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### *Poetry's Community*

#### **Abstract:**

*The paper examines the idea of community by means of its expression especially in modernist poetries. Theories of Bourdieu, Blanchot, Levinas, Lingis and especially Lyotard's construct, the differend, are applied to the project of assessing the relationship between aesthetic practices and the communities in which they arise and which they make possible.*

The Museum gives us a thieves' conscience. We occasionally sense that these works were not after all intended to end up between these morose walls, for the pleasure of Sunday strollers or Monday "intellectuals." We are well aware that something has been lost and that this self-communion with the dead is not the true milieu of art - that so many joys and sorrows, so much anger, and so many labours were not destined to reflect one day the Museum's mournful light.

By transforming efforts into "works", the Museum makes a history of painting possible. But perhaps it is essential for men to attain greatness in their works only when they do not look for it too hard. Perhaps it is not bad that the painter and the writer do not clearly realize that they are establishing a human community. (Merleau-Ponty 1964, p. 62)

It is the endless reversibility which Benveniste implies in the relations which characterise "I" and "you" as partners in dialogue (1971, pp. 223-30), these the basis of discourse, which constitute the necessity and im/possibility of community. For Merleau-Ponty the reversibility of conversation and its relation to the subject constitute a kind of blurring, in which they become impossible to pick apart: "the conversation pronounces itself within me. It summons me and grips me; it envelops and inhabits me to the point that I cannot tell what comes from me and what comes from it" (1974, p. 19).

We languaged humans are rarely out of the community of words, the community of words is never out of us. In this manner we are of the world; because I *do* refer to a world which is outside of my saying - that saying which the world inhabits in making possible. I do make possible a world in my saying, which is the habitation of the already said. I do pass beyond saying in the dialogue which is my means of overwhelming alterity. Grammar and canon, abstraction and naming, make up (in order to construe) the haunting of the world in words and of words in the world. In this manner diegetic and exegetic processes are naturally blurred: a particular effort of abstraction has been to divide them. Tristan Tzara writes: "I think of the heat that language weaves/ around its core the dream they call us by" (in Rothenberg and Joris 1995, p. 499).

To the extent that writing has hopes to survive, it hopes to be judged as much as possible. The value of the classic, Kermode writes, is asserted by "a more or less continuous chorus of voices" (1975, p. 117).

Canonisation, and continued inclusion in the canon, is the result of continuous judgement, the character of which is determined by the weight and force of all previous surviving judgements. If history consists of judged judgements (Lyotard 1988, p. 8) then this is no less the situation with that abstraction, *literature*, which we define by the contents of the canon. Canonic logic - the logic which determines survivals - is unavoidably at work in the process of writing.

Avant-garde aesthetic practices are in the paradoxical position which Bourdieu assigns to "permanent revolution" (1993, p. 188). Poetry, for instance, is in the position of having to "exclude from poetry all that makes up the 'poetic' ". What we call poetry is poetry because it is beyond the gates of a city which is encroaching on the foreign space outside. André Breton writes: "The embrace of poetry like the embrace of the naked body/ Protects while it lasts/ Against all access by the misery of the world" (in Rothenberg and Joris, p. 479). However, whenever its borders come to take charge of its others, new borders constantly devise themselves. There is always a new outside, there are always new refugees. The principle of avant-gardism is not so much that of seeing what art is, of its nature, beyond; but rather what art is immediately and practically beyond - generally the art of a last epoch, now resettled in the city as a part of its establishment. Poetry comes to that which is dislodged, dissuaded, which is collected to be discarded, discarded to be collected and so on, ad infinitum. Poetry's process is endless scavenging.

As speech is the beyond of haunting (and so the making of what will next haunt), poesis is likewise an involuntary and spontaneous event, an Orphic facilitation. Poesis is a process in which one is unable not to look, even when looking means that love must be cast back into hell, that one must be torn apart for love. As such it enables and disables practice and community. It lives in a circle. In *Sonnets to Orpheus* Rilke writes:

Though they destroyed you at last and revenge had its will,  
sound of you lingered in lions and rocks you were first to  
enthral, in the trees and the birds. You are singing there still.

Oh you god that has vanished! You infinite track!  
Only because dismembering hatred dispersed you  
are we hearers today and a mouth which else nature would lack.

(1949, p. 85)

The tearing apart of Orpheus (rejection for his constancy) was made possible by his inconsolable heart. He was beyond consolation because afflicted now with the *permanent* loss of Eurydice. He lost Eurydice because he was unable to obey the directive not to look, not to bear witness. Orpheus was torn between the authenticity of his desire (one so profound that in Virgil's account, his *death-chilled tongue* finds yet a voice to call her name [*Georgics*, 1952, p. 98] ) and the consciousness of a higher order and its directive, disobedience to which ensured his undoing. His dismemberment is the punishment for the rejection to which he, who could charm the trees and the beasts and even rivers, subjects women after his final loss of Eurydice.

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A limitless tropology, visited by way of Peirce and Eco and Benveniste, is in the perpetual process of inscribing a natural and involuntary community: the community of those who are or become intelligible to each other. That all beings should stand in such relation to each other is the basis of Menander's wish, that as a man nothing human might be foreign to him; likewise of Aquinas' definition of the soul as "the being whose nature it is to meet with all other beings" (in Heidegger 1996, p. 12). A still broader and more recent version is found in Rubén Darío's dictum that "every form in nature has something to say to every other" (in Rothenberg and Joris, p. 89). Independent of these metaphysical prescriptions, the community of speech which comes into being and maintains itself by means of intelligibility is an accomplished fact. It neither requires nor would it be moved by any campaigns to promote or destabilise or even imagine it. Those implied in such a community, by means of a mutual intelligibility, do however exercise choices, as entitled by their power or lack thereof. They have, for instance choices in making themselves more and less intelligible, not only with those with whom they are natively entitled to speak, but with others: those outside of their idiom whom they approach or shun as befits the complex of negotiations in which they relate or fail to relate. The process of these negotiations accounts for the manner in which the involuntary communities we know as languages, remain, however they appear, in a continuous process of flux. It is a voluntary

community however which mediates between the authenticity and consciousness of languaged subjects.

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As far as theory is concerned, any book, perhaps any mnemonic effort, constitutes a sharing of a language and a world and a halt in the dialogism which was there in speech before books were possible. It is an elaborate gift which, to be of any worth, must be reciprocal, living as it does in the hope of that cliché of a true marriage of minds.

The authorial *we*, so much now out of fashion, is a kind of declaration or claim of solidarity and the line drawn by its means is one between acknowledging who we are and how we come and dissolving these in a new claim; a claim to be other than as made, a claim to make ourselves, to wrest, as Jameson writes, in *The Political Unconscious*, "a realm of Freedom from a realm of Necessity" (1981, p. 19). We can make multiple authority, it can draw attention to universalising efforts and serve as a kind of hailing of the reader. The first person plural has this potential: of alerting the reader to an effort at identification, thus to the prospect of community.

The other side of the inclusion which the identification *we* assumes, is the exclusion a reader feels when s/he cannot go along with what is expressed under this aegis. In these circumstances s/he is alerted to a *differend*, to use Lyotard's coinage, such as is suggested in the observation that "a universal rule of judgement between heterogeneous genres is lacking in general" (1988, p. xi). Lyotard defines the differend as "the unstable state and instant of language wherein something which must be put into phrases cannot yet be" (1988, p.13). As such we may regard it as what lies between the communities which are implied in a speech intelligible to the participants of that speech. Lyotard claims that society is inhabited by differends. He writes that:

there is a differend between two parties when the "settlement" of the conflict that opposes them appears in the idiom of one of them while the tort from which the other suffers cannot signify itself in the idiom. (1993, p. 9)

That situation, I would argue, obtains wherever a law is the possession of particular parties . The discursive *regulation* which constitutes a language (such as is abstracted by the term 'grammar') necessarily excludes those who follow another rule. Alfonso Lingis writes:

Every discourse among interlocutors is a struggle against outsiders, those who emit interference and equivocation, who have an interest in that the communication not take place. But in the measure that communication does take place and that statements are established as true, it designates outsiders as not making sense, as mystified, mad or brutish, and it delivers them over to violence. (1994, p. 135)

Quite apart from its claimed affinities with madness, poetry, because it subjects its own language to the exigencies of a position between languages, plays a role akin to that of bearing witness to differends.

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Community is what lies, unselfconsciously, between differends. This word draws attention where attention cannot be maintained - to what lies between subjects as the process of their mutual self-creation. Community is the semiotic setting and event of life among humans, our inescapable sociality . What is authentic then is its invisibility to itself, its unavowedness (or the irrelevance of its avowals to how it is), its being known only by symptoms, by the metonym we call the differend. The differend is the symptom of community, the boundary by which the invisible is shown. Community is what differends show us in outline, the ineffable "we" which wastes our hopes of being who we are.

The other abstractions which the effort at its avowal falls into - nation, republic, council, club - these are necessarily flawed efforts to be who we are by knowing, by deciding, how to be. Of course these are necessary to us, as society is necessary to humans, civilised or otherwise. The efforts at deciding who and how to be are necessary means in dispelling the fiction that we are merely victims of a *world-as-is*, of the *already-thus*.

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Hiatuses infest all subjectivities, and in this manner - of doubts as to who we are - is acknowledged the difficulty of approaching a community of the self. In like manner poetries face us with the problem of how to sustain or enable a community of dissent, one which is not only subject to its own doubts but actually exists for them. If poetry must doubt the possibility of its having purpose, has it at least the guarantee that such a lack is approached by means of doubt? Dada was the original of that reflexive modernity which dealt (or feigned dealing) with itself as phenomenon in just the terms it brought to bear on society and on art in general. Georges Ribemont-Desaigues writes in a piece titled "Artichokes":

Dada, having only a few years or months or days to live, looks for a lawyer to draw up its last will and testament...

Dada doubts everything. They say that too constitutes a principle. No, doubt is not *in principio*, but even if it were thus, if dada believed in doubt, exactly that would prove that there is no principle. (in Rothenberg and Joris, p. 337)

Interrogating poetry's relation to society in a way which brings into question the efficacy of a poetic *function*, Ottó Orbán's poem, "Sinking Orpheus", written for Sándor Weöres on his 75th birthday, begins:

The sober mind is annoyed to discover that poetry's utterly functionless.  
 Defending the defensible, it sings of the doormat and it puts it by the door:  
 the dying poet lies on his side on the ground  
 and writes in the dust with his blood the word: *heimat!*  
 But should this scenario fail,  
 for lack, let us say, of a Struggle for Independence,  
 he is still permitted to sing of the scheduled reforms -  
 the government's or the opposition's - whichever appeals to him.  
 The sober mind, as we know,  
 (to use its own favourite expression)  
 with its indispensable aids to survival,  
 the various clichés for use in case of fire, flood or earthquake,  
 resides in the collective unconscious, or numbskull.

(1993, pp. 37-8)

But a sober mind, precisely because it is annoyed with poetry's lack of purpose, may yet succeed in attributing one to it. Orbán ironically reminds us that the death of the poet might open a field of intentions, such as is confused by our not knowing whether it is poetry or the resident of the numbskull which sings of the doormat it puts by the door. The poem as process and artefact blurs the canonic personae which go into the making and the keeping of the poem. In the second stanza of "Sinking Orpheus" Orbán writes of the everyday creature who:

was with me one minute, nowhere the next, wavered and rose and then fell  
 through the mysterious medium in which  
 a gabbling angel dictates down the phone, and the poem is ready for printing  
 and from the thick bog a slippery presentiment floats to the surface  
 serrated teeth, reptilian neck, and shark's fin,  
 most monstrous of monsters, the soul.

This artist's soul, reminiscent of the abomination of which Horace writes at the beginning of the *Ars Poetica*, is indeed a strange concoction of personae, no community at all, authentic only to the enigma of its gabbling angel.

And yet, whatever status we allow the artist, the soul, the poem, surely we acknowledge that they do participate in a community of sorts, even if of the outside, of strangers to themselves, perhaps Blanchot's *community of those who have no community*. As such they are borne in a common relation to society, and to the resident of the numbskull of which Orbán writes, and which they threaten by the means of the very rejection to which they - artist, soul, poem - are subject. Their community depends specifically on the rejection of that critical habitus which exists to exercise judgement over poetry and to conceal itself from the exercise of such judgement. And yet their community depends on that habitus and on the fact of judgement just as surely as judgement depends on its objects: in this case the poem-candidates for the canon. From the point of view of the production of poetry, here then is a

principal site of ambivalence: to depend on what it must reject and threaten, i.e. the process by which the canon is kept.

The monstrous concoction of soul Orbán offers us demonstrates the arbitrary nature of the community which coalesces as both bound by differends and covering over where a differend has been. Myth and metaphor, the making of words in common, depend, however they are motivated, on the exercise of arbitrariness. The truth of a community is of a recognition in common which naturally generates meaning. The confusion of patriotism and its intellectual weakness is the assumption that a community is the result of a meaning it exists to generate. We did not, by and large, decide how to be a people. Rather we find ourselves in a certain position, with a particular range of meanings and actions constitutive of and available to us. Those antics, conventions and the like, by which we play at constituting ourselves as such, mainly function to conform to the observation that the doormat is by the door.

The (canon-conscious) poem as process, which commences in the knowledge of a contingent destination, though appearing as if on the outside, is as limited as any other discourse to the stock of signs constituting its milieu. But at least in recognising its situation, as an (always compromised) art of the outside, it has the opportunity to make betweenness its own community. Such a community would in its process articulate an ethics of presence for the larger community in the cracks of which or outside of which it falls. By such means poetry would, despite itself, be performing a function for the numbskull which, yes, it too inhabits.

### Community of Futures

A poem lives if it lives as a passion of traces. It is in those terms that Orbán declares poets the "haunters of the future" (1993, p. 18). Poem and those personae which make it and read it, do not survive above or aside the patterns of assumption - canonic patterns, grammatical patterns - from which the poem is cast. The personae whose work it is to *understand* the poem, are, as I have argued, never fully knowledged. Yet if the politics of the canon are necessarily hidden (unconscious in the terms of Jameson's thesis [1981, *passim*]), it remains the case that poetry allows, by means of indirection, a way past those traps which stand in the way of the completion of knowledge/s. Thus poetry allows futures which could not have been without it. What requires the faith of assumption is the metaphysician's received world-as-ever-thus. The faith in doubt required of the ironist is necessarily contingent. Modern, especially modernist, poetries, despite their failure to agree with each other, have often defined themselves and their notional community, if not as functional, at least in terms of the world changing work of words. In Marinetti's "Manifesto of Futurism": "We want to hymn the man at the wheel, who hurls the lance of his spirit across the earth, along the circle of its orbit" (in Rothenberg and Joris, p. 198). In Tristan Tzara's "Dada Manifesto on Feeble and Bitter Love": "Dada is the chameleon of rapid and self-interested change" (in Rothenberg and Joris, p. 304). Tzara's efforts to undermine the pretension of a purpose or a place for poetry or Dada are themselves, predictably enough, undermined by the character of his own assertions:

dada is the dictatorship of the spirit, or  
 dada is the dictatorship of language,  
 or else  
 dada is the death of the spirit  
 which will please many of my friends. Friends.

(in Rothenberg and Joris, p. 303-4)

Death and dictatorship are the leitmotifs of the community at its own throat which Dada very generally showed Europe in a likeness of its own image. In its more extreme manifestations (for instance in the cut-up techniques which Tzara promoted and which writers as various as Ern Malley's creators and David Bowie have adopted) the Dada poem which cannot communicate, by means of this refusal and disavowal of itself, is as or more polysemous than any intelligible text could be. By such disconcerting means as these, or the defamiliarisation of the Russian Formalists, texts model and draw attention to the invisible communities of those for whom speech sounds may be understood. Rejecting these as such they invent a more temporary community, of those who cannot be understood.

Communities of arbitrary and anti-social metaphor, rather than papering over differends, could have the effect of multiplying them, of locating them in otherwise indivisible entities, for instance in the body as in Anatol Stern's "this throng of raging bacchantes is one centimetre of my skin" (in

Rothenberg and Joris, p. 260). But the body could be even more crowded and with the here-and-now of the world, the events by which Modernism itself was transformed, as illustrated in Apollinaire's poem "The Little Car":

The 31st day of August 1914  
I left Deauville a little before midnight  
in Rouveyre's little car

With his driver there were three of us

We said goodbye to an entire epoch  
Furious giants were rising over Europe  
The eagles were leaving their aeries expecting the sun  
The voracious fish were rising from the depths  
The masses were rushing towards some deeper understanding  
The dead were trembling with fear in their dark dwellings

The dogs were barking towards over there where the frontiers are  
I went bearing within me all those armies fighting  
I felt them rise up in me and spread out over the countries they wound through  
With the forests the happy villages of Belgium  
Francorchamps with l'Eau Rouge and the mineral springs  
Region where the invasions always take place  
Railway arteries where those who were going to die  
Saluted one last time this colourful life  
Deep oceans where monsters were moving  
In old shipwrecked hulks  
unimaginable heights where man fights  
Higher than the eagle soars  
There man fights man  
And falls like a shooting star  
I felt in myself new and totally capable beings  
Build and organise a new universe  
A merchant of amazing opulence and astounding size  
Was laying out an extraordinary display  
And gigantic shepherds were leading  
Great silent flocks that were browsing on words  
With every dog along the road barking at them

(in Rothenberg and Joris, p. 128)

The new and totally capable beings which Apollinaire feels in himself may have some setbacks to suffer but they represent the aesthetic of an age suddenly keen to show itself and to make its own way. Perhaps a best example of the culmination, in the thirties, of the spirit in which the past as accomplished fact is set aside in favour of taking possession of the future is in Auden's (later disowned) anthem for the Spanish Civil War:

Spain

Yesterday all the past. The language of size  
Spreading to China along the trade routes; the diffusion  
Of the counting-frame and the cromlech;  
Yesterday the shadow reckoning in the sunny climates.

Yesterday the assessment of insurance by cards,  
The divination of water; yesterday the invention  
Of cartwheels and clocks, the taming of  
Horses. Yesterday the bustling world of the navigators.

Yesterday the abolition of fairies and giants,  
The fortress like a motionless eagle eyeing the valley,  
The chapel built in the forest;  
Yesterday the carving of angels and alarming gargoyles.

The trial of heretics among the columns of stone;  
 Yesterday the theological feuds in the taverns  
 And the miraculous cure at the fountain;  
 Yesterday the Sabbath of witches; but today the struggle.

The poet in this work has an undoubted role in the struggle as the one who, afflicted with yesterday's belief in the absolute value of Greece, begins by whispering, startled among pines, of his vision, wishing for the luck of the sailor. Tomorrow will be for "the young poets exploding like bombs" but today remains to the struggle, this poem in its here-and-now an act enabling it. And why? Because:

The stars are dead. The animals will not look.  
 We are left alone with our day, and the time is short, and  
 History to the defeated  
 May say Alas but cannot help nor pardon.

(in Cunningham, pp. 97-100)

The century is not short of declared and decisive roles for poetry. But what the century has shown is that efforts at deciding either how to be or what is to be are a risk to those near them. Mandelstam, survivor and finally victim of Stalinism, in his "Last Poems" offers an antidote for Auden's "Spain", the life of resistance of the poet who becomes society's victim:

If our antagonists take me  
 And people stop talking with me;  
 If they confiscate the whole world -  
 The right to breathe and open doors  
 And affirm that existence will exist  
 And that the people like a judge will judge;  
 If they dare to keep me like an animal  
 And fling my food on the floor -  
 I won't fall silent or deaden the agony,  
 But will write what I am free to write,  
 And yoking ten oxen to my voice  
 Will move my hand in the darkness like a plough  
 And fall with the full heaviness of the harvest...

(in Rothenberg and Joris, p. 396)

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Do we reconcile these images of the poet as becoming legislator, of the poet as the victim of the operation of law? Is there a truth between the fiction that we decide the world and the fiction that we have no deciding? Lyotard writes:

The subject is therefore neither active nor passive, it is both; but it is only one or the other insofar as, caught in one regimen of phrases, it pits itself against a phrase from another regimen, and seeks, if not their reconciliation, then at least the rules for their conflict, namely, the subject's forever threatened unity. (1988, p. 65)

Pound framed a similar problem in his manifesto, "Vortex":

You may think of man as that towards which perception moves. You may think of him as the TOY of circumstance, as the plastic substance RECEIVING impressions.

OR you may think of him as DIRECTING a certain fluid force against circumstance, as CONCEIVING instead of merely observing and reflecting.

(in Rothenberg and Joris, p. 527)

Such differends are at stake as much for the rationalist sceptic as for the clairvoyant. They are the basis of lotteries, of all forms of gambling. They set off Modernism with a throw of the dice.

Poetry's authenticity is in the bearing witness of selves to differends, such as lie between communities, between their disparate and becoming realities. Poetry bears witness to a continuous manifestation of loss: the manner in which the world, by means of words, conducts itself away from words and worlds that were real and which haunt the *here-and-now*. Lyotard writes of the real: "a swarm of senses lights upon a field pinpointed by a world" (1988, p. 50). If the real is the *weltanschauung* of the unavoidable community in which mutually intelligible subjects participate, then poetries are acknowledged as picking holes in it, as picking the scab where the real heals together; that place where, by means of a metaphor, differends vanish.

Poetry is a theft of words in which other thefts are shown. It is along these lines we may frame poetry's rejection of the *economic world*, its rejection of those *real-world* premises from which it does not extricate its own dependence. In W.S. Rendra's "Prostitutes of Jakarta - Unite!" the least organised and most exploited segment of the workforce is exhorted by the most articulate segment to do, allegorically, what all of the people being screwed ought to do:

The politicians and senior civil-servants  
are a tight bunch of rogues  
Their congresses and conferences  
wouldn't go without you  
You who must never say no  
because of the terror of hunger  
and the yoke of poverty  
and your long futile search for work...  
You are a part of the proletariat  
they have created  
Still  
Regret as you may  
But don't despair  
or allow yourselves to be sacrificed.

Prostitutes of Jakarta  
Stop being ashamed  
When I read in the papers  
how those clowns persecute you  
accuse you of being the cause of the nation's disasters  
I am enraged.  
You are my friends  
I can't have this  
God  
What clownmouths  
What foulmouths  
They have even politicized sex...

My sisters. Unite.  
Take up sticks  
Wave your bras on the ends of them  
Carry them around the town in procession  
waving them like flags they have disgraced.  
Now it is your turn to demand  
Tell them:  
That recommending the persecution of prostitutes  
without also recommending  
marrying them  
is nonsense.

Prostitutes of Jakarta  
My sisters  
Do not tremble before men  
When quite easily  
you can strip the fakes  
Double your prices  
let them flounder



Strike for a month  
soon they will be committing adultery  
with their brother's wives.

(in Aveling, 1975, pp. 27-33)

Is this easy advice for a man to give? Is this the voice Richard Rorty (1989, p. 94) insists on as required by those oppressed who cannot speak for themselves? Where do we draw the line between solidarity and Syed Manzrul Islam's *othering the other*? Islam writes:

Othering does not produce the other; it only produces an othered-other. One cannot produce the other. The other is so radically inscrutable in being an outside or infinity that it eludes the othering of the subject (the master). In other words, the other remains beyond the representational capture - designation or predication - of the subject. If the other were to remain other, it would remain beyond representation. (1996, p. 80)

One asks again: does poetry make difference by proclaiming a new world? Or, can it only render itself outside of worlds, by proclaiming difference? Is the voice of the poet that of an authentic outside/r? Is the community of poetry a nomadic one? Or is it one which goes through such motions in order to make possible its later canonic inclusion?

In Deleuze and Guattari's vocabulary, does this war machine live with the intention of achieving a place in the economy of a state apparatus? The opposite of a fifth column, poetry then could be the barbarian legion, the legion which with its special knowledge is best able to defend the empire from barbarians. But for Deleuze and Guattari the nomad exists only in becoming. Once under the State's sway then it might be assumed that barbaric cunning would quickly be lost. What "history does is to translate a coexistence of becomings into a succession". Deleuze and Guattari write that "collectivities can be transhumant, semisedentary, sedentary or nomadic, without by the same token being preparatory stages for the State, which is already there, elsewhere or beside" (1987, pp. 430-1). But if the State (or canon) is already elsewhere or beside then how is it refused? For Bourdieu, the economic universe which art inhabits is one:

whose very functioning is defined by a "refusal" of the "commercial" which is in fact a collective disavowal of commercial interests and profits, the most "anti-economic" and most visibly "disinterested" behaviours, which in an "economic" universe would be those most ruthlessly condemned. (1993, p. 76)

Yet he argues, these (behaviours) "contain a form of economic rationality (even in the restricted sense) and in no way exclude their authors from even the 'economic' profits awaiting those who conform to the law of this universe" (1993, p. 76).

In *The Field of Cultural Production, or: The Economic World Reversed* Bourdieu writes that the "economy of practices" in his "autonomous sector of the field of cultural production" amounts to a reversal of the economic world "in a generalized game of 'loser wins', on a systematic inversion of the fundamental principles of all ordinary economies" (1993, p. 39). Poetry, Bourdieu writes is "the disinterested activity *par excellence*" (1993, p. 51). The rejection of poetry or the posture of such a rejection with which society has been saddled is met with the fact or posture of poetry's rejection of society and of its ordinary economies. The moment we claim to be beyond the city wall is the moment, were we in a position to look, we would see that the wall has shifted behind us. Perhaps there are true nomads out there. But if there are we may sensibly ask what their reality has to do with the art of writing, or more particularly, with that sedentary art, history (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 23). Perhaps the true nomads are, from our point of view, as those people Lyotard imagines: "human beings endowed with language... placed in a situation such that none of them is now able to tell about it" (1988, p. 3).

That destruction of every voice and point of origin with which Barthes (1977, p. 148) associates writing, becomes itself the condition of the possibility of writing's origin and community. Sartre writes "the permanent possibility of abandoning the book is the very condition of the possibility of writing it and the very meaning of my freedom" (1989, p. 37). Rejection then is the originary and reflexive possibility of writing which exists only on the basis that it may dissolve itself. A first condition in which the canon-inhabited author lives out her or his judgement on the canon is the possibility of total

rejection from the outset and from every setting out thereafter. By way of her/his own works s/he can withhold what little is in her/his power of the canon's next possibility.

How then do we account, from this negative possibility which the permanent threat of rejection constitutes, for the fact of aesthetic expression itself? Hegel writes of the need from which art springs, that it "has its origin in the fact that man is a thinking consciousness, i.e., that man draws out of himself and puts before himself what he is and whatever else is" (1975, Vol I, p. 31). Michael Dransfield's poem "Like this for Years", despite "the failure of language" and the fact that "no good comes of singing or silence", rejects rejection in favour of an ultimate commitment for survival:

In the cold weather  
the cold city the cold  
heart of something as pitiless as apathy  
to be a poet in Australia  
is the ultimate commitment.

When y've been thrown out of the last car  
for speaking truthfully or mumbling poems  
and the emptiness is not these stranded  
endless plains but knowing that you are completely  
alone in a desert full of strangers

and when the waves cast you up who sought  
to dive so deep and come up with  
more than water in yr hands  
and the water itself is sand is air is something  
unholdable

you realise that what you taste now in the mornings  
is not so much blood as the failure of language

and no good comes of singing or of silence  
the trees wont hold you you reject rejection  
and the ultimate commitment  
is survival

(1987, p. 50)

Is a reason necessary or possible for such a commitment? Shu Ting writes in "Perhaps..." a poem dedicated "for the loneliness of an author":

Perhaps these thoughts of ours  
will never find an audience  
Perhaps the mistaken road  
will end in a mistake  
Perhaps the lamps we light one at a time  
will be blown out, one at a time  
Perhaps the candles of our lives will gutter out  
without lighting a fire to warm us.

Perhaps when all the tears have been shed  
the earth will be more fertile  
Perhaps when we sing praises to the sun  
the sun will praise us in return  
Perhaps these heavy burdens  
will strengthen our philosophy  
Perhaps when we weep for those in misery  
we must be silent about miseries of our own

Perhaps  
Because of our irresistible sense of mission  
We have no choice

(in Milosz, 1996, p. 298)

\*

Because a community is bounded by differends we can say that it depends on rejection and that its truth must be a lie (or at least be misunderstood) from the outside. This is especially so from the point of view of those who bear witness to the differend which a community builds over. Such bearing witness always risks (whether it attempts in its own right) the foundation of a new metaphoric and a new community. It involves the becoming foreign of those bodies which, by this means, inhabit prospectively a community which cannot yet be theirs. Such a community would in its turn have buried differends, could in its turn lose its borders and eventually its self, to other such burials. Community then reveals itself in the image of Fortunatus' purse: where outside and inside unceasingly become each other. Someone else's sovereignty lies under the risk of erasure merely by virtue of being someone else's thought. And is it not already erased, in the manner of an orientalism, by the means which make it someone else's, by its always already having been othered? Can community then exist only from the outside? Is it always mythic, a greener grass? Or is it only ever where we are?

For Levinas speech founds community and it does this by giving; it explains us with respect to itself; it is a kind of teaching (1969, p. 981). Community is, for the literate however, the between of language and civilisation. Yes - there are others, outside of civilisation, for whom there is a sociality, one which the literate mind is inclined to believe that it can comprehend. But, from whichever direction it is approached, the same gulf lies between literate and aliterate minds. Community may be before, after or in civilisation. It cannot be before speech. None of these questions of anteriority matter, though, for us for whom community is inscribed as a civilised potential of ours. We do not succeed in meeting on equal terms those who lack the privilege of a history. Where there are such meetings terms are imposed by the party which brings to the meeting an historicising consciousness of itself and its others. This is a lesson drawn from Derrida's insistence on the anteriority of writing. Civilisation is that state of mind which declares itself conscious and privileges itself with a view built over other frames of mind. Barbarism is defined from its outside as a state of mind which preys on its civilised other; it is how thought regards the outside it makes of itself. In *The Ethics of Travel*, Islam offers an ethical prescription, the purpose of which is "to actualise the virtual encounter and become other". It consists of three parts: "the obligation for the irreducible alterity of the other", "the just conduct of not making a victim of the other by de-legitimising its phrases" and "becoming other in encounter". These, Islam writes, are the prescriptive imperative of the cross-cultural relationship or discourse (1996, pp. 114-5).

How should poetry deal with such a prescription when its work is to uncover how a word, a metaphor, tells us to be? Perhaps Islam's conditions function as a Description of what poetry does do in its business of bearing witness to differends. "Becoming other in encounter" is the becoming foreign of the body which lives as a theft in a community it denies in order to make its own. As indirection of consciousness the poem is a gift to a community which cannot yet be because the poem will make it possible, complete it or allow its completion. Perhaps it is the kind of unknowable gift which W.S. Merwin foreshadows in writing of a most certain and intimate unknowable event.

For the anniversary of my death

Every year without knowing it I have passed the day  
When the last fires will wave to me  
And the silence will set out  
Tireless traveller  
Like the beam of a lightless star

Then I will no longer  
Find myself in life as in a strange garment  
Surprised at the earth  
And the love of one woman  
And the shamelessness of men  
As today writing after three days of rain  
Hearing the wren sing and the falling cease  
And boding not knowing to what

(in Milosz, p. 272)

Death being the ultimate community in the dissolution of community and for which no prescription or avowal makes difference. Death entailing the incomprehensible dissolution of the self of which Orpheus reminds us.

### Canonic Personae

There is no writing able to exercise its authenticity by means of not having a sense of itself. All sorts of discourse are always invading each other. That is in the nature of the living word, the word which unfolds in dialogue and as the interaction of languages (Bakhtin 1994, p. 119); (cf., that dialogue which, as Levinas writes, "proceeds from absolute difference" and has in language "the power to break the continuity of being or of history" [1969, pp. 194-5]).

The mythic freedom and openness of art which Flaubert celebrated (in a letter to Louise Colet in 1852), depends on the construction of an aesthetic (meta-)subjectivity outside of life and whatever constructs it:

This is why I love Art. It's because at least there, in the world of fictions, everything can happen; one is at the same time one's king and one's people, active and passive, victim and priest. No limits; humanity is a jokester with little bells that one jingles at the end of one's sentence, like a street performer at the end of his foot. (in Bourdieu, 1993, p. 175)

But this game of Art with a capital A, as the outside of the real of life, is a reflexive game. It is one which is subject to its own subjecting, one where position is confounded with disposition. It is a game which exercises the betweenness and slipperiness of words, the doom of their diaspora, in the cause of confounding what Bourdieu describes as the *space of possibles*. The ideal, expressed by Bayle in the *republic of letters*, of a subjectivity to which all are subject, manages to elide the problem of subjections within the self:

Liberty is what reigns in the Republic of Letters. This Republic is an extremely free state. In it, the only empire is that of truth and reason; and under their auspices, war is naïvely waged against just about anybody. Friends must protect themselves from their friends, fathers from children, fathers-in-law from sons-in-law: it is a century of iron. In it everyone is both ruler and subject of everyone else. (cited in Bourdieu, 1993, p. 163)

Bourdieu reminds us here that the *subject* of the work of art is not *one* of these characters ("the producer who actually creates the object in its materiality") "but rather the entire set of agents engaged in the field" (1993, p. 261).

We may describe the personae which inscribe the possibility of writing (and its survival) as canonic. The canon is the arrangement of words and of voices to which the breath or the eye returns. The canonic personae comprise the community of habitus in which writing is practised. These include such varied functions as writing, teaching, reading, reviewing, editing, anthologising, workshopping, mentoring, funding, judging, selecting, supporting (in various ways), badmouthing, gossiping and on. Personae in such functions are ranged around every possible work of art. And while thoroughly entangled with each other (and at times indistinguishable) as a result of being, as it were, splits in a continuity of subject (of the work of art), all of their positions may be broadly aligned as leaning more or less in the direction of, on the one hand, making the canon, and on the other hand of keeping it.

The *classic* co-dependent stereotypes here invoked are those of the idiot savant artist who cannot know what s/he is doing or with what prospects of success and who thus is a victim of the critic/judge, that dry stick who cannot make anything but whose business it is to know the value of other people's productions. These two present for us as the literary avatars, respectively, of authenticity and consciousness. In fact they are more like moods of the one personality than antagonists in a meeting. The differend which makes up their community is the constant work of protecting and violating borders, especially those between them. But as we have seen, these personae, which appear in their operation to work by means of excluding each other, in fact depend on the community of their differend. They make a language together and by misunderstanding each other, so that their

misunderstanding is what will need to be understood by those who come after them, by those who pass beyond them by means of a judgement.

Canonic logic, in tending to present the field as a unified one, drowns personae -- the very personae on which it depends for its life. The monolithic logic of the canon establishes one reading position, that position which is formed by the reading of the canon. And yet the characters which the canon contains are, by and large, diverse and unpredictable. We know how they behave once their texts are finished. But they are not finished, they haunt those after them. They are available for this haunting because they are canonised. To assume, as Kermode does in *The Classic*, that the naïvety of texts as to their future readings allows them to become classics (1975, p. 130), is to assume that the centuries of judgement which keep the canon have been uniformly pluralist and democratic. Yet he is arguing such a view with an *imperialist* foe of only decades before his own, in the form of T.S. Eliot - a maker *and* keeper of the canon if ever there was one. It is difficult to swallow the idea that the canon should have generally over time buried without a trace, as insufficiently naïve, all that did not survive. More likely that, rather than the canon providing a home for the open text, the openness of particular stories or characters over time and for us now, is the result of inclusion and retention in the canon. Canonisation - or more particularly the revisiting it implies - ensures that texts are opened to the contexts in which they survive. The point is not that Homer and Joyce play respectively with a flat and a round character. What is remarkable is that there is a sense in which they play with the same character and at opposite ends of the one canon.

Paradoxically, from this example one can see that canonic logic, while imposing a vertical and hierarchic community on those (personae) under its sway, may have the function of opening all of the contents of a canon to the whims of a community (such as that of poems) which specifically exists not to have a function. In Kristevan terms we could say that a bivalent logic, imposed on the productions of literature, has nothing to allow but the work of ambivalence. Ottó Orbán concludes his poem "Sinking Orpheus":

Orpheus the diver. He scrapes the skin of the age and it scrapes  
him,  
but human suffering is merely the air in his cylinder,  
the essence of his mastery is this: that the depths are a freight on  
his poems:  
down in the depths is a shadow, a ship that went down,  
around it no coins, no amphorae, only the darkness within things,  
and within that still denser, the darkness of genesis,  
infinity contained in a mere point of fire -  
though infinity's not made of points: everything wavers,  
only the wind, only the whirling, only the flux remains firm...  
Seekers of treasure, we circle a sunken star with its torso of light,  
while empires stream by in a pearled string of bubbles,  
and above us the ocean of time is pulsing with light.

(1993, pp. 37-8)

Efforts at reclaiming a significance from the wrecks of the past, efforts at a canonic sentience, serve to recover only the darkness within things. And yet there is a kind of mastery to avail those reading in the canon, a mastery founded on the reciprocity in which Orpheus and his age scrape each other. It is both difficult and futile to imagine fire on the ocean floor. And yet a star is sunk there, light pulses above us. We are in these delusions, in the facts which betray them, as in the air of suffering which fills this diver's cylinder, a sort of community: a community of impossible subjects which only exists where community is impossible. Such is the Orphic position to which the bearing witness of differends brings us. Such is the canonic necessity of surpassing the contents of the canon. By means of this necessity the canon lies open to what it cannot contain: its foreign becoming body - its future. And so a circuit of text and flesh sustains the positions from which these are read, from which these are written.

### Whose Community?

We are here because of (and despite) crimes against humanity, crimes which allowed us to become, which allow us to continue. The question of guilt relates, not to what we ourselves never did, but to our unavoidable life long complicity and collaboration against the truth, that collaboration which

characterises lives lived in the absence of any intention to act: lives which fail to dissent, lived in the graves of meaning on top of everything. This question of bad faith is notwithstanding the fact that others may have hearts as dark as ours, is notwithstanding the ceaseless exchange of bodies between a community of excluded others and a community of excluding others. Freud, in "Thoughts on War and Death" writes that:

the primitive history of mankind is filled with murder. Even today, the history of the world which our children learn in school is essentially a series of race- murders. The obscure sense of guilt which has been common to man since prehistoric times, and which in many religions has been condensed into the doctrine of original sin, is probably the outcome of a blood-guiltiness incurred by primitive man. (1952, p. 763)

To be situated by crimes past is an aspect of the human condition. It is the universal ethical *in media res*. No one arrived at their present position through a lineage of exclusively pure volitions, consensually exercised in conditions of equal power and sentience. Religions obviated such ideal intersubjective conditions with the idea of an imposed and therefore necessarily hierarchic harmony. Knowledge of our position is in this way ethically immobilising. To the extent that we act, it will always have been out of ignorance. Nietzsche's guilt as the mark of reactive thinking, the bad conscience of Christian invention, he regards as the condition of peaceful society (1977, p. 116).

We wonder, as the Claudius of *Hamlet* wondered, whether we can find ourselves pardoned and yet retaining the offence. The canon, in profane as in sacred literature, is thus as the receptacle and validation of the crimes by which we now mis/read and in which we are mis/read. And yet the immensity of the crime enabling, the powerlessness of individuals in the face of it, the security of a collective amnesia (these in the forms of myth, religion, legislation) - all haunt the propensity to act. The future fades into our fading to past. We are impossible to pick apart: as victim, as perpetrator, as ignorant, as fully knowledgeable. There is a community of differends where individuals, all haunted in like manner, blur. In Paul Celan's "Fugue of Death" we find the apotheosis of such a community as Hegel's master and slave together make up.

#### Fugue of Death

Black milk of daybreak we drink it at nightfall  
 we drink it at noon in the morning we drink it at night  
 drink it and drink it  
 we are digging a grave in the sky it is ample to lie there  
 A man in the house he plays with the serpents he writes  
 he writes when the night falls to Germany your golden  
 hair Margarete  
 he writes it and walks from the house the stars glitter  
 he whistles his dogs up  
 he whistles his Jews out and orders a grave to be dug in  
 the earth  
 he commands us strike up for the dance

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night  
 we drink in the mornings at noon we drink you at  
 nightfall  
 drink you and drink you  
 A man in the house he plays with the serpents he writes  
 he writes when the night falls to Germany your golden  
 hair Margarete  
 Your ashen hair Shulamith we are digging a grave in the  
 sky it is ample to lie there

He shouts stab deeper in earth you there and you others  
 you sing and you play  
 he grabs at the iron in his belt and swings it and blue  
 are his eyes  
 stab deeper your spades there and you others play  
 on for the dancing

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at nightfall  
 we drink you at noon in the mornings we drink you at  
 nightfall  
 drink you and drink you  
 a man in the house your golden hair Margarete  
 your ashen hair Shulamith he plays with the serpents

He shouts play sweeter death's music death comes as a  
 master from Germany  
 he shouts stroke darker the strings and as smoke you  
 shall climb to the sky  
 then you shall have a grave in the clouds it is ample to lie  
 there

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night  
 we drink you at noon death comes as a master from  
 Germany  
 we drink you at nightfall and morning we drink you  
 and drink you  
 a master from Germany death comes with eyes that are  
 blue  
 with a bullet of lead he will hit in the mark he will hit  
 you  
 a man in the house your golden hair Margarete  
 he hunts us down with his dogs in the sky he gives us a  
 grave  
 he plays with the serpents and dreams death comes as a  
 master from Germany

your golden hair Margarete  
 your ashen hair Shulamith

(1972, pp. 33-4)

Death is what dwells between the oppressor and the oppressed. It is the manner of their community. Where there is no justice to come between them a poem may bear witness. To witness is a decision among undecidings. A poem is the community of this witnessing and in it the oppressed may show their way, may evolve the solidarity of knowledge by which liberation is effected. Celan's haunting phrase "it is ample to lie there" shows us a beyond of irony in which what is said overpowers the situation which saying represents. What is there for the dead but lying there? But these words are neither from nor for the dead. At least they cannot be entirely so. It is by deciding to witness that poetry grabs hold of the future. It is by such decidings, as in Jayne Cortez' poem "Rape", that words may change the world:

What was Inez supposed to do for  
 the man who declared war on her body  
 the man who carved a combat zone between her  
 breasts  
 Was she supposed to lick the crabs from his hairy ass  
 kiss every pimple on his butt  
 blow hot breath on his big toe  
 draw back the corners of her vagina and  
 hee haw like a California burro

This being war time for Inez  
 she stood facing the knife  
 the insults and  
 her own smell drying on the penis of  
 the man who raped her

She stood with a rifle in her hand  
 doing what a defense department will do in times of

war  
 And when the man started grunting and panting and  
 wobbling forward like  
 a giant hog  
 She pumped lead into his three hundred pounds of  
 shaking flesh  
 Sent it flying to the Virgin of Guadelupe  
 then celebrated day of the dead rapist punk  
 and just what the fuck else was she supposed to do?

And what was Joanne supposed to do for  
 the man who declared war on her life  
 Was she supposed to tongue his encrusted  
 toilet stool lips  
 suck the numbers off his tin badge  
 choke on his clap trap balls  
 squeeze on his nub of rotten maggots and  
 sing god bless america thank you for fucking my life  
 away

This being wartime for Joanne  
 she did what a defense department will do in times of  
 war  
 and when the piss drinking shit sniffing guard said  
 I'm gonna make you wish you were dead black bitch  
 come here  
 Joanne came down with an ice pick in  
 the swat freak motherfucker's chest  
 yes in the fat neck of that racist policeman  
 Joanne did the dance of the icepicks and once again  
 from coast to coast  
 house to house  
 we celebrated the day of the dead rapist punk  
 and just what the fuck else were we supposed to do

(in Hoover, 1994, pp. 337-8)

Imagining the other way, the other world, has been the legendary, if clichéd, work of fictions and poetries, as celebrated in Frost's "The Road Not Taken". But it is also, as in Cortez' poem above, the work of poetry to witness where there is no other way; to witness a necessity which, if it speaks for justice and against a silence which *amply lies there*, yet has nothing utopic about it.

For Levinas silence is the greatest violence. May we regard silence as a technology for forgetting? The jolly singalong of national culture, in which we pass the billy round and drink our own health, is a process in which we manage to miss all those absences which are the signs of our enabling, the means by which we have come. It is easy to see the desirability of forgetting that which makes us culpable. In his essay "Holocaust" Baudrillard writes: "Forgetting extermination is part of extermination, because it is also the extermination of memory, of history, of the social, etc. This forgetting is as essential to the event, in any case unlocatable by us, inaccessible to us in its truth" (1994, p. 49). Once we ask the question as to sources we have opened a Pandora's box: the same one which Rousseau opened in his *Essay on the Origin of Languages* and which Derrida re-opened, in following Rousseau, in *On Grammatology*.

Does this silence (and its technology) not throw into question the absolute community of those without community? Lingis, in *The community of those who have nothing in common*, writes "Communication is an effort to silence, not the other, the interlocutor, but the outsider: the barbarian, the prosopopeia of noise" (1994, p. 71). For Lingis "One sees in the dialectical cadence of communication, proceeding by affirmation and contestation, an interval in which each makes himself other than the other, when one sees each one speaking in order to establish the rightness of what he says" (1994, p. 71).

Of silence and forgetting one needs to ask: if something is never translated or written down how can it join this community of outsiders? Or is such a community necessarily, markedly, more evanescent than the community which memorialises itself in writing? Poetry is an ambivalent art, one in which



inside and outside do not escape each others' conditions. Poetry is a hesitation, for instance between sound and sight; between sound which conjures vision and sight in which speech lives. Poetry, in its modern role of having to suffice for the amorphous outside of other discourses, in its scavenging role as witness of the unsaid and unsayable, bears witness to rejection. Because its work is unfinalisable it is doomed to generate more of its kind; doomed equally to an infinite regression into the canon and the labyrinth of silences which conceal its means. These conditions commit the canon makers to a process and not to the unknowable of what will for a time be saved as the elements of a next bricolage.

### Genocide, Autochthony

With what ethical set can one approach the ongoing originary silence in which words bear witness? Writers, artists of any sort, have the clearest responsibilities where agendas are unspoken. Art perhaps in this sense shares the goal which Wittgenstein has identified for philosophy, that of supplying remarks on the natural history of human beings, remarks "which have escaped remark only because they are always before our eyes" (1994, pp 200-1). In poetry's case there is a vocation to tell what is meant but will not be said, to speak the silence in which the crime goes on because it goes on covering itself in the manner of those accepted facts which are always before our eyes. In Australia the effect of the *terra nullius* doctrine is that the land has been emptied (albeit retrospectively) of its ethical contents: realising this means realising that there is no ethical basis for the state. In this circumstance the only way to build the state, if there ought to be one, is from the outside in.

If Aborigines are the new fifth columnists in Australian society, the agents of a barbarism which the big owners (of land, of capital) claim as foreign to our way of life, then we should remember that poetry begins inside an idiom, though in the spirit of an expulsion (as in the *Republic*), with an affinity for the outside. As that discourse, that version of events which has been shown the door, its job is to live up to a fierce mongrel logic, a logic of reconciliation.

In Australia today, in the great amorphous debate which is emerging over the culture of identity and rights of possession, it appears more and more to be the case that the languages spoken (and unspoken) by the antagonists in this debate are mutually unintelligible. They represent the differend between two mythologies: of *terra nullius* and the Dreaming, of land which is possessed and land which possesses. Both are claimed as aboriginal myths in that they both posit their bearers as the autochthonous Australians, inheritors of a right. But, in the terms Lyotard articulates, the differend between these positions throws into question the very idea of rights of inheritance. This is because just as "it is in the nature of a victim not to be able to prove that one has been done a wrong" so the perfect crime consists, not in killing the victim, but in "obtaining the silence of the witnesses, the deafness of the judges, and the inconsistency (insanity) of the testimony" (1988, p. 8). This scenario assumes that the law is able to stand between plaintiff and defendant. While this may be becoming true, such a separation has not been constitutive of the law in this case, but rather of the image the law has promoted of itself. Lyotard writes that a plaintiff loses the means to prove having been done a wrong, "if the author of the damage turns out directly or indirectly to be one's judge" (1988, p. 8). If in the colonial world this can be generally claimed as the pattern, it is because one law buried another, buried the differend between it and its other. Because it is in the nature (or de-naturing) of laws to be one. And it is in the culture (or it could be said, the grammar) of ones to have others, to be stood outside of and neither to comprehend the differend beyond themselves nor the differends within: enabling as they must have been of the synthesis by which the law became one.

In *Strangers to Ourselves* Kristeva writes: "The foreigner is within us. And when we flee from or struggle against the foreigner, we are fighting our unconscious - that 'improper' facet of our impossible 'own and proper'" (1991, p. 191). For Kristeva psychoanalysis is a journey into two strangenesses: that of the other and of the self (1991, p. 182). Kristeva asks us how we could tolerate foreigners if we did not know ourselves as strangers.

Levinas writes of a gift which founds community and explains us with respect to itself as a kind of teaching (1969, p. 98). But what kind of a gift is it where the words are not or cannot be received, where nothing is shared or understood of the gift? What kind of a potlatch which can never be reciprocated? What kind of teaching where the student is deprived of language? Aboriginal Australia, read and written as a silence and emptiness, never had the opportunity to welcome strangers or to offer them such a gift as Levinas imagines. Is this opportunity (to offer something of our own) now available to that community which never allowed it before, which could never receive but only seize? Can we go by the way we never came? Whose law would authorise that?

Lyotard believes that "the activities of thought have a...vocation: that of bearing witness to differends" (1993, p. 10). This I would argue is also, not the duty, but the essential activity of an ethically engaged poetry. Such a poetry is a community in bearing witness to differends. This bearing witness is achieved by becoming foreign. Bearing witness is what the body of foreigners cannot help but do, yet need not articulate. In Lyotard's terms it implies an art of not knowing which in turn constitutes a resistance (1988, p xvi). This recognition necessitates neither a descent into obviousness nor a flight from polysemy. Nor should it excuse the withholding of compassion from those who know none. Bearing witness to differends is not a means of subjecting them to a new law or totality.

And it is for this reason that we need to seriously ask how possible (conversely how difficult) it is to bear witness to differends. If history is a dialectical progression then does that progression not always represent the victory of one party over another? What kind of voice does the culture have which lies under another allowing it? How much of a voice does a Caliban get to have? Whose voice is it he has? Spivak has put the question more eloquently: 'Can the subaltern speak?' The problem with the idea that the vocation of thought is the bearing witness of differends is precisely that differends are what bury the means of witness which constitute a language, a culture, a position.

In "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte", the immediate analogy which Marx presents for the forgetful process by which men make their own history ('in time-honoured disguise and borrowed language') is the language of the learner who moves freely in a new idiom only to the extent that he (if momentarily) forgets his mother tongue; whose freedom, to this extent, depends on his becoming foreign:

In like manner the beginner who has learnt a new language always translates it back into his mother tongue, but he has assimilated the spirit of the new language and can produce freely in it only when he moves in it without remembering the old and forgets in it his ancestral tongue. (1978, p. 595)

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What kind of speech is there from the silence in which one lies forgotten? What kind of witness is borne in a speech which entails forgetting what one was to witness, forgetting one's self as witness? In Australia a question arises as to what extent an English language literary tradition might be able to bear witness to the differends which mark its own boundaries, in this case the boundaries between indigenous community and the canonic literary community constellated around the traditions of the English language in Australia. The fact that we have translated texts, the fact that Aboriginal writers write in English tempts us toward too easy a transcendence, too easy a passage over a silence which may thus be consigned into the work (or failure) of someone else's witness.

Nor does acknowledging the problem does not get us out of its grip. The effort of bearing witness to a differend does not absolve us of the past or the acts of silence or forgetting which make us possible. Nor does it free us of their means, of the fact of theirs as being our means. Bearing witness is the beginning, not of absolution, but of responsibility. Levinas writes in *Totality and Infinity*:

*The infinity of responsibility denotes not its actual immensity, but a responsibility increasing in the measure that it is assumed; duties become greater in the measure that they are accomplished. The better I accomplish my duty the fewer rights I have; the more I am just the more guilty I am. (1969, p. 245)*

Herein lies the pastoralist's (and the prime minister's) nightmare: indigenous claims will always be the thin edge of the wedge, the crime enabling can never be expiated. Is this not also the true aim of genocide: that there be no more victims? But as perpetrator I do not succeed in wishing myself away any more than a photographer of wilderness succeeds in erasing the track by which s/he came and which s/he does not show. If the land were emptied of invaders tomorrow, if the descendants of the invaders were to divest themselves of the spoils, what would they be giving back, how would the land returned resemble the land invaded? That land no longer exists. How would we tell its new old inhabitants (and their means of possession) apart from their dispossessors? Indeed how can we now? When everyone puts the empire behind them, when nobody wishes to be a colonist, how viable (and for whom) is the indigene's persona? Oodgeroo Noonuccal writes in her poem "The Past":

Let no one say the past is dead.  
 The past is all about us and within.  
 Haunted by tribal memories, I know  
 This little now, this accidental present  
 Is not the all of me, whose long making  
 Is so much of the past.

But the past is never simply chosen or simply recognised, aside from an *accidental present*. For those whose fate it is to live out a differend, for those victims who must also expiate, by their resolve, the crime inflicted on them, haunting will never be unidirectional:

Tonight here in suburbia as I sit  
 In easy chair before electric heater,  
 Warmed by the red glow, I fall into dream:  
 I am away  
 At the camp fire in the bush, among  
 My own people, sitting on the ground,  
 No walls about me,  
 The stars over me,  
 The tall surrounding trees that stir in the wind  
 Making their own music,  
 Soft cries of the night coming to us, there  
 Where we are one with all old Nature's lives  
 Known and unknown,  
 In scenes where we belong but have now forsaken.  
 Deep chair and electric radiator  
 Are but since yesterday,  
 But a thousand thousand camp fires in the forest  
 Are in my blood.  
 Let none tell me the past is wholly gone.  
 Now is so small a part of time, so small a part  
 Of all the race years that have moulded me.

(in Gilbert, 1988, p. 99)

"Now" may constitute a small part of time and that fact is important to the reality of claims of indigeneity. It is important to an understanding of the scale and meaning of dispossession. But it needs equally to be acknowledged that means of access to the time prior to dispossession is by virtue of present knowledges and technologies: the episteme in which one questions whether the subaltern can speak. Becoming "one with all old Nature's lives" may indeed be the work of a dream. But it is a dream which has been worked over by hauntings other than those thus here reclaimed. Others have, in their genealogy, sat by a thousand thousand fires, in forests elsewhere, which share an absence with the forest here imagined. And there are other dreams which infest the consciousness of black Australia, dreams such as those suggested in writing by Robert Walker (1958-1984), before he was beaten to death in Fremantle Prison:

Unreceived Messages

Am I dreaming?  
 There you are.  
 Here am I.  
 ...But your gaze  
 Is beyond me.

You are speaking,  
 Your words are clear.  
 I am speaking.  
 You do not hear.  
 Inside - I move disturbed.

"I know you"  
 You echo: "I know you".  
 I reach out - but touch not.

My body still - still my body,  
And still again I have failed  
To communicate.

My feet are walking,  
My mind recalling the words we spoke  
To one another - but not at all.  
Sorrow seeps through my shell  
Touching me - and I turn with joy.

In the line for lunch  
I drift into oblivion again,  
Weary from my efforts  
To reach you - to know you  
Like you say you know me.

The key turns - the day dies.  
And once again I am born.  
A child gasping for his first breath of life,  
Crawling weakly from a plastic egg  
To surface in a prison cell.

The pen - automatic  
Like the beat of my heart.  
Pain - a stranger to me -  
Stops all but my heart.  
Acid tears burning chips of egg shell.

I feel  
And write life in every stroke.  
The threat of death in every still moment.  
Time circles above me like a vulture,  
Then crawls on like a dying man.

Sleep - the semen of death  
Draws me into its lust.  
The night dies - and once again I am conceived  
Oblivious to the life outside of my shell  
For again but a foetus - awaiting release.

(in Gilbert, pp. 130-1)

Time circled Robert Walker like a vulture. Oodgeroo Noonuccal saw herself living on time's iceberg tip. Was adopting a tribal name for her a way of reclaiming some of the vast continuity taken from her? Both longed for a return to conditions prior to those mediated by the words in which their longing was expressed. If European Australians ask *what sort of country makes me mine(?)*, they acknowledge that pride still shows in the cracks now, shows the pragmatist works by considered rights, distressed at the fraying of the law which made my country mine. The kingdom of vast regrets remains one. It is the bland voice resigned to its spoils, to its great good fortune, which consoles itself saying *there's no going back*. And yet, as Lionel Fogarty writes in his poem "The Worker Who, The Human Who, The Abo Who":

In our quest for living  
as an entity  
we belong to messages  
we belong to day to day realities

(in Gilbert, p. 159)

Subject to the absence of limits which dwells in the universality of the judgement I now cannot help but exercise, what I omit to recognise is that only the other can belong, can be placed. I myself am doomed to the exile of an *everywhereness* in which my I consciousness over and above the world and my place in it is exercised at the expense of the possibility of dwelling (of *being of*) anywhere in it.

Such a recognition imperils as well the indigeneity of the other, threatens it with the prospect of reduction to, not merely an atavism of my present state, but its barbaric outside (an outside, that is, which knows enough of me to threaten me, to be my *own* outside).

Poetry stands as a differend in the gulf of unintelligibility which is constituted by those languages (and we should say lects of any sort) which are foreign to each other. The dialectic of our age entails the challenge of passing beyond the differend between civilisation and barbarism into the condition foreshadowed by Menander, in which *nothing can be foreign* to us. This would be the (now impossible) condition of worldwide indigeneity.

Except for the hymn singers and praise sayers, the laureates and anthem-grinders, poetry's community has been established (following Romanticism and Shelley's Plato into the Modern) by tradition as on the outside, in exile. To ask how can that outside be taught or learned or even become, not belonging anywhere, is to ignore the facts of its presence (the facts that is, of its being learnt everywhere, of its teaching itself).

Poetry, all literature, is reflection on (in Bakhtin's terms, refraction of) the conditions from which it emerges. The general and permanent condition of the spoken animal is dialogic and polyglossic. The betweenness which we attribute, as intertextuality, to particular discourses, is characteristic of all instances of discourse: language is between people as languages are between peoples. We may say (with Nietzsche, 1993, p. 41) that poetry casts off the supposed reality of culture. It proposes a barbarising of the inside of a language (thus culture) such as is unavoidable for those coming to a culture (and language) from its outside. But poetry does this from the inside and in the spirit of its enabling, with all the resources of the particular language which haunt this next considered saying. Poetry makes itself foreign because it takes what is within its grasp and sets it at distance. It takes itself apart with doubt, with undeciding. From the inside, then, poetry draws out the exile of words, confounding *as is* with *as may be*. Poetry, as fiction, is a gamble against common sense. Such is the nature of daring not to know.

Bakhtin credits the novel, via Dostoyevsky, with rediscovering the polyphony which is the natural condition of human voices when they arrange themselves in conversation. Mythic, monologic and automatic instances of language and literature all participate in the rule of unspoken assumption in the interest of and with the effect of reifying the status quo as that which *goes without saying*. They are all in the manner of what has generally been considered concealed by ideology. The dialogic, the de-automatising, the poetic, similarly are, in the terms of this analogy, in the manner of what has been considered liberating, de-mystifying, as if exhuming the truth from the very process of its burial. Foreign speech is one in which nothing can *go without saying*. The mistakeness of the foreigner where s/he gets beyond her/himself in words is demonstration of this. The foreigner only gradually becomes responsible for the words of the language s/he has borrowed. Poetry, too (paradoxically because of the degree of native skill expected of it), exercises, as does the foreigner, a practice of becoming responsible for words, one in which, indeed, nothing must *go without saying*. In doing so it merely plays out as practice the fact, to which Sartre alerts us, that the meaning of my expressions always escapes me (1989, p. 373).

To be escaped by one's meanings, to escape one's potentials in the effort of meaning, the givenness of what one is *allowed* to mean: these are the volitional parameters of poetry's community, of the differences made both of and by its participants.

## Wandering

Blanchot's community is not only one of making but equally one of unmaking, of "not doing", of "unworking" (1988, p. 23). His unavowable community is one which:

by opening unknown spaces of freedom, makes us responsible  
for new relationships, always threatened, always hoped for,  
between what we call work, *oeuvre*, and what we call unworking,  
*désoeuvrement*. (1988, p. 56)

In a circular logic differend and community propose each other. A community is when humans participate with each other. What is between borders, however it absolves or undefines itself, is some kind of community.

What sort of community can poetry or its makers achieve when the work of art is torn between conforming and not, between making and unmaking sense? However art conforms to its canonic necessities, however canons bend to the shape of what they next contain, community is the canon's structural opposite. Its principles are horizontal and metonymic. It is always beside itself, never arrived, never over or under. The frustration of community and of everything we share, of everything which is between us, is precisely in this failure of community to coincide with itself.

\*

The work of making and the work of choosing/keeping the canon are contiguous and in some ways homologous. The makers of poems have no other model outside of their practice from which to derive an editorial process for their work than those processes by which works like theirs have been given or deprived or have had truncated/disturbed a place in the canon. The keeping of the canon has no model outside of its practice but the deciding which goes into the finishing of individual works. As *énoncé*, canon and work participate in the same illusion as to how stillness is attained. This is the illusion of Macleish's declaration that "A poem should not mean/But be" (Allison et al, 1983, pp. 1029-30). To the extent that canon and poem are able to be considered in their own right these have no model and no context outside of each other. Nothing becomes by merely being, nothing merely is. It is only together, as a two sided track, that we are able to speak of the context which canon and its contents share.

And yet while we say that there is no model for each but the other, if we allow the two completely to co-incide, there will be no model for either. This blurring, however desirable it may be, is a real risk to both processes. The industry of standing between the reader and the author (and in which neither of these parties is able effectively to withdraw consent) is doomed to survive in the fact that however these are made or are allowed to overlap, they ultimately remain the only two *necessary* positions. The industry of standing between reader and author is likewise frustrated by the *wandering* of these personae.

\*

Authorial wandering is a tropic refusal to settle or find a last frame, it is a telling which, whatever credulity it immediately demands of its audience, always opens onto a new story or a new telling, by virtue of which it acknowledges, not the particularity of its own antecedents, but the fact that its context is canonic. Living myth in an oral culture we guess may have been like this.

A culture tends towards coherence in its manner of resolving against aesthetic wandering : in the forms of decision that it chooses to assume, or that it cannot help but assume, where these are given it. Such aesthetic wanderings are away from past knowledges, knowledges passing. That is to say that the objective stillness of accounting arises from a subjective base of experience and practice, practice which entails a testing and a passing of limits. A canon's resolving against indirection performs a function for a community which cannot otherwise know itself and it may perform this function in the service of a textuality (such as poetry's) which disallows itself a function.

But the canon's accounting only succeeds in numbering the virtues by which it designates itself as the place of greatness (a singular place). It does not recognise itself as the place of the word between (a vector or movement, a *non*-place), such as all words are. So the canon is a kind of faith which makes and owns us and, if we agree with it (as does Bloom's Third World coming to understand itself through Shakespeare [1994, p. 38] ), we may be forgiven our foreignness in this ready-made home, the *heimlich* of word, of text. We may forgive ourselves because the canon will then be all our own work. It will bring to life those ghosts which acknowledge us.

Yet the mistakenness entailed in authorial wandering (necessary to the production of literary works) is not the mistakenness of divergence from the ideal to which the canon and the next thing it implies, conform; but rather the sort of mistakenness which anyone experiences in trying to explain a new place to themselves. This is the mistakenness of a Columbus who will not recognise the New World he is in. It lives or dies in the work uncorrected. If it is to be a mistakenness from an historic point of view then we note that Deleuze and Guatarri declare the multiple narratives of Nomadology to be the opposite of history. History for them is always written from a sedentary point of view (1987, p. 23). Like Columbus, the artist of any persuasion, to the extent that s/he is canonised, is the agent of a future agenda, to which s/he can have no privileged access, however it is later claimed that s/he was ahead of her/his time. But it is not primarily in relation to that unknowable agenda that we claim that the artist

is mistaken. Mistakenness is necessitated by the impossibility of knowing the true nature of the work's relation to its material. Merleau-Ponty describes this position in terms of a *wrong-sidedness*:

It goes without saying that language is oblique and autonomous, and that its ability to signify a thought or a thing directly is only a secondary power derived from the inner life of language. Like the weaver, the writer works on the wrong side of his material. He has to do only with language, and it is thus that he suddenly finds himself surrounded by meaning. (1964, pp. 44-5)

All the words with which we approach the business of making with words are from the wrong side of the track: a track which like the Mobius strip turns out if one follows it, to be continuous, a ceaseless return; both sides of which seem wrong simply because they are the same, because it is a one-sided loop. The poem (and any work of art) and its metabusiness (the business about its business) interanimate to achieve a community, if they can, on the basis of such a blindness to reversibility. The problem for *metabusiness* is that the authenticity of transcendence is always frustrated by its being said somewhere, by its having to refer. Perhaps this problem was never more clearly demonstrated than in "Mayakovsky's Suicide Note":

1

She loves me, loves me not.  
I tear my fingers  
and scatter them,  
broken,  
as one tears,  
superstitiously,  
and scatters all over  
May  
the little wreath of daisy.  
Let the haircut and close shave  
reveal  
greyness,  
and the silver of years  
pound.

I hope,  
I believe:  
I shall never be  
one  
of shameful prudence.

2

It's two o'clock already.  
I guess you're in bed.  
The Milky Way  
a silver river  
in the night.

I'm in no hurry,  
no point  
waking  
troubling you  
with telegrams.  
As they say,  
the incident is closed.  
The loveboat simply  
cracked up against circumstance.  
You and I:  
quits,  
no use listing  
mutual griefs,

miseries,  
 hurts.  
 Look at how quiet the world is.  
 Night  
 has levied a tax  
 of stars in the sky.  
 In such moments  
 one gets up and speaks to  
 ages,  
 history,  
 the whole cosmos.

3

It's two o'clock...  
 I guess you're in bed.  
 Or maybe you're  
 also up with this thing.  
 I'm in no hurry.  
 No point  
 waking  
 troubling you  
 with telegrams.

(in Rothenberg and Joris, pp. 249-50)

There is something terrifying in the calm assurance of the poet at work till the end which is his own work. One's own death at one's own hand, fashioned with poem for footnote, does not escape, but rather assures and cultivates, community. In a related final fragment, published as "Unfinished" in the *Selected Verse*, Mayakovsky writes of the embodiment of words, of their force ringing through centuries:

I know the force of words and warning they can sound  
 I don't mean those which draw front-row applause  
 But words at which coffins break lose to pound  
 the ground this way and that with heavy paws  
 They may be cast out publishers ignore them  
 But words forge on tighten their belly-bands  
 ring through the centuries and trains come crawling  
 to lick and fondle poetry's horny hands  
 I know the force of words They seem a petal flung  
 Under the heels of dancers just a trifle  
 But man possesses backbone heart and tongue

(1985, p. 268)

The bringing of worlds into being (work of backbone, heart and tongue) is a collectivity in which the body and the outside are in the condition of perpetual reversal we know as community; that community which Irigaray expresses as *infinitely neighbouring*, and which we have noted, for Levinas lives in the epiphany, in which God is reached through the *face of alterity*. This interaction is what ensures that, however civilised we become, we will always, to the degree that we know anything of our selves, find those selves foreign.

Regardless of what alterity assumes of us, of our words, of the community of their failing to get across, their failing to leave well alone, we live in an assumption of foreignness which is as good as the heeding of a prayer. This itinerance of wishes provides an endless spring of scavenging. Becoming foreign is the impossible work of scavenging self, forgetting whose skin one is in. Dialogue (however foreign to each other its partners are) is the act of faith and doubt which institutes, restores and allows the word between as community.

Speech models the failure of sentience to ever catch up with itself. Just as Levinas tells us that consciousness tears us away from the there is (in Lechte, 1994, p. 117), so in speech as it unfolds with others an authenticity is established from the defeat of consciousness because the sentience which



lives in speech cannot take in all that is meant. The ongoing of speech is thus always borne in mistakenness. That mistakenness by which we makers of context manage never to be fully apprised of our haunting, provides the specific breach which enables authentic freedom. Hence the need for all of the abstractions (grammar, semantics, the canon) which serve to take in meaning. When Levinas writes that "the word is a window; if it forms a screen it must be rejected" (1979, p. 205) it must be replied that unfortunately we are not privileged with the means of judging between these. We speak and judge and go into the future, certain only of a degree of mistakenness wherever we apprehend these processes. What forges community is the failure of the reflective/reflexive capacities behind speech to keep up with any of its manifestations. Herein lies the fascination of the transcendence in which speech participates: that the between of us remains perpetually beyond consciousness, that what we say is always beyond the means of apprehension which are at our disposal; that we are, if in community, always beyond ourselves.

What makes the body foreign is in the unavoidable borders the body makes in and of and by itself. Rilke writes:

Choose to be changed. With the flame, with the flame be enraptured,  
where from within you a thing changefully splendid escapes:  
nothing whereby that earth-mastering artist is captured  
more than the turning-point touched by his soaring shapes.

(1949, p. 111)

The borders which make the body and which articulate its place in speech at once make it foreign. To choose to be in community with others is to choose to be changed. Community exists only in the circle of alterity by means of which bodies apprehend each other only ever from the outside, in the gap which sensate experience broaches and makes common.

If poetry finds no community but the one which Blanchot suggests, of those who have no community, we may argue that this is because it is the *art* of being lost between, because it is (or rather it has long since become, in the movement from Romanticism to Modernism) an art of homelessness, the art (to go back to Plato) of the one disallowed from the city. The particularity of its dissonances establish the frame in which are found those affinities and disaffinities which work at making community.

In dreams, Cixous writes "foreignness is absolutely pure, and this is the best thing for writing. Foreignness becomes a fantastic nationality" (1993, p. 80). Dreams for Cixous are states for which there is no transition, states in which we experience an "extreme familiarity with extreme strangeness" (1993, p. 80).

Language is the site between us in which we become participants in a community which opens onto rejection, the risk which has, as Blanchot writes of the *community of lovers*, "as its ultimate goal the destruction of society" (1988, p. 48). Does a differend paper over that risk? Is in its place a word, a phrase indispensable? Nation, republic, legacy? What type of community is the invisible wishing to name, to see itself, to say its differends by unpronouncing them, by making that is, unintelligible, those who disagree with it?

If, as Merleau-Ponty writes, "through the action of culture I take up my dwelling in lives which are not mine" (1964, p. 75), then must there not attend this action a risk of eviction, of being told to mind my own business, or at least of earning the resentment of those less adept with signs, those less able to articulate their position in culture? And as if this were not itself sufficient risk to the prospect of culture, there remains the fact that this imperial self of mine may be met with an other which similarly claims a right to dwell in what does not belong to it, and perhaps specifically in what I have thought of as mine. However the last half millennium appears, the imperial view was never the exclusive privilege of Europe. Witness Po Chü-I's poem, "After Collecting the Autumn Taxes":

From these high walls I look at the town below  
Where the natives of Pa cluster like a swarm of flies.  
How can I govern these people and lead them aright?  
I cannot even understand what they say.  
But at least I am glad, now that the taxes are in,  
To learn that in my province there is no discontent.  
I fear its prosperity is not due to me

And was only caused by the year's abundant crops.  
 The papers I have to deal with are simple and few;  
 My labour by the lake is leisurely and still.  
 In the autumn air the berries fall from the eaves;  
 At the evening bell the birds return to the wood.  
 A broken sunlight quavers over the southern porch  
 Where I lie on my couch abandoned to idleness.

(in Milosz, 1996, p. 111)

The betweenness which makes possible culture also constitutes a risk to which it is subject: the risk of violence. It is in the exercise of this risk that civilisations build and threaten their others and as well the calm they cultivate, the idleness for which they live.

The mistake of phenomenology - we could call it Europe's mistake - is to assume, over the splits in and between subjects, too easy a passage of transcendence. The mind Marvell imagines in "The Garden" as one which, transcending its pleasures and resemblances, creates "far other worlds", may indeed have the effect of "annihilating all that's made" (1972, p. 101). But what it mainly cannot help but annihilate is its others. The mistake with which the human rights campaigner may have to contend is not so much in having generalised a particular polity as virtuous, but rather in assuming that her or his freedom (the freedom to disturb an order) is welcome; that our freedom will welcome us wherever we go.

If freedom is Europe's gift to the world, we may straightforwardly employ here Sartre's dictum: *to give is to enslave*. To give, he writes is "to appropriate by destruction while utilizing this destruction to enslave another". For Sartre "the craze to destroy which is at the bottom of generosity is nothing else than a craze to possess" (1989, p. 594). The context of these remarks is a discussion of two sides of possession (we may gloss these as ownership and haunting) which meet in the assertion that "a ghost is only the concrete materialization of the idea that the house and furnishings 'are possessed' " (1989, p. 587). For Sartre the possessor is the one I meet in and through the object he possesses. Generosity is a destructive function and destruction "realizes appropriation perhaps more keenly than creation does, for the object destroyed is no longer there to show itself impenetrable."

The flames which burn the farm which I myself have set on fire,  
 gradually effect the fusion of the farm with myself. In  
 annihilating it I am changing it into *myself*. Suddenly I rediscover  
 the relation of being found in creation, but in reverse; I *am* the  
 foundation of the barn which is burning; I *am* this barn since I am  
 destroying its being... to destroy is to recreate by assuming  
 oneself as solely responsible for the being of what existed *for all*.  
 (1989, p. 593)

The totalising mind rewrites the world in the name of its freedom and by means of the illusion that the world was a blank slate to be inscribed. Of the result of the world-making transcendence Marvell describes: "Annihilating all that's made/ To a green thought in a green shade" (1972, p. 101), how can we not ask - whose thought, whose shade?

These destructions are in the spirit of rejection in which artwork and canon participate in order to have a world theirs: they abolish the past and other worlds that these might be made objects in their image. The process of the canon provides just such an object (as it finds in itself) for the ideal consciousness which knows only and entirely what it ought to know: itself. But does a practical consciousness know its self when it knows no other selves? Or do consciousness and community turn out to be the same track?

In *The community of those who have nothing in common* Lingis writes:

To see the other as another sentient agent is to see his postures  
 and movements directed to a range of implements and obstacles  
 about him. To see the other is to see her place as I could occupy  
 and the things about her as harbouring possibilities that are open  
 to my skills and initiatives. It is to see the other as another one  
 like I am, equivalent to and interchangeable with me. It is the  
 sense of the death awaiting me that circumscribes the rage of

possibilities ahead of me. To see the other as one who has his own tasks and potentialities is to sense another death circumscribing the field of possibilities ahead of him... But the other turns to me empty-handed from across that wall of death. (1994, pp. 127-8)

But is death for the artist or the writer like this? Is Mayakovsky's death like this? What of a Keats, what of a name 'writ on water'? Acknowledging alterity is intimation of mortality. But what of the canonic implications of death? Death closes the corpus, makes it unequal to others, bars the possibility of its becoming equal. Death reduces that life of process to its products and leaves those products notionally open to unending judgement.

Levinas claims that the welcoming of the Other is the consciousness of my injustice. And Levinas' Other may not necessarily be a foreigner. But while the foreigner may not necessarily be in proximity with me, my knowledge of that Other, foreigner or otherwise, demands a proximity borne of opening, in the face to face, a consciousness of the same. Yet it remains to ask what if the Other should not welcome me? What if the face should not summon me, what if it should turn away? There would still be these words, whether windows or screens, and they would still lie between us; move with us by the means in which they are made infinite and by which we offer to ourselves our choosing, our desire. Desire in any case cannot escape the permanent seesawing yearning of exile - to be elsewhere in my home, and to know the foreigner's face in the body in the mirror. Blanchot's "impossible community" is one which can never be finished and which always and necessarily risks disappearance.

Community is merely the consequence of the fact that, wherever speech goes on, there is nothing but collaboration, voluntary or otherwise. In this sense then community is the becoming of that unsituatable place in which we ourselves are always becoming. It has - by virtue of this evanescence - the unknowable status which Socrates, in the *Cratylus*, attributed to a transition always going on (1952, p. 114). Brecht echoes Valéry's "perverse delight" in the dictum that a work of art is never finished but abandoned (in Block and Salinger, 1960, p. 29), beginning his poem in "About the Way to Construct Enduring Works":

How long  
Do works endure? As long  
As they are not completed.  
Since as long as they demand effort  
They do not decay.

(1976, p. 193)

It is in that failure to decay (corollary of never arriving), which can be said of none of us personally, that we discover a community which condemns itself and in which we are, as Sartre claims, *condemned to freedom*.

\*

The *problem* of community may be best expressed in the fact that it is not only we humans who are condemned to our freedom. For Lyotard the animal is the paradigm of the victim (1988, p. 28). In dealing with the effects of our freedom we would stand towards that most unavowable of our communities, that with which humanity never ceases to build its most fundamental differend, a gulf over which it is only our own words which we can hear. If consciousness was the characteristic of mind/fulness which served as a vehicle for that centring of ourselves in which all species have come to be threatened, then what the decentring now required depends on is its lack. In the mythology of the modern world it is Copernicus who begins us on this means by which we may learn to dwell among and not over. Robinson Jeffers writes in his poem "Carmel Point" of the extraordinary patience of things:

This beautiful place defaced..  
Now the spoiler has come: does it care?  
Not faintly. It has all time. It knows the people are a tide  
That swells and in time will ebb, and all  
Their works dissolve. Meanwhile the image of the pristine beauty  
Lives in the very grain of the granite,  
Safe as the endless ocean that climbs our cliff. - As for us:

We must uncenter our minds from ourselves;  
 We must unhumanize our views a little, and become confident  
 As the rock and the ocean that we were made from.

(in Milosz, 1996, p. 34)

What of the gap between the languaged and other sensate beings, even insensate beings, (the *fellow created* of certain religions, the others deserving our compassion, as in Buddhism)? It is true that we cannot let them speak. Does this fact diminish our need for their voices, our need to meet ourselves in them? We push toward too easy a transcendence when the goal of seeing less of ourselves simply involves our lessening, our retreat; at least the retreat of humanity's most virulent strains. That virulence can just as well be measured by genocidal effects as by the reduction of bio-diversity: two extreme monoculturalisms. If we get there, if we manage to order that retreat; we only get there by means of speech, by means of those technologies which seem to surpass but which do not succeed in abolishing speech. And it is speech which, like the missionary's love, abolishes what it cannot see and abolishes what allows it.

How are *we* divided: as selves and between selves, between communities and languages? To what extent are we entitled to speak or write as if these were mannered or modelled after each other? Or is this the same mistake phenomenology makes in assuming too easy a passage among subjectivities: is it the strategy of the imperial, inclusive, pronoun *we*?

In Merleau-Ponty's formulation of *we* as (becoming) the question and of the world as reply, we discover a community, inevitably of speech, the function of which cannot help but be heuristic, because it is only in such an open and dialectical movement that speech is possible.

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