



How to approach “Poetry as a mode of attention”?

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As part of a book that brings together texts analyzing the phenomenon of “attention” from different angles, my contribution has a specific prehistory, which needs to be explained in order to make its publication possible. When my friend and eminent colleague Katalin Kállay first invited me to participate in a colloquium on “attention” to be organized at Budapest, I enthusiastically accepted – for two main reasons. One was my consistently positive experience with the quality of intellectual events taking place at Budapest. But I also assured Katalin that there was hardly a topic that had greater attraction for my own thinking than “attention”, seen from the angle of poetry as “a specific mode of attention.”

The fascination for “poetic attention” was rooted in my regular conversations with Lucy Alford, an outstanding young poet who, in the Department of Comparative Literature at Stanford University, is now close to finishing a doctoral dissertation on this topic (a dissertation which, I strongly believe as one of her academic advisors, has the potential of making an immediate impression – and in the long run an authentic intellectual difference – within the world of Literary Theory and of Literary Criticism at large). Her central claim states that attention, in historically and individually different forms and levels of intensity, is not only a “natural” prerequisite for the reading and appreciation of poetry; according to Lucy Alford, it is equally necessary to describe and enjoy poetry as a mode of evoking and cultivating the very potential of the human psyche that we

refer to with the concept of "attention." "Poetry" and "attention," in this view, are not only mutually dependent but, so to speak, co-extensive, rather than subordinated to each other.

If our collaboration made it mandatory to give Lucy Alford full and fully admiring credit at the beginning of my Budapest lecture, to write a text based on this performance under my exclusive authorship appeared unthinkable at first. I therefore proposed a joint publication to her, which she declined, mainly for the plausible reason of not wanting to get distracted in the rhythm of putting together the final chapter of her dissertation. On the other hand Katalin Kállay showed serious interest in having an essay about the phenomenon of poetic attention for the volume she was preparing as an editor. In this difficult situation of intellectual ownership, interest, and tension, the three of us found a solution, which the present text represents. It is based on the both unproblematic and uncontroversial fact that some of the conceptual tools that Lucy Alford uses for her dissertation in order to approach the phenomenon of poetic attention in her own innovative way are based on some of my academic articles from the past twenty-five years. Thus I could describe, under my name and based on my own publications, the steps of this approach – leaving blank the field that the emerging dissertation will once occupy. Whenever this blank cannot be fully maintained Lucy Alford's name will be mentioned.

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Alford's thoughts about the relationship, about the inseparability indeed between attention and poetry are strictly phenomenological, and by "phenomenological" I am referring to a particular intellectual style. Instead of mainly or even exclusively relying on the Western poetological legacy or on recent scientific findings, she concentrates on forms of behavior that can be observed in a writer's or in a reader's mind (and to a certain degree also in a writer's or a reader's body) while the writing, reading and, also, the listening to poetry is happening -- and she then describes these observations as precisely as possible. Prior to her self-observations and formative for them, I believe, are three premises about the use of the concept "attention." "Attention" means, firstly, an openness of the mind to the world ("mind" and "consciousness" are the more extensive concepts in comparison to "attention" which is seen as a specific

function of consciousness). Secondly, she opts for the possibility of concentrating on attention independently of and prior to the appearance of objects of attention. After all, it is possible to be open and thus attentive to the world in general – before specific phenomena become sensual perceptions registered by consciousness and thereby turn into “intentional objects.” This, however, does not imply a preference for those poems that she characterizes by phrases like “objectless awareness” or “intransitive attention.” And thirdly she thinks of a quantitative scale (rather than qualitative contrasts) when she tries to distinguish between different types of attention. Attention can be, for example, “wide open” or “narrowly focused.”

According to Alford’s already mentioned central thesis the texts we call “poetry” are – and have always been -- about attention in an essential way. They are about attention not only as a condition of perceiving or imagining a world by constituting intentional objects on the basis of texts; often and by contrast, poems mainly deal with the production, the training, and the practice of attention. We can thus invert the relationship between attention and intentional objects as we normally see it. In poetry, attention is not exclusively (and perhaps not even primarily) a prerequisite for the constitution of intentional objects. Rather, the existence of intentional objects may sometimes be seen as a necessary condition for the constitution of different types and degrees of attention.

The relation between Alford’s thesis and my own previous work is based on the intuition that at least some types of attention intertwined with poetry are similar to the attention associated with charms and with other archaic religious practices.¹ Not by coincidence did the earliest poems of the Western tradition, Sappho’s and Pindar’s songs in praise of beautiful young women and successful athletes belong to ritual situations of speaking to Gods. The institutional functions of these situations were predominantly magic, that is they were meant to make present things and persons originally absent for us and to make absent persons and things originally present -- and they did so, as I will try to explain, through specific linguistic forms that are apt to produce an impression of time standing still. I do not want to suggest, however, that poetry is “religious” in essence. Rather, poetry and religious texts share a double

¹ See my contribution “744 – Bishop Bonifatius Found the Monastery at Fulda, Where – Nearly Two Centuries Later – Magical Formulas in Old High German Are Recorded on an Empty Codex Page. The Charm of Charms.” In: David Wellbery e.a. [eds.]. *A New History of German Literature*. Cambridge, MA, 2007, pp. 1-7.

affinity: an affinity with rhythm constituted by prosody in the first place; and secondly an affinity with magic, mediated through rhythm. In addition, I assume that poetry is primarily (but of course not necessarily) made for performance, more specifically for recitation, for singing, and for reading aloud. The prosodic structure that can become visible in the layout of a handwritten or a printed poem thus reminds us of its performance potential -- whereas nothing in a recited poem could seduce us to think that its genuine ontology is about being present on a page, in two-dimensionality.

To illustrate the impression of time standing still as an effect of poetic language and its association with magic functions, Alford uses Gottfried Benn's marvelous poem "Astern" from 1936, a text that has been dear to me for more than five decades. It describes one of those -- unavoidably transient -- moments of temporal stasis that poetry can produce but at the same time it performs (and thus produces) stasis itself, thanks to its prosodic form. Reading these verses aloud in the German original or in an outstanding English translation will make present what the text also speaks about:

<p>Astern – schwälende Tage, alte Beschwörung, Bann, die Götter halten die Waage eine zögende Stunde an.</p>	<p>Asters, and days that smoulder, Old incantation, spell, The gods hold the scales in balance A hesitant moment still.</p>
<p>Noch einmal die goldenen Herden der Himmel, das Licht, der Flor, was brüetet das alte Werden unter den sterbenden Flügeln vor?</p>	<p>Once more the herds of heaven, All golden, the light, the fields -- Old Becoming, what do your brooding Slow dying wings conceal?</p>
<p>Noch einmal das Ersehnte, den Rausch, der Rosen Du – der Sommer stand und lehnte und sah den Schwalben zu,</p>	<p>Once more all that I longed for: Rapture, those roses' "you" -- The slanting summer stood there And watched the swallows too.</p>
<p>noch einmal ein Vermuten, wo längst Gewissheit wacht: die Schwalben streifen die Fluten und trinken Fahrt und Nacht.</p>	<p>Once more a vain supposing When certainty's found its mark: The swallows are skimming the waters And drinking flight and dark.²</p>

² German original and English translation quoted after *Gottfried Benn: Prose – Essays – Poems*. Edited by Volkmar Sander. Foreword by E.B.Ashron. Introduction by Reinhart Paul Becker, New York, 1987, pp. 214-217.

The poem suggests a wish or perhaps only a vague mood of holding on to the summer during a time of the year when it begins to vanish, and with surprising directness this inclination appears as related to the magic practices of “old incantation” and “spell.” “Once more”, the light, the scenery, and some personal memories of the summer become present in the text but this presence is only the presence of a short, inevitably passing moment, the presence of an afternoon or of an early evening perhaps. A glimpse of the late summer had become alive (“the slanting summer stood there”), against the otherwise irreversible flux of time and anticipating its disappearance within the changing of the seasons (“what do your brooding slow dying wings conceal?”). But the text is indeed more than a description of that wish and its short time of fulfillment. If we read the poem aloud, its rhythm can produce, for a brief moment, the impression of conjuring up and keeping alive the presence of the late summer. For poems are sometimes able to perform what they describe so well.

I will now try to develop the double relation between poetry and presentification (“making present”) and between presentification and a specific form and central status of attention in five subsequent steps. Step one will be the proposal for a foundational definition of “rhythm” as a dynamic form. On this basis, I will try to describe an often-overlooked contrast between the relationship of rhythm and consciousness (meaning, thought) on the one side and, on the other side, the very different relationship of rhythm and perception (sensuality, imagination). In its complexity, this contrast will explain how rhythm can change the readers’ state of mind, produce an impression of time standing still, and thus provide an opening in which what is absent and remote may become present. From there, we will arrive at a decisive third step (more amply developed in Alford’s dissertation), that is the insight that, for such presentification to happen, a simultaneity of several different modes and functions of attention is necessary; and that their complexity ends up assigning to the training of attention a central status in the reception of poetry. A further and fourth step will lead us to a recent philosophical discovery regarding a convergence between the structure of attention required by poetic presentification and Martin Heidegger’s concept of the “event of truth” as “unconcealment of Being.” In concluding then, I will think about a question that could follow from Lucy Alford’s work, that is the question regarding the status of poetic attention, presentification, and

unconcealment of Being under the specific life conditions and depending on some forms of communication that dominate the contemporary everyday. As a descriptive discourse, my sequence of reflections will be very abstract. But it also suggests a high degree of concreteness by being grounded in some operations of the mind and of the senses that every reader should be able to discover and experience in her or his own thinking and world processing.

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For the purposes of this essay, let us use "rhythm" as a notion comprehending all kinds of linguistics forms that we specifically associate with "poetry (i.e. structure of verse, rhyme, stanza etc)."³ This is an opening towards the extensional definition of the word, focusing on objects and phenomena to which it refers. For an intensional, more semantically oriented definition I propose to describe "rhythm" as any solution of the problem of how a time object in the proper sense is able to acquire a form. But what exactly is the problem here? "Time objects in the proper sense" are phenomena that can only exist in their temporal unfolding, like any movement, like spoken language, or music. Following the system theorist Niklas Luhmann,⁴ "form" is the simultaneity of self-reference and outside-reference. A circle, for example, draws the observer's attention to its inside (self-reference) and, at the same time to the "rest of the world" that is not lying inside the circle ("outside-reference"). If you now imagine that the line making up the circle starts to expand and to contract, then the inside space that it surrounds begins to change and is no longer identical with itself. In other words, a moving circle does not seem to have the stability that we associate with the concept of "form."

The mediation of this seeming contradiction between movement (as property of time objects) and the stability of form comes with reiteration. If the expanding and contracting movements of the circle, after a certain time, come back to perform and repeat the same sequence of movements that they originally went through over and again, then we will say that

³ See [also for further bibliographical references] my essay "Rhythmus und Sinn," in: Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht / K. Ludwig Pfeiffer [eds.]: *Materialität der Kommunikation*. Frankfurt / Main 1988, pp. 714-729.

⁴ "Das Kunstwerk und die Selbstreproduktion der Kunst," in: Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht / K. Ludwig Pfeiffer [eds.]: *Stil. Geschichten und Funktionen eines kulturwissenschaftlichen Diskurselements*. Frankfurt / Main 1986, pp. 620-672.

this movement has a “rhythm”, and through its reiteration the – moving – circle recuperates an identity that we can call the identity of a “dynamic form.” Such reiteration, however, breaks and freezes the irreversible flux of everyday time. Now, continuing to speak metaphorically, we can say that the flux of time interrupted and frozen does function like a zone, more precisely like a window, through which moments and things from the past (and in principle also from the future) can become present and as if “tangible” for us. This mechanism explains why charms, brief texts that are used to conjure up things and situations from the past, are almost exclusively cast in prosodic (rhythmic) language. For such language interrupts the progression of everyday time and makes it possible for objects and phenomena from the past (and the future) to come into the present.

Some of the oldest texts written in German language, for example, are charms (“Zaubersprüche”). One of the most famous among them (called the “First Merseburg Charm”) starts by telling, in verses and with heavy alliteration, how once upon a time two gods were riding out on horseback; how one of the two horses twisted its leg; and how several goddesses were healing it by pronouncing magic formulas over the injured body part. The pragmatic implication is that reciting this text in a contemporary situation where a horse’s leg got injured will make the narrated scenario from the past present and thus activate in the present the efficiency of the healing formulas spoken in the past by the goddesses. Obviously, the conjuring-up power of prosody is not restrained to such epic situations where gods and heroes appear. We all are familiar with the simple and frequently used mnemotechnical function of verses. To possess a description in verse form of grammatical rules, of the steps making up a behavioral strategy, or of a list of concepts, doubtlessly helps to bring back what we might have forgotten otherwise (at age sixty-six I can still recite and even sing in prosodic form some Latin grammar rules learnt at my German Gymnasium back in the late 1950s, among them the tune containing all propositions followed by the ablative case: “a, e, de / cum, sine, pro und prae”).

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How does rhythm then interact and interfere with our more concept-based (as opposed to our rather more perception-based) world appropriation? As a point of departure in order to answer to this complex question, I will return to Niklas Luhmann's theory of social systems. Based on his analysis of different types of "couplings" (i.e. connections) between different social systems, we can suggest and supplement that rhythm is the "consensual domain" (i.e. the medium that coordinates the different sides) of a "first order coupling." In his distinction between two types of coupling, Luhmann calls second order couplings "productive," implying that they are configurations where the interaction between several systems leads to the emergence of levels, phenomena, and states (on all sides of the coupling) that would not have appeared without this interconnectedness. As a result of second-order couplings, he insists above all on internal levels of self-observation and even of self-government through which systems become capable of making distinctions and thus of developing a dimension of "meaning" or "semantics." If humans are involved we can of course associate such levels of meaning with consciousness.

First order couplings, by contrast, are described as "non-productive." They consist in a feedback-relation between system where state (a) in system one triggers state (b) inherent to system two; state (b) inherent to system two triggers state (c) inherent to system one; state (c) inherent to system one triggers state (d) inherent to system two until, after a longer or shorter sequence, a certain state inherent to system two triggers a return to state (a) inherent to system one and thus initiates a repetition of the sequence through which the systems just went. Obviously, the reiteration of sequences that I just described can be called "rhythm." Observations, concepts, semantics, or any other lasting changes and additions, however, do not emerge from first order couplings. In most cases, I suppose, the mutual reactions between the systems involved remain on a level comparable to and compatible with human perception (as opposed to experience and meaning), which makes first order couplings the appropriate medium for the coordination of body movements -- before too much thinking and reflection could possibly interfere.

If, as I mentioned, second order couplings have an affinity with consciousness and its capacity to expand its own complexity, we may speculate that (beside other effects) second

order couplings tend to lower the intensity level of the functions of consciousness. This thesis at which we have arrived by deduction further suggests an affinity between rhythm (first order coupling) and imagination, once again in contrast to the affinity between second order coupling and consciousness. For the Danish linguist and philosopher Louis Hjelmslev imagination was “substance of content,” that is contents of human consciousness before their interpretation and their transformation into more or less contoured structures (that is “forms of content” as opposed to “substance of content”). Substance of content, i.e. imagination, dominates whenever our consciousness is not wide-awake: in our dreams for example; when we listen to music; or in moments of intense emotions or arousal. Now this association between rhythm and imagination leads to the further claim that imagination has a specific closeness to the body and to our senses. In a fruitful thought experiment, George Herbert Mead⁵ once described as a case of “imagination” (we could now add: as a case of “substance of content”) the images of a wild and strong animal or of a weak and defenseless animal that the perception of certain noises could have produced in the mind of an early Homo sapiens. According to the size, the strength, and the estimated threat of imagined “the other” animal, our early Homo sapiens would then either escape (to save his or her life) or attack. In either case there seems to be an immediate connection between the image present in consciousness and innervation, i.e. the activation of muscles (for escape or attack). The specific affinity between imagination and our body (with its sensual perceptions) must be grounded in a similar type of immediacy.

On a more culturally developed level of Homo sapiens, however, such images in the human consciousness will normally be filtered through concepts and discursive patterns stored in our memory. It is this operation that transforms imagination into form of content, which is into meaning and knowledge. Only thus will former images and imagination become accessible for thought and reflection; only as forms of content will they allow the mind to pause and, if necessary, to block and postpone the impulse towards innervation. The important point to

⁵ George Herbert Mead: “Die Philosophie der Sozialitaet” [“The Philosophy of the Present” [1929]], in “Philosophie der Sozialitaet. Aufsaezte zur Erkenntnisanthropologie. Frankfurt / Main 1969, pp. 229-271.

understand, however, is that prosodic language and rhythm prevent this higher level and function of human consciousness from emerging (or, seen from the opposite perspective, rhythm lowers what Edmund Husserl called “the tension of consciousness”).

Against the background of an evolutionary discourse, we could therefore characterize the impact of prosody and rhythm as “regressive.” It will not only break and bring to a seeming standstill the flux of time, thus opening that “window” through which scenes and things from the past can be conjured up and thus become present. Rhythm is also responsible for this presentification to occur in the ontological dimension of imagination (“substance of content”), rather than in the dimension of meaning (“form of content”). The difference between meaning and imagination may well be the origin and the reason for the general impression that poems have a more intense and more emotional impact (are closer to our perception and our body) than texts written or recited in prose.

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As the filter through which humans perceive and then process what we call “the world”, consciousness is temporally structured, so fully and exclusively indeed that we will never know whether the world “outside” of consciousness (often called “the real world”) is also temporal in and by itself – or only appears temporal due to the unavoidable projection of the structure of consciousness upon it. If the temporality of the world were the result of such a projection then consciousness would not only be “temporally structured” -- but it would be the “origin of time.” The so frequently used metaphor of the “stream of consciousness” highlights our introspective certainty of the mind’s temporal form. Edmund Husserl has described this form by saying that each short moment of present in consciousness is surrounded by “retension” and “protension,” that is by a fast-fading memory of the previous and a brief anticipation of the following present moment.

For attention as the variable scale in which consciousness is open to the world and to the self, this means (and Alford presupposes throughout her work) that it always has to function along a normally linear temporality as an environment that is never stable (and I am

not aware of any precise – and therefore philosophically canonical – descriptions of the dynamic relationship between attention and the temporality of consciousness). Listening to a poem often challenges our consciousness (and attention as one of its functions and dimensions) on an exceptionally high level of complexity. As for the outside perception, a poem demands a specific focus of attention be given to prosody, in addition to a general concentration on the sound of language. As for the inner side of the human psyche, poetic attention must be open to concepts evoked through words as well as to effects and products of the imagination in their specific intertwinedness with the body and the senses – and should, in doing so, rather emphasize than neutralize the difference between concepts and imagination (Alford's dissertation will offer distinctions between several conceptual layers allowing to analyze such complexity). For under the impact of prosody concepts primarily evoked by words, that is concepts as form of content, become imagination (substance of content). This relationship between prosody and attention is not synonymous with the transitory standstill of the inner time of consciousness through which (as a "window") the past can become present. But the past that becomes present in our mind through a poem becomes present as imagination (and not as meaning), due to the influence of prosody on the level of content.

In order to produce all the poetic effects that we are familiar with, consciousness and attention as its opening function need to perform all these operations not as a sequence but in simultaneity. The standstill moments of consciousness as a framework are not an effect "going back" to rhythm and to prosody as their antecedent "cause." Rather, they occur under the influence and in co-presence with rhythm as their "catalyst." At this point, we begin to grasp the full complexity of Alford's central pledge, i.e. that attention is not just one among multiple functions and conditions that underlie poetry but, in reality, the one central dimension of human consciousness that poetry, due to its specific structure, may be able to challenge on a particular level of complexity and thus to develop and to expand. In this sense poetry both presupposes and contributes to the shaping of a more complex and powerful attention capacity, and in this sense also poetry is indeed all about (the development of) attention.

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A specific affinity exists, in my view, between the description of poetry's relation to attention developed by Lucy Alford and the motif of "unconcealment of Being" as "event of truth" that Martin Heidegger developed during the later stages of his philosophical life work – and it is an affinity that could perhaps help to further develop the understanding of poetic attention.⁶ "Being," I am convinced, does not belong to the meaning-constituted or metaphysical dimension for Heidegger. Rather, the concept refers to things, to individual things ("this specific watch of mine" instead of "the idea of a watch"), whereas "unconcealment of Being" refers to a situation that allows for these things to be perceived and experienced in an absolute way, i.e. as if they were not necessarily seen from a specific perspective but as things "in and by themselves." The most dramatic difference between Heidegger's conception and the classical Western modern epistemology of "Subject" and "Object" lies in an aspect that we may allude to as "initiative". If traditional philosophy of consciousness implied that the Subject was naturally and necessarily driven to discover truth in the sphere of objects, Heidegger positioned "Dasein" (his less exclusively spiritual replacement of the concept of "Subject") in a very different configuration. It is Being itself that unconceals itself or not (Being seems to take the "initiative" so-to-speak), but such unconcealment can only happen in the presence of "Dasein" (although Being unconcealed is not to be understood as a "message" directed toward "Dasein").

This observation may remind us of the reception of poetry. There, too, it does ultimately not depend on the good intentions of readers or listeners whether they will be confronted with substantial moments of imagination and past moments that appear as if conjured up. What the reader or listener can ultimately contribute for poetic inspiration and for unconcealment of Being to happen is his or her attentive openness to Being and to imagination when they have not shown themselves yet (and may end up never showing themselves). This is an attitude close to – if not identical with – what Alford, in the part of her book dedicated to "intransitive attention," defines as "vigilance": "a state of attention in which there is no object of attention but rather the practice of sustained awareness or alertness, marked by a

⁶ This affinity also becomes visible in a specific reading of Heidegger that I have outlined throughout my book "Production of Presence. What Meaning Cannot Convey." Stanford 2004.

readiness to detect the appearance of a potential but unpredictable signal or change." Any furthergoing, more "active" attitude on the side of Dasein, according to Heidegger, would push Being back behind the threshold that it needs to cross in order to show itself – and it may well thus also prevent imagination from emerging.

Once unconcealment of Being happens, it becomes destiny ("Geschick") because Being affects Dasein – but cannot be controlled by it. The appearance of Being may (but must not) be existentially – and even physically – overwhelming for Dasein confronted with it, and sometimes imagination and inspiration set free by poetry have similar effects both on poets and their readers. Hölderlin's hymn "Wie wenn am Feiertage" ("As if on a Holiday"), one of the important illustrations and points of reference in Alford's argument, describes the atmosphere after a thunderstorm, and likens the situation of a poet and her readers to the image of a farmer who wants to see his fields after that thunderstorm – in full awareness of the danger to get hit by lightning. Poetic inspiration as unconcealment of Being, then, is an existentially aggressive potential to which we may expose ourselves and our attention because we appreciate the intensity that it can produce – with an attention to this danger and with an apprehension of it being a precondition for its intensity.

Finally, in extensive notes that were only recently published for the first time, Heidegger played with the idea of assigning to "Stimmung" (that is to "mood," "atmosphere") a specific status as anticipation or (in a meaning first invented by the psychiatrist Charcot) as "aura," preceding moments of truth and of Being unconcealed.⁷ If we define "Stimmung," different from Heidegger's own thoughts about this concept in "Being and Time," as the lightest touch of a physical environment on our body (like the weather or like the music that someone plays in the background), then "Stimmung" may be able to get us back into touch, quite literally, with our physical environment while it triggers, at the same time, individually specific states in our psyche.

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⁷ "Stimmung und Da-sein." In: Gesamtausgabe. Band 71 ["Das Ereignis"]. Frankfurt / Main 2010, pp. 217-224. – As for my own thoughts about "Stimmung," see "Stimmungen lesen. Ueber eine verdeckte Wirklichkeit der Literatur." Muenchen 2011 [English translation at Stanford University Press 2013].

I do not dispose of any empirical evidence in this sense but from my own teaching experience (largely based on the reactions of underclass students to poetry) and from other observations in my intellectual environment (preferences in leisurely reading, research topics of choice etc) there is reason to believe that the status of poetry and of prosody has remarkably changed as of recent. A much greater fascination exists now with the formal aspects of poetry than, say, when I started studying Literature back in 1967; something like a Renaissance of recitation as a practice of reading poetry and as a ritual of performance is occurring as we are speaking; and there is a greater at large-interest in talking about (and perhaps even in reading) poetry now than I ever have seen in my lifetime. This, I believe, is a historical and cultural environment that must have contributed to Alford's choice of her dissertation topic – and it should also be the context for drawing further future-oriented conclusions from her writing.

In the center of those changes in contemporary literary culture is a new appreciation of the particular existential potential opened up by the formal aspects of poetry, and this appreciation may depend on reactions to the most recent epistemological situation in which we find ourselves on an everyday basis. We are living today in an ever-broadening present of simultaneities where all things appear to be juxtaposed, where the future is blocked by threats that seem to come towards us, and where we feel we no longer manage to leave the past behind.⁸ At the same time, due to the logic of not being able to leave the past behind us, this time construction of the broadening present is our life condition in simultaneity with traditional "historical time" that counts with an open future to be shaped from the present and from a past that we irreversibly leave behind.

The interference between these two chronotopes (or worldviews) produces an existential situation with a characteristic blurredness or even lack of contours and orientations. If, in the first place, the historicist belief in a "necessary" sequence of events as "developments" had been progressively replaced, since the mid-twentieth century, by a view of the world as a field of contingency where, between a margin of the necessary and a margin of the impossible,

⁸See my books "Our Broad Present," New York 2014, and "After 1945. Latency as Origin of the Present," Stanford 2014.

most phenomena seemed open to multiple interpretations and functions (they were “contingent upon” them), contingency has now become a universal condition. Nothing is “necessary” anymore (no assumption, no certainty cannot be challenged) but nothing is impossible either (even the project of eliminating death from the human condition has become a project that can be seriously discussed). We are surrounded by absolute contingency; contingency is our existential universe.

As for our present-day temporality, the broadening present seems to have broken the linear dynamics of “development” or of “progress.” Even for young people, it seems very difficult to structure and to shape, as subsequent segments of a historical narrative, the time elapsed since the implosion of State Socialism in 1989 and even more so the time since the – quite literally: irreversible – challenge of the United States as hegemonic world power on September 11, 2001. Time does not seem to “move” into any direction anymore – but it is highly agitated: every moment contains centrifugal energies, and under these conditions “saving time” has become an extremely time-consuming business and obligation. While there is neither any perception nor pattern of a coherent world order left in our universe of contingency nor any well-contoured temporality, space as an existential dimension has been deeply transformed and blurred indeed by the most common life form today, which is the life form of sitting in front of a computer screen. As we are “navigating through the web” we constantly produce multiple – and absurd – sequences of undetermined “spaces” through which we are “going” without having the possibility of taking our bodies with us. Thus, we are producing and constantly developing a new “spatiality” that is no longer constituted around our bodies but probably emerges within and through the interference between different websites visited.

Such an existential environment breeds mental quickness, flexibility, and perhaps even a layer in our everyday life that deserves to be associated with concepts like “freedom” and “independence.” At the same time and above all, I believe, it produces a desire for forms to hold on to, existentially and physically, a desire also to recuperate space by becoming part of “mystical bodies” or of “collective bodies”: in a stadium for example, in an open air-concert, in a large religious event, or in movements of “political” protest that are often not very certain of

their political agenda because what really motivates them is the elementary desire of being together.

For such an environment, even the most elementary promise inherent to poetry, that is the promise of being connected to and united with other persons through rhythm, has a specifically fresh contemporary value and appeal. On a more complex level, poetry can centrally offer its readers today what it may silently always have been about, that is a configuration of different exercises and modes of attention through which we can pause; through which we become open for the bodily substance of imagination; and thanks to which we become focused upon the little we may be able to hold on to in a world of universal contingency, temporal mobilization, and spatial blurredness. This is why poetic attention – and Lucy Alford’s dissertation about the topic – matter so much.

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