

THE NEED FOR FICTION IN POETRY AND POLITICS
AN INTERVIEW WITH SIMON CRITCHLEY

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JPS: In a recent talk you gave entitled “The Catechism of the Citizen”, you spoke of a need for what you called a “supreme fiction”, which is the same term you used in your work on Wallace Stevens’ poetry [*Things Merely Are*]. I was wondering if you would elaborate on what you mean by this “fiction” in terms of whether or not it is a narrative (like Scripture), a concept (such as friendship or responsibility), or maybe an image like what we get in poetry—or perhaps it could be any or none of these?

SC: It would be what Schlegel calls a “secular Bible”, very simply, or something that would have, as it were, the authority of Scripture without the author of Scripture being God but being ourselves. So that’s the problem: can there be Scripture without divine authority but with human authority. What I’m doing with the idea of a “supreme fiction” is transposing an idea from a conception of poetry to an idea of politics. In Stevens’ poetry the idea of a “supreme fiction” is a fiction that we know to be a fiction, but which we believe in. So these two characteristics of being a supreme fiction require belief that would be *like* religious belief but that we *know* is a fiction as such. And previously I’ve restricted the idea of the supreme fiction to poetry, but now I’m trying to extend it to thinking about politics on the basis of, specifically, Alain Badiou’s response to my book on Stevens where he understands “supreme fiction” in political terms. So the argument I was making in “The Catechism of the Citizen” is that politics really seems to require divine fiction. If you’re coming at it from a non-theistic perspective: can we re-think that notion as “supreme fiction” as the simple fiction that

would underwrite and make possible an act of human association?
Something like that.

JPS: Is this “supreme fiction” necessarily one fiction (perhaps a timeless fiction) or is it continually reinvented by the authors of the community, namely ourselves, approaching this question that necessitates the fiction?

SC: It’s tricky because in a sense Christianity is a fiction, right? And we know it’s a fiction. If that’s the case, then Christianity is obviously a set of stories; other religions are other sets of stories. But we believe those stories to be articles of revealed truth or something like that—really much stronger than just being a story. “Supreme fiction” would be a fiction that we know to be a fiction and we know that there’s no truth other than the truth we give ourselves.

But there are stipulations on the idea of a “supreme fiction” in politics. The idea of a “supreme fiction” for Stevens is his way of working through the legacy of Romanticism. The legacy of Romanticism is roughly: given that there’s no God, how can we construct something *like* God in a human work. Arguably, different Romantic poets—like Wordsworth in the *Preludes*—give different responses to that problem, and Stevens’ response is the notion of the “supreme fiction”. Now, the fiction would be different in different hands and different authors. But in political terms, “supreme fiction” for me has certain constraints. It has to be based on an act of association; it has to be based on a notion of rigorous equality; and the “supreme fiction” would be the act whereby a people comes to determine itself as a people as such. And in a sense that is not going to change—I think that is an expression of a modern conception of politics that is, for the moment, fixed.

JPS: This sounds similar to something you say in *Very Little ... Almost Nothing* with regard to the state of modernity when you bring up Jacobi who says that either we are God or God has to be outside of us. I was wondering if you could elaborate on what that means for how we can put our belief in a humanly constructed fiction (what we might call a very Nietzschean problem).

SC: Absolutely. I think it is a paradox, an aporia, that the consequence of what I call the post-Kantian settlement in philosophy is the following: that which is is a consequence of the activity of the subject. So there is an empirically real world for Kant—it’s the world that’s around us—yet that world is a world constituted ultimately by the activity of the imagination. Transcendental idealism and empirical realism are two halves of the same

thesis. But we do not have access to things in themselves—that’s the Kantian claim, and I still take that seriously. If that’s the case, then everything that is simply the reflection back to the subject of itself. This is what Jacobi calls “nihilism”. And he said if that’s the case, he’d rather die than the universe simply to be the reflection of myself, and he wanted something that he wants to call the “truth” which refers to something like God.

And I think we’re still just stuck in that position—that everything that is is constituted by the activity of the subject, yet what we require is something more than that: a moment of transcendence or heteronymy or externality and all the difficulty of dialectical and political thought is working out what that might mean, I think. The response to nihilism is the organizing problem of modern philosophy.

JPS: Elsewhere in your work you write about “infinite responsibility” à la Lévinas. Might the “supreme fiction” that you speak of be the articulation of this notion or is “infinite responsibility” the fiction itself?

SC: Good question. I think there’s a Lévinasian version of the supreme fiction, which is that infinite responsibility to the other person, to the widow, the orphan, the stranger, which is unconditional, absolute, and to be respected everywhere. Is that the case? Obviously it’s not the case. Lévinas was absolutely aware that the context in which he was arguing for ethics as first philosophy was a situation of generalized war, so what I try to emphasize in Lévinas’ work is the fragility and weakness of his position in a world defined by war which has culminated in the destruction of the people of which he was a part (the Jewish people). What we require is some notion of responsibility that is affective, unconditional, and not to be compromised. Is that a fiction? I guess it is a fiction. How do we persuade people of that fiction? That’s a political question, and it’s a question of how we hegemonize that fiction. The only other way of getting it is to say that it’s a feature of human nature, which I don’t think it is, and I wouldn’t want to make that naturalistic argument, anyway.

JPS: You say that infinite responsibility is a “metapolitical disturbance” that serves as the basis for political action—a politics you say is needed “now” and “here”. Would you elaborate on this?

SC: This is the argument of the book that is forthcoming from Verso in May 2007 called *Infinitely Demanding*. I roughly argue for an ethics of infinite responsibility, which isn’t Lévinasian—it’s much more independently conceived (Lévinas is one of the people I use, Badiou is another, and I use

other people as well and a little of myself), and I try to link that notion of an ethics of infinite responsibility that is infinitely demanding to a conception of politics. Ethics, for me, is the metapolitical moment in any sequence of political activity. So I think that ethics without politics risks being empty; politics without ethics risks being blind (to adapt Kant), or ethics without politics risks being angelic. So for me it's a question of thinking about political organization and political activity, which I think of more closely to anarchist traditions. It's a big shift in my thinking in the last four or five years toward a quasi-anarchist position in politics, because what appeals to me in anarchism is its understanding of political organization, which is powerful: its sense of locality (that politics needs to take effect in a specific conjunction) and its sense that politics is not the outcome of dialectical forces of relations of production (as it is in Marx). At the core of anarchism is an ethical demand rather than some sort of logic of history (as within orthodox Marxism). For me politics is the activity of creating what I call an interstitial distance within the state, within the subjects of the state, which exerts pressure on the state. I think that interstitial distance, which is the work of politics, draws on an ethical demand that is metapolitical.

JPS: One final question regarding what you said earlier about connecting your work on poetry with your work on politics. In both cases one term you use is “metaphysics in the dark”. You use it on the one hand in discussing the ethics of infinite responsibility and on the other in Wallace Stevens. I was wondering if you would speak to this condition of “darkness” and its relation to the “supreme fiction”.

SC: It's tricky because the “metaphysics in the dark” reference is an allusion to Stevens and he says that we are actors on a stage of our own making—we are “metaphysicians in the dark”. He says we can't see, we don't know what to do. So in a sense the problem of a supreme fiction—given that we're on our own and given that there is no divine light to guide us—is that we're in the dark: how can we construct this supreme fiction?

The other aspect of darkness is the darkness of the world. The darkness for Stevens in his life was the Second World War and for him the task of poetry is pushing back against the darkness of the present. The position that we're in now is also, I think, a time of enormous darkness. I'm someone who is constitutionally and philosophically an optimist in every conceivable way, and I can't think of a darker period in history than the one we're living through where the only discourses of transformation that are available are varieties of religious fundamentalism, all of which seem to me pernicious. It seems we're in a terrible situation, so now there's a double darkness. So one side of “The Catechism of the Citizen” was deeply pessimistic: what I'm attracted to in

Rousseau is the pessimism of his politics. For Rousseau, we're living in a state of war, described at the end of the *Second Discourse*, and very possibly that's it. And if I think about the world now, the problem that is not being dealt with at all—certainly not by this government but also not by any theoretical discourse I'm aware of—is the problem of inequality and poverty. It seems to me that leftists have just lost sight of the problem of inequality and this is deeply disturbing, and that's why we need to attend to Rousseau and Marx.

In Rousseau, the possibility of overcoming that state of war is establishing a form of association—the act by which a people becomes a people. Is that possible? “It's possible, possible, possible”, as Stevens would say. But at the present moment I really don't know.