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The Suspension of Experience and Modern Literature.

Abstract I: In 1978 Giorgio Agamben wrote an important book on experience, *Infancy and History*, in which he mapped with no uncertain words the zone and the task of modern literature. Discussing the work of Charles Baudelaire, Agamben claimed that: "In Baudelaire a man expropriated from experience exposes himself to the force of shock. Poetry responds to the expropriation of experience by converting this expropriation into a reason for surviving and making the inexperience its normal condition. In this perspective, the search for the 'new' does not appear as the search for a new object of experience; instead, it implies an eclipse and a suspension of experience." (Agamben 1993: 41)

The concepts that provide this passage a productive originality are "eclipse" and "suspension". But what exactly does "a suspension of experience" mean, and more importantly, what kind of language and literature "a language and a literature of suspension" are?

Abstract II: In *Infanzia e storia* (1978. Nuova edizione accresciuta, 2001), Giorgio Agamben describe così il compito della letteratura moderna: "In Baudelaire, un uomo, che è stato espropriato dell'esperienza, si offre senza alcuno schermo alla ricezione degli choc. All'espropriazione dell'esperienza, la poesia risponde trasformando questa espropriazione in una ragione di sopravvivenza e facendo dell'inesperibile la sua condizione normale. In questa prospettiva, la ricerca del 'nuovo' non appare come la ricerca di un nuovo oggetto dell'esperienza, ma implica al contrario, un'eclisse e una sospensione dell'esperienza." (Agamben 2001: 38)

I concetti fondanti di questo brano sono "eclisse" e "sospensione". Ma che cosa si intende precisamente per "sospensione dell'esperienza",

e che cosa sono in realtà una letteratura e un linguaggio della sospensione?

1.

It is worth reflecting further on Agamben's emphasis on the suspension of experience from which this essay originates. In chapter 3 of *Infanzia e storia (Infancy and History)* under the sub-heading "La poesia moderna e l'esperienza" ("Modern poetry and experience"), we read: "...la poesia moderna – da Baudelaire in poi – non si fonda su una nuova esperienza, ma su una mancanza di esperienza senza precedenti. Di qui la disinvoltura con cui Baudelaire può porre lo choc al centro del proprio lavoro artistico. L'esperienza è, infatti, rivolta innanzitutto alla protezione dalle sorprese e il prodursi di uno choc implica sempre una falla nell' esperienza. Far esperienza di una cosa significa: toglierle la sua novità, neutralizzare il suo potenziale di choc." (Agamben 2001: 37) ("...modern poetry from Baudelaire onwards is seen to be founded not on new experience, but on an unprecedented lack of experience. Hence the boldness with which Baudelaire can place shock at the centre of his artistic work. It is experience that best affords us protection from surprises, and the production of shock always implies a gap in experience. To experience something means divesting it of novelty, neutralizing its shock potential." Agamben 1993: 41) The word "shock" occupies a central and commanding position in this important passage. Further it appears to be in close relation to "surprise", and opposed to experience. "Shock" is the "surprise" that upsets experience and relegates experience to the background, out of sight, useless, inservibile (impracticable). It is not that experience disappears because of the exposure to "shock". Rather, experience becomes devoid of meaning, empty, voiceless. It speaks no more, and with its silence comes the nakedness of the subject. But exactly what is it that we mean by nakedness (*nudità*) – a word so dear to Agamben as well as other seminal contemporary thinkers? By nakedness we mean here the simple event of being devoid of experience, which in turn means that moment devoid of historiography, that abyss so vital to the thinking of Heidegger and Blanchot, the present-now (*Jetzt-Zeit*) to which Benjamin devoted so many pages and so much thought. In other words, by nakedness we mean here the suspension of historiographical existence by way of which existence manifests itself as pure existence; existence as-such.

2.

In 1975 Giorgio Caproni published a collection of poems under the title *Il muro della terra (The Wall of the Earth)*. Two of the most emblematic poems of this collection are "Ritorno" ("Return") and "Esperienza" ("Experience"). "Ritorno": "Sono tornato là/ dove non ero mai stato./ Nulla, da come non fu, è mutato./ Sul tavolo (sull'incerato/ a quadretti) ammezzato/ ho ritrovato il bicchiere/ mai riempito. Tutto/ è ancora rimasto quale/ mai l'avevo lasciato." (Caproni 1998: 374) ("I returned there/ where I had never been./ Nothing, from how it was not,

has changed./ On the table (the checkered/ cloth), half filled/ I found the glass/ never filled. Everything/ is still as/ I have never left it." Caproni 1992: 81). "Esperienza": "Tutti i luoghi che ho visto,/ che ho visitato,/ ora so – ne son certo:/ non ci sono mai stato." (Caproni 1998: 382) ("All the places I have seen,/ I have visited,/ now I know – I am certain of it:/ I have never been there." Caproni 1992: 88) The mirroring assertions and refutations, the careful fracturing of meaning through enjambements are signs of a language that searches in vain for its own "experience". This is a poetry that dares to watch a mirror that does not reflect, where not even the self of poetry can recover its own features. This negation of visibility and refraction is made even more compelling by the actual presence of poetry and the actual presence of the self, both of which are actually there where they have never been. They exist in the space of their taking place, as the pure event of language that stares into the abyss of its existence as-such. In 1982 Samuel Beckett wrote: "She still without stopping. On her way without starting. Gone without going. Back without returning." (Beckett 1982: 19)

3.

In Benjamin's *The Arcades Project*, in the chapter on the flâneur, we read: "Truth becomes something living; it lives solely in the rhythm by which statement and counterstatement displace each other in order to think each other." (Benjamin 2002: 418) Living truth is nothing other, then, than naked truth; that is the truth that exists as it confronts the shock of its own existence. What is extraordinary about Benjamin's thought is the stress on life beyond the ordinary conception of life, and of existence beyond the common understanding of existence. In a sense, the kernel and the motivator of most of Benjamin's work on language is contained in this remark, whose conceptualisation helps negotiate Benjamin's seminal distinction between *in language* and *through language*, and *pure language* (*die reine Sprache*) and historical language.

4.

Towards the beginning of Maurice Blanchot's *L'attente l'oubli* we find this puzzling as well as remarkable passage: "Quelque chose lui est arrivé, et il ne peut dire que ce soit vrai, ni le contraire. Plus tard, il pensa que l'événement consistait dans cette manière de n'être ni vrai ni faux." (Blanchot 1962: 13) ("Something happened to him, and he can say neither that it was true, nor the contrary. Later, he thought that the event consisted in this manner of being neither true nor false." Blanchot 1997: 4) The word "événement" is significant because it emphasises the taking place of something concrete; it bears witness to an event. But this event belongs in the interstices between truth and falsehood, and as such in the process of cognition in which the impossibility of an evaluation is the fundamental trait of the process's existence and the only possible habitus of Blanchot's characters. It may be that the ineffability of a potential truth or of its opposite decrees its indistinguishability and ultimately its irrelevance. On the other hand, it may be that the truth, the "living truth", is precisely these interstices, this indistinction and this suspension between statement and counterstatement. What remains to be explored and lived is the

only possible ontological space which lies in-between truth and falsehood and in-between their respective effability and ineffability and their visibility and invisibility. This is the zone of indistinction. And it is here that language is in the presence of its own existence. Blanchot again: "Parole qu'il faut répéter avant de l'avoir entendue, rumeur sans trace qu'il suit, nulle part-errante, partout-séjournante, nécessité de la laisser aller. C'est toujours la vieille parole qui veut être là à nouveau sans parler." (Blanchot 1962: 13) ("An utterance that must be repeated before it has been heard, a traceless murmur that he follows, wandering nowhere, residing everywhere, the necessity of letting it go. It is always the ancient word that wants to be here again without speaking." Blanchot 1997: 4)

5.

The messianic project that one finds in Benjamin's reflection on language, and Benjamin's interest in reconnecting with the original language - *die reine Sprache* -, is present in Blanchot's work as well, *la vieille parole*. Both Blanchot and Benjamin speak and retrace in their writing the linguistic split that has characterized the Western understanding of language throughout the centuries, and can be traced back to the Fall from grace in the Garden of Eden. The Fall determined the passage from the *in language* before the Fall to the *through language* after the Fall, and the irredeemable fracture between the original language and the many derivative languages that were born as a consequence of this fracture. Benjamin and Blanchot engage with this fracture and attempt to understand and articulate its meaning. It is the will to be in indistinction that invites the characters in Blanchot's *L'attente L'oubli* to look for the "pauvreté dans le langage" (Blanchot 1962: 19) ("the poverty in language" Blanchot 1997: 8), and that encourages them to "ignorer ce qu'on sait, seulement cela." (Blanchot 1962: 16) ("remain ignorant of what one knows, only that." Blanchot 1997: 6)

6.

"Remain ignorant of what one knows, only that", writes Blanchot in *L'attente l'oubli*. Thousands of years before Plato conceived something similar. In a significant, and yet rarely noted passage of *The Symposium* we come across this remark spoken by Diotima: "Forgetting is the departure of knowledge." (Plato 1999: 45) Oblivion, forgetting, surprise, shock as the departure of knowledge? Could we say that knowing commences in the event of naked existence? Further, in the event of the unconcealment of the subject, that is at the moment of the exposure to the "moment-now" of suspension and indistinction? Is this the state of "madness", of "manic" rapture that Plato speaks of in the *Phaedrus* as the necessary step into the doors of poetry? The passage of the *Phaedrus* I think of reads thus: "The third type of possession and madness is possession by the muses. When this seizes upon a gentle and virgin soul it rouses it to inspired expression in lyric and other sorts of poetry, and glorifies countless deeds of the heroes of old for the instruction of posterity. But if a man comes to the doors of poetry untouched by the madness of the Muses, believing that technique alone

will make him a good poet, he and his sane compositions never reach perfection, but are utterly eclipsed by the performances of the inspired madman." (Plato 1973: 48)

7.

Heidegger's seminal essay "What is Philosophy?" is nothing other than a long reflection on "destruction" and "astonishment" (*Erstaunen*) as the unavoidable route to philosophy, or rather, as the very thing of philosophy. "Astonishment (*Das Erstaunen*), as *pathos*", writes Heidegger, "is the *archê* (the beginning) of philosophy. We must understand the Greek word *archê* (beginning) in its fullest sense. It names that from which something proceeds (*Es nennt dasjenige, von woher etwas ausgeht*). But this 'from there' is not left behind in the process of going out, but the beginning rather becomes that which the verb *archein* expresses, that which governs. The *pathos* of astonishment thus does not simply stand at the beginning of philosophy, as, for example, the washing of his hands precedes the surgeon's operation. Astonishment carries and pervades philosophy (*Das Erstaunen trägt und durchherrscht die Philosophie*)." (Heidegger 1968: 81) Philosophy is made of surprise and astonishment; it is the thing of surprise and astonishment. Heidegger's astonishment is paired with the idea of destruction of which the German philosopher says: "Destruction (*Destruktion*) does not mean destroying but dismantling, liquidating, putting to one side the merely historical assertions about the history of philosophy. Destruction means – to open our ears, to make ourselves free for what speaks to us in tradition as the Being of being. By listening to this interpellation we attain the correspondence (*Indem wir auf diesen Zuspruch hören, gelangen wir in die Entsprechung*)." (Heidegger 1968: 71-72)

8.

In *L'attente l'oubli* Blanchot provides one of the most striking narrations of forgetting as the route to naked knowledge. Let us take, for instance, this passage: "Il se rendait bien compte qu'elle avait peut-être tout oublié. Cela ne le gênait pas. Il se demandait s'il ne désirait pas s'emparer de ce qu'elle savait, plus par l'oubli que par le souvenir. Mais l'oubli... Il lui fallait entrer, lui aussi, dans l'oubli." (Blanchot 1962: 12) (He understood quite well that she had possibly forgotten everything. That didn't bother him. He wondered if he didn't want to take possession of what she knew, more by forgetting than by remembering. But forgetting... It was necessary that he, too, enter into forgetting. Blanchot 1997: 4) The extraordinary thing that takes place here is that in the apparent aphasia of the woman the man perceives an unquantifiable form of knowledge that he wishes to possess. In this nothing of language the man glimpses something that his knowledge lacks and yet desires. The entrance into this knowledge clothed by nothingness – the nakedness of knowledge – might be achieved by two different routes that conventional semantics treats as opposite: "remembering" or "forgetting". But in this instance, "forgetting" and "remembering" are close; they share a common trait. They both imply a journey, and the journey is in both instances a reversal, a journey of return. And yet, in the case of "forgetting" the

journey takes place by accessing a totally new dimension in which the recovery of the origin must start from nothing. "Remembering" is based on the visualisation and meditation of an acquired knowledge, of a recovery of known and stored principles and notions. "Forgetting", on the other hand, depends on the erasure of such principles and notions, on unlearning the foundations of epistemological conditions for the benefit of a new experience. "Forgetting" means obliterating. As such it is the entrance into the domain of oblivion and the acceptance of knowing nothing: "Mais l'oubli...Il lui fallait entrer, lui aussi, dans l'oubli." Oblivion is the ban of the known and it is ushered in by the will to forget and by a conscious determination to exclude the known; in other words, to exclude experience.

9.

The exclusion of experience in language and in writing may be followed through and conceptualised in negativity – the preferred route of postmodernism. But it may also be conceptualised as a language whose existence, whose presence, is predicated on its very event as language. This is not a negative language. It is rather a naked language; a language that exists as it confronts only and exclusively its own existence. There is nothing behind this language, no thing, no object; just language as-such. This is a language that speaks by silencing its ordinary function as communicator of meanings understood and deciphered through the context of experience. It simply speaks itself. What can we learn – if anything – from a language that speaks itself? This is precisely, according to Heidegger, the language that speaks ecstatic thought. Answering a question posed by one of his French translators about what kind of language this might be, Heidegger said that: "*Eine ganz einfache Sprache* ("an utterly simple language"), dont la rigueur consistera moins dans le verbiage (Gerede) d'une apparente technicité que dans la nudité absolue de l'expression." (Munier 1992: 17)

10.

In March 1977 Giorgio Caproni wrote the poem "le parole" ("The Words"), published in the collection *Il franco cacciatore* (The Frank Hunter). "Le parole. Già/ Dissolvono l'oggetto./ Come la nebbia gli alberi,/ il fiume: il traghetto." (Caproni 1998: 460) ("Words. That's right/ They dissolve the object/ like the fog with trees/ the river: the ferry". My translation) Two verses of two lines separated by a blank space with a rhyme that dissolves the object by calling it in the house of language. The simplicity of this poem is staggering, no less than its magisterial construction. Caproni breaks the syntax and the flow of language by assembling the words paratactically, simultaneously stressing their individuality and their being together, not only with other words, but also, and more importantly, with the silence of the blank space, and with words' resounding nakedness. There is no continuity, not even a discontinuity marked by enjambements, as in other poems by Caproni. There are instead walls of silence and emptiness, that undifferentiated silence that the characters in Blanchot's *L'attente l'oubli* hear resonating and humming in their hotel room. What

resonates is nothing other than the object as it disappears, as it departs, carried away on its vessel-shelter: "oggetto-traghetto". Would it be possible to interpret silence, or rather, a language that speaks itself as the pause of subjectivity? In other words, could naked language be the resounding halo through which subjectivity *is*, but also waiting to be again? Is this the halo that Blanchot and Caproni make visible in their work?

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