JANUS HEAD

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Editor's Note

This edition of Janus Head is themed, all the essays are- in one way or another- focused on the connection between art and truth. As editor, I left the organizing theme open to all sorts of methods, art forms, genres, and philosophical orientation. There is always the possibility that such an open approach ends in more disconnection than connection between essays. Experience, however, generally leads to a different conclusion: at the very least the subject of "art and truth" will open the question concerning the nature of art and this is again, at the very least, a pre-condition for any discussion of art and truth. When fruitfully addressed, these big questions always seem to lead into nuanced and detailed argumentation, ideas and insights that help us to clarify or re-articulate the big questions. The spirit of the journal remains centered on free inquiry, originality, and philosophical innovation. At some point soon, we will be focusing on just how philosophy can be innovative. The essays published in this issue give many clues and directions for distilling the question of innovative work in philosophy.

We continue our commitment to publishing art, in this case poetry, which we hope our reader's will appreciate. In the past we have published visual art, and this remains one of our goals for future editions of the journal. We will also be adding fiction and creative non-fiction in editions to come, as well as returning to timely book reviews.

We are, however, a small operation. Hence, a great deal of appreciation is owed to Natasha Shipp, our Assistant Editor. And, as usual, we had diligent work from our poetry and literary editor, David Wolf. Most of all, I would like to thank our authors, as we continue the traditions of the journal while pushing forward into new ideas and themes.

John Pauley
Editor

How the Poem Thinks: Musical Silence and Emptitude in Christian Bobin

Gerald Cipriani

ABSTRACT

Ever since Plato's condemnation of the poets who did not deserve a place in his ideal city poetry has, in areas of the Western world, drawn suspicion as for its ability to convey the "truth." Philosophy, then, was thought to be a better candidate assuming that the truth in question could only be "discursive" as opposed to "poetic." In the West, the tension between poetry and philosophy reached a quasi-chiasmatic peak with modernism, a period during which the poem asserted in the most radical way its own mode of thinking. Alain Badiou in his *Que pense le poème?* (2016) qualifies the singularity of poetic thought in terms of "musical silence." Yet, in spite of the depth and beauty of the image, the poem falls short of being considered as philosophical thought proper. By moving away from a (Western) conception of philosophy centred on *logos* as method, the poem may conceivably reveal a profoundly philosophical nature. Such is the case with the poetic prose of French contemporary writer Christian Bobin. Starting from Badiou's conception of "musical silence" in poetry this essay reflects on the extent to which *emptitude* at work in Bobin amounts to a uniquely philosophical mode of thinking.

How the Poem Thinks: Musical Silence and Emptitude in Christian Bobin

La poésie est une pensée échappée de l'enclos des raisonnements, une cavale de lumière qui saute par dessus la barrière du cerveau et file droit vers son maître invisible.

J'ai surpris les yeux de Dieu dans le bleu cassant d'une petite plume de geai.[1]

1 Christian Bobin, *Les ruines du ciel* (Paris: Gallimard, 2009), 103. "Poetry is thought that escaped the enclosure of reasoning, a spree of light that jumps over the barrier of the brain and speeds on its way towards its invisible master. I caught God's eyes in the crisp blue of a jay's little feather." (Unless indicated otherwise, translations are mine).

The work of Christian Bobin (1951-) still needs to be fully discovered in the English speaking world. He is certainly a writer whose style cannot be easily pinned down, and perhaps "poetic prose" would best qualify his writing. Still, in all likelihood, Bobin's work will soon be seen on equal footing with the greatest poets of the modern world such as, in the West, Yeats, Rilke, Pessoa, Mandelstam, Rimbault, Lorca or Neruda. Why this? Because, just like his predecessors, he is an epoch-making poet, not by passively mirroring the spirit of the time by a clever usage of whatever aesthetic artifices; but rather by unsettling with words and thus awakening us to the ethos of his time. Kandinsky famously wrote

> Every work of art is a child of its time, while often it is the parent of our emotions.

> Thus, every cultural period creates art of its own, which can never be repeated again.[1]

Bobin is a child of his time who has grown out of it to awaken us in the most singular fashion to what we have lost and what could be retrieved in our present world. As a poet he thus contributes in the most spectacular fashion to the building of culture --- a brilliance that falls within the category of what Immanuel Kant called the work of "genius".[2] Indeed, Bobin disincarnates the attitudes and aspirations of what has become nowadays world, that techno-world steeped in mediatised experiences, delusion of complexity, and, above all, ethical alienation. What Bobin's poetic prose incarnates is a return to the concrete, the richness of simplicity, and the relational enaction of the person within the world.[3]

Of course, Bobin's poetic prose is written first-hand in French, which inexorably brings about the question of the loss (and gain) when read, or explained, in a different language. We are used to hearing that the more "poetical" a text

is, the less likely it will travel without loss into a different cultural context. On the contrary, the more "scientific" a formulation is the more universal it becomes. Albert Einstein's equation $E=mc^2$ can be understood around the globe once the mathematical symbols are learned, whereas Welsh poet R.S. Thomas' *Pietà* (1966) is unlikely to speak evenly to readers depending on their life experience of, say, the English language, Christianity and familiarity with artistic representations of the Virgin Mary holding the dead body of the Christ. In other words, much (not all) of the meaningfulness of a poem depends on the cultural texture within which it is written and read.

> Always the same hills
> Crowd the horizon,
> Remote witnesses
> Of the still scene.

1 Wassily Kandinsky, *On the Spiritual in Art* (New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1946), 9.

2 In the sense that, for Kant, although genius "is a talent for producing something for which no determinate rule can be given" and that "the foremost property of genius must be originality", "[s]ince nonsense too can be original, the products of genius must also be models, i.e., they must be exemplary; hence, though they do not themselves arise through imitation, still they must serve others for this, i.e., as a standard or rule by which to judge." Immanuel Kant, "Fine Art Is the Art of Genius," in The Critique of Judgment, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett, 1987 [1790]), SS 46, 174-175.

3 For a formalistic study on Bobin's major themes see Claire Carlut, *Entre Poésie et Philosophie: l'oeuvre de Christian Bobin* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2015).

And in the foreground
The tall Cross,
Sombre,untenanted,
Aches for the Body
That is back in the cradle
Of a maid's arms.[4]

R.S. Thomas, *Pietà*

The greatness of a poem, then, does not necessarily depend on its ability to travel unshaken across cultures and languages. Yet, in his collection of essays mainly focused on Western modern poetry and published as *Que pense le poème?* (lit. What does the poem think?), philosopher Alain Badiou suggests the opposite: *"le poème, le grand poème, se laisse traduire."*[5] Badiou cannot but admit the unavoidable losses in translation, whether formal or linguistic, whether pertaining to the musicality of the poem or the usage of metaphors, metonymies, symbols and other culturally ingrained practices of linguistic imageries. Still, in the "great poem," Badiou claims, something remains untouched: the "singularity of the [poet's] musical silence."[6] Despite the obvious essentialism and universalism as well as culture-centrism of what constitutes the "great poem", the claim invites us to reflect, albeit with noticeable nuances, on a fundamental aspect of Christian Bobin's poetic prose that we shall call its "emptitude" as correlative of "plenitude."

1. Alain Badiou's "musical silence": How certain poems think

To understand what Badiou means by the musical silence of the poet and its singularity, we have to look at *how* the poem thinks rather than what it thinks, for poetry, in actual fact, shares with "discursive thinking" ("*pensée discursive*", "*dianoia*" in ancient Greek)[7] many similar subject-matters in size and kind. Beside the established modes of conceiving poetry, either based on formal criteria (e.g. lyrical, rhythmic, or versal), or on ontological ones such as the ability the poem has to unveil being, reveal truth, or disclose "presencing" (as well-knowingly expounded by Martin Heidegger), Badiou suggests that the way the poem *thinks* depends on its ability to "affirm" without "object."[8] This is where lies the real "voice of the poet", in other words "the singularity of [the poet's] musical silence."

Leaving aside once and for all the overly universalising suggestion that the great poem is the one whose "singularity of [the poet's] musical silence"[9] remains untouched across cultures regardless of the linguistic and formal transformations, we can see how for Badiou the poem --- certain poems --- think: the singularity of the "musical silence" is what brings forth an "affirmation."[10] At first glance, the claim sounds self-evident. What resonates to most ears as a form of plenitude needs to spring out of emptiness, and vice versa. In other words, full and empty are mutually self-determining and self-determined. The silence of the poem is an aesthetic configuration that brings forth the plenitude of presence. This is *how* the poem "thinks," which Badiou as may be expected distinguishes from "knowing". 18 The poem "thinks" but does not "know," for it does not seek to establish knowledge of some-thing as object. Furthermore, the poem *silences* the object to the point that it no longer thinks *in relation* to the object. And to achieve the silencing of the object Badiou asserts that the poem proceeds to either "subtraction" (*soustraction*) or "dissemination"(*dissémination*).[11]

"Subtraction" is the means by which the poem manages to withdraw the object of representation from the line of sight of the poetical figure that becomes in the process akin to the abstraction of mathematical numbers. The poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé thus epitomises that form of object-less "pure thinking" with its usage of images such as "constellations", "stars", or "tempest", in other words metonymies, for their ungraspable designated objecthood withdraws to let the word speak for itself. "Dissemination" equally dissolves objectification but proceeds differently: the recognisable object to which the word points is silenced through the process of metaphors. Although the object is recognisable through the metaphor the latter points to another direction, disseminating thus the objecthood of what is represented. In this instance Badiou talks about an "excess" in contrast with the "lack" that characterises the subtraction of objecthood. Rimbaud's poetry would typify "dissemination".[12]

There are also other emptying devices that can equally fall under Badiou's categories of subtraction and dissemination. Versal and rhythmic "inconsistency" found for example in Celan's poetry that runs against the formal order of lyricism. "Disruption" and "disappearance" equally operate as "dis-objectifying" devices that let the figure bring forth a "subject without

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4 R.S. Thomas, *Pietà* (London: Rupert Hart Davis, 1966).

5 Alain Badiou, *Que pense le poème?* (Caen: Nous, 2016), 17. This short collection of reflections on poetry, albeit somehow unsystematic and at times veiled by unnecessary rhetorical effects and stylistic artifices, offers nonetheless original insights into the idea of poetical "silence" from the perspective of the theoretician of the "*mathème*".

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid., 25.

8 Ibid., 20.

9 Ibid., 17.

10 Ibid., 20.

11 Ibid., 18-20.

12 Ibid., 20-21

object";[13] or "disorientation" as in Trakl whereby figures are *unplaced* whether in terms of omitted identity or location.[14] Such poetry, in other words, makes present the *il y a* by stripping the word from what it designates and its "empirical objectivity".[15]

The effect of the poem using emptying devices is to bring forth the "affirmation" of some-thing while preventing representational thinking and its model, i.e., objecthood. Poetry --- the one whose "musical silence" can travel across cultures --- induces therefore "an experience without object",[16] that is to say, "pure affirmation." Poetry thus defined amounts to a "complete dis-objectification of presence" ("*complète désobjectification de la présence*").[17] Poetry ends up thinking the "presence of the present"[18] by emptying meaning from its established signifying function and by inexorably distorting linguistic norms. Hence the mysterious character of the poem for musical silence remains a non-totalising truth that can neither be known nor named ("*innommable*").[19] Here, one cannot help thinking of Badiou's conception of the musical silence of the poem as a form of ontological Taoism. The first lines of the Tao Te Ching read as follows:

The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao.

The name that can be named is not the eternal name.

The nameless is the beginning of Heaven and Earth.

The named is the mother of the ten thousand things. [20]

Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*

The poem would then manifest the *way* words name for eternity that which cannot be named, that is, in Badiou's words, the "disappearing of that which makes itself present."[21] But the comparison falls short: the way in Badiou becomes a "power",[22] the power of words that the same words cannot name and therefore know --- but still a power, as if it was able to force its way through regardless of the ethical need to harmonise with *the ten thousand things*.

Poetry cannot "name" and as such is no philosophy understood in the traditional Western sense: poetry does not seek to know thinking, rather it expresses the singularity of thought.[23] This is why Badiou asserts that the poem is a "thinking" ("*pensée*") rather than a "knowing" ("*connaissance*"), for poetry proceeds to a "withdrawal" ("*retrait*") from what makes knowledge possible. This is also the reason why poetry, to a greater or a lesser degree depending on the epoch, has always unsettled philosophy of which it can only remain a "symptom." And the period during which (Western) poetry adopted the most unsettling posture as regard (Western) philosophy, Badiou calls it "*L'âge des poètes,*"[24] which very broadly runs from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, from Rimbaud and Mallarmé to Trakl and Celan via Caeiro and Mandelstam

--- with Hölderlin as a nineteenth century precursor. This is the period when Western poetry reached a nodal point in the way it relates to philosophy. The period is singular when compared with how the relationship was conceived in ancient Greece.

Badiou identifies three conceptions that proved to be foundational in Western history of philosophy: 1) Parmenidean, a fusion between the subjective authority of the poem and the validity of its philosophical exposition; 2) Platonic, whereby poetry and philosophy are clearly distinguished in the form of "argumentative distance'; 3) Aristotelian, when poetic thinking is included in philosophy and becomes a category of objects on which philosophy reflects --- a "regional" form of thinking that marks the birth of "aesthetics," a "*régionalité esthétique*."[25] Beside the question of the validity of his categorisation, what Badiou identifies as a nodal relationship between poetry and philosophy in his *âge des poètes* not only differs from the Platonic and Aristotelian conceptions but also, perhaps more surprisingly, for the Parmenidean conception. Even more surprisingly given his notion of affirmative "musical silence" in forms of poetry, Badiou departs from Heidegger' ontological understanding of the "great" poem, for it smacks of a "re-activation of the sacred" combined with the illusionary endeavour to retrieve some allegedly forgotten conception of authentic disclosure of Being traced back to the Pre-Socratics (Anaxi-

13 Ibid., 44.

14 Ibid., 48.

15 Ibid., 70.

16 Ibid., 22.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid., 58.

19 Ibid., 73.

20 Lao Tzu, *Tao Te* Ching, trans. Feng Gia-Fu and Jane English (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), One.

21 Badiou, *Que pense le poème?*, 74.

22 Ibid.: *"Tout poème fait venir dans la langue un pouvoir, le pouvoir de fixer éternellement la disparition de ce qui se présente."*

23 Ibid., 77.

24 Ibid., 29-49.

25 Ibid., 53-54.

mander, Parmenides and Heraclites).[26] Sure, Heidegger sought to work out poetry as autonomous form of thinking, and as such neither Platonic nor Aristotelian, neither "distancing" nor "aesthetic." Great poetry for Heidegger had its own authentic truth-function, just like "great art"; in fact, Badiou claims, Heidegger did no more than reinterpret in his own high-minded language the Presocratic conception of poetry as fusion with philosophy whereby authentic truth lies within the "flesh of language" ("*la chair de la langue*"), the *saying* of the word.[27] Heidegger thus failed to offer an alternative fourth way to how poetry and philosophy can relate to each other.

As we know, the discord between poetry and philosophy has, in the Western world, ancient origins with long tasting effects including on Badiou's own conception of poetry as "musical silence." Plato condemned painting and poetry in Book 10 of *The Republic* because both were thought to be a danger for the good order of the *Polis*.[28] The problem was the proclaimed "mimetic" nature of poetry, to the point that it had to be excluded from the *Polis*. *Mimesis* in art can only provide a pale copy of the original truth. In fact, the crux of the problem was that poetry, unlike philosophy, is no discursive thinking. As a result, poetry for Plato can only be dubious, on the same level as Sophism.[29] As a "non-thought" with no explicit thought-process, poetry can only remain obscure and opaque.

As Badiou observes, poetry does not seek to work out reality and the Platonic Idea in terms of "measuring, numbering, and weighting" ("*la mesure, le nombre, le poids*").[30] In this sense poetic thinking is fundamentally

different from the "paradigm of mathematics" and by extension indeed discursive thinking. How can poetry affirm some-thing while remaining obscure and opaque? The question is at the heart of the ancient discord between philosophy and poetry. In the Western tradition poetry has always, to varying degrees depending on the epochs, unsettled philosophy, assuming that the latter had to be methodologically identified as "discursive." How could "thinking without knowledge," to use Badiou's expression, be possible?[31] How could poetic thought practice be grasped if "unmeasurable" ("*incalculable*")? Unlike discursive thinking, poetry does not go "through" (*dia-noia*) as a process that travels from the figure to the object and the object to the figure. Poetry is wholly "affirmative"; it does not seek to expound the Idea in all its clarity from the experience of objects. In fact, much of modern poetry shows that opacity does not mean absence of thought. Metaphors in modern poetry are anything but "blind."[32]

Badiou's "musical silence" in poetry has to be understood as a paradigm of "dis-objectifying operations" that express forms of ineffable truth --- an achievement much "envied" by philosophy throughout Western history of ideas. The operations can take the shape of "subtractions" or "disseminations" or both, of which *dianoia* is incapable by nature and definition. Poetry enacts thinking and, unlike philosophy, does not seek to *reflect on* thinking. The envy of philosophy then becomes clearer: Isn't it the case that poetry as enacted or sensible thinking is more "real" than philosophy as thinking on thinking? The ancient rivalry that Plato alluded to was that of enacted thinking

versus discursive thinking. And for Badiou the fundamental distinction between philosophy (and science) and poetry is precisely based on this distinction and tension.[33] For Françoise Dastur, the ancient rivalry "between *mythos* and *logos*" is no less than a fundamental question at the heart of the whole development of Western philosophy from its very origin.[34]

Anyone versed in Western philosophy would be hard-pressed to disagree with this view on the two distinctive thinking practices and how they have evolved in the Western world, but only on one condition: that we accept that philosophy, regardless of etymological considerations, be defined by a method that seeks order instead of chaos, clarity instead of opacity --- a mode of reasoning, indeed the *logos*, that has broadly determined the nature of Western philosophy since Classical Greece. But there remains a critical problem. This conception excludes de facto entire portions of the corpus of thought from pre-modern East Asia, pre-colonial India and Africa, as well as, to a lesser extent, the Pre-Socratics. Following this stance, the Tao Te Ching of Lao Tzu, the *Lun Yu* of Kong Fu Tzu, or the *Shobogenzo* of Dogen do not belong to the sphere of "philosophy," for they are like poetry and to a greater or lesser degree "affirmative" and indeed do not seek to expound the Idea in all its clarity from the experience of things. From the perspective of method, these texts express "thinking" but are not "philosophical." But if, instead of focusing on the method to determine what is philosophical as opposed to poetical, we ask ourselves what distinguishes philosophy from other thinking practices we will be at pain not to consider

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26 Ibid., 57.

27 Ibid., 56.

28 Plato, *The Republic* (London: Penguin Classics, 2007), bk x, 335-353.

29 Ibid., 25.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid., 26-27.

34 Françoise Dastur, *à la naissance des choses - art, poésie et philosophie* (Fougère: encre marine, 2005), 111-132.

the aforementioned texts as authentically philosophical. Philosophy as practice that reveals thinking in motion, underneath the surface of established orders of appearances can, as such, be identified in certain forms of poetry or poetic prose --- to which that of Christian Bobin belongs. The musical silence that Badiou discusses also characterises, to some extent, Bobin's writing. The silence, however, should not be understood as if in the service of the affirmation of some plenitude, but rather as the very motion of "emptitude."

2. "Emptitude" as motion in Christian Bobin

If there is a poet whose work can be characterised as philosophically unsettling --- and therefore profoundly philosophical --- it is Christian Bobin. He belongs to a category of poets that proves the traditional Western tradition of distinguishing poetry from philosophy as distinctive thinking practice (i.e., not as method) to be flawed from its very origin. Bobin's poetic prose is made of configurations of emptying words, the very "dis-objectifying operations" that Badiou identifies as one of the characteristics of the essence of poetry, especially that of his "*âge des poètes*." Bobin is of course not the first poet to unfold the link between "thinking" and "emptiness."

- Depuis quand écrivez-vous?

- Depuis que je n'ai plus le souci d'écrire.[35]

Christian Bobin, *L'Éloignement du monde*

As Badiou notes, so did poets Caeiro and Campos.[36] But before them, should it be stressed, several schools of Buddhism throughout centuries and across traditions from India to Japan via China and Thailand developed aesthetic practices, including poetry, around the fundamentals of *śūnyatā* (emptiness) and *vijñāna* (mind).[37]

To set emptiness in motion Bobin uses simplicity, as Chan and Zen Buddhist poets and artists do --- a form of ostensible minimalism akin to *wabi sabi* aesthetics that suspends the plenitude of things by withdrawing the explicit, the superfluous and the ornamental. Such an austerity is no representation of the austere but austerity in motion, in other words emptiness at work. Bobin's poetics does not induce any desire for fullness or for what is felt to be lacking. His poems do not represent forms of emptiness but are rather emptying modes whose movement awakens the reader to the formation of things as perceived, in other words their *such-ness*. His poetic configurations are therefore neither figurative nor narrative; neither romantic nor picturesque. The poetics in Bobin does not follow the clearly marked path of lyricism or any aestheticism that would prevent the emptying motion of words from letting things as such be perceived. What is figured in his poetic prose surprises us precisely by averting us from fixing in time and space the link between the signs, the metaphors, or the metonymies, and what they designate or narrate even if by transposition. We do not recognise what the figures represent or tell us; we experience their figurality. Bobin's wordings are the event, they catch us by surprise, but in a gentle manner, minimally, in a way that invites us to attentive contemplation.

Rien de plus bouleversant que la vision de petites pantoufles d'enfant dans une chambre, un jour d'école : toute absence même légère parle de la mort.[38]

Christian Bobin,
Carnet du soleil

Yet, emptitude in Bobin should not be confused with a mere form of "minimalism" in the sense of using a minimal amount of words in order to express the essential. This would inexorably lead to establishing an aesthetics of the plenitude of things calling thus for the mind to recognise on one single level of meaning what is "there" in order to experience its "presence." Bobins' poetic prose does make usage of metaphors, metonymies, periphrases, or attributes, but precisely with the aim of creating empty spaces and withdrawals to enliven the figure as in, for example, Zen painting, Noh theatre, Japanese cinematic cuts (*kire*), or asymmetric flower arrangement (*ikebana*). And just as Haiku poetry should not be categorised as minimalist per se as it operates on different levels of emptitude, neither should Bobin's poetic prose for its usage of what we may call "cut-figuring" and austerity.

Sur la route d'Arnay-le-Duc, le cerisier lançait ses bras en feu vers le carré noir d'une fenêtre ouverte --- comme une déclaration d'amour sauvage.[39]

Christian Bobin, *Une bibliothèque de nuages*

Even his anaphora that may be perceived as minimalising difference and variation are no less than emptying devices. Repeating or echoing the same word in two or more slightly different ways or contexts strip the word from its designating dimension to give it not

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35 Christian Bobin, *L'Éloignement du monde* (Éditions Lettres Vives: Castellare-di-Casinca, 1993), 53. "Since when have you been writing? Since I am no longer concerned about writing."

36 Badiou, *Que pense le poème*, 36.

37 Examples of aesthetics of emptiness in Buddhism include among many others the form-spirit aesthetics of Bodhidharma; Chinese Chan's ink and wash painting of the Five Dynasties (907–960) or the Southern Song (1127–1279) period; Yoshida Kenko's *Essays in Idleness* (1332); Tanizaki Jun'ichiro's *In Praise of Shadows* (1933).

38 Christian Bobin, *Carnet du soleil* (Éditions Lettres Vives: Castellare-di-Casinca, 2011), 52. "Nothing is more poignant than the sight of a little child's slippers in a bedroom on a school day: any absence, however light, speaks of death."

39 Christian Bobin, *Une bibliothèque de nuages* (Éditions Lettres Vives: Castellare-di-Casinca, 2006), 24. On the road to Arnay-le-Duc, the cherry tree threw its burning arms towards the black square of an open window --- like a wild declaration of love."

so much a permanence, an aura, or a presence, but rather a such-ness of its own within the textual configuration. The technique of anaphora was used among others by Celan, although more in the vein of the aesthetic tradition of "presencing" rather than "such-ness." In the following passage from Bobin's *Souvereineté du vide* the image of "leaving" and "coming back" is repeated several times, first by describing lights in the sky similar to some Virginia creeper on a wall torn out by the wind and growing back, and then to evoke the experience of love and absence. The principle of cut-figuring consists in different levels of imaging interrupting or "disseminating" each other, to use Badiou's expression, while echoing each other so that what is described and reflected upon becomes perceived *as such*.[40]

Un ciel comme
un jardin, avec des lumières folles, sau-
vages. Elles croissent, couvrant tout
l'espace, comme une vigne vierge sur
un vieux mur. Le vent les arrache, elles
reviennent. Un ciel sans jardinier.

Vous partez, vous
revenez. Dans votre absence, j'avale
une quantité considérable de paysag-
es, d'émotions et de lumières....

Vous revenez, vous
partez. Dans votre absence, une main
passe devant mes yeux, comme pour
les clore....[41]

(Christian
Bobin, *Souveraineté du vide*)

The poetics in Bobin is no abstraction deprived of signifying dimension. Of course not. The figures mean a*s such*, not from themselves, but in themselves by virtue of disrupting representation (figuration) and narration (signification) and therefore emptying

the designating link between the word and the reality or story it is expected to point to or tell. The emptying means that Bobin predominantly uses are austerity and cut-figuring. The former is a straightforward economy of words and elimination of the superfluous while the latter, again, cuts off among groups of words, sentences, or paragraphs one level of representation and narration from the following while at the same time maintaining some link in one form or another. Bobin's poetic prose very often brings to life otherwise unremarkable descriptive accounts with interruptions by seemingly unrelated imageries that nonetheless echo the former at reflective levels. The cut-figuring can occur with the same group of words, or between two sentences or two paragraphs. In the following lines the cutting-off passage takes place at the end of the description of a dove standing still on a branch of a lime tree and who suddenly flies away. We then discover an implausible explanation in the form of comparison: as if taken by a thought so beautiful that the dove had to tell it to her friend:

Une tourterelle,
longtemps immobile et songeuse
sur une branche dutilleul, s'envole
brusquement, comme saisie par une
pensée si belle qu'il lui faut tout de
suite aller la dire à son ami.[42]

(Bobin, *Ressuciter*)

The techniques of emptying used do not make Bobin a modernist poet of the type of Elliot or Char. Bobin's phrasing does not betray any violence of the means assertively becoming aware of itself. Bobin's poetic prose is no formalistic experimentations either; this is no meta-poetry. Means and meaning become one and the same thing, a figurality whose voice saturates and even stuns any mediation towards

the designated thing, be it real, ideal, desired or virtual. Hence the apparent opacity of the poetic wording, its apparent lack of "clarity" or communicative transparency, in other words when the signifiers operate as a vehicle for clearly distinguishable signified configuration that equally clearly points in the direction of a designated object or unfolds a comprehensible story. This lack, incidentally, defines much of the corpus of modern poetry to various degrees and in various ways with modernism as its most radical form. Still, the opacity of the poetic writing, the way words are configured, still means some-thing. Badiou tells us that poetry in essence amounts to a mere "saying" (*un dire*), or even a "declaration" that generates its own authority.[43] Bobin's poetic prose certainly "says" without resorting to discursive transparency, explanation, or validation; his poems "declare" without having to be confirmed; in this sense they do not rely on any authoritative models to validate a truth precisely because the same truth takes place by virtue of the poetics, *as such*. It would therefore be ill-thought to suggest that the authority of the truth-model is replaced by the authority of the truth-poem --- a form of irresponsible freedom enacted through some affirmative subjectivity. There is, in Bobin, no authority at work, be it on the side of the object or the subject. In fact, his poetics not only "dis-objectifies" but also "dis-subjectifies." The figures mean some-thing, but as such. This is no authoritative freedom but, instead, an ethical freedom that brings together poet, reader and world through the experience of emptitude whereby time-passing with the poetic prose is the very emptying motion that lets things be perceived *as such*. There is therefore no autonomy, or rather autonomous autonomy of the poetics in spite of the

40 See Ohashi Ryosuke, "Kire and Iki," trans. Graham Parkes, in ed. Michael Kelly, *The Encyclopedia of Aesthetics* (New York: Oxford University Press), 2: 553–55.

41 Christian Bobin, *Souveraineté du vide* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), 72-73. "A sky like a garden, with crazy, wild lights. They grow, coating the whole space, like a Virginia creeper on an old wall. The wind tears them out, but they come back. A sky without a gardener. You leave, and you come back. In your absence, I absorb a sizeable amount of landscapes, emotions and lights. ... You come back, and you go. In your absence, a hand passes in front of my eyes, as if to close them."

42 Christian Bobin, *Ressusciter* (Paris : Gallimard, 2001), 80. "A turtle dove, for a long time motionless and heedful on a branch of the lime tree, suddenly flies away as if seized by a thought so beautiful that it had to be told straight away to her friend."

43 "... *Il est seulement un dire, une déclaration qui ne tire son autorité que d'elle-même.*" Badiou, *Que pense le poème?*, 13.

naturalness of its motion (understood in Aristotelian terms). For the poetics to express the emptitude of words, their musical silence, and the *such-ness* of things, its voice must remain ethical. Bobin's poetic prose is without doubt one of the most telling examples.

> *La libellule, en me voyant, se fige sur la barrière. Je m'arrête pour la regarder. Le charriot de l'éternel avec ses roues de bois passe entre nous sans un bruit, puis la libellule revient à ses affaires et je poursuis ma promenade avec dans l'âme une nouvelle nuance de bleu.*[44]

Christian Bobin, *Un assassin blanc comme neige*

True, the poem always reveals, to some degree, a poetics of the in-itself of language. As Martiniquan philosopher and poet Edouard Glissant puts it,

> A poetics of language in-itself. It sanctions the moment when language, as if satisfied with its perfection, ceases to take for its object the recounting of its connection with particular surroundings, to concentrate solely upon its fervor to exceed its limits and reveal thoroughly the elements composing it --- solely upon its engineering skill with these.[45]

The poetics of the in-itself of Bobin's language is, however, no disregard for the "surrounding" designated or narrated world; such stance would amount to abstraction or, indeed, formalistic experimentation. Rather, the such-ness of the word in Bobin is its emptying motion *in regard* to its designated or narrated sources. Far from being a mere poetics of the in-itself of language per se, Bobin's poems incarnate a figural poetics that is anything but folded onto itself. The figurality is achieved by resorting to representational and narrative cut-figuring as well as by emptying itself from anything superfluous, explicit, or accomplished through austerity and simplicity. Bobin's emptying word is the voice of the voiceless that Japanese philosopher Nishida Kitaro claimed characterised "Oriental culture."[46] There also lies the beauty of Bobin's poetic prose; not in its formalistic autonomy nor in the explicit plenitude of what the mind seeks to recognise, but in the suggested emptitude of the such-ness of the word.

Cut-figuring and austerity are similarly well-known emptying tools of the *wabi sabi* aesthetics of "imperfection." These include poverty, understatement, mystery, asymmetry, and ephemerality, all of which Bobin makes use with words for a figurality whose effect on the reader is a form of awakening, more than, as it has often been suggested, wonder.[47] Awakening through Bobin's poetic prose amounts thus to Dogen's "enlightenment" more than anything else. Bobin's words are configured in a way that calls for attentiveness; that invites to resist distraction and remain faithful to the voice of the poet; liberates from ties, constraints and concerns whether material or personal; and that lets the poem be read in poverty, as it were. This is Dogen's thought from his *Shobogenzo* as it transpires from Bobin's poetics.[48] One is awakened to the such-ness of things by contemplating the emptitude of words. The aesthetic experience in Bobin pertains to such an awakening. As Japanese Tendai Buddhist poet Shinkei (1406-1475) reportedly put it, "In linked verse, put your mind to what is not said,"[49] so that one can appreciate the "beauty of empty space" (*yohaku no bi*).[50] In Bobin's poetic prose, cut-figuring and austerity put our mind to the emptying motion of the such-ness of things. This is an aesthetics of its own.

> *L'absolu a éclaté sur le carrelage dans un bruit de vaisselle précieuse. De toute façon on ne s'en servait jamais.*[51]

Christian Bobin, *Un assassin blanc comme neige*

To express the emptitude of things through the word awakens the reader to their such-ness and, by doing so, reduces the distance between noesis and noema to its minimum. Does this make Bobin's writing akin to phenomenological descriptions? What Bobin puts aesthetically in motion through words are the emptying relations that make the taking place of the such-ness of things possible. Bobin describes the emptitude of things at work rather than their posited plenitude. Still, the reader

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44 Christian Bobin, *Un assassin blanc comme neige* (Paris : Gallimard, 2011), 22. "The dragonfly, when it sees me, freezes on the fence. I stop to look at her. The chariot of the eternal with its wooden wheels passes between us without a noise. Then, the dragonfly goes back to its occupation, and I resume my walk with in my soul a new shade of blue."

45 Edouart Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997). 25."*Une poétique du language -en-soi. Elle sanctionne le moment où la langue, comme satisfaite de sa perfection, cesse de se donner comme object le récit de son rapport à un entour, pour se coincentrer sur sa seule ardeur à outrer ses limites, à manifester à fond les éléments qui la composent - sur sa seule science à les mangancer.*" in Édouard Glissant, Poétique de la relation (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1990), 37.

46 See Nishida Kitaro, from James Heisig's translation, in "Nishida's Philosophical Equivalents of Enlightenment and No-Self," *Bulletin of the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture* 39 (2015): 46. "Obviously, there is a great deal to esteem in the dazzling development of Occidental culture which made form into being and formation into the good, and a great deal to be learned from it. But is there not something that lies concealed in the ground of the Oriental culture that has nourished our forebears for thousands of years, something like seeing the form of the formless or hearing the voice of the voiceless? Our hearts never cease in its pursuit; what I want to do is give it a philosophical basis."

47 See Jean-Michel Maulpoix, "*Le désastre et la merveille*," in *La Quizaine Littéraire*, 15 Janvier 1987.

48 Dogen, *Shobogenzo* - T*he Treasure House of the Eye of the True Teaching*, trans. Rev. Hubert Nearman (Mount Shasta: Shasta Abbey Press, 2007).

49 Quoted by Komparu Kunio, in *The Noh Theatre: Principles and Perspectives* trans. Jane Corddry and Stephen B. Comee (Warren, Conn.: Floating World Editions, 2005), 74.

50 See, for example, Günter Nitschke's *Japanese Gardens: Right Angle and Natural Form* (Cologne: Taschen, 1999), 108.

51 Bobin, *Un assassin blanc comme neige*, 67. "The absolute has burst on the tiled floor with a the sound of precious plates. It was never used anyway."

cannot but remain closely attuned to the simplicity of the poet's voice for his words awaken us to that extraordinary moment when the ordinary appears through its own emptitude. Typically, Bobin orchestrates the ordinary for it to surprise us, be noticed, and become an event, but precisely to induce attentive contemplation. There is thus a close intimacy between the reader and the poet; a moment of awakening that the word allows to be shared, here and now. Glissant tells us that poets as subjects withdraw to reveal themselves in the very poem they create: "The creators of a text [i.e., the poem] is effaced, or, rather, is done away with, to be revealed in the texture of his creation."[52] But there is more to it. The poem only comes to life as a node of authorial and readerly emptying, as it were. What Glissant says about the fundamental of relation in poetry also --- and obviously --- applies to the reader. Through his reference to French traveller, polymath and literary figure Victor Segalen's aesthetic interpretation of the morally marked recognition of the other, Glissant defines the poet as one endowed with the ability to sense the surprise caused by otherness.[53] The *choc* at stake is no less than the emptitude found in Bobin's poetics, which appeals for the reader's well-disposability towards aesthetic self-emptying --- both a communion and the shock of mystery.[54]

Le rouge-gorge trouvé mort devant la porte du garage retient sous son duvet la chaleur des jours heureux. Dieu est un assassin blanc comme neige.[55]

Putting in motion emptying relations implies that the images used do not operate on the same levels of representation or narration; the images cannot be fixed systems of signs that would enable the reader to recognise what is represented or understand what is narrated. Again, this is not to suggest that Bobin's poetic prose is abstracted from any sense of reality or even ideality. In many instances we find, for example, criticisms of society, its absurdities, effective contempt for misery, greed, consumerism, the pernicious effect of television, and ignorance, among others, for instance in *L'inespérée*.[56] His images, however, are transient; they pass by and through leaving thus behind their expected or desired referents. This is how the images become alive, meaningfully *in excess*, having therefore more impact precisely by emptying themselves from models they are supposed to represent, narrate, or, as in the aforementioned cases, criticise. Most importantly we know the images will die off as soon as we decipher once and for all what they refer or point to. This is to say that Bobin's poetics is anything but symbolic. Bobin's poetics is dia-symbolic. It wanders through the symbols that can only be read as possibilities thus left to the imagination. The result is a suggestive imagery, very precise but never explicit, similar to the brushstroke of the Chan painter or the breath of the Shakuhachi player.

Les mousses le long du chemin forestier qui mène à la boîte aux lettres sont si lumineuses qu'elles me coupent sans arrêt la parole.

L'aiguille de Dieu est

enfoncée dans toutes sortes de tissus dont je ne me lasse pas d'admirer la richesse.

Agrippé au radeau de la beauté.[57]

Christian Bobin, *Les ruines du ciel*

The extraordinary such-ness of things, when expressed, calls for a particular perceptual attitude: attentive contemplation. First, that of the poet, who then transmits the perception to the reader. The attentive contemplation at stake is not the pupil's, disciple's, or devotee's attitude who needs to learn how to accept a lesson of morality; nor is it that of the critic who evaluates the degree of formal originality; or that of the human being who realises what is the essence of poetry. The poetics at stake, the one that calls for attentive contemplation, is no didactic poetry found for example in Milton's *Paradise Lost*; no modernist experimental poetry; nor does it have the universalist pretension of a Hölderlin. Attentive contemplation as response to Bobin's poetic prose, from his *L'enchantement simple, Éloge du rien*, or Souveraineté du vide is the emptying mind shaped not by normative morality but ethical orienting; not by attunement to formalistic complexions but to the beauty of the such-ness of things, and not by the ability to grasp a universal truth in the poetical language, but by one's availability to be awakened to the infinite richness of the particular and the ordinary. And for Bobin, there is an urge to retrieve this ability to contemplate and be attentive to the rich simplicity of life as suggested

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52 Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 25."Le créateur de texte s'efface, ou plutôt s'abolit pour se révéler, dans la texture de ce qu'il a créé." [*Poétique de la relation*, 37].

53 "...Segalen does not merely describe recognition of the other as a moral obligation [...] but he considers it an aesthetic constituent, the first edict of a real poetics of Relation. The power to experience the shock of elsewhere is what distinguished the poet." Glissant, Poetics of Relation, 29-30. "*Segalen ne dit pas seulement que la reconnaissance de l'autre est une obligation morale [...] il en fait une constituante esthéthique, le premier édit d'une véritable poétique de la Relation. Le pouvoir de ressentir le choc de l'ailleurs est ce qui nomme le poète.*" [*Poétique de la relation*, 42].

54 Glissant suggests that any poétics of relation is a "créolisation" defined by gathering and wandering: "It is not merely an encounter; a shock (in Segalen's sense), a metissage, but a new and original dimension allowing each person to be there and elsewhere, rooted and open, lost in the mountains and free beneath the sea, in harmony and in errantry." Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 37. "N*on seulement une rencontre, un choc (au sens ségalénien), un métissage, mais une dimenssion inédite qui permet à chacun d'être là et ailleurs, enracinee et ouvert, perdu dans la montagne et libre sous la mer, en accord et en errance.*" [*Poétique de la relation*, 46].

55 Bobin, *Un assassin blanc comme neige*, 41. "The robin found dead in front of the garage door is keeping under its down the warmth of happy days. God is a white as snow murderer."

56 Christian Bobin, "*Le mal*," in *L'inespérée* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), 17-26.

57 Bobin, *Les ruines du ciel*, 46. "The mosses running alongside the forest path that leads to the mailbox are so luminous that they constantly cut me off. God's needle has gone into all sorts of fabrics whose richness I never tire of admiring. Clinging to the raft of beauty."

or expressed for example in *L'épuise-ment* and *L'éloignement du monde.*

> *Nous passons notre vie devant une porte sans voir qu'elle est grande ouverte et que ce qui est derrière est déjà là, devant nos yeux.*[58]

Christian Bobin, *L'éloignement du monde*

The urge, in other words, is to learn how to recover the emptitude of things in the midst of the overflow of society and the world. And one way of doing so is through a particular type of poetic experience, again not by learning the moral values that the poem may teach us, but by experiencing the ethicality the poetic configuration may set in motion with its emptying words, its musical silence. Instead of being a "*pensée de la présence sur fond de disparition,*"[59] the poetic word becomes a thinking of emptitude in motion. And far from being the occasion for self-indulging pleasure, Bobin's poetics awakens us to the ethical fundamental of the voice of the voiceless. This is where lies the philosophical nature of his poetic prose.

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58 Bobin, *L'éloignement du monde*, 29. " We spend our life in front of a door without seeing that it is wide open and that what is behind is already there, before our eyes."

59 Badiou, *Que pense le poème*, 71.

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Random Acts of Poetry? Heidegger's Reading of Trakl

Brian M. Johnson

ABSTRACT

This essay concerns Heidegger's assertion that the biography of the poet is unimportant when interpreting great works of poetry. I approach the question in three ways. First, I consider its merits as a principle of literary interpretation and contrast Heidegger's view with those of other Trakl interpreters. This allows me to clarify his view as a unique variety of non-formalistic interpretation and raise some potential worries about his approach. Second, I consider Heidegger's view in the context of his broader philosophical project. Viewed this way, Heidegger's decision to neglect the poet's biography seems quite reasonable and consistent with his inquiry into the being of language. Finally, I consider Heidegger's suggestion that Trakl is a kind of mad genius. I recast this paradigmatic figure in terms of what I call the 'wretched prophet' and consider some ways in which its appeal sheds light on the crisis of modernity and the aestheticization of politics.

Random Acts of Poetry? Heidegger's Reading of Trakl

1. Introduction

There is a war on the European continent for the first time in decades, and unlike those of the 1990's that seemed to reaffirm America's post-Cold War global dominance, this one comes at a time in which the U.S. led liberal world order is in question.[1] In times like these, why spend our time pondering outdated commentaries on hundred year old Austrian poems?

> The feeling that an era has come to an end is present in all these writers [of the post-Nietzschean generation]. This 'sense of ending' is defiantly asserted or coolly taken for granted by the Germans among them, nostalgically cultivated by the Austrians. The feeling of dispossession is dominant…in Trakl's poetry.[2]

Sadly, our current situation seems not so different. We read now and then of increased mortality rates, drug abuse, and 'deaths of despair,' and it's not hard to sense that "feeling of dispossession," and even a "sense of ending."[3]

The hope of this essay is that a thoughtful engagement with Martin Heidegger's 1953 discussion of the poetry of Georg Trakl may help to sketch the contours of a certain kind of contemporary despair. My ambitions are not so world-historical as to characterize 21st

century America as a simple repetition of Continental Europe in the early 20th Century. I tend to share Hegel's view that philosophers are especially bad at making predictions, and we must tread cautiously when Heidegger links Trakl's poetry to the prospect of a rejuvenated Occident. So the central question of this essay must be more limited: why did Heidegger insist on ignoring Trakl's biography when interpreting his poetry? Trakl lived an interesting life. He served as a pharmacist in World War I. He suffered from depression, abused drugs, and attempted suicide at least once. He is rumored to have had a sexual relationship with his sister, and he died of a cocaine overdose in a military hospital at the age of 27. One would naturally suppose that these facts bear on his dark and notoriously difficult poetry. But Heidegger ignores all of this. Rather than situating Trakl in his immediate social and historical context, Heidegger casts him as a kind of hermit sage, a madman at the limits of experience who therefore heralds the destiny of a long-buried—and more authentic—Western civilization. Much of Trakl's actual biography supports this interpretation. If Trakl was anything, he was an alienated and disturbed outsider who lived at a time of rapid and radical global transformation. Why didn't Heidegger draw on biographical resources to support his interpretation?

I will address the question in three ways. First, what does the neglect of Trakl's biography mean from the standpoint of literary criticism and interpretation? Second, the question must be considered within the context of Heidegger's thought. Interpretive worries notwithstanding, we will see that Heidegger has good philosophical reasons for neglecting the poet's biography. The essays in which he discusses Trakl's poetry must be situated within the broader context of Heidegger's thoughtful inquiry into the nature of language. Finally there is the extent to which Heidegger's Trakl interpretation succeeds in omitting the the poet's biography. Even though he tells us that the poet is insignificant, it cannot be denied—and perhaps it couldn't have been avoided—that Heidegger's commentary would give us some sense of who Heidegger thought Trakl was. Instead of omitting Trakl's biography, Heidegger presents us with an archetype, the mad genius at the limits of experience who imagistic poems reflect "the clear eyed knowledge of a madman."[4]

2. Heidegger's Trakl Interpretation as Literary Criticism

This section begins with a brief biographical sketch of Trakl followed by a general taxonomy of Trakl interpretation. Then Heidegger's 1953 essay is considered in light of a standard criticism.

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1 Luce, 2016. Mearsheimer, 2019.

2 Stern, 58-59.

3 Case and Deaton, 2015; Case and Deaton, 2017.

4 Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, 197. Concerning the essays appearing in GA 12, *Unterwegs zur Sprache*, I have tried to follow the available English translations wherever possible. References are to Hofstadter's translation of "Language" in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (1971) and Peter D. Hertz's translations of the remaining essays in *On the Way to Language* (1971). Changes will be indicated in square brackets, and unless otherwise noted, they are based on the corresponding passages in GA 12.

2.1 A Life Apart

Georg Trakl was born in Salzburg on February 3, 1887.[5] His father Tobias established a successful hardware business that ensured a solidly upper-middle class lifestyle for his large family. Georg grew up with six siblings, including his younger sister Margarete (Grete) with whom he is rumored to have had an incestuous relationship. He was a bit of a disturbed child, and as he grew older, he took on the demeanor of a brooding artist. In 1906 he premiered a, now lost, one act play called, "Day of the Dead." [6] Reviews were mixed, but even at this young age, his work showed promise. From 1908 to 1910 he studied pharmacology at the University of Vienna. When the war broke out his medical degree kept him out of direct combat (though it did not exactly shield him from the horrors of war). This work also gave him access to the drugs he would continue to abuse until his death in 1914.

His literary career really began to flourish when he met Ludwig Von Ficker, publisher of the avant-garde literary magazine, *Der Brenner*. Trakl would publish many of his most famous poems in Der Brenner. After Trakl's death the magazine took a decidedly Catholic turn, and it has been suggested that this is why so many early critics read Trakl as a Christian poet. [7]Ficker also facilitated a connection to Ludwig Wittgenstein, who bequeathed a sum of money to poets in Ficker's circle. [8]In 1913, Trakl published his first book, *Poems*, and the following year, with the outbreak of World War I, he served in the Austrian military as a pharmacist in the medical core. During this time, he was struggling to publish his second book, *Sebastian Dreaming*, which wouldn't come out until after his death. In the fall of 1914, Trakl sent a letter to Wittgenstein thanking him for his generosity and suggesting a meeting. Wittgenstein agreed, and the two were supposed to meet in early November. Trakl died two days before the meeting was to take place. Wittgenstein had donated the money without knowing anything of how Ficker would disperse it, and after Trakl's death, Ficker sent Wittgenstein some of Trakl's poetry. In his reply, postmarked 28 November 1914, Wittgenstein said: "I do not understand them; but their *tone* delights me. It is the tone of a true genius." [9]

As a child, Georg was unusual. Some of this may have been the youthful affectation of an aspiring poet. Like many of his generation, he admired the work of edgy writers like Baudelaire, Verlaine and Poe, but his problems were real and cannot be entirely chalked up to mere pretense. Anecdotes from his childhood suggest an interest in suicide. These include stories of him jumping in front of an agitated horse and even the path of a moving train. He also walked into a pond: "his hat floating on the surface provided rescuers the only indication where he could be found."[10] Concerning the rumors about him and his sister, it's impossible to know what truth there is to them. It's clear that he had a great affection for her. The theme of incest is suggested in much of his poetry. An early poem, with the title "Dream of Evil," ends with a suggestive line:

In the park, siblings glimpse each other trembling. [11]

There could be me many explanations for the theme of incest in Trakl's poetry. It's possible that lines like these simply reflect the poets desire to provoke controversy. They might just be the product of an otherwise disturbed mind. Those who believe that Trakl actually slept with his sister often rely on the testimony of a single critic who claimed to have proof that he refused to disclose. [12]

Drug use was a consistent part of his short life. Translator, James Reidel quotes a 1905 letter to Karl von Kalmar: "to get over the subsequent strain on my nerves, I have unfortunately resorted to chloroform. The effect was awful."[13] It is also reported that he suffered visual hallucinations. He heard bells, and he occasionally would see a man standing behind him holding a knife. The hallucinations are said to have stopped when he was about twelve but picked up again when he was twenty-four.[14] The horrors of war probably compounded his mental disturbances. The Battle of Grodek was especially brutal, and it is the subject of his final poem. After a gory and humiliating defeat, Trakl was tasked with tending to 90 badly wounded soldiers. He saw men hanging from trees, at least one of whom hanged himself in desperation. Trakl announced his own intentions of

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5 The main outlines of Trakl's biography are well known. Interested readers may consult the biographical notes in James Reidel's translation, *A Skeleton Plays Violin: The Early, Unpublished, and Last Works of Georg Trakl* (2017).

6 Trakl, *A Skeleton Plays Violin*, 4.

7 Detsch, 2.

8 For an interesting discussion of how Wittgenstein's connection to Trakl might have philosophical significance for the Tractatus, see Bremer (2021). Interestingly, Bremmer notes that Ficker was considering publishing the *Tractatus* in *Der Brenner*, thinking it deserved to be treated both as a work of philosophy *and* literary work (528-29).

9 Ficker, *Briefwechsel* 1914-1918, 53. I quote the letter here in full: "Lieber Herr v. Ficker! Ich danke Ihnen für die Zusendung der Gedichte Trakls. Ich verstehe sie nicht; aber ihr *Ton* beglückt mich. Es ist der Ton der wahrhaft genialen Menschen. Wie gerne möchte ich Sie sehen und mich über manches aussprechen! Seien Sie herzlichst gegrüßt von Ihrem, Ludwig Wittgenstein" (53).

10 Sharp, 22-23.

11 Trakl, *Poems*, 23.

12 Detsch (1983) puts it well: "… the critics are divided, as they are with regard to a good many features of Trakl's obscure biography. A definitive statement is especially difficult because of the critics' proximity in time to the suspected deeds and the fact that those ho might possess information regarding such deeds would very probably be closely connected to Trakl's family, one of whose members was still alive as late as 1969. Most of the recent critics, however, rely on Theodore Spoerri's statement that he possesses indisputable evidence of an incestuous relationship from a source that he does not think it prudent to identify" (11).

13 Quoted in Trakl, *A Skeleton Plays Violin*, xix.

14 Sharp, 34-37.

suicide, at which point his comrades disarmed him and placed him under psychological supervision in a Krakow military hospital. The care he received seems to have been poor and, if anything, may have made matters worse. It is impossible to determine the extent to which it was intentional, his death from a cocaine overdose on November 3rd, 1914. [15]

2.2 Form and Content

Trakl's poetry is notoriously difficult. In his short life, he didn't publish any theoretical treatises or provide readers explicit aid on how to read or interpret his poetry. Images are often used in contradictory ways and unexpected contexts. This led to an important dispute in the early 1950's between formalists and those who emphasized the unmistakably Christian imagery of Trakl's poems.

Wanderer quietly steps within;

Pain has turned the threshold into stone.

There lie in limpid brightness shown,

Upon the table bread and wine.[16]

The formalists view such imagery as incidental, intended to evoke certain feelings in the reader without attributing "any symbolic or world-critical meaning whatsoever to the aggregate of Trakl's images."[17] As Michael Hamburger puts it: "every interpretation of Trakl's works hinges on the difficulty of deciding to what extent his images should be treated as symbols."[18]

But he adds, later on, that "any interpretation of his symbols must take Trakl's Christian faith into account." And he faults

Heidegger for evading such biographical questions with his claim that great poets always speak from the same, single, unspoken poem.[19]

So the criticism from formalists is that Heidegger projects content onto Trakl's poetry, and the criticism from Christian interpreters is that the content he projects is insufficiently attentive to Trakl's Christian imagery. The nice thing about the formalist approach is that it seems to be in keeping with the ambiguity and impenetrability of Trakl's poetry. Heidegger's reluctance to discuss Trakl's biography might seem to fit with a formalist interpretation. But Heidegger seems to rule this out with his claim that "every great poet creates his poetry out of one single poetic statement only." The purpose of discussing a great poet's work is to locate the original "unspoken statement" from which the various poems "derive their light and sound."[20] Heidegger's approach may seem to harmonize with the formalist's when he says, "the poetic work speaks out of an ambiguous ambiguousness," but he ultimately attributes the poetry's ambiguity to the ambiguous nature of its object. It is "not lax imprecision, but rather the rigor of him who leaves what is as it is."[21] Heidegger's search for the original, unspoken poem cannot be reconciled with the formalist approach. Discussing "A Winter Evening" in the "Language" essay, Heidegger says it directly: "the poem's content is comprehensible."[22]

2.3 Varieties of Non-Formalistic Interpretation

Concerning non-formalistic interpretations, Heidegger explicitly rejects the

Christian one. We have already acknowledged that Christian imagery is present in Trakl's poetry, but the decisive question is whether those images carry symbolic meaning. The ambiguousness of Trakl's imagery makes it hard to maintain the view that Trakl is painting a picture of a universe resembling any traditional Christian theological worldview. Heidegger emphatically resists the Christian reading of Trakl in the 1953 essay. He cites Trakl's image of "the icy wave" of eternity and asks, "is this Christian thinking? It's not even Christian despair."[23] Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis's *The Blossoming Thorn* (1987) is a good representative of where the Christian interpretation stands today. Leiva-Merikakas interprets Trakl's poetry as a *confessional event*. The Christian imagery is not so much a description of the universe according to Christian doctrine but a way of setting the stage for a genuine act of confession—or even instances of spiritual revelation. He sees Trakl's work in the "tradition of visionary poetry."[24] The nice thing about this view is its ability to balance the ambiguity of Trakl's metaphor and the occasional character of each poem with the guiding threads of confession and prophetic vision.

Another important approach emphasizes Trakl's drug abuse and mental instability. Heidegger rejects such approach as symptoms of "an age whose historical, biographical, psychoanalytical, and sociological interest is focused on bare expression."[25] Despite Heidegger's objections, the psychological approach has always been popular. Francis Michael Sharp, in his 1891 study, *A Poet's Madness*, notes that this sort of interpretation was

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15 Sharp, 33.

16 Heidegger, P*oetry, Language, Thought*, 192-93. This is the translation as it appears in the English edition of the "Language" essay. James Reidel's recent translation can be found here: Trakl, *Sebastian Dreaming*, 37.

17 Leiva-Merikakis, 12. We will see (in 2.3) that Leiva-Merikakis defends a version of the Christian interpretation. A good discussion of this debate, from a more Heideggerian perspective, can be found in the introductory chapter of Dretsch (1983).

18 Hamburger, 292.

19 Hamburger, 310.

20 Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, 160-61.

21 Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, 192.

22 Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 193.

23 Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, 193.

24 Leiva-Merikakis, 19.

25 Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, 159.

already suggested by none other than Ficker himself. "In Ficker's view, a possible reason for the prolonged observation [in the military hospital in Krakow] was the interest that one of the doctors had in Trakl as a case of 'genius and madness.'" [26] Along with the mad-genius narrative, there are those who read Trakl as a disturbed and even perverted mind. I'm speaking, of course, of those who emphasize the potentially incestuous relation between Trakl and his sister, Grete. [27]

Heidegger remains silent on this last point, but Jacques Derrida isn't buying it. Derrida returns to the 1953 essay on Trakl in his decades long exploration of Heidegger's use of the puzzling German term, 'Geschlecht.' [28] In a series of lectures on this essay, he tells us it can be interpreted "as a great discourse on sexual difference." [29] Derrida's reflections on 'Geschlecht' are quite helpful for understanding Heidegger's work in its philosophical context, and I approach the essay along somewhat similar lines below. That said, an interpretation that places at the heart of Trakl's poetry the imagery of the androgynous childhood relation between brother and sister is likely to result in the same sort of problem of ambiguity that plagues the other content-based interpretations discussed in this section. [30] All of these issues—Trakl's Christianity, his madness, his relation to his sister—are worth exploring thoughtfully in terms of how they shape the poetic imagery. But none of them strike me as decisive as a bases for interpreting the whole of Trakl's poetry.

2.4 Heidegger's Trakl Interpretation

Heidegger's 1953 essay is difficult, but we do get some definitive state-ments. First, Heidegger tells us that the "site" of Trakl's work is isolation. Heidegger uses the word 'Abgeschiedenheit,' which Hertz translates as 'apartness,' for technical reasons probably having to do with the 'site' [Ort] of Heidegger's 'discussion' [Erörterung]. But is important to see the word's poetic force. In Trakl's "Gesang des Abgeschidenes," 'apartness' or even 'being-apart' would not work. It is unclear whether the poem is the song of one who is living in solitude or even of the departed, in the sense of the deceased. In either case, the technical, spatial language obscures the poetic intent. Heidegger surely meant to invoke both in his essay. Second we get the formulation, near the end of the essay, of Trakl as the "poet of the yet concealed evening land." [31] Here, again, the translation causes some difficulty. 'Der Abendland' is the west. Sometimes it's hyphenated. Sometimes it's separated into two words. And occasionally it is spelled out with the genitive construction, 'land of evening.' But the two senses are always linked. When Heidegger refers to it, it is in the context of two of Trakl's poems: "Abendland" and "Abendländisches Lied." The image of the setting sun is lost with English translations like, 'occident' or 'the west,' and to call it the 'evening land' robs the term of its historical and cultural significance. Given Heidegger's biography, it's important to be cautious about what's being suggested, but the historicity of the concept is essential to what Heidegger is trying to say. He warns us not to confuse the yet unconcealed west with the legacy of Platonism, Christianity, or even Europe. Instead, "apartness is the 'first beginning' of a mounting world year." [32]

So what does all this mean? Heidegger begins his study with a passage from Trakl's "Springtime of the Soul":

Something strange is the soul on earth." [33]

This is indicative of his thinking on Trakl. Unlike the onto-theological tradition that Heidegger is constantly critiquing, which sets reason and things like souls outside of ordinary lived experience, Trakl places the soul on earth but as something strange. Dwelling in this strangeness isolates Trakl. It places him out away from from the Western tradition that goes back, at least, to Plato. He's able to see the West as it was originally, prior to the fallenness of onto-theology. Dwelling in this solitude he can herald the destiny of the still hidden west. The imagery of the seasons and the earths revolution in a year comes to symbolize the world-historical position of the evening land. Derrida makes an important philosophical point about Heidegger's view when he tells us that Heidegger "proposes no other *content*, only an originary, pre-originary double *on the basis of* which Platonism and Christianity could be produced as decomposed forms." [34] But this is not to be confused with the claim about formalism made above. Heidegger *does, in fact,* project symbolism grounded in his own view onto Trakl's poetry. In response to the decay of Platonism and Christianity, Trakl's poetry—only *apparently* dismal and depressing—poetry is seen by Heidegger to herald a new world-historical year. An age that resembles an "abyss of decay" [Abgrund des Verfalls] is a necessary sunset [Untergang] that is the first necessary step toward a dawn of a new beginning, a beginning that is the sunrise [Übergang] of a long buried past. [35]

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26 Sharp 33-34.

27 McLary, 2000.

28 Derrida, 1983; 1987; 1989; 1993; 2020

29 Derrida, *Geschlecht III*, 19.

30 Derrida, *Geschlecht III*, 43-44. Readers interested in exploring this line of interpretation further should check out Detsch (1987) and chapter seven of Farrell Krell (2015).

31 Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, 197.

32 Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, 194.

33 Heidegger, *On the Way to Langauge*, 161-64.

34 Derrida, *Geschlecht III,* 55.

35 Heidegger, *On the Way to Language,* 194.

2.5 On the Objections to Heidegger's Trakl Interpretation

It should be clear by now where critics find fault with Heidegger's view. We've already seen how Hamburger accuses him of projecting symbolic meaning into images that Trakl employs in explicitly contradictory ways.[36] Richard Detsch is probably correct in the following description of consensus among literary critics:

> Most critics reject Heidegger's contribution as a philosopher's unwarranted encroachment on literary criticism; some few approve but without really coming to grips with the philosophy of Sein und Zeit upon which Heidegger's interpretation is predicated.[37]

Along these same lines, Richard Millington identifies Heidegger as the "most flagrant practitioner" of an approach to Trakl that constructs interpretations based on collections of lines or images chosen for their suitability for supporting a particular argument." Millington insists on the importance of biography, adopting what he calls a "diachronic and developmental" approach. He naturally faults interpreters who, like Heidegger (in his view), extract images from their context, "with little or no regard for the relative chronology of the poems in question."[38]Derrida is sensitive to this point in his lectures on the essay, but in the end he is sympathetic to Heidegger's need to place himself into the text.[39]

3. Heidegger's Trakl Essays in Context

This section situates Heidegger's essays on Trakl in relation to Heidegger's broader project of overturning western metaphysics. I begin by considering the relation between the two essays on Trakl in *On the Way to Language*. This is followed by a brief discussion of the relation between early and later Heidegger after which I describe what I take to be a continuous thread running from "What is Metaphysics?" (1929) to "Language" (1950-51). Finally I attempt to situate the 1953 essay on Trakl in this lineage as well.

3.1 Random Acts of Poetry?

Heidegger's best known discussion of the poetry of Georg Trakl appears in the 1950-51 essay, "Language." In it, Heidegger uses Trakl's "A Winter Evening" as an instance of language purely spoken; he reprints the poem in full, allowing the poem to speak for itself. Given his goal of letting language speak for itself, it makes sense that Heidegger would want to omit the significance of the poet's biography: "The poet remains unimportant here, as is the case with every other instance of great poetical success [*grossgeglückten Fall eines Gedichtes*]."[40] In the late-fifties, Heidegger collected several of his essays from the fifties and published them as part of a collection called, *On the Way to Language*. In that collection, "Language" was followed by a more complete treatment of Trakl's poetry that had been published in the literary journal *Merkur* in 1953. Originally titled, "Georg Trakl: A Discussion of His Poetry," this essay was renamed, "Language in the Poem: A Discussion of the Poetry of Georg Trakl." The new title seems to link the second treatment of Trakl's poetry with the "Language" essay, and here again, we find Heidegger downplaying the significance of Trakl's biography, this time with a little bit of wordplay: "the discussion [*Erörterung*] speaks of Georg Trakl only in the sense that it thinks the site [*Ort*] of his poetry." This 'site,' we are told, is a single unspoken poem which is the gathering point of any great poet's work.[41]

There are good philosophical reasons for not discussing the poet's biography. In *On the Way to Language*, Heidegger situates "A Discussion of Trakl's Poetry" next to the "Language" essay under the new title "Language in the Poem." The treatment of Trakl's "A Winter Evening" in the "Language" essay is one of the most sensitive and subtle things Heidegger ever wrote. And the treatment of this poem cannot be accused of taking Trakl out of context. Indeed Heidegger cites the poem in its entirety and references a 1913 letter the author wrote to Karl Kraus wherein in he includes an alternate middle stanza.[42] More importantly, the poem is intended to bring us into contact with the pure being of language. One must suppose that chattering away about the author's life would lead us away from language itself—toward what he calls 'idle talk' (one might say, 'gossip' [*Gerede*]) in *Being and Time*.[43] If the discussion of Trakl's poetry struggles as a work of literary criticism, perhaps it succeeds as an extension of task of the "Language" essay. This puts the discussion of Trakl into line with Heidegger's broader project, going back to *Being and Time* and "What is Metaphysics?" From this perspective, to speak of the author's biography is to confuse the being of language purely spoken with everyday instances in the life of the

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36 Hamburger, *Reason and Energy*, 292.

37 Detsch, 4. Detsch himself is sympathetic to Heidegger's approach and attempts to approach Trakl's poetry along the lines of a rethinking of unity and difference.

38 Millington, 2020.

39 Derrida, *Geschlecht III*, 60-61. "I won't say that he knows where he's going, for this destination… is not of the order of knowledge, but still, he has an orientation…that pre-orients, magnetizes, and draws along his approach… He is not just going anywhere in the Trakl text. Incidentally, this is exactly what so-called competent people (philosophers, philologists, poetics critics) criticize him for; they criticize him for saying whatever, arbitrarily, without taking account of the internal organization or the apparent meaning of the text…and imposing on Trakl a situation and a place pre-determined by Heidegger… In any case one cannot overlook…this situation of Heidegger himself and this scene according to which he speaks of himself or, rather, of his proper place, his own step, his own pathway, in short, his signature. And this is not a criticism in my view."

40 Heidegger, *Poetry Language Thought,* 193. Hofstadter translates the bracketed phrase as "…every other masterful poem." This has the problem of overemphasizing the role of the author as master and loses the sense of the term "Fall" as a 'case' or 'instance' of poetic activity. It also leaves out the unusual adjective "grossgeglückten." "Geglückt" means 'successful,' not 'masterful,' and it's likely Heidegger was attentive to the etymological connection to 'Glück,' meaning 'good fortune' or 'happiness.'

41 Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, 159-60.

42 Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 193.

43 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 167-70.

poet. The *event* of poetry—a fortuitous instance of poetical success—has to be something vastly more profound.

3.2 Early and Later Heidegger

Heidegger was consistent in viewing his thought as guided by the question of the meaning of being. If there was a "turn" in his thinking, it seems to have had more to do with his approach than with the goal of his thinking. His style changed, but the question was always the same. He backs away from the technical term 'Dasein,' because of a tendency to read of *Being and Time* as a kind of philosophical anthropology. (You can't blame readers for this; it can be a powerful book when read that way.) But it wasn't about that. It was about analysis of the being concerned about being that would then prepare the ground for rethinking the question of being itself. It was an attempt to think being in a more original way. He clarifies this point in the "Letter on 'Humanism'" (1946) and contrasts Hölderlin with "eighteenth century humanists like Winckelmann, Goethe, and Schiller." Hölderlin, he tells us, "does not belong to 'humanism' because he thought the destiny of the essence of the human being in a more original way than 'humanism' could."[44] To get away from the reputation that he's doing philosophical anthropology, the later Heidegger adopted a different tone and even shifted away from calling his work 'philosophy.' His intention was always to think the question of the meaning of being, never to *philosophize* about it 'onto-theologically.' Whatever this new form of thinking is, it's clear that it is intended to move beyond the kinds of supernatural meta-narrative of being associated with (at least some) approaches to Western metaphysics since Plato.[45]

Some interpreters identify his discussion of Trakl as one of the few instances in which he took his eye off the ball.

According to Phillipe Lacoue-Labarthe, "on two occasions at least, Heidegger, by his own choice, indulged in philosophy." This refers to Heidegger's association with the Nazi party and some of his work on poetry, "Hölderlin and, to a lesser extent, Trakl." To think the question is not to theorize it but to allow oneself to encounter it. Lacoue-Labarthe speaks of Heidegger's "'Hölderlinian' preaching."[46] If Lacoue-Labarthe is right, we should exercise caution and perhaps not make too much of Heidegger's reading of Trakl. This is just one of the few times that Heidegger slipped of track and allowed himself to posit a kind of theoretical answer to a question we can only thoughtfully approach. Caution is surely warranted, but certain elements of the Trakl essays are continuous with Heidegger's thinking going back to the twenties. It is to these elements that I now turn.

3.3 From "What is Metaphysics?" to "Language"

In "What is Metaphysics?" (1929) Heidegger phenomenologically undercuts philosophical logic. He approaches the question of being from the standpoint of of the human being, but this standpoint is "freely chosen." And in "turning toward beings themselves" he approaches the origin of logical negation in a more original way.[47] Using human experience as the horizon, what's revealed is something he calls "the nothing," and it is in the "nihilation of the nothing" that beings like us first encounter the possibility of non-being. To say that we experience this as the existential dread of death only gives us part of the picture. This is actually the being of beings revealing itself, as it does to beings like us who are concerned about being by our own nature. We already have this experience of nihilation available to us before any sort of differentiation or categorization can be formalized. "The nothing is more

originary than the "not" of negation."[48] There are no disjunctive syllogisms at this level, only the original experience of the nihilation of the nothing.

The "Language" essay of 1950 is the continuation of this sort of reflection. Here he tells us that in attempting to understand the being of language we are trying "to get where we are already."[49] It is only in letting language speak that we are able to encounter it for itself. We do this through the hearing of a poem, Georg Trakl's "A Winter Evening." Heidegger picks the poem, somewhat cleverly, because it contains several of his key notions. The sounding of evening bell should remind reader of the "call" of conscience from *Being and Time*.[50] And the idea that it tolls longer on account of the gentle falling of the snow should remind readers of the contrast between authentic temporality and the ordinary notion of time as a measurable sequence of instances. Language speaks in the naming of things which calls them together. For example, when Trakl says "the window is arrayed with falling snow," the window and the snow appear in the attentive listener's imagination. Heidegger doesn't think of this the way that most of us intuitively do, as ideas (somehow, let's say metaphorically) *in* the mind. Even mind/body dualists would admit that there is no place for these ideas to go. They are not spatial; nor is the mind. But the question isn't how an unextended image can be *in* an unextended mind. The question is: how can there be *two* of them? The image of *the snow* and the image of *the window* belong to the same idea and are separated in movement of the falling snow. The poem broadens the field when it speaks of wanderers on dark paths who are drawn to the house where the window is still being hit with snow. The house has a table inside, with food on it. The "tree of graces" (which is God

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44 Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, 244.

45 Of paramount importance here is the twisting free of Platonism that Heidegger discusses in Chapter 24, Volume One of the Nietzsche lectures.

46 Lacouee-Labarthe, 12.

47 Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, 83.

48 Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, 86.

49 Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 188.

50 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 272-80.

knows where but still somehow in the world of the house) draws up 'cool dew' from beneath the earth. None of this is taking place in space, yet everything exists in a kind of as *if* spatial relation belonging to the same poetic world. I have been using the metaphorical language of 'ideas' in 'the mind' only because it's a useful way of expressing these things. But the metaphors themselves need to be replaced in order to capture the way in which language and thinking succeed in producing this world.

These various things are yoked together in a place that is no place at all, and they are, somehow, in this non-place differentiated as individual elements of the larger scene. The Christian imagery of Trakl's poem is unmistakable when a wanderer approaches the warmly lit house with bread and wine on the table. The wanderer cannot enter because pain has hardened the entry way into stone. Heidegger uses this pain-hardened threshold as an image of what he calls "the difference."[51] Language speaks in the painful opening up of the difference, where the difference stands for the medium that allows for the imagery of the poem to combine multiple elements within the world that the poem creates. He hyphenates the German word for difference, 'Unter-shied.' This is intended to separate the preposition 'unter' which he traces to the Latin 'inter.' This etymological move connects the 'unter' of the difference with the 'intimacy' of the connection between elements in the poem. The second part of the word is connected to the verb 'scheiden,' which means to 'separate' or 'divorce.' So, Heidegger uses the threshold beyond which it is too painful for the wanderer to pass to illustrate the fundamental separation at the heart of the being of language. Language calls things together but also peals them apart. The different elements of the poem intermingle in a kind of movement—now together, now apart, now in focus, now out of focus. The poet calls all these things together while simultaneously parting them in a pure instance of spoken language.

If the painful parting of the difference is what separates things within a world, then we are not too far off from the way in which the primordial nihilation of the nothing makes possible the "not" of negation in "What is Metaphysics?" If the nothing is ontologically prior to the not of negation, perhaps the pain of the difference is ontologically prior to the "all," "some," or "none" of categorical logic. We will see this developed a bit more in the next section.

3.4 "Language in the Poem" and 'Geschlecht'

In situating the 1953 essay alongside "Language" and giving it the new title, "Language in the Poem," Heidegger is drawing our attention to the fact that this essay carries on with certain themes from the other essay. We can see how "Language in the Poem" relates his discussion of the difference with the help of Derrida's reflections on the German word, 'Geschlecht.'[52] There is not space of a detailed study of this here, but some indications concerning the etymology of the word and a brief discussion of the most relevant paragraphs of the essay should be enough to illustrate the connection.

'Geschlecht' is the German word for 'sex.' Like the English word, it can indicate both the biological categories and the activity: 'geschlechtlich' means 'sexual,' and 'Geschlechtsverkehr' (lit. sexual traffic) refers to sexual intercourse. 'Geschlecht' also picks out other category terms, like: 'generation,' 'gender,' 'family,' 'lineage.' One probably wouldn't go wrong thinking of 'Geschlecht' when they think of those terms that are etymologically connected to 'genus.' The Latin, 'genus,' refers to a variety of category terms: 'kind,' 'race,' 'descent,' 'family,' 'nation,' and 'gender.' Etymologically, it survives in words that begin with gen-, like 'general,' 'genre,' and 'genesis' (as well as 'origin'). Derrida's decades long concern with Heidegger's use of the term 'Geschlecht' is related to his attempt to make sense of Heidegger's Nazism.[53] If Heidegger rejected biologism for its technological and scientific approach to the question of being, one might assume he'd be immune from the ideology of National Socialism. We think of the Holocaust as essentially linked to the eugenics movement and the pseudo-science of biological racism, which of course it was. But there are other ways to think the unity of the nation. If Heidegger wasn't a thinker of 'die Rasse' or 'der Stamm,' words more commonly associated with racism and the eugenics movement, perhaps he was still a thinker of the spiritual unity of the German 'Volk.' And if Heidegger's thinking surrounding these issues is more complex, which it certainly is, perhaps he makes use of the complex and ambiguous term, 'Geschlecht.'

In the 1953 essay, Heidegger invites us to think of 'Geschlecht' in the fullness of this ambiguity. [ein geschlecht passage]. In the subsequent paragraph, he connects 'Geschlecht' to the verb 'schlagen,' meaning 'to hit' or 'to strike.' An ordinary way of forming the past participle of a verb in German is to take the third person form and add the prefix *ge-*, but 'schlagen' is an irregular verb. The past-participle of 'schlagen' is 'geschlagen'; its third person singular form is 'schlägt.' However, if one were to take the third person present form, "schlägt," and use it to form the past participle, it would become "geschlägt." This made-up word would sound very close to the pronunciation of the word, 'Geschlecht.' So, for Heidegger, the category term, 'Geschlecht' picks out *that which has been hit*. This is just like the the "Language" essay, where the difference between intimate elements called together in Trakl's poem are painfully rendered apart in a naming that gathers. Here, membership in a categorization is secured when something is *slugged*. It is also the connection between 'schlag' and 'geschlagen' that enables Hertz to translate—not unreasonably—Heidegger's

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51 Heidegger places a dash between the *Unter of der Unterschied*, which Hofstadter tries to replicate with dif-ference. It works in German because 'Unter' is a preposition and because 'schied' is related to the verb '*scheiden*,' meaning 'to separate.' English doesn't have the same effect, so I will just mark it out using context and the definite article 'the' to help indicate when I'm using the technical term.

52 Derrida, 1983; 1987; 1989; 1993; 2020.

53 For a detailed discussion Derrida's interpretation of Heidegger's nationalism apropos of 'Geschlecht,' see Krell (2007; 2015; 2020) and Therezo (2018)

description of Trakl's unspoken poetic statement as the "call that the right race may come to be [*Rufen nach dem Ereignis des rechten Schlages*]."[54] Here, of course, it is important to tread cautiously. A more literal translation would be the "call of the event of the just hit." Perhaps he is suggesting something unexpectedly humanistic when he draws our attention to the emphasis that Trakl places, in the last line of Trakl's "Song of the Evening Land," on "one kind [Ein *Geschlecht*]."

3.5 Conclusion

In this section, I have attempted to show that Heidegger's Trakl essays are continuous with his earlier reflections on the meaning of being. When Heidegger applies his unique phenomenological approach to these questions, his thinking is radical in the sense that he thinks concepts down to the root. At the root of being, he uncovers the nothing. The ground [*Grund*] of being is an abyss [*Abgrund*]. Likewise, when he inquires into the being of language he uncovers something decidedly non-linguistic. Our proper comportment toward language is silence. Mortals genuinely speak only insofar as we respond to language.[55]

Alongside these investigations, we find Heidegger re-imagining fundamental logical concepts—like, negation, differentiation, and categorization—in terms more of their more fundamental phenomenological elements. Nothingness, differentiation, and 'Geschlecht' are decidedly beyond the scope of ordinarily philosophical logic, but for Heidegger, they are the ground from which such conceptual understanding emerges. The ground of logic, therefore, is nothing logical. If the typical empiricist approach is to apply logical concepts to experience in order to clarify and make it intelligible what's given, Heidegger's phenomeno-

logical approach deflates this underlying methodological distinction at work. Both experience and logic are grounded phenomenologically. For Kant, concepts without intuitions are empty; for Heidegger, concepts without intuitions are fabricated abstractions grounded in more fundamental elements of experience.

One might follow this line of thought to the experientialist psychology of authors like Goerge Lakoff and Mark Johnson. They seem to echo this Heideggerian attitude toward logic in the Afterword to *Metaphors We Live By* (1980):

> We continually find it important to realize that the way we have been brought up to perceive our world is not the only way and that it is possible to see beyond the 'truths' of our culture. But metaphors are not merely things to be seen beyond. In fact, one can see beyond them only by using other metaphors.[56]

As with Heidegger, it seems to follow from such a view that abstract and rarified concepts cannot have the last and final word in assessing other kinds of claims. No matter how abstract they might seem, theoretical concepts are just as much subject to evaluation as the metaphors of everyday discourse. If this sort of view is right, then the being of even the most abstract concepts is historical. The gathering that takes place in language (if you like, metaphor) precedes the formal and technical vocabulary that we would use to analyze it. This raises an important problem: if theoretical concepts are historically and experientially grounded, then they are likely to get things wrong in times of rapid or radical transition. Old concepts lag behind evolving social reality.

4. Decadence and the Dreadful Promise of Esoteric Wisdom

In this section I argue that Heidegger's failure fully omit Trakl's biography stems from something deeply compelling about the archetype of what I will call *the wretched prophet*. I begin by sketching this archetype and distinguishing Heidegger's Trakl from other versions. Then I attempt to articulate the difficult relation between democracy and esotericism by looking at Gorham Munson's critique of T.S. Eliot. Then I attempt to tie this all together by contrasting Trakl with a very different kind of war poet, Wilfred Owen.

4.1 The Wretched Prophet

The hermeneutical circle is much easier to understand than it is to escape.[57] I like to explain it using the little paradox from Plato's *Meno*.[58] You can't discover truths that you don't already know because you wouldn't recognize them if you found them. Heidegger's treatment of the problem in "A Dialogue on Language" is illuminating, and he tags it to his use of the word 'discussion' in the 1953 essay on Trakl.[59] Here he connects the word 'hermeneutics' to the Greek god Hermes, who has the power to bring divine gifts.

In the case of poetry, such gifts come in the form of inspiration. As any reader of the *Apology* has already learned, poets don't really know anything.[60] They are but vehicles through which inspiration speaks. Heidegger directs readers to the following passage from Plato's *Ion*:

> …these lovely poems are not of man or human workmanship, but are divine and from thee gods, and…the poets are nothing but the interpreters of the gods, each one possessed by the divinity to whom he is in bondage.[61]

The meaning of the poem, therefore,

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54 Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, 195.

55 Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought,* 207.

56 Lakoff and Johnson, 239.

57 A detailed discussion of the relevant parts of *Being and Time*—esp. 31, 32, 33, 41, and 42—would take us beyond the scope of this paper.

58 Plato, *Collected Works*, 80d-e.

59 Heidegger, *Unterwegs zur Sprache*, 115.

60 Plato, *Apology*, 22b-c

61 Plato, *Ion*, 534e

is not to be found in something like the mind of the poet, but rather at the site of authentic poetic inspiration. It is with these things in the background that we must understand Heidegger's claim that the artist and the work originate together: "the artist is the origin of the work. The work is the origin of the artist. Neither is without the other."[62]

One might stop here and ask why we should engage in literary criticism at all. If the poem speaks for itself, what but perversion could come from discussing it? Heidegger's answer is that the reading of poetry can occasion an encounter with the being of language. In the "Language" essay, I think we get something quite like this. His commentary is delicate. It leads us along the proverbial country path until we reach the clearing in which the poem can be heard for itself. We saw in the previous section, we get some fascinating insights concerning the nature of language. Critics of Heidegger may question the truth of these insights, but they are certainly worthy of serious consideration. So, we can defend the "Language" essay by saying that it's not really about Trakl or his poetry at all. It's about language. This is confirmed by the title and by the fact that the draft he wrote in October of 1950 doesn't even mention Trakl's name in the main body of the text.[63] All this would seem to situate Heidegger alongside those Trakl interpreters that Leiva-Merikakis calls the "arch-formalists," those who deny that there is any meaning or ideology or symbolism beyond the imagery of Trakl's poetry.[64] The only thing that matters is Trakl's use of language and imagery to evoke certain feelings in the reader. But we know that Heidegger doesn't stop there.

Heidegger's Trakl is the isolated madman who foretells the renewal of the yet to be revealed west. This Trakl is the 20th century version of what we might call the *wretched prophet*. In Plato's *Ion*, Socrates is having some fun at the expense of the poets and pointing out that they don't really understand what they say. The connection between ignorance and divine inspiration was much more important among theists who believed that revealed religion provided deep insight into the natural (or supernatural) world. Maimonides, for example, followed in the tradition of Muslim philosophers like Alfarabi who seemed to base their understanding of prophecy on Plato's philosopher king—at least as they understood it according to the documents available them. Maimonides insists on two crucial points. First God makes a prophet of whomever He wants; second, prophecy is only ever attained by those who are fit for it.[65] These two demands are obviously in tension. It seems intuitive that God could make anyone a prophet, regardless of preparation. Why would the prophet need to have the character of a philosopher king? Indeed, Spinoza cites "rustic fellows" and "insignificant women like Hagar" as proof that "those who look in the books of the prophets for wisdom and knowledge of natural and spiritual things are completely on the wrong track."[66] If these folks can gain prophecy, it must not be a good source of wisdom.

But this is only half the story. Socrates himself furnishes the other half in the same discussion from the Ion:

> these lovely poems are not of man or human workmanship, but are divine and from the gods, and…the poets are nothing but interpreters of the gods, each one possessed of the deity to whom he is in bondage. And to prove this, the deity on purpose sang the loveliest of all lyrics through the most miserable poet.[67]

Here we see that the lowliness and ignorance of the individual endowed with divine wisdom can also serve as a kind of *proof* that the message comes not from the poet but from the gods. This view has a legacy as well. Not only do we find it in the Bible, as Spinoza reminds us, but the notion of the wretched prophet is also something of a trope. To cite just one example, there is the letter written by 12th Century German mystic, Hildegard of Bingen. Attempting to prove her prophetic bona fides to the head of the Cistercian order, Bernard of Clairvaux, she writes:

> I who am miserable and more than miserable in my womanly existence have seen great wonders since I was a child. And my tongue could not express them, if God's Spirit did not teach me to believe.[68]

Here, again, we see the absence of wisdom being employed as evidence that spiritual insight is coming, not from the prophet herself but from actual divine inspiration. Her lowly social station, lack of education, and presumed—though certainly not actual—lack of intelligence makes her the perfect example of what I'm calling the wretched prophet.

4.2 Heidegger's Trakl as Wretched Prophet

Important qualifications must be made before we can apply the wretched prophet label to Heidegger's Trakl. First, whatever prophecy may be involved, Heidegger does not see it in terms of traditional theism. Heidegger's prophet would be someone who has a kind of special access to the being of beings that is compatible with the reversal of Platonism and the critique of all modes of traditional metaphysics, including theism. Second, Trakl's writing is woefully difficult to interpret. Whatever his 'prophecy' may

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62 Heidegger, *Off the Beaten Track*, 1.

63 Heidegger, GA 80.2, 987. The paragraph quoted from the version published in *Unterwegs zur Sprache* (1959) above seems to have been first added in February of 1951 and appears in the same location, same wording in GA 80.2, 1011.

64 Leiva-Merikakis, 12.

65 Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, 126-29. For a good discussion of the role of Islamic philosophy in influencing his position, see Frank's introduction to this volume, esp. 20-29.

66 Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, 27.

67 Plato, *Ion*, 534e.

68 Hildegaard of Bingen, *Letter to Bernard of Clairvaux*, 3.

be, it can be no more helpful in revealing divine truths than the poetry itself is susceptible to interpretation. The first of these concerns is answered partly by the second. Heidegger's wretched prophet is not the mouthpiece of the deity. There is no transcendent infinite speaking through him. Rather, his prophecy comes from an intimate nearness to the being of beings. This will involve a deep sensitivity to finitude and what Heidegger calls, being towards death. From The Autumn of One Alone:

A pure blue emerges from a rotting husk;

The birds on the wing resound of ancient lore. [69]

It is in the intimate mingling of the spiritual and the earthly that Heidegger sees Trakl moving beyond Platonism.[70] Heidegger notes that Trakl tends to prefer the word 'geistlich' to 'geistig,' and posits that this has to do with a rejection of "the gulf between the super-sensuous noeton and the sensuous aistheton."[71] For Heidegger's Trakl, the difference between the spiritual and the material is located on the same horizon as the question of the meaning of being, wherein difference originates in the unfolding of time through the nihiliation of the nothing and the painful separation at the heart to the being of language. Readers may or may not find such thoughts about the being of language compelling. What's clear, however, is that any alleged prophet of such a view would appear, to most of us, morbid and esoteric. Heidegger's Trakl is the clear-eyed madman whose hard-won insight is the result of painful lived experience. If we lack the ability to understand Trakl's poetry, this is—from the perspective of the believer—entirely to be expected. Compassion for the wretched prophet served to divide the true believers from those who think them mad.[72]

4.3 Democracy, Aristocracy, and Esotericism

Esotericism in poetry is nothing unique to Trakl. Another example might help illustrate what's dreadful in the prospect of esoteric wisdom. T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" has spawned endless commentary, even as the author made it logically impossible for any commentator to make a definitive statement on the poet's meaning. He achieved this by contradicting himself directly in his own commentary. The imagery and references of the poem are difficult enough on their own, and Eliot didn't exactly help readers with his footnotes indicating sources like Jessie Westin's From Ritual to Romance and Sir James Frazier's The Golden Bough. All this suggested a profound connection between Eliot's poem and Arthurian legend. But in a critical essay from 1956, the author cancels all of this out and expresses regret for even including the notes in the first place:

…my notes stimulated the wrong kind of interest among the seekers of sources. It was just, no doubt, that I should pay tribute to the work of Miss Jessie Weston; but I regret having sent so many enquirers off on a wild goose chase after Tarot cards and the Holy Grail.[73]

When I read this, I can't help but detect a certain enjoyment on the part of the author. He seems to me to get a certain kick out of breaking the critic's heart. All that work you did, pouring through volumes of Frazier, pondering ancient myth, the legend of King Arthur, 'twas all for naught!

We shouldn't weep for the critics, though, since they are the ones who get the last laugh. It is only with the author's denial that the game of interpretation becomes truly interesting. By saying both 'yes' and 'no,' Eliot has removed his authority from the language game and opened up genuinely limitless possibilities for interpretation. The poem both is and is not about the Grail. It becomes a kind of non-place that we can approach and move about, approaching and withdrawing according to some rules and suggestions about what it is. It becomes "A Game of Chess" but on an infinite checker board with the opponent's king constantly drawing back pretending to carry the Holy Grail.

It's good to be a little suspicious, and maybe even impatient, with this approach to interpretation. It's a fun game wherein one might learn alot, but when it extends out beyond the the world of literature it poses risks. An early critic of Eliot's The Waste Land faults the poet for his esotericism in what I think is an especially insightful way. Gorham Munson argues that Eliot's esotericism "derives neither from the abstruseness of subject nor the abstruseness of technic." And despite certain "formal achievements," he tells us, the poem is guilty of "deliberate mystification."[74]

…it is amazing how simple is the state of mind which these broken forms convey. The poet is hurt, wistful, melancholy, frail: modern civilization is a waste land, a sterile desert in which he wanders forlornly… Mr. Eliot is very fatigued. There can be no question that he suffers, at moments his cry is as sharp as that of a man mangled by the speeding wheels of a subway express… We respect that cry. But about the nature of this state of mind there is nothing occult. It is in fact a very

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69 Trakl, *Sebastian Dreaming*, 40.

70 Derrida is especially sensitive to this in his discussion of fire in Chapter nine of *Of Spirit* (1989).

71 Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, 178-89. Hertz translates 'geistig' as 'of the spirit' and 'geistliche' as 'spiritual.'

72 Interestingly, this accords to some extent with a theory of the origin of language that couldn't be more different from Heidegger's. A strain of research in evolutionary biology suggests that language evolved as a kind of cultural signaling system, marking out those who are good cooperators and committed members of a community from those who are not. Richard Joyce gives a nice summary of this research in attempt to anchor moral realists to the same unholy genealogy and provide support for his version of the error theory (Joyce, 2006, 88-92).

73 Eliot, *The Frontiers of Criticism*, 534.

74 Munson, *The Esotericism of T.S. Eliot*, 207.

familiar mood.[75]

To some, this will sound like a the griping of an aging reader who just doesn't get it, but Munson is a careful reader. His criticism is deeper than simply accusing Eliot of obscurity for obscurity's sake. That would be an easy charge to make against a difficult poem that one doesn't enjoy, but when the mood conveyed by the poem is one of dispossession or dissatisfaction with the state of the world, an alternative explanation presents itself. Why wouldn't Eliot want to be understood? Because all current efforts to understand the poem are anchored in the very same world the poet means to reject.

Munson sees in Eliot a longing for a different kind of aristocracy. He's right to see this. To the extent that "The Waste Land" expresses a longing for the noble monarchical world of Arthurian legend, it is also expressing a deep dissatisfaction with democracy. If Eliot's poem were understood by everyone, then his complaint against the modern world would be self-refuting. By leaving the masses puzzled and speaking exclusively to the elect, Eliot's poem is able to prove itself and justify its complaint that the everyday world is out of joint. In the absence of the ideal of aristocracy—that Munson describes as "the union of the ideas of intelligence and control"—true poetry must speak the secret language of the disempowered few, the few who by rights ought to rule. Sympathetic readers intuitively get this and lash out at those who reject the poem because their own ability is proof of their status among the elect.

This may just be all the better for aesthetics. The rigid recalcitrance of the true believer only makes the chess game of interpretation more exciting. But the same dynamic looms over ideology. Munson's criticism shows that the closer we bring this sort thinking to a discussion of large-scale social organization, the more frightful the implications become.

Lacoue-Labarthe quotes Joseph Goebbels, "politics, too, is perhaps an art, if not the highest and most all-embracing there is."[76] What makes the madman [*Wahnsinnige*] special is decidedly aesthetic. His senses [*Sinne*] are otherwise. This give his understanding of the world a different sense or meaning [*Sinn*]. As theoretical language inevitably struggles to keep up with our rapidly changing world, we must tread carefully when looking to the poets in hopes that they might herald the dawning of a new world.

4.4 "Grodek"

Trakl was not a wretched prophet. His poems did not herald a new world but lamented the loss of a dying one. His poetry manifests a deeper kind of powerlessness. Here it's helpful to contrast his poetry with the great English war poet, Wilfred Owen. Owen's writing is muscular and, in its own way, ideological:

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,

Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, wee cursed through the sludge

He speaks of the horrors of war with sneering anger. A contempt directed at the shallow patriotism,

Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—

My friend, you would not tell with such high zest

To children ardent for some desperate glory,

The old lie: *Dulce et decorum est*

Pro patria mori.[77]

Like Trakl, Owen died in World War I. He didn't know when he wrote this how the war would turn out. But I don't think this should stop us from inferring something from the difference in tone. Trakl's "Grodek" is also brutal, but it lack's Owen's confident defiance:

…the night envelops

Dying warriors, the wild lament

Of their shattered jaws.

There's no anger in the poet's voice, only an "angry God" who dwells in the "red clouds." The poet does not stand up against anyone in defiance because there's no one to stand up against. Neither Owen nor Trakl see meaning in the war, so defiance wouldn't be directed against the enemy. Owen's anger is righteous. It is directed at the proverbial men in suits who send boys off to die for worthless cause. He is standing up against an injustice that he sees a perpetrated, at least in part, by own country. But this opportunity for righteous self-assertion isn't available to Trakl who can only bear witness to the dissolution of the of Austria-Hungarian empire. The signs were already there, and Trakl's only recourse is loving lamentation:

And the black pipes of autumn play softly in the reeds.

O prouder sorrow! You brass altars

Today a colossal pain feeds the hot flame of the spirit,

The unborn descendants.[78]

This is the poetry of despair. There is no powerful authority for Trakl to rebel against, only disorder and decay at the foundations of his lifeworld. He himself is among the impotent and humiliated.

If this desperation and impotence are combined with the elements of the wretched prophet discussed above, an interesting dynamic starts to emerge. The powerless subject is drawn to the prophet as a symbol of an alternate reality. They see the prophet as a leader who promises a world in which those who are fit to rule get to rule. If the prophet horrifies those more content with the current order, this only confirms the follower's suspicion that the current order is corrupt. The more shock and confusion the prophet can elicit, the more the prophet becomes a sign of profound change to come. And for the desperate and powerless, profound change may

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75 Munson, *The Esotericism of T.S. Eliot*, 205-6.

76 Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Heidegger, Art and Politics*, 61.

77 Owen, *Poems*, 15. "The old lie: it is sweet and fitting to die for one's country."

78 Trakl, *A Skeleton Plays Violin*, 247.

promise hope. Profound change is better than the certainty of steady decline. The more the prophet is hated by (supposedly) upright professional types, the more the prophet's followers believe that the promise of change is real. Let the consultant class tremble in fear of the vulgar populist. If they laugh at him, even better. The more the comfortable and morally upright show contempt for the wretched prophet, the more they demonstrate the prophet's ability to upend the broken system.

5. Conclusion

As it pertains to Heidegger's location within the broader literature on Trakl, his is a non-formalist view that differs from the Christian interpretation in the same way that Heidegger's philosophy differs from the traditional metaphysics. As it pertains to his thoughtful inquiry into the meaning of language, however, his omission of biography is justified by deeper, longstanding, commitments. Viewed this way, the decision to ignore the rumors and controversy over Trakl's biography makes perfect sense. This may explain why he chose to rename the 1953 essay "Language in the Poem" and situate it next too the "Language" essay when he published *On the Way to Language* (1959). Concerning his construal of Trakl in terms of the archetype of the madman, I defended a connection to what I call the wretched prophet. The wretched prophet only seems unattractive to those who have not traced the path of the prophet's madness. To those who have, their ugliness is proof of their righteousness. That "everyone else" is repulsed by the wretched prophet only confirms that this prophet is *ours*. While a bit beyond the scope of this paper, it's worth noting that the empirical literature on belief in conspiracy theories seems to confirm some of the points made above about recalcitrance and powerlessness.[79] And if theoretical concepts are struggling to keep up with an ever changing reality, this would help explain the much-lamented futility of appeals to logic, facts, and data in persuading those committed to such modes of deep-questioning. After all, it must be admitted that the conspiracist is getting some things right.[80] The everyday view of the world is inadequate. One rejects this on pain of committing oneself to the untenable thesis that everything is just fine. Things are not just fine. But, as always, we must tread carefully in looking to those who promise to herald the dawning of a new world.

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79 Van Prooijen (2019) surveys the literature on this, suggesting that those who feel empowered are less likely to believe in conspiracy theories, and he suggests that opportunities for empowerment may reduce their appeal. This also accords with an interesting case study, investigated by Kevin Roose of the New York Times. In a long-form podcast series called *Rabbit Hole*, he traces the YouTube history of a young man named, Caleb Cain who claims to have been radicalized by videos on the platform. Especially interesting is the seventh episode of the podcast, featuring audio from conversations among conspiracists that suggest that a big part of the appeal is the camaraderie they feel with other believers who seem to get them better than their friends and family. To be drawn to a worldview seems connected to belonging to a Geschlecht with whom you can laugh about the outsiders who see you as mad.

80 Stanley (2015, 2018) maintains that the subjects of propaganda in liberal democracies are susceptible thereto because they are in grip of false ideology. What this account seems to miss is that—as frightening as it may sound—the aestheticization of politics actually finds its footing at an epistemically respectable level. When the old theoretical concepts have broken down, the ideology they supported begs to be replaced. It can only be replaced by a new theoretical ideology if that new ideology can be theoretically justified. But this is ruled out by the same changes that discredited the old one. In times of rapid and radical transformation theoretical concepts are still struggling to catch up to the new reality. Under such conditions it becomes reasonable to steer clear of theory altogether. Thus theoretical concepts give way to poetical ones. Poetical concepts can't be theoretically justified either, but this is no defect, since poetical concepts simply don't admit of theoretical justification. Such concepts may be good (by their own lights) so long as they ring true. This opens the way for all kinds for frightful consequences, but from a strictly epistemic perspective, it seems at least as legitimate as a new theoretical ideology that fails on its own terms. This is why the best modern propaganda campaigns devote most of their energy to discrediting mainstream viewpoints, rather than bolstering the case for their own side. For examples of this, see Pomerantsev (2014, 2019).

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Seeing Brancusi's First Cry, A First Time, Again

Ellen Miller

ABSTRACT

Constantin Brancusi's sculpture The First Cry (c. 1914; cast 1917)[1] asks questions that overlap with the concerns of contemporary existential phenomenology, namely, temporality, the relation between art and truth, the nature of embodiment, and the lived experience of perception. In this paper, I put Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty's writings into dialogue with one of Brancusi's many ovoid sculptures. Even though Heidegger is not commonly included by those involved in body studies, his writings—especially the later writings—sketch out a philosophy that is at least open to the materiality and physicality of artworks and beholders. We will move through several entrances into this moving work: the work's shining, listening, mirroring, and temporal dimensions. The phenomenological method employed follows Heidegger's fundamental claim that art opens up entrances to the truth of the world around it.

Brancusi's work allows us to experience Merleau-Ponty's concept of the chiasm, Heidegger's idea of the fourfold, and reveals the ways in which philosophy needs art.

When we stay with First Cry in our philosophizing and in the gallery, we experience the motion and movement within Brancusi's work; the experience is at once essential and sensuous.

1 http://stg.ago.ca/collection/object/81/142, c.1914; cast 1917.

Seeing Brancusi's First Cry, A First Time[1], Again

1 See last page of the essay for photo reference.

In this paper, I engage in an embodied phenomenology of a singular artwork: Constantin Brancusi's (1876-1957) *First Cry*. Heidegger's (1889-1976) ontological questioning of individual artworks yields a philosophical experience of art that respects the hermeneutic circle's workings. The back and forth movement from individual artwork to more general phenomenological truths is accomplished by attending to particulars first while keeping a general set of philosophical questions in mind. Here, the general philosophical questions concern Heidegger's key concept of the fourfold and Merleau-Ponty's (1908-1961) insights about how we see artworks as embodied beings. A single artwork discloses concrete ideas and concepts through the lines, breaths, silences, absences, and rhythms of the work. *First Cry* brings us towards the rhythms of essential times: birth and death. The artwork allows us to experience the flow and sinuosity of lived time. Even though Heidegger is not commonly included by those involved in body studies, his writings—especially the later writings—sketch out a philosophy that is at least open to the materiality and physicality of artworks and beholders.[1]

Gallery Prologue

At times when I stood before this elongated oval bronze sculpture and experienced the life that reached out through a glass encasement erected by human hands, my own hands long to hold this figure, this shape, this bronzeness that rests before me. I am then drawn into the gallery's surroundings. I sense that I have entered somewhere-else than the somewhere of my usual being-in-the-world. I have come here to see something, some works, some art-works at work. How do I see here? Artificial lights gaze at the work, illuminating their own electric force that radiates into the bronze surface below. The work catches these light beams, absorbs them into its bronze flesh, and reflects these lights into the gallery's space. I look and try to see the work. My trying, this struggling teaches me to see my own looking as looking. I see these artificial sources of light as sources, but not as the origin of light. The work soaks in these shining lights; swirls of light appear on the surface of the bronze work. These swirls were not put there by Brancusi, yet they now become part of the work that displays itself at the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO).

Bright swirls in the work invite participants to move closer and stay with the work. Staying with the work invites observers to move an arm to shield the work from the museum lights. Beneath these artificial lightings, artificial shinings, there is a multiply-layered light that dances like sunlight dances across an ocean's foam, a sun-filled radiance that fills the work with fluidity and movement. The work shines forth and radiates, not with a particular color or even a multiplicity of colors.

We know the work is made of polished bronze, yet it is not only bronze that shines forth. In this work, shining itself shines forth and allows us to experience it as shining. This experience of shining moves us away from asking what is in the museum's space and what is in the work's world as if these are separable. Overhead lights create immense swirls of light that then pass over into this shining we are beginning to understand. Merleau-Ponty says, "There is no choice to be made between the world and art or between "our sense" and absolute painting, for they pass into one another."[2]

Merleau-Ponty: Seeing and Shining

We are given the piece as offered now in this museum space—a gentle gathering of Brancusi's outpouring along with the piece as it has been preserved by the Art Gallery of Ontario and beholders. These are separable-yet-never-entirely separate. Somehow they radiate towards each other as lightening approaches a star-filled night. Merleau-Ponty's fundamental concept of the chiasm helps sketch out this relationship more fully: every relation is simultaneous holding and being held. The hold is held; it is inscribed and inspired in the same being that it holds.[3] Mallin unpacks the term chiasm even further, telling us that the members of a chiasm are related "sinuously or flexuously by means of bending themselves to each other."[4] External lights and the work join each other internally.

1 http://stg.ago.ca/collection/object/81/142, c.1914; cast 1917.

2 Maurice Merleau-Ponty. "Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence," 48. Signs (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 39-83.

3 See Samuel Mallin. *Art Line Thought* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1996), 243.

4 Ibid.

They move towards and away from the other. Our usual way of understanding relations—logically or causally—melts away into the richer phenomenological understanding of how things, people, concepts, and events relate when we are able to look beneath everyday surfaces and everyday ways of calculating.

First Cry discloses its shining as shining. Shining here brings something forth in its essence and yet the work's particularity is not transcended. The work comes forth as a work through its active shining, which is never a mere surface glistening. Active shining propels the viewer around the glass encasement so we can see the shining at work on the artwork. The viewer can then go to work on the work, enter its shining world, and circle the space of the artwork. This circling movement brings us towards the work's roundedness. Shining now stands forth in its essence as shining itself. This continuous shining shows that the work has set itself to work, internally lighting itself and its essence. The essentiality revealed is not static. Heidegger confirms this relationship between a work's activity, its essence, and shining: When the work sets itself to work the Being of the being comes into the steadiness of its shining.[5] Shiny objects disperse shininess throughout the space they inhabit like a mirror—highly polished metal—and disclose one's image. Here though the view is also held by the work. Our looking is also held beneath the work's surface. The work holds us as we hold the work. This reciprocal seeing and being seen, being observer and observed, opens me even more to the experience of seeing. I have entered this work where things shine not only by lighting up a bright path in front of me, but also by gathering back this brightness into itself. Gathering does not happen during one moment; instead, the work and the spectator relate chiasmically to one another continuously. This intermediary space between my looking and the work does not shine forth itself.

Merleau-Ponty's writings affirm this description of how we see: "I can therefore see an object in so far as objects form a system or a world, and in so far as each one treats the others round it as spectators of its hidden aspects and as guarantee of the permanence of those aspects."[6] My distance from the work reveals itself through this union of shining with holding. I see the hiddenness in the work as hiddenness only by dwelling, looking, and seeing the work with my entire being. That is, when I stop viewing the work as a commodity or object, I can experience the work as at once separate and part of my viewing. This intermediary space is more primordial than my looking or even the artwork. Meaning arises when we attend to our living relationship with the work. My lived body releases itself as I see myself seeing. I must leave enough distance for empty spaces to come forth. *First Cry's* ways of inhabiting space and its lines have drawn me to these reflections on distance, space, nearness, and hiddenness. Staying away from the work while still drawing near opens the beholder to meanings that arise between subjects and objects, before human subjects and human history.

The Listening

Another way into the work is through this hiddenness I have been describing. The work's title *First Cry* invites the beholder to listen for this cry. We can move into this concept of the cry through the work's mouth. This open mouth curves irregularly at the bottom to reveal a mouth that lacks what we normally expect to find within a mouth: emptiness, hollowness, cavernousness. Here we discover a mouth this is filled with bronze, filled up with the work's materiality. *First Cry* oozes bronzeness. If I look closely, I see an inner circle within the mouth and dark markings which are not shiny but rather deep and withholding. No sound penetrates this bronze space. This cry must be lodged within the work, ringing in a key the beholder cannot hear.

This restful piece carries me toward the movement the work shelters. As I listen alongside the work, I release myself from the assumption that speaking must be textually based. The work teaches that speaking is not only about words spoken. Speaking is more like singing. When I hear singing, I do not listen to the words alone. I listen so that I can experience the singer's body come forth. Immediately, I feel my mouth and face release and open up. The artwork invites this opening gesture. This visual artwork speaks from within its silent lines and rhythms. I understand the work's cry without hearing an audible cry. Importantly, *First Cry* does not give us a representation of someone crying, nor can we reduce the artwork to a general representation of crying. Not only is the piece not merely a representation, the work's meaning does not subsume the work. Instead, the work calls forth a certain way of inhabiting the world where intermediary spaces can be heard. Meaning lives in the work through its presencing and absencing. Here, we do not even need to name this open space as a mouth. Instead, we can name this space an open region filled with bronze shining forth and receding into itself. The work shows this shining and receding through its deep, dark markings inscribed into its bronzeness that shows forth as hidden.

The Eye

This open mouth beckons me to follow the sinuous line which moves from the top of the moth and empties into another opening on the left part of the head. This opening wraps itself around the head, emptying out into itself in a never-ending movement of opening. This should be a joyous discovery for I have found an opening—a space which will allow the piece to see its surroundings. This eye empties itself into emptiness so even though I can see this eye, there is still something that stays away. This showing from within emptiness moves me towards the right side of the head. I long for a symmetrical form here, a duplicate opening on the right side to mirror the left. Sameness would provide security and reliability; it would provide a way of seeing the left eye. I cannot look at this one opening without yearning for another. What is given instead? Here, there

5 Martin Heidegger. "Origin of the Work of Art (OWA)." Trans., Albert Hofstadter. *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Perennial Library, 1975), 36.

6 Maurice Merleau-Ponty. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Trans., Colin Smith (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962), 68.

is the materiality of polished bronze. The absence of eye makes bronzeness stand out as bronzeness. This invisibility within the work holds me for this is where I look to see my own looking. To see then is not only to look out with physical eyes. It is not merely sensory data hitting rods and cones. If this were the case, I would simply perceive nothing as the negation of a named something. Instead, this smooth bronze teaches me that seeing always includes the unseen. This absent eye allows other eyes in the gallery room to stand out as eyes. Other artworks now see me seeing them and meet my gaze. In turn, these other artworks' eyes show up the absent part of *First Cry*. Something calls the beholder to hold this roundedness and protect it.

The Earth

First Cry haunts its surrounding like a flower bulb haunts its place between earth and world. Absence here does not merely hang over the work, emptying it of meaning. Instead, it empties out into something else--a shadow beneath--that teaches how solitary heads can bring forth the fullness of our embodiment. Where there is shadow, there is body. *First Cry*, a piece that lacks what we normally expect from a body reveals itself as bodily in the shadows beneath its lines. These shadows bring us into the between-ness of earth and sky. Shadows need light in order for humans to see them, but they appear grounded on earth. When we look at the shadowy realm beneath this work, we notice that the piece reclines in order to display its shadowiness.

Ridges underneath the left part of the head jut forth. These ridges stand out from the rest of the head. These raised ridges call forth a tree's movements: veins pump bronze-blood mixed with darker flecks of blood that pulse throughout the bark. These thick interconnected

veins hold the piece and cradle it. *First Cry* is held by both shadow and earth. My initial urge to shelter the piece subsides some with this discovery of the world's self-holding. We will now describe this non-human self-holding.

This sheltering of bronze from the earth unveils a willingness to care for and maintain the world. Hidden earthiness maintains the work as work. This holding does not store the shining bronze within itself like a flash drive stores data in order to use it up later. This care-ful holding is like the cook who nurtures her ingredients and sets them in order. Heidegger tells us that the "work of the peasant (*Bauer*) does not challenge the soil of the field. In the sowing of the grain it places the seed in the keeping of the forces of growth and watches over its increase."[7] Caring cultivation preserves the soil in a similar way as *First Cry's* ridges care for its bronzes. Earth and soil recall the sky that allows the soil to remain soil.

First Cry's earthy holding is the lining that sustains the work. It is, to use Merleau-Ponty's term, the flesh of the piece.[8] This flesh cannot be detached from the lightening-bronze that breaks forth from these fleshy limbs. Hidden holding reveals the bronze flesh that pulsates through the work. The work's movement includes earthy hiding and moving flesh that pushes forward into the open, into the world. Brancusi's use of highly polished bronze in this piece and his many other bronze pieces, creates additional space, both inner space and what Arnold Berleant calls the "surrounding space" beyond the piece.[9] Our embodied phenomenology reveals that Brancusi did not overcome and transcend motion; he did not turn sculpture into "a kind of Platonic surmounting of motion, a turning of sculpture into static, cerebral art."[10] When we stay with this piece, we experience the motion and movement

within Brancusi's work; the experience is both essential and sensuous.

This cycling back motion allows the work to rest and recline into its earthy holding. The work retreats, bursts forth, stays away, hides, pulsates, rises, and falls. The work works by gathering these movements together from within itself. Here we can experience the meanings and truths Heidegger saw in the Greek temple: birth and death, disaster and blessing, victory and disgrace, endurance and decline.[11] The Greek temple revealed the meaning and values of its world. *First Cry* also sets up a world because it teaches about distance, closeness, fluidity, speaking, and silencing. *First Cry* rests within itself and melts away dichotomies that could be drawn between rest and motion. Here, repose includes motion. Earth and world chiasmically bend and bind to one another since "world and earth are essentially different from one another and yet are never separated."[12] The work's world opens up an openness where the work can recline, move, draw near, and then retreat.

World and Earth

The worlding of world—world being itself and earth's holding—draws me both into myself and away from myself. Even though I perceive the piece holding itself, I still long to hold its shape and feel its shining in my hands. I am drawn into my own body and its earthiness. At the same time, the everyday living that allows me to go forth into the world pushes forth. This is the world revealing itself alongside the earth. The world grounds itself on the earth, and earth juts forth through world. This return to my body leads me to my situatedness as an embodied being. The world of this museum comes forth and shows forth the work's world that is also grounded in earth. The work's particular bronze materiality shows up the limits to

7 Martin Heidegger. "The Question Concerning Technology," *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*. Trans., William Lovitt (New York: Harper Perennial, 1977), 15.

8 Mallin (1996), 251.

9 Arnold Berleant. *Re-thinking Aesthetics, Rogue Essays on Aesthetics and the Arts* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2004), 145.

10 Morris Grossman. *Art and Morality: Essays in the Spirit of George Santayana*. Edited by Martin A. Coleman (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), Chapter 16.

11 OWA, 42.

12 OWA, 49.

which Brancusi responded.

World and earth's essential struggling with and against each other open the materiality to a primary sensing. *First Cry* produces its own light beneath the museum's simulated lights. Bronze radiates on its own and suggests an eternal shining. *First Cry's* fluidity, roundness, bronze fullness, and emptiness opens opposition into something more than a rift between two mutually exclusive terms. Chasm blends into chiasm. Although the work suggests infinity through its ovid shape, it is an infinity that includes irregularities. The nose that looks straight is filled with ridges. The bottom of the mouth curves sinuously. Left and fight blend into one another without symmetry. The work resembles a child, and then sometimes the work resembles someone close to death. However, the piece does not merely represent life and death; it is not a representation of life and death. We do not need to know whether the piece represents a child or older person. Extracting exact meaning from the work will not bring us closer to the work's meaning. Meaning resides within the work's hiddenness.

Earth and world struggle with each other, yet there is still unity in the work. The work's unity is still filled with irregular lines, non-symmetrical openings, curvaceous earthy holdings jutting forth, and a shape that is neither completely round nor completely oval. Brancusi responded to this unity of earth and world we now encounter. The artist made room for earth and world to come into their own. By allowing art and world to come into their own and presence, the work's workings take us to its origin. In this beginning, we find a silent realm that gathers together the elements Heidegger calls the fourfold.

The Fourfold and Mirroring

The care-ful gathering of these four elements unites in *First Cry*. The work's long ovoid shape and bronze reflexivity help us better understand Heidegger's discussion of the fourfold. Heidegger

shared that each one of the four mirrors in its own way the presence of the other. Earth reveals itself as earth in its own way only in the presence of the other three. This mirroring does not just display similitude which exists between four concepts. This mirroring does not portray a likeness.[13] Mirroring is also chiasmic for worlding bronze holds my human image while showing itself to me. Earth juts forth from within the world, becoming part of the work's world while still remaining partially concealed. This unity brings forth a sacred element that we experience in the artwork's unifying and eternal dimensions.

The fouring of the four brings us to the work's createdness. It is only when the work's createdness is allowed to stand out from the work itself that the work can continue to exist. Heidegger's crucial question," Why is there something rather than nothing?" can be addressed by looking to this work's createdness. This invites us to think about the active communion among creator, work, beholders. Heidegger calls this the communion of "the artist and the process and the circumstances of the genesis of the work.[14] Beholders let the work's createdness come into view. This may not happen if beholders fail to give the work enough time and attention. However, the work holds open this possibility and invites beholders into its space.

The Beautiful Present

When beholders experience the work's createdness, we are brought to a beginning, a beginning of truth, an advent of truth. For Heidegger, the beautiful belongs to the advent of truth.[15] I am brought to the beginning of the world when this cry was first emitted, when it could be heard as a cry. The shape, form, materiality, shining, the setting up of a world, earth's worlding, bring me back to the past. The past lingers within this present setting, not only my present with this work, but present and past understood more generally. Brancusi's later ovid

sculptures "Beginning of the World" and "Sculpture for the Blind" resonate with *First Cry's* worlding and earthing. These later pieces' titles are often interchanged which shows up the interconnectedness of the pieces. The two later pieces resemble eggs or cells even more prominently than *First Cry*. This reinforces the theme of birth present in all three works. The artist's future works reveal themselves now in our experience—this present gift—of *First Cry*. This work shows that past, present, and future are related. We witness their intertwining in this artwork. These three related temporal dimensions bend towards each other, recline with each other, constantly move within each other and bend away from one another. Even though Brancusi worked on "the same" piece over and over, the works never become repetitious or monotonous. He continuously searched for beginnings— the spaces before space—silences.[16]

13 OWA, 179.

14 OWA, 65.

15 OWA, 81.

16 16 I thank the *Janus Head* editors for their helpful suggestions, and thanks to members of the Heidegger Circle and Samuel Mallin for constructive feedback on earlier versions of this work.

Constantin Brancusi
The First Cry, c. 1914; cast 1917
brass
Overall: 19.5 × 24.5 × 16 cm, 25 lb. (7 11/16 × 9 5/8 × 6 5/16
in., 11.3 kg)
Art Gallery of Ontario
Purchased with assistance from the Volunteer Committee
Fund, 1981
81/142
Romanian, 1876 - 1957
Photo © Art Gallery of Ontario

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The Poetics of Rumour and the Age of Post-Truth

Tom Grimwood

ABSTRACT

This paper explores how the poetic speaks to philosophical treatments of post-truth. In doing so, it reconsiders the relationship between poetry and philosophy, and the aspects of the poetic that are pertinent to the performance of rumour. It examines classic performances of rumour in both philosophy and poetry, through the lens of Nietzsche's account of poetry as a rhythm that creates an economy of memory. In doing so, it suggests that the poetic can alert us to the ways in which different dimensions of rhythm and memory are at work in the 'post-truth age.'

The Poetics of Rumour and the Age of Post-Truth

I

In this paper I will explore how the poetic speaks to philosophical treatments of post-truth. In doing so, I reconsider the relationship between poetry and philosophy, and the aspects of the poetic that are pertinent to the performance of rumour. Considering some classical examples of the rumour at work in both philosophy and poetry, I draw on Nietzsche for some suggestions as to what a poetics of post-truth might look like. These suggestions involve identifying a set of relationships with a far longer genealogy than the contemporary challenges of post-truth: between rumour and philosophy, philosophy and poetry, and poetry and rumour.

Much ink has been spilled, and many mouths have frothed, about the so-called age of 'post-truth'. The debate, broadly speaking, has created a perfect storm that collects up in its gales the legacies of postmodern and post-structural theories in the humanities and social sciences, the ethics of public debate within digital media, a reinvigorated call to a scientism that is both common-sensical and shrouded in the aura of experts, and intrigues of realpolitik of electoral successes for populist figures, with inevitable rafts of conspiracy theories accompanying them. For the meta-narratives that drive this debate, the problems of 'post-truth' centre almost exclusively on epistemology. Marcuse is reversed: epistemology is no longer a form of ethics in applied terms, but ethical judgement a consequence of having the right information before us. The political success of populism is diagnosed as a problem of 'if voters only knew better'; or worse of cognitive dissonance between what can be seen as true and what is felt should be.[1] Truth is, in this sense, conceived of as an informant; the basis of proper knowledge, and something to be defended from the seduction of lies, rumours and exaggerations. This is seen most prominently in the already-worn definition that the Oxford English Dictionary chose, and named it's 'word of the year' in 2016: 'relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief'.[2]

It is an unfortunate definition, though. It rides roughshod over the complexities of establishing 'objective fact' and what relations, institutions and power dynamics this involves; it ignores the work of feminist theory in addressing the early modern division of reason and emotion, and the separation of the political from the personal. In short, it insists that 'post-truth' is in fact (what could be more institutionally factual than a dictionary definition?) an 'anti-truth' that is opposed to knowledge, rather than a mutation of how truth is understood and used, much in the way that post-modernism was to modernism. In doing so, though, equally defining of the post-truth phenomenon can be left unsaid. While critics of post-truth typically advocate a separation of scientific truth from political rhetoric, Helmut Heit notes that the very definition of post-truth runs the two practices together. 'Unlike other composites with "post-" such as "post-modern" or "post-colonial," post-truth is obviously meant in an unmasking and compromising way. The term itself is inevitably embedded in political discourse, incriminating others for their increasing disrespect for facts and truth.'[3] As Heit points out, in certain contexts such as the campaigns of Donald Trump or Vote Leave in the Brexit referendum, where fact was seemingly played with for political gain, this merging of politics and science seems a justified manoeuvre. At the same time, significant questions of method are left ambiguous. The identification of, and defence from, post-truth implies an unmasking, a tearing away of appearance to reveal the solid and objective reality beneath it; while also lining up targets such as conspiracy theorists who effectively attempt something very similar.[4] Frieder Vogelmann brings attention to the contradictory problem of the potentially arbitrary acceptance of certain critical performances at the expense of others:

> those diagnosing a "post-truth era" often replace the hard work of justifying their truth-claims with

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1 See Tom Grimwood, *The Problem with Stupid: Intellectuals, Ignorance, Post-Truth and Resistance* (Winchester: Zer0 Books, 2022).

2 https://languages.oup.com/word-of-the-year/2016/

3 Helmut Heit, '"there are no facts.. .": Nietzsche as Predecessor of Post-Truth?' *Studia Philosophica Estonica,* 2018, 45

4 The relationship between critique and conspiracy is discussed in the much-cited article by Bruno Latour, 'Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern.' *Critical Inquiry* 30 (2004), 225-248.

appeals that we must learn to trust again […] our political elites, our fellow citizens and, most of all, our scientists. Yet which experts, which scientists, which politicians and who of our fellow citizens should we trust? Without explaining how we can discriminate between blind faith and trust, calls for a renewal of the virtue of trust turn into calls for being less critical – certainly a bad strategy if we really lived in a "post-truth era" with its reign of "fake news" and phony experts.[5]

What this means is the almost-exclusive focus on epistemology as the battleground of post-truth leads us into some uncomfortable tensions. No amount of rhetoric about returning to the scientific method, making truth matter again, or the regaining of integrity to political debate will resolve these because they seem to leave us with only three conclusions about why we find ourselves in such an era: a) adherence to these principles were in place when post-truth emerged, thus provided no defence against it (whatever we classify 'it' as); b) these principles were adhered to once, but a longer-term impact of socio-cultural turns wore them down (leading to the questionable assertion that intellectual theories such as Derridean deconstruction or Butler's performativity were adopted, not just by impressionable undergraduates, but also by the ruling neoliberal elite); c) these principles never really existed in reality (and so there would not be a *resurgence* of the scientific method, but simply an *implementation* of it; to paraphrase Cynthia Wampole, 'this time without irony'). It is clear that none of these are cases of simple historical reconstruction. They are, instead, accounts of how trust should be ordered and managed. What carries such arguments is the curation of cultural memory, and the negotiation of a specific mutation of knowledge: the rumour. This is why I would argue that a more

salient definition of 'post-truth' is that it is a general term used to cover a wide range of shifts and changes in the way epistemological standards are applied: it is the use of a non-contingent term to cover a number of contingent (and in some cases, contradictory) practices. In this sense, of course, the term 'post-truth' is a performance of post-truth in itself.

I agree with Vogelin that the 'era' of post-truth is effectively a fable, given its lack of any clear starting point, and its tendency to invoke rather worn 'enemies' at the core of its apparent structure: postmodernists, feminists, the irrational and the easily led. Nevertheless, it remains powerful *as* a fable, or, as I have termed it, an exercising in curating cultural memory in order to establish accounts that are not quite as complete as narratives or propositional arguments, but nevertheless retain a bank of stock figures and metaphors that are by now easily recognised.[6]

This is where, I think, it is important to attend not only to the role of medial technologies and the rise of the 'information age' in the development of the post-truth fable, but to the longer-standing problem of the rumour that these rest upon. Rumour carries a relationship not only to truth (a rumour involves a postponing of truth, whereby truth is performed without full conviction), but also to medium (rumour is carried through hearsay, gossip, the crowd, and whatever technological medium enables this, rather than strictly identifiable dialogue). Perhaps this was best summarised millennia ago by Tacitus, when he suggested that 'a rumour cannot spread unless people recount it; and they often give it some credit because otherwise they would not repeat it.'[7] In other words, the performance of the rumour carries its own trust via its contingent repetition. As such, it introduces a knowing blur between performance and authenticity, truth and lies, voice and echo. Making sense of this knowing blur at the core of its practice in-

vites certain forms of interpretation often more aligned with the aesthetic than the epistemological.

II

An aesthetic approach may lead us to some of the more ready-to-hand accounts of poetry and, or of, post-truth. This passage by K.R. Murray is a useful exemplar of such accounts:

Poetry has always been post-truth in the sense that it prioritizes emotional subjectivity over objectivity, usually sacrificing the literal plane for the sake of truths located elsewhere — deeper, higher. Indeed, the term "poetic truth" would be oxymoronic if we demanded verifiable truths in poetry. As it is, this term folds back on itself without disclosing its meaning, relying more on historical understandings of poetry than any inherent quality of the medium itself. Poetic truth seems at least in part to be that moment of indefinable recognition that happens within the reader, a resonance emotional or intellectual or both, and though we can describe this as "true" it is hard to say exactly why.[8]

That poetry has appealed to the 'emotional or intellectual or both' for its meaning is certainly not in question. But the problem with this account of poetry and post-truth is immediately clear: it remains committed to an incomplete definition of post-truth that, as we have already seen. over-emphasises its epistemological basis.

The idea that poetry can subsidise epistemology is not without merit. In some ways, after all, Murray's argument echoes William Franke's notion of 'poetic epistemology', whereby a 'sense of human significance' underlies all endeavours to knowledge and has done since the earliest natural philosophers

5 Frieder Vogelmann, 'The Problem of Post-Truth: Rethinking the Relationship between Truth and Politics.' *Behemoth: A Journal on Civilisation,* 11:2, 2018, 18-37. 21.

6 I think here of how we regularly read of 'drowning' in the 'overwhelming' amount of information age available, experiencing a 'bombardment' on the senses, a 'sea of noise' giving rise to stupidity. On the figures relied upon for describing the risks of the post-truth mediasphere, see Tom Grimwood, *The Shock of the Same: An Antiphilosophy of Clichés* (London: Rowman and Littlefield Intl., 2021), 165-171.

7 Cited in Israel Shatzman, 'Tacitean Rumours.' *Latomus*, 33:3, 1974, 549-578, 549.

8 K.R. Murray, 'Ears on the Floor: Poetry of Witness in a Post-Truth Era.' *Michigan Quarterly Review*, 55, 2016.

– Heraclitus, Thales, Anaximander and so on – presented their work at least partially in verse.[9] Poetry constitutes the original wonder that drives human beings to know, which goes beyond the methodologies of 'truth' in the scientific or philosophical sense. Perhaps, when such methodologies succumb to forms of cynical reason, one suggestion might be to pursue this notion of poetry as a form of 'truth that is difficult to say' as a route forward. Nevertheless, this seems to position the poetic as something of a placeholder for epistemology, either before or after it gets to grips with the problem of post-truth at hand; and in doing so, miss the significance of its emergence as a fable of contemporary culture.

A different approach would be to follow the largely German tradition in philosophy, where, rather than describe poetry as engaging with that which is difficult to represent in language, the relation between poetizing and thinking is thought of instead in terms of the poetic attunement to the (typically unsaid) difficulties of language itself. In the words of Bambach and George, 'against the propositional language of statements, poetic language invites us to heed the pauses, the interruptions, and the caesurae that calls us to attend to what is not said or can never be said in language.'[10] Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* provides an eminent example of poetic incision into the regime of philosophical representation. Disenchanted with doctrines, teachings and proclamations – the 'language of the marketplace'[11] – Zarathustra places himself instead amongst the 'silent stillness'; continuing a tradition, as Bambach and

George argue, that goes back to Eckhart, runs through Hölderlin, up to Heidegger and beyond. This attunement does not simply equate to a different kind of truth, one which might sit alongside that of propositional knowledge. Rather, it calls attention to the medium of language itself. 'To situate language in silence,' Bambach and George suggest, paraphrasing Heidegger, 'means to reflect on language's proper site.'[12]

In one sense, there remains a resonance with Murray's account of the 'truth' of poetry and the ways it might address a post-truth landscape. If there is one defining feature of such a landscape, after all, it is the *lack* of silence: fake news, conspiracy theories and triumphant reclamations of scientific method and political authenticity all emerge on a constant production and circulation of content in the mediasphere (what Jodi Dean once termed 'cognitive capitalism', where capital was premised not on meaning but on the endless circulation of content, regardless of what content it was).[13] However, while it may then be tempting to turn to poetry as a strategic way of restoring some semblance of clarity – drawing on both the stillness of Nietzsche's poet and the concision afforded to the modern poetic form – there are two reasons to be initially cautious of this.

First, there is a need to be careful that the model of poetry invoked in the post-truth debate does not simply repeat this call to return to (some kind of) truth, wrapped in the aura of nostalgia, much in the way that the critics of post-truth do for the 'scientific method' as a spectral return of Enlightenment ideals. As I

have argued elsewhere,[14] those seeking to defend society from post-truth will regularly invoke an 'again'. David Roberts, for example, decried the spread of 'tribal epistemology' amongst the supporters of populist politicians like Donald Trump.[15] In the face of such tribalism, Roberts is quick to warn that simply asserting facts will gain no traction. 'Accuracy doesn't matter unless there are institutions and norms with the authority to make it matter. The question for the press is how to *make truth matter again*.'[16] Lee McIntyre has also utilised the same phraseology in his work, arguing for a return to scientific method as an arbiter of epistemological value;[17] whereas in Matthew D'Ancona's critique of post-truth, which rejects the idea that there was ever a 'past of untarnished veracity', nevertheless insists on a revival of Enlightenment liberal values.[18] Indeed, discussions of post-truth as a threat are so often framed in terms of a call *to return* to something or somewhere else, and this is a key aspect of how the organisation of cultural memory and the preservation of particular relations and antagonisms are characteristic of the post-truth discussion. As such. whether appealing to poetic stillness or scientific method, there is always the same risk: the fetishizing of the poetic as an opening of the authentic, or the scientific method fetishized as producing 'pure' fact, overlooks what Bruno Latour once described as the attachment, precaution, entanglement, dependence and care necessary for either poetic or scientific insight to be produced.[19]

Second, it follows that in writing about the truth of the poetic, we cannot

9 William Franke, 'Involved Knowing: On the Poetic Epistemology of the Humanities.' *The European Legacy*, 16:4, 2011, 447-467, 452.

10 Bambach, Charles and George, Theodore, 'Introduction: Poetizing and Thinking.' In Bambach and George (eds.) *Philosophers and their Poets* (New York: SUNY Press, 2019), 5-6.

11 Ibid., 6.

12 Ibid., 7.

13 Jodi Dean, *Blog Theory: Feedback and Capture in the Circuits of Drive* (Cambridge: Polity, 2010).

14 Grimwood, *The Problem with Stupid*.

15 David Roberts, 'Donald Trump and the rise of tribal epistemology.' *Vox*. https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2017/3/22/14762030/donald-trump-tribal-epistemology 2017, May 19

16 Ibid., my emphasis.

17 Lee MacIntyre, *How to Talk to a Science Denier: Conversations with Flat Earthers, Climate Deniers, and Others Who Defy Reason* (New York: MIT Press, 2021).

18 Matthew D'Ancona, *Post-Truth: The New War on Truth and How to Fight Back* (London: Ebury Press.2017).

19 Latour, 'Critique.'

circumvent how rumours might affect the ways in which Bambach and George's 'proper sites' of language can be reflected. This would include not just the originary meanings that speech reveals, but also the organisation, collection, preservation and distribution of meaningful discourse. Of course, it was these such sites of the philosophical academy that Nietzsche utilised poetry to attack: specifically on their repression of the reliance on the same figures and metaphors they rejected as improper to 'truthful' writing.[20] But the issue here is not with truth, but with the work of rumour. By depending on habitual trust of some institutions, authorities, or organisations over others, and by postponing the appearance of any singular 'truth' (in either the philosophical or poetic sense we have indicated so far) by repeated circulation, rumours feed off the instability of relationships between site, institution and processes of signification. Such instabilities are brought to bear not only in Nietzsche and Heidegger's writing, but also in the current debate on post-truth, where the contingencies of such sites are swept aside by the apparent non-contingency of propositional language. This points to a relationship between poetry and philosophy that in many senses lies *underneath* the conjunctions just discussed.

III

It seems to me that a poetics of post-truth would not be overly concerned with the problem of truth that the previous accounts seem to prioritise. Indeed, while Nietzsche's presentation of the poet-philosopher in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is a commanding figure, it is in his earlier work that the role of poetry as a form of curator of memory is more prominent, and speaks, I think, far more to the problems that post-truth has raised. The emphasis here is not on stillness, and far less on truth, but on the *rhythm* and *tempo* that the poetic carries, which enables its untimely interventions into the seeming inevitability of the present age.

By insisting that philosophy depends upon language and metaphor, Nietzsche argues that philosophy cannot make any claims to absolute knowledge. Because of poetry's economising of language, it not only shares this partiality, but also provides a model for the philosopher to be inventive; particularly in order to 'soothe and heal provisionally, if only for a moment'[21] the meaninglessness of life. 'At a very basic level, then,' Roberson notes, for Nietzsche 'a philosophy is valuable when it resembles poetry and when it operates in a provisional manner.'[22] At the same time, Nietzsche is clear that this is not simply a case of hedonistic indulgence in beautiful expressions, or perhaps today the motivational meme. Indeed, he is critical of romantic ideas of poetic inventiveness and inspiration: a 'well-known illusion which all artists […] have somewhat too great an interest in preserving.'[23] Instead, the impact of the poetic lies in the continual production of 'things good, mediocre, and bad […] untiring not only in invention but also in rejecting, sifting, reforming, arranging.'[24]

The poet is thus situated as, first and foremost, a collector: hence why they 'must in some respects be creatures facing backwards, so that they can be used as bridges to quite distance times and ideas'.[25] Poetry's disruption of the present arises from its resonance with previous cultural understandings, those not so dominated by logics of cause and effect and propositional exactitude: the poet 'attributes his moods and states to causes that are in no way the true ones; to this extent he reminds us of an older mankind, and can help us to understand it.'[26] But the poet is not a historian, obviously. In the second of his *Untimely Mediations,* 'On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life,' Nietzsche diagnoses that our understanding of life has become characterised by an unhealthy awareness of memory; as such, the cultivation of history has become a defining principle of modern culture. But this cultivation, and the pride it instils, leads to an 'oversaturation of an age with history' which Nietzsche wants to argue leads to a 'dangerous mood of cynicism,' and is 'fatal to the living thing.'[27] The poet, however, has a different role in the preservation of cultural memory, one which is aimed rather at 'easing life'. This arises from the rhythm of their work: the 'rhythmic force that reorganises all the atoms of a sentence, bids one to select one's words and gives thoughts new colour and makes them darker, stranger, more distant.'[28] 'The poet,' Nietzsche remarks, 'presents his thoughts in splendour, on the wagon of rhythm – usually because they cannot go on foot.'[29] Hence, the great poet is one who is 'untimely': not simply about being ahead of one's time, or even old-fashioned, but rather in adopting a different tempo to that of 'habits and valuations' which 'change too rapidly'. 'For tempo is as significant a power in the development of peoples as in music: in our case, what is absolutely necessary is an andante of development, as the tempo of a passionate and slow

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20 See Sarah Kofman, *Nietzsche and Metaphor, Trans. Duncan Large* (London: The Athlone Press, 1993).

21 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human All Too Human*. Trans. Marion Faber, with Stephen Lehmann (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 148.

22 Michael Roberson, 'Nietzsche's Poet-Philosopher: Towards a Poetics of Response-ability, Possibility, and the Future.' *Mosaic*, 45:1, 2012, 187-202, 192.

23 Nietzsche, *Human All Too Human*, 156.

24 Ibid., 155.

25 bid., 148.

26 Ibid., 13. Hence Nietzsche's concern that within modernity the artist will be rendered only 'a wondrous relic, on whose strength and beauty the happiness of earlier times depended.' (137)

27 Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, Ed. Daniel Breazedale, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 83, 62.

28 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*. Ed. Bernard Williams, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 84.

29 Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, 189.

spirit'.[30]

Nietzsche thus points to a different form of memory from mere recollection: a rhythmic tempo of memory rather than an epistemological reappropriation. If Nietzsche's work places the focus of such rhythm on the 'free spirits' and great men he looks to for inspiration, for me there are far more banal – but no less important – aspects to this, which relate to the mechanisms by which such rhythms emerge through the 'sites' discussed earlier: the organisational and institutional flows of practice. This is explored, albeit briefly, in Derrida's essay *Che cos'è la poesia?*, when he writes of poetry requiring an '*economy of memory*': 'A poem must be brief, elliptical by vocation, whatever may be its objective or apparent expanse', in order to speak to '*the heart*', by which he refers initially to a 'story of "heart" poetically enveloped in the idiom "*apprendre par Coeur*,"', or to learn by heart.[31] Yet, the heart in Derrida's account is not simply an economy of learning (and, therefore, knowledge acquisition; learning as an institutional form), but also invokes the natural rhythmic beat of the heart's circulation (learning as living within, and sometimes in spite of, such institutions). As for Nietzsche, for Derrida poetry provides (or perhaps 'pumps') a particular life to the mechanistic trudge of the everyday. Rhythm does not simply imply the regular beats of iambic pentameter, but a more complex arrangement whereby, first, the necessary reduction of language into a poetic form – as opposed to Nietzsche's historian, who simply collects everything as it is – requires it to fall in with a particular rhythm of mood; and second, such rhythm allows the sense of the words to become amplified, whether by volume or by commitment to memory. The performance at work in the remembering of the poetic, historically linked to the repetition of dictation, necessarily includes rhythm and speed as well as figure and tone. It is this, as Nietzsche wrote, that philosophy has forgotten as its own basis, leaving truth as a worn and defaced coin obscuring the 'mobile army of metaphors' that upholds it.[32]

The manner of this performance is, as Derrida reminds us, unattached to the question of knowledge.[33] In this sense Nietzsche's infamous army of truth is best read not as a truth-claim in itself (as his equally infamous note that there are no facts, only interpretations might be), but rather as an expression of the logistical operation involved in supplementing the figures of meaning with the propositional concept of truth. After all, a 'mobile army' needs supply lines; it has territorial limits; it has itineraries and registers and stock checks; it marches on stomachs and hearts and minds. The key is not just that truth is originally a form of metaphor, and by extension philosophy is premised on forms of poetic expression, so much as truth is an effect of organisational habits typically unnoticed, or at least seen as unexceptional relative to the achievements of truth itself: the rhythm and tempo that dictate our everyday interaction with the truths presented to us.[34] It is here, I think, that the relationship between the poetic and the philosophical brings something to the post-truth debate that goes beyond the worn currency of epistemology: in performing an economy of memory, and undertaking the curating this involves, it also brings forward the logistics at stake.

IV

How does such an account of poetry and philosophy relate, then, to the work of rumours? It is, I think, such logistics that the rumour problematises, a point illustrated in perhaps the best example of rumour at work in philosophy: Aristotle's *On Marvellous Things Heard*. The Loeb Classical Library edition of A*ristotle's Minor Works* introduces the text with a short note:

This curious collection of 'marvels' reads like the jottings from a diary. All authorities are agreed that it is not the work of Aristotle, but it is included in this volume as it forms part of the 'Corpus' which has come down to us […]. Some of the notes are puerile, but some on the other hand are evidently the fruit of direct and accurate observation.[35]

This combination of the 'puerile' and the 'evidently accurate' makes the work both forgettable (in the context of Aristotelian scholarship) yet strangely timely. For sure, few philosophers will be gripped by the news that goats in Cephellenia drink by inhaling air coming from the sea, that the hedgehogs in Byzantium perceive when north or south winds are blowing, or that the penis of the marten is constantly erect. However, what is in *On Marvellous Things Heard*, unlike other treatises which take up an object of study and analyse it, is the *performance* of the rumour.

As a paradoxography the text provides a glimpse into a world in the grip of becoming rational, politicised and territorialised, yet remains puzzled over the mythical aspects of its culture. These are not the myths of Heracles or Perseus, though, with Gods and monsters fighting heroic battles for the future of the world. Instead, all of the Marvellous Things take place through fundamentally banal aspects of life. While the media ecology of post-truth is far removed from the world of the pseudo-Aristotle, both nevertheless stand within a dynamic transformation of how knowledge is circulated, and

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30 Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 10.

31 Jacques Derrida, *Points… Interviews*, 1974-1994. Trans Peggy Kamuf (Stanford: Stanford University Press1995), 291.

32 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*. Trans. Ronald Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 146.

33 On the separation of poetry from knowledge in Derrida's essay, see John Phillips. 'The Poetic Thing (On Poetry and Deconstruction).' *Oxford Literary Review*, 2011, 33:2, 231-243, 233.

34 Nietzsche's accounts of such ritual organisations and their effect on defacing values are consistent across his work: 'institutions', Nietzsche is still writing much later in his career, are essentially a form of 'levelling'; even if such levelling now refers to mountains and valleys rather than the surface inscriptions on a coin. See Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols and Other Writings.* Ed. Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman, trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) 213.

35 See https://www.loebclassics.com/view/aristotle-marvellous_things_heard/1936/pb_LCL307.237.xml

how once-established modes of proof are disrupted. The treatise is simply a list of things that are said to happen, without any sense of how the philosopher should relate to them, *other* than to marvel. It thus sits in a constant tension between the knowledgeable and the nonsensical, the rigorous cataloguing that forms the Aristotelian process and bizarre cryptozoological fascination.

What makes this distinct from other examples of Classical paradoxography is that the text is placed in Aristotle's canon; even though it is almost certain that he didn't write it. This means that the book itself is effectively a rumour of Aristotle. And while, as I have just suggested, it offers a kind of historical insight into the Classical world, it also resists being a fully historical text because, while there may be theories as to who the pseudo-Aristotle might be, it's not quite clear who wrote it, or when. Nevertheless, it still carries the detailed numbering system of the Aristotelian library's registry. These reference numbers are one of the oldest unchanging forms of cataloguing still in existence. In this way, even though the text is not Aristotle's, it still forms an essential part of his archive, because its numbering must necessarily be included in any collection of Aristotle's work. Ironically, though, one of the key anomalies of the text (and, indeed, others that are likely not authored by Aristotle, such as *Questions*) is precisely that they *do not* possess the relentless typological ordering which Aristotle, the great observer of the world, drives forward in his more famous works. For sure, it is somewhat thematically arranged (entries about mice, for example, are grouped together), but there is no argument here, and no detailed systematic explanations such as we find in the *Rhetoric*, the *Nicomachian Ethics*, and so on. The success of Aristotle's influence on both the Western European and Islamic traditions lie for the most part in his copious organisation of thought: his arguments are built on a systematic

archiving of the world according to rational principles. But *On Marvellous Things Heard* possesses no careful structure of argument based on astute observations of the subjects in question. Instead, it is, quite literally, a seemingly random list of marvellous things the author has heard. In this way, *On Marvellous Things Heard* is essentially *both* archival, in that its inclusion is necessary for the Aristotelian registry to make sense, *and* non-archival, in that it resists or refuses any registry of its own making.

What preserves the work is precisely a rhythm and a tempo: embedded within the 'tick tock' (as Nietzsche puts it) of institutional catalogue, as sure as one number follows the next. *On Marvellous Things Heard* provides a kind of pointless inversion of the cultural archive in this sense. The corpus of Aristotle is left in place, but with a minor disruption: not to any grand schema or particular end, but by rendering absurd that medial form which usually establishes the truth from fiction, and the canon from dispersed fragments of Ancient Greek hearsay. In this sense, the rumour is a form of misfired poetry, which lays bare any claims to the seriousness of truth, and leaves only an anomalous structure behind.

V

Aristotle – the real one – declared that poetry 'is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history: for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular.'[36] The salient term here is 'express'; for while the content of poetry imitates the philosophical more than the archive of history, its medium renders it different. *Fama* is the Latin translation of the Greek *Pheme*: a name related to Φάναι 'to speak' which can mean both 'fame' and/or 'rumour.' Of course, before the rise of print media, speech was wholly intertwined with fame, and by extension, with gossip and rumour.[37] Philip Hardie notes that the term is often positioned as a site of contrast; in particular between

the transient uses (including 'rumour' and 'hearsay') and the more fixed and preservative sense of cultural memory or individual fame. But, Hardie goes on to point out:

> that contrast is unstable in various ways. The presentation of fame as a free-standing and lasting monument is a mystification of the fact that praise of outstanding men is itself part of a system of exchange. What is perceived as a fixed tradition may crystallize out of a more fluid circulation of words. Folklorists see no sharp distinction between rumour and legend: legend may be defined as a rumour that has become "part of the heritage of a people". On the other hand, the preservation of a tradition depends on the repeated reuse of words within a social group.[38]

Fama is therefore both an 'unattributable' and 'unreliable' word from the streets, and the word of the poet to assert 'his uniqueness and authority within a poetic tradition.' This is played out in the short passage of Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, where the reader is invited into the House of Fama, the goddess of rumour. The house emerges from a climactic storm, and is situated between the heavens, Earth and the skies; from its position at the top of a tower is able to view all three realms. The house itself, the seat of rumour's power, consists of 'numberless' windows and doorways that are always open, allowing a 'flowing tide' of 'fresh reports' to rush in and out of the structure. The house itself is made of brass, which disperses the sounds that enter; 'the better to diffuse/The spreading sounds, and multiply the news.' Rumours collide and echo with each other, creating a low hum of constant noise which is described as:

> A thorough-fare of news: where some devise

> Things never heard, some mingle truth with lies;

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36 Aristotle, *Poetics*. Ed. Ingrato Bywater (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958), 1451b5-7.

37 In this sense, one might note the similarities between fama and Foucault's famous use of the term *parrhesia*: ostensibly, it is to speak or express everything in an open manner, to commit to fearless speech. But telling the truth was only the second characteristic of the Greek term: the first characteristic consists of ambiguous proclamations, ignorant outspokenness for the sake of itself; in other words, simple chatter or gossip.

38 Philip Hardie, *Rumour and Renown: Representations of Fama in Western Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 3-4.

The troubled air with empty sounds they beat,

Intent to hear, and eager to repeat.[39]

Of the many ambiguities around Ovid's representation of the rumour is his use of turba, 'throng', to describe what enters and circulates Fama's house; a term which may mean a general disturbance or noise, or a crowd of people. Indeed, the poem is never clear on whether the occupants of Fama's house – the 'some' who 'devise things never heard', for example – are corporeal people or merely noises; enhanced by the verb *uagantur* which may mean to roam and wander (as Raeburn translates it), or to diffuse (as Garth-Dryden has it).[40] While such ambiguity may cause problems for translators, the dual sense is entirely pertinent to the material manifestation of the rumour itself, particularly in the contemporary world where diffusion and 'the crowd' are perhaps more easily aligned.

Indeed, the paradoxes of what Ovid presents provide a somewhat timely account of the rumour at work; an account which is derived from the figure of Fama herself. It is notable that, unlike other poets before him, and in particularly stark contrast to Virgil's description of Fama as a monstrous creature, Ovid does not describe Fama herself at all. Kelly comments:

> By choosing to deliberately ignore Virgil's depiction of Fama, Ovid creates a discourse between his text and the Aeneid. The reader immediately wonders: "Why is Fama [not] here?" Her absence generates an unspoken, invisible, presence lurking beneath the surface of the text. The monstrous prequel of Virgil's hyper-physical Fama haunts Ovid's house; she is the loudest echo in the room.[41]

Fama's appearance, then, is also a rumour: not *quite* there, embedded instead within the literary memories of Hesiod, Homer, and Virgil. Indeed, just as

the rumour is fundamentally constituted by its own circulation (rather than its reference to an objective state of affairs), the goddess is diffused into her own diffusive structure: the house of rumour is, while certainly not a personification of Fama, the structure by which the goddess is manifested, which is the reflection of noises across surface.

There are a series of allusions in the passage from the Metamorphoses that indicate that Fama's house is indirectly bestowed with the same sensory organs that characterise Virgil's depiction of Fama's body: "from which place [the house] whatever is anywhere, however many regions apart, is looked upon, and every voice penetrates its hollow ears". Everything is seen from this place, yet it is the house that performs this seeing.[42]

If Fama is no longer an actual monster, but a 'wandering of noise', this raises the question as to how we discern the poet's narration from the echoes surrounding it. How is the reader to navigate a house that is also a rhetorical concept, which hollows out the meaningfulness of any communicative action? Not to mention the curiously non-functional figures at work in surroundings: a house with 'hollow ears', emitting 'a deaf noise of sounds', apparently without 'silence' or 'expression'? Safe passage, it seems, is only guaranteed by the rhythm of poetic language: the regularity of its pace and the curation of poetic memory (specifically with regards Virgil) allows the reader to consider the 'troubled air' in figurative terms rather than nihilistic pollution.

VI

These two examples are both 'untimely' in their own way. Both depend upon forms of rhythmic tempo, in the Nietzschean sense, for both their own preservation, and their own sense. They rely on an amplification via a combination

of internal rhythms, organisational habits and historical cataloguing. At the same time, the work of rumour in both serves to echo and reflect much of that 'sense' into ambiguity. Both texts are marked by the banality of such ambiguity, as well: in the context of either the Aristotelian corpus as a whole, or the Metamorphoses as an epic, both *Marvellous Things Heard* and the House of Fama are short places to pass through; after all, the pseudo-Aristotle's book has no impact on the better known works, and Fama's only *action* is, ironically enough, to tell the truth (reporting to the Trojans that a Greek fleet is approaching).

In the case of Aristotle's text, the absurdity of the rumours listed – reports without any attempt at philosophical reasoning or evidence – is carried by nothing less that the rhythm of the archive; it's numbering, its solid pace that refuses to allow the rumours of *On Marvellous Things Heard* to disappear. In Ovid, meanwhile, the poetic rhythm allows rumour to be envisioned as a municipal space that is held up only by the circulation of aimless noise: the poetic economising of language draws upon the rhythm of Fama's previous representations, channelling the work of rumours themselves.

I draw on these examples because they illustrate what I earlier suggested was a longer-standing concern, underling the contemporary 'post-truth' debate, between poetry, philosophy, and the work of rumour. Returning to the problem this paper began with, I conclude by suggesting that this notion of rhythm as a utility of amplification and memory allows us to sidestep the more conventional accounts of poetry as a slower, stiller and quieter form of truth. This latter definition leaves intact too many assumptions that in fact perpetuate the post-truth malaise: that stillness and quietness may lead to more authentic forms of knowledge, for example,[43] or that implementing pauses into the flow of competing information will have a profound effect; that we should

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39 Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 12.53-7.

40 Sarah Annes Brown, *Ovid: Myth and Metamorphosis* (London: Bloomsbury, 1999).

41 Peter Kelly, 'Voices within Ovid's House of "Fama". *Mnemosyne*, 67:1, 2014, 65-92, 75.

42 Ibid., p.77

43 On this, see Avital Ronell, *Stupidity* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 10.

look to poetry in much the same we might look to 'gatekeepers' of the media, or to the rejuvenation of expertise in the face of fake news.[44]

Instead, poetry and philosophy alike will be alert to the ways in which the fable of post-truth highlights different dimensions of rhythm at work in the culture surrounding us: one which is no longer the regular beat of the printing press as it was in Nietzsche's time, but rather the habits and rituals of a culture keen to curate its past; which involves the tempos of algorithms, of scrolling and clicking, and of all the ways in which 'the flow' of medial information is negotiated. If such rhythms have defeated epistemological attempts to resolve the real-world problems they are perceived to create, perhaps the poetic provides a more substantial frame for philosophical investigation into this effective and powerful fable.

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44 A more nuanced argument for this call for more scrupulous attention to information than I am able to give here can be found in Susan Haack, "Post 'Post-Truth': Are We There Yet?" *Theoria* 85, 2019, 258-272.

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The Poetics Of Bodies: Reflections On One Of Sara Ahmed's Philosophical Insights

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I aim to articulate, at least in part, what makes Sara Ahmed's uses and analyses of metaphors fruitful for thinking about problems in the social world. I argue that Ahmed's these metaphorical concepts perform three functions. First, her analyses improve our understanding of the social world precisely because we already understand the world through metaphors. They draw out the metaphors we use to think about ourselves and others and, in doing so, allow us to think more carefully about those metaphors. To support this claim, I will draw on the insights of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in their seminal *Metaphors We Live By*. Second, one thing that Ahmed's analyses of metaphors often allow us to see is that the movement and arrangement of bodies in the social world can be analyzed in poetic terms. To be clear, it is not just that we linguistically express and understand bodies through metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and the like, but also that the movement, arrangement, and reactions of our bodies are (1) themselves experienced as metaphorical and metonymical, and (2) that they provide the foundation for understanding social reality in metaphorical terms. Finally, as a result of the first two functions, Ahmed helps us imagine ways to intervene so that we can change how we live and interact with others. Specifically, to work toward positive social change, we might both (1) rework the metaphorical concepts we use to understand the social world and (2) alter our practices of movement that, all too often, reify existing social boundaries and inequalities.

Keywords:
Sara Ahmed;
metaphor;
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skin of the community

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The Poetics Of Bodies: Reflections On One Of Sara Ahmed's Philosophical Insights

Several semesters ago, I taught selections of Sara Ahmed's book, *Queer Phenomenology*, in my existentialism class. It is a rich text that fostered many fruitful discussions, but students were sometimes puzzled by Ahmed's use of metaphors. How are we to understand the text when she refers to compulsory heterosexuality as a form of repetitive strain injury, when she discusses sexuality as a way of being "in" or "out of line," or when she plays with the ambiguity between social and biological senses of familial lines of inheritance? Is there something underlying these metaphors that they give us access to? That is, are these metaphors merely suggestive devices that help Ahmed probe topics in a way that is memorable but that could potentially be achieved in a more literal or non-metaphorical way? I would like to argue against this interpretation. Instead, I contend that Ahmed's use and analysis of metaphors throughout her work performs three functions. First, her analyses improve our understanding of the social world precisely because we already understand the world through metaphors. They draw out the metaphors we use to think about ourselves and others and, in doing so, allow us to think more carefully about those metaphors. To support this claim, I will draw on the insights of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in their seminal *Metaphors We Live By*, because they carefully articulate the ways in which we understand and act in the world through metaphor. Second, one thing that Ahmed's analyses of metaphors often allow us to see is that the

movement and arrangement of bodies in the social world can be analyzed in poetic terms. To be clear, it is not just that we linguistically express and understand bodies through metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and the like, but also that the movement, arrangement, and reactions of our bodies are (1) themselves *experienced* as metaphorical and metonymical, and (2) that they provide the *foundation for* understanding social reality in metaphorical terms. To illustrate these first and second points, I will discuss two of Ahmed's ideas: the skin of the community and familial lines. Finally, as a result of the first two functions, Ahmed helps us imagine ways to intervene so that we can change how we live and interact with others. Specifically, to work toward positive social change, we might both (1) rework the metaphorical concepts we use to understand the social world and (2) alter our practices of movement that, all too often, reify existing social boundaries and inequalities.

Metaphors We Live By

In *Metaphors We Live By*, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson argue that metaphor is not a mere poetic device that exists on top of, or that extends beyond, our normal uses of language. Instead, we understand the world, and act in that world, through metaphors. They write, "Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature."[1] To establish this, they demonstrate how concepts fundamental to our understanding and experiencing the world are

metaphorical, and how these metaphors relate to one another in systematic ways. "The essence of metaphor," for Lakoff and Johnson, "is understanding and experiencing one thing in terms of another."[2] Notice their emphasis on experience as well as understanding. For the authors, we *live* by metaphors (as their title makes explicit) rather than just conceptualizing the world through them. Or perhaps more accurately, the way we conceptualize the world shapes how we act in that world and vice versa.

Metaphors work, according to Lakoff and Johnson, by highlighting some aspects of an object or phenomenon while hiding others. To understand the ideas discussed so far, consider the example of understanding labor as a resource. In understanding labor as a resource, we highlight certain aspects of labor that are shared with material resources. For example, it can be quantified (as hours clocked, units produced, etc.), "assigned a value per unit" ($15 per hour, $0.75 per unit boxed, etc.), and it serves a certain, specific purpose (collecting accurate payments from customers, counting and boxing products for shipment, creating profits, etc.).[3] We also hide certain aspects of labor, like the nature of the labor for the worker or the fact that some of what we think of as "labor" does not serve a clear purpose. If we find a way to mine and refine iron in a more efficient way, especially if we can do so with no more environmental destruction than earlier practices, this will be considered an unequivocal good, and that iron is con-

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1 George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 3.

2 Ibid., 5.

3 Ibid., 65.

sidered a resource insofar as there is a use for it. Similarly, hearing many politicians and economists talk about labor, one could reasonably come to the conclusion that people working for poverty wages in manual labor, people who work in office jobs for middle-class wages, and people who play golf while making decisions about restructuring entire corporations are all doing fundamentally the same sort of thing; that is, their activities are all the same sort of resource. Thus, within the "labor is a resource" metaphor, if a business finds a way to get more labor out of workers for less, this is considered a good; we're maximizing the resource. On the other hand, within the metaphor, it becomes difficult to recognize that a lot of labor does not serve a useful purpose (unlike iron as a resource). For example, many of us have been asked to write reports that are never read or scrolled through social media threads on the clock. Understanding labor as a resource means this effort and time are on par with all other forms of labor.[4]

Importantly, such metaphors not only influence how we understand the world, but they also shape our actions. Taking the "labor is a resource" example, we can attend to the ways this influences the actions of employers, governments, and workers themselves. Governments seek policies to minimize unemployment (that is, to make the most use of labor resources as possible), employers seek to squeeze as much value out of workers as possible, and workers negotiate for new positions or raises based on the value they create (that is, how valuable their labor is as a resource).

Another important insight offered by Lakoff and Johnson is that metaphors build upon one another in ways that establish coherence across a culture's

set of shared metaphorical concepts. For example, the metaphor "labor is a resource" builds upon other metaphors in a coherent way. Since labor is an activity, this metaphor relies upon another metaphor, "activity is a substance," which highlights the quantifiable aspects of labor. We also often understand labor as a particular kind of substance: a container. We ask how much effort is put *into* one's labor, how much value can be *extracted from* workers, and so on. And since much of labor is quantified in terms of time, it is unsurprising that we frequently make use of the metaphor "time is a resource," which is related to "time is a container" among other metaphors. Consider a claim like, "You have to guard your time. If you don't, your employer will squeeze what they can out of you." This claim relies on a complex set of relationships between (1) time as a resource that can be taken by an employer, (2) you, or your labor, as a container that can have its contents "squeezed" out, (3) your labor as a fixed resource that can either be used by you or by your employer but not both, and so on.

So far, I have discussed (1) how metaphors structure our understanding of and action in the world, (2) how they do so by highlighting some aspects of a phenomenon while hiding others, and (3) how different metaphors connect to one another in coherent ways. Before moving on to discuss Ahmed's work, I want to note one other, related idea developed by Lakoff and Johnson: metonymy. They understand metonymy (and its related phenomenon, synecdoche) as "using one entity to refer to another that is related to it."[5] Whereas metaphor is about conceptualizing or understanding something, metonymy is about referring to something, about one thing standing

for another.[6] But this referential function is not always straightforward; that is, one item is often not a simple replacement or substitute for the other. When we use metonymy, we may highlight one aspect of the thing being referred to. Consider the phrase "We need more boots on the ground." What this means is that we need more soldiers, workers, or whatever at a particular site. But using "boots" puts emphasis on being prepared for an activity (marching, setting up, etc.). Lakoff and Johnson note that our use of metonymy can sometimes structure our experiences in ways that are similar to our use of metaphors. For example, they note that we use "face" to refer to a person and that this is reflected in our culture more broadly. We both say "We need some new *faces* around here" and use paintings or photographs of a person's face as portraits, as representations of the person as a whole.[7] And our uses of metonymy often connect to the metaphorical concepts discussed above. Our use of "boots on the ground" for non-military activities, for example, relies upon metaphors like, "a task or activity is a battle."

Bodies in Motion: The Skin of the Community

In this section, I will move on to discuss Sara Ahmed's work in order to argue that her ideas can be understood in terms of Lakoff and Johnson's insights, but also that her ideas make important innovations. One important argument that Ahmed presents is that emotions like disgust, hatred, and love do not simply respond to an existing object. Instead, disgust, fear, love and the like constitute, or re-constitute, objects as disgusting, feared, or loved. In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* and elsewhere,[8] Ahmed references a story recounted by Audre Lorde.

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4 In this analysis I am obviously simplifying. Discussions of labor in the news do sometimes focus on worker complaints, labor conditions in factories overseas, wasted time at work, and so on. But the point Lakoff and Johnson are making is not that a metaphor completely obscures other aspects of the phenomenon, only that it emphasizes some and hides others. Notice, for example, how egregious the working conditions have to be to be considered newsworthy compared to the frequency of coverage of opening up new labor markets through trade deals or of dropping unemployment numbers. Also, consider the ways in which even these stories are often considered in terms of resources on the market. Discussions of unionization, for example, are often covered in terms of the market: workers increase their value on the market through work stoppages, strikes, and collective bargaining. In order to improve their dignity and working conditions, unionizing workers must understand themselves as a resource and act as one. We certainly do have competing ways of conceptualizing labor and workers, but these alternative concepts are not as dominant in our culture and, thus, they must often be mediated through the metaphor "labor is a resource."

5 Ibid., 35.

6 Ibid., 36.

7 Ibid., 37.

8 In addition to the other works cited here, the reader may consult: Sara Ahmed, The Organisation of Hate. Law and Critique, 12, (2001), 345-365.

Permit me two long quotations, one from Lorde and one from Ahmed, to prepare my reading of Ahmed's argument. Lorde writes,

The AA subway train to Harlem. I clutch my mother's sleeve […]. My mother spots an almost seat, pushes my little snowsuited body down. On one side of me a man reading a paper. On the other, a woman in a fur hat staring at me. Her mouth twitches as she stares and then her gaze drops down, pulling mine with it. Her leather-gloved hand plucks at the line where my new blue snowpants and her sleek fur coat meet. She jerks her coat closer to her. I look. I do not see whatever terrible thing she is seeing on the seat between us – probably a roach. But she has communicated her horror to me. It must be something very bad from the way she's looking, so I pull my snowsuit closer to me away from it, too. When I look up the woman is still staring at me, her nose holes and eyes huge. And suddenly I realize there is nothing crawling up the seat between us; it is me she doesn't want her coat to touch. The fur brushes past my face as she stands with a shudder and holds on to a strap in the speeding train. […] I quickly slide over to make room for my mother to sit down"[9]

Notice the movement of bodies that re-creates a boundary, here, between black and white individuals and between white and black communities. Of this moment, Ahmed writes,

The emotion of hate aligns the particular white body with the bodily form of the community – the emotion functions to substantiate the threat of invasion and contamination in the body of a particular other who comes to stand for, and stand in for, the other as such. […]

The organization of social and bodily space creates a border that is transformed in an object, as an effect of this intensification of feeling. So the white woman's refusal to touch the Black child does not simply stand for the expulsion of Blackness from white social space, but actually re-forms social space through re-forming the apartness of the white body. […] [T]he skin comes to be felt as a border through reading the impression of one surface upon another as a form of negation. Such impressions are traces on the skin surface of the presence of others, and they depend on the repetition of past associations, through which the other is attributed as the cause of bad feeling. It is through how others impress upon us that the skin of the collective begins to take shape.[10]

One way to read Ahmed, here, is as offering "skin" as a metaphor for boundaries of the community. If the essence of metaphor is understanding one thing in terms of another, then maybe that is what Ahmed has hit upon – that we can understand the boundaries between communities, including racial communities, as skin. Indeed, Ahmed is keen to point out that the skin, whether that of the community or of the human individual, is a boundary that is brought about by contact, a boundary that creates the inside which it bounds and the outside which it excludes. The surface of my skin is precisely where I lean against the wall, where it presses into me, or where the air presses against my body. She writes, *"the impression of a surface is an effect of such intensifications of feeling.* I become aware of my body as having a surface only in the event of feeling discomfort (prickly sensations, cramps), that become transformed into pain though an act of reading and recognition ('it hurts!')."[11] As such, the skin is constituted by the contact between

what is inside and outside, and the inside and outside are an effect of the boundary of the skin. The skin of the community can be understood in the same way. The boundary between races, neighborhoods, classes, etc. is an effect of bodies coming into contact but moving away from certain bodies and towards others. And that point of contact, that boundary, that skin, creates an inside and an outside. Drawing on Lakoff and Johnson, we could note that this metaphor highlights certain aspects of these boundaries while hiding others. For example, it highlights the phenomenological experience of one's skin and the similar experience of community boundaries, the felt experience of pain, threat, repulsion, or embrace. On the other hand, it hides the way in which the skin of a community does not need physical integrity (that is, it can be spread throughout space, across rooms, neighborhoods, or cultures) in the same way that an individual's skin does. We might also note that this metaphor relies on others, like bodies or social groups as containers, in a way that establishes coherence across metaphors.

I want to suggest, however, that stopping here would too quickly bring her argument to the level of metaphorical concepts and neglect the movement of bodies on which the skin metaphor is founded. In the white woman's movement away from the Lorde, and the movement of Lorde's mother sitting next to her, there is a sort of metonymy at work: Lorde *is* black and the white woman *is* white precisely in these movements. In "re-forming the apartness of the white body," as Ahmed puts it, both the woman's whiteness and the separation of white bodies from black bodies, of the white community from the black community, is enacted. Once the white woman stands, Lorde's mother sits next to her. Following Ahmed's quotation above, we could say that this movement re-forms the togetherness of both the black community and

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9 Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (Freedom: The Crossing Press, 1984), 147-8.

10 Sara Ahmed, Collective Feelings, or, the Impressions Left by Others, *Theory, Culture & Society,* 21(2), (2004), 32-33. See also *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburg University Press, 2014), especially Chapters 2 and 4. There she goes into greater depth describing the "stickiness" of some emotions, such that some groups are more likely to be experienced as disgusting, identified as invaders, etc. Words like "flood" and "overwhelm" "stick" to immigrants in the UK or USA, for example, in a way they don't to white people.

11 Sara Ahmed, The Skin of the Community: Affect and Boundary Formation. *Revolt, Affect, Collectivity: The Unstable Boundaries of Kristeva's Polis*, eds. Tina Chanter and Ewa Płonowska Ziarek (Albany: SUNY Press, 2005), 101.

Lorde's family. Importantly for Ahmed, the white woman's feeling of disgust or hatred for Lorde as a black girl does not originate in an inside feeling against an already constituted outside object. Nor, we could extrapolate, does her mother's feeling of love or comfort originate in an inside feeling toward Lorde as an already constituted outside object. Instead, the feelings of hatred and love re-create an inside/outside distinction that is inherited but that, by virtue of its status as a boundary between bodies in motion, is always unstable. It takes work to maintain this boundary, the work of some bodies moving toward certain bodies and away from others.

In short, bodies themselves must be read poetically. They move, they circulate, and in their juxtapositions they create metonymical and metaphorical relations. Lorde describes two movements: that of the white woman away from Lorde and that of Lorde's mother sitting next to her. These movements both establish the white woman as apart, as white, but also create the conditions by which Lorde's body (and her mother's) can be read *as* black, such that the white woman's body can be read *as* white. To the white woman, Lorde comes to stand for "blackness" in a sort of experiential metonymy. It is this more fundamental, affective movement of bodies toward some others and away from other others that gives rise to boundaries between communities that can be understood through the metaphor of the "skin of the community."

Importantly, for the white woman, what it means to experience Lorde's body as black is to experience it as filthy or threatening. Lorde is experienced metonymically by the white woman as a source of infection or invasion. By extension, blackness is experienced metaphorically as a disease or an invading force. Building on the insights of Lakoff and Johnson, we could note that these instances build upon metaphors like

"social groups are containers," "outside is contamination," "disease is an invasion from the outside," and so on. In order to experience blackness as an invasion, whiteness must be understood as a container with boundaries that can be compromised, interactions between outside and inside must be understood as battle lines. As Susan Sontag has noted, we also tend to think of disease in military terms, considering both individual bodies and entire populations as battlegrounds between outside, potentially invading diseases and inside processes and immune responses that maintain health (where health is understood as the integrity of the boundary).[12] It is unsurprising, then, that we can so easily slide between metaphors of containment, battle, and disease. Similarly, the comfort and sense of belonging between Lorde and her mother may well rely on metaphors of social groups as containers or homes. Consider phrases like, "You're always welcome *in* this family," "*within* communities of color," or "I feel *at home* with you." Indeed, Ahmed provides an insightful analysis of how likeness is produced by a desire for connection, a desire for familial or group identification, even while that likeness is itself read as a given. That is, being perceived as alike is understood as evidence of an already existing connection.[13]

Permit me to diagram the processes I have discussed so far.[14]

On my reading, Ahmed's analysis aligns with that of Lakoff and Johnson on points (a) and (d). While Lakoff and Johnson don't write about race in particular, they do comment upon the ways in which we consider social groups as containers and the ways in which we understand individuals metonymically as standing for, or referring to, groups or institutions. They can also help us recognize the coherent, if problematic, metaphorical concepts that reinforce one another in our understanding of

social groups as containers. Ahmed's innovation is in understanding affect as the experiential connection between (a) and (b), between the perception of a person metonymically and one's movement toward or away from them. It is through this bodily movement, this alignment of some bodies with particular others and against or away from other others, that communities are constituted such that they can be understood as metaphorical containers (d).

In this section, I have argued that the analysis of metaphor offered by Lakoff and Johnson can be helpfully used to understand Ahmed's argument concerning the skin of the community and develop further insights from it. I also argued that her emphasis on bodily movement reveals the embodied, affective experiences of metonymy upon which cultural metaphorical concepts are founded and through which those concepts are recreated. In the following section, I will offer a second example to illustrate these points: sexual orientation.

Lines of Desire: Sexual Orientation

In *Queer Phenomenology*, Ahmed offers an analysis of sexual orientation using the language of lines to take the "orientation" in sexual orientation seriously. We can think of sexual orientation as a line of desire[15] toward certain others (and away from others). But in certain heteronormative cultural contexts, not all such lines are equal. To be attracted to those of the opposite sex is "straight," while to be attracted to those of the same sex is "queer." What's more, mainstream culture often fails to accept queer desire *as* queer. Ahmed introduces the term "straightening device" to name those techniques for bringing deviations, queer or abnormal trajectories, "back in line." For a simple example, consider the way in which homosexual couples are often interpreted as having, or are expected to have, "traditionally" masculine and femi-

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12 Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors* (New York: Picador, 2001).

13 Interested readers should consult the third chapter of *Queer Phenomenology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

14 Please see page 60 to view the diagram referenced in this section.

15 Ahmed notes that the term "desire lines" comes from landscape architecture where it names the paths worn into the ground where people take shortcuts off the sidewalks. Desire lines are where "off the beaten path" becomes the beaten path. See *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 19-20.

nine roles and characteristics. Discussing Havelock Ellis's early account of "sexual inversion," Ahmed writes, "if the inverted woman is really a man, then she, of course, follows the straight line toward what she is not (the feminine woman)."[16] (2006, 71). By reading this lesbian as masculine, Ellis interprets her desire as "in line," saving the "straight line" of attraction between different sexes. This move leaves unquestioned not only the norm of heterosexual desire, but also the role that this straight line plays in defining the sexes in the first place. Treating sex difference as *the* difference or the "not" to which one is attracted in heterosexual desire, sex difference is in part constituted by the norm of heterosexual desire. In other words, the direction of heterosexual desire is toward that which is different, such that part of what it means to be a man, for instance, is to be attracted toward the different sex, namely women. This is why for Ellis the lesbian's attraction to other women can only be understood as coming from a masculine character. To desire another sexually, (1) that other must be different from the one who desires and (2) the only difference that matters is sex. Thus, the woman who loves other women must *really* be a man.[17] In sum, straightening devices read individual deviations as "in line" such that the conditions that constitute what is "in line" remain imperceptible and unquestioned.

In a way that resonates with the insights of Lakoff and Johnson, Ahmed notes several ways in which the metaphor of heterosexual desire as a straight line coheres with other line metaphors, specifically lines of inheritance and descent. To be "in line," Ahmed notes in a reading of Freud, "is to direct one's desires toward marriage and reproduction; to direct one's desires toward the reproduction of the family line."[18] The "straight" line of heterosexual desire is seen as being "in line" with the continuation of the line of familial descent, whereas queer desire threatens to terminate that line.[19] In turn, this family line is seen as a form of inheritance, an investment or debt. The gift of having been born into the family, the investments made by the family in rearing children, are burdened with the expectation of continuing the family line. As Ahmed says, "The child who refuses the gift [that is, refuses to continue the family line] thus becomes seen as a bad debt, as being ungrateful, as the origin of bad feeling."[20]

At this point it may be worth noting what is highlighted and what is hidden by these metaphors of orientation, line, and inheritance. These metaphors highlight sex differences as the basis for sexual attraction, genetic descent (or perhaps more loosely the continuation of a family's traditions or name)[21] as the most meaningful basis of a family, and the care of children as a form of investment that requires effort and resources with the promise of some form of return. They hide the way in which sex difference is itself constituted by heterosexual norms. They deemphasize various forms of meaningful family relations that do not rely upon passing on genes or a family name and the ways in which care for children can be motivated by things other than a return on investment. To be clear, even those who speak of their children as an investment or who concern themselves with their family line may love them for reasons that have nothing to do with how their children will repay them or make them proud. We have multiple metaphors for understanding the relationships between generations. Consider the metaphor popularized by Whitney Houston: "the children are our future." There is an ambiguity in the phrase. We could conceive of children as a mere continuation of the previous generations. (They are *our* future, suggesting a sense of possession.) But children could also be understood as gifting the present adult generations with a future. They *give* a future to the present through whatever lives they choose to lead. (Indeed, this is suggested by Houston's insistence that we should "let them lead the way.") The point I'm trying to make, though, is that when we understand the family through the concepts of the "family line," and thus the related concepts of children as investments and one's family as the gift of inheritance, we emphasize children as investments while downplaying other ways of valuing or understanding them.

As in the case of racialized communities discussed in the last section, however, Ahmed does not stop at considering these concepts as they shape our understanding and experiences of family and sexuality. She is also keen to point out the ways in which we are brought together or moved apart from others by these lines of desire and inheritance. Ahmed uses the table as an object around which we orient ourselves to demonstrate this point. First, the lines of descent move those who follow "in line" to family spaces. The family gathers around the dinner table, the card table, or the coffee table. A family that understands itself in terms of lines of inheritance may well exclude people from these spaces who are queer, who don't follow the family's line, or who fail to represent a return on investment. Some families even have designated seats. Maybe grandpa always sits at the head of the table or the kids always sit by the wall where they can squeeze in better. One could also consider the practice of having a "kiddy table," a table for the children to sit at until there is room for them at the "adult table," until they prove

16 Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 71.

17 Another story Ahmed shares may be worth sharing, in this regard. Walking toward her home, which she shared with a woman, one night, her neighbor asked, "Is that your sister, or your husband?" Notice how the neighbor refuses to recognize Ahmed's partner as a woman and a partner simultaneously. If she is a woman, she must either be a sister or (if we interpret the neighbor's use of "husband" as stretching the concept) a masculine lesbian. If the partner is male, he must be Ahmed's husband. See Ibid., 95-6.

18 Ibid., 74.

19 Ibid., 77.

20 Ibid., 86.

21 At one point in my life, I proposed changing my last name upon getting married. A patriarch in my family said he would never speak to me again if I changed my last name (read: exile me from the family).

themselves mature enough to conduct themselves as the adults in the family do. Again, we see a circular process: those who follow the proper familial lines are brought together, and in bringing certain people together familial lines are re-created.

We can see a similar phenomenon in more public spaces. Ahmed writes of going to dinner with her partner, "I face what seems like a shocking image. In front of me, on the tables, couples are seated. Table after table, couple after couple, taking the same form: one man sitting by one woman around a 'round table,' facing each other 'over' the table. […] I am shocked by the sheer force of the regularity of that which is familiar."[22] As we see in this example of dining out, straight lines of desire, reinforced by lines of familial descent, bring certain people together in shared social spaces outside of family gatherings. Such social spaces may also work to exclude those who deviate from the straight and familial lines. One only needs to hear a server ask, "Just you this evening?", consider the language of the "third wheel," or feel the weight of being the only non-straight party in a dining room to understand that the space welcomes those who are "in line" while seeking to exclude those who are not, that there is a pressure, that bodies are *pressed* in line. Or, to take another example, consider how often there develops a men's space and a women's space in friendly gatherings. A man who likes chatting, a woman who likes grilling, or a person who doesn't fit neatly into either gendered space will experience these gatherings as less welcoming, regardless of the intentions of the hosts.

However, it is not just that the "straight" line leads those "in line" together and excludes those who are "out of line." It is also the case that those who follow different lines also create different spaces. Ahmed writes,

Lesbian desire can be rethought as a space for action, a way of extending differently into space through tending toward 'other

women.' […] Lesbian bonds can involve orientations that are about shared struggles, common grounds, and mutual aspirations, as bonds that are created through the lived experience of being 'off line' and 'out of line.' To be orientated sexually toward women as women affects other things that we do.[23]

Just as the "straight line" and "family lines" bring people together around various tables, being "out of line" can bring people together to form other spaces. What Ahmed emphasizes here is that these spaces are not *just* about being brought together by shared lines of desire (though such desire may certainly be involved), but, like the extension of "straight lines" into "family lines," these spaces seek to form a community in which their lines of desire can be accepted, developed upon, and experimented with: a space to consider what social spaces would look like outside of the expectations of straight desire or biological family inheritance. And as in the case of the heteronormative family, we see a circular process: those who are "out of line" are brought together and, in bringing certain people together, ways of living and having desires "out of line" are re-created.

As I hope to have shown, Ahmed's discussion of sexual orientation offers another example of her nuanced treatment of metaphor and the ways in which widespread metaphorical concepts are founded upon and reinforce the movement of some bodies toward one another and away from others. By taking the spatial metaphors of sexual orientation and family lines seriously, Ahmed reveals the ways in which we understand sex, desire, and familial forms as being "in line" or "out of line." Her treatment also reveals the ways in which these different metaphors, from "straight orientation" to "children are investments," provide coherence for one another. And recognizing these concepts as metaphors can help us understand what is highlighted and what is left out by understanding desire and social relations in these ways. But, as

with the case of racialized communities and their boundaries, Ahmed is also able to show both (1) the ways in which these concepts are the effect of the movement of some bodies toward one another and away from others and (2) how such movement re-creates the conditions for the metaphorical concepts. The family line, the queer community, and the heteronormative couple are continually reconstituted by the movement of some family members toward shared spaces and the expulsion of others, the movement of people who are "out of line" toward one another, and the movement of men and women toward one another (at least in the appropriate settings, like the restaurant dining room), respectively.

Conclusion: Queering Our Metaphors, Queering Our (E)Motions

In conclusion, I would like to note that Ahmed's work is not only diagnostic, but it can also help us develop ways to work toward more just social relations. If it's true (1) that the metaphors we use to understand social groups and identities effect the movements of bodies toward and away from one another, (2) that the movement of bodies recreates the social groups and identities that are understood metaphorically, and (3) that current social relations are unjust and unnecessarily restrictive, then we could work to challenge those social relations by critically reevaluating our metaphors, our movements, and our emotions. Consider the way in which metaphors of battle and contamination are marshalled to support white supremacy, conjure fear of immigration, and present queer desire as a threat. One might follow Susan Sontag, here, in calling for metaphors to be viewed with skepticism or even abandoned. Perhaps the only effective solution is to understand black lives, immigrant lives, and queer lives in their concrete singularity. If Lakoff and Johnson are right about the importance of metaphor for our understanding of the world, though, then we cannot ask to simply stop understanding social phenomena like race, immigration, or sexuality through metaphorical

22 Ibid., 82.

23 Ibid., 102-3.

concepts. Becoming more aware of these metaphors and what they exclude, though, may work against the injustices supported by the current metaphors. Imagine calling to mind, for example, the way in which immigrants are largely different from invading forces because their motivations are usually about their personal or familial well-being rather than a desire to defeat or conquer their new home. Such an awareness quickly robs the "immigrants are an invading force" metaphor of much of its urgency. In this way, recognizing existing metaphors for what they emphasize or obscure could help us gain a greater degree of control over whether and how those metaphors are used. Indeed, I think that this is a tactic that Ahmed herself uses. In her discussion of the family line, for instance, she notes the way that children are understood as indebted to the family, as an investment. But of course, this excludes all sorts of other ways in which families may relate to children, and in recognizing the extent to which we view children as "investments" we may be motivated to put greater emphasis on these other modes of relation.

A second option would be to promulgate new metaphors. I find an example of this tactic in Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands*/La Frontera. In her discussion of *mestizaje*, she uses the language of "hybridity" and "mixture" to think of cultural mixture differently than it is often considered in U.S. contexts, that is, as contamination, of spoiling purity. Like corn that has been bred to develop certain traits, a culture that results from mixture has the opportunity to "take inventory," to glean the strengths from each culture and/or discard aspects that are regressive.[24] Lakoff and Johnson point out that creating and spreading new metaphors is difficult, particularly when they conflict with a broad range of other coherent metaphors that structure our experiences and/

or when they are promoted by those in positions of less power relative to those deploying the existing metaphors.[25] Still, this may be a useful long-term tactic, and even if new metaphors receive little uptake in mainstream culture, they may still be successful within some communities for whom the existing metaphors are more readily recognized as insufficient or problematic.

Of course, for Ahmed these metaphorical concepts are founded upon the movement of bodies such that to truly challenge unjust social relations, we must also work to question who we are moving toward and away from. This will require critical reflection on the emotions that move us. We might imagine starting on the smallest scale, the day-to-day interactions that serve as the foundation of social groups and institutions such that we can understand them through the metaphors discussed above. If one feels disgust, fear, hatred, or shame in encounters with a differently racialized other, for example, one could slow down and interrogate the basis of that emotion. Whence the fear, the hatred, or shame? A more difficult task, but one that is equally important, would be to interrogate feelings of comfort or love around those with whom one is identified. This is especially important for those in positions of relative privilege and/or power. What is the cost, one might ask, of this feeling of comfort? What or who is excluded? One may also experience spontaneous emotions that problematize their habits of movement and metaphors. Ahmed's example of feeling a surge of discomfort at the arrangement of tables for couples at the restaurant could prove instructive in this regard. One might also imagine the white woman on the subway feeling warmth, rather than hatred, toward Lorde as she sat next to her and working to sustain that emotion. Of course, the weight

of our metaphors and habits often leads us to reject these spontaneous emotions when they question the status quo, but such "outlaw emotions," as Alison Jaggar has called them, *may* be a starting point for challenging and revising our habits and metaphors.[26] Hopefully, with considered reflection, such self-interrogations could lead to embracing discomfort by moving toward those others that one has tended to move away from in the past. If more people moved toward one another regardless of race, if more families were welcoming of those who do not "honor their investment," if more public spaces were accessible and open to all, then it would be much more difficult to sustain the metaphors that understand some as outside, as deviant or "out of line," as a threat or contaminant.

To be clear, neither practice – questioning and revising our metaphors or interrogating our emotions and changing the ways we move toward and away from others – will be easy. Our metaphors are entrenched in the culture; our movements toward and away from others are habituated; and our emotions are sustained by these metaphors and movements. Indeed, I think Ahmed helps us understand the pull of the status quo. Still, by helping us understand our concepts, emotions, and movements as contingent – as a result of who we come into contact with and what form that contact takes[27] – she also provides resources for rethinking the status quo and for forming new habits. It is in our power to push boundaries and live lives "out of line."
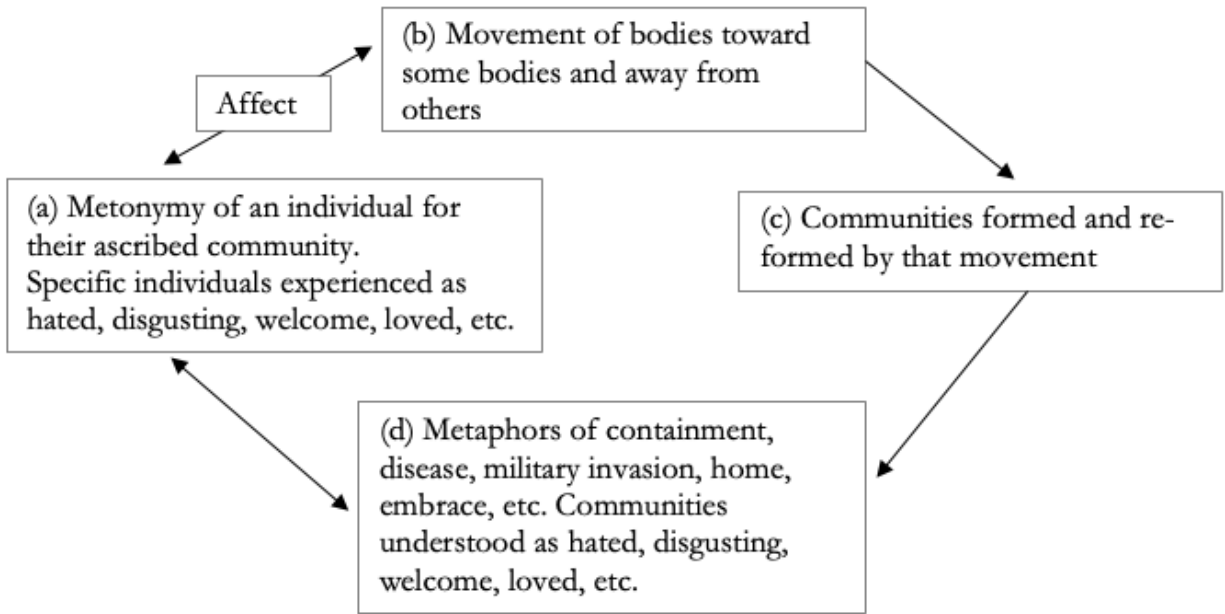
24 Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera* (San Francisco: Aunte Lute, 2012 [1987]). See especially Chapter 7.

25 Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By,* 145, 157.

26 Alison M. Jaggar, Love and Knowledge: Emotion in Feminist Epistemology, *Inquiry*, 32 (2), (1989), 157-176. In this article, Jaggar helpfully distinguishes between "outlaw emotions," which are those that challenge the emotional expectations of a specific context, and *feminist* outlaw emotions, which challenge the emotional expectations of a context in a way that is "characteristic of a society in which all humans (and perhaps some nonhuman life, too) thrive, or […] conducive to establishing such a society" (161). Clearly it is the latter I am advocating for.

27 Ahmed points out that "'contingent' has the same root in Latin as the word 'contact' (*contingere: com-*, with, *tangere*, to touch). So she uses the word in a way that honors this sense: "Contingency is linked in this way to the sociality of being 'with' others, to getting close enough to touch." Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 103.

Affect

(b) Movement of bodies toward some bodies and away from others

(a) Metonymy of an individual for their ascribed community. Specific individuals experienced as hated, disgusting, welcome, loved, etc.

(c) Communities formed and re-formed by that movement

(d) Metaphors of containment, disease, military invasion, home, embrace, etc. Communities understood as hated, disgusting, welcome, loved, etc.

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Josh Dohmen

Josh Dohmen is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Mississippi University for Women. His research focuses on feminist epistemology, twentieth century continental philosophy, and the philosophy of disability as resources for enriching ethical and political thought. Josh is grateful to the students in his Existentialism seminar for prompting him to think more about the topic of this paper.

Scent Reception

and Binding

St. John's Head

Leah Huizar

Scent Reception and Binding

Some sudden flash in the silk
shirt passing, purple air

carrying a particular salt.
The warm rubber of summer

sneakers & suggestion of Guess
perfume but from where? When?

What girl was I
then? Just under

the tongue, long emptied
shells drift back to a churning

gray shore. I won't succeed in re-grasping
whatever it was that must

once have been
important. I stood on the street

nearly touching a fold in time, the esters
of an afternoon from the last

millennium, carried away
on some stranger's passing body.

St. John's Head

Autumn's ether carries the currents of a distant
clash: *Those* people; *my* backyard. God only knows.
We take no evidence. We absorb no change
in our routine. We go to bed

and rise again, year over year. One night,
a moment's precision will mattered more than

the others. Boom. Break. Deep
as night in the country. That's how it'll go,

isn't it? The air, the autumn,
the accretion of unease,

the leaves thick on my boots.
The waiting for cold fire to take the last

leaf on the last branch
of this maple and like a revelation, Saint

John's stained-glass pattern will shatter
over pews some unexpected Someday,

on a morning when no morning arrives,
and the silver sun is no sun,

and swift cold flashes split the clouds;
I might believe,

selfishly, finally, only, that the world would end,
the morning it ends for me.

Leah Huizar

Leah Huizar is a Mexican-American writer and poet originally from Southern California. Her creative writing and research centers on the cultural and historic landscape of the West Coast and the ways in which gender, religion, and colonization have shaped it. Her first book of poems, *Inland Empire*, was published by Noemi Press. She holds an MFA from Penn State and is an assistant professor of English at Drake University. She can be found online at leahhuizar.com.

billow and pulse

Abi Pollokoff

billow and pulse

wide open in the meadow, a
shell in the greenspeak. wide
open & spinning in it.

gold thread spinning here, gold
heads tipsy. gold thread on the
arm & gold thread in the eye:
glisten & flicker & glisten &
gleam.

wingkissed & airy, i'm full up in
lilies. all harken & bloom. all
sunnery.

burrow in the toes & take root.
don't leave the windwatch,
don't leave the furl. fingers in
flicker & display. in parity &
pearl the little nailbeds, settled
& stretched. palms bedded
down with terrain, all tucked in
& gleaming.

•

those toes are rooted now,
bone, something to keep
covered. the skin: a mesh with
its own weakness.

process & pestilence: virus in
the touch of the earth, soaked
all in & sobbing. see it & retreat.
see it & believe. the body is the
muscle & the dirtstrain. the
muscle strains & splinters.

this is the body being soaked

up. this is the body being
soaped in. this is body being
pulled down, pushing out its
skin & pruning. falling
skincaved into granite &
dismay. this is body rejecting
itself.

this is the self's screech &
summon: this, what's silent &
screaming.

the minute & the month take
the same time: breath only one
breath, only one breach.
•
in this always assuming state:
tongue all twisted up about
itself. so many things in the
body, all sucked up from
below. so many things in the
body, so many things to cave it.
hard things & soft things. hard
things & soft things. hard things
& soft things all up the spine.

so: self-diagnose. self-medicate.
self-mediate.
measure & miss. measure &
miss. measure & measure
again. remind the self to be
human. remind the self to be
animal. tell the self to be tame.
grow a little.

a breeze in the breath. a music

now, what the body is made of.
breathe some life into the spine
& willow through it. bend &
don't break. beseech. beseech.
beseech. beseech.

•

toes in the row of earth now,
self grows out the self.
wingkissed & airy, all full up in
lilies. what aroma here, what
odor. virus in the touch of it,
unboned & burning.

all full up with oil & thistle: love
the lump & curdle of it, a
disappearing act. pluck & dry.
crush & inhale. this body is
made of all these beautiful dead
things, all wormed up. all
wriggling. worms stretch the
rustle here: ruby in the root.
ruby on the brow. ruby is the
pebble & the sweat.

so soundless, this body,
bedded down with nettles. all
worked out & something to
grow, to gather. the madness is
a muscle, stretched & tensing.
all verbed out. all swallowing.
all worked out, the root & rush
of it now, all spineplucked &
empty. what toes. what root.
what vertebrae.

Abi Pollokoff

Abi Pollokoff is a Seattle-based writer and book artist with work forthcoming or found in EX/POST, KALEIDOSCOPED, The Seventh Wave, EcoTheo, and Denver Quarterly, among others. Her work has been supported by the Jack Straw Cultural Center, Hugo House, The Seattle Review of Books, more. Currently, Abi is the managing editor for Poetry Northwest Editions and the events manager for Open Books: A Poem Emporium, along with spending time in many other hats. She received her MFA from the University of Washington. Find Abi at abipollokoff.com.

Future Hearing of Heels

blake nemec

Future Hearing of Heels

How heels click down the sidewalk, the ting tick echoing onto the road, jumping up
brick buildings can withstand fires
figure the stiletto tip
writing hard femme codes, directing
masses towards laughter, into joy to honor elevating
foreclosures of FOSTA-SESTA off heel point, tidal waves of energy
replace dead fuel, the spur tunnels allow free migrating routes, wild, unsanitized and
unmanicured
migratory routes rotate as resources bend and sway, anthropocentric realities, how
femme foundations for food, water or work locate steps, centers
rhythmic activity, beats bassy, beats rapid beats low how
cultures sense equanimity how a movement feels
forward how a group palpitates the pulse. How this cityscape presses on
one's dead reckoning-how this city speaks of its streets
salutes to its ancestors living in the heel tips. Did you
tip? Did you delight in tipping as an exchange
forward/back heel
tip tap onto one's equilibrium, tap alongside the daily rhythm, tell it around
town. Tell it under the city and through the tunnels where walls used to be. Heel tip
tracks da da daa, da da daa in the parks and people sway
scarves in appreciation. Noisy heel tip time; gobs of beats in the air.

blake nemec

blake nemec is a writer, teacher, sound recordist, and health care worker, who lives in Chicago. He is the author of Sharing Plastic, as well as ongoing articles supporting abolition, and the decriminalization of unprotected bodies.. Hir work has appeared in situations such as SoundWeb, &NOW, Entitle; Undisciplined Environments, JUPITER 88, Red Rover Reading Series, Rio Grande Review, Captive Genders, or the National Queer Arts Performance Festival. He has received fellowships from Lambda Literary and the Santa Fe Art Institute. blakenemec.net

Layered

What I Learned in Galicia

Lau Cesarco Eglin

Layered

I'm 50 years ago all the time
transforming into lives that belong
in the same stitch but are torn
apart by what I understand. Fail to.

I'm 50 years ago all the time
all my life. My lives. This one
that whispers softly under the everyday. Breath
infused by the flow I barely
perceive. I'm learning the language,
and by trying so hard
I push the whisper away:
Out of reach, this form of knowing.

I'm 50 years ago all the time
unraveling in the evasive.
A moment
of being in the continuous
balance between awake and asleep,
privy to magic—what is revealed
before me, within
is the present.

What I Learned in Galicia

I enjoy eating strawberries as much
as I saw you know when it was time
to bring them in from the garden,
bite into them fully, forgetting
everything else that is not
part of the word *ripe*.

        Real is much more than just there.
        Real is a different side of existing and royal.

Dirt and summer ran through
the colander holes and I
was not sure if strawberries tasted
more or less real after you washed them,
or what happens to real when it's not
tangible and edible and with you.

Lau Cesarco Eglin

Laura Cesarco Eglin is a poet and translator from Uruguay. She is the author of three collections of poetry and four chapbooks, including T*ime/Tempo: The Idea of Breath* (PRESS 254, 2022), *Life, One Not Attached to Conditionals* (Thirty West Publishing House, 2020) and Reborn in Ink, translated by Catherine Jagoe and Jesse Lee Kercheval (The Word Works, 2019). Cesarco Eglin translates from Spanish, Portuguese, Portuñol, and Galician. She is the translator of *Of Death. Minimal Odes* by the Brazilian author Hilda Hilst (co•im•press), winner of the 2019 Best Translated Book Award in Poetry. She co-translated from the Portuñol Fabián Severo's *Night in the North* (Eulalia Books, 2020). *claus and the scorpion*, Cesarco Eglin's translation from Galician of Lara Dopazo Ruibal's poetry collection, is forthcoming from co•im•press in 2022. Cesarco Eglin is the co-founding editor and publisher of Veliz Books and teaches creative writing at the University of Houston-Downtown. She can be found at lauracesarcoeglin.com