

THE SEMINAR AS A FORM FOR THINKING

One of Sappho's most beautiful fragments contains a couple of strophes, which in prose translation read:

I bid you Abanthis, take your lyre and sing of Gongyla while desire once again flies around you, the lovely one – for her dress excited you when you saw it; and I rejoice: for the holy Cyprian herself once blamed me for praying...¹

There is much speculation about the context the poem describes. Is it about a women's equivalent to the symposiums several male poets address in their work, not least Sappho's contemporary and compatriot Alcaeus? The two-thousand-five-hundred year reception of Sappho shows that such speculations more often reflect the ideas, desires and biases of the analyzer than the historical circumstances. Neither is it the historical Sappho that interests me here, rather the form of attention that the fragment creates and affords.²

Let us examine the nodes and connections that support the "space of attention." Who does the addressing and who is being addressed?

First one must naturally take into consideration that this concerns a poem. And a poem is always something spoken by someone and heard by someone (in our time often the same person since we usually read to ourselves in silence).

Then we have an implicit speaker, the first person who speaks the poem and in whom all who read the poem have an interest; I usually call this person "the signature" (here the signature is "Sappho").³

Then of course we have the one who speaks in the poem, she who begins, "I bid you, Abanthis." The fictive space of attention – which is always also an allegory of the act of reading – opens with her, in that the space calls our attention to our attentiveness and its possibilities. She – let's call her "the fictive Sappho" – addresses herself to Abanthis and re-minds

¹ *Greek Lyric, Sappho and Alcaeus*, trans., David A. Campbell, Loeb Classical Library (Harvard University Press, 1982).

² The concept of attention for many years has been central in the discussions at FSL (Free Seminar in Literary Criticism). For three years the seminar pursued a project entitled "Forms of Attention," which lay the groundwork for an entire way of thinking, to be seen, for example, in the books *Reading Precedes Writing--the Actuality of Poetry* by Magnus William-Olsson, *Performative Criticism* (Magnus William-Olsson, ed.) and *And they saw that they were naked--On Shame and Protection* by Kari Lovaas, all published in the series Ariel/Literary Criticism (Knopparp, 2011, 2013, 2013).

³ We always read the author as author, even when a poem appears anonymously. In the case of Sappho this is particularly complicated because her texts are the result of comprehensive philological deliberation that can always be tested and questioned. But the signature (from Latin *signare* "mark") is always the *mark* through which we are given entry to the poem.

her how she once saw a third woman, Gongyla, and was excited by her dress. That Abanthis recalls this incident, the fictive Sappho believes, makes desire (like the dress) flutter around her. And this fictive space of attention, so saturated with sensuality (song, sight, desire, rhythm and tactility) is finally linked, through eschatological address, to a far greater context, the goddess's possible attentiveness.

I think that the structure of attention being exhibited and established here is a possible point of departure for thinking about the prerequisites for the seminar as a form for thinking.

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We are living the epoch's final phase of attention-crisis.⁴ In many ways this has altered the terms for thought, art and criticism. The ability to present a great deal of information to a fleeting and impatient attention has become more important. Critical categories like "agency," "briefing," "linking," "tips" and "quotation" have gained ground on genres that demand slow, careful and thoughtful attention.

The crisis becomes apparent on many levels and in many contexts. In the academic world we have, e.g., received an almost industrial form of conference and seminar activity wherein groups of often extremely knowledgeable persons from all over the world attempt – in thirty minutes and fifteen minutes for questions – to convey before one another years of strenuous mental activity. But what seems effective from the perspective of an information-economy appears as a foolhardy waste of time from that of an attention-economy.

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For twenty-five years I have devoted myself to arranging seminars. For me it has been a way of seeking a sympathetic response to my own thoughts, and also a way of losing myself in those of others. During happy moments in these seminars we have simultaneously articulated thoughts, experienced thinking and gone beyond it. Far more often, however, the gatherings have become paralyzed by the distinctive grimaces of the joint participants, by indissoluble antagonisms, by muteness, by power plays, by insufficient attention and ruptured trust.

⁴ The crisis of attention is allied with digitalization. It's often said that we live in an information economy. But economy is usually defined as "the art of keeping house with limited resources." In our time, however, information is all but a limited resource. On the contrary, we're drowning in it. In information society the limited resource instead is attention. The concept "attention economy" has become a central tool when we in FSL have attempted to theorize and understand the information society and the public sphere. When digitalization in a short time made available enormous quantities of easily accessible information, almost all of us reacted by wasting our limited resource of attention wildly and chaotically. Now most of us are slowly beginning to learn to use our attention more cleverly in accordance with our newly won possibilities. We have learned to "scan read" and "multitask," but to a greater and greater extent we also begin a return to slow and careful attention which, e.g., poetry like much other art and thinking presuppose. See Richard Lanham, *The Economics of Attention, Style and Substance in the Age of Information* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

When I was young and played improvisational music in various combinations, I experienced similar dynamics, rare moments of actualized attention and long hours of hopeless attempts to get out of a kind of spiderweb pattern of predetermined *manners*, structures of response that only emptied out phrases and sounds to given stimuli, attempts to "get out" or "go further," which only brought us players back to repetitions and tame variations of readymade experiences and thoughts. I believe that many who have worked in and through some kind of ensemble recognize themselves in such experiences. And yet it's almost always worth continuing to try. The capacity to "stir the ashes," as if to give up the effort and listlessly busy oneself with what remains in the ashes' trail of loss, is, I have learned, one of the decisive capacities of the seminar and of ensemble playing. To endure the silence, the embarrassment, the relentlessness, and the alienation. To "damn it to hell" and yet not break up.

But is there joint thinking that is not individual thinking through and by virtue of others? From Heraclitus to St. Augustine, from Descartes to María Zambrano and Gilles Deleuze, time after time it's been asserted that thinking is solitary. Its critical power to change has its origin in the individual, even if through conversation thoughts can bounce off one another. In return the action that enables transformation is usually described as dependent on that which is held in common. The model for the former idea of course is *dialogue's* binary condition and double entendre, participation's and division's to-gether.⁵ While the model for the latter is often the relationship of the body to its limbs under the direction of the head. When all-and-one appear as a body of organs, senses and limbs in the mind's (consciousness's, the ego's) pay, we can hope to change the world. In this tedious metaphoric revolutions, armies, forms of government, organizations, families, seats of learning, conferences and businesses persist.

How would a common way of thinking be able to arise beyond such urgent metaphoric? A common way of thinking that does not have its starting point in that which already has been thought, rather in readiness for thought?

Would it perhaps be possible that the seminar, like the musical ensemble, out of listening could give expression to a "polyphonia," a "sound"?

Within the musical sphere harmony is represented with the term "accord," a word that etymologically goes back to Latin *cordis*, "heart." *To the heart* – "a-cordis." The heart will then be understood as the muscle of feeling. Accord [in Swedish] is *stämning* ["mood," "voicing," "tuning"], a consequence of ["pulling oneself together"] "*stämmer sig samman*." (Compare German *Stimme* ["voice"] and *Stimmung* ["mood," "attunement," "accord"], *ein Lied anstimmen*, ["begin to sing a song"] etc.) The heart, however, is also the pulse's muscle, which

⁵ Greek *dia-logos* "through words" from *dia-legein* ("through-to speak"). But *dia* also means "apart" and *legein* means "to pluck / pick" and the word *dialegein* even has the meaning "to separate, to divide." The prefix *dia* is of course a variant of *di* (related to *bi*) which denotes "two, du-," etc.

offers measured "syn-chrony," the kind of commonality that consists of a "close-beside-one-another-at-the same-time."

For jointly no one is free. Commonality is always obedience to participation's mutuality. This obedience to mutual participation has perhaps its original form in the meal. And the meal's community has its basis not in conversation, but in listening's mutuality. Franz Rosenzweig reflects on this in *Stern der Erlösung*:⁶

[A] meal together always means a real, realized and active community; in this wordless mutuality in itself of the meal is taken mutually, the mutuality is presented as a real mutual participation animated in life.

Where a meal is taken together, there such mutual participation exists. It is so in the home, but so too in monasteries, lodges, casinos, associations. And where mutual participation is lacking, as in classrooms or even in just university lectures, or even seminar practices, it does not exist, although the foundation of mutual participation, the mutual listening, is indeed by all means here.⁷

The Greek symposium's community is a meal community, a communion. The word *symposion* (from *syn* "together" + *potis* "drinker") signifies banquet. The phenomenon was, during early Greek history, one of the several regulated exceptions to other forms of sociality, but through antiquity it evolved and in classical Athens it took the form that we--thanks to authors like Plato and Xenophon--best recognize. However, there was very likely great variation in how symposiums were held, not simply over the course of time but also in connection with local customs and traditions.⁸ I prefer, as indicated, to think of it as a form of attention, a "community" built not on dialogue, on speaking and the word, but rather on all the capabilities and arts of attention which have their basis in what Rosenzweig calls "a wordless mutuality in itself."

The archeological hoard of Greek vase painting encompasses a long series of depicted symposiums. There the symposium is most often created as a kind of community of interchange; musical, sexual, poetic, terpsichorean, intellectual, culinary. People distinctly turned toward or away from one another. But like all painting it works first by virtue of someone looking at it. Observation is always one of its most important themes. In this sense the observer of these vase paintings corresponds to the eschatological addressee in the above fragment of Sappho. The one whose potential looking, out of wordlessness, provides "mutuality." This person is always seated [with the others] at the table. In the sympotic seminar-form we have tried to

⁶ *The Star of Redemption*, trans., Barbara E Galli (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 335.

⁷ Like Swedish German has several alternatives for expressing "together-ness." *Gemenskap* (*Gemeinschaft*), and even the Latin *Kommune* are at hand. The Germanic as well as the Latin words ultimately revert to Indo-European's *kom-moini* where *kom* means "with, beside"; *moini* means "general, collective."

⁸ A penetrating analysis of the symposium as occurrence, motive and phenomenon is given in the book *Sympotica--a Symposium on the Symposium*, Oswyn Murray, ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990).

develop at FSL [Free Seminar in Literary Criticism] I tend to think of this absent eschatological addressee as "*kleos*" [glory, fame, rumor, that which is heard]. The attention before which everything is at stake.

But the seminar, the sympotic seminar, depends on attention being made present, that it attends to itself not only in postures, miens and gestures but also in interpretations of what was said. To appear as listening. When the seminar is successful as a form of attention it seems to the individual as answering the not-yet-articulated question.⁹

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In the book *Reading Precedes Writing – Poetry's Actuality* I try to develop a poetics on the basis of attention.¹⁰ Poetry – defined in the book as "language in its highest potentiality, to someone" – appears as the prerequisite and possibility of thinking, in competition with philosophy. What do I mean then by "think"? I don't mean conceptualize. I don't mean the distinctions of dialogical reason, rather *think* in the meaning of making way for thought; to form attention so that thinking can be actualized in its possible multiplicity.

I will call it critical thinking if with "criticism" we mean acts of selection and judgment.¹¹ In this view criticism, critical thinking, is constitutive for all types of art, for art itself in its forming, because it's a matter of selecting and judging while oscillating between these positions. The starting point in attention allows us to understand this formation as work on one's own character; the work of practicing one's sensibility in all corporal and cognitive registers, so that one is able to form an attention that can actualize the work in its complex possibilities.

It is out of this insight and experience that the seminar appears as a form for thinking. Its concern is not an exchange of opinions and ideas. It's never about instructing and being instructed. Nor is it about making oneself understood or understanding. It concerns forming an attention that gives thinking the power of judgment and selection, which allows it to be expressed while it is taking form.¹²

One can seek a point of departure for such a form of attention in Plato's as well as Xenophon's portrayals of symposiums. The symposiums that appear in them offer schemas

⁹ See my lecture "This uneasily attentive alone-with-my-self-polka in the dark," in *Methodos -- Art's Knowledge, Knowledge's Art* (Knopparp: Ariel/Literary Criticism [5], 2014).

¹⁰ Ariel/Literary Criticism (Knopparp, 2011).

¹¹ The word criticism goes back to Greek *kritikos* "to judge, to evaluate" and *krinein*, "to select, to discriminate."

¹² If the verb *form* existed in the inchoative (*formna*) it would be useful here. Inchoative verbs indicate the beginning of, or passage from one condition to another. That is to say occurrence in its occurring. For example [the Swedish verbs]: *mulna*, *klarna*, *härskna*, *svartna*, which in English denote: get cloudy, begin to clear, become rancid, become black.

rather than dramaturgies. There is an order (which for that reason can be modified).¹³ There are expectations in different registers; sensuality, beauty, knowledge, pleasure, etc. There is a promise to the individual to come into being, to be transformed and to stand out. Those present obey a mutual participation based on the meal. This affords the possibility of intoxication. *Kleos* takes part in the party.

In such a form of attention the objects of thought are not unimportant but are still subordinate. Almost any subject at all proves to be worth considering because the mutual capacity to manage and transform, to form thinking, is central.

In its "knowledging" [creation of knowledge] these sorts of seminars resemble theater, dance, and music more than a school's or university's forms of knowledge¹⁴. If the latter are marked by dialogical, communicative and intermediary knowledging, the symposium is marked rather by performativity. So seen the sympotic seminar has the form of a party. It creates itself like a work.¹⁵ Simply put, in its forming, it forms conceptions of its externality and its future. Like all festivities it dreams of eternity.

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I usually argue that because art now with accelerating speed allows itself to be academized, under the protection of the phenomenon known as "artistic research," among other ways, it cannot take on the apparatus of institutional, scientific and philosophical knowledging. If art is to formalize its knowledging it has to theorize, which, however, is possible only by virtue of a fundamental revision of traditional knowledge-theory's concepts and traditions with its starting point in the arts' own way of knowing, its own traditions of knowledge and specialized vocabularies.

This also concerns its forms of thought and knowledge. I believe that such forms ought to be developed with their starting¹⁶ point in the concept *attention*. The symposium of antiquity offers a form to set out from. But equally important is the starting point in the concept *criticism*. And here I mean criticism not only in the meaning "select" and "judge," understood as a determinative act in all artistic knowledging, but also criticism in the meaning philosophical and esthetic criticism, criticism that through interpreting and evaluating, describing and conceptualizing, aims at understanding and transforming. For the latter criticism the public sphere is a prerequisite and starting point. The seminar as a form for thinking must

¹³ The order consists of the number of participants (never more than 30), their sex, social rank and age, the sequence of activities (from arrival to departure), etc. Op. cit., Oswyn Murray, ed.

¹⁴ In antiquity the symposium was a context for knowledge and education that clearly distinguished itself from instruction's *paideia* and *akademeia*. See Manuela Tecusan's "Logos *Sympotikos*. Patterns of the Irrational in Philosophical Drinking," op. cit., Oswyn Murray, ed.

¹⁵ Compare Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Die Aktualität des Schönen--Kunst als Spiel, Symbol und Fest* (Reclam, 1977).

¹⁶ A revision of this kind is needed, for example, for the concepts "form," "method," "concept," "theory," and "knowledge."

therefore, in my opinion, operate in and through the public sphere. Understood as thinking it is actualized not only in participation's mutuality, in its occurring, but also when it breaks up and like an artwork stands out as a subject of conversation, interpretation, judgment and evaluation.

Plato's *Symposium* is presented precisely as such a conversation about the symposium as an artwork made public. The story is related as an anecdote told again years after the actual banquet occurred.¹⁷ The symposium thus has taken place as a public anecdote, far from mutual participation, and is abandoned by all and no one, for reflection or dismissal, admiration or scorn. But the retold banquet also ends in breaking up. Some of the company make their way out, others fall drunkenly asleep and Socrates in the end leaves the party with his *kleos* in tow.

This is, as I see it, a decisive moment. Understood as an art form for thinking, the symposium, in its knowledging, doesn't only part with the apparatus of dia-logical reason, it also depends on it. If art is to be able to formalize its knowledging, and gain legitimacy as an academic form of knowledge, it must decline, and it cannot decline, the kind of thinking that in imitation of antiquity we call philosophy.

--*Rika Lesser, trans.*

¹⁷ The text begins with the storyteller Apollodorus being addressed by Glaucon, who believes he knows that the addressee was present at the famous Symposium he has heard his friend Phoenix talk about. Apollodorus brushes aside the thought but, like Phoenix, he's had it described to him by someone who was present. In Plato's ingenious fiction