



NOTES
TO
LITERATURE

Volume One

European Perspectives
A Series in Social Philosophy and Cultural Criticism

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European Perspectives seeks to make available works of interdisciplinary interest by leading European thinkers. By presenting classic texts and outstanding contemporary works, the series hopes to shape the major intellectual controversies of our day and thereby to facilitate the tasks of historical understanding.

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fall outside the controversy over committed art and *l'art pour l'art*, outside the choice between the philistinism of art with a cause and the philistinism of art for enjoyment. Karl Kraus once formulated the idea that everything that spoke morally out of his works in the form of physical, non-aesthetic reality had been imparted to him solely under the law of language, thus in the name of *l'art pour l'art*. It is a tendency inherent in form that demands the abolition of aesthetic distance in the contemporary novel and its capitulation thereby to the superior power of reality—a reality that cannot be transfigured in an image but only altered concretely, in reality.



On Lyric Poetry and Society

The announcement of a lecture on lyric poetry and society will make many of you uncomfortable. You will expect a sociological analysis of the kind that can be made of any object, just as fifty years ago people came up with psychologies, and thirty years ago with phenomenologies, of everything conceivable. You will suspect that examination of the conditions under which works are created and their effect will try to usurp the place of experience of the works as they are and that the process of categorizing and relating will suppress insight into the truth or falsity of the object itself. You will suspect that an intellectual will be guilty of what Hegel accused the “formal understanding” of doing, namely that in surveying the whole it stands above the individual existence it is talking about, that is, it does not see it at all but only labels it. This approach will seem especially distressing to you in the case of lyric poetry. The most delicate, the most fragile thing that exists is to be encroached upon and brought into conjunction with bustle and commotion, when part of the ideal of lyric poetry, at least in its traditional sense, is to remain unaffected by bustle and commotion. A sphere of expression whose very essence lies in either not acknowledging the power of socialization or overcoming it through the pathos of detachment, as in Baudelaire or Nietzsche, is to be arrogantly turned into the opposite of what it conceives itself to be through the way it is examined. Can anyone, you will ask, but a man who is insensitive to the Muse talk about lyric poetry and society?

Clearly your suspicions will be allayed only if lyric works are not abused by being made objects with which to demonstrate sociological

theses but if instead the social element in them is shown to reveal something essential about the basis of their quality. This relationship should lead not away from the work of art but deeper into it. But the most elementary reflection shows that this is to be expected. For the substance of a poem is not merely an expression of individual impulses and experiences. Those become a matter of art only when they come to participate in something universal by virtue of the specificity they acquire in being given aesthetic form. Not that what the lyric poem expresses must be immediately equivalent to what everyone experiences. Its universality is no *volonté de tous*, not the universality of simply communicating what others are unable to communicate. Rather, immersion in what has taken individual form elevates the lyric poem to the status of something universal by making manifest something not distorted, not grasped, not yet subsumed. It thereby anticipates, spiritually, a situation in which no false universality, that is, nothing profoundly particular, continues to fetter what is other than itself, the human. The lyric work hopes to attain universality through unrestrained individuation. The danger peculiar to the lyric, however, lies in the fact that its principle of individuation never guarantees that something binding and authentic will be produced. It has no say over whether the poem remains within the contingency of mere separate existence.

The universality of the lyric's substance, however, is social in nature. Only one who hears the voice of humankind in the poem's solitude can understand what the poem is saying; indeed, even the solitariness of lyrical language itself is prescribed by an individualistic and ultimately atomistic society, just as conversely its general cognecy depends on the intensity of its individuation. For that reason, however, reflection on the work of art is justified in inquiring, and obligated to inquire concretely into its social content and not content itself with a vague feeling of something universal and inclusive. This kind of specification through thought is not some external reflection alien to art; on the contrary, all linguistic works of art demand it. The material proper to them, concepts, does not exhaust itself in mere contemplation. In order to be susceptible of aesthetic contemplation, works of art must always be thought through as well, and once thought has been called into play by the poem it does not let itself be stopped at the poem's behest.

Such thought, however—the social interpretation of lyric poetry as of all works of art—may not focus directly on the so-called social perspective or the social interests of the works or their authors. Instead, it must

discover how the entirety of a society, conceived as an internally contradictory unity, is manifested in the work of art, in what way the work of art remains subject to society and in what way it transcends it. In philosophical terms, the approach must be an immanent one. Social concepts should not be applied to the works from without but rather drawn from an exacting examination of the works themselves. Goethe's statement in his *Maxims and Reflections* that what you do not understand you do not possess holds not only for the aesthetic attitude to works of art but for aesthetic theory as well; nothing that is not in the works, not part of their own form, can legitimate a determination of what their substance, that which has entered into their poetry, represents in social terms. To determine that, of course, requires both knowledge of the interior of the works of art and knowledge of the society outside. But this knowledge is binding only if it is rediscovered through complete submission to the matter at hand. Special vigilance is required when it comes to the concept of ideology, which these days is belabored to the point of intolerability. For ideology is untruth, false consciousness, deceit. It manifests itself in the failure of works of art, in their inherent falseness, and it is countered by criticism. To repeat mechanically, however, that great works of art, whose essence consists in giving form to the crucial contradictions in real existence, and only in that sense in a tendency to reconcile them, are ideology, not only does an injustice to their truth content but also misrepresents the concept of ideology. That concept does not maintain that all spirit serves only for some human beings to falsely present some particular values as general ones; rather, it is intended to unmask spirit that is specifically false and at the same time to grasp it in its necessity. The greatness of works of art, however, consists solely in the fact that they give voice to what ideology hides. Their very success moves beyond false consciousness, whether intentionally or not.

Let me take your own misgivings as a starting point. You experience lyric poetry as something opposed to society, something wholly individual. Your feelings insist that it remain so, that lyric expression, having escaped from the weight of material existence, evoke the image of a life free from the coercion of reigning practices, of utility, of the relentless pressures of self-preservation. This demand, however, the demand that the lyric word be virginal, is itself social in nature. It implies a protest against a social situation that every individual experiences as hostile, alien, cold, oppressive, and this situation is imprinted in reverse on the poetic work: the more heavily the situation weighs upon it, the more

firmly the work resists it by refusing to submit to anything heteronomous and constituting itself solely in accordance with its own laws. The work's distance from mere existence becomes the measure of what is false and bad in the latter. In its protest the poem expresses the dream of a world in which things would be different. The lyric spirit's idiosyncratic opposition to the superior power of material things is a form of reaction to the reification of the world, to the domination of human beings by commodities that has developed since the beginning of the modern era, since the industrial revolution became the dominant force in life. Rilke's cult of the thing [as in his *Dinggedichte* or "thing poems"] is part of this idiosyncratic opposition; it attempts to assimilate even alien objects to pure subjective expression and to dissolve them, to give them metaphysical credit for their alienness. The aesthetic weakness of this cult of the thing, its obscurantist demeanor and its blending of religion with arts and crafts, reveals the real power of reification, which can no longer be gilded with a lyrical halo and brought back within the sphere of meaning.

To say that the concept of lyric poetry that is in some sense second nature to us is a completely modern one is only to express this insight into the social nature of the lyric in different form. Analogously, landscape painting and its idea of "nature" have had an autonomous development only in the modern period. I know that I exaggerate in saying this, that you could adduce many counterexamples. The most compelling would be Sappho. I will not discuss the Chinese, Japanese, and Arabic lyric, since I cannot read them in the original and I suspect that translation involves them in an adaptive mechanism that makes adequate understanding completely impossible. But the manifestations in earlier periods of the specifically lyric spirit familiar to us are only isolated flashes, just as the backgrounds in older painting occasionally anticipate the idea of landscape painting. They do not establish it as a form. The great poets of the distant past—Pindar and Alcaeus, for instance, but the greater part of Walther von der Vogelweide's work as well—whom literary history classifies as lyric poets are uncommonly far from our primary conception of the lyric. They lack the quality of immediacy, of immateriality, which we are accustomed, rightly or not, to consider the criterion of the lyric and which we transcend only through rigorous education.

Until we have either broadened it historically or turned it critically against the sphere of individualism, however, our conception of lyric poetry has a moment of discontinuity in it—all the more so, the more

pure it claims to be. The "I" whose voice is heard in the lyric is an "I" that defines and expresses itself as something opposed to the collective, to objectivity; it is not immediately at one with the nature to which its expression refers. It has lost it, as it were, and attempts to restore it through animation, through immersion in the "I" itself. It is only through humanization that nature is to be restored the rights that human domination took from it. Even lyric works in which no trace of conventional and concrete existence, no crude materiality remains, the greatest lyric works in our language, owe their quality to the force with which the "I" creates the illusion of nature emerging from alienation. Their pure subjectivity, the aspect of them that appears seamless and harmonious, bears witness to its opposite, to suffering in an existence alien to the subject and to love for it as well—indeed, their harmoniousness is actually nothing but the mutual accord of this suffering and this love. Even the line from Goethe's "Wanderers Nachtlied" ["Wanderer's Night-Song"], "Warte nur, balde / ruhest du auch" ["Only wait, soon / you too shall rest"] has an air of consolation: its unfathomable beauty cannot be separated from something it makes no reference to, the notion of a world that withholds peace. Only in resonating with sadness about that withholding does the poem maintain that there is peace nevertheless. One is tempted to use the line "Ach, ich bin des Treibens müde" ["I am weary of restless activity"] from the companion poem of the same title to interpret the "Wanderers Nachtlied." To be sure, the greatness of the latter poem derives from the fact that it does not speak about what is alienated and disturbing, from the fact that within the poem the restlessness of the object is not opposed to the subject; instead, the subject's own restlessness echoes it. A second immediacy is promised: what is human, language itself, seems to become creation again, while everything external dies away in the echo of the soul. This becomes more than an illusion, however; it becomes full truth, because through the expression in language of a good kind of tiredness, the shadow of yearning and even of death continues to fall across the reconciliation. In the line "Warte nur, balde" the whole of life, with an enigmatic smile of sorrow, turns into the brief moment before one falls asleep. The note of peacefulness attests to the fact that peace cannot be achieved without the dream disintegrating. The shadow has no power over the image of life come back into its own, but as a last reminder of life's deformation it gives the dream its profound depths beneath the surface of the song. In the face of nature at rest, a nature from which all traces of anything resembling the human

have been eradicated, the subject becomes aware of its own insignificance. Imperceptibly, silently, irony tinges the poem's consolation: the seconds before the bliss of sleep are the same seconds that separate our brief life from death. After Goethe, this sublime irony became a debased and spiteful irony. But it was always bourgeois: the shadow-side of the elevation of the liberated subject is its degradation to something exchangeable, to something that exists merely for something else; the shadow-side of personality is the "So who are you?" The authenticity of the "Nachtlied," however, lies in its moment in time: the background of that destructive force removes it from the sphere of play, while the destructive force has no power over the peaceable power of consolation. It is commonly said that a perfect lyric poem must possess totality or universality, must provide the whole within the bounds of the poem and the infinite within the poem's finitude. If that is to be more than a platitude of an aesthetics that is always ready to use the concept of the symbolic as a panacea, it indicates that in every lyric poem the historical relationship of the subject to objectivity, of the individual to society, must have found its precipitate in the medium of a subjective spirit thrown back upon itself. The less the work thematizes the relationship of "I" and society, the more spontaneously it crystallizes of its own accord in the poem, the more complete this process of precipitation will be.

You may accuse me of so sublimating the relationship of lyric and society in this definition out of fear of a crude sociology that there is really nothing left of it; it is precisely what is not social in the lyric poem that is now to become its social aspect. You could call my attention to Gustav Doré's caricature of the arch-reactionary deputy whose praise of the *ancien régime* culminated in the exclamation, "And to whom, gentlemen, do we owe the revolution of 1789 if not to Louis XVI!" You could apply that to my view of lyric poetry and society: in my view, you could say, society plays the role of the executed king and the lyric the role of his opponents; but lyric poetry, you say, can no more be explained on the basis of society than the revolution can be made the achievement of the monarch it deposed and without whose inanities it might not have occurred at that time. We will leave it an open question whether Doré's deputy was truly only the stupid, cynical propagandist the artist derided him for being or whether there might be more truth in his unintentional joke than common sense admits; Hegel's philosophy of history would have a lot to say in his defense. In any case, the comparison does not

really work. I am not trying to deduce lyric poetry from society; its social substance is precisely what is spontaneous in it, what does not simply follow from the existing conditions at the time. But philosophy—Hegel's again—is familiar with the speculative proposition that the individual is mediated by the universal and vice versa. That means that even resistance to social pressure is not something absolutely individual; the artistic forces in that resistance, which operate in and through the individual and his spontaneity, are objective forces that impel a constricted and constricting social condition to transcend itself and become worthy of human beings; forces, that is, that are part of the constitution of the whole and not at all merely forces of a rigid individuality blindly opposing society. If, by virtue of its own subjectivity, the substance of the lyric can in fact be addressed as an objective substance—and otherwise one could not explain the very simple fact that grounds the possibility of the lyric as an artistic genre, its effect on people other than the poet speaking his monologue—then it is only because the lyric work of art's withdrawal into itself, its self-absorption, its detachment from the social surface, is socially motivated behind the author's back. But the medium of this is language. The paradox specific to the lyric work, a subjectivity that turns into objectivity, is tied to the priority of linguistic form in the lyric; it is that priority from which the primacy of language in literature in general (even in prose forms) is derived. For language is itself something double. Through its configurations it assimilates itself completely into subjective impulses; one would almost think it had produced them. But at the same time language remains the medium of concepts, remains that which establishes an inescapable relationship to the universal and to society. Hence the highest lyric works are those in which the subject, with no remaining trace of mere matter, sounds forth in language until language itself acquires a voice. The unself-consciousness of the subject submitting itself to language as to something objective, and the immediacy and spontaneity of that subject's expression are one and the same: thus language mediates lyric poetry and society in their innermost core. This is why the lyric reveals itself to be most deeply grounded in society when it does not chime in with society, when it communicates nothing, when, instead, the subject whose expression is successful reaches an accord with language itself, with the inherent tendency of language.

On the other hand, however, language should also not be absolutized as the voice of Being as opposed to the lyric subject, as many of the current ontological theories of language would have it. The subject,

whose expression—as opposed to mere signification of objective contents—is necessary to attain to that level of linguistic objectivity, is not something added to the contents proper to that layer, not something external to it. The moment of unself-consciousness in which the subject submerges itself in language is not a sacrifice of the subject to Being. It is a moment not of violence, nor of violence against the subject, but reconciliation: language itself speaks only when it speaks not as something alien to the subject but as the subject's own voice. When the "I" becomes oblivious to itself in language it is fully present nevertheless; if it were not, language would become a consecrated abracadabra and succumb to reification, as it does in communicative discourse. But that brings us back to the actual relationship between the individual and society. It is not only that the individual is inherently socially mediated, not only that its contents are always social as well. Conversely, society is formed and continues to live only by virtue of the individuals whose quintessence it is. Classical philosophy once formulated a truth now disdained by scientific logic: subject and object are not rigid and isolated poles but can be defined only in the process in which they distinguish themselves from one another and change. The lyric is the aesthetic test of that dialectical philosophical proposition. In the lyric poem the subject, through its identification with language, negates both its opposition to society as something merely monadological and its mere functioning within a wholly socialized society [*vergesellschaftete Gesellschaft*]. But the more the latter's ascendancy over the subject increases, the more precarious the situation of the lyric becomes. Baudelaire's work was the first to record this; his work, the ultimate consequence of European *Weltschmerz*, did not stop with the sufferings of the individual but chose the modern itself, as the antilyrical pure and simple, for its theme and struck a poetic spark in it by dint of a heroically stylized language. In Baudelaire a note of despair already makes itself felt, a note that barely maintains its balance on the tip of its own paradoxicalness. As the contradiction between poetic and communicative language reached an extreme, lyric poetry became a game in which one goes for broke; not, as philistine opinion would have it, because it had become incomprehensible but because in acquiring self-consciousness as a literary language, in striving for an absolute objectivity unrestricted by any considerations of communication, language both distances itself from the objectivity of spirit, of living language, and substitutes a poetic event for a language that is no longer present. The elevated, poeticizing, subjectively violent moment in weak later lyric

poetry is the price it has to pay for its attempt to keep itself undisfigured, immaculate, objective; its false glitter is the complement to the disenchanting world from which it extricates itself.

Everything I have said needs to be qualified if it is to avoid misinterpretation. My thesis is that the lyric work is always the subjective expression of a social antagonism. But since the objective world that produces the lyric is an inherently antagonistic world, the concept of the lyric is not simply that of the expression of a subjectivity to which language grants objectivity. Not only does the lyric subject embody the whole all the more cogently, the more it expresses itself; in addition, poetic subjectivity is itself indebted to privilege: the pressures of the struggle for survival allow only a few human beings to grasp the universal through immersion in the self or to develop as autonomous subjects capable of freely expressing themselves. The others, however, those who not only stand alienated, as though they were objects, facing the disconcerted poetic subject but who have also literally been degraded to objects of history, have the same right, or a greater right, to grope for the sounds in which sufferings and dreams are welded. This inalienable right has asserted itself again and again, in forms however impure, mutilated, fragmentary, and intermittent—the only forms possible for those who have to bear the burden.

A collective undercurrent provides the foundation for all individual lyric poetry. When that poetry actually bears the whole in mind and is not simply an expression of the privilege, refinement, and gentility of those who can afford to be gentle, participation in this undercurrent is an essential part of the substantiality of the individual lyric as well: it is this undercurrent that makes language the medium in which the subject becomes more than a mere subject. Romanticism's link to the folksong is only the most obvious, certainly not the most compelling example of this. For Romanticism practices a kind of programmatic transfusion of the collective into the individual through which the individual lyric poem indulged in a technical illusion of universal cogency without that cogency characterizing it inherently. Often, in contrast, poets who abjure any borrowing from the collective language participate in that collective undercurrent by virtue of their historical experience. Let me mention Baudelaire again, whose lyric poetry is a slap in the face not only to the *juste milieu* but also to all bourgeois social sentiment, and who nevertheless, in poems like the "Petites vieilles" or the poem about the servant woman with the generous heart in the *Tableaux Parisiens*, was truer to the

masses toward whom he turned his tragic, arrogant mask than any "poor people's" poetry. Today, when individual expression, which is the precondition for the conception of lyric poetry that is my point of departure, seems shaken to its very core in the crisis of the individual, the collective undercurrent in the lyric surfaces in the most diverse places: first merely as the ferment of individual expression and then perhaps also as an anticipation of a situation that transcends mere individuality in a positive way. If the translations can be trusted, García Lorca, whom Franco's henchmen murdered and whom no totalitarian regime could have tolerated, was the bearer of a force of this kind; and Brecht's name comes to mind as a lyric poet who was granted linguistic integrity without having to pay the price of esotericism. I will forgo making a judgment about whether the poetic principle of individuation was in fact sublated to a higher level here, or whether its basis lies in regression, a weakening of the ego. The collective power of contemporary lyric poetry may be largely due to the linguistic and psychic residues of a condition that is not yet fully individuated, a state of affairs that is prebourgeois in the broadest sense—dialect. Until now, however, the traditional lyric, as the most rigorous aesthetic negation of bourgeois convention, has by that very token been tied to bourgeois society.

Because considerations of principle are not sufficient. I would like to use a few poems to concretize the relationship of the poetic subject, which always stands for a far more general collective subject, to the social reality that is its antithesis. In this process the thematic elements, which no linguistic work, even *poésie pure*, can completely divest itself of, will need interpretation just as the so-called formal elements will. The way the two interpenetrate will require special emphasis, for it is only by virtue of such interpenetration that the lyric poem actually captures the historical moment within its bounds. I want to choose not poems like Goethe's, aspects of which I commented on without analyzing, but later ones, poems which do not have the unqualified authenticity of the "Nachtlied." The two poems I will be talking about do indeed share in the collective undercurrent. But I would like to call your attention especially to the way in which in them different levels of a contradictory fundamental condition of society are represented in the medium of the poetic subject. Permit me to repeat that we are concerned not with the poet as a private person, not with his psychology or his so-called social perspective, but with the poem as a philosophical sundial telling the time of history.

Let me begin by reading you Eduard Mörike's "Auf einer Wanderung" ["On a Walking Tour"]:

In ein freundliches Städtchen tret' ich ein
 In den Strassen liegt roter Abendschein,
 Aus einem offenen Fenster eben,
 Über den reichsten Blumenflor
 Hinweg, hört man Goldglockentöne schweben,
 Und *eine* Stimme scheint ein Nachtigallenchor,
 Daß die Blüten beben,
 Daß die Lüfte leben,
 Daß in höherem Rot die Rosen leuchten vor.
 Lang' hielt ich staunend, lustbekommen.
 Wie ich hinaus vors Tor gekommen,
 Ich weiss es wahrlich selber nicht,
 Ach hier, wie liegt die Welt so licht!
 Der Himmel wogt in purpurnem Gewühle,
 Rückwärts die Stadt in goldnem Rauch;
 Wie rauscht der Erlenbach, wie rauscht im Grund die Mühle!
 Ich bin wie trunken, irreführt—
 O Muse, du hast mein Herz berührt
 Mit einem Liebeshauch!

[I enter a friendly little town,
 On the streets lies the red evening light,
 From an open window,
 Across the richest profusion of flowers
 One hears golden bell-tones hover,
 And *one* voice seems to be a choir of nightingales,
 So that the blossoms quaver,
 So that the breezes are lively,
 So that the roses glow forth in a higher red.

I stood a long while marvelling, oppressed with pleasure.
 How I got out beyond the city gate,
 I really do not know myself,
 Oh, how bright the world is here!
 The sky surges in purple turbulence,
 At my back the town in a golden haze;
 How the alder stream murmurs, how the mill roars below!

I am as if drunken, led astray—
Oh muse, you have touched my heart,
With a breath of love!]

Up surges the image of the promise of happiness which the small south German town still grants its guests on the right day, but not the slightest concession is made to the pseudo-Gothic small-town idyll. The poem gives the feeling of warmth and security in a confined space, yet at the same time it is a work in the elevated style, not disfigured by *Gemütlichkeit* and coziness, not sentimentally praising narrowness in opposition to the wide world, not happiness in one's own little corner. Language and the rudimentary plot both aid in skillfully equating the utopia of what is close at hand with that of the utmost distance. The town appears in the narrative only as a fleeting scene, not as a place of lingering. The magnitude of the feeling that results from the speaker's delight in the girl's voice, and not that voice alone but the voice of all of nature, the choir, emerges only outside the confined arena of the town, under the open purple-billowing sky, where the golden town and the rushing brook come together in the *imago*. Linguistically, this is aided by an inestimably subtle, scarcely definable *classical*, ode-like element. As if from afar, the free rhythms call to mind unrhymed Greek stanzas, as does the sudden pathos of the closing line of the first stanza, which is effected with the most discreet devices of transposition of word order: "Daß in höherem Rot die Rosen leuchten vor." The single word "Muse" at the end of the poem is decisive. It is as if this word, one of the most overused in German classicism, gleamed once again, truly as if in the light of the setting sun, by being bestowed upon the *genius loci* of the friendly little town, and as though even in the process of disappearing it were possessed of all the power to enrapture which an invocation of the muse in the modern idiom, comically inept, usually fails to capture. The poem's inspiration proves itself perhaps more fully in this than in any of its other features: that the choice of this most objectionable word at a critical point, carefully prepared by the latent Greek linguistic demeanor, resolves the urgent dynamic of the whole like a musical *Abgesang*.* In the briefest of spaces, the lyric succeeds in doing what the German epic attempted in vain, even in such projects as Goethe's *Hermann und Dorothea*.

*The *Abgesang* was the closing portion of a stanza in medieval lyric poetry.

The social interpretation of a success like this is concerned with the stage of historical experience evidenced in the poem. In the name of humanity, of the universality of the human, German classicism had undertaken to release subjective impulses from the contingency that threatens them in a society where relationships between human beings are no longer direct but instead mediated solely by the market. It strove to objectify the subjective as Hegel did in philosophy and tried to overcome the contradictions of men's real lives by reconciling them in spirit, in the idea. The continued existence of these contradictions in reality, however, had compromised the spiritual solution: in the face of a life not grounded in meaning, a life lived painstakingly amid the bustle of competing interests, a prosaic life, as artistic experience sees it; in the face of a world in which the fate of individual human beings works itself out in accordance with blind laws, art, whose form gives the impression of speaking from the point of view of a realized humanity, becomes an empty word. Hence classicism's concept of the human being withdrew into private, individual existence and its images; only there did humanness seem secure. Of necessity, the idea of humankind as something whole, something self-determining, was renounced by the bourgeoisie, in aesthetic form as in politics. It is the stubborn clinging to one's own restricted sphere, which itself obeys a compulsion, that makes ideals like comfort and *Gemütlichkeit* so suspect. Meaning itself is linked to the contingencies of human happiness; through a kind of usurpation, individual happiness is ascribed a dignity it would attain only along with the happiness of the whole. The social force of Mörike's genius, however, consists in the fact that he combined the two experiences—that of the classicistic elevated style and that of the romantic private miniature—and that in doing so he recognized the limits of both possibilities and balanced them against one another with incomparable tact. In none of his expressive impulses does he go beyond what could be genuinely attained in his time. The much-invoked organic quality of his work is probably nothing other than this tact, which is philosophically sensitive to history and which scarcely any other poet in the German language possessed to the same degree. The alleged pathological traits in Mörike reported by psychologists and the drying up of his production in later years are the negative aspect of his very highly developed understanding of what is possible. The poems of the hypochondriacal clergyman from Cleversulzbach, who is considered one of our naive artists, are virtuoso pieces unsurpassed by the masters of *l'art pour l'art*. He is as aware of the empty and ideological aspects of

elevated style as of the mediocrity, petit-bourgeois dullness, and obliviousness to totality of the Biedermeier period, in which the greater part of his lyric work falls. The spirit in him is driven to create, for the last time, images that would betray themselves neither by their classical drapery nor by local color, neither by their manly tones nor by their lip-smacking. As if walking a fine line, the residues of the elevated style that survive in memory echo in him, together with the signs of an immediate life that promised fulfillment precisely at the time when they were already condemned by the direction history was taking; and both greet the poet on his wandering only as they are about to vanish. He already shares in the paradox of lyric poetry in the ascending industrial age. As indeterminate and fragile as his solutions are the solutions of all the great lyric poets who come afterwards, even those who seem to be separated from him by an abyss—like Baudelaire, of whom Claudel said that his style was a mixture of Racine's and that of the journalists of his time. In industrial society the lyric idea of a self-restoring immediacy becomes—where it does not impotently evoke a romantic past—more and more something that flashes out abruptly, something in which what is possible transcends its own impossibility.

The short poem by Stefan George I would now like to discuss derives from a much later phase in this development. It is one of the celebrated songs from the *Seventh Ring*, a cycle of extremely condensed works which for all their lightness of rhythm are over-heavy with substance and wholly without *Jugendstil* ornament. Their eccentric boldness was rescued from the frightful cultural conservatism of the George circle only when the great composer Anton von Webern set them to music; in George, ideology and social substance are very far apart. The song reads:

Im windes-weben
 War meine frage
 Nur träumerei.
 Nur lächeln war
 Was du gegeben.
 Aus nasser nacht
 Ein glanz entfacht—
 Nun drängt der mai
 Nun muss ich gar
 Um dein aug und haar
 Alle tage
 In sehnen leben.

[In the winds-weaving
 My question was
 Only daydreaming.
 Only a smile was
 What you gave.
 From a moist night
 A gleam ignites—
 Now May urges
 Now I must
 For your eyes and hair
 Every day
 Live in yearning.]

Unquestionably, this is elevated style. Delight in things close at hand, something that still colors Mörike's much earlier poem, has fallen under a prohibition. It has been banished by the Nietzschean pathos of detached reserve which George conceives himself to be carrying on. The remains of Romanticism lie, a deterrent, between him and Mörike; the remains of the idyll are hopelessly outdated and have degenerated to heartwarmers. While George's poetry, the poetry of an imperious individual, presupposes individualistic bourgeois society and the autonomous individual as its preconditions, a curse is put on the bourgeois element of conventional form no less than on the bourgeois contents. But because this poetry can speak from no overarching framework other than the bourgeois, which it rejects not only tacitly and a priori but also expressly, it becomes obstructed: on its own initiative and its own authority, it simulates a feudal condition. Socially this is hidden behind what the cliché refers to as George's aristocratic stance. This stance is not the pose that the bourgeois, who cannot reduce these poems to objects of fondling, waxes indignant about. Rather, despite its demeanor of hostility to society, it is the product of the social dialectic that denies the lyric subject identification with what exists and its world of forms, while that subject is nevertheless allied with the status quo in its innermost core: it has no other locus from which to speak but that of a past seignorial society. The ideal of nobility, which dictates the choice of every word, image, and sound in the poem, is derived from that locus, and the form is medieval in an almost undefinable way, a way that has been virtually imported into the linguistic configuration. To this extent the poem, like George altogether, is neoromantic. But it is not real things and not sounds that are evoked but rather a vanished condition of the soul. The

artistically effected latency of the ideal, the absence of any crude archaicism, raises the song above the hopeless fiction it nonetheless offers. It no more resembles the medieval imitations used on wall plaques than it does the repertoire of the modern lyric; the poem's stylistic principle saves it from conformity. There is no more room in it for organic reconciliation of conflicting elements than there was for their pacification in the reality of George's time; they are mastered only through selection, through omission. Where things close at hand, the things one commonly calls concrete immediate experiences, are admitted into George's lyric poetry at all, they are allowed only at the price of mythologization: none may remain what it is. Thus in one of the landscapes of the *Seventh Ring* the child picking berries is transformed, wordlessly, as if with a magic wand, through a magical act of violence, into a fairy-tale child. The harmony of the song is wrested from an extreme of dissonance: it rests on what Valéry called *refus*, on an unyielding renunciation of everything through which the conventions of lyric poetry imagine that they have captured the aura of things. The method retains only the patterns, the pure formal ideas and schemata of lyric poetry itself, which speak with an intensity of expression once again in divesting themselves of all contingency. In the midst of Wilhelmine Germany the elevated style from which that lyric poetry emerged as polemic has no tradition at all to which it may appeal, least of all the legacy of classicism. It is achieved not by making a show of rhetorical figures and rhythms but by an ascetic omission of whatever might diminish its distance from a language sullied by commerce. If the subject is to genuinely resist reification in solitude here, it may no longer even try to withdraw into what is its own as though that were its property; the traces of an individualism that has in the meantime delivered itself over to the market in the form of the feuilleton are alarming. Instead, the subject has to step outside itself by keeping quiet about itself; it has to make itself a vessel, so to speak, for the idea of a pure language. George's greatest poems are aimed at rescuing that language. Formed by the Romance languages, and especially by the extreme simplification of the lyric through which Verlaine made it an instrument of what is most differentiated, the ear of George, the German student of Mallarmé, hears his own language as though it were a foreign tongue. He overcomes its alienation, which is an alienation of use, by intensifying it until it becomes the alienation of a language no longer actually spoken, even an imaginary language, and in that imaginary language he perceives what would be possible, but never

took place, in its composition. The four lines "Nun muss ich gar / Um dein aug und haar / Alle tage / In sehnen leben," which I consider some of the most irresistible lines in German poetry, are like a quotation, but a quotation not from another poet but from something language has irrevocably failed to achieve: the medieval German poetry of the *Minnesang* would have succeeded in achieving it if it, if a tradition of the German language—if the German language itself, one is tempted to say—had succeeded. It was in this spirit that Borchardt tried to translate Dante. Subtle ears have taken umbrage at the elliptical "gar," which is probably used in place of "ganz und gar" [completely] and to some extent for the sake of the rhyme. One can concede the justice of this criticism and the fact that as used in the line the word has no proper meaning. But great works of art are the ones that succeed precisely where they are most problematic. Just as the greatest works of music may not be completely reduced to their structure but shoot out beyond it with a few superfluous notes or measures, so it is with the "gar," a Goethean "residue of the absurd" in which language escapes the subjective intention that occasioned the use of the word. It is probably this very "gar" that establishes the poem's status with the force of a *déjà vu*: through it the melody of the poem's language extends beyond mere signification. In the age of its decline George sees in language the idea that the course of history has denied it and constructs lines that sound as though they were not written by him but had been there from the beginning of time and would remain as they were forever. The quixotism of this enterprise, however, the impossibility of this kind of restorative writing, the danger of falling into arts and crafts, enriches the poem's substance: language's chimerical yearning for the impossible becomes an expression of the subject's insatiable erotic longing, which finds relief from the self in the other. This transformation of an individuality intensified to an extreme into self-annihilation—and what was the Maximin cult in the late George but a desperate renunciation of individuality construing itself as something positive—was necessary in creating the phantasmagoria of the folksong, something the German language had been groping for in vain in its greatest masters. Only by virtue of a differentiation taken so far that it can no longer bear its own difference, can no longer bear anything but the universal, freed from the humiliation of isolation, in the particular does lyrical language represent language's intrinsic being as opposed to its service in the realm of ends. But it thereby represents the idea of a free humankind, even if the George School concealed this idea from

itself through a base cult of the heights. The truth of George lies in the fact that his poetry breaks down the walls of individuality through its consummation of the particular, through its sensitive opposition both to the banal and ultimately also to the select. The expression of his poetry may have been condensed into an individual expression which his lyrics saturate with substance and with the experience of its own solitude; but this very lyric speech becomes the voice of human beings between whom the barriers have fallen.



In Memory of Eichendorff

Je devine, à travers un murmure
Le contour subtil des voix anciennes
Et dans les lueurs musiciennes,
Amour pâle, une aurore future!
Verlaine, "Ariettes oubliées"

*I*n a culture that has been resurrected on a false basis, one's relation to the cultural past is poisoned. Love for the past is frequently accompanied by resentment toward the present; by belief in the possession of a heritage that one loses the moment one imagines it cannot be lost; by a feeling of comfort in familiar things that have been handed down and under whose aegis those whose complicity helped pave the way for the horror hope to escape it. The alternative to all that seems to be an incisive gesture of "that's no longer acceptable." Sensitivity to the false happiness of a cozy security zealously seizes upon the dream of a true happiness, and heightened sensitivity to sentimentality contracts until it is focused on the abstract point of the mere present, in the face of which what once existed counts no more than if it had never existed. One might say that experience is the union of tradition with an open yearning for what is foreign. But the very possibility of experience is in jeopardy. The break in the continuity of historical consciousness that Hermann Heimpel saw results in a polarization: on the one hand, cultural goods that are antiquarian, and perhaps even shaped for ideological purposes; and on the other, a contemporary historical moment that, precisely because it is lacking in memory, is ready to subscribe to the status quo, even by mirroring it where it opposes it. The rhythm of time has become distorted. While the streets of philosophy are echoing with the metaphysics of time, time itself, once measured by the steady course of a person's life, has become alienated from human beings; this is probably why it is being discussed so feverishly. Something in the past that had truly been handed down would have been sublated in its opposite, in the most