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POETRY BETWEEN CONCEALMENT AND UNCONCEALMENT

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Meditating on the world as abandoned by the gods, Martin Heidegger proclaims the age in which we live (*Weltalter*) to be one of declining enlightenment, one in which the darkness of night (*Weltnacht*) overcomes the world because of the gods' failure to come to its aid. All that is available to us, in these needy times, is the saving power that lies dormant in poetry. Our age is profoundly affected, nay dominated by calculative thinking, and we have thus lost our aptitude for an authentic way of awaiting the *parousia*.¹

Friedrich Hölderlin's "Bread and Wine" addresses the question about the essential nature of poetry: "I don't know what to do or say in the meantime, and what is the use of poets in an impoverished age?" Barely into the new millennium, I am addressing this same question: "*wozu Dichter in dürftiger Zeit?*" "What are poets for, in needy times?"

Poetry finds itself on the horizon of the mystery of Being. In its origins, poetry emerges to meet the poet. Being a poet goes beyond the poet's own attempts at synthesis between the external world and his or her inner life. Poetry opens the poet to phenomena that are concealed yet not entirely unknown. The poet is driven into processes that actualize poetry. Poetry calls the poet to language, to an existing dwelling wherein poetry resides: "*Voll Verdienst, doch dichterisch, wohnt der Mensch auf dieser Erde.*"²

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¹ See Martin Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe* 5, *Holzwege*, ed. Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann (Frankfurt a.M.: Vittorio Klostermann, 1977), 267, hereafter GA; English, idem, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 91.

² Friedrich Hölderlin, "In lieblicher Bläue": "Ist unbekannt Gott? Ist er offenbar wie der Himmel? dieses glaub' ich eher. Des Menschen Maaß ist's. Voll Verdienst, doch dichterisch, wohnt der Mensch auf dieser Erde. Doch reiner ist nicht der Schatten der Nacht mit den Sternen, wenn ich so sagen könnte, als der Mensch, der heißet ein Bild der Gottheit."

The Uniqueness and Irreplaceability of Poetry

Poetry needs to reveal itself. It remains in the domain of pure possibility if it is not actualized in poems. The mystery of poetry is unveiled through poems. Only by emerging into existence, in the form of a poem, can poetry fulfill its intrinsic desire to pour itself out. A poet's self-expression, in a particular poem, helps poetry reveal its meaning and to show itself: poems open up the understanding of poetry. Writing a poem is a positive response to the interrogatory power of poetry, the very power that questions the *condition of the poet* in the first place.

Through poems, the poet reaches toward poetry. Thus, writing a poem gives expression to having been touched by poetry itself (the passive side of being a poet). The resulting poem is the residue of an encounter between poetry and poet, a testimony to a unique relationship; poets rescue existence in and through language by their concentration and attentiveness. To open oneself to poetry is to prepare for the otherness in oneself, the unveiling of Being, the most original and distinctive expression of the self. Being thus responsive is a multidimensional experience: it involves a gift and also a person's response to being gifted.³

The relationship between poetry, poet and poem expresses a unity in difference; a communion of presence. Poetic perception, when articulated in poems, signifies poetry's self-revelation. The poet is the medium through which poetry's self-disclosure is made possible; the act of poetic expression is a response to that disclosure. Poetry and art are always symbolic, and the role of the symbol is to make whole our own fragmentary life. Art is more than mere manifestation of meaning. According to Gadamer,

art is the containment of sense, so that it does not run away or escape from us, but is secured and sheltered in the ordered composure of the creation...Heidegger...enabled us to perceive the ontological plenitude or the truth that addresses us in art through the twofold movement of revealing, unconcealing, and manifesting, on the one hand, and concealing and sheltering, on the other. He showed that the Greek concept of concealment (*aletheia*), only represented one side of man's fundamental experience of the world. Alongside and inseparable from this unconcealing, there also stands the shrouding and concealing that belongs to our human finitude. This philo-

³ On the reciprocity of *Gabe* and *Aufgabe*, see Andrzej Wiercinski, *Das Miteinander: Grundzüge einer Sorge um den Menschen in seinem Unterwegssein* (Guernsey: Elan & Son, 1997).

sophical insight, which sets limits to any idealism claiming a total recovery of meaning, implies that there is more to the work of art than a meaning that is experienced only in an indeterminate way.⁴

To be a poet is to live a life of openness toward poetry, without being able to predict or to control when and where poetry will express itself. The poet's life of openness happens as a participation in this two-fold movement of revealing and concealing. The impact of poetry will always overwhelm the poet. The emphasis placed upon the relationship existing between poetry, the poet and the poem, does not diminish the importance of the role of the poet as seer, as the memory and consciousness of the people. Yet, as the relationship goes beyond the confines of time and place, it manifests the ontological fore-structure of poetry itself.

Writing poetry is a way of bringing forth, *poiesis* in its original sense, allowing truth to emerge into the splendor of its radiant appearance. Poetry (*poiesis*, "making") is, by itself, a paradigm of art, in the sense of bringing something into existence that did not exist before.⁵ Every activity which brings something into presence is conceptually close to truth, *aletheia*, the way from concealment into unconcealment. Being actualized, poetry is itself the revelation of truth. There is no dichotomy between the Being of the world and the Being of a work of art. In either case, Being comes to presence. The ontological significance of poetry can be seen in the way it acts upon a human being. Poetry engages the person and opens up horizons, lifting the poet into the purity and simplicity of truth.⁶

⁴ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, ed. Robert Bernasconi, trans. Nicholas Walker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 34.

⁵ "There is poetry, which, as you know, is complex; and manifold. All creation or passage of nonbeing into being is poetry or making, and the processes of all art are creative; and the masters of arts are all poets or makers." Plato, *Symposium*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (New York: Modern Library, 1996), 205b-c.

⁶ Truth can be described as the unveiledness, uncoveredness, disclosedness, and unconcealment of Being. The Greek concept of truth as *aletheia* refers to what is unveiled and to whom it is unveiled. Truth is the proper mode of Being. For Heidegger's fundamental-ontological understanding of truth as unconcealment of Being, see Martin Heidegger, "Platons Lehre von der Wahrheit," in idem, *Wegmarken*, GA9, ed. Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann (Frankfurt a.M.: Klostermann 1976), 203-238.

Aletheia and the Work of Art

Heidegger's understanding of truth as ἀλήθεια goes beyond un-concealment (*Unverborgenheit*) or dis-closure (*Entbergung*).⁷ He elaborates the understanding of *aletheia*, using our experience of the work of art, in *The Origin of the Work of Art*.⁸ Playing on our apparent familiarity with things that surround us, he shows us our lack of real understanding for, and of, the work of art. To demonstrate his point, he analyzes a van Gogh painting depicting a pair of shoes, ordinary things in their ordinariness, a subject that has been painted by this painter a number of times.⁹

⁷ Hans-Georg Gadamer devotes Part One of his *Truth and Method* to the significance of the aesthetic experience for revealing truth. It is called "The Question of Truth As It Emerges in the Experience of Art." Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2d rev. ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 2000), 1-169. Gadamer asks many vital questions with reference to the disclosing power of art: "Is there to be no knowledge in art? Does not the experience of art contain a claim to truth which is certainly different from that of science, but just as certainly is not inferior to it? And is not the task of aesthetics precisely to ground the fact that the experience (*Erfahrung*) of art is a mode of knowledge of a unique kind, certainly different from sensory knowledge which provides science with the ultimate data from which it constructs the knowledge of nature, and certainly different from all moral rational knowledge, and indeed from all conceptual knowledge – but still knowledge, i.e., conveying truth?" *Ibid.*, 97-98 For Gadamer, *aletheia* is the event of revelation. He writes: "In einem ursprünglicheren Sinne 'geschieht' Unverborgenheit, und dieses Geschehen ist etwas, was überhaupt erst möglich macht, daß Seiendes unverborgen ist und richtig erkannt wird. Die Verborgenheit, die solcher ursprünglichen Unverborgenheit entspricht, ist nicht Irrtum, sondern gehört ursprünglich zum Sein selbst. Die Natur, die sich zu verbergen liebt (Heraklit) ist dadurch nicht nur hinsichtlich ihrer Erkennbarkeit charakterisiert, sondern ihrem Sein nach. Sie ist nicht nur das Aufgehen ins Lichte, sondern ebenso sehr das Sichbergen ins Dunkle, die Entfaltung der Blüte der Sonne zu ebenso wie das Sichverwurzeln in der Erdtiefe." Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke* 3. *Neuere Philosophie* 1 (Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 1987), 259.

⁸ Martin Heidegger, "The Work of Art," in idem, *Poetry, Language, Thought*. See Graeme A. Nicholson, "Experience of Truth in Heidegger and Gadamer," in Andrzej Wiercinski, ed., *Between the Human and the Divine: Philosophical and Theological Hermeneutics* (Toronto: The Hermeneutic Press, 2002), 81-87. For a controversial reading of Heidegger, see Meyer Schapiro, "The Still-Life as a Personal Object: A Note on Heidegger and van Gogh," and "Further Notes on Heidegger and van Gogh," in idem, *Theory and Philosophy of Art: Style, Artist, and Society* (New York: Braziller, 1994), 135-141 and 142-151 respectively. A sympathetic reading is offered by Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987).

⁹ "Everyone is acquainted with them." "Everyone knows what shoes consist of." Heidegger, "The Work of Art," 32-33.

What happens here? What is at work in the work? Van Gogh's painting is the disclosure of what the equipment, the pair of peasant shoes, *is* in truth. The entity emerges into the unconcealedness of its being. The Greeks called the unconcealedness of beings *aletheia*. We say "truth" and think little enough in using this word. If there occurs in the work a disclosure of a particular being, disclosing what and how it is, then here there is an occurring, a happening of truth at work.¹⁰

Instead of focusing on the formal aspects of this painting, Heidegger discusses what is disclosed by that painting: the thinghood of this particular pair of leather shoes, with all the traces of being worn out, and as a result, the thinghood of a thing. In the presence of the work of art, we can experience what things really are. For Heidegger, the world is a clearing or a lighting, a space of illumination for beings that otherwise "refuse themselves to us" (*Seiendes versagt sich uns*).¹¹ What is revealed to us in the way van Gogh's painting speaks, is "what shoes are in truth."¹² Heidegger shows that when experiencing the work of art we encounter the thing as a thing. We also access the world of a human being, as related to those shoes:

Under the soles slides the loneliness of the field-path as evening falls. In the shoes vibrates the silent call of the earth, its quiet gift of ripening grain and its unexplained self-refusal in the fallow desolation of the wintry field.¹³

The work of art makes "unconcealedness as such *happen* in regard to what is as such."¹⁴ And beyond revealing the truth about the thing as a thing, the work of art discloses the event of disclosure¹⁵: the happening

¹⁰ Ibid., 36.

¹¹ Ibid., 53.

¹² Ibid., 35.

¹³ Ibid., 34.

¹⁴ Ibid., 56.

¹⁵ The act of self-disclosing is analyzed in depth by Heidegger, in section 7 entitled "The Phenomenological Method of Investigation." See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1962), 49-63. When analyzing the work of art as revealing the truth, we can find vital similarities with Heidegger's treatment of early Christianity in his 1920-1921 lecture course on the Phenomenology of Religion. See Martin Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe* 60, *Phänomenologie des religiösen Lebens*, GA60 ed. Matthias Jung, Thomas Regehly, and Claudius Strube (Frankfurt a.M.: Vittorio Klostermann, 1995), English, idem, *Phenomenology of Religious Life*, trans. Matthias Fritsch and Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana

of truth, *das Geschehen der Wahrheit*. "Light of this kind joins its shining to and into the work. This shining, joined in the work, is the beautiful. Beauty is one way in which truth *occurs* as unconcealedness."¹⁶ The truth that speaks in the work of art originates in that work.

Truth happens only by establishing itself in the conflict and sphere opened up by itself. ... The establishing of truth in the work is the bringing forth of a being such as never was before and will never come to be again. ... What is to be brought forth first clears the openness of the Open into which it comes forth. ... Truth establishes itself in the work. Truth is present only as the conflict between lighting and concealing in the opposition of world and earth. Truth wills to be established in the work as the conflict of world and earth.¹⁷

This "such as never was before and will never come to be again" evokes a very strong reference to the virginity of art. Because art is the revelation of truth, there will never be a full *re-velatio*, but rather a playful correlation between concealing and revealing.¹⁸ The aspect of novelty will always be part of the experience of art. The truth that is revealed guarantees the always new approach to reality: every revelation happens as for the first time and each subsequent revelation belongs to reality in the effective history (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) of all revealing events.

Among the arts, poetry holds a privileged place, for Heidegger. It is in language that beings come to be and are.¹⁹

Language, by naming beings for the first time, first brings beings to word and to appearance. Only this naming nominates beings to their being from

University Press, 2004). For Heidegger, the *parousia* is an event (*Ereignis*). The essence of the *parousia* lies not in a simple presence of the truth, but in a manifestation of the truth of awaiting the *parousia*. The timing of the second coming of Christ is transformed, in the life of the early Christians and hence Christianity, by the manner of awaiting it. The "When is determined through the How of the self-comportment, which is determined through the enactment of factual life experience in each of its moments." GA60, 105.

¹⁶ Heidegger, "The Work of Art," 56.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 62.

¹⁸ "The symbolic in general, and especially the symbolic in art, rests upon an intricate interplay of showing and concealing. In its irreplaceability, the work of art is no mere bearer of meaning – as if the meaning could be transferred to another bearer. Rather the meaning of the work of art lies in the fact that it is there. In order therefore to avoid all false connotations, we should replace the word 'work' by the word 'creation.'" Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, 33.

¹⁹ Martin Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. James Manheim, 4th ed. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1984).

out of their being. Such saying is a projecting of the clearing, in which announcement is made of what it is that beings come into the Open as. Projecting is the release of the throw by which unconcealedness submits and infuses itself into what is as such.²⁰

Naming beings is a truly creative experience in the primordial sense of bringing something into existence. Writing poetry is more than giving names to things and conditions, it is the creation of an atmosphere in which emotions and thoughts are confirmed in and through language. Often the meanings (in poetry) are barely expressed, rather, merely suggested or indicated. The reader is led to further questions until the self itself becomes a question. A unique relationship between poem and reader has been created:

The work issues a challenge which expects to be met. It requires an answer – an answer that can only be given by someone who accepted the challenge. And that answer must be his own, and given actively.²¹

This does not come from the same stable as manipulation; it is not the same, and represents the very nature of poetry, which is to awaken the self to the full complexity of human existence. Poems are often marked by deliberate ambiguity, initiating questions rather than closing these. They are endowed with hidden references and contextual implications and express the poet's dialogue, which takes place on a variety of levels of poetic existence. Because of this dialogue, the poet is led to a more differentiated attunement to life.

In *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, Hans-Georg Gadamer seeks to provide "a new legitimation for art."²² He examines the "indeterminacy of reference" in art, the fact that "the symbolic in general, and especially in art, rests upon an intricate interplay of showing and concealing."²³

²⁰ Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," 73. For an hermeneutic approach to language, see Gary B. Madison, "Being and Speaking," in idem, *Beyond the Symbol Model: Reflections on the Representational Nature of Language*, ed. John Stewart (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1996). See also Jacques Taminiaux, "The Origin of 'The Origin of the Work of Art,'" in John Sallis, ed., *Reading Heidegger: Commemorations* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1993), 392–404.

²¹ Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, 26.

²² Ibid., 5. See also Robert Bernasconi, "The Greatness of the Work of Art," in idem, *Heidegger in Question: The Art of Existing* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1993), 99–116.

²³ Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, 33.

Gadamer states that “alongside and inseparable from this unconcealing, there also stands the shrouding and concealing that belongs to our human finitude.”²⁴

Following Heidegger and Gadamer, we have refocused our attention upon experience. We are able to experience the world, time, truth, and Being. What matters the most is our readiness for experience, one “that distinguishes the experienced man from the man captivated by dogma.”²⁵ Our attentiveness, or, as Gadamer calls it, our “readiness for experience,” is what distinguishes our historically effected consciousness (*wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein*). Ricoeur would say that narrative is the kind of discourse that allows us to make sense of the temporality of our existence, of the hermeneutic understanding of our finitude. The experience of our finitude constitutes the experience of the work of art.

What is at stake in the case of the structural identity of the narrative function as well as in that of the truth claim of every narrative work, is the temporal character of temporal experience. The world unfolded by every narrative work is always a temporal world. ... Time becomes human time to the extent that it is organized after the manner of a narrative; narrative, in turn, is meaningful to the extent that it portrays the features of temporal experience.²⁶

The Ontological Status of the Word: “Making Things” and Not Only “Communicating Things”²⁷

In the Biblical tradition, *dabar* is the Word of God. This actualizing Word is conveyed by the Prophets. Isaiah says: “I say that my plan shall stand, I accomplish my every purpose.” (Is 46:10) The Word of God does not only communicate Jahweh’s will, but also creates reality, thus exercising the power to make things and bring them to life. The Word of God

²⁴ Ibid., 34.

²⁵ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 362.

²⁶ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 3.

²⁷ John L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words*, ed. James O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa, 2d ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976). The French translation of this book, *Quand dire, c’est faire*, trans. Gilles Lane (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1970), expresses Austin’s thesis perfectly: to say it, means to make it. See also John L. Austin, *Philosophical Papers*, ed. James O. Urmson and Geoffrey J. Warnock, 3d ed. (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).

is ἐνέργεια, which possesses the potency to 'put into action.' The Word of God proclaims His eternal plan and realizes it in its historical manifestation. It is the Word that "happens," that comes to convey, to interrogate, and to question. (Cf. Jer 1:3. 11. 13) The Word of God is a realizing energy: "For He spoke, and it came to be, commanded, and it stood in place." (Ps 33:9) The Biblical narrative begins with this potent expression of the power of the Word: "God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light." (Gn 1:3) In contrast to the Greek Logos, which expresses the concept, the idea, the Hebrew *dabar* is not only a thought, but an actualizing act.

The Witness of Poetry

For Heidegger, Hölderlin is "the poet of poets." Heidegger thematizes the essence of poetry as an expression of the *parousia*, the absolute presence of Being. In the age of the world's night the poet is called upon to renounce having words under his or her control. Poetry reveals what is concealed and becomes a witness to Being. According to Hölderlin, poetry itself is mediation; it can be fully embraced only in Being.²⁸ Here Milosz's understanding of poetry comes close to Hölderlin's: poetry testifies to the realm of language. In *The Witness of Poetry*,²⁹ Milosz admits that language discloses only through representation or concealment of that which it would unconceal.

What is important here, is to differentiate between the poet as witness and the witness of poetry. The poet, in his or her actual or imaginative witnessing, encounters several recurring dilemmas that are central to his or her being a poet and to our reading of poetry. The literature of witness gives voice to those who are unable to speak for themselves.³⁰ On the

²⁸ See Paul de Man, "Hölderlin and the Romantic Tradition," in idem, *Romanticism and Contemporary Criticism: The Gauss Seminar and Other Papers*, ed. E. S. Burt, Kevin Newmark, and Andrzej Warminski (Baltimore; London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 123-136.

²⁹ Czeslaw Milosz, *The Witness of Poetry* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983). *The Witness of Poetry* was originally delivered as the "Charles Eliot Norton Lectures" at Harvard University, 1981-1982.

³⁰ Paul Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutics of Testimony," in idem, *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Lewis S. Mudge (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 119-154. See also Françoise Mies, "L'herméneutique du témoignage en philosophie: Pour une anthropologie littéraire. Littérature, mythe littéraire et Bible," *Esphi* 4 (1996): 1-23; idem, "L'herméneutique du témoignage en philosophie: Littérature, mythe et Bible," *Revue des Sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 81, no. 1 (1997): 3-20.

journey, in all its aspects, to the origins of reality, which is also the origin of poetry, the poet strives to understand his or her condition in a more differentiated way. Poetic existence is about striving, a striving for understanding the essence of what it is to be human.

In any encounter with art it is not the particular, but rather the totality of the experienceable world, man's ontological place in it, and above all his finitude before that which transcends him, that is brought to experience.³¹

The question about the condition of being a poet is also the question about human finitude and human freedom. The condition of the poet is characterized by the relationship to his or her own freedom and by the relationship of the resulting poetry to the freedom of the poet. For Milosz, the poet fulfills his or her poetic vocation by witnessing to poetry. Poetry is a never-ending search for identity. Splitting and suspension are pertinent characteristics of the poet's consciousness and self-awareness. This is not to be equated with a cheap indifference. The poet's life plays itself out between being a pupil and being a teacher, a prophet, and a witness. With each poetic word, we see it reconfirmed that identity is something given. To search for one's own identity means to live it, regardless of whether this happens clearly and easily, or obscurely and incomprehensibly. Living in this dramatic poetic condensation constitutes not only the sense of being a poet, but also the sense of being human. In fact, poetry brings this dramatic condensation to a climax:

The word of the poet does not simply continue this process of *Einhausung*, or "making ourselves at home." Instead it stands over against this process like a mirror held up to it. But what appears in the mirror is not the world, nor this or that thing in the world, but rather this nearness or familiarity itself in which we stand for a while. This standing and this nearness find permanence in the language of literature and, most perfectly, in the poem. This is not a romantic theory, but a straightforward description of the fact that language gives all of us our access to a world in which certain special forms of human experience arise: the religious tidings that proclaim salvation, the legal judgment that tells us what is right and what is wrong in our society, the poetic word that by being there bears witness to our own being.³²

³¹ Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, 32-33.

³² *Ibid.*, 115.

To understand everything, to speak everything, is the *telos* of poetry. The most important role in this didactical desire is played by poetry itself. Poetry liberates humans from their own confining patterns of thinking; it liberates us from ourselves. This is done by witnessing. Poetry is itself this witness.

The hope of the poet, a hope that I defend, that I advance, is not enclosed by any date. If disintegration is a function of development, and development a function of disintegration, the race between them may very well end in the victory of disintegration. For a long time, but not forever – and here is where hope enters. It is neither chimerical nor foolish. On the contrary, every day one can see signs indicating that now, at the present moment, something new, and on a scale never witnessed before, is being born: humanity as an elemental force conscious of transcending Nature, for it lives by memory of itself, that is, in History.³³

Here we touch upon the basic Christian understanding of hope as lived in patience. Patience, *hypomone*, is yet another name for perseverance or endurance; it is indeed a persistent patience that gives courageous witness to God's faithfulness and presence in the life of His people. Hope creates a life of testimony, wherever and whenever people are challenged to stand up and bring forth a reason for their hope, unhesitatingly, yet in all humility and graciousness.³⁴

On the Condition of the Poet

The poet is more than a seeker of knowledge trying to express an understanding of existence. Poetry embraces the profundity of being human.³⁵ Consequently, and at a fundamentally existential level, both poet and reader must philosophize and theologize. Opening up toward poetry means opening up toward the complexity of being human and refusing to leave ultimate questions unaddressed. Such questions draw us into the

³³ Milosz, *The Witness of Poetry*, 116.

³⁴ "Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope, but do it with gentleness and reverence, keeping your conscience clear." 1Pt 3: 15-16.

³⁵ For Heidegger, "Being" is the inner light through which we become aware of beings. See Martin Heidegger, *What is Philosophy?* (New Haven, Conn.: College & University Press, 1955).

domain of philosophical and theological thinking. Since the world and being-in-the-world are ultimately ineffable, we must speak of dwelling in an atmosphere of astonishment. Poetic life is one of the conditions for an authentic human existence that is attentive to the process of creation. According to Gadamer,

this creation is not something that we can imagine being deliberately made by someone.... Someone who has produced a work of art stands before the creation of his hands in just the same way that anyone else does. There is a leap between the planning and the executing on the one hand and the successful achievement on the other. The thing now "stands" and thereby is "there" once and for all, ready to be encountered by anyone who meets it and to be perceived in its own "quality." This leap distinguishes the work of art in its uniqueness and irreplaceability.³⁶

Creative existence in the world is fidelity to the personal appropriation of one's own history, including those dimensions that transcend the scope of the natural sciences. Both the poet and the reader need to acquire the receptivity and attentiveness which constitute a poetic way of life.

Gadamer's and Ricoeur's hermeneutics show that no single interpretation of a poem can ever be said to be definitive.³⁷ The trajectory of interpretation does not depend on the poet's original idea. The poet is only an other (or additional) interpreter of his or her poetry; once written, the poem always escapes the hand of the poet. The variety of insights created by imaginative readers widens the horizon of interpretation beyond anything the poet could have anticipated. The poem manifests a threefold distancing from the poet, and this is determined by the act of writing itself. In being written, the poem acquires autonomy from the intention of the poet, the cultural and sociological context, and the original addressee. First, the world of the poem explodes the world of the poet. It embraces interpretations beyond the original idea that gave rise to the poem. Secondly, by being read, the poem decontextualizes itself from its original cultural and sociological conditions and recontextualizes itself into new situations. Thirdly, the poem is not limited to its original addressee but is always creating a new audience. The poem enjoys a full liberation:

³⁶ Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, 33-34.

³⁷ Gary B. Madison, "Hermeneutics: Gadamer and Ricoeur," in Richard Kearney, ed., *Continental Philosophy in the 20th Century*, Routledge History of Philosophy VIII (London: Routledge, 1994).

“the world is the set of references opened up by the texts.”³⁸ All readers are called to apply analytic tools to the interpretation of the poem with sensitivity to its aesthetic content. The interpretation of poetry requires logical and linguistic analysis, multiple perspectives and aesthetic awareness.

We need to realize that we must first learn to decipher a work of art, and then to read it, and only then does it begin to speak. In the case of modern art we have an effective warning against the idea that we can hear the language of ancient art without first deciphering it and learning how to read it.³⁹

Interpretation draws upon a dialectic of being-opened by the poem and of openness toward the poem. The poem opens the reader to a new world, a new horizon. Indeed, the poem requires from the reader a prior readiness to be open. Reading poetry is not equivalent to the divining of the poet's intention, hidden in the poem, but an entering into a new world that opens up in front of one's eyes, in front of the poem.⁴⁰ The relationship between the poet and the reader has been thematized by Gadamer in the context of art in general, emphasizing the fact that the desire to break down the distance that separates an audience or the public from a work of art has been significantly diminished: one only needs to look at the history of modern art. All works of art intend an effect on future audiences. Gadamer argues for the hermeneutic identity of the work of art:

So it is the hermeneutic identity that establishes the unity of the work. To understand something, I must be able to identify it. For there was something there that I passed judgment upon and understood. I identify something as it was or as it is, and this identity alone constitutes the meaning of the work.⁴¹

³⁸ “Le roi égyptien de Thèbes pouvait bien répondre au dieu Theuth que l'écriture était un faux remède en ce qu'elle remplaçait la vraie réminiscence par la conservation matérielle, la sagesse réelle par le simulacre de la connaissance. En dépit de ces périls, l'inscription constitue néanmoins la destination du discours.” Paul Ricoeur, “Le modèle du texte: l'action sensée considérée comme un texte,” in idem, *Du texte à l'action. Essais d'herméneutique II* (Paris: Ed. du Seuil, 1986), 185.

³⁹ Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, 48, translation altered.

⁴⁰ Ricoeur's famous formula reads: “to understand, is to understand oneself in front of the text”: “comprendre, c'est se comprendre devant le texte.” Paul Ricoeur, “La fonction herméneutique de la distanciation,” in idem, *Du texte à l'action*, 115.

⁴¹ Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, 25.

An opening is mediated by the poem, and the reader is in this way exposed to new horizons by his or her own openness and creativity. This mutual mediation is a convergence of the multiple horizons inherent in both the poem and the varied and variable comportment of its readers.

Interpretation is never constrained by a rule of direct correspondence to the work of art in question. On the contrary, a hermeneutic interpretation welcomes any unconcealment of the original work, any disclosure which might bring us closer to the world of the work of art itself.

When we read a poem, it never occurs to us to ask who it is that wants to say something to us or why. Here we are wholly directed toward the word as it stands. We are not recipients of some form of communication that might reach us from this or that person. The poem does not stand before us as a thing that someone employs to tell us something. It stands there equally independent of both reader and poet. Detached from all intending, the word is complete in itself.⁴²

Beyond that, a hermeneutic interpretation is based on the conviction that the work of art can show truth all by itself. An interpretation can only facilitate such a happening, which we know as the self-interpretation of the work of art, this unique inner power to disclose truth. A hermeneutic interpretation enables the work of art to attest to truth in its self-manifesting and self-interpreting. It influences the subject of an aesthetic experience to participate in the happening of truth,⁴³ communicating that the work of art encompasses more than a meaning that is being experienced.⁴⁴ The work of art exists as *this* particular work and not as a utilitarian means for conveying meaning; it is "a unique manifestation of truth whose particularity cannot be surpassed."⁴⁵ Interpretation is always equivalent to a conquest, on the part of the interpreter who attempts to understand.⁴⁶

The fact that the interpretation of a poem detaches itself from the poet's original idea is further emphasized by the experience of interpre-

⁴² Ibid., 107.

⁴³ Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Von der Wahrheit des Wortes," in idem, *Kunst als Aussage, Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 8 (Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 1993), 37-57. This essay goes back to Gadamer's Toronto lectures "The Truth of the Word" in 1981. It has been translated into English by Richard E. Palmer as "On the Truth of the Word," *Symposium* 6 no. 2 (2002): 115-134.

⁴⁴ Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, 34.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 37.

⁴⁶ Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth, Tex.: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 36.

tation of a given poem by the poet him or herself. Here the focus is not on the poet's source of inspiration, but on the effect the poem has on the reader, even if the reader is the poet him or herself. Central to our aesthetic experience is not the poet, but the reader. Self-interpretation and textual record will always tend to vary and to go off at tangents. Every time the poet gets a new hold on his or her poem, he or she reaches out to new experiences, and new perspectives of interpretation open up as a result. This infinite variance is a joyful invitation to what turns out to be an unending task of self-interpretation.

Ars Poetica: The Nostalgia for More

Ars poetica ?⁴⁷

I have always aspired to a more spacious form
that would be free from the claims of poetry or prose
and would let us understand each other without exposing
the author or reader to sublime agonies.

In the very essence of poetry there is something indecent:
a thing is brought forth which we didn't know we had in us,
so we blink our eyes, as if a tiger had sprung out
and stood in the light, lashing his tail.

That's why poetry is rightly said to be dictated by a daimonion,
though it's an exaggeration to maintain that he must be an angel.
It's hard to guess where that pride of poets comes from,
when so often they're put to shame by the disclosure of their frailty.

What reasonable man would like to be a city of demons,
who behave as if they were at home, speak in many tongues,
and who, not satisfied with stealing his lips or hand,
work at changing his destiny for their convenience?

It's true that what is morbid is highly valued today,
and so you may think that I am only joking
or that I've devised just one more means
of praising Art with the help of irony.

⁴⁷ Czeslaw Milosz, "Ars Poetica," trans. Czeslaw Milosz and Lilian Vallee, from *City Without a Name*, in idem, *New and Collected Poems (1931-2001)* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), 240-241.

There was a time when only wise books were read,
 helping us to bear our pain and misery.
 This, after all, is not quite the same
 as leafing through a thousand works fresh from psychiatric clinics.

And yet the world is different from what it seems to be
 and we are other than how we see ourselves in our ravings.
 People therefore preserve silent integrity,
 thus earning the respect of their relatives and neighbors.

The purpose of poetry is to remind us
 how difficult it is to remain just one person,
 for our house is open, there are no keys in the doors,
 and invisible guests come in and out at will.

What I'm saying here is not, I agree, poetry,
 as poems should be written rarely and reluctantly,
 under unbearable duress and only with the hope
 that good spirits, not evil ones, choose us for their instrument.

Berkeley, 1968

Ars poetica demonstrates poetic discipline.⁴⁸ The poet mediates poetry's individual and specific coming-toward language. It is by profound familiarity with poetry that the poet is able to mirror experience. To develop as a poet, by refining one's own *ars poetica*, involves perfecting one's relationship with poetry as such. Only a strong identification with poetry will give the poet the necessary means to reach a way of expressing this relationship. Everything that weakens that relationship, or the expression of it, weakens the inner growth of the poet. The poet is called to intensify his or her relationship with poetry, and to master possible ways of expressing this relationship.

Ars poetica is also about helping to preserve the integrity of the poet. It is an astonishing poetic journey toward this poet's silent integrity. The poet is well aware of how difficult it is "to remain just one person."⁴⁹ He

⁴⁸ Cf. Dante's conception of poetic discipline. Robin Kirkpatrick, *Dante's "Paradiso" and the Limitations of Modern Criticism: A Study of Style and Poetic Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978).

⁴⁹ Ricoeur distinguishes between two aspects of personal identity, sameness (*mêmeté*) and selfhood (*ipséité*). He advances the thesis that personal identity must primarily be conceived as narrative identity. "The genuine nature of narrative identity discloses itself,

has ushered in his own understanding of this difficulty by his deep desire to “understand each other without exposing / the author or reader to sublime agonies.” How can we understand each other without scrutinizing others, or being scrutinized ourselves by the often brutal techniques of the contemporary interview? Our everyday experience teaches us that this kind of “understanding each other” does not have overmuch to do with a real inter-view, with enriching our understanding by sharing the view of the other without invading an other’s life in order to possess “more” information about him or her, in order to be able to dominate and manipulate him or her.

A poet is certain that he or she has to make a choice between *ars poetica*, the dictates of poetic language, and fidelity to the real. This real, to which the poet wishes to be true, is what a poet experiences. It is being faithful to real things, by arranging them hierarchically, as Milosz would have said. Otherwise poets will lose themselves in a myriad of broken images, with no reference to the *hic et nunc*, the historical situatedness of a human being in his or her being-in-the-world. Hierarchy and being faithful to the real refer to a sacred order, to something we do not fully understand but long for in our hearts. Poetry thus is a marvelous depiction of the discrepancy between reality and the desire of our hearts, our restless hearts: “*inquietum est cor nostrum*.”⁵⁰ In their temporal and spatial situatedness, those hearts of ours mirror the restlessness of the world in which we live as *homo viator*.

Poetry represents an inquiry into the human condition, into how human beings exist in the world. Poems open questions, for the reader, regarding the concretization of the *how* of human existence in the world, and are predominantly an examination of the efficacy of its history, its *wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein*. We are already shaped by the history we are attempting to thematize.⁵¹

in my opinion, only in the dialectic of selfhood and sameness. In this sense, this dialectic represents the major contribution of the narrative theory to the constitution of the self.” Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 140.

⁵⁰ “Magnus es, domine, et laudabilis valde: magna virtus tua, et sapientiae tuae non est numerus. Et laudare te vult homo, aliqua portio creaturae tuae, et homo circumferens mortalitem suam, circumferens testimonium peccati sui et testimonium, quia superbis resistis: et tamen laudare te vult homo, aliqua portio creaturae tuae. Tu excitas, ut laudare te delectet, quia fecisti nos ad te et inquietum est cor nostrum, donec requiescat in te.” Augustine, *Confessiones*, 1, 1.

⁵¹ Gadamer’s key notion of *wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein* expresses effective-historical consciousness, which is affected by history and open to the effects of history.

The Subject of Poetic Language

The voice of the poetic subject is in the center of a hermeneutic reading of poetry. The apparently disjointed parts of a poem elucidate the speaking persona and thus are a vital contribution to the understanding of the *conditio humana*. The images illumine each distinctive poetic subject without thereby reducing the poem's subject (or subjects) to some superficial unity. Thus poems depict the difficulty we have with consciously embracing and integrating our disordered world. Nevertheless, they reveal the truth about our self; the self emerges into unconcealment. The truth about the human being comes into the light of Being. Reading poems, an activity which testifies to the transformative power of poetry, encourages us to be conscious of our own transformative moments, of bringing out into the light that which is hidden and withdrawn.

Poetry is language in the most primordial sense. Poetic language receives its brightest radiance in the company of truth. At least since Goethe's *Poetry and Truth*, the relationship between poetry and truth has been understood not as an antithesis but a mutual interdependence. Gadamer brings this relationship even closer:

It seems incontrovertible to me that poetic language enjoys a particular and unique relationship to truth. First, this is shown by the fact that poetic language is not equally appropriate at all times to any content whatsoever, and second, by the fact that when such content is given poetic form in language, it thereby acquires a certain legitimation. It is the art of language that not only decides upon the success or failure of poetry, but also upon its claim to truth.⁵²

"If we are trying to understand a historical phenomenon from the historical distance that is characteristic of our hermeneutical situation, we are always already affected by its history... Consciousness of being affected by history is primarily consciousness of the hermeneutical situation." Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 300-301. See also Rod Coltman, *The Language of Hermeneutics: Gadamer and Heidegger in Dialogue* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1998), 2. Ricoeur defines *wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein* as "the massive and global fact whereby consciousness, even before its awakening as such, belongs to and depends on that which affects it." Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, trans. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 74. "History precedes me and outstrips my reflection; I belong to history before belonging to myself." Paul Ricoeur, *From Text to Action* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1991), 72. See also Andrzej Wiercinski, "L'ermeneutica filosofica della tradizione," *Ars Interpretandi: Annuario di ermeneutica giuridica* 8 (2003): 21-40.

⁵² Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, 105.

The human being is grounded in language.⁵³ One is authentically actualized only in a conversation. Hölderlin says: "*Seit ein Gespräch wir sind und hören voneinander.*"⁵⁴ The ability to listen presupposes the ability to speak. They genuinely complement each other, they belong together. That "we are a conversation" means we *can* listen to each other.⁵⁵ A conversation consists in the fact that by using words we find ourselves and discover the community of people who are all listening to each other. This listening is not a passive attitude, but an expression of an authentic existence. Listening opens us up to the conversation, enabling us to give an answer to that which addresses us and which requests an answer.

In our hermeneutic endeavor, we participate in a conversation which revolves around our relationship to history and its texts, "the conversation that we are,"⁵⁶ a dialogue in which we are "far less the leaders than the led." If our conversation is genuinely hermeneutic, we will be transformed into a communion in which we will not remain what we were.⁵⁷

⁵³ "I have in mind the linguality, as such, through which and out of which languages are first able to form themselves at all and out of which have been formed the multiplicity of languages, even including those that are not within our own circle of culture. And one point cannot be left out: *the indissoluble connection between thinking and speaking* which compels hermeneutics to become philosophy. One must always think in a language, even if one does not always have to think in the same language." Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Reflections on My Philosophical Journey," in Lewis Hahn, ed., *The Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer* (Chicago: Open Court, 1997), 25, translation altered. On the primordial relationship between thinking and speaking, see Andrzej Wiercinski, "Die ursprüngliche Zugehörigkeit von Denken und Sprechen," in Andrzej Przylebski, ed., *Gadamer's Erbe* (Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang, 2005).

⁵⁴ Friedrich Hölderlin, *Friedensfeier*, in idem, *Gedichte bis 1800*, ed. Friedrich Beißner, *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 1, Stuttgarter Hölderlin-Ausgabe (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1946).

⁵⁵ Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Culture and the World," in idem, *Praise of Theory: Speeches and Essays*, trans. Chris Dawson (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1998), 3. See James Risser, "Shared Life," *Symposium* 6, no. 2 (2002): 177.

⁵⁶ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 378.

⁵⁷ In a conversation, "something is placed in the center, as the Greeks say, which the partners in dialogue both share, and concerning which they can exchange ideas with one another. Hence reaching an understanding on the subject matter of a conversation necessarily means that a common language must first be worked out in the conversation. This is not an external matter of simply adjusting our tools; nor is it even right to say that the partners adapt themselves to one another but, rather, in a successful conversation they both come under the influence of the truth of the object and are thus bound to one another in a new community. To reach an understanding in a dialogue is thus not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one's own point of view, but being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we were." Ibid., 378-379.

The experience of poetry has a truly transformative character, and this is the power of truth transforming our life: "In the beautiful presented in nature and art, we experience the convincing illumination of truth and harmony, which compels the admission: 'This is true.'"⁵⁸

The Event of Poetry: The Transforming Power of Poetry

The poet, by making use of self-reflexive commentary, names his or her observations and recollections, thereby holding and preserving subjectively experienced reality. It happens in simple words, a process which brings the poet some consolation as well as an ongoing rediscovery of meaning. Nevertheless, such rediscoveries are, by their very nature of being rediscovered, not immutable, nor can they be. They are subject to possible maturation and change. The fragility and pain of existence, the inexorable demands of everyday life, the vulnerability (both accepted and hidden) that is part and parcel of our lives, all these experiences encourage us to search for redeeming values to rely upon in our lives. Despite the unrecoverable dimensions of the past, the supersession of circumstances at the time of writing, and the evolution (but also the loss) of, or addition to, our personal relationships, we can preserve something of the intrinsic value of our experiences. Indeed, we can call upon our experiences to 'go away,' so preventing our possible (or even our complete) destruction.

Poems encompass, in concrete perceptions, what I call 'the event of poetry' in our poetic life; our perceptions emerge in tangible images that are possessed with internal rhythms of their own. They constitute the poet's inner landscape and the history of one's relationship with the poetic source. The sense of being part of nature and culture is fundamental to experiencing poetry. Bewildered by the existential estrangement suffered by so many human beings, a poet nonetheless preserves the hope that the power of poetic expression is the best counterweight that can be set before the leveling tendencies of our time. When depicting the detail of our everyday lives, poetry liberates us from 'everydayness' by representing the ordinary *in extremis*. It places us, as finite beings, within the horizon of truth.⁵⁹ What is hidden and forgotten is transformed into what is

⁵⁸ Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, 15.

⁵⁹ The essence of language cannot be found in some abstraction from differentiation, but is found in the totality of those differentiations. "Für die Sprachphilosophie bedeutet dies, daß sie auf das Bestreben, hinter der individuellen Mannigfaltigkeit und der his-

true. The transformative power of art transforms us as human beings by requiring profound intellectual and spiritual activity on our part. Encountering the work of art means that we do not remain the same (as before the encounter). Gadamer observes:

After going through a museum, we do not leave it with exactly the same feeling about life that we had when we went in. If we really have had a genuine experience of art, then the world has become both brighter and less burdensome.⁶⁰

Poetry possesses the unique power of healing our separation from nature and enabling the self to regain its lost harmony. It is not about some cheap, manipulated emotional experience, like some that are used in “healing sessions” performed by some pseudo-spiritual gurus of our time. Pain remains pain, weakness remains weakness, yet in the genuine experience of art we regain the courage to go on with our life. Having been brought up in a Judeo-Christian tradition, one cannot forget here the Biblical invitation to “Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest.” (Mt 11: 28) Here, of course, we touch upon the transformative character of the incarnate Word, who was not only able to give the pain of human existence a name, but also to heal it, in His encounter with the human being.

The Responsibility of the Poet

Writing poetry in a technological world that is predominantly occupied with controlling, making, and managing things is a difficult enterprise. Being a poet is in remarkable contrast to the ‘productive’ existence that is so valued by a market-driven culture. The poet is pressured into justifying his or her ‘unproductive’ way of life. Yet by participating in the

torischen Zufälligkeit der Einzelsprachen die allgemeine Struktur einer Grund- und Ursprache zu entdecken, ein für allemal verzichten lernt, daß auch sie wahre Allgemeinheit des Wesens der Sprache nicht in der Abstraktion von den Besonderungen, sondern in der Totalität dieser Besonderungen sucht. In dieser Verbindung der Idee der organischen Form und der Idee der Totalität ist der Weg bezeichnet, auf welchem Wilhelm von Humboldt seine philosophische Weltansicht gewinnt, die zugleich eine neue Grundlage der Sprachphilosophie in sich schließt.” Ernst Cassirer: *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*, vol. 1 (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1987), 99.

⁶⁰ Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, 26.

contemporary world, but without being colonized by technology, the poet is not removed from, or indifferent to, his or her environment. On the contrary: feeling the pulse of the world, the poet experiences the joys and pains of human existence no less keenly than anyone else. The main differentiating *characteristicum* of a poet is to be a contemplative being.⁶¹ However difficult, the poetic life is not inaccessible; it is essentially human. The interdependence between poetry and poet creates, for the poet, a spiritual realm of personal poetic responsibility. Poetry must not be reduced to a literary mitigation of the ego's entanglement with an alienating world. On the other hand, poetry is not confined to the sublime and the ethereal; it embraces the human being as a whole. The essence of being a poet is to allow poetry to speak. This voice has an invitational character. The poet must make a decision to be responsible to this voice (the original meaning of *re-spondeo* is to give an answer to a voice which has spoken). The gift of poetry brings with it the responsibility to dwell within the horizon of poetry.⁶²

⁶¹ Heidegger, in *Discourse on Thinking*, contrasts calculative thinking (*rechnendes Denken*) with contemplative thinking (*besinnliches Denken*). See Martin Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking*, trans. John M. Anderson and E. Hans Freund (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 46.

⁶² Here we can only indicate a different approach to the phenomenology of the gift than the approach favored by Jacques Derrida, for whom the only viable phenomenology of the gift requires him to reduce the gift to the giving. "The moment the gift, however generous it be, is infected with the slightest hint of calculation, the moment it takes account of knowledge or recognition, it falls within the ambit of an economy: it exchanges, in short it gives counterfeit money, since it gives in exchange for payment. Even if it gives 'true' money, the alteration of the gift into a form of calculation immediately destroys the value of the very thing that is given; it destroys it as if from the inside. The money may keep its value but it is no longer given as such. Once it is tied to remuneration (*merces*), it is counterfeit because it is mercenary and mercantile; even if it is real. Whence the double 'suppression of the object'... as soon as it is calculated (starting from the simple intention of giving *as such*, starting from sense, knowledge, and whatever takes recognition into account), the gift suppresses the object (of the gift). It denies it as such. In order to avoid this negation of destruction at all costs, one must proceed to *another* suppression of the object: that of keeping in the gift only the giving, the act of giving and intention to give, not the given which in the end doesn't count. One must give without knowing, without knowledge or recognition, without *thanks*: without anything, or at least without any object." Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 112.

The Disorder of Reality: No Words Left

Campo dei Fiori⁶³

In Rome on the Campo dei Fiori
baskets of olives and lemons,
cobblestones spattered with wine
and the wreckage of flowers.
Vendors cover the trestles
with rose-pink fish;
armfuls of dark grapes
heaped on peach-down.

On this same square
they burned Giordano Bruno.
Henchmen kindled the pyre
close-pressed by the mob.
Before the flames had died
the taverns were full again,
baskets of olives and lemons
again on the vendors' shoulders.

I thought of the Campo dei Fiori
in Warsaw by the sky-carousel
one clear spring evening
to the strains of a carnival tune.
The bright melody drowned
the salvos from the ghetto wall,
and couples were flying
high in the cloudless sky.

At times wind from the burning
would drift dark kites along
and riders on the carousel
caught petals in midair.
That same hot wind
blew open the skirts of the girls
and the crowds were laughing
on that beautiful Warsaw Sunday.

⁶³ Czeslaw Milosz, "Campo dei Fiori," trans. Louis Iribarne and David Broks, from *Rescue*, in idem, *New and Collected Poems (1931-2001)*, 33-35.

Someone will read as moral
 that the people of Rome or Warsaw
 haggle, laugh, make love
 as they pass by martyrs' pyres.
 Someone else will read
 of the passing of things human,
 of the oblivion
 born before the flames have died.

But that day I thought only
 of the loneliness of the dying,
 of how, when Giordano
 climbed to his burning.
 He could not find
 in any human tongue
 words for mankind,
 mankind who live on.

Already they were back at their wine
 or peddled their white starfish,
 baskets of olives and lemons
 they had shouldered to the fair,
 and he already distanced
 as if centuries had passed
 while they paused just a moment
 for his flying in the fire.

Those dying here, the lonely
 forgotten by the world,
 our tongue becomes for them
 the language of an ancient planet.
 Until, when all is legend
 and many years have passed,
 on a new Campo dei Fiori
 rage will kindle at a poet's word.

Warsaw, 1943

Milosz's poem, written in Warsaw in 1943, depicts the *Campo dei Fiori*, the Roman square, the "field of flowers," where "they burned Giordano Bruno." The colorful market is full of flowers, fruits and vegetables, signs of life, while a forlorn Giordano Bruno waits for his death.

The picture of the *Campo dei Fiori* is associated in the poem with the Warsaw of 1943, “one clear spring evening,” attuned to a carnival atmosphere. In the background we have the burning ghetto. Life goes on, and nothing seems to distract the jollifications. Those two pictures, distant in time and space, are strikingly similar to each other. Who cares about innocent people’s death, who mourns dying people? No words are left, to describe the human tragedy that is unfolding before our very eyes.

The most dramatic aspect of the poem is the “loneliness of the dying.” Nothing seems to change in the course of human history. Socrates, Jesus, and Giordano Bruno: they all “could not find / in any human tongue / words for mankind.” And the Jews in the Ghetto. All of them, “the lonely / forgotten by the world.”

“Our tongue becomes for them / the language of an ancient planet.” This language is the language of the unconditional promise God made to Abraham, that He would make his descendants a great nation and would bless all peoples through Israel. (Gn 12:1-3, Ex 7:5; 14:18; Jos 2:9-11; cf. the messianic prophecy, which will be fulfilled through Israel, Is 49:6, Ps 2:10-12; 117:1)

The poem ends with an expression of hope: Poetry will not allow the past to be forgotten. Poetry can victoriously face evil, even if many years must elapse before “on a new Campo dei Fiori / rage will kindle at a poet’s word.” Poetry is not about retaliation. It is not even a direct protest against the injustice in the world. *Rescue* (i.e., the title of the volume in which “Campo dei Fiori” originally appeared), comes from believing in justice, regardless of the atrocities committed in our own age. The word of the poet can preserve memory. It is an act of remembering and mourning at the same time. Someone will at some time read “of the oblivion / born before the flames have died.”

Meaning is not just revealed and made present in the symbol.⁶⁴ It is withdrawn and also preserved. This is the source of an indeterminate reference as encountered in the symbol and in the poem itself. Interpreting a symbol and a poem does not mean that we provide an interpretation that

⁶⁴ Ricoeur speaks of “the gift of meaning from the symbol.” “The symbol gives; but what it gives is occasion for thought, something to think about.” Paul Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretation: Essays in Hermeneutics* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1967), 348. Further see idem, *The Rule of Metaphor*, trans. Robert Czerny with Kathleen McLaughlin and John Costello, SJ (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977); idem, *Interpretation Theory* (Fort Worth, Tex.: Texas Christian University, 1976); idem, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, trans. John B. Thompson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

would exhaust, and thereby determine, its meaning. Such indeterminacy belongs to the very structure of symbolic representation, i.e., to the tension that exists within the “inner unity” of the symbol and the symbolized. Meaning exceeds its embodiment in the poem; there is always more to be embraced and expressed.

The experience of the beautiful does not only belong to a world of gods and angels. Lost human harmony, the atrocities due to human beings striving for more possessions and greater domination over the other, all those factors cannot prevent beauty to shine forth clearly. It is the responsibility of philosophy and poetry to refer to the true world. The essence of the beautiful is not contrary to reality, even though the experience of reality, as in a poet's word, can be devastating and filled with rage. Gadamer offers a very helpful reading of this important tension between beauty and reality:

We learn that however unexpected our encounter with beauty may be, it gives us an assurance that the truth does not lie far off and inaccessible to us, but can be encountered in the disorder of reality with all its imperfections, evils, errors, extremes, and fateful confusions. The ontological function of the beautiful is to bridge the chasm between the ideal and real.⁶⁵

“The Poet Remembers”

As Nietzsche puts it in *Beyond Good and Evil*: “‘I have done that,’ says my memory. ‘I cannot have done that’ – says my pride, and remains adamant. At last – memory yields.”⁶⁶ The poet is concerned with the duty of keeping his or her memory alive. The poet is asking oneself: What is memory? What is involved in writing history? How should we deal with the lapses of memory in our historical *conditio humana*? Analyzing our obligations with respect to memory, the poet touches on the subject of forgiveness and its impact on our historical condition.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, 15.

⁶⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. Helen Zimmern, 4th ed. (London: Allen & Unwin, 1967), 68.

⁶⁷ Paul Ricoeur addresses the relationship between memory and history, and the question of dealing with painful recollections of the past. He asks: “How can a memory be unworried if it is not a fair memory? ... A society cannot grow angry with itself indeterminately.” Paul Ricoeur, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli* (Paris: Seuil, 2000), 650-651.

*You who wronged*⁶⁸

You who wronged a simple man
 Bursting into laughter at the crime,
 And kept a pack of fools around you
 To mix good and evil, to blur the line,

Though everyone bowed down before you,
 Saying virtue and wisdom lit your way,
 Striking gold medals in your honor,
 Glad to have survived another day,

Do not feel safe. The poet remembers.
 You can kill one, but another is born.
 The words are written down, the deed, the date.

And you'd have done better with a winter dawn,
 A rope, and a branch bowed beneath your weight.

Washington, D.C., 1950

We live in times, when the political and ideological superpowers seem confused about what exactly their responsibility is. You can kill, but the poet will remember. At the end two words will survive: Truth and Justice.⁶⁹ The Just will live in God.

At the end of the seventh century B.C., the prophet Habakkuk complains about destruction and violence, "the law is benumbed, and judgment is never rendered." (Hb 1: 4) He demands from God justice and protection for His people. God promises, yet without any time indication, that He will take care of those who believe in Him. "The rash man has no integrity; but the just man, because of his faith, shall live." (Hb 2: 4) The righteous will live, for he follows God's commands. The wicked, who disobey the commandments, who pervert the course of justice, will per-

⁶⁸ Czeslaw Milosz, "You Who Wronged," trans. Richard Lourie, from *Daylight*, in *idem, New and Collected Poems (1931-2001)*, 103.

⁶⁹ In *The Just*, starting with a definition of the subject of rights, Ricoeur elaborates the concept of responsibility. He further explores some aspects of the theory of law, the act of judging, the ideas of sanction, rehabilitation, pardon, and the status of conscience in relation to the demands of the law. Paul Ricoeur, *The Just*, trans. David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

ish. Even if it looks as though God does not listen to the cry that is raised, and does not intervene in the violence (Hb 1: 2), He is with His people and calls for unconditional trust in His promise that He will “give might to his people ... and bless his people with peace.” (Ps 29: 11) Especially in times of trial, God expects His people to trust in His promise: “The one who is righteous by faith will live.” (Rom 1: 17, cf. Gal 3: 11)

The poet reminds us: “Do not feel safe.” The memory of the poet is a testimony to the historic past.⁷⁰ The poet’s word is a voice against complacency, against getting acquainted with and accustomed to the wrong. “Do not feel safe” is also an invitation to take responsibility for one’s actions. Milosz writes:

The twentieth century is a purgatory in which the imagination must manage without the relief that satisfied one of the essential needs of the human heart, the need for protection. Existence appears as ruled by necessity and chance, with no divine intervention; until recently, God’s hand used to bring help to pious rulers and to punish sinful rulers. But now even the idea of Progress, which was nothing else but Providence secularized, no longer provides any guarantee.⁷¹

There is no safe heaven on earth. Life is a constant struggle aiming to live a meaningful life, a “‘good life’ with and for others, in just institutions.”⁷²

The Unsatiability of the Poet

*In Warsaw*⁷³

What are you doing here, poet, on the ruins
Of St. John’s Cathedral this sunny
Day in spring?

⁷⁰ See Paul Ricoeur, “Memory, Forgetfulness, and History,” *Iyyon, The Jerusalem Philosophical Quarterly* 45 (July 1996): 237–248; idem, “Aesthetic Judgment and Political Judgment According to Hannah Arendt,” in idem, *The Just*, 94–108; idem, “Philosophies critiques de l’histoire: Recherche, explication, écriture,” in Guttorm Fløistad, ed., *Philosophical Problems Today*, vol. 1 (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1994), 139–201.

⁷¹ Milosz, *The Witness of Poetry*, 53.

⁷² Ricoeur, *Oneself As Another*, 172.

⁷³ Czeslaw Milosz, “In Warsaw,” trans. Czeslaw Milosz, Robert Hass, and Madeline Levine, from *Rescue*, in idem, *New and Collected Poems (1931-2001)*, 75-76.

What are you thinking here, where the wind
Blowing from the Vistula scatters
The red dust of the rubble?

You swore never to be
A ritual mourner.
You swore never to touch
The deep wounds of your nation
So you would not make them holy
With the accursed holiness that pursues
Descendants for many centuries.

But the lament of Antigone
Searching for her brother
Is indeed beyond the power
Of endurance. And the heart
Is a stone in which is enclosed,
Like an insect, the dark love
Of a most unhappy land.

I did not want to love so.
That was not my design.
I did not want to pity so.
That was not my design.
My pen is lighter
Than a hummingbird's feather. This burden
Is too much for it to bear.
How can I live in this country
Where the foot knocks against
The unburied bones of kin?
I hear voices, see smiles. I cannot
Write anything; five hands
Seize my pen and order me to write
The story of their lives and deaths.
Was I born to become
a ritual mourner?
I want to sing of festivities,
The greenwood into which Shakespeare
Often took me. Leave
To poets a moment of happiness,
Otherwise your world will perish.

It's madness to live without joy
 And to repeat to the dead
 Whose part was to be gladness
 Of action in thought and in the flesh, singing, feasts,
 Only the two salvaged words:
 Truth and justice.

Warsaw, 1945

This poem reiterates an ancient conflict between life and art, between the consciousness of the poet and one's human longing for happiness. It is the remembering of the well-known drama of human existence depicted by Qoheleth:

Rejoice, O young man, while you are young and let your heart be glad in the days of your youth. Follow the ways of your heart, the vision of your eyes; Yet understand that as regards all this God will bring you to judgment. (Eccl 11: 9)

The poet examines his conscience. He confesses: "You swore never to be / A ritual mourner. / ... never to touch / The deep wounds of your nation." He wants to write songs of joy, but instead can repeat "Only the two salvaged words: / Truth and justice." And despite the fact that he pleads: "Leave/ To poets a moment of happiness, / Otherwise your world will perish," he cannot stop himself from repeating the words, which carry hope and salvation. This is a very deep expression of poetic responsibility, which depicts the deepest meaning of the poet's vocation. With similar resoluteness the Apostle Paul states: "If I preach the gospel, this is no reason for me to boast, for an obligation has been imposed on me, and woe to me if I do not preach it!" (1Cor 9: 16)

Woe to me, where do I find,
 When winter prevails, the flowers, and where
 The shining of the sun,
 And the shadow of the earth?
 The walls stand
 Speechless and cold in the wind
 The flags clangor.⁷⁴

⁷⁴ Friedrich Hölderlin, *Hälfte des Lebens*, in idem, *Gedichte nach 1800*, ed. Friedrich Beißner, *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 2, Stuttgarter Hölderlin-Ausgabe (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1946), 117:

Weh mir, wo nehm' ich, wenn

Hölderlin expresses here a sense of poetic despair by using a powerful picture of worrying about existential integrity. The moments of happiness, flowers, and the shining of the sun are the *Sitz im Leben*, the context in which the poet is struggling with living his or her authentic poetic existence. "This obligation has been imposed on him," and woe to the poet if he or she should become satisfied with anything less.

Conclusion: The Sacred Art of the Word

Poetry has enjoyed a privileged position within the human sciences because of its power to reveal truth. The word is true, because it reveals things as they are.⁷⁵ Poetry seeks to uncover the truth (*aletheia*), to reveal truth through language and disclose the primordial meaning of Being. From such a perspective, poetry *is* truth. Facing its increasing irrelevance, poetry continues to tirelessly build bridges between cultures and peoples. It is animated by a hope of preservation: it remains faithful to manifest difference, while trusting in the unity that is never fully made manifest. Identity, death, and transcendence through art – these are major concerns of recent poetry. By following things rather than ideas, poetry invites the poet to attempt to tell the story of the self, to idealize the self. Concrete images are the touchstone of truth and thus the very heart of poetry. Without faith in the possibility of truthful language, there can be no poetry. Regardless of personal idiosyncrasies, the poet aspires to embrace the whole. In its fascination with the ordinary, poetry holds up a

Es Winter ist, die Blumen, und wo
Den Sonnenschein,
Und Schatten der Erde?
Die Mauern stehn
Sprachlos und kalt, im Winde
Klirren die Fahnen.

⁷⁵ The truth of the word and the lingual character of the truth are best expressed by the processual character of the Word as the mystery of the Trinity. "The mystery of the Trinity finds itself reflected in the wonder of language inasmuch as the word — that is true, because it says how things are — is nothing of itself and does not seek to be anything for itself: *nihil de suo habens, sed totum de illa scientia de qua nascitur...* The inner mental word is just as consubstantial with thought as is God the Son with God the Father." Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 421, translation altered. See also Andrzej Wiercinski, "The Hermeneutic Retrieval of a Theological Insight: *Verbum Interius*," in idem, ed., *Between the Human and the Divine: Philosophical and Theological Hermeneutics* (Toronto: The Hermeneutic Press, 2002), 1-23.

mirror to existence; it thus reaches into domains of meaning that are otherwise unattainable to theory. Poetry gestures to Being, without distorting it by trying to make it fit into a theoretical structure. Poetry is the freedom to let everything be itself.

Poetry is an affirmation of hope that springs from insights in the soul, from self-awareness and the awareness of atrocities, which people are able to commit. Our newest history bitterly reminds us, once again, that pain and devastation are not only the scary attributes of the past. From a broad historical and literary perspective we know that only by living an authentic existence can we avoid false ideological hopes for the future of humanity, false, that is, if they are based exclusively on our human endeavor and on an exaggerated trust in Progress. What unites us all, poets and readers alike, is our search for hope, without quite knowing when and how any help (*adiutorium, auxilium*) might come. Who knows, it might happen "at break of day," as it was once promised: "*Deus in medio eius non commovebitur adiuvabit eam Deus vultu suo.*"⁷⁶

Poetry is a witness. It attempts to bear witness to every human being's individual history, to be aware of each and every particular event in the history of the world, to memorize each detail, all in some poem. Nothing is unworthy of poetic attention. And nothing can vanish without trace, even if for the most part it will look that way, as if it disappeared forever, quite unnoticed. Thinking of this makes us tremble. There is something stronger than our pessimism, even our despair. Poetry, however futile it may seem, is absolutely necessary, as it allows us to transcend ourselves. Poetry challenges us to listen to it and to make its language our very own. We must give testimony to the witness of poetry, understanding that "there is no place which fails to see you. You must change your life."⁷⁷ This is the essence of our responsibility: being attentive to poetry to discover truth that is otherwise inaccessible to us.

⁷⁶ "God is in its [God's city] midst; it shall not be shaken; God will help it at break of day." Ps 46: 6.

⁷⁷ "Da ist keine Stelle, die dich nicht sieht. Du mußt dein Leben ändern." Rainer Maria Rilke, "Archaic Torso of Apollo," in idem, *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*, trans. Stephen Mitchell (New York: Random House, 1982), 61.