

THE EXPERIENCE OF POETRY

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Part 1

Everything begins with the reduction. From the first volume of *Ideas* (1913) to the *Crisis* (1936), Edmund Husserl never tired of stressing the fundamental importance of the *epoche* and phenomenological reduction. If only we would suspend the prejudices of common sense, he says, we could return to our experiences before they are processed by an uncritical objectivism. We would encounter the world as phenomenon, not as ground of explanation. We would open a new realm of infinite possibilities where the meaning of being stands revealed. This suspension of our usual ways of thinking is not a matter of practising Cartesian doubt, Husserl assures us, but of getting into position to understand things as they are; and to do that we must grasp that reality is not a mystery or a secret but is directly given to us. To dim the light of common sense is not to court irrationalism. It is to abstain from a thesis that has come to structure our assumptions about the world, namely that our lived experience is to be explained by the world. Phenomenology declines this naturalist dogma just as surely as it keeps idealism at arm's length. Both are misconstructions of reality, we are told, and both are to be bracketed in the interest of illuminating everyday experience⁽¹⁾. In this, as in everything it proposes, phenomenology is not so much a critique of a philosophical position as an act of vigilance with regard to philosophising. The reduction is a vigil, a preparation for seeing the world in all its radiance.

I too would like to begin with the reduction; but rather than present it as the methodology of a new science, as Husserl does, I want to remember it as the start of a romance. And while I would dearly love to evoke the return to our true home, the life world, as a moment of triumph, I must speak instead of the loss of that home and of coming to terms with the failure of rigour and of learning to value the rigour of failure. In this too I am, in a way, keeping faith with Husserl, though with the old man who, in the summer of 1935, bade farewell to his ideal of philosophy as a science, conceding that 'the dream is over' [*Das Traum ist. . . ausgeträumt*]⁽²⁾. As he penned these words, Husserl doubtless had recent works of Martin Heidegger and Karl Jaspers in mind, dialogues with and departures from the phenomenology he had proposed, though the bitterness of his judgement goes past feelings of personal betrayal. In his later years Husserl feared not only that a different style of thinking was abroad but also, and more poignantly, that his researches had honed a method so finely it no longer had a cutting edge. Those of us born long after the event, for whom 'philosophy as a rigorous science' is something whose demise we never witnessed, have found ourselves by turns living out a grief that is not ours and joining a wake that started long before we arrived. A dream is over. It was not ours, but it fell to us to interpret it. And so we trace the condensations and displacements at work in rendering acceptable a thought of philosophy as theory and a belief in theory as power. We do so partly to understand a father's wish and partly because we keep a little of the dead man inside us and will not consign him unreservedly to the past.

What attracted me to Husserl in my student days was not so much his conception of philosophy as his clarification of what is at stake in literature. These days I would prefer to speak of poetry rather than literature or, rather, I would prefer to bracket literature when speaking of poetry. The cultural and social projects in which 'literature' is embedded cannot be forgotten, but their character as theses is to be put out of play. This is not to deny the need for contexts in interpretation, far from it; it is

to ensure it is poetry we are listening to, not history or sociology, and to allow poetry an opportunity to determine itself. For poetry can question the standards of reality by which it is judged, beginning with those of literature. Nor is this a special pleading for verse over prose. I agree with Martin Heidegger when he claims that 'All art ... is ... essentially poetry [*Dichtung*]', though I disagree with his affirmation of poetry as origin ⁽³⁾. For me, poetry involves a loss of origin, opens onto that loss and responds to it in an exemplary way. So I shall be using the word 'poetry' to designate both a making and an opening. I can best condense what I have in mind by the expression 'the experience of poetry', a phrase that has haunted me for as long as I have written poems, and one that resonates with the phenomenology I discovered shortly after writing my first poems. My theme this evening will therefore be 'the experience of poetry'. Each word in this title looks in several directions, while the syntax flexes this way and that. How to proceed? Everything I will say presupposes many encounters with many poems, but I will focus on something more elusive, perhaps even illusive, namely what poetry encounters. What is it in poetry that invites us to regard it as an opening as well as a making? The words Husserl devotes to the arts are few and far between, and by themselves are often disappointing. Yet his incessant broodings over the reduction speak more vividly of something central to art than do his disciples' extensions of phenomenology into aesthetics, subtle and brilliant though they are ⁽⁴⁾. In first thinking about poetry I retain from Husserl a commitment to the primacy of lived experience, as well as the essential insight that consciousness is intentional; and above all I retain the judgement that the reduction yields a new way of being in the world, what the *Cartesian Meditations* (1950) call 'transcendental experience' ⁽⁵⁾. These initial commitments open a space for thinking about poetry, even though the space may change when one comes to reflect on how, where and why one started. All the same, I am inclined to begin here because, in doing so, I face the path taken by the writers who speak most powerfully to me. There are many poets I could quote for comfort and support, but this evening two come especially to mind. I think of P. B. Shelley: 'Poetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world, and makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar ...' ⁽⁶⁾. And I think of Yves Bonnefoy: 'poetry is an experience of what goes beyond words' ⁽⁷⁾. Several things follow from thinking about poetry in this way, and I would like to take a moment to present them very generally and, while I am about it, to note a few reservations that will inflect my sense of 'the experience of poetry'.

Firstly, as soon as the natural attitude is suspended any priority that fact may have enjoyed over fiction is annulled. Husserl testifies to the richness for phenomenological reflection that poetry provides, and even ventures the paradox that 'the *element which makes up the life of phenomenology as of all eidetical science is "fiction [Fiktion]"*, that fiction is the source whence the knowledge of "eternal truths" draws its sustenance' ⁽⁸⁾. Husserl is testifying here to the importance of free variation, a necessary stage of reflection before essences can be intuited. Poetry has its uses, no doubt, but here Husserl moves too quickly for my liking in suggesting that poetry is fiction. While all poetry is 'made' not all poetry is 'made up': Macbeth is fictive in ways in which *The Prelude* is not, while some lyrics take care to distance themselves from all hint of fiction. This is especially so with the romantic and post-romantic lyric, which we tend to experience quite differently from the ways in which we encounter novels, plays and narrative verse. Characteristically, the lyric presents itself as pure speech: that is its fiction, and it has been a powerful one for the last two

centuries. This is not to say that a lyric may not participate in other genres; it may be spoken by a character in a novel, tell a story, or propose a dramatic situation ⁽⁹⁾. No matter how self-contained it may appear, though, a lyric does not communicate an essence; it is meaningful only within intentional horizons. A living subject is required, yet the act of listening or reading is not simply subjective: some indices of genre and mode must be grasped or the poem will not be intelligible. When reading a sonnet by Shakespeare we come across a singular perspective on the history of the sonnet and a sense of its possibilities. The concrete relation is between this reader and I poem, to be sure, although even a solitary subject belongs to a community of readers, both dead and alive. A poem offers itself to be read at a particular time and place, in a situation that is always fraught for the reader. Similarly, the reader is constrained by having internalised the norms of a transcendental community, while remaining free both to transgress those norms and to refer the poem to his or her implicit horizons of consciousness.

Secondly, reading or writing poetry suspends naive attitudes to meaning and reference without abolishing either 'meaning' or 'reference'. The great power of rhythmic language is to cancel our sense of security in a posited world and to lead consciousness to a state of fascination. In a remarkable study of poetic language, Nicholas Abraham tells us that when listening to a rhythmic utterance the listener or reader falls subject 'to a fatal, horizonless future', and anyone who has heard *Beowulf* or Blake chanted will acknowledge the justice of those two adjectives. A poem opens onto a time when nothing happens except the poem; it is not the only temporal mode of the poem, but it is an important one. Abraham is also right to stress that '*poetic signification admits no correlative intentional objects*' ⁽¹⁰⁾. Neither Henry Wriothesley, William Herbert, nor any other candidate for the role of 'Mr W. H.', can be taken as a correlative object of a sonnet by Shakespeare. The poem proposes an 'object of expression' which cannot be identified apart from a reading of the sonnet. Of course, the words themselves can become noemata, as happens in puns or when a reader identifies the poet's ink as the 'Dark Lady'. This may be an extreme instance of *hule* becoming meaningful only in terms of *morph*, but it does not condemn the sonnet to an abyss of self-reference. To see poetry as a stream of noetic modifications unable to coalesce around a noema is not to reject meaning as a category. It is to suspend the thesis that meaning simply transcends the sign. Similarly, to observe that Shakespeare's sonnet 107 may not refer to the death of Elizabeth I or to the death of Philip II is not to disallow reference in literature. It is to indicate that the pathways from sign to referent twist and turn over themselves.

Thirdly, poetry speaks of transcendental experience. This does not mean that the poet is privy to a special 'region of being', as though it were a distinct metaphysical realm, but that the poem speaks of experience from a particular perspective and therefore charges it with a particular meaning. I think of Robinson Crusoe, in Elizabeth Bishop's monologue 'Crusoe in England', recalling his worn knife that enabled him to survive while on the island. Now that Crusoe is safe in England he can say 'My eyes rest on it and pass on', yet when he was stranded on the island, this same knife 'reeked of meaning, like a crucifix' ⁽¹¹⁾. As a placing shot, I will say that poetry answers to what consciousness registers, not to what is actually lived through, and that it opens onto the truth that experience does not mean the same thing in every region of being. Wilhelm Dilthey was admirably sensitive to the first of the these

judgements in *Das Erlebnis und die Dichtung* (1906). Almost a century later, these studies of Lessing and Goethe, Novalis and Hölderlin stand, like lighthouses, as both illuminations and warnings for later readers in the use they make of *Erlebnis*. It is valuable to learn that the word 'experience' denotes both a pre-reflective act and a content, and that art is often prized for fusing the two ⁽¹²⁾. And a focus on 'lived experience' is valuable in that it holds at bay the positivist notion of experience as the processing of sense data. At the same time, one should be wary of aligning the meaning of a poem with the poet's lived experience. Dilthey is prone to forget the reader's horizons of consciousness and that poems are affairs of language. Authorial intention organises language into a field of meaning, like a magnet that cannot be removed, but it is not the only force at play and cannot fully determine what a poem means.

Fourthly, poetry claims to present experience rather than to represent it, and thereby to skirt the immense inherited problem of *mimesis* as *imitatio*. It is doubtful, however, that such an exit can be made. One might claim that poets speak the truth of being and are not concerned with copying being. And to that end one could side with Aristotle rather than Plato, taking *mimesis* as 'creative imitation' rather than as 'copy' ⁽¹³⁾. Or, more boldly, one could insist that, in its true Platonic sense, *mimesis* names the appearing of *physis* and therefore signifies the refulgence of what is ⁽¹⁴⁾. The inevitable reply will be that, regardless of what poets may or may not think they do, any discourse is always and already entangled in one or more systems of representation. So, following Novalis, a modern poet may well insist that writing poetry is a matter of *Darstellung*, sensible presentation, but will find it impossible not to admit that for a reader any poem generates effects of *Vorstellung*, the representation of an image or an idea. The poet may distinguish between presentation and expression, and insist that during composition no theme or goal was in mind. By appealing to inspiration in this way, the poet affirms a special relation between poetry and being, or, in the Mallarméan version of the story, between poetry and non-being. Yet the reply does not meet the objection. For the reader, and for the poet who reads while writing, presentation and representation are always imbricated ⁽¹⁵⁾. To maintain the priority of presentation, one must have recourse to a negative theology of one kind or another, even when there is no question of recovering a luminous presence. And to that end, at least in modern times, people have looked to a disparity between language and consciousness or to a theory of the sublime.

At a certain level of generality, these two strategies share a ground or, rather, an abyss. It has been conceived in many ways, even to the point of generating opposing schools, yet a gap between different spheres of reality is commonly assumed in romantic and post-romantic writing, whether literary or philosophical. It is hard to say whether Kant or Wordsworth offers the fuller range of examples, but since the philosopher speaks more generally I will go with him. Kant seized on a gap between sensibility and understanding in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781): sometimes he writes as though sensibility is experience and there is a gulf between experience and understanding, and sometimes as though sensibility and understanding, taken together, constitute experience ⁽¹⁶⁾. Yet there can be no doubt he envisaged a chasm between possible and impossible experience; and we are Kantians to the extent we credit the thought of impossible experience, regardless of whether it is figured as noumenal or neutral. By the time he composed the *Critique of Judgement* (1790),

Kant had come to think there was an abyss between nature and freedom, one that might be spanned by aesthetic judgement. Since Kant many poets and critics have believed they have crossed a bridge from nature to freedom; and maybe they have, though I suspect they have been walking in circles. My sense of the situation is that we are right to posit a gap, but that it does not fall between experience and something else but in experience itself. This division may be called by all manner of names. What matters far more than vocabulary, though, is the consequence for thinking about poetry. If I am right, poetry would not be a transcendence in which the meaning of being is secretly disclosed. This orphic or romantic assumption would fall short. Instead, poetry would be a phased encounter of being and meaning, a mutuality without correlation.

Part 2

Everything begins with the reduction, but never so that it escapes the trial of beginning again and again. In saying this I am not so much concerned with the various attempts to reformulate the reduction so that one can be sure of reaching absolute consciousness or of avoiding the philosophy of the subject. And so I leave aside Husserl's worrying over preparatory explications in order to avoid the temptation of the 'Cartesian way' to transcendental life, and equally I put aside Martin Heidegger's rethinking of the *epoche* as a movement from the apprehension of beings to the understanding of Being⁽¹⁷⁾. I take my bearings, rather, from Maurice Merleau-Ponty's insight that 'The most important lesson which the reduction teaches us is the impossibility of a complete reduction'⁽¹⁸⁾. Understood from this perspective, the reduction does not seek - but fail - to lead us to a self-grounding consciousness; it is a perpetual rediscovery that we are in the world as carnal beings. Phenomenology does not attempt to render experience fully explicit to consciousness but to make us aware of a pre-reflective dimension of experience. Thought must always involve a reference to this dimension which constitutes for it 'a kind of original past, a past which has never been a present'⁽¹⁹⁾. Which means that the perceiving subject is unable to ground itself in a beginning or an end, unable to co-incide exactly with itself. I am never able to say 'I perceive', only that an other subject, an impersonal 'one', perceives in me⁽²⁰⁾. The subject of experience is divided, then, as is the object of experience: not only are we dealing with what is given but also with what is presupposed in order for the giving to occur.

In his last writings Merleau-Ponty came to talk of the incompleteness of the reduction leading to the rediscovery of 'wild' or 'vertical' being, and risked the idea of literature 'as *inscription* of Being [*l'Être*]'⁽²¹⁾. I do not know how Merleau-Ponty would have developed this thought, how he would have traced the connections between the 'wild' being that is prior to the subject-object distinction and 'meaning before logic'. No doubt he would have spoken of literature as an inscription of the flesh, of 'visibility in itself'. Perhaps he would have developed a line I draw from him, the thought of poetry as a peculiar form of writing, irreducibly double yet uniquely performed in the one act. For that which offers itself to writing is both the experienced and that which is declared, after the fact, to precede and enable the experience. This anteriority cannot be rendered present. It can be thought in many ways, of course, but it will always be valued for ensuring a non-cognitive dimension of experience and thereby preventing a lapse into idealism. What surprises, time and again, is how quickly

philosophers can move from assuming that experience minimally presumes consciousness to concluding that experience comprises 'a world of ideas' ⁽²²⁾. As I say, this anteriority can be approached in different ways. One might argue, as Merleau-Ponty does, for a notion of the flesh that interlaces subject and object and prevents a subject of knowledge from converging with itself. Experience, here, would never be a dialectical relation of subject and object, as Hegel requires; instead, one would have to speak of 'an experience that remembers an impossible past, anticipates an impossible future' ⁽²³⁾. Or one might argue, as Emmanuel Levinas does, for the significance of a realm of being anterior to reflection. We enjoy and suffer things before we think about them. And one might go further, as Levinas came to do, and argue not only for a deep past that has never been present, as with my pre-reflective consciousness, but for a past that is irreducible to my consciousness because it comes from another person.

My backdrop this evening is the deep romantic chasm of experience and understanding. Levinas proposes a way beyond romanticism by aligning experience and presence then distinguishing experience and epiphany, and he is led to do so by taking exception to one aspect of the reduction. In the *Crisis* Husserl proclaims, 'when I practice the reducing epoche on myself and *my* world-consciousness, the other human beings, like the world itself, fall before the epoche; that is, they are merely intentional phenomena for me' ⁽²⁴⁾. Declining to regard the other person merely as a phenomenon for me, Levinas turns to name and explore a gap between consciousness and obligation. His analyses of the sites where pre-original alterity coincides with the other person - death, sexuality and fecundity - illuminate much that I would gather under the heading 'the experience of poetry'. Unlike Levinas, though, I preserve the word 'experience' while resetting the concept so that it does not presume a fusion of subject and object. Levinas speaks of ethics, not poetry; even so, his studies of the prophetic word and the vulnerability of Saying, could tell us a great deal about poetry. This is not a path I propose to take this evening, even though I will not be going in another direction. To repeat: my response to the deep romantic chasm is that any gap between experience and understanding is foreshadowed by a division in experience itself. Poetry does not reveal the meaning of being through the genius of a poet, but holds being and meaning together for a while in an intense and unequal relationship.

In meditating on Merleau-Ponty's phrase '*inscription of Being*', I have lingered over the thought of Being. Now it is time to pass to inscription, and I shall do so by calling another witness to the incompleteness of the reduction. Jacques Derrida testifies that it was in Husserl's phenomenology that he found both a 'discipline of incomparable rigour' and an 'unthought axiomatics' ⁽²⁵⁾. Both expressions refer to the reduction. Although Husserl proposes the reduction as a methodological preface to thought, a leading back to the living present of intentional experience, it never quite manages to attain such purity. For one thing, since consciousness is consequent on experience there will always be a delay in our thinking or speaking about experience. And the gap cannot be closed since, as Husserl argues, the present moment always harbours protentions and retentions. The present can be thought only when it has passed, even when the reduction has been strictly followed. In itself, this is not a difficulty for Husserl. Nor was he troubled by the thought that every ideal object requires in its very constitution the possibility of being inscribed in order to be intelligible. Yet it is here

that Derrida comes upon an ‘unthought axiomatics’, for the possibility of inscription is linked to another possibility, that each mark may be repeated in any context whatsoever. An ideal object is therefore subject to another kind of ideality, a regulative idea with no content, that is in place regardless of whether or not an act of inscription occurs. A first act of inscription can never be an origin, or even refer directly to it, for the origin is disabled by what enables it to be represented. The only way of preventing being and meaning from diverging would be to perform the reduction at each and every moment. This is impossible: as Husserl admits, there will always be a delay in thinking. And so the reduction becomes ‘pure thought as that delay’⁽²⁶⁾. Univocity can never be guaranteed by an origin or an end.

While discussing the tendency to equivocity in a ‘natural’ language, Derrida poses an alternative. On the one hand, we have Husserl’s project of reducing empirical language until we can grasp an origin. On the other hand, we have James Joyce’s irruption of equivocity in *Finnegans Wake*, which enables the past to reveal itself in an unpredictable way through the play of language. And yet to choose between Husserl and Joyce, philosophy and literature, is impossible. ‘Natural’ language cannot be completely reduced, no matter what one is writing, while to affirm polysemic dispersal with Joyce or, more radically, dissemination with Derrida is to shift univocity from ground to horizon⁽²⁷⁾. Sure enough, we can still identify poems and submit them to the reduction. In doing so we will bracket all senses of *mimesis* as *imitatio*, but there will be no rigorously delimited ideal object disclosed, no essence of poetry that gives itself to intuition. Rather than finding a pre-predicative ‘being of poetry’, we will encounter nothing but acts of inscription. Each poem will relate, in its own way and to its advantage, a history of poetry and poetics. And here we brush against a limit of phenomenology. A poem may suspend imitation as a relation to the world, but it cannot abstain from imitating other poems: that is its chance of life and its fear of death. Acts of inscription are forces engaging other forces.

Part 3

There is no poetry without the reduction, then, and no poetry without a failure of the reduction. A poet may seek meaning outside the self or gaze intently within the self. It little matters, at this level of generality, if we are talking about God or consciousness. Poets begin romantically, in quest of the meaning of being, and in that moment accept or evade what forces itself upon them: that being and meaning fail to co-incide. In this way a poet may try to write just one poem, the one that seems to call both day and night, only to write hundreds of poems over a lifetime. A poem calls with the force of necessity, yet it gets written and rewritten as the necessarily accidental.

Whatever else it is, poetry is an experience of language and an encounter with other poems; it is an experience of the gap between the reflective and the pre-reflective, and it is a mourning for a rumoured origin. Now this conception of poetry cannot be disentangled from two thoughts. The first is that poetry does not revolve around a special kind of event. A poem may speak of experience in an exemplary manner - more attentively, more clearly, more feelingly, more richly, more self-consciously, or however you wish to phrase it - and it may take an experience to its limits. But a poem offers no access to a privileged sphere, whether ethical or religious. It keeps us in the midst of what Wordsworth in the ‘Preface’ to the *Lyrical Ballads* (1800) called

‘the company of flesh and blood’⁽²⁸⁾. It speaks to us in a relation charged with significance and with feeling, nothing more and nothing less. Pragmatists will say that any human act can be cultivated as an art, and in their measure they are right⁽²⁹⁾. Poetry does not require a distinctive ontological status; it imposes on us by virtue of its scope and strength. The second thought that accompanies my reasoning is that the experience of poetry is not determined by any presence, whether epistemological or ontological. A poem does not recover a past present, abide in the present moment, or anticipate a future present; it maintains itself in a strange state that is neither intelligible nor sensible. I have already entertained this idea when meditating on Merleau-Ponty’s notion of an original past that impinges on us pre-reflectively, and I want to approach it from a couple of other angles. As a first step, I will identify three ambiguities the word ‘experience’ carries in my title.

As Dilthey taught us to notice, ‘experience’ names a content and a process. The word allows me to speak of particular effects a poem has on me, while also enabling me to evoke a course of events. ‘The experience of poetry’ may be a detour or a journey; and if it is a journey, it may resemble that of Odysseus, a circling back home, though to a home that has changed, or that of Abraham, a quest for a true home far from where one was born. The second ambiguity flourishes near the first. The English word ‘experience’ wanders between and around *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*, a distinction with various functions in German but which always alerts us to a sense of experience as directed inward (‘lived experience’) and another sense which preserves the Latin *experiri*, ‘to undertake’, ‘to attempt’, ‘to make trial of’ (and within that, *peri*, from which we get ‘peril’), and which keeps in play a notion of experience as a setting at risk, a voyage that may well involve danger⁽³⁰⁾. Here we come upon the third ambiguity. For ‘experience’, especially when philosophy is in the air, can point to different areas. It can indicate a relatively stable state of affairs, as when one speaks in Kantian tones of establishing conditions of possibility for scientific experience. Or it can bespeak an adventure, a journey in which the concept itself will be harried or haunted. There can be no question of wholly eliminating these ambiguities from the expression ‘the experience of poetry’, not only because they overlap but also because at different times and to varying extents they all impinge on the reading and writing of poetry.

If they cannot be eliminated, these ambiguities can at least be identified and their forces distributed. One may ask whether conditions of possibility can be established for ‘poetic experience’ or whether one is to speak of poetry as worldly adventure. There can be no doubt that criticism is often tempted to adduce grounds for poetry. Formalisms offer one way with ‘literariness’ or ‘defamiliarisation’, while historicisms quietly try another path in positing epistemes or spirits of the age. Are we obliged to follow one or the other? I do not think so, for both rely too heavily on the assumption that a poem is an object and can therefore be described. A poem may appear to have characteristics of an object, but first and foremost it is an event: an intentional act that amounts to an understanding or a misunderstanding of another text (a ‘state of affairs’, another poem, or both). It is an important point, and to keep it in play for a while, I would like to introduce two people who develop it in contrary directions.

Harold Bloom and Maurice Blanchot mark extremes of modern criticism: the one seeking an absolute subjectivism and the other affirming a loss of selfhood, the one

affirming literary history as a titanic struggle for power and the other glimpsing in art a passivity beyond passivity. It is as though the Nietzsche who stands behind both is in reality two thinkers: a prophet of sensibility and strength, and an antichrist preaching writing as disarticulation. Only when we look beyond Nietzsche to the romantics do we find a common ground for the American and the Frenchman, though even here the one talks with Blake and Shelley and the other with Novalis and Friedrich Schlegel. Yet Bloom and Blanchot concur in seeing art as an event that not only courts danger but is itself a peril. Creation contests what makes it possible in the first place; it is a 'catastrophe', says the one, a 'writing of the disaster', says the other⁽³¹⁾. Bloom will argue that the sublime moment of creativity is thoroughly negative, a perverse revenge on what enables it; while Blanchot will maintain that art is 'infinite contestation, contestation of itself and contestation of other forms of power', not because it is anarchic but because it is a quest for what is peculiar to it: a power that falls outside the dialectic⁽³²⁾.

From their independent vantage points Bloom and Blanchot regard poetry as an experience of the limit. For Bloom, the strong poet is at first unwilling and then unable to sacrifice the pleasure principle to the reality principle; we see him or her living in the borderlands of solipsism, now approaching it and now emerging from it. The experience of poetry will be solitary and virile, a struggle to present the unrepresentable deep self: the divinity within, the uncreated spark of imagination. Poetry turns on *Erfahrung*, then, not *Erlebnis*: and that despite the relentless inwardness of the capable writer. Perhaps I will be forgiven for picturing Bloom and Blanchot, these two great thinkers of solitude, in conversation with one another. I imagine them agreeing that poetry is *Erfahrung*, then falling into silence. For while Blanchot speaks with Georges Bataille of 'inner experience', of 'a voyage to the end of the possible in man', he identifies an event that explodes rather than preserves an interiority, that exposes the individual to the community that precedes him or her both in fact and by right⁽³³⁾. Blanchot will therefore evoke an experience that comes at the limit of power, where all dialectical possibilities are exhausted, including those upholding meaning and truth, and especially those that underwrite the myth of coherent selfhood. It is in art, Blanchot tells us, that we characteristically feel the pull of this limit. We find ourselves losing the origin that once attracted us to a work, and being approached by an irruption in immanence, not a transcendence but an infinite dispersal of indeterminate being. As if trapped, we yield to the fascination this irruption exerts in language, giving ourselves over to the allure of the imaginary. I use the first person plural not to suggest that the experience is universal but to indicate that, for Blanchot, no 'I' can rightly claim to know it. Like Rilke, Blanchot will propose that the artist's experience is a foretaste of death, a dissolution of individual consciousness as ground of possible experience⁽³⁴⁾.

With implacable logic, Blanchot will tell us that the experience of writing is never a 'lived event [*événement vécu*]'; it does not engage 'the present of presence' and is 'already nonexperience'⁽³⁵⁾. This is not because the writer encounters being in an eminent sense, an eternal One that eludes the present as much as it does the past and the future. Rather, it is because fascination reigns in an absence of time, before any effective stirrings of negativity, at the threshold of logic and history where, as Hegel observes, being is 'neither more nor less than nothing'⁽³⁶⁾. The ontological indeterminacy where the dialectic begins is, on Blanchot's interpretation, also that

which the dialectic never quite overcomes and which he believes idles behind its each and every moment, remaining forever in excess of Spirit. It marks a limit of experience, and it offers itself as an experience of the limit. We cannot live this neutral indeterminacy - the very thought implies recuperation of a transgression - and we cannot escape the trial to which it summons us. This, then, is the danger to which art exposes us: 'the menacing proximity of a vague and vacant outside, a neutral existence, nil and limitless' ⁽³⁷⁾.

In every work of criticism, even those that relish deflating idealisations of art, there is a defence of poetry. It may be no more than a sentence, perhaps no more than an image from Sidney or Shelley, Aristotle or Heidegger; and it may be all the more passionate for being covert. Usually the defence pleads that poetry is ethical, despite appearances, or does not run counter to religion, despite more appearances. Bloom cuts a rare figure against this ground simply by denying the ground. Poetry, he says, has no social dimension whatsoever. To read Spenser or Milton, Whitman or Stevens, will do nothing to improve human relations, not even if one reads them through Marxist spectacles. And yet Bloom is an original and powerful apologist, for he argues that poetry helps us in talking to ourselves. If we now turn to Blanchot, trying to read him as an apologist, he shrinks from our gaze. His criticism offers what must surely be the least attractive defence of poetry in the western tradition. Why do we have art? Not to save us from the truth, as Nietzsche taught, but because it leads us to 'a sordid absence, a suffocating condensation where being ceaselessly perpetuates itself as nothingness' ⁽³⁸⁾. Only the most severe demystifier of literature would come to such a conclusion. That we forget where art leads us, that we must discover it each time anew, helps Blanchot explain why art continues to be produced. Yet it renders obscure why Blanchot himself would continue to write after having had this theoretical insight. Perhaps forgetfulness is so strong a force that it overcomes philosophical reflection, or perhaps there is a masochistic pleasure to be gained from writing. I will fold these concerns into a more general question. What is poetry that it can reveal such a frightening vista, one that unsettles us by its sheer unconcern with the human? To answer this question we need some perspective, both historical and contemporary.

Hegel has been mocked for his proclamation in the 1820s that art 'is and remains for us a thing of the past' ⁽³⁹⁾. And yet his point is entirely reasonable. For all the pleasures afforded by Goethe and Hölderlin, art has finally explored its range of possibilities. Indeed, the most recent artistic movement, romanticism, has been more concerned with presenting religion than art; and romanticism has already lapsed into reflection and irony. Kant thought that he had placed religion safely within the limits of reason, but his heritage was to be otherwise. Veering away from what Kant actually wrote, those who came after him invited religion to make a home 'within the limits of art alone' ⁽⁴⁰⁾. And so the ancient war between religion and poetry ended in a peace without honour, with talk of poetry having to bear the burden of religion. No romantic will be happy with the story Hegel tells, or even with the less complicated tale one reads in Matthew Arnold. Religion is a fall from poetry, a romantic will say, while dogma is a failure of confidence in personal experience. Bloom is never less faithful to romantic philosophy and more faithful to romantic poetry than when he denounces the '*religious* illusion' that a poem 'possesses or creates a real *presence*'. He is never more shrewd than when he observes that 'Presence is a faith' ⁽⁴¹⁾. And he is never

more arresting than when he claims that poetry yields a religious knowing, not a belief. However you regard it, this gnostic attitude upsets a familiar image of romantics, even very late ones, being keen to resolve dualisms. The split between the spheres of divinity and creation is absolute in gnosticism. For Bloom, then, poetry cannot span the gulf between myself and others; it can only help me find myself. Nor can poetry overcome the chasm of experience and understanding. The experience of poetry for him is neither an experience, an understanding, nor a passage from the one to the other. It is an apprehension through an extreme negativity of having always been prior to the realm of possible experience. In short, poetry is a remaking rather than a making, an opening onto a deep self uncreated by a dialectic with nature or culture. A romantic, Bloom calls this inner self the imagination rather than the soul.

I can follow Bloom's guiding line, that gnosis resembles poetic knowing, a fair way before feeling any discomfort. I agree that poems are multiple relations that disperse the present, not aesthetic objects caught in amber; that modern poetry is obliged to be sentimental rather than naive, thereby making confessional verse beside the point; and that as literary history lengthens strong poetry approaches a dangerous limit of self-reliance. What is always valuable in Bloom's criticism is his emphasis that unless one abstains from creeds - aesthetic, social or religious - one cannot hope to encounter poetry. The experience of poetry comes before any faith we may have in culture or method. Bloom reaches this by way of gnosticism, I approach it through phenomenology: it is the one truth, and it precedes all naturalism, including historicisms and materialisms. To say that gnosis is like poetic knowing implies that it is also unlike it, and Bloom is naturally unwilling to draw the implication. Poetic knowing is like gnosticism in that it can save us, he argues; but this is too great a burden for art, even if the salvation is a wholly secular return to the imagination conceived as origin. Poetry can lead us to understand or misunderstand a process; it may even jolt us into witnessing a sudden flaring of being and meaning; yet it saves us from nothing, not even from ourselves. A poem may point us to the gap between being and meaning, and in experiencing that void we may seek salvation, opening ourselves to a meaning of being that cannot present itself. In the end, though, poetic knowing is like and unlike gnosis.

To talk of presenting the unrepresentable, as I am doing, is to think by way of the sublime. Traditionally, the sublime has concerned itself with the transcendent, even when the transcendent has also been transcendental. So when Bloom affirms that poetry can name and unname an unrepresentable self, he is speaking of a transcendence that fulfills a transcendental role; and in doing so he has the full weight of romanticism behind him. I think of Novalis in the 'Fragmente und Studien' of 1799-1800:

The intuition [*Sinn*] for poetry [*Poësie*] has a great deal in common with the intuition for mysticism. It is the intuition for the unique, personal, unknown, secret, excessively disclosing, the necessarily contingent. It presents the unrepresentable [*Er stellt das Undarstellbare dar*].⁽⁴²⁾

There is a profound ambiguity in this influential formulation. Does poetry manage, against impossible odds and with ruin in sight, to present the unrepresentable, as Kant thought it could? Or does poetry go a step further than Kant ventured in his doctrine of the sublime and attempt to present the unrepresentable as unrepresentable? Although

he stands at an angle to Kant, as to all philosophers, Bloom elects the first alternative, arguing that strong poetry speaks at the limit of solipsism; and if we call him a religious critic because he proposes a poetics of salvation, we must also acknowledge that this religiosity remains within the limits of art.

It will sound odd to call Blanchot a religious critic, since his atheism is explicit and uncompromising. And since he rejects the romantic notions of genius and imagination, he cannot readily be called a covert religious critic. Yet the description has its point. Blanchot does not address atheism as an occasional or a privileged theme of poetry, inflected this way by Mallarmé and that way by Hölderlin, but as a necessary consequence of writing. All art indicates a dimension that is entirely incompatible with God, 'a sordid absence, a suffocating condensation where being ceaselessly perpetuates itself as nothing'. Were humans to be cured of religious longings this kind of atheism would cease to be antithetical, and there would be no point in calling Blanchot or anyone a religious critic. Yet since every atheism provides only negative answers to religious questions, the adjective remains a telling one. All the more so, I think, in that Blanchot's conception of writing is deeply rooted in a particular notion of sacrifice. In a central essay, 'Orpheus's Gaze', he maintains that the exemplary poem is 'sacrificed' in its 'movement of *unconcern*' (43). If we follow Blanchot for a few steps we find that sacrifice generates the sacred, and that the sacred, properly understood, is an ecstatic relationship with death. So when he writes of a literary work 'communicating' with the approach of death, we have no trouble pinpointing the ruling notion of sacrifice: it is the one developed by Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss in their 'Essai sur la Nature et la Fontion du sacrifice' (1889) ⁽⁴⁴⁾.

Once this debt is realised, we can grasp the otherwise obscure link between Blanchot's sense of literature and his affirmation of communism. For Hubert and Mauss argue that the point of sacrifice is its movement from the individual to society. What then is Blanchot telling us? That writing is the truth of the sacred, and the sacred is the truth of writing. And more: that writing indicates the final truth of religion, namely that the sacred expiates itself in the realisation of community. Blanchot turns out to be an apologist after all: art is of value because it discloses the meaning of being. That this meaning is neither a mystery nor of ultimate significance changes nothing. For all the precautions he gathers around each proposition, Blanchot ultimately wants to affirm that there is *one* sacred, that it is the neutre, that it constitutes '*the* most profound question' and that 'writing ... is present in the language where the real is articulated' ⁽⁴⁵⁾. And he also wishes to claim not only that the neutre is unrepresentable but also that art presents it as unrepresentable. In this hyperbolic sublime we pass from a romanticism to a mysticism. The form of divine communication is preserved while its religious content is expiated. Blanchot may trust that this form serves as a kind of categorical imperative: act always in such a way as to realise a community you cannot avow ⁽⁴⁶⁾. And yet there is reason to be sceptical. The Jewish experience of sacrifice is allegorised into writing, while the Christian experience, in which God sacrifices himself, is not acknowledged by Hubert and Mauss's conception of sacrifice ⁽⁴⁷⁾. And there is reason to be cautious. When the sacred has been thoroughly ontologised, and specific historical modes of resistance have been erased, it is as easy for being to be enlisted in the service of wickedness as in the service of goodness.

Part 4

I have been suggesting that poetry does not reveal the meaning of being, as orphics and romantics of all stripes would have us believe. Many poems begin in that hope, yet their naming of the powers opens onto a gap between meaning and being. Put this way, it might seem as though I am dismissing transcendence and the sublime; but that would be a mistaken impression. The argument I have borrowed from Derrida establishes that no presence can present itself to consciousness. Although many post-structuralists seem to think otherwise, Derrida's reasoning does not entitle one to conclude that there is no presence as such. Presence is a faith, not an illusion, and faith works itself out in an endless response to traces of the divine. Deconstructions of presence have repeatedly shown that we do not need the good favour of a transcendent realm, ruled by God or Man, in order to account for an abundance of signification in a text. All the levels of biblical meaning found by an Alexandrian who holds them to be underwritten by the presence of God, can be reaffirmed by someone who believes neither in God nor in the subject. Fluent in the language of absence, this same person can find an overflow of signification in secular writing: not by appealing to a romantic doctrine of genius, or even to semantic density, but by meditating on the unrepresentable gap between being and meaning.

It is commonly said that philosophy after Kant is a series of attempts to eradicate transcendence. I think this misses the point: a major impulse of modern thought has been to recode the transcendental with the explanatory functions, if not the religious values, of the transcendent. Ours is the century of primal scenes. It was a bold move for Freud in his analysis of the Wolf Man to pass from empirical observation to the hypothesis of a primal scene. Apart from giving him leverage in his polemic against Adler and Jung, the idea of a past event that could not be represented in memory and that perhaps never actually occurred appealed to Freud because of its sheer explanatory power⁽⁴⁸⁾. Heidegger was no admirer of psychoanalysis, yet his thought none the less gathers around a primal event. In a meditation on Hegel, he speaks of what is truly needed for there be to a conversation with historical tradition. The criterion is 'what has not been thought', and it sets traditional thinking into its 'essential past'⁽⁴⁹⁾. We see this tradition beginning in and through a concealing of the difference between beings and Being. What remains unthought would be the unrepresentable scission of beings and Being, and that would be the primal scene of thought. Following on from Heidegger, even when freely departing from him, are Merleau-Ponty with his notion of an original past, Levinas with the enigma of an immemorial past, Blanchot with the anterior call of the neutre, and Derrida with *différance*, that groundless condition of possibility and impossibility that is 'older' than Being⁽⁵⁰⁾. I do not have the time this evening to offer a nuanced discussion of these defections and deflections, to examine how the empirical and the transcendental are variously braided together, let alone how the demand for ever more original primacy increasingly stretches the metaphor of the scenic. Suffice it to say, somewhat bluntly, that where these primal 'scenes' do not seek to explain a reality drained of the transcendent, they offer to rethink the sacred by way of the transcendental. Thus Heidegger regards the holy as granted in a revealing and revealing of pre-originary difference; Levinas conceives God approaching us out of a past that was never present; Blanchot speaks of the sacred as an arriving that precedes any phenomenal

event; and Derrida notes that without the pre-archaic gift of *différance* there could be no theology. Where transcendent content was, there will have been transcendental form.

The romantics were perhaps the last people to experience living in History. If their sublime was charged with a religious significance, publically and privately, it was also tinged by an eerie sense of fulfilling a history of the west. Not the history of the west, as Hegel would have said, but a history, and a crucial one: the story of the meaning of being. These days we let ourselves be called postmodern rather than post-historical, though the aesthetic and social exhaustion that marks postmodernity is best explained by a feeling that the possibilities of tradition have been fulfilled, in principle if not always in fact. Adorno once spoke of our era as characterised by the 'impossibility of experience [*Erfahrung*]', and even the most attenuated thinker of negativity, in either its Hegelian or gnostic form, would find it hard to dismiss his diagnosis out of hand ⁽⁵¹⁾. Certainly much postmodern art feeds on the idea that authentic experience, at least in the first person singular, has become impossible. Be that as it may, the more compelling work has been done by those who turn the formula around and present their experience of the impossible, whether it be imagined as interior or exterior. That is the case, I think, with the modern poets who have come to mean most to me, John Ashbery and Wallace Stevens, Yves Bonnefoy and René Char, Roberto Juarroz and Tomas Tranströmer. Each has, in his own way, revealed that impossibility does not arrange itself in contradiction with possibility. I do not mean to say that they have penetrated a special realm, as Bataille thought when he speculated about poetry, but that they have taken the known in tandem with the unknown and, in doing so, have risked new feelings and new meanings.

In brooding on our transcendental turns, it might seem as though we postmoderns have replaced one sublime with another. The sublime that underscored the subjectivity of the romantics appears to have given way to one leagued with the transcendental rather than the transcendent. For Burke and Kant, the sublime was a response to something distant, vague and awesome, and these traits have been refigured rather than eliminated. Over the last hundred years or so we have been slowly losing faith in the idea of depth, and since our parents invested so profoundly there it is inevitable that the guiding metaphors about ourselves (Freud) and our society (Marx) are being painfully adjusted. And yet we have not completely lost a sense of awe. An immanence without bounds - the infinite play of texts and contexts, the endlessness of detail - can unsettle a mind that confronts it. And if one looks to *Es gibt, la différance* or *le neutre*, which are neither immanent nor transcendent, one may well be shaken by their independence from human consciousness ⁽⁵²⁾. Disquieting as it is, our sublime does not so much impose a doubled feeling of weakness and grandeur as a sense of fragility. It has no content beyond its indeterminacy; and accordingly the signature images of postmodernity include a writing that erases its author, a self that cannot master its subjectivity, and a dying that does not end in death.

For my part, I do not see a historical sequence of romantic and postmodern sublimes, any more than I recognise a complete translation of transcendence into the language of the transcendental. The postmodern situation, rather, is one of being turned toward the unrepresentable yet without knowing if it is an ineffable reality or a condition of possibility for thinking such a thing. There are doubtless many examples of this

perplexity; the one that stays with me, though, occurs in an exchange between Levinas and Derrida. Levinas ends a very beautiful essay, 'La trace de l'autre' (1963), with an allusion to Exodus 33, the image of Yahweh showing himself only by his trace. Taking this notion of the trace, and reformulating it at the level of the transcendental, Derrida poses a simple and devastating question to his friend: 'and if God was *an effect of the trace?*'⁽⁵³⁾. A believer will say that while God cannot be an effect of anything, the concept 'God' must be perpetually contested in the name of the divine reality. You can say that negative theology is the *epoche* that leads to theology. Or, taking another step or two, you can say that the transcendent and the transcendental are correctly positioned when arranged as an aporia, that is, when one is pulled this way and that at the same time. What we call 'religious experience' is a passing through an aporia, and what torments is that, for all its serried significance, we cannot locate such an experience in the present. The life of faith never converts to a life of assurance.

It is no accident that in contemplating the expression 'the experience of poetry' I have been led by way of religious experience. Poetry and religion are tied together in their hopes and in their illusions. In the nineteenth century Matthew Arnold prophesied that poetry would succeed religion, and that its future would be glorious. Looking back, and looking from postmodern America, Harold Bloom tells us that religion is a popular poetry. He is right, and it is exactly here that poetry has its most dramatic social effects. That said, it seems to me that both poetry and religion begin as quests for the meaning of being, and that a reflection on experience sends the quester on an interminable detour, a meditation on the divergence of being and meaning. The believer discovers that the word 'God' generates so many meanings that it comes to mean little or nothing when one faces the abyss. Here begins the dark night of the soul, the saints will testify, and to survive this spiritual suffering is perhaps to realise that no meaning attaches to the being of God. No wonder, when the lesson is so hard to bear, that Christianity reverses the narrative and makes God leave heaven in quest of us.

And poetry? Whatever happens to the man or woman who believes, there can be no question of the poet ever returning from the detour. He or she comes to realise that no forms or figures - however traditional, however non-traditional - allow a poem to become a window onto reality: the origin withdraws, and makes every poem an elegy at one level or another. To the extent this origin is another poem, each new poem will incorporate a little of what enabled it. The poems we cannot forget, the ones we call 'the canon', are precisely those we cannot mourn successfully. They touch us, whether we like it or not, and not to be touched is a poverty. Meanwhile language, with its uncanny ability to produce *other* meanings at unpredictable times, insists that the experience of poetry is always in part an experience of something inhuman. No poem is ever fully present to consciousness. To be sure, poets and their readers are powerfully drawn to the attractive thought that this inhuman dimension of art answers to the sacred, though this is almost always a mixture of haste and hope. Besides, in its own terms the inhumanity of language is to be highly prized. Like - and unlike - the sacred, it beckons without appearing. It enables a poem to configure the known and the unknown, the possible and the impossible, and to become for us an exemplary experience, a worldly adventure.

I would like to thank Jacques Derrida, Alexander García Düttmann, David Roberts and Walter Veit for comments on an earlier draft of this lecture. ‘The Experience of Poetry’ is dedicated to the two people who have taught me most about reading and writing: Harold Bloom and Jacques Derrida.

Notes

(1) In his early work Edmund Husserl calls this ‘the *philosophic epoche*’; in his later work, however, he attempts to think the phenomenological reduction by way of the history of philosophy. See *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, trans. W. R. Boyce Gibson (1931; rpt. New York: Collier Books, 1962), §18 and *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*, trans. and ed. David Carr (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), §6 and *passim*.

(2) Edmund Husserl, ‘Philosophy as a Rigorous Science’, in *Phenomenology and the Crisis of Philosophy*, trans. and introd. Quentin Lauer (New York: Harper and Row, 1965); *The Crisis of European Sciences*, appendix IX, p. 389.

(3) Martin Heidegger, ‘The Origin of the Work of Art’, in his *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. and introd. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), p. 72.

(4) See for example, Mikel Dufrenne, *Phénoménologie de l’expérience esthétique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1953) and Roman Ingarden, *The Literary Work of Art*, trans. George G. Grabowicz (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973).

(5) Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, trans. Dorion Cairns (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1977), §12. Husserl presented two lectures under this title at the Sorbonne in 1929; an extension of these lectures was published in *Husserliana* in 1950.

(6) P. B. Shelley, ‘A Defense of Poetry’, in *Selected Poetry and Prose*, ed. Alasdair D F. Macrae (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 212.

(7) Yves Bonnefoy, *In the Shadow’s Light*, trans. John Naughton, with an interview with Yves Bonnefoy (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p.162.

(8) Husserl, *Ideas*, §70.

(9) I am drawing here from Jacques Derrida’s ‘The Law of Genre’ in his *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (London: Routledge, 1992). I am also indebted to his account of literature and fiction in the interview that comprises the first chapter of that volume.

(10) Nicholas Abraham, *Rhythms: On the Work, Translation, and Psychoanalysis*,

trans. Benjamin Thigpen and Nicholas T. Rand (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), pp. 23, 43.

(11) Elizabeth Bishop, *Geography III* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1977), p.17.

(12) There are two words for 'experience' in German, *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis*. I discuss one or two forms of the distinction later in the paper. In general usage, however, the former denotes experience at large, while the latter indicates particular experiences. Hans-Georg Gadamer offers a concise account of the word and concept 'Erlebnis' in *Truth and Method*, ed. Garrett Barden and John Cumming (London: Sheed and Ward, 1975), pp. 55-63.

(13) See Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 3 vols, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), vol. 1, p.45.

(14) See Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, vol. 1: *The Will to Power as Art*, trans. David Farrell Krell (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), ch. 22, and Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1981), p.193.

(15) As a tangent to this thought, I would like to quote Allen Grossman: 'There is no poem of the experience at hand', he writes, while adding 'art is about experience (in the same sense that a cat indoors is "about" the house)', 'Summa Lyrica: A Primer of the Commonplaces in Speculative Poetics', in *The Sighted Singer: Two Works on Poetry for Readers and Writers*, Allen Grossman with Mark Halliday (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), p. 268.

(16) Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (London: Macmillan, 1933), A15/B29. Smith points out that 'experience' is used in both senses in his *Commentary to Kant's 'Critique of Pure Reason'* 2nd ed., 1923; rpt. (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1984), p.52.

(17) See Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences*, §43, and Martin Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, rev. ed. trans. and introd. Albert Hofstadter (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), p.21.

(18) Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith, rev. ed. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), xiv. Also see Merleau-Ponty's discussion of the reduction in 'The Philosopher and His Shadow', *Signs*, trans. and introd. Richard C. McCleary (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), pp. 161-66.

(19) Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 242.

(20) Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 215.

(21) Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), p. 197.

(22) I take my example from Michael Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*

(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1933), who makes the move in fourteen pages. See pp.13- 27.

(23) Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 123. Hegel defines ‘experience’ as ‘the name we give to just this movement, in which the immediate, the unexperienced [...] becomes alienated from itself and then returns to itself from this alienation, and is only then revealed for the first time in its actuality and truth, just as it then has become a property of consciousness also’, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 21.

(24) Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences*, §71. For Levinas’s objection to experience as a mode of presence that is the source of meaning, see his *Humanisme de l’autre homme* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1972), p. 14.

(25) Jacques Derrida, *Du Droit à la philosophie* (Paris: Galilée, 1990), pp. 444, 445.

(26) Derrida, *Edmund Husserl’s ‘Origin of Geometry’: An Introduction*, trans. John P. Leavey, Jr., ed. David B. Allison (Stony Brook, NY: Nicolas Hays, 1978), p. 153.

(27) Derrida, *Edmund Husserl’s ‘Origin of Geometry’*, pp. 102-3.

(28) W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser, eds. *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), vol. 3, p. 130.

(29) John Dewey examines ‘experience as art’ in his *Experience and Nature*, second ed. (La Salle, ILL: Open Court, 1959), ch. 9. Also see Joseph H. Kupfer, *Experience as Art: Aesthetics in Everyday Life* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1983).

(30) See Roger Munier’s discussion of ‘expérience’ in *Mise en page*, 1 (1972), pp. 37-38. I am indebted to Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe’s *La Poésie comme expérience* (Paris: Bourgois, 1986) for referring me to this discussion and, more generally, to Lacoue-Labarthe’s discussion of ‘catastrophe’ in that study.

(31) See Harold Bloom, *Poetics of Influence: New and Selected Criticism*, ed. and introd. John Hollander (New Haven: Henry R. Schwab, 1988), esp. p. 194; Maurice Blanchot, ‘Qu’en est-il de la critique?’ in his *Lautréamont et Sade* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1963), and *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986).

(32) Blanchot, ‘La gravité du project ...’, *Lignes*, 11 (1990), p. 182.

(33) Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience*, trans. and introd. Leslie Anne Boldt (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1988), p.7. See Blanchot’s remarks on ‘inner experience’ in *The Unavowable Community*, trans. Pierre Joris (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press, 1988), p.16.

(34) Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), p.151.

- (35) Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, pp. 50-51.
- (36) G. W. F. Hegel, *Science of Logic*, trans. A. V. Miller, foreword J. N. Findlay (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1969), p. 82.
- (37) Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, pp. 242-43.
- (38) Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, p. 243.
- (39) Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, 2 vols, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), vol. 1, p.11.
- (40) See Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, trans. Philip Barnard and Cherly Lester (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), ch. 2.
- (41) Bloom, *Kabbalah and Criticism* (1975; rpt. New York: Continuum, 1984), p.122.
- (42) Friedrich von Hardenberg, *Novalis Schriften*, vol. 3: *Das philosophische Werk II*, ed. Richard Samuel with Hans-Joachim Mähl and Gerard Schulz (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1983), p.685. My translation.
- (43) Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, p. 175.
- (44) Toward the end of their essay, Hubert and Mauss summarise their basic position: 'This procedure consists in establishing a means of communication between the sacred and the profane worlds through the mediation of a victim, that is, of a thing that in the course of the ceremony is destroyed,' Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss, *Sacrifice: Its Nature and Function*, trans. W. D. Halls, foreword E.E. Evans-Pritchard (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), p. 97. The original essay appeared in *L'Année sociologique* (1898), pp. 29-138.
- (45) Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1993), p.417. My ellipsis. 'The Most Profound Question' is the second essay of this collection. My emphasis.
- (46) See Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community*, trans. Pierre Joris (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press, 1988).
- (47) See John Milbank, 'Stories of Sacrifice: From Wellhausen to Girard', *Theory, Culture and Society*, vol. 12 (1995), p. 29.
- (48) For Freud's emphasis on the explanatory power of the primal scene see 'From the History of an Infantile Neurosis', in *Case Histories II*, The Pelican Freud Library (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), vol. 9, p. 286. Note that, toward the end of his reflections on the Wolf Man, Freud claimed to be indifferent whether there was a primal scene or a primal phantasy. See pp. 363-64.

(49) Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, trans Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), p.48.

(50) Derrida, 'Differance', in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), p.26.

(51) Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music*, trans. Anne G. Mitchell and Wesley V. Blomster (New York: The Seabury Press, 1973), p.181.

(52) It is important to draw attention to differences here. For example, although Heidegger occludes reference to consciousness when speaking of *Es gibt*, Derrida explicitly preserves a role for intentionality in the thought of iterability. Intentionality may not determine meaning but it cannot be excluded from any scene of reading or writing. For example, see Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc*, ed. Gerald Graff (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), p. 105.

(53) Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), p.108. Levinas's essay 'La trace de l'autre' forms part of the second edition of his collection *En Découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1967).

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