

§ 1 Making Poetry

If we understand or, in one way or another, accede to a dawning of sense, we do so poetically. This is not to say that any kind of poetry constitutes a means or medium of access. It means—and this is almost exactly the opposite—that poetry cannot be defined except by such access, and that poetry occurs only when such access occurs.

This is why the word “poetry” refers indiscriminately to a type of language, a particular artistic genre, and a quality that may be present elsewhere, and indeed may be absent from works of this type or genre altogether. According to *Littré*, “poetry,” used absolutely, signifies “those qualities that characterize good verse, and may be found elsewhere than in verse. . . . Poetic intensity and depth, even in prose writing. Plato is full of poetry.” On this account, poetry is the indeterminate unity of a set of qualities that are not restricted to the kind of writing called “poetry” and can be described only by applying the adjective “poetic” to terms such as depth, intensity, daring, feeling, and so on.

Littré also states that, in its figurative sense, “poetry refers to everything that is elevated or moving in a work of art, or the character or beauty of a person, and even a product of nature.” In this way, as soon as it is taken out of the literary context, the word “poetry” takes on a solely figurative meaning, albeit one that is merely an extension of the absolute sense, that is, the indeterminate unity of qualities that may be characterized generically by the terms “elevated” and “moving.” Poetry as such is therefore always properly identical with itself, whether we are dealing with a piece of writing or a natural object, yet at the same time it is always only a figure of that properness, which is indeterminable according to any proper,

LITERATURE

properly proper sense. "Poetry" does not exactly have a sense; rather it has the sense of an access to a sense that is each time absent, and postponed until later. The sense of "poetry" is a sense that is always still to be made.

Poetry is in essence something more and something other than poetry itself. Or, to put it another way: poetry itself may indeed be found where there is no poetry at all. It can even be the reverse or the refusal of poetry, and of all poetry. Poetry does not coincide with itself: perhaps this non-coincidence, this essential improperness or impropriety, is properly what makes poetry what it is.

Poetry, then, may be deemed what it is only insofar as it is (at the very least) capable of negating itself, in the sense of renouncing, denying, or abolishing itself. By negating itself, poetry denies that the access to sense may be equated with any given mode of expression or figuration. It denies that what is "elevated" may be brought within reach, and that it may be possible to overcome the distance between us and what moves us (which is of course why it moves us at all).

Poetry, then, is the negativity by which access makes itself what it is—that which has to yield, and for that reason first refuses and withdraws. Access is difficult—but this is not a contingent quality; it means that difficulty is what makes access occur. Something that is difficult is something that resists our efforts to make something of it, and this is properly what makes poetry occur. Poetry is difficult, and hard to please. But because this is what it does to us, poetry seems too easy, and this is why it has long been treated as something frivolous. There is more to this than mere appearance. Poetry is at ease with the difficult, the absolutely difficult. With ease, difficulty yields. This does not mean it can be brushed to one side. It means that this is indeed poetry, presented for what it is, and that we are engaged within it. Suddenly, easily, we are in access, that is, in absolute difficulty, both "elevated" and "moving."

The difference between the negativity of poetry and that of its double, the discourse of the dialectic, at this point becomes apparent. The negativity of the dialectic, according to the logic of identity, puts to work the refusal of access as the truth of access. But it makes it not only into an extreme form of difficulty but also into an ever-present, regulatory promise of resolution and thus of an extreme form of easiness. Poetry for its part is not the slightest bit interested in problems: making things difficult is what it does.

(All the same, this difference cannot be resolved in terms of a distinc-

Making Poetry

tion between poetry and philosophy, since poetry refuses to be confined to a single mode of discourse: "Plato" himself can be "full of poetry." Philosophy *versus* poetry does not constitute an opposition. Each of the two makes difficulties for the other. Together, they are difficulty itself: the difficulty of making sense.)

It follows that poetry is negativity, too, in the sense that it negates, in the access to sense, what would otherwise turn access into a moment of passage, either a way or a path, and that it affirms access as a presence, or an invasion. Suddenly (easily), being or truth, heart or reason yields its sense, and difficulty is there, holding us in its grip.

Correlatively, poetry denies that such access may be determined as one among others, or one relative to others. Philosophy accepts that poetry is another path (and at times, too, religion). Even Descartes can write that "within us are the seeds of truth: philosophers extract them through reason, while poets pull them out through the imagination, making them gleam with greater splendor" (I am quoting from memory). Poetry in return accepts nothing of the sort. It asserts the absolute and exclusive, immediately present, concrete and, as such, unexchangeable character of access. (Since poetry does not belong to the order of problems, there is no diversity of solutions either.)

It therefore affirms access, according to the rule not of precision (which is always susceptible to rearrangement, infinite approximation, and tiny adjustments) but of exactitude. It is finished, over; the infinite is here and now.

In this way, the history of poetry is the history of poetry's persistent refusal to allow itself to be identified with any given poetic mode or genre—not in order to invent one that would be more precise than all the others, or to dissolve them into prose, functioning as their ultimate truth, but in order ceaselessly to determine another, new exactitude. This is always necessary, every time anew, for the infinite is here and now an infinite number of times. Poetry is the *praxis* of the eternal return of the same: the same difficulty, difficulty itself [*la même difficulté, la difficulté même*].

In this sense, the "infinite poetry" of the Romantics is as determinate a presentation as the highly wrought texts of Mallarmé, Pound's *opus incertum*, or Bataille's hatred of poetry. This does not mean that these presentations are all interchangeable, nor does it imply that they are like so many figurations of a single self-identical, unfigurable idea of Poetry, or that struggles between different "genres," "schools," or "ideas" of poetry should

LITERATURE

therefore be seen as pointless. It does mean, however, that such differences are all there is: access occurs each and every time only once, and it has always to be done again, not because it may be said to be imperfect, but on the contrary because, when it is (when it yields), it is each time perfect. Eternal return and the sharing of voices.

Poetry teaches nothing other than such perfection.

To this extent, poetic negativity is also the rigorously determinate positing of the unity and exclusive uniqueness of access, its absolutely simple truth: the poem, or verse. (It could also be called: strophe, stanza, phrase, word, or song.)

The poem or verse is all one: the poem is a single whole of which each part is a poem, that is a completed act of "making," and verse is a part of a whole that is still verse, that is to say, a turning, a versing or reversing, of sense.

The poem or verse refers to the elocutionary unity of an exactitude. Such elocution is intransitive: it does not appeal to sense as a prior content; it does not communicate any sense, but makes it, being exactly and literally truth.

It thus utters nothing other than what serves as language, at one and the same time both its structure and responsibility, which is to articulate sense, bearing in mind that there is sense only by virtue of articulation. But poetry articulates sense, exactly, absolutely (and does not provide an approximation, an image, or an evocation).

That articulation is not solely verbal, and that language extends infinitely beyond language, this is something quite different—or just the same: "poetry" refers to "everything that is elevated and moving." In language or elsewhere, poetry does not produce meanings; it makes a thing and the "elevated" and "moving" into an objective, concrete, and exactly determinate identity.

Exactitude is integral completion: *ex-actum*, that which is done, acted to the limit. Poetry is the integral action of the disposition to sense. Each and every time it occurs, it is an exaction of sense. Exaction is the action of demanding a thing owed, then of demanding more than what is owed. What is owed by language is sense. But sense is more than all that may be owed. Sense is not a debt; it is not something to be demanded; and it is possible to make do without it. It is possible to live without poetry. It is always possible to ask, "Wherefore poets ... ?" Sense is a surplus, an excess,

Making Poetry

the excess of being in relation to being itself. The question is how to accede to this excess, to yield or cede to it.

This, too, is why “poetry” says more than what “poetry” wants to say. More precisely—or, better, more exactly: “poetry” says the more-than-saying as such and insofar as it structures saying. “Poetry” says the saying-more of a more-than-saying. And consequently also says the no-more-saying-it. But say it, sing it too, or beat it, chant it, thump it out.

The particular semantic field of the word “poetry,” its perpetual exaction and exaggeration, its way of oversaying is a congenital feature. Plato (him again, poetry’s ancient challenger) points out that “poiesis” is a word that was made in order to take the part for the whole: the solely metric production of chanted words for all productive actions in general. The former thereby exhausts the essence and excellence of the latter. The whole of *making* is concentrated into the making of the poem, as if the poem made everything that it is possible to make. *Littré* (him again, the poet of the “Ode to Light”) gathers up this concentration as follows: “*poem*,” he says, “from *poiein*, to make: the thing made *par excellence*.”

Why should poetry be the excellence of the thing made? Because nothing can be more accomplished than the access to sense. If it is at all, it is characterized entirely by its absolute exactitude, or else it is not (not even approximately). It is, whenever it is, perfect, and more than perfect, pluperfect. When access occurs, it is clear that it had always been there, and that similarly it will always return (even were one, oneself, to know nothing of this: but one has to assume that at each moment someone, somewhere, is acceding). The poem draws access from an immemorial past, which owes nothing to the reminiscence of some ideality, but is the exact existence, here and now, of the infinite, its eternal return.

The thing made is finished, finite. Its finishing is the perfect actuality of infinite sense. This is why poetry is represented as being more original than the distinction between poetry and prose, between different genres or modes of the art of making, that is, of art, taken absolutely. “Poetry” means: the first making, or making insofar as it is always first, each time an original act.

What is making? To posit within being. There is nothing more to making than positing as its end. But the end that started out being a goal now turns into its end in the form of its negation, and making is unmade as it reaches perfection. But what is unmade is identical with what is posited, perfected, more than perfected, pluperfect. Making accomplishes both

LITERATURE

something and itself each time. Its end is its finish: it thereby posits itself as infinite, each time infinitely beyond its own work.

The poem is the thing made of making in itself.

This selfsame thing that is both abolished and posited is the access to sense. Access is unmade as passage, process, aim, and path, as approach and approximation. It is posited as exactitude and as disposition, as presentation.

This is why the poem or verse is a sense that is abolished as intention (a wanting-to-say) and posited as finishing: turning back not on its own will but on its phrasing. Making no longer a problem, but access. Not to be commented upon, but to be recited. Poetry is not written in order to be learned by heart; but reciting something by heart is what makes each recited phrase into at least the suspicion of a poem. Mechanical finishing gives access to the infinity of sense. There is no antinomy here between mechanical legality and the legislation of freedom, but the first is what releases the second.

Presentation must be made; sense must be made, and perfected. This does not mean: produced, operated, realized, created, enacted, or engendered. It means none of all that, exactly; at least nothing that is not, before all else, what *making* wants to say: what *making* makes language do, when it perfects it in its being, which is the access to sense. When saying is making, and making saying, in the same way that one says "making love," which is making nothing, but making an access be. Making or letting: simply posing, deposing exactly.

There is no making (no technical operation or art, no gesture, no work) that is not shot through, more or less covertly, with this movement of deposing.

Poetry is to make everything speak—and to depose, in return, all speaking in things, with itself like a thing made and more than perfected.

Verses learned in childhood:

Es schläft ein Lied in allen Dingen
Die da träumen fort und fort
Und die Welt hebt an zu singen
Triffst Du nur das Zauberwort.

There sleeps a song in every thing
Which there lies dreaming on and on
And the world will rise up to sing
If you just happen upon the magic word.

Making Poetry

This weighty, age-old business of poetry, which lies so heavily upon us and entangles us, resists our boredom and profound disgust for all poetical lies, affectations, and sublimities—even if it does not interest us, it forces us to halt, necessarily. Today just as much as in the age of Horace, Scève, Eichendorff, Eliot or Ponge, albeit in a different way. It was once said that after Auschwitz poetry was impossible, but then, conversely, that it was necessary after Auschwitz; but it was precisely of poetry that it seemed necessary to say the one then the other. The exigency of the access to sense—its exaction, its exorbitant demand—cannot cease forcing us to halt: discourse and history, knowledge and philosophy, action and law.

Let there be no more talk about the ethics or aesthetics of poetry. The making denoted as “poetry” comes well before, in the immemorial pluperfect. It lies lurking like a wild beast, tensed like a spring, and thus in act, already.