

The Present of
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CRISIS & CRITIQUE

THE PRESENT OF POETRY

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4	276
<i>Introduction: The Present of Poetry</i>	<i>Poetry Strikes Back</i>
Frank Ruda & Agon Hamza	Jean-Jacques Lecercle
14	290
<i>Poets of the World Unite – with Philosophers, Against the Capitalist State</i>	<i>Badiou's Own Mallarmé</i>
Ali Alizadeh	Pierre Macherey
34	300
<i>Ransom! Baudelaire and Distributive Injustice</i>	<i>The Poet on Strike Against Society</i>
Emily Apter	Jean-Claude Milner
58	306
<i>Rimbaud, Mandelstam, Pasolini. Or: When the Red Flag Must Become Lint Again</i>	<i>Lorna Dee Cervantes and the Art of Refugeeship</i>
Judith Balso	Warren Montag
86	322
<i>The Poetry that Presents Itself</i>	<i>Beyond All That Fiddle? Poetry and Poetics 'After Theory'</i>
Philippe Beck	Christopher Norris
92	342
<i>Poetic Image Now</i>	<i>Time is a Word in Celan</i>
Victoria Bergstrom	Paul North
112	364
<i>Césaire's Claim: On the Retroactive Genesis of Free Verse</i>	<i>China, Workers and Poetry in (post)Communism</i>
Nathan Brown	Claudia Pozzana
138	380
<i>Poetry in Superposition: An Essay-Poem in Quantum Poetics</i>	<i>Poetry: From the Heart or From Blood?</i>
Amy Catanzano	Jean-Michel Rabate
142	400
<i>Propositions on the Philosophical Nature of Poetry</i>	<i>The Problem of Love and Distance in Anne Carson</i>
Alessandro De Francesco	Rafael Saldanha
164	424
<i>A Poem's Gap</i>	Interview with Kim Stanley Robinson:
Alex Garcia Düttmann and Juan Manuel Garrido	<i>Poetry is for Thoughts, Novels for Stories</i>
174	436
<i>The New Muses: The Poetic Vector of Civilization</i>	Interview with Heather H. Yeung:
Mikhail Epstein	<i>Entlassen. Thinking with Poetry</i>
188	Poems:
<i>In Praise of Bog</i>	454
Andrea Gadberry	Can You Read Me?
206	Reem Abbas
<i>"down-to-earth (o very earthy) magic": Nature, Objectivity and Folk Speech in Lorine Niedecker and Theodor W. Adorno</i>	456
Daniel Hartley	<i>Interglacial (Poems 2015-2021)</i>
226	Pierre Joris
<i>Out of Control: Yeats & Frayn</i>	464
Carol Jacobs	<i>Apocalypse Waltz</i>
254	Philip Metres
<i>From Passion for the Real to Passion for Knowledge</i>	466
Jela Krečič	<i>Rivercrossing</i>
	Heather H. Yeung
	478
	Notes on Contributors

The Present of Poetry

**Frank Ruda &
Agon Hamza**

"It is wrong to say: I think.
One ought to say: People think me."¹

Poetry thinks. This is an affirmation which marks the starting point of the present issue of *Crisis and Critique*. Poetry thinks and it is a unique and singular mode of thought. This means its *modus cogitandi* is different from that of politics, science, or philosophy as well as from the modes in which other forms of art think. Poetry thinks - in an artistically singular way and thereby shares something with all other arts. There is therefore something collective in its practice. But it is nevertheless unique. It also shares something with other ways of thinking. There is something universal in its practice. But it is nevertheless singular. The affirmation that "poetry thinks" therefore challenges substantializing conceptualizations of what is thought and of what thought is. That poetry thinks does also not mean - to some degree contra Heidegger - that only art and only poetry thinks. Rather it means to affirm that if there is thought, it can be poetic. To affirm that there can be poetic thought, that "poetry thinks" does not mean to substantialize. One avoids substantialization if one reads in this affirmation also an implicit second one, namely one that concerns the existence of a plurality of singular modes of thought. Thought is singular (and specific), but there is more than just one singular mode of thought. It is precisely such a plurality, commonality or communism of singularities that allows to point to and point out the very universality inscribed into each singular mode of thought. The present issue of *Crisis and Critique* is devoted to the singular universality of poetic thought.

Poetry, by manifesting the singular dimension of (its) thought, challenges any (philosophical) substantialization of the being of thought. "The poem is an exercise in intransigence", not only to philosophy but also, it therefore "remains rebellious."² It does not mean that it is opaque - this is part of the cliché - or that it is "saying" it without properly saying "it" - this is the other side of the same cliché. But it is rebellious because it produces a clarity of another kind. It is clearly and a distinctively singular mode of thought and hence articulates something universal - it is therefore a concrete form of thinking "*clara et distincte*" (Descartes). As such, poetry is and remains rebellious and bothersome. Poems are b(r)others - and sisters - not in arms, but in thought. They bother, not only, but also often and certainly, philosophy, especially by making apparent, visible and audible that there is thought in forms yet unexplored, yet unarticulated, yet unsaid and that thought - only? - thinks if it explores

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¹ Rimbaud 2005, p. 371.

² Badiou 2014, p. 23.

what has been unexplored, articulates what appeared to be inarticulable, if it says the unsayable. Poetry would then be the art of actually saying what is impossible to say. This is one of the reasons why the affirmation that “poetry thinks” does not come easy to some, many of whom have been philosophers and this even though the task of philosophy was also frequently defined as wagering on the universality of any singular mode of thought. Philosophers have often struggled with admitting, avowing or, at least, avoiding disavowing that poetry is not only capable of thought, but that it thinks in a way that problematizes philosophy’s claim to the mastery of (the being of) thought. This has to do with the idea that philosophers had and have of what counts as a (legitimate mode of) thinking - and thereby of what the task of philosophy is. That philosophers often found their poetic b(r)others in thought bothersome results from the former not seeing in the latter’s articulation the thought-expression of some-brother, but rather of something heterogeneous, alien, or foreign to - what was supposed to be - thought. Poetry can thereby appear to philosophy as a foreigner to thought.

Bachmann’s “I step outside myself” makes, for example and paradigmatically, thought’s point in the most poetically clear manner. It points out the point of thought and this is somewhat and unavoidably outside of thought. It does so by articulating thought’s own inner outsideness, its outsider-nature, within thought. But if there is thought that has always already happened:

I step outside
myself, out of my eyes,
hands, mouth, outside
of myself I
step, a bundle
of a goodness and godliness
that must make good
this devilry
that has happened.³

Poetic thinking is out-siding, stepping out, stepping out into a side, out-standing, siding, siding with the idea of thinking from the side, from the out, from the outside. Outing. But if “that has happened”, if “that must make good”, the demand on any thinking of this thought is that it interiorizes what is out-warding, that it internalizes what was never inner, that it accommodates what can only be a stranger, that it prepares a(n in-)side to what is unavoidably the result from a movement outside, from out-siding, from siding with the out-side. Poetry in this sense forces philosophy to confront the fact that thinking thought in its singularity

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³ Bachmann 2006, p. 465.

must inevitably mean that one must start from what appears foreign, outside, or off(side). But, to recall Simmel's definition of "the stranger" here, she is "who comes today and stays to morrow."⁴ Poetry makes us in this sense think what is here to stay (forever). It is what comes today and does s(t)ay for tomorrow.

There is in this sense no end to and of poetry's rebellion, since it is what is at the foundation of (its own) rationality. This produced many irritations within philosophy and not rarely desires of censorship, of control, or expulsion. And one can ultimately see it becoming manifest in all the things that philosophers claimed that the artists and especially the poets ruin (*vis-à-vis* thinking, politics, philosophy, etc.). It is a symptom of philosophy('s own problematic conception of thought). This certainly has to do, historically speaking, with the fact that philosophy begins to be philosophy by cutting its ties and separating itself from poetry, from its own appearing in and being-sutured to the poetic form.⁵ But it is also the case because as a result of its distancing act, the relationship between poetry and philosophy started to turn out to be determined by a peculiar rivalry. Famously, an articulation of this quarrel can be found in the tenth book of Plato's *Politeia*, where it was phrased and formulated in political, epistemological and ontological terms.

What the poets - and artists in general (Plato does not really discriminate much between the arts) - do is that they disorient (epistemically), because they make us blunder about the most profound things (in our lives) as they are able to create a passionate engagement for what is not true or good - in mere semblances and hence fakery. They disorient us (ontologically) through their fictional creations, because they give the impression that everything could be other than it is. This has practically disastrous effects for any (political) collective. The poets, paradigmatically embodied by the creators of theater, through their staging and mimicking of real actions, make people lose their direction, they make them lose track of what is truly good. That poets can be blamed for such disorientation is not only providing solid grounds for expelling them from any (ideal) political organization in Plato's view, but furthermore implies that any artists remaining within the polis must be put under the supervisor and guidance of those who (epistemologically) know the (ontologically) true and good orientation which grounds all collective (politically) practice, namely the philosophers. If there is poetry in the ideal city, it must be ideal-city-poetry or state-art. But with this ban of the poets, Plato inadvertently admitted the arts' and thereby poetry's ultimate power: poetry has a capacity to disorient and thereby to reorient, to transform and change ontological assumptions and what cannot but appear to be

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4 Simmel 1950, p. 402.

5 On the complexities of philosophy's beginnings, cf. Karatani 2017.

even (what ought to be stable) ontologies. The reason why Plato believed poetry to be dangerous to the political community therefore also indicates its (epistemological, ontological, political) potential. But it could not have such power if it were not able to ultimately stand in competition with what Plato addresses in terms of the idea (of the good - or the idea of what is an idea). This is also what is at stake with the infamous discussion about mimesis as fundamental to the concept of art and poetry. Poetic thought could not disorient, reorient us, if it were not able to intervene on the level of ideas, if it could not be a mimesis of the idea and hence productive of ideas itself. This is to say, it would not be dangerous ultimately if it did not have the power to touch the (very) idea (of the idea, i.e. the idea of the good). Plato's critique of the poets thus implies their greatest praise, as it points to the affirmation that poetry is always poetry not with but of the idea, or, in other words: that poetry thinks.

Poetry thinks. But what and how does it think? This is one of the questions the present issue of *Crisis and Critique* seeks to address. It does so through the lens and by addressing what the title of the issue articulates as "the present of poetry." This is not to raise the question of what poetry looks like or what poetry is pertinent or is read or is celebrated or sells well - does any? - today. Addressing the "present of poetry" means to take seriously that poems articulate what they say in a temporality of their own. Their mode of speaking is not that of their own historical present, which is why they therefore raise the question of what it means to be a contemporary - an issue that explicitly bothered poets like Mandelstam, for example. The present of poetry is thus not that of the historical time of this or that poet or poem but rather the time, the present created by poetry's articulation. It often is the time of resistance to the dominance temporal regime. In Maya Angelou's words, for example:

You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies
You may trod me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I'll rise.⁶

"Poetry thinks" means that it speaks (un)timely. The present issue thus seeks to examine how poetry speaks, articulates, presents, captures - its own - time; how its singularity, its singular mode of articulation captures something that is universal in its present, or how the present that it creates is the present of something universal that only exists because of its singular creation and invention.

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⁶ Angelou 1978.

The question of the present of poetry is certainly not a new one. It has been raised many times before and in multiple different terms. One specific take on the relation between poetry and its present was formulated in “one of Adorno’s most brilliant essays”⁷, namely his “Lyric Poetry and Society.”⁸ Therein, Adorno argues that lyric poetry is an artistic form defined by establishing a singular type of distance to the very society in which it appears. It is an art of distance, of distancing. The reason for this is that its mode of articulation makes it impossible for it to be explained by reference to its historical conjuncture (only). An effect of this is that poetry speaks and thinks in a language that most members of the society whose poetry it is do not understand, even though it is theirs. This is not the case because poetic language would be a foreign language. Rather, it enforces a becoming-foreign of language, an alienation of the language that one believes one understands all-too well (and then realizes one does not). Thereby, poetry forces an awareness of what otherwise does not only go unnoticed but even disappears in and because of its invisibilizing everyday uses. Poetry makes a different use of language because, in the words of Alain Badiou, “the poem is the guardian of the decency of saying. Or of what Jacques Lacan called the ethics of well-saying.”⁹ To affirm that “poetry thinks” means to take seriously that it does something with and to language that language usually does not do (when we do with it what we do with language). By using language otherwise, privately and therein pace Wittgenstein, by speaking differently, lyric poetry becomes, for Adorno, “a sphere of expression whose very essence lies in either not acknowledging the power of socializing or overcoming it through the pathos of detachment.”¹⁰ Poetry allows for detachment, it implies an act of *déliation* - “it has a moment of discontinuity in it.”¹¹ Therein one can see an expression of “poetic courage.”¹² It is a courage of establishing a singular, yet universalizable asociality within language.

This implies that any (reductive) attempt to articulate what poetry does in terms of its own time and social context - and even in terms of the language of its time, i.e. bad generalization -, any attempt to conceive of poetry solely through historicization and contextualization misses what needs to be thought when one seeks to think poetic thought. This, obviously, raises the stakes for approaching “the present of poetry.” How

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7 Jameson 1971, p. 35.

8 Adorno 2019, pp. 59-73.

9 Badiou 2014, p. 25.

10 Adorno 2019, p. 59.

11 Ibid., p. 62.

12 Badiou 2014, p. 73.

to factor into its present the act of detachment from what it is present, from what it is co-present with? If a poem is not an additional voice in the chorus of present chatter, if it is not simply adding another thing to what was said before, but rather adding by subtracting, adding by minussing in such a way that it brings about a new mode of saying (or a new articulation of what is a new mode of saying), this ultimately coincides with nothing less than with a specific kind of creation. Poetic creation is the creation of a militant new “silence in order to say that which is impossible to say in the language of the consensus, to separate it from the world so that it may be said and always re-said for the first time.”¹³ The present of poetry, in this account, is the time to re-say singularly what poems have said in other singular ways before repeatedly; it is the eternal return of the say-ing.

Is poetry thus the art of saying (it silently)? For Adorno poetry exemplifies - through its inherently collectively asocial nature - what he calls an “unrestrained individuation.”¹⁴ This does not mean that a poem allows an individual to speak as an individual in a private language that would be the expression of an inner life untouched by society. It is rather, an expression of what can be taken to be a paradigm of a subjectivization *sub specie aeternitatis*. Poetry subjectivizes but not according to context, yet singularly. There is something genuinely universal in this singularization, since it exemplifies the universal need of finding singular modes of articulation, of speaking. This is why, even for Adorno, “only one who hears the voice of humankind in the poem’s solitude can understand what the poem is saying.”¹⁵ This can only be done when poetic articulation is precisely not taken to be a moment of heroic individual isolation. Rather it is an articulation of “the unself-consciousness of the subject submitting itself to language”¹⁶; it is an act of letting a subject being spoken, not by society but by what happened to it. If “it”, if “that has happened”, it will speak through the invention of a language to articulate it. Poetry is thus not saying things singularly (only). It also implies an act of being-spoken. It thinks, it speaks, but it is also that which is being said. It would be mistaken, as Adorno sometimes is, to believe poetry is transcendental because in it “language itself speaks”; it is rather that in it “the subject’s own voice”¹⁷ is articulated as something that is foreign to the subject as much as it is foreign to language. Poetry is the voice of such a subject as an invention of its language. Might it be the art - and

¹³ Badiou 2014, p. 25.

¹⁴ Adorno 2019, p. 60.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 64.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 65.

implying an ethics - of un-saying it well? "Poetry thinks" means thus far that it thinks and speaks from the point of the impossible.

Paul Celan wrote

There also comes a meaning
Down the narrowest cut,
It is breached
By the deadliest of our
Standing marks.¹⁸

There is a certain "quixotism" in its "chimerical yearning for the impossible"¹⁹, in Adorno's words. But how is poetry's present, the present of the narrowest cut (that is breached) thought, re-thought, thought again (and again). Poetry thinks by cutting down meaning, by cutting what it means to mean anything at all, by producing meaning in a new or different way, by meaning otherwise. Meaning-otherwise, meaning-cutting, cutting-meaning: poetry as the art of unsaying it well. What is the present of the cut(ting), the present of poetry? This brief introduction to the new issue of *Crisis and Critique* only sought to indicate that we consider it high time to emphasize, return to, defend and think with our b(r)others and sisters in words (as arms) in dark times. Let us never stop to be bothered by their thought: Fra(e)ternité! With Celan, we affirm:

Two,
Not one -
Yes and?²⁰

The present issue of *Crisis and Critique* gathered thinkers, writers, philosophers, theorists and poets that all think through, think with, think in, and, one might risk saying, count with poetry, with the poem. And they all grapple, unravel, expose, exhibit, unfold its singularly universal dimension "- Yes and?"

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¹⁸ Celan, 2005, p. 142.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 73.

²⁰ Celan 1976, p. 56.

With Angelou, we affirm:

I am in the dream and the hope of the slave.

I rise

I rise

I rise.²¹

Frank Ruda & Agon Hamza
Dundee/Prishtina, June 2022

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Volume 9
Issue 1

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²¹ Angelou 1978.

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Volume 9
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**Poets of the
World Unite –
with Philosophers,
Against the
Capitalist State**

Ali Alizadeh

Abstract: Poetry's current marginalisation as a cultural practice requires an explanation beyond the artform's economic value. If seen from a Platonic prism that separates it from philosophy, poetry can be seen in terms of its relationship with the political, a relationship which has been dramatically reconfigured and weakened during modernity. This essay is an investigation of the contentions and correspondences between poetry, philosophy and politics in the age of capitalism. My aim is to dissect this tripartite construct, and to conclude by proposing a way of thinking about poetry's – and also philosophy's – renewal in concert with a revolutionary opposition to capitalism.

Keywords: poetry, philosophy, the State, Plato, Hegel, Napoleon, capitalism

What more is there to be said about the abasement of poetry in the contemporary world? Poetry, an artform that used to be so central to the story of civilisation, has become, at best, a marginal literary genre. It is, as Alain Badiou has already observed, 'receding from us. The cultural account is oblivious to poetry.'¹ On the rare occasions that the cultural currents become less oblivious to poetry, they do so for reasons that have nothing to do with the artform. The news reports of the inauguration of a new President of the USA may note the identity (race, gender, etc.) of the so-called *inauguration poet*, without anything in the way of a commentary on the *inauguration poem* itself; and we, in the West, may read about the mistreatment of a *dissident poet* in a non-Western *tyranny* (Iran, China, etc.) and endorse online petitions demanding that poet's freedom, without being able – or interested – to read a single poem penned by the apparent dissident. And it is not only us in the US-aligned West who are party to a culture oblivious – if not entirely ignorant – of the poem. In a country like Iran, where poets seem to matter enough to arouse the ire of the State, such poets are proscribed and persecuted due to their public statements and ideological affiliations, and not because of anything to do with their actual poetry.

There is no reason to assume that the demise of poetry in the modern world is an altogether lamentable fact. Should those philosophers who have, à la Plato, accepted that 'poetry has no serious value or claim to truth'² not be pleased with this development? It is not impossible to imagine an avatar of the ancient philosopher taking pleasure at the modern and contemporary degradation of poets, those

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1 Badiou 2014 [1993], p. 21

2 Plato 1960 [375 BC], 385.

with 'a terrible power to corrupt even the best characters.'³ Such a pleasure, at any rate, cannot be anything but short-sighted; for the very qualities that Plato chastised in poetry are abundantly present in other, non-poetic forms of cultural production. In the aftermath of poetry's modern fall from cultural grace, novels, photographs, recorded music and movies (and streamed TV shows, video games, digital media, etc.) have proved more than willing to 'give full vent to our sorrows'⁴ via their up-to-the-minute aesthetic simulacra. Furthermore, philosophy has gained nothing from the demise of poetry, and it too is receding from us. It is almost impossible to detect the presence of philosophy in the main discourses of the contemporary world outside of (ever-shrinking numbers of) academic spaces where philosophy is often reduced to *theory*, or in commercial publishing trends such as self-help and self-improvement in which any remotely serious attempt at the pursuit of truths is eroded by solipsistic, quasi-mystical obsessions with self-fulfilment.

The demotion of philosophy in the contemporary world, as with the decline of poetry, is not necessarily an *a priori* undesirable occurrence. Let us recall, if need be, Karl Marx's famous 11th thesis on Feuerbach – 'The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it'⁵ – as an emblem of the revolutionary view, espoused not only by the young Marx, which sees philosophy as a mere interpretation not only divorced from and/or incapable of amounting to an attempt at changing the world but, even worse, as potentially averse to emancipatory transformation. Such a view is apparent in Robespierre's attacks on 'the arguments deployed against justice and reason' by the politicians who, influenced by the philosopher Montesquieu and his admiration for the English political system, had decided to emulate 'England and its depraved constitution' by limiting voting rights in France;⁶ in Marx's own additional, more elaborate deprecation of 'Hegel's one-sidedness and limitations' and the philosopher's 'occult critique';⁷ and in Lenin's disdain for reformist Eduard Bernstein's 'whole battery of well-attuned "new" arguments and reasonings' and the intellectualism issuing from 'university chairs, in numerous pamphlets and in a series of learned treatises'.⁸ Citing these views does not provide an account of a total antagonism between the revolutionary and the philosopher in the modern world – indeed, Robespierre, Marx and Lenin were and

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3 Ibid., p. 384.

4 Ibid.

5 Marx 1969 [1845], <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/theses.htm>.

6 Robespierre 2007 [1791], 8.

7 Marx 1967 [1844], 139-140.

8 Lenin 1961 [1902], <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1901/witbd/>.

continue to be disparaged for their own philosophising and theorising. Nevertheless, it may be concluded that, on the face of it, the current decline in the occult or at least specialised milieu of philosophical activity could free the political subject from a whole battery of one-sided, limited philosophical arguments and allow the subject to get on with the urgent task of changing the world.

And yet, the modern political revolutionary's situation has not improved with the demise of the efficacy of philosophical pamphlets and treatises that so exercised Lenin. As with the philosophers who have gained nothing from the demise of their ancient poetic rivals, the political subject has not prospered at the expense of the philosopher. The modern world generally and, more specifically, the contemporary world in which both poetry and philosophy have been culturally decimated, is the world in which emancipatory politics too has been, at best, relegated to the periphery, at worst erased by the demands and practices of a techno-managerial political class. It would be unnecessary to state the obvious; that today's world is not one envisioned and hoped for by Robespierre, Marx and Lenin; that it is one in which politics has been distorted and disfigured into a professionalised milieu where our democratically elected representatives devote themselves to the interests of the economy to such an extent that politics has become practically indistinguishable from economics. Not only has the State been aligned with the dominant mode of production, it has also become participant in its own weakening. As Badiou has put it, in today's world

economic macroscopy trumps state capacity. This is what I call the weakening of states. Not only have states become what Marx already thought they were, namely 'the delegates of capital power' [...] there is increasingly a kind of discordance between the scale upon which large firms exist and upon which states exist, which makes the existence of large firms diagonal to that of states.⁹

What the modern world entails, then, is not only the dominance of economic power of global firms, but the corrosion of the entire field of politics – and not only of emancipatory politics – as a consequence or as a correspondence with this discordant dominance. And this subjugation of the political by (capitalist) economy is as much a feature of our contemporary world as are the decline and marginalisation of poetry and philosophy.

The dialectics of antagonisms between poetry and philosophy on the one hand, and between philosophy and politics on the other, have been annulled in the ascendance of the economy. The admittedly simplified accounts of these dialects which I have thus far presented –

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⁹ Badiou 2016 p. 9.

in which Plato has come to stand as an unflinching opponent of poetry and Marx as an opponent of philosophy – ignore that these oppositions are neither absolute nor irreversible. Plato's polemic against poetry was, after all, itself written in the mimetic, literary style of a dramatic dialogue; and Marx (as with Robespierre and Lenin), whilst opposed to a certain kind of overly speculative philosophising, was not at all averse to philosophy (and to much of Hegel's philosophy, at that) tout court. Furthermore, and more crucially for the argument that I wish to develop, these relative, contingent oppositions are superseded and overcome by the triumph of economy in the modern world. It is, after all, obvious that the instances of the concurrent degradations of poetry, philosophy and politics which I have briefly noted are not the consequences of the contentions within these fields, but the outcomes of the hegemony of the economy. Poets are trivialised as minor participants in the ideological operations of the capitalist-parliamentarian state (in the figure of the *inauguration poet*, the democratic panegyrist); philosophers, with very few exceptions, are segregated from society, relegated to the academy and reconfigured as careerists whose job is to overproduce monographs that disappear without a trace in their institutes' digital archives; and politics has become the weakened agent of capital power to an extent that, as Badiou has noted, even Marx could not have foreseen.

Why then am I evoking these quarrels – between the philosopher and the poet, and between the political revolutionary and the philosopher – if all I intend to illustrate is the hostile opposition between capital, on the one hand, and all aspects of human activity (such as poetry, philosophy and politics) on the other? I have two main reasons for developing my argument along this somewhat tortuous path. Firstly, I wish to avoid blunt arguments that limit the value of cultural and intellectual activities to a rather *vulgar* or deterministic appreciation of the parameters of capital's system of valuation. To observe, however sympathetically, that poets and philosophers in the modern world have lost their cultural prominence due to their inability to generate profits (on par with makers of Hollywood blockbusters, authors of children's books, etc.) would be to ignore both the ideological premise of cultural/ intellectual production and the fact that, in our age of financial capitalism, direct, immediate surplus-value extraction is not the only phase of capital growth. Space research, as an example of a stupendously valued intellectual enterprise in the modern world, is also not commercially profitable (as of now) and yet it remains a site of abundant (over) investment due to its gargantuan ideological value. What needs to be accounted for, then, is why it is that poetry and philosophy – supposed antagonists, at that – have both failed to retain their ideological worth in the modern world.

Secondly, and following from the previous rationale, if the decline of poetry and of philosophy in the contemporary world is (the result of) an

ideological devaluation, then both fields of poetry and philosophy must be understood in terms of their relationship with the State and politics. I accept Louis Althusser's general theory of ideology – according to which ideology is seen, in the first instance, as 'an imaginary assemblage, a pure dream, empty and vain' etc.¹⁰ – but, also after Althusser, I claim that this general theory is specified and concretised via processes such as subjective interpellation which require the very real (as opposed to entirely imaginary and dreamlike) apparatuses of the State, such as legal and political codes and institutions. As such, it would not suffice to say that poets have fallen foul of capital because they have proved less (monetarily) productive than, say, filmmakers – not only because, as noted above, such a statement would be incorrect (far, far more money is lost by a single obscenely expensive, unprofitable film than all of that which is invested in hundreds of poetry publications) – since such an account would also ignore the role of the State in generating and promulgating the ideological conditions that situate the artform's effacement.

It is with the purpose of providing an account of the relationship between poetry and politics in the age of economic domination that I must also consider the (seemingly) oppositional relationship between poetry and philosophy. The (Platonic) philosophical perspective properly divides poetry from politics, which allows us to view the interaction between poetry and politics as a conflictual relation and not as a (Romantic) fusion. What will follow, then, is the tale of philosophy and poetry's rivalry; their mutual and simultaneous attempts to enlist politics as an ally in this competition; their mutual defeats due to economy supplanting both poetry and philosophy as the State's ideological companion; and, finally, economy's unstoppable rise under capitalism and its overcoming of the political. But this will not be a grim account of the total victory of capital – I shall conclude by imagining unity and solidarity, at long last, between poets, philosophers and revolutionaries, in anticipation of what I hope will be the final struggle – *la lutte finale* of the philosophico-poetic revolutionary anthem 'l'Internationale' – against capital.

Politics: an Unlikely Ally?

It is of note that Plato's most vocal opposition to poetry is found in the dialogue which is ostensibly about politics, the *Republic*. We may find an opposition to aestheticised language in an earlier dialogue such as the *Gorgias*; but it is the *Republic* which provides us with the strongest account of the ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry. As such, I suggest that the key feature of Plato's strategy in delegitimising poetry resides in his determination to enlist the State in the philosopher's opposition to poetry.

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¹⁰ Althusser 2014 [1995], 175.

Note, for example, Plato's view that the poet possesses no 'practical skill' and can do 'no public service.'¹¹ Such supposed deficiencies are only so if viewed from the perspective of the milieu of public service i.e. from the position of the State (be it a well-ordered polity, as Plato would like it to be, or otherwise). Plato's critique of Homer, as Jacques Rancière has observed, is not aimed at the epics in their entirety: it is aimed at the moments within the poetic narratives in which the poet indulges in a 'deceptive *mimesis*' as opposed to the instances in which the poet 'tells the story in his own voice.'¹² What Plato disparages in the mimetic passages is that in these the poet mimics the speech of warriors – the political caste of the ancient Hellenic world *par excellence* – without the poet himself either belonging to this class or possessing the practical skills as a warrior. Anticipating an Aristotelian counterargument (which would defend such mimeses due to their potential to make accessible to the ordinary citizen via the affective 'delight' of poetry 'objects which in themselves cause distress'¹³), Plato warns against the deceptiveness of poetic images, irrespective of their accessibility, because they are created by an 'artist [who] knows little or nothing about the subjects he represents.'¹⁴

This lack of knowledge would not in itself pose an apparent problem for a viewer of a tragedy or a listener to an epic since such a person, as Aristotle would have it, is primarily drawn to the cathartic capacity of poetic representation; but delightful albeit deceptive representations – which may lead to an irrational and false understanding of a political activity such as waging and pursuing war – constitute a problem for the State, for the entity that must rationally and successfully engage in war when/if necessary. It is therefore the political, and not the philosophical, which stands as the ultimate arbiter of poetry's value; it is from the prism of the State that some varieties of poetry such as 'hymns to gods and paeans in praise of good men'¹⁵ may be accepted due to their ideological worth; and it is, finally, from the political territory of the Republic (and not from the philosopher's territory, the academy) that the majority of (ideologically worthless) poets are to be banished.

It is certainly true that Plato's antipathy towards poetry cannot be reduced to the political and that the philosopher has an *a priori* (ontological and/or epistemological) case against the poetic phenomena. But this opposition is dramatically enhanced and transformed *a posteriori* during the theoretical pursuit of an alliance between philosophy and politics, an

¹¹ Plato 1960 [375 BC], p. 378.

¹² Rancière 2004 [1998], p. 11.

¹³ Aristotle 1996 [335 BC], p. 6.

¹⁴ Plato 1960 [375 BC], p. 379.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 384.

alliance which is either aimed at or produces the exclusion of poetry from the proximity to the State. It is interesting to note that this anti-poetic philosophico-political alliance is theorised in the aftermath of the deadly conflict between philosophy and the State during Plato's youth – that is, the execution of Socrates by the Athenian rulers – and Plato's discourse may therefore be seen as, among other things, a gesture towards healing the wound of this conflict. It is equally interesting to note that in the ancient Hellenic world it is not Plato himself but his student Aristotle who enjoys the greatest proximity to political power by being a teacher to Alexander the Great and, allegedly, instigating and/or encouraging the young conqueror's desire for a war with Persia. Whatever the divergences and disagreements between the two philosophers – regarding, among other things, the value of poetry – both seem equally invested in affiliating philosophy with politics. And this is an affiliation which persists, to varying degrees, until modernity proper and into the early modern. One may note, among other famous instances, Seneca's acting as adviser to Nero; Machiavelli's proximity to the Florentine ruler Lorenzo di Piero de' Medici; Descartes' recruitment by Christina, Queen of Sweden; and Voltaire's correspondence with Catherine the Great and his patronage by Frederick the Great.

It would not be difficult to see these rulers as exemplars of Plato's *philosopher king* (or *queen*) but, perhaps to Plato's hypothetical dismay, these powerful *wisdom-lovers* were also, by and large, poetry lovers. Alexander's particular hatred of Persia may have been influenced by Aristotle's xenophobia; but his belligerence and aggressiveness are alleged to have been modelled on wrathful Homeric heroes. Poets, it seems, would go on to accompany political power more frequently than philosophers, and much more persistently than Plato would have approved. The most important ruler of ancient Rome, Augustus, was tutored by Stoic philosophers prior to his rise to power; but, as Rome's first emperor, he had much more ideological use for poet-propagandists such as Ovid, Virgil and Horace than any philosopher. It was not a philosophical treatise but the violent epic poem *Chanson de Roland* which was, apparently, chanted to Norman fighters prior to their historic victory over the English at the Battle of Hastings; and Omar Khayyam became a favourite of the Seljuk ruler Malik-Shah – sitting in court, supposedly, next to the king's throne – not only as an astronomer, and certainly not as a philosopher, but as the composer of witty quasi-mystical quatrains. Even Frederick who may be viewed as a philosopher king par excellence, seems to have been as drawn to poetry as he was to philosophy. In the midst of setbacks during the Seven Years' War, the Prussian ruler 'fell back upon the ethics of the Stoics';¹⁶ but he was also, when not 'conscripting and training men, writing and publishing poetry'.¹⁷

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¹⁶ Durant 1967, p. 48.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 59.

In the figure of Frederick – and of his protégé, Voltaire, who was both poet and philosopher – we may discern, if not an end, then something like a cessation in the Platonic war between poetry and philosophy. The philosopher king – who, in this case, is also very much a *poet king* – views, as an *enlightened despot*, philosophy and poetry as equally valuable: if philosophy (of the Stoics) provides the beleaguered ruler with an ideological discourse for accepting military defeats and maintaining his commitment to a difficult war, poetry provides the same ruler with an ideological (art)form which enables him to revel in the joy of military victories by writing ‘in French – a poem expressing his pleasure at having given the French a kick in the *cul*’ at the Battle of Rossbach.¹⁸ Here, at the outset of modernity proper, immediately before Europe and the world are transformed by the Industrial and the French Revolutions, poetry and philosophy are found in proximity to the State with more practical unison than perhaps at any other point since their theoretical falling-out in the *Republic*.

One could detect the signs of a genuine rapprochement in the aesthetic theory of many a philosopher of this era, such as Kant who credits an artform such as poetry with ‘advancing the culture of the mental powers in the interest of social communication.’¹⁹ In Hegel, poetry, far from being an opponent to philosophy, becomes philosophy’s nearest neighbour amongst all artforms, so much so that poetry may even be seen as pre-philosophy:

In poetry the mind determines this content [of consciousness] for its own sake, and apart from all else, into the shape of ideas, and through it employs sound to express them, yet treats it solely as a symbol without value or import. [...] . For this reason the proper medium of poetical representation is the poetical imagination and intellectual portrayal itself. [...] . Poetry is the universal art of the mind which has become free in its own nature, and which is not tied to its final realisation in external sensuous matter, but expatiates exclusively in the inner space and inner time of the ideas and feelings. Yet just in this its highest phase art ends by transcending itself, in as much as it abandons the medium of a harmonious embodiment of mind in sensuous form, and passes from the poetry of imagination into the prose of thought.²⁰

A number of points may be deduced from this important passage. One is that at this point in history poetry has assumed the role of a *phase*

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¹⁸ Ibid., p. 50.

¹⁹ Kant 2008 [1790], p. 135.

²⁰ Hegel 1886 [1835], <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/works/ae/ch03.htm#44>.

through which art as such transcends or overcomes itself by becoming philosophy; and that, in this process, representation (the main trope of Plato's case against poetry) has been overcome by imagination, an aspect of the mind which is in close rapport with the intellectual premise of philosophy. It is therefore easy to see why a union or a suturing – as Badiou would have it – occurs at this point between the philosopher and the poet, during what Badiou has termed *the age of poets*, a period when poets 'assumed certain of philosophy's functions.'²¹

The overcoming of the Platonic suture between poetry and philosophy, however, is announced by Hegel as an act whereby poetry (of imagination) gives way to prose (of thought). This announcement may be seen as both an acknowledgement of poetry's capacity – contra other artforms – to transcend mere sensuality or aesthetics and therefore be freed from the philosophical suspicion of the sensual; but it is also an ominous warning to the poet: in the modern world, the world of which Hegel is a most prescient theorist, the poetic shall find itself at the mercy of the prosaic. If poetry is to assume (some of) the intellectual functions of philosophy, then its status as a literary artform is to be supplanted by prose, not only by the formidable genre of the novel, but also by other *naturalistic* – i.e. non-poetic – forms of linguistic creation, such as realist drama, comedy, journalism, etc. As for philosophy, and as Badiou would further have it, the unity with the poem, beginning with the first poet of *the age of poets*, Hegel's contemporary and university classmate Hölderlin, forewarns the eventual – and sophistic – degradation of philosophy by 'language and language games.'²²

Herein, then, we have something of an eschatological mutuality. Through the sublation of their opposition in Hegel, at the very moment of the triumph of modernity proper, poetry and philosophy are exposed to the risk of being qualitatively transformed – through poetry becoming philosophical and philosophy becoming poetic – and both becoming, therefore, weakened and, even more dramatically, both coming to an end. This analysis alone could go some way towards accounting for the question of poetry's and philosophy's concurrent predicaments in the modern and the contemporary, the question with which I began this investigation. And, in acknowledgement of this analysis, I shall suggest a revival of a (non-antagonistic) separation of poetry and philosophy at the end of this piece.

The point I wish to emphasise here, however, is less hypothetical and more historical. Neither Hegel's theoretical resolution of the philosopher/poet dialectic nor the hypothetical consequences of this resolution could occur irrespective of the State; for, as I have argued, it

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²¹ Badiou 1999 [1992], p. 69.

²² Riera 2005, p. 5.

is in relationship with the State that the contention between philosophy and poetry transcends simple rivalry and becomes antithetical. And it is not only against the backdrop or in the context of arguably the single most crucial transformation of the political in history, that is, the triumph of the modern capitalist polity – vividly illustrated by Napoleon's crushing defeat of the proud Prussian army founded by the enlightened philosophico-poet king Frederick the Great – but as a result of this event (of modernity) that both poetry and philosophy, at the point of overcoming their animosity through Hegelian speculation and also through Hölderlin's poetry, are condemned to abandonment and degradation by philosophy's former ally against poetry – by the State which, from hereon, and as of now, is the delegate of capitalism.

The Emperor, the Philosopher and the Poet

It is well known that Hegel personally bore witness to the Franco-Prussian war of 1806. Upon seeing Napoleon pass through the philosopher's hometown of Jena, Hegel described the French emperor as 'the world-soul ... who, sitting here astride a horse, reaches out across the world and dominates it.'²³ Napoleon's domination, if symbolised in the image of a military conqueror on horseback, would soon prove to be much more than martial. Upon decimating the Prussian forces at the Battle of Jena-Auerstädt and entering the Prussian capital, the French emperor issued the Berlin Decree, significantly expanding the pre-existing economic blockade against Prussia's ally and France's incorrigible nemesis, England. Whilst there is nothing particularly remarkable about two warring states engaging in economic hostility in tandem with their politico-military conflict, what seems remarkable about the Berlin Decree – and the ensuing Continental System, France's attempt at imposing a Continent-wide sanction on British imports – is that this economic policy was specifically modern and capitalist; and that it came to have a determinist impact on the conduct and future of the short-lived French First Empire.

The policy, whilst putatively aimed at weakening France's implacable, non-Continental opponent, can be seen as primarily a response to France's own financial crisis of 1805 – in which the English had played no small part – which had resulted in 'a tightening of credit and the growing importance of money lending.'²⁴ Whilst the policy would go on to have a negative impact on Continental importers of British manufactured and colonial goods – an impact which Napoleon and his economic advisers may have foreseen prior to issuing the Decree – its

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²³ Qtd in Bell 2008, p. 237.

²⁴ Lefebvre 2010 [1935], p. 201.

aim was to strengthen the Continent's ascendent industrial bourgeoisie (perhaps, however temporarily, at the expense of some of its mercantile class) by protecting industries such as textile manufacturing from competition with their more technologically advanced English rivals. Although it was known, from the outset of Napoleon's promulgation of the policy, that the Continent's 'manufacturing capacity was very much smaller than her need,' it was nevertheless hoped that 'production would achieve the requisite advances' through Napoleon's attempts 'in setting up in France the manufacturing of machinery for spinning wool' and his offer of 'a prize of a million francs to anyone who could invent a machine for spinning flax.'²⁵ The push for such inventions was in part necessitated by the blockade imposed on the import of cotton from British colonies; but the demand for both a protection against English textile industries and also State investment in a more advanced mode of producing textile out of raw material to which French and Continental manufacturers had greater access in lieu of British cotton (such as wool and flax) was aimed at increasing the productivity and profitability of French industries and, by so doing, rescuing France from her economic woes. It is therefore not surprising to find that, despite the growing frustration of the mercantile bourgeoisie who had grown rich from trade with Britain in the past, France and the Continent's 'leading industrialists' championed the policy, 'without much concern for its costs.'²⁶

Furthermore, the Berlin Decree also marks the moment at which Napoleon's wars against France's numerous enemies were transformed from territorial or geopolitical struggles into a politico-economic campaign. The Continental System, as Georges Lefebvre has concluded, 'started by being a symbol of the Grand Empire, but in the end became a reason for its extension.'²⁷ Napoleon's armies would hereon fight not only to protect France's borders or to pre-emptively subjugate potential threats to her sovereignty; they were now committed to an increasingly unending war in the interest of French and Continental industrial capitalists.

What we find in the figure of Hegel's *world-soul*, then, is the soul or ideology of a new world taking shape before the bedazzled philosopher's eyes: a world in which the State commits itself – to its detriment, as was eventually the case with Napoleon's empire – to the interests of leading capitalists. The French Revolution had already occasioned, as Jean Jaurès notes in his famous history, 'the political advent of the bourgeois class';²⁸ and it was this class – contra both the aristocracy and the proletariat –

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²⁵ Ibid., p. 336.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 337.

²⁸ Jaurès 2015 [1901], p. 1.

which 'emerged victorious and established itself'²⁹ after its violent struggles against both the Royalist right and the Jacobin left. As a result of the triumph of the (bourgeois-backed) Thermidorian Reaction which toppled Robespierre, the Jacobin leader's cherished philosophico-ideological trope of *virtue* was 'replaced by a statist mechanism upholding the authority of the wealthy,'³⁰ and the nation, the post-Revolutionary France in its entirety, came to be seen, by the bourgeois-dominated State, as 'an economic objectivity.'³¹ The Industrial Revolution had already begun to transform the world's modes of production – and had provided the English with the techno-economic means to resist and ultimately subvert France's attempts at subjugating *perfidious Albion* – but it was the French Revolution and its Corsican son which turned the economically ascendent class of the industrial bourgeoisie into a properly political and – via policies such as the Berlin Decree – politically dominant class in the modern world.

It is in this world that we see the emblematic French Head of State and his armed forces march through the philosopher's hometown. As Eric Hobsbawm would have it, the besotted thinker's initial enthusiasm for the egalitarian sublation of the *ancien régime* master/slave dialectic in the figure of the bourgeois French *citizen emperor* cooled and Hegel 'eventually became utterly conservative';³² a conservatism which can be seen in his blaming Napoleon's later defeats on the very bourgeois anti-aristocratic egalitarianism which had made Napoleon's appearance in Prussia so startling in the first place; by saying that it was the 'entire mass of mediocrity' who 'succeeded in bringing down what is high to the same level as itself or even below.'³³ Hereby an older Hegel arguably rejects the modern secular bourgeois state in favour of an aristocratic, religious Prussian state – much to the chagrin of the progressive followers of his earlier thought. But it should be noted that this rejection is preceded by an earlier one: Napoleon's own rejection of philosophy. Note that the French ruler does not stop in Jena to converse with the German philosopher and is only seen from afar by the latter. In an attitude that would have infuriated Plato and all philosophers who had sought to become allies to the State, Napoleon shows not only utter indifference towards one of France's own great philosophical minds of the era, Germaine de Staël, but he also has her exiled from the Republic after observing, disapprovingly, that the philosopher 'teaches people to think who had never thought before.'³⁴

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29 Ibid.

30 Badiou 2006 [1998], p. 125.

31 Ibid., p. 129.

32 Hobsbawm 2014 [1962], p. 302.

33 Qtd in Dwyer 2014, p. 467.

34 Qtd in Rémusat 1880 [1879-80], p. 408.

We find here, at the historical moment when the State and capital merge, when war becomes not politics but (modern capitalist) economics by other means, an uncanny, ironic obverse to Plato's advice to the political forces of his own era. The modern sovereign, in the aftermath of a revolution that turned the bourgeoisie into the dominant political class, banishes not poets but philosophers from a state well-ordered by the demands of industrial capitalists. And does this exclusion of philosophy, of that which teaches people to think, from the political realm provide an opportunity for the philosophers' ancient rivals, poets, to assert themselves as the modern capitalist State's loyal ideological allies?

There is a potential for such an opportunity when we take into consideration the initial premise of the encounter between the French emperor and another iconic German cultural figure of the era, Goethe. The political leader does not accidentally cross paths with the poet, as he did vis-à-vis the philosopher, but he specifically summons the poet. Based on Goethe's own recollection of this 1808 meeting – taking place in Erfurt during an international conference that was meant to compel the rest of the Continent, Russia in particular, to abide by the Continental System – the French statesman's immediate response to receiving the famed poet was quite favourable. Upon learning about Goethe's advanced age, and seemingly impressed by the poet's posture, eloquence and stamina, Napoleon is supposed to have muttered 'more to himself than to this companions': '*Voilà un homme!*'³⁵ a remark that may be translated as 'What a guy!'

The conversation between Napoleon and Goethe was, perhaps surprisingly, neither immediately political nor ideological. Napoleon was keen to query what he saw as a flaw in the plot of *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers*, a novel which had made a great impact on him as a young man. Napoleon, very much the modern reader with a penchant for realist or naturalist prose narratives, saw the novel's suicidal conclusion as altogether too Romantic and too poetic. This criticism should not come as a surprise – despite the fact Napoleon himself would go on to attempt suicide in a few years – if we note that poetry 'mostly bored' the emperor whereas he viewed the novel as 'the most important creative literary form.'³⁶ Goethe's reply to this criticism is a cautious defence of poetry against the modern novel: 'a poet can perhaps be excused for taking refuge in an artifice which is hard to spot, when he wants to produce certain effects that could not be created simply and naturally.'³⁷ Napoleon, ever the utilitarianist modern politician, is happy to excuse the poet's resorting to an unnaturalistic artifice if this aesthetic can be put

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³⁵ Ludwig 1943 [1926], 323.

³⁶ Bell 2008, p. 202.

³⁷ Selin 2016, <https://shannonselin.com/2016/10/napoleon-met-goethe/>.

to political use, and immediately requests that Goethe place his poetic skills at the service of the State by staying at Erfurt for the duration of the French emperor's negotiations with the Russian tsar, to either turn 'the great drama'³⁸ of the political event into a play, or to 'dedicate something [e.g. a poem] to [the tsar] in honour of Erfurt!'³⁹

What Napoleon has in mind, then, is an ideological function for the poet, and he expects that Goethe will assist him, as poet, in the project of flattering and hence seducing the tsar into accepting compliance with the Continental System, that is, with the economic policy instituted for the purpose of empowering the Continent's industrial capitalism. Goethe's response to this request, and the conclusion to the meeting between the politician and the poet is worth noting in a little detail, as narrated, somewhat melodramatically, by the 20th century biographer Emil Ludwig:

... the poet only smiles civilly and candidly declares:

"I have never done anything of that sort, Sire, and therefore I have never had occasion to repent it."

A touch! A touch! The Emperor of the French cannot but feel it! Marvellous to relate, the son of the revolution tries to strengthen his position by referring to the Roi Soleil:

"In the reign of Louis XIV, our great authors held other views!"

"No doubt they did, Sire; but we do not know whether they may not have repented."

"How true!" is the Emperor's thought when he hears this sceptical answer, which is really a skirmisher's attack on the part of the German. Consequently, he makes no attempt to detain the poet when the latter, with a deprecatory gesture, himself closes the interview and bids the Emperor farewell – another breach of courtly tradition, with which Goethe is perfectly familiar.⁴⁰

Herein ends the *world-soul's* attempt at recruiting Europe's greatest living poet in the service of the Continental System. By rejecting the statesman's instrumentalisation of his art as a component of his empire's ideological apparatuses, Goethe absolves himself, in advance, of a political alliance which he may one day have to disavow and *repent*. Furthermore, he announces a clear breach with earlier, early-modern poets of the age of the Sun King. Whereas the latter were, supposedly, more than willing to play panegyrist and propagandist to the State, the modern poet is determined to avoid becoming *anything of that sort*. Goethe's refusal may be seen as a poet's Romantic or Idealist rejection

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³⁸ Ludwig 1943 [1926], p. 325.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 326.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 327.

of poetry's reduction to any kind of vulgar instrumentality, in rapport with Hegel's view of poetry as *the highest phase of art*; but it is important to note that the poet's *deprecatory gesture* and his abrupt *breach* with the political is preceded by Napoleon's own rather derogatory assessment of poetry as an artform – or a genre of literary artifices – that obstructs the telling of a good (prose and naturalist) story in a modern novel. Would Goethe's response to Napoleon's request have been other than a curt rejection had the latter appeared initially as sincerely appreciative of the poetic qualities of the former's popular novel? And, had Goethe then accepted to take part in Napoleon's attempt at wooing the tsar, could his involvement have put a stop to Napoleon's future, catastrophic invasion of Russia?

Such questions are, of course, unanswerable. What can be observed is that in the modern world, in the world in which economic objectives of the capitalist classes dominate the ideals and operations of the State, neither the philosopher nor the poet can participate in the political milieu. Both philosophy and poetry seem destined to lose their cultural and ideological worth.

What (if Anything) Is to Be Done?

I have evoked these historical vignettes – of Hegel's non-encounter with Napoleon and of Napoleon's failed encounter with Goethe – not so much to exemplify an anti-*ménage à trois* – or perhaps a *méfiance à trois* – between politics, philosophy and poetry, but to provide a glimpse into a concrete moment in the formation of the modern State, a moment which presages and prepares the future subservience of politics to economy and also the gradual and concurrent declines of poetry and philosophy in cultural and ideological significance. If it is at all possible to historicise the origins of these diminishments, then it would seem that these are related to another origin: the historical event of the hegemonic ascendance of the political bourgeoisie – an ascendance both occasioned and aided by the Industrial and the French Revolutions – which would bring about, at various velocities in various parts of the world, the domination of capitalism both as a mode of production and also as the sole environment for the development of the modern (liberal, egalitarian, democratic, etc.) State.

Revisiting the initial concerns of this essay in the light of these historical vignettes, we may conclude this investigation with four observations. Firstly, when we talk about the public value of cultural/intellectual activities like poetry and philosophy, we are not talking about their immediately economic or monetary (exchange-)value, and we are instead addressing their ideological value for the State. Napoleon's distaste for philosophy had nothing to do with the profitability of a philosophical publication or such like and was instead occasioned by a

(rather conservative) thinker such as Madame de Staël's capacity to *teach people to think*, and it seems that a *thinking subject* would interfere with the modern state's mission to enact, without any hinderance, the dictates of the capitalist classes. Furthermore, the contemporaneous exclusion of poetry from the ideological apparatuses of the State was occasioned by both the (seeming) aesthetic shortcomings of poetry in the age of prose and also by the poets' own reluctance to objectify and instrumentalise their art in the service of the State.

Secondly, although economy is not the immediate or sufficient milieu for the cultural depreciations of poetry and of philosophy, it is, nevertheless, the necessary and contingent condition for these devaluations. Although Marx and Engels note, in *The Communist Manifesto*, that the victorious bourgeois 'has stripped of its halo' the work of the poet, 'hitherto honoured and looked up to with reverent awe' as it has 'converted' the poet into one of 'its paid wage-labourers',⁴¹ we should not see this *being stripped of a halo* as directly related to *becoming a wage-labourer*. (By noting, for example, that in the world of capitalism it is perfectly possible for a cultural wage-earner – albeit an obscenely overvalued one – such as a movie star to be looked up to with worshipful awe.) We must instead understand what Marx saw as capitalist production's 'hostility' towards poetry⁴² as an indirect and meditated antagonism; one which is an outcome of the process of dominant (State) ideology – i.e. the bestower of a cultural *halo* in the first instance – becoming one with the economics of the capitalist mode of production; and it is only then, via the mediating process of the State becoming the state of capitalism, and its ideology becoming indiscernible from political economy, that the poet (and the philosopher, too) are no longer viewed with reverence.

Thirdly, seeing as this entire analysis has been premised on an *a priori* Platonic separation of poetry from philosophy, I should maintain the separation of the two despite their speculative immersion in Hegel's aesthetics or their shared misfortunes in the age of capitalism. As such, we must make note of the fundamental difference in how poetry and philosophy have each been sidelined and humiliated by the capitalist state. Philosophy, after its initial fascination with the modern Republic – as seen in a youngish Hegel's infatuation with Napoleon – has come to be highly critical of modern politics because modern politics has forsaken the philosophical pursuits of truths and wisdom in the interest of economic success. As such, we may say that the philosopher's misfortune resides in the State's abandoning philosophy in favour of economics. Poetry's core grievance against the State, on the other

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41 Marx and Engels 1986 [1848], p.82.

42 Marx 1968 [1863], <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1863/theories-surplus-value/ch04.htm>.

hand, is structurally different to that of philosophy. Whilst the poets know very well that their literary medium has been superseded by the prosaic (fiction, theatre, cinema, etc.) their frustration resides in the consequences of their diminishment that results, in part, from this supersession. Deprived of the aesthetic mastery in the cultural scene, poets are expected to perform sycophantic ceremonial roles – as seen in Napoleon's asking Goethe to *dedicate something* to the tsar – and therefore, instead of being unintentionally excluded by the State, poets recoil from an inclusion occasioned by the State's openly insincere and condescending exploitation of the poetic. Philosophy's predicament has been its abandonment by the State in favour of the economy; and poetry's tragedy has been its justified disillusionment with the State's adoption of an economistic ethics.

Finally, it seems inconceivable to me that either philosophy or poetry could make anything like a lasting or meaningful cultural comeback in the modern world (despite the ephemeral popularity of trends such as *Instagram poetry* or the sophistic fetishisation of *theory* at elite universities) for as long as the State remains the state of capital. And if anything is to be done about this situation, it can only be done in response to or in the context of modernity and capitalism, without any recourse to (a fantasy of) a regressive and utterly impossible return to the *ancien régime* enlightened despotism of poetico-philosopher kings and queens.

The task – which, I admit, is not an easy one, seeing as so many contemporary poets and philosophers are pathologically preoccupied with the misfortunes of their marginality – is to begin with recognising that the State's usurpation by capitalist economics has had consequences far exceeding those which feature readily in the grievances of poets and philosophers. It is unnecessary to list the key tropes of a Marxist opposition to capitalism in the final remarks of this essay; it should suffice to say that capitalism and its corresponding political, cultural and social advents and projects which, in the first instance, liberated – or sought to liberate – humanity from feudalism, absolutism, religious fundamentalism and the like, have, in the course of their historical development and domination, themselves become feudalist, absolutist, fundamentalist, and oppressive. There is now more economic and social inequality in the world and a far greater concentration of wealth in the hands of a smaller portion of the global population than at any other point in our history; the devotion to the market and sanctified ideals such as GDP far exceeds the fidelity of bygone political classes to any organised religion; and so on.

It seems to me that the struggle against capitalism – which, as I understand it, is both a struggle for the advent and propagation of a mode of production independent of capital as well as a struggle for the liberation of the State from politico-ideological co-optation by capitalist

economics – is, in the final analysis, the very same struggle in which poets and philosophers must participate if they are to oppose their increasing triviality in the modern world. The aim of this struggle, again, would not be to retrieve the poet's – and philosopher's – purloined halo or to have either poets or philosophers elevated to the position of the State's favoured ally; the aim of this struggle would be nothing other than ending capitalism through overcoming it. This universal struggle will certainly not be led by either poets or philosophers, irrespective of their political commitment and intellectual radicalism, and will be launched and led – as far as I am able to foresee it – by revolutionary wage-labouring classes who, not so unlike the modern bourgeoisie's own victorious uprisings against the aristocrats of the *ancien régime*, will rise up against the bourgeois neo-aristocracy of our own world. And for poets and philosophers, the only viable path out of their current insignificance, would be participation in this historical event.

One last remark: in joining a future social revolution against capitalism, poets and philosophers should resist the temptation of forsaking the fundamental (Platonic) differences between both each other and also between them and the political. A universal struggle does not require homogenisation or an eradication of difference between the ancient rivals. Far from it, poets, philosophers and revolutionaries can only collaborate if they do not try to fuse and, as a result, inadvertently submit one group's identity to that of the other. Past fusions of poetry and philosophy have either resulted in the submission of the poetic to the *prose of thought*; or have mutated philosophy into linguistic sophistry. (And fusions of politics with either philosophy and/or poetry have been properly catastrophic.) If poetry and philosophy are to play their part in our final struggle against capitalism, they must do so as poetry and philosophy, as nothing other than a literary artform in the case of poetry and nothing other than the pursuit of truths in the case of philosophy. As such, the poet and the philosopher will no longer see each other as competitors and politics as a potential ally that they must win over to undercut their competitor; they must instead see the other as a comrade committed to a collective, universal struggle for emancipation.

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Ransom! Baudelaire and Distributive Injustice

Emily Apter

Abstract: Baudelaire's poem "The Ransom" composed in 1848-9 and often judged to be one of his weaker poems, belongs to a corpus that decries material impoverishment, depredation and violence toward the poor, and that helped earn Baudelaire the sobriquet "poet of the people." A poem in the spirit of the July Monarchy, and of 1848, it joins Baudelaire to the company of the realist school of Courbet and Champfleury and to the larger radical confraternity of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon. In this essay the poem serves as point of departure for designating *ransom* as a political mode of economic, political and moral violence involving extortion, hostage-taking, and the perversion of economic reason within systems of distributive injustice. Drafted in obvious counterpoint to John Rawls's principle of "distributive justice" - applied by Rawls to the "fair" allocation of material goods, and to tolerance of inequality only to the ends of the greater good for the least advantaged - distributive injustice is developed as a political concept and aesthetic praxis tied to Baudelairean irony. It is activated in response to Baudelaire's topoi of the unjust portion, the unequal share, luxury as a violent extraction of capital from human labor, the uncivilly divided commons and the social damages of passive injustice.

Keywords: Baudelaire, capitalism, ransom, distributive injustice, equality, irony, violence

La Rançon

L'homme a, pour payer sa rançon,
Deux champs au tuf profond et riche,
Qu'il faut qu'il remue et défriche
Avec le fer de la raison;

Pour obtenir la moindre rose,
Pour extorquer quelques épis,
Des pleurs salés de son front gris
Sans cesse il faut qu'il arrose.

L'un est l'Art, et l'autre l'Amour
- Pour rendre le juge propice,
Lorsque de la stricte justice
Paraîtra le terrible jour,

Il faudra lui montrer des granges
Pleines de moissons, et des fleurs
Dont les formes et les couleurs
Gagnent le suffrage des Anges.¹

.....
¹ Baudelaire 1975, p. 173.

[Mais pour que rien ne soit jeté
Qui serve à payer l'esclavage,
Elles grossiront l'apanage
De la commune liberté]²

The Ransom

To pay his ransom, Man must take
Two fields of tufa, deep and rich,
And use the tools of reason, which
Are all he has, to dig and rake;

To grow a rose of shortest stem,
To wrest a few pathetic ears,
His grey head sheds its salty tears,
Which he must use to water them:

One field is Art, the other, Love
But then, in order that he may
Persuade the court, that awful day
Judgement is rendered from above,

He must display his barns, that teem
With harvest crops, with corn and grapes
And flowers of the shades and shapes
To earn the Angels' high esteem.³

Suppressed Strophe (as rendered by T.J. Clark)

[But that nothing should be sown
which would go to pay for slavery
They will swell the property
of the Common liberty.⁴

Francis Scarfe's prosaic translation:

To pay his ransom with, Man has two fields of deep rich soil, which
he must cultivate with the blade of Reason.

To nurse the smallest rose, to wring a few ears of corn from
the earth, he must water them ceaselessly with the salt tears of his
ashen brow.

.....
² Ibid. p. 1159. The proofs of *Les Epaves* contained this additional stanza.

³ Baudelaire 2008, pp. 317 and 319. Further references to the McGowan translations will appear in the text abbreviated JM. Unless otherwise noted the translations are mine. I have drawn on different translations depending on how well they bring out a stylistic nuance or idea with specific relevance to my readings.

⁴ Clark 1973, p. 206. Further references to this work will appear in the text abbreviated AB.

One is Art, and the other is Love. In order to propitiate the Judge when the terrible day of Justice dawns, he will have to show him barns full of harvested crops, and flowers whose forms and colours win the approval of the Angels.⁵

T.J. Clark's paraphrase of the poem:

"Man to pay his ransom, must till the fields of Art and Love with the ploughshare of reason - a ceaseless struggle, sweat pouring from his brow. At the Last Judgment he must show grain but also flowers - a plain harvest alongside a crop which will win favor by its forms and colors, or its food value." (AB 167).

Baudelaire's "*La Rançon*" [The Ransom] composed in 1848-9 and often judged to be one of his weaker poems, figures among the *Pièces diverses* of *Les Epaves*. It belongs to a corpus – including standouts like "Le Squelette laboureur," "Assommons les pauvres," "Le Vieux Saltimbanque," "Le Mauvais Vitrier," "Le Joujou des pauvres" and "Le Vin des chiffonniers" - that decries material impoverishment, depredation and violence toward the poor, and that helped earn Baudelaire the sobriquet "poet of the people." A poem in the spirit of the July Monarchy, and of 1848, it joins Baudelaire to the company of the realist school of Courbet and Champfleury and to the larger radical confraternity of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon.⁶

In what follows, the poem will serve as a point of departure for designating *ransom* as a political mode of economic, political and moral violence involving extortion, hostage-taking, and the perversion of economic reason within systems of distributive injustice. Drafted in obvious counterpoint to John Rawls's principle of "distributive justice" - applied by Rawls to the fair allocation of material goods, and to tolerance of inequality only to the ends of the greater good for the least advantaged - distributive *in*justice is not a term in common circulation in politico-legal theory, nor does it have any clear aesthetic purchase.⁷ But

5 Baudelaire 1986, p. 301. Further references to this edition will appear under the abbreviation BCV.

6 Anti-Proudhonianism was turned on Baudelaire, as seen in Jean Wallon's review of "Limbes" (the early title for *Les Fleurs du mal*): "They are doubtless Socialist verses, and in consequence bad verses. Yet another new disciple of Proudhon.... For the last few months everybody seems to have lost his head... everyone has rushed into Socialism - without seeing that Socialism is the absolute negation of art." (AB163)

7 Rawls 1971. In an essay "Types of Justice," revised in 2020 in the wake of the post-Floyd racial justice movements, Michelle Maiese offers a succinct account of some of the conflicting notions of fairness, equity, need and resource allocation that beset the concept of distributive justice and its pragmatic applications, particularly in economics, law, social choice and social contract theory:

Distributive justice, or economic justice, is concerned with giving all members of society a "fair share" of the benefits and resources available. However, while everyone might agree that wealth should be distributed fairly, there is much disagreement about what counts as a "fair

it aptly describes – and this is how I will be using it - Baudelaire's topoi of the unjust portion, the unequal share, luxury as a violent extraction of capital from human labor, the uncivilly divided commons and the social damages of "passive injustice," a phrase coined by Judith Shklar to emphasize the legal cost (in moral terms) of bystander syndrome.⁸ A locus of Baudelairean irony, distributive injustice engenders an ironic politics straddling what Baudelaire called his "mitigated Socialism" (born of his youthful support for the bloody worker uprisings of 1848), and the insufferable conservatism of the *juste milieu*, associated by François Pierre Guillaume Guizot, prime minister under Louis-Philippe, with a policy positioned "against all excesses, absolute principles, and extreme principles."⁹

Baudelaire sits in a broad continuum of thinkers who questioned the ethico-political foundations of property-ownership, entitlement, and wealth distribution, ranging from Proudhon and Karl Marx, to, in the twentieth century, Rawls and Peter Singer (whose idea of "one world" attempts to correct for Rawls's questionable assumption that under the "veil of ignorance" - a hypothetical all-things-being-equal condition -

share." Some possible criteria of distribution are equity, equality, and need. (Equity means that one's rewards should be equal to one's contributions to a society, while "equality" means that everyone gets the same amount, regardless of their input. Distribution on the basis of need means that people who need more will get more, while people who need less will get less.) Fair allocation of resources, or distributive justice, is crucial to the stability of a society and the well-being of its members. Different people will define "fair" differently: some will say that fairness is equity; others equality; still others, need.

Maiese 2003.

8 Political philosopher Judith Shklar analyzes how "passive injustice" operates in Giotto's allegory "Injustice" [*Ingiustizia*]:

"The face of Giotto's Injustice is cold and cruel with small, fanglike teeth at the sides of the mouth. He wears a judge's or ruler's cap, but it is turned backward and in his hand is a nasty pruning hook, not a scepter or miter. As he has sown no doubt so shall he reap, for some of the trees that surround him are rooted in the soil beneath his feet where crime flourishes. Around him is a gate in ruin, but under him we see the real character of passive injustice. There is a theft, a rape, and a murder. Two soldiers watch this scene and do nothing, and neither does the ruler. The woods, always a dangerous place, are unguarded; they are the place where the sort of men who prosper under passive injustice can be as violent as they please. They have a cruel tyrant to govern them, but he and they deserve, indeed engender, each other. The trees around these figures are not the 'fruit of the Spirit' but 'the work of the flesh,' as Paul wrote in his list of sins, and they are not just sown by active injustice but by a government that passively lets it happen. It is a perfect illustration of Justice Brennan's impassioned dissent from the appalling DeShaney decision: 'Inaction can be every bit as abusive of power as action, oppression can result when a State undertakes a vital duty and then ignores it.'

Unlike some of Giotto's other vices, Injustice does not appear to suffer at all; he seems completely affectless." Shklar 1985, pp. 47-48. Reading Shklar with Baudelaire we gain a heightened sense of how allegories of injustice, including passive injustice, are embedded in everyday life and ordinary vices. Throughout Baudelaire's writings – which show how political crimes and forms of ransom-taking manifest at the micropolitical level – we are made to feel the hypocrisy of the bystander who experiences moral repulsion but refuses to intervene.

9 As cited in Boime 2004), p. 272.

individuals will opt for a system of welfare beneficial to the worst-off).¹⁰ To this group we would add Derrida, whose reading of Baudelaire's prose poem "La Fausse Monnaie," [Counterfeit Money] in *Donner le temps* [Given Time], exposes "the madness of economic reason under capitalism" conveyed by Baudelaire's striking images of loose and false change, of coins "singularly and minutely distributed" among trouser and waistcoat pockets, or a rich man's effort to "win paradise economically" to pick up gratis the certificate of a charitable man" by dashing the beggar with false coin.¹¹ Like "'La Fausse Monnaie," "La Rançon" condemns the accounting system of pay-offs and cheats in which religion and capitalism are equally and reciprocally mired.

In describing the tribute to be paid on Judgment Day, "The Ransom" takes aim at "The Parable of the Sower" with its credo that God recompenses those who endure against adversity, avoid the temptations of riches, and harvest the fruits of their labor. The first stanza, which introduces a laborer tilling his fields, is something of a pastiche of George Sand's *La Mare au Diable* (1846).¹² Sand's celebrated "*roman champêtre*" opened with a meditation on Hans Holbein the Younger's *Simulacres de la Mort*, [Images of Death], a group of engravings circa 1526 featuring Death's dance with everyone from peasants to kings, bishops, monks, judges, lawyers and more. In *Death and the Plowman* Holbein's laborer is old, his clothes are tattered, and his nags are skin and bone. The only lively figure in this scene of sweat and desperate toil is a skeleton whipping the horses into motion. (In the poem from *Les Tableaux parisiens* - "Le Squelette laboureur" (1859) - Baudelaire would meld laborer and skeleton in a single figure, "dragged out of the boneyard," and condemned to having "to scrape the sullen earth, and shove a heavy spade beneath our bleeding naked feet" for eternity.)¹³ Sand treats Holbein's grim sixteenth century allegory of unrelenting, infinite labor with indignation, using it to chastise her own era for doing so little to rectify economic injustice. In the past the rich bought indulgences and drank to ward off death, now they empower their government to buy them protection

.....
10 Singer 2004

11 Derrida 1992, p. 34.

12 Baudelaire despised Sand's moralism, deriding her mercilessly in Section 27 of *My Heart Laid Bare*: "I cannot think of this stupid creature without a certain shudder of horror. If I ran into her, I could not resist tossing a font of holy water on her head."). see Baudelaire 2022, p. 123. Further references to this work will appear in the text abbreviated LF.

13 Baudelaire's most celebrated poem about a skeleton was "Danse Macabre" (XCVII in *Tableaux parisiens*), featuring a prostitute-coquette. Her artfully styled hair and fancy clothes deflect attention from her cavernous eye sockets, hairless skull and frail vertebra. She forms a couple with the skeletal laborer, insofar as both have bony frames that attest to starvation and exploitation. The narrator implicates society at large when he remarks, "Pourtant, qui n'a serré dans ses bras un squelette, / Et qui ne s'est nourri des choses du tombeau?" OC I op. cit. pp. 97-98. ["Yet who has never held a skeleton in his arms/who has never fed on the carrion of the grave?" Scarfe translation BCV, 194].

against rebellious peasants, fortifying the ranks of soldiers and jailors instead of advancing economic justice. Sand reserves special ire for artists (she is presumed to be targeting Eugène Sue's 1842 *Les Mystères de Paris*), who sensationally exploit the spectacle of the poor:

Sans doute il est lugubre de consumer ses forces et ses jours à fender le sein de cette terre jalouse, qui se fait arracher les trésors de sa fécondité, lorsqu'un morceau de pain le plus noir et le plus grossier est, à la fin de la journée, l'unique recompense et l'unique profit attachés à un si dur labeur. Ces richesses qui couvrent le sol, ces moissons, ces fruits, ces bestiaux orgueilleux qui s'engraissent dans les longues herbes, sont la propriété de quelques-uns et les instruments de la fatigue et de l'esclavage du plus grand nombre.

... en voyant la douleur des hommes qui peuplent ce paradis de la terre, l'artiste au coeur droit et humain est troublé au milieu de sa jouissance. Le bonheur serait là où l'esprit, le coeur et les bras, travaillant de concert sous l'oeil de la Providence, une sainte harmonie existerait entre la munificence de Dieu et les ravissements de l'âme humaine. C'est alors qu'au lieu de la piteuse et affreuse mort, marchant dans son sillon, le fouet à la main, le peintre d'allégories pourrait placer à ces côtés un ange radieux, semant à pleines mains le blé béni sur le sillon fumant.¹⁴

It is doubtless lugubrious to spend one's force and one's days splitting open the jealous earth, that yields the treasures of fecundity so reluctantly; the blackest, roughest morsel of bread is, at day's end, the only recompense, the only profit rewarding this hard labor. The riches that cover the earth, the harvests, fruits, and proud beasts who fatten themselves on the long grass, are the property of the privileged few, but the instruments of fatigue and slavery for the many.

(...) On seeing the suffering of those who populate this earthly paradise, the artist who is upright and human becomes troubled in the midst of his pleasure. Happiness would be where spirit, heart and strength come together under the eye of Providence, a blessed harmony would exist then between God's munificence and the joys of the human spirit. Instead of woeful, frightful Death, trawling the furrow, his whip in hand, the painter of allegories should place a radiant Angel by the laborer's side, throwing handfuls of blessed grain into the humid furrow.

.....
14 Sand 1995, pp. 13, 15. Influenced by Baudelaire's poems, the "danse macabre" became especially popular in art during the 1860s: Alfred Rethel, Grandville, Champfleury and Félicien Rops each did works featuring the theme.

Despite his misogynist aversion to Sand, Baudelaire would appropriate vocabulary from this text along with the theme of unjust recompense. And like Sand, he would subject the figure of the artist to ridicule as one who professes indignation over the laborer's toil while taking refuge in the aesthetic spheres of *otium* and *l'art pour l'art*.

"The Ransom" appeared in 1857 five years after it was rejected by *La Revue de Paris*. It was deemed too controversial to publish so soon after Napoleon III's *coup d'état*, especially the version that included that last stanza - ultimately suppressed - which invoked "the commons of liberty." T.J. Clark detects in the rich, ambiguous connotations of *commune liberté* the special force that Baudelaire attached to the word *commun* between 1848 and 1852, which extended to "the terrible equality of the common grave." (AB 169) Showcasing Baudelaire at his most militant, "The Ransom" is a poem infused with undercurrents of insurrectional violence that belie the sweet promise of reward for Art and Love. Its rhetoric of ransom and extortion challenges the justice of a system in which bounty is wrung from the worker by a punishing authority. The laborer must pay dear: having worked so hard to cultivate every rose and ear of corn he must turn his produce over or forfeit his grace. Blackmailed by God (fronting for the landowner), he is forced into paying ransom for his salvation.

The theodicy projected in this poem is indebted to Proudhon's influential *Système des contradictions économiques ou Philosophie de la misère* (1846), where Proudhon notoriously proclaimed: "For God is stupidity and cowardice; God is hypocrisy and lies; God is tyranny and wretchedness; God is Evil." Glossing these phrases T.J. Clark notes: "There is a God, and Man aspires towards him. But God in turn is jealous of his own creation, 'jealous of Adam', 'tyrant of Prometheus'. Knowledge and society are won in spite of God, against his trickery and opposition ... And the world itself is God's trap, the place where He becomes evil, in a sordid contest with his creatures." (AB 168) "Many men," Clark concludes, had accused their God of cruelty; what *they* [Proudhon and Baudelaire] did was take the accusation to its logical conclusion." (AB 168). "The Ransom" belongs to the space of this "logical conclusion" where God and man are locked into scoring wins and losses; where God metes out penalties whose severity is the measure of His jealousy and petty resentment, and where men draw on the economy of divine Evil to power their revolutionary revenge. Ransoming, in this context becomes the ruse of the defective, fallen sovereign who abandons the sublimity and impartial application of just laws and the dignity of his remote perch, to descend to the level of humans. In proving to behave "just like us" he relinquishes the authority of divine moral economy and unleashes the democratic demiurge.

Clark recalls us to the vexed issue of Baudelairean politics, which in recent criticism has been downplayed within a broader ethical

turn indebted to Walter Benjamin's Baudelaire. This ethical approach foregrounds trauma, violence, modernity, lyric, *techne*, dialectics and irony - above all irony. Kevin McLaughlin's densely argued essay "On Poetic Reason of State: Benjamin, Baudelaire, and the Multitudes" distills ethical irony from the Benjaminian concept of *Erlebnissen*, [translated as short-lived experience] which breaks down the ego's auto-affective mechanisms of defense and induces "liberation from the protective custody of a life of self-preservation."¹⁵ "If lyric, he writes, is traditionally understood to constitute a poetic genre defined by subjectivity and intersubjectivity, reason of state in Baudelaire's poetry dictates the violation of this constitutional principle in order to preserve the mediacy of a relation that is not subjectively determined."¹⁶ This ethics of mediacy, made possible by the role of poetic force in the "emancipation from experiences," and enabling a paradoxical preservation of the "transience of all states," helps produce a non-proprietary subject, emancipated from history and punctual death duties, leased in time, no longer historically heritaged, or morally propertied and leveraged.

For Debarati Sanyal, in *The Violence of Modernity: Baudelaire, Irony, and the Politics of Form*, irony forges the path to recovering "the ideological valences of modernism's retreat into form, in the hopes of reenergizing literature's spirit of critique vis-a-vis historical violence."¹⁷ Sanyal concentrates on the distance Baudelaire would take from his youthful revolutionary idealism. The punches and strikes that course through the prose poems, the rhetorical violence, the beating delivered by poetic phrasing and rhythm, the obsession with victim and executioner, the self-flagellating, self-evacuating narrative voice, are so many brutally ironic formal disfigurements of revolutionary ideals. She argues that throughout the later writings irony functions as "a textual violence and a historical counterviolence." (VM 29) This is most clearly brought out in the prose poem "Assommons les pauvres!" [Let's Beat up the Poor] where "the poet, bludgeoned into a theoretical stupor by the socialist literature of 1848, tumbles out of his ivory tower into the streets of Paris. He encounters a beggar, whose pleading eyes mirror both the idealist promises of utopian literature and the poet's own idealizing imagination, in a typically Baudelairean imbrication of poetic and social idealism." (VM 81) The works of the later, post-revolutionary Baudelaire, Sanyal argues further, "insistently implicate the utopian vocabulary of communion, fraternity, equality and concord with the reality of collective violence, terror and ongoing economic inequity." (VM 90). Seen through this lens, Baudelaire could be said to have ransomed the revolutionary social contract and

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15 McLaughlin 2014, p. 248.

16 Ibid. p. 264.

17 For Sanyal 2006, p. 4. Further references to this work will appear in the text abbreviated VM.

its ideal of equitable social, political and economic distribution, for the sake of wallowing in the pleasure of savaging Second Empire pretense to benign rule of law, popular democracy, and refined aesthetic taste. If the Revolution survives as a post-revolutionary, counter-violent effect, it is in the guise of *Nachträglichkeit*, the *après-coup* that quite literally takes hold *after the coup* of Louis-Napoleon. Manifest no longer in demonstrations or *attentâts* that target official representatives of an authoritarian regime, the revolutionary demiurge is diverted into impolitic outbursts of vicious laughter, anger, shouts and fisticuffs outside the moral economy of *lex talionis*. As Richard Sieburth notes, after 1861, when an encounter with the writings of conservative Catholic thinker Joseph de Maistre reignited Baudelaire's religious fervor, "the modes he now favored were rancorous irony, outright insult, or provocative farce (*bouffonnerie*)."¹⁸ (LF 22) We see this in the comic cruelty and explosions of cynical reason that figure in *My Heart Laid Bare*, especially those fragments that single out 1848 for "ridicule." Here, the folly of idealism, the base instincts of revolutionary motivation, and the futility of contesting Napoleonic state power are reviewed in the pitiless rear-view mirror of retrospection:

My inebriation in 1848.

What was the nature of this inebriation?

Thirst for revenge. Taking *natural* pleasure in demolition." (114)

(...)

My fury at the coup d'état. How many times I came under fire.

Another Bonaparte! Shame!

And nonetheless everything quieted down. Is not the president well within his rights?

What the emperor Napoleon III is. What he is worth. Come up with an explanation of his nature, as an instrument of Providence. (115)

(...)The only charming thing about 1848 was that it achieved the heights of Ridiculousness" ["1848 ne fut charmant que par l'excès même du Ridicule."]

(LF 115)

Ridicule, levied as a kind of payback or ransom exacted as the price of fighting for equality and justice, is the dominant mode of irony in late Baudelaire, the Baudelaire who was self-avowedly spineless and lacking in all political conviction. But as Slavoj Žižek has argued recently with respect to "the comedy of terrors" which we are seeing play out in the convergence of extreme racial injustice and the necrocapitalist maneuvers of old-school authoritarian nation-states, irony, humor, and *bouffonnerie* must never be underestimated as a means of overturning mastery and fomenting political change.¹⁸

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¹⁸ Žižek 2022.

“La Fausse monnaie” offers a perfect example of how a runaway “ha, ha, ha” gets the better of the smug bourgeois who tells a story at the expense of his Samaritan colleague, revealed to have knowingly passed off counterfeit coin to a mendicant. The narrator initially credits his friend with an economic calculus of “everybody wins:” the beggar believes he has received a windfall, while the alms-giver enriches himself *and* earns a moral reward from God for his act of charity. Perhaps, the narrator muses, he was also hoping to derive surplus enjoyment (“criminelle jouissance”) from the hypothetical “event” of the beggar’s arrest and imprisonment. (OC I, 324). And yet when questioned about his motive, the friend looks the narrator squarely in the eye and declares without apparent guile: “there is no sweeter pleasure than to surprise a man by giving him more than he hopes for.” This produces consternation on the part of the narrator. For while he was prepared to accept, however inexcusably, his friend’s perverse delight in scamming the beggar, he simply can’t countenance this *prima facie* stupidity: “On n’est jamais excusable d’être méchant, mais il y a quelque mérite à savoir qu’on l’est; le plus irréparable des vices est de *faire le mal par bêtise*.” [To be mean is never excusable, but there is some merit in knowing that one is; the most irreparable of vices is *to do evil out of stupidity*, my emphasis]. The moral of the would seem to be summed up here: better an evil capitalist swindler than a *bien pensant* philanthropist who falls for his own myth of his betterment of the poor. But if one rereads story from a contemporary vantage – retracing the chain of events connecting George Floyd’s putative attempt to pass off a counterfeit twenty-dollar bill, to his police murder, to the Black Lives Matter protests that anger over his death detonated worldwide, we see more clearly the revolutionary workings of ironic reflux in this text. For as the narrator projects his friend’s desire for “an event” that could lead to disaster, or some other, as yet unforeseen consequence [“créer un événement dans la vie de ce pauvre diable, peut-être même de connaître les conséquences, funestes ou autres”], he makes possible the very conditions of that event’s appearance: the abolition of benefactor privilege and, along with it, the justificatory procedures of cost-benefit calculation that keep distributive injustice in place. (OC I, 324)

It is just this revolutionary reserve, unleashed by the volatile mechanics of irony, that Jennifer Bajorek brings out in *Counterfeit Capital: Poetic Labor and Revolutionary Irony*. Seeking to reclaim irony from its “near total repression in political thought,” Bajorek looks to Walter Benjamin’s identification (in *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*) of irony with the production of “capital itself.”¹⁹

... Benjamin posits in language a kind of material underworld, from which everything else bubbles up: meaning, reference, the value that enters infinitely into calculation, and which is infinitely

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19 Bajorek 2009, p. 25. Further references to this work will appear in the text abbreviated CC.

capitalizable.... he is the first to thematize a relation between language and economy that would be more than just analogical, and thus to theorize allegory as the figural and even the ideological precipitate of a given productive mode.” (CC 73)

The failure of Benjamin's political project, she contends, lies in his fixation on the allegorical commodity. It is Baudelaire, far more than Benjamin who “goes beyond the replication of structures of commodity fetishism to something like the textual equivalent of capital” thus more fully realizing capital's ironic potential. (CC 74) “As a consummate theorist of capital's interference at every level of human life and as a contemporary of Marx's, he is the first to ... address in a single breath both the challenges posed by capital to the possibilities for changing things and the singular resources of literature for meeting these challenges.” (CC ii) Irony becomes, then, the fulfillment of capitalism's revolutionary interference with its own brute, profit-driven ends. Triggering mechanisms of shock, jolt, and parry, it throws up obstacles that arrest the calculated clock time of capitalized labor and expropriative accumulation. Completing the picture of Baudelairean irony as self-sabotaging capital in Bajorek's reading is her discussion of Marx's theory of “so-called primitive [*ursprüngliche*] accumulation,” where the violence of expropriation is of a piece with Baudelairean ransoming, itself cast as a terrorizing political technology of extortion and social death. Following Marx, Bajorek homes in on the naturalized violence of distributive injustice: How, Bajorek queries, “did it happen that the capitalist got to be a capitalist, the wage laborer – a wage laborer? ...how did some people get to have more property than others ... and thus a greater share of the means of production – more tools, more money, and thus the means to buy the labor power of certain other people, who have less, or even none, of these things? (CC 74) These questions are anything but simple or naïve. They go to the heart of what is least fathomable about capitalism's intractable division between haves and have-nots. Benjamin brings out this point in relation to Baudelaire's poem “Abel et Caïn,” where the lines “Race d'Abel, dors, bois et mange;/Dieu te sourit complaisamment./Race de Caïn, dans la fange/Rampe et meurs misérablement.” [Race of Abel, sleep, drink, and eat;/God smiles on you indulgently/Race of Cain, in the mire/Grovel and die miserably] are taken as a blunt articulation of the absurdity of a logic that consigns an entire class to destitution: “Cain, the ancestor of the disinherited, appears as a founder of a race, and this race can be none other than the proletariat (...) It is the race of those who possess no commodity but their labor power.”²⁰ To understand how rank inequality and the political violence that sustains it come not only to be naturalized but also consecrated (the Protestant ethic being perhaps the

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20 Benjamin 2006, pp. 55-56.

most blatant theological hat-trick), it is necessary to expose the *actually existing* violence of capital accumulation.²¹ Citing Marx - "Accumulation always requires the transformation of a portion of the surplus product into capital" - Bajorek goes through, blow by painful blow, the specific violences that make such "transformation" possible:

The engine behind the concept of history at work here is the rampant injustice of capital's brutal and bloody 'prehistory.' How did some people get more? They took it - by theft, forcible expropriation, bloody legislation, the branding of so-called vagabonds with red-hot irons, the slicing off of ears. (...) [As Marx writes in *Capital*] In [real or] actual history, it is a notorious fact that conquest, enslavement, robbery, murder, in short, violence, play the greatest part. (...) And this history, the history of [the freedmen's] expropriation, is written in the annals of mankind in letters of blood and fire.'" (CC 75)

Theft, forcible expropriation, enslavement, robbery -all are constitutive of the ransom economy that enables primitive accumulation by indenturing workers and enslaved people for eternity. In this picture, Baudelaire has more than a supporting role to play in Marx's depiction of the wage-laborer as model of ransomed life. While satirizing "liberal platitudes about equality, which were apparently already laughable in Baudelaire's time"), he literalizes, through vivid physical descriptions and scenes, capitalism's dependency on extortionate, arbitrarily administered violence. (CC 90). Repressive control of marginal people and vulnerable workers, depictions of necrophilic feeding frenzies by the rich off the bodies of the poor, gross income inequality, these forms of harm are directly tallied with police violence, the collateral damage of unbridled consumption, and the costs in mental health brought on by *rentier* entitlement and possessive individualism. With coruscating irony Baudelaire foregrounds not just an allegory of society's consumerist Fall into modernity (a predominant theme in Benjamin's "The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire" and its subsequent interpretations), but the moral travesty of capital's accounting system, which tallies sums extracted in pounds of flesh. In "Les Sept Viellards" [The Seven Old Men]), for example, we infer the history of back-breaking toil from the not so much bent "as *broken*" body of an old man whose "spine formed so sharp an angle with his legs that his stick, as if to add a finishing touch, gave him the carriage and the clumsy gait/of some lame animal...".²² Often the violence of capitalism inflicted on the bodies of destitute laborers, vagabonds, beggars and sex workers is rendered more vivid and personal by displacing it to acts of aggression and self-

21 For an illuminating discussion of Baudelaire's "religion of violence," see, Thélot 1993, p. 127.

22 Baudelaire 1983, p. 92.

harming performed on and by a first-person narrator. This comes through in “A celle qui est trop gaie” [To One Who is Too Cheerful] where “the sunshine like an irony that lacerates my breast” and “the green of spring that humiliates my heart” give way to the murderous desire “to castigate your body’s joy,/to bruise your envied breasts,/and in your unsuspecting side/to gash a gaping wound.”²³ This scene of *Lustmord* recurs in “Je t’adore à l’égal...” [“I love you as I love...”]:

“Je m’avance à l’attaque, et je grimpe aux
assauts,
Comme après un cadavre un chœur de
vermisseaux,
Et je chéris, ô bête implacable et cruelle!
Jusqu’à cette froideur par où tu m’es plus belle! (OC I, 27)

I climb to the assault, attack the source,
A choir of wormlets pressing towards a corpse,
And cherish your unbending cruelty,
This iciness so beautiful to me... (JM 53)

For Jonathan Culler, “The self-reflective irony in such strange modes of address (comparing yourself in lovemaking to a choir of wormlets) places the utterance of poems such as this in a world of poetic action, where the workings of fantasy in the confection of a passionate self can be tested.”²⁴ While I agree entirely with Culler that Baudelairean irony generates “strange modes of address” that belong to a charged sphere of “poetic action,” what is most strange for me is Baudelaire’s staging of a performative violence immune to the aesthetic distancing effects of versification. What is awakened in the reader by this “poetic action” is an experience of the “real” of violence, the brutalism of violated flesh, unmediated by automated reactions of sympathy, empathy, and moral revulsion.

McClaughlin, Sanyal, and Bajorek each in different ways attributes negative capability to Baudelairean irony. It emerges as an emancipatory poesis aligned with a self-canceling reason of state (in the case of McClaughlin), a violent commerce particular to Napoleonic authoritarian democracy (in the case of Sanyal), and a force of “swindling” or “hocus-pocus whereby capital pretends to produce something out of nothing, like a rabbit from a hat, even as it drags all that was once valued, apart from value, into its disappearing act” (in the case of Bajorek). (CC 1). My own emphasis, harking back to T. J. Clark’s attention to Baudelaire’s ironic

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23 Baudelaire 2008, p. 49.

24 Culler 1993, p. 8. The

Proudhonianism and parodic mutualism, foregrounds the political economy of the ransom, where unequal distribution meets unjustified retribution.

Clark, who wants to preserve "The Ransom" as a testament to the decidedly revolutionary Baudelaire of 1848 despite the poet's unreliable performance in any left political subject-position, situates the poem in apposition with an unrealized painting by Delacroix, referred to by contemporaries as *Equality on the Barricades of February*. Conceived as the 1848 counterpart to Delacroix's celebrated painting of the 1830 July Revolution, *Liberty Guiding the People* (inspired, like Sand's novel, by Holbein the Younger's *Dance of Death*), *Equality on the Barricades* was never executed. Delacroix turned instead to the subjects of *Ugolino and his Children* and *Samson and Delilah*. Clark discovers the "lost children of 1848" subtending these mythic stories of familial dysfunction. While he worked on these paintings in 1850, Delacroix made entries in his journal that convey his fear of civil disorder, squared with a grudging admiration for the revolutionary principle of distributive justice. One entry describes a mock-heroic battle between a spider and a fly: "I saw the two of them coming, the fly on its back and giving him furious blows; after a short resistance the spider expired under these attacks; the fly, after having sucked it, undertook the labour of dragging it off somewhere, doing so with a vivacity and a fury that were incredible. ... It may be noted that there was distributive justice in the victory of the fly over the spider; it was the contrary of what has been observed for so long a time." (AB 137) For Clark, "distributive justice" is a figure of equality that Delacroix seems at times to embrace but proves unable to represent. His failure to paint *Equality on the Barricade*, like the censored image of "commune liberté" in "The Ransom," are diagnosed as symptoms of an aborted revolutionary idealism.

Baudelaire's prose poem "Assommons les pauvres!," at first blush a text typical of what Patrick Greaney calls "a minor tradition of writing about poverty within the larger traditions of modernism and the history of the representation of poverty in Europe" (but in terms of its critique of moral philosophy, a work that far exceeds any genre convention), mobilizes the calculus of unequal payments and wrongful damages to drive home – albeit in thoroughly ironized mode – the impact of distributive inequality.²⁵

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25 Greaney 2008, p. xi. Further references to this work will appear in the text abbreviated UB. Referencing Louis Chevalier's landmark *Laboring Classes and Dangerous Classes in Paris during the First Half of the Nineteenth Century*, Greaney underscores semantic nuances of the French term *misère* that don't really carry over in English. *Misère* is usually associated with a condition of existential suffering not restricted to material impoverishment but Chevalier underscores that it refers not to the condition of distinct "unfortunate classes but the far more complex relationship between those classes and other classes," ... poverty is not a condition 'but the passage from one [condition] to the other..., an intermediary and fluctuating situation rather than a status.'" (As cited by Greaney, UB xii-xiii). Greaney develops this idea in Chapter 2, extending Anne-Emmanuelle Berger's suggestion that readers be mindful of "an experimental philosophy" in *Le Spleen de Paris* ("the narrator's philosophy of the *promeneur-moralist-logician*") to Baudelaire's "experimental disposition" towards power relationality between the poor and the poet. UB 31.

The narrator, swayed by the voice of his inner Demon (which tells him that “To truly be someone else’s equal, you have to prove it; to truly be worthy of liberty, you have to conquer it”), proceeds to randomly assault a beggar, giving him one black eye and breaking two teeth. To top it off, he bashes the beggar’s head against a wall, kicks him between the shoulder blades and pounds him with a tree branch “with the energy of a cook trying to tenderize a piece of steak.” (LF 194) The beggar returns the violence, repaying him with two black eyes, four broken teeth and a furious beating with the same stick used on him. “*Sir, you are my equal!*” Says the narrator. Please do me the honor of sharing my purse with you; and should any of your colleagues ask you for a handout, don’t forget (if you are truly a philanthropist) to apply the theory that it has been my *pain* to test out on your back.” (LF 194) By rights the beggar should walk away with the whole purse – he’s won the fight after all – but instead, he agrees to forfeit part of his share. Here, the blatantly unfair math of the violent capitalist plays social equality off against economic equivalence, performing an exercise in “voodoo economics” and a parody of the fairness economy at one and the same time. “Let’s Beat up the Poor!” like “The Ransom,” conveys the violence of distributive injustice in the guise of a computational ruse: the figures don’t add up, and the house still takes all.

Baudelaire’s laughable “let’s call it quits” scene in “Let’s Beat up the Poor” can and has been read as an acid take on Proudhonian mutualism since the man, in offering to divide his purse with the beggar, would seem to be making a mutualist move until we realize it is a hollow, self-serving gesture that hoodwinks the beggar with counterfeit equity. Claude Pichois reminds us that “*Assommons les pauvres!*” originally ended with the passive-aggressive “*Qu’en dis-tu, Citoyen Proudhon?*” [“What do you have to say to this, Citizen Proudhon?”] a put-down line recently restored in Richard Sieburth’s translations of the late prose poems. (OC I, 1350, LF 195). Though Baudelaire suppressed this flippant tag in the final version, it confirms his contempt for anarchist mutualism, revealed to be little more than hypocritical scaffolding for a system of distributive justice that morally ratifies the gross inequality of capitalist pie-sharing.

Baudelaire is a master of distributive poetics, of social snapshots and forms of versification that drive home a point made in contemporary political philosophy (much of it stemming from a critique of Rawls) that “theoretical equality is the basis on which actual inequalities are routinely justified.”²⁶ Never a democratic leveler – he was too proto-Nietzschean in his acceptance of inequality between the weak and the strong as social fact – Baudelaire nonetheless sets us on a path of *making-equal* by exposing the flaws and inconsistencies in capital’s logic of equivalence-making. Having given us a world in which no General Equivalent exists that isn’t, in the end, just a foil for distributive injustice, he tips us into the philosophy

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26 Bull 2011.

of mathematics, where what it means to posit “this *equals* that” is by no means settled law,²⁷ and how “equality” is measured in differential currencies (“legal status, opportunity, resources, capability or welfare”) is never stable or clear.²⁸

Antoine Compagnon makes the complementary argument that Baudelaire was in quest of a different form of equivalency, one that could be mystically and metaphysically connected to infinity, the purity of number. Compagnon interprets Baudelaire's constant evocations of the sea, the eternal, and the universal as symptomatic of the poet's desire to mathematize existence. He cites a letter to Armand Fraisse of 1860 in which Baudelaire writes: “Tout est nombre. Le nombre est dans *tout*.”²⁹

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27The equals sign, (=) as Alison Mirin notes, is crucial to all “identity statements and assessments of sameness” in mathematics, but when it comes to unpacking expressions like “*is the same as* or *is identical to*” there is no simple sense, even in mathematics, of what “is” means or does. Frege, she reminds us, “struggled with the nature of the equality relation (the “is” of identity). At stake in the equals sign, for Mirin, is relational thinking, and the conceptual tensions between equivalence (that translates “equals” as “another name for”), and equality, translated as “same value” or “same quantity” to the left and the right of the parallel bars). Both are easy to conflate, as they share notions of identity distinguished by properties of symmetry, reflexivity and transitivity. See, Mirin 2019.

What, I have long wondered, is the relation (if any) between = (the equality sign) and the word “equals” (derived from *æqualis*, meaning “uniform,” “identical,” or “equal”, and from *aequus* (meaning “level,” “even,” or “just,” and first recorded in 1557 by the Welsh mathematician Robert Recorde)? How does “equals” differ (if only indifferently) in meaning among arithmetic, logic, or other philosophical accounts of pure reason? Alain Badiou, will argue that Giuseppe Peano's equals sign “is in point of fact a logical sign, not an arithmetical one” and should thus be treated as a special case of irreducible signs). (NN 49) And then there is Kant's famous example of an a priori synthetic judgement, where $7 + 5 = 12$ uses “equals” to indicate a mental act of synthesis (and where the judgment in question is a priori because $7 + 5 = 12$ is a necessary truth). In Gottlob Frege's 1879 *Begriffsschrift* (subtitled “a formula language, modeled upon that of arithmetic, for pure thought”), the act of mental “judgment” is symbolized separately from the equals sign, with a vertical stroke at the left end of a horizontal one. In the formula “ $I \text{—} A = B$,” the equals sign designates an identity of conceptual contents, or to be more precise, a relation between the *names* of conceptual contents (A and B), though later Frege would split conceptual contents between reference (*Bedeutung*) and sense (*Sinn*), roughly sign and meaning. In this way he further complicated the task of what = can express with the notion of “intensional contents” (meaning how we grasp the sense of a term, whether along the bias of description, action, nomination, etc). Frege, *Begriffsschrift*, 20-21. On the problem of names and reference in the epistemology of number, see Benaceraf 1965, pp. 47-73. The paper opens with an epigraph from Frege's *The Foundations of Arithmetic* that is worth citing because it prepares his counter-argument that number cannot be a proper name:

“We can... by using...[our]...definitions say what is meant by
‘the number $1 + 1$ belongs to the concept F’
and then, using this, give the sense of the expression
‘the number $1 + 1 + 1$ belongs to the concept F’
and so on; but we can never ... decide by means of our definitions whether any concept has
the number Julius Caesar belonging to it, or whether that same familiar conqueror of Gaul is a
number or not.” (p. 47).

Benaceraf wants to “deny that all identities are meaningful.” His point is that “x and y are of some kind or category C, and that it is the conditions which individuate things as *the same C* which are operative and determine its truth value.” (p. 64, 65). This gets rid of the possibility that “Julius Caesar was (is?) or was not the number 43.” (p. 64). He thus limits the field of comparable identities to predicates of a common category, dismissing “entities” (like names) as “place fillers whose function is analogous to that of pronouns (and, in *more* formalized contexts, to variables of quantification”). (p. 66)

28 Ibid.

29 Compagnon 2003, p. 192. Baudelaire OC I, 649 as cited by Compagnon.

Compagnon does not discount the political significance of Baudelaire's reference to equality (reminding us that in "Le Miroir" a man claims to see in his reflection "the immortal principles of '89, according to which "all men are equal in their rights"), but in emphasizing the metaphysics of number his interpretation gives short shrift to the political thrust of Baudelaire's comic portrait of what Alain Badiou calls "the society of calculation." As in the worlds of Balzac's *Gobsek* and *César Birroteau* – the characters who control money in Baudelaire's financial fictions always steal and self-deal.

Given the extent to which Baudelairean poetics deconstructs equality as a political concept and exposes capitalism's "equal playing field" fairness economy as a sham, it is somewhat curious that a preeminent philosopher of equality like Jacques Rancière would select Mallarmé over Baudelaire as his paradigmatic poet of redistributive aesthetic praxis. Rancière emphasizes the relay in Mallarmé's writing between "a discourse that installs itself in the distributive separation of rhetorical place, and a discourse that enables the logic of distribution to evaporate, giving itself over to the indistinct equality of philosophical and linguistic invention."³⁰ For Rancière, Mallarmé's disarranged and reapportioned syntactic shares allow anyone in, or anything to count in preparation for what Kristin Ross calls "communal luxury" ("a beautiful commons available to all, a non-privatized experience of public culture, a time of communal enjoyment").³¹ Mallarmé, in this scheme, emerges as the radical theorist of political equality, while Baudelaire, by comparison, is merely the *eiron* of equality's impossibility, who prefers to travesty the *juste milieu* philosophy of centrism, happy medium, middle-grounding, equalizing, and averaging-out (and its communication through a numerical unconscious) over and against experimenting with the re-ordering of discursive hierarchies as practiced by Mallarmé.

I want to insist, *pace* Rancière, on the relevance of Baudelaire's ironic poetics of distributive injustice to debates within contemporary social justice movements. It is hard not to be struck by this relevance in, for example, "Morale du joujou," the 1853 essay that furnished the basis for Baudelaire's prose poem "Le Joujou du pauvre" (in *Le Spleen de Paris*). A rich woman invites the young narrator to pick out a toy from a pile of treasure, and while he is attracted to an extravagant object, his mother admonishes him to choose a lowly gift. In an effort to appease everyone he makes a Whiggish choice, selecting something average and safe. It is clear, however, that the gift yields no excitement, only a sense of resignation to a world absent romantic absolutes and heroic ideals. When the opposing poles of luxury and common value become

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30 Rancière 2011, p. 228.

31 Ross 2015, p. 58.

mutually substitutable, and when the remainder of what has been evened out is entered into the bourgeois ledger of unexceptional rewards and just deserts, the legibility of inequality is lost and we are plunged into a value system of “same difference” where there really is no longer any difference between a rarity or a piece of trash. This is nothing short of heresy in capitalist doxa!

A scene from the *Sp/leen* prose poem “Le Joujou du pauvre,” investigates the “same difference” paradigm in a slightly different way. Where “Morale du joujou” democratizes commodities to the endpoint of value-indifference, “Le Joujou du pauvre” shows how this world of value-indifference reverts to inequality. It features a rich child playing listlessly near the gates of a castle, a splendid toy left to the side in total neglect. A thin, raggedy child approaches the gate and shows off his plaything, a live rat. The privileged youth stares avidly at this “rare and unknown” thing, catching the benefit of the imagination of the poor, capable of converting the most humble item into marvelous ludic material. An expression of complicity is exchanged between the two: “Et les deux enfants se riaient l’un à l’autre fraternellement, avec des dents d’une égale blancheur.” (OC I, 305) [And the two children smiled at each other fraternally, with teeth of equal whiteness] Here, references to fraternity and “equal whiteness” suggest revolutionary solidarity and distributive justice, but it is hard to take this apparent equality seriously. The rat may be “free stuff,” plucked from nature and released into a sharing economy, but such free gifts come at a price. If they even out class hierarchies through a universal transvaluation of values that raises up the socially excluded poor child by vesting him the premium value of a non-exclusive toy, however, they also contain a preview of how the gig economy works with independent contractors “freely” providing their labor (and discovering they are economically worse off than before). Moreover, such “free stuff” ultimately brings double profit to the rich boy: not only has he acquired an equal share in the poor child’s rat, he can add it to the interest-earning stock of his fancy plaything – unshared, and held in reserve for a rainy day.

Baudelaire excelled in parables that parody the ethical pretenses of those endowed with class privilege. Consider the *Sp/leen* prose poem “Les Yeux des pauvres” (1864), in which two lovers repair to a fancy café whose glistening walls refract bright white table-clothes and a decor teaming with casts of nymphs and goddesses sporting cornucopias on their heads. On the pavement outside a beggar appears with two tattered children in tow, fixing the couple with a baleful stare and making the man feel shame at the “sight of our glasses and carafes, bigger than our thirst.” (OC I, 318, 319). This image of the unjust portion – a surplus that will go to waste if not redistributed to the hungry – fails to arouse his companion’s Samaritanism. She prefers instead to demand that the poor be ejected from the premises. As Sanyal explains:

In this prose poem, the underlying violence of economic inequity is conveyed in the failure of amorous reciprocity. ... His beloved “dismisses the entire hermeneutic circuit that emerges from the assumption that the eyes of the poor are readable texts... The interruption of dialogue between lovers voids the premise that the poet’s negative capability overcomes the symbolic and material bars between rich and poor. The dream of communion and social harmony is fully co-opted by bourgeois consumerism, ... The principle of correspondences is deployed both in its poetic and social form to unveil a structural inequity before which poetic empathy and bourgeois humanism are woefully inadequate. (VM 81)

In “Les Yeux des pauvres” distributive injustice, shored up by the wealthy woman’s casual entitlement, leaves no place for the apologist of equity. The man in this couple must clearly choose – for the sake of love! - to adopt his beloved’s point of view. He (and by extension the poet and the reader) is coerced into adopting the post-political position of reveling in luxury, in *luxure*, vice, depravity, deadly sin, and *voluptuousness* (elevated in the famous refrain of “L’Invitation au voyage:” “Luxe, calme, et volupté”). For Jean-Paul Sartre, Baudelairean *volupté* was a particularly bad sin precisely because “it was a luxury.”³² He associated Baudelairean luxury with the horrific exuberance of nature, with pleasure spiritualized by Evil, with possession at a distance, with self-withholding, and with veneration for the sheer uselessness of poetic creation (which justifies aestheticizing the poor, indulging in the shocking act of luxuriating in others’ misery).

And yet, there are inklings of rebellious, “crazy” energies “spurting out of ennui and reverie” [une espèce d’énergie qui jaillit de l’ennui et de la reverie] to be found in the lazy souls of voluputaries. We discover them as gratuitous acts of violence in “Le Mauvais Vitrier;” in the figure of a man who starts a fire to see how it takes, in the actions of another, who lights a cigar near a powder keg just to tempt fate, and in the brutal shove that narrator gives the bad glazier, followed by the missile of a flower-pot that shatters the glass contents of his livelihood. These impulsive gestures can cost one dear, but who cares about the price of eternal damnation, the heretical narrator asks, if one can obtain, in one second, a feeling of infinite joy?³³ “Le Rebelle,” a poem from 1861 published in *Nouvelles Fleurs du Mal* (1868), the voluptuary’s indifference to the poor (and to morality, ethics, religion and justice) becomes what Benjamin, in reference to “Abel et Caïn,” identifies as the “radical theological form” given by Baudelaire “to his radical rejection of those in power.”³⁴

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32 Sartre 1949, p.75

33 Baudelaire 2008, p. 287.

34 Benjamin 2006, pp. 55-56.

Un Ange furieux fond du ciel comme un aigle,
Du mécréant saisit à plein poing les cheveux,
Et dit, le secouant: "Tu connaîtras la règle!
(Car je suis ton bon Ange, entends-tu?) Je le veux!

"Sache qu'il faut aimer, sans faire la grimace,
Le pauvre, le méchant, le tortu, l'hébété,
Pour que tu puisses faire à Jésus, quand il passe.
Un tapis triomphal avec ta charité.

"Tel est l'Amour! Avant que ton coeur ne se blase,
A la gloire du Dieu rallume ton extase;
C'est la Volupté vraie aux durables appas!"

Et l'Ange, châtiât autant, ma foi! qu'il aime,
De ses poings de géant torture l'anathème;
Mais le damné répond toujours: "Je ne veux pas!" (OC I, 139–140)

Scarfe Translation: A furious Angel swoops down from Heaven like an eagle and grips the wrongdoer's hair in his fist, saying as he shakes him, "Now you will learn the rule! For I am your good Angel, do you hear? Such is my will.

"Know that you must love, without wincing, the poor and the wicked, the twisted and the stupid, so that you will make for Jesus, when he comes a carpet of triumph with your charity.

"Such is Love! Before your heart becomes indifferent, rekindle your ecstasy for the glory of God; that is the true voluptuousness, whose charms endure."

And the Angel, chastising as much - heaven knows - as he loves, tortures the blasphemer with his gigantic fists. But the damned man keeps on answering. "No, I will not!" (BCV 257)

Faced with the duties imposed by Christian charity, and religion's guilt-enforced love for the poor, Baudelaire's rebel simply will not yield; he won't pay up, he insists on defying his "good angel" to follow the path of the "anathème," the excommunicant, and the "true Voluptuary." Here, "Je ne veux pas," - "I don't want to, I won't" - affirms an opting out of the economy of religious conscience that interestingly parallels Bartleby the Scrivener's formula of civil disobedience: "I would prefer not to."

Baudelaire's rebel belongs, on one side, to a lineage of Maistrian "antimoderns" whom, according to Richard Sieburth,

Baudelaire needed in the wake of his traumatic 'depolitization' after the failure of the 1848 Revolution and the subsequent coup d'état of 1851. From Maistre's politico-theological vantage point (far more

extreme than Edmund Burke's), the French Revolution had been nothing sort of a providential event, a divine punishment visited upon France (and, indeed, upon all of the modern world), ushering in the reign of unmitigated Evil attendant upon the extermination of all traditional principles of truth and order, themselves grounded in the absolute sovereignty of God. This is the Maistre whose analyses of the crisis of sacrality and sovereignty in postrevolutionary Europe presage not only those of Charles Maurras but also those of Carl Schmidt, Georges Bataille, the 1930s Parisian Collège de sociologie, René Girard and Robert Calasso. (LF 47–48)

On the other side, though, his rebel belongs to the company of poet-conspirators (Nerval, Rimbaud, Lautréamont, Artaud, Michaux, P.K. Dick, Pynchon, De Lillo, Bolaño), and philosopher-paranoiacs (Rousseau, Adorno, Guy de Bord, Deleuze with his “control society,” Guattari with his “integrated network of global capital”), qualified by the anonymous authors of the *Manifeste conspirationniste* as “penseurs de soupçon” (thinkers of suspicion). Thirsting for revenge on the society of calculation, they are possessed of a “conscience that will not be disarmed,” marrying *complotisme* with weaponized *bouffonnerie*.³⁵ A dual political character, between Schmidt and de Bord, Baudelaire’s rebel harbors residues of the unrepentant forty-eighter, still able, as Sieburth says, “to imagine the abolition of private property (as proposed by the French utopian socialists) as an alternate religious solution to the dehumanizations of modern capitalism.” The Rebel’s refusal “To make for Jesus/when he passes here/A regal carpet of your charity,” like the refusal of the Man in “The Ransom’s” suppressed strophe (who will not sow his crops to pay for slavery and holds out for “Common liberty,”) implies a wholesale rejection of the system of just deserts, poetic justice or proto-Rawlsian principle of fairness that shores up the foundational principles of capital logic and the theo-logic of religious moral claims. The Satanic “No” which doubles as a “No!” to the Angel’s demand for tribute, marks refusal to comply with a system of extorted property, crushing levies and infinite debt.

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³⁵ *Manifeste conspirationniste* 2022, pp. 47, 48, 33.

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Volume 9
Issue 1

Rimbaud, Mandelstam, Pasolini. Or: When the Red Flag Must Become Lint Again

Judith Balso

Abstract: This paper discusses the work of a series of poets: Rimbaud, Mandelstam, Pasolini, Mallarmé in order to examine the possible relationship between poetry and communism. Through the intense relationship these poetic thinkers had to their respective political conjunctures plays out a decisive feature that concerns the possible identification and the existence of a "communism" that intervenes in the very substance of their works

Keywords: Rimbaud, Mandelstam, Pasolini, Mallarmé, poetry

Why reconvene these three poets in order to examine the possible relationship between poetry and communism? A first trait that they share is that, strictly speaking, they do not relate to Communism as an ideology or an organized politics - although Pasolini belonged for a time to the Italian Communist Party before being expelled because of his homosexuality; and even though Mandelstam could evoke his "Bolshevization" after his apocryphal association with the Socialist Revolutionary Party. On the other hand, each has an intense relationship with political conjunctures during which the hypothesis of communism was hardened, "galvanized" as one would have said in the language of Robespierre and Saint-Just. Rimbaud is traversed by the emergence of the Paris Commune of 1871, then by the effects of its annihilation. Mandelstam perceives the enigmatic, unprecedented greatness of the October Revolution of 1917, before confronting the Stalinist terror which would, in the late 1930s, be his end. Pasolini in the engagement of his younger brother with the Resistance detects a figure of political subjectivity in excess of any partisan belonging, before witnessing with horror the descent of Italy into an inferno – what he will call a new "Prehistory".

These historical sequences have in each case crucial life and death-consequences, but that, in my opinion, is not what is essential. The most striking thing seems to me to be the mode in which these circumstances - in which plays out something decisive concerning the identification and the existence of what a "communism" might be - intervene in the very substance of their works. In this, they are – knowingly or unknowingly – close to a Hölderlin stirred up by the existence of the French Revolution when at the same time he attempts to think its limits and to formulate what could be a step further, or to the side. Very soon, for each of them poetry becomes the place in which the possibility of the principles of subjectivation that historical novelty demands emerge and are propagated. Their time demands that poetry detaches itself from the known to hold the breach of the unknown, even more severely when the expiry of the traversed political sequence is declared. By this standard, they are once and the same in disagreement with their time: "a contemporary of no one", as Mandelstam will say of himself;

“a considerable passer-by”, as Mallarmé would say of Rimbaud; or according to Pasolini, “a poet of the common good”, when comes the time when everybody withdraws into “humble corruption”. Ferments of lucidity and anticipation; neither marginal nor dissident nor provocateur.

Part 1

RIMBAUD or the Proletarian Poem

Passing through the Commune

In November 1871, six months after the great Parisian massacre, Rimbaud walked through the city in the company of Delahaye. Delahaye writes:

“We took a fairly long walk on the boulevard and around the Pantheon. He showed me some cracks that whitened the columns: “It’s from the bullets,” he said. Everywhere, moreover, you could see on the houses these traces left by the claws of machine guns. I asked him where Paris was, according to a point of view of the “idea”. In a weary tone, he answered a few brief words that were cloaked in hope:

- Nothingness, chaos... all reactions are possible, or even probable. In this case, could a new insurrection be foreseen? Were there any “Communards” left?

- Yes, a few.

He knew some madmen who would keep shooting with their rifles until they were themselves dead... He would be with them... His ideal would have this outcome, he didn’t see another ... ”

This account alone would suffice to attest the importance of the “Paris Commune” for Rimbaud. But we also know that in August 1871 he had drafted a “Constitution” inspired by the Commune. This lost document was a project for a Communist Republic which would live without money and in which the people would administer themselves directly, by communes, headed by a Federal Committee and temporary delegates elected to carry out precise and imperative mandates. As for Verlaine, who was his tumultuous companion and his love, not only had his commitment to the Commune been public, but ten years later he was still meeting with some thirty pardoned former communards trying to create a revolutionary group, for which, when a new name was asked, he refused the provocative name of the “Soldiers of the Revolution”: There was no need now for “no more armies, no more soldiers”, instead it was necessary to “create new words for a new situation”; this was the “militant revolutionary group”, which, however, did not make it through the suffocating atmosphere of the 80s.

Accompanying or preceding the events of the years 1870 and 1871 (the war against Prussia, the defeat of the Empire, the fall of the regime, followed by the national betrayal of the Republican left, the advent of the Commune...), some poems awoke in Rimbaud, who projected the past

of the French Revolution onto a rebellious present and anticipated what should be the singular political consistency of the Communards: their freedom, their solidity, their cheerful insolence, the opposite of arrogance, their calm capacity for invention and organization. These poems still show an inspiration from Hugo, in form and breath, but they have a quality of immanence that Hugo does not possess, because his breath is always reliant upon a transcendence. A poem from May 1870, "Credo in Unam"¹ (Sun and Flesh), stresses on the other hand, that for young Rimbaud it is high time to get rid of all the Gods, including the sad Christian god who has abandoned mankind to "the hard way"². Without sinking into the temptation of skepticism, because of an inability to face the infinite. The new era, which Rimbaud describes as his own, has very marked features:

*"Man wishes to forget all-and to know!
Thought, so long, so long in him put down
Springs to his brow! He will know why! ...
Let thought rise free, and man will soon find Faith!"³*

*We cannot hope to know! We are weighed down
With ignorance and narrow fantasies!
Men are monkeys, dropped from maternal wombs;
Our faded reason hides the Absolute!
We wish to look: Doubt is our punishment!
Doubt, somber bird, blinds us with his wing ...
And the horizon fades, in an eternal flight!"⁴*

The only remedy for doubt: Love, as an inner disposition of humanity, and no longer as a divine prerogative:

*"And the gods are no more! Mankind is King,
And Man is God! But Love is the only faith."⁵*

Rimbaud will never abandon this major thread of Love, including the love of men and women but not limited to it: neither in "A Season in Hell"⁶ which seeks, among other things, to take stock and to orient oneself as to one's own romantic destiny, nor in "Illuminations", where Love is a

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1 Rimbaud 2000, p. 23

2 Ibid., p., 24

3 Ibid., p. 25

4 Ibid., p. 26

5 Ibid., p. 24

6 Ibid., p. 219

motor of the world to be built. It is, moreover, a constant of all his work to intertwine love poems - poems sometimes delicious, sometimes repulsive - and poems that I do not know how to name at this stage - the right name will come, I hope, later.

Rimbaud shares another trait that will be largely present in the communard subjectivity: the conviction that the political stake is to continue the work of the revolutionaries of '92 and '93. The poem "You dead of ninety-two and ninety-three"⁷ (authored on 3rd September 1870, when the Empire was preparing to declare war on Prussia and when the runaway Rimbaud was imprisoned for vagabondage in Mazas, while still a minor) calls with the greatest vigor that we who "*Have bent our backs by Imperial decree*" take up the flag of those "*million Christs with somber gentle eyes*", of those "*men made great by agony, ecstatic men*" that rose up in one century to crush "*a yoke that weighs / On the soul and brow of all humanity*"⁸. Under the cover of reviving the storming of the Bastille, "The Blacksmith"⁹ draws an astonishing portrait of a popular greatness who knows that its power can be limitless and, for that very reason, must measure its power against the principles of justice and love:

*"We felt within our hearts something like love.
We embraced our sons, and one another, that day.
And just like your horses, flaring our nostrils,
We walked around, strong and proud, and felt good right here!
We walked in sunshine, heads held high, like this,
Across Paris! They bowed before our dirty clothes!
Well, we were finally men that day! We were pale,
King, we were drunk with a terrible hope:
And when we gathered before the black towers
Waving our bugles and branches of oak,
Pikes in our hands, we felt no hate, we felt ourselves
So strong, we wanted only to be gentle!"*¹⁰

Now, for that people made of "*all the Poor, the ones whose backs are burned*"¹¹, all those whom the powerful designate with contempt as "*rabble*" or "*dirt*"¹² - emerges a political figure who is not that of '92 and

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⁷ Ibid., p. 60

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., p. 17

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 19

¹¹ Ibid., p. 21

¹² Ibid., p. 22

'93, but the one who truly identifies and concentrates with the fights of the 19th century:

*"We are Workers, King! Workers! We're the ones
Made for the time to come, the New Day dawning,
When Man will work his forge from dawn to dusk,
Seeker after great causes, great effects,
When he will finally bend all things to his will
And mount Existence as he mounts a horse!"¹³*

The riot of the poem is no longer that of the sans-culottes, it is already the active crowd of the Commune, the one who dreams, like the blacksmith:

*"Of living simply, fervently, without a word
Of Evil spoken, laboring beneath the smile
Of a wife we love with an elevated love:
Then we would labor proudly all day long,
With duty like a trumpet ringing in our ear!
Then would we think ourselves happy, and no one,
No one, ever, could make us bend a knee!
For a rifle would hang above the hearth!"¹⁴*

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Volume 9
Issue 1

A dream of peace, but one who does not ignore that victory is far from certain: there remain "*informers, sneaks, and profiteers*", and the air is "*full of the smell of battle!*"¹⁵ which should be carried on.

It would be necessary to quote one by one (and to truly read, to the letter) all the poems which speak of the disgusting war of 1870, of the lamentable defeat of the Empire and of nationalism: "*Angry Caesar*"¹⁶ – a sarcastic portrait of Napoléon III after the defeat in Sedan –, "*The Brilliant Victory of Saarebruck*"¹⁷ – a very ironic poem of October 1870. But also poems that carry a raw awareness of the damage caused by war, such as "*Evil*"¹⁸, "*Crows*"¹⁹ about these birds, the only survivals who still haunt "the fields of France / Where yesterday's dead men lie"²⁰, and between them

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¹³ Ibid., p. 21

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 21,22

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 22

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 62

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 60

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 61.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 69.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 70.

of course, "Asleep in the Valley"²¹ – a poem so famous that we forget that it is about a soldier fallen in a very real and recent war – or further still "Kids in a Daze"²², that is all the more violent because is tender and calm, a tableau of the horrors of hunger to which the encirclement of Paris by the victorious Prussian army condemned even children.

And then there are quite a few of those poems explicitly internal to the consequence of the Commune: the overcharged "Parisian War Cry"²³; the "Parisian Orgy"²⁴ (that in many ways resonates with Lissagaray's descriptions of the Versailles rot, at work against the Communards - which has not prevented some scholars from maintaining, against all evidence, that the poem was not about the aftermath of the massacre); "The Hands of Jeanne-Marie"²⁵ (a delicate metonymy for the admirable popular heroines of May), and the earth-shattering "What do we care, my heart"²⁶.

All these we can and we must read anew. Because these poems amply attest to Rimbaud's being as entirely "on this side" - as one said when the class struggle still had a meaning in politics. But this is largely understated, if not denied, in the commentaries on his work. The last verses of "What do we care, my heart" repeat however, without hesitation, what Rimbaud affirmed to Delahaye while walking through a destroyed Paris:

*"Oh, friends! Be calm, these are brothers, my heart:
Dark strangers, suppose we begin! Let's go, let's go!
Disaster! I tremble, the old earth,
On me, and yours, ah, more and more! The earth dissolves.
It's nothing! I'm here! I am still here!"*²⁷

Were his works limited to these poems, Rimbaud would never have become the immortal Rimbaud of the "A Season in Hell" and the "Illuminations"; which when encountered by any youth, will always bring forth new secrets, often in the form of enigmas which give more agility to desire and heart. It is therefore necessary to find another starting point, which is not just the sole coexistence of the poet with the time of the Commune. We must go so far as to name what this density of events – the Commune, then its crushing – does to his poetry.

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²¹ Ibid., p. 62.

²² Ibid., p. 31.

²³ Ibid., p. 63.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 67.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 64.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 96.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 97.

Being Preceding Action

Indeed, for Rimbaud it was never merely a question of "accompanying" with a poem what was taking place. Poetry is worth nothing if it is not capable of producing a principle of subjectivation which articulates in an action, which supports the acceleration, or its multiplication. On this point, we must start from what is declared and detailed in the letter to Paul Demy²⁸ known as the "Letter of the Visionary", which reads like a program:

"The poet, therefore, is truly the thief of fire.

He is responsible for humanity, for animals even; he will have to make sure his visions can be smelled, fondled, listened to; if what he brings back from beyond has form, he gives it form; if it has none, he gives it none. A language must be found;²⁹

[...]

This language will be of the soul, for the soul, and will include everything: perfumes, sounds, colors, thought grappling with thought. The poet would make precise the quantity of the unknown arising in his time in the universal soul: he would provide more than the formula of his thought, the record of his path to Progress! Enormity becoming norm, absorbed into everything, he would truly become a multiplier of progress!"³⁰

Written on May 15, 1871, on the eve of the dreadful Versailles rush over Paris, this letter begins with the offering of the poem entitled "Parisian War Cry", baptized by Rimbaud "a contemporary psalm"³¹. It then wraps around a major hypothesis: while Greek poetry was content to orchestrate action, now "Poetry will no longer give rhythm to action; it will be precede"³². To precede, what does that mean?

To begin with a remark on "action", which is an epochal word. We can hear that in the definition that Mallarmé will give later, in the past tense: to act "*meant, [...] philosophically to effect motion on many, which yields in return the happy thought that you, being the cause of it, therefore exist.*" When Mallarmé used the word, in 1895, twenty-four years after, it was to give a completely different definition of the poetic task: that of a "limited" action. A limit imposed by a lack: "Lack the Crowd declares in itself, lack – of everything." Mallarmé's world is no longer that of the pre-

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²⁸ Ibid., p. 114.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 117.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., p. 114.

³² Ibid., p. 117.

Commune, charged with multiple energies and vigor - that Rimbaudian word -, but a world that has seen a "republic" soak its hands in the blood of a great mass massacre which was meant to be a deterrent: "Socialism is over for a long period" will rejoice Thiers, the leader of the executioners. And Mallarmé too will follow suit: "Ill-informed anyone who would announce himself his own contemporary, deserting, usurping with equal impudence, when the past ceased and when a future is slow to come." Yes, with the crushing of the Commune, times became very obscure: what constituted action in the past is dead, and nothing yet indicates the premise of a future.

For Rimbaud, in those moments when he devotes himself to a poem, the action is never doubted, it just "is". Driven as never before by fraternal individualities whose ardor, long suppressed, monitored and after 1848 repressed, exploded in the space of seventy-two days, into a thousand prodigious inventions. Rimbaud himself belongs to this effervescent humanity, in the sense that he carries within him a creative energy analogous to that of the diverse beings who will make the Commune exist. His poetry arose in the same regime as the revolutions of collective life in besieged Paris between March and May 1871. We can now barely glimpse - it's like a lost secret, which absolutely must be rediscovered - the double relaxation of subjectivities to which we owe the ability to invent the Commune and, at the same time, a work like that of Rimbaud: two creations from beings at the height of both their creative individuality and of their trust in the collective construction of a world - the multiple crucibles of energies recognized as the absolutely necessary validation plan for all new thought. Who says "action" also says "actors." For Rimbaud, both are immediately recognizable:

*"Who will stir up whirlwinds of furious fire
If we do not, and those whom we call brothers?"*³³

But under what conditions and in what sense, in such a prodigious historical and political situation, can poetry "precede" these actors? Rimbaud assigns the poet a very precise task: to define "the quantity of the unknown arising in his time in the universal soul"³⁴. If we rid the figure of the "visionary" from the shoddy romanticism that covers it, the following emerges: the poet must be a kind of forerunner of humanity; to open a path to all in the unknown. For this the poem must be able to be "thought grappling with thought."³⁵ And in it "a language must be found."³⁶

.....
33 Ibid., p. 96.

34 Ibid., p. 117.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid

The project of any poet, you say? No, it is a singular and enormous ambition. Not even an individual ambition, rather something like a collective work program. Because what is at stake is nothing less than the constitution of a new subject, both political and sensuous: it is a question of experimenting *"All forms of love, of suffering, of madness," "exhaust all poisons, keep only the quintessences"*³⁷, and it is possible that one may lose its strength at this point. Then *"other horrible workers will come; they will begin from the horizons where the other one collapsed!"*³⁸ All of Rimbaud's texts are thus oriented towards the production of a subject to come: they are so projected towards this goal that when it is proven that such a future will be lacking, he will abandon poetry without looking back, without regret. It will no longer be useful. Its powers will be exhausted. At least for the historical time: that of the poetry's own existence, that of a non-rebirth of the powers of the Commune.

False Starts and Interruptions

It is still necessary to try to understand what, in his eyes, constitutes this possible future subject. And how its existence intersects - and is tied to - the question of modernity. Because Rimbaud does not hesitate to test out and then reject several false leads. His entire poetic trajectory is punctuated by "false starts". One of the most famous seems to me to be that of the *"The Drunken Boat"*³⁹. An acclaimed poem, because it rolls from verse to verse the dazzled ramblings of a splendid uprooting and of a liberation, the exuberant rejection of any adherence to a world that is both capitalist and colonial and cemented by profit and plunder:

*"Lighter than cork I revolved upon waves"
"Sweeter than children find the taste of sour fruit,
Green water filled my cockle shell of pine.
Anchor and rudder went drifting away,
Washed in vomit and stained with blue wine."*⁴⁰

[...] *"A froth of flowers cradled my wandering
And delicate winds tossed me on their wings."*⁴¹

.....
37 Ibid., p. 116.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid., p. 136.

40 Ibid., p. 136.

41 Ibid., p. 138.

The fact remains that this incredible boat, offered to the freedom of the currents by the death of its haulers under blows from wild life, this hull indistinguishable from a living body, "*drunk with the sea*", this "*lost branch*", which has senses and eyes that "*have seen what men have only dreamed they saw*", this wandering "*peninsula*" that fills the poem with splendid images, heaping up all the possible strangeness and exoticism, ends up desiring her own engulfment:

"Let my keel break! Oh, let me sink in the sea!"⁴²

This is the first interruption of note, and it is violent, because over the course of the poem a certitude arises, that on these drunken paths never again will meet the "*swarms of golden birds*" and the "*strength to come*". When one belongs to "*Europe and its ancient walls*", following the great rivers and then the sea swells does not ultimately bring forth any salvation. Wild spaces are already subject to trade, devastated by trafficking and wars of all kinds, or devolved to prisons. Also, as night falls on the poem, the drunken boat is abandoned for "*a crumpled paper boat*." that the hand of a child floats in a puddle - then wanes:

*"[...] If I long for a shore in Europe,
It's a small pond, dark, cold, remote,
The odor of evening, and a child full of sorrow
Who stoops to launch a crumpled paper boat.*

*Washed in your languors, Sea, I cannot trace
The wake of tankers foaming through the cold,
Nor assault the pride of pennants and flags,
Nor endure the slave ship's stinking hold."⁴³*

"*I cannot*" says the poem. Rimbaud will not follow Baudelaire in the domain of ambiguous colonial voluptuousness. To continue in this direction, would be to go astray. A restraint should be accepted: abandon broad effusion for sobriety; choose fragility, not false vigor; and to the flamboyance of words and rhythm, prefer the delicate meditation in the powers of the imagination. Sadness that it is like this. The poem does not exist to justify itself with words: if what it has attempted is hopeless, it must say so and draw the consequences. A man of consequence, Rimbaud is methodical in what he seeks. Not at all a jack-of-all-trades, nor fickle, although in the field of poetry he very quickly knew how to do everything. A man of consequences precisely because he knows the weight of interruptions and ruptures. The

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⁴² Ibid., p. 139.

⁴³ Ibid,

final interruption (when he turned away from all poetry, when he stopped writing, no longer being interested in it) will only follow what he always practiced: experimenting, seeking new paths, and radically interrupting what was proven that does not go where it should, what didn't work. "*Your memories and your senses will become | The food of your creative impulses. | And what of the world? | What will it become when you leave it! | Nothing, nothing at all like its present appearance.*"⁴⁴

"*A Season in Hell*"⁴⁵ is a first recapitulation, a first assessment in terms of "false starts". These "*few foul pages from the diary of a Damned Soul*"⁴⁶ are the diary, eternally incandescent, of everything that Rimbaud initially tried to experience on the way to a poetry that is "in advance of action"⁴⁷ We are before the account - incredibly lucid and loyal - of a hand-to-hand struggle with oneself to discern what could be a new path out of what turns out to be an impasse delaying the discovery of these unknown lands, where it will one day be possible to celebrate "*Christmas on earth*"⁴⁸ and to "*possess truth within one body and one soul*"⁴⁹. However, when we read this text, we are dazzled by the intensity of the language that each of these experiments share: its seduction, its capacity for the present is such that we find ourselves embarked, overwhelmed, without always taking care that that what is described there is already behind the one who writes, that he has renounced it, that he has moved on, that he is now elsewhere.

Among the impasses, we find, unsurprisingly, the one described in the "*The Drunken Boat*": the daydream of a maritime embarkation for distant warm countries: "*my daytime is done, I am leaving Europe.*"⁵⁰ A journey from which we imagine that we will return crippled but covered in gold – a prefiguration (with the exception of gold!) of what Rimbaud's life will be like when he has relieved himself of all poetry. But it is pronounced that these adventures do not open any real path, that it is here that everything is really played out: "*But no one leaves. Let us set out once more on our native roads, burdened with my vice - that vice that since the age of reason has driven roots of suffering into my side - that towers to heaven, beats me, hurls me down, drags me on.*"⁵¹

.....
44 Ibid., p. 276.

45 Ibid., p. 219.

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid., p. 117.

48 Ibid., p. 242.

49 Ibid., p. 243.

50 Ibid., p. 241.

51 Ibid., p. 222.

Then there is the impossibility of consenting to work under conditions of subjugated labor, of the proletarian labor of "a century for hands"⁵²: "*Work makes life blossom, an old idea, not mine; my life doesn't weigh enough, it drifts off and floats far beyond action, that third pole of the world.*"⁵³

The confession of the Foolish Virgin⁵⁴ carries, for its part, a tenacious uncertainty about the ability of the household he formed with Verlaine to sustain a figure of love over the long term: "*One hell of a household!*"⁵⁵, is the conclusion in a bitter-sweet tone.

To add confusion to the question of the new language that is to be found, the "turnings"⁵⁶ of an "alchemy of the word"⁵⁷ are ultimately judged a pure and simple phantasmagoria: "My turn now. The story of one of my insanities. For a long time, I boasted" ..., "*I boasted of inventing, with rhythms from within me, a kind of poetry that all the senses, sooner or later, would recognize.*"⁵⁸ ..., "*I became a fabulous opera*"⁵⁹... The story of this attempt is so powerful, that we forget that it was brought here only to be destroyed, with a very seriously conducted experiment which brings forth the discovery that "*Action isn't life; it's merely a way of ruining a kind of strength, a means of destroying nerves*"⁶⁰. And that it is therefore right to pronounce the abandonment of the attempt: "All that is over. Today I know how to celebrate beauty."⁶¹

Would science then be the way? When a dominant scientific rationalism proclaims and enjoins: "*Nothing is vanity; on toward knowledge!*"⁶², Rimbaud recognizes only that "*modern Ecclesiastes*"⁶³, which is to say the unthought gospel of "*everyone*"⁶⁴, and he walks away:

.....
⁵² Ibid., p. 220.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 224.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 227.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 231.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 234.

⁵⁷ Ibid,

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 232.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 237.

⁶⁰ Ibid,

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 238.

⁶² Ibid., p. 241.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 241.

*"What more can I do? Labor I know, and science is too slow."*⁶⁵

As for the desire to live – like the young proletarians of the time – as a vagabond, "more detached than the best of beggars, proud to have no country, no friends – what stupidity that was!"⁶⁶. So, a question comes forward: *"Quick! Are there any other lives?"*⁶⁷

First all we need to understand the source of these deviations. "A Season in Hell" systematically questions the weaknesses that led the damned to end up in this hell. Among these is the *"Bad Blood"*⁶⁸ inherited from *"my ancestors, the Gauls"*⁶⁹, which signals the belonging to an *"inferior race"*⁷⁰, unable to understand and bring truly forward the revolt. Writing on the *"insipid"*⁷¹ poetry of Musset, Rimbaud already opposed France and Paris, pointing to an irremediable division between conformism and audacity, between reaction and modernity: *"it is all so French"*, he wrote to Demeny, commenting that poem, *"that is, hateful to the highest degree; French, not Parisian!"*. But in "A Season in Hell" he widens the analysis: *"I can see that my troubles come from not realizing soon enough that this is the Western World. These Western swamps!"* The West is much larger than the Paris of the revolutionaries surrounded by the conservative France of the *"bourgeois"*⁷². It is the violence of colonial conquest, the democratic imposture, the corruption of all human relationships, the bourgeois avarice and ugliness, that Rimbaud stigmatizes with virulence and precision in many poems. He is the first to identify the negativity of a planetary world which, unlike the Paris of the Commune, exists only under corrupt and ferocious emblems: capitalism with its corollary, the slavery of workers and women; colonialism that subjects the non-Western world to unequal trade and wars; democracy which definitively caricatures and disfigures what the Commune had invented in this area.

In the terms of a "battle for the soul" which is *"as brutal as the battles of men"*⁷³ and in the awareness that the *"new era is nothing if not harsh"*⁷⁴, most of the paths taken would have been abandoned, because

.....
65 Ibid.

66 Ibid., pp. 238f

67 Ibid., p. 224.

68 Ibid., p. 220.

69 Ibid.

70 Ibid.

71 Ibid., p. 118.

72 Ibid., p. 64.

73 Ibid., p. 243.

74 Ibid.

they were not constitutive of a genuine new subjectivity. Dismissing false starts, however, does not mean denying oneself: "*For I can say that I have gained a victory*", affirms calmly "A Season in Hell". And the desire remains - still just as burning - for a collective future whose terms are very clear. "*When will we go, over mountains and shores, to hail the birth of new labor, new wisdom, the flight of tyrants and demons, the end of superstition, to be the first to adore... Christmas on earth!*"⁷⁵ New work, new wisdom, the decline of both political and intimate tyrannies, the disappearance of superstitions, including religion, these will be the signs of a Christmas that will no longer celebrate the birth of Christ "*eternal thief of energy*"⁷⁶, but the earthly advent of a new world. The poet, "*the thief of fire*"⁷⁷, must therefore continue his research, but only through paths that will differ from those he has taken so far: "*I called myself a magician, an angel, free from all moral constraint I am sent back to the soil to seek some obligation, to wrap gnarled reality in my arms! A peasant!*"⁷⁸

"A Season in Hell" ends with extremely strong prescriptions, the formulation of new rules, both poetic and political: "*Never mind hymns of thanksgiving: hold on to a step once taken.*"⁷⁹ Never mind hymns, this gives the prose poem (already at work in "A Season in Hell") precedence over the lyricism of the verse. Keeping up the pace is a maxim that prescribes a form of political patience, a "glowing patience"⁸⁰ which is a powerful subjective weapon. These two prescriptions authorize a promise and a confidence in a possible future: "*Let us all accept new strength, and real tenderness. And at dawn, armed with glowing patience, we will enter the cities of glory.*"⁸¹

.....
75 Ibid., p. 242.

76 Ibid., p. 94.

77 Ibid., p. 117.

78 Ibid., p. 243.

79 Ibid,

80 Ibid.

81 Ibid.

The Proletarian Poem

Rimbaud had been able, from his adolescence, to write in the manner of whomever he wanted. His work in verse constantly explores the most contradictory styles. We feel his pleasure in flowing into opposing language regimes, from the most delicate lyricism to the obscenest sarcasm. However, these are not unchecked games, simple exercises in virtuosity. "A Season in Hell" had opened up on the imperative need to push back Beauty: "One evening I took Beauty in my arms - and I thought her bitter - and I insulted her."⁸² It also indicated the reason for this separation and the step to the side that should be made:

*"I steeled myself against justice.
I fled. O witches, O misery, O hate, my treasure was left in your care"*⁸³

With the exception of a few rare poets in whom Rimbaud recognizes brothers and seers (Baudelaire, "the first visionary", although his form according to Rimbaud, remains "silly"⁸⁴, Hugo of the "Les Misérables", Verlaine...), the poetry of the time - that which appears in reviews, which is organized in salons and banquets - stays largely on the side of the established world, of its iniquitous order, of its injustice. The laws of Beauty that this world carries on are therefore unbearable, they must be repudiated, blown up, and Beauty should be given other sources. Modernity first must go through this.

We enter here into what the existence of the Commune does to the Rimbaud poem. Hugo had cleared the way by giving every rhythm, including that of the Alexandrine, the greatest fluidity. Baudelaire, by choosing to devote his poetry to "The Flowers of Evil", introduced prostitutes, old women, beggars, wine, spleen, drugs and the big city, as figures by which a poet should not be repelled, quite the contrary. Rimbaud will work to make the poem itself a proletarian, in a deep and singular political sense. Not at all "social". A proletarian from the time of the Commune, worthy of his abilities and his great freedom in all areas. Because while he seeks to make it capable of elevating misery and distress, like Hugo, he also delivers the unspoken sexual desire and its repression – "The Sitters"⁸⁵, "Seven-Year-Old Poets"⁸⁶, "My Little

.....
⁸² Ibid., p. 219.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 118.

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 77.

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 86.

Lovelies"⁸⁷, "*Venus Anadyomene*"⁸⁸, "*First communions*"⁸⁹; the violence of family and religious oppression – "*Poor People in Church*"⁹⁰, "*The Ladies Who Look for Lice*"⁹¹; as well as the impossibilities and misunderstandings of a non-reinvented love – "*What Nina Answered*"⁹², "*Sisters of Charity*"⁹³.

One could argue that Rimbaud wants to do to the poem what the Pasolini of "*Ragazzi di Vita*" will later do to the novel. In fact, he builds the poem out of a language which comes to him from the suburbs, which comes from the working population, without importing it there "realistically". These are new words, turns of phrase, syntactic structures that are embedded in the language, and exert a thrust that distances it as much from salons as from academism. He also brings into the poem characters usually removed from the majesty of verse, because they are considered too ugly, too ordinary, too obscene, too repugnant – it is no coincidence that it is with "*Parisian War Cry*"⁹⁴, "*My Little Lovelies*"⁹⁵ and "*Squatting*"⁹⁶ that Rimbaud illustrates the considerations announced in the "*Letter of the Visionary*"⁹⁷. Poems "*of a puberty both perverse and superb*"⁹⁸, as Mallarmé will greet them. The poem (here the poem in verse) must become capable of carrying situations and beings that are paradigmatically "antipoetic" while still remaining a poem in the strong and complete sense of its composition and its prosody.

Among the new characters that arise in the poem and make it a "contemporary"⁹⁹ of its times, the cities and their suburbs, Paris first occupies an eminent place. But women, too: both for the injustice of their oppression, the corruption it entails, and the confidence in the virtual universal power of their emancipation. To a Paris buried in abjection and filth by the Versailles counter-revolution, Rimbaud magnificently declares

.....
⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 82.

⁸⁸ Ibid

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 89.

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 80.

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 86.

⁹² Ibid., p. 47.

⁹³ Ibid., p. 84.

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 63.

⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 82.

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 79.

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 114.

⁹⁸ Mallarmé 2007, p. 67,

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 114.

his love in a poem from May 1871:

*"The Poet speaks: "Great is the sight of your Beauty!"
The storm has christened you supreme poetry;
An enormous stirring raises you; death groans.
Your task is lifted from you, Holy City!
Stridencies resound in your trumpet of bronze."*

*"The Poet will gather the sobs of monstrous Criminals,
The Convict's hate, the cries of the Accursed;
The streams of his love will flay all womankind.
His poems will soar: Behold, thieves! Do your worst!*

*Society, all is restored: orgies, the old
Groans choke the lupanars once more,
Maddened gaslight on blood-stained walls
Lights the blue dark with a sinister glare!"¹⁰⁰*

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Volume 9
Issue 1

As for women, from the letter to Demy, a major proof in the eyes of Rimbaud that new poets will exist, worthy of the name of "visionary", is that among them it will become possible to count women too: *"When the eternal slavery of Women is destroyed, when she lives for herself and through herself, when man - up till now abominable - will have set her free, she will be a poet as well! Woman will discover the unknown! Will her world of ideas differ from ours? She will discover strange things, unfathomable, repulsive, delightful; we will accept and understand them."*¹⁰¹

Then throughout "A Season in Hell" and "Illuminations" circulates like a red thread an extreme friendly attention to women, to the imperious need to put an end to whatever destroys them by subjecting them to the social order. Rimbaud thus places in the mouth of the "widow" in the "Infernal Bridegroom" (who is none other than himself in the couple he forms with Verlaine) this declaration: *"He says: 'I don't love women. Love has to be reinvented; we know that. The only thing women can ultimately imagine is security. Once they get that, love, beauty, everything else goes out the window. All they have left is cold disdain; that's what marriages live on nowadays. Sometimes I see women who ought to be happy, with whom I could have found companionship, already swallowed up by brutes with as much feeling as an old log."*¹⁰²

"A Season in Hell" ends with this review: *"My great advantage is that I can laugh at old love affairs full of falsehood, and stamp with shame*

.....
¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 69.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 117.

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 229.

such deceitful couples – I went through women's Hell over there – and I will be able now to possess the truth within one body and one soul."¹⁰³

The proletarian poem thus abandons the ranks of poetry from above, giving all their subjective stature to figures that the social order lowers and despises, while making visible the abject and obscene thickness of the figures of domination.

Formulas of Subjectivation

However, the Rimbaudian poem cannot content itself with carrying the hatred, the disgust, the ugliness that power and oppression lavish without counting. The end of "A Season in Hell" demands that it be the receptacle of everything that, in reality, can prove to be a bearer of vigor and tenderness. This went hand in hand with the other imperative: "*one must be absolutely modern*"¹⁰⁴, that we must continuously enlighten ourselves.

Kristin Ross is right to point out the influence of both slang and slogan on Rimbaud's language: what she calls a "cannibalization of the slang of that era."¹⁰⁵ But Rimbaud goes far beyond these materials by incorporating them into a language which escapes its time, and which reaches us as a language indeed "found"¹⁰⁶: a language that resonates in us, it seems to me, like a language forever contemporary with a future to come. From heterogeneous materials, he forges the unforgettable formulas of an unparalleled subjectivation. We have already encountered some of these formulas which give form to the unknown (as he desired in the "Letter of the Visionary"): "I'm here-I'm still here"¹⁰⁷, "But no one leaves. Let us set out once more on our native roads"¹⁰⁸, "I am sent back to the soil to seek some obligation, to wrap gnarled reality in my arms!"¹⁰⁹, "True life is lacking. We are exiles from this world"¹¹⁰, "*and I will be able now to possess the truth within one body and one soul*"¹¹¹, "*at dawn, armed with glowing patience, we will enter the cities of glory*"¹¹², "Love has to

.....
103 Ibid., p. 243.

104 Ibid., p. 243.

105 Ross 2007, p. 79.

106 Rimbaud 2000, p. 117.

107 Ibid., p. 97.

108 Ibid., p. 222.

109 Ibid., p. 243.

110 Ibid., p. 228.

111 Ibid., p. 243.

112 Ibid.,

be reinvented"¹¹³, "*It is recovered. | What? Eternity. | In the whirling light / Of sun become sea.*"¹¹⁴ There are many others, just as striking, in the "*Illuminations*", for example: "*I have strung ropes from steeple to steeple; | Garlands from window to window; | And golden chains from star to star... | And I dance*"¹¹⁵ or even "*Let us turn once more to our studies, | To the noise of insatiable movement | That forms and ferments in the masses.*"¹¹⁶

It is in the language and the subject of the "*Illuminations*" that an unprecedented alliance between the imperative of modernity and the subject to come of a "communism" is accomplished. It is not only a matter of form, nor of the dominant choice of prose. It is what these poems manage to bring to light that is, and remains, striking. "*Departure in affection, and shining sounds*"¹¹⁷ this "motto" – which starts the flight at the very moment of closing, in the poem "*Departure*"¹¹⁸ – is like a concentrate of the impulse that animates the whole. Nature, the city and time are the three materials which reshape themselves, recompose and rearrange as a possible world-to-come. These poems do not work as from within a utopian desire, but they produce a strong subjectivation in the present. While "*A Season in Hell*" was written under the regime of "I", the "*Illuminations*" take the form of an addressed discourse: indirect or direct, in the guise of a story, a tale, or an announcement. The formulas of subjectivation that are sought there are collective. It's concerns an "us", a new possible "we".

René Char, in his preface to Gallimard's "*Poésie*" collection¹¹⁹, notes that in Rimbaud "nature plays a preponderant part." He sees there a "rare phenomenon in French poetry and very unusual in the second half of the 19th century", that he renders this way:

"At the end of the 19th century, after several happenings, nature, circled by the enterprises of more and more men, pierced, stripped, turned over, broken up, stripped, flogged, mutilated, nature and her dear forests are reduced to a shameful servitude, bringing forth a terrible decrease of her goods. How can she protest, if not through the voice of the poet?"

To confirm what Char says, however, it must be specified that there are two modes of re-affirmation of nature in Rimbaud. On the one hand, the poet satirizes and parodies in his verses the established version given in the poetry of the era: a nature abstractly detached from

.....
¹¹³ Ibid., p. 228.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., p. 167.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., p. 252.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., p. 274.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., p. 258.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., p. 257.

¹¹⁹ Cf. Rimbaud 1973.

its invasion and its destruction by commercial, industrial and colonial expansion, and also by war. On the other hand, and this is particularly the case in the "Illuminations", he energetically restores her to the splendor that is her own as soon as she sees herself washed, liberated from all exploitation by the concentrated intensity of the sensation. This appears so exemplarily in the "Dawn"¹²⁰, a poem about a child that runs after "*the summer dawn*", which seizes and feels "her immense body". But also, in "*Childhood*"¹²¹, "*Wheel Ruts*"¹²², "*Flowers*"¹²³ or in the "*Seascape*"¹²⁴ - where landscapes that are neither realistic nor abstract arise like lightnings thrown on unheard-of worlds, which are brought in the regime of the present only by the sensibility, the sensuality of the poet.

The same goes for the tableaux that re-enact urban elements of the modern world - architectures, bridges, buildings, metros - to forge with them visions of unknown places, infinitely more beautiful than those that exist. "*The city, with its smoke and the sounds of its trades / Crept behind us, far along the roads ... / Oh, other world, sky-blessed land of shade!*": a desire for places that are inhabitable in a different way, places that are already places for other inhabitants different than those who populate them and are enslaved there. In the poems "*Bridges*"¹²⁵, "*City*"¹²⁶, "*Cities I*"¹²⁷, "*Cities II*"¹²⁸, "*Winter Festival*"¹²⁹, "*Metropolitan*"¹³⁰, "*Promontory*"¹³¹, "*Scenes*"¹³², "*Workers*"¹³³, love is the mainspring of these new assemblages which interrupt and recompose the world of cities populated by the enormous crowds that industry brings there. This is already stated in "To a reason"¹³⁴:

.....
120 Rimbaud 2000, p. 183.

121 Ibid., p. 173.

122 Ibid., p. 261.

123 Ibid., p. 184.

124 Ibid., p. 186.

125 Ibid., p. 259.

126 Ibid., p. 260.

127 Ibid., p. 262.

128 Ibid., p. 264.

129 Ibid., p. 186.

130 Ibid., p. 266.

131 Ibid., p. 261.

132 Ibid., p. 187.

133 Ibid., p. 258.

134 Ibid., p. 254.

*"Your finger strikes the drum, dispersing all its sounds,
And new harmony begins.*

Your step is the rise of new men, their setting out.

*You turn away your head: New Love!
You turn your head again: New Love!*

*"Alter our fates, destroy our plagues,
Beginning with Time," sing the children.
They beg of you: "Make out of anything
The stuff of our fortunes and desires."*

Come from always, you will go away everywhere."

Volume 9
Issue 1

And then there is the diptych made of "*Democracy*"¹³⁵ and "*Genie*"¹³⁶, which recapitulates the two paths that open up after the big massacre of the Communards. To rally to democracy, of which the West is the bearer, is to accept undertakings which the poem sums up with incredible lucidity: feeding to the metropolis "*the most cynical whoring*"; to destroy "*all logical revolt*"; to be in dominated countries ("*the languid scented lands*!"), in the service of the most gigantic "*industrial and military exploitations*."¹³⁷ He uses as the figure of subjectivation, a consensus, of which he paints a strikingly accurate portrait: we will be "*conscripts of good intention*", we will have "*policies unnamable and animal*", we will be "*knowing nothing of science*" but "*depraved in our pleasures*" and we will internalize the maxim that the rest of the world just has to die: "*to hell with the world around us rolling*". All this while we are convinced that this is the only way the world can progress: "*This is the real advance! Forward... March!*"¹³⁸

Such texts reveal to what extent Rimbaud can be for his time the "sensory plate of perception."¹³⁹ In the "Manifesto", in 1848, Marx had been able to describe, on the basis of his erudite studies, how capital ruled over the divisions of the earth:

"It (the bourgeoisie) compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production; it compels them to introduce what it calls civilisation into their midst, i.e., to become bourgeois themselves. In one word, it creates a world after its own image.

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¹³⁵ Ibid., p. 189.

¹³⁶ Ibid., p. 272.

¹³⁷ Ibid., p. 189.

¹³⁸ Ibid,

¹³⁹ Plaque sensible is a phrase coined by Paul Cezanne.

The bourgeoisie has subjected the country to the rule of the towns. It has created enormous cities, has greatly increased the urban population as compared with the rural, and has thus rescued a considerable part of the population from the idiocy of rural life. Just as it has made the country dependent on the towns, so it has made barbarian and semi-barbarian countries dependent on the civilised ones, nations of peasants on nations of bourgeois, the East on the West.”¹⁴⁰

In all of Rimbaud's poetry there is something deeply attuned to this vision. Not because he knew it but because his whole being shared it, sensing with even keener attention and sensitivity the ravages of colonialism, all that devastation that rule of the bourgeoisie was establishing on an earth scale, under the name of “Democracy”. In “A Saison in Hell”, he claimed “I am an animal, a nigger”¹⁴¹, and depicted the repressive savagery of the arrival of settlers: “*The white men are landing! Cannons! Now we must be baptized, get dressed, and go to work.*”¹⁴² It is no coincidence that he had first considered giving this book titles such as “Negro Book” or the “Pagan Book”: he felt like he belonged on that side of the world. In “*Historic Evening*”¹⁴³, he diagnoses the appearance of a “*a pale, flat world, Africa and Occidents*” in which will reign “*At every place the stagecoach stops, | The same bourgeois magic!*”. And in “*Movement*”¹⁴⁴, he depicts “*the conquerors of the world*”, embarked travelers “*seeking their personal chemical fortune*”:

*“Sport and comfort accompany them;
They bring education for races, for classes, for animals
Within this vessel.”*

“Genie”¹⁴⁵, on the contrary, brings together the emblems that undo this world point by point in order to give birth to a completely different one. The genie of the poem is not the genie of an individual, it is the “genie” which holds the resource of humanity itself. More precisely, “Genie” is a generic name, which does not designate anything other than what the poem defines, line after line, and which comes from a conflict with ourselves as humanity: “*He is love and the present [...] He is affection and the future, the strength and love | that we, standing surrounded by anger and weariness, | See passing in the storm-filled sky | and in banners*

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¹⁴⁰ Marx, p. 488

¹⁴¹ Ibid., p. 223.

¹⁴² Ibid., p. 223.

¹⁴³ Ibid., p. 189.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 270.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 272.

of ecstasy.”¹⁴⁶ This genie is not always at work: he “goes on his way”. To remember that it exists is to remember its vigor, capable of driving back the forces of death, capable of pronouncing also that the heavy burden of the time is nothing: “*Away with these ages and superstitions, | These couplings, these bodies of old! | All our age has submerged.*”¹⁴⁷ Its own power is love, as “*perfect and rediscovered measure, | Reason, marvelous and unforeseen*”, and eternity is on his side: “*beloved prime mover of the elements, of destinies.*” It always acts in the present, not in the future: “*He will not go away, will not come down again from some heaven. | He will not fulfill the redemption of women's fury | nor the gaiety of men nor the rest of this sin: | For he is and he is loved, and so it is already done.*” Under its impetus, the action changes nature, becomes clearer, accelerates: “*Oh, his breathing, the tum of his head when he runs: | Terrible speed of perfection in action and form!*”, just as the spirit and the universe take on new dimensions: “*Fecundity of spirit and vastness of the universe!*” The whole poem is a marvelous call, ardent but without exaltation, profoundly calm, to embrace this disposition, to choose this path: “*He has known us all [...] to hail him [...] to see him, and to send him once again away ... | And beneath the tides and over high deserts of snow | To follow his image, | his breathing, his body, the light of his day.*”¹⁴⁸ A call that always resounds in the hearts of those who aspire to “release” human lives from what mutilates and mortifies them.

What Rimbaud's Poetry Does to Communism

All sorts of appointments have been proposed to characterize Rimbaud's political leanings. The word illuminism was thus affixed to him, no doubt because he had written “Illuminations.” It seems to me that there is no great sense in wanting to attribute a doctrine to it, however personal it may be. I propose in particular to replace the question of whether or not Rimbaud belonged to this “communism” of which the Commune is the true historical birth certificate (twenty years after the *Manifesto* of Marx and Engels), by another question: that of knowing what Rimbaud's poetry, as we have just gone through it, does to communism. The “formulas of subjectivation” that he, in a sense, gives to communism, for all times:

1) “*Let us all accept new strength, and real tenderness. And at dawn, armed with glowing patience, we will enter the cities of glory.*”¹⁴⁹ All creative subjectivity must be nourished by positive energies, must desire

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146 Ibid.

147 Ibid., p. 273.

148 Ibid., pp. 273-274.

149 Ibid., p. 243.

intensively, with a desire that is both ardent and patient. Nothing good can come to light without this kind of desire.

2) *"I am sent back to the soil to seek some obligation, to wrap gnarled reality in my arms!"*¹⁵⁰ To desire is to try, to experiment, to start again. To understand where the error was, and without ever resenting oneself, to seek other ways to continue. These are the honest lessons from "A Season in Hell".

3) *"There is no one here and there is someone"*¹⁵¹, says "A Season in Hell". *"For I is an other. If brass wakes as a bugle, it is not its fault at all. That is quite clear to me: I am a spectator at the flowering of my thought"*¹⁵², *"It's wrong to say: I think. Better to say: I am thought."*¹⁵³ Any creation requires recognition of otherness. This discovery that will be resumed and deepened in the poetry of many other *"horrible workers"*¹⁵⁴ - like Pessoa with heteronymy - shows the path of the non-coincidence of self with itself, of the improper, of de-propriation.

4) *"One must be absolutely modern"*¹⁵⁵. But modernity does not belong to the dominant world that produces it: only emancipatory powers can break its automaticity and artifice, of rearranging its elements and composing with them new beautiful and fair figures like *"Release so long desired, / The splintering of grace before a new violence!"*¹⁵⁶

5) *"The hand that holds the pen is as good as the one that holds the plow. (What a century for hands!) I'll never learn to use my hands."*¹⁵⁷, *"I want to be free to work."*¹⁵⁸ Impossible to forget that manual labor, salaried labor, is forced labor, and that it is a question of freeing those who perform it and make us live.

6) *"Love has to be reinvented, we know that"*¹⁵⁹: *"I was right to distrust old men who never lost a chance for a caress, parasites on the health and cleanliness of our women - today when women are so much a race apart from us."*¹⁶⁰: rebuilding a friendship between women and men is the

.....
150 Ibid.

151 Ibid., p. 226.

152 Ibid., p. 115.

153 Ibid., p. 112.

154 Ibid., p. 116.

155 Ibid., p. 243.

156 Ibid., p. 273.

157 Ibid., p. 220.

158 Ibid., p. 121.

159 Ibid., p. 228.

160 Ibid., p. 239.

touchstone of an existence in which equality is liberation, not oppression; wealth, not impoverishment.

7) *"I am an inventor much more deserving, | Different from all who have preceded me; | A musician, even, who has found something which may be the key to love."*¹⁶¹ Love is also understood in another sense: love must guide action, at the moment when destruction is a dead end.

8) *"Air, and a world all unlooked for. Life."*¹⁶² We must be able to imagine such peace for all. We must quote the entire first part of "Vigils"¹⁶³:

*"This is a place of rest and light,
No fever, no longing,
In a bed or a field.*

This is a friend, neither ardent nor weak. A friend.

This is my beloved, untormenting, untormented. My beloved.

*Air, and a world all unlooked for. Life.
... Was it really this?
For the dream grows cold."*

.....

Rimbaud's abandonment of poetry has been made into a metaphysical posture, an enigma - from which the meaning of his work was to derive, and which has been over-interpreted. I think all this is less complicated. He had said what he had to say. He had moved very quickly, from poem to poem, never lingering and never stagnating in a conclusion once reached.

From the mid-1870s, with the same rapidity, he concluded that the Commune would not be reborn after the massacre, and that times had changed. That these new times were at the antipodes of what his poetry had produced the figures of subjectivation for. It was certainly hard, but that was the state of the world. It was then necessary to find advice on how to live. After having tried different expedients, he deserted from the Dutch colonial army where he had enlisted for 6 years, then he went south to Italy, passed from Genoa to Cyprus, then even farther south to Alexandria, and from there to Aden on the Red Sea, and finally Harare in Abyssinia. Working in the colonies, in a sense, was imposed as the most modern solution, the most "up-to-date" indeed, because now it was

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¹⁶¹ Ibid., p. 256.

¹⁶² Ibid., p. 182.

¹⁶³ Ibid., p. 181.

a question of working henceforth to live, with no other states of mind. These were then the painful conditions of a life to be lived alone, with the harshness of the climate and the places, the difficulties as an arms dealer, the disillusion as to what he could gain from it. And the wear and tear of a still young body, the knee cancer forcing him back and leading to death, after a terrible amputation of the whole leg.

His work was done, he had no reason to return to it.

But here we are, endowed with these unforgettable formulas where every revolutionary subject can recognize himself and draw strength and orientation.

Translated by Arbër Zaimi

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The Poetry that Presents Itself

Philippe Beck

Abstract: Poetry appears, that is, it is printed or published. Its temporality has the potential to be a space for sharing, but when the space is waiting for it, when it is waiting, then the event of which it is the sign already occupies a suspended place in the world. For the surface of recognition is not essentially different from Pessoa's rosewood chest: the actual sharing of the true poem for the purpose of community is indefinitely incomplete, and the reading is still and always necessary, being indefinitely exhaustible. The poem is a reserve for the appearance of the meaning of the common.

Keywords: publication, impression, space, time, event, community, recognition, reading, politics.

Poetry can make itself present in a shared time, but it can do so in two ways, according to what Roberto Calasso calls "a chronic exposure to appearance".¹

Firstly, because it tends to occupy a social space, a surface of knowledge of the works that affect an era – it gets published, joins that number and provides a common space for the event that is configured and constituted by its real poems. To know about the poetry that emerges means to recognize it, because the knowable poetic event needs its diffusion in space (the Arch-Earth), ordering itself side by side and at the interpersonal intervals where the possible plays out.

The possible depends on the space streaked with expressions which either go from being to non-being (re-joining the nothingness of conformity where use betrays the sayable), or else go from non-being to being. (re-joining historical life through the confrontation of the forces and limits of language where all recognition takes place). This double game, this reversibility between the trysts of the sayable and the thinkable, this taking into account of the important (the serious), this "leaving the mark", is the airy law of the History of humans. From this first case, where the publication is an impression, where it therefore reaches the thoughtful sensitivity of a community (to the series of impressionabilities), we can decline certain proper names as they form the indices of a strong and recognizable gesture since during the poet's lifetime (that "instaurator of discursivity" that is a poetic authority is first of all contemporary, one who shares and is shared with the people): Sophocles, Dante, Wordsworth, Hugo, for example, were able to find a space of recognition, therefore a space recognized by the authority of the emergence of their real poems. The diffused reality of those poems is due to their force of truth, which makes them true poems (capable of manifesting the thinkable), not only welcomed into the world, but received

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¹ *La Folie Baudelaire*, 2008.

with gratitude insofar as they were expected. The contemporary poet is then absolutely modern, because he immediately admits the signature of his relevant intervention; by what it dictates, it activates new movements.

Secondly, the event of a poem can project itself into the present without occupying the slightest social space: Emily Dickinson, reclused behind the glass of her house, or Pessoa writing for his rosewood chest, renounce the space of anthumous sharing – they are delivered to pure time or, at least, to reduced space, to the solitude of a haunted point, when the solitary creator makes the language pass from non-being to being according to the power of a community that has not yet taken place. Their language is a suspended movement. The real poems have the power of contemporary life while they are modern or relevant: their space is concentrated and unknown, awaiting adequate recognition, providential relaunch. The event of an unrecognized provident poetry is the preparation for the posthumous or preposterous sharing of the idiom, of the communicable singularity, of the one-by-one communication that it implies or envelops; it is a suspended preparatory event, returned to its pure implicit temporality, to the power of a restrained sharing. Its detention or restraint in a moment of history is not a matter of curse; it depends, on the contrary, on the slow relaxation of the populated point constituted by a maker called a poet.

The distinction between the two ways of bringing the present to life or of designating the living present in a language, makes it possible to understand why a large number of published poems occupy a social space which does not give rise to any living sharing, but above all it suggests that such a sharing of the passage from non-being to being is always in danger of being compromised with the "spiritual mechanics" which mire the epoch in its miseries. In other words: true poems, by publishing themselves or by withdrawing them from public, always retain the power of intense presentation and, indefinitely exhaustible, remain incapable of giving full rise to a community, for the reason that they are never fully shareable. They relaunch their reading from an era to another one, parallel to the policies that claim to provide an answer to the miseries where nothingness is realized. We can then say that true poems threaten the non-being of irrelevant and destructive politics, without ever configuring a community in an organic space-time, and so much the better, because if that were the case, there would be no more of history and the beings would be lambs incapable of thinking of preventing the covetousness of the wolves.

Is life a poem
or pre-poem?
Does it appear before coming to be for
some body or someone?
A thoughtful community says it is
already poem,
puppeteer silence,
as the novel already is
supposedly the drama of the raw
materials of the open conscience.
Is the conscience lying low?
Is she covered by the living?
And is the poem Pinocchio?
Does it need strings to make itself present?
Conscience, infinitely regressing in the raw
of a manipulative, voiceless life?
If life is a poem, then
poetry, that factory of words
whose conscious verse is the horizon
is buried: the silence of life
actuates or activates it and dictates its law
with strings of words, like a show-off ribbon
with savant lines, that let speak
but themselves don't talk anymore.
But the poem, prepared
in the living end of silence
speak and cause to be spoken. It calls for other lines
to emerge from buried silence.
Pre-poem is the silence of death,
nonappearance, nonpresence
rather than music of the spheres.
It expresses the absence of the previous
the divider.
Is the poem the boustrophedon of life
after phenomenology?
If so, Poem is document.
Does it learn life
which is passive prose (phrased inertia)
before poetry?
The document brings
what a first silence refuses.
The mute world becomes peopled with eloquent life,
And expression, and outward impression.

First is the resurrection;
the poem is uplifting, or resurrectional,
mute and remade puppet that talks
before the lives and half-lives it shares.
The first life arises alone like an island
in long retention.
Why poems
if all else is already isolated in life?
Is life a carp?
Carp Island?
Each one must talk
and answer as he pleases
for the absence, if there is².

Translated by Arbër Zaimi

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2 I gave a first version of this poem for the anniversary of a phenomenology journal of which I was the co-founder, in another life (Alter, n° 21 | 2013, p. 29-31.) François-David Sebbah made a short commentary on it, delicate and interesting, of which I reproduce a few words here: "The reader will read. He will read this words not like a more or less academic philosophy, very far also from any great untouched lyricism; very written and very melodious words that document life – which, indirectly, questions the ineradicable, the stubborn phenomenological naivety; the one that means life; the pure life – and what is more, believes to achieve it. This word elsewhere speaks of life, life before reflection – but not without it; life, the interrogative rhythm of saying/said – without prosaism – whose immediacy is not transparency, which thwarts its capture in a meaning, without really cancelling it; the life that worries the understanding – upsets it a little; and can only be understood that way. If life is already a poem, then "poetry is defunct", but if "life is pre-poem", remember that "pre-poem is dead silence", and that "poem is boustrophedon of life, after phenomenology".

A poem: when the divisions are no longer so clear (between silence and eloquence, between death and life – life which can be "shared half-lives"), when the resurrection is primary, and expression, always an "outwards impression". »

Poetic Image Now

Victoria Bergstrom

Abstract: This article unfolds a story of the image from the vantagepoint of French poetry of the late 20th century which places the question or problem of the poetic image in relation with problematics of the image from art history and media theory. Reflecting on the relation between poetry's now and the now of the image, we will consider recent work by poets in which what it is to speak, perceive, and remain alert to forces of alienation in a liberalizing Europe (and a rapidly commercializing literary field) demands action on and through the image. Taking as a central concern the role played by image in the polemical opposition between concepts of medium and media, this study lingers on a range of works by contemporary poet Pierre Alferi who thinks the temporal capacities of the poem in relation to the problematic of contemporaneity particular to the digital age (what Peter Osborne describes as a technologically enabled 'conjunction of present times').

Keywords: experimental poetry, lyric, mediation, image technologies, medium, Greenberg, indexicality

In response to the call to think the present of poetry, or poetry's 'now' as I'd like to frame it, my title's evocation of such a tired and seemingly antiquated idea as the poetic image might surprise. While lyric theory is back in vogue, enjoying an especially vigorous revitalization in Anglo-American literary criticism of the last ten years, scholarly attention to the concept of the poetic image has enjoyed no such renewal.¹ Furthermore, the question of poetry's 'now'—its alliance with an experience of immediacy and its pursuit of presence effects, its unfolding in the self-renewing present tense of reading or recitation—has generally been approached as a question bearing most pertinently on voice and the phenomenon of lyric enunciation, rather than image per se. At the same time, when we think the term 'image' today and its relation to problematics of presence and immediacy, it is hardly the poetic image that comes to mind. The actuality of *image* would seem to be very obviously elsewhere: in our pockets, on our screens. In what follows, I will be unfolding a story of the image from the vantagepoint of French poetry of the late 20th century that places the question or problem of the poetic image in relation with problematics of the image from art history and media theory. Reflecting on the relation between poetry's now and the now of the image, we will consider recent work by poets in which what it is to speak, perceive, and remain alert to forces of alienation in a liberalizing Europe (and a rapidly commercializing literary field) demands action on and through the image.

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¹The most influential among these: *The Lyric Theory Reader*, eds. Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins (2014); Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* (2015).

Poetry belongs, we've been told, to the arts of time. The diachronic unfolding of its meanings, its attendant ability to narrate events, its music as a system for the aesthetic organization and investment of time (the better to resist time by means of the mnemonic efficacy of rhythm and rhyme), all of these evidence of poetry's temporal nature. The tightest association of all, however, is with the present-tense of utterance, of a phenomenalized voice that is, in Paul de Man's account, the 'principle of intelligibility' for lyric poetry.² The here and now of utterance is the province of the index or deictic, the context-dependent utterance or gesture ('I', 'you', 'this', a pointing finger) that can only achieve its reference from within and in relation to a given deictic field. In the context of poetry, deictic utterances constitute the central feature of what Jonathan Culler has called the 'enunciative apparatus,' the collection of technical devices contributing to the production of 'effects of voicing' which are the calling card of lyric in his account.³ A recent wave of scholarship has identified deixis and the concept of indexicality more broadly not only as essential to poetry's intrinsic technicity, but as a rich conceptual field for thinking and theorizing the relationship between poetry and technological media, with some even suggesting that lyric be thought of as itself a technology of presence—a mnemotechnic support for the storage and preservation of presence—in analogy with phonography.⁴

Approaching this conceptual field from my area of expertise—twentieth- and twenty-first-century poetry from France—requires a reorientation, however. In the French context, the surrealists recognized lyric as a technology of a different sort: an image technology, one oriented and calibrated towards the explicit end of the production of images. The adventure of the surrealist image—doubtless the most significant poetic innovation to come out of twentieth-century avant-gardism—abolished what we might call technique in favor of the unmediated effusion of the unconscious, and developed an approach to poetic image-making modeled upon the generation of electrical sparks and the automatic inscription of photographic capture: 'a veritable photography of thought,' as André Breton once put it.⁵ In this study, I am interested in the long aftermath of the surrealist image, what comes after that practice of the image loses its revolutionary charge and fades into the caricaturable. The 'present' of poetry as I approach it here is characterized by an ongoing grappling with the vice-grip association between poetry and image that is surrealism's bequest, and by the particular forms this grappling has taken

2 de Man 1985, p. 55.

3 Culler 2015, p. 35.

4 See Kilbane 2016, not paginated.

5 Breton 1970, p. 101.

since the emergence of a so-called literalist paradigm in the late 1970s, premised on the antilyrical pursuit of a poetry without images.⁶

The poets typically gathered under the Literalist moniker—Claude Royet-Journoud, Emmanuel Hocquard, Anne-Marie Albiach, Jean Daive, Joseph Guglielmi—share an interest in the stripping down of the poem, the excision of metaphor, alliteration, musicality, all those features that support ‘evocation’ as poetry’s primary charge. ‘Dry as unbuttered toast’ is how Emmanuel Hocquard liked his texts, recruiting a gustatory analogy as he rules out sensory delectation as a motivating principle in his poetics.⁷ A favorite literalist injunction, from the pen of Claude Royet-Journoud, goes: ‘Replace the image with the *word* image.’⁸ The demand is not to replace the poetic image with a more evidently denotative formulation, substituting one kind or mode of description for another. But it does present an exchange of figuration for its opposite: swapping an image generated through figure and analogy (an image that is not *in* the words, per se, but that acquires form in the mind of a reader) for the unambiguous visuality of this typeset word. The literalism of these poets is, in a word, literal: having to do with this term’s etymological root in *letters*, with approaching words through the rote—and flat—materiality of print. Literality identifies poetic activity not with the primary inscription, the capture in writing of an immediate and new instance of inspired expression, but rather with the deferred activity of the typesetter, for whom writing means copying something that is already there (backwards and upside-down) so as to enable more copying, for whom language is organized materially and in spatial terms (uppercase, lowercase), and who understands the constitutive fullness of blank space in the printer’s composing stick.

Emmanuel Hocquard (1940-2019), who set type for a small-press editorial outfit before ever writing his own poems, defines a literal expression as one that reproduces letter-by-letter and word-by-word a pre-existing utterance; it is an act of citation, repetition, copying that severs the utterance from its original purpose and referential frame by making the words refer only to themselves. This literality, then, is not oriented towards reducing referential ambiguity; instead it aims to interrupt or side-step reference entirely by substituting a citational purpose (faithful to the exact formulation of an utterance) in the place of the referential one. The most important literary influences for Hocquard and his cohort do not come from within the French tradition, but rather from American Objectivist poets like Louis Zukofsky and, especially,

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6 In the Anglo-American tradition, we can recognize a correlate of this literalist orientation with the 1970s ‘turn to language’ of the Language poets (Bernadette Mayer, Ron Silliman, Lyn Hejinian, Charles Bernstein, to name just a few) who were seeking to break with the legacy of Imagism.

7 Hocquard 2001, pp. 25-6. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

8 Royet-Journoud 2007, p. 11.

Charles Reznikoff, whose 1934 work *Testimony*—composed entirely of verbatim text from court proceedings that the poet versifies—is a seminal instance of literal copying for Hocquard.⁹ In explanations of the role of copying and citation in his poetics, Hocquard often evokes Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's claim that language in its entirety is indirect discourse, a vast system of citation that precedes and precludes any claim to immediacy (originality, personality) in linguistic expression.¹⁰ If Hocquard embraces a citational conceit (insisting that 'I am the copier of my books'¹¹), it is as a way of estranging expression so that the fact of language's givenness can rise to the surface as the very foundation of the linguistic medium as such and the work of the text can become the performance (dramatization) and contemplation of the properties of language. The act of repeating an utterance, or copying it out word-for-word, transforms it from a site of passage (facilitating the externalization of internal states) into a rigorously non-conductive surface. So instead of cultivating poetry as a channel directing a flow of images, as in his caricatural view of surrealist automatism, Emmanuel Hocquard reminds himself to 'Question the word image // On a table arrange / the words which describe the image // Question the words'.¹² The poem, for Hocquard and the poets he's close with, offers itself as precisely this kind of surface, a table in an interrogation room upon which evidentiary puzzle pieces are strewn.

Image/Medium

The exclusion of the image within a poetic methodology that foregrounds the materiality of the print medium recalls another, better known, theorization of twentieth-century iconoclasm. Beginning in the 1940s, the art critic Clement Greenberg developed a formalist theory of modernist painting based on a concept of medium-specificity, the artwork's self-reflexive valorization of the material properties of its medium. In the case of painting, it is the flatness of the canvas and the quality and behavior of the paint that emerge as most salient to painterly invention, taking explicit precedence over subject matter. For Greenberg, the conventional

.....
9 Hocquard's first poem 'Spurius Maelius' takes direct inspiration from Reznikoff's 'cut-up' technique, as it 'transcribes' a passage from Livy's *History of Rome* into versified form. See Hocquard 2001, pp. 40-8.

10 Hocquard points to Deleuze and Guattari's treatment of indirect discourse in 'Postulates of Linguistics' in *A Thousand Plateaus*: 'Indirect discourse is the presence of a reported statement within the reporting statement, the presence of an order-word within the word. Language in its entirety is indirect discourse' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, p. 84). Hocquard asserts elsewhere, along these lines, that 'One never speaks of oneself There has never been a subject of enunciation There is no subject but the grammatical one' (Hocquard 2007, p. 182).

11 Hocquard 2009, not paginated.

12 Hocquard 1992, p. 32.

primacy of subject matter, exemplified in the European tradition of narrative painting (especially in the 17th and 18th centuries) and its representation of scenes from biblical and literary sources, reflects a 'confusion of the arts': the infiltration of *literature* within the picture plane as painting tasks itself with imitating effects proper to the (then) more prestigious art of poetry.

While Greenberg tempers this stance, insisting that it is not literature that must be banished from the picture plane (figuration is not in itself inadmissible), but rather the influence of sculpture and the temptation to create three-dimensional illusions on the two-dimensional surface of the canvas, the art historian Peter Osborne has observed that in either case what is at stake in Greenberg's exclusive valorization of the 'literal physical properties' of artworks is the 'exclu[sion of] 'image' as a category of artistic analysis, indeed as a constituent of the experience of modern art itself.¹³ Greenberg does not lean heavily on the term 'image,' and its exclusion, in his calls for the purification of painterly practice, but in art-critical discourse this is indeed the term for the visualizable content of a painting that exceeds the physical properties and brute presence of the art object. For theorists like Hans Belting, a picture (a painting, say) is an image *making use of* a medium, which he describes as simultaneously a 'support, host, and tool for the image' by means of which it becomes visible.¹⁴ It is precisely this metaphysics, which would have the material properties of an artistic medium function as a carrier for an image that does not coincide with its forms, that Greenberg's formalist ontology of medium dispenses with. If paint functions as a host in this way, it is because it is welcoming into its forms something other than itself; the fine-art object would thus find itself captured within a logic of transmission that would, in the mid-twentieth century, jeopardize its autonomy with respect to the mercantilist promiscuity of a rapidly expanding sphere of media (i.e. non-art) images. The radical opacity of the artistic medium that Greenberg championed was not only essential to the project of disentangling a particular medium from the confusion of the arts, recovering or indeed discovering its identity by 'emphasiz[ing] the medium and its difficulties,' in order that 'the purely plastic, the *proper*, values of visual art come to the fore.'¹⁵ In other words, its significance should not be taken to be strictly internal to the world of making, studying and commenting upon art. Rather, it represents a polemical gambit in favor of the autonomy of aesthetic practices amidst the spread of the antiformalist logic of media that threatened to capture every aspect of cultural production as assimilable within capitalistic networks of

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¹³ Osborne 2018, p. 135.

¹⁴ Belting 2011, p. 5.

¹⁵ Greenberg 1986, p. 34.

exchange. This is medium against media, medium as a concept requiring this kind of ideological reinforcement as its only defense against the bourgeois commodification of the arts (it wasn't successful!).¹⁶

In 'Towards a Newer Laocoon,' Greenberg discusses poetry at length and proposes some contrasts that better reflect the relative positions of poetry and the visual arts in the twentieth century, and the state of understanding regarding their respective 'pure' forms. Rather than distinguishing painting and poetry in terms of their unfolding either in space or in time, as Lessing proposes in that older *Laocoon*, Greenberg centers the relation between medium and the site of meaning: while the plastic art medium has its essence in its material composition, 'the medium of poetry is isolated in the power of the word to evoke associations and to connote,' and thus 'pure poetry strives for infinite suggestion, pure plastic arts for the minimum.'¹⁷ This dichotomy affirms the association of poetry with image, and through the language of 'suggestion' claims literality (in the usual sense) for the purified visual arts. Indeed, descriptions of medium-specific artworks, or really any attempt to draw attention to the material composition or self-conscious dimension of an artwork, rarely get by without recourse to the word 'literal' (emphasizing, for instance, the *literal* surface of the canvas, its *literal* flatness). To claim literality for poetry, to devise a poetry that excludes the image and insists on the presence of words where they are, rather than on their facility at deflecting attention into the associative, is to make a claim about the mediumness of poetry. In their valorization of the conditions and processes associated with typesetting and print, literalist poets dismiss incoherent efforts to define the medium of poetry in abstract or ethereal terms (is it the voice? the breath? language itself?) in favor of restoring it to the fact of its reliance on a material substrate and technical apparatus.

Lyric Mediation

Lyric poetry of the Romantic period, a low point in Greenberg's teleological account of medium-relations (Shelley is noted as exalting the superiority of poetry for the express reason that 'its medium came the closest to no medium at all'¹⁸), has also been of special interest to media theorists—chief among them Friedrich Kittler—who recognize in the expressive paradigm it inaugurates a clearly articulated system of mediation. For Kittler, this kind of expression is structured around the

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¹⁶ For a recent and insightful account of the mid-century consolidation of concepts of medium and media in the US, see Shechtman 2020.

¹⁷ Greenberg 1986, p. 34.

¹⁸ Greenberg 1986, p. 26.

explicit project of transferring images from the poet's imagination to that of the reader, with the poet's language acting as a channel.¹⁹ Describing the action of the Romantic poet, Kittler notes that the intertwined topoi of Nature, Love, and Woman—terms he notes were 'synonymous in the discourse network of 1800'—'produced an originary discourse that Poets tore from speechlessness and translated. It is technically exact,' he specifies, 'to say that language in such a function can only be a channel. If language had its own density and materiality, its own dead spots and transmission lapses, there would be no question of an all-encompassing translatability.'²⁰ (This is the same scholar who will be one of the first to theorize the kind of 'all-encompassing' intermedial translatability that fiber optics would bring to the digital revolution.²¹) The mediation thus described is necessarily transparent, requiring the absolute submission of medium to message: 'language's own materiality' must remain unremarked or suppressed *so that* this fulsome translatability may become possible.²² Citing Heidegger, Kittler emphasizes that the early nineteenth century is not a period in which poetry is 'defined in terms of language as language' as Symbolism will initiate and subsequent avant-gardes will carry forward, but rather is viewed as a form that 'leads through language onto something else,' setting it up as a kind of idealized medium whose transmissions generate, ironically, very little noise.²³

The literalist orientation consolidates during a period which saw the vocal resurgence of lyricism within the French poetry scene and the move to restore voice and image as central features of poetic invention. The contemporary poet Olivier Cadiot recently described the especially contentious period of the 1980s this way: 'It was war between literality and lyricism. Star wars. The grammatico-communist Robots against the real humans.'²⁴ The hyperbole he brings to this description underscores the extreme exaggeration of positions that was seen at that time, sending up in particular the caricatural depiction of literalism as a force working

19 Jacques Khalip and Robert Mitchell have recently emphasized that this model of expressive transparency is preconditioned and reinforced by the print culture of the early nineteenth century 'in which the mechanical reproduction of text and visual images was often understood as a 'means' for transmitting thoughts from one individual to another' (Khalip and Mitchell 2011, p. 10).

20 Kittler 1990, p. 73.

21 'Once movies and music, phone calls and texts reach households via optical fiber cables, the formerly distinct media of television, radio, telephone, and mail converge, standardized by transmission frequencies and bit format' (Kittler 1999, p. 1).

22 Contra Marshall McLuhan's famous dictum 'the medium is the message,' this model of transparent mediation relies on a conception of medium as that which gets in the way of message, and posits the possible reduction of medium's salience as a way of guaranteeing the primacy of the message. See McLuhan 2013 [1964].

23 Kittler 1990, p. 73.

24 Cadiot 2013, p.9.

to snuff out those human impulses (towards feeling and self-expression) that lyricism would naturally channel. Hocquard is centrally implicated in this antagonism and describes the partition in the field of contemporary French poetry, for his part, as an opposition between 'those who continue to celebrate 'the highest song of man' and 'the music of the soul' of eternal Poetry' and 'those who have chosen to place emphasis more particularly upon the *language* itself, its functioning and its functions.'²⁵ The 1980s is also a period when television enjoyed undisputed cultural dominance, a fact that is not indifferent to the dynamics at play in the field of contemporary French poetry. Kittler has remarked that television is 'just as ubiquitous as it is mystifying, and therein lies its much-heralded power.'²⁶ Thinking television in terms of technical mystification and the special power it wields as the mass-media organ *par excellence*, we can easily imagine that poets working in the midst of such an image environment might be especially wary of efforts to reinstate poetry as a channel of lyric expression with the transmission of images as its primary function. Indeed, given this specific technological context, it is unsurprising that the resurgence of lyric at the height of television's mediatic reign would have struck many as especially (even hyperbolically) nefarious. This would represent not only a return to a transparent model of mediation (language regaining its function as channel), but also a willing re-mystification of the image. And as one might expect, the logic of impasse that orders literalism's resistance to the profligate transmissions of the 1980s (of individualist expressivity in lyric, of noxious commercialism over the airwaves, of capital left right and center), borne as it is of this particular convergence of cultural factors, will appear less operable to the next generation (X) of similarly disposed poets.

Mediating Medium

The most significant development of the last thirty years in the world of French poetry, in terms of shaping the concerns and possibilities of contemporary experimentalism (as well as advancing a vision of what contemporaneity might mean in the context of poetry), comes through the *Revue de littérature générale*, a journal co-founded in 1995 by poets Pierre Alferi and Olivier Cadiot and whose inaugural issue was oriented explicitly towards the reappraisal of lyric as a mediating structure. This issue brought together experimental works from practitioners of a huge range of creative and intellectual disciplines (photography, music, land art, philosophy, history, as well as poetry) that cross every imaginable generic and medial boundary and steer our attention to the technical possibilities

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25 Hocquard 1995, pp. 17-18.

26 Kittler 2010, p. 24.

opened up—for literary creation—by the photocopier, cataloguing systems, the topiary arts, and the new convergence of media enabled by digital technology. The vision of poetry that this journal materialized was uncompromisingly anti-hierarchical²⁷, privileging no form, style, genre, technique, or professional pedigree over any other, and dispensing full-stop with the distinction between aesthetic and non-aesthetic objects and practices that stands in the way of interrogating their potential usefulness to literary critiques of the dominant social order.

In their co-authored preface to this first issue, 'La mécanique lyrique,' Alferi and Cadiot present a critique of the French neolyricism of the 1980s (and continuing into the 90s), judged to be anachronistic and intellectually and ethically compromised not only because of its patent alliance with the individualist ideology of a liberalizing Europe, but also because it expresses a (related) naïve disavowal of its own technicity. For Alferi and Cadiot, the term lyric designates a *problem* that precedes and determines the activity of the poet: the externalization of interior states as the fundamental technical challenge of literary creation. How it is that one person's thought—inspired or otherwise—might express itself in language legible to others? This is a question to which Romantic lyric, for example, offers a particular response (recognized by Kittler as an instance of transparent mediation). Poets of the modernist avant-garde respond to this imperative very differently—we might think of Guillaume Apollinaire's calligrams or conversation poems—, in accordance with a different set of technologically-inflected assumptions about the parameters of poetic mediation. Where Hocquard's literalism works to stop up the kind of inside-outside mediation that we associate with lyric expression, Alferi and Cadiot retain this—on the condition that such a mediating procedure be taken seriously and approached as a technical challenge. The '*mechanical* lyric' proposed by these authors is not intended to identify this technical challenge with any specific technological paradigm (mechanical as opposed to electronic, for instance), but rather to demystify lyric by thinking of it as a wholly material affair: the collective functioning of 'des unités de base.'²⁸ These base materials, which could just as easily originate from a flash of poetic insight as from a vacuum repair manual, must sacrifice their singularity to the standardization that will allow them to participate in the operation of the whole. To describe the functioning of these ensembles, the authors summon in rapid succession operational models related to mechanics (industrial production), mechanical images (cinema and its apparatus), televisual transmission (broadcast standard), computer programming languages (BASIC) and binary code. Amidst this parade of technological models, it is not one or the other of these that

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27 Indeed, the index at the back of the volume includes a winking reference for 'déhiérarchiser' that directs readers to pp. 3-411, which is to say every single page.

28 Alferi and Cadiot 1995, p. 7.

emerges as particularly well-suited to the task of thinking the technics of poetry, rather it is the fact of mediation itself that comes to the fore. Writing at the dawn of the digital age, these poets and the contributors they bring together in the *Revue de littérature générale* take the demystification of procedures of mediation (technological and literary) as the center of their preoccupations—the lyric imperative *par excellence*.

In step with this broader vision of the poetic act, Pierre Alferi's own poetics does not require the kind of distancing between the poet and the language he manipulates that is so central to the procedures of literality. In a 2002 interview, he explains without regret that 'in what I write, I can't keep myself from being there where I am.'²⁹ His poetry takes on the dynamics of expression as one of its central motivating concerns, and he brings to this work a genuine philosophical interest in what we might think of as para-lyrical questions related to the apprehension of the self, the tension between singularity and universality, and the incommensurability between an experience of presence and its representation. His entire poetics seems to flow from the question: what happens when we take seriously the issues underpinning lyric address? what if we were to understand these issues as technical imperatives, and approach them from a place of technical sophistication, rather than abandon them entirely to the defensive naïvety of contemporary neolyricists? Practicing the generic multiplicity enshrined in the pages of his journal, Alferi's expansive *oeuvre* includes works of philosophy, poetry, narrative fiction, theatre, literary and film criticism, as well as an array of works that extend beyond the page: public art installations, performance and sound pieces, and experimental film.

Temporal ontologies

The extension of his literary project into time-based performance and audiovisual formats attests to a preoccupation with time with deep roots in his poetry. To reflect on questions of time, presence, the experience of a 'now,' is invariably, for Alferi, to reflect on the possibility of their inscription (their becoming at once deferred and contemplable; Alferi is, I ought to mention, the eldest son of Jacques Derrida). We read, in an early volume:

as soon as you think of it an instant
splits in two. The breaking
of this thunderstorm is the *breaking*
of this thunderstorm but the second
alone was a memorable event (present
it was already ebbing...)³⁰

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29 Cited in Disson 2003, p. 258.

30 Alferi 1991, 67.

What is memorable is not the event but its inscription, the version of it that is its being named in writing. This is its becoming memorable, we might say. The instant, approached above as an object of thought, appears most frequently in Alferi's work as a precipitate of the technical structure of moving images. The 1997 collection *Sentimentale journée* assembles texts 'improvised like conversations' which unfold like the audio transcript of someone else's home movie; alongside a conversational conceit that explores the effects of deictic utterances cut loose from the contextual knowledge that would allow them to signify, this work pursues a preoccupation with images and analogy that centers the relationship to time of different image technologies. The poem 'Allegria' takes as its central concern the description of movement, specifically the movement of an interlocutor as s/he bounds down the stairs and emerges on a city sidewalk. As the text alternates between attempts at describing this person's movement and considerations of how such a thing can be interrogated, it calls upon a parade of technical images.

[...]—The instant you bounce
Onto the sidewalk after the final step
You are nothing but a film frame and the landscape along with you
Frozen by the VCR's 'pause' button
But which does not want to stop, trembles like a leaf
Or a rodent in a trap wriggling to go catch up with
His fellows. The image also wants to rejoin the dance
Of images/second.³¹

As soon as the figure emerges at street level, s/he is registered as nothing but a film frame, a *photogramme*.³² This 'nothing but' is just as quickly amended, however, as the figure and its surroundings find themselves not fixed in an isolated celluloid image, but frozen—'gelé'—by the pause button on the VCR. The still image, which in the cinematic context *precedes* the moving image it helps construct, shifts here from a photochemical image to a video image that has no intrinsic relation to stillness. The stillness of the paused video is registered here as stopped motion that retains its forward-moving energy, its desire to carry on, trembling like a leaf or a captive rodent hoping to wriggle out of his unnatural arrest. This image *wants* to get back to its fellows ('semblables'), wants to return to the flow of the moving image—to its frame rate. But something important has broken down in this slide from one kind of image to another. The concept of a frame as the basic discrete

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³¹ Alferi 1997, p. 98.

³² While there's nothing stopping us from reading 'photogramme' as a reference to the early photographic form (for the cameraless production of contact-print silhouettes), in French the use of this term to refer to a film frame is much more common.

unit for the creation of a moving image simply doesn't carry over to video. The art critic Bruce Kurtz has remarked that 'film, with its twenty-four complete still frames per second, reflects an illusion of movement, while television, with its constantly changing configuration of dots of light, provides an illusion of stillness.'³³ Any still image achieved in television or video—either through the presentation of a still image before the camera or as a result of paused playback in the case of video—is in fact moving: the rasterized light that makes it visible never ceases to scan left to right. And in the inscription of the moving image in video, what we might call a 'frame' is indeed composite: an interlacing of fields based on two consecutive images, with one image coming through on odd numbered lines and the other coming through on evens. Video does not and cannot visualize the spatiotemporal unity of the frame (the frame as spatiotemporal unity). The video 'still' maintains one foot on either side of an instant—locating both sides and neither—which is to say that an 'instant' takes on a unique construction (or technical definition) within the electromagnetic moving-image paradigm.

In 'Allegria,' the isolated certainty of the film frame does indeed emerge in the context of a punctual, instantaneous temporality—the *instant* you... That instant is just as quickly swapped, however, for the undecidable instant of the video image which indeed offers a more apt figure for the sense of potential energy that this description is trying to render as it detours through other analogies (leaf, trapped rodent) to return at last to the 'dance' of the frame-rate's naturalized flow. If this movement must be captured—stopped—in order to be considered, the intrinsic dynamism of the video image beats film's intrinsic stillness. This metonymic slide from film to video not only demonstrates Alferi's tendency toward building poetic images out of extant or imagined technical images—his bent towards remediation as a general metaphorical principle—but also stages an instance of image remediation that supports in technologically specific ways this poem's expressive (lyric) objective: to get a particular quality of movement to pass from perception to language.

In the late nineties, feeling a 'need to better materialize the rhythm and movement of a written text, in space and in time,' Alferi begins experimenting with the time-constrained formats of public readings, live performance, and musical collaborations. He is interested, in this work, in a 'modeling of time,' in staging encounters between the virtualities of linguistic representation and the 'palpable time' of the spectator.³⁴ After familiarizing himself with emerging tools for amateur video production, Alferi moves these investigations to the screen. This progression, from

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³³ Cited in Westgeest 2016, p. 31.

³⁴ Trudel 2013, p. 166.

text to performance to film, is a logical one, he tells us, as if 'trying out the same thing with different means.'³⁵ Over the course of three years, Alferi made a dozen or so short films, each of which manifests this preoccupation with time in various ways: through the animation of text on the screen, the introduction of visual rhythms that disrupt the sequential coherence of the sentence, or through the re-editing of footage from old Hollywood films to give form to the way these works have warped in his memory. His 2002 film *Intime*, however, earns an exclusive claim in this regard: 'the *only subject* of this film is the immersion in time, the fact of being in time.'³⁶ An immersion that, we will see, cannot be mistaken for immediacy.

In Time

Intime was commissioned to serve as the centerpiece for a solo exhibition of Alferi's audiovisual work at a gallery in Eastern France. The 16-minute film features ten distinct image sequences, each with a minimal text superimposed on its surface, and accompanied by musical and sound compositions by Rodolphe Burger. The images are digital, shot on a Sony camcorder as Alferi traveled eastward from Paris, and they record literal movements through space and time in contact with different mediums of personal transport: three sequences shot from inside a moving train; a brief view of clouds seen from a plane window; exterior shots of a busy street with buses, trams and cyclists passing; or of a city square traversed and re-traversed by pedestrians. The texts are short, elliptical, and appear at incredibly slow intervals, one line at a time. While never in clear referential relation to the images they hover over, these lines largely evoke the kind of suspended or dilated time one can experience while traveling: a deferred landing as your airplane circles above a busy airport, a meeting postponed as soon as you arrive in the foreign city where it was to be held. These texts unfold in the interval of deferred communication imposed on two people—lovers, perhaps—separated in space and time, between departure and return. They sketch a kind of one-sided correspondence, the chatter of the lonely traveler, full of questions—alternately banal and quasi-profound—that go unanswered, full of second-person pronouns that announce a communicative relation but inaugurate something other than the indexical present of lyric enunciation. Indeed, the text of the film's first sequence begins by crossing the wires of enunciation. First, a lament, cited between quotation marks: '« it's been too many days / since we were together »'. Next, without quotation marks: 'I can already hear your last

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35 Alferi 2002, p. 17.

36 Alferi 2002, p. 25.

words,' a phrase whose 'already' seems to recast the preceding line as *imagined* rather than reported speech, a predictable parting expression not yet uttered. The next line to appear reveals itself to be linked by enjambment to one that precedes it, a continuation of that line that shifts its meaning yet again: 'I can already hear your last words / *in a foreign language*'.³⁷ Which is to say: I can already hear your words in translation, I can hear—now, already—the last words you spoke to me—at a past time—after they've undergone a—still virtual—future transformation. The languorous pace of the text's animation allows each of these interpretive steps—and the various temporal orientations they propose—to assert itself in turn, producing a sense of presence (as a matter of discourse or of experience) that is anything but given, and can only be known in hindsight. The intimacy named in the film's title is caught in this web of displacements. Hovering undecidedly between relationality and isolation, it poses the full paradox of the play of virtuality and mediation within the intimate address, which is constantly negotiating between presence and absence, between self and other, and relying on communicative channels to perform or perhaps rehearse a virtual closeness in the face of actual separation.

These thematic investments are embedded within an image that is engaged in its own investigations of questions of presence, deferral, disjuncture, and the experience of time. Consider this still from early in the opening sequence.



Figure 1. *Intime*.

The outside world flashes by rapidly, right to left, as the train travels express, bypassing the Vesoul train station whose sign we can barely make out. Alferi splits his moving image into vertical panels each of

37 '« voici trop de jours / que nous ne sommes ensemble » / j'entends déjà tes derniers mots / dans une langue étrangère' (Alferi 2013, p. 9).

which is set deliberately out of sync with the others. At their normal playback speed, these images move slightly too quickly for the precise logic of their editing to be discernible, and the arrival of text, which must be read left-to-right, against the current of the passing façades, is a further obstacle to their study.

Alferi refers to the editing technique applied to these images—in force, with variations, throughout the film—as a ‘montage feuilleté.’ This expression suggests not only a layering and puffing (like the lamination of puff pastry: *la pâte feuilletée*) but also, activating its participial sense, something ‘flipped through,’ conjuring the flipbook, a pre-cinematic optical toy that holds a privileged place within Alferi’s imaginary. Here, though, the flipping of images happens not between frames but *within* the space of the frame itself. He describes this technique, in which slices of different frames are made to coexist and play back their footage side by side in endless *décalage*, as a means to explore—once again—an *instant* ‘whose elasticity becomes visible through the distension, the foliation within the image, and no longer just through slow-motion.’³⁸ This reference to slow-motion effects serves to define his *montage feuilleté* against the limitations of analog film—its bond to an illusion of continuity that it can only speed up or slow down—and to suggest something about the potential of the digital image to represent, through its distinct means, a distinct experience of this ‘fact of being in time.’

For many decades now, the concept of indexicality has provided the chief theoretical framework for thinking about the relationship to time intrinsic to different technical image forms. The index, a sign named within pragmatist philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce’s trichotomy of sign-types, is differentiated from the icon (which signifies by resemblance) and the symbol (which signifies by convention) by virtue of the ‘existential relation’ it bears with the thing or event it signifies. Examples of indexical signs offered by Peirce include a footprint, weathervane, smoke, the pointing (index) finger, the word ‘this’, and the instantaneous photograph. Discussions in art history and media theory tend to privilege the specific case of the still photograph in accounts of the index, emphasizing the existential and necessary relation between photographic film and the luminous field that scars it upon exposure, in explicit or implicit opposition to the array of subsequent photographic technologies that are not marked by light in the same way. But the physical trace—photographic exposure, footprint, death mask—is not all there is to the index, it is also the pointing finger and utterances that point (‘look at this!’), in which the physical relationship between sign and referent is that of the spatiotemporal or discursive contiguity of the deictic field, the speech context within which deictic expressions can obtain. In her essay ‘The Indexical and the Concept of Medium

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³⁸ Alferi 2002, p. 44.

Specificity,' film scholar Mary Ann Doane mobilizes this distinction between the index-as-trace (photographic inscription) and index-as-deixis (shifters, pointing), arguing that both are essential to the medium specificity of the cinematic image. The demonstrative, deictic function of the film image is active in the act of shooting film footage, but perhaps more crucially in the actualized present of projection and viewing. In both instances it is the frame of the image, selecting *this* field, *this* focal point and *this* degree of zoom, that we can see something of Peirce's pointing finger: 'Look at this!' In the constrained temporality of film-viewing, where spectators do not have the power to intervene in the image to rewind and re-watch the sequences that pass them by, the ephemeral quality of the deictic is apparent. Look at this, now this, now this, the film reel says. Bringing together these two valences of the index, Doane explains: 'The frame directs the spectator to look here, now, while the trace reconfirms that something exists to be looked at.'³⁹ Doane is working here to produce a more nuanced accounting of the centrality of the index to the specificity of these photochemical media. And if the index is elevated as a core concept for defining the particularity of photochemical media, it is to define these media *against* the increasing prevalence and cultural dominance of the digital image, which is considered to be *non-indexical*.

The non-indexicality of the digital image is argued as a lack of *necessary* relation, or internal necessity, between the image and the field of reality it purports to represent. As far as the digital photograph is concerned, the instability of its indexical function is due to the translation of the image into binary code, which unlike the film negative bears no *resemblance* to its object, is itself invisible and immaterial, and *manipulable*. The potential alterability of the digital image file means that the trace function of the photograph, which 'reconfirms that something *exists* to be looked at,' is contaminated. The digital format, based as it is on translation, invisibility, and alterability, cannot in itself *guarantee* the existence of what is depicted in a digital photograph, nor can it locate it in time and space. Doane asserts that 'the digital image has no internal, necessary, or inalterable relation to time since its temporal specificity is 'guaranteed' only by an external system, subject to manipulation.'⁴⁰ This unstable relationship to time is often reframed as timelessness, the temporal correlate to digital's supposed immateriality. If Doane views the digital era as a potentially dangerous one, it is because the dream of immateriality and timelessness associated with information technologies (data that survives, unchanged and forever accessible, despite the rapid transformation of hardware and software) points to a receding awareness of historicity, of matter and bodies as things subject to time, degradation and death.

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39 Doane 2007, p. 140.

40 Doane 2007, p. 150.

More than any other of Alferi's films, *Intime* takes on the work of probing the specific medial contours of celluloid and digital, very explicitly as they relate to the representation of time and to the relation to time that each of these formats claims. The *montage feuilleté* he employs as the dominant formal principle of this film is central to its investigation of the indexical properties of its own images. Most notably, it is a technique that deploys digital editing tools in order to manipulate the moving image in ways that would not be achievable on celluloid. The editing of celluloid happens between its discrete frames; cuts are made horizontally across the vertical axis of the filmstrip. When the projection of a celluloid image says 'look at this, now this, now this,' as the frames track through the projection gate, the seriality it creates is vertical. This is part of the power the cinematic *dispositif* exerts on Alferi's poetics, as this verticality relates to the sequencing of lines in a poem. Here, though, by cutting into the image frame itself he is able to produce a seriality that is horizontal, and backwards-facing, as each panel begins its playback 'behind' that of the one to its right. And, of course, where the vertical seriality of film frames is erased from view in their projection, this horizontal seriality is not only eminently visible (one could argue that it is the beginning and end of 'what there is to see' in these images) but it indeed impedes—definitively—the viewing of continuous movement that this technical principle makes possible in film.

In splicing the image in this way, Alferi references the discontinuity of film frames that underlies the effect of real-time continuity that the cinematic image achieves. In his notes, he describes these cuts as operating an 'action upon time,' an action that subverts the indexical coherence of the moving image by breaching the unity of the film frame and the uniqueness of the 'instant' with which this photographic unit is associated. Alferi's instant is multiple and unresolving. The train window, which holds together the panels' disjointed playback in that opening sequence, confirms the position occupied by the camera and thus establishes a point of view that is fixed in space but not in time. We seem to know where we're looking from, but not when. For Doane, 'indexicality is inevitably linked with the singular, the unique, with the imprint of time and all its differentiating force.'⁴¹ In these images, which deprive the viewer of a temporally stable point of view, it is precisely the singularity of the instant that is contested (a contestation already in force in his poem's observation that 'as soon as you think of it an instant / splits in two'). Indeed, he seems to take the assumption of the digital image's non-indexicality, its timelessness, as a direct provocation. Alferi's energetic exploration of the indexical properties of digital—its capacity to think and visualize actuality and simultaneity beyond the spatiotemporal conditions of the cinematic image—expresses a rejection of celluloid's monopoly on

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41 Doane 2002, p. 208.

temporal truth-telling, directing attention away from questions of medium specificity and towards a craftsman's appraisal of technical possibilities.

In his critique of Greenberg's formalism in his 2003 *Future of the Image*, Jacques Rancière counters the drive towards essentialization of artistic mediums in Greenberg, arguing that the question of 'properness' in this domain is precisely the wrong one:

A medium is not a 'proper' means or material. It is a surface of conversion: a surface of equivalence between the different arts' ways of making: a conceptual space of articulation between these ways of making and forms of visibility and intelligibility determining the way in which they can be viewed and conceived.⁴²

In the place of a medium-specificity that has each art turn inward to find its ways of making, Rancière reminds us that we can only speak of medium in the singular because they exist in a plurality. In this spirit, in their 1995 introduction to the *Revue de littérature générale*, Alferi and Cadiot explain that in bringing together contributions from philosophers and composers and photographers and visual artists for an issue dedicated to poetry, they are not motivated by any interdisciplinary obsession—interdisciplinarity for interdisciplinarity's sake—but rather as a way of 'sinking writing back into the plurality of the arts.'⁴³ Alferi's approach to intermediality is emphatically not that of the post-medium condition decried by Rosalind Krauss as artistic practice "cut free from the guarantees of artistic tradition" and indifferent to the unique capacities and histories of media and aesthetic forms.⁴⁴ Much to the contrary, what he savors most is the encounter between the incontrovertible technical specifics of two or more media forms and the silences and distortions that result from the remediation of one kind of image (for instance) by another, and through which we come to know each a bit better. If he takes his poetic preoccupations to the screen in his filmmaking, it is in part because the screen is an originary site of convergence—the site of potent childhood memories of watching *The Night of the Hunter* broadcast on TV, the depth of its celluloid image flattened out and struck through with scanlines. An experience of the present, of presence (and telepresence), that entails a confusion of temporalities, a layering (*feuilletage*) of times that yields an image of the contemporary.

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⁴² Rancière 2007, pp. 75-6.

⁴³ Alferi and Cadiot 1995, p. 18.

⁴⁴ Krauss 1999, p. 57.

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Césaire's Claim: On the Retroactive Genesis of Free Verse

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Abstract: In his “Reply to Depestre Haitian Poet (Elements of an *Ars Poetica*),” Aimé Césaire situates a claim upon the revolutionary content of free verse form amid a recollection of the Vodou ceremony at Bois-Caïman which sparked the Haitian revolution, linking both with an invocation of marronage as poetic practice. Excavating the radical implication of this claim—that the Haitian revolution contains the origin of free verse—this article draws out the retroactive, untimely structure of its historical intervention, working through the relationship of Vodou and marronage to written history, to the question of “national poetry,” and to the entanglement of speech and writing in Césaire’s free verse poetics. While Depestre views Césaire’s claim, and the poetics of negritude, as exemplary of an irrational metaphysics, the article argues that Césaire’s surrealism in fact entails a lucid recognition of the entanglement of reason and unreason in what I call the “historical metaphysics of race.” The article concludes by situating the historical and poetic logic of Césaire’s *Ars Poetica* as exemplary of the double function of the imagination as a faculty: to both synthesize the time of the present and to displace it through the representation of absent objects.

Keywords: Aimé Césaire, René Depestre, Negritude, Haitian Revolution, Free Verse, Vodou, Marronage

I think the problem is badly posed.
– Aimé Césaire, “On National Poetry”

There is no history of Vodou.
– Willy Apollon, *Vodou: A Space for “Voices”*

When reason and unreason come into contact, an electrical shock occurs. This is called polemics.
– Friedrich Schlegel, *Athenaeum* Fragments

Aimé Césaire’s polemical poem, “Reply to Depestre Haitian Poet (Elements of an *Ars Poetica*),” opens with a scene of imagined recollection:

It is a Seine night
and I recall as if drunk
the mad chant of Boukman birthing your country
with the forceps of the storm¹

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¹ Césaire, 2017, p. 805-809. All subsequent quotations of Césaire’s “Reply to Depestre” are from these pages.

It is a scene of *imagined* recollection because what is remembered was not directly experienced by the speaker who recalls it. Rather, it is a scene which has been spoken of, read about, mythologized, transmitted and transformed, claimed and reclaimed: the ritual oath led by maroon leader and Vodou houngan Dutty Boukman at Bois-Caïman on August 14, 1791, an event which marked the beginning of the Saint Domingue revolution and thus the birth of Haiti. From the banks of the Seine, in a state of poetic intoxication converting imagination into recollection, as if possessed by memory, Césaire's remembrance of the scene draws its taking place into the retroactive present of the poem. The "forceps of the storm" figure not only the torrential rains, thunder, and lightning said to have attended the ceremony at Bois-Caïman, but also the convulsive and rigid inscriptions of poetic language: that strange dialectic of inchoate determinacy that is the birth of poesis itself.

Césaire's claim not only to imagine but to remember "the mad chant of Boukman" will also come to imply, as the poem unfolds, a retroactive claim upon the history of poetic form: a claim to the genesis of free verse in marronnage, in Vodou ritual, in the Haitian revolution, and a claim to the identity of negritude with this inauguration. The retroactive claim of Césaire's poem is that the ritual at Bois-Caïman gives birth to free verse at the same time as it gives birth to negritude and to Haiti, and it is from this compound event, generating poetic form through historical rupture, that the "Elements of an Ars Poetica" may be drawn. However, I will argue as well that this generative event can only be produced through a displacement of history by retroactive causality, such that the poem demands an understanding of how the retroactive determination of the significance of an event, by poetic language, can determine as well the significance of the poetic form in which that determination is inscribed. Toward such an understanding, I will excavate a series of retroactive determinations implicit in Césaire's poem, thinking through the dense and complex structure of its historical dialectic in order to situate, at its core, a very specific approach to the relationship between imagination, time, and form. This approach has important implications for how we grasp the relationship between poetry, philosophy, and history.

Césaire's poem is the crux of a controversy in the mid-1950s over the poetics of negritude, socialist realism, and national poetry.² In a number of programmatic texts, Louis Aragon had argued for a turn against the "individualism" of free verse and surrealist experimentation, calling for a return to classical French forms and meters in the interest of linking socialist realism to national tradition.³ Aragon's dialectical

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2 For a selection of articles from this debate, see the dossier published by *Présence Africaine*, 2002.

3 See Aragon, 1954a and Aragon, 1954b. Aragon's argument for suturing forms supposedly representative of "national poetry" to socialist realism is best understood in the context of a transition from the wartime French Resistance into postwar French communist politics.

argument was that the revolutionary content of committed poetry would be more politically effective and legible to the masses if it transformed, from within, the forms of traditional French verse, rather than breaking with those traditions altogether. Convinced by this argument, the Haitian poet René Depestre wrote a letter to Charles Dobzynski declaring his allegiance to “the decisive teachings of Aragon,” which had helped him to cast off “the yoke of formal individualism.”⁴ Expounding “the interest that the new French movement of national poetry represents for any Haitian poet,” Depestre positioned himself as follows:

Since the French linguistic domain has expanded beyond the national and geographic borders of France, it is natural that any debate arising about matters of form become relevant also to those who have the honor, as a consequence of the ups and downs of history, to share with you French creators, the inheritance of prosody, the renewed continuation of traditional measures specific to the development of poetry in France.

Depestre's investment in Aragon's doctrine sparked a vigorous debate among black poets in the pages of *Présence Africaine*, amid which Césaire, following his poetic reply, offered a more severe rebuke in prose: “it seems to me that Depestre, under the pretext of aligning himself with Aragon's positions, falls into a detestable assimilationism.”⁵ Denouncing what he calls “a worthless and desiccating gymnastics,” Moustapha Wade asks “what is the connection between us Negroes of 1956, and any kind of ‘return to the sonnet’, to the historically necessary change of some western aesthetic?”⁶ Léopold Senghor acknowledges that Depestre is right to present Haiti as “historically founded upon a symbiosis, a crossbred civilization,” noting that “this fact legitimates his quest, his will to make a synthesis of both traditions.” Yet he argues that “the weakness of Depestre, to speak clearly, is that he grounded his debate on a realism invented by and made for the western world.”⁷ Addressing Depestre's aspiration to share the “traditional measures specific to the development of poetry in France,” David Diop points out that the development of *vers libre* is itself specific to the development of poetry in France, such

4 Depestre's letter to French poet Charles Dobzynski (then living in São Paulo) would be published in *Les Lettres Françaises*. See Depestre, 1955a.

5 Césaire, 1955. Depestre would later abandon this “renewed continuation of traditional measures,” most conspicuously in *A Rainbow for the Christian West: Voodoo Mystery Poem*. In that work, containing a long section titled “Epiphanies of the Voodoo Gods,” Depestre would suture a Haitian epic to the role of Vodou in the revolution. See Depestre, 1967.

6 For a pithy distillation of the debate and a summary of its contributions, see Joachim, 2002. Wade qtd. in Joachim, p. 214.

7 Qtd. in Joachim, 2002, p. 215.

that “limiting ‘national character’ to the use of fixed forms amounts to denying the value of those experiments which, arriving at free verse, have incontestably contributed to injecting new blood into french letters.”⁸

Indeed, when Mallarmé announced the advent of *vers libre* to an audience at Oxford in his 1894 lecture on “Music and Letters,” he spoke as a Frenchman arriving with tidings from his native land: “I do indeed bring news. The most surprising kind. Such a thing has not been seen before. — Verse has been tampered with.” Moreover, Mallarmé suggested that this transformation of verse had an asynchronic, inapparent, and ironic relation to the transformation of the nation: “Governments change; prosody always remains intact: either because, in revolutions, it goes unnoticed, or because the barrage does not impose upon opinion that this last dogma could vary.”⁹ In “Crisis of Verse,” Mallarmé specifically contrasts this crisis of the late nineteenth century with the revolutionary crisis of the late eighteenth century: “we are witnessing, in this fin-de-siècle, not—as it was during the last one—a revolution, but, far from the public square: a trembling of the veil in the temple, with significant folds, and, a little, its rending.”¹⁰ The crisis of verse is not a revolution that takes place in the public square, but it may be an aftershock, an asynchronous trembling in the wake of an earlier rupture, an underground relay between history and culture that went previously unnoticed. Such is the recessed implication of Mallarmé’s recondite prose.

This is the field of speculative and historical problems, in the background of a conjunctural debate, into which Césaire’s “Reply to Depestre Haitian Poet” intervenes. Césaire will transform that field by positioning the persistence of fixed forms as remainders of slavery, and by positioning free verse not as a trembling of the veil in the temple subsequent to the upheaval of the French revolution, but rather as a storm inaugurating and perpetually erupting from the Haitian revolution. The central section of Césaire’s poem develops the speculative logic of this intervention through an appeal to Depestre to leave aside the “cadged melody” of predetermined forms:

Leave it Depestre leave it
the solemn beggary of a cadged melody

leave them

the droning of the minuet blood the stale water trickling down
along the pink steps
and as for the gruntings of the schoolmasters
enough

8 Qtd. in Joachim, 2002, p. 214.

9 Mallarmé, 2007b, p. 183. Translation modified.

10 Stéphane Mallarmé, “Crisis of Verse” in *Divagations*, trans. Barbara Johnson, Harvard: Belknap Press, 2007, 201.

let's maroon on them Depestre let's maroon on them
as in times past we marooned on our slave drivers

Depestre I indict the bad manners of our blood
is it our fault
if the squall blows up
and suddenly unteaches us how to count on our fingers
to do three turns to salute

Or rather it comes to the same thing
blood is something that comes goes and comes back
and ours I suppose comes back to us after lingering
at some macumba. What is to be done? Truly
blood is a powerful vodun

It is true that this season they are turning out nicely rounded sonnets
for us to do that would recall far too well
the sugary juice that back there drool the distilleries in the mornes
when the slow thin oxen circle round to the buzzing of the mosquitoes

Ouch! Depestre the poem is not a mill to
grind sugar cane certainly not¹¹

To turn out nicely rounded sonnets would recall the distilleries of the plantations, but the poem is not a mill to grind sugar cane; therefore, the *ars poetica* of negritude entails a call to maroon on the grunting schoolmasters as slaves once marooned on slave drivers. The abandonment of fixed forms is attributed to “the bad manners of our blood”—opposed to “the droning of the minuet blood” of schoolmasters and slavedrivers—due to which “the squall blows up / and suddenly unteaches us how to count on our fingers.” The squall that unteaches quantitative form recalls the forceps of the storm associated, at the beginning of the poem, with the Vodou ceremony at Bois-Caïman—and thus blood is described as “a powerful vodun.” The circulation of blood, which comes goes and comes back, takes on the significance of a retroactive temporality through which the past returns “after lingering / at some macumba.”¹² The primary “elements” of Césaire’s *ars poetica* are thus as follows: marronnage is aligned with the formal escape of free verse from fixed forms that recall slavery, while such poetic marronnage itself recalls and indeed re-enacts the storm at Bois-Caïman relayed by

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¹¹ In these two lines I modify the translation of Arnold and Eshleman: the French is “le poème n’est pas un moulin à / passer de la cane à sucre ça non.”

¹² The sense of “macumba” here is glossed by Arnold as “A syncretic Afro-American religion of Brazil; by extension, a ritual ceremony analogous to vodou.” Césaire, 2017, p. 924.

the vodun of “the bad manners of our blood,” constituting a collective bound not only by blood but also by the flaring up of history against the night of an intoxicated present tense, possessed by memory, wherein the revolution is itself reborn.

Before proceeding, let me note that the intricate play of irony in this passage, and throughout much of the poem, amounts to a kind of implicit free indirect discourse. The “voice” of the poem, and the focalization of its cultural and political perspective, fluctuates with such subtlety that it not only mimics but effectively *sublates* the sensibility of the “them” to which its “I,” its “us,” and its “our” are opposed. “J'accuse les mauvaises manières de notre sang”: the line appropriates *their* perspective on improper manners and affirms it as *ours*—within the framework of Césaire’s address to a fellow black poet—thus excluding the white reader from very perspective such readers are implicitly assigned when they read the word “us.” Indeed, this is the basic rhetorical and psychological operation of negritude: the claiming of that for which blackness is blamed, thereby negating the white world’s perspective by subsuming and transforming it through an ironic, though nevertheless wrenching, affirmation. The speaker “plays dumb” so as to implicitly indict white condescension in its own voice, though now speaking for an “us” designating a collective black subject:

is it our fault
if the squall blows up
and suddenly unteaches us how to count on our fingers

Thus the act of subversive black agency the poem prescribes—poetic marronnage—is ironically attributed to an involuntary cause and a natural source: the bad manners of our blood within and the rising storm without, as if corrupting the relation between the Kantian moral law and the starry heavens. Yet this very attribution of causality to natural, reflexive sources itself recalls and instantiates the fusion of voluntary and involuntary causes connoted by “the mad chant of Boukman” and “the forceps of the storm.” August 14, 1791 re-enters the poem at the crux of the relation between nature and will, and also at the crux of the relation between “their” perspective and “ours.” In the very *act* of attributing agency to involuntary causes, the poem sublates those into voluntary claims upon a present tense—indeed upon the form of the poem as it unfolds—and these claims are fused by imagination and will with a revolutionary past and channeled into a clarion imperative: “marronnons-les Depestre marronnons-les.” The Leninist question—“What is to be done?”—is absorbed into the rhetoric of negritude through the ironic sublation implied by the reply: “Truly / blood is a powerful vodun.” What can we do? What is to be done about the nature they have assigned us—unreasonable, unteachable, ill-mannered, superstitious—except to take

it up within the medium of our own will, making of the rising storm our own political and poetic force, as lucid as inebriated? That is the question implicitly posed to Depestre by Césaire's poem in the voice of a would-be poetic Lenin, of an Aragon, which now speaks in the insinuating and subversive voice of negritude, as sly as it is direct.

Later Césaire will inquire (with no question mark), "did Dessalines actually mince about at Vertières," tying the knot between the beginning of the revolution at Bois-Caïmon and the end of the revolution with Dessalines' victory over Napoleon's army in 1803. Here the implied answer is "no," answering Lenin's question (1902) with Dessalines' defeat of the French (1803). A negative imperative to stop "mincing around" (mignonnerait) with fixed forms is indirectly delivered by a rhetorical question before being directly delivered by blunt instructions:

and for the rest
whether the poem turns well or badly on the oil of its hinges
screw it Depestre screw it let Aragon talk.

The poem then *does* let Aragon talk, but in a voice at once his own and another's:

Comrade Depestre
It is assuredly a very great problem
the relation between poetry and Revolution
content conditions form
and if we took into account the dialectical detour
by which form taking its revenge
like a strangler fig suffocates the poem
but no
I won't assign myself the report
I'd rather regard the spring. Precisely
it's the Revolution

Here we have a complex mode of parody, wherein the sincerity of Césaire's discourse emerges through ironic mimicry of Aragon's. The passage implicitly mocks the officious discourse of Communist Party disputation, as well as the argument that revolutionary content will transfigure traditional forms through a dialectical detour, comically transforming this into a revenge of form on content represented as a strangler fig suffocating the poem. Yet Césaire *does* think that revolutionary content conditions form, indeed that revolution is the *ground* of form ("le fond condition la forme"). He says this in Aragon's voice even as he affirms it in his own. This duplicity *makes* his argument, as he doubles the content of Aragon's discourse with the emergence of his own in an incisive free verse, then casting off this mimicry to

speak more directly from the position of a first person pronoun: "I'd rather regard the spring. Precisely / it's the Revolution." The content of revolution is the creative immanence of making, indivisible from the coming into being of form. As Senghor notes in his assessment of the Depestre/Césaire controversy, "the strength of the Césairian argumentation lies in the fact that it is without presumption. It rests soundly upon the self-evidence that content is what makes the container and the form."¹³ Yes, content conditions form, but it only does so in a revolutionary manner if form does not pre-exist content but is coeval and coextensive with its coming into being: if the form conditioned by content is itself an activity.

Césaire's deployment of an ironic, dialectical mode of free indirect discourse (who speaks?) in the medium of lyric address, shifting between imperative mood, rhetorical question, parodic mimicry, and figurative image is essential to the poem's retroactive logic, to its speculative claim upon history. Let us reconstruct the associative relations at the core of this claim, unfolding from the present tense in which the poem begins ("It is a Seine night"), and resulting in a particular determination of form by content:

1) Amid a Seine night in 1955, the speaker recalls the night of August 14, 1791 in Saint Domingue, "the mad chant of Boukman birthing your country."

2) The genesis of the Haitian revolution is thus associated with marronnage and Vodou ritual.

3) Marronnage and Vodou are associated with free verse, which is positioned as stemming from their revolutionary content.

4) The genesis of free verse is thereby situated not as subsequent to the French Revolution (as in Mallarmé's account), but rather as coeval with the genesis of the Haitian revolution, with the chants, the drums, and the storm of the ceremony at Bois-Caïman

The implicit claim at the heart of Césaire's poem is thus that the inaugural source of free verse is not Rimbaud's "Marine" or "Mouvement" in 1872-3,¹⁴ nor Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* in 1855, but rather "the mad chant of Boukman" in 1791. The form of the claim upon this revolutionary content, in the present, is the inscription of the poem itself, its existence on the page. Because it does not pre-exist the making of its marks (as would

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13 Qtd. in Joachim, 2002, p. 215 (translation modified).

14 For a list of the first published examples of *vers libre*, see Scott, 1990, p. 63-74.

the form of an Alexandrine, the sonnet, or a traditional rhyme scheme), the form is *nothing other* than that inscription, the content inscribed.¹⁵ The retroactively determined meaning of history inscribed *in* the poem comes to exist as the poem by which that meaning is determined, and this immanence of form and content is enabled at the same time by the inscription of the poem in free verse and the argument of the poem for the revolutionary genesis and significance of free verse. But how are we to understand this “meaning,” the series of determinations I outline above? In particular, how should we understand the centrality of marronnage and Vodou to Césaire’s claim upon the revolutionary content of free verse?

As Colin Dayan notes, “vodou enters written history as a weird set piece: the ceremony at Bois-Caïman. The story is retold by nearly every historian, especially those outsiders who enjoyed linking the first successful slave revolt to a gothic scene of blood drinking and abandon.” But as Dayan also points out, “what matters is how necessary the story remains to Haitians who continue to construct their identity not only by turning to the revolution of 1791 but by seeking its origins in a service quite possibly imagined by those who disdain it.”¹⁶ Any reference to Bois-Caïman thus involves the absorption of event and oral transmission into a complex entanglement of writing, history, imagination, and retroactive construction. The stakes of this absorption and this entanglement are high, because they are bound up with the distribution of facts and values perpetually renegotiated by accounts of, and claims upon, the Haitian revolution and its legacy. “Could the Haitian revolution be told in the language of France?”¹⁷ Dayan asks, and later she situates the relevance of Vodou to this question as follows:

15 As Charles Olson would put it, borrowing from Robert Creeley in his treatise on “Projective Verse” (an essay central to Amiri Barks’s poetics): “FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT.” Olson, 1997, p. 239-249.

16 Dayan, 1995, p. 29. The most important example of a report on the ceremony by “those who disdain it” is Antoine Dalmas’s account, written in 1793 and according to David Geggus “by several decades the earliest description of what many Haitians regard as the foundational event of their national history in the belief that Vodou played a central role in the Haitian Revolution’s success.” Here is Dalmas’s account: “The elements of this plan had been worked out a few days before by the main leaders on the Lenormand plantation at Morne Rouge. Before carrying it out, they held a sort of celebration or sacrifice in the middle of an uncultivated, wooded area on the Choiseul plantation called Le Caïman, where the Negroes gathered in great number. An entirely black pig, surrounded with fetishes and loaded with a variety of bizarre offerings, was sacrificed to the all-powerful spirit of the black race. The religious ceremonies that accompanied the killing of the pig were typical of the Africans, as was their eagerness to drink its blood and the value they placed on getting some of its hairs as a sort of talisman that they thought could make them invulnerable. It was natural that such a primitive and ignorant caste would begin the most terrible attack with superstitious rites of an absurd and blood-thirsty religion.” Antoine Dalmas, *Histoire de la révolution de Saint-Domingue*, qtd in Geggus, 2014, p. 78-79.

17 Dayan, 1995, p. 7.

The emblems of heroism or love recuperated in written histories of Haiti often seem to be caricatures or simulations of French “civilization.” In this recycling of images, as in the case of Louis Napoleon and Soulouque, we are caught in a mimetic bind. The heterogeneity of vodou syncretism, however, offers an alternative to such blockage. Vodou does not oppose what we might call “Western” or “Christian” but freely associates seemingly irreconcilable elements, taking in materials from the dominant culture even as it resists or coexists with it.¹⁸

It is because of this “heterogeneity of vodou syncretism” that the culture of Vodou can be properly aligned with a synthetic cultural movement that is a specifically modern, revolutionary *beginning*: drawing elements of African religion together with “seemingly irreconcilable elements,” it displaces the cultural hegemony of French colonialism while also sublating the lineage of African and precolonial origins.¹⁹

The integral relation between Vodou and marronnage is central to this specificity, as it is to Césaire’s poem. In her outstanding history of the revolution, *The Making of Haiti: The San Domingue Revolution from Below*, Carolyn E. Fick explains the fusion of Vodou and marronnage into a revolutionary force:

reciprocal relations existed between marronnage as a mode of slave resistance, in itself, and other forms of resistance for which marronnage provided conditions that allowed these to pervade. Among them was voodoo. As one of the first collective forms of resistance, it was both a cultural and, in its practical applications, a politically ideological force. Since it was severely outlawed in the colony and therefore forced into clandestinity, its development and proliferation were reinforced in the general context of marronnage. The maroon leaders of African origin were almost without exception either voodoo priests or, at least, voodoo devotees. And, of course, the case has generally been made for the perpetuation, or at least reconstitution within a New World context, of African ways in marronnage.²⁰

Fick will further elaborate on the specific manner in which Vodou ritual, both enabled by and motivating marronnage, also enabled and motivated revolutionary conditions of possibility:

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¹⁸ Dayan, 1995, p. 51.

¹⁹ Carolyn E. Fick notes, “one distinguishes in voodoo both a horizontal and a vertical syncretism; that is, a syncretism between Dahomean Vodou and other African cults, as well as between voodoo (comprising the diverse whole of these cults) and Catholicism.” Fick, 1990, p. 290.

²⁰ Fick, 1990, p. 57.

And so, a popular religion on the one hand, voodoo constituted, on the other, an important organizational tool for resistance. It facilitated secret meetings, as well as the initiation and the adherence of slaves of diverse origins, provided a network of communication between slaves of different plantations who gathered clandestinely to participate in the ceremonies, and secured the pledge of solidarity and secrecy of those involved in plots against masters.²¹

The most important such pledge of solidarity was the ceremony at Bois-Caïman, prior to the well-planned and coordinated slave uprising that began a week later on the night of August 22.²²

Sparking and sustaining revolt, the organizational cohesion and spiritual solidarity afforded by the combination of Vodou and marronnage established the revolutionary conditions under which Touissant L'Ouverture would come to lead the process of liberation through its long military phase, prior to his arrest on Napoleon's orders in 1802 and his death in 1803, followed by Dessalines' conclusive victory over the French at Vertières. Not only, then, does Vodou involve a syncretic combination of elements traversing African, precolonial, and Catholic traditions, and not only does the inauguration of the revolution involve an organizational and spiritual synthesis of Vodou and marronnage; the longer revolutionary process itself, from 1791-1804, also involves an entwining of Vodou religion with military discipline and what we might call Toussaint's Catholic rationalism, suffused with Jacobin principles.

But according to reports of his oration at Bois-Caïman, "the mad chants of Boukman" were already accompanied by an appeal to the principle of liberty experienced, importantly, as a corporeal voice:

The god of the white man calls him to commit crimes; our god asks only good works of us. But this god who is so good orders revenge! He will direct our hands; he will aid us. Throw away the image of the god of the whites who thirsts for our tears and listen to the voice of liberty which speaks in the hearts of all of us.²³

Whatever the veracity of this account or its degree of exactitude, what is striking about its centrality to the lore of the Haitian revolution is the

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21 Fick, 1990, p. 59.

22 For a concise but relatively detailed chronology of the revolution, see Nesbitt, 2008, p. 199-206. On marronnage and "slave agency," see Roberts, 2015. Roberts engages with Césaire's "Reply to Depestre" in his Introduction.

23 Qtd. in Fick, 1990, p. 93, translated from a French translation of the creole in Pauléus Sannon, *Histoire de Toussaint Louverture* (1920). On the history and veracity of accounts of Boukman's oration and the Bois-Caïman ceremony, see Appendix B in Fick, p. 260-266.

contradiction between the universal and the particular constructed by its closing formulation (*Couté la liberté li palé nan coeur nous tous*).²⁴ The whole passage develops an opposition between “the god of the white man” and “our god.” Yet the status of “the hearts of all of us”—the extension of “all of us” with respect to the opposition between “the white man” and “us”—is perfectly ambiguous, and this ambiguity encapsulates the dialectical *depth* of the contradiction of universality and particularity that Césaire will famously articulate in his 1956 letter to Thorez: “I’m not burying myself in a narrow particularism. But neither do I want to lose myself in an emaciated universalism....My conception of the universal is that of a universal enriched by all that is particular, a universal enriched by every particular, the deepening of the coexistence of all particulars.”²⁵ In a profound inversion of what Césaire calls “emaciated universalism,” it is *the whites* who are positioned as particular in the transmitted text of Boukman’s oration, while “our,” “us,” and “all of us” are positioned as that universal which is the enrichment, the deepening, and the righteous violence of the particular—universality as black power, as black religion, as the Vodou god Amiri Baraka will invoke at the end of his great poem, “Black Dada Nihilimus”:

(may a lost god damballah, rest or save us
against the murders we intend
against his lost white children
black dada nihilismus²⁶)

The signifier *Boukman* comes to incarnate the dialectical contradiction between Vodou and Jacobinism, French and Haitian revolutions, “the god of the white man” (particular) and “our god” (particularization of the universal/universalization of the particular). And the locus of this contradiction in Boukman’s reported oration, the site its depth, is the negation and sublation of *image* by the *voice* lodged in every heart: “throw away the image of the god of the whites”; “listen to the voice of liberty which speaks in the heart of all of us.” It is *speech* through which universality is enriched and deepened by the particular, through which image is corporealized as voice.

This brings us to the problem of the absorption and transmission of orality by writing—a problem already signalled in the passages we have cited from Dayan (who refers to “the emblems of heroism or love recuperated in written histories of Haiti”) and a problem inherent to any discussion of Vodou and its role in the revolution. The most compelling

24 On the politics of universality in the context of the Haitian Revolution, see Nesbitt, 2008.

25 Aimé Césaire, 2010, p. 152.

26 Jones, 1946, p. 64.

effort to address this problem is Willy Apollon's extraordinary book, written as a dissertation under the direction of Gilles Deleuze, *Le Vaudou: Un espace pour le "voix"* (1976).²⁷ Whereas Derrida developed a critique of the metaphysics of presence implicit in phonocentrism, Apollon develops a critique of "the imperialism of writing" as that which founds the numerable and its order of calculation.²⁸ In Apollon's account

writing is an instrument of conquest and a system of counting at the same time. On the one hand it conquers by bringing into a signifying (and thus conventional and profitable) unit. On the other hand it names and numbers. It counts. It makes multiplicities, innumerable and without remainder, pass into measurements where the infinitely repeatable unary trait introduces a controllable and exchangeable plurality.²⁹

The grounding of writing in the unary trait (an iterable mark forming a unit) numbers, counts, and calculates the innumerable of the voice while also producing it as a remainder, which is then situated as the cause of writing itself. Thus, for Apollon, "the refusal of writing-voice dualism means not turning the voice into a remainder of writing which could then be thought as its cause."³⁰ In this sense Apollon, like Derrida, produces a critique of phonocentrism as a form of "writing-voice dualism" which posits voice as the origin of writing, yet he does so as if from the opposite perspective, insisting upon "the innumerable of the voice" as itself refractory to presence and to the inscription of discrete marks, as an uncountable "Other."

Within the colonial operation of writing as an instrument of conquest, which "works to regulate the sign to such a degree as to substitute it for the voice,"³¹ Apollon situates Vodou as "a space for the

27 Apollon is a psychoanalyst of Haitian descent who, since 1977, has established and sustained a practically innovative and theoretically influential practice in Quebec City, focused in particular on the treatment of psychosis. For a selection of theoretical writings see Apollon, Bergeron, Cantin, 2002. For other writings and information on the clinical practice developed by Apollon, Bergeron, and Cantin, see <http://www.gifric.com>

28 Apollon, 1976, p. 268. I quote here from a draft translation by Heidi Arsenault and Cynthia Mitchell.

29 Apollon, *Le Vaudou*, 267. It is notable that the work of Alain Badiou, in which iterable mathematical signs are shown to enable the thinking of untotizable multiplicities, constitutes a significant rejoinder to a theory of writing's introduction of the infinitely repeatable unary trait as a production of controllable plurality. See Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham, London: Continuum, 2005. See also Badiou, "One, Multiple, Multiplicities" in *Theoretical Writings*, trans. Ray Brassier and Alberto Toscano, London: Continuum 2006, 68-82. An account of the relation between Badiou's work and Apollon's theory of writing would be well worth pursuing, especially considering that both inherent and transform aspects of Lacan's teaching.

30 Apollon, 1976, p. 267, my translation.

31 Apollon, 1976, p. 240. I quote here from the translation of Apollon's chapter on "The Crisis of Possession" by Canning and McNulty, 1999.

voices.” In particular, the crisis of possession—displacing not only the personality but also the voice of the one possessed—makes manifest the voice of a “stranger” irreducible to writing and refractory to individuality. “In the formation, as well as the historical reconstruction of Haitian Vodou,” writes Apollon, “the loas remain strangers, the cultural and historic figures of the voice.”³² Apollon thus acknowledges the paradox encountered by any written commentary upon Vodou:

What we are able to see of the ‘voices’ within the spectacle of possession runs the risk of being dissolved by the act of interpretation, in which writing reduces it to the sign....Indeed, the particular difficulty presented by the attempt to put Vodou in writing is an effect of this function of writing, which consists in stifling the multiplicity of the ‘voices’ by imposing on them a single meaning: that which is upheld by the dominant classes and social groups.

The question, then, is “how can possession be made to pass through writing?”³³

Before considering how Césaire’s poem implicitly answers this question, and how the question bears upon the dispute between Césaire and Depestre, we must also note Apollon’s consideration of the significance of this question for any understanding of the Haitian revolution. If the crisis of possession is the opening of a space for exterior voices, Apollon likewise considers marronage as the intrusion of an outside puncturing the time of slave labor (*un dehor troue le temps de la production esclavagiste*).³⁴ Indeed, marronage opens an outside which will be the exteriority of “the revolution” itself to historical narrative, of event to representation, of act to justification, of revolutionary activity to revolutionary principles, of the history of the masses to the history of their leaders—we might add, of “the mad chant of Boukman” to the *story* of Bois-Caïman. For Apollon, “there is no history of Vodou,”³⁵ just as, with respect to written narrative, the movement of the revolution “persists upon its margins, at the edge of its interstices, forever letting itself be carried along by what traverses the movement of denial and/or misunderstanding or misrecognition that (through which) history institutes (itself).” Any *description* of the revolution must therefore be cognizant of its own potentially repressive function:

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32 Apollon, 1976, p 269, draft trans. Arsenault and Mitchell.

33 Apollon, 1976, p. 240, trans. Canning and McNulty.

34 Apollon, 1976, p. 61, my translation.

35 Apollon, 1976, p. 107, my translation.

The description of the de-rangement that traverses the old world and destructures it may leave completely censored this wild and incendiary errancy of blacks/drives that afflicts, *from elsewhere*, the colonial order. This has another duration. It has no place in the space-time of the social formation of Saint Domingue. It is already...Haiti, unnameable, uncanny, unspeakable and shameful. Vodou, once again. A word made apt by the very strangeness of its dissonance.³⁶

But if the dissonance specified here is unassimilable to historical description, fracturing the sense of the very word through which it is articulated, what the inscription of that dissonance nevertheless connotes is the untimely genesis of an errancy at the crux of marronnage, Vodou, and revolutionary power:

In fact, it is the formidable errancy of the maroons that opens another time and space in the colony at the same time that it accounts for what must be called the birth of Haitian Vodou at the same time that it sets to work what would erupt in the great insurrection of August 1791 as an apocalyptic march towards independence.³⁷

Marronnage, an exterior time and space puncturing the temporal economy of slavery; Vodou, a space for the voices of strangers; Haiti, an unavowable future already deranging the colonial world of Saint Domingue. These find their simultaneity ("at the same time") in mythic time of unverifiable certainty: the victory of maroons become revolutionaries was not only made possible but inevitable through their possession by invulnerable loas, brushing aside the cannonballs and the numerical superiority of Spanish, British, and French armies. "This story," writes Apollon,

repeated to me many times with its dreamy allure, its surrealist accents, its delirious beliefs and its hallucinatory convictions, obviously has nothing to do with official writing. But it was the fecund instance of a suspicion that undermined everything else for us. This crazy story producing the real, the subversion of colonial space, the rupture of its language, at that point the only one, and the absence of words that mark the impossibility of saying the inadmissible.³⁸

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³⁶ Apollon, 1976, p. 65, my translation.

³⁷ Apollon, 1976, p. 75, my translation.

³⁸ Apollon, 1976, p. 51, my translation.

In Apollon's vertiginous book, we find marronnage, Vodou, and revolution sharpened into the single point of a mythic history infiltrating writing as the impossibility of what is written, as what could only make sense *somewhere else* than amid the admissible.

Now this is the field of impossibility within which Césaire inaugurates his poem: the recollection of what has never been experienced, a mad chant giving birth to a country, a storm functioning as forceps—the speculative elaboration of a literal-figurative history graspable only through the identity of fact and fiction, the certainty of their indistinction, the *confidence* of their coincidence. This elaboration will come to include a claim upon free verse as the form adequate to this content, and we are now in position to understand how this claim involves, as well, an inscription of writing within the space of voices. For this is indeed the project at issue: not to inscribe the voice within the space of writing, but to inscribe writing within the space of voices. Crucially, we must understand that Césaire's claim is not at all a *general* assertion that free verse is the adequate form of revolutionary content, but rather a *particular* claim upon a *singular* relay between the Haitian revolution, Vodou, marronnage, and free verse—and moreover, a relay that is retroactively established, skewing the linearity of history, negating the authority of verified record, and displacing the precedence of origin. The singular origin of this relay is Césaire's poem itself, which begins in the present tense, "C'est une nuit de Seine." The past intoxicates the present, which re-enters the storm of revolution through the medium of a chant recollected as a birth, such that the birth of a country *then* becomes the production of an *ars poetica* now. "Haiti where negritude rose for the first time," (29) Césaire had written in *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, staking there as well a retroactive claim upon the genesis of the present in the first poetic inscription of the word "negritude." The "Reply to Depestre" may be understood as a retroactive claim upon this earlier retroactive claim as well, now elaborating, in free verse, a speculative argument for the negritude of free verse ("the poem is not a mill to / grind sugar cane") which the earlier poem had made manifest without elaboration. It is now the possession of the poetic present by "the mad chant" of the revolutionary past that inscribes free verse within Vodou's space of voices, via the imperative of marronnage (marronnons-les Depestre marronnon-les).

Free verse will be Césaire's answer to the question, "how can possession be made to pass through writing?" What I mean to emphasize, however, is that the apparently "formal" nature of this answer is inseparable from the speculative "content" of the poem by which it is articulated. The poem establishes its address to Depestre through a rhetorical question:

valiant rider of the tom-tom
 is it true that you mistrust the native forest
 ...
 is it possible
 that the rains of exile
 have slackened the drumskin of your voice

It is the drums of Vodou ceremonies that figuratively bind Depestre's former poetic voice to his native forest, while his recent alignment with Aragon's position on traditional French forms suggests a slackening of the drumskin by the rains of exile. The poem thus ends with a syncretic exhortation toward rhythmic recovery:

Depestre

from the Seine I send you my greetings to Brazil
 to you to Bahia to all the saints to all the devils
 to those in the favellas

Depestre

Bombaya Bombaya

believe me as in former times beat for us the good tom-tom
 splattering their rancid night
 with a succinct rutting of moudang stars.

"Bombaya Bombaya" is the site of the poem's valedictory inscription of free verse within the space of voices. The word refers to a drum "known from Puerto Rico to Venezuela," but in his Glossary to *The Complete Poetry of Aimé Césaire* James Arnold notes as well: "No historical confirmation exists for the gloss 'a Haitian rallying cry associated with Boukman's voodoo ceremony at Bois Cayman on the eve of the 1791 revolts,' which has been repeated by Diop and Hénane."³⁹ Here Arnold qualifies the gloss provided, in another volume, by his co-translator Clayton Eshleman—yet the correction itself, through negation ("no historical confirmation exists...") indicates a chain of unconfirmed transmission that has itself entered into the associative field of the poem. Moreover, Césaire's repetition of the word, emphasizing its sound, is inscribed in an incantatory interpellation ("Depestre...Depestre... Bombaya Bombaya") which recalls the earlier repetition of "marronnon-les Depestre marronnon-les." The repetition does indeed suggest the function, in the poem itself, of a rallying cry, both accompanying and calling for the beating of drums—and this rallying cry is associated with the opening invocation of Boukman by the poem's closing return to its

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 39 Arnold, 2017, p. 920.

opening scene: “from the Seine.” The determinate contingencies of free verse form—drifting from the left margin, fracturing the stanza, separating words from their grammatical context as resonant invocations and as visual/phonemic material—quite precisely *space* the poem in such a way as to open the field of voices inhabiting it, their sarcastic inflections, their solicitations, cries, and urgent whispers (Depestre...Depestre...). The last two lines weld free verse form to surrealist content, the “rut sommaire” of warrior/stars splattering *their* rancid night (“éclaboussant leur nuit rance”) as Depestre is asked to beat the tom-tom for *us*. Surrealism and free verse fuse into the content-form of a revolutionary community constituted by a retroactive claim to temporal *simultaneity* with events that, supposedly, preceded the French advent of free verse and surrealism, and also a claim to geographical *coextension* with the site of marronnage, a diasporic exteriority now including the Seine, the favellas, Bois-Caïman, Bahia, Vertières, and distant stars identified with the moudang tribes of Chad. It is on the condition of *this* content, its inscription as free verse, that free verse becomes the poetic form of the revolution, becomes “the spring” sublating the doctrinal “report” (“content conditions form”). The voices of the revolution circulate through their diasporic traces, suffusing and displacing their doctrinal reincorporation, soliciting associations that evade “historical confirmation,” isolating signifiers upon the space of the page as if to cast a spell through their phonemic construction of repetitive singularities. And who, reading the surrealist free verse epic Depestre would publish twelve years later, *Rainbow for the Christian West: Voodoo Mystery Poem*, would deny that Césaire’s spell worked, at least temporarily—that the incantatory interpellation of Césaire’s claim would eventually have its intended effect?⁴⁰

Yet Césaire’s poem is also, of course, a well-calibrated argument, a rhetorically subtle polemic fusing pedagogical admonition and ventriloquial irony with figurative power. “When reason and unreason come into contact,” writes Friedrich Schlegel, “an electric shock occurs. This is called polemics.”⁴¹ The figurative and rhetorical point of contact between reason and unreason is precisely the polemical site of Césaire’s poem, its synthesis of argument and incantation, possession and pedagogy. When Depestre replies at length to Césaire’s poem, in his “Response to Aimé Césaire (Introduction to a Haitian Poetic Art),”⁴² he will criticize his interlocutor as a romantic metaphysician caught in the thrall of Hegelian idealism and religious mysticism, and thus badly in need of a materialist inversion. Césaire’s dialectic walks on

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40 Depestre, 1977.

41 Schlegel, 1968, p. 147.

42 Depestre, 1955b: 42-62. Reprinted in *Présence Africaine*, 2002, p. 207-269, from which pages I quote hereafter. My translation.

its head and must be set back upon its historical feet.⁴³ Where Césaire describes blood as “a powerful vodun,” Depestre replies “it seems to me Césaire adopts in these lines a contemplative and fatalist attitude with respect to religious alienation.”⁴⁴ Aligning Césaire’s allusion to Vodou with the “beautiful souls” of Haiti, Depestre “would emphasize the danger of either accepting or denying altogether, without critical examination, outside of class contradictions, these religious and folkloric manifestations.”⁴⁵ Referring to the wider debate on “national poetry” in the pages of *Présence Africaine*, Depestre notes that “One speaks above all of ‘black poetry’, of national poetry ‘among blacks’ [chez les noirs], of ‘black formalism’ opposed to ‘white formalism’, of ‘negritude’, of ‘black cultural alienation’,” and he finds that these are “all elusive categories.”⁴⁶ “To speak of ‘black poetry’ in general,” he writes, “is a myth as confused as the metaphysical notion of negritude.”⁴⁷ According to Depestre, these errors in determining the conditions of poetic realism (which he views as the matter at issue) derive from an incomplete mediation of the complexity of the national question, and thus, from an insufficient understanding, still at an idealist stage, still Hegelian (and in some cases existentialist) of internal relations among the indices (linguistic community is one of these) defining the historical category of the nation.⁴⁸

Accordingly, Depestre will go on to offer a reconstruction of “the national question” in Haiti, “placing the problem in its historical frame,”⁴⁹ outlining its linguistic complexity, noting the transformed historical circumstances under which Vodou functions as much as a means of ideological manipulation as of spiritual liberation, and arguing for the critical assimilation and deployment of a compound history of formal traditions. All of this is quite reasonable, if stemming from a rather doctrinaire species of historical materialism that may itself suffer from incomplete mediations, and indeed Depestre’s response elaborates a series of now familiar objections to the putative essentialism, nativism, idealism, or vitalism of negritude.⁵⁰

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43 Depestre, 1955b, p. 227.

44 Depestre, 1955b, p. 236.

45 Depestre, 1955b, p. 237.

46 Depestre, 1955b, p. 227.

47 Depestre, 1955b, p. 228.

48 Depestre, 1955b, p. 237.

49 Depestre, 1955b, p. 233.

50 See the chapter “On National Culture” in Fanon, 2004, p. 145-180. For a critique of Césaire’s book on Touissant L’Ouverture, see Dupuy, 2014, p. 33-51. “On the ‘vitalist foundations’ of negritude see Jones, 2010. For a superb theoretical consideration of the Fanon/Césaire relation, see Marriott, 2018.

But Césaire will begin his own prose reply, “On National Poetry,” as follows: “I think the problem is badly posed.”⁵¹ We can see why he would think so. From the perspective of Césaire’s retroactive claim upon the revolutionary inauguration of free verse at Bois-Caïman, there can be no grounding of “national poetry” in the elaboration of a more detailed history or anthropology of linguistic hybridity, Vodou culture, or relevant verse forms. The problem of “national poetry” is “a false problem” because the production of poetry is not something subsequent to and situated by the production or empirical predicates of a nation.⁵² Beyond and before the reasonableness of Depestre’s effort to elaborate the mediations defining the historical category of the nation, Césaire situates poetic rupture in revolutionary event, such that the project is to *instantiate* revolutionary rupture in writing, and such that “free verse” is not one poetic form chosen among others, according to the occasion or the hybrid affordances of compound cultural determinations. What goes by the name of free verse is the immanence of form to the making of content and content to the making of form, and in the field of Césaire’s poem formal determinations are thus experienced as *simultaneous* and *coextensive* with the revolutionary rupture of an apparent past possessing an apparent present, wherein the unfolding determinations and co-implications of time are themselves at issue in the unfolding of the poem.

In 1955, so it would seem, Depestre finds only an irrational metaphysics in such a claim. But the challenge is to understand why and how it makes sense, at the polemical point of contact between reason and unreason. The history of blackness is itself charged with unreason and is replete with metaphysical determinations, since any act of racial ascription or any affirmation of racial identity will inevitably be in excess of any physical trait, and since the meaning of race—its sense—is overdetermined by phantasms, complexes, and identifications in excess of rational self-reflection. What we might call the *historical metaphysics* of race is the locus of profound psychological and political derangements, of which the irrational phantasms and psychosexual complexes of the racist imaginary are an obvious example. Yet race is also the locus of rational claims upon world historical transformation and political principles, as in Fanon’s clarion formulation: “The colonial context, as we have said, is characterized by the dichotomy it inflicts on the world. Decolonization unifies this world by a radical decision to remove its heterogeneity, by unifying it on the grounds of nation and sometimes race.”⁵³ This is precisely what happened in Saint Domingue. Yet again, as Fanon shows in *Black Skin, White Masks*, the rationality of such political thought and action

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51 Césaire, 1955, p. 221.

52 Césaire, 1955, p. 222.

53 Fanon, 2004, p. 10

is inextricable from the irrationality of “the grounds” of race, from the fact that racial ascription or identification are bound up with and contaminated by racist ideology, unconscious representations, and affective states that cannot be completely integrated within a coherent unity of either selfhood or historical process.⁵⁴ From a critical perspective, this is perhaps most obvious in racially purist fantasies of white supremacy, predicated upon modes of identification and belonging requiring not only genocidal histories but also their disavowal or rationalization, propping up the pretended legitimacy of the fantasy itself. But in the context of negritude, as a literature and politics of the affirmation of blackness, the derangements of race are also conveyed by the surrealism of such exemplary works as Césaire’s *Cahier*, Baraka’s “Black Dada Nihilismus,” Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, or indeed Depestre’s *Rainbow for the Christian West*. The force of such works lies in the *depth* of their immersion in the irrational dimension of black identity and belonging, mediated by brutal histories, that cannot be divided from rational assertions of black power and the project of emancipation. Critiques of negritude as an irrational metaphysical essentialism miss the point of its dialectical truth: that the irrational dimension of racialization, racial ascription, racial identity, and racial community cannot be effectively engaged only through analysis, critique, or demystification. That irrational dimension requires a mode of imaginative and political reconstruction able not only to acknowledge but also traverse, inhabit, and thereby immanently transform the surreal facticity of the production of blackness, the metaphysics of its history. It requires a polemic and a politics situated at the point of contact between reason and unreason.

It is the *untimely* ontology of Césaire’s “Reply to Depestre” that makes it central to such a polemic and politics, displacing the historicism of Depestre’s rejoinder.⁵⁵ And we can be precise about the rational sense of the terms “untimely” and “ontology” in this formulation, about the philosophical rigor the temporal construction of the poem both implies and subverts, which we can provisionally clarify through a Kantian framework. The imagination, for Kant, is the faculty that synthesizes concepts and intuitions, enabling the application of transcendental time determinations and thus making experience possible in and through the unity of understanding and sensory receptivity.⁵⁶ Yet the imagination is also the faculty capable of presenting intuitions in the absence of an object,⁵⁷

54 On the “rational resort to unreason” in Fanon’s politics, see Ciccariello-Maher, 2017, p. 79.

55 For an account of the significance of the untimely in the work of Aimé and Suzanne Césaire, see Wilder, 2015. On the specifically *modernist* significance of the untimely, see Lehman, 2016.

56 See Kant, 1998, A137/B176 - A158/B197.

57 Kant, 1998, B151: “Imagination is the faculty of representing an object even without its presence in intuition.”

thus making possible the displacement of sensation as the medium of experience. Imagination synthesizes empirical givenness through time determinations, yet it may also displace the receptivity of givenness, and therefore the determination of experience as sensory presentation. The untimely potential of the imagination lies in the capacity of its synthetic power to both constitute and displace the present.

In his reconstructive reading of Kant, Heidegger will return to Kant's implication, in the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, that the imagination is the root of both the faculties of intuition and understanding, of receptivity and conceptual determination.⁵⁸ In this account, the temporality of imagination is prior to the stability of the "I" itself, or what Kant calls the transcendental unity of apperception. Thus the unity of the subject must be thought as itself involved in the synthetic productivity of temporalization, not as an atemporal unity providing the ground of temporal synthesis. Heidegger's existential analytic, thinking the being-there of the subject as exterior to its unity, always at once behind and ahead of itself, may be understood in terms of his fundamental rereading of Kant, situating the temporal productivity of imagination at the very root of an "I" that is never self-identical.

If this seems to take us beyond the field of Césaire's poem, it also enables a more serious engagement with its "existential" dimension, to which Depestre refers in passing. In the poem, the voice is not the site of a metaphysics of presence securing the subject, but rather the exteriority of a possession taking place at the crux of imagination and intoxication: the recollection of that which was never experienced, the infiltration of "one" time by "another." The untimely possession of the poem by "the space of voices" infiltrates the written word in such a way as to disturb, derange, and subvert the historical function of writing itself—its production of official histories—and this is registered through a polemical argument for the codetermining significance of marronnage, Vodou, and free verse as revolutionary content-form. Approaching the untimely function of imagination in Césaire's poem through the philosophical relay between Kant and Heidegger enables us to grasp the philosophical rationality of its apparent unreason—the temporal instability of a subject forever constructing its coherence in the medium of an absent presence—and also the unreason of such rationality: the temporality of subjective experience is not a mere application of logical categories to sensory receptivity, but an ungrounding of the present by a faculty that may present what is not there even as it synthesizes the presentation of what is.

The epochal significance of Césaire's "Reply to Depestre" is thus that it decisively situates this function of imagination, its ungrounded production of the time of a riven subject, in the field of black politics, even as it specifies the temporality of black politics as the revolutionary

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58 See Heidegger, 1997a, p. 137-138 and Heidegger, 1997b, p. 188-190.

ungrounding of historical continuity, and even as it inscribes an argument for “free verse” as the adequate poetic form of this political content—not insofar as it is a form that pre-exists it, but insofar as it is generated *by it*. Such is Césaire’s claim. The present of poetry, according to this claim, can never only be that of a Seine night in 1955 or of the mad chant of Boukman in 1791, but is rather a spatio-temporal exteriority possessed by traces of an untimely genesis only registered by a form that comes into being with the content inscribed, discharging an electric shock of polemic at the point of contact between reason and unreason. “Should I stop there?” Mallarmé asks amid his Oxford account of the birth of free verse in 1894. “Or why do I get the feeling I’ve come here about a vaster subject, perhaps unknown even to me, than such a renovation of rituals and rhymes?”⁵⁹ Displacing the historical frame of Mallarmé’s question, Césaire answers it with perfect clarity.

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⁵⁹ Mallarmé, 2007b, p. 185.

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Poetry in Superposition: An Essay-Poem in Quantum Poetics

Amy Catanzano

Abstract: This essay-poem, which seeks to establish a relationship between open questions in poetry, physics, and philosophy, is offered as an alternative to the normative academic paper or poem. It arranges the critical and the creative within a quantum superposition of both, where thinking and the literary are interactive properties of quantum states that can be detected as paragraphs or stanzas. It explores the present of poetry through the linguistic innovation of poetry and subjects such as uncertainty and wave-particle duality in quantum physics, dark energy in astrophysics, dynamic complex systems, orientation and disorientation, simultaneity, and the ontology of spacetime.

Keywords: poetry, poetics, *poiesis*, quantum theory, astrophysics, dark energy, *immarginable*, dynamic complex systems, wave-particle duality, quantum superposition

Poetry, like the mathematical formalisms of quantum systems that capture what can be potentially actualized through observation, moves outside of the scope of normative language, which assumes that it constitutes the “actual”: today, for instance, is both strata and subspace. Which spiral arm? Your arrow of time is all or nothing. Yet the unnamed sky keeps arriving without limit. Stop us if you can.

Poetry can be treated as a dynamic complex system that increases in complexity as its interactive elements increase, though not toward fundamental synthesis, narrative, and ethics or spatial, temporal, and conceptual direction. As each element becomes more interactive, a poem becomes less chiral, more multiversal, more *immarginable* (Joyce). Even at rest, our wings spread against a hazy horizon, we fly.

Poetry is not a lighthouse that guides ships through disorienting water; poetry is the water, which can be dangerous, as Plato knew. When water is not dangerous it is density and delirium. When poetry is not water, it is the indeterminate line where water and the ocean floor meet. Sometimes poetry is the bathysphere that travels here. Matter compresses in the gravity underwater. Without gravity, a poem breaks apart.

Poetry is a galaxy mediating strong and weak gravity. Outside of each galaxy, gravity is altered by a dark energy that transforms gravity into a repulsive force that moves matter from matter, which makes spacetime expand between galaxy clusters, growing the universe faster and faster. Like a poem, the universe is a dynamic complex system that becomes more complex in spacetime as its interactive elements increase.

Poetry at the boundary of gravity is a galaxy that compresses and expands. Since the spacetime between galaxy clusters is expanding at an accelerating rate due to dark energy, which alters how gravity behaves at cosmological scales outside of galactic systems, the boundary near

a galaxy where gravity compresses and expands deviates, too, binding matter inside the galaxy while unbinding matter beyond it.

Poetry is not only *the nature of things* (Lucretius) but the things of nature, including nature at quantum and cosmological scales of physical reality, where wilderness is simultaneously its elemental parts and the effects it produces outside of local ecologies. Poetry and quantum gravity are entanglements of quantum and relativistic states. Like the spin of a subatomic particle, entanglement is an intrinsic property of matter.

Poetry in quantum superposition is without direction, moving by quantum jump, subverting the law of deterministic causality. Poetry in superposition is not entropic, declining into disorder, but endemic to its everywhere and everywhen. A state beyond the emergence of the “actual,” quantum superposition defeats the dogma of the ideal, the power of the primordial. Constellated in superposition, we radiate, we burst.

Poetry as light is both a wave and a particle, energy and matter, before its wavefunction collapses when written and read. While the literary artform of poetry may appear to be capable of shapeshifting in any direction within spacetime, it is each direction and spacetime that shapeshift. Some choreographies in a poem seem clear: the rocket lifts off. But once past the heliopause *we laugh into our green beards* (Jarry).

Poetry is not only entangled with the inner and outer limits of its elemental parts, where it is capable of communicating with other quantum states instantaneously across distances, it is also entangled with the conditions of its own inception and cessation. *Poiesis* in spacetime is an activity where beginning and ending meet and release, release and meet, a river we travel that flows each way at once.

Poetry is as incomplete as an x-ray, as polished as a prism. Like the geography of grooves and ridges in a human neocortex, the folds of a poem increase its surface area. Oscillating at all scales by extending and collapsing spacetimes between them, a poem is an expanding universe that is a poem that is a portal, quickening travel among the distances it grows. Transdimensional, hydroelectric, our currents carry.

Propositions on the Philosophical Nature of Poetry

**Alessandro
De Francesco**

Abstract: This text contributes to the production of a contemporary poetic ontology under the aegis of the encounter between the physical and the metaphysical, the sensorial and the immaterial. It is not an academic paper but an open reflection written by and as a poet who sees his poetic activity as a form of philosophical inquiry and of artistic practice at once. As such, through its investigation, this hybrid text aims at tracing an unstable theoretical lexicon at the junction between poetry and philosophy (the keywords provided are part of it). The text is divided into three sections: a brief introduction about the background and the methodology adopted; 121 propositions on poetry and philosophy (with some incursions into epistemology), intertwined in a chaotic manner; and an appendix, stemming from the previous propositions and tackling the relation between being and infinity.

Keywords: density, irrepresentability, spectrum, continuum, multidimensionality, subversion, non-dualism

Introduction

During a conversation I recently had with my partner, I realised with even more clarity than before that if I had to identify a gesture uniting all the diverse, chaotic, and scattered pieces of my work as a poet, artist, and theorist, I would say that all these years I've been ultimately trying to produce (new forms of) philosophical poetry. A set of processes using the, both abstract and sensual, nature of the poetic language in order to create concepts, generate feelings, and invent knowledge. These *Propositions* – or rather 'proposals', in the sense that they propose something to be collectively thought – aim at summing up, in a very general way and from the unavoidably limited perspective of my own practice, what I think I understood over the years about poetry as a form of philosophical inquiry. Although each proposition is connected to the next one, there is no linear order in the argumentation and several key-themes come back at different places so that they can be further articulated through new remarks. The risk of perceiving these propositions as peremptory, which is inevitable given the form of this text, will hopefully disappear once it is read from the beginning to the end (appendix included).

A few more words about the approach I adopted: when I use the term 'poetry', I intend a set of language-based practices including also non-narrative forms of prose, multimedia and post-genre writing, sharing with each other a certain approach to language and knowledge that this text aims at describing. In other words, what I write in this text about poetry aims at defining the kind of poetry I am writing about, in a hopefully productive tautology, as it were. Therefore, even though I often

just say “poetry”, I do not intend any kind of poetry, but the – certainly numerous – kinds of poetry that are defined by the properties that I try to highlight in this text. On purpose, I do not quote many authors, since I would like these considerations to be as general as possible, and to be filled by the readers with their own references. Also, this text is written without any kind of scientific purpose, neither has it the structure of a scientific article. It lacks bibliographical indications and notes, but for a good reason: that I would like to invite the readers to go with the flow of thought while reading, rather than stumbling on this or that reference which would in any case remain arbitrary and partial.

Another preliminary consideration that will hopefully avoid misunderstandings: if, on the one hand, the poetry I talk about does not belong to a given era or style (the frame of reference goes from Parmenides to the contemporary period), on the other hand I am in the difficult place of sharing a vision of poetry *as a poet* before anything else. Such vision is thus clearly biased by my own practice, as I already said, but does not describe my own practice either, or at least not only. It is a vision of poetry – and of poetry as philosophical practice, or perhaps also of philosophy as poetical activity – which stems from my work as a poet in the sense that I am formulating such vision from this position, with all the contradictions and approximations that this entails. So that my practice acts as a sort of filter, or magnifying glass if you will, through which I strive to formulate general remarks about the philosophical nature and power of the poetic language. The number of the propositions is completely arbitrary and I could have gone on, but at some point I decided to stop because I had the feeling that I said enough for this time. Nevertheless, as any list of this sort, it is subject to be continued in a next occasion and it is never really finished.

Propositions

1 Poetry exists to say a multiplicity of things that could not be said otherwise. There (among other places) resides its gnoseological power.

2 Hence, as many have claimed, form and content are inseparable in poetry (and it might be even senseless to use these words in a poetic regime).

3 When poetry and philosophy converge (which is not always the case of course), they show that there is beauty in conceptualisation and abstraction, and that poetry is animated by a noetic and gnoseological necessity.

4 Because 'things' (in the ontological, continental sense of this word) and the ways in which they are said are inseparable in poetry, poetry is not defined by metaphoricity (in contrast with the structuralist cliché).

5 A fundamental misunderstanding at the origins of the opposition between poetry and philosophy consists in believing that poetry is a matter of hiding things behind language, or at least of saying something while meaning something else, whereas it is exactly the opposite.

6 The adherence of poetry to its enunciative gesture excludes metaphoricity, and also fiction and representation, as defining paradigms of what poetry is: "poetry is a matter of perception, and not of representation" (Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe on Paul Celan in *Poetry as Experience*).

7 Once we free ourselves from the preconception that poetry is necessarily and inevitably related to fiction and representation, the Platonic traditional opposition between poetry and philosophy is overcome.

8 Poetry performs, as such, the most extreme degree of adherence between language and world. In this also resides its philosophical potential.

9 "Never words over world but words as world" (Charles Bernstein on Louis Zukofsky).

10 Poetry is not "obscure" by choice (as Mallarmé points out) as much as it is not defined by metaphoricity, although it can of course make use of metaphors, yet not more than other kinds of language; but it can be difficult to read because it deals with complexity (in the epistemological sense) even when it looks simple.

11 Epistemological complexity implies unpredictability and can only be assessed by the human brain in terms of probability. This has something to do with poetry's refusal of predefined (linguistic, political,gnoseological) codes and rules.

12 In other words, the difficulty one encounters in reading poetry is bound to the complexity of the things poetry tries to say.

13 In this attempt lays perhaps the misunderstanding of poetry as fiction, or the belief that poetry deals with parallel worlds, whereas

it tries to say things of *this* world that were still unimaginable before they were said by poetry.

14 This is why poetry can be at once very complex and very simple, polysemic and straightforward, articulated yet always synthetic.

15 There isn't any story in poetry, even when there is one. The narrative patterns in poetry are not dependent on those of fiction, except in some cases of epic poetry, which we can rather describe as a form of novel in verses before the birth of the novel, and as such exclude from the kind of poetry we are referring to here. This does not mean of course that epic poetry and novels cannot contain philosophical elements, but such elements would pose questions that differ from those that are tackled here.

16 Similarly, the myth, which is sometimes assimilated to poetry by the philosophical discourse, is not necessarily a poetological form. Its features are normally, yet not always, rather on the side of fiction (story, characters, chronotope, etc.).

17 The definition of epic poetry as 'novel in verses' does not concern Lucretius, since even though *De rerum natura* is written in epic verse, it neither features diegesis, nor characters. This definition also excludes epic poems with a diegetic framework whose concentration of meaning is nonetheless mainly focussed on other aspects. A perfect example of this category would be Milton's *Paradise Lost*, for its philosophical and epistemological density largely outweighs the narration (and as such it responds to many considerations that are proposed here).

18 There isn't any character in poetry, even when there is one. This includes the so-called 'lyrical I'. The lyrical I is neither a fictional character nor a mirror of the poet themselves. Poetry brings back the subject (and the psychologism going with this notion in a literary framework) to its textual, as much as objectual, functions.

19 "I is a word like any other" (Marjorie Perloff on Lyn Hejinian).

20 Poetry takes advantage of the fact that human language is not made by direct visual images so as to deal with the unimaginable, the unrepresentable and the unknown. This is valid even when poetry deals with ordinary things.

21 On the other hand, poetry is not a notational system either: there isn't any mediation between the poem and its execution, as there is

in musical scores or in spatial mapping. In poetry, the accomplished work of art is the poem itself.

22 At the same time, because the poetic text is always a form of experience, rather than of mere signification, poetry is supposed to engender (inner and/or outer) action in those who take it seriously.

23 Experience, action, knowledge, and emancipation are intrinsically related in poetry.

24 Differently from mathematics and logic, poetry doesn't necessarily need special signs to formulate its processes. In most cases (yet not always, as asemic writing for instance shows), it prefers to redefine ordinary language.

25 Everything, in poetry, has to do with the unknown because even the most banal object is seen by poetry with wonder and complexity. Here resides another deep connection between poetry and philosophy, since they both stem from the astonishment generated by what exists (Thales, Aristoteles).

26 By the same token, poetry also transfigures ordinary language by giving each word we use every day an otherwise unseen depth. Philosophically speaking, poetry expands knowledge by expanding our understanding of ordinary language.

27 Poetry refuses (or should refuse) the normalisation and the formalisation of any kind of language, including ordinary language.

28 Poetry subverts the codes of language, speech, and imagination, even those previously set by poetry itself.

29 Poetry *misuses* language: it is a permanent subversion of the rules of language – and thus of any kind of imposed rule or predetermined code, in a grammatical as much as political sense.

30 Poetry therefore makes us discover new possibilities not only of meaning, but also of knowledge and action. It puts language in relation to domains of human experience that do not pertain to language as we usually understand it.

31 Even the most banal linguistic segment, when activated by poetry, escapes the borders of transitive communication. As much as poetry is not about fiction and representation, it is also unrelated to communication.

32 Although it can be found useful in retrospect, poetry doesn't communicate any useful content. It rather aims at creating the conditions for an intensified experience of reality.

33 Hence, there is no space for moralism in poetry, although there is space for ethics in the gnoseological and ontological intensity of the poetic experience.

34 This intensification of experience through language is related to the opening towards the unknown that is performed by poetry and explored by philosophy.

35 The unknown in poetry and philosophy is not a double of reality, but rather a previously hidden angle of it. In this aspect could reside a 'non-dualist' conjunction between physics and metaphysics: poetry perhaps suggests that the metaphysical is the unseen angle of the physical.

36 Poetry contributes to make the metaphysical present and the physical multi-layered.

37 If, as someone said, philosophy sets in when science is not able to formulate verifiable statements of truth, poetry sets in when philosophy is not able to ground its gnoseological processes on strictly rational thinking.

38 This does not imply that there is a hierarchy between those three areas of human understanding, we need all of them. It doesn't imply either that poetry doesn't have any capacity to influence knowledge. It rather means that poetry uses logical, semantical, and linguistic processes that differ from any other kind of human thinking.

39 Poetry stems from human language, but it permanently aims at trespassing the edges of human knowledge and logic.

40 Consequently, poetry is by definition problematic and unresolved. The poetic practice is full of uncertainty, full of risk, full of unsolved issues, full of chaos (in the epistemological sense), because it's full of life.

41 *Omnia licet poetis*: everything is allowed to the poets not because poetry is allowed to make statements and cross boundaries that philosophy or science, following the paths of reality, are not allowed to cross (this would be the position of Ingeborg Bachmann and Paul Valéry among others), but because it prospects modes of

knowledge and alternative logics that are the direct consequence of its unusual, and sometimes extreme, treatment of language and thought.

42 Thus “omnia”, everything, can be understood in terms of totality, that is, the continuity that poetry is able to establish between language, thought and the world in its widest manifestations, particularly when it comes to its less representable and observable parts.

43 Despite poetry’s proximity to thinking and perceiving, poetry is a powerful tool against correlationism (as intended by Quentin Meillassoux): poetry loosens the ties between thinking and being since the poetic investigation aims at *re*-placing language in the world, beyond the relativity of its point of view.

44 Poetry recognises being as independent from subjectivity. In poetry, language, thought, and subjectivity itself do not produce being, but are a consequence of it.

45 Poetry overcomes hypostatic distinctions between subjects and objects, to the point that – after the ‘objectivist’ experiences in the 20th century (American Objectivists and L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets, concrete poetry, French literalism, etc.) and their reactionary subject-oriented counterparts (often dubbed as ‘lyrical’) – poetry shows that today these two terms, *subject* and *object*, and their dualistic opposition, have become both philosophically and poetologically obsolete.

46 Although poetry tries to embed being in the immaterial ‘objectness’ of the text-as-thing, it never tries to isolate a part of being into a specific textual manifestation. On the contrary, it shows, through language, how everything is connected to everything else.

47 It is very difficult, when not impossible, to observe and verify things like the multiverse or geometrogenesis (the fact that time and space are contingent, that is, that they might be only one of the possible structures of reality, the one that emerged in this portion of the universe). Poetry – where logical and illogical (or beyond-logical) thinking converge into language – produces a perceptual glimpse of such conditions.

48 The phylogenesis of our brain is too recent and too connected with the needs of survival to understand infinity in a rational and

all-encompassing way. We need poetry, together with other forms of thought, to think at such scales and contribute to the future evolution of the brain.

49 In poetry, the *res cogitans* and the *res extensa*, abstraction and sensation, conceptualisation and emotion, here and there, language and world, and again physics and metaphysics, are not distinct instances.

50 There isn't any material *atom* that, in spite of etymology, is not at least conceptually divisible. Thus, the essential singular entity cannot be material (Lucretius, I 589 sq.). Poetry shows that reality is a *spectrum* of phenomena in which immateriality and materiality are in a continuous, instead of discreet, relation.

51 This could help to tackle the Leibnizian problem of the communication among substances, not just between body and soul, but among all the different degrees of immateriality and materiality.

52 Poetry is *semi-immaterial* because it situates itself at the encounter between thought and matter, immateriality of language and materiality of the written sign, but it is not *semi-material*, because it always tends towards immateriality if compared to other forms of art. It doesn't need images or objects, it doesn't need instruments to be executed, etc.

53 Poetry is *semi-immaterial* insofar as it tries to reproduce in language the speed and the multidimensional complexity of thought.

54 On the other hand, the poetic text is like a stone, or an organism. It does not mean anything beyond its existence. Does this constitute a paradox with respect to the semi-immateriality of poetry? Perhaps not that much if we consider again what we could call *the ontological spectrum*.

55 Poetry is an art of time, because the text is read, albeit often in a non-linear way, and it is an art of space, because the text is spatially composed, albeit often in a non-linear way.

56 The poetic text is immersive even when it remains on the page. Poetry always embodies textual spacetime, at least in this universe.

57 The non-linearity of poetry is deeply connected to its proximity with epistemological complexity. If the world is complex, then poetry is complex.

58 Poetry rediscovers language as part of nature since language is part of the world at the same ontological level as all the other things, but poetry also stretches our (cognitive, emotional, political) understanding of language towards unexpected dimensions.

59 The notion of *mimesis* is therefore not appropriate to describe poetry: poetry does not attempt to imitate or represent nature, but rather to intensify our experience of it through an intensified experience of language as nature.

60 In poetry, the opposition between *nature* and *culture*, and ultimately the very meaning of these two words, is irrelevant, when not inexistent. We should rather speak of “world”, or “real”.

61 Poetry is never only made by the subject who writes it, for two reasons: because the poet can only borrow language as a set of signs that is collectively and historically evolving; and because language is ontologically resituated in the world by poetry itself, i.e. as part of the world and not as a representation of it.

62 The best situation for a poet is when they don't have to decide what to write because they can just feel how to *de-code* (not much in the sense of decipher, but rather of subverting the code) the world into language.

63 The poet is always, and only, a *passeur* (cf. Judith Balso, *Pessoa: le passeur métaphysique*).

64 Pessoa's notion of *fingidor* gives fiction a meaning that differs from what Plato intended: Pessoa's heteronyms disperse linguistic subjectivity to encounter the world.

65 The poet is a collective figure and an emanation of nature (in the complex epistemological sense suggested above).

66 It is true that poetry doesn't always have to trust language, but the *arbitraire du signe* doesn't necessarily imply that poetry is insincere, as Marcel Broodthaers put it, once we realise, through poetry itself, that language and imagination ontologically belong to nature.

67 The evolution of plants and microorganisms is much older than the evolution of the brain. As such, plants are aware of more configurations of reality and manifestations of the truth than human beings. They cannot tell us about them in our language, but we can use poetry to listen to theirs.

68 Poetry is *Dichtung*, the place where language and meaning are concentrated in their highest densities. The accuracy of this otherwise false German etymology is proven by the nature of poetry itself. *Dichtung* contains the adjective *dicht*, 'dense'. The allegedly right etymology is much more problematic: *Dichtung* would originate from the Latin *dictare*; which is also where the word "dictator" comes from.

69 The etymology of poetry as *density* allows us to see poetry as a non-authoritarian and horizontal language, as it actually is.

70 Poetry is defined by density, not by rhythmic 'scansion', metrics, rhyme, or rhetorical figures, as we were taught at school, as much as painting is not defined by its capacity to depict objects as we see them or by the pigments it uses. If it were so, they would have both long since ceased.

71 György Ligeti said that "there is no pulsation" in music, and the same goes for poetry. In mathematical terms, poetry is a *continuum*.

72 Wittgenstein's notion of "philosophy as poetry", *Dichten*, is ambiguous: it has been explained in the sense of composing concepts as characters in a story, which would take us away from poetry as intended here; but it could also mean that we need poetry in order to formulate new forms of philosophy; or simply that philosophy is not an autonomous endeavour after the end of onto-theology.

73 As Alain Badiou points out, philosophy arises via certain *conditions*. One of those is, precisely, poetry.

74 Poetry is a form of thought and an art form rather than a literary genre, for it concentrates in the text the excess of the real, that is, what it appears impossible to say via a logical sentence, a consequential discourse, or a more or less linear story (be it real or fictional).

75 In this excess resides one of the major paradoxes of poetry: it is an art form based on language, and yet it eminently and permanently deals with the nonverbal.

76 Poetry contradicts the analytical assumption according to which language and thought are identical, for it tries to give a linguistic form to the multidimensionality, the speed, the synthesis, and the non-linearity of thought and perception when they are still formulated in our heads, *before* their grammatical organisation.

77 A poem can condense in its own way both the spatial and temporal infinity of the 'substance', in Spinozian terms.

78 A pebble, a leaf, the gaze of a bird, a group of people, a faraway quasar, William Carlos Williams's plums in *This is Just to Say*.¹ In poetry, all this matters with the same intensity, because these are all parts of the same infinite substance.

79 Poetry's intensity is not the intensity sought by the *society of the spectacle*, but its opposite: by challenging the interfaces between language, perception and world, poetry helps us to rediscover intensity everywhere, in the calmest day, in the emptiest space. Poetry is a desk-based, sofa-based, meadow-based revolution.

80 As it has been noticed, the semantical field of the word 'art' is, like the real etymology of *Dichtung*, quite unfortunate, since it presupposes the modern view of the work of art as something artificial, separated from nature. Several theorists propose the term *poiesis* in order to describe this other possibility for the work of art to be embedded in nature and history, and to enhance its proximity with poetry.

81 *Poiesis* comes from the ancient Greek 'to make': to make with the substance of the universe. This *i* that fell from *poiesis* to *poesis* indicates that a historical difference persists between the making of art with objects and actions and the making of poetry with words and semantics. Yet these gestures are united by three fundamental elements: feelings, concepts, and the whole substance of the universe of which they are a direct manifestation.

82 To create while conceptualising, to put synthesis before analysis, doesn't mean, as believed by some, to produce a philosophical fiction. It is, on the contrary, a *poiein*, a way of making in the real, so as to

.....
1 I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox

and which
you were probably
saving
for breakfast

Forgive me
they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold

rediscover that thought is a part of nature, not a discourse on nature, but also not a mere analytical reorganisation of collected data.

83 There is always extension in thought, as much as there is in poetry. Even thinking is not ontologically separated from the *res extensa*, since at least a part of thinking involves a complex set of chemical and physical processes. Yet thinking and poetry, given their *semi-immaterial* character and given the fact that they do not depend on images, are privileged playgrounds to explore the abysses of the undetectable and the irrepresentable.

84 In the traditional, Platonic conception, art imitates nature. In the modern conception, art, in the wake of the traditional dualism *nature vs. culture*, is opposed to nature. In both cases, nature and art are clearly differentiated. Hence the ancient Greek term of *techne* for 'art', which is of course at the origin of the words 'technique' and 'technology', and the, already mentioned, modern etymology of 'art' as the same of the word 'artificial'. Giordano Bruno writes in one of his philosophical poems: "Art, while operating, activates and thinks of itself in a discursive way. Nature operates in an intensive rather than discursive way. Art handles foreign matter, nature handles its own matter; art is applied to matter, nature is inherent to matter, as it is actually matter itself." (*De immenso*, 8.10). This is, wonderfully put, the pre-modern and modern conception of art as opposed to nature. But in a 'substance-oriented' paradigm art operates in an intensive way, in the sense of the contemplative, vulnerable *intensity* that I connected with the *density* of the poetic gesture; and art is matter itself and handles its own matter, because it belongs to the substance and it arranges things at the same level of non-human, natural instances such as plants, animals, celestial bodies, void. Artists, then, are *passeurs* also insofar as they arrange things. In other words: art *is* nature, since it is a manifestation of it, including of course its scariest, most violent, and most contradictory parts.

85 Art is one of the main ways in which humankind embodies nature through a highly complex set of cultural practices.

86 To be empathic means to feel the other not as another, but as the whole, as everything, and thus to feel myself and all the rest as exactly the same substance, the same object, the same ecosystem, the same universe, concerned by the same movements, the same history, the same problems, the same possibilities. Both in empathy and in poetry, everything is *here*, there is no *there*. Empathy and poetry are therefore deeply connected, and in turn their connection connects ontology, ethics, and politics.

87 Poetry always occurs beyond our own (author or reader) individual experience or feelings for this infinity and this totality, as much as language does not belong to anyone since it is a collective asset that poetry uses to condense an experience which is, necessarily, the experience of everybody and the experience of everything.

88 Hence, in poetry, any known object is in permanent relation to the unknown, to the whole 'substance' of the universe, towards other instances that we cannot even imagine.

89 *Poetry is a translation of everything*, as it brings into each text or even portion of text the recognition of this totality.

90 This is also why in poetry we are out of the realm of representation, because within its horizontal, infinitely signifying, non-normative, and non-authoritarian linguistic processes we can say and think what is not representable, either cognitively, or politically, or both.

91 From this perspective and in such a connection with the unrepresentable, one might say that poetry is, and will always be, searching for truth.

92 Those who refuse the word 'truth' in connection with poetry are afraid of all the colours of the *ontological spectrum* that exceed visible light.

93 On the other hand, even if everything, even if a potentially infinite unfolding of meaning and things is contained in the poetic expression, poetry teaches the poet how to choose and distinguish among things.

94 Poetry needs choices and therefore needs those who write it to learn what a choice is. This can sometimes be very painful, other times liberating.

95 Poetry is always questioning the mystery of language as such. Even when it doesn't overtly speak about language, poetry, in any language, always asks: why are words the way they are? Why is written and spoken language shaped as it is? Where does language come from, and how can we put it back in the world?

96 Because of all this, any form of contemporary poetry worthy of the name should avoid the easy ways of sentimental lyricism

and reactionary modernism, but also of epigonistic avant-garde postures and outdated formalisms.

97 Contemporary poetry does not need to decide between conceptuality and emotionality, abstraction and sensuality. On the contrary, its task in the 21st century (and after the 20th) is to join these dimensions in new, original ways.

98 I have claimed in the past that poetry as we intend it today and is also intended in these lines is a relatively recent art form, starting with the subversion of formal structures at the beginning of the 19th century (the practice and theory of free verse, Novalis's and then Baudelaire's poetry in prose, Leopardi's non-metaphoric language, and a little later Emily Dickinson, Stéphane Mallarmé, and what both Julia Kristeva and Francis Ponge have dubbed "revolution of the poetic language", referring to how rhetoric is reshaped by poetry in the second half of the 19th century). On the other hand, I believe that these considerations on poetry, especially in their philosophical implications, can also apply to many previous examples of poetic practice. I already quoted Lucretius and Giordano Bruno, but the first and foremost example is certainly Parmenides, at least in the Western tradition.

99 Parmenides, Lucretius and Bruno have one thing in common: they need poetry philosophically to explore the unknown in its widest manifestations, they need to formulate their exploration *poetically* for it to continue. This is, still today, one of the essential tasks of the poetic practice, although many among us are afraid of it and try to avoid it by pursuing more contingent literary or artistic goals, with the excuse of refusing pretentiousness. Such a task can indeed be quite scary, although the unknown ultimately scares only those who need control.

100 Another major poet-philosopher of the ancient times, Empedocles, formulated what I called the poetic *continuum* between thought and language, immateriality and materiality, abstraction and sensuality, in the following terms: "blood flowing to the heart is properly thought".

101 The problem of 'being' is at the foundation of both the poetic and the philosophical investigations. This starts indeed with Parmenides. On the other hand, also for Parmenides, just like Empedocles, the poetic and philosophical investigation on ontology is not separated from the investigation on the physical manifestations of nature. Again, this convergence of physics

and metaphysics, senses and concepts, animates the encounter between poetry and philosophy, and should be reactivated today with a renewed attention.

102 This vision, in which ultimately feeling and thinking, body and mind (or soul) are not distinct instances either, does not endorse contemporary mechanist or neo-positivist visions such as those of computational cognitivism, whose limits are merely their own self-imposed limits, but rather shows the connections poetry is able to engender when it's taken seriously by philosophy.

103 The mystery of the *continuum* (also physically intended, thus beyond quantum mechanics) cannot be exhausted by scientific discoveries because those are still – necessarily and usefully – embedded into predefined ontological schemes. Poetry can help us to change our ontological disposition and as such inform knowledge from a different point of view.

104 Poetry, therefore, is an antidote against the philosophical ingenuousness of some epistemological assumptions.

105 Two relevant concepts in this framework are those of 'infinity' and 'life'. For some scientists, an infinite universe implies the logical consequence that every person or moment should repeat itself an infinity of times in different locations. This is a typical example of application of a concept within an inappropriate ontological, and logical, regime. The infinite emerging in (philosophical) poetry, ever since Lucretius, is of a different order, it doesn't end in the boundaries of human codified understanding.

106 By the same token, the concept of 'life' is too often automatically assimilated to biological forms and processes we already know (in spite of, for example, quantum mechanical findings that were able to trace a continuum between the inorganic level of the quanta and the emergence of organic molecular life).

107 Poetry is essential for ontology not because, as Martin Heidegger famously put it, "language is the house of being", but because it permanently tries to expand, through its treatment of language, our understanding of being.

108 In poetry, the notions of 'being', 'substance', 'world', 'language', 'nature', 'reality' are ultimately interchangeable, given the *continuum* that poetry embodies and realises.

109 If we want to investigate being, we need to explore even its most enigmatic and invisible manifestations. We need to push thought and language where we've been told – or are afraid – to stop, not to justify the arbitrariness of religion, but to pursue knowledge. There is no *hubris* in poetry, precisely because its language is horizontal and inclusive.

110 Metaphysics, today, concerns poetry and gnoseology more than theology.

111 “Poetry, for me, is still global, total, and as such it could be said metaphysical, since it always bumps against the limits” (Andrea Zanzotto).

112 Also in this extent poetry is a paradox and somehow a failure that is as inevitable as indispensable, since it tries linguistically to formulate what escapes verbalisation and representation.

113 Another paradox that is intrinsic to poetry is what we could call at this point *the paradox of double inintepretability*: on the one hand, poetry is not interpretable because the poetic text is self-evident, it just says what it says, as many poets have claimed (hence also the frequent refusal of metaphoricity to describe poetic strategies); on the other hand, as *translation of everything* the poetic text is a surface in which a potentially infinite unfolding of meaning takes place, so much that no hermeneutic process can satisfactorily unveil all its multidimensional ramifications.

114 Poetry's language is intensive and multidimensional, verbal and yet extra-verbal, neither subjective nor objective, contingent, timeless, corporeal, incorporeal, to be read in silence, to be vocalised.

115 There, on the borders of language and what exceeds it, inside words that are incorporated into something that is not properly a language, a provisional ontology can perhaps arise from the *continuum* between language, being, and nature. Is this what the poet-philosopher Parmenides also meant in *Peri Physeos* with his key-concept of the ‘One’?

116 Of course, the fact that Parmenides's (as Empedocles's and many others') philosophy is written in verses confirms, but doesn't entirely explain, his choice to write philosophy as poetry. Again, there is much more than metrics and versification in poetry. Its *density*, its power to condensate the whole in the linguistic

expression, is what makes poetry a powerful tool of philosophical inquiry, ever since the beginnings.

117 Poetry helps to think outside of our modes of perception which, despite the instruments used to expand and augment them, still only see part of the spectrum of things – literally, if we think again of the electromagnetic spectrum.

118 As such, poetry constitutes a junction between the physical and the metaphysical also insofar as it produces, through language, a sensorial approach to what would otherwise exceed perception and experimental knowledge.

119 Thus, poetry helps us to expand our experience beyond three intertwined obstacles: the *cognitive* obstacle, caused by the limitations of our senses and logical processes; the *emotional* obstacle, caused by the reduction of the intensity of our capacity to feel; the *political* obstacle, caused by the limitations of knowledge and the manipulations of information that are artificially produced by power.

120 Poetry is always *another* language that follows the movements of thought, a multidimensional syntax that can replace codes, almost like a notational system that eludes its own rules and can only be performed inside and within thought and feeling.

121 Poetry makes vibrate, resonate together, thought and feeling, or rather thought as feeling and feeling as thought, until they become signs that (re)produce and (re)generate thoughts and feelings, in a seamless cycle.

Appendix: a brief stream of consciousness on being and infinity

One of the key aspects I tried to highlight in the previous lines is that we need poetry in order to deal with the ontologically irrepresentable. In Giordano Bruno (and in some way in Lucretius), this aspect is a consequence of the infinity of the universe. As Bruno puts it in his philosophical poem *De immenso*, the *infinite* gives itself to the human intellect as *indefinite*. We could say today that this is due to the current evolution of the human brain and perhaps the relationship between infinite and indefinite will change over time. Still, it remains a major ontological problem. Also because of our limited comprehension of infinity, it is difficult to decide whether the totality of being is finite or infinite. In Bruno and, in a much more philosophically formalised way, in Spinoza and Leibniz, the relation between being and (also temporal) infinity is a logical consequence of their respective – and indeed very different – ontologies. As a poet who, so to speak, works philosophically, this has increasingly been a guiding conception for me, especially ever since I realised that infinity is already present in the way in which poetry deals with meaning. Even the most literal poetic object contains in itself a potentially infinite unfolding of meaning, exceeding not only the author's intentions, but also this or that line of interpretation. Poetry literally contains ontological infinity in its treatment of language and signification. It is what I called semantic *multidimensionality*: meaning in the poetic language is like multidimensional space in geometry. In order to represent multidimensionality in a drawing one has to flatten and repeat some surfaces in the same space. The same goes for poetry: the text is the phenomenal surface beneath which a much wider unfolding of meaning (and experience through language) is deployed. The multidimensionality of meaning in poetry is potentially endless: depending on the text, it is possible to dive deeper into increasingly encompassing sets of relations. This is also why I am claiming that poetry is a *translation of everything*. As many have argued, it is also very difficult not to imagine that the totality of being is not endless, since if it were finite there would always be something outside of it, and therefore it wouldn't be a totality. The logical unicity of this totality (in Spinoza's argumentation, if the substance is all-encompassing, there cannot be another substance that is not comprehended in this substance) depends on the other hand on what we intend by 'unicity'. In this totality there is also necessarily an infinite plurality. But we also have to decide what is meant by 'infinity' in an ontological scenario, besides its different mathematical orders as shown by Cantor. From a temporal point of view, we could say that eternity, the infinity of time, could either be a temporal flow without beginning nor end, or the absence of time itself. Since, according to modern physics, time and space are the same entity, the same distinction could be applied to space, albeit in a less intuitive way. I find the notion of *geometrogenesis*

fascinating in this sense, as it allows us to understand infinity not only as something that has no end in time and space (temporal or geographical endlessness), but also something that, in certain physical conditions that are different from the ones we observe in this (portion of the) universe, is out of time and has no place. This, incidentally, can be connected to the very important – and in this case at least partially observable – notions of ‘non-locality’ and ‘quantum consciousness’, which seem equally appropriate for poetry and for the universe’s behaviours, as poetry also spreads beyond predefined spatiotemporal, geographical, psychological, individual, grammatical, semantical, and figural coordinates. Is the infinity of being somehow independent from the contingent configuration of time and space in this specific portion of the universe? Could being pre-exist to spacetime? And how could such a conception be connected to language? Are these models of infinity embedded into the semantical infinity of the poetic text? These seem to me major poetological questions in the 21st century. They might appear somewhat abstract, but they also have, I firmly believe, strong political implications. The opening of meaning towards infinity, and therefore of the possibilities of meaning, is, in my opinion, an essential step towards the creation of new political models, as much as it constitutes a gnoseological expansion towards a wider understanding of being which is not less real just because it hasn’t been figured out (in the literal sense) so far. In all the local and miserable sorrows, abuses, hierarchies, and conflicts that we observe at the human scale, there is a desperate need to look inside the sky for something present and yet irrepresentable. The irrepresentable in this sense has a deep connection with what Judith Balso calls the impossible in her political theory: we have no choice but to rely on the inexistent and the impossible (“*compter sur l’impossible inexistant*”, as she writes) to formulate new political scenarios, just like we have no choice but to rely on the unrepresentable within the realm of poetry. I have been claiming over the years, and striving towards this in my own practice, that poetry overcomes obstacles: cognitive, political, and emotional obstacles put by power, or by ourselves, inside language, imagination, and feeling, that can be subverted by the freedom, the variety, and the multidimensionality of the poetic approach to reality. I have also mentioned above the horizontality and the refusal of authority that are typical of the *Dichtung*, as well as its intrinsic subversive features. The different levels of – also semantical – infinity are, *together with* the question of being, at the core of the interaction between poetry and philosophy. This, in turn, is deeply connected to the creation of possibility from the impossible, within and without language. I would thus like to go back to the first text of the Western tradition in which poetry and philosophy operate together to question the nature of everything: Parmenides’s philosophical poem, often titled (not by himself) *Peri Physeos* – *On Nature*. Like many poets and philosophers, I am deeply fascinated by the fragments of

this text, and by the fact that Parmenides was the first to understand that poetry is indispensable to question being. The main reason why I am thinking of Parmenides again here is that I am troubled by the traditional interpretation of his notion of *being* as *finite*, in opposition to his disciple Melissos's. As it is widely known, Parmenides compares being to a sphere. I think that a too strict geometrical interpretation of this comparison led traditional scholarship potentially out of track.² First, let us recall that, from Nicholas of Kues and Neoplatonism onwards, the paradoxical possibility of an infinite sphere has been widely envisaged in order to represent the universe, the substance, and God, particularly when those instances exceed our imaginative coordinates. This image comes back in a famous fragment by Pascal ("une sphère infinie dont le centre est partout et la circonférence nulle part"). This notion of infinite sphere seems to me very close to the paradoxical nature of poetry as nonverbal language, immaterial materiality, and translation of everything I tried to express above. I think that Thomas Traherne's poetry confirms this connection:

'Twas not a sphere,
Yet did appear,
One infinite. 'Twas somewhat everywhere,
And tho' it had a power to see
Far more, yet still it shin'd
And was a mind
Exerted for it saw Infinity.
(*My Spirit*, VI)

Incidentally, in this "everywhere" we could spot an *ante-litteram* understanding of quantum non-locality. Poetry often precedes other forms of understanding. *Omnia licet poetis*: although I am not a Parmenides scholar, as a poet I dare to find not only in Traherne's, but in Parmenides's lines themselves the reason to question the finitude of being in his philosophy. Some terms Parmenides uses to qualify being – *οὐκ ἀτελεύτητον, οὐκ ἐπιδεδῆς, τετελεσμένον* – indicate that it is rather *not incomplete*, which is different from *finite*. Being can be complete as totality and yet be infinite in a sense that, precisely, exceeds our contingent, mathematical understanding of endlessness. This state of completeness of being implies, writes Parmenides, that it is *ἄπαυστον* and *ἄναρχον*, without an end and without beginning, which seems to me much closer to an idea of temporal infinity as described above than to a conception of being as finite. I cannot help to notice that being as *ἄναρχον* allows us to trace yet another connection between the openness towards infinity

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² Like other scholars, I have also doubts on Parmenides's correlationism, but I will leave this to another time.

and political subversion as refusal of hierarchical governance, since the very beginning of both philosophy and poetry. Being is also, according to Parmenides, *συνεχές* (continuous), another feature that I myself used in order to show the contribution that poetry can bring to non-dualistic metaphysical models (what I called *continuum* and *ontological spectrum*), which, especially since Spinoza, are connected with a conception of being, or substance, as infinite. Above all, the possibility to reconsider the infinity of being in Parmenides's poem could solve a philological puzzle: according to one of the most accredited readings, the one by the Byzantine philosopher Simplicius, being is *ἡδ'ἀτέλεστον*, "without an end". Scholars like Barbara Cassin proposed to replace this reading with *οὐδ'ἀτέλεστον*, "not endless"; others, like Leonardo Tarán, with *ἡδὲ τέλεστον*, "and complete". Could it be that those replacements are not necessary? Could it be instead that, ever since their common beginnings, poetry and philosophy have investigated being and infinity together, reminding us that no limit should stand between us, the understanding of this world, and the way in which we can act within it? Or that, if not Parmenides himself, at least Simplicius's reading opens this possibility? Whatever the right interpretation, the possibility of a deep convergence between being and infinity, between what is *here* and what cannot even be imagined, traces back to the dawn of thought the non-dualistic convergence of ethics and ontology, primarily embodied by poetry.

A Poem's Gap¹

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Garrido**

Abstract: The essay "A Poem's Gap" engages with the relationship between philosophy and poetry. It keeps them apart on the basis of poetry being a meaningless game to be enjoyed on its own grounds. Yet in a reading of a famous poem by Emily Dickinson, the essay also shows how the poem as a text that carries a (philosophical) meaning or a lesson (about life) emerges out of the poem's meaningless game. By interpreting Dickinson's poem as a scene of seduction without which there is no poem, and consequently no (philosophical) meaning, the essay refers to the famous Socratic debate, since it is the poem's seductive quality that the philosopher mistrusts. Finally, the essay demonstrates that Dickinson's poem is exemplary in that it stages the manner in which a reader gets hooked on art.

Keywords: Poem; meaning; seduction; being nobody; Emily Dickinson

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1

A poem must be an impossible prayer. Before this prayer can reach beyond itself, invoke without delay whatever or whomever may hear it and come to its encounter, yield to the words and silences, the sounds and pauses that withdraw into its singular ellipsis, it seeks to be shared and establish a complicity with its reader. Its address doubles and precedes itself, as if it had to make a detour, and in this movement it is no longer obvious whether it will, eventually, address what lies beyond itself, in the manner a possible prayer seems to do. But in what sense is this impossible prayer still a *prayer*? It is still a prayer because, in its address, the poem must dispossess me, its reader, of a proper name. It must place me in the same position from which it originates. This is how the poem comes about: by ceasing to advertise itself or to put forward names that trigger the automatism of recognition. But why does the poem need to be an *impossible* prayer, looking for me, its reader, as one who will be complicit with it from the start? Why does the poem whisper its seductive, shy, daring, ingenuous words into my ear, with a hesitating voice? Why does it look for company rather than venture outside straight away? Why does it introduce a fissure, the gap of a humorous, cheeky, and child-like turn, into its call for an unknown reader? Does it need to be reassured, make certain that we understand each other before the exposure takes place and the address takes flight? Must there be a bit of ease to let the unknown both in and out, the other to whom the poem is addressed and the otherness that hides within the folds of this address? "I am Nobody! Who are you? / Are you – Nobody – too? / Then there's a pair of us!"²

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¹ The authors wish to thank Jared Stark for his comments, which helped them to clarify their thoughts and improve their essay.

² Dickinson, 116. The poem dates from 1861.

Thus the poem speaks and thus it gets me hooked, no matter how its words and silences, its sounds and pauses end up striking me when I am no longer a kindred soul but the other who may hear them or not. Each time I get hooked by a poem, we remedy each other's solitude, the solitude of an address. Conversely, each time I feel addressed by a poem and begin to listen to its prayer, that is, to trace and retrace the figure of its address, its ellipsis, I can only do so because there is already "a pair of us" and the joy of such communion. A pair of nobodies! The poem approaches me ahead of its address, as it were, boldly and groping in the dark. As it senses my wavering presence, it begins to pull me into its circle and deprive me of my name with its first assertion and its first query. Will I be willing to allow such nudity? Its second query is a charitable one: "Are you – Nobody – too?" The constitution and exchange of complicity captured in the first few verses of Emily Dickinson's poem does not result in reasons for feeling addressed by it, reasons to do with its words and silences, sounds and pauses, reasons related to the elliptical figure they draw, or to the poem's singularity. If such reasons exist, and if I try to elucidate them, the poem also comes before them, preempting and preparing my attempt, getting me hooked. "Are you –" In every address of art, there is a poem, a series of secret advances that free me from defined meanings or names and make me turn like a trope. Dickinson renders this poem explicit.

The poem does not even ask who I am or what I want or need. It has already assigned me, as its reader, a (non-)place and a (non-)identity, that of being or becoming nobody. A few words into the reading and the poem is already dispossessing me of everything that seems irrelevant to its operation. In a way, the poem puts an end to the problem of its solitude even before it is read. It legislates the conditions for experiencing it: the suspension of my own identity, my own history – identity and history that I won't recover without at the same time losing the poem. The poem seems immorally violent towards its readers. It does not ask for my consent; it forces me, its reader, to dispossess myself of what I am and returns me to a place where I have never been – the place of the affirmation the poem needs me to be. The "yes" that Dickinson's poem takes for granted between the second and third lines ("Are you – Nobody – too? / Then there's a pair of us!"), this "yes" that I find myself having uttered without having done so, this passive, or active, or in any case immemorial complicity with the poem, has taken away the floor beneath my feet and replaced it with a different one, as in a syncopation or a gap. And what if I am not or will not or cannot be nobody? What if being nobody is not the position my solitude seeks or needs? What if my solitude is something else and mine a different madness? What if I have already lived without record, lacking an identity and banned from language and understanding? What if I needed first to be somebody in order to read and understand the poem and say "yes, I am Nobody too"? Why doesn't the poem take all this

into account? The choice the poem leaves me is hard and unfair. Either I reaffirm the poem's reasons and say – telling a lie I can hardly believe: “yes, I am nobody” – or else the poem excludes me and expels me from the circle into which it tries to pull me. The choice the poem leaves to the reader is not, in reality, a choice: the reader will have become nobody because of a decision that he or she will have made in a syncopated time, far from the self-deceiving scene of reading, far from anyone's world and history and identity. “Dont tell! they'd banish us – you know!”, the poem's fourth line reads. The poem seizes us, its readers, with its boundless hospitality. It involves us in its anarchic complicity, compels us to accept the terms that it takes for granted (“you know”) and that we ignore and will continue to ignore.

Invoking a supposed innocence on the reader's part would obviously be abusive. The reader approaches a poem on his or her own terms and reasons. As a reader, I assume that there is something in what I call a poem that has a meaning, a meaning that I can understand, or sense, and with which the poem can capture me in unpredictable ways and for unpredictable reasons. The reader is also preoccupied with remedying his or her solitude by abusing a poem that cannot elude the hunger of reading. The poem pays a high price for complicities that the reader will simply treat as artifice. It exposes itself, with unparalleled impotence, to the infinite risks of reading. The mere existence of readers, and the mere occurrence of reading, may inscribe the poem within worlds that are not the ones it may have initially sought. The poem is a profoundly solitary artefact on which readers may inflict violence far worse than the violence its unbounded hospitality inflicts on them. Readers can always turn their backs on a poem and leave it talking to itself, operating nakedly, overtly, stupidly, dispossessed of the means to seduce. They can always abandon the poem's explicit and implicit reasons to the indiscretion of their understanding, which inevitably hurts the poem's intimacy and denies its irremediable solitude.

Or perhaps the poem endures no matter what. No poem could delude itself to the point of ignoring the radical risk of reading. Could there be a poem that would forget that solitude has no remedy? Could there be a poem released from being an impossible prayer? And how could I deny the imminence of unforeseen meanings that the violence of my reading disseminates? How could I deceive myself to the point of forgetting that all reading presupposes the immemorial and syncopating desire to take nothing for granted, the desire, and the chance, to be nobody? The poem's and the reader's reasons seem thus to converge.

2

The first verses of Dickinson's poem, with their bold interrogation and exclamation marks and the guarded pauses that punctuate their impertinence, were written to be spoken by a voice, as if to prove a common place: one must hear a poem to fully appreciate it. The poem resembles a nursery rhyme that, in its initial stanza, lacks proper rhymes but includes assonances ("you" and "too"). It inhabits a world beneath the world of adulthood, an invisible world of small and wonderful creatures, a naïve, not a sentimental world. Adults, however, respond to such naïveté. The French philosopher Alain Badiou, for example, appears to share in the poem's search for complicity by endorsing its ingenuousness.³ He assumes that the poem's voice receives an affirmative answer to the second question it raises ("Are you – Nobody – too?") and that, after a short and perhaps slightly apprehensive wait, this answer fills it with contentment and allows it to continue, soaring into a newly found alliance ("Then there's a pair of us!"). Badiou also assumes that the poem's voice is a human one and that its insistence on anonymity addresses itself to a "generic humanity", a humanity whose members are all treated as equal, or a humanity that cannot become an object of knowledge since such an approach would turn nobodies into somebodies. And though Badiou mentions cultural heritage – the echo of Ulysses's cunning in the active usage the poem's voice makes of the pronoun "nobody", providing it with a majuscule and transforming it into a paradoxical proper name, or into the sign of a "somebody" that undoes itself – the philosopher does not proceed to exploit the erudition he attributes to the poem. His identification of nobodies – of a pair of nobodies and of pairs of pairs of nobodies – with a "generic humanity" is meant to resolve the paradox of Nobody, into which he does not delve. In short, Badiou remains a rather naive reader, caught by the poem's apostrophe. And thus his interpretation presents not much of a surprise to other readers. It seems to be accurate in its literalness, as if the poem were a straightforward affair and lend itself willingly to its translation into a political process: the liberation from self-centered individualism and the destruction of the "identitarian fetish" result in the establishment of a community that Badiou does not hesitate to call "communist". Yet if the naivety inherent in the poem, inherent to such a degree that it is impossible to distinguish between its spontaneous and its artfully staged manifestation, showcases a dimension without which poetry, and art in general, would be of no consequence, namely the dimension of an impossible prayer, or of getting hooked on a voice, then no reader, no participant in art, can ever be naive enough. There is a "poematic"⁴ naivety that outdoes all naivety.

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3 See Alain Badiou's lecture 'Comment vivre et penser en un temps d'absolue désorientation?', held on the 4th of October 2021 on a theatre stage at Aubervilliers, France.

4 Jacques Derrida coins the neologism "poematic" [*poématique*] in his essay '*Che cos'è la poesia?*'

To be dispossessed by a poem and to become a nobody means that ultimately it must prove undecidable whether a reader gets hooked on a poem or whether a poem gets hooked on a certain reading. What we have is a pair of hookers who are also punters and cease to advertise their services as they come across each other: “Are you – Nobody – too?”

There seems to be a disagreement about the fourth line of Dickinson’s poem. It says: “Don’t tell! they’d banish us – you know!” But in her manuscript, Dickinson adds the more subtle and sneaky word “advertise” below the phrase “banish us”.⁵ She even underlines it. Is she signalling a preference? Badiou does not seem to be aware of this option and goes for the banishment,⁶ giving it a lot of political weight. Perhaps it is not a matter of philology, of decisions that a reader or editor need to take and justify, but of sheer playfulness. The hooking relies on it. Naivety – I don’t know anything because I am in the know – can afford an additional element of self-reflection. The voice can abide written traces that elude vocalisation, the scene or the exchange can withstand sleaziness and admit a seductive tone, and the poem can have its own unavowed reasons, which seem legitimate for as long as they intensify the playing. Yet the reader must not to admit that he or she is hooked. Why? Because being-hooked, on which everything depends, is just an irrelevant surrender to a silly little poem and its playful voice. As soon as it is advertised and becomes something, nothing depends on it anymore.

To be hooked by the playful voice of the poem, that is to play the poem’s game, amounts, as with any other game, to following rules. Adults, young people and children know very well that, in order to enjoy a game, one has to know how to play a game. “You know!” No game is possible if it has no rules and if players do not know and accept them. The unscrupulous player may invent or reinterpret them, but that only shows that he or she needs them to achieve his or her unscrupulous goals. The game does not prevent the players from cheating, but the players need to know how to cheat. “Don’t tell! they’d advertise – you know!” Cheating is part of the game. The rules of a game are, like all rules, productive: they establish values and determine ways of doing and acting. They open horizons of possibility and uncertainty, of risk, loss, and salvation. The rules of the game give meaning and stability to the behaviour of the players who play it. The game is the infrastructure that alleviates the players’ solitude.

(Derrida, ‘*Che cos’è la poesia?*’, 296). It is used here in the general sense of “something relating essentially to a poem”.

5 A reproduction of the manuscript of Dickinson’s poem can be found online at the following address: <https://www.themorgan.org/exhibitions/online/emily-dickinson/11> Franklin replaces “banish us” with “advertise”.

6 In a previous version of his interpretation (Badiou 2018) Badiou quotes the corrected verse (“advertise” replaces “banish us”) – yet in this version, too, he does not mention that the uncorrected verse reads differently.

We know that games hook their players, but they do not gobble them up, and they always expel them in the end. Whether we lose or win, no one stays in a game to live. A game does not allow one to care about life. And games do not care about life either. They do not pursue a dialectical relation with life, they do not even need to know that there is a life outside the game, even though everyone in the game knows that there is life outside. Nor is the game interested in establishing a parallel reality. A game is not a play that represents life and addresses itself to readers, viewers, or auditors who know how to neutralise the game's artifice or its grammar. A game is not some kind of being or reality. Nor is the game a practice of experimentation or a form of exploration. That is to say, the game does not play with us or with the world. The game simply does not care. It lets things be.

The secret of the poem's frivolity, of the silliness that makes it perfectly impotent as well as infinitely resilient, lies in its carelessness. Meanings that readers of a poem who do not play its game assign to it from the outside are indifferent to it. They are useless when it comes to playing the game, or when it comes to cheating. The problem that philosophy has with the poem can be understood as a problem with its game. It is not that philosophy, in order to understand the poem's reasons, must become childish or juvenile. There is no age for enjoying a game. Yet it so happens that philosophy is not interested in games but in the meaning at play in them. The problem that philosophy has with poems is that a poem's game – its operation as a poem and the rules that this operation entails – places a primordial barrier in the way of any attempt to do anything with the poem other than play, while philosophy knows that a poem is not only a game but also, and vitally so, a prayer that invalidates presuppositions. The problem with philosophy is its own naivety: it believes, for example, that the poem's game naively conceptualises reality – “the thing here is, therefore, that”⁷ – as if the poem could ever conceptualise things when only sciences and philosophy and the languages we inhabit can do so. To conceptualise things is to “neutralise” the poem's game. This is what we do unwittingly, for instance, when we listen to the poem as a narrative and are careful not to fall for it or not to play along with it. If we fall for it, we cannot highlight or advertise the poem's lesson, the possible worlds it creates, or how it deepens our understanding of reality. To enjoy a story – to relate to it in such a manner that it can broaden the world, subvert given orders, denounce the false and the unjust, bring something new to life – we must learn not to take

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⁷We are freely translating an expression from Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, I, 1371b 6. The passage is well known and is worth to recall: “And since learning and admiring are pleasant, all things connected with them must also be pleasant; for instance, a work of imitation, such as painting, sculpture, poetry, and all that is well imitated, even if the object of imitation is not pleasant; for it is not this that causes pleasure or the reverse, but the inference that the imitation and the object imitated are identical (ἀλλὰ συλλογισμὸς ἔστιν ὅτι τοῦτο ἐκεῖνο), so that the result is that we learn something” (Aristotle 1926, 125).

what it says seriously. Neutralising the poem's game makes room for fiction, which is precious for our social survival and a more genuine and important business perhaps than all our science and thinking.

However, we cannot play and enjoy a game unless we take its rules seriously, and in so doing trivialise the real weight of things. When we assume that the poem seeks our complicity, when we assume that it humorously knows what we need and do not need to know to enjoy it, we are already in the process of neutralising its game and transforming the arbitrariness of its rules into the plausible rules of a possible reality. We see more at stake in the game than its sheer playfulness. In particular, we see life at stake, and if there is one thing that philosophy and the sciences and our languages take seriously, it is life. Life seems impossible without presupposing solid boundaries between the real and the unreal or between reading and playing. The poem supplies the semic or asemic infrastructure from which we extract vital meaning to keep life, and history, alive. And we forget – for it is irrelevant to life – the poem's playfulness. The poem does not care about life. From Aristotle's interpretation of mimesis to Kant's free play of the faculties, Schiller's play drive, and Heidegger's or Gadamer's concepts of the work of art, philosophy treats the poem's game as a vital mediation to fulfil or consummate meaning – “freedom”, “morality”, “truth”, “being” – even though we know too well that the poem's productive and unpredictable machine fills life and history with unexpected effects and with inadmissible, impossible meanings.

That Dickinson's poem plays a game is obvious since it does not really speak to us. Nor does it speak to anyone else. It does not even speak to anyone in general. The impossible prayer that so radically and implausibly dispossesses me of my life and of a reason to live asks nothing from me. A game is never interested or concerned with the one who plays it. The poem's game suspends the poem's and the reader's complicity. It suspends everything but the undecidable and undecided game of a silly voice. This is how the poem creates a radical distance that we can perhaps neutralise but in no case negotiate. From the start, it releases us from our naivety, that is to say, from the unaffordable cost of being the poem's readers. The poem executes its voracious and creative operation in the most absolute insignificance, like a dead person stripped of her solitude.

The second and last stanza of Dickinson's short poem reads: "How dreary – to be – Somebody! / How public – like a Frog – / To tell one's name – the livelong June – / To an admiring Bog!" This stanza does not add anything to the first stanza. It repeats it and can be taken as another instance of the poem's sheer playfulness, or of its absolute insignificance. But its repetitive character can also be understood to explicate, unfold, paraphrase, or illustrate a meaning, the meaning of a "generic humanity", for example. If so, the second stanza must be read as a powerful underscoring of a meaning that the reader should bestow upon the poem and export into his or her own life. The second stanza helps turn the poem from a game he or she has played, in a naïve and complicitous manner, or in the manner of someone hooked, into a lesson learned from a poetic address to which the reader has been attentive.

From the point of view of the conceptualising effect of repetition, without which the two stanzas could not convey a lesson, the poem's humorous vein affirms itself one more time. For what is a lesson if not an admiration? The poem wishes to be admired, not by frogs, to be sure, but by you, the reader whom it has stripped bare. Yet do you, the reader who has learned a lesson, remain nobody, or do you become somebody? Do you become nobody for the first time? Are you a frog now, feeding on a maddening repetition and telling your name "the livelong June"? Or are you the opposite?

If the poem entertains a double relationship with itself and with you or me, then its playfulness calls for the very conceptualisation it precludes, and it is in the gap between the two that the poem leaves us hovering, exposed to reasons that will never be sufficient, or private or public enough to be fully grasped, whether by a reader or by the poem itself. This is why readers are always torn between the desire to stay with the poem's playfulness, fascinated by an absence of solitude that transports them even beyond their complicity and naïvity, beyond their having been hooked, and a desire for philosophical or conceptual interpretation and appropriation fueled by a playfulness that they must also renounce when they attend to the important and serious business of the concept, or of thinking. With her poem, Dickinson places us on the edge of this gap.

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The New Muses: The Poetic Vector of Civilization

Mikhail Epstein

Abstract: This article presents the poetic outside of the traditional domain of poetry: not as inherent in verse, but as active in various spheres of civilization, from technology and science to biological and social processes. Contrary to the widespread view that the progress of civilization is mostly pragmatic, and that it diminishes the role of poetry, the author argues that the course of civilization is defined by the growth of its imaginative and metaphorical patterns. *Technopoeia* is viewed as the development of technical devices that extend the capacities of the human body as metaphors and metonymies of its various organs. *Biopoeia* embraces the diversity of metaphors created by the crossovers and hybridization of various organisms and the poetic uses of the language of genes. *Sociopoeia* demonstrates the growth of metaphorical patterns in contemporary societies, where traditional and static social roles and inherited identities are transformed and intermingled. *Noopoeia*, the poetic potential of scientific thought, is presented in the deeply metaphorical visions of the micro-world, in the concept of quantum entanglement and in fractal theory. Foundational metaphors—such as ‘planet as a living organism’, ‘computer as a brain’, or ‘genes as language’—underpin the conceptual apparatus of contemporary science. Thus, the magical powers of poetry, once glorified in ancient myths like the myth of Orpheus, extend into the imaginative advances made by various branches of civilization.

Keywords: poetry, the poetic, metaphor, life, technology, science, society

I. Progress and Poetry

Are there any definitive vectors in the history of civilization? A number of answers to this question come to mind, some of them more statistically persuasive than others: demographic growth, economic progress, increased labor productivity and social wealth, the spread of the free market, globalization, cosmic expansion, accelerated information flows, the expansion of the noosphere—these are all mutually compatible vectors that make up the coherent picture of historic development. Nevertheless, there is yet another vector that is regularly omitted from that picture—namely, the vector of the expansion of the poetic, of poetization of space, of life, society and technology.

This idea of progress as *poesis* (from the Greek *poiēsis*, ποιήσις, which translates literally as ‘creativity’) might seem, at first, to run against the grain of the other trends just mentioned. *Poesis* is the growth of the poetic in history, mediated by the creative efforts of humanity. This vector might appear counterintuitive: do not the economic, technological and informational progress all lead to a waning of the poetic element, which can but retreat further and further into the golden age of myth, of epics, fairy tales and legends? The poetic worldview is thought to have

prevailed only in the early stages of civilization, later to be superseded by science, technology and the rationalist mindset that would rather investigate and know than be enthralled in poetic visions.

II. De-poetization

This 'de-poetization' appears to run continuously through human history, intensifying especially in the Industrial age. The nineteenth-century Russian poet Evgeny Baratynsky noted this mournfully as early as 1835, in his poem 'The Last Poet':

The age advances down its iron pathway,
Hearts bent on lucre, while the common dream
Attends upon the needful and the useful
Each hour less embarrassed, more distinct;
And, in the glare of enlightened knowledge,
The tender reveries of Poesy are gone.
It is not her that generations cherish,
Absorbed in their industrial concerns.

This decline of the poetic was not only sensed by the poets themselves. Karl Marx stressed the same tendency in the language of economics, in his *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy* (1857–1858):

is Achilles possible with powder and lead? Or the *Iliad* with the printing press, not to mention the printing machine? Do not the song and the saga and the muse necessarily come to an end with the the printer's bar, hence do not the necessary condition of epic poetry vanish?¹

In contrast with Marx's optimistic views of progress, Martin Heidegger's reflections were imbued with nostalgia: mass production, he thought, destroys the poetry of singular things, making *poesis* itself a thing of the past. A bowl or a violin are created unhurriedly and authentically, the way a tree grows, too, the way a child is raised. What remains of poetry now is only poetry in the narrow sense—verse, and other islands of the poetic (painting, arts and crafts). These, nevertheless, exist amidst the sea of science, technology and economics. Our contemporary, the composer and art critic Vladimir Martynov, is equally pessimistic about the present and the future of poetry in heralding 'the end of the age of composers' as well as 'the end of the age of literature'.² Should we rejoice or lament in

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¹ Marx 1993, p.111.

² Martynov 2008, p.45.

the face of this inexorable decline of poetry? This is open to debate—yet the decline itself is somehow taken for granted, by ‘progressists’ and ‘nostalgists’ alike.

Contrary to the view that soulless technicalism and pragmatism should be the hallmarks of the twenty-first century, my thesis is that this century promises to be a century of poetry—in a much broader sense than our usual conception of what poetry is. Poetry is not about to disappear from the life of humanity; it is being reborn, on the macro scale of this civilization's megatrends.

III. The New Muses

Ancient Greece knew nine Muses—patronesses of poetry, the arts and sciences: Calliope for epic poetry, Euterpe for lyric poetry, Melpomene for tragedy, Clio for history, Urania for astronomy... The time has come to enlarge this panmuseion with the addition of new Muses: *Anthropopoeia*, *Biopoeia*, *Noopoeia*, *Sociopoeia*, *Technopoeia*... These kinds of creativity do not fit into the conventional scheme of the arts; they broaden the horizons of civilization and its future.

Poeia (from the Greek *poiein*, ‘to create, produce, compose’; cf. ‘mythopoeia’) is the poetic principle that manifests itself in a wide variety of activities, including poetry—but also technology, social and scientific practices, and the cultivation of nature. As the second term in compound words, *-poeia* can be attached to roots denoting different areas of human accomplishment, in order to draw attention to their poetic and imaginative potentialities: *technopoeia* (the poetic aspect of technology), *biopoeia* (of living organisms), *sociopoeia* (of society), *noopoeia* (of thought and science), etc.

IV. Anthropopoeia

First among these new muses is *anthropopoeia*—the creation of humans (from the Greek *ἄνθρωπος*, *anthropos*, ‘human’, and *ποιέω*, *poieo*). Anthropopoeia is the totality of practices aimed at creating and re-creating human beings. The greatest act of anthropopoeia, as described in the Bible, is the creation of humanity ‘in the image and likeness’ of God, which points to the poetic nature of a human being as a metaphor. The human being is a ‘creature’ not in the literal sense (like plants or animals), but figuratively, as she or he stands as an image and likeness of the Creator, as an iconic sign of Divinity. This aesthetic or semiotic construct can help in solving the theological problem of ‘godmanhood’ and of the relationship of the divine and the human. Under this theological assumption, the human being, as a metaphor of God, possesses some of the divine attributes: the ability to think, to create, to name things, and to exercise free will. The relationship between God and man is not logical,

but figurative, based on likeness, or resemblance. The human being should therefore be considered metaphorically—that is, poetically.

In one of his later poems, 'In lieblicher Bläue...' (1822), Friedrich Hölderlin described the essence of *poetry beyond poetry*: 'dichterisch wohnet / Der Mensch auf dieser Erde': 'poetically man dwells upon this earth'. The poetic is not only a property of words and meanings, but of the special way of being inherent to humans. What is this poeticism? It is the human capacity for recreating the world in their own image, and thus for mutual connection between individuals. Hölderlin explained this in a 1799 letter to his brother:

Poetry unites men not, I say, in the manner of play; it unites them, namely, when it is genuine and functions [*wirkt*] genuinely—with all the manifold suffering, happiness, striving, hoping and fearing, with all the opinions and errors, all the virtues and ideas, with everything great and small, that is among them—as a living, thousandfold divided [*gegliedert*] heartfelt [*innig*] whole.³

If humanity is first created in the image and likeness of the Creator, later it recreates the surrounding world in its own image and likeness. The advent of the cyborg and the android, of the super-brain and artificial intellect, all created in the image and likeness of the human, is the second act of anthropopoeia. Devices built into the human being, or closely interfacing with the person, will enlarge human memory and perception, multiply productive ability and creatively influence the human environment. This—the self-creation of man as a trans-natural being, absorbing everything created by him as a species—will be the greatest act of anthropopoeia since God created man.

Poetry, thus broadly understood, is not reducible to verse, for it inspires the whole scope of human creativity. Humanity, created as a metaphor, itself continues to create a world of metaphors. Tools of labor, technical inventions, scientific discoveries and works of art are all but ways of creating the world in man's image. Metaphor, as a transfer of meaning by resemblance, as 'one thing standing for another', predominates not only in poetry, but in all human activity. What we find in the products of civilization—in paintings and buildings, in computers and spaceships—is not the presence of man as a natural being, but his infinitely multiple images, symbolic projections, metaphors and metonymies of his abilities and his desires.

Anthropopoeia thus becomes *technopoeia*.

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3 Eldridge 2014, p.136.

V. Technopoeia

Technopoeia is the poetic principle of technology. Oswald Spengler famously postulated that the essence of technology is identical with the human soul. All the wonders of technology are essentially metaphors of the soul's capacities and its desires—for speed, for flight, for soaring...

The house is a metaphor of the body.
The hammer is a metaphor of the fist.
The bowl is a metaphor of the hand.
Glasses and the microscope are metaphors of the eyes.
The computer is a metaphor of the brain.

Technical implements are projections of bodily organs: this theory of technology dates back to Ernst Kapp's book *Elements of a Philosophy of Technology: On the Evolutionary History of Culture* (1877).⁴ In Russia, the philosophy of organ-projection was developed by Pavel Florensky (1882–1937), who wrote: 'Technology is an imitation of the living body or, more precisely, of the vital body-forming principle; the living body is the prototype of all technology.'⁵

The entirety of technical civilization is a multiplicity of images of the human, with its countenances and reincarnations. Communication technology is the image of the perceptive and thinking person, capable of extending over vast distances her or his capacity to see, to hear and to process information. Transport technologies are an image of men in motion, a hyperbolic enhancement of their ability to run, jump or swim. Manufacturing technology is an image of man's manipulation of objects, which produces tools and consumer goods.

Technology is no less metaphorical and symbolic than poetry, though it embodies the energy of imaginative displacement not in words, but in poetically transformed matter whose every element 'plays' with nature, by overcoming the force of gravity, spatial distance or the limitations of bodily capabilities. Technopoeia—as embodied in aviation, electronics or the Internet—makes it possible to see the invisible, to hear the inaudible, to speak many tongues, and to carry the word from human lips into cosmic distances.

Technopoeia allows us to look at the entire history of technology as a fusion of poetry and utility. Via technology, we act at once poetically, constructing new images of ourselves, and pragmatically, extending our power over the material world. The usefulness of the lever, for instance, is unquestionable, while its poetic aspect resides in the fact that it is a metaphor of the shoulder and the arm, their hyperbole (amplification,

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⁴ Kapp 2018.

⁵ Florensky 1999, p.402.

lengthening): 'Already dipped / In oil up to his elbow, /The lever begins /To cry out in a's and o's', wrote Eduard Bagritsky in his 1927 poem, 'Spring'. The same can be said of almost any technical device. It is no accident that folk imagination has been continuously ahead of technical invention, anticipating them and endowing them with poetic meaning: before the airplane, came the flying carpet, together with the 'self-weaving tablecloth' of Russian tales and the invisibility hat (i.e., '3-D disguise', to use the modern term).

It would be useful to distinguish technological *metaphors* (involving the transfer of meaning by similitude) and *metonymies* (transfer by proximity, extension or contiguity). The telephone, in this way, is a metaphor for hearing but a metonymy for the ear—in other words, it functions as an artificial ear attached to the bodily organ and extending its capacity.

VI. Biopoieia

Biopoieia is a set of biotechnologies that transform the living world. Its manifestations are manifold, including the creation of new varieties of organisms and hybrid beings. Life as such bears many characteristics of poetry. It is no coincidence that one of the most influential scientific theories of life is called 'autopoiesis': in the early 1970s, the biologists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela employed this term to characterize the self-generation and self-reproduction of living entities. What life and poetry have in common is language, both genetic and verbal. Sign processes evolve on all levels of life, from single cells to complex organisms and ecosystems. Studies in biosemiotics show that genetic language has also its own kinds of synonymy, homonymy and metaphors—methods for the construction of poetic images.

One of the most illustrative metaphorical processes in nature is hybridization, which involves the combination of genetic material from different biological species in a single cell. This paves the way for natural genetic engineering, the so-called horizontal transfer: with the aid of special viruses, genes can be transferred between very distant species, even between plants and animals, and new species can arise. On the basis of these transfers, new varieties of cultivated plants are created in the course of artificial breeding; these are, in fact, living and growing metaphors, as some plants acquire the properties of others (in the conventional metaphorical mode of 'starry eyes' or 'rosy cheeks'). Just think of the poetic names of the varieties bred by the American botanist and horticulturist Luther Burbank: quince with the scent of pineapple, dahlias with the scent of magnolia, blue poppy, fragrant dahlia, *tayberry*—a raspberry-blackberry hybrid, and *white blackberry*, a poetic oxymoron. Examples of recent transgenic mixes include a frost-resistant tomato variety with a built-in flounder gene, and drought-resistant corn with a gene borrowed from the scorpion.

The personification of the forces of nature, particularly the endowment of animals with speech (as in fairy tales and fables), is one of the oldest techniques of poetic imagery. Such speech is no longer mere fantasy, and it now enters the practice of another form of poetry—*zoopoeia*. With intermediary languages, real communication between humans and animals (first among them being the chimpanzees) becomes possible. This can lead to new, deep-dialogical relations between species. Nikolai Zabolotsky's poem 'The Triumph of Agriculture' (1931) offers a vision of such a newly-enlightened nature:

Here they teach butterflies to work,
The garter snake is taught the science
Of spinning yarn and making mica,
Of sewing gloves or tailoring pants.
Armed with an iron microscope,
the wolf here sings the evening star,
A workhorse readily engages
Radish and dill in lengthy conversations.

The poetic device of personification—the spiritualization of nature—thus becomes an experiment in its practical transformation.

Biopoeia, taken in the narrow sense, can include the poetic experiments of the so-called *ars chimaera*, 'chimeric art'. Following the Russian art theorist Dmitry Bulatov, this is 'the purposeful construction of new genetic combinations that do not exist in nature, allowing to obtain organisms with inheritable, predetermined aesthetic properties'.⁶ Genetic and biochemical techniques make it possible, for example, to create luminescent plants with radiant letters flashing on their buds, as purely artistic and poetic objects.

VII. Sociopoeia

Sociopoeia is the poetic principle of social life. In traditional societies, individuals coincide with their social ranks and ecological niches. The course of historic development leads towards a progressive dissolution of inherited social rank and of ethnic identities, individuals increasingly adopting the traits of different nations and cultures, and their languages. Books and movies, travels and the study of history and foreign languages are all a way of discovering the other within oneself: a Frenchman can feel like a Japanese; our contemporary can feel like an ancient warrior or a medieval monk... The universal symbolic exchange accelerates with the development of civilization, serving this poetic transference. Unlike the prosaic word, and especially unlike the word of science strictly defined,

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⁶ Bulatov 2002. See also: Bulatov 2008.

the poetic word tends towards utmost extension, absorbing the meanings of those other words. This is just what is happening with individuals in the contemporary society.

Today's human beings, contrary to the popular notion of their wholesale pragmatism, are becoming more and more poetic. We do not simply perform the roles assigned to us by society, but instead increasingly overstep and transform them, distancing ourselves inwardly from our direct functions, and perceiving them as metaphors. This playful, theatrical, carnivalesque mode of sociality exemplifies the Shakespearean vision of the world as a 'stage.' Network communities, virtual realities and role-playing games all involve our performing different personae, and forming our 'selves' in the image of not-self or not-quite-self. This turns out to be a powerful factor in the growth of new metaphorical communities—of sociopoetic environment. We break away from our biographical identities, turning them into our avatars, just as a poet would tap into her or his own personality in order to give a voice to the lyric protagonist. Displaced authorship and 'avatarship' is the principle of network sociopoeia.

In the twenty-first century, the person can incorporate, at least potentially, a greater number of different forms of selfhood than people ever did in prior eras. Two thousand years ago, Seneca exclaimed in indignation: 'how revolting is the fickleness of men who lay down every day new foundations of life, and begin to build up fresh hopes even at the brink of the grave... What is baser than getting ready to live when you are already old?'⁷ Today, this 'post-retirement' age becomes for many people just such a new beginning: one is still full of energy, but also endowed with a sense of freedom when facing the full palette of possibilities for self-realization. The age past sixty or sixty-five then becomes the most poetic phase of life, comparable in its potential for 'metamorphosis' to childhood and adolescence, when the person's professional identity and social roles have not yet been settled. The old age now becomes a time of life's renewed poetic openness.

Sociopoesis is the multiplication of identities and 'self-images' of a person in the course of social and professional development. Once chained for life to his or her craft, the individual is now dramatically more mobile. People can change occupations, acquire new skills and refashion themselves in a variety of ways. As Paul Valéry noted, 'a man deprived of the possibility of living many lives besides his own could not live his own life.'⁸

Whereas a person who travels imaginatively through different times and cultures is a *metaphor* of multiplying identities, belonging to multiple

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7 Seneca 1917.

8 Valéry 1954, p.213.

real communities suggests an extended *metonymic* existence. In this trans-ethnic, trans-linguistic, and sometimes trans-gendered individual, the 'direct meaning' of original identity gives way to figurative meanings, including transference by relatedness, contiguity and membership in various communities. Born in one country, educated in another and working in another yet... Such a person is an embodied metonymy.

VIII. Noopoeia

Followers of Rousseau and Heidegger, or of René Guénon and 'the great tradition', blame science and technology for destroying the charm of the primal poetry and the golden childhood of humanity, when nature was full of animate beings, when a naiad lived in every lake, a dryad in every tree, and the voice of the deity, be it Zeus or Perun, resounded in every thunderbolt. Science and technology allegedly alienate the human being from this ecstatic existence; they dismember that enchanting world into subjects and the objects, and thrust the individual into the cold and soulless space.

Such accusations were more or less justified in the industrial society, whose science was dominated by positivism, materialism and reductionism. Since then, nevertheless, science has changed dramatically, moving away from those dull 'isms', embracing the audacity of poetic reason, and discovering a paradoxical, explosive, pulsating universe that is more like a poem than an analytical judgment. We can speak of yet another variety of transpoetry—*noopoeia* (from the Greek νόος, *noos*, or 'mind')—the poetic principle of reason itself as it appears in modern science. The higher the stage of the evolution of science, the more profound its poetic quality. Albert Einstein maintained that scientific thought always contains an element of poetry.

According to the latest physical theory of quantum entanglement, even objects separated by immense distances turn out to be interdependent, and, in a certain sense, ubiquitous ('nonlocal'): the quantum state is transferred 'outside' of spatiotemporal dimensions. This deeply poetic idea violates the logic of empirical reasoning. Hence the phenomenon of quantum teleportation, when the state of one physical object is transferred to an 'entangled' object in another part of the universe. Even Einstein found too audacious the presumption of such a connection between particles, calling it 'spooky action at a distance'. But poetry is indeed this very 'spooky action at a distance', or 'conjunction of distant ideas'—a definition attributed to the Mikhail Lomonosov, the eighteenth-century Russian poet-scientist. Poetry is the teleportation of images on the grand scale of the universe. Between phenomena of any distance, connections are established via symbols, metaphors, metonymies and synecdoches.

Equally poetic is the modern understanding of the informational nature of matter. For the MIT physicist Seth Lloyd, the universe is essentially a giant computer, in which every atom and every elementary particle carries bits of information.⁹ The notion that the cosmos and its every constituent particle are continuously making calculations on a quantum level is at once a concept of modern information theory and a dizzying metaphor, reminiscent of the poetic vision of the ancient philosopher Anaxagoras, in his fifth-century BC work on *homeomeria*: in every particle, he thought, no matter how small, there are cities inhabited by people, cultivated fields, and the sun, moon and stars shining like our own. Homeomeria is literally 'semblance': the idea that every part must bear a similarity to the whole. This ancient mythopoetic intuition corresponds with Benoit Mandelbrot's theory of fractals, and with the idea current in physics, that elementary particles can be viewed as open gateways, or 'wormholes', leading to other universes. Everywhere in contemporary science we observe the patterns of metamorphosis and reversal: the interpenetration of the great and the small, the transformation of mass into energy, of particles into waves—the poetic workings of the Universe, revealed at the level of fundamental science.

Science, of course, remains science by rigorous adherence to method: observation, description, experiment, quantitative measurement, reproducible results, etc. Yet, at the highest level of generalization, science increasingly approaches poetry. Scientists themselves are often struck by the beauty of the formulas describing the laws of the universe: it is increasingly apparent that these laws are not solely physical—but also aesthetic. Bertrand Russell observed that 'Mathematics, rightly viewed, possesses not only truth, but supreme beauty—a beauty cold and austere . . . The true spirit of delight, the exaltation . . . is to be found in mathematics as surely as poetry.'¹⁰ In actuality, Big Science and Big Technology are the two main poetic genres of our time.

If we were to look at the comprehensive visions of the world offered by today's science, we would find that their foundations rest on grandiose metaphors. The metaphor of 'man-God' has been pivotal for centuries of Western civilization. A number of other fundamental metaphors have emerged, mostly from science:

Universe as a computer
Universe as a hologram
planet as a living organism
computer as a brain
Internet as a nervous system
genes as language

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⁹ Lloyd 2007.

¹⁰ Russell 1919, p.60.

The fact that the meaning of these metaphors is scientifically reasonable and sometimes even realized by technology does not make them less poetic. Poetry is part of the scientific worldview and serves a driving force for new discoveries and inventions.¹¹

IX. The Power of Poetry

Even while diminishing in social authority and standing as a verbal art, poetry is expanding its power on a much larger scale—at the levels of technical, biological and social transformations. To understand this new *transpoetry*, we need the new disciplines of *transpoetics* and *transphilology*, which would investigate metaphors and metonymies, oxymorons and hyperboles as expressed not only in words but also in things, organisms and instruments, in the technosphere, biosphere, sociosphere and noosphere. Technopoetics, biopoetics, sociopoetics, noopoetics—these new disciplines may one day appear on interdisciplinary syllabi in universities, and elucidate the poetics of technical invention, social transformation, and of new genetic and biological forms.

Poetry as it once appeared in ancient myth is not just ‘the best words in the best order’: it is a power tantamount to incantation and prayer, to wielding power over nature. In Greek mythology, Orpheus’ song could move trees and rocks and tame wild animals. When Väinämöinen, the demigod of the Finnish epic *Kalevala* sang the magic rune, the lakes shook and mountains crumbled. This power of poetry has not receded into the past, and it is more than just a beautiful legend. Today, poetry continues to transform the world, right before our eyes—more powerfully and purposefully than ever. Physics, biology, information theory and computer technology are all coming to the service of poetry, which defines the meaning of progress as *poiesis*. Its higher goal, once unattainable, is to re-create the universe as a poetic composition, where everything reflects upon everything.

Poetry thus emerges from its early, verbal form and becomes the engine of a most powerful transformation. Armed with the energy of science and technology, it will transform the world as magically and potently as it had ever done in verse and incantation.

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¹¹ Metaphor does not imply the identity of things, but instead their similarity and congruence. It would be blasphemy to identify man with God; it would be vulgar materialism to identify the brain with a computer. Where similarity verges towards identity, poetry ends and reduction begins.

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Volume 9
Issue 1

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Volume 9
Issue 1

In Praise of Bog

Andrea Gadberry

Abstract This essay inquiries into poetry and causation in relationship to poetic “matter.” Looking to Freud’s introduction of the concept of “overdetermination,” I show how poetry’s intrusion into the literal moment of the term’s definition, in Freud’s half-digested citation of Goethe’s dramatic poem *Faust*, offers a novel approach to grasping poetry’s material “effects.” For there, poetry marks matter’s ineluctable and earthy intrusion into multi-causal analysis. Inquiring further into how such matter and “muck” might ground poetry, I then turn to Emily Dickinson’s famous lyric poem, “I’m Nobody!,” in which the speaker’s abstract, conspiratorial associations, with its certitude in a causal order, yields to the stuff of “bog.” As “bog” becomes the poem’s “end,” as causal certitude bends to mere earth, poetry’s boggish “ground” shows itself to be the overdetermined and overdetermining material that enmires poetry and history alike in a common matter.

Keywords: causation, conspiracy, overdetermination, Freud, Dickinson, Goethe, bog

“The ground itself is kind, black butter

Melting and opening underfoot,
Missing its last definition
By millions of years.”

– Seamus Heaney, “Bogland”¹

In 1870, Emily Dickinson wrote a letter to her longtime interlocutor Thomas Wentworth Higginson telling him how she knew a poem when she saw one:

If I read a book and it makes me so cold no fire can ever warm me, I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry. These are the only ways I know it. Is there another way?²

Dickinson had read many poems, though, and by conventional accounts, her head seemed to be intact. Yet her unusual method of verification — indeed, “the *only* ways I know [poetry]” — merits a second glance and not just because it makes it much more difficult to believe that “poetry

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¹ Heaney 1972, pp. 41-42.

² Dickinson 1959, p. 104.

makes nothing happen.”³ That is Auden’s much-loved line, from his poem on Yeats’s death, and it has been annotated amply: it tends to be treated with more seriousness than Dickinson’s cephalic quagmire above, perhaps because it is easier to imagine a poem presiding over nothing at all than over a near-lobotomy. But Auden’s intriguing definition implies another problem, too, one that Dickinson takes (pun intended) head on: poetry’s relationship to causation. Where Dickinson locates the poem as the cause of startling bodily effects, Auden’s maxim permits his readers to bypass poetry’s relationship to causation or to mystify it: cause and effect can either be dismissed (poetry doesn’t cause anything) or be relegated, with a mysterious flourish, to the void (what it causes is, in fact, capital-N Nothing). While it may yet be ridiculous to ask, “what causes poetry?,” it is a mistake to neglect the question or its inversion and not only because investigating it might reveal how a poem itself might decide to withhold an answer.

If there is at least some confusion about knowing a poem when one sees one, let alone the question of its hazards, there is still more when it comes to naming and discussing its causes and effects. This is reasonable enough given that “poetry” and “causation” are both hard to talk about let alone to define. When “cause” seems to call for “origins,” attempts to show how poetry “begins” point toward the vast matter of primal feeling (if they do not tie themselves in a knot of their own in noticing the problem with the “originary.”)⁴ More modest literary genealogies trace influence from one poet to the next as, say, Milton endures the burden of Shakespeare before him and so on. Contextualizing studies give the vast materials of history their due in making poetry “happen,” and from these materials, we see a range of material conditions, as well as power’s brute hand, infiltrating the poem’s production. These conditions, hardly exhaustive ones at that, are not obstacles to a poem’s interpretation but the ordinary conditions of it: they are the stuff debated, described, and discussed in competing readings; in so-called “method wars,” the degree to which their arrangement inspires distance or superstition remains an ongoing conflict about literary interpretation and the production of meaning.⁵ All this is without attending to Dickinson’s head, to asking what poems themselves cause,

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3 Auden 1991, p. 248.

4 M.K. Blasing’s *Lyric Poetry: The Pain and Pleasure of Words* (2007) locates in language in general and lyric in particular an expression of both the communal and maternal.

5 On the so-called method wars, Rita Felski’s gloss is especially useful: “What does it mean to read a text, scholars are asking, and are there other things we can do with texts besides interpreting them? Critics are debating the merits of close reading versus distant reading, surface reading versus deep reading, and reading suspiciously versus reading from a more receptive, generous, or postcritical standpoint. The focus has shifted from theoretical claims or empirical arguments to matters of method and mood, style and sensibility—in short, the various procedures and practices that inform our encounter with a text.” (Felski 2014, p. v.)

from the ideas they make possible as philosophy's staging-ground to more pedestrian experiences like the reader's response or the critic's "affective fallacy." So it is surprising how seldom we discuss poetry's causes and effects given how very difficult indeed it would be to talk about the many spheres it touches and is touched by without them. It is not as if literature has not been central to thinking about causation as such. Consider just two examples: Heidegger needs Angelus Silesius's "rose without a why" to distinguish between "why" and "because."⁶ Deleuze needs Lewis Carroll's *Alice* as the "nonsense" that permits him to bequeath the Stoic stuff of immaterial *lekta* to materialists of the twentieth century.⁷ And so it seems to me to be worth it to take Emily Dickinson's claim a bit more seriously and to center poetry's effects frontally, rather than incidentally, by asking what a poem causes and what causes it.

To do so, however partially, I want to take on the problem of poetry's "cause" in light of the complexity of explanation I have described above, which is to say, there are many causes and many effects, and it is terribly difficult for any of us to untangle them. Therefore, I want to look to the place where cause and effect hang together in a causal muddle at the birth scene of the concept of "overdetermination" itself, that is, in its first invocation by Freud. I show how the appearance of Goethe's dramatic poem *Faust* puts poetry at the center of multi-causal interpretation in a scene of reading that invites us to look for poetry's ground in the unlikely stuff of its excretions. Following the diet of Freud's "Bücherwurm," I suggest that Freud's definition of "overdetermination," the dream's own overdetermination, finds through the poem the puncturing, and perhaps sully, of overdetermination itself, as the poem turns the dream to text at the site of a common, if imperfect, digestion. As Freud's account of causal complexity finds itself in and productive of an unlikely poetic muck, I follow his cue toward that matter in particular. Moving from dramatic to lyric poetry, I conclude in the "bog" of Dickinson's "I'm Nobody!" There, the poem's speaker grasps multi-causal explanation of another sort: I suggest that the poem begins with the causal (and identificatory) hopes of the conspiracy theory, with its causal certainty, but ends in the strange matter of "bog," an organic adiaphora that also offers itself as poetry's ambiguous ground.

The Future of an Allusion

In "overdetermination" (Überdeterminierung), Freud gave new language to the old problem of analyzing complex, multi-causal phenomena as

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6 Heidegger 1996, pp. 32-39. I am grateful to Alex Dubilet for his insight into "groundless ground" and "life without a why." (Cf. Dubilet 2021.)

7 Deleuze 1969.

he made dreams knowable and rendered them objects of interpretation central to the alleviation of psychic pain. Though the term would itself take on additional and distinct psychoanalytic, as well as political, dimensions over many decades to come,⁸ its first appearance is remarkable even beyond its arrival in the extraordinarily remarkable *Interpretation of Dreams* (1899). As Freud's "overdetermination" elaborates the concept of "condensation," it seems unwittingly to deliver a parallel effect whereby the dream becomes a text likewise unknown to itself. Through overdetermination's first invocation in the context of Freud's "dream of the botanical manuscript," Freud's association of the dream with his childhood persona as a "bookworm" (Bücherwurm) becomes the irresistible principle of his interpretation's own composition, one that has the effect of partially determining – and occasionally undermining – "overdetermination" itself. Rather than singly signifying the specter of a childish curiosity for sexual knowledge, as it is sometimes interpreted (when it is noticed at all),⁹ the "bookworm" is all the more interesting when read not for what it symbolizes but for what it does: namely, excrete scraps of poems. As Goethe's dramatic poem *Faust* punctures the definition of "overdetermination," Freud seems both to demonstrate a bold-faced Faustian wish (for knowledge, for textual immortality) and to show a poetry whose function is to survive the journey the reader, or dreamer, inflicts upon it, from the mouth of the worm to its textual expulsion.

First the dream, and then the worm. Freud's dream of the "botanical manuscript" comes up twice, once at the scene of its first relation and then once more in the context of defining the concept of "condensation." It is in its second appearance that Freud introduces "overdetermination." We meet the dream first in its summary: "I had written a monograph on a certain plant. The book lay before me and I was at the moment turning over a folded coloured plate. Bound up in each copy there was a dried specimen of the plant, as though it had been taken from a herbarium."¹⁰ Interpreting the dream, Freud shows how its apparent simplicity is only apparent as he considers each link in its rich relationship to recent events and more distant childhood memories. In the second appeal to the dream, we acquire the term "overdetermination." Noting the oversaturation of each oneiric element, Freud introduces his now-famous term:

Thus 'botanical' was a regular nodal point in the dream. Numerous trains of thought converged upon it.... Here we find ourselves in a factory of thoughts where, as in the 'weaver's masterpiece'—

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8 For an exceptionally clear discussion of overdetermination's relationship to the "instance" in the work of Althusser, Lacan, and others, see Balibar 2014, pp. 22-24.

9 On the bookworm and its relationship to Freud, "the sexually curious child" (p. 407), and bodily poetics, see Hoffman 2006, pp. 406-408.

10 Freud 2010, p. 193.

Ein Tritt tausend Fäden regt,
Die Schifflein herüber hinüber schießen,
Die Fäden ungesehen fließen,
Ein Schlag tausend Verbindungen schlägt.

*(...a thousand threads,
At a step on the treadle, are set moving,
Back and forth the shuttles fly,
The strands flow too fast for the eye)*¹¹

So, too, ‘monograph’ in the dream touches upon two subjects: the one-sidedness of my studies and the costliness of my favourite hobbies.

This first investigation leads us to conclude that the elements ‘botanical’ and ‘monograph’ found their way into the content of the dream because they possessed copious contacts with the majority of the dream-thoughts, because, that is to say, they constituted ‘nodal points’ upon which a great number of the dream-thoughts converged, and because they had several meanings in connection with the interpretation of the dream. The explanation of this fundamental fact can also be put in another way: each of the elements of the dream’s content turns out to have been ‘overdetermined’—to have been represented in the dream-thoughts many times over.¹²

Here, overdetermination explains the multiple and distinct factors that contribute to a single effect and, likewise, how one “element” might thus signify multiply, without detriment to other “dream-thoughts” or the dream’s interpretation. With “several meanings in connection,” all converging at a given “nodal point,” one sees easily how interpretation might proceed thanks to, rather than in spite of, meaning’s liability to multiply. Freud’s concept illuminates his book’s own method, too, for it explains the principle of textual expansion that he remarked upon just pages earlier, already obvious in each individual dream’s substantial explications: “if a dream is written out it may perhaps fill half a page,”¹³ he explains, while its elaboration and explanation required vastly more space. In the description above, the concept of “overdetermination,” too, comes to accrue “elements” of its own, including a second definition of sorts because it can be “put in another way.”

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¹¹ Goethe 1992, p. 59.

¹² Freud 2010, pp. 300-301.

¹³ Freud 2010, p. 296.

This is all without mentioning the devilish intrusion that marks overdetermination as a Faustian endeavor, that interrupts the definition itself with poetry. For it is Mephistopheles' wry speech to a feckless student from Goethe's dramatic poem *Faust* that pierces the definition, as if the rich account of the botanical manuscript's dreams are alone insufficient. Mephistopheles' description of the loom is illustrative, of course, of Freud's point: as in a loom's rapid weaving, so the dream's many threads and tangles are created through complex interweaving and repetition, and suitably, this complexity might be apprehended through analysis (that etymological "loosening up"). But it is hard to believe that the poem's eruption ought to be treated as so innocent an example given the dream Freud has just described, one in which the "costliness of my hobbies"¹⁴ refers to a habit begun in childhood, one mentioned in the first discussion of the dream of the botanical manuscript, the moment at which Freud, in his own words, came to realize, "I had become a bookworm (Bücherwurm)."¹⁵ Freud's association takes on more than a hobbyistic turn when we see our bookworm is mid-digestion: having bored through the intervening text, it leaves unignorable traces elsewhere.¹⁶ For while the "factory of thoughts" (Mephistopheles' fabulous "Gedanken-Fabrik") finds its way into Freud's prose, digested as if Goethe's language is his own as it hangs from his vermicular mouth just before the quotation, the poem itself appears as an undigested kernel.

The anatomy of the worm is on extraordinary display as the morsels of learning pass through the holes in the text, placing poetry into the prose and thereby marking on it. In this chewed up, and then apparently wholly passed, bookwormish work, Mephistopheles' rhymed couplets not only tell us explicitly about the unseen threads (die Fäden ungesehen) of our own dreams but remind us that that which we ingest may be knotted in ways that twist (and, for Freud, who, unlike Mephistopheles, sees the threads of dream as "tangles"¹⁷) the past too quickly or complicatedly to apprehend (the little shuttles [of the loom] shoot here and there: "Die Schifflein herüber hinüber schießen"). The possibly-uneaten fragment

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14 Freud 2010, p. 301.

15 Freud 2010, p. 196.

16 Freud places metaphorical dirt next to the "dream's navel," with its "reach...down" offering a kind of absent umbilical worm of its own: "There is often a passage in even the most thoroughly interpreted dream which has to be left obscure; this is because we become aware during the work of interpretation that at that point there is a tangle of dream-thoughts which cannot be unravelled and which moreover adds nothing to our knowledge of the content of the dream. This is the dream's navel, the spot where it reaches down into the unknown. The dream-thoughts to which we are led by interpretation cannot, from the nature of things, have any definite endings; they are bound to branch out in every direction into the intricate network of our world of thought. It is at some point where this meshwork is particularly close that the dream-wish grows up, like a mushroom out of its mycelium." (Freud 2010, p. 528). See also Freud 2010, p. 135.

17 For one example of such "tangling," see Freud 2010, p.528, above.

of the poem, however, is not unsullied by the bookworm whose guts have handled it (possibly excreted it), and the little shuttle's movement "herüber hinüber" reminds us that the loom has already given a path for the rearrangement of the central vowels of the infinitive "schießen" to show, to put it euphemistically, the vermicular path of their rearrangement from bookworm's mouth to its expulsion. Freud, our bookworm, has given us a dream of a botanical manuscript in which the dirt in which some worms turn is scarcely repressed, for however clean the pages of the "botanical manuscript" with their dried plants, the dirt in which representations of plants once grew cannot be fully expunged and is instead produced in the apparent manure of citation.¹⁸

Freud's own instructions to look to the dream to perceive wish fulfillment make it difficult not to see in the scrap of *Faust* a wish of another kind. It is hard *not* to see Freud as having taken Mephistopheles' own advice to Faust from the very same scene Freud cites, namely, his counsel to "Hire a poet, learn by his instruction. (Associirt euch mit einem Poeten / Laßt den Herrn in Gedanken schweifen.)"¹⁹ So Freud "hires" a poet (his bibliophilic habit, after all, has already been marked for us as suffering from a certain "costliness"), and we see at the same time the figure that permits the expense to produce its own currency in the worm who bores into the dream in the moment it becomes text.²⁰ But Freud has also made of himself the very Faust whose frustrations with the limits of the laboratory led to Mephistopheles' appearance in the first place. In other words, Freud, like Faust, would need to "hire a poet" precisely because what is on display is a Faustian ambition: to know beyond what is thought knowable, to turn even the great mystery of dreams into an achievement of scientific acumen. The bookworm imperils such ambitions: as it chews through manuscripts, it threatens to reveal that one's work was shit all along. But it also exceeds Goethe's poem in delivering a more ridiculous humiliation: whereas Mephistopheles follows Faust home in the guise of a poodle, the bookworm does one better as Freud's invertebrate familiar. It chews through the library and deposits bits of poems that the reader cannot recognize in full for what they openly

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18 Consider, too, the figure of the gardener: "I was reminded in the analysis that the man who interrupted our conversation was called Gärtner [Gardener] and that I had thought his wife looked blooming." (Freud 2010, p. 198) Freud's recollection of the gardener appears immediately after another citation of a dramatic poem, this time, from *Hamlet*: "There needs no ghost, my lord, come from the grave / To tell us this." (qtd. in Freud 2010, p. 198). Freud's work on *The Interpretation of Dreams* began in 1895, as he wrote of it to Fliess, and was published in 1899; Freud's father died in 1896. I do not need to remind my readers of the dirt or the worms of *Hamlet* – or the dead father haunting it.

19 Goethe 1992, p. 55.

20 Fittingly, then, the third scrap of poetry the bookworm produces is from Lessing, and it is about wealth that is "misplaced," not unlike our bookworm's hobbies. (Cf. Freud 2010, p. 413 on "the connection between gold and faeces.") In his comments on reading Ennius, Virgil makes epic poetry the scene of a like convergence: "I am searching for the gold in the dung (*aurum in stercore quaero*)" (qtd. in Goldschmidt 2013, p. 66). I thank Gerard Passannante for his insight and for this reference.

are. The poem, then, does one better than Mephistopheles, who demands a drop of blood in the exchange of soul for demonic power, because it achieves a cloak of invisibility: as if Freud's "*Zauberwort*" had become a *Zauberwurm*, the bookworm chomps his way through the text in spite of his bizarre reminder to the reader to be on the alert for such damage because the "bookworm[s']...favourite food is books."²¹

Freud's worm's poetic meal breaks the book's definition. The "monograph" (Monographie) not only "touches upon" (rührt...an) two subjects: it also plainly proves itself to be the oneiric element that extirpates the word's very roots. The monograph is not only *not* about one topic, as Freud himself has already demonstrated. It is also not even one book. The "plant," dried out in the dream itself, already signaled a kind of intrusion of something other than ink into the book, as if manageable dried matter separated page from page, a specimen at once resembling a bookmark. But writing the book of the dream into the book of the book (*The Interpretation of Dreams* itself) shows how making the dream into text is not an ordinary operation at all. It is not just that the second book witnesses the expansion of condensed dream elements. It is also the case that the interpretation itself has been infiltrated by the botanical manuscript's associations: the Bücherwurm's triumph is total because he has eaten many works from its library. The bookworm does its reading not with its mind but with its mouth. The poem stains the page, rupturing the definition and the production of the "new" concept; it likewise shows a poetry that both overdetermines and undermines, that is expelled somehow still intact even its very appearance raises the question of the threshold of meaningfulness, of a scrap of poem or a scrap of dream. The worm's destructive diet maims that which it touches but nonetheless also leaves a mark, one that, here at least, is clearly legible. In other words, the poem survives.

In Freud's overdetermination, then, we come upon our modern vocabulary for a problem of multiple causal factors we may not successfully unweave from the single effect they produce, even with a new capacity for noticing them. But in its appearance in Freud, the concept itself is produced by a method that issues an odd causation of its own with the intriguing eruption of the poem—if not quite a free association (freier Einfall) then at least an association of a kind, as in Mephistopheles' directions ("Associirt euch mit einem Poeten"). This happens at the hands – or rather at the mouth – of Freud our Bücherwurm, a bookworm that imposes a method and a form for the dream's analysis both overdetermining and undermining. For the bookworm subsists on literature, delivers poetry in scraps; it survives on it, and its digesting body seems quite the opposite of the skillful "master weaver" presiding over the thought factory or the analyst making the *katabasis* of the

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²¹ Freud 2010, p. 213.

dreamwork a scientific endeavor.²² Although he would also eulogize Freud in verse, it is rather Auden's eulogy of Yeats, with its enigmatic observation that "[P]oetry makes nothing happen," that recalls us now to the terminal moments of the stanza in which it appears:

For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives
In the valley of its making where executives
Would never want to tamper, flows on south
From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,
Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives,
A way of happening, a mouth.

Auden's poem shows the repetition Freud thought characteristic of overdetermination in its redoubled insistence of poetry's ongoing liveliness: "it survives...it survives." But I suggest that this other attribute of poetry, its status as "A way of happening, a mouth" might also invite us to think about the poetry borrowed by our Bücherwurm, himself not a poet, but nonetheless the mouth that receives it and, apparently, the ass that expels it.²³

The model of overdetermination gives us another way to grasp poetry's cause. In Freud's digestion, and indigestion, of the dramatic poem of *Faust*, I have tried to show poetry happening, and leaving evidence of having done so, at the scene of causation's explication. When Freud asks what is condensed in the dream, when he shows the multiple events and associations that together cause the dream's elements, his dream turned text does not reveal poetry's causes so much as its indelible effects. As the poem passes through the bookworm, who in turn passes through Freud's books, we see how both the dream and the text are the objects of complex causal schemes, how overdetermination passes through apparently indeterminate ingurgitations and out again. Freud's description of the dream's many associations illuminate a complicated web, one startling in its revelation of unseen threads (Fäden ungesehen) and its intimation of inmost wishes. In joining text and sustenance, in showing our most ordinary and embarrassing effects in the streaks they leave on the page, the material the worm has given us is one effect among many, but it also points us toward poetry's material grounds, toward the bog in which matter, poetic and otherwise, resides. But Faust's infernal,

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22 An intriguing counterpoint is to be found in the labor, and poetics, of the silkworm, which Crim (2020) reads across Marx and Bervin's *Silk Poems*.

23 For Strachey, reading itself follows a sequence of ex-corporation from author to reader: "The author excretes his thoughts and embodies them in the printed book; the reader takes them, and, after chewing them over, incorporates them into himself" (Strachey 1930, p. 328.) I cannot help wondering, however, if this human centipede might better describe, for Strachey at least, translation. A more recent count of reading as "not merely an intrapsychic, but rather an intersubjective entity" (p. 119), bringing a Bionian framework to the matter of reading, is to be found in Maniadakis 2016.

soul-sealing contract points us in an additional direction, however: while the dreamer's wish necessarily takes place in the optative mood, it is in the indicative mood, with its promise to turn the multi-causal node into the scene of prediction and certainty, that we find another poetic method of noticing connections and explaining their causes, namely, a poetry of conspiracy.

On Behalf of Bog: "A Swelling of the Ground"

I return, therefore, to Emily Dickinson's head and the products of it. Known for her "choosing not choosing," as Sharon Cameron describes Dickinson's characteristically indeterminate syntax,²⁴ Dickinson makes the multiplication of meaning an interpretive challenge for the most routine grammatical parsing of her poems. She seems at first glance a perfect test case for textual overdetermination of the sort Freud's ingenious method of reading makes available. And she likewise has an uncanny grasp of how weird causation can be²⁵ and not just because she intimates that poems can have strange effects on some of their readers. Showing how one of Dickinson's most famous and most commented-upon poems, "I'm Nobody!," relocates the problem of causation to a problem of both the causal and the literal ground of the "bog," I argue that Dickinson makes of our multi-causal analysis an even stickier affair than that of the Freudian bookworm above.²⁶ For Dickinson grasps a special problem for causation's recognition in portraying its appearance first in the serious abstraction of conspiracy before offering its dissolution in the earthy stuff of bog. In the case of Dickinson's bog, it is not that, when it comes to poetry's "cause," that the "center cannot hold," to borrow Yeats' apocalyptic verse, but rather that it never could because it was always bog.

Emily Dickinson was preoccupied with bog enough to have mentioned it in multiple poems. It was good enough stuff for poetry, even when the substance itself kept questionable company:

I'm Nobody! Who are you?
Are you – Nobody – too?
Then there's a pair of us!
Don't tell! they'd advertise – you know!

How dreary – to be – Somebody!
How public – like a Frog –

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24 Cameron 1992.

25 See, for instance, Dickinson's "Rehearsal to Ourselves," which seems to intuit Stoic causation. Dickinson 1999, p. 296.

26 Of course, Dickinson herself was famous for producing her own literary disjecta. On Dickinson's envelope poems and on lyric recognition, see especially Jackson 2005.

To tell one's name – the livelong June –
To an admiring Bog!²⁷

Much has been said about Dickinson's "pair" of "Nobodies" here. Most recently, Alain Badiou has located in the "pair" of Nobodies the mark of the impersonal, a refreshing alternative to a croaking liberal subject and, as such, an admirable alternative to the noxious individualism that began long before Emily Dickinson did.²⁸ The poem supports this reading well enough because, to be fair, it is easy to see how being "Somebody" might be a "dreary" state, one somehow already filthy with bog even before the poem arrives at its immersion, a circumstance perhaps even wounded in its own way by the etymological "gore" that inheres in the "dreary" (as in its now obsolete usage and its root in Old English "*dréorig* gory, bloody, sorrowful, sad").²⁹ In her ironic rejection of the fame of being "Somebody," the reclusive Emily Dickinson performs to her fabled reputation as attic hermit and perhaps even offers a flicker of political hope along the way.

But the poem's speaker, hailing its absent addressee, perhaps summoning a sympathetic reader, assumes that there is a kind of virtual community when there is no one to answer, at least not in the reader's earshot. The conclusion that "Then there's a pair of us" points to a "there" where the "pair" is more apparent than actual, produced by the speaker's own multiplication of "Nobody" or from the still more vague possibility that shouting "I'm Nobody!" might—in some locales, in certain "theres"—produce an echo, as it does across the poem's homophonous repetitions in which such pairing announces "two" (i.e., in the "too," "to," "to," "to" that trickles through the stanzas). Still, there is a relatively smooth sequence of cause and effect, stable enough such that future actions and future consequences can be predicted with the relative certitude of the conditional "would": if you're nobody, then there's a pair of us, and if you tell, then they will advertise. The sticking point here, I think, lies in what "they" do when "they...advertise." The third person plural "they" anticipates the nasty and "public" croak from the second stanza. But it is also a conspiratorial mark: the "they" that advertises does something warped with the poetic matter of "verse": like a pervert but more pointedly, the advertiser twists or turns (*vertere*) toward (*ad*). "They" also seem to warp knowledge, making something public rather than permitting what's untold – or told only in confidence – to remain a secret: to advertise is to make everyone know rather than just one (or two, "you know!").

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27 Dickinson 1999, pp. 116-117.

28 Badiou 2022, pp. 120-122.

29 "dreary, adj.," *OED* 2022.

Now I do not want to suggest that the speaker of the poem seduces its addressee or the reader into a kind of “Bog-Anon,” a secret society in which one Nobody speculates to another about what “They” do. But I think it is important to state the obvious, namely, that Nobody is talking (maybe *to* Nobody) about Nobodies and Somebodies with the certainty that another party altogether, “They” – themselves weirdly neither Nobodies nor Somebodies exactly – has the power either to “advertise” (making a Nobody a Somebody) or even to “banish” (making a Nobody a Somebody who lives Nowhere).³⁰ The flicker of paranoid knowledge (“you *know!*”), the identificatory fantasia that seemingly requires no answer from the interlocutor (“there’s a pair of us!”), performs at once a certainty in the stability of a causal order (if you tell, then this will come to pass) and an exciting crescendo just before the poem’s bathetic relocation to the swamp. It is this causal landscape, frankly the most straightforward of those I’ve discussed, that I want to investigate here: the kind where “They” do things and mere nobodies speculate about them and the order of things they orchestrate. Because Emily Dickinson may have gotten her head taken off many times upon encountering poems, because the things we dream about may contain secret messages from the day, from our deeper pasts, and from the literature that intrudes upon them should we try to turn those dreams to text, it is worth noting the superficial (I stress superficial) similarity of our furtive Nobody and the conspiracy theorist.

Because nothing deflates a conspiracy so fast as a frog’s belch. To be sure, the breathy exclamations of the poem continue (there are six exclamations across its eight lines, as if sparing two lines from enthusiasm for the sake of our “pair”), but the opening question “Who are you?” of the first stanza cedes to two “hows” in the second, “hows” that measure and valorize rather than interrogate: “How dreary,” “How public.” As “how” designates an unspecified extent, “They” recede entirely, and the machinations of both “advertisement” and “banishment” enjoy an exile, too, cast aside as the poem turns to organic matter. This movement, from the abstract to the mud offers something of a repetition of the fate that befell the clean concept of overdetermination as the threads of a saturated causation took their place alongside the worm’s excretions in the discussion of Freud above. Here, the second person address concludes, as if the secret of the Nobodies is kept, and its brevity (a mere four lines) contrasts with the ironic eternal summer of the “livelong June” of ranine self-congratulation. In this way, Dickinson’s second stanza enacts its own conspiratorial protection of the potential secrecy of the first stanza but also makes of our glimpse of the causal an affair that ends in muck. This does not so much indulge the conspiracy theorist’s tendency to “monocausal explanations that largely resist

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³⁰ “Banish” is the variant of “advertise” in Line 4.

refutation”³¹ as suggest that revelations about an overdetermined causal order may be more humble and more humbling: a keen grasp of how quiet non-conformists are likely to be treated may offer a momentary respite, a fleeting June and not a livelong one, a brief hiatus from the usual demands on attention from the loudest segments of the public. It might just be a conspiracy in its literal sense, a breathing taken together (from *con-* with and *spirare*, to breathe).

I would like, then, not so much to defend the bog from which the nasty frog of Dickinson’s poem gurgles its obnoxious self-promotions as to ask what the bog is the basis of, for this poem, and to ask how “bog” might be useful for thinking about poetry and the problems of “cause” I have adumbrated above. In “I’m Nobody!,” the bog is where the frog names itself, where it is audible even to the point of noxiousness. It is elsewhere, for Dickinson, the place where a fleeting beauty that requires no declaration at all to announce its extraordinary becoming as its beauty arrives in fantastic color: “It will be summer eventually.... //The wild rose – redden in the Bog -.”³² In still another poem, bog is the guileless substance that sticks to the speaker’s boot:

A Bog affronts my shoe.
What else have Bogs to do –

The only Trade they know —
The splashing men?³³

Like the bog of our poem, this one bears the capacity to offend, but it is plainly not the bog’s blame, just as it is not the fault of the burdock of the same poem that snares her dress when she comes “too near.”³⁴ To be sure, the “nearness” of the bog is a threat of a kind in our poem, too. For this bog has a special capacity not only to “splash” (and be splashed in) but likewise to “admir[e].” One wonders even if the bog might sometimes gaze back. The bog’s “nearness,” however, places it very close to the speaker’s foot, the metrical one, shod here and audible, in spite of the soft ground beneath, thanks to the sound of verse. The soft bog of our poem not only absorbs the abstractions of the first stanza and permits the wallowing of the sordidly aspirational but also reminds us that bog, too, is “ground.” It is the “ground” that causes “splash[es]” and stains, the stuff where summer rose’s wildly “redden[s].” It is likewise where a poem, or at least a stanza (from the Italian for “room”), may be submerged, not so

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31 Spiegel 2022, p. 66n20.

32 Dickinson 1999, pp. 171-172.

33 Dickinson 1999, p. 129.

34 Ibid.

unlike Dickinson's "House that seemed / A Swelling of the Ground."³⁵

In "I'm Nobody!," the bog ambiguously grounds Emily Dickinson's poem rather than causes it, and in doing so, it permits us to see a "bog" that is the "end" of a poem, the literal terminus, that is, but also its pleasantly indifferent telos. In a world of nobodies, somebodies, frogs, and "The[m]," the bog is something else altogether. It seems instead to resuscitate the Aristotelian category of *adiaphora*, or things indifferent, in its weird role in our poem and across its other boggish appearances. In each invocation, it happens to be there, it often inconveniences, and its existence, however predictable (the splash may surprise us, but the fact of it does not), seems to produce effects better described as undermining than overdetermining. The ambiguous imputation of the bog's capacity for "admiration" is too ironic to be taken seriously, and no one would begrudge frogs unhailed by simile their preferred habitats. The bog does not cause or make judgments about the rose's reddening. And in its contact with the speaker's "shoe" it offers a welcome alternative to "Trade" in illuminating, or rather splashing, the poetic foot's "tread." The bog is the muck in which celebrity-seeking frogs call attention to themselves, and its "admiration" (from *ad* toward, *mirare* to marvel) entails being *enmired* (from "en" in and "mire," mud, or, simply just bog). In its peaty invocation, "admiration" extirpates one root and puts a boggy one in its place. To look to the bog for the ordinary kind of "admiration" is the "Somebody's" mistake, for bog is the matter under foot, the splashing stuff revelatory of the unavoidable and indifferent contact between parts of matter, including between poem and ground.

I began this essay with two problems for poetry: the difficulty of its recognition and definition, on the one hand, and the problems of poetry's "cause," on the other. In its old invocation by Aristotle, poetry distinguished itself as "more philosophical and more serious than history"³⁶ because it dealt with that which was "possible" in contrast to telling what had already happened. When bog is under foot, history and poetry and philosophy are no longer distinguishable. And this is why I want to praise the bog rather than overlook it. In "I'm Nobody!," the bog is the end of the poem. It is the last word, but I think it also registers the poem's effect; it receives the conspiracy of the first stanza in its muted indifference, and in doing so, we gain not insight into "Them" and their machinations but rather that a fleeting certitude may end up in silence, in bathos, or simply in the mud. In Freud's Goethe, we see the terms of a poem's survival in similarly earthy terms: a poem might simply pass

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35 So Dickinson puts it in her "Because I Did Not Stop for Death." Dickinson 1999, pp. 219-220.

36 Aristotle 1995, pp. 58-59. Although "*spoudaioteron*" is often rendered as "more elevated," I translate it as "more serious," fittingly for our bog, which tends to be below rather than above.

through the reader, some of them bookworms, to become a sort of bog again. In this way, the abstract stuff of poetry and its determinations both issues matter and is of it. What it makes “happen” or the “nothing” into which it decays is a production in and of the matter it causes, the matter that grounds it.

In approaching the present of poetry in this way, we might see the poem as enmired in history, in the matter of our most searching philosophical questions and our most banal; the poem may be or become the bog we might chance upon should it float to the surface. Across an ocean and a century, Seamus Heaney wrote in one of his bog poems, “The ground itself is kind, black butter.” We know this “kind” to entail more than one type of “kind,” to house both the sympathetic adjective but also the familiar noun meaning “kin.” “Melting and opening under foot,” the bog grounds the poem’s metrical feet even as it occasionally threatens to subsume them. If there is a kind of yearning, in “missing its last definition,” it is not in the nature of the bog to desire but just to be there, for “millions of years,” to be shouted upon or into by the crass, to be contributed to by the bookworm. It survives. And, on occasion, it is grasped by the poet in spite of, or perhaps because of, its ungraspable and yet utterly ordinary depth: “The wet centre is bottomless.”³⁷

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37 Heaney 1972, p. 42.

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**“down-to-earth
(o very earthy) magic”:
Nature, Objectivity
and Folk Speech in
Lorine Niedecker and
Theodor W. Adorno**

Daniel Hartley

Abstract: This article reads the poetry of Lorine Niedecker through the lens of Adorno's theory of aesthetics, and vice versa. It argues that Niedecker's poetry can be read (among other things) as a reconstruction of the suppressed "nature" that lies at the heart of Adorno's aesthetics, and that her work belies the anxieties Adorno felt towards the poetic incorporation of dialect and working-class speech. Niedecker also allows us to detect an unconscious urban bias in Adorno's aesthetic theory, which tends to presume an achieved totality of capitalist modernisation, overlooking rural locales like that of Black Hawk Island where Niedecker lived and wrote, in which a non-domesticated nature persists within the wider web of capitalist social relations. In particular, the article likens the "non-expressive" sonic elements of Niedecker's poetry to the non-conceptual manifold which, in *Aesthetic Theory*, is said to constitute "nature."

Keywords: aesthetics, Niedecker, Adorno, folk, speech, nature, Objectivists

On Sunday May 11th 1941, the day before her 38th birthday, the poet Lorine Niedecker enjoyed a memorable day out near her childhood home on Black Hawk Island (Wisconsin).¹ She was accompanied by two friends from the Federal Writers' Project – a New Deal programme for out-of-work writers – and "the local bird woman," Angie Kumlien Main, granddaughter of Thure Kumlien, a nineteenth-century naturalist and ornithologist.² Niedecker wrote about it a week later to fellow poet Louis Zukofsky, her one-time lover and life-long correspondent and friend.³ The letter was important to her; she returned to a copy of it six years later when feeling lost so as to remind herself "[w]here I am and who I am":⁴ "The Brontes [*sic*] had their moors," she wrote a few days later, "I have my marshes!"⁵ It encapsulates almost every aspect of what makes her such a vitally important and fascinating poet.

The first half of the letter provides a jaunty biographical snapshot of Thure Kumlien, a Swedish aristocrat who "studied a map and in the middle of the ocean decided the best place for birds was Lake

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1 I am grateful to Peter Riley for his comments on an earlier version of this article. All remaining errors are my own.

2 Lorine Niedecker letter to Louis Zukofsky May 18, 1941, in Penberthy 1993, p. 125.

3 Their friendship was often strained. Zukofsky does not emerge favourably from Penberthy's compelling introduction to the Niedecker-Zukofsky correspondence.

4 Niedecker letter to Zukofsky, 1947, in Penberthy 1993, p. 144. As late as 1967, she expressed similar sentiments to Gail Roub. See Niedecker letter to Roub, summer 1967, in Roub 1996, p. 86.

5 Niedecker letter to Zukofsky, Christmas 1947, in Penberthy 1993, p. 146.

Koshkonong [Wisconsin],” arriving there in 1843.⁶ Kumlien became firmly rooted to the local spot (“shut up in the woods”) but enjoyed correspondence with a world-wide network of fellow naturalists, rather as Niedecker – ever remote from metropolitan centres – corresponded regularly with a small coterie of international avant-garde poets.⁷ Telling in this account is Niedecker’s honing in on certain “luminous details” of Kumlien’s own letters.⁸ She quotes from one to Dr Brewer of the Smithsonian Institute: “It is easier for me to kill and skin a bird than it is to go out and work hard all day for a farmer for fifty cents.”⁹ Given Niedecker’s life-long tendency of reworking textual material from letters, historical documents, and overheard speech into her poetry (heeding Zukofsky’s dictum that writers should “spend their time recording and objectifying good writing wherever it is found”),¹⁰ it is worth reflecting on what caught her ear here. The sentence has a subtly curious phonetic structure: from the brute monosyllabic frankness of “kill and skin a bird,” to the final alliterative flurry of “f” sounds. But there is also the economic content of the phrase: Kumlien seems at once consternated and bemused by the strange reality in which it is more profitable to kill wondrous animals than to perform agricultural labour. From the rest of the letter, it seems that Niedecker is just as interested in Kumlien’s perpetual attempts to avoid penury than in his naturalism; the natural world is not exempt, in Niedecker’s mind, from capitalist social relations. What catches her ear is this punctual sharpness of utterance, complex sonic texture, and aural traces of class contradiction.

She was acutely alert to her sonic environment. On this day in 1941 she was, characteristically, as enthusiastic about a rare bird’s song as about Mrs Main’s voice. While at the ruins of Kumlien’s old log cabin, they heard a western meadowlark: it was “like something you hear once in a lifetime and you can’t describe it and you don’t think you could remember it to identify it again, but like the leaves of the trees were singing in every direction, a little flute-like but soft and many tones.”¹¹ The proximity of descriptive difficulty and the danger of forgetting is not coincidental. As we shall see, from her early 1930s surrealist phase onwards, Niedecker viewed memory as a creative poetic act. Note, too, that she doesn’t in fact visualise the meadowlark; instead, she hovers between a visual objective correlative of the sound (“leaves of the trees were singing in every

6 Niedecker letter to Zukofsky May 18, 1941, in Penberthy 1993, p. 125.

7 Except for stays in New York in the early 1930s, Niedecker remained in Wisconsin the rest of her life.

8 The phrase “luminous details” is from Ezra Pound’s “I Gather the Limbs of Osiris.”

9 Niedecker letter to Zukofsky May 18, 1941, in Penberthy 1993, p. 126.

10 Zukofsky 2000 [1931], p. 201.

11 Ibid., p. 127.

direction”) and an exact sonic description. Of a later outing with Angie Kumlien Main, she wrote: “She always had to see the birds to appreciate ‘em whereas I knew by their sound what they were and knowing what their colours were in my mind, was happy enough.”¹² Suffering from a gradually worsening visual impairment and with a deaf mother (and hence acute awareness of what is *not* being heard), Niedecker was ever a poet ruled by sound – and voice. Mrs Main is described as having “a determined manner of speaking” and Niedecker gives the reader a taste. A strange woman had appeared and observed them. Who was she? Says Mrs Main: “‘Oh, she’s an old rip that’s got the best of Louie. She says We... we...we....’ She repeated this to us and by that time it sounded like Oui, oui, oui!” Niedecker’s ear for gossip – especially concerning embittered male-female relations – intersects here with her joy for homophones and homonyms, emphasising at once the materiality of language and the dispersal of sense. (When Kenneth Cox mentioned it, she replied: “is this I? A little like the Molière man finding he’d used prose – homophones and isophones, is that what they are!”).¹³ When listening to a “Song Sparrow,” Mrs Main told them that “Ridgeway, a bird man, says the bird says ‘Maids, maids, maids, put your teakettles, teakettles on.’” The hear-say relay (She told > Ridgeway says > the bird says) accentuates the folk-like mantra of the refrain, which itself has minimal semantic reference (a certain flirtatious, pre-modern domesticity is evoked) and increased phonetic prominence via repetition. For Niedecker, then, folk speech, the natural world and the playful materiality of language are primordially fused with her sense of place.

Yet she is no naïve romantic. In the very next paragraph she reminds Zukofsky of the settler-colonial history of her home, and of “Old Chief Black Hawk, who lost his women and children in the swamps where I live so the white army wouldn’t find ‘em.”¹⁴ “After I read about the Black Hawk War,” she states matter-of-factly, “I don’t think much of white people.”¹⁵ In Niedecker the visceral intensity and seasonal hardships of nature experienced by one “born/ in swale and swamp and sworn/ to water” is ever mediated by detailed historical knowledge of inherited violence.¹⁶ Her poems are alert to the continued legacies and renewals of dispossession and the brutal reign of capitalist property relations. Yet most of the locals with whom she shared this place had no idea she was a

12 Niedecker letter to Zukofsky, May 19 1946, in Penberthy 1993, p. 140.

13 Niedecker letter to Kenneth Cox, November 27, 1966, in Dent 1983, p. 36.

14 Niedecker letter to Zukofsky May 18, 1941, in Penberthy 1993, p. 128.

15 Ibid.

16 Niedecker 2002, p. 261.

poet, and she preferred to keep it that way – not to “expose myself.”¹⁷ She had several forms of employment throughout her life: researcher for the WPA Wisconsin guide, proofreader for *Hoard's Dairyman* (an important agricultural journal), rental property manager, and hospital cleaner. As far as most of the locals were concerned, that was all there was to it. On the rare occasion she admitted to a local friend she was a published poet, a note accompanied the volume she gifted: “to ask that it be kept mum – folks might put up a wall if they knew (‘she writes poetry, queer bird, etc. . . .’) and I have to be among ‘em to hear ‘em talk so I can write some more!”¹⁸ Anonymity was a precondition of her poetic production. It is no coincidence that William Carlos Williams called her the Emily Dickinson of her time.¹⁹

In what follows I want to place Niedecker's work in dialogue with an unlikely interlocutor, a figure whose comically dour mien and *haut-bourgeois* refinement could not be further from the Midwest poet's down-to-earth, cut-and-thrust geniality: Theodor W. Adorno. The two have more in common than first meets the eye. For a start, their lives were almost exactly coeval (Niedecker 1903-1970; Adorno 1903-1969). Likewise, both figures were committed, in one way or another, to the Marxist left, and both were involved in the avant-garde cultural movements of their time: Adorno from the *Plätze* of continental Europe and the neon lights of New York and Los Angeles, Niedecker from afar via internationally circulated journals like *transition* (edited by Eugene Jolas) and *Poetry* (edited by Harriet Monroe), and via epistolary exchanges with leading figures of poetic experimentation. Both struggled throughout their lives to think through the consequences of these movements for aesthetic theory and, in Niedecker's case, for her own poetic production. Both, in different ways, prioritised the art of sound – Adorno the musician and philosopher of modern music, Niedecker the careful sculptor of sonic texture. And both, finally, were deeply concerned with the problem of objectivity. Under the banner of the “primacy of the object” [*Vorrang des Objekts*], Adorno's post-war work developed a methodology, negative dialectics and aesthetic theory that attempted to chart a course beyond the deathly reifications of capitalist rationalization. Meanwhile, in her commitment to the principles of “Objectivist” poetry, Niedecker struggled constantly to combine the poetics of rigour and clarity with a surrealist-mediated aquatic, flow-like principle of construction. By reading these figures together – each a product of a single, combined and uneven capitalist modernity – I hope to show that Niedecker's poetry can be read (among other things) as a reconstruction of the suppressed “nature” that lies at

17 Niedecker letter to Zukofsky May 18, 1941, in Penberthy 1993, p. 129.

18 Cited from Jane Shaw Knox's *Lorine Niedecker: An Original Biography* in Niemann 2018, p. 159, n. 33.

19 Gail Roub 1996, p. 79.

the heart of Adorno's aesthetics, and that her work belies the anxieties Adorno felt towards the poetic incorporation of dialect and working-class speech. Niedecker also allows us to detect an unconscious urban bias in Adorno's aesthetic theory, which tends to presume an achieved totality of capitalist modernisation, overlooking precisely those rural locales in which a non-domesticated nature persists within the wider web of capitalist social relations.

Adorno's Lectures on Aesthetics: Nature, Objectivity, Expression, Construction

A brief reconstruction of some key terms from Adorno's aesthetic theory will clarify the stakes of the encounter with Niedecker. I shall work here primarily with the 1958/9 lecture transcripts that would become the basis of *Aesthetic Theory*, mainly because they contain certain formulations that are congenial to Niedecker's work and because their pedagogical *dispositio* lends itself to abbreviated summary. Adorno's opening gambit in these lectures is to follow Hegel (contra Kant) in re-grounding beauty in objectivity: "beauty itself is not merely a formal thing, or merely a subjective thing, but rather something in the matter itself [*in der Sache selbst*]." ²⁰ The demands of "the matter" echo across Adorno's late work. ²¹ Just as aesthetic theorists should jettison all dogmatic criteria of judgement and "immerse" themselves in the works, "devote [themselves] as purely as possible to the matter [*Sache*]," so artists must become "the executor of what the material [*das Material*] demands in every single one of its aspects." ²² Adorno criticizes the exclusion of natural beauty from Hegel's aesthetics on the grounds of its "not itself being pervaded by spirit through and through"; ²³ he claims, suggestively, that Hegel considers natural beauty "subaltern," ²⁴ thereby opening up the conceptual space in which both human *and* extra-human nature can be conceived as the "suppressed," "powerless" or "victims" of advanced capitalist societies. His own account will place such suppressed nature at the heart of the dialectic of the aesthetic:

art, which stands in a certain opposition to all nature because it is man-made and already a spiritual manifestation of existence

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²⁰ Adorno 2018, pp. 3-4. Adorno 2009, p. 13.

²¹ It is beyond the scope of the present essay to provide a philological reconstruction of each of the German terms (*die Sache, die Sache selbst, das Material, das Stoff*) translated variously as "matter" or "material."

²² Adorno 2018, pp. 4, 67. Adorno 2009, pp. 14, 109

²³ Adorno 2018, p. 22. Adorno 2009, p. 40.

²⁴ Adorno 2018, p. 21. Adorno 2009, p. 39.

[*geistige Gestalt des Daseins*], is at once mediated by nature in a certain sense and vindicates suppressed [*verdrängen*] nature, meaning that the theory of artistic beauty, precisely because of this dialectical relationship with nature, is actually inseparable from a theory of natural beauty.²⁵

Art is at once opposed to nature and the mouthpiece through which it articulates its suffering.²⁶ Yet, despite insisting upon the objectivity of beauty and its voicing of the suppressed, he nonetheless follows Kant in retaining the “disinterested experience of natural beauty.”²⁷ He holds that aesthetic experience proper is possible only when humanity is no longer “locked in a blind struggle with nature,” when its practical and appetitive interests are no longer at stake. The paradox of Adorno’s aesthetics, then, is that “nature” re-enters the realm of beauty *solely* in the mode of subalternity to which it has been reduced by fully capitalised and rationalised societies. At every point, he assumes an achieved finality of instrumental, administered control over nature. As someone who spent her life battling annual seasonal flooding, this raises interesting questions as to the “aesthetic” status of Niedecker’s work.

Adorno first introduces “expression” [*Ausdruck*] in Lecture 5 (December 2, 1958) as both the name for the articulation of suffering and a “mimetic residuum” – that is, a residual element of mimesis which, in Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, is a mode of knowing and dealing with the world premised upon imitation, which preceded and was gradually conquered by instrumental reason.²⁸ In Lecture 6 he elaborates upon expression’s desire to achieve pure immediacy: “to let suffering itself speak directly, as it were, without placing a third element between expression and artistic manifestation, without inserting a form of stylizing principle, a mitigating or surrounding factor.”²⁹ In this striving for absolute immediacy, expressionism throws off the shackles of all pre-established forms and conventions, but in doing so it slowly comes to realise that it is impossible to remain at the point of sheer expression: “It cannot unfold in time or in space and *cannot actually objectify itself at all*.”³⁰ This is the point at which “construction”

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²⁵ Adorno 2018, pp. 26–7. Adorno 2009, p. 47.

²⁶ Cf. Adorno 2018, p. 39 (Adorno 2009, p. 66): “Every dissonance is a small remembrance of the suffering which the control over nature, and ultimately a society of domination as such, inflicts on nature, and only in the form of this suffering, only in the form of yearning – and dissonance is always substantially yearning and suffering – only thus can suppressed nature find its voice at all.”

²⁷ Adorno 2018, p. 31. Adorno 2009, p. 54.

²⁸ Adorno 2018, pp. 48–9. Adorno 2009, pp. 80–81. See also Adorno and Horkheimer 2002.

²⁹ Adorno 2018, p. 59. Adorno 2009, p. 97.

³⁰ Adorno 2018, p. 60. Emphasis added. Adorno 2009, p. 99.

is demanded. Construction is the artistic elaboration of “the logic of the material”:

the effort to extract, purely from the matter [*aus der Sache*] and purely from the postulates of the matter – but through all efforts of the organizing artistic awareness – that objectivity which was once guaranteed by the established forms dictated to artists, whether truly or only supposedly, without borrowing from anywhere else.³¹

Adorno is at pains to stress that construction should not be confused with form. Construction is an organic, immanent elaboration of the logic of the material itself, whereas form is an externally imposed (implicitly reified) shaping power. The task of the artist is not *creation*, which Adorno equates with bourgeois ideology, but rather “to submit without arrogance or vanity, and with the utmost concentration, to what the matter wants purely of its own accord [*was die Sache rein von sich aus will*].”³² This is the precondition for artistic objectivity as Adorno understands it: that is, for an art truly adequate to the historico-philosophical conditions of the postwar world.

Yet construction comes with its own limitations. Its desubjectivizing bent risks reproducing an enlightenment antipathy to expression as such. On the one hand, Adorno associates this anti-expressivist tendency with the German postwar youth in particular, who seem committed to a “de-lingualization” [*sich zu entsprachlichen*] of art and an elimination of all “speech-like” elements of artistic production (one senses here the work of shame at any too-easy utterance in the aftermath of the Holocaust).³³ On the other hand, antipathy to expression is an integral part of instrumental reason. As a result, claims Adorno, “[the] greatest works of art today will probably always be those in which the construction principle is very radically taken to its conclusion yet which, often through the very hardness of the construction principle, no longer submit to this ban on the expressive sphere.”³⁴ But how would this argument look for an aesthetic mode effectively *constituted* by expression? A year earlier, Adorno had published what became one of his most famous essays, “On Lyric Poetry and Society,” tackling this problem head on. Language here is the meeting place of lyric’s subjective impulses (expression) and conceptual and social universality (objectivity). “The highest lyric works,” writes Adorno, “are those in which the subject, with no remaining trace of mere matter [*von bloßem Stoff*], sounds forth in language until language itself

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31 Adorno 2018, p. 63. Adorno 2009, p. 103.

32 Adorno 2018, p. 68. Adorno 2009, p. 110.

33 Adorno 2018, p. 68. Adorno 2009, p. 111.

34 Adorno 2018, p. 70. Adorno 2009, p. 115.

acquires a voice.”³⁵ In such works expression “reaches an accord with language itself, with the inherent tendency of language.”³⁶ Ever wary of Heideggerianisms, however, he quickly adds that “language should not be absolutized as the voice of Being”: the fusion should instead be viewed as a “reconciliation” whereby “language itself speaks only when it speaks not as something alien to the subject but as the subject’s own voice.”³⁷ From this utopian perspective, the subject achieves objectification by unlocking the hidden vitality of an otherwise reified language.

In case this reconciliation seems rather too eirenic,³⁸ Adorno emphasises that “the lyric work is always also the subjective expression of a social antagonism.”³⁹ Poetic subjectivity is enjoyed only by a privileged minority of “autonomous subjects capable of freely expressing themselves”; the majority of people have been degraded to objects – of the poetic subject and of history itself – “grop[ing] for the sounds in which sufferings and dreams are welded [...] in forms however impure, mutilated, fragmentary, and intermittent.”⁴⁰ Historically, the folksong has been one such form, and it is this which constitutes part of the “collective undercurrent” which is said to provide the foundation for all seemingly individual lyric poetry.⁴¹ Adorno identifies García Lorca and Brecht as two modernist heirs of this Romantic tradition of fusing lyric with folk collectivity, noting that Brecht in particular was “granted linguistic integrity without having to pay the price of esotericism.”⁴² But he also sounds a note of caution. This type of poetry is said to raise the question of “whether the poetic principle of individuation was in fact sublated to a higher level, or whether its basis lies in regression, a weakening of the ego.”⁴³ The ambiguity lies in such poetry’s close relation to *dialect*, which Adorno associates with a pre-individuated, pre-bourgeois state of affairs. Indeed, in his earlier *Minima Moralia*, he was even more vociferous:

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35 Adorno 1991, p. 43. Adorno 2003b, p. 56.

36 Adorno 1991, p. 43. Adorno 2003b, p. 56.

37 Adorno 1991, pp. 43, 44. Adorno 2003b, p. 56, 57.

38 See Denise Riley’s rather more fraught account of lyric authorship, which quotes and comments on this passage from Adorno, in Riley 2000, pp. 56-92.

39 Adorno 1991, p. 45. Translation modified to include “also.” Adorno 2003b, p. 58.

40 Adorno 1991, p. 45. Adorno 2003b, p. 58.

41 Ibid. The other part is “historical experience”: “Often, in contrast, poets who abjure any borrowing from the collective language participate in that collective undercurrent by virtue of their historical experience.” Adorno 2003b, p. 59.

42 Adorno 1991, p. 46. Adorno 2003b, p. 59.

43 Ibid.

To play off workers' dialects against the written language is reactionary. [...] Proletarian language is dictated by hunger. The poor chew words to fill their bellies. [...] If the written language codifies the estrangement of classes, redress cannot lie in regression to the spoken, but only in the consistent exercise of strictest linguistic objectivity. Only a speaking that transcends writing by absorbing it, can deliver human speech from the lie that it is already human.⁴⁴

The proletariat thus find themselves in a curious position in Adorno's writing. They constitute part of that subaltern nature suppressed and reduced to historical objects by capitalist rationalization and, as such, on the logic of his aesthetic theory, poetry must give voice to them; yet it seems it must do so in any voice other than their own. Of course, no transcription or elaboration of the vernacular in written work is ever truly "authentic" (always mediated by scriptural conventions), and such practices, when carried out by bourgeois writers, are fraught with issues of alienation and appropriation.⁴⁵ Nonetheless, the status of working-class speech in Adorno's work is arguably *symptomatically* ambiguous. Niedecker's poetry will allow us to probe this and other pressure points further.

Niedecker's "Folktales of the Mind"

It has become a critical commonplace to observe that Niedecker spent her life torn between post-Imagist objectification, with its ideals of condensation, compression and totality at rest, and Surrealism, with its interest in subjectivity and the unconscious.⁴⁶ An important early letter to Mary Hoard expresses her frustration: "Objects, objects. Why are people, artists above all, so terrifically afraid of *themselves*? Thank god for the Surrealist tendency running side by side with Objectivism and toward the monologue tongue. It is my conviction that no one yet, has talked to himself. And until then, what is art?"⁴⁷ Objectivist poetics is premised upon sincerity ("the detail, not mirage of seeing, of thinking with the things as they exist") and objectification ("the resolving of

44 Adorno 2005, p. 102. Adorno 1987, pp. 129-130.

45 For a probing account of issues of dialect and dialectic in Marx's *Capital* vol. 1, see Morris 2016. For an account of how these issues play out in the history of the novel, see Williams 1983, pp. 67-118.

46 Albeit a hard-won commonplace very much the result of Jenny Penberthy's heroic editorial labours, which have enabled a fuller view of Niedecker's oeuvre, especially her early surrealist work. In my view the most compelling accounts of Niedecker's dual allegiances to Objectivist poetics and Surrealism are Nicholls 1996, Blau DuPlessis 2008, and Bazin 2012.

47 Niedecker letter to Mary Hoard, mid-1930s, in Penberthy 1996, p. 87.

words and their ideation into structure”).⁴⁸ It is clearly part of the general modernist movement towards construction and desubjectivisation that Adorno identified in his lectures. Niedecker is here exasperated with what she perceives as its repression of the self, which generates a fear of subjectivity akin to that which Adorno had identified in the anti-expressionism of post-war art. Surrealism, not least automatic writing, offered a monologic counter-movement that enabled Niedecker to tap in to the suppressed field of expression (in Adorno’s expansive sense) whilst further elaborating a key element of objectivist poetics to which she was committed: its ability to capture *process*, “[t]he thing as it happens. The how of it happening becomes the poem’s form.”⁴⁹ She was influenced by Eugene Jolas’s magazine *transition*, which emphasised several elements that would inform her poetry: a sense of flow from the notion of “transition” itself (between states of consciousness, or historical periods), “verticalism” which added an ascending or descending *direction* of flow (and created the possibility for a simultaneity of conscious and unconscious states), an anti-realist celebration of the “madness of illogic,” and a “revolution of the word” – a renewal of language capable of figuring forth the vital, illogical associations of the mind, which itself, it was hoped, would re-vitalise the world.⁵⁰

What, in light of this, did it mean for Niedecker to talk to herself in the “monologue tongue”? We must take her at her word when she writes to Gail Roub: “Early in life I looked back of our buildings to the lake and said ‘I am what I am because of all this – I am what is around me – those woods have made me....’”⁵¹ Any adequate *self*-articulation will thus involve a mimetic speaking of place which is attuned to the minimal dissonance between “*because of all this*,” (implying that I am *separate* to that which I behold) and “I am what is around me” (suggesting an imaginary unification of viewer and viewed).

I must have been washed in listenably across the landscape
to merge with bitterns unheard but pumping, and saw
and hammer a hill away; sounds, then whatsound, then
by church bell or locomotive volubility, what, so unto
the one constriction: what am I and why not. That
was my start in life, and to this day I touch things
with a fear they’ll break.⁵²

.....
48 Zukofsky 2000, p. 194.

49 Niedecker on Zukofsky’s poetry, quoted in Bazin 2012, p. 983.

50 See Hatch 2016.

51 Niedecker letter to Roub, summer 1967, quoted in Roub 1996, p. 86.

52 Niedecker 2002, pp. 31-2.

These lines, from part VII of the 1934 version of “Progression,” tell a dislocated origin story. They begin with a supposition (“I must have been”), not definite knowledge. “Washed in” has two main permutations: to be “washed in” from somewhere else (by the river), or to have been spread like a thin, light base layer of paint across the scene. The neologism “listenably” then implies either the sound of the “I” being “washed in” (from elsewhere) or, paradoxically, that the projective painterly dispersal of self achieves visual integration via sound. The sonic and visual constantly usurp one another in these lines, enabled by the purposely ambiguous agreement of subject and verb. Bitterns are a type of heron known for going *unseen* in the vegetation at the edges of lakes or ponds, and for their comically, archetypically Niedeckerian “loud, bellowing” call resembling “an old hand-operated water pump.”⁵³ The line “to merge with bitterns unheard but pumping” thus means either that the bitterns are calling (“pumping”) without producing sound (“unheard”) – drawing attention to the silent sounds of reading – or that the poet herself, on the rural periphery, is invisible in the reeds, writing poetry she fears no one will read (“unheard but pumping”). The line defamiliarizes the bittern’s audibility by subtracting its sound and by emphasizing its mimetic association with the pump whilst metaphorizing the poet’s bathetic self-image.

There is no clear locus of enunciation here. The potential dispersal of the “I” renders moot deictic markers like “a hill away.” Likewise, grammatical forms cannot be relied upon as anchors of ordered meaning. “Saw” at the end of line 2 is initially read as a verb whose subject is the “I” from line 1, but is retroactively transformed into a noun by enjambement (“saw/ and hammer a hill away”). This practice of retroactive transmutation, sudden shifts in the flow and direction of sense, is one Niedecker increasingly refined, reaching its apotheosis in “Paean to Place.” Prepositions, which indicate logical relations between elements, become semantically overdetermined. Does the “by” in line 4 signal spatial proximity or causality? If the latter, then “church bell or locomotive volubility” becomes an agent of transformation in a mini narrative: “sounds, then whatsound, then/ ... what, so unto” where the last two prepositions visibly represent broken “sound” (so-un).⁵⁴ An internally undecideable sound (pre-modern church bell or modern locomotive volubility?) transforms unrecognized “sounds” into a recognizable “what”: “the one constriction: what am I and why not.” Constriction is at the heart of Niedecker’s poetics, signalling the

53 Stallcup 2007, p. 9. Archetypically Niedeckerian because of her obsession with sound and her well-known odes to the (modern) water pump that was belatedly installed in her home in the 1960s.

54 In one of her earliest poems, “Mourning Doves,” Niedecker played similarly with the written, visual form of “sound”: “The sound of a mourning dove/ slows the dawn/ there is a dee round silence/ in the sound.” Niedecker 2002, p. 23.

pressurized narrowing of subliminal flows (as figured, for example, in her odes to her newly installed water pump).⁵⁵ But this particular constriction is the compressed “I” of the poet’s identity, congealed from the soundscape. The monosyllabic beats imbue “what am I and why not” with the quality of a punchline, a point of sound implying a firm conclusion, but this sonic certainty is belied by the residual interrogative of “what am I,” as if hovering between proposition and self-doubt. The latter is then itself at odds with “and why not,” which connotes defiance (“yes, I do belong to this rural place, and what of it?”) and a certain arbitrariness (“Yes, this dislocated origin story will do just as well as any other”). The “I” of line 1 is thus retrospectively revealed as the ambiguous outcome of a process of sonic encounters, one whose identity inheres less in propositional certitude than momentary rhythmic punctuation.

Only now, perhaps, can we make sense of the rest of Niedecker’s letter to Mary Hoard:

It is my belief objects are needed only to supplement our nervous systems. I have said to Z. [Zukofsky] (and says he: is it logic? which he *would* say) that the most important part of memory is its non-expressive, unconscious part. We remember most and longest that which at first perception was unrecognizable, though we are not aware of this. We remember, in other words, a nerve-sense, a vibration, a colour, a rhythm [...] Along with this if anybody can possibly see the connection, I conceive poetry as the folktales of the mind and us creating our own remembering.⁵⁶

The unrecognizable is, by definition, that which escapes what Adorno would call identitarian thinking. The “non-expressive, unconscious parts” of memory are those elements at the edge of, or beyond, linguistic signification (Zukofsky’s “logic”): “a nerve-sense, a vibration, a colour, a rhythm.” Such “non-expressive” elements are, for Adorno, precisely the stuff of expression in the sense of a “mimetic residuum” of the “nature” that has been suppressed. Indeed, what Niedecker seeks to remember is not only what Ruth Jennison has aptly called “the material contingencies of subject formation,”⁵⁷ but arguably also *nature as such*. This is no nostalgic pastoral precisely because poetry is said to *create* “our own remembering”; in other words, *the memory does not precede the poem*, but is retroactively posited after the fact, just as the subject of memory is created in the poetic act of re-membering. In *Aesthetic Theory* Adorno

55 See “*To my small/ electric pump*”: “To sense/ and sound/ this world/ look to/ your sniffer/ valve/ take oil/ and hum.” See also “*To my pres-/sure pump*.” Niedecker 2002, pp. 197, 201. On constriction as key to Niedecker’s poetics, see Peterson 1996.

56 Niedecker letter to Mary Hoard, mid-1930s, in Penberthy 1996, p. 88.

57 Jennison 2012, p. 144.

reformulates the temporality of suppressed “nature” from a lost past to a not-yet-existent future:

Nature, to whose imago art is devoted, does not yet in any way exist [*Die Natur, deren imago Kunst nachhängt, ist noch gar nicht*] [...] What does not exist becomes incumbent on art in that other for which identity-positing reason, which reduced it to material, uses the word nature. This other is not concept and unity, but rather a multiplicity [*ein Vieles*]. Thus truth content presents itself in art as a multiplicity, not as the concept that abstractly subordinates artworks. The bond of the truth content of art to its works and the multiplicity of what surpasses identification accord.⁵⁸

Poetry remembers that which does not yet exist: nature. Nature here denotes the other of “identity-positing reason”; as such, it is a *non-conceptual manifold*. And what better way to describe “a nerve-sense, a vibration, a colour, a rhythm” than this? Niedecker imitates, configures and compresses these para-logical elements into futural anamneses.

Composing “Listenably”; or, the Vocalic Remainder

The voice is a prime locus of such “non-expressive” elements. As Mladen Dolar has observed, following the founding gesture of phonology – the total reduction of the voice as lived substance to logical oppositions – there remained “a non-signifying remainder, something resistant to the signifying operations, a leftover heterogeneous in relation to the structural logic which includes it.”⁵⁹ Niedecker’s is an art of the remainder, and hence of the voice. Her early interest in the “sub-conscious” (her term) segues into a prolonged experimentation with “subliminal” sound-structures, syntactical dislocation, and linguistic materiality.⁶⁰ Often, this is not a matter of her own voice (her own voice-matter), but of the “folk” voices she hears around her.⁶¹ Lisa Robertson is quite right that in Niedecker listening is a compositional act, and that “[t]he listener devises tactics of receiving in order to turn sound toward shapeliness.”⁶²

58 Adorno 2004, p. 173. Adorno 2003a, pp. 198-9. It was Flodin’s excellent article (2022) that drew my attention to this passage. I’m grateful to Antonia Hofstätter for alerting me to it, and to the edited volume *Adorno’s Rhinoceros* in which it is published.

59 Mladen Dolar 1996, p. 10.

60 Cf. Nicholls 1996, pp. 195-6.

61 I follow Niedecker in using the term “folk.” See, e.g., her letter to Jonathan Williams in 1970: “I probably show a folk base and even LZ [Louis Zukofsky] knew it many years ago,” cited in Penberthy 1993, p. 4.

62 Robertson 2008, p. 86.

In “Progression” Niedecker refers to her art as a “phonographic deep song,”⁶³ a phrase whose technological register recalls Freud’s advice on listening for analysts: “he must turn his own unconscious like a receptive organ towards the transmitting unconscious of the patient. He must adjust himself to the patient as a telephone receiver is adjusted to the transmitting microphone.”⁶⁴ This is Niedecker among the “folk from whom all poetry flows/ and dreadfully much else” (note the ambivalence),⁶⁵ ever on the listen-out for “some puzzlement, some sharpness, a bit of word-play.”⁶⁶ Her listening is perhaps more active than Freud’s, less a passive reception and more a mildly impatient expectancy of benign interpellation, awaiting some turn-of-phrase or wording to make her ears pop or the static charge – an aural *punctum*. The ear was formed from childhood: she had a grandfather “who somehow somewhere had got hold of nursery and folk rhymes to entrance me” and a mother “speaking whole chunks of down-to-earth (o very earthy) magic, descendant for sure of Mother Goose.”⁶⁷ A genealogy of entrancing sound, a down-to-earth magic: Niedecker’s infra-Enlightenment archive.

It was phrases like this that pricked her ears:

A lawnmower’s one of the babies I’d have
if they’d give me a job and I didn’t get bombed
in the high grass

by the private woods. Getting so
when I look off my space I see waste
I’d like to mow.⁶⁸

The surreal juxtaposition of lawnmower and babies locates us in the image-realm of the cyborg until we realise, with the second line, that this is a working-class voice with colloquial peculiarities. “Babies,” “bombed” and “Getting so/ when I look off my space” bring us close to the “dialect” of which Adorno was so wary. The latter enjambment in particular serves to emphasise the folksy lilt of the utterance, a

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63 Niedecker 2002, p. 29. Robertson’s excellent article elaborates upon this phrase.

64 Freud, cited in Bollas 2009, p. 10. Freud’s student, Theodor Reik, put it differently: “Psychoanalysis is in this sense not so much a heart-to-heart talk as a drive-to-drive talk, an inaudible but highly expressive dialogue.” Reik 1948, p. 144.

65 Niedecker 2002, p. 142. Peter Middleton writes of the ambivalence of these lines: “she oscillated between immersion and alienation from the local community, and the term ‘folk’ itself is a measure of this instability.” Middleton 1999, p. 175.

66 Niedecker letter to Corman, December 15 1966,

67 Niedecker letter to Kenneth Cox, December 10 1966, cited in Penberthy 1993.

68 Niedecker 2002, p. 96.

syntactical circumlocution that is strangely pleasant and familiar on the ears.⁶⁹ Yet the warm imitation of vernacular speech is at odds with the almost nihilistic content. Like many of the poems published in *New Goose* (1946), this one is haunted by the Depression and World War II alike. The man (for we infer it is a man) is unemployed and gets high (“bombed”) on, we assume, weed (because of the metonymic association of “high grass”). In his narcotic stupor he begins to fantasize about mowing “waste,” an act of destruction both against nature and, we infer, against himself – the “waste” of the capitalist economy. His nihilistic *jouissance* seems exacerbated by the proximity of private property, as if the latter’s very presence mocks him and the comparative littleness of “[his] space” (which, tellingly, rhymes with “waste”). In this context, the lawnmower assumes the nihilatory potential of the bomb, just as class *ressentiment* threatens to explode. Yet the *form* of the poem attempts to sculpt the sonic traces of capital’s “waste” into linguistic vitality, whilst its intense psychological subtlety belies any accusation that dialect equates to pre-individualistic regression.

Given Adorno’s attitude to fridge doors, one can only imagine what he made of lawnmowers.⁷⁰ Niedecker’s relationship to them was ambiguous. She spends countless letters informing Zukofsky of her constant mowing; the grass on Black Hawk Island seems particularly resistant to domestication: “Last week I reclaimed another several feet of lawn from the wilderness. Already more than I care to mow by hand but next year Henry [her father] will have a power mower we hope.”⁷¹ It seems the power mower never materialised because two years later she has “mowed by hand to the river.”⁷² In doing so she discovers “two red dogwood and the sweetest little ash sapling”; she leaves them 24 hours before heading back to fence them off “to keep ‘em from harm” only to discover

my neighbour who has a power mowing machine came over and in his zeal mowed me down my dogwoods and tree. Conservationists here! Also he destroys all the teal duck nests with his infernal machine.⁷³

In the earlier letter the power mower represented liberation from back-breaking labour, but now embodies the destruction of nature and

69 See also: “Must be going to give em/ to the church, I guess” in “Mr. Van Ess bought 14 wash-cloths?”. Niedecker 2002, p. 95.

70 See Adorno 2005, p. 40. Adorno 1987, pp. 42-3.

71 Niedecker letter to Zukofsky, April 28 1946, in Penberthy 1993, p. 138.

72 Niedecker letter to Zukofsky, June 6 1948, in Penberthy 1993, p. 148.

73 Ibid.

Niedecker's relation of care. Unlike Adorno, Niedecker's approach to labour-reducing technologies is one of circumspect pragmatism: the gratitude of the manual labourer for less work coupled with an alertness to its destructive potential. Both aspects are embedded in Niedecker's joyful relationship with the very extra-human nature that threatens constantly to overwhelm her: "Lots of wild mint where I wanted to mow (with corn knife) but I wouldn't, such sweet little things."⁷⁴ This is a poet who knew in ways Adorno could never imagine the suppressed "nature" of which he spoke.

Above all, she knew the floods. In his lectures on aesthetics, Adorno, discussing the tenuous provisionality of aesthetic sublimation, says: "the element of immediate desire [...] can flood it again at any moment" before reiterating Horace's dictum from the *Epistles*: "nature always returns, even if one drives it out with a pitch fork."⁷⁵ Less than two months after Adorno's final lecture in 1959, Niedecker was flooded again: "I was evacuated! Well, almost. Aen took me out in his speed boat after we elevated my furniture as best we could. Water up to top of hip boots as I walked out of my yard."⁷⁶ Adorno's learned dictum is Niedecker's life and death. It is this lifelong pattern of flooding, in which humans, their belongings and technology are annually humbled, that explains Niedecker's deep-seated attachment not only to a "poetics of flow," but also to that thick materiality of sound which occasionally threatens to overwhelm sense:

thru birdstart
wingdrip
weed-drift

of the soft
and serious—
Water⁷⁷

In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno speaks of the "more" of nature, its intrinsic excess.⁷⁸ Art is said to imitate nature, not in the sense of nature as *object* but by mimetically reproducing this excess itself. In Niedecker it takes the form of the excess of the linguistic and vocalic remainder, the para-logical or subliminal sound waves. Yet, despite the fact that the most rigorous

74 Niedecker letter to Zukofsky, June 19 1948, in Penberthy 1993, p. 149.

75 Adorno 2018, p. 35. Adorno 2009, p. 59-60.

76 Niedecker letter to Zukofsky, April 5 1959, in Penberthy 1993, p. 249.

77 Niedecker 2002, p. 238.

78 See, e.g., Adorno 1997, p. 104. Adorno 2003a, p. 122.

interpreters of Adorno's aesthetics allow for an element of the *uncanny* in such mimesis,⁷⁹ it remains the case that Adorno does not have in mind here the *literal* excess of nature: from seasonal flooding to (in our time) capitalogenic climate catastrophe. One suspects Niedecker's mimesis is more akin to a *détournement* of the sublime fused with Adorno's conception of pre-Enlightenment magic:⁸⁰ no Kantian, masculine heroics here in the face of nature's overwhelming power, but an earthy, wily acceptance of nature's force tinged with pragmatic resistance and linguistic homage. The scopic dominance of the gaze ("Objective: (Optics) – The lens bringing the rays from an object to focus")⁸¹ gives way to the receptive agency of the ear, an organ as porous as the threshold between nature and domestic interiority in times of flood. Hers is truly a "sublime/ slime-/song."⁸²

And yet it's a "song" composed with the most advanced poetic forces of production available. Combined and uneven capitalist development has produced a situation in which nature in Black Hawk Island has been surveyed and parcelled out as private property,⁸³ but has categorically *not* been fully domesticated. It achieves initial, uneasy articulation in Niedecker's *transition*-influenced surrealist flows and illogicités, but her work is also pitched quite consciously against the repressed objectivities of imagist and objectivist poetics. They are objectivities, we now see, whose unconscious is *urban*. It is no coincidence that the archetypal imagist poem occurs in the Parisian Metro, nor that Adorno's aesthetics assumes the total victory of capitalist rationalization. Niedecker's stubborn insistence upon flows and subliminals is thus proof of a faithful devotion to the demands of the "material" invoked by Adornian aesthetics; in heeding this demand, she was ensuring the adequacy of her art to the historico-philosophical situation of rural Wisconsin (a phrase whose potential bathos is precisely symptomatic of the situation itself). Her immanence to place and the local working-class community allowed her finely-tuned ear to compose "listenably" the vocalic traces of the political unconscious without ceding an inch to folksy regression or uncritical populism. The result is a paradoxical fusion in Niedecker's work of a *seemingly* pre-modern, pre-individual, *mimetic* relation to the world but one which *can only be articulated through the very latest modern poetic developments*. Extending

.....
79 See Flodin 2022.

80 "[Mimesis] played an equally central part in the lives of primitive humans, ultimately leading to the practice of magic, whose underlying idea is essentially that one can gain control of nature by imitating some natural phenomenon or other." Adorno 2018, p. 41. Adorno 2009, p. 68.

81 Zukofsky 2000, p. 12.

82 Niedecker 2002, p. 265.

83 Many of Niedecker's poems are overt reflections on private property and foreclosure.

Marx's argument that "the formation [*Bildung*] of the five senses is the work of all previous world history,"⁸⁴ Adorno suggests that Impressionism allowed us for the first time to see the beauty of the sea, "to objectify artistically the gradations found in the sea."⁸⁵ Likewise, Niedecker sought to objectify a contemporary natural world that was simultaneously "before" full modernisation, "alongside" literary modernity, and in advance of a post-capitalist "nature" whose dispersed manifold she re-members. In her writing, full individuality – the "monologue tongue" – becomes newly articulable as a retrospective projection of material encounters. It is no longer alienated in any simple sense from nature and the social totality, but rather seeks to

...tilt
upon the pressure
execute and adjust⁸⁶

working *with* natural forces whose objective powers it has learned to respect, and whose material resistances it channels into mimetic self-making.

.....
⁸⁴ Marx 1973, p. 353. Translation modified.

⁸⁵ Adorno 2018, p. 28. Adorno 2009, p. 49.

⁸⁶ Niedecker 2002, p. 265.

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Out of Control: Yeats & Frayn

Carol Jacobs

Abstract: There is a certain symmetry to it. Yeats in 1936 writes a poem that laughingly anticipates the bombing of London to come. Frayn, at the end of the century, immerses us in an uncertain jumble of time and space as his fictional, but historical, characters contemplate their past and the atomic bombs that ended the war that Yeats had so lightly dismissed. In both “Lapis Lazuli” and *Copenhagen* a nation at war, a meditation on what it means to be human, and a questioning of the medium of that contemplation: poetry and art in Yeats; the narrative of scientific theory, theatrical presentation, and historical recuperation in Frayn.

“Lapis Lazuli” culminates in the description of a carved piece of stone. The strange linguistic events of this last stanza rewrite the relationship between observer and the observed and also any sense of individual subjectivity. In *Copenhagen*: a crucial meditation on language, especially a confusion generated by metaphorical substitutions, upsets our sense of human understanding and also of scientific truth. Yeats’s poem ends in another world – one of unspecified gaiety: Frayn’s piece closes with apocalyptic forebodings. And yet, the unsettling implications of the two are similar.

Keywords: William Butler Yeats, Michael Frayn, “Lapis Lazuli”, *Copenhagen*, Ethics, Science and theory, Language of Poetry

Poetry: William Butler Yeats: “Lapis Lazuli”

In 1936 William Butler Yeats writes the remarkable lines which he gathers into five stanzas and names “Lapis Lazuli.” The poem’s title refers to a gift Yeats had received on the occasion of his seventieth birthday (June 13, 1935). He writes of it a year later. The poet is now in his seventy-first year, the age at which Socrates drank the hemlock.¹ One delights to imagine both poet and the philosopher going, as Yeats wrote in another instance, “proud, open-eyed and laughing to the tomb” (“Vacillation” line 34).² Yeats had been coming to terms with old age in a similar vein since his very first publications,³ and contemplating his own passing years and impending end in some of his most famous works,⁴ often hinting at a heroic encounter with death.⁵ And yet, in “Lapis Lazuli,” how shall we

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1 The name of *The Republic*’s author haunts the last decade of Yeats’s work.

2 Yeats 1983, p. 249

3 “The Wanderings of Oisín,” the first poem of the collection *Crossways*, “The Song of the Happy Shepherd,” Perhaps most famously in “Among School Children,” but also “Meeting” in “A Woman Young and Old” and many others.

4 “The Circus Animals’ Desertion”

5 Stallworthy cites a letter to Dorothy Wellesley in this regard: “I thought my problem was to face

regard heroic will as the poet, almost accidentally, comes upon another mode of art.

In the uncertain medium of poetry, at the same moments his language fails to find its stability (stanzas 1, 2, and 5), the poem sidesteps the apparent intent of descriptive performance through more precarious displays of language. This is the open proclamation of another poem written very shortly after “Lapis Lazuli,” “The Circus Animals’ Desertion.” The aging poet casts a cold eye on critical moments of his earlier writings. His passion has shifted, he tells us, from a burning desire for the imaginary object depicted, “for the bosom of [Oisin’s] fairy bride” (in “The Wanderings of Oisin” [1889]),⁶ to a withdrawal in later works from those things his words set forth to represent. Thus, in writing about the play *On Baile’s Strand* [1904]:

Players and painted stage took all my love
And not those things that they were emblems of.
 (“The Circus Animals’ Desertion” lines 31-32)⁷

Something similar will take place in the course of “Lapis Lazuli” where it is the mode of thinking, which is to say the linguistic gestures, that are the disconcerting and exhilarating upshot of it all.

This is already evident in the closing lines of the first stanza. A breaching of the border of the state, an act of war: it is 1936 and the barbarians threaten to eradicate the state – or, at least, to beat flat the city of London as they attempted to do in the Great War.

I have heard that hysterical women say
They are sick of the palette and fiddle-bow,
Of poets that are always gay,
For everybody knows or else should know
That if nothing drastic is done
Aeroplane and Zeppelin will come out (lines 1-6)⁸

Coming to terms with the bombardment as political reality is at stark odds with the gaiety of those who wield the “palette and fiddle-bow,” the visual and musical artists, and at odds above all with the poets. What are the remaining lines of “Lapis Lazuli” if not a rehearsal of this gaiety?

As the poem continues Shakespeare takes on the role of poet in the second stanza. The mournful melodies of the serving man who carries a

death with gaiety.” Stallworthy 1969, p. 49

⁶Yeats 1983, p. 35

⁷Yeats 1983, p. 346

⁸Yeats 1983, p. 294

musical instrument (stanza 5) is the subdued counterpart to those who play the fiddle-bow. And the visual “handiwork of Callimachus” (stanza 3) in its contrast to the carved piece of lapis lazuli (stanzas 4 and 5) will return to confront us with yet another mode of gaiety.

For everybody knows or else should know
That if nothing drastic is done
Aeroplane and Zeppelin will come out,
Pitch like King Billy bomb-balls in
Until the town lie beaten flat. (lines 4-8)

Norman Jeffares caught sight of it, writing just a few years after “Lapis Lazuli” was published:⁹ the threat may be of the current historical moment, but the violence that looms is pitched to us in terms that jumble several historical eras, and that blur the border that might distinguish history and poetry. “The Zeppelin, anachronistic for bombing purposes in 1936, is probably due to the poet’s memories of air raids on London in the 1914-1918 war. The ‘bomb-balls,’ however, are of older origin, for they seem to be derived from ‘The Battle of the Boyne,’ a ballad included in *Irish Minstrelsy*, an anthology.” He goes on to cite the 1888 “Battle of the Boyne.”

King James has pitched his tent between
The lines for to retire;
But King William threw his bomb-balls in
And set them all on fire.

With a certainty of knowledge about 1936, “For everybody knows or else should know,” the hysterical women insist. Over and against an unshakeable sense of impending apocalypse, a bacchanal of interchangeable historical moments and literary reference carries us back and forth among: the seventeenth century battle between the protestant William of Orange and the deposed English Catholic king James II, the 1888 ballad in which that same King William “between / The lines” “threw his bomb-balls in”;¹⁰ and that other King William (“King Billy,” as Yeats calls him) whose Zeppelins had carried the bomb-balls of the first World War, Kaiser Wilhelm II. Pitched in between the lines of “Lapis Lazuli” it is not difficult to hear echoes of another “Willy,” as the young poet was often called who was later to orchestrate this confusion.

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⁹ Jeffares 1950, p. 489

¹⁰ Richard J. Finneran, in the notes to *Parnell's Funeral and Other Poems* cites from the 1935 text of Yeats's lectures in America. The Battle of the Boyne is cited several times here.
Yeats 1983, pp. 660ff

1936, 1914-1918, 1888, 1690.¹¹ How are we to understand the jumble of the metaphorical palimpsest? The women cry apocalypse. Clear and present danger. A definitive end. Willy laughs their fears into the substitutability of one past crisis for another, and, in turn, of the poetry that might cite them.

The stanza to follow invokes an exemplary English poet, also, coincidentally a "William," to speak of "Gaiety transfiguring all that dread" (line 17). Might we regard this gaiety with all its powers of transfiguration as the half-way house on the ascent to the poem's closing lines, lines which might seem to do the same: transfigure tragedy? Does stanza 1 close with a bravado that tosses aside all dread, because, as so many other passages in Yeats suggest, a heroic displacement of fear by gaiety or joy might be instrumental in transcending death?

The second stanza stages an answer to this question.
All perform their tragic play,
There struts Hamlet, there is Lear,
That's Ophelia, that Cordelia;
Yet they, should the last scene be there,
The great stage curtain about to drop,
If worthy their prominent part in the play,
Do not break up their lines to weep.
They know that Hamlet and Lear are gay;
Gaiety transfiguring all that dread. (lines 9-17)

In an essay published around the time "Lapis Lazuli" was being written, Yeats wrote: "The heroes of Shakespeare convey to us through their looks, or through the metaphorical patterns of their speech, the sudden enlargement of their vision, their ecstasy at the approach of death."¹² A few such patterns follow this generalization, Horatio wishing to follow the dying Hamlet and ready to take his own life, for example. Hamlet begs his friend, rather, to remain, in order to tell Hamlet's tale. "'Absent thee from felicity awhile.'" "Felicity" stands as metaphor for death. Similarly, Yeats offers us Cleopatra's words "My baby at my breast" (*Antony and Cleopatra*, Act 5 Scene 2). Just as she is about to take her own life by offering her breast to a deadly asp, she substitutes the baby, figure of new life, for the venomous termination of her own. Such metaphorical patternings are simple substitution and reversal, like joy in place of dread in "Vacillation" which lauds those who come "Proud, open-eyed and laughing to the tomb." These are more graspable, more systematic, less chaotic than the confused similarities holding together the close of

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¹¹ It is not simply a question of history repeating itself. The plays on William and Wilhelm and the equal role given to literature and bare fact make it something else again.

¹² "A General Introduction for my Work," (1937) in W. B. Yeats 1961, pp. 522-23.

stanza I. What one needs to ask is whether gaiety, here in “Lapis Lazuli,” transfigures dread, transcends a fear of death, through such heroic, willed gestures of substitution and reversal.

The hysterical women claim certain knowledge of an imminent, total disaster. Bombs dropped from the heavens. The town beaten flat. In the world of theater (also in the realm of *all the world* as stage),¹³ both characters and the actors who play them (perhaps all of us), perform their tragic play. What is known has merely the appearance of a definitive end.

All men have aimed at, found and lost;
Black out; Heaven blazing into the head:
Tragedy wrought to its uttermost.
Though Hamlet rambles and Lear rages,
And all the drop-scenes drop at once
Upon a hundred thousand stages,
It cannot grow by an inch or an ounce. (lines 18-24)

“The great stage curtain [is] about to drop.” (line 13) “Black out” (line 19): it returns King Billy’s “bomb-balls” to mind (line 7). “Black out” is at once a theatrical term for extinguishing the stage lights,¹⁴ a maneuver to curtain off the city in times of enemy air raids, as well as utter loss of consciousness, the bombs from “Heaven blazing into the head”: culmination of and escape from the bombing conflated. Tragedy is wrought to its uttermost, but it is wrought rather than complete.

Knowledge, no longer the certainty of an imminent end (line 4), becomes the common knowledge of actors, as well as the figures the actors play. (They *know*, as does just about anyone, “that Hamlet and Lear are gay.”). Gaiety here, then, as an instrumental force, has the power to utterly transform the dread implicit in tragedy.

The potential fall of the “great stage curtain,” unlike that of bombs that fall from Heaven, can be upended by the thought of a less drastic version of the same: “all the drop-scenes drop[ping] at once / Upon a hundred thousand stages” (lines 22-23). Yeats, man of the theater, substitutes drop-scenes dropping for the “great stage curtain” which marks the end of the play. Drop scenes produce no end and bring about no black out. On them, painted scenes are lowered to delay the action, temporarily. No destructive bomb obliterating and culminating, they signal a disruption in a play that is yet to continue. Actors and painted stage had all of Yeats’s love and not the tragic end they might seem to speak of. Hamlet may ramble and Lear may rage, but their lines maintain an unbroken surface, lines that the actors, if worthy of their parts, lines that

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¹³This is strongly suggested by earlier versions of the stanza. See Stallworthy 1969, p. 48.

¹⁴This has been noted by a number of Yeats’s readers. See McCormack 2013, p. 8.

the characters, if worthy of their parts, do not break up. They may speak of death but in their gaiety they do not perform or succumb to its rupture.

The theater of "Lapis Lazuli" shifts to the stage of world history where other draperies will rise.
On their own feet they came, or on shipboard,
Camel-back, horse-back, ass-back mule-back,
Old civilisations put to the sword.
Then they and their wisdom went to rack: (lines 25-28)

At the close of stanza 1 historical events and their poetical reenactments were not quite beaten flat but scrambled. Here in stanza 3 the eras of history move forward to the clip-clop of beasts of burden. Each civilization has its place in the progression. Each replaces and destroys its predecessor. Art is exemplified in the handiwork of the ancient Greek sculptor Callimachus.¹⁵

No handiwork of Callimachus
Who handled marble as if it were bronze,
Made draperies that seemed to rise
When sea-wind swept the corner, stands;
His long lamp-chimney shaped like the stem
Of a slender palm, stood but a day;
All things fall and are built again
And those that build them again are gay. (lines 29-36)

However masterful such achievements might appear, they come to a dead end in the abrupt and isolated verb "stands": which, marks, of course, a previous fall. Fall is as certain here as the gaiety of building anew.

A carefully constructed counterpart to Callimachus's art follows: the lapis lazuli that celebrates Yeats's seventieth birthday. The handiwork of Callimachus is evidence of hard-won control over natural stone (he "handled marble as if it were bronze" [line 30]). So realistic were his celebrated draperies, they seemed responsive to the sea-wind sweeping by his marble artistry. Mimetic triumph.

The scene on Yeats's lapis, as well as the scene in Yeats's "Lapis Lazuli," stone of the East, they too present themselves as copies of a world exterior to art. But the poem will offer us a narrative tale with many more wrinkles, many more dents, than Callimachus's creations in marble. The designation "symbol" alters the force and intent of this particular carving, wresting it from replication to a traditional and agreed upon signification.

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¹⁵ O'Donnell reminds us that Yeats had spoken of Callimachus as half-Asian and McCornack reiterates that. O'Donnell 1982, p. 359. But here in "Lapis Lazuli" there is a stark differentiation between Callimachus and the Chinese artist whose work will follow.

Two Chinamen, behind them a third,
Are carved in Lapis Lazuli,
Over them flies a long-legged bird
A symbol of longevity;
The third, doubtless a serving-man,
Carries a musical instrument. (lines 37-42)

We are free of the impending threat of death, those falls in the opening stanzas: of bombs (stanza 1), of theatrical curtains (stanza 2), of the gravitational pull into disintegration over time (stanza 3). As we arrive at the poem's titular concern (lines 37ff) longevity, awkwardly forced to rhyme with "lapis lazuli," sets the mood.

The scene flies in the face of Yeats's initial description of the actual lapis lazuli that Harry Clifton had sent. Writing to his friend Dorothy Wellesley:

... someone has sent me a present of a great piece carved by some Chinese sculptor into the semblance of a mountain with temple, trees, paths and an ascetic and pupil about to climb the mountain. Ascetic, pupil, hard stone, eternal theme of the sensual east. The heroic cry in the midst of despair. But no, I am wrong, the east has its solutions always and therefore knows nothing of tragedy.¹⁶

The imprecise details of the letter are corrected in the poem Yeats was yet to write.¹⁷ Ascetic and pupil of the letter will in the poem become three: "Two Chinamen, behind them a third . . . doubtless a serving-man." A half-way house will displace the "temple." Yeats's initial take describes the stone and, most importantly, prepares us for the closing lines.

No artist's name is affixed to the carved stone. Still, the letter gives all we need concerning the Chinese sculptor. Unlike Callimachus whose name is well known, whose dates and works might be approximated in the Western calendar, "some Chinese sculptor" – which is to say no one in particular – might claim the lapis as their handiwork.

And yet, Yeats does in a sense put a name to the author of this lapis carving: "discoloration," accident, "crack," "dent." One might be tempted to call it time, as Yeats seemed to suggest in stanza 3, the progression of time which brought all things down in the West, even those fashioned of marble. Or, better yet, the force of nature, like the sea-wind that swept by the long lamp-chimney. But the artist of this artifact from the East might yet be more elusive.

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¹⁶ Yeats 1954, p. 837

¹⁷ See McCormack's essay on this transformation of the letter's details into the poem's content. The essay brings much new material to the understanding of "Lapis Lazuli," addressing as she does Chinese iconography, tradition, and cultural assumptions. McCormack 2013, pp. 5-6

Every discoloration of the stone,
Every accidental crack or dent
Seems a water-course or an avalanche,
Or lofty slope where it still snows
Though doubtless plum or cherry-branch
Sweetens the little half-way house
Those Chinamen climb towards, and I
Delight to imagine them seated there; (lines 43-50)

Work of “some” unnamed sculptor, it is, however, not simply work of the hand (“handiwork”). “Discoloration,” “crack or dent”: every instance of them, creates an accidental landscape of chance and conjecture, perhaps even of imagination. If the water-course sends us from above to below, and the avalanche suggests a more violent version of the same, the lofty slope carries us gently up to where it “still snows,” where the avalanche’s beginnings remain benign. Downward thrust or upward lift? Who is to say? Who is to fix the object, much less what it seems to depict? Unlike the symbolically determined signifying space reserved for the long-legged bird (line 39), this work, it now turns out, is potentially dented or cracked into being and into signifying--with what result one cannot say for sure.

Yeats will “delight to imagine [the figures] seated there” (line 50), floating “half-way” - in the uncertainties of the up and the down. “Lapis Lazuli” parts way, yet again, with Harry Clifton’s stone. It creates what is not there in Yeats’s first take of the stone. To the letter to Dorothy Wellesley the poet adds: not just the additional figure of stanza IV, the “third” who carries a musical instrument, but also, first, that “plum or cherry-branch” that sweetens the half-way house, and then the imagination that delights them into being. It places them half-way up, neither here nor there, between the ground of sage beginnings and the uncertain crest of that “semblance of a mountain” (Letter to Dorothy Wellesley).

The “Chinamen” on Clifton’s gift climb towards (lines 48-49) a half-way house, but the next lines find the journey already at an end, tranquility found. “I / delight to imagine them seated there” (lines 49-50): and we think, we sense, the new-found constancy of that completed ascent. We feel almost certain in the relation of the poet and “there.” We would, were it not for the lack of a period one might expect to find, at the close of line 50.

What then of this “there” voiced at the end of line 50 and repeated at the beginning of line 51, as though to clarify. The repetition suggests for a brief scan of the reader’s eye that they have reached their destination and that we might expect a further elaboration of their new-found repose. They, so the poet imagines, are “seated there; / There, on the mountain . . .” (lines 50-51). A bit like a drop-scene dropping, the repetition hints that there is, inevitably, more to come. Perhaps this is why the lines of poetry float so freely, with such uncertainty.

and I
Delight to imagine them seated there;
There, on the mountain and the sky,
On all the tragic scene they stare.
One asks for mournful melodies;
Accomplished fingers begin to play,
Their eyes mid many wrinkles, their eyes,
Their ancient, glittering eyes are gay. (lines 49-56)

“Doubtless” (line 41), “doubtless” (line 47), “Every” (line 43), “Every” (line 44): Yeats has played with repetitions suggesting certainty. But “there; / There” and “on... / On” (lines 50-52) are another matter. Inevitably, we are compelled to read them as cracks and dents, the apparent accidents of repeated terms that do not hold a fixed place. “There” and “on” bid us with each appearance, with each step forward of our eyes, then, to read as we might, but then to shuffle forth and back among other, disconcerting possibilities as we attempt to progress.

“And I / Delight to imagine them seated there; / There, on . . .”: with the repetition of “there,” with the introduction of the adverb “on,” are we about to discover more about the place they have come to, how they are seated, on what, at the half-way house? But it is not easy to carry over our expectation from “seated there” (line 50) to the “There, on” of line 51. If we can draw on the term’s consistency, then they are seated “there / There on the mountain and the sky.” (lines 50-51) How could the outcome of the climb find them so unseated, tossed floating between the stony mountain beneath them and the sky?

Of course, one needs only to slip down the lines (pretending they are unbroken by punctuation, line breaks, unsettling logic) and then make one’s way back up to find a syntax which makes more sense. Much poetry demands no less of us. The “there,” of course, can be read as *while there*, *being there*: while seated there, they stare on the mountain and the sky (which is to say, for reasons we have yet to contemplate, also “On all the tragic scene.” [line 52]) Or, the second “There” (line 51) can abruptly shift us away from the half-way house as it points to what they stare at: mountain and sky. Difficult to say how the mountain on which they are seated got suddenly shifted over there. “There” in line 50 is a calm place reached through an act of imagination. “There” at the outset of line 51, then, would flicker between that previous sense of stillness and a deictic wrenching to the horizon of their gaze.

The mountain and the sky – perhaps, after all, they are the key: what takes all the poet’s love – are stone and heaven. Not the marble stone of Callimachus, not the “Heaven” blazing into the head of line 19. They stare on the mountain and the sky, stone and blue sky: lapis (stone) lazuli (sky-blue).

“Lapis Lazuli.” The material of Harry Clifton’s gift,¹⁸ and also, in a sense, title of the poem we have been reading – created by intentional carving (line 38), or accident (line 44), or poetic imagination (line 50), or readerly interpretation (lines 45-47), the language object of Yeats’s creation, “Lapis Lazuli.” Every step of the readings, a glittering possibility that flickers in the interrelations of phrases and words – there – on the mountain, “on the semblance of a mountain” – there on the mountain and the sky – that is to say, there on all the tragic scene (seen). How could we have overlooked it – mountain and sky?

There is nothing tragic in the scene. Yeats has blended in the tragedy of stanza II with its theatrical scene, but there is nothing tragic in the seen – just mountain and sky – no bomb-balls crossing into London or crossing over the River Boyne, not even stage curtains falling or drop scenes, no works of art failing because falling (as in stanza 3), since fall and crack and dent might well be the force that created the scene offered us here.

And yet, this is not without relationship to what preceded it. The stanzas, as one reads them, have a logic of progression: the present threat of all out destruction through bombing, the ultimate fall of all civilizations and artworks, interrupted by the poetry of the Shakespearian stage with its claims to “Gaiety transfiguring all that dread.” (line 17) Still, already there, there in both the second and third stanzas, the hardly perceptible echo chamber of “there” and “their” had begun. Small cracks, tiny accidents in the visual and aural landscape of the texts one reads past: There/their: in the early stanzas as one reads they slide by unnoticed, eight times, and acquire particular significance only retrospectively, in the closing lines of “Lapis Lazuli,” from which it is as though we find ourselves standing on thin ice, with crackling connections now sending us back to the earlier lines. Yeats rewrote his early drafts of “Lapis Lazuli.” “There” and “their” are newly inserted no less than seven out of the eight times in stanzas 2 and 3 where they had not appeared originally. They break up the lines. For if “there,” “there,” “their,” “their,” and “their” somewhat overwhelm the closing lines of “Lapis Lazuli” (lines 50-56), breaking up its lines with their odd echo on the triumphant path to gaiety, they have their place as well earlier in the poem: eight times.¹⁹

There/their: in their thirteen emanations they might be compared to small chips of stone in a kaleidoscope, shapeless until, under the gaze of an ordering observer, and with the aid of mirroring, they seem to form patterns, however accidental and momentary. It tells us much

18 The material of the artwork takes Yeats’s love and our attention, just like the players and painted stage in *On Baile’s Strand*.

19 O’Donnell has a stunning sentence that appears suddenly with no preface to it and with no further development: “What ‘Lapis Lazuli’ accomplishes is done with words, rhythms, and repetition rather than with logical presentation of ideas.” O’Donnell 1982, p. 366.

about the stage scene (stanza 2): the possibility of pointing, of situating, of recognizing ("There struts Hamlet, there is Lear"),²⁰ the apparently unproblematic relation of observer to the object of observation, relation of audience to a stage (over there), the sense of easily recognized individual consciousness or personhood (their)—only slightly disturbed in the uncertain distinction between actors and characters in "their tragic play."

By the end of the poem, all this becomes radical dispersal of the deictic, questioning the gesture of pointing directly rather than an imposed kaleidoscopic organization. We cannot settle with known certainty on how or where to turn our attention. The scatter shot of the final stanza moves from half-way house to mountain and then to mountain and sky: to lapis lazuli. It may not be sensed on reading stanza 2 until one is sent back, nevertheless, to a newly understood there/their that was, as it turns out, already at play. If we learn anything in stanza 5, it is the uncertainty of any "there" presented to us as readers or observers, an uncertainty that just might, accidentally, break out and break up, through the aftershocks of an almost imperceptible earthquake, muted explosion of the relatively celebratory simplicity of "there" in stanza 2. A "there" that does not hold still, that connects back, reflects back on the material and linguistic materiality of which the artwork, poem, and thought are made up. Thus the disembodied eyes, "Their eyes," that come to us three times in the closing lines, accompanied by "accomplished fingers": they may cheer us but they do not build anything anew (line 36). Their gaiety, rather, is about no thing of which we can be certain. This is no transfiguration of negative dread of death to joyous liberation: the East, as Yeats wrote to Wellesley, knows nothing of tragedy. Accidental kaleidoscopic vision? Effect of an imperceptible explosion? Earthquake? Who is to say? "All metaphor" as Yeats put it two years later in "High Talk."

Science (Theater): Michael Frayn: *Copenhagen*

1941: It is just five years after Yeats completed "Lapis Lazuli," as Michael Frayn's *Copenhagen*²¹ begins. Again, a question of beating cities flat, of eradicating the enemy state, of what it means to cross the border between nations. Again, an impending apocalypse, though certainly not in the etymological sense (lifting of the veil, disclosure of knowledge). No laughing matter. It is more than a citational frolic with King Billy's bomb balls. No gaiety of a historico-poetical metaphorical jumble. No metaphors for war here. This time it is for real. We understand the dates in question--1941, 1947, 1924-1927: Werner Heisenberg's visit to Niels Bohr, his return six years later, the three years Heisenberg spent with

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20 That deictic gesture is also underscored by "that" in line 11: "That's Ophelia, that Cordelia."

21 Frayn 1998

Bohr as a very young man along with the extraordinary transformation of atomic physics that their collaboration brought about, and occasionally something less definite, in between. Still, it is not always easy to understand what we are observing. Frayn's characters, Niels Bohr and Werner Heisenberg, two of the 20th century's most renowned physicists, should be able to set the story straight. They share the stage with Bohr's wife, Margrethe, who knows the issues well, personal as well as scientific, knows them at certain moments, or from a certain point of view, better than her male counterparts. Her role is often to do just that.

Bohr and Heisenberg met in 1924: mentor and pupil, father and son, spiritually, and yet Dane and German. They work intensively together for three years when Heisenberg leaves to accept a chair at Leipzig. Three years, give or take, in which Heisenberg and Bohr develop the whole Copenhagen Interpretation (61) of atomic physics.-

In 1941, when Heisenberg returns to Copenhagen, the questions of physics are inseparable from politics, from the border dividing their two countries, between occupiers and occupied, and inseparable from the most extreme questions of ethical responsibility. As in Yeats's poem ever a call to vigilance about the medium in which thought takes place, which is to say, here, the language of science.

But, also, theater: the stage, which plays such a prominent role in "Lapis Lazuli," returns, because *Copenhagen* is not, of course, strictly speaking, science, but a play, even if it sometimes reads like a series of science lectures, with a great deal of other material strewn in between. It has much to tell about science, what it is, or at least, what kind of validity we might expect from atomic physics, what we cannot. It is the name we give to another, this time non-philosophical and non-poetical mode of truth. Explanations of fission in relation to the atomic bombs of World War II, wave mechanics and matrix mechanics (62-66), the uncertainty principle (66ff), complementarity, strung together in the guise of a play, with its assumption of a traditional, though, in the case of this unusual theater piece, uneasy, relation of observer or audience to the stage. Here too, then, as in Yeats, the concept of "there" could easily be underestimated. All this taking place in a theater work about the uncertainty principle (among many other things) in which the relationship of observer to observed, of course, cannot be taken for granted.

The bombs return, and with them various explosions, both historical and interpersonal, and not one of them is gay—and with them the dislocations of usually unquestioned spatial and temporal relations, and, once again, the end-times of "our ruined and dishonoured and beloved world" (94). Yet despite Frayn's very earnest, elaborately documented attempt at rigorous science and plausible history,²² we never forget it is

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²² Frayn attaches a very lengthy postscript to his play in which he goes over historical issues, scientific issues, and the varying opinions on what might have been said in 1941.

a work of fiction, upon a stage. This is a stage on which the drop scenes fall so fast and furious, a play in which what we are to see or read is so frenzied, we are not always sure what year we are in or what exactly we are observing, there before our eyes.²³ Uncertainty with respect to time and place is there from the very beginning, for even before the action is situated in 1941 we read:

Margrethe. But why?
Bohr. You're still thinking about it?
Margrethe. Why did he come to Copenhagen?
Bohr. Does it matter, my love, now we're all three of us dead and gone? (3)

To which Heisenberg echoes:

Heisenberg. Now we're all dead and gone, yes, and there are only two things the world remembers about me. One is the uncertainty principle, and the other is my mysterious visit to Niels Bohr in Copenhagen in 1941. Everyone understands uncertainty. Or thinks he does. No one understands my trip to Copenhagen. (4)

No one understands Heisenberg's trip to Copenhagen. Not Bohr, not Margrethe, not even Heisenberg, and certainly not Frayn, if by understanding we mean settling on one fixed view of it. The entire play, it turns out, poses as "a series of approximations." (72). It is a thought experiment²⁴ about a brief exchange of words in 1941 that might "just possibly" (94) have significantly altered the horrific closing chapter of the second world war. As Heisenberg puts it on approaching the Bohrs' front door "of all the 2,000 million people in this world, I'm the one who's been charged with this impossible responsibility." (12-13) What he has to say to Bohr will potentially have earth-shattering repercussions.

Heisenberg has come to Copenhagen to give a lecture on astrophysics. He carries it in his bag. But the more puzzling text he came to deliver is in his head. (6) Whatever it is he has come to say: "the more I've explained [it], the deeper the uncertainty has become." (4) Heisenberg speaks from the ghost time that engulfs the story, time of

²³This is partially due to the complexity of what David Barnett, in a highly intelligent essay, calls "the problematic time-levels of the play." Barnett 2005, pp.141-43

²⁴ See Victoria Stewart's excellent essay: Stewart 1999, p. 303

the dead, who speak sometimes to, but also past, one another. Now they hear what the others are saying, now they circulate in their own individual orbits, so that even when responding to, or echoing them, they might remain only half aware of the voices that share the stage.

Much of the play will be couched by the characters as a series of possible events. They call them at intermittent points: "drafts," like a scientific paper in search of a language that is just right. The script implicitly claims to represent plausible, if not the actual events of the enigmatic collision of these two bodies, Bohr and Heisenberg, in September 1941. Three times? Four times? Or is it five? Three times, at least three times, given the guideposts of almost the same grouping of words: "Heisenberg. I crunch over the familiar gravel to the Bohrs' front door, and tug at the familiar bell-pull. . . ."

Followed by:

Bohr. My dear Heisenberg!

Heisenberg. My dear Bohr!

Bohr. Come in, come in . . . (12, 53-54, 86)

And here begins the flood of all the non-scientific, nevertheless, perhaps, historically responsible language it's so difficult to account for: the intense love between the two men. Heisenberg was "one of the family" (4), Bohr tells us. "Margrethe. Niels loved him, he was a father to him." (16) In the realm of modern atomic physics Bohr was "the father of us all" (5), Heisenberg declares. Father and son, then, a relation which will soon fall in with the tragic deaths of two of the Bohrs' children.

Alongside this, are descriptions of the strange energy in the years of shared scientific creativity. The one constant in it all is the combative nature of the relationships. Heisenberg remembers Bohr's generosity, extending a hand to the German scientific community after the First World War. Bohr remembers holding out his hand and that Heisenberg "bit it" (22). It was 1922, Göttingen, their first encounter at a lecture festival in honor of Bohr. Heisenberg stood up at one of those lectures and publicly laid into Bohr because his "mathematics [were] wrong." (22)

Bohr: "You were always so combative!" (23) Heisenberg: "You were insanely competitive!" (23) And what follows now are the stand-ins for those scientific wars of words, tales of table-tennis and of poker (23), also chess. But above all skiing which will be a metaphor for scientific modes of thinking throughout the play, the cautiousness of Bohr's choices, the great speed of Heisenberg's paths in which decisions seem made *for* him, not by him.

Heisenberg. Your ski-ing was like your science. What were you waiting for? . . .

Bohr. At least I knew where I was. At the speed you were going you

were up against the uncertainty relationship. If you knew where you were when you were down you didn't know how fast you'd got there. If you knew how fast you'd been going you didn't know you were down. (24)

As we near the close of the first staged encounter, silence takes over. But we hear their voiced thoughts which in the course of the play return again and again to the accident that took Christian's life, the first born, the eldest son.

Heisenberg. Those short moments on the boat, when the tiller slams over in the heavy sea, and Christian is falling. . . . (29)

Bohr. If I hadn't let him take the helm . . . (30)

What law of physics about the collision of two bodies makes this an inevitability? Bohr had handed his son the helm: first of many errors in relation to questions of control as the scenes rush by.

Bohr. Those endless moments in the water.

Heisenberg. When he's struggling towards the lifebuoy.

Bohr. So near to touching it.

Margrethe. I'm at Tisvilde. . . . There's Niels in the doorway, silently watching me. He turns his head away, and I know at once what's happened.

Bohr. So near, so near! So slight a thing!

Heisenberg. Again and again the tiller slams over. (30)

At a loss as to how to communicate in that meeting of 1941, Bohr suggests one of their famous walks, away from all observers. Everything they say to one another might be observed: by the Gestapo, the Danes, us too. A precarious time for language. Bohr promises his wife to speak of physics and not of politics. "Heisenberg. The two are sometimes painfully difficult to keep apart." (18) Inside, they knew, the "walls had ears." (31) Outside meant away from the secret microphones, away from the listening witness of Margrethe. "If they're walking they're talking." (31) Uncharacteristically, they are back in a flash. "Margrethe. Ten minutes after they set out . . . they're back! . . . there's Niels in the doorway." (31) Niels in the doorway, as on the day that the tiller slammed Christian into the sea. Bohr is about to lose a son, yet again.

"Heisenberg wants to say goodbye" (31), Bohr announces. "What did he say?" (32), Margrethe asks. "Nothing." Bohr responds. "I don't know. I was too angry to take it in." (33) Surely, most of the audience does not take it in. We wait a considerable time to hear the words in Heisenberg's head in 1941. But Bohr had already registered something, what he at least thought he heard: "He's not right, though. How can he

be right? John Wheeler and I . . .” (32) John Wheeler and I? Bohr had from the beginning dismissed Margrethe’s suggestion that the Germans might be developing a weapon based on nuclear fission. (11) “One of the implications of [Wheeler and Bohr’s] paper is that there’s no way in the foreseeable future in which fission can be used to produce any kind of weapon.” (12) If the audience had been able to take that in, it could have rightly surmised that Bohr heard Heisenberg to suggest that a bomb was nevertheless possible. He had and he hadn’t.

In 1947 Heisenberg returned to Copenhagen seeking food parcels for his starving family and hoping to agree about what he and Bohr had said to each other in 1941. They couldn’t even agree where they had walked that night. Where Heisenberg remembers the fall leaves of September under street lamps, Bohr remembers the October drift of papers on his desk under the reading lamp.

Margrethe. So what was this mysterious thing you said?
Heisenberg. There’s no mystery about it. . . . I remember it absolutely clearly, because my life was at stake, and I chose my words very carefully. I simply asked you if as a physicist one had the moral right to work on the practical exploitation of atomic energy. (36)

Bohr doesn’t remember the carefully honed sentence, but he is again, as in 1941, horrified, certain of what it means: that Heisenberg was working on the bomb. While Heisenberg had said that he “now knew that [uranium fission] could be” (37) “used for the construction of weapons” (36), he himself had not, as he tells it, been working on the bomb but on a reactor, to produce electricity, something he could not say outright for fear it might get back to the Nazis.²⁵

Everything revolves around the fact that there were two ways to make atomic bombs. Bohr assumes a bomb using U-235 separated out with great difficulty from natural uranium, like the one eventually dropped on Hiroshima. In 1941 it seemed an impossibility because he had concluded that it would take 26,000 years to produce “even one gram of U-235.” (34) He was wrong. The fact is that Frayn’s tale of scientific endeavor is filled with miscalculations, overestimations, underestimations, each with implications for political advantage.

But Heisenberg had not come to say that he could separate out enough uranium 235. He had in mind, rather, the 1939 prediction of

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²⁵ In 2002 Frayn returns to *Copenhagen*, once again to respond to criticisms of his play. These criticisms, inevitably, almost always have to do with perceived discrepancies between the play and the historical truth, despite Frayn’s clear declarations about what his emphatically fictional and hypothetical piece might and might not accomplish. Still, the most striking revelation in the piece speaks of a letter Bohr drafted and redrafted over the last years of his life, but never sent. Bohr recalls Heisenberg giving him the impression of having led work to develop atomic weapons over the past two years. Frayn, of course, regrets not having had access to the letter earlier. Frayn 2002, p. 7

Bohr: that the U-238 in natural uranium would absorb the fast neutrons and would be transformed into Neptunium which in turn would decay and form the new element Plutonium which was just as fissile (37). (Plutonium was used in the Nagasaki bomb.) In short: "Heisenberg. If we could build a reactor we could build bombs. That's what had brought me to Copenhagen. But none of this could I say." (37) In 1941 Bohr had flown off, assuming Heisenberg was considering building bombs for Hitler. On their second meeting in Copenhagen, 1947, Bohr comes around. He calls on them to "start all over again from the beginning," and in an echo chamber of the phrase "plain language" (38) they set out to discover what had actually happened in 1941.

Heisenberg begs Bohr "to listen carefully . . . instead of running off down the street like a madman." (40)

Heisenberg. My one hope is to remain in control. . . .

Heisenberg. [S]ooner or later governments will have to turn to scientists and ask . . . whether there's any hope of producing the weapons in time. . . . So they will have to come to you and me. . . . In the end the decision will be in our hands. . . . That's what I want to tell you. . . . [I]f I manage to remain in control of our programme / will have to decide what to tell them! (40-41)

Not collision, rather cohesion, is what Heisenberg desperately desires, between the two who meet in Copenhagen, and cohesion among the various scientists, this is what Heisenberg claims he was calling for: scientists on both sides in solidarity, to avoid the otherwise inevitable production of the bomb. This Bohr should have told the Allies in 1941. The premise is choice, decision, control.

Heisenberg. That the choice is in our hands! In mine – in Oppenheimer's! That if I can tell [the Nazis] the simple truth when they ask me, the simple discouraging truth, so can he!

Bohr. This is what you want from me? Not to tell you what the Americans are doing but to stop them? (44)

Bohr finds the proposal most "interesting," his code word for nonsense. "Heisenberg. It's not a plan. It's a hope. Not even a hope. A microscopically fine thread of possibility. A wild improbability. Worth trying, though, Bohr!" (44) Bohr dismisses it as "bold ski-ing," racing down the slopes without regard for where one is going, letting the skiing determine the direction of the skier, anything but a carefully controlled plan.

But here is the complication, or one of many in this play so filled with complications. How to find the proper place for an ethical point of view? As beautiful and utopian as this thread of improbability is, it is intertwined with the reality that if Heisenberg adheres to this, his hope,

which the play suggests he might have done, even without a commitment from the other side, if he chooses what is obviously the ethical path from a universal prospective, it is Germany that will perhaps be bombed. "We have one set of obligations to the world in general, and we have other sets, never to be reconciled, to our fellow-countrymen . . . our family, to our children." (77-78) So even though Germany is "in the wrong":

Heisenberg. Germany is where I was born. Germany is where I became what I am. Germany is all the faces of my childhood, all the hands that picked me up when I fell, all the voices that encouraged me and set me on my way, all the hearts that speak to my heart. Germany is my widowed mother and my impossible brother. Germany is my wife. Germany is our children. I have to know what I'm deciding for them! (42)

How can one not feel compassion for that impossible choice between generalized righteousness and what, after all, is nationalism? Frayn has written the most impassioned and moving lines of the play for the German.²⁶ Perhaps this simply means that Heisenberg is the most eloquent of the three, or is it that such ethical decisions are nigh impossible?

Without control over the German atomic energy program, however, this whisper of a plan is not possible. No decision will be in his hands. Without control Heisenberg cannot decide what will be done, what the Nazis will learn, what will and will not be accomplished. (40-41) And if he does all that he claims, if he manages not to tell Speer that the reactor will produce plutonium and thus might be a crucial step on the way to making a bomb, if he is able to "continue with the reactor" (49), if he manages on purpose to limit his support to only "barely enough money to keep the reactor" program going (49), then that was the end of the German atomic bomb. Such a perilous bit of tight-rope walking.

This necessity of control, without which no moral choice appears effective, is thus established, but another sets in, in which Heisenberg utterly fails. If the program was under his control the reactor was not. "You couldn't even keep the reactor under your control. The reactor," says Bohr, "was going to kill you." (49) It had no cadmium rods and the reaction would not, as Heisenberg believed, have been self-limiting: had it gone critical, it would have melted down (50) and they would "all have died of radiation sickness." (51) "Nothing was under anyone's control . . ." (51) And now, here it comes: "Heisenberg. Two more weeks, two more blocks of uranium, and it would have been German physics that achieved the

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²⁶They are accompanied by descriptions of Heisenberg walking through puddles of molten phosphorous and people trapped in various stages of burning to death after a Berlin bombing, "as if the streets have been fouled by the hounds of hell." Frayn 1998, p.43

world's first self-sustaining chain reaction." (51) Nationalism, after all: and scientific failure, if the measure of science is less its content than the combative race to be first.

They all fall into silence, and when silence falls upon them "once again the tiller slams over, and Christian is falling" (53), even though it is really Heisenberg who is falling, the one son ever a figure for the other.²⁷ Unlucky strike.

So why did Heisenberg come? Bohr would never have told him what the Allies were up to. He would have returned to work on the reactor whatever transpired. "Bohr. Tell us once again. Another draft of the paper. And this time we shall get it right. This time we shall understand." (53) This new draft, however, is not strictly about 1941. Heisenberg crunches over the familiar gravel as he did in '41, and tugs at the familiar bell-pull. He senses the absurd and horrible importance of someone bearing bad news (53), that he had indeed "discovered a way you can use theoretical physics to kill people." (10). But there is also "Something good. Something bright and eager" (53). My dear Heisenberg! My dear Bohr! Come in, come in. The door opens and we are swept back to the twenties. Christian is still alive. What this draft of the paper reviews is the years of friendship and scientific collaboration (is it cohesion, is it collision?), explanations of their research, and also reflections by each of the three about the general implications of their work. They are following "the threads right back to the beginning of the maze" (56), as Bohr puts it.

This often entails using human beings as metaphors for atomic- and other particles and vice versa.²⁸ The linguistic gesture is offered, no doubt, as "plain language" so that someone like Margrethe (and the audience) might follow, but it also has other implications. Heisenberg had moved into the private office next to Bohr's "like the electron on the inmost orbit around the nucleus" (58), "with other electrons on the outer orbits around [them] all over Europe. . . . Max Born and Pascual Jordan" (59), for example. We progress to the narrative of "two . . . Dutchmen [who] go back to a ridiculous idea that electrons can spin in different ways" (59): ([Human] electrons now thinking through the concept that electrons can spin.) And what everyone wishes to know is how Bohr, the papal figure of their religion, will reflect on this outrageous idea. He steps onto a train. On the station platforms, along the way to Leiden and back, other scientists (like photons, it will turn out) check in with Bohr to find out how his ideas on spin have developed along the route (60). Pauli and Stern in Hamburg: Spin, Bohr says, is "interesting," which is to say nonsense. Einstein in

27 See Soto-Morettini's thoughtful commentary on the problematic of ethical certainty. Soto-Morettini 2002, 76-77.

28 See Victoria Stewart who raises similar issues: "*Copenhagen* is structured around the interchange between metaphor used to explain science and science itself used as a metaphor to explain action." Stewart 1999, p. 302

Leiden: his relativistic analysis resolves Bohr's doubts who now reverses his position. Heisenberg and Jordan in Göttingen, same question; Pauli again, but this time in Berlin, each hoping to hit upon any changes in Bohr's thinking along his path. The collision with Einstein has certainly brought about a deflection from Bohr's initial mode of thinking on spin. A few minutes later the theater audience is finally in on the joke when the three speak of the cloud chamber (65) and of the uncertainty principle. What we have been tracing is not a path, not a track, not a trajectory (65). It is a question, rather, of intermittent moments of contact with Bohr that each offer just a glimpse (66).

"If you detach an electron from an atom, and send it through a cloud chamber" (65), one seems to see a track. "And it's a scandal" (65), Heisenberg says, because, walking around Faelled Park he had realized that what one really observes is, rather, like a telescope in Norway catching sight of him as he passes in and out of darkness: first, under some streetlamps, then falling back into obscurity, and now coming into the sphere of a new light source, say the lamp-post near the bandstand. "Heisenberg. And that's what we see in the cloud chamber. Not a continuous track, but a series of glimpses – a series of collisions between the passing electron and various molecules of water vapour. . . ." (66-67) We don't even see the collision but the droplets condensing around them (67). This in turn is like Bohr's "great papal progress to Leiden and back in 1925." (67) First the metaphor of electrons to stand in for human life and then the metaphor of human figures to stand in for electrons.²⁹

In another rhetorical adventure, wishing to speak of the recoil of an electron inside the atom when it meets a photon, Heisenberg proposes: "Copenhagen is an atom. Margrethe is its nucleus. . . . Now, Bohr's an electron. He's wandering around the city somewhere in the darkness. . . . I'm a photon. A quantum of light." (68-69) And when the light particle collides with the electron he slows it down, he deflects it. The electron is deflected by the light particle that might have shown us where it is. Uncertainty.

Uncertainty not only with respect to the particles within the scientific tale, uncertainty also about the status of the scientific explanation. And let's set aside the temptation of the audience (a temptation Frayn encourages) to imagine that quantum physics might claim to speak of human behavior. Once that narrative is in "plain language" there is a dizzying relation between humans and scientific objects, electrons, photons. "Plain language" entails a disconnect between language and what it refers to. Nothing shows this better than the intricate usage of metaphors mixing particles and humans.

29 In a highly intelligent and rich article, David Barnett is particularly astute on this issue of "physics-based metaphors" used by the characters. Barnett 2005, p. 143

In order to explain science one has a choice of two languages. Over and over this is the argument between Heisenberg and Bohr.

Bohr. As long as the mathematics worked out you were satisfied. . . . But the question always, What does the mathematics mean, in plain language? What are the philosophical implications? (25)

For Heisenberg, mathematical language cannot be adequately transformed into “plain language.” He describes the moment when he “got” uncertainty. “I’ve got it. I seem to be looking through the surface of atomic phenomena into a strangely beautiful interior world. A world of pure mathematical structures.” (62) This is seeing of another order. No uncertainty. No disconnect between the mathematical language that describes it and the object observed.

Heisenberg. What something means is what it means in mathematics.

Bohr. You think that so long as the mathematics works out, the sense doesn’t matter.

Heisenberg. Mathematics *is* sense! That’s what sense is! (65)

Copenhagen, of course, is written in plain language—difficult but plain language. And in the course of its fiction, especially in this, the third draft, Frayn’s characters reflect on what Bohr has called the “philosophical implications” (25) of their scientific endeavors.

Heisenberg has shown the world a strange truth – that we can never know everything about the location of a particle, “because we can’t observe it without introducing some new element into the situation,” say, “a piece of light.” (67) He speaks of shattering the objective universe around us because “you have no absolutely determinate situation in the world, which among other things lays waste to the idea of causality, the whole foundation of science.” (68) Bohr’s Complementarity, he points out, mitigates that situation.

In fact, Bohr sees a remarkably sanguine side of it all: “We put man back at the centre of the universe.” (71) Starting anew with Einstein, measurement becomes a human act (Bohr again), “carried out . . . from the one particular viewpoint of a possible observer.” (71) And then came the Copenhagen years – when “we discover that there is no precisely determinable objective universe” (71-72), yes, but that the universe as a series of approximations comes to us “Only through the understanding lodged inside the human head.” (72)

Does this viewpoint of understanding lodged in the human head undo Heisenberg’s plain language which excludes us from ever knowing everything about the location of the particles we observe? Does Bohr’s rethinking of man’s position at the center of the universe invest man

with power and control? And how does it change our understanding when Margrethe pulls us abruptly back to the fact that the “one bit of the universe that [that human head] cannot see” (72) is its self.

Things fall apart more violently when Margrethe insists that “everything *is* personal,” no longer personal in the sense of a disinterested scientific observer, whose mind is the locus of understanding (72), but personal as in “confusion and rage and jealousy and tears and no one knowing what things mean.” (73) Impossible to know from what viewpoint one should be observing. Perhaps, she suggests, it was professional greed, that drove not only Heisenberg but even her dear husband to strategically accept one another’s doctrines (74). Perhaps science, from a certain point of view to which the play repeatedly returns, is, after all, war, as in Heisenberg’s wish to “bomb” Schrödinger in a “war” (73) over wave mechanics.

Bohr calls for one more draft, the fourth (86): the familiar gravel, front door, bell pull. This draft will not last long. Though shorter by far, it is a replay of the initial version, which it cites, touching down on phrases from pages 13, 14, 15, suddenly 30. Intermittent glimpses and not always in order. Frayn’s narrative itself now behaves like photons colliding with electrons of the play’s earlier scene. And how does that resituate the audience observing/reading this? No track, no path. In between we hear the repeated reminders from each of the characters, the insistence that they can see only the others, but not themselves. A badly scratched phonograph record, skipping from topic to topic, with a missing sense of self in each speech. Thus Heisenberg: “Two thousand million people in the world and the one who has to decide their fate is the only one who’s always hidden from me.” (87)

The text brings us finally to the familiar, practiced query: “Does one as a physicist have the moral right . . .” (88), the search for ethics that will once again come to disaster. Margrethe describes the moments. “The flying particle wanders the darkness, no one knows where. . . . The great collision. . . . And even as the moment of collision begins it’s over. . . . Already they’re [Bohr and Heisenberg] flying away from each other into the darkness again.” (88)

And yet, Bohr will propose a thought experiment that might change everything. It is no longer a question of what happened in the past, but a decision, a choice. Surely it seems offered as a ray of hope.

Bohr. Let’s suppose for a moment that I don’t go flying off into the night. Let’s see what happens if instead I remember the paternal role I’m supposed to play. If I stop, and control my anger, and turn to him. (88-89)

How to account for the proposal that he might have controlled his anger, in a play in which “control” has proven so elusive? What if, Bohr

asks, they were to return to the calculation and what if Heisenberg were this time to do the calculation that would make clear that it was just possible, after all, to extract enough U-235 to make a bomb? The thought experiment, however, does not result in a happy ending. This is because Bohr seems to understand it as a necessary corollary, that had Heisenberg calculated, had he realized that a bomb might in fact be made more easily than he had previously dreamed, a “very terrible new world [would begin] to take shape. . .” (89) But why? Why assume that Heisenberg would have used that knowledge to give Hitler the bomb? Nothing in the play made that the necessary or even obvious conclusion of this thought experiment.³⁰ Bohr substitutes paternal love for particle collision, puts it in place of international strife: he wishes to take control instead of behaving like an indifferent, deflected particle, “flying off into the night.” (88-89) How does that bring us to this pessimistic conclusion? Why does imagining the utopian combination of human control and familial love produce the worst outcome possible: a “very terrible new world” (89) placing nuclear bombs in the hands of a homicidal maniac? Laying waste to the idea of causality, which Heisenberg announced as collateral damage of uncertainty, seems to extend to the world of thought.

What has, however, also happened here in this final thought experiment is that Bohr (or Frayn) has switched registers. He wishes to put aside “flying off into the night” (88-89) like a particle. Suddenly Bohr is a human being and one with a familial role, a familial role in the form of love, rather than rage, say, or jealousy (73). The morally laudable choice of love does not align with that choice’s outcome.

In *Copenhagen* we can never be sure how to understand the human. Is it a sub-atomic particle, an electron, a photon, presumably, then, with no will, no control, no capacity for decision? Is it an individual? Is it a self “at the centre of the universe”? (Bohr, 71) and, if so, if “measurement is not an impersonal event [but] a human act” (Bohr, 71) is it in control, able to decide? Is it a locus of violent narcissistic desires and thus combative in scientific research? Is it a member of a family? Is it a friend among friends, a neighbor among neighbors, a citizen of a (warring) country, or a citizen, rather, of the world? And how could those irreconcilable moral obligations that Heisenberg speaks of (77) direct us to any particular one choice among these?

At the close of the play, when they have together sorted out that Heisenberg, in Bohr’s words, “never managed to contribute to the death

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³⁰ It is only in Bohr’s mind and in Bohr’s words that the “terrible new world” takes shape. Several readers have pointed to stage effects in the production of the play that have supported and generalized the voice of a single character into the necessary outcome. Nick Ruddick writes of “the third of only three sound effects in the Broadway production” (Ruddick 2001, p. 425) and he cites Thomas Powers in his May 2000 article in the *New York Review of Books* who speaks of “a roar and rumbling that shakes the gut of every playgoer with stunning intensity.” This is a production choice which transforms the bomb going off in Bohr’s head into an inescapable effect of Heisenberg making the calculation. It is not the foregone conclusion of the thought experiment.

of one single solitary person" (91), he proposes a "quantum ethics" (92) in which there would be a place in heaven for both himself and a fanatical Nazi. Those ethics are embedded in the narrative of a story of Heisenberg's own telling. The war is over. He makes his way through Germany to his family, on foot, past rubble, past lost and starving others on the road even more desperate than he is. He encounters an SS officer, who, calling him a deserter, reaches for his holster to pull out his gun. But Heisenberg does some fast skiing.

And suddenly I'm thinking very quickly and clearly – it's like ski-ing, or that night . . . in Faelled Park [when Heisenberg did uncertainty]. What comes into my mind . . . is the pack of American cigarettes I've got in my pocket. And already it's in my hand – I'm holding it out to him. . . . I wait while he stands there looking at it, trying to make it out, trying to think. . . . There are two simple words in large print on the pack: Lucky Strike. He closes the holster, and takes the cigarettes instead. . . . (92-93)

What is the "quantum ethics" that guarantees a place in heaven for the SS officer? Is he really to be forgiven? Or, is this possible only if we judge him "purely on the external effects of [his] actions"?³¹ the way in which we measure the activity of particles. Or is the critical issue that Heisenberg has managed to thwart the murder almost committed? Would that be because of the physicist's quick thinking that reaches a controlled, logical, and efficacious decision? Fast skiing, after all, earlier in the play, had always been about "Decisions mak[ing] themselves" (25) when you are coming downhill at great speeds. "The swerve itself [is] the decision." (26) So isn't it rather, just as the story tells it, merely a "Lucky Strike." "Lucky Strike" is, after all, written "in large print." (93) Not a question of scientific ingenuity, not a matter of loving one's fellow man, not a matter of control, not a question of general good over nationalism. It's an ethics of freak chance, the inverse of an efficacious bombing. It's not an ethics to be proposed as a method – since there is no method. It's an ethics of blind contingency, which is say, it's not an ethics.³² Nothing makes this clearer than the return of the tiller slamming over once again just a few lines later. "And over goes the tiller once again. . . . So near, so near! So slight a thing!" (93)

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31 Frayn 2002, p. 4

32 In the name of historical facts, Jonothan Logan (Logan 2000) makes a very convincing case for a far less sympathetic view of Heisenberg than *Copenhagen* might seem to suggest. Historical points taken. Still, the passage about "quantum ethics" and others complicate the theatrical piece, less in the name of history than in the name of literature.

The passage on “quantum ethics,” it should go without saying, gives us no overriding ethics of the play *Copenhagen*. This is theater. It is just “one particular viewpoint of a possible,” in this case ironic, observer/character (71).³³ The play comes to us as a bewildering onslaught of drafts that cannot simply be bundled as different answers to the questions: why did Heisenberg come to Copenhagen and what actually transpired there? They come at us, rather, exploding with a multitude of unsolved problems that make those questions unanswerable. What kind of plain language can we use to speak? What is a human being? Are control and decision possible? Why does an intentionally moral choice not result in a morally satisfying outcome? Is there any correlation between the behavior of atomic particles and human behavior, even though the science of the uncertainty principle is only applicable to the world of atomic particles? And then, there are the far more unfathomable questions that have nothing to do with recuperating that historical past. How is it possible that human intellect is capable of reasoning its way “with such astonishing delicacy and precision into the tiny world of the atom” (76)? And, given that mastery, how could human knowledge develop a force so powerful it can easily destroy the entire world, all the while having no effective knowledge as to how to control it, physically, politically. Where does this leave us? Hard to say. *Copenhagen* suggests we are at once the center and the blind spot of the universe. In the last lines of Frayn’s work Margrethe speaks of our inevitably “ruined and dishonoured and beloved world” (94), to which Heisenberg responds by locating us still “in this most precious meanwhile.” (94)

* * *

As chance would have it, just here, just as I am completing the first draft of my essay in this most precious meanwhile, Niels Bohr and Werner Heisenberg are replaced by two others who are bound to hold our attention. This is the theater of war.

Vladimir Putin, President of Russia, is invading and bombing Ukraine with indiscriminate brutality. Longtime a foreign intelligence officer for the KGB, he is good at plain language and at making things up as he goes along.

Ukraine has a president too, Volodymyr Zelensky. Before his election to office, he played a courageous president of Ukraine on TV, elected by chance. Before that he was a comedian. He is no longer funny, but he is a courageous president of Ukraine.

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33 Reed Way Dasenbrook speaks about this, though not in relation to the quantum elegy passage. He warns of conflating “what the character Heisenberg says in *Copenhagen* with what Frayn intends us to take away from the play. . . . [W]e cannot assume that Heisenberg is Frayn’s spokesman. . . .” It’s an error that some of the more outraged critics of Frayn make. Dasenbrook 2004, p. 222

Western Europe and its allies? They threaten to retaliate with radical financial assaults including the disengagement of Russia from SWIFT: they call this the “nuclear option.”³⁴ I read in wonder that anyone would make such a careless choice of language.

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³⁴ <https://fortune.com/2022/02/24/swift-sanction-russia-invade-ukraine/>

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From Passion for the Real to Passion for Knowledge¹

Jela Krečič

Abstract: In the last hundred years, the art scene underwent interesting changes. The beginning of the 20th century is marked by vibrant new avant-garde and modernist movements; all kinds of artistic experiments, accompanied by the idea that art can penetrate society and contribute to radical social change. Alain Badiou identified these endeavors as the passion for the real. After the second world war, this passion seems to slowly dissipate. The paradox lies in the fact that art institutions are today among the most woken, politically engaged, and enlightened ones, however effect of their political struggles is severely limited. The article argues that the passion for the real was replaced with the passion for knowledge. It traces the social and political consequences of this shift, but at the same time tries to determine other features of museums and art institutions that bear an emancipatory value and solicit compelling political lessons.

Keywords: avant-gardes, modernism, passion for the real, passion for knowledge, Banksy, aestheticization

With Plato, philosophy starts as a great disavowal of art, art's fiction, and illusions. In his essay "Under the Gaze of Theory," Boris Groys perspicuously observes a similar sentiment in the art sphere of the late 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th century when artists begin to doubt modes of classical representation.²

With the rise of modernism and avant-garde, a philosophical preoccupation with false appearances and mystifying representation arises. One can wonder what brought about such a concern. On the one hand, technological innovations such as photography, film, etc., thrust upon visual arts to develop new visual styles and different kinds of artistic expressions. On the other hand, the social and political context determined the sensibilities of modernist and avant-garde artists: it became impossible to ignore Marx and Engels's *Communist Manifesto*, or, more precisely, the concept of class struggle in the art sphere. At any rate, the urgency of social predicament demanded a different kind of art. With regard to social antagonisms, classical representation started to feel inadequate, fake, manipulative – merely a bourgeois comfort. In other words: if we accept that society is filled with tensions and contradictions, with explicit and implicit struggles, artists can no longer produce seemingly soothing works.

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¹ The contribution 'The real and the passion for knowledge in art' is a result of the work within the research program "Truth and Indirectness. Toward A New Theory of Truth" (J6-3138), financed by ARRS, the Slovenian Research Agency.

² Groys 2016, p. 25

The birth of psychoanalysis in the late 19th century also may have triggered not so much a disavowal of representation but an explosion of modernist and avant-garde innovations (in style, approaches, works, procedures). Freud's concept of the unconscious radically changed the understanding of the subject. Psychoanalysis legitimized an anxious, troubled subject and (to some extent at least) endorsed his or her right to express and address her or his predicament in his or her own way. The notion of a subject as fundamentally unbalanced³ resonated in various artistic experimentations: every single artist strived to create her or his distinguishable style, a unique touch against the proscribed artistic formulas of the past.

In spite of the possible conceptual background that sparkled great transformation in the western art world, it is nonetheless intriguing that the germ of philosophical aversion to representation penetrated art so profoundly. My thesis is that we can discern two very different aspects of the transformation that took place: if the drive of avant-garde movements at the beginning of the 20th century was wholeheartedly invested in revolutionary change, it dissipated from the second world war on. I will try to elaborate how we can understand these changes with respect to social and political context.

The art of a blow

In his *Theory of the Avant-garde* Peter Bürger connects avant-garde movements to art's role in the bourgeois society. He argues avant-gardes should be perceived as reactions to the aestheticism of the late 19 century. Art in this time becomes an autonomous institution, abiding by its own rules and following its standards. But the price for the almost absolute creative freedom is art's detachment from its social and political context – it loses any kind of real impact. This, of course, doesn't mean that aestheticism isn't critical of its social context, but that its criticism remains separated from the praxis of life, as Bürger puts it.⁴ Contrary to this, avant-gardes strive to penetrate society with their art, they strive to create art that would produce a tangible social and political impact. Consequently, European historical avant-gardes attack the status of art in the bourgeois society:

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3 Fredric Jameson makes a similar point in his essay on postmodernism, discussing artistic sensibilities in modernism and postmodernism: "Edward Munch's painting *The Scream* is, of course, a canonical expression of the great modernist thematics of alienation, anomie, solitude, social fragmentation, and isolation, a virtually programmatic emblem of what used to be called the age of anxiety. It will here be read as an embodiment not merely of the expression of that kind of affect but, even more, as a virtual deconstruction of the very aesthetic of expression itself, which seems to have dominated much of what we call high modernism but to have vanished away -- for both practical and theoretical reasons -- in the world of the postmodern." (Jameson 1991, p. 19)

4 Bürger 1984, p. 49

“What is negated is not an earlier form of art (style) but art as an institution that is unassociated with the live praxis of men. When avant-gardes demand that art become practical once again they do not mean that the work of art should be socially significant (...) Rather it directs itself to the way art functions in society, a process that does as much to determine the effect that works have as does the particular context.”⁵

Avantgardists try to intervene in society, contribute to revolutionary goals, and by doing so redefine art's status in society. Bürger emphasizes the problems that arise with such an attempt.⁶ However, the crucial question in my view is: what do avant-gardes propose instead of illusions and ideological mystifications produced within the autonomous institution of art?

They try to radically change the praxis of life (the existing *status quo*), and such a radical transformation demands a new art. In other words, modern and avant-garde formal artistic innovations do not simply denounce representation in favor of pure life or reality as it supposedly is, they establish a new kind of representation which amounts to a representation of the impossibility of creating pleasing images or to a representation of a distorted representation. Avant-gardes go even further and change the character of artwork more thoroughly: instead of traditional artifacts such as are paintings, sculptures, etc., they organize soirees and manifestations - they are predecessors of performing art and happenings. They intentionally focus on artistic practices that cannot be exhibited, fetishized, or sold at the art market. Besides that avant-garde movements go against the logic of artist-genius and instead work in groups as a collective body.⁷ Avantgardists also redefine relationships with their audiences. The spectators are themselves treated as a collective that can participate in artistic endeavors and can learn from artistic practices – an idea that resonates with contemporary interactive art projects. On every level, avantgardists try to sabotage or eradicate the prevailing conditions of the art system.

The function of all these changes, as mentioned, is the creation of a new world and a new man. Avant-gardes believe in absolute political creation or the creation of the political. Alain Badiou, in his book *The Century*, proposed the most accurate concept for their aspirations – the passion for the real:

“Can we observe, within in the century, the deployment of a critique of semblance, a critique of representation, mimesis, and 'the

.....
5 Ibid.

6The problem is that we cannot establish the function of art, which has transformed into the praxis of life, since it is indiscernible from form social life and hence is not autonomous anymore.

7 Ibid., p. 33

natural'? Quite apart from these verifications, which by and large we've already undertaken, we must acknowledge a strong current within the century's thought which declared it is better to sacrifice art than to give up on the real."⁸

What does this thesis, that art becomes sacrificed for the sake of the real, mean? Bürger's observation that avant-gardes strive to change the praxis of life, is quite in sync with this idea. The Real that avant-gardes are so passionate about has nothing to do with the immediacy of life, with direct depiction or revelation of reality. On the contrary, reality is something that must be eradicated and re-created. The real that avant-gardes aim at is a break with existing reality. Moreover, passion for the real demands creation of the new: new politics, new political subject.⁹ Numerous formal inventions or creations of different avant-garde movements (from futurist "parole in libertà" to Malevich's *Black Square* or Tatlin's *Tower*) are designed to produce a direct political effect. The multiplicity of artistic activities create a real impact that throws us, the public, off our feet, that suspends our known horizon of sense and meaning and introduces the creation of a new one.

Following Badiou, avant-garde manifestos embody the essence of their movements. They are distinctive linguistic creations aimed at the direct inauguration of the event, of the new, the completely modern. It is important to note that with modernist and avant-garde movements art theory or the passion for theorizing also enters the art scene. Since the object of avant-garde no longer aspires to be beautiful, comfortable, calming, it needs a theoretical justification. Artists in this epoch start to write and provide analyses and conceptual frames of their work.¹⁰

What is the status of this enormous amount of theory created by modernists and avant-gardists? Is it merely to provide an understanding of otherwise hermetic, enigmatic works? My thesis is that theoretical production – often itself very mystifying and enigmatic – functions as yet another manifestation of the passion for the real. Manifestos can be considered an extreme version of this passion. They do not address the works of art but are an accompanying ingredient of the creative urge also found in avantgardist manifestations and avantgardists' attitudes.

"Since in such cases works are uncertain – almost vanished before they are born, or concentrated in the gesture of an artist rather than its result (...) – their gist has to be conserved in theory, commentary,

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8 Badiou 2007, p. 131

9 Badiou connects the creation of the new also to the avantgardist inclination to being completely modern – a phrase created by Rimbaud (Ibid., p. 134).

10 It would be actually hard to find a modernist that didn't establish her or his own theory: from Schönberg to Malevich.

declaration. Through writing one must preserve a formula for this bit-of-the-real extorted by the fleeting passage of forms.”¹¹

Creating art no longer suffices. The art manifestation needs backing in a declaration or a gesture. Manifestos can be understood as a way to do things with words, to use J. L. Austin's formula. What does a manifesto do with words? What kind of words and what kind of actions are in play here? According to Badiou the meaning of words in the manifestos isn't essential. Manifestos are often intentionally misleading, shocking; they attempt to challenge, scare, disgust their readers, and they are not necessarily devoted to realizing their goals. Their explicit meaning is separated from their intended effect.

“My hypothesis is that – at least for those who in the century are prey to the passion of the present – the Manifesto is only ever a rhetorical device serving to protect something other than what it overtly names or announces.”¹²

Avant-gardes were often accused of not delivering on what they promised in their programs, but this accusation is in Badiou's view misdirected. Manifestos are in essence a pure will for the new and cannot be reduced to a meaningful program with a clear strategy and rational set of goals. They are, on the contrary, enigmatic formulas that still puzzle us since it seems their meaning escapes the real message they are producing. As Badiou would say, they keep the passion for the real alive. One could also argue that a manifesto functions as a gesture. Relying here on Lacan's theory, manifestos' point or meaning should not be traced on the level of the enunciated but on the level of enunciation.

We can clarify some of these concepts by turning to the first and most influential avant-garde manifesto and analyzing the crucial features of these art forms. *The Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism* written by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti in 1909 is an intriguing mixture of poetry, political program and eccentric theory of art.¹³

The manifesto starts with: “My friends and I stayed up all night, sitting beneath the lamps of a mosque, whose star studded, filigreed brass domes resembled our souls, all aglow with the concentrated

11 Ibid., p. 137

12 Ibid., p. 138

13 Is it necessary to note that different avant-gardes produced an enormous amount of manifestos. Futurists alone were very productive in this genre. The reason I am taking only Marinetti's manifesto into account is simply that it was the first one; it was very notorious and influential: in next years and decades other avant-garde movements followed suit. That is to say, even when we can spot indicative differences among different movements, these are articulated, pointed out in their manifestos. When discussing manifestos in plural I am not unjustifiably generalizing this whole production, but I am considering the prevailing and shared features of this genre in historical avant-garde.

brilliance of an electric hart.”¹⁴ The narrative of the manifesto starts with the insomnia of young people caused by unexplained excitement and enthusiasm. As the narrative progresses, we learn that they are taking a ride with a car – an object of modernity that futurists most cherish. They are racing around but when faced with a group of cyclists they end up in a ditch: “So with my face covered in repair shop grime – a fine mixture of metallic flakes, profuse sweat, and pale blue soot – with my arms all bruised and bangled yet quite undaunted, I dictated our foremost desires to all men on Earth who are truly alive (...).”¹⁵

Already in this part, where the manifesto reads more like a lyricized story, we can sense a certain grit, stubbornness, and untamable passion of the writer. It seems the author is already challenging his audience with an unusual choice of words, descriptions, unusual objects of fascination (cars, speed), and an excessively heroic attitude towards life. All these features are intensified in the central part of the manifesto where the actual program of the futurists is laid out. It starts with: “We want to sing about the love of danger, about the use of energy, and recklessness as common, daily practice.” Followed by: “Courage, boldness, and rebellion will be essential elements in our poetry.”¹⁶

So, the excitement of the first introductory part is here emphasized and it builds up to very daring, almost crazy statements. The love of new machinery, technology and speed demands its aesthetic laws: “A racing car, its bonnet decked with exhaust pipes like serpents with galvanic breath... a raring motor car which seems to race on like machine-gun fire is more beautiful than the Winged Victory of Samothrace.”¹⁷ And later on: “There is no longer any other beauty except struggle. Any work of art that lacks a sense of aggression can never be a masterpiece.” Admiration for aggression and violence escalates to promoting war (“We wish to glorify war”) and the destruction of the old world, especially old art institutions: “We wish to destroy museums, libraries, academies of all sort, and fight against moralism, feminism, and every kind of materialistic self-serving cowardice.”¹⁸

Manifesto on the one hand provides intriguing images of modern technology and is, on the other hand, bursting with violence against everything old, against the traditional institutions, especially the cultural ones, and against women, too. The destruction of everything old, traditional, everything that society holds in esteem, is in a manifesto put

14 Marinetti 2011, p. 2

15 Ibid., p. 4

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid., p. 5

18 Ibid.

in opposition to the praised new technological inventions. The manifesto is absolutely devoted to the art that celebrates these novelties. Moreover, it seems Marinetti is trying to invent a new language for these admired items. He celebrates the modern cities with all their new acquisitions and elements. For example, he promises he will sing praise to everything modern big metropolises have to offer: "(...) pulsating, nightly ardor of arsenals and shipyards, ablaze with their violent electric moons; of railway stations, voraciously devouring smoke-belching serpents; of workshops hanging from the clouds by their twisted threads of smoke; of bridges which, like giant gymnasts, bestride the rivers, flashing sunlight like gleaming knives, of intrepid steamships that sniff out the horizon (...)"¹⁹ Marinetti is trying to invent a new language for a new modern world that has arisen in the early 20th century. He is trying to create poetry for objects that traditionally weren't the privileged subject matter of artistic endeavor.²⁰

Marinetti provides new words and phrases for the adored new phenomena. But at the same time the creation of this new language already implies the creation of a whole new symbolic universe, where exhaust pipes and factory chimneys deserve special regard and are put on the throne of absolute beauty. On the other hand, this linguistic creativity seems to escape any definite meaning. It is not clear what Marinetti's text is communicating to us. Here we are confronted with the problem of the enunciation and the enunciated. We cannot discern the meaning of the manifesto on the level of the enunciated, it is not fully expressed or enacted on the level of the enunciated.

The true force of this manifesto is to be detected on the level of enunciation: the attitude, the will that can only be sensed between the lines – literally. One could say that the enunciated comprises the enunciation. Enunciation is a surplus of the enunciated. The question is, how can we conceptualize the enunciation of *The Futurist Manifesto*? In it we find a willingness to break with the old and inaugurate the new, the combativeness, the violence of the artistic agenda. In short – the passion for the real. This attitude seems to be the real message encoded in the enunciated. It is the surplus of the author's passion for the real that is a disturbing and incomprehensible part of the manifesto.

One could claim that the linguistic innovations of the manifesto serve as a break, as a punch in our faces. The manifesto uses words, the means of the symbolic, to produce a real effect. Marinetti's text was indeed received with fear and panic, it caused confusion and disgust

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¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ The ambition to create new world through new poetic language dedicated to new modern technological achievements can be also traced in Marinetti's artistic invention "parole in libertà". Using this technique an artist extracts the words from their symbolic placements and uses them as objects – as visual elements of a graphic.

among his audience. Today – even though equipped with several studies of avant-garde movements, analyses of their work, etc. – we still can sense the unbearable core of this kind of writing. All our attempts at interpreting and understanding it don't seem to domesticate it, they don't help to embrace it as an unproblematic part of the history of art. A horrible dimension of the manifesto(s) persists even today. We can describe manifestos as specific formulas that successfully survived their time-travel to the 21st century, carrying with them the ungraspable force of passion for the real. Many modernist and avant-garde paintings, sculptures, plays and movies are today integrated into the art system, they are even among most valued art pieces – they are respected and enjoyed. But that doesn't seem to stand for manifestos – as if avantgardists went too far even for our permissive and liberal standards, as if there remains something unsupportable in their attempts, in their aspirations. Manifesto seems to be resilient towards time and fetishization.

The outcome of avant-gardes' aversion toward representation, fakery, and the illusion of art is an attempt to push art into life, to create new art as a raid that can transform the symbolic order. The manifesto is an indicative materialization of such an attempt since it uses the means of language as a tool of the radical transformation of this same order of meaning. To sum it up in Badiou's terms, one has to give up art to invent the real that one can then be passionate about. The real that avant-gardes are aiming at is not already waiting for us in life, it has to be constructed, created anew.

This passion for the real – a firm belief that art can directly intervene and change the existing order – keeps appearing throughout the 20th century. If nothing else, the persistence of manifestos in this century is indicative enough. Film movements (from the Soviet silent film to Italian neorealism, from the French New Wave to Danish Dogma 95), in particular, found manifestos an always convenient form of introducing the break with the existing order of images. Manifestos helped announce films that aimed at transforming not only the art of filmmaking but reality as such. One should emphasize, though, that after the “golden age” of historical avant-garde movements, manifestos usually lose the violent rhetorics, the outrageous slogans, and aggressive vocabulary. They often seem comprehensible and devoid of really enigmatic features. The enigma that remains is the choice of manifestos as a form of communication. As if historical avant-gardes established manifesto as a genre which with its transgressive form alone already guarantees a surplus of gesture, a surplus of action – a real effect. Manifesto as a genre compels the reader to take into account not just its content but also its intent to create a new reality.

This is not a urinal

There exists another type of passion for the real in the early 20th century: Marcel Duchamp's ready-mades. Let us summarize the emergence of this intriguing object. Duchamp bought a massively produced item – a urinal, which he then signed (as R. Mutt) and named *The Fountain*. He attempted to exhibit it at the show organized by the Society of Independent artists (which he co-founded), but this attempt failed due to the outrageous character of this piece of art.²¹ Let us take a closer look at Duchamp's gesture: there is no more craft, no more artistic genius, no more predetermined artistic medium; the artist just takes an already-existing object and declares it his work of art. Urinal becomes *The Fountain* with a simple artistic gesture of renaming it. At the first glance there is no apparent difference between the two – looking at *The Fountain* one sees the urinal. However, this object, this ready-made sets in motion all sorts of speculative games.

With a simple artist's gesture, an ordinary object becomes something else, it no longer belongs to the ordinary world of profane objects. Gerard Wajcman ascribes this to the fact that *The Fountain* in comparison to a urinal is devoid of any function.²² Duchamp's ready-made thus looks the same as any other urinal from the same production line – with the exception that it doesn't function as a urinal anymore. How can this almost magical transformation occur? It suffices that an artist signs his name (or pseudonym R. Mutt, as is the case with *The Fountain*). The signature is a guarantee that the transformation is the result of artistic intervention in the world of profane objects. The signature changes the object's status.

According to Groys, the crucial characteristic of Duchamp's ready-made is that it carries the traits of artistic subjectivity (the signature) and that it is accepted by an art institution. Museums have the power of transforming ordinary objects into art pieces. One can argue that *The Fountain* hardly got an institutional endorsement at the moment of its conception. The only "institution" that accepted the first public ready-made²³ and introduced it to the public was the magazine *The Blind Man*. Alfred Stieglitz's photo of it was accompanied by Louise Norton's editorial which should still be considered as a crucial piece of art criticism:

²¹ It is not clear what exactly went on with the first ready-made; it seems it was not even officially declined, just somehow repressed. There is, however, a sense of irony in that this alternative, supposedly ground-breaking institution of independent artists excluded *The Fountain* from the show while, on the other hand, nothing less or more could be expected (as I'll argue later on).

²² Cf. Wajcman 1998

²³ With the term "first public ready-made" I am simply referring to the fact, that the *Fountain* was first ready-made to be publically exhibited, while Duchamp's first ready-made *Bicycle Wheel* (1913) was but kept in his studio.

“Whether Mr. Mutt with his own hands made the fountain or not has no importance. He **CHOSE** it. He took an ordinary article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view – created a new thought for that object.”²⁴

Thanks to this lucid interpretation *The Fountain* found its way into the public sphere and got its institutional endorsement, even though *The Blind Man* was not a widely accepted artistic magazine. It took several decades for this piece of art (which without Stieglitz and *The Blind Man* would be probably lost or forgotten) to enter the artistic canon. Its replicas were placed in important museums after the second world war while the original was presumably destroyed.

At first glance, one would think *The Fountain* is a piece of immediate reality that found its way to the art sphere since it was taken from the world of already existing objects. However, as we showed, we cannot think of this piece as an artwork without the artist's signature and its placement in the art scene – this was needed to transform an ordinary object to a work of art.

Duchamp's ready-mades follow almost to perfection the three moments of Lacan's definition of sublimation from his *Seminar VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*: sublimation is the satisfaction of a drive; sublimation creates socially acceptable norms; sublimation raises the object to the dignity of the Thing.²⁵

Especially this last definition fits *The Fountain* perfectly: a urinal which transcends into a work of art by the artist's gesture – hence becoming the Thing. Its name – *The Fountain* – indicates that we are no longer dealing with an object dedicated to defecation but with a noble cultural artifact. When we eliminate the use of urinal, we change its original meaning. Moreover, the transformative Duchamps gesture of elevating an object to the dignity of the Thing reshapes the symbolic structure. To take an ordinary object and move it to an un-prescribed (unthinkable) place – the gallery or any other art institution – is a signifying gesture, it disturbs the functioning of the symbolic structure, it demolishes the pre-established order of things/signifiers (urinal becomes an exhibited item). If Marinetti tried to create a grain of the real by exploiting signifiers in an unexpected, provoking way, Duchamp's strategy is of a different kind. He doesn't create the new with existing signifiers, he just slightly repositions the elements of the signifying structure, which results in a great disturbance of the structure as a whole.²⁶

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24 Norton 1917, p. 5

25 Lacan 1992, p.112

26 I owe this thesis to Gerard Wajcman elaboration in *L'objet du siecle* (Cf. Wajcman 1998).

This massive disturbance in the symbolic is connected to the idea that sublimation creates socially acceptable values. The emphasis of this definition is on the creation of new values as the result of artistic sublimation. In the case of *The Fountain*, one might say, it radically transformed art institutions which eventually became open to Duchamp's innovation and conceptual art. What at first appeared as an impossibility within the art system gradually became its very core. A seemingly innocent gesture of only repositioning one element of the symbolic universe caused the transformation of this universe as a whole, creating new possibilities, new boundaries for art, new artistic conditions and new values. *The Fountain* broadened the understanding of what art is or could be. The example of *The Fountain* is valuable also because it shows that for a radical change within a certain signifying order you do not need a spectacular, grandiose gesture – on the contrary, a minimal move as is an innocent repositioning suffices to thoroughly transform the character of art system as such. Duchamp's urinal also points to another paradox – when such an artwork appears there is no place for it, it can only expect disallowance, revolt, a harsh critique. Paradoxically, its appearance in the art world only retroactively creates the conditions for its own emergence and its recognition. This unwelcome piece of art creates a space which it will be eventually occupying.

And, back to Lacan's definitions of the sublimation, where does the satisfaction of the drive come in? I believe we can trace it to the artist's subjectivity, to his or her willingness to risk everything, inclusive of his/her wellbeing, for his/her creation. It is the indifference towards the fate of the artist that makes him/her a subject of the drive, dedicated to following through with a seemingly outrageous idea. In other words, creating new social values, transforming an object into a Thing, demands a specific type of subjectivity ready to jump into an abyss without any guarantee of surviving the fall.

Lacan's concept of sublimation is close to Badiou's passion for the real – both concepts imply the renunciation of the existing values and the creation of new ones. Let us repeat, passion for the real is not a passion for the existing set of objects and the existing order, but – on the contrary – a passion for the radical transformation of the prevailing reality, for a new social frame, which also demands new art and a specific type of subjectivity.

So what happened later to the passion for the real? Can we still trace it? Can we find it today, in life, art or politics?

Knowledge and pleasure in art

A notorious event took place a few years ago at the Sotheby's action: one of the paintings that were auctioned was Banksy's *Girl with Balloon*. But as soon as the work was sold for nearly a million pounds it started to

self-destruct. Banksy anticipated that the painting will be sold and built a self-destructive mechanism into the picture. Not surprisingly this incident soon became viral and the subject of much analysis. Some of the critics were enthusiastic about the event since – in their view – it succeeded in shading light onto the corrupt artistic system and market. Other reactions were more reserved since it became clear that Banksy's gesture and his picture would now generate even more profit and bring prestige to the auction house it was critical of.

This event is a good illustration of what is going on in the contemporary art world. More precisely, it raises a question about the true impact of political engagement of art and about the knowledge that provocative artworks generate.

Banksy, who started his career as a master of graffiti, is one of those famous contemporary authors that constantly promote radical political agendas in their work: he reacts to any kind of injustices of today's world, from the despair of the Palestinians on the West Bank to the corruption of the capitalist system and migration crisis in Europe. However, no matter how radical Banksy's political position might be, he is praised and valued by the (art) establishment. In other words, the status of his work within the art system and art market is in no way compromised by his political engagement. On the contrary, Banksy's rebellious status in the art world seems to generate even more attention and money. *Girl With Balloon* is not in any way different in this respect, even though the self-destructive painting is obviously a revolt against established institutions.

One should notice that a self-destructive work of art is not a novelty in the art world.²⁷ The critique of the art system is at least as old as modernism itself. Let us remember Bürger's analysis of avant-garde (or later neo-avant-garde) as a large movement against the established artistic norms, against cultural heritage and autonomous institution of art as the ideological support of the existing social order. Avant-gardes problematized the existence of art institutions: "Dadaism, the most radical movement within the European avant-garde, no longer criticizes schools that precede it but criticizes art as an institution, and the course its development took in bourgeois society."²⁸

This dire skepticism about art institutions implores avant-gardes to work on art that would function outside institutions, that would intervene directly into life. However, their project, looked at retroactively, has failed. Art institutions have changed due to modernist and avant-garde

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²⁷ Let us give just two examples: in 1960 the dadaist artist Jean Tinguely exhibited *Fragment from Homage to New York* in New York's Moma – an installation that started to dismantle in front of the audience. Also, the British author Gustav Metzger created since 1959 a series of his paintings with acid, so that acid destroyed the paintings while creating them.

²⁸ Bürger 1984, p. 22

tendencies, adapted to all the radical, unaccepted art of early modernism, and opened up their doors widely to all sorts of experimentation, critique, and scandal. However, as soon as these provocative, challenging works were exhibited within the walls of museums and galleries, the passion for the real seems to have dissipated. The protest, the radical politics of avant-gardes lost its edge as soon as they became canonized and included in art institutions' collections.

One might say that Banksy's protest – aimed at the art system – managed to accomplish exactly the opposite of the artist's intentions: the value of the painting has been raised. Moreover, the idea of self-destructive painting created the true aura of this artwork and became even more cherished in its semi-demolished form, now entitled *Love is in the Bin*. Not to mention the publicity that Sotheby's got for its "hosting" the artist's performance.

What does this mean? How can we interpret Banksy's project? Nothing seems to invigorate the art system more than such provocative attempts and radical criticism of the art world. The shock, the scandal, the critical message keeps the art system alive. One has to wonder why is it so. The answer can only lie in the fact that no critique or any radical political gestures executed within the art system can change or transform anything. Moreover, the art institutions guarantee that its declared radical politics will have absolutely no effect in life, in socio-political reality.

This realization requires that we discuss the changes in the Western art world and society in the last hundred years. Fredric Jameson's legendary text 'Postmodernism, or, the cultural logic of late capitalism' can help us to see why the passion for the real faded. The prevailing feeling that nothing radical, new, engaging, revolutionary can take place in art, is analogous to the predicament of our liberal societies since the sixties. The crucial characteristic of postmodern society is that it permits all radical, critical political and cultural trends – as long as the capitalistic economic frame remains unproblematized. Some of the characteristics that Jameson ascribes to the postmodern condition (the loss of sense of history, the blending of high and low art, its dedication to surface without any depth, etc.) have important political consequences. Everything in our life has become culturalized. One can talk of the managerial culture, minority culture, the culture of resistance, etc. And when every aspect of society becomes perceived as a cultural problem, when politics becomes the question of culture and of managing cultural differences (cultural diversity, different lifestyles), we lose exactly the political grasp on society. Society seems to be functioning well as long as we transform the real existing problems, antagonisms, inequalities into the question of respecting cultural differences. In other words, emphasizing cultural differences erases the underlying economic contradictions, conflicts, tensions, and antagonisms that cannot be reduced to the question of cultural differences and diverse lifestyles.

When every difference is accepted into the prescribed political and economic frame, the justified critique of the system also seems to miss its target:

“The shorthand language of co-optation is for this reason omnipresent on the left, but would now seem to offer a most inadequate theoretical basis for understanding a situation in which we all, in one way or another, dimly feel that not only punctual and local countercultural forms of cultural resistance and guerrilla warfare but also even overtly political interventions like those of *The Clash* are all somehow secretly disarmed and reabsorbed by a system of which they themselves might well be considered a part since they can achieve no distance from it.”²⁹

The strategy of late capitalism in the West is to encourage or at least tolerate any form of resistance, as long as it is taking place under the umbrella of the existing economic order. This brings us back to the art system where we can easily approve of artistic or curator's political agendas (targets of their criticism are usually convincingly identified: from acknowledging antagonisms produced by the capitalist economy to recognizing ecological perils ahead); however, the form in which this sort of criticism takes place guarantees that nothing will change. The institutional frame incapacitates any political effect. In other words: every criticism is welcomed, every revolutionary idea embraced, since the frame in which they are articulated makes all these endeavors irrelevant, impotent. The situation today very much resembles the struggle of aestheticism of the late 19th century which we discussed earlier – with one exception: now not only society and economic order are the targets of artistic criticism, but also the art institutions. However, as I tried to demonstrate, art institutions are only too eager to display artistic criticism of their own problematic role in contemporary society.

I am tempted to argue that the cultural turn of late capitalism owes its strategy to the art system which, after the second world war and especially from the sixties onward, opened itself to art criticism and revolt which in turn disempowered radical projects. The amortization of radicalism goes hand in hand with another process: capitalization of the cultural sphere. Notwithstanding their declared critical goals, the cultural field, museums, and galleries began to function as a lucrative field for capitalist profits. The paradox lies in the fact that the more an art institution is subdued to the capitalist logic, the more critical and woke it is becoming.³⁰

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29 Jameson 1991, p. 42-43

30 This thought has been extensively developed by several contemporary theoreticians. Let us point out at least a few of them. Chantal Mouffe compares contemporary art institutions to theme

At this point, we have to address a reasonable and to some extent correct consideration: shouldn't we embrace a society that has become open to radical art and radical self-criticism? Should we not acknowledge progress in the fact that women, people of all races and various minorities, etc., are finally getting recognized by art institutions and society? The answer is yes, of course. However, the problem is if we see this as the only and an already accomplished goal of contemporary politics. The liberal endorsement of minorities can serve as a tool to preserve the underlying conditions of exploitation which generate the antagonisms of today's society. So we shouldn't accept the false dilemma: either liberty of minorities or the fight for economic justice. One does not exclude the other. We can strive for both at the same time. Today, however, we seem to be satisfied with pushing just the first agenda, as if this already represents a great political achievement.

The art of the non-dupes

The debate about the art system becoming the playground for our liberal sensibilities, an exercise in self-reflection without any real political power, demands further elaboration. Let us go back to Banksy's self-destructive painting. His project owes a great deal to Duchamp's conceptualism. Duchamp's ready-mades broadened the understanding of what artwork can be – anything that is made by an artist and approved by art institutions. The self-destruction of an artwork can thus also be perceived as a work of art. The crucial aspect of self-destructive (suicidal) painting is that the work that undergoes its demolition also generates knowledge. A transformation of *Girl With Balloon* into *Love is the Bin* invokes the events in art from the 19th century on. Modern artwork is an artwork that is self-reflexive, that is thoughtful or full of thought and that provides a thesis and knowledge about itself. The art aimed at questioning traditional representation, suspicious of institutions and striving to destroy traditional modes of representation, produces or at least implies a certain knowledge. It demands that we recognize the history of art and the logic of functioning of images and institutions that harvest them. It demands that we think of power structures as well as of the context of every artwork. We cannot understand *The Fountain* without considering

parks aimed at attracting great masses to generate great profits (Cf. Mouffe 2013); Julian Stallabras examines how art institutions are dependent on the capitalist market although operating under the assumption that they are a free space of thought and political engagement (Cf. Stallabras 2006); Claire Bishop, among other things, emphasizes the compromises big art institutions make in their programming due to market demands and also how spectacular architecture – “starchitecture” – of contemporary art institutions became another vehicle for attracting massive audiences (Frank Gehry's Guggenheim in Bilbao being the prime example) (Cf. Bishop 2014); Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen comes to a similar conclusion of finding artistic political engagements ineffective. (Cf. Rasmussen 2017); Bojana Kunst also debates today's enlightened art system which keeps the conditions of exploiting artists intact. (Cf. Kunst 2015)

all this. Without this knowledge and realization, the famous ready-made could never be perceived as an artwork but would remain a urinal. As I tried to show, at the beginning of the century such knowledge was still a by-product of the passion for the real. It was there in support of the artistic ambition to abolish the previous artistic modes, including the art institutions, and to participate in the creation of a new world. After the second world war and especially in the last five decades, the passion for the real became almost obsolete, while knowledge, self-reflection, self-awareness of the contemporary art became a fundamental ingredient of any artifact and any respectable art institution.

Let us try to establish the nature of this knowledge. One must not mistake it for philosophical or theoretical knowledge, although it often relies on contemporary theoretical concepts. This is not an art that develops concepts about itself in the Hegelian sense. Conceptualism in all its shapes is not some kind of developed stage of artistic spirit with full self-understanding. It is rather a type of knowledge about how classical representation is no longer possible (in any sophisticated society), and about how art is no longer naive or mischievous. This applies to artists, their artworks, contemporary art institutions, and ultimately to the audiences themselves. All of these agents strive to prove that art is no longer the victim of deception, misrecognition, and self-delusions. They reassure us that they are aware of the fakery (of traditional representation), and that they are not susceptible to it. The art system thus becomes a place of contempt for deceptive images: instead of producing self-knowledge, it promotes a raising of (political) awareness.

At this point, one should emphasize that these institutions also provide another type of knowledge – knowledge connected to the institution's programs, knowledge which deals with historical contexts, scientific facts, and arguments (which we find in the books, catalogs, etc.). This knowledge belongs to the sphere of academia and is part of the so-called scientific knowledge. It is not to be mistaken for the knowledge we are interested in, the one that asserts its resistance to any kind of deception. I would argue that self-reflexivity and self-awareness in the art are also responsible for the art institutions' receptiveness to popular genres, kitsch and degraded taste – to everything, basically, as long as this play with references is accompanied by a better knowledge or awareness, either in the form of irony or in the form of self-theorization.

In comparison to avant-gardes and modernism in which theory is used as another manifestation of the passion for the real, contemporary art (system) is characterized by the passion for knowledge. The main function of this knowledge is, again, not the progress of (scientific) knowledge, not the development of art theory or art, but a declaration of one's enlightenment, awareness, or wokeness.

It has become very important to declare and constantly prove that one was able to avoid any kind of deception. This brings us to Lacan's

famous slogan from an unpublished seminar: “Les non-dupes errant.” In translation: “the non-dupes are mistaken”, or, “the non-dupes will be deceived”. The tendency to remain aware and undeceived is according to Lacan a guarantee that we will be deceived exactly where we believe we were able to get rid of any trace of deception. So why and how will the non-dupes become deceived?

As Alenka Zupančič argues – contemplating a broader socio-political context –, our awareness of all monstrosities, corrupt governments, antagonisms of capitalism, and the ecological doom does not contribute to any significant social action or change. On the contrary, the more we are enlightened (the more we are aware of different kinds of social catastrophes) the more we remain inactive, and at the same time pleased with ourselves. Zupančič connects this insight to Mannoni's formula of fetishism: “I know well, but...” Fetish stands in place of the truth and thus enables us to believe whatever we believe. However, the situation as illustrated above is even more complex and can be seen in connection to Freud's concept of *fausse reconnaissance*, the wrong memory or *déjà raconté*. Freud took note of patients who during the analysis hastily recognized a certain trauma or fact of their traumatic history as something they already know or have already acknowledged. This allows the patients to dismiss something essential to them or to their psychological mechanism as unimportant – as something they can remain indifferent to. *Fausse reconnaissance* is a tool that can keep the most traumatic, significant elements at a safe distance so that they cannot affect us. Zupančič's crucial point is that the repression of traumatic events persists not because we excluded the repressed but exactly with the help of acknowledging it.³¹

I would argue we are dealing with a similar predicament also in the field of art. Knowledge has become the fetish and the goal in itself. On the level of production, distribution, and consumption (of artworks), the most important thing seems to be the accompanying awareness. To know better is the primary goal which also guarantees that nothing will change – on the contrary, this knowledge functions as a kind of buffer that disables us from taking action, henceforth endorsing the current state of affairs.³²

Art institutions that are susceptible to contemporary sensibilities (gender, religion, race, etc.) and strive to embrace all of the minorities, differences within art system – a stance we can also perceive as part of the non-duped mentality – remain entangled in the art market, in the

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31 Cf. Zupančič 2016

32 There are many examples of this sort of attitude. For example, the incarceration of Julian Assange is widely accepted or tolerated, although his discoveries have potentially fatal consequences for our democracies. A great deal of Covid denial and anti-vaxxer mentality can also be ascribed to the urge to possess better knowledge. Similarly, the acknowledgment of climate change doesn't seem to trigger any real political measures.

functioning of the capitalist system. The more these institutions are woke and aware of injustices, the more we can be sure that in essence – on the level of institution's functioning, on the level of profits and distribution of power – nothing will change, except perhaps a better self-image and self-admiration of the art institutions.

What remains of museums?

Contemporary art museums are part of what we can call our current predicament. The passion for knowledge that is encouraged there is in the end the passion that ultimately – regardless of our intentions and well-meaning – serves the existing structures of power. However, one would be wrong to generalize this idea; not only because there are major differences between different museums in different parts of the world, but also because there persists a museum's function that is quite different from the one we dealt with until now.

I am referring here to a thesis Boris Groys's developed in his essay "On Art Activism". He locates the power of a museum into the very fact that it aestheticizes artifacts, which in turn renders them non-functional. He argues that aestheticization does not contribute to the improvement of life or progress.³³ Museums are cemeteries, Groys asserts and finds this characteristic exactly the most worthy one. If we compare design and art institutions, we realize that design is aimed at changing the *status quo*, improving objects and consequently our lives. "Art seems to accept reality, the status quo, as it is. But art accepts the status quo as dysfunctional, as already failed from the revolutionary or even post-revolutionary perspective. (...) By defunctionalizing the *status quo*, art prefigures its coming revolutionary overthrow. Or a new global war. Or a new global catastrophe. In any case, an event that will make the whole contemporary culture, including all of its aspirations and projections, obsolete, (...)"³⁴

The mere existence of contemporary art institutions therefore functions as a radical statement about the nature of our predicament.

Groys goes on to say: "Modern and contemporary art wants to make things not better but worse, and not relatively worse, but radically worse – to make dysfunctional things out of functional things, to betray expectations, to demonstrate the invisible presence of death where we could see only life."³⁵

Groys sees art's political potential in its aestheticization of things. "In fact, total aestheticization does not block but rather enhances political

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³³ Groys 2016, p. 47

³⁴ Ibid., p. 54

³⁵ Ibid., p. 57

action.” He concludes: “Thus, total aestheticization, not only does not preclude political action, it creates ultimate horizon for successful political actions if this action has a revolutionary perspective.”³⁶

We should also point out the consequences that aesthetization has on the spectator or the audience: very much like in the case of Duchamp's ready-mades, aestheticization introduces a world of different objects that have no prescribed meaning. Art institutions are places where one can wonder, where one can get excited or appalled, but in any instance these are spaces where things can function as enigmas, as questions and not as answers to our profane problems. In this sense, art institutions are in the vicinity of philosophy, since nothing in this world is pre-established or pre-figured. On the contrary, museums are institutions where ordinary things can become something entirely different, and the spectator is invited to participate in this philosophical game. Museums also address the viewer in a different way than consumerist institutions or the workplace. He or she is not at the service of anyone or anything but is allowed to consider the viewed artifacts in his or her way.

In my view, it is also crucial to emphasize that museums function as an intermediary between the spectator and the artifacts. Only the authority of the museum (its curators, professionals, its academic and technical infrastructure) enables us to approach these artifacts in such a philosophical, mindful way. In other words, if we were to analyze why contemporary museums are so popular (or were before the pandemics), the answer does not lie only in the consumerist capitalist appropriation of the art world, but in the indirection of the museum spaces where the program is still curated. Museums are alluring because they keep a certain form of intellectual life alive – they encourage the work of thinking, interpreting and discussing in a civilized manner.

Moreover, museums are one of the last institutions that cultivate curatorship. All other institutions that were based on this type of intermediary (newspaper editors, advisers, selectors) are slowly disappearing. The streaming platforms, the online bookstores, the instant news feed without the intermediaries, etc., are indicative of our culture. The curating institutions are vanishing in favor of everyone becoming his or her own curator: from choosing food or books to TV series and movies.

As with many changes in our society, this one also presents itself as a new form of liberation and freedom. We are no longer bound to the tastes of others but can refer to our own tastes and find what we like. And the only response that is expected from us comes in a form of a “like”. The argument for our like or dislike is no longer needed or expected. However, I would argue that this new curator-less world is very terrifying and to some extent a dangerous one. Not only because the abandonment of intermediaries results in maximizing profits on our (consumers)

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³⁶ Ibid., p. 60

account, but also because it impoverishes our public space and its mental condition. In the case of consuming culture, public space is exactly the space where we can gain some distance (from our tastes: dislikes and likes) and try to understand what was it that appealed to us, or what disturbs us, or what and why has left us indifferent. It is a space where one is not bound to his or her own taste but where the tastes can be rationally discussed. The Kantian idea of aesthetic judgment – subjective but at the same time in need of universal approval – can inspire us here. Kant's conception implies that we are not alone with our tastes. We can debate our tastes. What our taste should be is not prescribed in advance, but the form of discussion or of argumentation is: the argument should be apprehensible to all of us, it refers to the universal audience of thinking beings. This public discussion is not necessarily about knowledge (gaining or exhibiting knowledge), but about creating the space for developing thoughts. Again, in this case, universalism does not imply we have to or should like or dislike the same things: we can direly disagree about our tastes, but the form of the argument should be communal, quite literally aimed at forming a community, a collective (despite our different tastes). To put it simply, this type of debate can include very diverse people, opinions, attitudes, life styles, and in this way exhibits a more productive kind of political community. In this sense institutions that still nourish curatorship and public space that is otherwise disintegrating, are most important. In our predicament, where the passion for the real seems impossible and the passion for knowledge is at best (politically) insufficient, we should perhaps try and foster the passion for aestheticization in groysian sense, based on our full acceptance that the *status quo* of our social reality is irremediably failed (which is not hard with the pandemic and the new war on the horizon). This could be a stepping stone for rebuilding the public space and from there – perhaps – also an effective political engagement.

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Poetry Strikes Back

**Jean-Jacques
Lecercle**

Abstract: What if poetry, instead of being the object of the philosophical gaze, returns the gaze and treats the philosophical text as the object of its poetic operations? This is what happens with Steve Mc Caffery's "translation" of the first pages of the *Communist Manifesto* into the dialect of South Yorkshire. The essay analyses the linguistic, literary and ideological operations such translation cum transposition imposes on the original text, with literary categories such as irony, parody and pastiche taking the place of philosophical concepts.

Keywords: defamiliarization, intralingual translation, irony, operation, parody/pastiche, poetic thinking, transposition.

1. Philosophers are usually prepared to concede that poetry thinks, provided it is they who formulate that thinking. Holderlin may think on his own, but it takes Heidegger to spell it out. It would appear that all genres of discourse are equal, in that they convey thinking, but some are more equal than others.

How can we capture the specific thinking of poetry? The philosophical tradition offers various accounts, in the opposition of presentation and representation (as in Lyotard), in the tripartition of percept, affect and concept (as in Deleuze and Guattari), in the movement from the singular towards the general (as in Macherey, who borrows from Proust his conception of the *belles généralités* that only literature reaches).¹ In all these cases, poetic thinking is ascribed the highest value, in its capacity to produce truths, but it still needs a little help from a friend, namely philosophy, and poetry remains not so much a subject as an object of knowledge. For there is an obvious hierarchy in the tripartition of percept, affect and concept, knowledge by concept being what poetry, worthy as it is, fails to reach.

What if poetry decides to strike back, and submit conceptual thinking to the operations of poetic thinking?

2. I wonder in which language the following text is written:

Nah sithi, thuzzer booergy-mister mouchin un botherin awl oer place – units booergy-mister uh komunism. Allt gaffers errawl Ewerup's gorrawl churchified t' booititaht: thuzimmint vatty unt king unawl, unner jerry unner frog unt froggy bother-mekkers, unt jerry plain cloouz bobbiz.

Nah then – can thar tell me any oppuhzishun thurrent been calder kommy bithem thuts running show? Urrunoppuhzishun thur-

.....
¹ Macherey 2013, p. 251.

rent chuckt middinful on themuzintfrunt un themuzintback unawl?²
SO BUCKLE UP MATES UN SETTO, WIRRIVERYERAHR!³

The text seems to be written in a form of English, but one that diverges widely from what is known as standard English in that, although a fairly competent speaker of English, at first reading I understand almost nothing of the text, with the exception of the last line.

But I have cheated: I have suppressed the title of my text, and the name of its authors:

The Kommunist Manifesto
or
Wot We Workers Want
*By Charley Marx un Fred Engels*⁴

Everything is now clear: this is a translation of the first lines of the *Communist Manifesto*. But since I still have difficulties understanding the text, I need another translation of this essentially translatable and indefinitely translated text. For good measure, I shall offer two. First, the current English translation of the incipit of the *Communist Manifesto*:

A spectre is haunting Europe – the spectre of Communism. All the powers of old Europe have entered into a holy alliance to exorcize this spectre: Pope and Tsar, Metternich and Guizot, French radicals and German police spies.

Where is the party in opposition that has not been decried as communistic by its opponents in power? Where the opposition that has not hurled back the branding reproach of Communism, against the more advanced opposition parties, as well as its reactionary adversaries?⁵

Secondly, my own attempt at “translating” (I don’t know whether this is the right term) of the initial text into intelligible English, an intralingual exercise:

Now, you see, that bogeyman grumbling (?) and making trouble all over the place is the bogeyman of communism. All the old men of all Europe have gone to church in order to boot it out: those in the Vatican and kings and all and a Jerry and a Frog, and French trouble-makers and German plain clothes bobbies

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2 McCaffery 2002, pp. 157-96., p. 171.

3 Ibid., p. 180.

4 Ibid., p. 171.

5 Marx & Engels 2012, p. 14.

Now, then, can you tell me of any opposition that hasn't been called communist by those that run the show? Or any opposition that hasn't thrown this shit (midden-full) on those in front and those at the back and all.

The time has come to give my initial text an author. I have quoted the first two paragraphs of a translation (which only runs to a few pages) of the *Communist manifesto* into the dialect of South Yorkshire by Steve Mc Caffery, performance artist, L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E poet and literary theorist, who happens to be a native of that county. This is not the only time he has indulged in this form of pastiche: he has "translated" the *Alice* tales into the language of Toronto junkies (*Alice in Plunderland*) and into the language of the 19th century British working-class (*Alice in Workerland*).⁶ In our text, the authors do seem to be two members of the Yorkshire proletariat.

The text has two striking characteristics. First, it is an intralingual translation, from a form of English, the standard version of the language, into another form, the dialect of South Yorkshire, which involves a mixture of familiarity, or recognition (this is a form of English...) and defamiliarization, to the point of a potential failure of communication (... but I can't understand most of the text). Secondly, it is also the translation of a translation, since Mc Caffery's text is based on the English translation of a text originally written in German (but from the start meant to be translated into as many languages as possible), which may imply semantic divergence and possible deformation.

At first reading, defamiliarization dominates. Even if the text is always-already familiar, especially the first sentence, deciphering is not easy, and this is not so much due to my abysmal ignorance of the dialect of South Yorkshire (this is part of the game, as Mc Caffery is addressing a potential readership whose ignorance of the dialect is equal to mine) as to the deliberate deformations that this "translation" imposes on the original text. All we have to do to understand this is to compare the initial sentences, "A spectre is haunting Europe – the spectre of Communism" versus "Nah sithi, thuzzer booergy-mister mouchin un botherin awl oer place – units booergy-mister uh komunism". There is a certain laconism in the original incipit, which gives the sentence the illocutionary force of a maxim or political slogan: this is precisely what is expected of the first sentence of a political manifesto. Mc Caffery's version, on the other hand, is garrulous, its words increase and multiply: "mouchin un botherin" translates "haunting" (which involves not only over-translation but a shift in meaning), and "thuzzer booergy-mister" translates "a spectre" (six syllables instead of three). The standard translation uses mainly words of Romance origin, like "spectre", whereas Mc Caffery's version uses Saxon words, like "bogeyman": the frightening creature of Romantic or fantas-

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⁶ Mc Caffery 2015; *Alice in Workerland*, to be published.

tic texts becomes a homely character for folk tales and country customs. The standard translation aims at abstraction and generality, whereas Mc Caffery's version deliberately chooses the concrete and the particular. There is an element of abstraction in "haunting", which makes the metaphorical use of the term easier, whereas "mouchin un botherin" refers to concrete acts in daily life – the concreteness of sensory impressions, as in grunting, making faces, etc., all of which makes metaphorical generalisation much harder. The translation of "Europe" as "awl oer place" (even if "Ewerup" occurs two lines later) is typical of this strategy of systematically choosing the concrete and the particular, at the expense of the universal ("Workers of the world, unite!" – the French has "*Prolétaires de tous les pays...*"). The only abstract words still present in Mc Caffery's version are "komunism" and "oppuhzishun", which don't seem to have equivalents in the dialect, but we note that "komunism" has lost its initial capital letter. And we also note that Mc Caffery's text begins with two words, "Nah sithi", that exemplify the phatic function of language and have no equivalent in the standard translation.

The same kind of deformation may be found in the last line of the text, which is far more intelligible. The generalisation involved in the word "workers" (we are close to the concept of the "proletariat", a word used in French translations) gives way to the particularity of the word "mates", which insists on the direct solidarity of people who, day after day, work together in actual life. And the Romance term "unite" is replaced with two Saxon phrasal verbs, "buckle up" and "set to", whereby the abstract concept is replaced with concrete turns of phrase. The same movement occurs at the end of the sentence, where translation gives place to a form of transposition (with due deformation), as I find hard to believe that the dialect of South Yorkshire has no other way to refer to "the world" than the periphrasis "wherever you are". The abstract internationalism of the slogan gives place to parochial solidarity. And we note again the phatic addition of "so" to the sentence, which turns the political slogan into a familiar interjection.

We may draw a provisional conclusion from this systematic defamiliarization. Mc Caffery's text is a real translation, through total immersion in the dialect, which it treats as an independent language, distinct from what we acknowledge as English (we may compare this with the presence of fragments of Northern dialect within a text written in standard English, for instance in the novels of Mrs Gaskell). This total immersion, to the point of exaggeration, is paid for by the unintelligibility of the text, at least at first reading: it took me many painful re-readings to extract "boot it out" from "booititaht". I take this as the product of a series of operations, on and against the original text, whereby poetry strikes back and, in a reversal of the usual *rapport de forces* (power relation), turns a monument of political philosophy into an object for literary manoeuvring.

3. When I say that this “translation” is a product of a series of operations, I am not simply pointing out the complexity of the process (an operation transforms raw material into a finished product by a complex and determinate form of practice), I am insisting on the move from “translation” to “transposition”, that is on the creative intervention of the “translator”, which turns the text into an instance of poetic creation: philosophy has become the raw material for poetic practice.

It all begins, then, with a series of linguistic operations. We have already noted the first of such operations, the move from standard English to a specific dialect, treated like a foreign tongue, which raises questions about the unity of the English language. Can we still maintain that there is such a thing as “the English language”, as opposed to a host of divergent dialects, in a fuzzy relation of mutual intelligibility? Mc Caffery’s text increases the divergence to its extreme point, the contradictory result of the operation being that its product is, and yet isn’t, an English text.

The second linguistic operation turns a written into an oral text. Mc Caffery’s text is full of graphic marks of orality (one of the sources of its unintelligibility). It is offered as the transcription of an oral discourse, hence my difficulty in extracting “boot it out” from “booititaht”. Charlie Marx and Fred Engels are addressing a real audience of local workers, with all the pragmatic marks of such discourse, for instance what I have called the “phatic additions” to the original text.

The third linguistic operation involves a change of register. The original text, even if it means to address the widest audience, naturally aims at a literate register. The register of Mc Caffery’s text, on the other hand is not only vernacular but popular, not to say deliberately vulgar. This appears not only in the privileging of Saxon over Romance words, of short words over long, of concrete words over abstract, etc., but in the very choice of such words, as the word “worker”, is already a short, concrete and Saxon word: its rendering as “mates” deliberately trivialises the situation it refers to. This is no longer a political meeting, where universal emancipation is devoutly wished for, the working-class being the agent of such emancipation, but a party between friends, in a distinctly local environment.

We have already passed on to the fourth linguistic operation, which takes us from the universal to the particular, from English as the world language, the language of globalisation, to a local dialect, not merely the dialect of Yorkshire but the dialect of *South* Yorkshire, a particularity increased by the fact that Mc Caffery’s phonetic transcription has nothing conventional about it - it is his own version of the phonetic singularities of the accent of South Yorkshire. The curse of Babel takes on its extreme form: a text whose ambition was to reach out to workers all over the world is rendered in a kind of idiolect.

The result of those linguistic operations is the uncanny feeling generated by McCaffery’s text, a defamiliarization that is paradoxical as

a text of scarce intelligibility (the idiosyncratic transcription of the dialect means that potentially only its author is able to understand it) nevertheless appears to conform to what passes for common sense rules of “good writing”, to the guidelines for transparent expression, where language ceases to obtrude and conveys thought as simply and clearly as possible. Here I am referring to textbooks of style, for instance the Fowler brothers’ famous textbook, first published at the beginning of the twentieth century, with its five injunctions:

1. Prefer the familiar word to the far-fetched
2. Prefer the concrete word to the abstract
3. Prefer the single word to the circumlocution
4. Prefer the short word to the long
5. Prefer the Saxon word to the Romance.⁷

This appears to be an accurate description of the style of Mc Caffery’s “translation”. We have already noted that rule n°5 was systematically followed in Mc Caffery’s text, a direct effect of the translation into dialect, as the dialect has few Romance words, mostly through borrowing from standard English. And we have already encountered instances of conformity to rule n°2. Here is another such instance: “them thats runnint show” translates “its opponents in power” – a sharp fall from the abstraction of the political concepts to the concrete phrases of everyday language, with consequent vagueness. The same occurs with rule n°1, for instance when “plain cloouz bobbiz” translates “police spies”: rather than the treacherous figure of the *agent provocateur*, we have a homely character, the “bobby”, whom we might well meet doing his rounds on the next street corner. As for rule n°4, it obviously applies in the phrase “themuonzintfrunt”, in which we recognize “those that are in front”, a sequence of monosyllabic words thinly disguised as a single unit, as a translation of “more advanced opposition parties” (and here it is obvious that transposition has replaced translation, as if the dialect was unable to grasp what are for us elementary political concepts, expressed through polysyllabic words).

The translation of “reactionary” as “themuzintback” brings together rules n°1, 2, 4 and 5, as it chooses Saxon words that are short, concrete and familiar to translate a single, polysyllabic, abstract Romance word which belongs to a specialised lexicon. The only rule that seems to be broken by Mc Caffery’s text is rule n°3 since, in contrast with the laconism of the translated text, it is garrulous, or rather, to avoid a negative value judgment, playful and full of verve. So that we remain within the general paradox, in that conformity to rules that define clarity of style produces a text that is hardly intelligible. In truth, simplicity and clarity rather belong

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7 Fowler 1924, pp. 4-7.

to the laconic translated text, and the use of dialect, in spite of its aim at concreteness, produces a text that is neither simple nor clear. Thus, even when the text has been painfully deciphered, we have difficulty in recovering the political message that the *Communist Manifesto* directly conveys: “advanced parties” and “reactionaries” are immediately meaningful in the language game to which the words belong, whereas “those in front” and “those at the back”, if we don’t know precisely which words they translate, remain vague and indeterminate. The only conclusion we can draw from this is that those linguistic operations are, at the same time, literary and ideological operations.

4. This is the main point of the literary operation practised by Mc Caffery: this translation is not so much inter- or intra-lingual as inter-generic. Mc Caffery’s “translation” in fact produces a literary text out of an original text which belongs to another genre. Even if we may wonder whether any text calling itself a “manifesto” doesn’t by definition belong to literature, an extension that might even apply to any text that lays claim to a form of style. We may therefore describe a series of literary operations, parallel to the linguistic operations just described.

The first literary operation involves a move from a serious to a comic mode. This begins as early as the paratext, which ascribes the authorship of the text to Charlie Marx and Fred Engels, thus turning the old revolutionary into the fifth of the Marx brothers, more eloquent than Harpo but less funny than Groucho. And there is no need to remind you of the fact that if there is one element of a text that doesn’t need translation, it is the name of the author (what about a French translation of *Hamlet* attributed to one *Guillaume* Shakespeare?). By translating the authors’ first names, Mc Caffery moves the source text into a new genre: he turns it into a *literary* text. The irony here is that such a move might be conform to the Marxian conception of historical repetition, whereby a historical event first occurs in the tragic mode, but repeats as farce. Translating the *Communist Manifesto* into the dialect of South Yorkshire amounts to giving free rein to the comic potential it contained without being aware of it.

The second literary operation involves a move from the abstract to the concrete, the consequence of which is a change in register. The linguistic operation that imposes the constraints of the Fowlers’ rule n°2 on the text produces a literary effect: it is an instrument of comedy. Hence the fact that the title, at first translated straightforwardly by Mc Caffery, undergoes a second translation (a rather unusual occurrence) into the trivial language of daily life. A call for the advent of communism becomes “what we workers want” (complete with poetic alliteration), that is a list of concrete demands for a local strike. Not to mention the ironic use of an inclusive “we” that suggests that Marx and Engels are working class characters – but as we saw they are no longer the Marx and Engels we know but Charlie Marx and Fred Engels, two members of the South

Yorkshire proletariat. The literary operation that imposes the comic mode on the text aims at deflating the source text in its claim of serious, not to say portentous meaning. This literary operation is the original operation of irony, the operation of the *eiron* of Greek comedy. Mc Caffery is the trickster servant who, like Molière's Sganarelle, mocks Marx and Engels, those bourgeois intellectuals who would pass for members of the working class. And Sganarelle's linguistic verve is deployed at the expense of his masters. Thus, "entered into a holy alliance" is translated as "gorrawl churchified", while "to exorcise the spectre" becomes "to boot it out" ("t'bootitaht"); And we may note that both examples of ironic deflation conform to almost all of the Fowlers' rules: the dialect version prefers its words short concrete, familiar, and of Saxon origin.

The third literary operation is a move from an idiom that is, if not scholarly, at the very least literate, an idiom pervaded with political and historical culture, to the most trivial form of the vernacular. The example just mentioned transposes a historically and culturally situated process (the allusion to exorcism convokes the religious ideological apparatus, a vision of the world rationally expressed within a theology – the metaphor is culturally sedimented, all the more so as it occurs in connection with another culturally sedimented metaphor, the metaphor of the spectre, whose philosophical posterity is well-known) into a concrete daily process, which makes what was merely an abstraction concrete and actual, in other words makes the metaphor literal. This is a typically literary operation, that moves from the portentous seriousness of abstraction to the verve of the common people, the verve of Dickens's Sam Weller. Typical of this is the refusal to translate the historical allusions to Metternich and Guizot, who become simply respectively a "jerry" and a "frog".

The fourth literary operation is a move from the political, with philosophical leanings, to the poetic. No one will deny that the object of the *Communist Manifesto*, even if it takes a popular form (a form that Mc Caffery pushes to its extreme limit) is the formulation of a political philosophy. Even if it is addressed to the masses, the *Manifesto* adopts a strategy of the concept: beneath "workers of the world" we must indeed understand the Marxist concept of the proletariat. By moving from the concept, and its translation on to the common term "workers" (used as a common-sense notion rather than a concept), Mc Caffery operates not only a change in register, but a change of genre. The change is made manifest by the fact that his text compels the reader to become aware of its materiality. Even if the famous formulae of the *Manifesto* are memorable and forceful, their aim is to convey political and philosophical content, witness the fact that their force is not lost in translation: the metaphor of the ghost is as memorable and forceful in English and French, and potentially in all the languages in which the *Manifesto* is translated, as it is in the original German. In fact, the metaphor also works in the dialect of South Yorkshire, but in Mc Caffery's text it is caught in a strategy of *écrit-*

ure that uses all the resources of style to produce an idiom which we shall eventually call poetic, as it is based on an extensive recourse to rhythm, rhyme and repetition. In order to understand this, all we have to do is again quote the opening paragraph of Mc Caffery's text: "thuzzimint vatty unt king unawl, unner jerry unner frog unt froggy bother-mekkers, unt jerry plain cloouz bobbiz". The obsessively regular return of the coordinator "and" (it inscribes the move from a literate, hypotactic style to a vernacular, paratactic style), combined with the lexical repetition of "frog" and "jerry" gives rhythm to the text and turns it into a kind of chant – oral poetry rather than political and historical analysis. Such transformation is the typical result of a literary operation. Language loses its transparency, it obtrudes and compels the reader to focus her attention on its materiality, at the expense of its intellectual contents.

We could summarize the effect of the four literary operations thus: a canonical text of our modernity (we remember that in the American Marxist Marshall Berman's *All That is Solid Melts Into Air*, the subtitle of which is "The Experience of Modernity", there is a chapter devoted to the *Communist Manifesto*),⁸ has been translated into the language of post-modernity, in spite of the apparent historical regression from the idiom of globalisation, standard English, to an archaic dialect. What allows me to make this claim is that the literary operation is inextricably mixed with an ideological operation, the deconstruction of what Lyotard calls a "grand narrative", the Marxist grand narrative.

5. The literary operation just described works through irony. It turns the serious import of the source text into comedy, it makes the abstraction of the concept concrete and deliberately trivial, its moves register from the literate to the vulgar. This work of irony fulfils not only a literary, but also an ideological and political function. We must therefore describe an ideological operation, which works in two stages.

The first stage takes the claims made by the *Manifesto* to their limit, by taking the slogan "workers of the world...", together with the promise of general translation made on the second page of the text, literally. There is no reason why South Yorkshire, an industrial county with a strong working-class tradition (the miners, the Sheffield metal workers) should not be concerned by that universal claim, why it should not get a translation of the *Manifesto* in its own dialect. And such literal interpretation of the source text also implies a change of addressees: not the generic and abstract workers, in other words the actual or potential intellectuals that the standard dialect convokes, but the concrete workers, in their determinate social, geographical and linguistic environment. As a consequence, the translation must speak, at last, the real language of the real proletariat, a refutation in act of the thesis, ascribed to the joint efforts of Lenin and Kautsky, that used to prevail in communist organisations,

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8 Berman 1983.

whereby socialism is not a spontaneous product of working-class masses (left to themselves they hardly go beyond corporative trade-unionism) but is brought to them from the outside by intellectuals, like Marx and Engels, converted to the cause. Or, to use a contemporary theoretical language, it must let the subalterns speak, in their own language.

This leads us to the second stage of the ideological operation, which deconstructs the text of the *Manifesto* by showing, in the approved manner, that it critiques itself, that it is the site of paradoxes, that its chosen language prevents it from really addressing its intended addressees. The aim, at this stage, is to deflate the myth of the liberation of the proletariat (who have nothing to lose but their chains) through the work of the concept, that is through the work of science and culture, as these only serve to turn it into a bourgeois middle-class fully integrated into the capitalist system. Shades of the political pessimism of Adorno and Horkheimer can be heard here, but we also remember the positions of New Labour and the famous declaration by John Prescott, the worker turned minister: “we are all middle-class now”. Which we may translate thus: we have all given up our dialect, which carried with it our history and our working-class traditions, in order to speak the standard language that is not only the dominant dialect but the dialect of domination.

This is indeed an ideological operation, with political consequences (a form of working-class nostalgia which the French political idiom calls *ouvriérisme*). But since, in Mc Caffery's text, the ideological operation is also and inextricably a literary operation, its content is immediately inverted. A typical example of this is the translation, at the end of the first paragraph, of “French radicals” as “froggy bothermekkers”. The accurate, historically situated naming of a fraction of the French petty-bourgeoisie, whose leader was Ledru-Rollin, becomes an emotional shaming that carries with it affects neither political nor historical. Which means that the real language of real workers is not the language of reality, of the accurate analysis of the historical conjuncture, being caught up in what Gramsci called common sense, which he contrasted with both good sense (accurate ideas that come out of practice, especially the practices of work) and philosophy, that is the system of concepts into which both common sense and good sense must be reformulated so that the subaltern classes may emerge out of dominant ideology and engage in the struggle for emancipation through the development of their own hegemony. This *a contrario* comforts the position of Lenin, shared by Gramsci, on the pedagogic function of the revolutionary party (and incidentally this explains the apparent contradictions of Gramsci's position on dialects, his hesitation between recognising the importance of the multiplicity of regional dialects that have survived Italian unity and his insistence on the limitations of the conception of the world carried by such dialects).⁹

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⁹ Gramsci 2007, vol. III, p 2235 and vol. II, p. 1377.

Here lies the specificity of the literary operation. The two stages of the ideological operation (passage to the limit and deconstruction) are examples of self-critique in that the literary text applies the ideological operation to itself. And it is the privilege of such text not to have to choose between the deconstruction of its object and self-deconstruction, which means that Mc Caffery's "translation" is both entirely faithful to the manifest meaning of the *Manifesto* and radically critical of such intended meaning, that is of the political positions inscribed in the text. This is how poetry strikes back.

5. But such "striking back" does not mean the mere inversion of the *rapport de forces*, it does not mean that literature makes theory the object of its theoretical gaze, that it grasps it (as, etymologically, the concept does) in order to take it to pieces. We must change metaphors, and turn to the metaphor of contamination, of the literary operation as the inoculation of a virus or the attack of a parasite that works not from the outside in but from the inside out. And what we need, in order to describe such contamination, are not the concepts of philosophy but literary categories. We have already described the operation of irony, with Mc Caffery as the trickster servant of his masters, Marx and Engels. But we may also refer to the twin categories of pastiche and parody. The relation between these categories may be described in the following manner. Pastiche, by a process of reduction and concentration identifies the characteristic elements of a style, its essence (in the sense one speaks of essential oils as basis for a perfume). It operates through imitation and simplification, one might say sublimation. But what happens if pastiche is itself the object of pastiche? The result is parody, the pastiche of a pastiche: the second-degree sublimation turns the concentration on the essential elements of a style, by taking it to its limit, into mockery. The original style is not only imitated and thus celebrated, but mocked, as its pretensions are deflated.

Mc Caffery's translation *cum* transposition of the *Manifesto* is both pastiche and parody. It is a pastiche in that, as we saw, it is in a sense the most faithful of translations, faithful to the intention of the authors of the *Manifesto* to address real workers all over the world, "wherever they are". Calling such workers "mates", as Mc Caffery's translation does, focuses on the real relation, at work and after work, in those real working-class communities, such as he mining villages of South Yorkshire. But it is also a parody, in that the elevated language of the source text is entirely inadequate to address the real concerns of real workers in their specific social and geographical environment, precisely because it does not speak their language. The translation as parody deflates, as we saw, the claims to universality of the source text, but it also deflates its own claims by reducing such universal claims, with their own grandeur, to trivial local concerns. In other words, parody is always-also a parody of itself.

And this may help us understand what it is literature thinks, what is the kind of truths, or of knowledge, it produces. Not, or not merely, not mainly, a knowledge of “life”, as in Deleuze’s famous reading of a page in Dickens’s *Our Mutual Friend*,¹⁰ that is not a knowledge of particularities moving towards *belles généralités*, not a knowledge that takes the form of affect and percepts, but a knowledge of the workings of language as the instrument of the constitution of the social by means of the interpellation of subjectivities within various pragmatic structures, language games and universes of discourse. It would seem that the motto of Mc Caffery’s translation of the *Manifesto* is not so much “Workers of the world, unite!” as “The limits of my world are the limits of my language”.

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¹⁰ Deleuze, 2003, p. 361 ; C. Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend*, London : Penguin, 1971, p. 503.

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Badiou's Own Mallarmé¹

Pierre Macherey

Abstract: Stephane Mallarmé's poetry is all-pervasive in the philosophical project of Alain Badiou. In his thinking, Mallarmé is a singular poet, among the poets discussed in Badiou's work. He who exists among others, but is always placed ahead. Or, as Badiou himself says, he is "like a Master of truth, "emblematic of the relation between philosophy and poetry." This essay is an examination of Badiou's Mallarmé, in all its specificities.

Keywords: Badiou, Mallarme, poetry, philosophy, method

I myself have expressed the desire for a philosophy that would finally be the contemporary of Mallarmés poetic operations². – Badiou

My philosophy assumes the poem as one of its conditions³ – Badiou

Mallarmé is omnipresent in the oeuvre of Alain Badiou, to the point of being a preoccupation – of interest and confusion – a distinctive trait of his oeuvre, above all, like a singular cloud that takes form between philosophy and poetry, particularly through Mallarmé and reflection. We would almost be tempted to speak of *rumination*, which is obsessively and obstinately given: all the more so since thought, which does not exist for the purpose of monographic study, or the taking up of this or that aspect of Mallarmé's poetic production, can be found in *Theory of the Subject* and *Being and Event*, combined, mixed, and implied in forms that, moreover, remain to be elucidated, to the philosophical argument on its own terrain, where we encounter Mallarmé as a protagonist in his own right, a "thinker" to be reckoned with. Consequently, this reflection does not boil down to a reflection on, or by Mallarmé, treated as one object of thought among others, but rather presents itself as reflection, whereby Mallarmé is at once that which is reflected and that which reflects in the operation, whereby something like truth is expressed. It is through such reflection that philosophy and poetry dialogue as equals, one of the conditions of this dialogue, given that poetry has been subsumed by the jurisdiction of aesthetics, and has been installed in the order of what Badiou terms the "inaesthetic," in action, "inaestheticization," which is

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1 Translator's note: When possible, the English translations of Badiou, as cited by Macherey throughout the text, have been employed. Otherwise, they are my own.

2 Badiou 2005, p.36

3 Ibid., 54

the necessary condition for the restoration of its speculative dimension. It is worth considering who is the Mallarmé who is reflecting and who is reflected in the philosophy of Alain Badiou. How does this reflection operate, and why Mallarmé, who exists among others, but is always placed ahead, like a Master of truth, “emblematic of the relation between philosophy and poetry,” (Badiou’s own formulation in the “Method of Mallarmé” from *Conditions*) which constitutes a privileged vector of this reflection.

Firstly, which Mallarmé? Let us permit ourselves to say that there is one Mallarmé, essential and attuned to his vocation, as demonstrated by his numerous productions, poetic and theoretical: that is to say, *purified*, becoming a figure of his own oeuvre, in the sense of the Mallarmé of Mallarmé. No doubt separated from his epoch, from the inexorable flouncing and fanning, and other dated affectations, he stands detached from them, in the sense of a retreat, through which the distance is set by way of them. The book, as exemplar of these affectations, is rendered absent to itself, becoming a quasi-metaphysical operator of disappearance, which also orchestrates a power of revelation. This Mallarmé, without a doubt, is the true Mallarmé, not “true” in the sense of the historicist, of an exactitude that purports to exhaust every detail of the thing, by saying everything there is to say about Mallarmé, as the literary critic or biographer might do. In a sense, Mallarmé is changed by eternity, that is to say, he has become, in the Mallarméan sense of the term, a tomb of himself, and under this condition, he delivers his pure thought over to the examination of philosophy, which, according to an expression that brings us back to Badiou, places itself at his level, his height. For Mallarmé, essentialized, stands at a vertiginous height, like a constellation of thought, whose order, or rather necessary disorder, evades direct apprehension and demand, is emptied of any hermeneutic requirement and of the task of deciphering, beyond the illusions of meaning, he surges toward the event of truth, to the event that is the eruption of truth.

Reduced to pure form, and stripped of all anecdotal content, Mallarmé is presented as the bearer of a “method” and even a “logic,” a “subtractive” method that takes the poem to be “a negative machinery that states the being or the idea at the precise point where the object has vanished”: as Badiou says, this method “submits the object to the test of its lack” (“Que pense le poème?” in *L’art est-il une connaissance ?*, 219). This strategy, of elision and lack, in a sense evokes the Hegelian concept of the negativity, and is detailed at length in *Theory of the Subject* and in the text on “the Method of Mallarmé,” whereby method is presented while “the Method of Rimbaud” (from *Conditions*) constitutes a return, that is itself purged of its previous analyses. This strategy is performative:

"What the poem says, it does."⁴ This is to say, it is insufficient to speak to about the lack of being, whereby the world returns to its essential place, a "nothing takes place but the place." This lack is carried out by saying "the lack of lack," wholly other than a negativity of saving and redeeming, which is, in the final instance, Hegelian negativity. Rather, it is a negativity of the incomplete, whose poem is the *mise en oeuvre*, paradoxically complete, ordered, and rigorously thought through. Conceived in this way, the poem does not reproduce the world in its absence, and this is why it has renounced it in all possible ways, the mirages of imitation. Rather, he produces, in the space of language that is his site, the absence of the world; in a literal sense, he speaks in the future anterior of how being is devoid of world, which is something else entirely than evoking or suggesting its presence. In other words, we might say that the poem dictates to the poet his intervention, charged with enunciating the un-representability of the world, in opposition to the pretension to represent it by carrying out an illusionary wedding of the beautiful and true, as celebrated by traditional aesthetics.

Understood this way, a Mallarméan poetics appears to be inseparable from its "truth procedure," which proceeds from the dissolution of particular significations, despite their claim to an immediate positivity: submitting to schemes of solitude and separation, the significations explode, and the machine of the poem has no other function than to produce and set this explosion. What the poem says, it does. It does not speak of the nothingness of the world, from beneath a gloss that enunciates the secret of its presence, but rather, it annuls the world, concretely, if we may say so, by elevating poetic speech to the maximum of its power, by making of it a *dispositif* intervention, an action. This is why its method and its logic do not make Mallarmé a philosopher, that is to say, at bottom, a commentator of truths. Nevertheless, on occasion one finds in some of Mallarmé's prose, texts that are philosophical texts, and even great philosophical texts, is that his poetic action, embodied in the production of poems, gives the philosopher objects for commentary, ideas in their pure states, materialized in verbal formations that are perfectly self-enclosed, which are not, however, segments of sense to be interpreted, but rather, the traces left by the poetic activity, the de-segmentation of the truth, which liberates it from the prison of meaning.

These are the singular characteristics of poetic activity that are commonly received as manifestation of hermeticism: and once again, the interpretation fails to reach the truth of the thing. Mallarmé is not hermetic, in the sense of a well-hidden secret that must be pierced; he is only difficult because he is, as an essential poet, a producer of enigmas that provoke thought. The effort is not to bring out into the open a pre-

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4 Badiou 2009, p.81

existing truth, given the difficulty of its decipherment, but to insinuate it in the act by which truth occurs – literally produces – by way of a form that is precisely that of the enigma, and at the limit of non-sense; the secret being ultimately that there is no secret, such that what the poem has to say is spread out, scattered, dispersed, carefully spaced black on white, in the constellation that is for eternity, once thrown, the throw of dice, its text. Michel Leiris, in a text on “Mallarmé as professor of morality,” written in 1943, had already explained that Mallarmé had invented, “a language that aims less at describing or recounting, than at activating certain movements of spirit.” These movements of spirit provoke the mechanisms (machine) of the poem, and here we must consider the word “provocation” in its fullness, the exercise of a thought in action, that is to say, of a thought that freely confronts the exigencies and constraints that impel it, without that which obliges it to mold itself according to a pre-established program: and this is why the machine of the poem is self-moving, given the elocutionary absence of the poet, and the foreclosure of the subject of the poem, and there lies its essential nature, like a machine that propels thought, producing flashes of truth.

Thus rendered essential, how might we read this Mallarmé, who exists as a proposition or an occasion of truth? Such that his method calls forth, demands. Though the instructions of the poem are not read with the poem or with the accompanying notes, where the poet delivers the shards of his poetic art, which cannot be exploited unless we have already entered into the dynamic of the movements of spirit, without which the poem is null and void, as Badiou writes: “It is the poems that shed light on the prose, and the effectiveness of the thought–poem of the event and of the undecidable retroactively authorizes the multi-faceted formulation of a programme. It is from thought to the thinking of thought that we go, and not the other way round.”⁵

The way that Badiou reads Mallarmé, how he gears into thinking poetry, is astonishing. He takes up poetic works, like *le Faune*, *la Prose pour des Esseintes*, the sonnet in *yx*, or *A la nue accablante tu*, to the letter, not for the purpose of glossing word by word, in order to extract their hidden meaning, but rather literally, to work on the body of a text, thus making it work in such a way as to produce the event, the event of truth, of which they are, rather than carriers or vectors: that which incites, triggers. This passage through prose functions like an attempt at translation that produces a narrative transposition of the poem and demonstrates, for example, that the *Throw of Dice* is a story of shipwreck, while *A la nue accablante tu* is a story of disappearance. This is the theme, or as one might say, the subject, of the poem. This indispensable preliminary operation returns our reading to the level of intelligible syntax; the other constitutes that inaccessible armature of the poem, a

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5 Badiou 2008, p.298

necessary meter that measures its force of truth, as if it were a question of a dream text, revealing itself.

The poem is obviously irreducible to its subject, as the previous cases demonstrate. Rather, it consists in the *mise en page*, which is discovered as soon as the inverse movement is traversed, thus confronting the return of the text itself, of the poem to its “translation,” without forcing a reciprocal re-translation of the first translation, from the poem to the prose where the central theme is revealed. What is important, is how the operation of the poem and its roll of dice bring to the fore a novelty in relation to the subject, or latent content, as with the passage through prose that affords the possibility of highlighting a certain newness, which the prose, in its narrative flatness, is unable to enunciate. In the case of *A la nue accablante tu*, where the subject is, as we have noted, a shipwreck, what Badiou proposes is not the telling or evoking of certain aspects or episodes of the shipwreck, but rather how the purely verbal modes reveal that the shipwreck has already taken place, and thus is no more, having left behind the negative event that it was and that no longer exists, save the evasive wake of its annihilating power, which is something other than nothingness simply opposed to being. To put it more simply, we can say that the subject of the poem is shipwreck, which enunciates as its subject: the shipwreck of shipwreck. Similarly, in the sonnet *xy*, what is evoked is not the convoluted and anecdotal evocation of an absence, the brute facticity of an empty room, but rather, it is an effort to say what is absent in absence, the absence of the absence, the nothingness of the nothingness, that is to say, its force of becoming-nothingness, whereby a truth, a fragment of truth comes to be.

This movement between poetry and prose and prose and poetry produces a looping effect. In a key passage from *Theory of the Subject*, Badiou virtualizes this operation by adding an additional four stanzas to *A la nue accablante tu*, a supplementary tercet carefully composed in dialectical fashion, following the operation of the shipwreck of shipwreck, to the point where, as if by the magic virtue of a negation of the negation that is transformed into affirmation, the shipwrecked object, the ship, reappears on the surface of the waves. Now, this fifth stanza is not written by Badiou in order to complete the poem to its incompleteness, but rather to make us understand, ironically, that the fifth stanza does not figure in the constellation of the poem, thus depriving it of any poetic reality. It literally does not exist: the poem gleams through absence, and is perfectly self-enclosed, it is completed by its enigmatic closure that ‘subtracts’ it; in Mallarmé, the subtraction is the poetic operation par excellence. This is the reason that Badiou writes: “let us proclaim that Mallarmé’s poetic machine, though opaque when looked at from the outside, nevertheless possesses only a single meaning. We must put an end to the laziness that has so many readers bypass the obstacle in order to claim that the enigma’s virtue consists in allowing a hundred

underlying answers. This absolute dialectician does not present any 'polysemy'.⁶ By way of this incursion, the poem is arrested, is made to end, and draws from its incompleteness, from its finitude, its power of completion, identical to the constellation that follows from the throw of dice. This would be, in the eyes of Badiou, what distinguishes the pure poetry of Mallarmé from the prose of Beckett or the poetry-prose of Rimbaud, which do not produce a similar looping effect. On the contrary, they open the possibility of continuing beyond themselves. The poem, as Mallarmé produces it, is a poem that is materially self-enclosed, appearing to be sufficient, and it is by virtue of this closure that the poem functions as a poem, following the conditions of the operation, it must be switched on to illuminate, like the machine that propels thought.

Now we are beginning to understand why Badiou returns to Mallarmé as exemplary of the cloud between poetry and philosophy, as he conceives it. The introductory remarks in *Handbook of Inaesthetics* make this clear: Against aesthetic speculation, inaesthetics describes the strictly intra-philosophical effects produced by the independent existence of some works of art.⁷ Badiou's fidelity to the excellence of Mallarméan poetics means that his philosophical inaesthetics concern only "a few works of art," a carefully selected group consisting of Mallarmé, Rimbaud, Pessoa, Beckett, Celan; but not Hugo, not Baudelaire, nor Verlaine, Reverdy, Aragon; he does not consider Vielé-Griffin, Rodenbach or Verhaeren, and we may presume that they are too "expressive" to be treated as machines that propel thought. The severity of this selection demonstrates that Badiou is intent on avoiding the trap of a generalized aesthetic, which poses in the abstract, the question concerning the relation between art and truth: to this end, it is not art as such that produces truths, and, in fact, for the most part, it does not produce any, it remains sensuous entertainment, therefore in all cases of seduction, we may say that truth is only revealed in exceptional cases, and are, by virtue of their exceptionality, testimonies to the will of rupture, that defines, in its essence, the poetic fact: unique and irreplaceable, Mallarmé. From this point of view, Badiou's enterprise becomes clear: to sketch the boundaries of an Aesthetic-Thought, limits that are narrowly forged, limits that would disqualify most aesthetic productions, which, possessed by the vertigo of image and meaning, offer themselves up for aesthetic consumption, barring them from any relation to truth. This is one manifestation of Badiou's Platonism. In a truly classical manner, this Platonism is anti-Aristotelian. That is to say, in line with his thinking about poetry, Badiou stands on the front line against his foremost adversary: *mimesis*.

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⁶ Ibid., p.74

⁷ Badiou 2005, p.5

What makes the poetic approach of Mallarmé's (and a few others) so exceptional, is the way it wrests poetry from the trap of the referent, that is to say, from the mirage of presence. As previously stated, in essence, poetry has nothing to say about the world, we could say, in other terms, that it "reflects" nothing, "a reflection" that bears the mark of realism, that may even be socialist, has reignited ancient mimesis, renewing the pretension that art can adequately represent reality, a reality that can only affect those who conform to it, who treat it like money, that is to say, that which alienates them. Conceived in this way, the inaesthetic is, as we can see, the bearer of a latent aesthetic, a negative aesthetic from the point of view of art and its controlled vertigos. Contrary to the position held by Badiou and his scrupulous reading of art works, whereby Mallarmé holds first rank, the inverse position draws demarcation lines as to exclude the whole of poetic production from the alienating jurisdiction of aesthetics and its hedonic attachments, even when these productions take on a mimetic form and reveal themselves as image and meaning. In the end, in Badiou's own prose writing, which we can suspect is inseparable from his philosophical activity, and philosophical reflection concerning Mallarméan poetics, Badiou privileges, at the exclusion of poetry, the novel, theater, and dramatic narrative, that is the say, the two genres that edify Aristotle's *Poetics*.

In brief, to close the discussion: the image, whether verbal or plastic, is not solely the evocation of a presence, but also its other side, the de-presentation of that which is presented, producing a reality effect that alienates, though not fatally. In the mimetic space it can also function as a potentially critical mode, as a means of critique. Understood this way, we may prefer Badiou's position and the program of a general inaesthetic, which does not amount to a new positive aesthetic that would restore to the whole production of art, or at least to the majority, a certain familiarity, the degree which would have to be re-evaluated each time in a determinate manner, alongside the work of thought. In the case of Mallarmé, as privileged by Badiou, this familiarity reveals a sort of evidence that we may call palpable, but this does not hold in other cases or with less apparent forms, works of literature which, at first glance, only offer themselves to common consumption, and thus cannot, given the cost of facile engagement, elevate itself, or be raised to the height of truth, to be reflected in thought.

Translated by Emily Laurent-Monaghan

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The Poet on Strike Against Society

Jean-Claude Milner

Abstract: The present work is an excerpt from *Profils perdus de Stéphane Mallarmé*. This particular essay deals with the relation of Mallarmé to society, strikes, workers, and so forth, and their relation to (anti)politics.

Keywords: poet, Mallarmé, anarchism, strike, worker

In 1891, the journalist Jules Huret published eight groups of interviews under the title, *Enquête sur l'évolution littéraire* that were published daily between March 3rd and July 5th in the *Écho de Paris*. Each group of interviews in the series was centered around the main representatives of an identifiable literary movement at the time.¹ The third in this series is dedicated to "Symbolists and Decadents," and it opens with an interview and reflections on two figures that Huret considers the movement's *Precursors*, first among which we find Mallarmé.² The article appears in the *Écho* on March 14th, with a post-scriptum added on the 19th of the same month.³

From the very outset of the interview, Mallarmé draws attention to the irreducible fragmentation, the division and dispersion warping contemporary French society at the time. He deems the "organization of the social" to be, in his words, "unfinished. [*Organisation sociale inachevée*]. The poet thus concludes that, in such a world, art can find no real place or true role: "in a society without stability, without unity, no stable art, no definitive art can be created." In such conditions, there can be neither masters and figureheads, nor schools and movements: "From this unfinished organization of the social, which at the same time accounts for the worried restlessness [*inquiétude*] of our minds [*esprits*], emerges that unexplained need for individuality which finds its mirror image in the literary movements and works [*manifestations*] of our day."⁴ Huret, on the other hand, believes in movements and groups, in schools of art. His vision of the literary universe finds itself, in other words, fundamentally negated here.

For the measured tone with which the poet expresses his view of things should not soften the blow of their radicality. It is up to the reader to be attentive, to draw the right conclusion: Mallarmé wants no part or stake in poetry such as it is or has become. He largely follows without

1 Huret's interviews took place against the cultural backdrop of a wild proliferation of different, antagonistic aesthetic manifestos, schools, anti-schools, and groupuscules in the early years of the Third Republic that the journalist seeks to catalogue for the readership of the *Echo de Paris* (e.g., Decadents, Symbolists, *Fumistes*, Parnassians, Psychologists, Neo-Realists, Naturalists, Spiritual-Naturalists). See Grojnowski 1999, pp. 9-38. [Translator's note]

2 The second such "precursor" was Paul Verlaine. (Translator's note)

3 Mallarmé 1998/2003, pp. 697-702

4 Huret 1999, p. 101.

rejecting certain aspects of its evolution, but his equanimity on the matter is part of a strategy of alliances, and does not entail any commitment. One grasps this in singling out the sparse statements where the poet sums up his own axiomatic poetic principles: “For me, the case of a poet in this society which will not allow him to make a living is the same as that of a man shutting himself up alone to sculpt his own sepulture. [...] [P]oetry is made for the highest and most opulent ceremonies of a solidly established society. [...] [I]n an era such as ours, [the poet] is on strike against society.”⁵

The word *strike* [*grève*] is important. At the end of the nineteenth century, workers’ protests reinvented the form of the strike in France, anarcho-syndicalism—which was the majoritarian radical current in factories at the time—having turned the strike into the ultimate weapon in working-class struggles. More and more explicitly, the path towards the social revolution lay through the general strike. Whence the programme adopted by the Federation of Syndicates during its 1888 congress: “the general strike, which is to say the complete stoppage of all work, which is also to say: revolution, this alone can lead workers to their emancipation.” And let us note the equivalence drawn here between those two terms, *general strike* and *revolution*, such that the latter adds little if nothing to the former. The general strike replaces the revolution, especially as conceived by Marx: the seizing of the power of the State and the destruction of its machinery, its forms. Mallarmé followed closely these events, regularly read the anarchist press.

By declaring himself on strike against the whole of society, for Mallarmé, the poet is a figural precursor of the general strike; in the strictest sense of the term, he is the *avant-garde* in the wider struggle. His strike announces the end of society in its present organization. Two caveats are necessary, however, both of which upend the game.

First, the poet goes on strike by continuing his work, not interrupting it. One finds, for instance, the following dictum dated April 1894 in Henri De Regnier’s notebooks: “the only person who has the right to call themselves an anarchist is me, the poet, because I am the only one making a product that society does not want and in exchange of which it will not give me enough even to survive.”⁶ One might justifiably see the link here to Mallarmé’s earlier proclamation in 1891: the strike against society [*la grève contre la société*] is accomplished through the continuance of work, in contradistinction with the workers’ strike which puts a stop to it.

Second, the people will not follow the lead, the movement [*le peuple ne suivra pas*]. That much is evident from the anti-progressist manifesto

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5 Ibid., p. 104.

6 Henri de Régner, *Cahiers inédits* (Paris : Pygmalion, 2002), p. 385. Cited by Roger 2014 <http://www.fabula.org/colloques/document2443.php>.

that is the text titled “Conflict”.⁷ What we find there is a description of the waning moments of a group of workers’ Sunday, more specifically a group of road workers. “Rumor has it they are road workers [*chemineaux*],”⁸ writes Mallarmé using an antiquated orthographic form—*chemineaux*—which, without realizing it, also allows him to call forth a name which in present-day French⁹ continues to ring in our ears: *cheminots*.¹⁰ Just as they do today, these workers were on the minds and occupied the imaginations of the *litterates*, who saw figured in them an image of modern manual labor, distinct from the work of peasants or artisans while still close enough to the latter for a kind of type to be cast and conserved: that of the ideal worker. “Treasured as the unspecified workers *par excellence*,” as the poet put it in a turn of phrase that continues to ring true in our own time. The story recounted here is that of the workers’ evening, of their interminable discussions followed by the repose of a nap nourished by “a considerable number of little drinks”. *Proof by appeal to Sunday* [*une preuve par le dimanche*], one might call it, with the weekly interruption of labor, the manner in which this cessation unfolds, affording a glimpse of what a general strike might look like. *It entails going to sleep, which, in turn, is equivalent to a kind of death: a stop, a wait and a “momentary suicide,” etc.* such is the summary that Mallarmé offers to us.

The replies to Huret’s inquiries thus take on a different light. When the poet declares that he is going on strike against society he constitutes society as a totality of which the prose poem, “Conflict,” reveals the constitutive law: *there will be no general strike*. That term, *strike* [*grève*], resonates so deeply and intensely that it turns out to be a kind of reversible glove [*doigt de gant*]. Mallarmé is not unaware that the worker’s strike is a form of struggle that is at once a symptom of social division and a refusal of that same split in society. By calling off work, by suspending labor, it seeks to transform the conditions of labor itself. It is possible that a worker’s strike might carry within it, however explicitly or not, the seeds of revolution, except that in going on strike against the servitude of labor one is not going on strike *against* society as such. Quite to the contrary, it is the proof that one believes in that society enough to want to change it.

In turn, the poet’s strike manages to arrive at a position of authenticity by affirming that society will not be changed.¹¹ And yet,

7 First published in 1895 in the *Revue blanche*, reprinted in *Divagations* (OC, II, p. 104-109)

8 Mallarmé, 2007, p. 42.

9 When I was writing my book, the trains were on strike and there was much discussion about the special status of railway workers.

10 According to the TLF, one of the earliest occurrences of the vocable “cheminot” designating an employee of a railroad company dates back to 1911.

11 The verbal regime here is that of the reflexive “se transformera,” which, to the degree that such

to withdraw or abstain is not the same thing as to wallow in inertia, but rather to engage in an active form of subversion. The poet is, in Mallarmé's estimation, an "outlaw" – outside of the law, *hors la loi*, precisely because he does not oppose it. Not content to simply take note of his own exteriority, the poet intends to construct a linguistic space [*espace de langage*] radically extraneous or external to social space, which is of course also a linguistic space. It is not enough for him to define his own individuality as a point that is off-line or off-plane. His goal, rather, is to create a multidimensional object, even if that means creating [it as] a verbal tomb.

When a strike is defined as a continuance of work, that connection constitutes a paradox. We might be able to resolve this enigma, if we could understand that what is at stake is language (*la langue*). Whosoever goes on strike against society begins by going on strike against that society's language, against the words and grammars it uses to cover up and conceal its inner division. But that requires (a form of) labor. To trouble and suspend the fake transparency of everyday language, to remind readers and speakers that its apparently irresistible dominance is always and only ever dependent on force-of-habit, to accept that by breaking with this habitus one runs the risk of being accused of obscurity, this is the work and the duty of the language striker [*gréviste de langue*]. By stepping away from gloriously direct interventions as a poetic spokesperson—of which Victor Hugo was, in the nineteenth century, the very model—Mallarmé affirms a negative politics. Or, an anti-politics.

This anti-politics chooses the nothing. Rather than constructing for itself imaginary modes of negotiation with laboring people, and rather than denying, in so doing, the impossibility of contact,¹² this anti-politics will abandon society to itself.

[Excerpted from chapter 5 of *Profils perdus de Stéphane Mallarmé*, Verdier, 2019. This volume received the Académie Française's Henri Mondor prize in 2020.]

Translated by Robert St. Clair

verbs are frequently deployed to avoid the passive voice, could be read as introducing a problem of agency with respect to the transformation of society (i.e., *by itself*, society will not change) as well as one of possibility (i.e., it cannot *be changed*). [Translator's note]

¹² As the poetic subject states in the same text, "a contact can, I fear, not intervene between men" [*un contact peut, je le crains, n'intervenir entre des hommes*]. OC, II, p. 108.

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Lorna Dee Cervantes and the Art of Refugeeship

Warren Montag

Abstract: Chicana poet Lorna Dee Cervantes' first collection of poetry, *Emplumada* (1981), includes two paired poems, *El Barco de Refugiados* and "Refugee Ship," the first entirely in Spanish and the second in English, except for the last line. Critics have assumed that one is a translation of the other, with most discussion focused on "Refugee Ship." I argue that there are significant differences between the two and that they are most productively read as components of a kind of disjunctive synthesis that renders the reader a kind of refugee moving between the two languages, unable to settle in either. The title, "Refugee Ship," can be read as "refugeeship," the condition of being a refugee, of crossing borders, linguistic as well as national, surreptitiously, a captive of a voyage without beginning or end.

Keywords: refugee, bilingualism, racism, translation, Chicana

Je pense aux matelots oubliés dans une île,
Aux captifs, aux vaincus!... à bien d'autres encor!
— Charles Baudelaire, "Le Cygne"

I will begin with an anecdote. Some years ago, a student came to my office and announced that she had decided to write her senior thesis on Lorna Dee Cervantes' poem "Refugee Ship."¹ When I asked why she had chosen that particular poem out of all those contained in the collection *Emplumada*, she answered, in a matter of fact tone, that she liked the idea of "refugeeship." My face must have betrayed my incomprehension and she was kind enough to indulge me by explaining that reading the two words, "refugee ship," aloud made her think of "refugeeship," that is, a noun produced by the addition of a morpheme, in this case the suffix "ship," to "refugee." Refugeeship, she informed me, like "championship" or "ownership," signifies the condition of being something, in this case, a refugee. Finally, the addition of "ship" to a noun can also indicate the skill involved in being something, as in the case of "marksmanship." There is a lesson here about what can be seen from certain perspectives and not others, but in what follows I have limited myself to a few observations on what the notion of "refugeeship" makes intelligible in the poem and beyond.²

Lorna Dee Cervantes is one of the most powerful literary voices to emerge from the Chicano movement of the sixties and seventies. Her poetry, not simply in its content but in its form, represents an exploration

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¹ Cervantes 1981, pp. 40-41.

² I wish to acknowledge Pilar Fernandez, Occidental College, class of 2016.

of the lived experience of the interwoven practices of exclusion and forced assimilation that both shaped the generation of Mexican-Americans who took the name of Chicano, and were in turn shaped by counter-practices of resistance and subversion.³ One of the most important sites in this conflict was language, specifically the right to speak Spanish to fellow Spanish speakers at work and at school.⁴ Anti-Mexican racism led to mass deportations: between 1954 and 1964, more than a million men, women and children, many of whom were US citizens, were deported to Mexico as a result of the US government's persecutory "Operation Wetback." Fearful parents discouraged their children from speaking Spanish in public and, not infrequently, at home, and often gave them "American" names. In 1968, when thousands of students walked out of seven predominantly Mexican-American high schools in East Los Angeles, the right to speak Spanish outside of the classroom figured among their demands.⁵

She writes, not as an observer positioned outside these struggles, but from a position within them, providing a perspective from which this too often unseen conflict becomes visible. In particular, she explores the family's role in reproducing the subaltern status of Mexican-American by treating Spanish as an "inferior" language, unworthy of study, that deserved only to be cast aside in favor of English. Separated from the *Mexicanidad* of her parents and grandparents, but racialized as "Mexican" by the dominant culture, the speaker in "Refugee Ship" has suffered a double loss and a double rejection, adrift in the space of neither/nor. Not content to represent or express this experience, Cervantes has set out to make her readers feel it by means of an experiment in bilingualism and perhaps translingualism. By participating in this experiment, that is, by reading this poem (or poems), we may, if we are lucky, learn something about the practice of refugeeship. The poem, "Refugee Ship," as we will see, is paired with a poem in Spanish entitled "*El Barco de Refugiados*." The latter, often understood as a version of the English language text, represents an attempt to create a bilingual poem in the guise of a translation that tests and reveals the points of contact between languages and cultures, points where they do not simply meet but also enter into conflict.

Following my student's suggestion, I will argue that it is both possible and necessary to read Cervantes' "Refugee Ship" not simply as an expression of the poet's sense of having been exiled from the Spanish language, but also as an exploration of the condition of being a refugee, the different borders in relation which one is defined as a

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3 Dávila 2012, Kraver 1997.

4 Gutfreund 2013

5 Hernández 2008

refugee, and the skills involved in existing in, or surviving, this mode of existence. Even when Cervantes employs the term “refugee” figuratively or metaphorically, she never lets the reader forget the refugee ships, past and present, filled with those to whom no one will give refuge; indeed, to read “*El Barco de Refugiados*” and “Refugee Ship” together is to lose one’s bearings and to feel the fragility of such pillars of our existence as home and mother tongue.

“Refugee Ship” is thus one of those poems that appear to have been waiting for an encounter that might never have happened to disclose meanings that readers had never seen or understood until the moment of the encounter. These meanings, however, were neither hidden nor overlooked: the poem’s words, lines and rhythms have taken on new meanings and new connotations, adding them to those that existed at the moment of its enunciation, meanings and connotations inscribed on them by a new historical conjuncture. It is as if, in particular, the words “refugee” and refugee ship/refugeeship, continue to pursue their ever-proliferating referents to gather them into their domain. This has nothing to do with what is commonly referred to as anachronism; it concerns the process of what Pierre Macherey called “literary reproduction,” that is, the process by which the literary text takes on, or takes on board, additional meanings and associations that become woven into its texture.⁶ Thus, the title “Refugee Ship” will undoubtedly elicit very different responses today than when the poem appeared in Cervantes’ first book, *Emplumada* in 1981. Now, forty years after its publication, it inescapably evokes images of barely seaworthy boats and rafts crowded with refugees from Africa and Asia crossing the Mediterranean only to be turned away by the officials of whatever European nation they have managed to reach: these too are refugee ships never allowed to dock. The images, and the words that carry them, allow us to ask why Cervantes uses the word “refugee” to describe a linguistic orphan who has been deprived of a mother tongue, and compelled to use an adoptive language in its place and whose foreignness is underscored by the experiences described in the poem: seeing her brown skin and black hair in the mirror, but forbidden by her mother to learn Spanish.

We might begin with the history of the word (and concept) of refugee, not simply in its legal sense, but in its actual usage, may not illuminate aspects of the poem that have to a great extent resisted interpretation. The origins of the term “refugee” lie in the Latin root it shares with “fugitive:” the verb *fugio*, meaning to flee, desert or escape. From this verb was derived the Latin term *fugitivus*, denoting the one who runs away or flees. Both the verb and the noun were most frequently used in relation to escaped slaves and army deserters. While the noun, *refugus*, could also be used to signify one who flees, it most commonly refers

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⁶ Macherey 1998, pp. 42-51.

to the action of fleeing back to a previous location (as indicated by the prefix “re”). The noun, *refugium*, rarely used in classical Latin, signified a refuge, that is, a place to which the *fugitivus* or *refugus* might flee to find safety. Finally, another term, absent from “Refugee Ship,” but which the poem seems often to evoke: exile, in the sense of the person who has been exiled, whose relation to “fugitive” and “refugee” is complicated. The exile is one who is banished, who must leave involuntarily, often as punishment. The fugitive, in contrast, is one who has been involuntarily detained and who voluntarily flees detention. “Refugee,” in contrast, designates a far more ambiguous condition that renders any attempt to determine whether the departure of the refugee is voluntary or involuntary very difficult: what is the refugee fleeing from (and why) and where does the refugee hope to find refuge?

Up to this point, I have spoken, as many critics do, of *the* poem, “Refugee Ship.” In *Emplumada*, however, “Refugee ship” does not appear alone, but is paired with and preceded by a poem written entirely in Spanish, entitled “*Barco de Refugiados*,” (“refugee ship”).

BARCO DE REFUGIADOS

Como almidón de maíz
me deslizo, pasando por los ojos de mi abuela,
bíblia a su lado. Se quita los lentes.
El pudín se hace espeso.

Mamá me crió sin lenguaje.
Soy huérfano de mi nombre español.
Las palabras son extrañas,
tartamudeando en mi lengua.
Mis ojos ven el espejo, mi reflejo:
piel de bronce, cabello negro.

Siento que soy un cautivo
a bordo de un barco de refugiados.
El barco que nunca atraca.
El barco que nunca atraca.

REFUGEE SHIP

Like wet cornstarch, I slide
past my grandmother's eyes. Bible
at her side, she removes her glasses.
The pudding thickens.

Mama raised me without language.
I'm orphaned from my Spanish name.
The words are foreign, stumbling
on my tongue. I see in the mirror
my reflection: bronzed skin, black hair.

I feel I am a captive
aboard the refugee ship.
The ship that will never dock.
El barco que nunca atraca.

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Volume 9
Issue 1

The two poems are set on facing pages, as if mirroring each other, an effect enhanced by their very similar (but not quite identical) layout: both consist of three stanzas, the first and last of which consist of four lines. The middle stanzas differ slightly: in the Spanish text it is 6 lines, in the English 5; the former consists of 14 lines and a total of 82 words, the latter of 13 lines and 73 words. Given that "Refugee Ship" was first published in 1974, seven years before the appearance of "*Barco de Refugiados*" in *Emplumada*, commentators remain divided over the chronology of the poems' composition. Most, however, assume that the Spanish text is a variation on or, more commonly, a translation of "Refugee Ship," and thus composed at a later time. But Cervantes' arrangement of the poems in *Emplumada*, on facing pages with the Spanish text preceding the English, renders the problem of priority and with it, a series of other problems, undecidable.

The question of translation, however, must in certain ways condition our reading of the two poems and in doing so pose the question of refugeeship at the outset of any reading. The act of translation (which is by no means limited to the scholarly or literary realms) is currently understood as the transmission of the meaning of an original, or source, text written in one language into a target text written in a different language, whose meaning will not be the same as the first, but "equivalent." The Latin verb from which the word translation is itself derived signifies to carry or transport something (even a meaning) from one place or person to another, suggesting that there exists a meaning or sense for which a given language is merely a means of transport or conveyance. Following this conception of translation, the distinction between the original or source language, on the one side, and the

target language, on the other, collapses and the source loses whatever privilege it might have had. All that matters is the meaning that is always separable from a given language. In the case of Cervantes' two poems, the chronological sequence of their appearance or composition would become irrelevant; the Spanish and English would be equivalent to each other because both are equivalent to an ur-text that lies outside of its possible actualizations and serves as the foundation and guarantee of the meaning to which both texts offer equivalents. However, extravagant this theory of translation might seem, its assumptions are those that guide much of what is said about the relation between the Spanish and English texts.

There is another problem with any assertion of the priority (chronological or thematic) of "Refugee Ship" over "*Barco de Refugiados*": in *Emplumada*: the Spanish text precedes the English, suggesting, if anything, the priority of the former over the latter. But we are no more capable of solving the problem by reversing the order of genesis and declaring the priority of the Spanish text based on the chronology imposed on the reader in the experience of reading *Emplumada*, or on the supposition that in the beginning, "*Barco de refugiados*" existed in some inchoate form, realized or unrealized, that grew in the interstices of "Refugee Ship," finally to supplant it.

The very question of which came first, which was the original and which the translation, forces us to confront the fact that that nothing in *Emplumada* indicates that one of the pair is a translation of the other: no note, no identification of a translator, nothing to indicate that the two are anything other than separate poems. If, as Saussure noted, the condition of possibility of translation, and therefore of the mutual intelligibility of languages, is the existence of a "concept" or idea, outside of and prior to language per se, whose externality allows it in principle to be expressed in any particular language, are we sure that Cervantes' two poems convey an equivalent idea or set of ideas? If this were the case, reading the poems would consist of the act of reducing them to the meanings for which they have supplied the equivalents. This takes us beyond the questions of how one achieves this equivalence, whether through fidelity to the source or through an unfaithful fidelity that remains true to the original by deviating from it. Rather, it is a question of the irreducible materiality of the texts, the meanings that arise "accidentally," perhaps from the words the poet is constrained to use, but often from the non-sense of sound and rhythm, the formation of puns or the concatenation of certain sounds. The play of homophony that, as I learned from my student, overdetermines the title "Refugee Ship" and if we are convinced, as I am, that "Refugeeship" is as important to the poem as the title, "Refugee ship," the title of the Spanish text, "*Barco de Refugiados*" cannot be understood as its equivalent. Instead, "Refugee Ship" itself must be regarded as untranslatable by virtue of its properties, both graphemic and phonological, that in their materiality resist translation. This does

not mean that the title "*Barco de refugiados*" does not produce its own singular effects, the functions both denotative and connotative imposed on it by its own history and the chain of associations to which it is inescapably linked. But it is impossible not to see the paradox inherent in the presentation of the two poems in *Emplumada*: that of a speaker who describes the continuing effects of being forbidden to learn Spanish by her mother and who does so in Spanish before describing it in English.

This paradox in turn provokes a series of additional questions concerning the intended audience of *Emplumada* as a whole and this pair of poems in particular. At the end of the book, the reader will find a "Glossary of Spanish Words and Phrases" found in nine of *Emplumada*'s poems. It is significant that none of the Spanish words or phrases listed in the glossary are marked as "foreign" terms in the poems in which they are found, whether through the use of italics or any other graphemic device. Cervantes' suspension of such markings effectively opens the border between the languages; she invites her audience to treat Spanish words just as they would unfamiliar English words, that is, deriving their meaning as far as possible from the context or consulting a dictionary (online or otherwise). Cervantes' Glossary might appear as a negation of this gesture, re-instating linguistic borders by resorting to a notion of equivalent meanings in two languages whose borders are not only distinctly drawn, but carefully guarded, so that there can be no encroachment of one language on the other. As we might expect, however, the Glossary works instead to problematize such notions. If the non-Spanish speaking segment of the book's audience thought they could skip over the Spanish phrases and yet still arrive at an adequate understanding of Cervantes' poems, they will find a glossary on the page facing the final poem, "*Emplumada*," that so closely resembles its layout that the glossary might, from a distance, be mistaken for a poem itself. Readers who persist will find themselves addressed as hopelessly monolingual and ignorant even of Spanish terms like "machismo" (recognized by spellcheck as an English word), "casa" and "abrazo" (Cervantes will define "abrazos" in the plural as "bear hugs"). The readers to whom such unshakeable incomprehension may be imputed are those who fully embrace their privilege not to know Spanish (there is no corresponding right of Spanish speakers in the US not to know English). They are those among whom the mother described in *Barco de Refugiados*/ "Refugee Ship" would have her daughter live as an unwelcome refugee.

But what is perhaps most important about the Glossary is what is missing from it: neither *Barco de Refugiados* nor "Refugee Ship" are among the nine poems whose Spanish words and phrases are defined. Of course, "*Barco de Refugiados*," the only poem in the collection written entirely in Spanish, and accompanied by what has passed for its English equivalent, lies outside the purview of a glossary, but the same cannot

be said for “Refugee Ship,” whose final line, *El barco que nunca atracar*, although untranslated, does not appear in the glossary. Readers with a reading knowledge of Spanish might take it as a rendering of the previous line, “The ship that will never dock.” But is it the case that the concluding lines of the English text are equivalent to those of the Spanish text? In fact, if we compare “the ship that will never dock” to *El barco que nunca atracar*, we will note that the English version is formulated in the future tense; in the Spanish, the verb *atracar*, (to dock) is conjugated in the third person present tense “*atraca*,” and is more properly be rendered “the ship that never docks.” The English phrase stresses what will happen or rather not happen in the future; the Spanish line concerns the present, the experience of being a prisoner on a ship that never docks, that never finds, has never up to this point found, a place of refuge. The speaker has been on the ship for a long time, perhaps a lifetime; readers, in contrast, have just come aboard, or at least feel that they have just come aboard, only to be told that, to cite Pascal, *vous êtes embarqué*.⁷ The journey without destination on a ship that never docks because its passengers are everywhere refused, has already begun.

The differences between the two texts are perfectly apparent when we compare the first stanzas:

Como almidón de maíz
me deslizo, pasando por los ojos de mi abuela,
bíblia a su lado. Se quita los lentes.
El pudín se hace espeso.

A translation that preserves the division of lines and sentences might appear thus:

Like cornstarch
I slide, passing before the eyes of my grandmother,
bible at her side. She removes her glasses.
The pudding thickens.

The first stanza of “Refugee Ship,” in contrast, differs in some significant ways from the Spanish text:

Like wet cornstarch, I slide
past my grandmother's eyes. Bible
at her side, she removes her glasses.
The pudding thickens.

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⁷ Pascal 1962, fragment 397.

In addition to the insertion of the adjective “wet” before cornstarch, what stands out is the enjambment or run-on lines that interrupt the sentences at “slide” and “Bible.” Perhaps most surprising is the reorganization of the sentences, so that the two sentences that unite to form the first stanza in the Spanish text, become three in English. The speaker slides past her grandmother and her bible in the former, but only past her grandmother in the latter, where our attention is directed away from the speaker and to her grandmother’ as she removes her glasses, “bible at her side.” The verb, *deslizar*, might be read as “slip,” as if she slips by her grandmother’s eyes (and the Bible at her side) furtively, unnoticed, quietly. But her grandmother’s removal of her glasses as if in order not to see, suggests that the speaker is simultaneously slipping away from her grandmother who does not see her and perhaps has never seen her, above all because the speaker cannot communicate in Spanish.

The final line of the first stanza, “*La pudin se hace espeso*” and “The pudding thickens” refers back to the cornstarch with which the poem opens and to which the speaker compares herself. Cornstarch is a thickening (and binding) agent: in what sense does the speaker serve this function as she slides or slips past her grandmother (and is she slipping out or in?)? In Spanish, as in as English, “thicken” has another meaning, as in “*la trama se espesa*” or “the plot thickens,” phrases that signal a discovery that the plot (originally of a play) is more complicated than initially thought. The speaker reveals herself to be a thickening agent in this sense: a thickener of plots, as well as puddings, leaving undetermined the question of whether she is slipping away, slipping out, or slipping in. The use of “slide” in place of “*deslizo*” in the English text suppresses many of the questions that arise in the first stanza of “*E/ Barco de refugiados*,” thus posing in turn a question that can emerge only when the two poems in their different languages are read together in a specific sequence, as if the English both adds and subtracts meanings from the Spanish in seeming to repeat it.

The next, central, stanza marks the beginning of the speaker’s refugeeship, retroactively assigning a meaning to the translation of *deslizo* as “slide” instead of “slip.” Deprived of language—any language—and orphaned from her Spanish name, made a stranger from the language of previous generations, now nothing more than a foreign language whose sounds she cannot master, she is finally a stranger to herself, that is, her own body, her brown skin and black hair:⁸

Mamá me crió sin lenguaje.
Soy huérfano de mi nombre español.
Las palabras son extrañas,
tartamudeando en mi lengua.

.....
8 Aparicio 1986.

Mis ojos ven el espejo, mi reflejo:
piel de bronce, cabello negro.

A translation that preserves the lines and sentences:

Mama raised me without language.
orphaned from my Spanish name.
The words are foreign,
stuttering on my tongue.
My eyes see the mirror, my reflection:
bronze skin, black hair.

I am

And, finally, from “Refugee Ship:”

Mama raised me without language.
I'm orphaned from my Spanish name.
The words are foreign, stumbling
on my tongue. I see in the mirror
reflection: bronzed skin, black hair.

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Volume 9
Issue 1

The first line of the stanza should not be allowed to pass as mere hyperbole. “Without language” recalls the fact that no words pass between the speaker and her grandmother. Forcibly exiled from the Spanish language, from its sounds, its music and rhythms, but most importantly from the histories congealed in even the simplest terms, the *palabras cariñosas* and the *palabras sucias*, even as her family name and the color of her skin and hair ensure that she will remain a Mexican in the eyes of those who would denigrate her for speaking Spanish. Refugees not welcome there, except, of course, refugees from Europe who are deemed white.

The first two lines of the stanza have in many ways determined the dominant reading of the poem, including the tendency to privilege biography over history, particularly the history of schools in the Southwestern part of the US, and the campaigns to exclude the use of Spanish at any time or place in educational institutions below the level of college or university. Nor was the supposedly free realm of civil society in the 1950s and 1960s a place of tolerance or even indifference to the use of foreign languages, especially Spanish. Workers in many industries were forbidden to speak Spanish, even among themselves while on the job. Language became a terrain of struggle: the suppression of Spanish in the workplaces of the Southwest by employers represented an attempt to prevent workers from organizing to protest low wages and unbearable working conditions. In the schools, the children of Mexican immigrants were expected to divest themselves of their culture (with its traditions of solidarity and collective responsibility) and language. Their

families, subject to a variety of pressures, often, but by no means always, supported the policy of monolingualism, if only as a way of sparing their children the racism they had faced. This is precisely what Althusser meant when he described the family as an Ideological State Apparatus.

There are few literary works that so effectively capture the feeling of overwhelming destitution and loss among those whose lives became the target of the disciplinary practices exercised at the workplace and the school, and whose effects carried into home and family. Cervantes makes visible and legible the fact that the Americanization campaign in which her mother was an unwitting participant was far less concerned with teaching young students English than with policing their relation to Spanish, and reducing it to the bare minimum. The realization of such objectives had the effect of isolating students from their families, of pathologizing Mexican culture, and of stigmatizing the Spanish language, as well as any intrusion of Spanish pronunciation (including through what in phonology is called “overcompensation” or overcorrection of vowels). The speaker’s mother functions as a condensation of all the forces arrayed to prevent the children of Mexican (and later Central American) parents from identifying with the culture of their forbears, and suggests how these forces came to occupy even the sanctuary of the home.

The speaker describes this experience as being “*Huerfano de mi nombre español*” and “orphaned from my Spanish name.” In current English usage, the construction “orphaned from” can be understood in two senses, one of which is fairly rare. Most commonly, it refers to the cause of the parents’ death, a way of saying “made an orphan by” a car accident, a pandemic and so on. The far less common meaning of “orphaned from” refers to those whose loss has rendered one an orphan, typically one’s parents. While this sense is more common in Spanish than in English, the effect of reading these texts one after the other, and perhaps returning to the Spanish after reading the English, is to feel and be caught up in an oscillation between the two that never allows the reader to settle on (or in) one or the other. This oscillation binds them in their difference, as if each must be read in the light of the other, allowing the intermingling of meanings. We cannot help but hear the Spanish in the English and vice versa until the words begin to sound like synonyms in a single language.

In this way, we may read “orphaned from my Spanish name” as meaning 1) that the speaker has lost her Spanish name, that is, lost it as a Spanish name, pronounced as it is in Spanish and with all the cultural and literary associations it maintains in Spanish. It remains as a relic or keepsake of what no longer exists for her; and 2) that she is orphaned because of her name, because it separates her from the White world around her like an identifying tattoo and triggers the operations of compulsion and constraint designed to secure her assimilation to that world. Her assimilation, however, can never erase the difference associated with her name (and her skin color): she will be assimilated,

if at all, as an inferior version of the white American, whose whiteness functions as the norm against which “others” are measured. The speaker’s description of her attempts to speak Spanish as stuttering or stumbling signals the confrontation between the demand not to speak Spanish and to remain unable to do so, and the opposing demand, perhaps implied by her grandmother’s silence in the opening stanza, to “live up to her name” and know the history of her family and people in and through their language. She finds herself treating Spanish as a foreign language even as she attempts to speak it, just as she is trapped in the foreignness imputed to her by the English-speaking world no matter how great her ignorance of Spanish.

The final lines of the stanza are marked by an increasing divergence between the Spanish and English texts. The Spanish, *Mis ojos ven el espejo, mi reflejo/piel de bronce, cabello negro* [My eyes see the mirror, my reflection/bronze skin, black hair] differs in important ways from the English of “Refugee Ship.” In the latter, “my eyes see the mirror, my reflection” becomes “I see in the mirror/my reflection.” The replacement of “my eyes see” with “I see” eliminates the reference to the eyes of the speaker’s grandmother in the first stanza, the eyes she “slides past.” Perhaps her grandmother’s eyes were the mirror in which the speaker’s eyes see themselves and the dark hair and skin that surrounds them. But that these features are not seen by her but by her eyes suggests a fundamental dehiscence between what she thinks (and feels) and what the eyes see, as if she cannot entirely believe her eyes. Her skin in the English is not even “bronze” as in the Spanish (*bronce*), but “bronzed,” suggesting that her skin was originally lighter and only became dark through exposure to the sun, or through exposure to those in whose eyes the color of her skin constitutes an unremovable stain.

No wonder then that the speaker tells us in the final stanza, “I feel I am a captive/aboard a refugee ship.” A prisoner, the speaker is detained and imprisoned, forced to remain in the space allotted to those whose identity is imposed on them like a set of restraints designed to prevent the prisoners from escaping. Always already expelled from her native land, she is rejected by all others. Henceforth, she belongs only to the condition of refugeeship, a prisoner on the ship that wanders without port of origin or destination.

The final line of “Refugee Ship” is in Spanish and identical to the final line of *Barco de refugiados*, “*El barco que nunca atraca*.” Unlike the Spanish words and phrases that appear in the nine poems listed in the Glossary, the final phrase is italicized. Repeated like an incantation, punctuated by the hard “c” sound in four of its five words, it is the only Spanish phrase in an otherwise English-language poem, but is omitted from the Glossary. Why is it italicized? Because italics legitimize the admission of Spanish into English, but like the issuance of a tourist visa, only temporarily? Or because the italics direct the readers’ attention

back to the Spanish text, inaugurating the oscillation between languages that joins the two texts in a single experience of reading, as if each is a continuation of the other and not its equivalent? In any case, the act of concluding an English language poem with an untranslated line in Spanish, or at least a line that many readers may not know is a kind of translation of the line above it, is a gesture of defiance, disrupting the intricate mechanisms of subjection that operate in and through language, like an unauthorized crossing of borders.

This is not to say that Cervantes' poem is simply a representation of the fracturing of borders, the borders between languages coextensive with national borders. On the contrary, it tears a hole in the border fences common to languages and nations; Cervantes steers the *barco de refugiados* away from ports of entry and the authorities prepared to deny sanctuary to those most in need of it, and takes it instead to deserted beaches where asylum seekers scatter to safety on moonless nights. But we also think of others: the refugee ships that sink in darkness without a single survivor, those that reach the shores of Europe only to be turned away, abandoned to a fate no one cares to know, and, finally those, whose refugee ship is of a different kind, massed on the southern border of the US and likely to be refused asylum and sent back to places to which they cannot return.

Never has Cervantes' poem(s) been more true, and the art of refugeeship more necessary, than today. The two poems, in Spanish and in English, separate only to converge into a composite: a map, a chant, a chronicle, a place of refuge from which the struggle to turn a world without refuge into a world where no one can be a refugee begins.

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Volume 9
Issue 1

Beyond All That Fiddle? Poetry and Poetics 'After Theory'

Christopher Norris

Abstract: This essay is partly a reflection on the current state of English-language poetry and poetics, and partly – though inseparably from that – a reflection on my own experience as one who has exchanged the role of critic-theorist to that of poet. As such it takes a stand on various issues in the wake of literary Modernism that continue to divide poets along sometimes complex and criss-crossing lines. I discuss the limits of post-structuralist thinking about poetry (my own earlier thinking included), the relevance of Derrida's texts, especially those on the topic of invention, the continuing function of rhyme as an endlessly renewable asset, and what I call 'verse-thinking' – in and through rhyme – as a mode of creative criticism. I distinguish two kinds of formalism, one of them (which I reject) stressing the poem's self-enclosure or autonomy, the other opening poetry up to the widest range of intellectual, philosophical, and socio-cultural-political contexts. My essay also points to the relative neglect of syntax in current poetic practice, a neglect that has gone along with the countervailing emphasis on metaphor, symbol and spatial form. The interaction or counterpoint of syntax and prosody is again, like rhyme, one of poetry's greatest resources and its waning fortunes a major loss.

Keywords: creativity, Empson, formalism poetics, rhyme, theory

I

First a bit of life-history, or what passes for it in the case of someone who has spent a large part of his life thinking, teaching and writing. There have been life-events 'beyond all that fiddle', as Marianne Moore memorably said of poetry, but any account of them would be of little interest to anyone but myself and maybe a few others. For better or worse the intellectual life tends to acquire its own saliences, structures, narrative shapes, and even epiphanic highlights which may have rather little connection with what's going on to the eye of a less preoccupied or more practically involved observer. Almost by definition it is a life that takes place in the company of books, journals, correspondence, and ideas despite the extent to which other things intrude, whether beneficially (as most often with family and friends) or malignantly (as most often with obtuse and ill-willed university bureaucrats). But in case you're wondering, very reasonably, just how this entitles me to lay some claim on your limited reading-time let me start with a few academic-biographical details that might provide at least the outline of an answer.

My academic career – briefly stated – went from English Literature, via literary-critical theory, to Continental Philosophy; took a turn toward analytic philosophy (i.e., the kind practised in most UK, US and other Anglophone philosophy departments); and then, till my retirement from Cardiff University, busied itself with tracing and promoting connections between those (so-called) 'two traditions'. My official,

i.e., departmental switch from English to Philosophy took place in 1991 and reflected the impact on my thinking of continental thinkers, among them – pre-eminently – Jacques Derrida.¹ For the earlier part of my university career I was doing what came to be known as ‘theory’, a catch-all term that included elements of deconstruction, post-structuralism, Marxism, psychoanalysis, feminism, and Frankfurt-School sociology. If my work later came to fit less easily into that commodious slot it is because I turned against the anti-realist, cultural-relativist, and social-constructivist aspect of a movement – roughly, post-structuralism – which I thought needed a strong injection of realist thinking from, among other disciplinary quarters, philosophy of science. At risk of sounding paranoid, I’d say this left me badly exposed to fire from both sides, as in Frank Kermode’s image of the WW1 soldier wandering out during a Christmas cease-fire to offer cigarettes all round.

The situation was repeated in modified form when I retired from university teaching – along with the periodic scourge of the Research Assessment Exercise – and took to writing poetry instead of academic books and articles. Maybe the decision went further back and was a kind of unconscious pre-emptive strategy designed to keep me writing – how possibly give that up after all those decades of ceaseless production? – but not writing in the same genres or on the same topics. I have now published eleven volumes of poetry with two more currently in the pipeline and upwards of a hundred individual poems in various journals and collections.² This has occupied most of my writing time over the past ten years and – since I don’t go in for the fashionably slim volumes that launch and sustain many poetic careers – has resulted in what’s already a sizable body of work. I should add that the switch wasn’t quite as drastic as I have made it sound since a good proportion of my verse is devoted to philosophical themes, or to topics from science, history, music, politics, aesthetics, literary theory, and other subject-areas central to my academic work. But any continuity in that regard was counteracted by the poems’ conspicuously formal structures, by their not (or not primarily) being intended to make good on some explicit proposition or truth-claim, and by their not representing a ‘contribution to knowledge’ in received academic terms. Creative Writing courses might seem to be exceptions to that rule, but they could just as well be seen as evidence of extensive and ongoing changes to prevalent conceptions of ‘knowledge’ and ‘creativity’ alike.

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¹ See for instance Norris 1982, 1983, 1985, 1987, 1988, 2000, 2012, 2015

² Norris 2015, 2017a, 2017b, 2018, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2020a, 2020b, 2022a, 2022b

II

Now I propose to complicate the matter by finessing the terms of my discussion so far. That is, I have to say that a large part of my current project is to make a case for the kind of verse that combines a strong commitment to formalism (often thought to dispense poetry from the protocols of rationality and truth) with an interest in areas – like science, philosophy, history, and politics – where those values are (or at any rate should be) very much in play. This is not a flat contradiction but an ambiguity about the word ‘formalism’ that has caused a good deal of confusion in literary-critical debate over the past half-century and more. On the one hand, as in my preferred (Type 1) usage, it can signify the kind of poetry that deploys a range of formal devices, verse-structures, rhyme-schemes, symmetries, and other such marked deviations from everyday prose discourse as a means of achieving greater pointedness or heightened powers of expression. On the other it is used to indicate allegiance to a view of poetry as somehow existing in a realm of formal autonomy or closure, effectively quarantined from all commerce with ‘outside’ (prosaic) interests or concerns. Then poetic deviations from prose discourse go along with certain critically favoured rhetorical tropes like ambiguity, paradox, or irony to become the basis for a full-scale formalist (Type 2) doctrine. What’s more this comes with penalties attached for critics who stray into regions such as history, politics, author-biography, or any such extra-poetic precinct where the operative standards are those of valid argument or alethic accountability.

This was the programme raised to a high point of aesthetic, philosophical, and pedagogic principle by the US New Criticism of the 1940s and ‘50s.³ It also had distinct theological overtones, amounting to a veto on poetry that entered into issues of religious faith, like Milton’s or Shelley’s, or criticism that drew those issues out in – to this way of thinking – unacceptable directions. The programme was always a shaky pretence when it came to the business of actually carrying out the kind of ultra-detailed verbal analysis that the New Critics required, often (be it said) with striking results. Thus they smuggled in large amounts of cultural history, biography, and other sorts of presupposed ‘background’ information without which their fine-grained exegetical points would simply not have struck them, or not carried anything like the proper weight of critical-readerly conviction. Consider, if you will, whether Cleanth Brooks could possibly have arrived at his estimate of Marvell’s exquisitely subtle hovering between opposed sympathies in his ‘Horatian Ode upon Cromwell’s Return from Ireland’ had he not already known a great deal about the poet’s life-history, political dealings, and changeable

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³ See for instance Brooks 1956, Wimsatt 1954, Ransom 1979.

(not to say fickle or opportunist) shifts of party allegiance.⁴ In short: Type-2 formalism is a doctrine more favoured by critics than poets and one that, in theory, places tight constraints on how we think about poetry while Type-1 formalism is a verse-practice with no such designs on our creative, interpretative, or intellectual freedoms.

The New Critics followed T.S. Eliot in constructing a tradition of English poetry that had its high-point in the seventeenth century – in Shakespeare, the ‘School of Donne’, and revenge tragedians like Webster and Tourneur. At this time, according to Eliot’s fanciful but massively influential myth, the ‘dissociation of sensibility’ had not yet occurred, the English language was in a state of creative flux, and poets were briefly able to express an unequalled range of jointly cerebral and sensuous experience.⁵ Much critical ink has since been spilled in defending, rejecting, or modifying this myth, as well as pointing out how effectively it served Eliot’s self-promoting purpose as an American poet lately fetched up in London and keen to establish his British (more accurately English) cultural credentials. Yet if one reads his poetry on the look-out for signs of that elective genealogy then the evidence looks pretty thin, at least if one expects the affinity with (say) Donne or Marvell to go beyond localised instances of ‘intellect at the tips of the senses’ and involve a more sustained or – what his essays gesture toward – a more creative-exploratory mode of thought. The closest Eliot came to his proclaimed seventeenth-century mentors was in the quatrain poems of his early period which, for all their frequent unpleasantness, do sometimes manage to hit off a Donne-like intensity of thought and feeling. Also worth noting is the fact that they manifest a use of rhyme that is distinctly more pointed and semantically charged than in his better-known poetry – from ‘Prufrock’ on – where its function, though not merely decorative, is very much a matter of tone, mood, or atmosphere.

In short, we should not go along too readily with Eliot’s keenness to associate his project with the ‘line of wit’ in English poetry. Later on he rather undermined that claim, not least by electing Dante, not Donne, as the indispensable point of reference for anyone seeking to acquire a sense of ‘tradition’ as defined by his own highly selective Classical-Christian-Monarchist-Conservative lights. In the same revisionist spirit was his later insistence that we not take Donne’s ideas too seriously – especially his at the time radical thoughts about cosmology, theology, and the strained relationship between them – since poetry could or should lay no claim to authority in those areas. Like the US New Critics, who followed him in this as in many respects, Eliot viewed with grave disapproval any notion that matters of such weight and moment might

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4 Brooks 1956

5 Eliot 1999

be adequately treated in poetic form. What he rejected above all was the idea that Donne, at whatever conscious or unconscious level, might have found certain grounds for religious scepticism – or doubts concerning the truth of Christian doctrine – in the new science of his time. Hence Eliot's increasing stress on the need for a complete severance between poetry and faith or belief, on the one hand, and poetry and science or rational thought on the other. Hence also William Empson's growing emphasis, against Eliot, on the wrongheadedness of any such requirement, the extent of Donne's scientific knowledge, and the ways in which readers of his poetry should benefit from grasping how keenly it deploys that knowledge to heterodox or sceptical conclusions. I shall have more to say about Empson, whose influence on my work over the past forty years has been – as he (ironically) said of Eliot – 'keen and penetrating, like an East wind'.

For these and other reasons I am a Type-1 formalist, much devoted to rhyme, metre, and various sorts of complex verse-form but convinced – *contra* autonomist creeds – that poetry can and should partake in all manner of debates across the greatest range of subject-areas. This puts me, I think, in some distinguished company – W.H. Auden, Elizabeth Bishop, William Empson, John Fuller, Marianne Moore, A.E. Stallings, and Richard Wilbur among others – but also draws its share of negative comment from practitioners of free verse (an oxymoron, but leave that aside for the moment) and assorted experimentalist or *avant-garde* quarters. Poets are a competitive, not to say rivalrous and (sometimes) prickly bunch – myself included – and on this matter they tend to divide along sharply-drawn if not impregnable lines. Rhyme and metre are often written off by anti-formalists, together with anything in the least complex or challenging in the way of verse-forms, on the grounds that these are irksome constraints which fetter creativity, falsify experience, trade feeling for artifice, and constitute a barrier between poet and reader. Formalists typically respond by acknowledging the few undeniable 'free-verse' successes – often instancing 'The Waste Land', though it takes a tin ear to miss Eliot's subtle tweakings of the norm – before going on to stress their fewness and freakishness.

There are times, especially after lengthy work on a new poem, when I do if fleetingly feel the force of objections to rhyme and metre. Might they not, after all, have something retrograde, even atavistic about them, some echo of how they once served a collective mnemonic purpose, as in oral epic poetry where speech-melody and rhythmic stress patterns made up for the absence of graphic notation? Or don't they buy into a kind of Rousseauist guilty nostalgia, a desire to recall civilization to that imagined pre-literate state of grace when language expressed feelings directly with, as yet, no need of inferior supplements like writing or grammar? I once spent a lot of time rehearsing the fallacious character of such ideas through a detailed account of Derridean deconstruction, including (of course) his

now canonical reading of Rousseau on the evils inflicted by writing on speech, as likewise by culture on nature, harmony on melody, and civil on 'primitive' orders of society.⁶ Thus I can say with some confidence that my thinking is not unduly in hock to that particular misconception. And I am further armed against it by my preference for verse-forms that deploy rhyme and metre in distinctly literate (writing-dependent) ways, along with extended, often complex stanzas and syntax that would stretch comprehension beyond reasonable limits in oral delivery.

Any defence of rhyme and metre advanced on my part as a practising poet is unlikely to involve the self-deconstructing mystique of a language conceived as somehow harking back, in its origins, beyond the very possibility of language as a system of articulate structural relations. If that defence is to fit what I do as a poet – or am attempting to do – then it will need to offer a justification in quite different terms. I shall take rhyme first since that's the aspect of 'traditional' verse that raises most hackles amongst hustlers of the *Zeitgeist* who maintain that things have moved on and that nothing more surely indicates failure to keep up than the falling-back on such a time-worn, otiose device. My view, conversely, is that functional (as opposed to decorative or purely musical) rhyme is a vital creative-exploratory resource, a means to open up new possibilities of poetic thought through the access to semantic, conceptual and speculative regions unreachable by prose discourse. Especially when joined to complex verse-forms – pushing hard on the rhymester's inventive powers – it can prompt a sounding-out of remote meanings and associations that would scarcely occur to anyone just wanting to have their preconceived say on this or that topic. No doubt poets need to bear in mind that their own chief sources of satisfaction, like hitting on a wonderfully apt or innovative rhyme, may not have quite the same effect on even the most responsive reader. All the same it is a feeling that should be just as familiar to readers of Auden, Empson or Wilbur as to enjoyers of Cole Porter's or Stephen Sondheim's lyrics.

III

I should be clear that all this has very little to do with Heideggerian poetics, or with the depth-hermeneutic questing-back to supposedly primordial meanings and truths covered up through the history of Western thought but occasionally there to be divined in the texts of poets like Hölderlin, Rilke and Celan.⁷ Etymologies, primordial or not, may sometimes play a part in such moments of discovery but the latter far more often result – in my experience – from multiple meanings, senses, or

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⁶ See Derrida 1976; also Norris 1982 and 1987.

⁷ See especially Heidegger 2001.

connotations within a single word whose interaction produces that effect. It is at such moments that poetic creativity – or inventiveness – is most strikingly apparent. Something like this goes on in certain uses of the very word ‘invention’, its Latin etymology having to do with fortuitously ‘coming upon’ some received but highly apt rhetorical device for a given purpose or context, while its subsequent history points in more radically creative directions. Once more we have Derrida to thank for some subtle and revealing commentary on this process of semantic-conceptual change.⁸ But for me, as poet-theorist, the thinker who did most to figure out what was happening with instances of truly inventive rhyme was Empson in his 1951 book *The Structure of Complex Words*. Here he went far beyond the brilliant but somewhat scatter-shot approach to close-reading that characterised his earlier and much better-known *Seven Types of Ambiguity*.⁹ In short he now offered a theory of multiple meaning that, had it been taken up more widely, might have had profound consequences for literary criticism, philosophy of language, and related disciplines.

What Empson means by a ‘complex word’ is one that contains two or more senses but which also manages to fit them into an ‘equation’, that is, a logical (or sometimes not-so-logical) structure where the relation between them is one of predication, inclusion, purported identity, analogy, or metaphor, this latter conceived in broadly Aristotelian terms as a complex chiasmic pattern of inter-exchanged properties or attributes. These equations are emphatically intra-verbal, i.e., located within the word and not thought of as spread over a larger context or vaguely there in the background. Empson had come to feel, not without cause, that ambiguity was too vague or catch-all a term and that *Seven Types*, with its huge early influence, had tended to promote an over-emphasis on the irrational element in poetry. This was accompanied by a growing fascination with themes of extreme psychological conflict and – one of Empson’s abiding *bêtes noires* – with Christian-theological paradoxes such as that of the Trinity and Christ’s atonement for human sin.¹⁰ Thus *Complex Words* sets out to provide the theoretical apparatus – the table of equations, the symbolic notation (albeit rather homespun and out of line with modern logicians’ practice), and above all the working interpretative procedures – for a full-scale intention-based structural semantics with due sensitivity to social and historical shifts of usage. This still leaves room for the poetry of conflict but enables us to place it against a set of recognisably normative structures, examined most closely in the word ‘sense’, which allows for deviations from the rational or reasonable norm without (normally!) counting them instances of verbal psychopathology.

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8 Derrida 2007

9 Empson 1930 and 1951

10 See especially Empson 1988.

The main problem with the book, as Empson realised, was its unbalanced, internally fractured and to this extent un-reader-friendly structure. It comprises some lengthy outer chapters of a largely theoretical-expository character along with a central core of interpretative essays where the theory is applied to texts of Erasmus, Shakespeare, Milton, Pope, Wordsworth, Jane Austen, and others. But the complex words in question – ‘fool’, ‘dog’, ‘sense’, ‘all’, and a range of lesser though related instances like ‘quite’ and ‘delicate’ – are simultaneously put through their logico-semantic paces and supplied with a truly remarkable depth of historical, social, and cultural-intellectual grasp. Like no other book known to me *Complex Words* gives the sense of a mind intensely conscious of its own creative-critical workings whilst also maximally receptive to the ways that other writers – or indeed collocutors – can jolt that mind in new and revelatory directions. It is perhaps worth noting that Empson ceased to write poetry – so far as the record goes – at the time when he was most deeply engaged in working out the theory and producing the book. Having read it repeatedly over many decades as a critic-theorist and found its insights constantly coming to mind while writing poems I can see how those two events might well have coincided in Empson’s case.¹¹ The sort of mental activity involved in doing critical work like that is very much on a level with the kind of inventiveness required to write poems like those he produced during a fairly brief but intensive early period of verse-creativity.

The chapter that shows this most strikingly, I think, is ‘Wit in the “Essay on Criticism”’, a *tour de force* of sustained close-reading that examines how the key-words ‘wit’ and ‘sense’ between them articulate the various options, commitments, and moral-intellectual priorities that emerge in the course of Pope’s verse-essay. The chapter defies quick summary but captures with incomparable deftness, aided by a poet’s insider knowledge, how it is that these key-words enable Pope to think his way through – and suggestively beyond – what might seem a clash of contrary doctrines. Thus ‘sense’ conveys the received Augustan wisdom on this topic, namely the kind of fundamental good sense that won’t be too much distracted by the ‘high gyrations’ of (e.g.) seventeenth-century poetic ‘wit’ but will rather provide the ‘steady ground bass’ of an outlook rooted in common-sense virtues. ‘Wit’ has its place, all the same, when it comes to enlivening, provoking or upsetting the often complacent since thought-resistant verities of plain good sense. Besides, its etymology (from Old English *witan* = ‘knowledge’) is sufficient to suggest – without going full-strength Heidegger – that Popean ‘wit’ can justifiably lay claim to its own epistemic or cognitive credentials. What results, in Empson’s reading, is a niftily instructive dialectic of concepts staged in such a way that ‘wit’ and ‘sense’ end up by retaining their tensile opposition but have meanwhile run the gamut of multiple, increasingly complex encounters. If the reader is sensitive to

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11 Norris 1978, Norris and Mapp (eds.) 1993

Pope's very likely pre-conscious subtleties of semantic implication they will then find out how it feels to achieve a set of ethical, social and literary responses more 'adequate to the task of criticism'.

I have no room here to go more deeply into this or other chapters of Empson's remarkable book. What it gave me to think, first as a critic-theorist of poetry, then as philosopher of language, and then as a practising poet was the possibility of doing the same kind of thing more consciously, or with foregone intent. Indeed, as I've said, Empson's advance from *Seven Types* to *Complex Words* consisted precisely in devising an analytic framework – a 'machinery' of equations, intra-verbal structures, or compacted 'statements in words' – by which to articulate what had previously seemed, even at its most brilliantly revealing, a rich but confused or contradictory bunch of meanings. This has some large consequences regarding my case for rhyme as a creative-exploratory resource, that is, as a means of allowing thought its inventive head through the encounter with unpredictable events of logico-semantic discovery. For one thing it envisages a kind of *rapprochement* between what we're apt to think of as two quite disparate genres of poetry, the seventeenth-century Metaphysical 'line of wit' and the eighteenth-century ('Augustan') mode of rational, often philosophical or theologico-political verse that may be considered prosaic for couching its ideas in a largely discursive or constative form. For another, it places poetry in close relation to the kinds of practice that characterise present-day philosophy of language and which likewise involve – at their insightful best – a capacity to think *in and through* the varieties of utterance (e.g., statements or the sundry kinds of performative speech-act) that make up their elective domain.¹² More than that, it lets us see that autonomist doctrines of closed poetic form are ignoring – or perversely pretending to ignore – the patent continuity between poetry and other matters of human intellectual, moral, political, and scientific concern.

Not all complex words are rhyme-words, or formally required to function as such, although many of Empson's most striking instances (like 'wit' and 'sense' in Pope) have their special clincher-like uses in that role. My own poems often let the rhyme-words bear a high degree of semantic overdetermination and, to that extent, can be seen as 'rhyme-driven' very much as A.E. Stallings describes her own formalist verse-practice.

Paradoxically, I like things like rhyme and meter precisely because using these random limitations (as a more *avant-garde* poet might say) can leave you open to things beyond your control, spaces for the Muse to move through.¹³

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12 See for instance Austin 1975, Derrida 1988, Felman 1984.

13 Stallings 2018

Her point is that rhyme-driven verse isn't poetry that sticks – as its detractors claim – with outworn, self-hobbling conventions and thereby abjures the expansive horizons of free-verse practice. Rather it is poetry that takes creative bearings from its own most vital resource, namely the capacity of ear-and-mind attuned language to surpass the confines of everyday communicative discourse. One reason for that – though Stallings doesn't make the further point – is that rhyme performs this function to greatest, most striking effect when the sound-sense complex in question is that of an Empsonian complex word with senses that don't merely aggregate but form intra-verbal structures with latent propositional content and force. This may seem an overly complicated way of talking about natural-language features or functions that go back to an early stage of human cultural development and continue to exert a strong fascination, not least for young children. But it is one worth attempting at a stage in that development when thinking about poetry in advanced or (academically) fashionable quarters has very largely turned away from such resources.

It has also tended to devalue the syntactic dimension of poetry, chiefly in consequence of the Romantic-to-Modernist emphasis on image, metaphor, and symbol – along with their larger-scale structural analogues like 'spatial form' – as the prime constituents of poetry.¹⁴ This goes along with a marked distaste for poems that possess any kind of propositional content, or adopt a discursive mode of address suited to the conveyance of ideas, arguments, or points of view. Here again Empson is the great exception since his poems exhibit such a remarkable gift for combining a Donne-like power of condensed yet far-reaching metaphorical expression with a syntax that articulates complex ideas and a verse-music, in the best sense, that keeps ear and mind jointly on their toes. Indeed, his central thesis in *Complex Words* can usefully be seen as a micro-application of the same approach, that is, a way of treating – unpacking – individual words or lexical units to reveal 'compacted statements' or immanent structures of sense and implication. That poetry can best be understood this way, by deploying more keenly rather than suspending our everyday modes of linguistic grasp, is Empson's main premise in this book and its major advance on *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. As I have said, it is one that goes flat against some of the ruling suppositions of present-day poetic practice and theory, which no doubt explains why *Complex Words* has remained far less widely read than the earlier book. My case, more generally, is that syntax – on whatever scale – is among the greatest resources of poetry and its interactive counterpoint with prosody something to be thrown away only at huge expense.

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¹⁴ See especially Frank Kermode 1957.

IV

This was brought home to me lately by a review of my collection *The Trouble with Monsters*, a sequence of verse satires, polemics, interventions, and occasional reflective poems addressed to the current state of UK, US and global politics.¹⁵ They are written in a range of rhyming and metrical verse-forms and with the aim of deploying those forms to the most sharply pointed and knowingly provocative effect. Thus they stand more in the line of descent from a satirist like Juvenal, an excoriating brand of 'savage indignation', than the line from Menippean satire whose more genial, dialogical, 'polyphonic' values have earned the allegiance of theorists brought up on the ideas of Mikhail Bakhtin.¹⁶

Sour grapes, if you like, but I felt the review was oddly off-the-point, above all when the author expressed surprise that I, with my known post-structuralist leanings, should fall back on those traditional props. Rather, he opined, I should have brought my verse-practice more into line with my politics and taken a lead from those – like the so-called L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E poets – who build post-structuralist theorising into their poems, often through direct as well as implicit reference to sources like Barthes and Derrida.¹⁷ No matter that their poetry is self-occupied to the point of epistemic-linguistic solipsism and entirely without those requisite features – tonal, prosodic, rhetorical, performative – without which it must be sadly lacking in political-activist potential. Indeed, any attempt to make good the equation between 'advanced', 'progressive' or 'radical' tendencies in the arts and the use of those terms as applied to political movements or positions will very quickly run into a whole range of problematical counter-instances. Nor is this really such a puzzle given the hermetic and the often highly specialised, theory-driven character of many artistic developments in the wake of cultural High Modernism.

It is here that 'verse-music' takes on a significance about as far as possible removed from its typecast association with Tennysonian mourning, early-Yeatsian yearning, or Symbolist-decadent swooning. In political poetry more than anywhere there is nothing so reliably effective – or powerfully engaging – as well-chosen rhyme-schemes and metrical patterns. The Brecht-Eisler partnership is just one, albeit very striking instance of the way that political activism can tap into the latent energies released when poetic (and to this extent musical) speech joins up with just the right vocal setting.¹⁸ In such cases the deployment of a good, i.e., functional, complex, semantically load-bearing rhyme can sharpen the satirical point so keenly that it feels like a knock-down point in debate.

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¹⁵ Norris 2019a, DiDiato 2020

¹⁶ Bakhtin 1984

¹⁷ Bernstein and Andrews (eds.) 1984

¹⁸ Bunge 2014

I have taken issue with my reviewer here not by way of a shift to the (supposed) special case of political verse, or verse-satire, but because it seems to me not at all untypical of the choices nowadays facing any poet who wants to stay in touch with the vitalizing sources of verbal creativity. Indeed it is a mark of poetry's present-day retreat from its wider responsibilities – along with what I have elsewhere called the hegemony of lyric – that a combination of Type 2 formalism and self-occupied brooding has made those genres appear so wide of the contemporary mainstream.

This is by no means to attack theory or endorse the wish of poets that it not make such grossly unwarranted intrusions on their privileged since ultra-sensitive domain. Empson put this notion very firmly to bed in *Seven Types of Ambiguity* when he stood up for the virtues of tough-minded 'analytic' criticism against the wilting-flower defenders of an 'appreciative' approach that renounced analysis for fear of 'pruning down too far' and destroying the delicate plant.¹⁹ Rather it is to say that theory is best deployed in relation to poetry at a certain agreed-upon distance, or – as logicians might say – at a certain meta-linguistic remove such that each avoids treading too heavily on the other's expressive, creative, critical, or conceptual-explanatory toes. What's more this outlook has the signal virtue of leaving the supply-lines open in both directions for poet-theorists unwilling to declare sides in so ultimately futile and misconceived a debate. All the same there is a risk, as rather urgently needs saying, that Creative Writing courses will combine the wrong kinds of theory with ill-chosen examples of poetic practice and thereby achieve the worst of any worlds to be placed in the path of impressionable students. If anti-formalism is made a chief principle of such teaching then they will, for reasons suggested above, be apt to miss out on one of poetry's most vital human as well as creative-intellectual resources.

I have said a lot about rhyme and hardly anything about metre so should now try to make good the omission. It is a big help here that in the heyday of 'theory', that is, of post-structuralism as it affected our thinking about poetics and literary criticism, Anthony Easthope published a book entitled *Poetry as Discourse* where he took a strong line against formal metrics in general, and the iambic pentameter in particular.²⁰ I admired his pugnacity at the time – and recommended the book to students – though, like him no doubt, I went on reading and teaching the canon from (let's say) Wyatt to Tony Harrison, and often without theoretical cautions or disclaimers. Easthope's thesis was that, more than any other metrical form, iambic pentameter naturalised the accents, rhythms, tonal inflections, social nuances, velleities, discreet intimations (etc.)

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19 Empson 1930

20 Easthope 2002

of a certain class, the ever-rising bourgeoisie, for whom it served as a collusive *entre-nous* while for others it marked a zone of exclusion, again with penalties attached. His argument was a great deal subtler than this and supplied with a good range of practical instances from other, e.g., popular or folk-poetic traditions. But these were there chiefly to emphasise the point that iambic pentameter had hogged the cultural high ground – especially in consequence of Shakespeare's having used it for his tragic or high-class (not comic or low-class) characters and scenes – and so went to reinforce Easthope's case for its deep complicity with the norms and prerogatives of bourgeois society. My own writings at the time fell in pretty much with this historical, political, and socio-cultural view of things, as indeed did my and Richard Machin's priorities in co-editing the volume *Post-Structuralist Readings of English Poetry*.²¹ So – again – I should acknowledge how powerful its appeal from a standpoint that is by no means entirely alien or opaque to the way I think today.

All the same it is alien in certain ways, and those ways have much to do with my return to writing poetry after many decades as a traveller in the purlieu of theory, philosophy, and the history of ideas. I have already given one reason for this in the fact that my poetry is largely discursive in character – presenting a case, pursuing an argument, thinking a problem through, looking at an issue from different angles – and thus tends to settle on measures, like iambic pentameter, that allow maximum scope for such applications. The main desiderata are line-length (long enough to carry the discourse forward but not so long as to muffle a point); flexible stress-patterns set off against an always present but unobtrusive background norm; a capacity to register tonal inflections or nuances of speech implicature; and the scope, via enjambment, for lengthy and complex syntactic structures in counterpoint with verse prosody. These all count as virtues for my purposes, while for Easthope they are all subtly complicit in a hegemonic order that passes off as natural or ahistorical what is in truth thoroughly cultural and timebound. Hence his title, *Poetry as Discourse*, where 'discourse' signifies roughly 'a mode of address marked by the assumption that its style, tone or register will be familiar to, and shared by, a dominant social community or group'.

To be sure, that assumption is strongly present in some poetry of the kind, as with the heavily end-stopped 'Augustan' rhyming couplets of Pope, Dryden, Dr. Johnson and (to a lesser extent) Swift, where modern readers may well be offended by the tone of complacency or unquestioned common-sense wisdom. But this is an extreme instance readily explainable with reference to historical, political and cultural factors bearing on the poets' keenly felt need for a sense of restored social stability and civic order. Otherwise the word 'discourse' can just as readily apply to interrogative, critical, oppositional, radical, or

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21 Machin and Norris (eds.) 1987

politically dissident poetry just so long as – in accordance with its basic meaning – the verse-form is indeed properly discursive, or sufficiently concerned to engage the reader in a process of open-ended dialogical exchange. To this extent, I would suggest, there is a good deal of poetry in the broadly modernist line of descent that lacks, underplays, or in effect repudiates the above set of claims. In so doing it subscribes to the Type 2 formalist doctrine that I rejected earlier, that is, the idea of poems as verbal constructs best thought of in spatial terms, or with reference to the visual arts, especially those of architecture or sculpture. This gives the impression, very often, of lifting poems out of the discursive domain and raising them to some transcendent realm of timeless, object-like being. One need only think, in that connection, of Horace's 'monuments more lasting than bronze', or the habit amongst critics of treating poetic 'development' – say, from early to late Yeats, Eliot, Rilke or Celan – as a gradual and hard-won passage from the temporal to the eternal.

This tendency is further reinforced by the privilege traditionally granted to metaphor over metonymy, symbol over allegory or, in more Coleridgean-Romantic terms, imagination over fancy. Behind all these value-laden binaries stands the preference for eternizing figures of thought and for the sense of aesthetic and spiritual transcendence that comes of their denying the contingencies of time and change. Critics, theorists and linguists have lately been at pains to reveal the extent of this bias, whether through Roman Jakobson's rehabilitation of metonymy as a trope with creative-imaginative powers different from but by no means inferior to those of metaphor, or – more controversially – Paul de Man's beady-eyed deconstructive undoings of 'aesthetic ideology'.²² Ages back I had a hand in these fairly arcane endeavours but would now prefer to take the poet-practitioner's part and simply note, as above, how much is lost in the way of depth, intellectual reach, and communicative force in consequence of letting such prejudices shape the writing or reading of poems. To which I'd add – with an eye to the L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E poets and other anti-rhymesters or anti-formalists – that the prejudices in question run not only all the way from Romanticism to Modernism but well beyond that remarkably protean chapter of developments.²³

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Here I find myself in the good company of Donald Davie when he remarks that '[a] poem is necessarily a shape made out of lapsing time, out of the time the poem takes to be read; yet we seem to conceive of a poem by analogy with architectural forms, forms which occupy not time but

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22 See for instance Jakobson 1987, de Man 1996, 1986, Norris 1988.

23 Andrews and Bernstein (eds) 1997

space'.²⁴ Davie acknowledges, as must any competent judge, that some splendid poems have been written during the past century that do indeed invite the analogy with visual, sculptural or architectural forms and which likewise aspire to a condition outside or above the temporal-successive. Indeed he allows that most good poems partake of both attributes in varying degree and that the tension between them is often a source of creative stimulus. But in the end, he says, '[t]he great advantage of taking poetry as a special kind of discourse, rather than a special kind of art, is that it evades these ancient and troubling questions about the metaphysical or religious grounds of the poetic activity'.²⁵ This recalls the anxieties expressed by late-1960s rear-guard defenders of the 'old' US New Criticism when their autonomist doctrines of the poem as 'verbal icon' or 'concrete universal' came under threat from a range of 'continental' (phenomenological or deconstructionist) quarters. Theirs was essentially the idea of poetry as a 'special kind of art', and of poems as artefacts – Keatsian well-wrought urns – possessed of a formal or structural integrity that rendered them proof against the depredations of time. More specifically, it headed off the sorts of questioning – 'metaphysical or religious' but also historical, political, social, and ideological – that might befall the poem if opened to the buffeting winds of 'extra-poetic' or 'extraneous' debate.²⁶

I therefore agree with Davie when he plumps for poems – or conceptions of poetry – which stress the discursive dimension of verbal art rather than the visual artwork-based analogy that finds insufficient room for poetry as continuous with other modes of human linguistic interaction. 'To take poetry as a special kind of discourse', he writes, 'is to make it a special kind of communication between persons', unlike the other, non-interactive, quasi-sculptural idea of it which treats any deviation of that type as falling into one or other of the New Critically forfended 'heresies' (intentional, biographical, historical, or paraphrastic).²⁷ Such issues now feel decidedly antiquarian but they are still rumbling on in various contexts of present-day poetic debate. Thus the notion of spatial form finds its ultra-symbolist but also post-structuralist and deconstructive variant in a late-Mallarméan poetics where the scattered signifiers call for a mode of reading – or scanning – that blocks any thought of the text as unfolding in and through the time of interpersonal discourse. The same goes for much OULIPO-influenced poetry where interest is focused on lexical games or on wordplay at the level of the signifier and where this very often works to exclude any larger

²⁴ Davie 2004, p. 132

²⁵ Davie 2004, p. 135

²⁶ Brooks 1956, Wimsatt 1954 and 1976, Ransom 1941

²⁷ Wimsatt 1954

appeal to contexts of thought, knowledge or experience beyond the 'words on the page'.²⁸ If that phrase echoes the 'old' New Critical insistence on readings that remained strictly within autonomist bounds then the echo is hardly accidental.

As I said earlier, there is not much hope of conjoining a radical poetics with a radical politics if the former entails a severance of signifier from signified, sign from referent, or textual from extra-textual realms of discourse. The 'revolution of the signifier' was heady stuff and elicited some truly brilliant writing from a few highly gifted individuals like Roland Barthes. But it can now be seen as a revolution that never came to terms with its own art-based rather than discourse-oriented approach. Post-structuralism was always a self-defeating enterprise because it staked its claim to a world-transformative, revolutionary programme for the reading of (among other things) fiction and poetry on the false premise that this could be achieved by severing the tie between word and world.²⁹ Coming to reject that misplaced belief while acknowledging how 'theory' sharpened our critical, philosophical, and readerly perceptions is not at all the sign of a late-Wordsworthian retreat into social-political conservatism. Rather it is to recognise, with the benefit of late-gained experience, that certain of poetry's most important functions depend on its not giving up resources – such as rhyme and metre – that make of it, in Davie's precisely stated sense, a 'special kind of discourse'.

When Empson chides Eliot for spoiling Donne's poetry, or spoiling the experience of it for readers told not to take serious notice of Donne's ideas, he is speaking up strongly in defence of that 'special kind of discourse'.³⁰ It is 'special' not at all in the 'special interest' or 'restricted access' sense but in so far as it finds room for a great range of human experiences, from the sensual to the cerebral, with connections between them going by way of metaphor, analogy, structuring conceit, and all the formal devices brought into play by formalist poets. This description is a good fit for Empson's own poems, or those of them – the best-known, mostly early ones – written at a time when he was, by his own account, 'imitating Donne with love and wonder'. What he took from Donne and adapted to his own purposes was an advanced knowledge of the current physical sciences, a 'conceited' (intellectually precocious) style, a high valuation of enlightened modernity, and – consistent with that – a distinctly qualified respect for the achievements of literary Modernism. That these latter two movements were often at odds in political, cultural, and intellectual terms was an issue that registered increasingly with Empson as literary academe swung in, for the most part, behind the high

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²⁸ Terry (ed.) 2020

²⁹ For a range of views see Attridge, Bennington and Young (eds.) 1989, Eagleton 2008.

³⁰ Empson 1993

Modernist banner. Indeed he spent much of his time from the mid-1960s on in a spirited defence of humanism and rationalism against what he saw, rightly enough, as a creeping erosion of values widely shared in his earlier years but now under attack on multiple fronts.³¹

At that point the logico-semantic theorising of *Complex Words* gave way to a far more combative or gloves-off approach that tackled the malaise in its various guises from French Symbolism down. This is one reason why the complicated tale of 'Empson on Eliot' has so much to reveal about the twentieth-century background to present-day literary schisms and debates. It is a tale that starts out with the Empson of *Seven Types* who wrote some of the sharpest-minded and most sympathetic early criticism of Eliot's poetry as well as pretty much accepting Eliot's mythic but potent view of English poetic tradition. It ends just as tellingly with Empson's insistence, *contra* Eliot, that poetry is continuous with the widest range of human experience and interests, including those of science and (crucially) the critique of religious belief.³² I have rehearsed the tale here because my poems owe more to Empson, as poet and critic, than to anyone else and because I have attempted – hopefully with a few successes – to stick with that continuity-principle. This has meant keeping them so far as possible in touch with the contemporary life of the mind as manifest beyond the rather cramping regions of first-person lyric utterance. And it has also involved doing justice to the claims of a formalism aware of its part in extending and enabling, not restricting, that openness to the widest range of ideas and experience.

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³¹ See Empson 1987.

³² Empson 1993

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Time is a Word in Celan

Paul North

Abstract: Across his mature poetry, Paul Celan makes attempt after attempt to suspend, in a phenomenological manner, the meaning and concept of time, so as to discover new temporal syntheses that are not equivalent to successivity. He does this chiefly through word-compounds, literal correlatives of temporal syntheses. By mixing the word time with other, more mundane words, time's purity is compromised. Through this method, he demonstrates that time is a way of saying how things have happened, re happening, and will happen, a modifier of existents, a determination of the manner in which things hang around, interact with one another, vanish. Celan discovers in Husserl's phenomenology a potential category name for time as manner, "Zeithof," "timecourtyard" or "timehalo."

Keywords: time, temporality, Celan, German poetry, poetry and philosophy, phenomenology, Husserl, Heidegger, Augustine

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1. On the Timeword

The timeword in Celan, it is an obsession, a repetition, a worry, and, I think, a project. In certain locales it comes up, often near the end of a poem, just as frequently in conjunction with another word as on its own. How does Celan dare to conjoin the word time—*Zeit*—to other, lesser words, empirical words like "Staub," "dust"? *Zeitstaub*. How does he dare at other points to make time into a modifier, subordinate and ancillary to other operations, like "Zeitoffen,"¹ "open in a time-ish way" or "open to time"? We are used to time having aspects or parts—lengths, moments, periods. We are used to time being applied like a lens to areas of life: worktime and playtime, time to leave, time left.

A timeword is different than the concept of time. Of unique concepts of time there are indeed only a handful, distinct from one another and well-worked out, in the central strands of European-style thinking. Of writers who handle time as word, merely and purely a word but also boldly as a word, there seem to be even fewer. So far, the list includes two. Time is a word in Celan; and time is a word in Augustine, a word and not—yet, or not at all—a concept.

That is to say, Augustine on one hand and Celan on the other—not exclusively, surely, but explicitly and remarkably in ways I want to describe—stand toward time as Beckett stands toward consciousness.

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¹This can be read in a number of ways, and Celan himself does so. It can be an opening to an addressee who is not yet and still coming—"The poem waits (=stands open) to its absent – komming and thereby futural – you" ("Das Gedicht wartet (= steht offen) auf sein abwesendes – kommendes und damit künftiges – Du") (*Meridian*, 136). Or it can be an opening to time itself (*Meridian*, 113). In 2006, Sandro Zanetti asked what allows "the poem" to be spoken of "as a time-open shape" ("als einer zeitoffenen Gestalt") ("zeitoffen," 73). One answer he proposes is *Chronographie*, the particular way that writing, *Schrift*, is open to other times and receivers (119).

They decide not to believe in the thing, even if they keep on using it as a figure, as an empty figure. They refuse to believe, Augustine in at least one important textual moment, and Celan more and more across his poems I think, that the word says anything much, least of all that there is a concept somehow attached to it. Once they accept that the concept is empty, these two treat time as an empty figure, which, nonetheless, when it is said, is an event of language, as something that is said despite the absence of a concept.

"Time" is an utterly familiar thing to say and also a word from the highest orders of educated discourse. How many grand pronouncements of banal wisdom mention time? How many pedestrian clichés are there that depend on it? How many different day to day activities get attached to it in order that some sort of image can be associated with this thing that claims to regulate our activities? These are already, in everyday speech, before or beyond a concept. What do all these sayings do to time? How can it be separated from these uses and abuses and isolated into a metaphysical, mental, or physical thing? In American English at least, time flies. It also runs and flows and crawls. It is a quantity you can have too much or too little of, a stock you can save or spare or lose, and a place or position you can be ahead of or behind. It has a face and hands, it is ripe like a fruit, and full like a bottle, and pressed like a grape for its precious drops. Time can take almost any preposition as a determining particle: it can be out, off, in, to, ahead of, behind, on. It can be counted, marked, and, importantly, it can be told. Amidst the junk heap of culture in which time gets a mess of conflicting co-designations, one of the actions that is reportedly done with it is: telling. But telling time is not telling about time, is not saying "time" with any sense of its true meaning. Heidegger made this clear, as Husserl did as well, and Augustine too. Telling time does not require telling anything about time. Rather, you carry out an operation under the name of time, and this "carrying out" does not bring you any closer to saying what is designated under that name. The name flees from the named; it seems to speak on the condition that no one ask into the concept.

In philosophical writing, the word "time" on its own belongs to well-known conceptual circuits. Time stands alongside the other great philosophemes, holding its own with the likes of "space," "soul," "world," "being," "truth," and "existence," a list that in one philosophy or another comes at last to time. In some modern systems of thought, time is the single titan that holds all the others, that holds them in place or holds them together, depending on the system. Time is a medium, milieu, a principle of principles that since Kant is supposed to protect us against the metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties of the other great concepts, the ideas. It is momentarily supposed to ward off the greatest unknowables, like God and eternity. Time is the real for all these idealities, or so it seems. In critical philosophy, time accomplishes a number of

functions internal to the system. It reconciles the empirical with the intellectual world; it makes us believe that despite our finitude we can say true things about experience. What makes us able to say these true things is that the final basis of experience is time and we are made of time, we are the medium and the message. Saying time with modern philosophy, we seem to be saying quite a lot.

For example, when you ask the question of being and the question within that question is what is the meaning of being, the answer you want to give is time. There are deep reasons for wanting this answer, as deep as the reasons for which Heidegger cannot give the answer directly in *Being and Time*. He wants to say being means time, but in the end he finds he cannot. In the end, I think, to put it very coarsely and without going into the details, although they are truly interesting, the difficulty is that by Heidegger's own logic, "time" has neither being nor meaning, since it is the guarantor of the meaning and being of everything else, and so it stands at the edge of sense. It can't respond to philosophical questioning because it is the ultimate answer to all of them. Time gives sense to the modes of existence and the one position in existence that can't be given sense is time. Time gives meaning and leaves itself destitute. To add a sentence *apres la lettre* to *Being and Time*: *Der Sinn von Sein ist an sich sinnlos. Zeit hat keinen Sinn*. You cannot pretend time has a sense, because it is the sine qua non of sense; time is the non of sense, nonsense, in a way not so different from Kant's picture of time in the *First Critique*.

There time suffers from high indeterminacy, since it transcends all the other transcendentals. Time does have an explicit meaning — it means "succession." About this meaning, however, little else can be said, no other determinations can be given, because all other determinations are determined, in turn, by their relation to successivity. The only figure in all our known world that isn't subject to successivity is the concept, object, operation—time itself.

Our normal intuition of successivity is, however, spatial and not temporal. Kant notes this sentence in the margin of the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*: —"The schema of time a line" (271 note a). The image could not be clearer perhaps. But the sense could not be more obscure. Specifically, it is hard to see how a schema solves the problem of saying what time is, since a schema is itself supposed to correspond to "the transcendental time-determination." How do you make a line? You stretch a point in time. An argumentative circle ensues, which without serious interpretive labor leaves time rather less determined than more. The schema of time a line, the meaning of schema: time. Time is time is time. It cannot be described, analyzed, conceptualized, or modified by anything else. A similar difficulty can be glimpsed in Kant's discussions of the "inner sense," and also when he derives the table of categories from a table of judgments, whose specific characters derive in turn from

their relationships to successivity. Perhaps it is useful to represent the difficulty like this: it is easy to make an image for yourself of the manner in which something is “next to” something else, but it would not be not so easy, if you could shut off your spatial intuition, to make an image of something “after” something temporally.

Time is a hole in the philosophical tapestry of concepts. When time is spoken or written by philosophers, they may be pointing at experienceable effects, but the deduction of a form or concept stalls. This is not so dissimilar to moments time is spoken or written on the street or in the office. Time determines almost everything, but time itself is under- or undetermined. What are we doing when we say “time”? What is being said?

Let me say a few things about time as it is said at a few moments in Husserl’s phenomenological philosophy. Phenomenology has as much claim as any school of thought to give content and meaning to time, and perhaps a bit more. Because its objective is to present the structure of human experience, which is to say experience tout court—in its estimation—without departing from human experience, whatever it does say about time has to be because the philosopher experiences time in some way. The great boon of phenomenology is its method, one instrument of which is the modification of attitude of the scientist that Husserl sometimes calls *epoché*. This often gets glossed as “suspension” in English, and this is not wrong, but in all its forms the epochal suspension is in service of leading back, *Zurückführung*, to the structure in question, to get a special experience of it. In his lectures on time, Husserl proposes to do what he does for other phenomena to time. But is time a phenomenon?

We seek to bring the *a priori of time* to clarity by exploring the consciousness of time, by bringing its essential constitution to light, and by exhibiting the apprehension-contents [*Auffassungsinhalte*] and act-characters that pertain—perhaps specifically—to time and to which the *a priori* temporal laws [*die apriorischen Zeitcharaktere*] essentially belong. Naturally, I mean by this laws of the following obvious sort: that the fixed temporal order is a two-dimensional infinite series, that two different times can never be simultaneous, that their relation is a nonreciprocal one, that transitivity obtains, that to every time an earlier and a later time belong, and so on. —So much by way of general introduction.

(*On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time* 10)

In other words, the experience of time that you will have, if you learn with Husserl, along the course of the “Lectures on Internal Time Consciousness” of 1905 and its precursors and paralipomena, to go behind the everyday saying “time,” is an experience of a very determinate structure, already known in advance by the philosopher. This is the

complete antipode of what Augustine will say and Celan will say, when they say time. Augustine will say effectively the reverse: I can do time but I cannot think it. Celan will try to say time otherwise. Augustine's starting point will be to admit that the time-word is self-suspending. You say it and its sense goes away. You have its sense and it stops functioning. The going away of time's sense is my topic here.

It is not Husserl's topic however—whatever happens when you or I say time, a phenomenologist can suspend the saying and our everyday experiences tied to it and follow its "Auffassungsinhalte" back to their essential "Zeitcharaktere." True, this is the common way Husserl proceeds with any phenomenon. He moves from the way humans do some phenomenon day to day to its essential characteristics. The epochal movement strips away the emptiness or indeterminacy that marks the word in the mouths and pens of the masses. And yet, when it comes to time, the phenomenologist does not move from an experiential fullness and cognitive emptiness—the natural attitude—to an essence internal to the experience. When it turns its attention to time, phenomenology fills up or better fills in what is missing in the experience of time. Is this, I want to ask, still phenomenology? It is remarkable that Husserl, who mentions Augustine's famous passage on the self-erasure of time, and Heidegger, who makes even more of the passage, ignore this fundamental fact. Augustine tells us that the timeword says little to nothing. It is remarkable that an experience that is not an experience, a poor experience or an un-have-able experience should become so crucial to a philosophical movement that claims to move from experience back to experience in its essential outlines.

When Husserl gets to the determination of time, a frustration arises. It is not the only frustration in this long and complicated text but I want to let it stand as an example of a class of issues I have already named: time determines but is itself less than determined. The frustration about time in the fourth section of the 1905 lectures is the following. Husserl puts this in terms of what time determines, the temporal object. He calls the determinations of a temporal object, such as a musical melody, the object's "temporal determinations" (15). It is a little confusing to speak this way, but I want to recall that I am interested in the determination of time (in this case the consciousness of time, not time beyond consciousness, in an intersubjective zone or in "nature"). Husserl is interested in temporal determinations, that is, what are the determinate characteristics of a temporal object such that we can recognize it, think it, describe it, and be certain about its form, all the while conceding there is something doing the determining that is time. It should be obvious that what I want depends on what Husserl wants. The determination of "time" depends on the determinateness of the temporal object. That is to say, if time is consciousness of a temporal object, then the attributes of the object are the attributes of which

consciousness is conscious. Time consciousness gets its attributes from its objects. A more phenomenological way to say this is: time-objects are intentional structures.

The determinateness of time-consciousness depends on the determinateness of its intended objects. This dependency is what distinguishes phenomenology from psychology on one side, or pure logic on another, what makes it about experience in its fulness and richness, rather than about mere mental effects or consistent rule systems. Thus, if the object is not determinate, the consciousness of it will not be, and time—in my estimation—will be less than satisfying as a word—maybe not a word as we usually understand it.

Evidence is in the way Husserl presents a time object, early on in the lectures. A time object has a special kind of existence. It exists in such a way that its determinations alter. A time object can be distinguished from a non-time object (although ultimately all objects will have to enter the flow of consciousness) because its determinations “alter essentially.” We can make this adjustment. It isn’t hard to do. When we experience the essential determinations of something altering, it is a time object. So, a melody that starts on note A will by necessity change to another note, B; its determination as a particular position on a scale will give way to another determination. Here time is not empty — it is filled, with alteration. A becomes not-A, it is emptied out of a specific determination but always fills again with another, this the essence of music and by extension of all time objects. The frustration here is that you cannot ever say, under time-consciousness, that A has happened. There is no note A because in this picture of a continuum of alterations the transitions are utterly undetermined. This is not exactly how Husserl puts it, but the fact can be read between the lines.

Only the determination ‘now’ constitutes an exception. The A that now exists is certainly an actual A. The present does not alter, but on the other hand it does not determine either. If I append the now to the representation of a man, the man acquires no new characteristic thereby, nor is any characteristic designated in him. (15)

A continuum of alteration satisfies the requirement, for time objects, that their determinations alter, but you cannot say what is being altered, since a now is undetermined. Lacking here what is present, all-too-present in Hegel, a theory of determination through difference, Husserl loses the moment when he posits the continuum. A discontinuous object, in contrast, may be highly determined, but you cannot account for the transitions of its alterations. A is A while A is A and only while A is A. When A becomes not-A, then A cannot be said to be A in isolation. In other words, you can either see time as punctiform or as continuous, but not both. It can either be indeterminate, moving through determinations

that have no stability—which infinitesimal point between A and B would count as the right determinate point for measurement? – or determinate and motionless. Under the punctiform view, each note is an object with characteristics, but they do not alter themselves or transmute into one another. Under the continuous view, the notes move into one another but you can never isolate one or even really say “this experience is music.” This is not music’s problem of course, but philosophy’s.

These are examples of difficulties in the concept of time. To confront one of these difficulties, Kant in the First Critique attempts to add mathematics, to bring the metaphysical concept of time into line with the limits of cognition. He says: the intuition that corresponds to time is a line—here the image time takes for consciousness is geometric, and in this way it makes time space. Something similar happens when not the intuition but the concept of time is at stake, whose expanded logos is “succession.” Time here collapses into space before and after are essentially “next to” plus direction. But there are more difficulties around the concept as well. Where the image of time is a line, the concept of time is a number sequence, is pure and simple “successivity.” The next difficulty then is reflexive, to wit: you need time to construct succession. Successivity by itself is not enough to be the model or the transcendental meaning of time. It has to happen, and happen with restriction, that is with necessity. So there will always be a mysterious thing, time, that allows, no forces, something to follow another thing. So in fact, in the First Critique there are at least two difficulties, one where time is not itself, is really only space, and another where the concept time requires successivity in order to define itself, but the meaning of time, successivity, requires real existing time to put it into necessary motion. The first leaves time not fully individualized as a concept, the second leaves time in a kind of empty reflex, like a mirror before a mirror.

These divagations prompt me to ask: what does it mean to keep saying time, even though its metaphysical and theological stains have never been and perhaps can never be washed out? More than this, time has been the very concept upon which a theological view of reality was supposed to be overthrown, time, as opposed to eternity. It is obviously crucial for our self-understanding to be able to say, not just say but mean, not just mean but say with a history-bending gesture of strong meaning, time. Instead of doing this, the tradition stutters – keeps saying time – but in an unhealthy repetitiveness.

It may not be an accident that difficulties saying “time” are addressed explicitly somewhat outside the precincts of philosophy, strictly speaking. The first place stands beyond disciplinary or genre classification, that is, Augustine’s *Confessions*. The possibility of time’s meaninglessness, and the problematic gesture it is to say “time” anyway, gets addressed when a human subject confronts God. The passage is well known. It is less well known that it paraphrases Plotinus

at *Enneads* 3.7.1.1–13, and thus is invested in the source's Platonizing mood. "What therefore is time?" Augustine begins his inquiry with a "what" question—*quid est enim tempus* (*Confessionem*, XI.14, p. 236)—and such a beginning, such a way of starting to say "time," reinforces the conviction he already has when he begins to explore the topic, not a Platonizing conviction at all, that the problem and the solution lie with the understanding, and, again at the beginning of the investigation of time, the understanding is supposed to be of a thing, a what. Time's whatness is what is in question. "enim," "therefore" refers to previous talk about God and how God could have created time, since God is eternal, and given this absurd negation of his own mode, time, how it could itself be, in its essence, both eternal, that is divine, and passing. The conflict between regimes, divine and human, localize in this dilemma. Time should be human all-too human, but in order for it to be, it has to be itself eternal—an eternal medium of passing away. This is not the difficulty Augustine will address with his famous question, but it is the background for it.

We shouldn't forget the *Confessions*' structure of address. The book is a silent speech between Augustine's soul and God. Readers are not the addressees but interlopers. Only by virtue of having written down this silent, private, most private of all, one-sided dialogue, can readers overhear it, in a precarious and doubtless sinful position, as interlopers. What is first overheard by readers in this section is the question: *quid est enim tempus*, what therefore is time. Augustine's soul speaks this to itself, with confidence that God is listening. I would prefer to take this as a general image. Whenever a human being says "time," I would like to propose: there is this structure. The word is said like a prayer, in reality to oneself, in hopes of a confirmation, a confirmation on one hand that someone is listening, and on the other hand that the words are the right ritual words to propitiate the one, the real, the eternal. Whenever time is said, then, it is something like an offering, an obeisance, and at the same time a question—not "are you listening" but "is this the right word"? Or else it is a petition: please tell me what is being said when I say this word-nonword.

Note that the passage in the *Confessions* is not asking for an entity that would correspond to the name time. Augustine is not expecting an answer like the one Plato gives in the *Timaeus*, that time is a "moving image of eternity." Augustine discloses the kind of what he thinks it is. It is a what of sense, not an object to be pointed out; not a reference, but an explainable to be explained—at the extreme would be a worry that it was, in the end, unexplainable. Thus he follows the first question with a second: *quis hoc facile breviterque explicaverit* (236), who could easily and briefly explain it? "What is time" asks for compact material to be loosened up, the windings of a process to be uncoiled, a single word to be amplified with more, other words, a name to become a discourse. The second question deviates from the first also in asking not what but who,

who would be equipped to do the uncoiling? This is a more desperate utterance, more than a prayer—or along with a prayer it hints for a second at the passionate need motivating it. The question is a remark, a cry for God's help with a human predicament that only a super-human could teach them how to talk their way out of. The who also indicates an irony. Who could possibly—the answer is: not myself, and not you, readers. If you claim understanding already, you are probably not the one to respond to my cry. That is, the question also indicates that explanation might not be the right way to talk about time. This constitutes the confession: the thing that is so difficult, so contradictory, created, definitely, but impossibly created, can be brought into our lingua franca, can become fodder for a transaction between yourself and God and between yourself and others. It can come in, but only without explanation. His complaint is that, of all the words he can do this with, the founding concept of human existence will not yield to brevity or ease.

The solution is not long-windedness and difficulty. He does not offer, in place of a puzzle, a theory of time. The famous passage asks for the what and the who of explanation, but it indicates very soon that it is most concerned not with knowledge or understanding but with speech. The third question is decisive: *quis hoc ad verbum de illo proferendum vel cogitatione comprehenderit* (236). “Who could comprehend this even by cognition, uttering about that “ad verbum” (my translation). The condition for understanding time is a condition of speech, of saying. If you say it right, you can understand it. Understanding is only useful if it speaks “in precise words”—*ad verbum*. This is what is missing when Augustine, in the day to day, says “time.” Time's problem is that it has not yet been said *ad verbum*, to the word. Time may be said, but it is not yet a word, it has not moved toward words that will make it more precise. Augustine steps from understanding and explanation to words and the precision they bring. As he moves closer to the word, however, Augustine finds that comprehension moves farther from him. For the history of philosophical attempts to give “time” its words, this counts as a big discovery.

Augustine's discovery is not mentioned by Heidegger or Husserl, who cite this passage almost as a talisman—. Time has not or perhaps cannot be said *ad verbum*, unfolded in the right words.² You can say *ad verbum* a multitude of other doctrines, but “who can speak of that [time] *ad verbum*?” No doctrine of *tempus* is precise enough in its

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2The requirement to speak *ad verbum* can be understood here, I think, similar to the way it is used in the highly sophisticated treatise on language that anticipates semiotics, *De doctrina Cristiana*. There the important phrase “ad verbum” is used several times in one of its more usual senses: to remember something “ad verbum,” to bring it back to mind to the very word, verbatim, meaning without loss. Knowing *ad verbum* is crucial for Christian doctrine, as you can imagine. Doctrine's truth lies in large part in not deviating from scripture. You can say something other than scripture, promulgate a doctrine, so long as it remains *ad verbum*, *ad scripturam*. So long as the words keep scripture strictly in memory. With that in mind, the discussion of time in *Confessions XI*, becomes more decisive. *De doctrina christiana* Book 4 §68.

saying. It will always be vague. Vague speech is the linguistic correlative of the emptiness or puzzlement in the metaphysics of time. Vague or imaginative—a movement *ad tempum* is a movement *ab verbo*, away from the literal, into flights of fancy that Augustine, already, wants to avoid. Nevertheless, we learn here that, as something said, time moves away from explication's strict requirement to add and not lose determination. Further, as if the requirement to move toward words, to speak of time while only adding determinacy, were not enough, Augustine makes the famous comment that nonetheless we talk about it all the time as though it were familiar and known, *familiarius et notius in loquendo* (236). There is no end to speaking and hearing about it, and yet, when someone asks, you cannot answer. Time is, for Augustine, something said and something heard, among people. But he stops here. He is one of the very few who refuses to give it an image, a concept, or a corresponding substance. What he does say is this: time wants to be spelled out in words to the precise length and breadth that would satisfy comprehension, and what it gets day to day is mere speaking without saying, much. When time is said, saying as determining withdraws. Saying time withdraws determination, leaving an under- or undetermined speech effect.

A movement *ad tempum* is a movement *ab verbo*, away from the literal, away from the precise, away from the punctiform identification of this with that, and towards language of a much looser sort. The easy speakability, yes, the downright loquaciousness of the timeword is, in the famous passage, an allegory of its unsayability. This is what everyday language knows. Saying "time," "tempus" talks a drifting speech, whose intention may simply be to fill the air. To approach time produces a retreat of the word from its designating or meaning function to its notional function, a word's way of being familiar and purely familiar, a purely practical maneuver, a placeholder for the lack of understanding that it represents and, as well, perhaps, a backdoor to God, as a prayer for meaningful existence, on one hand, and also as a nonsensical creation not even God could explicate, if explication, the opposite of creation, means making knowable instead of abandoning a fictum to be used by humans as they will. Instead of responding to his own questions, instead of proffering a who that could say time or a what that could uncoil time into its most literal literality, Augustine's immortal passage demonstrates the futility of the question form in proximity to time—a formal consequence of Augustine's prose to which the path of *Being and Time* testifies, even if it doesn't admit it. Time belongs to the everyday chatter that Heidegger claims to be canceling and raising to a higher meaningfulness through it. Yet questioning language will never approach the timeword, insofar as asking's intentional structure, to quote phenomenology, is to determine.

2. Unsayng Time

If someone asks me, I can't tell them what time is, but I can tell them what kind of time Augustine is worried about. He is worried about the kind of time that passes. What preoccupies him is the time that comes full of that peculiar, paradoxical phantom, the now, a now, nows, nows and more nows. "...if nothing passed there would be no past time; if nothing were approaching, there would be no future time; if nothing were, there would be no present time" (Hackett 242). In this part of the text, the concern is with the now in its fullness and vitality. Like Husserl, and for that matter Aristotle, "now" is a difficulty, perhaps the unique difficulty of time. There is some affinity between a "now" as a unit or element of time and the difficulty determining what time is *ad verbum*. If time is in the now, so to speak, if it is punctiform like this, it can easily be determined. If time passes, is in passing, there is little to hold onto that would be enough like an entity, that would have anything like a form that could be described or an essence that could be said, without having to constantly revise your saying. It would need a saying that passed as quickly and as constantly as it did, and not only a saying but a way of saying. Language, as speech, would pass as well, in a double movement with time—a particular madness that may be our everyday madness after all.

There is another choice, it's an obvious and probably silly one: to imagine time without a now. It is time to try this, time to give up on the phantasm, emanating from Aristotle and elsewhere, in the Kairos and its reflectionless seize-the-day-morality. Abandon the now, the instant, the present—this would entail never again saying "when" or "until," not to mention "now," or even "later," refusing point-like punctures in a flow, or an end or limit like a drawn line. These and other tools for determination would have to be allowed to fall away, permitting a caesura of time rather than banking on caesuras within it. It is time for unlimited time. Revisions of 'time' change it drastically, but to a one (Bergson excepted) they don't let fall the now and its troubles. Husserl and Heidegger don't drop it, even when they revise time as flow, the one adding a complex structure in which nows echo together into a flow, the other freezing the flow altogether but keeping its vectors, past, present, future. Inner time consciousness has a now without which the absolute flow of consciousness would have no impulses and no articulations, *Jetztpunkte, die herabsinken*;³ and ecstatic time has a now that can be seized to take a stand on existence, *Entschlossenheit*. Now is decisive for both, and for each, all decisiveness and determination depends on the mysterious, troublesome entity, now.

Although they don't let the now fall away, both phenomenologists have a practice of avoiding the time problem that is in any case linguistic. They substitute other words for the simple timeword "time." This is an

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3 §9, p. 28 English

interesting phenomenon, to be studied. Unlike the metaphysical tradition, and even the critical tradition, phenomenology doesn't like to let the word "time" stand on its own, as though it were an old man in need of propping up. Husserl says *Zeitbewusstsein* and Heidegger says *Zeitlichkeit*. They sneak up on old man time through subtle modifications. They add it to compounds and suffix it with qualifying particles. I like to think of this as a kind of "epoché" of time, a suspension of the difficulty through mixing time with other things. Neither Husserl nor Heidegger thematizes these compound and extended timewords as part of a necessary epoché of time, a suspension of chatter to move toward the effects it tries to name. This is what Augustine does with time in *Confessions XI*, thematize the need for a suspension of the word in order to better assess the hopes pinned on it and the effects that its particular emptiness produces.

Augustine announces a suspension of time, Celan carries it out. Augustine points out the speaking without saying, and Celan does what could be called unsaying the timeword. Celan does not do this just once, but many times, and in a variety of ways. Saying time in a variety of ways is itself a mode of suspension of its univocity and an attack on the ontological oneness that the name connotes in its history. Augustine leads time the concept back to the timeword. Celan leads the timeword, or timewords, into other sayings and mode of saying. In this respect, Celan is doing something similar to what Heidegger and Husserl also began to do, to experiment with complements to time, to propose that there are flavors of time colored by experiences and objects.

I want to suggest that timewords carry out two main tasks across Celan's poetry, and in some of his prose as well. To say "time" without saying anything much and to imagine a kind of time without a now, that old difficulty of difficulties.

Scanning for timewords quickly across Celan's poems, in a type of attention we could call diagonal, produces dizzying but important effects. The first effect I would call allowing time to empty of meaning. Here *Zeit* is said, there it is mentioned, then it is quoted, then paraphrased, until at one point "speech gives way to sound."⁴ These are procedures for suspending time. There are others as well. For instance, the statement "it is time," *es ist Zeit* in the poem *Corona* written in Vienna in the late 1940s, carries out an effective reduction of time to the timeword. *Corona* calls its own time; it calls time and calls for time as something that is called upon. *Es ist Zeit*. A notorious chant. *Es ist Zeit* is a quote from everyday speech, and also a version of the first line of Rilke's *Herbsttag* and its address to God, "Herr: es ist Zeit,"⁵ which itself is a perversion of psalm 119.126, which in Luther's German says "Es ist Zeit, daß der HERR handelt" and

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4 Here I am quoting Michael Levine in an unpublished conference paper delivered at Hebrew University, in the conference *Caesurae: Celan's Later Work*, November 12-14, 2019.

5 Felstiner 1995, p.54

turns the supplication of a servant into a command-like statement to God to punish lawbreakers. Timewords are used for many things. Be that as it may, "it is time" is first a quote of a quote. Soon it becomes a mention of itself, in the very same poem. You could say the phrase is repeated, but I prefer to say it is "said." Said here means being enunciated a second time, since the first time something is spoken it may be uttered, but only the second time, when it is referenced as a saying, is it properly "said." Saying is referencing as a saying, as having been said before. Perhaps "time" the timeword is the epitome of this effect. So far from being a thing, a substance, a created medium, a meaning, a concept, time gets its force by lacking a referent or a sense but nonetheless being said again and again. Time is a pure saying. It is a loquacious saying, in Augustine's sense, something you do with words leaning on a legend of meaning, an archaism growing older as it is repeated, moving farther and farther from its possible explanation and gaining currency and power as it does. There is so much to say about this empowering saying, but let us keep on the diagonal path across Celan's poems.

In an early line of the poem *Corona*, Celan has a job for time. There "time" is young, a fledgling thing. It can hardly walk. At that age it can be used in a poetic figure. Time is cracked from a nut, taught to walk, and returns back into its shell, and this indicates a game of lovers, who have some power over time. They can start time at will; they can help it to move. What happens after that however does not seem to follow their plans.

Wir schälen die Zeit aus den Nüssen und lehren sie gehn:
die Zeit kehrt zurück in die Schale

We shell time from the nuts and teach it to walk;
time comes back again into its husk

Time is a hard nut. Even if you manage to crack it, and certainly lovers are more able to than philosophers or priests, if they manage to crack it, and as if it were a newborn, teach it to walk, rather than to run or fly, time has its own mind. It returns to its shell. Time prefers to hide.

The last cluster of lines in the poem *Corona*, come back to the hardness of the nut.

es ist Zeit, daß man weiß!
Es ist Zeit, daß der Stein sich zu blühen bequemt,
daß der Unrast ein Herz schlägt.
Es ist Zeit, daß es Zeit wird.

Es ist Zeit.

It is time that one knew!
It is time for the stone to get used to blooming,
that unrest beats a heart.
It is time that it becomes time.

It is time.⁶

The scene appears laden with import. Something is supposed to arrive, an object of time. Time's object is being called for. It is time that x. An event is supposed to happen, a now—at last. At last the now arrives, or is called upon. The word “time” in this phrase means “is supposed to.” Its meaning is an ought, not an is. “It is time that” communicates an urgency and points to the importance of an object for the speaker. It points to the need, the desire, it becomes a prayer for a medium of the object's coming. There ought to be a medium that ought to make the unnatural state of affairs, that stones bloom, the new nature; the human heart ought to give up its automatism and let itself be swung by unrest. While these objects are still on the horizon, events that are supposed to land on the time, happen on time, the call “it is time” is already also, in addition to calling for events to happen, calling for the medium—calling for time to happen, to be happening. It calls for a now of transformation, the elusive desideratum of theories of time. The repeated phrase, the call—“es ist Zeit”—is the calling of a now, a now called upon to happen, to come, to transit into being. Indeed, the little sign of a big transformation of nature, the moment when stones start to bloom and that becomes their habit, cannot happen until time happens. Then, almost as an aftereffect, the messianic urgency flows away. Said once, said twice, thrice, more—the phrase becomes a mention of itself. More than this, more than a demotion to a less forceful, less direct, mode of speech, the call gets answered by itself, as though it had an echo. It is time—it is time. Time is made in an unhealthy repetitiveness, but expressly so, in the poem.

This is the effect as the poem goes on, to empty out the messianic now until it merely echoes back our wishes. For anything to happen to us on earth, you learn that the now-time has to be called for, first. Now must come before the transformation comes. Now has to respond before anything else can be called upon. Now precedes even the messiah. This is a deeply categorial thought, almost on par with Hegel or Kant. The framework of transformation is the now that gives space for any happening, an apriori requirement without which nothing could ever be seen to be different. And, in this poem at least, the now does not come. Is this because the transcendental structure of timeliness is—out of service? absent? Or is it an old fantasy or legend whose time has, qua legend, finally come?

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⁶Translations of Celan are mine—PN.

Es ist Zeit, dass es Zeit wird. Celan has the temerity to write this line, which is close in its form to a joke. What is intended in the first half is made into nothing in the second half. Any force left in the call for time, by this line, is gravely weakened. The call has fallen far from its initial high urgency. It has fallen from a call to a mention to a wish. It has fallen from a call for a state of affairs to a wish for a time structure in which states of affairs could come about cleanly. From a wish it has become a saying, the saying of a saying. The poem writes out in a repetition: here is where someone would want a “now.” Which reads as: this is the kind of thing someone says who has this view of time. Just here, that someone is left with the saying alone, a saying without a thing said.

What could be less urgent, less promising, than the final utterance, which works as a notification that the call has been spoken but whatever it wanted was not forthcoming. After all the calls, a whimper: “Es ist Zeit.” Although it may not have been the task, the effect, over the course of these sayings, is step by step to unsay the familiar saying. Unsay is not saying. Not saying something preserves it in the inner chamber of a language for a future in which it can be brought out once again. Unsay is a direct, rather violent act in which a word is said with the full force of its historical meaning, but what it says in a language’s archive of sayings is, through linguistic procedures alone, suspended. This at least is the hope.

Celan apes a history of time philosophy across the poem’s final lines: philosophy says it, and says it again, celebrating the discovery of time, each time definitively, each time awaiting another theory to unseat and best it. Looked at from galaxies away, this procedure of philosophy sounds like: here is time, here is time, here is time. In philosophy, it is always time for time. A cult with a single idol meets its exhaustion in the last line, which acts, as I said, like an unsaying. Although not codified by linguists, unsaying is a real mode of speech, though it is a highly negative one. Just as you can say, you can also unsay. In Celan’s practice, exemplified in this poem, unsaying uses a saying to bring to an end a particular use of a saying. This should not be confused with silence, or nonsense, although the latter is closer to what happens here. Silence is always metaphysical.

I want to turn, in this diagonal march across Celan’s corpus, to another poem, written much later, that expressly quotes a philosophical account of time. One way to address the empty, conflicting and at times contradictory, vague and still alluring talk about time is to unsay time as now. This Celan did, consciously or not, in *Corona*. Another way is to invest in other images, that conform neither to flow nor to punctiform punctures. One thing is true: under time philosophy that insists on the preposterous dichotomy and impossible union of flow and point, phenomena have to come either as determinate flows or as punctiform happenings. There are only rarely other alternatives (Bergson, again, comes to mind).

In a *Hof*, phenomena mill around, neither going nor staying, not fully happening, at least not in a blaze of intensity so that you could say they had definitively occurred, and not taking shape suddenly all at once at a particular impression or point. Importantly, the sovereign is excluded from Celan's *Hof*, a word that refers to the architectural space of an interior outside, the courtyard, and also to the political space of a royal court. No doubt, in temporal matters, the sovereign is "now." In a *Zeithof* the sovereign "now" is closed out, refused. Reading diagonally across Celan's archive, the *Zeithof*, this word, this evocation of another alternative shape of time, is written in poems very late. It comes up in two poems in the posthumously published collections *Lichtzwang* and *Schneepart*.⁷ Variations on this word and this shape are also found in the late typescripts that together carry the title "Zeitgehöft," which also include poems related to his trip to Israel in October 1969.

Reading diagonally, one of the poems in this late typescript, "Erst wenn ich dich," could be said to rewrite "Corona." If it does, it also leads the earlier poem back to an intention it did not know it had. Pierre Joris translates "Zeitgehöft," the title of the typescript in which "Erst wenn ich dich" stands, as "Timehalo," which helps move the reading toward what *Corona* may have been after. In that poem, *Corona*, time had a halo, you could say, looking back from the far removed spirit of the late typescripts. "Time" was, in the earlier poem, the hallowed structure that preceded and made possible, paradoxically, the messianic arrival. More holy even than the messiah himself was time, then—the messiah depended on it to bring about a now, so that he could step into the world. Here, more than twenty years later, time has no halo, no corona. Time is a halo in the sense of being halo-shaped rather than a punctiform line. In being halo-shaped it has no halo itself, no more than it has a now or a flow. It comes in the shape of a halo, and not a holy one like a corona or crown, of thorns or light. A halo is a simple shape, but it is also somewhat less than a shape. It is a vague area, unevenly lit, trailing off at the edges, roughly hovering around something it is not. The timeword *Zeitgehöft* is never used in these poems, but *Zeithof* is. In a *Zeithof*, the halo shape overlaps with the political or architectural court. Hof implies a zone of secondary dispersion, a circumradiation, as Plotinus called the partly lit penumbra outside the One.⁸ In both the corona and the court, royal power circulates in a dimmer, reflected mode. If the sovereign sits at the center, the Hof is everything that is not the sovereign; it is not power but conduits of power, it is not plenty but needs, wants, desires, not God but fallen angels. In "Corona," you could say, Celan was gesturing, before he knew it, toward a timepenumbra, which would light up once a substitute for "now" was found.

7 "Schwimmhäute" (GW Bd. 2 p. 297) and "Mapesbury Road" (GW Bd. 2 p. 365)

8 *The Enneads*, 5.1.6, p. 540; Loeb Greek edition, p. 30, line 28.

It has been noted that Celan read Husserl's lectures on time consciousness, edited by Heidegger, and he underlined the word *Zeithof* in §14 on the "reproduction of time objects (secondary memory)."⁹ Without getting into the philosophical details of Husserl's invention of this word, it is important to say that Heidegger has no *Hof* for his concept of time. Heidegger says time without a halo or a court shape. Celan had to go back to Husserl to encounter this shape, and effectively then he writes Husserl back into the story of phenomenological theories of time after Heidegger had erased the inventor of phenomenology's time thought from the dedication to *Being and Time*. This is to say, also, philologically, that in the time of the *Hof*, the past does not go away, is not superseded, and the future does not dominate interpretations of the present as it does in ecstatic time for Heidegger.

Celan's procedure around this word, *Zeithof*, and its variations, involves, I believe, a reduction of Heidegger back to Husserl, reinscribing the teacher back into the rebellious student's work and the Jew back into the German. It also involves a return from ecstatic time to a less problematic and more promising revision of the time concept. It further lets fall away time as a concept, as a philosophical desideratum, through a special speech procedure: condensation. The condensation, or to speak with Celan, the *Engführung* of "Zeit" together with another word is not extraordinary. Quite the contrary, it is an absolutely common phenomenon among the loquacious speakers of German, it has to be said, which, if Heidegger had listened to this way of saying "time" he might have discovered a less heroic stance for Dasein. Agglutination of other substances to the mythical time substance, this possibility in the language, is recycled by Husserl from the natural attitude into a technical modification of time, first and foremost in the compound word *Zeitbewusstsein*, and then, in a much more minor train of thought, for him, in *Zeithof*. Two compounds, two condensations of alien substances. The condensation of words allows Husserl to imagine unholy mixed substances that stretch what "time" says. Each instance when this sort of condensation happens, in everyday talk as well as in philosophical discourse, the time's claim to mean something on its own is slightly diminished, its high reputation slightly tarnished. Old man time learns to lean on younger words.

The condensed form of the word *Zeithof*, although borrowed from Husserl, is not unique in Celan's poems. Across the corpus diagonally a string of time condensations shapes up: *Zeitrot*, *Zeitleer*, *Unzeit*, *Herzzeit*, *zeitstark*, *Zeitwort*, *Zeitkörnern*, *Zeitstaub*, *Sternzeit*, *zeithin*, *Zeitenschrunde*, *Zeithof* (3x), *Zeitwinkel*, *zeiteinwärts*—showing a playful

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9 See *La Bibliothèque philosophique* p. 422 and *Celan Handbuch* p. 127. Sandro Zanetti discusses Celan's encounter with the word "Zeithof" in Husserl (145-6) and lists the appearances in poems of that and similar words (note 94, 146).

and inventive attitude toward time's old problems. What can't be solved might become better in solution with another, diluting its potency while inventing other modes. Leaning on other words makes holes in the concept and the thing—*Zeitlöcher*—threatening time's independence from what is supposed to happen in it. This seems to be the procedure here, to contaminate time with other phenomena, which become qualities that interfere in its autonomy and reduce it itself from a substance to a quality of other things.

What is the quality to which time is reduced, through condensation with another thing, in Husserl's timeword *Zeithof*?

Anything, regardless of history or geography can clamber around in a *Zeithof* so long as it appears as a background, so long as a sovereign "now" is excluded. In the "Lectures on Inner Time Consciousness," Husserl is stingy with details. Every perception has a courtyard surrounding it of protentions and retentions, anticipations of future events along with memories of past ones. The courtyard or garden or halo in which protentions and retentions reside together is not itself a protention or a retention, thus not like a future or past supporting a particular now. To fill in the details on the Husserlian timecourt, *Ideen I* is helpful. For every experience of a thing, there is also the experience of a court surrounding and supporting it. "Every perception of a thing has such a courtyard/halo of background intuitions" ("Jede Dingwahrnehmung hat so einen Hof von Hintergrundsanschauungen (oder Hintergrundsschauungen)") (*Ideen I* §35 71). Husserl characterizes the *Hof* in two further ways in *Ideen I*, as a *Hof der unbestimmtheit* (§84 190) and a *Hof von Inaktuellen* (§35 73)—a court/halo of indeterminateness and a court/halo of untimely things. These regions contain "'implicitly' conscious objects" ("'implizite' bewussten Gegenstände") (§35 72), with the proviso that no two experiences have "an absolutely identical 'court/halo'" ("einen absolut gleichen 'Hof'") (§83 187). In terms of time, then, in the unfolding of the "Hof" image that Husserl gives in *Ideen I*, a *Hof* would attend any object, hold indeterminate, non-now-like, background phenomena and effects, without a flow and without the now to anchor them, floating around as it were. To repeat, what happens in the *Hof* is and stays in a state of non-currency, implicitness, and indeterminacy—the very qualities that made time inaccessible to phenomenology in the first place. If you want to put a fine word on it, this, the *Hof*, when applied to time, says what time had always been in the philosophical tradition: lacking an intelligible now, having no details that would be explicit or vivid, and fully, wondrously indeterminate.

This deep critique of the time idea still needs to be better described with reference to Celan's poems. An indication has to suffice here. Where "Corona" had

der Mund redet wahr.
Mein Aug steigt hinab zum Geschlecht der Geliebten
the mouth speaks true.
My eye climbs down to the beloved's sex
And
Es ist Zeit, dass es Zeit wird.
Es ist Zeit
It is time that it becomes time.
It is time.

The late poem "Erst wenn ich dich," from the *Zeitgehöft* typescript, has:

glaubst du mir meinen Mund,
der klettert mit Spätsinnigem droben in Zeithöfen umher,
believe you my mouth,
it clambers around with the late-sensed up there in the timecourt,

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Volume 9
Issue 1

In the *Zeithof* of the poem, the plural *Zeithöfen*, at least two *Höfe* overlapping, where time is not halted, for that would imply an underlying now-flow, but is kept merely as whatever qualities go along with a haltless inner dispersion—which might include indeterminacy, out-of-date-ness, and merely implicit consciousness, that is, a species of unawareness, as phenomena from all dates clamber around, under an epoché of the now, signaled here by the lateness of what could sense it directly, *spätsinnig* with regard to the fullness of now, and regarding the other fullness as well, the fullness of decay. Nothing is now, nothing flows, either forward or backward. If someone asks, call the quality of what happens in *Hofzeit*: "umher"—"around-about-ish"—

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Volume 9
Issue 1

China, Workers and Poetry in (post)Communism

Claudia Pozzana

Abstract: The poetry of the Chinese migrant workers of the last two decades arises in the conditions of the zeroing of this communist promise and lives in nowadays era of the restoration of capitalist rule, based on the social and political non-existence of wage workers. The conditions of extreme social precariousness of the wage-earners, particularly the hundreds of millions of migrant workers, are manifest in their verses as an x-ray of the contemporary political desert and, at the same time, allow us to broaden our retrospective gaze on the workers-communism relationship.

Keywords: workers – communism – factory – poetry – migrant

The knot between workers and communism, which played a crucial role in modern politics, is undone. In an era that ended almost half a century ago, state communism of the twentieth century affirmed the entire political and social recognition of the working class under the leadership of the Communist Party. The poetry of the Chinese migrant workers of the last two decades arises instead in the conditions of the disappearance of this communist promise, and it lives in the era of the restoration of capitalist rule, based on the social and political inexistence of wage workers.

These are poems of great value, already recognized on the Chinese literary scene. These new poets, going against the tide of the extreme social precariousness of the wage-earners, particularly the hundreds of millions migrant workers, manifest an intense desire for artistic existence and remarkable stylistic skill. In addition to their intrinsic poetic value, their verses are an x-ray of the contemporary political desert and, at the same time, allow us to broaden our retrospective gaze on the relationship between workers and communism.

The situation of the workers in China has not always been the same as it is today. We can distinguish at least three eras. In the first fifteen years of the People's Republic, the worker-factory link was firmly inscribed in state communism under the uncontested leadership of the party. In the following decade, during the Cultural Revolution¹, under the pressure of a widespread malcontent of the workers toward the party, new forms of factory management were experimented aiming at enhancing the intellectual activity of the workers.

Multiple experiments limited the division of labor that reshaped the relationships between workers, technicians, and managers. "Workers' universities" and "study groups" of all kinds, literary, political, philosophical, and economic, were opened in the factories. On the horizon of those experiments there was Marx's vision of the difference between a longshoreman and a philosopher to be in principle inferior to that

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¹ Russo 2020.

between a hunting dog and a guard dog. The communist goal of limiting the division of labor in the factory required the intellectual elevation of the workers.

These experiments, and these Communist political goals, were suppressed by Deng Xiaoping as a source of absolute disorder and anarchy. The "reforms" first of all restored the capitalist order in the factory in increasingly intransigent forms. However, the tremendous political labor activism of the long 1960s around the world was by no means a series of mere insurrectionary convulsions. It was animated by the search for new possibilities for the political existence of the workers beyond the framework of state communism. The political experiments in the Chinese factories of those years altered in an unprecedented way the despotic structure of the modern factory, on which Marx's diagnosis remains decisive. In those attempts by the Cultural Revolution to reinvent the socialist factory, glimmers of democracy were opened.

In a seminar held together with the new worker poet, 于坚 Yu Jian², a great contemporary poet and professor of literature, recalled with acumen the atmosphere of a Chinese factory during the Cultural Revolution. The factory that he describes, based on his experience of a decade as a worker, is multifaceted but characterized by at least two original aspects: a significant relaxation of the rigid military discipline typical of the modern factory and, at the same time, the opening of surprising spaces of freedom for intellectual activities of all kinds.

"In my factory, there were people defined right-wing, former film actors, painters, dancers, various owners of the old society, descendants of capitalists and intellectuals. They were highly educated people, a kind of living textbook, and they became my teachers. I remember well the period in the factory. The funniest thing was when someone told a story; so many people told stories and put them together; they seemed like novels in which everyone was talking. There were frequent power cuts in that factory, so we had plenty of time to tell stories. Now, come to think of it, the factory was like a secret art school; it had revealed the identity of the coal-making machinery and equipment, but not the identity of the clandestine artistic activities. I remember that I had time to write poetry, sing, and play flute; there was painting, writing ancient poems, studying philosophy of science, and listening to the Voice of America. We also read Western authors from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, whose works circulated in private. I also read the poems of 食指 Shi Zhi³; I read the brochures of Robespierre, Herzen, and Chekhov. "

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2 Yu Jian 2015, p. 396.

3 Shi Zhi is a poet considered as the father of the contemporary *menglong* poets.

Yu Jian humorously recounts some particular conditions in his factory that favored his intellectual and artistic formation, such as the presence of educated (downgraded) workers or even the interruption of electricity that created some free time. Yet, that mental energy aiming at ancient and modern poetry, flute, painting, philosophy, and nineteenth-century European novels was the “rhizomatic” result of the experimental opening of those years, under the imperative of reinventing the socialist factory through mass intellectual mobilization.

Yu Jian effectively paints the climate of that intermediate decade in the factory, completely different from the current restoration of capitalist discipline and very far from the 1950s. However, Yu Jian himself in the mid-1980s, wrote a poem entitled “In praise of work”⁴, which already revealed a decidedly changed climate in the relationship between worker and factory at the beginning of the “reforms”.

赞美劳动

我赞美劳动
我赞美一个劳动者
他手臂上的肌肉鼓出来 抡动着锤子
他把黑炭砸碎 弓下腰去
儿粒火种 脱离他粗糙的手
爆裂成一炉真正的火焰
火光 照亮了他的脸
把铁砧和整个作坊照亮
劳动 就这样开始
他干的活 是浇注一批铁链
他肯定用不着这些链子
他也不想 它们将有什么用途
这是劳动 一个冶炼和浇注的过程
说话的是手和工具
把一批钢坯投进火炉
浇注成另外一批
废弃的犁头 锤子
从燃烧的煤中出来 成为新的铁链
他的动作和表情没有任何与心情有关的暗示
他只是一组被劳动牵引的肌肉
这些随着工具的运动而起伏的线条
唯一的含义 就是劳动

.....
⁴Yu Jian 2015, p. 19-20.

I praise the work
I praise a worker
with the muscles of his arms drums up a hammer rotating
he smashes coal bows down
sparks come off from his rough hands
exploding into a full blaze
the firelight illuminates his face
illuminates the anvil and the whole workshop
this is how the work begins
his job is to pour iron chains
he certainly will not need these chains
he does not even think about how they will be used
this is the work a process of fusion and metal processing
it's hands and tools that speak
he throws the iron bars into the furnace
pouring them into something else
abandoned plows hammers
out of burning coal become a new chain
his movements and expressions do not suggest any emotional
concern
he is just a bundle of muscles drawn by the work
swinging lines follow the movements of the tools
the only meaning is the work

We can consider this poem as the trace of a watershed between two eras, or rather between three. In the period preceding the Cultural Revolution, the political existence of workers had been glorified as intrinsic to state communism. During the Cultural Revolution, new paths had been opened. However, since the 1980s, work has already lost any political value. The worker's existence, Yu Jian writes, has no other meaning than that of work itself. Let us consider closely, through the lenses of poetry, the first and the third of these periods.

There are several voices of poet workers from the early years of the Chinese socialist factory, which were, moreover, homogeneous with the government discourse of the time. While tuned with the pathos of participation in the collective political enterprise, their verses were suffocated by heroic rhetoric. "Morning in the factory,"⁵ a poem from 1957 by 李学鳌 Li Xue'ao, is an example of that ideological climate.

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5 Li Xue'ao 2015, p. 370.

工厂的早晨

英雄的烟囱像一条桅杆
挺立在工厂中间
巍峨的厂房是巨大的船舱，
党委书记是我们红色的领航员，
当四野还在静静地甜睡，
我们就鸣笛起航——
载着千万颗雄心驶进更广阔的一天！

Factory morning

The heroic chimney is the ship's mast
which stands in the center of the factory,
the majestic shed is the gigantic hold,
the party secretary is our red pilot.
When everything around is still immersed in sweet sleep
we set sail at the whistle of the siren.
Carrying millions of ambitions,
we advance into a wider day.

In the poem by 于德成 Yu Decheng, "Spring in the workshop,"⁶ we can read an attitude that is at the same time enthusiastic about the communist project and distorted by the propaganda. In the scene of an Arcadian harmony, a glance in love is even drawn; it is not clear whether it is more for the girl or the factory.

春在车间

五色缤纷的铁屑正像盛开的牡丹，
喷射的冷却液像一座飞泉，
一台台机床正是一棵棵深绿的树
一颗颗闪着金光果子挂在上边。

一个姑娘飞似地转动着手柄，
她身上只穿了一件淡绿的衣衫，
流着汗的脸上，
像含着露珠的芙蓉花瓣……

车间里电灯像一排排大雁，
一股暖流扑向我们胸前，
门外的雪哪怕下得再大
车间里呀，永远是春天。

.....
6 Yu Decheng 2015, p. 384.

The multicolored scraps of iron are peonies that bloom
the cooling spray gushes from a flying fountain.
The rows of machinery are green trees
from which hang fruits of golden flashes.

A girl turns the handle as if it were flying
wearing only a light green smock
sweat runs down her face
like drops of dew on a hibiscus flower ...

The lamps in the workshop are rows of wild geese
a jet of hot air leaps onto our chest.
Even if it is snowing hard outside
in the workshop, it is always Spring.

The idyllic image of the harmony between worker and factory in state communism was shaken to its foundations by the political activism of the workers in the sixties and seventies, a phenomenon certainly not limited to China. The best artistic synthesis of the fall of the "socialist hero of labor" comes from Poland. Andrej Wajda's film *The Marble Man*, on the eve of the foundation of Solidarnosc, reveals the bitter fiction of that rhetoric, which ultimately overwhelms the most authentic intentions of the protagonist.

The poetry of contemporary Chinese migrant workers is entirely foreign to any "heroic" intonation. The subjective condition of life in the factory has nothing of the "harmony" of the classical socialist era, but there are also no traces of the disordered egalitarian experimentalism of the Cultural Revolution. These new poets indeed sing of their collective existence without referring to a "class," much less to a communist political project.

Actually, the boundless uprooting from any foregone social belonging prevails. The "we" of these verses is an "immense singular number"⁷ (庞大的单数 *pangdade danshu*), as in the title of a poem by 郭金牛 Guo Jinniu, which was also chosen as the title of the first English collection of these migrant poets. The oxymoron reveals the strident dissonance between a singular desire for infinity and a condition of painful absence of sociality. The only relationship with the "homeland" of these figures condemned to perpetual nomadism, Guo writes with bitter sarcasm, is the "payment of the temporary residence permit."

.....
⁷ Guo Jinniu 2015, pp. 152-153.

庞大的单数

一个人穿过一个省，一个省，又一个省
一个人上了一列火车，一辆大巴，又上了一辆黑中巴
下一站

祖国，给我办理了一张暂住证
祖国，接纳了我缴交的暂住费

....

哎呀。那时突击清查暂住证。

An immense singular number

One goes through a province, another province, another province
takes a train, then a bus, and then another black bus
Next stop

The homeland has granted me a temporary residence permit.
The homeland has accepted my payment for the temporary
residence permit.

(...)

Someone in the South breaks into a rented room
Ouch! It's a raid to check residence permits.

Even more raw is the fabric of figures that intertwine in "Stones on the roadside"⁸ by the woman poet worker 寂之水 Ji Zhishui. They are workers screwed to systems of machines but at the same time forced to whirl in a whirlwind in search of work, in incessant migrations that leave them like "abandoned stones on the roadside." Their mutual proximity is a shared chill, "elbow to elbow." Just the opposite of the warmth of "spring in the factory."

路边的石头

一阵风将我们
从土地上吹了起来
落在异乡的机器上，流水线上
被噪音、机油、红黑胶、铅粉、铁锈浸泡着
被抽打、拧紧、钉牢
我们飞快地旋转着
将乡音、呐喊、眼泪的温度甩出去
直到再也挤压不出一粒汗水

.....
8 Ji Zhishui 2015, p. 332

坚硬成一块石头
被丢弃在路边
就算回到地理也种不出庄稼
不断堆积在路边的石头
互相挨着，冷贴着冷

Stones on the roadside

A wind blowing
lifts us off the ground
and makes us fall on the machinery of another city, on an assembly
line.
We are impregnated with noises, machine oil, red and black ribbons,
lead dust, rust,
we are beaten, screwed, tied
and quickly blocked, we spin.
The dialects we speak, the cry, the warmth of tears
they escape us until we cannot squeeze
not even a drop of sweat anymore.
We harden like stones
abandoned on the street.
Even if we go back to the countryside, we do not have to cultivate.
Stones continuously stacked on the side of the road,
elbow to elbow, the frost of one glued to the other.

The heterogeneity of thought and style compared to the workers' poetry of the 1950s is evident. Instead, the tones of these verses resonate with the 朦胧诗人 *menglong* poets⁹, who revitalized the Chinese literary scene in the late 1970s. The latter were the first to recognize the value of the new migrant poets; indeed, they actually discovered the existence of this immense contemporary poetic configuration. The meeting between these two generations of poets was partly intentional, partly casual, and finally necessary. In fact, several *menglong* poets, such as Bei Dao, Shu Ting, Mang Ke, Zhai Yongming and others, who were factory workers during the Cultural Revolution, also recognized that time as vital to their artistic training, as Yu Jian did in his above-mentioned memory of his experience as a factory worker.

In 2012, the leading poets of the *menglong* generation announced an "International Chinese Poetry Prize" (国际中国诗歌奖 *Guoji Zhongguo shigejiang*), open to anyone sending texts to an online address, *Artsbj.com*. In a few months, the site was flooded with 800,000 poems by

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⁹Two anthologies of *menglong* poets, in Pozzana and Russo 1996, Id. 1999. See also Pozzana, 2010, rist. 2021.

thousands of authors. This result put a strain on the commission and caused an inevitable delay in the conclusion of the reading. Finally, 10% of these works were judged to be high quality, most of which were written by migrant poets.

An unexpected result, undoubtedly due to the sensitivity of the *menglong* poets toward the novelty of something they had an inkling. On the other hand, the poetry of migrants was driven by the poetic novelties of the previous generation. It has taken from the *menglong* the conception of an "independent intellectual space" of poetry, as Yang Lian¹⁰ said, at a distance from the dominant cultural rituals. These new poets also share with their predecessors the suspension of the communicative self-evidence of language. They are looking for new possibilities of thought that spring from the "sparkle in the interstices" of language, as the poet 萧开愚 Xiao Kaiyu said in the 1990s.

To mark their proximity and correspondences, both these generations of poets position themselves on the edge of a void. The *menglong* started in the situation of exhaustion of all previous cultural and political references after the Cultural Revolution. For migrant poets, the stake is how to exist in the void of the very name of the worker. In China today, the "working class" is a highly obscure name.

The poetic energy of these workers manages to take this void as a resource. They affirm their existence at a distance from the void that surrounds them. In such exemplary alienation, the poem is based on an "estrangement" that precludes imaginary identification with the factory and demands that it be kept under control. For example, in 杏黄天 Xing Huangtian's "On Steel,"¹¹ the labor's materiality differs from the "colorful peonies" that bloom in "Spring in the workshop." Instead, the steel scraps are those that "pile up blackened and full of rust." The opening words of the two poems seem to face each other from an epochal distance, and without forgetting that steel was a key term for the project of socialist industrialization.

.....
¹⁰Yang Lian 1999, pp.59-66

¹¹ Xiao Kaiyu 1999, pp. 74-81.

关于钢铁

这个角落里堆满了这些
锈红、暗淡的废物
以各种可能的形状
我们并不知道什么
关于钢铁。只有猜测
我们说金属的光芒
说坚硬的质地
还有黑暗等等这些
都只是我们的想象
想象的钢铁
我们锤炼这些钢铁
在其上打孔，制造
我们想要的图案
还有我们的想象
但多么可笑，人这种动物
永远在做自己并不能到达的
练习，梦。一如这些钢铁
一开始就离我们很远
他们有自己的死亡法则

About the steel

This corner is littered with these
rust-red and pale-colored waste
of all possible shapes
we know nothing
about steel. We can only guess
we speak of the luster of the metal
of its hardness
and there is also darkness and so on
but all this is only
the imaginary steel
we forge this steel
we punch holes in it and make of it
the pattern of what we desire
and there is also our imagination
but how ridiculous it is. The human animal
eternally does the exercises of what it cannot achieve:
dreams. Just like these steels
far away from us since the very beginning
they have their own rule of death

Steel seems a self-evident thing, but in reality, it raises questions about which only conjectures can be made. A restless "we" (我们 *women*) recurs throughout the poem. A "we" that faces a steel belonging to the chiaroscuro of the unconscious. Forging steel involves a desire, including its imaginary and ridiculous side. The awareness of the unattainable "dream" is a memento to limit imaginary identification with these steels, to keep them away from "us," and to keep "us" away from "their law of death."

In a completely different key, the law of death, the intrinsic destructiveness of factory work, is explored in another poem by Xing Huangtian, "Work."¹² While "About steel" is impregnated with industrial materiality viewed from the distance of a dream, in "Work," there are three abstract figures: the poet, the "unreliable things," and the "Work." Note that "work" appears only at the end of the poem, as a figure of radical destruction, when the relationship between the poetic self and the "unreliable things" is lost.

劳动

我说，为了把那些不可靠的事物
表达清楚，而这还不够
我写，为了把那些不可靠的事物
描述清楚，而这还不够
我做，为了把那些不可靠的事物
能够留住，而这还不够
于是我劳动，为了把那些
不可靠的事物彻底消除

Work

I speak, to express clearly
those unreliable things, but that's not enough.
I write, to describe clearly
those unreliable things, but that's not enough.
I make, so that those unreliable things
are maintained, but that's not enough.
So, I work to eliminate
those unreliable things radically.

What are the "unreliable things" (不可靠的事物 *bukekao de shiwu*) for which the poet wants to speak, write and act? We can hypothesize that it refers to the workers themselves, reduced to "things," as accessories

.....
12 Xing Huangtian 2015, p. 151

to machines' systems, whose workforce is equivalent to any other commodity. Essentially inexistent. However, they are also "unreliable" because they contain subjective possibilities beyond their "reification." The poet has the purpose of "clearly expressing," "describing clearly," and "ensuring" that such "unreliable" subjectivities are maintained. Still, he also warns that his poetry "is not enough." However, if it fails in these poetic intentions, only "the work" remains, intrinsically aimed at subjective annihilation. His work as a worker is hinged on that destructive and self-destructive automatism that commands the subjective inexistence of wage-earners. The final lines can be read as a warning to persevere in poetry; otherwise, there is only connivance with the radical elimination of the "unreliable."

This configuration of migrant worker poets in China is so vast and multifaceted that it would take a much more comprehensive selection than the present one not to exclude great voices. In conclusion, I limit to "Kneeling to ask for a salary,"¹³ a poem by 郑小琼 Zheng Xiaoqiong, author of several verses collections, which exemplifies the richness of stylistic tones explored by many authors. Her singular stylistic code is essentialist and cutting, drawing an almost theatrical or cinematographic scene. There are real characters whose expressions on their faces can be recognized, or vice versa, their inexpressiveness, joy, awkwardness, courage, or silent connivance. The scene is one in which there are myriads of small and medium-sized workers' protests taking place all over the country.

跪着的讨薪者

她们如同幽灵闪过 在车站
在机台 在工业区 在肮脏的出租房
她们薄薄的身體 像刀片 像白紙
像發絲 像空氣 她們用手指切過
鐵 膠片 塑料 她們疲倦而麻木
幽靈一樣的神色 她們被裝進機台
工衣 流水線 她們鮮亮的眼神
青春的年齡 她們閃進由自己構成的
幽暗的潮流中 我無法再分辨她們
就像我站在他們之中無法分辨 剩下皮囊
肢體 動作 面目模糊 一張張
無辜的臉孔 她們被不停地組合 排列
構成電子廠的蟻穴 玩具廠的蜂窩 她們
笑着 站着 跑着 彎曲着 蜷縮着
她們被簡化成為一雙手指 大腿
她們成為被拧紧的螺絲 被切割的鐵片
被壓縮的塑料 被彎曲的鋁線 被剪裁的布匹

.....
13 Zheng Xiaoqiong 2012, pp. 107-108. See also Tamburello 2019, pp. 45-64

她们失意的 得意的 疲惫的 幸福的
散乱的 无助的 孤独的 表情
她们来自村 屯 场 组 她们聪明的
笨拙的 她们胆怯的 懦弱的.....
如今 她们跪着 对面是高大明亮的玻璃门窗
黑色制服的保安 锃亮的车辆 绿色的年桔
金灿灿的厂名招牌在阳光下散发着光亮
她们跪在厂门口 举着一块硬纸牌
上面笨拙地写着 "给我血汗钱"
她们四个毫无惧色地跪在工厂门口
她们周围是一群观众 数天前 她们是老乡
工友 朋友 或者上下工位的同事
她们面无表情地看着四个跪下的女工
她们目睹四个工友被保安拖走 她们目睹
一个女工的鞋子掉了 她们目睹另一个女工
挣扎时裤子破了 她们沉默地看着
下跪的四个女工被拖到远方 她们眼神里
没有悲伤 没有喜悦 她们面无表情地走进厂房
她们深深的不幸让我悲伤或者沮丧

On their knees, asking for their salary

Flash-like ghosts, at bus stops,
on work machines, in industrial areas, in filthy rented apartments.
Their bodies are thin like knife blades, like paper,
like hair, like air, they cut with their fingers
iron, film, plastic ... Tired, numb,
as spectra assigned to machines.
Work clothes, assembly lines, sparkling eyes,
youth shines in what they constitute.
In the dark tide, I can no longer distinguish them
just as if, standing among them, I couldn't make out
the movement of the other bodies, blurred faces, one by one,
innocent faces that are constantly arranged and rearranged.
They are the anthill in the electronics factory,
the honeycomb in the toy factory,
laugh, get up, run, bend, curl,
are reduced to a couple of fingers and thighs,
they become screws to be tightened, iron plates to be cut,
compressed plastic, curved aluminum wire, custom fabric.
Frustrated, proud, exhausted, happy,
scattered, helpless, lonely ... so they manifest themselves.
They come in groups from the countryside, from the villages, from
the valleys; they are intelligent, clumsy, shy, cowardly....

Now they are kneeling; in front of them is the high and bright
window,
the black-uniformed guards in beautiful orange-green vehicles,
the golden factory sign shines in the sun.
The four workers kneeling in front of the gates hold up a sign
with the clumsy inscription "Give us the blood and sweat money."
The four, fearless on their knees before the gates,
around a crowd watching. A few days ago, they were countrymen,
friends, colleagues, superiors, or inferiors.
Now they stare blankly at the four kneeling workers;
they look at the four workmates dragged away by the guards, they
look
at a worker who loses a shoe, they look at another worker
who, while fighting, tears her pants. They watch in silence
the four kneeling workers being dragged away. In their eyes,
neither pain nor joy... they enter the factory with an empty look.
Their misfortunes sadden me, depress me.

The condition of those workers is pulverized. Even in the face of the pain
of the four kneeling friends, emotions freeze on the expressionless faces
of an inert crowd. The sadness and depression of the last verse ultimately
share the feeling of insufficiency of the poem, manifested by Xing
Huangtian. Poetry persists. But to overcome these misfortunes, poetry
alone is not enough. Contemporary Chinese workers' poetry is a symptom
of the need for new collective inventions to come.

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Poetry: From the Heart or From Blood?

Jean-Michel Rabate

Abstract: Starting from Jacques Derrida's analysis of poetry seen as a hedgehog crossing a highway in risk of being killed, along with his remarks on cruelty in psychoanalysis, I interrogate the place of the heart. I look at the trope of the "book of the heart" as formalized by Augustine. Derrida shapes a book of blood and heartbeats in "circumfessions" following Augustine. If the heart is seen as the seat of emotions, according to Hegel, blood, not the heart, condenses the vitality of life cycles. If poetry appears closer to *cruor*, or gore, blood pouring out of the body after events or accidents that provoke cuts in the life cycle, there is a need to keep a memory of the event, for which the heart plays a crucial role. To exemplify the themes of a heart functioning as memory and text, I look at *Troilus and Cressida*. Chaucer is relayed by Cavalcanti translated by Ezra Pound, whose *Cantos* systematize the image of a "formed trace" in the heart. I conclude with T.S. Eliot's *The Elder Statesman* in which a final twist is given to the parable of the dying heart, of Freudian road kill, and even of hedgehogs.

Keywords: Poetry, the heart, blood, cruelty, memory, Derrida, Chaucer, Pound, Eliot.

The dialogue between philosophy and literature, an ancient dialogue fraught with suspicion, has led to attempts at reciprocal containment or aggression. In fact, the two domains should appear less as enemies than rival neighbors needing and needling each other. If philosophy and literature can function as starring partners, each attempting to stare the other down, poetry has often played the role of a mediator. The roots of German Romanticism offer a case in point as they were marked by bifurcation, the parting of ways between Hegel and Hölderlin. Hegel, the systematic thinker let his former friend explore the night of myth, tragedy, and lyrical poetry on his own. More recently, Jean-Luc Nancy has given his version of the age-old confrontation and goes back to the tradition that returns to Homer, Heraclitus, Plato, and Aristotle and includes Schlegel, Novalis, Heidegger, Valéry, Celan and Blanchot.¹ Moving away from these mythical references, I will try to begin in medias res by sketching a slightly divergent concept of poetry that takes its point of departure (but not its origin) in two of Derrida's unrelated statements, the first one stating that what defines poetry is a wish to learn by heart, the second asserting that cruelty has remained and will remain an intractable problem for psychoanalysis, phenomenology, and the so-called human sciences.

Derrida's 1988 essay "Che cos'è la poesia?" defines poetry via rote memory by elaborating a whimsical parable. Derrida's allegory portrays poetry as a little hedgehog attempting to cross a highway, a threatened

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¹ Nancy 2018, pp. 1-4.

animal whose precarious survival does not prevent it from making huge demands on its readers. The poem as hedgehog voices a demand: it requires to be memorized and never forgotten. When attempting to answer to the question: “What is poetry?”, Derrida refuses to begin with a definition of the “essence of poetry” as Heidegger and others have done, because for him, poetry distinguishes itself from other literary modes given that specific insistence, that injunction, the expression of a fundamental desire, which might be summed up as: “I want readers to learn me by heart.”

This initial statement might look surprising in a superficial reading, for it could look as if poetry’s essence implied a return to what had been rejected under the name of “logocentrism,” that naive trust in the pristine originarity of the living voice as opposed to the difference, spacing and deferral typical of writing. Indeed, Derrida’s prosopopoeia of poetry deploys itself as a dictated dictation, a dictatorial request never to be forgotten coupled with a didactic effort at raising the stakes of any text. Poetry says clearly that it is a dictated dictation—a *dictée*, that common enough exercise in French schools (and even televised media) in which a given text is read aloud and copied by all. It is possible that Derrida had heard of the tragic death of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, raped and murdered in 1982, one week after her superb book of poems and images, *Dictée*, had been published. *Dictée* begins by foregrounding the French context of the school task, copying a text that has been dictated:

“Aller à la ligne C’était le premier jour point Elle venait de loin point...”

Open paragraph It was the first day period She had come from afar period...”²

Derrida’s essay is dated from 1988, and the first answer to the question posed by the title, namely “What is poetry?” or more precisely, “What is that thing called poetry?” elicit a first approach: “I am a dictation, pronounces poetry, learn me by heart, copy me down, guard me and keep me, look out for me, look at me, dictated dictation, right before your eyes: soundtrack, *wake*, trail of light, photograph of the feast in mourning.”³ But poetry soon turns into “the poetic,” for the declension from noun to adjective makes it possible to usher in a specific emotional experience, an operation requiring the “economy of memory” defined by brevity, and an awareness of the key role played by the heart (CP, p. 225). This heart is not an organ that might be analyzed by “cardiography” because what is meant here is the operation of “learning by heart,” an operation linking

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2 Cha 2001, p. 1.

3 Derrida 1991, p. 223.

the brain and its memory cells and the beating heart pumping blood. The two “axioms,” one predicated on economy, the other on memory, converge in an event, which might be crossing the highway, being killed in an accident, or succeeding in the impossible task of translating the text; and this time the Italian idiom corresponding to learning by heart is introduced:

“The poetic, let us say it, would be that which you desire to learn, but from and of the other, thanks to the other and under dictation, by heart; *imparare a memoria*. Isn’t that already, the poem, once a token is given, the advent of an event, at the moment in which the traversing of the road named translation remains as improbable as an accident, one which is all the same intensely dreamed of, required there where what it promises always leaves something to be desired?”⁴

A poem is both an event and a learning program, a learning presupposing an emotional apprenticeship. This comes from the structure of a writing that is unique and singular, and nevertheless immediately requires its repetition. Without such repetition, there is no text; because this repetition is a memorization, the text is embodied, inscribed in the body, lodged within the body’s most intimate organ, the heart. Such a stress on an embodied experience entails that poetry will separate itself from the ideality proper to literature. Poetry would be less literature than rhythm and event, the dictation of an affective gush seizing the subject in a moment of frenzy: “*Literally*: you would like to retain by heart an absolutely unique form, an event whose intangible singularity no longer separates the ideality, the ideal meaning as one says, from the body of the letter.”⁵ All this would remain a wish, a desire, an injunction, even if what is mobilized is nothing less than the literary absolute that the Romantics saw as their main object: “In the desire of this absolute inseparation, the absolute nonabsolute, you breathe the origin of the poetic.”⁶

The heart posited as beating on its own belongs both to the poem and to the reader because their union will be achieved by a certain rhythm: “*Donc: le coeur te bat*, naissance du rythme, au-delà des oppositions, du dedans et du dehors, de la representation consciente et de l’archive abandonnée.”⁷ I underline the expression “le Coeur te bat,” for it suggests both an excessive excitement (“le Coeur *me* bat” meaning “my heart is pounding”) and an impersonal structure (the heart’s rapid

.....
4 Ibid., 227

5 Ibid., 229

6 Ibid., 231. Obviously “breathe” was meant here

7 Ibid., 230.

beats come to me from the outside). As Mozart's Zerlina tells Don Giovanni: "Mi trema un poco il cuore," a phrase that could be construed in the second person: "Ti trema il cuore..." English cannot exactly render this: "So; your heart beats, gives the downbeat, the birth of rhythm, beyond oppositions, beyond outside and inside, conscious representation and the abandoned archive."⁸

The main point of the parable is to link a letter that has become your body, while each poem has been cast like a hedgehog on a highway; each driver is free to crush it or to spare it, picking it up cautiously, accepting the request. A poem-hedgehog has also another defense: it can roll up in a ball. However, even when it rolls upon itself, the poem is still exposed:

"The poem can roll itself up in a ball, but it is still in order to turn its pointed signs toward the outside. To be sure, it can reflect language or speak poetry, but it can never relate back to itself, it never moves by itself like those machines, bringers of death. Its event always interrupts or derails absolute knowledge, autotelic being in proximity to itself. This "demon of the heart" never gathers itself together, rather loses itself and gets off the track (delirium or mania), it exposes itself to chance, it would rather let itself be torn to pieces by what bears down upon it."⁹

When poetry states such a wish to be "learned by heart," to be copied or interiorized for ever, this wish of learning by heart is more dream than reality:

"Thus the dream of *learning by heart* arises in you. Of letting your heart be traversed by the dictation. In a single trait – and that's impossible, and that's the poematic experience. You did not yet know the heart, you learn it thus. From this experience and from this expression. I call a poem that very thing that teaches the heart, invents the heart, *that which*, finally, the word *heart* seems to mean, and which, in my language, I cannot easily discern from the word itself."¹⁰

The shift from the prosopopeia of poetry speaking to us to a heart that contains the core of one's interiority while opening up to exteriority implies that the *Erinnerung* responsible for the inscription depends upon an organ reachable via networks of traces. Such traces are produced mechanically by mnemotechnics or Freud's *Bahnung* ("facilitation" in the

.....
8 Ibid., 231.

9 Ibid., 235

10 Ibid., 231

Standard Edition, also “breaching” (by Alan Bass) or “fraying”). We have shifted from “that which wants to be learnt by heart” to the “heart that learns.” To understand how poetry is both an injunction to keep traces in one’s memory and a reliance upon a machine that will keep the memory, we have to explore what the phrase “by heart” contains and tease out the implications of a heart as text.

This exploration has been done superbly by Eric Jager in *The Book of the Heart*, which studies the origins of the phrase and traces it back to patristic origins that reach full expansion with Augustine:

“The book of the heart as it appeared in the writings of early Christian thinkers such as Origen and Ambrose was developed further by Augustine of Hippo, the most influential of all the Church Fathers. Augustine extended the range and subtlety of patristic textual metaphors as part of a comprehensive theory of the written word that was the first of its kind.”¹¹

For Augustine, not only was the cosmos seen as a book, but humans resembled texts. The metaphor became loaded because the issue was hot to explore one’s interiority. For him, “the inner person and interior life were centered in the “heart,” understood in its biblical sense as the moral and spiritual core of the human being. And throughout his writings, Augustine portrayed the heart as a place of “writing,” “erasure,” “reading,” “interpretation,” and other textual operations.”¹² As Jager concludes, the *Confessions* can be understood as the story of Augustine’s heart. The main operation performed by the text is *recordatio*, which means a recollection taking the heart (*cor*) as its main site. Indeed, we know that *recordor*, *recordari*, is a deponent verb in Latin: it is a verb that looks like a passive but is active. *Recordari* means “to remember,” “to call to mind” and to “think over.” The reflexive prefix “re-” indicates that the heart can turn back upon itself. Jager lists the terms that designate the heart in Augustine’s *Confessions*, which include *pectus*, the chest, the breast, next to *viscera* (bowels) and *venter* (stomach). As Augustine writes, “my heart is where I am whatever I am.”¹³ The heart is both a physiological part of the body and an already inscribed text, for the Law of the letter has been incised in it.

Thus, the law of God has not been written in stone but in the “circumcised heart.” The Word inhabits the heart. Augustine’s narrative discovers it and makes it legible. His “recordation” relies on the function of memory, as we know from the famous book XI of *Confessions*.

.....
¹¹ Jager 2000, p. 27.

¹² Ibid, p. 28.

¹³ Quoted in Jager 2000, p. 29.

Augustine often puns on Latin echoes generated by his vocabulary, like “*coram*” meaning “in front of”: “*Coram te cor meum et recordation mea*” (*Confessions*, V, 6). Augustine says to God: “My heart and my memory are open before you.”¹⁴

The mention of the “circumcised heart” sends us to a more recent version, Derrida’s own “Circumfession.” “Circumfession” is a text in which Saint Augustine, abbreviated as “SA,” becomes his twin brother, and indeed Derrida describes himself as a modern Augustine, both being rather dark-or brown-skinned and African. These numbered fragments of a circular autobiography focus on Derrida’s circumcision and on the death of his mother. Derrida begins by stressing the “bloody” nature of his writing when he sets a parallel between “*cruor*” (flowing blood) and “*Confiteor*.”¹⁵ This confessional essay calls for a “hematology” more than a grammatology. This allows Derrida to deploy a whole phenomenology of blood whose main object spreads as a network of veins, which shows how “a crural vein expelled my blood outside...”¹⁶ The rhythm of this pulsating writing is to be determined by “the pulse of an encircling phrase, the pulsion of the paragraph which never completes itself, as long as the blood, what I call thus and thus call, continues its venue in its vein.”¹⁷ A recurrent pun on “*pulsion*” splices the Freudian drive (*Trieb*) and a vital “pulsation,” the number of heart beats per minute. This *pulsion/pulsation* will be my main conceptual hinge.

Echoing Augustine, Derrida mentions the heart several times in “Cicumfession,” often while quotes *Confessions* in Latin; thus we find “*ecce cor meum, deus, ecce cor meum...*” rendered as “Look at my heart, O God, look at my heart” (II, iv, 9, quot. p. 161, trans. p. 163). Later, we discover “*ego certe, quod intrepidus de meo corde pronuntio...*”¹⁸ translated after three pages as “I am saying this from my heart, without any fear...” However, in that same section dated from March 31, 1990, a day called “*dies sanguinis*,” a day of blood,¹⁹ we find frenzied images of “adorers of the goddess” running in the streets with their severed penises in their hands, and then we return to the hedgehog. Surprisingly, by this time, the old hedgehog will not allegorize a poem rolled in a ball; on the contrary, the image hints of raw sexuality with a nightmarish twist, as presented via a recurrent dream that Derrida had in Moscow:

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¹⁴ Ibid., p. 32.

¹⁵ Derrida 1993, p. 6.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 10.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 15.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 233.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 232.

“... a second skin which seems to be mine without being mine, and whose provisional half-ownership, the thick firm hairy spiny graft of a vegetable superepidermis, yellow-green mossy outgrowth, pale-blooded crust of an extraterrestrial would no longer leave my desire at rest, would paralyze it too, hold it still between two contradictory movements, tear off the hedgehog to make it bleed to the point of orgasm and keep it protect it suck it along its erect fur...”²⁰ (p. 235)

Surprisingly, two years after publishing his essay on poetry, Derrida rewrites the parable of the hedgehog when he gets a disturbing glimpse of a part of his body that he wants to tear off. The image then morphs into a circumcised penis whose fresh blood is sucked by the mohel, as we see in other sections. All this shows that the dominant tone of “Circumfession” is given by a quote from Paul Celan: *Es war Blut...* (CP. p. 103).

It was blood, it was
That which you shed, Lord.
It gleamed.
It cast your image into our eyes, Lord.
Our eyes and mouths stand open and empty, Lord.
We have drunk, Lord.
The blood and the image that was in the blood, Lord.²¹

We gather from these quotes that the heart is less dominant as a motif here than a thematic of blood, as oozing or flowing blood permeates these fragments.

This recurrent image leads me to my second point, the insistent manner in which the issue of cruelty underpins Derrida’s critique of psychoanalysis. Derrida first chose to focus on the concept of blood in order to talk about the treatment of cruelty that he saw in Freud’s texts and in psychoanalysis more generally. This took place in July 2000, when Derrida gave the opening lecture for the Paris *États généraux de la psychanalyse*. He took stock of a particular political situation, and began by voicing personal complaints about suffering, reminding his audience of the Jewish joke explaining who and why one becomes a psychoanalyst: a psychoanalyst is a Jewish surgeon who cannot stand the sight of blood.²² A similar analysis is developed in the Seminar on the Death Penalty. Derrida starts from the Eighth Amendment of the United States Constitution, the prohibition of “cruel and unusual punishments.” Derrida

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²⁰ Ibid., p. 235.

²¹ Celan 1983, p.163 (2008)

²² Ibid.

asks pointedly: have we avoided cruelty by choosing efficient or painless ways of killing? He thus examines the rhetoric of the “painless” cutting of the neck that accompanied the invention of the guillotine. Above all, according to him, cruelty remains a riddle for psychoanalysis.

By shifting from the Latin *cruor* to Freud's *Grausamkeit*, we have moved from bloody cruelty to bloodless cruelty, which generates an echolalic “*sans sang*” (without blood).²³ However, it is not by replacing the bloody decapitation of the guillotine by a jolt from the electric chair, a lethal injection or the gas chamber, that we have abolished cruelty. In “Psychoanalysis Searches the States of Its Soul,” Derrida argues that the end of bloody cruelty does not signal the end of cruelty: it corresponds to a social modification affecting the visibility of cruelty.

Freud's “Three Essays on sexuality” presents a theory of cruelty as linked with sexuality. “... there is an intimate connection between cruelty (*Grausamkeit*) and the sexual drive (*Sexualtrieb*).”²⁴ If there is indeed a “drive to cruelty” (*Trieb zur Grausamkeit*) for Freud, which is found at the root of the transformation of love into hate so common in paranoia, it is also present in the ambivalence evinced by all affects. Cruelty would be a stumbling stone for ethics, as Lacan hints when reading Sade and Kant side by side: its very existence negates the belief in reciprocity which is the foundation of humanitarian rules of non-aggression. Having moved beyond the pleasure principle and the morality principle, we need to return to an archaic and foundational substance. One has to face blood. As Derrida asked pointedly: *Is there a future for blood?*²⁵

To understand the substance underpinning “cruelty,” we need a theory of blood. It might be seen to underpins Carl Schmitt's theory of the opposition between the friend and the enemy, since for Schmitt, what defines a “friend” is predicated on the concept of a blood-relative. In English as in French, “cruel” keeps its etymological link with blood that flows from a wound, *cruor*, while being linked with the blood that flows from the heart, or *sanguis*. The distinction between these two meanings of blood has been lost in modern languages like French, German and English, where we only find one term. Jean-Luc Nancy has attempted to reconceptualize it in his recent and posthumous book *Cruor*.²⁶ To make sense of the theoretical logics of blood, we can take a look at Hegel's synthesis in his *Philosophy of Nature*.²⁷ Hegel must be the first thinker who elaborated a systematic philosophy of blood.

23 See Derrida 2002, pp.238-40, pp. 269-271, pp. 279-280. See also Derrida 2017, pp. 219-243.

24 Freud 1953, p. 159, modified.

25 Derrida 2017, p. 219.

26 Nancy 2021.

27 Hegel 1970.

Hegel links facts of natural life to concepts stemming from the “Spirit.” In his book on the “springing point in Hegel”,²⁸ Markus Semm notes that the deployment of Spirit through Nature follows a rhythm that plays out as a tempo, that is a vital pulse. Rhythmic exchanges are underpinned by a pulsation running through all phenomena. The pulsating beat enacts a regenerative negativity exemplified by breathing and the circulation of blood.²⁹ We can follow the transformations by which blood as a substance ends up characterizing the individuality of the living subject marked by a pulsation obeying a universal law, which is the logical progression of the Concept: “The endless process of division and this suppression of division which leads to another division, all this is the immediate expression of the Notion (*Begriff*) which is, so to speak, here visible to the eye.”³⁰ One main factor accounts for the pulsation of these operations, the essential “irritability” evinced by blood:

“Blood in general, as the universal substance of every part, is the irritable (*irritable*) concentration of everything into the interior unity (...). Just as all food is converted into blood, so, too, blood is dispensed as the source from which everything takes its nutriment. That is what pulsation (*Pulsieren*) is in complete reality.”³¹

Thus for Hegel the life cycle is founded on blood, not on the heart, for the fact is that blood is seen as the agent facilitating biological dynamism. Indeed, the heart appears as a muscle that pumps blood, it is a material cause, but blood condenses the life process itself. A section devoted to breathing generalizes the same dynamics, both being underpinned by the concept of “irritability.” For Hegel, blood would be “irritable” in itself, which causes its endless mobility, and he thus rejects the theories that reduce the circulation of the blood to the outcome of mechanical force:

“From whence comes this elastic pressure of the walls and the heart? “From the irritation (*Reiz*) of the blood” they reply. According to this, therefore, the heart moves the blood, and the movement of the blood is, in turn, what moves the heart. But this is a circle, a *perpetuum mobile*, which would necessarily at once come to standstill because the forces are in equilibrium. But, on the contrary, this is precisely why the blood must be regarded as itself the principle of the movement; it is the “leaping point” (*punctum saliens*), in virtue of which the contraction of the arteries coincides

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28 Semm 1994.

29 Hegel 1970, p. 366.

30 Ibid., p.368.

31 Ibid.

with the relaxation of the ventricles of the heart.”³²

Hegel alludes here to Harvey’s discovery of the circulation of the blood in the body in 1628, when Harvey described the heart of the embryo as a “*punctum sanguinem saliens*,” a tiny pulsating point, the spot in which one recognizes that the heart begins beating. Since the cause of blood circulation cannot be a reflex action (the heart cannot beat without blood but blood needs the heart to circulate: here would be an argument *ad infinitum*),³³ the “self-movement of blood” has to be the cause of the life cycle.

Blood’s fundamental irritability then generates a principle of subjectivity by ushering in endless negativity, a negativity that turns into fire, thirst, hunger and desire. The same applies to the breathing process: “Exhalation and inhalation are a volatization (*Verdunsten*) of the blood, a volatizing irritability (*verdunste Irritabilität*).”³⁴ For Hegel, the operation of the lungs resembles the mechanism of the heart: “The blood is this absolute thirst (*absolute Durst*), its unrest (*Unruhe*) within itself and against itself; the blood craves to be ignited (*hat Hunger nach Befeuerung*), to be differentiated.”³⁵ Like fire, blood perpetually consumes itself: “Air is in itself the fiery and negative element; the blood is the same thing, but as a developed unrest—the burning fire of the animal’s organism which not only consumes itself but also preserves itself as fluid and finds in air its *pabulum vitae*.”³⁶ We come back to a clear sense of the “restlessness of the negative,” the idea that Jean-Luc Nancy identified as Hegel’s main conceptual discovery.³⁷

Blood would allegorize subjective negativity because its restless agency limns the main law of life, for regeneration presupposes destruction, division, and negation. Is this the idea underpinning Freud’s concept of cruelty? We need to notice here that German, like French or English, has only one word, blood, sang, Blut, whereas the Latin etymology splits blood into two distinct notions: on the one hand, one finds *sanguis*, circulating blood that ensures the continuity of life; on the other, there is what is called *cruor*, turgid or flowing “gore,” that is the red blood issuing from a wound or a diseased organ. On the one hand, the essence of life, a fluid liquid passing through the veins of all mammals, on the other, the sign of impending death, blood-shedding or blood-letting,

.....
32 Ibid.

33 Ibid., p.369.

34 Ibid., p.392.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid., pp.392-3.

37 Nancy 2002.

which might entail castration or maiming. *Cruor* is blood as I falls from a wound," but it can also call up thick, clotted blood, or even a pool of blood. It is linked with all the connotations of « raw » as in bloody meat, which calls up cruelty via adjectives like *cruentus* and *incruentus* (suggesting "no blood-shedding"), as well as the word *crudus*, an adjective conveying the ideas of "bloody" as a state, and the action of spilling blood. Hence verbs like *crudesco* ("to become more violent"), *incrudesco* ("to become cruel") and *recrudesco* ("to worsen", "to reburst"). One might imagine that whereas *sanguis* conveys the theme of continuity via the constant regeneration of body fluids, even if some from of negativity is at play, *cruor* implies a violent cut, a suspension, a forceful scansion. If we return to poetry, it partakes from these two semantic domains: there is on the one hand the need to generate a certain rhythm, which may or may not rely on rhymes, parallelism, musical patterns, etc, and on the other hand to introduce a raw gesture breaking with the easy drone of rhyme and formal patterns. The rawness of *cruor* is an interruption that can appear as lodged within the cycle of life-affirming re-generation, a true "cry" or a scream when one faces death, loss, absence, or any type of excess.

The English word "cry," which became current in the thirteenth century, derives from the old French *crier*, which goes back to Vulgar Latin *critare*, from *quiritare* "to wail, shriek." It might be a variant of *quirritare*, "to squeal like a pig." Beckett had understood that point clearly when, in an earlier text written in French, "Les deux besoins." he attempted to describe the interaction of art and life as regular dodecahedron in which vital need and unquenchable desire would be spliced together:

*"Côté et diagonal, les deux besoins, les deux essences, l'être qui est besoin et la nécessité où il est de l'être, enfer d'irraison d'où s'élève le cri à blanc, la série de questions pures, l'oeuvre."*³⁸

(Side and diagonal, the two needs, the two essences, the being that is pure need, along with the necessity of being that being, a hell of unreason from which the white-hot cry rises, the series of pure questions, the work.) The whole work of Beckett might be adduced here, especially if we agree that the poetic dimension defines his entire corpus, from the prose works to the plays.³⁹ This would take us to a wider corpus than I could tackle in one essay. In order to connect Hegel and Freud on the issue of blood and poetry, we can understand the heart as a machine whose energy is provided by blood sending us back to the drives. Blood's excitability or irritability forces us to consider Freud's metapsychology

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38 Beckett 1983, p. 56.

39 For the theme of pigs in Beckett, see Rabaté 2016.

in which the death drive slowly imposes itself, at least as a resistant alternative to the forces of Eros. Here is why most poetic texts that rely on the heart in order to explore human passions tend to evoke the drives as some point. I want to limn here a tension between a single drive (which, in the end, is quasi identical to the death drive) and a divided heart.

To exemplify this, I will look rapidly at an early modern corpus, beginning with Chaucer's *Troilus and Cressida*. This epic love-story contains the first mention of the phrase "by herte" in the sense of "memorizing." It appears in a context marked by the extensive recurrence of the word "heart" (used hundreds of times in the poem, it echoes with the other recurrent rhyme of "Troy" and "joy")⁴⁰ with its suggestions of feeling, love, passion, thought, and memory. However, we see that the meaning of "heart" imperceptibly shifts from that of the seat of affects and passions to being the site of memory. I will focus on the turning point of the poem, when Cressida, who has left Troy and is being courted by Diomedes, is about to forget her eternal vows to Troilus.

*Ful ofte a day she sighte eek for destresse,
And in hir-self she wente ay portrayinge
Of Troilus the grete worthinesse,
And alle his goodly wordes recordinge
Sin first that day hir love bigan to springe.
And thus she sette hir woful herte a-fyre
Through remembraunce of that she gan desyre.*

V, # 103, l. 715-720: Many a time she sighed in her distress, / In her imagination picturing / Her Troilus in all his worthiness, / And all his golden words remembering, / From when her love had first begun to spring; / And so she set her woeful heart on fire / By the remembrance of her lost desire.⁴¹

*To late is now to speke of this matere;
Prudence, alas! Oon of thyn eyen three
Me lacked alwey, er that I come here;
On tyme y-passed, wel remembred me;
And present tyme eek coude I wel y-see.
But futur tyme, er I was in the snare,
Coude I not seen; that causeth now my care.*

V, # 107, l. 743-749. Cressida speaks: "For it is now too late to speak of it; / Prudence, one of thine eyes – for thou hast three--/ I ever lacked, as now

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40 See the exhaustive analysis by S. L. Clark and Julian N. Wasserman 1984, pp. 316-328.

41 Chaucer 1971, p. 268.

I must admit; /Time past I safely stored in memory, /Time present also I had eyes to see; /Time future, till it caught me in the snare, / I could not see, and thence has come my care." (p. 269)

Cressida poses the philosophical question of her situation within time. Her sense of having three eyes, one caught up in the past defined by memory, one looking at the present hopeless predicament, one trying to foresee her future, accounts for her paralysis. She cannot imagine her future ; her lament points to the gap between memory and desire. In the next passage, Chaucer manifests some irony:

*For which, with-oute any wordes mo,
To Troye I wol, as for conclusioun.'
But god it wot, er fully monthes two,
She was ful fer fro that entencioun.
For bothe Troilus and Troye toun
Shal knotteles through-out hir herte slyde;
For she wol take a purpos for tabyde.*

V, #110, l. 764-770. "So, without further argument, / I'll make for Troy; let me conclude it thus." / And yet, God knows, two whole months came and went / And still her purposes were dubious. / For both the town of Troy and Troilus / Shall knotless slide out of heart; / She never will take purpose to depart. (p. 270) Finally, we come to the assessment of her lack of constancy directly presented by the voice of the poet:

*She sobre was, eek simple, and wys with-al,
The beste y-norissshed eek that mighte be,
And goodly of hir speche in general,
Charitable, estatliche, lusty, and free;
Ne never-mo ne lakkede hir pitee;
Tendre-herted, slydinge of corage;
But trewely, I can not telle hir age.*

V, # 118, l. 820-826. She was discreet and simple and demure, / And the most kindly-nurtured there could be; / And she was pleasant-spoken, to be sure, / Stately and generous; she / Had a free nature, having the quality / Of pity; but she had a sliding heart. / I cannot tell her age, I lack the art. (p. 272) It was impossible to translate this literally, and Coghill did well: "Tender-hearted, of sliding courage"... Once more, we are back to the ancient root: *corage* appears in Middle English as coming from Old French and Latin, i.e. from *cor* (the "heart"). Thus Cressida is undone by the site of the memory. Her heart functions as memory, not as the seat of love and passion.

Again, it seems difficult to establish a clear-cut distinction between the heart and the organs of perception. Chaucer may have read Guido

Cavalcanti's famous poem, "Donna mi pregha," which predates his poem by half a century. Chaucer's poem is dated from 1380, whereas Cavalcanti's dates are 1250-1300. We know that *Troilus and Criseyde* is based on a poem by Boccaccio, *Il Filostrato*, that Chaucer partly translates. Ezra Pound was one of the first to point to the links between the mixed portrayal of Guido Cavalcanti in Dante's Inferno 10 and Purgatorio 11, and Boccaccio portrayal of Guido in *Decameron* VI, 9, in which we meet Guido making fun of his interlocutors; they see him in meditation in a graveyard, and pounce on him, asking why he does not believe in God. Guido answers he will only speak to them when they are in their own house... Guido was considered a materialist and an Epicurean, therefore something of a heretic for Dante.

Here is Cavalcanti's poem translated by Pound in Canto XXXVI:

A Lady asks me
I speak in season
She seeks reason for an affect, wild often
That is so proud he hath Love for a name (...)
Where memory liveth (*dove sta memoria*),
it takes its state
Formed like a diafan from light on shade
Which shadow cometh of Mars and remaineth
Created, having a name sensate,
Custom of the soul,
will from the heart...⁴²

Pound was important to Derrida who understood that the American poet tried to bring about a dislocation of knowledge via a new system of writing. Thanks to Ernest Fenollosa from whom he derived an imperfect theory of the Chinese language, Pound understood the ideogram as parallel to the dynamism of nature. Pound's concept of ideogrammatic writing was a way of launching his modernist poetics; poetry aspired to be complex and inclusive, so inclusive that it blurred the distinctions between prose and poetry, between music and verb, between personal lyricism and historical document. It turns into a logbook of the divided or torn consciousness of modernity.

Of Grammatology names Pound as being one of the few poets who broke with a Western tradition dominated by logocentrism:

"It was normal that the breakthrough was more secure and more penetrating on the side of literature and poetic writing; normal also that it, like Nietzsche, at first destroyed and caused to vacillate the transcendental authority and dominant category of the *epistémè*: being. This is the meaning of the work of Fenollosa whose influence upon Ezra

.....
42 Pound 1989, p. 177.

Pound and his poetics is well-known: this irreducibly graphic poetics was, with that of Mallarmé, the first break in the most entrenched Western tradition. The fascination that the Chinese ideogram exercised on Pound's writing may thus be given all its historical significance."⁴³

The crucial decentering was achieved via an Oriental writing that was partly imaginary. Fenollosa simplified the writing system of the Chinese language, and reduced all ideograms to pictograms, forgetting that most of them are composed of a phonetic element linked to a radical. But Fenollosa's tendentious presentation of another writing provided a perfect starting point for Pound's conception of poetry.

Derrida's remark on the "historical significance" of Pound's gesture is true when one looks at the *Pisan Cantos*, a poetic journal written when Pound believed that he was going to be executed for treason. Pound "recollects" his past activities and meditates on the traces of his previous writings and historical events. Seeing himself about to die and writing a Testament like François Villon, Pound's Cantos reactivate all the traces of these activities in his heart:

What thou lovest well remains,
The rest is dross
What thou lov'st well shall not be reft from thee⁴⁴

Here, the *Pisan Cantos* return to the translation of Cavalcanti's Canzone of Canto XXXVI in which love is presented as linked with vision, making *Eros* derive from *oras*, as Pound had seen it in Plotinus, but then love is produced in a vision that inscribes material traces in a heart that turns into a recording chamber. The phrase of "formèd trace in his mind" becomes a leitmotiv in the Cantos.

And his strange quality sets sighs to move
Willing man look into that formèd trace in his mind
And with such uneasiness as rouseth the flame.⁴⁵

Pound's Cantos is a book of memory, the heart's memory, a book chockfull of personal vignettes, most of which are opaque: the references recapture the tribulations of the poet exiled from New York to London, from Paris to Rapallo and Pisa. Pound thus constitutes a living tradition through the persisting effort of his poetic writing. In his later Cantos, Pound adapted from Leo Frobenius, the German anthropologist and historian if

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⁴³ Derrida 1997, p. 92.

⁴⁴ Pound, pp. 534-535.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 178.

Africa, the term of *Sagetrieb*. This refers to a “drive to tell” that impels all groups of people to narrate stories. Such a drive would be prevalent in oral cultures, but it also persists in the heartbeats of any poetic speech. The drive to tell legends underpins the very definition of culture. The tragedy of the later Pound is that he identified the poetizing force of this same drive at the moment that he felt excluded from it. In the poems following the *Pisan Cantos*, a radical self-critique brought Pound always closer to silence. When Pound identified the poetizing force as a general drive, he himself was brought to the brink of mutism. The last fragments of the *Cantos* accomplish this ultimate shattering of the voice that is metamorphosed into text and letters—the space of the poem opened up for all, letting the drive remain triumphant, and the heart shattered, broken up in multiple pieces.

A similar issue about apology for past sins haunts Eliot's last play, *The Elder Statesman*, a play in which poetry tends to be undistinguishable from prose. However, a few lyrical passages stress the role of the “heart” as the site of love and perhaps also of death. The ending suggests rather than shows the passing of the statesman, who retires under a tree, far from all those who are around. Earlier, Lord Claverton had told his daughter:

I've had your love under false pretenses.
Now, I'm tired of keeping up those pretenses,
But I hope that you'll find a little love in your heart
Still, for your father, when you know him
For what he is, the broken-down actor.⁴⁶

Dying without a bang and not even a whimper, invisibly because he is off stage, Claverton appears as a modern version of *Oedipus at Colonus*. It is no coincidence that the mythical murder of the Father should be represented by a road-kill with a speeding car. This is the most egregious sin Lord Claverton has on his conscience: once he ran over someone in the dark and never acknowledged this accident. This revision of Oedipus killing Laios on the highway is in line with Derrida's “Che c'è la poesia?” With this modernizing device, Eliot finally managed to kill the adolescent poet in him. While this prosaic verse play celebrates enduring love, it destroys the “literary dictator” in him. There only remained an old man displaying his affection for a much younger wife. In the play itself, Lord Claverton is left to die alone of a heart attack under a tree. His death appears out of sight. We assume that like Oedipus at Colonus, this death spreads blessings all around, including the little hedgehogs that have come from the woods.

To recapitulate my meanderings through various poetic and

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⁴⁶ Eliot 1969, p. 569.

theoretical corpuses, I would want to claim that poetry provides a more fundamental mode of expression than literature as such or philosophy as such because it is founded on a more knotted link to the drives in the Freudian sense. Its material and musical patterns require an embodied experience, and so poetry relates the body of the poet and the body of the reader to drives that point to an ontology of universal life-and-death forces. Poetry would not just be the expression of one's affects, as is often argued. In fact, when it succeeds, it excavates human language captured in singular idiolects to show that it rests on a bedrock of the drives, the paradigm of which is the death-drive. This is why poetry can be said to bridge the gap between life and death.

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The Problem of Love and Distance in Anne Carson

Rafael Saldanha

Abstract: The present paper aims to present the re-articulation of the problem of love in the work of the classicist and poet Anne Carson. In her book *Eros, the bittersweet*, Carson reconstructs the problem of love in the Hellenistic tradition. The operation, however, is not restricted to a mere historical reconstruction, since the author's conceptual elaborations end up placing the problem of love as a type of situation that has its singularity precisely in the transcendence of particular conditions. We will analyze, therefore, how Carson conceives the contours of the dynamics of love as a relationship between lover, beloved, and the distance between them, starting from the works of Sappho of Lesbos. We will then discuss in the article how, from this conception of love, the author elaborates, through a reading of Plato's dialogue *Phaedrus*, the unfoldings of the problem of love in the question of the composition of subjects (i.e., redefining "what a subject is" from the point of view of the problem of love) and in the experiences of time and space. In the end, we seek to demonstrate how Carson's work provides us with a renewed view of the problem of love.

Keywords: love; Eros; Anne Carson; Plato; Sappho; distance

We would like to develop here the notion of love elaborated by Anne Carson in her *Eros, the bittersweet* which was published in 1986. If this book interests us, it is because it presents us with a way to *rethink the problem of love in philosophy*. A problem that, we believe, has been somewhat forgotten in philosophical circles, but that has not ceased to be elaborated in related disciplines. In psychoanalysis, for example, the relations between love, desire and sex are a central theme¹. In the social sciences, on the other hand, there is no lack of research that seeks to analyze the meaning of love in social life and its countless cultural variations². And in philosophy? Well, in philosophy it seems that, apart from some occasional or isolated exceptions³ (which become even smaller if we consider the longevity and breadth of the history of philosophy), we are condemned to repeat the question *Phaedrus* asks at the beginning of the *Symposium*: "Eryximachus," he says, "isn't it an awful thing! Our poets have composed hymns in honor of just about any god you can think of; but has a [b] single one of them given one moment's

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1 cf. Freud 2007 and Lacan 2017.

2 cf. Bauman 2003 and Eva Ilouz 2012.

3 Although the problems of desire, sex, passion and friendship appear frequently in the history of philosophy, it is curious that the problem of love always appears subordinated to this field of problems, almost as a footnote, a corollary that should be mentioned without giving it much centrality.

thought to the god of love, ancient and powerful as he is?"⁴ It is strange to the point of sounding almost foreshadowing that, already at the origins of philosophical thought, the problem of love is presented as a sidelined discussion. Even the fact that Plato — the most influential philosopher in the history of philosophy — placed the theme at the center of his thought in dialogues such as the *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium*⁵, does not seem to be enough to remove love from the position described by the character *Phaedrus* in the *Symposium*. Carson's book interests us, therefore, because it restores the philosophical dignity of the problem of love.

That said, in this work we will present the author's position and discuss the implications of her conception of love. But this will not be done by an analysis of the content of her text. What interests us, even to mark the specificity of the Carsonian reading, is to highlight as well *how* she produces this reading, something that appears above all in the peculiar way she reads the Platonic dialogue *Phaedrus*. The author is not satisfied with reconstructing the theses elaborated in the *Phaedrus*, but rather seeks to rearrange the very events of the dialogue in order to shed light on certain themes and problems that previously did not appear as clearly. With this gesture, however, the author also seems to dramatize the very theses she builds in her re-reading of the *Phaedrus*, since one of the elements that is highlighted is the intimate connection between the problem of love and the transformation of love into an object of thought.

First of all, it should be noted that Carson's book presents itself as an elaboration of the general features of the problem of love in Greek (and occasionally Roman) antiquity. The analysis of this *topos*, which ranges from the poetry of Sappho to Plato's dialogues, is not limited, however, to merely describing a type of feeling that would exist in classical Greek culture. What Carson seeks to do in her historical reconstruction is to show the emergence of a field of problems related to the experience of love. If this reconstruction *needs* to be historical, it is because, as the author shows, the appearance of love as a problem in Greek culture would be intimately linked to the transformations in the Greek world that occurred in this period. But it is precisely for this reason that the book, despite having a certain historical scope, goes beyond the reconstruction of a finished past. Love is not simply thought of as a strictly historical phenomenon, but as an event that aspires to overcome the conditions of finitude.

This is why, even if it is possible to read this book as a work that

4 Plato 1997, 177a-177b

5 As Socrates himself states at the beginning of the *Symposium*, this is the only subject he really knows. This is why, when it comes time to decide the topic to be discussed, Socrates states without hesitation that "No one will vote against that, Eryximachus [and his proposal to discuss love]. [...] 'How could I vote 'No,' when the only thing I say I understand is the art of love?" (Plato 1997, 177d). Cf. D'Angour 2019.

merely reconstructs the concept of love in a certain historical period, I believe that this underestimates both Carson's work and also the conceptual implications that appear in her reconstruction of the problem of love. The first way to avoid this historicizing reading is to remember that this field of problems that was developed in antiquity continues to appear as a concern to us — even if altered by time. This is possible because the type of experience described does not correspond to a feeling that exists in a particular culture. Love, as discussed by Carson, is an experience that, in its very essence, calls into question the distinctions between the particular and the universal because of the way it deals simultaneously with time and eternity (which would explain the lovers' abilities to transcend the moment in which their encounter takes place). If Carson's work presents itself as historical, then it is precisely to try to understand the emergence of a type of event that has the characteristic of detaching itself from its finite and historical ground towards an infinite and eternal dimension.

This experience of love is summarized by the author already at the beginning of the book, drawing on two elements that appear in Sappho's poetry. First, *Eros* (i.e., love)⁶ is always bittersweet (γλυκύπικρον), as we see in fragment 130: "Eros the melter of limbs (now again) stirs me — sweetbitter unmanageable creature who steals in"⁷. But what kind of experience is this? It is, at first, the experience of desiring what one does not have. That there is a component of bitterness in this experience is not surprising. After all, as in hunger, that which we lack is bound to cause discomfort, suffering. But what makes love appear as an issue — what makes it weird — is that this experience has a sweet, pleasant quality. In love, the very *aspiration* for the beloved object contains something that is savored, so that love would be a kind of lack that also fills us — but with what?

It is to account for this confusion between the sweet and the bitter that Carson highlights the second element that would delimit the structure of the experience of love: its triangular character. In fragment 31, Sappho draws this structure as being composed of a lover, a beloved, and an obstacle. What is important to note, however, is that the obstacle is not the cause of failure, but rather it is the condition of the bittersweet

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6 It is necessary to keep in mind that the discussions, the mentions, and the praises of love are not just comments that present a misunderstanding between the mythical figure of Eros and the experience of love. Something that can be observed in the Symposium itself, which has in its first two speeches (by Phaedrus and Pausanias) praises to the gods, and only afterwards the discussion deals with the feeling of love. There is, therefore, in Carson's book, an ambiguity in the use of the word "eros," between a usage that refers to the mythical figure and another that indicates the experience of love (marked by the lower case). Although the emphasis of which sense predominates in the use of the term can be pointed out by the use of an uppercase spelling (to refer to the god) or lowercase (to refer to the experience), it is important to keep in mind that, even with the emphases, both senses are present in the use of the term.

7 Carson 2003, p. 265

experience of Eros itself. Here is the fragment:

He seems to me equal to gods that man
whoever he is who opposite you
sits and listens close
to your sweet speaking

and lovely laughing—oh it
puts the heart in my chest on wings
for when I look at you, even a moment, no speaking
is left in me

no: tongue breaks and thin
fire is racing under skin
and in eyes no sight and drumming
fills ears

and cold sweat holds me and shaking
grips me all, greener than grass
I am and dead—or almost
I seem to me

But all is to be dared, because even a person of poverty⁸

What makes this structure necessary — and what makes the obstacle not a failure but a condition — is that the desired object only *appears as desired* to the extent that it is, in some sense, separated from us. It is the presence of an edge that makes it visible as a love object. At first one might think that this is not very different from other situations in which we desire something. If, however, it is believed that love is not just any desire, it is because this separation does not only concern a body that is different from mine. What is distant from the lover, and what produces one of the anxieties that usually consume lovers, is the opacity of the other's desire. If their desire were like that of the lover, no mystery would exist, the lovers' bodies would be attracted to each other, and everything could be resolved more easily. The edge that one finds in the experience of love (and which shows up through the lover's uncertainties) is a sign of a distance between the lover's desire and that of the beloved.

In the case of the fragment quoted above, the object of Sappho's love appears only through the man with whom she talks ("whoever he is who opposite you / sits and listens close / to your sweet speaking"). The beloved does not speak to Sappho, does not direct her charms to her, but rather to the man. Since it is not to her that the beloved turns, but

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⁸ Carson 2003, p. 63

to the man with whom she speaks, a distance and a possible mismatch between the desire of lover and beloved is revealed. Sappho is able to perceive her beloved — and to feel how distant she is — by seeing her through an intermediate. But this does not amount to a merely frustrating experience. As Sappho herself describes, there is an ambivalence. For in the same degree that one desires the beloved, one is separated from her ("and dead — or almost / I seem to me"); there is also a pleasure in the attractive laughter that "puts the heart (...) on wings" and a "thin fire" that runs under Sappho's skin. It is within the distance that love is allowed to experience itself out of a bittersweet sensation. Hence the vital importance of the third element for Carson.

But it is important to make clear that the third element doesn't have to be someone (it doesn't have to be a third person, the object of jealousy⁹). The "third element" can be anything as long as it simultaneously connects and separates lover and beloved. A case that allows us to think of other forms of distance would be Liev Tolstoy's novel *Anna Karenina*. In this book, the protagonist Anna Karenina and Count Alexei Vronsky not only love each other, but they also know of each other's love. At one point they even flee their worlds in order to live together. Inverting the traditional structure of love stories in which the content of the narratives is the overcoming of all obstacles that keep lovers from living their love, what Tolstoy depicts are the distances that exist *even when lovers are together*. In this book what prevents love from being fully realized, and what figures as a third element between the lovers, are the social and moral constraints of Anna Karenina and Vronsky's world. She was married, wealthy, and older than Vronsky, and even though she abandoned her family and social status in the name of her love, the kind of life they lead together soon proves to be unbearable for her. Love brings the lovers together, but its effects on their lives drive them apart. Anna Karenina ends up preferring suicide than having to live the implications of that love. What we see in this case is a distance that is constantly pushing them apart whilst they keep on trying to overcome it.

As Carson says: "the third component plays a paradoxical role for it both connects and separates, marking that two are not one, irradiating the absence whose presence is demanded by eros."¹⁰ Returning to Sappho, this is visible in her fragment 31, since it is through the connection mediated by the man, it is through him that Sappho absorbs and experiences the presence of her beloved. At the same time, since the beloved turns to him and not to her, the lover is separated from the beloved.

With this in mind, Carson will say that it is an experience in which

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9 As is the classic case in the proustian *recherche*.

10 Carson 1998, p. 16

we come face to face with the limits of ourselves from the feeling that something (someone) is lacking. We perceive our existence, we exist, as did Sappho in the fragment 31 referenced above, when the absence of our lover makes us appear to ourselves ("and cold sweat holds me and shaking / grips me all, greener than grass / I am and dead—or almost / / *seem to me*"). The movement of attraction combined with an experience of limits constitutes the edges of a self that must be overcome in order to fulfill love. At the same instant in which the lover appears as something we desire, a lack is outlined in us and simultaneously outlines us as subjects. It is on account of this structure that love is a dangerous experience: to love implies being willing to overcome our limits (to lose the self) at the very time when such limits (that is, the edges of our subjectivity) are most clearly outlined.

But before continuing, it is necessary to better explain what this "lack" means. It is not that eros points to an absence, a void within us. Rather, it is an excess of the subject that loves. If he is confronted with his limits, it is because, paradoxically, he sees some form of self-realization in the other. This is why the attention to one's own limits that appears in the experience of love ends up also becoming an "awareness" of the heterogeneous composition of the lovers. When loving, a subject has the experience of being more than an atomic structure closed in on itself. If he loves, it is because, at the same time, there is something in the other that hooks and concerns the lover. He is constituted through lack, but that which is lacking is only his excess.

The experience of *eros* depends on its constitutive incompleteness. This ends up implying within the dynamics of love, as Carson illuminates, a temporal dimension:

As a lover you reach forward to a point in time called 'then' when you will bite into the long-desired apple¹¹. Meanwhile you are aware that as soon as 'then' supervenes upon 'now,' the bittersweet moment, which is your desire, will be gone.¹²

But what is this disappearance of desire *in time*? It is certainly not the end of a relationship —or rather, it might be, but this end is not the cause of the disappearance of desire, but rather its consequence. The point that Carson alludes to seems to be associated with the problem of novelty. If love is typically portrayed in movies as an overcoming of obstacles, it seems that the problem of time appears when these movies end. After the barriers are cleared, love enters a new dynamic: it is no longer a matter

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11 This is a reference to Sappho's fragment .n 105a: "as the sweetapple reddens on a high branch / high on the highest branch and the applepickers forgot — / no, not forgot: were unable to reach" (Carson 2003, p. 215)

12 Carson 1998, p. 111

of simply finding your beloved, but of making that encounter last. The philosopher Alain Badiou, in his reflections on love, presents the problem in a similar way. For him, there is a temporal dimension in love, which concerns the challenges of its persistence:

One has to understand that love invents a different way of lasting in life. That everyone's existence, when tested by love, confronts a new way of experiencing time. Of course, if we echo the poet, love is also the "the dour desire to endure". But, more than that, it is the desire for an unknown duration. Because, as we all know, love is a re-invention of life. To reinvent love is to re-invent that re-invention.¹³

In the case of love, this temporal question appears, above all, associated with the dimension of novelty — of the approximation of an unknown element that, with time, becomes known. In the classic case of romantic couples, this takes the form of an approximation that leads to the dreaded *routine*. Thus we can say that part of the pleasure of love is associated with the relationship to something new or unknown. This is something very close to the experience of the ice that melts when we hold it in our hands, as described in the fragment from Sophocles that follows below:

This disease is an evil bound upon the day.
Here's a comparison—not bad, I think:
when ice gleams in the open air,
children grab.
Ice-crystal in the hands is
at first a pleasure quite novel.
But there comes a point—
you can't put the melting mass down,
you can't keep holding it. Desire is like that.
Pulling the lover to act and not to act,
again and again, pulling.¹⁴

This melting of the ice in the fragment is, like the experience of love, conflictual. On the one hand, the pleasure comes from the initial feeling one gets from squeezing the ice; on the other hand, keeping the ice squeezed in one's hands causes it to melt, so that at some point, the ice itself disappears completely. This is a paradoxical situation that brings us a question: how do we deal with something where the pleasure depends on proximity, but where the very proximity ends up, in a second moment, suppressing the condition for that pleasure? We see here the same

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¹³ Badiou 2012, p. 33

¹⁴ Radt, 1977 apud Carson 1998, p. 112

problems we find in the dynamics of love. Our pleasure comes from the approximation to the beloved, but the radical fulfillment of this desire can end up destroying love itself (since this would erase the distance that constitutes love).

It is in order to deal with this conflicting dynamic that Carson will use the concept of shame to consider the ethics of love. Echoing problems that arise in Aristophanes' speech in the *Symposium* (and that will not be contradicted by Socrates), the undoing of distances, the merging of lovers, would be more of an unbridled *hybris* than a fulfillment of love. In this speech, he claims that human beings had in the past a "doubled" form. Because of their strength in that doubled-form, these humans defied the gods, seeking to upend them. Following this episode, to punish the humans, Zeus decided to split the human beings in half, thus creating their current form. The lack generated by the loss of their other half would explain the emergence of love in human beings. After analyzing the troubles of love, Aristophanes ends his speech with a plea for caution in the face of love. He implores us not to seek in love a kind of fusion that would make us full of *hybris* again; that causes, just as in the original act of Zeus, further splits. To void the distance is to void the very subject that is *constituted through the distance*. But that is not all, since the persistence of a difference between the loving subjects in their attempt to merge ends up producing, at most, an extreme proximity between lover and beloved without them being merged. The result of this attempt to undo the distance between the lovers is a situation in which, because of their closeness, they become unbearable to each other. And they become frustrated both by not being able to merge, and by having their limits (each with its "self") threatened by the extreme contiguity of an other who is never effectively incorporated. Instead of the desired fusion, there is only the hope that a fusion is actually possible. For the lovers, any action that does not produce the desired result is seen as a sign of insufficient love; any attention to a third party can only be read under the sign of jealousy. If the fusion that Aristophanes feared is, in practice, impossible, the belief that this is the right way to love —through the *absolute* undoing of distances —is enough to generate immense suffering for the lovers, to the point of jeopardizing their own love.

With this in mind, Carson proposes the feeling of shame [αἰδώς] as something that generates the careful keeping of distance that drives away the desire for two to become one. Shame, however, wouldn't be a mere fear of being rejected by the lover. It is the point at which the lover realizes the nature of *eros* and he himself interposes a distance between him and the beloved: "a sort of voltage of decorum discharged between two people approaching one another for the crisis of human contact, an instinctive and mutual sensitivity to the boundary between them. [...]"

the shared shyness that radiates between lover and beloved."¹⁵ Here, however, we are faced with a circle (but is it virtuous?). For if the end of love is what produces fear, shortening distances too quickly with the beloved to experience love can end up exhausting the lovers (through boredom, paranoia, frustration, and even the discovery of things in the beloved that would be better received with time) and rendering this experience fleeting. Love takes place in the imbalance between a closeness that is desired and the dangerous consequences of getting too close. Shame and decorum towards the beloved would be a way to avoid this fleetingness. There arises, then, the need for a complex approach that brings to light the intimate relationship between love and time. One cannot get too close to the beloved, because one might get tired of him (or he might get tired of the lover). On the other hand, moving too far apart can generate forgetfulness of the beloved, which leaves the lover permanently distant from his or her love. Even though the lovers' movement is always towards getting nearer to their beloved, it takes distance to love, since the end of distance is the exhaustion of love. In this way, just as space is the condition of *eros* — because it is from the spatial distance between lover and beloved that love appears —, time is its inverse condition, that which constantly threatens its dissolution — because getting too close to the beloved too fast can cause an acceleration of the relationship that results in the exhaustion of love before its time. Love, in order to last in time, needs some distance between the lovers.

If it is possible to speak in terms of a solution, Carson will say that lovers not only live these distances (spatial and temporal) but, in the name of love, perpetuate them, enlarge them. Without the creation of obstacles — now by the lovers themselves, who go out of their way to multiply the space of novelty — love would have no occasion to be experienced in a lasting way. In a curious twist, time and space are generated from the needs of *eros*.

It is in order to deal with this structure that Carson undertakes a strange reconstruction of the Platonic dialogue *Phaedrus*. What the author finds in the figure of Socrates is someone who epitomizes the acceptance of the infinite character of love. If at the beginning of the dialogue Socrates agrees with Lysias on the harmful character of love, they diverge with regard to the solution.

Lysias, as we know from the speech read by Phaedrus, sees the bittersweet dynamic of love as something *pathological*, something that only produces frustration and suffering for the lovers¹⁶. He is unwilling to enter into the game of distances in which we risk losing our limits, in

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15 Carson 1998, p. 20-21

16 cf. Platão, 1997, 230e-234c.

which we are subjected to countless pains and sufferings. This is why, as Carson stresses, he seeks to jump over all the temporal distance that exists in love. To prevent "the ice from melting," one loves when there is no more love. Meaning that he only gets involved with people he does not love, but likes dispassionately (without leaving himself). "Lysias sidesteps the whole dilemma of *eros* in one move. It is a move in time: he simply declines to enter the moment that is 'now' for the man in love, the present moment of desire."¹⁷ To love without loving is the solution, to become involved with someone for whom one nurtures no more than a pleasant appreciation. One avoids the dynamic of distance by nullifying it from the outside in. By positioning himself outside of love, Lysias thinks he has solved the problem of love by avoiding all the suffering inherent in the game of desire, by avoiding all the work of love in maintaining the game of distances.

What happens next unfolds as follows: first Socrates gives a speech recognizing the complicated nature of love, its problems, and its risks. Out of shame for his speech, since he cannot accept that love can be something negative, he then delivers another speech. It is at this point that Socrates effectively delivers a tribute to love. But Carson does not just follow in Socrates' footsteps. She inverts the structure of the Platonic dialogue, rearranges its parts, and, going from one part of the dialogue to another, rearranges the various images evoked throughout the text to reinforce the problematic character of the "escape from time" proposed by Lysias.

The rearrangement of the text by the author can be seen as a figuration of what she discusses in the chapter "Damage to the living"¹⁸, where Carson focuses on the praise of writing at the end of the *Phaedrus*. And even though commenting on Plato's criticism of writing with a tone of disappointment has become a standard in French continental philosophy since Jacques Derrida, Carson reminds us that, in the Platonic dialogue, the criticism of writing¹⁹ is directed at texts that have lost any semblance of life. If the *logos* is associated with speech, this is done to the extent that

in its spoken form is a living, changing, unique process of thought. It happens once and is irrecoverable. The *logos* written down by a writer who knows his craft will approximate this living organism in

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17 Carson 1998, p. 126

18 Carson 1998, p. 130-133

19 "You know, *Phaedrus*, writing shares a strange feature with painting. The offsprings of painting stand there as if they are alive, but if anyone asks them anything, they remain most solemnly silent. The same is true of written words. You'd think they were speaking as if they had some understanding, but if you question anything that has been said because you want to learn more, it continues to signify just that very same thing forever." (Plato 1997, 275d)

the necessary ordering and interrelation of its parts: 'organized like a live creature with a body of its own, not headless or footless but with middle and end fitted to one another and to the whole.' (264c)²⁰

Not surprisingly, the author herself sets out to reorganize the order of the Platonic discourse to reveal the problem that concerns her: the relationship between love and time.

We must remember that Lysias and Socrates share the same problem. Both start from the negative effects that the dynamic of distance produces in lovers, in the sufferings they experience *in the name of love*. As we have seen, it is a concern that puts the experience of time at the center²¹. But one must also admit that this problem does not appear immediately in the dialogue. If, as Socrates and Carson point out, good writing has an *order*, it is only as an effect of the Carsonian rearrangement of the *Phaedrus* that the relation of time to love seems to surface. This will be done from a sequential repurposing of three images that, in the running form of the dialogue, are scattered at different points. These images are reorganized in a way that they end up indicating different strategies for dealing with the problem of love. Even if all these strategies fail, for reasons explained by Carson, what results from this operation, however, is the perception that there is more to the dialogue than one usually reads into it. If one usually considers this text based on the problem of love and writing—but always with a difficulty in understanding the integration of these two problems in the context of the dialogue—, Carson makes the dialogue appear in a renewed way when she reveals the centrality of the problem of time in its essential relationship with love²². It is as if we were looking through new eyes at an old flame, reproducing in this gesture the same kind of temporal negotiation that lovers must face in order for their love not to exhaust itself.

In the Carsonian rearrangement, the first of these strategies is considered from the story of the inscription that would have been written on the epitaph of the tomb of Midas²³. What will be noted from the highlighting of this image are the problems in Lysias' discourse. In the dialogue, Socrates compares the lifeless structure of Lysias' speech to what is inscribed on Midas' epitaph. In it, the verses can be placed

20 Carson 1998, p. 132

21 "Both theories observe that the conventional *erastēs* responds to this problem with certain tactics, attempting to block the natural currents of physical and personal development that are moving his beloved through life. These tactics are damaging, Sokrates and Lysias concur; they do not concur at all on what tactics are preferable." (Carson 1998, p. 137)

22 Not to mention that by putting the problem of time at the center of the dialogue, Carson manages to tie the problem of writing with that of love, an integration that has always been a huge challenge for readers of this text.

23 Plato 1997 264c-264e

in any order without any different sense being produced, indicating not only lifelessness but meaninglessness, so that "like Lysias' nonlover, the words of the inscription stand aloof from time and declare their difference from the world of ephemeral beings."²⁴ If Lysias' writing is dead, it is because the order makes no difference, as in the example mentioned. The inscription of Midas appears, therefore, as an image of a type of strategy in love affairs that seeks to resolve the suffering of time by situating oneself outside of time. This equivalence between absence of order and departure out of time, however, makes clearer what is meant by the concept distance. Love is not only made up of a distance that one seeks to overcome; it is also a journey that gains meaning in a specific duration, in contact with certain obstacles and in certain trajectories — just like the good logos, which organizes itself as a living being. Love is thus something that is given and is made as a story. So that if it makes no difference, if there is no distance that marks the space between the lovers, there is no loving relationship, there is only a false movement in which one stays within the limits of the "self" that can, at most, give a pleasant stability to the lovers. And it is precisely this kind of difference that Carson stresses when rearranging the Phaedrus. She not only shows that this book changes according to its order, but also manages, as we have talked about, to present something different about the problem of love from this rereading.

The second image deployed also appears very briefly after Socrates' long second speech on love, but before the image of Midas' tomb: the myth of the cicadas. Carson's aim in bringing out this passage is to present a second strategy for dealing with the problems of love. In this case, she explores the possibilities for lovers to fully inhabit the "now moment" of love, which the partisans of Lysias and Midas shy away from²⁵.

After Socrates' speech in praise of love and Phaedrus' compliments on this speech, there is a transition that moves from the discussion of the topic of love to an analysis of writing and rhetoric. But if this transition is short (occupying no more than a few pages), there are some elements in it that, once made explicit, allow us to see to what degree this seemingly casual image would be playing with the subject of love as it relates to time.

In this case, the shift in subject occurs after Phaedrus commends the literary quality of Socrates' speech. Moving on to a comment on good and bad speeches, Socrates will ask:

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24 Carson 1998, p. 135

25 "They are creatures pulled into confrontation with time by their own desire. They enact a nobler version of this dilemma than Midas did, for their passion is musical, and they offer a new solution to the lover's paradox of 'now' and 'then.' The cicadas simply enter the 'now' of their desire and stay there." (Carson 1998, p. 139)

So what distinguishes good from bad writing? Do we need to ask this question of Lysias or anyone else who ever did or will write anything—whether a public or a private document, poetic verse or plain prose?²⁶

Ao que o Fedro responde: “Pergunta se temos necessidades? E em vista de que alguém viveria, por assim dizer, se não por prazeres desse tipo?”²⁷. Sócrates responde a isso falando “Há tempo para o ócio, ao que parece”²⁸. Ele observa então as cigarras e se pergunta sobre o que elas achariam do que eles fazem e emenda com um suposto mito de origem delas. O que há de interessante nesse mito sobre como se originaram as cigarras é (como sublinha Carson) que elas provêm de seres humanos que decidiram viver no “agora”, do amor às artes, a ponto de esquecerem de se alimentar e de se hidratar. Em troca, como um presente, as Musas fizeram que deles nascesse uma raça de animais, as cigarras, que passam a vida sem nunca precisar se preocupar com alimentação ou bebidas, cantando até morrer às suas Musas, até que, após a morte, “para junto das Musas vão anunciar a cada uma por quem são honradas aqui”²⁹.

To which Fedro replies, "You ask if we need to? Why else should one live, I say, if [e] not for pleasures of this sort?"³⁰. Socrates answers this by speaking "It seems we clearly have the time."³¹. He then notes some cicadas and wonders what they would think of what they were doing, and follows it up with a supposed myth of their origin. What is interesting about this myth about how the cicadas originated is (as Carson stresses) that they came from human beings who decided to live in the "now," out of love for the arts, to the point of forgetting to nourish and hydrate themselves³². As a gift in exchange, the Muses caused a race of animals to be born from them, the cicadas, who spend their lives without ever having to worry about food or drinks, singing their Muses until they die, upon which, after death, "they go to the Muses and tell each one of them which mortals have honored her."³³.

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26 Plato 1997, 258d-258e

27 Plato 1997, 258d-258e

28 Plato 1997, 258d-258e

29 Plato 1997, 259c

30 Plato 1997, 258d-258e

31 Plato 1997, 258e

32 "When the Muses were born and song was created for the first time, some of the people of that time were so overwhelmed [c] with the pleasure of singing that they forgot to eat or drink; so they died without even realizing it." (Plato 1997, 258e-259b)

33 Plato 1997, 259c

The second strategy discussed by Carson would therefore be a kind of explicit sacrifice directed at the enjoyment of the now. For while the non-loving Lysias "sacrifices the intense and transient pleasure of the lover's 'now' in return for an extended 'then' of consistent emotion and predictable behavior."³⁴, the cicadas, on the other hand, "choose the opposite sacrifice, investing their whole lives in the momentous delight of 'now.' Passing time and its transitions do not affect them. They are stranded in a living death of pleasure."³⁵. In short, if in a sense they do not refuse the paradoxes of love, in another, they can only choose it to the extent that they have been graced by the gods. For as Carson says, "they are creatures who were once men but who preferred to decline from human status because they found man's condition incompatible with their desire for pleasure. [...]. It is not a choice open to human beings, nor to any organism that is committed to living in time."³⁶. What this means is that the cicadas' choice is one that removes them from this temporal dynamic based on the game between a "now" and an "after". By giving up this dialectic in favor of one of its poles, one renounces what would constitute the loving subject. That is, a subject would be precisely constituted through the distances enacted in the loving relationship, a here and a there, or a now and a then. In the absence of these poles, it would not be possible to speak of love, but at most of a desire, because love is precisely the experience that appears within this paradox. By avoiding the paradox, as in the case of these two first strategies, one also avoids love.

But there is something else to be said about this interlude. Even if the strategy of the cicadas cannot be adopted by us, since we have not been graced with this divine gift (and nor would we like to be, since it would mean that we would not exist as we do), there is something in it that allows us to begin to understand how it is possible to better negotiate the distances of love. If we go back to the beginning of the story (which we purposely went through too fast), we can observe that Socrates notices the cicadas because he is curious as to what they would think of them spending their time discussing philosophy:

Besides, I think that the cicadas, who are singing and carrying on conversations with one another [259] in the heat of the day above our heads, are also watching us. And if they saw the two of us avoiding conversation at midday like most people, diverted by their song and, sluggish of mind, nodding off, they would have every right to laugh at us, convinced that a pair of slaves had come to their resting place to sleep like sheep gathering around the spring in the

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34 Carson 1998, p. 139

35 Carson 1998, p. 139

36 Carson 1998, p. 139-140

afternoon. But if they see us in conversation, steadfastly navigating [b] around them as if they were the Sirens, they will be very pleased and immediately give us the gift from the gods they are able to give to mortals.³⁷.

They would misjudge men in case they were resting. But if they were talking about philosophy, it was possible that the cicadas would give men the gift they had been granted by the gods, namely, that of being able to live wholly off their art.

Here, however, there is something ambiguous. For it is obvious that the life of cicadas is not fully desirable, since living that way is what shortens their lives. On the other hand, philosophy, and the other arts, appear as things so desirable that shortening one's life by making them one's sole focus of attention could actually result in humans being honored by the Muses. Philosophy appears, therefore, as a kind of luxury, a supplement, but a supplement that dignifies life, even if it comes at the cost of damaging it.

Even if we cannot live on philosophy (such were once the cicadas, who, in order to continue living on it, moved on to another kind of life, as Carson points out), doing philosophy would be the moment in which we somehow enter into the grace of the gods, even if we cannot bear this way of life endlessly. To be close to this divine element is, therefore, in some way to be touched by the figure of the eternal, of what is outside the time of our duration, without being crushed by it and losing the limits that compose us as subjects³⁸. We see here a way to deal with the problem of love and time that will be further developed by Carson since, for her, in the impossible demands of love lies the very problem of our relationship with eternity, that is, with something that transcends our finitude. So if love is a problem, dealing with it would also involve negotiating with the impossible demands and distances of the eternal from the point of view of finitude. Not only of what our finitude allows us to understand, but of what it is capable of handling without losing itself in the face of the infinite.

The third image summoned by Carson in the rearrangement of the Platonic dialogue is the image of gardening rituals in honor of the god Adonis, an image that appears at the end of the text when the critique of writing takes place. Plato compares writing to these gardening rituals that would cause seeds to germinate *out of season* in just a few days. Even if one can speed up the germination process, it does not come without a cost. Sown into pots and without roots, these seeds, as soon as they blossomed, would be dead the day after the festival was over. From this image we can see the third strategy that Carson outlines for dealing

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37 Plato 1997, 258e-259b

38 But also without being, as in the case of the "non-lover," someone who avoids suffering by simply refusing to enter the game of love.

with the problems of love. This kind of lover tries to accelerate time itself, "which starts where it should end and achieves its rhetorical and conceptual purposes by a violent shortcut through the beginning stages of love."³⁹ But how does this work in practice? How would this strategy avoid the dramas of love if one is still crossing the "now" over into the "after"? The answer to this lies in the characterization of the festival as a "joke," since an experienced gardener, interested in the sustainability of his garden, would only perform such gardening "as an amusement and in honor of the holiday"⁴⁰. The third type of strategy, therefore, would only be possible by not being a *serious* love affair. As Carson says, "so Sokrates describes the manipulative tendencies of the conventional erastēs [lover]. This lover prefers to play his erotic games with a partner who has neither roots nor future."⁴¹. This is what allows the more seasoned lovers to act manipulatively —and this is what ends up taking place in the romantic relationships criticized in the dialogue (both by Sokrates and Lysias). In order for them to be coldly manipulable relationships, free of frustration, they must lack something that makes distances *relevant*. That is, *eros* is missing, as that which makes those distances between a "now" and an "after" not just any distances, but ones that have meaning.

In all these images and strategies evoked, there is an attempt to unravel the paradoxes of love. In the first image one tries to avoid time by rejecting the "now" for the sake of the "after". In the second image we see the opposite, the "after" is rejected in favor of the "now". In both cases the temporal dynamic is dissolved through the choice of one of the poles. In the case of this third image, the very link that unites the two lovers and gives meaning to these distances is missing, since it is experienced only as a game. All we have is the connection between a "now" and an "after" but where the two poles have been rendered meaningless.

The passage through these images allows us to better understand what is at stake in the attempts to deal with love and why Lysias is an opponent worthy of being confronted (to the point of having so much space in the dialogue, even if through a speech riddled with holes). If Sokrates is concerned about Lysias' position, it is because he promises the very thing that we do not have when we are taken with love and that appears as the cause of countless sufferings: *control*⁴². By choosing to position himself outside of time, what he promises the lovers is an experience that helps them avoid the delusions of love. We would remain masters of ourselves, we would not be enslaved by passions But again,

39 Carson 1998, p. 143

40 Plato, 1997, 276b

41 Carson 1998, p. 144

42 "Lysias' text offers to its readers something that no one who has been in love could fail to covet: self-control." (Carson 1998, p. 147)

this is only possible because Lysias ignores the very beginning of the experience of love.

This is the reason why Socrates will deliver not one, but two speeches. Lysias' experience lacks something that his speech also lacks, the initial moment, the moment when love *appears* and makes someone into a lover. That is, the moment when someone falls in love. No wonder, as Carson points out in her assessment of the beginning of Lysias' speech, Socrates asks *three times* for Fedro to repeat his beginning, "Come, then—read me the beginning of Lysias' speech."⁴³ "Will you read its opening once again?"⁴⁴ and "Read it, so that I can hear it in his own words."⁴⁵ This insistence is not only a criticism of Lysias' poor speech, but of the fact that the element that gives meaning to the love is absent. If Lysias manages to speak of an "after," this is possible only because he avoids the element of love that eludes our grasp: the fact that we do not choose to fall in love. If we don't choose to fall in love, it is not possible to decide to position oneself outside of its temporal dimension. This is why the three strategies mentioned can at most be false solutions to a false problem, since to *solve* the paradoxes of love they choose to dissolve love itself.

After this rearrangement of the platonic dialogue, we can better understand Socrates' own position. Being a supporter of Eros, he sees love as the occasion when the infinite imposes itself between the lovers to the point of giving meaning to a story, a moment when distances appear as *relevant distances that must be dealt with*—even if they are insurmountable in an absolute sense (that is, without being able to be annulled). With this in mind, there is no possibility of positioning oneself in the "after", the "before" and not even just "playing at love", because these distances only truly appear when we fall in love. And when we fall in love it is already too late. "As Sokrates tells it, your story begins the moment Eros enters you. That incursion is the biggest risk of your life. How you handle it is an index of the quality, wisdom and decorum of the things inside you"⁴⁶. But beyond that, there is something divine in this relationship, as Socrates' own speech says, when he calls love a *divine madness*, because

for Sokrates, the moment when *eros* begins is a glimpse of the immortal 'beginning' that is a soul. The 'now' of desire is a shaft sunk into time and emerging onto timelessness, where the gods float, rejoicing in reality.⁴⁷

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43 Plato 1997, 262d

44 Plato 1997, 263e

45 Plato 1997, 263e

46 Carson 1998, p. 152

47 Carson 1998, p. 157

The divine, however, is not here simply a reference to a specific theo/mythological content. The divine is precisely the space in which the eternal/infinite intersects the temporal/finite. Love, by taking us out of ourselves toward the other, allowing us to see the distances that make up the beloved and the lover, would be just such an occasion.

If time and space are generated from love, this implies that for Carson love is not of this world. It is that which appears to mess up our sense of location of these coordinates in a way that makes them actually matter. Time and space would be products of an awareness of love as distance between lovers—that is, time and space perceived, understood, felt in their singularity to the extent that they constitute an erotic zone that links lovers. Love, by taking our ordinary experience off balance, gives meaning to time, gives it an order, constitutes a story. In the same way that a good text depends on its order, life itself is ordered *through love*. The time spent waiting for the beloved to return from a trip is what makes it a lived time. One could say that time starts to be organized from the mess that is a love that erupts without being called.

This does not mean, however, that everything is settled. For if *eros* is the irruption of the infinite in the finite, this does not automatically make us infinite, gods. We are, still, mortal. And this implies an opacity that prevents us from understanding this force that runs through us. Nor is it the case to say that the experience of *eros* is lost in the infinite⁴⁸. For, as finite beings, this infinity is bound to be at some point finitized by the experience of love. If love has meaning, it is because at some point (invisible to those who are crossing these distances as lovers) this infinite virtuality collapses into the actuality of a loving relationship that takes place in a finite time period⁴⁹.

This opacity is further discussed when Carson comments on a couple of verses quoted by Socrates in his second discourse on love:

τὸν δ ἦτοι θνητοὶ μὲν Ἔρωτα καλοῦσι ποτηνόν,
ἀθάνατοι δὲ Πτέρωτα, διὰ περοφύτον ἀνάγκην.

“Now mortals call him winged Eros
but immortals call him Pteros, because of the wing-growing
necessity”⁵⁰

This difference between the names of mortals and gods is not just a difference in predicates, although this difference exists. The language of the gods would itself be *realer* than human language, since it not

.....
48 I would like to thank Gabriel Tupinambá for this idea.

49 Which reveals in its inverse a pathology: the belief that a finite being can sip this infinite experience without finite mediation.

50 Plato, 252C apud Carson 1998, p. 161

only describes an experience (as is the case with human language), but also gives an account of the reason for the being of that experience (its cause). In the aforementioned case a semantic gain is visible in the passage from "Eros" [Ἔρωτα] to "Pteros" [Πτέρωτα] even though this difference is not fully intelligible.⁵¹

The semantic difference appears at the cost of breaking the rhythm of the second verse. In this verse, it is precisely the presence of 'Pt' [Πτ], as a marker of the difference between human and divine language, that disrupts the metrics in a way that even Socrates admits is "quite indecent and does not scan very well"⁵². The verse, a dactylic hexameter, scans perfectly, except in the word "of" [δὲ], as Carson⁵³ points out. This conflict appears on account of the rules of Greek prosody. If the word that follows "δὲ" were Ἔρωτα [Eros], the syllable would be short and simple, respecting the requirement that in that place there should be a short syllable, thereby respecting the meter. The problem is that according to these rules, short syllables become long when they are followed by two consonants, which is the case of the "Πτ" that exists at the beginning of the word Πτέρωτα [Pteros]. This "Πτ", however, is exactly what marks the difference between divine and human language. This messiness is not by chance. So there is a dilemma in the structure of these verses: "*de* cannot be both a long syllable and a short syllable at the same time, at least not in reality as we see it."⁵⁴. The mess in the metrics can be read, then, as the moment when the divine element appears to us. Not as a harmony, but precisely because it points to a kind of harmony that could only be visible to the divine itself, since in the divine language it must be possible for the syllable to be long and short at the same time in this verse⁵⁵. For us there is only a sort of opacity that is not resolvable.

Why is this important? Because, from the point of view of finitude, love is a problem; "falling in love, it seems, dislocates your view of what is significant. Aberrant behavior ensues. Rules of decorum go by the wayside. This is the common experience (*pathos*) of lovers, Sokrates

51 "The translation is inept because the translator does not know what it means. This phrase ostensibly supplies us with a divine *aitia* for the true name of Eros. But whose are the wings and whose is the necessity? Does Eros have wings? Does Eros need wings? Does Eros cause others to have or to need wings? Does Eros need to cause others to have wings? Does Eros need to cause others to need to have wings? Various possibilities, not incompatible with one another, float out from the epic quotation. It is arguable that in their enhancing way the gods mean to imply all the possibilities at once when they use the name Pteros. But we cannot know that." (Carson 1998, p. 163)

52 Plato 1997, 252b

53 Carson 1998, p. 162)

54 Carson 1998, p. 162

55 "Eros wings mark a critical difference between gods and men, for they defy human expression. Our words are too small, our rhythms too restrictive." (Carson 1998, p. 163)

says, to which men give the name *Eros*. (252b)⁵⁶. From the point of view of finitude, love can only appear as troublesome. By invoking a verse with irregular metrics, Socrates could be pointing to an opaque dimension in love itself. There is a strangeness brought about in this irruption of the infinite, but because of its infinite nature, we cannot adequately dimension it. What seems to happen is that this intrusion generates the process of awareness of distances that become distances, as we described above. Love is, in a sense, the very movement of attention to distances.

But, we must remember, the verses are written, the words are read (without the strangeness of the infinite language of the gods being completely tamed). In such a way that two positions are occupied at the same time in the experience of love: one in which the story takes place in a temporal duration (the duration of life, in which we move not always knowing what moves us) and another in which it indicates its eternal aspect. We don't always understand what is happening in this domain, what makes lovers persist (because, from an terrestrial point of view, frustrations can build up). But it is possible to say that what encourages us to continue playing the game of amorous distances, even when there seems to be no clear reason to press on, it is precisely the eternal side of love that determines us as *lovers*. This second aspect of love remains strange, because it is opaque. We cannot fully inhabit this second perspective that opens up in love, since we are finite, but the experience of love is precisely the experience of this impulse that transcends our finitude and that is the reason for the start of any love story. This, then, is the way Socrates seems to deal with —and not solve —the paradoxes of love.

This opacity, however, is not blindness. It is an effect of our finite constitution. But this is also where the relationship between love and philosophy, which brings Carson close to Plato, becomes visible. If love is a certain form of attention to distance, it becomes clearer to what extent the movement toward knowledge relates to love. The condition of philosophy is ignorance, the existence of a certain zone of unknowing that drives knowledge (as Plato describes it in the *Symposium*). It is not an absolute ignorance, however. Hence the importance of astonishment and the fact that opacity initially presents itself as opacity. It is always a question of an ignorance that presents itself as an ignorance, that raises awareness of the distance between a lack of knowledge and knowledge and drives us to travel this distance: "we think by projecting sameness upon difference, by drawing things together in a relation or idea while at the same time maintaining the distinctions between them."⁵⁷. As Carson points out, this would be precisely Socrates' love and wisdom: "a

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56 Carson 1998, p. 160

57 Carson 1998, p. 171

power to see the difference between what is known and what is unknown constitutes."⁵⁸

But wouldn't this "ignorance" be precisely the distance (strange, divine) that interposes itself in the erotic situation? The irruption of the infinite in the finite is precisely that which at the same time escapes us (and which, as finite beings, we cannot account for), and hooks us into an intimate relationship. We are captured by our excesses, which are made visible in the distance that appears between a lover and his beloved. Philosophy and erotics would be, therefore, inevitably intertwined, without, however, being the same thing. It is not surprising that the very relationship between philosophy and love is also a performance of Eros.

Love ends up being precisely that which allows us some degree of clarity by placing us before the eternal. This happens because, if love depends on the distances between lovers, one can say that the moment they become relevant, that they present themselves as obstacles, is simultaneously the moment they become visible, that they become the object of sensation and perception. But as we have seen, these distances are themselves products of love, that is, of something from another world. This is why it can be said, as Carson states, that lovers are enveloped in "a mood of knowledge [that] floats out over your life. You seem to know what is real and what is not."⁵⁹ The love of wisdom and the wisdom of love are confused, for what is known is precisely the space between the lovers, that which truly matters and which we must learn to negotiate with.

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58 Carson 1998, p. 172. The quote continues: "A thinking mind is not swallowed up by what it comes to know. It reaches out to grasp something related to itself and to its present knowledge (and so knowable in some degree) but also separate from itself and from its present knowledge (not identical with these). In any act of thinking, the mind must reach across this space between known and unknown, linking one to the other but also keeping visible their difference." (Carson 1998, p. 171)

59 Carson 1998, p. 153

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Interview with Kim Stanley Robinson: Poetry is for Thoughts, Novels for Stories

**Frank Ruda &
Agon Hamza**

You put a lot of faith in the novel as a form of art, or artistic expression. Can we start by asking you why the novel is the artistic form you prefer? How would you distinguish it from other forms of art, say with regard to the present issue of “Crisis and Critique”, from poetry? In what way do you see the novel continuing something, or intersecting with or doing something that a poem can(not) or does (not) do?

Maybe poetry is for thoughts, novels for stories. Narrative instead of lyric. Both are great forms. I read a lot of poetry, mostly looking back in time; I pick a “Collected” of some poet, then take six months or more to work my way through it. Most recently, George Mackay Brown.

But I spend most of my reading time on novels. That’s just an instinctive preference. I write novels because I love them as a reader. I like all aspects of writing them. And my sentence rhythms are prose rhythms.

The relationship between philosophy and poetry (maybe, in more modern terms: literature) has always been a fraught one, a relationship of rivalry, so to speak. One can account for the struggle between them in many different lexics, for example in political, epistemological and even ontological terms. Whatever register one emphasizes most will change the terms in which one will account for the conflict between philosophy and poetry. What is your take on and what do you make of this struggle?

There shouldn’t be a rivalry. Maybe philosophy tries to generalize, while literature tries to particularize. Each is committed to its approach, and has its usefulness. A rivalry would be a useless contest, although I can add this: I prefer literature. But they both have their place.

Considering the origins of philosophy, it can hardly be doubted that it was preceded and just emerged from poetry or from a form of thought that articulated itself in a rather poetic mode of expression (in this sense, one could say that the pre-Socratics are thinking poetically). Some have suggested that philosophy originated when the primary and intimate link between thought and poetry was ruptured and displaced, inter alia by the creation of mathematics. This did not simply debunk poetic thinking, but placed it next to this newly emerging scientific thought. What is your take on this relationship (between poetry, philosophy, science, to put it most broadly)?

Actually, I doubt this genealogy. These are three aspects of thinking, they evolved together. It’s not the case that any of them began when writing began; the long paleolithic period of orality has to be considered.

Also, you didn't mention the religious impulse, which is very ancient, deep-seated in the temporal lobes of the brain, which are older than the prefrontal cortex. So is religion older than poetry and philosophy, perhaps? And math too? So this is a confused and confusing question.

To play the game of this duality, I've heard both the pre-Socratics and Heidegger called "poetic philosophers," and Nietzsche is surely another; while poets like Gary Snyder, Robinson Jeffers, or Wallace Stevens, have been called "philosophical poets." Proust might be a good example of a philosophical novelist. But are these combinations or distinctions really illuminating? Labels: when you're a science fiction writer, you can get tired of labels.

Climate crisis is one of the issues that your work addresses. Your last novel *The Ministry of the Future* gives a powerful fictional account of how climate change will affect all of us. If we were to flirt with Althusserian terminology, can we read your work as a class struggle in the realm of literature? Of course, this is if we agree that ecology is one of the most important domains of class struggle today.

I would like to flip this, and say that the class struggle is a crucial battleground in the fight the people in the precariat are waging for the health of the biosphere. Capitalism is destructive of both people and planet, and needs to be replaced by an ecologically-minded post-capitalism. I write about this repeatedly in my novels, especially in *The Ministry for the Future*.

This does lead us again to the intersection of, at least, literature and politics. How would you -- and maybe in line with or different from other recent eco-poetics -- articulate the link between politics and literature (and/ or poetry)?

All literature is political. It's a form of praxis. Somewhere Jameson writes that works of literature are always both class excuse and utopian dream, at one and the same time. Keeping that notion in mind helps me when I'm writing my novels. To be clear, if I were asked what I most want to do, I would say I want to write a good novel; but to do that, I have to make it political, which is to say, to be aware of it as a work of praxis on my part. So luckily, I can try for both at once.

Do you think that the Paris Agreement can be redeemed and at the same time serve as the framework and basis for fighting the climate crisis? We know *The Ministry of the Future* is about an international body trying to implement its accord. Although it might appear naïve, our question concerns the Paris agreement

itself: is it enough to try and prevent future environmental/ecological catastrophes? Many believe it is already too late. Is poetic thought able to transform the coordinates of our thinking, even our imagination and assessment of the catastrophe?

The Paris Agreement does not need redemption. But of course, it isn't enough to prevent catastrophe. It's merely a space in which we contemplate each other to see what we're doing. We make promises to each other there, as nation-states. The work itself remains to be done.

Also, it should be clarified and insisted on that it is not "too late." That formulation is apocalyptic hyperbole, and encourages inaction, in that if it isn't "too late," there's no reason to do anything; if it's "too late," there's no reason to do anything.

At this moment, we are still in a situation inside the boundaries of inevitable catastrophe and a mass extinction event. If we were to do the right things in the 2020s, our science tells us, we could get to a much better place, and dodge the mass extinction event. We're obliged to do that, and the Paris Agreement is a space to discuss how. So, it helps us to organize that work to make it happen faster, and an accelerating program is written into its format; along with its consensus format, which tends to make it too cautious and slow. It's not perfect by any means, but it's what we've got.

Many believe that socialism is the answer to the looming ecological catastrophes. Without taking a classically reactionary position, however, what to do with the fact that socialist regimes, historically speaking, have not been particularly careful about nature and the environment? For example, the era of mass and rapid industrialisation created major problems in this regard. What are your thoughts on this? Is a post-capitalist society in itself, broadly put, the answer to ecological catastrophes? Does one need literature, fiction or even poetic thought to conceive of it (and what can each contribute to thinking it)?

Historical examples have their own specifics of time and circumstance, so judging socialism's ecological record by what happened in the twentieth century is not very useful; to the extent we do it, we should remember Cuba, which has taken better care of its island's ecology than most capitalist countries, and has one of the world's highest combinations of low energy use and high quality of life.

That said, some kind of post-capitalism, which will inevitably have some classic features of socialism as part of its formulation, is indeed the central answer to our biosphere emergency. Justice among people lessens the biosphere burdens of extreme wealth and poverty, and increases people's ability to plan past their daily crises to join in the struggle to cope with the shared biosphere crisis.

I don't think it takes art to think of this, or to imagine it. We all have our internal utopias and dystopias, as a function of our hopes and fears for ourselves and our loved ones. People do this without art's help all the time. If art does sometimes help people to imagine various future states of society more clearly, great. That would be its greatest use value.

To follow up on this: you identify as a leftist, as a democratic socialist. You have maintained that we can choose between planetary death or the end of capitalism. We cannot but think of Jameson's phrase here "it is easier to imagine the end of the world, than the end of capitalism." Can we read your work, or at least parts of it, from this perspective?

Yes, certainly; my work says this explicitly. But "planetary death" is not the right phrase. The planet will survive, the biosphere will survive. But it could get very bad for human civilization, if we shove the biosphere into the "hothouse Earth" state that has obtained at many points in the geological past. Billions of humans could die, and the remainder struggle. So, the dire possibilities are very real and very dire, so much so that they don't need hyperbole; accuracy is bad enough!

Anyway, if we are to escape this bad fate, then there has to be an emphasis on the collective, in the usual leftist formulations: government over business, public over private, the commons over enclosure. An end to market dominance and to profit as such. As a sequence starting from now, I hope for immediate Keynesianism replacing the neoliberal order, followed by social democracy, then democratic socialism, then some further even-more ecologically based post-capitalism, in a great red-green fusion, as it has sometimes been called.

I feel the danger in this stepwise approach, which could stall at any point, especially the earliest stages; and Europe shows how all these programs can cross wires, compete with each other, fall apart, etc. It might be better to "leap to heaven," as the Chinese say, but their own history shows the dangers in that strategy.

I wonder if some kind of ecological compass, applied by everyone at every point of the way, could help keep global policy on point; that we could declare "what's good is what's good for the biosphere," since the biosphere is our extended body. Maybe this is the content of the Paris Agreement's form.

As a start, the Keynesian approach is what we can enact with what we've got now. It would only be a start. Obviously, this is the big scary question of our time: how to get where we need to go fast enough? What should be our strategy and tactics as eco-leftists?

9) As a novelist, but also an American leftist, what is for you the potential of Marx's work for you?

What's useful for me is to regard him as a theorist of history and a science fiction writer, depending on whether he is writing about the past or the future; then to apply his clarifying interpretive lens to my own imagined future histories. I feel a certain added edge and heft to my stories when I do that; maybe they are better oriented, using Jameson's image of the cognitive map, and therefore more persuasive and effective. More coherent.

Something to add: for me, Marx has usually been mediated by way of Jameson, most of all, then also by Althusser, Gramsci, Bloch, Lukacs, Benjamin, Bakhtin, and Williams. These are the Marxist writers whose books I've found most helpful in my work as a novelist.

One aspect of your work deals with the relationship between science and technology. Unlike many, you do not identify science with technology. In fact, you put a lot of faith in science, but you do not opt for the rather liberal dogma or hope that "science will provide or is the answer." Can you tell us something about this important distinction (between science and technology) that you make in your work?

That's a hard one to answer in any brief or helpful way. Actually, I do think of science and technology as closely aligned, and I often use STEM as a formulation, with the M standing for both math and medicine.

I do think that science is a kind of unselfconscious and poorly theorized utopian politics. Science is a praxis, often expressed in technology; but this latter term *technology* needs to include law, language, medicine, justice—at which point the word has been blown up, and hopefully reconsidered. We were technological before we were *homo sapiens*, we co-evolved with science and technology shaping us over the last 200,000 years. So these activities can't be alienated or reified as "not us" without misunderstandings proliferating.

Thinking of your *Mars* trilogy, through *New York 2140*, up to *The Ministry for the Future*. Can we discuss what would be the unifying element in them if you therein identify any? Do you see a continuation there or is it a series of disruptions, as it were?

I find it hard to say. For me it's one book at a time, and while I'm writing, I'm focused on what that novel might be doing. I definitely didn't want to be creating a unified future history across my novels, as you sometimes saw in earlier science fiction.

The novels you mention, and more, are utopian novels, leftist in orientation, trying to imagine and portray leftist futures. That a unifying element for sure. Then also, beginning with the *Mars* trilogy, I've been focusing on climate change one way or another, for a reason that must

be obvious: it's the overdetermining story of our time. So it would be a dereliction to avoid it, an irreality. Say that literature can be an engagement with reality, and also, that it shouldn't be an escape from reality; so I've tried to come at each book with the idea that it will have its own approach to the situation of our time.

We have been discussing Adam McKay's *Don't Look Up*. We are quite divided about it amongst ourselves. What did you make of it? Do you think there is an emancipatory dimension to it, or is it simply the current poster-child for liberal 'virtue-signaling' so to speak? Or does its farcical form -- indicating how knowing that we are facing a looming catastrophe -- is never enough to produce practical effects, especially, because there is a very strong will-not-to-know, as it were?

I've only had the movie described to me, but in some detail. Satire is an ancient and powerful genre; one of my first professors, Robert Elliott, author of *The Power of Satire*, reminded us that Archilochos could kill people with curses, and also that satire was the precursor, or flip side, of utopia. So, I think deploying satire is always worth a try.

Also, no single work has to do everything art can do. So, it sounds to me like this movie is a big success, doing the Brechtian work of estrangement: we see it and say, but they're so stupid, it's amazing! and then catch sight of the movie's mirror and see ourselves in it, and hopefully get a little shock from that.

That means it also provides a little lesson in allegorical thinking, which is always useful. So, it sounds like it was definitely worth doing. But I guess I've been thinking, I already know how allegory works, and I know how much danger we're in now, and also how many people are avoiding that reality: so, don't I know this story too well already? And will this movie be too painful to laugh at?

One of the main questions or problems amongst the left today is the form of political organization. What do you think is the necessary form of political organization which could stand up to the challenges and overcome the contradictions of capitalism? Can we think of rehabilitating the party-form, and along with it, the state as a political objective of the emancipatory or, if we may, revolutionary politics? How can literature and / or poetry contribute to these political questions?

I think there is no one answer to this, but rather the multitude going out there and trying everything we can think of. On the one hand, we are in capitalism and the nation-state system, with each nation having a different form of government; that's the present reality, and needs to be manipulated

to the purpose at hand, which is to dodge the mass extinction event. This is such an emergency that the question becomes really immediate: how can we use the systems we're in to decarbonize as fast as possible, no matter how lame or awful they are; we have to start with them.

Thus, dragging the center-left parties leftward toward eco-socialism would be the ordinary party work. But the urgency of the situation suggests we should also be seizing these systems in an emergency way. I know historical analogies are always weak, but I'm remembering how governments seized businesses during World War Two, and directed them to their overriding project, which was survival in a war. This is a statist solution, of course, and even authoritarian, although one could postulate democratic support for such a planned society, because of the severity of the danger.

Though historical analogies are never really apt, sometimes they're suggestive in good ways. Maybe they're yet another kind of allegory. Perhaps the makers of *Don't Look Up* should make their next movie about the British Treasury seizing the Bank of England to help pay for winning WWII. Would people understand that as an allegory for climate change? Depends on how it was written, I suppose.

In an existential planetary emergency, that story and others would say that some kind of democratic socialism has to take over, to direct all society and coordinate it in the necessary work. The market is a fool, an over-simple algorithm; it can't deal with this crisis, because it generated the crisis itself by its greed and stupidity. Some simple allegory could be told, perhaps, about a small group or groups of people on an island, acting out various political economies; this might be a good thing to try in a movie, something like an adult *Lord of the Flies* with a Hayek, an Ayn Rand, a Keynes, a Fourier, a Marx, a Lenin, a Fidel, and so on. A wicked murderous black comedy.

In any case, we are about to hit some fundamental planetary boundaries, beyond which we will be headed into a Hothouse Earth situation, which we could not claw back from. In that emergency, it may become obvious, by way of a new structure of feeling imposed by the biosphere itself, that it's time to give up on capitalism, and do the work; listen to the scientists as to what's needed in energy and ecological terms, and act. Get a working political majority to back taking legislative control of our economies to decarbonize as fast as we can, as one start.

I feel the weakness of all these suggestions; it's terrifying. But I can't think of anything else that will work better. Maybe this is capitalist realism catching me up in its grip, despite myself; maybe I should advocate that everyone simply stops working now, walk away and gather around the nearby farmers and ask what to do, etc. But my mind balks when thinking this would work, given where we are now. So, I keep thinking "all hands-on deck," and looking for good actions at all levels.

In your account, do different modes of artistic expression have different potentials, especially when it comes also to their political articulation? Is there a conjunctural and historically specific aspect involved in what might prove most apt and powerful in a specific situation?

I speak first for science fiction, always, and in the context of this question, I'd say it is clearly the great art form of our time; it fits this time, it speaks this time.

As to how historical forces push various art forms to the fore, then make them less relevant and then completely of the past—of course this is one of Jameson's special topics. He is very good on this. So, I read him, and listen to his recent lectures at Duke, and feel pretty well oriented in this regard. For a proper answer to this question, I'd say, read Jameson. "Metacommentary" sets the method, and then right up to *The Antinomies of Realism* and *The Ancients and the Moderns*, it's a perpetual interest of his. To this immense inquiry I can only add, Go Fred.

Jameson once claimed that especially the American novel tried to solve a problem that other media of aesthetic representation struggled with before, namely how to adequately represent capital. But he added then also that a certain type of the American novel proved unable to do so, because through its inner complexity it ended up redoubling the disorientation and the lack of cognitive mapping that capitalism creates as an everyday form of experience. How do you think this problem can be dealt with or is it not a problem? We are asking, since the condensed form of poetic expression, we mean poems, operate very differently from what Jameson claimed that novel was doing: poetry might not be said to represent, but rather generate -- in its very complex forms -- names for things and thoughts that did previously go unnamed or even appeared unnamable (we could here think of Mandelstam's work, making the unthinkable of the Stalinist disaster thinkable). What are your thoughts on this?

Also Baudelaire, catching the new affect state of modernity: poetry can be the canary in the coal mine. But I don't know enough about contemporary poetry to say much more about this.

My teacher Gary Snyder was crucial to me, as the "poet laureate of deep ecology." He showed me that poetry has a shamanic power that fiction can't have. Same with W. S. Merwin; he and Snyder both show how poetry in our time can stay grounded in the biosphere, calling out the dangers of our civilization's drift away from the natural world, which is to say the animals and plants, our cousins; thus, poetry has been sharply political until very recently; and maybe it still is.

What I see in my casual reading is that poetry seems to exhibit influences from the twentieth century more in terms of form than content; and here the great influencer looks to be John Ashbery. His slippery fractured syntax, supple and surprising, is something younger poets have learned from, it seems to me—as with Josie Graham and others. These startling poets are like Emily Dickinson without the dashes, and I like them very much; or to be more precise, I like that formal move very much.

Back to the novel: maybe Jameson is saying the novel should be diagnostic, or a cognitive map, as in his famous formulation; and so, if the novel dives too deeply into the internal labyrinths of its characters, it's just more bourgeois self-absorption, and the novel's ability to synthesize, clarify, historicize, diagnose, and teach gets lost in that morass of MFA-program standards, which are so tedious at this point. What's needed is something more like Dos Passos's method in the *USA* trilogy, perhaps: or, to say it again, the need now is for science fiction.

In the work of Samuel Beckett, as some scholars have argued, one can detect a movement from forms of experimenting with the novel-form that then moves to a more dramatic form and ultimately ends or culminates in poetry. One might see this movement itself as a movement of condensation. We do not want to ask you about Beckett (even though, we are happy for you to comment on his work), but rather if you think that now is the time to reverse this movement of condensation or if there is a way in which the novel might even operate side by side with poetry?

I've read Beckett with pleasure. His novels are a mess, they're too much work, and strangely sentimental: oh these poor people who can't ride a bike competently, can't even get out bed, or think a thought, dear me, the pathos of it all: no. I think that the experience of looking at Proust and Joyce from up close, as he did, blew his fuses as a novelist. But then came "Waiting for Godot". He turned out to be a man of the theater, and discovering that changed his life, he'll be in the canon forever—because he found the right form for his content. Later still, his project dove hard toward silence. This is a personal trajectory, not a program.

Compression can be very powerful, not that I've managed it very well myself, but I would like to, and I've felt the power of it, from time to time—mainly, in my own work, in the eyewitness accounts scattered through *The Ministry for the Future*. I'm thinking about what more I could do with that kind of squeezing.

In the other direction (though it won't be mine, as I've already tried it), the Very Long Novel has possibilities that normal-length novels can't manage: sheer vastness (big data?), and the possibilities of long arcs and weavings that can be put to use to do things the normal-length novel can't. Proust showed how this can work, and I'd mention also the twenty-

volume Aubrey/Maturin novel by Patrick O'Brian, one of the great novels of the twentieth century, some 6,000 pages long. So expansion can be good too. It depends where you are in your life, as well as in history. Late style is usually about compression, and in Thomas Hardy you can see a novelist shifting to poetry: he was good at both. For myself, I don't know where I am right now in that regard. I'll find out later by trying things.

Back to poetry, your topic here: in twentieth century American poetry there were many who tried to write a modern epic poem, combining the compression and fracture of modernism with older narratives, into some kind of grand enjambment: you see attempts by Crane, Pound, Williams, Eliot, Berryman, and so on. The real success in that kind of project, for me, is *The Folding Cliffs*, by W.S. Merwin, who finessed the problem by going back to the oral tradition and writing in that mode. Each individual page is a lyric poem in his own late style, a beauty by itself, while it also advances a taut, tragic tale of Indigenous people crushed by the coming of the modern state. I wonder if contemporary poetry could learn something from Merwin's great achievement. But maybe it's singular; and in any case, his was a historical fiction, and a novel in verse, as well, which has always been a weird hybrid.

For now, I think heteroglossia is the proper approach for literature in our time; and maybe there is no escaping science fiction. No matter what, I keep coming back to the novel. What a surprise!

Interview with Heather H. Yeung: Entlassen. Thinking with Poetry

**Frank Ruda &
Agon Hamza**

We would like to begin this interview by raising a rather broad question, namely one that concerns poetry and temporality. The question is, rather generally: what kind of relationship do you see or think exists between poetry and the present? Is there a possibility, a necessity, a need, an urge or something of that kind at stake when poetry relates to its own or more generally the present (time)?

It's interesting that you should start your question raising the problem (or question) of poetry's concern with temporality (or is it that you ask of temporality's concern with or to poetry?), but then you modulate, to a 'relationship' (visible or thought) between poetry and the present, and finally to 'the present (time)' of (or in?) poetry and in an almost chiasmatic shift, also poetry's relation to 'the present (time)'. These are all quite different, and it may be that you are trying also (perhaps?) to avoid asking about the 'now' of/in poetry, but in this unpicking, I hope that what I'm already showing is how I see or think this concern or relation. However, it may be more prudent to begin (once more) to answer your broad or general question (or questions) somewhat differently. So, I'd like to attempt to draw out poetry's concerns with the time(s), including its own (often this latter is problematically hermetically philosophised but perhaps we will get to that later...) as related through two (also)related phenomena: the count, and the line.

Now, it is a poetic line*, empirically conceived, in which one encounters the count, and thus the measure of the line. Subsets of these may be the beat and the foot, or the rhythm. Also, subsets are effects which are more syntactically related or underlined such as suspense and such rhythmicities which are sonorously created (a primacy of line and count is true indeed for fettered, freed, distributed, performed, and concrete verse alike; in which problematic encounter one also must politically engage, but probably more of that later - suffice it to say here that I'm not using those highly problematic 'f' words without due and difficult weight). A poetic line, to return to the point here (which is a work towards your question(s)), is of course at once not empirically conceived and also is absolutely so. The line is the possibility of the formation of the poem, but also carries with it all sorts of difficult senses of count and accounting, of medium (for purposes here, poetry) and measure (for purposes here, time). The line is formed of the (or a) count, which is its accounting, and so poetry, or the poetic, makes (or marks) time. How one draws or holds a line, how one makes one's mark, and how one breaks a line, and effaces or remarks, is then a question of the count, and in such an accounting of aptitude, or effect, or governance, or force, or responsibility, or injunction, or gesture, or difficulty...

None of this is new in terms of thought, or of ways of thinking how poetry thinks, and some is perhaps rather hackneyed, but when you ask

about poetry's concern with time, and ask then what is at stake in poetry's relation to the question of time (and of the relation of this to how time is established by and in the poem), what is at stake is the first principle of how time or temporalization is thought in poetry, and only then can one begin to establish any relation or concern between poetry and time, because one can only then start simultaneously from temporal (qua, I suppose, time as philosophical or political or mathematical, etc) and poetic-temporal predicates. To read a line takes time (etc), to accede to a poetic-linguistic-sonorous rhythmicity is to be forced to take account for how one counts (or, experiences poetic time), or, to take account of a different mode of accounting. This is not to fall back on a (quite apathetic, in fact) model or cliché of 'poetic' or 'lyric' time as a state of 'exception' or 'suspense' or even 'suspended animation' (the idea that in reading one removes oneself, somehow, from the 'real' of 'life', only to subsequently 'return', 'changed'), rather, to make the point that poetic structure and effect precisely do have a mode of temporal interaction that question, or are concerned with, or which bring us to consider differently, time. All of which is of course contingent on the poem itself in its specificity: its count, its line.

A different way to have begun to answer your question(s) (which are in themselves interesting to remember and answer in interview form) may have been instead to draw out this question of specificity, and how it relates to a supposed universal of a 'line' or 'count' (on both material and figurative, hence also metapoetic, registers). And with the 'line' and the 'count' one perhaps then turns not to 'time' but 'timing' (when thinking of poetic 'timing' I always recollect Elizabeth Bishop's totally incisive essay on timing in the poetry of Hopkins, where she links it to ideas of co-ordination within a series of momentary durations of an action within an overall action, or poem, or poetic action, I suppose); this becomes a question of technique, of the reading of measure, of drawing lines (making lines), of counting and accounting, which also perhaps does say something about (the) time in / of poetry...

I've been saying all this gesturing to many well-worn ways of thinking (nothing new), and with a certain naivety in a sense in the consciousness that abstraction, on formal or conceptual or otherwise levels regarding the question of poetry and time is pointless, without a point (or punctum), that all these expressions really work to give an overall sense towards, are a working towards, the reading of any given poem in its specificity (what is the titular injunction of the recent book by Stephanie Burt, which is delightfully provoking -- *Don't Read Poetry* (read poems) !), and also in a manner that is both conjunctural in various ways, and with a sort of resonant and respondent consciousness of the metapoetic temporal registers built into poetry itself (or, well, any given poem itself, but in radical, oblique, ornery, even absent ways -- think about Keats's 1819 odes or, a totally paratactic move, the so-called 'Misty'

poets and 'Bei Dao' (趙振開)'s infamous 'Answer' ('回答')) which answer and play out questions of time in ways often absent or impossible within plainly denotative prose, or political, or philosophical discourses. So to circle round and address (回答!) your question again, there is, I'd say, a certain urge or even urgency to the way I feel it's important first to address the modes by which poetry 'marks' time, before then turning to the idea of the ways in which poetry 'relates' to (its) 'time' -- these things are enfolded, condensed, and many of their aspects are (think simply, of the Norse kenning, or how any compound word 'compounds' as well as condenses; or of how the caesura might at once mark violent rupture and give a breathing space) entangled to the extent that without a working attention to poetry's (in)visible and non-lexical temporal markings we run the risk of not being able to adequately read how a poem really does relate to or comment on its 'present (time)', irrespective of the explicit content of the work!

So in a sense a question of 'time' and present-ness (or presence or prescience) of and in the 'time' of poetry, is rather different from the sort of 'now' and 'present' in a question of the contemporary or contemporaneity, which I fear is absolutely irrelevant to the 'now' of how I am formulating an answer to your question and yet... So to return (回答...) to the terms, at least, of your question, what may be at stake (amongst many at-stakenesses) of a or any poetic writing is perhaps the claim of readers to the poem's analeptic resonance (its expression of the historical conjuncture, of its time or times of writing and circulation) and its simultaneous proleptic resonance (the expression of the poem in the socio-political conjuncture in which it is being read), or, more concisely, the manner in which poetry can encourage the comfort of bad anachronism...

And here, of course, is a caveat. This is poetry considered from a particular perspective, almost as a vacuum-isolated phenomenon (chimeric), which, of course, it is not. So, the important gesture now we have addressed in some ways the question of time and the question of the present: if not explicitly documentary, monumentalising, protesting, witnessing, or even commissioned (or banned!) as a particularity, this is to say poetry which is written out of an impetus to absolutely, occasionally and conjuncturally mark a time, or poetry which expresses itself as so doing ('Good Friday 1613, Riding Westwards'; 'Butcher's Dozen'; the growing reams of presidential inaugural poems; the writing of the 'Democracy Wall', rather than 'On Sitting Down to Read King Lear Once More', but already the possibility of a thousand objections can be raised not least concerning the place as well as the time of circulation**), this is a poem that claims not 'a' time but Time and the action of the marking of time through its timing. The problem this and all other poetry faces is that it can then be incorporated in (thus made somehow incorporeal to itself) or annexed by 'history' (more accurately, historiography, where the

'count' becomes an historical count and so the poem becomes document, evidence, questionable on terms other than its own), or rendered more crassly a 'symptom' - in Rosetti's words taken grossly out of context, a 'moment's monument', in which the 'age' of the poet is read through the poem qua symptom. Both of these moves made singly or in conjuncture automatically place 'the poem' as poetic 'symptom' and as document or symptom of a Zeitgeist (generated outwith the poetic claim of the poem in itself). Which matter generates an 'urgency' (your question-terms) because such moves allow for the possibility of (mis- or un- or partially) reading poetry in the terms only of a particular sentimental-conjunctive-material mode of diagnostic encounter.

Poetry, of course, can, too, be forced into this ridiculous and sublimely depoliticized de-formulation from its internal conviction through various more or less problematic external economies. Check your reliance on prize culture, on blurbs and endorsement, on twitter, on Nobel prize culture on the one hand, and on your knowledge or otherwise of material, verbal, or digital samizdat circulation and the stakes (I refer us all again back to '回答') of these in the assignation of 'living' and 'dead' value on poetry, the poem, and poetic production. There is a 'not only this but also' relation with and in the poem whose appearance is not always lexically substantial (and even then may wrest irony from the grip of direct speech), but reliant on mobile forms of resonance: 'I cannot (or will not) make this explicit to you 'now'; you must be able to hear it in the work, or at least hear that the possibility of such resonance exists'. Such, perhaps, the temporal message, or instruction, of 'the poem'. And in all this time I fear I have only approached and not answered your question... Perhaps with the next I will manage to manage better our present 'time'...

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*The emphasis here is on the line in the language in which we are speaking, but the question of the count and its simultaneous subdivision and accretion, alongside the question of 'holding the (or a) line', are perhaps when poetry, or the poetic mode, comes closest to the or a universal.

**Circulation rather than publication is appropriate here and elsewhere. Do I need to expand on this? I'd say (politically at the very least) the necessity of such semantic quibbling is obvious.

The following three questions might just be sub-questions to the previous one. Nietzsche once coined the formulation of philosophy having a necessary relationship, a systematic relationship with biography and more recently Alain Badiou has taken this up by modifying it. He argued that philosophical thinking is on some level always linked and in some form the condensation of transformative biographical events that lead the philosopher to think in a way that thinking is the thinking of what changes (her or a) life. These

accounts imply a peculiar relationship between philosophy and the life of the philosopher, more precisely: a link to what in her life is more than just her individual, particular life. Is there, for you, a link between poetry and the present of the poet? And / or is poetry's temporality a temporality of another kind - as your work does seem to emphasize this link in a unique and singular way?

Might we start rather than with one of these three questions with an aspect of your preamble? I'm really taken by your reformulation of Badiou's reformulation (or modification) of Nietzsche -- the recourse or use of the image or figure or concept, even, of 'condensation'. Laughingly so, as I am conscious of a tendency to run on for too long in prose (and prose 'condenses' differently, 'breaks' and 'continues' differently -- what would happen, here, if the call and response of an interview were formulated poetically? A different sort of dialogism, or flyting, even, - even a different sort of (un)even-ness -- may emerge), and also a quite different set of problems and misprisions, jokes and gestures, co-respondances, condensations...

With condensation, do we begin, indeed, with symbolic bathroom windows or microphonic recording devices, battery alternatives or refrigeration devices (all of these relevant of course to poetic thought: the screen/site of inscription, the voice and record, the power or charge, and energy transferential effects)? Or, do we remain unrepentantly literary: with condensation a part of my mind also turns to the infamous horrible German in chapter four of Ezra Pound's *ABC of Reading* (citing Basil Bunting, and, as usual, sloganizing himself) 'Dichten = condensare': to write poetry is to condense across cultures, languages, phonemes, a method or charge which for Pound is a part of a personal poetic economy which is carried over and changed by Bunting in his 'overdrafts' (or, translation-versionings, demonstrating an aerated palimpsestic writing-over as well as loan taken out against poetry or promissory note to an ethical realm that is perhaps being momentarily ignored). In the case of both of these poets it is their very contemporaneity which is a charge levelled against the poetry, which brings to the work a different (difficult) tenor, of course. These are of course two poets whose 'present time' (the 'present of the poet' of your question) and the idea of the (poetic) word (condensation) which 'changes [a] life' is played out with and against them both in their own sloganeering impulses as well as the impulse of a readership towards extracting and decontextualizing from a poem a quotation which acts as a slogan for something (in a sense here we're back to an even worse idea of the poem as symptom of an age): 'make it new'; 'take a chisel and write'; 'Du mußt dein Leben ändern'; '我——不——相——信！'. Then, how much of this is ultimately even, any more, to do with the poem, the poet, or poetry?

If contemporaneity is a charge, of sorts, what is excessive to the life but which may enter into the work, which then demonstrates a mode

IMPROVISATION-response

meanders and floods

the pulse overwriting itself, or what is

metronome, silence

... poetry changes its observer or voicer through its speculative force (note I do not call this fictional), in a way (as the future projection of the vers[e], or turn-and-towards of the line, becomes the turn, subsequently, to the retrojective), and leaves them unchanged, unmovingly moved and/or movingly unmoved (delete as applicable; re-read; repeat!); a sort of listing manoeuvre without unending parataxis or overly vulgar wishing or desiring towards action ('whoso ... to hunt...') or listlessness, but where 'listing' looks back to hlyst-ing and listing (by art, by cunning, careening quickening, dis/orientational), perhaps... (a phonoaesthetic logic).

We refer to your work in terms of singularity (a term which is philosophically, poetically, but even physically quite charged – this is agreed), because we wondered if your own approach does something that is paradigmatic of poetic operation in general (and thus displays as something singular a universal dimension). In your work on the *Archipelago* (for example [here](#)) you indicate neither only the singular nor solely the universal element but rather a move, a movement of and also between the two. The true singular-universal-ity could then lie in the singular poetic form of expressing but also making visible this move, movement, as if travelling between conceptual islands, the pass(ing) from one to the other. Put differently, would you agree that poetry condenses, it (ver-)“dichtet”, to the point of and where singularity explodes (and thus multidirectional moves) into something that is so singular that it becomes universal and shows, articulates, brings to the page this (great) leap (not simply forward)? A great leap to the side, maybe?

Again, a richness of question(ing)s, so a question again of where to begin again... Certainly not with the idea of a claim (either for the singular or the universal), as almost surely the move to begin so is to favour the possibility of the fall absolute without allowing for the dance (or, sorry, I leap ahead of myself -- without allowing for the challenge or call for, and then potentially even the action of, the jump, or proof of the (or any) boast (or claim)). So let's begin with quite another associated resonance (the determined un-singularity of the crystalline phrase which is too complex, one hopes, to be fully cut loose into the realm of sloganicity!): the island, or the movement in which the island is the obstacle or measure: hic rhodus, hic... - up! The boast, the challenge; the phonoaesthetic-metapoetic logic of wilful prising and mis-prising (in this joke of course poetics politics and philosophy meet each other), or of paracoustics

-- the hearing of two (incompatible) modes at the same time which moment or conjuncture of hearing-simultaneously forces condensation -- a paracoustic translingual doubling of your 'ver-' which makes the very move of the 'ver-' poetically possible.

Reprise: we attend to the island (jump over Rhodes, then, or as far as you can...), and forget that the island (of roses, of snakes (the snake or worm or ver(se)) is what is meant to be circumvented in the jump, if the jump is successful. That is to say, that if one jumps over Rhodes -- the winning fulfilment of the wager -- one of course lands in the sea rather than on land; has ones feet pulled out from under one - reorienting onesself from an environment momentarily airy to one that is watery. Only the failure to achieve the wager (or boast) means one is landed. The achievement of the jump is to be at sea. Quite the opposite of the Icarian, or at least the Icarian within its most infamous poetic mode -- the Audenesque, whose sensibility is precisely the starting points of your question, of poetic (human) singularity, self- universality -- the 'doggy lives' of dogs which are not the be all and end all for or of the poem, rather are the sense, internal to the poem, of where the poem has already ended, and thence the singular-universal gesture ('something amazing') is -- if not jokingly at least in some jesting manner -- made; all too and only human in its poetic echolocation.

In this flying jump we (un)land not just in any sea, but, the ur-Archipelago of the Mediterranean. Which is a space as contested poetically as it is philosophically, politically, such that any claim to either a particularly or a universality immediately exposes the faults in the claim. And it is a space that challenges paradigms, effects their shifts as well as giving many so called 'traditions' a dangerous sense of a 'womb of origin' or foundational stasis; a space more watery than islanded. A space where thought in a sense cannot but be at sea, and it is this rather than the islands which are quite the opposite in this metaphorology than the conceptual stopping points your question seems to think of their being. Sure, the island might be the punctum in a sense, but there are many of those, and the sea's the expectation or modus or method; the whole process is combinatory, but a whole process whose expression is only in condensation, symptom of competing weather-fronts.

All this to say, yes, okay, let's think about *Archipelago*, which we have already thought about over the last few minutes, as this shift is precisely one of the questions the poem (a long poem ever evolving in multiple sequences) is trying to pose and answer, answering of course in layerings and mis-steps, mis-takes: the jump potentially through the obscure that lands you on not even uneven but no ground at all; a quite different orientation (where 'ground' is the measure of failure) begins to be essential; your (great [impossible]) leap (to the side) effects not a side-step but a 90 degree shift as the jumper becomes not a dancer but a swimmer (or, simultaneously a dancer and swimmer). And the

archipelago is at once geographically specific and any archipelago (a comparative paradigm). For me the most resonances currently rest between the Mediterranean, Orkney, and Hong-Kong for reasons of exposure rather than bias. The question 'archipelago?', and of the leap as/or answer, is conceptual, formal, lexical, sonorous, and in-between, condensing these things. From suspense to suspense (an investigation into thinking as form of suspense, or a pass(ing) in to, and of what allowances we must make for such a mode to be possible without falling back on or into itself... To misprise (bad) Pound (badly): Ver-dichten = condensare (obviously!). And somewhere the thought of a jump.

Things and thought(s) in the "Archipelago", already in its Mediterranean ur-form, immediately seem to become multi-dimensional (is this why you call it a "space"?), but therefore also quite disorienting, or they complicate the distinction between orientation and disorientation. If there is a "Ver-" movement that you describe as taking place in poetic form and thought – there is not only thought in parapraxis, but thinking is always also parapractical, a hic-up, hic...hic-up –, there seems to be a "Ver-" movement even in any "Ver-" movement itself (therefore multidimensional and dis-orientational), a movement in more than one "ver"s, or: movement in "Vers", if you excuse this Germanisation (it is only a minimal step to the "verse" from here). Would you say one lands in "vers(e)" if one to the risk to leap (and thus to think) poetically? What role does the sequence of poems play here (you will notice, we are trying to ask you the impossible, to ask for locating the impossible "point" when and where we started to "swim"))?

Your question itself seems to enact this 'Ver-', circling back and reformulating itself in a manner or method I guess you might claim for a dialectic but in whose formulation my ear would rather pick up something ode-ishly Pindaric, and a 'weather eye' might mark instead as something syntactically resonant with the movement and interaction of weather fronts or oceanic currents. It's in archipelagic spaces where one might observe most brutally, distinctly, excessively, or quickly these movements of 'Vers' and re-'Vers'e (for might we wager they are all formally cognate somehow?), but in which observation the passing-over of these movements can also be badly decontextualised in a form of picturesque style, or, (almost the same thing I suppose) the catalogue of observed forms (the tourist's 'snap', the philosophical sound-bite, the poetic cliché xeroxed a thousand times and sent out post-haste across the waters). And there - misprised - is your paraPraxis (paraTaxis): the slip (up) becomes list(ing); the boundaries, which may not have anyway existed are in some ways broken, or, one has created a different mode of

(dis)orientation and/or dimensionality. Hence, I suppose, 'space' (as you parenthetically gesture towards in your question).

To reverse: this paratactic-practic is the danger, also, of such an 'Archipelagic' rather than the singular is/landed mode of thinking movement which in many ways forgets the question, even, of the leap in favour of the landing. The word's dimensionality is, through mis-taken substitution (a hiccup!, which forces in itself a jump and interruption, a different relation to breathspace which is a part of the animate force of poetry) something, in all senses, of a 'leap' in thought

-- the piper's pied, cast	double-reededness
aside. petrify	old stones by singing
a wild dance wilder.	bent foot first forward
takes the trip, the tang	of iron on cut
tongue brings whistling to	whistlestop life. jump
over desarts, just	ify (you did not
'til now know stony	habits).
	watch io
dine-ripened wavespume	break in roseate
forms	
	and watch scentclouded pressure bring
	weight.
ask (if you know	how) whether such sea
sits glassy or crys	talline. It is the
solid that dances,	the glass that flows.
pay (pied) the play	of piper-plied trade
tripping your lines half	held or heard condensed
in rows cry future	waves or stones or sound --

I suppose an example of this leap is precisely the leap that the previous answer alluded to (the 'hic rhodus'), a question of (in)authenticity surrounds its (mis)use, born in a way out of the sloganicity of the (in) famous two versions (Rhodes/jump = rose/dance) of the line. But does this very sloganicity invite infinite substitutions? How do we hear them and how do they think?

Well, the paracousis poetic listening demands (even across languages, certainly across the literary and otherwise time of a single language) is a form of (and formal) dimensionality, and also a formal mode of equivocation (para-cousis is equi-vocalic). It also involves, of course, form, and what we sometimes call 'space' (viz. where for the most part there may be no text), as well as modes of combination and of refusal of combination. The 'Vers' demands attunement within and outwith what anyone might consider 'poetry' tout court ('vers' containing multiple possible resonances within itself and as a prefixal marker). I'd wager, perhaps, poetry's prefixal region, as much, punningly or side-steppingly,

as it is the 'Vers', is often the 'para-' (which we have in part addressed already): the prefix does supply a certain 'orientation' (or dimensionality), but also contains within itself resonance and internal modification. It's however dependent on what is suffixal to it, which it, retroactively, or in a simultaneous forwards-backwards suspended move of reading, modifies. But in beginning to read a word which is in part prefixally constituted, we leap into an unknown of meaning (until we know the suffix we may not know which form of the prefixal meaning is appropriate), of rhythm (or syllabry), and form. It is not a compounding, however, which is an differently orientational verbal effect of condensation-crystallization effect through a double-directional internal meaning-modification (both elements yoked together 'mean' equally, and modify each other through the, often neologistic, re-placement as a singular, or dual, word-unit), and the compound (horizontal movement)'s vertical analogue -- the pun. Of course much condensation may be simultaneously both: both are a sort of condensed paratactic mode or feeling; all is highly conjunctural.

This leads to a problem with logic: what is logical, but condensed, if it drops, is either finally crystalline OR glassy (which is to say supercooled, not solid but frozen - fundamentally a-crystalline - a real virtuoso act of temperature-control or substance abuse); can be petrified... can easily fall into false economies or gimmicks or elicit the hermeneutic-ist's paranoiac fear of the (in)joke, which is often more politely cast as a 'secret', whose obscurity must be exposed leads to a too-much of the accusation of the personal which is the mistaken misunderstanding of conjuncture or specificity. What is conjunctural is not personal, but its formal modes and gestures may not be lexical, or may not have a specifically linear or grounded mode of internal orientation. So, to return to the start of your question ('[...] complicate relation between orientation and disorientation') we are bad perhaps at articulating this complexity in prose as the form infrequently allows for the same moves which the poem may make with deceptive ease, for the line is never simply a line. But we may have to work to get there, realising we may never get 'there', or even realise what the 'there' truly is. This is the para-; the suspense paradigmatic to the poem, which works with and against the 'vers-' (condensation-tension), in all, the leap. And this perhaps answers, too, the final part of your question -- perhaps this is the role, multi-orientational, of the 'sequence' of poems in itself -- the form becomes, then, a part of the question. (Did you start to swim yet?)

Poetry and the paralogical are thus aligned? Hegel once claimed that thinking is as if to jump as if into a borderless ocean. Which simply means that some things one does are irrevocable. Are the irreversible and the paralogical part of the same articulation for you?

Let's avoid just for a moment thinking jumping (again) as we've addressed already questions of the jump (or leap) in terms of the line and its relation to questions of suspense or, if one were to push the boat out a little, of negative capability. Through the 'island' or archipelago problem. Of course it's related, and, attempting to remember the start of this, didn't we begin somehow with parataxis?, but it might be interesting, rather than with alignment per se to the drawing of parallel (or otherwise) lines – the co-respondent simultaneities which provide a certain sense of poetic logic – to think through what the 'paralogical' might be at this moment (in the interview, so, our poetry's 'now'), or what it may mean to avoid the usual pejorative sense which implies always the relation of the 'para' in the paralogical as that which is *not* logical. By nothing more (and therefore more) than a prefixal relation the para must needs be defined by its relation against and with what comes after it (the logical). Attend to the logic of the 'para-', rather than the 'paralogical' as more commonly (mis)understood; the latter, that is, as a series of 'leaps' in 'logic' which are unconscionable within a framework given to 'reason' as they are non-conforming to being as if, what was it Virginia Woolf called the redundant logic of narrative forms of/and life?, a 'series of gig-lamps symmetrically arranged'. If the suffixal logic of the para has not moved beyond the symmetrical or unidirectional gig-lamp stage we are in trouble, indeed.

What sort of trouble? For almost all modes of literary, writerly, philosophical, or political 'realism', contains at its core a profound paralogical wager which is almost, although it goes against the function or form of the modes, a speculation (were we to think betting on the outcome of the dice-fall rather than the fall itself were in any way more 'realist' an attitude; which of course it is not – the jump is real, yes, and therefore so too the logic of the jump). It may be attended to with resignation, comfort, horror, as it may be that of a 'realism', or of a 'mimesis', or a 'concretion', or 'abstraction'... the list goes on, with each so-called positive mode also bringing with it an equally positive or positioning move 'against', and after some time the same thing again 'anew'! The list itself is another para- (parataxis, whose slippage into the Freudian Faultline we've already mentioned). And pre-fixally, each para works with and against itself as non-self-defining act (or, a clichéd substitutional parapraxis, *art*): the para modifies what has not yet come, prefixally, what comes then modifies the mode, suffixially, of the para. So what does this then say to the (non)-self, and how does that articulate itself? In a different sort of speculation perhaps (on the jump?) perhaps even the indifference to the result of the post-jump-fall until it has happened: an avoidance of such predication as can lead to a dangerous cycle of narcissistic performance or world-building claim. The claim of this issue of C+C seems to be in part that 'poetry thinks' and is thought *of* rather than *for* by what is not poetry – thus it also seems to mean that poetry 'speaks' (and indeed it does, even as we speak of it) – the fact of

such 'thinking' and 'speaking' being in essence a substantializing of a movement toward 'truth' or a 'real', which may indeed work paralogically with *other* ways of thinking. But in itself?

This creates a series of different problems, really, than one of an alignment or otherwise between 'poetry and the paralogical' (can these two things really even bear formal relations with each other?) and thus bears a different relation to the second part of your question, the articulation of 'irreversibility' and the paralogical (which I read as the question of 'irreversibility and the paralogical *in poetry*'). Which is to say, that although poetry – outwith itself – may be paralogically read (viz in 'commentary') as co-incidental 'evidence' for event(s), it is also in itself making claim to 'event'-based temporality: when we simply 'read' poetry. And in doing so can we think of the 'paralogical' as a counterpoint? We must attend of course to lexis, syntax, figure, form, and conjuncture. Each of these things (and yes, somehow, I find myself sounding rather like a very standard undergraduate 'close reading' assignment, but there is a lot of value, as with the same way of thinking in and with music, in its demand for a technics of reading-as-interpretation) operate under their own internal logic and combined may be something that appears to us as poetry. Add to this resonance, or translation, or a certain ekphrasis of medium or mode, and there is no hope but to be forced to think, as it were, paracoustically (or to follow a suite of simultaneous logics and the moves between them), 'in' and 'with' poetry. Out of this and on the question of 'irreversibilities' then, well, perhaps it's obvious: each 'reading' or interpretation will be a further 'now' in itself, and un-doable, but of course the poem may again be returned to and re-read. Against the principle of the *translatio imperii*? For poetry in some way, always. A re-vocation, still? Yes.

Some things are irrevocable; these things may also demand (or even command) to be also multivocable. With due attention there will almost always be more than one thing going on, and each new move demands some form of shift in both ana- and pro-lepsis we've already talked about in order that the so-called 'line' (or lines, interwoven) successfully co-respond and the overall effect is convincing.* And of course once we've learnt a joke or the metaphorical ground, or the kenning-source, in a line, we can't but hear it again and often for a while see it inappropriately elsewhere too; this way the paralogical works, and also what seems the irrevocable may leads to a multivocable which provokes, irrevocably – an accretion and condensation of meaning-making effects – which is nevertheless also a revocation of a singular previous state. Why should we pretend ignorance to this?

===

*the way that syntax operates a-formatively in Chinese poetry particularly attests to this: characters provide the logic for sound and meaning of other characters in a way that is impossible in most Western poetries

except through the ways grammatical logic may ensure that the verb or noun of a verbal noun is emphasised, or one meaning of a homophone is emphasised. This is not really however a functional analogy at all!

So, let's make the form part of this question: could we venture to say that poetic practice, practical poesis – and what you make us think seems to force and necessitate this differentiating repetition that goes somewhat against Aristotle's neat distinction – is therefore explosive as well as condensing? Moving into two directions at once, in two different ways and modes. This obviously puts – condensed condensing – pressure on the poetic form, such that starts to become difficult, if not impossible, to say where it begins and where it ends (the notorious critiques or appraisals of what was believed to have been proclaimed as the end of art might have already pointed in this "direction").

Another multifold question, then, which looks to an aspect of the antepenultimate moment left suspended – the question of form – and which seems in a sense to be the form of this interview overall, which is to say or play or perform in thinking, in a sense, that mode and form are somewhat interlinked, yes; to use your expression, simultaneously relatively simple directional move in its act of 'putting pressure' (on) the poetic mode [I'd argue this is a more-than-double pressure; it must be to provoke a condensation reaction. This is why I modify you and say not just form but mode (language, sound, form, punctuative denaturing, combined as under pressure – therein lies perhaps your identification of 'difficulty', albeit only superficially a difficulty, ultimately, rather, a form of outstretched ease)]; as well as an act of allowance for what is perhaps an unanticipatable condensation, explosion, 'pressure front', *storm*... and the associated caesuring release (entlassen) – for that is what form does: releases, obviates, but not until it also has exploded, condensed... Thus we move again somewhat towards the meteorological as figurative mode (and figurative *affirmation*). Had we more time we might talk about the move between the poet and the philosopher of being (thinking) as the storm in itself – an explosion-expression of a-poetic (perhaps too frequently read as 'poetic' or (at least Romantically) a-phoristic) of the Nietzschean mode, in itself a further possible enactment of your question of form (or 'differentiating repetition'). But then things must become specific, whilst also calling to many resonant modes. A productive destruction thus constituted must needs be the sort of paralogical irrevocability we already spoke about which leads you, then, to ask more about form – that poetic materiality – in which the *para* and the *vocable* are part of an agglutinative method which (because it agglutinates) neither fetishises nor underplays the importance of the explosion-effect as well as the condensation-effects. So.

1. To parse out of the form (syntactic suspension; multivalence) of your question one question: of poetic practice as explosive as well as condensing, sure. With which comes an injunction to *hear well* (responsibility) to, in not *forcing* writing (writing as lexis, writing as soundwork, writing as transumption, writing as form) and thus allowing it its *force* (taking responsibility).
2. A practical poesis as forced explosion and forced condensation which functions on a multiform 'ground', demanding simultaneity, thus constant re-orientation (the 'jump'; the wager), of taking a 'stand' (sta-- as a multilingual suffix we have not time to address, which is a shame), writing such a 'stand', as a catch (your breath) and release (entlassen). Yes, perhaps a double-demand, but also a multivalent one as it occurs multiply within the same 'form'. Not really a removal from the 'real' then but a way of thinking, suspended (suspirating).
3. Such a poesis (as you read, translate at will) is
 - a. moving in two directions at once / moving at once in twos
 - b. moving in two ways at once / moving at once in twos
 - c. moving in 2 modes at once / moving at once in twos

We must thus end, or return; allowing poetry not only to demonstrate, but to think; to speak.

If there is something breathing

after Ibn Arab

شارع الحمراء June 2022

Amari happened. There were Cedars there. There was a name cognate to the cedars and yet it was not and was not here and yet nine places were and now no longer are and now there is a monument which cannot grow but yet exists. We do not see. The landscape lives with lime, and orchids in a will to fuck protrude. Bonelli's eagle swoops.

We are not there. The sky burns (as the sky will ever burn, no claude glass puts it right or more precise than that or this) and we know that this burn means time has never been as such excepting that it were a sop held soppishly against the form. The form persists. We are not there. As Leila sings then only we might sing; as Leila sings to nothing, nothing sings.

What mines exists. The mole explosive mode as metaphor screams addled from its gloom in future set in stone and petals fall. The sepal, stamen, stigma sit and fall. The thread is frayed and tattered loses force through force unbound yet is. What's stray has strayed already and what's lost is lost. The weave is warp. The warping warps unseen.

The pressure building in what gap there is is avidly avoided, unapproached but pushes a cold front indifferent in praise. Of what? Belief? Or faith? Of course the libido then screams but what is left to hear? Some ill-formed ideal of a long-lost light? Some postured precedent? The resin burns with a white gas the flame's colour unseen, but were we there...

All's left is that black nothingness of star without apostrophe, without what's with, and yet what is remains as pulsate thing within the all-too-human-heart. A precedent antecedent to a fact. A fact aligning precisely with what's not. A fact long gone. And in the stores the what-nots shine, absorbed in your black-pupil-gap of sight.

One dies. Too close one sees that sight occludes. The petals fall. And petals. And a fall. The foam is formed of scent. The eyes occulted close. In square blue-green horizonlines light blurs or purrs; the cedar stands. Oh ancient force of nothingness arranged by phyllotaxis and the last; the kiss

(we deal in liberation (what we believe that is)
the much as force or sense or boundedness)

Can You Read Me?

Reem Abbas

can	you	read	me
سي؟	سامعين	هون	أنا
can	you	read	me
down	here	see	me
in	these	gaps	ليش
you	leave	me	I
I	say	هون	you
don't	see	me	still
you	read	me	can
these	lines	reed	me
sing	a	story	free
me	swim	but	you
sink	me	swim	I
هون	و	هون	we'll
sow	blood	you	bullet
so	dirt	blot	me
until	you	blot	اسمعوني
this	sea	fire	sown
skinned	me	why	can't
you	why	you	nought
can't	you	down	gap
me	news	me	report
me	but	you	don't
see	you	سامعين	

Interglacial (Poems 2015–2021)

Pierre Joris

(to be published October 2022 by Contra Mundum Press, together with
Always the Many, Never the One: Conversations In-between Mersch & Elsewhere,
with Florent Toniello)

A SHELTER IS NOT NECESSARILY AN ISLAND

as title for something cogent right now
comes to mind & brings to mind

Eric Mottram's 1971 book title

Shelter Island & The Remaining World

so now is shelter
the opposite of the

"remaining world"

— when the remaining world is
helter-skelter (late 16th century adverb: a rhyming jingle of
unknown origin,
perhaps symbolic of running feet or from Middle English skelte
'hasten') —

or not? No,
shelter is island
island is always plural
is always already part of

some
multiplicity, an archipelago
"a series of sound groups a local thrush
chickadees at their red plastic spinning bins
active for dark brown striped white sunflower seeds
gull's white crab and cree low over wrinkling shore planes"
(E.M. *Shelter Island*)

3/30

Thinking of a possible essay on “commissure” that piece, that place conjoining Celan & Olson, I just came across this in an old notebook, 8 June 1971, London, a day on which I threw the I Ching & got:

	21	—————>	27	
	/		\	
	Biting Through		The corners of the	
			mouth	
/			\	
the clinging, fire, above the			keeping still, Mountain,	
above the				
arousing, thunder			arousing,	
thunder				

Volume 9
Issue 1

3/31

We are eternal only while we are alive.

4/1

These buds on the branches
here this year too
their steadfastness, my surprise

*

Nachhaltige Nicht-Nachhaltigkeit

= title of a German book

translates as:

sustainable non-sustainability
(or: the empire strikes back...)

4/12

So in the last dream,
Derrida comes down the
majestic red-carpeted
staircase just before day
breaks and with a
large smile & an even
more expansive wave
of his left arm
(the other rests on the
baluster) gives the
order for the gerrymandering
to begin or to end
I can't be sure how
this one links to the
long black and white
dream just before (only
a quick pee separates
them) in which I talked
lengthily to various politicians
and a few pundits
(me included, it seems)
about the evil of
gerrymandering, and
we are all absolutely
certain, as certain as one can
only be in a dream, that
our lives depend on
ending that terrifying
trend and now that I
woke up for good I
would really like to go
back into the last one
and ask Jacques if his
gesture meant to begin
or to end what the

dream proposed. But I
can't, I can't, the sun
has risen behind me
where I can't see it but
I do see its reflection
in front of me, reddening
the East Coast buildup
West of here on
Staten Island just
across the Verrazano Straights
— much quieter today,
these waters, not half as roiled
as yesterday, or as my dreams
made me today.

DURING A ZOOM READING by Jerome Rothenberg

Two thousand run
of the mill Buddhas
tread water

There are no mirrors
anywhere in the world
: only others

In several parts
the whole
is & is not

The whole is
& is not
in separate parts

In acts of cruelty
the present is miscarried
again and again

Time you say is a bullfight
I say time is kneeling
in the sand-hour facing the bull

*

4/14

So what is there left
except for the light
of a watery sun slanting
through clouds,

some cars, some runners
all wearing masks except
for those three in a circle
(what is a circle of three?)

((there is
no way of
squaring that one
except as the four-line
stanza, come in without asking
& now broken up))

based on 6 feet distance
who are smoking in concert
and that 5-kid family of
orthodox Jews rushing toward

the pier and maybe the water
will part and they can
escape the plagues of New York
— no pharaoh will chase them to
no paradise.

4/28

This morning's birds,
no owl in Owl's Head Park,
but

6 or more

Northern Flickers (my first sighting
after Nicole's excited reports)
the usual mess of robins,
my gaggles of sparrows, some
common house, some white-
throated, some chirping balls
of white bellies stuck out &
red-brown Mohawk aimed at
the rising sun,

the usual array of doves, never think of calling
them mourning, in or
out of same, they're just a
bit sad,

but then a ring of doves
with capitals in English
but without in the Arabic
tawq al-hamanah is
a major treatise on love
by Ibn Hazm
(to be looked into
when home-in-shelter from
early morning birding
walk).

4/29

Merle Bachmann: "I am in exile from exile."

5/4

one-hour morning walk nets
a day to be named “Grey Catbird
Day” in honor of the multiple sightings
in Owls Head Park —
a walk ending w/ 7 cormorants off
Pier 69, & in between
one Eastern Towhee
any number of robins
one female cardinal
one “Elster” — ah, yes, magpie,
and all the sparrows,
all the sparrows!

5/11

Days ago
I wrote about a dove,
& thinking back on it
& Ibn Hazm’s *Ring*
of same I turn
to the window
& there she is
on the branch of
the tree, keeping a cool
6 feet
social distance,
as I raise my head
& she’s gone
except for the
cooing, still
hanging in the
air — even after the
sharp warning wing
whistle
 stopped.

Apocalypse Waltz

Philip Metres

--after Gertrude Stein

Everyone is certain that nothing is certain,
everything is curtailed

and nothing is open

and all we can do is play, all we can do is
all we can do and all we can do
is play

Everything is over and nothing is ever
Under the under is

all of a tremor

Something is sundered at beginning's beginning,
while under the concrete

there is a burning

and nothing is certain, everyone is certain
and all we will do is pay,
all we can do is

try to rhyme with the sun and mime with the moon,
while inside the swerving
earth is a womb

where something is shortly due to transpire,
dear implacable planet
cored by this fire

C
R
I
S
I
S

&

C
R
I
T
I
Q
U
E

/

Volume 9
Issue 1

Rivercrossing

Heather H. Yeung

The sea is no-one's skin.
The sailor, bred in a tannery, addicted
to the repulsion of water and salt and air, sails.
The verb determines the effort : sail as close
to sea-skin as we get, hull (so goes the old riddle)
plough, net riddle, and enginegrease
an attempted transformation or rainbow
from which slick grey masks a venture
in which there is no landscape
to impugn.

Burnt pinepitch and oil soils pages,
blooms futures. The old poet's claim for mist
is mistranslated through too many miscegenations
to count : we no longer think in combinations
of mountain and air, remember in bonescript
cracks the goddess or excess, breathe and

the red feather falls.

The past crosses the Sam Chun River at the point where freshwater
and sea collide, saltmarsh makes new skin, lips parch, the city
imagined beyond reedbed the only horizon, the new mobility,
the new speech salted out from the lips
in this final effort.

Nothing is so deep swimming is fear.
There is now, each now new, each bird rising the first
and soon lost to a new first, each weed catching your ankles
and thread of skin stripped and lost to the swim the first and new.
You refuse the seed-metaphor, seek a different planting. Uncle,
you are the red bird, are the one

black smudge
among many (an old poet's claim that water drawn falling
must happen in a single brushstroke uninterrupted
but in various moments disturbed) I bear relation
to you only in untranslatable generation names.

We can re-
count what was into what is across breakwaters

stand on three peaks viewing the source
and unimagine the impossible : one great sun looking down
to scoop up each transient seed, replant, force growth, reap
in red and skin and flay with nets what attempts
to cross marshland (or 'area of environmental protection' where
scrutiny of the crossing, misty, prevails).

Recall : I ask you impossibly
why tradition burnt in generation books makes of the woman
waiting stone on a mountaintop.

Stones do not wait or want
nor woman either. What is forgotten also marks such a punctum.

What is we is a future and keens
backwards, does not know
what you are
except the margin
of a story

before
what decisive break
when mist like skin
fell over poetry

before
a single origin point

Again the marshland calls (the birds
call, rising from reedbeds and mangroves)

I wager on the breaks
to find the crossing point, desire
the point of no return, build life
for end times.

The vision brought to a terminus
in one of the following ways (check
which are applicable and discriminate,
find thus a path) *darkness*
 landmass
 skyscrapers
 what horizon exists (its band of light)
 such condition that disavows the manysidedness of things

Imagine now (address to the poet) what it may mean to
 not abuse your wife with dictation so
 indulge in cataract removal surgery
 dislodge the cormorant who sits crowing on the rough walls
 stop fêting old beginnings

/
Volume 9
Issue 1

With the black shadow gone and the light
we return to the saltmarshes
 dredging (the mobile fisherman
sets out to work the assumed land exists below the water)
built the wall, ratcheted the dimmerswitch down,
sent in red notes a reckoning to the back of the cave
you imagine somewhere on the mountain you also imagine
but do not see, chew kernels to a pulp, key in observations,
return
to find bolted onto bedrock an aggression of rise and fall
not creature nor symbol giving power through synthesis to the settlement.

We are speaking at crosspurposes (evolutionary requirement)
beak bent as wing (each birdflight new)
and on skin fine stretchmarks show
the transformative care
you have afforded the metaphor *scars circuitous*
 rooftop corrugated iron
 village brought to a stop
 by city
 which flows.

The vowels escape
or the crossroads.

into flesh, refuses

the wind-up, the body
a kernel and the ghost

grates mobile
and hearth.

Calluna
from pine, asks in pitch
except change.

Motes
airs, smudge out words.

a cold hearth, smoor
meant for leaving.

blackening plumage
the stone

which is perhaps the point

Plumage, cryptic, rots
featherfall.

We forget
invisible in the grain, remember
of a figure, smell mulch.

An I

between hearth

burns, resin spits gold
what it is has been missed

in migrant patterns scatter

Stasis breeds
of heart in a room

Birds nest in chimneys
by association

stains with night.

STONEGATHERER

What dust there is is never only stone.
Imagine : the stone speaks. Prise open
the mind. Imagine (again) : the stone.
Reprise. A is more or less B
polytropos.

We cannot be sure
what stone is (were never sure
of bedrock).

An orange bird migrates, hops
from stone to stone seeking dust

*[there was an error
in the original – for dust
read knife [read worm
read false dusting
[there was an error in
the original – for hop
read in a vowel
a hop[e from stone
to s]tone, a c]row
false destiny, d]us[t
a]ston[ishment*

finds
beneath one stone, trembling, voice-
wizened figures

caps
the open mouths with more stone
before they can utter
– how

we did not divine such a bird

the 'dark' falls
the comedy is over. We
are bathed in orange light, colourblind, prating
or nightblind (something chokes nightsongs in tonerows)
but no longer static on the screen.

moss
whets
stone

C
R
I
S
I
S

sea
saltlipped rolls
knife

&

C
R
I
T
I
Q
U
E

The dark tripped and fell
from the universe once

which was before this action began.

/

Volume 9
Issue 1

Observe the romance of the sprinkling of dust which must be avoided.

The threat display is upright.
the man begins to count,
in-two, the bird, the saltmarshes,
falls apart, smothered
croaks in segments,
and yet is, does not
is essential.

Vision brought to a terminus
starting with the one-
and the world
in apostrophe. The 'man'
in 'modern' 'ruins' and what was not
annihilate, and thus night is and

Serve man sprinkling dust.

Be void.

to have been capstone or cairn
of some planetary orbital force
flies cutting sky and mending it

The bird balances on what we interpret
but which now under weight
crumbles further. The bird
in its wake is our vision ironstained.

(obsolete theory of emendation)

It is the eye which slows

sound from happening.

It is the eye

which is party to what the dual is

the eyes

seek
(the red bird's beak)

are

clouded

is different now the sound barrier is broken.
To send is to stain but in this supercool movement it is only
memory that strains and you who forces from fear
or knowledge of the liquid crystalline.

Too many
will not take grey over ground, let gooselag pain sky
with sound and disappear (strange weaving through cloud
and cloud alike).

Further down, murmurations attempt
the aerial, fail, are read as patternings.

We tread thin ice
as clouds do not wait, do not count. Imagine : the
stone. Imagine : the cloud. Fail to draw clouds
and with brushcurves on the dull of paper
watch grey surround a drying habit.

There is a certain salinity in it all, a certain avoidance
of reprisals, the ink haloes of the wager (no-one
wears it convincingly anymore and weaving
becomes the darning of thin patches in matter).

I dare you. Because there is always a city
on a horizon
the plain
(if it still exists) is a figure, is
the sea, development, capital
there are forms
of petrol that flame green, orange
the sailor spreads animalskin over
the sea
effects a crossingplace,

twists his tongue

at the stench of the tannery
of the letter, forgets

the line

of light

is vertical : the horizon bends : the clouds

are too thick to cut or knot : the clouds

are not –

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Volume 9
Issue 1

Reprise, now, the story of the start of the red bird's migration,
what it carries with it, hooked on the cross of its bill with muted
swifttongued trill even as there is no one sure saying any more. The letter
cryptic as plumage bright in the pocket does not snag or chafe, break
skin or sing through seams.

It is well known that in the story there can be
no fault lines, only travel. Light rests in the ocean your eyes I keen toward.

Curtains immaterial to the moment are thrown open
to the solar term marked by the possibility of big snow.
Candles not lit on the night-time table set underneath the curtains
in certain finery; none of this is nocturnal, nor whiteout, all wields
posed nothing. There is no domestic reflected in windowpanes,
the spheres have changed and neither star nor screech owl
hurl cries onto the dark.

We walk towards what we know
held by clock lag. Slowed, the book tells us we cannot wait for birdsong
(Loxia's red is irruptive as its figure). Snow does not fall,
the letter still, the world's sky gauze. The bird shines elsewhere,
breaks bitter almonds to quench an inarticulate thirst,
prevented from calling. There are no colours here, a cessation.

Past the city the ocean pays nightlight's debts in a gold that floats dissembling,
neither either nor or; the eye held captive by the band of it between city and sky
sends out flares.

These, then, are the lessons we might learn
should we see or ask for them, and as for the ocean, the bird, the negation
that comes before dawn, one day we will have cause to swim there.

Tonight in this winter on this hill I have walked too many times
unhampered by claw or beak shadows sough, fascicles twist, shortening,
a summerheady currency of gorse is studied lack and pine
no longer smoulders. Winter rain is not cold
nor precipitate.

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C
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Q
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Volume 9
Issue 1

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sue 1

sue 1

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Notes on Contributors

Reem Abbas is a poet and critic currently working on Persian influences in the poetry of Basil Bunting. She is a 2021 'Undertow' poet at the Poetry Translation Centre.

Ali Alizadeh is an author and scholar, and senior lecturer at Monash University, Melbourne. His current publications include a work of aesthetic theory, *Marx and Art* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2019); a collection of poetry, *Towards the End* (Giramondo, 2020); and a novel, *The Last Days of Jeanne d'Arc* (Giramondo, 2017). He is currently writing and studying Horror fiction.

Emily Apter is Silver Professor of French Literature, Thought and Culture and Comparative Literature at New York University. Her books include *Unexceptional Politics: On Obstruction, Impasse and the Impolitic* (Verso, 2018), *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (2013), the *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon* (co-edited with Barbara Cassin, Jacques Lezra and Michael Wood) (2014); and *The Translation Zone: A New Comparative Literature* (2006). Her current project, *What is Just Translation?* takes up questions of translation and justice across media. Her essays have appeared in *Public Culture*, *Diacritics*, *October*, *PMLA*, *Comparative Literature*, *Art Journal*, *Third Text*, *Paragraph*, *boundary 2*, *Artforum* and *Critical Inquiry*. In 2019 she was the Daimler Fellow at the American Academy in Berlin. In 2017-18 she served as President of the American Comparative Literature Association. In fall 2014 she was a Humanities Council Fellow at Princeton University and in 2003-2004 she was a Guggenheim Fellowship recipient.

Judith Balso is a professor of poetry at the European Graduate School. Each year during a summer seminar she invites internationally renowned poets such as Jacques Roubaud, Alessandro De Francesco, and Philippe Beck to discuss the relation between poetry, philosophy, and politics. She has published numerous works on the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa, including *Pessoa, le passeur métaphysique* (Seuil, 2006) translated as *Pessoa, The Metaphysical Courier* (Atropos, 2011). Recently, Balso also contributed to the collection *The Idea of Communism Vol 1*, edited by Costas Douzinas and Slavoj Žižek (Verso, 2010).

Philippe Beck (b. 1963) is a contemporary French poet, writer, and philosopher. He is Professor of Poetry at The European Graduate School / EGS and Senior Lecturer of Philosophy at l'Université de Nantes. Philippe Beck is a founder and editor of *Alter*, a journal of phenomenology, and of the poetry journal *Quaderno*. He has, as well, written numerous academic essays for various journals, and translated the work of

Walter Benjamin, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, F.W. von Schelling, and Karl Philipp Moritz.

Victoria Bergstrom recently completed a PhD in French at UC Berkeley and will take a position as Postdoctoral Fellow at the Fox Center for Humanistic Inquiry at Emory University later this year. She is currently at work on her first scholarly monograph, *Against Immediacy: Visual Media and the Image in Modern and Contemporary French Poetry*, which tracks evolutions in the concept of the poetic image amidst the proliferation of electromagnetic and digital image technologies since the mid-twentieth century. Isolating the issue of immediacy as a site of convergence for critical reflection on twentieth- and twenty-first-century poetry and media, this study explores how French-language poets demystify the dreams of unmediatedness fundamental to the operations of lyric and transmission technologies alike and mobilize poetry as an organ of critique of a metastasizing image-world.

Nathan Brown is Associate Professor of English and Canada Research Chair in Poetics at Concordia University, Montreal, where he directs the Centre for Expanded Poetics. He is the author of *Rationalist Empiricism: A Theory of Speculative Critique* (2021) and *The Limits of Fabrication: Materials Science and Materialist Poetics* (2017), as well as *Baudelaire's Shadow: An Essay on Poetic Determination* (2021) and a complete translation of Baudelaire's *The Flowers of Evil* (2021).

Amy Catanzano, associate professor of English and poet-in-residence at Wake Forest University, publishes poetry, poetics, and multimodal artworks. She is the author of three books, including *Multiversal* (2009), recipient of the PEN USA Literary Award in Poetry, and *Starlight in Two Million: A Neo-Scientific Novella* (2014), recipient of the Noemi Press Book Award in Fiction. Recent projects include *World Lines: A Quantum Supercomputer Poem* (2018) and applied theory in *CounterText: A Journal of the Post- Literary* (2021). Her regular visits to scientific research centers include CERN, where she was a research artist with the ATLAS Experiment at the Large Hadron Collider.

Alessandro De Francesco is an Italian poet, artist, and essayist. He has exhibited and performed internationally and published several books, among which: *And Agglomerations, of Trees or* (Mousse Publishing, forthcoming); (((Uitgeverij / punctum books, 2021); *Pour une théorie non-dualiste de la poésie* (MIX / Les Presses du réel, 2021); *Remote Vision* (punctum books, 2016). Alessandro graduated in Philosophy at the University of Pisa and obtained his doctorate in Literary Theory from the Sorbonne

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Volume 9
Issue 1

in Paris. He taught poetry and artistic practice at the Ecole Normale Supérieure, the European Graduate School, the Basel Academy of Art & Design, the Ecole de Recherche Graphique and the ENSAV "La Cambre" in Brussels. He is currently affiliated with the Y-Institute at the Bern Academy of the Arts. www.alessandrodefrancesco.net

Alexander García Düttmann teaches philosophy at Universität der Künste in Berlin. His most recent book publications include *In Praise of Youth* (Zürich: Diaphanes 2021) and *The Hopeless* (Berlin: August 2021). He has just finished translating into German Jean-Luc Nancy's last book, *Cruor* (Zürich: Diaphanes 2022)

Mikhail N. Epstein is an American literary theorist and critical thinker of Russian-Jewish origin. He is Samuel Candler Dobbs Professor of Cultural Theory and Russian Literature at Emory University (Atlanta, USA). He has authored 40 books and more than 700 articles and essays, translated into 24 languages. His areas of specialization include postmodernism, cultural theory, Russian literature and intellectual history, contemporary philosophical and religious thought, and interdisciplinary approaches in the humanities. His latest books include: *The Transformative Humanities: A Manifesto* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2012); *The Irony of the Ideal: Paradoxes of Russian Literature* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2017); *A Philosophy of the Possible: Modalities in Thought and Culture* (Brill, 2019); *The Phoenix of Philosophy: Russian Thought of the Late Soviet Period (1953-1991)* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2019); and *Ideas Against Ideocracy: Non-Marxist Thought of the Late Soviet Period (1953-1991)* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2022).

Juan Manuel Garrido is full professor of philosophy at Universidad Alberto Hurtado in Santiago de Chile. His main books include: *La formación de formas* (Paris, Galilée, 2008), *Chances de la pensée - à partir de Jean-Luc Nancy* (Paris, Galilée, 2011), *On Time, Being, and Hunger: Challenging the Traditional way of Thinking Life* (New York, Fordham University Press, 2012) and *Producción de conocimiento* (Santiago, Metales Pesados 2018).

Andrea Gadberry is Associate Professor at New York University where she holds a joint appointment in the Department of Comparative Literature and the Gallatin School of Individualized Study. She is the author of *Cartesian Poetics: The Art of Thinking* (Chicago 2020) and is currently at work on a second book on mereology, justification, and literary criticism.

Dr. Daniel Hartley is Assistant Professor in World Literatures at Durham University (UK). He is the author of *The Politics of Style: Towards a Marxist Poetics* (2017), and has published widely on Marxist theory and modern and contemporary literature.

Carol Jacobs taught as Birgit Baldwin Professor of Comparative Literature and Professor of Germanic Languages and Literatures at Yale University. Before that she was also Professor of German, at New York University, Professor of Comparative Literature and English Literature, SUNY Buffalo, and Associate Professor of German Literature at Johns Hopkins University. Her most recent books are *In the Language of Walter Benjamin* (Johns Hopkins University Press), *Skirting the Ethical* (*Sophocles, Plato, Hamann, Campion, Sebald*) (Stanford University Press), and *Sebald's Vision* (Columbia University Press).

Pierre Joris just published his *Celebratory Talk-Essay on Receiving the Batty Weber Award* (CNL, Literary Talks series), *Fox-trails, -tales & -trots* (poems & prose, Black Fountain Press); in 2020 he completed his 1/2 century Celan translation project with *Memory Rose into Threshold Speech: The Collected Earlier Poetry of Paul Celan* (FSG) & *Microliths: Posthumous Prose of Paul Celan* (Contra Mundum Press). Also in 2020, *A City Full of Voices: Essays on the Work of Robert Kelly* (CMP) & in 2019, *Arabia (not so) Deserta* (essays on Maghrebi & Mashreqi Literature & Culture, Spuyten Duyvil) & *Conversations in the Pyrenees* with Adonis (CMP). Forthcoming fall 2022 from CMP are *Always the Many, Never the One: Conversations in-between*, with Florent Toniello & *Interglacial* (Poems 1915-2021), from which the sequence published herein is taken.

Jela Krečić is a philosopher. Her work is dedicated to philosophy of art, contemporary art and popular culture. She co-edited books on contemporary TV-series and on film director Ernst Lubitsch. She also edited a volume *The Final Countdown: Europe, Refugees and The Left* (Ljubljana: Irwin; Vienna: Wiener Festwochen, 2017). She published a book *Zmote neprevaranij: od modernizma do Hollywooda* (*The Errors of the Non-duped: from modernism to Hollywood*) in 2020. She works as a researcher and lecturer at the University of Ljubljana.

Jean-Jacques Lecercle is Emeritus Professor of English at the University of Nanterre. A specialist of Victorian literature and the philosophy of language, he is the author of, among others, *The Violence of Language, Interpretation as Pragmatics, A Marxist Philosophy of Language* and *Badiou and Deleuze Read Literature*. His latest book, *De l'interpellation* was published in 2019.

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Volume 9
Issue 1

Pierre Macherey, born in 1938, has taught philosophy in Paris and in Lille, after working with Louis Althusser. His research was mainly focused on the thought of Spinoza, the philosophical activity of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in France and on the relations between philosophy and literature. Recent publications: "Marx 1845: les "Thèses" sur Feuerbach" (éd. Amsterdam, Paris, 2008), "Petits riens - Ornières et dérivés du quotidien" (éd. du Bord de l'eau, Bordeaux, 2009), "La parole universitaire" (éd. La Fabrique, Paris, 2011), "De l'utopie!" (éd. De l'Incidence, 2011), "Etudes de philosophie "française" de Sieyès à Barni" (Publications de la Sorbonne, Paris, 2013), "Le sujet des norms" (éd. Amsterdam, Paris, 2014), "S'orienter" (éd. Kimé, Paris, 2017).

Philip Metres has written numerous books, including *Shrapnel Maps* (Copper Canyon 2020). Winner of Guggenheim, Lannan, and NEA fellowships, he is professor of English and director of the Peace, Justice, and Human Rights program at John Carroll University, and core faculty at Vermont College of Fine Arts MFA.

Warren Montag is the Brown Family Professor of Literature at Occidental College in Los Angeles. His most recent books include *Althusser and His Contemporaries* (2013) and *The Other Adam Smith* (2014). Montag is also the editor of *Décalages*, a journal on Althusser and his circle, and the translator of Étienne Balibar's *Identity and Difference: John Locke and the Invention of Consciousness* (2013).

Christopher Norris is Emeritus Professor in Philosophy at Cardiff University. In his early career he taught English Literature, then moved to Philosophy *via* literary theory, and has now moved back toward creative writing. He has published widely on the topic of deconstruction and is the author of more than thirty books on aspects of philosophy, literature, politics, the history of ideas, and music. More recently he has turned to writing poetry in various genres, among them – unusually – that of the philosophical verse-essay. His collections include *For the Tempus-Fugitives* (2017), *The Matter of Rhyme* (2018), *A Partial Truth* (2019), *Socrates at Verse* (2020), *As Knowing Goes* (2020), and *Damaged Life: poems after Adorno's Minima Moralia*. He has also published two collections of political-satirical verse, *The Trouble with Monsters* (2018) and *The Folded Lie* (2019). He lives in Swansea (Wales) with his wife Valerie and is active in left-wing political movements.

Paul North is a critical theorist who teaches at Yale University. He has written the following books: *Bizarre Privileged Items in the Universe: The Logic of Likeness* (Zone, 2021), *The Yield: Kafka's Atheological Reformation* (Stanford, 2015) and *The Problem of Distraction* (Stanford, 2012). Currently, he is co-editing a new English edition of Marx's *Capital Volume 1*, to be published by Princeton University Press in 2023.

Claudia Pozzana studied in Venice at Ca' Foscari University, and in China at Beijing University; she was teaching Chinese language, literature and history at Bologna University and did research in Europe, China, America. She met, translated, presented and published various Chinese poets since the '80s of 20th century.

Jean-Michel Rabaté, Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of Pennsylvania, co-editor of the *Journal of Modern Literature*, co-founder of Slought Foundation, is a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. He is the author or editor of more than forty books on modernism, psychoanalysis, philosophy and literary theory. Recent titles include *Rust* (2018), *Kafka L.O.L.* (2018), *Rire au Soleil* (2019), *Beckett and Sade* (2020), *Rires Prodiges: Rire et jouissance chez Marx, Freud et Kafka* (2020), *Joyce, Hérétique et Prodiges* (2022), and the edited collections *After Derrida* (2018), *New Beckett* (2019), *Understanding Derrida | Understanding Modernism* (2019), *Knots: Post-Lacanian Readings of literature and film* (2020), and co-edited with Angeliki Spiropoulou, *Historicizing Modernism* (2022).

Kim Stanley Robinson is an American science fiction writer. He studied under Fredric Jameson at UC San Diego in the 1970s. Robinson is the author of about twenty books, including the internationally bestselling Mars trilogy, and more recently *Red Moon*, *New York 2140*, *Aurora*, *Shaman*, *Green Earth*, and *2312*. He was sent to the Antarctic by the U.S. National Science Foundation's Antarctic Artists and Writers' Program in 1995, and returned in their Antarctic media program in 2016. In 2008 he was named a "Hero of the Environment" by Time magazine. He works with the Sierra Nevada Research Institute, the Clarion Writers' Workshop, and UC San Diego's Arthur C. Clarke Center for Human Imagination. His work has been translated into 25 languages, and won a dozen awards in five countries, including the Hugo, Nebula, Locus, and World Fantasy awards. In 2016 asteroid 72432 was named "Kimrobinson." His last book is *The Ministry for the Future*.

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Volume 9
Issue 1

Rafael Saldanha is an independent researcher in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. He is a member of the Subset of Theoretical Practice research group which is currently engaged with developing a new approach to leftist political thinking, in which political economic analysis and questions of political organization can be treated under a common theoretical framework. He is currently writing a book on the relation of philosophy and its institutionalization in Brazil and researching the problem of dis/orientation of contemporary subjects.

Heather H. Yeung teaches poetry and poetics at the University of Dundee. She is the author of *Spatial Engagement with Poetry, On Literary Plasticity*, and other writings. Her poetic and artist book works can be found archived at the Scottish Poetry Library and National Library of Scotland.