

## Commentary: *Poesis* and Imagination

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Bringing the poetic in cultural psychology is part of the attempt to grasp human experiences in their complexity, and in their culturally mediated, rather than sole physiological, nature (Valsiner, Marsico, Chaudhary, Sato, & Dazzani, 2016; Zittoun, 2015). However, bringing “poetry”, “imagined worlds” and “creativity”—together with “everyday experience”—is puzzling enough to need a bit of theoretical clarification. In order to do so, in this commentary of the opening section of this book, I first come back to the definition of the “poetic”, or rather, “poesis”. Given its coverage, I try to identify an approach specific to sociocultural psychology, which considers both psychological experiences and their social and cultural nature. This brings me to consider three theoretical points. I first consider the “poetic chain”, by which cultural elements or semiotic constructs circulate among people and sociocultural settings to enable poetic experiences. I then focus on the poetic experience by a given person itself, which I understand as a specific type of guided imagination, particularly efficient in what regards emotional work. This leads

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me, third, to consider the outcomes of poesis—and especially, its fundamental subversive power, which can nevertheless be questioned when the sociocultural setting is taken into account. My commentary finally brings me to consider the methodological implications of the study of poesis.

## Defining Poesis

As Argüello Manresa and Glăveanu (2017) as well as Lordelo (2017) propose in this volume, it may be worth to start with an etymological enquiry on the notion of the Greek “poiesis” which is the basis both of the meaning of poetry as a literary genre, and of the common-sense of “poetic” as experiences. Poesis has been translated as “creation, fabrication” and then only later as “action of creating poetic work” (Rey, 1998, p. 2808). In French, poetry initially designated a text in verse, and then the art of creating these (fourteenth century), or the poetic “manners” of those who create them (sixteenth century). It is only at the beginning of the nineteenth century that Romanticism produced the idea that an experience or an emotion can be “poetic”. Hence, in French “poésie” or “poetic” moves from designating the “poetic power” of those who create (1694) to anyone’s aptitude to experience a poetic emotion (1810) (Rey, 1998, p. 2808). Note that these terms entered later in English with slightly different meanings but the same movement from qualities associated to literary work (e.g., the expression of feeling and ideas through certain style and rhythm), to the same expressive qualities extended to other types of artifacts.

In the first section of this book, the authors precisely explore the same whole range of “poetic” experiences. These are poetic emotions (Valsiner, 2017), the creation of a poem and the poetic experiences it allows in readers (Watzlawik, 2017), creation through performative arts (Lordelo, 2017) and the capacity of many to use poetic expression to change the world (Argüello Manresa & Glăveanu, 2017). In other words, these chapters cover a wide range of meanings of poetic/poesis/poetry, and it is not up to me to decide which are more appropriate. Rather, adopting a minimal pragmatic stance, I could say that *poesis* or the poetic designates dynamics and/or experiences understood by its bearer or observer as “poetic”.

However, on the basis of the chapters gathered here and of my own work on experiences of listening to music (Zittoun, 2016), watching films (Zittoun, 2013) or engaging with contemporary art (Zittoun & Gillespie, 2014), I will propose a more theoretically grounded definition. I propose that human transactions around cultural elements are here qualified as “poetic” because of their affective load, because they allow semiotically guided experiences, and because these experiences enable the person to suspend their adhesion to the socially shared reality and its norms.

In what follows, I first address the movement of poesis or the trajectory of poetic elements, before turning back to the poetic experience itself, and to its consequences.

## The Poetic Chain

As cultural and sociocultural psychologists, what can we say that centuries of literary and aesthetic analysis, or even cultural studies, have not already said? Even in psychology, can we add anything to Freud’s psychology of writing poetry (Freud, 1959), or experiencing sculpture (Freud, 1914), Vygotsky’s analysis of experiencing poetry (Vygotsky, 1971) or Dewey’s more general analysis of experiencing art (Dewey, 1934)? In my understanding, the specificity of a sociocultural, psychological approach is that it is focused on human experience and sense-making, as it is socially and culturally enabled, yet through the prism of a unique human trajectory, and that it also shows how these might participate to the transformation of culture and society.

Within such an approach, cultural artifacts or elements have at least three phases of being. This “poetic chain” implies a trajectory of transactions with semiotic objects all engaged in “poesis” seen as movement. First, these are produced and possibly presented by one or many persons, in a given time and place (or period and situations), to fix or share or express their experiences of the world. These cultural elements, made out of material things as well as signs, thus “crystallize” human experience. Second, cultural elements can then lie down in a cave for millennia, stay on a wall for years or be offered to a neighbor the next day. Over time, they can be transformed by rain, manipulation, corrosion; they can be

also objects of speculation or commerce. As long as they are not experienced by another person, however, these are mute—they are things, as silent as a stone in the middle of a forest untouched by man (if there is such a thing). Cultural elements have a third life when they are experienced by other persons—who then enter in dialogue with them, reactivate them, feel them, react to them, like or dislike them.

The three phases of the poetic chain can be intermeshed, as when someone improvises a story for an audience or does a life performance in the street (Lordelo, 2017)—here, phases one and three overlap. However, for analytical reasons it still seems useful to distinguish them. As psychologists, we can study any moment within that chain in which people are engaged—experiencing, feeling, interpreting, but also trading, or forgetting. Of course, even the processes involved in trading or transmitting, involving “poetic objects”, although psychological and cultural and part of a general “movement”, are different from these of creating or enjoying poetic work. Now whether transmitting a poetic work is part of a “poesis” as sociocultural and psychological dynamic is a matter of discussion. Let us examine one example.

The trajectory going from the creation of an artifact to its diffusion and its experiences by other people, who then experience and share it further, is nicely illustrated by Watzlawik (this volume). In her chapter on the Raven, she shows how a poem, written by Poe, circulated over ages, until it was experienced by people today. Having such cultural experiences brought together the semiotic guidance of the text, with all its cultural meaning and resonances, and people’s inner flow of experience—recent ones, as well as deeper biographical ones—thus allowing them to make a unique sense of it (Zittoun, 2006, 2007). Once personally loaded, cultural elements became for these persons powerful symbolic resources, and as such, these persons decided to turn them into a new cultural creation—a tattoo on their skin, which would allow more cultural experiences to themselves and to others. Poetic experiences take place here when people met Poe’s poem, and when they contemplate or speak about their tattoos, that is, moments one and three of the poetic chain. On the other hand, the long historical circulation of “The Raven” as poem and the culturally mediated process of creating a tattoo on the skin, which constitutes phase two of the poetic chain, may be part of poesis as a movement and as a

whole. Are these parts of the poetic experience itself? I am tempted to say no; and for this I now turn to poetic experiences themselves.

## The “Poetic” as Guided Imagination

What is it, then, to “have” a poetic experience, whether at the moment of creation, performing, or when experiencing a naked back or a painting? Emotional and aesthetic experiences are turned into signs by people that want to capture or keep some traces of them, or at times, such signs constructions are created in order to experience some of these experiences. In any cases, this process results in “works”, “cultural elements” or artistic/poetic or more generally symbolic artifacts. Interestingly, these cultural elements can take a wide variety of forms and use different semiotic modalities (Jewitt, 2014): songs and demonstration (Argüello Manresa & Glăveanu, 2017), hairdos (Valsiner, this volume), clothing wore in specific places (Lordelo, 2017) and tattoos (Watzlawik, 2017). Even more, the “same” experience can take different modalities, or can even be transmodal, as the “raven experience” moving from poems to tattoos and narrations, or the hairdos, moving from actual backs and heads to painting, to dresses, posters and photographs (Valsiner, 2017).

If any semiotic mode can have an expressive, and thus poetic function—likely to trigger emotional experiences in others—modalities have however differences. Mainly, some semiotic modalities have been more culturally cultivated than others, and are constituted in more or less systematic, theorized and shared systems, than others. Hence, although a majority of women have hair and therefore hairdos, only a small percentage of the contemporary population master complex hair arrangements, and the meaning these might have. Anyone would confer some vague sense—this is elegant, or suggestive—but only a few, hairdressers, selected social groups or collectors, would consider hairdos as complex semiotic system, with its rules, codes and shared meanings. In contrast, poetry is written in verbal language, which most people master and use on a daily base, and have deeply internalized since their first adult-child interactions. Most people that have been to school have been exposed to poetic verbal

assemblages—songs, recitation or sayings. And most children in western-world schools have been exposed to the basics of poetic analysis. Hence, cultural elements presented in a verbal, poetic form, are much more likely to be accessible as such by people, and their meaning is accessible by many; of course, the full apprehension of the sense of an abstract poem, or appreciation of its technical beauty, also requires further acquaintance with language and its possible constructions, and the mastery of a secondary language (Rochex, 1998)—a language to speak about language construction (e.g., to identify versification, assonances, figures of speech, etc.).

Second, the specificity of “poetic experiences” is that they demand from the person to accept having his or her experiencing of the world guided by a semiotic assemblage. It is very clear in the case of cultural elements, who are “social techniques of emotions” (Vygotsky, 1971); it is less clear, yet still the case, when one accepts to be moved by the sight of a partially naked back (Valsiner, 2017), the presence of a male artist in a feminine bathing suit (Lordelo, 2017), or when one is taken by the enthusiasm of a demonstration (Argüello Manresa & Glăveanu, 2017). Here, the “poetic” falls into the case of any cultural experiences: it demands the meeting of the flow of the person’s experiences, with all the depth and harmonics of past and imagined lives, and the semiotic guidance provided by the arrangements of that particular cultural element (Winnicott, 2001; Zittoun, 2011, 2013; Zittoun & Gillespie, 2014). Only like this can the personal flow of experience be channeled, challenged, brought to new, alternative or impossible experiences, and accompanied by pleasant, fearful, exalting or nightmarish emotions.

It is not simple to describe these channeling movements. Music and literature have been accompanied by an intense scholarship describing the movement of thought or feeling, or experiences they provoke (e.g., among many others: Boëthius, 1995; Bruner, 2003; Chartier, 2003; Hargreaves, Miell, & MacDonald, 2012; Johansen, 2010; Trevarthen, 2012). Describing these movements in visual arts and experiences of everyday assemblages demands also a specific language. This is what Valsiner proposes here with a system of “attention guiding vectors” (this volume), to designate an operation between a scene and a viewer, supported by affordance in a given whole. Of course, depending on the semiotic mode and the genre, this guided movement can bring to experi-

ence tensions and their resolutions (as in Vygotsky's *catharsis* (Vygotsky, 1971), which is typical of art of classical composition), to increased uneasiness leading to distancing and reflection (as in existential or absurd literature, certain forms of revolutionary theater and many forms of contemporary art, see Lordelo, 2017), or to simple submission to a form of higher power (as in religious art or political propaganda). Also, depending on the social and cultural context and local values, cultural experiences can lead to more self-awareness, or, on the contrary, aim at its dissolution.

Third, poetic experiences have outcomes, or at least, have, per essence, transformative qualities. Affectively relating with a bare back in the street (Valsiner, 2017), experiencing a poem that seems to formulate and beautify one's sorrow (Watzlawik, 2017), being taken by a chanting crowd (Argüello Manresa & Glăveanu, 2017) or experiencing the anger of a provoked crowd (Lordelo, 2017) involves an expansion of experiences (Zittoun & Cerchia, 2013): one has felt more intensively, one has experienced the beauty and the shared nature of one's pain, one has found a community. And these may have further outcomes, individual or collective: falling in love, having a tattoo made, leaving the country or creating a political movement.

Poetic experiences, or "poesis", designate in that sense a subgroup of experiences of imagination: these that are specifically guided by semiotic creations, which have—among others—as goal, on the side of their creator, to create, to share or to magnify a specific emotional experience. This is why most poetic works are carefully crafted, in any semiotic mode, so that they may capture, guide and transform one's own and, or other people's experiences. Complex poetic works demand, on the side of the creator but also of the audience, the mastery of complex semiotic codes and often, rules of the genre; in addition, the poetic experience itself foregrounds, in most cases, what Freud has called "secondary processes" (Freud, 1963, 2001a, 2001b). Indeed, through semiotic guidance, people's flow of experiences is guided along semiotic movements that bypass formal categories and logical structures: feelings and sense move through logics of displacement, condensation, crystallization or inversion. They thus activate other ways of connecting traces of past experiences in people, closer to "pseudo-concepts" or what we have called "distal spheres of

experiences” with their associated emotional qualities (Zittoun & Gillespie, 2015). Poetic works have the power to create resonances between dispersed distal experiences, as well as barely remembered traces of experiences—these can be brought together, allowed to irrigate each other, create connections where there never were—and creative synthesis can thus be triggered.

And thus, poesis or poetic experiences have power to move and transform: to “arouse emotions hard to control”, as precisely described by “New York’s junior league” (Valsiner, this 2017), or to bring people to revolutions (Argüello Manresa & Glăveanu, 2017).

## **Sociocultural Settings and *Poesis* as Subversion**

Poesis is thus a particular genre of guided imagination, with a stronger emphasis on affective dynamics. However, there is a second specificity to the poetic work reported in this section: in all these examples, poesis is fundamentally subversive.

If the poetic can “arouse emotions hard to control” (Valsiner, 2017)—whether aspirations to beauty, desire, sadness, anger or the feeling of injustice—it can also, when feeling-out, bring to guide one’s attention to what may appear as the cause or the sources of one’s experiences, or realize the source of one’s frustration. One way or another, this movement has the unique property of making the world appear differently to the person experiencing it. Such intuition has largely been expressed by many artists or critics: as sacred art it put in contact with the divine; in romantic forms, it explores the depth of the “human soul” and brings it to the fore; in its theatrical form, it can purify society; in its surrealist forms, it can unleash the power of unconscious and shake society as a whole; in contemporary forms, it can question societal norms (Lordelo, 2017); and so on. Obviously, other art movements have also brought to look at the simplicity of things, or have tried to evacuate the irrational and emotionality of poetic forms. But even so, these create new shapes and forms that demand new synthesis, and if they don’t trigger simple emotions such as desire or fear, it may be more subtle proprioceptive impression and more



abstract aesthetic experiences. Hence, whether explored on the side of the creator, alone or with others, or in the audience, poesis seems to imply a double movement: feeling-in—go closer, absorb, immerse yourself in the element offered as poetic, loose the sense of your limit, follow the path—and feeling-out, go back to your sense as if after a dream, and take hold of semiotic means, and look around you (Benson, 1993, 2001). The point proposed here is that because of this dialogical movement it engages—when creating, or when experiencing—the poetic might bring person to experience something which is “beyond the given”, or in the interstices of the realities (or “through the looking glass” (Carroll, 2001)). In that sense, poesis is subversive in a fundamental sense: it temporally suspends one’s adhesion to the socially shared and materially given reality. In other words, the poetic is per essence counter-normative.

Or is it? As sociocultural psychologists, we also know that the poetic is deeply social and cultural—and all along the chain described above. Poetic experience and expression takes place in the life of a person, with her trajectory within or through specific social and cultural norms, values and constraints. The semiotic modes used for shaping cultural elements are also those available in that time and place or that can be defined with or against specific others. The conditions of preservation, transmission or distribution of cultural elements are enabled by social, political and economic conditions. How people experience and share a specific cultural element depends on their own trajectories in specific settings, in a given social and cultural context: one does not “feel” a poem in the same way whether one has studied literature at secondary school or not, or does not enjoy the lyrics of a music band similarly when heard as lonely teenager, or as political resistant. In these social and cultural contexts, poetic works are thus not individually produced or experiences. The poetic that changes a life can be the product of a very specific merchandized analysis. It can thus be tailored to bring people to expect the next series or the next volume of a work of fiction, to buy products ranging from clothes to cars, or to slowly get acquainted to certain norms and values. It can also be imposed by a large institution or a State, produced to trigger and channel certain feelings useful for nation cohesion and self-sacrifice. Then, the poetic has not much counter-normative or subversive left—or maybe, it precisely works against preexisting taken-for-granted shared norms to bring people to submit to new ones—see, for instance, the state promoted art under communism.

Poesis or poetic experiences have a fundamental role in our human lives: we don't live only in a world of facts and things: we live in worlds of sense and meaning, some used for shared understanding and knowledge of the world, some to create alternative worlds—many to support a life worth living. However, this fundamental power that touches upon the deeper layers of human experience can also be used for the worst. As sociocultural psychologists, we therefore have to be aware of the social and cultural dimension involved.

## Methodological Challenges

Studying the poetic and imagination opens up psychology to a range of experiences long ignored, and triggers researchers' creativity. As this first section shows, it invites to look around, to see the poetic in everyday life, to extend the range of phenomena to account for, and the material on which to build demonstration. Methodological creativity is most welcome; it should however remain consistent with one's theoretical assumptions. If we write about the poetic as sociocultural psychologists, one basic assumption is that any semiotic act is a social and cultural act, enacted or externalized by someone, in a specific setting.

This has two methodological implications. The first is the most important one: when authors describe the "poetic" nature of a back, or a painting, or a tattoo, who is speaking? Who is the experiencing subject? From a psychological point of view, there is no cultural element which is poetic *per se*—it might be constructed according to standard "poetic rules", yet most of our conceptual tools do not account for these. We need to know who is *experiencing*, as only experiences can be accounted for. In the chapters here, the matter of the experiencing person is more or less clearly addressed. Valsiner (this volume) seems to speak from the position of the camera holder, and the experience might be attributed to the camera-holder-locutor. Lordelo (2017) combines her first person as performer, with interviews with another performer, attempting to account for his first-person perspective; Watzlawik (2017) accounts for third-person perspective, having interviewed people about their tattoos; and Argüello Manresa and Glăveanu (2017) use people's externalization in blogs and the media to

analyze shared creativity. In each case, it seems of great importance to be able to account, directly or indirectly, for a person's perspective—that of the researcher, that of others or any combinations. Then, what techniques and cultural elements are used is infinitely open: interviews, diaries, pictures, online material, actual clothes and hairdos, and so on. Important, however, is to locate that material: for sociocultural, dialogical and critical approaches have taught us that utterances are, for their authors, intentional, and addressed to specific audiences. Interpretation does not have to limit itself to the obviously shared meanings; but it cannot ignore these. Hence, the paper in this section can, thanks to their methodological creativity, open roads to address the complex work of imagination, creativity and everyday experiences (Brinkmann, 2012; Dreier, 2015; Gillespie & Zittoun, 2010; Zittoun, 2015; Zittoun & Glăveanu, 2018).

Second, a sociocultural account implies accounting not only for the cultural element, or the meeting between the person and different cultural elements; it also demands precisely to take into account the social settings defining the situation, with its values, possibilities, constraints, ultimately shaping the dialogicality of the poetic. Here, Valsiner (2017) puts his reflection on the relation between hair and bare backs in a diachronic, historical perspective, showing how an historical event can shape and constrain the meaning and possibility of this dialogue. Argüello Manresa and Glăveanu (2017) give us a good example of a more synchronic analysis, showing the specific cultural and socially embedded nature of a poetic shared experience. Similarly, Lordelo (2017) retraces a sequence in the trajectory of one artist, facing the tensions and contradictions of the open-yet-religious Brazilian society. This awareness can take many forms—yet it is again fundamental to support the development of wider understanding: generalization needs to be based on complex understanding of phenomena (Zittoun, 2017).

## To Conclude

The poetic power of cultural elements is unpredictable and considerable; it transforms over time and leaves traces in human psyche and shared culture. It is of great importance for sociocultural psychology to address

poesis—it is an invisible yet powerful aspect of human experience. Establishing such a new field of enquiry in psychology is therefore welcome and refreshing, as this first section shows. Yet it is a difficult exercise that demands standing on the solid base established by the field, implying theoretical, methodological and ethical obligations (Marková, 2016). Bearing this in mind, researchers may write new pages of psychology.

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