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Beyond Autonomy and Activism. ‘Poetic Understanding’ as a ground for political community.

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Abstract: This paper takes the particular case of poetry to chart a route beyond the registers of the autonomist and activist dimensions of understanding aesthetic politics. I argue that poetry’s political impact lies neither in the politics of the author or the text (activist dimension), nor in its removedness *vis-à-vis* concrete political situations (autonomist dimension). Instead, a work’s political impact is located in the intersubjective dynamic between readers and poems or works of art more broadly. I propose an intersubjective pragmatist framework of interpretation, which takes the actualisation of a decolonial and anti-identitarian political plurality as the basis of poetry’s political potential. I develop the framework by bringing together Hannah Arendt’s theory of political plurality, Édouard Glissant’s concepts of ‘relation’ and ‘opacity’ and John Dewey’s pragmatist theory of aesthetic experience. At its core is the concept of ‘poetic understanding’, a transformative quality of understanding that facilitates a dynamic and contingent process of mutual transformation and constitution between reader and text. I explore the potential of such understanding as a ground for political community.

In this paper, I take the case of poetry as a particular literary form of aesthetic art to develop and substantiate an intersubjective pragmatist framework that takes the actualisation of a decolonial and anti-identitarian political plurality as the grounds for an aesthetic politics. I suggest that the political impact of poetry doesn’t lie in the politics of the author or text, nor in its removedness *vis-à-vis* certain concrete political situations. Rather, poetry’s political value

is located in the intersubjective dynamic between readers and poems. Poems as works of (literary) art have the potential to show us complex transformative ways of engaging with, and understanding of the words and distinctive worldviews of others. An intersubjective pragmatist approach can draw out the political potential of such understanding, while also pointing a way beyond the oppositional dynamics familiar to the autonomist and activist positions.

First, I identify and outline in broad strokes some key lacunae that the autonomist and activist positions share in theorising poetry's political potential (I). Subsequently, to address these lacunae, I propose an intersubjective pragmatist framework by bringing together three distinct conceptual fields: the phenomenological dimensions of Hannah Arendt's theory of political plurality, Édouard Glissant's concepts of 'relation' and 'opacity' (II) and John Dewey's pragmatist theory of aesthetic experience (III). At the core of the framework is the concept of 'poetic understanding' (IV), a transformative quality of understanding that facilitates between the reader and the text a fundamentally dynamic and contingent process of mutual transformation and constitution. Such understanding, I argue, can serve as a ground for the actualisation of a plural political community, where you and I are constituted as a 'we' in the space of interaction. I thereby examine poetry as a site of intersubjective transformation, whereby a genuine plurality of interactive relations, divested of discriminatory and hierarchising mechanics, can be actualised.

I. AUTONOMY AND ACTIVISM: LIMITS AND LACUNAE

Current understandings of the political value of poetry typically find themselves at a point of tension between two opposing theoretical tendencies: the autonomist and the activist.¹ On one hand, the autonomist position treats poetry as removed from both society (in its very being) and social forms of communication. According to those who hold the autonomist position, it is from this abiding remove that poetry can and does participate in society; does the social work of critique; makes alternative forms of communication possible; or creates community where our everyday language of communication divides, discriminates, or in some circumstances, threatens to annihilate.² On the other hand, the anti-autonomist or what we might now call the activist position takes precisely the situatedness of poetic speech in the heart of social reality and its role in engineering language, as a juncture to locate and substantiate poetry's political relevance: as a powerful affective means of political protest and activism.³

The dynamic between the two positions, however, is not one of simple opposition. Many current critical discussions on poetry's political potential – for instance, contemporary theories of the Avant-Garde, New Formalism, or New Historicism – aim for a balance between the extremes of autonomy and activism, while carrying significant overlaps in their modes of approaching

poetry.⁴ Moreover, despite their apparently antithetical drift, the two positions share, *prima facie*, several lacunae that I take as starting points if we are to begin to rethink the political dimensions of poetry today.

First, in either view, as Aukje Van Rooden argues, ‘it is not so much the phenomenon of literature as such that has social relevance, but only certain texts dealing with certain issues in a certain way’. Van Rooden thus considers ontic approaches limited since they are unable to account for the expansive role that literary practices play in an ontologically shared world.⁵ Similarly, I seek an approach that can account for poetry’s political influence as an art form, irrespective of the particularities of specific poems.

Secondly, along both the autonomist and activist dimensions, poetry is conceived as centred around a subject, with the subject being either outside politics (autonomist) or inside politics (activist). This subject-centeredness, inherent to a romanticist definition of ‘lyric’ poetry, has come to dominate the ways in which we understand poetry at large.⁶ Even those autonomist positions that seek to challenge the defining frames of the lyric have been unable to move beyond an individualist ontology when theorising poetry’s political dimension.⁷ Contrariwise, I would argue that such an approach falls short because politics is necessarily intersubjective. It is what goes on between a plurality of people.⁸ My question then is: can we begin to rethink what makes poetry political through an intersubjective approach commensurate with the intersubjective nature of the political itself?

Thirdly, nearly all key theoretical positions along the autonomy-activism spectrum frame politics in terms of opposition, be it as critiques of or protest against variegated structures of oppression, harm or injustice.⁹ But poems and works of art as widely prevailing socio-cultural phenomena do much more than critique or protest. They create aesthetic/poetic experiences.¹⁰ They are sources of pleasure, reprieve and the creative growth of individuals and communities.¹¹ It is known that poems, even as they resist and challenge the forces that undermine our personhood, can make room for ‘small moments of human sensibility’, wilful acts of feeling with the other.¹² In view of the multifaceted nature of poetry’s public life, I would argue that reading in terms of resistance or opposition is in itself an inadequate way of understanding poetry’s political potential. I thus ask, how can we conceptualise poetic political engagement in terms of forms of relation that go beyond the oppositional?

Fourthly, the modes of interpretation proffered by both the autonomist and activist positions consistently neglect the role of the situated reader who reads politically and participates in the political meaning-making process. In most interpretations along these dimensions, politics is cast as something that belongs to the poems or to the poet, and not as something that belongs equally to the act of reading, in the dynamic between readers and poems. Insofar as poetic and artistic practices are co-relationally constituted with the traditions of criticism and interpretation that surround them, networks of critical readership are important. Yet they remain neglected sites of con-

tention when it comes to thinking about what makes poetry or art political. When we speak of ‘poetic language’, we mean a recognition of, and a mode of engagement with this language as poetic; a process in which readers play key parts. Yet, understandings of the role this recognition and engagement can play in our shared political lives have remained marginal.

More importantly, I hold that neglecting the role of the reader has been accompanied by a neglect of globally-entrenched structures of racial and colonial hierarchisation that indelibly shape the ways in which poetry is politically valorised, in terms of whose and what kind of work is regarded as politically valuable and in what way.¹³ On the one hand, traditions of experimental and Avant-garde poetics constituted along the autonomist dimension have remained ‘overwhelmingly white’, marked by a persistent history of marginalising or disregarding the work of non-white and Global-South writers.¹⁴ On the other hand, in scholarship along the activist dimension, we see a risky tendency to reify identities and identitarian thinking in ways that end up placing the burden of social amelioration upon politicised minorities. If the activist dimension serves a valuable emancipatory function of giving voice to the margins of society, and of creating a poetry of ‘social conscience’, it also opens towards a veritable hermeneutic slippery-slope, whereby political meaning ultimately relies on the ‘marginal poet’ – the marginal subject who is required to do ‘politics’, while consolidating an ‘essential’ identity in and as an ‘Other’.¹⁵ Such a turn, as several critics of identitarian politics have already argued, precludes from the outset conceptions of how variegated cultural practices (and this includes poetry) might help us better understand how genuinely plural and non-identitarian solidarities can be imagined beyond the dividing lines of race, class and coloniality.¹⁶

II. TOWARDS AN INTERSUBJECTIVE FRAMEWORK

To mitigate the limitations of the autonomist and activist positions, I propose an intersubjective pragmatist framework as a mode of conceptualising poetry’s political impact. I begin with the hypothesis that in the intersubjective dynamic between poem and reader we can see the emergent conditions for transformative modalities of understanding that can serve as a ground for actualising a non-hierarchical political community. I ask how attending to the ways in which we understand poems can offer us valuable insights into how solidary practices of understanding across interpersonal and socio-political divides can be actualised. As my framework’s title suggests, its key components are: i) the intersubjective, developed by bringing together Arendt’s and Glissant’s concepts of ‘plurality’ and ‘relation’, respectively, to locate poetry’s political potential in the space of interaction between poems and readers and ii) the pragmatist, which infers poetry’s political relevance from reader-poem dynamics. In this section, I focus on the former.

Hannah Arendt, Political Plurality

A turn towards a practice of reading that centers on non-hierarchical intersubjectivity and political relation requires, first and foremost, an expanded understanding of what could productively constitute politicality for poetry. As mentioned above, a recurring limitation in both autonomist and activist positions is the reduction of politics to a scene of opposition (critique or protest). In contrast, a focus on intersubjectivity requires a conception of the political that can also illuminate forms of relation that go beyond the oppositional or antagonistic, towards an ‘associative’ mode of relation.¹⁷

Arendt’s thesis in *The Human Condition* on political plurality as the fundamental condition of political life, offers us a productive starting point for such an approach. Arendt conceptualises the political as a space of freedom constituted by a plurality of perspectives that are disclosed as distinct perspectives only in interaction with others. As such, a mere multiplicity in numbers or a multiculturally understood diversity do not yet constitute a plurality. Instead, as Loidolt notes in her phenomenological interpretation of the concept, political plurality occurs only in interaction, where a relation between ‘subjectivity, intersubjectivity and world’ gets actualised.¹⁸ The ‘polis’ in Arendt’s usage of the term is not just where people can interact or deliberate together. It is also the space where we can reveal who we are, and it is always through other people that we can do so. In this space is our capacity to start an action and thereby set in motion an *inter-action* through which my and others’ perspectives can come forth in, and as a plurality. Plurality is an *enactive* concept, actualised by the ‘uniqueness of my and the other’s standpoint in interaction itself’, wherein the I comes into being as both ‘I and ‘we’.¹⁹

Arendt characterises this appearing of ‘I-as-‘we’ through a distinction between ‘*who* one is’ and ‘*what* one is’.²⁰ The *who* is not a mere objective presence like a tree or a book, but something/one that is actualised only as a unique perspective on the world. It is an access to the world, distinct from the *what*, which in contrast, is comprised of objects that exist from the perspectives of distinctive *whos*. Furthermore, who one is cannot be described. It does not allow for an objectification or reification without disappearing as a unique perspective. Thus, to become who I am raises an ethical desire, the wish that my ideas and perspectives on the world be taken up by others in an appropriate way. There is a never-ending practical element in understanding identity this way: it must be reached for. Other people can certify or authenticate me (in *who* I am), but they can’t simply describe or objectify me (in *what* I am) without undermining or eviscerating my unique perspective. Similarly, this perspective can only emerge in ‘acting and speaking’, in the action of putting my perspective out there so that it can be taken up by others.²¹

It is this complex ‘whoness’ that is crucial to Arendt’s conception of plurality: singular whos can only emerge in interaction as a plurality, and a

plurality of whos can emerge only in interaction as singulars. Arendt conceptualises the political as a process that discloses the who and at the same time constitutes and sustains a ‘we’ as a dynamic ‘web of relationships’ integral to an authentically intersubjective world.²² Who I am cannot be disclosed simply through whatever action I might take. It is rather contingent upon what others, who are with me, see it as. Regardless of intention, one cannot control how one’s ‘actions’ appear to others or how they will be taken up. Thus, interaction is not an obstacle to the distinctive identities of its interlocutors, but rather constitutive of them, as they are integrated ‘from the outset in the publicness of appearance’.²³

It is important to note that a political ‘we’, actualised by ‘acting in concert’, need not be harmonious. Acting in concert does not mean acting as *one*.²⁴ The ‘we’ is necessarily a dynamic, open-ended ‘we’ of constant communication and deliberation that ‘discloses the distinctiveness of singular world accesses’, be it in debate, conflict, or permanent distance.²⁵ As Loidolt elaborates, the task of a political philosophy is to continuously assess the modalities of the ‘we’ that are constituted in different instances of appearing and acting in the public sphere. Different activities afford different modes of ‘we’ in which a plural ‘we’ could either be facilitated and reinforced (political community), or ‘absorbed, obstructed or destroyed’ (strong group identity).²⁶

Now, while Arendt’s approach offers a convincing way to take a plurally constituted ‘we’ as the basis of the political, how does it relate to the political value of poetry? A link between the concept of ‘plurality’ and Arendt’s late engagement with Kant’s *Critique of Judgement* provides further insight. Kant’s notion of the *sensus communis* as a ground for (aesthetic) judgement, becomes, in Arendt’s interpretation, a constitutive element of the power to differentiate distinctive *whos*, whose ‘appearance’ is indispensable to the actualisation of a political plurality. As Georg Mein observes, the *sensus communis* for Arendt is,

a principle that enables the subject to set aside the subjective, private conditions of his judgment and assume a general standpoint. . . [It] enables a kind of thought that. . . cannot be satisfied with an inner dialogue. . . Arendt [foregrounds] the structural moment in aesthetic judgment at which the structural moment of the *sensus communis* emerges, via the beautiful, as the decisive principle for the political area as well. A principle that can be used to substantiate that form of

the public sphere that makes plurality, in the emphatic sense of the word, conceivable in the first place.²⁷

If we follow Mein’s take on Arendt, we could begin to envision poetic praxis as a realm that presents us with a structure of differentiation of distinctive perspectives – just as we resort to this realm to protect these differences.

That said, Arendt's model of plurality has provoked criticism. For instance, despite the fact that plurality is constituted by the interaction of irreducibly distinct perspectives, she tends 'to embrace only comparatively harmless differences'.²⁸ She considers dramatic differences a threat to political community. Several scholars have rightly pointed out Arendt's racial prejudices, not only in her disparaging treatment of Africans and African-Americans in seminal works such as *On Violence* and *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, but also in her neglect of racialised structures of domination when she systematically dismisses emancipatory struggles for black rights as constituting violent and identitarian forms of self-interestedness.²⁹ Arendt's account needs to be supplemented with one that can elucidate the role that histories of colonisation and racial othering play in shaping how we take up the voices of others in the public sphere. It is one thing to conceptualise the political as that realm of freedom where we appear to each other as equals, but quite another to understand how deeply embedded (and instituted) social hierarchies and biases obstruct equality in interaction. I hereby turn to Édouard Glissant's anticolonial concept of 'relation' to ensure that when we take in hand the concept of 'political plurality', we do so with a full awareness of the socio-political hierarchies that prefix our interactions.

Édouard Glissant: Relation and Opacity

While Arendt and Glissant share many common resonances in their emphasis on mutual constitution and the importance of preserving uniqueness in interaction, Glissant shows what actualising a genuine political plurality requires in a world built on racial and colonial hierarchy (one that places so much emphasis on what we are). More importantly, Glissant centralises the role of the poetic in helping to realise a decolonial, antiracist and anti-identitarian commitment to a plurality that is calibrated to the struggles of marginalised voices to obtain equality on a global stage. In so doing, Glissant offers an indispensable second step toward the intersubjective framework that sheds light on poetry's political stature.

At the heart of Glissant's intellectual and political commitment to the situation of postcolonial and immigrant communities in today's globalised neoliberal-capitalist systems is what scholars have called a post-Western model of (re)thinking relation.³⁰ This model finds its most systematic articulation in the *Poetics of Relation* (1997), wherein Glissant argues for an alternative vision of globalisation in an 'already creolised' world that is affirmatively oriented towards the turbulent creative potential of globalised world-relations.³¹ Glissant defines 'world-relation' by taking as paradigmatic the Caribbean model of 'creolisation' as a phenomenon that evinces most explicitly how identities function only *in* and *as* relation. According to Glissant, the term 'creolisation' names a mode of transformative sharing that occurred between migrant communities that were brought together by the violent flows of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. The new Creole languages and cultures that

emerged from these interactions exemplify not just a mixing of differences, but a violent sign of ‘their consensual, not imposed sharing’.³² Creolisation, in Glissant’s usage is paradigmatic of a ‘Poetics of Relation’ in that it takes up the necessity of difference and facilitates modes of thought capable of resisting assimilation to dominating universals (absolutes) and reductive generalisations (to types/ *what* people are). The latter two, Glissant insists, operate in the interest of cultural domination, and not ‘relation’.³³

Central to Glissant’s notion of relation is the concept of ‘opacity’. Opacity, in his terms, functions as an active strategy of resistance against the reductive and objectifying forms of knowability that typically operate in relations between the West and the non-West. Yet, it is not simply a matter of resistance in terms of opposition. Colonial power, Glissant emphasises, tends to operate by way of a reciprocal dynamic of forced transparency: a certain dominant transparency of the coloniser culture as the powerful other; and the transparency of the colonised as absolutely knowable and thus controllable.³⁴ In this context, opacity comes forth as a radical protective shield ‘that allows for non-dialectic difference’ to emerge.³⁵ It has emancipatory value not only as resistance, but also as simultaneously stimulating a transformative engagement with others as who they are; not *despite*, but *together with* their differences. Actualising a non-hierarchical relation requires a recognition of the other’s difference as irreducible and a presupposition that each of us encounters the density and opacity of the other. In Glissant’s terms, an acknowledgement that the other is never entirely comprehensible safeguards the processual, communicative, and open-ended nature of identity and protects diversity in the sense of a genuine political plurality, where who one is is constituted through a process of co-constitution and mutual transformation.

Glissant insists that non-identitarian, non-discriminatory, and non-hierarchical relation occurs only through the non-reduction of the other’s opacity. And in this, the poetic plays a central role. Poetry, Glissant claims, lets those who encounter it be ‘contaminated’ by the opaqueness of otherness. It shows us ways to engage with radical difference without having to ‘understand’ it in the repressive sense, i.e. without dismissing it, refusing to engage with it or assimilating it into the same.³⁶ In encountering the poetic, the imagination opens up to the possibilities of mutual transformation, where our differences are the affirmative ground for a relation of irreducible particulars. We can thus infer another dimension from Glissant in terms of how we construe poetry’s emancipatory potential, as that which allows for a disclosure of the who in interaction, just as much as it necessitates and facilitates modes of understanding that can acknowledge and engage with the layered and evolving opacities of others.

Arendt and Glissant’s concepts of ‘plurality’ and ‘relation’, respectively, offer us the first important steps in developing an intersubjective practice of interpretation that comprehends poetry’s political capacity. Taken together, they give shape to the intersubjective dimension of the framework I propose,

bringing to the fore an unflinching avowal that any ‘we’, any sense of self in relation, is a constantly evolving process of interacting with others’ differences and opacities. This processuality is crucial to ensuring that the ‘we’ doesn’t simply surrender to a sense of essential group identity or become enclosed and static as a collectivity bound together by only what is common. Crucially, the mode of engagement proffered by an intersubjective approach embeds the reader as indispensable to the process: poetry’s political value here emerges in the very action of taking up a poem, as the irreducible voice of another.

III. THE PRAGMATIST DIMENSION OF INTERSUBJECTIVITY

Yet, as a framework, an intersubjective approach is incomplete in itself, and raises several questions. For instance, even if it were to play a substantive role in our appreciation and valuation of poetry on an everyday basis, how are we to extrapolate from the micro-action of reading a poem towards addressing a larger political need? How could a reader-poem interaction figure in broader issues of solidarity, sharing, and dynamic political community? In this section, I argue that the intersubjective approach needs to be supplemented with a pragmatist dimension to be able to demonstrate how reading intersubjectively can contribute to actualising plural political relations in the everyday. I develop this dimension primarily through John Dewey’s *Art as Experience*. I argue that a pragmatist approach offers a good complement to Arendt’s political plurality, and Glissant’s ‘poetics of Relation’, in that it presents a particularly flexible kind of social ontology, offering concrete strategies to understand the ways in which poems can participate in and give emancipatory shape to our situated political relations.

Particularly, following Dewey’s characterisation of ‘art’ not as a collection of objects with certain qualities, but as ‘an experience’, I demonstrate in what ways the poetic – as a particular quality of experience facilitated by readers’ interactions with poems – can impact how we take up the voices of others. I characterise poetry in Deweyan terms as a particular kind of experience whose material is language, and whose primary demand as linguistic medium is understanding. This characterisation has two basic requisites: i) that poetic language be seen not as separate from the language of everyday communication, but as an integral part of it, inseparable from it, and ii) understanding: poetic language asks for a special kind of complex understanding. We’re not cracking a code, or finding an answer, but something else. I call this ‘poetic understanding’. In what follows, I make my way to the concept of ‘poetic understanding’ through two key terms from Dewey’s theorising: experience and form. Over the course of this section, I will show how a pragmatist take on each of these parameters addresses some of the most pressing aspects of poetry’s political potential that have been points of contention in activist and autonomist frameworks, while also bringing the intersubjective dimension to bear concretely on the relevance of poetry to our turbulent political times.

An (aesthetic) Experience

One of the fundamentals of Dewey's aesthetic theory is that it does not operate on the basis of the distinction between art and life, or, for that matter, on the basis of the specialness and distinctiveness of art from other processes of thinking, being and doing. With the aim to recover 'the continuity of aesthetic experience with the normal processes of living', Dewey approaches art as rooted in the commonplace, in the 'basic vital functions' of humankind.³⁷ Dewey distinguishes between experience in general, and 'an experience'. The latter is a term reserved for moments when the otherwise inchoate and indeterminate flows of experience come to satisfactory emotional completion; they acquire the quality of *an* experience. In Dewey's terms, this characteristic of completion – which requires a unity of form, substance, rhythm and ordered change, just as it requires a productive engagement with the tensions resulting from the interaction of incompatible moments – *is* the aesthetic. Similarly, 'the material of aesthetic experience in being human . . . is social'.³⁸ Experience, in and of the world, according to Dewey – as to Arendt and Glissant – is never the experience of one, singular individual. In the material realm of the aesthetic too, so long as it is grounded in the everyday, it is always the experience of a plurality, formed out of the material of our shared livingness. This is a particularly relevant thesis for the analysis of poems, as the material of poetry – primarily language – belongs to our intersubjective world, and responds first and foremost to our need to communicate and to understand one another. Furthermore, it offers a viable counterpoint to activist positions that valorise experience in terms of a subjective 'experiential agency'.³⁹

Importantly, in Dewey's terms, 'aesthetic experience' is not limited to art. However, artworks do embody the intentional and concentrated play of the very forces that constitute an experience. They are the 'axis of continuity' in a shared world, and are thus a fundamental part of our communicative systems.⁴⁰ The artist is interested in formal completion, in playing the edge of tension between incompatible forces, so as to be able to communicate an intentionally arbitrated 'experience' to others who encounter the work. Yet, the arbitrated unity between form and substance does not mean the end of all tension or disturbance; equally it does not mean giving in to a state of total flux with no hope for resolution. These are two limits, two ends of the spectrum, in which 'aesthetic experience is not possible'.⁴¹ What makes unity an integral part of aesthetic experience, is precisely its careful negotiation of these limits while avoiding a cascade to either end. Turning the general flows of experience into an experience requires a play of tensions into structured relationships that can make possible a similar experience for anyone who encounters the work of art. Holding together the fragmentations, incoherencies, tensions and flux in a delicate poise, before they fall apart is indispensable to making shareable the quality of closure that marks an experience. In a different sense, as Glissant would say, in the interaction of

often incompatible differences comes not a scattering or dilution of the parts, but the ‘explosive sign of the world-in-relation’.⁴²

Let’s take as an example the final stanzas of Amiri Baraka’s ‘Ostriches and Grandmothers!’, a typical lyric poem that relies on its formal ending as the moment of closure or completion that actualises the text as ‘poem’:⁴³

It’s these empty seconds
I fill with myself. Each
a recognition. A complete
utterance.

Here, it is color; motion;
the feeling of dazzling beauty
Flight.

As
the trapeze rider
leans
with arms spread
wondering at the bar’s
delay

Note here the poised negotiation between completeness and incompleteness, recognition, and suspense; the way the suspension at the end retrospectively gives the beginning stanza a sense of completeness that otherwise might not matter, or even be recognised. What we see here is precisely, in Deweyan terms, the intentional constitution of *an* experience. Yet, even as there is the completeness – in that the poem has ended – the final word (‘delay’), broken deliberately from the sentence, seals the poem in its suspension. There is but incompleteness, a certain anticipation that is held through ‘the bar’s/delay’. We, the readers, are asked to complete the action. The experience, though intentionally set up, is given over to the reader to complete, to give it that quality of closure that Dewey names as the characteristic of *an* aesthetic experience.

Rethinking Poetic Form

The example above shows that it would be reductive in a pragmatist account to see unity of form and substance as a unity of fixed properties. Rather, we need to see it as an arbitrated, dynamic, and transformative unity that is possible only intersubjectively, in that both the text and the reader play a role in it.⁴⁴ In many autonomist positions in literary theory, the term unity is typically associated with form-content unity as a basis to justify poetry’s autonomy, to determine a poem’s value on its intrinsic worth alone. I quote A.C Bradley’s (still) influential approach to poetry’s formal autonomy:

[Poetic] value is. . . intrinsic worth alone[. Its] ulterior worth neither is nor can directly determine its poetic worth as a satisfying imaginative experience; and this is to be judged entirely from within. . . The consideration of ulterior ends, whether by the poet in the act of composing or by the reader in the act of experiencing, tends to lower poetic value. It does so because it tends to change the nature of poetry by taking it out of its own atmosphere. For its nature is to be not a part, nor yet a copy, of the real world (as we commonly understand that phrase), but to be a world by itself, independent, complete, autonomous; and to possess it fully you must enter that world, conform to its laws, and ignore for the time the beliefs, aims, and particular conditions which belong to you in the other world of reality.⁴⁵

According to Bradley, this autonomous world of the poem is built on the pillars of a unity of form and content, where the two are inextricable, and ‘only the poem can specify its own content’.⁴⁶ While it is the case that a delicate dynamic between the content and the form is needed to constitute the unity of an experience, a pragmatist approach would be opposed to such an autonomist account in several ways. First, on Dewey’s account there is no art object, as a closed isolated thing. ‘Art is a quality that permeates an experience’; thus, there is art as experience and there is the aesthetic quality of experience that a work of art might intentionally facilitate.⁴⁷ Secondly, it is in the context of the general flow of experience that an aesthetic experience acquires value; not intrinsically, but precisely in its relation to the general structure of experience. An aesthetic experience has a transformative quality in that it both transforms a singular instance in a flow of experience, while also casting a new light on all prior experiences; though this can only be done if it is not seen as isolated from the rest. A poem, in this light, is valuable precisely for its ‘deep instrumental worth’, its role in shaping all experience.⁴⁸

Thirdly, such an approach offers valuable insights into how poetic ‘form’ can be understood in continuity with lived experience. As opposed to definitions of form that dominated twentieth-century aesthetics – as that which belongs exclusively to the aesthetic (autonomy thesis) i.e. that which ‘makes a poem a poem’ or as a product of ideology and historical circumstance – Dewey defines form as the result of ‘the dynamic interaction’ of the material of our lived experiences. Form is ‘arrived at when a stable though moving, equilibrium is reached’ between the flows of experience and the creation of an aesthetic experience.⁴⁹ Form is ‘a way of presenting experienced matter, so that it readily becomes material’ for new experiences, new ways of relating, and of understanding one another.⁵⁰ Reading poetry with such an understanding of form in mind facilitates from the outset an approach that emphasises the presence of the common world, and the interaction of the individual with the common in every instance of poetic expression. It enables ways to make visible the continuities between the poetic and the everyday, and subsequently, as I explain in the following section, to construct the axis

between formal coherence and the enhancement of solidarity and social understanding in the everyday.

Finally, following Peter Lamarque's argument that unity is formed between the experience and its interlocutors and is never merely intrinsic to the experience, I will add a fifth difference that a Deweyan pragmatist account poses to Bradley's formalism: the reader is not one who simply enters a world (of a text) that is already there, whose laws they must follow. Rather it is only in the intersubjective moment, together with the reader, that the world of the text comes to be. And only in this is an experience possible.⁵¹

IV. POETIC UNDERSTANDING

In section II, I elaborated, through Arendt and Glissant, the idea that the political is a matter of the intersubjective; that which occurs between people. Consequently, I articulated the need to valorise the political potential of poetic expression in terms of its role in potentiating emancipatory forms of a plural 'we'. This implies taking an intersubjective approach to poems, as integrally imbricated in the disclosure of subjects (*whos*) in and as 'we'. A Deweyan pragmatist dimension takes us a step further to embed the poetic in continuity with everyday life and sharing of experience, illuminating the poetic as a transformative aspect of livingness as a whole (not just of some lives at some exceptional moments). This idea falls close to Glissant's aspirations, but where his model takes a utopian flight, the pragmatist dimension emphasises how a poetic plurality can be actualised and accentuated through our quotidian practices of engaging with poems and works of art.

Altogether, the arc of an intersubjective pragmatist approach gives us, I argue, the concept of 'poetic understanding': a transformative quality of understanding – emerging in the interaction between poems and readers – that is necessarily a dynamic, contingent, non-hierarchical and non-identitarian *process* of transformation and constitution, where who I am comes to be constituted in my process of understanding, as does *who* the other is.

To examine what such an understanding would entail, I would like to dwell on a conjecture, a certain image of reciprocity. Let us say that in order to be able to communicate a feeling or an idea, I need to give it a shape or a form to which you, as my interlocutor, can also relate. Not only do I need to give it a concrete embodiment in a shared language of some kind, but I also need to bring it into that space that both you and I cohabit; to bring it within the reach of a shared structure of understanding. Now let us say that I struggle with the enormity, the difficulty of this task. And what I would like is not only to be able to get my message across, but to communicate the entirety of this effort, including its impossibilities, its difficulties, its hesitations. Let us further say, that only in such a communication can who I am and who you are be revealed to each other. A 'poetic understanding' marks the difference between understanding the communicated information and sharing in

an experience. In a Deweyan sense, ‘it does not operate in the dimension of correct descriptive statement, but in that of experience itself.’⁵² While both require understanding, the latter requires my own experience to be affected by the other’s experience in order to truly understand it. We need between us precisely a *poetic* understanding.

Three closely allied theoretical senses of the term ‘understanding’ can be reassessed here: hermeneutic (interpreting another’s words), identification (identifying the Other as x in the process of interaction) and recognition (in the Hegelian sense of the subject-object dialectic). Each of these can yield deficient forms of understanding such as misinterpretation, essentialising identitarian identification or misrecognition, which potentially become pretexts to rejecting further engagement. Similarly, if we think of everyday usages of the term ‘understanding’, three further senses are noteworthy: (i) as a ‘success’ term – as in ‘I understand this’, ‘I get it’ – that often marks the end of engagement, means we’ve sorted the thing in terms of what we know, subsumed it under a category we already have; (ii) as a means, something we need to do – ‘I don’t understand’, or ‘I need to understand what’s really happening here’ – that is regarded as successful when understanding in the first sense is accomplished, or a failure when it isn’t; and (iii) as acceptance, agreement, or apology – ‘I understand why you were angry’ or ‘I hear you’.

While this last sense of understanding may come closest to what we might think of as the beginning of a poetic understanding, it is but the beginning. The element of the ‘poetic’ becomes central here, suggesting a quality of understanding that doesn’t necessarily end in acceptance, apology, or a bridging of differences; or for that matter, that does not end. The ‘poetic’ proffers a mode of reflective engagement in interaction, where understanding becomes more than a means to overcome a communicative hurdle, to resolve a conundrum, to merge our horizons and differences.⁵³ It becomes constitutive of *who* I am and *who* you are as a ‘we’ with our irreducible differences in the space of interaction. The ‘poetic’ also names not only a conscious and concerted engagement with that which we cannot (claim to) understand, but also a self-critical reckoning: a recognition of and reconciliation with the limits of one’s own understanding.⁵⁴

In this way, through the concept of ‘poetic understanding’, we can begin to examine what tools poems might have to offer us in our structures of understanding, what political potential such understanding can have, and most importantly, what we readers, as people who wish to understand and be understood, need in order to do justice to the complex forms of understanding that poetry and people demand.

V. CONCLUSION

With the intersubjective pragmatist account of ‘poetic understanding’, I have shown that the social work of poetry is grounded in its potential to reconfigure existing modes of being and sharing with others. Despite the differing philosophical positions of Arendt, Glissant and Dewey, I’ve brought their work into conversation to articulate the core aspects of a framework that offers valuable instruction for rethinking the political value of poetry beyond the registers of autonomy and activism, locating poetry’s political potential not in the poems themselves, but in their context-specific imbrications and interactions. In centralising the ways in which particular poems come into expression in relation with their readers, this framework offers a promising avenue to explore the role poetry plays in making genuinely plural ‘we’ relations a real social possibility, without undermining individual difference, and with cognisance of the racial and colonial stratifications that attribute (positive or negative) values to our differences.

Let me conclude by outlining two ways in which ‘poetic understanding’ can have immense political value. First, emancipatory politics and social movements rely on the ethical formation of communities that strive for enhanced participatory democracy, appropriate self-definition and the procurement of both equal rights and agency for everybody. However, we want to avoid ‘community’ in the sense of a static harmony that binds on the basis of group characteristics or mutual moral guilt, where inclusiveness also implies exclusion. What we seek is a society where the ‘we’ becomes possible in and through a productive play of tension and flux; where inclusion is a continuous process of understanding and experiencing with others, of sharing experience, where individual expression can find a space in the habitudes of the community, where there is no ‘I’ without the ‘we’, and no we without the interaction of distinctive perspectives on the world.⁵⁵

Secondly, democratic politics are a scene of constant communication, deliberation and reconstitution between differential and even antagonistic voices. As Oliver Marchart argues, a democratic politics must remain ever-unsettled, engaged in a constant reworking of its principles; ‘its... foundations have to be reassembled and reinstated constantly if it is to have a future’ as democratic, and not as another kind of authoritarianism.⁵⁶ In this activist component of democratic politics, ‘poetic understanding’ can play a crucial role as that which stimulates the continuous and irreducible effort required to actualise plurality, to retain the ‘chaos-world’ and the never-settled nature of relations in all their beauty and irresolvability.

Finally, a note on the value of ‘poetic understanding’ for art more broadly. While I’ve used poetry to develop this concept, I wish to emphasise that a ‘poetic understanding’ is not limited to poetry and has broader implications for the ways in which we understand the politicality of art (and social relations) more broadly. Through the exemplary case of poetry, I ultimately hope to have made a case for the deep instrumental role that not only poetry, but in

fact all art, plays in facilitating and making widely accessible the conditions for complex modalities of understanding necessary for a non-hierarchical and non-discriminatory political plurality. In that poems and works of art lay out before their readers and audiences precisely the process and labour of understanding another's distinct perspective, lies an underestimated cornerstone of solidary understanding and political community, one of art's decisive political contributions.

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NOTES

¹For a popular overview of the debate, see Fitterman 2014 and Soto 2017.

²Theoretically, the autonomist position (in its political dimension) can be traced back to Theodor Adorno, the foremost proponent of a dialectics of autonomy. Adorno 2013, 308.

³Marchart 2019, 12–17 examines the 'activist turn' in the second decade of the 21st century when political art becomes constituted explicitly as an activist practice.

⁴Nadkarni 2022.

⁵van Rooden 2019, 112 turns away from earlier ontic approaches to propose a relational paradigm, arguing that all literature is relational in its very mode of being. My own questions are deeply indebted to Van Rooden's work, though my approach eventually moves in a different direction.

⁶Lamarque 2017; Perloff and Dworkin 2009, 2-3.

⁷Altieri 2009; Perloff 2004; Kaufmann 2017.

⁸Arendt 1998, 22.

⁹Hickman 2015; Nealon 2011; Bernstein 1990.

¹⁰Grossman 2009, 5-6.

¹¹Spahr 2001.

¹²Dawes and Teyie 2018, 5. Also, Cavell 2015, 257-264; Rorty 1989, xvi.

¹³Mufti 2010; Roelofs 2020.

¹⁴Hong 2014. See also Reed 2014; Wang 2014.

¹⁵Hirsch 2014, 491–92.

¹⁶Dean 1996; Glissant 1997; Haider 2018.

¹⁷Marchart 2007, 38-40.

¹⁸Loidolt 2018, 265.

¹⁹Loidolt 2018, 165; Arendt 1998, 181.

²⁰Arendt 1998, 179-181. Italics mine.

²¹Arendt 1998, 179.

²²Arendt 1998, 181.

²³Loidolt 2018, 200.

²⁴Arendt 1998, 180.

²⁵Loidolt 2018, 179.

²⁶Loidolt 2018, 222.

²⁷Mein 2017, 118-119.

²⁸Früchtel 2018, 137.

²⁹For critiques of Arendt's racial prejudices, see Kautzer 2019; Owens 2017.

³⁰Drabinski and Parham 2015, 2-3.

³¹Glissant 1997, 6.

³²Glissant 1997, 34.

³³Glissant 1997, 28.

³⁴Glissant 1997, 49.

³⁵Stanley 2017, 618.

³⁶Glissant 1997, 32. Contamination, which otherwise denotes something undesirable that ought to be contained or expunged, acquires an immensely positive and emancipatory value in Glissant's work.

³⁷Dewey 2005, 9 and 11.

³⁸Dewey 2005, 326.

³⁹Dowdy 2007, 24.

⁴⁰Dewey 2005, 326.

⁴¹Dewey 2005, 41-42.

⁴²Glissant 1997, 34.

⁴³Baraka 2015, 51.

⁴⁴Dewey 2005, 112.

⁴⁵Bradley 1965, 7.

⁴⁶Lamarque 2017, 69.

⁴⁷Dewey 2005, 326.

⁴⁸Dewey 2005, 84.

⁴⁹Dewey 2005, 13.

⁵⁰Dewey 2005, 110.

⁵¹Lamarque 2017, 69: ‘form-content unity and unparaphrasability are established but...arguably, it is not a fact about a poem that it exhibits form-content unity but a demand made of it when it is read or valued [in] a certain way’.

⁵²Dewey 2005, 89.

⁵³I allude here to Hans Georg Gadamer’s approach to hermeneutics as a ‘merging of horizons’. For a critique, see Vasterling 2003.

⁵⁴I would like to challenge here a misconception that Glissant’s concept of ‘opacity’ is antithetical to a project that constructs poetry in terms of understanding. According to Glissant, opacity and transparency or understanding and incomprehension do not constitute a simple oppositional dynamic; they are not other to each in any

simplistic sense. Under his paradigm case of the Creole language, Glissant argues that what is interesting is opacity as production of ‘unintelligible presence within the visible presence,’ (Britton 24-25) or that quality that makes understanding a process of ‘limitless’ interaction (Glissant 1997, 172.). If we are to follow Glissant, and Celia Britton’s reading of Glissant, we can see how the recognition and acknowledgement of unintelligibility within visibility, opacity within transparency and non-understanding within understanding become immensely crucial to an actualisation of political plurality.

⁵⁵For a more detailed examination of the concept of ‘community’, see Nadkarni 2021.

⁵⁶Marchart 2011, 968.

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