

Encountering Poems

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Ce qui arrive,
si quelque chose arrive,
c'est cela.

Jacques Derrida
Schibboleth

What does that mean: encountering poems? Where does that lead? What is the subject of this encounter, what is its object? What is at stake in encountering poems? Is it an action or reaction: to encounter? Does it answer? Answer to whom, answer to what? It is indeed an echo of a lecture in German by Martin Heidegger, published about half a century ago:

Mit etwas, sei es ein Ding, ein Mensch, ein Gott, eine Erfahrung machen heißt, daß es uns widerfährt, daß es uns trifft, über uns kommt, uns umwirft und verwandelt. Die Rede vom „machen“ meint in dieser Wendung gerade nicht, daß wir die Erfahrung durch uns bewerkstelligen; machen heißt hier: durchmachen, erleiden, das uns Treffende vernehmend empfangen, annehmen, insofern wir uns ihm fügen. Es macht sich etwas, es schickt sich, es fügt sich.¹

In an attempt to understand the meaning / the being of language (das Wesen der Sprache) Heidegger turns to poetry. Poetry, so his argument, offers a possibility to experience language: „Mit der Sprache eine Erfahrung machen heißt dann: uns vom Anspruch der Sprache eigens angehen lassen, indem wir auf ihn eingehen, uns ihm fügen“². To experience language then means

to let oneself be approached by language, to listen to it, to go along with it, to submit to it. This English sentence is not a translation of the above German words. It is well known how difficult it is to translate Heidegger. This is because Heidegger does not usually refer to the surface meaning of words, instead he delves deep into the historical grounds, the etymology of language, surfacing unexpected dimensions of meaning. Therefore, along this paper, I shall refrain from translating, at least in the common sense of the word. What I will do, what I cannot do without, however, is interpreting, carrying on a meaning that I have encountered while listening to language. In the above German sentence an abundant use of movement and touch is audible: „Anspruch“ with its twofold meaning of „demand“ and „address“, „angehen“ and „eingehen“, basically words of movement („gehen“/“to go“), but here also expressing „demand“ and „pleading“, „acceptance“ and „response“, „(sich) fügen“, meaning „to touch“, „to connect“ and „to submit“, „to submit to fate“.

The main keyword of Heidegger's approach to language is indeed „erfahren“ / „to experience“, which is well reflected in the volume's German title „Unterwegs zur Sprache“, literally „on the road to language“. Heidegger tries to recover the genuine meaning of the word „erfahren“, dissecting it into the basic verb „fahren“, meaning „to move“, „to be on a road to“, „to transport“, and the prefix „er-“ shifting and intensifying that basic meaning. „Erfahren heißt nach dem genauen Sinne des Wortes: *eundo assequi*: im Gehen, unterwegs etwas erlangen, es durch den Gang auf einem Weg erreichen“³. In order to be able to experience something, one has to be on the road, in motion, to advance, so as to be able to reach, to reach out, to attain, to gather something. To gather information, to get to know, to learn, another aspect of the meaning of „erfahren“. The German word „erfahren“ („to experience“) then points to the basic action of being on a road to somewhere, and in doing so encountering something. As Heidegger explains it in the first quotation: to experience something, someone, God, means: to encounter it, to be befallen by it, to be hit and thrown to the ground and henceforth transformed. Heidegger makes sure to point out that the German phrase „Erfahrungen machen“, in spite of the active meaning of the verb „machen“, should rather be understood as a passive reaction: to accept, to suffer, to submit, to have an

experience, rather than to make it.

However, there is more to that basic word „fahren“, as one can readily come to understand in that other German word „Fährnisse“, referring to the dangers one may encounter while travelling, while living, or in the common German word for „danger“: „Gefahr“. Following Heidegger’s argument Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe refers in his book *La poésie comme expérience* to the etymology not only of the Germanic but also the Romance languages:

Expérience vient du latin *experiri*, éprouver. Le radical est *periri*, que l’on retrouve dans *periculum*, péril, danger. La racine indo-européenne est PER à laquelle se rattachent l’idée de *traversée* et, secondairement, celle d’*épreuve*. En grec, les dérivés sont nombreux qui marquent la traversée, le passage: *peirô*, traverser; *pera*, au-delà; *peraô*, passer à travers; *perainô*, aller jusqu’au bout; *peras*, terme, limite. Pour les langues germaniques on a, en ancien haut allemand, *faran*, d’où sont issus *fahren*, transporter et *führen* conduire. Faut-il y ajouter justement *Erfahrung*, expérience, ou le mot est-il à rapporter au second sens de PER: épreuve, en ancien haut allemand *fara*, danger, qui a donné *Gefahr*, danger et *gefährden*, mettre en danger? Les confins entre un sens et l’autre sont imprécis. De même qu’en latin *periri*, tenter et *periculum*, qui veut d’abord dire épreuve, puis risque, danger. L’idée d’expérience comme traversée se sépare mal, au niveau étymologique et sémantique, de celle de risque. *L’expérience* est au départ, et fondamentalement sans doute, une mise en danger.⁴

The etymological analysis reveals a common Indo-European root: PER – carrying two basic ideas: on the one hand the idea of „passage“, „traversing“, „transporting“, on the other the idea of „probing“, „testing“, even „affliction“ and „danger“. For the Romance languages this leads to „péril“ and „expérience“, for the Germanic languages to „fahren“ and „Gefahr“. The two concepts are, etymologically and semantically, difficult to separate. The German word „Erfahrung“ for example, according to the etymological argument, may well be connected to either of the two basic ideas. But even the linguistic historical conclusion reaches the understanding that the meaning of „experi-

ence“ is fundamentally connected to „endangering“. A view that is also found in Heidegger when he emphasizes the meaning of experience as encounter („widerfahren“): that which befalls, an illness, an accident, fate. An experience is not something that one chooses to have, rather, one encounters a difficulty, a situation, more or less dangerous, in any case strange and new, unheard of, and one learns from experience: out of danger. If there were no danger, if nothing were at stake, there would be no experience, no Erfahrung, nothing to be the wiser.

But what is there to experience with language? Let us return to Heidegger's words:

Was zu tun übrig bleibt, ist, Wege zu weisen, die vor die Möglichkeit bringen, mit der Sprache eine Erfahrung zu machen. Solche Wege gibt es seit langer Zeit. Sie werden nur selten in der Weise begangen, daß die mögliche Erfahrung mit der Sprache ihrerseits zur Sprache kommt. In Erfahrungen, die wir mit der Sprache machen, bringt sich die Sprache selbst zur Sprache. Man könnte meinen, das geschähe doch jederzeit in jedem Sprechen. Allein, wann immer und wie immer wir eine Sprache sprechen, die Sprache selber kommt dabei gerade nie zum Wort. Zur Sprache kommt im Sprechen vielerlei, vor allem das, was wir besprechen: ein Tatbestand, eine Begebenheit, eine Frage, ein Anliegen. Nur dadurch, daß im alltäglichen Sprechen die Sprache selber sich nicht zur Sprache bringt, vielmehr an sich hält, vermögen wir geradehin eine Sprache zu sprechen, von etwas und über etwas im Sprechen zu handeln, ins Gespräch zu kommen, im Gespräch zu bleiben.⁵

Heidegger differentiates between the everyday use of language, in which language is nothing but an instrument, a medium to carry information, to talk about facts, to negotiate relationships, to chat around, and poetic language – a term he himself does not use –, which offers the possibility to experience language. Whereas in everyday speech language holds back and does not express itself, in poems language is present as language, language becomes language. If one is ready to set out on the road, ready to experience,

which means: ready for danger. For what makes the poem a poem is not its outward appearance, but its experience with language: „Wo aber kommt die Sprache selber als Sprache zum Wort? Seltsamerweise dort, wo wir für etwas, was uns angeht, uns an sich reit, bedrngt oder befeuert, das rechte Wort nicht finden“⁶. It is not where the poem masters language that we can experience it, it is where the poem is at a loss for words, that we may be befallen by language, experience language, and encounter danger. „Wenn es wahr ist, da der Mensch den eigentlichen Aufenthalt seines Daseins in der Sprache hat, unabhngig davon, ob er es weit oder nicht, dann wird eine Erfahrung, die wir mit der Sprache machen, uns im innersten Gefge unseres Daseins anrhren“⁷. For Heidegger, who regards the proper dwelling place of the human being as language, any such experience with language will certainly touch at the innermost „Gefge“ (structure, fate) of the human „being“.

So, let’s take Heidegger’s advice literally and move on. Let’s set out on a journey and encounter some poems and see what may befall us...

It was indeed by chance that I came across a rare volume of poems by the great Italian author Giuseppe Ungaretti, who, one might well say, re-invented Italian poetry in the 20th century and promoted the cause of modernity in and outside of Europe’s borders, leaving an enormous imprint on various literatures⁸. It is generally agreed that it was the horrors of World War I, which Ungaretti experienced as an infantryman in the battles of the Carso, that influenced and changed his poetry markedly. Whereas the great Italian futurist poets, d’Annunzio at the literary forefront, celebrated victory in bombastic hymns of war full of patriotic pathos, the simple soldier Ungaretti, stunned and aghast, saw only suffering and victims. What he wrote was different, almost silence, almost nothing:

SOLDATI

(Bosco di Courton luglio 1918)

Si sta come
 d'autunno
 sugli alberi
 le foglie⁹

As if there were no experience at all, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, so laconically begins this poem, yet with an almost alarming staccato in the first two syllables preceding the surprisingly soft „come“. And yet, what a terrifying experience – language does not say it. And how could one find adequate words for the death and the constant fear of death of hundreds of thousands of soldiers. It is not said. And even the comparison does not say it: there are the leaves, still in their trees. But we know their fate. Even though a few may cling on, but does that mean survival, life? They cannot fear, the leaves. The „come“ of the comparison only touches the surface, there is no emotion, there is only being and waiting and passing, implied by the seasonal tropos. It is those first two unpretending words which make the difference, invoking the whole of human existence: „si sta“ and turn the comparison around: the leaves like soldiers, alive and facing death.

„L'Allegria“ is the title of that famous volume, another word almost impossible to translate, the joy of being (still) (alive). More obvious still in the full title of the original edition: „L'allegria di naufragi“ – the joy of the shipwrecked. How close are horror and happiness? Ungaretti's explanation of his choice of title reflects the meaning of Erfahrung, experience and encounter, as developed by Heidegger, however in retrospect. Only the shipwreck (as metaphor of disaster) allows any poetic, any human enterprise to encounter danger, to throw over board all illusions and to become experienced, and therefore overjoyed:

Allegria, perché Allegria di naufragi? Ebbene, perché, insomma, la poesia, l'uomo in tutte le sue imprese anche quando crede di essere ar-

rivato in porto, sì ci arriva, ma ci arriva da naufrago, ci arriva dopo aver lasciato molte illusioni se non aver subito dei veri disastri. Ma il fatto di essere comunque arrivato in porto anche dopo un naufrago, dà un certo piacere, no? dà un' allegria. Ecco: Allegria di naufragi.¹⁰

The irony in the second half of this quotation, however, hints at the fragility and monstrosity of any poetic word. In another poem of this volume Ungaretti wrote: „Quando / trovo in questo mio silenzio / una parola / scavata è nella mia vita / come un abisso“¹¹. If there is a word to be found, it opens up an abyss in language, in life.

Could Heidegger have asked for a better poem than „Soldati“ to illustrate, to embody his argument? The encounter with death and suffering not only of the poet (in reality at war), but of language trying to grasp that experience and failing before the word, and because of failing experiencing. And the reader in front of that possibility to experience language, to encounter what has not been said.

Ungaretti's early poems are on the verge of silence, of nothingness: a rigorous reduction of language – „la poesia pura“, as it has come to be called. A use of words, so scarce that it can well remind one of the vastness and loneliness of the sea and desert that Ungaretti experienced in his youth growing up as an emigré child in Alexandria, Egypt. A poetic language, so careful and quiet, that answers to the horrors of war, to desperation and hope, to death and life, and love and loss. Although Ungaretti returned in the middle of his life and work to more traditional forms and longer verses, like the classic *endecasillabo*¹², to Greek and Roman mythology and Christian imagery, he readopted in old age that fragmentary experiment with language.

Now that we have seen the horizon of what encountering poems can mean, let us take a much more modest approach and ask how a poem encounters, how a poem reflects the experience its subject, its writer is undergoing. The volume I referred to above is not Ungaretti's attempt to grapple with the horrors of war and death in his younger age, it is a far more „large“ experience – to borrow another Ungarettian musical term – , everyday life and commonplace, and nevertheless, the other ultimate experience man can

have: old age. *Il taccuino del vecchio* is one of Ungaretti's last great collections of verse published in 1960¹³. It is indeed a programmatical title: the old man's notebook (as it is usually translated into English). It offers a subject in the double sense of the word, an author or narrator, generating the text (the old man), and a theme, a topos even, setting the frame („old age“). Ungaretti did in fact regard his oeuvre as an „autobiography“, completing a full life cycle, starting with the diary-like *L'Allegria* and ending with the „notes of an old man“. And for that very reason he named his collected works when they were published under his auspices in 1969 „vita d'un uomo“:

Il carattere, il primo carattere di tutta la mia attività è autobiografico. Io credo che non vi possa essere né sincerità né verità in un'opera d'arte se in primo luogo tale opera d'arte non sia una confessione. Naturalmente la fantasia ha tutti i diritti, quindi ha i diritti di trasportare questa confessione in campi che la rendano del tutto libera da chi quella confessione vada facendo. Ma questo, però, non impedisce che si tratti d'una confessione sottoposta alle pressioni e ai voli del sentimento e della fantasia.¹⁴

Ungaretti states that all his writing is autobiographic, that confession is the only sincere and true basis of any work of art. And yet he is of course aware of the meaning and power of imagination (della fantasia e del sentimento), a power that does not suffocate but rather liberates the true meaning of what is to be confessed. It is the process of language, that is needed to be able to confess. And since we have learned from Heidegger that in order to experience language, one needs to be aware of its shortcomings, and since a confession is a confession only if it is „true“ in language, then the awareness of the shortcomings of language needs the support of „fantasia“ and „sentimento“ in order to be able to say what cannot be said.

But reading about the influence of „fantasia“ and „sentimento“ on the poetic work of art, a third somewhat suspicious term may also come up: discourse. For Ungaretti's „old man“ is of course no *tabula rasa*. This is not the first time that anyone endeavoured to write about old age. There is in

fact an abundant discourse on „aging“ and „old age“ reaching as far back as literature itself¹⁵. But can we trust that discourse? Of course we can, but for that very reason there may be little possibility for experience. Thinking of the influence of discourse on a poetic work of art, what we will have to expect from *Il taccuino del vecchio* – keeping that metaphor of Erfahrung in mind – is a rather well-trodden, staked-out path full with well-known signposts leading the way. What kind of mishap could befall us there? Is shipwreck possible at all in safe waters?

Il taccuino del vecchio – that very first noun sets not only the frame but also the underlying structure of this book on old age: „il taccuino“, a „notebook“ – a book in which to write spontaneous vague ideas, scribblings and memos, as well as long-pondered and well-organized thoughts. A book, the structure of which shows the progress of time, page after page, counting entries, amassing notes, continuing. A notebook, less rigidly organized than its chronological counterpart, the calendar, which counts and disposes of days, presenting dates long before their existence, but already quite similar to the yet more stringent diary, without date entries. A poorly kept diary perhaps? Here is the first poem of *Il taccuino del vecchio* that will set the tone:

1

Agglutinati all'oggi
I giorni del passato
E gli altri che verranno.

Per anni e lungo secoli
Ogni attimo sorpresa
Nel sapere che ancora siamo in vita,
Che scorre sempre come sempre il vivere,
Dono e pena inattesi
Nel turbinio continuo
Dei vani mutamenti.

Tale per nostra sorte

Il viaggio che proseguo,
 In un battibaleno
 Esumando, inventando
 Da capo a fondo il tempo,
 Profugo come gli altri
 Che furono, che sono, che saranno.¹⁶

As could have been expected from any poem on the topic of old age, there is the mentioning of time in its threefold classification of present, past, and future. There is the passing of years and even centuries, bringing to mind that discursive weariness of human longevity. That is all very traditional and well known. But how does this poem deal with these discursive elements? They mark but the starting point of an inquiry into the meaning of time. On the one hand, from the very beginning, this poem contradicts the standard representation of time as an objective, measurable concept as shown in the organization of a calendar (day after day). On the other hand, it is not surprising that any subjective organization of time should, like this poem, start with the here and now, today, and from there on turn to the past and the future. That is in fact the philosophical approach to time as argued for example by Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir: „now“ being the realm of existence, whereas „past“ and „future“ are conceived as mere representations of the mind, as „memory“ and „project“ respectively¹⁷. What is surprising in this poem, however, is its very first word „agglutinato“. The poem offers neither the calendric day-after-day version that organizes (auto)biography, nor a philosophical intrinsic concentration on the here and now determined by a subjective organizing mind progressing in time. In this poem the days of the past and the days to come are simply glued onto „today“. It seems a somewhat arbitrary gesture, almost like tinkering with pieces of time to make them stick together, to force together what does not belong, to construct „time“, and to construct it out of words: „agglutinazione“ is of course a grammatical strategy to organize meaningful relationships.

But from that irritating starting point onwards, the poem's language, using the enchantment of its sounds and rhythms, develops a convincing

flow from past to future, almost narrative („i giorni del passato e gli altri che verranno“), leading to an even more epic phrasing of time: „per anni e lungo secoli“. So much rhetorical energy is summoned up only to surprise the reader in the next line with the opposite concept of the shortest period of time, the „moment“, dodging any definition of length and point in time; and filling that moment with the surprising knowledge of being still alive, in spite of the weariness of the years and centuries that no man can outlast. But time flows on, and change, in vain, (a classical topos) presents its gift and pain in that continuous whirlpool of time, conglomerating both the standard physical concepts of time as line and cycle. The taccuino is more than a notebook. The *Dizionario Garzanti della lingua italiana* defines it expressively as the antonym of the „almanacco, lunario, su cui erano segnate le previsioni astrologiche“¹⁸. It is not by chance that Ungaretti selected that significant word „taccuino“. Thus he made a point of not choosing the imperious almanacco or lunario with their cosmic reign over human and terrestrial fate as an organizing principle for his inquiry into the meaning of time, instead he chose their opposite, the much more chaotic and almost makeshift notation of the secularized taccuino, undermining any attempt at higher, cosmic or transcendental signification.

And for that reason a phrase like „tale per nostra sorte“ of the third stanza remains lost between the preceding second stanza and the following personal account: „sorte“ – again a word with many nuances, in any case, regarded as the outcome of a terrestrial or even divine lottery, it is much more „accidental“ than its other Italian counterpart „fato“. „Sorte“ carries indeed the idea of „outcome“, but the agency remains unknown. It is, however, „our fate“, „profugo“ – is it I, a fugitive among others, or am I „profugo“, volatile, short-lived, like all the others? Which goes well with the „battibaleno“, the flash of lightning, of the personal journey – a lifetime enterprise, nothing but a flash of lightning in cosmological calculations. But what happens in this flash of light? „Esumando, inventando / Da capo a fondo il tempo“. I rediscover time, invent it, „da capo a fondo“ in a flash of lightning. Is it surrealist or even ironic? How can one exhume anything within a flash of lightning. And what on earth is there to exhume? A treasure, a time capsule? Or rather

some ancient artifact or antediluvian bones? A skeleton, as in so many other poems, death as the beginning of time? Or is simply a hole, any hole, the beginning of something, philosophically, physically speaking? To invent time from the beginning to its end – that is a scientific or philosophical, if not a theological problem: Is time an infinite or rather finite concept? In order to invent time, is it necessary to do it from outside of time? Which in fact means either eternity or its counterpart, the infinitesimal unit, where time turns into notime. But in these lines there is also another reference to the concept of categorization of past and future. Is it the human task to rediscover a genuine meaning of time or to invent a temporality that suits the human „being“? What method should we apply to learn about time (erfahren)? An archeology of knowledge or the constructions of imagination? It seems that at the end of this poem we are more at a loss than before. All the concepts of time have been deconstructed, reduced to the scribblings of an old man, be he conceived as individual or generic.

Only after having prepared the ground with so much scepticism, imagination and deconstruction, Ungaretti is ready to confront the reader with a much more stereotype and seemingly very positive image of old age:

2

Se nell'incastro d'un giorno nei giorni
Ancora intento mi rinvengo a cogliermi
E scelgo quel momento,
Mi tornerà nell'animo per sempre.

La persona, l'oggetto o la vicenda
O gl'inconsueti luoghi o i non insoliti
Che mossero il delirio, o quell'angoscia,
O il fatuo rapimento
Od un affetto saldo,
Sono, immutabili, me divenuti.

Ma alla mia vita, ad altro non piú dedita

Che ad impaurirsi cresca,
Aumentandone il vuoto, rezza di ombre
Rimaste a darle estremi
Desideri di palpito,
Accadrà di vedere
Espandersi il deserto
Sino a farle mancare
Anche la carità feroce del ricordo?¹⁹

This second poem starts indeed with that calendric concept of time just deconstructed and dismissed: „incastro d’un giorno nei giorni“, a day framed by days, as shown in any calendric table. And the old man, the I, contemplating this date, concentrating and trying to remember („mi rinvengo a cogliermi“), chooses a moment, that will remain with him forever: „mi tornerà nell’animo per sempre“ – which is nothing less but a declaration, a strong belief asserting a constant memory for the future, an imperative gesture carried by the future tense of the verb. What will be remembered is given in the second stanza: persons, objects, incidents, and places – strangely objectified words for personal memory –, which once had triggered off powerful emotions like affection and ecstasy, delusion and fear. But now the perspective has changed: these all have already become, unchangeably, me („sono, immutabili, me divenuti“). The poem’s I seems to be the perfect memory: „these have become, unchangeably, me“ means a lot more than the idea of a memory one has and cherishes. It also implies a burden, a duty, to live on, to continue in order to keep that memory „alive“.

Yet, while the first stanza ends with only an assertion of future memory, the second stanza freezes time. These have not only become me, these have become history, „immutabili“, dead matter, well reflected in the use of the *passato remoto* („mossero“) expressing a process that has ended in the past. In order to create that kind of historical memory, a concept of time is needed that does neither allow any flow of time nor of signification: the (calendric) date, that claims its self-contained identity. But far from being at ease and relishing those perfect timeless moments, the poem’s I is haunted not only

by the increasing shadows falling on its life, but by its own fear to which alone its life is dedicated. The continuing wish to live in spite of all the dead, in spite of death, in spite of growing old. The frozen moments of the past cannot chase away the expanding emptiness of its future. Ungaretti turns to a stunning metaphor in order to express the doings of remembrance in the old man's mind: „la carità feroce del ricordo“. That backward turned remembrance feeds on the I's remaining life, killing time, mercifully.

The third poem seems like an answer, a helpful, practical piece of advice to the dilemma just encountered:

3

Quando un giorno ti lascia,
Pensi all'altro che spunta.

È sempre pieno di promesse il nascere
Sebbene sia straziante
E l'esperienza d'ogni giorno insegna
Che nel legarsi, sciogliersi o durare
Non sono i giorni se non vago fumo.²⁰

Now we are confronted with the opposite idea: days not singled out and framed like dates in a calendar, but days following each other, following the sun, the natural cycle. „Un giorno che spunta“ does not only imply the new daybreak, but also an incentive, a new starting point. But what a beautiful phrase full of meaning: „quando un giorno ti lascia“ – does it mean that the day leaves you behind, that time goes on, inviting you to follow, or does the waning day foresee your passing on and sets you free? In any way the day is drawing to a close, evening, nighttime, a time to reflect. What supports the argument of these lines is their brilliant rhetorical construction: Rhyme and rhythm are carried by the parallel construction of two adonics (úuuúú: „quándo un giòrno“; „pénsi all'áltro“), – there are not only the three words ending in „-o“, there is also the alliteration of „al-“ making it even more harmonic – while at the same time the metric foot is continued by the un-

derlying dactyl (úuu), giving that impression of continuance, and of change at the end of each line when the dactyl's third syllable is replaced by a pause or lengthening of time (a spondee: úu- or úú), as if the day turned into night and day again and night:

Quándo un giòrno ti láscia, (úuuúuuúu-)
Pénsi all'áltro che spúnta. (úuuúuuúu-)

In the second stanza the daybreak turns into the birth of a new day, into a birthday, full of promise, full of pangs. And now we do indeed come across that word, which has been leading our inquiry: „esperienza“, starting from the very first moment of life, to be born – to experience, to encounter, never to return. And therefore, quite logically, the experience of every day, it teaches, literally, „che nel legarsi, sciogliersi o durare“ – these Italian infinitives of reflexive verbs turned nouns lose all their beauty when translated into English: „in binding oneself, in separating oneself or in lasting“ – days are nothing but vague smoke, profugo, volatile. Of course, it is the practical meaning of a string of days, of the continuance of life, that one has to move on from one day to another, and that moving on does not only mean advancing, but also leaving behind. Something which would also be true of human relationships – which is not said. But there is also „lasting“ – lasting during a day or lasting while continuing? Yet even the lasting turns out to be nothing but intangible, vague smoke. There is nothing, but to let go.

Go where?

4

Verso meta si fugge:
Chi la conoscerà?

Non d'Itaca si sogna
Smarriti in vario mare,
Ma va la mira al Sinai sopra sabbie
Che novera monotone giornate.²¹

One flees towards a target. That is granted, but who knows what it is? It is indeed logical, if there is a flight, there must be an aim. If the aim is not known beforehand, it shall be obvious when hit. Whatever travels in terrestrial time, comes to an end. It is not by chance that Ungaretti chose those slightly military, technical words „meta“ and „mira“ which strongly imply a trajectory.

The poem offers two alternatives, both well known in the discourses on old age: Ithaca and Sinai, implying, of course, Odysseus (Ulysses) and Moses, the two famous journeyman. Odysseus, after the historic victory over Troy travelling for decades, straying from island to island and coast to coast, from adventure to adventure, always hoping to return home, he is the standard Western personification of the metaphor of the journey of life. Yet, what is his motive? What makes him move? Nostalgia – the original meaning of this Greek word is in fact „homesickness“²². Odysseus wants to go home. He is driven by his memories of the past, to which he clings, longing. His point of arrival is nothing else but his point of departure, that same point in space, decades later, the envisaged point in time, he can never reach. His lifetime experience, the Odyssey, to him it is nothing but obstacles on his way home, in discourse it has become the symbol of the journey of life, of life as experience. Moses is the other epitome of a lifetime traveller, who after so much hardship and distress, perseveres and reaches as an old man the aim of his destination: Mount Horeb, Sinai, where he is destined to face his God and be given the „Ten Commandments“, „al Sinai sopra sabbie“ – nothing to exhume, no antediluvian time, no terrestrial artefacts, no more straying in desert or sea, instead a godsend from the heavens above, a new commitment. The past behind, the future ahead. Moses, the worldly patriarch, „novera monotone giornate“ – obediently counting the days (of his life) in the „one voice“ („monotono“) of his One God, redeemed of all experience.

But who knows the aim?

Di qualche immagine di prima in mente,

Della Terra Promessa

Nient'altro un vivo sa.²³

But is there really an alternative? The perspective has changed again, and so the tone: dry, laconic, and with a touch of irony: to run through the desert with residues of some images of before in mind. Nothing else a living man knows about the Promised Land²⁴. Without any celestial divination, there is no knowing about the future, no knowing about life after death. Even the Promised Land does not belong to the future. In so far as it is promised, it already belongs to the past. The promise has been granted long before, but „promised“ it will be – la Terra Promessa, that space in time joining past and future in the totality of the One Presence – a religious discourse. Images of the mind, however, more exact: „residui di qualche immagine di prima in mente“ evoke another discourse: psychoanalysis. Whatever man imagines is rooted in his past, most likely, subconsciously, leaving only traces above the ground, or residues, or refuse „residui“. It is not a question of images, it is a question of the residues of images, so far away, so severed is a human being from his past, from primordial time („di prima“). So disconnected that he is running about in the desert, not knowing where to look for what he is searching, craving. So connected that he has kept those „residui di qualche immagine di prima in mente“, searching in the one place to look for – the desert: „sopra sabbie“, wandering and living.

There is another poem testing the relationship of „past“ and „future“, and „present“, a love poem, and since Ungaretti lets his old man write so many love songs, this one shall represent all others:

8

Sovente mi domando

Come eri ed ero prima.

Vagammo forse vittime del sonno?

Gli atti nostri eseguiti
 Furono da sonnambuli, in quei tempi?

Siamo lontani, in quell'alone d'echi,
 E mentre in me riemergo, nel brusio
 Mi ascolto che da un sonno ti sollevi
 Che ci prevede a lungo.²⁵

„Sleep“ and „sleepwalk“ have been classical topoi for man's sceptical assessment of reality and the meaning of life. In this poem they do not only function as a lever for doubting reality, but also as a mode to express the distance man may feel towards his own younger life, his own past. So that the question is no longer „Who am I?“, but „Who have I been?“, or more sceptical yet „Who was I?“, or, literally, „How were we?“. In those times did I, did we act like somnambulists, not being aware of ... what? of time? of us? of being? So far the problem is understandable, present and past are far apart, there is no clear memory of one's own reasons of being in those days. It is the last stanza that probes man's concepts of time and recharges the meaning of „past“ and „future“ and „present“. But this cannot be experienced alone, there is need of the beloved one, already passed away – if an autobiographical note may be permitted –, there is need of love to overcome the linearity of time: While you re-emerge in me, I hear myself in whispers, that you raise from sleep. It is the echo, that classical topos of love, in which time and space are overcome, uniting what is separated. The totality of presence – this time a lover's discourse – „Siamo lontani, in quell'alone d'echi“: We are, we are far away (from one another?) together in one halo of answering echoes. We are, as foreseen in that dream, a long time ago. We are – but when? but where? The echo is a utopia, no place in space, but an effect of sound waves, an effect of language in language. And the present tense? Where in time is it situated between the beloved past and the sleepy present and the future of a dream? A time of lovers and somnambulists. A time of poems?

If encountering poems means to experience language, to experience the

shortcomings of language, then this poem, with its utopian desire of love, experiences the shortcomings of language, which are the shortcomings of a tense system, that, no matter how elaborate (e.g. Italian), falls short of the possibility to experience time. In trying to come to grips with that deficiency of language, the tense system, the poem experiences language anew and encounters in an ancient topos a new way of expressing time: the echo, saying what has been said, but strangely transformed and in a new perspective, remembering without the need of memory, waves like smoke, passing by. A „halo of echoes“ – a *mise en abîme*, with no end to signification, unless in time dying away.

When one writes about „old age“, discourse is unavoidable. To reduce its keywords to an echo, to unveil their lineage, and to transform their ways of signifying is a poem’s starting point, from where to set out in order to try and experience language anew. Such keywords are of course the well-known chronological metaphors of „old age“: „autumn“, and „west“, and „evening“. How can they be de-metaphorized? How can one make them signify something else, something beyond that standard discursive metaphoric meaning?

22

È senza fiato, sera, irrespirabile,
Se voi, miei morti, e i pochi vivi che amo,
Non mi venite in mente
Bene a portarmi quando
Per solitudine, capisco, a sera.²⁶

Although the subject, and writer, of this poem is an old man, the „evening“ signifies here nothing but an evening: a summer evening, suffocating without any refreshing breeze whatsoever. An almost naturalistic depiction, that recreates the image of an evening the reader may well remember from his or her own experience. The poem recreates it word by word – literally: word by word, each word burdened with its own meaning, proceeding slowly, metric foot by metric foot. Starting with the isolated upbeat „è“ – what is?

Something is: „sénza fiáto, séra,“ – the trochee three times pulling the words back, imitating the impossibility of movement, the stillness in the air, the evening: without breath. „irrespirábile“ – give this word all the length it needs. The two dactyls, forcing a change in rhythm, and yet repeating the effect from before, the sluggishness, but demanding one more syllable each and the lengthening of the Italian -a-: unbreathable. This is language not only telling, but creating, what it is saying. And continuing after the next upbeat with the isolating trochaic rhythm ending in the soft embrace of an adonic: „se voi, miei morti, e i pochi vivi che amo“ (when you my dead, and the few living people I love). Then the dactyl blending into the next adonic, which caresses, gratefully, those who come, even if this time they do not come, soothing and contradicting what is being said: „~~non~~ mi venite in mente“. The next trochaic line „bene a portarmi quando“, but now there is no more sluggishness, instead the trochee supports the positive meaning of the above line, confirming: when you ~~do not~~ come to mind, bringing me goodness, happiness. „Per solitudine, capisco, a sera“. Again after an upbeat trochees, stretching the sólitúdiné by a metric twist and then turning once more into the open arms of the adonic, now, finally understanding: „capisco“ – a colon all by itself – I understand, in the evening. The three adonics at the end of their lines (with or without upbeat) – „vivi che ámo“, „(ve)níte in ménte“, „(ca)píscó, a séra“ – becoming one string of thought, defying the solitude, the lonely desolation of that unbearably inanimate evening.

In this poem language has indeed become language. It has summoned up all its power and magic, contrived every rhetorical, rhythmic or melodic trick it could think of in order to conjure up that enchanting feeling of a vivid memory of those beloved dead. The loved ones, the dead and the living, bringing „bene“ like balm to soothe and ease the pain of that unbearable solitude of the lonely survivor, who has already outlived so many friends and still sees the number of the living diminishing. And yet it is only a rhetorical trick of the double negation („senza“/ “ir-“, and „non“) affirming and denying at the same time, recreating those wonderful evenings in the imaginary circle of a loving memory, and at the same time creating a still life, inanimate, unbreathable, and desolate. And that is when the metaphor catches up with

the literal meaning of „sera“: it is an evening, but it is also the evening of a lifetime. But the poem does not say what is most important: „capisco“. What could be the insight of such an experience? Or does it say it? – „capisco“: „a sera“!

12

L'Ovest all'incipita spalla sente
Macchie di sangue che si fanno larghe,
Che, dal fondo di notti di memoria,
Recuperate, in vuoto
S'isoleranno presto,
Sole sanguineranno.²⁷

How to de-metaphorize a metaphor? First, overload it: „L'Ovest all'incipita spalla sente“, the „West“, another discursive metaphor, replacing the end of man's lifetime by the end of the sun's circle, here it is turned into the second-degree metaphor of a personification: the West, feeling on his shoulders darkness creeping. The rhetorical blending of a sun setting and a person standing in the rising darkness is easy to recognize. The reddening of this scene is also expected: stains of blood growing, and the night should follow. And it does. But the order of time is strangely twisted: night (the metaphor of death) should come after the evening sunset, yet here those stains of blood are retrieved from the depth of nights of memory long ago. The chronological metaphor is dissolving, turning into emptiness, into empty space („in vuoto“). Instead the stains of blood take over, becoming larger, isolating themselves. Suddenly („presto“) everything is concrete and visual, blood stains all over – like a nightmare. Nothing but bleeding, solely bleeding. So much of death and life in one word: bleeding, but bleeding in the future (tense).

So we are back to matter and materiality. Time as a movement in space: blood flowing – the concrete fluid (panta rhei), and from the metaphor of the poem's beginning: shadows creeping, following the movement of the setting sun, like a sun dial. We are back to astrology and the beginnings of his-

tory, to one of mankind's basic questions: What is time? When they turned towards the heavens, looked up at the stars, in order to understand. The Greek language demonstrates it: *empeiría* and *máthema* (both words occasionally understood as experience), using language and mathematics. Time as a movement in space – the moon, the sun, the planets, and the stars. That must be where it all began:

17

Rilucere in veduto d'abbagliati
 Spazi ove immemorabile
 Vita passano gli astri
 Dal peso pazzi della solitudine.²⁸

How can one avoid pathos, thinking of time, and looking up at the glittering stars? Here Ungaretti's *taccuino* comes closest to the *almanacco*, its celestial counterpart, but it tries hard to keep a matter-of-fact tone, more physical and philosophical than astrological and transcendental. „Rilucere“, with a prefix secretly hinting at the complex concept of „reflecting“ rather than the naive idea of „shining“, betrays some careful insight into optics, and so does „in veduto“ („unseen“) because seeing light is a reflecting process in the retina. Someone has to see. The starry night needs an observing subject, something more than mere space. But looking straight into the light one is blinded („abbagliato“). And astronomic knowledge tells us that we are not only blinded but deluded because the star light we are seeing is lightyears older than it seems. That beam of light belongs to a different time, immemorable, a time and space devoid of human beings: there is no one to remember. But the stars – and now rhetorics demands its share – personified, they spend, not only time, but their life – which is in fact a scientific catachresis – passing, continuing. Personified as they are, that state of being is unbearable, it turns them mad. „Dal peso della solitudine“ – it is the weight of solitude that pulls them down. Pure mass is space's most attractive matter. Without it, no relationship. A star alone feels in itself but gravity. Following that imagery, a star's beam of light is like a desperate message in a bottle from immemorable

time thrown into space. This dramatization in space allows the poem to combine both, the objective, measurable and the subjective, emotional concepts of time. Passing time in solitude and creating time through distant memory, both serve in the construction of the poem to transform, what is usually called, „real“ (objectified) time into, what is usually called, „imaginary“ time experienced by human beings.

These two concepts of time Ungaretti also finds in Henri Bergson. He is adopting and transforming Bergson's lifetime inquiry into the meaning and being of time²⁹. Ungaretti, too, spent a lifetime coming to grips with Bergson's theory, which is well reflected as much in his two early essays „L'Estetica di Bergson“ and „Lo Stile di Bergson“ as in his late notes of the sixties on „Canzone“ in which he expresses his indebtedness to Plato and Bergson: „sono i due maestri che mi hanno sempre accompagnato quando io ho dovuto pensare“³⁰. In „L'Estetica di Bergson“ Ungaretti distinguishes between Bergson's „l'uomo edificatore“ (homo faber) and „l'uomo profondo“:

Presentataci l'operosità dell'uomo, l'uomo edificatore, l'imperio della materia mediante l'intelligenza, Bergson ci presenterà l'uomo profondo, il possesso della vita mediante l'istinto. E si soffermerà a considerare il tempo.³¹

While the „uomo edificatore“ represents intelligence and efficiency, the „uomo profondo“ is characterized by his understanding of time. He is aware of man being a drop within the great river of time, a moment of eternity, passing from past to future:

Incarnazione momentanea dell'eternità, per quel passato di cui siamo lo slancio, e quell'avvenire che rampollerà dal nostro passaggio. Il nostro atomo di tempo non è perduto nell'eternità, è una goccia del gran fiume.³²

An argument that leads to a reversal of the traditional concepts of „real“ and „imaginary“ time, as stated in the above interpretation of the poem. Man's

conscience becomes in Bergson as well as in Ungaretti „la realtà unica“, the only reality of time, which is conceived as „profound“ („profundo“) and anchored in depth, an important metaphor, as we shall see soon. In the essay this passage is then followed by an analysis of the meaning of time in language, based on the use of Italian conjunctions, concentrating on the movement of time within sentence structures. In his second essay, „Lo Stile di Bergson“, Ungaretti finds a similar approach to language in Bergson's own writing. He explains Bergson's use of „intuizione“:

Le parole hanno per lui un significato „mobile“. Bergson è titubante davanti alle parole. Qualcuno, per esempio, gli ha mosso il rimprovero che, a seconda gli fosse convenuto di collocarla, si servisse della parola „intuizione“ con significato sempre diverso. Il luccichio dello stile di Bergson è dovuto allo struggimento del filosofo d'infonder vita alla parola profferita, vita che provenga dalla parola precedente, che rimbalzi, ricca d'un'altra sfumatura, dalla successiva, che circoli così, più lieve e espressiva, e conquistata la propria verità profonda, si scioglia com'un'increspatura marina, lasciando al termine del discorso il lettore, avido di certezza, pieno di sgomento.³³

This is a description of language very much reminiscent of Jacques Derrida's concept of „différance“ and its „chain of signification“, yet it is still considered as „lo stile di Bergson“, and there is no explicit elimination of the possibility of „true“ signification: a word gaining its meaning (signified) and „élan vitale“ in a communicating chain of fellow words, never isolated, but always preceded and succeeded by others, leaving the reader – as it is also the case with Derrida and with Ungaretti himself – at a loss, burdened with the task of probing his or her own understanding.

L'indefinitezza è nel vocabolo, è all'interno dei suoi significati, ed è fuori dei significati del vocabolo: è anche anteriore ad essi, e ad ogni significato definito: è nel valore musicale, radicale del segni, è nella verità ch'essi velano, alterata, contesa dal crescere dei significati, oscura dall'uso

d'una moltitudine di generazioni.³⁴

In his study on Leopardi in 1950, „Secondo discorso su Leopardi“, Ungaretti extends his argument on the temporality of language from one diachronic analysis to another: whereas in the essay on Bergson he was concentrating on syntactic phenomena of diachrony, he now turns to the study of historical diachrony in vocabulary. Words have a history which is veiled by the use of generations. There is a constant play of meaning within the historical depth of each word, surpassing any willful selection of signification. While Leopardi is tantalized by the impossibility to retrieve the times and words gone by³⁵, Ungaretti in fact enjoys the vagueness of words, that he understands as vividness and strength, and bases his poetics on „la durata della parola“ (the duration of the word). The common interpretation of this part of his poetics is the idea that an original meaning of a word can be unveiled and used for new ways of signification, that a word oscillates between past, present and future³⁶. Consequently analyses of Ungaretti's writings and poems have focused on historical meanings of words that have become obsolete. A perfect example of Ungaretti's poetics is the following poem which does not only explain the meaning of „la durata della parola“, but also shows its functioning:

CANTO TERZO

1932

Incide le rughe segrete
Della nostra infelice maschera
La beffa infinita dei padri.

Tu, nella luce fonda,
O confuso silenzio,
Insisti come le cicale irose.³⁷

On the surface this is a poem on the relationship of contemporaries and their

ancestors. The poem states that the fathers mock their offsprings („la beffa dei padri“) and cut secret wrinkles („rughe segrete“) on their (sons’) unhappy masks („infelice maschera“). In the second stanza a „tu“ in deep light („nella luce fonda“) is approached and addressed as „confused silence“, and advised to insist like spiteful cicadas. Probably the only part of this poem that is beyond doubt is the scorn of the fathers for their sons. That relationship seems obvious. It can be interpreted in line with Leopardi’s criticism of modernity, presenting the classics in an unattainable height, scorning their blunt epigrams. The scenario would then be the theater, all the artists wearing masks. The unhappy masks of the younger generation betraying their failure and showing the marks of the acid scorn of their predecessors. The „tu“ would then be one of them standing in the stage’s spotlight, naturally, confused in silence because of his failure, instead of chirping away like cicadas in a summerday. It would not be the first time that the „theater“ is used as metaphor for literature, erudition, and success. However the „cicale irose“, the „spiteful cicadas“, do not seem such an appropriate metaphor for the literary and artistic achievement of the great classics. It has a strange taste of comedy and comedians, the whole scenario is somewhat bizarre. And inexplicable remains the wrinkles’ secret.

That inexplicable „secret“ at the beginning of the poem may well throw some doubt on the whole text. What if there were a totally different meaning to some of the poem’s words? „maschera“ (mask) obviously has quite a variety of meanings even today, especially when used as a technical term: besides referring to something one puts in front of the face in order to disguise oneself, it has quite a number of different meanings in art, photography, semiconductor technology, and data processing, all of which refer either to the construction of something new by way of duplicate, like a mould in art or a lithographic printing process, or to the intensity and intensification of signs, information, and data, like in text processing and photography. Viewed in that light, „felice“ unveils its ancient meaning of „fertility“, not surprisingly. The data processing of the younger generation turns then out to be rather barren as compared to the artistic production of their fathers. „Luce“, too, has one more fascinating meaning, that one would normally hardly think

of: it is in fact an Italian typographical technical term referring to the „text area“, the space a text covers on a blank page – „luce di stampa“ is the unabreviated term³⁸.

If we now read the poem again, we find that it does not only indulge in a theatrical metaphor in order to describe the disparity of classic and modern poets. Much more than that, it is a masterly constructed poetical manifesto of Ungaretti's „durata della parola“. Because the meaning of the second stanza has almost completely changed: „nella luce fonda“ now meaning „in the depth of the text's area“, addressed as „o confuso silenzio“, „o joining silence“ (the original Latin meaning of „confuso“), is „tu“ – the word itself, of course (whose double would be the reader), a word that by the mistakes of generations has been made silent, but should insist on its garrulity, its excessive processes of signification. The poem's subject and addressee is „la parola profonda“, the word, rooted in history, full of life and creativity. The text itself presents the opposite characteristics of a palimpsest: it is not a new text written over an old one, but rather an old one inscribing itself into the new text. Yet there is a glimpse of hope for the younger epigones' texts in spite of their barrenness, because they are already inflicted by the creativity of their predecessors, by the „durata della parola“, implied in the oldest of all meanings of „mask“: the Arabic word „mashara“³⁹, meaning: „scorn“, „la beffa (dei padri)“.

Now, let us see what happens, when the poetical element of „la durata“ is generating meaning in a poem of *Il taccuino del vecchio*, a book concerned with the meaning and being of time:

9

Ogni anno, mentre scopro che Febbraio
È sensitivo, e, per pudore, torbido,
Con minuto fiorire, gialla irrompe
La mimosa. S'inquadra alla finestra
Di quella mia dimora d'una volta,
Di questa dove passo gli anni vecchi.

Mentre arrivo vicino al gran silenzio,
 Segno sar  che niuna cosa muore
 Se ne ritorna sempre l'apparenza?

O sapr  finalmente che la morte
 Regno non ha che sopra l'apparenza?⁴⁰

It is not necessary to know that Ungaretti was born in February, it helps, however, to be well versed in the Roman calendar: Every year I realize that February is sensitive, muddy, and full of shame. In the ancient Roman calendar Februarius was a month of purification and penance. The Lupercalia, as the name suggests, originally a feast to implore the protection from wolves, were celebrated in the middle of the month and consecrated to the God of Nature, Faunus⁴¹. It goes with a feast of purification, like Februarius, to feel dirty or muddy („torbido“) and full of shame because of repentance. The complete name of the mimosa, which is known for its sensitivity (irritated by touch), is the Latin „mimosa pudica“, the same word used in this poem to describe the characteristics of the month of February („per pudore“). The reactions of the mimosa were rhetorically interpreted as originating in her chastity. The mimosa, a plant with tiny yellow buds, each flowering separately for only a day, however, does not bloom in February but in summer. So there is a temporary connection between the purification month of February – also the birthday, in ancient times traditionally regarded as an anniversary purification feast – and the time of the mimosa in summer. Mimosa and birthday / February, though separated, have something in common: they return every year, and they remind the poem's I of one another. And so the mimosa becomes a symbol of a life cycle accompanying the I of the poem wherever it lives and exists („dimora“). Framed in a window it is disconnected from the changing space around it, like the birthday date in a calendar.

The two questions at the end of the poem, however, distinguish between two concepts of time: the yearly life cycle of a plant and the annual human birthday with its numeric increase. The mimosa gives the (wrong) impression that it never dies, that only its appearance changes in time. Whereas

the birthday with its linear temporary structure, (wrongly) implies a yearly return (because there is no real seasonal cycle involved), it is really heading towards death („finalmente“ / „la morte“). The two concepts of time are integrated into two different religious believes: the repetitive life cycle of fertility cults and the linear eschatology of Christianity. Yet, when one reads very carefully the two final questions, it turns out that they are not so different after all. Both questions are not open-ended, they both simply ask if a given statement is true or not: The first question concerning the mimosa asks if it is true that nothing dies and that appearance only returns year after year. The second question inquires if it is true that death reigns only over appearance, ergo: nothing dies. Though there is a slight difference in the meaning of „appearance“ in these two questions, and consequently in the concepts of life that go with it which of course is due to the underlying religious believes, the main point is that in neither of these questions death sets an end to life. Which could have been expected some lines earlier: „Mentre arrivo vicino al gran silenzio“ – the „great silence“ referring of course to the nearness of death.

This poem is more concerned with life than with death. February, the month of carnival, represents the end of winter in European traditions. The mimosa with its daily flowering blossoms can be regarded as a joyful reminder of the passing days. The lodgings in the poem referred to as „dimora“ is a place of „being“, existing, in a very Heideggerian sense. And even the way towards death is depicted as an active process („arrivo“), which also marks the point in time of the utterance and the psychological condition of the poem's persona, I. In this poem the words are employed to evoke life, their historical meaning serves to insist on a temporality, blending past, present, and future, while the metaphorical structure – also reflected in the sentence structure – has a duplicating and generating effect.

As we have seen in our analysis of some poems in *Il taccuino del vecchio* so far, there are many words of long duration, the most interesting of these is probably the title word „taccuino“. That it is an antonym to the *almanacco* and *lunario*, which organize time from an astrological and calendric perspective, has already been said. The historical original meaning of this word,

however, is a veritable turn of the screw: It is of Arabic origin – „*taqwīm* „giusto ordine”, diffuso attraverso il lat. mediev.“⁴² – translated into English meaning as much as the „right order“ or the „right serial order“. So that the taccuino is probably not at all as chaotic as was claimed earlier. Its likely „higher order“ is hidden behind its secular, makeshift surface. But what is that „right order“? A deeper insight into the meaning of duration as presented by Henri Bergson and adopted by Giuseppe Ungaretti may help to understand, what is meant and what is at stake.

Although Ungaretti’s poetical concept of „la durata della parola“ is based on Bergson’s „durée pure“, there is a rather obvious influence of Leopardi’s thinking, which concerns most of all the use of historical, cultural, and literary vocabulary⁴³. After all, Leopardi is concerned with poetics, as is Ungaretti, who needs to transport Bergson’s philosophical, mathematical and physical analysis and interpretation of „la durée pure“ to his own field of literature and poetics. In his essay on Leopardi Ungaretti tries to combine the two thinkers. Though Leopardi questioned the durable quality of the past, being something that does not exist except in memory, according to Ungaretti, he saw its capacity of temporizing meaning by creating context exactly in memory, which should be considered as the basis of the human understanding of „real“ time:

Leopardi s’era reso conto, dopo Vico, di ciò che in realtà è una durata. *Non si tratta* affatto dicendo durata *di tempo fattosi immobile*, come taluni suggeriscono, anche se essa possa suppersi, considerando *il passato*, come un *tempo circoscritto*. Il tempo, se non in moto, è inconcepibile. Leopardi si rivolgeva la domanda se fossimo ridotti – non essendo il passato se non tempo defunto, consumato – a non potere più se non evocare – se non mettere in moto per effetti di memoria – da realtà del nostro essere.⁴⁴

„La durée pure“ becomes Ungaretti’s credo and „la durata della parola“ the heart of his poetics. In a late interview he once more confirms the meaning of both for his life and oeuvre. Seen in this light his statement, that all his writing is autobiographic, reaches a new philosophical dimension: living and

writing are but expressions of duration:

Naturalmente ogni giorno le cose sono diverse e nuove, ma in ogni giorno è contenuto tutto il passato e tutto il futuro. Credo che la mia lingua poetica, continuamente rinnovandosi e rimanendo antica, non l'abbia dimenticato mai.⁴⁵

Bergson's concept of la „durée pure“ does indeed understand time as process, as an indivisible transition from past to future. However, as a philosopher interested in physical analysis, he is compelled to question that experience of time minutely and concretely. Starting with the idea Ungaretti stated in the above quotation on Leopardi, that time is only conceivable when in motion („Il tempo, se non in moto, è inconcepibile“), Bergson tries to analyse the perception of time in motion and its relationship to the experience of duration. The ideal starting point for such an analysis is of course the problems the (analogous) clock presents to the human observer. Since Bergson offers a very elaborate and detailed analysis of this problem, he shall be quoted in full:

Il est vrai que nous comptons les moments successifs de la durée, et que, par ses rapports avec le nombre, le temps nous apparaît d'abord comme une grandeur mesurable, tout à fait analogue à l'espace. Mais il y a ici une importante distinction à faire. Je dis par exemple qu'une minute vient de s'écouler, et j'entends par là qu'un pendule, battant la seconde, a exécuté soixante oscillations. Si je me représente ces soixante oscillations tout d'un coup et par une seule aperception de l'esprit, j'exclus par hypothèse l'idée d'une succession: je pense, non à soixante battements qui se succèdent, mais à soixante points d'une ligne fixe, dont chacun symbolise, pour ainsi dire, une oscillation du pendule. – Si, d'autre part, je veux me représenter ces soixante oscillations successivement, mais sans rien changer à leur mode de production dans l'espace, je devrai penser à chaque oscillation en excluant le souvenir de la précédente, car l'espace n'en a conservé aucune trace: mais par là même je me condamnerai à

demeurer sans cesse dans le présent; je renoncerais à penser une succession ou une durée. Que si enfin je conserve, joint à l'image de l'oscillation présente, le souvenir de l'oscillation qui la précédait, il arrivera de deux choses l'une: ou je juxtaposerai les deux images, et nous retombons alors sur notre première hypothèse; ou je les apercevrai l'une dans l'autre, se pénétrant et s'organisant entre elles comme les notes d'une mélodie de manière à former ce que nous appellerons une multiplicité indistincte ou qualitative, sans aucune ressemblance avec le nombre: j'obtiendrai ainsi l'image de la durée pure, mais aussi je me serai entièrement dégagé de l'idée d'un milieu homogène ou d'une quantité mesurable. En interrogeant soigneusement la conscience, on reconnaîtra qu'elle procède ainsi toute les fois qu'elle s'abstient de représenter la durée symboliquement. Quand les oscillations régulières du balancier nous invitent au sommeil, est-ce le dernier son entendu, le dernier mouvement perçu qui produit cette effet?⁴⁶

In his analysis of the observation of time passing, as presented by the movements of a clock, Bergson finds three models of mental representation: 1. an overall perception negating the idea of succession; 2. a successive representation which eliminates any connection of elements; and 3. a blending of past and present perception which he considers as „pure duration“ and compares to the auditive perception of music, that is a sequence of pervading tones. The result of this act of perception is a qualitative or indistinct multiplicity without any resemblance to the concept of number, without the need of the notion of any homogeneous medium or a measurable quantity. The elimination of numbers is important to Bergson because duration is not an experience that can be expressed by numbers, and the elimination of any spacial notion or background is necessary to avoid a flawed representation of duration by reducing time to space.

His findings lead Bergson to a philosophy of time in which duration replaces the Christian concept of eternity. With a slightly ironic and challenging rhetorical gesture he converts „sub specie eternitatis“ to „sub specie durationis“, creating an „eternity of life“, duration in immanence.

Plus, en effet, nous nous habituons à penser et à percevoir toutes choses *sub specie durationis*, plus nous nous enfonçons dans la durée réelle. Et plus nous nous y enfonçons, plus nous nous replaçons dans la direction du principe, pourtant transcendant, dont nous participions et dont l'éternité ne doit pas être une éternité d'immutabilité, mais une éternité de vie: comment, autrement, pourrions-nous vivre et nous mouvoir en elle?⁴⁷

Living in itself is the basis of „la durée pure“: „Se laisser vivre“ – a state of being in which the mental representation does not distinguish between past and present, instead it experiences duration:

La durée toute pure est la forme que prend la succession de nos états de conscience quand notre moi se laisse vivre, quand il s'abstient d'établir une séparation entre l'état présent et les états antérieurs.⁴⁸

Returning to Ungaretti's concept of „la durata della parola“, we now find its meaning has broadened. It does no longer just refer to the unreliability of the sign's signified due to historical changes, but to any durable characteristic of language, such as: verbs (expressing processes instead of states of being), melodiousness (created through sound attractions, alliteration etc.), and rhythm (creating durable patterns). All of these we have encountered in the analyses of Ungaretti's poems from *Il taccuino del vecchio*. Here it shall suffice to give one example for each of them: In the first poem Ungaretti makes a point of differentiating between past and future: „I giorni del passato / E gli altri che verranno“ – while the past has ended (expressed by a state of being, a noun), the future continuing the present is expressed by a verb in the future tense. The importance of this choice of words is confirmed in the poem's last line, which consequently represents the life of man as „profugo“ with the adequate tenses of the verb „to be“: „Profugo come gli altri / Che furono, che sono, che saranno“. In the fourth poem the final line „Che novera monotone giornate“ resounds with the monotony of the accumulating „o“, expressing

the lengthiness of the action (which is not represented by the numbers themselves, as we have learned from Bergson). In the third poem Ungaretti uses patterns of dactyls and adonics in order to express the succession of days and nights: „Quando un giorno ti lascia / Pensi all'altro che spunta“. In *Il taccuino del vecchio* there is one poem, that can be interpreted as carefully reflecting and brilliantly expressing Bergson's philosophical concept of „la durée pure“ and Ungaretti's poetical concept of „la durata della parola“:

16

Da quella stella all'altra
 Si carcera la notte
 In turbinante vuota dismisura,

Da quella solitudine di stella
 A quella solitudine di stella.⁴⁹

The second stanza seems to be nothing more than a repetition – a repetition in itself, as well as a repetition of the first line of the poem – reading: from the solitude of this star / to the solitude of that star. The first stanza, however, presents a few problems, even though it is syntactically unharmed: Something is stretching from one star to another. It is the night („la notte“) incarcerating itself / confined to itself in a whirling, empty immensity („turbinante vuota dismisura“), all words interpretable not only as a description of concrete space (whirlwind, emptiness, and immensity), but also as metaphors of emotion (instability, emptiness, and excessiveness). But even though there is this detailed description of the night, the poem's subject seems to be „solitude“, the word, twice repeated in the poem's end and already implied in the first line as the reader understands from the poem's ending. The feeling of solitude, however, cannot be attributed to the night because it is explicitly stated as belonging to the stars: „la solitudine di stella“. So once again the subject of the poem seems to be the loneliness of the stars, as in that other poem set in the universe. Why then is the night endowed with a concrete spacial description or even emotional states of being? The spacial description

is needed to express the spacial immensity of the night, serving to reflect the spacial distance of the stars, of two stars („da quella stella all'altra“), too far apart to have any contact with each other whatsoever, consequently feeling lonely, and perhaps in a state of instability, emptiness, and excessive emotions, caused by the immensity of the night, reflected by the night, which, however, is not said explicitly. Yet the night is „immense“, „immeasurable“, and by that word alone defies the meaning of space as a category of calculation. There is no space, but infinity – „confined“, an oxymoron –, undermining any spacial meaning whatsoever.

How then are we to understand „solitude“? Is it not a word semantically connected to space? An unhappy feeling arising from being alone, being apart, or separated – all spacial expressions? What we can learn (erfahren) from this poem is that the feeling of solitude is not grounded in space, but in time, and that the word „solitude“ is – like the Greek word „nostalgia“ („a desire of home“ becoming „a desire of temporal origin“) – literally derived from space, but used to express a temporary emotion: It is the relentless memory of something lost that creates the feeling of solitude. Solitude is in fact one possibility of experiencing duration. But how can the poem express this duration experienced in solitude? How can it be expressed, avoiding any spacial mental representation as demanded by Henri Bergson?

The first condition is of course the elimination of space in the mental representation. This is done in the poem by avoiding any words expressing calculable space like „distance“ or „stretching“, they are in fact left out: from this star to that star ... what? „Si carcera la notte“ is not a verb expressing distance, quite the opposite. „Turbinante vuota dismisura“ also allows no mental representation of space, and neither does the underlying meaning of „infinity“. To grasp the solitude of the stars the reader is forced to resort to another mode of representation: time. This is supported by the poem's metric structure, which is rather monotonous. All lines beginning with an upbeat and continuing with trochees, whose characteristic of slowing down movement we have already encountered in another poem. This time the use of trochees is forced onto some words, which in prose demand a longer, dactyl pronunciation increasing the slowness of the words and the impression of

monotony. The long words in the last three lines intensify the monotony of the rhythm which has almost no variation, except the lengthening effect on words and the upbeat at the beginning of each line. But there is one important exception: the adonic in the first line, having once again a charming effect, expressing the impossible desire of being together, as near to each other as possible: „stélla all’áltra“. The alliteration and accumulation of „l“s and „a“s supporting the idea of belonging, of echoing one another. But this feeling of nearness at the beginning has no metric echo in the continuation of the poem, it remains all alone. The two stars in the end of the poem being as far apart as possible even though referring to one another in the literal reduplication of themselves. These last two lines are of course no mere repetition, they are the ultimate source of the effect of duration in the poem: they take the place of the eliminated spacial representation expressing in time the experience of solitude as duration: the repetitiveness of the trochees creating monotony, intensified by the repetitiveness of sounds, the only difference in the two lines being a „d“, the mere repetition of the line inducing an experience of duration, so many beats or syllables, twice. The spacial representation being reduced to a literal „da – a“ or the space between the lines, between the stars.

There is no hope for the lonely stars, but there is the poem’s compassion, aware of the solitude of both stars: allowing an echo, dying away. For the last line is indeed an echo of the one before – like every natural echo losing the onset of the utterance (the „d“):

Da quella solitudine di stella
...a quella solitudine di stella.

So what is the „right order“ of the *Taccuino*? It has been said all along: It is duration, an understanding of time as life, of life as time, living, being, growing old, which is man’s ultimate experience of duration.

Encountering poems: So far we have seen, how someone encounters a poem and how a poem encounters something, and on the way, we ourselves have encountered language. There is one more possibility of encountering poems: a poem encountering a poem, and for that matter a poet encountering a poet. Paul Celan⁵⁰ – an even darker hermetic poet than Ungaretti – translated *Il taccuino del vecchio* into German and published it together with the translation of *La terra promessa* in a bilingual book: *Das verheißene Land, Das Merkbuch des Alten* in 1968⁵¹. The bilingual text enables the reader to encounter both, the Italian and the German poems.

It is said that Ungaretti was quite satisfied with Celan's translation of his poems, speaking of an „interpretazione generosa“ in a dedication to him.⁵² Celan, too, occasionally uttered his satisfaction concerning translations of his poems by others. Edmond Jabès relates an anecdote that helps to understand what is at stake:

Paul Celan était, lui-même, un admirable traducteur. Un jour, comme je lui disais mal reconnaître les poèmes qu'il me lisait, dans les traductions françaises que j'avais sous les yeux [...] , il me répondit que ces traductions, dans leur ensemble, le satisfaisaient. [...]

La satisfaction que manifestait Paul Celan pour les traductions, publiées ou sur le point de l'être, me déroutait. „Il est difficile de faire mieux“, précisait-il. Est-ce parce que, au fond de soi-même, il savait, plus que tout autre écrivain, qu'il était un auteur *intraduisible*?⁵³

Celan, who was as a prolific translator as Ungaretti, knew of course the problems of translating. His satisfaction may have been gained from his own experience: translating is a delicate task, not easy to accomplish. Whereas Jabès takes the somewhat elitist position, that some poets are simply untranslatable – which does not necessarily need to be wrong –, Celan's position is more complex, it has to be more complex, because he himself translates. His somewhat affable answer implies that there is no such thing as a good or a bad translation, that a translation in fact is not a translation at all, if one understands translation as a duplicate of the original poem. Translat-

ing is a much more complicated matter. His „translation“ of *Il taccuino del vecchio* should shed some light on this.

Giuseppe Ungaretti translated not only poems from other languages, he also wrote poetry in French⁵⁴. His ideas on translation are stated clearly in an essay from 1946 „Poeta e uomini“:

È a tal punto individuale e inimitabile la poesia ch'essa è intraducibile. La traduzione è la prova del fuoco di quanto essa sia individuale e inimitabile. Non è traducibile il ritmo, ciascuna lingua derivandone i raggruppamenti dalla propria indole e dalla lunghezza delle proprie parole nel modo più intrasferibilmente proprio. Non è traducibile la qualità sillabica, la prima differenza sensibile tra due lingue risiedendo precisamente nei valori fonici. Non è traducibile il contenuto poiché ogni contenuto è animato e coinvolto nel segreto d'una personalità. Non sarebbe altrimenti personalità unica, com'è fatalmente ogni persona umana. Il contenuto sarà quindi soggetto ad interpretazione anch'esso. Non è traducibile infine né la forma né lo stile, in cui tutto l'altro s'assomma, si fonde e vive, e si fa commovente, se traducibile non doveva né poteva essere tutto l'altro.⁵⁵

Ungaretti, too, has a deeper understanding of the problem of translation. His position is quite clear, and not so far from Celan's: poetry is untranslatable, not only because of the differences in languages, in rhythm, sound, and linguistic characteristics, but because every poem is individual and inimitable, it has its own content and style. A statement Celan himself could have uttered. Since translation is impossible, only interpretation can take its place, which explains Ungaretti's comment on Celan's „translation“ quoted earlier. But what is the meaning of „interpretazione generosa“, keeping the effects of Ungaretti's „durata della parola“ in mind? Generous is most likely Ungaretti's gesture, like Celan's before, allowing and accepting the „translation“. Modest is Celan's gesture towards Ungaretti, taking the place of the humble translator, publishing the book in Ungaretti's name⁵⁶, as it is usage, but with both knowing that there is no such thing as a translation, that a translation

of a poem can only be a new poem, a poem indebted to that other poem⁵⁷, and for that reason bound to be „generous“.

Now, let's have a look at some of Celan's „interpretations“ and see if we can understand how Celan encountered Ungaretti, how their poems encounter each other. Let's start with the last poem interpreted because it is so well constructed and full of poetic and philosophic meaning

16	16
Da quella stella all'altra	Stern-zu-Stern, zwischenein
Si carcera la notte	kerkert die Nacht sich,
In turbinante vuota dismisura,	
	Unmaß, kreisendes, leeres,
Da quella solitudine di stella	von dieser Sterneinsamkeit
A quella solitudine di stella.	zu jener Sterneinsamkeit. ⁵⁸

The most obvious difference is the length of the two stanzas. Celan moves the last line of the first stanza to the beginning of the second stanza, making that line much more eminent and ominous than it is at the end of Ungaretti's stanza. The charming adonic „stélla all'áltra“, expressing the utopian desire to be together, Celan makes even sweeter: „Stern-zu-Stern“ („star-to-star“), a neologism, reminiscent of children's games and the magic of belonging, the hyphenation strengthening that impression. „Zwischenein“, another neologism, in structure and meaning close to the English „inbetween“. With Celan the utopian longing of the stars becomes the first word of the poem, clarifying from the very beginning its subject. Yet he has to strain the syntax of the German sentence in order to get this effect. He has not only turned „stella all'altra“ into one compound noun („Stern-zu-Stern“), he has also transformed the important final sentence, turning three Italian words („solitudine di stella“) into one German („Sterneinsamkeit“), another neologism. Which was not necessary at all, he could have constructed a much more similar German sentence like „von díeses Stérnes Éinsamkéit / zu jénes Stérnes Éinsamkéit“ with a similar metric foot as the Italian: trochees with the stretching of „Éinsamkéit“ as Ungaretti did it with the „sólítudiné“. There are two

new effects he gains by not following the original poem in these points: one is the metre. Ungaretti's poem is based on the monotony of the trochee, with the adonic as exception. In the first stanza Celan's poem shows more metric variation: the two words in the first line have the same metric pattern: „Stérn-zu-Stérn, zwischeneín“, „kérkert die Nácht sich“ is in fact an adonic expressing no positive idea whatsoever. The words of the final two lines in the German poem not only defy any metric flow, they are even for German tongues within the smoothness of the poem difficult to pronounce. That difficult pronunciation and metre hinders the reader to advance quickly and makes him aware of that fact. Secondly, Celan gains the neologisms, which have a similar effect to Ungaretti's „durata della parola“ i.e. the vagueness and ambiguity of meaning. Even though neologisms are not words taken from the past, the reader in order to verify their meaning is confronted with the vast historical tradition of language.

In order to understand what is happening between Ungaretti's poem and Celan's it is necessary to ponder the meaning of encountering poems. Ungaretti's poem, which is not a translation, is trying to put something into words. That does not mean that it is not aware of language, and literature, and tradition, but its primary aim is to express something in words that has not been said in words before, at least not in that way. Celan's poem, being a „translation“, is encountering another poem, that does not mean that it does not want to put something into words for the first time, but its primary task is to encounter language. As a „translation“ it is bound by the words of the „original“ and confronted with the differences between languages.

Celan's choice to turn „Da quella stella all'altra“ into the German „Stern-zu-Stern, zwischenein“ tells a lot about his encounter with Ungaretti's poem and the meaning of his own poem. „Stern-zu-Stern“ is really on the verge to kitsch. In order to destroy that risk, he needs to break it. Which he does, by adding „zwischenein“, which literally goes inbetween the two stars, pulling them apart. At the same time the parallel construction of both phrases („Stérn-zu-Stérn“, „zwischeneín“), created by the metre, sets them apart, leaving on the one side a utopian desire almost kitsch, and on the other the spacial reality of the universe. This has almost a demetaphoriz-

ing effect on the poem, strengthened by the fact that Celan has at the same time dismissed the personification of the stars (possible from the beginning) in Ungaretti's poem. Instead of having two stars at a distance feeling lonely, Celan creates an abstract idea, „Stern-zu-Stern“, which could be kitsch, which could be fate. If there were no hyphens, as it is the case when one hears the poem, it could even be the beginning of communication: a star sending a message to another star.

The effect of the word „Sterneinsamkeit“ is similar. Here, too, the personification is lost, and the signified of the abstract noun, though pushed into the forefront of the sentence, does not unveil its meaning. What on earth could be „Sterneinsamkeit“? Ordinarily one would expect that the first part of this compound word functions as a specification of the second: „Sterneinsamkeit“ would then be the specific solitude of stars as opposed to other kinds of solitude. Which does not make sense. It can only be supposed to mean „the solitude a star is feeling“, but that as an abstract noun also leaves the reader at a loss. He is forced to find his own way in this universe of abstract feelings, which is well reflected in the two completely prosaic final lines which are so difficult to pronounce.

Celan's rearrangement of the poem's stanzas also changes the meaning. Providing the „night“ with an adonic and the eminent position of the final line of the first stanza, Celan draws attention to her. With Celan she becomes the only personification left in the poem. Only she is acting. Here is a subject completely alone. There is only one night. Incarcerating herself, because she wants to be alone or because she cannot help being alone? And that is the subject of Celan's poem: much more than the importance of the expression of duration in language, it is the difficulty of communicating, of understanding, of being in language, of being imprisoned by everyday language and not being able to reach out, to encounter the other, the other, so much desired: „Stern-zu-Stern“, where one and the other is the same without difference.

So how much attention did Celan pay to the meaning of time and duration in Ungaretti's *Il taccuino del vecchio*? A look at the first poem should be helpful.

1
 Agglutinati all'oggi
 I giorni del passato
 E gli altri che verranno.

Per anni e lungo secoli
 Ogni attimo sorpresa
 Nel sapere che ancora siamo in vita,
 Che scorre sempre come sempre il
 vivere,
 Dono e pena inattesi
 Nel turbinio continuo
 Dei vani mutamenti.

Tale per nostra sorte
 Il viaggio che proseguo,
 In un battibaleno
 Esumando, inventando
 Da capo a fondo il tempo,
 Profugo come gli altri
 Che furono, che sono, che saranno.

1
 Angefügt, nahtlos, ans Heute
 die Tage gestern,
 die Tage morgen.

Jahre, Jahrhunderte hin, jeden Nu
 das Noch-am-Leben-Sein als
 Überraschung,
 das Immer-und-immer-Dahin des
 Lebens,
 Geschenke, so unverhofft wie Pein,
 im unaufhörlichen Wirbel
 all des vergeblichen Wechsels.

So, durch unser Geschick,
 meine Reise und Weiterreise,
 im Handumdrehen
 grab ich die Zeit aus, erfind sie
 vom Grund bis zum Scheitel,
 ein Flüchtling, den andern gleich,
 die waren, die sind, die sein

werden.⁵⁹

In Celan's poem past and future are represented by the same word category: „yesterday“ and „tomorrow“, whereas Ungaretti made a point of using different word categories, implying a structural difference in meaning. Celan's first line, however, although on the surface quite different, reflects a deep understanding of the inquiry into the meaning of time Ungaretti undertakes in this poem. „Anfügen“ is in fact a German word that can replace the grammatical term „agglutinieren“. It is formed of a prefix and the basic verb „fügen“. The noun „Füge“ refers in construction technology to the space that is needed to join two things together. The attachment in this way ac-

complished remains visible to the eye. Therefore Celan needs to add „nahtlos“ („seamless“) in order not to destroy the meaning of „agglutinato“ in the original, implying an (almost) invisible attachment. What seems to be an awkward solution at first sight, using two words instead of one, turns out to be a perfect rendering of the two concepts of time on which Ungaretti’s poem is based. The „angefügt“ refers to the objective-calendric concept, while the „nahtlos“ refers to the subjective-progressive one. Celan’s „angefügt, nahtlos“ is as surprising as Ungaretti’s „agglutinato“. They both confront the reader with an unexpected concept of time representation. While Ungaretti’s „agglutinato“ draws attention to the workings of language, Celan’s „angefügt“ does even more than that. It calls to mind the word „fügen“, and „Fügung“, which means – as we have already seen in Heidegger – fate, and hints at a deeper order of the organization of time, i.e. the ancient meaning of „taqwīm“.

This is also reflected in Celan’s handling of the third stanza. „Geschick“ is another German word for „fate“. It is much more rarely used and more poetic than the word „Schicksal“ commonly used, and its linguistic structure reveals the underlying understanding of „fate“: The basic verb „schicken“ means „to send“. „Unser Geschick“ then implies that we are sent, that we are because we are as sent, that we are directed (towards), a meaning that can also be found in the Italian „sorte“ (derived from „sortire“). That Celan understands the important role verbs play in Ungaretti’s poem, is visible at the end of his own poem when he, too, uses verbs (and a smooth dactylic metre) to express the experience of being in time: „die wáren, die sínd, und die séin werden“. A rare rendering of words in Celan, who usually avoids the use of verbs, as can be seen in the rest of the poem: the verb „proseguo“ rendered as a noun „Weiterreise“; „scorre“ and „siamo“ of the second stanza as individual verbs completely deleted and only serving in compound constructions. Ungaretti’s liking for „parlando“⁶⁰ must have been quite an experience for Celan. But it carries the meaning of Ungaretti’s poems. Ungaretti is narrating, he is giving language all the time it needs, experiencing its advancing, passing from word to word, generating meaning. Ungaretti wants that time to be experienced. In order to achieve that he uses metric, rhythmic, and me-

lodic patterns which support the flow of the words, like the popular trochee or adonic and alliterations. Celan on the other hand does neither trust the smoothness of the poetic verse nor the garrulity of the prosaic sentence.

In the middle stanza he has therefore completely deleted all verbs. Thereby avoiding Ungaretti's elaborate narration („Nel sapere che ancora siamo in vita / Che scorre sempre come sempre il vivere“). Celan begins his stanza with a threefold listing of nouns expressing time – en passant dropping one line in Ungaretti's poem – and continues with two incredibly long abstract compound nouns („das Noch-am-Leben-Sein“ / „das Immer-und-immer-Dahin“), which give a much more distant, almost disinterested impression of the process of life than Ungaretti's sentence with its identification inviting subject „siamo“ (we are). In the following three lines Celan's stanza is full of negativity: the „unverhofft“ – a very rarely used German word – including two negative particles „un“ and „ver“ (as opposed to the Italian „inattesi“), the „unaufhörlich“ and the „vergeblich“ rendering „continuo“ and „vani“, two words, which, though negative in their meaning, do not display that kind of negativity. It is that same line of sceptical, negative thinking that makes Celan translate „in battibaleno“ in the final stanza not with the equivalent German „in Blitzesschnelle“, but with „im Handumdrehen“, meaning not only „fast as lightning“, but also „twisting someone's arm“, resorting to force, inflicting violence. And for that very reason he understands „profugo“ as „Flüchtling“ – I am a fugitive like the others. Which in fact he was – autobiographically – fleeing from the Nazis and losing almost everything, everyone he loved.

3

Quando un giorno ti lascia,
Pensi all'altro che spunta.

È sempre pieno di promesse il nascere
Sebbene sia straziante
E l'esperienza d'ogni giorno insegna
Che nel legarsi, sciogliersi o durare

3

Wenn ein Tag dich daläßt,
denk du an den, der anbricht.

Stets ist Geburt voll Verheißung,
auch wo sie reißt an den Herzen,
auch wo das täglich Erfahrene lehrt,
es seien im Sichbinden, im

Non sono i giorni se non vago fumo.

Sichlösen, im Dauern
die Tage Rauch, der verfließt.⁶¹

The interpretation of Ungaretti's Italian poem showed how important its metric construction is for the understanding not only of the poem itself, but also of the underlying temporary structure of duration. This time Celan follows suit and displays all the traditional craftsmanship of a poet. While Ungaretti used a combination of dactyls and adonic in the first stanza to imitate in language the succession of days and nights, Celan uses opposite metres to create a divide between the waning and the rising day that can also be felt in language: „Wénn ein Tág dich dáläßt / denk dú an dén, der ánbricht“ – the trochee slowing down the rhythm of the first line, while the iamb presses ahead in the second. In doing so he stresses the end of what is left behind and the beginning of something new. His next two lines are even more harmonic than Ungaretti's, using a combination of dactyls and adonic in spite of the semantic contradiction between the joy of a new birth and the pangs that go with it: „Stéts ist Gebúrt voll Verheißung / áuch wo sie reißt an den Hérzen“. The following line continues this smooth metre, even though what is taught by daily experience is not easy to swallow: „áuch wo das táeglich Erfáhrene léhrt“. The next line consequently returns to a trochaic pattern: „es seíen ím Sichbín-den, ím Sichlöesen, im Dáuern“. In the last line the combination of iambs and anapaest flows swiftly with the image of the disappearing smoke: „die Täge Ráu-ch, der verfließt“.

Celan does not only use harmonic metre, inviting the reader to follow his words, he also uses quite a bit of delightful poetic imagery. His „birth“ is not full of „promise“ as Ungaretti's, but „voll Verheißung“, a word in connection with birth similar to „annunciation“, e.g. the birth of Christ. Ungaretti's „straziante“, already a somewhat poetic word, Celan tops with a beautiful heartrending metaphor „reißt an den Herzen“. And „das täglich Erfáhrene“ is also a rather poetic version of the down-to-earth „täglich Erfahrung“. The following German reflexive verbs flow even smoother than the Italian. The metre of the last line, however, though quite different in the construction of each poet, leaves a harmonic finish with both poems. This time Ungaretti

uses a combination of dactyls and trochees slowing the last verse down, making the smoke linger at the end of the line.

Celan's poem is almost too beautiful to be true. It seems as if he, the fugitive who is haunted by dreadful memories and unspeakable sorrow, has taken the poem's advice to heart: to turn over a new leaf. Which was impossible for him. No, in this beautiful poem there are some wrinkles („rughe segrete“) from the past: The annunciation together with the heartrending metaphor points of course to Christ, but less to his birth than to his death, to his sacrifice – an interpretation in accordance with biblical typology – to the sacrifice of the one who wanted to suffer for all, so that all would be redeemed. But what does daily experience teach? That life is nothing but smoke. – That is Ungaretti's version. Celan cannot negate the smoke, not even by a double negation. He finds it disappearing, swiftly, completely. What we are confronted with in this poem is again the opposite characteristics of a palimpsest: this time the hidden text inscribing itself is written by history and autobiography.

On me pardonnera si je ne nomme ici l'*holocauste*, c'est-à-dire littéralement, comme j'avais aimé l'appeler ailleurs, le *brûle-tout*, que pour en dire ceci: il y a certes aujourd'hui la date de cette holocauste que nous savons, l'enfer de notre mémoire; mais il y a un holocauste pour chaque date, et quelque part dans le monde à chaque heure. Chaque heure compte son holocauste.⁶²

This smoke is not an index, but a trace of a date and a schibboleth. Derrida's quotation – which is not concerned with this poem specifically, but with Celan's poetry and poetics on the whole – does not only recover the cause of that smoke, it also fixes it to a date, to the one date referred to by the „holocaust“ and to all the dates, all the hours and all the days: „die Tage – Rauch“. „Rauch“ in this poem is the trace of a date, that one may be able to recover, if one knows what to look for. It is a schibboleth in the sense that it divides between those who know and those who don't. Or as Derrida likes to specify in his book: between those who can pronounce it and those who

can't, drawing attention to the one biblical „schibboleth“, that password that Jephthah's Jews could pronounce, but their enemies, the Ephraimites, could not:

Un *schibboleth*, le mot *schibboleth*, si c'en est un, nomme, dans la plus grande extension de sa généralité ou de son usage, toute marque insignifiante, arbitraire, par exemple la différence phonématique entre *shi* et *si* quand elle devient discriminante, décisive et coupante. Cette différence n'a aucun sens par elle-même, mais elle devient ce qu'il faut savoir reconnaître et surtout marquer pour *faire le pas*, pour passer la frontière d'un lieu ou le seuil d'un poème, se voir accorder un droit d'asile ou l'habitation légitime d'une langue.⁶³

According to Derrida it is the one word in a poem the reader has to recognize, to mark, to notice, in order to be able to step over the poem's threshold. It is not a question of understanding, only of recognition. The schibboleth will not tell the truth of the poem. What is needed to recognize it, is insider knowledge. But to step over the poem's threshold, does that mean to encounter the poem, to experience it?

[U]n poème prend valeur de philosophème. Il peut s'offrir, et il doit le faire, au travail d'une herméneutique qu'i n'a pas besoin, pour sa lecture dite „interne“, d'accéder au secret singulier un temps partagé par un nombre fini de témoins ou d'acteurs. Le poème lui-même est déjà un tel événement herméneutique, son écriture relève de l'*hermeneuein*, elle en procède.⁶⁴

Derrida distinguishes between two ways of approaching a poem (by Celan). One is the insider knowledge turning a word into a schibboleth, turning écriture into autobiography, the other is the hermeneutical task. If the reader tries to understand, the poem will offer itself to him or her, because the poem itself is already a hermeneutic event, its écriture a hermeneutic process. The possibility for the reader to experience language, however, depends neither

on the recognition of a schibboleth nor on the positive task of hermeneutics, even though both can support it. It is only based on the poem experiencing language, which, as Heidegger explained, can only be an experience of the shortcomings of language, of language failing to express itself.

Celan himself went through such an experience of language failing. In answer to the highly regarded „Literary Award of the City of Bremen“ in 1958 he described his path to writing poetry, his experience with language:

Sie, die Sprache, blieb unverloren, ja, trotz allem. Aber sie mußte nun hindurchgehen durch ihre eigenen Antwortlosigkeiten, hindurchgehen durch furchtbares Verstummen, hindurchgehen durch die tausend Finsternisse todbringender Rede. Sie ging hindurch und gab keine Worte her für das, was geschah; aber sie ging durch dieses Geschehen. Ging hindurch und durfte wieder zutage treten, „angereichert“ von all dem.⁶⁵

Yet he describes it not as his own experience, but as an experience of language: Language, shipwrecked, passing through its own responselessness, through dreadful silence, and deadly garrulity, passing through, experiencing without finding any words in itself, until surfacing again, transformed. That experienced language has become the language of his poems, he explains. And, swerving from language to poet to poem, he uses the metaphors of „Unterwegssein“ (being on the road) and „Uhrzeigersinn“ (clockwise direction) in order to describe the „being“ of a poem: that is on the road, clockwise proceeding in a relentlessly progressing time, because the poem is not timeless, even though it aspires to timeless renown, it is in time, grasping through time⁶⁶.

In „Der Meridian“, the speech Celan gave in 1960, when accepting Germany’s most prestigious literary award („Georg-Büchner-Preis“) he continues in the same line of thinking, quoting an early poem and explaining, or rather questioning, the experience (Er-fahrung) gained by poetry:

„Stimmen vom Nesselweg her: / *Komm auf den Händen zu uns.* / Wer mit der Lampe allein ist, / hat nur die Hand, draus zu lesen“.

[...]

Geht man also, wenn man an Gedichte denkt, geht man mit Gedichten solche Wege? Sind diese Wege nur Um-Wege, Umwege von dir zu dir? Aber es sind ja zugleich auch, unter wie vielen anderen Wegen, Wege, auf denen die Sprache stimmhaft wird, es sind Begegnungen, Wege einer Stimme zu einem wahrnehmenden Du, kreatürliche Wege, Das-einsentwürfe vielleicht, ein Sichvorausschicken zu sich selbst, auf der Suche nach sich selbst ... Eine Art Heimkehr.⁶⁷

That little poem says what it means to experience language: being approached by it, being seduced by it – a path of stinging nettles coaxing to come, come on one's hands, get stung, a million times, and then read from one's palms, experienced, experiencing letters written into burning flesh. And Celan asking: are those the kind of paths one takes with poems? Where do they lead? Are they detours, taking time, to be endured? To encounter? To be encountered by another? Another human? Another creature? Is it a creature's runway? Being projected into the future, searching after oneself? A way home? So many questions. On the road with poems.

How close are Celan and Ungaretti in that same year, 1960. Both understand the poem as experience, as a road to erfahren (understanding and experiencing) life, what it means to exist in space and in time. And both see two directions the poem can lead to: the past in search of oneself, and the future to project. But at the same time they know that time only offers one direction, that being and writing is clockwise, faltering, stumbling over seconds and minutes, and being aware of it. Both struggle with duration and solitude, but for different reasons. One has been interested in duration all his life, and reaching old age understands how life is an experience of duration, the other has been driven by one date all his life, by one word that has changed everything and given time a new meaning („Endlösung“ / „Final Solution“). In that view, similar and different, both regard the poem as being, „still being“ („dieses Immer-noch des Gedichts“), and both feel the „angle of inclination“ over every living being („unter dem Neigungswinkel der Kreatürlichkeit“)⁶⁸.

And for that very reason the poem's mode of existence is the present. The poem – on the road, solitary – or is it: singular? unique? (as Lacoue-Labarthe would have it⁶⁹). Yet he or she who writes it – inscribed: „Das Gedicht ist einsam. Es ist einsam und unterwegs. Wer es schreibt bleibt ihm mitgegeben“⁷⁰. Which is the beginning of dialog because: the poem speaks! Celan puts an exclamation mark. After all that has been said of language failing before the word, facing silence and an abyss opening up, how can the poem still speak, endeavour to speak in spite of all experience? „Aber das Gedicht spricht ja! Es bleibt seiner Daten eingedenk, aber – es spricht. Gewiß, es spricht immer nur in seiner eigenen, allereigensten Sache“⁷¹. The poem, that experienced language, it speaks of course of its experience, it says what cannot be said, indebted to a date, that is its cause. That, too, is inscribed, dated, given, not to be forgotten⁷². The poem speaks of its own cause, of its very own cause. But it needs the other, it needs the other to speak to. Because speaking, as Celan argues, is a dialogical process, which, according to him, cannot be said of language. The other to whom the poem is on the way, encountering, encountering any thing (jedes Ding), any one (jeden Menschen). Whatever it encounters, whoever it encounters that is the Other. „Das Gedicht will zu einem Andern“ „[E]s spricht sich ihm zu“⁷³. „The poem is speaking itself towards the other“. That other, the poem wants to encounter, it is its addressee, but not in the usual sense of the word, not the reader, not yet, it is the other that the poem reaches out to, that it tries to reach through language, „dialogos“. It is the other of language. And the poem concentrates all its attention on this other, in this encounter, cherishing every minute detail, transforming it into language, noticing, noting, noting down into its notebook (Merkbuch – merken: to notice, to remember, to date, to mark).

Aber ich denke – und dieser Gedanke kann Sie jetzt kaum überraschen –, ich denke, daß es von jeher zu den Hoffnungen des Gedichts gehört, gerade auf diese Weise auch in *fremder* – nein, dieses Wort kann ich jetzt nicht mehr gebrauchen –, gerade auf diese Weise *in eines Anderen Sache* zu sprechen – wer weiß, vielleicht in eines *ganz Anderen Sache*. [...]
[V]ielleicht ist sogar ein Zusammentreffen dieses „ganz Anderen“ [...]

mit einem nicht allzu fernen, einem ganz nahen „anderen“ denkbar
– immer und wieder denkbar.⁷⁴

Yet it is the poem's hope not only to speak on its own behalf, but to speak also on the other's behalf, who is not a stranger, a word Celan dismisses. But he needs to say it, because for one reason the German language throughout this speech does not betray the essence of this other, not even, whether it is human or not – which makes any rendering of Celan's words into English rather awkward. Jacques Derrida's French interpretation does not help either, it is in its use of gender too close to German. His text poses the same problems as Celan's. He, too, leaves that question open: „*Le tout autre* vient donc d'ouvrir la pensée du poème sur une chose ou sur une cause (*in eines Anderen Sache...in eines ganz Anderen Sache*) dont l'altérité doit non pas contredire mais s'allier“⁷⁵. All he says at one point is „l'autre *comme Moi*“, taken from Celan's earlier interpretation of Büchner's *Lenz*⁷⁶, which does not clarify the problem either, since the „I“ of the passage in question is referring to the poem. Lacoue-Labarthe's interpretation is also not specific on this point: „Bien entendu, Celan ne dit pas *le* temps, mais parlant de l'autre qui est, chaque fois, tel ou tel autre: *son* temps“⁷⁷. Yet he is convinced that the obscurity and confusing detours of „Der Meridian“ have a distinctive function: they serve to draw the reader's attention on the urgency and complexity of the problem posed⁷⁸. And indeed, if there were an unambiguous signified of the „other“ in Celan's text, it would be a blow to alterity. Celan's text thrives on the ambiguity of „the other“, which is oscillating between different nuances of meaning throughout the text. The word „stranger“ and the phrase „in eines Anderen Sache“ (on behalf of someone else) refer clearly to the human being and to an ethical discourse. Strangely enough „eines ganz Anderen Sache“ (on behalf of a completely Other) is much easier to understand, because in this case the reader simply resorts to discourse, which is quite clear on the point that this completely Other can only be divine⁷⁹, which is supported by Celan adding that this is expressing an „old hope“. And Celan continues that this completely Other could coincide with another other, not so far away, in fact quite near, implying the other as neighbor in ethical discourse. But how

can the poem, which is concerned with its own cause, represent the other's cause? How can it represent the other at all? Derrida poses the same questions:

[C]omment telle autre date, irremplaçable et singulière, la date de l'autre, la date pour l'autre peut-elle encore se laisser déchiffrer, transcrire, traduire? Comment puis-je me l'approprier? Mieux, comment puis-je me transcrire en elle? Et comment sa mémoire peut-elle disposer encore d'un avenir?⁸⁰

In the answer Celan gives to these questions the other becomes a „you“, being addressed by the poem, which is the addressing and naming „I“. The addressed other, which has become „you“ presents its alterity within the presence of the poem. And in the poem, Celan claims, here and now, the proper being of the other is expressed in language as the other's time. As if there were two voices in the poem, the voice of the „I“ and the voice of the „you“, speaking in unison, expressing the time of the other, which is supposed to be his / her / its most essential property. Because of the parenthesis in Celan's sentence one does not even know for sure who is the subject of this sentence, the poem, the „I“, or that which has become „you“? The most essential property, the proper being of the other (*das Eigenste des Anderen*) is said to be his / her / its time. What does that mean? Derrida replaces „time“ by „date“, which, too, is a temporal expression, but in his argument, as we have seen above, this „date“ is given a much larger, signifying function. Nevertheless it is quite obvious that the date plays an important role in Celan's oeuvre⁸¹. Lacoue-Labarthe understands „time“ in this context as the opposite of being („pensée du né-ant (de l'être), c'est-à-dire pensée du temps“), but does not indulge in a detailed and convincing explanation of his interpretation of the passage in question⁸².

Erst im Raum dieses Gesprächs konstituiert sich das Angesprochene, versammelt es sich um das es ansprechende und nennende Ich. Aber in diese Gegenwart bringt das Angesprochene und durch seine Nennung

gleichsam zum Du Gewordene auch sein Anderssein mit. Noch im Hier und Jetzt des Gedichts – das Gedicht selbst hat ja immer nur diese eine, einmalige, punktuelle Gegenwart –, noch in dieser Unmittelbarkeit und Nähe läßt es das ihm, dem Anderen, Eigenste mitsprechen: dessen Zeit.⁸³

But does it not make sense to propose dessen Zeit as das Eigenste des Anderen? What else could it be? What we are confronted with is obviously an ethical discourse, and as far as we have seen, a rather radical and extreme one. The problem is as Derrida posed it: how can the poem express that alterity of the other without reducing it to the same? The problem is that the poem, being in language, has to express it. Celan says „mitsprechen“ – „to speak with someone together“, „to have a say in something“ is the ordinary meaning, not applicable in the syntax of this sentence, but certainly implied. Das Eigenste des Anderen kann mitsprechen: what can it say? What on earth can the poem let the other say, and is guaranteed not to be said by the poem? Nothing. Whatever it said would be an interpretation of the other by the poem, by the same. So, there is nothing the poem can do, but to respect that it cannot say it, because it is the other's. And as we have learned (erfahren) from the interpretations of Ungaretti's and Celan's poems there is something the poem can say without saying, it is the time it spends to speak without conferring meaning. It is the temporality of language, which reflects the temporality of being, which is das Eigenste des Anderen, without any meaning whatsoever imposed. Because anything else, any word, any characteristics, any implication of quality, would be an infringement of the integrity of the other. Time alone remains as the medium in which the poem can encounter the other. Because the poem takes place in time. It practically spends time with the other, expressing this in language. While the other entices the poem, keeping it occupied on its way to become itself. And anyone else reading that poem spends again time with it, tracing a process that has led to that extraordinary encounter which brought the poem into existence.

Elsewhere Celan calls it „das Geheimnis der Begegnung“⁸⁴, „the mystery of encounter“. Which shall remain a mystery, for once because there are no

words to describe this encounter. Derrida, too, has his doubts: „Ce qui arrive, si quelque chose arrive, c'est cela [– la rencontre de l'autre]“.⁸⁵ And Celan himself:

Das Gedicht? [...]

Ich spreche ja von dem Gedicht, das es nicht gibt!

Das absolute Gedicht – nein, das gibt es gewiß nicht, das kann es nicht geben!⁸⁶

The poem I am talking about does not exist, he exclaims. That would be the „absolute“ poem, which, surely, does not exist. It cannot be! Again an exclamation mark. But note the „gewiß“ („surely“) – a confirmation of certainty on the surface, but we know very well, that it also expresses doubt. Especially when combined with semantic modality: it cannot be! And therefore Celan continues: „Aber es gibt wohl, mit jedem wirklichen Gedicht, es gibt, mit dem anspruchlosesten Gedicht, diese unabweisbare Frage, diesen unerhörten Anspruch“.⁸⁷ But every poem, even the most undemanding, provokes this question, this unheard-of demand and address. The poem is speaking itself to the other. „Einsam und unterwegs“, „alone and on the road“ it is already there to encounter, it is already within the mystery of encounter: „Aber steht das Gedicht nicht gerade dadurch, also schon hier, in der Begegnung – *im Geheimnis der Begegnung?*“⁸⁸ Because the poem is einsam. There is a definition of „einsam“ in Heidegger's „Der Weg zur Sprache“, which Celan certainly knew. Yet what Celan is arguing for the poem, Heidegger does for language in general:

Aber die Sprache *ist* Monolog. Dies sagt jetzt ein Zwiefaches: Die Sprache *allein* ist es, die eigentlich spricht. Und sie spricht *einsam*. Doch einsam kann nur sein, wer *nicht* allein ist; nicht allein, d.h. nicht abgesondert, vereinzelt, ohne jeden Bezug. Im Einsamen west degegen gerade der Fehl des Gemeinsamen als der bindendste Bezug *zu* diesem. „Sam“ ist das gotische sama, das griechische háma. Einsam besagt: das Selbe im Einigenden des Zueinandergehörenden.⁸⁹

Heidegger traces the meaning of „einsam“ back to Gothic and Greek and argues that it does not at all signify „alone“, which means „apart“, but rather a mode of being that is one which knows of its belonging to. So the poem, with Celan – the language with Heidegger – is „unterwegs“, on the road, speaking itself already, always to the other. And the mystery of encounter takes place already there. The difference between the einsam poem and the absolute poem being only that the absolute poem would have accomplished that encounter already. The Latin etymology is not certain, but possible: ab-solutus – one being apart, but in any case meaning „perfect“, „perfected“.

So we are back on the road. Celan approaching the end of his speech, talking of topoi and u-topia. And searching with his finger on the map of a child, searching for places, he cannot find, though he knows where they should be⁹⁰. Driven by ... – one does not dare to call it nostalgia because one knows why he cannot find those places on the map of a child that might have been him. And, suddenly, Celan, finding something:

Ich finde etwas, das mich auch ein wenig darüber hinwegtröstet, in Ihrer Gegenwart diesen unmöglichen Weg, diesen Weg des Unmöglichen gegangen zu sein.

Ich finde das Verbindende und wie das Gedicht zur Begegnung Führende.

Ich finde etwas – wie die Sprache – Immaterielles, aber Irdisches, Terrestrisches, etwas Kreisförmiges, über die beiden Pole in sich selbst Zurückkehrendes und dabei – heitererweise – sogar die Tropen Durchkreuzendes –: ich finde ... einen *Meridian*⁹¹.

He apologizes for having taken such an impossible road in the presence of his audience. And then he declares straightforwardly that he has found something that can lead to encounter like the poem. It is something immaterial like language, terrestrial, circular, something returning to itself, something – and here he plays on words – something that „hilariously“ crosses and thwarts („durchkreuzen“) the tropical zone: a meridian. In German the word

„Tropen“ has two meanings: the geographical tropical zones and the rhetorical figures. Celan takes comfort in the idea of a meridian, in the possibility that something allows an encounter, literally with a geographical place (although wiped out by war and genocide), rhetorically with a u-topia on a line of past and present. Celan is staging in front of the audience his own encounter with a meridian. How are we to understand this?

Jacques Derrida, as if seduced by that magnificent tropos of deconstruction, by its polytropic fertility, gives an almost hymnic interpretation of the meaning of meridian at the end of his close reading of Celan's speech, as if he had forgotten all his reservations from before: at high noon the encounter with the other seems at least „provokable“:

Ce que Celan trouve ou découvre *sur l'heure*, invente si l'on peut dire, plus et moins qu'une fiction, ce n'est pas seulement un méridien, le Méridien, mais le mot et l'image, le trope *méridien* qui donne l'exemple de la loi, dans son inépuisable polytropie, et qui *lie* [...], qui provoque en plein jour, *à midi*, à la mi-journée, la rencontre de l'autre en un seul lieu, en un seul point, celui du poème, de ce poème⁹².

Lacoue-Labarthe on the other hand begins his interpretation of Paul Celan's „Meridian“ with a comment on exactly that word from the end of the speech: „Justement: le titre lui-même, ou plus exactement le mot, lorsqu'il fait son apparition dans le cours du discours, ne le fait pas sans croiser ou recouper, sans ‚rencontrer‘ un certain *Witz* sur les tropes et les tropiques⁹³. But he leaves it there, and throughout his book he will never give a detailed analysis of that final passage of Celan's speech. In a different context, however, he does offer an interpretation of the „poetic act“ which is very reminiscent of the tropos of meridian at the end of Celan's text:

C'est en ce sens que l'acte poétique est extatique. L'exorbitant est la pure transcendance de l'étant. De là vient que le poème, en tant que questionner, est tourné vers l'ouvert, offert à lui. Lui-même ouvert d'une certaine façon à l'u-topie, au lieu sans lieu de l'avènement. Ou dit autre-

ment: l'acte poétique est catastrophique: rapport renversant à ce qui est et renversement, dans l'étant, vers le néant (l'abîme)⁹⁴.

The etymology of Lacoue-Labarthe's choice of words calls the meridian to mind: „extatic“, „exorbitant“, „transcendance“. Merging the image of the meridian with the idea of the poem – Lacoue-Labarthe speaks of the poetic act – he sees it in two ways: On the one hand the poem is directed towards the open and in that sense itself a utopia (two concepts expressed by Celan in his speech). On the other hand the poetic act is a catastrophe, in the original meaning of the word: a turning point, tropos, and fall into the abyss – a shipwreck becoming ex-perience, as Ungaretti called it.

There is something uncanny about Celan's handling of the meridian, a line on the globe of the earth, that he endows with the poetic magic of encounter. It seems too random to be true. And it is certainly not by chance that he is returning to images of childhood while recreating it in his mind. Derrida hints at something, but he is unwilling to disclose it. He knows that Celan's meridian is fictitious, he says so explicitly. And any encyclopedia will support him, because the meridian is not a circle, as Celan would have it. It is only a half-circle, as one can tell from its name: „meridian“ (Latin: meridies, meaning midday). It is that line of longitude that is defined by the sun at noon. Given the rotation of the earth, only half its surface is in daylight. So the meridian turns at the poles into its opposite, the line of midnight, which does not exist⁹⁵. And that is what Lacoue-Labarthe is insinuating with the word „catastrophic“, reminding us of the danger of experiencing. In spite of Celan's desire, there is no return possible, at least not on the path of the geographical meridian. There is, however, – and that most likely amused Derrida – a displacement possible, which in itself is even more polytropic. The meridian differs from all lines of longitude in that it alone is defined by the sun, which means it follows the sun over the surface of the earth, connecting all those places in one line that enjoy noon at the same time. So that, when Celan at noon is following the meridian with his finger on a map, in reality the meridian has already moved on. Because the meridian, as Celan and the earth, is subject to the passing of time. There is no standstill,

much less turning back, there is only continuation. And yet Celan insists. He insists on the possibility of encounter along that line. A random line, but defined by the movement of the sun. A line subject to time, like any human being, like the poem, and the other. In a poetic gesture Celan endows that random line with the mystery of encounter, recreating poetically a space in time, a u-topia, recalling something gone by long ago, and directed towards the future. Here and now Celan is inventing a trope that crosses and thwarts all the tropes. That is his *mise-en-scène*, and that is what Derrida so appreciated. The meridian, a trope of contingency, allowing an encounter, demanding one, and, more than all tropes, saying what cannot be said.

And so the poem speaks. It is speaking itself to you.

5

Si percorre il deserto con residui
Di qualche immagine di prima in mente,

Della Terra Promessa
Nient'altro un vivo sa.

5

Die Wüste durchqueren mit Resten
einiger Bilder von einst im Sinn,

vom Gelobten Land:
nichts sonst weiß ein Lebender
von ihm.⁹⁶

1 Martin Heidegger: „Das Wesen der Sprache“, in: Martin Heidegger: *Unterwegs zur Sprache*, (Vittorio Klostermann) Frankfurt a.M. 1985, p. 149.

2 Ibid., p. 149.

3 Ibid., p. 159.

4 Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe: *La Poésie comme expérience*, (Christian Bourgeois ed.) Paris 1986, pp. 30: Lacoue-Labarthe is quoting from Roger Munier: *Mise en page*, 1, May 1972.

5 Heidegger, op.cit., p. 151.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid, p. 149.

8 Born in Egypt and living for some time in Paris Ungaretti began to write poetry in French long before using the Italian language. During World War II he lived in Brasil and taught Italian literature. For an introduction to Ungaretti's life and works, cf: Vincenzo Siciliano: *Giuseppe Ungaretti*, (Giunti Lisciani ed.) Teramo 1994, and Renzo Frattardo: *Lungo tempo ungarettiano. Materiali di stu-*

- dio*, (Fratelli Palombi ed.) Rome, 1989.
- 9 Giuseppe Ungaretti: *Vita d'un uomo. Tutte le poesie*, (Arnoldo Mondadori) Miland 1986¹¹, p. 87.
 - 10 Ungaretti: "Ungaretti commenta Ungaretti" (1963), in: Ungaretti: *Vita d'un uomo. Saggi e interventi*, (Arnoldo Mondadori) Miland, 1986⁴, p. 816.
 - 11 Giuseppe Ungaretti: *Vita d'un uomo. Tutte le poesie*, op.cit., p. 58.
 - 12 Cf. Ungaretti on his use of the endecasillabo (eleven syllables without rhyme) in: Ungaretti, *Vita d'un uomo. Saggi e interventi*, op.cit., pp. 827.
 - 13 For a Japanese translation, cf. ウンガレットィ：全詩集、河島英昭訳、(筑摩書房) 1988.
 - 14 Ungaretti: "Ungaretti commenta Ungaretti" (1963), in: Ungaretti: *Vita d'un uomo. Saggi e interventi*, op.cit., p. 815.
 - 15 Cf. e.g. Thomas R. Cole and Mary G. Winkler (ed.): *The Oxford Book of Aging* (Oxford University Press) Oxford 1994. Which by the way omitted Ungaretti's „Il Taccuino del vecchio“.
 - 16 Ungaretti: „Il Taccuino del vecchio“, in: Ungaretti: *Vita d'un uomo. Tutte le poesie*, op.cit., p. 273.
 - 17 Cf. Jean-Paul Sartre: *L'Être et le néant. Essai d'ontologie phénoménologique*, (Gallimard) Paris 1987, and cf. Simone de Beauvoir: *La Vieillesse*, (Gallimard) Paris 1970.
 - 18 Giorgio Cusatelli (ed.): *Dizionario Garzanti della lingua italiana*, (Aldo Garzanti ed.) 1965, p. 1781.
 - 19 Ungaretti: „Il Taccuino del vecchio“, op.cit., pp. 273.
 - 20 Ibid., p. 274.
 - 21 Ibid.
 - 22 Cf. Jankélévitch's superbe interpretation of Ulyseus and nostalgia in: Vladimir Jankélévitch: *L'Irréversible et la nostalgie*, (Flammarion) Paris 1974.
 - 23 Ungaretti: „Il Taccuino del vecchio“, op.cit., p. 275.
 - 24 There are English translations of *Il taccuino del vecchio*, but none really satisfying.
 - 25 Ungaretti: „Il Taccuino del vecchio“, op.cit., pp. 275.
 - 26 Ibid., p. 279.
 - 27 Ibid., p. 277.
 - 28 Ibid., p. 278.
 - 29 Cf. e.g. Henri Bergson: *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience*, (Presses Universitaires de France) Paris 1970; Henri Bergson: *Durée et simultanéité*, (Presses Universitaires de France) Paris 1968;
 - 30 Giuseppe Ungaretti: *Vita d'un uomo. Tutte le poesie*, op.cit., „Canzone“, p. 561.
 - 31 Giuseppe Ungaretti: „L'Estetica di Bergson“, in: Ungaretti: *Vita d'un uomo. Saggi e interventi*, op.cit., p. 82.
 - 32 Ibid., p. 83.
 - 33 Giuseppe Ungaretti: "Lo Stile di Bergson", in: Ungaretti: *Vita d'un uomo. Saggi*

- e interventi*, op.cit., p. 87.
- 34 Giuseppe Ungaretti: "Secondo discorso su Leopardi", in: Ungaretti: *Vita d'un uomo. Saggi e interventi*, op.cit., p. 485.
- 35 Cf. the chapter on Leopardi in: Angelika Baader: „Unschuld“ und „Gedächtnis“: *Bewußtsein und Zeiterfahrung in Giuseppe Ungarettis Poetik und Lyrik*, (Kirchheim) Munich 1997.
- 36 Cf. e.g.: Angelika Baader, op.cit., Vincenzo Siciliano, op.cit., Renzo Frattardo, op.cit.
- 37 Giuseppe Ungaretti: *Vita d'un uomo. Tutte le poesie*, p. 183.
- 38 Cf. Salvatore Battaglia (ed.): *Grande dizionario della lingua italiana*, vol. 9, (Unione tipografico-editrice Torinese) Torino 1975, passim. And cf. *Brockhaus Enzyklopädie*, vol. 14, (F.A.Brockhaus) Mannheim 1991¹⁹.
- 39 Brockhaus, op.cit., p. 278.
- 40 Ungaretti: „Il Taccuino del vecchio“, op.cit., pp. 276.
- 41 Brockhaus, vol. 7 op.cit., p. 150.
- 42 Giorgio Cusatelli (ed.): *Dizionario Garzanti della lingua italiana*, op.cit., p. 1781.
- 43 On the influence of Leopardi on Ungaretti, cf.: Angelika Baader, op.cit.
- 44 Giuseppe Ungaretti: "Ragioni di una poesia", in: Ungaretti: *Vita d'un uomo. Saggi e interventi*, op.cit., p. 763.
- 45 Giuseppe Ungaretti: "Intervista con F. Camon", in: Ungaretti: *Vita d'un uomo. Saggi e interventi*, op.cit., p. 841.
- 46 Henri Bergson: *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience*, (Presses universitaires de France) Paris 1970, p. 78.
- 47 Henri Bergson: *La Pensée et le mouvant*, (A. Skira) Geneva 1946, pp. 175.
- 48 *Ibid.*, pp. 74.
- 49 Giuseppe Ungaretti: „Il Taccuino del vecchio“, op.cit., pp. 278.
- 50 For Paul Celan cf. Clemens Heselhaus: *Deutsche Lyrik der Moderne von Nietzsche bis Ivan Goll*, (Bagel) Duesseldorf 1961.
- 51 Unfortunately there is no Japanese translation of Celan's translation of Ungaretti's "Il taccuino del vecchio".
- 52 Cf. Peter Gossens: *Paul Celans Ungaretti-Übersetzung. Edition und Kommentar*, (Universitätsverlag C. Winter) Heidelberg 2000, p. 102, passim. Cf. Peter Gossens: *Angefügt, nahtlos, ans Heute: Paul Celan übersetzt Giuseppe Ungaretti. Handschriften, Erstdruck, Dokumente*, (Insel) Frankfurt 2006.
- 53 Edmond Jabès: *La mémoire des mots. Comment je lis Paul Celan*, (Fourbis) Paris 1990, pp. 11.
- 54 Cf. Jean-Charles Vegliante: *Ungaretti entre les langues*, (Sorbonne nouvelle) Paris 1987.
- 55 Giuseppe Ungaretti: „Poeta e uomini“, in: Ungaretti: *Vita d'un uomo. Saggi e interventi*, op.cit., p. 739.
- 56 There was some disagreement over the design of the publication between Celan and his publisher: Celan did not want his portrait next to that of Ungaretti's

- on the cover, which the publisher demanded, seeing an advantage in sells. Cf. Peter Gossens, *op.cit.*.
- 57 Cf. Walter Benjamin: “Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers”, in: Charles Baudelaire: *Tableaux parisiens*, in: Walter Benjamin: *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 4,1, ed. by Tillman Rexroth, (Suhrkamp) Frankfurt 1972. Cf. Jacques Derrida: “Des tours de Babel”, in: Jacques Derrida: *Psyché. Invention de l'autre* (Galilée) Paris 1987-1998. Cf. Herrad Heselhaus: “The Time of Translation. Walter Benjamin’s *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers*”, in: *Studies in Language and Literature*, (University of Tsukuba) 54, 2008.
- 58 Giuseppe Ungaretti: *Das verheißene Land, Das Merkbuch des Alten*, bilingual edition, translated by Paul Celan, (Insel), Frankfurt 1968, pp. 92/93.
- 59 *Ibid.*, pp. 62/63.
- 60 Stephanie Dressler: *Giuseppe Ungarettis Werk in deutscher Sprache. Unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Übersetzungen Ingeborg Bachmanns und Paul Celans*, (Universitätsverlag C. Winter) Heidelberg 2000, p. 162.
- 61 Giuseppe Ungaretti: *Das verheißene Land, Das Merkbuch des Alten*, *op.cit.*, pp. 66/67.
- 62 Jacques Derrida: *Schibboleth. Pour Paul Celan*, (Galilée) Paris 1986, p. 83.
- 63 *Ibid.*, p. 50.
- 64 *Ibid.*, p. 88.
- 65 Paul Celan: „Ansprache anlässlich der Entgegennahme des Literaturpreises der Freien Hansestadt Bremen“, in: Paul Celan: *Ausgewählte Gedichte. Zwei Reden*, Nachwort von Beda Allemann, (Suhrkamp) Frankfurt 1970, p. 128.
- 66 *Ibid.*
- 67 Paul Celan: „Der Meridian“, in Paul Celan: *Ausgewählte Gedichte*, *op.cit.*, p. 147.
- 68 *Ibid.*, p. 143.
- 69 Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe: *La Poésie comme expérience*, (Christian Bourgeois ed.) Paris 1986, p. 63 and *passim*.
- 70 Paul Celan: „Der Meridian“, *op.cit.*, p. 144.
- 71 *Ibid.*, p. 142.
- 72 The „date“ is at the focus point of Derrida’s analysis of Celan’s poetry and poetics. Cf. Jacques Derrida, *op.cit.*
- 73 Paul Celan: „Der Meridian“, *op.cit.*, p. 144.
- 74 *Ibid.*, pp. 142.
- 75 Jacques Derrida, *op.cit.*, p. 24 and *passim*.
- 76 *Ibid.*, p. 20.
- 77 Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *op.cit.*, p. 97.
- 78 *Ibid.*, p. 86.
- 79 Or for that matter Lacanian: l’autre et l’Autre, as Lacoue-Labarthe insinuates. Cf. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *op.cit.*, p. 91.
- 80 Jacques Derrida, *op.cit.*, p. 20.

- 81 Ibid., p. 23 and passim.
- 82 Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, op.cit., p. 97.
- 83 Paul Celan: „Der Meridian“, op.cit., p. 144.
- 84 Ibid.
- 85 Jacques Derrida, op.cit., p. 23.
- 86 Paul Celan: „Der Meridian“, op.cit., p. 145.
- 87 Ibid.
- 88 Ibid., p. 144.
- 89 Martin Heidegger: “Der Weg zur Sprache”, in: Martin Heidegger: *Unterwegs zur Sprache*, (Vittorio Klostermann) Frankfurt a.M. 1985, p. 254. (The Greek is rendered in the Latin alphabet by H.H.). Celan was an avid reader of Heidegger’s. Lacoue-Labarthe takes this into account in his interpretation of Celan’s poetics. He quotes the same passage. Cf. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, op.cit., p. 140.
- 90 Paul Celan: „Der Meridian“, op.cit., p. 148.
- 91 Ibid.
- 92 Jacques Derrida, op.cit., p. 28.
- 93 Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, op.cit., pp. 61.
- 94 Ibid., p. 99.
- 95 *Brockhaus Enzyklopädie*, op.cit., vol. 14, p. 481. The geographical meridian, that Celan explicitly refers to, is often mixed up with the older astronomical meridian which is indeed a whole circle, ergo its name: “circulus meridianus”.
- 96 Giuseppe Ungaretti: *Das verheißene Land, Das Merkbuch des Alten*, op.cit., pp. 70/71.