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Coyle, Derek (2002) *'Out to an other side': the poetry of Paul Celan and Seamus Heaney and the poetic challenge to post-modern discussions of absence and presence in the context of theological and philosophical conceptions of language and artistic production.* PhD thesis.

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Thesis:

'Out to an Other Side': The poetry of Paul Celan and Seamus Heaney and the poetic challenge to post-modern discussions of absence and presence in the context of theological and philosophical conceptions of language and artistic production

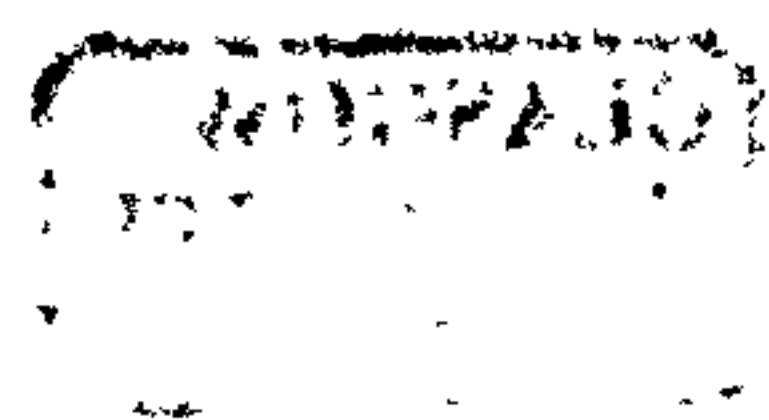
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For the Ph. D Degree

University of Glasgow

Faculty of Divinity

July 2002



Abstract

Martin Heidegger in 'The Origin of the Work of Art' seeks to approach the self-subsistent nature of art. The Greek Temple opens up a space within which our Being may dwell. It is the site of human civilization and religion, and of our capacity to dwell within abstractions like peace, justice, truth and representation. Art breaks open a new place and presents things in a fresh light. Language is the primary model for this activity.

Paul Celan in his poetry offers a challenge to Heideggerian abstraction. Both poet and philosopher were intimately familiar with each other's work, yet there is no essay on Celan, or even a reference, in the entire Heideggerian corpus. Celan's poem 'The Straitening' conveys the breakdown of meaning that has occurred after the holocaust. In form and content it challenges any Heideggerian notion of the higher univocity achieved by great poetry.

We will explore recent examples of how poets have examined the idea of cultural belonging and exclusion. We present a distillation of this idea in the writings of Paul Celan, particularly his presentation of the moment of 'Shibboleth'. We explore the biblical origin of the term 'Shibboleth' in a conflict between the army of Jephthah and the Ephraimites. We look at a contemporary poem with 'shibboleth' as its theme, Seamus Heaney's 'Broagh'.

A consistent theme of Maurice Blanchot's critical reflection from *The Work of Fire* in 1949 up to and including *The Space of Literature* in 1955, is the manner in which our being creatures unto death allows us to create art, and to think and write in the abstraction that is language. Life endures death and maintains itself in it. For Blanchot Rainer Maria Rilke is one of the most significant modern poets in the way in which he has presented and explored this theme. We challenge Blanchot's inadequate reading of Rilke in *The Space of Literature* as an instance of his own pre-conceived philosophical nihilism.

We present Jacques Derrida's essay *On the Name*, along with a reading of Seamus Heaney's poetry in the light of this essay, as an attempt to keep open a modern philosophical horizon to the invitation of the transcendental Other. We present Immanuel Levinas' thought in *Totality and Infinity*, as well as Derrida's critique of Levinas in *Writing and Difference*, as an attempt to preserve a post-modern, intellectually credible, metaphysical expression for thought.

Acknowledgements

The first person I am deeply grateful to for bringing this thesis into the world, with his vast midwifery experience in all things academic, is my supervisor the Rev. Prof. David Jasper. Thank you David for your insightful thoughts, for being a paragon of patience and for possessing such a well read mind. Many thanks for guiding me through all stages of the Ph. D process. In your capacity as founder of the Centre for the Study of Literature, Theology and the Arts at the University of Glasgow, I thank you for your vision and persistence in running a creative, progressive and satisfying intellectual environment. My best wishes to your lovely wife Alison and all the family.

I convey also my appreciation to other Centre personnel: to Dr. Kiyoshi Tsuchiya for the many provocative and heated seminar papers that kept us arguing for three years, to the Rev. Prof. George Newlands for so ably taking control of the helm and to all the various Ph.D and M.Th. students who passed through the Centre in my time there, along with all other visiting lecturers and researchers. A particular thank you to Dr. David Klemm from the University of Iowa for his term as a visiting researcher. Words fail to express my gratitude to you for your more than generous hospitality in Iowa in my time there.

In particular a big expression of gratitude to fellow students over the years: Raphael Sys, Thorsten Leisser, Trygve Stabrun, Nick Thompson. To the staff in the office who endured much blarney: Margaret, Jean, Marion and Marie. To all the staff of the GFT, truly one of the highlights of my stay in bonnie Alba, and who also happened to keep me financially and good humouredly afloat in my last year there.

Special thanks and buckets of creativity to that great, neglected poet of Dundee, my good friend Pete Faulkner, his lovely wife Ruth and all their beautiful children, especially Caitlin. To Suzanne Scott and all poets everywhere. An especial thank you to old friends in Ireland: Aoife Kerrigan for being such an ace proof-reader and great pal. A great big thanks to Paul Nestor, friend and confidante for many years: that was a great trip to the Highlands wasn't it? To Helena Donnelly and Deirdre McCabe for that last minute visit. To Caroline Gavin and Brian Higgins. To Padraig Kenny and Caroline: get that stage play written boy! And last but by no means least, thank you to that most wonderful of women Dorothy Kenny.

A big hug and kiss to all my wonderful fellow LGBT friends at the University of Glasgow who, what can I say? kept me sane for so long and so well, with whom I boogied and occasionally cried, shared so much with, to friendship lifelong and deep: Dan and Sharon, thanks for that unforgettable thirtieth birthday party, now what am I to do at forty?, especially that Greek Apollo amongst Apollos Menelas Siafakas, to Brian Matthews, David Hay, David Grant, Graham Ramsey, Kenny Duffus, Sean Nye, Laura Howell and Maggie Currie, Ruth and Jo, Bob Softley, Pam and Jo, Andrew Kane, and Iain Bull. Salutations: to Craig I and II, to Nick, to Kiel, Paul Brown, Ian, Ross Feilen, Stephen Keltie, Sarah, Ray and John, Lindsey and Abe. For the many great late Thursday nights at Karen Dunbar's karaoke night in Sadie Frost's under Queen Street Station and into the wee hours at Bennett's, Glasgow's trashiest club. And the many Saturday nights begun in Delmonica's and well and truly concluded in that most tasteful of venues The Polo Lounge. Thanks to Donald Reid. I acknowledge the creative verve of Stuart Hammond and all at the Poetry Workshop in the LGBT Centre on Dixon Street.

Thanks to all the baristas of the coffee shops of the West End. Especially the staff in Costas on Great Western Road, and one of my favourites, the one with the motor bike in the window, on Byres Road, and whose name I cannot remember right now! Ah, I remember it now, Tinderbox.

A special thanks to Prof. Brian Cosgrove at the Department of English, National University of Ireland, Maynooth for his close and thorough reading of this thesis.

And finally a big thank you to all my family, to Dad and Mum, to Anthony, Alan, Roisin and Liam. I bet you're glad this is over, finally!

for my

Father and Mother

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Introduction:

Unemployed and Homeless, Theology in a Post-Modern Space

Where does thought find itself today?

Is it too big a question to ask: where in terms of intellectual enterprise does humanity stand today? How do we understand ourselves, the world we live in, the shape of human destiny, the purpose of existence? What answers to these questions are given in the current sociological and political matrix; how are these questions answered in the universities, in schools around the world, on television and radio? Does theology or religion play a role today in addressing these questions? To begin to address some of these questions we will commence with contemporary academic philosopher Simon Critchley, geographer David Harvey and finally theologian Jean-Luc Marion.

In a recent publication Simon Critchley states the problem of post-modernity quite bluntly: 'the task of *philosophical* modernity, at least in its peak experiences—Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger - is a thinking through of the death of God in terms of the problem of finitude'¹. This has radical implications, for not only are we considering the death of the God of Judaeo-Christian tradition, but also the disappearance of many of the ideals that have given to humanity a purpose, goal and meaning in life. We are witnessing the death of all altruistic principle, ideal or rule for

¹ Simon Critchley: *Very Little...Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature*: Routledge: London: 2000, p. 2

governing human affairs; we have seen the death of all that has given humanity direction and which has existed as a font of human aspiration for millennia. Critchley writes: 'those familiar with the landscape of philosophical modernity will recognize this situation as a description of the problem of nihilism'². What is nihilism? It is the breakdown we have described; where all of our systems of meaning collapse, where all which once was seen as a transcendent (meaning above and beyond our world to which we should direct ourselves) source of value is denigrated and nullified.

In terms of philosophy Critchley tracks down the wellsprings of this expression of thought. He sees it emerging first in the Enlightenment, spreading into modernity, eventually finding its current form in a distinctive post-modern nihilism. For Critchley it is broached first in the writings of Immanuel Kant.³ We re-call Kant's critique of metaphysics. Kant denied human beings cognitive access to the speculative objects of classical metaphysics, realities like God and the soul, and removed the possibility of knowing things-in-themselves and the ground of the self. Kant's goal was to achieve epistemological certainty through a limitation of the achievements actually possible or attainable by human cognition. Friedrich Nietzsche took this position further in his assembled miscellany *The Will to Power*, where he wrote that: 'the highest values devalue themselves. The aim is lacking; 'why' finds no answer'.⁴

For Martin Heidegger when we begin to contemplate and think about the essence of nihilism we are brought into the thought of Being as that unthought ground of all metaphysical thinking. We cannot overcome nihilism as long as we speak the

² Critchley: 2000, p. 3

³ David Harvey writes: 'the moral crisis of our time is a crisis of Enlightenment thought': *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*: Blackwell: Oxford: 2000, p. 41

⁴ Critchley: 2000, p. 7

same metaphysical language of nihilism, and, for Heidegger, we can only hope to overcome this problem by a radical transformation of language. Theodor Adorno writes: ‘the only philosophy which can be responsibly practised in face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption’.⁵ For Adorno the intellectual task is to fashion perspectives that reveal the world as it will appear in the messianic light, as needy and deformed and in need of transformation, and pointing towards what that change would look like, if realisable or realised. We must achieve this goal without violence. We can say, at the very least, that this perspective has the merit of keeping open the horizon of future action.

For Martin Heidegger, especially the young Heidegger, death is something to be achieved and it is the fundamental possibility that permits us to grasp the totality of existence; it is the closure that makes sense of the open possibility of Being. For Maurice Blanchot death is something that we are unable to lay hold of. The event of our death is always too late for us. We will examine Blanchot’s thought in greater detail in Chapter Four of this thesis. For him death is radically resistant to the order of representation. We will question this closely after a reading of the poems Seamus Heaney has written about the death of his parents. In a sense representations of death are always misrepresentations or representations of an absence. Poets like Heaney who wish to speak of death use a trope like *prosopopeia*, the trope by which an imaginary person, or an absent one, is presented as speaking or acting. We will

⁵ Critchley: 2000, p. 18

examine what happens in this act of the creative imagination. Is it ‘the failure of presence’ Simon Critchley argues it is?⁶

How do we characterise post-modernity?

We have used the term post-modernity in this introduction. What do we understand by this term? David Harvey in his academic bestseller *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* provides us with a lucid analysis of the phenomenon referred to as post-modernity⁷. What characterises the post-modern? For Harvey a mark of the post-modern is the acceptance as inevitable of ephemerality, fragmentation, discontinuity, and the chaotic; the post-modern subject swims within this cultural dislocation as if that is all there is. Within post-modern art forms different realities coexist, collide, and interpenetrate. For example, in Salman Rushdie’s recent novel *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* there is a constant shifting of narrative worlds, summed up in the abiding metaphor of the novel of the constant seismic activity below the earth’s surface; we move from the quiet, low-key, pre-colonial preoccupations of a family in Bombay, to the modern urban city of London, England, to a rock band performing in a football stadium, just one product of contemporary bohemian culture in the US.⁸

Another example will serve to illustrate; it is Ciaran Carson’s *Shamrock Tea*, a book about which we may ask: is it a novel, or a text, a surrealist memoir, or a fantasy? The central conceit of the work features *The Arnolfini Portrait* by Jan Van

⁶ Critchley: 2000, p. 26

⁷ David Harvey: *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*: Blackwell: Oxford: 2000, Chapter Three

⁸ Salman Rushdie: *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*: BCA: London: 1999

Eyck. The core protagonists are invited to enter into this painting rather like the characters in Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, or those in C.S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* as they enter into their respective fantasy realms. The second device is the magical concoction labelled Shamrock Tea, an invention of the imagination of Carson. When consumed this magical substance allows the participant to enter into any time or dimension, to see reality with a divine perspective, and so we enter into a narrative where a Wittgenstein (yes, the philosopher) converses with contemporaries of a young boy called Carson who might be a version of the author, and where Oscar Wilde, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and Arthur Conan Doyle mingle with folk of many centuries and locations, as real or authorial presences, with the distinction between the two erased as a logical irrelevance within the framework established by the work.

In *Shamrock Tea* what often provides the only narrative logic is a particular Saint being a patron of an art practiced well by a protagonist. Their Saint's day happens to fall on the day that Oscar Wilde was tried, and this association provides the only link and logic connecting the next event that is about to occur within the book with that which has proceeded it. There are no weak links in this chain and this is an integral part of its point: the mystical, almost medieval notion of the interconnectedness of all reality as seen from God's perspective. Carson does pull in post-Modern, post-Enlightenment, tricks like wormholes and space-time continuums, drawn as much from the world of Sci-Fi and *Star Trek* as from Stephen Hawking. Carson mimics or simulates many voices, from mock seriousness to profound reflections on obtuse topics, to the lilted perambulations of a peasant Irish religious brother serving Shamrock Tea to Gerard Manley Hopkins in the grounds of a

fictitious Loyola House in the rolling hills of the Mourne Mountains.⁹ As should be evident from this example a characteristic of post-modernity, as we have seen, is its foregrounding of the situation where different realities co-exist, collide and interpenetrate.

The post-modern city consists of an emporium of styles. We have a maniacal scrapbook filled with colourful entries. An example from close to hand, in order to illustrate, is the Clydesdale bank plaza in Edinburgh. Here we have a typical clash of modernity and post-modernity; on the one hand we have the brash, glass-fronted abstract designs of modernity and, on the other, these sit side by side with the neo-classical, grand styles of post-modernity which simulate a past world and its attendant glories. The communication of knowledge is a significant factor here. For through films, television, books and radio, history and the experience of the past is turned into a seemingly vast archive that is instantly retrievable and capable of being consumed endlessly at the push of a button. Harvey writes: 'the post-modern penchant for jumbling together all manner of references to past styles is one of its most pervasive characteristics. Reality, it seems, is being shaped to mimic media images'.¹⁰

Harvey identifies mass television ownership, satellite, radio and other electronic media as a key factor influencing the contemporary mindset or sensibility. The world's different times and spaces have been collapsed onto the depthless surface of the television screen. The world can watch as they happen and observe where they happen everything from the Olympic Games, the World Cup, to a deadly tragedy and the rise and fall of political dictatorships, from the comfort of their armchairs, while

⁹ Ciaran Carson: *Shamrock Tea*: Granta Books: London: 2001

¹⁰ David Harvey: 2000, p. 85

films made in spectacular locations and mass tourism have made available to many vicarious or simulated experiences of different cultures, histories and locations.

We see something of the effects of such stimulus in the poetry of Matthew Sweeney, a poet whose original imaginative and real location was County Donegal on Ireland's northwest coastline, but who has lived in London city's cosmopolitan milieu for many years now. In the world of the poem all times and places can co-exist in a simultaneous instance of imagining, form, line and word. Post-modern art forms might well just be the achievements of the human imagination in specific forms, and yet, ones whose realisation have only been technologically achievable in recent decades but whose potential have always been latent. In Sweeney's poem 'In the Ice', itself a version of thirteenth century Italian poet Dante's *Inferno*, XXXII, 16 - 139, one of the protagonists swears in idiomatic Hiberno-English: 'Fuck off and don't annoy me further'.¹¹ One is certain a vital advocate of the Tuscan dialect would appreciate such vernacular genius. 'The Tunnel' presents the younger poet's imaginary journey down a tunnel running underneath the island of Ireland in his homemade dinghy, having entered via a manhole near his family home in Donegal, emerging eventually as if in Atlantis, Mars or Florida to view the strange 'accents of Cork fishermen/ who stood and watched me emerge'.¹² There is a disruption in the concrete locale of the poem; it moves easily between these locations within its world; as opposed to the early poems of Seamus Heaney, work that is characteristically strongly rooted in its sense of place, Sweeney's recent work as an aura of the virtual about it.¹³

¹¹ Matthew Sweeney: *A Smell of Fish*: Jonathan Cape: London: 2000, p. 45 - 47

¹² Matthew Sweeney: 2000, p. 5

¹³ See poems like 'Digging' and 'Follower' in Seamus Heaney's *Death of a Naturalist*: Faber & Faber: London: 1966

Sweeney frequently deploys such imaginative strategies to evoke in his reader a sense of the brilliance of our being in the world, the spontaneity of the senses as they comprehend the presence of the world to them in a moment of radical encounter. This is often coupled with a confrontation that forces us to face the radical contingency of our being, often in moments of danger that border on exhilaration. 'The Volcano' could be a news reel or a snippet from a disaster movie in its recounting of the fleeing of a couple with their best sari, Armani suit and monkey from the area of natural disaster. David Harvey might read this poem with a commentary like 'a typical middle-class couple with their eclectic but cool commodities identifying their buying power and class status, a collage of random fashion items deconstructive of overarching narratives of meaning, inter-relatedness or connection'; and Sweeney's ending about how the chairs in their house will, by the lava, be eventually turned 'into sculptures/ that one day we'd come back and see' is typical of this group's attraction to provocative spectacle lacking in ethical and emotional substance or depth.¹⁴

Another contemporary poet, originally hailing from New York's Irish community, but living in London for many years, Michael Donaghy's work exhibits similar post-modern facets and exploits comparable tactics. In 'Cruising Byzantium' there is the deliberate echo of William Butler Yeats's 'The Circus Animals' Desertion' (and we re-call also his 'Sailing to Byzantium' and 'Byzantium') in the line 'and not such lives as these are emblem of'¹⁵. We witness post-modern quotation and parasitism, although Donaghy's poem adopts a somewhat sexier take on things than the Sligo bard might ever have conceived even in a Crazy Jane moment (and this

¹⁴ Sweeney: 2000, p. 10

¹⁵ Michael Donaghy: *Dances Learned Last Night: Poems 1975 – 1995*: Picador: London: 2000, p. 68

is altogether in keeping with a post-modern penchant for *jouissance* or pleasure). Surrounded by middle-class commodities: 'cash, cashmere coat nor cat', Donaghy's narrator is still in search for love. The poem does explore a post-modern dilemma with its presentation of the photos of the holiday with his lover in Byzantium and how the electronic memory or preservation of the event is/was as important as the event itself, fore-grounded within the choice of idiom in the poem: 'You have become the fetish that you wear'.

The problem of reference, association and meaning is explored explicitly in 'City of God'. Augustine's influential work *City of God* is there of course, and Augustinian despair at the fallenness of the world of men. The poem tells the story of the seminarian whom the poet knew from the back pews of his local church and his method of associating one thing with another in order to learn for exams, how the interior of a church can be read as a manual of theology. The poet imagines the neighbourhood transformed by this student's concern with salvation and damnation. By implication, the poem argues, the Christian mindset of previous centuries intrudes into present consciousness and can bear an oppressive weight.

Here was Bruno Street where Bernadette
 collapsed, bleeding through her skirt
 and died, he had heard, in a state of mortal sin;
 here, the site of the bakery fire where Peter stood
 screaming on the red-hot fire escape,
 his bare feet blistering before he jumped;
 and here the storefront voodoo church beneath the el

where the Cuban *bruja* bought black candles,
its window strange with plaster saints and seashells.¹⁶

From the sublime concerns of theology and redemption, the next poem in his volume 'Liverpool' concerns itself with tattoos on the body.¹⁷ And so the poetic landscape of Donaghy's work resembles the pastiche or kitsch of a contemporary cityscape where one might find a classical church beside a bizarre market pedalling all forms of apparently irredeemable clutter.

There is a particular aptness to Michael Donaghy's choice of title for his collection *Conjure*.¹⁸ In the poems 'My Flu' and 'Haunts' memories of childhood, incidents with his father recently deceased, are re-called from memory by the poet. What happened and what didn't? The poet refers to film as a means of preserving the past authentically and questions that proposition. If he had a camera recording would that tell or hold the truth of the experience, how it was to be there? Would it really contain the experience of what it was like to be sick in bed with the flu and comforted by his father way back in 1962. 'Haunts' in its title alone suggests the territory of ghostliness, presence, revenants and literary quotation and life, reading Hamlet into an encounter with his own ghostly father and his telling his father not to be afraid in the dark as a child, in a deliberate reversal of roles. What is the proper perspective from which to approach the world or reality? Such are the characteristic pre-occupations of the post-modern artwork.

¹⁶ Donaghy: *Dances Learned Last Night: Poems 1975 – 1995*, p. 69 - 70

¹⁷ Donaghy: *Dances Learned Last Night: Poems 1975 – 1995*, p. 71

¹⁸ Michael Donaghy: *Conjure*: Picador: London: 2000

Theological icons and idols

What is the theologian to make of all this? How can we begin to critique it? Does it have a positive side, and do we necessarily have to shout 'No!', conservatively assuming that such change is a bad thing, that we are on a path bound for moral and cultural ruination in the end? What is the proper task of the theologian, if any, in this present age? Philosopher and theologian Jean-Luc Marion has spoken of the 'I' of our time as 'a modern of the age of distress'¹⁹. To help us formulate a way of approaching post-modern phenomena critically and intelligently we turn to his slim but thoughtful and provocative book *God Without Being*.

In the first chapter of *God Without Being* Marion develops a distinction between the idol and the icon. Both icon and idol indicate a manner of being for beings. With regard to aesthetic production they indicate works of art that are so worked that they no longer restrict their visibility to themselves. However, through remaining absolutely immanent to themselves they signal indissolubly towards another, still undetermined term. What distinguishes them eventually? The idol is characterised by the fact that we can 'see it so visibly that the very fact of seeing it suffices to know it'²⁰. And so: 'in this stop, the gaze ceases to overshoot and transpierce itself, hence it ceases to transpierce visible things, in order to pause in the splendour of one of them'²¹. What happens with the idol is that the gaze lets itself be filled, and instead of outflanking the visible, of not seeing it and rendering it invisible, the gaze discovers itself as contained and held back by the visible. The idol becomes

¹⁹ Jean-Luc Marion: *God Without Being: Hors-Texte*: Univ. of Chicago Press: Chicago: 1995, p. 15, Trans. by Thomas A. Carlson

²⁰ Jean-Luc Marion: 1995, p.9

²¹ Jean-Luc Marion: 1995, p. 11

like a mirror, a mirror reflecting the gaze's image, in fact, the gaze's aim and the scope of its aim. And so 'with the idol, the invisible mirror admits no beyond, because the gaze cannot raise the sight of its aim'²².

What does Marion do with the foregoing reflection? He utilises it to critique the methodology of philosophical thought. He develops his notion of the conceptual idol. He argues that in concepts thought can freeze, or stop at a particular place as much as the imagination can within the medium of poetry or in artistic, visual representation. Philosophy itself produces idols: 'when philosophical thought expresses a concept of what it then names "God", this concept functions exactly as an idol. It gives itself to be seen, but thus all the better conceals itself as the mirror where, thought, invisibly, has its forward point fixed, so that the invisible finds itself, with an aim suspended by the fixed concept, disqualified and abandoned, thought freezes, and the idolatrous concept of "God" appears, where, more than God, thought judges itself'²³. Marion is then in a position to speak of Nietzsche as a breaker of idols, conceptually, and not necessarily an irreligious thinker. His assault on God was upon the God of the philosophers whom he exposed as an empty idol, worthy of worship no longer. He may well have done thereby some good service to religious thought.

What has Marion to say of the icon? He writes: 'the icon does not result from a vision but provokes one'²⁴. What the icon achieves is to allow the visible to be saturated little by little with the invisible, and thereby summons sight. He speaks of: 'the invisible bestowing the visible, in order thus to deduce the visible from itself and

²² Jean-Luc Marion: 1995, p. 13

²³ Jean-Luc Marion: 1995, p. 16

²⁴ Jean-Luc Marion: 1995, p. 17

to allow itself to appear there'²⁵. A feature will always be its rendering this visible this invisible as such – the unenvisageable. As such the visible will always refer to something other than itself; without however rendering or reproducing it in the visible. He writes: 'the gaze can never rest or settle if it looks at an icon; it always must rebound upon the visible, in order to go back in it up the infinite stream of the invisible. In this sense, the icon makes visible only by giving rise to an infinite gaze'²⁶. And so he can speak of 'an abyss that the eyes of men never finish probing'²⁷.

Enough then of fine theological conceptualisation; can we find any examples, in the concrete, as it were, of what Marion is hinting at? One is drawn to a book by Seamus Heaney provocatively titled *Seeing Things* (1991). Therein we find the following poem:

Field of Vision

I remember the woman who sat for years

In a wheelchair, looking straight ahead

Out the window at sycamore trees unleafing

And leafing at the far end of the lane.

Straight out past the TV in the corner,

The stunted, agitated hawthorn bush,

The same small calves with their backs to wind and rain,

The same acre of ragwort, the same mountain.

²⁵ Jean-Luc Marion: 1995, p. 17

²⁶ Jean-Luc Marion: 1995, p. 18

²⁷ Jean-Luc Marion: 1995, p. 21

She was steadfast as the big window itself.

Her brow was clear as the chrome bits of the chair.

She never lamented once and she never

Carried a spare ounce of emotional weight.

Face to face with her was an education

Of the sort you got across a well-braced gate-

One of those lean, clean, iron, roadside ones

Between two whitewashed pillars, where you could see

Deeper into the country than you expected

And discovered that the field behind the hedge

Grew more distinctly strange as you kept standing

Focused and drawn in by what barred the way.²⁸

There is a note of the permanent nature of the vision contemplated and seen by the woman from within the stasis of her life. She is fixed like the gateway described, and is a gateway of sorts herself. It is with her that Heaney has to contend as a poet, with her steadfastness. She has been there and endured; this is the hint of the items indicative of her existence provided by the poem. She bypasses the medium of the modern (dare one say post-modern) world by ignoring her TV in the corner. She is almost at one with her environment. What differentiates her is her moment of vision or insight. So she is both at one with her surroundings and different at the same time. In nature and her Heaney can encounter the visionary. The poem's conclusion

²⁸ Seamus Heaney: *Seeing Things*: Faber & Faber: London: 1991, p. 22

suggests the necessity of perspective, of a framework; otherwise, we would not know what we are looking at, it would not make sense, and at the same time we have to allow the visionary its own claim, its own moment of difference, that takes us 'deeper into the county than you expected' and to allow access to the 'more distinctly strange'. The merit of Heaney's poem is how it grounds the visionary within the world of the tangible, the accessible, the everyday and the real. In terms of the framework elaborated by Jean-Luc Marion Heaney's poem does not present the vision as such and really just leaves open the possibility of illumination from unexpected and strange places; so rather than being an instance of the religious vision, and risking the possibility of presenting us with a moment of artistic idolisation, it leaves open rather, or creates an aporia, that allows for the movement of the visionary, or religious icon.

In this thesis we will examine poetry as a mode of accessing the distinctly strange, as retaining a capacity to force open our conceptual idols when they settle down in either of the discursive modes of philosophy and theological thought. One of our major concerns will be with the poetry of Seamus Heaney. Why the poetry of Seamus Heaney and not that of his major contemporaries writing in the English language: Derek Walcott, Les Murray, or John Ashbery? Any of the above poets could have been used in the present study. A concern for the religious as a possibility or impossibility for the critically reflective human being today is found in all of their work. In Caribbean poet Derek Walcott we find the following reflection in a poem about the premature death of his daughter:

As for you, little star,
 my lost daughter, you are
 bent in the shape forever
 of a curled seed sailing the earth,
 in the shape of one question, a comma
 that knows before us whether death
 is another birth.²⁹

Walcott's most recent ambitious long poem *Tiepolo's Hound* is a poetic analysis of the drift into what we have identified as cultural nihilism, through an examination of Impressionist painting and the major currents of European civilisation in the late Enlightenment period.³⁰ Australian Les Murray has been preoccupied with the question of religion and belief throughout his writing career.³¹ New Yorker John Ashbery sounds in 'The Gods of Fairness' as if he has read Jean-Luc Marion's *God Without Being* with its argument for charity as the greatest moment between God and humanity when he writes:

The failure to see God is not a problem
 God has a problem with. Sure, he could see us
 if he had a hankering to do so, but that's
 not the point. The point is his concern
 for us and for biscuits. For the loaf

²⁹ Derek Walcott: *Collected Poems 1948 – 1984*: Faber: London: 1992, p. 450

³⁰ Derek Walcott: *Tiepolo's Hound*: Faber: London: 2000

³¹ Up to and including one of his best recent collections: *Subhuman Redneck Poems*: Carcanet: Manchester: 1996, and poems like 'The Say-but-the-word Centurion Attempts a Summary', p. 14

of bread that turns in the night sky over Stockholm.³²

So, any one of these contemporary, living poets could have been a focus for this study. We opted for Seamus Heaney because, apart from his being one of the most significant poets writing today, we note that unlike Walcott's declared disappearance of faith in late adolescence, and yet, his persistent examination of this issue, and unlike the openly accepted and traditional religious faith of Les Murray, Heaney has sought out and occupied a more ambivalent position, not overtly religious, and yet not sceptical or dismissive of it either. Most pressingly though his work pursues, in volumes like *Seeing Things*, *The Spirit Level*³³ and *Electric Light*³⁴, a fascinating path of exposing contemporary poetry to the contest and necessity of keeping open horizons of vision within art, thought and culture that challenge, provoke and unearth us from easily accepted orthodoxies of any ilk. His achievements in this respect are intriguing and will be examined closely later. We will read Heaney's work within the context of contemporary Irish poetry and culture, utilising the work of his fellow poets, especially his most significant predecessor, John Montague. Another major poet who will feature significantly in this thesis is the Romanian/German poet Paul Celan whom many have written of as the most significant post war European poet.

We will place our thoughts within the framework of post-modern philosophy, starting first with Martin Heidegger's essay 'The Origin of the Work of Art'³⁵. We will do this in Chapter One. This essay defines the agenda, asking first, in its way,

³² John Ashbery: *Your Name Here*: Carcanet: Manchester: 2000

³³ Seamus Heaney: *The Spirit Level*: Faber & Faber: London: 1996

³⁴ Seamus Heaney: *Electric Light*: Faber & Faber: London: 2001

³⁵ Martin Heidegger: *Basic Writings*: Routledge: London: 1999, p. 139 – 212, (ed.) David Krell

many of the questions pursued by subsequent thought, particularly that of Maurice Blanchot. We will examine in Chapter Two the poetry of Paul Celan as it stages a revolt against Heideggerian totalitarian philosophical domination and we will read his work as an exemplary instance of poetry's capacity to resist thought, idolisation and as an effective way to force open alternative horizons for contemplation and engagement with reality. In Chapter Three we will examine Celan's work as a way of retaining the strange and the Other, of creating a language resistant to all attempts to domesticate and homogenise it, a strategy that may well be vital in an era of post-modern utilitarianism and commercial exploitation. In Chapter Four we will engage with the nihilism of Maurice Blanchot and suggest avenues of challenge to his position. In Chapter Five we will examine particular outstanding issues, and will confront unresolved questions about the place of art within and without civilisation and barbarism, and the implications that this might have for theology, as well as exploring the possibilities of a type of post-modern faith; both excavations will occur through engaging with the writings of Jacques Derrida.

Chapter One:

On the Path to Post-Modernity: Clearances and Presences, a Poetic Challenge for Martin Heidegger's 'The Origin of the Work of Art'

In a humble gesture Derek Walcott (unusual for this poet with his typically grand pronouncements and tropes) ventures to ask in an elegiac poem 'The Bounty' (for his deceased mother Alix) whether his poetic re-creation of the sea and its echo of Ovid speaks truly of continuity, human endurance beyond pain and death, against mortality and decay. He then writes: 'I hope this settles the matter // of presences'¹. Belfast poet Derek Mahon begins 'A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford' with the statement: 'Even now there are places where a thought might grow'². And he suggests Peruvian mines, Indian compounds and disused sheds in Co. Wexford. All are places where a poem, a reflection, a fresh start or reconsideration might begin. What is the nature of these worlds imagined within the real? The consideration of this question is a central starting point in much contemporary reflection on art and literature. Does art touch the transcendental in some way or is it touched by it? Is the world of the imagination an illusory pursuit of the diminished and evasive transcendent God, who was only a mirage in the very first instance? Such reflections have pre-occupied many contemporary theorists of art, a fact revealed by only a cursory glance at book titles. George Steiner published *Real Presences: Is there anything in what we say?* in 1989³. French thinker Jean-Luc Nancy published a series of reflections *The Birth to*

¹ Derek Walcott: *The Bounty*: Faber: London: 1997, p.11

² Derek Mahon: *Collected Poems*: Gallery: Meath: 1999, p.89

³ George Steiner: *Real Presences*: Faber: London: 1991

Presence in 1993⁴. And French deconstructionist (so-called) Jacques Derrida set the cat amongst the critical pigeons early on with his challenge to the transcendental signified in his magnum opus of the 1960s *Of Grammatology*⁵. We wish to propose an earlier starting point to this debate, an origin indeed; we will begin with the much-discussed essay of German philosopher Martin Heidegger 'On the Origin of the Work of Art'⁶.

However, before moving on to look at Heidegger closely we will have a brief look at what Derrida has to say in *Of Grammatology*. Jacques Derrida writes about the traditional association of signified and signifier, of writing's intimate connection with sense, in that the written word, traditionally understood, captured the immediacy of the spoken word and indeed, of the world. He writes: 'the age of the sign is essentially theological'⁷. In the Middle Ages it was understood that a sign signified 'an eternal verity, eternally thought and spoken in the proximity of a present logos'⁸. However the consciousness revealed in Nietzsche's writing signifies a break with this understanding, in that he understood his writing to be 'originary' operations in that he has written what he has written and it is not in any sense originally subordinate to the

⁴ Jean-Luc Nancy: *The Birth to Presence*: Stanford Univ. Press: California: 1993, (Trans.) Brian Holmes and Others.

⁵ Jacques Derrida: *Of Grammatology*: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press: Baltimore: 1998, (Trans.) Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

⁶ In 1935, the year in which Martin Heidegger gave his lecture course, 'Introduction to Metaphysics', he presented a lecture in Freiburg to the Society of Art Sciences entitled 'Concerning the Origin of the Work of Art'. When asked by the students of the University in Zurich to give a talk there he gave the same lecture again. That was in January 1936. A short time thereafter he expanded this lecture and gave it as three lectures in 1936 in Frankfurt. These three lectures were published in *Holzwege* in 1950 under the title, 'The Origin of the Work of Art', with the addition of an Afterword, written in part after 1936. In 1956 Heidegger wrote an Addendum that sought to clarify some aspects of the essay. The version I will work from is the final edition published by David Krell in his anthology of Heidegger's work entitled *Basic Writings*: Routledge: London: 1999, p.140 - 203. Although the version referred to by the critic Françoise Dastur, whom I quote in my chapter, is the first draft, Dastur refers to it as the Freiburg version (FV) and it was published first in 1987.

⁷ *Of Grammatology*: 1998, p. 14

⁸ *Of Grammatology*: 1998, p. 15

logos and to truth. After this realisation we enter into the realm of play, with Derrida writing, 'one could call play the absence of the transcendental signified as limitlessness of play, that is to say as the destruction of onto-theology and the metaphysics of presence'⁹. For Derrida this is where we are now in terms of theology and philosophy of language, writing and their comprehension, and in many ways, then, the philosophical disciplines of epistemology and hermeneutics remain challenged by this radical understanding with relation to the connection between thought and language, writing and presence, and the origin of all meaning. We consider Martin Heidegger's *The Origin of the Work of Art* as a key moment in the development of this trend of intellectual argument and understanding.

Martin Heidegger begins his essay *The Origin of the Work of Art* with the seemingly obvious position that: 'Origin here means that from which and by which something is what it is and as it is'¹⁰. Heidegger states that 'the artist is the origin of the work. The work is the origin of the artist'. And in a more primary sense: 'art is the origin of both artist and work'¹¹. When one uses the language of origin in relation to art one is already hinting that one intends to speak about something that is fundamental. We might expect Heidegger to venture into developing ideas concerning the related issues of truth and essence, and it no surprise to see him do so.

⁹ *Of Grammatology*: 1998, p. 50

¹⁰ *Basic Writings*: 1999: p. 143

What about Things and the Nature of their Work?

Heidegger states early on that all works have a ‘thingly’ character¹². In fact they would be precious little without it. Yet we always claim something more for the work of art. We do not let it reside in its *thingliness* (sic!) alone. For example, we commonly assume that there is something that separates the vacuum cleaner and the familiar hairdryer from a sculpture by Rodin. There is something different about the shoes of a peasant as worn in the fields of Flanders, on the hills of Tuscany or on a bog in Connemara, compared to those painted by Vincent Van Gogh. We often assert that it is this something else that constitutes the artistic nature of the work. The artwork is a crafted object, is made of fabrics and such like, yet we say it says something other and more than what the mere thing itself is. The best way to speak of this aspect of the work might well be to describe the work as intrinsically allegorical, always destined to manifest something wholly other than itself. The work brings together something different with what is made and thus is, in the original Greek sense, *symbollein* a work of the symbolic.

Heidegger states that his objective in this essay is to approach ‘the immediate and full actuality of the work of art’¹³. We must first view the thingly element in the artwork for it is in it that the symbolic is made to do its work. The thingly element is the foundation, means, medium by which the other, proper element is put to work. We need to be clear about the nature of the thing before we proceed to elaborating the nature of art. We must know what a thing is before we can know what the artwork is, as something that adheres to, dwells within, is located in, the thing. It is only after we

¹¹ P. 143

¹² *Basic Writings*: 1999, p. 146

have grasped this point that we can begin to determine with confidence and clarity whether the work is in the end something else and not a thing at all.

For Heidegger everything that *is*, is a thing. From the spoon in the drawer, to the fiddle on the wall, the tree in the field to the cow in the byre; all of these are things in themselves, in short, everything that we can say *is* about, are things. At the same time we do not normally consider people to be things, or God, even though we presume s/he is, a thing. In common parlance we speak of things as a basic component, or self-contained unit, a common denominator, such as a clod of turf or a block of wood. A thing here means that which is nothing more than a mere thing and that which is only a thing.

Heidegger describes the block of granite, its bulky shape, its odd colour and its rough texture. Thus we approach its thingliness. However, we are rarely content to leave it at that. We often speak of the thing as that around which the properties have assembled. And thus we begin to speak of the core of things, what the Greeks spoke of as *to hypokeimenon*, the core that lay at the ground of the thing, what is already there. And the characteristics are described as *ta symbebekota*, as that which has turned up already with the given core and occurs along with it.

The centrality of language, translation, metaphor and poetry to all thought is highlighted by Heidegger's concern over the translation of these terms from Greek to Latin thought. He expresses the concern that we have translated the words without having experienced the primary event that forged the Greek concepts in the first

instance. The word *hypokeimenon* becomes *subiectum*; *hypostasis* becomes *substantia*; *symbekos* becomes *accidens*. For Heidegger this translation marks the rootlessness of Western thought. Something quirky creeps in due to the syntactical structures of Latin. We combine the subject of the sentence with what is stated of it in the predicate, through words, and assume blindly that this is a given of actuality. Heidegger asks: 'Who would have the temerity to assail these simple fundamental relations between thing and statement, between sentence structure and thing-structure?'¹⁴ Heidegger asks what will later become an abiding question: What is the primary thing, what emerges first, reality, or the language through which we structure it?

Heidegger proposes that the truth might be far more complicated than we have previously conceived it to be. He proposes that the sentence and thing-structure derive, in their typical form and in their possible mutual relationship, from a far more original source. First Heidegger questions the assumption that the thing-concept that sees the thing primarily as the bearer of its characteristics is the truth of things, can be assumed to be true, that it lies at a moment prior to all questions and exists before all radical thought. Heidegger argues that an act of ancient violence of thought and on thought has occurred here. When we seek for the irrational, as an other to the rational, as the abortive offspring of the unthought rational, a curious by-product we discover, and Heidegger lays claim to it, is that the current thing-concept does not lay a hold on what is essential to the thing as it is in its own being, and thus does not assault it.

¹⁴ *Basic Writings*: 1999, P. 149

How can we avoid such an act of verbal or intellectual assault? To jump slightly ahead of Heidegger at this point we suggest trying to create an opening through language itself. Through language we can create a free field within which the thing may display its thingly character directly. Our aim at this stage, as Heidegger perceives it, is to dwell before the unmediated presencing of the thing. Heidegger says we cannot perceive the abstract sound of noise, but can only perceive the concrete smashing of pottery, the throb of a diesel engine over the drive and aggression of a petrol one, the sound of a guitar as opposed to the notes and tones of an abstract music. We cannot listen abstractly. If we are to rely on our senses to bring the thingliness of things to us it seems to disappear further out of view. We must strive to allow the thing to remain in its own steadfastness and its self-containment.

Heidegger proposes another traditional option about which he has some reservations. He considers the matter of things within which the form is already always present, coextensive and coexists within it. The thing is formed matter. This view has equal application to nature and the utensils drawn upon by the intellectual capacity of humanity. The concepts of form and matter have been used extensively in the domain of aesthetics and beyond for many a long year, to the point of being lazily assumed to be true, to being a cliché of thought. The result of this is that various subsequent oppositions are conjoined without any real thought. Form, it is assumed, is related to the rational and matter to the irrational; the rational is understood to be logical and the irrational illogical; and then the final sin and aberration of original thought, the subject-object relation is coupled with the conceptual pair of form-matter. Heidegger is keen to trace down the origin of the conceptual framework of form and

matter: does it emerge from the thingly character of the thing or in the workly character of the artwork?

We are aware of the form of a block of granite. It is a material in a definite if unshapely form, chiseled out from the mountainside by man, woman, machine or dynamite before it is altered or worked to serve a definite function. We are aware also of the forms taken by a cup, boots, or an umbrella. The form determines the distribution of the matter in these cases and is determined again by the function which these objects have been created to serve. Usefulness is a key factor in considering these objects and, in fact, grounds their matter and form. However, a being that is useful is nearly always the product of a process of making destined for a particular end. So then, as determinations of beings, matter and form assume their proper place under the rubric of equipment. So, matter and form do not relate in any essential way to the thingness of the mere thing.

Heidegger admits that the piece of equipment, like the pair of shoes, does have a self-contained character like the merest of objects. However, it does not have the character of possessing this innately, of having taken shape of its own accord, like the granite boulder lying at the foot of the mountainside. The shoes though, like the artwork that preoccupies Heidegger, are made objects, the product of human activity. Yet, by its self-sufficient presencing the work of art is somewhat closer to the mere thing that has given birth to its own form and is self-contained. And yet we still say that the work of art is separate from these mere things. Is it because of the middle ground that equipment occupies between the mere thing and the artwork, a fact we determine by means of the matter-form formulation, that tempts us into taking this

formulation as the pathway into our discussion of the unique properties of the work of art, as opposed to the mere thing? The biblical tradition gives a further impetus to this tendency by its support for the view that God has made everything, and in some sense form has been pre-ordained within matter. We are tempted to see God as the primary and original, originary craftsman. According to Heidegger this view borrowed from Scholastic philosophy still remains in operation in Kantian transcendentalism and can hinder our approach to the thing-being of the thing. These three views that approach the thing as a bearer of traits, a unity of manifold sensations and as formed matter actually conceal the thingliness of the thing and do not allow us to approach it in its naked state, in its thing-being and its own self. The most salient lesson that is to be gathered from the above effort, the examination of misleading modes of thought and the failure to describe or approach the thingliness of things, is that obviously this is a more difficult task than we might have imagined. As Heidegger writes: ‘The unpretentious thing evades thought most stubbornly’¹⁵. We have made mistakes, and Heidegger decides to take up the most misleading and widely evident error, the issue of matter and form and equipmental being in the search for why this misadventure has become so prominent, for this might lie quite close to the true nature of things.

Heidegger presents us then with the infamous example of the peasant’s shoes, a piece of equipment that recommends itself for our consideration on the grounds of simplicity and commonness.¹⁶ Heidegger speaks of Van Gogh’s several paintings of peasant’s shoes. He proceeds to argue that the equipmental nature of things is best located when we observe them being used. The best place to observe the peasant

¹⁵ *Basic Writings*: 1999, P. 157

¹⁶ A latter day example might be *Nike* runners, but they are somewhat more expensive and fashionable, symbols of status, than anything Heidegger had in mind. Depending on how they are to be used, for dancing or for working in, or for just hanging out and looking good in, form will alter the matter.

woman's shoes, doing that for which they received their form, is to see them working in the field where they disappear into their function and are hardly considered in themselves at all. It is only when such objects fail in their proper function that we give them any deliberation at all. Van Gogh's painting offers us no clues that tell us exactly what job these shoes do.

Heidegger proceeds from the entrance into the shoes for one's foot to a meditation on the toilsome labours and conditions of the peasant woman. Heidegger, and this is a key point, reads into the shoes evidence of their earthly character and thus accesses the world of the peasant woman, as he imagines it, a world within which the shoes are protected and where they most truly rest within themselves. Heidegger draws attention, after the fact, to his own lyricism, suggesting that it is only within the world of the picture that we can read such imaginings unfettered and free. The peasant woman, in herself, only wears the shoes. Once her shoes are reliable, once they still function, they will not be a source for reflection or contemplation to her. This reliability is her stability and guarantees her relation to the earth and her world that grows from that or is secure in that, is grounded by it. World and earth come together in the equipment and guarantee her mode of being.

However, as Heidegger notes without a note of sentimentality, usefulness wears out. Shoes deteriorate, become unreliable and are used up and thrown away. The shoe recedes into the background as mere stuff. And this dwindling away highlights the essential character, the original essence of equipmental being. The form imposed on this matter, we have the impression, is just a mere fabrication that eventually breaks down and fades away. Yet, Heidegger persists that in its genuinely

equipmental being, equipment stems from a distant source. The distinction of matter and form arises from a deeper origin.

The reliability of which we have spoken speaks nothing of the thingly character of things, as well as failing to move us any closer to apprehending the workly character of the work, particularly the work of art. Heidegger says that our processes of inquiry hitherto have not been wasted for we realize that it was Van Gogh's painting of the peasant's shoes that permitted us to see them. They did not jump up and do a jig of their own accord to draw our attention to them, nor did they sing a song or call out to us and thereby allow us to see or hear them, and thus contemplate them in themselves. As Heidegger writes of Van Gogh's painting: 'In the nearness of the work we were suddenly somewhere else than we usually tend to be'¹⁷. It is the work of art he argues that allows us to know what the shoes are in truth. Heidegger states that it is not his reading into the work that allows the shoes to emerge in all their thingliness; instead it is true to say that 'the equipmentality of equipment first expressly comes to the fore through the work and only in the work'¹⁸.

How does Heidegger describe this process? What happens there? He argues that Van Gogh's painting offers a disclosure of the truth of the pair of shoes. In the work of art, here Van Gogh's painting of the peasant's shoes, the being of the shoes emerges into the unconcealment of its Being. The ancient Greeks called such unconcealment of beings *aletheia*. Heidegger speaks of it as a disclosure of a particular being, disclosing what and how it is. If there is such an occurrence within a work then a happening of truth occurs. And it appears also that it is a work of art.

¹⁷ *Basic Writings*: 1999, p. 161

¹⁸ P. 161

Heidegger writes: 'in the work of art the truth of beings has set itself to work. 'To set' means here 'to bring to stand'. Some particular being, a pair of peasant shoes, comes in the work to stand in the light of its Being. The Being of beings comes into the steadiness of its shining'¹⁹. And so the essence of art, for Heidegger, is the instance when the truth of beings sets itself to work. This has the air of a new departure about it, Heidegger notes, in that traditionally aesthetics concerned itself with beauty, while logic concerned itself with truth. However he is keen to distance himself from any facile mimetic theory. Traditionally agreement with what *is* has been seen to be the essence of truth. Heidegger is after a more elusive idea. He says the work of art does not seek a purely external resemblance to things but wishes to capture things in terms of their general essence. What is the truth of a temple? What are we the viewers and critics to check the artist's representation against? If we consider Holderlin's poem *The Rhine*, what is pre-given to the poet, and how, so that the poet may re-give it again in the poem? Can truth appear in a work that has been created in a historical instance, when we have traditionally conceived of truth as something atemporal and outside history?

A Poetic Interlude: The Poem asks its Question

The Peninsula

When you have nothing more to say, just drive

For a day all round the peninsula.

The sky is tall as over a runway,

The land without marks so you will not arrive

¹⁹ *Basic Writings*: 1999, p. 162

But pass through, though always skirting landfall,
 At dusk, horizons drink down sea and hill,
 The ploughed field swallows the whitewashed gable
 And you're in the dark again. Now recall

The glazed foreshore and silhouetted log,
 That rock where breakers shredded into rags,
 The leggy birds stilted on their own legs,
 Islands riding themselves out into the fog

And drive back home, still with nothing to say
 Except that now you will uncode all landscapes
 By this: things founded clean on their own shapes,
 Water and ground in their extremity.²⁰

Seamus Heaney

Seamus Heaney provides us in this poem 'The Peninsula' with an illustration of the problem posed by Martin Heidegger. How does an abstract poetic form, the four quatrains of this poem, come to contain something as tangible as a peninsula? What happens here and how can we speak of it in intelligible, conceptual terms?

In this poem Seamus Heaney stresses the opposition of speech and writing. The poem is a meditation upon the necessary space of the artwork and recounts a journey into the dark night of silence where the poet is blind to the remarkable

present. Writing is seen here to be a natural complement to the faculty of speech and not as an unnecessary appendage or as speech's repressed Other. Initially the landscape is presented as a text that has been erased of all trace of speech and writing. This *kenosis* has the status of a necessary beginning. A new space is thereby created whereby a new annunciation occurs in the influx of fresh images and new words. Reality undergoes a necessary displacement prior to being re-called, re-membered, re-constituted in the poem by the artistic mind or imagination.

The islands and the birds of the poem become emblems of the poet who is doubled back on himself. He offers the reader a meditation on the writer's imagination by means of the writer's imagination. (What else could he use?). After the event of the poem things may be grasped in what Aquinas and Joyce would identify as their *quidditas*, their unique 'thingness', defined radiantly and clearly. While things had previously been unfocused and lacking in clarity, now they present themselves in such a manner that the landscape has been uncoded and can be translated into writing.

Heaney's use of the self-reflexive image provides images of the self-conscious poet. They dramatize the paradox of creation, a creation that is partly controlled and partly uncontrollable. The poem aims for a poetic re-creation, a re-birth and renewal. It is deeply rooted in the material world and the materiality of language itself. Heaney travels through linguistic indifferences, that of the unmarked landscape and his own silence, hoping to uncode distinct shapes through his own artistic means.

²⁰ Seamus Heaney: *Opened Ground: Poems 1966 – 1996*: Faber: London: p. 21

Helen Vendler notes another quality of this poem. She writes of 'peninsular remoteness, where water and ground meet in their outermost reach, without distraction'²¹. She observes how Heaney essentially re-writes this poem many years after, with 'Postscript', the final poem of his collection *The Spirit Level* (Faber: London: 1996). She writes: 'Heaney here gratefully pays homage to the sheer power of perception itself - how much it sees in a glimpse, in a glance - how many objects and shades it absorbs at once, how breathtaking the conjunction of world and senses can be, breaking open the shut door of the heart'²². It is worth observing that here the self is 'a hurry through which... things pass', nothing more. The self itself is unfounded and thus can hardly hope to 'found things' in the way his younger self possibly hoped to do.

The Work and the Nature of its Truth

'The origin of the artwork is art' writes Heidegger²³. This seems on the surface at least to be a paradox, or an oxymoron of thought. Is Heidegger just being perverse? Not really, insofar as Heidegger wants to argue for the thesis that the work of art possesses a self-subsistence unique to its being: 'Nothing can be discovered about the thingly aspect of the work so long as the pure self-subsistence of the work has not distinctly displayed itself'²⁴.

Heidegger realizes that there is then a problem about our access to the artwork. Can we ever access it in its true self if it is caught up in its own unique self-subsisting world? The logic of his position would push him to the conclusion that to approach

²¹ Helen Vendler: *Seamus Heaney*: Harper Collins: London: 1998, p. 25

²² Vendler: 1998, p. 25

²³ *Basic Writings*: 1999, P. 165

the work of art we would have to create the unlikely, unsustainable and artificial situation where it related to absolutely nothing other than itself, standing purely on its own for itself alone. The artist attempts to push the artwork in this direction. In truly great art there is no relationship still pertaining between the artist who created the work and the work itself; the work exists, subsists and consists of and in splendid isolation. The artist is similar to an opening in the fabric of reality that allows the artwork to emerge by passing through her or him and then they must erase themselves at the end of the process of becoming. This should occur once the work of art has fully emerged and is capable of standing on its own.

Heidegger notes the difficulty of approaching the artwork on its own, in the world of its own self-subsistence. In the gallery the painting is surrounded by other artworks. In the gallery the artwork is surrounded and grounded by certain agendas, presumptions and premises. If we attempt to approach the Van Gogh painting today, the signature in the corner is laden with many connotations that exist as a pre-judgement and which presume an approach to the world contained within the painting. The Cathedral in the town or city square is a focus for the tourist. The world of the work has decayed and they are ruins of themselves, given over to a realm of tradition and decay. The instance of their self-subsistence has fled. A key distinction emerges for Heidegger here. Those who work in the world of art conservation and preservation only deal with the object-being of the works and do not approach the world of the work-being of the work. As Robert Bernasconi writes: 'Even if a work remains in its original location, as usually happens with architectural works, once the world of the work has perished, nothing can be done to restore it. As a result of the withdrawal and

decay of its world, the works are no longer works'²⁵. And again: 'no amount of textual emendation, no extensive critical apparatus, can restore Sophocles' text to its own world and so let it be a work once more'²⁶. We might well experience and enjoy the splendour of the Vatican, the Cathedral at Cologne and the Castle perched atop the Royal Mile in Edinburgh; these may well attest to the previous artistic aspirations, wealth, pomp and power of their respective by-gone eras, and are expressions of such, but none of them because of the very demise of their time are works in the sense that Heidegger is attempting to elucidate.

Heidegger is urged on by a key question: can we really conceive of a work of art that exists outside of all relations at all? Is it not of the essence of the work of art that it exist in relationship? Heidegger will say of course it does, but we must determine what the nature of that relationship is. Heidegger plays a trump card with the assertion: 'the work belongs, as work, uniquely within the realm that is opened up by itself. For the work-being of the work occurs essentially and only in such opening up'²⁷.

We have an interesting example of this process at work in John Montague's poem 'Windharp'²⁸. It provides us with a synthesis of 'natural' and historical elements that are culturally specific. The wind is the movement of becoming of nature, against the harp, a man-made symbol of Ireland and its national culture. What

²⁵ Robert Bernasconi: 'The Greatness of the Work of Art', from *Heidegger Toward the Turn*: (ed.) James Riser: SUNY Press: New York: 1999, p. 103

²⁶ Bernasconi: 1999, p. 103

²⁷ *Basic Writings*: 1999, P. 167

²⁸ John Montague: *Selected Poems*: Penguin: London: p. 108. John Montague is the major Northern Irish poet of the generation preceding Seamus Heaney. Born in 1929 he is still writing.

is produced are 'the sounds of Ireland'. The sound emerges from 'low bushes and grass', 'heatherbells and fern' and 'wrinkling bog pools'. Light and sound come together to produce a vision of a hand combing and stroking the landscape until

the valley gleams
like the pile upon
a mountain pony's coat.

We witness Montague create a space that is utterly a pure creation and exists only in the world of art.

Heidegger writes that it is necessary for us to approach the truth question in relation to the work of art, once again. He selects a work of art that does not come from the realm of representational art. This is why he opts for the example of the Greek Temple. The Temple exists in a valley and houses the god. The presence of the god is an extension and delimitation of the precinct as a holy place. However, this temple and the precinct it constructs and contains does not fade away into the indefinite, and here we reach a central core in Heidegger's essay. He writes: 'it is the temple-work that first fits together and at the same time gathers around itself the unity of those paths and relations in which birth and death, disaster and blessing, victory and disgrace, endurance and decline acquire the shape of destiny for human being. The all-governing expanse of this open relational context is the world of this historical people. Only from and in this expanse does the nation first return to itself for the fulfillment of its vocation'²⁹. We recall here the involvement of Heidegger with Nazi

²⁹ *Basic Writings*: 1999, P. 167

socialism in the nineteen-thirties and are attentive to the political overtones of his statements here. In earlier drafts, Robert Bernasconi notes, in the *Holzwege* edition especially, Heidegger hints that great art not only is an origin but also destroys. It destroys the public in order to form a people. As Robert Bernasconi writes: ‘in Germany in the 1930s nothing could have been more politically charged’³⁰. We note, in the passage quoted from Heidegger above, a residue of such sentiment.

The Temple is set on solid ground from which it draws support and stands firm against the storm raging above it. It is the presence of the temple that makes manifest the capacity of the ground itself to lend support and to illustrate the violent nature of the raging storm. The gleaming of the light is illustrated by the temple, the nature of the surging sea, the tree, its fruit and flower are defined, enter into their distinctive shapes, and come into what they are, by the presence of the Temple. The Greeks, Heidegger writes, called this process of emergence and becoming, of things coming to reside in their true essence, *physis*. All of this happens by and in the presence of the temple, on that which and in which man bases his dwelling, the earth. Heidegger does not have a material substance in mind here, the geologist’s pre-occupation with a physical presence, but rather a more abstract, maybe metaphysical idea, of the earth as that which is brought back by the temple’s arising and which shelters everything that arises as such. In all raised things the earth occurs essentially as the sheltering agent.

³⁰ Bernasconi: 1999, p. 106

Marc Froment-Meurice illustrates a key issue here about Heidegger's formulation. He writes: 'the temple, as its Greek name indicates, is the cut, the enclosure that is sacred because it is withdrawn from the profane. At the same time, the paradox of this delimitation is that it exposes nothing but pure façade, a pure in front of, before. The behind, the inside, remains empty. There is nothing but the purely phenomenal, nothing that would remain behind and of which it would be but the appearance or representation'³¹.

The Temple first gives to things their look and to humanity our outlook on ourselves. This view is always open once the work is a work and the god has not fled. The statue of the god is not there to make it easier to visualize the god but rather to make the god present, and *is* the god in that sense. It is the same in the theatre. Here the battle of old and new gods is continually being waged, but they are always there, really, fighting a duel to the bitter end. The theatrical or poetic work transforms the speech of the people. In that transformation every living word is drawn into the battle and is involved in deciding what is in or out as holy and unholy, what is noble and what is lowly, what is dignified and what is cowardly, and finally who is the master and who is the slave.

Again John Montague's poem 'Like Dolmens Round My Childhood, The Old People' provides us with an example of this process at work³². For, it is only against art and its hint of permanence that our transient lives receive any definition. Montague

³¹ Marc Froment-Meurice: *That Is To Say: Heidegger's Poetics*: (Trans.) Jan Plug: Stanford Univ. Press: California: 1998, p. 158

³²Montague: 2001, p. 10 - 11

defines the spaces within which his old people lived. Jamie MacCrystal lived in an old cottage, Maggie Owens surrounded by 'a mongrel bitch and shivering pups', the Nialls along a mountain lane, and Mary Moore in 'a crumbling gatehouse'. Within the Temple of Montague's art their lives are finally defined, receive their ultimate meaning, suggested by the ritual lost and associated with the Dolmen, burial mounds of a forgotten people.

For years they trespassed on my dreams,
 Until once, in a standing circle of stones,
 I felt their shadows pass
 Into that dark permanence of ancient forms.

What happens when the work of art is 'set up'? For Heidegger, at this point, it is difficult to separate the work of art from what is holy, for to dedicate means to consecrate. When one sets up the work then the holy is opened as holy and the god is invoked into the openness of his presence. The god brings forth through himself what is dignified and what is fabulous, and what Heidegger calls 'the world' is reflected from this splendour. So the world emerges from the radiance of the god and achieves clarity. Heidegger argues that the work opens itself up and the world with it, and as such is an essential form that gives guidance. Is the work always associated with consecration and praise? A key question Heidegger answers by saying it is of the essence of the work-being of the work to be such. In its work-being it is orientated, directed towards this opening up, opening a world and keeping it abidingly in force.

Heidegger writes that the reason for being of the work is to world worlds. It is to stand in direct relation to being. The world of which he writes is not an object in the world like a screwdriver, car or bed. It does not stand before us for contemplation and viewing. We are subject to this non-objective world as long as we are human beings travelling along the paths opened up by birth and death, blessing and curse, as long as these paths transport us into Being. The work of art emerges from a space where essential decisions of our human being are made, where we take up these questions, abandon them, where they go unrecognized for a while and need to be taken up again, and it is from and within this space that the world worlds. The opening of the world defines our relationship to stones; for they are in our broader world, fall under our perspective. The opening of the world defines all things and their relationship to us. It is here that the remoteness or nearness of things to us is defined, as well as their scope and limits, and whether these objects are lingering in our world or hastening out of it. The space is opened by which the god may grace our existence by the world of the work, and even in the doom of the god remaining absent can be found an inverse way of the work worlding worlds.

The work, as a work, makes the space for this spaciousness. The work liberates the free space of the open region and establishes it in its structure. As Heidegger writes, 'the work as work sets up a world. The work holds open the open region of the world'³³. Is this what Seamus Heaney has achieved in his poem 'The Peninsula'?

³³ *Basic Writings*: 1999, p.

Heidegger notes how a setting-up and a setting-forth of the work are necessary. A piece of equipment aims to be useful and serviceable, and so the stone used in a hammer is used and used up. The stone disappears into its usefulness. However, in Heidegger's conception of things the Temple is quite different. When the Temple sets up a world it does not cause it to disappear, but rather causes it to come forth for the first time and causes the material to come up, forth and into the open region of the work's world. This comes forth as the work rests in upon the material from which it emerges. The earth is that on which the work rests, which comes forth in the work and which shelters it. When the work sets up a world, it succeeds in setting forth the earth. Heidegger writes: 'this setting forth must be thought here in the strict sense of the word. The work moves the earth itself into the open region of a world and keeps it there. *The work lets the earth be an earth*'.³⁴

Heidegger notes the essentially mysterious nature of the earth. We can weigh the earth, measure it, analyze it, but it remains other to us in its manifest difference. The earth only really opens to us when we recognize that it is essentially undisclosable. He meditates on the dividing line that separates all things also. How do we understand this figure of the 'earth' in Heidegger's essay? Earth is a pseudonym for the 'without name'. It corresponds neither to the material nor the sensible, nor even the elementary, and resists all appropriation by meaning. Earth wants to say or means the unsayable. It is the unsayable that will nonetheless be said through the work. As Marc Froment – Meurice writes: 'the unsayable, as Heidegger puts it clearly, is - Nothing, or is the Origin itself as the leap into what comes before everything, including every work. What founds the work "of" the origin and makes it

³⁴ *Basic Writings*: 1999, P. 172

original is this leap into what comes before everything'³⁵. Heidegger here prepares the way for other thinkers after him, primarily Jacques Derrida, when he speaks of 'the bordering stream' that 'delimits everything present in its presencing'³⁶. There is an essential difference of non-understanding, separation, alienation, otherness highlighted here. So the separation and self-seclusion of the earth is highlighted through the work of art. Have we arrived at a core limit for thought? In fact, is the limit itself the proper place for thought? Is it that from which it begins to think, what gives thought its identity and the thought of identity, and first of all, of the identity of Being and thought? We witness a central conflict at the heart of Being, a conflict similar to the one reigning in art between earth and world.

For Heidegger the earth is not uniform, a given of limited form and capacity. He argues that the earth unfolds itself in an infinite manner and by inexhaustible means. The sculptor, unlike the mason, does not use stone up, nor the painter, pigments, but rather both allow the material 'to shine forth'. The same may also be said for the poet. She or he does not use words up but allows the word to become and remain only and truly a word. Heidegger argues that *the world* is the 'self-opening openness of the broad paths of the simple and essential decisions in the destiny of a historical people'³⁷. He writes then that *the earth* 'is the spontaneous forthcoming of that which is continually self-secluding and to that extent sheltering and concealing'³⁸. An essential difference is articulated although he goes to a bit of trouble to highlight their inter-relatedness. The world is always and can only be grounded on the earth and the earth always emerges in the world, juts through it. They do not float away into

³⁵ Froment-Meurice: 1998, p. 154

³⁶ *Basic Writings*: 1999, P. 172

³⁷ *Basic Writings*: 1999, P. 174

³⁸ P. 174

their separate spheres unconcerned with one another, for the world, although resting on the earth, strives to dominate it. As an opening it cannot bear what is closed. The earth as something sheltered and unconcealed cannot bear what is not and always tends towards the world, drawing it into itself and striving to keep it there. We are in the realm of a classic tension or dependent polarity.

There are key questions we can ask of Heidegger here. Marc Froment-Meurice asks the most pressing one: ‘What Heidegger does not determine is the ontological status of this statue that “is” the god himself. We cannot understand this as a pure and simple identification. The god is not stone, and yet he “is” the statue in the sense of an analogy with Being itself. Just as the god manifests himself, makes a remarkable modality of presence (visibility, *eidos*) that has entered into presence, so too the statue brings the truth of appearing into presence. In its brilliance, what appears effaces all difference between the present and presence, what appears and appearing. The work as bringing into the open of presence “is” presence, difference that has been effaced because returned into the work. But the effacement of difference takes place in the name of an analogy with Being, a metaphoricity, a transfer about which Heidegger does not speak. The work has the divine quality of bringing the god into presence, because presence itself is quasi-divine, or better, because Aletheia is a goddess³⁹. Aletheia procures visibility, being the source of all and every image, but is not itself an image. Therein lies the whole aporia.

Françoise Dastur writes: ‘if the metaphysical essence of art consists in the conception of art as (re) presentation of something suprasensible in a sensible matter

³⁹ Marc Froment-Meurice: 1998, p. 157 - 158

submitted to a form (FV 45), it means, following the etymology of the *Dar-stellen*, that, accordingly to the metaphysical conception of art, art “places” (*stellen*) something there (*dar*), and as such is a presentation or an exhibition - I just want to recall here that Kant translates the Latin *exhibitio* by *Darstellung*. In contrast to this, Heidegger proposes to think of art as a *positio*, a thesis, in the sense of an institution (*stiftung*) of the There. Heidegger’s definition of art is *das Ins-Werke-setzen der Wahrheit*, the setting-into-work-of truth, and we should not forget that the verb *setzen* is stronger than the verb *stellen* (which cannot be marked in the English translation). The emphasis on the institutional and positional value of art brings forth a total reversal of what seems to be the “normal situation” of first nature and then art which finds in nature its location. It is the work of art that primarily gives to natural beings their visibility, so now nature comes after art. This is not only the case with architecture, but also with sculpture and poetry. The statue of the god is not a picture made after him, but is the god himself, that is to say, his coming into presence and not the reproduction of an absent or remote being. Tragedy is not the telling of a story and does not speak about the battle of the gods, but in it the battle is being fought. The work of art initiates presence rather than being a (re)presentation or exhibition of something absent⁴⁰.

At this point Heidegger reaches out for one of his typical terms: *strife*. This is his term for the opposition that exists between world and earth. For Heidegger this term does not bear negative charges of discord, disharmony, and destruction. In a classic instance of strife what happens is that: ‘the opponents raise each other into the

⁴⁰ Françoise Dastur: ‘Heidegger’s Freiburg Version of the Origin of the Work of Art’: in *Heidegger Toward the Turn* (ed.) James Risser: SUNY Press: New York: 1999, p. 126 - 127

self-assertion of their essential natures'⁴¹. What is asserted here is not some contingent external factor that is defended or fought for in a fetishized way, but rather, a surrender or recognition of the 'concealed originality of the provenance of one's own Being'⁴². In the instance of strife each opponent carries the other beyond itself. There is a continual cycle of opening, grounding, sustaining and defining that Heidegger conceives of as existing between the earth and the world. The central role of the work of art is to bring the world into being and into relation to the earth and to instigate the moment of strife between them. Francoise Dastur writes: 'it is now possible to conceive that the essence of truth understood in this manner can only result from a conflict'⁴³. And again: 'the work of art as such can happen only on the ground of the primal conflict which is not to be identified with the essence of art alone'⁴⁴.

Heidegger begins to approach his notion of the truth by an argument based on the idea of being. In the past we have spoken of the essential essence of things as their truth. We can only be in truth when we are what we are in truth, that is, when an entity is itself in truth, is true to itself, to what it is. So the truth of an entity is determined by way of its true Being. However he shifts the angle of the question by asking what is the essence of truth, rather than the truth of essence? With incredible confidence Heidegger asserts that the essence of truth lies in the idea of *aletheia*, in the unconcealment of beings. He argues that Greek thought has been sent in the wrong direction in its pursuit of what is the truth: 'unconcealment is, for thought, the most concealed thing in Greek existence, although from early times it determines the

⁴¹ *Basic Writings*: 1999, p. 174

⁴² p. 174

⁴³ Dastur: 1999, p. 133

⁴⁴ Dastur: 1999, p. 133

presencing of everything present'⁴⁵.

We have for a long time presumed that the essence of truth lies in its conformity with matter. If matter cannot reveal itself then how are we to know whether our language or logic has properly approached it? Matter can only show itself if it can step out of the closet of its own concealment. From Descartes on we have understood truth to mean, or understand the definition of truth to lie in, an idea of correctness. As Heidegger notes: 'the essence of truth which is familiar to us - correctness in representation - stands and falls with truth as unconcealment of beings'⁴⁶.

Heidegger notes how it is no surprise that we have made some obvious errors in our approach to the truth. For too long have we rested easily and lazily on unquestioned presuppositions. With typical Heideggerian logic he asserts that there must be an obvious and simple reason why this is so. We are close to the truth but yet stand some distance from it also. Again, Heidegger: 'it is not we who presuppose the unconcealment of beings; rather, the unconcealment of beings (Being) puts us into such a condition of being that in our representation we always remain installed within and in attendance upon concealment'⁴⁷. This conforming to something must already occur in the unconcealed: 'with all our correct representations we would get nowhere, we could not even presuppose that there already is manifest something to which we can conform ourselves, unless the unconcealment of beings had already exposed us to,

⁴⁵ *Basic Writings*: 1999, p. 176

⁴⁶ P. 177

⁴⁷ *Basic Writings*: 1999, p.177

placed us in that cleared realm in which every being stands for us and from which it withdraws'⁴⁸.

A key question remains as to how all this happens. How do we approach this truth that occurs as a type of unconcealment? Heidegger steps forward with a statement of his credo: what he believes things to be. This is a significant passage in the essay. He notes in a rather obvious way that there are many different realities that exist, many objects, persons, things possess being in one shape or another. Our universe consists of human beings, gifts and sacrifices, animals and plants, equipment and works. The particular always stands in the larger framework of things, the concrete being stands within the larger Being. We have the mystic-like sentence: 'Through Being there passes a veiled fatality that is ordained between the godly and the countergodly'⁴⁹. The inadequacy of our intellect and senses is all too apparent. There is much in reality that we see dimly and can only inadequately grasp. We are not the origin point of our own being, this is unquestionable and inalterable: 'And yet - beyond beings, not away from them but before them, there is still something else that happens. In the midst of beings as a whole an open place occurs. There is a clearing. Thought of in reference to beings, this clearing is more in being than are beings. This open centre is therefore not surrounded by beings; rather, the clearing centre itself encircles all that is, as does the nothing, which we scarcely know'⁵⁰.

Françoise Dastur writes: 'setting up as an essential feature of the work of art is different from the bare placing of art works in a museum or exhibition. It has the

⁴⁸ P. 177

⁴⁹ P. 178

sense of dedication and praise so that in setting up the work the holy is opened up as holy. And the opening of the dimension of holiness is at the same time the setting up of a world. The work of art is therefore not set up (*aufgestellt*), but it is essentially in itself a setting up (*Das Werk ist in sich seinem Wesen nach aufstellend*) in the sense that it opens a world (FV 28)⁵¹.

Heidegger notes that beings can only be as beings, if they simultaneously stand within and stand without what is cleared in this clearing. We have to share it and we have to be deprived of it in order to know what it is. We have to be shadowed by what it is not in order to know what it is; we assume to read Heidegger in this way. As we will see later in this thesis Being can only be known through the possibility of its non-being; this is how Maurice Blanchot reads Heidegger in his work *The Space of Literature*. As Heidegger writes: ‘Only this clearing grants and guarantees to us humans a passage to those beings that we ourselves are not, and access to the being that we ourselves are’⁵². It is this clearing that allows beings to be unconcealed to varying degrees. We can only speak of the unconcealed in the context of this clearing within being. In the moment of encounter with another being we are involved in an instance of clearing that is also a concealment. It is a strange counter-dynamic that is continuously moving.

As Marc Froment-Meurice writes: ‘How could a temple (or a painting) speak if speech is refused to stone? If the temple speaks, it is not for having a mouth (even an oracular one) and a tongue. Besides, that is not what speaking is: the voice of Being is voiceless. If the temple speaks, it is in the same sense that language speaks. It

⁵⁰ *Basic Writings*: 1999, p. 178

⁵¹ Dastur: 1999: p. 127

says, shows, or rather lets itself be (re)said. To speak is to show, and if the temple shows, it is because it is this showing without intermediaries such as words. It shows before all speech, in the Open of this essentially voiceless milieu that is the disclosure of Being, before language as a means of expression and communication of a sense (through words)⁵³. We note the distinctiveness of Heidegger's choice of a Temple as an illustration of his argument.

We are not just talking about the limits of knowledge, about running into the furthest frontier of what can be known. We are encountering the edge of what is cleared. Beings block other beings, simulate other beings, in this space, and beings appear sometimes to be other than what they are. Errors occur therefore. We can be deceived. This suggests that the open clearance is not a permanent opening with rigidly defined edges or frontiers. It is not a given, a state or stage that is an existent but rather exists as a happening. Heidegger's thought is rather fluid and poetic at this point, non-dogmatic and non-systematic. The implication thereby is that unconcealment or the moment of truth is not an attribute of matter or one of propositions.

Things are always shadowed by their opposite. What seems ordinary is in fact extraordinary. The essence of truth, understood by Heidegger as articulated in what has preceded, as unconcealment, is dominated by the idea of a denial. He does not see this denial as something defective in our approach to the essence of the truth, for *'this denial, in the form of a double concealment, belongs to the essence of truth as*

⁵² *Basic Writings*: 1999, p.178

⁵³ Marc Froment-Meurice: 1998, p. 153

*unconcealment*⁵⁴. (Italics are Heidegger's). There is always an element of un-truth to truth. As he writes: 'the proposition "the essence of truth is un-truth" is not, however, intended to state that truth is at bottom falsehood. Nor does it mean that truth is never itself but, viewed dialectically, is also its opposite'⁵⁵.

When Heidegger talks about concealing denial he wishes to indicate, or preserve, hint at, denote the fact that opposition in the essence of truth subsists between clearing and concealing. We are dealing with the opposition of the original strife spoken of earlier. Truth and its essence in itself is the primal strife in which that open centre is won within which beings stand and from which they set themselves back into themselves. This open region always and only occurs within the midst of beings. To the open region there belongs a world and the earth. However, we are not to make some easy connection between the world as the open region that corresponds to the clearing and then the earth as its opposite, the closed region that corresponds to concealment. Rather, he writes, 'the world is the clearing of the paths of the essential guiding directions with which all decision complies'⁵⁶. Every decision inescapably rests on something not fully comprehended, on what has not been fully mastered, on something that is concealed and confusing. The earth is not intrinsically and inescapably closed but rises up as that which is self-closing. And so the belligerence of earth and world emerges and is inescapable. They exist in conflict and 'only as such do they enter into the strife of clearing and concealing'⁵⁷.

⁵⁴ *Basic Writings*: 1999, p.179

⁵⁵ *Basic Writings*: 1999, p. 180

⁵⁶ *Basic Writings*: 1999, p. 180

⁵⁷ *Basic Writings*: 1999, p. 180

As soon as one sets up the work of art, a world and earth are set forth and the work exists as the instigation of the strife in which the unconcealment of beings as a whole, or truth, is won. Truth is the instance of unconcealment. When the Temple stands where it is a moment of truth happens. Heidegger is not concerned about an adequate or correct representation. Rather beings are brought into unconcealment through this process and are thereby held therein. We witness an instance of truth in Van Gogh's painting of the peasant shoes. That is not to say that he has portrayed the shoes correctly. Rather the equipmental nature of their being is highlighted. The beings of things as a whole are thereby highlighted and the world and earth in their counter-play are illustrated and exist in a moment of unconcealment. When the shoes exists in close relation to their essence then this is valuable for the overall truth of beings at large. And therefore we touch on the beautiful because: *'beauty is one way in which truth essentially occurs as unconcealment'*⁵⁸. (Italics are Heidegger's).

Heidegger feels he has not approached the thingly character of the work adequately. We have ignored the issue that the work is exactly that, a work, and is thereby something that has been created. As a created object it shares in the medium out of which and in which it has been created; as such then the thingly element has entered into the work. Is there a difference in being made and created, from creation and making? Can we approach the innermost essence of the work and thereby gauge the degree to which createdness belongs to the work and affects its work-being? Does it lie within the essence of truth to move towards the work of art, to exist within that work? What is truth that it can only exist if it is set to work within the work? What is truth that it can happen as art and why are there art objects at all?

⁵⁸ *Basic Writings*: 1999, p. 181

In this section we have seen Heidegger struggle with the concept of art as origin on the one hand, and on the other an art as mere supplement on the other. Art as supplement is art as a routine cultural phenomenon. As Robert Bernasconi writes: 'what has to be decided, according to Heidegger, is whether art is to remain something secondary, as happens when it is conceived in terms of expression and elucidated further in terms of such concepts as embellishment, entertainment, recreation and edification, or whether art is to be an instigator of our history'⁵⁹. And our history here has overt connections to the direction of the German peoples under Nazi socialism. It is impossible to avoid this conclusion. When Heidegger pursues the question of whether or not we are in the vicinity of art as origin, the 'we' that he has in mind is the German people. He is keen to clarify whether the German people are a public or a people. Are the German people purely a passive audience waiting to be entertained by this intellectual or any other artistic jester, or are they a people with a historical destiny and direction? Such is the issue he is pursuing when he seeks for clarity about who we are and who we are not when in the vicinity of the origin. As Bernasconi writes: 'so long as art was restricted to being a form of expression, the public might be inspired for example by a German cathedral, but a people would never come to be founded'⁶⁰.

What about Truth and Art?

Between

That deep, dark pool. To come upon it,
after driving across the Gap in midsummer,

⁵⁹ Bernasconi: 1999, p. 106

⁶⁰ Bernasconi: 1999, p. 107

the hedges freighted with fuchsia, hawthorn,
blood-red and white under shining veils of rain.

A wind flurry finecombing the growing grain
as a full-uddered cow precedes us along the lane,
a curious calf poking its lubberly head over stone
while the country road winds betwixt and between.

Sudden, at the summit of the Knockmealdowns,
a chill black lake, a glacial corrie or tarn,
some large absence, hacked, torn
from the far side of the dreaming cliff.

A brooding silence, a hoarded font of nothing,
lightless, still, opaque...severely alone.

Except when a shiver, a skirl of wind
makes the waters tremble, mild as that field of grain.

But on the shorn flank of the mountain,
a flowering, flaring bank of rhododendron,
exalted as some pagan wedding procession.

Fathomless darkness, silent raging colour:

A contrast to make your secret self tremor,
like a child cradled in this quarry's murmur,

delighted but lost between the dark, the blossoming,
 On one side, a moorland's bareness, rufous heather

Sheltering a long-nebbed curlew, bog asphodel or lobelia
 and, on the other, that terraced orchestra of colour,
 avenues of lavish amethyst blossom.

Chill of winter: full warmth of summer,
 colliding head on in stillness, and a heavy aroma.⁶¹

John Montague

We note John Montague's initial statement 'we come upon it'. So the scenario presented in the poem occurs naturally, it happens within nature as such. He premises the moment central to the poem, its instant of revelation, by a journeying 'betwixt and between'. We re-call the title of the poem 'Between'. The poem elaborates a contrast. The glacial corrie stands as a moment of emptiness in stark contrast and opposition to a scene of plenitude. Yet the poem insists that they belong to each other, one is the inverse of the other. It would appear that each needs its opposite in order to be: 'Fathomless darkness, silent raging colour'. The poem's implicit argument is that poetry exists in the moment of the caesura, where one rolls into the other, or in the instance of union. Montague links this difference to the country's seasons, for in this scene there is a trace still of the 'chill of winter; full warmth of summer'. We will explore Montague's argument further with the aid of Heidegger's reflections on the

⁶¹ Montague: 2001, p. 210 - 211

centrality of the primal rift, or the necessity for opposition in the creation of the work of art.

Heidegger begins this third and final part of his essay with a meditation on the workly character of the work of art. The similarity between the craftsman and the artist exists in the fact that they both work their respective materials. Heidegger writes: 'it is as difficult to track down the essential features of the creation of works and the making of equipment as it is easy to distinguish verbally between the two modes of bringing forth'⁶². Heidegger introduces the key term *techne*, a word the Greeks used to refer both to craft and art.

When Heidegger uses the term *techne* he has in mind a mode of knowing rather than a kind of practical performance. It appears to be a type of vision, the apprehension of what is present. He links this with the Greek concept of *aletheia* that he developed earlier. For *aletheia* involves the essence of knowing, in that it is concerned with the revealing of the truth of beings. *Techne* is the bringing forth of beings in that it brings forth what is present as such out of concealment into the unconcealment of its appearance. Thus the word *techne* as used here by Heidegger is a more sophisticated term than the modern derivative technique might suggest.

The artist and craftsman are people who utilize *techne* because they are people involved in the setting forth of works and equipment that permit both to come forward and be present in an outward and external manner. If we cannot approach the creation of the work from the point of view of craft then, a better approach might be found in

⁶² *Basic Writings*: 1999, p. 183

the workly character of the work. It is within what is created that we find evidence of its creation. When we speak of creation we are referring to that process by which something emerges as a thing that has been brought forth. It is in the work's becoming a work that truth comes into being and happens. Again Heidegger approaches an essential question: what is truth that it should choose to reside in a work, in something that has been created?

Heidegger speaks of truth as also being un-truth to the degree that it always holds something in reserve. It retains within itself the reservoir of the not-yet-revealed, what is un-covered in the sense of still to be revealed. There is a type of double refusal here. As Heidegger writes: 'truth essentially occurs as such in the opposition of clearing and double concealing. Truth is the primal strife in which, always in some particular way, the open region is won within which everything stands and from which everything withholds itself that shows itself and withdraws itself as a being. Whenever and however this strife breaks out and happens, the opponents, clearing and concealing, move apart because of it. Thus the open region of the place of strife is won. The openness of this open region, that is, truth, can be what it is, namely, this openness, only if and as long as it establishes itself within its open region. Hence there must always be some being in this open region in which the openness takes its stand and attains its constancy. In thus taking possession of the open region, openness holds it open and sustains it'⁶³.

As Heidegger notes this might be the unique role Being plays in things. If the unconcealment of beings belongs in any way to Being itself, then Being, by way of its

⁶³ *Basic Writings*: 1999, p. 185 - 186

own essence, lets the free space of openness happen, and introduces this space as a place of the sort in which each being emerges in its own way. It is at this point and place that truth is established. It is only when beings open up in this region or space that a place for truth emerges. It does not exist out there floating free but always exists within a particular context. Truth can only happen within a site where an openness happens, where an open region has been established. As Heidegger writes: 'because it is in the essence of truth to establish itself within beings, in order thus first to become truth, the *impulse toward the work* lies in the essence of truth, as one of truth's distinctive possibilities, by which it can itself occur as being in the midst of beings'⁶⁴.

Heidegger at this point begins to unite the elements or terms he has worked out progressively in his essay. Thus he writes: 'truth essentially occurs only as the strife between clearing and concealing in the opposition of world and earth'⁶⁵. Truth aims to exist, to be established in the work as the very strife of world and earth. The strife is started by it and does not just find a place there to dwell. This being will always therefore bear within itself the essential traits of the strife. It is through the strife that the unity of world and earth is won. Once again we find Heidegger in a lyrical frame of mind: 'as a world opens itself, it submits to the decision of a historical humanity the question of victory and defeat, blessing and curse, mastery and slavery. The dawning world brings out what is as yet undecided and measureless, and thus discloses the hidden necessity of measure and decisiveness'⁶⁶.

Heidegger attempts to outline further, and clarify what he means by strife. He reverts to his terms earth and world. As the world moves towards opening the earth

⁶⁴ *Basic Writings*: 1999, p. 187

⁶⁵ *Basic Writings*: 1999, p. 187

comes into opposition with it. The earth seeks to retain everything within it according to its own laws. The world moves in opposition to this. World seeks for beings to reach their own open region and all of this against the resistance of the earth. The strife Heidegger has in mind is not the rift of complete separation, of complete alienation from and to each other, of earth and world. Rather it marks out the common ground that lies between them as opponents. This rift carries them towards a point of unity, due to this ground that they share in common.

Heidegger uses for the first time another concept, what he refers to as the *figure*. The *figure* is the name for the strife that has been brought into the rift and set back into earth and is thus fixed in place. The work is a created thing. Therefore we can speak of truth's being fixed in place. This happens in the *figure*. The *figure* is the structure (maybe matrix) in whose shape the rift composes itself. It is from this point that truth shines forth. When we speak of the work it is as something that provides an enframing and placing and the naming of this nodal point is identified by Heidegger with his term *figure*. As Marc Froment-Meurice writes: 'the proper will enter into presence only under the figure of the Figure, and even if it calls for the status of the proper, in the statue of the god, "for example", this figure will never be able to efface its improper origin, its proper status as figure. To enter into presence will always be to enter into the space of (re)presentation. To take on a figure will be to enter into (dis)figuration'⁶⁷.

What distinguishes the work of art for Heidegger is that its createdness is part of its existence. This separates it from the piece of equipment. Of course Heidegger

⁶⁶ *Basic Writings*: 1999, p. 187 - 188

⁶⁷ Marc Froment-Meurice: 1998, p. 157

admits that all things have been created, the pair of shoes as much as the painting of those shoes by Vincent Van Gogh. However Heidegger argues that the fact of its being created stands out from the work of art in a highly particular way. What is highlighted is not the originality or genius of the artist. For Heidegger what is significant is that we are aware that a genuine unconcealment of being has happened here. We must ask the question of Heidegger here: What are the critical criteria by which we determine this? What is vital is to recognize that something exists, *is*, before us that just as easily may not have been. (Maurice Blanchot will develop this strain in Heidegger's thought as we shall see in Chapter Four). The self-subsistence of the work of art is to be located in this remarkable fact that it just is. We can approach this more clearly where relatively few facts about the artist who produced the work are known. We are confronted thereby with just the plain fact of its existence. We know relatively little of Sappho or Hesiod but we are familiar with the poems that give currency to these proper names. The same can also be said of Homer and, to a lesser degree, Shakespeare.

Heidegger is keen to drive his point home, to the point almost of repetition, and devotes quite a bit of space and thought to the unique nature of the existence of the work of art. All things are, from the hammer to the nail, and from the stocking to the shoe. However the work of art is singular in the attention it draws to the fact that it is as a work. The work is created and always holds before it for inescapable observation that it has been created. When the work opens itself up what is illustrated is the unique fact of its existence at all. When this is highlighted in the open region it highlights the strangeness of the work of art as well as its solitude.

What is seen as the unique workly character of the work, for Heidegger, is inescapably bound up with its createdness. When we examined it closely we perceived that createdness is revealed as the strife that is fixed in place in the figure by means of the rift. The work cannot escape its createdness. It is the work's createdness that is thrust into the open region of the 'that'. However the work is never exhausted in the createdness.

For Heidegger there is an element of alienation in the work of art. The strangeness of its being cuts us off and forces us to contemplate the familiarity of our surroundings by pushing us into a position of estrangement or alienation. It does this through its self-subsistence in and through the figure and its distance from human beings. It just is. The extraordinary stands before us while the intimately familiar is placed at a remove from us. As Heidegger writes: 'To submit to this displacement means to transform our accustomed ties to world and earth and henceforth to restrain all usual doing and prizing, knowing and looking, in order to stay within the truth that is happening in the work'⁶⁸.

This is intimately tied up with Heidegger's notion of Origin. The art of the Origin for Heidegger is Greek. The beginning in the sense of the original jump that jumps out in front of everything that is going to come, that precedes everything and thus already contains it, this beginning takes place when beings in their totality and as such want to be carried out into the open. For Heidegger this occurs for the first time in the Occident within the Greek world. It was here that what was subsequently

⁶⁸ *Basic Writings*: 1999, p. 191

known as Being was put to work. Even with fresh departures like the Cartesian cogito we are still determined by the first movement. And the original work does not want to emerge from the source but to return to it. And as Heidegger conceives it, to return to the source is not to return to something, especially not a past model. For it is continually to confront the absence of models and precedents, to confront the without-origin and without-sense at the origin of presence itself. It is to face the original lack of a foundation, this founding lack that is the secret of the purely springing-forth.

However the work of art has to be preserved in its place as a work and thus requires preservers. What is created cannot come into being without those who preserve it. The setting of truth to work in the work requires preservers. The work cannot be a work without them. This also happens while the work is waiting for them to arrive on the scene of its unveiling of truth.

We must be willing to share in knowledge. Through this willingness and the knowledge it strives after we enter into the unconcealment of Being. Human being, although captive, reaches towards the openness found in Being. Heidegger knows though that we cannot move from some inside to some outside and reside there completely and abide within the outside and openness as if it were our true and proper element. The truth of our existence suggests that we can stand out while standing within the clearing of beings that opens up. Knowledge that is based on the having seen of the unconcealment of truth within the work must be always resolved.

Heidegger writes that we can only approach the truth of the being of the work of art through the work itself and not some theory, or historical scholarship, for 'the work is

preserved in the truth that happens through the work itself⁶⁹. That is the work's own peculiar actuality.

Heidegger resolves his question about the thingly character of the work under the symbol of the earth. The thingly character of the work of art is its earthly quality jutting through the work. However this can only be revealed when it intersects with a world. The sense of the earth as that which is self-secluding, and as that which bears patiently, can only be revealed by the opposition of earth to world. The strife between them is fixed in place in the figure of the work and is made manifest by it.

Heidegger asks an astute question of his own schema. How does the rift emerge originally? As he asks it: 'How can the rift be drawn out if it is not brought into the open region by the creative projection as a rift, which is to say, brought out beforehand as strife of measure and unmeasure?'⁷⁰ He justifies his position on the grounds that nature itself possesses a rift design. How does Heidegger justify this? Is he just looking for an easy escape? Linked to this is a capacity for bringing forth. Nature has a tendency towards the production of art. Again we have to ask of Heidegger how can we validate this? Paradoxically though 'this art hidden in nature becomes manifest only through the work, because it lies originally in the work'⁷¹. We can illustrate this point further by returning to Heidegger's image of the Temple. The Temple represents nothing, but it presents the scene. We must think of it as the image of nothing. This is not easy. To aid us we draw on the analogy of the trait. For she or he who draws a line retraces the tearing, the re-trait, or retreat of, the withdrawal, of the Earth that does not want to be exposed. Art hides itself as nature does, in that it

⁶⁹ *Basic Writings*: 1999, p. 193

⁷⁰ *Basic Writings*: 1999, p. 195

encrypts itself. And the retreating, or withdrawal into nature, cannot be extracted except in being re-traced in art, and as the art of the origin. Every work is only an extract, an excerpt of the origin in withdrawing, a trace that makes a sign towards its whiteness.

There is an essential place for those who preserve the work. We cannot dismiss the preservers as ranking lower than the creator or creators. They belong to the work's createdness in an essential way. The work insists on them. The essence of the work is to crave for preservation. The work allows those who essentially belong together at work, the creator and the preserver, originate, each in his own essence. What is peculiar to art that it can function as a place of such origin Heidegger asks?

Art is a becoming and happening of truth. The art object sets truth to work. This process involves bringing the work-being of the object into movement and happening. Does this truth initially emerge from nothing? We move in two directions as always with Heidegger. Yes, it emerges from nothing in that it does not rely on what is given already. It also challenges the ephemeral character of beings. It emerges from the nothingness that precedes them and which will swallow them up. Is this John Montague's 'hoarded font of nothing'?⁷² At the same time beings are moving towards their annihilation as beings and it is the aporia that allows this moving forward that allows truth to emerge. When one is an object thrown in the world then the possibility of the emergence of truth through openings in the fabric of being is plausible. As Françoise Dastur has written: 'because truth has to establish itself (*sich enrichten*) within that which is in order first to become truth (truth does not exist in itself before

⁷¹ *Basic Writings*: 1999, p. 195

⁷² Montague: 2001, p. 210

hand), the impulse toward the work lies in the essence of truth so that art is a distinguished possibility by which truth can happen'⁷³.

Truth occurs in the moment of composition. The truth that concerns Heidegger here is the clearing and concealing of the being of things. The essence of art for Heidegger is poetic. The poetic centre of all art is capable of breaking open into an open place, and this new space is a place wherein everything is presented in a new light, or is deprived of its everyday mundane reality and familiarity. We are alerted to the unbeing of the world through the work of art. It does this by its capacity to highlight or set into the work the unconcealment of beings. This unconcealment moves towards us and challenges everything that is ordinary and familiar. That we are not talking about some causal or physical alteration here Heidegger is at pains to make clear. The change happens within the world of the work itself, from out of the work in truth, and has to do with the unconcealment of beings, and therefore of Being itself. Poetry clears the ground. It does this through the open region. Simultaneous with that the open region allows poetry to happen. Through this process beings are allowed to shine and ring out.

Heidegger seeks to continue an ancient tradition that privileges poetry as the most primary form of the expressive arts. He argues that such a position is justified by the medium utilized by poetic expression. Language has unique characteristics that are primary to any discussion of the distinctiveness of artistic production. We view that language too narrowly if we only conceive of it on the basis of a means of communication. Heidegger writes: 'language alone brings beings as beings into the

⁷³ Dastur: 1999, p. 134

open for the first time'⁷⁴. Stones, plants and animals do not possess a language and thus cannot enter into the openness of beings, and cannot experience non-being and the empty.

Language names beings. Thereby it brings beings to the word and into appearance. It is this process of naming that nominates beings to their Being from out of their Being. When we utter and say we project a clearing in which an announcement is made of what it is that beings come into the open as. Heidegger names this projective saying as poetry. Such a saying is a speaking of the world and the earth, the saying of the arena of their strife and is the place of the nearness and remoteness of the gods. In this saying the concepts of a historical people's essence are performed for that people. The sayable and unsayable are both brought into the world simultaneously.

Language itself is the original poesy because it is the happening in which beings first disclose themselves to humanity as beings. Language always preserves the original sense and essence of poetry. Architecture and painting already occur after language in the open region of saying and naming. 'They are an ever special poetizing within the clearing of beings which has already happened unnoticed in language'⁷⁵.

Heidegger writes that 'the essence of art is poetry. The essence of poetry, in turn, is the founding of truth'⁷⁶. The founding that Heidegger has in mind here has a tripartite function. It is founding understood as bestowing, as grounding and as beginning. This founding, however, only becomes actual in preserving. And it

⁷⁴ *Basic Writings*: 1999, p. 198

⁷⁵ *Basic Writings*: 1999, p. 199

illustrates a unique actuality also. Every work of art refutes what has come before.

Founding is always an overflow in this sense, a bestowal.

Art has a direction also. It does not aim to speak into the indeterminate void. It points out to, moves towards, its preservers. It seeks out a specific, historical people to address. As Heidegger writes: 'truly poetic projection is the opening up of that into which human being as historical is already cast. This is the earth and, for a historical people, its earth, the self-secluding ground on which it rests together with everything that it already is, though still hidden from itself. But this is also its world, which prevails in virtue of the relation of human being to the unconcealment of Being. For this reason, everything with which man is endowed must, in the projection, be drawn up from the closed ground and expressly set upon this ground. In this way the ground is first grounded as the bearing ground'⁷⁷.

Heidegger argues that this bestowing and grounding have an unmediated character that we identify by speaking of them as a beginning. This unmediated character includes the fact that the beginning prepares itself for the longest time and wholly inconspicuously. A real beginning is always ahead, a leap beyond, in which everything that is still to come has been leapt over, even when it, or they, are/is still veiled. The beginning contains the end latently within itself. This genuine beginning contains always the undisclosed abundance of the awesome. Therefore it contains strife with the familiar and ordinary.

⁷⁶ *Basic Writings*: 1999, p. 109

⁷⁷ *Basic Writings*: 1999, p. 200

Whenever art happens - that is, when a beginning occurs - a thrust, a new impetus occurs in history. History will begin for the first time or will start over again. Heidegger is not speaking of history here in the narrow sense of a sequence of events that occur in time. He understands history in the sense of the writing of a people and their destiny; history as the transporting of a people into their appointed task and entry into their own particular endowment as a people. Heidegger writes: 'art is history in the essential sense that it grounds history'⁷⁸.

And so we find Heidegger return to his starting point or source. The idea of art as a point of origin. Art is the place where truth originates. Art is a leap and as such, as founder and preserver, is a point of origin. This is what to be an origin means. Art, poetry, brings something into being from out of its essential source in a founding leap. And so Heidegger writes paradoxically, but clearly: 'The origin of the work of art - that is, the origin of both the creators and the preservers, which is to say of a people's historical existence - is art'⁷⁹.

Heidegger draws his meditation to a close with the powerful question: 'Are we in our existence historically at the origin? Do we know, which means do we give heed to, the essence of the origin? Or, in our relation to art, do we still merely make appeal to a cultivated acquaintance with the past?'⁸⁰

Martin Heidegger finally concludes *The Origin of the Work of Art* with a quote from Holderlin:

⁷⁸ *Basic Writings*: 1999, p. 202

⁷⁹ *Basic Writings*: 1999, p. 202

Reluctantly

that which dwells near its origin abandons the site.

- 'The Journey', verses 18 – 19⁸¹

As should be clear from our analysis Heidegger's essay constitutes a break with the metaphysical tradition of understanding art. In that tradition art has been understood right from the start as a fabricated thing. We have thought of the work of art as something else, something more than a mere product. We have conceived of it as a bringing together under the rubrics of allegory and symbol. We have worked with the dualism of a material content and then a spiritual meaning added on, or seen as an addition to the material dimensions of the artwork. Art under this logic is defined as the (re)presentation of the suprasensible into the sensible. We have a metaphysical logic of addition at work here. In terms of language, the phonetical material to which is added meaning, animal body to which is added soul, and thus the leading idea behind the metaphysical conception of things is that the spiritual element can be represented in the material. Heidegger marks a distinct break from this tradition. As Françoise Dastur writes, for Heidegger: 'the work of art does not (re)present anything: it is neither representation of something else nor presentation of something absent. It has in fact no relationship at all to presence, but, on the contrary, it has a relationship to the becoming or happening of truth, to the coming into presence of everything. That is why Heidegger puts the stress on the initiality of art: the work is a commencement (*Anfang*), an institution (*Stiftung*), a creation (*schaffen*)'⁸².

⁸⁰ *Basic Writings*: 1999, p. 203

⁸¹ *Basic Writings*: 1999, p. 203

⁸² Dastur: 1999, p. 138

The temple would no longer be a temple if it resembled anything. It resembles nothing in a similar manner to the way in which the mountain resembles nothing. The mountain appears as an *a priori*. It appears to be instituted or installed. The installment of the temple is similar to that of the mountain; on the earth, or after it? It emerges from the earth and is made of the stuff of earth. Materially it is no different, except it exists as Temple. This is the source of its radical otherness. We have here the installation of the There. And as Marc Froment-Meurice writes: ‘which precisely is not there, not available, but which always arrives, suddenly, takes place in giving place. The There, first named *Dasein*, then *Aletheia*, is Heidegger’s major, and perhaps even only, discovery. What remains to be discovered beyond the Open?’⁸³,

Marc Froment-Meurice argues for another implication of Heidegger’s thinking on art. He argues that one of the implications of Heidegger’s thought is that ‘sense or meaning would never be whole, present to itself in presence, but always self-affected with a “without sense”. But it would also imply that the *without* is also not whole, put differently, that there is no pure non-sense, or that the without-sense is not non-sense, and thus that the *without* is not reduced to a negation or to a nihilism that is always the weapon sense uses to reduce the other to its mercy. This also means that at the same time the work is not the final instance and remains what cannot be passed over, not because there would be nothing else, but precisely because by its very breaking it testifies for the other to whom it refers, without, however, this reference making sense’⁸⁴.

⁸³ Marc Froment-Meurice: 1998, p. 176

⁸⁴ Marc Froment-Meurice: 1998, p. 171

Chapter Two:

Remembering the Word after the Shoah in the poems of Paul Celan: A Challenge to Heidegger

George Steiner has written that one of the implications of the *Shoah* experience of the death of millions of Jews in Nazi death-camps has been the death of humanity as rational, ‘forward-dreaming’ speech-organisms. When we contemplate how the death camps were organized, and attempt to approach a hypothesis for their motivation, and when we discover the deathly efficiency with which they were run, we are left with profound questions about the nature of human logic as it has been and is ordered in relation to social and psychological circumstance. We are left with no other conclusion to draw but that the *Shoah* is a travesty enacted upon meaningfulness and can be legitimately termed a ‘cancer of reason’. The *Shoah* leaves us with profound questions about some of what had been hitherto the deepest philosophical and theological positions achieved in Western thought. For theology after the *Shoah* we are forced with brutal honesty to speak of the exit of God from the bounds of human experience.

If there is to be a recovery of language and reason it must begin within German, the language of death itself. If language is to be re-humanized, if we are to restore its capacity to address God and to speak to and about humanity, we must begin in the place in which all of these potentialities were challenged and eventually eradicated. Steiner has written: ‘reparation and restoration can come only from within

the death-idiom itself¹.

The Challenge to Theology

George Steiner addresses the question of the uniqueness of the *Shoah*. There has been a long history of anti-Semitism in Western history that has been well documented. However, aside from anti-Jewishness recent history has seen the death of millions of Russians in the *gulags*. We have had many massacres on the continent of Africa by various political dictatorships. Minorities have been assaulted and attempts at their annihilation made at various junctures of human history.

And so Steiner concludes: ‘if there are qualitative differences between the Shoah and the innumerable examples of mass-murder which punctuate history both before and since, they must lie very deep: in that symbolic and metaphysical-theological realm which I want to point towards’².

Steiner begins with St. Paul’s *Epistle to the Romans* 9 - 12 as a starting point for the framework he wishes to suggest. Christ was the Messiah long awaited by the Jewish people. He was the Davidic liberator and saviour prefigured in the Psalms and Isaiah’s vision of the Suffering Servant. This Messiah the Jews had foretold in their own Torah, prayers and prophecy and yet they were the ones to hand him over to abominable suffering that resulted in his death. Understood from this perspective, developed in later Christianity, Judaism eradicated from within itself the act of divine election. This is the most plausible of Steiner’s

¹ George Steiner: ‘*The Long Life of Metaphor: An Approach to the Shoah*’: *Encounter*: 1987, p. 56

scenarios.

Steiner's second proposal is somewhat less reasonable. By their refusal to recognize Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah foretold by their own scriptures the Jews have postponed the day of humanities' salvation. By refusing Christ the Jews have condemned humanity to the treadmill of history. We will not be liberated from our historical bondage, our enslavement to the agonies, bloodshed and injustice of history until the Jewish people recognize the messianic truth of Jesus's ministry and incarnation.

Another version of this scenario runs: the messianic purposes of Christ the Son of God were not accomplished either in His earthly sojourn or in His resurrection. They are incomplete, a continuous process which will find fulfillment only when Judaism enters freely into the *Ecclesia* of the Christian Churches. They will be consummated when synagogue and Church are united in a common tabernacle. Until that day Christianity itself is a fragmentary, often self-contradictory and culpable institution. We respect the Jew as sacred because the potentiality of the truly ecumenical contains within itself the only access to the genuine realisation of God's promise in and through Christ. Steiner detects this strain of argument in the late writings of Karl Barth and more explicitly in the writings of Jurgen Moltmann.

Steiner has only been staking out the ground for his core argument. The attack upon the Jewish people has not been for their role in crucifying God in the form of Jesus Christ. They have not been loathed as deicides but, more radically, 'as *inventor*

² Steiner: 1987: p. 57

of God; it is as spokesman for and remembrancer of an almighty, all-seeing, all-demanding Deity. It is because Judaism has kept man awake, as do the Prophets in the sleeping city'³. For Steiner Judaism has done this at three key junctures in Western history; firstly, in its invention or discovery of monotheism, secondly in the message of the religious radical known as Jesus Christ and, thirdly, in Marxism and messianic-socialism. In all three moments Judaism has asked of ordinary women and men more than human nature ordinarily wishes to give. And in fact, possibly more than organically and psychically it is able to give. We have come to despise those who have asked of us a self-transcendence greater than our natural or common limits of being. Steiner writes: 'our hate and fear are the more intense precisely because we know the absolute rightness, the ultimate desirability of the demand. In failing to respond adequately, we fail ourselves. And it is of deep-lying self-hatreds that hatreds spring'⁴.

And it is only such a deep psychological, metaphysical-theological framework that Steiner feels can persuade us to the depth of loathing and hatred that underlay the Nazi drive to eliminate the Jew from history through the death-camps. And:

It is, therefore, no accident that the theological-metaphysical levels of language of metaphor, of symbolism should be the foundation and constant resource of the one writer who, to my knowledge, has not only taken us to the unspeakable centre of the Shoah-experience, but - and this is far more difficult and important- has located the sense of that experience within the definition of man, of history, and of human speech. ... That Paul Celan is also among the greatest poets in the German tongue, indeed in modern European literature (being, perhaps, an even more *necessary* poet than was Rilke); that Celan alone can stand beside Holderlin in both his poetry and his prose- is almost an extraneous wonder. The necessary and sufficient condition for Celan's poems is the situation of all human saying after the Shoah, a situation which Celan lived and articulated in the absent face of God. In this one supreme

³ Steiner: 1987, p. 59

⁴ Steiner: 1987, p. 59

witness... the fate of the Jew, the night-charged genius of the German language, of the idiom of Auschwitz and Belsen, a profound intimacy with the Hebraic and the Yiddish legacy, coalesced; and they coalesced around the central criteria of the theological and the metaphysical orders of questioning...⁵

Celan's Witness through the Word

Paul Celan was born to a family of German-speaking Jews in 1920 in Czernowitz, capital of the Bukovina region, which passed to Romania just before his birth. After Soviet, then German occupation in 1940 and 1941, after forced labour, his parents' deportation and subsequent disappearance, and the Russians' return in 1944, Celan departed for Bucharest first, then Vienna, before finally settling in Paris in 1948. In Paris he wrote a body of poetry that questioned the possibility of meaning, commemoration, personal and interpersonal communion open to a language soiled by the travesties of history⁶.

The classic expression of such concerns in Celan's body of work is the poem 'Psalm'. A cursory glance at this poem indicates its radically theological and metaphysical field of referral.

No-one kneads us again out of earth and loam,

No-one bespeaks our dust.

No-one.

Praise unto thee, No-one.

For love of you will

⁵ Steiner: 1987: p. 60.

we bloom.
 Toward/against
 You.

A nothing
 were we, are we, will
 we remain, blooming:
 No-one's rose.

With
 the stylus soul-bright
 the dust-thread sky-waste,
 the crown reddened
 by the purple word, which we sang
 above, o above
 the thorn.⁷

As John Felstiner writes: 'The psalm, benediction, doxology, and prayer which this poem sounds like are undercut in breath-turnings, abysses opened beneath those ritual forms. Throughout the Christian West, words for "psalm" are alike. Identical in German and English, they need no translating - whence the snare of Celan's title. As with his "Tenebrae", we assume we know what is meant. But "Psalm" can never, for this poet, purely and simply line up with the hymns of lament and praise that have

⁶ Israel Chalfen's *Paul Celan: A Biography of His Youth*: Persea Books: New York: 1991

⁷ I use Steiner's translation. From Steiner: 1987, p. 60.

comforted generation unto generation'⁸.

Firstly, let us look at some of the influences behind Celan's poem in order to attain a firmer grasp of its field of allusion. Celan's threefold conjugation of time will evoke for some the Christian doxology. There is also though the echo of a more ancient hymn, the Hebrew liturgy contains the phrase: 'Adon Olam' (Lord of the World): 'For He has been, for He is now, for he shall, in radiance, For He is One, no Other is'. The rose's soul-bright 'pistil', besides being a flower's seed-bearing organ, *Griffel* also means a stylus and thereby suggests that the rose blossoms with the energy of writing. 'The dust-thread sky-waste' replaces the earth of *Genesis* - 'waste and void' - with a wasted heaven and this suggests the deep intent of Celan's poem. The 'crown' or 'corolla' with its association with the 'purple' word conjures the bleeding King of the Jews in his purple robe, tying Christ's agony back into Jewish suffering.

'Psalm' is indebted to Heidegger's meditations on nothingness. It is indecipherable without the pages of *Principle of Reason, Satz vom Grund*, prompted by Leibniz's question: 'Why is there something rather than nothing?' Here Leibniz is bent on saying the abyss of being or presence: the *Ab-grund* and the *Un-grund*, the without-grounds and the non-ground. Celan's poem also recalls Angelus Silesius's phrase: 'The rose is without a why, blooms because it blooms'.

There is, also, a long tradition of kabbalistic speculation and ascetic piety behind Celan's choice of phrase for his address: 'No-one'. It re-calls a tradition of

⁸ John Felstiner: *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew*: Yale Univ. Press: New Haven: 1995, p. 167 - 168

witness to the inconceivable, unimaginable, unspeakable, anti-metaphoric tenor of the god of Israel. Celan's biographer notes that Celan was reading works of Jewish mysticism at this point in his life. He had bought writings by Gershom Scholem in 1957 and was studying him by 1960⁹. There is an ancient echo in the formulaic liturgical phrase 'Praise unto thee, No-One'. It suggests piety, resignation and rebellion signaled in the phrase 'blooms' both *towards* God - in that place, at that hour - and a blooms 'against' God. The word *Entgegen* signifies a towards and an opposition.

As Celan attempts to articulate the nothingness of the Jew in Auschwitz he suggests the nothingness of man prior to God's creating him. This nothingness echoes with and re-calls the nothingness which constitutes every individual extinction. And it is the very specific nothingness of the Jewish person and people before their killers in the death-camps of recent history. However Celan loads this nothingness with the issue of contradiction, of a nothingness ironically 'in bloom', a terrible flowering towards and against the 'Nothingness' of God's absence. And as Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe notes there is an irony in a poet's concern with such nothingness, for 'a poem wants to say; indeed, it is nothing but pure wanting to say. But pure wanting-to-say nothing, nothingness, that against which and through which there is presence, what is'¹⁰.

There is the powerful phrase chosen by Celan in his second line. Here he suggests there will be no bespeaking of their dust, of those annihilated in the *Shoah*: 'niemand bespricht unsern Staub'. This echoes with the story of God's breathing life into the clay of Adam, to God's *saying of being* in the Hebrew scriptures:

⁹ See Felstiner: 1995, p. 235

¹⁰ Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe: *Poetry as Experience*: Stanford Univ. Press: California: 1999, p. 20.

'Besprechen' also carries the sense of 'to talk about' or 'to talk to' (as one addresses oneself to a topic). And so the sense becomes: no one - not, above all, God Himself - will speak to the condition of Auschwitz, will speak about it in adequate witness or commemoration. The absence of God from the *Shoah* is his silence in the face of the unremembered dead, a lack of remembrance which makes of their deaths a double annihilation.

And this leads to the stunning reversal of perspective in Celan's poem. For it is only the victims themselves, in the red flowering of their anonymous, unspeakable deaths, who can rescue God from the void of His silence. Theirs is 'the purple word', blood-soaked and royal, theirs is the song over the thorn, the living mystery of the *Niemandrose* above the lacerating murderousness of 'the thorn'. Celan writes a psalm that is also an anti-Psalm. The Jew in the *Shoah* speaks to and against the non-speaking, the unspeaking of God. So long as the Jew addresses God, God must listen. The reversal in Celan is incredible. For, if in the Christ-passion it is understood that a divine being, a Son of God and of Man, is held to have died for man, so in the *Shoah*, the Jewish people, that 'Root of Abraham, root of Jesse, No-one's' ('Radix, Matrix')¹¹ is seen, or understood, to have died for God, to have taken upon itself the inconceivable guilt of God's indifference, or absence, or impotence. And this is the very small miracle of Paul Celan's poetry. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe asks: 'How does it happen that in poetry, out of poetry, all is not lost, that a possibility of articulating something still remains, if only in stuttering, if only in an incomprehensible and incommunicable language, an idiolect or idiom?'¹²

Trans. by Andrea Tarnowski.

¹¹ Paul Celan: *Selected Poems*: Penguin: London: 1990, p. 187, Trans. by Michael Hamburger

The Poet's Challenge To Philosophy

The German philosopher Martin Heidegger, whose essay *The Origin of the Work of Art* was the central preoccupation of our first chapter, was no stranger to the writings of Paul Celan and, for years, Paul Celan had read Heidegger closely. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe has written: 'It would be an understatement to say Celan has read Heidegger. Celan's poetry goes beyond even an unreserved recognition of Heidegger. I think, one can assert that it is, in its entirety, a dialogue with Heidegger's thought. And essentially with the part of this thought that was a dialogue with Holderlin's poetry'¹³.

Paul Celan's copy of *Being and Time* contained extensive notes; he was familiar with Heidegger's interpretations of Holderlin, Trakl and Rilke. His poems show numerous Heideggerian traces. His Bremen and Meridian speeches find in poetry the truest path toward Being - though only under history's acute pressure. Heidegger, for his part, had sent his books to Celan and had wanted to meet him. 'I know everything of his', he said in 1967¹⁴. Celan's major biographer in English John Felstiner has written of Celan's first meeting with Martin Heidegger: 'if even some journalist's insensitive review could disturb Celan, it is clear that an encounter with the man who under Hitler was Rector at Freiburg in 1933 - 34, who in 1935 declared Nazism's "inner truth and greatness", who in 1936 still signed his letters *Heil Hitler!*, had his classes give the salute, and sported a swastika pin, and who paid party dues until 1945 - an encounter with this man has to be fraught, especially given

¹² Lacoue-Labarthe: 1999, p. 23

¹³ Lacoue-Labarthe: 1999, p. 33

¹⁴ Felstiner: 1995, p. 245

Heidegger's silence about it all since the war'¹⁵.

Rudiger Safranski, Heidegger's biographer, records the fraught air that surrounded this first meeting. He details the reluctance of Celan to be photographed alongside Heidegger. He writes of Celan: 'He was impressed by Heidegger's work and personality. He felt himself attracted and, at the same time, blamed himself for it. He sought his presence, yet he forbade himself to seek it'¹⁶.

Despite this deep personal interest of the two men in each other's personality and writing Paul Celan is a strange absence in the writings of Heidegger. There is no trace of Celan in the writings of Heidegger concerning poetry and poetics. We recall that Celan was emerging and being recognized as one of the foremost poets of the German language in the period that Heidegger and Celan were in correspondence. Heidegger's silence is more astonishing given Celan's conscious attempt to carry forward, examine and explore the legacy of Holderlin, Trakl and Rilke. As we have noted, a tradition of poetry Heidegger devoted much attention to.

We turn to Celan's well-known poem about his first meeting with Heidegger, *Todtnauberg*.

Arnica, eyebright, the
 draft from the well with the
 starred die above it,

¹⁵ Felstiner: 1995, p. 245

¹⁶ Rudiger Safranski: *Martin Heidegger: Between Good and Evil*. Harvard Univ. Press: Cambridge,

in the

hut,

the line

-whose name did the book

register before mine? -,

the line inscribed

in that book about

a hope, today,

of a thinking man's

coming

word

in the heart,

woodland sward, unlevelled,

orchid and orchid, single,

coarse stuff, later, clear

in passing,

he who drives us, the man,

who listens in,

the half-

trodden wretched
 tracks through the high moors,

dampness,

much.¹⁷

The poem re-calls Heidegger's rural retreat where he completed most of his writing and thinking. It was an enabling place of rural simplicity and solitude. The poet conveys something of this through his presentation of the essentials of a plain homestead, the fountain and stars, the mountain floors, the visitor's book and the moor. The tranquility of this agrarian-intellectual idyll is menaced by the intrusion of history at the outset. This intrusion into the world of nature also affects the very articulation of language and thereby the modalities of manifestation. The star-die upon the water brings to mind the star of David. In Todtnauberg Celan had taken a drink from Heidegger's much-photographed well with its star-shaped wooden cube on top, and signed the guest book 'with a hope for a coming word in the heart'.

The homestead is a shack. Does it echo with the memory of army-barracks? This survivor Paul Celan inscribes his name in a book. It is not a book of life, but rather contains, in all probability, names of many who, directly or indirectly, are complicit with those who committed horrendous crimes and murder against Jews like Celan and his family. The traditional image of life-sustaining and cleansing water from the fountains is here transformed into something suggestive of weeping. We note the disabling pervasiveness of the moist in Celan's poem.

¹⁷ *Selected Poems*: 1990, p. 293

During the war in Czernowitz Paul Celan had astonished friends by using botanical terms in several languages. Now, like Jew Klein in Celan's prose piece 'Conversation in the Mountains'¹⁸, he names the natural world, and the particular flowers named signify healing - arnica for bruises, and eyebright is a balm he recalled from childhood. Arnica is a medicinal herb and might be a cure for the wounding with which the poem closes. There is a circularity within the poem in terms of form and content. There might well be an echo of the death camps in the language of the poem chosen to suggest the 'woodland swards'. They are not a typically leveled phenomenon. Celan's choice of an unusual term might suggest the naturally rolling ground around Auschwitz that was leveled with the ash of the dead.

The word 'coming' mattered to philosopher and poet alike. In a 1936 essay Heidegger described Holderlin's sense of a 'new time': 'It is the time of the fled gods *and* of the coming God'¹⁹. Holderlin's hope still awaits a heartfelt word, Celan implies. Again his poem challenges Heidegger noting the 'half-/ trod log- / paths' of their aborted walk. Heidegger's 'Woodland Paths', showing poetry 'under way' toward truth in language convinced Celan. Yet, in a deft wordplay, Celan's term for 'log' echoes with the term 'bludgeon'. Translating his own *Night and Fog* he had used that word for death camp prisoners 'bludgeoned awake' at 5 a.m. Along the paths of the German language Celan could only go halfway with Heidegger.

With this poem, Celan's biographer John Felstiner notes, he made an unusual step²⁰. He had his Paris printer do a bibliophile edition and he sent the first copy to Heidegger. The response was a letter empty of anything but conventional thanks. How

¹⁸ *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*: Norton: New York: 2001, Trans. by John Felstiner, p. 397

¹⁹ Felstiner: 1995, p. 246

could the seventy-eight-year-old philosopher respond? When Celan readied 'Todtnauberg' for his next book, he made one change, taking out 'un - /delayed'. He was still waiting for the coming word. For Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe this word was vital. For: 'What "Todtnauberg" speaks about, then, is this: the language in which Auschwitz was pronounced, and which pronounced Auschwitz'²¹. And again, the importance of having this word uttered lay in its being not about 'life, which is always possible, which remained possible, as we know, even in Auschwitz, but existence, poetry, speech. Language. That is, relation to others'²². And finally: 'the word that the West, in its pathos of redemption, has never been able to say. The word it remains for us to learn to speak, lest we should sink ourselves. The word *pardon*'²³.

Heidegger has written of his experience of a unity with nature in his rural retreat: it 'has the peculiar and original power of not isolating us but of projecting our whole existence out into the vast nearness of the presence of all beings'. For Celan however there is an experience of fragmentation and isolation. The orchid is replicated in the landscape but ultimately stands alone, 'orchid and orchid, single'. Speech is crude and meaning only dawns on one after the moment has passed. And one is left unfulfilled, for the hope that grows in the heart is not fed by the 'coming/word' that would or should spring from the same place. Celan owes a debt to Heidegger's thought for this reference. For the 'coming/word' is a line that responds to Heidegger's metaphysical adventism, to his 'coming God', to his *On the Way to Language*, which can bring about a Turn.²⁴ Celan's language is fragmented and halting. He seeks out the thinker and is unsure of what he finds. Celan stands before

²⁰ Felstiner: 1995, p. 247

²¹ Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe: 1999, p.37

²² Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe: 1999, p. 38

²³ Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe: 1999, p. 38

the living person of the Other. Both the thinker and the poet must respond to the same historical configuration. They are both called to responsibility. What is interesting is the figure of the anonymous 'man' who is thoughtfully listening. He is undistinguished. His technological vocation is driving. Does the poet suggest he is most 'with it'?

Celan's Thought on Poetry in the 'Meridian'

One understanding of Art conceives of it as something that seeks to expand itself; that clamours to be expanded. Art aims to efface its difference from the things and beings of nature. In a way that which is art's own, what is 'proper' to art (to the *Unheimlich*), is the tendency to mitigate differentiation, and in so doing invade and contaminate everything. Or mediate everything. We recall aesthetic formulations that nature is only nature because of art. Celan throws down a serious challenge to this notion of art and what it implies, as can be gathered from a close reading of his thoughtful reflection on poetry 'Meridian'.

What can we use to bolster us against the estrangement implied in the aforementioned conception of Art? Celan's 'Meridian' suggests a humble reply to that ancient question about art. What Celan will say opposes the *Unheimlich*, the estrangement of art, is under various names the *own* - the own-being: the 'self' or 'I', even the 'he' of singularity. We should strive to protect the creature and the creaturely. Poetry should aim to shelter the human. Not one man or another - but that man there, here and now, in the singular. This is the drift of Celan's reflections in

²⁴ Rudiger Safranski: 1999, p. 424

'Meridian'²⁵. The estrangement of humanity that occurs in and through art occurs because of language. We forget ourselves when we speak in words. Poetry, as understood in Celan's sense, is 'every time' the interruption of language. Something removed from, or preserved from the realm of 'art'. Poetry is really the suspension of language. Poetry occurs when a word appears in the pure suspension of speech. This is what Holderlin means by speaking of the caesura as 'the pure word'. Poetry, then, says the human, it speaks of our suspension over the abyss. And so, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe will write: 'the place of poetry, the place where poetry takes place, every time, is the place without place of the intimate gaping - something we must certainly conceive of as the pure spacing which places (do not) sup-pose and which upholds them, with no hold'. Poetry then is the proper abyss of art. It occurs in the between time of the caesura and is always singular, unique.

Celan writes in the 'Meridian': 'Perhaps, I must tell myself now – perhaps even a meeting between this “wholly Other” – I'm using a familiar term here – and a not all that distant, a quite near “other” becomes thinkable – thinkable again and again'²⁶. As it speaks its own name, or speaks in its own individual cause, speaks in the language of singularity, of an individuation that is radical, the poem hopes in this language to speak 'in the cause of the strange'. It will use the language of estrangement. However, the self - or the singular I - reaches itself within itself only via an 'outside'. For the here and now of singular existence is immediately an elsewhere and another time (a date whose memory must be kept). We must substitute for the topological division of here and strange, near and far - which inevitably

²⁵ *Selected Poems and Prose*: 2001, p. 401 - 413

²⁶ *Selected Poems and Prose*: 2001, p. 408

assigns places - the unlocatable division of difference or alterity. As Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe writes: 'In the place (without place) of the elsewhere, an "other" occurs, that is, a singular existent in whose name - and this time, the expression is apt - the poem maintains the hope of speaking. Estrangement yields ground to the encounter'²⁷.

However, as soon as other occurs there is the threat of an absolute alterity, absolute, which forbids or renders impossible all relation. The other is immediately the wholly other. Paradoxically, the other is unthinkable without relation to the same. As soon as other appears, detaching itself from the same, the same, in advance, has already recovered it and brought it back. It is impossible to think a total unbinding.

The same is itself in relation to the Other. Between the same and the other there is necessarily a relation. As Lacoue-Labarthe writes: 'in the "relating to", it is by definition the movement of alteration that predominates. Or if one prefers, difference is always more primitive. So that in the relation of the same and the other there is an imbalance. This means that it is the alterity of the other, the being-wholly-other of the other or a certain "duplicity" in the other that institutes the same as a relation to the other, and thus always differentiates it'²⁸. The wholly other de-parts the other, that is approaches it: re-lates it to the same, which receives it in, or rather as its most intimate difference. So that the wholly other is the gift of the other as the possibility of the same, that is, as the possibility for the same of establishing itself as 'differance'. The same (the Subject) does not go outside the self and pass into its other, with a view to turning and relating back to the self so as to establish itself as such. But under the original gift of the other to which it already always relates itself, the same is the pure

²⁷ Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe: 1999, p. 59 - 60

²⁸ Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe: 1999, p. 60

movement that allows the 'intimate gaping' (Lacoue-Labarthe's phrase) - which is, within the self, its 'original outside self' (time)- to hollow itself out, to open and spread.

We read Celan's poem 'Your Being Beyond':

God, so we read, is
 a part and a second, a scattered one:
 in the death
 of all those mown down
 he grows himself whole.

There
 our looking leads us,
 with this
 half
 we keep up relations.²⁹

And then we have 'On Either Hand':

... I
 find my way out.
 O this wandering empty
 hospitable midst. Apart,

²⁹ *Selected Poems*: 1990, p. 161

I fall to you, you
 fall to me, fallen away
 from each other, we see
 through:

One
 and the same
 has
 lost us, one
 and the same
 has
 forgotten us, one
 and the same
 has - -³⁰

And thus it would seem that what Celan calls the encounter is thus first the hollowing out, the intimate gaping of the singularity. The encounter is the original intimate ecstasy according to which singular being exists. This is why one can say of the poem that is 'alone' that it also takes place 'in the mystery of an encounter'.

To speak to the other being or thing - to address him or it, is to let what speaks in him or it occur, and accept this word in the very heart of the poem (in its immediacy and proximity) as the gift of the other. It is to prepare, ecstatically, for the 'presence' of the other within oneself: to allow this intimacy to open up. The other de-

³⁰ *Selected Poems*: 1990, p. 163

parts, and yet remains close to us in a manner such that it makes the very space an intimacy that renders possible thought and word, that is, dialogue. And so Lacoue-Labarthe writes: 'For this reason the poem turns within itself, to the appearing, to what is "in the process of appearing"; it questions the very coming into presence. The poem (the poetic act), in this mode proper to it (dialogue), is the thought of the present's presence, or of the other of what is present: the thought of no-thingness (of Being), that is to say, the thought of time'³¹. The experience of the You, the encounter, opens onto nothing other than the experience of Being, of the no-thing of being - which Celan designates as 'openness', 'emptiness', 'freedom'.

The poetic act then is always ecstatic in the original sense of that term as a stepping outside of oneself. The exorbitant is the pure transcendence of being. The poem is turned towards the open, offered up to it. And the open is open to u-topia, to the place without place of the advent. The poetic act is in Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe's word 'catastrophic'³²: an upsetting relation to what is an upset, in being, in the direction of no-thingness (the abyss). And so, after Heidegger, there is a challenge to the art of representation. For true poetic art, in these terms, is about perceiving rather than re-presenting.

The Interlocution with Heidegger

Heidegger argues in *On the Way to Language* that the essential place of a poet's poetic saying is a point of convergence 'at the tip of the spear'³³. This place or

³¹ Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe: 1999, p. 65

³² Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe: 1999, p. 67

³³ Veronique M. Foti: *Heidegger and the Poets: Poiesis, Sophia, Techne*: Humanities Press: New Jersey: 1992, p. 81

point indicates the 'highest and utmost' inner necessity of the saying. This extreme gathering responds to or converges with the hidden source or origin of the saying which for Heidegger is dislocated into the 'unsaid'. Heidegger is insistent that the wave of poetic saying as it rhythmically surges forth, does not abandon the source, but rather 'lets all the movement of the saying flow back into the ever more concealed origin'. This origin and gathering point concealed in the 'unsaid' becomes the locus of the interlocution between the poet and the thinker. Heidegger is in search of a differential unification. A post-metaphysical moment, but a post-Hegelian one that no longer functions within the closed economy of the self-unfolding of the Absolute. Heidegger is in search of a place of unity but one which within itself contains the power of transition and of transformation.

Celan had his own relationship with Holderlin. It is articulated in a poem from a posthumous collection.

I drink wine from two glasses
 and plough away on
 the king's caesura
 like that one
 on Pindar,

God turns in his tuning fork
 as one among the least
 of the Just,
 the lottery drum spills

our two bits.³⁴

Holderlin had a particular understanding of the poetic caesura. It was formulated on the basis of his work on Pindar and Greek tragedy. He conceived of it as a 'counter-rhythmic interruption' by the 'pure word' which at the height of poetic transport, allows representation to show itself as such, in its law. The division effected by the caesura frustrates both dialectical unification and decisive orientation. For Holderlin this has a cathartic function. It purifies a tendency to limitless unification by limitless separation. The gap created by the caesura falls outside of the philosophical economy.

The division of the caesura is intensified by Celan's explicit negation of any unified source of poetic inspiration - the 'draught of vintage' of traceable provenance. Celan is caught between two glasses. He is displaced from the Western classical inheritance. Holderlin's God has given over the 'tuning fork' to the inconspicuous small just ones of Jewish mysticism. Poetic meaning no longer allows itself to be collected at the acme of convergence prepared for by the craftsmanship of Heideggerian poetizing and thinking. It falls, instead, to the dictates of chance, out of the spinning drum that allots destiny - not because of the poet's carelessness but because the possibility of the convergence in the 'unsaid' has become superseded. By what? Celan writes in 'A la pointe aceree' of 'unwritten things' that in the cataclysms of recent history have 'hardened into language'³⁵. The effect on language is that it is no longer supple and capable of the movement of surging forth and recollective confluence so typical of Heideggerian thought, let alone the poet's or thinker's

³⁴ *Selected Poems and Prose*: 2001, p. 367

³⁵ *Selected Poems*: 1990, p. 193

prescriptive collecting of meaning.

In virtue of an historical upheaval, the hidden things of the earth, 'the ores... the crystals,/ the geodes', are cast out and lie bare, 'crossways', shamelessly exposed in disorder. Their exposure 'lay[s] bare a sky'. This sky is insecure. It may with the turning of the breath become an abyss before one's feet. For Celan, there is no univocal reading either of the symbols of history (the 'killed/chalk star') or of its orientation. No saying or collecting can prepare for a Heideggerian turning 'from out of the abyss'. We are tied to reading nonetheless. It traces its 'spluttering tracks' (to the site of the death camp) in the quiet of the 'forest hour', and questions with the searching touch of 'finger thoughts', what is unrepeatable³⁶.

There is an embedded challenge to Heidegger here. For Heidegger the disclosive power of poetic language, together with its ability to open up the dimension of human dwelling and to give it a layout, remains essentially unaffected by history. So, from the poets of classical Greece, to his contemporary Germany, down to our own time, poets say essentially the 'same' thing without historical difference. However, for Celan, the point of the metaphors of home, dwelling, root, or ground is to describe the nature of the self in a disruption for which the only oblique analogue in the tradition of modernity is found in Holderlin's late poetics. It stems from the *Shoah's* being a systematic destruction of the resources and integrity of the self as the source of poiesis, the instilling, in the survivors, of 'the shame of Being' and, for poets like Celan, the useless residue of the Western idea of art. However, Celan's poetry and poetics, one that finds itself dislocated to the zero point of this devastation,

³⁶ *Selected Poems*: 1990, p. 195

strives nevertheless to reconfigure itself in response to the urgency of another mandate.

We will look more closely at the poem 'Engfuhrung'. Celan composed this poem between February and May 1958. Celan's biographer argues that Celan wrote this series of poems when he thought his earlier poem 'Todesfuge' was being appropriated too readily and easily by critics and readers.³⁷ He needed to come up with something that would resist and defy any appropriation. This was part of the problem as Celan conceived of it, our incapacity to respect the singularity and uniqueness, the un-repeatability of things. This poem consists of nine sections. It is inter-linked by a reprise of textual fragments. It suggests the musical form of the *stretta*. The *stretta* is the third and last part of the structure of the fugue. Amidst the interlacing voices of the poem Celan creates a certain poetic 'constancy': what Martin Heidegger calls a sameness without identity. However, Celan's plurivocity repudiates the accord of the 'higher univocity' Heidegger discerned in Trakl. The effect of Celan's technique is to avoid discursive speech, closure and a focus on textual function rather than meaning. And so Veronique Foti can write: 'Celan's poetic diction implacably frustrates unifying and crypto-eschatological moves'³⁸.

We come to the first section of 'The Straitening'³⁹:

Driven into the
 terrain
 with the unmistakable track:

³⁷ See Felstiner: 1995, p. 118 - 119

³⁸ Foti: 1992, p. 85

grass, written asunder. The stone, white,
with the shadows of grassblades:

Do not read any more - look!

Do not look any more - go!

Go, your hour

has no sisters, you are -

are at home. A wheel, slow

rolls out of itself, the spokes

climb,

climb on a blackish field, the night

needs no stars, nowhere

does anyone ask after you.

In this poem we are deported into a strange terrain. John Felstiner writes: 'we are led into straits of language that will constitute the reality to be explored... "Engfuhrung" displaces reality into a text, making the poem into real time, place and event'⁴⁰. Through the poem one is transported into a landscape that is not one in which humans dwell but rather is that of the trace. We are in a textual landscape. The first verse ends in a colon, and opens on a descriptive specification of terrain and trace. This blank terrain reveals the trace of 'grass, written asunder'. This grass has no trace of rural innocence. Felstiner argues that the grass referred to is that of the death-camps. He notes such imagery in the film *Night and Fog* that Celan had translated

³⁹ *Selected Poems*: 1990: p. 137 - 149

⁴⁰ Felstiner: 1995, p. 119 - 120

into German⁴¹. In being written asunder the grass traces its shadow writing on the white stones.

There is a direct address. The implied 'you' is singular and familiar. It is given not a promise but a command. It must no longer 'read' and decipher but 'look' upon what is inescapable. However, it must *go into* the textual terrain that does not allow itself to be read. This imperative is not the Holderlin one of go and greet so as to achieve recollection in a sisterly hour. Rather the hour and time-space into which it drives the one who is addressed is cut off and unrepeatable. As Foti writes: 'if what is commanded to go forth is (also) the poem (Celan's poetry throughout is self-reflective and self-problematizing), the time-space of origin in which it is at home is a point of effacement'⁴².

Celan's poem seems to be at home in and must go forth from a destinal time and space of refusal. The reference to the hour has no reference to the calendar and the clock, to the laying out of times and seasons, but is instead rolling blindly 'out of itself'. As the spokes climb, revealing and inscribing, they convey a 'blackish field' instead of a play of light. The night here has no stars by which one might find orientation. And the poet or poem of this destitute time is not asked for.

Nowhere

does anyone ask after you –

The place where they lay, it has

⁴¹ Felstiner: 1995, p. 119

⁴² Foti: 1992, p. 86

a name - it has
 none. They did not lie there. Something
 lay between them. They
 did not see through it.

Did not see, no
 spoke of
 words. None
 awoke,
 sleep
 came over them.⁴³

The fact that the poem is nowhere asked for appears to be linked to a failure of poetic naming, an erasure of name and place. By means of the poem Celan paradoxically raises questions about the representational character and the disclosive power of language. Celan challenges the assumed reciprocity between word and thing. His poem suggests that those who lay or did not lie in a nameless place in the textual terrain of the trace experienced language as opacity rather than as granting disclosure. When they spoke it was 'of/ words' only. Not one of them awoke to the power of the logos. All that came to them was sleep. Which shut them out from any sort of temporal ecstasy.

Came, came. Nowhere

anyone asks -

⁴³ *Selected Poems*: 1990: p. 137 - 139

It is I, I,
 I lay between you, I was
 open, was
 audible, ticked at you, your breathing
 obeyed, it is
 I still, but then
 you are asleep.⁴⁴

Among the echoes of sleep's coming and of being nowhere asked for, another coming announces itself with the insistence of repetition and the directness of the first person singular and the present tense - a coming whose essence is arrival. That which, in its coming, reveals its openness and the constancy of its Being is what already 'lay between you'. It is unrecognized but sustains temporality and interconnection. Even as they slept and experienced oblivion this ticking remained audible. It had an awakening touch. For the breath of the sleepers responded. Was it their life force, spirit, or speaking? However, as of now, the sleepers appear to be lifeless, beyond recall, and debarred from the opening.

It is I still -

years.
 Years, years, a finger
 feels down and up, feels
 around:
 seams, palpable, here

⁴⁴ *Selected Poems*: 1990, p. 139

it is split wide open, here
 it grew together again - who
 covered it up?⁴⁵

What is the call that asserts itself through years of darkness? It is a call to remembrance. A call to bear witness. The finger, in a very personal and intimate image, searches around, feels its own way into the terrain of memory and explores the gaping wound. Does it touch on scar tissue? We have the sense of a wound that has been covered over and covered up. The gesture appears to be ambiguous. It is both compassionate and concealing.

Covered it

up - who?

Came, came.
 Came a word, came,
 came through the night,
 wanted to shine, wanted to shine.

Ash.

Ash, ash.

Night.

Night-and-night. - Go

to the eye, the moist one.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ *Selected Poems*: 1990, p. 139

⁴⁶ *Selected Poems*: 1990, p. 141

What 'came' irrepressibly, at last, was a 'word'. A word that dispelled sleep. A word that penetrated the darkness. A word that rendered manifest what the searching finger discovered in the dark. Felstiner writes: 'It may be Christ the light that the Jews rejected and /or a language that passed through darkness - these two histories converge'⁴⁷. Some commentators argue for the central significance of this section of the poem. Seeing the sequence in the format of 4 + 1 + 4 we reach a vital transition between the two strophes of this poem. We are at the poem's and the sequence's exact centre. The word, which in its coming sought to shine, is suffocated by ashes and by night closing in upon itself, which repudiates all illumination. At its nadir the poem has no 'I', 'you', 'they', or 'we' but a single word 'Ashes'. The poem had set out on a quest for remembrance and witness and does not simply leave the present as it approached it. Rather, still following the command to 'look' and 'go', it now bears witness in a new way, by going to the moist eye, which, in its weeping, is incapable of luminosity and panoramic vision.

Once we have abandoned any notion of harmony, and accept that meaning has withdrawn itself, we witness how the poetic word is released from its task of illumination. When it enters into the depths of mourning it abandons the fiery element of illumination and enters into the dark, turbulent waters of a primal sea. It encounters storms and whirlwinds. Within the poem the word begins to disseminate itself with a bewildering prolixity. And thus the sixth section of this poem is the longest and hence we will discuss it in two parts:

⁴⁷ Felstiner: 1995, p. 121

Go

to the eye,

the moist one -

Gales.

Gales, from the beginning of time,

whirl of particles, the other,

you

know it, though, we

read it in the book, was

opinion.

Was, was

opinion. How

did we touch

each other - each other with

these

hands?

There was written too, that.

Where? We

put a silence over it,

stilled with poison, great,

a

green

silence, a sepal, an

idea of vegetation attached to it -

green, yes,

attached, yes,

under a crafty

sky.

Of, yes,

vegetation.⁴⁸

What emerges from the word as it issues out of mourning? There is a total breakdown of language and its drive to articulacy. We are presented with a textuality devoid of sense. Celan denies form, and indirectly any Heideggerian essencing, the fit order of any cosmos. Although Celan introduces a 'you' and poignantly addresses them, we can speak of the constitution of a new 'we'. And so, the person of the other and the possibility of communion with them is severely problematized.

The 'we' of the third strophe indicates no community but rather the speaker's implication in a cultural work of dissembling and silencing. What this silencing and concealing refused to recognize was the terror of the nihilistic vision. The 'poison-stilled' silencing calls to mind such Heideggerian tropes as the resounding of stillness, the stilling of pain, or the stilling of man's unprotectedness. Celan's thematic of the 'green' and 'plantlike' allude possibly to the Heideggerian interpretation of *physis* as a word for Being, for the very happening of manifestation, to the mythology of soil

⁴⁸ *Selected Poems*: 1990, p. 141 - 143

and rootedness. These are seen to be compelling cultural and intellectual constructs. The speaker does not entirely dissociate himself from them, but sees them still as forms of denial:

Yes.

Gales, whirl of part-

icles, there was

time left, time

to try it out with the stone - it

was hospitable, it

did not cut in. How

lucky we were:

Grainy,

grainy and stringy. Stalky,

dense;

gray and radiant; kidneyish,

flattish and

lumpy; loose, tang-

led -: he, it

did not cut in, it

spoke,

willingly spoke to dry eyes, before closing them.

Spoke, spoke

Was, was.

We
 would not let go, stood
 in the midst, a
 porous edifice, and
 it came.

Came at us, came
 through us, patched
 invisibly, patched
 away at the last membrane
 and
 the world, a millicrystal,
 shot up, shot up.⁴⁹

Before the terrifying vision one realizes that the path which leads to the moist eye is a path without issue. We have time, the whirl rush and fissioning of particles and the fissioning of language. The only way left now for the poetic word is 'to try it out with the stone'. The stone is not plantlike. Its hardness, resistance, and opacity recall the earlier characterization of language in its resistance to diaphonous presencing and the continual effort to speak 'through' it, or 'across' it.

The speaking which leaves behind the moist, quasi-vegetative realm of remembrance and mourning, achieves a synchronic crystallization, a spatialization

⁴⁹ *Selected Poems*: 1990, p. 143 - 145

and solidification of time itself, can be interpreted as a Mallarmean pure poetry. This stone-speaking, as presented in the sixth strophe, consists of strings of adjectives which conjoin forms of both organic and inorganic nature without any growth principle, narrative order, or other evidence of historicity, without the metaphysical subject-predicate structure, and without subjectivity. The erasure of subjectivity is indicated by the shift from the gendered pronoun *er* (referring to the stone) to the ungrammatical neuter pronoun *es* in the seventh verse.

What is the price for continuing to speak and to affirm Being, of reconstituting the cosmos as a 'thousand-crystal' out of poetic language? It is a distancing from ordinary life involvements. The hospitable stone thus 'did not interrupt': no mourning or metaphysical anguish disrupts the serenity of its speaking 'to dry eyes' that, however, it eventually closes to the concerns of the times. In the seventh part of 'The Straitening' Celan voices dissatisfaction with the crystalline purity and consummate formal play of pure poetry:

Shot up, shot up.

Then -

Nights, demixed. Circles,

green or blue, scarlet

squares: the

world puts its inmost reserves

into the game with the new

hours. - Circles,

red or black, bright
 squares, no
 flight shadow,
 no
 measuring table, no
 smoke soul ascends or joins in.⁵⁰

The emphatic 'then' in the reprise of the seventh section allows the crystalline world to appear that has, *per impossibile*, separated out the very darkness into a prism of spectral colours. The world which crystallized and displays its consummate formal structure now 'pledges its inmost' in play with the 'new hours'. The form of the poem is dependent on shifting constantly the balance between sense and sound. This poetry aims to restore the ordinary word back to its power for naming. Is this the power that releases the 'new hours' (hours no longer 'without sisters'), and thus initiate a new temporal order?

What this crystalline cosmos excludes, however, is shadow and smoke, as well as any possibility of meaningful human encounter. The absence of a flighty shadow brings home the ghostly insubstantiality of this poetic 'mobile' of geometric simples and pure colours (and does so in paradox, since shadow itself is insubstantial), but it also sets off the importance of shadow-writing and trace-writing in the constitution of the poetic text. The plane table allows for the charting of the meridians of interconnection. There is the obvious reference to the crematoria, but also perhaps to

⁵⁰ *Selected Poems*: 1990, p. 145

Exodus 17.21-22, and again to certain Heraclitean fragments (B7, B98) concerning the need of the psyche to orient itself by smell in a smoke-world where vision fails. It is clear that shadow and smoke are not to *displace* the lucid articulation of the world constituted out of language, but to *take part* in it, to 'play along'.

Ascends or

joins in –

At owl's flight, near

the petrified scabs,

near

our fled hands, in

the latest rejection,

above

the rifle-range near

the buried wall:

visible, once

more: the

grooves, the

choirs at that time, the

psalms. Ho, ho-

sanna.

So

there are temples yet. A

star

probably still has light.

Nothing,

nothing is lost.

Ho-

sanna.

At owl's flight, here,

the conversations, day-grey,

of the water-level traces.⁵¹

As the smoke-soul mounts and plays along, one finds oneself returned to the terrain of the trace in the twilight hour of the owls' (not the gods) fleeing and flight. Fled also are 'our hands' (with which 'we/ grasped each other'); and the crystal world has become the mineral realm of a petrified leprosy/outcasting. What becomes visible in and by the place/time of outcasting, however, is 'above' the butts for target practice on the buried wall, surmounting the closure of the death camp. Resnais' *Night and Fog* showed the yard of Block Eleven at Auschwitz with its infamous black wall 'shielded against the ricochet of bullets'⁵². The narrow channels that show themselves anew are opened by 'the/ choirs at that time', the intoning of psalms, the stammering response to the brutal 'ho, ho' as 'ho-siannah', a cry for divine salvation and mercy. 'Hosanna' shouts welcome and praise, like the glorious *Osanna in excelsis* in Bach's

⁵¹ *Selected Poems*: 1990, p. 147

⁵² Felstiner: 1995, p. 123

B Minor Mass. But in Psalms, the Hebrew term means 'Save [us] please!' (118: 25).

Celan's 'Ho, ho-/ sanna' reduces to a stammer or derisive laughter, with echoes of the German marching song 'For we are Hitler's brown-clad host - Huzza, ho-ho!'

What is interesting is that neither the poisoned silencing nor the terrifying nihilistic vision is reinstated. If, then, perhaps temples still stand or a (one) star still has light - if in this sense 'nothing is lost' - this suffices for the repudiation of nothingness, of nihilistic negation. Celan, however, is not voicing any simplistic acquiescence and hope. It is, after all, the frail word of the deported, condemned, and dying - the word spoken in extremity as prayer and cry, seeking an Other - which etched open the channels without, for all that, accomplishing any Heideggerian instituting and founding. This power of the word, at once slight and awesome, is preserved by a poetizing that insists on being 'here', whose highest lucidity is the irrecusable 'gray' of the day, and which does not take part in any exalted and prophetic interlocution but rather in a conversation of traces, of remembrance and witness - the traces, nevertheless, of what is life-sustaining.

(- - day-grey,

of

the water-level traces -

Driven into the

terrain

with

the unmistakable

track:

Grass.

Grass.

written asunder.)⁵³

This last section, entirely in parentheses, is itself a reprise of the opening - a repetition that cannot close the circle but instead subjects the opening verses to greater fragmentation and attrition. It serves to call into question the achievement of the whole straitening duction traced in and as the poem. This calling into question does not come about through any correction as to form, content, or vision, but through the halting reiteration of the situational determinates, resulting in a retracing of the trace which resists all appropriation. In many ways 'The Straitening' responds to Rilke's tenth Duino elegy, which 'sings jubilation and praise' and traffics with 'the endlessly dead', especially 'the Mothers'. Celan's elegy has none of the Orphean power so characteristic of Rilke. Much has happened in-between.

The duction led first from a time/space of refusal and from the need to cast a counter-light on the linguistic basis of memory and myth, from which the self of atrocity was formed, to the fissioning disarticulation of language and to the brink of nihilism. From this failure of any coherence there was a move toward pure formal creation, the re-creation of the cosmos out of language that avoids any rhetoric of tradition, prophecy, nature or renewal as modalities of a 'poisoned silencing'. As Foti writes: 'Celan continues, as he notes in conversation in 1966, to seek to present "excerpts of a spectrum-analysis of things", showing them in the multiplicity of their

⁵³ *Selected Poems*: 1990, p. 149

aspects, showing also how one facet veers to release another, in quasi-dialectical permutation. However this formal play, this poetic mathematics, must be restored to the obscure terrain of the trace; geometry of itself (even in its Platonic version) is not ethical. It must respond to the height and the daring of the word of those who in their extremity, transmuted the very language of brutalization into one of prayer and invocation'⁵⁴. In the hearing of their word ('they' - as Celan himself indicated in his late poetry - are not limited to the victims of the Holocaust), Heidegger's position, that the destitution of the age remains withheld and has not, as such, come to experience and language, is untenable. And so, by this means, we have an ethical corrective to Heidegger's philosophical position. In utmost abandonment and through the matrix of language there arises the mandate of extending oneself toward the Other, 'studying' the Other in his or her otherness.

John Felstiner has written about 'The Straitening': 'by far Celan's most demanding poem, [it] came just after the Bremen speech, which ends with the poet "stricken by and seeking reality". He told an interviewer in Bremen: "In my first book I was still transfiguring things - I'll never do that again!" "Engführung" reconceives the manner and matter of "Todesfuge", going beyond the pathos of black milk, exploring memory itself as a dimension of the original trauma. The poem's close melds into its opening, the way memory almost coincides with reality. And there is something else here, easy to miss. Not only does an asterisk come after each section, but there is also an asterisk between the title and the first line - a mark devoid of purpose unless we are to link "Stretto's" [Felstiner's translation of Celan's title] last line to its first and set out again, *da capo*. Repeat this to the six-millionth degree, and

⁵⁴ Foti: 1992, p. 96

“Nothing is lost”.⁵⁵

A Summary:

Our questioning must return to the break between this ‘spiritual’ poetics and that of Heidegger. For Heidegger, a major poet’s poetic saying remains obedient to its own ‘highest and utmost’ inner necessity - an essential necessity to which thinking responds. What reason does Heidegger offer for the necessity of approaching the ‘unsaid’ and why might there be a necessary interlocution between the poet and thinker? Something of Heidegger’s thinking on this can be grasped by Robert Bernasconi’s comments concerning the ‘experience with language’ that Heidegger seeks to make possible in his meditation on George’s poem ‘Das Wort’:

The experience of the nothing [which ‘points to Being’] arises in the anxiety in which we are deprived of speech. Nothing is not a word for Being... The nothing corresponds to the thinker’s experience of the lack of a word for Being. This speechlessness, this breaking of the sequence of words for Being, comes to be understood historically as marking the end of the succession of words for Being within metaphysics.⁵⁶

An essential culmination and transformation is thus announced in what has failed to ever come to language but has betrayed itself through the rupture, the caesura. One of the circumlocutions through which Heidegger approaches this essential unsaid is ‘the word for the word’. The word (‘saying’) lacks Being; it is not a being to which a word can be affixed, and hence it is not its essence as Being which has been withheld. The word is a marker of Difference, of the donation of Being out of emptiness; it brings to pass the *es gibt*, which, as Heidegger is careful to note, is

⁵⁵ Felstiner: 1995, p. 125

⁵⁶ Foti: 1992, p. 96

divested of 'the whole spook about the it (*es*)'⁵⁷.

Since, on Heidegger's understanding, language or 'saying' alone can accomplish the donation of Being, of the Open, and can also, in its very breakage and failure, let this donation appear as such, poetizing and thinking, as privileged forms of saying, stand in proximity. The challenge presented to the thinker by rupture or by the caesura is, then, as Heidegger understands it, the task of differential or polemic unification - be it of art and the technical, of Earth and World, of poetizing and thinking, or of the unconsummated past with the withheld promise of the future. This avoidance of ellipsis by differential integration is, for him, the properly spiritual task.

However, Celan's own prominent thematization of rupture, of the possible tasks which remain for poetizing and thinking, and even of the spiritual, is at odds with Heidegger's. Celan's work does not offer the thinker points of engagement on his own terms. As Foti writes: 'For Celan, the rupture that defines the contemporary situation is not *essential* but historical in provenance. It subjects the intellectual and cultural constructs of the Western tradition, in which, of course, poetizing and thinking remain implicated, to what might be called a hermeneutics of suspicion. It refuses, furthermore, to leave language inviolate, for the word which bestows Being can veer almost imperceptibly to bestow devastation. Poet and thinker are dislodged from their normative preeminence; for this preeminence has not been ethical'⁵⁸.

What can we expect from the poet? We do not expect a wandering step and a word which defines a trail of transition from out of the darkness. Rather, we are given

⁵⁷ Foti: 1992, p. 97

⁵⁸ Foti: 1992, p. 97

the 'finger-thoughts' that explore the terrain of the trace to bear witness, to persevere in remembrance, and to respond to the creative word of those who dared to name what Heidegger might call the god(s) or the holy in the situation of desolation. Through the screen and crystalline matrix of language Celan's poetry seeks to extend itself to the otherness of the Other, while repudiating 'all oracles' and any essential unification.

Violence and Poetry from Northern Ireland:

We will now place some of the above reflections within a contemporary context in order to illustrate their possible relevance. We will look closely at a poem of Seamus Heaney's from his 1979 volume *Field Work*. It is called 'The Toome Road'. It begins:

One morning early I met armoured cars
in convoy, warbling along on powerful tyres,
all camouflaged with broken alder branches,
and headphoned soldiers standing up in turrets.⁵⁹

Here there is a presentation of the visible consequences of violence with the presence of an alien force upon the known landscape. The poem dwells upon the details of the intrusion so that the intrusive dimension is exactly what stands out. The poet asks: 'How long were they approaching down my roads / As if they owned them?' The voice behind this question suggests a fixity, a rootedness within its narrative voice and location that stands against the observed, intruding force. The poet enumerates a list

⁵⁹ Seamus Heaney: *Opened Ground: Poems 1966 – 1996*. Faber: London: 1998, p. 150

of solid possessions that suggest intimate local knowledge:

I had rights-of-way, fields, cattle in my keeping,
tractors hitched to buckrakes in open sheds,
silos, chill gates, wet slates, the greens and reds
of outhouse roofs.

Given the poet's emphasis upon the local and familiar we are struck by the poem's ending. The poet refers to 'the invisible, untoppled omphalos'. We note this significant poetic turn, this strange Greek word, *omphalos*, which brings a note of otherness again, and is set against the local and the intrusive alien suggested by the armoured car. What the poem stages is an assertion of possession and permanence, through which the individuality, the specific nature of the *omphalos* stands as a moment of resistance against all narratives of usurpation. The ancient associations of the word *omphalos* suggest a permanence beyond the current conflict, yet it is precisely located within it. So we have an excellent movement between the specific and the general, with the word *omphalos* carrying the burden successfully of both poetic demands.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ For a more detailed discussion of this issue within contemporary Northern Irish poetry see Peter MacDonald's *Mistaken Identities: Poetry and Northern Ireland*. Clarendon Press: Oxford: 1997, p. 58

Chapter Three:
Through the Eye of the Shoah:
The Shibboleth in Paul Celan
and Seamus Heaney

Shibboleth

One didn't know the name of Tarzan's monkey.

Another couldn't strip the cellophane

From a GI's pack of cigarettes.

By such minutiae were the infiltrators detected.

By the second week of battle

We'd become obsessed with trivia.

At a sentry point, at midnight, in the rain,

An ignorance of baseball could be lethal.

The morning of the first snowfall, I was shaving,

Staring into a mirror nailed to a tree,

Intoning the Christian names of the Andrews Sisters.

'Maxine, Laverne, Patty'.¹

Michael Donaghy

¹ Michael Donaghy: *Dances Learned Last Night: Poems 1975 – 1995*: Picador: London: 2000, p. 19

Contemporary New York poet Michael Donaghy, now living in London, although hailing *originally* from an Irish-American cultural background is well placed to explore and examine the nature of cultural belonging, and its opposite, exclusion. 'Shibboleth' with its biblical title from his collection of the same name explores in a situation of life and death how discrimination operates in separating out an 'in' group from an 'out' group. The poem suggests how this can occur at various levels of culture. As his poem presents the scene the group excluded by the empowered group did not know the name of Tarzan's monkey; a shallow cultural signifier indeed, but enough to define one as not a member of twentieth-century popular American culture. This example illustrates how what one knows, one's inside knowledge expressed in the language of a culture, communicates your familiarity with its dimensions, or not. Then there is the secondary language of the body; one's way of acting or carrying oneself. Donaghy conveys this in his poem through the action of opening a packet of cigarettes in a certain way. This might be enough to give the game away, and signify one's outsider status.

Again, something as culturally specific as baseball, and a knowledge of its rules, players and history can operate as a magical horizon, or a barrier, as a border crossing even, signifying who the initiated are, as opposed to the alien, the strange, the foreign and those who stand outside. Something of the anxiety that lies at the base of this need to define oneself as belonging on the inside is communicated in the final verse. The poem's first two verses present the actions of the empowered group. In the final verse we meet for the first time the voice of the solitary narrator. He is anxiously rehearsing his knowledge of popular culture in order to be at the ready when he is tested. By this means the author subtly suggests that it may not be too long before the

group makes a mistake, or turns on one of its own members. How long will it be before we are all subject to a scrutiny that may prove fatal?

The thematic of the *shibboleth* in contemporary poetry receives its impetus from the corpus bequeathed to us by the life and writing of one Paul Celan through poems like 'Shibboleth' and others. One of the best commentators on the significance of the shibboleth in Paul Celan's body of work has been French writer, thinker and philosopher Jacques Derrida in his major essay entitled '*Shibboleth for Paul Celan*'². Before we move on to an extended analysis of Derrida's essay we will look at one example of a shibboleth from the poetry of Seamus Heaney. The poem is the first from a sequence Heaney published in *North* (1975) called 'Singing School'. The title of the specific poem, the first in the sequence, is 'The Ministry of Fear'. It is dedicated to fellow poet, critic and old school friend Seamus Deane.

The Ministry of Fear

for Seamus Deane

Well, as Kavanagh said, we have lived
 In important places. The lonely scarp
 Of St. Columb's College, where I billeted
 For six years overlooked your Bogside.
 I gazed into new worlds: the inflamed throat
 Of Brandywell, its floodlit dogtrack,
 The throttle of the hare. In the first week

² Jacques Derrida: '*Shibboleth for Paul Celan*', Trans. by Joshua Willner, *Word Traces: Readings of Paul Celan*: (ed.) Aris Fioretos, John Hopkins Univ. Press: Baltimore: 1994, p. 3 - 72

I was so homesick I couldn't even eat
 The biscuits left to sweeten my exile.
 I threw them over the fence one night
 In September 1951

When the lights of houses in the Lecky Road
 Were amber in the fog. It was an act
 Of stealth.

Then Belfast, and then Berkeley.

Here's two on's are sophisticated,
 Dabbling in verses till they have become
 A life: from bulky envelopes arriving
 In vacation time to slim volumes
 Despatched 'with the author's compliments'.
 Those poems in longhand, ripped from the wire spine
 Of your exercise book, bewildered me -
 Vowels and ideas bandied free
 As the seed-pods blowing off our sycamores.
 I tried to write about the sycamores
 And innovated a South Derry rhyme
 With *hushed* and *lulled* full chimes for *pushed* and *pulled*.
 Those hobnailed boots from beyond the mountain
 Were walking, by God, all over the fine
 Lawns of elocution.

Have our accents

Changed? 'Catholics, in general, don't speak

As well as students from the Protestant schools’.

Remember that stuff? Inferiority

Complexes, stuff that dreams were made on.

‘What’s your name, Heaney?’

‘Heaney, Father.’

‘Fair

Enough.’

On my first day, the leather strap

Went epileptic in the Big Study,

Its echoes plashing over our bowed heads,

But I still wrote home that a boarder’s life

Was not so bad, shying as usual.

On long vacations, then, I came to life

In the kissing seat of an Austin Sixteen

Parked at a gable, the engine running,

My fingers tight as ivy on her shoulders,

A light left burning for her in the kitchen.

And heading back for home, the summer’s

Freedom dwindling night by night, the air

All moonlight and a scent of hay, policemen

Swung their crimson flashlamps, crowding round

The car like black cattle, snuffing and pointing

The muzzle of a sten-gun in my eye:

‘What’s your name, driver?’

‘Seamus...’

Seamus?

They once read my letters at a roadblock
 And shone their torches on your hieroglyphics,
 'Svelte dictions' in a very florid hand.
 Ulster was British, but with no rights on
 The English lyric: all around us, though
 We hadn't named it, the ministry of fear.³

Seamus Heaney

Though they haven't named it, symbolic for their not having grasped its violent essence, the young Heaney and Deane are being initiated into the mores of their community. They are being sent to school to learn the language of a society. In this school they must behave and study hard, or pay the price for it. Sometimes violence is meted out regardless of its having been deserved or not. There are at least two violent dimensions to the community that Heaney and Deane are being schooled in. There is the violence of the religious education they both received. It is an almost military regime. The author uses the term 'billeted'. There is the beating in the Big Study. There is also an implicit suggestion of the driving underground by the religious authorities of the natural expression of sexual urge. The illicit nature of sexuality makes Heaney's intimacy in the Austin Sixteen an 'act of stealth' also. And then there is the violence of the state. Its representatives man sentry posts with sten-guns. Violence is endemic. This is suggested by the throttling of the hare at the dog-track; its blood-letting is part of an animal nature.

³ Seamus Heaney: *Opened Ground: Poems 1966 – 1996*: Faber: London: 1998, p.134 - 136

What is almost as striking is the linguistic dimension to the schooling process. How Heaney emphasizes in the poem the vital role language played in defining arenas of conflict, of belonging and struggle within the domain of culture. His 'hobnailed boots' are a symbol for his farming background. The boots symbolize what is rough and ready, and thereby lacking the refinement of the town, city and attendant notions of importance and supremacy. He is from 'beyond the mountain', a potent signifier of his stranger status, his outsidership. He is outside the pale. This mountain contrasts with the 'fine lawns of elocution'. This is a potent image for the cultivation required of civilization. It suggests a site where everything has its place and is tamed.

Social division is signified through the language and speech of the individuals and their respective communities. Heaney hints at the social snobbery that saw Protestants looking down snootily upon their less well-spoken Catholic neighbours. He uses direct speech, and this is appropriate given that the focus is upon speech and language and how they signify social division and sustain them. This is picked up on two fronts. The priests in the school are happy with the fact that his name is Heaney, for this signifies good Catholic stock to them. The reverse is explored when he is confronted by the soldiers at the road block. The name 'Seamus' is a potent shibboleth, now defining him as an enemy in their eyes, for it signifies papist, republican, foreignness and strangeness, a fact emphasized by Heaney's italicizing their pronouncing of '*Seamus*' at the frontier. It is the Gaelic term or translation for the English 'James'. What is interesting to note is the author's setting of this incident. Just prior to the confrontation we are in an almost idyllic pastoral setting. There is a description of a quiet late summer's evening with Heaney returning home after meeting his lover. One feels that the intrusive action of the state's forces is all the

more potent for this. There is then a strong contrast drawn between the world of nature and the world of culture.

There is an irony in the description of the soldier's being unable to read the poem's Deane sent to Heaney, for to this soldier they are 'hieroglyphics'. They define a linguistic community once again, in that an arena of belonging shared between Heaney and Deane is determined over and against that of the soldier. The irony in this is one that the poet is not slow to draw out, which is that the language Heaney and Deane are using has been taught to them by the occupier. Ulster might be British but some in her territories have invaded her language and made it their own in an act of subversion within the paradigm of the dominant force.

Derrida begins his essay *Shibboleth for Paul Celan* by emphasizing the uniqueness of circumcision. It is something that can only happen once. Through this means Derrida sounds the note that conveys his preoccupation in this essay with the nature of singularity, the unique and the unrepeatable. He will examine the anti-Semitism that emerged before the Second World War that resulted in the deaths of many, as well as, specifically, the death of German-speaking poet Paul Celan's parents. Particularly Derrida will concern himself with the resistance to that war. This will force him into a consideration of boundaries, for the last world war challenged many boundaries and sought to impose others. In the light of recent history and atrocity Derrida is forced to contemplate lines of demarcation and discrimination. He is interested in passports and passwords. By this means he will begin to approach the *Shibboleth*. Language itself possesses shibboleths, hidden codes that allow us passageway. Through language we belong, or do not. For as soon as we speak we

utter what is common. When we learn to talk we have access to a community and the language that it speaks.

The Origin of the Shibboleth

Jacques Derrida in his essay '*Shibboleth for Paul Celan*' will consider first the calendar date, for example the 13th of February. In its outward appearance it appears to be distinct from the actual writing of a poem. It has a metonymic character, designating part of an event or a sequence of events by way of recalling the whole. When we speak of the 13th of February we are referring to a part of what happened on that day, a part though that stands for the whole in a given context.

An example is given from Celan's poem 'In One'. The opening line of this poem is 'Thirteenth of February'. The 'in one', 'all at once', several times at once, all seem to constellate in the uniqueness of this date. However in being all alone, *the only one*, is this date one? Is there more than one thirteenth of February? For, the thirteenth of February recurs every year, becoming thereby, each year, its very own *revenant*. Could it be also that there is a multiplicity of events, dispersed at different periods, in foreign idioms, that conjoin at the heart of the same anniversary?

IN ONE

Thirteenth of February. Shibboleth

Roused in the heart's mouth. With you,

people

de Paris. *No pasaran*.⁴

Derrida considers the opening of this poem to be ciphered. Thirteen we know has an idiomatic reference to fate or chance: what falls – for good or for ill – together. The poem announces the desire to con-sign and co-sign a multiple singularity. The title moves into the date of its first line. All this is incorporated into the poem. They give access to the poem that they are, although it is a ciphered access.

There is a sense in which all of Paul Celan's poetry is untranslatable. This becomes apparent as soon as we consider the aporia in Celan. An aporia is a barred passage. It is suggested in this poem through the phrase '*No pasaran*'. Quite quickly Celan confronts us by means of this poem with four languages. In a single poem, all at once, these four languages move like a series of proper names or signatures, or even like the face of a seal.

The title, the date and the first line are in German. The second line confronts us with a second language, the apparently Hebrew word, one that arises in the 'heart's mouth': *shibboleth*.

This second language could well be a first language, the language of the morning, the language of origin speaking from and of the heart. The word *Shibboleth* is found in a whole family of languages: Phoenician, Judeo-Aramaic, Syriac. It has a multiplicity of meanings by which it is traversed: river, stream, ear of grain, olive-twig. Beyond all these meanings however it has acquired the value of a password. It

⁴ Paul Celan: *Selected Poems*: Penguin: 1990, Trans. by Michael Hamburger, p. 207

was used during and after war at the crossing of a border under watch. The meaning of the word did not matter as much as the way it was pronounced. The relation to the meaning or to the thing was suspended or neutralized. The army of Jephthah defeated the Ephraimites and, in order to keep the soldiers from escaping across the river, each person was required to say *shibboleth*. Why? Because the Ephraimites were known for their inability to pronounce correctly the *shi* of *shibboleth*, which became for them, in consequence, an ‘unpronounceable name’; they said *sibboleth*, and, at that invisible border between *shi* and *si*, they betrayed themselves to the sentinel at the risk of death. They could not re-mark a mark thus coded. These events occurred at the border of the river Jordan.

With the fourth language of Celan’s strophe, after the French of ‘People of Paris’, we are placed at another border. The phrase is *No pasaran*. The date is February 1936 and the electoral victory of the *Frente Popular*. We are on the eve of civil war. *No pasaran*: la Pasionaria, the no to Franco, to the Phalange supported by Mussolini’s troops and Hitler’s Condor legion. This phrase became a rallying cry and sign during the siege of Madrid three years later. *No pasaran* became a shibboleth for the Republican people, for their allies, for the International Brigades. And yet, what passed this cry, what passed despite it, was the Second World War, the war of extermination. The Spanish Civil War was the dress rehearsal. The Spanish phrase becomes a rallying sign, a type of handclasp, a sign of membership and political watchword.

into our hands

he spoke the word that we needed, it was

shepherd-Spanish,...

in icelight of the cruiser 'Aurora'...⁵

We have the German language, the Hebrew word and the Spanish phrase.

Among them we have the People of Paris:

With you,

peuple

de Paris. *No pasaran.*

The multiplicity of languages may concelebrate, *all at once*, at the same date, the poetic and political anniversary of singular events, spread like stars over the map of Europe, and henceforth conjoined by a secret affinity: the fall of Vienna and the fall of Madrid, for both cities are associated in the same line by another poem, 'Shibboleth'; and still other memories of February, the beginnings of the October Revolution with the incidents tied not only to the cruiser Aurora and to Petrograd, but also to the Peter and Paul Fortress. The last stanza of 'In One' recalls other unforgettable singularities:

'Aurora':

the brotherly hand, waving with

the blindfold removed from

his word-wide eyes – Petropolis, the

roving city of those unforgotten,

⁵ *Selected Poems*: 1990: p. 207

was Tuscanly close to your heart also.

*Peace to the cottages!*⁶

Even within the habitation of a single language, French for example, a discontinuous swarm of events are commemorated all at once, *at the same date*. This consequently takes on the strange character of a type of *unheimlich*, or the dimensions of a cryptic predestination. The date itself comes to resemble a *shibboleth*, for the date gives a ciphered access to the collocation, to this configuration of places for memory.

If we just focus on Celan's use of 'February' we can make some connections with France, Derrida suggests. On the twelfth of February 1934, after the failure of the attempt to form a Common Front of the Right, with Doriot, after the riot of February 6, a huge march took place in Paris that spontaneously regrouped the masses and the leadership of the parties of the left. This was the origin of the Popular Front.

However, Celan does specify the thirteenth of February. We think of February 13th, 1962 and Celan was in Paris. This is the day of the funeral for the Metro Charonne massacre victims, an anti-OAS demonstration at the end of the Algerian war. Several hundred thousand Parisians, the people of Paris, are marching. Two days after the meetings begin which lead to the Evian accords. These people of Paris are still the people of the Commune, the people with whom one must band together. In the same event, at the same date, national and civil war, the end of one and the beginning – *as the beginning of the other*.

⁶ *Selected Poems*: 1990: p. 207

The poem names the rallying cry that brings together all the political situations along the historical borders that are brought together in the poem's configuration. We are talking about a visa that is the shibboleth, the theme, meaning and content of the poem. Shibboleth also spells the anniversary date's singular power of gathering together. This anniversary grants access to the date's memory, its future, but also to the poem itself. Derrida writes: '*Shibboleth* is the *shibboleth* for the right to the poem which calls itself a *shibboleth*, its own *shibboleth* at the very moment that it commemorates others'⁷. For Celan the signifying conjunction of all these dramas and historical actors *constitutes* the dated signature, the dating of the poem. When we recognize how the *shibboleth* functions in the poem we are not at the moment at which it ceases to be cryptic. Rather the *shibboleth* remains secret, the passage uncertain and, as Derrida writes: 'the poem only unveils this secret to confirm that there is something secret there, withdrawn, forever beyond the reach of hermeneutic exhaustion'⁸. It remains heterogeneous to all interpretative totalization, eradicating the hermeneutic principle. Derrida writes: 'there is no one meaning, from the moment that there is date and *shibboleth*, no longer a sole originary meaning'⁹.

At this point Derrida reaches the crux of his meditation on the word shibboleth and how it functions: 'a *shibboleth*, the word *shibboleth*, if it is one, names, in the broadest extension of its generality or its usage, every insignificant arbitrary mark, for example the phonemic difference between *shi* and *si*, as that difference becomes discriminative, decisive, and divisive'¹⁰. The difference has no meaning in and of itself. However, this difference becomes what one must know how to recognize and

⁷ Jacques Derrida: '*Shibboleth for Paul Celan*': 1994, p. 28

⁸ Jacques Derrida: 1994: p. 28

⁹ Jacques Derrida: 1994, p. 28

¹⁰ Jacques Derrida: 1994, p. 28

above all to mark if one is to get on, to get over the border of a place or the threshold of a poem, to see oneself granted asylum or the legitimate habitation of a language. Derrida writes: 'to inhabit a language, one must already have a *shibboleth* at one's disposal: not simply know this meaning or know how a word *should* be pronounced (the difference of *h* between *shi* and *si*: this the Ephraimites knew), but *be able* to say it as one ought, as one ought to be able to say it'¹¹. So it has an unavoidable performative dimension.

We are dealing with a type of marking. The difference between *shi* and *si* has no meaning. Yet it is the ciphered mark which one must *be able to partake of* with the other, and this differential power must be inscribed in oneself, that is, in one's own body, just as much as in the body of one's own language, and the one to the same extent as the other. There is nothing 'natural' about this. As Derrida notes: 'its very origin presupposes participation in a cultural and linguistic community, in a milieu of apprenticeship, in short an alliance'¹². Then shibboleth does not cipher something, but emerging from that non-meaning where it keeps itself in reserve, becomes the cipher of the cipher.

Paul Celan's work, like that of James Joyce, indicates a multiplicity and migration of languages within the language presented, the example here being the presence of four languages within the one poem. His poems are a poetic version of the tower of Babel. In the poem 'CROWNED OUT' with the reference to the 'ghetto-Rose' and that phallic figure knotted in the heart of the poem ('bound phallic to you') that is also its last word, its address and envoy:

¹¹ Jacques Derrida: 1994, p. 28

¹² Jacques Derrida: 1994, p. 29

And an earth arises, ours,
 this one.
 And we send
 none of ours downward
 to you,
 Babel.¹³

The poem's address and envoy certainly, but what appears to be said to Babel is that nothing will be addressed to it.

We are dealing with a multiplicity of languages and their migration; and, as languages shift and move, so too can the defined boundaries of a country, for countries' borders often shift, change, migrate, transfer and are transported. As Derrida writes: 'it displaces itself like those names and those stones which one gives as a pledge, from hand to hand, and the hand is given, too, and what gets detached, sundered, torn away, can gather itself together anew in the symbol, the pledge, the promise, the alliance, the imparted word, the migration of the imparted word'¹⁴.

- what ripped apart, grows back together—
 you've got them now, so take them now, so now you've got
 them both,
 the name, the name, the hand, the hand,
 so take them and this pledge will stand,
 he takes it too and you've got back

¹³ *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*: Norton: New York: 2001, Trans. by John Felstiner, p. 193

¹⁴ Jacques Derrida: 1994, p. 30

what's yours, what was his,

windmills

drive air into your lungs, you're rowing

We are struck by the image of the windmill. The windmill might symbolize chance and risk. Language itself holds as much of wind and illusion as it draws from breath and spirit, from the breathing bestowed. This is illustrated within the body of this poem through its many references. There are references to the Russia of Osip Mandelshtam and to Moravia and the Prague cemetery. With the reference to 'Normandy-Niemen' there is a reference to the emigration of the country itself and of its name. Like language:

what is it called, your land

back of the mountain, back of the year?

I know what it's called.

...

it wanders everywhere, like language,

throw it away, throw it away,

then you'll have it again,

the pebble from

the Moravian Basin

your thought carried to Prague.¹⁵

¹⁵ *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*: 2001, p. 203 - 204

Derrida notes that the multiplicity and migration of languages occurs within language itself. We can speak of the Babel within *a single* language. *Shibboleth* marks for Derrida the multiplicity within language and insignificant difference as the condition of meaning. However, language can only take on meaning in relation to a *place*. By place we mean the relation to a border, country, house, or threshold, as any site, any situation in general from within which, practically and pragmatically, alliances are formed, contracts, codes and conventions are established which give meaning to the insignificant, institute passwords, bend language to what exceeds it, make of it a moment of gesture and step.

Derrida emphasizes the heterogeneity of language here. Untranslatability is connected with the difficult passage suggested by *no pasaran*, the aporia or the impasse that isolates one poetic language from another. Babel, though, is also the *impossible possible step*, beyond hope of transaction, tied to the multiplicity of languages within the uniqueness of the poetic inscription: several times in one, several languages in a single poetic act. The poem is unique, in itself another date and *shibboleth*, it forges and seals in a single idiom, 'in one', the poetic events, a multiplicity of languages and of equally singular dates.

What will always remain untranslatable within this poem are the marked differences of languages within the poem. There is a doing that cannot be reduced to knowing. Celan's *marking* is a setting into motion of the differences. As Derrida writes: 'the *shibboleth*, here again, does not resist translation by reason of some semantic secret, but by virtue of that in it which forms the cut of a nonsignifying difference in the body of the written or oral mark, written in speech as a mark within a

mark, an incision marking the very mark itself¹⁶. On both sides of the historical, political, and linguistic border (a border is never natural), the meaning, the different meanings of the word *shibboleth* are known: as river, ear of grain and olive twig. One can know how it should be pronounced. Yet a single trial will determine that some cannot, while others can, pronounce it with the heart's mouth. Some will not pass, while others will pass the line – of the place, of the country, of the community, of what takes place in a language, in languages as poems.

For Derrida every poem has its own language. Every poem is one time alone its own language, even when, and maybe especially when, several languages *are able* to cross there. There are no guarantees however. The poem may become a watchtower, one may be endowed through the poem with the vigilance of a sentinel, one may see well. However, the value of the shibboleth may always, tragically, be inverted. The good will of men may sometimes count for naught. As Derrida notes: 'Watchword or password in the struggle against oppression, exclusion, fascism, and racism, it may also corrupt its differential value, which is the condition of alliance and of the poem, making of it a discriminatory limit, the grillwork of policing, of normalization, and of methodical subjugation'¹⁷. What is striking is how Celan, as we shall see, will work through this to develop a way of speaking to the Other, to the strange, the different and the opposite.

¹⁶ Jacques Derrida: '*Shibboleth for Paul Celan*': 1994: p. 32

¹⁷ Jacques Derrida: '*Shibboleth for Paul Celan*': 1994: p. 32 - 33

The Centrality of Dates

The word ‘Shibboleth’ speaks in effect of the threshold, of the crossing of the threshold, of that which permits one to pass or to cross, to transfer from one threshold to another: to translate. We find this word in the second line of ‘In eins’. We recall the earlier poem that took the word ‘Shibboleth’ as its title also. In both poems there is a similar configuration of events. They are sealed by the February anniversary, and in both there is a linking of capitals, Vienna and Madrid, and of Paris, Madrid and Petropolis. *No pasaran* already figures in close conjunction with *shibboleth*. We are dealing with the memory of February 1936 – 1939, although neither date nor year appear.

Heart:

here too reveal what you are,

here, in the midst of the market.

Call the shibboleth, call it out

into your alien homeland:

February. *No pasaran*.¹⁸

Celan seems to be speaking of an essential strangeness, of an estrangement in one’s own home, of not being at home. There is a suggestion also of being called away from one’s homeland or away from home in one’s homeland, the ‘shall not’ pass, which secures and threatens every border crossing in and out of oneself. This moment of the *shibboleth* is re-marked in the date, in the month of, and in the word, *February*.

¹⁸ *Selected Poems*: 1990, p. 97

The two poems beckon to one another, kindred, complicitous, allies, but as different as they can possibly be. They bear and do not bear the same date. A shibboleth secures the passage from one to the other in the difference, within sameness, of the same date, between *Februar* and *Feber*. They speak, in the same language, two different languages. They partake of it.

Let us pause for a moment with the word 'partaking'. We are suggesting a word that names difference. It is a line of demarcation, the parting of the waters, scission, caesura as well as participation, that which is divided because it is shared or held in common, imparted and partaken of. Derrida will speak of the imparted or partaken as *shibboleth* and *symbolon*. In both cases of S-B-L, a pledge is transmitted to another, 'he spoke / the word in our hand'. A word or a piece of a word, the complementary part of an object divided in two to seal an alliance, a tessera. This is the moment of engagement, of signing, of the pact or contract, of the promise, of the ring.

What is important here is the role the signature of the date plays. Beyond the singular event which it marks and of which it would be the detachable proper name, capable of outliving and thus of calling, of recalling, the vanished as vanished, its very ash, it gathers together, like a title, a more or less apparent and secret conjunction of singularities which partake of, and in the future will continue to partake of, the *same* date. We cannot assign a limit to such a conjunction. It is determined by the future to which a fracture promises it. No testimony or knowledge could by definition exhaust its deciphering.

For Celan the date is a witness, but one that may bless it without knowing all of that for which and of those for whom it bears witness. It is possible that there may no longer be any witnesses for this witness. The last words of 'Aschenglorie':

No one
 bears witness for the
 witness.¹⁹

Folded or refolded in the simplicity of the singular, a certain repetition Derrida argues assures the minimal and 'internal' readability of the poem, even in the absence of a witness, of a signatory or of anyone who might have some knowledge concerning the historical reference of the poetic legacy. The word shibboleth, for Celan, seems not to have this or that meaning derived from its language of origin: river, ear of grain, olive-twig, or indeed the other meanings that it takes on in the two poems. It signifies: there is shibboleth, there is something of a crypt; it remains incalculable, it does not conceal a single determinate secret, a semantic content waiting for the one who holds a key behind the door. What the poem marks, what enters and incises languages in the form of a date, is that there is a partaking of the shibboleth, a partaking at once open and closed. The date (signature, moment, place, gathering of singular marks) always functions as a *shibboleth*. It shows that there is something not shown, that there is a ciphered singularity: irreducible to any concept, to any knowledge, even to a history or tradition, be it of a religious kind. The poem speaks, even should none of its references be intelligible, none other than the Other, the one to

¹⁹ *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*: 2001, p. 261

whom it addresses itself and to whom it speaks in saying that it speaks to him. Even if it does not reach and leave its mark on, at least it calls to, the Other. Address takes place.

Within a language, in the poetic writing of a language, there is nothing but *shibboleth*. Like the date and the name it permits anniversaries, alliances, returns and commemorations - even if there is no trace, the subsistent presence of a remainder. 'Tubingen, Janner' is at once a poem, a date and a signature. Like a shibboleth, it takes into its consignment enigma and memory, citing the enigma:

Their - 'a
Riddle, what is pure-
ly arisen' -, their
memory of
floating Holderlintowers, gull
enswirled.²⁰

In parentheses, 'La Contrescarpe' writes '(*Quatorzel juillet*...)'²¹. We have the French language, and hence, what is untranslatable. July 14th celebrates a political and revolutionary anniversary. Maybe anniversaries in general. The anniversary marks the return, and by revolution, of the revolutionary.

We note also how the '(*Quatorzel/juillets*...)' is written with an s. In its dis-orthography this inaudible mark of the plural insists on the plurality of rings. The

²⁰ *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*: 2001, p. 159

anniversaries do not signal only, necessarily, the return of the same original July 14th. Other more or less secret events, other rings, anniversaries, and alliances, other partakings partake perhaps of the same date. A parenthesis sets alongside: aside. The same parenthesis sets aside, in reserve, other 'quatorze juillet': '(Quatorze / juilletes. Et plus de neuf autres.)' The poem opens itself to many other anniversaries. However the 'I don't know' it forces us into before all the possibilities indicates a situation. The poem speaks beyond knowledge. As Derrida writes: 'it writes, and what it writes is, first of all, this very fact, that it is addressed and destined beyond knowledge, inscribing dates and signatures which one may encounter and bless, without knowing everything of what they date or sign'²². What we are dealing with is a blessing beyond knowledge commemorating through forgetting or the unimparted secret, partaking yet in the unimpartable. The 'Quatorze/juilletes' form the cut of an unrepeatable singularity.

In many ways we witness how this poem contains many dates or signs of other events associated with July 14th. We then come to think of this date, July 14th, not as a date of public and political history but more perhaps as a date which signs in secret. It signals the advent of this particular poem. We re-call that 'Conversation in the Mountains' also says: 'and July is no July'²³. This occurs in the course of a meditation on the Jew, son of a Jew, whose name is unpronounceable, who possesses nothing of his own, who has nothing that is not borrowed. Like a date, what is proper to the Jew is to have no property or essence, or identity. It is worth asking, does Celan open a space beyond the confines of identity politics?

²¹ *Glottal Stop: 101 poems by Paul Celan*: Wesleyan Univ. Press: Hanover: 2000, Trans. by Nikolai Popov and Heather McHugh, p. 16

²² Jacques Derrida: 'Shibboleth for Paul Celan': 1995, p. 37

²³ *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*: 2001, p. 398

We have mentioned before what we have designated as ‘constellations’: the several heterogeneous singularities that are consigned to the starry configuration of a single dated mark. We bring back to mind the ‘constellations of November’. This time they are associated with an ear not of grain as in *shibboleth*, but of corn:

WITH THE HAILSTONE, in

the rust-blighted ear

of maize, at home,

obedient to the late, the hard

November stars:

woven into your heart-thread, the

conversation of worms- :

a bowstring, from which

your arrow-script whirrs,

archer.²⁴

Months return here, March and September especially. The month and its return are mentioned without reference to the year, and so it becomes a sign, a way of marking off the date, its partaking and deportation. What is re-called is the ring and fate of all archival recording. As Derrida writes: ‘A date marks itself and becomes readable only in freeing itself from the singularity which it nonetheless recalls. It is readable in its ideality; its body becomes an ideal object: always the same, traversing

²⁴ Jacques Derrida: ‘*Shibboleth for Paul Celan*’: 1994: p. 38

the different experiences which point to or constitute it, objective, guaranteed by codes. This ideality carries forgetting into memory, but it is the memory of forgetting itself, the truth of forgetting'²⁵. This is because the reference to a singular event is annulled in the ring's annulation, when a month recalls and annually annuls a year. This becomes the moment when the year turns on itself.

The date, in truth, offers itself up for annihilation. The threat does not come from without and it is not connected to the possibility of some accident suddenly destroying the archive's material support. For the date is threatened in its coming due, in its conservation and its readability, by them, insofar as it remains, and permits itself to be read. In its risking the annulment of what it saves from forgetting, it may always become no one's and nothing's date, the essence without essence of ash in which one can no longer even know what one day, one time alone, under some proper name, was consumed. The name and the date partake of this destiny of ash. This is intrinsic to the functioning and being of the date. For it is inherent to the date's erratic essence to become readable and commemorative only in effacing that which it will have designated, in becoming each time no one's date.

How do we understand that 'no one's'? There are two possibilities. The date is encrypted and remains so. That is, Paul Celan has named and ciphered an event that he alone, or alone with a few others, is able to commemorate. In this case, then, the date of this 'Nevermankind in September'²⁶ is destined no longer to signify at all *one day* for the survivors, that is to say, essentially, for the reader, interpreter, or guardian of the poem. The date becomes, once it has crossed the threshold of this survival, or

²⁵ Jacques Derrida: *'Shibboleth for Paul Celan'*: 1994, p. 38

²⁶ Jacques Derrida: *'Shibboleth for Paul Celan'*: 1994, p. 39

spectral return, from the moment it crosses the threshold of the poem, a no one's date, nevermankind. We have just a moment of finite survival. The name of September crops up in a poem that 'speaks!' It lends itself to reading to the extent that it is caught up in, catches itself up in a network of marks that signify and are by convention, intelligible. It has its share in the beauty of the poem. However, it pays for this readability with the terrible tribute of this lost singularity. We catch a rare moment of mourning reading itself. What is encrypted in the date, is dated in the date, is in effect effaced. The date becomes marked in marking itself off. And we have all the losses, all the beings whom we lament in this mourning, all the griefs gathered in the poem of a date whose effacement does not await effacement.

The second possibility: nothing at all is encrypted in the date. It makes itself available to all. And yet, the effect in the end is the same. For the other's singularity is incinerated. The September rose that is no one's rose. In 'Huhediblu' we find: 'Oh when will they reflower, of roses, your Septembers?'²⁷ The future belongs to dates, to their blossoming to come, more particularly in the re-flowering of returns. One does not place flowers on the stone of a date, but rather one awaits the time of the roses, the dated time. What is significant is the date and not what is born, flowers, opens.

This double phenomena of sorts is in the nature of things. For the sameness of all dating is gathered and constituted here. What we encounter here is the possibility of reading and recurrence, the ring, the anniversary and its keeping. We encounter the truth of the poem and its madness. For a date never is what it is, or what it says it is,

²⁷ Jacques Derrida: *'Shibboleth for Paul Celan'*: 1994, p. 40

and is always more or less than what it is. Instead, it remains without being, by force of music, remains for song.

When

when bloom, when,

when bloom the hoomendibloom,

hoohedibloo, yes them, the September-

roses?

Hoo - on tue... when then?

When, whenwhen,

manywhens, yes mania-

brother...²⁸

And so in the date's annulment in the anonymity of nothing, as in that of the ring, is this given of the date that leaves its trace in the poem. In fact, this trace is the poem. It is not just the trace of something, of a non-trace that happened, which took place in that it was lived through in one sense of the word and asks to be commemorated. It is this and more. Firstly, it is the trace as date, that which is bound to mark itself off if it is to mark, to bereave itself if it is to remain. It must expose its secret, and risk losing itself if it is to keep it. It must constantly blur the border, crossing and re-crossing it, between readability and unreadability. This is the madness of fire that consumes a date from within. During the finite time of incineration the

²⁸ Jacques Derrida: *'Shibboleth for Paul Celan'*: 1994, p. 42

password, however, is transmitted, communication happens, and the *shibboleth* is passed from hand to hand and heart to heart.

This annulment is proper and right. For annulment is at work everywhere that a date describes its here and now within iterability, when it consigns itself to losing its senses, in self-forgetfulness, succeeding only thus in effacing itself. These names stand for others. And a date's destiny is analogous to that of every name, every proper name. Desire leads us to praise and bless the given letter, a date which, in order to be what it is, must give itself to be read in ash, in the non-being of its being. Ash is that remainder without remainder. Concerning the date itself, nothing remains, nothing of what it dates, nothing of what is dated by it. Rather no one remains, *a priori*.

We re-call the lines from 'Psalm':

Praised be your name, no one.²⁹

Or in 'Einmal' ('Once'):

One and Infinite,
annihilated,
ied.

Light was. Salvation.³⁰

²⁹ *Selected Poems*: 1990, p. 175

³⁰ *Selected Poems*: 1990, p. 271

When the date becomes readable its shibboleth says to you: 'I' (an almost nothing, once alone, once alone endlessly recommenced but ended in that very act), I am, I am only a cipher commemorating just that which will have been consigned to oblivion, destined to become name, for a finite time, the time of a rose, name of nothing, 'voices of no one', name of no one. Ash, finally.

Like the September roses, the no one's rose calls for the blessing of that which remains of that which does not remain, what does not remain in this remainder, the dust or ash. It sings, yes, amen, to this nothing that remains, and even to the desert in which there would be no one left to bless the ashes. And so we have 'Psalm' again:

No one moulds us again out of earth and clay,

no one conjures our dust,

No one.

Praised be your name, no one.

For your sake

we shall flower.

Towards

you.

A nothing

we were, are, shall

remain, flowering:

the nothing-, the

no-one's rose.³¹

To speak to no one is an act of faith itself. What blessing could be otherwise?
Once it becomes certitude, it becomes dogma. We are dealing with what might be
given. We can never presume. It is incalculable. Thus 'Chymisch':

Great, grey,
sisterly shape
near like all that is lost:

All the names, all those
names
burnt with the rest. So much
ash to be blessed. So much
land won
above
the weightless, so weightless
rings
of souls.³²

However, there is a remainder. What seems to nourish itself or quench its
thirst at the spring of being-present. Although it emerges from being, it uses up in
advance the being from which it seems to draw. The remnant of the remainder - ash,
almost nothing - is not the being that remains. What is drawn, sucked up, drunk with

³¹ *Selected Poems*: 1990: p. 175

³² *Selected Poems*: 1990: p. 179

the scoop, with the ash-scoop, with the ash-ladle comes out of the tub of being. It comes out of it clean, soapy:

DRAWN WITH THE ASH-LADLE

from the tub of being

soapy...³³

A Lingering Relevance

The centrality of the shibboleth to language, and thereby to all human thought, can be garnered by a widening of our discussion from the post-war poetry of Paul Celan to the various *shibboleths* we encounter in the poetry of Seamus Heaney. We will begin by looking at a poem from his 1972 collection *Wintering Out*. The thematic of the shibboleth is developed in the poem 'Broagh':

Riverbank, the long rigs
ending in broad docken
and a canopied pad
down to the ford.

The garden mould
bruised easily, the shower
gathering in your heelmark
was the black O

³³ Jacques Derrida: '*Shibboleth for Paul Celan*': 1994, p. 47

in *Broagh*,
 its low tattoo
 among the windy boortrees
 and rhubarb-blades

 ended almost
 suddenly, like that last
gh the strangers found
 difficult to manage.³⁴

We note that the word 'Broagh' is an anglicization of the Gaelic word 'Bruach' which means 'riverbank'. The first three lines of the poem conclude with dialect words: we have 'rigs' for 'furrows', a word brought to the North of Ireland by Scots planters; 'docken' is a Scots and archaic English word, a plural for 'dock-leaves'; and the last 'pad' is an English and Scots dialect word for 'path'. Further into the poem we find the word 'boortrees' which is an old Scots plural for the elderberry. This poem then celebrates the local Planter's dialect as well as the 'native' tongue. What is interesting is how Heaney connects the landscape, language and the body. The language and the landscape are tattooed like the body.

The poem does set up a paradigm of exclusiveness through the last '*gh* the strangers found/ difficult to manage'. And this in the name of a type of inclusiveness. For the word 'Broagh' is a word available to Unionist and Nationalist in the North of Ireland but excludes anyone from the island of Britain, especially, one imagines

³⁴ Seamus Heaney: *Opened Ground: Poems 1966 – 1996*: 1998, p. 54

someone from England who has no cultural connection to the roots of this particular idiomatic usage of the language. Neil Corcoran writes of this poem: 'Exhilaratedly riding on its own melting, it acts as the linguistic paradigm for a reconciliation beyond sectarian division. Its point is that conflictual histories have resulted in a community whose individual members, whatever their political or religious affinity, now all speak the same language, whether derived from Irish or English or Scots roots. Hence the ability of everyone in this community, whether Catholic or Protestant, to pronounce the place name "Broagh" is intended as a little optimistic or hortatory allegory of potential political, as well as linguistic, community'³⁵.

Another poem in which we encounter in a significant way the 'shibboleth' in Heaney's work is 'From the Frontier of Writing'. It is one of many parabolic poems that mark a departure in style and ambition in Heaney's writing. It is from the 1987 collection *The Haw Lantern*:

The tightness and the nilness round that space
 when the car stops in the road, the troops inspect
 its make and number and, as one bends his face

 towards your window, you catch sight of more
 on a hill beyond, eyeing with intent
 down cradled guns that hold you under cover

 and everything is pure interrogation

³⁵ Neil Corcoran: *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney: A Critical Study*: Faber: London: 1998, p.47 - 48

until a rifle motions and you move
with guarded unconcerned acceleration -

a little emptier, a little spent
as always by that quiver in the self,
subjugated, yes, and obedient.

So you drive on to the frontier of writing
where it happens again. The guns on tripods,
the sergeant with his on-off mike repeating

data about you, waiting for the squawk
of clearance; the marksman training down
out of the sun upon you like a hawk.

And suddenly you're through, arraigned yet freed,
as if you'd passed from behind a waterfall
on the black current of a tarmac road

past armour-plated vehicles, out between
the posted soldiers flowing and receding
like tree shadows into the polished windscreen.³⁶

What is new here is the vocabulary suggestive of sexual violation. The 'little

³⁶ Seamus Heaney: *Opened Ground: Poems 1966 – 1996*: Faber: London: 1998, p. 297 - 298

emptier' and 'a little spent', the 'quiver in the self' all convey something of sexual transgression, where the poet has been left weakened and powerless by this encounter. What is interesting is the move from the reality of roadblocks in the North of Ireland, or somewhere resembling it, to the land of language, imagination and form. In the world of art an examination, interrogation of the self occurs also. The self is examined, questioned, one presumes by the other half of the self; is it that the ethical self must ask questions of the artistic self? This presumes an otherness within, a division within the self. A path must be cleared, to allow one to journey on. In the poem Heaney achieves this. There is a sense of liberation and progression by the poem's conclusion. What is interesting is how Heaney imagines the transition. The world of definite objects, soldiers, guns, tripods and surveillance equipment, becomes blurred, fuzzy, indefinite, conveyed through the watery imagery of a verb like 'flowed'. We have a sense of movement in stasis. Things are not as they seem. We are in a liminal space of the nihilism prior to creation. We should be open to an element of surprise in the actual. Keeping the ways open for a moment of liberation, an opening out to a moment of freedom, one has a release from the forces of tyranny. As Daniel Tobin writes: 'The poet is never completely cleared, though the hope of clearance, of pure transcendence, is a promise made viable by our willingness to forgo clearance in the here and now'³⁷.

³⁷ Daniel Tobin: *Passage to the Centre: Imagination and the Sacred in the Poetry of Seamus Heaney*: Univ. Press of Kentucky: Lexington: 1999, p. 232

The Cracked Tune Chronos Sings

As we have discussed things thus far the commemorating date and the commemorated date have tended to rejoin and conjoin in a secret anniversary, and the poem is this anniversary - the anniversary it sings and blesses, the giving of this ring, the seal of an alliance and of a promise. It belongs to the same date as the one it blesses, gives and gives back again - the date to which it at once both belongs and is destined. At this strange border point that has already passed and is still yet to come there is an effacement between the poem's external appearance, its 'empirical' date, and its internal genealogy. We are in a utopian place, where the barriers that normally exist between the inner and the outer, between the empirical and the essential, break down. Such is the place of the poem that is a blessing.

For Derrida we begin to cross the border into philosophical questioning at this point. The philosophical experience begins with a questioning that is a crossing of limits, and it always occurs within the experience of language; and as such it is as poetic and literary as it is philosophical.

Derrida touches on the significance of the clock and the calendar in Celan's work. Both are key in how they mark off the day, months and years. We have the space and sound of the revolution of the hours sounded to us in the beating of the clock. Both, for Derrida, name 'the return of the other, of the wholly other in the same'³⁸. For Derrida the hour writes and the hour speaks, in Celan's poems with their

³⁸ Jacques Derrida: *'Shibboleth for Paul Celan'*: 1994, p. 48

frequent reference to *Uhr* and *Stunde*. The hour calls and assigns the poem. The hour provokes, convokes, apostrophizes and addresses the poem thereby, and the poet who is claimed by the hour. There is a summons and an hour. In the poem 'Nacht' there is a sense of the hour, and a dialogue or conversation with the turning hour; the sharing of a word with it.

Mallarme spoke of the initiative returning to words. For Derrida the initiative also returns to the hour. The poet is provoked and constituted by it. He is revealed to himself from within it. The 'caesura of the hours', cadence, chance, and sufferance scan the poem from the moment and moments of its origin. This rhythm that involves a spacing concerns not only the form of the language, but also the origin of meaning, and of the meaning of language. Celan's Bremen address confronts these questions. What is the meaning of language, of its sense and place for an exile? The German language for a poet of the German language who is not German:

In this language I have sought, during those years and the years since then, to write poems: so as to speak, to orient myself, to find out where I was and where I was meant to go...

It was, you see, event, movement, a being underway, it was an attempt to gain direction. And if I inquire into its meaning, I believe I must tell myself that this also involves the question of the clockhand's direction.

For a poem is not timeless. Certainly it lays claim to infinity, it seeks to reach through time – through it, not above and beyond it.³⁹

This is a fearful moment. It is the moment when the hour begins to turn on itself. We are at a moment of consumption. It is the becoming-ash or burning up of the date: on the hour, in the hour itself, at each hour. This is the ever present threat of

³⁹ *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*: 2001, p. 395 - 396

the absolute crypt: the moment of nonrecurrence, unreadability, amnesia with nothing left, but nonrecurrence *as* recurrence, *in* recurrence itself.

We are at the moment of the holocaust of each hour. Every hour within the world there is a holocaust. There is a hell, a memory of the all-consuming, within our consciousness. To quote Derrida: 'every hour is unique, whether it comes back, and this is the wheel that turns on itself, or whether, the last, it comes no more, no more than the sister, its own the same, its other revenant'⁴⁰.

Go, your hour
 has no sisters, you are-
 are at home. A wheel, slow,
 rolls on its own, the spokes
 climb,
 [...]
 Years.
 Years, years, a finger
 feels down and up,
 [...]
 Came, came.
 Came a word, came,
 came through the night,
 wanted to shine, wanted to shine.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Jacques Derrida: 'Shibboleth for Paul Celan': 1994, p. 50

⁴¹ Jacques Derrida: 'Shibboleth for Paul Celan', 1994, p. 50 - 51

In this poem the ash and the night call to each other:

Ash.

Ash, ash.

Night.

Night - and - night.

We have spoken of the commemorated date and the date of the commemoration, the commemorating. How do you distinguish between them today? Or on the anniversary hour, when it has come? Not so much because this hour, today, at this date, this dated here and now is not rigorously the same as, merely analogous to, the other, but because the originary date, as coded mark of the other here-now, was already a sort of fiction, telling of singularity only in the fable of conventions and generalities, of what are in any case iterable marks. What is the truth of this fiction? Can we speak of the untrue truth of this truth? Are we at the *shibboleth*?

The Jewishness of Thought

Derrida states that 'poetic writing offers itself up to dating in its entirety'⁴². He points out that Celan's Bremen address hints at this idea also. Here Celan suggests the poem is always en route from a place toward 'something open' ('an approachable you'), and it makes its way 'across' time, it is never 'timeless'. The poem is cipher of singularity, offering its place and recalling it, offering and recalling its time at the risk of losing them in the holocaustic generality of recurrence and the readability of the

⁴² Jacques Derrida: '*Shibboleth for Paul Celan*'. 1994, p. 52

concept, in the anniversary repetition of the unrepeatable. Derrida writes that wherever there is 'a signature which is *at once* unique and iterable, cryptic and readable, there is date'⁴³. It can never be an absolute date, in the same way that there can never be an absolute poem. However, date, the madness of when, and the terrifying ambiguity of the shibboleth, the sign of belonging and the threat of discrimination, remains.

A date discerns and concerns a place. It is a *situation*. The poet's passion is for what Derrida calls the crypt. It occurs every time a singular incision marks the language. A voice of a poem will always carry beyond the singular cut: in that the cut becomes available for reading for those who have no part in the event or the constellation of events consigned to it, for those excluded from partaking but who may yet thus partake and impart. And thus we come to what Derrida calls poetry's resembling or possessing the status of a philosopheme. Derrida writes: 'Philosophy, hermeneutics, and poetics can only come into being within idioms, within languages, the body of events and dates a metalinguistic overview of which one could not say is impossible - but rather that it is guaranteed, from within, so to speak, by the structure of marking off which pertains to the date's iterability, that is to say its essential annulment. The effacement of the date or of the name inside the ring: here is the origin of philosophy, of hermeneutics, of poetics, their sendoff'⁴⁴.

Does the affirmation of Judaism within Celan have the same structure as that of the date? Derrida proceeds to discuss what the statement 'We are all Jews' might mean. It suggests a notion of responsibility, suggesting that we take it upon ourselves.

⁴³ Jacques Derrida: '*Shibboleth for Paul Celan*': 1994, p. 52

⁴⁴ Jacques Derrida: '*Shibboleth for Paul Celan*': 1994, p. 53

It suggests an ancient rootedness, and an accepted memory within an unchosen destination. Is there an essence here? Is there a sense of belonging and of partaking?

Celan recalls the common theme that there is no Jewish property. 'Because the Jew, you know, what does he have that is really his own, that is not borrowed, taken and not returned?'⁴⁵ The hint is that the Jew is also the other, myself and the other; I am Jewish in saying: the Jew is the other who has no essence, who has nothing of his own or whose own essence is not to have one. Thus we have at one and the same time the quote from Russian poetess Marina Tsvetaeva 'All poets are Jews', with its suggestion of the alleged universality of Jewish witnessing, and the incommunicable secret of the Judaic idiom. We have the singularity of 'his name, his unpronounceable name'⁴⁶.

What then of the Jew's unpronounceable name, his proper name? It says *shibboleth*: this unpronounceable name that cannot be said by one who does not partake of the covenant. The Ephraimites know what one ought to say but cannot. If one partakes of the covenant or alliance one cannot utter the name of God also. It is unpronounceable to the Jew, who can say it, but does not, a fact commanded by the law. It is finally the name of the Jew which the non-Jew has trouble pronouncing; or, which he doesn't wish to pronounce or derides by mispronunciation. And so we can say that its unpronounceability keeps and destroys the name. It can keep it like the name of God, or doom it to annihilation among the ashes. And so Derrida writes:

⁴⁵ Jacques Derrida: *'Shibboleth for Paul Celan'*: 1994, p. 54

⁴⁶ Jacques Derrida: *'Shibboleth for Paul Celan'*: 1994, p. 54

'apparently different or contradictory, these two possibilities can always cross the border and exchange with one another'⁴⁷.

The Jew and the name Jew come to exchange themselves with the *shibboleth*. They are both in the name of the other, both singular and universal. Derrida writes: 'witness to the universal by virtue of absolute singularity, by virtue of and in the name of the other, the stranger, you toward whom I must take a step which, without bringing me nearer to you, without exchanging myself with you, without being assured passage, lets the word pass and assigns us, if not to the one, at least to the same'⁴⁸. For Derrida we are dealing with the passage of the other, toward the other - respect of the same, of a same that respects the otherness of the other. In 'Sprachgitter' we find Celan choose the word 'Passat' to say 'We are strangers', 'Passat' being the name of a wind:

(Were I like you. Were you like me.

Did we not stand

under *one* tradewind?

We are strangers.)⁴⁹

They are both strangers. We are both strangers to each other. Are we both strangers then to outside parties?

We find in Celan a temptation to designate the Judaic, Jewishness - yours and not only mine, as always something inappropriable of the other's - found for example

⁴⁷ Jacques Derrida: 'Shibboleth for Paul Celan': 1994, p. 54

⁴⁸ Jacques Derrida: 'Shibboleth for Paul Celan': 1994, p. 55

in the poem 'Zurich, zum Storchen'. We find Celan use the words 'I and You' in complex ways. You can be and are a me. So the word You, may be addressed to the other as well as to myself, to oneself as other.

Of too much was our talk, of
 too little. Of the You
 and You-Again, of
 how clarity troubles, of
 Jewishness, of
 your God.

[...]

Of your God was our talk, I spoke
 against him,...⁵⁰

The 'you', the 'yours' may be addressed to the other as Jew but also to the self as other, as another Jew or as other than Jew. 'The Lock Gate' addresses you, and your mourning, 'all this mourning/of yours'⁵¹. What has been lost, and is beyond a trace, is the word, a word which opens like a *shibboleth*, on what is most intimate. This lost word, the word that is to be mourned, is not only the word 'that had remained with me': 'sister'. It is also the word that opens the possibility of mourning what has been lost beyond a trace (the exterminated family, the incineration of the family name in the figure of the sister - for the word is 'sister' - at the final hour

⁴⁹ *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*: 2001, p. 107

⁵⁰ *Selected Poems*: 1990, p. 157

which no longer has a sister - 'your hour/ has no sisters'). It is the very word which grants access to Jewish mourning: '*Kaddish*'. This word addressed me, sought me, like the hour's interpellation; it came before me, it sought me out, it took the initiative. Then, I lost it. Like the word that had remained with me: 'sister'. I lost the word that had remained with me, I lost the one that sought me out to mourn the one that had remained with me:

To a mouth

for which it was one of a thousand

I lost -

I lost a word

that had remained with me:

sister.

To

the worship of many gods

I lost a word that was looking for me:

Kaddish.⁵²

Celan is imagining the worst kind of loss. He imagines crossing the line, the boundary where mourning itself is denied us, the interiorization of the other in memory, the preserving of the other in the sepulchre or epitaph. Celan names the incinerated beyond of the date, words lost without sepulchre. Once dead, and without sepulchre, these words of mourning which are themselves incinerated may yet return.

⁵¹ *Selected Poems*: 1990, p. 169

⁵² *Selected Poems*: 1990, p. 169

They come back then as phantoms. One hears them roaming about the stelae:

like unsepulchered words,
 roaming
 in the orbit of attained
 goals and stelae and cradles.⁵³

Celan mentions the spectral errancy of words. This spectral return is partaken of by all words, from their first emergence. Derrida writes: ‘What one calls poetry or literature, art itself ... is nothing perhaps but an intense familiarity with the ineluctable originarity of the specter’⁵⁴. We can translate it into the ineluctable loss of the origin. It is the moment of mourning, and the experience of mourning.

The Circumcised Mind

Celan has mentioned the unique event of circumcision that marks the legitimate entry of the Jew into his community. We have the phrase ‘it carries across/ the wound-read’⁵⁵. We have a passing beyond, over that which is read to the quick, to the point of bleeding and wounding. The cipher is painfully inscribed on the body itself. It is readable and unreadable. The literal word ‘circumcision’ appears rarely in the body of Celan’s writings. However, Derrida writes ‘the *tropic* of circumcision disposes cuts, caesuras, ciphered alliances, and wounded rings throughout the text’⁵⁶.

⁵³ Jacques Derrida: ‘*Shibboleth for Paul Celan*’: 1994, p. 58

⁵⁴ Jacques Derrida: ‘*Shibboleth for Paul Celan*’: 1994, p. 58

⁵⁵ Jacques Derrida: ‘*Shibboleth for Paul Celan*’: 1994, p. 58

⁵⁶ Jacques Derrida: ‘*Shibboleth for Paul Celan*’: 1994, p. 59

He argues that 'it is tied to both the differential marks and the destination of language: the inaccessibility of the other returns there in the same, dates and sets turning the ring'⁵⁷.

What does Celan mean by saying 'all poets are Jews'? What the trope comes to, then, is locating the Jew not only *as* a poet but also in every man circumcised by language or led to circumcise a language. We have three basic significations for the word 'circumcision':

- (1). The cut which incises the male sexual member, entering and passing around it to form a circumvenient ring;
- (2). A name given to the moment of covenant or alliance and of legitimate entry into the community: a *shibboleth* which cuts and divides, then distinguishes, for example, by virtue of the language and the name which is given to each of them, one circumcision from another, the Jewish from the Egyptian operation from which it is said to derive, or indeed, the Muslim operation which resembles it, or many others.
- (3). The experience of blessing and of purification.

As Celan develops the idea, those who undergo or participate in a certain experience might well be called Jews. And that experience might be legitimately referred to as a type of circumcision. We can say that if all the poets are Jews, they are all, then, circumcisers, or circumcised. Celan is keen to focus in on all ciphered wounds.

⁵⁷ Jacques Derrida: '*Shibboleth for Paul Celan*': 1994, p. 59

What does Celan mean by 'no one's circumcision'? The evocation of the exterminated race designates the race and root of no one: black erection in the sky, verge and testicle, race and root of no one. Uprooting of the race and the sex in 'Radix, Matrix':

Who,
 who was it, that
 lineage, the murdered, that looms
 black in the sky:
 rod and bulb- ?

(Root.
 Abraham's root. Jesse's root. No one's
 root - O
 ours.)⁵⁸

We have the command in Celan to circumcise the word. The verb here has the word as its object, it speaks about an operation to be performed on the verbum, on the word. Its complement is the world, or rather the Word. We have a reference to Rabbi Low:

Rebbe, I gnashed my teeth, Rebbe
 Loew:

⁵⁸ *Selected Poems*: 1990, p. 187

cise

this one's

word...⁵⁹

This word given to be circumcised for someone, this word must be an opened word. Open like a wound. Open like a door. A door open to the stranger, to the neighbour, and the guest and to whoever. Open to the one who will come. Maybe open to the monstrous creature. Monstrous because beyond anticipation, form and norm, beyond every conceivable and known genre.

Is there a reference here to the prophet Elijah? Is he the one to whom hospitality is due? He may come at any moment. And then in Derrida we find: 'He may cause the event of his coming to happen at each instant'⁶⁰. Elijah is not only the guest, the one to whom, as relationship itself, the door of the word must be opened; he is not only or simply a messianic and eschatological prophet; according to tradition Elijah is by God's command to be present at all circumcisions, each time, every time. He watches over them. The one who holds the circumcised infant must be seated on what is known as Elijah's chair.

So, here in this place, in the poem, the monster, or Elijah, the guest or the other, stands before the door, at the poem's first step, on the threshold of the text. The poem's title in translation is: 'To one who stood outside the door...' ⁶¹ He stands

⁵⁹ *Glottal Stop: 101 Poems by Paul Celan*: Wesleyan Univ. Press: Hanover: 2000, Trans. by Nikolai Popov and Heather McHugh, p. 9 - 10

⁶⁰ Jacques Derrida: '*Shibboleth for Paul Celan*': 1994, p. 62

⁶¹ *Glottal Stop*: 2000, p. 9 - 10

before the door, as before the law. We think of Kafka's obtuse parable 'Before the Law'. The door and the law are intimately connected in Jewish tradition.

The 'I' of the poem, the poet, (as figure for you and me maybe?), as representative anyway of 'all' those who 'are Jews'. He opens the door to him, but the door turns into the word. What he opens to him is not the door, but the word:

To one who stood outside the door, one
 evening:
 to him
 I opened my word -:...)

Can we read this poem, then, as an allegory? We remember that an allegory bears the word for the other, to the other or from the other. The poem follows the vicissitude of the hours. The times in their turns are marked. The vicissitude begins one evening in the Occident of the poem 'eines Abends'. The poet, the one who says I, opens the word and addresses himself to the Rabbi, to the *Mohel*, to the one whom he appoints as circumciser since he says to him 'circumcise'. What does he ask of him? To close the door of the evening and to open the door of the morning. If the door speaks the word, he now, once the word is circumcised, asks it for the word of morning, the Oriental word, the poem of the origin.

And Rebbe, slam shut evening's door.

.....

Rip open morning's, Re-⁶²

Here we witness a violent opening and closing. Celan's German suggests the opening of something brusquely, rapidly and wide. It also has connotations of breaking something open, to rend in one stroke, like a veil. There is a hint also of a door being slammed, of something brutal. As though in someone's direction, signifying its closing to someone. As for Re-, the name interrupted in the final caesura, the first syllable of an appellation that is not completed and finally remains in the mouth, the Rabbi cut in two. It also carries a connotation of the Egyptian God as well, the sun or light, at the opening of the 'morning door'. This poem is the becoming-poetic of the word; of the words becoming Jewish, if 'all poets are Jews'. It attempts to describe the becoming circumcised of the word of origin.

Circumcision will always remain, inescapably, a matter of the body. As much of the physical body as the corpus of poems Paul Celan bequeathed to us. It offers itself for writing and for reading on the body. Or rather: the sense of the senses, the body, offers itself for thinking, signifying, interpreting thus, as it is revealed through this response to the question: 'What is the body proper, said to be proper?': a place of circumcision.

In the Bible, on the subject of circumcision, the opposition of the clean and the unclean, the proper and the improper, the pure and the impure, coincides often with that of the circumcised and the uncircumcised, extending without limit the semantic

⁶² *Glottal Stop*: 2000, p. 10

field of circumcision and thus defining it only at the limits of definition, of limitation, of circumscription itself, which is to say, conferring on it a singular indefiniteness.

The circumcision of a word is intimately related, always, to the body. There is then an essential analogy between this event, on the one hand, and the diacritical difference between *shibboleth* and *sibboleth*, on the other. For, it is in the body, by reason of a certain impotence *coming over* their vocal organs, but an impotence of the *body proper*, of the already cultivated body, limited by a barrier neither organic nor natural, that the Ephraimites experienced their inability to pronounce what they nonetheless knew ought to be pronounced *shibboleth* - and not *sibboleth*.

So we have an 'unpronounceable name' for some, *shibboleth* is a circumcised word. For this one, Rabbi, circumcise the word. Give him the word of partaking, impart it to him, also, to this one also.

The word which is to be circumcised: here it is first of all, opened, like a door, offered, given, or at least promised to the other. The other remains indeterminate - unnamed in the poem. He has no identifiable face, he simply has a face since he must see the door, and receive the word, even if this face remains invisible. It never shows itself in the poem. It is *no one*, anyone, the neighbour or the stranger, for with the other it comes to the same.

The one who is not yet named, the one who perhaps awaits his name, awaits its bestowal by a circumcision, is the one-and-only, the unique, *this one*. He draws the whole poem towards him. It is to him, *to this one*, that one must open, give,

circumcise, *for him* that the living Nothing must be inscribed in the heart: to him, for him, this one.

to him

I opened my word

[...]

cise

this one's

word, write

the living

nothing-

ness into

this one's

heart, spread

this one's

two crippled fingers into a healer's

benediction.

This one's.)⁶³

The offering of this word for circumcision is indeed the giving of a word, of one's word, since it is said that 'I opened my word'. Given word, promise, engagement, signature, date, saving word also in the form of a poem or a decision. This word of opening permits one to pass through the doorway. It is yet another

⁶³ *Glottal Stop*: 2000, p. 9

shibboleth, the very *shibboleth* at the origin of all the others, and yet one among others, *in a given language*.

The *shibboleth* is given or promised by me to the singular other, 'this one' that he may partake of it and enter, or leave, that he may pass through the doorway, across the line, the border, the threshold. This word also asks. It asks intercession, or rather it intercedes with the Rabbi - still an other - that he might bestow him, the third, the value of circumcision on this word - the *shibboleth* of the community before the law, the sign of the covenant. The Rabbi is a wise man invested with this right; he has the knowledge, and the power to circumcise the word. He is the guardian and the guarantor; it is through him that the transmission of the *shibboleth* passes just as the doorway is crossed. And this doorway is nothing other than circumcision as *shibboleth*, the place of decision for the right of access to the legitimate community, the covenant or alliance, the given name of a singular individual, but the dated name, singular but inscribed right on the body, on a given day in a genealogical classification.

It appears that the intercessor seems to hold all the powers and all the rights, whether one thinks of the poem's intercession, of mine, or of the Rabbi's. This - a *shibboleth* - intercedes. Here, the power and knowledge are annulled of themselves. The knowledge and the power of Rabbi Low are annulled, his knowing - being able - to circumcise, which amount in truth to the same thing, which are but one - are immediately annihilated in the *object-less*. They know how and are able to infinitely, but must also infinitely annihilate themselves. For the writing of circumcision which I ask of him, for which I intercede with the intercessor, is a *writing of Nothing*. It

performs its operation on Nothing, an incisive surgery which, to the point of bleeding, to the point of wounding, embeds the inscription of Nothing in the flesh, in the living word, in the flesh of the pronounceable and circumcised word. In Celan's writing there is a proximity of words for writing, slicing, inscribing, cutting and separating. One gives the word, one's word, in inscribing this Nothing in the heart; thus one should not cut in, but on the contrary allow the word passage.

There is in Celan the echo of Heidegger; in the poem 'Todtnauberg'⁶⁴ a hint of the question of Nothing and the meaning of being. There is the hint of the truth of a being which passes through the experience of Nothing. We have in Celan the hint always of no one's circumcision, the word's circumcision by the incision of Nothing in the circumcised heart of the other, of this one, you.

What is meant by the demand to circumcise the word for him, to circumcise his word? More than one can *mean-to-say*, more and less than this or that meaning, more or less than this determination. Circumcision is also a determination: it defines and it decides. But to ask for circumcision is not to ask for something determinate, a meaning or an object.

The circumcised word is *first of all* written, at once both incised and excised in a body, which may be the body of a language and which in any case always binds the body to language: the word which is entered into, wounded in order to be what it is, the word cut into, written because cut into, caesured in its origin, with the poem.

⁶⁴ *Selected Prose and Poems of Paul Celan*: 2001, p. 315

The circumcised word is, *next of all*, readable, starting from nothing, but readable, *to be read* to the point of wounding and to the point of bleeding. This circumcised word grants access to the community, to the covenant or alliance, to the partaking of a language, in a language. The Rabbi becomes then a poet, revealing the poet in him. Celan explores the question: how can the German language receive circumcision at this poem's date, that is to say, following the holocaust, the solution that was the final cremation, the ash of all? How is one to bless these ashes in German?

And then, as a mark at once both readable and secret, a mark of belonging and of exclusion, as the wound of partaking, the circumcised word reminds us also of the *double edge of a shibboleth*. As the mark of a covenant or alliance, it also *intervenes*, it interdicts, it signifies the sentence of exclusion, of discrimination, indeed of extermination. It may be turned against oneself: then it is the circumcised who are proscribed or held at the border, excluded from the community, put to death, or reduced to ashes: at the mere sight, in the mere name, at the first reading of a wound.

How does one guard oneself against it? With Nothing.

The circumcision of the word is not dated in history. It calls forth the date. It opens the word to the other, and the door, it opens history and the poem and philosophy and hermeneutics and religion. Of all that calls itself - of the name and the blessing of the name, of yes and of no, it sets turning the ring, to affirm or to annul.

Chapter Four:

'Out to An Other Side': Poetry as a Way to the Transcendental Other

Before proceeding to a discussion of poems by Seamus Heaney we will look at poems by two very different writers. The poet Cathal O' Searcaigh comes from Donegal on the North West coast of Ireland and writes in Gaelic. The second is the American contemporary poet Adrienne Rich. The first poem from O' Searcaigh is called 'Breakthrough':

Sound asleep, you put up
No defences, no wall,

So at night, I walk
Your mind's landscape,

Its sky more naturally blue
Than the sash God's mother wore.

On the other side of a word
There is such a view.¹

This is a poem drawn from the intimacy of the boudoir. We identify its context fairly quickly; it is a pillow poem. It is significant that it is so intimate. We are at a

point where normal boundaries break down. There is a possibility of deep communion which human romantic love offers us the greatest taste of. The body is one of our primary boundaries. Interestingly O' Searcaigh claims the de-limiting power of this fact is challenged, removed, rendered less powerful in the moment of human intimacy. So he can walk the 'mind's landscape' of his lover. And how does O' Searcaigh envision this space? It is a deep blue - bluer than the virginal blue of Mary the Mother of God. So we are talking about positivity and purity. There is a quality of absoluteness about this blueness also, because it is associated with the divine. We recall that O' Searcaigh is in a very positive frame of mind here lying beside his sleeping lover. The poem argues that this is the space that poetry itself emerges from. O' Searcaigh introduces a very strange idea, alien, apparently to his overall preoccupation. He says poetry, or language tries to capture the plenitude he has touched on here. It is the view on the far side of a word. So there is a gap to be traversed, there is an echo to be heard, a promise to be fulfilled and it is poetry that signals that for us. In another translation the suggestion is of a melody, a music where word and feeling are united, the distance normally or typically haunting them is closed down.²

In this context another poem of O' Searcaigh's provocatively titled 'Transubstantiation' is worth examining:

Between the thought and the word
Are regions of ice and fog;

¹ Cathal O'Searcaigh: *Out in the Open*: Clo Iar-Chonnachta: Conamara: 1997, p. 117, Trans. by Frank Sewell

² Cathal O'Searcaigh: *An Bealach 'na Bhaile: Homecoming*: Clo Iar-Chonnachta: Conamara: 1995, p.151, Trans. by Joan McBreen

But all my life I'll be
 Shattering the frost, scattering the fog

 Stirring and sunning
 With my heart's fiery rays

 So that you'll flower one day
 You that are only a shadow.³

O' Searcaigh paints the moment that exists in between. The moment of poetry's birth is when the fog and the ice are dispersed by the sun's rays flowing from the poet's heart, in an attempt to bring the moment of shadow to light. What exists between the thought and the word is a nebulous region within which we cannot dwell comfortably. In more contemporary terms, is O' Searcaigh speaking of the gap that exists in the realm between signifier and signified? O' Searcaigh suggests a moment of nothingness. For Blanchot it is the moment of absence. For O' Searcaigh the continual poetic task is to venture into this domain and bring the poem to light, to make it live, to allow it to be. And he has succeeded in doing that here. We can enter into the moment of nothingness suggested by his terms 'fog' and 'ice' and dwell there. So his poetry has succeeded. We can imagine the moment of nothingness, approach it and dwell within it, all through the transubstantive poetic world and word, where those terms are tautological.

³ Cathal O'Searcaigh: *An Bealach 'na Bhaile: Homecoming*: Clo Iar-Chonnachta: Conamara: 1993, 185, Trans. by Gabriel Fitzmaurice

Adrienne Rich's poem comes from a collection suggestively titled *The Dream of a Common Language: Poems 1974 - 1977*:

Your silence today is a pond where drowned things live
 I want to see raised dripping and brought into the sun.
 It's not my own face I see there, but other faces,
 even your face at another age.

Whatever's lost there is needed by both of us-
 a watch of old gold, a water-blurred fever chart,
 a key....Even the silt and pebbles of the bottom
 deserve their glint of recognition. I fear this silence,
 this inarticulate life. I'm waiting
 for a wind that will gently open this sheeted water
 for once, and show me what I can do
 for you, who have often made the unnameable
 nameable, for others, even for me.⁴

Rich is talking about the nature of poetic activity here. The implication of her imagery is that she sees it as a sacramental, certainly sacred process. She creates the idea of depth through the use of water imagery. The nothingness that exists before the poetic moment and which always threatens it from the outside, at the edges of poetic utterance, is vast, has a surface and depth to it. Rich succeeds in suggesting its spatial dimensions. And yet, paradoxically, drowned things live there, waiting to be retrieved. Items, useless elements from a past itinerary wait there, exist, live, awaiting

⁴ Adrienne Rich: *The Dream of A Common Language*: Norton: New York: 1993, p.29

retrieval by the poetic word which is a type of personal, maybe racial, memory. It is a necessity that we enter into this space. We need to name even the most inconsequential things. What is normally passed over must not be missed in our naming of creation. Nothing exists outside the poetic word.

The one moment of dread sounded in the poem is the fear of silence, of not being able to utter the poetic word. The mouth of Orpheus must never be silenced. It is the voice of the race, its past, present and future depends on the ability of this poetic word to name the world within which it exists and the nothingness from out of which it came: which always shadows it. There is a continual, creative and constructive battle going on between the poetic naming and the nothingness that precedes it and from which it proceeds. Wind is a traditional term for poetic inspiration, sanctioned by the Judaeo-Christian tradition also as an image of the holy spirit. The poet awaits this moment of visitation in order to be able to name. Is the 'you' in that poem a partner, a lover of the poet? Or is it inspiration itself which is known in intimate terms? Again, the key suggestion is one of similarity, in the sense of familiarity. Something will arrive which you will know and be able to name, and help you to name thereby. The struggle is always with bringing things to the surface, to the light, to clarity and understanding by naming.

Some poems by Seamus Heaney are informative in this context. The first comes from his sequence 'Glanmore Sonnets'. It is number four, and a poem taken from his 1979 collection *Field Work*.

*Glanmore Sonnets**IV*

I used to lie with an ear to the line
 For that way, they said, there should come a sound
 Escaping ahead, an iron tune
 Of flange and piston pitched along the ground,
 But I never heard that. Always, instead,
 Struck couplings and shuntings two miles away
 Lifted over the woods. The head
 Of a horse swirled back from a gate, a grey
 Turnover of haunch and mane, and I'd look
 Up to the cutting where she'd soon appear.
 Two fields back, in the house, small ripples shook
 Silently across our drinking water
 (As they are shaking now across my heart)
 And vanished into where they seemed to start.⁵

The circumstances described in this poem are easy enough to sketch in. The poet had been told to listen to the train coming by feeling its vibrations through the railway tracks. The poet disputes what he has been told, and received wisdom is under question. You must test it for yourself. He says he heard the train coming over the trees. There is an interesting play or reversal at work here, between the ground and the air as images for transmitting presence, between the below and the above. While Rich favoured the underground currencies of rivers, the lake and the sea, Seamus Heaney is

⁵ Seamus Heaney: *Opened Ground: Poems 1966 – 1996*: Faber: London: 1998, p. 166

opting for the air, its very airiness and lightness is the medium of travel for any message of significance. Heaney conveys brilliantly how you can know something before it arrives by its registering in the sensible things around you, in its vibrations. Its being is announced despite its absence. Even the sensitive although unintelligent world can register this. Thus the image of the horse that is sensitive to and re-acts, pre-empts, is aware of, the oncoming train and announces this moment to the poet. Even two fields back, registering distance in local currency, the presence of the train is anticipated in the rippling water which also registers in the poet's heart. What is interesting to note is the 'now' of that second last line. Is Heaney talking about the later moment of poetic creation which has come after the original, originary event but which still retains its innate force, or presence? And then we have the stunning final image: 'And vanished into where they seemed to start'. And so we have the image of nothingness and clearance; what seems to allow being to emerge is the moment of its disappearance. To quote Derrida on Heidegger from *Aporias*: death 'signifies the possibility of the measureless impossibility of existence'⁶. The poem itself exists, is, can be read and understood, just as the image that is inscribed within it contains the idea of its own disappearance.

The second poem from Heaney comes from his sequence of sonnets 'Clearances', from his 1987 volume *The Haw Lantern*. This entire cycle deals with the death of significant members of Heaney's family, particularly his mother and a favourite aunt:

⁶ Jacques Derrida: *Aporias*: Stanford Univ. Press: California: 1993, p.72, Trans. by Thomas Dutoit

Clearances

II

Polished linoleum shone there. Brass taps shone.
 The china cups were very white and big -
 An unchipped set with sugar bowl and jug.
 The kettle whistled. Sandwich and tea scone
 Were present and correct. In case it run,
 The butter must be kept out of the sun.
 And don't be dropping crumbs. Don't tilt your chair.
 Don't reach. Don't point. Don't make noise when you stir.

It is Number 5, New Row, Land of the Dead,
 Where grandfather is rising from his place
 With spectacles pushed back on a clean bald head
 To welcome a bewildered homing daughter
 Before she even knocks. 'What's this? What's this?'
 And they sit down in the shining room together.⁷

In this poem Heaney creates and re-creates a lost world. Simon Critchley identifies the poetic trope *prosopopeia* as one in which an absent or imaginary person is presented as speaking and acting⁸. He speaks of this as revealing a failure of representation, an inability to convey the reality of death because it is a moment when consciousness disappears. And it is a failure of presence. We will read Heaney closely

⁷ *Opened Ground*: 1998, p. 308

⁸ Simon Critchley: *Very Little...Almost Nothing*: 1997, p. 73: 'the representation of death is not the representation of a presence, an object of perception or intuition – we cannot draw a likeness of death, a

bearing this reflection in mind, with the view that Heaney still creates a world that is there and into which we can enter and comprehend. So we enter a transcendental space that is meaningful and can be comprehended. It exists in its own unique space. Heaney suggests the world his mother grew up in. It is a very ordered world where everything had its proper place, from the children to the china. There is a luminosity announced in this world from the word *go*, or at least from the use of the word 'shone' twice in the opening line. A trait of Heaney's work is the focus on the particular and the tangible. We recognize the scones, the butter, the tea set and the sun. The moral world is created or suggested also, the world apart from the material world that the child inhabited, through phrases like 'Don't run', etc. The surprising shift is the sestet when we realize that the place described in the octet does not exist any longer. It is the 'land of the dead'. Heaney's grandfather is rising to meet his spectral daughter, although he is a spectre himself. There is a moment of recognition, a meeting point which the poem can only hint at and not describe where both expect the arrival of something they will know, have expected and yet not have understood or grasped with the intellect, or conceptual understanding. The poem suggests that the world of the unknown will be recognized and understood.

Heaney has created two tangible worlds. Through the real he has suggested the liminal, the unreal, the disappeared. We can enter into or reside in the world of the octet. It is the world we know, yet it is only, although a significant only, the world of a poem. So there are layers of removal. We have the poetic re-creation of a world, of the real world that is the world of the disappeared, and then, in the sestet we have the description of an afterworld in terms drawn from this world, a world that we don't

portrait, a still life, or whatever. Thus, representations of death are *misrepresentations*, or rather they are representations of an absence'.

know yet. Poetry, the innate argument of the poem deals with the language of presence and absence, is a practicing of the sacramental word, and is the only means by which such cross over lines, the traversing of the chiasmus between being and nothingness, presence and absence, can be achieved. Heaney's poem operates on a transcendental act of faith grounded in the possibilities of the poetic word. We are urged to travel with him as we believe in the reality of the fictional world he has constructed or created.

The idea of a type of sacramental presence being conveyed, suggested, created by means of the poetic word is an idea Heaney utilizes in another poem from this sequence, sonnet three from 'Clearances':

III

When all the others were away at Mass
 I was all hers as we peeled potatoes.
 They broke the silence, let fall one by one
 Like solder weeping off the soldering iron:
 Cold comforts set between us, things to share
 Gleaming in a bucket of clean water.
 And again let fall. Little pleasant splashes
 From each other's work would bring us to our senses.

So while the parish priest at her bedside
 Went hammer and tongs at the prayers for the dying
 And some were responding and some crying

I remembered her head bent towards my head,
 Her breath in mine, our fluent dipping knives-
 Never closer the whole rest of our lives.⁹

We note the daring use of sexual innuendo in the second line 'I was all hers'. This is all the more striking by being placed in the vicinity of the reference to religious observation; the rest of the family are at Mass. The religious ceremony is aimed at creating communion, a moment of unity when the normally disparate elements of the human world are united in harmony through and with the body of Christ. Heaney creates a secular alternative. Through the act of peeling potatoes, again a solid, everyday reality, also a life sustaining food item for Heaney's generation of rural Irish folk, a moment of communion is created between Heaney and his mother. There is a sense that they are lost in their work; the mind is removed from the body in a way. This language and imagery is suggestive of a type of spiritual or mystic harmony; where the alienated mind that often operates at a remove from the activities of the body is suspended in a type of ecstasy. And so while the priest goes through with the formal liturgy utilised at the death-bed Heaney recalls this moment of genuine intimacy and closeness as he mourns for the loss of his mother. In this poem we witness the creativity of the analogical imagination at work. What is interesting to note is how Heaney is still intrigued by and fascinated with the notion of communion; it is what he is still trying to attain poetically, and in the real world. The situation described by Heaney locates a sacred power within the everyday, and within the imagination of the poet as he draws it out through his verbal act of poesy, in a direct challenge to the representatives of official religion. The implication behind Heaney's

⁹ *Opened Ground*: 1998, p. 309

poem is of a unity to experience and the world; the poet draws on metaphor to overcome the world's apparent gaps and breakages in a narrative moment of wholeness and meaning.

Enter Maurice Blanchot

The Space of Literature (1955) by French novelist, critic and philosopher Maurice Blanchot contains a chapter entitled 'The Work and Death's Space'¹⁰. Here Blanchot expounds a core argument in his thesis for the first time. A novelist himself, Blanchot is keenly aware of the elusive nature of 'creative' writing. The figure for this is Poetry. For him Poetry is always escaping each and every attempt by the writer to hold it or tie it down, to formulate and thereby contain it. There is no certainty about Poetry in terms of either form or content. Those who attempt to formulate a moral framework on the basis of poetic activity or its products are bound to flounder. The mark of the true poet is his hesitancy regarding his status as a poet at all. What is vital is the poet's search for her poetry, or just Poetry. The poet must relinquish all attempts at mastery here as she is challenged, tested, investigated, rendered uncertain by Poetry itself. The work produced by Poetry questions everything. The work always forces the writer out of complacency, and forces her out of the familiarity of what she does and knows, thereby forcing her out from the possibilities of what she can do.

What then is the nature of the poetic work? What is achieved when the poem is finally born? For Blanchot the poem is but one instant of the infinite possibilities of the human mind. The poem is the moment when possibility becomes power, the

¹⁰ Maurice Blanchot: *The Space of Literature*: Univ. of Nebraska Press: Nebraska: 1989, p. 85 – 159, Trans. by Ann Smock

'graced' moment (to use a word foreign to Blanchot's formulation) when mind becomes the given certainty of a realised form, a beautiful body. For Blanchot the work is but one instant, a privileged moment, along the path of infinity which the mind is capable of conceiving. The mind is infinite and the work always recognises this.

Blanchot considers in detail a note from Franz Kafka's *Diaries*: 'On the way home, I said to Max that on my death bed, provided the suffering is not too great, I will be very content. I forgot to add, and later I omitted this on purpose, that the best of what I have written is based upon this capacity to die content'¹¹. Kafka writes about the power he feels over his characters who are dying, and indirectly the reader who will feel the pathos of this moment: 'I even enjoy dying in the character who is dying. Thus I calculatingly exploit the reader's attention which I have concentrated upon death; I keep a much clearer head than he, who will lament, I suppose, on his deathbed. My lamentation is thus as perfect as possible. It does not interrupt itself abruptly the way real lamentation does, rather it follows its beautiful, pure course'¹². The sense of mastery and calculation suggested here by Kafka amazes Blanchot. Contemplating this Blanchot wonders, should one turn the moment of supreme dissatisfaction to one of satisfaction; should one be clearheaded and balanced in this moment, the more so to the degree that these values are threatened? One should be capable of turning the extreme negative, death, into the supreme and absolutely positive, where possibility, project and time are realised.

¹¹ *The Space of Literature*: 1989, p. 90

¹² *The Space of Literature*: 1989, p. 90

Blanchot argues that a concern with death is the central factor in all of Franz Kafka's work; from the stories *In the Penal Colony* and *The Metamorphosis* and *The Judgement* right through to when he conceives and writes his novel *The Trial*. What surprises the reader who identifies this line of enquiry is how quickly and silently Kafka's characters die. Blanchot accounts for this through what will become the central argument of *The Space of Literature*. He suggests that not only when they die, even as they struggle to live, when they are alive, Kafka's protagonists exist within death's space. It is to the indefinite time of 'dying' that they truly belong. In fact the reason that they exist at all is to test this strangeness out, and through them Kafka himself is also tested. The reason he can work, create work at all, is through his ability to be in tune with this eventual possibility, to stand trial with death, to be its equal.

Enter Kirilov, Stage Right

The figure of Kirilov has haunted modern writing ever since Dostoyevsky conceived him for his novel *The Possessed*. French writer and philosopher Albert Camus devotes some reflections to this figure in his philosophical and political essay known in English as *The Rebel*. Kirilov is the cool and calm rationalist. Men fear death and that is why they are persistent in living. Our human fear of death is the point at which the idea of God originates. The authentic human challenge is to liberate ourselves from this fear, and to oust God, and we can only conduct this enterprise satisfactorily by choosing death, to die in opposition to what we fear. It is here that authentic human freedom is located. Vital to this is that we annex to our consciousness the idea of our own disappearance. Blanchot's particular insight lies in his question: 'Does he [Kirilov] prove through his death the possibility which he

received in advance from his death, that power of not being which permitted him to be himself – to be, that is, though freely linked to himself, always other than himself – the power, to act, speak, take risks, and be without being?’¹³

Blanchot is here developing themes that he touched on in his earlier essay ‘Literature and the Right to Death’ found in *The Work of Fire* (1949)¹⁴. In that earlier essay Blanchot had written: ‘The realm of the imaginary is not a strange region situated beyond the world, it is the world itself, but the world as entire, manifold, the world as a whole. That is why it is not in the world, because it is the world, grasped and realized in its entirety by the global negation of all the individual realities contained in it, by their disqualification, their absence, by the realization of that absence itself, which is how literary creation begins, for when literary creation goes back over each thing and each being, it cherishes the illusion that it is creating them, because now it is seeing and naming them from the starting point of *everything*, from the starting point of the *absence* of everything, that is, from nothing’¹⁵. Blanchot will go on to say that literature, like life, must endure death and maintain itself in it. The basis for Blanchot’s argument lies in an interpretation of how language works. It lies in how meaning is created in the first instance in language itself. We present an object in language. We represent it. This is the death, though, of the object in itself and of the person. When we speak of the boy, the man, or of John, we deny the boy, the man and John their reality. We deny them their flesh and blood reality in the realm of representation that is language. The word is a place of deprivation presenting being in the absence of being. For Blanchot the death that is to come is present in this moment of figurative death. It is what makes it possible. The boy, a man, or John, or a woman,

¹³ *The Space of Literature*: 1989: p. 99

¹⁴ *The Work of Fire*: Stanford Univ. Press: California: 1995, Trans. by Charlotte Mandell

can be removed from their present and presence, removed from their existence and be plunged into nothingness by the fact of their future death. The annihilation through which signification comes into being through language is possible because of the mortality of human being.

Speaking of the woman, as figure for his thought, Blanchot writes: 'if this woman were not really capable of dying, if she were not threatened by death at every moment of her life, bound and joined to death by an essential bond, I would not be able to carry out that ideal negation, that deferred assassination which is what my language is'¹⁶. We note Gillian Rose's astute criticism of Blanchot here¹⁷. She notes the passivity of this female subject for Blanchot. Does this female subject not have a will, identity, personality and a desire to work of her own? Blanchot goes on to write that literature 'is the presence of things before the world exists, their perseverance after the world has disappeared, the stubbornness of what remains when everything vanishes and the dumbfoundedness of what appears when nothing exists'¹⁸. And so Rodolphe Gasche will write: 'if literature is a marvel, a wonder (*une merveille*), as Blanchot holds, it is so precisely because its origin is a mystery. It occurs in ways that are not predicatable. It happens as if it had no antecedents, each time new and singular. The contradictory conditions that give rise to literature are felicitious, precisely because it remains mysterious how literature depends on them. The wonder

¹⁵ *The Work of Fire*: 1995, p. 316

¹⁶ *The Work of Fire*: 1995, p. 323

¹⁷ Gillian Rose: 'Potter's Field: death worked and unworked', in *Maurice Blanchot: The Demand of Writing*: Routledge: London: 1996, p.203. She writes: 'nothing... can be learnt from the disparity between the evocation of her name and her actuality, *her desire and work*, because she is not a self-relation whose middle term is equally the other's self-relation, his desire and work. The ruin of love, with its always attendant risk of loss, follows from the ruin of action and the impossibility of death in Blanchot'.

¹⁸ *The Work of Fire*: 1995, p. 328

of literature is nothing but the silent wonder about its existence'¹⁹. Given the impossibility of his task the writer will always produce something that is singular and unique. Gasche writes: 'the work is an Other in that it is unpredictable, unmasterable in its effect, and escapes reappropriation. It is not an Other in the Hegelian sense of being the Other of self. Its Otherness is not that of the alienated self, but of something that refuses derivation from self and hence remains irrecoverable'²⁰. Paradoxically then in a moment of emptiness everything becomes possible. Literature possesses an infinite power to endure contradiction. This is founded ironically on the death of the subject for Blanchot. For language and literature to proceed at all, which they patently do, then I must not be fully recuperable to myself. For me to speak at all and become thereby a universal subject I must experience a distance from myself. And thus we reach the point described by Christopher Fynsk where we can speak of: '*my consciousness without me, appearing as other in the form of an impersonal anonymity that is less a presence than the presence of an absence, the intrusion of the outside, relation with an irreducible alterity*'²¹.

For Blanchot then *to be* is always determined by our capacity *not* to be.

Shadow determines light. We are now beginning to strike the particular tenor of Blanchot's thought, what we might submit as his 'originality'. Blanchot argues that whoever gives him or herself over fully to negation can never use it. For if you belong absolutely to it, you can never take leave of yourself, for you thereby belong to the neutrality that is absence, in which one is oneself no longer. From this perspective death is no longer to come, for it is that which comes no longer. Death, or suicide,

¹⁹ Rudolphe Gasche: 'The Felicities of Paradox: Blanchot on the nulls-space of literature', in *Maurice Blanchot: The Demand of Writing*: Routledge: London: 1996, p. 45

²⁰ Gasche: 1996, p. 47 - 48

more properly considered, is a delusion according to Blanchot, if the desire that lies behind suicide is to kill oneself at a determined moment. For Blanchot death can never be present. Suicides seek to abolish the future as the mystery of death.

Indecipherable death is rendered readable, is made transparent, the suicide vainly hopes. The suicide seeks to relieve death of its still-to-come-ness which is its very essence, to render it safe and vulnerable, but substanceless thereby. For Blanchot all our preparations and readiness, the careful suicide note and chosen moment are vain, for we can have no power over the essential indeterminacy that is the moment of death – for death can never be a relation to a chosen, determined moment any more than it can bear a determined relation to myself.

For Blanchot then there is a similarity and difference in art and suicide. Both involve an investment in possibility. Both wish to extend themselves into the region of the ungraspable. Death as such is not the answer. Death appears to offer an answer in that we have conceived of it as an attempt to deliver us up finally into the unfathomable beyond. For Blanchot all that death reveals is the 'empty depth of the beyond'. Death loosens my hold upon myself and casts me out of my power from the beginning until the very finish, and becomes ultimately, without relation to me, 'the unreality of the infinite'. This is what suicide delivers. However, the work seeks this reversal as its origin. The work seeks, wants to dwell in the moment of absence, when my death is robbed from, or denied to, me. Suicide or voluntary death is blind to this possibility, refuses to see the death one cannot grasp, the death one cannot reach. A call from this space reaches out to the work. The work is drawn to this space despite itself. It is absolutely put to the test by something that visits it from this space. The

²¹ Christopher Fynsk: 'Crossing the Threshold: Literature and the Right to Death', in *Maurice Blanchot: The Demand of Writing*: Routledge: 1996, p. 84

work is drawn to this moment, space, or place where everything is exposed to the highest risk, where being is put at risk, where the right and power to die itself is gambled. As he wrote in his earlier essay 'Literature and the Right to Death': 'Death works with us in the world; it is a power that humanizes nature, that raises existence to being, and it is within each one of us as our most human quality; it is death only in the world - man knows death only because he is man, and he is man only because he is death in the process of becoming. But to die is to shatter the world; it is the loss of the person, the annihilation of the being; and so it is also the loss of death, the loss of what in it and for me made it death. As long as I live, I am a mortal man, but when I die, by ceasing to be a man I also cease to be mortal, I am no longer capable of dying, and my impending death horrifies me because I see it as it is: no longer death but the impossibility of dying'²².

The Descent into Hell

In Blanchot's view two modern poets have had something valuable, interesting and revealing to say concerning suicide and art. For a time Mallarme confused a concern for the work with an affirmation of suicide and Rilke sought a relationship with death that would be more 'exact' than that previously considered under the rubrics of voluntary death.

Mallarme acknowledges in a letter to Cazalis (November 14, 1896) that *Igitur* is an undertaking in which poetry itself is at stake. The idea of *igitur* suggests an attempt to make the work possible by grasping it at the point where what is present is

²² *The Work of Fire*: 1995, p. 337

the absence of all power, a type of impotence. As Mallarme describes it:

‘unfortunately, by digging this thoroughly into verse, I have encountered two abysses which make me despair. One is Nothingness... The other void which I have found is the one in my breast.’²³ ‘And now, having reached the horrible vision of a pure work, I have almost lost my reason and the meaning of the most familiar words.’

‘Everything which, as a result, my being has suffered during this long agony is indescribable, but fortunately I am perfectly dead... Which is to convey to you that I am now impersonal, and no longer Stephane whom you know’²⁴. What is altered for Mallarme is his ‘normal’ relationships; that relationship that ordinarily exists to the world, to his habitual use of the language; what this experience alters is the physical assurance of his own living. Mallarme the poet is finally yielded up to the experience of death – the death of his person and its truth; he meets the cold face of death’s impersonality. We hazard.

From outside the experience we guess that Mallarme began within the feeling or sensation of nothingness. He was attentive to, in touch with the pulsing of its vitality; its force and mystery was what he contemplated in order to accomplish the poetic task. In the language of paradox we might say that he experienced the activity of absence. For Blanchot, in the moment of his poetic darkness Mallarme grasped the peculiar presence that shades absence. In the moment of abandonment one feels the strength of a persistent presence. Mallarme articulated in his remarks on language the ability of the word to render the absence of things, to evoke them in this absence, and yet to somehow authentically transmit, to be faithful to, the value of their absence. We might speak paradoxically of a present absentness: ‘it subsists as the dissimulated

²³ *The Space of Literature*: 1995, p. 108

²⁴ *The Space of Literature*: 1995, p. 108

presence of being, and in this dissimulation it persists as chance which cannot be abolished. And yet this is where everything is at stake, for the work is possible only if absence is pure and perfect, only if in the presence of Midnight, the dice can be thrown. There alone the work's origin speaks; there it begins, it finds there the force of the beginning'.²⁵

In the moment of absolute absence the poet encounters two words: *it is*. Disengaged from beings he meets the mystery of this reality. In the moment of nothingness, nothingness itself can no longer be negated, it is what is affirmed, the base line which is asserted, and which states and claims nothingness as being. This experience operates as the limit upon the infinite and bears witness to a definitive moment when the moment of death partakes in truth. For the work which begins in negation can do so because it begins in the certainty of that distant horizon which is its point of origin, and ultimately, arrival.

The authentic *igitur* experience presents to consciousness its own disappearance. This is the ongoing artistic task. We have to imagine, lucidly, advance outside ourselves, 'transcend' our bodily limits, our present presence, and grasp the moment of our disengagement, our absence and dissolution. We must appear to ourselves in this disappearance, we must gather up to ourselves this essential death which is the life of the consciousness and form the unique act of the death to come. There is a converging of emergent and vanishing lines of thought, consciousness, Being or Poetry, at the moment when thought reaches the point where *its-very-self*

²⁵ *The Space of Literature*: 1955, p. 109 - 110

emerges and disappears into liquidation. For Blanchot what is experienced here is the intimacy of absence, the moment of night. Essentially, by disappearing into death we do not institute disappearance and thereby establish the night. No, it is always the absolute presence of this disappearance, and that alone, whereby we are allowed to die. Through this baseline of experience we are introduced to our mortal decisions and ability to act. As Blanchot wrote in 'Literature and the Right to Death': 'if we call this power negation or unreality or death, then presently death, negation, and unreality, at work in the depths of language, will signify the advent of truth in the world, the construction of intelligible being, the formation of meaning'²⁶.

Wherein the Panther Stalks

For Blanchot Rainer Maria Rilke of all modern poets carried out the intensest clarification of our human task of what it means to live within this intimacy of darkness, night, or death. When we examine Rilke's poetic images something philosophically significant is revealed. Rilke suggests that death 'ripens' in our very heart. Death is the 'fruit'; that sweet, obscure fruit, a fruit still 'green' that, we 'leaves and bark', must bear and nourish²⁷. For Rilke then death is not something from outside that befalls us by accident. The logic of his images suggests that we should strive, or aim to live with death as an intimate amidst our being, our living. Death strikes profoundly from within the deep heart's core. Death draws life from deep within, from the centre of our living. We have to strive to respect the immanence of death within our lives. At the same time we must respect the transcendence of death to

²⁶ *The Work of Fire*: 1995, p. 344

²⁷ *The Space of Literature*: 1989, p. 125

our human history, life and experience. So it is always there, as a presence, and not there, at the same time.

We must continually strive to be aware of 'this other side'. Rilke struggled to articulate it in poetic terms:

With all its eyes the creature sees

The Open. Our eyes only are

As if reversed.²⁸

For Rilke, if we could see things from the other side, we will alter our perception, or access to our experience. We would be ready for transformation. Rilke also calls this 'other side' 'the pure relation', because the fact of being lies in this relation, outside oneself, in the thing itself, and not in the representation of the thing. Through death our eyes turn back and this return indicates, comes from the other side, and the other side is the fact of living no longer turned away but turned back, working from within the intimacy of conversion, from within the night. We are not deprived of consciousness, but established by consciousness itself, outside of it. For Rilke this is always an ecstatic moment or movement. What Rilke is struggling to articulate is the space whereby the reality of the outdoors is experienced intimately from within, and where the outside is within ourselves in all its intimacy and when the intimate vastness of the outside within the intimacy is known, felt and experienced. Rilke names this experience by the term *Weltinnenraum*, the world's inner space:

²⁸ *The Space of Literature*: 1995, p. 134

Through all beings spreads the one space:
 The world's inner space. Silently fly the birds
 All through us. O I who want to grow,
 I look outside, and it is in me that the tree grows!²⁹

Blanchot notes how everything is converted inward, and needs to be transmuted by this experience of the outside/inside, and the inside/outside:

Man is linked to things, he is in the midst of them, and if he renounces his realising and representing activity, if he apparently withdraws into himself, it is not in order to dismiss everything which isn't he, the humble and outworn realities, but rather to take these with him, to make them participate in this interiorization where they lose their use value, their falsified nature, and lose also their narrow boundaries in order to penetrate into their true profundity. Thus does this conversion appear as an immense task of transmutation, in which things, all things, are transformed and interiorized by becoming interior in us and by becoming interior to themselves. This transformation of the visible into the invisible and of the invisible into the always more invisible takes place where the fact of being unrevealed does not express a simple privation, but access to the other side which is not turned toward us nor do we *shed light* upon it.³⁰

Thus emerges the poetic task. The poet introduces all things into the space where nothing retains them at all and where they are utterly free, then, to be themselves, after having confronted the possibility of their very non-being. In confrontation with their absolute dispossession they are released, we no longer see them as objects of decoration, of purpose or utility. They join us in the intimacy of the risk where they and we are no longer sheltered. In the poem Rilke says that interior space 'translates things'. Through that space they are passed, translated, one dares to say transfigured from one language to another. The poet translates them through this

²⁹ *The Space of Literature*: 1989, p. 136

³⁰ *The Space of Literature*: 1989, p. 139 - 140

space from the foreign, exterior language to the altogether interior, the interior of language even where language names in silence and possibly because of and by silence itself. The poem's space is one in which nothing is no longer present and is, where everything is spoken in the midst of absence and emptiness, and everything finally returns into its true spiritual accord which is openness, the dead centre of the eternal movement.

The poet's task as a bearer of the Word is to translate the visible into the invisible and the invisible into the visible. As Rilke reflected: 'how could one sustain, how could one save the visible, if not by creating the language of absence, of the invisible'?³¹ The poem is the vortex into which everything dies, where everything is reversed, where there is an infinite passage between the two domains and the final space of metamorphosis and energetic circulation. The figure for this possibility in Rilke's writing is Orpheus. Orpheus is the act of metamorphosis: a singer of the song born at the moment of disappearance, the song that articulates the anguish of that disappearance. He is always more though than poetic plenitude although he is that. He is the origin of the poem. He is the sacrificial point which is no longer the reconciliation of the two domains, but rather he is the abyss, the chasm of the lost god, the one who infinitely traces the moment of absence:

O you, lost god! You, infinite trace!

By dismembering you the hostile forces had to disperse you

To make of us now hearers and a mouth of Nature.³²

³¹ *The Space of Literature*: 1995, p. 142

³² *The Space of Literature*: 1995, p. 143

There is an interesting shift in the later Rilke. He seems to allude in later writings to a completed time that would hold still in a pure circle of time closed upon itself. What exactly is the nature of that time? Does Rilke mean a space wherein this time rises above the specific nature of a given moment, or a space wherein absent presence is consumed and duration is altered into timelessness? Rilke seems to have in mind a space where we can be, but not just subsisting, a being there that is whole, liberated, complete and content. We have as our task to aim for this space, this state of equilibrium, to establish things and ourselves within this space. We will not just disappear but perpetuate. We will make things invisible so that they may be reborn in their invisibility. Rilke seems to open up the horizon, window, or possibility whereby through dying we can escape death:

And these things whose life
 Is decline understand that you praise them; fleeting,
 They lend us, us the most fleeting, the power to save.
 They want us to change them in the bottom of our invisible
 heart
 Into – O infinite – into ourselves! Whatsoever we may be in the
 end.³³

For Rilke if one only sees death then one suffers the error of a limited life and a poorly converted or understood consciousness. Maybe death narrowly understood is the dangerous lie. Death is the means by which we close down, de-limit, being. It is the false route through which we transmute, badly, all things into objects. When we

³³ *The Space of Literature*: 1995, p. 146

are unjustifiably pre-occupied with our own finish we tend to close off, narrow down other objects. If freedom means anything then it must be liberation from this closing off, a real liberation from death where we approach the point whereby death becomes transparent.

As Blanchot reads Rilke there is a key element to the human's consent to death. It hinges on our awareness of our own passing away. We are the only ones this side of death to be aware and to have the opportunity to consent to the passing that is death. We are the only creatures who articulate through speech, song, drama, art and poetry, our disappearance. So, in humanity death attains a new level, a unique point, of being, in that in and through us it sings. For Blanchot then there is a pact between death and singing, death is the moment that is transmuted in song, the invisible transformed by the invisible. We must not lose sight of the everyday world here. For it is only through the mediation of objects towards which we are called to be responsible that this transformation is possible:

Being here below and being beyond, may both claim you
Strangely, without distinction.³⁴

One of the two domains must not be overemphasised at the expense of the other: the visible is necessary to the invisible; it is saved in the invisible, but it is also what saves the invisible. This necessary contrast establishes a vital equality between the two poles.

³⁴ *The Space of Literature*: 1989, p. 150

This entire movement is dependent upon what we will term the *transcendental moment of vision*. It is found in our gaze as it no longer looks forward at goals, but that looks backward, over the shoulder at things themselves as they lie behind in order to grasp their 'closed existence', a vision found in my attempt to grasp them in their complete separateness, as objects perfected not defined by context or utility, but in the pure innocence of being itself. This experience lies at the kernel (this detached vision, at the heart) of Rilke's *Duino Elegies*. For Blanchot this experience is 'an ecstatic experience' which is also the gaze of art and 'an experience of death'³⁵. The writer does not begin with the hierarchy imposed by the material and commercial worlds. Art is only interested in objects according to an absolute disinterestedness defined by the infinite distance given it by death. The poet's point of departure is the approach to the point where nothingness begins. Art searches for the point of opening, the experience of the origin, the Open. Art is in search of a true dying. As Simon Critchley notes: 'Orpheus does not want to make the invisible visible, but rather (and impossibly) to see the invisible as invisible'³⁶.

For Blanchot there is a dark impurity that haunts this moment isolated by Rilke's writings and reflections. It is the fearful side of the absolute indeterminacy that is the moment of death. It is the other side of its excessiveness. It is the very indeterminacy that makes it an impure transcendence, what makes this moment absolutely ungraspable. Death is something beyond its worldly reality, it is always elusive, its face is always turned away. Death is discrete, revealing its essential intimacy at the very moment that it opens us up to its profound unreality. For death is an abyss, something which does not found but always reveals absence and the loss of

³⁵ *The Space of Literature*: 1989, p. 151

³⁶ Simon Critchley: *Very Little...Almost Nothing*: 1997, p. 43

all foundation. So, for Rilke, death becomes at the heart of its invisibility, a non-event, a moment that is not there, yet is an accomplishment, a part of an event that is happening and yet cannot be realised. As Rodolphe Gasche writes: ‘Death is the power of an always other or alternate possibility (*alternative*) and hence the “cause” of ambiguity, because even though it allows ideality, universality and meaning to come about, it continues to perpetuate “an irreducible *double meaning*, a choice whose terms are covered over with the ambiguity that makes them identical to one another as it makes them opposite” [Gasche is quoting from Blanchot’s essay ‘Literature and the Right to Death’]. Indeed, death is the inevitable power of the additional possibility of a foundering of meaning, a lack of meaning, and losing the chance of its occurrence. Ideality and universality are always in jeopardy. There is always the possibility that they may not occur. This also means that all relation to an Other, and all possible address could possibly be missing’³⁷.

The Orphic Space Descends

Once and for all,

It is Orpheus when there is song. He comes and he goes.³⁸

In Rilke then, according to the reading provided by Maurice Blanchot, Orpheus is not a symbol of a lofty transcendence that the poet is the vehicle of and for. Orpheus is not the figure for the god speaking through the poet. Orpheus is not a symbol for eternity and the immutability of the poetic sphere. No, Orpheus is the

³⁷ Gasche, *Maurice Blanchot: The Demand of Writing*, p. 64 - 65

³⁸ *The Space of Literature*: 1989, p. 156

symbol of the immeasurable demand that we disappear. Orpheus prophetically calls us to die more profoundly:

O seek to understand that he must disappear!
 Even if the anguish of it dismay him,
 While his word extends this world,
 Already he is beyond where you may not accompany him.

 And he obeys by going beyond.³⁹

Orpheus draws us towards the point where he himself, symbol of the eternal poem, enters into his own disappearance, where he identifies with the very forces that dismember him and becomes a pure contradiction, the 'lost god', the absence of God. Orpheus is the bridge, the empty signifier, lying over the moment of origin, where the poem is lacking, as well as the secure existence and hope for and in truth and the gods. In this space the power to speak and the power to hear are tested, they undergo their own lack, they endure the instance of their impossibility.

We arrive, then, at the symbol of the rose in Rilke's poetic oeuvre. For Rilke the rose is a symbol, the perceptible presence of Orphic space; it is the space of outerness and intimacy. It is a place where things do not de-limit one another, where in their common unfurling they make room for each other, and where constantly they 'transform the outside world... into a handful of Within'⁴⁰:

³⁹ *The Space of Literature*: 1989, p. 156

⁴⁰ *The Space of Literature*: 1989, p. 157

Almost a being without boundaries and as if spared
 And more purely inner and very strangely tender
 And illuminating itself right up to the edge,
 Is such a thing known to us?⁴¹

The poem – and in it the poet – is this intimacy exposed to the world, opened unreservedly to being. Within this space, things and being itself are transformed into innerness. Here the word touches and is touched by the deepest intimacy. The word abandons assurance and risks itself. The word touches this point where nothing can be said of being and nothing made. Here everything starts over, and here, dying itself is a never-ending task:

Rose, oh reiner Widerspruch, Lust
 Niemandes Schlaf zu sein unter soviel
 Lidern.

Rose, O pure contradiction, delight
 Of being no one's sleep under so many
 Lids.⁴²

Introducing Jacques

In his first major work *Of Grammatology* Jacques Derrida proposed the thesis that 'differance' is the source of linguistic value. For meaning to be constituted there

⁴¹ *The Space of Literature*: 1989, p. 157

⁴² *The Space of Literature*: 1989, p. 157 - 158

has to be a trace of otherness within the smallest portion of temporal experience. Meaning is constituted through difference: 'Without a retention in the minimal unit of temporal experience, without a trace retaining the other as other in the same, no difference would do its work and no meaning would appear'⁴³. At this point we witness the birth of the *trace*. For Derrida the *trace* opens up meaning. It is neither in the world nor in 'another world', neither in time or space. Differences produce the elements of texts through the chains and systems of traces: '*The trace is in fact the absolute origin of sense in general. Which amounts to saying once again that there is no absolute origin of sense in general. The trace is the difference which opens appearance [l'apparaître] and signification*'⁴⁴.

Derrida and the Faith of the Blind

In *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*,⁴⁵ Derrida writes of the structural blindness that is built into all art. Arguably the core argument of the book is that all seeing is inhabited by a type of blindness. Writing of this text by Derrida John D. Caputo speaks of a 'transcendental blindness'⁴⁶, that is, the invisibility of the act of drawing itself which can never be represented. Drawing becomes thereby an operation of the blind.

To illustrate. A blindness inheres in the originary act of drawing itself, at the very point of contact between pen and paper. The moment of the trace involves both

⁴³ Jacques Derrida: *Of Grammatology*: John Hopkins Univ. Press: Baltimore: 1998, Trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, p. 62

⁴⁴ *Of Grammatology*: 1998, p. 65

⁴⁵ Jacques Derrida: *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*: Univ. of Chicago Press: Chicago: 1993

memory and forgetting. Even in the presence of a live model, once the artist turns his or her eye from their model to face the blank sheet before them, they must proceed on the basis of memory alone. So there is a break with the tyranny of the present. Before the pen strikes a line on the blank page there is a re-assembling of sorts as there is an act of exclusion and inclusion, enlargement and diminishment as some things are left out and others are exaggerated. When the artist proceeds to draw they become blind to the immediacy of what is present and surrender their pens or brushes and paper to the world that is instituted in the dark.

Derrida, continuing his idea of the *trace* first developed in *Of Grammatology*, notes how even the trace itself, what is traced out, after it is traced, is also withdrawn. The lines drawn must not obtrude with their own density and colour. For the picture or painting to work they must withdraw, become invisible and allow themselves to be eclipsed, in favour of the visible things that rise up into presence through the trace. In the strict sense of the term we do not see the lines but 'through' the lines which are what permit the visible to be seen by shuttering or structuring the light. Derrida notes how this echoes talk of the *deus absconditus*, the God who disappears, who withdraws behind the visible world.⁴⁷

Concerning the self-portrait, Derrida notes how it is a drawing that always arrives too late. This is set up by the gap or spacing that exists between the seeing glance and the seen. The artist's living gaze is always a moment of ruin. For Derrida there is no seeing that sees itself as seeing. The seeing eye of the artist, the dead eye in the mirror, and the spectator eye that sees himself or herself as an object seen, are all

⁴⁶ John D. Caputo: *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion*: Indiana Univ. Press: Bloomington: 1997, p.319

separated by an abyss. As soon as the artist attempts to re-capture himself, to see himself seeing, the thing itself has already slipped away.

For Derrida this ruin is not a failure or a weakness; rather the moment of fracture is the transcendental condition of the self-portrait:

Ruin is that which happens to the image from the moment of the first gaze. Ruin is the self-portrait, this face looked at in the face as the memory of itself, what *remains* or *returns* as a specter from the moment one first looks at oneself and a figuration is eclipsed. The figure, the face, then sees its visibility being eaten away; it loses its integrity without disintegrating.⁴⁸

For Derrida, then, rather than the felicity and originary integrity of self-knowledge, the self-portrait is more like mourning a lost loved one, the thing itself having slipped away. Derrida speaks of ruin not as if it were the remaining fragment of a lost totality, but the conditioning structure of experience itself, and of memory, the inherent spacing and withdrawal that inhabits experience so that what we experience is never quite 'presence', is always marked up and partially withdrawn, marked and re-marked by *trait* and *retrait*.

And by such means Jacques Derrida makes room for faith. We cannot know face to face, we must see through the glass darkly, or through the looking glass. Derrida will say 'Je ne sais pas. Il faut croire', 'I don't know, one has to believe'⁴⁹.

⁴⁷ *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion*: 1997, p. 320

⁴⁸ *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*: 1993, p. 68

⁴⁹ *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*: 1993, p. 129

Chapter Five:

Un-solid Foundations: The Aporetic, Philosophical Faith and the Plight of Metaphysics today

We concluded the last chapter with a reference to Jacques Derrida's *Memoirs of the Blind*¹. That reference suggested a type of post-modern faith. We will explore this position in the current chapter with the aid of Seamus Heaney's poetry. There is a recurrent concern in Heaney's oeuvre with the act of writing itself. We can trace this tendency at work from the poem that is often seen as his early poetic manifesto 'Digging' (found in the 1966 collection *Death of a Naturalist*²) right through to 'Field of Vision' (in 1991's *Seeing Things*³). This preoccupation is revealed in the Heaney poems that concern themselves with reflections on the work of art and the role of the artist. One of the finest examples of this type of Heaney poem is 'The Forge' found in his 1969 collection *Door Into the Dark*⁴. 'The Forge' is generally seen as belonging to a distinctive type of Heaney poem in which he takes the craftsman or the artisan and imaginatively re-constitutes him as a figure for the poet. Such poems also include 'The Diviner', 'Follower', 'Digging' from *Death of a Naturalist* and 'Thatcher' and 'The Given Note' found in *Door Into the Dark*.

¹ Jacques Derrida: *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*: Trans. by Anne Brault and Michael Naas: Univ. of Chicago Press: Chicago: 1993

² Seamus Heaney: *Death of a Naturalist*: Faber & Faber: London: 1991, p.13 - 14

The Forge

All I know is a door into the dark.
 Outside, old axles and iron hoops rusting;
 Inside, the hammered anvil's short-pitched ring,
 The unpredictable fantail of sparks
 Or hiss when a new shoe toughens in water.
 The anvil must be somewhere in the centre,
 Horned as a unicorn, at one end square,
 Set there immoveable: an altar
 Where he expends himself in shape and music.
 Sometimes, leather-aproned, hairs in his nose,
 He leans out on the jamb, recalls a clatter
 Of hoofs where traffic is flashing in rows;
 Then grunts and goes in, with a slam and flick
 To beat real iron out, to work the bellows.

The suggestion of a negative poetics is hinted at in the rather gnomic phrasing of 'The Forge's' opening line: 'All I know is a door into the dark'. There is a hint here of knowledge, transition and passageway. The 'all I know' is intrinsically negative. It concerns itself with the limits of knowledge about something. The passage is not the normal voyage into enlightening understanding, for the poet only knows a 'door into the dark', or maybe the voyage into 'the dark' will be a paradoxical journey into a dark understanding that will be illuminating? The knowledge worth knowing might be

³ Seamus Heaney: *Seeing Things*: Faber & Faber: London: 1991, p. 22

⁴ Seamus Heaney: *Opened Ground: Poems 1966 – 1996*: Faber & Faber: London: 1998, p. 19

located where we cannot find, are not looking for it, or where we least expect to locate it.

Heaney's use of the phrases 'outside' and 'inside' suggest a barrier crossed, a before and an after. It is worth noting how he constructs the sense of space in this poem. The passage to the interior of the ironmonger's forge is seen as a journey from the mundane and the transitory, the 'old axles and iron hoops rusting' to the fantastic and the exciting, the 'unpredictable fantail of sparks'. Although the end of the poem indicates that the trade of the forger is virtually extinct, for now the 'traffic is flashing in rows', Heaney still uses the suggestive phrase 'the anvil must be somewhere at the centre'. Does this 'centre' indicate a creative, literary, philosophical or theological centre removed from the commercial highways or the technological highways? We are justified in asking this question because the imprecise language used in the poem suggests more than it defines. The vagueness of 'somewhere' indicates an appropriate lack of definition or fixedness that is somewhat paradoxical given the very solid world of the forge with its iron hoops, axles, and anvils.

In fact, the language of the poem operates at two significant levels. On the one hand we have the concrete language of the 'clatter of hoofs', of the 'slam and a flick' and the 'hairs in the nose' of the forger himself. On the other hand we have the anvil which is called 'an altar' at one point, the 'unpredictable fantail of sparks', 'shape and music', and as we shall see the 'real iron' that gets beaten out in the world of the forge. Both tendencies are united in the description of the anvil. It is 'horned as a unicorn' at one end and at the other it is just 'square'. The image of the unicorn emerges from the world of myth and fantasy while the phrase 'square' suggests the

somewhat dull, if reliable. Heaney holds both together in his image of the anvil as altar. It is a place of transformation. Does the fantastic become the real, or does the real become fantasy? Or are elements of both found together? Heaney doesn't answer this 'question' after raising it. In one sense poetry has an advantage over the more rigorous procedures of thought found in philosophy or theology. The poet does not have to justify his choice of metaphor. It is as if the real world is shadowed by the world of the imagined. One seems to reflect and contain the other. That is all he needs for his poem to work.

For the farrier to do his creative work there is a type of generous giving required. We note Heaney's use of the term 'expends'. This verb suggests more than hard physical labour, a labour of love maybe, or life-giving birth? There is something stubbornly resistant in the work and attitude of the farrier. He returns to his work with defiance even after observing how the world has passed him and his trade by. He goes 'to beat real iron out'. The poem suggests that despite the fact that his trade has been superceded by modern transport the farrier is still involved in work that will last, something of value. What is that value?

To help us explicitly theorize our concerns we turn to the arguments about negative theology presented by Jacques Derrida in his essay '*Sauf le Nom*'⁵. This

⁵ The first version of this text appeared in English under the title *Post-Scriptum* (subtitle: *Aporias, Ways and Voices*) in a volume devoted to negative theology (Harold Coward and Toby Foshay, eds. *Derrida and Negative Theology* [Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992]). The version we have worked from appeared in the collection of essays called *On the Name* (trans. John P. Leavey Jr.) under the title *Sauf le Nom (Post – Scriptum)* (Thomas Dutoit ed.: Stanford Univ. Press: California: 1995).

essay concerns itself with the limits of negative theology. In particular it meditates on the mystic poetry of Angelus Silesius.

The logical premise of negative theology is easily stated. God, the deity, exceeds all the boundaries of containment we can create for him in and through the language of human thought and argument. The manner in which Derrida writes about this indicates a recurrent pre-occupation of his own philosophical meditations. For him negative theology deals with 'the singularity of the unknown God'⁶ that always overflows the boundaries of essence and divinity. The unknown God will always exceed the conceptions of negative or positive theology, of philosophical categories like being and nothingness. The unknown God utterly transcends all these limiting categorizations. Derrida notes that he is not the first to arrive on this scene. Husserl stated that the apophatic statements of negative theology indicate a significant 'moment of crisis'⁷. This crisis challenges the presumptions of phenomenology, as well as ontological and transcendental theology and philosophy. What challenges the premises of these disciplines is the emptiness articulated by the apophatic statement; this is 'essential and necessary to them'⁸. One outgrowth of this is a new sense of community, precisely and paradoxically through this communal, possibly primal emptiness. Can a new tongue, a new speech, a new language be translated from the depths of this silence, this primitive inarticulateness that negative theology concerns itself with?

⁶ Jacques Derrida: *Sauf le Nom*: 1995, p. 52

⁷ Jacques Derrida: *Sauf le Nom*: 1995, p. 50

⁸ Jacques Derrida: *Sauf le Nom*: 1995, p. 51

Derrida's *Sauf le Nom* opens up a 'window', a door into the world of Heaney's forger that allows us read this world as a world that always contains something 'more'. There is a plus factor, an alternative dimension to the world as we have conceived it. It is simply not enough to see things as they are. In the words of conventional cliché: there is more to the world of the forger than meets the eye. Heaney has something in common with the forger. Indicative of this is our question: Why does Heaney deploy the forger as a figure for the artist, if we concede that that is that he is doing in this poem, and in similar poems like 'The Diviner' and 'The Given Note'⁹? Heaney is clearly working in the world of metaphor but is this dependent, and does it revolve or hinge on the possibility of transcendence as deployed by linguistic and imaginative substitution? Are we in the world of Derridean 'differance'? Is the imaginative act at work in Heaney's poem (where the forger can come to stand for so much more than the manual worker he is) indicative of something profound in the way language works, which is of profound significance to any discourse that presupposes to speak of 'God'?

As we have noted before, in his first major work *Of Grammatology* Jacques Derrida proposed the thesis that 'differance' is the source of linguistic value. For meaning to be constituted there has to be a trace of otherness within the smallest portion of temporal experience. As we saw earlier, meaning is constituted through difference: 'Without a retention in the minimal unit of temporal experience, without a trace retaining the other as other in the same, no difference would do its work and no meaning would appear'¹⁰. At this point we witness the birth of the *trace*. For Derrida the trace opens up meaning. It is neither in the world nor in 'another world', neither in

⁹ Seamus Heaney: *Opened Ground: Poems 1966 – 1996*: Faber & Faber: London: 1998, p.13, p.36

time nor space. Differences produce the elements of texts through the chains and systems of traces: *'The trace is in fact the absolute origin of sense in general. Which amounts to saying once again that there is no absolute origin of sense in general. The trace is the difference which opens appearance [l'apparaitre] and signification'*¹¹.

John D. Caputo argues that Derrida's concept of *differance* is not a transcendental category.¹² The Derridean term *differance* is not a symbol for the hidden God, it is not a manifest presence, it has no truth. Still and all we have to allow for the fact that it is what enables what is manifest to appear in the first place. In the passage quoted above from *Of Grammatology* Derrida is dealing with the conditions under which words and concepts come to be conceived, formed or articulated in the very first instance. The term is a substitute, all we have, for the differential matrix from which all names, concepts and identities emerge. For Derrida the term *differance* indicates a certain nervous breakdown of language. It extends a challenge to all discourses from negative theology, with its attempt to non-speak God's ground and soul, as if from within the inner sanctum of divine being itself, to the representational thinking, conceptual formation and discursive reasoning of traditional philosophy and theology. Negative theology is always an event within language, something that occurs to language, a fear and trembling of language. As such it will always be tainted by the brush of *differance*.

Can we speak of *differance* then as a primary category, to speak the language of a more conventional and traditional metaphysics? Any sufficient or enabling

¹⁰ Jacques Derrida: *Of Grammatology*: John Hopkins Univ. Press: Baltimore: 1998, Trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, p. 62

¹¹ Jacques Derrida: *Of Grammatology*: 1998, p. 65

condition would be traditionally referred to as a transcendental condition. A classic expression of this type of formulation is David Tracy's arguments in *Blessed Rage for Order*¹³. Here Tracy argues that there are two 'moments' that give birth to each and every form of philosophical reflection. Tracy identifies the first by the term 'the phenomenological moment' and the second by 'the transcendental moment'. The phenomenological moment has been with us since the birth of Western philosophy (even though it might find the terminology strange) insofar as one of the primary aims of classical philosophy was to initiate and sustain a detailed exploration of the very ground, that is, basis, of every phenomenon which presented itself to human consciousness. By its very self-definition philosophy was obliged to seek out the fundamental presuppositions of every discipline, method and phenomenon. The transcendental moment has also shadowed Western philosophy from the very outset, for philosophy has always sought to rise above or delve below each and every phenomenon, discipline and method in an attempt at unearthing the 'conditions of possibility' of that phenomenon, that discipline and that method.

It is a fundamental tenet of Western philosophy in its transcendentalist mode that every phenomenon or object possesses 'a priori' conditions. These conditions are constitutive of all human experience and knowledge to the extent that we might call them *conditions of possibility*, that is, they are so constitutive of any performance of action or cognition that we can exhibit them deductively from it. Modern philosophy is still pursuing this task when it addresses the question: what are the basic 'a priori' conditions of all human living and thought?

¹² John D. Caputo: *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion*: Indiana

One suspects the reason why Tracy uses the term 'moment' is that he wishes to suggest the basic unity behind what is really a philosophical movement, that the metaphysical moment is an essential part of the phenomenological moment itself; that the phenomenological moment moves on into the transcendental moment; that both are different dimensions of the one philosophical movement. We witness this clearly when phenomenological self-awareness is raised to the point where a reflective and explicit examination of the problematic status of phenomenological reflection itself becomes unavoidable. At this point the phenomenologist is obliged not only to explore phenomena but must reformulate the transcendental question itself since logic demands that she or he address the primary question of the basic ground or presuppositions of every and all phenomena, of any or all phenomenological reflection. To phrase it differently, the phenomenological moment discloses the meaning and meaningfulness of any given experience while the transcendental moment discloses the true conditions of possibility of that experience.

For John D. Caputo this is indicative of traditional metaphysics' attempt to tie things up, nail things down, seal up the case. Caputo argues that it is a better and more adequate description to refer to *differance* as a *quasi-transcendental* condition. It is all too aware of its own inadequacy and feebleness. *Differance* always indicates a moment when meaning slips away, when sense squirms free from the strict demarcations of surrounding, enclosing horizons. It always exceeds, overflows, transcends its own margins.¹⁴

Univ. Press: Bloomington: 1997, p.12

¹³ David Tracy: *Blessed Rage for Order*: The Seabury Press: New York: 1975

¹⁴ John D. Caputo: *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*: 1997, p. 13 - 14

In the light of such a position 'The Forger' can represent Heaney and his world, it can be itself, as well as being a figure for the artist, as well as standing for all of creative humanity, in an infinite variety of creative possibilities. It is surely liberating to conceive of poetry, language and meaning in such playful terms.

In *Sauf le Nom* it is interesting to observe how Derrida deals with the logical incongruities of the negative theological tradition that always threatens to deconstruct its own premises from within before it even utters a word. A distinctive tradition of negative theology exists because it has left behind the traces of its thought in its own classic texts and its own style. The most creative metaphor or symbol of this tradition is 'the desert'. From within this desert though negative theology cultivates itself as an oasis of memory, an institution, a history: 'it is a culture, with its archives and its traditions'¹⁵. For Derrida the language utilized in negative theology tests the very limits of language itself. It is no surprise to find the author of *Of Grammatology* interested in such a prospect. Through the moment of witness negative theology finds its presence: 'by testifying it *remains*'¹⁶.

Let us look at the poem with which Heaney closes *Door Into the Dark*, 'Bogland'. 'Bogland' is the starting point of a major concern of Heaney's that grows in stature in subsequent volumes of verse. The image of the bog as a source, as a repository of the past, as a transcendental space within which it is possible to re-imagine our past, our present and ourselves will grow in interest for Heaney, reaching its logical conclusion in his volume *North*:

¹⁵ Jacques Derrida: *Sauf le Nom*: 1995, p. 54

Bogland***for T.P. Flanagan***

We have no prairies
To slice a big sun at evening-
Everywhere the eye concedes to
Encroaching horizon,

Is wooed into the cyclop's eye
Of a tarn. Our unfenced country
Is bog that keeps crusting
Between the sights of the sun.

They've taken the skeleton
Of the Great Irish Elk
Out of the peat, set it up
An astounding crate full of air.

Butter sunk under
More than a hundred years
Was recovered salty and white.
The ground itself is kind, black butter

¹⁶ Jacques Derrida: *Sauf le Nom*: 1995, p. 54

Melting and opening underfoot,

Missing its last definition

By millions of years.

They'll never dig coal here,

Only the waterlogged trunks

Of great firs, soft as pulp.

Our pioneers keep striking

Inwards and downwards,

Every layer they strip

Seems camped on before.

The bogholes might be Atlantic seepage.

The wet centre is bottomless.¹⁷

For Heaney Ireland's values are epitomized by its spiritual heartland, as expressed in 'Bogland'. What are the values associated with this terrain? The openness, the freedom and imaginative sense of adventure suggested by the prairies of America is found in 'our unfenced country', the bog. We can be astounded in the present by the past that has been preserved by the bog. The skeleton of the Great Irish Elk has been retrieved from the bog: 'an astounding crate full of air'. We note Heaney's suggestion of hollowness at the core of this image: air lacks substance. Butter has been retrieved from the bog fully preserved. At the centre of the bog itself we discover a peculiar, maybe necessary, certainly customary hollowness: 'Missing

¹⁷ Seamus Heaney: *Opened Ground: Poems 1966 – 1996*, p. 41 - 42

its last definition/By millions of years'. Let us not, in a moment of theological naïveté, miss the political implications of Heaney's rhetoric. Heaney sets up a contrast with the landscapes of the Industrial Revolution that made Britain great. England's coal-fields provided the power that fuelled the Empire. For Heaney the coal-fields are symbolic of imperial might, strength, brutality: 'They 'll never dig coal here, //Only the waterlogged trunks/Of great firs, soft as pulp'. The Irish bog is softer, feminine, and pliable. The bog is an inexhaustible source of excavation and exploration: 'every layer they strip/seems camped on before'. In fact the bog is so rich for explorative possibilities that it almost seems endless: 'the wet centre is bottomless'. What is interesting in this poem is how Heaney constructs a sense of never-ending space that is open to continual and expanding definition. Is Heaney's poem sitting at the center of an aporia that we can locate at the heart of language usage and creation itself? Can we read Heaney's poem as a potent symbol of language itself, of language chasing its own tail? Is it revealing in the context of our discussion of the possibilities of God-talk? Let's look again at Derrida in *Sauf le Nom*.

For Derrida negative theology has one pre-eminent word in and through which we glimpse many fraught questions. That word is 'God' and negative theology's most potent symbol of bottomless collapse. It indicates the continual *desertification* of language¹⁸. Heaney's bog, it could be argued, is a slightly colder and wetter version of Derrida's desert. What is surprising and worth noting is that we can always state this. We can name this name. This is an event possible to language. We can say 'God' equals 'Desert' equals 'Bog'; although the tradition of negative theology argues that we can never exhaust the name of 'God'. Is *he* the arche-type of Heaney's bottomless

¹⁸ Jacques Derrida: *Sauf le Nom*: 1995, p. 55 - 56

centre? God is beyond all giving, even the giving of the name, his name. Is it God that lies at the bottom of Heaney's soggy wet bog?

Derrida is intrigued by the re-configuring of space that seems to always occur in the traditions of negative theology. For Derrida this has a long and honoured history and manifests itself in many different cultural traditions: the Jewish, the Christian and the Greek networks of thought. The name of God is often referred to within the context and experience of place. When one hangs out in the locality of the word 'God' one often develops interesting re-configurations of this spatiality. They often have a distinctly desert hue to them. In fact the desert is 'a figure of the pure place'¹⁹. This place has no geographical location and does not play host to a single object or subject. Have we witnessed an exemplary indication of this in the reading of Heaney we have offered? We recall that Heaney wrote in an early essay called *The Sense of Place*: 'We are dwellers, we are namers, we are lovers, we make homes and search for our histories'²⁰. What is worth noting here is Heaney's use of verbs that suggest continual activity. Is this cultural and personal work that we are always doing, work we will always need to do and with which we will never be finished? Are we always left to chase the tail of the *trace*?

There is a lexical peculiarity to the words developed in negative theology to speak of 'God'. These words, metaphors, symbols attempt to name God, to speak God, to speak to him. The names used are always shadowed by uncertainty. They attempt to name something beyond themselves. They point to the unnameable beyond the name. This is where Derrida develops his phrase *sauf le nom*. He develops this

¹⁹ Jacques Derrida: *Sauf le Nom*: 1995, p. 57

French phrase in an attempt to protect the name of God itself. One is caught in paradoxical terrain. One needs to save the name and everything except the name, everything outside the name which isn't tangible but there nevertheless, which escapes the name but which the name 'shadows': 'as if it was necessary to lose the name in order to save what bears the name'²¹. There is a reversal of 'normal logic': if you lose the name you respect it. By losing the name you do not undermine, disrespect or attack it. In pronouncing the name you travel through and across it toward the other.

Let us look at some poems Heaney published in his 1972 collection *Wintering Out*. These are Heaney's well-known 'word' poems. They include 'Anahorish', 'Toome' and 'Broagh'. We can also include 'Gifts of Rain' and 'A New Song'²². We can include the poem 'Song' from 1979's collection *Field Work* due to its provocative last line: 'And that moment when the bird sings very close/To the music of what happens'²³. There is something of *Genesis* about this group of poems. Throughout these poems Heaney uses words 'to call into play' the qualities of a place. We will look in detail at just two of these poems: 'Anahorish' and 'Toome'.

Anahorish

My 'place of clear water',
 the first hill in the world
 where springs washed into
 the shiny grass

²⁰ Seamus Heaney: *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968 – 1978*: Faber & Faber: London: 1998, p. 148 - 149

²¹ Jacques Derrida: *Sauf le Nom*: 1995, p. 58

and darkened cobbles
 in the bed of the lane.
Anahorish, soft gradient
 of consonant, vowel-meadow,

 after-image of lamps
 swung through the yards
 on winter evenings.
 With pails and barrows

 those mound-dwellers
 go waist-deep in mist
 to break the light ice
 at wells and dunghills.²⁴

In the poem 'Anahorish' the title is an Irish place name translated by Heaney as 'my place of clear water'. So Heaney is on home ground. For Heaney the poet the name of the place calls into being the place itself. The world of this poem is almost primeval. For Heaney this 'first place in the world' is his first place, and thereby resembles all first places. His experience of this place can be translated into a transcendental metaphor for all persons, and all places, all homes possibly. When Heaney pronounces the name *Anahorish* in the poem it conjures up a world of 'soft gradient/of consonant, vowel-meadow'. This world then translates into an afterglow

²² Seamus Heaney: *Opened Ground: Poems 1966 – 1996*: Faber & Faber: London: 1998

²³ Seamus Heaney: *Opened Ground: Poems 1966 – 1996*: Faber & Faber: London: 1998, p. 181

²⁴ Seamus Heaney: *Opened Ground: Poems 1966 – 1996*: 1998, p. 46

of lights swung in farmyards. Heaney uses the phrase 'mound-dwellers'. The inhabitants, the natives, of this world work as they have always worked, disappearing in 'the mist' to break the ice that has formed over their water supplies. Things have not changed all that much. There is an element of continuity in this world. What are the links in this chain of light and language? The words themselves possibly, as articulated by the memory bank of the poet, caught in the world imagined through the language of image and metaphor in the poem.

In the poem 'Toome' the place name becomes for the poet an historical repository and then the place itself:

Toome

My mouth holds round

the soft blastings,

Toome, Toome

as under the dislodged

slab of the tongue

I push into a souterrain

prospecting what new

in a hundred centuries'

loam, flints, musket-balls,

fragmented ware,

torcs and fish-bones

till I am sleeved in
 alluvial mud that shelves
 suddenly under
 bogwater and tributaries,
 and elvers tail my hair.²⁵

When Heaney pronounces the name *Toome, Toome* as an incantation in the poem, he enters into the world of the place name's past to unearth a troubled history. The historical struggle is inscribed into the name of the place until both are inextricable. The weapons of ancient and modern warfare have collected here, from the primitive flints to the musket-balls. The artworks have a similar genealogy, from the more primitive fish-bones to the advanced torcs. However Heaney digs so deep in this poem that he enters into an underground torrent. He digs down

till I am sleeved in
 alluvial mud that shelves
 suddenly under
 bogwater and tributaries,
 and elvers tail my hair.

Heaney has become part of the landscape itself. Has he become a part of the life-giving streams that bubble creatively underground, under the world of the real,

²⁵ Seamus Heaney: *Opened Ground: Poems 1966 – 1996*: Faber & Faber: London: 1998, p. 53

the tangible, the historical and the linguistic? In becoming part of this unifying and assuaging current, does he escape the narrow definitions that have become so central to our intransigent and intractable history? What transcendental possibility inherent in language has allowed Heaney this creative leap?

The poem 'Toome' can be read as a poem which offers us a positive way out of the intractable linguistic (read as symbolic for the many religious, social, and economic) barriers that exist in Northern Irish society. In its conception of an originary, benign river as resting place for the creative imagination the poem can become a space of imaginative renewal. However, there is the issue of the ethical responsibility of the artist himself or herself. For we see Heaney in the poem 'A New Song' write a poem that implicitly calls for a linguistic re-clamation or re-plantation, with the poem's title itself sounding a rather eschatological tone, which is somewhat worrying:

But now our river tongues must rise
 From licking deep in native haunts
 To flood with vovelling embrace,
 Demesnes staked out in consonants.

And Castledawson we'll enlist
 And Upperlands, each planted bawn-
 Like bleaching-greens resumed by grass-
 A vocable, as rath and bullaun.²⁶

²⁶ Seamus Heaney: *Opened Ground: Poems 1966 – 1996*: 1998, p. 58

Let us not be found guilty of offering a theological or aesthetic reading of Heaney that is not attentive to political overtones and implications from within his work.

From a reading of Jacques Derrida's essay *Sauf le Nom* we discover that language is opened up by the reference to what is named by the word 'God' but at the same time this phrase always points to and indicates its own inadequacy. It is at this juncture that we might conceive of poetry as a continuing theological exercise. The language used by negative theology always declares its own inadequacy concerning that about which it claims to know something. So there is a continual desire and need for re-invention. This might be the basis for the negative poetics we have argued is at work in the poetry of Seamus Heaney. For Derrida the symbols used in negative theology always traverse across a mighty chasm. There is no common measure found between the moment of revelation and knowledge on the one hand and the suggestion of an absolute secret on the other. Paradoxically we are ushered into that place where we are not able to go. We are invited into a concern with place: 'over there, toward the name, toward the beyond of the name *in* the name'²⁷. Is this why Heaney values the work of the diviner, the farrier and the poet even though this defies common sense? Through the ordinary we are invited into the extraordinary. Heaney's forger is a paradigm for one who can point us towards, send us off in the direction of the other. Is this why the forger, the diviner and the thatcher are emblems for the poet? The poet is one who sends us in new and unexpected directions. As the cultural archivist of language, the high priest who serves at the altar of language, the poet is a channel for

²⁷ Jacques Derrida: *Sauf le Nom*: 1995, p. 59

the other. In keeping language alive the poet keeps open the channels of communication to the other.

In *Sauf le Nom* the word of negative theology is always a *post-scriptum*.²⁸ It is always trailing behind the event itself. The phrases used in the poetry produced by negative theology always occur at the edge of language, the border of reference itself. As it flows *over the edge* negative theology draws its energy from having occurred, having carried off the legible-illegible text of itself. So the text always operates as a *post-scriptum*; it trails behind the event.

Derrida develops a key metaphor at this juncture. The language of negative theology is for him an arrow. An arrow is only that, an arrow, and an end in itself. It is pointed towards something, destined to strike it, but it can never become that towards which it is directed. So the arrow misses, even as it touches, and that is what makes it safe....

So there is a peculiar passiveness about this work. One thinks of the writer Heaney in the poem 'Digging' observing his father at work. Heaney is in a passive position in relation to the activity of his father. Heaney's father works the land while he works his pen. Heaney constructs an archaeological dig from his personal past, a family memorial and a type of the poetic archive. Heaney refers to the grandfather who 'cut more turf in a day/Than any other man in Toner's bog'²⁹. There is an anxiety at work in this poem, the primal anxiety of procreation maybe. Heaney wonders whether he is following his ancestors in a fitting and worthy manner: 'I've no spade to

²⁸ Jacques Derrida: *Sauf le Nom*: 1995, p. 60

follow men like them'. He is trailing behind. Heaney develops this theme more explicitly in his poem 'Follower'. Referring to his father's ability with the plough Heaney notes: 'I stumbled in his hob-nailed wake', and 'All I ever did was follow/In his broad shadow round the farm'³⁰. What is revealing in these poems is the anxiety about following, trailing in a past which the poet worries about catching in his poetry. Are they indirectly meditations on the inability of the writer to hold meaning down in words? Are words always shooting off somewhere else, pointing where you want them to go but not getting there fully? Are these poems fraught with the anxieties of Derrida's arrow? Can we read them as metaphors for the anxiety of writing itself?

Derrida himself does not use the term metaphor. He opts for a more resonant term. He seizes on Plato's use of the term *hyperbole* in *The Republic*. For Plato, as read by Derrida, the term suggests the movement of transcendence that carries or transports beyond being or beingness, *epekeina tes ousias*. This hyperbole always *announces*: it indicates an open possibility, but it also provokes thereby the opening of the possibility. It reveals as it produces. It will precipitate discourse, and hence being, existence. For Derrida: 'the Platonic, Plotinian, or Neoplatonic style will not only precipitate beyond being or God insofar as he is (the supreme being), but beyond God even as name, as naming, named or nameable, insofar as reference is made there to some thing'³¹.

The beyond, what is conceived of as beyond God, is for Derrida radically conceived behind, before and after, beyond place itself. This movement of

²⁹ Seamus Heaney: *Opened Ground: Poems 1966 – 1996*: 1998, p. 3

³⁰ Seamus Heaney: *Opened Ground: Poems 1966 – 1996*: 1998, p. 11

³¹ Jacques Derrida: *Sauf le Nom*: 1995, p. 65

transcendence surpasses God himself. It surpasses the being, the essence, the proper self, the divinity of God. This is the source of the radical thought that lies behind negative theology. For Derrida this movement of thought has radical implications for all philosophizing. In its transcendental gusto this movement radically shatters being and knowing, existence and knowledge. Such thought shatters, fractures, and opens up the *cogito* as conceived by St. Augustine or Descartes.

Do we witness this at work in the poems we have examined by Heaney? The moment of the poem opens us into a vista we could not enter otherwise. We are invited into the world of Heaney's farrier in order to enter into the graced world of poetry itself. We are called into a unique place of consciousness caught only in the language of the poet. In the being of the world of the poem we have our existence and knowledge. Eric Voegelin in his collection of essays *Anamnesis* has an essay 'Reason: The Classic Experience' in which he articulates ideas concerning human understanding that may be of use to us here³².

Eric Voegelin argues that the classic philosophers developed key symbols or terms around which any discussion of the *psyche* of humanity should be developed. For Plato a central symbol was the 'philosopher' in whose psyche humanity had become luminous for its noetic order. This is most apparent in the writings of Plato where 'man', in 'his' tension toward the ground of existence, is opened towards a depth of divine reality beyond the stratum that has revealed itself as the *nous*. So in the Platonic system a window is opened to a theophanic understanding of reality. An extension of this opening is the type of pneumatic revelation found in the history of

³² Eric Voegelin: *Anamnesis*: Univ. of Missouri Press: Columbia: 1990

Judaeo-Christianity. There is also an opening for the arguments and insights gained from the later traditions of mysticism. Can we extend this definition and understanding to include moments of poetic insight? Let us explore further.

As Voegelin understands it reason in the noetic sense does not end history in an apocalyptic sense. Rather it pervades history with a new luminosity. The primary state of humanity for Plato and Socrates is our existence in a state of unrest. Humanity is not a self-sufficient end in itself. We are aware that we do not bear the origin and end of our existence within ourselves. The human is not a divine *causa sui*; from the experience of his or her life in precarious existence within the limits of birth and death there rather rises the wondering question about the ultimate ground, the *aitia* or *prote arche*, of all reality and specifically her or his own. Our humanity is defined through our questions about the where to and the where from of our existence. As Plato and Aristotle explore the issue humanity's questioning unrest carries within itself the assuaging answer. This is so because the human is moved to his or her search for the ground of existence by the very divine ground of which he or she is in search. As Voegelin argues: 'The man who asks questions, and the divine ground about which the questions are asked, will merge in the experience of questioning as a divine-human encounter and reemerge as the participants in the encounter that has the luminosity and structure of consciousness'³³. The ground of which Voegelin speaks is not a spatially distant thing. It is rather the divine presence that becomes manifest in the experience of unrest and the desire to know. The wondering and questioning is sensed as the beginning of a theophanic event that can become fully luminous to itself if it finds the proper response in the psyche of concrete human beings. The responsive

³³ Eric Voegelin: *Anamnesis*: 1990, p. 95 - 96

pursuit to the divine mover requires the effort of articulating the experience through appropriate language symbols. The product of this effort is insight into the noetic structure of the *psyche*. It is my contention that it also produces poems. It opens the way to a type of revelatory theology based on the presence of God as articulated through the language of the poem as it traces its own inadequacy or search for the basis of its own being. The poem is fraught with this anxiety. As is the question of 'God' as explored by Derrida in *Sauf le Nom*, and as a human being is all too aware of their fragile hold on existence. What is the net effect of all this?

For Derrida this *post-scriptum* has the character of a *countersignature*, even as it effaces itself. Even as it effaces itself before the face of God, it effaces itself before that which it names. It is necessary for this to happen. The name is not enough. It is lacking and it is necessary because it is lacking. We must continue to re-name even as we are aware of the inadequacy of naming itself. (One wonders if this is why we keep writing poetry). In saying 'God is not, neither this nor that' you are still saying something about what the being is. You are still saying the entity. One keeps to the promise of telling the truth. One renders an account of oneself before the name: 'it is a matter of recording the referential transcendence of which the negative way is only one way, one methodic approach, one series of stages. A prayer, too, and a testimony of love, but an "I love you" on the way to prayer and to love, always on the way'³⁴.

Derrida goes so far as to say that he trusts no text 'that is not contaminated by negative theology'. For him negative theology is an attempt to record the 'referential

³⁴ Jacques Derrida: *Sauf le Nom*: 1995, p. 68

transcendence of language'³⁵. This form of theological iconoclasm is attempting to suggest God as he is, beyond, behind, before his images. It attempts to shatter the idols of positive theology. The name that we know God by, to be and to hear and respond to. The negative theological approach favors non-saying over the inadequate attribution to the point of denial and refusal. Such defiance is carried out and justified on the basis of being a way of truth and in the name of justice.

What is significant for a theological poetics is the independent stance of negative theology. Derrida calls it its translatability. The apophatic mode of discourse steps outside of revelatory modes, of the literal language of New Testament eventness: the birth of Christ, the Passion of Christ, and the subsequent dogmas of Christ's divinity and the Trinity as well as the credal formulations. At its extreme limit the logic of this mysticism points to an independence from the history of Christianity.

For Derrida there is a great playfulness in the dynamics illustrated by negative theology. For him it allows an approach to the other. Through the poetic forms explored in this tradition of thinking we can approach the other without crossing the threshold into the other. One can learn to respect and love the invisibility that shrouds the other. One can lay one's weapons down. We are allowed an entry into the playfulness of the divine creation. We can be co-creators with God. To quote Angelus Silesius:

God plays with creation.

³⁵ Jacques Derrida: *Sauf le Nom*: 1995, p. 69

All that is play that the Deity gives Itself:

It has imagined the creature for Its pleasure.³⁶

(2: 198)

What we do not know on this side of our experience is whether this event, testified to by the classic texts of negative theology, is opened by God, or the name of 'God', or if it is older than creation, older than Time, History or the Word itself. We do not know whether we can appeal to this event. We do not know whether it is impervious to our pleading. This is the journey of faith.

The Era of the Question:

Can we formulate a philosophical foundation for the issues we have explored thus far? To aid us in this task we will now consider the writings of a thinker very different from Martin Heidegger, Maurice Blanchot or Jacques Derrida, and that is Emmanuel Levinas. In his writings Emmanuel Levinas indicates an awareness of and attentiveness to the post-modern scene of intellectual thought; however what is distinctive about his writings is their consistent attempt at constructing and maintaining a broadly religious framework for contemporary thought. We will deal with his thought through the critical probing of one of Levinas' closest readers, Jacques Derrida. In Derrida's essay *'Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas'* we find a fascinating meeting of two significant contemporary minds³⁷.

³⁶ Jacques Derrida: *Sauf le Nom*: 1995, p. 75

In the essay's opening paragraph Jacques Derrida begins by writing that we are living in an era ripe with new possibilities. Our era is a time of questioning, with the question having liberated us from past tyranny. We can now question the totalities that surround us. We can interrogate the totality of beings in our world as well as the many objects that exist within it and the determinations that appear to secure them and us; the question is our ultimate point of reference. We live with its discipline. We must consider the origin point of this question. There is still a distinctly holy, metaphysical, religious dimension to this line of inquiry insofar as Derrida speaks of the 'absolute origin' of this question, of an origin that is absolute and *other*. The question and its history may be 'grounded' in the 'other absolute decision'³⁸. We witness the emergence of the questioning of the question in Emmanuel Levinas' work *Totality and Infinity*³⁹. Here we stand close to the essentially metaphysical nature of philosophy itself, for when we ask this type of question we discuss the very possibility of philosophy itself, what might be termed the 'fundamentals of philosophy'. The question corresponds with itself, remembers its point of origin and yearns for it, and is haunted by this place of beginnings and return.

A Copernican Revolution:

What Emmanuel Levinas' project in *Totality and Infinity* entails for Derrida is a questioning of the origin of Western philosophy from Plato through to Kant and Heidegger. In the discipline of Western philosophical thinking there exists a particular history, pattern of thought, a tracing of a series of questions through definite texts

³⁷ Jacques Derrida: *Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas*: from *Writing and Difference*: Routledge: London: 1997, Trans. by Alan Bass, p. 79 - 153

³⁸ Jacques Derrida: *Writing and Difference*: 1997, p. 80

ascribed to individual writers. The definite paradigm is that of Being or being, from Plato through to Heidegger. Levinas however attempts to exist outside that line of questioning, this history, those texts and the question or questions they attempt to clarify, expand and explore. In Levinas an attempt is made at a new beginning and a total re-thinking of the question. This may be a valuable, and certainly is an intriguing project. There has, by necessity, to be a dislocation of our Greek origins here, our Greek identity as Western European thinkers and citizens. We are urged, provoked and challenged to move from the safe, secure site of our usual preoccupations and concerns to reconsider them, to put them under question! Derrida describes this departure as an '*exhalation*'⁴⁰. Derrida hints at the distinctively Jewish nature of this project. When the adjective 'prophetic' is placed before speech we are in the territory of the Old Testament and the origin of the prophetic word. Derrida gambles that this word that emerges from this fresh source point may be close to, related through otherness, to the word and words of the Greek philosophers. With these two distinctive conjunctions we stand within the bosom or cradle of our civilisation.

Distinctive to Levinas's position is his consideration of an ethical relationship that exists in relation to its infinitely other, to the Other. For Levinas this is the only place that transcendence and metaphysics can begin. Ethics and metaphysics thereby become self-supporting and autonomous entities. Levinas justifies his position on the basis of analyzed experience. It is within the ambit of our experience to witness the birth of metaphysical thinking and ethics from within experience as it departs from itself in the direction of the other. Everything is shadowed, or halved, communicates with, travels towards that which is irreducibly other within it: Others. As Derek

³⁹ Emmanuel Levinas: *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*: Duquesne Univ. Press:

Walcott described it in an early poem; the artist is in possession of 'Only the gift/ To see things as they are, halved by a darkness/ From which they cannot shift'⁴¹. This hollow space is not one opening amongst many. For Levinas this aporia does not exist in equality alongside many other fissures in the fabric of experience. Rather this is the opening of openings, and thus is irreducible, cannot be enclosed, shut off or limited by any category or totality, that is, everything within experience that cannot be articulated, touched, understood by traditional concepts, and thus is the place of resistance to all being thought.

Levinas probes many traditional stances of Western philosophy. He challenges some of the presumptions surrounding the sun of the *epekina tes ousias*. This has always illuminated the awakening of our capacity to reason and has been seen as the inexhaustible source of all our thinking. It is the ancestor of the Greek Infinite that transcends totality. It is also the instrument of destruction for the phenomenology and ontology subjected to the neutral totality of the Same as Being or as Ego. Ever since Plato the Western mind has had a tendency to place the Good beyond Being. For Levinas this movement is not theological and is not an instance of transcendence toward a superior existence. He calls it instead 'excence'. It begins from being but excence is a 'departure from being and from the categories which describe it'⁴². The term 'excence' names the site from which metaphysics begins as meta-theology, meta-ontology and meta-phenomenology.

Pittsburgh: 1998, Trans. by Alphonso Lingis

⁴⁰ Jacques Derrida: *Writing and Difference*: 1997, p. 82

⁴¹ Derek Walcott: *Collected Poems 1948 – 1984*: Faber & Faber: London: 1992, p. 66

⁴² Jacques Derrida: *Writing and Difference*: 1997: p. 85

Levinas takes issue with Husserl's positions as outlined in the *Fifth Untersuchung*. As Levinas reads it this work gives a primal position to the theoretical consciousness. This is the means by which we access, create the being of the object. If 'the existing world, which is revealed to us, has the mode of existence of the object given over to the theoretical glance', if 'the real world is the world of knowledge', if 'in his [Husserl's] philosophy...knowledge and representation is not a mode of life to the same degree as the others, nor a secondary mode' then Levinas is obliged to depart from this conception of understanding or philosophy⁴³. Levinas reads Heidegger in the light of his opposition to this placing of the centre of our being as consciousness by Husserl. Heidegger, as read by Levinas, does not see this world as primarily given over to the theoretical glance, but rather, in the words of Levinas is, 'in its very Being like a center of action, a field of activity or of *solicitude*'⁴⁴. For Levinas there is in man a historicity and temporality that are predicates for, and indeed are, the substantiality of his substance. And it is 'this structure...which occupies such an important place in Heidegger's thought'⁴⁵.

Levinas however does not let Heidegger away too easily either. He directs also a critical ray over Heidegger's writings. Heidegger fails to question key metaphors in the Greco-Platonic tradition of thought, for example the surveillance of the agency of the glance and the metaphor of light. That is, by the spatial pair of inside-outside which gives life to the familiar opposition of subject and object. 'Heideggerean care, illuminated as it is by comprehension (even if comprehension offers itself as care), is already determined by the structure "inside-outside" that characterizes light'⁴⁶.

⁴³ Jacques Derrida: *Writing and Difference*: 1997, p. 87

⁴⁴ Jacques Derrida: *Writing and Difference*: 1997, p. 87

⁴⁵ Jacques Derrida: *Writing and Difference*: 1997, p. 87

⁴⁶ Jacques Derrida: *Writing and Difference*: 1997, p. 88

Levinas does not deny or pretend to erase the existence and power of the structure 'inside-outside'. As such Levinas respects the layers of 'traditional truth' and does not criticize the philosophies he describes, nor does he refute them. Rather he seeks to reveal what founds them, what is dissimulated within them, 'a situation which precedes the division of Being into an inside and an outside'⁴⁷. His aim is to inaugurate a new metaphysics of radical separation and exteriority. Quite correctly Derrida suggests that this new departure will find it difficult to create a language in the medium of the traditional logos governed, as it is, by the structure 'inside-outside', 'interior-exterior'. Tradition illustrates how the Eleatic stranger and disciple of Parmenides had to give language its due for having vanquished him: shaping non-Being according to Being, he had to say 'farewell to an unnameable opposite of Being' and had to confine non-Being to its relativity to Being, that is to the movement of alterity⁴⁸.

The Origin of the Alterior Motive:

For Levinas multiplicity and alterity are to be understood as the absolute solitude of the existent in its existence. The relationship to the other arises from the depths of this solitude. To understand the secret on the basis of the unity of existence, on the pretext that it exists or that it is the secret of the existent 'is to confine oneself to unity'⁴⁹. To escape this Levinas moves towards the thought of original difference.

⁴⁷ Jacques Derrida: *Writing and Difference*: 1997, p. 88

⁴⁸ Jacques Derrida: *Writing and Difference*: 1997, p. 89

⁴⁹ Jacques Derrida: *Writing and Difference*: 1997, p. 90

Levinas seeks a direct and unmediated encounter with the face, using phrases like 'face to face without intermediary' and without 'communion'⁵⁰. Having no intermediary, having no communion, without being mediate, or immediate, the truth of our relation with the other is the truth to which the logos, traditionally conceived, is by definition inhospitable. Levinas seeks to persuade us that this is a living of the truth of experience that is unthinkable, and which cannot be encompassed or contained by philosophical speech without its fractures being illuminated by that very speech itself. What appears to be solidity is really rigidity. Metaphor to which philosophy is so often reduced at key junctures is an illustration of this; for metaphors provide an opening in and through which experience itself is silently revealed. We are dealing with a type of non-presence and a non-phenomenality. It is the totally other that illustrates or manifests itself prior to the moment of shared truth, as a type of nonmanifestation or as a certain absence. The implications of this for philosophical thought are immense. Traditional philosophy in its overlooking of the absolute Other cannot have time. Without time they have no history. And the absolute alterity of each instant, without which there would be no time, cannot be constituted within the identity of the subject or the existent. This can only emerge in time through the Other. If one renounces the Other one becomes enclosed within solitude, and it is the negative solitude of solidity and self-identity. By this route one suppresses ethical transcendence. For Levinas the tradition disregards the irreducible solitude of the existent and thereby disregards the relationship to the other. Its solitude is that of totality and opacity. There emerges a soliloquy of reason and of light in all its solitude. The tradition cannot respect Being and the meaning of the other, and by this means phenomenology and ontology become philosophies of violence. Through them

⁵⁰ Jacques Derrida: *Writing and Difference*: 1997, p. 90

communion is made with oppression as philosophy is bound to the totalitarianism of the same. The other is seized, possessed and known as we attempt to conquer it in the name of power and control. Under the aegis of this light everything that is given appears to be given from myself to myself.

How does Levinas envisage a way out or beyond the current impasse in our thinking? We begin with conceiving of metaphysics or ethics as *desire*. We see beyond our disdain or disregard of the other in a transcendental movement that breaks us free from the limits that constrain the other as we attempt to understand and possess it. For Levinas desire has nothing but respect for the other as other, and knowledge of it as such, and consciousness must forbid itself the transgression of this respect. This desire is always inadequate before the claims of the other, as it is appealed to by the absolutely irreducible exteriority of the other. No totality can ever encompass this desire and the vastness of difference to which it is drawn and by which it is defined. There is a great gulf between desire and its other. As Derrida reads Levinas we are dealing with a metaphysics of separation, and a distance that creates an opening within which freedom is born.

We have been trapped within our egos. Levinas argues that the apparent alterity or negativity of the ego, the interior difference, is but an *illusion*, for it is but the play of the same. The ego alters itself from within itself. We are caught within a moment of the same, a finite moment that forms a system and a totality with the agent. *History* is but the tracing out of this 'progression' as we are blinded to the other, and as the same moves laboriously in procession. Derrida asks whether we can truly have history if work is not met with resistance through alterity. Does history not

begin with this relationship to the other that Levinas places beyond history? Derrida wonders whether the ego can engender alterity within itself without encountering the Other?

For Levinas the ego and the other do not permit themselves to be dominated or made into totalities by a concept of relationship. Language is always *given to the other*, never encompasses the other and never includes the other. We cannot conceptualise our encounter with otherness then: it is made possible by the other that is the unforeseeable 'resistant to all categories'⁵¹. The infinitely-other is by definition beyond our capacity for conceptualisation. The idea of horizon implies always a horizon of the same. Within this conception of things there is always a unity as eruptions and surprises are welcomed by understanding and recognized. To escape this conceptualisation Levinas conceives of the presence of the other as *trace*. This other can achieve the only possible opening of time not by any industry of ours. And it is found at the heart of experience as a presence. It is not wholly present but exists there as a *trace*. Before all systems of thought, before all dogmatic systems of belief, before theology and before philosophy, there exists this opening of experience to an eschatological ending which is also its beginning, and which is to be found or traced throughout all its varying aspects.

We are called to recognise as our primary relation respect for the other, and thereby ethics precedes metaphysics. Metaphysics is born at the point when theory is forced to criticise itself as ontology, as the dogmatism and spontaneity of the same, and when metaphysics, in departing from itself, is put into question by the other in the

⁵¹ Jacques Derrida: *Writing and Difference*: 1997, p. 95

movement of ethics. Levinas argues for the primary nature of metaphysics over that of ontology. He thus proceeds to critique Heidegger. Heidegger, in affirming the priority of *Being* over the *existent*, makes a decision about the essence of philosophy. As Levinas reads this move, Heidegger subordinates the relation with *someone*, who is an existent, to a relation with the *Being of the existent*⁵². The impersonal nature of this relation permits, or allows, the domination of the existent and subordinates justice to freedom. True metaphysical transcendence occurs when we conceive of infinity beyond the restraints of totality. This is the infinity that is irreducible to the representations or thought of infinity, it exceeds, goes beyond, transcends, the ideation in which it is thought. It is in truth that which cannot be an object or a simple 'objective reality' of the idea. The expression of this idea of infinity is the *face*. This face is not only a visage that may only be a surface, it is that which is seen because it is naked, but also that which sees. And it is not only that which sees things, but also that which exchanges its glance. This visage only becomes a face in the moment of face-to-face encounter.

This face is presence, *ousia*. The face represents the original unity of glance and speech, eyes and mouth. The primary unity of the face exists prior to the dispersion into the organs of sensibility: the eyes, ears and mouth. The other is given 'in person', truly and completely, without allegory, in the face. It is the origin point of space, orienting space through speech and glance, through the face. The face is not a signifier, does not understand or present itself as a chief sign, but expresses itself, offers itself in person, in itself: the thing in itself expresses itself. Living speech in its mastery and magisteriality is the only thing able to assist itself; it is not a servile sign

⁵² Jacques Derrida: *Writing and Difference*: 1997, p. 97

but a genuine expression, the only genuine expression that living speech can be. For Levinas then the written and the work are not expressions but signs.

Derrida points out how Levinas is keen to preserve the living dimension of original speech itself. Outside of this horizon writing itself becomes nothing. Writing is secondary. To be behind the sign that is in the world is *afterward* to remain invisible to the world within epiphany. In and through the face, the other is given over in person *as other*, that is, as that which does not reveal its very self, and as that which cannot be made thematic. We can only speak to the other. The other appears within our missing categories as non-presence, or present as absence, appearing as the non-phenomenal. Lurking behind its signs and works, always dwelling within its secret interior, forever discreet, interrupting all historical totalities through its freedom of speech, the face is not, and cannot be, 'of this world'. Thought is always related to the other. However it is the relation to an irreducible other who summons me without possibility of return from without. It is through this order that we are presented with the idea of the infinity that no thought can enclose and which forbids all monologue. Through this means we arrive at a cornerstone of Emmanuel Levinas's thinking: the other is and can only be the other only if his or her alterity is absolutely irreducible, that is infinitely irreducible; and the infinitely Other can only be Infinity. As speech and glance the face does not belong to the world, because it opens and exceeds the totality. Due to this it marks the limit of all power, all violence, and the beginnings or origin of the ethical.

Derrida asks some serious questions of Levinas's thesis. Levinas stresses the invisible transcendence of the Other. As such it is not possible to conceive of the face

as a moment of religious, or other, revelation. What is termed the unrevealable is expressed thereby beyond all thematization, beyond all constitutive analysis and beyond all phenomenology. Philosophers, theologians and poets are all out of a job. In Levinas's schema the infinitely-Other is not an object because it is speech, speech as the origin of meaning and the world. By means of this schematic phenomenology is ruled out as a means by which to account for ethics, speech and justice. We witness Levinas explore these ideas through the theme of nudity. Speech is obliged to uncover the nudity of the face, without which no nudity would have any meaning. All nudity, 'even the nudity of the body experienced in shame', is a 'figure of speech' in relation to the non-metaphorical nudity of the face⁵³. This nudity is not an opening, for an opening is always relative to a surrounding plenitude. So the word nudity is effectively erased as soon as it serves to indicate something beyond itself. What is the appropriate response to this exposure to and by the nude face? The demand is for supplication, as the unthinkable unity of a speech able to assist itself and a glance that calls for assistance summons to us in all its nakedness.

Derrida points out that for Levinas a basic presupposition is the idea of a finite totality. When Levinas speaks of infinity, what is infinitely other, he is always speaking of a non-violent reality. This is different to his presumptions surrounding totality. The figure of God redeems the world for Levinas insofar as a world without this figure of infinite otherness would be torn apart by strife of the worst kind imaginable. A world without God is unimaginable. We are not able to imagine this world at all, a world of primary violence, inescapable immorality, of pure blood lust and uninhibited violence. War as we know it would not be definable, approachable,

⁵³ Jacques Derrida: *Writing and Difference*: 1997, p. 106

without our experience of the face of God. In the network of thought or understanding expounded by Levinas then, Derrida argues, the figure or face of God is implicated in war. War implies the presence of God as a form of denial of that presence. War would be meaningless without the presence of God as absence. War, the reality of which we cannot deny, is the difference between the revelation of the face and the finite world without a face.

Derrida points out that in Levinas' conception of things we are always too late as human beings. We are an after image of the already primary divine presence. We are gods arrived too late, or emerging on the plane of a pre-existent, primary Being. We can walk upright, but only after or in the midst of being drawn to the face existing before, above and beyond us. It is this originary face that draws us up from our knees and allows us to walk upright at all. Metaphysical thought begins when we recognise this a priori basis. We must return to our true selves, the point of recognition, comparison or similarity where we acknowledge the resemblance between or with our face and the face of God. However, Levinas argues that we must converse with God, and not as a god or gods, we are not in God as co-equals in a conversation of participation. God is after all infinitely Other. We enter into the space of separation where God properly dwells. This is what *creatio ex nihilo* means. We are outside the world of incarnation here. We are dwellers in the presence of the *trace* of God. We note the distinctive note of post-modernity that rings through such a thought.

As God's face emerges, so it disappears. In *Totality and Infinity* then, the Face of Yahweh is evoked in many different guises and locations. We are in the primary site of Old Testament theology: 'Thou canst not see my face: for there shall be no man

see me and live... thou shalt stand upon a rock: and it shall come to pass, while my glory passeth by, that I will put thee in a clift of the rock, and will cover thee with my hand while I pass by: And I will take away mine hand, and thou shalt see my back parts: but my face shall not be seen' (Exodus 33: 20 - 23)⁵⁴. Edmond Jabes has written in the *Book of Questions*: 'All faces are His: this is why HE has no face?'⁵⁵ The face outlined by Levinas then is not the face of God or the face of man: it is their resemblance. Derrida points out though that this face that is a resemblance must be thought before, or without, the idea of the Same, without its assistance or as a means or road, guarantee, to its possibility. This is a strong 'bone of contention' for Derrida and the means by which he deconstructs, or questions the premises of Levinas' thinking in *Totality and Infinity*.

Stubbornly Jacky:

Derrida will begin his deconstruction of Levinas by pointing out the linguistic game within which Levinas's thought is encircled, caught up, played out and engaged. We are within 'the system' of Levinas's thought that is self-referential and self-defined. It makes sense within the terms defined by its own internal logic: 'the route followed by Levinas's thought is such that all our questions already belong to his own interior dialogue, are displaced into his discourse and only listen to it, from many vantage points and in many ways'⁵⁶.

⁵⁴ Jacques Derrida: *Writing and Difference*: 1997, p. 108

⁵⁵ Jacques Derrida: *Writing and Difference*: 1997, p. 109

⁵⁶ Jacques Derrida: *Writing and Difference*: 1997, p. 109

Levinas has argued consistently and thoroughly in *Totality and Infinity* that there is no interior difference, no fundamental and autochthonous alterity within the ego. The other is not myself (Derrida asks: who has ever maintained that it was or is?) but it is *an Ego*, and has to be if Levinas is to maintain his own discourse. The journey from Ego to other as *an Ego* is the passage to the essential, non-empirical *egoity* of subjective existence *in general*. When Soren Kierkegaard speaks of himself it is not just the Danish Protestant writing of his own egotistical and 'self-centred' concerns for personal salvation, but this name becomes a pseudonym within which we all stand for ourselves and everybody else. Otherwise he would not be writing philosophy and we would not be concerned with reading it. It would be a self-contained and meaningless babble, the ravings of a madman and lunatic. For example, the 'I' of Walt Whitman's *Song of Myself* contains all of our individual 'I's past, present and future, otherwise it could not be the poem of a new nation, or indeed a poem for us all as children of the human species. Unless we could enter into or be contained by the 'subjectivity' that speaks to us, or speaks for us, in this poem, we would not converse with it at all. Derrida asks: 'is not this essence of subjective existence presupposed by the respect for the other, which can be what it is - the other - only as subjective existence?'⁵⁷ The logic of Levinas's position Derrida points out would seem to require the elimination of all discussion of the *essence* or *truth* of subjective existence. Here lies the radical break with previous conceptions of phenomenology and ontology. Derrida points out that Levinas cannot do this without renouncing philosophical discourse itself in the first instance. As such this cannot be done outside of the arena of language. The attempt to attain, speak toward, or from, the beyond of philosophical discourse, by means of philosophical discourse, impossible by definition, cannot possibly succeed

⁵⁷ Jacques Derrida: *Writing and Difference*: 1997, p. 110

within language, unless we, formally and thematically pose the question of the relations between belonging and the opening, the question of closure. Are we moving towards the beginnings of poetry? Derrida speaks of departing from logic and writing from within an inscribed description, in an inscription of the relations between the philosophical and the non-philosophical, in a kind of unheard of *graphics*.

Levinas attempts to radically restructure our notions of *exteriority* in *Totality and Infinity*. Previously when we spoke of exteriority we spoke of a unity of space that neutralised radical alterity: the relation to the other, the relation of instants to each other, the relation to death. All of these issues revolve around notions of an Inside to an Outside. We are all post-Heidegger in this sense: read Blanchot's *The Space of Literature*. Levinas writes in *Totality and Infinity*: 'the relation with the other is a relation with a Mystery. It is the other's exteriority, or rather his alterity, for exteriority is a property of space, and brings the subject back to himself through the light which constitutes his entire being'⁵⁸. We recall the subtitle of this work by Levinas, *Essay on Exteriority*, which abundantly employs the notion of exteriority, but *true* exteriority, according to Levinas, is not spatial for space is always the site of the same; the Site is always the site of the Same. Can we truly speak of an exteriority outside of a conception of space? Derrida argues that we find Levinas here attempting to obliterate our notion of exteriority but without erasing that notion altogether. Can we not avoid speaking of infinity's excess over totality within the language of totality itself? Can we possibly conceive or speak of the other without using the language of the Same? Derrida argues that we cannot avoid the Inside-Outside structure and spatial metaphors. We cannot but speak from within the ruined metaphor and we are obliged

⁵⁸ Jacques Derrida: *Writing and Difference*: 1997, p. 112

to wear the patchy clothes of the tradition. For Derrida, we must be deported from our own site towards the Site, toward the spatial locale that is the metaphor congenital to the philosophical word or logos. Is all thought therefore primarily poetic, insofar as its point of beginning is concerned, dependent on and emerges from the world of metaphor? Metaphor is the emergence of language itself, referring to itself within itself prior to being a rhetorical procedure within language. For Derrida all philosophy can do is, is a speaking of this metaphor, a stating of the metaphor itself, which amounts to thinking through this metaphor within the silent horizon of the non-metaphor that we identify as Being. Space is the primary wound without which we cannot even open language, without which one would not have a true or false exteriority to speak of.

For Derrida one can only write by crossing out, by crossing out what has been already crossed out: for crossing out writes, still draws in space. And thus we find Heaney going down and down for the 'good turf' in poems like 'Digging' or the bog in 'Bogland' 'missing its last definition/ By millions of years'⁵⁹. We can only re-write, have or operate our discourse within a tradition. And thus we find poets re-writing on the words of previous poets. Thus is T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* a compendium of the best lines written in the tradition of Western (and Eastern) writing and poetry. We can also read Cathal O'Searcaigh's selected poems *Out in the Open* as a commentary, a modern re-inscription of the classical conventions of Gaelic poetry, or as a re-writing of poets of the Irish tradition writing in English⁶⁰. For Derrida we cannot conceive of language without the rupture of space. An aquatic or aerial language would be meaningless, unless we could trace alterity within it. Derrida pursues Heidegger in

⁵⁹ Seamus Heaney: *Opened Ground: Poems 1966 – 1996*: 1998, p.41

arguing that the meanings that emerge from, radiate outwards, the concepts Inside-Outside, from Light-Night, inhabit proscribed words, and are embedded in person or vicariously, at the heart of conceptuality itself. Why or how, we might be tempted to ask?

Derrida argues that the structures Inside-Outside, Night-Day do not signify an immersion *in* space. These structures have no meaning *in* a pure space given over to itself and disorientated. It is because of an *included* origin that this structure emerges, an *inscribed* eastern horizon that is neither within nor without space. The text of the glance is the text of speech. It is on this basis that we can speak of it as Face.

Language and space are inseparable. Language rises with the day to face the sun.

Surely what Levinas is attempting to do when he speaks of the infinite exteriority of the other as non-spatial, as non-exteriority and non-interiority, is to acknowledge that the infinite cannot be stated? Is this not to say that the structure 'inside-outside' which is the very structure of language itself is marked by the original finitude of speech?

Derrida writes: 'Philosophical language belongs to a system of language(s). Thereby, its nonspeculative ancestry always brings a certain equivocality into speculation.

Since this equivocality is original and irreducible, perhaps philosophy must adopt it, think it and be thought in it, must accommodate duplicity and difference within speculation, within the very purity of philosophical meaning⁶¹.

For Derrida the infinitely other, the infinity of the other, is not the other *as* a positive infinity, as God, or as resemblance with God. The infinitely Other would not

⁶⁰ Cathal O' Searcaigh: *Out in the Open*: Clo – Iar Chonnachta: Conamara: 1997, trans. by Frank Sewell, especially a poem like 'Dear Dark-Haired Love', p. 113

⁶¹ Jacques Derrida: *Writing and Difference*: 1997, p. 113

be what it is, other, if it was a positive infinity, and if it did not maintain within itself the negativity of the indefinite, of the *apeiron*. To speak of the 'infinitely other' is to talk about that which does not end despite my endless labours and continual and continuous experience. Derrida tackles Levinas on the grounds that we cannot expel negativity - understood as labour, work, or maybe 'care' - from within the realms of transcendence, for to do so would disrespect the Other as Other. What we speak of as the positive Infinity (God) cannot be infinitely Other. We can only understand infinity as Other in the form of the in-finite. When one attempts to speak of Infinity as a positive plenitude purely and absolutely then one banishes the other as the unthinkable, the impossible and the unutterable.

If we are to follow Levinas all the way down his street then we are required to neutralise space within the description of the other in order thereby to liberate positive infinity. Does this not require that we neutralise the essential finitude of the face as speech and glance that is always a body, and not, as Levinas continually insists, the corporeal metaphor of etherealized thought? When we speak of the body and embodiment we are talking about the literal body, an exteriority embedded in a locale that is fully spatial and literally so. Thereby the point of origin is inseparable from the space it engenders and orients. It is inescapably an inscribed origin. The inscription is the written origin: traced and inscribed within a system. Unless this inscription is written in, then we would no longer possess, have or be a body proper to ourselves. The entire metaphysics of the Face would literally collapse, but not fall on its face. Derrida argues that within philosophy and within language, within what he terms philosophical discourse we cannot simultaneously maintain, save, preserve or speak of the ideas or themes of positive infinity and of the face. We can only preserve or

unify them and hold them together within the horizon of infinite and indefinite alterity as the irreducibly common horizon of Death and the Other. What he terms 'the horizon of finitude or the finitude of the horizon'⁶².

If the face is body it is mortal. Logic illustrates an infinite chiasmus, as such, for if we speak of infinite alterity as death then we cannot reconcile this with infinite alterity as positivity and presence (God). What we are identifying as a metaphysical transcendence cannot be at once both transcendence toward the other as Death and transcendence toward the other as God, unless of course that God means death. Can he appear, or is he named within the difference that exists between all and nothing? Can God be both all and nothing? Is God both life and death? Is God inscribed here within difference, as Difference itself? Negative theology is born at this frontier. It speaks a speech that knows itself doomed to failure, enmeshed as it is in the finite. Levinas has landed himself in troublesome waters. What happens when within your conception of things metaphysical responsibility is responsibility for language, because as Levinas writes in *Totality and Infinity*, 'thought consists of speaking', and metaphysics aims to be a language of communication with God?⁶³ How does one begin to think the other, if the other can be spoken only as exteriority and through exteriority, that is, nonalterity? How does one do this if the speech that must inaugurate and maintain absolute separation is by its essence rooted in space, which cannot conceive of separation and absolute alterity?

Where do we find peace then? We recall what Levinas wished to achieve in *Totality and Infinity*. He was hoping to establish a modern ethic, and this was and is a

⁶² Jacques Derrida: *Writing and Difference*: 1997, p. 115

commendable aim. All Levinas wished to do was re-situate the ethical question. Having criticised the foundations of Levinas's thought does Derrida attempt to recapture or redirect, reclaim Levinas's original aim when he set out the arguments contained within *Totality and Infinity*? Derrida argues that peace is a certain silence, a certain beyond of speech, a certain possibility, albeit as a type of future presence, a certain silent horizon of speech. As soon as discourse opens war begins. Peace and silence are the strange vocation of a language called outside itself by itself. Finite silence is a medium of violence. We experience it as such. What then? Language can only indefinitely tend toward justice by acknowledging and practising the violence within it. We must use violence within violence within an economy of violence. We must use light against light, in order to avoid the worst violence, mainly the violence of the night of repression that precedes discourse. If we take history seriously we must be vigilant. Philosophy must be aware of its historical stature, its stature as an economy. Speech is the first victory against violence, and yet violence did not exist before our possibilities for speech.

Violence and the Transcendental:

Levinas has argued that the 'false-infinity' (a Hegelian term not used by Levinas) is, or would be, the indefinite, negative form of infinity⁶⁴. Levinas himself conceives true alterity as non-negativity (non-negative transcendence), and so he can make the other the true infinity, and make the same (in a strange complicity with negativity) into the false-infinity. We ask a basic question here: how can you separate

⁶³ Jacques Derrida: *Writing and Difference*: 1997, p. 117

⁶⁴ Jacques Derrida: *Writing and Difference*: 1997, p. 119

alterity from negativity? How can alterity be separated from the 'false infinity'? To put it simply, how can absolute sameness not be infinity?

If we follow Levinas we are led to believe that the same is a violent totality, and as such it is finite. Again, as such it is abstract. It is more other than the other. He would have us believe that the same as finite totality would not be the same, but still the other. He appears to be speaking of the other under the rubric of the same, and of the same under the rubric of the other. For, if the finite totality was the same, it could not be thought or posed as such, without becoming other than itself. Failing to do so would mean that it could not enter into war with others (finite totalities) and could not be violent. No longer being violent it could not be the same in Levinas's sense, of what we call a finite totality. When war is engaged in, we must begin to speak of the other's other, gaining access thereby to the other as an other self. At this point then it no longer exists as a totality in Levinas's sense.

How do we escape this minotaur's maze? We might begin by conceiving the false-infinity as irreducible. Where can we find a tenable position? One position we can live with is found in the writings of Edmund Husserl. He set about demonstrating the irreducible nature of intentional incompleteness, and therefore of alterity. If consciousness is irreducible then it can never become absolute self-consciousness. In some future parousia of an absolute knowledge it cannot be reassembled absolutely close to itself by its very self-definition. Can we think of the 'false-infinity' without the true infinity lurking too far behind, near, alongside it, for we cannot conceive of the false without thinking of the true? Husserl consistently argued that vision always calls into question the necessity, utility, function, or adequate nature of the division or

structure, inside-outside. We are continually forced by our vision to the point where we overflow our constricting horizons. We deal with incompleteness the minute we set out on the path of pursuit that leads us toward the transcendent. Husserl's position is that we are creatures of immanent perception that are placed or occur within the infinite horizon of the flux of experience.

For example, we can speak of the *Idea* in the Kantian sense. This designates the infinite overflowing of a horizon, which due to an absolute and essential necessity can never be, or become, an object itself. The horizon cannot become an object because it is the unobjectifiable wellspring of every object in general. The concept of horizon turns every constitutive act into an object, and in that very move opens the work of objectification to infinity. We must reverse our perspective and realise that in phenomenology we do not speak of the constitution of horizons but rather the horizon of constitution. This is valuable in the context of Derrida's debate with Levinas. This is because the Husserlian horizon takes the form of an indefinite opening and thus offers itself, ceaselessly, without any possible end to the negativity of constitution. This project, role or task, Derrida implies, keeps it from all totalization while at the same time preserves it from the illusion of the immediate presence of a plenitudinous infinity in which the other is absolutely and untraceably swallowed. We respect exteriority, thereby, realising that our consciousness cannot but be infinitely inadequate in its approach to the infinite (and indeed the finite). We dwell within the thought of the eternal irreducibility of the other to the same, but of the other appearing as other for the same. And it is at this point within the world of phenomenology that ethics finds its true freedom and its absolute radicality.

What are the implications of Husserl's concept of horizon? It means that the ultimate jurisdiction of evident truths is infinitely open, is open for every type of possible object, that is, for every conceivable sense present for consciousness in general. Derrida posits that no discourse (for example, the one offered by Levinas in *Totality and Infinity*) can be meaningful, can even be thought or understood, without drawing upon the layer of phenomenological truth proposed by the writings of Husserl. When we begin to speak of the possibilities of essence; that which guides all concepts; what is presupposed or assumed when one proceeds to speak of ethics, transcendence, of infinity, et al, we have to be in the domain of ideas accessible to concrete consciousness at the most general level, for, if not no human discourse or thought would be possible at all. We are in the domain of a transcendental phenomenology and prior truths, from which a phenomenology of ethics must take root. We are at the beginnings of thought, truth, value, before concrete positions are argued for, created, begin, or are held, even acted upon.

Derrida notes the surprise of reading in Levinas's work *Totality and Infinity* the phrase: '*from beyond the totality or history*'⁶⁵. There is a presupposition in the phrase that the totality is finite and that history can be a finite totality, and finally that there is no history beyond the finite totality. Derrida will argue for the position that history is impossible, actually meaningless within a finite totality, and that it is impossible and meaningless within the positive and actual infinity. Derrida elaborates ideas here that will preoccupy him for the rest of his writing life: the idea of *differance* developed in *Of Grammatology* and the aporetic developed in *Khora, Sauf*

⁶⁵ Jacques Derrida: *Writing and Difference*: 1997, p. 122

le Nom, and *Aporias*.⁶⁶ Derrida argues that history keeps to the difference between totality and infinity, history being precisely that which Levinas calls transcendence and eschatology, a system that is neither finite nor infinite, but a structural totality that escapes this alternative in its functioning, escaping the archaeological and the eschatological by inscribing them within itself.

Levinas's tussle with Husserl:

Levinas has a disagreement with Husserl, with positions developed and outlined by Husserl in his *Cartesian Meditations*. According to Levinas, by making the other the ego's phenomenon constituted by analogical appresentation on the basis of belonging to the ego's own sphere, Husserl allegedly missed the infinite alterity of the other and ultimately reduced it to the same. Levinas reiterates often that as soon as one makes of the other an alter ego then one neutralises its absolute alterity.

For Derrida Husserl is involved in a different strategy in the *Cartesian Meditations* than Levinas is prepared to admit. What preoccupies Husserl according to Derrida is how the other as other, in its irreducible alterity, is presented to me. Husserl will argue it is presented to me as originary non-presence. The ego's phenomenon is the other as other: the phenomenon of a certain non-phenomenality that is irreducible for the ego as ego in general. We cannot encounter the alter ego (in the very form of the encounter set up by Levinas's thought), it is impossible to meet and know it, with respect, in language or experience, if this other, in its alterity, does not appear for an ego (in general). To quote Derrida: 'one could neither speak, nor have any sense of the

⁶⁶ Jacques Derrida: *On the Name*. Stanford Univ. Press: California: 1995, Thomas Dutoit (ed.);

totally other, if there was not a phenomenon of the totally other, or evidence of the totally other as such⁶⁷. And to allow Husserl speak of his dilemma in his own voice: "They, (the other *egos*) however, are not simple representations or objects represented within me, synthetic unities of a process of verification taking place "within me", but precisely "others"...subjects for this same world...subjects who perceive the world...and who thereby experience me, just as I experience the world and in it, "others" (*Cartesian Meditations*)⁶⁸.

Here we meet a core issue for Husserl in the fifth of the *Cartesian Meditations*. His most central affirmation concerns the irreducibly mediate nature of the intentionality aiming at the other as other. The other as transcendental other (other absolute origin and other zero point in the orientation of the world), can never be given to me in an original way and in person, but only through analogical presentation. The world of poetry begins here. The essence of metaphor is a respect and confirmation of separation and does not reduce the other to the same. We can only approach the other through analogy, for, if I did not approach the other by way of analogy, but immediately, originally and silently, in communion with the other's experience, the other would immediately cease to be the other. Husserl's theme of appresentative transposition indicates, preserves, recognises, the radical separation of the absolute origins.

Bodies, transcendent and natural things, are others in general for my consciousness. They are always outside, and thereby their transcendence is the sign of an already irreducible alterity. We also have something hidden within us. We can only

approach this hidden 'somethingness' through poetry, that is, by means of analogy, anticipation and appresentation. Derrida argues that in relation to the other as transcendent thing, in principle, it is always open to a presentation of the originary and original hidden visage. In Levinas' thought this is never possible. We are talking about a distant and absolute incompleteness that is unapproachable. It would be radically impossible to go around and see things from the other side. The stranger will always be infinitely other because, in essence, no enrichment of his or her profile can give me the subjective face of his or her experience *from his or her perspective* such as he or she has lived it.

Derrida points out the key difference between Husserl's conception of things and that of Levinas. For Husserl when he speaks of the infinitely other what appears to us as such, Husserl legitimates, founds and authorises his discussion, through speaking of the intentional modification of the ego. However, Levinas speaks of the infinitely other without speaking of the intentional modification of the ego which would be a violent act for him, depriving himself thereby of a foundation for his discussion. How can he begin to speak of the infinitely other if it does not appear in the zone of the same? If to follow Husserl is indeed violent then a primary level of transcendental violence is inescapable and exists prior to every ethical choice. Levinas has written in *Totality and Infinity*: 'The other, as other, is not only an alter ego. It is what I myself am not'. He has also written that 'decency' and 'everyday life' incorrectly lead us to believe that 'the other is known through sympathy, as an other like myself, as alter ego'⁶⁹. Husserl adopts a totally different stance. He stresses the other as Other only in its form as ego, in its form of alterity, which cannot be that of

⁶⁷ Jacques Derrida: *Writing and Difference*: 1997, p. 123

things in the world. If the other were not recognized as a transcendental alter ego, it would be entirely in the world and not, as ego, the origin of the world. Husserl stresses the point that the other as alter ego signifies the other as other, irreducible to my ego, precisely because it is an ego, because it has the form of the ego. This is why he is face, can speak to me and understand me. Dissymmetry itself would be impossible without this symmetry, which is not of the world, and which, having no real aspect imposes no limit upon alterity and dissymmetry - in fact, probably makes them, on the contrary, possible.

A basic position of Derrida's against Levinas is crystal clear at this point: we cannot move transcendently toward the other, unless, in my ipseity I know myself to be other for the other. Unless this was the case violence would have no victim or author. It is only when all egos are others for others that we can legitimately speak of violence and its victims and the authors of violence. The infinitely other can be what it is only if it is other, other than. Other than must always be other than myself. It cannot be absolved of a relation to an ego. If it were it would no longer be infinitely, absolutely other. It could no longer be what it is. Derrida argues that this is not some form of self-enclosed game available to language. If it were then the expression 'infinitely other' or 'absolutely other' could not be stated and thought simultaneously. The other cannot be absolutely exterior to the same without ceasing to be other. The same is not and cannot be a totality closed in upon itself, an identity playing with itself, possessing only the appearance of alterity in what Levinas calls economy, work and history. There could not be a 'play of the same' if alterity itself was not already *in*

⁶⁸ Jacques Derrida: *Writing and Difference*: 1997, p. 123

⁶⁹ Jacques Derrida: *Writing and Difference*: 1997, p. 125

the same. Unless there was alterity the play of the Same could not occur in the sense of playful activity, or of dislocation.

What does Derrida achieve with these thoughts? Derrida's basic position is that: the other is absolutely other only if she or he is an ego, that is in a certain way if he or she is the same as I. Simultaneously less other and less 'the same' than I. Are we encountering a form of 'irrationality'? It appears that we find it difficult to translate my relation to the Other into the rational coherence of language. What does this suggest? Derrida bravely ventures to suggest that we can no longer draw inspiration from within the coherence of the Logos, but that thought is stifled in the region of the origin of language as dialogue and difference. We are dealing with an origin that is an inscribed inscription and with the 'irrational' concrete condition of rationality, that which cannot be 'included' within language.

For Derrida to access the egoity of the alter ego as if to its alterity itself can be a peaceful gesture. He has acknowledged the existence of a transcendental and pre-ethical violence. This exists, though, as a general dissymmetry whose archia is the same and permits, actually, the inverse dissymmetry, that is, the very ethical non-violence that Levinas's thought attempts to approach. This transcendental violence, what Levinas might call an ethical violence is the original point that institutes the relationship between two finite ipseities according to Derrida. To gain access to the other as other may well be a violent act. To understand and approach the other involves an approach to their territory. We are in the domain of paradox, for, as Derrida writes: 'this transcendental origin, as the irreducible violence of the relation to

the other, is at the same time nonviolence, since it opens the relation to the other'⁷⁰.

We are within an economy. It is the nature of the economy itself, which, by this opening, will permit access to the other to be determined in ethical freedom as moral violence or nonviolence.

For Derrida violence is the origin of meaning and of discourse during the reign of finitude. The difference between the same and the other, which is not a difference or a relation among others, has no meaning in the infinite, except to speak as Hegel does of the anxiety of the infinite that determines and negates itself. So violence necessarily appears within the horizon of an idea of the infinite. What the idea of otherness means is phenomenality as disappearance. We are not in search of a third elusive path or route. Rather we witness the birth of the *trace*, the word as metaphor whose philosophical elucidation will result in the exploration of contradictions. Without this metaphor or word its originality would not emerge or appear. It must be made to appear. And the phenomenon itself supposes an original contamination by the sign. War is the emergence of speech and of appearing. We are it seems, within the realm of *strife* as first suggested by Martin Heidegger.

Discourse does itself violence, negates itself in order to affirm itself and wages war against the war that institutes it without ever being able to re-appropriate this negativity. We must utter the word in order to avoid the nothingness of pure non-sense. It is the task of philosophy against nihilism, or the task of discourse to choose itself violently in opposition to nothingness or pure non-sense. We witness Derrida's awareness of the contemporary philosophical scene here. And, what is interesting,

⁷⁰ Jacques Derrida: *Writing and Difference*: 1997, p. 128 – 129

writing against it, or at least creatively countering it. Derrida takes Levinas to task for not taking proper responsibility for the terms and implications of his philosophical discourse. Levinas spoke in *Totality and Infinity* of the horizon which 'overflows its framework'⁷¹. By this means Levinas wishes to suggest the abolition of violence by the suspension of the difference between the same and the other. However this also leads to the banishment of any possibility for peace. Levinas's goal can only be achieved through violence. As such, the passage through violence is what we know as history. Levinas is harshly rebuked by Derrida at this point in so far as Derrida reasserts his position that 'no philosophy responsible for its language can renounce ipseity in general, and the philosophy or eschatology of separation may do so less than any other'⁷². Philosophy exists as the discourse between original tragedy and messianic triumph. Through philosophy violence is returned against violence within knowledge, in which original finitude appears; and in which the other is respected within, and by, the same. Why is an experience outside of my own unthinkable and impossible? We are at the limits of reason in general. We can only answer in language, and language itself is only opened by the question. Philosophy opens itself to the question within it and by it. It can only let itself be questioned.

Violence might be inescapable. When we free absolute alterity in the absolute same we are liberating temporality to its movement and so we open access to the living present. This living present might be the absolute form of egological life insofar as it is the absolute form of the opening of time to the other in itself. If egoity is the absolute form of experience, then the present, the presence of the present, and the present of presence, are all originally and forever violent. Our living present is always

⁷¹ Jacques Derrida: *Writing and Difference*: 1997, p. 130

marked by the absence of death. We speak of presence as a form of violence in the sense of being the meaning of finitude and the meaning of meaning as history. Derrida suggests that when we begin to question the very grounds of 'transcendental phenomenology' we encounter the origin and end of phenomenology's logos, in that the naked opening of the question, its silent opening always escapes phenomenology. Yet the silent opening of the question about history as finitude and violence permits the appearance of history as such. We are in pursuit of the origins of the strange dialogue between speech and silence.

Ontology and Violence:

Derrida argues that after Heidegger we have a tendency to hold the position that Being is not simply a predicate of the existent, any more than it is the existent's subject. When we take Being, and he is inclined to do so, contra Levinas, as essence or existence (as Being-such or Being-there), if it is taken as copula or the unitary focal point of all these possibilities, then the Being of the existent does not belong to the realm of predication because it is already implied in all predication in general and makes predication possible. The question of Being becomes the basis for every synthetic or analytic judgement, it exists beyond genre and category, as well as being the most concrete thought of all thoughts, the common root of essence and existence, what allows for every judgement and language itself. We are at the centre of a new understanding or basis of metaphysics. Can we speak of and from the strange difference that exists between Being and the existent? Does this have any meaning? Can we talk about the 'priority' of Being in relation to the existent? This is where

⁷² Jacques Derrida: *Writing and Difference*: 1997, p. 131

Levinas begins his case against core presumptions of Western thought and is the impetus behind much of *Totality and Infinity*. Levinas had sought to question the enslaving of ethics to 'ontology'.

Derrida states: 'there can be an order of priority only between two determined things, two existents'⁷³. As Heidegger has made clear though, Being is nothing outside of the existent and in no way precedes the existent in terms of time or dignity. One cannot legitimately speak of the 'subordination' of the existent to Being or of the ethical relation to the ontological relation. There is no violent subordination here for Being is but always the Being-of this existent. As explicated by Heidegger Being is not a principle and Being is not a principal existent in the form of an *archia* that would permit Levinas to insert the face of a faceless tyrant under the name of Being. The thought of Being is alien to the search for a primary principle, as it exists beyond theory and outside all hierarchies. As Derrida writes: 'if every "philosophy", every "metaphysics", has always sought to determine the first existent, the excellent and truly existent existent, then the thought of the Being of the existent is not this metaphysics or first philosophy. It is not even ontology, if ontology is another name for first philosophy'⁷⁴. The thought of Being is not concerned with and does not yield any power, for power relationships only exist between existents. Levinas has written in *Totality and Infinity*: 'Ontology, as first philosophy, is a philosophy of power'⁷⁵. This may well be true, but, as developed by Heidegger, the thought of Being is not an ontology, a first philosophy, and neither is it a philosophy of power. If it is true, as Heidegger suggests, that the Logos 'is the Logos of no one', he does not mean the anonymity of oppression, the impersonality of the State, or the neutrality of 'one

⁷³ Jacques Derrida: *Writing and Difference*: 1997, p. 136

says⁷⁶. It is anonymous only as the possibility of the name and of responsibility. In his *Letter on Humanism* Heidegger has written: 'But if man must one day arrive in the neighbourhood of Being, he must first learn to exist in that which has no name'⁷⁷.

For Derrida there can be no ethics without this thought of Being. Moreover this thought of Being conditions our respect for the other as what it is: other. Being is nothing outside of the existent. The opening itself amounts to the ontic-ontological difference, and it is impossible to avoid the ontic metaphor in order to articulate Being in language, in order to let Being circulate in language. Language both illuminates and hides Being itself. Being is alone though in its absolute resistance to every metaphor. Thought reaches a point where metaphor itself must be thought of as metaphor, and that is the moment when it has been ripped apart as the moment when it is lifted as the veil which hides or discloses Being. The moment of metaphoricity is the moment when the thought of Being itself emerges. This emergence occurs always under or beneath the emergence of another metaphor. We can only think through and with metaphor, and so, at some level, we are always involved in a poetic world.

To treat Being and the same as categories, or to treat the relationship to Being as a relation to a category which itself could be posed afterward, or subordinated to a determined relation (an ethical relation, for example), Derrida asks, is this not to forbid oneself every determination from the outset? Following a classical Heideggerian line Derrida argues that every determination in effect presupposes the thought of Being. It is only through this thought that we can ground or give meaning

⁷⁴ Jacques Derrida: *Writing and Difference*: 1997, p. 137

⁷⁵ Jacques Derrida: *Writing and Difference*: 1997, p.137

⁷⁶ Jacques Derrida: *Writing and Difference*: 1997, p. 137

⁷⁷ Jacques Derrida: *Writing and Difference*: 1997, p. 137

to Being as other, as other self, to the irreducibility of the existence and the essence of the other, and to consequent responsibility. If Being is always to be let be, and if to think is to let Being be, then Being is indeed the other of thought. But since it is what it is only by the letting-be of thought, and since the latter is thought only by virtue of the presence of the Being which it lets be, then thought and Being, thought and the other are the same; which does not mean identical, or one, or equal.

Like the Other Being is not at all the accomplice of the totality, whether of the finite totality, the violent totality of which Levinas speaks, or of an infinite totality. Being cannot and could not oppress or enclose the existent and its differences and thereby is foreign to the idea of the finite totality, to the infinity of existents, foreign without being another existent or another totality of existents. If, as Levinas would have it, the glance of the other is to command me, then I must be able to let be the other in his freedom as Other. Being itself, however, commands nothing or no one. Being does not lord it over the existent and it is not, in its priority (an inescapably ontic metaphor) is not an *archia*. In order to be liberated we must set the question free that will make our search for the *archia* tremble. The thought of Being is the best, maybe only, means of doing this. For Derrida the pre-conceptual unity of Being, and pre-analogical, is the only road that can break open the possibility of relation between man and God, possibly the most ancient of metaphysical preoccupations.

Could we possibly speak of the face, without reference to the question of Being? Eyes and mouth can only make a face if they 'let be', if they can reach the Being of what is. Since Being is, we do not produce it, but respect it through the glance and speech. There can be no speech without the statement of Being. However,

as Being is nothing outside the determined existent it could not appear outside of the possibility of speech. And so Being is dominated by the theme of unveiling. Derrida speaks of the birth of history and of the world in the ontic determinations unveiled, uttered, in the history of metaphysics. Historical 'epochs' are metaphysical or onto-theological determinations of the Being that thus brackets and reserves itself beneath metaphysical concepts.

Therefore the Site is not an empirical Here but always an *Illic*: for Heidegger, as for the Jew, the Irishman and the Poet. This site is never a given proximity but a promised one. The Sacred of which it speaks belongs not to religion in general, nor to a particular theology, and cannot be determined by any history of religion. It is first the essential experience of divinity or of deity. It precedes every relationship to God or the gods. It presupposes some pre-comprehension of the Deity, of God's Being-god, of the Sacred. Heidegger writes in his *Letter on Humanism* that it is the 'only essential space of divinity which in turn opens only a dimension for the gods and the god...'⁷⁸

This space is within faith and atheism for both presuppose it: 'it is only on the basis of the truth of Being that the essence of the Sacred can be thought. It is only on the basis of the essence of the Sacred that the essence of Divinity must be thought. It is only in the light of the essence of Divinity that one can think and say what the word "God" must designate', writes Heidegger, again in the *Letter on Humanism*⁷⁹. As Derrida writes: 'that the gods or God cannot be indicated except in the Space of the Sacred and in the light of the deity, is at once the limit and the wellspring of finite-

⁷⁸ Jacques Derrida: *Writing and Difference*: 1997, p. 145

Being as history'⁸⁰. We cannot grasp God but we can see him coming. The sacred appears but God remains distant. And so we are at the beginnings of a negative theology, a thought concerned with liberating and acknowledging the ineffable transcendence of an infinite existent. And “ontological” anticipation, transcendence toward Being, permits, then, an understanding of the term “God”, for example, even if this understanding is but the ether in which dissonance can resonate. This transcendence inhabits and founds language, and along with it the possibility of all Being-together'⁸¹.

Derrida dwells in the paradoxical by arguing that only a face can arrest violence, and can do so only because it is a face alone which can provoke it. It is the thought of Being itself which opens the face, without it there would be only pure violence or non-violence. The thought of Being in its unveiling is never far removed from the idea of violence. Being dissimulates itself in order to appear and does violence to itself in order to be stated. A speech produced without violence would offer nothing to the other; it would not be history, and it would show nothing. Such a language would be without the verb *to be* and one wonders hypothetically what sort of language it would be. It would be a language of pure adoration and pure invocation, Levinas suggests. It appears that violence emerges with articulation. And so the unhistoricity of meaning at its origin, therefore, is what profoundly separates Levinas from Heidegger. For Heidegger Being is history, and so it is not outside difference, and thus it originally occurs as (non-ethical) violence, as dissimulation of itself in its own unveiling.

⁷⁹ Jacques Derrida: *Writing and Difference*: 1997, p. 146

⁸⁰ Jacques Derrida: *Writing and Difference*: 1997, p. 146

⁸¹ Jacques Derrida: *Writing and Difference*: 1997, p. 146

Derrida concludes by paying homage to Greek thought and the birthplace of his own philosophizing. He acknowledges the site of philosophical encounter as a place that does not offer just occasional hospitality to a thought that remains foreign to it. The Greek is not absent when the Jew and the Christian meet in his home. Greece can never be a neutral, provisional site. Why? The Greek logos can house eschatological prophecy and does not remain outside and accidental for any thought. As Saint John Chrysostom noted no one can treat the Greek sages as 'sages of the outside'. Greek thought recognizes that alterity has to circulate at the origin of meaning, and by this welcoming of alterity into the heart of the logos, the Greek thought of Being has forever protected itself against any and every absolutely surprising convocation.

Conclusion:

The State of Play: Some Useful Tips from Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur, with illustrations from Seamus Heaney and Michael Longley

In the previous chapter we noted the line from Angelus Silesius' poem in which he scandalously observes: 'God plays with creation'¹. We re-call Jacques Derrida's reference to the significance of play in his work *Of Grammatology*. There Derrida wrote: 'one could call play the absence of the transcendental signified as limitlessness of play, that is to say as the destruction of onto-theology and the metaphysics of presence', but we will hope to illustrate, not necessarily the end of all theology but maybe even the place of a new and different beginning². What can we say for this theme of playfulness as expressed in language and art? Has it any relevance for the noble, serious and sublime subjects of philosophy and theology, as they are traditionally understood? In order to clarify our thought, and in fact, as an elaboration of thought on the subject, we call to our aid Hans-Georg Gadamer, especially his work *Truth and Method* in which he devotes a considerable amount of time and space to the theme and act of play.

¹ Jacques Derrida: *On the Name*: Stanford Univ. Press: California: 1995, Ed. Thomas Dutoit

² Jacques Derrida: *Of Grammatology*: 1998, p. 50

Hans-Georg Gadamer on Play

The first thing that Gadamer wishes to make clear is that when we speak of the event, or activity, of 'play' we are not referring to a state of mind of the creator or even of the spectator who is caught up in and enjoying the world of the art object. When we speak of 'play' we are not even referring to the freedom of subjectivity engaged in play, but rather we are referring to the mode of being of the work of art itself.³

Firstly we can make a valid distinction between the activity of play and the behaviour of the player. We note that for the player play is not serious, for that is the reason why he plays in the first instance. However, play exists in a special relation with what is serious, and indeed has its own sacred aura of seriousness about it. In the moment of play the usual purposive relations that pertain to human activity are curiously suspended. Gadamer notes that 'play fulfils its purpose only if the player loses himself in play. Seriousness is not merely something that calls us away from play; rather, seriousness in playing is necessary to make the play wholly play. Someone who doesn't take the game seriously is a spoilsport. The mode of being of play does not allow the player to behave toward play as if toward an object'⁴.

Our aim is to discover more about the nature of play itself. What the concept of play forces us to recognise is that the work of art is not an object that stands over against a subject for itself, but instead, the work of art's true being resides in the fact

³ Hans-Georg Gadamer: *Truth and Method*: Continuum: New York: 1998, trans. by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall: p. 101

⁴ Hans-Georg Gadamer: *Truth and Method*: 1998, p. 102

that it becomes an experience or event that alters the person who has undergone it, or has experienced it. If we can say that the 'subject' of the experience of art is not actually the subjectivity of the person who experiences it but the work itself, then we must recognise that play has its own essence, independent of the consciousness of those who engage in the act of play.

Let us focus briefly on common usages of the word play. In common speech we speak of the play of light and the play of forces; there again we note the play of the waves, and we note somebody's deft use of wordplay. What such colloquial usage suggests is an event or happening of a to-and-fro movement that is not tied to a particular goal that would bring it to an end. So, the event of play has no goal that brings it to an end, but rather it is an activity that renews itself through the means of constant repetition. The play is the occurrence of the movement and thus a play of colours does not mean the happening of one colour playing against another, but rather a process underway in which to sight there is displayed a changing variety of colours. Gadamer notes: 'the primordial sense of playing is the medial one'⁵. One can then speak of 'the *primacy of play over the consciousness of the player*'⁶ (Gadamer's italics).

We can all relate to the view that a vital part of the play is that its movement must not only be without goal or purpose, but also without effort. It must happen by itself, and have the appearance of something that is spontaneously overflowing. Real play, ironically enough, must exist without strain, and is most often experienced as a relaxation. The structure of play is such that it absorbs the player and thereby rids her

⁵ Hans-Georg Gadamer: *Truth and Method*: 1998, p. 103

⁶ Hans-Georg Gadamer: *Truth and Method*: 1998, p. 104

or him of the burden of taking initiatives, which is a typical burden of everyday, mundane existence. Real play artlessly tends towards a refreshing repetition and constant self-renewal. Could we legitimately and ironically speak of it as a type of spirit at work?

Can we say that nature itself is without purpose and intention, in fact is without exertion, and is a very model of constantly self-renewing play? Is it through this fact that it can appear as a very model for art? Are we beginning to come close to a sense of how the Godhead might play with creation, in a way that is joyous, refreshing, and liberating?

Gadamer observes 'the movement to-and-fro obviously belongs so essentially to the game that there is an ultimate sense in which you cannot have a game by yourself'⁷. This does not mean that there is always, necessarily and literally another player. Rather, there must be something else with which the player plays, responding to her or his countermove. Allied to this is the notion of risk. For the game itself is a risk for the player. One can only play with serious possibilities, and so through the play of the game we enjoy a freedom of decision that is endangered and limited.

What is reflected here is the idea that all play is a being-played. For whoever tries a game is in fact the one who is being tried. When we start to play the game once again, we gamble with the fact that this time around the game may not succeed, it may not work out, and we might fail. From this we can ascertain that the real subject of the

⁷ Hans-Georg Gadamer: *Truth and Method*: 1998, p. 105

game is and can only be the game itself, for it is that alone which draws in, seduces and engages us in its spell, and thereby retains us in the there.

The empirical fact of their being many games in our world makes obvious that there is not just one game played within the one spirit. Rather there are many games that differ widely with each other in terms of the spirit with which each is played, and which, more properly, each engenders. The particular nature of a game properly lies in the rules and regulations that prescribe the way the field of the game is filled. Interestingly the playing field in which the game is played is set by the nature of the game itself and is defined most by the structure that determines the movement of the game from within than by what it confronts.

The game does play something. We want to play, and we choose one game over another, and this is for the movement of that game over another. The movement of the game is especially marked out and reserved for that particular game. When we set off a playing field we set off the sphere of play as a closed world. Within this sphere the players comport themselves in a particular way. Gadamer writes: 'every game presents the man who plays it with a task. He cannot enjoy the freedom of playing himself out without transforming the aims of his purposive behaviour into mere tasks of the game. Thus the child gives itself a task in playing with a ball, and such tasks are playful ones because the purpose of the game is not really solving the task, but ordering and shaping the movement of the game itself'⁸.

⁸ Hans-Georg Gadamer: *Truth and Method*: 1998, p. 107

The Benefit of One Example

Let us look at an example from Seamus Heaney's body of poetry.

Markings

We marked the pitch: four jackets for four goalposts,
That was all. The corners and the squares
Were there like longitude and latitude
Under the bumpy ground, to be
Agreed about or disagreed about
When the time came. And then we picked the teams
And crossed the line our called names drew between us.

Youngsters shouting their heads off in a field
As the light died and they kept on playing
Because by then they were playing in their heads
And the actual kicked ball came to them
Like a dream heaviness, and their own hard
Breathing in the dark and skids on grass
Sounded like effort in another world...

It was quick and constant, a game that never need
Be played out. Some limit had been passed,
There was fleetness, furtherance, untiredness
In time that was extra, unforeseen and free.

II

You also loved lines pegged out in the garden,
 The spade nicking the first straight edge along
 The tight white string. Or string stretched perfectly
 To make the outline of a house foundation,
 Pale timber battens set at right angles
 For every corner, each freshly sawn new board
 Spick and span in the oddly passive grass.
 Or the imaginary line straight down
 A field of grazing, to be ploughed open
 From the rod struck in one headrig to the rod
 Stuck in the other.

III

All these things entered you
 As if they were both the door and what came through it.
 They marked the spot, marked time and held it open.
 A mower parted the bronze sea of corn.
 A windlass hauled the centre out of water.
 Two men with a cross-cut kept it swimming
 Into a felled beech backwards and forwards
 So that they seemed to row the steady earth.⁹

⁹ Seamus Heaney: *Seeing Things*: Faber & Faber: London: 1991, p. 8 - 9

Heaney captures well the sense of the role of the imagination in this world of the game. It might be clearer to speak of his obliquely suggesting the invisible boundaries defined by the rules of the game. This is suggested by the lack of definition conveyed by a field of play hinted at by the four jacket goalposts within which the game is played; what is left open are the exact parameters of the field of play which will be argued about later by the boys in the course of the game. Then there is the imaginary line drawn between the players on one team as opposed to another. It is arbitrary but allows the game to proceed. The sense of otherness hinted at by Heaney in the direction of which we are invited or lifted up to in the playing of the game, is found in the phrases 'dream heaviness' and the 'another world' towards which the players are playing. What is the effect of this activity? It alters the world within which the boys exist. They are lifted to a place where time is transformed and their movement within it. They are brought to a place where a nimbleness of activity is experienced and time's heaviness is removed as they move into an extra temporal dimension. Understandably enough this is experienced as a liberation.

Heaney extends the field of reference of his own poem in the second part. He refers there to a gardener's activity of marking out parts of the garden design. Builders use a similar method to construct on the ground the foundation plans of a house. There is something ethereal, unreal, unrealised about the builder's plans as sketched out on the ground, but before too long they will become something solid, founded and very real and tangible. The hint of the poem is that both realities depend on each other for their existence. The moment of unity of these two separate domains is contained within the line: 'all these things entered you/ As if they were both the door and what came through it'. It is worth noting that Heaney's poem contains two

odd sets of diction, unusual and striking in the sense that they clash against each other when placed side by side within the world of this poem. The last sentence quoted above contrasts with the concrete terms of ploughing, gardening and playing football. Its reference is to an abstraction: as are the reference points of terms like 'dream heaviness' and 'some limit'. Phrases like these contrast with the concreteness of reference behind 'the actual kicked ball'. The opposite of actual is imagined or unreal, and that ball is also kicked in this poem, strangely enough, and has to be if the 'actual kicked ball' line is to make any sense. That is part of Heaney's magical achievement in the poem.

The poem's movement is contained in its paradoxical final image. We have the two men rowing the steady earth. The key verb is 'seeming' and the argument of the poem is that the imagined, virtual world is as important, significant and influential as the 'real', narrowly defined. And one key way to enter or access this world is through the play of the game.

Let us return to Gadamer. Gadamer argues that performing a task successfully 'presents it'. Play is limited to presenting itself. It, like the world of nature, is a form of self-presentation. This draws on the player to present him or herself in the course of the game too. Gadamer writes: 'only because play is always presentation is human play able to make representation itself the task of a game'¹⁰. And this representation is always for someone, especially so when we are in the realm of art or the religious rite.

¹⁰ Hans-Georg Gadamer: *Truth and Method*: 1998, p. 108

We note the 'in between' nature of the game. We have said that a game does not have its being within the consciousness of the player or within his or her attitude, but rather that the play draws either her or him into its dominion and fills them with its spirit. In this activity the player experiences the game as a reality that surpasses him or her. In a sense artistic presentation exists always for someone even if there is no evident presence of someone listening or watching.

Gadamer calls the change in which human play comes to its true consummation in being art a '*transformation into structure*'¹¹ (Gadamer's italics). The word transformation means that something is suddenly and as a whole something else, with the transformed thing that it has become being its true being. In the play too the playwright and the players cease to be themselves in a way and become utterly only what they are playing. The world of the play is another world, maybe a closed world, and is its own measure and measures itself by nothing outside of itself. The action of the drama exists entirely within itself. Gadamer notes: 'it no longer permits of any comparison with reality as the secret measure of all verisimilitude. It is raised above all such comparisons - and hence also above the question of whether it is all real - because a superior truth speaks from it'¹².

What happens in art in this instance? What *is* emerges. What is produced and brought to the light is what has been constantly hidden and withdrawn. And so what we experience in a work of art and what invites our attention and sustains it is how true the work of art is. Within the work of art we know and recognise something and ourselves. The real joy of recognition is the discovery of knowing more than is

¹¹ Hans-Georg Gadamer: *Truth and Method*: 1998, p. 110

¹² Hans-Georg Gadamer: *Truth and Method*: 1998, p. 112

already familiar. We touch upon the essence of things. And so the play has a revelatory dimension to it. We cannot then define the being of art as of something that is an object for aesthetic consciousness, for the aesthetic attitude is more than it knows of itself. For art is a part of the event of being that occurs in presentation. And so Gadamer can write: 'what we have called a structure is one insofar as it presents itself as a meaningful whole. It does not exist in itself, nor is it encountered in a mediation (*Vermittlung*) accidental to it; rather, it acquires its proper being in being mediated'¹³. There is primarily the event or fact of its being embodied. And yet the work can only open up from itself its own possibilities of being. We are in a situation where we are both bound and free.

Play in the Concrete Instance

Let us test our analysis by looking closely at some poems. We will look at a clutch of poems by contemporary Belfast poet Michael Longley from his collection *Gorse Fires*.

The Velocipede

He walks past my bedroom window carrying a spade.
 That Joseph Murphy, father of four sets of twins,
 Jockey, lover of horses, the gun club's secretary,
 Should hide in his cottage a ledger full of poems
 Is hardly surprising: consider his grandfather
 Who beachcombed from the strand barrels and spars

¹³ Hans-Georg Gadamer: *Truth and Method*: 1998, p. 117

And built the first velocipede in Thallabaun.
 Out of an umbrella and old sheets he improvised
 A parachute, launched himself from the byre roof
 And after a brief flight was taken to hospital.
 On home-made crutches and slipping all the tethers
 Joseph Murphy's grandfather swings past my window.¹⁴

This poem tells the story of Joseph Murphy, and at one level it is a straightforward narrative poem. Longley presents us with a picture of a man solidly rooted in the communal world in which he was born and raised. He loves horses and shooting and so is well grounded in 'real' life; the poem presents his being involved in what are the respectable pursuits of the average individual of those parts. The surprise is the revelation that he is a closet poet. Longley traces a genealogy of oddity for him, his grandfather was a bit of an innovator, a man who followed his own star, let his creativity lift him out of the ordinary world to which he customarily belonged. Joseph Murphy's grandfather risked social ridicule by being childish and indulging a type of play normally reserved for naïve children, as well as eventually enduring physical injury, by building the first velocipede in Thallabaun. He aimed for freedom but found he was bound to the world in a way that he could not ultimately escape. He was motivated by a desire to fly, to move above the ordinary and see it from a new perspective, from within a new and different element. Longley uses the telling phrase 'slipping all the tethers'.

¹⁴ Michael Longley: *Gorse Fires*: Secker & Warburg: London: 1992, p. 14

Was Joseph Murphy and his grandfather in search of what a conventional theology might call 'elevating grace'? In terms of Gadamer's analysis there is an expression of desire for transformation, of needing to escape one element by moving through another. One sought for it through poetry and the other through the act of flying. Were they pursuing an intuition that there was more to their humanity than their mundane world and social networks allowed or grasped? The poet hints at his participation in this desire and world in the final image of the poem. Longley says he can see Joseph Murphy's grandfather swinging outside his window. At a literal level we could say this must be a lie. For he has only imagined it after watching Joseph Murphy pass by his window with a spade and his subsequent reflections on his possessing a ledger full of poems and then the meditation on his family's past. However, the story of the grandfather was only recollected; yet Longley hints at the truth and substance of his recollection through the concrete imagery of the grandfather swaying outside his window. Within the world of the poem such a statement has its own truth and validity. Real art does not and cannot lie.

The second poem we look at from *Gorse Fires* deals with Longley's mother.

The Balloon

You are a child in the dream and not my mother.
 I float above you ahead as in a hot air balloon
 That casts no shadow on you looking up at me
 Across the shallow streams and fields of shiny grass
 As though there were neither malformation nor pain.
 This is the first time ever I have seen you running.

You are a child in the dream and not my mother

Which may be why I call out from the balloon to you:

'Jump over the hedges, Connie, jump over the trees'.¹⁵

From the circumstances revealed in the poem we gather that Longley's mother was disabled in 'real' life, certainly she could not walk 'properly', for she has suffered from 'malformation' and 'pain' and the poet has never seen her running. The scenario imagined by Longley in the world of his poem is his having a vision of his mother running and jumping and being so agile, fit and able, to an almost superhuman degree, that she can spring over hedges and trees. Longley imagines himself as if in a balloon floating above the world in which this is happening. Once again we see him develop the image of flight as a type of transcendental metaphor that symbolizes the possibilities of poetry itself. The idea of flight allows one to rise above the mundane, the real, and the ordinary into the world of the imagined and open-ended possibility. Thus he looks at the world of his mother's real suffering and disability by constructing a counter-world. This suggests a dissatisfaction with the given and a yearning for something more, an 'other'. We appear to be people of a dual identity too. There is another part of ourselves that can think again of other possibilities apart from the concrete facts of our being in the world. What is this strange capacity? Again, is the poet in pursuing the possibilities of his imagination and the medium in which he works language and metaphor moving towards a world of 'other-ness'? So we see the poet enter a dreamscape that moves him to an-other place of better things.

¹⁵ Michael Longley: *Gorse Fires*: 1992, p. 34

The last poem is a fascinating observation of the ritual life of a rural Irish village. Watch how Longley constructs the role of the narrator of the poem:

Detour

I want my funeral to include this detour
 Down the single street of a small market town,
 On either side of the procession such names
 As Philbin, O'Malley, MacNamara, Keane.
 A reverent pause to let a herd of milkers pass
 Will bring me face to face with grubby parsnips,
 Cauliflowers that glitter after a sunshower,
 Then hay rakes, broom handles, gas cylinders.
 Reflected in the slow sequence of shop windows
 I shall be part of the action when his wife
 Draining the potatoes into a steamy sink
 Calls to the butcher to get ready for dinner
 And the publican descends to change a barrel.
 From behind the one locked door for miles around
 I shall prolong a detailed conversation
 With the man in the concrete telephone kiosk
 About where my funeral might be going next.¹⁶

Ostensibly marking the passing of a hearse down a village street, what the poet actually achieves is a description of the life of the village in which the individual

¹⁶ Michael Longley: *Gorse Fires*: 1992, p. 7

being buried once partook. Through the ritual of death we are forced into observing the daily rituals of living. And in asking, maybe praying, that his funeral will be like the one being enacted before him, the poet is in fact elevating the life he witnesses. It is worthy of emulation. In disappearing into the everyday Longley finds something to elevate, to praise. We notice the daily rituals: the wife cooking dinner for the butcher, the changing of the barrels. Longley casts a loving eye over the debris of the village, as if seeing it for the last, maybe first time: the hay rakes, the broom handles, the gas cylinders.

The really striking achievement of the poem is Longley's construction though of the 'I' of the poem. While dead he also maintains a presence and effectiveness in the world, for it is he who watches and participates in the event of his own funeral. He is conversing with, playing against the other characters in the poem's world. His identity, his concrete place and location are constantly called into question, or are shifting and changing in a fluid movement. He will move through the street observing the everyday goings on of village life, but he will also be conducting a conversation with the person at the other end of the telephone line about this funeral. Is that what he is actually doing in this poem? Because the poem is about a hypothetical event that will one day be real, for he will have a funeral at some point in the future. The whole poem is an invention and so can consider this possibility. We know what the poet is talking about, we can understand him and validate his desires.

Within the Playground of Philosophy

What are the benefits of such an understanding of 'play' and its importance for philosophical thought as outlined by Gadamer? As John Caputo writes in *Radical Hermeneutics*: 'the "principle of reason" is all around us today. As a principle, reason is an *arche*, a *princeps*, a prince, which like all royalty makes its presence felt everywhere. It has an enormous sphere of influence (*Machtbereich*), leaving nothing out, no entity untouched by the claim it makes. It demands reasons, sufficiency, the rendering of a sufficient reason, for everything. So how can we speak of the play of reason if reason is a deadly serious principle?'¹⁷ Poetry as a manifestation of play can rescue us from the deathly efficiency of reason.

Martin Heidegger was aware of this, especially as he lived through the dawning of the nuclear age, and in his later writings set about de-limiting the sphere of influence enjoyed by reason. This is part of Heidegger's well-noted turn towards the poets. Heidegger spoke of the *Ab-grund*, the Abyss, with which the poet is an intimate familiar, a sphere of groundlessness. It is a region where play is to be found and which is outside the reach of principle. Heidegger was in search of a sphere of poeticising and thinking which eluded rationalization, especially when he arrived at the point in his thought where he discovered that the principle of reason can offer no reason for its reasonableness.

¹⁷ John D. Caputo: *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project*: Indiana Univ. Press: Bloomington: 1987, p. 222

Play's Import for Theology

Jean-Luc Marion notes in *God Without Being* that the real challenge of theology lies in the Eucharist and '*the theologian must go beyond the text to the Word, interpreting it from the point of view of the Word*'¹⁸ (Marion's italics). Yet we accept as Christian theologians that we cannot through any hermeneutic reach a view that could open our eyes to see the exegete of the Father (John 1:18). However, we can reach a shining through an absence, when we realise that once the Word has been announced it disappears in favour, or towards the benefit of the eucharistic moment (Luke 24: 28 – 33). The Word intervenes in person in the Eucharist to accomplish in this way the hermeneutic. There is a profound implication for theology: the text, where the Word's effect of meaning is fixed in verbal signs, consigns the incommensurability of the Word: the Scriptures thus exceed the limits of the world (John 19: 30, 21: 35). Potentially then we have an infinite reserve of meaning. Do we witness an expression of this in the poetic word? The implication of this for interpretation is immediately obvious; there must also be an infinite response on the part of interpreters, with each one leading a fragment of the text back to the Word, in taking the point of view of the Word; so, we must have then an infinite amount of eucharistic hermeneutic activity. Marion writes: 'in order to give an (infinite) hermeneutic of the (finite) text in view of the (infinite) Word, an infinity of situations are mobilized from the point of view of the Word, hence an infinity of Eucharists, celebrated by an infinity of different communities, each of which leads a fragment of

¹⁸ Jean-Luc Marion: *God Without Being: Hors-Texte*: Univ. of Chicago Press: Chicago: 1995, Trans. by Thomas A. Carlson: p. 149

the words back to the Word, to the exact degree that each one repeats and welcomes eucharistically the Word in person'¹⁹.

This opens up some room for play. Theology can learn from the achievements of play in poetry as we have examined them above. The flexibility of play as a mode of comprehending aesthetic activity and interpretation lends itself quite readily as a model for activity in theological thought. Maybe they provide the base model that theology should be following? We can learn from the new horizons opened up by the poet, and can learn something about the nature of communion as pursued through the poet's natural reliance on metaphoric strands of thought. We see this in the examples given above. Michael Longley in the poems examined above illustrates a community orientation worth emulating; in the poem 'The Velocipede' there is a sense of familial ancestry, of communal activity between father and son, but also indirectly the poet who shares a similar activity to the son in the poem. In 'Detour' a community and its ritual is observed and the poet aims to participate in that ritual in a centrally important way. The poet offers to theology a way of opening up new horizons of thought and connection, and his or her exuberance of thought as evidenced by the many examples provided counters nihilistic conceptions of the world, through a radical re-thinking of the human situation, and a continually striking representation of human ways of being within new contexts.

Paul Ricoeur and 'Oneself as Another'

To help us pursue our strain of thought we turn to philosophy once again. In his book *Oneself As Another* Paul Ricoeur is interested in pursuing the question: what

¹⁹ Jean-Luc Marion: *God Without Being: Hors-Texte*: 1995, p. 157

mode of being belongs to the self, and what sort of being and entity is it? He is also interested in the relation of the self to others, or the relation of selfhood to otherness. He writes that 'only a being that is a self is *in* the world; correlatively, the world in which this being is, is not the sum of beings composing the universe of subsisting things or things ready-to-hand. The being of the self presupposes the totality of a world that is the horizon of its thinking, acting, feeling – in short, of its *care*'²⁰. Again he notes: 'there is no world without a self who finds itself in it and acts in it; there is no self without a world that is practicable in some fashion'²¹.

In what ways do we note our activity as human beings? One example is our move from inadequate to adequate ideas about the world, at least about ourselves and things within the world. This signals the possibility of our being truly active. It also constitutes an ethical activity. Hereby we note a close connection between the internal dynamism that is life and the power of human intelligence that presides over the movement from inadequate to adequate ideas. We become powerful as human beings when we note our horizontal and external dependence upon all things, as well as our vertical and immanent dependence with regard to the primordial power that motivates us as human beings.

How do we account for the work of otherness that we experience at the heart of self-hood? Firstly we have an experience of our own body as a mediator between the self and the world that is itself taken in, in accordance with variable degrees of practicability and foreignness. The self finds itself in relation to the foreign, in the very precise sense of other than self, which implies an otherness at the very heart of

²⁰ Paul Ricoeur: *Oneself As Another*: Univ. of Chicago Press: Chicago: 1994, p. 310

²¹ Paul Ricoeur: *Oneself As Another*: 1994, p. 311

inter-subjectivity. Then there is the relation of the self to itself. So our sense of otherness indicates a high degree of complexity and relational density.

Let us look a little closer at Ricoeur's understanding of the importance of our bodies and of the flesh in any analysis of the self and otherness. We note that if others are bodies, it is so because we have a body ourselves or are a body. I am for myself my own body. And thus we can ascribe mental and physical predicates to one and the same entity because the human body is at one and the same time a body among others and my body. We note also the twofold adherence of our bodies to the domain of things and to that of the self due to our observing that human action constitutes an event in the world, designating its author in a self-referential manner, because the latter belongs to the world in a mode in which the self is constitutive of the very sense of this belonging. Our body is the very place of this belonging.

Ricoeur notes 'this global phenomenon of anchoring'. In any ontology of the flesh we must emphasize one important dimension of the body, and that is its passivity in the presence of suffering which is undergone and endured. Ricoeur writes: 'most of the evil in the world comes from violence among human beings. Here, the passivity belonging to the metacategory of one's own body overlaps with the passivity belonging to the category of other people; the passivity of the suffering self becomes indistinguishable from the passivity of being the victim of the other (than) self'²². This alerts us to the body as a place where resistance gives way to effort. We are aware of our body and its intimate diversity, as well as its extension irreducible to any imagined or represented extension, its mass as well as its gravity.

²² Paul Ricoeur: *Oneself As Another*. 1994, p. 320

Through active touch things attest to their existence as indubitably as our own. Existence is a form of resistance, attesting to our existence and that of the world.

Ricoeur will also recognise the otherness of our own flesh. We can reign over our bodies. But they resist us in their strangeness. And so Ricoeur will write: 'ontologically, the flesh precedes the distinction between the voluntary and the involuntary'²³. Thereby selfhood implies its own proper ownness for which the flesh is the support. And so, even if the otherness of the stranger can by some impossibility be derived from the sphere of ownness, the otherness of the flesh will always precede it. Husserl noted that I must make the flesh part of the world if it is to appear as a body among bodies.

We note in this context Heidegger's concept of thrownness. This phrase suggests the way in which *Dasein* becomes a burden for itself, and suggests the character of the weight of existence being such as to constitute a burden for oneself, of being delivered over to oneself, which suggests a certain being there and self-intimacy. And so we touch upon what Ricoeur will describe as 'the strangeness of human finiteness, insofar as it is sealed by embodiment, hence what we call here primary otherness, in order to distinguish it from the otherness of the foreign'²⁴.

We will examine now the otherness of other people. We will realize that the Other is not only the counterpart of the Same but belongs to the intimate constitution of its sense. In fact the *self* is differentiated from the *ego* by the degree to which it is

²³ Paul Ricoeur: *Oneself As Another*: 1994, p. 324

²⁴ Paul Ricoeur: *Oneself As Another*: 1994, p. 327

affected by the activities of others. One obvious example is the way in which we are affected by the address of others to us in speech. Ricoeur notes that this is the premise on which fiction operates. Rather than distracting us with the unreal, the reception of fictional works widens our experience and makes a vital contribution to the imaginary and symbolic constitution of the actual exchanges of words and actions. Ricoeur notes that in any given moment of ethical decision there is both an agent and a patient, with the possibility that at any point in the future these roles may be reversed, and so, we must retain a necessary plurality in our thinking, for the acting beings in any ethical moment are each affected by forces operating reciprocally. And so we are enjoined to conceive of a 'two-pronged conception of otherness', one 'that does justice in turn to the primacy of self-esteem and also to the primacy of the convocation to justice coming from the other'²⁵.

Ricoeur notes that we can only really speak of a 'world' when we have established a 'common nature'. And we can only build an analogy when we recognise that my body is already held to be a body among bodies. 'Only a flesh (for me) that is a body (for others) can play the role of first *analogon* in the analogical transfer from flesh to flesh'²⁶. We must also acknowledge the other's givenness, which we do when we recognise that intentionalities that are directed to the other as foreign, that is, as other than me, go beyond the sphere of ownness in which they are nevertheless rooted. We can never live the experience of others although we can commute between our separate selves on the basis of an analogising apprehension whereby we gather the other possesses a body like my own. It can only be analogical as I can never convert the other's experience into an event of ordinary presentation. We bear in mind that

²⁵ Paul Ricoeur: *Oneself As Another*. 1994, p. 331

²⁶ Paul Ricoeur: *Oneself As Another*. 1994, p. 333

there will always be a gap both implied and real in this procedure, for the notion of analogising grasp suggests the assimilation of one term to another, and what is implied in the necessity of the use of analogues is the notion or fact of a fundamental dissymmetry.

For Ricoeur, Immanuel Levinas' criticism of Husserl touches upon this fact. As Levinas understood Husserl, if one represents something to oneself one assimilates it to oneself, and thus includes it in oneself, and hence you deny it thereby of its otherness. For Levinas the face of the other when raised before me is not an appearance that I can include within the sphere of my own representations but is rather a spectacle, a voice that tells me 'Thou shalt not kill'. In me the movement from the Other completes its trajectory, with the other constituting me as responsible. In Levinas there is a desire to avoid the Same as it speaks a language of totalization. With Levinas there is a desire to protect the exteriority of the Other which can never be expressed in the language of relation. However, Ricoeur points out we are left with the question of 'how are we to think the irrelation implied by this otherness in its movement of absolution?'²⁷ Ricoeur also notes that Levinas' conception of the self is such that it renders selfhood devoid of any openness and capacity for discovery.

Ricoeur then proceeds to emphasize the importance of the conscience in any consideration of the sense of the self, and conscience is implicitly connected to notions of otherness. For, under the impetus of conscience the self is capable of taking hold of itself in the anonymity of the 'they'. We experience conscience as a sort of

²⁷ Paul Ricoeur: *Oneself As Another*: 1994, p. 336 - 337

call or appeal indicated by the metaphor of the voice. In this interior, intimate conversation the self appears to be called upon and to be affected in a unique way. It is Heidegger who notes that conscience does not say anything, *delivers no message in the midst of a commotion but rather is completely immanent*: ‘the call undoubtedly does not come from someone else who is with me in the world. The call comes *from me and yet from beyond me and over me*’²⁸. Ricoeur sees this as a moment of otherness proper to the phenomenon of conscience, for listening to the voice of conscience signifies the being-enjoined by the Other. And, after Hegel, Ricoeur will ask: is this Other not, in one way or another, other people?

In the concluding pages of the last chapter of *Oneself As Another*, ‘What Ontology in View?’, Paul Ricoeur notes Sigmund Freud’s notions about moral conscience. For Freud moral conscience is another name for the superego. The superego itself is made up of sedimented and forgotten, often repressed identifications with parental and ancestral figures. Freud’s notions although dressed up in the garments of science really concur with populist notions that the voices of our ancestors continue to make themselves heard among the living, thereby ensuring the transmission of wisdom, but also its intimate personal reception each step along the way. An interesting thought, although Ricoeur points out that the generational model of conscience runs into problems when we consider that there is an unavoidable movement of infinite regress in which the Other progressively loses from generation to generation its initial, presumed familiarity. And whence does the ancestor draw the authority of their voice, if not from their privileged tie to the Law, immemorial just as they are?

²⁸ Paul Ricoeur: *Oneself As Another*: 1994, p. 348 - 349

Ricoeur is critical of the reduction that results from the work of Emmanuel Levinas as a whole. With Levinas all we are finally left with is the reduction of the otherness of conscience to the otherness of other people. With Heidegger we are left with the reduction of being-in-debt to the strange(r)ness tied to the facticity of our being-in-the-world. Writing continually against the backdrop of Heidegger's thought Immanuel Levinas is left only with the modality of otherness derived from reflection upon the externality of the face. In short, for Levinas, 'the model of all otherness is the other person'. Ricoeur sees that as restrictive, and seeks to retain a third modality of otherness, '*being enjoined as the structure of selfhood*'²⁹ (italics Ricoeur's). For him if the injunction coming from the other is not part and parcel of self-attestation, it loses its character of injunction, for lack of the existence of a being-enjoined standing before it as its respondent. Ricoeur concludes his reflection humbly: 'Perhaps the philosopher as philosopher has to admit that one does not know and cannot say whether this Other, the source of the injunction, is another person whom I can look in the face or who can stare at me, or my ancestors for whom there is no representation, to so great an extent does my debt to them constitute my very self, or God – living God, absent God – or an empty place. With this aporia of the Other, philosophical discourse comes to an end'³⁰.

²⁹ Paul Ricoeur: *Oneself As Another*: 1994, p. 354

³⁰ Paul Ricoeur: *Oneself As Another*: 1994, p. 355

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