of the other within,” in possession of indeterminate desire and a distress that is “unsanctified” by any vehicle for its working through and overcoming.

Yet what Coleridge experiences as the woundedness, indeterminate desire, and unsanctified distress of the female subject position may also, Battersby argues, itself be productive and affirming. Elaborating Irigaray’s work on the Thesmophoria festivities, Battersby suggests that “what was celebrated in these all-female spaces was a form of identity in which the self was relational, and in which otherness extruded out of (and was then reincorporated within) the female self via relationships of gift, birth, ripening and (productive) decay.” Perhaps, Battersby intimates, female subject-position writing that is continuous with such ritual celebrations can provide a more persuasive model of the sustenance of human identity

generally than the post-Platonic male models of transcendence of the given that we have mostly inherited from our traditions.

Whether, how – under what modalities of practice –, and to what extent self-integrity is possible for us, through coming to achieve reciprocal recognition in a perfected culture, where both self-integrity and the perfection of culture are envisioned through *poiesis*, is the issue around which all the contributions to this volume center. How, if at all, might we come to be affirmatively free human subjects in culture? Is this either possible or desirable? These questions are the focus of attention in chapter 12, “Scene: an exchange of letters,” the contribution of Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy. In moving through this field of concerns, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy are meditating, roughly fifteen years later, on the fundamental issues raised by their epochal 1978 book *L’absolu littéraire* – the book from which Seyhan and Bates explicitly, and several other contributors implicitly, take their points of departure.

That book – we may now recall from these other contributions – enunciates the Kantian and post-Kantian problematic of the subject not present to itself. That is, in *The Literary Absolute* Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy describe the post-Kantian sense of the human subject as always in process, bearing a kind of decentered subjectivity always in reformation, in and through its poetic and critical envisionings of itself and its situation. Those who bear this sense of themselves as subjects – pre-eminently Friedrich Schlegel – hence find their philosophical concerns for self-integrity, freedom, and the perfection of culture migrating into poetry, or better yet into a kind of philosophico-poetico-criticism, wherein disciplinary distinctions break down. In this way, these figures continue the concerns of philosophy by another means. For the modern, Romantic subjects who bear this sense of themselves – for those who have become poets radically, Johnston would say –

programmatically, the philosophical *organon* is thought as the product or effect of a *poiesis*, as work (*Werk*) or as poetical *opus* ... Philosophy must effectuate itself – complete, fulfill, and realize itself – as poetry ... [L]iterature, as its own infinite questioning and as the perpetual positing of its own question, dates from romanticism and as romanticism. [This means that] the romantic question, the question of romanticism, does not and cannot have an answer. Or, at least that its answer can only be interminably deferred, continually deceiving, endlessly recalling the question ... This is why romanticism, which is actually a moment (the moment of its question) will always have been more than a mere “epoch,” or else it will never cease,

right up to the present, to incomplete the epoch it inaugurated ... Romantic criticism – and indeed criticism and poetics since romanticism – conceives of itself as the construction of the classical work to come. This is also why, with regard to romantic poetry “itself,” criticism in turn possesses its own superior and as yet unactualized status: that of this “divinatory criticism,” which alone (again in *Athenaeum* fragment 116) “would dare to characterize” the ideal of such a “poetry.”³⁰

In their present meditation on what it is like to bear this sort of subjectivity, scrutinizing itself and its possibilities through this form of philosophico-poetic-critical thinking, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy begin from a question about the meaning and importance of *opsis* – staging or spectacle (it makes a difference which term we choose) – in Aristotle’s *Poetics*. Tragic drama, Aristotle claims, essentially takes place through staging, yet staging as spectacle is nonetheless secondary and inessential to tragedy and its proper effects.

For Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, this issue in the *Poetics* about the nature and importance of staging is but one side of a much larger issue: what is the nature and function of performance in the construction of a human subjectivity and its life? Their turn to this larger issue is motivated by the fact that the French word “scène,” which translates one sense of Aristotle’s *opsis* (stage or staging, not performance or spectacle) is also the word in psychoanalytic theory in French that describes the place of the formation of subject identity: *la scène originnaire*, the primal, Oedipal scene. (Their essay was first published in French in a 1992 issue of *Nouvelle revue de psychanalyse* devoted to “The Primal Scene and Some Others.”)

Against the background of their post-Kantian concerns, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy then see the scene (primal and otherwise) as the place of the continual coming-to-be of the subject. The work done in this scene is characterized by a dialectic of order and disorder (Seyhan), by a mixture of coercion and free consent (Fischer), by productive imagination acting under constraints set by materiality and tradition (Danto, Fleischacker). It is a place of the performance (Altieri) of identity, including gender identity (Battersby) and voice (Danto), wherein subjects bear both a double consciousness of their possibilities (Bates, Eldridge) and guilt (Johnston), wherein they are locked in relations of confession and forgiveness, sustained or refused (Bernstein).

Given all this, how is the work of subject formation best to be done? Here Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy divide themselves in their

exchange of letters. ("A dialogue is a chain or garland of fragments. An exchange of letters is a dialogue on a larger scale," as Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy cite Schlegel's *Athenaeum* fragment 77 in *The Literary Absolute*.³¹) "I always," Nancy writes, "take the side of the *opsis* and you the side of the 'solitary reading.'" As Nancy develops this stance, it emerges that this side, the side of *opsis*, involves a commitment to the values of spectacle, free performativism, and the enunciatory gesture (wherein meaning is not readily parted from effect or from touch) in the enactment of subjectivity. Occupying this stance means conceiving the subject as itself not a fixed point of origin of performances, but instead as something wholly caught up and constituted "in a game, in an exchange, in a circulation, and in a community which depends on an economy completely different from that of subjective representation [i.e. from a unified, punctual subject's having of ideas]." Here we may think naturally of Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy* on the Dionysian and its form of fragmented, collective subjectivity.

Against this stance, Lacoue-Labarthe urges "a principle of restraint in art." Lacoue-Labarthe does not deny that we are always becoming what we are in and through scenes of performance. There is no reversion to a Cartesian conception of subjectivity. "I am . . . fully convinced that we are at the end of a subjectivity understood as a self-presence which supports presentations and brings them back as one's own – this subjectivity being, precisely, unrepresentable," Nancy writes, enunciating the Kantian and post-Kantian conception of the subject described in *The Literary Absolute*, and Lacoue-Labarthe apparently accepts this. But, while accepting subjectivity as always coming to be in and through a scene of its staging, Lacoue-Labarthe nonetheless resists the values of performativism and open, unleashed figurality. Such unleashed figurality, an attempt to think and embrace the figurality of figure, involves, according to Lacoue-Labarthe, a potentially dangerous, Heideggerian "sacralization or mythologization" of figural breaks from the tradition and the ordinary – figural breaks that threaten to undo everything that is, all partial identity and all partially free culture, far too apocalyptically. Unleashed figurality as a positive value threatens to make "a religion of the unrepresentable," threatens to enact an empty and dangerous sublime. At the very least, too much figurality and openness in performance, and too little concern for tradition, for the ordinary, and for the real as it has so far presented itself in and through culture, supports, Lacoue-Labarthe suggests, a

certain “sentimentality” and “an expressionistic weakness” in thinking about our possibilities of character and culture. We would be better off, Lacoue-Labarthe asserts, to keep to a certain normative principle of sobriety and restraint in our performances of ourselves and our culture – a stance that we can recognize as urging the values of the Apollonian sensibility as Nietzsche describes it in *The Birth of Tragedy*.

Is there, then, any way to reconcile these stances on the performances of subjectivity and of culture, any way to resolve the question about how being-in-common (*être-en-commun*), both within oneself and with others, might best, even if fitfully, be achieved? Near the end of their exchange, Nancy writes that “an antinomy, if you will, of perceptions and affections” inhabits their exchange and makes there to be this scene – this staging of oneself for and to and with another – between them. This seems right, as their exchange enacts the sense that questions about how best to go on reforming our partially integrated, partially free, but also partially self-opposed, partially unfree, subjectivities and cultures as they stand must always remain open for us.

III

Many of these essays – and most especially the exchange between Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy – display a critical and philosophical performativism, particularly when contrasted with more routinized forms of professional philosophical thinking and expression. Truth is here pursued through criticism, and articulation, and envisioning, not through any attempt neutrally to measure and trace what is independently materially real. In these pursuits, varieties of voice and sensibility become strongly evident, as the writers of these essays enact – stage, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy might say – their respective subjectivities.

A certain careful, materialist cast of mind will find these pursuits suspicious, and it will seek, perhaps, to reduce these enactments of sensibility to the expressions of mere preferences (it will say) somehow formed elsewhere – in either material nature or material social life. One ambition of this collection is to make that reduction harder to sustain, by presenting essays – enactments or stagings or envisionings – of such depth and richness that it is hard to reduce them away and to deny the reality of always enacted-enacting subjectivity. On their showings, we are human subjects in and

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through the tangled, self-opposed, work of *poiesis*, aimed at ourselves in our culture and our culture in ourselves, and the work of *poiesis* lasts a long time.

Notes

- 1 Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton University Press, 1979). See especially Rorty's characterization of the role of philosophy as it was conceived of by Descartes, Locke, Russell, and Husserl, among others: "Philosophy can be foundational in respect to the rest of culture because culture is the assemblage of claims to knowledge, and philosophy adjudicates such claims. It can do so because it understands the foundations of knowledge, and it finds these foundations in a study of man-as-knower, of the 'mental processes' or the 'activity of representation' which make knowledge possible. To know is to represent accurately what is outside the mind; so to understand the possibility and nature of knowledge is to understand the way in which the mind is able to construct such representations. Philosophy's central concern is to be a general theory of representation, a theory which will divide culture up into the areas which represent reality well, those which represent it less well, and those which do not represent it at all (despite their pretense of doing so)" (p. 3).
- 2 Ian Hacking, *Why Does Language Matter to Philosophy* (Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. 187: "At any rate, I have one answer to the question of why language matters to philosophy now. *It matters for the reason that ideas mattered in seventeenth-century philosophy*, because ideas then, and sentences now, serve as the interface between the knowing subject and what is known." Hacking then goes on to look forward to a situation in which discourse is "that which constitutes human knowledge" (p. 187), without dependence on either a knowing subject or a given external reality. Here he anticipates the subsequent work not only of Rorty, but of such post-structuralist literary theorists as Catherine Belsey.
- 3 Rorty, *Philosophy*, p. 3.
- 4 G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), para. 73, p. 47.
- 5 Charles Taylor, "Overcoming Epistemology," in *After Philosophy: End or Transformation?*, eds. Kenneth Baynes, James Bohman, and Thomas McCarthy (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1987), p. 474.
- 6 Hegel, *Phenomenology*, para. 74, p. 47.
- 7 Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 6.
- 8 Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice* (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1980), p. 40.

- 9 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1978), p. 93.
- 10 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 81.
- 11 There is controversy about how this word ought to be spelled. The Greek word is ποιησει, later transliterated into Latin as *poesis*, as in Horace's *Ars poetica*, and it is this latter, Latin spelling that has been familiar from schoolboy classical educations for several hundred years. There is also controversy about whether the e in *poiesis* (however spelled) should carry a macron, no accent, or even a circumflex. Insofar as the philosophers, poets, and critics who will be under consideration are themselves trying to recover and refigure certain wide-ranging senses of the nature of poetic activity and its value in the life of a subject that are principally evident in the Platonic and Aristotelian texts, it seems apt to prefer a direct and simple transliteration of the Greek. I owe the information about the history of the spellings of *poiesis* to my colleagues in Greek and Latin Studies, Gilbert Rose and William Turpin.
- 12 See the discussions of *poiesis*, *theoria*, *praxis*, and *mimesis* in the Glossary to Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Richard Janko (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), as well as Janko's helpful section of his Introduction on "Aristotle's Concept of Representation" (pp. xiv–xv).
- 13 Paul Shorey, notes to Plato, *Republic I*, trans. Paul Shorey (London: William Heinemann Ltd. [Loeb Classical Library], 1930), p. 224, note c.
- 14 Hegel, *Phenomenology*, para. 167, p. 105.
- 15 *Ibid.*, para. 178, p. 111.
- 16 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Lewis White Beck (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1956), p. 89.
- 17 Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, trans. Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), pp. 30, 31, 32.
- 18 Robert B. Pippin, *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), p. 50.
- 19 Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith, 2nd edn. (London: The Macmillan Press, Ltd., 1933), Ax, p. 8.
- 20 Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, ed. Raymund Schmidt (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1956), Ax, p. 6. My translation.
- 21 Theodor Adorno, "Resignation," *Telos* 35 (Spring 1978), 168.
- 22 Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1972), p. 7.
- 23 J. M. Bernstein, *The Fate of Art: Aesthetic Alienation from Kant to Derrida to Adorno* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992).
- 24 Charles Altieri, *Canons and Consequences: Reflections on the Ethical*

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Force of Imaginative Ideals (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1990).

- 25 Arthur Danto, "The Representational Character of Ideas and the Problem of the External World," in *Descartes: Critical and Interpretive Essays*, ed. Michael Hooker (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. 295.
- 26 See especially Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), especially chapter 7, "Metaphor, Expression, and Style," pp. 165-208; and "Narrative and Style," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 49: 3 (Summer 1991), 201-209.
- 27 Danto, *Embodied Meanings: Critical Essays and Aesthetic Meditations* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1994), p. xii.
- 28 Percy Bysshe Shelley, "A Defence of Poetry," in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Vol. 2, 3rd. edn., ed. Abrams et al. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1974), p. 632.
- 29 Christine Battersby, *Gender and Genius: Towards a Feminist Aesthetics* (London: The Women's Press Limited, 1989).
- 30 Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, *The Literary Absolute*, pp. 36, 83, 112.
- 31 *Ibid.*, p. 84.