Strangeness–Measure of Poeticity?

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1. The Notion of Strangeness: Some Ramifications and Complications

Critical discourses, as we all know, are founded on very few central axioms, or even on only one; they can perhaps best be comprehended as unfoldings and enactments of these axiomatic conceptions, be they existential, moral, metaphysical, epistemological, or whatever. The idea of *strangeness* functions as such an axiom, and it may be more frequent in discourses about poetry than others because it is a purely formal notion and can occur in different concrete manifestations, within different contexts. It may, in a sense, be something like an axiom of axioms, or an axiom that is capable of generating the more concrete axiomatic bases of specific discourses about poetry. (The term *poetry*, incidentally, is used here in its full ambiguity, i.e. as referring to poetry as a genre and to imaginative literature in general, in so far as it is viewed as being essentially similar to poetry and dependent for its existence on essentially poetical principles.)[1]

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[1] The 'confusion' is of venerable age, which presumably argues for some degree of usefulness on its part. It is there when, for Aristotle, the poet becomes *the* artificer, and one of its more recent manifestations occurs in the New Critical writings of Tate and Ransom — particularly of the latter, which may suggest that it is more useful to "philosophical" or "theoretical" discussions, with their tendency to aim at a notion of literariness, rather than to practical discussions of the concrete act of writing. Compare, however, the well-known practical implications of the theoretical position — the poeticization of all other literary genres in modernism. Cf., e.g., Earl H. Rovit, "The Ambiguous Modern Novel," *Yale Review*, NS 49 (1959/60), 413–424. — I am conscious of arguing largely in a modernist context at this point already; this is an anticipation of the thematic focus on the modernist notion of *poetry* that will be more fully developed later.

The term *strangeness*, then, appears to have the scope (some would say, the vagueness) indispensable to cover a series of notions concerning what makes a poetic text poetic; these are notions of *difference* that imply estrangement,[2] distance, and newness — or one might say they imply temporal or spatial or psychological dislocation from an area of the known to an area of the unknown. Whether such dislocation happens on the level of form (genre, register, imagery, perspective, or what not) or on the level of content (thought, message, setting, action, character, or what not) is immaterial to the present discussion; for indeed, the notion of strangeness is less applicable to the isolated poem 'as it is' and its different constituent elements, than to the interaction between it and the reader's mind (to *Rezeption*) and even to the process of its creation, and in both of these dimensions, the form/content distinction appears as even less apt to produce genuine insight than in that of the poem-as-product.[3]

The notion of strangeness, as a basically experiential category, can then cut across the form/content dichotomy (or opoosition, or dialectic) within the poem, while also leading to a formalist analysis of the pragmatic dimension of the poetic text. This use of the category is indebted to the well-known definition of a fictional event (i. e. an event in narrative), by Lotman, as the transgression of the boundary between two semantic fields.[4] This is an obviously formalist notion which can, I

[2] I am avoiding more clearly system-bound terms like *alienation, Verfremdung, Entfremdung, anomie, deviation, subversion,* etc., in order to keep the discussion as free as possible from clearly circumscribed ideological contents and implications.

[3] We know that the poem-as-product co-exists with other texts that appear to say the same or very similar things in different ways, or that appear to say other things in very similar ways; paraphrase and discussions of genre would otherwise be illicit activities. But we do not know in the same way how paraphrasable content or genre-bound form enter into the author's creation of the poem or the reader's perception of it.

[4] Jurij M. Lotman, *Die Struktur literarischer Texte* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1972), p. 332: "Ein Ereignis im Text ist die Versetzung einer Figur über die Grenze eines semantischen Feldes." This is part of Lotman's discussion of *Sujetaufbau*, i. e. of the creation of a thematic narrative structure in a text. As such it is, on the one hand, nothing but a re-statement and amplification of the general structuralist tenet that meaning arises out of difference. On the other hand, Lotman stresses (pp. 332 f.) the fact that such differences are culturally sanctioned, that they are bound up with the entire system of the culture within which the text exists, and that they therefore have far-ranging ideological impli-

believe, be said to realize the pragmatic focus or intention of Russian "formalism" more clearly than other tenets of that movement;[5] and it seems to lend itself to extension and application in other areas of inquiry. If we can define the narrative event as a transgression of one sort, perhaps we can define the poetical event, in strict analogy, as the transgression of boundaries between semantic fields, of which one is defined as near, known, and accepted, and the other as distant, unknown, and unaccepted or unacceptable. Such a notion would be informed with the concept of the poetical 'effect' as a form of aesthetic information – as innovation over a redundant repertoire of the known.

This view makes it easy, at least, to say which critical axioms of poeticity are excluded from this discussion: all those that talk about poetry as a return from the distant, the unknown, the unaccepted or unacceptable, to the near — in other words, all those that view the poetic process as a transgression of the same boundary, but in the other direction. Such views, the paradigm of which is perhaps the definition of poetry as the mother tongue of humanity or as the language of humanity's infancy, and of the poet as a child, pose problems of a very interesting nature once they are phrased in terms of the notion derived from Lotman, with its focus on information and innovation; for what concept of information is hidden where the transgression does not produce the new, but always only the already known? In terms of all viable definitions of information, it seems to me, this would be a self-contradiction or at least a paradox. This may be why such axioms of poeticity do not readily seem to occur by themselves and in pure form as constitutive axioms of discourses about poetic texts, but always in more or less apparent intermixture with their opposites. The language of humanity's infancy is then recovered in poetry as one that is forever new, and so forth.

This is not to say that both views of poeticity occur only in necessary admixture. Interestingly enough, there are fairly pure historical forms

cations. The German translation of Lotman to which I am referring actually uses the term *Weltbild* in this context, and it is precisely this focus or direction of the analysis that I would wish to preserve for the following discussion of strangeness as a measure of poeticity.

[5] I am regarding — for the moment at least — both Russian Formalism proper, as it developed in connection with the avant-gardes of the second and third decades of our century, and the much more recent so-called Tartu/Moscow school as parts of one general intellectual movement.

of the one that is based on strangeness, particularly among the avant-gardes of this century; I wish to argue here that its entire predominance is a very recent phenomenon and that strangeness is a or the dominant criterion of poeticity only in Modernist aesthetics.[6] Since strangeness is an age-old criterion in definitions of poetry and in statements of poetic intention, this argument can only hold if it is possible to disentangle a more basic notion of strangeness — presumably restricted to the period or movement of Modernism — from more general and historically less restricted ideas of difference and (particularly) of transformation.

A glance at the rebirth metaphor at the center of the *Tempest* that has so frequently served as a description or even definition of the poetic process[7] may be enough to make my meaning clear — though not, of course, to validate it in any way.

> Nothing of him [Alfonso, or the subject] that doth fade,
> But doth suffer a Sea-change
> Into something rich, & strange ... (I ii, 463–65, Variorum Ed.)

What, concretly, poetry does *in* the process of transformation is discretely left unmentioned by references to Ariel's delusive song; what it does *through* that process is clearly indicated. It conquers and annihilates the poverty, averageness and mortality of our daily reality by transforming it into something different: rich, strange, and immortal.

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[6] It should be added at this point that the sketch I am going to attempt does not, of course, pretend to "define" Modernism or Modernist aesthetics in any way. In particular, it disregards what used to be a dominant element in Modernist self-reflection and in the early criticism of Modernist fiction, but what has become something of a lost perspective: the "realist" argument that said, basically, that the formal and thematic innovation of Modernism was at least in part mimetic. The criticism of, e.g., George Orwell is a case in point, the most famous example probably being "Inside the Whale."

[7] The metaphor may, incidentally, be ironically disavowed by the plot of the entire drama, since *no death takes place*. This dimension is ignored by its "poetological" uses, although it could be incorporated via the notion of make-believe, of poetry-as-lie. George Steiner's speculations concerning the loss of all pretensions to "immortality" in our "post-culture" are not completely incompatible with my following argument. ("In a Post-Culture," *Extraterritorial* [Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975], pp. 163 ff.) In that essay, Steiner is concerned with the changes I consider in my last section, and he stresses the classic heritage in its continuities up to and including Modernism, where I try to divide it up into significantly different phases. He, therefore, preserves the links between immortality, richness, and strangeness (or difficulty) that I attempt to sever.

For the Elizabethan, with his acute and almost medieval consciousness of death, immortality must have been the dominant element in the series. And Shakespeare's terms *rich* and *strange* are, in a sense, nothing but specifying, concretizing metaphors for *immortal* – i. e., for the term that does not even occur verbatim in the passage, but that rather constitutes the overall meaning of the the entire statement. It is that notion of immortality and the general context of the drama, with Prospero as the artist-magician, which is the starting point of all applications of the passage to poetry, as a metaphorically poetological statement.

For the bourgeois civilization of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with its materialism and idealism, and with its specific fusion of both, *rich* must have occupied the same place. Palgrave's *Golden Treasury* is not carelessly or accidentally, but programmatically named.[8] In the late nineteenth century search for the historical, the archaic, and the exotic, richness and strangeness momentarily become one,[9] and ever since the primary function of poetry seems to have been to conquer the alienation and ennui of inauthentic twentieth century existences through strangeness.

The three terms are not only separate ones, though, which indicate separate and different aspects of poetry; they are also, in some measure, tautological and concerned with one and the same aspect of poetry: its

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[8] In the dedication to Tennyson, Palgrave expresses his hope that the anthology will be "a lifelong fountain of innocent and exalted pleasure; a source of animation ...; and able to sweeten solitude itself with best society, — with the companionship of the wise and the good, with the beauty which the eye cannot see, and the music only heard in silence." Strangeness is conspicuous by its absence from the catalogue of attributes.

[9] It is interesting to observe that in Eric Warner and Graham Hough's recent anthology *Strangeness and Beauty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), the term does not even occupy a central position — except in the title. It does not occur in the introduction to the first volume, and in that to the second one the reader only finds the passing remark that "for Pater beauty was always allied with a certain strangeness" (p. 1). I take this refusal of Warner and Hough to focus on the notion of strangeness as an indication of their recognition that — though it is important enough in the pre- or proto-modernist current of thought in the nineteenth century with which they are concerned to merit a place in their title — it still remains an implicit and subsidiary, rather than a dominant and explicit criterion of poeticity or aspect of poetry. One should perhaps explore the idea that the *ennui* of the 19th century, about which George Steiner talks at length in *In Bluebeard's Castle* (London: Faber, 1971), creates the criterion of strangeness.

constituent difference from other discourses. In this sense, Ariel's song as a cliché view of poetry defines all poetic discourse as strange. But the general strangeness of poetry that becomes visible behind the more specific term does so (and becomes interesting), I think, only or primarily in the light of the twentieth-century's predominantly Modernist aesthetics. Retrospectively, we recognize precursors and anticipations of our current axioms and interests that had not appeared in the same light before. The Warner/Hough anthology, for example, is expressly dedicated to the attempt to show that "the early Modernists opposed the ruling orthodoxy of High Victorian tastes and standards by developing the antithesis to that orthodoxy which Victorian culture had in fact engendered within itself."[10] The shaping interest of the present, then, illuminates the entire past so as to establish interpretive and legitimizing links with it — though this may only happen after a period of antagonism and disruption designed to legitimize the present by denying the legitimacy of the past.

There is the related strategy of applying criteria and methods, assumptions and interests shaped in constant interaction with twentieth-century (modernist and post-modernist) texts to earlier ones, and it produces results that are extremely interesting and very disturbing at the same time. When, for example, Viola Sachs "reveals" the paleo-, proto-, or quasi-(post)modernism of Melville, she lays bare, I think, a dimension of his work that exists "objectively" and that accounts for its seminal nature, particularly in the Modernist 1920's and 1930's.[11]

On the other hand, a *caveat* of Harriet Hawkins' (in a completely

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[10] Vol. 1, p. 1. Does historical change ever happen in any other way?

[11] Viola Sachs, *The Game of Creation: The Primeval Unlettered Language of "Moby-Dick; or, The Whale,"* (Paris: Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, 1982). Cf. the current tendency to take seriously D. H. Lawrence's postulate of a constituent subversiveness of American Literature, and to connect it with a notion of the essential or anticipatory modernity of (particularly nineteenth-century) American authors. A characteristic example would be *Nathaniel Hawthorne: New Critical Essays*, ed. A. Robert Lee (London: Vision, 1982); cf., in particular, Lee's "Introduction" (pp. 7-10): Hawthorne's has been recognized as "a trenchant, subversive imagination" (p. 7), and in spite of all his historical interests, Hawthorne "also points forward: in the striking modernity of his philosophical interests and in his strategies of voice and narrative which for many anticipate literary modernism, and even post-modernism." (8) This is not an isolated view in the volume, but an adequate description of its entire tendency.

different context) comes to mind that could, for our purposes, be re-phrased to read as follows:

> A theory which is not refutable by anything that might occur in a given body of works *cannot* serve to explain specific traits that do occur in individual works. Thus, the universal applicability of a theory is not its greatest virtue, but, arguably, a vice resulting in dogmatic, one-sided and boring books and articles that slavishly apply the reigning theory to whatever works it has not previously been applied. It might be more fruitful to consider ways in which a theory which does illuminate certain works does *not* apply to others.[12]

If the tendency here exemplified by Warner and Hough is to say, basically, that Modernism was, after all, not nearly as new as its exponents and propagandists pretended, the tendency sketched out via the Hawkins adaptation is to 'modernisticize' all (good) literature. The net result, or the besetting danger, is in both cases that historical differences are denied, at the same time that an approach to texts is found that is experienced as vital or relevant. What is given to (literary) history with one hand, is taken from it with the other.

It appears necesssary therefore to disengage the more specific notion of strangeness from the more general one, and to concern oneself less with that difference between poetic and other discourses that has to do with poetry's immortality or richness, than with that difference that rests on difference, or that strangeness that is defined as strangeness pure and simple. It is necessary, in other words, to focus (once more) on the fact that strangeness has a privileged status in twentieth-century definitions of poetry.

It must already have become obvious that I do not wish to deal with any specific national literature – either its poetry or its aesthetics — and

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[12] Harriet Hawkins, "Critical Studies," *Shakespeare Survey*, 34 (1981), 161–177. The original quotation, on p. 177, reads:

> A theory which is not refutable by anything that might occur in the complete works of Shakespeare *cannot* serve to explain specific events that do occur in individual works. Thus, the universal applicability of a theory is not its greatest virtue, but, arguably, a vice resulting in dogmatic, one-sided and boring books and articles that slavishly apply the reigning theory to whatever works it has not previously been applied. It might be more fruitful to consider ways in which a theory which does illuminate certain works does *not* apply to others. Thus, our various 'approaches' might serve as incentives to independent thought rather than substitutes for it.

In order not to be misunderstood, I should add that the criticism here suggested could easily be turned against my own *Ästhetische Innovation und Kulturkritik: Das Frühwerk von John Dos Passos*, (München: Fink, 1983).

that I do not wish to deal with the chronological permutations of the criterion of strangeness. Having indicated that one can indeed perceive in the course of history several such permutations, I would rather like to concentrate on the Modernist version, which appears to me as the most absolute, the most ontological one. For whatever reasons, at this point in history the term *strangeness* appears most adequate as a description of the being of poetry, of what makes a poetic text poetic.

In the following discussion, I am conscious of straddling a few borderlines that normally serve good purposes. Trying to deal with the underlying axioms of critical and creative verbal acts, my own discourse will necessarily waver between theory and history, between criticism and metacriticism. The ultimate focus, however, is clearly historical. It is the attempt to use the question of the criterion of strangeness to differentiate (once again) the Modernist enterprise from predecessors and successors, and thereby to preserve the period concept of Modernism as a viable tool of historical analysis.

In this attempt, the following questions will briefly be looked into:

What does the term *strangeness* concretely refer to in Modernist texts?

What is the basis of the notion's predominance in our century?

What is currently (in "Postmodernism"?) happening to it?

2. Strangeness in Modernism: From Paradigmatic to Syntagmatic Axis

The easiest way to a concrete discussion of that strangeness that makes for poeticity is through an interpretation of the transgression of the boundary between the known and the unknown under the headings of *selection* and *combination*. These being the two essential acts of any process of contextualization, strangeness is then firmly anchored in the actual production of the text, as its overriding strategy.[13]

[13] I am, of course, using the same distinction that Jakobson used to define the metaphorical and the metonymical as two basic strategies of contextualization, which he identified with symbolic and realistic modes of writing. (See Roman Jakobson, "Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances," *Selected Writings II: Word and Language*, [The Hague: Mouton, 1971], 239–259). After David Lodge's work along the lines suggested by Jakobson, the latter identification would seem to break down or to be in considerable need of modification (see: "The Language of Modernist Fiction: Metaphor and Metonymy," in *Modernism: 1890-1930*, ed. Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, [Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976], pp. 481 ff., and *The Modes of*

Selection deals with terminology, subject, theme, character, place, atmosphere, and so forth; in all of these areas, there exist elements that are *as such* (i. e. historically) defined as poetic. This presupposes the existence of a widely accepted canon of elements of poetry that are guaranteed by conventions. It presupposes the validity of the notion that there are two verbal universes as well as two experiential universes that exist in parallel: the everyday and the poetical, or the practical and the artistic. Such canons are, as we all know, sometimes surprisingly stable. Although the notion that the realm of nature is more poetical than that of civilization, or that the rural is more poetical than the urban, changes in its concrete manifestations, the basic distinctions function even today, so that we 'read' a reference to nature as more poetical than one to the city, unless we are informed otherwise. The convention as the base line of communication is still intact.

It has to be acknowledged, at the same time, that the convention has lost some of its ability to bind authors and readers into comprehensive communities of communication: The conventionally guaranteed poetical element of one group has precisely become the trite cliché of another group, and this is particularly obvious with regard to terminology. As a measure of true poeticity, the very distinction between the two languages of life and of art has largely broken down; the criterion of strangeness is no longer found on the side of the conventionally poetical discourse, but rather on that of language not conventionally poetical, used in a context that re-defines it, through *combination*, as poetical. It seems that this dimension has been strengthened as that of selection has been weakened. This is not only true of terminology, the surprising collocation of terms having reached unprecedented degrees of strangeness in our century perhaps, but also of elements from reality introduced into the context of the poem. Any comparison between, say, a few lines from Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* like these:

Modern Writing: Metaphor, Metonymy, and the Typology of Modern Literature, [London: Arnold, 1977]), but the difficulty may merely lie in the attempt to define discourses on the basis of one single strategy of contextualization, when Jakobson himself stresses the fact that the basic operations of substitution and combination recur independently on each of a number of levels of contextualization. I am therefore *not* attempting to describe, via these terms, the entire process of contextualization but only the act of creating strangeness, of violating an expectation, and that is, of selecting from a repertoire. The terms *selection* and *combination*, in his argument, both refer to acts of substituting the unexpected for the expected.

> ... our horses, stumbling as they trode
> On heaps of ruin, hornless unicorns,
> Crack'd basilisks, and splinter'd cockatrices,
> And shatter'd talbots, which had left the stones
> Raw, that they fell from, brought us to the hall,

and another few lines like Eliot's

> A rat crept softly through the vegetation
> Dragging its slimy belly on the bank ...

will, I think, clarify sufficiently the difference between a poetry that relies for its poeticity on selection, both of thing and word, and a different kind of poetry that relies rather more exclusively on combination — ultimately, of course, even on a combination of repertoires whose separation was the basis of conventional belles-lettres. Strangeness, here, does not have the same underpinning of convention, and hence familiarity, that it has in the earlier text; it is rather more absolute, and more clearly connected with difficulty or hermeticism. To decode this kind of message presupposes the knowledge of an entirely new repertoire of rules of contextualization, not just that of a repertoire of things and terms (and literary forms). One could perhaps even go so far as to suggest that repertoires of such rules of contextualization are the only essential (enabling) repertoires of poetry in our time — everything else has been placed in jeopardy.

3. The Limits of Strangeness

One could speak, then, of a loss of the notion of inherently poetic matter and inherently poetic language in Modernism – i. e. a loss of the connection between strangeness and *paradigm*, and a new *syntagmatic* notion of strangeness. The slogan *Make It New* would appear to refer less to the creation of new elements and patterns, than to a continuous process of new combinations. This view of strangeness, even more than the paradigmatic one, poses the problem of a regulating and delimiting agency. It is obvious that the degree of deviation may be a measure of a text's poeticity *up to a certain point*; it is at least as obvious that beyond that point there is no further increase in poeticity, but rather a sudden and (in a sense) irrevocable fall into nonsense. (The move is irrevocable in the sense that it lays bare and unmasks strategies of poeticization that

have to remain masked in order to remain viable.) There are texts, of course, that straddle the line between poetry and nonsense — Gertrude Stein comes to mind immediately. Their existence proves the existence of the line and its relevance to this type of discussion; for it seems to be fairly obvious in such texts that in order to remain acceptable as poetry they strengthen certain types or forms of control at the same time that they abolish others. (Gertrude Stein, for example, often employs a very rigid principle of serial transformation which offers the reader at least a rhythmical order, where semantic order is denied.)

It seems to be rare, however, that the problem of regulation is seen in terms of greater or lesser degrees of control, i.e., in terms of an interplay of tendencies that are of the same order. (And such notions are always in danger of deteriorating into empty postulates of 'balance.') Much more frequent and characteristic appears to be the gesture used by Ransom at the end of his essay "Wanted: An Ontological Critic"[14] — the appeal to a shared sense of reality, or to a common standard of language, or (a criterion underlying both earlier ones) to a shared participation in a communicative community. Deviation is, then, quite simply limited by communication— which is either a truism or a problem. We can regard ourselves as members of the same historically formed and historically continuous community of readers, or we can — still taking communication, in a sense, for granted — think that we are free to choose that attitude; we are then competent, in our own minds, to judge whether communication works in a given text, and depending on whether it does or not, the deviation in that particular text will or will not have communicative value. It is only when we refuse or are unable to take that attitude of *faith* that the problem becomes real. Much of the theoretical writing of the New Criticism, as well as of related forms of Modernist criticism, is predominantly a search for such a faith. The centrality of ideas like those of the symbol, of myth, of *Gestalt*, of anthropologically given forms of perception and interaction is evidence of this concern and of the overriding need to anchor the primary move towards authenticity-through-strangeness in a counter-

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[14] John Crowe Ransom, *The New Criticism* (1941; reprint Westport: Greenwood, 1979), pp. 279 ff.; cf. George Steiner's fear, expressed in *The Death of Tragedy* (1961; rpt. New York: Oxford U.P., 1980), p. 321, that "when it is torn loose from the moorings of myth [i.e., a communal repertoire that amounts to a world view], art tends toward anarchy."

move towards that which is always already known, which is, in a sense, absolute. This was all the more necessary since the notion of strangeness tended to be invested with an absoluteness of its own.

4. Strangeness in Modernism: The Fusion of History and Ontology

The characteristic gesture of Modernist dealings with the problem of strangeness appears to be the attempt to collapse its two perspectives into one another — the ontological one, according to which poetry, through its strangeness, affords a glimpse of another, and invariably higher reality, and the historical one, according to which that strangeness is a product and a strategy of a renewal of (general, average) language that perpetually goes on in poetry. This collapsing I take to be the source of the absolute character of strangeness in Modernism.

Some confusion of the two perspectives is perhaps unavoidable. The most clearly avant-garde notion of poetry will violate the anticipatory gesture implied in the name of the avant-garde and reassure itself of its own validity through recourse to that privileged alienation that *makes* poets and poetry. Even where Russian Formalism and the Prague School define the ever-recurring act of de-automatization as *the* historical act of poetry, there lurks the ontological gap between normalcy and strangeness; and taken collectively, the two languages of *praxis* and art *are* separate, irreconcilable, of radically different ontological status. Conversely, even in the most clearly ontological program of Ransom's "Wanted: An Ontological Critic," which is motivated by an attempt to step outside history, that ontological gap between *praxis* and art is (at decisive moments in the argument) threatened with a sort of disintegration into a historical one: When the middle-of-the-road strangeness which Ransom attributes to *really* great art gives way to a more radical strangeness that he finds in modernist poetry, it is not only that different meanings are attributed to the two kinds of poetry, but different *functions*. Thus, Ransom's notion of strangeness as the manifestation of a second level of reality disintegrates into radically different strangeness*es* that exist in historical succession and that result from different historical relations between the language of poetry and the language of everyday reality.

The fusion of perspectives can perhaps be best understood within the context of the relationship between Modernism on the one hand and

Romanticism and Classicism, or romantic and classic tendencies, on the other. The classicist and the romanticist have no quarrel about the existence of a "normal" level of thought, language, and existence, *and* the existence of a strange level. They do have a quarrel about their interrelation. For the classicist, the separation between the levels is an ontological given: Art has to do with a higher reality that is not subject to historical change in the same way as our everday reality: it has to do with models that aspire to the status of timeless ideals, and this is why, to the classicist, poetry can be both sublime and sublimely irrelevant. To the romantic, on the other hand, art anticipates or recreates realities in the image of their own innate potentials, and the revolutionary or avant-gard intention is never very deep below the surface.

Paradoxically, this intention to interrelate art and life in a historical relationship frees the former to attempt all kinds of experiments, where the classicist scheme imposes restraints on the degree of strangeness. The separateness of the poetic and the everday codes "freezes" the poetic one in its own ideal, eternal realm and de-historicizes it. Ideally, at least, the classicist code should not change, but form a fixed canon of works and norms. Conversely, the romantic view, at least in theory, demands a constant reaching-out towards the unprecedented. In Modernism, the alternative is replicated in the tension between the slogan *Make It New*, with its implied avant-garde program, and the frantic search for a viable canon and for a rigidly structured cultural system to which one might unquestioningly adhere, which appears most clearly in the classicism of Eliot and the Southern Agrarians/New Critics.

In Modernism, then, the two dimensions in which the notion of strangeness exists in pre-Modernist aesthetic thought appear to be collapsed into one: history and ontology, process and stasis, becoming and being are *intentionally* fused. If one takes the Modernists to be *primarily* the heirs of the Romantic movement, this fusion can be explained as a result of a radical doubt whether a new future or a genuine regeneration is indeed possible, or whether it has always already been pre-empted by an overwhelming dead past. What is strange, then, must not ever be overtaken by normalcy, and the classicist introduction of the notion of a second level of language and reality — indeed, of another reality — guarantees that it never is. This distrust of the historical can also be found in the Modernist fascination with apocalyptic endings, which seem to guarantee that history will, at least, not end in a whimper. (The recognition of the Thirties and Forties that the apocalypse could indeed

take on the aspect of triviality, in a sense was the death-blow to this High Modernist notion.)

This attempt to fuse the two basic currents of Western aesthetics cannot take place except in tension and paradox. It is a highly ambivalent solution, which, in the context of cultural politics, can serve just about any purpose; it is also a very intense one, and its intensity reflects the urgency of the need to justify and legitimize strangeness as a source of authenticity and ultimately of authority, for the work and for the voice behind it. The cultural moment in which it occurs, then, is obviously one that exhibits its own demand for a separation of life and art as a separation of the inauthentic from the authentic.

Criticism is easy — perhaps too easy — at this point: the criterion of strangeness is a reification of the criterion of difference. By using it, one can avoid specifying the kind and degree of difference that separates art from reality, while at the same time generalizing it (ultimately) into an absolute. The critique of reality that may, conceivably, take place in and through art (and particularly in and through literature, since it shares the medium of language with severely practical forms of interaction and communication) then becomes unspecific, even abstract, and in a bad sense utopian.

5. The Present: The Loss of the Poetological Criterion via a Diffusion of Strangeness?

The criterion of strangeness seems to have lost its force in the contemporary scene. I do not mean to say that the modernist discourse(s) based on that axiom have lost their strangeness; one could rather argue the reverse — that they have preserved it remarkably well and that, although we have developed some strategies to deal with them more or less intelligently, we have not managed to domesticate them. What I mean to say is rather that those discourses have spilled over into the everyday world, via fashion, advertising, the media, in such a way as to endanger or entirely take away from that strangeness the ability to function as a barrier between art and life. Life, one might say, has become strange along similar lines as modernist art, via processes of aestheticization and semioticization[15] that, in turn, have led to the as-

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[15] Art, in a sense, would seem to have left the museum and to have spilled

sumption, by art, of a different, new stance towards life. It can frequently, I think, be called a play *in* and *about* life, rather than *against* life — which would, I think, be an adequate formula for much of what Modernists were doing. This would indicate a change in the function and in the institutional status of art, upon which I should briefly like to comment by way of a coda to this sketch.

In a recent essay, Peter Bürger deals with Habermas' argument that art, together with science and ethics/law, constitutes a realm of abstract or theoretical thought that has to be reconciled with *praxis*. The esoteric knowledge provided by the three cultural disciplines has to be made usable in an attempt to re-invest the average existence with meaning:

> As the [religious and metaphysical] world views disintegrate and the traditional problems — divided up according to the specific perspectives of truth, of conformity to norms, of authenticity or beauty — can be dealt with separately as questions of knowledge, of justice, of taste, there occurs a differentiation of science, ethics, and art from one another, as spheres of values. ... The project of the modern, as it was formulated by the philosophers of the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century, consists in the attempt rigorously to develop the objectifying sciences, the universalistic foundations of ethics and law, and the autonomous arts according to their own innate laws, but *at the same time also* to free the cognitive potential thus accumulated from its esoteric form and to utilize it practically, i. e., for the reasonable shaping of the conditions of life.[16]

over into life, thereby losing authority and "sacred" relevance, but gaining in contact, interaction, and "communicative" relevance. In the contemporary city, one of the most widespread and profitable activities appears to be the selling of beauty, and this has led to a transformation both of the city and of the notion of beauty. Poeticity no longer primarily resides in the context of the art object, or in the work-as-context, but comes to be lodged in the context provided *for* the work, or for *any* object that will, then, be defined as an art object.

[16] Jürgen Habermas, "Die Moderne — ein unvollendetes Projekt," *Die Zeit*, 19 September 1980, p. 48; quoted in Peter Bürger, "Institution Literatur und Modernisierungsprozeß," in *Zum Funktionswandel der Literatur*, ed. P. Bürger, (Frankfurt/Main: Surkamp, 1983), p. 10:
"Indem die [religiösen und metaphysischen] Weltbilder zerfallen und die überlieferten Probleme unter den spezifischen Gesichtspunkten der Wahrheit, der normativen Richtigkeit, der Authentizität oder Schönheit aufgespalten, jeweils *als* Erkenntnis-, *als* Gerechtigkeits-, *als* Geschmacksfragen behandelt werden können, kommt es zur Ausdifferenzierung der Wertsphären Wissenschaft, Moral und Kunst. [...] Das Projekt der Moderne, das im 18. Jahrhundert von den Philosophen der Aufklärung formuliert worden ist, besteht nun in dem Bemühen, die objektivierenden Wissenschaften, die universalistischen Grundlagen von Moral und Recht und die autonome Kunst

Against this view, Bürger advances his own argument, which refers back to the more conventional notion that art concerns itself with a realm that is opposed to rational thought; he suggests that Habermas overlooks "the conflict . . . into which art (as it has been institutionalized in fully developed bourgeois society) enters with rationalism as the ruling principle of that society."[17] To Habermas' opposition *esoteric/theoretical vs. practical*, Bürger adds the opposition *irrational vs. rational* — one that aligns, e. g., science with *praxis* and opposes both of them to art. He is, then, quite right in finding the two distinctions incompatible, and the statements about the status and function of art they imply, mutually contradictory. It is all the more interesting that he also recognizes their tendency to be intermingled and confused with one another, for example in the thought of Max Weber. There, Bürger argues, the opposition rationality/irrationality constitutes the institutional *locus* of art in (bourgeois) society, while at the same time a specific kind of rationality is attributed to it — albeit a non-practical one.[18]

The antagonism of the two arguments is predominantly a Modernist problem. It is, more specifically, I believe, the result of a tension between the *institutional locus* and the *function* of art in Modernist societies: the first opposition (*theory vs. praxis*) is concerned with the formal status of the institution in the overall culture, and it defines it as *Überbau*, or super-structure; the second one formalizes art's concern with the limits of all the dominant cultural patterns of problem solution within a given civilization. (A view expressed most clearly by Adorno and Iser, perhaps.) Many Modernist discussions of art that are concerned with a definition of art as an institution via a description of its function appear to be bothered by this tension and try to ignore it or blur its outlines. The New Criticism as shaped by Ransom and Tate, e. g., with its insistence on a superior kind of knowledge attainable in art, which is privileged precisely because it does not obey the laws of rationality, but which *is* knowledge because it obeys the laws of a

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unbeirrt in ihrem jeweiligen Eigensinn zu entwickeln, aber *gleichzeitig auch* die kognitiven Potentiale, die sich so ansammeln, aus ihrer esoterischen Form zu entbinden und für die Praxis, das heißt, für eine vernünftige Gestaltung der Lebensverhältnisse zu nutzen."

[17] Bürger, p. 10, focusing on "den Widerspruch . . ., in den die Kunst (so wie sie in der entfalteten bürgerlichen Gesellschaft institutionalisiert ist) mit dem Rationalismus als dem beherrschenden Prinzip dieser Gesellschaft tritt."

[18] Bürger, pp. 11 f.

different kind of 'logic', is a case in point. Such a position does reconcile the apparent contradiction between the two basic views, but only through an act of verbal sleight-of-hand, through a creative *and* dangerous misuse of the term *knowledge*.

The notion of strangeness, now, is meaningful only in the context of the second opposition: it confronts art, in an act of implicit criticism, with the entire rest of the civilization and, more specifically, with its *rationale* and its concept of rationality. If this is correct, and if my assumption that the criterion of strangeness is losing ground in our contemporary cultural scene is correct, then what I have been trying to hint at is that the loss of the axiom of strangeness as a constituent element of poeticity may indicate the current "loss" of the problem of alienation from an overwhelmingly rational (industrial, bourgeois) cultural system. This is not to say that there is no alienation any longer at the center of our socio-cultural life. But one may wonder whether contemporary notions of poeticity and of poetry — particularly, of course, those that are called Postmodern(ist) — do not suggest that the alienation may no longer be the same as the one Modernism took its stance against, and that rationality may not be the predominantly alienating factor in our contemporary society.

Another interpretation of the same evidence would hinge on the notion of freedom. Given the fact that the Modernist revolution is in many ways an attempt to achieve some degree of freedom from a civilization that has become rigid, sterile, authoritarian, and hence alienating, there had to come a moment at which the same transgression that seemed to offer that freedom through the creation of strangeness began to appear as another authoritarian act — a replica of the same oppression which it professed to oppose. The aporias explored in Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialektik der Aufklärung* as early as 1944 recur in the current critical axiom of the guilt of all language as well as in the refusal of creative texts to permit themselves to be subsumed under any one (generic, stylistic, historical, intentional) category. That very same reflection and creation, however, still appears to be motivated by the intention it denies; the possibility of freedom has become remote, but the need to reach out towards it remains. Perhaps the diffusion of strangeness is a strategy energized by this tension between a sophisticated scepticism concerning the ability of art to transgress limitations and of the fundamental drive to make the attempt.