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Time at a Standstill. Some Remarks on Acceleration and Subjectivity

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Abstract

From an experiential point of view, acceleration is a space-shrinking and a time-stressing phenomenon. Assuming that this phenomenon has reached a decisive pervasiveness in late modernity, so that it has become determinative of social relations in general, a question about its impact on the structure of experience and of the subject of experience bears a double signification: on the one hand, it concerns temporality, i.e., the structure of the experience of time, and, on the other hand, it concerns historicity, that is, the structure of the experience of historical time. I suppose that the development of this question requires examining the structure of the experience of the present, given that acceleration may be considered at first sight as an intensive experience of the present. But, then, an examination of the structure of the experience of the present is deeply rooted in the structure of the present itself. So, my argument relates three concepts: experience, present, and acceleration, the latter according to the double effect in which this phenomenon appears (space-shrinking and time-stressing).

Keywords: experience of the present, acceleration, history, modernity

From an experiential point of view, acceleration is a space-shrinking and a time-stressing phenomenon. Assuming that this phenomenon has reached a decisive pervasiveness in late modernity, so that it has become determinative of social relations in general, a question about its impact on the structure of experience and of the subject of experience bears a double signification: on the one hand, it concerns temporality, i.e., the structure of the experience of time, and, on the other hand, it concerns historicity, that is, the structure of the experience of historical time. I suppose that the development of this question requires examining the structure of the experience of the present, given that acceleration may be

considered at first sight as an intensive experience of the present. But, then, an examination of the structure of the experience of the present is deeply rooted in the structure of the present itself. So, my argument relates three concepts: experience, present, and acceleration, the latter according to the double effect in which this phenomenon appears (space-shrinking and time-stressing).

Regarding this threefold relation, a relevant issue concerns the tolerance threshold of the subject of experience with respect to acceleration. You may recall some old—and in some cases not so old—sci fi movies in which the performers had to make a variety of extreme gestures in order to suggest the impact that an accelerating spaceship exerts on their bodies: let us take this sort of bizarre pantomime as a hint pointing to that threshold. It could be argued—hypothetically—that the experience of acceleration strains the subject of experience to the point where experience founders in its sheer condition of possibility, meaning that there is a limit beyond which acceleration cannot be experienced as such, but—provided that the creature stands the test—only suffered as a kind of dull, continuous noise or, if you wish, as something of a still stand, a continuity of the same.

Here the threshold, the limit is the thing that matters. If the experience of acceleration at its highest intensity limits with the very condition of possibility of experience, what could this condition be? To begin with, one cannot experience the condition of possibility of experience. This condition is the blind spot of experience, which is active in it, but never appropriable for experience at the moment of its presence—of its present. This condition, then, is a certain lapse, a leap, an interval, a lacuna that opens in the present of experience. You never experience the present of your experience. In this primary sense, experience is always a posteriori, *nachträglich*, *après-coup*. The present of experience is something of a blow, a stroke: you don't feel the blow instantly; at the moment it hits, it has an anesthetic effect. According to this, the present of experience is necessarily disrupted in itself, and its structure is unavoidably determined by an intrinsic deferral. Without this structural deferral there would be neither past nor future, neither memory nor perception, neither thinking nor even the possibility of language; there wouldn't be the possibility of relating to oneself nor of opening oneself to otherness—there would be no possibility at all.

It could be argued, perhaps, that the striving for ever increasing acceleration—as seen from the point of view of the subject—seeks anxiously precisely this: to remove any deferral, to make experience coincide with its condition, to bring it to a pure and simple present, which would mean the standstill of experience. Yet it may be a desperate search.

In his Preface to the *Genealogy of Morality* Nietzsche states that we, humans, like busy laborious bees, are occupied only in bringing something home, with neither heart nor ears for “experiences.” And he continues: “On the contrary, like somebody divinely absent-minded and sunk in his own thoughts who, the twelve strokes of midday having just boomed into his ears, wakes with a start and wonders ‘What hour struck?’, sometimes we, too, afterwards rub our ears and ask, astonished, taken aback, ‘What did we actually experience then?’” (Nietzsche 2006, 3)

I return now to the question of acceleration. I am inclined to believe that it is not possible to speak of acceleration as a fundamental and determining vector of the modern (and certainly late modern) individual and social life without bringing complexity into view. In this sense, the essential character of modernity and of its present developments may be envisaged as a constant interplay between acceleration and complexity. Of course, this is nothing new. But the way to tackle the one or the other, or both concepts at a time is diverse

beyond nuances. I confess that I am old-fashioned: although much has been thought and said about this issue during the last century, my understanding of these two concepts owes much to Hölderlin and Hegel, or, more generally, to the consideration of the critical changes that occurred in the transition from the 18th to the 19th century¹. Both, Hölderlin and Hegel had, perhaps, a most penetrating insight into the historical tendencies harbored by the forces to which both concepts and their interplay refer.

In the following I will address the question of acceleration keeping in mind its interplay with complexity. Of course, a proper discussion of both concepts would exceed the limits of this communication. I will develop my considerations under diverse headings that I deem to be relevant in view of the “times of acceleration” (and the “acceleration of time”) that would characterize, precisely, *our* time. These headings will introduce vignettes threaded by the question: what remains of experience in the “times of acceleration”? And this means: what remains of the subject of experience in such “times”? Would it be, if anything, a subject? Or should it be someone or something definitively *other*?

Dislocation

At the beginning of his first Bremen lecture of 1949 on *Das Ding (The Thing)*, in a short preamble entitled “The Point of Reference,” Martin Heidegger comments on the fact that “[a]ll distances in time and space are shrinking.” (Heidegger 2012, 3) A vertiginous transformation of the relation of human beings to time and space is in course, and this transformation is essentially attributable to the multiple technological advances: radio, airplanes, film, recording apparatuses, television. However, this shrinking, “this hasty setting aside of all distances brings no nearness,” (ibid.) sentences Heidegger. He is implying that nearness is not something that you could properly measure by meter units, or by inches or yards. Nearness is not touched by this abolition of distances. It “remains outstanding,” so that “[e]verything washes together into the uniformly distanceless.” (Heidegger 2012, 4) This pervading condition would be “more uncanny,” argues Heidegger, than the bursting into pieces of everything that a nuclear war could bring about. In fact, the horrible, the atrocious (*das Entsetzliche*), the uprooting of everything that is has already occurred. Here are the closing remarks of the preamble:

The horrifying is what transposes [*heraussetzt*] all that is out of its previous essence. What is so horrifying? It reveals and conceals itself in the way that everything presences, namely that despite all overcoming of distance, the nearness of that which is remains outstanding. (Heidegger 2012, 4)

The expression *das Entsetzliche* is translated here as “the horrifying.” That is correct, but the noun means also displacement, dislocation, an abrupt removal (*Heraussetzung*) of something from its usual or proper site, and in this case, according to what Heidegger says, radically of everything, a removal that forecloses the access to the thing, not of course to the Kantian “thing in itself”, because this is part of the closure: the removal under

¹ Under the metaphor of “saddle period,” Reinhart Koselleck conceived the times between 1750 and 1850 (or 1770 and 1830) as the transition from the “Modern Times” (*Neuzeit*) to Modernity (*Moderne*); from a different perspective, Foucault viewed the same period as the “birth of biopolitics” and with it, as the beginning of the new form of power essentially associated with liberalism.

consideration forecloses the access to the thing *as* thing. In this sense, it is properly uncanny, *unheimlich*: and there is a close proximity between the “horrifying” and the uncanny. With these implications, the preamble gives way to the lecture. And it is particularly interesting that, however emphatic the use of the word *das Entsetzliche* is here, there is no trace of it in the following disquisition about “the thing,” unless we take the disquisition about it as a meditation on the “nearness” that remains outstanding (*ent-setzt*) as a result of the technological shaping of experience in the modern world. Anyway, it could be said that the word (*das Entsetzliche, die Entsetzung*) would be, in Heidegger’s view, the proper name of what is at the same time the essence *and* the effect of the shrinking of all distances, let us say, of acceleration². In this sense, it is a concept that deserves further interrogation under the characteristic of the aforesaid structural disruption of the present.

History

In terms of historical experience, it is perhaps the French Revolution that constitutes the decisive stage for the emergence of an explicit sense of acceleration. For good reasons, of course, since the French Revolution could not but be felt as an unprecedented acceleration of historical time. Events evolved one after another at a breathtaking pace, putting to the test the capacity of everyone’s comprehension, including those who deemed themselves as the ones steering the whole process. But in fact, as seen from a broader point of view, this acute sense of acceleration of history epitomized a host of feelings and sensations experienced and of efforts done in order to keep up with multiple and disturbing changes occurring for more than a century in all fields of social and individual life.

This “keeping up” indicates that it became more and more difficult for the subject to relate to her own experience in a manner that could preserve untouched the innermost characteristics of a stable identity: the pace of changes began to be glaringly faster than the subject’s ability to adapt to it, not to say to gain thorough control of it. In a certain way, Romanticism was the most acute response to this challenge. The dialectics of self-annihilation and self-creation (the supremely smart ruse of Romantic irony, as Schlegel, for

² In order to learn something about this Entsetzlichkeit of time and space shrinking in connection with speed and acceleration, we should consult Heidegger’s *Beiträge zur Philosophie* (Contributions to Philosophy) from 1936-1938, known as *Vom Ereignis* (Of the Event or From Enownment). In § 56 “The Lingerings of the Abandonment of Being in the Concealed Manner of Forgottenness of Being”, point 15, he affirms: “the abandonment of being (is] brought nearer by being mindful of the darkening of the world and the destruction of the earth in the sense of acceleration, calculation, the claim of massiveness.” (Heidegger 2000, 83) These three aspects are three concealments of the abandonment of Being, of which Heidegger offers a nearer approach in § 58. Concerning acceleration he says: “Acceleration — of any kind; the mechanical increase of technical ‘speeds,’ and these only a consequence of this acceleration, which means not-being-able-to-bear the stillness of hidden growth and awaiting; the mania for what is surprising, for what immediately sweeps (us) away and impresses (us), again and again and in different ways; fleetingness as the basic law of ‘constancy.’ It is necessary to forget rapidly and to lose oneself in what comes next. From this point of view, then, the false idea of what is high and “highest” in the dis-figuring [Mißgestalt] of maximum accomplishment; purely quantitative enhancement, blindness to what is truly momentary, which is not fleeting but opens up eternity. But from the point of view of acceleration the eternal is the mere lasting of the same, the empty ‘and-so-forth.’ The genuine restlessness of the struggle remains hidden. Its place is taken by the restlessness of the always inventive operation, which is driven by the anxiety of boredom.” (Heidegger 2000, 84f.)

instance, deployed it) was for a fleeting moment the way to save the ego from its absorption in raw and hostile objectivity.

The Revolution was a kind of *Entsetzung*, an abrupt displacement, a dislocation of all earthly things. Not just a temporal displacement, nor a spatial dislocation, but a spatio-temporal disruption, a collapse at once of the place in its present and of the present in its place, which in its core maintains a sort of strange imbalance; strange, because it is this very imbalance that stabilizes at any moment the driving force of the disruption of historical experience and of the subject's sense of historical time.

Language

There were symptoms, symptoms of the most diverse nature and in the most diverse fields. Take for instance language. In an article published in the *Tatler*, 1710, the alleged author of an epistle that is reproduced by the alleged Isaac Bickerstaff, Esq., one of the many monikers of Jonathan Swift, complains about “the great Depravity of our Taste; and the Continual Corruption of our Style.” The core of the corruption is the extended practice of abbreviating words by the elision of vowels, the contraction of consonants, the reduction of two syllables to one, and more severe mutilations, which increase the overload of monosyllables, “which are the Disgrace of our Language.” (Swift 2014, 98) It is a kind of linguistic entropy, a regression that threatens to dissipate the word in the last whisper, at a short distance of the most extreme linguistic project at the Academy of Lagado (third voyage of *Gulliver's Travels*), directed to the total suppression of language in favor of a communication by way of *things*. (Not a proper communication, you would say, but a “commodification.”) It is Swift's critique of the Moderns, as seen from the dominant satirical side of his writing. This critique, in what concerns language, has its very center in the repudiation of the capitalistic structuration of all social relations in the Kingdom, led by the “moneyed class.”

In this sense, it seems sound to say that the Swiftian critique, his taking sides with the Ancients against the Moderns, inasmuch as it concerns the changes of “the English Tongue,” points towards the transition from the countryside to the city. And, of course, the place of the moneyed class is the city, not the rural areas. The city narrows the relations between human beings. The market, as its fundamental reality, urges, sets them in emergency. The linguistic result of such narrowing and urgency is the subordination of language to the same principle that governs economy: language must submit to the rules and requirements of business, it has to become a language of the market, so that its possible nuances and ambiguities do not distract partners from the ends to which it has to ancillary serve. The definitive scope of a totally urbanized society would be the erasure of language, for economic exchange would be total exchange of meaning, and of one and only one univocal meaning: money would replace the word.

In contradistinction to this, as seen from Swift's critical point of view, the countryside characterizes itself by extension and leisure (leisure as spacing of production and business), whose proper expression is the ample phrase, the polysyllabic expansion of words, the vocalic opening. And there is more: for precisely this expansion and leisure make possible to share the word without the interests of each one being immediately compromised; they make conversation possible.

In the end, the shortening, the mutilation of words, and the promptness and efficiency of exchanges is the pressing demand that the determination of social relations by economic

interests makes on the forms by which those relations used to be exercised in the common space of communication and linguistic exchange.

Fate

Let's linger still a while on language, but this time considering its poetic articulation. The one who is perhaps the most conscious of all modern poets, Friedrich Hölderlin, had the sharpest sense for the changes that language, that is, human life itself, suffers under the prevailing epochal forces, which are, indeed, complex and essentially contrasting. This means that, as a modern poet, Hölderlin had the most penetrating perception of the destitute condition of the poet and of poetry itself in the context of Modernity. His testimony about this condition anticipated Hegel's sentence according to which art has ceased in modern times to keep up with the Spirit's interests and exigencies (I will return to this in a moment), though Hölderlin's essential concern was "to secure for today's poets a bourgeois existence" (Hölderlin 1988, 101), in a sort of implicit allusion to Plato's exclusion of the poets from the polis, which—as condemnation of the arts of appearance and deception—would be a sign of the philosopher's commitment to truth. The aforesaid securing of the poets' existence in bourgeois (that is, modern) society depends on a consideration of the condition that made poetry (*Dichtung*) originally possible precisely as a primordial mode of truth in the Greek world. In this sense, what is needed is to take "into account the difference of times and institutions [in order to] elevate poetry today to the *mechane* of the ancients." (Hölderlin *ibid.*) This *mechane*, this eminent technique consists in a "lawful calculation," in the "law of calculus." The essential problem of modern—or, in Hölderlin's terms, Hesperian—poetry is that its prosody is unstable, that it lacks the "law of calculus." The "lawful calculation," which was the admirable feat of the Greeks, is not at hand for the modern poet, and even if a certain technique were at her disposal there is no guarantee that it could consistently accomplish the task of calculation, which has to do with what is in itself incalculable, "the living meaning," existence itself. The tones, which are forms of life—tragic, epic, and lyric—, are accelerating. This imposes a poetological reflection that has in its core the question of measure (*Maas*) and the poetic knowledge that "[e]ach one, nonetheless, has its measure,"³ (Hölderlin 1990, 227) that is, that each one blossoms in the language of its own, which is the task of the poem to greet and to harbor. This knowledge has the character of memory, a remembrance (*Andenken*) that re-members each one to itself, inasmuch as each one owes herself to each other.

Complexity

Hegel was the thinker of complexity in many ways and of course the Hegelian dialectics is the overarching systematic operation that deals with complexity in all of its dimensions and manifestations. For the present purpose, I am particularly interested in one of the many relationships in which these dimensions and manifestations make their power felt. It is precisely what characterizes the modern world in a certain sense by contrast: I mean, the end of great art, that is, of the power of art to respond to the highest interests of the spirit. This power consists in the capacity of bringing worldly relations, circumstances, events, and behaviors to a higher, purer, truer level by the work and effect of fantasy: of imaginal representation. For Hegel, the point is that this capacity is no longer able to undertake the

³ "Nur hat ein jeder sein Maas." I have slightly changed Christopher Middleton's translation of this verse of *Der Rhein* (*The Rhine*): he has "Each man, nonetheless, has its measure."

elaboration and clarification of those relations in correspondence to the challenge that they pose to the spirit in present times. Such relations have become *complex*, specified and stratified in multiple ways. So, the spirit has to resort to other dispositions of its own, definitively abandoning the noble epoch of—allow me to phrase it this way—the imaginary management of reality in its actual life and work. By virtue of this abandonment, art is consigned to the past of the spirit, no matter if it may improve and refine its performance and outputs in the future. The present of a new epoch demands an activity absolutely different: sober judgment, penetrating scientific knowledge, the effectiveness of general laws, and—in essential terms—the limitless unfolding of a reflection that has to take charge of concrete reality in its over-determined diversity and pervade it with its constant operation.

Nevertheless, a certain complexity escaped Hegel's indisputable acumen. And it was a rather obvious one. It was the new complexity of a new form of life, whose flagrant evidence is the hustle and bustle of the modern city.

There is a letter from Hegel to his wife reporting his first impressions of Paris, which have Hegel's long acquaintance with his beloved Berlin as background. Taking his first sightseeing of "this capital of the civilized world," he evokes the Zelten in Berlin on passing in front of some Parisian cafés, but with a proviso that "[they host] ten times as many people at the tables ... As I go through the streets, the people look just the same as in Berlin, everyone dressed the same, about the same faces, the same appearance, yet in a populous mass." (Letter of September 3, 1927, Butler & Seiler 1984: 650) It is true that Paris was still at that time a city that displayed abundant remnants of its medieval past, but Hegel's statement betrays a certain blindness of him, not being capable to grasp the difference that an incomparably greater number of people may entail in this case. This number, observable in the streets and public places, announces the advent of a different type of city, the modern city, and with it an essentially different type of subject, which is substantially determined by the city itself. The crowded city is also a city where people are caught in the rush of a feverish activity, no matter that this activity is aimed at filling idle hours, just at wasting time⁴.

City

The fundamental experience of the modern city was primarily coined by Charles Baudelaire. It is an experience of rapid change and of the weight of memory that counterbalances the haste. The *Tableaux Parisiens (Parisian Scenes)*, second part of *The Flowers of Evil*, and *The Spleen de Paris* bear witness to this experience. But there is perhaps no other place in Baudelaire's oeuvre than a couple of verses of *Le Cygne (The Swan)*, the fourth piece of the *Scenes*, which can give to the sense of change the most compelling expression:

Le vieux Paris n'est plus (la forme d'une ville
Change plus vite, hélas! que le cœur d'un mortel);
The old Paris is gone (the form a city takes
More quickly shifts, alas, than does the mortal heart);

⁴ In this context, there are few things more telling than the comparison between Hegel's fresh view of the City of Lights and the description of London's thronged streets and places in Edgar Allan Poe's *The Man of the Crowd* (Poe 2006, 229ff.).

(Baudelaire 1975, 85; Baudelaire 1998, 175)

It is, of course, the transformation of medieval Paris (mainly on the right bank of the Seine, where the places to which Baudelaire refers in his poem are) by Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann in the middle of the 19th century.

There is no possibility for the beats of the heart of a mortal to keep pace with the irresistible transformation of Baudelaire's city. But this heart, wounded by the abolition of so many familiar places and scenes (the old "Parisian scenes"), opposes the gravity of its memory:

Paris change! mais rien dans ma mélancolie
 N'a bougé! palais neufs, échafaudages, blocs,
 Vieux faubourgs, tout pour moi devient allégorie,
 Et mes chers souvenirs sont plus lourds que des rocs.
 Paris may change, but in my melancholy mood
 Nothing has budged! New palaces, blocks, scaffoldings,
 Old neighbourhoods, are allegorical for me,
 And my dear memories are heavier than stone.
 (Baudelaire 1975, 86; Baudelaire 1998, *ibid.*)

The Swan is dedicated to Victor Hugo, who at the time was banished and had to remain in Guernsey, one of the so-called Anglo-Norman Isles or Channel Isles, according, respectively, to the French and the British denomination. It is, perhaps, the greatest poem of exile ever written, and in fact it deploys a gallery of unfortunate figures that share this melancholy fate: Andromache, the wretched swan longing for its native lake, painfully stretching the head towards the sky like Ovid's man, the consumptive "negresse," the orphans, the sailors "left forgotten in an island," the "captives, the defeated ... many others more!" All of these, in a first instance, are called as witnesses to a condition that is entirely new, but at the same time awaken things immemorial, which resist this condition by their own fragility and their abandonment to the forces that call them back. In this sense, more decisively, they are the figures of memory.

And certainly, it is the radical experience of the emergence of an unfathomable memory as a sort of gravitational pull exerted on the subject, not by the past in a merely chronological sense, but by her finitude. The specificity of this memory is expressed at the very beginning of the poem: "Andromache, I think of you..." "Andromaque, je pense à vous..." "I think of you..." is, of course, "I remember you," "je me souviens de vous," but what is decisive is to hear this "penser à" ("to think of") as a modification (a modalization, if I may) of the Cartesian "I think," "je pense," "ego cogito," which takes place in a (supposedly) pure present. This little "à" is what evinces an undeniable fracture, a hiatus in the present; it is the gravitational (weak) force that separates the present from itself, at the same time that it makes this present possible (and also its past—and a future beyond conjecture). Any haste, no matter how marginal, any acceleration of the pace of life awakens the little "à" and the unending memory hidden in it. And the haste itself is nothing but the desperate flight from the non-disposable sediments that this memory reminds and brings to the present, as a pending present.

You might call that unapparent force, which disrupts the present from itself, *Ent-setzung*.

Society

Preceding my vignette on the city, it seems to me that it would have been on the line to have “society” in the sequence. It is another guess of mine that this option should have led us to discuss things that deserve a more patient attention. However, I cannot leave unsaid something that relates to my last notes about the experience of the Baudelerian subject. I was referring to the haste that characterizes the modern city: this haste is a flight, I was saying, and the flight is the mode and the essence of the accelerated movement of modern society. To accelerate is to run away. But in running away there should not remain anything of that wherefrom one runs away. The more accelerated the runaway, the more intense the momentum of the flight, the more it drags with itself all of those forms and ways, customs and relations that were current until they dissipate, under the force of the gale, in the density of a new air. This density owes to the many relics that, in a somewhat more ethereal way, remain now in the air we breathe and absorb.

I keep in mind the famous passage of the *Communist Manifesto* that speaks of the restlessness of the bourgeoisie. “Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones.”⁵

But I stop here and make haste, for the sake of time. Just one vignette more.

Wind

In *The Meridian*, the discourse of acceptance of the Georg Büchner Prize, pronounced on 22 October 1960 by Paul Celan, whom it is apt to consider as the greatest poet of the German language in the 20th century, one reads a passage that speaks about the poem—the poem that, in its turn, speaks on its own behalf, but at the same time and in a certain sense the poem that has always hold the hope of speaking “on behalf of a totally other.” (Celan 2011: 8) Yet this is not a granted expectation—indeed, a hope is precisely this, a non-granted expectation, a hypothesis; it is a thought, a thought of the heart, a thought that opens towards what thought cannot preconceive, a possible thought that frailly rests on its own possibility, which would be the present condition of the poem. Here is the passage:

The poem tarries and tests the wind—a word related to the creaturely—through such thoughts. Nobody can tell how long the breath pause—the testing and the thought—will last. The “swift,” which has always been “outside,” has gained speed; the poem knows this, but heads straight for that “other,” that it considers reachable, able to be set free, perhaps vacant, and thus turned—let’s say: like Lucile—turned toward it, the poem. (ibid.)

⁵ The entire passage, namelessly quoted, is the following: “The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society. Conservation of the old modes of production in unaltered form, was, on the contrary, the first condition of existence for all earlier industrial classes. Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their “train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.” (Marx/Engels 2016, 36f.)

The word “swift” translates *das Geschwinde*, the fast, the speedy, that which moves and pushes in a rush. There is no explanation of what is that to which this “swift” refers, but it seems clear that it alludes to an all-embracing phenomenon—a global phenomenon, if you wish. Celan is evoking a passage from *Woyzeck*, the marvelous play by Büchner. In the passage, the Captain asks Woyzeck about the weather. Woyzeck answers: “Bad, Herr Hauptmann, bad. Wind.” And the Captain adds: “I can feel it already, there’s something of a speed (s’ist so was *Geschwindes*) out there; a wind like that has an effect on me like a mouse.” (Büchner 2013, 240) You could say, in German, *der geschwinde Wind*, “the swift wind,” the wind of swiftness, the wind that swiftness is. In fact, it could be said, it is the wind that nowadays blows everywhere, perhaps the Benjaminian wind that blows from Paradise, which prevents the Angel of History from making a halt and mending all things broken, perhaps it is the wind that the creature, the most vulnerable of all things tests, bearing in its tremulous scenting testimony to its own fragility⁶. This wind, this swiftness, blows now and hurries everywhere, provided that everywhere is always “outside,” “out there.”

Duplicity

Celan, with whom the modern poetic insight firstly deployed by Hölderlin may have come to its consummation, due to overwhelming personal and historical experiences, was the poet of a double *Geschwindigkeit*, of a double uncanniness, of a double *Unheimlichkeit*. This double uncanniness, if we follow Celan’s argument in *The Meridian*, is the one that separates and at the same time tends to confuse art and poetry, that is, technology and the poem, for art, *techne*, is the secret force that drives Western history, global history today, in an ever more rapid pace. Despite the seeming close proximity between this consideration and Heidegger’s stance as I tried to sketch it earlier, a crucial difference subsists, since Heidegger wants to maintain ultimately separated art and technology. For Celan there is a strangeness that art relentlessly fosters, bringing everything under its mastery. In the end, the Holocaust cannot be neatly separated from the “sacred German art,” as Celan’s early poem, *Death Fugue*, implies. There is this strangeness, then, but there is still another strangeness to which the poem opens itself: and this one is the improbable advent of a further other that resists any compulsory assimilation⁷. Correspondingly, a double acceleration prevails: the forcefully one that doesn’t spare anything nor anyone who cannot keep its pace, searching to coincide absolutely with its present, and the one that the poem exerts “at times,” as Celan says, which are *other present* times, always. “La poésie, elle aussi, brûle nos étapes,” Celan writes (Celan 2011, 6): “Poetry, too, burns our steps.” *Poésie*, poetry means here *existence*, an existence that runs towards an encounter, at the same time that it remains mindful (*eingedenk bleibt*) of its dates, i. e., of that which separates one present from another.

In the eye of the storm of unbounded and irrepressible acceleration—and within the abyssal place of uncanniness, which is one with deferral—there is the need to discern one wind from another, one present from the other. One present is the dull, incessantly varying and escalating continuity of the same, the other present is an opening to the improbable and

⁶ I was referred to this passage by Esther Cameron’s study on *The Meridian* (Cameron 2014, 305).

⁷ “[...] perhaps it will succeed here to differentiate between strange and strange (zwischen Fremd und Fremd zu unterscheiden) [...] — perhaps here a further Other is set free” (Celan 2011, 7).

unforeseeable advent of a further other, another experience, the experience of another that, just by its possible *and* impossible imminence, by its coming, brings disruption and with it the present of another present, a present to come. This other experience is the work of memory; it is its work in Hölderlin's, Baudelaire's, and Celan's certainly different, but mutually reverberating senses: *Andenken, penser à, eingedenk bleiben*.

Coda

At the beginning of this essay I posed a question that was to be tested along the series of vignettes that I deemed suitable for the task of addressing the condition of our present “times of acceleration.” The question concerned experience in the first place, asking what on the whole could be experience (or what could be left of experience) in such “times.” This question necessarily involves another one, which concerns the subject of experience, particularly if acceleration affects the possibility of experience as such. Granted that experience needs time, which is time of attention, time of recall, and time of anticipation as well, then acceleration, as a formidable time-stressing phenomenon, would tend at once to erode experience's nourishing base and to put the subject of attention, recall, and openness towards what is to come in an unbearable situation, if not simply to abolish it. If acceleration defies the sheer possibility of having experiences, it calls into question the capacity of referring what *happens* and what happens *to me* to this very “me.” You have to adapt yourself to the vertiginous changes that acceleration brings about, and in adapting to them you have to adapt your self to this vertigo. What is left of this “self” is problematic.

It seems to be generally agreed upon, I think, that the way according to which one constitutes oneself as a subject of experience depends on, or at least is fundamentally connected with, the capacity to tell, to narrate the experiences one has been through. A further question is if this capacity does not restrict itself to the subject's constitution, but contributes to the structuration of experience as such. If this were the case, narration would not be something of an aftermath with regard to the actuality and density of experience. There would be, indeed, a cardinal relation between experience and narration, and that means, between experience and language. Following this line of thought, it could be said that experience's structure is originally linguistic. Of course, this assertion does not imply that you can exhaustively tell your experiences: such achievement is utterly impossible, not just because of the swarm of unnoticed minutiae of every event, but also because of the remnants that still throb in it, and of the multiple divergent directions it may take. Anyway, I am inclined to state that language is responsible for the fabric of experience. The linguistic character of experience evinces as soon as you realize that experience itself exists, i. e. *persists*, only in its aftermath. “We” are never there in the present of our experiences, in the same sense that we do not feel the blow in the exact moment in which it strikes us. This amounts to say that there is not a *present* subject of experience, and that there is not a *present* experience at all, supposing that one sticks to a drastic concept of “present,” in terms of what, for instance, Aristotle calls *stigma*, the “point,” the punctuality of time, *now*, absolute now, *tempus instans*. Experience belongs to the moment, persists in it; moment is movement, and movement, as it moves, is always change, mutation: *momen mutatum* said Lucretius about the atomic swerve, which occurs in a supposedly indivisible point of time, but which bears in itself the indelible span and deferral of movement, of change, of time itself. The same applies to the subject of experience. The “subject” is a trace, a spectral attribution, some sort of equivocal reminiscence by which you ascribe to yourself that what happened and, in happening, affected “you”. You tell your experiences, yes, for the want, for the will, for the

irresistible drive to telling them, and of telling *you*, as the one who went through those experiences, but in the end you tell them for the sake of what in them is ineffable. This ineffability is nothing mystical, it's just the impossibility of telling or naming the movement and the trace at the moment it is changing. This ineffability originally springs from the linguistic character of experience. And you, me, we, by the drive to narrating our experiences, and so being witnesses of them, are witnesses for this character, which is one with our own determination. But you are the sole witness of "your" experience, because, as you know, "No one / bears witness / for the witness."

In this sense, there is something paradoxical about acceleration. The irresistible thrust by which it pushes experience to the verge of its very dissipation brings to light in the blink of an eye the temporal structure of experience. As far as acceleration tends to suppress the inherent condition of experience through its breathtaking time-stressing (and shrinking) effect, it also reveals the structural deferral of experience. As it tends, too, to dissolve the very possibility of narrating experience, it evinces that experience, because of that deferral, is at once the soil and the product of narration. And narration is the work of memory — memory, I say, though not in the usual sense of a capacity to remember things and events past. 'Memory,' I would say, as openness towards deferral: memory, as attention, response, and promise. This is the seal of *Andenken*, *penser à*, and *eingedenk bleiben*, bearing, each one according to its own peculiar mode and idiom, an essential relation to such deferral: to experience's ineffable core. They resist the devastating power of acceleration: as long as it is possible.

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