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Message from the President

Francis Peddle

This issue of *ELEUTHERIA* contains diverse pieces by James Lowry, Peter McCormick and myself. McCormick's article "Reddish in Nothing but Night" was read in a shorter version, under the title "Reasonably Interpreting Fictions", at Montreal, where there was, October 16-19, 1996, a joint annual meeting of the Canadian Society for Aesthetics and the American Society for Aesthetics. Both societies have cordial relations with a number of scholars holding dual memberships. On occasion the two societies hold their annual meetings together here in Canada.

McCormick's panoramic excursion through thinking about fictions, and more particularly through thinking about what counts as reasonably interpreting fictions, goes beyond instrumental, procedural and relativistic terms. His focus is on "the more substantive terms that specify a cardinal role for more speculative accounts of meaning, truth, and objectivity as aspects of the fictional." Reflecting on these accounts in the poetry of suffering in the twentieth century is a principal element of McCormick's work on philosophy, poetry and fictions.

Speculative accounts of the history of philosophy have traditionally formed a significant component of the major systems of speculative philosophy. James Lowry's "Speculative Philosophy and the History of Philosophy" treats the two subphrases as contraries which on their own

create fundamental obstacles to the perennial philosophical endeavour. Lowry maintains that followers of system-builders such as Aristotle, Aquinas or Hegel invariably become either "historical" traditionalists or "ahistorical" dogmatists. Philosophical speculation avoids this trap by working speculatively and rationally through the history of philosophy. The perennial lesson to be learned, not simply intuited, is the recognition of "the necessity of knowing what has been thought in order to think systematically and anew."

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With the first publication of *ELEUTHERIA* in the Spring of 1989 we made available access to a computer *via* modem, which was left in "host" mode for a specified time one day a week. Communications technology has taken a quantum leap since then with the development of the Internet and E-mail. We now have an E-mail address: isp@raynon.com. We also hope to have a home page on the world wide web in 1997. It will primarily contain information about the Institute, *ELEUTHERIA*, papers on speculative philosophy and other occasional items of interest to those who keep track of what is going on in the discipline.

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With the Fall issue of *ELEUTHERIA* we once again enclose our annual request for membership renewal. If anyone has professional questions about charitable donations for the Institute, or about how to contribute to the Institute's Endowment Fund, they should contact me.

WHY WE SHOULD BE THANKFUL THERE IS NO NOBEL PRIZE IN PHILOSOPHY

Francis Peddle

Every year since 1901 prizes from the estate of Alfred Nobel have been awarded to chemists, physicists, researchers in medicine and physiology, writers of literature and "champions of peace." In 1968 a sixth award was established by the Bank of Sweden for economists. Alfred Nobel, as some may remember, was the inventor of dynamite. He thought, presaging some of his successors on the atomic level, that the invention would end war by making it too horrific to contemplate. The dynamite, not his reflections on it, made him rich. Fortunately for subsequent recipients Nobel had no heirs and so a foundation in his name was established.

More than 600 awards have since been made. They have grown continuously in prestige and value over the century. Thanks to a wise investment program, the awards are now worth about \$1.5 million each. The list of Nobel prize winners is certainly a biographical display of the intellectual life of our times. Albert Schweitzer, Martin Luther King Jr., Albert Einstein, Rudyard Kipling, Alexander Fleming, Linus Pauling and Paul Samuelson are just a few of the notables.

Sometimes the awards have been controversial, seemingly based on regional and other extramural criteria. Sometimes, though not often, they are treated with disdain, as when Jean-Paul Sartre refused to accept his, in 1964. Perhaps Sartre would have thought differently had there been a prize for philosophy?

Why there is not a prize for philosophy we will never know. It is no good to speculate on Nobel's limited acquaintance with the discipline. However, it could be instructive to speculate lightly on the advantages for philosophy of not

having a Nobel prize. An example can help us in this regard.

The Nobel prize this year for economics went to William Vickrey of Columbia University in New York and James Mirrlees, who teaches at Cambridge University. This is not unusual, the prize is often split within a discipline. There is, however, something more revealing in this split award than the official reasons for giving it in the first place.

Both professors of economics asked the very Aristotelian question "What is the best tax system?" Professor Mirrlees, in a recent article in *The Guardian* (October 14) answered that because the effect of take home pay on work incentives seems higher for the boss and the apprentice than for the middle manager, then the highest marginal income tax rates ought to be levied on middle income earners. Does it need to be said that those who hold economic abstractions to be the essence of scientific virtue do well to avoid the rigors of public office?

Professor Vickrey asked the same question and came to a surprisingly different answer. He said get rid of income taxes, sales taxes and the endless nickel and diming that makes life so miserable for workers. The optimum conditions exist when the economic rent of land and other natural resources are treated as the primary tax base or revenue source for governments. This is astonishing because most people accept the current system for an apparent want of a viable alternative. Vickrey challenges the assumption and the acceptance.

Professor Mirrlees says the best tax system is

more or less what we have. Just make a few and occasional adjustments in marginal rates geared to work incentives. It would be an alien mind indeed to believe it is possible to get by without taxing "work" at all. Professor Vickrey believes the best tax system is nothing like what we encounter in the present set up of things.

If there were a Nobel prize in philosophy, the same situation would occur. The analytic philosophers and the Rortyan conversationalists would muck around a lot with empirical givens, occasional concepts, snippets of the tradition, endlessly trying to come up with something "original" – to keep things going. The speculative philosophers, who know the substance of the philosophical tradition without being enslaved to it, and being never content with piecemeal philosophizing, want to do things radically different, to banish the marginal and structure philosophical principles on unrevisable grounds.

Now most Nobel prizes in economics have gone to the Rortyan conversationalists, otherwise known as Keynesians, neo-Keynesians and neo-classical economists. And one can have an endless conversation about marginal tax rates if one does not question the wisdom of taxing earned income in the first place. Should we expect anything different for philosophy? A prize must be awarded every year and you cannot win it twice. Imagine an award for every philosophical "breakthrough" that would be immedi

ately exposed in the next symposium as a thinly disguised rendition of a pre-Hegelian category. The Swedish Academy of Sciences and the Swedish Academy would find their halo dissipating gracelessly as rebarbative philosophers undermined the very core of their decision-making legitimacy.

Incidentally, Professor Vickrey died while on his way to Ottawa to give a paper at a conference co-hosted by the Canadian Research Committee on Taxation of which I am the Director of Research. His remarks would have focused on the alternative system of public revenue generation previously mentioned. I have a copy of the paper if Institute members wish to peruse it.

Newspaper articles on Professor Vickrey did not mention any of these core ideas. They concentrated on the Vickrey auction, assymetrical information systems, congestion pricing and the like, in tandem with the Nobel Foundation announcement. Vickrey did not see a minor excursion into abstract economics as anything much of significance for human welfare. He got the Nobel prize for the wrong reasons but they are the only reasons in the work of Professor Mirrlees. Hegel would have perhaps received it, and been remembered, for his views on smell as a particularized airiness. At the Institute we are grateful there is no Nobel prize for philosophy.

REDDISH IN NOTHING BUT NIGHT

Peter McCormick

No one can explain or give an intelligible concept of them [the products of the imagination]; each is

a kind of monogram, a mere set of particular qualities, determined by no assignable rule, and forming more

a blurred sketch drawn from diverse experiences than a determinate image.

Immanuel Kant

In what follows I would like to call attention to one kind of fiction only, poetic fictions. And I would like to investigate briefly what is to count as a reasonable interpretation of some poetic fictions.

I begin with an example of a poetic fiction and then use this example to formulate three questions about the nature, referents, and construction of fictions. I also suggest how trying to interpret such works reasonably should make us think twice about the nature not just of poetic fictions but of interpretation and rationality as well. Much of what follows must, in order to respect our usual restraints on time, remain largely at the level of proposal rather than detailed argument.

[1.] The Flame, It Stood Still

Thirty-five years ago this month, Johannes Bobrowski, the German poet of Polish and Lithuanian ancestry whose several works memorialize the eponymous peoples and settlements of "Sarmatia" between the Vistula and the Memel rivers along the sandy, pine-streaked Baltic littoral, composed his poem, "Latvian Autumn." It was in the Autumn of 1961 more than ten years after his release as one of the last German prisoners of war working at forced slave labour in the Soviet coal mines of the Donets Basin, and less than four years from his premature death at the age of forty-eight in an East Berlin hospital far from the polyglot borders of his childhood and the Baroque splendours of his youth amid the pre-War Königsberg cityscapes of Kant and Herder. Here is the second part of his poem:

When the river is not awake any more,
the cloud above it, voices
of the birds, calls:
We shall not come any more--

Then I'll kindle your light,
that I cannot see, my hands
I shall lay over it, close
to the flame, that stayed
upright reddened by so much night
(like the castle that came down
over the slope, in ruins,
like a winged snake
of light through the river, like the hair
of the Jewish child)
and did not burn me.¹

Now, even when we take this piece as a whole, and even after many contextual readings against the complex backgrounds of Bobrowski's work and times to which I have merely alluded, much here remains enigmatic.

Consider briefly one element only, the crucial yet deeply puzzling presentation of a poetic fiction, the light in a "Latvian Autumn," "the flame," the speaker in the poem says, ". . . die Flamme, sie blieb / stehen roetlich vor lauter Nacht," ". . . the flame," one translator writes, "that stayed / upright reddened by so much night," or, as another would have it, ". . . the flame, it stood still, / reddish in nothing but night."²

What is this poetic fiction, we might ask, what is this "flame," what is this "night?" Why is the flame presented in connection with night? How could the night redden the flame? How could the redness of this flame be "reddish in nothing but night?"

This poetic fiction is puzzling because we find it persistently difficult not just to interpret this

¹ Johannes Bobrowski, "Der lettische Herbst," *Gedichte* (Leipzig: Reclam, 1990), p. 89; tr. M. Nagel, "The Latvian Autumn," in J. Bobrowski, *The White Mirror: Poems by Johannes Bobrowski* (Orono, Maine: Puckerbrush Press, 1993), p. 25, translation slightly modified; and tr. R. and M. Mead, "The Latvian Autumn," in J. Bobrowski, *Shadow Lands: Selected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1984), p. 125.

² J. Bobrowski, *Shadow Lands: Selected Poems*, tr. R. and M. Mead (New York: New Directions, 1994), p. 148.

utterance in the sense of to translate, but to interpret in the sense of to render its meaning and significance not inappropriately. Yet this puzzling poetic fiction is also crucial because its meaning and significance determine whatever understanding we can achieve of the entire final stanza with its three similes, in fact, of the poem as a whole. For each simile adduces some kind of likeness between what this utterance says about the reddishness a flame exhibits and, successively, a bright castle falling into dark ruins, a snake rippling with light in dark waters, and the hair of a Jewish child. Thus, if we cannot reasonably render this utterance with its poetic fiction of a lame that is "reddish in nothing but night," we cannot reasonably interpret this poem. There is then a particular issue here about how to interpret a specific poem. But a general issue arises too, an issue about what is to count as a reasonable interpretation of such crucial yet puzzling poetic fictions.

[2.] A Line of Inquiry

May I suggest that what makes an interpretation of such difficult and painful poetic fictions reasonable is the articulation of the poem's sense and significance in the kind of form that allows of appraisal as both objectively true or objectively false, largely speaking? And "largely speaking" comes finally to understanding the rational interconnections among meaning, truth, and objectivity, at least in the domains of the language arts, in not just epistemic but also more speculative, even metaphysical ways.

Generally, I would argue that understanding how some instances of literary interpretation can be reasonable, say interpreting what the redness of the flame was like in Bobrowski's dark "Latvian Autumn," requires rethinking some important construals of rationality today. Central to such argument is exhibiting the conceptual resources of a Kantian inspired version of the fictional for reconciling persistent tensions between linguistic and philosophical accounts of meaning, correspondence and coherence versions of truth, and relativistic and non-relativistic views of objectivity in the interpretation of problematic

elements in representative instances of what I will call vaguely the twentieth-century's distinctive poetry of suffering.

On such a general view, we need to assume two tasks and not just one. First, we need to show how trying to interpret representative instances of the poetry of suffering puts the rationality of interpretation itself into question. And, second, we also need to show how reconstructing rational interpretation today within the domain of the literary arts requires articulating a fuller understanding of the fictional.

In other words, we need to show how trying to interpret one distinctive genre of twentieth-century art puts our usual understandings of the nature of rational interpretation into serious question. For several strongly conceptual strategies on exhibit in, for example, some of the cardinal work of Valery and Rilke, Yeats, Eliot and St.-John Perse, Machado and Lorca, Mandelstam and Akhmatova, Montale and Ritsos, Milosz and Celan, Herbert and Bobrowski, require not just literary but philosophical reflection.

Trying to interpret reasonably this kind of poetry with its insistence on testimony and prophecy, its continuous dialogues with a murderous history, its subversions of linguistic and literary conventions, its unalterable focus on the overwhelming powers of evil, its evocations of the incomprehensible immensities of suffering, its implacable indictments of reason, and, sometimes as perhaps in Bobrowski's poetic fiction of a "Latvian Autumn" that could never be a Montreal October, its realizations of the requisite conditions for experiencing a negative sublime – reasonably trying to interpret this kind of poetic fiction raises more than literary issues.

Difficulties, however, in pursuing our usual philosophical practices in analyzing the linguistic, cognitive, and objective elements of the poetic strategies in question force renewed conceptual attention to underlying assumptions in these practices about some central aspects of rationality itself. Thus, interpreting the poetry of suffering both requires philosophical analysis

and yet puts elements of the reasonableness of such analysis into question. That is, interpreting such poetry requires renewed investigation into what makes an interpretation rational.

And just here is where a first question about poetic fictions arises. We want to know not just what poetic fictions are. Rather, we want to know what could ever be the nature of such poetic fictions that they should be able to force fresh inquiry into our usual understandings of interpretation and reason?

But what of these vague terms?

[3.] Some Terms

Talk of interpretation, rationality, fictions, and the poetry of suffering is of course not unambiguous. And trying to specify exactly what I mean by one of the crucial expressions, "the twentieth-century's distinctive poetry of suffering" (after all, every century has its distinctive tragic literature) by merely listing several characteristic features of such poetry is not satisfactory. For we need to see in context and in detail just what elements of which individual poems and poetic practices invite such a general description. Similarly, in the cases of other crucial expressions here like "interpretation," "rational," and "fiction," we need to articulate a particular picture of just how one would want to use such expressions for these specific purposes.

Consequently, I think we need to restrict the notion of interpretation here to the domain of the arts while excluding the broader uses of the term in, for example, the various senses of "interpretation" in logic and mathematics, the natural and social sciences, the computer sciences, and the historical disciplines. Moreover, inside the various domains of the arts I am mainly concerned with interpretation in the different genres of the literary or language arts, although what I would want to hold about interpretation with respect to these arts should be generalizable to some of the other arts as well. Finally, the quite particular interest here

is specifying what would count as a reasonable interpretation of poetry like Bobrowski's "Latvian Autumn," poems of the still unthinkable immensities of human suffering.

I think our focus should be mainly on the nature and kinds and roles of the mental acts that comprise the various processes of interpreting rather than on the product or result of these processes, the interpretation itself. For the stress is on interpreting not interpretation. Whether such acts are best construed strongly as explanatory or more weakly as explicatory needs elaboration.

I would proceed similarly with the expressions "reason," "rationality," and "reasonableness." That is, initially I urge that such expressions be used rather loosely, as here, to call attention to whatever may or may not be properly taken as suitable criteria, evidence, and warrant for a set of claims about the process of interpreting in the domain of the literary arts. This general usage would then need careful qualification in the context of different assumptions that lie behind the resolution of interpretive cruxes in the poetry of suffering.

And, of course, the key notion of the "fictional" needs particular attention. Traditionally, talk of "fictions" in philosophical contexts, whether in Plato and Aristotle or in the Medievals and Moderns such as Aquinas and Spinoza, has been disparaging. The fictional is usually contrasted with the real as the actual or with the true as what is justifiably the case. Initially however the word may be used more neutrally, as in the Latin sense of *fictio* where the core meaning has to do with whatever is shaped, composed, invented, or constructed. Thus, I would use the expression "fiction" not with respect to products but mainly with respect to acts, for example, in the sense in which Carpaccio signs his *Disputation of Saint Stephen* in his narrative cycle in the Scuola di San Stefano in Venice: "Carpaccio finxit."³ We need

³ P. F. Brown, *Venetian Narrative Painting in the Age of Carpaccio* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), pp. 217-8.

now, however, to say something more about fiction.

[4.] Some Reminders About Fictions

Contemporary uses of the word "fiction" stress the thing as well as the action. Thus, a fiction can be either an imaginatively invented narrative, statement, idea, or the action of imaginatively inventing such things. More specifically, contemporary uses of "fiction" usually refer either to literary matters such as novels or stories or poems, conventionally accepted pretences in, for example, social situations (polite fictions we say), or to some elements of legal reasoning (legal fictions). The latter uses include suggestions of something false, untrue, or not genuine that are nonetheless conventionally acceptable. Recently, some literary scholars and philosophers have used the word "fictionalization" to particularize both the process and the product of constructive versions of actual events and entities.

If however we pursue an inquiry into what makes interpreting a poetic fiction rational with the distinction here between fictions as products and fictions as processes, as I have above, then right away several problematic issues arise. As a product, a fiction is some kind of thing. But of precisely what kind?⁴

One reply is that a fiction, say the character "Emma Bovary," is some thing that does not exist in the actual spatio-temporal world. But are we then to suppose that, besides existing entities comprising the actual world, other non-existing entities comprise other kinds of worlds? Such suppositions however remain controversial.

Perhaps a fiction is a thing that does not exist but could exist. But now, instead of a proliferation of non-existent, possible entities, we have a problem with accounting for those fictions, say square circles, that are impossible, that is,

entities with contradictory properties.

Are fictions then to be construed like, say, quarks, as theoretical entities? But many fictions are necessarily concrete, whereas theoretical entities are abstract.

Perhaps a fiction is an ontological type only, of which some actual entities are tokens. But, as we have noted, many fictions lack non-fictional counterparts. As types having no tokens, could fictions be types at all?

Of course strategies are on hand to deal with the simple objections here. But these strategies have given rise to more complicated objections. The result is that saying what fictions as products are remains difficult. And similar difficulties arise in articulating what fictions are as processes.

One approach to resolving such difficulties has been to focus on sentences that include fictions as substantives with a view towards establishing more precisely two things, the referent of such expressions and the truth or falsity of assertions that incorporate such expressions. In the first case, the problem has been to distinguish between two kinds of objects. On the one hand, the referent of a fictional expression might be taken as a non-existent object of some sort that subsists, that might exist (i.e. that is not impossible), but will never exist in the sense of being a spatio-temporal segment of the one actual world. In this sense, "Emma Bovary" will never exist. On the other hand, the referent might be taken as a possible object of some sort, i.e. an object that subsists, that might exist, and that may in fact sometimes become part of the one actual world. The peculiar mental state of Emma's quite particular boredom with Charles may one day be exactly the kind of boredom Louise Colet will come to experience with Flaubert. So far, however, neither alternative for construing the referent of fictional expressions has found consensus.

In the second case, the truth or falsity of sentences incorporating fictional expressions, similar debates continue. The critical issues here

⁴ See D. Proudfoot, "Fictional Entities," in D. Cooper, ed. *A Companion to Aesthetics* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell's, 1992), pp. 152-55.

seem to turn, as in some versions of instrumentalism in the philosophy of science, on whether using such expressions must commit one to asserting their problematic referents in some strong sense. Could one use such expressions without necessarily positing what these sentences state? If yes, then exactly what would the appropriate theory of reference look like in detail? If no, then what other distinctions than the shaky one here between weak and strong senses are required to deal effectively with the putative truth or falsity of such ordinary utterances as "Just like Emma, Diana the Princess of Wales was monumentally bored with Charles."

These issues are difficult. But however we choose to address these issues about fictional entities, their referents, and their putative truth or falsity, here is where a second key question about poetic fictions arises. Are there good enough reasons for taking some "poetic fictions" not just as referring to literary artworks but sometimes as referring to the mental contents of some species of interpretive mental acts?

Seeing whether such a question should monopolize all our critical attention however requires stepping back briefly to consider one further set of reflection on fictions.

[5.] Reflection on Fictions

European reflection on fictions begins mainly in the Homeric representations of the effects of bardic singing on heroic characters. Philosophically, Greek reflection focuses on forms of argument, especially Aristotle's key notion of "καθ' ὑπόθεσιν." Later, Roman rhetorical works, especially Quintilian's *Institutio oratorio*, explore the vague notion of "hypothesis" in the context of arguments that posit something as true that, if it were true, would either resolve or be useful in resolving a disputed issue. And Roman jurisprudence, especially Gaius' *Institutio juris civilis*, develops a similar notion of fictions as those kinds of hypotheses that, in the context of particular legal situations, can allow some otherwise insoluble matters to be adjudicated equitably.

The whole discussion of fictions as hypotheses however is subjected to reexamination in the early modern period thanks to Newton's distinction in the domain of physics between hypotheses and fictions. And in mathematics Leibniz introduces a further distinction between positive fictions like imaginary numbers that contribute to the solution of mathematical problems and negative fictions like formless first matter that have no connection with the nature of things. In the eighteenth century these distinctions are still active in A. Baumgarten's aesthetics and, in still clearer form, in the work of his successor, G. F. Meier.

The most important modern transformations and systematizations of classical reflection on fictions however are twofold. For besides the radical work of Newton and Leibniz, Kant introduces a fundamental rearticulation. Already in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (B 799 ff.) Kant is at work on specifying the concepts of reason as "heuristic fictions" or, in the more familiar phrase, as "regulative principles," that are required for the systematic articulation of the uses of the understanding and of the unity of reason itself. In his later work however, in the *Critique of Judgment* and especially in the *Opus postumum*, Kant tries to rethink his earlier reflection in terms of a typology of ideas and ideals of reason.⁵ This late work in turn stimulates further developments in Neo-Kantian circles. R. H. Lotze, for example in his 1843 *Logik*, while returning to the Newtonian preoccupation with distinguishing hypotheses from fictions, construes fictions as "assumptions" that are made in full awareness of their not holding in the actual world. Much later, in his 1902 work, *Über Annahmen*, A. Meinong will extensively develop this notion of "assumptions." And, in his attempts to systematize Neo-Kantian reflection on fictions under the late Kantian notion of "as if," H. Vaihinger will take "fiction" as what some would call today a "term of art," that is, a subjec-

⁵ See however the crucial role of Bolzano in the early critique of key issues in Kant's aesthetics in my book, *Modernity Aesthetics, and the Bounds of Art* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), pp. 125-46.

tive formulation that unlike an hypothesis is an element in some types of methodical investigation rather than a formulation of the probable results of a particular scientific investigation.

When we turn back from this brief historical sketch to our contemporary philosophical interests in fictions and rational interpretation, we can observe how some central aspects of the fictional have so far been either underemphasized or left out of account altogether. These aspects include questions about fictions as sources of knowledge and rational belief, as capable of generating genuine and not just spurious emotional involvement, and as capable of exercising a formative influence on the rationalization of certain actions.⁶ One issue however requires a closer look, the question as to whether some fictions may be properly considered as rational. Considering briefly this issue will bring into view our third and last question here about fictions.

[6.] Epistemic Rationality

Remedying the conceptual strains that appear in much current reflection on conceptions of rationality when interpreting the twentieth-century poetry of suffering is at issue requires, I think, displacing a largely epistemic notion of rationality with a mainly speculative or metaphysical one. For, accounting successfully for the distinctive features of such poetic fictions irreparably undermines the predominantly internalist, subjectivist, ahistorical, and foundationalist elements of such an epistemic notion. By contrast, these distinctive features come much clearer on the assumption of a metaphysical or speculative notion of rationality, a notion that is predominantly externalist, objectivist, historical, and non-foundationalist. Moreover, essential to this shift from one understanding of rationality to another, I think, is the role of a reconstructed notion of the

nature of the fictional in our construals of what makes interpreting rational in the domain of the arts.

The epistemic notion of rationality in question here is a strong, sophisticated version of a general conception of rationality deriving from Aristotle. In one of its recent and most cogent versions,⁷ this epistemic viewpoint on rationality is held to comprise both a goal and a perspective. The goal is that of, in the immediate as opposed to the mid or long term, believing truths and not believing falsehoods about, for example, what Bobrowski's talk of "your light" refers to. And the perspective is that of the reflective individual subject, of, we will say, the reflective interpreter of poetic fictions.

This epistemic viewpoint differs from an approach to rationality in terms of sets of rules whose following would constitute the rationality of a belief or action – think of "rules for interpretation." It also differs from an approach in terms of virtues where rationality is to be taken as the product of such dispositions as impartiality, thoroughness, and so on – think of the values and interests of "interpretive communities." Rather, the epistemic notion construes rationality in terms of a reflective interpreter's effectiveness in achieving goals; it focuses sharply on means-ends reasoning.

Key elements in this viewpoint on rationality, for example its strong ahistorical, subjective, and goal-oriented character, idealize the traditional Aristotelian conception of rationality. Here, what is rational for an interpreter to believe or to effect is for that person, all else being equal, to realise a goal, say a non-arbitrary interpretation of the poem, by making use of means that he or she would believe effective in realising such a goal, say by using a contextual methodology. The epistemic notion of rationality thus focuses this Aristotelian conception of rationality on the

⁶ I discuss some of these issues in detail in chapters three, four, and five of my book *Fictions, Philosophies, and the Problems of Poetics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), pp. 107-130, 131-151, and 152-219 respectively.

⁷ See R. Foley, *The Theory of Epistemic Rationality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987) and *Working Without A Net* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

general epistemic goal and perspective of the individual interpretive subject.

In this light, any judgment about the rationality of a reflective interpreter's beliefs about Bobrowski's "Latvian Autumn" should focus on the perspective of the interpreter. More precisely, the epistemic notion of rationality emphasizes that, all else being equal, it is rational for an interpreter to bring about Y if he or she has a goal X, and neither just believes that Y is an effective means to X, nor Y in fact is an effective means to X, but on reflection *would* believe that Y is an effective means to X.

But trying to interpret rationally representative poetic fictions like the reddish light of Bobrowski's "Latvian Autumn" from this kind of widespread epistemic viewpoint on rationality, I think, is just what needs displacement with a different conception, call it a less instrumental, a less procedural and more substantive, more constructionalist one.

Such an alternative conception of rationality is neither a foundationalist one according to which an interpreter is rational to the degree he or she assents to arguments that are in fact truth-preserving or likely to be so, as opposed to those that he or she would take to be truth preserving on reflection. Nor is an interpreter's belief to be understood as rational only over the long term (as opposed to rational from a synchronic viewpoint on the immediately present), i.e. rational just if the interpreter's belief follows on the use of reliable methods for forming, acquiring, and sustaining beliefs or from the proper functioning of reliable cognitive capacities. Of course a more substantive account of rationality that would elucidate how interpreting the poetry of suffering can be rational should preserve some of the still cogent features of an epistemic notion. But, more importantly, such an account needs to incorporate the missing yet essential externalist, objective, intersubjective, and constructionalist elements. And, if such components are to be effectively incorporated into a more adequate understanding of interpretive rationality in the arts, this substantive notion of rational-

ity must rearticulate a viable notion of the constructionalist aspects of interpretation in terms of the fictional.

Here then is a third and for now final question about fictions. How are we to articulate a less inappropriate understanding of the fictional in the painful and difficult contexts of the twentieth-century's distinctive poetry of suffering using the still vague terms here of a "constructionalism" that is objective enough to obviate interpretive arbitrariness yet subjective enough to accommodate genuine interpretive creativity?

But now, if not conclude, I must end.

Some years before Johannes Bobrowski's capture on the Eastern Front and commitment for almost fifteen years to slave labor in the Soviet coal mines, between February and March 1937, in the small provincial town of Voronezh during the Yezhov Terror in the Soviet Union, another poet in exile kept murmuring half-aloud the final lines of what would be an unfinished eight-part poetic cycle his wife and friends would memorize in their hope against hope that one day the poem could be written down with impunity. Here are these last lines.

Aortas fill with blood
 And a quiet whisper resounds through the ranks:
 "I was born in ninety-four,
 I was born in ninety-two . . ."
 And amidst the mob and the mass,
 Squeezing my outworn birthdate in my fist,
 I whisper through my blood-drained lips:
 "I was born the night of the 2nd to the 3rd
 Of January in the ninety-first
 Unreliable year, and the centuries
 Surround me with fire."⁸

In its magisterial command of the extraordinary Russian literary convention of Aesopian language, a language deliberately fashioned to mislead, this extended poem is both a memorial-

⁸ Osip Mandelstam, "Verses on the Unknown Soldier," tr. J. G. Harris in her *Osip Mandelstam* (Boston: Twayne, 1988), p. 144.

izing and a prophetic utterance.

Retrospectively, the poet links his unknown yet expected, rapidly approaching, and representative death – on December 27, 1939 from starvation and exhaustion outside Vladivostok in Magadan in the northern Siberian camps of the Kolyma River Gulag, his body with a wooden board and its inscribed number attached to his leg loaded on the cart with the other bodies and then dumped into a common grave – the poet ties his death to the memories of the immeasurable sufferings of the Russian revolutions, the First World War, the forced and massive population transfers, the unending purges, the terrors, the collectivisations, the famines. Prophetically, the poet anticipates the immensities of suffering that, six years later, were to overwhelm the numberless soldiers like Bobrowski and civilians like the poet's wife, Nadezhda, throughout the Voronezh Front of Operation Barbarossa and end only with the still uncounted dead of the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union. And, in a movement of imaginative and spiritual solidarity, the poet also fuses his individual suffering collectively with that of every human being who has ever lived or who will ever live.⁹

Now, trying to interpret reasonably such harrowing pieces as these and, more generally, the twentieth-century's distinctive poetry of suffering, suggests philosophical reconsideration of what makes interpretation in the domain of the arts rational. In particular, I have been suggesting that at least three questions need serious reconsideration. What could some poetic fictions be that they should be able to force fresh inquiry into our usual understandings of interpretation and reason? Second, are the referents of some poetic fictions to be construed as the mental contents of some species of interpretive mental

acts? And, finally, how could a so-called constructionalist account of such contents be at once both sufficiently objective and subjective too? Three questions then about poetic fictions – their nature, their referents, and their construction – require second thoughts.

My general proposal today – it can be nothing more – is that interpreting central instances of fictions in the poetry of suffering may be taken properly as rational when what is reasonable here is understood on neither instrumental nor procedural nor relativistic terms alone. Rather, what counts as reasonably interpreting poetic fictions must be construed in more substantive terms that specify a cardinal role for more speculative accounts of meaning, truth, and objectivity as aspects of the fictional, aspects, may we say, of Johannes Bobrowski's poetic fiction, of "the flame / Reddish in nothing but night"?

Postscript

Here is a slightly amended translation of the second part only of Johannes Bobrowski's October 1961 poem, "Latvian Autumn." The complete poem can be found in Bobrowski's *Gedichte* (second edition, Leipzig: Reclam, 1992), p. 89, translated by R. and M. Mead in Bobrowski's *Shadow Lands* (New York: New Directions, 1984), p. 148.

When the river is not awake any more,
the cloud above it, voices
of the birds, calls:
We shall not come any more –

Then I'll kindle your light,
that I cannot see, my hands
I shall lay over it, close
to the flame, that stayed
upright reddened by so much night
(like the castle that came down
over the slope, in ruins,
like a winged snake
of light through the river, like the hair
of the Jewish child)
and did not burn me.

⁹ See P. Maggs, *The Mandelstam and "Der Nister" Files: An Introduction to Stalin-era Prison and Labor Camp Records* (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1996), and M. Ignatieff, "Whispers from the Abyss," *The New York Review of Books*, October 3, 1996, pp. 4-6.

SPECULATIVE PHILOSOPHY AND THE HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY

James Lowry

Speculative philosophy is, exoterically speaking, many things to many people. The same can be said for metaphysics, which is sometimes thought to be identical to it. Metaphysics may be regarded traditionally as the kind of deductive speculation practised by the ancient Greeks — yet this tradition is often thought by modern empiricists to be reducible in its relevance to more physical speculation, or, as we might call it, natural science or more precisely physics. The only metaphysics popularly known today is the variety seen at psychic fairs where it is in the popular imagination akin to palm reading and astrology.

Spoken of esoterically, speculative philosophy is a perennial form of metaphysics which has had few successful practitioners and even fewer successful followers. There are important reasons for this. They have to do with the nature of philosophical history and systematic thought. True speculative philosophy requires the unity of two contrary abilities neither of which can properly become forms in which talent is reduced to technique. Such reduction naturally occurs when the contraries are separately pursued to their limits.

The contraries are, understood roughly, the history of philosophy on the one hand and philosophical speculation on the other. History of philosophy has a certain narrow meaning which is mostly due to the rise of empiricism in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. It came into its own in the nineteenth century. Today it is assumed ahistorically that everything has its history and is somehow what it is as a result. This is theoretically weak in so far as it itself has a history. We may call this the "paradox of history." Such paradox is the natural logical outcome of empiricism, caught as it is in time as motion unending.

The contrary to the "paradox of history" is empiricism in its purely sceptical form in which induction and time are replaced by assertion. This attitude of philosophy in its history becomes fossilized as "dogmatic theology." As living it is metaphysics ungrounded by dialectic. As such it is prone to sophistry in so far as it cannot be empirically opposed; that is, as unlimited by otherness, it has no measure.

The actual practitioners of speculative philosophy, as successful, will throw these remarks into the light in so far as they can be seen to be *both* historians of philosophy *and* metaphysicians. Their number is few. Among the Greeks, the discoverers and inventors of philosophy, we find Plato and Aristotle. Among the moderns we have only Kant and Hegel. Neoplatonism and Christianity provide a dividing line between the moderns and ancients. Neoplatonism is best represented by Plotinus and Proclus, while the Christian mediation finds its most successful advocate in Aquinas. The dividing line can again be drawn between Plato and Kant on the one side and Aristotle and Hegel on the other. Aquinas provides a nexus in so far as he uses Aristotle to guide him through a Neoplatonic universe.

What is unique to these seven philosophers is that each is both master of the history that preceded him and of pure speculative reasoning free of such history. Each recreates the tradition anew. Their followers inevitably bifurcate into "historical" traditionalists or "ahistorical" dogmatists. But the masters were "masters" just because each knew what we naively term "history of philosophy" supremely well; for it was in each case the painstaking working through such history that made possible the flowering of their thought as a synthesis, sometimes positive sometimes not. In the usual course of events,

such historical polymathy leads either to an indecisive learning too wide to focus on speculative truth, or a specialized thinking caught in the historical time warp of a single thinker ahistorically understood. The former indecision futilely loses the necessity of learning, the latter dogmatism is unable to grasp the polymathy that provides the necessary but insufficient condition of philosophical genius.

The sainted seven in our pantheon were able to be systematic and creative in spite of their learning and paradoxically also because of their polymathy. In other words they were *neither* overwhelmed with their learning *nor* carried away with unlearned ignorance. The consequences of being unable to withstand this paradox is best represented in the twentieth century by reflecting on the thought and careers of Wittgenstein and Heidegger. Wittgenstein impresses those unburdened by the empiricism of philosophical history with a subtle logic of temporality and encourages the more independent to embrace the purer empiricism of science. Heidegger impresses those unburdened by the logical requirements of metaphysical speculation with a sophisticated historical empiricism and encourages his more independent followers to embrace the more ethereal air of poetry and art.

A close reading of Plato and Aristotle reveals an unparalleled understanding and grasp of the writings and thoughts of their predecessors and a fine sense of the need to include these predecessors' thoughts in a perennial philosophy which completes itself in their own exposition of it — not as individuals but as followers, as devotees of the truth. Kant and Hegel show the same ability to combine knowledge of philosophical history with metaphysical argument. In Kant argument tends to predominate, while with Hegel history has a markedly more powerful presence. But with both there is a keen sense that being *systematic* will bring philosophical history to a close, though in opposite ways. As with the ancients, and this is crucial, Kant and Hegel see the effort of thought as passing through them *universally*, not just as a temporal or idiosyncratic anomaly.

To understand the achievement of Plato and Aristotle, of Kant and Hegel is to understand that philosophy cannot be confined to either its history or its logical exposition. It is, in its true form, the form of speculation as concrete, a *unique* conjunction of historical instantiation and pure logical construction.

The *way* in which Neoplatonism and Thomism bridge the chasm between the ancient and modern worlds illuminates the rationality of the speculative enterprise as perennial. Neoplatonism was an attempt to realign the negative doubt of the Sceptics and the cosmic dogma of the Stoics and Epicureans with the speculative insights of Plato and Aristotle. In this attempt philosophy was faced for the first time with the necessity of beginning with the ultimate principle rather than working up to it from a sensibility which simply assumes it. By placing Aristotle within a Platonic context Neoplatonism ended up with religion rather than philosophy. In the Thomistic synthesis this Neoplatonic reversion to religion is assumed and Aristotle becomes a prolegomenon to faith.

The breakup of Christianity into sectarianism sets loose once again scepticism and dogmatism: this time in the lethal form of an empiricism unchecked by metaphysics or theology. Kant and Hegel respond. Kant is unable to regain the high ground of metaphysics because the history he masters is, in the end, medieval theology on the one hand through Wolff and its negation on the other through Hume. Kant can only regain his faith through scepticism metaphysically argued. Hegel knows the history more completely, since he has direct access to the Greek texts of Plato and Aristotle. A Greek reincarnated in a Christian land, he seeks to ground faith in metaphysics and thus to refute Kant. Yet, as a modern, Hegel cannot give up a history so hard won, and will baptize metaphysics in the waters of empiricism. The rapprochement with the ancients as so mediated by Neoplatonism and Christianity remains unable to transcend an ultimate scepticism.

Moderns, caught in a dilemma of their own

making, are left with either the scepticism of Kant and the dogmatism of Hegel or, speculatively put, an amalgam, alchemically concocted, consisting of one part dogmatism of Kant and one part scepticism of Hegel. The essence of the dilemma shows itself historically, empirically, in time as a flight from reason to expressionism and naturalism, to art as secular, to physics rather than biology, to numbers rather than thoughts.

While we cannot simply follow Plato and Aristotle, Plotinus, Proclus and Aquinas, Kant and Hegel, we can learn from them as from no others a perennial lesson – the necessity of

knowing what has been thought in order to think systematically and anew. We will not extend the grasp of rationality as perennial except in the tradition they bequeath us as it was bequeathed to them. If we lose sight of their apprenticeship we will only lapse into mere imitation of an unknown past, into the sophistry of aphoristic profundity, into forms of pre-philosophy, into Tartarus and the life of the giants in unlit grottos longing for the light of Olympus. To see clearly, to bathe in the sunlit beams of Iris will be to accept the effort of historical labour and the liberation of it from itself at the very same time.

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