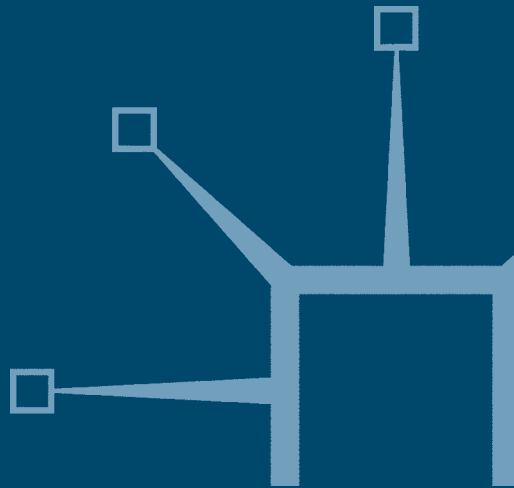# Aesthetics and World Politics

Roland Bleiker

Rethinking Peace and Conflict Studies

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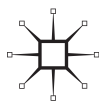WORLD SOCIETY AND THE MIDDLE EAST
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Aesthetics and World Politics

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Introduction

Is it trivial, or perhaps even irresponsible, to explore aesthetic themes at a time when the world is engulfed by war, genocide, terrorism, poverty, climate change and financial turmoil? Why indulge in painting, poetry or music when lives and livelihoods are at stake? Can we really afford to entertain questions of taste while concrete political action is urgently required?

This book offers a passionate but systematically sustained defence of an aesthetic engagement with politics. Yes, we should embrace aesthetics as an essential aspect of understanding world politics; yes, questions of taste are central to who we are and what we do; and, yes, we can – and indeed should – indulge in artistic endeavours. During destitute times we might, in fact, need aesthetic inspiration more than ever to find innovative solutions to entrenched conflicts and difficult political challenges.

By making the case for aesthetics I write against the grain of much prevailing international relations scholarship. Alexander Wendt, one of the discipline's leading scholars, argues in an equally passionate manner that 'poetry, literature and other humanistic disciplines are not designed to explain global war or Third World poverty'. This is why he believes that 'if we want to solve those problems our best hope, slim as it may be, is social science'.[1] Wendt is a sophisticated scholar. Quoting him here out of context does injustice to the complexity of his work. I do so only because his statement perfectly captures the prevalent wisdom in international relations scholarship: that the business of world politics is too serious to take risks when dealing with its key dilemmas; that only well-proven social scientific inquiries can give us the certitude we need to navigate through the metaphorical – and real – minefields of world politics.

The premise of this book rests on the opposite assumption: that hope for a better world will, indeed, remain slim if we put all our efforts into one set of knowledge practices alone, no matter how compelling they may seem. The problems that currently haunt world politics, from terrorism to poverty, are far too serious not to employ the full register of human intelligence to understand and deal with them. This is why politics is, as Ekkehart Krippendorff

once put it, 'too important to leave to politicians, or to political scientists for that matter'.[2]

One of the key challenges ahead consists of legitimising a greater variety of approaches to the study of world politics. Aesthetics is an important and necessary addition to our interpretative repertoire. To pinpoint the exact nature of this contribution is not easy, but it can probably be captured best by terms such as creativity and imagination. Aesthetic sources can offer us alternative insights into international relations; a type of reflective understanding that emerges not from systematically applying the technical skills of analysis which prevail in the social sciences, but from cultivating a more open-ended level of sensibility about the political. We might then be able to appreciate what we otherwise cannot even see: perspectives and people excluded from prevailing purviews, for instance, or the emotional nature and consequences of political events.

Aesthetics, in this sense, is about the ability to step back, reflect and see political conflict and dilemmas in new ways. This is why aesthetics refers not only to practices of art – from painting to music, poetry, photography and film – but also, and above all, to the type of insights and understandings they engender. There are, then, good reasons to return to an earlier and much broader Romantic notion of the aesthetic. The Romantics sought to validate the whole register of human perceptions and sensations – not only the practices of reason and logos that triumphed in the wake of the Enlightenment, but also a range of other, more sensuous and perhaps more tangible, yet equally important forms of insights.[3]

There is deep scepticism towards an aesthetic engagement with politics, not only from social scientists, but also from many artists. The latter, though, are worried about a very different set of issues. They often fear that political commitment jeopardises the independence of art; that it superimposes preconceived and dogmatic ideas upon freely flowing creative activities. Orhan Pamuk, for instance, wants to avoid the mistakes that some of his fellow Turkish writers from previous generations made: to believe that a novelist has a social responsibility, that his or her works ought to have moral and political purpose. By pursuing such a realist mission, Pamuk believes, those writers 'wasted their talent on trying to serve their nation'.[4] Gao Xingjian takes this point one step further and argues that 'literature basically has nothing to do with politics'.[5] But one can also read Pamuk and Gao against themselves, at least when one adopts a broad conception of the political. The nature and impact of a novel can be deeply political, even in Gao's own sceptical terms, for, as he stresses, 'the writer writes what he wants without concern for recompense not only to affirm his self but also to challenge society'.[6] It is in this challenge, even if apolitical in nature, that art becomes political. It is so, as Gao aptly puts it, not by waving a flag or by shouting a slogan or driving a war chariot, but by breaking taboos and promoting 'uncompromising independence and spiritual freedom'.[7] This is also why

the German poet Hans Magnus Enzensberger sees the political dimensions of poetry precisely in a conscious detachment from short-term purposes of agitation. The political task of a poem then is 'to refuse any political task and to speak for everyone, even when it speaks of no one, of a tree, a stone, of that which is not'.[8]

It would be highly presumptuous of me to pretend that I can offer a comprehensive take on the links between aesthetics and world politics. Aesthetics is the subject of one of the most extensive philosophical debates, going back millennia. There have been countless efforts to theorise the aesthetic dimension of politics or to politicise the concept of the aesthetic. During the last decade there have also been a growing number of inquiries that draw on aesthetic sources to rethink world politics, so much so that I refer to an actual 'aesthetic turn' in international political theory. Scholars who have contributed to this new body of knowledge include – to name only a few of them – Anthony Burke, David Campbell, Stephen Chan, Costas Constantinou, Alex Danchev, Philip Darby, James Der Derian, Jenny Edkins, Marianne Franklin, Nicholas Higgins, Gerard Holden, Emma Hutchison, Vivienne Jabri, Ekkehart Krippendorff, L. H. M. Ling, Debbie Lisle, Cerwyn Moore, Iver Neumann, Oliver Richmond, Dieter Senghaas, Michael Shapiro, Christine Sylvester, Cynthia Weber and Maja Zehfuss. I will engage and draw upon some of their contributions, but there is no way I can survey them comprehensively and do justice to the complexity and diversity of the aesthetic turn. My ambition is inevitably much more modest.

The more specific objective of this book is twofold. The first part of the book explains why aesthetic approaches offer important new ways of understanding world politics. I do so mostly because no book-length study has ever offered such a conceptual introduction to the aesthetic turn in international political theory. I draw upon different theoretical sources, such as the concept of the sublime or the juxtaposition of mimetic and aesthetic approaches. I highlight how we represent political events and what consequences this has for our understanding – and political engagement – with them. I illustrate the issues at stake by engaging the phenomenon of global terrorism, showing how we can rethink the issues at stake when viewing them through aesthetic sources, such as painting, literature, photography, architecture and music.

The purpose of the second part is to move beyond conceptual arguments and illustrations. Here I systematically demonstrate how, in different cultural and historical settings, aesthetic insight can give us new perspectives on key political dilemmas. My case studies deal with topics that range from war and genocide to authoritarianism and poverty. They move from Stalinist Russia to postwar Germany, from Cold War Eastern Europe to Chile and contemporary Korea. But throughout these inquiries I focus on one aesthetic domain in particular: on the poetic imagination.

Poetry seems, at least at first sight, an odd choice, particularly in an age dominated by visual images and their circulation in the global mass

media. In recent years, many contributions to the aesthetic turn have thus focused on photography, film and other aspects of popular culture. Poetry, by contrast, looks like a relic from a far distant past, a type of bourgeois indulgence reserved for those few privileged elites who have the luxury not to worry about the problems of real life. In this sense, poetry is perhaps the hardest case to demonstrate the contemporary political relevance of aesthetics. But it might also be one of the most suitable ones, for poetry is the most explicit engagement with the very essence of who we are and what we do: language. No matter how much our age is dominated by visual images we cannot escape language, for we ultimately need words to make sense of our world. Language, then, is far more than a means of communication: it is the process through which we represent and make sense of ourselves and our surroundings: the cultural crystallisation of who we are as people. This linguistic process of making sense of the world is as subjective as it is inevitable. There is no way of representing the world in a neutral way. Languages always already contain values that frame our attempt to imbue the world with meaning. Poetry is a conscious attempt to highlight and engage this process. It is thus political in the most profound sense of the term. And it is all about creativity and the imagination: about stretching language and entrenched habits of knowledge so that we can see the world anew, see it through different eyes and from different vantage points. We might then be able to rethink the political dilemmas that have become so entrenched that we no longer even recognise their origin, nature and implications. The poetic imagination can thus be likened to an experimental micro-biotope from which we can distil important lessons for the larger world of world politics.

Questioning representation

Exploring aesthetic sources of insight, such as poetry, literature, visual art or film, is no easy task. Debbie Lisle and Alex Danchev recently stressed that investigations into art have been largely ignored in the field of international relations. They are 'a minority interest, routinely ghettoized'.[9] While such a description may have been accurate a decade ago, it no longer captures the current scholarly dynamic. There are now numerous high quality political engagements with literature, art, photography and film – so much so that the aesthetic turn has become an important and relatively well recognised part of international relations scholarship. Many leading academic journals, such as the *Review of International Studies*, *International Studies Quarterly*, *Millennium*, *Alternatives*, *Third World Quarterly* and *The Peace Review*, have published articles and special issues that deal with aesthetics. Some of the most senior disciplinary scholars, particularly in the United Kingdom, have either engaged aesthetic themes or acknowledged their importance.[10] But Lisle and Danchev

are not entirely wrong, for these mainstream engagements with aesthetics still remain relatively rare as well as very limited in nature and scope.

Although contributions to the aesthetic turn are growing in visibility and scholarly importance, most prevailing approaches to understanding and dealing with conflict and world politics pay little attention to literature and art. They have revolved around social scientific conventions so extensively and for so long that they have constituted knowledge practices such that aesthetic sources are generally seen as politically irrelevant.

The prevalence of realist ideologies in the theory and practice of international relations can serve as an illustration. Realism has become so entrenched that we no longer recognise the particular and inevitably subjective positions from where they emanated. By realism I mean not only the positions associated with the realist school of international relations, but also the more fundamental assumption that we are able to understand and represent the realities of world politics independently of our values and assumptions. While I use realism here as an illustration of such broad positivist assumptions, the same attitude underlines most other prevailing approaches to international relations scholarship, such as liberalism and constructivism. Policy-makers, likewise, often assume that we are somehow able to capture the facts of world politics without having to interpret them. This is why liberal and open-minded diplomats, such as the former US Secretary of Defence William Perry, frequently evoke the realist dictum that we need to understand the world 'as it is, not as we might wish it to be', and that this position necessitates a 'realist view, a hard-headed understanding of military realities'.[11]

We are herd animals. We often take the path of least linguistic resistance. This is why we have rehearsed the realist mantra to the point where, as Nietzsche once put it, 'we start to lye herd-like in a style obligatory to all'.[12] We easily forget, for instance, that the language of realism only appears clear and realistic because we have acquired familiarity with it. Abstract realist concepts like realpolitik, balance of power, national interest and security dilemma are not clear and intelligible by some objective standard, but only because they have been rehearsed, time and again, as part of a system of shared meanings that channels our thinking into particular directions. But these concepts do, in fact, reflect an entire system of thought – a system that embodies and at the same time masks a series of inherently subjective political judgements and assumptions.

This is not to say that realist ways of conceptualising politics are wrong. Realism is a highly sophisticated and diverse body of literature and knowledge. It is certainly far more complex than my brief and necessarily stereotypical sketch here can portray.[13] The problem is that realist insights, compelling as they are, have been elevated to the status of common sense, so much so that they are no longer recognised as the inevitably partial and historically contingent interpretations they are.

The same powerful construction of common sense is visible in liberalism, which has re-emerged in a particularly powerful manner since the end of the Cold War. Numerous peacekeeping and peace-building interventions around the world, from Bosnia to East Timor and Iraq, are shaped by strong liberal policy preferences. These preferences have been advanced with such a strong realist sense of righteousness that they are no longer recognised as a rather particular – and inherently subjective – approach to solving conflict. Oliver Richmond is among the growing number of scholars who convincingly demonstrate how liberal approaches to international peace missions tend to impose a top-down strategy that promotes individual human rights, elections and institution-building in a manner that often marginalises local needs and cultural practices. The result is all too often growing resentment and new conflicts.[14]

Just as I did with realism, I am inevitably simplifying the complex nature and sophisticated diversity of liberalism. But this is irrelevant, at least in the present context, for all I want to do is underline a basic but very important point: that no matter how sophisticated they may be, all theories, including realism and liberalism, are not beyond contention, nor are they as unequivocally 'realistic' as their proponents would claim. Nietzsche would say that 'all things that live long are gradually so saturated with reason that their origin in unreason thereby becomes improbable'.[15] By placing their insights beyond contestation, realism and liberalism make it very difficult, if not impossible, to identify the many instances where their own values have generated the types of conflicts they seek to analyse and solve. Nor does the strong prevalence of realist and liberal values throughout all aspects of life today allow enough space to explore and validate viable alternatives.

The issues at stake might become clearer when we compare these prevailing approaches to international relations with what might be seen as the realist equivalent in aesthetics: photography. Both realism and photography seem to deliver perfect resemblance: images of the real world as it really is, not as we wish it to be.

Photographs can be as convincing and as deceptive as realist claims to objectivity. Photographs seem to give us a glimpse of the real. They provide us with the seductive belief that what we see in a photograph is an authentic representation of the world: a slice of life that reveals exactly what was happening at a particular moment. This is the case because a photograph is, as Roland Barthes stresses, 'a message without a code'.[16] As opposed to a linguistic representation, for instance, or a painting, a photograph is 'a perfect analogon'. Indeed, its very nature, as Barthes continues, is defined by this analogical perfection. In the realm of documentary photography, for instance, it was for long commonly assumed that a photographer, observing the world from a distance, is an 'objective witness' to political phenomena, providing authentic representations of, say, war or poverty.[17] Theoretically

such naturalistic positions hinge on the belief that a photograph can represent its object in a neutral and value-free way, transferring meaning from one site to another without affecting the object's nature and signification in the process. François Debrix stresses that this belief is part of a long Western search for transcendental knowledge, be it of a spiritual or secular nature.[18]

While most scholars who work on photography acknowledge that photographs mimic vision in one way or another, few if any claim that such representations, even if they are pictorial simulacra, are authentic representations of the world as it is.[19] There are two key reasons for this.

First: a photograph is taken at a certain time of the day, with a certain focus and from a certain angle. Indeed, these choices make up the very essence of the photograph: its aesthetic quality. But, of course, they result from artistic and inevitably subjective decisions taken by the photographer – decisions that have nothing to do with the actual object that is photographed.[20]

Second: a photograph cannot speak for itself. It needs to be viewed and interpreted. This is why Barthes stresses that there are always two aspects to a photograph. There is the 'denoted message', which is the above-mentioned analogically perfect representation of a visual image. But there is also a 'connoted message', which includes how a photograph is read and interpreted, how it fits into existing practices of knowledge and communication.[21] There is widespread scholarly agreement that a connoted message cannot take the form of an unmediated representation of reality. John Berger, for instance, points out that photographs 'only preserve instant appearances'.[22] When we look at a photograph we never just look at a photograph in isolation. We actually look at a complex relationship between a photograph and ourselves.[23] Our viewing experience is thus intertwined not only with previous experiences, such as our memory of other photographs we have seen in the past, but also with the values and visual traditions that are accepted as common sense by established societal norms. Guy Debord, likewise, stresses how everything directly lived becomes distanced through representation. It becomes part of a 'spectacle', which he defines as 'social relationship between people that is mediated by images'.[24] For David Levi Strauss the important aspect of this process is that there are always relations of power at stake, that there is always an attempt to tell a story, and that this story is always told from a particular, politically charged angle.[25]

The very same principles engulf our attempts to analyse and understand the realities of world politics. No social scientist can ever represent a political event or issue independently of the methods chosen for this task. Even the most thorough empirical analysis cannot depict its object of inquiry in an authentic way. It too reflects colour choices, brushstrokes, angles, framing. It too remains a form of interpretation, and as such an inherently political exercise. It too says just as much – if not more – about the artistic choices of the interpreter than the object of interpretation.

The politics of art

Aesthetic approaches have the potential to engage these practices of representation in creative ways. In so doing they gain political relevance in the most basic and far-reaching manner: they highlight how we understand and construct the world we live in.

The most significant political potential of the aesthetic is thus not located where one would suspect it at first: in politically committed art. Gao Xingjian convincingly argues that literature loses its essence as soon as it becomes 'the hymn of a nation, the flag of a race, the mouthpiece of a political party or the voice of a class'.[26] Most war poems, for instance, primarily take the form of personal testimonies. The same is often the case with so-called protest poetry. James Scully is one of many commentators who lament that such poems tend to be 'issue-bound', 'victim-oriented' and 'conceptually shallow'.[27] Others too suggest that the type of political resistance that literature engages in is often exaggerated.[28] Such statements are perhaps a bit too categorical. They miss the complexities involved. Personal experiences are often of a political nature. There are countless instances where poets have successfully engaged in political battles, showing how the struggle against oppression is in many ways a struggle for language.[29] But Scully is right insofar as he stresses that to be of both poetic and political value a poem has to transgress the 'boundaries between private and public, self and other'.[30]

Overtly committed art forms often do no more than promote a particular position. They may be political, yes, but not aesthetically so. They are simply another way of expressing a political message. The fact that this message is conveyed through a song, a poem, a novel, a painting or a film is a mere coincidence. It has little or nothing to do with the aesthetic qualities of the art form itself.

Aesthetic politics, by contrast, has to do with the ability of artistic engagements to challenge, in a more fundamental way, how we think about and represent the political. Here the political content lies in the aesthetic form itself, which often is not political in an explicit and immediately recognisable manner. For instance, poetry that is political in the more basic sense must deal not only with a specific political issue, but also, and above all, with the manner in which this issue has come to be represented through language: with how it is internalised in our minds, our habits and our collective political consciousness. When examining the links between aesthetics and politics one thus needs to make a distinction, as Gordon Graham points out, between works of art that simply assert and those that actually lead to a better understanding. The former are no less dogmatic than any other propagandistic effort to advance an opinion. The latter, by contrast, have the potential to engender reflection that could open up political and ethical insight.[31]

In making such a case on behalf of aesthetics I am advancing no novel or radical claim. I am merely pointing out the relevance of aesthetic positions

to a domain of study – international relations – that has revolved almost exclusively around social scientific conventions. Scholars who work on the intersections of aesthetics and politics have explored the respective dimensions for a long time. Consider Jacques Rancière, who sees politics, in a Foucauldian sense, as a domain of power relations that 'revolve around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak'.[32] He calls this 'the distribution of the sensible', our perception of facts and phenomena that have become so self-evident that we no longer recognise that they exclude as much as they reveal. Aesthetics, for Rancière, acquires political significance when it interferes with, even disrupts, this commonsensical delineation of what can be seen, said and thought. This is why he believes that 'an aesthetic politics always defines itself by a certain recasting of the distribution of the sensible, a reconfiguration of the given perceptual forms'.[33] Maureen Whitebrook, writing more specifically about the links between literature and politics, makes a similar argument. She speaks of the ability of art to make us see a different reality from the one we are used to and the one that is commonly accepted.[34] She highlights, in particular, the ability of novels to provide us with different options and beliefs and, perhaps more importantly, with detailed illustrations of the implications that issue from them.[35] Or look at Richard Rorty, Martha Nussbaum and Philip Darby, who all identify literature as the key source through which we can imagine and gain understanding of people other than us. More so than factual accounts, philosophy or theory, literature is defined by its ability to describe situations and people, including emotional states, that would otherwise remain beyond our personal knowledge experiences.[36] Numerous novelists agree. 'There is always the chance', says Ernest Hemingway, that 'a book of fiction may throw some light on what has been written as fact.'[37] John Updike suggests that we might want to 'look to fiction for images of reality . . . that more factual, explanatory accounts cannot quite supply'.[38]

But do such aesthetic insights really constitute knowledge? Or are they mere attempts to contextualise and challenge existing knowledge practices? There have, of course, been long debates about the nature of knowledge and the possible contribution that aesthetics can make to it. Michael Wood is among the more recent voices in the respective conversations. He claims that literature can provide if not knowledge as such, then at least something that approaches knowledge, a 'taste' thereof, a pretence, so to speak, but one that nevertheless 'sets out to encounter real knowledge along imaginary roads'.[39] In doing so literature challenges knowledge in a way that substantially adds to what we know. Or, as Woods puts it, literature makes knowledge dizzy, it makes it spin and dance.[40] We can, as a result, never be secure in the knowledge we encounter through literature and other aesthetic sources. Aesthetic knowledge is contingent, so to speak: it will never offer us an unequivocal take on the real. But, at the same time, literature reminds us that 'there are many ways of meeting knowledge, and many knowledges

to meet'.[41] The very word 'knowledge' might in fact not be appropriate for an aesthetic engagement. It is far too much compromised, Milan Kundera stresses, through its association with the sciences.[42] This is why I try to use the word 'knowledge' sparsely and broadly, preferring to write instead of aesthetic understanding or insight, even though the latter term is tainted too. It privileges the visual in a way that linguistically sidelines other aesthetic experiences that could be just as important. But speak and write we must, and the existing language is all we have to make sense of the world.

Aesthetics, politics, ethics

If one approaches the links between aesthetics and politics in such a broad way, then a number of ethical implications inevitably follow. Aesthetics, politics and ethics can, in fact, be seen as inevitably intertwined. This is not to say that aesthetics is always enlightening, or that it necessarily promotes good causes. All political approaches and positions – good and bad, progressive and regressive – have their aesthetic. There is always a danger that art or literature might mislead us, as Darby puts it.[43] Aesthetic beauty could lead us astray, so to speak, seductively promoting and at the same time disguising a vision of the world that is inherently dangerous, perhaps even evil. The aesthetic seduction of Nazi Germany is ample testimony here, as exemplified, for instance, by some of its most prominent artistic defenders, from the novelist Louis-Ferdinand Céline to the poet Ezra Pound and the film-maker Leni Riefenstahl. The remarkable artistic creations of the latter, such as *Triumph of the Will* or *Olympia*, helped the Nazi regime turn mere propaganda into a broader mythology that was instrumental in gaining popular support for a racist and militaristic state apparatus: 'Fascinating Fascism', as Susan Sontag called it.[44] Or look at the philosopher Martin Heidegger, for whom poems were songs that could lead mere mortals to the feet of the fugitive gods. This is why he claims that 'the poet in the time of the world's night utters the holy'.[45] In the meantime, Heidegger himself publicly endorsed a far less godly political project, calling for *Wehrdienst*, *Arbeitsdienst* and *Wissensdienst*.

   The political desire to establish societal models based on beauty and harmony has, indeed, led to very dangerous situations. Nazi Germany is only one of many examples. This is why we need to acknowledge, along with George Kateb, that potentially problematic consequences can emerge from searching for stability amidst chaos through a resort to beauty as the ultimate value.[46] That a great deal of immorality has indeed emerged from such aestheticisations of the political is clear. But in itself this does not preclude the aesthetic from playing the opposite role: from being a force of light and good in a world of darkness and gloom. Heidegger's personal failings, for instance, do not invalidate aesthetic insight itself or, for that matter, all of Heidegger's philosophical insights.[47] 'The aesthetic dimension of ethics is clearly susceptible to misuse', Jane Bennett acknowledges, 'but so is the commitment to

moral command or the scientific method or the exercise of authority.'[48] Consider how Josef Mengele and other Nazi scientists tried to develop a detailed theory of eugenics to legitimise the superiority of the Aryan race and the ensuing genocidal policies.

Aesthetics is neither good nor bad, progressive nor regressive. It works more like an amplifier. Aesthetics adds a different dimension to our understanding of the political and, by consequence, to the ethical discourses that are central to waging political debates. Since art is not the language of habit, since it searches for the new, the different, the neglected, it may even create a certain 'mental and emotional alertness' – an encouragement to reflect upon and rethink what has been taken for granted, to move beyond dogma and promote debate about issues that would otherwise remain silenced or marginalised.[49] Aesthetics could, for instance, give us insights that cannot be gained through the practices of instrumental reason that have come to be elevated to the prime – if not only – way of understanding politics. It is in this sense that art is ethically relevant: it challenges the modern tendency to reduce the political to the rational. And, by doing so, aesthetics can expose political practices whose problematic dimensions are no longer recognised because years of habit have turned them into common sense.

Let us return to photography for an illustration. In an insightful essay, Nicholas Higgins demonstrates how Western knowledge of the indigenous population of Mexico emerged in the context of photographic practices that were an essential part of early anthropological explorations. The ensuing visual documentations were intrinsically linked to the larger colonial quest to establish order and policing methods through the imposition of the modern state upon the populations to be colonised. A case in point is Alphons Bertillon's project – dating back to the 1870s – to establish a photographic databank that systematically represents racial identity types. Even today, Bertillon's typical profile shots remain, as Higgins points out, the standard identifying practice in police stations, prison and intelligence units worldwide.[50] But the photographic tradition initiated by Bertillon did more than merely identify people. It created stereotypical images of identity that were then superimposed upon the far more complex lives of colonial subjects. The linkages between photographic depiction and colonial subjugation led to practices of seeing and policing in which one form of identity, usually race-related, tended to annihilate all others, such as gender, age, religion and class. Louise Amoore calls these practices 'vigilant visualities', pointing out how in today's world they are part of governmental practices designed to monitor and control people, particularly minority populations.[51]

At the same time as being implicated in colonial subjugation, photography – and art in general – also has the potential to provide us with a more inclusive view of the world. Good photography, Higgins argues, seeks not scientific authenticity, but artistic representation. It allows us to move

beyond a merely external depiction of the world. It may help us see and deal with the spirit of a period or event. This is why the best photographic art strives to capture, as Higgins puts it, 'that which you cannot see'.[52] Rather than superimposing an externally perceived image, it seeks to bring out multiplicities and ambiguities. In the case of Mexico this photographic quest for inclusion would need to be directed towards establishing images of a world in which the indigenous population can live 'as both Indians and Mexicans without one identity subsuming the other'.[53]

Aesthetics cannot absolve us from the responsibility to think and take political decisions, but it can substantially improve our options when we have to do so. It is in this sense that aesthetic approaches to politics contain an inevitable ethical dimension. But the ethics we find here is very different from the automatic and codified form that prevails in much of the theory and practice of international politics. It is not a black-and-white ethics, one that clearly stipulates a set of rights, rules and regulations. Rancière would say that 'there is no criterion for establishing a correspondence between aesthetic virtue and political virtue'.[54] Aesthetic engagements cannot tell us exactly what is right or wrong, or what to do in a particular situation. This is both the advantage and the difficulty of literature, as Alberto Manguel knows. It is the opposite of dogma, for 'it states facts, but gives no definitive answers, declares no absolute postulates, demands no arguable assumptions, offers no labelling identities'.[55] When we look to literature, or to another art form, we cannot expect to gain clear answers. Nothing can absolve us from the need to draw our own conclusions and to take responsibility for them. But while art cannot tell us how to stop wars or prevent terrorism and genocide, it can give us insights into these experiences and the feelings we have about them.[56] In so doing, art can shape the way we understand and remember past events and, in consequence, how we set ourselves the challenges we face in the future.

The ethical significance of the aesthetic emerges from the effort to open up different perspectives and options, from being mindful about the potentially problematic nature of all ethical systems that rely on fixed principles. This is not to say that we should dispense with principles, and with the ability to distinguish right from wrong. Aesthetic approaches simply remind us to be self-aware and mindful about the politics involved in setting up principles and rules in the first place. Morton Schoolman, for instance, argues that the aesthetic refers to a kind of openness and responsiveness that contrasts sharply with those tendencies in the modern world towards a preoccupation with control and the repression of difference.[57]

Ethics, then, becomes a mode of being rather than a set of principles: the cultivation of an attitude that emerges from seeing things in different and insightful ways. Embracing a certain level of ambivalence is inevitable if one is to accept the aesthetic contribution to ethical debates. Krippendorff points in the right direction here. He accepts the ethical lessons from Shakespeare's plays, for instance, because they do not simply promote or

denounce positions, but pose important questions, thus leaving the view-ers/readers with the responsibility of making their own judgements. Likewise, Sophocles' *Antigone* is presented as a key form of ethical critique because it offers political alternatives without committing itself to a programmatic agenda that immediately closes off options.[58] Herein lies the power of art: in its refusal to be dragged into short-term political manoeuvrings, which would reduce art to merely one more propaganda tool. Art is thus politi-cal in the more basic sense of offering insight into the processes through which we represent – all too often in narrow and highly problematic ways – political facts and challenges. 'Knowledge is the novel's only morality', Milan Kundera says.[59]

The most typical objection to such an open-ended approach to ethics is, of course, the accusation that it inevitably leads into a relativist void from where it becomes impossible to separate good and evil: that only a categor-ical approach to ethics can save us in a time of moral need. This is why, for instance, many theorists, philosophers and policy-makers are deeply scep-tical about the potential of inevitably ambiguous literary insights to make a meaningful contribution to the formulation of moral beliefs and political decisions.[60]

But our most difficult ethical decisions must often be taken precisely at a time when dramatic events, such as wars, genocides, terrorist attacks or financial turmoil, have shaken the very foundations of our principles, at moments when the boundaries between good and evil need to be revisited and redrawn in order to carve out a path into a more stable and peaceful future. Falling back into old intellectual habits, whether they are codified or not, will not give us any answers, at least not those we need to move forward and deal with the challenges ahead in a sensitive and fair way. Finding ethical solutions at such times of dearth requires a leap of faith into the unknown. Søren Kierkegaard already knew that the results of such a leap can never be known, that the ensuing decisions are, by nature, terrible.[61] No foundation can ever guarantee to save us from a fall. No pre-established principles can give us certainty that we are on the right path. Nothing, in short, can absolve us from the terrible burden of decision-making. But we are most likely to face the ensuing challenges successfully when equipped with an ethical sensibil-ity that rules and principles alone cannot provide. It is at such moments that the inspiration of aesthetic sources can become crucial to ethical and polit-ical debates for they are not bound by the force of habit: they allow us to review and rethink the taken-for-granted principles that caused havoc in the first place; they give us a range of different options and they illuminate the consequences of these options; they give us spaces to reflect before we need to make difficult decisions and they remind us that these very political deci-sions are a responsibility we have to actively assume, rather than rely upon, rules and norms that were written for a different time and a different set of political challenges.

The structure of this book

Chapter 1 outlines the nature and significance of aesthetic approaches to the study of word politics. More specifically, it contrasts aesthetic with mimetic forms of representation. The latter, which have dominated scholarship on international relations, seek to represent the political as realistically and authentically as possible. An aesthetic approach, by contrast, assumes that there is always a gap between a form of representation and what is represented therewith. Rather than ignoring or seeking to narrow this gap, as mimetic approaches do, aesthetic insight recognises that the inevitable difference between the represented and its representation is the very location of politics.

   The chapter examines some of the contributions to international relations scholarship that have begun to draw on aesthetic sources. They have multiplied in recent years to the point that one can speak of an increasingly significant 'aesthetic turn' – one that challenges some of the key disciplinary assumptions. I do not claim to offer a comprehensive overview of these scholarly contributions. Instead, I engage some of them to illustrate how one can reclaim the political value of the aesthetic, not to replace social science, but to broaden our abilities to comprehend and deal with the key dilemmas of world politics. Aesthetic sources of insight, such as literature and art, could then be appreciated alongside more accepted sources of knowledge about the international. But embarking on such an aesthetic turn amounts to more than simply adding an additional, sensual layer of interpretation. It calls for a significant shift away from a model of thought that recognises external appearances and channels them into one form of common sense, towards an approach that generates a more diverse but also more direct encounter with the political. The latter allows for productive interactions across different faculties, including sensibility, imagination and reason, without any of them annihilating the unique position and insight of the others.

   The second chapter illustrates my conceptual arguments about representation and aesthetics in a practical context: the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, or 9/11. I show how art can help us understand dimensions of security challenges that cannot easily be recognised through conventional forms of policy analysis. The chapter draws attention to this potential by examining some of the artistic reactions to 9/11. I draw on examples from literature, visual art, architecture and music to understand the relationship between aesthetics and politics. I point out, in particular, that artistic engagements have the potential to capture and communicate a range of crucial but often neglected emotional issues, which are essential for understanding the nature and implications of global terrorism for practices of security.

   Chapter 3 draws upon the notion of the sublime to bring together the various theoretical and practical strands of inquiry I have pursued up to that point. I show why key events in international politics, such as terrorist

attacks, can be characterised as sublime. This is to say that our minds clash with phenomena that supersede our cognitive abilities, triggering a range of powerful emotions, such as pain, fear and awe. Encounters with the sublime allow us an important glimpse into the contingent and often manipulative nature of representation. For centuries, philosophers have sought to learn from such experiences, but in practice the ensuing insights are all too quickly suppressed and forgotten. The prevailing tendency is to react to the elements of fear and awe by reimposing control and order. I emphasise an alternative reaction to the sublime, one that explores new moral and political opportunities in the face of disorientation. But I also stress that we do not need to be dislocated by dramatic events to begin to wonder about the world. Moving from the sublime to the subliminal, I explore how it is possible to acquire the same type of insight into questions of representation and contingency by engaging more everyday practices of politics. Such a move challenges how prevailing international relations approaches have almost exclusively focused on dramatic events and high politics: on phenomena such as war and terrorism and the manner in which key actors, most notably states and their leaders, try to deal with them. A broader set of political practices, including the seemingly mundane and politically irrelevant domains of the everyday, all of a sudden come into focus as an essential aspect of global politics.

Chapter 4 sets up a series of micro-case studies that actually demonstrate, rather than merely assert, the links between aesthetics and politics. The key objective here is to examine how the poetic imagination can help us gain a better – or at least a different – understanding of political issues. To underline the importance of this task I begin by demonstrating the relevance of language to international relations. Most prevailing approaches to the study of conflict and world politics pay little attention to issues of language. Words are treated as mere tools to represent factual events which have qualities of their own, qualities that are said to exist independently of how we perceive them through human eyes and human speech. The chapter problematises this assumption. It then presents the poetic imagination as particularly well suited to reveal how language and social life are intrinsically linked, how more inclusive ways of theorising and conducting world politics may emerge from engaging the linguistic habits through which some of our most pressing dilemmas have become objectified. What is needed, then, is a critique of language that opens up possibilities to gaze beyond the givenness of world politics, that can problematise political dilemmas which have been rendered unproblematic, even invisible, through years of normalising speech and corresponding political practices.

Chapter 5 begins the case studies with a systematic political analysis of Paul Celan. His poetry epitomises the search for thinking space in the immediate postwar period. Much of the German language at the time was so closely associated with the horrors of the Nazi regime that it was difficult to address critically many important social issues. In dealing with this dilemma, Celan

recognised that politics ought to deal with language, with how we have come to objectivise the dilemmas that surround us. His poetry tried to stretch the boundaries of the German language such that it became possible to speak once more, critically, dialogically, humanely. By scrutinising the potential and limits of this process, the chapter addresses various issues that are at stake in the interaction between language, politics and society.

Chapter 6 analyses a group of East German poets who engaged in what could be called linguistic dissent during the decade that led up to the fall of the Berlin Wall. Epitomising their activities is the area around Prenzlauer Berg, a former workers' quarter in East Berlin, which turned into a Bohemian artistic and literary scene during the 1980s. Most of these poets felt that the existing language was inadequate to express their feelings and experiences. They searched for words to describe the undersides of daily life in East Germany: the urban and industrial wastelands that had no place in the official ideological discourse. In doing so they challenged the state's promotion of a black-and-white image of politics and society. The East German poets of the 1980s epitomise not only the potential, but also the difficulties of resisting deeply entrenched forms of domination. A couple of years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, declassified documents revealed that some of the leading underground poets had actively collaborated with the state's notorious security service. Language-based dissent clearly had not been enough to create a critical distance from the authoritarian regime. But rather than invalidating the project of poetic resistance altogether, as some suggest, these revelations underline the need to come to terms with the complexities that are entailed in breaking through existing webs of power and discourse.

Chapter 7 examines the links between poetry and social justice, focusing on the work and activism of Pablo Neruda. Nobel laureate, international diplomat and political activist in one, Neruda reveals how poetry can enter the political process and, perhaps more importantly, turn into a voice that can draw attention to questions of injustice. But to engage political struggles a poet must be as accessible as possible. Neruda was well aware of this necessity, which is why he sought to write in the language of everyday life. But he was also aware of the need to break through existing linguistic habits, for it is these very conventions, inaudible and seemingly harmless as they are, that objectify practices of domination. The chapter scrutinises both the theoretical issues that are at stake in this paradoxical tension as well as the more specific attempts Neruda undertook to engage political issues related to fascism, imperialism and class domination.

Chapter 8 focuses on the Russian poet Anna Akhmatova, whose life and work spanned almost entirely her country's twentieth century. Here I examine the potential of poetry to take on the role of a critical historical memory. Akhmatova addressed several major – and terrible – political events, from the two world wars to the Stalinist purges. Her poetry still stands today among the

most valuable historical records – capturing not only facts and data, but also the spirit of a period and its emotional intensity. Akhmatova demonstrates the continuing relevance of one of the oldest functions of poetry: to pass on, from generation to generation, the wisdom of previous periods. Poetry was originally written in rhyme so as to optimise the process of remembering and to reduce the possible errors and distortions that would inevitably creep into narratives that are handed down over long periods of time. Even though written documentation now renders this function of poetry obsolete – thus enabling the possibility of free verse – the deeper seated poetic ability to capture the aspects of particular situations remains largely intact.

Chapter 9 chronicles the political nature and impact of the poetry of Ko Un, one of South Korea's most important writers of the last fifty years. Here I focus in particular on the role that poetry plays in articulating questions of identity and community. During Ko Un's life he and his nation faced numerous challenges: a brutal colonial occupation by Japan, the division of the peninsula into a communist North and a capitalist South, an unusually devastating war between the two sides, the integrating of the divided peninsula into global Cold War politics, long periods of authoritarian rule on both sides, as well as the more recent challenge to promote reconciliation. Many of these traumatic episodes challenged the very existence of Korea as a people, a nation and a state. Ko Un's poetry was part of a larger effort to regain a sense of their being and a national identity in the face of turmoil, war and globalisation.

A conclusion summarises the main themes of the book and outlines both the potential and limits of aesthetic insights into world politics. I do so by addressing some of the possible objections to my arguments, such as issues related to the process of choosing particular literary sources and reading political content into or out of them. I also reflect on the future of the aesthetic turn, identifying the key areas that require more and more sustained engagement. Particularly central here is (1) the need to build upon existing conceptual and empirical investigations and address criticisms that have been made, particularly with regard to the alleged relativist dangers of aesthetic approaches; (2) to expand the aesthetic turn beyond a vibrant subcommunity of scholars and influence more mainstream debates in international relations scholarship; and (3) to demonstrate and explore the policy implications of the aesthetic turn.

1
The Aesthetic Turn in International Political Theory

> The fact that through the work of art a truth is experienced that we cannot attain in any other way constitutes the philosophic importance of art, which asserts itself against all attempts to rationalise it away.
>
> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*[1]

We have all grown accustomed to familiar representations of the international and its conflicts. Wars, famines and diplomatic summits are shown to us in their usual guise: as short-lived media events that blend information and entertainment. The numbing regularity with which these images and sound-bites are communicated to great masses soon erases their highly arbitrary nature. We gradually forget that we have become so accustomed to these politically charged and distorting metaphors that we accept them as real.

Those who make the analysis of these political events their professional purview – the students of international relations – adhere to representational habits that have become equally objectified and problematic. Many of them are social scientists for whom knowledge about the 'facts' of the 'real world' emerges from the search for 'valid inferences by the systematic use of well-established procedures of inquiry'.[2] But relatively little practical knowledge has emerged from these efforts, even after successive generations of social scientists have refined their models and methods. Our insights into the international have not grown substantially, nor have our abilities to prevent deadly conflicts. From Kosovo to Afghanistan, from Iraq to Darfur, violence remains the modus operandi of world politics. Even proponents of scientific research lament that 'students of international conflict are left wrestling with their data to eke out something they can label a finding'.[3]

The purpose of this book is to validate and explore an entirely different approach to the study of world politics: aesthetics. The present chapter provides the conceptual foundation for this endeavour. It does so by distinguishing between mimetic and aesthetic approaches. The latter, which have

dominated international relations scholarship, seek to represent politics as realistically and authentically as possible, aiming to capture world politics as it 'really' is. An aesthetic approach, by contrast, assumes that there is always a gap between a form of representation and what is represented therewith. Rather than ignoring or seeking to narrow this gap, as mimetic approaches do, aesthetic insight recognises that the inevitable difference between the represented and its representation is the very location of politics.

The distinction I draw here between mimetic and aesthetic approaches is to some extent a conceptual tool. Mimesis is a complex term in art theory, suggesting not necessarily life-like reproductions, but a creative engagement with the relationship between artistic images and reality.[4] Although I engage some of these debates, I employ the actual term 'mimesis' in a less art-historical sense, referring to it in a more everyday manner, and according to the *Oxford Dictionary*, as an 'imitative representation of the real world'.[5] I do so because my main objective is not to offer a contribution to theories of art, but to highlight how crucial issues of representation are to the theory and practice of international relations.

Some of the most significant theoretical and practical insights into world politics emerge not from endeavours that ignore representation, but from those that explore how representative practices themselves have come to constitute and shape political events. Although most approaches to international political theory remain wedded to mimetic principles, an increasing number of scholars are confronting the issue of representation. The most explicit attempt to address the issues at stake has occurred though so-called postmodern approaches, which started to emerge during the late 1980s. But during the last decade or so an increasing number of international relations scholars have also started to deal with and employ aesthetic sources, so much so that one can speak of an actual aesthetic turn. Numerous scholars meanwhile have explored different forms of insight that emerge from aesthetic sources, such as literature, visual art, architecture, music, cinema and other aspects of popular culture. Of course, not all of the ensuing endeavours are necessarily convincing. Nor do they supersede the need for rigorous social scientific inquiries. But aesthetic approaches have begun an important process of broadening our understanding of world politics beyond a relatively narrow academic discipline that has come to entrench many of the political problems it seemingly seeks to address and solve.

The key challenge ahead consists of finding ways to reclaim the political value of the aesthetic. To do so is no easy task, for the modern triumph of instrumental or technological reason has by and large eclipsed the aesthetic from our political purview.[6] Overcoming the ensuing construction of common sense would amount to far more than simply adding an additional, sensual layer of interpretation. The aesthetic turn reorients our very understanding of the political: it engenders a significant shift away from a model of thought that equates knowledge with the mimetic recognition of external

appearances towards an approach that generates a more diverse but also more direct encounter with the political. The latter allows for productive interactions across different faculties, including sensibility, imagination and reason, without any of them annihilating the unique position and insight of the other.

Mimetic versus aesthetic theories of representation

Before exploring the significance of aesthetic insight it is necessary to juxtapose it, if only briefly, to the prevailing wisdom of international relations scholarship. One perhaps could, with Jacques Derrida, speak of two fundamentally different approaches. The first seeks to discover a truth or an origin that somehow escapes the necessity of interpretation. The second accepts or even affirms that representing the political is a form of interpretation that is, by its very nature, incomplete and bound up with the values of the perceiver.[7]

Much of international relations scholarship has, undoubtedly, been conducted in the former, mimetic mode of representation. The most influential contributions to the discipline, particularly in North America, continue to adhere almost exclusively to social scientific conventions. They uphold the notion of a neutral observer and a corresponding separation of object and subject. J. David Singer announced at the height of the behavioural revolution that 'there is no longer much doubt that we can make the study of international politics into a scientific discipline worthy of the name'.[8] The ensuing search for epistemological certainty may have made political sense in the context of a rigid Cold War thinking pattern and America's quest for scientific superiority over the Soviet Union. But decades after the collapse of the Berlin Wall not much has changed, notwithstanding the fact that prevailing structural and social scientific approaches to international theory, including those that claimed predictive insight, have miserably failed to explain, let alone anticipate, the momentous transformations that took place in 1989. The hope of discovering scientifically authenticated insight that defies the necessity of representation remains as strong as it was at the height of the Cuban Missile Crisis. Of course, there have been major debates among international relations scholars, generating much discussion and disagreement among diverse versions of realism, liberalism and Marxism, to name just the principal traditions of thought.[9] But even the fierceness with which these debates were waged cannot hide the fact that they all took place within a relatively narrow overall frame – a frame that was established by the persistently recurring aspiration to become what the most influential of all approaches, realism, purports to be: 'a general theory explaining the essence of international politics'.[10]

Representation is still widely seen as process of copying which, ideally, erases all traces of human interference so that the scholarly end-product looks just like the original. Realism has made 'the real' into an object of desire,

Hayden White would say.[11] Or, as one of the most influential contemporary methodology textbooks in political sciences states, and this without any apparent sense of irony: 'the goal is to learn facts about the real world'.[12]

Mimetic approaches do not pay enough attention to the relationship between the represented and its representation. Indeed, they are not really theories of representation, as F. R. Ankersmit demonstrates in an insightful study. They are theories against representation. But political reality does not exist in an a priori way. It comes into being only through the process of representation.[13] Various neuroscientific studies largely support such an assumption. A prominent review article, for instance, summarises neuroscientific insights as revealing that 'external reality' is largely a 'construction of the brain'. The authors stress that 'our senses are confronted by a chaotic, constantly changing world that has no labels, and the brain must make sense of that chaos'. From a neurological point of view, then, 'it is the brain's correlations of sensory information that create the knowledge we have about our surroundings'.[14]

To foreground the politics of representation is not to deny the existence of facts or to claim that the 'real' world does not really exist. It is, rather, to acknowledge that a political event cannot determine from what perspective and in what context it is seen. Neither has it any influence over how we interpret the event in view of our own prior experiences. Our effort to make sense of this event can thus never be reduced to the event itself. This is why representation 'always raises the question of what set of true statements we might prefer to other sets of true statements'.[15] It is a process through which we organise our understanding of reality. Note as well that even if the ideal of mimesis – perfect resemblance between signifier and signified – were possible, it could offer us little political insight. It would merely replicate what is, and thus be as useless as 'as a facsimile of a text that is handed to us in answer to our question of how to interpret that text'.[16]

Aesthetic approaches, by contrast, embark on a direct political encounter, for they engage the gap that inevitably opens up between a form of representation and the object it seeks to represent. Rather than constituting this gap as a threat to knowledge and political stability, as mimetic theories do or imply, aesthetic approaches accept its inevitability. Indeed, they recognise that the difference between represented and representation is the very location of politics. What is at stake, then, is 'the knowability of the world', as Elaine Scarry puts it, and the fact that 'knowability depends on its susceptibility to representation'.[17]

Consider, by way of illustration, the similarities between the work of a painter and a social scientist. Both portray their objects through particular modes of representation. Even a naturalistic painting is still a form of representation. It cannot capture the essence of its object. It is painted from a certain angle, at a certain time of the day, and in a certain light. The materials are those chosen by the artist, as are the colours and size of the

painting, even its frame. Recall for a minute the famous and much-discussed painting by the surrealist René Magritte: the one that features a carefully drawn pipe placed above an equally carefully hand-written line that reads 'Ceci n'est pas une pipe' ('This is not a pipe'). What becomes obvious fairly soon – that the painting is not a pipe itself, but only an artistic representation thereof – challenges the very notion of mimesis. It draws attention to what, in Saussurian language, is called the arbitrariness of the sign: the fact that the relationship between signifier (the drawing of the pipe) and the signified (the pipe) is contingent on a range of interpretative steps.[18]

The aesthetic alternative to mimesis, it must be stressed, refers to much more than art – to more than what Immanuel Kant called 'the beautiful representation of a thing' (Kant cited in Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 46). There are compelling reasons to return to an earlier, Romantic understanding of the aesthetic. From such a vantage point the objective is to rely on a broad register of sensibilities and insight, rather than be limited to the practices of reason and logos that triumphed in the wake of the Enlightenment. Central, then, is the effort to draw on a range of other, more sensuous and perhaps more tangible, yet equally important forms of insights, from the poetic to the visual and the musical. Questions of evaluation and taste, for instance, tend to be seen today as being of a purely private and thus subjective nature. Not so at the end of the eighteenth century, when the concept of taste, despite being located outside the realm of reason, was seen as an important 'mode of knowing … that is not a private but a social phenomenon'.[19] For Kant, heeding to such aesthetic experiences opened up an alternative to the deeply embedded modern assumption that our knowledge of the world is structured according to the objects we seek to know. Because all attempts to know something a priori about them had failed, Kant proposed that we proceed like Copernicus. Instead of assuming that the stars circle around us, he approached the problem the other way around. Knowledge of objects was thus not seen as being structured primarily by their a priori existence, but by the nature of our perception of them.[20] It is in this sense that Kant, despite his often problematic search for a transcendental subject and a universal code of ethics, has inspired a tradition of critical thought that affirms contingencies and actively engages the struggle between reproductive and productive thought or, as Michael Shapiro prefers to put it, between 'the demands of reason and the work of imagination'.[21]

One of the most insightful and politically relevant extensions of Kantian aesthetics can be found in the work of Gilles Deleuze. He too detects problems with the prevailing mimetic image of thought, but conceptualises them in a slightly different way. Orthodox approaches, Deleuze stresses, are based on the principle of recognition, which he defines, in Kantian terms, as 'the harmonious exercise of all the faculties upon a supposed same object'.[22] Such a harmonious state is possible if all faculties (such as perception, memory, reason, imagination and understanding) collaborate along the same model of

recognition towards a particular object. The object itself is thus assumed to remain the same independently of whether it is perceived through sensual, rational, memorial or other forms of representation. The ensuing construction of common sense is problematic, for it conflates thought with knowledge and supposes that knowledge is ultimately based on recognising external appearances.[23] The consequences are far-reaching, because a few dominant forms of insight, usually those emerging from reason, are being given the power to coordinate and synchronise a variety of otherwise rather disparate faculties. Harmonious as the resulting notion of common sense may be, it can neither explain its emergence nor become aware (and critical) of its own values. As a result, the established mode of thought makes it very difficult, if not impossible, to locate and explore a wide range of other and potentially very valuable insights into the political.

Deleuze finds hope in Kant for overturning this orthodox or dogmatic image of thought, for it was Kant who first provided a model of discordant harmony among the faculties. By examining how the beautiful and the sublime generate an inherent tension between imagination and reason, Kant sought to find ways for allowing each faculty to cultivate its unique insights and passions. But what is communicated across irreducible differences between faculties should not and cannot result in a shared recognition of objects. These traversing and transgressing insights neither converge in common sense nor are they necessarily the object of any one faculty in particular. Rather than embarking on a project that requires synchronisation and submissive integration, aesthetics thus promotes productive interactions across different faculties. Insight is then no longer associated with recognition, but with a process that flows 'from sensibility to thought and from thought to sensibility, capable of engendering in each case, according to their own order, the limit- or transcendent-object of each faculty'.[24] The notion of common sense, which freezes knowledge and imagination around the overwhelming influence of a dominant faculty, must then give way to a multiplication of common senses or, as Deleuze prefers, to a 'parasense', which does not create a harmonious accord, but 'determines only the communication between disjointed faculties'.[25]

The power of mimetic habits

The task of critically analysing world politics is to make fuller use of various faculties and to challenge the mimetic and exclusive conventions of realist international politics, just as Magritte's painting of a pipe was aimed at undermining 'the mimetic conventions of realistic painting'.[26] But few tasks are more daunting than that. We all have an intuitive longing for the hope that what we represent is what we see and think, and that what we see and think must, really, be real. The belief in resemblance and recognition is part of our desire to order the world. We know, of course, that Magritte's

drawing of a pipe is not a pipe. But we are also wedded to conventions of language – conventions that tell us, to appropriate Foucault's words, that the entire purpose of a scholarly analysis of world politics 'is to elicit recognition, to allow the object it represents to appear without hesitation and equivocation'.[27]

Representation is always an act of power. This power is at its peak if a form of representation is able to disguise its subjective origins and values. Realism has been unusually successful in this endeavour: it has turned one of many credible interpretations into a form of representation that is not only widely accepted as 'realistic', but also appears and functions as essence. Realism has been able to take historically contingent and political motivated commentaries – say by E. H. Carr and Hans Morgenthau about how to deal with the spread of Nazi Germany, or by Kenneth Waltz about how to interpret the 'logic' of 'anarchy' during the Cold War – and then turned them into universal and ahistoric explanations that allegedly capture the 'essence' of human nature and international politics.[28] Expressed in other words, realism has managed to suppress what Kant would have called the 'aesthetic quality' of politics, that is, the elements which are 'purely subjective in the representation of an object, i.e., what constitutes its reference to the subject, not to the object'.[29]

The power to raise subjective interpretations to a level of objectivity is rooted in a variety of factors other than the mere persuasiveness of the respective perspective. Time is one of these factors: a simple but important one. Realist theories of (anti-) representation have been around for so long that the metaphors through which they legitimise their political view of the world (from the primacy of the 'national interest' to the dictates of realpolitik) no longer appear as metaphors. They have generally come to be accepted as realistic responses based on representations of the world as it 'really' is. Through decades of dominance in academic scholarship, policy formation and public discourse, the anti-representational values of realism have shaped how we perceive the boundaries between the rational and irrational. As a result, we have forgotten whether we understand realist interpretations by noticing resemblances to the world or whether we notice resemblances as a result of having internalised realist interpretations.[30]

Realists are, of course, not the only ones who succumbed to the power of mimesis. Throughout history people often sought comfort and stability in the illusion that their representations not just resembled but actually captured the respective objects as they really were. The history of art, for instance, is just as intertwined with a desire for mimetic stability. Until the advent of Expressionism and other modern movements, approaches to art were dominated by a strongly mimetic position that placed great value on life-like portrayals, such as those by Rubens and Velázquez. From such a vantage point an abstract painting or sculpture would have lacked any artistic qualities. Indeed, artistic value was measured in direct relation to the ability to produce

life-like representations.[31] But, of course, even the most 'perfect' painting is, as outlined above, still a form of representation. Consider how John Constable, one of Britain's most popular and most naturalistic landscape painters, had to create his illusions of perfect resemblance by employing blues and greens that could not actually be found in natural sky or foliage.[32]

Modernism moved art away from mimesis to the point that some commentators now see inherently anti-mimetic qualities in art. The aesthetic has taken over, they argue, because a modern artist does not merely try to bring about *trompe l'oeil* effects – attempts to create representations so realistic that they give the illusion of the actual thing depicted. To be of artistic value, a work of art – be it a poem, an opera, a painting or a photograph – must be able to engage and capture not only exterior realities, but also, and above all, our human relationship with them. The key, the argument goes, is to offer an interpretation of reality that *actively* differs from the reality itself. Gadamer calls this process 'aesthetic differentiation'[33] and Ankersmit stresses that this difference between representation and represented 'is the source of and condition of all aesthetic pleasure'.[34]

Blurring boundaries between the aesthetic and the mimetic

The boundaries between the aesthetic and the mimetic are inevitably blurred. Not all social science is mimetic and not all mimesis is of a social scientific nature. Debates in the philosophy of science range anywhere from the openly positivist to the hermeneutic. Even in its purely quantitative form, social science can be not only insightful, but also subversive of existing political practices. For instance, an empirical analysis of the simple fact that more than 30,000 children under the age of five die each day from preventable causes problematises the prevailing aesthetic of media representation. Such data have been around for years.[35] They reveal how market-dependent and entertainment-oriented television networks favour heroic and spectacular images of wars and terrorist attacks over more mundane daily problems, even if the human, social and economic impact of the latter is far more devastating and consequential in nature.

Mimesis is as diverse and ambivalent as social science. This is in part because the concept of the mimetic is used in various different ways, in part because the boundaries between the aesthetic and the mimetic overlap. Theodor Adorno, for instance, considers mimesis a central strategy of resistance, for 'art is modern art through mimesis of the hardened and alienated'.[36] Mimesis is seen here not as imitation, but as a way of reversing years of alienating processes of commodification. It is, then, a form of 'creative imitation', a manner of reshaping life through action.[37]

Look at Andy Warhol looking at Campbell soup cans. His famous series of paintings seem perfectly mimetic at first sight: they seek nothing but a naturalistic representation of a common consumer object, soup cans:

total correspondence between signifier and signified. How can a useful, let alone critical understanding emerge from such an attempt at perfect mimetic resemblance? 'If art adapts to [the] most superficial element of the commodity society,' Peter Bürger warns, 'it is difficult to see how it is through such adaptation that it can resist it.'[38] For some, though, such undistorted representation of external realities can be subversive insofar as it draws attention to what is taken for granted and would otherwise go unnoticed. The challenge to commodification and consumerism thus works through ironic mimesis. But this is not to say that it is mimetic, at least not in the sense described above. The very nature of irony is located in the tension between representation and represented. Irony is a process of metaphorical distinction – and this distinction is of an inherently aesthetic nature. Just as Magritte's painting of a pipe is not an actual pipe, Warhol's paintings of soup cans are not soup cans per se. They are representations thereof. The fact that Warhol's naturalistic style deceives us initially only highlights the problematic objectives of mimesis: the impossibility of perfect resemblance.

Ironic mimesis, then, is not mimetic in the conventional sense of the word: it does not aim for authentic representation. It becomes a metaphor that problematises the link between the representation and that which is represented, for irony always refers to something else than what is literally expressed. It refuses to identify an object by its name or face value. Ironic art, or ironic writing for that matter, does not expect the world to be smooth. It does not anticipate that all of our observations neatly fit into preconceived and clearly delineated conceptual boxes. Rather, complex occurrences and even inconsistencies and contradictions are accepted as inevitable aspects of our effort to make sense of social phenomena. 'Irony irritates,' Milan Kundera says. It does so because it exposes the world in all its ambiguities and thus denies us the certainties we were craving for.[39] Irony draws attention to the fact that representation is an inevitably political issue, that there is always a gap between what is observed and how this observation is represented in and through language. The ironist, Richard Rorty says, is a person who has doubts about the vocabulary that is currently used, but is also aware of two additional insights: that no argument phrased in the present language can sustain or dissolve these doubts, and that there is no other, alternative vocabulary that can ever be final in the sense that it would be able to grasp an essence of things.[40]

Some of these tensions between the mimetic and the aesthetic have insinuated themselves into prevalent international relations scholarship. Kenneth Waltz, in one of his relatively frequent escapes from mimetic conventions, stresses that theories result from a process of abstraction and are thus distinct from the realities they seek to explain. He goes as far as arguing that 'explanatory power is gained by moving away from reality, not by staying close to it'.[41] In some passages, Hans Morgenthau too acknowledges that representation is an imperfect process, that mimesis is by definition impossible. He does so by likening the difference between the practice of international politics

and the attempt to derive a rational theory from it to the difference between a photograph and a painting. The photograph, Morgenthau argues, 'shows everything that can be seen by the naked eye'. The painting, by contrast, does more: 'it shows, or it seeks to show, one thing that the naked eye cannot see: the human essence of the person portrayed'.[42] The most explicit contemporary extension of this approach in conventional international relations scholarship is perhaps found in Alexander Wendt's attempt to theorise unobservables through scientific realism.[43]

Legitimising aesthetic insight

Why, then, are there significant problems with the mimetic conventions of prevalent approaches to international political theory? Two points are particularly crucial here.

First, most approaches fail to recognise and deal with their own aesthetic. Mimesis in realist scholarship contains few if any elements of irony or self-reflection. Social science, as a result, is not presented as a form of interpretation. Instead, the overwhelming objective remains to elicit recognition and to close or ignore the gap between a representation and what is represented therewith. The complexities mentioned above fade when it comes to affirming the core values and purpose of international relations research. While acknowledging limits to what 'the naked eye' can observe about the political, Morgenthau nevertheless is convinced that it is possible to capture the 'essence' of politics and society, namely the 'objective laws that have their roots in human nature'.[44] Wendt, likewise, believes that 'epistemological issues are relatively uninteresting' because 'the point is to explain the world, not to argue how we can know it'.[45]

Second, and far more consequential, is the fact that a relatively narrow, positivist and exclusive understanding of social science has come to dominate much of international relations scholarship. In the extreme version, this approach holds that all hypotheses 'need to be evaluated empirically before they can make a contribution to knowledge'.[46] Or so at least argue three prominent political science and international relations scholars. They claim strongly that there is, in essence, no difference between quantitative and qualitative approaches. Differences between them are 'methodologically and substantively unimportant', for both need to provide 'verified scientific explanations . . . of the real world'.[47] The consequences of such positions are far-reaching. They have dramatically narrowed the scope of inquiries into world politics and the tools available to pursue them. They have elevated a few select faculties – reason in particular – and given them the power to order all others. The result is the erasure of a crucial location of political struggles – the domain of representation – from our purview. This is why Waltz's otherwise commendable attempt to move away from resemblance

and recognition ends up in a science-driven process of abstraction that isolates a few select features and produces generalities from them. The problem here is not with abstraction per se, for abstraction is an inevitable component of any process of representation. 'We end up with abstraction whether we want it or not', Christine Sylvester stresses.[48] But Waltzian abstraction is obsessed with deduction, categorisation and scientific legitimacy. Rather than celebrating the diversity of life and drawing from its sensual potentials, as abstraction in art seeks to do, the neo-realist version 'blocks the construction of people in international relations and hinders our view of states as more than the proverbial empty boxes'.[49] The result is a form of common sense that is as narrow and problematic as it is deeply entrenched in international relations scholarship. This is why even more moderate, constructivist scholars rely on analytical tools that are largely confined to mimetic principles.

To broaden our knowledge of the international does, however, require more than simply adding a few additional layers of interpretation. Needed is a more fundamental reorientation of thought and action: a shift away from harmonious common sense imposed by a few dominant faculties towards a model of thought that enables productive flows across a variety of discordant faculties. For Deleuze, this difference amounts to a move from recognition to a direct political encounter, from approaches that affirm appearances without disturbing thought towards approaches that add to our understanding and, indeed, force us to think.[50]

A brief illustration from the world of art may help: consider how Picasso's *Guernica* has given us insight into the Spanish Civil War and the human psyche not because it sought recognition and life-like representation. The significance of *Guernica* as a form of insight and historical memory is located precisely in the fact that Picasso aesthetically engaged the very substance of politics: the difference between the represented and its representation. *Guernica* allows us to move back and forth between imagination and reason, thought and sensibility, memory and understanding, without imposing one faculty upon another. Abstraction here takes on a very different role than in international relations scholarship. It seeks to free our senses from the compulsion to equate knowledge with the rational recognition of external appearances. This sensual transgression of mimetic conventions is perhaps at its most extreme in those visual instances where figuration is given up altogether. Abstraction then draws attention to the fact that a figurative painting runs the risk of leading the eye to the temptation of recognition. Abstraction, by contrast, projects an immediacy of sensation that is not linked to direct representational tasks. To preserve political relevance in such a process is, of course, far from self-evident. And yet, abstraction has taken on very explicit political dimensions, as the close association of Abstract Expressionism with Cold War politics amply demonstrated.[51] This is why the Australian painter David Rankin, whose abstract canvasses engage political themes from the Holocaust to the Tiananmen massacre, stresses that the paintings of Paul

Klee and other seemingly non-political artists 'were political in an exciting way because they were leading to shifts of sensibility within society'.[52]

Aesthetics is an essential tool for promoting such shifts in sensibilities, be it through abstraction or figuration. The aesthetic model of thought challenges the construction of common sense that has given social science, and instrumental reason in general, the power to synchronise the senses and claim the high ground in the interpretation of world politics. But meeting this challenge is not easy. Nothing is harder than to think outside common sense, to question what 'everybody knows ... and no one can deny'.[53] The seemingly harmless ability to define common sense is, as Steve Smith has noted in the context of international relations scholarship, 'the ultimate act of political power'.[54] It determines what is thinkable and unthinkable in the first place.

How, then, is one to legitimise approaches to thought, knowledge and evidence that contradict virtually every central principle that has guided international relations scholarship since its inception as an academic discipline? Knowledge that is communicated through artistic, philosophical and historical insights cannot always be verified, as Gadamer stresses, by methodological means proper to science. Indeed, the significance of aesthetic insight is located precisely in the fact that it 'cannot be attained in any other way'.[55] It produces what can be called an 'excess' experience – that is, an experience, sensuous at times, which cannot be apprehended or codified by non-aesthetic forms of knowledge. Indeed, aesthetic understanding is based on the very acknowledgement that signification is an inherently incomplete and problematic process.[56] And this is why aesthetic truth claims need to be validated by means other than empirical evidence and scientific falsification procedures. They require productive and respectful interactions among different faculties or, as Gadamer puts it, an investigation into the very phenomenon of understanding.[57]

Theorising representation: postmodern and constructivist approaches

I would now like to offer a brief sketch of the approaches to international relations that have already engaged questions of representation and aesthetics. To do so I proceed in two steps. I first examine – in the present section – how over the past twenty years so-called postmodern approaches have challenged the often exclusive reliance on social science methods. The respective contributions have drawn attention to issues of representation and thus opened up possibilities for using a broader set of methods and insights. In a second step I then examine – in the subsequent section – how in more recent years numerous scholars have begun to employ aesthetic forms of insight into world politics, including those that emerge from literature, visual art, music, cinema, photography, architecture and aspects of popular culture. These approaches have moved international relations scholarship away from

an exclusive and often very narrow reliance on diplomatic documents, statistical data, political speeches, academic treatises and other traditional sources of knowledge about the international. But first to the movement that made such a broadening of scholarship possible in the first place.

The most explicit engagements with questions of representation have so far occurred through so-called postmodern approaches. They began to enter international relations debates in the mid-to-late 1980s, leading to what some called a 'third disciplinary debate', following the interwar dispute between realists and liberals and the postwar methodological exchange between science-oriented behavioural scholars and those who rely on more traditional sources, such as history, philosophy and law.[58]

The postmodern has become a very stretched and polemical term, used far more often by its critics than its proponents. Defenders of the postmodern present it as a necessary critique of modern thought forms: they challenge, often passionately, the very nature of scholarship about world politics, trying to open up spaces to think about the international in different ways. Opponents justify the modern project at all costs. Speaking of nihilism and relativism, of an 'anything goes' ideology,[59] they fear that the postmodern would lead us into 'an intellectual and moral disaster'.[60]

Once one ignores the hostile exchanges and polemics that surround the term 'postmodernism' one can find a series of insights that are of direct and practical relevance to international relations. To suggest this is not to claim that the postmodern is beyond contentions and problems, or to downplay the fact that the respective inquiries are characterised more by diversity than by a single and coherent set of positions and assumptions. The issues raised by this body of literature range from critiques of the positivist and state-centric nature of prevalent approaches to attempts at understanding how ensuing theoretical assumptions were intertwined with the violent nature of political practices.

My aim here is not to summarise postmodern approaches to international relations. There have been several highly insightful attempts to do so. The most authoritative among them is a classic essay by Richard Devetak as well as more recent but equally compelling essays by David Campbell, Anthony Burke and Jenny Edkins. These authors point at numerous issues at stake, focusing, at times, on the more specific contribution of poststructural scholarship.[61]

I am using the term 'postmodernism' in its broadest sense here: as a series of inquiries that stress the need to come to terms with what Nietzsche called 'the death of God', the disappearance, at the end of the medieval period, of a generally accepted world view that provided a stable ground from which it was possible to assess nature, knowledge, common values, truth, politics, in short, life itself. Rather than continuing a long modern tradition of finding replacements for the fallen God, postmodern scholarship accepts the ultimately contingent nature of political life.

Recognising the importance of representation is a central contribution of postmodern thought. David Campbell writes of the need to politically engage 'the manifest consequences of [choosing] one mode of representation over another'.[62] Significant here is the recognition that language is the precondition for representation and, by extension, all meaningful knowledge of the world. It is in this sense that postmodern scholarship has taken the 'linguistic turn' and recognised that our understanding of the world is intrinsically linked to the languages we employ to do so; languages that express histories of human interactions; languages that have successfully established and masked a range of arbitrary viewpoints and power relations.[63] Linked to this insight into representation was a more broadly conceived discussion of positivism and its relationship to the theory and practice of international relations. Contrary to prevalent social science wisdom, postmodern approaches stressed that our comprehension of facts cannot be separated from our relationship with them, that thinking always expresses a will to truth, a desire to control and impose order upon events that are often random and idiosyncratic. Positivism, whether based in science or not, was thus presented as an approach that ignores the process of representation and holds the problematic belief that the social scientist, as detached observer, can produce value-free knowledge.[64]

The significance of early postmodern scholarship – and its implications for questions of representation and aesthetics – can perhaps best be appreciated if we compare the respective position with those of the more recently proliferating literature on constructivism. At first sight, the two bodies of literature share much in common. Among them are a common concern with the social construction of meaning, state identity and international politics in general. Both approaches reject, even at an analytical level, the notion of autonomous and rational actors. Instead, they scrutinise how rules, norms and values shape actors and issues in global affairs. Alexander Wendt, one of the key contributors to these debates, declares himself a 'constructivist'. For him this means that he acknowledges that the world is 'socially constructed', that the structures of international politics are social, rather than merely material, and that these structures shape the identity and interests of actors.[65] Most commentators agree and stress, to use John Ruggie's words, 'that the building blocks of international reality are ideational as well as material'.[66] But to claim such is not necessarily new or radical. Hardly anyone would disagree, for instance, with the proposition that the conflict in Iraq emerged from both material and human factors, or that the UN was created as a result of certain ideational constellations at the end of the Second World War. Even the most ardent defender of realism would not see political institutions and events as naturally given. The key issues, rather, revolve around how to understand and interpret these products of ideational and material forces. And here significant differences are evident between constructivist and postmodern contributions.

While portraying constructivism as a broad school of thought that includes both modern and postmodern perspectives, most constructivists actually pursue a much more specific approach. For Ruggie the term 'constructivism' is limited to those scholarly positions that recognise the social construction of reality but nevertheless display a 'commitment to the idea of social science'.[67] This commitment comes in various shades.

At one end of the spectrum are commentators, like Alexander Wendt or Nicholas Onuf, who strongly defend a positivist understanding of science, stressing that 'constructivists need not repudiate positivism just because it is liable to criticism'.[68] Those scholars remain firmly grounded in normative realist attempts to reproduce life-like portrayals of the world as it 'really' is. They continue to sidestep the aesthetic gap between the represented and its representation. Wendt explicitly states that 'theory reflects reality'.[69] Wendt's attempt to combine a post-positivist ontology with a positivist epistemology runs into difficulties: the social construction of political reality, which is theoretically acknowledged, remains unexplored in practice because of a mimetic epistemology that seeks to narrow or even eliminate the gap between the represented and its representation. That contradictions emerge from such attempts has been acknowledged not only by post-positivists,[70] but also by methodologically more conventional constructivist scholars. Ruggie, for instance, identifies the inevitable tension between postmodern ontology and positivist epistemology as 'the most debilitating problem in regime analysis'.[71]

At the other end of the constructivist spectrum are those who repudiate positivism but, at closer look, retain a certain desire for mimetic knowledge. Illustrative here is the position taken by Richard Price and Christian Reus-Smit in an insightful and now classic review article on constructivism. The authors argue at great length that constructivism has grown out of the Third Debate in international political theory, and is thus compatible with postmodern positions. Differences between the two approaches, they argue, have to do with relatively minor metatheoretical questions.[72] Constructivists have simply taken the research agenda a step further by moving towards a 'more empirically-based form of critical scholarship'. The achievement of constructivism, so the argument goes, is 'to have arrived at logical and empirically plausible interpretations of actions, events or processes'.[73]

The argument that critical insight into world politics can be deepened through more thorough empirical analysis is problematic. It is a position that risks falling back into the same mimetic tendencies from which postmodern scholarship has tried to free itself. The point here is not to deny the value of social scientific work or to question the impact of material forces, but to emphasise that critical insight into international relations must go beyond empirical validations if it is to deal with the politically charged content of representational practices. This is why numerous postmodern authors fear constructivist scholarship suppresses representation. It is 'desire all the

way down', as Roxanne Doty says of Wendt's work: realist and mimetic desire that expresses itself in a 'relentless quest for the essence of international relations'.[74] This is also why Campbell believes that for all their efforts to reach beyond the dominant neo-realist and neo-liberal interpretations, Wendt and other constructivists exhibit 'an overwhelming but under-recognised commitment to many of the general tenets of that disposition'.[75] Indeed, realists and liberals do not necessarily disagree, for they stress that constructivist positions pose no fundamental challenge to their paradigm, but only seek to 'revitalize and expand its conceptual lenses'.[76]

A few qualifying remarks are in order at this point. I am in no way trying to provide a comprehensive account of constructivism, nor do I claim that postmodern and constructivist approaches are inherently incompatible. Anthony Burke's insightful study has convincingly shown that there are compelling reasons for a more serious and thorough engagement between these two approaches to the study of international relations.[77] Neither am I claiming that postmodern approaches are beyond contention or the only ones that contain the potential of furthering aesthetic sensibilities. In fact, many postmodern texts remain buried in a highly abstract and unnecessarily complex language that displays little aesthetic sensibility. All I intend to do at this stage is to demonstrate how key differences between early postmodern and constructivist approaches highlight the crucial issue of representation. And this issue is central to developing an aesthetic sensibility.

Representation can, of course, be made into a political issue without postmodern theories – or, indeed, without any theoretical engagement at all. I would like to offer two brief illustrations here before engaging aesthetic approaches more specifically. The first example is the practice-oriented work of the feminist author Cynthia Enloe. By sidestepping the seductive power of the scholarly canon Enloe manages to identify and question practices of representation in an exceptionally compelling manner. Instead of starting with or anchoring her inquiries in the usual discourse on Hobbes, Morgenthau or Waltz, Enloe begins and pursues her observations from the margins: through the voices and deeds of Carmen Miranda, for instance, a Brazilian dancer cum Hollywood star cum symbol of America's political and economic policy towards Latin America. By doing so, Enloe circumvents disciplinary boundaries and reveals what otherwise would remain unnoticed: that 'relations between governments depend not only on capital and weaponry, but also on the control of women as symbols, consumers, workers and emotional comforters'.[78] Enloe's non-disciplinary based inquiries represent a political encounter, for they challenge both the conventions of international relations scholarship and the narrow 'realities' they have created through well-entrenched representational practices. By doing so, Enloe blurs the boundaries between the mimetic and the aesthetic in a way that subverts existing practices of domination and creates the preconditions for the establishment of a more just and inclusive political order.

A move beyond the comfort of academic disciplines inevitably highlights the problematic dimensions of representation. Indeed, the closer one observes political struggles on the ground the more one realises the manipulations of realities that are part of the very essence of politics. Look at a second example: how Michael Ignatieff has learned not from academic ruminating, but from extensive on-the-ground-experiences that 'all exercises in political judgement depend on the creation of "virtual realities", abstractions that simplify causes and consequences'.[79] Indeed, the unquestioned understanding of politics as it 'really' is, which permeates all mimetic approaches, can make sense only as long as it stays within the detached and neatly delineated boundaries of academic disciplines. As soon as one confronts the actual realities of conflict zones, it becomes evident that 'war is the easiest of realities to abstract',[80] and that this abstraction process is intrinsically linked to whatever representational practices prevail at the time.

Nowhere are the representational dimensions of politics, and our mimetic attempts to conceal them, more evident than in the domain of television – perhaps the most crucial source of collective consciousness today. Abstractions about war are intertwined with representational practices that are increasingly shaped by the dictates of the entertainment-oriented media industry. Consider the fact that 'the entire script content of the CBS nightly half-hour news would fit on three-quarters of the front page of the *New York Times*'.[81] Or note how in the period from 1968 to 1988 the average sound-bite during televised coverage of US elections decreased from 43 to 9 seconds.[82] Figures are probably even lower today, and whatever substance can still be packed into what remains is likely to get further blurred when presented in the context of other news and no-news, from drive-by shootings to touch-downs, famines, home-runs and laundry detergent ads. The numbing regularity and the mimetic conventions with which these images and sound-bites are communicated to great masses soon erase their highly subjective and problematic representational form. We all distance ourselves, in one way or another, from the often highly disturbing realities that are communicated to us. We create a moral shield from wars and famines that are not our own.[83]

The aesthetic turn

Aesthetic sources can help us recognise and challenge such forms of numbing regularity and complacency. Confronting the massive tragedy of the Bosnian War, Ignatieff thus looks for help not in the mimetic conventions of social science, but in the example of Goya's *Horrors of War* and Picasso's *Guernica*, 'which confront [the] desire to evade the testimony of our own eyes by grounding horror in aesthetic forms that force the spectator to see as if for the first time'.[84] Such direct encounters with the political can contribute to a more inclusive and just world order, for they challenge our very

notion of common sense by allowing us to see what may be obvious but has not been noted before. This is why we have a responsibility – both as numbed spectators of televised realities and as scholars wedded to social scientific conventions – to engage our representational habits and search for ways of heeding forms of thought that can reassess the realities of world politics.

Over the last dozen or so years more and more international relations scholars have engaged aesthetic sources, from literature to photography, from art to film. One could go as far as speaking of an actual aesthetic turn in international political theory. An authoritative – and so far only – systematic review of this intellectual movement has been offered by Gerard Holden. He acknowledges that aesthetic engagements go back to the early days of disciplinary international relations. Holden reminds us that key figures in so-called English School scholarship, such as Herbert Butterfield, E. H. Carr and Martin Wight, also embarked on detailed studies of literature.[85] The latter did, in fact, famously suggest that theorising about international relations is 'more akin to literary criticism' than to scientific inquiry.[86] Kenneth Waltz's foundational realist text *Man, the State and War* uses a wide range of literary sources.[87] Even Hans Morgenthau, one of the founding fathers of scientific realism, stresses that 'politics is an art and not a science, and what is required for its mastery is not the rationality of the engineer but the wisdom and the moral strength of the statesman'.[88] But few if any of Wight's, Waltz's and Morgenthau's contemporaries took up their interest in literature, nor did subsequent generations of scholars. The actual aesthetic turn is a much more recent phenomenon – and one that challenges the discipline of international relations at its core.

Representative of the aesthetic turn and its growing importance are a series of special issues of international relations journals that deal with the broad linkages between art and politics. They include, in chronological order, issues of *Alternatives* on 'Poetic World Politics' (2000; Vol. 25, No. 3); of *Social Alternatives* on 'Painting Politics' (2001; Vol. 20, No. 4); of the *Peace Review* on 'Literature and Peace' (2001; Vol. 13, No. 2); of *Millennium* on 'Images and Narratives in World Politics' (2001; Vol. 30, No. 3) and on 'International Politics, Representation and the Sublime' (2006; Vol. 34, No. 3); of *Security Dialogue* on 'Visual Culture' (2007; Vol. 38, No. 3); of *Cultural Politics* on 'Nuclear Stories: Cold War Literatures' (2008; Vol. 4, No. 3); and of *The Review of International Studies* on 'Art and Politics' (forthcoming 2009).

I am not pretending that I can provide an authoritative overview of these and countless other scholarly activities that make up the aesthetic turn. They have in any case become far too numerous and diverse to allow for a succinct summary in a few pages. This is why I offer only a few selective engagements that highlight the wide range and depth of contributions to the aesthetic turn.

A good place to start my brief and selective tour d'horizon is with what might be the only book-length study that has so far tried to assess the relevance of aesthetics to international relations across a range of different artistic endeavours: Ekkehart Krippendorff's *The Art of Not Being Governed*.[89] Unfortunately only published in German, this ambitious book seeks no less than to unravel the links between aesthetics and ethics from ancient Greek philosophy to the present day. Socrates and Plato provide Krippendorff with an initial spark, but it is mostly in Greek tragedy that he finds hope and inspiration. Tragedy has, of course, become a fairly major theme in international relations scholarship. But even though some of the contributors, such as Ned Lebow, draw upon an unusually wide range of sources, few of them explicitly theorise questions of representation and aesthetics.[90] Krippendorff does so directly. He stresses that the theatre's dialogical nature always contained the possibility of an alternative course of action. And it infused the ensuing critical spirit into the public realm, for the Athenian theatre at the Acropolis could accommodate up to 17,000 people, or about a quarter of all citizens. Entries to the spectacle were subsidised, thereby creating a public sphere whose vibrancy may have surpassed the far more apathetic civil society of our days. And yet, Krippendorff believes that despite their remarkable celebration of political theatre, the Greeks did not take their tragedies seriously enough. Otherwise they would have heeded to poetic wisdom and refused to embark on the ultimately self-destructive Peloponnesian War.[91] With the demise of the Greek order, the significance of the theatre vanished too. Later attempts to revive its political and public significance, such as through the great operas of the nineteenth century, did not last long. Politics turned into representation, theatre became professionalised, and Krippendorff seeks other aesthetic sources of inspiration. He finds them in Shakespeare, which he employs to great effect to rethink the conflict in Yugoslavia, or in Goethe, whose work as minister in Weimar initiated one of the most radical political experiments, consisting of an attempt to dismantle the military and increase public spending for education and health.

Krippendorff highlights the issues at stake by examining one of the most tragic historical episodes: the First World War. The battle of Verdun alone, he reminds us, killed some 800,000 German and French soldiers. As tragic as the war itself was the political attitude that led to it in the first place. The feverish patriotism, the euphoric call for war that swept across Europe in the months leading up to the conflict, is 'one of the bleakest hours of European intellectual history'.[92] Very few leaders were able to resist the glorification of the battlefield and anticipate the horrors to come. Many artists, too, became caught in the patriotic desire for war. The painters Max Beckmann, Otto Dix and Ernst Ludwig Kirchner were among them. They voluntarily joined the army but soon turned against war, as did many other artists. The portrayal of war as an utter absurdity in the Dadaist movement was as characteristic of

this tendency as was the widespread refusal of many artists to contribute to the construction of war memorials after 1919.

The political role of representation becomes particularly obvious when we compare not only individual moral attitudes of artists, scholars and decision-makers, but also the respective 'scientific' and 'aesthetic' representations that underlie their understanding of conflict. Conventional analyses of war, from Thucydides to Clausewitz and Kissinger, provide insights through a process of abstraction that focuses on such factors as the struggle for power or the nature of the international system. Embracing the spirit of social science, experts in fields as diverse as sociology, politics or economics have searched for generalisations, for laws of nature that could explain the recurrence of conflict throughout history. Insightful as some of these analyses may be, they provide a view of the world in which people are all but invisible, reduced to impotent bystanders in a drama that is shaped by forces too powerful to be swayed.

The dominance of scientific representations accounts for the fact that it is still possible to speak of the 'outbreak' of the First World War, as if events somehow just happened, broke loose on their own, as if nobody had wanted war and played a role in orchestrating it. Krippendorff does an excellent job in showing how aesthetic approaches challenge such avoidance of responsibility. Artists realised, and managed to communicate, that the First World War was above all a civilisational crisis, whose causes reached far deeper than what could be understood through conventional socio-political analyses. Rather than abstracting war as a systemic inevitability, artists focused on the fate of individuals. Dix painted soldiers living and dying in the trenches. Beckmann too chronicled the struggle for survival far away from the grand political doctrines that justified the need for violent encounters with enemies. Particularly noteworthy is that neither of them did so in a way that highlighted national identity. The wounded and dead in Dix's paintings, for instance, are neither French nor German nor English. They are simply wounded or dead. We have a different form of representation and abstraction here, one that draws attention to the human side of war, one that gazes beyond the state-centric discourses that justify violence in the name of either domestic order, structural inevitability or international glory.[93]

Poetry and literature

Krippendorff's study is only one among many that make up the aesthetic turn. I will now highlight at least some of the key contributions by touching briefly upon three broad aesthetic realms: (1) poetry and literature; (2) photography, film and visual art; and (3) music and popular culture.

I am very brief on poetry, for the later parts of this book offer a series of case studies on the poetic imagination. But I would like to acknowledge that I am writing in the wake of several innovative international relations

scholars who have explored how poetry might give them – and us – a different perspective on political issues. I think of contributions by Anna M. Agathangelou, Anthony Burke, Costas Constantinou, L. H. M. Ling, Louiza Odysseos, Nevzat Soguk and Marysia Zalewski.[94] Soguk, for instance, writes of poetry's potential to bring out 'echoes-monde': neglected echoes that need to be registered across the world. Constantinou and Burke employ poetry to problematise the links between security and certitude that are part of conventional international relations thinking. They point out that the promise of security, when articulated through militaristic defence strategies, paradoxically tends to generate fear. Constantinou and Burke believe that poetry can help us validate a different notion of security, one that points not to an escape from danger, but to a 'passage through fear and loss', one that allows us to 'feel secure-in-danger ... and dwell next to one's enemy in security, without surrendering, or dominating, or making the foe friend'.[95]

Engagements with literature more generally are among the most extensive contributions to the aesthetic turn in international political theory. Numerous authors have sought to rethink political dilemmas by engaging them through fictional sources and by theorising the importance that narrative plays in our representation and understanding of the political. Key contributors here include Stephen Chan, Christopher Cooker, James Der Derian, Richard Devetak, Lisa Disch, Roxanne Doty, Ian Hall, Cerwyn Moore, Girma Negash, Michael Shapiro, Hidemi Suganami and Maja Zehfuss – to name just a few of the respective authors.[96]

I would like to highlight two examples that illustrate the issues at stake in the links between literature and world politics. The first one is a book by Debbie Lisle that engages a domain of inquiry which has so far received little attention by international relations scholars: contemporary travel writing.[97] Travelogues are a curious intermediate literary genre. Located somewhere between factual and fictional accounts, between personal stories and description of places and people, they are said to be more nuanced than guidebooks but lacking the sophistication associated with novels. Authors such as Bruce Chatwin and Paul Theroux report from exotic locations back to the 'civilised' world in accounts that transgress genres as much as geographical boundaries: anthropological explorations and literary ambitions crisscrossing scientific reporting, cultural judgements and political commentary.

It is precisely this ambiguity between literary and documentary genre that makes travelogues an interesting object of inquiry. Even when presenting purely personal – or even fictional – positions, travelogues still have the potential to shape political discourses in a significant manner. In making this point, Lisle builds on Edward Said, who already stressed that travelogues written by famous nineteenth-century authors, such as Gustav Flaubert, were essential to producing Orientalist relations of power.[98] Lisle finds similarly problematic colonial stereotypes in many contemporary travel writers. But she also believes in the 'transgressive' potential

of this writing genre. By their very nature, travelogues engage difference: they tell of encounters with people and cultures other than those familiar to the writer. She finds hope in those writers who play with or radically deconstruct the very genre of travelogues. She highlights the importance of non-Western travel writers who turn the genre upside down: Salman Rushdie, Tété-Michel Kpomassie, V.S. Naipaul and Pico Iyer are explored here. There are also numerous women travel writers, such as Josie Dew and Robyn Davidson, who break with the mould of 'honorary men'. There are those like Jenny Diski, Amitav Ghosh and Gary Younge who write of becoming vulnerable in the face of travel, revealing how difference resides as much within as across geographical boundaries. And there are P. J. O'Rourke and Mark Lawson, whose satirical ventures into Western suburbia mock the long colonial tradition of discovering authenticity in remote zones of danger.

The second example of literary international relations I would like to highlight is a book by Philip Darby: a comprehensive attempt to explore how fiction can help us understand colonial and post-colonial relationships between the West and Asia as well as Africa. Darby, like Lisle, argues that it has become increasingly untenable to draw an absolute difference between fiction and non-fiction.[99] He laments international relations scholars have never had 'the assurance to reach out and allow the subjectivity of fiction to disturb its stable structures'.[100] He finds plenty of evidence – just as Lisle did – that novels have played an important part in the representation and, even more importantly, the justification of colonialism. And, finally, Darby also believes that fiction can play an important part in resisting domination. It does so through its ability to help us review and rethink the nature of imperialism and, in a broader sense, the relationship between the West and the Third World.[101]

Darby locates the more specific political potential of fiction in its ability to give us insights into cultural dynamics that are far too often written out of the abstract and universalistic approaches that dominate the study of international relations.[102] He highlights how fiction can provide readers with empathetic views of the ordinary – and often extraordinary – lives of average people. Doing so can be highly political, as a recent (auto)biographical account by Kim Huynh convincingly demonstrates.[103] By retracing and retelling the story through the voice of his parents, Huynh shows how and why the grand narratives of international relations, from colonialism to revolutionary progress, shape the lives of people. But more importantly, he shows that these people – the unnamed and often forgotten objects of international relations – are not entirely defined by the events we often identify as the sole political reality. Everyday struggles seep into, around and through grand narratives. But these transgressions are only rarely explored and theorised in prevailing scholarly approaches. This is precisely the aspect that Darby associates with insights that emerge not just from autobiography, but also from

fiction: the recognition that politics on the ground is often very different to that told from above.[104]

Visual culture

Visual culture, broadly understood, is the second major field of investigation in aesthetic international relations. The authors who are active here draw on research from numerous other disciplines. One of the key sources is the work of W. J. T. Mitchell, who has explored in detail why – and with what consequences – the visual has come to be seen as a particularly important and reliable, even 'authentic' way of knowing the world.[105] This is the case, at least in part, according to David Campbell, because the visual is one of the major avenues through which news from distant places reaches people around the world.[106]

International relations scholars have, for instance, studied the political role of museums, most prominently represented through books by Timothy Luke.[107] Others have engaged various aspects of visual art. Contributions here have been made by Alex Danchev, Vivienne Jabri, Debbie Lisle, Anca Pusca, Oliver Richmond, Violaine Roussel, Steve Smith and Christine Sylvester.[108] These and other authors derive political insight, for instance, from the way in which painters deal with the process of representation and abstraction. Or they examine the role that prominent artists play in raising public awareness of political issues.

There are meanwhile several extensive studies on cinema and international relations. Key examples here include – but are not limited to – single-authored books by Michael J. Shapiro and Cynthia Weber.[109] The topics in these and other aesthetic inquiries range from war and terrorism to humanitarian interventions and diplomatic negotiations. Consider, for instance, how our memory of the Vietnam War can no longer be separated from how the events have been represented through influential movies, such as *The Deer Hunter*, *Apocalypse Now*, *Full Metal Jacket*, *Born on the Fourth of July*, *Forrest Gump*, *Good Morning Vietnam* and *Platoon*. These and numerous other cases illustrate how aesthetic representations can capture aspects of international relations in a way that is qualitatively unique – and how these very representations then become an important aspect of political dynamics themselves.

Other scholars preoccupied with visual culture have focused on understanding the role of photography.[110] The most substantial contribution here has been made by David Campbell through a series of highly compelling essays. Although Campbell engages a wide range of different and complex issues, he repeatedly highlights a key theme addressed above: how standardised photographic practices of presentation reinforce colonial stereotypes. They often create what Campbell calls an 'iconography of anonymous victimhood' and, in a more general sense, they have profound implications for how we construct our identities and our relationship with others.[111] Other scholars, such as Emma Hutchison, have further pursued this line of inquiry.

Through extensive case studies, most notably on the Boxing Day tsunami of 2006 and the Bali bombing of October 2002, Hutchison demonstrates in a highly compelling manner how photographic representations by media and aid agencies shape not only notions of identity, but also the manner in which the international community reacts towards people in need.[112]

Rather than trying to cover all aspects of visual culture, I limit my engagement by illustrating briefly how photography played a major role in generating public discussions about the (mis)use of torture in the war on terror. Not long after the US embarked on wars of response against the terrorist attacks of 9/11, news reports surfaced about the use of aggressive interrogation techniques designed to extract crucial information from captured combatants. The existence of so-called rendition programmes was well known: programmes designed to move prisoners to third-countries where less restrictive human rights rules and practices permitted a wider range of interrogations. But no matter how compelling these reports were, they did not generate major debates. Public discussion – and moral outrage – only grew with the widespread circulation of photographs that visually documented how torture was practised at the US prison facilities in Abu Ghraib, Iraq. Particularly shocking were the explicit nature of these photographs and the fact that they were actually taken by US service personnel and placed on websites. Liam Kennedy shows how such practices – termed internet photoblogging or 'milblogging' – are part of a wider range of new digital media technologies that increasingly interact with how we see and constitute security.[113]

There is something in the confronting nature of photographs that can generate public discussion of torture in a way that no textual evidence possibly could have. For one, photographs give us the illusion of the real: we think we see what is really going on. And few things can be more shocking than seeing torture in the making. No text can possibly deliver the same kind of confrontation. Elizabeth Dauphinée believes that the inability to actually know how another person's pain feels is a further driving force behind tendencies to visually depict the origin of pain. Expressed in other words: if pain cannot be known, then the closest we can get to it is to represent the visible causes of pain.[114] That a range of ethical dilemmas emerge from such practices is evident. Frank Möller points out why. On the one hand, photographic representation of torture and other traumatic events pull us in, forcing us to look at what happened but, on the other hand, giving in to this urge and viewing photographs of somebody else's suffering is a form of voyeurism which, in the worst case, is complicit with the crime that is represented.[115]

Music and popular culture

Music is one of the sensual experiences that can broaden – and at times challenge – our exclusive reliance on reason and argumentation in the exploration of the political. Music may, in this sense, generate the type of

sensitivity that Nietzsche considered an essential precondition for insightful thought.[116] Music also highlights an issue that permeates much of the aesthetic turn in general: the interaction between so-called high and low art. Although the boundaries between 'refined' artistic endeavours and popular culture are inevitably blurred and a matter of judgement, they do have some significant implications – if only with regard to the number of people that the respective activities reach.

A good example of an engagement with high art is a book by Dieter Senghaas that examines the relationship between music, peace and international relations.[117] The terrifying realities of war and the search for peace have inspired composers throughout history, Senghaas notes, and it is this dual political dimension of music that he sets out to explore. 'Why do the nations so furiously rage together?' ask the voices of the choir in Georg Friedrich Händel's *The Messiah* (1742). Senghaas asks similar questions, beginning by discussing musical compositions that seem to anticipate war, such as Anton Webern's *Six Pieces for Orchestra* (1913) or Béla Bartók's *Divertimento* (1939). One is immediately struck by how Senghaas politicises not just titles or sung passages, where references to the political are easy to find, as in Ralph Vaugham Williams' appropriation of Walt Whitman's poem 'Beat, beat, drums' in *Dona Nobis Pacem* (1936). Senghaas also finds traces of fear and mourning, or the desire for reconciliation, through sensitive listening to various instrumental passages. That is, indeed, one of the distinguishing features of this book: the willingness to engage in a political listening that scholars of international relations are simply not accustomed to.

The link between marching tunes and uniformed men is perhaps the most evident manifestation of instrumental music that contains political dimensions. But attempts to raise the fighting spirit of troops and the population can also be found in compositions of high musical integrity. Dmitri Shostakovich's *Leningrad Symphony No. 7* (1942), for instance, is a direct political engagement in the context of the city's siege by the German Wehrmacht. Senghaas reads this and many other compositions not only as battle cries, but also as warnings of war. He finds an oscillation between the realities of conflict and the desire to reconcile above all in Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*. Through constant and abrupt changes in speed, key and volume, Beethoven manages 'like no other moment in musical history to portray . . . the dramatic wrestling for peace against war'.[118] Such an interpretation is, of course, not uncontested. Many commentators, Bertolt Brecht being one of the most prominent ones, have experienced Beethoven's music also as a problematic celebration of battlefield heroism. This is particularly the case, as Senghaas acknowledges, in *Wellington's Victory or the Battle at Victoria* (1813), which uses the respective triumph of British, Portuguese and Spanish troops over the French army as a way of artistically supporting the campaign against Napoleon.

Victory compositions, by Beethoven, Handel, Rameau, Vivaldi and others, were part of a period when war was fought on the battlefield, with soldiers facing each other in a contest of strength. There were winners. There were losers. There was glory. But the nature of war has changed fundamentally since then. In an age where weapons of mass destruction dominate the spectre of war, where the boundaries between soldiers and civilians have become largely blurred, wars have no more winners. Only losers. And on all sides. War now increasingly appears, as Senghaas appropriately puts it, as a 'civilisational, societal and human tragedy'.[119] As a result, one finds few contemporary compositions that are infused with the triumphant spirit of, say, Handel's *Fireworkmusik*. Instead, an aesthetic anti-war attitude has become a central and constant element of the musical scene. Dieter Schnebel's *Lamento di Guerra* (1991) for soprano and organ, simply moves into an extended 'choking, moaning and sobbing' when it comes to representing the theme of war. Senghaas writes of a music of gloom (*Finsternismusik*), of a long *concerti funebri*, which he locates in works by Béla Bartók, Isang Yun, Frantz Schmidt, Paul Dessau, Steve Reich and Arnold Schoenberg, to name just a few.[120]

In juxtaposition to Senghaas' pursuit of music that reflects high culture we find investigations into popular music, ranging from jazz to punk, hip-hop and 'world' music. The wide range of these inquiries is represented through a path-breaking book edited by M. I. Franklin on *Resounding International Relations*.[121] There are also numerous studies that engage other aspects of popular culture, including films and texts. Examples here are volumes by Jutta Weldes on science fiction, by Daniel Nexon and Iver Neumann on the phenomenon of *Harry Potter*, or by William Callahan on various aspects of cultural politics in Asia.[122] These and other studies illustrate how an engagement with popular culture can provide us with important insights into international relations. Nexon and Neumann, for instance, draw attention to the importance of so-called 'second-order representations': depictions of the social and political world that occur not through factual accounts, but through literature. But even though the latter are fictional, they can still tell us a lot about the values that make up our political practices – perhaps even more so than first-order representations, such as media reports or speeches of politicians, which aim to address politics in a more direct way. In a different study Neumann underlines this point by demonstrating that a close viewing of fictional diplomatic practices in the popular US television series *Star Trek* can help us break through the dichotomies between realism and liberalism that often dominate – and paralyse – real practices of US foreign policy.[123] Further adding to the importance of popular culture is that its products do not just mirror the world or give us alternative insight, but actually influence it in a substantive manner too. Key features of popular culture, such as the *Star Trek* series or *Harry Potter* novels and films, reach a remarkable number of people. This is why popular culture can play what Neumann and Nexon and call a 'constitutive' role.[124] Mark Doucet makes a similar case

for children's films which, he argues, disseminate certain values and are an important pedagogical influence on young people – people who will later shape public opinions and, in some cases, decision-making processes.[125]

Reclaiming the political value of the aesthetic

My brief engagement with the aesthetic turn in international political theory is obviously incomplete. I left out numerous aesthetic domains, such as the role of architecture and public memorials. I also left out numerous important contributions and contributors – and my rough sketch has undoubtedly done injustice to those I mentioned in passing. But all I wanted to do, at this stage, is to highlight the complexity and increasing importance of the aesthetic turn – as well as the manner in which its key contributors engage crucial questions of representation.

One of the challenges ahead is to render such aesthetic engagements with international relations more legitimate – even in the eyes of social scientists who are inherently sceptical about approaches whose nature and understanding of evidence do not correspond to established scientific criteria. The ensuing task is not easy, for there are major disagreements about how to reclaim the political value of the aesthetic. At least two distinct approaches are visible: one seeks to carve out an autonomous sphere for artistic endeavours, the other aims to make aesthetics a more central and integrated part of political struggles.

The first approach tries to carve out a certain level of autonomy for art and the types of insight it generates. Kant, for instance, saw judgements of the beautiful and the sublime as examples of instances where one faculty does not rule over others. Aesthetic judgements are questions of taste that take place somewhere in the 'middle between understanding and reason' – without either of these faculties determining the rules for identifying the object that is to be judged.[126] Aesthetic judgement is thus 'contingent', as Kennan Ferguson puts it, but 'neither arbitrary nor unimportant'.[127] The contingency of aesthetic knowledge originates in its self-awareness about the fact that it too is a form of representation, and thus an inherently political exercise. This is why ensuing insights into the political can be seen as truth claims, as long as we see truth 'as unconcealment', as Heidegger would say.[128]

Kant goes a step further and grants the feeling of pleasure or displeasure its own constitutive status, which is to say that it is irreducible to any other faculty.[129] But even though we perceive and judge a work of art through means that are constitutive, we need to rely on other faculties, including reason, to process these perceptions and judgements. The 'eye', Pierre Bourdieu would say, 'is a product of history reproduced by education'.[130] Even a visual image is never located in a separate aesthetic realm. The perceived effects of a painting, for instance, are clearly different from the process of understanding and judging it, let alone communicating the so-experienced sensation

to others. The latter is a linguistic process, even though it originates in and refers to a non-linguistic realm. This is why understanding art, or politics for that matter, expresses an aesthetic relationship not only to a given object, but also to the 'history of its effect'.[131] Sensibility and imagination can offer an encounter with this history. They can reorient our thoughts in a way that a mimetic process of recognition cannot. It is in this sense that a work of art can serve as an example of thought that generates productive flows between sensibility and reason, memory and imagination or, as Constantinou puts it, between 'mind, body and soul, thought, power and desire'.[132]

The most explicit form of such claims on behalf of the aesthetic can be found in the modernist movement and its promotion of *l'art pour l'art*. Art, then, is seen as having no other purpose but itself. In such a situation, says Clement Greenberg, 'content is to be dissolved so completely into form that the work of art or literature cannot be reduced in whole or in part to anything but itself'.[133] Heated debates did, of course, emerge about the relative merits of art that seeks to be autonomous from society. For some, a piece of literature or visual art that represents nothing outside of itself lacks political relevance. By contrast, those who defend the autonomous work of art locate its political relevance precisely in the attempt to create a critical distance from moral norms and social practices. Adorno, for instance, fears that committed and overtly political art is already a form of accommodation, for it often merely struggles in the name of a noble cause that has already become a political trend. Autonomous art thus contains critical potential precisely because of its refusal to identify itself with the socio-political; because of its hidden 'it should be otherwise'.[134] This is why, for Gadamer, the key difference between the natural and human sciences lies with the latter's aesthetic consciousness which, he argues, 'includes an alienation from reality'.[135] For both Gadamer and Adorno this autonomy has limits: while losing its historicity by self-consciously distancing itself from representational objectives, the work of art remains historical insofar as an understanding of it cannot take place outside the cultural sphere in which the perceiver operates. 'Art is autonomous and it is not', Adorno would say.[136] But some commentators go further.

A second approach tries to accept some of the above insights while avoiding the dangers entailed in separating art from other aspects of life. The respective authors argue that in the process of creating critical distance from moral norms and mimetic conventions, the modernist search for an autonomous aesthetic sphere may, paradoxically, have undermined its very power to provide significant insight into the political. So argue a number of commentators who, in the wake of Heidegger, have explored how efforts to secure an autonomous domain of aesthetic judgement have contributed to its separation from the realm of modern science and technological reason.[137] The latter, of course, have meanwhile been elevated to the most widely shared form of legitimate knowledge. I have already outlined how ensuing mimetic representational practices have led to a construction of common sense that

revolves around a few key faculties, imposing a harmonious accord among the others. Expressed in Heidegger's words, technological reason has led to 'a kind of revealing that is an ordering', and 'where this ordering holds sway, it drives out every other possibility of revealing'.[138] The only legitimate production of knowledge that is left today is intrinsically linked to mimetic forms of representation, for, as Heidegger stresses, the revealing promoted through modern technology 'puts to nature the unreasonable demand that it supply energy which can be extracted and stored as such'.[139]

This is why one of the main political challenges today may consist not in retaining the autonomous sphere of art, but in rendering the aesthetic central again, not only as an alternative to technological reason, but as a way of promoting non-coercive relationships among different faculties. It is essential that ensuing legitimisation processes reach beyond the Western sources and values that still dominate most approaches to aesthetics. Reclaiming the political value of the aesthetic is thus intrinsically linked with the challenge of internationalising the aesthetic, with redeeming the unthought: cultural insights that remain eclipsed by the present obsession with the occidental gaze. Indeed, the sensibility that the aesthetic promotes, and that instrumental reason is unable to apprehend, revolves precisely around the unknown, the unseen and the unthought. For Walter Benjamin this is the very task of art: to integrate the possibility for the unknown and to generate a demand for which a sense of need has not yet arisen.[140] To think of the unthinkable, however, is not as far-fetched as it seems at first sight. Most people experience moments when the language available to them is not adequately suited to express exactly what they feel. For Gadamer, this common occurrence is particularly pronounced when we are faced with a work of visual art – a confrontation that highlights the extent to which our desire and capacity for understanding goes beyond our ability to communicate them through verbal statements and propositions.[141]

Conclusion

No representation, even the most systematic empirical inquiry, can represent its object of inquiry as is. Any form of representation is inevitably a process of interpretation and abstraction. The power of aesthetics, and its political relevance, lies in the explicit engagement with this inevitable process of abstraction. This is why the discipline of international relations could profit immensely, both in theory and in practice, from supplementing its social scientific conventions with approaches that problematise prevailing practices of representation. Paraphrasing Gadamer, we could then recognise how we make every interpretation of world politics into a picture.[142] We choose a particular representation and detach it from the world it came from. We then frame it and hang it on a wall, usually next to other pictures that aesthetically resemble it. We arrange them all in an exhibition and display them

to the public. In this manner we have all admired 'blockbuster' exhibitions of realist and liberal masterpieces of world politics. Some of us may have visited the occasional smaller exhibit of, say, feminist and postmodern sketches of the international. Or perhaps we have stumbled upon an opening of a new postcolonial gallery, or caught the occasional glimpse of a radical experimental installation. Such aesthetic adventures do not tend to be very popular with a public used to figurative eye-pleasers. The most admired paintings remain the old masterpieces: the massive and heroic realist canvases. Indeed, we love them so much that we have embarked on extensive and costly attempts to restore the gargantuan Thucydides and Machiavelli frescos that adorn the intellectual temples of our discipline. Some parts of the original paintings were faded, damaged or at times effaced altogether. Fortunately, though, the skilful restoring experts interpreted the missing brush strokes confidently and repainted them with gusto. All new and shiny again, our old and cherished masterpieces have meanwhile been displayed so often and admired for so long that their figurative form of representation has come to be viewed as real. We have forgotten that they too are, in essence, abstractions: representations of something that is quite distinct from what they represent. And in the age of globalisation and mechanical reproduction[143] we have come to see these celebrated artistic representations multiply *ad infinitum*: reprinted in catalogues and books and posters and projected onto T-shirts and buses and transposed into songs and films and other cultural memory banks.

But what if? What if we were to hold bold new 'blockbuster' exhibitions: arrangements of art not yet appreciated or even seen? Or abandon the notion of 'blockbusters' altogether? Seek a fundamentally different understanding of art and its role in society, of politics and its relationship to aesthetics? What if we were to search for a cultural appreciation of painting techniques other than those few Western ones that have set the standards of beauty and taste? What if we rearranged the paintings that hang in our public buildings, our offices, our living rooms, our minds?

Perhaps we would then be more modest about our claims to know the realities of world politics. Perhaps we would grow more suspicious of judging interpretations of the international by the extent to which they reassure us of the familiar inevitability of entrenched political patterns, violent-prone as they are. Perhaps insights into world politics could then be judged, with Gadamer, by their aesthetic qualities, that is, by their ability to project a form of truth that is not linked to an exclusive mode of representation, a form of truth that 'opens up an open place'.

2
Art after 9/11

> Maybe this is how things look like when there is no one there to see them.
>
> Don DeLillo, *Falling Man*[1]

Aesthetic theories are illuminating, but they become politically significant only in the context of real-life situations. This is why I now provide practical illustrations of the conceptual claims I advanced in the previous chapter.

I show how art can shed new and revealing light on contemporary security problems. More specifically, I address a fundamental paradox that became apparent with the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon of 11 September 2001. While security threats are becoming increasingly complex and transnational, our means of understanding and responding to them have remained largely unchanged. They are still based primarily on strategic expertise and corresponding militaristic and state-centric ways of articulating defence policy. Military defence will undoubtedly remain a crucial element of security policy, but the problem of terrorism is far too complex and far too serious not to use all of our cognitive tools and sensibilities to understand and deal with it. This is particularly the case because the potential use of weapons of mass destruction amplifies the dangers of terrorist threats.[2] One of the key intellectual and political challenges today thus consists of broadening our understanding of and policy engagements with the phenomenon of terrorism.

Art has the potential to contribute to this broadening process. It can help us recognise dimensions of security challenges that cannot easily be understood through conventional forms of policy analyses. I draw attention to this potential by examining some of the artistic reactions to 9/11. The ensuing endeavour lays no claim to comprehensiveness, for surveying the astonishing outpouring of artistic creativity that followed the tragic events would be doomed from the start. The objective, then, is limited to two specific tasks: (1) to draw upon a few select examples, stemming from literature, visual art,

architecture and music, in order to demonstrate the relevance of art to the process of coming to terms with 9/11; and (2) to link these issues up with the discussions on representation and aesthetic sensibilities I introduced in the previous chapter. To do so I ask a series of difficult questions:

Can fiction express certain aspects of terrorism better than a straightforward factual account? Can we see things through visual art that we cannot express through textual analyses? Can music make us hear something that we cannot see? If aesthetic engagements are indeed qualitatively different from others, what is the exact political content and significance of this difference? How can the respective insights be translated back into more conventional expressions without losing the essence of what they capture? I do not pretend to offer definitive answers to these questions. But in posing them I hope to provide a more thorough conceptual foundation for my subsequent inquiries into the links between aesthetics and politics.

The chapter begins by stressing that 9/11 did not just constitute a breach of security, as it is generally understood: a violation of national sovereignty, a failure of the state's intelligence apparatus and a shattering of a deep-seated sense of domestic security in the US. The terrorist attacks also, and perhaps more importantly, precipitated a breach of understanding. Prevalent faculties, including reason, were simply incapable of grasping the event in its totality. Policy analyses in particular were unable to capture and deal with the emotional side of the events – a shortcoming that explains the astonishing outpouring of artistic creativity in the months following the attack. After analysing a range of artistic engagement I focus in particular on music, arguing that its seemingly apolitical and unrepresentative nature has the potential to capture and communicate a range of crucial but often neglected emotional issues. Prevailing scholarly analyses and policy approaches to global security rarely pay attention to the role of emotions, even though terrorism is a highly emotional issue. But various recent studies in philosophy, aesthetics and ethics have shown how emotions are not just subjective and irrational reactions, but do in fact contain insights that can be as revealing and as important as conventional knowledge forms, such as those emanating from social scientific inquiries.

9/11: from a breach of security to a breach of understanding

The terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 undoubtedly mark a key turning point in international politics. The death toll alone would not necessarily render the event so central, for many other recent conflicts, from Bosnia to Rwanda, produced far more casualties. 9/11 is significant because it fundamentally questioned the prevailing sense of security and the political structures that had been established to provide it. Or so at least argue most scholarly commentators. They stress that the attacks were directed not just at physical targets, but at representations of power. No building symbolises

the neo-liberal economic world order better than the twin towers of the World Trade Center, and no building symbolises the military might of the US better than the Pentagon. The White House, the target for a failed third attack, would have been the perfect representation of political power.

The shock experience of 9/11 was thus linked to a fundamental breach of security, for security had come to be associated with the integrity and sovereignty of the nation-state. But 9/11 also represented a different type of threat, one that cannot easily be anticipated, or prevented, through prevailing state-based structures of security. The danger did not emanate from another state, but from a non-state actor, and one that cannot even be precisely defined and located. The conflict was not launched with conventional military equipment, but with simple and unanticipated means. The attack itself took place by surprise, revealing a fundamental weakness in the state's intelligence apparatus. The attack was also asymmetric, insofar as it did not actually involve opposing forces. And, finally, the attack was not directed at a battlefield or a military target – it struck at the very heart of political, economic and civilian life. As a result, it shattered both a deeply rooted sense of domestic security and the integrity of the sovereign state.[3]

But the significance of 9/11 goes beyond a mere breach of state-based security, which is dramatic but can still be understood through existing conceptual means. The terrorist attacks also engendered a more fundamental breach in human understanding, which remains largely ignored by security experts. 9/11 displays all the features that Susan Neiman identifies as key elements of major turning points: moments in history when certain events defy 'human capacities for understanding' and trigger a 'collapse of the most basic trust in the world'.[4]

Aesthetic insights into 9/11 have the potential to identify and shed light on this fundamental breach of understanding. It is no coincidence that one of the most remarkable but often overlooked reactions to the terrorist attacks is the astonishing outpouring of artistic creativity. Countless artists around the world have tried to deal with both the nature of the tragic event and its implications for the future. They painted and filmed, they wrote poems and novels, they composed and performed music. This is not surprising, for, as Debbie Lisle and Alex Danchev stress, artists have for long been preoccupied with the same issues as international relations scholars: 'with war, peace, order and justice'.[5] Consider, for instance, the bourgeoning industry of 9/11 novels, which include Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland*; Ian McEwan's *Saturday*; Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*; Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*; Jay McInerney's *The Good Life*; Janette Turner Hospital's *Orpheus Lost*; Frédéric Beigbeder's *Windows on the World*; Reynolds Price's *The Good Priest's Son*; and Lynne Sharon Schwartz's *Writing on the Wall*. Numerous film versions of 9/11 and the subsequent war on terror have followed suit. They include *9/11*; *World Trade Center*; *September 11*; *United 93*; *Fahrenheit 9/11*; and, with regard to the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, features such *The Valley*

of Elah; *A Mighty Heart*; *The Kingdom*; *Lions for Lambs*; *The Kite Runner*; and *Rendition*.

This wave of aesthetic creativity may be comparable to the reactions Immanuel Kant described when faced with a powerful object, such as a storm or erupting volcano. The prevalent faculties, including reason, are confronted with their limit, for they are unable to grasp the event in its totality.[6] Being involuntarily submitted to phenomena that defy comprehension, the awesome power of nature makes us aware of our own vulnerabilities, our finitude; it humbles us, it shakes us to our very core. The result is a form of crisis, a plunge into pain and loss that leaves one puzzled, unable to answer key questions or even express the emotions that are felt. This is one of the reasons why the immediate response to 9/11 was one of shock and a stunned silence. David Eng and Jenny Edkins are among several commentators who stress how the entire city became 'utterly silent',[7] how bystanders became speechless, 'transfixed in horror as they watched the impossible turning into the real in front of their eyes'.[8]

Aesthetic engagements might have been able to capture some of these silences that opened up in the wake of the terrorist attack. They have the potential to capture aspects of the trauma that more conventional forms of representation elude. At minimum, they are an essential element in how the tragic events of 9/11 are viewed, interpreted and remembered. But while offering insight into the nature and meaning of terrorism, these aesthetic reactions have had little influence on the making of security policy, which continues to be dominated by prevalent techno-strategic assessments of threats. Although presented as 'new ways of thinking and new ways of fighting',[9] the US response is above all characterised by a strong desire to return to the reassuring familiarity of dualistic thinking patterns that dominated foreign policy during the Cold War. Once again the world is divided into 'good' and 'evil', and once again military means occupy the key, if not the only role in protecting the former against the latter. This has the unwelcome effect of representing the wars of response – Afghanistan and Iraq – as moral crusades, obscuring a deeper understanding and threatening to evoke the atavistic logic of religious war. Such an approach may make sense in the context of the shock that followed the events of 9/11, but it creates more difficulties than it solves. The rhetoric of 'evil madmen', one commentator stresses, 'advances neither understanding of [terrorist] horror nor, for that matter, the capacity to combat or prevent it'.[10] Even high-ranking military commanders now question the usefulness of the wars of response, admitting that 'defeating terrorism is more difficult and far-reaching than we have assumed'.[11] Indeed, years after 9/11 the spectre of terrorism remains as threatening and elusive as ever. The wars of response in Afghanistan and Iraq have not brought peace but have instead generated new forms of hatred and political violence. No end to the spiralling cycle of violence is in sight. Fault lines of conflict have instead been set for decades. They have been drawn around

arbitrary and highly stereotypical perceptions of what and who might constitute a threat. A case in point here is the much discussed clash of civilisations, which assigns essential attributes to diverse cultural traditions, and then juxtaposes them in an inherently conflict-prone manner. Although dating back to Samuel Huntington's search for identity and community in the wake of the collapsing Cold War structure, the (il)logic of the clash of civilisations applies well to the situation following 9/11.[12] And the (il)logic is the very same that dominated realist strategies during the Cold War: that feelings of identity, belonging and community can only be constituted in reference to an external threat, which has to be warded off at any cost. The only difference is that civilisations replaced states as the main actors, and that foreign cultures, evil rogues and terrorists have now taken the place of communist subversion and the Soviet empire. In both cases, however, the roots of the conflict remain unaddressed. All this is not to deny that threats did and do exist. Rather, it is to point out that prevailing ways of dealing with them have not healed the wounds opened up by the traumatic events but, instead, have set the stage for new tensions and conflicts.

The tendency to resort to old thinking patterns in times of crises is as entrenched in international relations scholarship as it is in the domain of policy-making. Most approaches to the study of world politics remain dominated by social scientific principles. The resulting tendency to marginalise alternative insights, such as those emanating from aesthetic sources, is particularly prevalent in the specific domain of security studies. The exclusive reliance on social science marks even those approaches that seek a broadening of the security agenda, such as advocates of human security, who urge policy-makers to view security beyond the conventional military-based defence of the state and its territory.[13]

Forays into alternative sources of insight remain rare and unsystematic. Walter Laqueur is one of the exceptions. In an influential book on terrorism he laments that 'literature as a source for the study of terrorism is still virtually *terra incognito*'.[14] Laqueur tries to rectify this shortcoming and tap into the potential of fiction to illuminate terrorist threats. He does, in fact, devote an entire chapter to this theme. But his engagement remains limited to retracing the 'motives, thoughts and actions' of terrorists through literary texts. He does not engage the extent to which aesthetic insights may offer us a qualitatively different understanding of the more fundamental aspects of terrorism, including its nature, impact and the policy responses it triggers.

While major crises initially tend to reinforce old thinking and behavioural patterns, they also allow societies to challenge and overcome entrenched habits, thereby creating the foundations for a new and perhaps more peaceful future. Major traumas have, indeed, always played a central role in redefining political communities.[15] Questioning the key assumptions that guide security thinking should therefore be an essential element of coming to terms with 9/11. And it should entail fundamental discussions about the nature and

meaning of security in a rapidly changing world – discussions that include the use of a range of hitherto neglected sources of insight, such as aesthetic ones. The latter are essential not least because aesthetic factors have made 9/11 into a major global event in the first place. What haunted the world more than anything were the images and sounds of the crumbling Twin Towers, of human suffering and death, being instantaneously and repeatedly televised around the world.[16]

Blurring factional and fictional accounts

A series of aesthetic questions thus need to be posed with regard to 9/11. These questions revolve to a large extent around the issue of representation, around how one can understand major political events in a way that does justice to both their complexities and the need to find adequate ways of responding politically. This chapter raises some of these questions by focusing on four specific aesthetic domains: literature, visual art, architecture and music. My ambition is not to map how artists in these aesthetic fields have engaged 9/11. There have been far too many artistic engagements to even attempt a comprehensive survey, at least in an chapter-length exposé. I am merely showing how paying attention to artistic activities allows us to pose questions that are central for the study of security and international relations in general.

The potential and problems of literature's contribution to the study of political phenomena is well illustrated through a controversial book by the populist French philosopher Bernard-Henri Lévy. Entitled *Who Killed Daniel Pearl?*, the book engages the regional political context of the US invasion of Afghanistan, which was the initial military response to 9/11. Lévy examines the death of Daniel Pearl, an American journalist who, in early 2002, was kidnapped in Karachi and then decapitated. The latter act was captured on video and linked with a range of political demands. Lévy's book, which became a best-seller in both Europe and North America, mixes investigative journalism with fiction, a style he calls *romanquête*. Since many facts regarding the case are not known, Lévy simply uses his literary imagination to provide a coherent narrative. The latter includes speculation about events and motives and about Pearl's emotional response to being captured and tortured.[17]

Lévy's book caused a great deal of controversy. One prominent commentator, writing for the *New York Review of Books*, dismissed Lévy's research as 'amateurish', drawing attention to his 'shaky' knowledge of South Asian geography, his 'deep ignorance' of the corresponding political situation and his stereotypical representation of 'fanatical Orientals'.[18] This comes in the wake of years of critique by prominent philosophers, such as Gilles Deleuze or Pierre Vidal-Naquet, who accused Lévy of gross factual errors and intellectual mediocrity.[19] Without entering these debates, I merely draw attention to Lévy's book because it contains an interesting feature that triggered a number

of more generic, more fundamental controversies, which are well worth investigating. They have to do with the author's stylistic transgressions, with his attempt to blur journalistic inquiry and fictional creativity. Many reviewers were far more disturbed by these transgressions than by Lévy's lack of investigative competence, cultural sensitivity and literary flair. They worry primarily about 'a more unsettling doubt raised by the fusion of genres',[20] about occasions when the author 'distorts his evidence and actually invents the truth'.[21]

What are the exact political and ethical dangers of crossing factual and fictional accounts? Can literature, as Proust once claimed, provide certain insight into human beings and their emotions that other sources and representations fail to capture?[22] Can literature's appeal to the imagination generate political and social change in a way that prose accounts cannot?[23] Or is not today's opposition between 'fact and fancy' a historical product, replacing earlier intellectual traditions that provided space for a range of different truth claims, including those 'that could be presented to the reader only by means of fictional techniques of representation'?[24]

Some answers to these difficult questions are already visible in an insightful essay by Richard Devetak. He juxtaposes a novel by Don DeLillo – *White Noise* – with the events of 9/11. In doing so, Devetak discusses the nature of 'events' in world politics, showing that they are intrinsically linked to the manner in which we represent them – through stories, pictures, films and other 'narrative' material. The conceptual evidence that Devetak provides is convincing. He stresses that the key disputes around how to respond to 9/11 do not revolve around what actually happened. No one doubts what really took place. Nor are there major disputes about the key facts, such as the date and time, the coordinated hijacking of planes and the destruction of buildings, or the approximate number of people who lost their lives as a result. But the various meanings of the event are far more amorphous and contingent. Indeed, what meanings we have are inevitably linked to a series of 'stories' that were told, and are being continuously retold, about how the attacks unfolded and shaped subsequent policy responses. Devetak distinguishes between four distinct interpretations of 9/11: the terrorist attack as trauma, as a world-changing event, as an act of war, and as a manifestation of evil. Each of these interpretations, he stresses, depends on a series of assumptions: political perceptions that are not intrinsically rooted in the event itself but are shaped by a range of subjective attitudes. These attitudes, in turn, strongly shape our understanding of the event as well as the policy responses that ensued. Devetak goes as far as stressing that 'there are no events independent of the narratives in which they are depicted, analyzed and judged'. A resort to literature – as exemplified by DeLillo's *White Noise* here – can help us realise how representation, narrative and political understanding are intrinsically linked – and how these linkages determine to a large extent the political response to major events, such as terrorist attacks.[25]

Needless to say, a chapter-length survey cannot spell out the exact policy relevance of literary readings of 9/11. But the potential of such engagements can nevertheless be identified. Fictional accounts of terrorist movements, for instance, may offer insight into the psychological, political and cultural motives and methods that underlie them. They may capture emotional dimensions that a purely analytical account cannot represent. A policy that takes such insights into account would be better attuned than an approach which simply labels terrorism as 'evil' and thus presents the phenomenon as impossible to understand in rational terms. Concrete benefits from aesthetic insight may range from improving the ability to anticipate the timing and nature of terrorist attacks to a fine-tuning of preventive means, such as targeted development assistance or the promotion of cultural tolerance.

Visualising 9/11

A focus on visual art highlights similar and similarly difficult questions. There have been an unusually high number of painters, from leading artists to amateurs, seeking to deal with various aspects of 9/11. The diversity of websites devoted to representing these activities is in itself astonishing. Various internet-based projects, such as the 'WHY Project', the 'ARTproject', 'Rhizome' or 'Arts Healing America', display literally thousands of art works that deal with the terrorist attack and its aftermath. They stress the importance of art in the process of 'coming to terms with what has happened',[26] in the 'healing, recovery and rebuilding of self and community'.[27] They seek to 'function as a dialogue for those who wish to communicate through images'.[28] They want to 'open up avenues of discussion and expression . . . through cultural intervention'.[29] Such artistic and cultural engagements were not limited to local people, reacting directly to the events in New York. One of the most prominent websites, the WHY Project, was established on the day of the attacks. It featured instructions in several languages, inviting artists around the world to submit their work as part of a collective effort to address the aftermath of the events.[30]

Many visual artists throughout the world did, indeed, feel the need to deal with the event in the medium they know best. Look at the indigenous Australian painter Gordon Bennett. As an extended aesthetic dialogue with the African-American artist Jean-Michel Basquiat, Bennett produced a series of paintings that dealt directly with the events of 9/11.[31] On some level, the paintings are relatively figurative, with tumbling buildings, aeroplanes, flames and suffering people clearly visible. But they also represent the events in ways that place emphasis not on external appearances but on the emotional reaction to them. Can such artistic engagements provide insight that language-based accounts cannot? If so, what is their exact content and can they be translated back into language-based representations and brought to bear upon the formulation of security policy?

Public debates about the aesthetic reconstruction of Ground Zero

Some of these difficult questions also entered debates about the rebuilding of Ground Zero, the space in New York where the twin towers of the World Trade Center used to stand. Look, for instance, at the work of Daniel Libeskind, who was given chief responsibility for overseeing the rebuilding process, and a range of other architects and artists, such as Michael Arad, whose design was chosen for the memorial at Ground Zero. Debates about the highly symbolic rebuilding process led to heated disagreements, both between the architects involved and amongst the public at large. The very existence of these debates demonstrates that architecture has the potential to generate discussion about political and moral issues. 'Architecture is communication', Libeskind argues;[32] it is 'poetry in stone and in light and in gravity'.[33] And he goes on to stress that 'contrary to public opinion the flesh of architecture is not cladding, insulation and structure, but the substance of the individual in society in history'.[34] Structural elements did, however, generate considerable tension. Look at disagreements about the so-called Freedom Tower, the centrepiece of the rebuilding process. Libeskind's master plan foresaw a building with a slanting roof that holds a spire reaching up to 1,776 feet in total, symbolising the year of the Declaration of Independence. David Childs, the architect chosen by the developer, planned a much more massive structure with a facade that is twisted as it rises. A compromise between these two architectural approaches produced a hybrid design that retains elements of Child's basic structural ideas while adding Libeskind's notion of an asymmetrical summit and a symbolic height of 1,776 feet.[35] The latter makes it the world's tallest building when it is completed, thus symbolising, in the words of Governor George Pataki, that 'the world of freedom will always triumph over terror'.[36]

Debates over the memorial at Ground Zero offer particularly revealing glimpses into the relationship between aesthetics and politics. The purpose of the memorial is to commemorate the 2,982 lives lost in the attacks on the World Trade Center. A thirteen-member jury was set up to oversee the selection process. Rather than choosing politicians for the process, it consisted mostly of people from the arts and cultural professions, including Maya Lin, the designer of the Vietnam War Memorial, and Vatan Gregorian, the president of the Carnegie Corporation. The main aim of the jury was to 'find a design that will begin to repair both the wounded cityscape and our wounded souls, to provide a place for the contemplation of both loss and new life'.[37] Besides this broad goal there were very few official rules, but they included that the memorial should 'make visible the footprints of the original World Trade Center towers' and that it 'recognise each individual who was a victim of the attacks'.[38]

After examining a total of 5,201 submissions the jury announced eight finalists in November 2003. The respective designs were far more abstract

and minimalist than, say, Bennett's figurative rendering of the event. In some sense they continued a tradition of abstract memorialisation that was initiated twenty years earlier by Maya Lin's Vietnam War memorial. 'Everywhere abstraction and minimalism became the unavoidable language of the monument', stresses one commentator. 'We have become uncomfortable with the idea of literal representation when we make monuments.'[39] Arad's design reflected a very conscious aesthetic choice made by the jury which, as mentioned, included Lin. 'We resisted the idea of the literal', said one of the jurors.[40] The basic idea was to choose a memorial that could provide a living memory by allowing 'for the change of seasons, passage of years and evolution over time'.[41] The initial public reaction was rather negative. A survey conducted by the Municipal Art Society found that the most frequent criticism of the designs, including the subsequent winner, was that they were 'too cold, bleak and angular'.[42] A leading New York architect spoke of 'a public-relations disaster'.[43] One commentator aptly summarises these critical voices by stressing the designs were too remote and sanitised to 'capture the destruction and injustice' of the event, to 'speak of the cruelty and the horror, of the vulnerability and desperation, of the valour and sacrifice'. To remember what 'really happened' on 11 September, he stressed, one needs to be more figurative, one needs monuments that 'capture the drama, images that haunt us and objects that carry the scars of their survival'.[44] Others strongly defended the choice of finalists, stressing that they 'make the strongest possible case for simplicity as the most suitable aesthetic for ground zero'.[45]

The eventual winner of the competition, Michael Arad's memorial 'Reflecting Absence', perfectly captures these aesthetic tensions. Revised in collaboration with Peter Walker, a prominent landscape architect, Arad's memorial consists of an open plaza with pine trees. In the middle of it, and submerged thirty feet below street level, are a pair of enormous reflective pools marking the space where the twin towers used to stand. These 'voids can be read as containers of loss, being close-by yet inaccessible', Arad stresses. He describes the descent into the memorial as follows:

> This descent removes [visitors] from the sights and sounds of the city and immerses them into a cool darkness. As they gradually proceed, step by step, the sound of water falling grows louder, and more daylight filters in from below. At the bottom of their descent, they find themselves behind a thin curtain of water, staring out at an enormous pool that flows endlessly towards a central void that remains empty.[46]

Disputes arose about several aspects of the design, including the manner in which the dead are individually remembered. Arad's original design envisaged the two central and massive pools surrounded by a ribbon of names that indicated the victims of the attack. It was key that the names appear in no discernible order, so that they 'reflect the haphazard brutality of the death'.[47] But many relatives of victims found the plan 'too impersonal

and generic', and demanded a more specific acknowledgement. Some family members of officials killed in the attack went as far as threatening to remove the name of their relatives from the memorial in case they were listed together with civilians.[48] As a compromise, the revised version of Arad's and Walker's memorial designated individual shields for the names of police officers, firefighters and other officials.[49]

How can such memorial and architectural features, and the discussions about them, contribute to our memory of 9/11? Can artistic representation express forms of memory that the more linear representations of verbal narrative cannot?[50] Prevalent political reactions to 9/11, for instance, generated a patriotic movement that led to a considerable amount of cultural and racial stereotyping, particularly vis-à-vis people of Arabic origin. Aesthetic representations of traumas, such as memorials, are much less linked to cultural values or boundaries of sovereignty. They might thus contain the potential to rearticulate notions of community and security in a transnational and culturally sensitive way.

Politics between text and music

The final aesthetic glimpse I would like to take at the events of 9/11 is through music. The reasons for doing so may not be obvious at first. Music, at least in its 'pure' instrumental form, does not seem to represent anything outside itself – certainly no concrete and straightforward political message. But musical activities are among the most widespread and intensive engagements with 9/11. The domain of popular music alone has produced countless songs about the event. Some musicians are explicitly political. DJ Shadow, for instance, composed a song that is highly critical of the US military campaign in Afghanistan. His rationale for doing so is that 'artists, be they painters, actors, writers or musicians, have a responsibility to reflect and interpret the world around them'. Or, expressed in the lyrics accompanying his music:

> I was born with the voice of a riot, a storm lightening the function, the form, far from the norm ... I'm back in the cipher my foes and friends, with a verse and a pen against a line I won't toe or defend.[51]

Other musicians focus less on the explicitly political and more on the purely emotional aspects of coming to terms with 9/11. Consider, for instance, the album by Bruce Springsteen, which contains songs such as 'My City of Ruins' and 'Into the Fire'. The latter states how 'I need you near, but love and duty called you someplace higher, somewhere up the stairs, into the fire'.[52] Some commentators endow Springsteen's music with central importance, elevating it to a semi-official 'requiem for those who perished in the sudden inferno, and those who died trying to save them'.[53] Others see it above all as a patriotic celebration of New York's heroic firefighters[54] or criticise him for

not mentioning anything about the state of the country or, for that matter, the far more problematic war of response.[55] Entering these debates is not my task. I am interested in the more generic relationship between music, text and politics.

The independence of musical content from the lyrics that may accompany it becomes evident if one examines an earlier song by Bruce Springsteen. The title track of his 1984 album 'Born in the USA' is often cited as the most misinterpreted song in the history of rock music. But a closer looks reveals less a misinterpretation than an inherent tension between text and music. The textual message Springsteen wanted to communicate was one of protest. It was meant to critique American society for its treatment of working-class veterans from the Vietnam War. Two representative stanzas from the song are as follows:

> Got in a little hometown jam
> So they put a rifle in my hand
> Sent me off to a foreign land
> To go and kill the yellow man
> Born in the USA . . .
>
> Down in the shadow of the penitentiary
> Out by the gas fires of the refinery
> I'm ten years burning down the road
> Nowhere to run ain't got nowhere to go
> Born in the USA . . . [56]

While designed as a protest against American society, 'Born in the USA' had mostly the opposite effect. It became a widely recognised and uncritically employed hymn for the celebration of patriotic pride and duty. 'Born in the USA' was even used as a theme song in Ronald Reagan's Republican presidential campaign in 1984. A conservative columnist, George Will, perfectly captured the logic of this appropriation:

> I have not got a clue about Springsteen's politics, if any, but flags get waved at his concerts while he sings songs about hard times. He is no whiner, and the recitation of closed factories and other problems always seems punctuated by a grand, cheerful, affirmation: 'Born in the USA!'[57]

Springsteen is said to have been horrified by this political appropriation of his music. But the death of the musician is as prominent a theme as the much discussed death of the author. Once composed, a piece of music takes on its own life, independently of the intention its creator bestowed upon it. The nature and direction of this life has as much to do with the musical content as with the lyrics that accompany it. Eliminate the text of Springsteen's song for a moment, or assume a listener who does not understand English, and

the appropriation of 'Born in the USA' suddenly looks far less surprising. One commentator hits the nail on its head:

> If you set your troubled examination of Vietnam's after-effect to the sort of declamatory fanfare last heard when an all-conquering Caesar returned to Rome, bellow it in a voice that suggests you are about to leap offstage and punch a communist, then package it in a sleeve featuring the Stars and Stripes and a pair of Levi's, it's no good getting huffy when people seize the wrong end of the stick.[58]

'Born in the USA' shows how the sound of music itself can carry a message, either in the absence of words or in combination (or contradiction) with them. There is evidence that suggests Springsteen himself recognised this feature. Following the controversy of Reagan's appropriation of his song, Springsteen started to perform and record a series of much less 'bombastic' versions, featuring only himself on guitar, rather than the entire band.[59] All this suggests that there is something about music itself that contains political dimensions. A move back to theoretical debates might help to us to understand why this is the case.

Aesthetics and emotional knowledge

In the previous section I hinted at the possibility that literature, visual art, architecture and music might be able to capture emotional dimensions of terrorism that other, more conventional approaches cannot. Some claim that music in particular is suited for this task.[60]

Helping us understand the political role of emotion would certainly be of key importance, for experts on terrorism and international security are not adequately equipped to understand the complex emotional dimensions of terrorist threats. Emotions are, by and large, still seen as purely private and irrational phenomena – and thus of little relevance to political analysis and public deliberations about security issues. But excluding the role of emotions from scholarly inquiries and political analysis is paradoxical, for terrorism is a highly emotional phenomenon. The motives and means of terrorists are usually presented in emotional terms, as 'fanatical', 'irrational' or simply 'evil'. Reactions to terrorist attacks are equally emotional. They involve dealing with the memory of death, suffering and trauma, leading to emotional calls for political action, often involving feelings of retribution that go far beyond the mere need to provide security. Political leaders do not shy away from drawing upon emotional appeals, such as nationalist rhetoric, to win support for their positions. And yet, the actual policy analyses of terrorist threats are advanced in a highly detached and rationalised manner. This was the case during much of the Cold War and continues today. Consider, as one example among many, a recent media release by the Australian Law Reform

Commission, which aims at generating public debate on the effectiveness and need for sedition laws.[61] Its main objective is to come up with constructive policy advice by taking 'some of the emotion out of the debate'.[62]

Numerous international relations scholars have meanwhile started to deplore the remarkable lack of attention paid to emotions. Jonathan Mercer and Neta Crawford were among the first to make this point.[63] They acknowledge a long tradition of exploring the role of psychology in foreign policy, but stress that the respective scholars have not appreciated emotions fully, in part because they mostly saw them as 'deviations from rationality', as factors that could explain misperceptions.[64] Some of the discipline's senior scholars agree. Robert Jervis, who played a key role in examining the role of perception and misperception in world politics, admitted that his early neglect of emotion was a 'major blunder'.[65] Across the Atlantic the situation is no different. Christopher Hill and Andrew Linklater, two senior scholars in the UK, acknowledge the crucial role of 'feeling and intuition' in decision-making[66] and deplore the fact that the study of emotions in world politics is still 'in its infancy'.[67]

Although the centrality of emotions to world politics is now largely recognised, there are surprisingly few studies that systematically analyse how emotions matter in concrete political settings. This gap is to a large extent due to the strong – at times almost exclusive – role that social science plays in orthodox approaches to the study of international relations, such as realism, liberalism and constructivism. Although social science offers a wide range of methods, the most prevalent among them are limited in their ability to understand the nature, role and impact of phenomena as ephemeral as emotions. Emotions cannot be quantified, nor can they easily be measured, even in qualitative terms. For a social scientist, investigating emotions would thus seem to result in research that is speculative or tenuous at best. This is why Crawford recognises that the inherently 'ephemeral' nature of emotions poses major 'methodological concerns'.[68] Mercer worries that 'emotion is hard to define, hard to operationalise, hard to measure, and hard to isolate from other factors'.[69] Jervis perfectly sums up prevailing attitudes by declaring that he would love to study the relationship between emotion and cognition but that 'at this point the challenge is simply too great'.[70]

Some of these obstacles to an appropriate appreciation of emotions can be addressed through a more active engagement with aesthetic approaches and, in a more general sense, methods from the humanities. Although largely neglected by security experts and international relations scholars in general, emotions have actually been of central concern in psychology, anthropology, sociology, philosophy and feminist theory. Many of these scholars disagree with each other. They wage passionate debates about the manner in which emotions should be understood and appreciated. But there are still some common themes, two of which stand out. First, is the recognition that emotions are more than mere personal reactions. They play an important social

and political role, particularly in the process of constituting identity and community attachments.[71] The second involves an investigation into the extent to which emotions are not just irrational reactions, but also forms of insight and judgement. Robert Solomon and Martha Nussbaum are two of the most prominent representatives of this latter tradition.[72] They both suggest that emotions provide us with insights that could be of use in our attempts to address social and political challenges. This so-called cognitive approach to emotions has always been juxtaposed with positions that view emotions not primarily as thoughts, judgements and beliefs, but as bodily sensations.

While I refrain from entering the details of these debates on the nature and meaning of emotions, I want to emphasise an important point that Nussbaum brings up: that literature, music and other works of art offer possibilities to express emotional insights in ways that cannot easily be achieved through conventional accounts of events. Aesthetic engagements focus on the human reactions to and emotional interpretations of events, rather than their mere factual occurrence. This is why, Nussbaum stresses, emotional intelligence and aesthetic ways of representing them should be accepted, alongside more conventional sources, as legitimate elements in the formulation of ethical and political judgement.[73]

Highlighting music's ability to capture emotional insight is not to draw a stark line between emotion and reason. The latter can, in fact, be seen as a form of sensibility itself, even in its instrumental form. Perhaps the sanitised discourse of defence policy is a form of rationalised fear. The aesthetic, in turn, could thus be seen as offering an alternative response, a creative enchantment that takes its place in a broad spectrum of different forms of reasons.[74] Be that as it may, music exemplifies the potential of and limits to gaining emotional insights into political puzzles. Music is not based on the idea of representing a specific object in the political world. But music does, at the same time, relate to aspects outside itself, to a state of mind, an attitude, a feeling, or an emotion.[75] Music is unique in a variety of ways, including its performative and rhythmic nature and the fact it can be perceived simultaneously from all directions, which is not the case with visual or textual sources.[76] These are some of the reasons why several writers and philosophers, including Schiller, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, believed that music is particularly suited to express emotions, that the effects of music are more immanent and profound than those emanating from other arts, for 'these speak only of the shadow, but music of the essence'.[77]

Can music thus offer insight that other forms of knowledge cannot? Mahler, for instance, was only interested in composing music about experiences that cannot be expressed in words.[78] As with other aesthetic insight, the challenge here consists in locating the precise political content and communicating it in non-musical terms. Prevalent linguistic conventions are inadequate to capture musical knowledge. Consider, for instance, how I reluctantly but, for lack of alternatives, had to refer to musical 'insight',

or to the possibility of music 'illuminating' political phenomena. Both of these terms are inherently visual, reflecting a deep-seated assumption that our ideal experience, as Nussbaum stresses, 'must be a visual experience, that its illumination must be accounted for in terms of the eye'.[79] But to communicate aural experiences through visual metaphors is problematic. To express musical experiences appropriately one would need to replace concepts like 'insight' and 'illuminating' with 'inhearing' or additives such as 'musicate' or 'aurate'.[80] Some languages are already better equipped for such sensitivities than English is. For Aboriginal people in the western desert of Australia, for instance, 'the metaphor for thought and memory is the ear'.[81] But even if equipped with more appropriate metaphorical tools, language would still not be able to capture the unique representational style of music, or, rather, music's refusal to engage in representation at all. 'Music has to be listened to and nothing can replace this experience', Gordon Graham points out.[82]

The challenge to appreciate artistic knowledge on its own terms

The main methodological challenge consists of legitimising musical and other artistic insights on their own terms, rather than through the conceptual framework of social scientific conventions. But how is one to legitimise approaches to knowledge and evidence that contradict many established principles that guide international relations scholarship? And how can one communicate aesthetic insights in ways that retain their uniqueness and integrity?

Many contemporary commentators are pessimistic about the practical possibilities of conveying clear emotional issues through music. Gordon Graham, for instance, admits that music is an unusually powerful means for expressing emotions. But he is very sceptical about music's possibility to say anything concrete, or at least anything that goes beyond very broad sensations, such as sadness or happiness. Graham thus believes that 'very few other states or conditions can be ascribed to music without a measure of absurdity creeping into the discussion'.[83]

Reading concrete emotional messages into (or out of) music is, indeed, a difficult, perhaps even an inherently problematic endeavour. But it is not quite as impossible as Graham believes. Nussbaum's study shows why. While acknowledging the difficulty of describing connections between music and our emotional life, Nussbaum stresses that part of this difficulty has less to do with music and more with our lack of conceptual insight into the issue of emotions in general.[84] Reaching a systematic understanding of the importance of emotional insight is thus central. And so is the need to recognise the limits of what can be conveyed through music. Nussbaum, for instance, admits that music cannot communicate clear and authentic emotional messages. Any persuasive account of the emotional content of music, she argues,

is intrinsically linked to the experiences of listeners.[85] This, in turn, requires recognising that the links between music and emotions are culturally specific. Indian or Japanese music, Nussbaum illustrates, is not immediately accessible to the untrained Western ear. This is why an appreciation of music, as well as of its emotional content, requires a certain level of 'education and attunement'.[86]

Music in this sense is a form of representation, even though it does not represent anything outside of itself. Its attempt to capture and express emotions may well be broader and less demarcated, but in other ways it is not much different to language. Neither medium, language or music, can capture the world as it is. Whenever we use language to convey meaning, we say as much about our values and prejudices, which are embedded in specific linguistic structures and cultural norms, as we say about the actual objects and phenomena we seek to describe. Nussbaum thus stresses that

> Music is another form of symbolic representation. It is not language, but it need not cede all complexity, all sophistication in expression, to language. So it is not obvious why we think that there is a greater problem about expressing an emotion's content musically than about expressing it linguistically. We think this way because we live in a culture that is verbally adept but (on the whole) relatively unsophisticated musically.[87]

In a highly insightful and inspiring dialogue about music, society and politics, Daniel Barenboim and Edward Said stress a similar point. They lament the increasingly marginalised role that music plays in society, and ascribe this marginalisation to the larger modern process of splitting up life and knowledge into ever more specialised subfields. The ensuing practices have led to impressive advances of knowledge, but they have come at a certain price. Music, for instance, is now treated as separate not only from politics, but also from the other arts. Most people today no longer receive a basic education in music. But precisely such an education would be necessary, as Nussbaum has already stressed, to appreciate the various dimensions of music, including its intertwinement with politics and society.[88] Without that knowledge music is simply dismissed as irrelevant to the political, even though the careful and informed listening necessary to correct that image requires no more and no less education than, say, the specialised skills necessary to read a defence studies manual. The result is that we know more and more about increasingly specialised topics, but hardly ever explore the promising linkages between them.

Barenboim and Said advance a passionate claim for making music more central again to societal and cultural life, and thus to politics too. They draw attention to the benefits that could emerge from such a renewed appreciation and reintegration of music. They have done so in a very practical way, by bringing together a group of young Israeli and Arab musicians in the

German cultural centre of Weimar. Named after Goethe's *West-Eastern Divan*, the project used music as a way of promoting cross-cultural communication, understanding and tolerance.[89] Although pre-dating the events of 11 September, this musical dialogue represents precisely the type of cultural engagement that many critics find missing in the official policy response to the terrorist attacks.[90]

Said stresses the need for a 'common discourse', a type of broad understanding of society that replaces the current specialisation of knowledge, where only a few fellow experts are still able to communicate with each other. For Said the danger of this tendency is that we no longer take on the most challenging problems, for the fragmentation of knowledge and its corresponding institutionalisation makes it easy to avoid responsibility for decisions regarding the overall direction of society.[91] Barenboim, likewise, stresses that music is 'one of the best ways to learn about human nature'. Learning here means far more than the mere accumulation of knowledge. It means retaining the ability to question some of the problematic assumptions that are often taken for granted, even though they cause a great deal of conflict in the world. The elevation of realist power politics to a virtually unchallenged mantra of foreign policy behaviour is case in point. The key political challenge, then, consists in searching for new perspectives (i.e. listening capabilities), rather than new facts. This challenge is perfectly expressed by Barenboim, who wants to make listeners forget what they know, so that they can experience the world anew and thus open up to possibilities that are foreclosed by intellectual and practical conventions that are so entrenched as to be uncritically accepted as common sense.[92] Music may well be better suited for this task than many other forms of expression, for, as Nussbaum stresses, 'it is not the language of habit'.[93] It may thus be able to offer us a fundamentally different take on some of the key political challenges, thereby opening up possibilities that stay foreclosed within conventional policy deliberations.

Conclusion

Artistic insights are not necessarily better or more authentic than prevalent interpretations of security dilemmas. They certainly do not replace the need for technical expertise and social scientific inquiries. But aesthetics offers the opportunity to reach a broader understanding of the emergence, meaning and significance of key political challenges, such as global terrorism. While writers, painters, musicians and philosophers, such as Barenboim, Said and Nussbaum, have long made this point, international relations scholarship has so far paid far too little attention to knowledge that can emerge from drawing upon alternative sources, including aesthetic ones.

It is reasonable to assume that art can provide only limited or no input on purely technical and strategic issues, such as decisions with regard to weapons systems or strategic deployment of troops. But security policy is, and always

has been, about far more than military policy. Although presented as a pragmatic response to external threats, security is just as much about defining the values and boundaries of political communities, about separating a safe inside from a threatening outside. It is about sustaining national identity and legitimising the use of violence for political purposes.[94] In short, security is about the political imaginary as much as it is about facing threats. And it is in this realm that art can become politically relevant: it can contribute to discussions about the nature of threats and their impact on political communities, about the memory of trauma and its shaping of future policies, about the fundamental definition of security and the ensuing relationship between inside and outside. Doing so entails expanding the definition and task of security beyond an assessment of threats and the search for an appropriate strategic response to them.

An appreciation of aesthetic sensibilities may well offer insights that cannot be reached or even comprehended by way of mimetic recognition of external appearances. It is important that such aesthetic explorations do not get lost in a political environment that tends to reduce strategic discussions to interactions among a few select members of the policy community. What is needed – especially at moments of crisis – is not a return to the familiarity of past habits, reassuring as this move may seem at first sight. Innovative solutions to entrenched political problems are unlikely to emerge from the mindset that has come to frame existing political interactions. This is why a move back to the dualistic and antagonistic realist thinking patterns of the Cold War will not be able to solve the security dilemmas of the twenty-first century. From an aesthetic point of view, security is more than just the task of protecting the state. Just as important is a transnational search for stability, subsistence, dignity, basic human rights and freedom from fear. Artistic engagement, unpredictable and ambivalent as it may be, shows us that security is – or at least should be – not only about strategic and geopolitical manoeuvring, but also about the search for political visions and the need to adjust our intellectual and policy attitudes to changing circumstances.

3
The Sublime Nature of Global Politics

> There are so many times when you know you're feeling a lot of
> something, but you don't know what the something is ... Right now
> I am feeling sadness, happiness, anger, love, guilt, joy, shame, and a
> little bit of humor ... My insides don't match up with my outsides.
>   Jonathan Safran Foer, *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*[1]

These are the words of Oskar Schell, the eleven-year-old protagonist of
Jonathan Safran Foer's 9/11 novel.[2] He expresses perfectly what I thought
to discuss and argue in the previous chapter, namely, that aesthetic sources
are particularly suited to provide insight into a range of powerful and often
seemingly contradictory emotions triggered by terrorism: fear of death and
suffering, awe at the sheer magnitude of a traumatic event; anger at who-
ever or whatever caused the tragedy, relief for having survived it; hatred
towards those deemed responsible, compassion for those who died or are in
pain.

I now provide a further conceptual foundation for my argument. I do so by
drawing upon the philosophical concept of the sublime. Here too, issues of
representation will be central, and so will the juxtaposition between mimetic
and aesthetic approaches that I introduced in Chapter 1. I offer this add-
itional conceptual step so that I can lay the foundation for my subsequent,
more empirically oriented effort to demonstrate systematically how aesthetic
sensibilities can offer crucial insights into concrete political dilemmas.

In the realm of the aesthetic, the beautiful is linked to harmony and pleas-
ure while the sublime is related to feelings of agitation, fear and awe, even
to violence and terror. Few political spheres generate more fear and awe than
the international. This is not only the case with key events, such as wars or
terrorist attacks, but also applies to the very nature of global politics. Con-
sider how conventional realist approaches to foreign policy, which revolve
around nation-states seeking to maximise security, are in many ways political
attempts to master and manipulate the awe-inspiring fear of the international
and the conflicts it engenders.

The sublime helps us reflect on the impact of, and responses to, dramatic political events, such as terrorist attacks. The magnitude of such events is often so overwhelming that it defies our capacity for rational understanding, thus triggering a range of powerful emotions – such as the ones expressed by Foer's fictional character. Our habits of knowing and conducting politics are fundamentally dislocated.

The sudden uprooting wrought by sublime events can provide us with key insights into the contingent nature of representation. The very ambivalence that issues from sublime events opens up opportunities for reflecting upon the fundamental moral and political issues at stake. But all too often the experience of dislocation wrought by the sublime is countered immediately with heroic and masculine understandings of the political, which seek to mobilise the unleashed energy for projects of mastery and control. The sublime appears to invite its own dissolution, as whole nations attempt to obliterate the conditions of possibility of ambivalent experiences.

The instincts of mastery and control often take over, but that need not be the case. I emphasise an alternative reaction to the sublime, one that explores different moral possibilities in the face of disorientation and the loss of control. In contrast to seeking reassurance in the bright light of the conscious, these possibilities involve an exploration into the deeper capacities and orientations contained at a subliminal level. But we do not necessarily need dramatic political events to disrupt entrenched political habits and generate our ability to wonder about the world. We can acquire the same type of insight into questions of representation and contingency by engaging more everyday practices of politics.

I thus move the conceptual focus from the sublime to the subliminal. The latter relates to the less dramatic but equally important aspects of politics. It focuses on unconscious dimensions of our existence: dimensions that are shaped by aesthetic sources, such as literature, art and music. This is why I try to show, throughout this book, that an engagement with aesthetics can yield important insights into political problems and even provide sources for articulating moral values at a time when international relations are increasingly characterised by ambiguity and clashing interests.

The chapter begins by outlining the relevance of the sublime to the international, drawing attention to the key roles played by the odd mixture of pain and pleasure, fear and delight. I then present the main philosophical reasons given for these reactions to the sublime, pointing out that an awareness of them offers crucial insight into the nature of political representation. The second part of the chapter employs these insights, but reorients them away from the heroic notion of the sublime to an exploration of subliminal knowledge, focusing in particular on the role of awe and wonder as antidotes to conventional responses to fear. Dramatic international events, such as wars or terrorist acts, do not happen spontaneously and without reason. They are the product of decades of everyday practice, of a gradual build-up

and consolidation of particular ways of knowing and acting. I argue that cultivating a sense of the subliminal, drawn from day-to-day life, can increase awareness of these largely inaudible yet crucial and highly consequential political processes.

Before I begin my analysis it is important to stress that to engage the multiple dimensions of the sublime, I theorise its relevance from a variety of vantage points. I contemplate the possibility of being directly affected by acts of terror as well as the far more frequent experience of witnessing such events from a safe distance. I examine policy responses to terror as well as broader reactions to them. These and various other positions are generated by different experiences and are shaped by different motives. I move back and forth between them, knowing that by doing so I transgress certain scholarly conventions that distinguish carefully between different levels of analysis. I do so because I want to capture the multifarious and dislocating nature of the sublime. I also do so because I believe that at a time of rapid globalisation, the boundaries between direct witness and spectator are increasingly blurred. The very nature of 9/11, for instance, was intrinsically linked to the fact that it was televised instantaneously around the world, thus affecting even those people who were not directly threatened by the event. The key objective of terrorism is, indeed, not to destroy physical targets. In the age of telecommunication, terrorism is, as W. J. T. Mitchell stresses, 'a war of words and images carried by the mass media, a form of psychological warfare whose aim is the demoralization of the enemy'.[3]

The strange encounter of pain and pleasure, terror and delight

At first sight, the sublime seems a concept of little relevance for political analysis. In everyday language, the word is usually associated with feelings of exultation, with moments when one is overwhelmed by the beauty or sheer awe of an object or an experience. But the sublime is also one of the oldest and most rigorously debated concepts in Western philosophy, referring to something far more specific than commonly assumed. I enter these debates by engaging a select number of sources, including two of the most influential classical texts: Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and the Beautiful* and Immanuel Kant's reflections on the 'Analytic of the Sublime' in his *Critique of Judgement*. But I stress at the outset that I have no intention of providing a comprehensive take on a debate that is both exceptionally complex and, as Jean-Luc Nancy noted, very much 'in fashion' among political philosophers.[4] I do, for instance, gloss over important differences between Burke and Kant. I admit that I rather ruthlessly appropriate their insights, which were developed to explain how spectators observe natural events, and then employ them to illuminate political phenomena.[5] I ignore crucial antecedents to Burke and Kant, such as the classical rhetorician Longinus. I also brush over or selectively draw upon many influential

subsequent texts, from Friedrich Schiller's essay 'On the Sublime' to the contemporary writings of Walter Benjamin, Gaston Bachelard, Pierre Bourdieu and Slavoj Zizek, to name just a few authors who have shaped the debate. My reading of the sublime has probably been influenced most by Jean-François Lyotard's approach, but here too I do not offer an exhaustive account of his position.[6] I justify my rather selective engagement with the sublime by the fact that I am not a philosopher, nor do I try to be. Rather, my task is much more practical: I want to provide a brief and accessible – and thus necessarily inadequate – summary of philosophical discussions about the sublime so that I can then examine the concept's potential usefulness for the study of international politics.

Definitions of the sublime usually begin with attempts to distinguish it from the beautiful. Kant, for instance, differentiated between aesthetic judgements about taste, which deal with the beautiful, and judgements about the sublime. Beauty is seen as something that brings pleasure and comfort. It is associated with a calm sense of harmony. The sublime, by contrast, is linked to excitement and astonishment. But it also involves awe and respect, even pain and terror. Both Kant and Burke illustrate emotions associated with the sublime through examples drawn from the experience of observing natural phenomena. They contemplate the encounter of our minds with momentous forces, such as thunderclouds and storms, hurricanes and volcanoes: phenomena that are so overpowering that they are not just awe-invoking, but simply too vast to be comprehended in their totality. Kant writes of how these forces become all the more attractive due to their fearfulness, for if we are in a secure enough position we find that sublime experiences raise our soul above the level of everyday routine.[7] For Burke, the result of such experiences is a 'delightful horror, a sort of tranquillity tinged with terror'. And he asks how such seemingly opposed sentiments could be experienced in combination:

> But if the sublime is built on terror, or some passion like it, which has pain for its object; it is previously proper to enquire how any species of delight can be derived from a cause so apparently contrary to it.[8]

The contradictory encounter of pain and delight, horror and pleasure, is not limited to the experience of natural phenomena. One could extend the insights provided by Burke and Kant so that they can be applied to the cultural and political sphere as well. Gothic churches, for instance, are not simply designed to be beautiful. They are supposed to evoke the awe-inspiring effects of the sublime. Their sheer size – gargantuan architectural structures, lifted up by massive stone pillars seemingly reaching up to the skies – subjugate people into an acute awareness of their finitude, their insignificance in relation to an omnipotent God, who is too vast and too powerful to be represented or comprehended through words and images.

Contemporary political events evoke similar reactions. The terrorist attacks of 9/11 can, for instance, easily be seen as 'quintessentially sublime', for they interrupted the normal course of life and fused an aesthetic of horror with an aesthetic of beauty.[9] Some go so far as to describe the event as 'the greatest work of art ever'.[10] Notoriously shocking as this description may be, it nevertheless captures an important aspect of the attack: the fact that it contained a very explicit aesthetic dimension. The terrifying visual presentation of death and suffering superseded our understanding of the real, or at least our conception of what could, conceivably, happen. The impact of the attack became intensified through its highly aestheticised nature. Televised ad infinitum around the world, media networks provided the event with truly global dimensions, symbolised through the constant replay of images depicting exploding aeroplanes, crumbling towers, victims jumping to their death to avoid being consumed by flames.[11]

The odd aestheticisation of horror reaches well beyond dramatic events. One can, for instance, find the same tendency in 'normal' practices of warfare. We all know about the horrors of war. We know of its senseless destruction and the tragic long-term impact it leaves in its wake. Pain, death, trauma and fear are some of the first words that come to mind.[12] But there is also another side to war, one that gets to the core of what philosophers have tried to understand through the concept of the sublime. Joanna Bourke, in an extensive study of accounts by veterans of the two world wars and the Vietnam War, found that for many soldiers the act of killing can invoke not only distress and horror, but also 'intense feelings of pleasure'. Bourke cites a solider from the First World War who found sticking his bayonet into the enemy was 'gorgeously satisfying'. And she stresses that such forms of pleasure associated with cruelty are by far not exceptional. When going through accounts by soldiers of their battlefield experiences she found, time and again, that feelings of pain, rage and empathy were mixed with excitement and enjoyment of the act of killing.[13]

There is, of course, a major difference between directly experiencing a terrifying terrorist attack and merely observing it from a safe distance through media representations. With the modernisation of warfare the actual act of killing now takes place mostly at a distance. But the subliminal mixture of pain and pleasure remains largely intact. Bourke found that when soldiers were no longer able to see the enemy and the effects of their weapons, they 'conjured up face-to-face encounters'.[14] Even those distant observers who are not directly linked to the event in question can be profoundly unsettled by a confrontation with the sublime. They too cannot avoid being influenced by the aestheticisation of terror and war, be it through the visual representation of 9/11 or the equally aestheticised media coverage of the 'war of response' that followed the attack.[15]

Powerful emotions emerge from the mixture of pain and pleasure, destruction and aestheticisation that is part of a sublime event like war or terrorism.

The previous chapter has outlined the respective issues in detail. What remains to be said here is that most of these emotions are misunderstood and unexplored. Instead, politicians frequently manipulate the feelings of fear and anger that are associated with the sublime. Look at some of the responses to 9/11, particularly in the United States. Washington's foreign policy became immediately centred on this major event. The motives and means of terrorists were presented as 'fanatical' and 'irrational'. Couched in a rhetoric of 'good' versus 'evil', the US response to 11 September re-established the sense of order and certitude that had existed during the Cold War: an inside/outside world in which, according to the words of President George W. Bush, 'you are either with us or against us'.[16] But this very rhetoric of evil removed the phenomena of terrorism into the realm of irrationality. Evil is a term of condemnation for things that can neither be fully comprehended nor addressed, except through militaristic forms of dissuasion and retaliation. This is why a variety of commentators believe that the rhetoric of evil is an 'analytical cul de sac' that prevents rather than encourages understanding.[17]

The presentation of 'evil' as irrational and incomprehensible provides an ideal opportunity to engage in political manipulations. For Richard Devetak, security policy in the wake of the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 strongly resembles key themes in Gothic literature: an evocation of monsters and ghosts designed to produce a general atmosphere of fear and anxiety.[18] In the absence of rational or even knowable phenomena, virtually all forms of legitimisation become defensible. The ensuing policy positions have thus become very difficult to challenge. This is the case even in the face of highly convincing conceptual or even empirical evidence, such as the fact that the war against Iraq was legitimised by the immanent need of a pre-emptive attack designed to destroy dangerous weapons of mass destruction which, as it later turned out, never existed. But even in the absence of legitimacy, the respective policy discourses could not be seriously challenged, for all critique was dismissed as unpatriotic subversion.[19]

Drawing attention to such manipulations of nationalist sentiments is not to deny that terrorist attacks have an intense emotional impact. It is inevitable that they evoke memories of death, suffering and trauma, leading to impulsive calls for political action. But these calls often involve feelings of retribution that go far beyond the need to provide security. The terrorist attacks of 9/11 were used to legitimise a range of policy initiatives that had little or nothing to do with the event. Various scholarly commentators have already drawn attention to this phenomenon. It is not my intention here to engage these debates in detail, but a few brief examples are nevertheless in order. Consider how the war in Iraq, which was presented as essential to fight global terrorism, was waged against a government that had no known links to the perpetrators of 9/11. No matter how authoritarian the Iraqi regime may have been, one can view the US legitimisation of the war in the same

terms as Al Gore characterises terrorism itself: as 'the ultimate misuse of fear for political ends'.[20]

The sublime and the limits of representation

Terrorist attacks and other major events give rise to a range of political legitimisations that are made possible by the highly emotional and seemingly contradictory nature of the sublime. Sublime occurrences constitute a break in the normal course of affairs. They create opportunities and evoke strong responses. It is striking, then, that international relations scholars have paid scarce attention to the concept, even though it touches upon the very essence of world politics. Analysis of the sublime provides, in particular, an understanding of how and why practices of representation are integral to political phenomena.

What exactly accounts for the fact that the sublime creates so much emotional and political turmoil? Why do we not simply feel pain and fear and grief and despondency when faced with terror and death? Why does the sublime also generate a variety of other complex feelings and reactions? Burke, Kant and their subsequent interpreters have given us a range of explanations to these questions, often with reference to how people react to natural events. These explanations diverge greatly, but one can still crystallise a number of recurring themes. I identify three of them as particularly relevant for understanding the political dimensions of the sublime.

The first key feature of the sublime has to do with the sheer magnitude of an encounter between our minds and a terrible event, be it an erupting volcano or a terrorist attack: it confronts us with the limits of our capacity for understanding. Kant, in reference to natural upheavals, puts it as follows:

> In the immeasurableness of nature and the incompetence of our faculty for adopting a standard appropriate to the aesthetic estimation of the magnitude of its realm, we found our own limitation.[21]

Burke, too, stresses that the key feelings triggered by the sublime in nature are astonishment, reverence and respect. But he quickly adds that other emotions follow in their wake, such as pain, anger and torment. He stresses, in fact, that 'a mode of terror, or of pain, is always the cause of the sublime'.[22] Burke explains that these feelings are caused by being involuntarily submitted to phenomena that defy explanation, phenomena that are simply too vast, too infinite, too obscure or too astonishing to be comprehended in their totality. The awesome power of nature makes us aware of our own vulnerabilities, our finitude; it humbles us, it shakes us to our very core. The result is a form of crisis, a plunge into pain and loss that leaves us puzzled, unable to answer key questions or even to express the emotions we feel. It is in this sense that the sublime supersedes both beauty and reason.

The events of 9/11 capture perfectly this aspect of the sublime. A common, immediate response to the events was one of overwhelming shock: a feeling that something like this cannot possibly be happening, that it is too unreal to be true. The attack thus shattered our understanding of the real; it interrupted the daily flow of events and confronted us with our inability to represent something that, in essence, cannot be represented, that is beyond our imagination.[23] The result is incomprehension, pain and fear, expressing the gap between what is experienced and what can actually be apprehended by existing conceptual and descriptive means. This is particularly the case for survivors of major traumas, who tend to find that there are no words to convey adequately what happened.[24]

A second key feature of the sublime is a certain distance from the events in question, a distance that explains why one is not simply overwhelmed by pain and fear, but why there are also seemingly misplaced feelings of pleasure and delight. The latter, Burke points out, emerge when one feels relief, when one realises that the threat posed by the overwhelming source of terror is not immanent, that it is suspended or held at a distance. Burke points out that satisfaction emerges from contemplating our freedom from evils we see represented, stressing that this is why 'terror is a passion which always produces delight when it does not press too close'.[25] Someone directly affected by a terrorist attack, for instance, may be either dead or so traumatised that she or he is under severe shock or paralysed by physical and mental pain. As soon as we experience fear we recognise, in a sense, that we have not been consumed by the event, that we are located at a certain distance to terror. Maurice Blanchot tries to understand this dynamic by stressing that disaster is both total destruction and salvation, in the sense that 'disaster ruins everything, all while leaving everything intact'. A disaster is an 'experience none can undergo', for those who are sucked into it are no longer here to talk, and those who are spared by it are, by definition, outside of it, not physically touched.[26]

The realisation that terror has not overwhelmed us can give us a sense of relief, perhaps even the illusion that our power is equal to that which threatened to destroy our very being. We may thus feel exultation, for we are affirmed in our existence by having survived a direct confrontation with our vulnerability. If we can overcome a challenge as gargantuan as a terrorist attack, then we can overcome anything.[27]

A third feature of the sublime can provide us with important insight into the contingent nature of representation. It is perhaps the feature that is politically most relevant. I have already stressed that the sublime is about events that are too overwhelming, too awe-inspiring to be adequately represented. Lyotard thus refers to the sublime as 'ideas of which no presentation is possible'.[28] But out of this confrontation with the limits of our cognition, frightening as it may well be, emerges insight into the very nature of representation. We are forced to confront the fact that all objects and events, small

or big, spectacular or daily, cannot be known as they are. Our knowledge of the world presupposes a form of interpretation that is embedded in deeply entrenched socio-linguistic practices. When we seek to know the world we learn as much about ourselves and our values as about the object we seek to represent. For some scholars this gap between a representation and what is represented therewith constitutes the very essence of politics.[29] But in our daily existence we are rarely aware of this highly political dimension. Being embedded in habits of knowing and representing, we assume that what we see is real and authentic, that we can visualise objects and political phenomena exactly as they are.

Confrontation with the sublime shatters this misplaced belief in authentic representation. Our mind clashes with phenomena that supersede our cognitive abilities and our imagination. In Slavoj Zizek's Lacanian language, this is the moment when the normal functioning of the symbolic is ruptured and we can catch a fleeting glimpse of the real. He underlines the importance of this process:

> Thus, by means of the very failure of representation, we can have a presentiment of the true dimensions of the Thing. This is also why an object evoking in us the feeling of Sublimity gives us simultaneous pleasure and displeasure: it gives us displeasure because of its inadequacy to the Thing-Idea, but precisely through this inadequacy it gives us pleasure by indicating the true, incomparable greatness of the Thing, surpassing every possible phenomenal, empirical experience.[30]

If we accept the lessons of the sublime and recognise that no authentic representation is possible, then we must also recognise that political insight should do more than merely present 'factual evidence'. The political, in this sense, is located around practices of representation that manipulate our inability to know the world as it really is.

Reorienting the Romantic legacy of the sublime

Although philosophical debates about the sublime gained momentum in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe, it was during the Romantic period that the concept reached its peak. Engagement with the indeterminacy of the sublime fitted perfectly into a period that was, in essence, a reaction against Enlightenment determinism. Disillusioned with their predecessors' trust in reason, some Romantics tried to escape the suffocating world of scientific laws by creating space for self-expression and imagination. The focus shifted from the realm of the objective to the subjective, to the unconscious and the mystical, from reason to emotion, passion and spontaneity. Truth no longer lay in science, but in aesthetics, then comprising not just art or music or literature, but all aspects of human sensation and cognition. In the realm

of politics, Romanticism signified above all a strong belief in the importance and autonomy of human agency. The subject was no longer simply a perceiver in the world, but again an agent. History was once more open to be shaped by the will and actions of people.

But the Romantic reassertion of agency and subjectivity was associated with a very heroic and masculine understanding of the political. Thus, most illustrations of the sublime since Burke and Kant have focused on heroic events, on the effects of tornadoes and erupting volcanoes, for instance. Various commentators have stressed how Burke and Kant, and their Romantic interpreters, advance a highly gendered view of the word. The sublime is associated with the momentous, the military and masculine while the beautiful is seen as the feminine, and thus as less important. The latter may engender love and affection, but it is only the masculine sublime that inspires fear, awe and respect.[31] This particular aspect of the Romantic period is very much alive, for our contemporary consciousness can, in many ways, be seen as having emerged from a combination of the Enlightenment trust in scientific reason with the heroic Romantic belief in the autonomy of human agency. Although international relations scholars now take on a range of different tasks, from analysing the impact of economic institutions to theorising the normative role of human rights, many of the discipline's key debates still revolve around a preoccupation with big events, such as wars or terrorist attacks. This is the case even though these events cause far fewer casualties and far less suffering than many more chronic, but less spectacular challenges, such as poverty, hunger and malnutrition.

Crucial insight into international politics can be gained from a reorientation of our Romantic legacy. Instead of arbitrarily rehearsing the Romantic preoccupation with the heroic and the masculine, it would be far more productive to resurrect the largely forgotten, or at least marginalised, sceptical element of the Romantic period: its rejection of determinism, its aesthetic validation of spontaneity, wonder and emotional insight, its exploration of unconscious sources of illumination. This resurrection need not entail reiterating the naïve and problematic idealism that characterised the Romantic period, the belief that art offers the ultimate solution to the crises of the modern world.[32]

The key lies in retaining the insight derived from an engagement with the sublime – insight related to the political nature of representation – but detaching it from both a preoccupation with dramatic events and an assertion of human agency. Such a step first requires the recognition that the sublime is, in essence, not about big natural disasters or political events and heroic responses, but about our *perception* of these events. That is, of course, already a central conclusion of Kantian analysis: that our knowledge of the world is structured not primarily by objects themselves, but by the nature of our perceptual apparatus.[33] And this is why Kant stresses that sublimity 'does not reside in any of the things of nature, but only in our own mind'.[34]

Stephen White captures these possibilities well when talking about the cultivation of an understanding of the sublime situated in the everyday. It is true that confrontation with overpowering big events forces us into awareness of our very limits. But a sensitive engagement with the more mundane aspects of life can more voluntarily produce the same consciousness of contingency. For White, a different attitude to knowledge and life emerges from such a reorientation:

> Openness here means an active embracing of contingency as the mirror of human finitude. And this means that we no longer envision what disrupts or dislocates our plans and projects as merely obstacle, but also as reminder. We cultivate the pain of the sublime in everyday life experiences of disjuncture and frustration.[35]

A rethinking along the lines suggested by White moves us away from the sublime to the subliminal. The subliminal retains the same scepticism about authentic representation as suggested by Burke and Kant, but instead of structuring it around dramatic events and heroic responses, focuses on the cultivation of a more mundane, everyday sense of scepticism, wonder and even enchantment about the world.

The key, then, is to recognise that we do not need to be violently confronted with the limits of cognition to acknowledge the political dimensions of representation; that we do not need major events to bring about shock and awe and a related ability to wonder about the world. I devote the remaining parts of this chapter to outlining how an enchanted 'mood' can emerge from the everyday, and how such a new attitude to knowledge would lead to different understandings of the international.

The everyday cultivation of wonder and enchantment

The sublime opens a door to a world that is usually closed to us by sedimented habits of representation. The opening of that door is an ambivalent experience, and it is easy to take heroic flight into efforts of mastery and control in response. The potential for insight is soon forgotten in attempts to recreate stability. If you are shocked out of your mind, it is only natural to want to return home, to restore order, to resort to the comfort of old routines. The strong tendencies towards heroism and masculinity have been built up and elaborated upon for centuries. It seems natural to resort to these habits because the alternatives have been maligned, silenced and repressed. Gaston Bachelard knows that a return to the safety of the house, real or virtual, is a deeply rooted instinct: when under threat we want to curl up in a protected space, like an animal hiding away in its hole. But he also knows that a house only provides the illusion of stability, stressing that

> the imagination functions in this direction whenever the human being has found the slightest shelter: we shall see the imagination build 'walls'

of impalpable shadows, comfort itself with the illusion of protection – or, just the contrary, tremble behind thick walls, mistrust the staunchest ramparts.[36]

What would happen if we cultivated a different reaction to and sense of the sublime? What is involved in dismantling the conventional, routinised responses, the ones that lead to mistrust, resentment and, far too often, violence? Can the type of insight triggered by the sublime allow societies to challenge and overcome entrenched habits, thereby creating the foundations for a new and perhaps more peaceful future? But do we need to wait for dramatic events to gain insight and generate change? And where do we go if we follow a path that explores the implications of, rather than reacts against, sublime experiences?

Dramatic, sublime events can uproot entrenched habits, but so can a more mundane cultivation of wonder and curiosity. Friedrich Nietzsche pursued such a line of inquiry when reflecting upon what he called the 'aftereffects of knowledge'.[37] He considered how alternative ways of life open up through a simple awareness of the fallibility of knowledge. We endure a series of non-dramatic learning experiences as we emerge from the illusions of childhood. We are confronted with being uprooted from the safety of the house. At first, a plunge into despair is likely, as one realises the contingent nature of the foundations on which we stand and the walls behind which we hide and shiver in fear:

All human life is sunk deep in untruth; the individual cannot pull it out of this well without growing profoundly annoyed with his entire past, without finding his present motives (like honour) senseless, and without opposing scorn and disdain to the passions that urge one on to the future and to the happiness in it.[38]

The sense of meaninglessness, the anger at this situation, represents a reaction against the habits of one's upbringing and culture. One no longer feels certain, one no longer feels in control. The sublime disruption of convention gives rise to the animosity of loss. The resentment may last a whole lifetime. Nietzsche insists, however, that an alternative reaction is possible. Completely different 'aftereffects of knowledge' can emerge over time, if we are prepared to free ourselves from the standards we continue to apply, even if we no longer believe in them. To be sure, the

old motives of intense desire would still be strong at first, due to old, inherited habit, but they would gradually grow weaker under the influence of cleansing knowledge. Finally one would live among men and with oneself as in *nature*, without praise, reproaches, overzealousness, delighting in many things as in a spectacle that one formerly had only to fear.[39]

The elements of fear and defensiveness are displaced by delight if and when we become aware of our own role in constructing the scene around us. The 'cleansing knowledge' of which Nietzsche speaks refers to exposing the entrenched habits of representation of which we were ignorant. We realise, for example, that nature and culture are continuous rather than radically distinct. We may have expected culture to be chosen by us, to satisfy our needs, to be consistent and harmonious, in contrast to the strife, accident and instinct of nature. But just as we cannot predict or prevent a thunderstorm from striking, so we are unable to ever eliminate the chance of a terrorist from striking in our midst. We can better reconcile ourselves with the unpredictability and 'irrationality' of politics and culture by overcoming our childish and idealistic illusions.

The cultivation of the subliminal, then, can dilute our obsession with control by questioning the assumptions about nature and culture in which this obsession is embedded. Without this work of cultivation, we are far more vulnerable once hit by the aftereffects of knowledge. We find ourselves in a place we never expected to be, overwhelmed by unexamined habits of fear and loathing. But if, as Nietzsche suggests, we experiment with the subliminal disruptions encountered in the process of 'growing up', we may become better prepared. We may follow Bachelard's lead and recognise that the house not only offers us a space to withdraw from the world when in fear, but also a shelter in which to daydream, to let our minds wander and explore subliminal possibilities. That, Bachelard believes, is indeed the chief benefit of the house: 'it protects the dreamer'.[40]

Dreaming and wonder are integral parts of the subliminal. They entail and engender a feeling of freedom from hegemonic practices of representation. It is not surprising, then, that dominant constructions of modernity emphasise how dreaming and wonder are relentlessly excluded and repressed in the process of modernisation. It seems like the opportunities for the subliminal dry up inexorably. Jane Bennett disagrees.[41] She argues that tales of secularisation and disenchantment are premised on a particular conception of enchantment, namely that the world has a telos or intrinsic purpose. The German Romantics sought to discover and recover such a world in the face of the onslaught of science and materialism in the eighteenth century. The decline of a culture that provides for purpose seems to leave only one alternative, 'an undesigned universe' in which there reigns a 'cold-eyed instrumentalism'.[42] Such is the classic story of modernity told by the likes of Max Weber, where our eventual fate is necessarily an existence without freedom or meaning, an 'iron cage'. As Bennett demonstrates, however, this well-rehearsed tale is anchored in a number of questionable assumptions. Most crucially, it assumes there is either teleological meaning, or no meaning at all. The principles of traditional aesthetics – purpose, harmony, order – train our thinking to filter out and reject any meaning that does not conform to these principles.

Bennett argues that subliminal possibilities are spread throughout our apparently banal and commodified landscape. She draws attention to surprise encounters in mundane settings, stressing that 'to be enchanted is to be struck and shaken by the extraordinary that lives amid the familiar and the everyday'.[43] Consider some of her examples, relating to the amorphous margins of nature and culture. Beings that cross boundaries such as the nature/culture divide may provoke a crisis of meaning, but they can also provoke wonder. Bennett refers to Andoar, the goat-kite; Rotpeter, the ape-man; Alex, the thoughtful parrot; and Deleuze and Guattari's body-without-organs.[44] These instances of 'morphing' from one kind of being to another indicate the possibility of mobility, of becoming otherwise, of room for freedom. They enchant because they 'bear some resemblance to the wonderful, unlikely possibilities called miracles'.[45] They can perhaps inspire similar possibilities within ourselves for crossing over into a different mode of being and perceiving.

Below the threshold: subliminal perception and the nature of knowledge

Conventional practices of representation provide a foundation, a frozen lake, upon which we conduct our daily lives. We often forget just how thin the ice is until a sublime event cracks open the surface and we are plunged into the cold water below. Yet we can make voluntary experiments, cut open holes in the ice, and dip our toes into the shadowy depths. We can explore what lies behind and beneath representative habits and perceive the world with new eyes and ears. In this respect, the shift from the sublime to the subliminal not only means a movement away from the dramatic and the heroic, but also a realignment from the conscious to that which is below or outside of it.

The word 'subliminal' literally means, 'below the threshold'. Since the late nineteenth century, there have been numerous attempts to understand the nature and impact of 'subliminal perception'.[46] I cannot even begin to address these contributions, which include an extensive body of scholarship on psychoanalysis. Some of the claims made on behalf of the subconscious and unconscious may be exaggerated, but there is little doubt that conscious thought occupies only a part of our being. John Gray puts the point more forcefully: 'Consciousness counts for less in the scheme of things than we have been taught.'[47] Our intellectualist education, shaped by Enlightenment ideals, seeks to cultivate a more conscious mode of existence. It enlists knowledge in a project of providing rational and authentic concepts as the secure foundation of thought and action. But what are the costs of this widespread convention of representing ourselves and our relationship with the world? What are the social and political implications of relying so much upon the conscious as the foundation of the future?

A key problem is that the conscious is inherently limited in its capacity. Some scientists estimate that it accounts for only 10 per cent of our potential brainpower. Of all the information we receive at any one point in time, the conscious can only process a small fragment. It distils, according to its experience and conditioning, an enormous amount of data, throwing out most of that data as either false or irrelevant. If we base political thought and action only on the range of understandings registered on the conscious level, we necessarily limit our capacity to respond to the challenges in the present. The aesthetic dimension of modernity has always been alert to this problem. As Gray remarks, the 'Surrealists understood that if we are to look at the world afresh we must recover the vision of things we are given by unconscious or subliminal perception'.[48]

The very meaning of 'knowledge' needs to be expanded so as to incorporate these insights about the neglected role of the subliminal. This is not to say that drawing on the unconscious for insight and inspiration is an easy and straightforward affair. How can we access our large and largely untapped powerhouse of subliminal ideas? This question has been at the centre of William Connolly's research, which has explored the boundaries between disciplines such as political theory, neuroscience and international relations.[49] Connolly disputes the value of intellectualist and cognitive models of politics and ethics, because they are not attentive to the different layers and levels of subjectivity. It is no good changing your ideas and becoming more idealistic, he argues, if instincts of vengefulness and anxiety remain uncontested at a deeper level. Genuine change and education require work at multiple levels of our being. What is most important is 'below the threshold' of conscious thought. Here, we find 'thought-imbued' feelings and intensities that cannot be directly controlled but play a momentous role in ethics and politics.

A subliminal orientation is attentive to what is bubbling under the surface. It is mindful of how conscious attempts to understand conceal more than they reveal, and purposeful efforts of progressive change may engender more violence than they erase. For these reasons, Connolly emphasises that 'ethical artistry' has an element of naïveté and innocence. One is not quite sure what one is doing. Such naïveté need not lead us back to the idealism of the Romantic period. 'One should not be naïve about naïveté', Simon Critchley would say.[50] Rather, the challenge of change is an experiment. It is not locked up in a predetermined conception of where one is going. It involves tentatively exploring the limits of one's being in the world, to see if different interpretations are possible, how those interpretations might impact upon the affects below the level of conscious thought, and vice versa. This approach entails drawing upon multiple levels of thinking and being, searching for changes in sensibilities that could give more weight to minor feelings or to arguments that were previously ignored.[51]

Wonder needs to be at the heart of such experiments, in contrast to the resentment of an intellect angry at its own limitations. The ingredient of

wonder is necessary to disrupt and suspend the normal pressures of return-ing to conscious habit and control. This exploration beyond the conscious implies the need for an ethos of theorising and acting quite different from that mode directed towards the cognitive justification of ideas and concepts. Stephen White talks about 'circuits of reflection, affect and argumentation'.[52] Ideas and principles provide an orientation to practice, the implications of that practice feed back into our affective outlook, and processes of argu-mentation introduce other ideas and affects. The shift, here, is from the 'vertical' search for foundations in 'skyhooks' above or 'foundations' below, to a 'horizontal' movement into the unknown.

Strangely enough, the scope for awareness expands rather than diminishes with this letting go of the conscious. The ingredients of wonder and enchant-ment allow us to become more attentive to the subliminal orientations that were always influencing thought and action, but which were excluded from view by the psychological need for justification. To use Nietzsche's words again, we are able to step back and 'delight in many things as in a spectacle that one formerly had only to fear'.

Conclusion

The sublime captures odd and seemingly contradictory phenomena: fascina-tion, awe and even delight at events that are inherently painful and horrific. The sublime is, as Nicholas Mirzoeff puts it, 'the pleasurable experience in representation of that which would be painfully terrifying in reality, leading to a realization of the limit of the human and of the powers of nature'.[53] Philosophers have for centuries sought to draw upon the insights that open up through such encounters with the sublime. They allow us an important glimpse into the incomplete and inevitably political nature of representa-tion. But in political practice such insights are all too quickly suppressed and forgotten. Because the sublime confronts us with the limits of our cognitive abilities, most conventional forms of analysis are ill-equipped to capture its contingent nature. Social science, in particular, tends to be at a loss when it comes to capturing aspects of representation that defy our capacity to reason.

The prevailing tendency is to react to the element of fear and awe in the sublime by reiterating the heroism so dominant in our histories. We tend to seek salvation in control and mastery by retreating into conscious and purposeful action. But we can also explore other possibilities. We may pick up on the elements of delight and see what happens when our existing habits and conventions are dislodged.

The cracks in the conscious opened up by dramatic, sublime events, such as terrorist attacks, can provide access to a world within ourselves that is nor-mally closed off. It is important to cultivate such possibilities, particularly at a time when political dilemmas require new and innovative responses. But we do not need to be dislocated by dramatic events to cultivate the types

of insights that are generated by the sublime. When we move from the sublime to the subliminal, we can, in everyday life, try to engender the same type of awe and wonder that is usually inspired by overwhelming events. Such a subliminal practice of the everyday is crucial for a more nuanced understanding of the political, but is largely invisible because scholarship on international relations tends to remain preoccupied with big and heroic events, with fireworks and explosions, so to speak.

Aesthetic forms of insight offer important sources for understanding the emotional and subliminal dimensions of global politics. To tap into them is the main purpose of this book. And I now proceed to engaging the ensuing issues in a more systematic empirical manner.

4
Poetic World Politics

Poets are adventurers who depict the maximum of the universe with the minimum of words.

Ko Un, 'Interview'[1]

Perhaps the immobility of the things around us is imposed on them by our certitude that they are themselves and nothing else, by the immobility of our thinking about them.

Marcel Proust, *Du côté de chez Swann*[2]

The remaining chapters of this book now build on the conceptual inquiries and aesthetic examples I have offered so far. The task now is to move beyond assertion and illustration and actually demonstrate, in a systematic manner, why and how aesthetic approaches to world poetics matter. I do so through a series of case studies that reveal how, in a variety of cultural and historical settings, the poetic imagination can give us new – or at least different – insights into important political challenges and dynamics. The present chapter sets up this task. It does not summarise the themes that will follow, but merely sets the stage by outlining why, of all the possible aesthetic realms, I chose to focus on poetry.

Why poetry indeed? This seems an odd choice. Most people view poetry as a rather archaic and obscure aesthetic activity, one that is of little relevance to politics: an ode to beauty from those who have the luxury to dwell on words, rather than the more serious, real-life problems that haunt most people. Why poetry, then?

Enlightenment and especially Romantic philosophers had a special affinity with poetry. Edmund Burke, for instance, thought that poetry was the art form best able to break with the complacency of everyday language, which is why it was particularly suitable to capture our passion, incite our imagination and face the sublime.[3] Immanuel Kant, likewise, stressed that poetry is central because 'it enlarges the soul by giving liberty to the imagination'.[4] This is for

many subsequent, post-Romantic commentators the key to why the poetic is crucial to the political. It connects, as Gaston Bachelard puts it, the soul and the mind, thus giving us back our dreams and opening up possibilities for creating 'images which have not been experienced, and which life does not prepare'.[5]

But why poetry today? The Romantic period has long passed, and so has the heyday of poets. There are no more Byrons, Baudelaires and Pushkins roaming our metaphorical countryside, capturing our imagination and shaping our public discourses. Few people today still regularly read, let alone write, poems.

We now live in a visual age, an age dominated by pictures, still and moving ones, and by five-second sound-bites, broadcast around the world twenty-four hours a day. Events like the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, for instance, simply cannot be separated from the manner in which they have come to be visually represented. The terrifying images of 9/11 have shaped, in a central manner, how the world now understands, and in consequence, reacts to this event. Theories of art seem to further underline the primacy of the visual. Jean-François Lyotard, for instance, views abstract art as the symbolic key to understanding the politics of representation. The Abstract Expressionism of Barnett Newman, Lyotard believes, is ideally suited to 'present the unpresentable', the type of sublime experiences I discussed in the previous chapter. This is the case, in Lyotard's view, because abstract art manages to channel our emotions into the inevitable gap between what we can perceive and what we can imagine.[6] Few art movements have, indeed, been as radical as Abstract Expressionism in this regard: it has sought to break with representation altogether, seeking, instead, to capture an emotional state. Such radical aesthetic engagements undermine the false belief in visual authenticity, thus exposing the inevitable gap that opens up between a representation and what is represented therewith. It is in this sense that modern art, as Jean-Luc Nancy stresses, 'has been destined for the sublime'.[7]

In today's visual age one would, indeed, be hard-pressed to maintain that the poetic is the prime site of aesthetic engagements with the political. I certainly do not claim so. But I argue that the poetic can still give us critical insight.

I do so because I believe that the centrality of the visual has not superseded the more fundamental role played by language. The key to understanding our age most likely lies, as W. J. T. Mitchell stresses, somewhere in the complex interaction between images and words.[8] There are, for instance, numerous instances where visual images confront us with sublime experiences: moments when the language available to us is not adequately suited to express exactly what we feel. This can be the case when we see a stunning work of art or, at the other end of the spectrum, a terrifying terrorist attack. Such a visual confrontation highlights the extent to which our desire and

capacity for understanding goes beyond our ability to communicate them through verbal statements and propositions.[9]

But this does not mean that visual experiences are severed from language – that they occur in some sort of extra-linguistic realm. We ultimately need to make sense of our visual experiences, and we can do so only through language, through the types of knowledge practices we have acquired over a long time. Meaning outside language does not exist or, at minimum, cannot be communicated meaningfully.

Language is perhaps the most fundamental aspect of human life. It is omnipresent. It penetrates every aspect of world politics, from the visual to the aural, from the local to the global. We need language to make sense of the world. 'Language is the ultimate crystallisation of human civilisation', Gao Xingjian says.[10] Martin Heidegger argues likewise that we speak when we are awake and when we are asleep, even when we do not utter a single word. We speak when we listen, read or silently pursue an occupation. We are always speaking because we cannot think without language, because 'language is the house of Being', the home within which we dwell.[11]

I focus on poetry because it is the art form that engages most explicitly with language. Poetry is, in fact, all about language, about engaging its core and stretching its boundaries so that it becomes possible to think and dream again. It is in this sense that poetry is a perfect illustration of an aesthetic engagement with politics: a kind of micro-biotope in which we can observe, in an experimental way, why and how the aesthetic matters to politics. This is why it is worthwhile to occupy oneself with a form of speaking and writing whose impact remains confined, in most cases, to a small literary audience.

The poets I engage in the chapters that follow epitomise a certain type of political activist, one who is situated, as Roland Barthes notes, 'half-way between militant and writer', taking from the former the commitment to act and from the latter the knowledge that the process of writing constitutes such an act.[12] It is not by accident that poets, playwrights and novelists are time-honoured dissident figures. They have entered political domains in a great variety of cultural spheres, from Vaclav Havel's dissident-cum-president engagement in Czechoslovakia[13] to Mexico's Lacandon jungle, from where the Zapatista rebels relate their press communiqués in poetic form.[14]

The most significant political dimension of poetry may, however, be located not in direct political commitments, but in the ability to engage the linguistic habits through which some of our most pressing dilemmas have become objectified. The political potential of a poetic work thus consists of providing us with a language that creates the precondition for a more diverse and perhaps even more inclusive approach to world politics – one that may reveal what has been eclipsed by linguistic representations couched in social science language. The innovative potential of a text emerges precisely in its refusal to take existing linguistic conventions for granted, in searching for new ways of speaking about issues that have been rendered

unproblematic through a series of worn-out metaphors. By doing so it allows us to see and appreciate not only facts and data, which in themselves have little meaning, but also their interpretation and their ensuing relationship to human activities and thus to politics.

An engagement with the poetic also epitomises the shift I advocated in the previous chapter: a shift from the sublime to the subliminal, from an almost exclusive preoccupation with the heroic aspects of international relations – with wars and terrorism and the actions of state and statesmen – towards a broader understanding of where the international is located and how it functions. Such a broader engagement includes analysing more everyday practices, including how we speak about and conceptualise the political at all levels. Seen from such a vantage point the everyday is not a purely local affair but, as David Campbell has convincingly argued, inevitably involves a range of 'global interconnections' and 'transterritorial flows'.[15]

The chapter begins by highlighting the political importance of language. Most prevailing approaches to the study of world politics pay little attention to issues of language. Words are treated as mere tools to represent factual events which have qualities of their own, qualities that are said to exist independently of how we perceive them through human eyes and human speech. I show why this assumption needs to be problematised, and why drawing upon the poetic imagination can reveal how language and social life are intrinsically linked, how more inclusive ways of theorising and conducting world politics may emerge from engaging the linguistic habits through which some of our most pressing dilemmas have become objectified. I end the chapter by reflecting more specifically on the task of writing about – and reading – poetry in a way that is politically meaningful and does not impose preconceived political ideas upon far more complex and independent literary texts.

Language and world politics

To scrutinise the role of language in world politics is not simply to examine the clash of values between different national languages. Interactions between them, as for instance in translating activities at diplomatic summits, are of course a central aspect of international relations. But the political struggle over language also occurs in an array of other, far more subtle and, indeed, far-reaching domains. Consider how a key event in world politics, such as the fall of the Berlin Wall, can be represented through different types of speech, each of which embodies a subjective but at the same time objectified way of looking at the world. The turbulent events of 1989 can, for instance, be understood through the vocabulary of high politics, which revolves around great power relations and diplomatic negotiations; or through the vocabulary of strategic studies, which stresses military capacities, state repression and relations of coercive force; or through the vocabulary of international

political economy, which places emphasis on market performance and its impact on political stability; or through the vocabulary of peace studies, which focuses on popular dissent and its ability to uproot systems of domination; or through the vocabulary of feminist theory, which illuminates the gendered dimensions of crumbling walls; or through the vocabulary of the common men and women in the street, which epitomises the daily frustrations of living in a suffocating society; or through any other vocabulary that expresses the subjective dimensions of interpreting events. In each case, though, the specific vocabulary that is used embodies and objectifies a particular, discursively embedded world view – one that is inherently political, even though it presents its viewpoints, often convincingly, as unbiased representations of the real.[16]

Language is more than merely a means of communication. Languages are never neutral. They embody particular values and ideas. Theodor Adorno stresses that thinking cannot be done without language. And language has always already established a preconceived conceptual order prior to what thinking is trying to understand.[17] In fact, Adorno even claims that before dealing with specific speech contents, languages mould a thought such that it gets drawn into subordination even where it appears to resist this tendency.[18] The poet Arthur Rimbaud puts it more succinctly by reversing Descartes' famous 'I think, therefore I am'. For Rimbaud, the 'I' never really thinks by itself. It is never alone and independent. More appropriate, then, is to say 'I am thought', for the 'I' is always already 'somebody else'.[19]

Language is an integral part of power relations and of global politics in general. Languages impose sets of assumptions on us, and frame our thoughts so subtly that we are mostly unaware of the systems of exclusion that are being entrenched through this process. A brief preparatory chapter cannot possibly do justice to the complex links between language and politics. Discussions on language have played a crucial role in philosophy, particularly in the last hundred years. Hardly any philosopher today would not claim to have made the 'linguistic turn', the admission that knowledge of 'reality' is always pre-interpreted by the language that we employ to assess and express it. I thus limit my remarks to a few illustrations that will, hopefully, provide enough conceptual grounding for the following poetic engagements with language and politics.

A well-known example from literature may be a good way to start: George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Consider how Orwell's fictional country, Oceania, introduced Newspeak to accommodate its official ideology, Ingsoc. New words were invented and undesirable ones either eliminated or stripped of unorthodox meanings. The objective of this exercise was that 'when Newspeak had been adopted once and for all and Oldspeak forgotten, a heretical thought – that is, a thought diverging from the principles of Ingsoc – should be literally unthinkable'.[20] By then history would be

rewritten to the point that even if fragments of documents from the past were still to surface, they would be simply unintelligible and untranslatable.

Orwell's example is fictional and simplistic. But one does not need to look hard to find similar Orwellian dynamics in the real world of world politics. Carol Cohn, for instance, has superbly demonstrated how the particular language that defence intellectuals employ not only removes them from the 'reality' of nuclear war, but also constructs a new world of abstraction that makes it impossible to think or express certain concerns related to feelings, morality or 'peace'. The consequences, Cohn stresses, are fateful because the language of defence intellectuals has been elevated to virtually the only legitimate medium of debating security issues.[21] Noam Chomsky, in a similarly compelling example, shows how prevailing policy and media representations during the 1960s have linguistically presented the 'involvement' in Vietnam such that the actual thought of an American 'aggression' or 'invasion' was unthinkable, and this despite plenty of readily available evidence in support of such an interpretation.[22]

The metaphorical nature of language and politics

The issues at stake, and the possible link to poetry, might become clearer when we consider the role of metaphors. Metaphors are supposed to be the business of poets – those who think and write though figures of speech, through poetic images, rather than through the type of objective descriptions that characterise the work of, say, scientists or political analysts. Poets are meant to be the masters of metaphor – and the command of metaphor, Aristotle already believed, is by far the greatest thing, 'the mark of a genius'.[23] More recently, Terrell Carver and Jernej Pikalo put the same proposition somewhat differently, stressing that 'metaphors are the weapons of struggle in the linguistic theatre of operations'.[24]

But metaphors are far more than poetic tools to express creative ideas. Metaphors lie at the very heart of language. In a traditional, dictionary-based sense, metaphors are usually understood as 'the application of a name or descriptive term or phrase to an object or action to which it is imaginatively but not literally applicable'.[25] To speak metaphorically, then, is to rely on tropes: practices of bestowing a word with a temporary meaning that differs from its usual significance. There are intricate debates on the issue at stake, such as the difference between various kinds of tropes – metaphors, metonymy and synecdoche.[26] I am not entering these debates. Instead, I use the term 'metaphor' in the broad sense, as tropes that capture the gap between a word's established place and its temporary appropriation.

Although widely shared, the division between metaphorical and literal, fictional and realistic ways of speaking is largely misleading. Some linguistic practices, such as poetry, may rely on particularly striking and imaginative metaphors in their effort to redescribe reality, but no form of thought can

be expressed without some form of representation. Nietzsche went as far as stressing that language itself is metaphorical: selectively filtered verbal images of objects and impressions that surround us. This is, in simplified terms, how Nietzsche portrays the functioning of language: a person's intuitional perception creates an image, then a word, then patterns of words, and finally entire linguistic and cultural systems. Each step in this chain of metaphors entails interpretations and distortions of various kinds. When we look at things around us, Nietzsche illustrates, we think we know something objective about them, something of 'the thing in itself'. But all we have are metaphors, which can never capture an essence because they express the relationship between people and their environments. Truth, Nietzsche says in a famous passage, is no more than

> a mobile army of metaphors, metonyms and anthropomorphisms – in short, a sum of human relations, which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people: truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are.[27]

No matter how insightful, how systematic, how apparently neutral a text or speech appears, it is always a form of representation that has chosen to structure its image of reality through a particular series of metaphors. Being built on specific grammatical and rhetorical structures, all of these stories and accounts, Michael Shapiro points out, implicitly advance political arguments. All of them, 'no matter how much their style might protest innocence, contain a mythical level – that is they have a job to do, a perspective to promote, a kind of world to affirm or deny'.[28]

Although all forms of speaking and writing are metaphorical, it is not always easy to recognise the political dimensions or even the very existence of these metaphors. After they have entered the vocabulary of everyday speech, metaphors often become so common that they start to appear as authentic representations of something termed reality. Yet, the process of neglecting that we are all conditioned by decades of linguistically entrenched values largely camouflages the system of exclusion that is operative in all speech forms. Nietzsche, again, hits the (metaphorical) nail on its head:

> This has given me the greatest trouble and still does: to realise that what things *are called* is incomparably more important than what they are. The reputation, name, and appearance, the usual measure and weight of a thing, what it counts for – originally almost always wrong and arbitrary, thrown over things like a dress and altogether foreign to their nature and even to their skin – all this grows from generation unto generation, merely because people believe in it, until it gradually grows to be part of the thing and turns into its very body. What at first was appearance

becomes in the end, almost invariably, the essence and is effective as such.[29]

The implications of such a position for the theory and practice of world politics are far-reaching. Consider, just as one of many possible examples, one of the key metaphors of Cold War international relations: the notion of 'balance of power'. This political practice usually refers to a 'principle of international politics, whereby any state which threatens to increase its power becomes at once subject to increases in countervailing power from potential belligerents'.[30] It is by and large around this metaphor that the 'free' Western world structured its 'defence' against the threat of Communism. The arms race was a product of a reciprocally perceived need to keep up with the other's strategic capacities. If the Soviet Union acquired a new generation of missiles, then the US had to follow suit in order not to endanger the precarious balance of power that guaranteed peace – or, rather, the absence of open war at a time when a nuclear confrontation could have annihilated the entire planet in seconds. Billions of dollars in defence spending have been justified in the name of this metaphor, and so have a variety of surrogate wars, from Vietnam to Nicaragua, that led to immense human suffering and to wars that were much less 'cold' than in the first and second worlds. But once the Soviet Union had crumbled it became evident that the balance that was supposed to be maintained at all cost had actually never existed. The Soviet Union had not only been, and this for quite some time, on the brink of economic and social collapse, but its actual military might, towering as it may have appeared to decision-makers in Washington, was actually never quite what it appeared to be. Some of the massive missiles that were pompously displayed during annual military parades in Moscow's Red Square, for instance, turned out to be simulacrums: no more than empty shells. As recently released archival material has revealed, the Soviet Union never had the money or technology to build these missiles. Little did that matter, though, for the mere perception of these weapons, non-existent as they were, was enough to activate the balance of power metaphor and push the arms race up to the next level.

At the height of the Cold War the balance of power metaphor was, of course, not perceived as a metaphor. It was seen as a strategic reality, a situation that required not just urgent attention and action, but a certain kind of action. The range of options that would have been available to policymakers at the time was obscured and narrowed down by the fact that decision-making processes were based on Cold War thinking patterns that presented their representations of world politics as authentic images of political reality, rather than the metaphorical interpretations that they were. In retrospect, though, it has become obvious that these metaphorical practices contained strong political dimensions. Equally obvious is that the state has a certain interest in repressing the fact that politics is conducted and masked through a series of metaphors. The merit of ignoring representation, Ankersmit stresses,

'is that it helps the state to make itself invisible, to obscure the nature and the extent of political power as much as possible and to assume without opposition the Leviathanistic dimensions that it has acquired in the course of the last two centuries'.[31]

Poetry as critique of language

How can one turn language from a system of exclusion to a practice of inclusion, from a method of domination to an instrument of resistance?

The starting point lies with what is aptly called *Sprachkritik* in German. Literally translated as 'critique of language', *Sprachkritik* is, at least according to the linguist Fritz Mauthner, 'the most important task of thinking humanity'. The poet Paul Valéry probably captured its objective best when claiming that 'the secret of well-founded thinking is based on suspicion towards language'.[32] If challenges to practices of domination and attempts to open up thinking space are to avoid being absorbed by the dominant discourse, then they must engage in a struggle with conventionally recognised linguistic practices, or at least with the manner in which these practices have been constituted. The form of speaking and writing becomes as important as their content. There can be 'no new world without a new language', says one of Ingeborg Bachmann's fictional characters.[33]

But can a language so easily be appropriated as a tool of dissent against its own subjugating power? Is it enough, as Nietzsche suggests, to 'create new names, estimations and probabilities to create eventually new "things"'?[34] Of course not. One can never be free within language. One can never break free from language. But one can *engage* language.

There are many ways of stylistically resisting impositions by systems of shared meaning. Consider Nietzsche's resort to aphorisms and his particular writing style in general, which is often considered to be the most important substantive contribution of his work. We know of Zarathustra, who constantly asserts things just to deconstruct them a few pages later, to the point that Thomas Mann, Giorgio Colli and many others argued that to take Nietzsche literally is to be lost, for 'he said everything, and the opposite of everything'.[35] The key to Nietzsche does not lie in his viewpoints, but in the style through which he opened up thinking space and celebrated diversity.

Among the various styles of writing and speaking, poetry may be the one that engages metaphors and the nature of language most explicitly. Poetry is, in fact, critique of language by nature, and par excellence, for arguably it is the most radical way of stretching, even violating, the stylistic, syntactic and grammatical rules of linguistic conventions. A poem is a conscious transgression of existing linguistic conventions, a protest against an established language game and the systems of exclusion that are embedded in it. In this sense poetry sets itself apart from prose because it negates, not by chance or as a side-effect, but because it cannot do otherwise, because that is what poetry

is all about.[36] A poet renders strange that which is familiar and thus forces the reader to confront that which she or he habitually has refused to confront. For Kristeva, poetic language disturbs, transgresses rules, fractures meaning. In doing so it 'breaks up the inertia of language habits' and 'liberates the subject from a number of linguistic, psychic, and social networks'.[37] Costas Constantinou is one the few international relations scholars who has drawn attention precisely to this poetic ability to challenge and reinvent existing ways of presenting political issues. In doing so, Constantinou stresses, poetry can make us aware that words are not just empty shells or neutral communicative tools, but actually have a life of their own and 'can themselves have stories to tell'.[38]

The essence of poetry, then, is not located primarily in its formal aspects, such as rhyme or line breaks. The key, rather, lies in the self-consciousness with which a poem engages the links between language and socio-political reality. In its broadest meaning the poetic refers, as Valéry suggests, to all compositions in which language is means and substance at the same time.[39] He separates poetry from prose and stresses that in the latter form is not preserved. It disappears as soon as it has fulfilled its purpose. Once you have understood the content of my speech, Valéry illustrates, the form of my speech becomes meaningless; it vanishes from your memory. The form of the poem, by contrast, does not vanish after its usage. It is an integral part of speech, designed to rise from its ashes.[40] Roman Jakobson offers a similar definition and refuses either to reduce the poetic function to poetry or limit poetry to the poetic function. What matters is whether or not the poetic function becomes dominant in a literary work. This is the case if a word possesses its own weight and value, if it is perceived as a word, and not simply as a substitute for an object.[41]

If successful, then, a poem helps us review the metaphors that are so worn out that we no longer even recognise them as metaphors. Poetry, then, returns metaphor to its essence: a linguistic engagement that 'floats a rival reality', as James Wood puts it.[42]

The content of a poem cannot simply be translated into straightforward prose. The manner in which the poem speaks is an essential element of what it says. Language is not merely a means to an end. It merges into an inseparable unity of substance and form. Language, then, is recognised as being part of the material realm, as constituting a form of action in its own right. This is why any definition of poetry that tries to be more specific than drawing attention to the importance of form runs the risk of failing to appreciate the very power that poetry may be able to unleash. Indeed, it is precisely this fluidity, the stylistic refusal to accept what is, that sets poetry apart from other forms of writing. It generates shifts of focus not unlike the one usually associated with Proust's monumental novel *À la recherche du temps perdu*: an aesthetic mutation from the 'what is said' to the 'how it is said'.[43]

The poem is not able to escape the constraints of language, but it makes these constraints its *raison d'être*. The ensuing process is, of course, ongoing. Language will never be free of power and exclusion. There will always be a need to disturb meaning, to search for words that name silences, to disturb immobilising certitudes. Step by step, invisibly and inaudibly, the poet works away at language. This is why the inability to come up with immediate political solutions cannot be held against her or him or the potential of aesthetics to make a political contribution. 'With each collapse of proofs the poet responds with a salvo of future', René Char would say.[44]

Writing poetic world politics

Illustrating the power of poetry to redescribe reality is no easy task, for poetry is not about this or that argument, this or that idea. It is about searching for a language that provides us with different eyes, different ways of perceiving what we already know; it is about unsettling, making strange that which is familiar, opening up thinking space and creating possibilities to act in more inclusive ways. No isolated citation will ever do justice to this objective. Only an extended lecture of poetry can succeed in stretching the boundaries of our mind.

If form is indeed the essence of poetry, then the problem arises of how to talk about it. Because style is what sets poetry apart from other forms of writing, one cannot simply translate the meaning of poetry into prose and explain its significance to world politics in a language familiar to our daily forms of verbal interaction. How can poetics, the study of poetry, possibly do justice to its object of inquiry? To speak of a poem, Martin Heidegger warns, is to judge from the outside what a poem is. No position, no insight can ever justify such a presumptuous approach.[45] This is why Paul Celan, when asked to explain the meaning of his poems, often replied: 'Read! Just keep reading. Understanding comes of itself.'[46] The point, then, is not to drown poetry in an ocean of explanatory prose, but to let a poem speak, to accept its authority and listen to the political message that is hidden in its core.

But the problem of speaking about poetry cannot be solved by poems alone. No poem can ever represent or even illustrate what poetry is all about. This is in part because a poem, and often a work of literature in general, works by way of synecdoche. This is to say, as George Von der Muhll stresses, that it confronts readers with a part of life – all too often a minuscule one: a state of mind, a concrete life situation – and then tries to crystallise key aspects that are of much larger significance.[47] The key challenge then consists, as Philip Darby stresses, in understanding the extent to which one can explore political and social issues through the lives of individuals.[48] Whatever insight might emerge from such inquiries, they embody a process that is the reverse of what is practised in social science, where scholars tend to identify and analyse broad institutional structures

and socio-political patterns through the introduction of abstraction and generalisation.

Because the poem strives for openness it refuses to speak of and for a totality. Because the poem searches for cracks in hegemonies, voices that have gone unnoticed, it is an instance of subversive particularity. Celan explains in one of his rare excursions from poetry into poetics: 'But I am speaking of poetry that does not exist! The absolute poem – no, it certainly does not exist, it cannot exist!'[49] Heidegger, likewise, explains that 'no single poem, not even all of them taken together, can tell everything'.[50] Poetry deals with the particular, but it is not primarily about this or that argument, this or that idea. It is about searching for a language that provides us with different eyes, different ways of perceiving what we already know. It is about unsettling, about making strange that which is familiar to us, about opening up thinking space and creating possibilities to act in more inclusive ways.

What are we, as students of world politics, left with if poetry cannot be explained in prose and if there is no absolute poem either, one that could represent and illuminate the power of poetry? We must attempt the impossible task of speaking about the unspeakable. Heidegger has some ideas about how to tackle this difficult puzzle. For him, a poem surrounded by the noise of unpoetic language is like a bell hanging freely outside. Even the slightest snowfall would throw it out of tune. Each comment to a poem, he frets, may well do nothing but cast snow onto the bell. But because there is no absolute poem we must still look for a way to talk about poetry, a way that swirls up as little snow as possible. What we must aim for, Heidegger suggests, is a form of comment that renders itself obsolete once it is spoken; a form of comment that explains but then defers authority back to the poem.[51] And we must then try to find a way of bringing this close reading to bear on broader, socio-political issues.[52] To search for this formless form and its political potential is the principal methodological challenge of the chapters that follow. I can only hope that I manage to maintain at last a basic poetic sensibility in my prose, thus avoiding a fall into the stylistic abyss that James Wood identified with Roland Barthes and Viktor Shklovsky: two highly insightful critics who nevertheless 'were drawn, like larcenous bankers, to raid again and again the very source that sustained them – literary style'.[53]

Reading poetic world politics

Just as intricate as representing poetry is the task of reading poems. It requires a certain amount of effort, especially if one is to explore a poem's political dimensions. Poetry alludes, rather than explains. It shows, rather than argues. It must 'leave traces of [its] passage, not proofs. Only traces bring about dreams', says René Char.[54] This is why, for instance, the Zapatistas' poetic struggle against the overwhelming prevalence of neo-liberal

governmental rationales is 'not directed to the head', as Higgins stresses, but aims for 'the heart, the part most forgotten'.[55]

A poem plays with the imagination, it presupposes an active reader, one who produces meaning herself. To take a rather well-known example: George Orwell's *Animal Farm* is a book that contains few if any lines that are explicitly political. And yet, it may be difficult to find a more direct critique of Communist totalitarianism. 'All animals are equal, but some are more equal than others' is a poetic line that may have had a greater political impact than any of the numerous texts that sought to critique Stalinism in more realistic ways. But a poetic line can become politically relevant only with the help of a reader – someone who recognises and validates a metaphor. It is the reader, and the reader only, who establishes a poem's political significance, who brings to the fore the struggle that takes place between the tension of what is and how this 'is' is represented in and through language.

This is why a poet repaints an object in different colours and from different angles, again and again, thereby revealing the familiar in new ways. Neruda was always puzzled when asked about what kind of book he was currently working on. 'My books are always about the same thing', he said. 'I always write the same book.'[56] It is in the reworking of political reality that transformative potential is hidden. Poetic re-representations, much like a Picasso canvas, can thus open our eyes and minds to different ways of seeing what we have already taken for granted. Hence the plea to readers of the chapters that follow: to take seriously a domain of inquiry that can, if valorised properly, help us deal with some of today's most pressing political challenges.

5
Poetry after Auschwitz

'It's not all that simple,' Paul Celan is said to have responded, when asked about his seeming lack of political engagement in the spring of 1968.[1] Oppression, for him, was deeply entrenched in social customs and language. A more just and inclusive political order could not be ushered in overnight, especially not through a violent outburst of rage and rebellious energy. Waves of rising fists, flooding the streets of Paris, seemed visually and acoustically too reminiscent of a recent and rather grim chapter in German history, one that Celan had experienced personally. Not that he was indifferent to the voicing of dissent. His poetry was all about the search for thinking space. Yet, he located revolutionary potential not in heroic upheavals, but in slow and inaudible processes, in the gradual transformation of societal values.

Political resistance, for Celan, is apolitical. Instead of getting entangled in the agitation that permeates heated political manoeuvrings, dissent must deal with the forces that have already framed the issue, circumvented the range of discussions, and thus pre-empted fundamental public debates. Political resistance that aims at more than replacing one form of domination with another must be dialogical and include the other, the strange, the yet unknown:

> Speak, you also,
> speak as the last,
> have your say
>
> Speak –
> But keep yes and no unsplit.
> And give your say this meaning:
> give it the shade . . .[2]

In the domain of social science, poetry is often considered a mere ode to the beauty of life. This chapter adds to the overall objective of this book: to demonstrate that students of world politics ought to take poetry seriously and this even when, or rather, precisely when poems do not seem to carry an overtly political message.

More so than perhaps any other poet, Celan demonstrates that poems that seem to carry no explicit political message at all can, in fact, be political in the most profound sense of the term: they interfere with how we speak and write about the world, and thus how we constitute the very foundation of political life. Celan's poetry radically interferes with the very linguistic foundations of politics, and thus deserves to be examined seriously and systematically. This is not to say that Celan has easy solutions to political challenges, or that he can solve, once and for all, the problem of domination. His poem merely highlights what is at stake in the interaction between language and politics. Because poetry is self-conscious about the usage of language, it is able to shed light on processes through which all practices of speaking and writing can engender a gradual transformation of societal values. Poetry demonstrates how it is possible to reveal the grey shades of domination and resistance, how social change can emerge from questioning linguistically entrenched ideas, assumptions and social practices that have been placed beyond scrutiny.

'Black milk of daybreak': searching for thinking space after Auschwitz

Celan is one of the most influential German language poets of the postwar period. He was born in 1920 and grew up in what is today the Ukraine. Although he spent most of his adult life in Paris, Celan's poetry is marked most by his experience of living the Second World War, as a Jew, under Soviet and German occupation. He managed to avoid arrest and then survived the later part of the war in a labour camp in Southern Moldavia. Both of his parents, however, died during the Nazi period.[3] And so, of course, did many other Jews. Celan's work deals with how one can still live after a disaster of such magnitude. He epitomises, in particular, the search for words and integrity in a destitute time, the effort to dissociate the German language from its Nazi past, so that it becomes possible to speak once more, critically, dialogically, humanely.

Every single German word in the immediate postwar period was drenched in blood. Each spoken and written sentence carried the crushing weight of the Holocaust. Language was not just an innocent bystander to the horrors of Nazism. Hitler, Goebbels and Himmler did not just happen to speak German, Georg Steiner points out. 'Nazism found in the [German] language precisely what it needed to give voice to its savagery.' How could a simple word like '*spritzen*', Steiner illustrates, 'ever recover a sane meaning after having signified for millions the "spurting" of Jewish blood from knife points?'[4]

How is it possible to speak again in the language of the butchers without being immediately sucked into its tainted linguistic vortex? Celan's poetry is a direct engagement with this highly politicised linguistic dilemma. For him, the German language 'had no words to express what happened'. Language,

he stresses, 'had to walk through its own loss of answers, through its terrible silence, through the thousand darknesses of deathbringing speech':[5]

> Should,
> should a man,
> should a man come into the world, today, with
> the shining beard of the
> patriarchs: he could,
> if he spoke of this
> time, he
> could
> only babble and babble,
> over, over
> againagain.[6]

The point of Celan's poetry, then, is not to search for harmony and beauty, but simply to speak again, to lift the burdensome weight from some of the most tainted words. We see him shaking the German language, rattling at some of the links between words and meanings that are considered unproblematic.

I focus on two of Celan's best-known poems, 'Deathfugue' and 'The Straightening', in an attempt to illustrate the processes by which Celan tried to pierce through the silence of language. My task is not primarily one of interpretation, for both of these rather long poems have already received widespread attention. Rather, I select a few passages to demonstrate, via the text and its interpretations, the political potential entailed in poetic dissent. Needless to say, this truncation does violence to the structure, the rhythm and, indeed, to the very essence of the texts. Thus, my more limited task of illustrating the political dimensions of Celan's poems cannot replace the process of reading them closely.

'Deathfugue', composed in the mid-1940s, is the poem that won Celan immediate and widespread recognition when it was published in 1952. It is also his most direct, explicit and accessible way of dealing with the Holocaust. The following opening stanza establishes the themes that then interchangeably recur in rhythmic form throughout the remaining parts of the poem:

> Black milk of daybreak we drink it at sundown
> we drink it at noon in the morning we drink it at night
> we drink it and we drink it
> we dig a grave in the breezes there one lies unconfined
> A man lives in the house he plays with the serpents he writes
> he writes when dusk falls to Germany your golden hair
>   Margarete

he writes it and steps out of doors and the stars are flashing he
whistles his pack out
he whistles his Jews out in earth has them dig for a grave
he commands us strike up for the dance . . .[7]

There are many interpretations of this poem. For Jerry Glenn 'Deathfugue' is
a relatively realistic description of a concentration camp, narrated through
the polyphonic voices of its victims. Concrete images, like a Nazi official
(the man in the house who 'whistles his Jews'), take turn with more indirect,
but still easily recognisable accounts of events (like 'he commands us strike
up for the dance,' which may allude to the actual existence of orchestras in
some camps).[8] Michael Hamburger interprets the poem as a release of Celan's
personal anguish through a 'distancing imagery and musical structure' that
seems altogether incompatible, at least at first sight, with an event as atro-
cious as the Holocaust. But thinking space emerges precisely by contrasting
the celebration of beauty with the commemoration of destruction.[9]

Celan's critics warned that this 'aestheticising' of the death camps would
only help to turn the Holocaust into a form of art. Representative of this
position is Adorno's notorious assertion that it is impossible to write poetry
after Auschwitz, that even the attempt to do so would be barbaric.[10] Many
disagree, then and now. Caputo, for example, argues that even though
'Deathfugue' embodies the paradox of being beautiful, it does not bestow
beauty or meaning upon the Holocaust. It is simply a gesture of mourning
that records a disaster in the heart.[11] Celan demonstrates that poetry goes on
after Auschwitz, with or without the permission of Adorno and other philoso-
phers or literary critics. Poetry simply happens, not as logos, not as meaning,
but, as in the case of 'Deathfugue', as a method of letting the disaster stand
out, as a lament in a void of meaning.[12]

What sets 'Deathfugue' apart from comparable prose accounts of the Holo-
caust is its self-consciousness about the usage of tropes. Poetry is an effort
to highlight the role that language plays in the constitution of social reali-
ties. A metaphor may then turn into a political strategy that provides us with
new ways of looking at the world. It becomes, according to Paul Ricoeur,
'the rhetorical process by which discourse unleashes the power that certain
fictions have to redescribe reality'.[13]

'Black milk of daybreak' is the first and one of the most central metaphors
of 'Deathfugue'. Milk stands for life, birth, youth, nourishment. In the myth-
ology of the Old Testament, milk is the symbol of clarity, fertility and purity.[14]
But the milk of 'Deathfugue' is black – a terrifying notion that annihilates
immediately all comfort and nourishment. There is no more existence, no
more hope for a better future in a world that has deprived itself of its basis
for growth. Blackened milk is the moral status of a society that can generate
and tolerate constant clouds of smoke emerging from the crematoriums of
its death camps.

Elements of style and rhythm then intensify the terrifying images that Celan uses to redescribe the moral parameters of Nazi realities. Compare the opening stanza of 'Deathfugue' cited above with the following final lines:

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night
we drink you at noon death is a master from Germany
we drink you at sundown and in the morning we drink and we
drink you
   death is a master from Germany his eyes are blue
he strikes you with leaden bullets his aim is true
a man lives in the house your golden hair Margarete
he sets his pack on to us he grants us a grave in the air
he plays with the serpents and daydreams death is a master from
   Germany

your golden hair Margarete
your ashen hair Shulamith[15]

The opening of the poem indicates the relentless recurrence of suffering through the drinking of black milk, mornings, afternoons, evenings, nights. The above passage illustrates how this circle is itself repeated, in different forms, again and again. The monotony and lack of punctuation evoke the drudgery of life in a concentration camp, the resignation of the masses of Jews who are silently condemned to death.[16] But 'Deathfugue' does not just repeat, it alters and intensifies the repetitions at the same time. Black milk is now no longer referred to in the third person ('we drink it') but in the second one ('we drink you'), thus increasing the sense of despair which permeates the poem. In the second passage the refrain-like metaphor of drinking black milk is also abruptly interrupted by the phrase 'death is a master from Germany'. This sudden intrusion into the polyphonic play of the victims, which remains a key feature until the poem's end, reveals the increasing proximity of the victims to the oppressor and to death itself.[17] Despair is at its peak. The only form of freedom left is to escape the tortured mortal body and search for 'the breezes [w]here one lies unconfined', to be granted a 'grave in the air'. The final lines of the poem then slow down, enter a state of transition, a trance where evil and suffering blur into daydreams, until, at last, death emerges from the victims' final words. The only task left is to give Shulamith, covered with ash, the last word and the silence after, the power of 'holding unto what Nazism tried to erase: a rooted identity'.[18]

The problem of assessing the political impact of poetic dissent

How is one to assess the political influence of poetry?

'Deathfugue' does not directly cause particular events. It works tactically, that is, by insinuating itself into its target – the population at large – without taking it over, but also without being separated from it.[19] Those who have

read the poem, those whose constitution of the Holocaust memory has been reshaped by Celan's polyphony, may have passed bits of altered knowledge on to others. And Celan was, of course, not the only one who struggled with the linguistic silences of the Nazi period and its aftermath. Countless other poets, novelists and playwrights have done so too. There are even more agents, common men and women, faceless and innumerable, whose daily acts of speaking and writing have subverted the remnants of a linguistically sanctioned practice of domination.

In the case of 'Deathfugue', evidence for its impact on social dynamics can be found on various fronts. When 'Deathfugue' appeared in the early 1950s, literary critics generally embraced it, as Hans Egon Holthusen did in the influential journal *Merkur*, as 'one of the most splendid *Zeitgedichte* (period poems) we have'.[20] The poem's influence soon spread beyond the narrow circle of intellectuals who preoccupy themselves with poetics. Several generations of German high school children have learned 'Deathfugue' by heart. It has been anthologised countless times and today, more than half a century after the flowing of black milk, 'Deathfugue' represents an important critical memory of the Nazi period. It is this presence beyond death and beyond the current, historically delineated moment that many consider to be the key function of poetry.[21] A poem remembers in the name of those who cannot remember, for, in Celan's words, 'no one / bears witness for the / witness'.[22]

The tropes of 'Deathfugue' still stand as significant and widely used cultural markers that signify the necessity for a continuous critical engagement with Germany's past. Metaphors such as 'death is a master from Germany' or 'your ashen hair Shulamith' have served, for example, as titles for several anthologies and a prominent Holocaust television documentary.[23] Each episode of this six-hour series, broadcast in April and May 1990, begins with a 'full-screen image of Celan's face, then pans over death camps and monuments as his voice is heard reciting ['Deathfugue'] in its entirety'.[24] Many other examples illustrate how the German public has, as Felstiner underlines, absorbed 'Deathfugue' as a virtual institution. Its polyphony was recited in the German parliament in 1988, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Kristall-nacht. Several composers rendered Celan's poem into vocal and instrumental combinations. By the 1990s, there were more than a hundred musical compositions of Celan's texts. A Jewish dance group performed 'Deathfugue' in their repertory and several lines invoking Margarete and Shulamith appeared on canvasses painted by one of German's leading contemporary artists, Anselm Kiefer.[25]

For Felstiner the prolonged impact of 'Deathfugue' on German society and politics cannot be overestimated. It is one of these rare poems, he believes, that upsets assumptions and forces new choices:

> This astonishing piece of writing has drawn more passionate attention than any other poem from the war. What looms largest is its public career

since 1952, when it came out in Germany. The *Guernica* of postwar Euro-
pean literature, 'Todesfuge' has become a historical agent, accumulating its
own biography . . . [N]o lyric has exposed the exigencies of its time so rad-
ically as this one, whose speakers – Jewish prisoners tyrannized by a camp
commandant – start off with the words . . . 'Black milk of daybreak . . .'[26]

Felstiner's claims are bold, but not unrealistic. Others agree and point towards
the key role Celan played in postwar discussions about the possibilities
and impossibilities of contemporary poetry to deal with an event like the
Holocaust.[27] Even the sceptical Adorno had to revise his earlier position and
admit, although after several decades of delay, that his hasty dismissal of
poetry 'may have been wrong'. He even went as far as crediting Celan with
writing poetry that achieves the near impossible: to resist the tendency of
language to reify itself.[28]

Despite the overwhelming evidence of Celan's influence on German polit-
ical and social dynamics, it remains difficult to determine how exactly
'Deathfugue' may have engendered human agency. Help may come from the
body of knowledge that has emerged from attempts to understand the role of
literature in social and political affairs. There are various treatises (Hans Mag-
nus Enzensberger's is the most prominent among them) which demonstrate
how postwar German poetry has revealed forms of domination that had been
normalised through language.[29] And there are even more extensive inquiries
into the links between literature and the Holocaust. Many of them are based
on the premise that social reality is decisively shaped through the manner in
which it is represented through language. From this viewpoint, 'Holocaust
fact and Holocaust fiction are Siamese twins, joined at birth and severed at
their peril.'[30] Such a recognition is not meant to deny or diminish the bru-
tal reality of the Holocaust. It is meant, as many commentators point out,
as a form of political engagement, a plea for social transformation that can
emerge from altering the route through which we approach a disaster of the
magnitude of the Holocaust.[31]

A study by James Young demonstrates how a poem like 'Deathfugue' shapes
political practices. Young analyses the construction of memory, meaning
and understanding in Holocaust narratives. He emphasises that the truth
of the Holocaust does not lie beyond the ways we understand, interpret
and write its history. The events of the Holocaust are, in this sense, 'shaped
post factum in their narration'.[32] Young pays particular attention to the role
of tropes in this process. Because the Holocaust cannot be known out-
side language, one must look for its political meaning within the domain
of tropes. This is why questions of metaphor, he stresses, have conse-
quences that go far beyond literary texts.[33] The behaviours of Holocaust
perpetrators and victims, as well as our reactions to them, depend on the
tropes available to deal with the issues in question. Young points out, for
instance, how the long-standing and linguistically entrenched tradition of

anti-Semitism may have blinded much of the world to the actual gravity of the events, and therefore left many unprepared to face the Nazi threat.[34] Metaphors become political and mask politics when, for instance, German soldiers 'who poured quicklime down the sewers in Warsaw to kill Jews in the uprising could write home that they were busy "liquidating vermin"'.[35]

The very same figurative dimension of language also contains liberating potential. By engaging with the metaphorical aspect of language and interpretation, authors of critical texts about the Holocaust can shape the course of future actions. The manner in which we linguistically constitute the past, influences our understanding of the present and shapes our choices for the future. This is why Young locates the most explicit potential for literature to transform social practices in the recognition that 'particular kinds of knowledge lead to particular kinds of actions'.[36]

In the specific case of postwar German politics, the consequences of engaging with language and interpretation could have led in two basic directions, one moving back towards the events of the Holocaust, and another one moving out and away from them into a world that is understood in light of this human disaster.[37] Celan's metaphorical reworking of the Nazi legacy through the polyphonies of 'Deathfugue' is one of the reasons why German politics has embarked on the latter route.

Resistance at the edge of language games

Just when 'Deathfugue' became a major linguistic and political symbol for coming to terms with the Holocaust, Celan started to turn against his famous early poem. He considered it too explicit, too directly linked with the physicality of the events. Above all, he felt deeply ambivalent about the ways in which the poem became appropriated and normalised into approaches that attempted to master and surmount the Holocaust, rather than merely let it stand out as the disaster it was. He did not want 'Deathfugue' to be read and internalised as an attempt to 'dissolve that which is irreparable ... to erase the dark image of horror and shame'.[38] By the time Celan received the prestigious Georg Büchner Prize, in 1960, the style of his writings had changed. His language grew more and more sparse. He deconstructed words into their syllables or created new words, especially compound words.

By stretching the boundaries of the German language further, Celan hoped to rewrite 'Deathfugue' in a manner that could avoid the interpretative dangers implied in its explicitness. This new, more radical phase in Celan's poetry contains great transformative potential, but it is also plagued by equally great difficulties and dangers. It illustrates the dilemmas entailed in embarking on resistance at the edge of language games. The immediate reaction of the German literary establishment to Celan's later poetry is revealing. Most critics considered his language to be difficult, irrational, alienating and hermetic.

His later poems were perceived as cut off from reality and thus socially irrelevant.[39] They were portrayed as outdated, not in tune with rising lyric traditions that attempted to speak in a language accessible to everyone.[40] One commentator, for instance, notes that many of Celan's poems are so strange that their meaning can be accessible only to readers who share the author's linguistic assumptions. This is, he explains, because Celan no longer operates in a language that deals with things, but in a metalanguage, that is, a language that deals with language itself.[41] It was perhaps the very difficulty and complexity of these poems that accounted for the emergence of an immense body of secondary literature about them after Celan's suicide in 1970.

The poem 'The Straightening', written in the spring of 1958, is considered to be one of Celan's most demanding poems. It is also regarded as his most successful attempt at rewriting the form and content of 'Deathfugue'. Like his other later poems, 'The Straightening' has so far been too difficult to have an impact on social and political dynamics in Germany. But this remarkable poem nevertheless offers valuable insight. It highlights the difficulties, and maybe the future potential, of working at the edge of language games. It provides theoretical insight into the functioning of linguistic dissent, insight that is useful far beyond the specific, difficult and highly intellectualised tropes of the poem itself. It is with this more widely perceived objective of probing the potential and dangers of linguistic forms of dissent that I now engage in a reading of the text.

The opening lines of 'The Straightening' reveal immediately that Celan's treatment of the Holocaust now takes on a very different, much more abstract form than in 'Deathfugue':

*
Driven into the
terrain with the unmistakable track:

grass, written asunder. The stones, white,
with the shadows of grassblades:
Do not read any more – look!
Do not look any more – go!
Go, your hour
has no sisters, you are –
are at home. A wheel, slow,
rolls out of itself, the spokes
climb,
climb on a blackish field, the night
needs no stars, nowhere
does anyone ask after you.
*

           Nowhere
              does anyone ask after you – . . .[42]

A detailed and influential interpretation of this poem by Peter Szondi brings us directly to the central issue. The first two lines inevitably raise a number of questions. What is meant by the terrain, the unmistakable track? What is 'grass, written asunder'? Where are the answers? They are elusive, missing altogether. And this, according to Szondi, is Celan's main point. What matters at the beginning of 'The Straightening' is not the actual meaning of the words employed, but precisely the fact that this meaning is open, that the reader is led into a context that she or he does not know, or, more precisely, is not supposed to know.[43] The reader is driven into a terrain in which she or he is responsible for constituting the context of meaning. This participatory structure renders impossible any separation between the one who reads and that which is read. In other words, the reading subject merges with the poem itself.[44]

The tropes of 'The Straightening' are more complex and more difficult to grasp than those of 'Deathfugue'. The terrain one is driven into suggests a landscape, but not an ordinary one. It is a written landscape, a text in which the grassblades turn into letters.[45] This textuality, we are told, casts shadows onto white stones. Are they gravestones? Grass, the symbol of vegetation, turned into a rigid and arid terrain? Green deadened into white stone, slipped into the dark and forgotten parts of our collective memories? Some surely think so.[46] But the text is less clear. Various tropes suggest an ambiguous terrain that gradually reveals itself as a place of shadows, of silences, of mourning. We are in an hour that has no more sisters, in the last hour, the hour of death. And we are told not to read any more, but to look. And, indeed, not to look any more, but to go. To go where?

Into the text. Szondi emphasises, once more, that we have entered a landscape of textuality that is not an object of reading, but that which is read itself. The reader thus stands not outside, but is driven into the textual terrain. This is to say that the poem is no longer mimesis, no longer a representation of something beyond itself. The word becomes a mimesis of itself because the text refuses to stand in the service of some external reality. The poem constructs and develops its own reality – a reality which, of course, always remains poetic reality.[47]

Celan refuses to go beyond the poem, to engage directly with concrete political issues. He does not employ the more explicit, more prosaic language that characterises the approach of many contemporary poet critics of Nazism, like Kurt Tucholsky or Bertolt Brecht. 'Give it the shade' is Celan's main leitmotiv when trying to come to terms with the political and moral legacy of the Holocaust.

But does this poetic search for thinking space not run the risk of ending up in some form of linguistic idealism? Does the lack of direct engagement, this explicit apoliticality, mean that Celan and like-minded poets live in their own world, a world that is not relevant to the concrete aspects of daily life? Not necessarily.

Language is always already politics. Celan's poetry becomes political precisely through its explicit apoliticality. By refusing to be drafted for narrow and short-term political objectives, by attempting to 'give it the shade', poetry acquires a subversive dimension. Only by speaking in its own matter, Celan points out, can poetry speak in another, an entirely different matter.[48] If poets detach themselves and explore their own poetic reality, it is not to search for a perfect language or to ignore the multiple realities of social and political life. If poets pretend that words are things, that the poem knows nothing but itself, they draw attention to the fact that words are arbitrary signs. By refusing to go beyond the poem, the poet thus subverts the often unquestioned link between the sign and the referent, the non-linguistic reality that the sign designates.

Celan knows that reality never is. It has to be searched for and conquered.[49] For the poet, or at least for Celan, reality *is* not, it *happens*. It 'is in no way something that stands established, already given, but something standing in question, that's to be put in question'.[50] Reality has to be opened up to multiple ways of seeing. This opening can only occur through language, and it is never complete. Interfering with the constantly shifting interactions between linguistic meanings and political practices is a long process, saturated with obstacles and contradictions, obscurities and frustrations. A passage from the middle of 'The Straightening' leads us into this problematique:

*

> Covered it
>   up – who?

Came, came.
Came a word, came,
came through the night,
wanted to shine, wanted to shine.

Ash.
Ash, ash.
Night.
Night-and-night. – Go
to the eye, the moist one.

*

> Go
>   to the eye,
>   the moist one – . . .[51]

This passage, which constitutes the exact centre of 'The Straightening', signifies a crucial turning point that is even intensified within the passage through a shift from past to present tense. The poem literally leaps from the past to its exploration of the present. But we are still in a world of margins

and silences, where the 'nobody asks after you' from the beginning of the poem continues to resonate strongly. All questions are covered up. We do not have words to talk about that which needs to be talked about.

There is hope that words will come. But then this aspiration is once more suffocated by the return of the night, by the ashes, the overwhelming memory of Nazi death camps, the morbid crematoriums that extinguish all life and light. Not all is in vain, though, Fóti points out. She detects a new response to the initial commands of 'look' and 'go'. The poem now bears witness by going to the moist eye, whose weeping renders impossible luminosity and panoramic vision.[52] Others interpret this passage in a less optimistic way. Jacques Derrida hears above all a terrifying scream echoing back and forth between 'ash' and 'night', a scream that recalls the all-consuming Holocaust, 'the hell of our memory'.[53] The crucial point for Szondi is that we have only just arrived at the turning point of the poem. It is still unthinkable that the word itself really comes, that it will shine in the night of sleeping texts. At this point there is above all censorship and contradiction between, on the one hand, the world of the word that comes through the night in order to shine and, on the other hand, the world of ash, of absolute night, of 'night-and-night, which knows nothing but itself'.[54]

Out of the contradiction between the world of words and the world of ash emerges the necessity to push the boundaries of language games. Thus, poetry must open up thinking space by asserting itself, as Celan believes, at its own margins.[55] The poem then signifies a 'turn of breath', which Schmidt interprets as the struggle to breathe, the call for voice, the body's effort to absorb the surrounding world and to extend itself beyond it.[56]

Weighing down the net: social reality in light of its poetic possibilities

The fact that a poem must assert itself at its own margins to become a viable political practice is both its strength and its weakness. To be effective, a poet must operate right at the edge of language games. A step to the right and the poem gets sucked into the linguistic vortex of the dominant discourse, a step to the left and what looms is a fall into the abyss of incomprehensibility. In both cases the poem fails as a linguistic form of dissent.

Poetry has to go beyond what is. A poem that seeks transformation must look for utopia. But the desire for utopia must stay within the possibilities of existing language games. This weighing down of poetic dissent may be against the intuition of radical resistance, but it is necessary in order to avoid a fatal step into the abyss to the left of the narrow cliff-walk. Celan, in one of the poems that seek *Atemwende*, a 'turn of breath':

In the rivers north of the future
I throw out my net, which you

weigh down, hesitantly,
with stone-written
shadows.[57]

The metaphorical power of this short poem captures one of the key aspects of Celan's engagement with language and social reality. One who throws out the net engages in an act of expectation. The hesitant weighing down of the net, Hans-Georg Gadamer emphasises, does not signify doubt or inner indecisiveness. Rather, it expresses the subtle process of placing the net into the right position: too much weight and it will sink, not enough and it will drift on the surface of the river, unable to catch anything at all.[58] The unity of throwing out and weighing down captures the need to stretch language games while resisting the illusory temptation of eluding them altogether.

Only a carefully thrown poetic net can capture voices of dissent that have the potential to transform social practices. In his few poetological texts Celan emphasises that poetry, while seeking freedom through its radically subversive nature, is at the same time confined by the boundaries of existing language games. Thus, the language of poetry 'attempts to measure the range of what is given and what is possible'.[59] This means that a poem must be able to communicate. It is, at least for Celan, never far removed from the memory of pain and death and yet it must see beyond the narrow construction of this memory.[60]

Poetry is inevitably thrown into this tension between resisting language games and falling silent by overstepping their margins. The poem sees reality as process, as a multiplicity, rather than something single, static and unproblematic. Utopia in Celan's poetry is not idealistic, not a dream that exists merely in our minds. Poetic utopia is a perspective on reality, a perspective that 'views reality in light of its possibilities'.[61] The final passage of 'The Straightening' brings us deeper into the practical aspects of this problematique:

At owl's flight, here,
the conversations, day-grey,
of the water-level traces.
*

                     (– day-grey,
                       of

                              the water-level traces –

Driven into the
terrain
with
the unmistakable
track:
Grass.

   Grass,
   written asunder.)[62]

We have arrived back at the beginning of the poem. But while the beginning purposely deprived the reader of knowing the meaning of 'the terrain with the unmistakable track', the ending lifts this suspension. After reading the preceding parts of the poem, the reader now knows what the elusive meaning is. It is, at least according to Szondi, the very reading of that which precedes.[63] The 'conversations, day-grey, of the water-level traces' take off where Nazi gas chambers imposed silence. The 'water-level traces' break this silence, turn into conversation, like the water underneath the earth bearing witness for lost life and, at some point, bubbling up and spurting onto the surface of the earth again. By now language is transformed, for the meaning of spurting, of *spritzen*, no longer bears the weight of its tainted association with the flowing of Jewish blood from knife-points. Language has turned against the flow of its own narrowly constructed legacy.

Conclusion

A poem, for Celan, is like a 'message in a bottle', a plea that is sent out with the hope that some day it will be washed onto a shore, onto something open, a heart that seeks dialogue, maybe a receptive 'you', a receptive reality.[64] Once bottled, the message leaves its author and embarks upon an undetermined journey with an undetermined dialogical task of finding the Other. It continuously travels to include that which is strange, that which is different, that which is yet unknown. Many who have interpreted Celan's poetry since Szondi's path-breaking essay have drawn attention to this central issue. Emmanuel Levinas is probably the most prominent, but not the only, commentator who pointed out how Celan's poetry searches for an ethical and dialogical relationship with the Other.[65]

   Poetic attempts to embrace otherness are, by definition, difficult to decipher. The dialogical poem must, after all, stretch language games to be able to speak to the Other. This is why Celan believes that poems 'lead a subversive, subterranean existence'.[66] The message in the bottle may not be picked up immediately. At the point of its release there may be no language to make sense out of the bottled plea for dialogue. Celan's poem 'The Straightening', for example, has not yet been able to alter social dynamics as powerfully as did 'Deathfugue'. It is still too difficult.

   Poetry cannot end the linguistic normalisation of domination, but it is unique, and offers valuable insight, insofar as it makes this problem the vortex of its existence. Recognising that the search for dialogue and inclusion 'isn't all that easy' constitutes a crucial step towards unmasking forms of domination that have long been rendered unproblematic.

Celan's sustained effort to 'give it the shade' epitomises the potential of poetry to illuminate the complexities that are entailed in many social and political issues. Poetry reveals that a language is not just a medium of communication or a manner of representing the world. It is 'part of an activity, a way of life', as Wittgenstein's famous dictum holds.[67] Languages embody the relationship between people and their environment. They are disguised political practices, for they silently frame, objectify and entrench particular ways of constituting social realities.

To recognise that language is politics is to acknowledge that form and substance cannot be separated. The manner in which a text is written, a speech is uttered, a thought is thought, is integral to its content. There is no neutral form of representing the world, a form that is somehow detached from the linguistic and social practices in which the speaker or writer is embedded. Poetry engages directly with this central political problematique. The full potential of this engagement can only be appreciated and explored once poetry becomes a domain of inquiry that is taken seriously among social scientists. The present chapter has tried to take a small step in this direction. More should undoubtedly be done. Attempts to scrutinise the relationship between language and politics are needed, especially in today's increasingly complex and interdependent world. Celan's poetry is one of the few guiding lights, flickeringly abstract as it may be at times, that can help us find dialogical solutions to this and many other political and social dilemmas we are facing today.

6
Poetic Resistance to Cold War Politics

The dissident writer was a prominent figure in the Cold War theatre of Eastern Europe. The likes of Solzhenitsyn, Havel and Michnik stirred up political waters at home and made headlines in the West, where they were celebrated as symbols of light in a world of darkness and evil. Lesser known than these icons of Cold War rhetoric, but in some ways more interesting, is a younger generation of East German poets that emerged in the late 1970s and flourished, mostly underground, until the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Epitomising the activities of this generation is the area around Prenzlauer Berg, a run-down workers' quarter in East Berlin which, during the 1980s, turned into a Bohemian artist and literary scene. In it flourished a counterculture, a kind of ersatz public sphere that opened up possibilities for poetry readings, art exhibitions, film showings and the publication of various unofficial magazines. Vibrant and symbolic as the Bohemian underground scene at Prenzlauer Berg was, it soon came to stand as a metaphor to capture the sprit of an entire generation of poets – a generation whose *raison d'être* revolved around the desire to gaze and live beyond the confines of the Iron Curtain.

The contention of Cold War boundaries became a central theme of the young East German writers. It was this *Entgrenzung*, this yearning for a world beyond the spatial givenness of international relations, that rendered their poetry inherently political. But this engagement occurred in ways that seem, at least at first sight, neither political nor particularly international, for it took place primarily at the level of language and everyday life. For the young poets the existing language was simply not adequate to express their experiences, frustrations and hopes, in short, the world they lived in. They searched for words to describe the underside of daily life in East Germany, the urban and industrial wastelands that had no place in the vocabulary of the official ideological discourse. These engagements with the linguistic constitution of daily political realities went far beyond the local terrains in which they were articulated.

Some authors advance rather bold claims on behalf of the Prenzlauer Berg poets. David Bathrick, for instance, believes that they succeeded in creating a

counter-public sphere that challenged the one-dimensionality of the official political discourse. They were part of a literary intelligentsia whose activities, he stresses, 'contributed to the process of peaceful social change, even "revolution" in [East Germany]'.[1] Although Bathrick's arguments are compelling, it is impossible to say whether the poets of the 1980s directly contributed to the fall of the Berlin Wall. Too diffuse are the links between cause and effect to endow an underground and thus relatively marginal literary movement with such revolutionary credentials. But this is not to say that Prenzlauer Berg poetry was ineffective. The key, rather, lies in approaching questions of causality and evidence in more subtle ways.

This chapter seeks to identify and explore the complex political dimensions of poetic dissent in Cold War East Germany. The idea is to examine, through a few selective examples, how a group of poets struggled with the discursive boundaries of the society they lived in; how this struggle took on cross-territorial dimensions; and how these dimensions challenged the spatial constitution of Cold War politics. The analysis begins by introducing the context within which the East German poetry scene of the 1980s emerged. By closely reading and examining passages of several poems, I then demonstrate how a deliberate stretching, even violating, of linguistic conventions may engender social and political transformation. The limits of this process will be outlined in relation to damaging revelations that document how the Prenzlauer Berg subculture had, after all, been penetrated by the *Staatssicherheit*, the state's notorious security service.

Language, power, politics

One of the key aspects that sets the young East German poets of the 1980s apart from those who came before them is that they were born into an already existing socialist edifice. Unlike their fathers and mothers, they did not witness the end of the war and the division of their country into two separate states. They never searched for socialism with a human face. Born in the 1950s and 1960s, their desire was to think and live outside the prescribed boundaries of political and social acceptability. Uwe Kolbe, one of the most active poets at Prenzlauer Berg, in his much-cited 'Born into it' wrote of a

Tall wide green land,
Fence-scattered plain.
Red
Sun-tree at the horizon.
The wind is mine
And mine the birds.

Small green land narrow,
Barbed-wire-landscape.
Black

Tree besides me.
Harsh wind.
Strange birds.[2]

There is disillusionment in these lines, an unresolved tension between youthful dreams and the reality in which they failed to materialise. The sense of loss, though, is not about a derailed ideological experiment. It is about shattered personal aspirations that had little to do with high politics. One can hear the frustrated voice of an individual who simply wanted to live his life. Nothing more, nothing less.

Being born into an already existing socialist order meant a variety of things: born into a country that built walls to keep its citizens from voting with their feet; born into a dichotomy of barbed-wire landscapes on the inside and a vast, mostly unseen world on the outside; born into a political idea at a time when its contradictions became increasingly visible; born into a society that had, despite its crumbling foundations, allegedly solved all major social problems and arrived, so to speak, at the end of history. There was nothing left to deal with, except the immobility of daily routines. Kurt Drawert, trying to figure out how to live a historical moment that was not his, wrote:

> What was it worth, my
> presence in an already thought through world,
>
> ordered, in definitions, tables,
> headlines delivered?
> Ready-made-conditions and ready-made-judgements.
> History was over. The present
> was over, the future, the revolution,
> the answers were over.

Drawert, like many of his fellow poets, searched for an 'I' in a void, for a purpose in a world where the individual had no more historical task to fulfil. The frustration of feeling homeless at home was only amplified by a perceived lack of alternatives. It was this loss of meaning and the attempt at working through it, futile as it may have seemed at times, that provided the younger writers with a poetic *raison d'être*.

Exploring the relationship between language and power was one of the most central concerns of the Prenzlauer Berg poets. One could say that the dilemmas they dealt with arose from being born into a language whose boundaries had already circumscribed the range of their possible experiences. The existing language was simply not adequate to express their agonies, frustrations and confusions, in short, the world they lived in. Neither did it permit the development of a critical attitude towards political and ideological issues.

The existing language had thrown sheet after sheet of silence over a generation of writers long before even one of its members could have raised her voice in protest. 'People are formed by language – if one has devoured the language, then one has eaten the order as well', says the poet Stefan Dörig.[3] Uwe Kolbe goes even further. The frustration of being sucked into the political vortex of an existing language led him to believe that there had never been an authentic opposition in East Germany. This, he claimed, was true of prominent dissident writers like Christa Wolf, Heiner Müller, Rudolf Bahro and Wolf Biermann. Although some of them were imprisoned and suffered extensively as a result of their opposition to the authoritarian regime, they cannot be considered genuine opposition because they articulated their critique from within the dominant world view, and especially from within the dominant Marxist language.[4] Kolbe may have somewhat overstated the case, but he was certainly not the only one who struggled with the inadequacy of the language the younger generation had inherited. Kurt Drawert wrote:

> I did not want to speak like my father (or grandfather, for instance) . . . to use this language would have been a form of subjugation . . . I felt that whenever father (or grandfather, for instance) spoke, it was not really father (or, for instance, grandfather) who spoke, but something distant, strange, external, something that merely used his (or her) voice . . . I had no choice but to speak and thus to be forced into misunderstandings or lies, to feel observed, influenced and dominated by something distant, strange and external.[5]

The very same feeling of suffocating in the prevailing language is expressed by a different author, Jayne-Ann Igel, and this time directly in poetic form:

> was i caught forever, as i learned their language, my
> voice a bird-squeak, keeping me under their spell; they held
> me near the house like a vine, whose shoots they clip
> ped, so that they do not darken the rooms
>
> and close to the wall of the house i played, under the light
> of drying sheets, the fingers pierced through the plaster, i
> did not want to miss the personified sound of my name, which
> smelled like urine; those who carried my name in their mouth,
> held me by the neck with their teeth[6]

Trying to break through this existing web of language and power, the young East German poets of the 1980s purposely wrote in ways that violated both poetological traditions and guidelines of ideological correctness. They tried to 'formulate what language does not yet contain'.[7] In some sense these experiments with language were simply meant to shock, to serve as an avant-garde confrontation with the establishment. But they did more than

that. They recognised that what was needed was a radical critique of language that pierces through the plaster of the ruling philosophy, breaks its spell, slips away from the linguistic teeth drilled into one's neck.

What was needed was a language that is not a vine, confined to the wall of the house and constantly trimmed, but a free-standing and freely growing tree, pushing its branches up into the open sky.

Igel's poem not only captures this objective in content, but also in form. In a societal context of strong ideological dogmatism and strict behavioural rules, her poem purposely violates a number of existing linguistic conventions. For example, she starts off with a question ('was i caught forever, as i learned their language') but refuses to close this question with an appropriate question mark. One is inevitably thrown into a continuous questioning mood, a permanent state of suspense that lasts until the end of the poem. This sense of suspense is accentuated by the fact that Igel fuses sentences with commas, semi-colons or a simple 'and' where they normally would be terminated with a full stop. Indeed, the suspense of the initial question even goes beyond the end of the poem for Igel refuses to close it with any sort of punctuation. The question 'was i caught forever, as i learned their language' echoes long after the last word is read. Moreover, her poem entirely disregards the German linguistic convention of capitalising nouns – a subversive act my English translation is unable to convey, except perhaps through the refusal to capitalise 'I' and the first word of the poem.

Resisting linguistic domination

The poetic and political purpose of the Prenzlauer Berg writers was no longer to critique the existing system in order to replace it with something else, such as a superior ideology or a more adequate way of advancing the old one. The writer was no longer supposed to confront the system, as most previous dissidents had seen their vocation, but to refuse it, to step outside of it altogether. Years of dialogue had led nowhere. Resistance was now perceived to be a matter of eluding the system altogether, of breaking the old dichotomy of dissident/collaborator. Elke Erb, the co-editor of an influential early anthology of works by the young authors of the 1980s, characterises the transgression of linguistic conventions that marks their work as the result of 'an exit from the authoritarian system, a liberation from the tutelage of predetermined meanings'.[8] The textual landscape of the poet thus looked somewhat like a caravan of refugees, trying to leave behind a world whose main premises ceased to offer hope long ago. The poems written in the 1980s were traces of flight that featured strikingly little direct criticism of politics and ideology. There were hardly any references to historical struggles and class conflict. Critique became a process of forgetting, as in eluding the spell of the old world by not even naming it.

Most striking, from both a political and a poetological point of view, is the persistent use of spatial metaphors. They signify the cross-territorial aspirations of the Prenzlauer Berg scene, the willingness to transgress and challenge the constitution of Cold War international politics. Constantly recurring tropes like 'horizon', 'wall', 'border', 'narrow land', and 'barbed-wire landscapes' suggest a strong desire to break out of an entire way of living and thinking. Bert Papenfuß-Gorek, one of the more radical poets of the 1980s, destroyed linguistic conventions in an attempt to envisage what may lie beyond the horizon:

> scream against the wall
> scribble it at the wall
> stroll through the wall
>
> varieti not simpliciti
> & you sighter of varieti
> are not simpliciti but
> stand and stem of varieti[9]

Papenfuß-Gorek's poetry is characterised by a disregard for existing orthographic conventions. At times Papenfuß-Gorek ventures into a nearly incomprehensible (and untranslatable) private language. He breaks up words into their components or experiments with grammar, syntax and style. There are moments, however, when his misspelled adventures and his play with words and double-meanings manage astonishingly well to open up dialogical spaces by transgressing linguistically fixed modes of thinking.

Papenfuß-Gorek's desire to 'stroll through the wall', to leave the old world behind without the least trait of melancholy, did, indeed, almost perfectly anticipate the explosions and implosions that were to take place in November 1989, the moment when, after months of sustained mass demonstrations, hundreds of thousands of East Germans literally strolled through the Berlin Wall to take their first glimpse of the West. The image of the disintegrating Wall remains deeply engraved in our collective memories of the Cold War. It must be remembered, though, that at the time the Prenzlauer Berg poets wrote, in the early and mid-1980s, there was little prospect of such a spectacular turnaround. Hardly anybody in the East or West, neither international relations scholars nor Cold War politicians, had expected the foundations of the Soviet alliance system to crumble like a house of cards. Papenfuß-Gorek's transversal persistence is thus all the more astonishing. In 1984, from the underground in East Berlin, he wrote:

> power will fall
> down, i.e. over
> thrown until stump-
> bling, ignored it will
> turn into motherearth[10]

Various modernist and postmodernist themes resonate in the approach to language that became central to the work of Papenfuß-Gorek and other Prenzlauer Berg poets. Indeed, Sascha Anderson, one of the key figures of the underground literary scene, emphasises the strong influence that writers such as Foucault, Baudrillard and Barthes exerted on him and fellow writers.[11] As a result, the discursive dimension of power, particularly its link with the production and diffusion of knowledge, is an ever-present theme. The poets of the 1980s relied on what could be called a later Wittgensteinian view of language and politics. Words were no longer perceived as representations of an externally existing reality. Rather, language was seen as an activity in itself – one that already contained, by definition, various political dimensions. Rainer Schedlinski, one of Prenzlauer Berg's most articulate theorists, speaks of the 'resistance of forms', of a protest culture that attacks the sign itself, rather than merely the meaning that it arbitrarily imposes on us (or, more precisely, on other signs).[12]

For many observers, though, this avant-garde move was everything but dissent. Its postmodern aesthetic was said to lack both moral integrity and the power to oppose a very real political force, the authoritarian government. Yes, Prenzlauer Berg writers were not dissidents in the normal sense, nor did they want to be seen as such. But dissent has too often been understood only in romantic terms, as heroic rebellions against authority, exemplified by demonstrating masses, striking workers and brick-throwing students. Dissent, however, is a far more daily and a far more intricate phenomenon:

```
              . . . covered
    black               you see
            snow                              the
                   on the
                              sides
    are gratings                          the lines
            of humanity
                              language
    prison                                an open
            where
                         there is
                    no
                         outside[13]
```

Schedlinski's poem does not only speak of linguistic prisons, but actually visualises them through the appearance on the page. The text is like a grating. Confinement, however, is only one aspect that is evoked by this particular spatial arrangement of words. One discovers, at the same time, an array of escape routes. Because the poem can be read in a variety of ways – horizontally, vertically, diagonally – it offers an alternative to the monological

thought form that dominated much of the political rhetoric in East Germany. Prison and polyphony at once, Schedlinski's poetic grating accepts the limits of language but urges us to search for the multitude of voices that can be heard and explored within these limits.

Naming alternative realities

In a political context where the voice of the subject had all but vanished, poetry became a way of defending individuality against the collectivisation of experience. Poetry turned into a tool to describe the daily realities that were unspeakable, perhaps even unthinkable, through the language that had come to prevail in Cold War East Germany.

Durs Grünbein, although never really part of any collective poetic movement, is among those who most successfully vented frustrations that had been blocked out of prevalent ways of speaking. His poetry is grey, grim and ironic. His sources are explicitly cross-cultural. His politics, however, is not about grand historical struggles. It is about the daily realities imposed by political boundaries. It is about the search for words that can describe the East German urban and industrial wastelands.

Mid-1980s. The wall still intact. No cracks in sight. The Cold War landscape obfuscated by more than just industrial fumes. A poem from Grünbein's first collection, *Grayzone at Dawn*:

So many days during which nothing
   happened, nothing but the
narrow manoeuvres of the winter, a few

piles of snow, long melted at
   night and the strange
moment in the barrack region was

an exotic flyer: as this
   small squad of Russian soldiers in
green feltwear silently

guarded a bundle of newspapers and I read
   'КОММУНИСТ' on top of it and
I remembered the line 'Think

of the watch at the wrist of
Jackson Pollock.'[14]

A strange poem, indeed. One that seems very real but at the same time plays with surrealist images – a tendency that is not surprising given that the environment in which he wrote was itself marked by rather pronounced surrealist traits. But Grünbein neither escapes into surreal fantasies nor stays with a pure description of reality. He interweaves both of them in an attempt to break through to a different way of perceiving and living the world.

The poem goes through several stages. Its initial stanzas describe the monotone daily life in East Germany, a life 'during which nothing happened'. But what are we to make of the 'exotic flyer' that turns the poem around at the beginning of the third stanza? Does it refer to the 'small squad of Russian soldiers'? Unlikely. Their silent but suffocating presence is part of East Germany's daily monotony. The 'КОММУНИСТ' (communist) writing on top of the bundle of newspapers is hardly exotic, hardly exciting. Grünbein's casual mention of the ideologically charged context is a form of political critique that refuses to even engage the political topic it destabilises. He silently evokes the decay of ideology: an idea that snowed in at dawn but melted long before dusk. He critiques the existing spatial arrangement of Cold War global politics – an arrangement that persists only because it is guarded by a squad of soldiers in khaki uniforms.

The fourth stanza of Grünbein's poem ends abruptly with the admonition to 'think'. Think? Cut through the fog of the East German wasteland? Break out of the language that has been forced upon his generation? To be precise: 'think/of the watch at the wrist of/Jackson Pollock'! Rather bizarre, but judged by the spatial arrangement of the poem, it is a suggestion that the author clearly endowed with great importance. Does the watch signify the senseless passing of time, the vanishing of a youth ill-spent in a suffocating society? Or does Pollock simply become one of these mysterious but somehow glamorous and exotic Western symbols that so many East Germans longed for? Does he symbolise the desire for the excitement of the strange, for what was believed to be, often very naïvely, the materially abundant world on the other side of the unyielding Wall?

What does Grünbein know about Pollock? What does the average reader of the poem know about him? Are they aware of the early Cold War days, when American foreign policy, through the help of New York's Museum of Modern Art, promoted the paintings of Pollock and other Abstract Expressionists as a way of demonstrating the cultural superiority of the 'free world', the boundless existential opportunities of the new liberalism?[15] Does the poem perhaps evoke Pollock's chaotic drip paintings as signs of disintegration, announcing the collapse of the Soviet empire? Is expressionism a form of opposition to socialist realism? Or is abstract poetic dissent a way of opposing a position that portrays language as a neutral way of representing the world? And can we assume the reader should know that Pollock himself flirted with socialism when he was part of a group of left-wing, avant-garde artists in New York City during the 1930s?

We cannot assume. We do not know. Grünbein does not give answers. He stays ambiguous on purpose. His poem expresses dissatisfaction with the status quo. It silently screams out a desire to leap over the Wall and embrace the excitement of the West, its unknown and mystical dimensions. But the author's position cannot be nailed down. The few references to politics and ideology are slippery and inconclusive.

Grünbein's poetic critique was grey-shaded. It was named without being named, spoken and yet not spoken. David Bathrick, in his attempt to show how power in East Germany was articulated and contested through discourse and language, argues that poetry was subversive precisely because of the refusal to be narrowed down to a single meaning, precisely because of the absence of an 'I' that can be held responsible.[16] 'In a hierarchical society or in a dictatorship', another observer points out, 'nonsystematic thought [was] a form of threat.'[17] The poet's constant ambivalence directly undermined the state's promotion of a black-and-white, one-dimensional and teleological approach to history. There was no progress in Grünbein's lyrics, only depressing circularity and its ideological subversion.

Barbara Köhler's poem 'Rondeau Allemagne' launched a similar attack, but did so differently, both in terms of form and content. Instead of relying on experimental styles, as most Prenzlauer Berg poets did, Köhler shows that traditional verse forms can advance powerful linguistic critiques as well. She was not concerned with Pollock's representation of American superiority. Her gaze was directed inwards. She observed how the unfulfilled desire to leap beyond the Wall had transformed her and her immediate environment:

> I hold out in this land and grow, estranged,
> With that love pushing me beyond the verge
> Between the skies. To each his own urge;
> I hold out in this land and grow estranged.
>
> With that love pushing me beyond the verge;
> Entrenched agreements do I want to thwart
> And laugh, tearing to pieces my own heart.
> With that love pushing me beyond the verge;
>
> Between the skies to each his own urge:
> A bloody cloth is raised, the airship sinks.
> No land in sight; maybe a rope that swings
> Between the skies. To each his own urge.[18]

One cannot but walk away from this poem with a certain sense of despair. It is a rondeau in which the last stanza does not resolve the puzzle that was presented in the previous ones. The tension between sky and land, desire and restraint, dream and reality remains unresolved. Does the poem's estrangement from the existing political and social system advocate a retreat into the self, a sort of neo-liberal individualism? Is it the testimony of someone who opted against trying to slip through the iron curtain into the West? Someone who decided to stay and make the best out of what remains? And what does remain? Only 'a rope that swings between the skies', and only maybe. We discover a similar feeling of lost time as in Grünbein's poem. The same despair: the desire to thwart entrenched agreements. But Köhler does not

express her frustration through the senseless ticking away of the mysterious, imaginative watch of Jackson Pollock.

'Rondeau Allemagne' conveys a sense of time through form and unusual juxtapositions. The rondeau's strict rules and its rhyme are not there to please the reader or to celebrate poetic conventions. They mark boundaries, restraints and rising tension. They represent the various components of a straitjacket.

Köhler's poem speaks through its rhythm. It evokes, at one level, the monotonous passing of time, a voyage from nowhere to nowhere, and then back to nowhere. Repetition and repetition and repetition. Hopes and dashed hopes. Again. And again. But there is more to 'Rondeau Allemagne' than monotony. The rhyming conjunctions of verge and urge, which echo through the poem, provide an additional sense of urge(ncy). Tension is rising. There is impatience, rage, despair – the futility of being born into a social and linguistic order that refuses to acknowledge its own anachronistic nature; imprisonment in a world of circularity that preaches linear progress. Sascha Anderson writes:

> go across the border
> on the other side
> stands a man and says:
> go across the border
> on the other side
> stands a man and says:
> go across the border
> on the other side
> stands a man and says:[19]

The limits of poetic dissent

Anderson's poetic roaming into absurdity brings us to some of the more controversial aspects of Prenzlauer Berg. He was one of its most illustrious representatives, the unofficial spokesperson of the avant-garde poets, an active and extrovert personality who organised readings, publication arrangements and the like. But Anderson was more than that. He also stood at the centre of a scandal that broke out a couple of years after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

The archives of the disintegrated old regime have revealed that various poets were paid informants of the *Staatssicherheit* or *Stasi*, the notorious state security service. Anderson and Schedlinski were the most prominent among them. Anderson's role was particularly damaging. As opposed to his more elusive poetry, his *Stasi* reports, filed over a period of twenty years, were precisely articulated and contained incriminating evidence against his fellow writers who often took great personal risks in articulating their avant-garde

poetry. Intense and emotional debates emerged in Germany. The *Stasi* affair not only questioned how successful the younger generation of writers were in breaking out of boundaries, but also shattered the cliché of the Bohemian underground poet. Of course, virtually all oppositional activities were infiltrated by the *Stasi*. But Prenzlauer Berg poets were supposed to be different. The whole premise of their activities was based on refusal and flight, on stepping altogether outside the system and its realm of influence. This strategy had contributed to the high level of integrity that the Prenzlauer Berg poets enjoyed during the 1980s, particularly in the West, where they stood for 'a seemingly intact critical identity'.[20] The fall from grace was thus all the harder when the *Stasi* revelations gradually emerged in November 1991.

Many writers from the previous generation were particularly harsh in their judgements of the Prenzlauer Berg scene. There was talk of hypocrisy and betrayal. Wolf Biermann, who dismissed the Prenzlauer Berg poets as 'late-Dadaistic garden gnomes with pencil and brush',[21] was the most outspoken, but certainly not the only hostile voice. He and others spoke of lacking responsibility, of a generation that had abandoned the commitment of revolutionary poetry for a naïve and impotent avant-gardism. The fact that Anderson and Schedlinski put some of their fellow writers at risk signified for many the moral bankruptcy of the postmodernism that drove the writings of the 1980s: the autonomy of the aesthetic sucked back from its theoretical loftiness to the sump hole of dirty politics.

Anderson's and Schedlinski's response to the accusations further intensified the debate. Anderson first downplayed his involvement with the *Stasi*. Even after the extent of his collaboration could no longer be denied he was rather blasé about the role he played as a paid informant of the authoritarian regime. 'To me it's all the same', he declared without remorse. 'To me it meant nothing ... I had no moral problems.'[22] Schedlinski consolidated this culture of indifference by legitimising it through an analysis of postmodern theory. In a notorious 1992 essay he emphasises the radically different understandings of resistance that separated the writers of the 1970s from those of the 1980s. The former embraced a direct and explicit critique of society which, Schedlinski claims, led not only to a futile dialogue with the authorities, but also to an entanglement with existing power regimes. The latter, by contrast, lived in a postmodern age – a time when the object of resistance was no longer the meaning of something, but the sign itself, that is, the power–knowledge nexus that has already circumscribed the range of possible meanings.[23]

Schedlinski's reading of postmodern theory is highly problematic, for it revolves more around self-serving justifications than an attempt to grapple with the important political and ethical issues that the *Stasi* affair brought to the forefront. The fact that people in the opposition talked to the *Stasi*, Schedlinski says, 'does not necessarily mean that the *Stasi* controlled this opposition'.[24] Relying on a quasi-Foucauldian notion of complex and

stratified power relationships, he portrays the *Stasi* as an institution that was as much enabling as it was repressive. The notorious State Security Service, so the argument goes, 'took decisions not only with regard to prohibition, censorship and persecution, but also with regard to permission, non-censorship and tolerance'.[25] To ignore the *Stasi* then or to demonise it now, in retrospect, is thus a sign of naïveté, Schedlinski says. That may be right, and so is his argument that transformation can only come from within. But this hardly justifies the claim that he 'could, with the best of intentions, not imagine how it would have been more honourable to submit to an authority than to arrange oneself with it'.[26] Such and other self-absolving trivialisations of the *Stasi* did, of course, leave Schedlinski and Anderson wide open to various critiques. Particularly problematic is their implicit equation of postmodernism with relativism, which suggests that those who reject an essentialist view of the world can neither pronounce ethical judgements nor occupy standpoints from whence it is possible to advance critique. Far from disabling critique and normative judgements, an acceptance of multiplicities is the very prerequisite for the formulation of a politics and ethics that does not objectify problematic practices of exclusion.

Poetic resistance as an ongoing struggle

The accusations against Anderson and Schedlinski, and their self-serving theoretical defence, go to the core of the problem of language and politics. Can poetry that refuses to engage direct political issues have any validity as a practice of dissent? Is the amoral poet-collaborator a necessary consequence of an approach that assumes language has to be critiqued before a fundamental political critique becomes even possible?

   These are difficult questions and, as such, demand complex answers. They certainly cannot be put to rest by a stereotypical lashing out against something called postmodernism. Such a polemic is unable to understand not only the complexities of the theoretical issues at stake, but also the contradictions that characterised the lives of a generation that was born into an existing socialist state. It trivialises the centrality of political boundaries and the attempts that were undertaken to transgress them. Most of the Prenzlauer Berg poets had, in fact, never claimed to be conventional dissidents. And to dismiss an entire generation of writers by the behaviour of two of its members is a highly problematic exercise, especially if done from a comfortable position of hindsight. Péter Nádas, for instance, a writer who experienced similar pressures in Cold War Hungary, nevertheless warns of making moral judgements too easily. While he agrees with Biermann's characterisation of Anderson as a 'shithead', Nádas is nevertheless reluctant to 'speak unequivocally of his guilt'.[27] Instead, he asks us to contemplate the fact that none of us knows exactly how we would act if placed in a situation like Anderson: to be a young writer in an authoritarian society, being interrogated by police,

perhaps violently so, and forced to decide between collaborating or suffering the consequences of not doing so.

The numerous political pressures and dilemmas in Prenzlauer Berg were certainly far more complex than a judgement from a comfortable distance tends to assume. Add to this that the writers of the 1980s were not the uniform generation of poets that some of their supporters and critics claimed them to be. There were always tensions and disagreements, even within Prenzlauer Berg. Jan Faktor, for instance, left the scene in disgust over its lack of political commitment, its 'panic fear to produce texts in which anything could be fixed clearly and definitely'.[28] And even those who stayed had strong reservations about the actions of Anderson and Schedlinski. Hardly any fellow poet thought that 'it was all the same', or accepted as normal the paralysing atmosphere of mistrust that resulted from the constant *Stasi* threat.[29] Perhaps it is simply too early to evaluate the contribution of the Prenzlauer Berg poets. The grim wastelands of East German communism and the turbulent events of 1989 are too close and emotionally laden to allow for detached judgements about these writers and the difficult situation they faced. What is needed, however, is a commitment to a continuous and differentiated inquiry into the multiple and cross-territorial dimensions that make up the complex relationship between language and politics.

There are various reasons why the Prenzlauer Berg poets in particular, and the younger East German writers in general, have to be taken seriously, why their work must be viewed through lenses that are more refined than those that are being applied by an anti-postmodern polemic. The relative merit of an autonomous aesthetic sphere is an old and much debated issue – one that certainly cannot be put to rest with the Prenzlauer Berg case. The key lies in retaining some form of aesthetic autonomy without losing contact with the language of existing social and political realities. The ensuing tightrope walk is an intricate affair, and the poets of the 1980s were not always successful in pursuing it. Perhaps most impressive is their achievement at the level of language itself. Despite their unusual styles (or maybe because of them), there was a sense of reality in much of their work, a feeling of place and time that cannot be dismissed as a naïve avant-garde spearheading into unexplored linguistic terrains. Kolbe's 'Small green land narrow, / Barbed-wire-landscape' was more than just a metaphor. It gave voice to the reality of everyday life and its confinement by the boundaries of Cold War international relations. And by naming this reality, the poem turned into a form of local resistance against the spatial delineation of global politics. It is in this sense that the poetry of the 1980s was meant as an 'existential answer', rather than a mere experiment with language.[30] By engaging in poetic subversion the younger generation tried to bring consciousness from the level of ideological doctrines and high politics down to the sobering level of the everyday. It is in this attempt to describe the undersides of East German life that the young writers of the 1980s were dissidents of the most subversive kind.

The Prenzlauer Berg poets seem less successful, at least at first sight, in creating a critical distance from power. The *Stasi* revelations demonstrated that the aim of eluding the authoritarian system, of avoiding its spell through the creation of an independent underground art and literary scene, had failed. The presence of informants amidst the allegedly autonomous and subversive poets ensured that the state was aware of all major movements that took place. But this does not necessarily mean that the scene was ineffective or entirely controlled by the state. In fact, East German security files reveal the extent to which state authorities were concerned by the activities of subversive writers. Consider a letter by the Minister of Culture, Kurt Hager, to the head of the Ministry for State Security, Erich Mielke dated 13 October 1986. The letter presents the poet Lutz Rathenow as a 'provocateur' who agitates against socialism and whose writings should be punished as a 'defamation of the state'. There are two possibilities to deal with Rathenow, Hager writes. One is to expatriate him (as was done with Biermann and others in the 1970s), the other is to pay no attention to his activities. Since the former would provide Rathenow with dangerous international public attention, the preferred option was to simply 'ignore him henceforth'.[31]

Rather than invalidating poetic dissent, the attitude of high-ranking politicians and security officials reveals how fearful the state was of the political potential of Prenzlauer Berg poetry. The forcible expatriation of Biermann and other dissident writers in the 1970s had brought the regime much unwanted publicity abroad. The *Stasi* thus resorted to a more thoughtful, more complex attempt to minimise the challenges that could emerge out of the burgeoning underground poetry scene of the 1980s. Surveillance, co-optation and pre-emption were the key pillars of this strategy. It succeeded only insofar as the state was able to monitor, via paid informants such as Anderson and Schedlinski, some activities of the avant-garde writers and artists. The state's strategy certainly failed, as many commentators stress convincingly, in controlling the underground scene entirely.[32]

Conclusion

No political system, no matter how authoritarian, is ever able to dominate all aspects of a society. And no form of dissent, no matter how radical, is ever entirely autonomous from the political practices it seeks to engage or distance itself from. There is no easy way out of an existing web of power and knowledge. Poetic resistance cannot achieve success overnight. A mere decade, which is the rough life span of the Prenzlauer Berg scene, can hardly be expected to do more than highlight the difficulties and contradictions entailed in breaking though a linguistically entrenched political order. It would have been naïve, even absurd, to think that a group of disillusioned underground poets could escape the claws of power and lift themselves and their society into a state of perpetual emancipatory triumph.

Linguistic dissent works slowly, by changing the way we speak and think about ourselves and the world we live in. The young poets of the 1980s were part of this constant process of reframing meaning. They may not have been the heroic freedom fighters they were sometimes taken to be, but their works and lives can shed light on the complexities that make up the increasingly cross-territorial interaction between domination and resistance. Some of their poetic engagements with daily life in East Germany will remain important, if only because they captured a certain *zeitgeist*, the spirit of a decaying regime. And, for better or for worse, the Prenzlauer Berg writers have triggered a series of controversies that led to considerable public debate. The best we can hope for is that the ensuing issues, difficult as they are, remain debated in a serious and sustained manner. It is in this sense that the Prenzlauer Berg poetry scene – precisely because of its mixed success, because of its controversies and failures – has opened up opportunities to rethink the crucial relationship between language and politics in spaces that lie far beyond the gradually fading memory of East German wastelands.

7
Come See the Blood in the Streets

Few public figures are more convincing than Pablo Neruda when it comes to substantiating the possible relevance of poetry to the study – and conduct – of global politics. Nobel laureate, political activist and international diplomat, Neruda and his poems epitomise the *Zeitgeist* of an epoch, the ups and downs of a century whose spirit has come to define the passage into the next millennium. Between his early assignment as honorary consul in the colonial Far East of the late 1920s and his role as Salvador Allende's ambassador to France in the early 1970s, Neruda wrote some three dozen volumes of highly influential poems. His extraordinary writings are perhaps matched only by the persistence and the audacity of his political engagement. He stood at the forefront of the fight against fascism and imperialism and he battled relentlessly for social equality in his native Chile. He spoke about gaps between North and South, rich and poor, about how the United Fruit Co. 'disembarks, / ravaging coffee and fruits / for its ships that spirit away / our submerged lands' treasures / like serving trays'.[1] While exposing the undersides of the international political economy, Neruda never lost sight of the least privileged. Indeed, his writings were all about heeding whispers that risk drowning in the roaring engines of high politics:

> Meanwhile, in the seaports'
> sugary abyss,
> Indians collapsed, buried in the morning mist:
> a body rolls down, a nameless
> thing, a fallen number,
> a bunch of lifeless fruit
> dumped in the rubbish heap.[2]

Neruda's voice was the voice of the working class, the voice of peasants and factory workers, of ordinary people whose perspectives are so often obliterated from the more grandiosely perceived domain of global politics. Of course, Neruda's sense of justice and dignity, no matter how poetically

refined, cannot possibly represent the diversities of the human condition. The very idea of speaking for those who have no voice is a highly problematic practice.[3] Some of the political causes championed by Neruda are as compelling today as they were half a century ago. Others appear naïve at best, irresponsible at worst, especially if judged in hindsight. Neruda vigorously defended Castro's revolution and stood behind Stalin long after his authoritarian side had been exposed. 'You showed me how one being's pain has / perished in the victory of all', said the apologetic poet-politician.[4] Neruda's image of gender relations can, likewise, be criticised at length. His world is a world of working men and fighting men, of struggles and defeats, of victories and heroes, in short, a masculine world in which women are either obliterated or fulfil the traditional functions of lover, childbearer and caretaker. Men venture out into the turbulent political realm to fight tyrants of all kinds. Women, by contrast, are passive onlookers to this unfolding drama. They represent 'home and hearth and the humble verities of everyday life'.[5] The point of this chapter, however, is not to problematise such images, important as this task may be. Rather, the objective lies in understanding the more general processes through which the poetic image reflects or interferes with the constitution and conduct of global politics.

One may or may not agree with the content of Neruda's politics, but the quality of his poetry is widely acknowledged. And so is the fact that it dealt with socio-political struggles. Neruda's poetic testimonies have become so influential that they are part of today's collective consciousness. They have entered the global imagination. This is why even those commentators who are hostile to his politics readily accept the central importance Neruda has played as a poet and a poetic chronicler of our time. Some even argue that from such a perspective Neruda's 'unfortunate Stalinism' becomes no more than 'an excrescence, a kind of wart on the texture of his poems'.[6]

This chapter draws attention to the intersections between poetry and global politics in ways that go beyond the writer-activist persona. It contemplates the political dimensions of poetry and the poetic dimensions of politics through an engagement with some of Neruda's testimonies. What follows will thus lay no claim to presenting events in an empirically or historically exhaustive manner. Rather, the idea is to illustrate how an inquiring poetic mind may help us see old things in new ways, and how this reviewing may engender more critical, more tolerant and more ethical approaches to global politics. The point, therefore, is not to argue for or against Neruda, but to explore the core of what poetry and politics are all about – or, to be more precise, to acknowledge that there is no such core, that the very nature of politics emerges from the forms of representation that are employed to make sense out of human interactions. The political dimensions of poetry are located precisely in the engagement with these linguistically conditioned representations, with the inevitable gap that opens up between an event and the way

this event has been imbued with meaning and significance. The poet, then, explores the political in domains that are located prior to what is usually considered politics proper.

To illustrate these rather abstract points, the chapter looks at a well-known poem from Neruda's *Residence on Earth*, a collection that is said to have revolutionised Spanish-language poetry. The poem in question, called 'A Few Things Explained', speaks of the dilemmas that its author faced when posted as consul to Madrid in the mid-1930s. Neruda had not been particularly political until then, but with the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War he abandoned his diplomatic neutrality and sided with the Republicans – a move that would soon cost him his post. He published openly political verse, collaborated with a group of activist poets and organised a prominent writers' congress aimed at opposing Franco – in short, he became an increasingly vocal public figure. 'A Few Things Explained' underlines the moral necessity to speak up and take sides, but it does so in ways that go beyond merely screaming for help or documenting the fight against fascism. The poem also engages politics in a wider sense, for it deals with some of the underlying forces that shape political struggles, from the heroic to the everyday, from the local to the global.

Of tomatoes and toothaches: poetry and everyday life

Neruda was in no way predisposed to take on a political role, certainly not one that would span the geographical and temporal dimensions of twentieth-century global politics. Born in 1904 as Neftalí Reyes Basualto in a small agrarian town in southern Chile, he grew up in a modest environment. His father was a railroad worker and his mother, a primary school teacher, died of tuberculosis soon after giving birth. Neftalí wrote and published poetry from early on. To conceal this activity from his disapproving father he took on a *nom de plume*, Pablo Neruda. Some commentators believe that this very pseudonym, taken from the then well-known Czech writer Jan Neruda, 'signified a refusal to be limited by his provincial background'.[7] At seventeen he moved to Santiago with the intention of becoming a French teacher but instead living the life of a Bohemian poet. Two years later he published his first book of poems, *Crepusculario*, and soon after appeared *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair*, a volume that speaks of love in the language of everyday life and which became a classic in the Spanish-speaking world. Neruda had already acquired a poetic reputation among the bohemian circles he frequented, but his thoughts were elsewhere. He wanted to leave Santiago, a place where he could find only sporadic work as a translator and journalist.

Most Latin American countries, including Chile, had a long tradition of sending poets – men that is – abroad as consuls or sometimes even as ambassadors. Neruda had approached the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on several occasions and in 1927 he was offered a posting as Honorary Consul to

Rangoon. He was an adventurous 23-year-old poet with no qualifications for the task that awaited him. Soon he set out on the long journey that would take him to his rather modest consular position in Burma. The income he was able to generate barely covered his living expenses. In 1928 he was transferred as consul to Colombo, Ceylon, and the following year to Batavia, the capital of the Dutch East Indies. Most biographers of Neruda agree that his stay in the colonial Far East was by and large a frustrating experience, mostly due to his persistent financial difficulties and the isolation he experienced as a poet surrounded by foreign tongues. 'The Orient for Neruda', say some, 'was a mixture of chaos, poverty, and fascinating perceptions of the ancient cultures in contrast with a degrading colonial present.'[8] After a final brief posting to Singapore, in 1932 Neruda embarked on a two-month journey back to Chile. In early 1934 he was sent to Buenos Aires but was soon appointed consul in Barcelona, only to be transferred again to Madrid, where he arrived in December 1934.

Neruda's move to Madrid occurred primarily for poetic reasons. His boss in Barcelona, so the story goes, noticed Neruda's less than impressive skills in subtracting and multiplying. 'Pablo', he is reported to have said, 'you should go live in Madrid. That's where the poetry is. All we have here in Barcelona is that terrible multiplication and division that certainly doesn't need you around. I can handle it.'[9] And so Neruda left for Madrid at a time when his literary success was mounting. The first two volumes of his *Residence on Earth*, partly written in East Asia, had been published and were received with critical acclaim. Soon he was actively involved in a literary circle that included Spain's leading avant-garde poets.

One of the key trademarks of Neruda's poems was their simplicity, their accessibility. For much of his life he tried to dispel the widespread perception that poetry is a mere entrance key to the society of high culture, a pleasant distraction for those who have the leisure to pursue verse-based fantasies, for those whose privileged education has rendered the obscure style of poems accessible. Poetry, for Neruda, was not just an ode to the beauty of life as viewed from the sheltered living rooms of the upper classes. Poetry had to deal with the verities of everyday life, with tomatoes and toothaches, with old shoes, haircuts and artichokes. Neruda wrote 'for simple habitants who request / water and moon, elements of the immutable / order, / schools, bread and wine, guitars and tools'.[10] Like the American poet Walt Whitman, Neruda operated in the language of everyday life. Consider how Neruda describes his arrival in Spain in the opening passages of 'A Few Things Explained':

I'll tell you how matters stand with me.
I lived for a time in suburban
Madrid, with its bells
and its clocks and its trees.
The face of Castile

could be seen from that place, parched,
like an ocean of leather.
               People spoke of my house
as 'the house with the flowers'; it exploded
geraniums: such a beautiful
house, with the
dogs and the small fry.[11]

By bringing alive the ordinariness of daily life, its rhythm and its ruptures, poetry must see beyond the pleasant and the harmonious. It ought to grasp the complexities of life, its ups and downs, its frustrations and hopes. It ought to deal with the impurities of our existence, Neruda insists, and search for words that are 'steeped in sweat and in smoke, smelling of lilies and urine'.[12]

The poetic search for voice

Neither Neruda's poetry nor his life stayed for long within the beautiful house in suburban Madrid. In July 1936 General Franco staged a right-wing revolt and with the subsequent onset of the Spanish Civil War the geraniums gave way to a different kind of life:

Till one morning everything blazed:
one morning bonfires
sprang out of earth
and devoured the living;
since then, only fire,
since then, the blood and the gunpowder,
ever since then.[13]

A political poem like 'A Few Things Explained' can be read in a variety of ways. One approach is to focus on how the poem goes back and forth between private and public, local and universal, immanent and timeless. 'But I saw it', Neruda explains. 'A million dead Spaniards. A million exiles. It seemed as if that thorn covered with blood would never be plucked from the conscience of mankind.'[14]

For Neruda the war experience was intrinsically linked to the circle of avant-garde poets in which he was active, the so-called Generation of 27. Most of its members became heavily politicised. They sought to defend the Republic and paid for it dearly. Neruda's close friend Federico García Lorca, one of Spain's foremost poets, was assassinated by Franco's forces. Two others, Rafael Alberti and Miguel Hernández, were members of the Communist Party. They supplemented their pens with guns and employed both of them on the battlefield.

The former was exiled and the latter died in one of Franco's prisons:

>   Remember, Raul?
>   Remember it, Rafael?
>   Federico, under the ground
>   there, remember it?
>   Can you remember my house with the balconies where
>   June drowned the dazzle of flowers in your teeth?[15]

Neruda's poem mourns the death of his poet-friends. But this is not all. He also seeks to retain their voice and their struggle. He wants to preserve their activist commitment by lifting it out of a purely personal context into the larger public domain, into politics, into history. The poem, then, becomes a form of presence beyond death and beyond the current moment. Many commentators consider this to be the key aspect of poetry in general.[16] Neruda too believed that the poem can – and should – fulfil the function of memory – perhaps that of a critical societal memory: that it has to pass on, to future generations, the voices of those who are no longer able to speak:

>   I
>   am the one who remembers,
>   although there are no eyes left on the earth,
>   I'll go on seeing
>   and that blood
>   will be recorded here,
>   that love will go on burning here.
>   There's no forgetting, ladies and gentlemen,
>   and through my wounded mouth
>   those mouths will go on singing![17]

Of course, Neruda the chronicler cannot insert himself into the mind of victims such that their voices carry on as if they had never vanished, as if silence had never been imposed onto their fading plea for help. Some form of silence may always be there. Indeed, one of the key tasks of a poet is to deal with silence, to transform its terrifying void into hope. The voices that emerge from this engagement will never be authentic, but they are nevertheless important.

The poem functions as memory long after the inevitable rupture between a text and its author. Neruda, for instance, died in 1973. His poetic testimonies, however, are as timely and compelling today as they have ever been. It may well be that a hundred years from now people will remember the Spanish Civil War through Neruda's 'A Few Things Explained' or Picasso's *Guernica*, rather than the countless history books that seek to represent historical events in ways that seem, at least at first sight, more 'realistic'. A poetic or artistic rendering of an event or epoch might be able to deal more

adequately with the gap that opens up between what is and how this 'is' is represented through language. Poetry recognises that this inevitable gap is the very location of politics. The poem, then, becomes a critical historical memory because it speaks from multiple perspectives. Instead of trying to repress or ignore representation it deals with its political function, with the inherently problematic nature of rendering meaningful that which often has no meaning for those who live through and around it.

Of factories, town squares and trenches: poetry and the public sphere

The Spanish Civil War transformed Neruda. From then on politics would play a central role in his life and his poetry. In this sense the politically active avant-garde poets may have shaped Neruda even more than his poetry influenced them. Neruda increasingly believed that the poet had a certain responsibility to the public, that a poet had the ability and the responsibility to 'write about any given subject, about something needed by a community as a whole'.[18] He gave up the neutrality that his position as Chilean consul commanded and used his growing international reputation to support the leftist forces that opposed General Franco. The dismissal from his official duties soon followed, but Neruda stayed on nevertheless. He started to publish a poetry review called *The Poets of the World Defend the Spanish People* and travelled to Barcelona and to Paris in order to help organise a major international conference of writers and artists – mostly men – that supported the besieged Spanish Republic. Hemingway, Koestler, Yeats, Spender, Auden, Aragon and Malraux, amongst others, took part in the conference or sent their explicit support. Spain turned into a *cause célèbre* for all those who sought to ward off the increasing menace of fascism in Europe.[19] 'A Few Things Explained' speaks of this fight back, of how resistance emerged from all walks of life and in all parts of Spain:

> Turncoats
> and generals:
> see the death of my house,
> look well at the havoc of Spain:
> out of dead houses it is metal that blazes
> in place of the flowers,
> out of the ditches of Spain
> it is Spain that emerges,
> out of the murder of children, a gunsight with eyes,
> out of your turpitude, bullets are born
> that one day will strike for the mark
> of your hearts.[20]

The poem becomes more and more combative, and so does Neruda the activist. Poetry, he believes, has always had the same obligation throughout history. It had 'to go out into the street, to take part in this or that combat'. The poet did not shy away from this task, did not mind being branded as subversive. 'Poetry is rebellion', Neruda insists.[21] Neruda's activist approach to poetry is, of course, not beyond criticism. Far from it. Various gendered images are embedded in this approach, and so are puzzles that have to do with the nature and function of language. But before going on to problematise Neruda's political poetry we must at least heed the premise of his undertaking.

To be rebellious and effective at the same time a poem must reach a wide public. 'It must excite indignation and admiration', Neruda stresses, 'inflame the heart, move the hand towards the gun. It must become a flag, a slogan, a marching song.'[22] This is why he sought to write poetry in the language of everyday life. A poem cannot be obscure if it is to be used as a political weapon. Neruda knew that his poems had to speak to a large audience if he wanted to have any impact on the Civil War and the struggle of the working class in general. Given his status as one of the most widely read poets of the twentieth century, one could argue that Neruda's poems have indeed bridged the gap between the personal and the public. When he urges 'Federico, under the ground / there, remember it?' he speaks not only of Federico García Lorca, his close poet-friend who was assassinated by Franco's forces. He speaks not only of victims and their muffled voices, but also of the more fundamental dialectic of violence into which both perpetrators and perpetuated have been sucked. 'Out of murdered children . . . bullets are born', bullets that will haunt subsequent generations, bullets 'that one day will strike for the mark of your hearts'. The issue at stake is thus no longer Neruda himself, or even his testimonies, but the effect that they will have on future lives. When he writes 'I bear witness! / I was there . . ./ I am the one who remembers'[23] he speaks not primarily of himself, of Neruda the diplomat and activist who recalls the atrocities of the Spanish Civil War. He speaks of a collective memory, of a time in which he, as the author of the poem, will no longer be around to serve as witness. The task of remembering will be fulfilled by the poem alone – and by its future readers.

Political poetry had to be oral poetry, poetry that is read aloud in town squares, trenches and at the dinner table, poetry that sticks in the mind and carries with it the force of language to convince and convert. 'At the gates of factories and mines I want / my poetry to cling to the earth, / to the air, to the victory of abused mankind'.[24] Neruda's book *Spain in My Heart*, where 'A Few Things Explained' first appeared, did indeed come out of the earth and cling to it. This volume, which expressed Neruda's anguish and contained explicitly political poems, dealt with the Civil War. It was printed in an old monastery near Barcelona, close to the front lines. The production was not only interrupted by intermittent bombardments, but also occurred in an improvised way. Due to the lack of proper paper pulp – so the story

goes – the book was produced from a variety of makeshift materials, including enemy flags, bloodstained shirts and pieces of discarded paper. By the time the book appeared the defeat of the Republic was all but complete. But the soldiers who printed the poems under great threat nevertheless held on to them. Among the half a million refugees who hastily left Spain for a long march to France, many are said to have carried copies of *Spain in My Heart* in their bags. At least that is how Neruda wants us to remember the episode.[25]

Come see the blood in the streets . . .

Despite his courageous and persistent political commitment, Neruda always displayed a certain ambivalence towards political poetry. Less so perhaps than most other poets, but he still felt the need to justify the act of writing activist poetry. Clearly, when it came to standing up for what he felt was a just political and humane cause, Neruda did not hesitate to commit his poetry. 'A Few Things Explained' was written to defend this commitment – a task that was needed not only because Neruda had never written openly political verse before, but also because he was well aware of the dangers that were entailed in doing so:

> Would you know why his poems
> never mention the soil or the leaves,
> the gigantic volcanoes of the country that bore him?

> Come see the blood in the streets,
> come see
> the blood in the streets,
> come see the blood
> in the streets![26]

The echo of these final lines is terrifying. At first sight they do not seem to need any justification. And yet, the fact that even in the face of immanent political need Neruda feels compelled to defend his approach testifies to the complexities that are entailed in the interactions between poetry and politics.

The main issues at stake, and the reasons for Neruda's hesitation, have to do with the contentious terrain of poetry itself. What actually renders a poem political? Of course, a poem about war inevitably deals with politics. But this does not necessarily mean that the poem is political in the sense that it gazes beyond the ego's horizon or engages the foundations of political discourse, that is, the manner in which an issue, event or epoch has been constituted and framed through language. Many seemingly political poems are either short-lived battle cries or expressions of agony that reflect mostly personal experiences that are of little public relevance.

There are those, like Neruda, who take sides in conflicts and use poetry as a weapon to pursue a political objective. And there are those who see

the political dimensions of poetry precisely in its independence from activist engagements. Poetry, then, is political because it resists being drawn into the narrow black-and-white debates that characterise politics. Instead of getting entangled in myopic purposes of agitation, poetry seeks to investigate the forces that have already circumscribed the functioning of politics, the ones that have silently predetermined what can be said and what cannot. Poetry locates politics in the search for a language that can stretch the range of these boundaries and reveal the foundational framing of political choices.

Neruda tried to navigate somewhere between these two perspectives on poetry and politics. He clearly defended the need for an engaged poetry but he was, at the same time, aware that a too direct, too combative message could not interfere with the more fundamental forces that had already constituted the boundaries of the political, that is, the linkages between language and the representation of socio-political realities. This is why he knew that the poet had to hover back and forth between reality and utopia, between what is and what might be. 'The poet who is not a realist is dead', Neruda said. 'And the poet who is only a realist is also dead.'[27]

No single poem, no matter how politically inciting and poetically insightful, can possibly achieve what poetry seeks to do: to break through the boundaries of existing reality constructs and reveal to its reader that which is, or perhaps even that which ought to be. 'Come see' is the prime dictum of a poem, whether it has political aspirations or not. But the process of seeing inevitably takes time. 'I write for the people, even though they cannot / read my poetry with their rustic eyes.'[28] There has to be a language first, a way of understanding that can actually see the blood in the streets, that can pierce throughout the dialectic of violence within which the more immediate political battles are waged. Poets are, of course, not the only ones who have come to this insight. Some critical practitioners of global politics have reached similar conclusions. John Burton, for instance, is aware that entrenched political conflicts cannot be solved through approaches that simply extend old thinking patterns. Different mindsets are needed to mediate successfully in a conflict that opposes hostile parties. Without a shift in thinking there can be neither dialogue nor compromise. And 'any shift in thinking', Burton stresses, 'requires a new language'.[29]

There is, of course, an inherent tension in this interaction between language and politics. A poet and, indeed, any political communicator, must be as accessible as possible if he or she wants to engage the struggles that shape societal dynamics. Neruda was well aware of this necessity, which is why he sought to write in the language of everyday life. But he was also aware of the need to break through existing linguistic habits, for it is through these very conventions, inaudible and seemingly harmless as they are, that practices of domination become objectified. There is no easy way of dealing with this dilemma. Indeed, the dilemma may never go away.

Neruda likens the problematic process of breaking through the inaudible walls of linguistically objectified conflicts to the work of Arctic fishermen. 'The writer has to look for the river, and if he finds it frozen over, he has to drill a hole in the ice. He must have a good deal of patience, weather the cold and the adverse criticism, stand up to ridicule, look for the deep water, cast the proper hook, and after all the work, he pulls out a tiny little fish.'[30] But eventually the labour will bear fruit, the catches become more frequent and the fish grow bigger. And then, one day, poetry will find its voice and its listeners, the 'moment will come in which a line, the air / that stirred my life, will reach their ears, / and then the farmer will raise his eyes, / the miner will smile breaking stones, / the brakeman will wipe his brow, / the fisherman will see clearly the glow of a quivering fish that will burn his hands'.[31]

Conclusion

To observe Neruda and his effort to make poetry political is not to endorse all of his ideas and ideological leitmotifs. Much of Neruda's post-Spain activism, in particular his unwavering support of Stalin, can be criticised from a variety of perspectives. And so can the masculinism that accompanied most of his poetry and politics. It was not the purpose of this chapter to problematise these images – a task that would require a sustained engagement with a variety of themes that could not be dealt with in a chapter-length exposé. A brief revisit to at least some of these problematic zones is, however, necessary to put Neruda's poetic politics into perspective.

Neruda's world is a world of men, a world of brakemen and fishermen, of shoemakers and shovellers, of seamen, woodcutters and welders, of miners, mountaineers and mechanics. Of course, there are women in Neruda's world. There are many women. Neruda devotes some of his most beautiful and important poetry to them. 'Rest here with me', he pleads, 'let us darken our eyelids together.'[32] But Neruda's women are mostly seen through the male gaze. They are painted as objects of beauty and desire, even as places of worship. The world of women is 'like a cloudburst, sultry and dense: / red sulphate of quicklime, a secret sun / opening and closing the genital doors'.[33] For Neruda women are 'minimal, supple, earthy, transparent, round'.[34] They are passive objects rather than fully-fledged agents, members of a society with their own political will, individual or collective. When women occasionally surface as agents or as metaphor for agents, then it is in typically womanly trades, as gardeners, childbearers and menders, as lovers and nocturnal fantasies. The battles women fight are the battles of fire and foam, of wrinkles and piles, of linens and coarse cottons, in short, the 'wars of the washerwomen'.[35]

Neruda was a chronicler of his time. He was a mirror of society, a mirror that reproduced, in an unproblematised way, prevalent images of unequal gender relations. Neruda's mirror was a mirror with blind-spots, with dark

corners and blurring edges. There were scratches too, even the occasional crack. Of course, no mirror can represent all that is or ought to be. It can only show what lies within its frame. Neruda may have employed multiple mirrors and directed them in multiple directions. But he still took decisions, inherently personal decisions, inherently political decisions, about how to position his poetic viewing devices.

A poet who wants to function as a chronicler of his or her time must do more than merely reflect the *Zeitgeist* of an epoch. Reflection is not enough. To write poetry that is of poetic and political value, the author must produce more than mirror images of society. He or she has to distort visions in order to challenge the entrenched forms of representations that have come to circumscribe our understanding of socio-political reality. The poet's task is to help us see familiar things in new ways, to make us recognise how we have constituted our vision of the world and, by extension, the world itself. By opening up different perspectives on realities, poetry may be able to provide new solutions to old dilemmas. But in order to aspire to this ambitious endeavour the poet may at times have to hurl a rock against the mirror and shatter its deeply embedded image of the world. Only then can multiplicities emerge. Only then can poetry remain open, anticipate the unexpected and seek out the Other, the one that has not even come into sight yet. This search for conversation beyond the here and now, beyond the current understanding of social reality, is the essence of poetry, its *raison d'être*. Poetry, Neruda says, 'has to walk in the darkness and encounter the heart of man, the eyes of women, the strangers in the streets, those who at twilight or in the middle of the starry night feel the need for at least one line of poetry'.[36] Neruda's stroll through the twilight of politics, his play with mirrors and mirror-images, was characterised by mixed success. It is in the mixture of this success, and in a critical engagement with it, that we can most successfully locate the insight Neruda brings to contemporary socio-political challenges.

There were days in Neruda's poetry, bright days, days when his words showed the way, glowing in the midday sun. His poems gave voice to many people who had no voice before. They dealt with the unjust arrangements of class societies, the suffering caused by war or the inequalities of the political and economic relations between North and South.

There were nights in Neruda's poetry too, dark nights, nights when his words were suffocated by death-bringing silence, nights when his own words drowned the voices of others. He was clearly unable to recognise the authoritarian dimensions of Stalinism. He also failed to understand the complex and far-reaching political forces that are at play in unequal gender relations. Neruda's poems not only left the masculine images of society intact, but actually replicated them, thereby entrenching the patriarchal status quo and its corresponding relations of domination.

Neruda died only weeks after Allende's government was ousted by the coup d'état that brought General Pinochet to power. But the silence that followed

the death of Neruda and his political vision for Chile did not last for ever. Neruda's body vanished. His poetry re-emerged, and so did the people of Chile. Poetry 'has a cat's nine lives', Neruda knew before his inevitable physical demise. 'They harass it, they drag it through the streets, they spit on it and make it the butt of their jokes, they try to strangle it, drive it into exile, throw it into prison, pump lead into it, and it survives every attempt with a clear face and a smile as bright as grains of rice.'[37]

Poetry is like water. It may evaporate but it never disappears. It will always return and it will do so in ever-changing forms, as rain, as snow, as rivers, as oceans, as something that constantly flows and seeps into all aspects of life, even the most minuscule cracks. It is this oozing and mutating quality of poetry that gives Neruda hope, the kind of hope for utopia that he expressed in his acceptance speech at the Nobel Prize ceremony in Stockholm in 1971. 'We poets of today', he stressed, 'have been struggling and singing for happiness in the future, for a peace of tomorrow, for universal justice, for the bells of the year 2000.'[38] Of course, the turn of the millennium has long passed and Neruda's vision is as far away as ever from being global reality. But his hope for the good life, whatever it may be, remains as timely and important as ever, for it is this very aspiration – utopian and inherently impossible as it is – that helps us keep alive the struggle for a better world:

> Give me silence, water, hope.
> Give me struggle, iron, volcanoes.
> Cling to my body like magnets.
> Hasten to my veins and to my mouth.
> Speak through my words and my blood.[39]

8
Poetics and the Politics of Memory

> Everything has been plundered, betrayed, sold out,
> The wing of black death has flashed,
> Everything has been devoured by starving anguish,
> Why, then, is it so bright?
>
> <div align="right">Anna Akhmatova, June 1921[1]</div>

The chapters so far have made clear that poetry can be a form of socio-political critique. It pierces through worn-out metaphors and ruptures tissues of power. It names what had no name before. It slips into memory what was void of voice. It visualises light that still lingers unseen in the dark. It does so, for poetry disturbs linguistic habits through which we have come to accept whatever is, no matter how unjust and violent-prone that 'is' may be. This is why the Russian poet Anna Akhmatova believes that 'there is no power more threatening and terrible / Than the prophetic word of the poet'.[2]

To be clear: Akhmatova was above all concerned with issues aesthetic, with love and beauty and personal memory. Nothing particularly political, one would think, at least at first sight. And yet, her poems had a tremendous political impact, perhaps precisely because they refused to speak in the name of short-term political objectives; perhaps precisely because they could not be contained within and by the political manoeuvrings of the day. Having poetically recorded most of her country's troublesome twentieth century, Akhmatova's poems became signs of hope and humanity in a world of poverty, turmoil and war. For one of her more recent biographers, Akhmatova was 'the voice of a whole people's suffering under Stalin'.[3] Vision and testimony at once, her poems have remained as radical and politically relevant today as when they were composed.

Akhmatova wrote at a time and place – twentieth-century Russia – during which literature was an unusually vital force. Or so believe Alexander Blok and numerous other prominent commentators.[4] Roberta Reeder speaks of a country where 'hungry people gathered in cold rooms to read poetry to each other'.[5] Or consider the fact that a 1960 edition of Akhmatova's poems had

a print run of 1,700,000, which compares to an average 3,000 to 5,000 for a poetry book today.[6] The reasons for this unusual phenomenon may be as much practical as cultural. Poetry in Russia had for long been a vehicle to express dissident thoughts, to the point that the voice of leading writers carried enormous political weight. In an authoritarian political system, where censorship entered virtually all domains, literature and art became a replacement for the annihilated public sphere. They constituted the only domains where political debates could be waged openly, albeit in a camouflaged way. The ambiguous character of poems further increased their political potential, and so did their form, which lent itself easily to underground distribution. It was thus that 'literature and artistic wars became', as Isaiah Berlin puts it, 'the only genuine battlefield of ideas'.[7]

The purpose of this chapter is to focus on one aspect of Akhmatova's poems: their function as a critical historical memory. I am doing so not as a specialist in Russian history and literature – a domain to which I can claim no expertise – but as someone interested in the intersection between poetics, politics and history. Previous chapters have already hinted at the relationship between poetry and memory. Paul Celan believed that poems had to remember for those who were no longer around to do so, for 'no one / bears witness for the / witness'.[8] Neruda, likewise, was convinced that he was 'the one who remembers, / although there are no eyes left on the earth'. He added that 'There's no forgetting, ladies and gentlemen, / and through my wounded mouth / those mouths will go on singing!'[9]

The function of poems as memories is critical in the sense that poems do not give us a dogmatic, black-and-white image of the past. They consciously leave part of the memory process open to interpretation, reminding us that the relationship between remembering and forgetting is always incomplete, open to contestation and thus of an inherently political nature. Poems, such as those by Akhmatova, Celan and Neruda, can also make sure that the voices of victims are not silenced – that what they had to say, or would have wanted to say, is preserved and carried on from generation to generation. It is in this sense that poetry fulfils the task of a critical memory: it assures a presence beyond death and beyond the here and now.[10]

Memory is perhaps the oldest function of poetry. It is no accident that poetry began as a form of speaking that revolved around rhyme and other regularities. The rhythmic and rhyming elements of a poem made it easy to remember. Poems thus came to fulfil the function of a societal memory: they handed down from generation to generation the wisdom that had accumulated over time. Poems transmitted and inscribed into cultural traditions the insights that had emerged from specific historical struggles. Rhyme was essential because it maximised both the likelihood of remembrance and the adequacy of memory. This stylistic component of poetry was to remain essential until the widespread use of paper and printing created new possibilities for the collective retention of facts and data. Free verse,

the prevalent form of poetry today, was able to emerge only because the function of remembering could be consigned, as James Scully emphasises, to a variety of alternative memory banks, from conventional books to their latest electronic extensions. 'With increasing dependence on such repositories, and with less individual need to remember, free verse becomes possible and even, perhaps, inevitable.'[11]

The personal and the political

Born as Anna Gorenko in the Ukraine in 1889, Akhmatova grew up near St Petersburg, in cultured and materially well-off circumstances. Her first published poems date back to 1907. A few years later she was already a leading figure in the artistic world of St Petersburg.[12] Her poems were in many ways personal testimonies that reflect her reactions to a variety of private and public issues: the coming of age as an aristocrat at the turn of the century and the confrontation with the political events that followed: the First World War, the revolution of 1917, the civil war, the long terror under Stalin, and yet another world war, which she spent in exile in Uzbekistan. By the time she died, in 1966, Akhmatova was internationally recognised as one of the century's most significant poets.

Akhmatova was part of a group of Russian poets, including Alexander Blok, Boris Pasternak, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Osip Mandelstam and Nikolay Gumilyov, who chose to stay in Russia despite protracted periods of terror, fear and poverty. Although none of these poets was a political activist per se, the artistic independence of their work was often seen as subversive and thus threatening by the authorities. Gumilyov, who was Akhmatova's first husband, was executed in 1921 for alleged counter-revolutionary behaviour, lack of evidence notwithstanding. Mandelstam's fate was similar. His work was mostly of an apolitical nature. But on one occasion, in 1934, he wrote and recited a satirical poem about Stalin, describing the 'Kremlin's mountaineer' with his 'cockroach whiskers' and 'fingers fat as worms'.[13] Mandelstam was arrested, interrogated and sent into exile. Having served his sentence he returned to Moscow in 1937, but was soon arrested and deported again. According to Soviet documents he died a couple of years later in unknown circumstances. And so did many other writers at the time. Isaiah Berlin likens Stalin's large-scale purge of intellectuals to the St Bartholomew's Day Massacre in 1572. 'Russian literature and thought emerged in 1939 like an area devastated by war', he says, 'with some splendid buildings still relatively intact, but standing solitary amid stretches of ruined and deserted country.'[14]

Akhmatova was one of those few splendid buildings that remained intact. She survived both wars as well as Stalin's purge, but often under very dire material circumstances. And although her work was censored or banned for several extended periods, her poetic voice could not be silenced.

One of the key contributions of Akhmatova's poetry was her break with the ornate and erudite style that characterised the dominant Symbolist poetic movement at the time. Akhmatova's poems were written – much like those by Neruda – in a direct and accessible way. And this was also the source of her politics.

Akhmatova became politically relevant when she succeeded in portraying her personal experiences and reactions to events in a language that had universal appeal. Consider her way of dealing with issues of gender. Akhmatova wrote at the beginning of the twentieth century, at a time when, in her own words, 'for a women to be a poet was – absurd'.[15] She took on her nom de plume of Akhmatova because her father commanded her not to 'bring shame upon [the family] name'.[16] Several years later, Akhmatova's second husband, Vladimir Shileyko, a distinguished Assyriologist, forbade her to write poetry during the early days of their marriage.[17] She did, indeed, write hardly any poems in the early 1920s, but what she wrote before and afterwards gave voice to emotions and perspectives that had meaning and mattered for many other women. In a poem written in 1917 she remembered how 'you forbid singing and smiling'. The last stanza:

Thus, a stranger to heaven and earth,
I live and no longer sing,
It's as if you cut off my wandering soul
From both paradise and hell.[18]

Until the advent of Akhmatova's poetry, feminine emotions had only rarely been explored in public. Among the exceptions was Marina Tsvetaeva, whose poetry both expresses strong female emotions and served as a dissident voice during an oppressive period of Russian history. But Tsvetaeva's poetry has not received much attention outside Russia, in part, as some argue, because she committed suicide while in exile during the Second World War. In any case, at the time Akmatova wrote, virtually all literary works portrayed love either from the male point of view or through distinct male lenses.[19] By giving voice to several generations of Russian women, Akhmatova demonstrated what would later become one of the key arguments of feminist thought: that the private is political. Consider, for instance, one of those moments when Akhmatova transgressed, or perhaps transposed, her own experiences to take on a different poetic personae, that of a peasant woman:

My husband whipped me with his woven belt,
Folded into two.
All night I've been at the little window
With a taper, waiting for you.[20]

Fearful times are drawing near . . .

Akhmatova's foray into politics continued when she was confronted with the political and military conflicts that shaped the twentieth century. And her perceptions of conflict stood in stark contrast to those of her first husband, Gumilyov, who glorified the onset of the First World War. The latter relished the battlefield as 'an opportunity to test his courage'.[21] Akhmatova, however, departed radically from the patriotic war fever that engulfed not only Gumilyov but also her country and, indeed, most of Europe. Long before war euphoria gave way to despair and desolation, Akhmatova had already recognised what would lie ahead. She wrote of the terrors of war, of its 'black death' and its 'starving anguish'. It is this ability to anticipate events that Mandelstam recognised in Akhmatova: her tragic fate, the fate of Cassandra, the fate of seeing the future without anybody paying attention to it.[22] Two years before euphoria turned into gloom, she wrote, in a poem entitled 'July 1914':

> Fearful times are drawing near. Soon
> Fresh graves will be everywhere.
> There will be famine, earthquakes, widespread death,
> And the eclipse of the sun and the moon.[23]

It is in the process of naming the realities of war that Akhmatova's poetry became not only more political, but also more problematic. Problematic for the political authorities, that is. Problematic because her artistic interpretations of death and suffering would not lend themselves easily to be used as political tools by the regime. 'The best war poems of Pasternak and Akhmatova', argues Berlin, 'were too pure artistically to be considered as possessing adequate direct propaganda value.'[24]

Poetry alludes, rather than explains. It shows, rather than argues. And it is this artistic ambiguity that provides poetry with its most potent political weapon. Akhmatova's poetry was political not in the sense that she rallied for a particular political perspective or cause. Her poetry was political insofar as she documented the atrocities and emotional dimensions of war in a way that clearly diverged from what political authorities at the time considered the only purpose of art and literature: to help the Party educate the masses about communism.[25] Socialist Realism was considered to be virtually the only possible aesthetic approach to this political project. Any divergence from this position – even if apolitical in nature – was thus inherently political, if not subversive.

As opposed to more dogmatic political engagements, the poetic quest for inclusion does not bring certitude. Poems often do not speak in a single voice. For it is exactly knowledge without doubt that turns into political dogma. Poems address the inevitable flaws entailed in our attempts to interpret and

master the world: the fact that we cannot know without language, and that language always already provides meaning, culturally specific meaning, far beyond our attempts to know. 'Never will you discover the bottom of it', says Akhmatova, 'and never will its hollow silence / Grow tired of speaking.'[26] A good poem, then, removes immobilising certitudes and reveals the grey shades of life, and of politics, of course: its complexities and paradoxes. 'In order to be clear to contemporaries / A poet flings everything wide', Akhmatova says.[27] And by flinging things wide, the poetic image has the potential to bring into a dialogue many of the repressed voices, perspectives and emotions that otherwise may never reach political debates.

Look at another one of Akhmatova's poems about the First World War and consider its hidden political dimension. Note, especially, that she seeks to capture the anguish of death without naming an event or a battle or a war, without blaming a general or an army or a country, without endorsing a leader or an ideology or a political agenda. She merely documents:

> And all day, terrified by its own moans,
> The crowd churns in agonized grief.
> And across the river, on funeral banners,
> Sinister skulls laugh.
> And this is why I sang and dreamed,
> They have ripped my heart in half,
> As after a burst of shots, it became still,
> And in the courtyards, death patrols.[28]

In the absence of any reference to specific events, this poem about grief and death acquires multiple meanings. It contains elusive and constantly shifting political messages. We cannot even be sure if the poem actually speaks of the tragedy of the First World War. Read a few years later, the poem may just as well describe the death patrols that trailed Stalin's purges. We don't really know who the laughing sinister skulls are. Who exactly rips her heart in half? Who shoots?

Akhmatova's poem contains an implicit *j'accuse*. And it is this aesthetic accusatory dimension, contained in many of her poems, which alarmed the authorities. They were concerned with Akhmatova's striking ability to somehow express things that cannot be said openly.

At various moments Soviet authorities either banned Akhmatova's poetry or pressured her into pursuing a more acquiescent line. A few examples: Akhmatova was among a group of poets that Trotsky declared 'irrelevant' to the new Soviet state. In 1925 she was prohibited from publishing by a Communist Party resolution. There were times, as in early 1939, when Stalin would be more tolerant and allow her poems to appear again, just to reverse his policies soon afterwards. By September of 1939, for instance, the Central Committee of the Communist Party ordered the withdrawal of her books, for

their alleged 'allusions to religion and lack of reference to Soviet reality'.[29] At other times, pressure was exerted in indirect ways. In 1933 Akhmatova's son, Lev Gumilyov, was arrested – again, on dubious grounds. He was released upon Akhmatova's intervention, only to be arrested again. In 1938 he was sentenced to ten years in a Siberian prison camp, to be released a few years later only to fight the German army. One of the very few moments when Akhmatova acquiesced to the authorities was in the 1950s, a few months after her son was arrested again and sentenced to ten years' 'hard labour'. In a series of poems called 'In Praise of Peace' she proclaimed that 'Where Stalin is, there too are Freedom, / Peace, and Earth's Grandeur'.[30]

Akhmatova's poetic concession was a survival strategy, a desperate attempt to bring about the release of her son. It was an endeavour that failed. And an endeavour that remained the exception. At virtually all other moments her poetic urge to 'speak truth to power' was far stronger than any pragmatic concern. She was one of those Russian writers who 'suffered' from what Mandelstam called 'Nightingale Fever', that is, the 'inability to stop singing regardless of the consequences', the need to poeticise even in the face of death.[31]

Poetry as critical historical memory

The most significant and lasting political aspects of poetry, and of Akhmatova's poems in particular, are not located in their immediate engagement with events of the day. A poem's lasting political contribution lies above all in its function as a critical historical memory.

Look at how Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Pushkin or Gogol have told the world far more about social and political life in nineteenth-century Russia than all the history books added together. It is through the voices of Anna Karenina, Count Vronski, Raskolnikov, Ivgeni Onegin or the Brothers Karamazov that the values and struggles of an epoch have been conveyed to subsequent generations. Likewise, knowledge about Russia's twentieth century will remain linked to the poetic testimonies of Akhmatova, Mandelstam, Blok, Mayakovsky, Pasternak and Brodsky, to name just a few significant authors. Or consider how our future recollection of the Holocaust may be shaped primarily by, for instance, the poetry of Primo Levi and Paul Celan, or by movies such as Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* and Roberto Benigni's *Life is Beautiful*. This is not only the case because these accounts are read (and the film versions are viewed) far more than meticulously researched history books. John Girling stresses how good works of imaginative fiction can 'condense . . . an entire historical situation'.[32] This is in part because a fictional account of an event or epoch more actively engages the gap that opens up between the event in question and its representation through language. Poetry, for instance, recognises that this inevitable gap is the place where politics and the struggle for power take place. The poem engages this struggle, but instead

of taking sides it seeks to appreciate and save from historical annihilation the multiplicities that make up political and social life. In this sense the poem becomes a critical historical memory, one that retains for future generations a variety of voices and realities. Such a validation of difference can be achieved only if the poet does not repress or ignore representation, if she or he seeks to deal with its political functions, with the inherently problematic nature of rendering meaningful that which often has no meaning for those who live in and through it.

Akhmatova was well aware of the linkages between poetry and memory. She knew that poems can preserve, for subsequent generations, the multiple dimensions of historical events. Says Akhmatova: 'I – am your voice, the warmth of your breath, / I – am the reflection of your face.'[33]

In a series of astonishing poems written between 1935 and 1940 and called 'Requiem', Akhmatova seeks to provide a poetic account of Stalin's terrifying legacy. 'Requiem' is as good a historic account of Stalin's 'Great Terror' as any historical treatise. And it deals with a phenomenon that almost all survivors of traumatic events – from the Holocaust to the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 – acknowledge: that there are usually no words to describe what happened. The words we have at our disposal are simply not adequate to describe the terrifying experience of trauma and its emotional impact.[34] Akhmatova poetically recalls a question asked by a bluish-lipped woman standing behind her in the prison lines of Leningrad:

'Can you describe this?'
And I answered: 'Yes, I can.'
Then something that looked like a smile passed over
what had once been her face.[35]

Akhmatova was trying to find words for events that were too terrible to be expressed or apprehended through the existing language. Words had to be stretched to capture the terrifying aspects of reality that had no apparent meaning. Akhmatova knew well that her poetic attempt to describe the Stalinist purges would not reach the Russian people right away: they were first published in 1963 in München. But Akhmatova also knew that the poetic voice would be stronger than any political leader or institution, no matter how authoritarian: 'And if they gag my exhausted mouth / Through which a hundred million scream, / Then may the people remember me / On the eve of my remembrance day.'[36]

There is no doubt that Akhmatova fulfilled her poetic promise: people did and still do remember her and the voices she saved from historical annihilation. Her poetry is meanwhile a recognised part of our collective memory of Russian history and our canon of world literature. Some would even go a step further and provide Akhmatova with a unique place. Roberta Reeder, one of Akhmatova's biographers, believes that there is

something unique in the way poetry – and particularly Akhmatova's poetry – remembers:

> Poetic prose mirrors the way memory works. A story is based on analogy and association rather than on temporal or cause–effect relationships. There is a simultaneity and bring into juxtaposition of key related moments of the past in order to give them new meaning within new context, and these fragments become equivalent in relevance.[37]

Akhmatova was and is unusual because her poems directly challenge what Nietzsche long ago recognised as one of the most subtle forms of domination: our political appropriation of the past or, to be more precise, situations when powerful rulers fail to gain legitimacy on their own and thus rely on the misappropriation of historical figures and events to justify their form of dominance.[38] Such was undoubtedly the case during the Stalinist area. Akhmatova's poems directly oppose such political doctrines and the practices of domination they promote and conceal. They represent what Nietzsche called 'critical histories', attempts to challenge the notion of a single historical reality and create the political space in which diverging narratives of the past can compete with each other, perhaps even respect each other despite the differences that divide them.

Conclusion

There is much we can learn from Anna Akhmatova's poems. We can learn not only as students of poetry or of Russian history, but also as scholars concerned with the theory and practice of world politics. Akhmatova's poetic engagement with key events of the last century, from the Stalinist purges to the two world wars, demonstrates how representing and remembering political events is an inevitably political process – one that involves an interaction between remembering and forgetting. Forgetting, in this sense, does not mean ignoring what happened. Forgetting, after all, is a natural process, an inevitable aspect of remembering; we all do it, whether we want to or not. We cannot possibly remember everything. We cannot give every event the same weight. Our memory of the past is the result of a process through which certain events and interpretations are remembered and prioritised, while others are relegated to secondary importance or forgotten altogether.

Allow me to illustrate the significant implications of these insights through a rather mundane example. Next time you are in a public space – say a train station – try to remember one minute of what you experience: look around you, remember all the details on the timetables you see – where the trains arrive from or depart to, and at what times; remember the size, shape, colour of all objects you see – trains, vending machines, pillars, everything – and the way they project shadows onto other objects; remember all the people who

pass by, what they wear, how they look and move, what they speak, in all their different accents and languages. Close your eyes and remember every-thing you hear – from the exact announcements to the chit-chatting around you and all the background noises; remember all the smells and all your emo-tional and rational reactions to these and countless other impressions, and how you compared them, directly or subconsciously, to impressions from previous experiences.

Of course, it is impossible to remember all of this. The only way to remem-ber anything about these sixty seconds is to forget almost everything of what you have experienced.

Now imagine a second hypothetical exercise: try to write up a one-page summary of this one-minute experience, an account that simply condenses the facts of what took place during this uneventful period. Imagine that all the other people who were at the train station at the same time did so too: that they also sought to represent, authentically, what happened during these sixty seconds. Finally, imagine how all these various summaries compare. Each of them will inevitably be unique, offering a completely different factual representation of what took place.

If we cannot retrace and adequately represent a single minute of our mun-dane life, how could we possibly remember something as monumental as the First World War, the Stalinist purges, the fall of the Berlin Wall, 9/11 or any other event in world politics? Again, only by forgetting virtually everything about them, except for the few facts, impressions and interpretations that have been deemed memorable.

This is precisely what historians and scholars of international relations do. They select the events worthy of remembering and decide how they ought to be represented. They separate these selective accounts of our past from the overwhelming rest: all the facts and events and impressions we can-not possibly remember and represent in a meaningful way. The disciplinary canon has done so in a largely disciplined way, constituting international relations largely as a heroic and masculine domain of wars and politico-diplomatic struggles among the only actors judged significant: nation-states. The methods deemed proper to study these phenomena have been equally restricted, mostly to well-established social scientific procedures that pro-vide the appearance of rational and unbiased insight. Although the ensuing scholarly discussions are presented in a scientifically legitimated manner they are in essence no different to what people have done from time immemorial: 'they gathered about the fire and told tales of the great deeds, great triumphs, and great defeats of their heroes'.[39]

In making this claim I am not advancing any radical suggestions. Scientific studies have meanwhile provided plenty of evidence about the inherently unreliable nature of memory. Sue Halpern, for instance, in a fascinating study of how scientists try to understand memory and memory loss, draws atten-tion to an experiment conducted by the Cambridge Psychological Society.

Members of the Society were asked to recall the exact content of the meeting that had occurred a week before. On average, a member was able to recall approximately 8 per cent of the meeting's key content. But, more surprisingly, almost half of these recollections were actually factually incorrect. Most people remembered things that had either taken place elsewhere or never actually occurred.[40] This is why it might actually be useful to draw a distinction, as Duncan Bell suggests, between memory and myth. The former, he argues, ought to be limited to experiences of people who directly witnessed and shared certain events. The latter, by contrast, are collective recollections of past events – as represented through history books, media, films, school curricula, art and the like.[41] But both processes – memory and myth – are of an inherently political nature – and they thus need to be examined as such.

Akhmatova teaches us how to face this challenge and oppose understandings of the past – or the present, for that matter – that either claim to be beyond representation or are so well rehearsed and accepted that we no longer see their representational – and inherently political – nature. Akhmatova shows us how to 'fling everything wide', how to use poems in a way that opens our eyes to things we could not see before. She does so through poems that speak long after her death. They will go on speaking, and in ways that she did not and could not imagine. Most likely also in ways she would have disapproved of. This is the power of poetic memory: to speak, to disturb, to let us not fall into political complacency. It is in 'The Cellar of Memory' that Akhmatova discovers that politics goes far beyond the types of agitations and debates presented to us as politics proper. Political insight is above all located in the continuous ability to reveal the unknown, that which cannot even be imagined yet. The unthought:

> I don't often visit memory
> And it always surprises me.
> When I descend with a lamp to the cellar,
> It seems to me – a landslide
> Rumbles again on the narrow stairs.[42]

9
The Poetic Search for Identity and Community

> Peace is waves.
> Waves breaking, alive
> and beneath those waves
> swim fish of every kind, alive.
>
> <div align="right">Ko Un, 'Song of Peace from Jeju Island'[1]</div>

The final case study of this book focuses on the Korean poet Ko Un.[2] I pursue similar themes to those in previous chapters, from the poetic resistance to authoritarianism to the search for a critical historical voice, but I do so in a different cultural context and by highlighting an additional underlying factor: the role that poetry plays in articulating questions of identity and community.

Ko Un is one of South Korea's best known poets. Born in 1933 he was shortlisted for the Nobel Prize several times. As a young man, Ko Un directly experienced colonial occupation and the atrocities of the Korean War, including the death of several relatives and friends. He then spent ten years as a Buddhist monk, eventually holding several high ranks in monastic life. In 1962 he rejoined the secular world to set up a charity on the Korean island of Jeju. During the 1970s and 1980s Ko Un gained prominence as an outspoken nationalist poet who was active in the democracy movement that opposed a series of military dictatorships. As a result he spent two years in prison under the regime of General Chun Doo-hwan. Released in 1982 as part of a general pardon, Ko Un devoted himself to a life of poetry. Most recently he has used his literary reputation to advance the cause of reconciliation with North Korea. Ko Un's output comprises over a hundred volumes of poetry, novels, autobiography, dramas, essays, travel books and translations. His work is particularly known for a style that brings everyday language to poetry.

It is hard to say what exactly is political about Ko Un – whether it is his poetry or his personal political actions, or a combination thereof. Ko Un's engagement was undoubtedly political, particularly during the democracy

movement of the 1970s and 1980s, as well as during his more recent engagement for reconciliation between North and South Korea. He has also written explicitly political poems, but most of them are as seemingly apolitical as those of Celan and Akhmatova.

The underlying political significance of Ko Un's poems lies in their search for a critical notion of Korean identity. During the various stages of Ko Un's life Korea faced challenges that at times took on a deep existential nature: a long and oppressive colonial occupation by Japan that sought to erase all traces of Korean language and culture; a division of the country into a communist North and a capitalist South; a devastating war between the two sides that involved several great powers and led to a permanent division of the country; the subsequent entanglement of the peninsula into global Cold War political dynamics; a rapid industrialisation process in the South, driven by several authoritarian regimes; and the still ongoing residues of national division and corresponding security threats.

During these and other challenges Korean society struggled to maintain a sense of itself. And it is in this context that Ko Un's poetry sought to provide an avenue through which the Korean people could regain a sense of their being and their national identity. Ko Un does, in fact, explicitly acknowledge that 'an independent response to modern times . . . depends on a consistent representation of oneself and a discovery of one's own identity'.[3] Poets have, of course, often been used – and far more often misused – to construct national identities. Look at the role of Goethe, Heine or Hölderlin in Germany, or at epic poetry in countless articulations of patriotism: the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* in ancient Greece, the *Mahabharata* in India, *Beowulf* in England or the *Song of Roland* in France. Almost every society has a few key poets whose work is recited time and again as part of a national mythology that articulates, sometimes in a highly idealised fashion, what it means to belong to a particular group of people. The result is far too often a form of nationalism that asserts identity in juxtaposition to what is different. The latter tends to be presented as threatening, thus generating political dynamics that can easily lead to conflict.

Ko Un's poetry shows that it is possible to articulate national identity in less nationalist and hostile ways: as part of a political movement that portrays other people and their identities in empathetic ways, and thus avoids the inside/outside logic that can lead to problematic forms of nationalism.

Most engagements with Ko Un divide his work into periods that reflect his own experiences: the so-called 'Buddhist phase', encapsulating his childhood, his decade as a monk, and the years following his leaving the monastery; then the 'Yusin phase', which includes the 1970s and 1980s, a time when he was at the forefront of the fight for democracy in South Korea; and, finally, his latter years, during which Ko Un married, experienced fatherhood and sought to explore the basis of human life more broadly.[4] I am departing from this tradition because I am less interested in Ko Un's life than

in the nature and role his poetry played in articulating notions of national identity. I retain a chronological structure, but divide it into four parts: Ko Un's attempt to carve out a notion of identity in response to Japan's colonial occupation, his engagement with the trauma of national division and war, the role of poetry in the fight against authoritarianism, and the most recent role that his literature plays in efforts to achieve reconciliation between the still hermetically sealed Northern and Southern parts of Korea.

Colonialism

Born in 1933 in the southern city of Kunsan, Ko Un grew up during a particularly turbulent time, a time when Japan's colonial occupation sought to erase all traces of Korean identity.

Korea's geopolitical importance was – and still is – a key factor in its politics. Japan fought two wars for the control of Korea, one in 1894/5 against China, the other in 1904/5 against Tsarist Russia. The outcome of these conflicts was the basis for Korea's annexation into the Japanese colonial empire in 1910, which lasted until the end of the Second World War.[5] Korea was seen as an essential element in Japan's imperial expansion. Especially after the invasion of Manchuria in 1931, Korea became a key source of commodities for the imperial economy. During this time the occupation forces tried everything possible to eradicate Korean identity – to the point that schools were not allowed to teach Korean history, culture or language. Koreans had to adopt Japanese names and even at home they were not supposed to speak Korean.

Ko Un witnessed this form of political and cultural oppression from an early age. In primary school he was forced to adopt a Japanese name: Dakkabayai Doraske. Ko Un already had a keen interest in poetry and his experience of colonial occupation substantially shaped his literary engagement over the subsequent decades. He also realised later how central linguistic practices are for questions of national identity – and politics in general: 'When defining a people, one naturally asks whether they have a language of their own.'[6] When this language is taken away, with it vanishes not only political, but also cultural sovereignty.

In numerous later poems Ko Un sought to deal with the challenge of retaining a form of Korean national identity under the threat of colonial annihilation. In a poem called 'Arirang', he recorded the often forgotten fate of Koreans who were either killed or forcibly relocated to foreign territories during the Japanese colonial occupation:

> It was a day in 1937. Korean residents of the Maritime Province
> were ordered into freight cars in a train that ran ten or
> fifteen days along Lake Baikal on the Siberian Railway.
> Five thousand died and were dumped, one body after another,
> until at last the train reached the wilderness of Alma-Ata.

> They were ordered out and told, 'This is where you will make
> your home.' The freight cars went back empty to where they came from.[7]

Ko Un then shows how these Koreans in exile in Russia retained a certain Korean identity, even after having been integrated into local culture. He speaks of a time sixty years later, of young 'Natalia Kim, Illich Park; and Anatoli Kang'. The latter is an 11-year-old child, and a good balalaika player. He is handed the music for Arirang, one of the oldest and most popular Korean folksongs. He immediately starts to play it, and does so beautifully:

> In that melody the young boy played for the first time
> in his life, all the sorrows of generation after generation,
> ages-long sorrow passed down from grandfathers to
> grandsons, to a boy's sad tears.
> Is it blood or music, I wonder.
> Arirang, Arirang, Arariyo.[8]

Arirang occupies a particularly symbolic role in the Korean imaginary. It exists in numerous regional versions and it gained political significance in the 1920s, when it became associated with the nationalist movement that opposed Japanese colonial occupation. The closing scenes of a film called *Arirang*, for instance, depicts the protagonist singing the song as he is being arrested by the Japanese. The film was banned and its theme song subsequently became associated with nationalist sentiments.

By presenting the issue of national identity through people in exile, Ko Un appeals to more than mere patriotic sentiments. He does, in fact, draw attention to the constructed – and thus political – nature of identity. He goes as far as asking if the very notion of 'home' can exist 'only in the memories of those who have left their original homes'.[9] This attitude was to shape Ko Un's poetic engagement for decades: an almost cosmopolitan approach to national identity that gives key importance to retaining a sense of national pride while also recognising that one's home can be in different places, that it is possible – perhaps even desirable – to develop deep attachments to places and allegiances other than those of one's original birthplace.

National division and war

The defeat of Japan at the end of the Second World War ended the colonial occupation of Korea, but not the country's tragic fate, or Ko Un's own suffering, for that matter. Once Japan was defeated, the two dominant victorious countries, the United States and the Soviet Union, dismantled the colonial empire. In this context they divided the Korean peninsula into two parts along the 38th parallel. This line was drawn by American officials in August 1945, hastily, arbitrarily, and without consulting any Koreans.[10] The

unilateral US move was then accepted by the Soviet Union. Separate political regimes were established on each side, reflecting the ideological standpoints of the two superpowers. In the south the Republic of Korea was formed in August 1948. The new country, led by its first president, the Korean expatriate Syngman Rhee, became a close ally of the US. The northern part of the peninsula became the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. Its first head of state was Kim Il Sung, an anti-Japanese guerrilla fighter. The country adopted a unique nationalist form of communist ideology and became a close ally of both the Soviet Union and China.

What happened between then and the outbreak of the Korean War is much debated. The most neutral descriptions, to the extent that this is possible given the highly emotional issues at stake, hold that 'tension along the thirty-eighth parallel flared up in intermittent military clashes until a full-scale war broke out in June 1950, when North Korea launched a general invasion against South Korea in an attempt to bring all of Korea under its rule'.[11] The two Korean governments, however, sponsored much more black-and-white accounts of the war: accounts that put all the blame for the conflict on the other side. The respective narratives then became essential elements in the creation of two diametrically opposed notions of nationhood. For instance, Park Chung Hee, South Korea's president during the 1960s and 1970s, argued that 'the north Korean Communists villainously unleashed an unwarranted armed invasion of the south with a view to communizing the entire Korean peninsula'.[12] The North, by contrast, saw the events as a heroic attempt to 'liberate the homeland' and 'drive out the beast-like American imperialists'.[13] The juxtaposed interpretations of history are deeply rooted in the respective state mythologies – to the point that it is virtually impossible, as a senior scholar acknowledges, 'to venture a balanced account of Korea's recent history'.[14]

Numerous revisionist scholars, such as Bruce Cumings, Choi Jang-jip, Chong Hae-gu and Kim Nam-sik, stress that things were indeed much more blurred than either side pretends – that intense fighting between communist and capitalist sympathisers took place long before the outbreak of open hostilities.[15] In numerous parts of the South, for instance, a strong communist insurgency movement emerged during the initial period of national division, at a time when the US army military government had legal authority and operational control over the southern part of Korea. Some of the respective movements, like one on Jeju island, were brutally suppressed in 1948, mostly by army and police forces from the mainland. The death toll reached anywhere between 30,000 and 60,000 people – at a time when the island's population was at most 300,000. Dismissed as an externally instigated communist rebellion, a series of subsequent South Korean governments sought to banish the 'incident' from the society's collective memory. It is only in recent years that discussions of the incident have become possible.[16]

While the nature and cause of the war were and remain disputed, its tragic impact is undeniable: more than a million people died before the armistice was signed in June 1953. The war also involved two great powers on opposing sides: first the United States, which intervened, together with other nations through a UN mandate designed to roll back the Northern occupation of the South; and then China, whose involvement saved the North from defeat and secured a military stalemate along the original dividing line at the 38th parallel.

The young Ko Un was caught in the middle of this turbulent period. Several of his relatives and friends collaborated with the communist North during the war, and many of them were killed in revenge. As punishment he was forced to bury their corpses in a nearby graveyard. He recalls how the smell of death drove him mad, how even after weeks of washing his hands he could not get the smell of death out of his skin.[17] His first suicide attempt occurred during this period.[18] And in his poetry the respective trauma keeps reappearing. He writes of the 'home to the grief-filled souls of those many who fell / victim to the barbarism of modern Korean history'. For him, 'peace was birds – / birds that all flew away at the sound of a gun'.[19] The violence cannot be forgotten, it can only be narrated, and even this is and will always be a traumatic process:

> Mow down parents and children
> this, that, and the others,
> everything else.
> Knife them in the dark.
> Next morning
> the world is piled with death
> our chore is burying them all day.
> And building a new world on it.[20]

It is obvious that this poem reflects very personal experiences that Ko Un had as a teenager during the war. But a memory is never a purely individual matter. Ko Un explicitly points out that the devastation across the Korean peninsula overlapped with the ruins of his own house; that his own trauma is organically linked to a larger historical disaster. This merger between private and public is particularly pronounced in the realm of the aesthetic. Ko Un knows all too well that a poem can only 'truly be a poem when personal matters overlap with public ones'.[21] This is also how the poem works politically: as synecdoche. It presents the reader with the concrete experience or the thought of a single person or a particular instance, but by crystallising from this specific moment something larger, perhaps even universal, the poem can be of much broader relevance.

Ko Un's engagement as a public poet was to come later. For now he turned inward as a way of dealing with the traumatic memory and the daily reality

of a country torn apart by war, national division and poverty. At the age of 19 he entered a Zen (*Seon* in Korean) Buddhist monastery in 1952. Monastic life gave Ko Un not only a way of dealing with the traumatic memory of war and the problems of daily life, but also an opportunity to pursue his passion for poetry. He published his first collection, entitled *Other World Sensibility*, in 1960 while serving as a monk. His poetry in this period was a mixture of the traditional Korean variety of folk poetry and Zen Buddhism.[22] During his decade as a monk he assumed several high positions, but eventually became disillusioned with the corruption that infiltrated even the monastic order. He also searched for an opportunity to pursue his childhood passion for poetry more actively than the busy schedule of a practising monk allowed him to.[23]

The struggle for democracy

Ko Un gave up his monastic life in 1962. In the following years he taught art and Korean language on Jeju island. This unpaid work provided him with the time he needed to pursue his poetry. Free of his monastic commitments, Ko Un soon produced two new volumes of work: *Seaside Poems* (1966) and *God, the Last Village of Languages* (1967). His work took on an experimental and spontaneous character, reflecting the broadening of his social experiences.[24]

Ko Un eventually returned to Seoul, but the decade after leaving the monastery was a difficult period for him. In numerous autobiographical reflections he stressed how he was consumed by a deep sense of nihilism and recurring periods of depression and alcoholism. The respective images often recur in his poetry:

> Stop for a moment; get our mind
> off the drink.
> What're we?[25]

In today's language one would mostly likely speak of post-traumatic stress disorder, of a person's inability to process the overwhelming experience of war, death and suffering. Numerous poems of Ko Un capture his depression, his recurring nightmares and his flashbacks to the trauma of war. 'It's cold, it's / the mind', he writes.[26] But it is not just his personal experience he is writing about: it is the trauma of an entire nation devastated by war and torn apart by a dividing line across the 38th parallel:

> The song I sang,
> the song I couldn't sing
> come crashing down on me.
>
> Is it me

> – running with the torch light?
> Is it me?
> – this luminous regret?[27]

Ko Un's depression was so severe that he attempted suicide several times. He recovered from one attempt only after thirty days in a coma.[28] Ko Un recalls how his struggle with alcoholism, and his attempted suicides, drew his attention to a similar but much more public event that took place in 1970: the suicide of Chun Tae-il, a young garment worker. His self-immolation happened as part of a public protest against the dire working conditions that prevailed at the time. A brief contextual explanation is necessary before I can engage the respective events.

The Korean War sealed the division of the peninsula into a communist North and a capitalist South. On both sides an unusually strong and authoritarian state apparatus emerged. This was the case not only in the North, where Kim Il-Sung established a ruthless form of communist authoritarianism, but also in the South, where a series of military dictatorships managed to quell all possible opposition.

By 1970 South Korea had experienced almost a decade of authoritarian rule under General Park Chung Hee. Park's claim to legitimacy was his ability to develop a strong state that promoted rapid economic development. Central to this strategy, particularly in its early stages, was the development of low-wage, labour-intensive industries, such as the production of footwear, textiles and wigs. Such an industrial shift was significant, for Korea had before been a predominantly agrarian society – and one devastated by war. Numerous factories opened in and around big cities, such as Seoul, attracting a great number of workers from rural areas. The working conditions that these people found were extremely poor. Wages were minimal and factory owners often called on the police to quash attempts by workers to organise collectively. A good example is Seoul's 'Peace Market', which housed numerous factories that mostly produced garments. Workplaces were cramped and working conditions were exceedingly demanding, if not downright brutal. Employers were unwilling to provide even the most basic of entitlements to workers, such as a 48-hour working week, a ban on child labour (defined as less than 14 years), and special monthly rest days for female workers.

It was in this context that Chun Tae-il committed a public act of self-immolation. As a young garment worker he took part in a series of actions designed to pressure employers to guarantee at least minimal working conditons. But the protest movement was ignored by employers and quashed by the police. In frustration and in despair, Chun set himself on fire in front of his workplace. Surrounded by his co-workers and in the process of dying, he chastised the police and employers for their cruelty.[29]

Chun's suicide drew unprecedented public attention to the fate of factory workers. The incident came as a jolt to Ko Un, who started to question the

broader process of development and governance in Korea. Most notably, he started to ask himself 'what literature could do for hungry children' and what poetry could do when facing a dictatorship.[30]

Ko Un took on a leadership role in the political opposition, penning numerous declarations in the name of intellectual and literary groups. But for some time there was a rather large gap between his open political commitment and his still largely apolitical poetry. 'The poet was running faster than the poetry', Ko Un later said. Eventually his poetry caught up with him, though always being a bit 'short of breath'.[31] More and more he started to tackle social and political themes. And he did so prolifically. His main works in the 1970s were *Senoya Senoya* (1970), *On the Way to Munui Village* (1977), *Going into Mountain Retreat* (1977) and *Early Morning Road* (1978). But he also published several collections of essays, short stories, travelogues and studies on famous Korean artists and poets.

The main theme in his poetic work during this period was resistance to oppression. He tried to be a voice for the dispossessed, for those who had no voice.[32] As the Chun Tae-il incident exemplified, the plight of workers' rights in the early stage of Korean industrialisation was the clearest manifestation of oppression. But Ko Un sought to expose deeper-rooted practices of exclusion and marginalisation:

> what sound can penetrate
> the ear that has never heard the sick child's moan?[33]

A good example is Ko Un's poem 'Indangsu', which tells the tale of Sim-ch'ong, a despairing young woman about to throw herself into the sea. The poem is a mixture of social critique with a more aggressive call to do something about the injustices in Korean society:

> Come, clouds, driving furious!
> Beat out, deep drums!
> Sharp waves in Mongkumi Straits,
> Tear away at the loose rock slabs!
> Open your eyes, everyone!
> Blind father, open your eyes!
> Go sell yourself for sixty bushels of rice![34]

Ko Un also used short stories as a form of socio-political critique. The story 'The Night Tavern', which was written while he was under house arrest in the early 1970s, depicts life at the fringes of Seoul in the mid-1960s, when Korea was still recovering from the ruins of war.[35]

Ko Un avoided the fixed poetic form that Korean tradition – as well as Chinese poetry – dictated. This stylistic digression symbolised a larger refusal to accept the legitimacy of the Park regime. But he went further, becoming

more and more explicit and activist in his poetry. He tried to read his poems to different audiences – to people in factories or at universities, for instance. And he was by now convinced that 'poetry had the power to bring about social and historical changes'. This is why, he says, he wrote poems that were like arrows.[36] Such is, indeed, the key theme of his best known resistance poem:

> Transformed into arrows
> let's all soar together, body and soul!
> Piercing the air
> let's go soaring, body and soul!
> With no way of return
> but transfixed there
> rotting with the pain of striking home,
> never to return.
>
> One last breath! Now, let's quit the string,
> throwing away like useless rags
> all we have had over the years
> all we have enjoyed over the years
> all we have piled up over the years
> happiness
> and whatever else.
> Transformed into arrows
> let's all soar together, body and soul
>
> The air is shouting! Piercing the air
> let's go soaring, body and soul!
> In dark daylight the target is rushing towards us.
> Finally, as the target topples
> in a shower of blood,
> let's all just once as arrows
> bleed.
>
> Never to return!
> Never to return!
>
> Hail, brave arrows, our nation's arrows!
> Hail, Warriors! Spirits of the fallen![37]

From the vantage point of a democratic and safe society, this poem reads overly activist and melodramatic. It is the type of poem that can ruin a poet's reputation. 'It's usually a disaster for a poet to write political poetry', says Robert Hass, citing Yeats' dictum that political poetry 'produces rhetoric which is man quarrelling with others, but real poetry is man quarrelling with himself'.[38] But Hass classifies Ko Un's poetry as among the world's finest. And while not his most exquisite poem, we need to acknowledge that Ko

Un's 'Arrows' is indeed a very daring public statement in the context of an extremely authoritarian and ruthless dictatorial state. Public gatherings were all but forbidden during most of the 1970s and 1980s. Organising and taking part in them were dangerous activities. Dissidents regularly ended up in jail – as did Ko Un – and all too often died under mysterious circumstances. There was absolutely no room for dissent, which is why a poem like 'Arrows' was extremely subversive.

'Arrows' captured the widespread anger and despair that was building up in Korean society. It also got its author into trouble. Ko Un was imprisoned in 1977 for opposing the constitution. But after his release he continued to be involved in the fight to uphold workers' rights. He was active in a protest movement that opposed the YH Trading Company, a garment manufacturer notorious for exploiting its predominantly female workforce. The workers went on strike to protect their livelihoods when the factory's owners took off with the firm's funds. One of the strike's leaders, Kim Gyeong-suk, was killed by the police in November 1978. Ko Un was part of a public campaign to support the strikers, which eventually led to a wider revolt against the state.

Park Chung Hee was assassinated in late 1979, arguably as a result of the tensions within the regime about how to respond to the strikes.[39] Chun Doo-hwan, another military leader, seized power following Park's death. But popular opposition to the continuation of military rule was strong, especially in the south-western Jeolla province. The most extensive display of opposition to the new regime was in Gwangju, the capital of Jeolla. The public had hoped that Korea would revert to civilian rule following the assassination of Park, but the new military junta instead repressed all political activity and arrested opposition leaders, such as Kim Dae-Jung. Weeks of demonstrations culminated in a popular revolt and a subsequent violent repression by security forces, in which several hundred protesters were killed.

Ko Un was arrested again in May 1980, but this time he was given a life-sentence for 'seditious activity', which meant opposing the military coup of Chun Doo-hwan. Meanwhile, the violence of Gwangju shook South Korean society to its core. While Ko Un remained in prison, a radical popular poetry movement emerged in the early 1980s. The Chun regime also faced a broad coalition of oppositional forces, including workers, students, church groups and the so-called *minjung* (people's) movements. These disparate sources of opposition grew over the years until weeks of massive, nationwide protests in 1987 forced General Chun's resignation and led to the first popular elections in decades.[40]

In search of a critical notion of national identity

Ko Un's own life-path changed once again before the dramatic shift from authoritarianism to democratic elections took place in 1987. He was pardoned and set free in 1982, after more than two years of imprisonment. But

he continued to struggle. Ko Un recalled that after he left prison he wanted to write, but could not remember anything at all. Everything slipped from his grasp, he says: he felt like an imbecile and all he did 'was drink, day in and day out for two years'.[41] Things only improved when Ko Un moved to the countryside, to Ansong, and, at the age of 49, married Lee Sang-wha, a professor of English literature.[42]

Although Ko Un stayed politically involved, he became more critical about his own political poetry. He believed he had become too much of a 'fighting poet', and that this tendency had created an increasing distance from many of his readers.[43] This is why Ko Un sought to distance himself from his earlier work. He went as far as revising his earlier poems and releasing them in a new version, as *The Complete Poems of Ko Un* (1984). This, in turn, dismayed some of his admirers as well. They believed that the revised poems lacked the vivacity of the originals.[44]

The poetry that Ko Un wrote in the years that followed was certainly less politically explicit. He focused on exploring the human condition in a more basic way. Instead of engaging political leaders and challenging their repressive policies, Ko Un appealed to the Korean people in general and asked them to create the condition for a better society within themselves. To do so is to recognise that democracy is more than merely a set of institutions – that it also has to be accompanied by a way of life, a certain democratic ethos.[45] The revolution of 1987 had certainly introduced democratic elections and institutions to South Korean society, but the corresponding democratic attitude took much longer to develop. Sungmoon Kim describes this situation as 'an immensely grotesque mixture of a democratic hardware, on the one hand, and persistent authoritarian software, on the other'.[46]

Ko Un's work in this less political phase can be seen as contributing to this broader process of social democratisation. He was certainly prolific. Ko Un's scope of inquiry widened and his literary output increased commensurately. He produced works such as *Pastoral Poems* (1986), *Morning Dew* (1990), *What? Zen Poems* (1991) and *Songs of Tomorrow* (1992). In the latter, Ko Un expressed a gloomy prognosis of the future of Korean society, warning of a 'new age of barbarism' that was set to envelop the country following the triumph of global capitalism.[47] Another project of note was the seven-volume *Baektu Mountain: an Epic*, which was composed between 1987 and 1994. This body of work was an extended poem that described in great detail the struggle of the Korean independence movement against Japan in the first half of the twentieth century.[48] *Songs for Cha-ryeong* (1997) was a volume of poems devoted to Ko Un's daughter. Starting in 1986, he also published an autobiography in five volumes.

The single most significant poetic project of Ko Un was undoubtedly his *Maninbo* collection – an exceedingly ambitious undertaking he had started in prison. *Maninbo* means 'ten thousand lives' and it consists of an attempt

to write a poem for every person that Ko had met in his life. Ko Un describes how he was inspired in his prison cell to write *Maninbo*:

> The darkness was like a dream, and in that darkness and isolation people from my past came to visit me – my parents, grandparents, friends, people I'd met in passing, people I had never met at all, historical figures . . . I spoke with these faces that came to me. I wanted to record every one of them in a poem. At the time I thought that I was going to die, but I swore if I should live I would write a poem for each of them.[49]

Changbi Publishers started to publish this project in 1987. Up to now some twenty volumes have appeared, reflecting Ko Un's remarkable creativity. But he ultimately accepted his wife's advice and agreed to limit his goal to about 3,000 poems, rather than the originally planned 10,000.[50]

The collection is very much a reflection of its time: a document that captures the *Zeitgeist* of a period. Robert Hass describes *Maninbo* as a combination of pungent village gossip and epic reach, combining numerous voices – from farming wives to snake catchers, from beggars to well-known historical figures – into a single collective consciousness.[51] There is an English-language volume that presents a selection from the first ten volumes of *Maninbo*. Some poems contain references to political events, from the war to the struggle for democracy. They reflect the lives and voices of ordinary Korean people during the various – and often tumultuous – periods of contemporary Korea. Given the diversity of this project, it is hard to select poems that are representative – and it is even harder to select one that is representative of its underlying political themes. But here is an example nevertheless – one that perhaps hints at the multiple and complex – and inevitably political – dimensions of the many *Maninbo* poems:

> Cow eyes
> those dull vacant eyes
> my grandmother's eyes.
>
> My grandmother!
> The most sacred person in the world to me.
>
> A cow that has stopped grazing the fresh grass
> and is just standing there.
>
> But she's not my grandmother after all:
> rather, this world's peace,
>
> dead and denied a tomb.[52]

Maninbo captures the underlying political dimensions of Ko Un's poems: their attempt to define a sense of Korean identity at a time when his nation was under threat from colonialism, war, division and globalisation. In one

sense, Ko Un is a very nationalist poet. He seeks to articulate and defend a very distinct form of Korean character. Like many of his generation, Ko Un had survived the calamities of the colonial period and was deeply imbued with resentment towards Japan and to a lesser extent the United States. In the face of cataclysmic changes, such as colonialism and global ideological conflict, he sensed that Korean society was struggling to maintain a sense of itself. Ko Un's work was a deliberate attempt to reclaim what was valuable in Korean culture from the threat of conflict and modernisation. The proudly Korean character of Ko Un's work is evident in the original introduction to *Maninbo*, which took the form of a 'declaration of independence from all foreign literary influence'.[53] Ko Un clearly relied on Korean literary traditions to the greatest extent possible, constructing 'a rustic vernacular, a poetry of the Korean countryside as earthy as the mountain vegetables that deepen the flavour of Korean food'.[54] This is also why Ko Un was quite disappointed with the performance of more recent 'reformist' governments, such as those under President Roh Moo-hyun. Ko Un certainly approved of the meanwhile very broad-based democratic nature of governance, but feared that the ensuing policies, such as a free-trade agreement with the United States, would further expose the Korean economy to the forces of the global economy.[55]

Judged from such a vantage point, one could easily portray Ko Un as an inward- and backward-looking poet, a nationalist who tries to hold on to some idealised authentic notion of Koreanness that is long gone. But to do so would be unfair. As a victim of state violence, Ko Un was well aware – and very cautious – about the powerful allure of nationalism. He also questioned, in a more general sense, whether it is really wise to let one's birthplace be the only strong influence on one's identity. In fact, Ko Un points out that 'the nation state can be violent and cause much harm', which is why he is searching for a notion of citizenship that goes beyond nationhood.[56] In order to free literature from what he perceived as the fascist and statist tendencies of nationalism, Ko Un used the concept of people's literature (*minjung munhak*) in the 1980s to replace the national literature of the previous decade. The underlying idea here is that a nation is made up of its people, not the state. It is thus necessary to shift attention to the overwhelming mass of people who were marginalised by successive authoritarian governments. In a sense, Ko Un sought to remember all Koreans who have suffered over the years, depicting these people – rather than their oppressors, both Korean and non-Korean – as the true heroes of Korean history. Or, expressed in his own words, it was necessary to make workers into 'the subject of history and not the object of history'.[57] Nothing can capture this aim better then Ko Un's own poetry, as for instance a few lines from his earlier mentioned activist poem 'Indangsu' demonstrate:

Where are our country's deepest thoughts found?
Not in Toegye, the noted scholar,

but in the firm resolve of one destitute girl
from Mongkumpo, by the name of Sim-ch'ong.[58]

Reconciliation and unification

Questions of identity and nationalism in Korea cannot be understood outside the traumatic division of the country. The memory of violence and death continues to dominate politics on the peninsula. For the last half century the Korean peninsula has been divided between a communist North and a capitalist South, each viewing the other as its ideological archrival. On each side an unusually strong state emerged and was able to promote a particular ideological vision of politics and society: a vision that constructs the other side of the dividing line as an enemy and a source of fear and instability. A passionate anti-capitalist attitude dominates the reclusive North while a more moderate but still pronounced anti-communist orientation prevails in the South.

One of the most striking features of politics in Korea is the almost total state control over cross-border relations. Travel, mail and telecommunication links between North and South have been entirely cut off. For the past half century the Demilitarised Zone has perhaps been the world's most hermetically sealed border. In the case of North Korea, state control over civil society is particularly pronounced. One could, indeed, speak of an annihilation of civil society. Oh Kongdan and Ralph Hassig stress that North Korea is 'the most closed society on earth', and that it has been more successful than any other modern government in cutting off its people from the outside world.[59] Average citizens have no access to foreign television programmes, radio broadcasts or newspapers. The country's official and only media is completely controlled by the state and geared towards one objective: the mythological legitimisation of the state and its leaders. In the context of a hermetically divided peninsula, where there is virtually no communication and information passing from one side to the other, each state could easily promote propagandistic regime-legitimisation processes without running the risk of having its truth claims questioned by the population.

Much has, of course, changed with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the global dissolution of a Cold War power structure. But not so in Korea. The peninsula is still divided, caught in a tense and highly anachronistic Cold War stalemate. The presence of weapons of mass destruction, combined with a hostile rhetoric and the intersection of great power interests, have created an ever-present danger of military confrontation. Nearly two million troops face each other across the dividing line.

It is not surprising, then, that Ko Un believes 'unification of and communication between North and South Korea is the greatest challenge we face'.[60] In much of his poetry we find depictions – implicit or explicit – of the recurring

pain caused by national division and the persistence of deep hatreds and antagonism:

> I came back
> to where hatred
> clumps like dry dung
> – this is the world I longed for:
>
> Where I spit and swear
> at the grey sky,
> where the scavengers and gangs
> hustle,
> yell all night.[61]

More so than in many other contexts, in Korea the past drives the present. The memory of war dominates virtually all aspects of politics. Questions of identity are absolutely central here, for each state has sponsored a version of the past that corresponds to its own ideological vision. History textbooks in secondary schools, for instance, not only advance a completely different version of what took place during the war and who was responsible for it, but also link this ideological version of the past to an understanding of what it means to be Korean.[62] Says Ko Un:

> Forgotten things
> from the days past pile up
> filling the heart
> like the useless dust from a mountain range.[63]

Ko Un's engagement for reconciliation with the North goes back to his early activist days. He received his first jail term in 1977 on the grounds of criticising Park Chung Hee's unification policy – an act that was tantamount to sedition. The Park regime had initiated talks with its northern counterpart in the early 1970s, but showed little substantive interest in compromising on the capitalist order that it oversaw in the South. Ko Un criticised the regime for putting its relations with the United States and Japan ahead of the goal of national unification. But at that time – and to some extent still today – anti-communism was such a strong political imperative in South Korea that no alternative visions were allowed, to the point that 'socialist discourse was legally forbidden'.[64] At some stage North Korea was actually seen as not belonging to the same nation. Park Chung Hee literally believed that the North had lost its Korean national identity because communism is an ideology 'wholly alien to the tradition and history of our nation'.[65]

Ko Un received another prison term in 1991 for illegally organising contacts with the North, in this case a festival for writers from both sides. It was only in 1998, with the inauguration of President Kim Dae-Jung – a one-time prison

cell-mate of Ko Un – that a more tolerant attitude towards the North became possible. Kim Dae-Jung's engagement policy, which was maintained by his successor, Roh Moo-hyun, opened up opportunities for cultural, economic and political exchanges between the two sides, albeit still at a very limited level.[66] But some of the breakthroughs were significant. The most symbolic event took place in June 2000, when Kim Dae-Jung visited Pyongyang for a first ever summit meeting with the North Korean leader, Kim Jong-il.

Ko Un accompanied Kim Dae-Jung to the summit meeting. He also played a key role in a number of initiatives, trying to bring poets and novelists from both sides together in an attempt to develop a common sense of national literature. Doing so has been a long-time goal of Ko Un, going back to the 1980s: to develop a type of national literary movement (*minjok munhak*) that can build 'a new nation transcending the dichotomy of the capitalism of the south and the socialism of the north'.[67] In 2005 a group of North and South Korean writers issued a joint declaration, aiming to promote reconciliation on the peninsula. Numerous activities followed. Ko Un, for instance, led 98 South Korean writers on a visit to the North. Among the plans that this group of writer-activists have are a joint literary organisation and a common North–South dictionary.[68] The latter alone is a gargantuan task. During sixty years of division the spoken and written language has developed in markedly different directions on each side. There are key differences in grammar, spelling and vocabulary – all reflecting deep-seated societal and political values. A group of ten specialists on each side is now working towards establishing a mutually acceptable dictionary, consisting of 300,000 words.[69] These and other activities are based on the fundamental belief that literature could play a positive political role, that it 'could lead in the effort of overcoming Korea's societal and national divisions and its contradictions'.[70]

Here, too, addressing questions of identity are absolutely central. At its most basic level, identities in Korea are articulated largely in negative terms. To be South Korean above all means not to be communist. To be North Korean means not to be part of a capitalist and imperialist order. Each state bases its legitimacy, as Leon Sigal puts it, 'on being the antithesis and antagonist of the other'.[71] Understanding the realm of identity formation is thus central, as Moon Chung-in and Judy E. Chung insist, because 'at a very deep level, state behavior is shaped by what states are – and what they are is socially constructed'.[72] Moon further notes how antagonistic identity constructs are among the most difficult obstacles to successful arms control negotiations. 'Both parties', he stresses, 'are entrenched in their perceptual vortex of mutual denial, mistrust, and tunnel vision.'[73]

Ko Un is fully aware that changing identities is a long process, littered with obstacles. One cannot shift identities overnight. But neither are identities immutable. They inevitably change over time – and they do so often in relation to how we speak and write about the world. Literature can thus

be an important source for promoting social change. But only time will tell. The wounds of the past are far too deep to give way to reconciliation overnight. While there has been progress in inter-Korean relations, the divisions between North and South remain very deep. There is still widespread suspicion, hostility and hatred – and the spectre of a direct military confrontation continuously hovers over the peninsula. Ko Un is all too aware of these limits to reconciliation:

> One day in January 1958
> Cho Bong-am, chairman of the Progressive Party,
> stood at the foot of the scaffold in Sodaemun Prison.

> His last words were:
> 'Give me a cigarette.'

> Having been refused even one last cigarette,
> *thud!* his two feet hung dangling.

> Here, since his death,
> faithful to his hope
> at least in words,
> 'unification' no longer means invading the North,
>   as Syngman Rhee insisted,
> and saying 'peaceful reunification' is no longer a crime.
> But the day is still far away
> When the shadow of his death will lift.[74]

Conclusion

Ko Un's poetry documents – and engages with – the complex contemporary history of Korea. His poems struggle with the agony of colonialism and war, with how their memory continues to fuel conflict on the peninsula. Ko Un also engaged politics more directly, using literature as a way of promoting social justice and political change during long periods of authoritarian rule in South Korea. Most recently, he employed both his reputation and his poetry to promote reconciliation between North and South. But the most basic underlying theme of these engagements has been the role of poetry in articulating a sense of national identity – and this against a range of challenges: colonial occupation, war, national division and globalisation.

   No single poem of Ko Un can capture the essence of this poetic and political engagement. The power of poetry lies in giving us a different language to understand and articulate the world – including, but of course not limited to, its political elements. Politics is then inevitably part of a much broader, human project. And it is a project fraught with challenges and obstacles. Nobody knows this better than Ko Un and his fellow Koreans, who have

struggled through numerous difficult periods, and continue to do so. Peace, they know, is something essential but also something that can never actually be: it is a world in the making, a world which is as filled with hope as it is with disappointment, as characterised by breakthroughs as by inevitable setbacks:

Peace is fresh green dreams.
With people dreaming,
the very name of peace
dies crushed beneath tanks' caterpillar tracks.

Peace is dreams
today's dreams
are dreams becoming tomorrow's reality.
Even with just a half such dreams
the world achieves peace.
Peace is the future's own flesh and blood, its nest.
It's on its way.
It's on its way.
We must set off to welcome it.
It's on its way like summer winds on Jeju Island's southern seas.[75]

Conclusion

> Do not think you are the only one in his perspective.
> His falcon eyes capture many other things and motions,
> Fluttering wings at the fringes of speech.
>
> Ko Chang Soo, *Between Sound and Silence*[1]

The purpose of this book has been to draw attention to the crucial but largely neglected potential of aesthetic sources to rethink world politics. I have demonstrated the issues at stake through a series of conceptual inquiries and case studies. The latter have focused on poetry and addressed, in particular, how we can speak and write critically about world politics.

How, indeed, is it possible to speak critically in the prevailing scholarly language of international relations? Many commentators are sceptical and correspondingly frustrated. Consider the Indian public intellectual Ashis Nandy and the Australian aboriginal scholar and activist Marcia Langton. The former laments that important voices from around the world cannot be heard because they do not speak in the language of the Western academy.[2] The latter stresses that there is a major gap between scholarly discussion and the actual lives of indigenous people.[3]

How, then, is it possible to speak critically in scholarly language? How, in a more general sense, is it possible to speak critically in English – a language that has historically evolved from the centre of the world, first from the British colonial empire, then from the vantage point of American hegemony, and now as the new lingua franca of international political, economic and cultural interactions? How to express those silenced voices, those worlds that lie beyond the linguistic zone of exclusion that the global dominance of English has established? How to decentre the centre through the language of the centre?

Poetry can show us ways of dealing with these important and difficult issues, with the 'reconstruction of the world through words'.[4] This is why – as demonstrated in several case studies through this book – literature plays a

particularly important role in authoritarian contexts, where aesthetic engagements might be able to open up spaces for dissent and promote social change. But the importance of aesthetics goes much further, touching upon the very essence of political life. This is so even though the radically different viewpoints that a poetic image illuminates may not always be directly translatable into clear-cut policy recommendations. The poetic imagination can show us – in the form of a micro-experiment that reveals much larger implications – how to bring into view many of the repressed perspectives, voices and emotions that otherwise may never reach the eyes and ears of those who theorise or practise world politics.

By focusing my case studies on the poetic imagination I have, in some ways, gone against the trend of recent contributions to the aesthetic turn. Many scholars have begun to focus on the role of images and on popular, rather than high culture. My focus on the poetic is not meant to question and counter this trend: visual culture is one of the most important and largely under-studied aspects of international relations. Likewise, popular culture offers a range of important ventures to understand world politics. My decision to engage the links between poetics and politics is in part a result of personal interests and of the need to focus a scholarly inquiry in order to provide meaningful insights and sustain an argument in a systematic manner. But there is a more substantial issue as well: no matter how much our age revolves around visual images, we can never escape words, for language is far more than a means of communication: it is the very basis of how we make sense of the world and, ultimately, of who we are. Our individual and cultural values are inevitably intertwined with the manner in which we speak and write about ourselves and our surroundings. There is no escape from the prism of language, from the manner in which words represent the world in culturally specific manners. But what we can do – both as scholars and as political beings – is to engage this process: to be aware of how language frames the world and how a linguistic reframing might also allow us to rethink and reshape the real world.

A successful rethinking of world politics, a search for a more peaceful and just international order, must deal with representation. It must engage the languages through which we have come to distinguish the safe from the threatening, the rational from the irrational, the possible from the impossible. What is needed is a critique of language that opens up possibilities to gaze beyond the givenness of world politics, that can problematise political dilemmas which have been rendered unproblematic, even invisible, through years of normalising speech and corresponding political practices.

Rather than summarising the key themes I have introduced throughout this book, I conclude by trying to address some of the most challenging objections against my arguments. I do so in response to a series of insightful essays written by Gerard Holden. While offering an assessment of the relationship between literature and world politics, Holden also raised a number of

objections against my work on aesthetics.[5] I now try to face these challenges and, in doing so, hope to clarify some of the arguments I have advanced in the course of this book. I must, however, stress that this engagement is inevitably incomplete. This is in part because Holden's criticism focused on some of my previously published essays, not on the complete version of this book; in part because Holden engages more generally with the aesthetic turn in international political theory. I certainly cannot claim to speak for all contributions to the aesthetic turn, though I am flattered to be associated with some the writers Holden mentions. I can only try to clarify my own work and, more specifically, the chapters presented in this book. I can only speak for myself. 'Anything else is an abuse of power', Milan Kundera would say. 'Anything else is a lie.'[6]

I begin this conclusion by responding to Holden's call to clarify my position and to 'strengthen the case for using fiction and poetic texts to illuminate or even transform world politics'.[7] I argue for the need to draw a clear distinction between international relations scholarship and literary criticism. The purpose of the former is to investigate political phenomena, not literature as such. Literature – and aesthetic sources in general – is merely one of many means through which insights into the political may be gained. An equally strong distinction must be made between personal aesthetic pleasures and political insight. The former are of relevance to international relations scholarship only if they directly illuminate the latter. The boundaries between these different spheres of insight and activity can be navigated most successfully by conceptualising research as driven by puzzles, rather than theories or methodologies. Such an approach helps to counter Holden's most trenchant critique, namely that I and scholars with similar approaches 'tend to use literature to bolster views [we] already hold about world politics'.[8] Two related challenges will be taken up in the final sections: the problematic distinction between progressive and conservative literature, and the difficult role of writing styles. Since all of these issues concern not just poetry and literature, but art in general, my examples will be drawn from a correspondingly broad range of domains.

The relationship between poetry, prose and politics

The case studies in my book revolve around an engagement with poetry and an attempt to show how poetic readings of political dynamics can give us important new insights into them. I have presented these poetic engagements as a type of experimental biotope: small, micro-political engagements with everyday practices that can nevertheless tell us important things about the larger political dynamics of world politics. But to advance such an argument is not to claim – as Holden reads into my work – that poetry is the 'best way of identifying alternative visions'.[9] Prose can challenge representational

practices just as successfully. And so can many of the more established international relations approaches.

I am thus not advocating that we all should abandon social science in favour of poetic readings and rewritings of international relations. And I am certainly not suggesting that we should turn our eyes away from the key challenges of world politics, from war, inequality and hunger, to devote ourselves only to contemplating poetry and gazing at art. The key, rather, is to draw upon the innovative nature of the aesthetic to rethink deeply entrenched and often narrowly conceived approaches to understanding and solving world political problems.[10]

The globe has become too complex a place not to employ the full register of human insight, creativity and intelligence to understand and address the political challenges of our day. Some political puzzles may, for instance, best be understood through an application of statistical methods. Others may become clearer if scrutinised through, say, literary insights. But international relations scholarship has tended to reduce knowledge to reason and reason to a set of rigid social scientific conventions. This is why it is crucial to legitimise insights derived from other knowledge practices, be they of a philosophical, historic, poetic, visual, acoustic or any other nature. Indeed, many of these aesthetic practices can give us insight into politics that the more mimetic social scientific methods may miss, for the latter often fail to deal with the inevitable but inherently problematic dimension of representation. Calls for such a broadening of approaches have become increasingly strong in recent years, to the point that we can, as I suggested, speak of an actual 'aesthetic turn' in international relations scholarship.

The dilemmas of political forays into literature

Coming back to the more specific domain of fiction, Holden contends that I and some of my 'colleagues' simplify literature scholarship, and that we ought to give the respective debates more, and more systematic, attention. That is, of course, an inherent danger of any interdisciplinary foray into new and unfamiliar territories: that one risks looking amateurish at best, foolish at worst. Some scholars spend their entire life examining, say, Mikhail Bakhtin's interpretation of Dostoevsky's novels. How can an international relations scholar, trying to gain political insight from a reading of literature, not look anything but dilettantish in comparison? It took me an entire month of sustained reading simply to gain a preliminary understanding of *The Brothers Karamazov*. The solution to this dilemma lies in a recognition that Holden fails to make, or at least fails to articulate clearly: that the purpose of a political foray into literary domains is not, as Holden puts it at one point, 'to write about literature as such'.[11]

As an international relations scholar I have neither the intention nor, for that matter, the qualifications to engage in literary criticism. My prime scholarly interest is and must be politics, not literature. I want to see whether literature gives me insights into politics that I cannot gain by other means. Literature as such is thus not my object of inquiry, no matter how passionate I may feel about it in private. The point, then, is not to 'bend it like Bakhtin', as Holden puts it,[12] but to bend as required to engage the political puzzle that needs to be understood.

The very nature of interdisciplinary inquiries into literature leads to Holden's most challenging critique: that I and my 'colleagues' are 'too selective' in our approach to literature, that we tend to 'use the literary field for [our] own purposes without reflecting its complexity adequately'.[13] More specifically, Holden believes that 'we' tend to dwell on 'critical' and 'progressive' aesthetic realms. Works of art that are acceptable to 'us', Holden believes, are 'expected to be anti-realist, anti-positivist, and anti-masculinist'. Other poems, novels or films simply 'need not apply'.[14] The result is a rather fundamental dilemma, Holden argues. Either aesthetic approaches to international relations do not really need the works of art they engage, for the latter merely serve as illustrations of positions that have already been formed; or, alternatively, there is no need to read or view the art in question for the scholarly engagement with them has already provided insight into international relations.[15]

Holden has identified an important and much recognised dilemma. Many commentators fear that scholars with political intent all too often look towards works of art merely to confirm their preconceived ideas. Doing so is problematic on numerous counts, not least because literature can never be reduced to doctrines and ideas.[16] Milan Kundera, for instances, is 'fearful of the professors for whom art is only a derivative of philosophical and theoretical trends'.[17]

There is a short and a long answer to this challenge. The short one is to admit: *mea culpa*. Yes, I am a professor on a mission: I am 'using' literature for very specific research purposes and, as mentioned, I do not claim to represent the sophisticated field of literary criticism in a comprehensive way. The critique that I have missed important aspects of literary debates is well taken. I shall do my utmost to be more thorough and 'cast the net wider' in my future efforts.[18] But I still hope that I can address Holden's challenge – and that I am not one of the professors whom Kundera has in mind. At minimum, I take Holden's word of caution on board and agree with Kundera that novelists have engaged the unconscious long before Freud, the class struggle before Marx, and human nature before the phenomenologists. But there is something more basic and, dare I say, more important at stake than my own biases and shortcomings.

Engaging literature to address particular political puzzles is in principle no more and no less arbitrary an activity than conducting conventional

social scientific analyses of international politics. I think Holden misses this point when stressing that my political sympathies are 'clearly with postcolonial subjects and other marginalised actors' and that my choice of literature reflects this bias.[19] Of course, I make certain 'political-aesthetic judgements' when designing a research project. I fully admit it, for I can only research and write about issues that are of burning interest to me. As a result, I tackle questions that I feel most passionate about, such as those related to issues of exclusion and justice. But exactly the same can be said about a scholar who is passionate about, for instance, issues of national security. No Sherlock Holmes is required to figure out that he or she is likely to engage questions related to, say, military strategy, weapons systems or the role of threat perception.

Taking on certain political challenges does not mean that the outcome of the research is pre-given, or that the respective arguments are 'formulaic and predictable'.[20] Allow me to illustrate this issue with reference to a research project that took up several years of my time and passion: an investigation into transnational and transversal practices of dissent. I became interested in this topic because I witnessed, in 1987, how massive street demonstrations toppled one of Asia's most authoritarian regimes, that of General Chun Doo-hwan in South Korea. I was fascinated by the power that popular dissent could unleash, by how seemingly powerless people managed to dismantle, in a largely non-violent manner, a regime that was armed to its teeth. Being part of this process mesmerised me. I became obsessed with the need to find out more about it. I embarked on extensive historical and empirical research, but after several years of work I reached conclusions that contradicted just about every assumption (and passion) I started off with. I had to concede that street demonstrations were often far less powerful than their spectacular appearance suggested, that some of their heroic and masculine features did in fact entrench many value-based practices of domination. Detailed scrutiny of transformative processes revealed that seemingly mundane daily forms of resistance can often have a far more potent effect in the long run. I also realised that literature provides key insight into these inaudible political spheres – that, indeed, literature itself can be an important means of political transformation.[21]

The advantages of problem-based research

Some of the concerns that Holden rightly raises, such as bias in research design or the problematic nature of interdisciplinary forays, can be met successfully by conceptualising research not as method- or theory-driven, but as revolving around problems or puzzles. Ian Shapiro is probably the most prominent author who has advocated such an approach. He laments that much political science research has taken on the form of internal disciplinary discussions, as if theorists themselves were the proper objects of study. Rather

than structuring research around existing theoretical and methodological debates, Shapiro thus urges scholars to engage 'the great questions of the day'.[22] One can challenge various aspects of Shapiro's suggestions, such as his call for theorists to serve as 'roving ombudsmen for the truth', or his implied juxtaposition of 'normative' and 'empirically informed' research. But critique is not my task here, for in its most basic form the principle of problem-driven research is convincing. A scholar would thus start by identifying a fundamental political puzzle, such as, for instance, the persistence of malnutrition and hunger despite the fact that the world could, at least in principle, produce enough food to nourish its entire people. The next step would consist of identifying key research questions that could serve to focus and structure the project. Only then is it possible to think about which methodologies are best suited to approach, understand and perhaps solve the problem. It is self-evident that different puzzles require different methodologies. In some cases social science methods, such as statistics, game theory or structured interviews, may be the most useful and appropriate means of research. In other cases, however, a range of alternative tools, such as historical or literary analyses, may yield more insights into the puzzle and the research questions it has generated.

Various advantages emerge from puzzle-driven research. Since one is no longer obliged to rehearse existing disciplinary debates before engaging problems in the 'real' world, a scholar may be more successful in escaping the narrow conception of remembering and forgetting that international relations conventions have imposed for decades. Cynthia Enloe, for instance, has produced innovative research through such attempts to sidestep academic conventions. She interprets the dynamics of world politics not from the vantage point of existing scholarly debates, but by listening to voices of, say, women migrant workers in Mexico or prostitutes in brothels outside US military bases in Asia. By rethinking the international from the margins, Enloe allows us to see relations of power in a completely different way.[23]

If a puzzle is the main research challenge, then it can be addressed with all means available, independently of their provenance or label. A source may stem from this or that discipline, it may be academically sanctioned or not, expressed in prose or poetic form, language-based or visual or musical or take any other shape or form: it is legitimate as long as it helps to illuminate the puzzle in question.

Puzzle-based research allows a scholar to venture into various disciplinary realms, including literature, without getting lost in 'the great unread' that Holden recognises as problematic: the inevitable mass of literary texts and commentaries that can never be read by a single person.[24] The same principle does, of course, hold true for political engagements with all aspects of art. If I want to explore how Picasso's famous canvass *Guernica* has influenced or illuminated attitudes to war, I do not necessarily need to know everything about art history, or even about Picasso's paintings. I must have an idea of

the methodologies proper to art historical studies, but I can gain important insight through a study of *Guernica* without engaging detailed discussions on, say, the significance of Picasso's Blue Period or the gendered representation of his numerous lovers.

As a scholar of international relations I can take from the field of literature whatever I need, without either having to address all disciplinary debates in literary theory or basing this 'appropriation' on purely personal and arbitrary grounds. Needless to say, such a foray into art is not without both aesthetic and political controversy. Art is, of course, far more than a means, a method or a tool. There is always a certain ambivalence, a certain aesthetic independence in art, and it is this very ambiguity that makes appropriation possible, but ultimately also defies any form of exclusive ownership of meaning. This is why political engagements with art (and artistic engagements with politics) must be judged on certain grounds, but not necessarily – as Holden acknowledges – based on those of established 'standards of good international relations theory'.[25] The criteria for assessing aesthetic forays into world politics must be different from, for instance, those used to evaluate analyses that rely on statistical methods. There will never be an ultimate empirical proof to reject or sustain one literary reading over another. The central question a reader must ask of a work on international relations that relies on literature is not whether or not the conclusions are true. Far more important is whether or not it is able to present old dilemmas in a new light. The key, in this sense, is to seek 'uncoveries', rather than discoveries; new perspectives, rather than new facts.[26] To pursue this line of inquiry is not to say any reading is sustainable, or that 'fiction' can be used to justify any 'factual' interpretation. Nor is it to question that certain literary 'facts' are as immutable as those that exist in the 'real' world. The point, rather, is that an evaluation of a literary engagement with political realities should assess not only its empirical truthfulness but also, and above all, its conceptual merits.

Between emotional involvement and scholarly detachment

No research, even the most systematic social scientific inquiry, can be free of political-aesthetic judgements. In this sense, Holden's critique applies not just to me and my 'colleagues' but to all scholars investigating political phenomena. They all have to grapple with the intertwinement of object and subject. The key, then, is to be as transparent as possible about one's research assumptions. This entails, as Holden correctly stresses, that 'authors should be aware of the limits of their own samples and the particularity of their own visions'.[27]

Exposing one's own preferences, inevitable as they are, becomes a scholarly imperative, but I think in ways that are slightly different from the manner in which Holden suggests. He draws attention to various ways in which the

'I' cannot be separated from reading literature and evaluating politics. 'Pleasure matters', he stresses, adding that 'one can have pleasurable aesthetic experiences that are not in harmony with one's own political convictions or instincts'. He particularly laments that 'Bleiker and his colleagues do not seem to have this kind of aesthetic experience, or if they do they are not telling us about it.'[28] I can freely admit to having had such experiences, and frequently so. I do, for instance, admire and enjoy the writings of Martin Amis, J. G. Ballard, Raymond Carver, Don DeLillo and Philip Roth, even though I am often rather disturbed by their masculinism. Or I love Puccini's *Turandot* and *Madame Butterfly* while at the same time being repulsed by their Orientalist representation of the 'Far East'. But I am at the same time also fond of reading non-Western and women writers, from Ko Un, Akhmatova and Neruda, as exemplified in my chapters, to Jeanette Winterson, A. L. Kennedy and Anne Michaels. But I see no reason why I should tell the readers of my scholarly work about these personal aesthetic pleasures and dilemmas, unless they directly help to illuminate the research puzzle I seek to address. This is, of course, not to question that the personal can be, and indeed is, inherently political. Feminist scholars have long drawn attention to the latter point, and rather convincingly. Likewise, I am certainly not trying to re-establish the problematic positivist boundary between object and subject. Private feelings inevitably influence our attempts to make sense of the world, even though a long tradition of rational thought, reaching from Aristotle to modern social science, has tried to deny this link. 'Emotions colour the line drawings with which cognition represents reality', Alphonso Lingis rightly stresses.[29] 'Was it not the mists and the driving sleet', he asks, 'the blossoming prairies, and the swallows rhapsodic in the tides of summer that opened our hearts to ever more vast expanses of reality?'[30]

Analytical and methodological precision is called for precisely because the boundaries between the rational and the aesthetic, between the public and the personal, are inherently blurred; precisely because an author cannot escape the push and pull of emotional involvement and scholarly detachment. Consciously running the risk of erring on the cautious side, I thus see only two rather limited ways in which my personal pleasures are of academic relevance: if they allow for a more convincing representation of the political puzzle in question or if they help to identify the inevitably subjective dimensions of my approach to constituting, understanding and solving it. If neither of these two conditions is present then I prefer not to bother readers with my personal whims, for the 'I' is always already present in every single word I write.[31]

News that stays news, news that suffocates news

Holden's contention that 'one can be simultaneously entertained and disturbed' by the act of reading goes far beyond the domain of personal

aesthetic experience.[32] He does, indeed, make a convincing case for taking this seemingly contradictory phenomenon seriously politically. Of course, art can be as regressive as progressive. And so can politics. In fact, the very notions of progress and regress are highly arbitrary. Art takes place beyond these temporal and arbitrary spheres of judgement. Holden is thus correct in drawing attention to the fact that my choice of literature is biased, that it is primarily oriented towards works that destabilise existing practices of exclusion and foster 'diversity, hybridity and respect for the other'.[33] But this choice does not mean that all works of literature have such an effect. Art has always sided with all shades of the political spectrum. Or, rather, it has refused to side at all. And this is precisely why great art – whatever one's definition of this is – has always been appropriated by leaders of all political orientations. The more authoritarian the ruler, the more passionate their love for literature. Radovan Karadzic, Saddam Hussein, Muammar al-Gaddafi, Saparamurat Niyazov or Kim Jong-il, to name just a few recent examples, all claim to have written poetic works. Of sorts, that is.[34] And virtually all 'great' dictators were eager to surround themselves with 'great' works of art, hoping that timeless beauty would lift their appropriators to the same level of legitimacy and historical importance. The same, of course, holds true of more democratically elected leaders, even though some of them, such as George W. Bush, have distinctly less pronounced literary ambitions. But the aesthetic is no less central to democracies, for it is an integral part of modern ordering and governing principles, as in the aestheticised presentation and legitimisation of military organisations and their operations.[35]

Even more than generating reverence and legitimacy, art has also always installed great fear in most rulers, even though 'all art is', as Oscar Wilde once put it, 'quite useless'.[36] Besides its aesthetic qualities it is precisely this uselessness that renders art inherently political, even subversive. For the independent and ambivalent nature of art can never be entirely subjugated to short-term political or moral agendas. Art is thus always a potential threat to these very agendas, particularly if they are articulated on narrow grounds. 'Totalitarian truth excludes relativity, doubt, questioning', Milan Kundera stresses. This is why he believes that it is never able to accommodate 'the spirit of the novel'.[37] A novel, for him, embodies complexity and inevitably supersedes the intents of the author or reader. The novel, Kundera believes, always tells the reader that 'things are not as simple as you think'.[38] Consider a highly indicative passage from a prominent book on etiquette written during Korea's Choson dynasty. It demonstrates how seemingly apolitical literary traditions can have a fundamentally challenging, even subversive effect on prevailing moral-political orders:

> Romances and novels teach cunning and licentious behaviour; one should not read them, and one should forbid children to read them. Sometimes you meet a person who speaks of these novels at length, even urging

that you read them. This is really pathetic ... There are women who consume a family's fortune in borrowing these novels from lending libraries. These narratives are all about jealousy and sex; not infrequently they cause women to fall into licentiousness. How can we say that those cunning writers are not unfolding stories of romance and unusual events to incite longing and to move sentiments?[39]

Given the inherently independent and ambivalent nature of art, and my admittedly biased preference for literature that moves the sentiments and incites licentiousness, I plan to take up Holden's challenge and investigate the political dimensions of more uncomfortable aesthetic figures, such as Louis-Ferdinand Céline, Yukio Mishima, Ezra Pound and Leni Riefenstahl. But for now the best I can do is to recapitulate, very briefly, how literature, and art in general, is neither progressive nor conservative, but simply political – or at least politically independent, and thus independently political.

Consider the war in Iraq, and how art served both to critique and aesthetically legitimise the events. First look at Picasso's painting *Guernica*, which is one of the best known aesthetic anti-war statements. The history and political effect of the painting has been much discussed.[40] A tapestry version of it hangs at the United Nations in New York, just outside the entrance to the Security Council. When, in February 2003, US Secretary Colin Powell delivered his final plea for war against Iraq, Picasso's *Guernica* was curiously covered with a large blue cloth. UN officials insisted that the cover was designed to create a more effective background for the television cameras. The true reasons were probably far more political in nature, given that the painting is a highly symbolic and effective reminder of the horrors of war. Be that as it may, the shrouding of *Guernica* only served to highlight its political power, generating major protests against both the looming war and the act of negating the ethical insight of a major work of art. *Guernica* also revealed that art can be far more independent and memorable than any political statement. It is 'news that stays news', as Pound famously put it (in *ABC of Reading*, p. 29).

Art can, of course, also have exactly the opposite effect. Consider how the BBC televised the events in Iraq. In the lead-up to the *World News*, the television station regularly broadcasted a few minutes of highly romanticised images of war, presented to the tunes of a seductively rhythmic music: silhouettes of soldiers strolling towards a desert sunset that could have come right out of a cigarette advertisement clip; cruise missiles erotically gushing out of aircraft-carrier silos, elegantly piercing into the night and then spectacularly raining down on Baghdad in a manner that looked far more like a Fourth of July celebration than a brutal war. Even the short intermittent scenes of wounded and dead bodies seemed distressingly appealing when presented to the pulsating tunes that accompanied them. No scent of burning

flesh. No screams. No shrill voices. No drowning noise. No deadly silence. Only the dangerous seduction of aestheticised pain and suffering. News that suffocates news.

Towards 'world' literature and world politics

When engaging in the politics of reading world literature, scholarly engagements need to go beyond what Holden – using Franco Moretti – portrays as the 'sacred texts of the Western world'.[41] Goethe's idea of promoting an age of *Weltliteratur* is certainly commendable, for it seeks a 'cosmopolitan conversation between different national literatures that would bring different nations together'.[42] Prominent scholars and writers have picked up on Goethe's idea that novels open up spaces to think – and mentally travel – across national boundaries. Milan Kundera is perhaps the most prominent among them.[43] Literature can, indeed, be part of a cosmopolitan project, for it has long engaged in cross-cultural conversations. Goethe's *West-Eastern Divan* is only one of many examples testifying to a cosmopolitan literary attitude that is missing in much contemporary international relations scholarship. But when drawing on 'the best of past and present global literary production' one must still look beyond the likes of Joyce, Musil and Proust.

The term 'world' should be interpreted much more literally and empathetically, reaching beyond the standard Western canon. Otherwise interdisciplinary forays into literature merely serve to entrench the problematic ethnocentric nature of international relations scholarship. Holden knows that, for he underlines this point on numerous occasions and laments the strong Anglo-Saxon and Anglophone domination of international relations scholarship.[44] But most Western scholars – including Holden and, alas, myself – often fail to draw the implications from such recognitions. They remain surrounded and inspired mostly by texts that make up the Western canon or by those that critique them.

Challenging this Eurocentric and correspondingly narrow tradition is not easy, particularly for a Western scholar. Whoever we are, we are inevitably pulled towards the texts, interpretations, stories and mythologies we are most familiar with. We draw our inspiration from them, construct our universe around them, and are thus inevitably caught in their cultural delineation of what is and is not possible and thinkable. I have tried to break out of this conceptual prison in this book by trying to gain inspiration from a range of non-Western authors, such as Ko Un or Pablo Neruda. But my efforts remain limited, in part because of linguistic constraints, in part because I have been strongly shaped by reading Western theories and literary texts. For the research of this book, for instance, I managed to rely on English, German and French sources. I have a rudimentary knowledge of Korean and Spanish, but here I would have been lost without the advice and help of linguistically more talented colleagues. And for all the other sources, such as

the Russian poems of Akhmatova, I simply had to rely on translations. Doing so inevitably limited my attempt to break out of the constraints imposed by the cultural dominance of Western and English texts. But try we must. And since there will always be limits to our ability to cross languages and cultures, we above all need to be aware of our limits and the manner in which our thoughts are inevitably embedded in culturally specific traditions. 'Do not think you are the only one in his perspective', the Korean diplomat and poet Ko Chang Soo reminds us, putting his hopes into 'fluttering wings at the fringes of speech'.

The linguistic limits of radical critique

Short contemplative pause. Radical change of scene.

Holden's last but certainly not least challenge has to do with writing styles themselves. The issue seems rather trivial, but is nevertheless central to issues of war and peace. Allow me to explain. Holden stresses that 'Bleiker and those who take his view are thoroughly *bourgeois gentillhommes* who write orthodox academic prose most of the time and do not, presumably, address their students in iambic pentameter.'[45] If poetry and literature are so central and revelatory, why indeed represent the respective insights through conventional academic prose? Is there no inherent contradiction in this practice, particularly for someone who admits that poetry cannot be translated into prose? Holden puts his finger on the contradiction, stressing that although I and my 'colleagues' are 'theoretically in favour of irony and playfulness, [our] work has in practice all the light-hearted frivolity of a Fassbinder retrospective'.[46]

Here too, there is a short and long answer. And the short one is, again: *mea culpa*. I do not, indeed, address my students in 'iambic pentameter', although I periodically remind them, with Zarathustra, that 'slack and sleeping senses must be addressed with thunder and heavenly fireworks'.[47] I am also not unlike Jean Baptiste Mollière's Monsieur Jourdain; in my roots far more working class than *bourgeois gentillhomme*, to be sure, but still aspiring to drift effortlessly through the lofty spheres of high culture, from painting to poetry, literature, music, dance and theatre. And like Monsieur Jourdain I constantly risk exposing my ignorance and becoming everyone's laughing stock. But that is, as mentioned, the price to pay for embarking on interdisciplinary research. I can reduce the risk by striving to do my best, or by asking colleagues to retrace and verify my adventures into the exotic terrain of higher learning, but I cannot eliminate all the dangers of such an exploratory journey. No matter how much and how carefully I read, the 'great unread' will always remain dauntingly present. And no matter how much I admire and try to embrace irony and playfulness, I cannot quite escape my more stern Germanic origins. After all, Rilke already knew that 'almost everything serious is difficult, and everything is serious'.[48]

The long answer is somewhat different and has to do with the disciplinary power of international relations scholarship, with how its narrow notion of remembering and forgetting limits what is realistically possible, even for radical critique. Allow me at this stage to give in to Holden's urge and share an unsettling personal experience, because it can directly illuminate the issue in question. The fact that I have not published anything poetic on world politics is not for lack of trying, as I have already alluded to in the introduction to this book. But until recently even prose comments on poetics and world politics were often met with either hostility or indifference. On numerous occasions I received rejection letters from journals that responded to my submissions along the lines of 'interesting but not relevant to international politics: should be sent to a literary journal'. Once I was denied an already agreed-upon visiting fellowship because the director of the respective institution vetoed my appointment, on the grounds that a person who writes about poetry is not and could not possibly be a political scientist. I thus came to accept Adorno's observation that 'the power of what is erects the boundaries into which our consciousness crashes'. And I have taken to heart his advice that 'we must seek to crash through them'.[49] But up to now I mostly kept crashing into the boundaries, rather than through them. A compromise thus seemed in order. I wrote an essay, for instance, that started off introducing the idea of aesthetically rethinking world politics in straightforward conventional language. Half-way through the essay, when I thought its theme was clear and clearly established, I switched to an aphoristic writing style that aspired to enact the very linguistic principles I sought to explain in prose during the first part of the essay. But the reaction from disciplinary journals was no different: the essay, so the verdict went, was clear and convincing until the middle, but then moved into an obscure writing style that would not be suitable for an audience of international relations scholars. I felt exactly like the narrator in one of John Ashbery's poems, expressing the frustration of passionately wanting to communicate something essential, needing to scream it out, but simply failing to utter a single word that reaches the targeted audience:

> And sometimes when you want it to it won't:
> the space around a yodel grows deafening,
> then vomits into the orchestra pit.[50]

Some scholars are far more skilled than I am in yodelling poetic comments on world politics without vomiting them into the orchestra pit. They have managed to write radical aesthetic critiques of international relations scholarship without crashing, as I have, into Adorno's walls. I think, for instance, of Anthony Burke, Stephan Chan, Costas Constantinou, James Der Derian or Cindy Weber, to name just a few authors.[51] Their respective poetic publications remain controversial, precisely because they are experimental, but

they also make a significant contribution by drawing attention to a key dilemma that cannot be avoided: we need both poetic retreats into mountain cabins and orations at the marketplace; we need both radical ways of forgetting orthodox international relations theory and sustained engagements with it.[52] As a result of this unavoidable challenge, I mostly write in conventional and (hopefully) accessible prose, even when I seek to rethink political dilemmas through poetic insights. The pragmatic limits of communication simply make this choice an imperative, for the written word loses its transformative power if there is no shared language between text and reader. Holden knows that, I believe, not least because he laments that political readings of science fiction are 'rather hard going for anyone who is not an aficionado'.[53]

Acknowledging the central importance of communication and accessibility does not mean that one always needs to address political issues at their lowest common linguistic denominator, that is, standard social science language. The jargon of conventional international relations scholarship is as obtuse as the most exotic science fiction lingo, except that we have become used to even its most bizarre and contradictory metaphors, from 'clean bombs', 'friendly fire' and 'collateral damage' to 'absolute gains' and 'independent variables'. The ensuing construction of common sense often prevents us from seeing and exploring alternatives to existing political practices and ideas. Some poetic challenges to this order will undoubtedly be successful, even in the context of an environment that is dominated by the powerful linguistic grip of canonical scholarship. A highly celebrated series of performances at London's National Theatre, called 'Collateral Damage', is a case in point.[54] But many experimental texts are likely to be dismissed as irrational or obscure by political discourses that have managed to present their own, subjectively motivated interpretation of world politics as the only true take on reality. These marginalised perspectives are neither unimportant nor lost. They can perhaps be compared to how Celan described the function of poems. They are 'messages in a bottle': pleas that are sent out with the hope that they will be recovered at some stage in the future. The message may not be picked up immediately. At the moment of its release there may, in any case, be no language to appreciate the bottled plea for dialogue. But one day it will be washed onto a shore, onto something open: a scholar longing for alternatives, a political situation requiring insight, or simply a receptive reality.[55]

Writing aesthetic world politics

Writing about the potential of aesthetic approaches is, then, an inevitable tightrope dance. An aesthetically inspired author must, on the one hand, defy the language of prevailing scholarship in order not to get drawn into its powerful linguistic vortex and, on the other hand, articulate alternative thoughts such that they are accessible enough to constitute viable tools to

open up new ways to think and act. This can, of course, only be achieved if alternative knowledge can break out of intellectual obscurity, if it can reach and change the minds of many people. The poet has no choice but to 'work with a shared language', Alberto Manguel reminds us.[56] But a text that breaks with established practices of communication to escape their alluring power has, by definition, great difficulties in doing this.

Nietzsche was well aware of this inevitable dilemma. Zarathustra is constantly torn back and forth between engaging with people and withdrawing from them. The masses fail to comprehend his attempts to defy herd instincts and problematise the unproblematic. 'They do not understand me; I am not the mouth for these ears', he cries. 'Must one smash their ears before they learn to listen with their eyes?'[57] At times he appears without hope: 'What matters a time that "has not time" for Zarathustra? . . . why do I speak where nobody has *my* ears? It is still an hour too early for me here.'[58] Succumbing to the power of language, Zarathustra returns to the mountains, withdraws to the solitude of his cave. But thoughts of engaging with humanity never leave him. He repeatedly climbs down from his cave to the depths of life, regains hope that monological discourses will give way to dialogue, that the herds will understand him one day. 'But *their* hour will come! And mine will come too! Hourly they are becoming smaller, poorer, more sterile – poor herbs! poor soil! and *soon* they shall stand there like dry grass and prairie – and verily, weary of themselves and languish even more than for water – for *fire*.'[59]

An aesthetic rewriting and rethinking of world politics will not immediately incinerate the dry grass of orthodox scholarly prairies. Firefighters are holding back the blaze. Discourses live on and appear reasonable long after their premises have turned into anachronistic relics. More inclusive ways of theorising and living world(s) politics cannot surface over night. There are no quick solutions, no new paradigms or miraculous political settlements that one could hope for. Changing the practice of international relations scholarship is a long process, saturated with obstacles and contradictions. It is in our daily practices of speaking, of forgetting and remembering that slow transformative potentials are hidden. The great events in history, Zarathustra claims, 'are not our loudest but our stillest hours. Not around the inventors of new noise, but around the inventors of new values does the world revolve; it revolves *inaudibly*.'[60]

Whither the aesthetic turn

The main ambition of this book has been to provide an introduction to the aesthetic turn in international political theory: the growing recognition that aesthetic sources, such as poetry, photography, music and film, can offer important insight into the nature and meaning of international events. International relations scholars have shown interest in aesthetics for

many years. Some of the discipline's founding 'fathers', such as E. H. Carr, Hans Morgenthau, Martin Wight and Kenneth Waltz, have either drawn on literature or likened the pursuit of scholarly inquiries to an art form that requires abstraction, intuition and imagination. But such appreciations of aesthetic sensibilities remain rare as well as limited in nature and impact. They were largely overshadowed by a discipline that sought to establish a body of systematic scholarly work that can live up to the rigorous standards of scientific inquiry. Judged from such a perspective, inquiries into aesthetic sources inevitably seemed unsystematic and thus of a purely speculative nature: in short, scientifically untenable and inappropriate for the study of world politics. This is why aesthetic inquiries played virtually no role during the first seventy or so years of international relations as an academic discipline.

It is only in the last decade or two that aesthetic inquiries have started to emerge, so much so that by now one can speak of an actual aesthetic turn in international political theory. While the ensuing scholarly activities are meanwhile very diverse and sophisticated, a number of challenges still remain. Three of them stand out as particularly salient.

First, there is a need to further refine theoretical positions and to conduct more empirical studies that demonstrate how exactly aesthetic inquiries add to the understanding of international relations – and this with respect to a range of different political challenges, in numerous cultural contexts, and across a broad spectrum of high and low culture. There is a need for more thorough interactions between different approaches to the aesthetic turn, between those who primarily draw inspiration from aesthetic sources to rethink political dilemmas – as I have done in this book – and those who focus more on how political dynamics themselves have an inherent aesthetic dimension that needs to be recognised and understood. There is also a need for more thorough engagements with critics, ranging from those represented by Holden in the previous pages to those who remain unconvinced, for instance, that aesthetic insight can overcome the problem of relativism. Equipped with a more nuanced body of conceptual and empirical knowledge it might then be possible to advance more fruitful cross-disciplinary engagements. Ideally, such engagements would go beyond tapping into new sources by bringing together scholars and practitioners from different disciplinary realms. The point, rather, would be to actually change the very way we think about disciplines themselves, finding ways to move across and beyond them, not least within our own minds. The ensuing challenges are undoubtedly gargantuan, but daring to face them might help us explore numerous issues that have opened up through the aesthetic turn, such as the important but so far largely neglected role that emotions play in world politics.

Second is the need to expand the aesthetic turn beyond a vibrant and rapidly growing subcommunity of international relations scholars. So far this has not happened, despite the proliferation of increasingly sophisticated

research on aesthetic politics, and despite the relatively prominent outlets in which the respective publications have appeared. Most mainstream realist, liberal and constructivist approaches have remained largely oblivious to the aesthetic turn. There is a need for a much greater engagement with scholars who represent these conventional positions – and, not least, a need for them to engage back and to recognise that a move beyond an exclusive reliance on social science towards a more holistic approach to knowledge can significantly increase our ability to understand the key issues and conflicts that shape world politics. It would then become evident that aesthetics is not only about drawing insight and political inspiration from different art forms, but also, and above all, about the consequences that issue from such inquiries. Central here is the need for a more reflective awareness of how we represent political events and how such representations, subjective and inevitable as they are, shape both our understanding of these events and our political response to them. The difficulty here consists in opening up such dialogues with conventional approaches without getting subsumed into the vortex of worn-out metaphors and entrenched knowledge-practices – in short, without losing the radical edge and independent insight that the aesthetic turn has opened up over the last decade.[61]

Third is the need for more interaction between aesthetic explorations of international relations and the policy community. Demonstrating the concrete policy relevance of aesthetic insight is not easy, and this for obvious reasons. Aesthetic sources cannot give us certainty. Embracing them is all about refusing a single-voiced and single-minded approach to politics in favour of embracing multiple voices and the possibility of multiple truths. This is why a novel, a painting, a film or a piece of music can never tell us what to do, whether to go for option A or B. But aesthetic engagements can broaden our ability to understand and assess the challenges at hand. They might be able to tell us more about what options A or B entail, or what consequences might issue from them. They might also reveal that A and B are in fact not the only options – that there is C as well. Consider how novelists and artists are some of the brightest and most innovative members of our communities. And yet, they are hardly ever consulted when it comes to, say, articulating issues of security or financial policy. To make this point is, of course, not to argue against expert knowledge or to deny the need for taking clear decisions and assuming responsibility for them. But deciding on a particular political position and a related course of action in a well-informed and far-sighted manner requires a careful balance between specialist and general knowledge, for the problems we face today are far too serious not to draw upon all the resources we have to understand and address them.

Notes

Introduction

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40. Sue Halpern, *Can't Remember What I Forgot: the Good News from the Front Lines of Memory Research* (Easton, PA: Harmony Press, 2008) and, for a discussion, Michael Greenberg, 'Just Remember This', *New York Review of Books*, 4 December 2008, pp. 10–14.

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10. Don Oberdorfer, *The Two Koreas: a Contemporary History* (London: Warner Books, 1998), pp. 6–7.
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(Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990). See also Henry H. Em, 'Overcoming Korea's Division: Narrative Strategies in Recent South Korean Historiography', *Positions*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 1993, pp. 450–85.

16. See, for instance, Yang Han Kwon, 'The Truth about the Cheju April 3rd Insurrection'; Bruce Cumings, 'The Question of American Responsibility for the Suppression of the Chejudo Uprising', and other essays in *Cheju April 3rd Massacre Not Forgotten*, http://www.kimsoft.com/1997/cheju.htm (accessed April 2002).

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24. Hass, 'Poet of Wonders', p. 60.

25. Ko Un, 'You and I', in *Traveler Maps*, trans. David R. McCann (Cambridge, MA: Tamal Vista Publications, 2004).

26. Ko Un, 'Small Song', *Traveler Maps*.

27. Ko Un, 'Self Portrait', *Poems from Ko Un's An Epitaph*, trans. Clare You and Richard Silberg, *Korean Culture*, Vol. 20, No. 1, spring 1999, p. 15.

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29. George E. Ogle, *South Korea: Dissent within the Economic Miracle* (Washington, DC: Zed Books, 1990), pp. 72–5.

30. Ko Un, 'Ko Un on Ko Un'.

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32. Lee, 'Jeolmang-ui simyeon-gwa bangdaehan him-ui eoneo', p. 208.

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34. Ko Un, 'Indangsu', http://www.othervoicespoetry.org/vol11/un/indangsu.html (accessed December 2008). For a comment see Choi Won-shik, 'Ko Un's Place in Modern Korean Poetry', paper presented to 'The Poetic World of Ko Un', Stockholm University, Sweden, 8 May 2003.

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38. Robert Hass, 'On Korean Poetry and Ko Un', *Korean Culture*, Vol. 22, No. 1, spring 1999, p. 12.

39. Choi, 'An Interview with Ko Un', pp. 141–3; Ko Un, *Munhak-gwa minjok: uri sidae salm-ui choejeonbang-eseo jeongaehan minjok-gwa minjok munwha-ui nolli* (Literature and Nation: the Logic of Nation and National Culture that Develops from the Front Line of Life in Our Times) (Seoul: Hangilsa, 1986), pp. 370–3.

40. See Ilpyong J. Kim and Young Whan Kihl (eds), *Political Change in South Korea* (New York: Paragon House, 1988) and Hagen Koo (ed.), *State and Society in Contemporary Korea* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993).
41. Ko Un, 'Ko Un: an Interview'.
42. Hass, 'Poet of Wonders', p. 59.
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45. For a detailed discussion of this argument see William E. Connolly, *Pluralism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005); *The Ethos of Pluralization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995).
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49. Ko Un, 'Ko Un: an interview'.
50. Paik, 'Zen Poetry and Realism: Reflections on Ko Un's Verse', pp. 559–78.
51. Hass, 'Poet of Wonders', p. 62.
52. Ko Un, 'Grandmother', in *Ten Thousand Lives*, trans. Brother Anthony of Taizé, Young-moo Kim and Gary Gach (Kobenhavn and Los Angeles: Green Integer, 2005), p. 63.
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57. Ibid., p. 147.
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61. Ko Un, 'Returning Home', in *Poems from Ko Un's An Epitaph*, p. 16.
62. See Hart, 'Creating the National Other'.
63. Ko Un, 'Forgetting', in *Poems from Ko Un's An Epitaph*, p. 17.
64. See Kil Soong Hoom and Moon Chung-in, 'Introduction' to Kil Soong Hoom and Moon Chung-in (eds), *Understanding Korean Politics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), p. 2.
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70. Choi, 'An Interview with Ko Un', p. 147.

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Conclusion

1. Ko Chang Soo, 'At the Art Gallery', in *Between Sound and Silence*, trans. David McCann (Elizabeth, NJ: Hollym, 2000).

2. Ashis Nandy, 'The Darker Side of Modernity: Interview with Philip Darby', in Phillip Darby (ed.), *Postcolonizing the International: Working to Change the Way We Are* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006), p. 118.

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4. Peter Szondi, 'Durch die Enge geführt: Versuch über die Verständlichkeit des modernen Gedichts', in *Celan-Studien* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1972), p. 103.

5. Gerard Holden, 'World Literature and World Politics: In Search of a Research Agenda', *Global Society*, Vol. 17, No. 3, 2003, pp. 229–52. Roland Bleiker, 'Learning from Art: a Reply to Holden's "World Literature and World Politics"', *Global Society: Journal of Interdisciplinary International Relations*, Vol. 17, No. 4, October 2003, pp. 415–28; Gerard Holden, 'A Reply to Bleiker's Reply', *Global Society: Journal of Interdiscipinary International Relations*, Vol. 17, No. 4, October 2003, pp. 429–30; Gerard Holden, 'Cinematic IR, the Sublime and the Indistinctness of Art', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 3, 2006.

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11. Holden, 'World Literature and World Politics', p. 241.

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17. Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, trans. Linda Asher (London: Faber & Faber, 1988), p. 32. For a further discussion of the respective problems involved see John Horton, 'Life, Literature and Ethical Theory', in John Horton and Andrea T. Baumeister (eds), *Literature and the Political Imagination* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 70–97.

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24. Holden, 'World Literature and World Politics', p. 232.

25. Ibid., p. 229.

26. For Janice Bially Mattern discoveries are attempts to find 'a new, previously untouched fact', while uncoveries imply 'an excavation from underneath layers of ossified or never problematised knowledge'. *Ordering International Politics: Identity, Crisis and Representational Force* (New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 5.

27. Holden, 'World Literature and World Politics', p. 243.

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29. Alphonso Lingis, *Dangerous Emotions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), p. 15.

30. Ibid., p. 18. In a subsequent publication Holden largely agrees with this interpretation as well, revising his former critique. See Holden, 'Cinematic IR', pp. 793–818.

31. See Morgan Brigg and Roland Bleiker, 'Expanding Ethnographic Insights into Global Politics', *International Political Sociology*, Vol. 2, No. 1, March 2008, pp. 89–91.
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34. For a discussion see articles on 'Die literarische Achse des Bösen: Blut an den Händen und an den Fingern Tinte – Wenn Schurken zur Feder greifen', *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, No. 90, 17 April 2003, p. 16.
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36. Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Ware: Wordsworth, 1992), p. 6.
37. Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, p. 14
38. Ibid., p. 18.
39. *Small Manners for Scholars*, published in 1775, as cited in Ch'oe Yong-ho et al. (eds), *Sources of Korean Tradition*. Volume II: *From the Sixteenth to the Twentieth Centuries* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), pp. 64, 67.
40. See, for instance, Russell Martin, *Picasso's War: an Extraordinary Story of an Artist, an Atrocity – and a Painting that Shook the World* (London: Scribner, 2003).
41. Franco Moretti, cited in Holden, 'World Literature and World Politics', p. 249.
42. Holden, 'World Literature and World Politics', p. 231.
43. Milan Kundera, *The Curtain: an Essay in Seven Parts*, trans. Linda Asher (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), esp. pp. 35–7.
44. See Gerard Holden, 'Who Contextualizes the Contextualizers? Disciplinary History and the Discourse about IR Discourse', *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 2, 2002, p. 253; Holden, 'Cinematic IR', pp. 793–818.
45. Holden, 'World Literature and World Politics', pp. 239–40.
46. Ibid., p. 242.
47. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. W. Kaufmann in *The Portable Nietzsche* (London: Penguin, 1982/1954), p. 205.
48. Rainer Maria Rilke, *From Letters to a Young Poet*, trans. M. D. Herter Norton (New York: W.W. Norton, 1993), p. 35.
49. Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialektik* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1992/1966), p. 29.
50. Several years ago I read (and was captured by) this stanza in a Swiss newspaper. It appeared in the original and in a German translation, and was attributed to a poem entitled 'Die Frau, die der Löwe eigentlich hätte beschützen sollen'. I have since failed to retrace the English original, but I trust that it belongs to John Ashbery, as indicated.
51. Anthony Burke, 'Poetry outside Security', *Alternatives: Social Transformation and Humane Governance*, Vol. 25, No. 3, 2000; Stephen Chan, 'Writing Sacral IR: an Excavation Involving Küng, Elidade, and Illiterate Buddhism', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 3, 2000, pp. 565–89; Costas Constantinou, 'Hippopolis/Cynopolis', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 3, 2001, pp. 785–804; Cynthia Weber, 'IR: the Resurrection of New Frontiers of Incorporation', *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 5, No. 4, 1999, pp. 435–50; James Der Derian, 'Fathers (and Sons), Mother Courage (and Her Children), and the Dog, the Cave, and the Beef', in J. N. Rosenau (ed.), *Global Voices: Dialogues in International Relations* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993), pp. 83–96.

52. The latter point is emphatically and convincingly presented in Helena Rytövuori-Apunen, 'Forget "Post-Positivist" IR! The Legacy of IR as the Locus for a Pragmatic Turn', *Cooperation and Conflict*, Vol. 40, No. 2, 2005, pp. 147–77.
53. Holden, 'World Literature and World Politics', p. 240.
54. See Michael Billington, 'Making Drama Out of the Iraq Crisis', *Guardian Weekly*, 24 April 2003, p. 20.
55. Paul Celan, 'Ansprache anlässlich der Entgegennahme des Literaturpreises der Freien Hansestadt Bremen', and 'Der Meridian', both in *Gesammelte Werke*, Vol. III (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1986), p. 186, 198.
56. Alberto Manguel, *The City of Words* (Toronto: Anasi Press, 2007), p. 22.
57. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, pp. 128–30.
58. Ibid., pp. 280, 284.
59. Ibid., p. 284.
60. Ibid., p. 243.
61. On this dilemma see my 'Forget IR Theory', *Alternatives: Social Transformation and Humane Governance*, Vol. 22, No. 1, 1997, pp. 57–86.

Acknowledgements

This book has grown gradually, organically and above all very slowly. It started with a purely personal interest in poetry, literature, art and music. For quite some time I kept these private passions separate from my scholarly engagements with politics and international relations. But at some point the two started to merge, in part because whenever I read a poem, viewed a painting, saw a film or listened to a song my aesthetic experiences seemed to shape my understanding of political issues. This occurred in ways that were quite profound but, at the same time, difficult to express. It was this struggle to grasp the exact political relevance of art that compelled me to begin writing about aesthetics, some fifteen or so years ago. Doing so was a way of discovering, for myself, why exactly aesthetic issues seem so central to my understanding of the political.

I started rather randomly, writing about what interested me at the time: essays on this or that poet, this or that painter, a chapter for a book on music, a piece on photography or looted art or architecture. I wrote on my own or I collaborated with colleagues and graduate students. I also embarked on my own version of aesthetic 'field work': I began to play the flute and to paint; I took up photography. I fully admit that these artistic efforts were – and still are – hopelessly amateurish, but in my defence I need to say that my main aim was not to achieve artistic competence, but to satisfy my intellectual curiosity. I wanted to see and feel what happens to my mind – and to my understanding of politics – when I engage in different ways of knowing, viewing, perceiving, hearing and feeling than those I had become used to over the years. I also organised and curated an art exhibition around the theme of political abstraction. All this led me to literature on aesthetic theory, literary criticism and art history, which I could only make sense of by actually writing about them. The result was a series of journal articles and book chapters on a rather wide – most would probably say incoherent – range of aesthetic themes, all written at different periods over a fairly long stretch of time.

It is only a few years ago that I had the confidence to ask whether these disparate writings might amount to something more coherent. And it was after asking this question that I stated to conceptualise a larger project. The result is the present book. I am not sure it is as lucid as I wanted it to be. But at least I can say that it is not merely a collection of previously published essays. The task of forging these disparate texts into something more than the sum of their parts soon took on a life of its own. I cut, changed and rewrote. I added new texts, cut and rewrote, again and again, to the point that the shift-shaped chapters that emerged bore only a faint resemblance to the individual essays I had started off with. Below are the publications that served as the starting point for the book. An asterisk precedes those essays from which I drew in a particularly extensive manner, and for which I gratefully acknowledge reprinting permission from Blackwell Publishing; Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc; Sage Publications, Inc; and Taylor and Francis.

'Forget IR Theory', *Alternatives: Social Transformation and Humane Governance*, Vol. 22, No. 1, 1997, pp. 57–86.

'Poetik des Widerstands: Über das Untergraben selbstgerechter Autorität' [Poetics of Resistance: On the Subversion of Self-Righteous Authority], *Konzepte: Literatur zur Zeit*, Vol. 12, No. 18, 1997, pp. 60–6.

'Representing HIV/AIDS in Africa: Pluralist Photography and Local Empowerment' (with Amy Kay), *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 51, No. 1, March 2007, pp. 139–63.

'Emotional Reconciliation: Reconstituting Identity and Community after Trauma', (with Emma Hutchison), *European Journal of Social Theory*, Vol. 11, No. 3, 2008, pp. 385–403.

'Fear No More: Emotions and World Politics' (with Emma Hutchison), *Review of International Studies*, special issue on 'International Relations and the Challenges of Global Communications', Vol. 34, No. 1, 2008, pp. 115–35.

'Art and Peacebuilding: How Theatre Transforms Conflict in Sri Lanka' (with Nilanjana Premaratna), forthcoming in Oliver Richmond (eds), *Advances in Peace and Conflict Studies* (London: Routledge).

'Nietzsche's Style: On Language, Knowledge and Power in International Relations', (with Mark Chou), forthcoming in Chris Farrands and Cerwyn Moore (eds), *Interpretive Dialogues: Hermeneutics, Philosophical Traditions and International Relations Theory* (Routledge).

'The Symbiosis of Democracy and Tragedy: Lost Lessons from Ancient Greece' (with Mark Chou), in *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, special issue on 'Interrogating Democracy in International Relations', Vol. 37, No. 3, 2009, pp. 659–82.

My aesthetical-political journey over the last fifteen years has not been nearly as straightforward and unproblematic as this list of texts suggests. When I started writing on aesthetic themes, in the early and mid-1990s, the discipline of international relations looked very different than it does today. Its key protagonists were very much concerned with carving out a distinct academic presence for a young and seemingly very insecure academic discipline. The result was an unusually active effort to police the boundaries of what can and cannot be seen as legitimate international relations research. These boundaries were drawn in a particularly narrow manner, limiting the ensuing scholarly focus mostly to the action of states and to social scientific methods of understanding them. Art – and aesthetics in general – certainly was not seen as being compatible with such a disciplined disciplinary endeavour.

At first I found it very difficult to publish aesthetic engagements with politics and international relations. My efforts were met with a mixture of bemusement and outright hostility from some parts of the academic community. Editors of international relations journals often told me to send my work to literary magazines and literary magazines sent me back to the politics crowd. I had an equally challenging time in the job market. A long period of unemployment followed my PhD, which gave me plenty of time to write and sharpen my interdisciplinary research skills, but no money to pay my bills and seemingly no future ahead of me. I am still not sure if this miserable performance was due to the unusual aesthetic nature of my work or – and this is the far more likely scenario – the poor quality of my scholarship. In any case, engaging the aesthetic dimensions of world politics certainly did not feel like a smart career move. I thought I was digging my own scholarly grave. But I kept up my aesthetic activities nevertheless. I had no choice, really. I could only research what I felt passionate about, and I did feel passionate about aesthetics. I wrote about numerous other issues too, some of them far more conventional, but aesthetic themes always lurked in the background, and at times popped into the foreground. And, then, eventually, I managed to convince some journal editors to take on my essays on aesthetics. I even found two universities – first Pusan National University and then the University of Queensland – who hired me despite my esoteric interests and dubious credentials. I am still deeply

grateful to these institutions and to the individuals who took a chance with me back then.

I was, indeed, very lucky to receive support from numerous exceptionally generous colleagues and friends around the world. Without them I would not have been able to sustain my aesthetic passion as long and as intensively as I have. They and their deeds are far too numerous to acknowledge here appropriately. The people in question included senior scholars who tolerated or even actively supported work on aesthetics and politics; editors who started to take risks and published pieces that did not fit the usual disciplinary mould; colleagues who commented on my work, pursued similar lines of inquiries and helped establish a small (virtual) global community that made our existence less isolated and lonely; my PhD students from whom I learned far more than I could possibly teach them back; artists and curators who were open-minded enough to accept my intrusion into their world; friends who supported me when the disciplinary walls seemed particularly insurmountable or who celebrated with me when the occasional crack opened up a line of flight.

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Times have changed. The discipline of international relations today looks very different than fifteen years ago. It is more mature, self-confident and tolerant. It now offers a lot more space for alternative investigations into the international. Numerous prominent disciplinary journals and book series now regularly publish works on aesthetic themes. The same tolerance is now evident in many universities, and certainly in the department I am lucky enough to teach in. A few yeas ago I was able to introduce a

course on Art and Politics, which I immensely enjoyed putting together and teaching. The idea of moulding my aesthetic engagements into a book took shape as I taught this course, and I am particularly grateful to my students and tutors who helped me explore many of the key themes in a way I could not have done on my own.

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Finally, I need to admit that I am bringing this book to a close with a deep sense of hesitation, even reluctance. I spent three years refining it and putting off the final dot – in part because the longer I work on this theme the more I realise how much more I still have to learn, know and write. There will never be a final dot that can pronounce such an inquiry complete. I am fully aware that there is far too much left 'out there' to read and experience and contemplate and write about. I know of concrete topics I should have explored in much more detail, such as the links between emotions and aesthetic insight, which I address in a far too fleeting manner. I also know that there are far more topics that I should have addressed but that I am not even aware of. Thankfully my ignorance is still more than large enough to give me the false confidence necessary to wrap up this manuscript. But sending it off to the publisher still feels less like completing a project than putting a temporary lid on an ongoing obsession. I hope the lid won't shut tight. I hope that this is only a momentary pause, a moment to reflect and regroup, in a never-ending aesthetical-political journey that takes me – and perhaps even a reader or two – in directions I cannot even imagine today.

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