

## Poetry in a Destitute Time: Toward the Open

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Poetry is an attempt to speak the Nothing at the heart of Being, the attempt to grasp the ungraspable, or name the unnamable. It is an attempt to say the unsayable, to write the “white page” (to use Stéphane Mallarmé’s language); therefore, a necessarily impossible task, doomed to failure.

However, in that very failure lies its “victory”. Instead of making present, or recapturing, some mythic “origin” or sense of plentitude or wholeness (a return to some mythic past in which human beings were not separated from Being, qua Nature), poetry in fact makes Absence “present”, so to speak — it attests to its own failure, bearing witness to its impossible task, by making the Nothing (what I referred to above as “Absence”) present and turning us “mortals” toward the Open, an experience akin to “those first moments of love, when one human being sees his vastness in another, his beloved, and in man’s elevation toward God” (Rainer Maria Rilke, cited in Martin Heidegger’s “What are Poets for?” 105-106).

In other words, in a “modern age”, one marked by Nietzsche’s (in)famous dictum that “God is dead”, or to use Friedrich Hölderlin’s imagery, “a destitute time”, a time, that is, which is marked by the “un-grounding”, so to speak, of all previous grounds or foundations of meaning (be they God, Reason, Truth, Justice, Man, etc.), poetry does nothing less than bear witness to this death or destitution, this un-grounding or *Ab-grund* (lit. “abyss”), this abandonment by meaning (or, for Hölderlin as we shall see, by the gods) — thereby, also to the fact that we are indeed “thrown” (to use Heidegger’s language) into existence, always already “in the middle” or on-the-way, in a condition that may be seen as “absurd” or “cruel”, painful or joyous, and yet, somehow, impossibly, one which must be affirmed in its all its absurdity, cruelty, pain and joy.

What counts as “poetry”, for me, is precisely this attempt to affirm our condition, our very existence in a “destitute time”, a world abandoned by the gods or meaning, in an effort to point toward “the Open” (*das Offene*) of which Rilke so eloquently wrote. In what follows, I would like to sketch the contours of an upper-division, undergraduate literature course introducing this genre to students in such a way that they will come to understand the absolute importance of poetry in their lives. I would like to begin with a slightly Heideggerian reading of Hölderlin’s “Blood and Wine” (I say “slightly” because there isn’t enough time or room to do justice to his absolutely crucial reading of that poem, so I am going to be selective in my reading), followed by “the Swan” by Charles Baudelaire, “Will New and Alive the Beautiful Today...” by Mallarmé, “the Second Coming” by W.B. Yeats, the “First Elegy” of the *Duino Elegies* by Rilke and, if room, end my meditation with two poems from Paul Celan, “Deathfugue” and “Tübingen, January” (which brings us back, full-circle as it were, to Hölderlin, via a brief encounter with Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe).

As Martin Heidegger remarks, at the beginning of his essay (of 1946, commemorating the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Rilke’s death) entitled “What are Poets for?”, the poet Friedrich Hölderlin in his elegy “Bread and Wine” poses the question: “...and what are poets for in a destitute time?” (89). In the course of that essay, Heidegger attempts to bring to light or reveal both the question and the answer that Hölderlin provides. As Heidegger puts it, “[n]ot only have the gods... fled, but the divine radiance has become extinguished in the world’s history. The time of the world’s night is the destitute time... it can no longer [even] discern [the abandonment of the gods, indeed its own destitution as such]... [b]ecause of this...there fails to appear for the world the ground that grounds it... [and] the age for which the ground fails to come, hangs in the abyss [*Abgrund*]... [i]n the age of the world’s night, the abyss of the world must be experienced and endured. But for this it is necessary that there be those who reach into the abyss... [poets] reach into

the abyss... [and come to know] the marks that the abyss remarks. For the poet, these are the traces of the fugitive gods... [t]o be a poet in a destitute time means: to attend, singing, to the trace of the fugitive gods” (89-92). Heidegger next asserts that “even the trace of the holy has become unrecognizable” in our time, marked as it is by destitution itself: “[t]he time is destitute because it lacks the unconcealedness of the nature of pain, death, and love” (94-95). These ideas of holiness/unholiness and concealment/unconcealment are crucial and I will return to them shortly.

But first, Heidegger poses the question, specifically of Rilke but in a symptomatic way of all “modern poets” (their precursor being Hölderlin, which is why I begin and end my course and meditation with him), “[d]o we moderns encounter a modern poet on this course?... Is Rainer Maria Rilke a poet in a destitute time?.. How deeply does [his poetry] reach into the abyss?” (94). He then answers in the affirmative: “Rilke has in his own way poetically experienced and endured the unconcealedness of beings which was shaped by [the completion of Western metaphysics, in the current age, that of the ‘world picture’]” (95). Now, because for Heidegger “language is... the house of Being” (129), and we can only “reach what is by constantly going through this house”, that is, by “daring” to exhaust language and therefore “be more daring than the Being of beings” (Ibid.), the poet is the epitome of the being that ventures forth, daringly, into the *Abgrund* or Abyss and sings of the traces of the fugitive gods. It is, therefore, precisely in and through language (to some extent through its very exhaustion) that this is attempted (but never accomplished, of course): a ceaseless striving, a saying that is a singing, or as Heidegger phrases it, “[t]he saying of the more venturesome which is more fully saying... [in other words] the song” (135). In his reading of Rilke, Heidegger teases out a connection between this singing and existence (he cites a line from *Sonnets to Orpheus, part I*: “Song is existence”), claiming that “[t]o sing the song means to be present in what is present itself. It means: *Dasein*, existence” (Ibid.). The poet sings *Dasein*, “tracking” or tracing the holy, as it were, “because [the poet] experience[s] the unholy as such”; in other words, “[t]he more venturesome [again, poets] experience unshieldedness in the unholy. They bring to mortals the trace of the fugitive gods, the track into the dark of the world’s night” (138). Therefore, “the poet belongs in the destiny of the world’s night” (139). Rilke, for Heidegger, emerges a “poet in a destitute time” and, as I will argue in what remains, the poets I have selected can and must be seen in this same light.

To begin with, we have the incomparable poetry of Friedrich Hölderlin, the “precursor of poets in a destitute time” for Heidegger (139), particularly his elegy “Bread and Wine” of 1800-1801. In this poem, Hölderlin sings of the abandonment of the world by the fugitive gods: “Church-bells ring; every stroke hangs still in the quivering half-light/And the watchman calls out, mindful, no less, of the hour... and Night, the fantastical, comes now/Full of stars and, I think, little concerned about us...” (243). He goes on to exhort the poet, those like himself with ears to hear his message, to enter into that Night and sing of the Abyss: “Night, the astonishing, there, the stranger to all that is human/Over the mountain-tops mournful and gleaming draws on/Marvelous is her favour, Night’s, the exalted, and no one/Knows what it is or whence comes all she does and bestows” (Ibid.). He continues, elaborating on what this “gift” is, which Night bestows upon the “loyal man” (the poet): “Deep in the dark there shall be something at least that endures/Holy drunkenness she must grant and frenzied oblivion/Grant the on-rushing word, sleepless as lovers are too/And a wine-cup more full, a life more intense and daring/Holy remembrance too, keeping us wakeful at night” (245). Here, the “on-rushing word”, or language, is the Night’s gift — and this, in turn, is the Poet’s gift to “mortals”.

Hölderlin laments the passing or abdication of the gods: “Why are they silent too, the theatres, ancient and hallowed?/Why not now does the dance celebrate, consecrate joy?/Why no more does a god imprint on the brow of a mortal/Struck, as by lightning, the mark, brand him, as once he would do?...But, my friend, we have come too late. Though the gods are living/Over our heads they live, up in a different world/Endlessly there they act and, such is their kind wish to spare us,/Little they seem to care whether we live or not” (249). He then goes on to describe the task of the poet in this destitute time: “Only at times

can our kind bear the full impact of the gods...But frenzy,/Wandering, helps, like sleep; Night and distress make us strong/Till in that cradle of steel heroes enough have been fostered/Hearts in strength can match strength as before/Thundering then they come...friendless as we are, alone/Always waiting, and what to do or say in the meantime/I don't know, and what are poets for in a destitute time?/But they are, you say, like those holy ones, priests of the wine-god/Who in holy Night roamed from one place to the next" (249, 251; translation slightly amended).

Hölderlin calls on the poet to become one who is "strong for Joy's extremity", one who "conveys the trace of the gods now departed [or "fugitive gods", *entflohenen Gotter*]/Down to the godless below, into the midst of their gloom" (251). In other words, as Heidegger rightly described him, Hölderlin is truly the precursor of poets in the modern era, marked as it is by warfare, bloodshed and strife on an unprecedented scale; and yet, even in "the midst of [our] gloom", the poet must bear witness and testify to existence, in all its dimensions (painful, joyous, etc.), and in that testimony, must joyfully affirm the fact that *there is*, that *we are* — or, as Heidegger famously raises in the form of a question: "why are there beings instead of nothing?" (from *Introduction to Metaphysics*). Again, Hölderlin puts it much more eloquently than I am capable: "What of the children of God was foretold in the songs of the ancients/Look, *we are it, ourselves*" (253, emphasis added). The poet must bear witness to, and sing the fact that, "there is" (*il y a* or *es gibt*), in the face of the Abyss of nothingness.

For many other "poets in a destitute time", such as Baudelaire, Mallarmé and Yeats surveyed in our course, reaching into the *Abgrund* was enough — perhaps, even, *too much*: for them, the experience was shattering as they daringly ventured forth, into the Abyss, in their attempts to track the traces of the fugitive gods. Charles Baudelaire, in his poem "The Swan" ("Le Cygne", in "Tableaux Parisiens", from *Les Fleurs Du Mal* of 1857), dedicated as it is to Victor Hugo, sings of the destitution of our "modern" time: "The old Paris is no more; the shape of a city changes faster, alas, than a human heart" (85); then later, "Paris changes! But nothing in my old melancholy has moved!" (87). He goes on to describe the fragmented experience that marks "modern life": "I see only in the mind's eye that camp of shacks... the weeds... the nameless jumble. That was the sight of a menagerie" (86); and later, again, "New palaces, scaffolding, blocks, old, settled districts..." (87). Into the midst of this fragmented menagerie he spies a "swan that had escaped from its cage, and, rubbing its webbed feet on the dry pavement, was dragging its white plumage on the rough ground. Near a dry gutter the creature, opening its beak/Was nervously bathing its wings in the dust, and saying, its heart full of its beautiful native lake, 'Water, when will you rain down? When will you thunder, o lightning?' I see the poor wretch, strange and ineluctable myth/Sometimes reach towards the sky, like Ovid's man, towards the ironic, cruelly blue sky, stretching its greedy head on its convulsive neck, as if it were reproaching God" (86-87).

Baudelaire here speaks of the condition of the poet in the modern, "destitute" age in which we find ourselves, like that of the swan of his poem, "with his mad gestures, like an exile, ridiculous and sublime, and consumed of an unrelenting desire" (87); in other words, the swan's all-consuming desire is to sing (paradoxically, of course, is the fact that the swan only sings, at least in mythology, at the moment of its death), and how absurd, if not impossible, it is to sing of gutters, shacks, the dust of centuries! How can one sing of "thin orphans withering like flowers" (88)? To put it more pointedly, as we can given our historical distance from Baudelaire (and the intervening — and murderous — twentieth century between us), how can one "sing" of Auschwitz or Hiroshima? Baudelaire, at least in this poem, seems overcome by grief and the impossible burden of the Abyss, ending his musings on a melancholic note: "And in the forest where my spirit wanders and is lost, an old Memory sounds its horn at full blast. I think of sailors, forgotten on some island, of captives, of the defeated... of many others yet" (88).

How does Stéphane Mallarmé, the next poet to be taken up, negotiate this "destitute time"? Does he fare any better than Baudelaire? Taking as an example a poem in which he, too, plays with the swan metaphor, "Will New and Alive the Beautiful Today..." ("Le vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd'hui..." of 1885, from

*Plusieurs Sonnets*), we shall see how he in fact charges Baudelaire with succumbing to *ennui* after reaching into the Abyss. It would seem for Mallarmé that the poet must go beyond *ennui* or despair and sing of Life, even in the midst of suffering and pain.

The first stanza is as follows: "Will new and alive the beautiful today/Shatter with a blow of its drunken wing/This hard lake, forgotten, haunted under rime/By the transparent glacier, flights unflown!" What he seems to be describing here is the powerlessness of the "beautiful", the swan's song, perhaps even language itself, when confronted by the "hard lake" of our modern existence. And yet, perhaps this is because the swan has not recognized the true "power" it possesses in its song. He continues: "A swan of long ago remembers that he/Magnificent but lost to hope, is doomed/For having failed to sing the realms of life/When the ennui of sterile winter gleamed" (45, 47). Here, in the second stanza, Mallarmé charges the swan (here it is made fairly clear, I believe, that he is referring to Baudelaire) with relinquishing its role as poet, as one who must "sing the realms of life" in the face of the Nothing.

Be that as it may, he then continues in this vein: "His neck will shake off the white torment space/Inflicts upon the bird for his denial/But not this horror, plumage trapped in ice" (47). Here it is vitally important to recognize the nuance that Mallarmé gives to the word "torment", inflicted as it is upon the poet-swan for "his denial" rather than due to "this horror" — that is, of living in a destitute time. It is, I insist, *the refusal to sing* of life, of joy, or rather to joyfully affirm existence (which we may perhaps term "Life", or possibly Heidegger's "Being of beings") in the face of the Abyss, which has doomed the swan-poet. At any rate, Mallarmé ends the poem with a characteristically intense flourish: "Phantom by brilliance captive to this place/Immobile, he assumes disdain's cold dream/Which, in his useless exile, robes the Swan" (Ibid.). The swan-poet, so long as she shrinks back from her task of tracking the traces of the fugitive gods, "unconcealed" to her in all their "unholiness" or ugliness — indeed, horror — will remain truly powerless, immobile, trapped in a veritable lake of ice, as this poem of Mallarmé's hauntingly, unforgettably, laments.

The next poet to be encountered in our course is W. B. Yeats, whose best-known poem, "the Second Coming" (1920), in the interests of space, will be briefly considered, before moving on to Rilke's poetry, which brings us to somewhat of a different level, we might say — closer, in a way, to Hölderlin's, with which we began our course and meditation. Regardless, I strongly feel that Yeats is an important figure whose poem under consideration here attests to the destitution of our time perhaps more graphically than that of either Baudelaire or Mallarmé. In short, we can say that this poem's imagery is of nothing less than the Abyss itself, the very void or Nothing at the heart of Being — and, in hindsight, Yeats' vision seems somehow clearer, perhaps even truer to, or in some way prophetic of, our "modern age": "Turning and turning in the widening gyre/The falcon cannot hear the falconer/Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold /Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world/The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere/The ceremony of innocence is drowned/The best lack all conviction, while the worst/Are full of passionate intensity/Surely some revelation is at hand/Surely the Second Coming is at hand" (124). I would like to point out the importance of the word "anarchy" employed by Yeats in this oft-cited, lyrical flourish: "Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world". The word "anarchy" comes from the Greek term "an-arche", meaning "without ground or foundation" (*archê*). Here, Yeats sings of the vision of the void which he has endured, and which he sees casting its shadow (mixed metaphors aside) over what will come to be known as "the Long Twentieth Century", upon whose threshold Yeats and his contemporary Rainer Maria Rilke sat.

Rilke, in his unsurpassed *Duino Elegies*, attests not only to the "mere anarchy loosed upon the world", which threatens the poet with *ennui* and impotence, but also (and most importantly) attests to the "mission" (*Auftrag*) of the poet in the face of this "danger", as Heidegger calls it, of the *Ab-grund* or *An-archê*: "Don't you know yet? Fling the emptiness out of your arms/into the spaces we breathe; perhaps the birds/will feel the expanded air with more passionate flying/Yes — the springtimes needed you. Often a star/was waiting for you to notice it. A wave rolled toward you... [a]ll this was mission/But could you accomplish it? Weren't you always/distracted by expectation, as if every event/announced a beloved?"

(“First Elegy”, 151) Here we must recall Heidegger’s memorable citation of Hölderlin: “But where there is danger, there grows/also what saves” (“What are Poets for?” 115). In other words, the dangerous experience of the Abyss, which lies at the heart of *Dasein* (qua existence), conceals the “saving” power—and it is through language, and with the poet at the forefront of literary *poiesis*, or artistic creation, that this power is realized. Instead of “expectation”, *Dasein* must be resolved to wait, without projecting an otherworldly future or wallowing nostalgically in the past, but rather *singing*: of the Open, the Future, the time- and people-to-come, without lapsing into *ennui* or powerlessness.

As Rilke phrases it: “Sing of women abandoned and desolate... Begin again and again the never-attainable praising/remember: the hero lives on; even his downfall was/merely a pretext for achieving his final birth...Shouldn’t this most ancient of sufferings finally grow/more fruitful for us? Isn’t it time that we lovingly/freed ourselves from the beloved and, quivering, endured:/as an arrow endures the bowstring’s tension, so that/gathered in the snap of release it can be more than/itself. For there is no place where we can remain. Voices. Voices. Listen, my heart, as only/saints have listened...Not that you could endure/God’s voice — far from it. But listen to the voice of the wind/and the ceaseless message that forms itself out of silence” (153). Doomed as we are to ceaseless wandering upon this earth, to suffering, failure, and ultimately death, we nonetheless must listen to the message coming from the Divine breath all around us, according to Rilke, and, partaking of that “holiness” (in even the most humble of things, creatures or experiences — even the seemingly “unholy”), we must say the unsayable, thereby translating it into the sayable (however imperfectly realized — in fact, doomed to failure — this project might ultimately be): “Here is the time for the sayable, here is its homeland/Speak and bear witness” (201). It is through this “breath” (that is, the poem) that the poet can, and must, “turn” mortals toward the Open, toward the Future.

Finally, before course’s end, we must engage with the haunting song of a poet who quite literally bears witness to the *Ab-grund* of our destitute age. Paul Celan endured forced labor in Romanian camps from 1942 to 1944; his parents, German-speaking Jews, died at Nazi hands during the war and he was left at war’s end, quite literally with nothing but his “mother tongue” — German, the very language of his parents’s murderers. Until his suicide in 1970, Celan bore witness to one of the “Long Twentieth Century’s” greatest calamities — tortuously, in the very language of its perpetrators. He did so, as is well known, by twisting and turning the language, deforming it, as it were, as in the two poems I would have students read: “Deathfuge” (“Todesfuge”, from *Mohn und Gedachtnis* of 1952) and “Tübingen, January” (“Tübingen, Janner”, from *Die Niemandsrose* of 1963). In the first, he bears witness to the horrors of the Nazi death camps; in the second, he pays homage (and challenges) Hölderlin, thus bringing our course (and this meditation) to its close in an almost circular fashion.

In “Deathfuge”, which begins with the unforgettable line, “Black milk of daybreak we drink it at evening/we drink it at midday and morning we drink it at night/we drink and we drink/we shovel a grave in the air...” (31), Celan presents the reader with the two sides of “Germany”: that of “Margareta” (recalling Goethe) and that of “Shulamith” (recalling the Hebrew Bible), she of the “golden hair” as opposed to she of the “ashen hair” — in fact, he ends the poem with the lines “dein goldenes Haar Margarete/dein aschenes Haar Shulamith” (33). Here, as throughout the poem, in which he contrasts the Jews being forced to play music while digging their own graves (in the air, where they “won’t be too cramped”; in other words, via the crematorium chimney) to the orders of the “Aryan” German (“der Tod... ein Meister aus/Deutschland”), he creates a world that vividly comes to life for the reader. This world is infinitely crueller than the dusty gutter of Baudelaire’s swan, and yet, somehow, the same task is at hand, the same impossible task: to give voice to, or sing, the Nothing; to say the unsayable.

As Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe has described it, in his *Poetry as Experience* (primarily a reading of Celan’s poetry): what Hölderlin (and Celan following him, particularly in “Tübingen, January” with the lines “Came, if there/came a man/came a man to the world, today, with/the patriarchs’/light-beard: he could/

if he spoke of this/time, he/could/only babble and babble/ever-ever-/moremore. ('Pallaksch. Pallaksch.')

[159]) gives voice to is "what is at stake in our era (*dieser Zeit*). A world age — perhaps the world's old age — is approaching its end, for we are reaching a completion, closing the circle of what the philosophical West has called, since Grecian times and in multiple ways, 'Knowledge'. That is, *technê*. What has not been deployed, what has been forgotten or rejected in the midst of this completion — and no doubt from the very beginning — must now clear itself a path to a possible future. Let us agree to say that this pertains, as Heidegger says himself, to the 'task of thought'. Such thought must re-inaugurate history, reopen the possibility of a world, and pave the way for the improbable, unforeseeable advent of a god. Only this might 'save' us. For this task, art (again, *technê*), and in art, poetry, are perhaps able to provide some signs. At least, that is the hope, fragile, tenuous, and meager as it is" (*Poetry as Experience* 7). Perhaps, as a means of concluding these thoughts, and our undergraduate course on modern poetry, we might say that it is in this "babble", or perhaps in its interruption, that we might discern the destitution of our time, and track the traces of the fugitive gods-as Celan so elegantly phrased it: through *the encounter that is poetry*, a poetry that "signif[ies] an *Antemwende*, a Breathturn" ("the Meridian" 407). Perhaps through this "breathturn" poets can guide us "mortals" toward the Open — toward affirmation of Life, existence — and perhaps we, as educators, can help our students follow them.

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