

# Criticism and Style

Michel Chaouli

Poetry can only be critiqued by poetry. A judgment of art that is not itself an artwork . . . has no citizenship rights in the realm of art.

—Friedrich Schlegel, Critical Fragment 117

**W**HAT CRITICISM IS WORTH bothering with? I know of no more compact way of putting into words the turmoil that literary studies, like other interpretive disciplines, has found itself in (ever since I have been aware of it) than this simple question. What criticism is worth writing and worth reading?

For me, the answer begins not with ideas but with names: Barbara Johnson, Roland Barthes, Eve Sedgwick, T. J. Clark, Kenneth Burke, Pauline Kael, Richard Alewyn, Angus Fletcher. These, along with a few others, are critics to whose writings I feel drawn, yet they do not seem to share conceptual categories, overlap thematically, or belong to the same genres. Given how much energy I have put into tangling with and untangling theories, it is a bit confusing—and more than a bit humbling—that a critic's theoretical commitments do nothing to predict whether I end up finding his or her work engaging. (I have found that the same goes for philosophers.) This becomes more confusing still considering that over time some texts and writers can migrate from engaging to indifferent or vice versa (and some, such as Adorno, have migrated in both directions).

It is true that proper names hold a talismanic power that exceeds the force of concepts, yet since we also wish to understand, we must try to unpack what it is that names hold within them. What makes their writing worth bothering with? Let me begin with a specific passage, that, while not chosen at random, is also not meant to serve as the exemplar of exemplars; it is, rather, one among many possible points of departure. It comes from Roland Barthes's strange book about Japan, *Empire of Signs*, where over many pages he seeks to capture the essence of Japanese food:

Japanese rawness is essentially visual; it denotes a certain colored state of the flesh or vegetable substance (it being understood that color is never exhausted

by a catalogue of tints, but refers to a whole tactility of substance; thus *sashimi* exhibits not so much colors as resistances: those which vary the flesh of raw fish, causing it to pass, from one end of the tray to the other, through the stations of the soggy, the fibrous, the elastic, the compact, the rough, the slippery). Entirely visual. . . . food thereby says that it is not *deep*: the edible substance is without a precious heart, without a buried power, without a vital secret: no Japanese dish is endowed with a *center* . . . here everything is the ornament of another ornament: first of all because on the table, on the tray, food is never anything but a collection of fragments, none of which appears privileged by an order of ingestion; to eat is not to respect a menu (an itinerary of dishes), but to select, with a light touch of the chopsticks, sometimes one color, sometimes another, depending on a kind of inspiration which appears in its slowness as the detached, indirect accompaniment of the conversation (which itself may be extremely silent).<sup>1</sup>

How might we characterize this passage? Is it a description? To some extent it is, but not an especially helpful one, for to someone who has not partaken of a Japanese meal it fails to provide even a basic map. Is it an interpretation? Again, yes and no. Clearly Barthes has a take on Japanese food, yet he does not endeavor to uncover the real meaning concealed within the plate of sashimi, if that is what we mean by interpretation. Still, description and interpretation are both very much in play. Barthes describes as he interprets and interprets as he describes. It is the description of the texture of flesh that reveals the mystery of its colors, which in turn discloses the recognition that its truth lies in itself, not in some unseen depth.

A better question about the passage might be: how does it wish to be read, heard, listened to? In literary studies, as in other academic disciplines, we are primed to identify a thesis and evaluate the evidence marshaled in its favor. This procedure does promise some degree of success in our case. We can certainly distill a thesis, a version of which might read: Japanese food is arranged like an abstract tableau of colors, without central motif, which the diner paints in reverse, as it were, with the chopsticks. It is an interesting thesis; one can amplify it, debate it, challenge it. But is this how the passage wishes to be read? To anyone not equipped with a tin ear, it is manifest that the language of thesis and argument is ill suited to Barthes's passage. Reducing it to a thesis shortchanges not only the text but also our own experience of it, for that way we shield ourselves from the texture of thinking—the style—with which Barthes means to open Japanese food to us. If there is truth in the passage, it will reveal itself not in propositions but in the grain of the adjectives, in the cadence of its sentences, in resonances with other passages in the book (and other books), all of which stand in a complex

relation to propositional language. The text is a bit like the Japanese meal it takes as its subject: its depth reveals itself on its surface.

To keep an ear open for Barthes's style means that we hear the accent of his thinking not merely in the words he has chosen but in the consistency of the things themselves—the elasticity of the fish, the finish of the vegetables, the way tactility and visuality vie for attention. This does not mean that we will always take pleasure in it. Quite the contrary: the passage may rub us the wrong way; we may find it precious and overwritten. But even then, we engage not with a thesis or a logical construction stripped of all fleshliness. What appears before us is not merely a bento box, but a bento box conjured by a writer with a carnal existence, someone with a front and a back, a history and a future. Though it leaves us uncertain about specifics, the passage makes palpable that it was a human being who wrote these lines, in a particular situation, in a place and time identified not by geometric coordinates but through a network of reminiscences, ambitions, moods, and intentions. In the grain of this human being's voice we feel passions, even when they remain unnamed. What we pick out in the voice is the general disposition the writer has developed towards his "material" and his audience. We need not check the title page to realize that *someone* wrote the passage (which is also true of the writings by the other names I listed). Though there is neither the word "I" nor an autobiographical datum to be found in the passage, we do not find ourselves in the territory of disembodied observation.

But we are also distant—perhaps even more so than we are from disembodied observation—from an autobiographically authenticated "personal" account. Look at the passage. Every word bears Barthes's stamp, yet there is not a personal trace, not a hint of whether the meal was satisfying, for instance, or the company pleasant. The passage is saturated with appetites, though not with an appetite for *this* meal. (Strangely, reading the larger section from which I take the passage invariably arouses an intense craving for sushi in me, so much so that sometimes I purposely go to it before heading off for a Japanese restaurant. I wonder if I am misusing the text when I use it as an aphrodisiac.) It is not that autobiography has been banished: understanding the text depends on our assumption that a man named Roland Barthes at one point spent time in Japan, time that included visits to restaurants. Yet we are not offered a mere narrative of these events, authenticated by his first-person experience. Instead we become witness to how the quotidian particularity and biographical inflection of a life is transformed into the intensity of a poetic account. It happens at the point at which the writer responds to an opacity in the world that activates something in him that remains opaque to himself. This is an act of exposure as much

as of mastery, and it risks “a continual extinction of personality,” as T. S. Eliot says of the artist (in “Tradition and the Individual Talent”).<sup>2</sup> The extent to which Barthes exposes his self remains an open question, which cannot in any case be answered on the basis of one isolated passage. But reading the passage “as it wishes to be read” (a conceit, I admit) means recognizing that the writer aims to transmute idiosyncrasy into universality. The very specificity of *his* sashimi is what is meant to disclose its essence to us. His signature, singular like every signature, becomes the mark of a general significance.

### Reading as Observation

I begin with Barthes’s passage because the way it opens us to Japanese food can also open our path to criticism worth writing. I suggest thinking of this way of writing as being attuned to style. By style I do not mean a “style of writing,” though that plays a role, but a much broader phenomenon related to attitude, tone, mood, voice, and tact. To be sure, these terms do not denote the same thing, but they do share a certain resemblance (or style) in that they prompt us to think together features that, seen from a different perspective, splinter into detached entities called “subject” and “object” of perception (or description or interpretation). A style or attitude or mood captures the ways in which a subject’s engagement alters the very meaning of the object seen in isolation. When we say that the way someone wears a hat (or handles a word or concedes a point) has a certain style—and it always does—then we are calling attention to the fact that in every case this way exceeds subject and object and thereby transforms both. Neither the hat nor its wearer is quite the same as they would be if we considered them separately.

To expect critics to be attuned to their own style ought to be uncontroversial, but leafing through books and journals in the interpretive disciplines it becomes clear that it is not.<sup>3</sup> There, one can get the sense that our most urgent task lies not in engaging with our objects but in detaching ourselves from them. We are happiest quarreling about the precise location the objects of our attention occupy in the large grids of meaning we employ, grids such as history, ideology, genre, and so on. “It’s part of the hegemonic power of late capitalism,” you say. “No,” I invariably reply, “it stands with the resistance!” And we are off to the races. Focusing our attention on moving these objects to and fro like toy soldiers on a battle map has the advantage of leaving untouched the *I* performing the understanding. We usually call this *I* “the reader” (or “the viewer,” “the listener,” etc.), but this entity has little in common

with any real or even ideal reader. It is no more than a thin abstraction whose main privilege lies in remaining shielded from the interpretation it conducts. In this respect, our behavior parallels the method of the natural sciences far more closely than many of us like to admit. These sciences sever the observing subject from both observations and ideas so that these can be made available for public scrutiny and put to public use. What Newton thought or felt while recording his findings or what material shape his theories took is irrelevant to the science of mechanics, which is what accounts for its robustness. To be scientifically sound, an experience must be intersubjectively valid, and to become thus valid, it must be stripped of its plenitude and singularity as it is funneled through the tight window of disciplined observation. Relinquishing the rich texture of subjective experience is not a bug but a feature of the method; it is needed if the multiplicity of experiences are to be coordinated into the intersubjectively valid perspective that will then be labeled “objectivity.”<sup>4</sup>

Resorting to the fiction of “the reader” (“the viewer,” etc.) is our way of turning reading into a species of quasi-neutral observation: look through this instrument and you will see what I see, because you and I have dissolved ourselves into this form of seeing-through-the-instrument (where “instrument” can stand in not just for a microscope but also for the assemblage of concepts and evidence we often term interpretation). To be sure, there are forms of literary and cultural studies—philological scholarship or historiography concerned with periodization, for example—in which stripping the subject of inquiry of its particularity is as legitimate a method as it is in the natural sciences. Yet to the extent that our interpretations are not forensic but register the feelings and behaviors that we take cultural formations to elicit in people (feelings and behaviors such as fear, pity, amusement, delusion, empathy, racism, patriotism, cognitive confusion, sexual disorientation, and on and on)—to the extent that they register *aesthetic* effects, in other words—they stand in need of a subject capable of registering these aesthetic effects. Even so, we cling to an abstracted subject called “the reader” though we know it to be false, for the idea of understanding at stake in interpretation depends on an experience encompassing the full range of the subject’s capacities and limitations. When we cloak this subject in an abstraction, we falsify its understanding.

Subtracting the subjective dimension may or may not make the accounts we give of our aesthetic experience—that is, criticism—more scientific, but it does deprive them of a vital characteristic. Without that dimension, criticism is not just flat; it is no criticism at all. It fails to give voice to elements essential to aesthetic experience, without which

interpretation and criticism would not even get off the ground. By the lights of any substantial account, such an experience calls upon the full range of the perceptual, cognitive, and affective capacities available to the human being. This in turn means that aesthetic experience can only be *this particular* aesthetic experience, available to *this particular* human being, for only I, here and now, can feel the power of poetic justice, of irony, of the yellow of the tulip, or of the phrase “the yellow of the tulip.”<sup>5</sup> A figure such as “the reader” or “the viewer” lacks both particularity and the full range of capacities, and so remains bereft of aesthetic experience. Thus when disciplines deploy such figures and marshal their “tools” to “interrogate” a work of art, we are right to wonder whether this commotion indeed serves a better, deeper, more nuanced understanding of that work, as is repeatedly claimed, or whether what we call an “approach” is not in fact a manner of avoidance. One way of seeing our disciplines is as a measure of the lengths to which we go to keep at bay the force of artworks, the same artworks whose ability to snap us out of our torpor drew us to them in the first place. How curious it is that we dig wide moats—of history, ideology, formal analysis—and erect thick conceptual walls lest we be touched by what, in truth, lures us.

What shape might a response take that would forgo a schema in which I—inviolate, invisible—perform a set of operations on a text that exists in a realm distinct from my own, cordoned off by the resources of scholarship? How would we go about encouraging a mode of reflection with a better chance of being true to the experience of art, a mode of reflection whose core lies not in imposing *mastery* over the artwork, but in allowing an *exposure* to it, an exposure that may lead to a different kind of mastery? I think Barthes shows the way. Even the paragraph I have quoted here tells us that the usual arrangement in which “the reader” makes sense of “the text” “using” a theory (or method or approach) offers a poor description of what happens in a significant encounter with literature or, indeed, in any configuration calling on our aesthetic sensibility. The alternative involves an attunement to style, which means that what I take the text (or the artwork or the sashimi) to mean cannot and therefore should not be detached from the way it calls to me. This is just what Walter Pater drives at when he takes Matthew Arnold’s dictum about the aim of criticism—“to see the object as in itself it really is”—and folds it into the language of experience. He writes, “in aesthetic criticism the first step towards seeing one’s object as it really is, is to know one’s own impression as it really is, to discriminate it, to realize it distinctly.”<sup>6</sup> The object “as in itself it really is,” then, discloses itself aesthetically in the subject’s experience of it. If done well, an attunement to style does not simply liquefy concepts such as “text” and “reader” into

an undifferentiated soup, nor does it use a notion of experience that is imagined to be self-sufficient and immune to challenges from without to authenticate the accounts emerging from it. It does something more interesting and more significant.

### The World, a Style of Being

Before asking how style can breath life into criticism, we would like to have a better sense of the concept itself. What thinkers have given us the means of reflecting on a rich notion of style? For me, the answer lies, again, not in a theory or a school but in another list, which includes Montaigne, Friedrich Schlegel, Emerson, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Freud, William James, Merleau-Ponty, Derrida, and Cavell (among others), all thinkers to the extent that they are *writers*. Among these, it is Maurice Merleau-Ponty, I think, who offers the most inspiring reflections on style, for he allows style to morph from being the topic of reflection and writing to just being that reflection and writing. It is true that every great philosopher or critic becomes known to us through his or her style long before we know anything definitive about the shape of the “thought” being developed. We hear the idiosyncratic melody in Kant or Wittgenstein within a few words, and more often than not it is the character of that melody, the particular intellectual mood it evokes, that leaves a more enduring trace than the isolable arguments that are, supposedly, at issue. In this sense, style does not describe a quality limited to modes of reflection attuned to their own voice. Still there is a difference between a style unreflectively lived and one attuned to itself, since philosophers and critics, along with their readers, behave as though the question of style were in fact immaterial to thought. Thus style tends to invite derision, even hostility; Stanley Cavell, who knows something about style as a medium of thinking, goes so far as to claim that in academic philosophy “an attention to style in writing—we might say signature—is a sign of the unphilosophical.”<sup>7</sup> The suspicion of style does not run as deep in the interpretive disciplines, but even here by and large we continue to aim for the “thought content” (argument, thesis, idea) behind or underneath the layer of “rhetorical presentation.”<sup>8</sup> My point here is not that there are no arguments or ideas in philosophical or critical writing; manifestly there are. It is rather that the modes of reading as observation that are harnessed to build theses and marshal evidence and that pervade our work necessarily impoverish our ways of thinking about the style with which arguments and ideas reveal themselves to us.

It is no exaggeration to say that bringing style, as a dimension not only of thinking but also of existence itself, to reflection is the major achievement of Merleau-Ponty's writings. They can help us think of style less as ornamentation or rhetoric, as a surface feature of something we think of as "substance," and more as something that *permeates* a phenomenon. At the very outset of his masterpiece, *Phenomenology of Perception*, he proclaims that "phenomenology can be practised and identified as a manner or style of thinking, that it existed as a movement before arriving at complete awareness of itself as a philosophy."<sup>9</sup> We should not be surprised that a philosophy aware of itself as a style of practice before it becomes aware of itself as a structure of ideas seeks its inspiration in poetry and art, aspiring to be "as painstaking as the works of Balzac, Proust, Valéry or Cézanne—by reason of the same kind of attentiveness and wonder" (xxi/xxiv). The result is a mode of speaking and writing in which "word and speech must somehow cease to be a way of designating things or thoughts, and become the presence of that thought in the phenomenal world, and, moreover, not its clothing but its token or its body" (182/211). Words are the body of thought rather than merely its garb because an assemblage of words in speech or writing brings out in them something beyond their standardized meanings, namely their style, which has its own ways of opening some meanings and closing others. About psychiatric patients who, without understanding a text, can "put expression into it" while reading, Merleau-Ponty says: "This is because the spoken or written words carry a top coating of meaning which sticks to them and which presents the thought as a style, an affective value, a piece of existential mimicry, rather than as a conceptual statement. We find here, beneath the conceptual meaning of the words, an existential meaning which is not only rendered by them, but which inhabits them, and is inseparable from them" (182/212).

Merleau-Ponty makes us aware that style is a term of analysis not confined to language, nor to any system of signification. It is rather part of our engagement with the world, right down to our very perception of it. What phenomenology allows us to reflect on is what we cannot help but see and feel, yet what the empirical sciences feel obliged to exclude, namely the fact that perception itself, and not only some downstream "interpretation," includes "the anger or the pain which I nevertheless read in a face, the religion whose essence I seize in some hesitation or reticence, the city whose temper I recognize in the attitude of a policeman" (23–24/27). But even this level of description does not go deep enough. There is a way in which the coordination of muscular and perceptual capacities in the human body, ordinarily consigned to the instinctual automatism of physiology, happens thanks to "a certain style



informing my manual gestures and implying in turn a certain style of finger movements" (150/174). And thus it is that the material world itself, in its very materiality, appears with a style, because it appears to someone in some situation: "Every thing appears to us through a medium to which it lends its own fundamental quality; this piece of wood is neither a collection of colours and tactile data, not even their total Gestalt, but something from which there emanates a woody essence; these 'sensory givens' modulate a certain theme or illustrate a certain style which is the wood itself, and which creates, round this piece of wood and the perception I have of it, a horizon of significance" (450/523).

If we follow this way of thinking, the term to be distinguished from *style* is not *substance*, but rather *view* (or *perspective*), which serves as the model for the abstracted, third-person standpoint of the interchangeable observer that sends so much work in the interpretive disciplines off course. The notion of view (perspective, stance, position, etc.) suggests the availability of a sharply drawn object in thought-space, "clear and distinct" in its outlines (as Descartes says about ideas), to which we can refer independently of its maker as though it had its own existence. Thus we can say with a straight face that "there are four views (or theories or readings) of X." Since each of these is a static and transparent entity, so that its "content"—what is in view—can be translated across time, languages, and genres without damage, I can hold it before me and examine it. In fact, the idea of a view is a lot like Descartes's view of the mind: disembodied, limpid, stable, and self-enclosed.

This form of abstraction has been immensely powerful and productive in driving scientific inquiry. Yet we begin to see the cost it exacts when philosophical thinking is packaged into a "view" (as is routinely done in Anglophone academic philosophy). For even Descartes himself, in putting forward the ideas that were to morph into "Descartes's view," labeled them meditations (*Meditations on First Philosophy*), a genre in which thoughts, far from appearing in a fixed arrangement, unfold in time and thus acquire their own developmental history. But things really go awry when interpretive accounts imagine themselves as "views" or "perspectives," leading us to say, for example, that "there are three main interpretations of *King Lear*," as though each worked like a pair of tinted glasses that we might put on to get a glimpse of a different *Lear* (say, deconstructionist, New Historicist, or gender theoretical). We in the interpretive disciplines have foresworn, and flamboyantly so, some of the core equipment of scientific discourse—terms such as explanation, prediction, objectivity, verifiability and falsifiability, and, ultimately, truth—yet at the same time we work to disencumber our voices of all weight and to provide as thin a description of our experience as we can

get away with, so that it can be shoehorned into the academic form of thesis-cum-evidence. The alternative lies in developing a style (a voice, a way of handling) that, while connecting us with our experience, helps us to unfurl that experience itself.

### Reading As Encounter

How might the brief excursus through Merleau-Ponty help us make the idea of style productive for criticism, for a criticism worth bothering with? Rather than assuming an inquiring subject—someone conducting “research,” as we like to put it in the academe—arranging before itself an object that is to be examined, identified, surveyed, and taxonomized, criticism responsive to style occurs in an encounter between myself and a significant part of my world. The idea of the encounter signals the fact that what I have in mind involves more than merely adding a subjective side or some feeling to the sorts of accounts we tend to produce, but asks for a change in basic orientation. It is neither a matter of “listening to my inner self” and reporting what I hear nor one of dissecting, using the tools of analysis, an object splayed open before me. In fact, common conceptions of both object and subject, the way we tend to use them in our accounts, get in the way, for entities such as “the reader” and “the text” turn out to be both less and more than the ordinary disciplinary view takes them to be.

Take the object of inquiry. The interpretive disciplines (literary studies, art history, performance studies, etc.), like all self-respecting disciplines, would like to be able to declare what exactly it is that we study. We have developed procedures such as reading lists and syllabi for identifying these objects, which work well enough. Still, it remains true that we cannot say where exactly the boundaries of literature or visual art or dance lie, because no definition will ever help us separate literature from not-literature, sculpture from not-sculpture, dance from not-dance. Compared to other disciplines, which have (or believe they have) a firmer grasp of their objects of study, our field remains underdetermined. Yet the objects we attend to also exceed the boundaries of what we expect an ordinary object of study to be, for under certain conditions, conditions we cannot enumerate ahead of time, *anything* can come to be artistically meaningful. For what interests us is not the object “as in itself it really is,” but the object as its force registers in a human being with his or her own history and style. Kafka’s writings are significant only to the extent that they are significant to me (or become significant to me because they have been significant to someone else

who has taken the trouble to make this experience available to me), and what is true of those writings is also true of any other formation in the world that could become significant to someone.

A similar logic transforms the subject of inquiry: while the “I” responsive to style far surpasses “the reader” or “the viewer” in richness of experience, this experience is not fully accessible to the I, nor the I to itself. In this conception, experience lacks the consistency and portability ascribed to it by group-based epistemologies (where, for example, women or Jews or Indians are thought to know certain things because of experiences they supposedly hold in common, yielding knowledge unavailable to others and immune to challenge). The subject is pulled into the vortex of reflection and description; like the work, it is not simply given but is itself *at stake*. Criticism is not a record of an experience that lies in the past and whose features await documentation; it is, rather, the arena for developing the experience. I may know that I have something to say about a novel or a film, but in the best cases I only discover what that is in trying to say it. Just as I read criticism to learn how someone else was changed, I write criticism to find out about myself, including about the limits of my cognitive and affective resources. What seduces me? What am I afraid of? Why do I find myself drawn to this object? My experience cannot serve as the guardrail keeping interpretation from veering off the straight and narrow, because experience itself is not simply available as something I can consult to orient my reading. Any emphatic experience surpasses the ordinary capacities of the I, revealing it as exposed to dimensions beyond itself.

To say that the subject of an encounter with art (or with some other significant formation) is exposed tells us that this subject is not merely engaged in the sort of self-limitation, self-effacement, or self-bracketing recommended by various forms of reading. Exposure differs too from the suspicion—of self and of other—that suffuses virtually all contemporary criticism.<sup>10</sup> For exposure names that way of being in which I put myself into a position such that I can be affected in ways I cannot fathom. When I lean back in the theater seat before the movie starts or walk back and forth looking for the right spot from which to take in a painting, I am developing techniques of becoming passive in the right ways. This learned passivity, this developed sensitivity is what exposes me to what is “beyond myself,” a region that names the way I remain opaque to myself. I run a risk, for I may or may not be able to grapple with what hits me. But without this exposure my experience remains aesthetically deficient. What is more, without this exposure my experience fails to open to others. For it is precisely by exposing myself to an experience I potentially fail to master that an intensive experience of

art radiates beyond the confines of my self to make demands on the attention of others. If the natural sciences (and much of the interpretive disciplines) aim to achieve “intersubjective validity” by thinning out experience to the point of its disappearance, exposure takes the full range of experience to its limits, to what, in myself, is beyond myself and what extends to others.

### The Range of Interpretation

The idea that in criticism worth bothering with the reader is just as exposed as the text being read reveals something crucial about a concept that I have invoked without saying much about it, namely the concept of interpretation. We commonly think of interpretation as uncovering patterns of meaning in a material configuration, patterns that are then fixed in propositional form. This is a capacious understanding of interpretation that takes it beyond hermeneutics, its philosophical home, to encompass the many critical practices in the interpretive disciplines that have flown the antihermeneutic flag, practices based in psychoanalysis, deconstruction, discourse analysis, systems theory, and so on. These practices too identify patterns of meaning, just not ones anchored exclusively in the consciousness of individual human actors. Still, even in this broad sense, interpretation (or reading) as we commonly use the term is an anemic conception,<sup>11</sup> not because it does not include enough “theories” or “approaches,” but because we reduce it to the outcome of what is in truth a complex process. In our academic practice, interpretation congeals into a set of propositions (“A reading of . . .”) when in fact it is a process responsive to and embedded in the full range of the ways in which we respond to configurations we take as meaningful, responses such as being perplexed, amused, stricken, enraptured, or bored. Interpretation, I want to say, is not what comes *after* we have cleaned up the mess of the encounter, which is what we commonly do in print and, to a lesser extent, in the classroom. True interpretation is what occurs *in* the encounter.

I am sympathetic with the disaffection Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht feels towards the way interpretation has become the core institutionalized practice in the humanities. But I do not therefore posit, as he does, a way of responding to the world called “presence” that is everything interpretation is not: presence “exclusively appeal[s] to the senses,” “reestablish[es] our contact with the things of the world outside the subject/object paradigm,” has as its “dominant self-reference . . . the body,” and so on.<sup>12</sup> To conceive of interpretation and presence as mu-

tually exclusive modalities (understood not empirically, but ideally) misrecognizes the truth of both. For when we come face to face with things that hold our attention, it is not the case that we are *either* struck dumb by a purely sensory, purely bodily moment of ecstatic truth entirely evacuated of meaning *or* stuck on the endless treadmill of a quest for spiritualized meaning where we feel nothing. Rather, our epiphanies are shot through with conceptually mediated sensitivities to meaning (for why else would we be seized in a manner *significant* to us?), and even the most labored excavations of meaning have woven into their texture our passionate engagement with things. Meaning and presence are not opposite “poles” or distinct “layers” between which we are to “oscillate,” as Gumbrecht recommends (xv; 107), but constitutive dimensions of all experience. The fact that academic practice favors desiccated accounts of this experience does not condemn the experience itself.

To be clear: my point is not that we must include an emotional or bodily “component” (whatever that might entail) in our interpretive accounts. This is not a plea for leavening our intellectual arguments with affective ingredients. The mistake in such a proposal lies in assenting to such a division in the first place. Indeed, divisions such as the one between meaning and presence let interpretation, as it is conventionally practiced, off the hook, for when interpretation is thus opposed to some meaty counterpart (the body, the senses, substance, ecstasy, rapture, and so on), its thinness is merely affirmed and condoned. But meaning is vast and so is interpretation, once we cease thinking of it as a method of bringing to light occult messages and understand it instead as the way our ear is tuned to the world. Merleau-Ponty is right to insist that meaning does not constitute a special region of the world cordoned off from the rest. “There is not a human word, not a gesture, even one which is the outcome of habit or absent-mindedness, which has not some meaning,” he writes (xviii/xx). True, but he does not repeat often enough that this bit of “meaning” is not a quantum we can gather, measure, and align with other bits of meaning, but something that may rather, at any moment, slip away into the meaninglessness of the mindless world. Who has not been in a fluidly moving conversation that all at once loses its rhythm because we think we have detected a quiver of the lip in our interlocutor, which may signify something or, then again, may not?<sup>13</sup> If the account of our experience with meaning, including meaning in artworks, is to become richer and truer than it tends to be in our practice, then we must first acknowledge that interpretation itself is exposed to the ever-present possibility of the lack or loss of meaning. Meaning, then, is, once again, not given but at stake, not because the motion of the lip is ambiguous—if that were all, it would be the particular shape

taken by meaning that was at stake rather than its existence—but rather because the very emergence of meaning depends on what threatens to bring it to ruin because it has no meaning. Clifford Geertz, summarizing a thought experiment dreamt up by Gilbert Ryle, reminds us that there is always a risk of getting it wrong when we attempt to distinguish a wink from a twitch, let alone from a pretend twitch.<sup>14</sup>

### The Grain of the Voice

When thinking takes its bearing from the style with which it appears, it is more apt to give rise to a mode of articulation—whether spoken or written—mindful of its comportment. This mindfulness, though it originates in the speaker or the writer, transmits itself to the listeners and readers, who take note of the fact that the thoughts taking shape before them come not from an anonymous source but from a being implicated in a language, a history, a culture, and a body, which is to say out of a human situation, elastic in some respects and rigid in others. They arrive with a voice and a weight of their own. The articulation of thoughts occurs in time not because language is a sequential phenomenon, but because it takes time to develop the grain of a writer's voice and to recognize the style of her thinking (though once we have the hang of it, we can pick it up even in a few words or phrases, the way we recognize a familiar gait after a step or two). In such a situation, I find it more difficult to think of the account before me as a view, separable from the perspective that generated it, and instead perceive the entire movement of thought as a distinctive attitude towards certain ideas. Even this is not quite right, for ideas are not fixed entities that are linked to one another like Tinkertoys, but they change their bearing depending on whether they are handled indifferently or with tact.

This divide between an idea and the attitude with which it appears becomes acutely palpable when I get the sense that someone is getting the style of an idea all wrong, missing the idea itself, even though semantically or conceptually he seems to be making the right commitments. When someone speaks of the violence that social norms exert against the weak (a routine lament in our academic discourse), I may be sympathetic to both the analysis and the moral charge that carries it forward, yet I may also find that the style in which it appears pushes me into a posture of wariness or of mistrust; instead of a plea for justice, I may end up hearing smugness, and instead of being roused I may merely feel bullied. That is because, in following someone's reasoning in a piece of writing, long before I have arrived at a coherent judgment about the plausibility

of the ideas being presented I have become aware of the intellectual and affective climate that prevails in the text. I hear the tone—curious, narcissistic, unguarded, playful, full of bluster, etc.—which stands neither wholly in the service of the argument that everyone insists is at issue nor completely apart from it. It is neither a mere means to an end nor an end in itself, but remains in an ambiguous relation to “what is being said.” I put the words in quotation marks to signal what all of us know but learn to ignore in writing geared towards knowledge and truth—in *Wissenschaft* broadly understood—namely that the thoughts “contained” in the propositions are merely part of what is being said.

Does this amount to saying that “there is nothing outside of style”? If it did, we would have made things too easy on ourselves. Though style is pervasive and goes “all the way down,” it does not therefore dissolve the argument, making the two indistinguishable. I am sympathetic to the point advanced by a line of mainly pragmatist thinkers that philosophy—indeed any sort of reasoned communication—is nothing but writing and therefore a form of literature, yet I cannot quite shake the feeling that things are more complex. Even if we agree that the idea of “philosophy as more than a kind of writing” “is an illusion,” as Richard Rorty maintains,<sup>15</sup> we would not wish to deny something we know to be the case, namely that ordinarily we are perfectly able to abstract a network of ideas related by logical connectors from a tissue of language (as I did when referring to the basic point pragmatists make about the impossibility of distinguishing form and content and as they routinely do in their own writings when referring to other people’s ideas). What we call argument does have an internal structure and a solidity that permits it to be summarized, scrutinized, and placed in the context of a broader discourse or discipline. That is not an illusion. Far from being obsolete or deluded, the distinction between argument (more generally, content) and style (more generally, form) obtains not merely for writing oriented towards communicating ideas; it appears to be a dimension of all writing, perhaps of all representational practice. We can bring to light something like an argument (or a plot) even in such unpromising cases as Barthes on sashimi (or Proust on dinner parties or Sebald on country walks). To say, then, that accounts responsive to the meaningfulness of the world come with their own style is not to wrap them in the inviolability of what is mine alone nor to exempt them from rational debate. Even when presenting an account that is sustained by an experience that cannot but be mine, I remain open to reasoning.

For similar reasons, describing style as a rhetorical effect does not quite capture its force, regardless of whether one understands rhetoric as a deceptive practice standing opposed to truth or as what enables

truth to disclose itself in the first place (as in Nietzsche's dictum about truth being "a mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms").<sup>16</sup> In its classical conception, rhetoric enumerates techniques of persuasion; it makes available instruments with which to manipulate an audience. One may frown on such behavior (as philosophers traditionally have) or celebrate it, but in either case one assumes that the speaker knows what he or she wishes to say and what effects to bring about in the audience, leaving only the question of how best to accomplish it. Yet this, I have said, precisely cannot be taken for granted in criticism guided by the idea of an encounter, for the encounter is not simply given but unfolds in the writing (or reading) of criticism itself. I do not have an experience, then an idea about communicating this experience, which—using rhetorical tools—I then seek to transmit to my reader, sincerely or deceptively. It is true that everything I say and write cannot help but move within the field of rhetoric (just as it also moves within the fields of logic, grammar, pragmatics, and poetics), yet it cannot be reduced to a series of rhetorical moves.

An attentiveness to style—to the style of the thing that has caught my interest, to my own style, and to the way the two intersect and perhaps collide—does help us avoid the mistake of taking the "thought content" as the true purpose of all communication, without, however, compelling us to claim that everything is "finally" nothing but style (or text or writing or rhetoric). For we can now see more clearly how reasoning itself appears with its own style, without which it would lack all force. We are in a better position to distinguish the moment a train of thought "leaves me cold" from the moment I start "disagreeing" with it. When we acknowledge and reflect on the dimension of style in thought, we may find ourselves in a position of being able to say to an interlocutor: "The evidence you have marshaled from *The Castle* is impressive, as are the historical data you refer to. I also have no trouble with your theory or with your method. Still, the overall disposition of your essay strikes me as being ill suited to reading Kafka. And here is how . . ." Instead, we nitpick quotations and pull apart concepts as though they were the source of our discontent. As it is, we have drawn the lines of our academic playing field so narrowly that we constantly find ourselves out of bounds. This harms our credibility because it interferes with our ability to provide an account that remains true to our experience as we unfold it in language, by which all of our work is finally guided.



## Between First and Third Persons

So if the third-person stance of observation and description that virtually all discourses, including the interpretive disciplines, that lay claim to rationally mediated validity strive to maintain fails to remain true to a reflection on art, on significant formations generally, is the alternative then a first-person view? Readers may come away from these pages thinking that I have recommended a first-person, personal, poetic, and emotive account to counterbalance the third-person, impersonal, prosaic, and rational view, but they would only be half right. The problem lies in the bifurcation of first- and third-person accounts and the train of associated qualities that is hitched to each. Many thinkers will admit that while the third-person account can get you far, it will not go “all the way,” leaving a remainder made up of felt experience—often given the strange name of qualia—that can never be opened to a view from outside. The remedy, it is sometimes suggested, is for the third-person to be supplemented by a first-person view.<sup>17</sup> The gesture is meant to be catholic in scope and generous in intent: only if we approach the problem “from all sides,” only if the natural sciences and the humanities “join together,” do we stand a chance of providing a full account of our world. This idea assumes that the first- and third-person accounts provide views of the *same* phenomenon and that adding them must therefore yield a synoptic view. Since you can add only like to like, this picture accords the first-person view an epistemological status equal to all others; in effect, it treats it as a special kind of third-person view to be aligned with all other third-person views. What is thereby lost is precisely what distinguishes the first-person account.

There is another, more significant way the effort of welding these “views” or “approaches” into a synthesis misfires. It supposes that the third-person view, while partial and prone to error, is public and therefore the true arena for the pursuit of rational inquiry that takes eliminating error as its aim. The first-person view, in turn, is taken to possess an absolute validity, which it purchases at the price of absolute privacy. The assumption, then, is that no one else can know how the world appears to me because I know it fully, because I, and I alone, maintain the deepest intimacy with my own thoughts and feelings. But is this so? In truth, I am a stranger to myself, and an account of my encounter with a significant phenomenon earns a right to make a claim on others when it testifies to the ways that I somehow find my own resources outstripped by that encounter and thus find myself exposed. What is more, the place where I am a stranger to myself coincides with the place that my experience ceases to be mine alone and can become public. Just because the phe-

nomenon appears *to me* does not render my account of it first-person, for my experience is not black-boxed to others nor is it blind to them. The ways I have of having the experience, let alone the ways I have of lending voice to it, give evidence of the fact that they are possible only within a world replete with other human beings, with language, desire, technology, power, history, and other dimensions of human existence.

Which is why my experience remains opaque to me for the same reason that it opens to others, and my style is available to others in ways it is not to myself. The way the individual formation, with all its idiosyncratic knots and blind spots, intersects with an openness to the public is not something we can test in an experiment, for it is not available to us at every moment of our quotidian existence. But it does make itself felt at certain moments of intensity, and the arresting experience of coming face-to-face with an artwork provides me with such moments. I recognize that the artist has arranged words or images or sounds or just space in a way that could only have emerged from a singular imagination with its own history and affective charge, yet I also recognize that the very singularity of the arrangement somehow calls to me. It is not clear what I “share” with the artwork or the artist, if I share anything at all. I do not find myself in an alliance of experience, the way I do when I am in solidarity with a cause. Perhaps I am driven to take note of the way my own singular experience—my style—opens to this other way of being singular, though this feels too meager an account of what happens to me in the company of some works of art. In any case, any account I wish to give of this intensive experience—call it an interpretation or a reading—must unfurl itself in such a way that the most private layers of experience come to reveal what is most public. This is how I understand Emerson’s dictum that “the deeper he [the orator] dives into his privatest, secretest presentiment, to his wonder he finds, this is the most acceptable, most public, and universally true.” It is merely the corollary to the poet who “in utter solitude remembering his spontaneous thoughts and recording them, is found to have recorded that, which men in crowded cities find true for them also.”<sup>18</sup> Friedrich Schlegel condenses the sentiment in the fragment that serves as my epigraph: “Poetry can only be critiqued by poetry.”<sup>19</sup>

Schlegel’s proposition can also be put this way: criticism has a kinship with what it critiques, not because the two are made of the same fundamental stuff (of words or other basic signifying elements), but because they unfold their force in the same manner. They give voice to a way of encountering the world—to a style of experience—in whose composition we cannot help but discern the privatest, secretest signature. Yet the force of style, like that of signature itself, lies in the fact that it signifies beyond

the particular. It does so most immediately by partaking of cultural patterns (we recognize French styles, eighteenth-century styles, military styles, etc.), yet most powerfully by revealing more than the signer can know. These are the best cases. But things do not always go right. Sometimes, when seeking the significance of a particular formation, I find nothing that draws me in. Instead of a signature, I see a squiggle that bewilders without intriguing me. Or, what is often more disappointing, I find the particularity of style overwhelmed by the cultural patterns to which it belongs so that little more than typicality reveals itself.

What criticism is worth bothering with? It is criticism that I read not for its conclusions but for what it brings to light in each of its sentences. And what does it bring to light? Not some piece of knowledge, cut to a size and shape that allow me to add it to pieces I have already assembled, nor some feeling (which could never truly be communicated to me anyway), but testimony about how another human being has grappled with a significant part of the world in his or her own style. If the insight I glean from it manages to transcend the particularity of its source to become part of the resources I have for encountering the world, this testimony may be called a genuine form of knowledge, distinct from opinion or intuition. And yet, it also maintains some of the texture with which it first appeared to me, since what I know about sashimi by reading Roland Barthes always retains something of Roland Barthes—his style. This style in which the knowledge arrives is, of course, Barthes's own, but it also manifests something beyond what he can report about himself, what I earlier called exposure. For this reason, the sort of knowledge I am interested in when reading criticism makes itself known not only through the words that appear on the page, but also through what has gone unsaid. The knowledge of sashimi (or of anything else), as disclosed in criticism, is above all a kind of self-knowledge, a knowledge of the self attained not through introspection, self-reflection, or analysis but through an encounter with something that both draws and exceeds the self. Criticism is a record of the change the self had to undergo to become receptive to the knowledge it is able to glean in the encounter with the object.

It is only to be expected that in trying to answer the question about what criticism is worth my while, I should focus on the criticism. But what finally draws me to criticism is neither the object that is at issue nor the ways its presence has altered the life of the critic, but my own interests and motivations. If a piece of criticism ends up resonating with me, it is because it activates something in me—a blend of understanding, curiosity, pleasure, and desire, for instance—whose true shape may well

remain unknown to me. Thus my encounter with criticism is similar in structure to the critic's encounter with the artwork (or the piece of fish, etc.); both seek not to control their objects but to be affected by them in ways that are not always predictable. To say that I am interested in Barthes's thoughts and feelings about sashimi really means that I am curious about *my* thoughts and feelings about his sashimi. In reading criticism, then, I want to know not only about the ways the critic's self was touched by the encounter with an object, but also about my own responses. In other words, the self-knowledge at stake in criticism involves at least two selves.

If good criticism indeed follows the logic of the encounter with art, then what I give up in responding to criticism is the idea that there are extrinsic criteria—academic, scholarly, veridical, methodological, etc.—according to which I should judge the piece before me. Instead I assume that criticism worth its salt—like the art that is its ostensible object—will establish the very standards by which it should be measured. I therefore feel no need to fence myself off with the tools of scholarship or a posture of knowingness. Nor do I need to prove that I am smarter than what I am reading. I can set aside the anxious, defensive stance that in our academic climate we dignify with the appellation “critical” and instead try to find the attitude from which the piece of writing wants to be listened to (which may not coincide with the attitude imagined by the author). There may be a resonance that develops between the writing and me, or there might not. I cannot know this ahead of time, nor should I, since I'd like to surprise myself. Why else bother?

INDIANA UNIVERSITY

#### NOTES

I am grateful to Judith Brown, Marie Deer, Jonathan Elmer, Florian Klinger, Andrew Miller, and Dieter Thomä for their thoughtful comments.

1 Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, trans. by Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 20–22.

2 T. S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” *Perspecta* 19 (1982): 39.

3 The more common name for what I am calling interpretive disciplines is “the humanities,” which I avoid because it is easily confused with the administrative arrangement at universities, which often have divisions or schools or deans of humanities. A number of misunderstandings then tend to follow. One is that disciplines such as political science, sociology, law, economics, anthropology, and even history end up not being counted among the humanities, even though much—if by no means all—work in those fields engages the meaningfulness of human behavior. If here “humanities” designates something narrower than what I mean, the second misunderstanding courts the opposite danger, for within the humanities, understood administratively, some researchers pursue projects that are not primarily interpretive. And third, an identification of the humanities with academic

work, whether understood narrowly or widely, overlooks the fact that some of the most powerful interpretive work is done by people who have no truck with universities. When I do use the term “humanities,” it does not map seamlessly onto the institutional order that happens to prevail at universities (which, in any case, differs widely), but refers to a *mode* of understanding the world, which one might encounter anywhere.

4 Thus, to cite just one canonical locus, Karl Popper defines “the objectivity of scientific statements” as lying “in the fact that they can be *inter-subjectively tested*.” Karl Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (London: Routledge, 2002), 22.

5 The phrase is from John Ashbery’s prose poem “Whatever It Is, Wherever You Are,” published in his collection *A Wave: Poems* (New York: Viking, 1984). I came across it first in Barry Mazur’s wonderful *Imagining Numbers: Particularly the Square Root of Minus Fifteen* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 16–17.

6 Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry: The 1893 Text*, ed. Donald L. Hill (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1980), xix.

7 Stanley Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy: Autobiographical Exercises* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1996), 14.

8 As Jonathan Elmer has pointed out to me, some tendencies in queer criticism make for a striking exception to my claim. Some of its most prominent exponents—Eve Sedgwick, D. A. Miller, Lee Edelman, and Wayne Koestenbaum are the names that come to my mind—are among the critics with the keenest eye and ear for style. Attuning readers to style and changing the tone of criticism may well be where the most enduring legacy of queer criticism lies. I find Sedgwick’s case against what she calls “paranoid reading” especially congenial to the way of thinking I try to develop here. See chap. 4 of her *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2003).

9 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962), viii/viii (italics removed). I quote from the reprint of 2000. Since then, the publisher has seen fit to reissue the book with the old text but new page breaks. This is irksome, since without benefit of a concordance page references in older scholarship are rendered obsolete. To spare users of the newer printing endless searching, I give its page numbers after a slash.

10 Asceticism is a virtue enjoined by many modes of reading and many readers, yet none more urgently than Paul de Man. His kind of deconstruction is meant to stand as a bulwark against all manner of weakness and temptation. His practice of reading is driven by a suspicion, directed at himself as much as at others, whose purity and force has not been equaled by others since Freud. William Elford Rogers attempts to provide a theoretical foundation for self-limitation in the context of hermeneutics in his *Interpreting Interpretation: Textual Hermeneutics as an Ascetic Discipline* (University Park: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 1994).

11 Many scholars favor the term “reading” to avoid taking on the baggage that comes with the concept of interpretation, understood hermeneutically. Since I do not put forward a notion of interpretation entrenched in a certain tradition or defined by a certain theory, to my ear, they amount to the same thing, so I will use “interpretation” and “reading” interchangeably.

12 Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 2004), xv, 56, 80.

13 The opposite can happen as well: a word that is stuck at the tip of my tongue can be released through a gesture my interlocutor makes. Heinrich von Kleist provides an account of such scenes in his essay “On the Gradual Production of Thoughts While Speaking,” written around 1805.

14 Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 6–7. To be sure, a twitch can be folded into the field of the meaningful (by a detec-

tive, an analyst, a suspicious lover, etc.), but only by being distinguished from yet other nonmeaningful features of the world. Meaning is a differential operation—something becomes meaningful if we understand it as having been selected *rather than* something else. This occurs along two axes. The more obvious one happens within the field of meaning, when we distinguish one meaningful sign from a range of others. But there is also always a second axis at work, often taken for granted, that distinguishes the meaningful from the meaningless, the way the figure is set off from the ground. Seeing a certain motion of the eyelid as a wink thus requires two distinctions: from other signs (such as facial gestures), all conveying their own meanings, and from the body's organic functions that, in this context, are taken as meaningless.

15 Richard Rorty, "Philosophy as a Kind of Writing: An Essay on Derrida," *New Literary History* 10, no. 1 (1978): 144.

16 Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sence," *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, trans. Ronald Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1999), 146.

17 Most such proposals treat these perspectives additively. Among the more thoughtful I have come across is Arnold Modell's *Imagination and the Meaningful Brain* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), which states that "a biology of meaning will, I hope, include first-, second-, and third-person perspectives," 14 (italics removed). It remains unclear from his account how this multiplicity of perspectives would be accommodated by the single science of biology.

18 Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The American Scholar," in *The American Scholar, Self-Reliance, Compensation*, ed. Orren Henry Smith (New York: American Book Company, 1893), 37.

19 Friedrich Schlegel, "Critical [or *Lyceum*] Fragment 117," in *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Peter Firchow (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1991), 14, translation modified.