

GADAMER AND DEWEY ON THE ROLES OF POETRY AND THE POET

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The study of aesthetics is a perennial topic for philosophers and consists of questions such as what counts as art and what role the artist plays in the production of art. Specifically, analyses of poetry and the poet hold a special place of emphasis for philosophers of art. In this paper, I will investigate thoughts on the roles of poetry and the poet by the philosophers Hans-Georg Gadamer and John Dewey. I shall consider Gadamer's thought on the purpose of poetry as the preservation of nearness. Then, I will discuss Dewey's analysis of a quote by John Keats to consider whether the character of the poet is merely a transparency. Finally, I will apply the thoughts of both philosophers to an analysis of an actual poem. Therefore, I will argue not only that Gadamer and Dewey's aesthetic views are compatible, but also that they have applicability to actual poetry and artistic production.

I will begin with Gadamer's essay "On the Contribution of Poetry to the Search for Truth." Gadamer begins by questioning just what poetry's relation to truth is. The truth in a poem doesn't seem to lay in its correctness to some exterior situation. Gadamer notes that it doesn't make sense to evaluate poems on their accuracy to reality, or to indict poets for getting the facts wrong or accuse them of lying. Instead, he says it seems "that poetic language enjoys a particular and unique relationship to truth" (Gadamer 105).

Gadamer begins to delve into this relationship by discussing the unique hermeneutic or interpretative character of a poem. He says when someone experiences a poem, the person "who wishes to understand a poem intends only the poem itself (107). As such, we would miss experiencing the poem in and of itself if we jump to questioning the poet's intent in writing the poem. Indeed, Gadamer asserts that a genuine poem is not like a motivated speech. It is not leading its audience to believe the viewpoint of the author, nor to manipulate the readers towards some course of action. Rather, when we read a poem, it ought not to occur to us who is writing the poem and why. Instead, the words of the poem itself become the focus, not the author nor his intentions: "Here

we are wholly directed toward the word as it stands. . . . It stands there equally independent of both reader and poet” (ibid.).

Gadamer investigates then what it means for a poem to be a word “*that stands written*” (108). This does not simply mean that because a poem is written down, its importance lays in the ability for readings of it to be recreated indefinitely—a written copy of lectures notes could fulfill the same practical purpose. Hence, a poem is not just a copy of a past verbal performance or a blueprint for another reading. Instead, there is something about the written poem itself that is self-fulfilling and complete. Gadamer claims then: “Whether the poet himself reads his works aloud or whether someone else reads them, we all know that the spoken word falls short of the poem” (109). Thus, the poem seems to have a certain reality unto itself, an autonomous status as a text.

Gadamer considers next whether a poem is autonomous in the way other kinds of texts of high importance are. A religious text carries this sense of autonomy and authority. But a religious text differs in purpose from a poetic text. Religious texts constitute a pledge: a promise between the revelation of the religion and the believer. Similarly, a legal text can be authoritative and autonomous, but this takes the form of a proclamation: A proclamation that declares the legality of a particular situation. A poem, though, makes a statement which is self-fulfilling “in that it bears witness to itself and does not admit anything that might verify it” (110). Hence, a poem has a special relationship to reality that other texts do not. Gadamer gives an example to what he means. He notes that the works of the poet Hölderlin announced the return of the gods (112). A reader would be misinterpreting the work if he saw this as a prophecy for some future event. Yet, the truth of the poet’s words resounds regardless.

Finally then, what does the truth of poetry consist in, if a poem is neither a pledge, nor a proclamation, nor a verifiable account of external events? Gadamer states that the truth of poetry comes from its ability to evoke the nearness of the world. What is this “hold on nearness” (113) that poetry produces, and why is this important for the human being? Gadamer fully articulates this in a poignant paragraph:

A genuine poem...allows us to experience “nearness” in such a way that this nearness is held in and through the linguistic form of the poem. What is the nearness that is held there? Whenever we have to hold something, it is because it is transient and threatens to escape our grasp. In fact, our fundamental experience as beings subject to time is that all things escape us, that all the events of our lives fade more and more, so that at best they glow with an almost unreal shimmer in the most distant recollection. But the poem does not fade, for the poetic word brings the transience of time to a standstill. (114)

Thus, the unchanging reality and truth of poetry, in and of itself, lets us preserve the nearness of an evanescent world which is always slipping out of our grasp. Gadamer would agree that all things are steadily fading into time: events, memories, feelings. Poetry is the one human activity that tries to take hold of this nearness and preserve it. And though all humans remain constrained to the passage of time, the glow of the poem continues on as a beacon to illuminate our world and our being.

I now turn to Dewey to investigate the role of the poet by considering portions of

the chapter “The Human Contribution” from *Art as Experience*. He begins the chapter by noting that experience for a human being consists in an interaction between the organism and the environment. The environment for Dewey is one of physical as well as mental structures, traditions, and customs the organism has acquired as well as its surroundings. Experience then, as interaction between the self and the environment, is a reciprocal process in which the self is both active and is undergoing action from its surroundings:

The self acts as well as undergoes, and its undergoings are not impressions stamped upon an inert wax but depend upon the way the organism reacts and responds. There is no experience in which the human contribution is not a factor in determining what actually happens. The organism is a force, not a transparency. (256)

For Dewey, art represents the epitome of experience, of the doings and undergoings in the interaction of the human being and the surrounding environment. As he points out in the passage above, experience always involves this contribution on the side of the human. Experience does not just happen to us: we are actively involved in it. Thus, it follows that a human organism could not just be a transparency in its relation to artistic experience. In the experience of creating or perceiving art, the human is not merely a transparent vessel into which an experience is poured.

However, further on in the chapter, Dewey gives a lengthy quote by John Keats on the role of the poet which seems to contradict, at least on the surface, Dewey’s claim that an artist, as a human organism, is not a transparency:

As to the poetical character itself ... it is not itself—it has no self. It is everything and nothing—it enjoys light and shade; it lives in gusto, be it fair or foul, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated. It has as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen. What shocks the virtuous philosopher delights the chameleon poet. It does not harm from its relish for the dark side of things, any more than from its taste for the bright one, because they both end in speculation [Imaginative i.e. imaginative perception]. A poet is the most unpoetical of anything in existence, because he has no identity—he is continually in and for, and filling some other body.... When I am in a room with people, if I am ever free from speculating on creations of my own brain, then, not myself goes home to myself, but the identity of every one in the room begins to press upon me, so that I am in a very little time annihilated—not only among men; it would be the same in a nursery of children. (268)

In describing the poetic process at work, Keats seems to be suggesting that there is a transparent quality to the poet: a chameleon that becomes the color of his surroundings. As such, he says the poet himself is unpoetical, and takes on the character of any experience in his writing. Keats goes as far to liken this to annihilation: the poet “has no identity” in that he is infused by the identities of the people around him, no matter the situation.

Dewey is quick to point out, though, that the poetic process Keats is describing here is quite different from a sheer disassociation from the self which is the key feature of several other aesthetic theories. Specifically, Dewey argues against disinterestedness, detachment, and psychical distancing as possible candidates to describe this poetical process. The term “disinterestedness” seems to suggest uninterestedness, or that the artist has no interest in the subjects of his art (268). Clearly, this is not the case in the Keats quote: Keats seems to be intimately linked with every subject within his surroundings. Yet, Dewey points out that both “detachment” and “attachment” would fail to encompass this poetical character. “Detachment” suggests an aloof self, severed from its situation (ibid.). Conversely, “attachment” describes a self in close connection with its surroundings, yet still a completely different entity. Finally, the concept of “psychical distancing” would fail as it leaves no room for active participation in the artistic process, nor accounts for the impulse which moves one to create art, nor the complete surrender to perception which occurs in art (269).

For Dewey’s positive answer of what is taking place in the poetical process, let us turn back to the beginning of the chapter. Dewey elaborates on his description of experience as interaction with the following:

Because every experience is constituted by interaction between “subject” and “object,” between a self and its world, it is not itself merely physical nor merely mental, no matter how much one factor or the other predominates.... In an experience, things and events belonging to the world, physical and social, are transformed through the human context they enter, while the live creature is changed and developed through its intercourse with things previously external to it. (256-57)

Hence, every experience a human has consists of this interaction between the human’s self as the subject, and the world as object. But for Dewey, the self is always undergoing change from its experiences: the transformation by interaction with the world. This is especially the case in aesthetic experiences, where the barriers between subject and object break down, and the self undergoes a fusion with the world.¹ Thus, an aesthetic experience occurs when “organism and environment cooperate to institute an experience in which the two are so fully integrated that each disappears” (259).

This process of interaction and integration between subject and object can then be used to illuminate the poetical process that Keats describes. This annihilation of identity that he speaks of when he is engaged in poetic thought is not an elimination of the self, per se. Instead, this annihilation consists in the breaking of the barriers between self and world in an aesthetic experience. When Keats says that as a poet, he becomes everyone in the room, this suggests that the subject and object are being fused as one. The self as a living organism must be there in order for poetizing to take place. But the aesthetic experience does not come about just from a self as a transparency in which an experience is merely impressed upon the perceiver without any interaction on his side.

Now I would like to present one of my own poems in an attempt to apply Gadamer and Dewey’s thoughts about poetry to actual work of poetry:

I know what Emily meant: “Nobody”
Is pure personage of artistic bent,
The quiet one amongst raw reverie,
Amidst Carnival, perpetual Lent.
Their dance is a pulled prance: rolling dice,
Robots, grinds, jukes, vents & speculators.
No songs they make, no sounds in cup-less bras,
Their lime-lives cleansing like childlike dullards.
But none escapes the gaze: the white prism,
Transparent to the narratives they hatch.
Unbeknownst to their panting pantomime,
My body is resistance, world & flesh.
This is art, this is making, meaning, sex.
This is poiesis. Not un-vacant texts. (Bratkowski 552)

On the one hand, it is easy for one to get caught in overanalyzing the subtle minutiae of his own work. On the other, I would be hard pressed to explain the poem in its entirety, as some portions contain nuances which I cannot put into other words, and must remain ineffable. Thus, let me limit my analysis to applying the thoughts on poetry expressed by Keats, Gadamer, and Dewey to this particular poem.

Like the quote from Keats, this poem is depicting how the poetical process itself unfolds. My first encounter with Keats’ quote was a major motivation for writing this poem, and his influence is seen in the first quatrain of the sonnet. Keats spoke on the annihilation of the poet in adopting the identities of his subjects. I reference this indirectly through referring to another poet, Emily Dickinson, and her poem which starts with the line “I’m nobody!” Hence, the theme at play is Keats’ view of how the poet disappears into the subjects of his work. While referencing the section where Keats talked about the poet becoming everyone in the room, I take the analogy further by describing my situation as being almost a silent observer to festivities of others which are going on around me. As such, I feel my own role of the poet as indicative of a melancholic attitude: the one person who still feels like it is a time of mourning even when others are celebrating.

This theme continues on into the second quatrain, where I describe further this observation of others’ revelry. I stand as an observer in the midst of a party, yet I’m apart from it: I’m there, yet at the same time, not there. I’ve been invited to attend, yet still not invited to participate. The feeling of isolation I am evoking here can be understood in reference to Gadamer’s view of poetry as the preservation of nearness. In these lines, I am speaking on an actual event of my life, but I am not merely giving a literal account of what took place. Instead, I am preserving the feeling in this moment of time. Hence, the nearness of this event is preserved in the metaphorical and evocative language of my poem. And as Keats has pointed out, the dark moments of a poet’s life are just as important, if not more important, as subjects to tap into for insight.

The poem builds upon the theme of observation further in the third quatrain, where I discuss my gaze as the poet as inescapable by its subjects, to the point where the gaze itself becomes transparent. Yet, I make a critical turn here by noting that my gaze nec-

essarily entails a body, which in turn, requires a world. Hence, though the poet almost disappears in his subjects, this movement is not an obliteration. Rather, the self as body and the world become connected. This is indicative of Dewey's thoughts on aesthetic experience. The firm rift between self and world, subject and object, vaporizes and the external world becomes internal to the self. This interaction between self and world is summed up in my final two lines. The interaction, or intercourse, is suggested with the metaphor of sex: meaning is made in the climactic act of poetry.

To conclude, I have broached the topic of poetry and the poet from several different angles in this discussion. From the side of sheer philosophic analysis, we have observed the importance of poetry from outsiders looking in, with Gadamer's view of the preservation of nearness in poetry, and Dewey's discussion of the interaction within aesthetic experience. We have seen Keats writing in prose about his own poetical process, and discussed how this meshes within a philosophic theory of aesthetics. Finally, I have presented my own view on poetry in poem form, which, intentionally or not, is indicative of all three of these thinkers' views. Hence, it seems there is indeed a vital link between the philosophic approach—in a theory of aesthetics—and its subject—the actual art itself. As Dewey would say, philosophy and art run along similar lines, but only differ in their directions: "Philosophy is said to begin in wonder and end in understanding. Art departs from what has been understood and ends in wonder" (Dewey, 281).

NOTE

1 For ff. see Alexander's *John Dewey's Theory of Art, Experience, and Nature: The Horizons of Feeling*, 231 and onward.

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