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About Metapoetry and Performativity

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Arturo Casas,
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Abstract: In his article "About Metapoetry and Performativity" Arturo Casas argues that with regard to metapoetic practices a change of perspective would be necessary. Casas postulates that the new perspective would centre more on the enunciative and performative aspects of metapoetry and that it would focus on the theoretical and poetological contribution of the metapoem, its criticism of language and text, and its convergence with those theoretical-critical practices based on the refutation of the traditional critical pact. Following Jenaro Talens's work, Casas argues that in poetry disorder orients itself in practice to unmask power and its inscriptions in language and that it is among inscriptions we find the poet's own authority.

Arturo CASAS

About Metapoetry and Performativity

Translated from the Galician by Marla Arbach

After several decades of scholarship, it can be said that studies of what is considered the metaliterary have not favored analyses of poetry. Perhaps this is because it is thought that other rules govern the poetic sphere. This is most noticeable in the English-speaking world, where the commonly accepted meaning of "fiction" is significant when it comes to separating analyses and has driven the exploration of metapoetry toward other approaches, which only partially overlap with an understanding of metaliterature as metafiction. The metafictional has often been considered a narrative type or subgenre, and sometimes as the predisposition of certain narratives to interpret and explain themselves and has been confined to the sphere of the narrative, or, at most, to that of mixed types of writing, those seriously affected by some sort of narrativity. Theorists such as Robert Spires, Patricia Waugh, Michael Boyd, or Linda Hutcheon have brought out the auto-referential, self-conscious, reflexive, or narcissistic aspects of metafictional narration. This resulted in the approach that specialized terminology specific to each case aside, they have done so approaching the phenomenon in ways not always different from other approaches in the same theoretical and critical space. Another noticeable overlap is in the time period of the practices in question, since their focus is on postmodern writing: they take up the challenge implied by John Barth's phrase from 1967, according to which postmodern writing is characterized by the "exhaustion of literature" transformed into literary material.

If the schema I am outlining is valid, it is possible to see how the consideration of the metaliterary, at least from the English-speaking perspective, has been formulated as a thematic and logical/ontological issue. The typologies derived from these presuppositions highlight distributions of the metaliterary in which the crucial factor can be found in a certain level where the world of the story is transcended — the "frame-breaking" of which Waugh spoke — and in the logical links between that world and other neighbouring ones on the horizontal or vertical planes, links that are more or less complicated by the obvious recurrence of various passageways, scaffoldings, and alleyways that of course hardly represent a find that we can attribute solely to postmodernity. In fact, the discovery of a series of self-conscious practices, again barely inscribed in the territory of narrative and without sufficient clarification of the subject affected by the reflexive "auto-" led scholars to propose — from Robert Alter's initial approach to Patricia Cifre Wibrow's more recent one — that the border between strictly metafictional postmodern uses and simply self-referential ones (modern or postmodern) would be found in the explicit manifestation of a narrative pact questioned from the inside, at times systematically self-challenged by the display of artifice and the shattering of the mimetic illusion. Therefore, a satisfactory investigation of the heteronomy of discourse (of all discourse), a correlate of the very indefiniteness of the limits of real and fake, would establish the true threshold of postmodern metafiction. So much so that Cifre Wibrow in the tradition inaugurated by Hutcheon signals in the emergence of disruptive commentary — commentary which neither sanctions nor explicates, which does not compose plots or dislocate frames and reveals the artifice of all adjustments — an unequivocal clue to the impulse that pushes one to cross that threshold.

It is perhaps risky to argue that from other perspectives, bearing in mind, of course, the specificity of poetry and metapoetry (taking into account, for example, what Hölderlin, Keats, Mallarmé, Lautréamont, Rimbaud, etc., might bring to this field), but also the reasonings of Saussure, Heidegger, Foucault, Barthes, or Derrida, priority has been given to an understanding more epistemological or hermeneutic than ontological, less thematic than linguistic or even distinctly pragmatic. I stress that such an argument could be risky for two reasons. Firstly, because in spite of everything — for example, despite their aim to find support within a theory of the subject, the voice and otherness, in short, of enunciation and performativity — these other perspectives often share formalist and structuralist narratological premises, questioning the importance of the real and its representation and thereby resisting separation from the diegetic plane. And secondly, because in such understandings of the problem as Hutcheon's a distinction was made between diegetic and linguistic narcissism, in addition a placing of the emphasis on the need to rectify the reduction of the

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enunciative subject and even of complete discursive action by those schools which, through the sublimation of the text or of its reception, were attempting to ignore something so obvious as the existence of that other side of enunciation.

Pragmatics is the ideal platform for the examination and typology of the metaliterary phenomenon, as Domingo Ródenas de Moya and Antonio J. Gil González (*Teoría y crítica*) have recognized in the priority they give to discursive and metadiscursive enunciation. Metaliterature is or could be important in the various developments of pragmatics as a discipline. In terms of a conception of semiological/textual field, of course, but it could also play a part in a theory of communicative action or in the working out of a framework for inferential processes, possibilities which are addressed much less frequently. Aspects such as coherence, illocutive force, or the relevance of metaliterary discourse would surely be fruitful avenues for the application of pragmatic perspectives such as the aforementioned. This presupposes that we accept as valuable not only traditional linear patterns, those of Charles Morris, but also other orientations, such as the argumentative (Anscombre and Ducrot) or the cognitive (Sperber and Wilson). However, we must not conceal the difficulties of such applications when working on purely linguistic coordinates, or coordinates excessively dependent on the dialectic between metalanguage and language-object, not to mention other perspectives, such as the sociocultural perspective, or the historical/institutional contextualization of (meta)literary discourse as tradition and as interaction.

Dan Sperber's and Deirdre Wilson's theory of relevance, for example, establishes that a statement is more relevant the less interpretive effort it demands and the more cognitive effects it produces. It is not easy to apply this position to the space of metapoetic discourse in which another of the vectors we must define from pragmatics is the intentionality of the enunciator in a particular communicative context and that has a high level of complexity based on three key points: 1) the poetic act as enunciation and statement as enunciative transgression, an antidiscourse characterized by the cancellation or subversion of discursive linearity and by the problematic simultaneization of divergent contexts the text itself is transformed into an element of its discourse (Stierle); 2) the theoretical/critical projection and intervention that post-romantic poets renounced and whereby since the end of the eighteenth century we have been witnessing a "radical transformation" of the idea of poetry owing to the convergence of creation and theory and between the discipline and its object: "their mutual influence has resulted in the lyric being the genre in which theory is most indebted to creation" (Pozuelo Yvancos 180); and 3) the identity of the poetic subject in the general framework of all fictional discourse with a double enunciation which includes the empirical and fictive dimensions of the illocutive act and which thus presents the relationship between at least two subjectivities and two intentionalities, the real or empirical ones (which belong to the poet) and those shaped by the enunciated enunciation (which belong to the poetic speaker or speakers and which take shape as virtual constructions based at the same time in information present in the statement and in each reader's resolution of the lacunae and other indeterminations of that very same statement). The first two key points indicated here are related to what Jean Bessière presents as the falsity of fiction and metafiction and as their conceptual interrelativity or mutual otherness and that is to some extent a criticism of the widespread theoretical subsidiarity of that second term, and, at the same time, of the reductionist tendency to posit the existence of just one type of fiction. On the other hand, the three key points signalled here would reappear if we opted to apply the hypotheses of metapragmatics, in the way that this perspective has been oriented in the last fifteen years (see, e.g., Lucy); that is, not so much in the sense of a theoretical and epistemological structuring of pragmatics itself, but, rather, as what would be understood as an axiology (almost an aesthetics) of the appropriateness and effectiveness of language acts linked to the competence of those who participate in them (see Reyes).

Next, I discuss the antidiscursive specificity of metapoetic transgression and the location of metapoetic discourse: does it exist on the empirical plane? The fictive plane? Or both? Or on a completely different one? I argue in favor of the fictive ontological status of poetic communication extending it as far as lyrical manifestation and the manifestation of romantic subjectivity, as understood by Hegel, among others (see Casas). In this sense, a poem of whatever type is a verbal act that represents a discourse that could be natural discourse in exactly the same conditions as a narrative, for example. Also as in narrative, this fictional representation certainly does not make any assumptions as to the degree of proximity between the effective discourse manifested by the poem

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and the discourse the poet might express on that same topic. Through a special and persistent receptiveness to the constitution of the lyrical subject in Hegelian terms — often balancing the recognition of a form of subjectivity and a figurative non-identity in complex ways, as well as through heavy restriction of the register of genres and forms considered — some theorists have called attention to sentimental, ideological, aesthetic, etc., overlaps which often exist between the discourse of the poet (outside the poem) and the poetic speaker (inside the poem). In the area of metapoetry, it is probable although not assured (see Sánchez Torre), that these convergences will be accentuated, and as a result, it becomes almost necessary to accept assumptions such as those of Dominique Combe on the subject of a doubled reference (*référence dédoublée*) of lyric discourse, which furthermore has been linked to a double intentionality on the phenomenological plane, the intentionality associated with the empirical enunciator and the intentionality of the poetic enunciator or speaker. As Gil González has pointed out ("Autobiografía"), with this comes a new problematic for metapoetic enunciation, also of importance for a theory of autobiographical writing and pacts.

Following Oskar Walzel who explored the proximity between the "I" of pure poetry and an objectivised and distanced he/she, Combe has spoken of a surpassing or redescription of the empirical subject by the poetic subject, which would fix and universalize it, such that, just as with allegorical discourse, in poetry we would see the simultaneous validity of readings received by the readers, of a more dialogical than dialectical sort. In principle, this would occur without requiring attribution, either partial or complete, to one of the two sectors (the empirical or the fictional), nor the closure of meanings by any synthesis. What would remain in the experience of reading would be an implicit invitation to accept various attributions and meanings as self-allegorical simultaneity without allowing it to end in aporia: "in this way, the mask of fiction behind which the lyric subject hides, following critical tradition, could become an imagined departure in relation to the autobiographical subject" (Combe 56; unless indicated otherwise, all translations are by Casas and Arbach). Naturally, such an analysis becomes powerful if we think in terms of postmodern poetics — in which simultaneity can even be substituted by an alternation of attributions — in such a way that transitions from the empirical to the fictional plane would always be subject to a functional indefiniteness of the border between the real and the apparent, between identity and its negation. Furthermore, we would sometimes see a complementary rotation that poetic enunciation could induce through varied mechanisms — no less than the rotation of the syntactic plane which defines subjectivity, not as "interpretation based on personal feelings" but rather, as "condition of subject." Consider, for example, the significance of the occasionally attempted transposition of the figure of the implied author to the field of poetry, presumably admissible for the purposes of examining the metapoetic from the standpoint of the habitual recognition of the metanarrative function as one of the functions that define the discursive identity of the implicit author. For this reason I suggest the possibility of certain localizations of the metapoetic phenomenon on the edges of or on top of the empirical and fictional planes, a view which I would understandably find objectionable, but which in the end is seen as particularly useful for those poems in which not all enunciation is metapoetic and in which at some point there exists a sort of *débrayage* which leads to some type of intrusion or comment. This is also the case for those poems which from a liminal standpoint present themselves as emphatic declarations on the entire book of poems to which they belong and function as authentic poetic prologues or epilogues. This generally occurs in the works of José Hierro, and, furthermore, with an added typographical mark, the italics usually used to identify these poems. This is the case, for example, with "Preludio," which opens *Cuaderno de Nueva York* (1998). Something similar, but requiring much more biographical reception, can be found in José María Valverde's prologue poems or his dedication poems, particularly the one which appears in *Voces y acompañamientos para San Mateo* (1958). Another variant is offered by epilogue poems such as "Sobre la efímera existencia," which closes Aníbal Núñez's *Fábulas domésticas* (1972).

Further, we must also consider an even more noticeable intrusion, the appearance of the author him/herself in the place where generic borders dissolve and we enter into the realm of an ambiguous and diffuse (meta)discursiveness, for example in order to favor an essayistic or wholly critical — or theoretical — poetry in which the voice of the poetic speaker risks losing the autonomy associated simply with being a fictional entity. Some examples of this can be found the work of Galician poets: Carlos Quiroga's *A espera crepuscular. Viagem ao Cabo Nom* (2002), which combines poetry,

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narration, criticism and photography to create markedly hypogrammatical writing, with a distribution of voices/directions that converge at a certain critical moment; Emma Couceiro's *(Cito)* (2003), with the complex metadiscursive results of its paratexts (dedication, anteprologue, prologue, epilogue, and notes); and María do Cebreiro's *Non queres que o poema te coñeza* (2004), where we find a speculative afterword called "Capítulos prescindibles." Still on the problem of the localization of metapoetic discourse and with a desire to focus the debate on the possibility of a typological adaptation from a metapoetic standpoint of the processes described for metanarrative, I reiterate that it would be appropriate to give more detail to the question. Hutcheon's proposal differentiated between diegetic and linguistic narcissim on the one hand and overt and hidden narcissism on the other. The intersection of the two axes creates a four-part diagram. Diegetic narcissism is based in the questioning of narrative processes: if the thematizations relative to this reflexivity are explicit, we are talking about a case of overt diegetic narcissism; if not, then it is a case of hidden diegetic narcissism. In the same way, linguistic narcissism appears when language is questioned and can also be overt or hidden. The difficulty of transposing this diagram to the field of poetry is obvious, since it is a field where the gradual difference between the purely linguistic and what could be understood in the broad sense as purely signs of narrativity or of the presentation of a world surely pose an irresolvable challenge. It would also be an arduous task to determine in which poetic enunciations there exists no form of hidden narcissism — especially inside the linguistic axis — and which line, when crossed, leads to overt poetic narcissism. Symptomatic of this is the fact that in what Ródenas de Moya presented as the basis for a future typological outline of metafiction, metalepsis (understood in the sense of Gérard Genette as a transgression of narrative levels by the implicit author, narrator, narratee, or character) occupies an axial position. In fact, Ródenas de Moya argues for a classification where the operative term is metaleptic metafiction, with the result that all that lies outside that path is a jumble with two main sectors, the *mise en abîme*, with all its variants, and a "bundle of devices" (also plural) structured by "the union of all those enunciations that attempted literary speculation (theory, criticism, poetic art), provided that the speculation applied to the text in question" (333-34).

Since Gil González aligned his typological proposal regarding metafictionality towards a theory framing enunciation — and this is helpful when extended to the extradiegetic (discourse), the diegetic (narrative), and the hypodiegetic (narration) levels — we could say that the polarity he traced between metadiscursivity and metanarrativity resulted in identifying as a criterion the absence or presence of metalepsis, according to a standard not always shared by Ródenas de Moya as regards the intrusion of the authorial figure or the links between what this figure presents and what narrators or characters present (see *Teoría y crítica* 61). And, similarly, I do not believe that the triangular diagram that Bessière laid out as variations on fictional redoubling is a complete departure from this territory, although its rhetorical turn toward reception is significant because of the resulting importance of the orientation towards simile, metaphor, and the literal quality of the metafictional statement. Regarding its application to the field of poetry, we must presume that it is in the non-metaleptic sector — which Ródenas de Moya organizes into three subtypes with respect to the enunciative voice (metacomments from the implicit author or from the narrator, statements from the characters, and digressions or notes that have no explicit or clear enunciator) — that we would have to place the majority of metapoetic variants. However, the variant of a "poem within a poem" is much less present than the variant of "story within a story." In this sense we might find enlightening José Antonio Pérez Bowie's systematization of recent Spanish self-referential poetry into five nuclei: the poem on poems, the poem as poetics, the impossibility of speaking, the insufficiency of language, and the centrality of graphic material.

Perhaps for reasons similar to those already mentioned, scholars and critics have lost interest in the typological model on metapoetry proposed by Leopoldo Sánchez Torre who separates the metatextual level of the literary text and chooses to focus on the metaliterary level. This level would be formed of the ensemble of statements used in a literary text for the thematization of reflection on literature, and would be of particular interest only when this set served to structure the work (Sánchez Torre 65). This is a generally accepted key point among scholars who have approached the question. However, despite the consensus, we are talking about positions that are easier to argue as general principles than to verify later in a detailed examination of each one of these matrices. In addition, directing attention to the internal space of the poem has often led to neglecting the syntagmatic and

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mactrotextual links that the metapoem establishes with the other pieces with which it forms a textual series or a book (aside from when these pieces are distinguishable or not in a given continuum). And it could be the case that the metapoetic resides in specific formulations precisely there, in the dialectic of an ensemble of texts, themselves — each one on its own — not particularly metapoetic. Or even in the dialectic of an organic textual whole which challenges certain generic or other conventions; for example, to constitute a *cancionero* form different from the Petrarchan form. A book such as Haroldo de Campos's *Finismundo. A última viagem* (1990) combines the Brazilian author's characteristic intertextual tastes with a two-part structure where it is the paraphrastic convergence of the two sectors of the text which basically supports a metapoetic projection.

Given my above argumentation, it seems inconvenient to exclude from the metapoetic frame the so-called metatextual level. In fact, in Sánchez Torre's proposal metapoetry is reduced to those poetic texts "in which reflection on poetry is the organizing principle" of the poem (85), such that we find in them a particular gnoseological tension between poetic and theoretical language which provokes in the reader what the theorist has called meta-expectation, "which makes us expect from the metapoem a questioning of its poetic character, that is to say, of the rest of the expectations involved in reading [fictionality, revelation, ambiguity, unity, expressiveness, genre, and rhythm], and which, at the same time, serves to neutralize this questioning and read the metapoem as a poem" (118). Although Sánchez Torre's theory in general pays a notable amount of attention to poetic conventions, these conventions being a result, obviously, of cultural and historic conditioning, one cannot help remarking the essentialist insistence on maintaining particular signs in the metapoem, basically, the signs of poeticity and literariness, without highlighting sufficiently the fact that they themselves as models are also the result of variable contingencies and conventions. In this light, particularly inappropriate is the consideration of the so-called functional displacements of the metapoem (138) upon whose occurrence the metapoem would cease to function as a poem (it would cease to be one and would cease to be literature), yielding to a theoretical or critical discursivity. It is obvious that this type of reasoning, developed coherently and based on certain premises is influenced by the previously mentioned partial comprehension of poetry — a result of the experiential limitation of the poetic spirit and of the very construction of the poetic subject following Hölderlin — and in extreme cases by an unexplained and unacceptable identification of poetry with the lyric. Because, of course, poetry is more than the lyric and a metapoem does not have to base its development in lyrical discourse. Thus, to return to a formulation I propose above, it would be helpful to start by recognizing the plurality of fiction and the plurality of literature and thus poetry to attain valid perspectives that explain the plurality of metafiction and the plurality specific to metapoetry.

To a certain extent this is the starting point for more recent theoretical and critical perspectives which benefit from the time that has passed and which focus on different heuristics, less favorable to the localization of models which are more or less in the formalist and structuralist vein, and, by contrast, more prone to investigating the liminal, the zones of confusion and hibridization of traditions, (arch)genres, and poetic language, or to examining directly the crises of language, representation, and the sociocultural figure of the poet (see, e.g., Pérez Parejo). Furthermore, it is not unusual for these new perspectives to depart from conceptual indefiniteness and the questioning of the poetic subject and author. Or of their relationship, even as a de-mediated autobiographical construction (see, e.g., Gil González, "Autobiografía"). It is not unusual either for them to deal with the metapoetic phenomenon in a wide framework of alternative practices: intertextuality, concrete poetry, hypertext, remediation, performance, parody, the interarts, etc. Nonetheless, I do not believe that the entire problem can be reduced to a polarity between two epistemological positions in the sense in which Laura Scarano formulates two basic theoretical traditions: first, the tradition founded by Scholes and Hutcheon who argue for discursive hybridism and make its main objective the development of a model for the metaliterary phenomenon and second — and this would be the position closest to Scarano's own premises, since she has managed to avoid tautological closure and its analytical ineffectiveness — the tradition based on the work of Alter and Waugh. These approaches, following the assumption of metatext as a self-referential construct would have turned away from the localization of possible metatextual models and towards research nearer to the most controversial areas of the current theoretical debate.

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One aspect that seems necessary to address is that of metapoetry oriented in a theoretical and critical direction (e.g., Blesa; Mayhew; Pérez Parejo, Sánchez Torre, Talens) which of course has roots in the texts that certain poets have written on the trajectory or the poetics of other poets or on certain commented aesthetic positions (see, e.g., O'Neill), sometimes as elegiac homage. Following this postulate there are some notable cases of critical compromise useful to be reread in the light of what some theorists have said on the subject, for example Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, and Octavio Paz. Consider works such as Emilio Alarcos Llorach's work on Blas de Otero or Rosa Maria Martelo's work on João Cabral de Melo Neto, the poet who coined the phrase "critical poetry" to refer to self-reflexive texts, as well as substantially to hypertextual or metatextual ones. We might even speak of an "essayification" of contemporary poetry and of the acceptance of a hermeneutic model incorporated from the essay, or, in general, of a convergence of poetry and essay (see Zubiate) or the genre of the manifesto of poetry and essay, as was so often the case in surrealist poetic practice following André Breton and Philippe Soupault. In a way, we are talking about options and strategies related to those produced on the other side of the poetry and criticism relationship, especially, again, in postmodern writing. I am referring to practices called post-theoretical and post-critical (see Herbrechter and Callus), which can be applied with such interesting results in the criticism of poetry (see, e.g., Fortier, Chénard, Leclerc). Discursive signs such as the incorporation of a certain critical narrativity, at times against the interests of the argumentation and even open to the exploration of paths of fictionality (see Casado), a Foucauldian and deconstructionist lack of confidence as regards the discovery of a truth system to explain the text in question, a mixture of semiospheres and languages correlated to the mixture at the base of postmodern literary production itself, an attempt to rid itself of the trappings of modern and premodern critical authority. In short, all these tendencies imply a different critical attitude and a different interaction leading to an other form of critical enunciation and that can bring about a convergence at some point with — and this is what is most relevant — poetic-critical practice itself. Iris Cochón Otero and María do Cebreiro Rábade Villar signalled something similar when they established a series of intersections between Margarita Mateo's (narrativized) essay "Ella escribía poscrítica" (1995) and Galician poet Chus Pato's unclassifiable book of poems *m-Talá* (2000).

But, to return to Stierle's arguments, I feel it is more urgent to reconsider the internal textual-discursive relationship that romantic and postromantic poetry have built up as one of their distinguishing characteristics in order to liberate themselves from the theoretical clichés that conceive the metapoetic as lending an excessive importance to commentary, in the rhetorical sense, as *parékbasis* or as *anacenosis*. That is, as digression or as the simulation of an open dialogue with a dialectical rival or with the public in order to achieve greater conceptual or argumentative detail in the matter which one desires to elucidate. In relation to this change of point of view, we owe to Jenaro Talens credit. His proposals stem from the prologue to Antonio Martínez Sarrión's book *El centro inaccesible* (1980), which Talens himself has declared as being, among other things, a response to the conceptual framework developed by Carlos Bousoño in his introduction to Guillermo Carnero's book *Ensayo de una teoría de la visión* (*Negociaciones* 25-35). Talens understands metapoetry as a discourse against power in the framework of a critique of rationalist reason and at the same time a sign of a desire to challenge any polarizing understanding of a supposed poetry-metapoetry axis, especially if the axis were read as a copy of the axis between language and metalangue or of the proposal in terms of rhetorical ascendence between content and form or between reference and *téchnē*. According to Talens, "metapoetry does not exist, or else poetry does not exist: they are one and the same" (*El sujeto* 266). Thus we would return to key points already mentioned above for the purpose of a tradition of antidiscursivity, of which Stierle identified as the point of departure in Hölderlin. But the issue is somewhat more complex and it is useful to see it in terms derived from Talens's understanding of literary practice (writing and reading). That practice is not seen as communicative action but, rather, as oversignificant expression. What a literary text might do is promote the production of meaning through reading and this refusal to understand the work as information and communication extends logically to those texts which speak of themselves, of their origins or of their conditions, and in those cases no type of referential reduction is accepted as valid either. Hence the equation of poetry and metapoetry.

For Talens, the alternative is none other than to reflect on what can be defined as the metapoetic function. Based on the assumption that all language is powerful language and the language of power,

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the metapoetic function must be "critical reflection on power, as it is inscribed in language" (Talens, *El sujeto* 267). The concrete manifestation of this function could occur in three areas, as analytical language, as reflexive language, and as critical language, the first two being, following Jürgen Habermas, means that favor achieving an understanding (the analytical to achieve it "as an object" and the reflexive in the sense of the application of statements). However, only as critical language would the metapoetic function include the project of studying the symbolic relationship with reality without acting as a means, but, rather, simply letting language speak, using it, with no goal or implications for knowledge. As Talens suggests, just as pleasure and as a proposal of disorder would it orient itself in practice to unmask power and its inscriptions in language. And it is among inscriptions we find the poet's own authority.

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