



A Conceptual Malapropism: Aesthetics and the Political

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It is difficult to decide where to best begin in responding to Gregg Lambert's elegantly sly riffs on Deleuze's refrain, "The people are missing," as there is much that I agree with in his readings and diagnoses. Let me begin, then, by singling out this particularly delicious provocation: "In order to liberate the concept of 'minor literature' today, the first thing we do, let's kill all the critics, and second, close all the creative writing factories."¹

While the recommendations are tantalizing, I will leave aside the slaughter of critics and the closure of creative writing factories. We might concentrate instead on why the concept of minor literature should be liberated. Certainly, Lambert's suggestion that "minor literature" has been taken hostage by an academic-cultural program engaged in a frictionless spinning in the void without ever touching the real of our contemporary political situation is a worry that, like Lambert, I suspect most of us have experienced. The call to liberate the concept of minor literature is then a criticism of the shallowness of the contemporary use of the concept, the way in which it defuses real thinking about politics by bringing in too quickly the air, the appearance, of the political. Thus, in Lambert's analysis, the political is doubled. On the one hand, it designates the trappings of the political that work to keep the academic-literary machines chugging on. On the other hand, it refers to the unidentified political content that hovers out of reach of the critic's grasp.

This doubling is foreshadowed in the formulation of the problem: Lambert's interpretation of Deleuze and Guattari's purposeful reading of Kafka's *description* of minor literature as a *concept* of minor literature. The shift from description to concept leaves behind the messy, polemical, sometimes vacuous, often petty, motivations and squabbles in the writer's concrete situation. Hence the perhaps inevitable fantasy of a missing people that counterbalances the absence of the concrete historical situation.

We can see the temptation of the overly hasty and thus superficial limiting of the concept of minor literature in its common reduction to a catchphrase: the sloganized insight that "the personal is the political." To be snippy, one could ask whether this statement has ended up operating in the manner of the statement "all bachelors are unmarried men." The air of authority conferred by the slogan's definitional simplicity offers an easy way to give weight and meaning to the everyday. If the personal is political in this sense, then even the mundane bathes in the halo of the (abstract) idea of a political act: choosing not to buy a can of Goya beans is on par with a direct political act

(in fulfillment of the dangerously slick slogan that we can “vote with our dollars”). The immediate gesture of invoking the jargon of the political is part of our academic habits as well.

In this regard, Lambert’s stance that the “political” short-circuits both the aesthetic and the political is on point. Nonetheless, the question remains: what would a liberation of the concept of minor literature offer? Lambert highlights Deleuze’s strategic overstatements—that there are no metaphors, that the act of art is an act of resistance, that there are only collective assemblages of enunciation—as attempts to think new possibilities of organizing being. This analysis in turn provokes the question of what Lambert’s strategy in focusing on these overstatements might be. Certainly, part of the impetus is the need to lay bare what looks like the utter impossibility of an effective art—of Literature, in short—in the context of the contemporary configuration of academic institutions, on the one hand, and the culture industry, on the other, whose insularity functions to keep the cogs of the culture machine turning without any need to plug into what might be called the concerns of “the people.” All this in the face of a political and social landscape that cynically creates, if not outright encourages, the conditions for the mass fantasy of a return of the archaic Father, the rise of fundamentalisms of all stripes, and another “new” impasse in global politics. Lambert’s analysis of the strategic use of overstatements intended to “cut the Gordian knot of all political interpretations” (123) is a rebuke of the failure to adequately understand the concept of minor literature as becoming-minor.

Nonetheless, the question emerges whether there is any need for the liberation of a concept if that concept is a provocation aimed at a delusion. Part of the hesitation that I feel in the face of this call for a renewed attempt to understand becoming-minor lies in the problematic conjoining of art and politics. How do we think together these two moments of Kafka’s description: on the one hand, minor literature is a vital component in the emergence of a minoritarian people (through the spiritualization of the public, the creation of the possibility of recognition, etc.); on the other hand, minor literature reaches the boundary of the political too soon since, in practice, it is disseminated through political slogans oriented towards an as-yet unachieved majority (a move that we find today highly suspect)? Isn’t the problem of the liberation of minor literature a way of avoiding a more pressing question, one that Lambert himself raises: the “more fundamental question [...] of whether there is still something called literature today” (57).

More than half a century ago, Emmanuel Levinas asked whether we are not duped by morality. It may be that the question that we should ask is whether we are not duped by art: “[The] ‘aesthetic’ revolution produced a new idea of political revolution: the material realization of a common humanity still only existing as an idea.”² So, have we been duped? And even more worrisome, have we been duped because of our finer instincts and aspirations? Deleuze’s notion of the work of art as an act of resistance knots together the depersonalization of the work along the lines of Kant’s critique of beauty and the political force of the concept of minor literature in a vibrating tension. Minor literature as a call to or reminder of a missing or not-yet existing people can situate itself against majoritarian forms and histories because the reified identities and hierarchies offered by majoritarian forms are annulled in the work of art: this is the

beautiful's evacuation of the merely personal from the properly aesthetic judgment. (I know that it is an exceedingly ticklish move to equate the beautiful of the third *Critique* and the work of art, but the expansion of Kant's aesthetics of natural beauty to include art provides me with some justification.) And the merely personal is always political, since it involves what has been decided in advance for me. This evacuation of the merely personal from judgment is the key difference between art and the decorative, gustatory, or entertaining, in which a congealed identity is confirmed as the basis of a liking or a disliking. This shared identity, in turn, makes it possible to cathect the image of our "common humanity."

What I am saying here might be old hat, but it is nonetheless worth stating as baldly as possible. Although Kant would probably take umbrage at my psychologization of his aesthetic theory, isn't an important part of any work of art the refusal of easy routes of identification; that is, its precipitation of a subject out of an identity that is the creation of the admixture of both creaturely inclinations and a socio-political? This is, after all, what distinguishes Lars von Trier's *Antichrist* and *Nymphomaniac* from pornography. (Perhaps Kant would actually be more forgiving of my psychologization than I initially assumed. In scattered comments on the novel, which he does not seem to consider art, he pointedly criticizes the novel's felicity in setting its readers to daydreaming themselves into the novels' situations. That is, the novel encourages identification as the basis of the relationship between reader and text, and this basis is precisely what discounts the novel as art for Kant. I only reserve the right to take novels to do more than enable essentially masturbatory pleasures.)³

By blocking identification, the work of art refuses the already decided distribution of the sensible, opening up a space for an alternate imaginary: or, in Kafka's chipper assessment of the potential of a minor literature, it creates a space of recognition for minoritarian identities that have been dignified, spiritualized, and made conscious. The non-equivalence of recognition and identification is brokered by Deleuze through the denial of individual enunciation. This is the trap that the overhasty application of the concept of minor literature to works of art falls into: the error of positing an immediately political meaning based on existing minoritarian identities, which in turn generates criteria for judging the work's value along non-aesthetic lines, criteria that can and usually do find the artist in default. The reception of a work like Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is instructive in this respect. First decried by a number of leading figures in the Harlem Renaissance for its perceived failure to seriously engage with the problems of racism and then rediscovered with the rise of Black studies and Black feminism, it is perhaps still impossible to read Hurston's novel without the identifying minoritarian tags "Black" and "female" preceding it and determining not only its aesthetic value but also the location of its aesthetic value. This "tagging" may be inevitable, at least in a place like the United States, which has no foundational figure such as Shakespeare or Goethe against which a minor literature could sharpen itself. Indeed, this may be the motivation for that wonderful prank of history that Lambert points out: "minor literature" finds its first home in English departments in the United States as the foundation for official programs of interpretation (123). Without the support of a major literature of its own, how does a program of interpretation decide (the tautology of) its literary history to serve as the basis and justification of its work? The answer, in the United States at least, is a cobbling

together of “minor literatures” whose claim to major status is their minority (although this functions in tandem with the exaggeration of the universality of major figures from other national traditions) to compose an ersatz major literature whose patchwork quality is meant to represent or even correlate to the social and cultural, if not exactly the existing political, patchwork.

I hope I am not misunderstood as fantasizing about a proper major American literature. The concern is not a nostalgia for a major literature that never was. Rather, the concern is that the creation of an ersatz major literature as a patchwork of “minor literatures” in the United States has substituted the question of identification for the question of recognition. (We might see in the rise of the practices of “shipping” and “kinning,” of the explosion of fandoms and fan fiction, that dominate “aesthetic” perception in popular culture an outgrowth of this confusion.) If the substitution occurs, this may be the consequence of a problem internal to recognition itself. How can recognition function except as absolute deferral if there is not even a regulative ideal of humanity as in the Kantian judgment or a telos of a nation-people in the nineteenth century sense as that underlying Kafka’s description? Isn’t this where the critic steps in, or perhaps steps into it, to provide a second-order discourse that would attempt to grasp the force of the work of art and the constellation of the (bachelor) artist and the (missing) people? Especially in light of the discouraging fact that the masses out of whose lumpen state will emerge the people proper have thus far resisted recognizing their own collective enunciation in works of art. Thus, we move from the idea of humanity to the ideal of a missing people (since a people, infinitely deferred, is always preferable to an existing people) to the critic who, since the work of art has nothing to do with communication, takes on the task of articulating both the meaning of the work of art and the people. The critical function, then, is simultaneously necessary for the work of art if it is to afford a space of recognition and remains blind to the work of art since it must (mis)translate the force of the work into a communication.

What the critic senses and cannot help but respond to is a deep affinity between politics and art that obligates her (mis)translation: “Politics and art are neither tasks nor simply ‘works’: they name, rather, the dimension in which linguistic and bodily, material and immaterial, biological and social operations are deactivated and contemplated as such.”⁴ To adequately confront that identity, the critic is perhaps constrained to attempt to seize the immediate parallelism to cash out art as politics, and therefore politics as art. I would like to return to what I see as the core of the problem to approach this confrontation: Deleuze’s reformulation of the challenge posed by Kant’s aesthetics. While Deleuze positions himself against the universalizing moment of the judgment of the beautiful, he very much depends on the evacuation of the personal that Kant’s analysis of the beautiful posits as its key component. For a moment in the judgment “this is beautiful,” I am purged of any merely individual taste (although this requires an immense cultural training and practice on my part as well as a specific situation that enables the judgment). Kant’s dictum of subjective universality strains to articulate an anarchic normativity, the “ought” without recourse to a concept.

The evacuation of the merely personal should be understood in at least a double sense. The first sense is the subjective universality of aesthetic judgment as the confirmation of the possibility of the harmonization of the faculties located on the level

of a subjectivity's rational and sensible constitution in general rather than as this particular individual. To offer a banal concretization, even if I dislike the color pink in everyday life, I can make the judgment that Francis Bacon's 1946 *Painting* is beautiful (because what is at stake in the aesthetic judgment is not the empirical content of the senses but the universal validity of the free play of the faculties).

The second sense in which the evacuation of the personal should be understood is in fact immanent in the first sense. We could say that in the first sense of the evacuation of the personal the emphasis falls on the self as a creaturely-rational being in general that, through the suspension of individual tastes, gives rise to the glimpse of a "potential of life."⁵ The second sense of the evacuation of the personal, however, consists of the distinction between the subject in general and the subject bearing idiosyncratic tastes and a particular history. That is, we should remember that the aesthetic experience evokes not only the potential of a life or a people that is missing but also the particular subject as well. And the crucial point is not that the particular subject is temporarily annulled in the aesthetic experience but that the subject in general is held at a distance, in abeyance, from the particular subject. The analogy to morality could be helpful here: my ability to universalize (at least as an "ought") my feeling of pleasure or the maxim of my action is my ability to evaluate myself from the point of view of a third person. The point at which the analogy breaks off is the status of the missing subject. In taking the maxim of a possible action as universalizable, the subject in her particularity is abolished in the moral subject, which coincides with the pure form of willing. The subject of aesthetic judgment, however, does not coincide with a pure form. Therefore, the subject in her particularity is not abolished so much as sublated in the harmony of the faculties. The evacuation of the personal is not the purging of history and inclination but the precipitation of the subject in general out of the particular person. As the subject of an aesthetic judgment, I do not will to find Bacon's *Painting* beautiful. I do not put aside the creaturely, historical, and cultural situation that renders me capable of aesthetic perception as I must put aside my emotional connections, pragmatic concerns, desires, and habits in the act of moral willing. Instead, I am held in a radical disinterest that overrides the seeming immediacy of my creaturely and rational modes of being, that calls to the missing people who could likewise make this judgment and to whom I refer in my judgment.

I may have been precipitous here. Does my disinterest give rise to the hearing of the work's evocation of a missing people, to its insistence that there is a "life that men have imprisoned," or resonate with the idea that art "liberates a life, a powerful life, a life that's more than personal"?⁶ Is the evacuation of the personal necessarily political? Certainly, I've rather cherry-picked my Bacon example, which belongs to a family of works of art whose aesthetic force seems to rely on the crucifixion of flesh, thereby nicely dovetailing with the idea of the act of art as an act of resistance. Despite my cherry-picking, to experience the disinterest necessary to the aesthetic judgment, the judging subject is necessarily released—however evanescently—from the facticity of life as it is. This is what enables the potential of a life to be glimpsed.

If I am re-hashing the basic contours of the judgment "this is beautiful," it is because the extent of Deleuze's anti-Kantian strategy, his rejection of the *sensus communis*, takes on its full import only in light of the history of the aesthetic "solution"

Kant offers to defuse the consequences of his Copernican turn: the reconciliation of freedom and causality in the harmonious play of the faculties, but with an eminently sensible (no pun intended) restraint. In refusing a more than symbolic relation between beauty and freedom, Kant puts into no uncertain terms the futility of a faith in the political power of art and emphasizes contingency in the development of a culture capable of aesthetic appreciation. Moreover, the refusal to decide once and for all the exact relation between the beautiful and morality or freedom, genius and supersensible ends (the tentative language of the “as if” that Kant employs whenever he touches on these relations) isolates the harmonious play of the faculties less as an actual reconciliation and more as the image of a possible reconciliation. This is only consistent with the mystery of the source of the beautiful’s ability to provoke the harmonious play of the faculties. The beautiful’s being as a symbol (of our moral vocation, of the reality of freedom, what have you) is precisely its persisting in its distinction from the domains of cognition and morality, of science and politics. The cultivation of art may help to prepare the subject for moral and political autonomy, may offer “perspectives” that may suggest new knowledge, but it is not a bridge in any substantive sense. Hegel’s “end of art” thesis doubles down on Kant’s analysis of the beautiful in offering a historical accounting of art’s new vocation outside of the domains of cognition and morality. In the readings of sympathetic critics like Danto and Žižek, the end of art thesis is the liberation of art from service to a heteronomous power.⁷ In this, Hegel remains faithful to the Kantian insight against the Romantic desire for a new mythology that would dissolve all boundaries. The domains of science, politics, and art are distinct.

I am, no doubt, exaggerating the clarity of Kant’s distinctions for my own strategic purposes. If I do so, it is to resist one tendency in Kant scholarship, which draws the aesthetic and the cognitive closer together by locating aesthetic judgments as the basis of all judgments. This reading takes the aesthetic judgment’s infamous qualification as being “without concept” as a proto-cognitive or precognitive determination. In this reading, any use of concepts of the understanding first must find the appropriate concept to organize the manifold of intuition. While the question of how appropriate concepts are selected, employed, extended, or created is a real problem, the proto-cognitive or precognitive reading offers a substantial payoff in lending a certain weight to aesthetic judgments and in undermining the distinctions that Kant draws between these domains since all knowledge, then, bears an aesthetic moment.

A similar tendency, I suspect, is at work in the drawing together of the domains of aesthetics and morality in the positing of an identity of the act of art and the act of (political) resistance. The temptation here is to extend freedom from the domain of practical reason, through the beautiful’s analogy to freedom and the sublime’s affirmation of our moral vocation. The obscurities of the genius’ and art’s relation to Nature provide a rationale for this extension, but we would do well to maintain the rigor of Kant’s distinctions if we wish to avoid the critical tautologies that Lambert points out.

I anticipate that there may be some bridling at the suggestion that art is part of a cultural practice that prepares for political maturity, which is one possible gloss on Kantian aesthetics. But there is another way of reading this separation and contiguity. Art and politics involve the gesture of supersensible ends, of taking seriously the idea that the world is amenable to our creaturely, cultural, and moral existence, and that our

creaturely, cultural, and moral existence is amenable to the world. In that gesture is the act of resistance: “[To] resist always means to free a potential of life that was imprisoned or offended.”⁸ But the identity of art and politics as resistance does not entail their identity with each other.

As a response to Lambert’s provocation, I offer this counter-provocation: that we seriously consider whether the exaggerated aporias, futilities, and often inanities of contemporary art and its reception are a consequence not of the overhasty grafting of the political onto the aesthetic but the saturation of the political by the aesthetic. That is, we should entertain the possibility that the particular problem of the concept of minor literature—based on an inadequate understanding of art as an act of resistance, as arising out of particular social and historical conjunctions, the way in which it connects with the political (this is the problem of mediation that Deleuze tries to circumvent by denying individual enunciation)—stems from a conceptual malapropism.

Rather, the quasi-divine power attributed to art—of creation or healing—overflows the conceptually empty center of the aesthetic object in the post-Kantian promise of art as the moving force of the great reconciliation. And the political, having lost its bearings once the nineteenth century fantasy of an organic becoming of nation-and-people goes terminally wrong, cathects to the powerful autonomy and self-given teleological structure of art as a corrective for its deficiencies. That this hidden messianic power of art is in turn sometimes identified with an archaic Father figure muddies the movement between the aesthetic and the political even more. We could think here of an instance such as Bulgakov’s veneration of Stalin in the figure of Woland in *Master and Margarita* or the final gesture of a cosmic paternal forgiveness in Tarkovsky’s *Solaris*.

What I am suggesting is that the condition of being without a sense of measure that Kafka finds in minor literature is in fact the state of the politics today. Where he saw minor literature latching onto political slogans, of meeting the boundary of the political too soon, politics today latches onto aestheticized slogans and meets the boundary of the aesthetic too soon. To put it another way, the congealing of cynical reason as the dominant mood of political gamesmanship is the bankruptcy of the possibilities of seriously imagining the specifically political supersensible. Again, the bankruptcy is partially the result of a confusion of the political and the aesthetic: “The failure of political revolution was later conceived of as the failure of its ontologico-aesthetic model.”⁹ The more impossible the vision of a political revolution, the more fervent the belief in the apocalyptic force of art.¹⁰ The consequence of the conflation of the aesthetic and the political does not only stymie the perception of the aesthetic. The evaporation of a political imaginary that does not depend on a vocabulary of a salvific aesthetics leaves us with neither—it leaves us with an impoverished political imaginary on the one hand and the tautology of literary history on the other.

¹ Gregg Lambert, *The People are Missing: Minor Literature Today* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2021), p. ix. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically.

² Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, translated by Gabriel Rockhill (New York: Continuum, 2004), p. 27.

³ Consider the following three passages from Kant:

1. “The *third* wish [that provokes discontentedness with the providence that governs the entire course of the world] – or rather, the empty longing (for one is aware that the wished for object can never come to be) – is for the *golden age*, whose vague image the poets praise so highly. In that time we shall be released from all the imagined needs that voluptuousness now piles on us, and there shall be satisfaction with having merely natural needs met, a thoroughgoing equality among men, and peace among them that endures forever – in a world, there shall be the pure enjoyment of a carefree life, dreamt away in idleness, or trifled away in childish play. This longing is stimulated by tales of *Robinson Crusoe* or of trips to the South Seas Islands...” See, Immanuel Kant, *Perpetual Peace and other essay on Politics, History, and Morals*, edited and translated by Ted Humphrey (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983), p. 59. 2.
2. “If fanaticism in its most general sense is a deliberate overstepping of the limits of human reason, moral fanaticism is this overstepping of limits which practical pure reason sets to making. Pure practical reason thereby forbids us to place the subjective determining ground of dutiful actions... anywhere than in the law itself... If this is no, then not only novelists and sentimental educators... but also philosophers... have instituted moral fanaticism instead of a sober but wise discipline, though the fanaticism of the latter was more heroic, while that of the former is of a more shallow and pliable nature.” See, Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, translated by Lewis White Beck (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1956), p. 88-9.
3. “[A] person may desire something in the most lively and persistent way even though he is convinced that he cannot accomplish it or even that it is absolutely impossible... It is important for morality to warn emphatically against such empty and fantastic desires, which are frequently nourished by novels, and sometimes also by mystical representations, similar to novels, of superhuman perfections and fantastical bliss.” See, Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, translated by Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 32.

⁴ Giorgio Agamben, *Creation and Anarchy: The Work of Art and the Religion of Capitalism*, translated by Adam Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019), p. 27.

⁵ Agamben, *Creation and Anarchy*, p. 14.

⁶ Gilles Deleuze, “R is for Resistance,” *Gilles Deleuze From A to Z*, dir. Pierre André-Boutang, translated by Charles J. Sivale, *Semiotext(e)*, 2011.

⁷ “[T]he fact that art is no longer obliged to serve as the principal medium of the expression of the Spirit frees it, thus allowing it to gain autonomy and stand on its own: is this not the very definition of the birth of modern art proper – that it is no longer subordinated to the task of representing spiritual reality?” See, Slavoj Žižek, “Hegel and Shitting: The Idea’s Constipation,” in *Hegel and the Infinite: Religion, Politics, and Dialectic*, edited by Slavoj Žižek et al. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), pp. 221-232.

“Part of what ‘the end of art’ means is the enfranchisement of what had lain beyond the pale, where the very idea of a pale – a wall – is exclusionary.” See, Arthur C. Danto, *After the End of*

Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 9.

⁸ Agamben, *Creation and Anarchy*, p. 14.

⁹ Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, p. 27.

¹⁰ We can hear the undertones of this idea in Danto's quasi-religious fervor: "How wonderful it would be to believe that the pluralistic art world of the historical present is a harbinger of political things to come!" See, Danto, *After the End of Art*, g. 37.