



THE POETRY

FROM

OF THOUGHT

HELLENISM

GEORGE

TO

STEINER

CELAN

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# The Poetry of Thought

From Hellenism to Celan

*George Steiner*

*A New Directions Book*

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*For Durs Grünbein*

*Poet & Cartesian*

*Toute pensée commence par un poème.*

(Every thought begins with a poem.)

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—Alain: “*Commentaire sur ‘La Jeune Parque,’*” 19

*Il y a toujours dans la philosophie une prose littéraire cachée, une ambiguïté des termes.*

(There is always in philosophy a hidden literary prose, an ambiguity in the terms used.)

—Sartre: *Situations IX*, 19

*On ne pense en philosophie que sous des métaphores.*

(In philosophy one thinks only metaphorically.)

—Louis Althusser: *Éléments d'autocritique*, 19

Lucretius and Seneca are “models of philosophical-literary investigation, in which literary language and complex dialogical structures engage the interlocutor’s (and the reader’s) entire soul in a way that an abstract and impersonal prose treatise probably could not. . . . Form is a crucial element in the work’s philosophical content. Sometimes, indeed (as with the *Medea*), the content of the form proves so powerful that it calls into question the allegedly simpler teaching contained within it.”

—Martha Nussbaum: *The Therapy of Desire*, 19

*Gegenüber den Dichtern stehen die Philosophen unglaublich gut angezogen da. Dabei sind sie nackt, ganz erbärmlich nackt, wenn man bedenkt, mit welcher dürftiger Bildsprache sie die meiste Zeit auskommen müssen.*

(In contrast to the poets, the philosophers look incredibly elegant. In fact, they are naked, piteously naked when one considers the meager imagery with which they have to make do most of the time.)

—Durs Grünbein: *Das erste Jahr*, 20

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# PREFACE

What are the philosophic concepts of the deaf-mute? What are his or her metaphysical imaginings?

All philosophic acts, every attempt to think thought, with the possible exception of formal logic (mathematical) and symbolic logic, are irremediably linguistic. They are realized and held hostage by the one motion or another of discourse, of encoding in words and in grammar. Be it oral or written, the philosophic proposition, the articulation and communication of argument are subject to the executive dynamics and limitations of human speech.

It may be that there lurks within all philosophy, almost certainly within all theology, an opaque but insistent desire—Spinoza's *conatus*—to escape from this empowering bondage. Either by modulating natural language into the tautological exactitudes, transparencies and verifiabilities of mathematics (this cold but ardent dream haunts Spinoza, Husserl, Wittgenstein) or, more enigmatically, by reverting to intuitions prior to language itself. We do not know that there are any such, that there can be thought before saying. We apprehend manifold strengths of meaning and figurations of sense in the arts, in music. The inexhaustible significance of music, its defiance of translation or paraphrase, presses on philosophic scenarios in Socrates, in Nietzsche. But when we adduce the "sense" of aesthetic representations and musical forms, we are metaphorizing, we are operating by more or less covert analogy. We are enclosing them in the mastering contours of speech. Hence the recurrent trope, so urgent in Plotinus, in the *Tractatus*, that the nub, the philosophic message lies in that which is unsaid, in the unspoken between the lines. What can be enunciated, what presumes that language is more or less consonant with veritable insights and demonstrations, may in fact reveal the decay of primordial, epiphanic recognitions. It may hint at the belief that in an earlier Pre-Socratic condition, language was closer to the wellsprings of immediacy, to the undimmed "light of Being" (so Heidegger). But there is no evidence whatever for any such Adamic privilege. Inescapably, the "language-animal," as the ancient Greeks defined man, inhabits the bounded immensities of the word, of grammatical instruments. The *Logos* equates word with reason in its very foundations. Thought may indeed be in exile. But if so, we do not know or, more precisely, we cannot say from what.

It follows that philosophy and literature occupy the same generative though ultimately circumscribed space. Their performative means are identical: an alignment of words, the modes of syntax, punctuation (a subtle resource). This is as true of a nursery rhyme as it is of a Kant *Critique*. Of a dime novel as of the *Phaedo*. They are deeds of language. The notion, as in Nietzsche or Valéry, that abstract thought can be danced is an allegoric conceit. Utterance, intelligible enunciation is a dance. Together they solicit or withstand translation, paraphrase, metaphrase and every technique

transmission or betrayal.

Practitioners have always known this. In all philosophy, conceded Sartre, there is “a hidden literary prose.” Philosophic thought can be realized “only metaphorically,” taught Althusser. Repeatedly (but how seriously?) Wittgenstein professed that he ought to have set down his *Investigations* in verse. Jean-Luc Nancy cites the vital difficulties which philosophy and poetry occasion each other: “Together they are difficulty itself: the difficulty of making sense.” Which idiom points to the essential crux, to the creation of meaning and poetics of reason.

What has been less clarified is the incessant, shaping pressure of speech-forms, of *style* of philosophic and metaphysical programs. In what respects is a philosophic proposal, even in the nakedness of Frege’s logic, a rhetoric? Can any cognitive or epistemological system be dissociated from its stylistic conventions, from the genres of expression prevalent or under challenge in its time and milieu? To what degree are the metaphysics of Descartes, of Spinoza or Leibniz conditioned by the complex social and instrumental ideals of late Latin, by the constituents and underlying authority of a partially artificial Latinity within modern Europe? At other points, the philosopher sets out to construe a new language, an idiolect singular to his purpose. Yet this endeavor, manifest in Nietzsche or in Heidegger, is itself saturated by the oratorical, colloquial or aesthetic context (witness the “expressionism” in *Zarathustra*). There could be no Derrida outside the wordplay initiated by Surrealism and Dada, immune to the acrobatics of automatic writing. What lies nearer deconstruction than *Finnegans Wake* or Gertrude Stein’s lapidary finding that “there is no there there”?

It is aspects of this “stylization” in certain philosophic texts, of the engendering of such texts with literary tools and fashions which I want to consider (in an inevitably partial and provisional way). I want to note the interactions, the rivalries between poet, novelist, playwright on the one hand and the declared thinker on the other. “To be both Spinoza and Stendhal” (Sartre). Intimacies and reciprocal distrust made iconic by Plato and reborn in Heidegger’s dialogue with Hölderlin.

Fundamental to this essay is a conjecture which I find difficult to put into words. A close association of music with poetry is a commonplace. They share seminal categories of rhythm, phrasing, cadence, sonority, intonation and measure. “The music of poetry” is exactly that. Setting words to music or music to words is an exercise in shared raw materials.

Is there in some kindred sense “a poetry, a music of thought” deeper than that which attaches to the external uses of language, to style?

We tend to use the term and concept of “thought” with unconsidered scattering and largesse. We affix the process of “thinking” to a teeming multiplicity which extends from the subconscious, chaotic torrent of internalized flotsam, even in sleep, to the most rigorous of analytic proceedings, which embraces the uninterrupted babble of the everyday and the focused meditation in Aristotle on mind or Hegel on self. In common parlance “thinking” is democratized. It is made universal and unlicensed. But this is to confound radically what are distinct, even antagonistic phenomena. Responsibly defined—we lack a signal term—serious thought is a rare occurrence. The discipline which it requires, the abstentions from facility and disorder, are very rarely or not at all in reach of the vast majority. Most of us are hardly cognizant of what it is “to think,” to transmute the bric-à-brac, the shopworn refuse of our mental currents into “thought.” Properly perceived—when do we pause to consider?—the instauration of thought of the first caliber is as rare as the crafting of a Shakespeare sonnet or a Bach fugue. Perhaps, in our brief evolutionary history, we have not yet learned how to think. The tag *homo sapiens* may, except for a handful, be an unfounded boast.

Things excellent, admonishes Spinoza, “are rare and difficult.” Why should a distinguished philosophic text be more accessible than higher mathematics or a late Beethoven quartet? Inherent

such a text is a process of creation, a “poetry” which it both reveals and resists. Major philosophy metaphysical thought both begets and seeks to conceal the “supreme fictions” within itself. The bilgewater of our indiscriminate ruminations is indeed the world’s prose. No less than “poetry,” in the categorical sense philosophy has its music, its pulse of tragedy, its raptures, even, though infrequently its laughter (as in Montaigne or Hume). “All thought begins with a poem” taught Alain in his commerce with Valéry. This shared incipience, this initiation of worlds is difficult to elicit. Yet it leaves traces, background noises comparable to those which whisper the origins of our galaxy. I suspect that these traces are discernible in the *mysterium tremendum* of metaphor. Even melody, that “supreme mystery among the sciences of man” (Lévi-Strauss), may, in a certain sense, be metaphorical. If we are a “language-animal,” we are more specifically a primate endowed with the capacity to use metaphor, so as to relate with arc lightning, Heraclitus’s simile, the disparate shards of being and passive perception.

Where philosophy and literature mesh, where they are litigious toward one another in form or matter, these echoes of origin can be heard. The poetic genius of abstract thought is lit, is made audible. Argument, even analytic, has its drumbeat. It is made ode. What voices the closing movements of Hegel’s *Phenomenology* better than Edith Piaf’s *non de non*, a twofold negation which Hegel would have prized?

This essay is an attempt to listen more closely.



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# 1

We do speak about music. The verbal analysis of a musical score can, to a certain extent, elucidate its formal structure, its technical components and instrumentation. But where it is not musicology in a strict sense, where it does not resort to a “meta-language” parasitic on music—“key,” “pitch,” “syncopation”—talk about music, oral or written, is a suspect compromise. A narration, a critique of a musical performance addresses itself less to the actual sound-world than it does to the executant and the reception by the audience. It is reportage by analogy. It can say little that is substantive of the composition. A handful of brave spirits, Boethius, Rousseau, Nietzsche, Proust and Adorno among them, have sought to translate the matter of music and its significations into words. On occasion, they have found metaphoric “counterpoints,” modes of suggestion, simulacra of considerable evocative effect (Proust on Vinteuil’s sonata). Yet even at their most seductive these semiotic virtuosités are, in the proper sense of the idiom, “beside the point.” They are derivative.

To speak of music is to foster an illusion, a “category mistake” as logicians would put it. It is to treat music as if it was or was very close to natural language. It is to transfer semantic realities from the linguistic to a musical code. Musical elements are experienced or classified as syntax; the evolving construct of a sonata, its initial and secondary “subject” are designated as grammatical. Musical statements (itself a borrowed designation) have their rhetoric, their eloquence or economy. We incline to overlook that each of these rubrics is borrowed from its linguistic legitimacies. The analogies are inescapably contingent. A musical “phrase” is not a verbal segment.

This contamination is aggravated by the manifold relations between words and musical setting. A linguistically ordered system is inserted within, is set to and against a “non-language.” This hybrid coexistence is of limitless diversity and possible intricacy (often a Hugo Wolf *Lied* negates its verbal text). Our reception of this amalgam is to a large extent cursory. Who but the most concentrated—score and libretto in hand—is capable of taking in simultaneously the musical notes, the attendant syllables and the polymorphic, truly dialectical interplay between them? The human cortex has difficulty in discriminating between and re-combining entirely distinct, autonomous stimuli. No doubt there are musical pieces which aim to mime, to accompany verbal and figurative themes. There is “program music” for storms and calm, for festivities and lamentation. Mussorgsky sets to music “paintings at an exhibition.” There is film music, often essential to the visual-dramatic script. But these are justly taken to be secondary, mongrel species. Where it is *per se*, where it is according to Schopenhauer more enduring than man, music is neither more nor less than itself. The ontologic echo lies to hand: “I am what I am.”

Its only signifying “translation” or paraphrase is that of bodily motion. Music translates in

dance. But the enraptured mirroring is approximate. Stop the sound and there is no confident way telling what music is being danced to (an irritant touched on in Plato's *Laws*). But unlike natural languages, music is universal. Innumerable ethnic communities possess only oral rudiments literature. No human aggregate is without music, often elaborate and intricately marshalled. The sensory, emotional data of music are far more immediate than those of speech (they may reach back to the womb). Except at certain cerebral extremes, associated mainly with modernism and technology in the west, music needs no decipherment. Reception is more or less instantaneous at psychic, nervous and visceral levels whose synaptic interconnections and cumulative yield we scarcely understand.

But what is it that is being received, internalized, responded to? What is it that sets the sum of it in motion? Here we come upon a duality of "sense" and of "meaning" which epistemology, philosophical hermeneutics and psychological investigations have been virtually helpless to elucidate. Which invite the supposition that what is inexhaustibly meaningful may also be senseless. The meaning of music lies in its performance and audition (there are those who "hear" a composition while silently reading its score, but they are rare). To explain what a composition means, ruled Schumann, is to play it again. To women and men since the inception of humaneness music is so meaningful that they can hardly imagine life without it. *Musique avant toute chose* (Verlaine). Music comes to possess our body and our consciousness. It calms and it maddens, it consoles or makes desolate. For countless mortals music, however vaguely, comes closer than any other felt presence to inferring, to forecasting the possible reality of transcendence, of an encounter with the numinous, with the supernatural. These lie beyond empirical reach. To so many religious people emotion is metaphorized music. But what sense has it, what meaning does it make verifiable? Can music lie or is it altogether immune to what philosophers call "truth functions"? Identical music will inspire, and seemingly articulate irreconcilable proposals. It "translates" into antinomies. The same Beethoven tune inspired National solidarity, communist promise and the vapid panaceas of the United Nations hymn. The selfsame chorus in Wagner's *Rienzi* exalts Herzl's Zionism and Hitler's vision of the *Reich*. A fantastic wealth of variant, even contradictory meanings and a total absence of sense. Neither semiology nor psychology nor metaphysics can master this paradox (which alarms absolutist thinkers from Plato to Calvin and Lenin). No epistemology has been able to answer convincingly the simple question: "What is music for?" What sense can it have to make music? This crucial incapacity more than hints at organic limitations in language, limitations pivotal to the philosophic enterprise. Conceivably spoken let alone written discourse are a secondary phenomenon. They may embody a decay of certain primordial totalities of psychosomatic awareness still operative in music. Too often, to speak is to "get it wrong." Not long before his death Socrates sings.

When God sings to Himself, He sings algebra, opined Leibniz. The affinities, the sinews which relate music to mathematics have been perceived since Pythagoras. Cardinal features of music and composition such as pitch, volume, rhythm can be algebraically plotted. So can historical conventions such as fugues, canons and counterpoint. Mathematics is the other universal language. Common to all men, instantly legible to those equipped to read it. As in music, so in mathematics the notion of "translation" is applicable only in a trivial sense. Certain mathematical operations can be narrated or described verbally. It is possible to paraphrase or metaphrase mathematical devices. But these are ancillary, virtually decorative marginalia. In and of itself mathematics can be translated only into other mathematics (as in algebraic geometry). In mathematical papers, there is often only one generative word: an initial "let" which authorizes and launches the chain of symbols and diagrams. Comparable to that imperative "let" which initiates the axioms of creation in *Genesis*.

Yet the language(s) of mathematics are immensely rich. Their deployment is one of the fe

positive, clean journeys in the records of the human mind. Though inaccessible to the layman, mathematics manifests criteria of beauty in an exact, demonstrable sense. Here alone the equivalence between truth and beauty obtains. Unlike those enunciated by natural language, mathematical propositions can be either verified or falsified. Where undecidability crops up, that concept also has its precise, scrupulous meaning. Oral and written tongues lie, deceive, obfuscate at every step. More often than not their motor is fiction and the ephemeral. Mathematics can produce errors, later to be corrected. It cannot lie. There is wit in mathematical constructs and proofs, as there is wit in Haydn and Satie. There may be touches of personal style. Mathematicians have told me that they can identify the proponent of a theorem and of its demonstration on stylistic grounds. What matters is that once proved, a mathematical operation enters the collective truth and availability of the anonymous. It is moreover, permanent. When Aeschylus is forgotten, and already the bulk of his work is missing, Archimedes' theorems will remain (G. M. Hardy).

Since Galileo, the march of mathematics is imperial. A natural science gauges its legitimacy by the degree to which it can be mathematicized. Mathematics play an increasingly determinant role in economics, in prominent branches of social studies, even in the statistical areas of history ("cliometrics"). Calculus and formal logic are the source and anatomy of computation, of information theory, of electromagnetic storage and transmission as these now organize and transform our daily lives. The young manipulate the crystalline unfolding of fractals as they once manipulated rhyme. Applied mathematics, often of an advanced class, pervades our individual and social existence.

From the outset, philosophy, metaphysics have circled mathematics like a frustrated hawk. Plato's exigence was clear: "Let no one enter the Academy who is not a geometer." In Bergson, Wittgenstein the mathematical libido is exemplary of epistemology as a whole. There are enlightening episodes in the long history of the philosophy of mathematics, notably in the early investigations of Husserl. But advances have been fitful. If applied mathematics with its inception in hydraulic agriculture, astronomy and navigation can be located within economical and social needs, pure mathematics and its meteoric progress pose a seemingly intractable question. Do the theorems, the interplay of higher mathematics, of number theory in particular, derive from, refer to realities "out there" even if as yet undiscovered? Do they, at however formalized a level, address existential phenomena? Or are they an autonomous game, a set and sequence of operations as arbitrary, as autistic as chess? Is the unbounded, one may say "fantastic" forward motion of mathematics from Pythagoras's triangle to elliptical functions, generated, energized from within itself, independent of either reality or application (though, contingently, the latter may turn up)? To what psychological or aesthetic impulses does mathematics answer? Mathematicians themselves, philosophers have debated the issue across millennia. It remains unresolved. Add to this the luminous puzzle of mathematician's capacities and productivity in the very young, in the preadolescent. An enigmatic occurrence analogous with, and only analogous with, virtuosity of the musical prodigy and the child chess master. Are there links? Is some transcendent addiction to the useless implanted in a handful of human beings (a Mozart, a Gauss, a Capablanca)?

Being condemned to language, philosophy and philosophic psychology have found themselves more or less helpless. Many a thinker has echoed an ancient sorrow: "Would I have been a philosopher if I could have been a mathematician?"

In regard to the requirements of philosophy, natural language suffers from grave infirmities. It cannot match the universality of either music or mathematics. Even the most widespread—today it is Anglo-American—is only provincial and transient. No language can rival the capacities of music for

polysemic simultaneities, for manifold meanings under pressure of untranslatable forms. The enlistment of emotions, at once specific and general, private and communal, far exceeds that language. At some points, blindness is reparable (books can be read in braille). Deafness, ostracism from music is irremediable exile. Nor can natural language rival the precision, the unambiguous finality, the accountability and transparency of mathematics. It cannot satisfy criteria of either proof or refutation—they are the same—inherent in mathematics. Must we, can we mean what we say or say what we mean? The implicit generation of new questions, of new perceptions, of innovative findings from within the mathematical matrix has no equivalent in oral or written speech. The forward paths of mathematics look to be self-sustained and unbounded. Language teems with shopworn specters and factitious circularities.

And yet. The very definition of men and women as “language-animals” put forward by the ancient Greeks, the nomination of language and linguistic communication as the defining attribute of what is human, are no arbitrary tropes. Sentences, oral and written (the mute can be taught to read and write) are the enabling organ of our being, of that dialogue with the self and with others which assembles and stabilizes our identity. Words, imprecise, time-bound as they are, construct remembrance and articulate futurity. Hope is the future tense. Even when naively figurative and unexamined, the substantives we attach to concepts such as life and death, to the ego and the other are bred of words: Hamlet to Polonius. The force of silence is that of a denying echo of language. It is possible to love silently, but perhaps only up to a point. Authentic speechlessness comes with death. To die is to stop chattering. I have tried to show that the incident at Babel was a blessing. Each and every language maps a possible world, a possible calendar and landscape. To learn a language is to expand incommensurably the parochialism of the self. It is to fling open a new window on existence. Words do fumble and deceive. Certain epistemologies deny them access to reality. Even the finest poetry is circumscribed by its idiom. Nonetheless, it is natural language which affords humanity its center of gravity (note the moral, psychological connotations of that term). Serious laughter is also linguistic. It may be that only smiling defies paraphrase.

Natural language is the ineluctable medium of philosophy. The philosopher may resort to technical terms and neologisms; he may, like Hegel, seek to crowd familiar idiomatic terms with novel significations. But in essence and, as we have seen, barring the symbolism of formal logic, language must do. As R. G. Collingwood puts it in his *Essay on Philosophic Method* (1933): “If language cannot explain itself, nothing else can explain it.” Thus the language of philosophy is “as every careful reader of the great philosophers already knows, a literary language and not a technical.” The rules of literature prevail. In this compelling respect, philosophy resembles poetry. It is “a poem of the intellect” and represents “the point at which prose comes nearest to being poetry.” The proximity is reciprocal, for often it is the poet who turns to the philosophers. Baudelaire adverts to de Maistre, Mallarmé to Hegel, Celan to Heidegger, T. S. Eliot to Bradley.

Within the disabling confines of my linguistic competence and drawing lamely on translation, I want to look at a pride of philosophic texts as these proceed under pressure of literary ideals and the poetics of rhetoric. I want to look at synaptic contacts between philosophic argument and literary expression. These interpenetrations, fusions are never total, but they take us to the heart of language and the creativity of reason. “What we cannot think, that we cannot think: we cannot therefore say what we cannot think” (*Tractatus*, 5.61).

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## 2

The incandescence of intellectual and poetic creativity in mainland Greece, Asia Minor and Sicily during the sixth and fifth centuries B.C. remains unique in human history. In some respects, the life of the mind thereafter is a copious footnote. So much has long been obvious. Yet the causes of the sunburst, the motives which brought it about in that time and place remain unclear. The penitentiary “political correctness” now prevalent, the remorse of postcolonialism make it awkward even to pose what may be the pertinent questions, to ask why the ardent wonder that is pure thought prevailed almost nowhere else (what theorem out of Africa?).

Manifold and complex factors must have been interactive, “implosive” to borrow a crucial concept from the packed collisions in atomic physics. Among these were a more or less benign climate and ease of maritime communication. Argument traveled fast; it was, in the ancient and figural sense, “Mercurial.” The availability of protein, cruelly denied to so much of the sub-Saharan world, may have been pivotal. Nutritionists speak of protein as “brain food.” Hunger, malnutrition lame the gymnastics of the spirit. There is much we do not yet grasp, though Hegel sensed its central role concerning the daily ambience of slavery, concerning the incidence of slavery on individual and social sensibility. It is, however, evident that for the privileged, and they were relatively numerous, the ownership of slaves comported leisure and dispensation from manual and domestic tasks. It bestowed time and space for the free play of intellect. This is an immense license. Neither Parmenides nor Plato needed to earn a living. Under temperate skies, a nourished man could proceed to argue or to listen in the *agora*, in the groves of the Academy. The third element is the most difficult to evaluate. With stellar exceptions, women played a housebound, often subservient part in the affairs, certainly in the philosophic-rhetorical affairs of the *polis*. Some may have had access to higher education. But there is little evidence prior to Plotinus. Did this (enforced, traditional?) abstention contribute to the luxury and even arrogance of the speculative? Does it reach, via the arrestingly modest contribution of mathematics and metaphysics made by women, into our own, now metamorphic day? Protein, slavery, male prepotence: what was their cumulative causation in the Greek miracle?

For let us be clear: a miracle it was.

It consisted in the discovery, though that concept remains elusive, and cultivation of abstract thought. Of absolute meditation and questioning uncontaminated by the utilitarian demands of large economy, of navigation, of flood control, of astrological prophecy prevalent, often brilliantly so, in the surrounding Mediterranean, Near Eastern and Indian civilizations. We tend to take this revolution for granted, being its products. It is in fact strange and scandalous. Parmenides’ equation between thought and being, Socrates’ ruling that the unexamined life is not worth living are provocations of

truly fantastic dimension. They incarnate the primacy of the useless, as we intimate it in music. Kant's proud idiom, they aspire to the ideal of the *disinterested*. What is stranger, perhaps ethical more suspect, than a willingness to sacrifice life to an abstract, inapplicable obsession as do Archimedes when pondering conic sections or Socrates? The phenomenology of pure thought almost daemonic in its strangeness. Pascal, Kierkegaard bear witness to this. But the deep currents radiant "autism" which relate Greek mathematics and speculative, theoretical debate, which exalt the hunt for truth above personal survival, launch the great western journey. They impel that "voyaging through strange seas of thought alone" which Wordsworth attributes to Newton. Our devising theories, our sciences, our reasoned disagreements and truth-functions, so often abstruse, proceed toward that distant Ionian light. We are, as Shelley proclaims, "all Greeks." I repeat: miracle there is, but also strangeness and, it may be, a touch of the inhuman.

Philosophic and literary prose, indeed prose itself, come late. Their self-awareness hardly predates Thucydides. Prose is wholly permeable to the dishevelment and corruptions of the "real world." It is ontologically mundane (*mundum*). Narrative sequence often carries with it the spurious promise of logical relation and coherence. Millennia of orality precede the use of prose for anything but administrative and mercantile notations (those lists of domestic animals in Linear B). The writing down in prose of philosophic propositions and debates, of fictions and history is a specialized ramification. Conceivably, it is symptomatic of decay. Famously, Plato views it with distaste. Writing, he urges, subverts, enfeebles the primordial strengths and arts of memory, mother of the Muses. It purports a factitious authority by preventing immediate challenge and self-correction. It lays claim to false monumentality. Only oral exchanges, the license of interruption as in the dialectic, can quicken intellectual inquiry toward responsible insight, insight that is answerable to dissent.

Hence the recurrent resort to dialogue in the works of Plato himself, in the lost books of Aristotle, in Galileo, Hume or Valéry. Because it preserves within its scripted forms the dynamics of the speaking voice, because it is in essence vocal and kindred to music, poetry not only precedes prose but is, paradoxically, the more natural performative mode. Poetry exercises, nurtures memory as prose does not. Its universality is indeed that of music; many ethnic legacies have no other genre. In Hebrew scriptures the prosaic elements are instinct with the beat of verse. Read them aloud and they tend toward song. A good poem conveys the postulate of a new beginning, the *vita nuova* of the unprecedented. So much of prose is a creature of habit.

Demarcations we presume, almost casually, as between metaphysics, the sciences, music and literature, had no relevance in archaic Greece. We know next to nothing of the origins, oracular, rhapsodic, didactic, of what was to become cosmological thought. We know nothing of the shamans or metaphor to whom we owe the identity of the western mind, who laid the foundations for what Yeats called "monuments of unageing intellect." Ascriptions to Orphic covens, to mystery cults, to semiotic contacts with Persian, Egyptian, perhaps Indian practices of sagacity remain hypothetical at best. There is reason to believe that Pre-Socratic teachings were recited orally, perhaps sung, as Nietzsche intuited. For a very long time the lines between creation narratives, mythological-allegoric fictions on the one hand and philosophic, propositional dicta on the other were entirely fluid (Plato is a virtuoso of myth). At some unrecapturable stage, abstraction, the *cogito* assumes its imperative autonomy, its ideal strangeness. Theories—themselves a formidably challenging concept alien to so many cultures—as to the components and ordinances of the natural world, as to the nature of man and his moral status, as to the political in the encompassing sense, could be formulated most incisively in poetic modes. These in turn could facilitate recall and memorization. The rhapsodic precedent, its subversions of textuality disturb Plato. Witness the disquieted ironies of his *Ion*. We find it again

Wittgenstein's paradoxes on the unwritten. The belief that Homer and Hesiod are the true teachers of wisdom persists. The paradigm of the philosophic poem, of a seamless fit between aesthetic articulation and systematic cognitive content continues into modernity. Lucretius's aspiration "to pour forth on the darkest of themes the clearest of songs" has never lost its spell.

The aesthetics of the fragment has of late drawn attention. Not only in literature. In the arts the sketch, the maquette, the rough draft have been prized above the finished work. Romanticism invested in an aura of incompleteness, in the unfinished graced by early death. So much that is emblematic of the modern remains incomplete: Proust and Musil in the novel, Schoenberg and Berg in opera, Gaudí in architecture. Rilke exalts the torso, T. S. Eliot shores up fragments "against our ruin."

The issues are important. The centrifugal, anarchic motions in modern politics, the *accelerando* of science and technology, the undermining of classical stabilities in our understanding of consciousness and meaning, as in psychoanalysis or deconstruction, make systematic unison and comprehensiveness implausible. "The center cannot hold." The encyclopedic ambitions of the Enlightenment, the leviathan constructivities of positivism as in Comte and Marx no longer persuade. We find it difficult to tell or attend to "the great stories." We are drawn to the open-ended, *la forma aperta*. Levinas discriminates between the coercive claims and foreclosure of "totality," of the totalitarian and the liberating promise, messianic in essence, of "infinity." Adorno simply equates completeness with falsehood.

These antinomies are as ancient as philosophy itself. Consonant, perhaps, with radical polarities of human sensibility, there have been the master builders and the mercurial practitioners of shorthand, perception in provisional motion. The lineage of Aristotle is that of the attempt at total ingathering and harvest. It inspires the plenitude of Augustine and the *summa* of Aquinas. It underwrites the axiomatic coherence of Spinoza's *Ethics* and Kant's Newtonian universalism. Paramount among systematic builders is Hegel whose very resort to the term "encyclopedia" crowns a millennium-long ambition. When they promise the passing mariner the revelation of all that has been, is and shall be, the Sirens are setting Hegel to music.

The countercurrent dates back to the Pre-Socratics and the abrupt, parataxic aphorisms of *Ecclesiastes*. Even when they are formally copious and discursive, Montaigne's essays—we must not overlook the literal meaning of that word—proceed by leaps and digressive bounds. They proceed by marginalia and annotate existence. Pascal's *Pensées* achieve the seeming contradiction of fragmentary magnitude, of fractured immensities. This model will be realized in the "flash photography" of Novalis and Coleridge, precisely where these thinkers were haunted by the mirage of an *omnium gatherum* (Coleridge's macaronic tag). All Nietzsche, all Wittgenstein is fragment, sometimes willed, sometimes enforced by contingent circumstance. In contrast, Heidegger's writings will run to nine tomes and the incompleteness of *Sein und Zeit* is amended incessantly thereafter. Only those too feeble or vain to do so write, publish books, said Wittgenstein. The truths of the fragment may, given luck, border on those of silence.

The format in which Pre-Socratic thought has come down to us is, to be sure, largely fortuitous. What we have are remnants. So many of the splintered sayings are embedded, inaccurately perhaps, in later contexts, often polemical and adversative (in the Church Fathers or Aristotelian detractors). The material requisites for the conservation of extended written works evolved slowly. They hardly precede the redaction of the Homeric epics. Once only does Socrates consult a written scroll. But the

are also substantive motives for the aphorismic and apodictic tenor of these auroral pronouncements. When the Magus in Miletus declares that all matter is founded on water, when a rival sage at Ephesus affirms that everything is ultimately fire, when a Sicilian seer proclaims the oneness of all things while a wandering Sophist insists on their multiplicity, there is, strictly considered, nothing to add. Step by step demonstration, as expounded in mathematics, comes only gradually to cosmology and metaphysics. Initially, thought and dictum are, as it were, inebriated with the absolute, with the power of a sentence to speak the world. Extreme concision, moreover, draws impact from oral exposition and enlists memory. The sheer volume of Plato's dialogues is not the least of the revolutionary genius. Though here also there is frequent recourse to fictions of orality, to reproductive remembrance. The lapidary teachings of the Pre-Socratics can be spread by word of mouth and memorized throughout a preliterate community. "Pigmy in extent" (Jonathan Barnes' phrase), these archaic vestiges tell of what must have been audacious, in some sense entranced, forays into unknown seas. The simile of philosophic thought as an Odyssey will persist till Schelling.

The obscurity of many of these vestiges may not be accidental, albeit our ignorance of the relevant setting and of linguistic specificities contributes to it. If the "Orphic," the "Heraclitean" or the "Pythagorean" carry connotations of the hermetic, this association implies the possible existence of more or less initiate theosophic, philosophical, even political covens. Wittgenstein's acolytes offer a modern counterpart. They also direct us toward connections between the genesis of philosophy and rationality and the far older, at times ritual performance of poetry. The matter of Orpheus is inextricably mythical, but points to what we can intimate of the wellsprings of both music and language. The utter force of the fable has not diminished across the millennia. Already to the ancients Orpheus's visionary wisdom instructs his spellbound listeners about the origins of the cosmos and the instauration of an Olympian hierarchy. To medieval and renaissance mythographers, artists and poets this sung syllabus, as reported in Apollonius of Rhodes's *Argonautica*, made of Orpheus the begetter of cosmological understanding. A tragic begetter, in whose wake philosophy will never evade the informing shadow of death.

The unison of poetry, music and metaphysics continues to haunt philosophy like a fraternal ghost. Near the end, Socrates turns to Aesop and to song. Hobbes translates Homer into verse. Astringent Hegel writes a profoundly felt poem to Hölderlin. Nietzsche thinks of himself as a composer. I have cited Wittgenstein on *Dichtung*. Passages from Plato and the *Tractatus* have been set to music. As we have seen, at their highest reach these pursuits share an enormity of uselessness. Already Thales was said to have rejected all material gains. It is pragmatically absurd to sacrifice one's life in defense of a speculative intellectual hypothesis; to renounce economic security and social esteem in order to paint pictures no one wishes to see, let alone purchase; to compose music without realistic expectations of performance or audition (electronic devices have somewhat qualified this paradox); to project topological spaces forever beyond demonstration or decidability.

It is a comely cliché to associate poetry with the lunacies of love. But the inward solitudes and abstentions from normality which energized logic in Gödel are no less strange. Eros can have its recompense. What makes abstruse philosophical argument indispensable to certain men and women? What disinterested passion or arrogance induces Parmenides and Descartes to identify cogitation and being? We do not really know.

I have suggested that the "discovery" of metaphor ignited abstract, disinterested thought. Does an animal metaphorize? It is not only language which is saturated with metaphor. It is our compulsion, our capacity to devise and examine alternative worlds, to construe logical and narrative possibilities beyond any empirical constraints. Metaphor defies, surmounts death—as in the tale of Orpheus out



Thrace—even as it transcends time and space. Frustratingly, we are unable to locate, even to conceive the hour in which a human agent in ancient Greece or Ionia saw that the ocean was wine-dark, the man in battle had become a ravening lion. Or to grasp how the author of *Job* saw the stars raining down their spears. In what plausible ways, moreover, can music and mathematics be taken to be metaphoric? What is metaphoric in their relation to and radical self-distancing from everyday experience? Of what is a Mozart sonata or the Goldbach conjecture a metaphor?

It is out of a metaphoric magma that Pre-Socratic philosophy seems to erupt (the volcanic is not far off). Once a traveler in Argos had perceived the shepherds on the stony hills as “herdsmen of the winds,” once a mariner out of the Piraeus had sensed that his keel was “plowing the sea,” the road to Plato and to Immanuel Kant lay open. It began in poetry and has never been far from it.

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“The power of Heraclitus’s thought and style is so overwhelming that it is apt to carry away the imagination of his readers . . . beyond the limits of sober interpretation.” So remarked Hermann Fränkel, soberest of scholars. The history of attempted elucidations of Heraclitean fragments, often truncated or imperfectly rendered within later, adversative contexts, is itself among the highest adventures of the western intellect from before Plato to Heidegger. Heraclitus is to Blanchot the first virtuoso of surrealist play. To numerous artists and poets he is the very icon of meditative solitude, aristocratic aloneness. “*Ce génie fier, stable et anxieux,*” writes René Char, spellbound, as was T. S. Eliot, by a voice which consumes the husk of baffled translation. Yet Sextus Empiricus and Marcus Aurelius read Heraclitus as civically engaged and scrupulous in communal observance. For Nietzsche his “legacy will never age.” Together with Pindar, rules Heidegger, Heraclitus commands an idiom which exhibits the matchless “nobility of the beginning.” Meaning at dawn.

Philologists, philosophers, historians of archaic Hellas, have labored to define, to circumscribe this auroral force. Heraclitus’s dicta are arcs of compressed voltage setting alight the space between words and things. His metaphoric concision suggests immediacies of existential encounter, primacy of experience largely unrecapturable to rationalities and sequential logic after Aristotle. The *Logos* is at once performative enunciation and a principle inherent in that which it signifies. Thus enunciation is the decoding of thought, takes on a substantive reality somehow external to the speaker (Heidegger: *die Sprache spricht*). In some respects, Heraclitus bears witness to the origins of intelligible consciousness (Bruno Snell). Thus Heraclitus both celebrates and wrestles with—all celebration agonistic—the terrible power of language to deceive, to demean, to mock, to plunge deserved renown into the dark of oblivion. Dialectically, the capacity of language to ornament and enshrine memory also entails its faculties of forgetting, of ostracism from recall.

Heraclitus “works in original manner with the raw material of human speech, where ‘original’ signifies both the initial and the singular” (Clémence Ramnoux, one of the most insightful commentators). He quarries language before it weakens into imagery, into eroded abstraction. His abstractions are radically sensory and concrete, but not in the opportunistic mode of allegory. They enact, they perform thought where it is still, as it were, incandescent—the trope of fire is unavoidable. Where it follows on a shock of discovery, of naked confrontation with its own dynamism, at once limitless and bounded. Heraclitus does not narrate. To him things *are* with an evidence and enigma of total presence like that of lightning (his own simile). What would be the past tense of fire? Not a man who has been seduced. Contradiction, Heraclitus’s chosen instrument, “implies falsity; and that is the truth” (Jonathan Barnes). He was “a paradoxographer” whose “conceptual inadequacy” is patent. It is

verdict which Plato, though fascinated by Heraclitus, hints at in the *Sophist*.

Already to the ancients Heraclitus was proverbially obscure. A proponent of dark riddles, equal contemptuous of his plebeian inferiors as he was of those, the great majority of mankind, incapable of grasping a philosophic paradox or argument. But what does it mean for articulate thought, for executive discourse to be “difficult”? I have elsewhere tried to sketch a theory of difficulty. The most prevalent is contingent and circumstantial. We know next to nothing of the linguistic and social background to Heraclitus’s idiom and terrain of allusion. We cannot “look things up.” He crassly dismisses Homer and Archilochus because they have not understood the harmony of opposites which governs human existence, because they waste words on puerile fantasies. But epic hexameters crop up in Heraclitean texts and what may be elements of pre-Aesopian fables in Heraclitus’s references to animals. The metaphoric names which he often enlists in place of common nouns point to the gnomic formulations of the oracular. We simply do not know enough about oracular, mantic and Orphic conventions to assess their influence on Heraclitus. Famously, Fragment XXXIII professes that Apollo “whose oracle is in Delphi neither declares nor conceals, but gives a sign” (a Wittgensteinian move). Contrary to an Adamic nomination, Heraclitus does not label or define substance but infers its contradictory essence. Semantic ambiguities, a second order of difficulty, both relate the internal to the external and signal their dissociation. In what may again derive from archaic precedents, riddles are crucial (they are the crux). Puns, wordplay, deceptive synonymy convey the polysemic depth of the constant mobility in phenomena and their presumed linguistic counterpart. Poetic affinities, for example with the etiology of Chaos in Hesiod, are plausible but cannot be demonstrated. Scholars have proposed analogies between Heraclitus’s cosmogony and Middle Eastern creation myths. What, if anything, did he know of Egypt? Virtually inescapable is the suggestion that Zoroastrian symbolism in regard to fire finds resonance in Heraclitus. Ephesus neighbors on Iran. Overall, however, the sinews of Heraclitean grammar and vocabulary, of his paratactic constructs and elisions are his own. Only certain choral odes in tragedy, only certain tropes in Pindar provide any parallel. It is not verbally but in music that Heraclitus’s suspensions of linear logic, that his simultaneities in contramotion (inverse canons) have their analogue. Nietzsche felt this affinity. Here also, as in *Zarathustra* and Nietzsche’s melodies at midnight, obscurity can be made luminous.

This “darkness” is undoubtedly part of the spell which Heraclitus has exercised on literature. The most mesmeric of “*penseurs poètes*,” is exemplary of a tradition and aesthetic of “dark matter.” Of a lineage which includes Pindar, Góngora, Hölderlin, Mallarmé and Paul Celan. One is tempted to say that where poetry is most itself, where it comes nearest the fusion of content and form in music, its inclination toward the hermetic will be strongest. There is an enduring conception of poetry insurgent against natural language, against all *dialektikē technē*, the sequential criteria of reason, demonstration and ordered persuasion. The resulting difficulties are what I have called “ontological.” Thought and saying seek to transcend their available means, to enforce transgressive potentialities. S. Eliot adverts to this “boundary condition” in the Heraclitean echoes in the *Four Quartets* (the musical citation is evident). Heraclitus presses utterance toward *aporia*, toward antinomies and undecidabilities at the very edge of language, as if language, like mathematics, could generate from within itself innovative, forward-thrusting understanding. Precisely, Char invokes Heraclitus “*contraires—ces mirages ponctuels et tumultueux . . . poésie et vérité, comme nous savons, états synonymes.*”

It is the most “stylish” of philosophers, those most alert to the expressive constraints and resources of stated thought, to its implicit cadence, such as Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, who look to Heraclitus. It is Novalis, practitioner of the Orphic fragment, and Heidegger the neologist, the

craftsman of tautology. Rhapsodic and oracular intellects recognize in Heraclitus the fundamental generative collision between the elusive opacity of the word and the equally elusive but compelling clarity and evidence of things. Immediate or hurried apprehension, the colloquial, misses this decision, that, in Heraclitus's celebrated duality, of the bow and the lyre. To listen closely—Nietzsche defined philology as “reading slowly”—is to experience, always imperfectly, the possibility that the order of words, notably in metrics and the metrical nerve-structure within good prose, reflects perhaps sustains the hidden yet manifest coherence of the cosmos. A conjecture cardinal to metaphysics. The analogy with Pythagorean and Keplerian models of concordance between harmonious relations and intervals in music and planetary motions is relevant. Again, music is the transit between metaphysical-cosmological speculation, i.e. “mirroring,” and semantic articulation.

The occult violence of inspiration fascinated Heraclitus no less than it did Rimbaud or Rilke. He invokes “the Sibyl with raving mouth” whose voice, adds Plutarch, “carries through a thousand years.” He refers, though guardedly, to acolytes who “raved for Dionysus” in ecstatic possession. But Heraclitus's eminence as a writer lies in his exponential economy. A very few, terse words unfold into the unbounded (an effect realized in Ungaretti's diptych—*M'illumino / d'immenso*—where immensity illuminates and enlightens). I have already referred to Heraclitus's use of “bow,” differentiated from “life” by a mere accent: “The name of the bow is life; its work is death.” A concision in which Artemis and Apollo are present like incipient shadows. Grammatical construction can make of an apparent riddle or paradox a font of expanding intuition: “Death is all things we see awake; all we see asleep is sleep.” Ring-structures spiral into esoteric depths which we might, mistakenly, sense as psychoanalytic: “Living, he touches the dead in his sleep; waking, he touches the sleeper” (Heraclitus is our great thinker on sleep). With audacity, perhaps alone among ancients, Heraclitus challenges the gods in a tautly balanced aphorism: immortals and mortals are close-knit “living the other's death, dead in the other's life.” Nietzsche attends to the implications of this (Fragment XCII) and Euripides will give it echo: “Who knows if life be death, but death in turn / be recognized below as life.” “Kingship belongs to the child.” “The thunderbolt pilots all things” which Heidegger makes pivotal to his teachings. A cognitive surrealism virtually defiant of paraphrase.

Nineteen words suffice to stage a cosmic drama: “The sun will not transgress his measure. If he does, the Furies, ministers of Justice, will find him out.” The collision between universal metrics and a measure (*métra*) and infernal Justice will inspire the Prologue to Goethe's *Faust*. The actual quotation may have been a Plutarchian paraphrase, but Heraclitus is unmistakably embedded: “Souls smell things in Hades, they use their sense of smell.” As do poets, Heraclitus follows language where it leads him, where he is receptive to its inward and autonomous authority, with somnambular yet acutely lucid trust. Hence his recurrent attempts to characterize, to make us party to the twilight zone between sleeping and waking. Day melting into night, night begetting day in subversion of the trenchant Mediterranean light. There is here no distinction between philosophic or scientific finding and poetic form. The springs of thought are identical in both (*poiesis*). Poetry betrays its *daimon* when it is too lazy or self-complacent to think deeply (Valéry's *astreindre*). In turn, intellection falsifies the shaping music within itself when it forgets that it is poetry.

Ancient report has it that Heraclitus deposited the scroll containing his writings in the temple of Artemis at Ephesus. Wittgenstein notes that he would have wished to dedicate the *Philosophical Investigations* to God. Comparable points of method and sensibility are arresting. Both thinkers are constantly aware of what lies beyond rational saying, of the claims of mysticism and of silence which both abrogate and substantiate the legitimacy of the word. The author of the *Tractatus*, no less than Heraclitus, seems to have distrusted systematic completion. The fragmentary told of thought

provisional motion. It empowered compacted breadth. The timbre, the pitch of their style are often kindred. As is the virtue or drawback of that style to generate the aura of myth, of inspiring strangeness which emanates from both *personae*. Withdrawal, a pulse of secrecy underwrites the propositions: “God does not reveal himself *in the world*” (*Tractatus* 6.432); “All inference takes place a priori” (5.133); “I am my world. (The microcosm)” (5.63); “Philosophy is not a theory but an activity” (4.112).

This oracular economy carries over into Wittgenstein’s more technical, heuristic *dicta*. Both sagaciously possess the rare gift of making of logical conundra or didactic provocations something like a flash of pure poetry. “Are roses red in the dark?” “Has the verb ‘to dream’ a present tense?” Heraclitus and Wittgenstein play “language-games” in which the syntax and conventions of the colloquial are corrected by those of mathematics and of music. In Number 459 of the *Zettel*, Wittgenstein cites Heraclitus on not stepping twice into the same river: “In a certain sense one cannot take too much care in handling philosophical mistakes, they contain so much truth.” Just like those riddles at Delphi. We recall Heraclitus’s *legein* and its conceivable contacts with *Ecclesiastes* when Wittgenstein notes in 1937: “Thinking too has a time for plowing and a time for gathering the harvest.” And during the darkness of 1944: “If in life we are surrounded by death, so too in the health of our intellect we are surrounded by madness” (those “raving mouths” in Heraclitus). What could be more in accord with the spirit of Heraclitus than Wittgenstein’s admonition of 1947: “One keeps forgetting to go right down to the foundations. One doesn’t put the question marks *deep* enough down”?

The point is straightforward: in both philosophy and literature style is substance. Rhetoric in amplitude and laconic contraction offer contrasting images and readings of the world. Punctuation is also epistemology. Within philosophy resides the perennial temptation of the poetic, either to be made welcome or to be rejected. The nuances of tension and interaction are manifold. Seemingly disparate teachings are made contiguous by affinities of voice. “When you are philosophizing you have descended into primeval chaos and feel at home there.” Was Wittgenstein, in his notebook for 1944, transcribing a fragment of Heraclitus not yet available to the rest of us? Another minimalist of immensity is Samuel Beckett. Echoes out of Spinoza and Schopenhauer are frequent. Again the crossings need not be those of specific doctrine. The matter is that of rhythm, of intonation, of grammatical bent. The barest bones of language are made resonant. Words, often monosyllabic, press against the unspoken. Connectives and disjunctives, formally void, take on normative, monumental finality. “You CRIED for night: it comes. It FALLS: now cry in darkness. . . . Moments for nothing now as always, time was never and time is over, reckoning closed and story ended” (not a bare summation of Hegel’s ending of history). Consider that Heraclitean tide of perpetual motion, of cosmic flux in *Krapp’s Last Tape*: “We lay there without moving. But under us all moved, gently, up and down, and from side to side.” In both philosopher and dramatist, the ministry of time is unfathomable: “Now and then the rye, swayed by a light wind, casts and withdraws its shadow.” How vivid is Pre-Socratic cosmogony in Lucky’s mad monody in *Waiting for Godot*: “in the plains in the mountains by the seas by the rivers running water running fire the air is the same and then the earth namely the air and then the earth in the great cold the great dark the air and the earth abode of stone in the great deeps and the great cold . . . on sea on land and in the air”—where the elision of punctuation declares archaic perceptions of elemental unison prior to the impoverishing, distorting fragmentations of logic and the sciences. Earth, air, fire and water, as immediate to Beckett as to the visionaries before Plato. Just as in Heraclitus, Beckett’s brevities safeguard their implosive secret. They rebuke “This craze for explication! Every i dotted to death!” (*Catastrophe*). And how could Shakespeare not have intuited Heraclitus on the damned smelling their way in hell when tortured

Gloucester is tauntingly bidden smell his blind way to Dover? As between metaphysics and poetry, the air is thick with echoes.

Also with failures. With the frustration of not being able to embody, to communicate in and with language the inchoate, tentative birth of meaning. At best, we intimate that birth in Anaximander, in Heraclitus, in the despairing honesties of the *Philosophical Investigations*. What tumults, what celebrations but also setbacks of consciousness must have attended on the utterly uncanny realization that language can say *anything*, but never exhaust the existential integrity of its reference? What Beckett bids us fail, fail again but “fail better,” he locates the synapse at which thought and poetry *doxa* and literature mesh. “It’s the start that’s difficult.”

That inception, that tenor of thought at dawn, is emphasized by Heidegger in his lectures on Parmenides of 1942–43. Editorial, exegetic attempts to discriminate between poem and cosmology on Parmenides are anachronistic. No such dissociation is valid. Instead of *Lehrgedicht* or didactic verse Heidegger proposes *sagen*, a “Totality of the enunciated,” as the only category appropriate to what we can make out of Parmenides’ vision and intent. We find it difficult to do justice to this form because we are inapt “to go toward the beginning,” to move upstream where meaning may have originated.

Heidegger’s autocratic gloss—founded on the scandalous but not altogether easy to disprove dogma that only ancient Greek and German after Kant are endowed with the executive means of magisterial metaphysics—has a gnomic fascination of its own. The contrasts which he draws between Parmenides’ allegory, between the alternating pulse of self-disclosure and withdrawal of Greek *aletheia* (“truth”) on the one hand, and the celebration of “openness” in the VIIIth of Rilke’s *Duino Elegies* on the other, crystallizes almost every facet of the theme and history of the poetry of thought. Heidegger’s commentary is virtually untranslatable as is the poetry with which it is interwoven: “*Das Haus der Göttin ist der Ort der ersten Ankunft der denkenden Wanderung.*” The journey toward the dwelling of the deity who sets Parmenides’ text in motion “*ist das Hindenken zum Anfang.*” It is the “thinking of inception.” Academic philology and textual criticism find this idiom irresponsible.

Parmenides’ uses of rhythm, of symmetrical juxtapositions suggest an archaic frieze. What we need to tease out, argues Karl Reinhardt in his seminal monograph of 1916, are the rules of archaic composition. In what ways, characteristic of the Pre-Socratics, does Parmenides encapsulate the substance of his arguments in each seemingly discrete section? The mythological lineaments of the poem are not investment or masque in the baroque sense. The mythological embodies, allows, the only direct access to the invocation and articulation of the abstract where language, prior to Aristotle, has not yet evolved key modes of logical predication. But already Gorgias the Sophist understood that Parmenides’ verses have the same imperative alignment as do the motions of thought which they strive to verbalize and unify. For Parmenides, the world is nothing but the mirror of my thought—a proposal whose enormity across the millennia should never escape us. Thus poetic form becomes the natural configuration for the most radical, overwhelming yet also strange and perhaps counterintuitive of assertions: that of the identity of thought and being. This existential identity will be a determinant in the genesis and pilgrimage of western consciousness. In a sense, Descartes and Hegel are footnotes to Parmenides’ vocabulary and syntax, so far as we can make them out, enact thought as the voice of being. The cautionary ambience of prose will come later.

There are flashes of poetry in our fragmentary texts. Imitating Homer, Parmenides tells of the moon “wandering around the earth, a foreign light.” Another passage, eerily prescient of modern astrophysics, recounts “how the hot power of the stars started to come into being.” Scholars have

suggested that Parmenides possessed a poet's sensitivity to the psychological undertones and acoustic associations of words. His resort to ambiguity and poetic irony in the address of the Goddess is that of a true writer.

Like Heraclitus, Parmenides uses oxymorons—how were these discovered?—to dramatize, “perform” his central thesis of conflict leading toward harmonic resolution; the sun blinds us, putting out the stars and thus making objects invisible. Parmenides seems to register a poet's awareness, his audition of the nascent surge and prodigality of language before it stiffens into colloquial, utilitarian usage. Handsomely, the salutations which initiate Plato's *Parmenides* echo the welcome of the Goddess in Parmenides' *On Nature*. These moves bear the imprint of dawn. In contrast, says Heidegger, ours is the *Abendland*, the vespereal land of sundown.

Formally, Empedocles is the finer, more memorable of the two poets. His idiom is both archaic and inventive. The expression of the cosmic cycle exercises “a subtle aesthetic fascination; and Empedocles' poetical style—grand, formulaic, repetitive, hierophantic—adds to that seductive power” (Jonathan Barnes). Aristotle records that Empedocles had also written epic poetry. Empedocles' vivacious Ionian is studded with neologisms and local turns. Often its prodigal epithets derive from Homer. The debt to Hesiod is evident. Certain touches may derive from Pythagoras and the formulaic parlance of the mystery cults. Empedocles will surface at moments in Aeschylus, notably in the *Oresteia*. The matrix of doctrine is literary. Empedocles' philosophic verse, particularly his *Purifications*, was declaimed at Olympia by the rhapsode Cleomenes. Thought is sung. Sheer poetry emerges: “Zeus, the white splendor”; “the voiceless throng of profusely-spawning fish” (did Yeats know that line?). Surreal terror marks Empedocles' depiction of the torn but errant bodies of the dead and of the turbulence of Chaos (Dante's *bufera*). There are locutions which, observes Barnes, suggest “a Cartesian artist.” Empedocles tells of the bruising onrush of images and knowledge into the human mind. Their pressure is polymorphic: “I have already at times been a boy and a girl and a bush / and a bird and mute fish in the salty waves.” Radiant Aphrodite will annul the agonistic scissions, the cruelties and hatreds and bloodletting which darken our world. Via Empedocles' poetics, the logical constraints of the Eleatic school yield to metaphysical conceits and lyric intuitions. The technique of varied reiterations has its didactic musicality.

Hence Empedocles' recurrent presence throughout western literature. The legend of his suicide, his sandal (golden?) found on the crater's edge have afforded this presence an iconic status. Empedocles remains the philosopher-poet celebrated in poetry. No document in the mythography of thought, no reconstruction of the sacrificial strangeness and apartness of intellectual creativity surpasses the three successive versions of Hölderlin's *Der Tod des Empedokles*. Commentaries on this towering text constitute a meta-poetic and meta-philosophic genre in their own right. Every issue I try to clarify in this essay is set out in Hölderlin. A cyclical cosmology, the doom of a philosopher-king bringing harmony to the works and days of men, teaching made eros are given both intimate and monumental articulation. No other exegesis comes close to Hölderlin's understanding of the transition in Empedocles from ritual and magic to ethics and politics. To his metamorphic rendition of the self-destructive, almost inhuman demands of pure speculative thought as it entrances and consumes the fragile contours of reason. Hölderlin was Hegel's theoretical peer; but pressed further into the vortex of questioning and experiencing the disaster which he anticipates in his *Empedokles*. Whatever his communicative force, the preeminent thinker is condemned to solitude: “*Allein zu sein / Und ohne Götter, ist der Tod.*” Godless solitude is death. Not even the human being we love most can think with us.

The pedagogic earnestness of Matthew Arnold's *Empedocles on Etna* cannot altogether dull the

Before the sophist-brood hath overlaid  
The last spark of man's consciousness with words—  
Ere quite the being of man, ere quite the world  
Be disarrayed of their divinity—  
Before the soul lose all her solemn joys,  
And awe be dead, and hope impossible,  
And the soul's deep eternal night come on—  
Receive me, hide me, quench me, take me home!

What we have of Nietzsche's several attempts to compose an "Empedocles" is not only intriguing itself but points forward directly to the figure of Zarathustra. McLuhan directs attention to the inherence of Empedocles' speech on double truth in T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*. Empedocles' fiery death is evoked by Yeats, Ezra Pound and Joyce. It is present in Primo Levi's *Ad Ora Incerta* of 1984.

Such literary encounters and permutations extend to the Pre-Socratics as a whole. The afterlife of Pythagoras in mathematical lore, in musical theory, in architecture and the occult reaches from the Hellenistic era and Byzantium to Scholasticism and the present. Zeno and the paradox of his arrow and his immobility make their meteoric entrance in Valéry's *Cimetière marin*. The materialist atomism of Democritus is a part of the Marxist pantheon and of Marx's hunger for validating precedent.

Subsequent currents in western thought are manifest, be it embryonically, in Eleatic, Ionian, Pythagorean and Heraclitean pronouncements. These are poetic throughout or, more precisely, the antedate differentiations between verse and prose, between narrative moored in mythology and the analytic. From this hybrid source stems the enduring tension between image and axiom in all of philosophy. The Siren song of the poetic, the potential of subversive metaphor which it comports, inhabit systematic thought. Attempts either to enlist this subversion, as in Nietzsche, or to hold it stringently at bay, as in Spinoza or Kant, are the unresolved legacy of the wonder of voiced meditation which originated (but how?) with Thales, Anaxagoras and their inspired successors.

Doubtless, Lucretius looked to Empedocles for guidance. The suicide of the magus quickens the evocations of Etna in *De Rerum Natura* VI: *flamma foras vastis Aetnae fornacibus efflet*—"how a eddy of fire roars suddenly out of Etna." Santayana ranks Lucretius's poem with the *Commedia* and Goethe's *Faust*. It is the *locus classicus* of our theme. But the differences from these other summits are fundamental. Lucretius aims at a "high vulgarization" of the cosmological and moral teachings of Epicurus, at an exposition of his master's instructions on life and death, though he gives to these a personal torsion. Much may escape us in what could well be an incomplete work. It is clear, however, that Lucretius's reflections and perhaps eclectic, Stoically influenced, worldview have an impetus of their own. The sources of vision are twofold. In the Epicurean mode, Lucretius aims to enfranchise men and women from servility to superstitions and from the fear of death. The gods are distant and possibly mortal (Nietzsche knew this text). As is our world, as are the heavens "which must begin and end." At the same time, Lucretius celebrates and seeks to account for manifold natural phenomena, from organic life whose teeming, transformative wonders and terrors he observes unflinchingly.

The opening hymn to Venus, patroness of generation, has rung through the ages. In Dryden's festive version:

For every kind, by thy prolifique might,

Springs, and beholds the Regions of the light.

The very stretches of ocean laugh at this generative wonder: *tibi rident aequora ponti*. Animated by love, by a cosmic *élan vital*, “herds go wild and bound in their pastures”; as does the Latin: *ferae pecudes persultant*. In counterpoint to this exultant naturalism, Lucretius has an implacable sense of “the reality principle,” of irremediable human exposure to disaster. Who, save Thucydides, has matched his rendition of the plague? Of that “tide of death” out of Egypt which engulfs Athenians, scorching men to madness. Lucretius emphasizes the strengths of reason, of rational diagnosis. But he enforces their limitations. The observation is numbing: *mussabat tacito medicina timore*. In C. J. Sisson’s translation:

The doctors muttered and did not know what to say:  
They were frightened of so many open, burning eyes  
Turning towards them because they could not sleep.

Sleep is instrumental in *De Rerum Natura*. It liberates the spirit from turmoil and anguish. Why fret if it should prove everlasting after the stress of transient life? In as lapidary an axiom as Wittgenstein’s, Lucretius concludes that “death cannot be lived,” it lies unharmed outside existence.

Lucretius is the most *Latin* of Roman poets, the one whose ear and linguistic sensibility connect most intimately with the genius of the tongue where it is least informed, as in Virgil, by exemplar Greek. No other Roman poet matches the weight, the tread as of a legion on the march:

ergo animus sive aegrescit, mortalia signa  
mittit, uti docui, seu flectitur a medicina.  
usque adeo falsae rationi vera videtur  
res occurrere et effugium praecludere eunti  
ancipitique refutatu convincere falsum.

This simile of truth in combat with false reasoning, cutting off its retreat as it flees and vanquishing error with a two-pronged refutation, is military throughout. The noise of battle is consonant with the fricatives, the *r* and *f* sounds which drive the passage forward. Walter Savage Landor characterized the register of *De Rerum Natura* as being “masculine, plain, concentrated, and energetic.” It defines Latinity.

Lucretius makes us feel that there are in certain movements of thought, of abstract argument, *gravitas*, a material weight (Simone Weil’s *la pesanteur*). The syllables, in which consonants energize the packed, sometimes rebarbative syntax, seem to bend and then spring forward under the weight of philosophic speculation. When there is speed in the cadence it is that of an armored swiftness, of pugnacious *accelerando*. Like that of boys dancing “clad in armor, clashing bronze upon bronze to measure.” No translation matches the mercurial weight, if there is such a thing, of the original:

cum pueri circum puerum pernixe chorea  
armatei in numerum pulsarent aeribus aera.

Lucretius’s genius for the “interanimation”—I. A. Richards’s term—of moral, cognitive, scientific, medical and political teachings with inspired poetic enactment proved exemplar. Numerous poets of a philosophic or scientific bent strove to rival *De Rerum Natura*. Whenever wherever western speculative sensibility inclines toward atheism, overt or masked, toward



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