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Erlebnis and Techne as Essential Constituents of Poetry

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Abstract:

Throughout time, many memorable metaphorical definitions of poetry have been given, the most spectacular of which remains that of the great modern American poet Carl Sandburg, who stated that *Poetry is the journal of the sea animal living on land, wanting to fly in the air*. This definition of poetry is an aporia and a paradox at the same time, which suggests that poetry implies the aspiration towards the Absolute. Poetry contains a high coefficient of the ineffable, a *nescio quid*, and this is the reason why we do not know what poetry is, in its essence. This article is an attempt to establish some constitutive elements of poetry, some factors or, we could say, some conditions of poetry. According to the great German critic and philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey, in his fundamental work *Poetry and Experience* (1985), in which he deals with poets such as Lessing, Goethe, Novalis and Hölderlin, the first and most important condition of poetry is lived experience (*Erlebnis*). Another essential element of poetry is technique (gr. *Techne*). Musicality or *Harmonia* is the third important component of poetry. Without lived experience, technique and musicality, there can be no poetry.

Keywords: *lived experience, technique, musicality, human spirit, poetry.*

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Introduction

“Poetry is the journal of the sea animal living on land, wanting to fly in the air.” This is probably the most memorable definition, given by the great modern American poet Carl Sandburg. This definition is an aporia and a paradox at the same time, which suggests that poetry implies the aspiration towards the Absolute.

Many memorable metaphorical definitions of poetry have been given throughout time. In an instructive poetic art, the great Italian poet Giosué Carducci, exponent of Neoclassicism and the 1906 Nobel Prize laureate for Literature, was asked the following question by a little girl: *What is poetry?* To this question, the great Italian poet answered that poetry is when melancholy knocks at the gate of the heart: *Esce la poesia / O, piccola Maria / Quando malinconia / Batte del cor la porta!* In other words, melancholy, or rather the state of metaphysical sadness, is, according to Carducci and other great poets, generator of poetry.

Poetry contains a high coefficient of ineffable, a *nescio quid*, and this is the reason why we do not know what poetry is, in its essence. If we knew exactly what poetry is, then a phenomenon worthy of the laboratories of ancient alchemists would occur. Poetry would be produced as on a conveyor belt and we could all be decreed poets. Poetry is the product of the human spirit. It helps shifting cultural values from one area into another and many poets have influenced in a decisive manner millions of individuals, by recreating a vision of the world. Poets are creators whose vision of the world originates in the observation of the depths of the human spirit and who can modify the objects they observe through their own perception. Poets have the ability to come as close as possible to the very essence of the human spirit through their own representation of the human nature and can convince us that the Human, the Natural and the Divine can co-exist in harmony, as in Spinoza’s utopian view.

Poetry, like all authentic forms of human creativity, springs from the knowledge of life. As a process of mirroring objective reality, poetry as an authentic creation expresses a profound human truth. Poetry is the field of illustration of the multitude of nuances that the relationship between interiority and the external world develops. However, we cannot say exactly what poetry is, but we can only approximate it, we can only say what poetry is like. If we cannot give a rigorous, mathematical definition of poetry, we can instead establish some constitutive elements of poetry, some factors of poetry or, we could say, some conditions of poetry.

Erlebnis as the first condition of poetry

According to the great German critic and philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey, in his fundamental work *Poetry and Experience* (1985), in which he deals with poets such as Lessing, Goethe, Novalis and Hölderlin, the first and most important condition of poetry is lived experience or *Erlebnis*. There is no authentic poetry in the absence of *Erlebnis*. Without lived experience, poetry can only be, at most, an ingenious counterfeit. The emphasis on *Erlebnis* should come as no surprise, taking into account that Wilhelm Dilthey is a forerunner of Existentialism. The foundational function of *Erlebnis* understood as immediate experience is conditioned by its relationship with the supporting concept of *Erlebnis* as previously lived experience. Dilthey used the concept of *Erlebnis* to refer to lived experience, but sometimes to refer to immediate experience as well. This erratic use of key terms in Dilthey’s work shows us that the philosopher had a double determination of understanding experience as the ground of all knowledge. This double aspect of Dilthey’s concept of experience can be interpreted as the result of

his critique of both empiricist and transcendentalist accounts of how to become aware of what we know and what we know for sure. Dilthey's concept of experience or *Erlebnis* is inextricably linked with life. *Erlebnis* is defined as "a combination of perceptions, thoughts, feelings and desires enriched by memories and anticipations" (Rickman 1971: 113). In Dilthey's opinion, experience is the primary layer of every science. Dilthey demonstrated that there is a continuity between natural and human science on the basis of a better understanding of experience. Dilthey had a broad understanding of the psychological processes that form experience, which he defined as "pressure and counter-pressure, expanding towards things which in turn respond, a vital power within and around us which is experienced in pleasure and pain, in grief over burdens which cannot be shifted, in delight of what we receive from the outside. So the I is not a spectator who sits in front of the world's stage, but is involved in actions and counter-actions in which the same actualities are overwhelmingly experienced whether kings figure in them or fools and clowns. This is why no philosopher could ever persuade those involved that everything was appearance or show and not reality" (Rickman 1971: 114).

Dilthey's concept of *Erlebnis* as lived experience has the following characteristics:

- From the perspective of requirement of a consequent form of empiricism and within the context of the postulated insufficiency of epistemology as foundation, *Erlebnis* as lived experience is used to complete Dilthey's determination of the ground of all knowledge and of all science;
- *Erlebnis* as lived experience and the correlative mode of consciousness that is the reflective self-awareness are intended to account for the constitution of knowledge;
- *Erlebnis* as lived experience constitutes a double determination of the whole ground of all science;
- The concept of *Erlebnis* and reflective self-awareness establish the knowledge-constitutive importance of the practical interests of scientists as individuals or as members of a society or culture.

One of the fundamental principles of Dilthey's theory of knowledge is that all knowledge is the result of the interaction between the perceiving subject and the object of perception. For Dilthey, the source of knowledge lies in the immediate experience, as the foundation of our knowledge of the external world is materiality residing in reality. By focusing on the reflexive character of consciousness and experience, Dilthey highlights the pre-reflexive dimension of the constitution of all knowledge. As representation, knowledge is possible through the subject – object relationship that is delimited as the domain of immediate experience. Dilthey defines this mode of consciousness, which is, at the same time, a mode of experience, as reflexive awareness. Starting from Dilthey's interpretation of *Erlebnis* as immediate experience, we must make a distinction between the foundational function of experience as immediate experience and some other forms of experience, such as the concept proposed by Dilthey himself, that is *Innerwerden*, or self-reflection. Self-reflection allows the contents of consciousness to appear as ordinary experience and is defined by Dilthey as an attitude of consciousness: "Life requires an orientation of consciousness in order to endure sickness, death, exile etc. If this leads most people to religion, then what is needed by the educated classes after the dissolution of dogmas is a form of the same, which, religious or philosophical, originates from reflection. Historically and presently, the philosophies, which today surround us as the satisfaction of this need, are insipid. The

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contemplative pantheism, which emerges everywhere, is the expression of the modern preoccupation with the natural nexus of human beings.” (Dilthey 1968: 304)

Reflexive awareness is a life-related process which can be defined as a natural way in which the human being responds to the environment. Dilthey also defined self-reflection as a more developed and articulated form of reflexive awareness: “Life in conformity with its structure is teleologically limited in its performance by the increase of the consciousness of external objects according to their nature of constitution, their modes of effectivity, the means to call them forth or to displace them. It is on the other hand conditioned by the strengthening of the reflection on the values and the aims which appear in the internal perception.” (Dilthey 1968: 320)

By *internal perception* we can understand a moment of awareness in which the activity and the structure of acknowledgement reveals itself as more than simple awareness of the reality of the external world. For Dilthey, the shifting of self-reflection towards *Erlebnis* or lived experience is done in relationship with life and allows us to comprehend experience and knowledge in its complex wholeness.

Erlebnis is therefore defined by Dilthey as an immediate and reflexive experience connected to a double determination of consciousness and reflective awareness. From the perspective of naturalized epistemological point of view, *Erlebnis* is nothing more than subjectivity as reflective awareness and is seen to derive its force from the fact that it is life itself, as humans live, perceive and experience it.

Dilthey established correlations and relationships at all levels of existence and poetry. Relationships and correlations form configurations, in which the conception of life (*Weltanschauung*), including everything related to life experience, ideal of life, spiritual construction, understanding of the world, the unique vital principle (energy, force, imagination, will) speak for themselves, to a certain extent. The experience - creation correlation is the most important in Dilthey’s vision. In his opinion, creation is, first of all, experience of life. This main correlation between creation and experience forms the axis of Dilthey’s theory, which enables us to understand that without *Erlebnis*, no authentic creation is possible.

Just as Dilthey pointed out that *Erlebnis* is a sine-qua-non condition of poetry, so did Martin Heidegger, who considered *Erlebnis* to be the necessary condition of any authentic work. In his *Letter on Humanism*, Heidegger considers that the essence of the human being is its own existence. Man is man so far as he exists. The key concept for understanding Heidegger's philosophical thinking is the *Dasein*, which cannot be taken in the traditional sense of existence as such, because it is almost untranslatable. The most appropriate translation is that of human being, in the sense of constituting the meaning of being. Heidegger conceptualizes the *Dasein* through an activity of interpretation and explanation of the human being. The *Dasein* is, therefore, the human being who explores and grasps the meaning of the world.

Heidegger stated in a specific existentialist way the irrevocable disappearance of any metaphysics. However, he always tried to understand the Being, but only so far as it goes through the conspicuousness of the *Dasein*. Therefore, Heidegger claims that the study of ontology should stop at the Being, as we experience it in the concrete existence. From this perspective, Heidegger was a phenomenologist, but he did not limit himself to a simple phenomenology, but searched for the *Being of beings*. Heidegger (1971: 30) stated: “What concerned me then and still concerns me today is to discover the Being of beings but not in a metaphysical way”. From this assertion we gather that, although his search was still a metaphysical one in intention, the method no longer had a

metaphysical direction, but was triggered by the direct experience of materiality, having rather a phenomenological character. It is true that Heidegger spoke not only of *the Being of being*, but also of *the House of Being*, concluding that *the Being of being* resides in the word, and that “thus [...] language is the house of being” (Heidegger 1971: 163). In other words, the word and the language are fundamental constitutive elements of the Being: “the essence of the language does not consist in being only a simple means to give information. Language is not just a simple tool [...] rather it is that event which has the supreme possibility of human existence” (Heidegger 1971: 188).

Heidegger (1931: 44) claims that comprehension of phenomenology is also an essential structure of the being: “Understanding is the existential Being of one's own potential to be the *Dasein*; and it is in such a way that this Being discovers in himself what his Being is capable of.”

The philosopher shows that speech, discourse (*Die Rede*), is the expression of understanding and it functions only in the context of interpersonal communication. Discourse is, therefore, an existential component of the *Dasein*: “As an existential state in which the *Dasein* is revealed, discourse is the basis for the existence of the *Dasein*” (Heidegger 1931: 204)

Consequently, Heidegger underscores the ontological character of word and language and the participatory character of discourse (*Die Rede*) which, together with listening, give a clear image of the constitutive dimension of the self. Although Heidegger acknowledged that his concern was to discover the Being of being, but not in a metaphysical way, his assertion that word and speech are fundamental elements of Being is a solid starting point for formulating a response to the deconstructivist approaches to language.

***Techne* as the second condition of poetry**

Another essential constituent of poetry is technique (gr. *Techne*). Only through technique poetry can reach a structure, an organization. Without structure there can be no poetry. If in the Romantic period poetry was considered a product of divine inspiration, in the modern period, starting with Paul Valery, the emphasis has fallen more on technique. Poetry, to a large extent, is craftsmanship. *Techne* is mentioned in Plato's *Ion*, where the critique of poetry is structured around the concepts of craft (*techne*) and divine inspiration (*enthousiasmos*). These two concepts are not mutually exclusive, but complementary. The *Ion* depicts Socrates in dialogue about the nature of the rhapsodic *teche* with Ion, an actor or rhapsode, who recites Homer's poetry in contests or for private audience. Socrates brings into discussion the technical account of poetic composition and instrumentation, assuming that both of them are fully rational and technical activities. Then, reversing the course of discourse entirely, Socrates brings forth the inspired account, by which divine inspiration accounts for the poetic composition and interpretation. It was Plato's deep belief that poetry has immeasurable value, as it comes as a gift from the gods. Plato considered that creating poetry was a process of divine inspiration, but technical expertise was not excluded from poetic creativity. Plato is famous for having excluded Homer, Sophocles, Euripides and Aristophanes from the ideal city of the Republic not because they were poets, but because they did not have *techne*, that is because they created the wrong sort of poetry. Plato considered *techne* as an important part of poetry as *enthousiasmos*.

In the modern era, Heidegger made two points about *techne*: in the sense of technique, *techne* refers to manufacturing of goods, whereas in the sense of art, *techne* is

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referred to as part of poiesis. Heikkilä writes: “For Heidegger, *techne* is also what guides poiesis.” (Heikkilä 2010: 210). His argument was that “art, as *techne*, brought about *poiesis* for man, parallel to the *poiesis* that occurs in nature. For Heidegger, *poiesis* is the event of truth or *aletheia*...” (Heikkilä 2010: 207). “The act of expressing the truth of one’s being in an art form is referred to by Heidegger as “poiesis”. This act “makes present, a presencing that comprises both disclosure and concealment.” (Heikkilä 2010: 209)

In his analysis of experience in *Truth and Method*, Gadamer compares *techne* to genuine experience, emphasizing that just as experience does not always mean going through something, so *techne* does not always mean being a practitioner or knowing how to get a job done. *Techne* is not about improving one’s performance or becoming a skilled practitioner, but it refers to the active engagement that generates knowledge, that is why one deed is more effective than another in order to achieve a desired result. Gadamer stresses that this sort of knowledge is only possible provided that a certain degree of distance is gained by reflection. Both *Erlebnis* and *Techne*, in Gadamer’s vision, require the ability to reflect on the experience itself. *Techne* involves the type of experience which allows the individual not only to be able to choose in a particular case, but to know how to choose in every case. What ensures the richness of this sort of experience is memory, which allows one to generalize beyond a single, isolated event: “From the multiplicity of memories, a state of having experience emerges. So the essential thing of having experience is that through our retention of what is the same in every same case, our having made something many times before leads to a wider circumspection.” (Gadamer, 2004: 23)

Gadamer highlights the distinction between *techne*, which he defines as “the knowledge of the craftsman who knows how to make some specific things” (Gadamer, 2004: 31), and *phronesis* or *moral knowledge*. For Gadamer, both *techne* and *phronesis* are genuine forms of practical knowledge: they both involve the ability to apply a general understanding to a particular situation and so to respond correctly to a concrete set of practical demands. Gadamer made an attempt to identify the differences between *techne* and *phronesis* under the following aspects:

1. Technical knowledge is characterized by externality, as it aims at producing things by using materials and craftsmanship. Conversely, moral knowledge is internally related to knowing the subject and does not aim at shaping any externally given material. Morality is not produced out of craftsmanship, as a consequence Gadamer claims that the kind of knowledge provided by *phronesis* is fundamentally different to the craftsman’s technical knowledge. Moreover, as Gadamer points out, in contrast with moral knowledge, technical knowledge can be learnt and then forgotten.

2. In Gadamer’s opinion, the contrast between *techne* and *phronesis* concerns the relation between *means* and *ends*. When taking into consideration the technical knowledge, the end is fixed by the purpose for which the object is intended. In the case of moral knowledge, the end of moral action is not given like the purposes served by productive action, and the means to this end is subject to a different order of reflection. The reflexivity which characterizes moral knowledge makes it impossible to know what is right in advance of the particularities of concrete situations and it gives this kind of knowledge a degree of uncertainty which is not specific to *techne*.

3. Gadamer analyzes the effects that both *techne* and *phronesis* have on the knower’s relation to other subjects. In the case of *phronesis*, the person is forced not only into a kind of self-deliberation, but into a reflective stance that takes the viewpoints

and feelings of others into account. In the case of *techne*, technical knowledge is by no means generator of social feelings.

Musicality or *Harmonia* as the third condition of poetry

We consider that there is one more important constituent of poetry, that is *musicality*. Many Symbolists shared the notion that poetry should aspire to the condition of music, which was thought to be the most emotionally direct aesthetic medium. Paul Verlaine's poetry is probably the most representative in terms of verse musicality. His poems are splendidly orchestrated, with the different senses called in to play their part at carefully chosen moments and with a subtle intimate melody in lines beautifully ballanced. Here is an example of Verlaine's musicality in *Soleils Couchants* from *Poèmes Saturniens*:

<i>Une aube affaiblie</i>	<i>A pale dawn light</i>
<i>Verse par les champs</i>	<i>Creeps over the fields</i>
<i>La mélancolie</i>	<i>With all the sadness</i>
<i>Des soleils couchants.</i>	<i>Of setting suns.</i>
<i>La mélancolie</i>	<i>All the sadness</i>
<i>Berce de doux chants</i>	<i>Soothes with songs</i>
<i>Mon cœur qui s'oublie</i>	<i>My heart which sinks</i>
<i>Aux soleils couchants.</i>	<i>With setting suns.</i>
<i>Et d'étranges rêves,</i>	<i>And strange dreams,</i>
<i>Comme des soleils</i>	<i>Like suns</i>
<i>Couchants, sur les grèves,</i>	<i>Setting over shores,</i>
<i>Fantômes vermeils,</i>	<i>Like crimson ghosts,</i>
<i>Défilent sans trêves,</i>	<i>Ceaselessly wheel,</i>
<i>Défilent, pareils</i>	<i>Wheel like</i>
<i>A de grands soleils</i>	<i>Huge suns</i>
<i>Couchants sur les grèves.</i>	<i>Setting over shores.</i>

When Paul Verlaine, the Symbolists' spokesperson, asserted the supremacy of music in his famous *La musique avant toute chose*, he did not make a discovery, but rather a rediscovery. Deliberately or not, the Symbolists went back to the Greek origins, to Orpheus, the legendary Thracian musician and the world's first greatest poet. In ancient Greece, Orpheus was a man who sang like a god, creating confusion among the categories of conventional thoughts. When Orpheus sang and played the lute or the lyre, the Human and the Divine became one harmonious whole. Orpheus could draw the creatures of air and sea towards him so that the natural and human worlds might sing in harmony to the same song. Even the Pythagorean doctrine was influenced by Orphism, because the hypotenuse (gr. *hypoteinusa*), from the famous Pythagorean theorem, means the extended string of the harp.

Musicality introduced the concept of harmony, deriving from the Greek *harmos* – meaning literally a 'joint', hence uniting otherwise disparate parts. In Plato's opinion, one can experience the divinely inspired vision of the poet through his poems and thus experience a poem's true beauty. As the standard by which poetry is judged, beauty, conceived as harmony and rhythm, is the outward manifestation of that vision (Plato, 2000: 401). Musicality is of divine origin, as the great mathematician and philosopher Pythagoras showed. Pythagoras taught that each of the seven planets produced a particular note according to its distance from the still centre, which was the Earth. According to Pythagoras, the Sun and the other planets revolve around the primordial

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fire, or *hestia*, producing divine, almost imperceptible music, which he called *the Music of the Spheres*. The sound produced is so exquisite and rarified that our ordinary ears are unable to hear it. It is the *Cosmic Music* which, according to Philo of Alexandria, Moses had heard when he received the Tablets on Mount Sinai. This music is present everywhere and governs all temporal cycles, such as the seasons, biological cycles and all the rhythms of nature. Together with its underlying mathematical laws of proportion, it is the sound of the harmony of the universe, the harmony of what Plato called the "one visible living being, containing within itself all living beings of the same natural order". (Plato, 2000: 377)

Harmony is a key concept for poetry. We do not refer here to the onomatopoeic, imitative or reproductive harmony, which can be encountered in the poems of many poets, in order to imitate certain natural noises, but to a much broader and more complex concept, which is musical and philosophical at the same time. Harmony represents the fusion of the poetic self with the external world, with nature, and involves ingenious correspondences of rhythm, rhyme, alliteration, euphony and distribution of accents. At the same time, the role of the subconscious in achieving harmony in poetry must be emphasized, as it is the main element that dictates the form of poetry.

A distinction must be made between the internal harmony and the external harmony of poetry. If external harmony can be analyzed and explained by researchers, internal harmony is an almost unanalyzable factor. Internal harmony takes us to the realm of the ineffable and is a diminution of self-consciousness, in a separation from the state of lucid personality.

Harmony in poetry can be classified in three types: *stylistic harmony*, that ensures a correct proportion of poetry; *poetic harmony*, which deals with the relationship between words and the topic of the thought and *artificial harmony*, which matches expressions and sounds appropriate to their meaning so that all the syllables in a verse produce another type of expression which adds to the original meaning of the words.

Numerous correspondences can be established between poetry and music, but also some necessary delimitations. If music remains the purest and most immaterial art of all, the art of sounds, then poetry is the music of ideas. Harmony can be defined as agreement, concordance, conjugation of parts into a whole and is a part of the architecture of the whole world. In poetry, musicality or *Harmonia* unites *Erlebnis* and *Techne*. Modern poetry cannot exclude *Harmonia* from poetry and cannot rely only on *Erlebnis* and *Techne*.

Conclusion

All things considered, poetry transfers values from one cultural environment to another and poets influence in a decisive manner the way people project their own vision of the world. Poets have the ability to probe the depths of human spirit and to transform aesthetically the human existence. They are active thinkers whose perception of reality modifies the world and the objects through their subjective projections, but, paradoxically, they come close to the nature of the human being, revealing its true essence. *Erlebnis*, *Techne* and *Harmonia* are three important constituents of poetry, which can be metaphorically seen as the creation of the human spirit. Therefore, we can now give an approximative definition of poetry: it is the harmonic product of the human spirit, based on lived experience (*Erlebnis*) and craftsmanship (*Techne*).

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