

# NOW is Always. NOW is Never. On the Immediacy and Mediation of 'Message' in Poetry

*Ferdinand Schmatz*

## Abstract:

What characterises poetry that is understood as carrying out research? How does it generate knowledge on a poetological basis? It shapes the moment of the present, the 'Now,' immediately mediated—a paradox that provokes the path to a different, poetically researched knowledge. The approaches, methods, and constructions necessary to create these spaces of individual symbolisation are presented. At the same time, an attempt is made to approach the reflections of Alfred North Whitehead on cultural symbolisation and its modes of experience.

## 1

Poetry and language form a symbiosis; that is nothing new under the sun of literature. In poetic research, however, the significance of language is a more specific one: here, language is understood and used literally as meaning-endowing material and not just as a bearer of these meanings. A style that deliberately construes poetry as a methodological and linguistic-reflexive handling of language raises the question of the meaning of a word and a statement—and also of meaning itself. This question of the possibilities of how the world is and can be representable and communicable is connected to that of linguistic-systematic interpretations: we are thinking of a poetic attitude that hopes for and practises the production or elicitation of the world out of linguistic movements, whereby the linguistic part does not only serve stylistic interests.

This production—*poiesis* means to manufacture, to bring into being, to elicit—proves to be an interplay of a poetic ego that is constantly in motion with an associated linguistic reflection and construction. The dismantling and building of this ego lead to the producing of poetry that can be viewed as artistic research.

Observing, collecting, ordering, analysing, reflecting are the fields that characterise the work of this reality-critiquing poetry: systemic linguistic parameters such as those of syntax and grammar, criteria of the assignation of

meaning by the dictionary, encyclopedic and cyclic procedures enable the development of methodological positions and contribute to the reconstruction of reality. They are some of the methodical-formal characteristics of what can be considered poetic research, which they more than just codetermine.

This language work, which regards the relationship between content and form as an equitable interaction that can be mutually developed, is broadly construed and not just mere material processing. The desire to work with the dominant discourse also arises from the orientation towards the questions and working steps of the medial expansion of poetry, such as those regarding the relationship between word and picture, picture and object, word and object in analogue as well as digital types, etc. In any case, it arises from a profound desire to celebrate and criticise the symbolically given world.

This poetry does not preach separatism of art but insists on the autonomy of the aesthetic function (after Roman Jakobson). Its aesthetic-ethical attitude and procedure are especially relevant for the styles addressed here in the sense of artistic research. Its primary focus is on a field that is individual and personal, yet co-determined by collective laws: it observes, grasps, and thereby attempts to reposition the aesthetic, social, and economic impacts of the writing process.

Poetic, colloquial, and other social-linguistic forms are examined, reduced, or expanded. Fundamental interpretations are kept in mind. A poetical act in the field of contexts radically breaks or ironically interrogates the 'content' prescribed: the meaning of a single word is determined in relation to the words surrounding it, and its effect in the social-aesthetic field is examined, poetically transformed, and documented in an adequate form. This can also happen through the linguistic conversion of rule-conforming algorithms that poetically 'reprogramme' those experiences stored in the memory, thus breaking expectations and bringing us the point of realisation: The utilised linguistic, pictorial or other medial resources are ascribed a special significance. They are forms of resistance that, on the one hand, are those of the discourse bearer, but on the other hand are transformed by poetical empowerment. Or representations of a different positioning of reality—a world that thus becomes a reality of realities, a world of worlds.

These realities and worlds co-write poetry, but how? "The poem is finished before its author knows." Does this still apply today—decades after Gottfried Benn's account of the "Problems of the Lyric"—for the poetic research discussed here? It may be prefabricated as 'finished' in the interior of a more or less unconscious knowledge process. Nevertheless, the decision as to which contents in which forms (and vice versa) ultimately come to light—i.e. to the page, the screen, etc.—lies with the poets. It is the writers who put the

previously condensed point of the statement on display in a final state of complexity. But this final state is not ideologically solidified in the sense of a single valid statement; rather, it is open and creates a kind of free space that liberates the thinking about what its message and truth can be.

At least in its interpretation and reception. This—it should be stressed—must by no means be confused with arbitrariness or indifference on the part of the statement or of the expressed content.

The transformation of that which is commonly traded and sold as information—the transformation of information into the ‘open’ message—is what connects these poems and qualifies them as poetry in the aforementioned sense: they question meaning and re-endow meaning—through a comprehensive consideration of the prerequisites and fundamentals of writing and its possibilities for translating a given reality. Concerning the extensions as well as contractions of reality. An experiment in a laboratory of the interior, interlocking forms and contents collected from the outside world in the individual styles. It leads to that poem in the poetic space, written or constructed by other media, which will have a different effect on the internal and the external social field in which the styles originated.

Despite the dominance of the analysis of linguistic processes within and beyond the writing subject, other parameters, as indicated, also flow into and constitute the styles: figurative contributions in particular that reduce or expand the usual metaphorical content of the poetry. Internal images that are constructed without external experience but also those that originate from the observation and experience of the external world, and therefore may also have a direct political content. These multi-tiered levels of the medial discourses—literal and pictorial communication practices, etc.—are transformed and translated, respectively, into a poetically developed language.

This process of translation turns poetry into poetry. It is fundamentally essential for the poetic research described here if we understand it as a transposition of given words, sentences, images, and experiences into new or different constellations. Günter Eich defined poetry as “a word translated into a word.” A word is transformed into another word, lifted from one place to another—from the sentence in which it stands, from the dictionary in which it is fixed, into a different sentence structure or medium in which it finds its new meaning. Or it can adopt the fixed meaning differently; in a poetically reconstituted book of the world of worlds.

Their contents, as forms, can thereby be freely developed associatively, but they can also be methodically guided along their paths—each depending on the intention and disposition of what the poetical work of the respective writer determines. An alternation between method and the undercutting of

this method is also conceivable and occurs. In any case, there are, so to speak, internal experimental arrangements beyond the methodological procedures, such as e.g. self-observation in the internal and external space, which is scarcely accepted by conventional science. This approaches a—tentative—search for truthfulness, deeply anchored in the corporeal and intellectual motives of the individual authors, which make the poem a fundamental poetry: to reach through this and in this the comprehensive experience of a specific and not arbitrary world of worlds.

## 2

In an incidental remark in his *Cahiers*—and here the question arises of whether there are incidental remarks in poetic thought at all—Paul Valéry points to the relationship between stupidity and poetry. It is a mysterious passage, but thinking, and particularly poetic-poetological thinking, serves to decipher mysteries or to posit them with the desire to explore the world. Deciphering and positing—these would be, in addition to the already mentioned trajectories, to be pursued by a poetic research. Thus: deciphering and positing, taking into account and integrating emerging secondary aspects, which can be incorporated *ad hoc* into the goal-oriented ‘first thinking’—would that be sensible or stupid, idiotic in Valéry’s sense?

Stupidity or idiocy, as understood by Valéry, is not a human defect, but a kind of ability to perceive and shape reality, or what has been defined as such, differently. It is, first of all, of no consequence whether ‘real’ spaces of action are maintained for this purpose. It is about the possibilities of the imagination, or even better: of a ‘pre-positing’ [*Vorstellung*], which allows turning world models experienced in the inner world into real ones. We are thinking not only about Robert Musil’s sense of possibilities, with which he complements the sense of reality. Even the ‘language of the insane,’ as it was called in the first half of the 20th century after the *zeitgeist* and is still called by the incorrigible, speaks of its own reality. “The mentally ill have been deprived of everything, except their minds,” *Poeta Doctus* Reinhard Priessnitz formulated. His poetic work, by the way, is one of the essential examples of the poetics of the knowledge that emerges through poetry. A work that creates this knowledge in process—from a poetic way of generating modes of thinking and speaking. A poetry that emerges from a research intention that, as more than just a gesture, sounds out and attempts to reevaluate every given reality.

The resultant snapshots of realities lead to a kind of truth of the insight into time, which has to be regenerated again and again. This still has its nucleus to

be elaborated, and the nucleus will be co-formed in this attempt at exposure. The goal is to set no goal before the elaboration, but to advance the goal, as it were, methodically regulated or 'freely associative' (which often makes no difference). And to understand the writing progress for this purpose. Therein lies the comprehensibility or connectivity addressed at the beginning, also in the reception of the poetry writer himself.

We call this reception understanding, or at least an aspect of understanding, as the poetic work jeopardises the traditional parameters of understanding. And it constantly attempts to determine this jeopardy, to integrate it into the already established positions or to discard it, if it should drift past these nuclei. We refer to these nuclei as the inner knowledge that precedes a process of cognition—'flashes before us,' as it were—and thus before knowledge finds its form of representation. According to Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, we should say 'it lightens' just as we say 'it thinks.' Or, let us call this the kind of knowledge which brings about thought in "the gradual construction of speech" (Heinrich von Kleist). The thought, or the knowledge, that slumbers within us before its language-mediated transformation (possibly pre-linguistically) or that is brought forth during this transformation. That arises, develops, and is open to new connections to a (perhaps dumb-appearing) correctness. Knowledge that retroactively pushes forward and transmutes itself, and poetry, and us as recipients. This way towards transformation, however, involves paths that form differently, that shun the predetermined linguistic patterns. Or take them literally. Not infrequently word-for-word.

What arises here is, to begin with, the incomprehensible or mysterious, or, more beautifully said: the miraculous, but which has the character of deciphering the world. Comparable to the progressive universal poetics of Romanticism, but going beyond that. A 'contemporary' miracle which also arises from analytical processes. Processes that are employed in poetry or artistic design, apart from the synthetic, which flow in and out of the various fields of knowledge into actual work.

A poetic-artistic research that seeks or constructs the 'other' truths or realities—and understands these processes as the generation of knowledge. A knowledge that claims nothing new under the sun, but that opens up different perspectives to the world. A venture willing to take the risk of setting out for the unknown shore beyond the conventions, which is sometimes not connected by a bridge to the departed mainland. A 'crazy' undertaking, but in the sense of a truth of the relations that result from the displacement of the given.

And it seems to be this 'truth' that Paul Valéry names in his bold pairing of poetry and stupidity. A 'truth' that includes the aspects of reordering and reconstructing given reality parameters through others, heaved from a new

pattern of thinking. Constructing a reality (often dismissed in the scientific ‘diagnosis’ as a figment of the imagination or a pipe dream) which appears in a poetically specific developed manner, unmediated or even mediated in and before the poetic ego.

Specifically, this ego is also in jeopardy—literally in play. It is part of a language game, which it attempts to appropriate in order to become the ego therein and thereby. Which the game helps to bring about. To find its own rules and to mix them with the given ones. This, in turn, is not to be accepted, but to be arrived at: to create a word-place that is also available for the readers, despite the often ironic and unfathomable word and speech rules.

In poetry, connotations of words that have two or more meanings open places and spaces of the real that are appointed and placed in relation to the given and found others. The lyric ego is not one that sighs, but one that performs that sighing—its linguistic and existential conditions—in and as a poem itself. There, thence, and therein, it gives its call, yearning, seeking its place, referring to all the other places and spaces that are laid out in its words and concepts.

A kind of scanner set over the world represents what has gone through the poetic filtering, what is left over, to search for other contact points and regions. Where the everyday fetters of existence are linguistically arranged and discarded to achieve an existence of freedom. A desire for individuality and collectivity in the shared experience of the negotiation of language as a rule of life spreads and strives for fulfilment.

Thus, the ‘real’ plane of action is invoked to reconcile abstract thinking with physical experience. Noise and silence get the chance to ‘speak,’ arising from the observation of the movements of the world, the language movements and the movements of the image, in the body and in the external world. In the process, the relationship between observation and writing is very often reversed. Writing makes observation possible. Also by us readers.

### 3

It is precisely this moment that will guide us in our reflections on the ‘Now’ in poetry, and thus on the notion of “presentational immediacy” or “immediate clarity” in the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead. He puts this ‘presentational immediacy’ first, while ‘causal efficacy,’ for him, forms only the second mode of experience. This usually becomes effective after ‘presentational immediacy,’ the ‘dream’ of all empirical art. The unmediated reality is always one that is mediated, however; it cannot be otherwise: with and from words which move from the smallest units of letters to syntactically constructed verses. To

construct those spaces as image-sets that could not yet be opened in the usual way of descriptions. Multilayer language complexes and image sequences, which are produced or even taken up and reassembled. Beyond whole words, back to syllables and letters, which are more than representatives of the given language material.

Yes, this poetic research is—to summarise once again—composed of several strata: the stratum of the linguistic material may be the basis or the building blocks for a pictorial and word topology of the interior, which then intersects with that of the exterior to multiply and to visualise itself potentially spatially as a poem-entity. Which spaces are necessary for this? Basing this on experience or conception, we say immediately: experience is process, and we think of Whitehead's 'reality as process.' But this means, in turn, that in order to experience reality or the poetically constructed spaces, to learn to understand them, something must first be moved in us: our mapped-out imaginative spaces, the images, and the words and phrases connected with them. The models that, as conceptual bearers, do not only represent reality but also construct it. Even if this reality and its models should never be reproducible as a whole. Hence, it is necessary not only to accept those spaces, which are caused to be interpreted by images and words, as fundamental significances, but moreover, to explore, to test, and thus to experiment, in order to generate other meanings in poetry, especially in the poem itself and in us. Then the poem moves itself and us into these spaces of possible and constructed meanings, and we are therefore moved—stirred, understood.

In this comprehensive complex of a whole experience, parts of it are focused on that truth, which finds expression in the correspondence of the previously experienced with the newly experienced. An expression that lies within the interiors of the experiential and connects the patterns of memory or stored images and words with newly emerging ones, and unites them into the message to be accepted.

Involved in this message, however, is a not insignificant proportion of self-construction: it can only be compared to what is stored in the memory of the individual. The complexity we incorporate makes it appear as if the constructed message were objective. Essentially, highly individually attuned programmes are running here, which are similar in their status to automated programmes in all of us. The difference is what they are filled with. This distinction, which makes us individuals, does not exclude something like a communicable message without relying on an objective truthfulness that is attained one-by-one.

This truthfulness, therefore, lies more in the receiver than in the sender of the message or information. It comes through the channels of noise in the eye, ear, and in the skin of the viewer, the listener, or the touching person. Deviating,

it is formed into what we call the understanding of information or message, or even truth—through construction with the language in the language, also in media-expanded form and practice. As work of the non-sensical or circum-sensical, which applies to the poet herself as well as to her recipients—in highly composed sagas and writings of semantics, syntax, and verse settings, synthesising connotations, and association chains. A metric of being without metaphysical speculation, which does not attempt to approximate a transcendent truth. Which rather transforms truth into the play of word and image, and, in doing so, all the more constitutes something fundamentally existential.

Despair and pleasure at the failure to grasp the whole along with the detail: this is perhaps the stupidity Valéry meant. But through the work of poetic research, in the sense suggested here, this failure—indeed this stupidity—becomes fundamental poetry, which attempts to extend those aforementioned spaces of knowledge.

As already said, the usual path of knowledge work, which presents knowledge from experience, should be abandoned. Or it should be used in unorthodox ways to reach other fields of knowledge. In a sense, an artifice which whirls around the culturally expected symbolisation (as Whitehead also illuminated). The result is a revolution in the known relationship between symbol and meaning that constitutes our common knowledge of the world. Where a forest consists of individual trees which receive their names or meaning from the textbook and are summed up into a fixed and coherent entity of a forest.

In the poetic arts, however, it looks like this: the tree exists only during the observation of the forest, the other trees, and then receives its meaning in the moment of perception. It is only created, as it were, by the linguistic designation in consciousness. It is as if the concept of the forest did not consist of the named individual trees, but rather the tree consisted of the not-yet-named forest. The trees are created by the names. The words. Moreover, this observation does not have to occur on the spot. It can also be taken from the designations in the textbook and vice versa. The symbol becomes real and the real symbolic. Literal. Verbatim. Image-yielding.

The poetry thus created does not discover and reinvent the world in this reversal or constant alternation of symbol and meaning—how could this be possible? However, it does build up the world insofar as it pounds on observations of the external world, which are interpreted in the inner world of the poet as symbols and transformed into words. Moreover, through the rhythm of the poetry, they also become an (at least brief) immediate perception and experience of reality—in the poet himself and the reader. Addressing an ‘I,’ a ‘you,’ or a

third person can be helpful. It aids the participatory incorporation of the readers into the text. It represents a world for all who engage in the perspective of poetical observation and change with it—thus leading to ever new viewpoints and the associated development of world variations.

The language that achieves this is found in all poetry that is thinking fundamentally immediately, and that is speaking presentationally. What comes to speak and to be written is a poetology that reworks, advances, and undermines the given forms (often primarily syntactic and grammatical). Or that expands the forms in typically individualised ways by switching their hierarchies and the related spatial and temporal orders. For us who read this poetry, something opens that we have not glimpsed before and therefore did not know. It creates our world by producing and exhibiting itself—it builds itself and us: trees are made, manufactured. But as the proverb says, we do not see the forest for the trees when we are overwhelmed or obstructed. This does not mean that it is possible to decipher the forest only by finding and naming its trees. If it is logically predicative, then in the sense of attributing meanings, which are perpetually rearranged by words and word constellations.

And which can always make other assignments possible. The inner world and the outer world then interweave in the word ‘tree,’ which grows into the storyline ‘forest.’ An originally fixed conceptual quantity that becomes a double, a multiple. That can be further developed in other verses, or words, or word pairs and linked to other aspects.

The glimpse of causal efficacy becomes the vision of presentational immediacy. But always only briefly. Now is always. Now is never.

Translation from German by Jason S. Heilman.

### Bibliography

- Benn, Gottfried, *Probleme der Lyrik*. Wiesbaden: Limes Verlag, 1951. [Extracts: “Problems of Lyric Poetry,” in: *Selected Poems and Prose*, translated and ed. by David Paisey. Manchester: Carcanet, 2013, pp. 462–454.]
- Eich, Günter, *Gesammelte Werke. Vol. I: Die Gedichte. Die Maulwürfe*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1973.
- Jakobson, Roman, “Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics,” in: Thomas A. Sebeok, ed., *Style in Language*. Boston, MA: The Technology Press of MIT/New York, NY, London: Wiley, 1960, pp. 350–377.
- Lichtenberg, Georg Christoph, *Philosophical Writings*, translated and ed. by Steven Tester. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2012.

- Lichtenstein, Swantje et al., *Ausfindig machen. Sprachkunst und textuelle Verfahren in den Künsten*. Cologne: Verlag der Kunsthochschule der Medien, 2015.
- Musil, Robert, *The Man without Qualities. Vol. 1* (1930), translated by Sophie Wilkins and Burton Pike. New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1996.
- Priessnitz, Reinhard, "Pathologie und Poesie. für alexander," in: *Alexanders poetische Texte*, ed. by Leo Navratil. Munich: DTV, 1977, pp. 184–192.
- Priessnitz, Reinhard, *vierundvierzig gedichte*. Linz: Edition Neue Texte, 1978.
- Valéry, Paul, *Cahiers 1894–1914. Vol. VI: 1903–1904*, ed. by Nicole Celeyrette-Petri. Paris: Gallimard, 1997.
- Whitehead, Alfred North, *Symbolism. Its Meaning and Effect*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1927.
- Whitehead, Alfred North, *Process and Reality. An Essay in Cosmology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1929.