

## LYRIC

John Brenkman

**Abstract:** *Unlike the obvious fact of poetry's close connection to emotion, the nature of the connection is a problem that criticism and theory approach from various, often incompatible angles. Where is the feeling in poetry located? The poet, the reader, or the poem? Affect and discourse are inseparable in Aristotle's rhetoric, Kant's aesthetics, and Heidegger's poetics. For Hegel, lyric subjectivity is concrete insofar as it is fictive; for T. S. Eliot, experience and emotion are realized poetically insofar as they separate from the poet's actual experiences and emotions. Gilles Deleuze and Susanne K. Langer develop aesthetic theories founded on the premise that aisthesis belongs to the artwork or poem not to the creator or recipient. By contrast, G. Gabrielle Starr and Stanley Fish lodge affect in the reception of artwork or poem, Starr via neuroscience and Fish through affective stylistics. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht argues that a collective feeling—atmosphere—undergirds the poet's expression of individual feeling. These various theoretical approaches are illustrated, and tested, with reference to poems by Shakespeare, Milton, Elizabeth Bishop, and W.S. Merwin.*

Lyric and emotion—what could be more obviously connected? That's just the problem, for while the fact of connection is obvious, its nature is not. My task here, as I see it, is to point out some of the ways that criticism and theory attempt to comprehend poetry's particular power to convey, evoke, disclose, express, or name affects—recognizing that each of those verbs can imply a radically distinct perspective on the question. As a result, I will maintain a certain methodological agnosticism toward the plurality of perspectives. Nevertheless, my own perspective on some basic questions inflects my account, so let me summarize salient features of my view at the outset.

In their strong form, three of the theses I develop in *Mood and Trope* extend the implications, nearly to the breaking-point perhaps, of pivotal ideas in Aristotle, Kant, and Heidegger.

Aristotle's *Art of Rhetoric* establishes such an intimate relation between rhetoric and the emotions that not only are the modes of persuasion intrinsically linked to the orator's capacity to arouse or dampen particular emotions but also, beyond this explicit argument, the emotions Aristotle enumerates are inseparable from the social and discursive fabric in which those modes of persuasion themselves are embedded. The socio-discursive conditions of rhetoric at the same time condition the emotions. Rhetoric and emotion are co-emergent and interdependent.

Two essential claims in Kant's *Critique of Judgment* are that the experience *this is beautiful* entails the claim that others find it beautiful and, on the other hand, that there is no standard

or principle that determines the beautiful or could compel someone else to have the same experience and make the same claim. The urge to persuade is part and parcel of the feeling *this is beautiful*—that is, the affect contains within itself the tacit appeal to others—even as that appeal is ungrounded in any preexisting rule or objective standard. It is thus that from Kant we glimpse the nature and practice of modern criticism.

From Heidegger's *Being and Time* I derive the thesis that affect in poetry lies not in what is said *about* emotion, feeling, passion, and so on, but in the *saying* and the *way of saying*. Refusing to grant a primary or foundational role to the affective, the cognitive, or the linguistic aspect of human existence, Heidegger argues for the "equiprimordiality" of mood, understanding, and speech (*Rede*). They affect one another but none precedes or masters the others. We are always in a mood; it is at once within and without, since it is the vibration of being-in-the-world, the attunement of "being-in"; as concern, worry, attention, it reaches toward understanding, and always latent in understanding is the potential for being articulated. Heidegger uses a cluster of nearly interchangeable terms in referring to emotion as a fundamental aspect of human existence, principally state-of-mind (*Befindlichkeit*) and attunement (*Gestimmtsein*) in addition to mood (*Stimmung*). The link of the poetic and the affective is asserted as follows:

Being-in and its state-of-mind are made known in discourse and indicated in language by intonation, modulation, the tempo of talk, 'the way of speaking.' In 'poetical' discourse, the communication of the existential possibilities of one's state-of-mind can become an aim in itself, and this amounts to a disclosing of existence.

(205; H 162)

The poem is autotelic not in a formalistic sense but in being the fullest exploration and exploitation, in and for itself, of the capacity of language to disclose states of mind.

Affect is indissociable from language and discursive practices in all three of these problematics: emotion and the rhetorical techniques of persuasion in Aristotle; feeling and the claim to agreement in Kant's aesthetics; and state-of-mind, attunement, or mood and the specifically poetic act of communication in Heidegger. All of which brings to the fore another feature of poetry, namely, that poems are at once poetic, rhetorical, and aesthetic. Yet the distinct fields of inquiry of poetics, rhetoric, and aesthetics cannot be unified or synthesized. Poetry exceeds all the disciplines that set out to understand it. And the question of understanding brings out yet another mode of inquiry: interpretation. Hermeneutics, then, comprises a fourth set of procedures interacting with poetics, rhetoric, and aesthetics without completely meshing with them. The fact that poetry mobilizes and compels four ultimately incommensurate modes of inquiry affirms its specificity, irreducibility, and inexhaustibility within the totality of human undertakings. By the same token, it provides a caveat to critics and theorists. The more refined or systematized the approach the more sharply it will bring into focus particular dimensions of the poetry and the more unaware it will be of what it does not bring into focus. The undeniable but elusive connection of poetry and emotion will vary within the intrinsic plurality of criticism itself.

...

The first problem in thinking about the connection of poetry and affect concerns where precisely is feeling located. In the reader, the poet, the poem? And what would it mean to locate affect in the poem rather than the poet or reader? When engrossed in the performance of a Shakespearean tragedy, our feelings are aroused to ever greater intensity by, say, Lear's soliloquy on the heath. And yet neither we nor the actor is feeling what Lear feels. The raging exiled and abandoned king's unique and revealing emotions are at once tangible and virtual. What has recently been

called affect theory faces just this paradox of the tangible and the virtual, the felt and the imagined, when it comes to literary works. Even though the dramatic soliloquy is not an adequate model for lyric, the emotion expressed or embodied by a poem is likewise at once tangible and virtual. Poetry is the most precise possible way of conveying an emotion, and yet that emotion is not the reader's, nor even the poet's. It belongs to the poem alone.

This paradox has often been expressed negatively, as when T. S. Eliot rebuts the notion that poets are motivated by a need to communicate their experience:

The "experience" in question may be the result of a fusion of feelings so numerous, and ultimately so obscure in their origins, that even if there be communication of them, the poet may hardly be aware of what he is communicating, and what is there to be communicated was not in existence before the poem was completed.

(131)

Hegel advances a positive rather than negative formulation by saying that "the poet . . . to be the center which holds the whole lyric work of art together" must grasp some fragment from the stream of actual experiences, impressions, feelings, thoughts, and so on, and "identify *himself* with this particularization of himself as with himself, so that in it he feels and envisions *himself*" (1133). One could chalk up the difference as stemming from Hegel's benchmark of romanticism and Eliot's of modernism. More significant, though, is the way their formulations resonate with one another despite not quite jelling. For Hegel, the lyric *I* attains its concreteness only via the poet's complete identification, in the composition of the poem, with a transitory "situation" or "*specific mood*." For Eliot, the poem evokes experiences and clusters of feeling that do not exist as such before the poem's composition is achieved. Lyric subjectivity in Hegel is concrete insofar as it is fictive, and for Eliot experience and emotion are realized poetically insofar as they separate from the poet's actual experiences and emotions.

The question is taken up afresh by Gilles Deleuze in *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation* and in *What Is Philosophy?*, co-authored with Félix Guattari. Deleuze asserts that art is a form of thinking, just as much as philosophy or science; what distinguishes it from those forms of thought is that it thinks via percepts-and-affects, which are to be distinguished from perceptions and feelings in everyday life. He is looking to understand the artwork as "*a bloc of sensations, that is to say, a compound of percepts and affects*. . . . Sensations, percepts, and affects are *beings* whose validity lies in themselves and exceeds any lived [experience]." They "are independent of a state of those who experience them" (*Philosophy*, 164). What is this enigmatic difference between the artwork's percepts-and-affects and lived experiences, perceptions, and feelings? A benchmark for Deleuze is Cézanne's practice of using a large palette and never mixing colors but juxtaposing or "modulating" them on the canvas:

sensation . . . is in the body; even the body of an apple. . . . Sensation is what is painted. What is painted on the canvas is the body, not insofar as it is represented as an object, but insofar as it is experienced as sustaining *this* sensation.

(Bacon, 32)

This idea combines with a certain sense of the artwork's autonomy:

The artist creates blocs of percepts and affects, but the only law of creation is that the compound must stand up on its own. The artist's greatest difficulty is to make it *stand up on its own (tenir debout tout seul)*.

(*Philosophy*, 164)



The bloc of percepts-and-affects is a being insofar as it constitutes the artwork itself, and an artwork endures because as a bloc of percepts-and-affects it stands up on its own.

From the hermeneutical perspective, which Deleuze largely eschews, an artwork endures insofar as it persists through varying receptions and interpretations across decades and centuries. The artwork is a temporal object in the strong sense that it exists in time. It persists by varying. Its significance is not fixed but is constituted anew throughout the history of its reception, and yet the bloc of percepts-and-affects confronts every reception, every interpretation, as at once invitation and obstacle to understanding. The artwork's resistance to understanding assures its endurance. What is conventionally called the artwork's permanence is, rather, its impermeability.

While preparing this chapter, I finally cracked open a book that has accusingly stared out at me from the bookshelf for three decades or more, its title alone commanding my attention and mocking my neglect. *Feeling and Form* is Susanne K. Langer's major contribution to aesthetic theory. Published in 1953 and sufficiently overlooked that its author has yet to make it into the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, the work takes on, I discovered, just this problematic of the difference between lived experiences, feelings, and thoughts and those embodied in artworks. "Here we are supposed, then, to encounter as an actual content of the world a feeling that is not being felt. No subject is expressing it; it is just objectively there" (20). Langer works with three linked concepts: vital import, symbolic form (borrowed from Ernst Cassirer), and significant form (borrowed from the Bloomsbury art critic Clive Bell). Taking music as her model, she poses the need to bridge vitalism and hermeneutics. "Music has *import*, and this import is the pattern of sentience—the pattern of life itself, as it is felt and directly known. Let us therefore call the significance of music its 'vital import' instead of 'meaning'" (31–32). Vital import is music's mode of significant form:

its significance is that of a symbol, a highly articulated sensuous object, which by virtue of its dynamic structure can express the forms of vital experience which language is peculiarly unfit to convey. Feeling, life, motion and emotion constitute its import.

(32)

The stake of Langer's starting-point in music is to wrest the term "symbol" from a linguistic model and establish a fundamentally aesthetic relation between the symbol and the symbolized: "The function of music is not the stimulation of feeling, but expression of it; and furthermore, not the symptomatic expression of feelings that beset the composer but *a symbolic expression of the forms of sentience* as he understands them" (28, my italics).

Modifying Langer's modification of Bell's concept, I construe artistic form as significant form in the sense that an artwork's form provokes an act of understanding, jolts us into a new or distinct perspective on the world, opens a question about existence, even, as Rilke testifies in "Archaic Torso of Apollo," confronts us at rare moments with *You must change your life*. The relevant contrast is with form, pattern, or shape in general. Design, for example, requires a wealth of imaginative and artistic creativity to give a distinctive shape and feel to the objects produced and yet differs from significant form, for while the decorative or usable object adduces aesthetic pleasure, it does not effect the existential jolt that inaugurates questioning and interpretation. Form in the sense of music's patterns of articulated sound is the hinge between vitalism and hermeneutics, that is, between life and significance, sentience and understanding, sense and sense.

Like Deleuze, Langer recognizes that the affects materialized in the artwork do not belong to the subjective experience of creator or recipient, and again like Deleuze, she takes a vitalistic



approach to the materials and processes at work in the artwork. Both philosophers bring the double problematic of materiality and vitality to bear on aesthetic theory. Like painting for Deleuze, Langer's benchmark of music challenges literary theory to understand the aesthetic in relation to artistic forms that language is not a part of in order to understand the aesthetic dimension of poetry. Northrop Frye, it is worth noting, defines the inner dynamic of the lyric as a genre in *Anatomy of Criticism* in its tendency to reach toward the boundary where it would become music or the one where it would congeal into image. It is as though the most condensed and fullest exploration of linguistic possibility at the same time probes language's dissolution.

When Langer turns to literature, the phenomenology of reading sets the terms. With reference to Blake's "Tyger, tyger, burning bright," she asserts that "the very first words of the poem effect the break with the reader's actual environment" (214). She produces a cascade of terms to designate poetry as appearance in relation to reality. The poem is the "semblance of experienced events," "illusion of life," or "virtual order of experiences" (214); the "semblance of life" (217), "semblance of reasoning" (219), "symbol of feeling" (230), or "virtual experience of belief" (243). The problem with these richly suggestive formulations is that they implicitly render the first term—semblance, appearance, symbol, image, illusion—secondary to the second: feeling, reasoning, experience, reality, life. And they do not account for the dynamic relation between the two sides of the *of*. What gets obscured in the idea of the "illusion of life" is the fact that the illusion itself becomes part of life! In Niklas Luhmann's terms, the artwork differentiates itself from reality and, in thus differentiating itself, becomes a part of reality. "The function of art concerns the meaning of this split" (142)—a meaning that, in my view, is specific to every work and every artist. The limitless ways in which the split occurs and its meaning unfolds open the very space in which criticism operates. The "break with the reader's environment" needs to be seen at once as separating the lyric from reality and, during the vibrant interval of reading, drawing the lyric into the reader's reality.

...

The difficulty of addressing this problematic emerges in those theoretical projects which foreground the reader's experience. Rhetoric and aesthetics intend to do just that. The question of affect rotates from the artwork's percepts-and-affects to the recipients' perceptual and affective experience. Let's consider two radically distinct attempts to account for how the recipient is affected by the literary or artistic work: Stanley Fish's classic essay "Literature in the Reader," which proposes a theory and method of "affective stylistics" designed to comprehend a text's rhetoric as an action performed on the reader, albeit "an ideal or idealized reader" (145); and G. Gabrielle Starr's *Feeling Beauty*, in which she seeks to shed light on aesthetic experience via neuroscience by examining the brain activity of empirical subjects engaged in looking at artworks under laboratory conditions.

Starr doubled her training in literary studies with extensive formal study of neuroscience and then collaborated with neuroscientists to design and conduct a series of experiments to determine the sites and nature of the brain activity involved in responding to visual artworks. She supports the view that the mind is capable of producing *imagery* in the sense of "imagined sensory experience" that can be said to "mime perceptual experience" (77), be it visual, auditory, olfactory, haptic, gustatory, or of motion. Research in neuroscience purports to show that areas of the brain engaged in sensations and perceptions of actual objects are also active in "imagined" sensations and perceptions. Starr points to the brain's "default mode network . . . a set of interconnected brain areas that are generally active in periods of waking rest but whose activity generally decreases with external stimulation" (23). The experiments she conducted indicated that these areas remained active even as the subjects' attention was drawn to actual

visual images. "With intensely powerful aesthetic experience, parts of the default mode network are, surprisingly, engaged" (23). Neither Langer nor Luhmann would be surprised, since for them the artwork or poem is immediately grasped in its difference from reality. Kant would not be surprised because the objects and phenomena that throw one into a *disinterested* aesthetic attitude set themselves apart from objects of desire or use (or danger or threat). Starr offers a further angle, concluding that the scientific research "indicates that the default mode network is important to aesthetic experience in its ability to mediate the interconnectivity of the internal and external worlds, an interconnectivity lit up by pleasures and rewards" (63). This accords with the, I assume, widely shared experience that the concentrated attentiveness to an artwork or reading of a poem is accompanied by all manner of free associations, personal memories, fleeting feelings, thought fragments, fantasies, and images or phrases from other works; there is a vibrant, scarcely perceptible oscillation between "inside and outside."

What to make of this oscillation? The question animates, or roils, Kant's thinking, as he struggles against his own subject-object, outer reality-inner reality distinctions in saying that in aesthetic judgment the beautiful is wrongly attributed to the object whereas it belongs solely to the subject—and yet could not arise without the object. Here is another way of marking the space in which the art of criticism operates, where one's inner responses *to* the work must sort themselves out into an account *of* the work and an appeal for others' agreement. This role of criticism gets eclipsed in Starr's theorizations. Ironically so, since it is her commentaries on Ovid, Keats, and Elizabeth Bishop, far more than the neuroscience experiments, that drive her theoretical claims about the aesthetic. In effect the poetry criticism determines the postulated connections between the aesthetic and the neural.

Bishop's "At the Fishhouses" turns around the acquaintance with an "old man" who works at the wharf cleaning fish, repairing nets, and unloading the catch of incoming boats:<sup>1</sup>

The old man accepts a Lucky Strike.  
He was a friend of my grandfather.  
We talk of the decline in the population  
and of codfish and herring  
while he waits for a herring boat to come in?

Around this pivotal encounter Bishop weaves vivid descriptions of the fishhouse and environs; of frequent visits that sometimes include singing "Baptist hymns" to a seal "interested in music;/ like me a believer in total immersion"; and of the sea that laps at the wharf and stirs imaginings and thoughts beyond sensory immediacy. In the poem's final lines, as Starr says, "the sense-strewn landscape of the poem melds onto a world of words, words that gesture toward what we could not ever properly sense" (96):

If you tasted it, it would first taste bitter,  
then briny, then surely burn your tongue.  
It is like we imagine knowledge to be:  
dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free,  
drawn from the cold hard mouth  
of the world, derived from the rocky breasts  
forever, flowing and drawn, and since  
our knowledge is historical, flowing, and flown.

Starr homes in on the "layers of sensory imagery, from sight (dark) to taste (salt), touch (cold), and motion and sound (with poetry itself), matter" (97), and shows that all those senses and the

words themselves occur across the entire poem. Stressing the closing lines' "drawn . . . forever, flowing and drawn, . . . flowing and flown," Starr concludes that this

imagery of motion . . . unites the sensory modes together, from audition to vision, taste, and touch. Motion can thus emerge not just as denoted or described but as felt, making the lawful rhythm of the poem in mind, or hand, or tongue.

(97)

As in Langer's conception of form and feeling, the poem's rhythmed movements, from the metrical and sonorous to the syntactical and semantic, are *felt*. Starr goes further (my italics): "The pleasures of interconnection are organized around *imagined movement* and are distributed in a variety of images that call on the broad variety of modes through which *imagery may come to life*" (97). But can it be presupposed that in the flow of reading the sense of "it would first taste bitter," "small iridescent flies," and "your wrist would ache" gives rise to an imitative sensing of a bitter taste, fly iridescence, and an aching wrist?

The term *imagery* in the neuroscientific idiom is not just overdetermined but overburdened; there is poetic imagery (a term used with more ease than precision); there are poetry's "sensory images" (words that designate tastes, sights, smells, touch, and movement); there is the supposed "imagined sensory experience" of mental imagery (using the metaphor of "image" to designate even proprioception or silent audition); and there is the brain scan's imagery that furnishes the evidence of the locale and intensity of cerebral activity (an "image" only because the fMRI, in registering quantities and intensities of blood flow, mechanically represents them in color-coded visuals). The mixing of these loosely defined kinds of "imagery" lends an unearned aura of knowable connection, analogy, mirroring, between brain and experience, the neural and the aesthetic. Starr herself obliquely acknowledges the problem, I believe, in pointing out that at the end of Bishop's poem the sensory imagery "melds onto a world of words, words that gesture toward what we could not ever properly sense" (96). Starr's intent is to align the poem with the neuroscientific concept of "sensory competition" (114), the perpetually fluctuating prominence of one sense over others. What stands out, though, is her notion of "semantic-sensory metaphor" (78) and of "the *valenced relations* between what we experience—sensations and images, yes, but also ideas and events" (117). The sensory and the semantic are in fact locked together in the poem's language.

In contrast to Starr, Fish looks to poetry's rhetorical rather than aesthetic dimension in his innovative contribution to reception criticism. He takes the term "affective" in affective stylistics in an expansive sense. In the context of debates going back to I. A. Richards, he insists that the affective in literary response cannot be restricted to the "emotive":

in the category of response I include . . . all the precise mental operations involved in reading, including the formulation of complete thoughts, the performing (and regretting) of acts of judgment, the following and making of logical sequences; and . . . my insistence on the cumulative pressures of the reading experience puts restrictions on the possible responses to a word or a phrase.

(140)

Style and rhetoric according to Fish are crafted into a strategy designed to adduce a specific response, the response of the putatively ideal reader. He calls this reader a "construct," "neither an abstraction, nor any actual living reader, but a hybrid—a real reader (me) who does everything in his power to make himself informed" (145) in the sense of acquiring



a wide range of linguistic, cultural, historical, and literary competences. While the aim is to recognize the reader's "actively mediating presence" (123), the resulting method does something quite different. The postulated ideal reader is passive rather than active. As is clear in Fish's sample analyses, the ideal reader is the optimally manipulated reader. The syntactical and figurative aspects of the text—its style—are viewed as strategies to *affect* the reader in a particular way, to *effect* a particular response. There is indeed an active mediator nevertheless. Namely, the theorist-critic who creates the ideal reader. In the rhetoric of Fish's critical writing, the actual critic—"the real reader (me)"—is self-effacing, or self-disguising, through the claims made about the text's stylistic strategies as they affect and effect the ideal reader. The actual plurality of possible readings is casually flicked aside; as opposed to a criticism that tacitly acknowledges, via the "enlarged mentality" (Kant), others' perspectives and plausible responses and interpretations in arguing for one's own. Fish's account ends up more objectivating than the view of the New Critics, his principal antagonists, for whom the text is an object, verbal icon, or well-wrought urn.

All critical methods can be said to stylize the critic's response to the work, and Fish's are so elegant and consistent that they bring immense insight to an essential aspect of poetry and, by the same token, are utterly blind to many other essential aspects. Let's dare to locate the blindness and the insight on a terrain where Fish enjoys unrivaled critical acuity. He offers this line from *Paradise Lost* (I, 335): "Nor did they not perceive the evil plight," and proceeds with a word-by-word, super slo-mo analysis to show how affective stylistics is supposed to work. *Nor did they*, he claims, creates the expectation of a verb, which is thwarted by

the intrusive (because unexpected) "not." In effect what the reader *does*, or is forced to do, at this point, is ask a question—did they or didn't they?—and in search of an answer he either rereads—in which case he simply repeats the sequence of mental operations—or goes forward—in which case he finds the anticipated verb, but in either case the syntactical uncertainty remains unresolved.

(125–26)

Fish's ideal reader is whipsawed word-by-word, syntactical unit-by-unit, in the hope, apparently unfulfilled in this case, of making sense of the utterance. But is that how anyone reads? The double negative is not all that ambiguous in context. The preceding fiftysome lines have the staggered Satan stand at the shore of the burning lake where his vast army of angelic rebels lie "intrans't," "Abject and lost," and "Under amazement of thir hideous change." He addresses them to arouse them, calling "so loud that, that all the hollow Deep/Of Hell resounded." Following the last line of his ensuing speech (I, 315–30) comes the passage describing the fallen angels' reaction:

Awake, arise, or be for ever fall'n.  
They heard, and were abasht, and up they sprung  
Upon the wing; as when men wont to watch  
On duty, sleeping found by whom they dread,  
Rouse and bestir themselves ere well awake.  
Nor did they not perceive the evil plight  
In which they were, or the fierce pains not feel;  
Yet to thir General's Voice they soon obey'd  
Innumerable.

(I, 330–38)

The truncated line in question—"Nor did they not perceive the evil plight . . ."—is prepared by the several descriptions of the defeated angels' barely conscious state of abjection. Like negligent sentries asleep on duty and suddenly coming-to "ere well awake," they take stock of their situation. Milton's double negatives are an emphatic way of saying *and they did not fail to see their plight and feel their pain*. Despite their half-awake state they see and feel the waking reality. And "Yet," despite this realization and suffering, "to thir General's Voice they soon obeyed/Innumerable." The passage's affective dimension in the sense of the pathos and psychological complexity of the rebels' predicament is lost in simply concluding that the double negative's "syntactical uncertainty remains unresolved."

Nothing of course is simply simple in Fish's reading of Milton. The sample sentence is a fragment pulled from his earlier *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in "Paradise Lost."* The supposed undecidability of the double negative is there given a precise significance.

Milton leads the reader to understand how the alternatives he hovers between are equally true. [The fallen angels] do perceive the fire, the pain, the gloom, but they are blind to the moral meaning of their situation, that is to their evil plight.

The supposed syntactico-semantic uncertainty (*they did/they did not*) is here neatly divided into physical recognition and moral misrecognition. They know they have fallen but not that they are fallen. The poem's rhetoric is in the service of a harsh authorial glare: "Milton will not allow Satan even a small success. His forces are only half awake ('ere well awake')" (99). Fish sees his method as overcoming the schism within Milton studies at the time between the Blakean and the doctrinal interpreters.

*Paradise Lost* is about how its readers came to be the way they are; its method . . . is to provoke in its readers wayward, fallen responses which are then corrected by one of several authoritative voices (the narrator, God, Raphael, Michael, the Son). In this way, I argued, the reader is brought to a better understanding of his sinful nature and is encouraged to participate in his own reformation.

(x)

The ideal-reader construct purports to understand the rhetorical effectiveness of poetic style, but isn't the rhetorical domain of persuasion precisely that where responses are possible not necessary, contingent not mandated?

...

The two prongs of rhetoric—mode of address and figures of speech—are essential to poetry. *Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?* launches an incipient metaphor, simile, or conceit and a mode of address promising a compliment, flattery, a declaration of admiration or adoration, seduction: *Thou art more lovely and more temperate*. But when the couplet arrives, figure and address shift: "So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,/ So long lives this, and this gives life to thee." To paraphrase: *Sorry, my love, you're going to age and decline, lose your youth and beauty, die, and, unlike the summer, never return—except in my song, which will endure and immortalize its author's name while yours and you are forgotten*. As with God's creation and the tailor's trousers in Beckett, *Look at your beauty, and look at MY POEM!* My heretical paraphrases are not inaccurate, but they are also decidedly wrong. Restated as things someone who writes poetry might actually say to a lover, they are arrogant and spiteful. In the poem, by contrast, the seductive playfulness and ironic bite interlace in a complex rhetorical unity

that discloses the clashing temporalities of cyclical seasons, transitory beauty and love, human mortality, and poetry's power to endure. While there are crueller moments throughout Shakespeare's scattered rimes, the hint of cruelty here—or tinge of resentment in the older lover's very attraction to the beloved's youthful beauty—is double-edged, evoking the impermanence not only of the beloved's beauty and youth but also of the love that motivates the poet's utterance itself. The cruelty is nested in the unspoken melancholy, the hubris in the implied expectation of loss. The couplet's trope, according to which the poem celebrates beauty, youth, and love by triumphantly outliving them, trammels up the poet and his beloved alike in the seine of time and mortality. All the darker shadings are the inner lining of the overtly expressed admiration and passion, which is what gives Shakespeare's sonnets the psychosexual complexity they introduced into the Petrarchan tradition, where cruelty, for example, is attributed to the beloved and only figuratively for her withholding the pleasure that her beauty and charms inspire the poet to beseech her to grant.

That the act of saying and way of saying are the site of affect in poetry can be tested by looking at how another poet takes up the same constellation of themes—the seasons' cycles, love's transitoriness, human mortality, and poetry's aspiration to endure—and conveys an altogether different mood and feeling. In W. S. Merwin's *The Pupil* (2001) several poems evoke a return visit to the stone house he restored and lived in for many years perched above the Dordogne river valley in southwestern France. "The Veil of May" casts *a summer's day* not as a conceit for beauty and youth but as a veil of leaves; the forest of ash, walnut, hawthorne, and oak breaks out in summertime foliage, and "in a moment the river has/disappeared down in the valley":<sup>2</sup>

it will not be seen again now  
a while from this place on the ridge  
but over it the summer will  
flow and not seem to be moving

The latent paradoxes—the river's flow is hidden under the flow of unmoving summer—anticipate the imbrications of natural and human time in "The Night Plums,"<sup>3</sup> where return is an act of recovery—"I saw them again/the sloes on the terrace"—but at the same time an encounter with the unrecoverable: "When almost all whom I had known there/in other days had gone." Whether he stands in the predawn from a sleepless night or an early rising is left unsaid; human time, unlike that of the flowering shrubs, is implacably linear not cyclical: "After a season of hard cold and the turning/of the night and of the year and of years." The poem's power lies in being neither affirmation of renewal nor lamentation. The passage of time is sustained in memory and also sustains memory and the very possibility of return. Grasped through this human time the season is felt not as cycle but as the paradoxical simultaneity of birth (the "white blossoms" that "open,/in their own hour naked and luminous") and a time older than time in the blossoms' "ancient fragrance." It is only in the sharpened attitude toward his own mortality, and as his own longevity measures what has passed, that the blossoms' transitory and ephemeral scent puts him in contact with the vast expanse of nonhuman time. The bloc of percepts-and-affects in these few lines exceeds any single emotional label, no less complex than the emotional knot of resentment, melancholy, hubris, and expectation in Shakespeare's sonnet.

Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, moved by recollections of his earliest acquaintance with Sonnet 18, devotes an essay to Shakespeare's sonnets in *Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung*. Read four centuries after they were written, the sonnets convey a sense of a world that is radically distinct from our own. Gumbrecht calls this sense the *atmosphere* embodied in the poems.



As a matter of principle, texts and artifacts soak up the atmosphere of their times. In both aesthetic and historical terms, however, everything depends on the degree to which texts absorb them and the intensity with which acts of reading and reciting make these moods present again.

(40)

As a critic, Gumbrecht moves adeptly between the vitalist and the hermeneutic dimensions of literary experience. For he teases out the atmosphere of the sonnets by identifying the "levels of significance" by which "separate phenomenal spheres," variously emphasized "like different instruments in an orchestra," body forth the "climates and moods" specific to Shakespeare's world. There are four such layers in his interpretation. The *universe and stars*: "But from thine eyes my knowledge I derive,/ And, constant stars, in them I read . . ."; "For nothing this wide universe I call,/ Save thou, my rose; in it thou art my all." *Seasons, weather*: "So are you to my thoughts as food to life,/ Or as sweet seasoned showers are to the ground"; "That time of year thou mayst in me behold/ When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang/ Upon those boughs which shake against the cold." *Space, distance, proximity*: "Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore,/ So do minutes hasten to their end"; "For nimble thought can jump both sea and land/ As soon as think the place where he would be." *Physical presence of others*: "That use is not forbidden usury/ Which happies those that pay the willing loan"; "How can my Muse want subject to invent/ While thou dost breathe, that pour'st into my verse./ Thine own sweet argument . . .?" The examples are Gumbrecht's, taken from Sonnets 14, 109, 75, 73, 60, 44, 6, 38, respectively. Each of his interpretive categories marks one of the "palpable register[s] of world, atmosphere and mood" (44) operating and woven together in the sonnets. He leaves tacit the orchestration discernable in Sonnet 18: "the darling buds of May," "the eye of heaven shines," "thy eternal summer," "Nor shall death brag thou wander'st in his shade."

Atmosphere places mood on a collective rather than individual plane. It suggests a period feeling or collective state-of-mind. Atmosphere is palpable on more intimate levels in everyday life, too, as when visiting a family or couple one feels the mood of their household, its vibe, its background tones. For Gumbrecht the set of predispositions and expressive possibilities that condition poetic utterance is an atmosphere in the sense of the historical precondition of specific feelings. It is the feeling from which feelings emerge. I put it that way because there are several such attempts among the philosophers and theorists I have discussed to understand specific emotions as arising from an underlying tonality or affective base, like the social structure of feeling in Aristotle or the base mood of *Angst* in Heidegger. Poetic affects arise from the "illusion of *life*" or "pattern of sentience," for Langer. Temperament or sensibility have been given a similar role. "Life is a train of moods like a string of beads," writes Emerson in the essay "Experience."

It depends on the mood of the man, whether he shall see the sunset or the fine poem. . . .  
The more or less depends on structure or temperament. Temperament is the iron wire on which the beads are strung.

(243-44)

In Heidegger's conception, by contrast, mood (*Stimmung*) is not subjective distortion but rather the attunement of being-in-the-world. Inconsistencies abound. Affect eludes fixed terminologies. It's why we have poetry.

### Notes

- 1 The poem is available in full at the Poetry Foundation website, [www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/52192/at-the-fishhouses](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/52192/at-the-fishhouses) (accessed 8 August 2021).
- 2 The poem is available in full at the Merwin Conservancy website, <https://merwinconservancy.org/2018/05/the-veil-of-may-by-ws-merwin/> (accessed 8 August 2021).
- 3 Available in full at The Poetry Foundation website, [www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/browse?contentId=41100](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/browse?contentId=41100) (accessed 8 August 2021).

### Works Cited

- Aristotle. *The Art of Rhetoric*. Translated by H. C. Lawson-Tancred, Penguin Books, 2004 [1991].
- Bishop, Elizabeth. *Poems, Prose, and Letters*. Edited by Robert Giroux and Lloyd Schwartz, The Library of America, 2008.
- Brenkman, John. *Mood and Trope: The Rhetoric and Poetics of Affect*. U of Chicago P, 2020.
- Deleuze, Gilles. *Frances Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*. Translated by Daniel W. Smith, U of Minnesota P, 2003.
- , and Félix Guattari. *What Is Philosophy?* Translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell, Columbia UP, 1994.
- Eliot, T. S. *On Poetry and Poets*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009 [1957].
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Essays: First and Second Series*. Vintage Books/The Library of America, 1990.
- Fish, Stanley. "Literature in the Reader: Affective Stylistics." *New Literary History*, vol. 2, 1970, pp. 123–162.
- . *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in "Paradise Lost."* 2nd ed., Harvard UP, 1997.
- Frye, Northrop. *Anatomy of Criticism*. Princeton UP, 2000 [1957].
- Gumbrecht, Hans Ulrich. *Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung: On a Hidden Potential of Literature*. Translated by Erik Butler, Stanford UP, 2012.
- Hegel, G. W. F. *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*. Translated by T. M. Knox, Oxford UP, 1974.
- Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. Translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, Harper & Row, 1962.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Edited by Paul Guyer, translated by Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews, Cambridge UP, 2000.
- Langer, Susanne K. *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art*. Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953.
- Luhmann, Niklas. *Art as Social System*. Translated by Eva M. Knodt, Stanford UP, 2000.
- Merwin, W. S. *The Pupil*. Alfred A. Knopf, 2001.
- Milton, John. *Complete Poems and Major Prose*. Edited by Merritt Y. Hughes, Bobbs-Merrill, 1957.
- Shakespeare, William. *The Sonnets*. Edited by G. Blakemore Evans, Cambridge UP, 1996.
- Starr, G. Gabrielle. *Feeling Beauty: The Neuroscience of Aesthetic Experience*. MIT Press, 2013.

Abstr  
partic:  
world:  
as mo  
human  
artifa  
same  
affect  
as a c  
(impli  
with t  
event  
and s  
story

Prose  
think  
seen  
to en  
provi  
tents  
featu  
deliv  
and t

Wh  
they  
spec  
hum

DOI

THE ROUTLEDGE  
COMPANION TO LITERATURE  
AND EMOTION

*Edited by Patrick Colm Hogan,  
Bradley J. Irish and Lalita Pandit Hogan*

 Routledge  
Taylor & Francis Group  
LONDON AND NEW YORK

2022