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The European Society for Aesthetics

Department of Philosophy

University of Fribourg

Avenue de l'Europe 20

1700 Fribourg

Switzerland

Internet: <http://www.eurosa.org>

Email: secretary@eurosa.org

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Table of Contents

Lydia Goehr [Keynote Paper] <i>Painting in Waiting Prelude to a Critical Philosophy of History and Art</i>	1
Lucas Amoriello <i>(Non)Identity: Adorno and the Constitution of Art</i>	31
Claire Anscomb <i>Photography, Digital Technology, and Hybrid Art Forms</i>	43
Emanuele Arielli <i>Strategies of Irreproducibility</i>	60
Katerina Bantinaki, Fotini Vassiliou, Anna Antaloudaki, Alexandra Athanasiadou <i>Plato's Images: Addressing the Clash between Method and Critique</i>	77
Christoph Brunner & Ines Kleesattel <i>Aesthetics of the Earth. Reframing Relational Aesthetics Considering Critical Ecologies</i>	106
Matilde Carrasco Barranco <i>Laughing at Ugly People. On Humour as the Antitheses of Human Beauty</i>	127
Rona Cohen <i>The Body Aesthetic</i>	160
Pia Cordero <i>Phenomenology and Documentary Photography. Some Reflections on Husserl's Theory of Image</i>	174

Gianluigi Dallarda	<i>Kant and Hume on Aesthetic Normativity</i>	194
Aurélie Debaene	<i>Posing Skill: The Art Model as Creative Agent</i>	214
Caitlin Dolan	<i>Seeing Things in Pictures: Is a Depicted Object a Visible Thing?</i>	232
Lisa Giombini	<i>Perceiving Authenticity: Style Recognition in Aesthetic Appreciation</i>	249
Matthew E. Gladden	<i>Beyond Buildings: A Systems-Theoretical Phenomenological Aesthetics of “Impossible” Architectural Structures for Computer Games</i>	272
Moran Godess-Riccitelli	<i>From Natural Beauty to Moral Theology: Aesthetic Experience, Moral Ideal, and God in Immanuel Kant’s Third Critique</i>	319
Xiaoyan Hu	<i>The Moral Dimension of Qiyun Aesthetics and Some Kantian Resonances</i>	339
Jèssica Jaques Pi	<i>Idées esthétiques et théâtre engagé: Les quatre petites filles de Pablo Picasso</i>	375
Palle Leth	<i>When Juliet Was the Sun: Metaphor as Play</i>	399
Šárka Lojďová	<i>Between Dreams and Perception - Danto’s Revisited Definition of Art in the Light of Costello’s Criticism</i>	431
Sarah Loselani Kiernan	<i>The ‘End of Art’ and Art’s Modernity</i>	448
Marta Maliszewska	<i>The Images between Iconoclasm and Iconophilia – War against War by Ernst Friedrich</i>	483
Salvador Rubio Marco	<i>Imagination, Possibilities and Aspects in Literary Fiction</i>	506

Fabrice Métais	<i>Relational Aesthetics and Experience of Otherness</i>	522
Philip Mills	<i>The Force(s) of Poetry</i>	541
Yaiza Ágata Bocos Mirabella	<i>“How Food can be Art?” Eating as an Aesthetic Practice. A Research Proposal</i>	556
Zoltán Papp	<i>‘In General’ On the Epistemological Mission of Kant’s Doctrine of Taste</i>	575
Dan Eugen Ratiu	<i>Everyday Aesthetics and its Dissents: the Experiencing Self, Intersubjectivity, and Life-World</i>	622
Matthew Rowe	<i>The Use of Imaginary Artworks within Thought Experiments in the Philosophy of Art</i>	650
Ronald Shusterman	<i>To Be a Bat: Can Art Objectify the Subjective?...</i>	672
Sue Spaid	<i>To Be Performed: Recognizing Presentations of Visual Art as Goodmanean ‘Instances’</i>	700
Malgorzata A. Szyszkowska	<i>The Experience of Music: From Everyday Sounds to Aesthetic Enjoyment</i>	728
Polona Tratnik	<i>Biotechnological Art Performing with Living Microbiological Cultures</i>	748
Michael Young	<i>Appreciation and Evaluative Criticism: Making the Case for Television Aesthetics</i>	766
Jens Dam Ziska	<i>Artificial Creativity and Generative Adversarial Networks</i>	781

The Force(s) of Poetry

Philip Mills¹

Royal Holloway, University of London

ABSTRACT. In the 20th century, philosophy of language and aesthetics seem to have agreed on one point, namely that of placing poetry away from the centre of attention. In philosophy of language, poetic utterances have been considered ‘deviant’ or ‘non-serious’. In aesthetics, attention has turned towards visual arts, music, or literature (mainly in the sense of the novel), thus leaving poetry as a rather peripheral subtopic. This leaving aside of poetry has led to considering it without force, and this at various levels. Two examples: for Austin, poetic statements are without any performative force and, for Sartre, poetry must be distinguished from literature, the latter having a political force and the former not. In my paper, I aim at reinstating the force of poetry by showing it has a linguistic, philosophical, and even political force (and this as much as the novel). Against the idea that literature (as novel) can teach us facts about the world, I argue that literature (as poetry) teaches us a different way of seeing the world and that its force resides precisely in its capacity to bring us (or force us, perhaps) to see things differently. In this sense, poetry is not only doing something with language, by also doing something to language. To rephrase Austin’s famous title, and thus reverse his evaluation of poetry, poetry might not reveal us *How to Do Things with Words*, but how to do things *to* words.

I therefore have to say that the poem does something. It does something to language, and to poetry. It does something to the subject. To the subject who writes it, to

¹ Email: philip.mills@romandie.com

the subject who reads it. (Meschonnic 2006, 43)²

This paper explores the force(s) of poetry and how they affect language and our being in the world. I argue that contemporary aesthetics has somehow missed the creative, transformative, and even revolutionary forces that take part in the poetic process. As Meschonnic argues, ‘the poem does something.’ To understand what the poem does and how it does it, I briefly argue against views which consider poetry forceless, be it linguistically or politically, by discussing Austin and Sartre in the first section. This forcelessness is the result of a certain conception of language and, in the second section, I explore how the concept of force can be brought back in language and art by focusing on Nietzsche and Menke. The relations between linguistic, artistic, and political forces that arise from this exploration lead me, in the third section, to analyse how the transformative force of poetry can be considered political in the works of Meschonnic and Kristeva. Poetry is not only doing something with language, by also doing something to language. To rephrase Austin’s famous book, and thus reverse his evaluation of poetry, poetry might not reveal us *How to Do Things with Words*, but how to do things *to* words. The force of poetry is not primarily political, but it becomes political insofar as its force modifies language and, through this modification of language, our ways of being in the world.

² My translation throughout: ‘Je suis donc obligé de dire que le poème fait quelque chose. Il fait quelque chose au langage, et à la poésie. Il fait quelque chose au sujet. Au sujet qui le compose, au sujet qui le lit.’

1. The Forcelessness of Poetry

Despite its attempt to systematically analyse the specificities of each and every artform, contemporary aesthetics seems to have surprisingly left poetry aside. From being the paragon of the arts in 18th and 19th century philosophy, poetry in the contemporary world seems to have lost most, if not all, of its philosophical force. Even Plato, who is famous for being rather unkind to poetry, nevertheless admits that poetry has a particular force, one he is afraid of, and his unkindness reveals his fear of poetry more than an indifference towards it.³

How can one explain such a change of attitude towards poetry? One of the main reasons for this shift can be found in one of the founding aspects of analytic philosophy: the ‘linguistic turn’. If, following this turn, philosophy is a matter of language and solving problems of language, poetry seems to be of no help at all to philosophy of language, be it as ‘ideal language philosophy’ or ‘ordinary language philosophy’, the two types of philosophy of language Rorty considers in editing *The Linguistic Turn*. (Rorty 1967, 15) If poetry is a problem for the former, as it presents a form of language which cannot be translated into formal logic and therefore not be given any truth-

³ At the beginning of his introduction to *The Philosophy of Poetry*, John Gibson paints a similar picture of the place of poetry in the contemporary aesthetic scene: ‘Indeed, until very recently one could fairly say that poetry is the last great unexplored frontier in contemporary analytic aesthetics, an ancient and central art we have managed to overlook more or less entirely.’ (Gibson 2015, 1)

value, the latter also shows no interest in it, as Austin suggest that performative utterances in a poem, are ‘*in a peculiar way hollow or void.*’ (Austin 1975, 22) Inasmuch as Austin deprives poetry from any performative force, contemporary aesthetics strips poetry from its philosophical force. Failure for philosophy of language to give a substantial account of the language of poetry might have contaminated the realm of aesthetics and incited philosophers to look at artforms other than poetry, more easily approachable with these new philosophical tools. The great interest in literature and the problem of truth in fiction as well as the distinction between fiction and non-fiction can be seen as a consequence of the ‘linguistic turn’: philosophers have started looking into aesthetic problems for which philosophy of language could be of use, rather than artforms which are problematic to philosophy of language.

If this account gives a schematic picture of the place of poetry in analytic aesthetics, one might think poetry fares better on the other side of the so-called ‘analytic-continental divide.’ At first glance, some continental philosophers like Heidegger seem to pursue the 19th century romantic praise of poetry. However, if one takes a closer look, a shift in attitude similar to that of analytic aesthetics seems to occur in continental philosophy. Although it is not a mark of indifference towards poetry, Sartre’s theory of literature operates a similar shift from poetry to literature, from the poem to the novel. He defines literature in terms of political commitment and denies

such commitment to poetry.⁴ For Sartre, the greatness of literature is proportional to its political force and he denies such a force to poetry. This does not mean that Sartre denies any greatness to poetry, but one which might be of another kind than the novel, and one certainly not of help to any concern in the actual world.

One of the possible reasons for this shift is an inversion of value between literature and poetry. Whereas poetry was literature (or the highest literary form) for 18th and 19th century philosophers, the 20th century marks the rise of the novel and poetry becomes a subcategory of literature.⁵ This shift does however not explain the philosophers' indifference towards poetry and why they have stripped it from its force. In my paper, I aim at reinstating the force of poetry by showing that it has a linguistic, philosophical, and even political force (and this as much as the novel). Against the idea that literature (as novel) can teach us facts about the world, I argue that literature (as poetry) teaches us a different way of seeing the world and that its force resides precisely in its capacity to bring us (or force us, perhaps) to see things differently. As Wittgenstein suggests in *Culture*

⁴ 'How can one hope to provoke the indignation or the political enthusiasm of the reader when the very thing one does is to withdraw him from the human condition and invite him to consider with the eyes of God a language that has been turned inside out?' (Sartre 1988, 34)

⁵ It can be argued that the rise of the novel begins in the 19th century already but, in terms of defining literature, the Romantic tradition which considers poetry as the overarching concept for literary productions remains strong throughout the whole century. In that sense, Heidegger is still very much influenced by the romantic tradition, whereas other continental philosophers like Adorno move away from it.

and Value: ‘The work of art compels us to see it in the right perspective.’ (Wittgenstein 1998, 7) More than seeing the work of art itself in the right perspective, it compels us to see the world in the right perspective, in a perspective which makes sense.

2. Nietzsche, Menke, and the Notion of Force

As long as we remain within the Austinian (and the philosopher of language) framework in which poetic statements are considered forceless, there is no way for the poet to affect the ordinary world. The first step towards making poetry relevant again for social and political concerns is to give its force back to poetic language.⁶ Nietzsche’s views offer useful insights in how force operates within language, and therefore how force can operate within poetic language.

Claudia Crawford’s reading of Nietzsche’s theory of language provides an ideal starting point to explore the notion of force in Nietzsche’s views on language:

[...] Nietzsche begins to lay more stress on the power which each individual instance of language production exerts as an instance of

⁶ In a sense, postulating the distinction between ordinary and poetic language as philosophy of language has traditionally done is already a way of placing a hierarchy. This is precisely the remark Derrida makes in discussing Austin’s theory of language in ‘Signature, Event, Context’ (Derrida 1988) and Searle’s reply to it misses this point.

value and action. [...] Language becomes a dynamic instance of interpretation and valuing, not in a critical sense of a subject who interprets values and then speaks or writes about those interpretations, but in a creative sense where the speaking or writing itself *is* the new value force embodied. (Crawford 1988, xiii)

This characterisation of Nietzsche's conception of language is Austinian in the sense that language is equated with action. If each instance of language is 'an instance of value and action', each instance could be considered a performative. Against Austin's limitation of performativity to a certain class of verbs, Nietzsche's views on language consider every instance of language to be performative.

This broadening of the scope of the performative to all speech acts establishes a connection between language and power. In a parenthesis from *On the Genealogy of Morality*⁷, Nietzsche makes this connection explicit:

(The seignorial privilege of giving names even allows us to conceive of the origin of language itself as a manifestation of the power of the rulers: they say 'this *is* so and so', they set their seal on everything and every occurrence with a sound and thereby take possession of it, as it were). (*GM I*, 2)

The relation between language and power lies in the fact that naming is an

⁷ Nietzsche 2006, hereafter *GM*.

act of power. Language does not only mirror the world in a neutral way but crafts it according to those who give names, to those with power. Two conceptions of language are opposed to one another: a ‘representational’ one in which language mirrors the world and an ‘expressive’ one which considers that language takes part in shaping the world. Charles Taylor considers the expressive tradition to originate in the ‘HHH view’ with the works of Herder, Hamann, and Humboldt. Such a view ‘allows us to identify a constitutive dimension, a way in which language does not only represent, but enters into some of the realities it is “about.”’ (Taylor 1985, 273) In *GM*, Nietzsche considers that the keys to shaping the world has been given to the rulers but, in his earlier works, he suggests something quite different.

In *The Gay Science*⁸, Nietzsche suggests that those who give names—and hence those with power—are those with originality as they can see what has not yet been named: ‘What is originality? *To see* something that has no name as yet and hence cannot be mentioned although it stares us all in the face.’ (*GS* 261) This notion of originality brings us back to the realm of art and poetry. Reading this aphorism with *GM* in mind suggests that those who have power are not the rulers but the artists, those with power are those with originality.

As a shaping of the world, originality is a poetic force in the etymological sense of *poiesis*. It is a making of the world which is also, at

⁸ Nietzsche 1974, hereafter *GS*.

the same time, an unmaking:

We can destroy only as creators.—But let us not forget this either: it is enough to create new names and estimations and probabilities in order to create in the long run new ‘things.’ (GS 58)

The force of artists, and poets especially as they are primarily concerned with language, lies in their capacity to create new words and hence new things. The poetic force is a destructive-creative force which alters the world we live in.

Following Nietzsche, Christoph Menke also considers art to have a force. He suggests that ‘there is no aesthetic making without the action of “unconscious forces” (Herder). This action is play: the connection and disconnection and the new connection and again disconnection of images in the acts of imagination.’⁹ (Menke 2013, 67) The play of forces connects and disconnects (in Nietzsche’s terms: creates and destroys) images. In poetry, such images are words and the poets are those who connect and disconnect words, not only between one another, as in a sentence or spatially on the page, but also between language and the world, thus shaping the world with words, as Nietzsche says: ‘Those with originality have for the most part also assigned names.’ (GS 261)

⁹ My translation throughout: ‘denn es gibt kein ästhetisches Machen ohne das Wirken “unbewußter Kräfte” (Herder). Dieses Wirken is Spiel: das Verbinden und Lösen und Neuverbinden und Wiederauflösen von Bildern in Akten der Einbildung.’

Originality is a poetic force that shapes the world by shaping the words. Menke considers this force to be opposed to capacity, in the same sense that ‘expressive’ language is opposed to ‘representational’ language: one is creative and the other passive.

Capacity makes us subjects who successfully take part in social practices, insofar as they reproduce their general form. In the play of *forces*, we are pre- and over-subjective agents who are no subjects; active, without consciousness; inventive, without aim.¹⁰ (Menke 2013, 13)

If the play of forces is creative, it also creates the agent. The poet is not subject to language, she exists even before this first determination. In poetics, the unconscious always plays a role, not in the sense that the originality or genius of the poet lies within what Freud calls the unconscious, but because ‘the world of which we can become conscious is only,’ as Nietzsche argues, ‘a surface- and sign-world, a world that is made common and meaner.’ (GS 354) The poet’s play with the unconscious is therefore a broadening of the scope of language and hence an expansion of the world.

¹⁰ ‘*Vermögen* machen uns zu Subjekten, die erfolgreich an sozialen Praktiken teilnehmen können, indem sie deren allgemeine Form reproduzieren. Im Spiel der *Kräfte* sind wir vor- und übersubjektiv—Agenten, die keine Subjekte sind; aktiv, ohne Selbstbewusstsein; erfinderisch, ohne Zweck.’

3. The Force(s) of Poetry

We have seen that Nietzsche's views of language bring force back into poetic language, and that Menke's conception of art brings to the fore the idea that art is a play of creative and destructive forces. In this play, the poet is a pre- and over-subjective agent who does not operate on the world of consciousness, but on that of the preconscious. This notion of 'subject' is at the heart of Meschonnic's and Kristeva's conceptions of poetry and both of them reveal the importance of the transformative force(s) of poetry: transformation of language, of the subject, of society.

Poetry does not leave the subject (as reader or writer) unchanged as she undergoes a transformative process due to a transformation of language. As Meschonnic clearly states: 'there is a poem only if a form of life transforms a form of language and if reciprocally a form of language transforms a form of life.'¹¹ (Meschonnic 2006, 292) This double transformation of a form of life and a form of language—both being intimately related to one another—is precisely where the force of poetry operates. Because of this transformation of her form of life, the reader or writer cannot maintain the same attitude within and towards her surrounding world. In taking poetry seriously (unlike Austin's rejection of poetic utterances in the realm of the 'non-serious'), she must accept this

¹¹ 'il y a un poème seulement si une forme de vie transforme une forme de langage et si réciproquement une forme de langage transforme une forme de vie.'

transformation of her form of life.

Against the views which argue that poetry is remote from the everyday politicised world—and hence remote from ordinary life—Meschonnic considers poetry and life to be intimately bound to one another. The poem must therefore not be understood in terms of work, i.e. in an essentialist way, but in terms of activity. The poem as a work of art is a working at changing the world. Against the idea that poems have a truth, Meschonnic argues that they have an activity, an effect, a force. Thinking about poetry is not something which concerns only small details of our lives. Quite to the contrary according to Meschonnic as ‘to think the poem, one must rethink the whole of language, and the whole relation between language, art, ethics, and politics.’¹² (Meschonnic 2006, 256) Insofar as poetry transform our form of language and our form of life, it has an ethical and political impact. For Meschonnic, thinking poetry requires rethinking language and, through this reconceptualisation of language (from a representational to an expressive framework, as we have seen), rethinking our being in the world. If our ways of being in the world are dependent on our language, i.e. if our form of life is dependent on our form of language, and if a conception of language must account for poetry—because one can hardly argue that poetry is not related to language—we must modify our conceptions of language which fail to account for poetry and by changing

¹² ‘C’est pourquoi, pour penser la poésie, le poème, il y a à repenser tout le langage, et tout le rapport entre le langage, l’art, l’éthique et le politique.’

those, change our ways of being in the world. It is in this sense that poetry has political, ethical, and foremost existential dimensions.

In a different way, Kristeva argues for something similar. According to her, there is a revolution of poetic language, i.e. poetic language affects our ordinary politicised world and transforms it. A revolution of poetic language is not only a *Revolution in Poetic Language* as the translator suggests: it is not only a changing in the way poetry is written at the end of the 19th century (although it is an important aspect of Kristeva's book), but it is also a revolution from poetic language. Poetry affects language in such ways that our conceptions of language—and thereby our conceptions of the world—cannot remain unchanged.

In order to conceptualise what is at play in poetry, Kristeva elaborates the notion of practice and, as we have seen with Meschonnic, a poem is not a work but a working, an activity, a practice: 'The text thereby attains its essential dimension: it is a *practice* calling into question (symbolic and social) *finitudes* by proposing *new signifying devices*.' (Kristeva 1984, 210) The notion of text that Kristeva substitutes to that of poem broadens the scope of what poetry is and can do. Shifting from poem to text undercuts all formal definitions of poetry and moves towards the notion of practice. This practice is, according to Kristeva, a critical one as it questions finitudes, i.e. established symbolic and social aspects. This criticism is however only one side of the practice as, following Nietzsche's idea that we can destroy only as creators, the criticism of finitudes occurs only through the 'proposing [of]

new signifying devices.' The text therefore becomes a signifying practice in which the subject comes to living language in a creative way. It is in this sense that poetry is a revolutionary force: it proposes new signifying practices which replace the old ways of thinking.

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