The Ethics of Poetic Force

Jacques Derrida, Hélène Cixous, Paul Celan

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Abstract

This thesis makes the claim that there is an important correlation between the poetic and the ethical in the work of Jacques Derrida, Hélène Cixous and Paul Celan. Taking its cue from Derrida's 1988 'Che cos'è la poesia?', it proposes that what he calls the 'poematic' entails an ethical experience. It seeks to show that the underlying link between the poetic and the ethical as it emerges in Derrida's text calls for a reconsideration of the relation between the literary and the ethical. Rather than merely describe ethical situations or prescribe ethical behaviour, the poetic involves an ethical experience of the arrival or 'invention' (from the Latin *invenire*: to come upon) of the other. Focusing on Derrida's notions of responsibility and hospitality in turn, it argues that the interruption at the heart of Derrida's ethical event is what characterises poetic force.

Chapter 1 presents a reading of Derrida's notion of the poetic as an instance of ethical responsibility. It begins with a discussion of Derrida's understanding of responsibility that underlines the importance of the interrelation between the secret, the call and the response. It subsequently argues that the poetic dictate, like responsibility, also involves an interruptive call or apostrophe that demands a response. Referring closely to the biblical narrative of Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac as well as Derrida's notions of the 'double yes' and the countersignature, it finally considers the ethics of poetic response.

Chapter 2 claims that the force of Hélène Cixous's work is intricately bound to the Derridean ethical imperative of responsibility as explored in Chapter 1. It begins by showing the parallels between Cixous's 'coming to writing' and the Derridean notion of the poetic dictate. It maintains that the complex question of genre in Cixous's work is related to her writing practice as an instance of submitting to the call of the other. Finally, it argues that the ethical import of her work is to be found in what Derrida has described in terms of a monstrous force.

Turning its attention primarily to Derrida's seminars around the subject of hospitality, Chapter 3 begins by focusing on the inherent violence in hospitality through an analysis of the etymological root of the word 'hospitality' and Derrida's neologism 'hostipitality'. It then addresses Derrida's aphoristic claim that an 'act of hospitality can only be poetic'. Relating this assertion to his understanding of invention as the instance of the coming of the other, it argues that the poetic is ethical at its core because it invents the impossible. Finally, drawing out the implications of Derridean hospitality for a reading of Sophocles' play *Antigone*, it demonstrates that the eponymous character enacts the poetic experience at the centre of the discussion.

In an extended analysis of the notion poetic hospitality, Chapter 4 takes the concept of the uncanny in Paul Celan's 'Der Meridian' speech as its foremost concern. It makes the claim that the ethical force in Celan's oeuvre lies in its power to overcome the uncanny automaticity of art. It then turns to *Die Niemandsrose* to explore the uncanny in relation to what Celan calls the 'groundlessness' of the poem. Finally, it suggests that the uncanny in Celan's oeuvre can be seen as the ethical counterpart to the aesthetic of the Romantic sublime that is arguably no longer possible today.

Acknowledgements

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List of Abbreviations

CCP   Jacques Derrida, 'Che cos'è la poesia?', trans. by Peggy Kamuf, in *Points…Interviews, 1974–1994*, ed. by Elisabeth Weber (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995)

GD   Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, 2nd edition, trans. by David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2008)

WB   Hélène Cixous, 'Writing blind: Conversation with the donkey', trans. by Eric Prenowitz, in *Stigmata: Escaping texts* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005)

WE   Hélène Cixous, 'Without end, no, State of drawingness, no, rather: The Executioner's taking off', trans. by Catherine A. F. MacGillivray, in *Stigmata: Escaping texts* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005)

OH   Jacques Derrida and Anne Dufourmantelle, *Of Hospitality*, trans. by Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000)

TM   Paul Celan, *The Meridian: Final Version–Drafts–Materials*, trans. by Pierre Joris and ed. by Bernhard Böschenstein and Heino Schmull (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011)

JF   Paul Celan, *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*, trans. by John Felstiner (London: W.W. Norton, 2001)

MH   Paul Celan, *Selected Poems*, trans. by Michael Hamburger (London: Penguin Books, 1996)

DY   Paul Celan, *No One's Rose*, trans. by David Young (Grosse Pointe Farms: Marick Press, 2014)

PJ   Paul Celan, *Breathturn into Timestead*, trans. by Pierre Joris (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014)

Introduction

Derrida's Ethical Counterpoetics

Writing in 1988, in response to the question 'Che cos'è la poesia?', Jacques Derrida's answer is radical; not only does he call into question what may traditionally (or, in his view, naïvely) be called 'poetry', but, more provocatively, he orders that the 'library of poetics' be set alight.[1] As he elucidates in the interview 'Istrice 2: Ick bünn all hier', 'the great Western poetic tradition', from Greek antiquity up to, and indeed including, Martin Heidegger's 'The Origin of the Work of Art', is a genealogy that 'repeats the most originary foundation of [...] *mimesis*'.[2] This is the genealogy that Derrida rejects. What he calls the 'poematic' is that which turns away from the 'histrionics' of *poiesis* or the Heideggerian imperative of 'the "setting-forth-of-truth-in-the-work"' (*CCP*, 297). Out of the ashes of this genealogy rises the lowly hedgehog that imperils its life across the highway. This hedgehog is not a member of the Grimm, Schlegel, or Heidegger family.[3]

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[1] Jacques Derrida, 'Che cos'è la poesia?', trans. by Peggy Kamuf, in *Points...Interviews, 1974–1994*, ed. by Elizabeth Weber (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 295. Subsequent references to this work shall be provided in parentheses within the main text following the abbreviation *CCP*.

[2] Jacques Derrida, 'Istrice 2: Ick bünn all hier', trans. by Peggy Kamuf, in *Points...Interviews, 1974–1994*, ed. by Elizabeth Weber (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 313.

[3] Derrida explains: '[...] although they have the same name, these two hedgehogs [Schlegel's and Heidegger's] don't have much relation to "mine"; they don't belong to the same family, the same species, or the same genre, even though this non-relation says something about a deep genealogical affinity, but in antagonism, in counter-genealogy' (Derrida, 'Istrice 2', p. 302). Interestingly, Derrida would later hint at a possible next of kin or blood relative for his so-called 'counter-hedgehog'. Writing in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, he remarks: 'I would of course have liked to inscribe my whole talk within a reading of Lewis Carroll. [...] You can't be certain that I didn't already do it one day when, ten years ago, I let speak or let pass a little hedgehog, a suckling hedgehog [*un nourrisson hérisson*] perhaps, before the question 'What is Poetry? For thinking concerning the animal, if there is such a thing derives from poetry. [...] The hedgehog of 'What is Poetry?' not only inherited a piece of my name but also responded, in its own way, to

Rather, it is 'a solitary counter-hedgehog', whose fate, when traversing the road, is entirely subject to chance.[4] Derrida's humble hedgehog hazards the journey on the autoroute in the hope of an accidental encounter with an 'other' on whom it will leave its mark. This is the mark that gives birth to 'you' and to whom the injunction 'learn by heart' is addressed. Central to the Derridean 'poematic' experience (a word, as Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe reminds us, that retains the trace of its Latin root *ex-periri* 'crossing through danger'),[5] this address is not to be understood merely as an instance of apostrophe; for what Derrida invites us to attend to is the *claim* that this address has on its recipient. The 'poematic' is, therefore, more event than written text. This is clearly exemplified in the following extract from 'Che cos'è la poesia?' where Derrida's radical reconception of the 'poem' is as alluring as it is elusive:

> No poem without accident, no poem that does not open itself like a wound, but no poem that is not also just as wounding. You will call poem a silent incantation, the aphonic wound that, of you, from you, I want to learn by heart. It thus takes place, essentially, without one's having to do it or to make it: it *lets itself* be done, without activity, without work, in the most sober *pathos*, a stranger to all production, especially to creation. The poem falls to me, benediction, coming of (or from) the other. (*CCP*, 297)

The full import of this dense and compelling passage as well as Derrida's entire piece are explored in more detail in Chapter 1. By way of introducing the salient concerns of this thesis, however, suffice it here to point out three important aspects. First, the poem involves a certain violence: it opens like a 'wound' and is also 'wounding'. This telling comparison underlines the force of the poem and its impact upon the one who receives it. Second, the poem occurs as a 'silent incantation' or 'aphonic wound' that compels its recipient to learn it by heart. Already it is clear that Derrida will reinterpret the meaning of the idiomatic expression 'to learn by heart'. For how can something 'silent' and 'aphonic' be put to memory or be learnt by rote? Third, the poem is not a 'creation'; it is not to be thought of as the product of a deliberate act of writing (by an author). Rather, 'a stranger to all production', it 'falls' to me from the other like an event. Thus, clearly, Derrida's response to the question 'What (thing) is poetry?' sets itself apart from the conventional, and seemingly irrefutable, view that the poem is a piece of writing. In fact, as the main

the appeal of Alice's hedgehog'. Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, trans. by David Wills (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), p. 7.
[4] Derrida, 'Istrice 2', p. 302.
[5] Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Poetry as Experience*, trans. by Andrea Tarnowski (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 18.

contention of this thesis claims, Derrida's 'Che cos'è la poesia?' prompts an important (re)consideration of the poetic as an ethical event rather than a textual artefact. The violent opening of the wound, the silent (if forceful) incantation as well as the arrival of the other evidently share more common ground with the ethical experience as conceived by Derrida than with the principal treatises in the Western tradition of poetics. In this thesis, I argue that a close analysis of Derrida's notions of responsibility and hospitality shed light on the inherent ethical force or demand within the poematic experience. Taking Derrida's understanding of ethics as its staring point, this thesis goes on to draw on the work of Hélène Cixous and Paul Celan to provide instantiations of what it calls the ethics of poetic force.

The rest of the introduction provides what can only be a very brief overview of the recent discussions around the broad subject of the intersection between ethics and literature. It then introduces Derrida's understanding of the ethical moment as an instance that is characterised by undecidability and aporia, and addresses the relevance of the question of violence within his conception of ethics. It subsequently turns its attention to some of the more influential critical works that have sought to explore the relevance of the Derridean ethical experience within literary studies before introducing the counterpoetical nature of 'Che cos'è la poesia?'.

Derrida's Ethics of the Impossible

The relationship between literature and ethics has a very long history. Suffice it to recall that the quarrel between poetry and philosophy was already an 'ancient' one when Plato famously denounced poetry and banished it from his imaginary ideal state in the *Republic*.[6] The grounds for Plato's denunciation are clearly related to the ethical implications of poetry. For Plato, the poetry of his time (as evidenced, for instance, in Homer's work) fails to provide good models of behaviour for young men. It has a tendency to indulge the emotions and is full of instances of unmanly comportment. It fails to contribute to the desired moral standards within the ideal community and can thus only be described as having a 'pernicious effect' on its audience.[7] Indeed, not only does it fail to contribute to the formation of a 'well-regulated community', but it is dangerous and may

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[6] Plato, *Republic*, trans. by Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 361.
[7] Plato, *Republic*, p. 86.

corrupt even the good citizen.[8] Even when he attacks poetry on metaphysical grounds in Book X, Plato's concern is still primarily an ethical one. For in dealing with appearances and distorting reality, poetry distances young men from the truth and inhibits their ability to reason. Plato's 'most serious allegation' against representational poetry is that, in departing from goodness, truth and reason, it has 'a terrifying capacity for deforming even good people'.[9]

Providing a commentary on the multi-faceted, complex history of the study of literature and ethics from Plato to Emmanuel Levinas (and after) is well beyond the scope of this introduction. It is worth pausing briefly, however, on some of the more recent discussions that have emerged in what has been variously described as a 'veritable renaissance in ethical theory', a 'groundswell' and a 'turn to ethics'.[10] Several critics have sought to outline the various approaches to ethics that are current within literary studies; not least since, in the words of one critic, the term 'ethics' has become 'increasingly ductile and thereby [a] potentially confusing one'.[11] In his overview of the recent ramifications of the intersections between ethics and literature, Gerald Bruns makes a broad distinction between what he describes as the two main conceptions of the ethical in contemporary thought. On the one hand, the approach that goes back to Kant is based on the application of a set of existing rules and principles that ensure good moral conduct. As

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[8] Plato, p. 75.

[9] Plato, p. 359.

[10] Respectively in Bernard Quigley, 'Introduction: Questions of Responsibility', in *Literature and Ethics: Questions of Responsibility in Literary Studies*, ed. by Daniel Jernigan, Neil Murphy, Bernard Quigley and Tamara S. Wagner (New York: Cambria Press, 2009), p. 7; Lawrence Buell, 'Introduction: In Pursuit of Ethics', *PMLA*, 114.1 (1999), p. 7; Marjorie Garber, Beatrice Hanssen and Rebecca L. Walkowitz, 'Introduction', in *The Turn to Ethics,* ed. by Marjorie Garber et al. (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p. vii. Michael Eskin speaks of 'a slew of publications' whereas Wayne Booth remarks about the 'explosion of interest in questions about the ethical effects of reading literature'. Respectively in Michael Eskin, 'Introduction: The Double "Turn" to Ethics and Literature?', *Poetics Today*, 25.4 (2004), p. 559 and Wayne Booth, 'Foreword', in *Ethics, Literature, Theory*, ed. by Stephen George (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005), p. xi. On the question of whether this renewed interest ought to be described as a *turn* see Michael Eskin's 'Introduction: The Double "Turn" to Ethics and Literature?', *Poetics Today*, 25.4 (2004), pp. 557–72.

[11] Lawrence Buell, 'Introduction: In Pursuit of Ethics', *PMLA*, 114.1 (1999), p. 11. Speaking of the 'radically antithetical ways' in which the term 'ethics' has been understood in poststructuralist discourse, Geoffrey G. Harpham outlines its many contradictory attestations. Ethics, he explains, has been understood 'as the agent of repression and as the repressed itself, as the essence of classical humanism and of postmodern antihumanism, as the discourse of the integrated and self-mastering subject and of the fissured or overdetermined subject, as the locus of forthright worthiness and of self-disgusting power'. In the introduction to the 1999 *PMLA* Special Issue on *Ethics and Literary Studies*, Lawrence Buell provides one of the more comprehensive overviews of the subject. He identifies six main 'genealogical strands' of what he broadly calls 'ethically valenced inquiry' (p. 7). Respectively in Geoffrey G. Harpham, *Shadows of Ethics: Criticism and the Just Society* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), p. 26 and Buell, 'Introduction: In Pursuit of Ethics', pp. 7–11.

Bruns explains, these rules are either universal or, as Hegel's concept of *Sittlichkeit* proposes, determined by the customs practised in the place one inhabits. On the other hand, the more recent philosophical work of Emmanuel Levinas proposes a mode of ethics that is wholly dependent on the chance encounter with the other and is therefore outside the domain of concepts and *a priori* established modes of conduct.[12]

A number of things could be said about these two largely antithetical approaches to the ethical. For the purposes of this introduction, however, it is important to highlight the following distinction: whereas the Kantian notion presupposes the existence of a moral agent who is duty-bound to act in the interest of the community, Levinasian ethics does away with the subject as moral agent altogether. For Levinas, it is precisely the face-to-face encounter with the other that first singles me out and calls me to responsibility. Prior to the encounter, therefore, there is no conscious, willful 'I' who abides by the Kantian categorical imperative to act 'according to that maxim whereby you can, at the same time, will that it should become a universal law'.[13] Whereas the former approach is subject-centred, the latter is primarily concerned with how we respond to the claim that the other has on us. Spoken of in terms of an 'arrival', a 'coming' or a 'call', as we shall see, this momentous event is central to what Robert Eaglestone has described as the 'ethics of undecidability and questioning'.[14] The unforeseeable arrival of the other makes any prior value-system or set of principles wholly inadequate. Clearly, the encounter with the other as an ethical experience is far more complex than the mere application of a pre-existing rule. And it is this integral difference between the two approaches that allows one to speak of the former in terms of a moral programme and the latter in terms of an ethical event or experience.[15]

Jacques Derrida, whose readings of Emmanuel Levinas's 'ethics as first philosophy' have been credited with introducing Levinas's thought to the field of literary studies, claims that the encounter with the other (which he extends beyond the Levinasian *Autre*) is an event precisely because it cannot be anticipated. Speaking of the event in the

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[12] Gerald L. Bruns, 'Should Poetry be Ethical or Otherwise?', *SubStance*, 38.3 (2009), pp. 72–73.

[13] Immanuel Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. by James W. Ellington (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing, 1993), p. 30.

[14] Robert Eaglestone, 'One and the Same? Ethics, Aesthetics, and Truth', *Poetics Today*, 25.4 (2004), p. 606.

[15] Throughout this thesis the terms ethics/ethical and moral/morality are not used interchangeably. Whereas the former are employed to refer to the deconstructive understanding of ethics as an aporetic and impossible event, the latter refer to the rigid codes of conduct that the subject as a moral agent should follow to lead the good life.

late essay 'A Certain Impossible Possibility of Saying the Event' (2003), Derrida uses the metaphors of horizontality and verticality to emphasise the interruptive force of the ethical moment. He argues that an event can only be considered such when it *befalls* me:

> The arrival of the *arrivant* will constitute an event only if I'm not capable of receiving him or her, only if I receive the coming of the newcomer precisely when I'm not capable of doing so. In the arrival of the *arrivant*, it is the absolute other who falls on me. I insist on the verticality of this coming, because surprise can only come from on high. When Lévinas or Blanchot speak of the "Très Haut," the Most High, it is not simply religious terminology. It means that the event as event, as absolute surprise, must fall on me. Why? Because if it doesn't fall on me, it means that I see it coming, that there's an horizon of expectation. Horizontally, I see it coming, I fore-see it, I fore-say it, and the event is that which can be said [*dit*] but never predicted [*prédit*]. A predicted event is not an event. The event falls on me because I don't see it coming. Like the *arrivant*, the event is something that vertically befalls me when I didn't see it coming [*sic*].[16]

The encounter with the other or the one who comes (the '*arrivant*') exceeds all expectation. The French *arriver*, which means both 'to arrive' and 'to happen', underlines the unforeseeable and unpredictable nature of the event. In the very absence of a programme detailing 'How to Live. What to Do', to use Wallace Stevens's words from his 1935 poem title, the arrival of the other compels me to experience complete undecidability in face of the unknown. This is the determining characteristic of the ethical moment in Derrida's view. As he explains in his last interview for *L'Humanité* (2004), ethics begins with aporia, where there is no viable, already trodden path to follow:

> Ce qui m'intéresse, ce sont, en fait, les apories de l'éthique, ses limites, notamment autour des questions du don, du pardon, du secret, du témoignage, de l'hospitalité, du vivant — animal ou non. Tout cela implique une pensée de la décision : la décision responsable doit endurer et non seulement traverser ou dépasser une expérience de l'indécidable. Si je sais ce que je dois faire, je ne prends pas de décision, j'applique un savoir, je déploie un programme. Pour qu'il y ait décision, il faut que je ne sache pas quoi faire.[17]

Focusing on this aspect in Derrida's understanding of ethics, Kelly Oliver has argued that the uncertainty that characterises the ethical moment is akin to stepping into the abyss. She writes: 'we have to risk stepping into the abyss, into a place where we are uncomfortable, where we don't know the difference between right and wrong, a place where we don't

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[16] Jacques Derrida, 'A Certain Impossible Possibility of Saying the Event', trans. by Gila Walker, *Critical Inquiry*, 33.2 (2007), pp. 451–52.

[17] Jacques Derrida, 'Jacques Derrida, penseur d'événement', interviewed by Jérôme-Alexandre Nielsberg <http://www.humanite.fr/node/299140> [accessed on 11 May 2017].

even know who we are. And only from that place can "we" hope to approach ethical thinking and thinking through what it means to be ethical'.[18]

The question of the relation between ethics and deconstruction has long been broached. Initially, and most vociferously, by the opponents of what was erroneously and disingenuously labeled as 'nihilistic' deconstruction. Such critics claimed that deconstruction was not only ethically vacant, but completely amoral.[19] Their definition of deconstruction was, to borrow Simon Critchley's words, 'a form of nihilistic textual free play that threatened to undermine rationality, morality and all that was absolutely fabulous about life in Western liberal democracy'.[20] Or, in Richard Kearney's more succinct rendition, 'a strategy of nihilism, an orgy of non-sense, a relapse into the free play of the arbitrary'.[21]

First published in 1992 and currently in its third edition (2014), Critchley's *The Ethics of Deconstruction* was the first book-length study to argue that deconstructive reading ought to be 'understood as an ethical demand'.[22] Critchley's main contention underlines the importance of an 'injunction' that motivates this reading practice: 'My argument is that *an unconditional categorical imperative or moment of affirmation is the source of the injunction that produces deconstruction and is produced through deconstructive reading*'.[23] The book makes a persuasive case against the view of an inherent nihilism within deconstructive thought and argues that 'ethics is the goal, or horizon, towards which Derrida's work tends'.[24] Focusing on the Levinasian influence on Derrida's thought, Critchley locates 'moments of ethical transcendence' within a textual reading practice that 'opens an irreducible dimension of alterity'.[25] He describes this in terms of Derrida's notion of the 'double gesture' of deconstructive reading, which, while

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[18] Kelly Oliver, 'The Poetic Axis of Ethics', *Derrida Today*, 7.2 (2014), p. 109.

[19] Suffice it to recall that as late as 2004, the hostile obituary that appeared in 'The Independent' after Derrida's death still insisted on labelling his work as amoral and outright dangerous. Johann Hari speaks of the 'pernicious' effect of what he describes in terms of Derrida's cancerous thought and goes on to claim that the 'deconstructionist virus has swept through the humanities departments of universities across Europe and America'. <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/commentators/johann-hari/why-i-wont-be-mourning-derrida-543574.html> [accessed on 11 May 2017]

[20] Simon Critchley, 'Derrida: the reader', in *Derrida's Legacies: Literature and Philosophy*, ed. by Simon Glendinning and Robert Eaglestone (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 8.

[21] Jacques Derrida and Richard Kearney, 'Deconstruction and the Other', in *Debates in Continental Philosophy: Conversations with Continental Thinkers,* ed. by Richard Kearney (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), p. 154.

[22] Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p. 1.

[23] Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, p. 41.

[24] Critchley, p. 2

[25] Critchley, p. 30 and p. 41.

familiar with the dominant interpretation of a text, is also sensitive to its blind spots and ellipses. Hence, Critchley's claim that such 'clôtural' readings are instances of 'interruption' and 'dislocation'.[26]

Similarly, in the 1993 essay 'The Morals of Genealogy: Or Is There a Poststructuralist Ethics?' Martin Jay calls attention to the highly ethical leaning in the work of poststructuralists such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, Luce Irigaray and Derrida. Contrary to the popular view at the time, poststructuralism, he argued, had a clear ethical bent: 'despite the conventional wisdom concerning their [poststructuralists'] alleged nihilism, a closer familiarity with their work will in fact reveal an intense and abiding fascination with moral issues'.[27] Jay singles out two important aspects in relation to poststructuralist ethics, namely a 'hostility to universalist normative systems' and 'a clear distrust of a morality grounded in an external theory'.[28] Indeed, both these suspicions are central to what Derrida, borrowing Vladimir Jankélévitch's phrase, has described as a 'hyperbolic ethics' that 'carries itself beyond laws, norms, or any obligation'.[29] In the gloss that follows this definition, he goes on to use the apparently counterintuitive phrase 'an ethics beyond ethics' to distinguish it from the more commonplace understanding of ethics as a moral code.[30] Geoffrey Bennington's remark on this point provides a useful clarification:

> Simply following one's duty, looking up the appropriate action in a book of laws or rules, as it were, is anything but ethical — at best this is an *administration* of rights and duties, a *bureaucracy* of ethics. In this sense an ethical act worthy of the name is always inventive, and inventive not at all in the interests of expressing the subjective freedom of the agent, but in response and responsibility to the other.[31]

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[26] Critchley, p. 61 and p. 88.

[27] Martin Jay, 'The Morals of Genealogy: Or Is There a Poststructuralist Ethics?', in *Force Fields: Between Intellectual History and Cultural Critique* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 39.

[28] Jay, pp. 41–42.

[29] Jacques Derrida, 'On Forgiveness', trans. by Michael Hughes, in *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. 35–36.

[30] Derrida, 'On Forgiveness', p. 36.

[31] Geoffrey Bennington, *Interrupting Derrida* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 38. In a similar vein Kelly Oliver makes the claim that deconstruction 'provides a kind of corrective for morality': 'Moral imperatives made and followed by the sovereign "I am" or "I can" are at odds with ethics. Moral codes may give us a clear sense of our duties, but they do so by turning response into mindless reactions that avoid the difficulty of ethical decision making […]'. Kelly Oliver, 'The "Slow and Differentiated" Machinations of Deconstructive Ethics', in *A Companion to Derrida*, ed. by Zeynep Direk and Leonard Lawlor (Oxford: Blackwell, 2014), p. 121.

A number of works that delve specifically into the ethics proposed within deconstructive thought, which have emerged over the last decade, stress precisely this crucial distinction. It is interesting to note the many phrases that have been coined in these works to describe this particular mode of ethics: 'non-moral discourse of ethics', the 'ethics of alterity', 'aporetic ethics', 'the ethics of the im-possible', 'ethics of uncertainty' and 'ethics under erasure'.[32] Primarily engaged with Derrida's reflections on ethical issues, such critical works have sought to underline the characteristic features of what may be called Derridean ethics. As the above epithets evidence, the key aspects at the core of such an ethics are alterity, impossibility, aporia and indecision.

Derrida addressed the subject of ethics throughout his long and prolific writing career, with a noticeable insistence in the later years when he turned to subjects such as the gift, testimony, friendship, forgiveness, responsibility and hospitality. Indeed, several works could be consulted to elucidate his understanding of ethics. One of the first reflections on the use of the word 'ethics' comes in his conversation with Jean-Pierre Labarrière and others (1986) where Derrida exhibits characteristic caution in his use of the term. He maintains that an awareness of the genealogy of the concept is a prerequisite in any discussion of the matter. Speaking of the semantic transformation of the word 'ethics' in Levinas's thought, he maintains that the importance of the relation to the 'other' compels a rethinking of the concept of 'ethics'. Indeed, he goes on to assert that the question of alterity necessitates the use of the term 'ultra-ethics' to delineate its distinctiveness.[33] The singular relation to the other is a complex one and challenges our customary understanding of ethics:

> In order to establish a relation with the other, interruption must be possible. The relation has to be a relation of interruption. And interruption in this case does not interrupt the relation to the other, it opens the relation to the other. […] It is a mad relation, a relation without relation, which comprehends the other as other in a certain relation of incomprehension. This is not ignorance, nor obscurantism, nor resignation from any desire of intelligibility; but at a given moment the other has to stay other, and if the other is the other, the other

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[32] The phrases are taken from the following works respectively: Derek Attridge, 'Innovation, Literature, Ethics: Relating to the Other', *PMLA*, 114.1 (1999), p. 29; Shane Weller, *Beckett, Literature and the Ethics of Alterity* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Marko Zlomislíc, *Jacques Derrida's Aporetic Ethics* (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2007); François Raffoul, 'Derrida and the Ethics of the Im-possible', *Research in Phenomenology*, 38 (2008); Michael Anker, *The Ethics of Uncertainty: Aporetic Openings* (New York: Atropos Press, 2009); Nicole Anderson, *Derrida: Ethics Under Erasure* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012).
[33] Jacques Derrida et al., 'Alterities, Part 3: Discussion', trans. by Stefan Herbrechter, *Parallax*, 10.4 (2004), p. 62.

is other. At this moment the relation to the other as such is also a relation of interruption.[34]

Clearly indebted to Levinas, for whom ethics begins when one is exposed to the naked face of the other, Derrida's discussion of ethics prioritises the relation with the other. Unwilling to turn the decisive experience of his ethics into a concept, Derrida's description of this encounter is necessarily vague and provides very little by way of clarity. The relation with the other is a 'mad' one, one of incomprehensibility and, in classic Blanchotian logic, 'a relation without relation'. The decisive (vertical) interruption that signals the opening to the other characterises the ethical moment. Indeed, the operative term in the above cited passage is clearly 'interruption'.[35] The choice of term is significant not least since it underlines a certain violence at the heart of the relation with the other and thus within the ethical experience. Speaking of what he calls Derrida's 'ethics of the impossible', Bruns emphasises the importance of this rupture: 'An event of the impossible is something like an epiphanic break — what complexity theorists call a catastrophe — an absolutely singular disruption in the course of the order of things'.[36] This interruptive break marks the moment when the 'order of things' is shattered and no reassuring rule or norm is left in its wake. In her analysis of Derrida's late seminars, Oliver focuses on his claim that the death of each person is the end of the world and speaks of ethics precisely in these terms: 'The ethical obligation, then, is an impossible obligation, one that begins when the world ends'. She adds that 'where there is ethical obligation, there is no world'.[37] In this sense, then, the ethical instance, which always involves the arrival of the other, entails a violent break in the ordinary course of things.

In 'The Time of Violence' Elizabeth Grosz is particularly sensitive to the 'primordial or constitutive violence' in Derrida's work around the subject of ethics:[38]

> Though his work has strayed very far from many of his initial concerns, Derrida returns to a remarkably similar problematic in more recent works, of

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[34] Jacques Derrida et al., 'Alterities', pp. 68–69.

[35] Focusing on the relevance of Levinas's work for literary studies, Jill Robbins has argued that what she calls 'altered reading' is characterised by an interruption that disrupts and challenges the economy of the same. She claims that interruption is central to Levinasian ethics: 'One might pause to note the distance between this sense of ethics — as an interruption on a primordial and originary level — and its derivatives and used-up senses of right conduct, a set of moral precepts, or any particular morality. Prior to the elaboration of all moral precepts, the interruption *opens* ethics, is its upsurge' (Jill Robbins, *Altered Reading: Levinas and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), pp. 5–6).

[36] Bruns, 'Should Poetry be Ethical or Otherwise?', p. 84.

[37] Oliver, 'The Poetic Axis of Ethics', p. 130.

[38] Elizabeth Grosz, 'The Time of Violence: Deconstruction and Value', *Cultural Values*, 2.2 (1998), p. 193.

which a number are clearly linked to the question of violence and its founding role in the constitution of systems of ethics, morality, law and justice, in the operation of modes of gift and hospitality, in the structure of relations to the other, notions of singularity, heterogeneity, the movement of double affirmation, not to mention in his earlier preoccupations with iteration, trace, and undecidability.[39]

Grosz's remarks on this important aspect of Derridean thought provides an important nuanced analysis of Derrida's reflections on violence. She sets out to explore the ways in which violence, within the domains of thought and writing, can be seen to have a positive force. Drawing attention to the violence inherent in Derrida's notion of *différance* as an 'originary tearing', she maintains that the 'cutting' or 'breaking apart' signalled by the movement of *différance* is 'also a bringing together, a folding or reorganizing, and the very possibility of time and becoming'.[40]

In the more recent, highly-acclaimed book, *Radical Atheism* (2008), Martin Hägglund is keen to stress the more negative understanding of violence as it emerges in Derrida's considerations of ethical issues. Contrary to the view that Derrida's thinking holds open the promise of an 'ethical ideal' that aspires towards an absolute good, Hägglund makes the strong claim that, in deconstructive thought, violence is constitutive of the ethical experience. Unlike Levinas's belief in a prior state of peacefulness, Derrida's contention is that violence always already threatens the good. There is no pure, pre-existent state that can be retrieved. Hägglund's phrase 'radical atheism' seeks to underline the fact that for Derrida 'nothing can be unscathed'. Turning to his notion of autoimmunity, he argues that Derrida has repeatedly stressed that 'everything is threatened from within itself'.[41]

> The integrity of any "positive" term is necessarily compromised and threatened by its other. Such constitutive alterity answers to an *essential corruptibility*, which undercuts all ethico-theoretical decisions concerning how things ought to be in an ideal world.[42]

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[39] Grosz, 'The Time of Violence', p. 195.
[40] Grosz, p. 192.
[41] Martin Hägglund, *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), p. 9.
[42] Hägglund, *Radical Atheism*, p. 81.

This 'non-ethical opening of ethics' — a provocative phrase by Derrida that acts like an insistent refrain in Hägglund's work — is crucial to Derrida's understanding of alterity.[43] 'The opening is violent,' Hägglund explains, 'because it entails that everything is exposed to what may corrupt and extinguish it'.[44] Indeed, it is here worth recalling the image of the vulnerable hedgehog in 'Che cos'è la poesia?' that in crossing the autroute to reach the other side exposes itself to danger and is threatened by oblivion.

The Literary Work and the Ethics of Singularity

The relatively recent resurgence in the subject of ethics and literature has been attributed to 'a renewed interest in the legacy of Levinas, to the more proximate engagement in Jacques Derrida's late work with religious, ethical and political themes, and to a number of crucial interventions in literary studies, beginning with J. Hillis Miller's *The Ethics of Reading*'.[45] Published in 1987, Hillis Miller's work focuses on the moment or act of reading that gives way to an ethical engagement with the work. Drawing on a number of self-reflexive texts by writers as diverse as Immanuel Kant and Henry James, he considers the possibility that 'the law exemplified by a text might also be properly ethical […] as opposed to grammatical, syntactic, or tropological'.[46] For Hillis Miller the genuinely ethical act of language has a double definition: 'It is a response to an irresistible demand, an "I must", and it is an act which is productive, a doing which causes other things to be done in their turn'.[47] Both the writer and the reader are subject to this demand and compelled to *do* or produce something. Arguing, in evident deconstructive terms, that the ethical demand comes as a result of the unreadability of a text, Hillis Miller claims that the narrative betrays the reader's expectations in one important way: 'Narrative can be defined as the indefinite postponement of that ultimate direct confrontation of the law which narrative is nevertheless instituted to make happen in an example worthy of respect'.[48] In the final chapter, borrowing Henry James's words, Hillis Miller speaks of

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[43] Derrida uses the phrase the 'non-ethical opening of ethics' in the essay 'The Violence of the Letter', in *Of Grammatology*, trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), p. 140.

[44] Hägglund, *Radical Atheism*, p. 88.

[45] Quigley, 'Introduction: Questions of Responsibility', p. 8.

[46] J. Hillis Miller, *The Ethics of Reading: Kant, de Man, Eliot, Trollope, James, and Benjamin* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), p. 18.

[47] Hillis Miller, *The Ethics of Reading*, p. 121.

[48] Hillis Miller, p. 33.

this law as 'some latent or gathered force' in the work. Its elusiveness is highlighted in the following passage:

> Though the law has force to perforate in my words more adequate channels for itself, those channels are never more than approximate. They are always subject to revision and re-vision, always idiomatic in the sense that they are good only for one time and place. They are never a final and definitive expression in so many words of the law as such. The text gives only itself. It hides its matter or thing as much as it reveals it.[49]

Even though the law makes an 'irresistible demand', it remains beyond grasp and defies any attempt at description or definition. This is further evidenced in the near-poetic description Hillis Miller provides: 'The law is the Absolute, empty air or an undifferentiated expanse of shining snow'.[50] And yet its force, however impervious to interpretation, is experienced as an imperative "I must" that cannot be ignored. Significantly, in '"Le Parjure", *Perhaps*' (2002), Derrida remarks that he is in 'profound agreement' with this notion of the ethics of reading. Indeed, he goes so far as to claim that 'the ethics of reading' may in fact simply be rendered as 'ethics'.[51] Thus in his view there is an equivalence between the force of the 'I must' within the act of reading and ethics itself. Speaking elsewhere of what he calls the 'Millerian gesture', Derrida underlines the clear connection between the singularity of the literary work and its ethical force:

> The Millerian gesture consists of always taking account, in order to render an account, in order to do it justice, of what is most idiomatic in the opus, in the operation itself, in the inimitable signature of the text studied, in what *The Ethics of Reading,* precisely, will call the *example,* the ethical necessity of the singular example.[52]

Towards the close of the piece, remarking that Hillis Miller's notion of ethics is 'risky' and 'aporetic', Derrida can be seen to present an accurate description of his own stance on the notion of ethics:

> The interminable debate with ethics remains for Miller, it seems to me, a fight that is tormented, risky, bold, aporetic, constantly obliged to reinvent probity and loyalty with every 'example,' with every 'I,' with every 'text,' with every singularity, with every 'other' — and this does not enclose him either in the

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[49] Hillis Miller, p. 121.
[50] Hillis Miller, p. 121.
[51] Jacques Derrida, '"Le Parjure"', *Perhaps*', in *Without Alibi*, ed. and trans. by Peggy Kamuf (Stanford : Stanford University Press, 2002), p. 165.
[52] Jacques Derrida, '"Justices"', trans. by Peggy Kamuf, *Critical Inquiry*, 31.3 (2005), p. 695.

library, in bibles, in what are called books, in the books of literature, or especially in the university.[53]

The essential relation between ethics and the singularity of the literary work that Derrida emphasises here has provided much fertile ground for literary criticism.

Writing in 2007, William Watkin remarks on the renewal in the relevance of deconstruction within the field of literary studies: 'we are on the cusp of a second generation of deconstructive literary criticism no longer committed to the consideration of issues of signification and metaphysics […] but instead considering a diverse yet interrelated set of concepts pertaining to the issue of singularity'.[54] Indeed, recent reflections on the literary have turned to and emphasised the importance of the singularity of literature. Rejecting critical approaches that treat the literary text as an object for scrutiny, such works have sought to reveal that the force of the literary lies precisely in its power to elude and escape the impulse to define or delimit it.[55] There is no essence of literature, and to ask the question 'What *is* literature?' — *after* Maurice Blanchot and Jacques Derrida — has come to betray a certain naïveté.[56] Some of the more influential studies to emerge include works by Derek Attridge, Timothy Clark and Leslie Hill. Particularly sensitive to the notion of the singularity of literature, they have all significantly underlined the conjunction between Derrida's reflections on literature and his understanding of ethics. In what can only be a cursory look at these works, I shall draw attention to the salient theme of a certain ethical response *vis-à-vis* the work of literature.

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[53] Derrida, '"Justices"', p. 717.

[54] William Watkin, 'Counterchange: Derrida's Poetry', in *Encountering: Legacies and Futures of Deconstruction*, ed. by Allison Weiner and Simon Morgan Wortham (London: Continuum, 2007), p. 69. Whereas some critics have argued that we should move beyond Derrida's provocations regarding the literary, others, like Jonathan Culler, maintain that we have not yet begun to give his work due attention. As recently as 2005, Jonathan Culler, claiming that Derrida's work on literature has been largely 'neglected', called for 'a second, literary reception of Derrida' (Jonathan Culler, 'Derrida and the Singularity of Literature', *Cardozo Law Review*, 27.2 (2005), p. 875). Similarly, in 'The Future of Literary Criticism' (2010), Richard Klein claimed that 'we are only at the beginning of the task of exploring the implications and drawing the consequences of deconstruction for literary criticism, for what we are calling reading texts' (Richard Klein, 'The Future of Literary Criticism', *PMLA*, 125.4 (2010), p. 923).

[55] Timothy Clark warns against using this inherent elusiveness of the literary as an excuse to avoid discussing the literary on the grounds that it defies commentary or discussion. He writes that 'to defend literature and the poetic as that which, by definition, escapes critical appropriation is surely a strategy with a limited future. One cannot go banging on indefinitely about the ever-elusive strangeness of the literary without giving the impression that one has nothing more to say' (Timothy Clark, *The Poetics of Singularity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), p. 7).

[56] And yet arguably the question haunts any serious reader of literature. To ask the question is to acknowledge and actively engage with the power of the literary. So that it *remains* in a sense an obligation both to address the question and to avoid it.

Derek Attridge's *The Singularity of Literature* (2004) observes that although the view that literature is experienced more as an event than an object has been amply acknowledged, little has been made of the implications it has for our understanding of the literary. In an attempt to move away from what he reads as a tendency towards the mystical or dismissively demystifying approaches, he emphasises the importance of three integral aspects, namely invention, singularity and alterity — all of which are clearly indebted to Derrida's work.[57] This so-called 'trinity', he argues, lies 'at the heart of Western art as a practice and as an institution' and draws attention to two crucial dimensions that he seeks to emphasise: the performative aspect of the literary as itself an event and its participation in the ethical realm.[58] He maintains that an integral aspect of the literary work as event is the claim it makes on the reader; something he refers to as the 'call coming from the work itself'.[59] Remarking on the fact that responsibility is not a concept we usually consider when reading works of literature, he speaks of the 'strange compulsion' that often accompanies the act of reading. The 'responsible response' that a work demands is evoked by the 'singular staging of otherness'.[60] Hence, the encounter with otherness in the work elicits an ethical moment that is similar to the event as described by Derrida. As a result, the literary critic is faced with the task of doing justice to the singularity in question. In fact, Attridge seeks to offer an alternative to the otherwise prevalent instrumental interpretation of literary works. Refusing to treat response as a straightforward (or facile) act of criticism of a work, he comments about the complexity entailed and hints at a certain difficulty that is part of what he refers to as an act of 'responding' to the work. The vocabulary he uses to describe what he calls '*readerly hospitality*' is indicative of the response he espouses:[61] one reads of 'attentiveness', 'commitment', 'responsibility', 'justice', 'affirmation' and, indeed, 'generosity'.[62] Bringing together the literary and the notion of alterity, he writes that 'to respond to the

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[57] Though the approach adopted by Attridge in this work is such that he omits any references to writers who inform his thought in the main text, he acknowledges Derrida's influence in an appendix entitled 'Debts and Directions'. He writes: 'The greatest debt of which I am conscious is to the thought of Jacques Derrida, primarily in the form of his published writings but also as manifested in numerous lectures, panel discussions, exchanges of letters, and private conversations. Derrida's work over the past thirty-five years constitutes the most significant, far-reaching, and inventive exploration of the importance of literature of our time' (Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 139).
[58] Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature*, p. 2.
[59] Attridge, p. 124.
[60] Attridge, p. 124.
[61] Attridge, p. 80.
[62] Attridge, p. 123 and p. 126.

demand of the literary work as the demand of the other is to attend to it as a unique event whose happening is a call, a challenge, an obligation'.[63]

In *The Poetics of Singularity* (2005) Timothy Clark emphasises the inassimilable nature of the literary work that does not hold still within categories. In a provocative definition of reading, he maintains that 'the experience of reading is not an accumulation of knowledge but a becoming-other of that consciousness itself'.[64] Drawing on the work of Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Blanchot and Derrida, he underlines the ways in which their work offers 'a more fruitful' and 'a more *just ideal* for reading literary texts'.[65] He maintains that such post-existentialist thinkers offer a liberating way out of the reductive and institutionalised modes of reading that characterise 'professionalised' criticism.[66] Taking his cue from Hannah Arendt's notion of 'natality', he argues that only a mode of thinking that 'affirms a capacity for becoming other' can release criticism from 'unscholarly complacency' and 'the simplifying forms of identification that often lie at the basis of the critical institution'.[67] In his chapter on the pragmatics of singularity in Derrida's work, he turns his attention to Derrida's notion of testimony and its importance within the literary work (understood as an event of singular inventiveness). He argues that by acting as witness to the work, the reader comes to occupy 'the impossible position of witnessing for the text's own witness' and that, therefore, the reader's experience entails a kind of 'implication' or 'collaboration'.[68] In Clark's view, for Derrida 'true and responsible understanding can only be a kind of participation'.[69] In an earlier work, speaking of Derrida's notion and practice of literature, Clark significantly ends with a brief section entitled 'Postscript: Responsibilities' in which he claims that 'a responsible reading will attend to the singular *viens* […] that sets each text in motion and constitutes its allure or fascination'.[70]

Primarily concerned with the singularity of the work, like Attridge and Clark, Leslie Hill's *Radical Indecision* (2010) engages with the work of Roland Barthes, Blanchot and Derrida to explore what a response to the event of the work might entail. Hill's main

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[63] Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature*, p. 131.
[64] Clark, *The Poetics of Singularity*, p. 3.
[65] Clark, p. 28.
[66] Clark, p. 8.
[67] Clark, p. 160.
[68] Clark, p. 150 and p. 152.
[69] Clark, p. 152.
[70] See Timothy Clark, *Derrida, Heidegger, Blanchot: Sources of Derrida's Notion and Practice of Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 186.

contention is that the response to a literary work, understood as a singular unpredictable event, is highly fraught with difficulty. He argues that the reader's engagement with the work gives rise to indecision and that this should not be thought of as a negative or nihilistic moment. Rather, it is a moment of affirmation that responds to the singular writing of others. Speaking about the literary event as 'incalculable', 'enigmatic' and 'unexpected', Hill maintains — throughout his dense and scrupulously researched work — that the critical act ought to approach literature with 'justice'. He asks: 'How, then, to respond to the unpredictability of an event, to speak to it, and address it?' And, more provocatively, 'how to approach literature, if it exists, with justice?'.[71] For Hill, justice can only come in 'the form of the singular and exorbitant exposure to an event: to the otherness of the other'.[72] Such a critical position must by necessity remain provisional; indeed, Hill writes that it is characterised by a response that is 'hazardous, unreconciled, inadequate'.[73] Yet this is not to be viewed with scepticism or dismissed as relativist. Rather, as his conclusion asserts, it should challenge the literary critic to affirm the 'intractability of reading as an experience of radical indecision'.[74] Hill's envisaged role of a new critical disposition finds the possibility of justice precisely within this 'radical indecision'.

Reflecting on the implications of the singularity of literature, Attridge, Clark and Hill may be seen to converge on a number of points, not least since they all engage with Jacques Derrida's work around the subject of ethics. A brief overview of some of these important convergences is here due. All three writers start with the premise that there is no essence of literature and hold the view that literature is a singular event. It follows from this that they must perforce refute the notion of criticism as mere application of theoretical norms and they are extremely wary of a method that seeks to reduce the other to the economy of the same.[75] They refuse, as Clark writes elsewhere, 'to subsume literary force

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[71] Leslie Hill, *Radical Indecision: Barthes, Blanchot, Derrida, and the Future of Criticism* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), p. 22 and p. 48.
[72] Hill, p. 335.
[73] Hill, p. 335.
[74] Hill, p. 336.
[75] Recall Derrida's description of criticism as an act of signing a literary work in the well-known interview 'This Strange Institution Called Literature'. Rather than producing a text that attempts to master or subjugate the text it contemplates, Derrida proposes that one signs it in one's turn. The indecision regarding Derrida's (pre-)position *vis-à-vis* the text reveals Derrida's solicitude in relation to the work: 'the literary texts I write *about, with, toward, for* (what should one say? This is a serious question), *in the name of, in honor of, against*, perhaps too, *on the way toward* [...] I almost always write in response to solicitations or provocations' (Derrida, '"This Strange Institution Called Literature": An Interview with Jacques Derrida',

into institutional values'.[76] Instead they propose a mode of reading that responds to the work with hospitality, responsibility or justice. It would appear, therefore, that the singularity of literature is coextensive with an ethical moment. In the introduction to a special issue on the subject of ethics and literature, Michael Eskin (2004) makes a similar reflection when he points out what he considers to be a 'new kind of "aesthetics"' that is informed 'by a newly formed conceptual inventory and vocabulary'; namely, the admittedly 'vague and slippery' terms in the following list: '*alterity*, *interpellation*, *call of the other*, *answerability*, *ethical responsibility*, *openness*, *obligation*, *event*, *doing justice*, *witnessing*, *hospitality*, *singularity*, *particularity*, or the *gift*'.[77]

Taking its cue from Jacques Derrida's 1988 compellingly provocative text 'Che cos'è la poesia?', this thesis argues that the poematic is, at heart, an ethical experience. It seeks to show that Derrida's text calls for a reconsideration of the relation between the poetic and the ethical. The ethical is not to be understood, of course and as has been argued, in terms of the purposiveness of a poetic work or its ability to guide us along a moral path, but rather, and more compellingly, as the experience of the arrival of the other. How does the poetic intersect with the ethical event as conceived in Derrida's work? What are the consequences of thinking the poetic as it is conceived in Derrida's response? How does it contribute to a new thinking about the poetic in our time (if at all)? And what does it mean to think of the poetic in terms of an experience of responsibility or hospitality? This thesis proposes to explore what is at work within the poetic and how this '*doing*', to borrow Eskin's term, enacts an ethical experience.[78] In emphasising the point that the ethical force is found in literature's '*doing*', Eskin draws attention to its ability to activate or set in motion an ethical engagement rather than merely describe ethical situations or

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trans. by Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby, in *Acts of Literature*, ed. by Derek Attridge (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 41.).

[76] Timothy Clark, 'Literary Force, Institutional Values', in *The Question of Literature: The Place of the Literary in Contemporary Theory*, ed. by Elizabeth Beaumont Bissell (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), p. 98.

[77] Michael Eskin, 'Introduction: The Double "Turn" to Ethics and Literature?', *Poetics Today*, 25.4 (2004), p. 561. Eskin describes this as 'an aesthetics that conceives of art and our engagement with it not in standard aesthetic but in what has been called "poethic" terms, whereby the ethical and the literary are transformed and sublated into a qualitatively altogether novel union'. The term 'poethics', he explains, has been employed by a number of critics to suggest 'the fusion of the ethical and the literary'. See Eskin, 'Introduction', p. 563. Interestingly, as we shall see in Chapter 3, Derrida also uses this term in a piece on the poet Michel Deguy entitled, 'Comment nommer'.

[78] Michael Eskin, 'On Literature and Ethics', *Poetics Today*, 25.4 (2004), p. 574.

prescribe ethical behaviour.[79] Focusing on Derrida's notions of responsibility and hospitality in turn, it argues that the interruption at the heart of Derrida's notion of ethics is what characterises poetic force. If, as this thesis maintains, the poetic as conceived in 'Che cos'è la poesia?' is bound by ethical imperatives, then it follows that the violence that is always potentially operative in the ethical instance is also at work within the poetic experience.

A cursory view at the extant ethical criticism will immediately reveal that fiction and narrative take pride of place in the large majority of critics' analyses of literary works across the whole spectrum of so-called ethical criticism (and here I use this phrase as broadly as possible). Hillis Miller goes so far as to categorically maintain that 'there is no theory of ethics [...] without storytelling'.[80] In fact, it is starkly noticeable to anyone interested in the intersection between poetry and ethics that poetry has received far less attention in this field of literary criticism.[81] David-Antoine Williams, whose own book-length study is an attempt at filling the lacuna, speaks about poetry's 'conspicuous' 'lack of status within the revival of ethical criticism' and maintains that '[m]any writers on the ethics of literature simply ignore poetry and the poetic altogether'.[82]

As indicated above, this thesis makes the claim that Derrida's 'Che cos'è la poesia?' offers an important, though largely ignored, contribution to the subject. It starts from the premise that the text explores, albeit in a highly elliptical fashion, the question of the ethicality (or of what Derrida calls 'ethicity') of the poetic experience.[83] As the ensuing introduction to the text makes clear, Derrida immediately questions the seemingly

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[79] Attridge makes a similar comment when he maintains: 'There are grounds for arguing that the most fundamental engagement between the literary and the ethical occurs not in the human world depicted in works of literature but in the very act of reading such works, whether or not they deal with situations and relations that could be called ethical'. Derek Attridge, 'Ethical Modernism: Servants as Others in J.M. Coetzee's Early Fiction', *Poetics Today*, 25.4 (2004), p. 653.

[80] Hillis Miller, *The Ethics of Reading*, p. 23.

[81] For critical works that address the question of poetry in relation to a Levinasian or Derridean understanding of ethics, see Krzysztof Ziarek, *Inflected Language: Towards a Hermeneutics of Nearness: Heidegger, Levinas, Stevens, Celan* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994); Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Gadamer on Celan* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997); Michael Eskin, *Ethics and Dialogue: In the Works of Levinas, Bakhtin, Mandel'shtam, and Celan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Gerald L. Bruns, 'Should Poetry be Ethical or Otherwise?', *SubStance*, 38.3 (2009), pp. 72–91.

[82] David-Antoine Williams, *Defending Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 17 and p. 18. Williams remarks that 'if Neo-Aristotelian didactic and the responsibility-oriented deconstructive streams of ethical criticism share anything, it is that both rely on broad theories of narration, which is to say they regard real and imagined human actions, consequences, and fates (usually) within social situations' (*Defending Poetry*, p. 18).

[83] Jacques Derrida, 'Passions: An Oblique Offering', trans. by David Wood, in *Derrida: A Critical Reader*, ed. by David Wood (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p. 14.

straightforward concept of 'poetry' and is quick to substitute it with his preferred alternatives — the terms 'poetic' and 'poematic'. No sooner have we proclaimed an interest in the oft-ignored subject of poetry within the field of ethical criticism than Derrida's own foray compels us to make cautionary warnings about the specific understanding of 'poetry'. And it is here important to stress that Derrida, whose humble hedgehog belongs to a 'counter-genealogy', is not interested in poetry as a literary genre. Indeed, in making the claim that the poetic is an experience, Derrida immediately anticipates that the poetic exceeds the limitations of the genre of poetry. In spite (or, perhaps, because) of its provocative response to the question of the essence of poetry, Derrida's response to the question 'What thing is poetry?' is conspicuously unremarked. Very few critical works take as their main focus the import and consequences of Derrida's reflections in this piece. Perhaps it is the elliptical quality of the text that, in refusing to respond directly to the question '*What is* poetry?', fails to present any definitive statements on the subject. Indeed, the style of the piece, as elusively poetic as the subject it treats of, seems to preclude or discourage what Derrida, when prompted to explain aspects of the text in the interview 'Istrice 2: Ick bünn all hier', has described as the act of 'resemantiz[ing] the letter' — something he would prefer not to do. His position is clearly stated:

> I would rather not re-semanticize this letter ['Che cos'è la poesia?']. It must remain of little meaning. Without secret but sealed. It is also better not to stuff polysemic vitamins down the throat of a humble little mammal. Let's not entrust it with any message, it's not a carrier pigeon that would carry off into the blue, hidden in its band, a coded order, a law of the heart, or strategic information.[84]

A second reason may be related to what Nicholas Royle seems to suggest is an inherently intimidating quality about Derrida's conception of the poetic, which criticism would rather avoid or, indeed, shield itself from: 'Literary criticism — at least according to a certain traditional conception and practice — protects us from poetry or, at any rate, from the sort of shattering, catastrophic conception of the poetic that Derrida talks about, in "Che cos'è la poesia?" and elsewhere'.[85] Indeed, many of the references to the highly elusive 'Che

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[84] Derrida, 'Istrice 2', p. 311.
[85] Nicholas Royle, 'Poetry, Animality, Derrida', in *A Companion to Derrida*, ed. by Zeynep Direk and Leonard Lawlor (Oxford: Blackwell, 2014), p. 526.

cos'è la poesia?', with the notable exception of Timothy Clark's enlightening reading,[86] are limited to short remarks that mention the text in passing — very often invoking one of its more memorable motifs: the heart, the hedgehog or the dictation of the poem. Refusing to meddle with the prickly hedgehog, such passing (and, hence, tantalising) remarks fail to explore the import of Derrida's provocative reflections.[87] Royle has spoken of Derrida's stance on the subject in terms of a 'poetry break'; a phrase which signals, as he argues, that for Derrida 'it is necessary to break with poetry, with everything that might have been gathered in or under the name "poetry"'.[88] In concert with this view of Derrida's significant contribution to the subject, Watkin has claimed that the fact that Derrida is 'an inventive thinker on poetry' remains 'a fact still relatively unacknowledged'.[89] In an effort to respond more fully to what it claims is a crucial reflection on the question of the poetic and its relation to Derrida's notion of the ethical, this thesis sets out to tread the path of the dangerous ramblings of the Derridean hedgehog.

Counterpoetics: ~~Poetry~~ sous rature

Significantly parting ways with the traditional and seemingly irrefutable conception of the poem as a piece of writing, in 'Che cos'è la poesia?, Derrida takes the Italian idiom '*che cos'è…?*' literally, and speaks of the poetic in terms of a 'thing'. This is immediately clear in the second paragraph where poetry itself proclaims:

> I am *a* dictation, pronounces poetry, learn me by heart, copy me down, guard and keep me, look out for me, look at me, dictated dictation, right before your eyes: soundtrack, *wake*, trail of light, photograph of the feast in mourning. (*CCP*, 289)

The above cited list is worth pausing on, not least since it foreshadows Derrida's departure from traditional poetics; a 'soundtrack', a 'wake', a 'trail of light' and a 'photograph of the feast in mourning'. These 'things' hardly qualify as *things* one would consider when addressing the question 'What is poetry?'. What is immediately noticeable, in fact, is the

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[86] See Timothy Clark, *The Theory of Inspiration: Composition as a Crisis of Subjectivity in Romantic and Post-romantic Writing* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), pp. 259–81.

[87] For instance, in view of the subject of this thesis, it is worth citing Stefan Holander's incisive (if fleeting) observation at the end of a chapter on a book-length study on Wallace Stevens's poetry. Referring to the hedgehog at the centre of Derrida's reflections on the poematic, Holander draws attention to the ethical import of the text and maintains that Derrida 'has tried to capture the *elusive ethics* of the poetic "object" in an exceptionally "thorny" and admittedly "farfetched" metaphor' (my emphasis). Stefan Holander, *Wallace Stevens and the Realities of Poetic Language* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 146.

[88] Nicholas Royle, *Jacques Derrida* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 129 and p. 137.

[89] Watkin, 'Counterchange: Derrida's Poetry', p. 69.

lack of terms commonly associated with poetry in Derrida's response: 'words', 'lines', 'stanzas', 'poet' as well as rhetorical and figurative terms are conspicuously absent (with the noteworthy exception of 'catachresis', as we shall see in Chapter 1). This makes for a strange poetics indeed. Even 'the two words' that he speaks ('right away […] so as not to forget)' make no explicit reference to a textual artefact. And whereas both words — the 'economy of memory' and the 'heart' in the idiomatic phrase 'to learn by heart' — implicitly suggest a piece of writing, Derrida's brief elucidations avoid any such references. For instance, though he writes that the 'economy of memory' refers to the elliptical nature, brevity and '*Verdichtung*' of the poem, he emphasises the passage or 'retreat' of memory rather than its verbal expression. Similarly, speaking of the heart embedded within the idiom, 'learning by heart', he refrains from mentioning the expected lines of a poem that one would supposedly learn by heart. Rather, in an evident departure from the meaning of the idiomatic expression, he describes the poem as 'the advent of an event':

> The poetic, let us say it, would be that which you learn, but from and of the other, thanks to the other and under dictation, by heart; *imparare a memoria*. Isn't that already it, the poem, once a token is given, the advent of an event, at the moment in which the traversing of the road named translation remains as improbable as an accident, one which is all the same intensely dreamed of, required there where what it promises always leaves something to be desired? A grateful recognition goes out toward that very thing and precedes cognition here: your benediction before knowledge. (*CCP*, 291)

Derrida's attempt to rework the meaning of the idiom 'learn by heart' is here clear. In its idiomatic sense, it signifies the act of memorising or committing to memory, in this context, say, a couple of lines, a stanza or a sonnet. Yet evidently there is no direct claim or, for that matter, subtle innuendo that the idiom refers to memorising a number of lines of poetry. Rather, Derrida uses the idiom 'learning by heart' to signify the reception of some*thing* that comes from the other: 'The poetic […] would be *that* which you learn, but from and of the other, thanks to the other and under dictation, by heart' (*CCP*, 291; my emphasis). The demonstrative pronoun 'that' remains without a clear subject. More event than text, this 'thing' called poetry, as he goes on to describe, happens as (an) accident on the autoroute. Hence, the reference to the 'advent of an event' and the momentous traversal to the other side of the autoroute (*CCP*, 291). Significantly, taking place or befalling, as an event should, before cognition and knowledge, this benediction is not to be understood in

the sense of a 'poem' as literary artefact or creation: 'the poem does not hold still within names, nor even within words' (*CCP*, 293). In another, more direct, claim he maintains: 'It is first of all thrown out on the roads and in the fields, thing beyond languages, even if it sometimes happens that it recalls itself in language' (*CCP*, 293).[90]

Thus, when called upon to account for poetry — the question posed after all is specifically about *la poesia* — Derrida chooses to break ties with the genealogy of poetry as a literary genre. As he proclaims early on, Derrida is interested in what he calls the poetic 'experience'. The one answering (to) the question of the poetic and hence, answering, *for* the poetic (in this instance, Jacques Derrida) can be seen to question his own admittedly unconventional path. Indeed, he is quick to distinguish between poetry as a literary genre and the poetic voyage or experience of welcoming the other and the other's gift, in this case, a brief, elliptical poem. Already in the early paragraphs of what Peggy Kamuf has described as a 'poem' in its own right, Derrida makes it clear that he is not interested in the study of aesthetics or poetics.[91]

> […] what would all of this, the very thing in which you have just begun to turn deliriously, have to do, at that point, with poetry? Or rather, with the *poetic*, since you intend to speak about an *experience*, another word for voyage, here the aleatory rambling of a trek, the strophe that turns but never leads back to discourse, or back home, at least is never reduced to poetry — written, spoken, even sung. (*CCP*, 291)

This refusal to reduce the poetic experience to 'poetry' is more pronounced still in a remark a few paragraphs later:

> Most of all do not let the *hérisson* be led back into the circus or the menagerie of *poiesis*: nothing to be done (*poiein*), neither "pure poetry," nor pure rhetoric, nor *reine Sprache,* nor "setting-forth-of-truth-in-the-work". Just this contamination, and this crossroads, this accident here. This turn, the turning around of *this* catastrophe. The gift of the poem cites nothing, it has no title, its

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[90] Though much has been written about Derrida's notion of literature and its relevance within the field of literary criticism, the more specific understanding of the 'poetic' or 'poematic' that Derrida provides has received considerably less attention. It is necessary to point out that Derrida's use of the words 'literature' and the 'poetic' or 'poematic', are not interchangeable. In seeking to explore the intersection between the ethical and the poetic, this thesis is primarily concerned with the poematic conceived as 'the mark […] whose letter is not thoroughly nominal, discursive, or linguistic' (Jacques Derrida, 'Istrice 2: Ick bünn all hier', trans. by Peggy Kamuf, in *Points…Interviews, 1974–1994*, ed. by Elisabeth Weber (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 305). This, of course, stands in contrast with Derrida's well-known understanding of literature as a linguistic invention that 'makes the limits of our language tremble', which, intriguing as it may be, shall not be the subject of our focus here (Derrida and Kearney, 'Deconstruction and the Other', p. 144).

[91] Jacques Derrida, 'Che cos'è la poesia?', trans. by Peggy Kamuf, in *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*, ed. with notes by Peggy Kamuf (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), p. 221.

histrionics are over, it comes along without your expecting it, cutting short the breath, cutting all ties with discursive and especially literary poetry. In the very ashes of this genealogy. (*CCP*, 297)

The 'gift of the poem', as we shall see in more detail in the chapters that follow, is more closely related to the event or happening of the unforeseeable arrival of the other than it is to the literary work or written text. Derrida's demand that the entire genealogy be set alight is an unequivocal one: 'set fire to the library of poetics' (*CCP*, 295). Perhaps this is the catastrophe that Royle has in mind when he refers to Derrida's response as 'dangerous, inflammatory, catastrophic'.[92] Clearly, Derrida's stance *vis-à-vis* literary poetry explains the dearth of poetic terms in his singularly inventive tribute to the poetic. And it is timely at this introductory stage to anticipate that, taking its cue from 'Che cos'è la poesia?' and seeking to explore the subject of the ethics of poetic force, this thesis is not primarily interested in poetry as a literary genre. Rather, it takes as its subject the experience of the *poetic* as it emerges in 'Che cos'è la poesia?'.

This thesis proposes to focus on the intersection between the poetic and Derrida's notions of responsibility and hospitality in order to shed light on what it claims to be a necessary correlation between the poetic and the ethical.[93] In light of the subject matter of this thesis, it is indeed fitting to invoke the extremely suggestive phrase from a recent article by Kelly Oliver to introduce the main concern in this study, that is to say, the phrase that gives the article its title, 'The Poetic Axis of Ethics'.[94] This insightful article highlights the connection between the poetic and the ethical in a seminar from Derrida's *The Beast and the Sovereign* and we shall return to it on more than one occasion in the ensuing chapters. For the moment suffice it to underline, through the invoked phrase, that this thesis shall reveal that the ethical revolves around the poetic, but also, through a chiastic

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[92] Nicholas Royle, 'Poetry, Animality, Derrida', p. 531.

[93] This does not mean, of course, that Derrida's reflections on the poetic are limited to these two notions. The decision to focus on these two ethical notions has meant that other equally compelling issues could not be central to the discussion presented here. William Watkin gives a very succinct overview of some of the more salient themes that emerge in Derrida's reflections on the poetic: 'Poetry and memorability, the poematic, and poem as event in '*Che cos'è la poesia*' [*sic*]; poetry and the date, poetry and testimony, the shibboleth of the non-translatable mark, and the cut of the word in the caesura in 'Shibboleth'; the countersignature of the poem, the idiom of the poet's oeuvre or timbre, and poetry and philosophy in 'Signs[é]ponge'; the hymen, the turn of the poetic line, gaps and spacing, and the title and the law in "The Double Session"'. Watkin, 'Counterchange: Derrida's Poetry', p. 69.

[94] The phrase is appositely used to describe the manner in which a line from Paul Celan's poem 'Vast Glowing Vault' ('Die Welt ist fort, ich muβ dich tragen' / 'The world is gone, I must carry you') informs the ethics espoused by Derrida in a late seminar from *The Beast and the Sovereign*. See Oliver, 'The Poetic Axis of Ethics', pp. 121–36.

reversal of said phrase, that the poetic revolves around ethics. Chapter 1 and Chapter 3 provide detailed analyses of Derrida's notion of the poetic in relation to his understanding of responsibility and hospitality respectively. For Derrida both notions are to be understood in relation to the arrival or *invenire* (from the Latin 'to come upon') of the other. Following on the more theoretical analysis of each of these chapters, Chapter 2 and Chapter 4 turn their attention to the work of Hélène Cixous and Paul Celan respectively to point to instantiations that manifest the ethics of poetic force. Significantly, the two writers whose work I have elected to propose as exemplary instances of the ethics of poetic force also question the limiting and limited understanding of poetry as a literary genre. Hélène Cixous whose prolific body of work cuts across the boundaries of genre has not published any works of poetry as such and yet it is clear that her work is *poetic* to the core. And whereas Paul Celan is undoubtedly a poet, his renunciation of what he calls 'genre-bound poetry' is a clear indication of his broader understanding of the poetic.[95]

Chapter 1 presents a reading of Derrida's notion of the poetic as an instance of ethical responsibility. The first section addresses three central aspects of the notion of Derridean responsibility, namely the secret, the call and the response. The second section deals more directly with the notion of the poetic and argues that the poetic involves an interruptive call or apostrophe that entails a certain violence, which is subsequently related to Derrida's understanding of catachresis. The final section considers the nature of the response that this insistent call of the other demands by referring closely both to the biblical narrative of Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac as well as Derrida's notions of the 'double yes' and the countersignature.

Focusing primarily on Cixous's writing practice as an instance of heeding the call of the other, Chapter 2 maintains that her work can be understood as 'poetic' in the Derridean sense. It begins by outlining the parallels between the experience that Cixous describes as 'coming to writing' and the Derridean notion of the poetic dictate. Through a close reading of the essay 'Without end, no, State of drawingness, no, rather: The Executioner's taking off', it then shows that the complex question of genre in Cixous's work is related to her writing practice as an instance of submitting to the call of the other. Finally, it argues that the Cixousian ageneric text is an instance of what Derrida has

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[95] Paul Celan, *The Meridian: Final Version–Drafts–Materials*, trans. by Pierre Joris and ed. by Bernhard Böschenstein and Heino Schmull (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), p. 125.

described in terms of a 'monstrous mutation' and maintains that the ethical force of her work is found in this monstrosity.[96]

Turning its attention primarily to the 1990s seminars around the subject of hospitality, Chapter 3 proposes to explore the relation between the poetic experience and hospitality. It begins by focusing on the inherent violence in hospitality through an analysis of the etymological root of the word 'hospitality' and Derrida's neologism 'hostipitality'. In a second section, the chapter addresses Derrida's aphoristic claim that an 'act of hospitality can only be poetic'.[97] Relating this assertion to his understanding of invention as the instance of the coming of the other, it is argued that the poetic is ethical at its core because it invents the impossible. The final section seeks to draw out the implications of Derridean hospitality for a reading of Sophocles' play *Antigone*, where it is argued that the eponymous character can be seen to enact the poetic experience at the centre of the discussion.

In an extended analysis of the notions of the poetic and hospitality, Chapter 4 takes the concept of *das Unheimliche* in Paul Celan's 'Der Meridian' speech as its foremost concern. It begins by underlining Celan's attempt to locate the place for what he calls the 'groundlessness' of the poem. Its main claim is that the ethical force in Celan's poetry lies in its power to overcome the uncanny automaticity of art. The second part of the chapter turns to *Die Niemandsrose* (1963) to explore the uncanny motifs in relation to what Celan calls the 'groundlessness' of the poem. Finally, the third part of the chapter suggests that the uncanny in Celan's oeuvre can be seen as the ethical counterpart to the aesthetic of the Romantic sublime that is arguably no longer possible for poetry today.

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[96] Jacques Derrida, 'Deconstruction and the Other', in *Debates in Continental Philosophy: Conversations with Continental Thinkers,* ed. by Richard Kearney (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), p. 154.
[97] Jacques Derrida and Anne Dufourmantelle, *Of Hospitality*, trans. by Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 2.

Chapter 1

Poe(ma)tic Respons(e)ibility

Che cos'è la poesia?: the question is posed and thus heard, as Derrida points out ('déjà tu parles italien'), in Italian: 'domanda'.[1] According to its Italian etymology, therefore, the question here is more than just a question; it is also, and more importantly, a demand that imposes itself on its addressee. It falls under the category of questions that Derrida has elsewhere provocatively described as 'questions that are so many demands, and even prayers'.[2] It also suggests, if we trace its etymology further back to its Latinate root, the act of entrusting someone with a task or duty.[3] All three attestations, as we shall see, are enveloped in the response to 'Che cos'è la poesia?' that begins by immediately drawing attention both to the question being posed to Derrida as well as the act of responding to its demand. Indeed, the French *demander* and *répondre* appear no less than seven times on the first page of this brief, if immensely powerful and masterfully condensed, response. Yet the demand does not only come from the Italian magazine *Poesia*, which, in 1988, invited Derrida to contribute an entry to its staple opening piece

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[1] Jacques Derrida, 'Che cos'è la poesia?', trans. by Peggy Kamuf, in *Points… Interviews, 1974–1994*, ed. by Elisabeth Weber (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 288. Subsequent quotations from this work will be given in parentheses within the main text following the abbreviation *CCP*.

[2] Jacques Derrida and Anne Dufourmantelle, *Of Hospitality*, trans. by Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 131.

[3] The *OED* entry explains: 'The transition from the Latin sense "give in charge, entrust, commit, commend" to the Romanic sense "request, ask", was probably made through the notion of *entrusting* or *committing* to any one a duty to be performed, of *charging* a servant, or officer, with the performance of something, whence of *requiring* its performance of him, or *authoritatively requesting* him to do it. Hence the notion of *asking* in a way that commands obedience or compliance, which the word retains in English, and of simple asking, as in French.'

around the subject of the essence (*What is…?*) of poetry.[4] More significantly, it is a demand or dictate that comes from poetry itself:

> Even though it remains inapparent, since disappearing is its law, the answer *sees itself (as) dictated (dictation)*. I am *a* dictation, pronounces poetry, learn me by heart, copy me down, guard and keep me, look out for me, look at me, dictated dictation, right before your eyes […]. (*CCP*, 289)

Derrida's response thus begins by laying emphasis on the demand imposed both by the question 'che cos'è la poesia?' and by the dictation of poetry. The dictate of poetry demands that its recipient look out for it and guard it; in a word, it must take responsibility for it.

As the introduction explains, Derrida does not describe the poem as a verbal or linguistic artefact. In keeping with this unusual conception of the poem, he speaks in terms of a poetic 'mark' that elects its recipient to responsibility:

> […] a mark addressed to you, left and confided with you, is accompanied by an injunction, in truth it is instituted in this very order which, in its turn, constitutes you, assigning your origin or giving rise to you: destroy me, or rather render my support invisible to the outside, in the world […], in any case do what must be done so that the provenance of the mark remains from now on unlocatable or unrecognizable. Promise it. (*CCP*, 293)

It is worth pausing briefly on this dense extract to introduce four important claims that are made in relation to the poetic and that anticipate the main concerns in this chapter. First, the address or apostrophe is not, as usually understood, merely an invocation of a person or an object. The function of the apostrophe (itself an indispensable feature of the lyric), whilst remaining integral to Derrida's notion of the poetic, undergoes considerable revision. It has the far more consequential role of 'giving rise' to its addressee. The counterintuitive claim made here is that the mark itself gives birth to the addressee. There is no addressee prior to the mark that has the crucial role of calling 'you' to responsibility. Second, the use of the imperative mood and the sequence of commands reveal the urgency

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[4] The Italian poetry journal *Poesia*, which opens every issue with a response to the question "Che cos'è la poesia?", invited Derrida to offer his contribution in 1988. A year later, it appeared in *Po&sie* preceded by the following note: 'La revue italienne *Poesia,* où ce texte parut en novembre 1988 (traduit par Maurizio Ferraris), ouvre chacun de ses numéros par la tentative ou le simulacre d'une réponse, en quelques lignes, à la question '*che cos'è la poesia?*'. Elle est posée à un vivant, la réponse à la question *che cos'era la poesia?* revenant à un mort, dans ce cas à l'*Odradek* de Kafka. Au moment où il écrit, le vivant ignore la réponse du mort : elle vient en fin de revue et c'est le choix des éditeurs. Destinée à paraître en italien, cette «réponse»-ci s'expose au passage, parfois littéralement, dans les lettres ou les syllabes, le mot et la chose ISTRICE (prononcer ISTRRITCHÉ), ce qui aura donné, dans une correspondance française, le hérisson'. Jacques Derrida, *Points de suspension* (Paris: Editions Galilée, 1992), p. 303.

of the poetic dictate or mark. Adding gravitas to the nature of the demand being made, the series of injunctions reveal that for Derrida the poetic mark has the force of an order that ought not to be ignored. The recipient is called upon to respond to the demand of the poetic dictate. Third, the nature of this response involves two seemingly contradictory tasks. On the one hand, 'you' — as the elected addressee — must *protect* the mark that, entrusted in confidence like a secret, has the weight of an 'injunction' or an 'order'. On the other hand, 'you' are also ordered to 'destroy' the mark and to 'render [its] support invisible'. Finally, the addressee must give its word and 'promise' to honour the commitment both to guard and destroy the 'mark'.

Heeding the dictates of 'Che cos'è la poesia?', this chapter presents a reading of Derrida's notion of the poetic as an instance of ethical responsibility. Focusing on Derrida's understanding of responsibility, the first section addresses three central aspects of the notion of Derridean responsibility, that is to say, the secret, the call and the response. The second section deals more directly with Derrida's understanding of the 'poetic' and argues that it involves an interruptive call or claim that entails a certain violence. The final section considers the nature of the response that this insistent call of the other demands by referring both to the biblical narrative of Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac and Derrida's notion of the 'double yes'.

Secret(s) of Responsibility

Derrida presents his most sustained exploration of the genealogy of responsibility in *Donner la mort* (1992), where one of the main concerns is the coincidence between the awakening of responsibility and the gift of the other. Like the poetic 'mark' in 'Che cos'è la poesia?', it is the gift of the other that elects me to responsibility. This immediately points to the crucial distinction between the classic metaphysical conception of responsibility and Derrida's own understanding of responsibility. Traditionally, responsibility has been attributed to the individual who, exercising free will and agency, is accountable for his actions. For Derrida, however, the concept of responsibility is not ascribed to the subject's conscious execution of a moral norm. Rather, the experience of responsibility arises when the unforeseeable event causes the very collapse of any stable moral or ethical norm. Addressing the absence of accountability in the post-metaphysical conception of responsibility, François Raffoul writes: '[r]esponsibility becomes less about

the establishment of a sphere of control and power, less about the establishment of a sovereign subject, and more about an exposure to an event that does not come from us and yet calls us'.[5] As the ensuing analysis reveals, the operative terms 'event' and 'call' are integral to what David Wood has described as Derrida's 'resurrection of responsibility', which involves the transformation of responsibility 'from being an attribute of a subject to being an openness that makes being a subject possible'.[6]

In his reading of Jan Patočka's analysis of European responsibility in *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History* as well as Kierkegaard's interpretation of the biblical narrative of the Binding of Isaac, Derrida is mindful both of the European legacy of the notion of responsibility and intent on, if necessary, rupturing ties with it. As he claims, the investigation of a particular notion or concept requires a profound awareness of its heritage. Speaking specifically about responsibility in an interview with Jonathan Dronsfield and others, he explains:

> […] to know what responsibility means I have to rely on memory, on culture, on language, on what I've been taught, thus I am an heir. […] Since we are heirs to certain concepts, values, axioms, to be responsible means first to account for this heritage, to know what to do with this tradition, to understand it, to reaffirm or confirm it or not, and to select what we think we have to select from it.[7]

Derrida's own revision of the concept of responsibility requires a thorough understanding of its heritage as well as a process of careful selection. Interestingly, in an extreme instantiation of this responsibility, when dealing with the question of poetry in 'Che cos'è la poesia?' Derrida, somewhat hyperbolically, calls for the entire library of poetics to be set alight. Clearly cognizant of the literary tradition and the long-standing tradition of poetics, he knows what he repudiates in calling for the incineration of the 'library of poetics'. The opening paragraph immediately begins by calling attention to a necessary familiarity with the tradition and an equally necessary willingness to renounce it:

> In order to respond to such a question [che cos'è la poesia?] — *in two words, right?* — you are asked to know how to renounce knowledge. And to know it well, without ever forgetting it: demobilize culture, but never forget in your

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[5] François Raffoul, *The Origins of Responsibility* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2010), p. 23.
[6] David Wood, 'Responsibility Reinscribed (and How)', in *Responsibilities of Deconstruction*, ed. by Jonathan Dronsfield and Nick Midgley, *Warwick Journal of Philosophy*, 6 (1997), pp. 104–05.
[7] Jacques Derrida, 'On Responsibility', in *Responsibilities of Deconstruction*, ed. by Jonathan Dronsfield and Nick Midgley, *Warwick Journal of Philosophy*, 6 (1997), p. 21. For a book-length study on this aspect of Derrida's thinking see Michael Naas, *Taking on the Tradition: Jacques Derrida and the Legacies of Deconstruction* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

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learned ignorance what you sacrifice on the road, in crossing the road. (*CCP*, 289)

In a similar vein, he later writes:

In order to respond in two words: *ellipsis*, for example, or *election*, *heart*, *hérisson*, or *istrice*, you will have had to disable memory, disarm culture, know how to forget knowledge, set fire to the library of poetics. (*CCP*, 295)

The injunction to set fire to the library of poetics is a strong one that underlines a certain violence that is not foreign to Derrida's thoughts on responsibility and, as the introduction elaborated, his notion of ethics in general. Already in 'Che cos'è la poesia?' the poetic mark orders its own destruction in the forceful imperative: 'Destroy me'. Similarly, in the aforementioned interview, the language used is indicative of the constitutive violence inherent in responsibility: 'As an heir one has to, and it's a terrible choice — but it is a choice, one has to kill something, one has to destroy part of the heritage by this hierarchising, this selection. To keep one part of the heritage living means, necessarily for a finite being, to kill or to destroy or to marginalise or to subordinate another part of the heritage'.[8]

Following Patočka's lead, Derrida begins *The Gift of Death* by highlighting the complex transition of the European genealogy of responsibility from Platonism to Christianity. According to Patočka, as Derrida observes, a central tenet of the Platonic conception of responsibility revolves around the question of knowledge or foreknowledge of what responsible action entails. The mores and guidelines for leading a responsible life are public and accessible to all. At the origin of the European concept of responsibility, therefore, responsible decision-making is based on knowledge of the Good. Thus, for Plato, as Derrida notes, 'not knowing, having neither sufficient knowledge nor consciousness of what being *responsible* means, is of itself a lack of responsibility'.[9] This reliance on and subordination to knowledge, in Patočka's view, discounts responsibility. In contradistinction, the Christian understanding of responsibility is bound to the concept of secrecy. The *mysterium tremendum* of the Christian doctrine introduces an experience of responsibility that, unlike the Platonic version, is essentially an interior experience. The public (and, one may say, general) knowledge of responsible life in the Greek model is

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[8] Derrida, 'On Responsibility', p. 22.
[9] Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. by David Wills, 2nd edition, (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2008), p. 27. Subsequent quotations from this work will be given in parentheses within the main text following the abbreviation *GD*.

thus replaced by the unknowable *mysterium tremendum.* Hence, to simplify a complex history that cannot be elaborated upon further here, a central difference between the Platonic and Christian models of responsibility is that whereas the former is based on public knowledge, the latter is founded on a private and unique experience of the *mysterium.* Indeed, within the Christian tradition, responsibility, far from being bound to knowledge, is conceived as emerging from the gift of the absolute and unknowable other. Christian responsibility originates in the gaze of the inaccessible and unknowable. As Rodolphe Gasché remarks, 'that which makes me responsible is something that remains impenetrable to me — in other words, secret. It is also something that shatters me because I cannot adequately respond to such a self-denying gift'.[10]

This 'structural disproportion or dissymmetry', as Derrida describes it, transforms the experience of responsibility into one of disequilibrium and, hence, one of guilt:

> I have never been and never will be up to the level of this infinite goodness nor up to the immensity of the gift, the frameless immensity that must in general define (*in*-define) a gift as such. This guilt is originary, like original sin. Before any fault is determined I am guilty inasmuch as I am responsible. What gives me my singularity, namely death and finitude, is precisely what makes me unequal to the infinite goodness of the gift, which is also the first appeal to responsibility. (*GD*, 52)

The coincidence of events is here noteworthy. It is the secret gift that singles "me" out and singularises me and which, in turn, calls me into account. Preceding the subject and, therefore, coming *before* the subject, the gift announces the very birth of the 'I'.[11] The moment of the reception of the gift is significantly coincident not only with the feeling of guilt and the apprehension of death but, more importantly for our discussion, with the first 'appeal' to responsibility. It is the appeal or call to responsibility that awakens the 'I' insofar as it has a claim on me.[12]

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[10] Rodolphe Gasché, 'European Memories: Jan Patočka and Jacques Derrida on Responsibility', *Critical Inquiry*, 33.2 (2007), p. 300.

[11] Considering the question of the subject in respect to deconstruction, Derrida, in conversation with Nancy, maintains: 'This deconstruction (we should once again remind those who do not want to read) is neither negative nor nihilistic; it is not even a pious nihilism, as I have heard said. A concept (that is to say also an experience) of responsibility comes at this price. We have not finished paying for it. I am talking about a responsibility that is not deaf to the injunction of thought. As you [Jean-Luc Nancy] said one day, there is a duty in deconstruction. There has to be, if there is such a thing as duty. The subject, if subject there must be, is to come after this' (Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Nancy, '"Eating Well", or the Calculation of the Subject', in *Who Comes After the Subject?*, ed. by Eduardo Cadava, Peter Connor and Jean-Luc Nancy (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 107–08).

[12] The Levinasian undertones are unmistakable here. For Levinas, as Derrida knew well, it is the gaze of the other that calls me into my own. The self is a responsibility for the other human being and wholly determined

An attempt to locate Derrida's conception of responsibility within the European tradition would arguably align his view with the Christian imperative of the secret. For Derrida responsibility can only begin where knowledge ends. Without the passage through the undecidable, no one can lay claim to responsibility. As he maintains in the oft-cited 2004 interview with *L'Humanité* and has repeated without cease in discussions around the subject of ethics, 'C'est au moment du "je ne sais pas quelle est la bonne règle" que la question éthique se pose'.[13] Speaking of the inadequacy of the thematisation of the concept of responsibility, he argues that the responsible act always *precedes* its thematisation:

> […] the activating of responsibility (decision, act, *praxis)* will always have to extend behind and beyond any theoretical or thematic determination. It will have to decide without it, independently from knowledge; that will be the condition of a practical idea of freedom. We should therefore conclude that not only is the thematization of the concept of responsibility always inadequate, but that it will always be so because it must be so. (*GD*, 27)

Contrary to the Platonic view of mandatory foreknowledge, Derrida maintains that it is precisely the predicament of 'not knowing' that characterises the moment of responsibility. The *lack* of dogmatic certitude is, in fact, an essential aspect of Derrida's understanding of responsibility and ethics in general. In a more explicit remark he writes that responsibility is 'the experience of absolute decisions that involve breaking with knowledge or given norms, made therefore through the very ordeal of the undecidable' (*GD*, 7).[14] As Derek Attridge maintains in his discussion of responsibility in Derrida's work, responsibility 'is not something we simply take: we find ourselves summoned, confronted by an undecidability which is also always an opportunity and a demand, a chance and a risk'.[15]

For Derrida, the passage through the undecidable is, in a necessary paradox, an aporetic passage. We may recall the claim from *The Other Heading* that 'responsibility

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by the claim that the other has on me. As Derrida remarks, 'A decision is a bet: you don't know in advance from where it comes, and where it goes to, it's an interruption. Finally, if we want to summarise, a decision is the other's. Responsibility is for the other, with the other. I am, as Levinas would say, the hostage of the other. Responsibility is not my property, I cannot reappropriate it, and *that* is the place of justice: the relation to the other' (Derrida, 'On Responsibility', p. 27).

[13] Jacques Derrida, 'Jacques Derrida, penseur de l'événement', interviewed by Jérôme-Alexandre Nielsberg for *L'Humanité*, 28th January 2004 <http://www.humanite.fr/node/299140> [accessed on 11 May 2017]

[14] Similarly, in conversation with Jean-Luc Nancy, he asserts that 'there is no responsibility, no ethico-political decision, that must not pass through the proofs of the incalculable or the undecidable. Otherwise everything would be reducible to calculation, program, causality, and, at best, "hypothetical imperative"' (Derrida and Nancy, 'Eating Well', p. 108).

[15] Derek Attridge, 'Derrida, Deconstruction and Literary Criticism', in *Reading and Responsibility: Deconstruction's Traces* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), p. 27.

[…] will only ever have begun with the experience and experiment of the aporia'.[16] As Derrida has remarked numerous times, the decision must be taken not in spite, but because of the experience of undecidability. Only the experience of undecidability ensures that a true decision is made. In 'A Certain Impossible Possibility of Saying the Event' he describes this as follows: 'A decision should tear — that's what the word *decision* means; it should disrupt the fabric of the possible'.[17] Derrida's use of the term 'decision' makes its etymology resonate. As the *OED* explains, the word goes back to the Latin *decidere* primarily meaning 'to cut off, to cut down, to mark out, carve' (from the prefix *de* and *caedere*, meaning to 'cut down'). Such attestations emphasise the 'incision' at the heart of de-cision. The words 'cut', 'mark' and 'carve' are, in fact, central to the act of decision as understood by Derrida. Speaking of the 'responsible decision' in *Adieu*, he describes the process as characterised by a 'tearing rupture'; one that 'should occur in every decision we call free'.[18]

The complex nature of the 'ordeal of the undecidable' is exemplified in the eternally perplexing biblical narrative of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac. In the third chapter of *The Gift of Death* entitled 'Whom to give to (knowing not to know)', Derrida describes God's demand that Abraham sacrifice his only son as 'that most cruel, impossible, and untenable gesture' (*GD*, 58–9). It would appear, therefore, that such a situation is itself a hyperbolic and exceptional instance. Yet Derrida counterintuitively maintains that Abraham's predicament is 'the most common event in the world'; indeed, a daily occurrence for each one of us in which we are compelled to sacrifice ethics in order to attend to the demands of the singular other (*GD*, 85). In this respect, as Matthew Halteman observes, '*all* responsibility has the structure of sacrifice'.[19] Derrida's claim is that 'Abraham's radical responsibility before God parallels that of each person before every other'.[20] Remarking on what Kierkegaard calls 'the ethical order' as opposed to the singular moment of responsible decision-making, Derrida describes Abraham's decision as 'absolutely

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[16] Jacques Derrida, *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today's Europe*, trans. by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael B. Naas (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1992), p. 41.

[17] Jacques Derrida, 'A Certain Impossible Possibility of Saying the Event', *Critical Inquiry*, 33. 2 (2007), p. 455.

[18] Jacques Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, trans. by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), pp. 23–24.

[19] Matthew C. Halteman, 'Toward a "Continental" Philosophy of Religion: Derrida, Responsibility and "Nondogmatic" Faith', in *Rethinking Philosophy of Religion: Approaches from Continental Philosophy,* ed. by Philip Goodchild (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), p. 69.

[20] Halteman, 'Derrida, Responsibility and "Nondogmatic" Faith', p. 68.

responsible' since Abraham decides to place the demands of the Other above all else (*GD*, 78). Ignoring the imperative of the generality of ethics that requires he save his son, Abraham, in Derrida's view, obeys a higher-order ethics. He gives without knowing and without asking to know. He respects the secret of God's mysterious intentions. He is ignorant of the consequences of fulfilling God's order and is unaware of the reason behind this incredibly outrageous demand. And yet allowing faith to take precedence over knowledge, he complies without question and without hesitation. Moreover, he keeps his own actions secret, thus guarding God's secret (or what Derrida has called the 'super-secret') from common knowledge (*GD*, 129). For Derrida, Abraham's ignorance is central to the experience of responsibility:

> He accepts his responsibility by heading off toward the absolute request of the other, beyond knowledge. He decides, but his absolute decision is neither guided nor controlled by knowledge. Such, in fact, is the paradoxical condition of every decision: it cannot be deduced from a form of knowledge of which it would simply be the effect, its conclusion, or explicitation. It structurally breaches knowledge and is thus destined to nonmanifestation; a decision is, in the end, always secret. (*GD*, 77–78)

The crucial distinction that Derrida makes between 'absolute responsibility' and 'responsibility in general' hinges precisely on the secret and the necessity of acting without knowledge.[21] It entails what Kelly Oliver has described, as we noted earlier, in terms of a step into the abyss: 'we have to risk stepping into the abyss, into a place where we are uncomfortable, where we don't know the difference between right and wrong'.[22] Hence, the paradoxical claim that responsibility, as Derrida conceives of it, must be 'irresponsible':

> Absolute responsibility is not a responsibility, at least it is not general responsibility or responsibility in general. It needs to be exceptional or extraordinary, and it needs to be that absolutely and par excellence: it is as if absolute responsibility could not be derived from a *concept* of responsibility, and therefore, in order for it to be what it must be, it must remain inconceivable, indeed unthinkable: it must therefore be irresponsible in order to be absolutely responsible. (*GD*, 62)[23]

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[21] As Derrida writes: 'As soon as I enter into a relation with the other, with the gaze, look, request, love, command, or call of the other, I know that I can respond only by sacrificing ethics, that is, by sacrificing whatever obliges me to also respond, in the same way, in the same instant, to all the others' (*GD*, 68).

[22] Kelly Oliver, 'The Poetic Axis of Ethics', *Derrida Today*, 7.2 (2014), p. 109.

[23] Speaking of the biblical narrative as a fable soon after, Derrida reflects on its moral: 'Absolute duty demands that one behave in an irresponsible manner (by means of treachery or betrayal), while still recognizing, confirming, and reaffirming the very thing one sacrifices, namely, the order of human ethics and responsibility. In a word, ethics must be sacrificed in the name of duty. It is a duty not to respect, out of duty,

It is in light of this stance that Oliver elsewhere remarks that the secret is closely related to the impossibility at the heart of Derridean ethics: 'To think the secret is to think the impossibility of knowing, the impossibility of articulating, and perhaps even the impossibility of ethics itself. And yet, this attempt to think the impossible, to articulate the impossible, may be the very condition of possibility for ethics'.[24] In a similar vein, speaking of the secret, Joseph Kronick goes so far as to claim that ethics itself (again, in its Derridean sense) depends wholly upon the secret. He remarks that the secret 'is mute, impassive, it is neither sensible, nor intelligible, but there is a secret; we may even say that without it, there could be no ethics, no demand for a response'.[25]

In 'Literature in Secret', appended to the second edition of *The Gift of Death*, Derrida continues his reflection on Abraham's near-sacrifice of his only son by pointing to the relation between the secret and the call of the other:

> In the trial to which God submits Abraham, by means of the impossible command […], by means of the interruption of the sacrifice which resembles yet another pardon or a reward for keeping the secret, fidelity to the implicitly requested secret does not essentially relate to the content of something to hide […], but rather to the pure singularity of the face-to-face with God, the secret of this absolute relation. It is a secret without content, without any sense to be hidden, any secret other than the very request for secrecy, that is to say the absolute exclusivity of the relation between the one who calls and the one who responds "Here I am": the condition of appeal and response, if there ever is such a thing, and presuming it can be conceived of in all purity. (*GD*, 154)

It is on rare occasions that Derrida, thinker of contamination and advocate of *différance*, uses the word 'purity' without irony, skepticism or scare quotes.[26] Within the space of a few sentences, he here employs the term twice to refer to the relation between God and Abraham. This 'pure' relation between the one and the other not only binds them together, but sets them apart from the rest of the world. Indeed, it is worth pointing out that

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ethical duty. One must behave not only in an ethical or responsible manner, but in a nonethical, nonresponsible manner, and one must do that *in the name of* duty, of an infinite duty, *in the name of* absolute duty' (*GD*, 66–67).

[24] Kelly Oliver, 'The Slow and Differentiated Machinations of Deconstruction', in *A Companion to Derrida*, ed. by Zeynep Direk and Leonard Lawlor (Oxford: Blackwell, 2014), p. 106.

[25] Joseph Kronick, *Derrida and the Future of Literature* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), p. 159.

[26] In *Monolingualism of the Other*, for instance, making an allowance or exception for what he calls 'pure French', he writes: 'I have never ceased calling into question the motif of "purity" in all its forms (the first impulse of what is called "deconstruction" carries it toward this "critique" of the phantasm or the axiom of purity, or toward the analytical decomposition of a purification that would lead back to the indecomposable simplicity of the origin)', Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other, or The Prosthesis of Origin,* trans. by Patrick Mensah (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 46.

Derrida's use of the word 'secret' comes closer in meaning to its etymological root *sēcernĕre*, which means 'to separate, divide off' (*OED*) than to its more common attestation of keeping something concealed or hidden.

The summons that calls Abraham to responsibility, that brings him face-to-face with God, that singles him out and elects him over (all the other) others is itself an injunction to secrecy. God issues no order to Abraham regarding the pact of secrecy that Derrida discusses at such length. The pact of secrecy remains unspoken. There is neither an aside on God's part in which he indicates that the command is spoken in confidence nor a change in tone to intimate as much. At no point does he demand secrecy on Abraham's part. Still the summons itself, as Derrida argues, commits him to secrecy.

> The request for secrecy begins in this instant: I pronounce your name, you sense yourself being called by me, you say "here I am" and by your response you commit yourself not to speak of us, of this exchange of words, where we give our word, to no one else, you commit to respond to me and to me alone, solely, to respond before me alone, and only me, in tête-à-tête, without a third party. You have already sworn, you are already committed to keeping the secret of our covenant, this call and this co-responsibility, between the two of us. (*GD*, 122)

The interrelation between the secret, the call and the response is clearly a crucial one.[27] The irrefutable exigency of the call demands a response and announces the pledge of secrecy. God's call compels Abraham to respond 'Here I am' and this response, in its turn, pledges Abraham's commitment to heed God's command. The Abrahamic pact with God begins precisely when God first summons Abraham. Derrida situates the insistent call of the other at the origin of responsibility and, as we shall see shortly, at the origin of the poetic experience. Speaking of the importance of the call within the Derridean notion of responsibility, Eric Prenowitz emphasises the coincidence between the call and the origin of the subject:

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[27] The relation between responsibility and the secret also surfaces in 'Passions: An Oblique Offering' where Derrida's extensive treatment of the question of response is tackled through an exploration of what it would mean to respond, and conversely, not to respond to his friend's request for a contribution to a collection of essays on his work. Significantly, Derrida's way out of the paralyzing 'contradictory orders' of response and non-response, is found in the secret. In what may be described as an abrupt and unanticipated change of subject, a few pages before the end of his 'oblique offering', he announces that 'there is something secret' (p. 20). His guiding dicta, '*Il y a là du secret*' and '*Il y a du secret*' lead to a series of apophatic paragraphs in which the question of the secret is approached through an inventory of statements of what it would *not* be (See pp. 20–22). Page references refer to 'Passions: An Oblique Offering', trans. by David Wood, in *Derrida: A Critical Reader*, ed. by David Wood (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992).

The general concept of responsibility, if nothing else, ought to preside over the call, it calls or ought to call, each time as *my* responsibility, telephone long before the telephone, it calls me, on me, on any and every subject each time as 'me'. Because a subject is subject to the call, he or she as such does not anticipate but responds to the call even if there is no response, the non-response, secret or silence of an irresponsible subject, and even if there is no call. And insofar as the call constitutes the subject as subject (the subjectivity of the subject always starts with 'Here I am' in response to the call), there is no subject to respond to the call before the call calls forth the subject [...].[28]

Like the poetic mark that assigns the 'origin' of the addressee, the call, in Prenowitz's terms, 'calls forth the subject'. As this part of the chapter has shown, Derrida's concept of responsibility, clearly distinct from the classic metaphysical conception of responsibility, begins with the call of the other and demands a readiness on the recipient's part to respond. The next part of the chapter explores the relevance of the call within the poetic experience as it emerges in Derrida's 'Che cos'è la poesia?' through an analysis of the call as an apostrophe that entails a violent interruption.

Apostrophic Turns: The Call to Respons(e)ibility

Speaking of Derrida's indebtedness to Martin Heidegger's notion of responsibility, Rodolphe Gasché focuses precisely on the importance of the call in Heidegger's radical revision of the concept. He explains that for Heidegger, 'responsible thinking or acting is a thinking or acting that answers a call and presupposes a consent, an agreement to engage and bind themselves'.[29] As Gasché observes, Derrida's explicit reference to Heidegger's notion of responsibility, in 'Ulysses Gramophone: Hear Say Yes in Joyce', addresses section 57 of *Sein und Zeit*, where Heidegger proposes to alter the understanding of the commonly held assumptions about the 'voice of conscience' by introducing the phrase '*call* [*Ruf*] of conscience' (my emphasis). The importance of the call also points to the moment of reception: 'To the call of conscience there corresponds a possible hearing'.[30] Only through an attentive listening to the call can *Dasein* free itself from the daily idle chatter that conceals 'its ownmost potentiality-for-Being-its-Self'.[31] The call has the power

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[28] Eric Prenowitz, 'Dialectics of Another Litter: Found(er)ing Democracy', *Oxford Literary Review*, 24.1 (2002), p. 114.

[29] Rodolphe Gasché, 'On Reading Responsibly', in *Inventions of Difference: On Jacques Derrida* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), p. 229.

[30] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), p. 314.

[31] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 318.

to interrupt the 'hubbub' of idle talk thus bringing, or *recalling*, Dasein 'back to itself from its lostness in the "they"'.[32] Heidegger speaks of the 'momentum of a push' and the 'abrupt arousal' caused by the appeal that summons *Dasein* out of its inauthenticity.[33] It is significant for the purposes of this discussion that Heidegger goes on to describe the appeal as a call that involves, as the translators' note on the word 'schuldig' makes clear, 'guilt', 'indebtedness' and 'responsibility (for)'.[34] Hence, the relation between the call and responsibility that we find in Derrida is already attested to in Heidegger's reflections on *Dasein*. Yet the primary focus is clearly distinct. Whereas Heidegger's call of conscience occurs within *Dasein* itself, Derrida's call comes from the other.[35] For Derrida the origin of responsibility is always external to the self or the subject. Indeed, as we have seen, the subject only comes forth upon being called. Such an understanding of responsibility, as François Raffoul observes in relation to its post-Kantian conception, is not based on the 'spontaneous initiating' of a transcendental subject; rather, the subject is to be understood as 'the recipient of the call'. As Raffoul succinctly puts it, 'we are respondents, not absolute initiators'.[36]

Derrida's brief allusion to Heidegger's *Ruf* in 'Ulysses Gramophone' suggests a similarity between 'a *Dasein* that accedes to itself only on the basis of the Call' and Leopold Bloom's 'being-at-the-telephone', which, crucially for Derrida, points towards the *other* at the other end of the line. Bloom's 'being-at-the-telephone', as Derrida reminds us, is also a 'waiting for someone to respond to him, waiting for an answer'.[37] As Gasché has noted, while Heidegger's meditations on the origin of responsibility are 'the constant point of reference' for Derrida, the analyses in 'Ulysses Gramophone' serve 'to cut the

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[32] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 333. This nostalgic backward glance to a primordial, ideal state of affairs that Heidegger desires to retrieve is precisely one crucial point on which Derrida has often claimed to part ways with the German philosopher.

[33] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 316.

[34] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 325. The translators note that while the German *schuldig* has various meanings, Heidegger can be seen to stress three significations, namely 'guilt', 'indebtedness' and 'responsibility (for)'. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 325, fn.1.

[35] In this respect, Derrida's demand is evidently closer to the Levinasian visage of the other whose gaze is experienced as an act of interpellation. Michael Eskin's observation in relation to Levinas's Saying reveals an important intersection with Derrida's thinking: 'It is to this appeal or call of the other as visage that I respond in what Levinas calls 'Saying' before using any language whatsoever. In Saying, I do not say anything, I signify my response-ability in response to the other's assignation' (Michael Eskin, *Ethics and Dialogue: In the Works of Levinas, Bakhtin, Mandel'shtam, and Celan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 34).

[36] Raffoul, *The Origins of Responsibility*, pp. 18–19.

[37] Jacques Derrida, 'Ulysses Gramophone: Hear Say Yes in Joyce', trans. by Tina Kendall and revised by Shari Benstock, in *Acts of Literature*, ed. by Derek Attridge (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 273.

essentializing link between response and Being' and to prepare for what Derrida in 'Force of Law' describes as '"an increase in responsibility"'.[38] For Gasché this heightened responsibility entails 'the multiplication of the characteristic features of response', which include both the traits of 'addresses and responses' as well as 'a cluster of heterogeneous yeses'.[39] Limiting its focus to the trait of address in 'Che cos'è la poesia?', this section argues that, for Derrida, the poetic experience is an event of interruption that entails a call to responsibility. Both the poetic mark and the call of the other give rise to the 'I' that first comes into being as the one who is responsible for the other and who is called upon to respond. This compelling demand begins the moment that, called by name or called upon as singular, 'I' cannot ignore its force.

'Che cos'è la poesia?' begins by drawing attention to the question that has been posed and the act of answering such a question. As a solicitation, the question cannot be ignored without dishonouring what Derrida has elsewhere called 'the very essence of the *socius*'.[40] Addressed specifically to Derrida, the question is equivalent to a dictate or an order that demands a response: 'Who dares to ask me that?', he objects (*CCP*, 289). Derrida maintains that the response to the question imposes itself on the respondent in the form of a dictate: 'Even though it remains inapparent, since disappearing is its law, the answer *sees itself (as) dictated (dictation)*' (*CCP*, 289). Indeed, both the question and the response are described as dictates that come from the other. Recall Derrida's tentative (if reluctant) attempt at defining the poetic: 'The poetic, let us say it, would be that which you desire to learn, but from and of the other, thanks to the other and under dictation, by heart; *imparare a memoria*' (*CCP*, 291). Derrida's repeated use of the word 'dictée' recalls the German counterpart *Dichtung*, which, coming from *dichten* meaning 'to invent, write or compose verses', has a connection to the writing of literary works, more specifically, poetry. Significantly for this discussion, as Timothy Clark explains in relation to Heidegger's use of the term, '*Dichtung* does not arise from any meaning-bestowing act. It cannot be simply *created*. It is the non-human *daimon*, as it were, within the activity of

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[38] Rodolphe Gasché, 'On Reading Responsibly', p. 229. See Jacques Derrida 'Force of Law: The "Mystical Foundation of Authority"', trans. by Mary Quaintance, in *Acts of Religion*, ed. by Gil Anidjar (London and New York Routledge, 2002), p. 955.
[39] Rodolphe Gasché, 'On Reading Responsibly', p. 230.
[40] Derrida, 'Passions: An Oblique Offering', p. 18.

poets; something received not bestowed'.[41] This integral distinction between creation and reception also emerges in Derrida's 'Che cos'è la poesia?' that stresses the desire as well as the demand to learn 'from and of the other'. As the opening pages of the introduction made clear, Derrida rejects the notion of the poem as an act of creation: 'It thus takes place, essentially, without one's having to do it or to make it: it *lets itself* be done, without activity, without work, in the most sober *pathos*, a stranger to all production, especially to creation' (*CCP*, 297). This view may, as Clark has noted, align Derrida's conception of the poem to 'the oldest notion in Western poetics — of the poem as dictation from another'.[42] And yet it is important to point out one important distinction between Derrida's conception and the classic notion of the divinely inspired rhapsode as described, for instance, in Plato's *Ion* where the poet speaks only insofar as he is bestowed with 'a divine gift'.[43] Clearly stripped of the connection with the divine, for Derrida, the dictate of the other is an obligation that is imposed on me from the other that remains *other*. Recall the description of the encounter with the other as a 'relation of interruption' and 'incomprehension' in which the 'other has to stay other'.[44] As J. Hillis Miller points out in 'Deconstruction and a Poem' in relation to 'Che cos'è la poesia?', 'the other in question in a poem's benediction is entirely different, "wholly other". […] Something wholly other is frighteningly alien, unassimilable'.[45] And, thus, as we have seen, the arrival of the other may always end in catastrophe. The violence inherent in Derrida's conception is an important distinction not least since it reinforces the ethical force at the heart of 'Che cos'è la poesia?'. As we shall see both in Chapter 2 in relation to Cixous's writing practice and in Chapter 4 in relation to Celan's understanding of poetry as a 'Gegenwort' ('Counterword'), the confrontation with the unassimilable other is central to the ethical (counter-) poetics of each writer.

Derrida's response to the question 'What thing is poetry?' retains the structure of the *dictate* it discusses when summoning its other or addressee: 'It sees itself, the response, dictated to be poetic, by being poetic. And for that reason, it is obliged to address itself to

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[41] Timothy Clark, *Derrida, Heidegger, Blanchot: Sources of Derrida's Notion and Practice of Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 41. For an extended analysis of Heidegger's conception of *Dichtung* see pp. 20–63.

[42] Timothy Clark, *The Theory of Inspiration: Composition as a Crisis of Subjectivity in Romantic and Post-romantic Writing* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 278.

[43] Plato, *Complete Works*, ed. by John M. Cooper (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), p. 942.

[44] Jacques Derrida et al., 'Alterities, Part 3: Discussion', trans. by Stefan Herbrechter, *Parallax*, 10.4 (2004), pp. 68–69.

[45] J. Hillis Miller, 'Deconstruction and a Poem', in *Deconstructions: A User's Guide*, ed. by Nicholas Royle (London: Palgrave, 2000), p. 171.

someone, singularly to you' (*CCP*, 289). Anticipating the dialogic nature of the poetic experience as well as that of his own response, Derrida immediately underlines the importance of address. Speaking of the poem as the experience of the dictate 'learn me by heart', he also establishes the parallels between the subject matter and the formal features of his own text. In a brief introduction to the text, Peggy Kamuf has observed that Derrida seeks 'to abolish the distance between what he is writing *about* (poetry, the poem, the poetic, or as he will finally call it: the poematic) and what his writing is *doing*'.[46] As John W. P. Phillips puts it, 'Poetry must (be the) answer (to) the question, what is poetry?'.[47]

In 'Che cos'è la poesia?' the addressee is invoked throughout. The constant reference to the second person singular 'tu' contributes to the performative aspect of Derrida's response, which addresses the recipient who, like Derrida, receives the 'dictate' (to learn by heart). The address is directed both inwardly toward the self and outwardly to the other. Examples of the former appear in the first few paragraphs where Derrida can be seen to address himself: 'In order to respond to such a question […] *you* are asked to know how to renounce knowledge' and 'if *you* respond otherwise depending on each case, taking into account the space and time which *you* are given with this demand' (*CCP*, 289; my emphases). A few paragraphs later he writes, 'if *we* were talking about poetry' and '*our* poem does not hold still within names, nor even within words' (*CCP*, 293; my emphases). The examples of the more conventional type of address that is directed toward another can hardly be cited or enumerated. Derrida addresses the 'singular you', which he introduces as crucial to the structure of the poetic, throughout the entire piece. The phrase 'the gift of the poem' is used on two occasions to refer to the moment when the poem reaches its destination or addressee (*CCP*, 291, 297).[48] Significantly, this address is not merely an appeal to an already existent recipient, but rather it signals the moment when the recipient comes into being: 'someone writes *you*, to you, of you, on you' (*CCP*, 293).

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[46] Jacques Derrida, 'Che cos'è la poesia?', trans. by Peggy Kamuf, in *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*, ed. with notes by Peggy Kamuf (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), p. 221. It is worth noting that in Jon Cook's 2004 *Poetry in Theory: An Anthology 1900–2000*, which brings together 73 reflections on poetry by established poets and philosophers, only Jacques Derrida's 'Che cos'è la poesia?' strays from the conventional and formal exercise in poetics by adopting a personal, almost lyrical, mode of address.

[47] John W. P. Phillips, 'The Poetic Thing (On Poetry and Deconstruction)', *Oxford Literary Review*, 33.2 (2011), p. 232. In his article, Phillips focuses on the aspect of 'dictation' in Derrida's 'Che cos'è la poesia?' by underlining its connection to the 'recent history of the school setting'. See especially pp. 231–36.

[48] In the French original the motif of the gift is slightly more pronounced as Derrida uses the verb *donner* on two other occasions (*CCP*, 288, 290). The English translation 'given' loses the direct relation to the gift (*don*) that the French *donner* underlines.

As the opening of the chapter suggested briefly, the moment of address, when the dictation (and the dictate) to 'learn by heart' is first uttered, assigns the origin of the recipient. Arguably, the Derridean poetic experience or event hinges precisely on the moment when the recipient is summoned by the other: 'The *I* is only at the coming of this desire to learn by heart' (*CCP*, 299). In what is surely the most enlightening reading of 'Che cos'è la poesia?', Timothy Clark makes the provocative argument that Derrida's response is 'a complex post-Romantic, post-modern reconfiguration of the ode form'.[49] He maintains that Derrida's mode of address, the use of the future tense as well as the highly performative mode are staple features of the ode. Clark dwells at considerable length on the importance of what he calls 'apostrophe' in Derrida's text. Limiting his understanding of apostrophe to a mode of 'address' or 'appeal' that is opposed to the language of 'constative' statement, Clark is keen to stress what he describes as a 'violence' or 'force' inherent within the call. He argues that the 'most startling aspect of Derrida's text' is 'the notion of an apostrophe that brings into being its addressee':[50]

> The poetic obviously does not constitute the addressee in his or her empirical being. It reconfigures identity in the *experience* of surprising the reader in the mode of having become the addressee projected by the text […]. It interrupts, or cuts across, subjectivity conceived as a structure of possible self-return.[51]

On Clark's reading, this violent interruption is central to the poetic event understood as an instance of address or appeal. He speaks of the apostrophe (also 'the vocative "you"') in terms of 'a force in or rather *as* the very incision of the poetic mark in language'.[52] It would appear, therefore that the poetic experience constitutes a certain violence that coincides with the moment that the addressee is summoned. Both the terms 'interruption' and 'incision' indicate the occurrence of a break or a cut, which underlines the violence of poetic force. In a similar vein and focusing specifically on the central motif of the 'heart', Toyotaka Ota speaks of the appeal of the other as an 'intrusion': 'At the heart of "me" takes place this intrusion of the other, and it is this event — unterminable irruption of the other at heart — that pumps life in me, that gives me life, that gives me birth — as to the other'.[53]

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[49] Clark, *The Theory of Inspiration*, p. 266.
[50] Clark, p. 266.
[51] Clark, p. 276.
[52] Clark, p. 277.
[53] Toyotaka Ota, 'Felix Culpa — or, of a heart that begins to vibrate (Toward a poem at the conjunction of Derrida and Cixous)', *Oxford Literary Review*, 24.1 (2012), p. 174.

For Clark, this violence is related to what he describes as a counterintuitive rethinking of the 'familiar tripartite division of a sender, a relay and a receiver'. He remarks that the relation between the world of the text and the reader 'becomes both more complex, more creative but also more violent in Derrida's understanding of the poetic as a singular and singularizing apostrophe'.[54] Derrida's notion of the call challenges the commonsensical view that the recipient precedes the instance of apostrophe by claiming that the recipient only comes into being upon being summoned. The poetic event 'must be conceived as a relation prior to its relata, bringing what it relates into being by force of its own event'.[55] For Clark, this violence, in giving birth to its recipient, also necessarily effaces the recipient's former subjectivity:

> The poetic is the chance of an event of interruption whose arrival constitutes its receiver, even as it simultaneously institutes itself and is contaminated, risking effacement, by the force of this reception.[56]

The moment of reception (coincident with the instant of apostrophe) is experienced as an interruption, which, as Clark notes, should be considered as an interruption that, in Derrida's words, 'opens the relation to the other'.[57] In fact, this recalls Grosz's remarks, cited in the introduction, that the 'originary tearing' within deconstructive thinking is 'also a bringing together, a folding or reorganizing, and the very possibility of time and becoming'.[58] Derrida's counterintuitive claim that the poetic mark gives rise to its addressee must be read in this light: 'a mark addressed to you, left and confided with you […] constitutes you, assigning your origin or giving rise to you' (*CCP*, 293). Like the call to responsibility, the poetic entails a summons that interrupts the addressee to the extent that the addressee may be said to be projected by the very call. It is well to recall Derrida's claim that the 'first appeal to responsibility' is what awakens the 'I' in the first place. To be sure, this 'I' does not represent what Derrida has elsewhere described as the 'being-one with oneself' or 'indivisible individuality'.[59] Rather, it is an 'I' that is summoned to respond and to responsibility. This is the 'fissure in the structure of subjectivity' that Clark

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[54] Clark, *The Theory of Inspiration*, p. 275.
[55] Clark, p. 275.
[56] Clark, p. 277.
[57] Clark, p. 276.
[58] Elizabeth Grosz, 'The Time of Violence: Deconstruction and Value', *Cultural Values*, 2.2 (1998), p. 192.
[59] Jacques Derrida, 'Istrice 2: Ick bünn all hier', trans. by Peggy Kamuf, in *Points… Interviews, 1974–1994*, ed. by Elisabeth Weber (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 305.

has in mind when he speaks of the instance of apostrophe as a 'crisis of subjectivity'.[60] Interestingly, in a related discussion on the link between the ethical moment and apostrophe in the work of Jean-François Lyotard, Dawne McCance comes to a similar conclusion regarding the interruptive force of the apostrophe: 'What breaks in on the ego in the ethical event is [...] *nothing but an apostrophe*'.[61]

In his reflections on Michel Deguy's poetic oeuvre in 'How to Name' (1995), Jacques Derrida underlines the intersection between the call, responsibility and the poetic by focusing on what he calls a 'triptych', namely 'denomination, salutation, responsibility'.[62] He remarks: 'the appellation salutes, when an appellation calls out, at the instant it addresses someone who, finding himself called, happens perchance to be there, on this day, and assumed to be responsible, capable of responding here to his name, answering for his name and in his name [*sic*]'.[63] Here, the act of calling someone by name is equated with the act of saluting. As Derrida observes, the French *salut* has a double meaning: 'the salute one addresses to the other and the salvation that saves'. The former attestation is glossed in the following terms: 'a call one sends or resends in salvos, in the outburst of an apostrophe, vow or benediction'.[64] The apostrophic call, here a forceful 'outburst', beckons response. Yet, as Derrida is quick to point out, the threat of non-response is always present. Bringing together the two meanings of *salut* towards the end of the piece, Derrida reflects on the possibility that salvation may, in fact, not take place:

> To be able to call, oneself as well as another, to call oneself or call out to one another, in order to be able to call, where saluting is more than naming, it is necessary that *le salut* of salvation or health, *le salut* of redemption or resurrection never be assured. Not that it is out of the question, but it is necessary that it always could be refused, threatened, forbidden, lost, gone [...] The possibility of the non-salut of salvation or health must haunt *le salut* as calling, that is, a poetical chant that promises a chance to call.[65]

If the response is guaranteed even before the act of summoning, then the call may no longer be considered an ethical instance in the Derridean sense. Rather, it merely falls into the category of the foreseeable: 'As long as there is a horizon and a horizon-structure, one

[60] Clark, *The Theory of Inspiration*, pp. 277–78.
[61] Dawne McCance, *Posts: Re Addressing the Ethical* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), p. 54.
[62] Jacques Derrida, 'How to Name', in Michel Deguy, *Recumbents*, trans. by Wilson Baldridge (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2005), p. 193.
[63] Derrida, 'How to Name', p. 192.
[64] Derrida, p. 194.
[65] Derrida, 'How to Name', p. 218.

sees it coming, absorbs it in advance, and nothing happens, nor the other'.[66] Hence, the call is always already the call for salvation. As Kas Saghafi explains in his reflection on the meaning of *salut*:

> Derrida's own thinking of *salut* not only does not favor one strand, whether salutation or salvation, whether calling out and greeting or desiring safety and conferring health, but insists that the two must be thought together. He attends to these two *saluts* when he exploits the bivalence of the French reflexive verb *s'appeler*. *S'appeler* would be to call or name oneself, to salute oneself, and in doing so call for one's own salvation. Yet *s'appeler* is also to call one another or to call out to the other.[67]

Hence, the call as *salut* both salutes and calls for salvation.

It is, in fact, significant that in 'Che cos'è la poesia?' the impending catastrophe of the *hérisson* is equated with the address:

> The ruse of the injunction may first of all let itself be inspired by the simple possibility of death, by the risk that a vehicle poses to every finite being. You hear the catastrophe coming. From that moment on imprinted directly on the trait, come from the heart, the mortal's desire awakens in you the movement […] to guard from oblivion this thing which in the same stroke exposes itself to death and protects itself — in a word, the address, the retreat of the *hérisson*, like an animal on the autoroute rolled up in a ball. One would like to take it in one's hands, undertake to learn it and understand it, to keep it for oneself, near oneself. (*CCP*, 293)

The threat of oblivion is amply attested to here. The hedgehog's instinct to roll up in a ball with its quills pointed outward as a protective guard simultaneously expose it to the danger of being run over. As Mary-Jane Rubenstein observes, '[w]hat is interesting about Derrida's description of this endangered hedgehog […] is that it is not simply receptive, rather, it is active in its very passivity, wounding in its very vulnerability, for it only exposes itself by means of the act of violence by which it seeks to defend itself'.[68] Its weapon of defence also makes it vulnerable to death. In view of this discussion it is indeed compelling that the imperilled hedgehog stands in — catachrestically, as Derrida will later acknowledge — for the address: 'in a word, the address, the retreat of the *hérisson*'. The hedgehog refers to the poem only insofar as the poem is conceived as the address of *salut* that compels the mortal to protect it from danger and thus calls it to responsibility. The

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[66] Derrida, p. 218.

[67] Kas Saghafi, 'Incurable Haunting: Saluting Michel Deguy', *Oxford Literary Review*, 33.2 (2011), pp. 256–57.

[68] Mary-Jane Rubenstein, *Strange Wonder: The Closure of Metaphysics and the Opening of Awe* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), pp. 155–56.

instance of apostrophe does not merely singularise its addressee. It is an event of singularisation bound up with the call of salvation or *salut* and thus of responsibility: 'translate me, watch, keep me yet awhile, get going, save yourself [*sauve-toi*], let's get off the autoroute' (*CCP*, 295).[69] Interestingly, while Derrida refrains from using the term 'apostrophe' in this piece, he uses its cognate 'cata-strophe' when speaking of the address (or apostrophe) that receives no response. The dictate to learn by heart and to keep 'it' (the address) near oneself may, in fact, be read as an injunction to responsibility that calls on the recipient to guard the address (apostrophe) from oblivion (catastrophe).

The understanding of apostrophe in the analysis of Derrida's exploration of the poetic event as a call to responsibility has thus far been limited to *address*. Yet, as the *OED* explains, apostrophe is a device 'by which a speaker or writer suddenly stops in his discourse, and *turns* to address pointedly some person or thing, either present or absent' (my emphasis). Etymologically the Greek word *apostrophē* stresses the act of breaking away (the prefix 'apo' means 'off, away from') through a movement of turning (from *strephein* meaning 'to turn'). In fact, within classical rhetoric, 'apostrophe' refers specifically to the act of turning away from the proper audience to address another listener. In the essay 'Romantic Aversions: Apostrophe Reconsidered', J. Douglas Kneale has convincingly argued that the integral act of *turning* that distinguishes apostrophe from the figure of exclamation (or *exclamatio*) is very often ignored or totally overlooked in some recent discussions of the rhetorical device. For instance, speaking of Jonathan Culler's influential essay 'Apostrophe', he demonstrates that Culler's examples are all instances of 'exclamation' or 'prosopopoeia' because they do not involve the integral act of turning away from one addressee to another. In tracing the various definitions of apostrophe from Quintilian's *Institutio Oratario* to Renaissance treatises on rhetoric and beyond, Douglas Kneale points out that the 'vocal turn' or movement of interruption is what defines apostrophic address:

> By describing apostrophe as a turning from an original (implicit or explicit) addressee to a different addressee, from the proper or intended hearer to

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[69] Speaking of the address in 'Shibboleth: For Paul Celan' (itself an address, as the title underlines), Derrida maintains that even if, 'destinerrantly', the address does not reach its addressee, the instance of the call will still be significant: 'The poem speaks, even if none of its references is intelligible, none apart from the Other, the one to whom the poem addresses itself and to whom it speaks in saying that it speaks to it. Even if it does not reach the Other, at least it calls to it. Address takes place'. Jacques Derrida, 'Shibboleth: For Paul Celan', trans. by Joshua Wilner and revised by Thomas Dutoit, in *Sovereignties in Question*: *The Poetics of Paul Celan*, ed. by Thomas Dutoit and Outi Pasanen (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), p. 33.

another, we emphasize the figure as a movement of voice, a translation or carrying over of address. This understanding is crucial if we are to distinguish simple direct address from the turning aside of address, from the rhetorical and temporal movement of apostrophe.[70]

It is relevant to this discussion that Douglas Kneale chooses to cite Derrida's remark about apostrophe as a rare instance of a 'thoroughly historical and conventional definition of apostrophe' to emerge in the writing of a twentieth-century writer.[71] He quotes the following reflection from the early paragraphs of 'Envois' in which Derrida underlines the movement of turning away:

> The word — apostrophizes — speaks of the words addressed to the singular one, a live interpellation (the man of discourse or writing interrupts the continuous development of the sequence, abruptly turns toward someone, that is, something, addresses himself to you), but the word also speaks of the address to be detoured.[72]

Hence the violent interruption discussed thus far in relation to the force of the poetic dictate is further reinforced through this second characteristic of apostrophe. The apostrophe thus requires an 'abrupt' turn or detour whereby someone (or something) other than the proper addressee is summoned. Arguably, it is within this turn that the singularising moment that elects the recipient to responsibility occurs. For the invoked addressee — taken by surprise by this sudden and unexpected interpellation — experiences therein the benediction of the poetic event, which, to recall Derrida's words as cited in the introduction, 'vertically befalls me when I didn't see it coming'.[73]

Significantly, Derrida's remarks about the unconventional approach he adopts in what ought to be an exercise in the study of poetics emphasise precisely this motif of the turn. In an early paragraph in 'Che cos'è la poesia?', reflecting on his chosen path, he writes:

> […] what would all of this, the very thing in which you have just begun to turn deliriously, have to do, at that point, with poetry? Or rather, with the poetic, since you intend to speak about an experience, another word for voyage, here the aleatory rambling of a trek, the strophe that turns but never leads back to discourse, or back home. (*CCP*, 289, 291)

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[70] J. Douglas Kneale, 'Romantic Aversions: Apostrophe Reconsidered', *ELH*, 58.1 (1991), p. 147.

[71] Douglas Kneale, 'Apostrophe Reconsidered', p. 145.

[72] Jacques Derrida, 'Envois', in *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 4.

[73] Derrida, 'A Certain Impossible Possibility of Saying the Event', pp. 451–52.

By sleight of hand, Derrida draws attention to his 'detoured' address: 'turn deliriously', 'rambling of a trek' and, more explicitly, 'the strophe that turns but never leads back to discourse' are all indications of the approach he has adopted. In fact, the motif of the turn may be viewed as an early warning on Derrida's part that his response will not provide the expected response or follow the expected (dis-)course. Rather, through an apostrophic turn (however delirious and daring), he shall treat of what he describes as the poetic experience in a mode that departs from traditional poetics. Mindful of the task at hand, Derrida highlights the status of his text as a response that is 'obliged to address itself to someone' (*CCP*, 289). And yet, as the response amply attests, it is not so much the 'proper' addressee or listener that he chooses to address. In refusing to present the expected response, Derrida can also be seen to eschew the 'proper' addressee who poses the question 'Che cos'è la poesia?'. In this light, the Tudor rhetoricians' terms for apostrophe, namely 'turne tale' or 'aversion', fittingly describe Derrida's strategy in this response.[74] Both terms stress the movement of turning away from what Douglas Kneale has described as a 'pre-text or prior discourse'.[75] Derrida's response fails to fulfill the required task of an exercise in poetics (the pre-text in question) and can thus be seen to project another listener — one who will respond more readily to what Royle, as we have noted, describes as a 'dangerous, inflammatory, catastrophic' text.[76]

The closing paragraphs of 'Che cos'è la poesia?', which reveal that Derrida's piece is, in fact, a dialogue, can be seen to give voice to the 'proper' addressee who expected the typical exercise in poetics that the question calls for and usually elicits. After Derrida concludes his response, a second interlocutor (whose tone and style are markedly distinct from Derrida's) makes the following interjection:

> — But the poem you are talking about, you are getting off the track, it has never been named thus, or so arbitrarily. (*CCP*, 299)

Aware of the many oppositions which his audacious response is likely to give rise to, Derrida preempts the criticisms and responds to them before the very objections can be raised. The complaint relates to the subject matter. The second interlocutor accuses Derrida

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[74] Douglas Kneale, 'Apostrophe Reconsidered', p. 142.
[75] Douglas Kneale, p. 146.
[76] Nicholas Royle, 'Poetry, Animality, Derrida', in *A Companion to Derrida*, ed. by Zeynep Direk and Leonard Lawlor (Oxford: Blackwell, 2014), p. 531.

of 'getting off track'; something that the careful addressee will have expected given the early forewarning. The piece comes to a close with Derrida's response:

> —You just said it. Which had to be demonstrated. Recall the question. 'What is…?' […] 'What is…?' laments the disappearance of the poem — another catastrophe. By announcing that which is just as it is, a question salutes the birth of prose. (*CCP*, 299)

Derrida's refusal to embark on yet another exercise in essentialism requires him to *turn* away from philosophical discourse, which, as he writes elsewhere, has largely excluded the 'strophic turn of the apostrophe'.[77] Central to his exposition of the poetic, the apostrophic turn is also enacted within Derrida's response when he turns away from the 'proper' audience to approach the question of poetry in a more *responsible* manner. Recall the claims quoted above that responsibility requires the violent act of killing or destroying a part of the heritage and that the response to 'Che cos'è la poesia?' will entail setting the library of poetics alight. The 'strophe that turns but never leads back to discourse or back home' — which arguably reads like a definition of apostrophe — is a necessary and responsible breach in the tradition of poetics. Hence the violence of responsibility is enacted within Derrida's response to the question about the essence of poetry.

In fact, it is indeed remarkable that the only rhetorical trope that Derrida refers to directly in 'Che cos'è la poesia?' is *catachresis* — a trope that various rhetoricians over the centuries have described in terms that suggest a certain violence.[78] Towards the close of 'Che cos'è la poesia?', Derrida describes the hedgehog (which, as we have seen, stands in for the poetic call or *salut*) as a 'catachrestic *hérisson*'. The *OED* defines catachresis as the 'improper use of words' and the 'application of a term to a thing which it does not properly denote'; but also, as the 'abuse or perversion of a trope or metaphor'. This latter sense of catachresis as abuse is attested to as early as Cicero's *De Oratore,* where the Latin term for catachresis is precisely *abusio.* Remarking on the distinction between metaphor and

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[77] Derrida writes: 'To bring this point home, it helps (though it does not suffice) to underscore to what degree philosophical discourse has excluded (one might even say prohibited) this strophic turn of the apostrophe, as well as "thou" and "you", from Aristotle to Kant, from Descartes to Hegel and to Heidegger. Even today, this prohibition extends to many others'. Jacques Derrida, *On Touching — Jean-Luc Nancy*, trans. by Christine Irizarray (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 23. Interestingly, this echoes Jean-Luc Nancy's earlier remark in the preface to *Being Singular Plural*, first published in 1996, where he claims that the philosophical treatise is 'the neutralization of address' (Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, trans. by Robert D. Richardson and Anne E. O'Byrne (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. xv).

[78] Clark describes the absence of critical terms in 'Che cos'è la poesia?' as its 'most perplexing aspect' and suggests that Derrida's 'studied avoidance' of such terms is clearly deliberate (Clark, *The Theory of Inspiration*, p. 269 and p. 276).

catachresis, Patricia Parker observes that the latter is, already in Cicero, identified with a 'sudden, unexpected or violent' 'intrusion'.[79] Similarly, in her analysis of metaphor and catachresis from classic oratory to the English Renaissance, Judith H. Anderson describes the early associations of the trope with 'unruliness' and 'aggressive[ness]'.[80] In the sixteenth century, George Puttenham referred to catachresis as a 'Figure of Abuse' that involves the application of a term or word that is not proper or natural in a given context.[81] This emphasis on violence is also in evidence in contemporary definitions such as Northrop Frye's succinct rendition of catachresis as an 'unexpected or violent metaphor' and Helen Vendler's reference to its 'standard disruptive effect'.[82]

In his commentary on Pierre Fontanier's work in 'White Mythology', Derrida's emphasis falls along similar lines. He explains that catachresis concerns 'the violent and forced, abusive inscription of a sign, the imposition of a sign upon a meaning which did not yet have its own proper sign in language'.[83] This emphasis also emerges in conversation with Richard Kearney when he reflects on his own attempts at catachrestic writing in the following terms:

> The term *metaphor* generally implies a relation to an original "property" of meaning, a "proper" sense to which it indirectly or equivocally refers, whereas *catachresis* is a violent production of meaning, an abuse which refers to no anterior or proper norm. […] In a work such as *Glas*, or other recent ones like it, I am trying to produce new forms of catachresis, another kind of writing, a violent writing which stakes out the faults (*failles*) and deviations of language, so that the text produces a language of its own, in itself, which, while continuing to work through tradition, emerges at a given moment as a *monster*, a monstrous mutation without tradition or normative precedent.[84]

Viewed in this light, it may thus be argued that 'Che cos'è la poesia?' is itself an instance of catachrestic writing. Hélène Cixous suggests as much in her description of Derrida's text: 'The thing nicknamed *che cos'è la poesia*, if it is a text (it is written), cannot be

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[79] Patricia Parker, 'Metaphor and Catachresis', in *The Ends of Rhetoric: History, Theory, Practice*, ed. by John B. Bender and David E. Wellbery (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), p. 67.

[80] Judith H. Anderson, *Translating Investments: Metaphor and Dynamics of Cultural Change in Tudor-Stuart England* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), p. 138.

[81] George Puttenham, *The Art of English Poesy: A Critical Edition*, ed. by Frank Whigham and Wayne A. Rebhorn (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), p. 264.

[82] Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 281 and Helen Vendler, *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 34.

[83] Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. by Alan Bass (Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1982), p. 255.

[84] Jacques Derrida, 'Deconstruction and the Other', in *Debates in Continental Philosophy: Conversations with Continental Thinkers,* ed. by Richard Kearney (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), pp. 153–54.

compared to any other in the world. No one has ever seen a being like it — a borning or an unbeing'.[85] In the absence of a 'proper sign' to refer to the poetic conceived as an ethical act of responsibility, Derrida elects the unsuspecting, lowly and humble *hérisson* as a figure of the poetic. Derrida's counterpoetical tract is itself a 'monstrous' exercise in erasure — or burning, as his more 'incendiary' metaphor would have it, that demands an ethical rethinking of the poetic. Recall that Hillis Miller reminds us that in 'Che cos'è la poesia?' the other in question is 'frighteningly alien, unassimilable'.[86] Indeed it is significant that in a related discussion around the subject of ethics in the work of Michel Foucault, Dawne McCance, referring to Derrida's above-cited elucidation of catachresis comes to the conclusion that catachrestic writing is, in fact, '*ethical writing*':

> Catachresis, so understood, is what "the French" call *ethical writing*, a style of historical analysis which looks for lines of fragility and knots of resistance that are spread over the great surface network of words and things. Foucault's catachresis does not attempt dissolution of discourse through the unveiling of something hidden. Rather, by following surface fault lines, it attempts to practice reading and writing as other than what we have taken these to be. The opening to difference is what makes catachresis ethical.[87]

This opening to difference marks the interruption at the origin of the ethical event. As we shall see in the next chapter in relation to Cixous's work, the opening to the 'unassimilable' other produces a highly ageneric text that has been described as monstrous.

Before addressing Cixous's work, however, the next section turns its attention to another integral aspect of responsibility, that is to say, the notion of response. It begins by pointing out the parallels between the Abrahamic *hineni* and Derrida's notion of the 'double yes' in order to explore the 'mandate' of the thing called poetry. If the poetic begins with the call or mark of the other, what response does it call for? What is the claim or 'frantic call' of this thing called poetry? What makes, to cite Derrida himself, 'the poem

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[85] Hélène Cixous, 'Jacques Derrida as a Proteus Unbound', trans. by Peggy Kamuf, *Critical Inquiry*, 33.2 (2007), p. 407.
[86] Hillis Miller, 'Deconstruction and a Poem', p. 171. In light of the unfolding argument in the thesis that shall see an emergent (almost irrepressible) concern with the uncanny, Patricia Parker's conclusion, which makes a direct association between catachresis and the uncanny, is indeed interesting: 'The violent intrusions of catachresis and the possibility of transfers that, unwilled, subvert the very model of the controlling subject, are the gothic underside of the mastery of metaphor, the uncanny other of its will to control. And words' taking on a life of their own not only conflates the abuses of metaphor with the abusio of *catachresis* but informs a potential linguistic return of the repressed, the insinuation of figures into the most "familiar" and apparently "proper" discourse, the *unheimlich* return of the dead of slumbering to life'. Patricia Parker, 'Metaphor and Catachresis', in *The Ends of Rhetoric: History, Theory, Practice*, ed. by John B. Bender and David E. Wellbery (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), p. 73.
[87] McCance, *Posts: Re Addressing the Ethical*, p. 129.

(*Gedicht*) a given order and the dict of a dictation'?[88] Focusing on the ethical underpinning of Derrida's exploration of the call (of the other), it argues that the force of the poetic as explored in 'Che cos'è la poesia?' compels its recipient to respond.

Responding to the Poematic Call

Derrida's epigrammatic claim in *Politics of Friendship* that there is 'no responsibility without response' points to the equally important notion of response in his radical rethinking of responsibility.[89] 'How is the *question of the response* to be linked to the question of responsibility?' he asks.[90] He argues that the three interrelated modalities of 'answering for', 'responding to' and 'answering before' are all enveloped in the act of responding. Of the three, he claims, it is the second — 'to respond to' — that appears 'more originary, more fundamental and hence unconditional'.[91] He proposes the following reasons for this:

> One first responds to the other: to the question, the request, the prayer, the apostrophe, the call, the greeting or the sign, the adieu of the other. This dimension of *answering qua* responding *to* — appears more originary than the others for two reasons. On the one hand, one does not answer for oneself in one's own name, one is responsible only before the question, the request, the interpellation, the 'insistence' of the other. On the other hand, the proper name structuring the 'answering for oneself' is in itself *for the other* — either because the other has chosen it […] or because in any case, it implies the other in the very act of naming, in its origin, finality and use.[92]

The election to responsibility thus begins with the call of the other that not only implicates its addressee but also demands a response on its part. What is important, and in Derrida's view, 'more originary', is that the response (which is necessarily 'a response *to*') has its origin in the insistent call of the other that is primarily a call to respond. In fact, for Derrida the response is a crucial aspect of responsibility. As he remarks elsewhere: 'Whoever ponders the necessity, the genealogy and therefore also the limits of the concept of responsibility cannot fail to wonder at some point what is meant by "respond", and "*responsiveness*", a precious word for which I can find no strict equivalent in my

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[88] Jacques Derrida, 'Rams: Uninterrupted Dialogue — Between Two Infinities, the Poem', trans. by Thomas Dutoit and Philippe Romanski, in *Sovereignties in Question*: *The Poetics of Paul Celan*, ed. by Thomas Dutoit and Outi Pasanen (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), p. 138.

[89] Jacques Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, trans. by George Collins (London: Verso, 2005), p. 252.

[90] Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, p. 250.

[91] Derrida, p. 250.

[92] Derrida, p. 251.

language'.[93] Significantly, this same emphasis on the response to the other as an act of responsibility emerges as one of the more salient concerns in 'Che cos'è la poesia?'.

Indeed, in the first three paragraphs alone Derrida refers to his response (or answer) to the question 'che cos'è la poesia?' no less than seven times. As we have seen, Derrida speaks of his response as itself a dictate: 'the answer *sees itself (as) dictated (dictation)*' (*CCP*, 289). This 'dictated dictation', pronounced by poetry, involves a series of commands: 'learn me by heart, copy me down, guard and keep me, look out for me, look at me' (*CCP*, 289). The injunction to respond to the demand of the poetic mark, as introduced briefly at the outset of the chapter, coincides with the order to take responsibility for it: 'look out for me'. Reflecting on the nature of the response that is required of him, Derrida equates the response to the 'animal thrown onto the road, absolute, solitary, rolled up in a ball, *next to (it)self*' (*CCP*, 289). Hence, the hedgehog, which, as we argued in the previous section, represents the *call* that summons the other, also represents *response*.[94] Focusing on the theme of responsibility in 'Che cos'è la poesia?', David Goicoechea and Mary-Jane Rubenstein both maintain that the hedgehog stands in for the poem as a *response*. In his exploration of the notion of responsibility in Derrida's work, Goicoechea goes so far as to argue that the 'hedgehog in her rolled-up-interiority is an image of the responsible person'.[95] For Goicoechea, the traversal across the autoroute represents the act of responding to the call of the other: 'The hedgehog is called by and for others to cross the road. She responds to that call from the other'.[96] In a similar vein, speaking of the figure of the hedgehog as an 'emblem of the poem', Rubenstein writes: 'All alone in the middle of the road, facing oncoming cars and trucks, the poem *is* as sheer response to whatever comes its way'.[97] She argues that 'the hedgehog […] is indeed some sort of figure of responsibility'.[98]

This last section in the chapter seeks to underline the ethical underpinnings of 'Che cos'è la poesia?' by focusing mainly on what Derrida comes to call the 'poematic'

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[93] Jacques Derrida, 'Passions: An Oblique Offering', p. 15.

[94] Alluding to this counterintuitive aspect of the poetic whereby the poem is conceived as both call and response, Timothy Clark describes Derrida's text as a 'deconstructive reworking of the distinction between […] the "process of composition" and an "aesthetics of reception"'. He also adds that the 'event of the poetic is a two-way movement in which it makes no sense to say which pole has temporal precedence — whether this is the text's inception by its possible reception or its addressee's "telepathic" projection by the text' (Clark, *The Theory of Inspiration*, p. 277).

[95] David Goicoechea, 'The Moment of Responsibility', *Philosophy Today*, 43.3 (1999), p. 214.

[96] Goicoechea, 'The Moment of Responsibility', p. 213.

[97] Rubenstein, *Strange Wonder*, p. 155.

[98] Rubenstein, p. 160.

experience as an ethical event that demands response. It begins by drawing out the parallels between the Abrahamic *hineni* and Derrida's 'double yes' in order to highlight the characteristic features of Derrida's notion of response. It then turns its attention to the demand or dictate of the poetic mark in order to explore the nature of this imperative. The closing part of the chapter addresses the dangers of the automatic or parodic 'yes' that risks turning response into mere automated reaction; a threat that is embedded, as Derrida argues, in the idiomatic expression *apprendre par coeur*.

In *The Gift of Death* Derrida argues that Abraham assumes responsibility the moment he responds to God's call with the words 'Here I am' (Genesis 22:1). First uttered when God calls upon Abraham to test his faith, these words simultaneously mark his commitment to God and the moment he pledges responsibility. In replying to God's summons, Abraham has already bound himself to the Other. It is his prompt response that 'exposes' him to God:

> "Here I am": the first and only possible response to the call by the other, the originary moment of responsibility such as it exposes me to the singular other, the one who appeals to me. "Here I am" is the only self presentation presumed by every form of responsibility: I am ready to respond, I reply that I am ready to respond. (*GD*, 72)

Derrida maintains that 'the originary moment of responsibility' begins with the act of responding. For Derrida, the deictic phrase 'Here I am' is the only possible response to the call. God's 'Where art thou?' demands a commitment on the recipient's part that precedes knowledge of the demand. Hence, Eric Prenowitz's counterintuitive claim that saying 'Here I am' is an act of responding *before* responding:

> Abraham responds to God's call, 'Here I am' he says, or 'Here am I'. And this is the repeat performance of an opening act, the performative speech-act of responsibility, a heteronomous self-reflection through which the called-on (subject) responds before responding by constituting him or herself precisely as a subject able to respond, a response-able self-present subject. It never happens simply 'alone', 'with' oneself; nor does it ever simply happen 'with' the other. This response that is not quite a response, here-am-I, is thereby the condition for any response to be given, for any responsibility taken.[99]

'Here I am' fulfills the double task of answering to the call and accepting responsibility.

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[99] Prenowitz, 'Dialectics of Another Litter: Found(er)ing Democracy', p. 115.

In the Old Testament it is Abraham who first utters the response 'Here I am' (Genesis 22: 1).[100] Translating the Hebrew *hineni*, these words communicate an open readiness to heed the call of the other. For Emmanuel Levinas, as Jill Robbins observes, these words are considered 'the paradigmatic response of responsibility […] the sole utterance in the primordial lexicon'.[101] Hilary Putnam explains that the word is a combination of two elements *hine* and *ni*. The latter is a contraction of the pronoun *ani*, meaning 'I'. The former, translated as 'here' in this Biblical phrase, 'cannot occur in a mere descriptive proposition'; it 'performs the speech-act of calling attention to, or presenting, not describing'.[102] Repeated when the angel of the Lord calls upon Abraham to stop him from committing the abominable crime, Abraham's second 'Here I am' (Genesis 22:11) can be read as a confirmation and corroboration of his first response. Having reached Mount Moriah, the designated site for the sacrifice, Abraham prepares the altar and binds his son for the offering. Just as Abraham reaches out for the knife to slay his only son, the Angel of the Lord intervenes to stop him from fulfilling God's unforgivable command. The second instance of summoning, this time through God's messenger, takes place at a far more precarious moment. Yet (once again) there is no hesitation on Abraham's part. Strangely composed and in control in spite of the circumstances, his response comes immediately and with no questions asked. Abraham's first 'Here I am' is thus followed by a second and can therefore be seen to have the same structure of what Derrida calls the 'double yes'.

Integral to Derrida's understanding of the response, this notion receives its most thorough examination in 'Ulysses Gramophone: Hear Say Yes in Joyce' (1984), where Derrida maintains: 'the question of the *yes* has mobilized or traversed everything I have been trying to think, write, teach, or read' for a 'very long time'.[103] For Derrida, Joyce's signature is precisely 'the yes' with which the author signs off the last word in the novel. Choosing to end *Ulysses* with Molly's well-known erotically-charged phrase: 'yes I said

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[100] God's previous summons to a mortal takes place in the newly lost Garden of Eden when, soon after eating from the Tree of Knowledge, Adam is called upon by God with the words he would later use to address Abraham: '*Where art thou?*' (Genesis 3: 9). Guilt-ridden and suddenly aware of his nudity, Adam's reply is a feeble attempt at justifying his actions: 'I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid' (Genesis 3: 10). Adam can thus be seen to relinquish the opportunity to say 'Here I am'.

[101] Jill Robbins, *Altered Reading: Levinas and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 32.

[102] Hilary Putnam, 'Levinas and Judaism', in *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, ed. by Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 38.

[103] Derrida, 'Ulysses Gramophone', p. 287.

yes I will Yes', Joyce, according to Derrida, surreptitiously and vicariously leaves his own signature, 'Yes' (with an 'inaudible capital letter'), inscribed in Molly's so-called monologue.[104] Used over two hundred times in the course of the novel, the word 'yes' has, on Derrida's reading, at least ten different modalities. These include the more common meanings of 'obedience', agreement' and 'emphatic confirmation' as well as the more alluring attestations of 'rhythmic breathing' and 'the passionate breathing of desire'.[105] As he explains, 'yeses' can be 'articulated by the simple mark of a rhythm, intakes of breath in the form of pauses or murmured interjections'.[106] Derrida admits that it is difficult to say anything definitive about this 'odd word' that 'names nothing, describes nothing, whose grammatical and semantic status is most enigmatic'.[107] 'Such a word says nothing in itself,' he later adds, 'if by saying we mean designating, showing, describing some thing to be found outside language, outside marking. Its only references are other marks, which are also marks of the other'.[108] Like Abraham's *hineni*, its meaning is context-bound and wholly dependent on the appeal of the other. In fact, a few paragraphs later, Derrida describes the nature of this 'preconceptual vocalization' in terms of an 'I-here', which is one of the standard translations of *hineni*: 'The minimal, primary *yes*, the telephonic "hello" or the tap through a prison wall, marks, before meaning or signifying: "I-here," listen, answer, there is some mark, there is some other'.[109]

Significantly, for Derrida, the 'yes' is never a true affirmation unless it is followed by a second 'yes' that confirms the first. In 'Ulysses Gramophone' he maintains that in order 'for the yes of affirmation, assent, consent, alliance, of engagement, signature, or gift to have the value it has, it must carry the repetition within itself'.[110] As a response, 'yes' announces the absolute relation between the one who calls and the one who responds. The responsibility inherent in the act of saying 'yes' or answering to the call (of the other) is evident when Derrida relates the 'yes' to 'alliance' and 'engagement'. As Derrida writes: 'We cannot say *yes* without promising to confirm it and to remember it, to keep it safe, countersigned in another yes, without promise and memory, without the promise of

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[104] Derrida, p. 274.
[105] See Derrida, 'Ulysses Gramophone', p. 307, fn. 26.
[106] Derrida, p. 297.
[107] Derrida, p. 265.
[108] Derrida, p. 297.
[109] Derrida, p. 297 and p. 298.
[110] Derrida, p. 276.

memory'.[111] Linked to the etymology of 'promise' meaning 'to send forth', the first yes is always already bound to the futural 'yeses' it will require to keep its *word*. Speaking in an interview, Derrida points out the interrelation between the yes and the promise: 'To say yes is also to promise, to promise moreover to confirm the yes. There is no yes that is not a promise to confirm itself'.[112]

Indeed, as Derrida's many references to the impossibility of enumerating Joyce's yeses suggests, it is not sufficient to speak merely of two "countable" yeses. It becomes clear that the 'double yes' stands in for the necessarily infinite yeses. The strange wording of the near-contemporaneous piece, 'A Number of Yes', refers precisely to this impossible reckoning. The incalculable yeses that are required to fulfill a promise cannot be enumerated. Drawing attention to the etymology outlined above, Derrida concludes: 'Already but always a faithful countersignature, a *yes* cannot be counted. Promise, mission, emission, it always sends itself off in number'.[113] This crucial sending off or *envois* underlines the centrality of the other in Derrida's analysis. The 'yes' always comes as a response to the other, that cannot be initiated without heeding the call. Derrida goes so far as to claim that the existence of the 'I' is essentially bound to the 'movement' of the yes:

> […] as engagement or promise, it [the yes] must *at least* and in advance be tied to a confirmation in another [prochain] *yes. Yes* to the other [au prochain], that is, to the other *yes* that is already there but nonetheless remains to come. The "I" does not preexist this movement, nor does the subject; they are instituted in it.[114]

[111] Derrida, pp. 304–05.

[112] Jacques Derrida, 'Passages — from Traumatism to Promise', trans. by Peggy Kamuf, in *Points…Interviews, 1974–1994*, ed. by Elisabeth Weber (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 384. In an interesting echo of his succinct claim that there is 'no responsibility without response', in 'Faith and Knowledge' Derrida remarks: 'No response, indeed, without a principle of responsibility: one must respond to the other, before the other and for oneself. And no responsibility without a given word, a sworn faith, without a pledge, without an oath, without some *sacrament* or *ius iurandum [OATH]'*. It is also here that speaking of the relation between religion and responding, Derrida cites Émile Benveniste on the etymological root of the word 'respond' that goes back to the Latin *spondere*, which is related to the act of promising and affiliated with the act of swearing and answering for something. See Jacques Derrida, 'Faith and Knowledge', trans. by Samuel Weber, in *Acts of Religion*, ed. by Gil Anidjar (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 64. For Simon Critchley, this understanding of response is an integral feature of deconstructive thinking in general: 'Prior to all questioning, deconstruction opens a dimension of responsibility — grant, pledge, prayer, demand, call, Saying — that precedes ontology and puts me in relation with the Other'. Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p. 197.

[113] Jacques Derrida, 'A Number of Yes', trans. by Brian Holmes, in *Psyche: Inventions of the Other*, vol. II, ed. by Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), p. 240.

[114] Derrida, 'A Number of Yes', p. 239.

Derrida's claim that the 'I' emerges within the ethical experience of saying 'yes' (and thus giving one's word) to the other, recalls the structure of both the poetic mark and the call to responsibility. An essential aspect of the awakening of the 'I' is thus necessarily related to the injunction to respond and to responsibility. Yet what is this forceful demand that it should compel me to say 'yes' and call me to respons(e)ibility?

In *Signéponge* (1975) Derrida sheds light on the nature of this demand in his reading of Francis Ponge's 'signature'. He begins precisely by calling 'Francis Ponge' and reflecting on what it means to *call* Francis Ponge.[115] Indeed, in concert with the main concerns of the present chapter, the opening of the 1975 Cerisy lecture introduces the interrelation between the apostrophe, the dictate and an underlying violence. Using the word 'attack' to describe his opening gambit, he explains that the French word *attaque* designates 'the first piece of a text, of a theatrical scene or an act, the intrusive intervention of a preliminary speech act which no longer leaves you in peace'.[116] Remarking on what he calls the 'law of the thing', which, significantly for our discussion, is a *dictated* law, he underlines the force of the demand: 'I speak of a law dictated, as in the first person, by the thing, with an intractable rigor, as an implacable command'.[117] The important point to make here is that for Derrida the *dictated* law cannot be ignored. Its distinctiveness lies in its undeniable power over its addressee or recipient:

> […] the thing is the other, the entirely other which dictates or which writes the law, a law which is not simply natural […], but an infinitely, insatiably imperious injunction to which I ought to subject myself, even when this involves trying to acquit myself afterwards, at the end of a duel, having offered it, with my life and desire, something akin to my signature.[118]

It is noteworthy that the demand of the thing entails a 'duel' and requires a *signature* on the recipient's part. Derrida relates the signature to the 'yes' on more than one occasion. In 'Ulysses Gramophone' he writes that 'the use of the *oui* is always implicated in the moment of signature' and that 'a promise, an oath, an order, a commitment always implies

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[115] Derrida writes: 'I could have started just as I did: by playing around with the fact that the entire name of Francis Ponge can […] very well form the whole of an interpellation, apostrophe, or greeting addressed to him'. Jacques Derrida, *Signéponge/Signsponge*, trans. by Richard Rand (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), p. 2.

[116] The *attaque* refers to the polysemous sentence, 'Francis Ponge will have been self-remarked'. It is not possible, he claims, to decide whether 'Francis Ponge' refers to the proper name of the so called 'poet of the Thing' or the thing designated by the signature 'Francis Ponge'. See Derrida, *Signéponge/Signsponge*, pp. 4–10.

[117] Derrida, *Signéponge/Signsponge*, p. 12.

[118] Derrida, *Signéponge/Signsponge*, p. 12 and p. 14.

a *yes*, I sign'.[119] Emphasising the violence at the heart of this act of signing in *Signéponge,* he goes on to write that the 'gripping force of an attack never occurs without a scratch; never, in other words, without some scene of signature'.[120] The incisive scratch of the signature is in turn related to the addressee's singularity. Once again, it is worth noting that like the poetic mark, the claim that the demand has on its recipient is in large part owing to its ability to single me out:

> Thus the thing would be the other, the other-thing which gives me an order or addresses an impossible, intransigent, insatiable demand to me, without an exchange and without a transaction, without a possible contract. Without a word, without speaking to me, it addresses itself to me, to me alone in my irreplaceable singularity, in my solitude as well. I owe to the thing an absolute respect which no general law would mediate: the law of the thing is singularity and difference as well. An infinite debt ties me to it, a duty without funds or foundation. I shall never acquit myself of it.[121]

Stressing the forceful nature of this demand, Derrida goes on to describe it as a 'tyrannical *thou must*':

> What is singular about this tyrannical *thou must* of the thing is exactly its singularity. The singularity of a command which is irreplaceable each time — its rarity — prevents it from becoming law. Or rather, if you prefer, it is a law that is immediately transgressed (let us say, more precisely, *freed up),* the one who responds being placed, immediately, in a singular link with it, whereby he frees himself from the tyranny even as he experiences and approves it.[122]

The singularity of this unique call — that calls me by name or, what amounts to the same thing, appeals to me singularly — is impossible to ignore. Its insistence, described as 'imperious, gentle, intractable', is significantly associated with what Ponge described as the 'ethic' of his writing, which, as we shall see below, is echoed in a remark by Derrida from another Cerisy lecture in relation to his own 'ethics'. This is the injunction Nicole Anderson has in mind when, in her discussion of Derrida's notion of responsibility, she writes about a 'must' that ought to be distinguished from the imperatives of a moral programme: 'The *must* is not an ethical injunction in the sense that it requires the subject to obey certain rules and calculations prescribed by ethical systems. Rather, the *must* is a messianic "promise", and it is urgent, and therefore this *must* is other than mere

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[119] Derrida, 'Ulysses Gramophone', p. 257 and p. 298.
[120] Derrida, *Signéponge/Signsponge*, p. 4.
[121] Derrida, *Signéponge/Signsponge*, p. 14.
[122] Derrida, *Signéponge/Signsponge*, p. 50.

calculation'.[123] Or, in Leslie Hill's more concise phrase, it is 'an imperative without imperative'.[124]

This ethical engagement is evidently linked to what Derrida, borrowing the concept from Francis Ponge's *Pour un Malherbe*, calls the 'countersignature'.[125] Derrida addresses this notion in various works with the earliest references appearing in *Glas* (1974) and *Signéponge* (1975).[126] Countersigning refers to the act of responding to the work of the other by signing it in one's turn. As Peggy Kamuf writes, it is 'the act of affirming the other work by taking responsibility for it'.[127] The term is used intermittently throughout 'Ulysses Gramophone' to refer to the instance of responding to the 'yes' of the other. It is also here that Derrida, in a markedly earnest tone, declares that 'we must write, we must sign, we must bring about new events with untranslatable marks — and this is the frantic call, the distress of a signature that is asking for a yes from the other, the pleading injunction for a countersignature'.[128] The undeniable urgency in this passage is a result of the pressing nature of the claim that the call of the other has on the recipient. A number of important motifs that emerged in the foregoing discussion are brought together in this brief interlude of gravitas that is all the more striking within Derrida's otherwise semi-comical stance and comparatively light-hearted tone in this lecture, which ends on the theme and a note of laughter. The imperative to heed the call that is experienced as an injunction as well as the demand to respond to the *salut* of the other are here rendered in a noticeable

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[123] Nicole Anderson, *Derrida: Ethics Under Erasure* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), p. 123.

[124] Leslie Hill, *Radical Indecision: Barthes, Blanchot, Derrida, and the Future of Criticism* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), p. 68.

[125] Jacques Derrida, 'Counter-Signatures', trans. by Peggy Kamuf, in *Points…Interviews, 1974–1994* , ed. by Elisabeth Weber (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 366. Derrida here cites Ponge's remark: 'Rightly or wrongly and I don't know why, but since childhood I have always considered the only valid texts to be those that could be inscribed in stone. The only texts that I can with dignity accept to sign (or counter-sign) are those that could be unsigned altogether'. Explaining the Pongean notion of countersignature, Derrida writes: 'The thing is the Other that one must force to counter-sign the poem in some way. And beginning with this guiding thread, one recognizes a certain number of texts in which this scene of the signature is in play and in which it is a matter of forcing the Other — an animal, a thing, a swallow, a meadow — to counter-sign the poem' (Derrida, 'Counter-Signatures', p. 366).

[126] Writing in 2004 with the benefit of hindsight, he explains that the provenance of the concept owes both to his work *Glas* and to Francis Ponge's own elaboration of the concept. He writes 'about a year after the publication of *Glas*, I had proposed a sort of general logic of the countersignature that came from *Glas* — without coming from it — but especially from Ponge who had elaborated a theory, a discourse on the countersignature' (Jacques Derrida, 'Countersignature', trans. by Mairéad Hanrahan, *Paragraph*, 27.2 (2004), pp. 21–22).

[127] Peggy Kamuf, 'I See Your Meaning and Raise the Stakes by a Signature: The Invention of Derrida's Work', in *A Companion to Derrida*, ed. by Zeynep Direk and Leonard Lawlor (Oxford: Blackwell, 2014), p. 197. In this essay, Kamuf draws up a list of seven generalisable features of the 'concept of countersignature' only to conclude that 'there are only examples of countersignature without general concept' (p. 201).

[128] Derrida, 'Ulysses Gramophone', p. 282.

tone of desperation ('frantic', 'distress' and 'pleading' communicate an uneasy fretfulness) — as though the threat of non-response (which is always a possibility) could result in a catastrophe.

Interestingly, Derrida uses similar terms to describe the possible catastrophic killing of the hedgehog on the autoroute when he speaks of the response demanded by the poetic mark:

> Whence the infinite resistance to the transfer of the letter which the animal, in its name, nevertheless calls out for. That is the distress of the *hérisson.* What does the distress, stress itself, want? *Stricto sensu*, to put on guard. Whence the prophecy: translate me, watch, keep me yet awhile, get going, save yourself, let's get off the autoroute. (*CCP*, 295)

As the French phrase 'la détre*sse* du héri*ss*on' seeks to emphasise (*CCP*, 294) through its phonemic affinity, the choice of the 'hérisson' is clearly not accidental. The stress or distress of the *hérisson* — 'thrown out' on the autoroute and subject to chance — lies in its dependence on the other who may or may not heed its injunction to respond. Responding to Derrida's text in 'Jacques Derrida as Proteus Unbound', Cixous pauses on this distress in a sentence that is a powerful poetic statement in its own right and is here cited in its entirety:

> Bearing in its name a syllable of Derrida's name, the one that laughs, this body is a soul; he she is pending in transit, *en souffrance*, suffering always signs absolute singularity, solitude he would say, no one can die or suffer in the place of the other, and the *hérisson* is anguished, with *ss* he is caught in distress, *ss* and without the o, *save soul* he signals in silence, not even the force of an *our*, the more one observes him the more he looks familiar to us, this foreboding of danger, this tragic impossibility to save oneself without losing oneself, this ingenious deployment of strategies of survival, without ever being able to know what is going to happen, this very moving mental gesture of turning oneself over to the other's keeping, to the chance of a benediction, may you say the poem well that confides itself like a prayer, and may you speak well of it, how can we not recognize him, this poem without subject without signatory, who goes on rolling his life on the roulette wheels of the autoroute, who cannot not take the risk of being translated, either to be brought safely to his destination or brought up on charges, it's double or nothing, it's he obviously Jacques Derrida, his metamorphosis.[129]

Significantly, 'the distress of a signature that is asking for a yes from the other' that Derrida refers to in 'Ulysses Gramophone' is, on Cixous's reading, the same distress that Derrida (as metamorphosed hedgehog) experiences in traversing the autoroute and turning

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[129] Cixous, 'Jacques Derrida as a Proteus Unbound', pp. 408–09.

himself over 'to the other's keeping'. Indeed, Cixous's compelling reading brings together a number of concerns that have emerged in this chapter in relation to Derrida's conception of the poetic experience as a call (or *SOS*) that demands a response. The survival or *salut* depends on the intervention or countersignature of the other.

In the 2000 Cerisy lecture entitled 'Countersignature' Derrida proclaims his love for the said word: '"Countersign"' is a word I love, a word I have much loved. There is a sort of love story — the story of a love that holds me "prisoner" — between the word and me'.[130] In his most elaborate and complex discussion of countersigning, Derrida seeks to emphasise the affiliation between countersigning, betrayal and an inevitable suicide. This is powerfully rendered in the following passage where Derrida guardedly describes what he calls the 'ethics' of his writing:

> My interest in the countersignature […] has always been in competition, if I may say — as a sort of counterpath — with what in essence, spontaneously or deliberatively, will have always been of the order of an ethics or law of my writing when it responds to the other's, to another's work. What I here call, with a word that leaves me a little dissatisfied because it is ambiguous, the ethics of my writing, the law it is out of the question I should infringe, is to say 'yes' to the work that comes before me and that will be have been without me, a work that was already affirmed and signed with the other's 'yes', so that my own 'yes' is a 'yes' to the other's 'yes', a sort of blessing, an alliance. Not infringing this law thus means doing everything not to betray it, not to betray either the law or the other. But, firstly, the possibility of betrayal is part of respect for the law. To obey, to be faithful, it must be possible to betray. Someone who *couldn't* betray *couldn't* be faithful. Secondly, there is also a terrible law of betrayal […] a terrifying law meaning that the more I betray (by writing differently, by signing differently), the less I betray, the less I betray (by repeating the same 'yes', by imitating, by counterfeiting), the more I betray. This means that perjury — or betrayal, if you prefer — is lodged like a double band at the very heart of the countersignature.[131]

Suspended between blessing and the risk of betrayal, the countersignature is caught in a double bind. Both the act of repeating faithfully and signing differently entail a betrayal. This paradox is captured in Derrida's claim that a countersignature requires 'a repetition without imitation' or 'a doubling without repeating'.[132] It is in this sense that Hill describes the countersignature as 'banded, bonded, bound, or bounded'.[133] Sensitive to what he calls the 'the abyssal double meaning of "counter"', Derrida dwells at some length on the

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[130] Derrida, 'Countersignature', pp. 15–16.
[131] Derrida, pp. 28–29.
[132] Derrida, 'Countersignature', p. 26.
[133] Hill, *Radical Indecision*, p. 289.

'formidable ambiguity of this "*contre*"'.[134] For the double meaning of the adverb or preposition denotes both opposition and proximity. Significantly, it is the 'destructive opposition' of the word that he emphasises at the close of his lecture on Jean Genet where, contrary to the affirmative signature that promises to say *oui* to the work of the other, the countersignature is 'unable to avoid the deathly rigidity of mimetic or mechanical repetition'.[135]

Bound as it is to the necessary repetition of the 'yes', the act of response is not without its dangers. It runs the risk of becoming an automated response or a mere mechanical reproduction of the first 'yes'. As Derrida explains in conversation with John D. Caputo, the origin of the 'yes' is threatened by a 'yes' that, always ghosting the first, may be "gramophoned" parodically:

> […] the second "yes" may be simply a parody, a record, or a mechanical repetition. You may say "yes, yes" like a parrot. The technical reproduction of the originary "yes" is from the beginning a threat to the living origin of the "yes". So the "yes" is haunted by its own ghost, its own mechanical ghost, from the beginning. The second "yes" will have to reinaugurate, to reinvent, the first one.[136]

In order to circumvent this deadly mechanicity and retain the living 'yes', the response must be reinvented. Arguably, this re-invention is a first 'yes' in its own right (and so on *ad infinitum*). In his response to David Wood's invitation to write a piece for the publication *Derrida: A Critical Reader* (1990), Derrida provides a long reflection on the question of response by exploring what it would mean to respond, and conversely, not to respond to his friend's request. It is also here that he asks, albeit without providing an answer, what the opposite of 'response' would be.[137] The answer seems to suggest itself in the posthumously published, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, where Derrida dwells on the distinction between 'response' and 'reaction'. For Derrida here takes up the issue of the automaticity of parodic repetition by questioning the distinction between response and reaction that philosophers from René Descartes to Jacques Lacan have made in order to distinguish the human from the animal. As he maintains early on, one of the main concerns in the seminar as a whole is precisely with 'a problem that will henceforth never leave us,

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[134] Derrida, 'Countersignature', p. 19.
[135] Derrida, 'Countersignature', p. 39.
[136] Jacques Derrida, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida*, ed. by John D. Caputo (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), pp. 27–28.
[137] Derrida, 'Passions: An Oblique Offering', p. 13.

that of appellation — and of the response to a call'.[138] Derrida casts doubt on 'the purity, the rigor, and the indivisibility of the frontier that separates — already with respect to "us humans" — reaction from response'.[139] He argues that this 'trenchant distinction' obscures the possibility of considering what he calls 'the reactionality in the response', which, as he suggests, may well typify instances of *human* "response".[140] Keen on emphasising the different attributes of the human and the animal '*in general*', philosophers like Lacan have failed to consider such reactional "responses". In Derrida's view, it is necessary to complicate this simple distinction in order to shed light on what he calls 'reactional automaticity'. These reactions are characterised by their association to 'death', 'technics', and the 'mechanical', which Derrida in turn attributes to the traditional concept of responsibility:

> [...] casting doubt on responsibility, on decision, on one's own being-ethical, seems to me to be — and is perhaps what should forever remain — the unrescindable essence of ethics, decision, and responsibility. All firm knowledge, certainty, and assurance on this subject would suffice, precisely, to confirm the very thing one wishes to disavow, namely, the reactionality in the response.[141]

The phrase 'reactionality of the response' underscores the possibility of a certain automaticity within human reaction, which is typical of what Derrida describes as a 'calculable, rationally distributed responsibility'.[142]

If, as this chapter argues, there is an integral link between Derrida's notion of the poetic and that of responsibility, then it follows that the response demanded by the poetic mark also threatens to turn into an automated reaction. Derrida's choice of the term 'poematic', which, as he explains in the 'Istrice' interview, seeks to distinguish his notion of the poetic from the German tradition, unmistakably points to a certain automaticity inherent within 'l'expérience poématique' (*CCP*, 294).[143] Significantly for our discussion, the phrase is first used in a paragraph that introduces three terms with a direct phonemic resonance with 'poématique', namely 'automate', 'mnémotechnique' and 'mécanique', and explores the well-known idiomatic expression *apprendre par coeur*. Through this central

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[138] Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, trans. by David Wills and ed. by Marie-Louise Mallet (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), p. 13.
[139] Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, p. 125.
[140] Derrida, p. 124 and p. 126.
[141] Derrida, p. 126.
[142] Derrida, 'Eating Well', p. 118.
[143] Derrida, 'Istrice 2', p. 308.

motif, Derrida reveals that the distinction between response and reaction is also lodged at the heart of 'Che cos'è la poesia?'. Speaking of the double and contradictory meaning of the idiom, Derrida explains that *to learn by heart* points both to spontaneity and automaticity:

> *Heart*, in the poem "learn by heart" (to be learned by heart) no longer names only pure interiority, independent spontaneity, the freedom to affect oneself actively by reproducing the beloved trace. The memory of the "by heart" is confided like a prayer — that's safer — to a certain exteriority of the automaton, to the law of mnemotechnics, to that liturgy that mimes mechanics on the surface [...]. (*CCP*, 295)

The poetic mark that elicits (or demands) a response from its addressee is threatened by the danger of turning into mere mechanical repetition or what Derrida, as we have seen, calls 'reactionality'. This recalls the contradictory injunctions we referred to in the opening part of the chapter. On the one hand, the addressee receives the order to 'copy me down, guard and keep me'; on the other hand, a second injunction, unequivocally stated, dictates the contrary: 'destroy me'. As Clark has remarked, the Derridean poematic remains caught in this necessary 'double-bind' that captures the 'poem's contradictory conditions of being'.[144] For the poematic mark is threatened by the very response — the act of learning by heart — that can safeguard it from oblivion. The threat of mechanical reproduction emerges as soon as the dictate urges the addressee to 'learn me by heart, copy me down' (*CCP*, 289). The repetition of the poematic mark risks turning into mere automated 'mnemotechnics'. Speaking of this double bind in terms of a 'hedgehog' that turns into a ball with its quills pointed outward to protect itself, Derrida maintains that the hedgehog exposes itself to death in the very act of protecting itself.

> Rolled up in a ball, prickly with spines, vulnerable and dangerous, calculating and ill-adapted (because it makes itself into a ball, sensing the danger on the autoroute, it exposes itself to an accident). (*CCP*, 297)

In light of this description of the hedgehog, Rubenstein, in admittedly heavy-handed terms describes the poem — as (re)configured in Derrida's 'strange little response' — as 'an active-passive-wounding-wounded response'.[145] She explains that the hedgehog is both passive and active. For when it senses danger it simultaneously stops in the middle of the road (passively awaiting its fate) and points its prickly quills outwards (actively defending

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[144] Clark, *The Theory of Inspiration*, pp. 263.
[145] Rubenstein, *Strange Wonder*, p. 156.

itself). It is thus subject to becoming wounded and all the while capable of wounding. Contrary to Schlegel's well-known fragment on the *Igel*, which underlines the hedgehog's self-sufficiency, Derrida's above-cited counter-genealogical statement describes a lowly, humble *hérisson* that depends upon its relation to the outside.[146] As Clark explains, for Derrida the poematic 'relates to otherness as well as to itself'; it 'would be definable in terms of a desire to relate *never* to itself or to itself *only* as to otherness'.[147]

Pointed outward, the quills of the 'fretful porpentine' (to borrow a phrase from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*) are indicative of what Derrida considers to be an imperative openness to the other.[148] Indeed both the French *hérisson* and the Italian *istrice* bear the trace of the 'spines' that is lost in the English 'hedgehog', for which the French-derived 'porcupine' (a blend of *porc* and *espin*) or the Latinate 'urchin' (derived, interestingly in this context, from the Latin *ericius* suggesting to 'bristle') might have provided a better crossing over or 'translation'. For Derrida, these bristled spines metaphorically convey the poem's relation to the outside and thus to the other:

> The poem can roll itself up in a ball, but it is still in order to turn its pointed signs towards the outside. To be sure, it can reflect language or speak poetry, but it never relates back to itself, it never moves by itself like those machines, bringers of death. Its event always interrupts or derails absolute knowledge, autotelic being in proximity to itself. This "demon of the heart" never gathers itself together, rather it loses itself and gets off the track (delirium or mania), it exposes itself to chance, it would rather let itself be torn to pieces by what bears down upon it. (*CCP*, 299)

Like Derrida's own response (recall the interlocutor's complaint: 'you are getting off the track'), the poem gets off the track and exposes itself to the threat of death ('torn to pieces') precisely when seeking to avoid the 'machines' (or 'bringers of death'), which here refer to the automated repetition of the poematic mark. Hence, the hedgehog's attempt to avoid the deadly blow of the *macchine* ('cars') on the *autostrada*. Suspended between the threat of automated reaction and that of non-response, the poem seeks out the other whose response may affirm its mark.

As the foregoing analysis reveals, Derrida's exploration of the call of the other and the response are integral to his notion of the poetic mark as an imperative that demands it

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[146] Clark, *The Theory of Inspiration*, pp. 261–62.
[147] Clark, *The Theory of Inspiration*, pp. 261–62.
[148] William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. by Philip Edwards (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), I. 5. 20.

be heeded. This chapter has shown that Derrida's notion of respons(e)ibility is reflected in his counterpoetical tract on the 'poematic' experience. The ethical experience of the other's unforeseeable arrival is bound, as we have seen, with the forceful awakening of the 'I'. Hence Derrida's seemingly counterintuitive conclusion that the poem is a 'stranger to production':

> You will call poem a silent incantation, the aphonic wound that of you, from you, I want to learn by heart. It thus takes place, essentially without one's having to do it or make it: it *lets itself* be done, without activity, without work, in the most sober *pathos*, a stranger to all production, especially to creation. The poem falls to me, benediction, coming of (or from) the other. (*CCP*, 297)

Close to the end of the piece, Derrida claims that the poem is never the creation of the subject. Rather, it is only ever the work or force of the other's arrival and the concomitant desire on the part of the recipient 'to learn by heart':

> Without a subject: poem, perhaps there is some, and perhaps it *leaves itself*, but I never write any. A poem, I never sign(s) it. The other sign(s). The *I* is only at the coming of this desire: to learn by heart. (*CCP*, 299)

Like Abraham's *hineni*, the poem, as conceived by Derrida, is the act of giving oneself over to the other. It is the promise whereby one says *yes* to the other and, in so doing, takes respons(e)ibility for the other and relinquishes the authority and power involved in the act of signing '*I*'. A poem only ever happens when the other signs. This understanding of the poetic experience is the subject of the next chapter that makes the claim that Hélène Cixous's writing practice is an instance of such poetic abandonment to the other.

Chapter 2

Hélène Cixous's Poetic *Puissance*

     The scene in which Hélène Cixous receives her first stigmata remains vivid in her mind. The place is the garden of the *Cercle Militaire* in Oran — the only garden in the desert town of Cixous's birth place in the north of Algeria. As the daughter of a military officer during the Second World War, three-year-old Hélène is granted entry in the 'terrestrial paradise' reserved exclusively for the class of officers.[1] Yet this entry, as she recalls, immediately complicates the concepts of inside and outside. Oran is always already '*Hors En* [Out In]', as she translates the name of her native, yet nonetheless promised, city.[2] She recalls:

> […] the garden is enclosed with bars rising to the sky and burrowing into the earth which separate humanity into two camps: the admitted and the non-admissible. Now I am admitted, at least that is what I think. Joy of the earth, the plants, the trees. I am inside, *and yet*. A superior force keeps me from being truly inside, and I do not know its name.[3]

It is only when she attempts to gain entry into the clique of friends who have ostracised her by offering to bring them the stamps they covet that she gets an intimation of the meaning

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[1] Hélène Cixous, 'Preface: On Stigmatexts', trans. by Eric Prenowitz, in *Stigmata: Escaping texts* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), p. xv.

[2] Hélène Cixous, 'Promised Cities', trans. by Laurent Milesi, in *Ex-Cities*, ed. by Aaron Levy and Jean-Michel Rabaté (Philadelphia: Slought Books, 2006), p. 30. She goes on to claim: 'She is outside [*dehors*] inside. And it will always be like that' (p. 32).The complicated relationship with Algeria as her place of birth is a compelling one that Cixous returns to obsessively from the early *Dedans* (1976) where the opening paragraph describes how after the narrator's father's death the family were suddenly subject to intolerable animosity to the more recent *Si Près* (2007) in which the narrator finally makes the return journey to the country where her father's tomb has lain unforgivably unvisited for decades.

[3] Cixous, 'Preface: On Stigmatexts', p. xv.

of the two words that are hurled at her in bitter disgust by her supposed French compatriots: 'Jew' and 'liar'. The words define her difference and define her as different. This scene of exclusion was to remain forever imprinted in her mind, or, more to the point, branded on her skin: 'I have the Cercle Militaire and its bars under my skin for eternity. Am I inside, am I outside? The inside pierces me with holes in my brain'.[4] This is the scene that she claims has 'engendered all of [her] literature'.[5]

For in Cixous's view, all literature is 'scarry' — 'it celebrates the wound and repeats the lesion'.[6] Speaking to Mireille Calle-Gruber, Cixous insists on her preference for the word 'wound' over 'break' to describe the origin of her writing:

> I do not follow you about the word *breaking*. […] Because in breaking, I sense: irreparable. But there is *wounding*. The wound is what I sense, the wound is a strange thing: either I die, or a kind of work takes place, mysterious, that will reassemble the edges of the wound. A marvellous thing also: that will nonetheless leave a trace, even if it hurts us. It is here that I sense things happen.[7]

The collection of essays in Cixous's 1998 *Stigmata: Escaping texts*, as she explains in the preface, all 'share the trace of a wound': 'They were caused by a blow, they are the transfiguration of a spilling of blood, be it real or translated into a haemorrhage'.[8] The volume brings together twelve essays, originally published in French between 1991 and 1997, that present compellingly poetic readings of the wound as it emerges in myth, novels, paintings and, of course, life itself. In the first of what Derrida has described as 'twelve songs on the wound', Rembrandt's Bathsheba is stabbed by a violent letter that transports her into an interior world far from the spectator's inquisitive gaze. In 'Stigmata, or Job the dog', Cixous recalls how at the age of twelve, still reeling from the loss of her father, her dog, Fips, locked its maddened jaws in her foot.[9] In 'What is it o'clock? or The door (we never enter)', the personified 'Hour' is the protagonist that deals the blows when

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[4] Cixous, 'Preface', p. xvi.
[5] Cixous, 'Preface', p. xvi.
[6] Cixous, 'Preface', p. xii.
[7] Hélène Cixous and Mireille Calle-Gruber, *Rootprints: Memory and Life Writing*, trans. by Eric Prenowitz (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 16.
[8] Cixous, 'Preface', p. xi.
[9] For an extended and illuminating reading on the recurrent episode of the dog bite in Cixous's work in relation to the wound, see Elissa Marder, 'Bit: Mourning Remains in Derrida and Cixous', in *The Mother in the Age of Mechanical: Reproduction, Psychoanalysis, Photography, Deconstruction* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), pp. 229–49, especially, pp. 229–39.

we least expect it. 'None of the scenes that are played again here', Cixous declares, 'avoids the cruel mark'.[10]

The language of violence in the preface is clearly central to her description of the origin of these texts. Nouns such as 'lesion', 'scar', 'haemorrhage', 'stigmata' and 'traumatism' as well as the verbs 'struck', 'stab', 'lacerate' and 'pierce' are indicative of the close association Cixous makes between the act of writing and the instant of wounding. She introduces this subject through a reflection on the word 'stigma':

> In this volume I chose to *cultivate the stigma*. In the first place I take it by its roots. Its etymology. Let us follow the *sti*. What a stupefying multitude starting with the Greek *stigmè*, and the Latin *sti*-! Stigma sticks, stings in English. *Pique* in French. *Sticht* in German.
> Stigma stings, pierces, makes holes, separates with pinched marks and in the same movement distinguishes — re-marks — inscribes, writes.
> Stigma wounds *and* spurs, stimulates.[11]

Underlining the originary *sti*- that 'carves out a place for itself', Cixous is keen to stress the contiguity between her writing practice and the stigma.[12] The 'mark of the pointed object' is almost impossible to erase. Like the piquant quills of the Derridean hedgehog that leave their mark on the recipient, the stigma stings, scars and scarifies.

Not only, however, for Cixous makes a fortuitous discovery: 'In another reign, in another scene, that of vegetation, stigma is not a sign of destruction, of suffering, of interdiction. On the contrary, the stigma is a sign of fertilization, of germination'.[13] In the world of plants, the stigma is part of the pistil, the female life-bearing part of the flower, where the male pollen germinates. The stigma extends outwards from the ovary through the stalk to capture the pollen and start the process of flowering. Insofar as 'what is dead and what will live share the same bed,' as she puts it, Cixous does not fear her stigmata: 'I do not want the stigmata to disappear. I am attached to my engravings, to the stings in my flesh and my mental parchment'.[14] The essays gathered in *Stigmata* celebrate lesions and resurrections alike. This conflict between life and death is not foreign to Cixous, who thinks of the scene of writing as a battlefield in which multiple conflicts come to pass. She does not try to tame the tempest on the page; neither does she shy away from the bloodshed. For the stigma both wounds the flesh and germinates the pollen. Speaking to

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[10] Cixous, 'Preface', p. xi.
[11] Cixous, 'Preface', p. xiii.
[12] Cixous, 'Preface', p. xiii.
[13] Cixous, 'Preface', p. xiv.
[14] Cixous, 'Preface', p. xiv.

Frédéric-Yves Jeannet about the wound at the origin of writing, she underlines the association between *blessure* ('wound') and *blé* ('wheat') in a sentence that reveals interesting parallels with the Derridean poematic: 'I think at the outset one needs at least (1) the wound [*la plaie*] (2) the letters of the wound: *p*, *l*, *a*, *i*, *e*, fading [*pâlie*], the call [*l'appelée*], the wound and the wheat of the wound [*la blessure et le blé de la blessure*]'.[15]

In his epigrammatic foreword to this volume, Jacques Derrida introduces Cixous's work by making a similar observation through the interlingual pun on the French *blessure* meaning 'wound', but also, through its phonemic affinity with the English word, 'blessing'. Alluding both to its content and style, he writes: 'Sublimity of a book in twelve songs on the wound [*blessure*]. I hear it as a blessing of the *blessure*, a great poetic treatise on the scar at the origin of literary writing — and no doubt of all writing'.[16] This recalls the pithy statement from *Glas* where Derrida declares, 'The signature is a wound, and there is no other origin for the work of art'.[17] The essential relation between the poetic and the wound as well as the poetic and the blessing (or benediction) that was explored in Chapter 1 also emerges in these powerful 'stigmatexts'.[18] Both the wound and the blessing come from the unforeseeable event of the other. It is well to recall the words from 'Che cos'è la poesia?' where Derrida binds the poem together with the wound and the benediction:

> No poem without accident, no poem that does not open itself like a wound, but no poem that is not also just as wounding. You will call poem a silent incantation, the aphonic wound that, of you, from you, I want to learn by heart. […] The poem falls to me, benediction, coming of (or from) the other. (*CCP*, 297)

Indeed, Cixous's view that the wound is ultimately a 'fertile wound' is clearly in concord with Derrida's description of the poem as both wound and benediction.[19]

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[15] Hélène Cixous and Frédéric-Yves Jeannet, *Encounters: Conversations on Life and Writing*, trans. by Beverley Bie Brahic (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), p. 27.

[16] Jacques Derrida, 'Foreword', trans. by Eric Prenowitz, in *Stigmata*, p. ix.

[17] Jacques Derrida, *Glas*, trans. by John P. Leavey and Richard Rand (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), p. 184.

[18] Speaking of their common experiences in French-occupied Algeria during the Second World War, Cixous coins the term '*nosblessures*': 'We [Derrida and Cixous] had experienced expulsion by Vichy. I was three years old when I watched my father unscrew his doctor's sign board. We share what I have called *nosblessures*, "ournoblewounds": wounds [*blessures*], but ours [*nos*] and they become our title to nobility [*noblesse*]. We have been able to understand each other to the tenth of a word, because the work of stigmatization, of the scar, was originarily inscribed in the life-book of both of us'. Jacques Derrida and Hélène Cixous, 'From the Word to Life', trans. by Aliette Armel and Ashley Thompson, *New Literary History*, 37.1 (2006), p. 5.

[19] 'Stigmata, or Job the Dog', trans. by Eric Prenowitz, in *Stigmata: Escaping texts* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 245. Ian Thomas Fleishman, who claims that Cixous 'has displayed an undeniable

Focusing primarily on Cixous's writing practice as an instance of such benediction, this chapter maintains that her work can be understood as 'poetic' in the Derridean sense explored in Chapter 1. Developing the main claims made in relation to the 'imperious injunction' of the call of the other, it argues that Cixous's work is a compelling example of the ethics of poetic force.[20] It begins by outlining the parallels between the experience that Cixous describes as 'coming to writing' and the Derridean notion of the poetic dictate. Through a close reading of the essay 'Without end, no, State of drawingness, no, rather: The Executioner's taking off', it then shows that the complex question of genre in Cixous's work is related to her writing practice as an instance of submitting to the call of the other. It subsequently argues that the Cixousian ageneric text is an instance of what Derrida has described in terms of the monstrous and maintains that the ethical import of her work is to be found in this monstrosity.

Coming to (Blind) Writing

In the 1971 essay 'La Venue à l'écriture' Cixous evocatively recalls the instance she was first called to writing. Dramatically conveyed in her characteristic poetic style, her initial reaction conveys the forceful injunction of what may be called the start of her writing vocation:

> Suddenly I was filled with a turbulence that knocked the wind out of me and inspired me to wild acts. 'Write.' When I say writing seized me, it wasn't a sentence that had managed to seduce me, there was absolutely nothing written, not a letter, not a line. But in the depths of the flesh, the attack. Pushed. Not penetrated. Invested. Set in motion. The attack was imperious: 'Write!' Even though I was a meager anonymous mouse, I know vividly the awful jolt that galvanizes the prophet, wakened in mid-life by an order from above. It's a force to make you cross oceans. Me, write? But I wasn't a prophet. An urge shook my body, changed my rhythms, tossed madly in my chest, made time unlivable for me. I was stormy. 'Burst!' 'You may speak!' And besides, whose voice is that? The Urge had the violence of a thunderclap. Who's striking me? Who's attacking me from behind? And in my body the breath of a giant, but no sentences at all. Who's pushing me? Who's invading?[21]

fixation with the figure of the wound' (p. 195), explores another aspect of this 'coupure' in a comparative essay on the work of the wound in Jean Genet and Cixous where he argues that omission (or self-censorship) is a 'productive textual strategy' (p. 190). See Ian Thomas Fleishman, '"Ce qui est coupe repousse": Jean Genet, Hélène Cixous, the Wound, and the Poetics of Omission', *French Studies*, 69.2 (2015), pp. 190–204.

[20] Jacques Derrida, *Signéponge/Signsponge*, trans. by Richard Rand (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), p. 12.

[21] Hélène Cixous, 'Coming to Writing', trans. by Deborah Jenson, in *Coming to Writing and Other Essays*, ed. by Deborah Jenson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), pp. 9–10. In conversation (or correspondence) with Frédéric-Yves Jeannet, she recalls this moment with equal vividness: 'A holy terror.

The instant she is called to writing has all the makings of an attack — what elsewhere she speaks of in terms of 'the eventual shock with the other, the violence of the other'.[22] In fact, the event of 'coming to writing' is experienced as a moment of violence that takes the then anonymous and unsuspecting writer-to-be by complete surprise. Spoken of in terms of a piercing attack, the 'order' to write comes from a force over which she has no control. The narrator's tumult of emotions is powerfully rendered and reveals that, like Derrida's 'thou must', this is a command that ought not to be ignored.[23] Cixous underlines its authority through the comparison to the prophet's visitation from above. This unforeseen arrival dispelled the traditional view of writing she had held theretofore:

> I used to imagine Writing as a result of the work of a scholar, of a master of Lights and measures. And you? Myself, I experienced it by surprise, I didn't move forward, I was pushed. I didn't earn my book by the sweat of my brow, I received it.[24]

Far from being a deliberate and conscious act on the writer's part, the text or, to use Cixous's preferred term, the 'book' *arrives*.[25] Cixous thus emphasises her peripheral role in the scene of writing. As Mireille Calle-Gruber's questions in relation to the *call* of the book suggest, it is the arrival of the book that initiates the writing process: 'She calls it. Or does she? Is it not, rather, the book that calls? Calls her to write it? Puts her to the work of the word [*le Verbe*]?'[26]

This openness or submission to what 'comes' characterises her writing practice in its entirety. What we may call her poetico-autobiographical-fiction, the essay, the seminar and the dream are all instances whereby Cixous receives the dictate of and from the other. Take, for instance, the claim at the start of *Les rêveries de la femme sauvage* (2000), the work in which she first begins to break her silence on the fraught question of Algeria (or what she has variously described as her 'disalgeria', 'algirritation' and 'algeriance'):[27]

As well as a kind of dread at the idea that in those days I *knew* nothing, I didn't know how to write. It was like in that vision, which always appealed to me, of the biblical prophet, the poor guy who suddenly hears the voice of God. I've always believed myself part of that scene'. See Cixous and Jeannet, *Conversations on Life and Writing*, pp. 12–13.

[22] Cixous and Calle-Gruber, *Rootprints*, p. 16.

[23] Derrida, *Signéponge/Signsponge*, p. 14.

[24] Cixous, 'Coming to Writing', p. 45.

[25] Cixous, 'Coming to Writing', pp. 9–10.

[26] Mireille Calle-Gruber, 'The Book Inside the Book', trans. by Sophie Thomas, *Oxford Literary Review*, 24.1 (2002), p. 71.

[27] Respectively in Hélène Cixous, *Reveries of the Wild Woman*, trans. by Beverely Bie Brahic (Evanston: North Western University Press, 2006), p. 39 and p. 71; Hélène Cixous, *So Close*, trans. by Peggy Kamuf (Cambridge: Polity, 2009), p. 49.

I had written without turning on the light so as not to risk scaring the Comer off, quick, without a sound, I grab the pad of paper that never leaves my bedside and the thick-tipped pen for scribbling big across the page, and I had noted the first lines that the Comer dictated to me, hastily covering a good-sized page with priceless sentences, yeast of the book, gift of gods whose names I don't even know.[28]

In a similar vein, speaking of the dream in the 'forewarnings' to the provocative work *Rêve je te dis* (2003), she introduces her openness to the arrival of the dream: 'Docile I say not a word the dream dictates I obey eyes closed. I have learned this docility. The dream commands. I do'.[29] This is reiterated elsewhere when she confesses that she does not feel worthy of being called the 'author' of her dreams:

> I kept thinking: what I have just written didn't come from me. *I* could write a thesis, but the texts I wrote were never mine. For a long time I lived in a state of serious uncertainty — sometimes I even told myself I shouldn't sign my name. Or else I felt great uneasiness when people talked to me about the texts 'I' had written. They think it is me, but I only copy the other, it is dictated; and I don't know who the other is.[30]

The use of the words 'dictate' and 'receive' clearly occur with frequent insistence in these descriptions of Cixous's writing practice. Even in her more academic work there is an evident abandonment to the will of the other. In response to Derrida's claim that he writes out his seminars 'from the first word to the last', she explains that her process of preparing seminars entails a very different approach:[31]

> I don't write my seminars. For days I travel through a region of multiple texts by ramifications crossings grafts until I can think them through by heart. Then I improvise for four or five hours with two pages of notes serving as a seedbed. I have this need to let myself be haunted by voices coming from my elsewheres that resonate through me. I want to have voices. As a result I am at the mercy of their inspiration [*insufflement*]. They can fail me. I master nothing, I submit to the oracles.[32]

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[28] Cixous, *Reveries of the Wild Woman*, p. 3.
[29] Hélène Cixous, *Dream I Tell You,* trans. by Beverley Bie Brahic (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), p. 1.
[30] Hélène Cixous, *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, trans. by Sarah Cornell and Susan Sellers (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), pp. 102–03.
[31] Derrida and Cixous, 'From the Word to Life', p. 1.
[32] Derrida and Cixous, 'From the Word to Life', p. 2.

As Mairéad Hanrahan aptly puts it, for Cixous 'writing is the site of an ongoing splitting or opening of the self through which it becomes possible not only for her otherness — her other self, herself as other — but for her others to achieve inscription'.[33]

First published in 1997, 'Writing blind: Conversation with the donkey', one of the essays in *Stigmata*, provides a detailed description of the experience of the writing process. Leaving the alleged certainty of broad daylight, Cixous enters the night to heed the call of the book and follow its passage. Intent on being faithful to the book, she attempts to capture the text as it arrives (and escapes) at lightning speed.[34] She delights in the fact that the word '*passage*' does not stay in line. To the Francophone ear, it splits into two words: '*Pas-sage* (ill-behaved/unwise)'.[35] She hears this as an interdiction warning her against chasing after the book. Yet she is not deterred. On the contrary, the intrigue of unexplored territories compels her to submit to the force of the dictate:

> What I write then knows neither limit nor hesitation. Without censorship. Between night and day. I receive the message. I receive without trembling. In broad daylight I would never have paradisiacal nudity. One can only receive nude. No, not unclothed. The nudity from before all clothing. (*WB*, 187)

Exhibiting a generous openness for what 'comes', Cixous describes her role as that of a mere scribe who attempts to scribble away the dictate as faithfully as possible. Indeed, she chooses to downplay the importance of the 'author' and the 'writer' in order to give pride of place to the more humble profession of the 'scribe' who merely listens to and notes down the dictates of the book: 'It is not me, it is at the crossing of my thinking body and the flux of living events that the thing is secreted. I will only be the door and the spokesperson supplying words. The linguistic receptor. The scribe' (*WB*, 192). This subordinate position in relation to the book is rendered in the telegraphic, clipped sentences of the following extract:

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[33] Mairéad Hanrahan, 'Of Three-Legged Writing: Cixous's *Le jour où je n'étais pas là*', *French Forum*, 28.2 (2003), p. 111.

[34] The phenomenon of speed within the Cixousian text was first discussed in 1972 by Gilles Deleuze in a short review of one of her early novels, *Neutre*. He speaks about an 'accelerated reading speed' that is required to read what he describes as Cixous's 'stroboscopic writing'. Jacques Derrida also addresses this aspect in *H.C. for Life, That Is to Say...* where he associates speed (*vitesse*) to the 'puissance' or might of her writing. See Gilles Deleuze, 'Hélène Cixous or Stroboscopic Writing', *Oxford Literary Review*, 24.1 (2012), pp. 203–205; Jacques Derrida, *H.C. for Life, That Is to Say...*, trans. by Laurent Milesi and Stefan Herbrechter (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), pp. 61–85.

[35] Hélène Cixous, 'Writing blind: Conversation with the donkey', trans. by Eric Prenowitz, in *Stigmata: Escaping texts* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 186. Subsequent quotations from this work will be given in parentheses within the main text following the abbreviation *WB*.

> Now I write. Which is to say that in my black interior softness the rapid
> footsteps of an arriving book print themselves. Catch me it says
> The race begins. In front of me
> My book writes itself. (*WB*, 187)

Hence, for Cixous writing is a both a passive activity and an active passivity: it requires the scribe's blind submission to the will of the book, but it also calls for the scribe to chase after the escaping text.

In *H.C. for Life* Derrida claims that Cixous's "might" lies in her ability to make the distinction between 'letting come' and 'making come' disappear. As we have seen, her writing practice entails a submission to the dictate of the book. In opening itself to the other, her work is an instance of letting the other come. Yet for Derrida, in Cixous's work, this 'letting come' is inseparable from 'making come' as the German phrase *kommen-lassen* suggests. Reflecting on this phrase, Derrida notes that it 'means at once *letting come* and *making come*, letting arrive and ordering to come'.[36] This condition of submitting to the other and simultaneously making the other come is what Derrida singles out as her 'puissance'. This *puissance*, he explains, is not derived from *pouvoir* (meaning 'power'), but rather, through the 'grammatical alchemy' of her work, from the subjunctive mood of *puisse*. Derrida claims that this alchemy 'makes the mighty power of the letter work and grants might not from power, having or being, but from the wish of the *puisse*, this wish that is an order, an "I order (*jubeo*)"'.[37] By way of anticipating the relation between Cixous's writing practice and Derrida's conception of the poem, it is worth outlining the evident parallel with his view of the poem as a demand or '*thou must*', which we explored in the previous chapter. It would appear that Cixous's puissance, on Derrida's reading, is of the same order as the 'dict of a dictation'. For as Ginette Michaud explains, the puissance derived from *puisse* is 'of a might beyond power, a weak or powerless power'.[38] It is thus similar to the poem's ability to relinquish the power to sign *I* and to let the other sign; or, more precisely, in relation to the Cixousian text, to *make* the other sign. Speaking of what he fittingly, in this context, calls Cixous's 'poematic might', Mark Dawson provides a succinct explanation of the impotence at the heart of this *puisse*: 'Impotence makes the impossible; impotence is, counter-intuitively, a productive force, an (in)activity

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[36] Derrida, *H.C. for Life*, p. 67.
[37] Derrida, *H.C. for Life*, p. 70.
[38] Ginette Michaud, 'Derrida & Cixous: Between and beyond, or "What to the Letter Has Happened"', trans. by Sarah-Anaïs Crevier Goulet, *New Literary History*, 37.1 (2006), p. 97.

which makes not what is possible […] but the impossible'.[39] Hence, the force or poetic puissance at the heart of the Cixousian writing practice is thoroughly coextensive with the Derrridean ethical experience of the impossible as we shall see in more detail in the final section of the chapter.

For Cixous, the dramatic event that plays itself out in this scene of writing would not be possible without 'the person whose name is *You*' (*WB*, 199). The central role of the addressee is evident in the following passage that brings together the recurrent Cixousian motifs of the letter and the address with what she calls the 'pure poem':

> I write you: I write to you and I write you. I will never say enough what (I) my writing owes you.
> I address myself to you. You are my address.
> Each book is in a certain way a letter that wants to be received by you.
> But it is not for you that I write: it is by you, passing through you, because of you ——— And thanks to you each book takes every liberty. Crazy liberty, as you say. The liberty to not resemble, to not obey. But the book itself is not crazy. It has its deep logic. But without you I would be afraid of never being able to return from Mount Crazy. But I can lose myself without anxiety because you keep me. This book is not a narrative, it is not a discourse, it is a poetic animal machine, the grain of its skin is pure poem. Because you keep watch, this book gives itself the freedom to escape from the laws of society. It does not fit the description. It does not answer the signals. It does not get a visa.
> For the policeforce reader it seems to be an anarchic thing, an untamed beast. It incites the reflex to arrest. But the freedom my book gives itself is not insane. It exercises the right to invention, to research. We only search for what no one has yet found, but which exists nonetheless. We search for one land, we find another. (*WB*, 199)

Some of the more important characteristics of Cixous's book or what she here significantly calls 'a poetic animal machine' are condensed in this passage. The centrality of the addressee whose identity remains, in the manner of Derrida's 'Envois', tantalisingly erased is evident. Significantly, the anonymous 'you' is not only the addressee ('I address myself to you'), but, more importantly, the person who makes the book possible in the first place: 'it is by you, passing through you, because of you'. Hence, the Cixousian text begins with and through the gift of the other. As Calle-Gruber remarks in her reflections on Cixous's writing:

> There is the scene of writing: scene of coming-giving [*venant-donnant*] — generosity of the apparition, of the dictation, of the manna — then of giving-

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[39] Mark Dawson, 'Of Force and the Future — Hélène Cixous's Poematic Might', *The Oxford Literary Review*, 33.2 (2011), p. 154.

giving [*donnant-donnant*] because to the call of the book responds the 'recall of energies' of the act of writing, in order to pursue it. The book gives to give.[40]

Moreover, the strategy of writing through the *other* involves a certain freedom that does not meet the expectations of the 'policeforce reader'. Cixous admits that the result of giving way to such 'crazy liberty' is 'an anarchic thing, an untamed beast'; and, thus, 'frigtheningly alien' and 'unassimilable', to recall Hillis Miller's words.[41] Its refusal to abide by the 'laws of society' has the effect of producing some*thing* that cannot be categorised according to existing forms. As we shall see in more detail below, this aspect of her work is intricately related to the ethical event as described by Derrida.

Indeed, Cixous's 'pure poem' or 'poetic animal machine' cannot but recall Derrida's 'poematic', with which, as we have seen, she engages at some length in 'Jacques Derrida as Proteus Unbound'. At this point it is worth pausing to outline briefly how Cixous's writing practice bears a striking similarity to Derrida's radical (catastrophic, even) conception of the 'poem' as discussed in the previous chapter. First, the poematic is a dictate that comes from the other. It is not a creative process in its traditional sense and the one who signs is not involved in a deliberate act of writing. As he succinctly puts it: 'A poem, I never sign(s) it. The other sign(s)' (*CCP*, 299). Like the Derridean 'poem' that falls on me like a benediction, the Cixousian 'book' is also received as a gift or dictate. Second, the poematic imposes itself with all the force of a command that cannot be ignored. As was discussed at length in Chapter 1, the injunction to responsibility begins with the '*thou must*' of the other, which Cixous evidently heeds: 'The other is imposed on me, is dictated in an absolute way to me'.[42] Third, the poematic is an event that awakens my respons(e)ibility for the call of the other and that compels me to look out for it and guard it. In her readiness to heed the dictate, Cixous's 'pure poem' manifests a similar awakening upon the event of the arrival of the other. As she writes at the end of her preface to *Stigmata*: 'We are elected for responsibility. We are nailed fast by events'.[43] In her categorical claim in response to Verena Andermatt Conley's remark about the ethical

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[40] Calle-Gruber, 'The Book Inside the Book', p. 84.
[41] J. Hillis Miller, 'Deconstruction and a Poem', in *Deconstructions: A User's Guide*, ed. by Nicholas Royle (London: Palgrave, 2000), p. 171.
[42] Hélène Cixous and Verena Conley, 'An Exchange with Hélène Cixous', in *Hélène Cixous: Writing the Feminine* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), p. 143.
[43] Cixous, 'Preface: On Stigmatexts', p. xvi.

dimension of the 'other', Cixous asserts: 'for me, there is only ethics, nothing else'.[44] Fourth, the 'catachrestic *hérisson*' that rises from the ashes of the literary genealogy bears a family resemblance to Cixous's 'anarchic thing' or 'untamed beast' that refuses to be domesticated into already existent modes of writing.

As many critics have remarked, Hélène Cixous's work inhabits a space that is not easily defined or circumscribed. Indeed, genres that may be considered distinct and incompatible, such as the theoretical treatise and the poetical text, the autobiographical diary and fictional narrative coalesce in texts that resist categorisation.[45] The title of Calle-Gruber's essay, 'Cixous *Genre* Outlaw', immediately points to Cixous's defiant position in the face of generic conventions. For Calle-Gruber the Cixousian text is best described using the French adverbial pronoun '*Y'* meaning 'there'; but also, as the sign visually suggests, an opening. She explains this as follows:

> *Y*: this is the place Hélène Cixous's writing attempts to compose-invent. An indefinite and infinite place (whose limits are not marked); sign of the crossroads, the opening; bursting, fragment, star; crow's-foot, crossing (-out) […]; fork (in the road and the tongue); symmetrical dissymmetry, neither one nor two, neither the one nor the other but more: a growing, an effervescence.[46]

This limitless opening accounts for the inability to pin down the Cixousian text to any one genre. In their analysis of genre in Cixous's work, Sissel Lie and Priscilla Ringrose must admit at the close of their discussion that the critic 'may never find a truly satisfying generic term to describe these elusive texts'.[47]

The complex question of genre within the Cixousian oeuvre is one that she also addresses in 'Writing blind'. Speaking of the submission to the other, she describes the

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[44] Cixous and Conley, 'An Exchange with Hélène Cixous', p. 138.

[45] Interestingly, Cixous's own writing seems to produce similar responses or countersignatures to her work. It is noteworthy, for instance, that Cixous's style is mirrored in critical reflections on her work. Here I am thinking of articles as diverse as those by Martin McQuillan, Nicholas Royle, Sunil Manghani and Reginald Gibbons. McQuillan's essay begins precisely with a reflection on this phenomenon: 'There is a temptation in writing this essay. The temptation that one writes in the manner of the writer that one wishes to discuss. How often in "theoretical writing" have we seen the impersonation of a Derridean sentence, a Lacanian paragraph, a Cixousesque fragment? The heroics of imitation fall somewhere between homage and pastiche, "I've taken twenty-four steps in the direction of Bathsheba"' (p. 43). See Martin McQuillan, 'The Girl who Steps Along, or 10 Steps on the Ladder to Reading Cixous', *Oxford Literary Review*, 24.1 (2002), pp. 43–69; Nicholas Royle, 'Away', *Parallax*, 13.3 (2007), pp. 94–103; Sunil Manghani, '"Yes… but when?" – An Open Letter', *Parallax*, 16.3 (2010), pp. 62–73; Reginald Gibbons, 'To Write with the Use of Cixous', *New Literary History*, 37.1 (2006), pp. 169–78.

[46] Mireille Calle-Gruber, 'Cixous *Genre* Outlaw', in *Rootprints: Memory and Life Writing*, trans. by Eric Prenowitz (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 149.

[47] Sissel Lie and Priscilla Ringrose, 'Personal and/or Universal? Hélène Cixous's Challenge to Generic Borders', *The European Legacy*, 14.1 (2009), p. 63.

experience as one of letting go: 'When I close my eyes the passage opens, the dark gorge, I descend. Or rather there is descent: I entrust myself to the primitive space, I do not resist the forces that carry me off. There is no more *genre*. I become a thing with pricked-up ears. Night becomes a verb. I night' (*WB*, 185). Descending into Hades, where Eurydice naively waits for Orpheus to bring her back to the world of the living, Cixous enters the untrodden path of darkness. Recall Maurice Blanchot's description of Orpheus' role: 'His *work* is to bring [the essence of night] back to the light of day and give it form, shape, and reality in the day'.[48] Notwithstanding their disparate motives, however, both Orpheus and Cixous forgo the possibility of giving orderly shape and form to 'night'.

Having traversed the realm of 'no more *genre*', Cixous refuses to impose the constricting rules of existing genres and to tamper with what she calls the 'nudity from before all clothing' (*WB*, 187).[49] Rather she abides by one law alone, that is to say, the lawlessness of blind writing. She warns the 'policeforce reader' not to expect the accepted: the book 'does not fit the description. It does not answer the signals. It does not get a visa' (*WB*, 199). Cixous has little patience with the confines of established genres, which she interestingly associates with inhospitable state borders:

> Models? No models: there are none where I go, the wild earth is still being invented. But while I move ahead alone in the mobile night, I perceive the signals of other nocturnal vessels passing under the same sky. It is because there is always that famous secret society, the Masonic Order of the Alert, the entirely diasporated people of borderjumpers. […] The sonorous night is a caravan. Kayrawan came from Persia in the thirteenth century. And to sense that dead and surviving star-searchers share the solitude is reassuring. The solitude of each writing is always shared *[partagée],* partaken. (*WB*, 197)

The writer submits to the call of the other and, like the dispossessed diaspora, crosses borders *sans-papiers*. After all, as she explains, she is not the one in control: 'I do not command. I do not concept, I chase after what goes beyond me' (*WB*, 191). Arguably, it is this high regard and deep respect for the dictate of the other that compels her to ignore the limiting strictures of genre. 'Do not waste time wiping your feet', she advises aspiring writers (*WB*, 195). Even in the essay 'Writing blind', a performative text that inscribes

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[48] Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. by Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), p. 171.

[49] As Calle-Gruber rightly explains, the French word *genre* refers to three different domains, namely the biological, the grammatical and the literary; all of which are challenged in Cixous's work. See Calle-Gruber, 'Cixous *Genre* Outlaw', pp. 151–52. In this discussion, given the focus on Cixous's writing practice, I shall limit my analysis to *literary* genre.

what it describes, the neat distinctions between the autobiographical, the fictional, the poetic and the theoretical are clearly ignored. Cixous progresses from musings about Abraham's supposed conversation with his donkey on Mount Moriah to a recalled (*actual*) conversation with an Air France employee; from philosophical ruminations about the meaning of life as revealed to her by her pet cat to domestic scenes featuring her sometimes disapproving mother and her prematurely lost father.[50]

For in the fecund time of profusion when the 'book' arrives 'nothing is proper, nothing is of its own' (*WB*, 188). Rather, everything exists in a boundlessness that cannot be textualised according to existing conventions. As she observes, this mode of writing is not allowed within the academy:

> To write by shreds, by storm clouds, by visions, by violent chapters, in the present as in the archpast, in pre-vision, in the true chaos of verbal tenses, crossing over years and oceans at a god's pace, with the past on my right and the future on my left — this is forbidden in academies, it is permitted in apocalypses. What joy it is. All those who secretly have not broken with the earliest times are so happy when they find the giantities [*géances*] of their magic stage under the policed mask of a volume.
> It is always there, just behind thought, behind the eyelids, the kingdom whose queen is poetic freedom, and where all these values that do not have civil rights in reasonable and so-called democratic society are reaffirmed: there we can say: justice, truth, love, forgiveness, responsibility, we can speak a language that is laughable in the city governed democratically by law, Realpolitik, conflict, hate, lies, irresponsibility. (*WB*, 190)

In light of the analysis in the previous chapter, it is significant that Cixous here associates 'poetic freedom' with heeding the dictate of the other as well as the necessary disregard for the limiting conventions of literary genre. Clearly Cixous's work, to which critics have invariably ascribed the qualifier 'poetic', can also be described as *poetic* in the Derridean sense that it welcomes the wound and benediction of the other.[51] As Hanrahan aptly

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[50] It is interesting to note that in giving voice to the animal — the 'bêtise' as well as the 'chatte' — Cixous may be seen to receive the dictate from the *animal* (as other). Irving Goh has argued that in 'Conversation avec l'âne' (which the English translation provides as the subtitle to this essay) Cixous renounces human vision in order to provide the animal's point of view, which has always been 'abandoned at the margins'. Irving Goh, 'The Passion According to Cixous: From Human Blindness to *Animots*', *MLN*, 125.5 (2010), p. 1054.

[51] Suffice it to draw attention to the general comments made by two of her most careful readers. In the introduction to the *New Literary History* special issue 'Hélène Cixous: When the Word is a Stage', Eric Prenowitz introduces Cixous as 'the author of some forty books of fiction which together constitute one of the most creative, innovative, challenging, poetic bodies of experimental literature ever written'. In her article from the same issue, Ginette Michaud speaks of 'the letter of the event of Cixous's poetical writing'. Respectively in 'Introduction: Cracking the Book: Readings of Hélène Cixous', *New Literary History*, 37.1

observes, Cixous's work is everywhere 'haunted by the advent of an otherness'.[52] Similarly, Anthea Buys and Stefan Polatinsky, who have outlined the relation between Cixous's 'poetic overflow' and the other, maintain that Cixous 'creates a horizontality of spacing that opens up writing to the exorbitance of its other'.[53] And, significantly for this discussion, they conclude that 'to write poetically […] is to write with the other of writing in front of us, to write towards this other, almost to touch with words what altogether exceeds them'.[54]

Even though her prolific and varied body of work does not include any poems in the traditional sense, Cixous has repeatedly spoken of herself as a 'poet' rather than as essayist, theorist or writer of fiction and plays. As she tells Jeannet: 'It seems to me that I write poetry or that in the text I play on all the registers and colors, deliberately. I don't think I've ever really prosed'.[55] A brief overview of some of Cixous's own remarks about the poetic will confirm the crucial relation between the poetic and the necessary blind submission to what arrives. In one of her earlier texts, she explains: 'I call "poet" any writing being who sets out on this path, in quest of what I call the second innocence, the one that comes after knowing, the one that no longer knows, the one that knows how not to know'.[56] In conversation with Calle-Gruber she associates the poetic with what is 'most true' and speaks of it in terms of a nudity:

> What is most true is poetic. What is most true is naked life. I can only attain this mode of seeing with the aid of poetic writing. I apply myself to seeing the world nude, that is, almost e-nu-merating the world, with the naked, with the obstinate, defenceless eye of my nearsightedness. And while looking very very closely, I copy. The world written nude is poetic.[57]

In a letter to Martin McQuillan in which she explains why she cannot write the 'Post Word' to a volume of essays on 'Post-Theory', Cixous posits the poetic and the theoretical at diametrically opposed ends. If theory, like an appendix or afterword, is what follows the

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(2006), p. x; Ginette Michaud, 'Derrida & Cixous: Between and beyond, or "What to the Letter Has Happened"', trans. by Sarah-Anaïs Crevier Goulet, *New Literary History*, 37.1 (2006), p. 91.

[52] Mairéad Hanrahan, 'Countersigning Painting: Hélène Cixous's Art of Writing about Painting', *The European Legacy*, 14.1 (2009), p. 6.

[53] Anthea Buys and Stefan Polatinsky, 'The Provocation of Hélène Cixous: Philosophy in Poetic Overflow', *Mosaic*, 42.4 (2009), p. 82.

[54] Buys and Polatinsky, 'The Provocation of Hélène Cixous', p. 83.

[55] Cixous and Jeannet, *Conversations on Life and Writing*, p. 5.

[56] Hélène Cixous, 'The Last Painting or the Portrait of God', trans. by Deborah Jenson, in *Coming to Writing and Other Essays*, ed. by Deborah Jenson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 114.

[57] Cixous and Calle-Gruber, *Rootprints*, p. 3.

word, the poetic is what precedes the very birth of the word. The poets are those 'who, at lightning speed, want to write, write, *before*, in the still-boiling time before the cooled fall-out of the narrative when we feel and it is not yet called such-and-such, this, him or her. Tempest before the immobilization, the capture, the concept. Where there is already the murmur of words but not yet proper-name-words'.[58] Hence, it is clear that for Cixous the poetic is essentially bound to the moment of arrival of the book that is synonymous with nudity, innocence and 'prenatality'. Turning its attention to an essay that deals specifically with the moment of 'prenatality', namely 'Without end, no, State of drawingness, no, rather: The Executioner's taking off' (1993), the next section argues that Cixous's ageneric writing is a direct result of her desire to submit to the arrival of the other and to write the world 'nude'.

'No more *genre*' or 'the collusion of all genres'

Originally published by the Musée du Louvre in a volume called *Repentirs*, 'Without End' hesitates between the desire to go on writing and the necessary moment of cutting before publication. Taking her cue from Rembrandt's painting 'The Executioner's Taking Off', which was later called 'The Beheading of St John the Baptist', Cixous tries to combat the tension between the *décoller* of the original title and the *décollation* of the second one. The French *décoller*, in this context meaning 'to take off', is true to the urge to depart into the night and surrender to the fecundity of blind writing: a flight that takes pleasure in, as she boldly writes elsewhere, 'dislocating things and values, breaking them all up, emptying structures, and turning propriety upside down'.[59] Conversely, *la décollation*, or 'beheading', conveys the writer's necessary act of editing prior to publication. As Catherine MacGillivray, the translator of this essay, remarks, this text is characterised by 'a breathless hesitation that goes from error to error, a limning of the fight between *décollage* [take-off] and *décollation* [beheading]'.[60]

For Cixous, however, error is not something to be feared or avoided. Rather, straying from the path of rectitude is necessary:

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[58] Hélène Cixous, 'Post-Word', trans. by Eric Prenowitz, in *Post-Theory: New Directions in Criticism*, ed. by Martin McQuillan (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), p. 211.

[59] Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', trans. by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs*, 1.4 (1976), p. 887.

[60] Catherine A. F. MacGillivray, 'Without end, no, State of drawingness, no, rather: The Executioner's taking off: Translator's Preface', *New Literary History*, 24.1 (1993), p. 88.

For the moment, I am, following, the error, without fear but with respect. To what extent we need error which is the promise of truth, to what extent we can't do without the silvery burst of error, which is the sign, all those who go by the pen don't cease to marvel at this in a similar way, from century to century.[61]

She goes on to remark that St Augustine, James Joyce, Clarice Lispector and Michel de Montaigne — four of her lifelong mentors — reflect that the necessary and productive submission to what comes from the other entails error, which is here anthropomorphised as the 'faltering essential companion' (*WE*, 28). Cixous insists that there should be no *pentimento* or *repentir*. As Catherine MacGillivray explains: 'In French, *repentir* is both the verb "to repent" and a painterly term referring to any alteration made by the artist in the course of a work's execution, a sort of artistic "second thought"'.[62] This is the impulse that Cixous attempts to keep in check as she creates a text that, step by erring step, refuses to 'behead' the spontaneous onrush of thought. 'And repentance?' she asks, 'No repentance. We who draw are innocent. Our mistakes are our leaps in the night. Error is not lie: it is approximation. Sign that we are on track' (*WE*, 28). The result of this submission, as Cixous writes, is not 'hesitation' or 'correction', but an 'essay' — in its French sense of 'attempt' or 'trial' — that weaves its way through a plurality of forms and genres while refusing to inhabit any singular one (*WE*, 29). It is hardly surprising that Cixous turns to the father of the 'Essay', Michel de Montaigne, who in 'On Repentance' writes: 'Could my mind find a firm footing, I should not be making essays, but coming to conclusions; it is, however, always in its apprenticeship and on trial'.[63] Significantly, this is also where he reflects on his reluctance to 'fix' his subject:

I cannot fix my subject. He is always restless, and reels with a natural intoxication. I catch him here, as he is at the moment when I turn my attention to him. I do not portray his being; I portray his passage; not a passage from one age to another or, as the common people say, from seven years to seven years, but from day to day, from minute to minute.[64]

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[61] Hélène Cixous, 'Without end, no, State of drawingness, no, rather: The Executioner's taking off', trans. by Catherine A. F. MacGillivray, in *Stigmata: Escaping texts* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 28. Subsequent quotations from this work will be given in parentheses within the main text following the abbreviation *WE*.

[62] MacGillivray, 'Translator's Preface', p. 87.

[63] Michel de Montaigne, *Essays*, trans. by J.M. Cohen (London: Penguin, 1993), p. 235.

[64] Montaigne, *Essays*, p. 235.

Hence the attractiveness of the 'essay' for Montaigne (whose use of the word *essai* led to the literary term 'essay') and for Cixous, his self-proclaimed grandchild, whose trials and errors are of utmost importance in her work.

In 'The Essay as Form', Theodor Adorno remarks that the hybrid nature of the essay as well as its childlike freedom do not permit its domain to be definitively circumscribed. He presents it as the form that most appropriately defies the rigour of scientific and philosophical method. He argues that 'the academic guild accepts as philosophy only what is clothed in the dignity of the universal and the enduring'.[65] Content to divest itself of such garb, the essay chooses instead to make the transitory eternal and progresses through discontinuity whilst shunning the very notion of completion. In fact, it chooses to accentuate the partial and the fragmentary. Adorno shows how the essay flouts the Cartesian scientific method of '*clara et distincta perceptio*' that marks the beginning of Western modern philosophy.[66] By attacking its subjects from all sides and embracing contradiction, the essay nails the philosophical lie that Truth can be complete and completed. In his conclusive remarks, he goes on to outline the immanent rebelliousness of this oft-disparaged form and maintains that 'the essay's innermost formal law is heresy'.[67] Similarly, in *The Politics of the Essay* Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres and Elizabeth Mittman point to a rebelliousness that underlies the choice of the essay. Focusing specifically on an exploration of the feminist essay in their volume, they remark that to choose 'the essay is to step away from a path of obedient submission to the academic world'.[68] They remark that whereas some critics have underlined the 'persistent uneasiness about where the essay "belongs" in the standard division of genres', others have gone so far as to describe it as an 'anti-genre'.[69] In their view the essay is 'consigned to a netherworld of something different, borderland, extra-ordinary' and this characteristic tends to be a cause of consternation: 'Literary critics want to know where it "fits" and are disturbed by the fact that it seems to stretch the fabric of definition at the seams'.[70] For Cixous, however, the

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[65] Theodor Adorno, 'The Essay as Form', in *Notes to Literature I*, trans. by Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 1991), p. 3.
[66] Adorno, 'The Essay as Form', p. 14.
[67] Adorno, 'The Essay as Form', p. 23.
[68] Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres, and Elizabeth Mittman, 'An Introductory Essay', in *The Politics of the Essay: Feminist Perspectives*, ed. by Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres and Elizabeth Mittman (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1993), p. 20.
[69] Boetcher Joeres and Mittman, 'An Introductory Essay', p. 12.
[70] Boetcher Joeres and Mittman, p. 12.

above outlined characteristics of the essay rather than causing consternation are undoubtedly part of its appeal.

Margaret Brügmann's discussion of Cixous's 'essayistic experiments' in her seminal 'The Laugh of the Medusa' introduces the essay as a dominant mode of 'recalcitrance'.[71] Brügmann convincingly argues that Cixous uses seven sections in the essay to rewrite the Biblical story of Creation and to show that 'all ordering must be rethought'.[72] This explains why the essay she remains best known for is characterised by a 'spontaneous concert that may well seem chaotic from the outside'.[73] In her introduction to the volume *Coming to Writing and Other Essays*, Susan Rubin Suleiman asks the following questions in relation to the Cixousian *essai*: 'Is this poetry? Critical commentary? Autobiography? Ethical reflection? Feminist theory? Yes. One wall these texts most definitely get past is the wall of genres'.[74] This aspect of her work is not a peripheral one, as Eric Prenowitz has argued, but, rather, its 'very element':

> There is no absolute line between Hélène Cixous' essays and her fiction, to take just these two 'genres': in both, the theoretical cohabits with the creative, the philosophical with the poetic, the analytical with the oneiric. As an example of the more general unclassifiability of Cixous' work […], this particular subversion of genres is one of the unmistakable strengths and signatures of her writing: the creative, poetic invention is in no way contradicted by the hyper-conscious, super-critical analysis. Admittedly, this is the very principle of performativity, whereby a critical consideration *of* something simultaneously *does* something. Yet in Cixous' work this non-contradiction is not an exception or a special case, but rather the very element of the writing.[75]

Seeking to draw attention to what Mary Bryden has described as Cixous's 'rich and prolific trans-generic writing', the ensuing discussion of Cixous's essay 'Without end' also focuses on this compelling fusion of the creative, the critical and the performative.[76]

Exploring the analogous activities of writing and drawing, 'Without end' draws attention to the importance of the 'tornadoes in the atelier' (*WE*, 26) in the three sketches

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[71] Margaret Brügmann, 'On the Essayistic Experiments of Hélène Cixous in "The Laugh of the Medusa"', in *The Politics of the Essay*, ed. by Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres, and Elizabeth Mittman (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1993), p. 74.
[72] Brügmann, 'The Essayistic Experiments', p. 82.
[73] Brügmann, p. 82.
[74] Susan Rubin Suleiman, 'Writing Past the Wall or the Passion According to H.C.', in *Coming to Writing and Other Essays*, ed. by Deborah Jenson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. xi.
[75] Eric Prenowitz, 'Introduction: Cixousian Gambols', in *Volleys of Humanity: Essays 1972–2009* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), p. 9.
[76] Mary Bryden, 'Stroboscopic vision: Deleuze and Cixous', *Women: A Cultural Review*, 15.3 (2004), p. 328.

that are the subject of Cixous's reflections, but also in her own essay, which, keen on laying bare the process of writing, retains evidence of the writer's work in progress. In fact, the fragmentary quality of the piece, noticeable in the frequent stops and starts as well as the abrupt changes in subject, reveal that Cixous pays little attention to the demand for rigour and orderly presentation of ideas. The opening paragraph, which reads like a writer's record or journal, soon gives way to remarks on the writing practices of Clarice Lispector, Franz Kafka and Fyodor Dostoevsky, and the writer's proclamation of love for the notebook: 'I want the forest before the book, the abundance of leaves before the pages' (*WE*, 26). Within the same page we read about her regret that the French language has lost the gerund, the 'violent divorce between Good and Evil' and 'the twin adventures' of writing and drawing (*WE*, 26). For Cixous, as the title forewarns, the work is 'without end', and, perhaps more disconcerting, without a proper beginning too. The random composition of discontinuous fragments that make up the text invite the reader to 'start' reading it at any point.[77] Almost deridingly, she exclaims: 'To think there are those who seek the finished. Those who seek to portray cleanly, the most properly!' (*WE*, 28).

The genesis of the work is central to an essay that explores the violent combat in three sketches by world-renowned artists. The reproductions of the preliminary sketches of da Vinci's 'Virgin and Child', Picasso's 'Woman Ironing' and Rembrandt's 'The Beheading of St John the Baptist' feature (in this order) alongside Cixous's text. Significantly in their unfinished state, all three sketches bear witness to the early scribblings that coincide with the arrival of the other. This is the 'prenatality' Cixous speaks of in an early paragraph when she pledges allegiance to the 'fecundity' 'before the midnight scissors' (*WE*, 26). The preparatory under-drawings, usually veiled from the viewer's sight, are here put on display and presented to the reader *before* the definitive moment of decision when the artist completes the work and makes all the necessary amendments or *pentimenti*. The three sketches — all clearly in very initial stages — depict scenes that inscribe the 'unforgettable stroke' (*WE*, 32). Emphasising the executioner's jubilant act of decapitation, Rembrandt's 'Beheading' scene directs attention away from St John's severed head, which lies almost unnoticed at the edges of the bottom margin. Even in the two works that supposedly deal with wholesome scenes of motherly love and daily

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[77] Speaking with Frédéric-Yves Jeannet, Cixous agrees, in fact, that all her works lend themselves to this reading approach. Jeannet remarks: 'One can read them linearly, but they also allow an exploded reading, as one reads poems in a collection'. Cixous and Jeannet, *Conversations on Life and Writing*, p. 29.

domestic chores, Cixous observes the rage that is captured by da Vinci's and Picasso's first sketches. In da Vinci's 'Virgin with Child', Cixous points out the nervous agitation of the child who is eager to make his escape from the loving gaze of the mother. In Picasso's 'Woman Ironing', she draws attention to the expressive furious scribblings that capture the 'traces of blows, bruises and even of blood' (*WE*, 34). Reflecting on the link between the three works, close to the end of the piece, she suddenly realises that what brings them together is the fact that they are all scenes of combat:

> And now I see what the Woman Ironing, the Executioner, the Saint, the little boy, have in common: it's Violence. It's about combat.
> Drawings of combat, these drawings which, fatally, touch me, wounded though they are, and therefore similar to us.
> Drawings par excellence: because every drawing (is) combat(s) itself. Drawing is the emblem of all our hidden, intestine combats. There we see the soul's entrails. (*WE*, 36)

Cixous may here be seen to lay bare her own thinking process as she discovers the common theme of violence in the three sketches: 'And *now* I see […]'. This raw, unrevised quality is what characterises the essay as a whole. For instance, pondering her attempts at trying to draw '*the living of life*', she reproduces the passage (or passing) of her efforts in a piece that reads like an autobiographical interior monologue:

> It's something small, precise — I'm guessing — it must be red, it's, I'm guessing, the fire speck — or the blood speck — it's — I'm searching — the point which nails this drawing, this page, this verse, in our memory, the unforgettable stroke — the needle planted in the heart of eternity — I'm searching — a minuscule fatality, a point which hurts my heart and hurts the world's heart […] (*WE*, 32)

Carefully punctuated to delineate the passage of thought, the above extract seeks to *draw* the piercing point or the stigma, which, as Derrida reminds us, comes from the Greek for 'the point, the spike or the punctuality of the instant'.[78]

Yet clearly the text is not simply a critical essay on the three sketches and the process of writing. The immediacy of the first-person pronoun, as well as the apostrophic 'you' that feature throughout, are evidence of its pronounced lyrical quality. The personal address surfaces again and again as the writer guides the reader: 'You will recognize the

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[78] Derrida, 'Foreword', in *Stigmata*, p. x. In *H.C. for Life*, Derrida remarks that Cixous 'watches over punctuation as no one else can' and, interestingly, relates this to what he calls an 'ethics of punctuality': 'the art of punctuation […] is also an art and an ethics of punctuality. […] it calls for a wager [*gage*], a commitment [*engagement*] of the other, at both ends of the line and of the lifeline'. Derrida, *H. C. for Life*, p. 62 and p. 85.

true drawing', or the more earnest: 'Do you see?' and the imperative (with its almost biblical resonance): 'Look and you shall see' (*WE*, 28, 30, 27). In true lyrical mode, however, the addressee is an unstable point of reference. The following paragraph, for instance, exemplifies the fluidity of the first- and second-person singular pronouns:

> It is the dead of night. I sense I am going to write. You, whom I accompany, you sense you are going to draw. Your night is waiting. (*WE*, 27)

It is not clear, here, whether Cixous is addressing the reader, the escaping text or the anonymous *genre*less scribe. Indeed, soon enough, this I-you distinction is abandoned in favour of the first-person plural pronoun 'we', the references of which proliferate: 'we', in this context, can refer to the writer and the text, the writer and the reader, the writer and the painter, the painter and the viewer, the scribe and the text, and so on.

The indeterminate quality of the text is sustained through the intrusions of dialogue — very often urgent in tone — that intersperse the text. The following is one example of unattributed dialogue:

> — When do we draw?
> — When we were little. Before the violent divorce between Good and Evil. All was mingled then, and no mistakes. Only desire, trial, and error. Trial, that is to say, error. Error: progression. (*WE*, 26)

Groping her way through the darkness, Cixous has no interest in diurnal clarity and therefore leaves unanswered questions the reader might have regarding the identity of the two voices. Moreover, the use of the definitive past tense in answer to a question that uses the generic present, upsets the very logic of the question. For, if the time for error and drawing *was* childhood, how is it that Cixous *writes* 'error'? Does she, perhaps, turn child when writing? It seems that she too is at a loss for an answer. Her own doubt is apparent in the agrammatical question she asks: 'if it is I who drew this unknown child then who are I?' (*WE*, 27). The multiplicity of voices in this text further destabilises the notion of an 'author' or 'master'. Indeed, this essay may be described, to use Derrida's words, as 'a choreographic text with polysexual signatures'; one that does away with the monological and monosexual voice.[79] This uncertainty is also evident in a second, more curt, exchange that underlines the exigent demands made on the scribe:

> — A little farther! Go on! Start again! Forward!

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[79] Jacques Derrida and Christie McDonald, 'Interview: Choreographies', in *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation*, trans. by Peggy Kamuf and ed. by Christie McDonald (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), p. 183.

— To the right? Shall I draw to the right?
— Try…
— I'm trying.
— I'm still trying. (*WE*, 29)

It would appear that the two voices belong to the escaping 'book' that instructs the scribe and the perplexed and breathless scribe herself. Yet towards the end of the dialogue, the identity of the two interlocutors is no longer clear. The voice that appears to be providing guidance in the form of orders such as 'Go on! Start Again!' and 'Try' suddenly loses its authority and merely echoes the tentative remark of the one taking orders: 'I'm still trying'.

Evidently Cixous manifests an increasing proclivity towards the errant, and, it could be said, the aberrant. Fugitively, she shifts from poetical address to critical insight, from assertive declarations to hesitant observations, from N.B. to parenthetical asides. The desire to heed the dictate of the other compels Cixous to write 'no more *genre*'. The result, as Derrida has observed, is that 'the collusion of all genres' is 'at work at every moment'.[80] In this essay, for instance, one can point out the 'collusion' of autobiography, the critical essay, the dialogue, the diary, the fragment, the interior monologue, the letter, and the lyric. It is also a profound reflection on the perennial philosophical questions of Love and Hate, Good and Evil, Truth and the Soul — notions that however hackneyed they may seem in an increasingly sceptical and secular age are here imbued anew with pulse and verve. And, to this inventory, one may add the notebook and the dream — two Cixousian modes of writing.[81] Born(e) of this strange collusion of genres, the Cixousian text announces, in the words of her first reader, an 'unpredictable birth'.[82]

One way of accounting for this birth is to view it, as this chapter has shown, as a direct result of Cixous's writing practice as an instance of heeding the dictate of the book. Arguably, what Bryden has described as 'porous assemblages' of genre are more intricately bound to the gift of the other than they are to what has often gone under the name of 'experimental' writing. In a comment that echoes the citations at the start of the chapter on the subject of the coming of the other in 'Without end', she writes:

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[80] Derrida, *H. C. for Life*, p. 12.
[81] Cixous has published selections from both her notebooks and her dream journals. Significantly in their original state — indeed, the notebook entries are faithful reproductions of Cixous's own hand-written notebooks — these texts bear witness to the importance of the unaltered primal state of her writing. See Hélène Cixous, *The Writing Notebooks of Hélène Cixous*, ed. by Susan Sellers (London and New York: Continuum, 2004) and Hélène Cixous, *Dream I Tell You,* trans. by Beverley Bie Brahic (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006).
[82] Derrida, *H. C. for Life,* p. 147.

> You who pray with the pen, you feel it, hear it, dictate. […] First it exists at the torment state in the chest, under the waist. See it now as it precipitates itself in spasms, in waves, the length of the arm, passing the hand, passing the pen. Eyes open wide in the night, staring wide-eyed with hope, the one who draws follows the movement. S/he obeys. (*WE*, 27)

And later:

> I submit myself to the invisible truth of my vision, I obey the strange and foreign voice in my body. (*WE*, 27)

The desire to *obey* the dictate overrides any (de)limiting considerations of literary genre. The openness to what comes from the other as well as the imperative to remain faithful to its dictate, compel Cixous to disregard the formalities of generic conventions. As Calle-Gruber succinctly puts it, 'Cixous "treats" *genre* under the sign of […] otherness. Treats, that is to say transforms, exchanges, trades, negotiates. Leaves nothing of the pre-established classifications intact'.[83] Turning its attention to the consequences of this *treatment* of genre, the final section argues that Cixous's text generates something monstrous and claims that the ethical force of Cixous's work lies precisely within this monstrosity.

Monstrous Might: The Poetic Force of Cixous's Oeuvre

In his final homage to Cixous's body of work, Derrida places Cixous alongside the all-time literary greats, Homer, Shakespeare and Joyce, and describes her body of work, indeed, 'every single letter' of her work, as 'incommensurable with any library supposed to house them, classify them or shelve them'.[84] Still more provocative, he adds: 'Bigger and stronger than the libraries that act as if they have the capacity to hold them [works of great writers, including Cixous], […], they derange all the archival and indexing spaces by the disproportion of the potentially infinite memory they condense according to the processes of undecidable writing for which as yet no complete formalization exists'.[85] Thus we may say that Cixous's 'escaping texts',[86] as the subtitle of the *Stigmata* volume anticipates, and

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[83] Calle-Gruber, 'Cixous *Genre* Outlaw', p. 151.
[84] Jacques Derrida, *Geneses, Genealogies, Genres and Genius: The Secrets of the Archive*, trans. by Beverley Bie Brahic (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), p. 15.
[85] Derrida, *Geneses*, p. 15.
[86] The motif of flight has been an important one in Cixous's oeuvre. In 'The Laugh of the Medusa' (1975) Cixous incites women to action and calls for a '*new insurgent* writing' that can come into being by means of flight. *Voler*, which in French plays on the two meanings 'to steal' and 'to fly', is essentially a woman's gesture. Thrilled to turn both burglar and bird, Cixous relates this stealthy flight to an act of defiance against

we have this on Derrida's authority, escape even the library.[87] For Derrida this ability to evade categorisation is related to Cixous's 'genius':[88]

> The noun 'genius', one supposes, names that which never yields anything to the generality of the nameable. Indeed the genius of the genius, if there is any, enjoins us to think how an absolute singularity subtracts itself from the community of the common, from the generality or the genericness of the genre and thus from the shareable. One may readily believe genius generous; impossible that it be general or generic. Some would say that it amounts to a one-person genre. But this is another way of saying that it surpasses all genre of generality or the genericity of all genre. Another way of indicating that it exceeds all the laws of genre, of that which one calls genre in the arts, literary genres, for instance, or what one calls gender, sexual differences. Not to mention humankind in general, for each time that one allows oneself to say 'genius', one suspects that some superhuman, inhuman, even monstrous force comes to exceed or overturn the order of species or the laws that govern genre.[89]

In a word, genius eludes genre. It does not allow itself to be contained within or subsumed under already existent and classified species; hence, Derrida's allusion to its 'monstrous force'. And, hence, the relation that emerges with the foregoing discussion on catachresis as a 'monstrous mutation without tradition or normative precedent'.[90]

   In 'The Law of Genre' (1980) Derrida focuses on Blanchot's *La Folie du jour* as an instance of a text that 'surpasses' the law of genre. He opens with the interdiction: 'Genres are not to be mixed', only to call into question this seemingly indisputable law.[91] By sleight of hand, he lifts the ban against the mixing of genres by arguing that the very notion of genre is made possible through an *a priori* counter-law of 'contamination' and 'impurity'.[92] The issues relating to propriety and belonging that are fundamental to discussions of genre are thus challenged. Rather than compromising the strength of the law

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the Law: 'What woman hasn't flown/stolen?'. Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', trans. by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs*, 1.4 (1976), p. 880 and pp. 887–88.

[87] For instance, the volume *Stigmata*, first published by Routledge in 1998, is classified as 'Literature', 'Philosophy', and 'Gender Studies', whereas the 2005 edition — published by Routledge Classics — appears as 'Literary/Critical Theory', 'Feminist Literature and Theory', and 'Literature and Gender Studies.' Hence, the difficulty posed to the library that must shelve the volume according to its generic category.

[88] It is worth remarking that the term 'genius' is Derrida's own addendum to the name of the symposium organised by Mireille Calle-Gruber in May 2003 on the occasion of Cixous's donation of her entire manuscripts to the Bibliothèque nationale de France. The symposium was called 'Hélène Cixous: Genèses Généalogies Genres'.

[89] Derrida, *Geneses*, pp. 1–2.

[90] Jacques Derrida, 'Deconstruction and the Other', in *Debates in Continental Philosophy: Conversations with Continental Thinkers,* ed. by Richard Kearney (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), p. 154.

[91] Jacques Derrida, 'The Law of Genre', trans. by Avital Ronell, *Critical Inquiry*, 7.1 (1980), p. 55.

[92] Derrida, 'The Law of Genre', p. 57.

of genre, however, Derrida argues that the counter movement against the law legitimises it further.[93] As he maintains elsewhere, such subversions 'would have no force without the instance of the law they seem to defy; they would have no reason for it without drawing reason from it, without provoking it'.[94] It follows, therefore, that genres *are* to be mixed; indeed, it is 'impossible not to mix genres'.[95] Hence, Derrida's argument would seem to fall in line with Gérard Genette's well-known assertion in *The Architext* that no text can lay claim to being free from genre. Genette maintains that 'the blending and scorning of genres is one genre among others; and [...] no one can either avoid this crude schema or be satisfied with it'.[96]

Yet in Derrida's view there is, in fact, a way to avoid getting caught up in the system. In relation to Blanchot's *La Folie du jour*, he maintains that a text can free itself from generic determination through 'a sort of participation without belonging'.[97] Blanchot's indecisive *récit*, he comments, seems to exist to 'make light of all the tranquil categories of genre-theory and history in order to upset their taxonomic certainties, the distribution of their classes, and the presumed stability of their classical nomenclatures'.[98] Whereas Derrida maintains that each text bears a 'trait' that signals its genre, he asserts that such a trait is, perplexingly, what can never *belong* to any genre or class. Rather, this trait, which is always already 're-markable', 'excludes itself from what it includes'.[99] This barely perceptible grafting can never fully take root as a result of what Derrida has called the 'clause or flood-gate of genre':

> The clause or flood-gate of genre declasses what it allows to be classed. It tolls the knell of genealogy or of genericity, which it however also brings forth to the light of day. Putting to death the very thing that it engenders, it cuts a

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[93] Derrida's argument in this essay is exceedingly close to the Blanchotian stance in the essay 'At Every Extreme'. Here, Blanchot writes: 'We must rather think that, each time, in these exceptional works in which a limit is reached, it is the exception alone that reveals to us this "law" from which it also constitutes the unusual and necessary deviation. It seems, then, in novelistic literature, and perhaps in all literature, that we could never recognize the rule except by the exception that abolishes it: the rule, or more precisely this center, of which the certain work is the uncertain affirmation, the already destructive manifestation, the momentary and soon negating presence'. Maurice Blanchot, *The Book to Come*, trans. by Charlotte Mandell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 109.
[94] Jacques Derrida, 'Title (To Be Specified)', trans. by Tom Conley, *SubStance*, 10.2 (1981), p. 22.
[95] Derrida, 'The Law of Genre', p. 57.
[96] Gérard Genette, *The Architext: An Introduction*, trans. by Jane E. Lewin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), p. 83.
[97] Derrida, 'The Law of Genre', p. 59.
[98] Derrida, p. 63.
[99] Derrida, p. 65.

strange figure; a formless form, it remains nearly invisible, it neither sees the day nor brings itself to light.[100]

Derrida's reference to 'The Law of Genre' in his discussion of Cixous's oeuvre in *Geneses, Genealogies, Genres and Genius* confirms that, like Blanchot's elusive *récit*, Cixous's ageneric texts also cut a 'strange figure'.[101]

Holding fast to the moment of birth, Cixous's 'formless form' refuses to cut the umbilical cord that binds it to the pre-natal. It is well to recall that as *sage-femme* of *écriture féminine*, Cixous has often stressed the limitations of rigid systems of classification. In one of her early manifesto-like texts — for which she remains best known among most Anglo-American readers — she writes: 'There's work to be done against *class*, against categorization, against classification — classes. "Doing classes" in France means doing military service. There's work to be done against military service, against all schools, against the pervasive masculine urge to judge, diagnose, digest, name […] not so much in the sense of the loving precision of poetic naming as in that of the repressive censorship of philosophical nomination/conceptualization'.[102] Refusing to nominate and conceptualise, the Cixousian text gives way to the happening of thought in its pre-nascent state. 'We are in naïve submission. In prenatality', as she explains in 'Writing blind' (*WB*, 29).

In *The Birth to Presence*, Jean-Luc Nancy makes a similar distinction between the '*verb*' that traces the passage of thought and the discourse that '*names*' it conclusively.[103] He argues that at its inception, thought very often falls prey to philosophical appropriation and suffers irremediable loss when it is passed over into what he describes as 'ornamentation' or 'the repetition of philosophy'.[104] Nancy underlines the importance of thought's coming into being and significantly associates it with the instance of birth: 'Not form and fundament, but the pace, the passage, the coming in which nothing is distinguished, and everything is unbound. What is born has no form, nor is it the fundament that is born. "To be born" is rather to transform, transport, and entrance all

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[100] Derrida, 'The Law of Genre', p. 65.

[101] Derrida, *Geneses*, p. 72.

[102] Hélène Cixous, 'Castration or Decapitation?', trans. by Annette Kuhn, *Signs*, 7.1 (1981), p. 51.

[103] Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Birth to Presence*, trans. by Brian Holmes (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), p. 4.

[104] Nancy, *The Birth to Presence*, p. 5.

determinations'.[105] Hence, thought in its nascent state is still uninhibited by the conventions of form. Nancy elaborates that the 'poverty of thought' is 'a matter neither of "genre" nor of "style". It goes much further. It is, quite simply, a question of knowing, in a voice, in a tone, in a writing, whether a thought is being born, or dying: opening sense, exposing it, or sealing it off (and wishing to impose it)'.[106] Clearly, Cixous, who, as Derrida writes, is indefatigably on the side of life, seeks to give birth to thought in its passage even at the risk of producing offspring without recognisable form.[107]

At this point it is well to recall that upon first reading Cixous, Derrida felt that he was dealing with an 'unpredictable birth'.[108] As he recounts in *H.C. for Life, That Is to Say...*, his initial reaction was one of confusion and bewilderment: 'What is this? I asked myself more or less. What is happening here? What is happening to me? What genre? Who could ever read this?'[109] This is reiterated close to the end of the book where, significantly, he speaks of Cixous's first novel, *Le Prénom de Dieu* (1967), in terms of an unclassifiable species of 'literary animal': 'while ceaselessly asking myself what kind of new species, what unique individual of a new unclassifiable species of literary animal or poetic prose I was dealing with, I no doubt began worrying'.[110] Commenting on this 'stunned and stuttering response', Peggy Kamuf emphasises precisely the 'monstrous force' of this birth. Cixous brings forth 'an absolutely im-possible child, the first-born of a new kind, as yet unbaptized and uncleansed by the world's belief, still covered in first creation's primeval

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[105] Nancy, *The Birth to Presence*, p. 2.

[106] Nancy, p. 4.

[107] Such a remark may also be seen in light of what is undoubtedly one of Cixous's most harrowing novels, *Le jour où je n'étais pas là* (2000), where she speaks about her Down's Syndrome son as 'the dim nestling the nestled dimling' (p. 5). Trying to come to terms with the birth of her firstborn son, she thinks of it as an incomplete birth: 'All of a sudden she thinks something crazy: He isn't born. Does it exist, to be born without being born yet? To be almost? Almost'. Hélène Cixous, *The Day I Wasn't There*, trans. by Beverley Bie Brahic (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2006), p. 30.

[108] Derrida, *H.C. for Life*, p. 147. This reaction marks the beginning of a long intellectual friendship between the two. Ginette Michaud, who provides a detailed overview of the works in which Jacques Derrida and Hélène Cixous discuss each other's work, writes: 'Several effects of countersignature arise between these two oeuvres that have been constantly chasing after each other these past few years' (p. 88). See Ginette Michaud, 'Derrida & Cixous: Between and beyond, or "What to the Letter Has Happened"', pp. 85–106 (especially, pp. 88–91). For a comprehensive account of 'bibliographical crossings' between Cixous and Derrida, see Laurent Milesi, 'Portraits of H. C. as J. D. and Back', *New Literary History*, 37.1 (2006), pp. 67–69. The friendship and ongoing dialogue between Cixous and Derrida has been the subject of numerous other articles over the last few years. See, for instance, among the more enlightening discussions: Nicholas Royle, 'Portmanteau', New *Literary History*, 37.1 (2006), pp. 237–47; Frédéric Regard, 'Derrida Un-Cut: Cixous's Art of Hearts', *Paragraph*, 30.2 (2007), pp. 1–16 and Marta Segarra, 'Friendship, Betrayal, and Translation: Cixous and Derrida', *Mosaic*, 40.2 (2007), pp. 91–101.

[109] Derrida, *H.C. for Life*, p. 7.

[110] Derrida, *H.C. for Life*, p. 148.

ooze, incredible therefore, absolutely incredible, like a miracle, a monster, a phantasm, a dream'.[111] Indeed, Cixous herself, on the occasion of donating her manuscripts to the Bibliothèque nationale de France, speaks of her first book in similar terms. She confesses her need to show Derrida what she describes as a 'haggard violent thing crazy for death':[112]

> Why go and see him? I wanted to show him my monsters in secret, my wounds, the limbs and pieces [morceaux] of my disaster, scraps of cut tongue, baskets of sliced phonemes, traces of fauns, lots of loose sheets of paper to which I consigned in vain the mad and urgent question of the real.[113]

Wounds, limbs, scraps, traces, pieces or 'morsels' (as the French *morceaux* suggests) — there is nothing whole (or wholesome for that matter) about this severed textual body. In her essay 'Bit: Mourning Remains in Derrida and Cixous', Elissa Marder focuses on how a string of phonemically related words ('*Mors*, *mords*, *morceau*, *morts*, *mort*, *morsure*, *remords*') occur with frequent insistence in their work. Significantly, in light of this discussion, she notes that 'the *mors* is not a concept; the bit *resists* conceptualization. The *mors* is the trace of that which cannot be fully incorporated and therefore leaves an unassimilated remainder'.[114] Hence, the monstrosity of the wounded, wounding book that in its bitty and battered state refuses to yield to categorisation. Rather, it monstrates (to use a near-obsolete word) the birth of something aberrant and strange.

The subject of 'monstrism' is explored in a special issue of the *Oxford Literary Review* (2001) where, as the brief, though highly suggestive, editorial explains, the neologism 'monstrism' 'feeds from the mixed and divided sources of "monster"'. Etymologically, the word 'monster' is related both to the Latin *monstrare* ('to show') and *monere* ('to warn'). As we have seen in relation to Cixous's work, the monstrous demands it be brought to the light of day ('Je voulais lui *montrer* en secret mes monstres')[115] and issues its warning: recall Cixous's admonition, 'It does not fit the description. It does not answer the signals. It does not get a visa' (*WB*, 199). In the co-authored editorial to the aforementioned special issue, 'monstrism' is described as an outgrowth that arises 'from a common group of spores'. One of these spores is the concern with the monstrous 'in the

[111] Peggy Kamuf, 'Outside in Analysis', *Mosaic*, 42.4 (2009), p. 28.
[112] Hélène Cixous, 'The Book I Don't Write', trans. by Beverley Bie Brahic, *Parallax*, 13.3 (2007), p. 11.
[113] Cixous, 'The Book I Don't Write', p. 14.
[114] Marder, 'Bit: Mourning Remains in Derrida and Cixous', p. 240.
[115] Hélène Cixous, 'Le Livre que je n'écris pas', in *Genèses, Généalogies, Genres: Autour de l'oeuvre d'Hélène Cixous*, ed. by Mireille Calle-Gruber and Marie Odile Germain (Paris: Galilée/ Bibliothèque Nationale de France, 2006), p. 239.

sense of the unassimilable and uncanny'.[116] It is worth noting that discussions of the monstrous seem to resort, almost unfailingly, to a vocabulary of childbearing, birth and growth. Yet these births are significantly without world. They are 'unassimilable and uncanny' because they are not *recognised* or *known* (as the etymology of 'un*can*ny' suggests) by the world. Commenting on this aspect in an interview with Elizabeth Weber, Derrida remarks:

> The monster is also that which appears for the first time and, consequently, is not yet recognized. A monster is a species for which we do not yet have a name, which does not mean that the species is abnormal, namely, the composition or hybridization of already known species. Simply, it *shows* itself [elle se *montre*] — that is what the word monster means — it shows itself in something that is not yet shown and that therefore looks like a hallucination, it strikes the eye, it frightens precisely because no anticipation had prepared one to identify this figure.[117]

Hence, monstrosity may be said to begin when the world fails to recognise something. Like Derrida's countergenealogical and catachrestic tract on the thing called poetry, the monstrous *interrupts* the ordinary course of things and announces the birth of something without predecessor or genealogy. In the context of a discussion about Cixous's ageneric texts, it is worth pointing out that Nicholas Royle has made a direct connection between the ageneric and the uncanny. Speaking of the ambiguity posed by texts that 'do not belong' to any specific genre, he remarks: 'There are mixings, deformations and transformations of genre. What is the uncanny? Does it belong to philosophy or literature or psychoanalysis? *If* it belongs, it is no longer a question of the uncanny. Rather, the uncanny calls for a different thinking of genre and text, and of the distinctions between the literary and the non-literary, academic and non-academic writing'.[118] Indeed, this observation on the uncanny may well be a description of Cixous's own writing.[119]

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[116] Andrew Bennett et al., 'Editorial', Special Issue on 'Monstrism', *Oxford Literary Review*, 23.1 (2001), p. 3. It is worth pointing out that Cixous's work can also be described as a 'monstrism' in the other two senses detailed in the editorial. One expresses a 'desire to generate' a 'performative criticism' whereas the other announces 'a hope of changing the possibilities of what criticism can mean, by engaging and deploying to new effects the distinction between the fictional and the critical'. At this point in the chapter, it should be clear without further elaboration, that Cixous's work exhibits 'monstrism' in each of these senses.

[117] Derrida, 'Passages — From Traumatism to Promise', trans. by Peggy Kamuf, in *Points…Interviews, 1974–1994*, ed. by Elisabeth Weber (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 386.

[118] Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 18.

[119] The subject of the uncanny in Cixous's work is an intriguing one and would require a chapter-long analysis in its own right. In conversation with Jeannet, for instance, she describes the experience of writing her first book as *unheimlich*: 'the first book I wrote got written in a sort of very *unheimlich*, strangely disquieting, mental atmosphere, in which the phenomenon of writing was for me very monstrous, terrifying, vital but deadly' (Jeannet and Cixous, *Conversations on Life and Writing*, p. 10). Remarking on the

In the oft-cited last paragraph from 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences', Derrida also associates the monstrous with the birth of something unrecognisable. The unnameable proclaims itself, he remarks, 'whenever a birth is in the offing, only under the species of the nonspecies, in the formless, mute, infant, and terrifying form of monstrosity'.[120] The new birth poses a threat or appears terrifying precisely because the existing means of classification and identification fail to account for it. We may say that monstrosity frightens because it is not identical to anything else. The monstrous shows (up) a lack or a deficiency in the programmes or systems of conceptualisation. This cannot but recall Derrida's description of the ethical event which, as the introduction made clear, must always entail the experience of the undecidable in the face of the unknown. In one of his last seminars, Derrida makes the relation between the monstrous and the ethical explicit:

> A principle of ethics or more radically of justice, in the most difficult sense, which I have attempted to oppose to right, to distinguish from right, is perhaps the obligation that engages my responsibility with respect to the most dissimilar, the least 'fellow'-like, the entirely other, precisely, the monstrously other, the unrecognizable other. The 'unrecognizable' I shall say in a somewhat elliptical way, is the beginning of ethics, of the Law, and not of the human. So long as there is recognizibility and fellow, ethics is dormant. It is sleeping a dogmatic slumber. So long as it remains human, among men, ethics remains dogmatic, narcissistic, and not yet thinking. Not even thinking the human that it talks so much about. The 'unrecognizable' is the awakening. It is what awakens, the very experience of being awake.[121]

The monstrous is thus intricately related to the experience of the ethical. As we shall see in more detail in relation to Paul Celan's work, it is the confrontation with the uncanny or the unknown that rouses ethics from its dogmatic slumber.

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importance of the uncanny in Cixous's work, Nicholas Royle makes the following claim: 'The significance of her work has for several decades been construed there primarily, indeed massively, in terms of feminism and feminist theory, but for me it has from the beginning, and most abidingly, entailed the question, the question mark or point (*point d'interrogation*) of the uncanny, the troublingly strange or strangely familiar' (See Nicholas Royle, 'Portmanteau', *New Literary History*, 37.1 (2006), pp. 237–47). Moreover, Anneleen Masschelein singles out Hélène Cixous's 'Fiction and its Phantoms: A Reading of Freud's *Das Unheimliche*' (1972) as instrumental in drawing attention to the relevance of the uncanny in the second half of the twentieth-century. She writes that 'it is undeniably Cixous's deconstructive reading of "The Uncanny" that has been responsible for the uncanny's breakthrough'. Anneleen Masschelein, *The Unconcept: The Freudian Uncanny in Late-Twentieth-Century Theory* (Albany: State University of New York Press), p. 122.

[120] Jacques Derrida, 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences', in *Writing and Difference*, trans. by Alan Bass (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 370.

[121] Jacques Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, vol. I, trans. by Geoffrey Bennington and ed. by Michel Lisse, Marie-Louise Mallet and Ginette Michaud (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), p. 108.

By way of conclusion, it is worth citing Kamuf's description of Cixous's 'unpredictable birth' that brings together some of the more salient concerns of this chapter:

> Something came into the world of an unknown type, an unclassifiable new species, a monster, therefore, or a miracle, which are interchangeable common names for the unforeseeable, the unpredictable that punctures, pierces, breaks through every horizon of expectation. An event worthy of the name, as Derrida has written many times, is always apprehended as monster or miracle, because it interrupts the programs set to pre-comprehend whatever comes about. To be sure, every literary work, if it is a work, will be an event that deconstitutes all pre-comprehending programs, and thus the world as known to that point.[122]

Punctures, pierces, breaks through — Kamuf's choice of verbs when describing the force of the Cixousian text echoes Cixous's Preface to the *Stigmata* volume where she describes the wound at the origin of her writing. The nature of the rift or opening is here related to the event of the unforeseeable that 'deconstitutes all pre-comprehending programs'. Clearly then, it is also closely affiliated with the experience of the ethical as conceived by Derrida.

As this chapter has shown, Cixous's ageneric text, itself a monstrous birth, is born of its encounter with the other. In view of Derrida's notion of ethics as the experience of the unforeseeable arrival of the other, and the foregoing discussion about Cixous's writing practice as a *puissant* submission to the other, we may conclude that the Cixousian text is ethical in two important ways. First, as we have seen, like the Derridean poematic, it is open to the wound (and the coming) of the other. Cixous's poetic puissance not only relinquishes the power to sign *I*, but its makes the *other* sign. Second and as a direct consequence of the first, it generates a monstrous being in its own right that refuses to *conform*. It is well to recall Derrida's definition of catachresis as a 'monstrous mutation without tradition or normative present' as well as the claim we made in the previous chapter that ethical writing entails the violent work of catachresis. Thus, the strange and unpredictable progeny of the Cixousian text is both born of the wound and wounding in its turn. Like Derrida maintains in the text that Cixous has described as a 'borning' in its own right: 'no poem that does not open itself like a wound, but no poem that is not also just as wounding' (*CCP*, 297).[123]

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[122] Peggy Kamuf, 'Outside in Analysis', *Mosaic*, 42.2 (2009), p. 27.

[123] Hélène Cixous, 'Jacques Derrida as a Proteus Unbound', trans. by Peggy Kamuf, *Critical Inquiry*, 33.2 (2007), p. 407.

This final section has seen the emergence of a number of concerns that revolve around the notion of the uncanny and the theme of hospitality. The 'strange' and 'foreign' quality of the monstrous poses a threat, as we have seen, because it is not recognisable or known in the world where it appears or manifests itself. Described as 'unassimilable and uncanny', the monstrous is synonymous with the 'untamed' and undomesticated, which does not belong and is not *at home*. Seeking to explore the unforeseeable arrival or coming of the other as an experience of hospitality, the next chapter proposes to explore the otherwise implicit and consequently largely overlooked relation between Derrida's notion of the poetic and the subject of hospitality.

Chapter 3

In-venire: A Poetic Hospitality

The dictation of the poem from the other, which, as we have seen, is integral to the Derridean poetic experience, cannot take place without an act of hospitality. The invention (from the Latin *invenire*: 'to come upon') of the other is central to the Derridean notion of hospitality — a theme that would be the subject of various seminars in the second half of the 1990s as well as a colloquium on the work of Emmanuel Levinas.[1] Significantly, in 'Che cos'è la poesia?' we read that the poem is dictated to 'the being lost in anonymity, between city and nature' who is called upon to guard the imperilled and precarious existence of an 'animal thrown onto the road'; more specifically, to the road-crossing *hérisson* as it attempts to reach safety on either side of the *autoroute*. Hence, both the recipient and the hedgehog are seen to be in the (non)place of the in-between: the recipient is suspended between city and nature, and the lowly, humble hedgehog is thrown onto the middle of the road. Responding to the demand 'Che cos'è la poesia?', Derrida brings together — in a highly dense and fittingly economic passage — a number of important motifs that can be seen to anticipate his later work on the theme of hospitality:

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[1] Derrida gave two series of seminars around the subject of hospitality in Paris and the United States in 1995–1996 and 1996–1997. Unfortunately, most of the sessions of these seminars remain unpublished to this day. The 1997 *De l'hospitalité: Anne Dufourmantelle invite Jacques Derrida à répondre* presents two of Derrida's sessions from the first series of seminars, namely, 'Question d'étranger: venue de l'étranger' and 'Pas d'hospitalité', both of which were delivered in January 1996. The session entitled 'Hostipitality' from the second series of seminars, which was delivered in January 1997, is published in *Acts of Religion* (ed. by Gil Anidjar) and should be distinguished from the 1997 Istanbul lecture by the same title that is collected in Barry Stocker's edition of Jacques Derrida's *Basic Writings* (2007). The colloquium on Emmanuel Levinas, entitled 'A Word of Welcome', was given on 7th December 1996 in the Richelieu Amphitheater of the Sorbonne, at the opening of 'Homage to Emmanuel Levinas' and was originally published in *Adieu à Emmanuel Levinas* in 1997.

And if you respond otherwise depending on each case, taking into account the space and time which you are *given* with this *demand* […], by the demand itself, according to *this* economy but also in the imminence of some traversal *outside* yourself, away from *home*, venturing toward the language of the other in view of an impossible or denied translation, necessary but desired like a death — what would all of this, the very thing in which you have just begun to turn deliriously, have to do, at that point, with poetry? (*CCP*, 289, 291)

The event of the other is clearly foremost in Derrida's most direct, if elliptical, analysis of the question of the poetic. The poetic experience is here significantly linked to the act of stepping outside the home; more to the point in the French original: 'traversée *hors de chez soi*' (*CCP*, 290). Hence, a step both outside the home and outside the self, as a figurative reading of '*chez soi*' would suggest. The one who responds to the demand of the poetic dictate becomes 'lost in anonymity' (*CCP*, 289) and must give up both home and identity. Moreover, there is no guarantee that the one who ventures out may ever return home to find one's previous identity anew; or, more pertinent to the focus of this chapter, one's *ipseity*. Indeed, ipseity, as we shall see, emerges as one of the integral concerns in Derrida's discussion of the subject of hospitality. Taking his cue from Émile Benveniste's work on the etymology of the Latinate cognates of 'hospitality' and its various Indo-European ramifications, Derrida is keen to stress the relation between the arrival of the other and its impact on the ipseity of the one who offers hospitality. 'Is not hospitality an interruption of the self?', he asks.[2]

For Derrida, hospitality is of paramount importance to the question of ethics. In fact, in his view, it is not merely one aspect among other ethical considerations but ethics *itself*. As he claims in 'A Word of Welcome', 'hospitality is not simply some region of ethics, […] it is ethicity itself, the whole and the principle of ethics'.[3] Reiterating this point in *On Cosmopolitanism*, he remarks that:

Hospitality is culture itself and not simply one ethic amongst others. Insofar as it has to do with the *ethos*, that is, the residence, one's home, the familiar place of dwelling, inasmuch as it is a manner of being there, the manner in which we relate to ourselves and to others, to others as our own or as foreigners, *ethics is hospitality*; ethics is so thoroughly coextensive with the experience of hospitality.[4]

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[2] Jacques Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, trans. by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 51.
[3] Derrida, *Adieu*, p. 50.
[4] Jacques Derrida, 'On Cosmopolitanism', trans. by Mark Dooley, in *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. 16–17.

Bearing the trace of both the Hegelian concept of *Sittlichkeit* and Heideggerian dwelling, the Derridean understanding of *ethics* is inextricable from his discussion of hospitality. In yet another explicit statement on this regard, he stresses the importance of the dwelling place in his conception of *ethos*:

> It is always about answering for a dwelling place, for one's identity, one's space, one's limits, for the *ethos* as abode, habitation, house, hearth, family, home. So we should now examine the situations where not only is hospitality coextensive with ethics itself, but where it can seem that some people, as it has been said, place the law of hospitality above a "morality" or a certain "ethics".[5]

Significantly for this discussion, Derrida's emphasis on the integral association between *ethos* and habitation leads to him to coin the term 'poethic' in the aforementioned piece on Michel Deguy's poetry. In the opening paragraph of 'How to Name', introducing Deguy as a 'geo-political thinker poet', he draws attention to the continuity between the poet*h*ic and ethical responsibility.[6] He writes that the 'dysorthography of a poethics whose *h* has been frequently recalled these last few days, beckon[s] toward the traveler's sojourn and halt as well (to recall the Heideggerian translation of ethos by sojourn, *Aufenthalte*, halt) as toward the ethical responsibility'.[7] Given the position espoused in the above statements, a consideration of Derrida's work on the subject of hospitality is clearly central to a study that seeks to bring into sharper relief the relevance of his understanding of the ethical for an analysis of the poetic experience.

The various motifs that emerge in the opening paragraphs of 'Che cos'è la poesia?', namely the interruption of the '*chez soi*', the 'other', the 'traversal outside yourself' and the impossibility of returning 'back home', make manifest the underlying theme of hospitality in Derrida's elucidation of what he conceives of as a poetic voyage.[8] Such

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[5] Jacques Derrida and Anne Dufourmantelle, *Of Hospitality*, trans. by Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 149 and p. 151. Subsequent references to this work shall be provided in parentheses within the main text following the abbreviation *OH*.
[6] Jacques Derrida, 'How to Name', in Michel Deguy, *Recumbents*, trans. by Wilson Baldridge (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2005), p. 191.
[7] Derrida, 'How to Name', p. 192.
[8] In concord with his claim that he shall speak about a poetic 'voyage', Derrida uses a series of leitmotifs from the very beginning right through to the end, that are associated with travelling and transport, such as 'vehicle', 'autoroute', 'port' and 'accident'. A comprehensive list would include the following terms and phrases, listed according to the chronology of the text: 'what you sacrifice on the road, in crossing the road', 'between city and nature', 'the animal thrown onto the road', 'it may get itself run over', 'away from home', 'retreat,' 'a single trek with several tracks', 'the traversing of the road', 'as improbable as an accident', 'rendered indeterminate in its *port*', 'the shore of the departure', 'transport it in you', 'like an animal on the autoroute rolled up in a ball', 'thrown out on the roads and in the fields', 'save yourself, let's get off the autoroute', 'the automobile that surprises your passion', 'between paths and autostradas', 'sensing the danger

motifs as well as the references to 'the port' and 'the shore of departure', whilst recalling an early and major concern with margins, borders and the threshold, anticipate his later discussions on hospitality.[9] Turning its attention primarily to the 1990s seminars, the structure of this chapter is threefold. It begins by addressing the inherent violence of hospitality through an analysis of the etymological root of the word 'hospitality' and Derrida's neologism 'hostipitality'. In a second section, the chapter addresses Derrida's aphoristic claim that an 'act of hospitality can only be poetic' (*OH*, 2). It relates this axiom to his notion of unconditional hospitality as the instance of the arrival of the other that requires the invention (from the Latin *invenire*: to come upon) of the law of hospitality. The final section takes its cue from Derrida's provocative description of Antigone, the Sophoclean character, as 'a single daughter who must keep a singular relationship to unwritten law' (*OH*, 95). Seeking to draw out the full implications of this comment, which remains undeveloped in Derrida's seminar, it locates the ethics of poetic hospitality in Antigone's singular law of hospitality, which, uncannily, welcomes the dead rather than the living.

'Hostipitality': Interruption as Violence

In his discussion of the Kantian notion of conditional hospitality as put forth in the 1795 essay 'Perpetual Peace', Derrida notes that the French *hospitalité* and the German *Hospitalität* have a Latin root with 'a troubling and troubled origin'.[10] Drawing on Benveniste's work on the etymology of the word, he observes that the inherent tension that is fundamental to the concept may be traced back to the Latin root *hospes*, a compound of *hostis*, which originally meant 'stranger', and *pets*, meaning 'to have power'. Derived from two proto-Indo-European words, the Latin *hospes* has an interesting history. As Benveniste observes, the primitive sense of the Latin *hostis* designated a relation of reciprocal obligation to the other and a pact that instituted a bond between two parties. It is only with

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of the autoroute, it exposes itself to an accident', 'no poem without accident', 'this crossroads, this accident', 'transporting yourself in the name beyond a name', 'gets off the track' and 'you are getting off the track'.

[9] In 'Tympan' (1972), for instance, Derrida explores the margin both thematically and performatively through the bicolumnar structure adopted. Itself paratextually placed within the book *Margins of Philosophy*, 'Tympan' seeks to challenge the unquestionable unity of the philosophical text through a complex typographical presentation in which the text defies linear progression. Perhaps the more audacious exploration of the margin would follow shortly thereafter with *Glas* (1974), in which the work of one writer (Genet) can be seen to physically infringe and trespass into the space of another (Hegel) as it questions the self-containment of the text.

[10] Jacques Derrida, 'Hostipitality', in *Jacques Derrida: Basic Writings*, ed. and trans. by Barry Stocker (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 244.

the emergence of the *civitas* that the meaning of *hostis* undergoes a drastic change. Indeed, the establishment of the city-state led to a transformation in human interaction that severed the extant individual relations between men and among clans that had subsisted previously. These relations were soon replaced by higher order laws dictated by the *civitas* that, whilst uniting a group of citizens under a binding law, expelled those that were not part of it. Consequently, the *hostis* (formerly a 'stranger') is now singled out by exclusionary city-states and comes to be viewed with suspicion. In the new political state, the determining distinction is whether one belongs within or without the city-state. Coincident with this change and of particular interest for Benveniste and Derrida, the Latin *hostis* attains its classical hostile sense of 'enemy' and loses its pre-political (and neutral) sense of 'stranger'.[11]

Another problematic aspect, in Benveniste's view, arises in relation to the second of the two compounds, namely, the root *pets*, related to the Latin forms *potis* meaning 'powerful' and *-pt-* meaning 'one's identity'. As is evident in English words such as 'despot' and 'potentate', the root *potis* is indicative of the one in power or the master, whereas the form *-pt-* has the meaning of identity or more specifically 'oneself', clear, for instance, in the English word 'ipseity'. For Benveniste what appears unusual is the subsequent conflation in meaning of the two distinct meanings of 'power' and 'ipseity'. Remarking on this anomaly, he writes: 'il est difficile de concevoir comment un mot désignant « le maître » a pu s'affaiblir jusqu'à signifier « lui-même »'.[12] He observes that the change in meaning from 'master' to 'himself' involves a weakening. Reflecting on these words at the close of 'Hostipitality', Derrida concludes that 'the question of hospitality is also the question of ipseity'.[13] As we shall see in more detail below, the experience or event of hospitality entails what Derrida speaks of in terms of an interruption of the self whose mastery or power is put in question.

Similarly, the Greek cognate of *hostis*, *xenos*, is also replete with various and contradictory acceptations. In his study on ritualised friendship in the Greek city, Gabriel Herman observes that a conflict arises between the pre-political pact or *xenia* between members of different parties and the changes instituted with the emergence of the *polis*

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[11] Benveniste remarks: 'Quand l'ancienne société devient nation, les relations d'homme à homme, de clan à clan, s'abolissent; seule subsiste la distinction de ce qui est intérieur ou extérieur à la *ciuitas*'. Émile Benveniste, *Le vocabulaire des institutions indo-européennes*, vol. I (Paris: Minuit, 1969), p. 95.

[12] Benveniste, *Le vocabulaire des institutions indo-européennes*, vol. I, p. 95.

[13] Derrida, 'Hostipitality', p. 262.

structure that views non-citizens as potential enemies. As a result, the law of Athens regarding non-citizens was seen to counter the morals of the inhabitants that had long observed, as well as inherited, the duties and obligations of *xenia* or guest-friendship. Herman explains: 'Outside the city, or before the city arose, it was one of the most sacrosanct duties of a *xenos* to succour his partner in distress or misfortune. But now this duty clashed with the communal principle of justice, and the community had to assert its precedence lest its essential principles be subverted. The archaic morality of guest-friendship could not be reconciled with communal justice'.[14] Hence, the multiple meanings of *xenos*, which, as Elizabeth Belfiore remarks in her analysis of *xenia* in the Sophoclean play *Philoctetes*, 'varies in meaning and connotation from "enemy stranger" to "friendly stranger" or "guest," to "ritual friend"'.[15]

Such is the 'troubling and troubled origin' that Derrida has in mind when he speaks of the origin of the word 'hospitality'.[16] Focusing mainly on the first of the two compounds, he adds that 'hospitality' is 'a word which carries its own contradiction incorporated into itself, a Latin word which allows the parasitism on itself of its contrary, hostility, the undesirable guest, which it harbours as the contradiction of itself in its own body'.[17] This contradictory co-existence is reflected in the word Derrida coins to accentuate this parasitism: 'hostipitalité', rendered as 'hostipitality' in English.[18] The term denotes the interdependence of hostility and hospitality and underlines the possibility of the foreigner (*hostis*) being either welcomed as guest or treated with hostility as an enemy. J. Hillis Miller's reflection on the etymology of the word 'parasite', in his well-known essay 'The Critic as Host', hints at a similar interdependence; a situation in which one party may be seen to depend on and oppose its other in an ambiguous way. Focusing on the prefix in particular, he explains:

> "Para" is an "uncanny" double antithetical prefix signifying at once proximity and distance, similarity and difference, interiority and exteriority, something at once inside a domestic economy and outside it, something simultaneously this side of the boundary line, threshold, or margin, and at the same time beyond it, equivalent in status and at the same time secondary or subsidiary, submissive,

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[14] Gabriel Herman, *Ritualized Friendship and the Greek City* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 4.

[15] Elizabeth Belfiore, '*Xenia* in Sophocles' *Philoctetes*', *The Classical Journal*, 89.2 (1993–1994), p. 117.

[16] For Derrida's most sustained commentary on the etymological root of hospitality see Derrida, 'Hostipitality', pp. 258–62.

[17] Derrida, 'Hostipitality', p. 244.

[18] Derrida has delivered two seminars under the title '*Hostipitalité*'. See note 2 above.

as of guest to host, slave to master. A thing in "para" is, moreover, not only simultaneously on both sides of the boundary line between inside and outside. It is also the boundary itself, the screen which is at once a permeable membrane connecting inside and outside, confusing them with one another, allowing the outside in, making the inside out, dividing them but also forming an ambiguous transition between one and the other.[19]

Hillis Miller's explanation emphasises the elusiveness of the prefix *para-* through the use of spatial metaphors. The prefix appears to flaunt all the rules that pertain to belonging within a designated space and is described as crossing borders indiscriminately — a feature that incidentally recalls the uncanny transgression of generic borders in the Cixousian text discussed in the previous chapter. Significantly, the metaphor of the boundary line and the threshold evoked in the above passage is, within the discourse of hospitality, all the more pertinent. The examples cited are equally relevant to Derrida's discussion of hospitality as both the relationship between guest and host and that between master and slave are integral to the complexity that Derrida seeks to bring to the fore. Indeed, his exploration of the subject is keen to disturb — in a characteristic deconstructive mode — the apparent fixed boundaries between a term and its antonym.

For instance, tracing the genealogy of hospitality to its biblical origins in 'On Cosmopolitanism', Derrida outlines the difficulty and, perhaps, impossibility, of translating a sentence from the tenth book of the New Testament, the Epistle to the Ephesians (2:19–20): 'And so therefore, you are no longer foreigners abroad (*xenoi, hospites*), you are fellow-citizens of the Saints, you belong to the House of God'. In view of the various available translations, Derrida observes that '"foreigners" (*xenoi*) is also translated by guests (*hospites*)' and further remarks that '"metic" [...] designates as much the neighbour [...] as the foreigner without political rights in another city or country'.[20] The semantic undecidability and polysemy of the words 'foreigner', 'neighbour' and 'guest' are central to Derrida's exploration of the question of the foreigner. The foreigner can never be seen to inhabit the same place or to come from the same place. Rather, the foreigner — perhaps 'neighbour', 'guest' or 'barbarian' — challenges the very laws that try to define his position and delimit it. For Derrida the 'aporetic crossroads' of the semantic filiations of hospitality are fundamental to what he calls a 'complete hospitality'. Speaking of the fourth acceptation of the guiding phrase in 'Hostipitality' ('We do not

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[19] J. Hillis Miller, 'The Critic as Host', *Critical Inquiry*, 3.3 (1977), p. 441.
[20] Derrida, 'On Cosmopolitanism', p. 19.

know what hospitality is'), he remarks: 'without the repeated endurance of this paralysis in the contradiction, the responsibility of a hospitality, a complete hospitality […] would not have any chance of coming to pass, of coming, of making or allowing to welcome'.[21] Hence, the semantic changes of the cognates *hostis* and *xenos* — in large part due to the historical emergence of the city-state — are here viewed as integral to the concept of hospitality.[22] The inherent violence of the opposing meanings embedded within the same term is not, on Derrida's reading, to be viewed as negative; rather, it is a 'necessary aporia'.[23]

In Derrida's seminars, the corruptibility and perversion at the heart (and root) of hospitality is extended to the mutual incompatibility yet necessary relation between conditional hospitality and unconditional hospitality, which presents his most provocative and controversial position on the subject. In 'Hostipitality', Derrida claims that in Kant's 'Perpetual Peace' the cosmopolitan laws of hospitality are determined and controlled by the State. Like the ancient Greek ritual of *xenia* that binds generation after generation to observe the duty of guest-friendship, such conditional laws of hospitality concern 'an obligation, a right and a duty regulated by law'.[24] Derrida distances his discussion from such regulatory strictures and instead proposes a law of *unconditional* hospitality. The visitation (as opposed to the invitation) of the other may be said to be a constitutive feature of the Derridean ethical moment of hospitality. As he says in the aforementioned 'Istrice 2' interview, 'the "ethical"' concern arises when no established economy (or, in a transliteration from Greek, 'the law of the household') can provide a ready solution. Significantly for this discussion, Derrida selects the humble, poematic hedgehog as representative of the break with *economy*:

> A hedgehog may always arrive, it may always be given to me. There is something non-formalizable and the concern comes from there, precisely. It is for that very thing that there is concern, interest, desire, non-indifference. One

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[21] Derrida, 'Hostipitality', p. 258.
[22] Heidrun Friese observes that '*Historically*, hospitality has been considered a religious and ethical duty, a sacred commandment of charity and generosity to assign strangers a place in the community — albeit an ambivalent one. With the development of the modern nation-state, these ethical obligations have been inscribed into the procedures of the public political deliberation and legal institutions that determine rights, duties and the social spaces of foreigners, residents and citizens'. Heidrun Friese, 'The Limits of Hospitality', *Paragraph*, 32.1 (2009), pp. 52–53. Thus both the religious commandments and the laws of the state prescribe certain modes of action. For Derrida, these manifestations of hospitality would be examples of conditioned hospitality that do not require the host to endure the indecision that characterises the event of welcoming the other.
[23] Derrida, 'Hostipitality', p. 258.
[24] Derrida, 'Hostipitality', p. 244.

cannot remain in the couple, nor in the dialectic, nor in the third party. Perhaps an "ethical" concern, in fact: in any case, the interested desire comes from a place that no longer belongs either to the couple or to the circle.[25]

As argued in the introduction, for Derrida the ethical arises precisely where the unexpected arrival of the other reveals the ineffectiveness of *a priori* established modes of conduct — what he here refers to as the 'couple' or the 'circle'. Indeed, it is the unforeseeable arrival of the other (which, unlike the Levinasian *Autrui*, may be human, animal or divine, benevolent or malevolent, alive or dead) that ruptures the circle and challenges the conditional laws of hospitality. This is closely related to what, in the dialogue 'Hospitality, Justice and Responsibility', Derrida refers to as the willingness to relinquish mastery. Whereas in an act of conditional hospitality the host remains master of the house and 'controls the borders', an act of unconditional hospitality exhibits a readiness to give up such a position of power.[26] This is the moment when the host renounces his ipseity (on which more below) and risks losing his own property. Hence, the conclusion in 'Hostipitality' that in the instance of visitation 'there is no door'.[27] For Derrida the unforeseeable visitation of the other leads to the 'implosion' or 'auto-deconstruction' of the concept of hospitality whereby the host is no longer the one in control:[28]

> So unconditional hospitality implies that you don't ask the other, the newcomer, the guest, to give anything back, or even to identify him or herself. Even if the other deprives you of your mastery or your home, you have to accept this. It is terrible to accept this, but that is the condition of unconditional hospitality: that you give up the mastery of your own space, your home, your nation.[29]

As we shall see in more detail in the next section, this intrusion (or break in) of the other who or which divests the host of his power is similar to the poetic experience whereby, as Derrida asserts, I relinquish my mastery to give way to the coming of the other. Recall the

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[25] Jacques Derrida, 'Istrice 2: Ick bünn all hier', trans. by Peggy Kamuf, in *Points… Interviews, 1974–1994*, ed. by Elisabeth Weber (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 323.
[26] Jacques Derrida, 'Hospitality, Justice and Responsibility: A dialogue with Jacques Derrida', in *Questioning Ethics: Contemporary Debates in Philosophy*, ed. by Richard Kearney and Mark Dooley (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 69.
[27] He explains this by arguing that 'where there is a door and windows, that means that someone has a key for them and must consequently control the conditions of hospitality. There must be threshold. But if there is a threshold, there is no more hospitality. This is the difference, the gap, between the hospitality of invitation and the hospitality of visitation' (Derrida, 'Hostipitality', p. 260).
[28] Derrida, 'Hostipitality', p. 245.
[29] Derrida, 'Hospitality, Justice and Responsibility', p. 70.

counterintuitive conclusion as the close of 'Che cos'è la poesia?': 'A poem, I never sign(s) it. The other sign(s)' (*CCP*, 299).

Tracing the genealogy of hospitality from Sophocles' Theban plays and Plato's dialogues to Pierre Klossowski's *Roberte ce soir* (1953) and the more immediate contemporary crisis in human migration, Derrida outlines a numbers of examples in which the supposed host becomes the guest and vice-versa. This indeterminacy is immediately introduced in the work that shall be the primary reference in what follows, namely *Of Hospitality*, co-authored with Anne Dufourmantelle. The subtitle of the work reads: 'Anne Dufourmantelle Invites Jacques Derrida to Respond'; yet it is clear that the text by Dufourmantelle succeeds the writing of the two seminars by Derrida collected in the work. It is, therefore, Dufourmantelle herself who responds to Derrida's invitation to respond. Thus, Dufourmantelle poses as the host when in fact she is the guest whose very words and thoughts are informed by the one who is presented as the welcome guest. Indeed, Derrida's capitalisation on the ambiguity of the French word *hôte* that signifies both 'guest' and 'host' can be seen to inform his notion of hospitality. In one important way, his interrogation of the question of the foreigner may be seen to explore the possibility of the word *hôte* to mean 'guest' and 'host' at one and the same time.[30] Indeed, Gil Anidjar argues that the French *hôte* should not be translated as 'guest' or 'host' for such a translation would 'erase the demand made by hospitality as well as the violence that is constitutive of it'.[31]

In line with this, the seminar *Pas d'hospitalité* stresses the hesitation between taking a step ('*pas*') and not ('*pas*') doing so. The 'transgression' and 'digression' through which Derrida introduces his subject point to the act of stepping out of line or trespassing into forbidden territory (*OH*, 75). In a logic that recalls the strategy of his discussions on the gift, friendship, forgiveness and translation among others, Derrida argues that 'uncrossable thresholds' are the only thresholds worth crossing (*OH*, 75). The threshold, under the close watch and scrutiny of juridico-political laws, is the place where questions are asked and documents of identification requested. Such conditional hospitality,

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[30] Writing about Albert Camus' short story 'L'Hôte', Derrida refers to this strange homonymy as 'l'hôte a deux visages'. Jacques Derrida, 'Responsabilité et hospitalité', in *Autours de Jacques Derrida: Manifeste pour l'hospitalité*, ed. by Mohammed Seffahi (Genouilleux: Éditions La Passe du Vent, 2001), p. 139. David Carroll observes that for Derrida the genius of Albert Camus' short story lies in his refusal to state or define who the host is and who the guest is. David Carroll, '"Remains" of Algeria: Justice, Hospitality, Politics', *MLN*, 121.4 (2006), p. 820.
[31] Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, ed. by Gil Anidjar (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 356.

regulated and determined by the State, goes counter to '*the* unconditional law of hospitality', which, as Derrida explains, seeks to annul thresholds altogether. The two distinct laws cannot, in spite of their apparent incompatibility, exist independently of each other. This is the 'double imperative', in the words of Critchley and Kearney, that constitutes Derrida's notion of hospitality.[32] To propose an unconditional hospitality outside the institutionalised rituals and norms of conditional hospitality is, Derrida is quick to admit, both illusory and utopic. His concluding remarks in 'On Cosmopolitanism' make this point clear:

> It is a question of knowing how to transform and improve the law, and of knowing if this improvement is possible within an historical space which takes place *between* the Law of an unconditional hospitality, offered *a priori* to every other, to all newcomers, *whoever they may be*, and *the* conditional laws of a right to hospitality, without which *The* unconditional Law of hospitality would be in danger of remaining a pious and irresponsible desire, without form and without potency [...].[33]

The 'insoluble antinomy' between the two laws must remain at work, as we shall see, within every singular and inventive act of hospitality (*OH*, 77).

At this point it is well to recall Martin Hägglund's aforementioned work, *Radical Atheism*, in which he emphasises the constitutive violence within Derridean ethics generally and hospitality in particular. Highly critical of a certain reception of Derrida's work around the subject of ethics, he has sought to dispel the view that it offers an 'ethical ideal' and that it aspires towards a prior absolute or pure good.[34] Rather, he argues, Derrida's radically atheist position, which informs his work from beginning to end, emphasises the threat and risk inherent in the act of receiving the other. For Derrida, Hägglund maintains, 'alterity cannot be understood in terms of goodness and nonviolence. If alterity is irreducible, then violence is a necessary risk since, far from being "absolute,"

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[32] Simon Critchley and Richard Kearney, 'Preface', in Jacques Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, trans. by Mark Dooley and Michael Hughes (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), p. ix. Heidrun Friese concludes that hospitality 'troubles conventional divides, it *opens* spaces and forms of exchange that *allow* for encounter, it produces significant places, and yet, it does not extinguish duties and obligations that must be noticed and noted for hospitality to come into being and to subsist. It is precisely these distinct sites that should be evidenced, places that trouble the conventional dichotomies between interior and exterior, inclusion and exclusion, belonging and alterity'. Friese, 'The Limits of Hospitality', p. 64.

[33] Derrida, 'On Cosmopolitanism', pp. 22–23.

[34] Martin Hägglund, *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), p. 103. Indeed, in Hägglund's view, the most evident difference between the Levinasian and the Derridean discussion of ethics is that whereas the former believes in a state of primordial purity, the former rejects the existence of such a state. See especially Hägglund, *Radical Atheism*, pp. 76–106.

one is always dependent on others that may violate, negate, or exploit'.[35] This is the risk at the heart of the gesture of welcoming the one whose arrival is unforeseen. Only such a gesture — a potential blessing or curse — can pave the way for an act of hospitality. In Hägglund's view 'a hospitality and justice that would be immune from the violent coming of the other would cancel out the possibility of hospitality or justice'.[36] Hence, the significance of Derrida's discussion of autoimmunity that Hägglund distinguishes from the absolute immunity that characterises the religious argument of faith in the unscathed.[37] For Derrida everything is always already threatened from within. The 'auto-immunising' mechanism within hospitality or, more precisely, *hostipitality*, ensures that every unique instance of hospitality is contaminated or haunted by the threat of violence.[38]

Neither is it possible, in Hägglund's view, to argue, in the manner that Simon Critchley does in *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, that conditional hospitality pertains to politics whereas unconditional hospitality pertains to the field of ethics. Hägglund maintains that Critchley's alliance of Levinasian thought to so-called deconstructive ethics clearly fails to pay heed to Derrida's 'analysis of the intrinsic link between alterity, violence and temporality'.[39] It is erroneous to think of unconditional hospitality as an ethical ideal that is free from all decision-making. Rather, as Hägglund concludes, 'the only unconditional law of hospitality is that one will have been forced to deal with unforeseeable events'.[40] As he writes in response to Derek Attridge's review of his work, 'justice and the incalculable cannot be dissociated from law and calculation: Derrida explicitly emphasises that our exposure to the incalculable requires us to calculate and that

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[35] Hägglund, *Radical Atheism*, p. 86.

[36] Hägglund, *Radical Atheism*, p. 105.

[37] For an extended discussion of autoimmunity see Giovanna Borradori, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2003), pp. 94–102 and pp. 149–59.

[38] Suffice it to recall Derrida's forceful example at the close of the seminar *Pas d'hospitalité*, when he invites us to consider whether our tradition of hospitality is still indebted to the Biblical account of Lot and his virgin daughters. In this powerful reminder of the violence inherent in what may be viewed as a desire to honour one's promise of hospitality, we witness a father who is willing to offer his virgin daughters to placate the men from Sodom who threateningly request to speak to his guests. This act of hospitality towards his guests is a clear breach of his duties as a father. Guided by the norms of conditional hospitality, which decree that one protect a guest from danger, Lot's decision compels him to relinquish his responsibilities as a father (*OH*, 71).

[39] Hägglund, *Radical Atheism*, p. 96. He maintains that Critchley's reading is 'fallacious' on a number of counts. See especially Hägglund, *Radical Atheism*, pp. 96–100.

[40] Hägglund, *Radical Atheism*, p. 105.

doing justice to a singular other requires us to invent or transform the law'.[41] Turning its attention to the notion of invention, the second section of the chapter shall address the relation between hospitality and invention in light of Derrida's aphoristic claim that 'An act of hospitality can only be poetic'(*OH*, 2).[42]

In-venire: The Coming of the Other as Poetic Invention

Speaking in an interview to *Le Monde* in 1997, Derrida remarks about the moment of arrival of the other and the precarious situation that arises when one is faced with the absolute other. How is the *arrivant* to be greeted and welcomed? For Derrida, this question is fraught with difficulty, not least since posing questions such as 'What is your name?' and 'Where are you from?' while necessary to welcome the newcomer, can also be misconstrued and turn into a 'police inquisition, a blacklist or a simple border control'.[43] There is no easy way to resolve the quandary that presents itself at this crucial instant of reception. Derrida identifies a fundamental distinction between two modes of reception that can only be told apart through a subtle, barely perceptible inflection of voice. With reference to this inflection, he provocatively concludes that 'An art and a poetics, but an entire politics depends on it, an entire ethics is decided by it'.[44] This is a remarkable sentence in more than one respect. In spite of its brevity, it brings together three major fields (namely art, politics and ethics) to make the claim that a subtle inflection in the manner that one asks a question can bespeak an entire politics and ethics. Moreover, it emphasises their interdependence and reveals that hospitality is as much about politics and ethics as it is about art, or, more precisely, as shall be argued below, the poetic. And thus it invites us to consider not only the relation between ethics and politics, as many have done especially in relation to Derrida's later work, but, more importantly for the discussion here,

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[41] Martin Hägglund, 'The Non-Ethical Opening of Ethics: A Response to Derek Attridge', *Derrida Today*, 3.2 (2010), p. 300.

[42] Anne Dufourmantelle does not cite a written source for this quote. One may conjecture that Derrida may have exchanged such words in person to Dufourmantelle, so that the quote marks may indicate a citation of a spoken, and not written, word.

[43] Jacques Derrida, 'The Principle of Hospitality', trans. by Ashley Thompson, *Parallax*, 11.1 (2005), p. 7. In 'Une hospitalité à l'infini', he also considers the possibility of remaining silent during such moments. Maintaining that there is a certain violence inherent in the word one speaks at the moment of reception, he wonders whether silence would not be the more appropriate welcome: 'Aussi la question est de savoir si l'hospitalité exige une parole ou, au contraire, un certain silence'. Jacques Derrida, 'Une hospitalité à l'infini', in *Autours de Jacques Derrida: Manifeste pour l'hospitalité*, ed. by Mohammed Seffahi (Genouilleux: Éditions La Passe du Vent, 2001), p. 120.

[44] Derrida, 'The Principle of Hospitality', p. 7.

the relation between Derrida's understanding of ethics and the poetic and their co-implication — a subject that has received very little attention thus far. If, as Derrida has argued, there is a complex relation between ethics and politics, it seems that there is an equally intriguing one between the ethics of hospitality and the poetic. Indeed, the aforementioned 'Invitation' by Anne Dufourmantelle that features beside the Derrida seminars on hospitality in *Of Hospitality* begins by citing as epigraph the aforementioned aphorism by Derrida on this regard, namely 'An act of hospitality can only be poetic' (*OH*, 2). Seeking to explore the implications of this categorical claim, this section brings into sharper relief the otherwise implicit relation between an act of hospitality and the poetic experience that Derrida discusses in 'Che cos'è la poesia?'.

The recurrent use of the term 'invention' in relation to the instant of reception in Derrida's discussion of hospitality draws attention to its importance. For instance, in 'Une hospitalité à l'infini', he claims that at the moment of arrival the host is without knowledge and must therefore *invent* a new mode of speaking. As he argues more fully in 'Hostipitality', the moment of hospitality does not lend itself to objective knowledge because it is not a stable concept. Rather, it is an experience that 'gives itself in thinking beyond knowing'.[45] Recall Derrida's demands in 'Che cos'è la poesia?' in this regard: 'you will have had to disable memory, disarm culture, know how to forget knowledge' (*CCP*, 295). And it is precisely this ideal situation of not knowing that gives rise to the poetic instant within hospitality:

> Là surgit la parole poétique: il faut inventer une langue. L'hospitalité doit être tellement inventive, réglée sur l'autre et sur l'accueil de l'autre, que chaque expérience d'hospitalité doit inventer un nouveau langage.[46]

The singularity of each moment requires the invention of a new mode of reception or a new mode of speaking, as Derrida's 'nouveau langage' suggests. The refusal to act in accordance with predetermined norms and conditions decreed by laws is a result of the singularity of the one who arrives:

> La décision de l'hospitalité me demande d'inventer ma propre règle. Dans ce sens, le langage de l'hospitalité doit être poétique: il faut que je parle ou que j'écoute l'autre là où, d'une certain manière, le langage se réinvente. [...] Je n'invente pas la langue. Mais encore faut-il que chaque fois que je dis à l'autre

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[45] Derrida, 'Hostipitality', p. 251. In 'Hostipitality' Derrida argues that the phrase 'we do not know what hospitality is' has four acceptations. For a more detailed analysis of this aspect of hospitality, see Derrida, 'Hostipitality', pp. 247–62.

[46] Derrida, 'Une hospitalité à l'infini', pp. 116–17.

‹‹viens, entre, fais comme chez toi››, que mon acte d'accueil soit comme le premier dans l'histoire, soit absolument singulier. Je dis ‹‹viens›› non à une catégorie d'immigrés, de travailleurs, etc. mais à toi. Il fait donc que j'invente l'énoncé dans lequel je le dis alors que je ne peux pas parler une langue absolument nouvelle.[47]

Hence, he who receives may be seen to take the law into his own hands; not by enacting the existing law himself, but rather by (re)inventing it. Strangely, however, this law is not generalisable for it can only apply to one specific arrival, as we shall see in more detail in relation to Antigone's singular law of hospitality. The relation between *langue* and *langage* is also important as it recalls Derrida's remarks on the necessary negotiation between the heterogeneous yet indissociable workings of conditional and unconditional hospitality. The host has recourse to the existing *langue* but must invent the *langage* or the mode of speaking (what Derrida refers to as the 'inflection' in the aforementioned interview). Thus, the invention does not arise from a vacuum but emerges as a violent force from within the existing structures not only to disturb the slumber of a regulated system, but, more importantly, to address the here and now and the singular 'you' ('à toi'). As we discussed at some length in Chapter 1 in relation to apostrophe, the 'you' is central to Derrida's conception of the poem as a dictate that gives rise to its recipient.

Yet clearly there are two distinct meanings of the word 'invent' that Derrida exploits in relation to his discussion of hospitality. On the one hand, the word 'invention' is used to refer to the necessarily unique and singular instant of reception in which the unforeseeable newcomer is greeted with an unconditional 'yes'.[48] In these instances, as we have seen, hospitality is offered beyond conditional and existing norms. Such a reception is an invention in the sense that it cannot turn to a programme of action and must therefore be a unique welcome that responds to the singularity of the event of arrival of a particular 'you'. On the other hand, the word 'invent', in Derrida's work, can be seen to recall the more archaic sense of the Latinate root that stresses the *in-venire*, that is to say, *coming upon* the other. Within the context of hospitality, this instant of arrival is seen as a moment in which the other's *in-venire* interrupts (or comes upon) the host with a force that, as we

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[47] Jacques Derrida, 'Responsabilité et hospitalité', in *Autours de Jacques Derrida: Manifeste pour l'hospitalité*, ed. by Mohammed Seffahi (Genouilleux: Éditions La Passe du Vent, 2001), pp. 133–34.
[48] As Derrida writes: 'Let us say yes to who or what turns up, before any determination, before any anticipation, before any identification, whether or not it has to do with a foreigner, an immigrant, an invited guest, or an unexpected visitor, whether or not the new arrival is the citizen of another country, a human, animal, or divine creature, a living or dead thing, male or female' (*OH*, 77).

explored in Chapter 2 in relation to Cixous's 'book', cannot be ignored. It is in this sense that, as Derek Attridge observes in relation to Derrida's work, 'invention is always the invention of the other'.[49]

In 'Psyche: Invention of the Other' (1984), Derrida's most thorough analysis of the concept of invention, he distinguishes between its Latinate sense and its more modern sense of inventing something new and original. In his characteristic aporetic manner, he claims that invention can only invent the impossible. Invention must overflow the already possible: it 'ought to produce a disordering mechanism, open up a space of unrest or turbulence for every status assignable to it when it suddenly arrives'.[50] Derrida starts with a reading of Francis Ponge's 1948 'Fable', a six-line poem that famously begins with the self-referential line 'Par le mot *par* commence donc ce texte' and ends with a parenthetical remark about a female figure who breaks her mirror after seven years of misfortune. Drawing attention to the 'mirror' as the central image in the poem, he argues that an invention can only be considered as such if it can 'pass beyond the mirror' or, more violently, 'break' the mirror. Derrida reminds us that while referring to the mythical character, *psyché* in French, also means 'a large double mirror mounted on a rotating stand'.[51] This provides him with a figure for the same or self-identical that must be exceeded or, in this context, broken. Whilst instituting itself *within* the existing statutes and conventions, the invention, like a 'deconstructive operation', evades 'possibility' — here understood as 'the danger of becoming an available set of rule-governed procedures, methods, accessible approaches'.[52] Distancing his understanding of invention, therefore, from the modern sense of inventiveness, Derrida stresses the Latinate meaning of *invenire* as a *coming upon*.[53] It is precisely the coming of the other, as the title anticipates, that motivates Derrida's intervention on the subject. Thus invention, for Derrida, does not simply involve an *active* making, but also involves a certain *passivity* in the act of letting (the other) come, which interestingly recalls Derrida's description of Cixous's *puissance* as

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[49] Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 43.

[50] Jacques Derrida, 'Psyche: Invention of the Other', trans. by Catherine Porter, in *Psyche: Inventions of the Other*, vol. I, ed. by Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), p. 22.

[51] Derrida, 'Psyche: Invention of the Other', p. 18.

[52] Derrida, 'Psyche: Invention of the Other', p. 15.

[53] Recalling the various cognates of the Latin *venire* in Romance languages, Derrida asks: 'How could one translate this lexical cluster outside the Romance languages while preserving its unity, the unity linking the first time of invention to the coming [*venue*], to the arrival of the future [*avenir*], of the event, of the advent, of the convention or of the adventure?' Derrida, 'Psyche: Invention of the Other', p. 6.

the ability of making the difference between activity and passivity disappear. Speaking of what he calls possible invention, he remarks that 'invention invents nothing, when in invention the other does not come, and when nothing comes to the other or from the other'.[54] Clearly, the *other* (in the title), though it remains tangential throughout most of the essay, is central to Derrida's concept of invention. At the close of the essay, Derrida returns to the question he poses at its opening: 'What do we still have to invent in regard to the coming, the *venire*? What does it mean, *to come*? To come a first time?'[55]

Reflecting on the word '*arrivant*' in *Aporias*, Derrida remarks on the absolute surprise of the coming. This coming, as he is quick to underline, is never that of a foreseeable entrant ('the immigrant, the emigrant, the guest, or stranger').[56] Rather, it is the incalculable and totally unforeseeable event that 'most arrives':

> What is the event that most arrives [*l'événement le plus arrivant*]*?* What is the *arrivant* that makes the event arrive? […] What we could here call the *arrivant,* the most *arrivant* among all *arrivants,* the *arrivant* par excellence, is whatever, whoever, in arriving, does not cross a threshold separating two identifiable places, the proper and the foreign, the proper of the one and the proper of the other […]. No, I am talking about the absolute *arrivant,* who is not even a guest. He surprises the host — who is not yet a host or an inviting power — enough to call into question, to the point of annihilating or rendering indeterminate, all the distinctive signs of a prior identity, beginning with the very border that delineated a legitimate home and assured lineage, names and language, nations, families and genealogies.[57]

Significantly, the *arrivant* disturbs the 'prior identity' of the so-called same. Indeed, Derrida's use of the word 'annihilate' underlines, as the previous section has argued, the potential destruction of the one who receives. It is not so much the state or status of the *arrivant* that seems to be at risk of being violated as much as that of the one who is receiving the *arrivant*. This is a fundamental claim in Derrida's understanding of the *in-venire* of the other. Indeed, as we shall see in relation to Sophocles' *Antigone* in the final part of the chapter, the arrival of the other can also end in death. The *arrivant* arrives to destabilise the *status quo* of the one at the receiving end who, as Derrida observes, is not 'yet a host' because the *visitation* of the other takes him or her by complete surprise. Not only is identity in question, but so is the entire structure on which that identity is built:

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54 Derrida, 'Psyche: Invention of the Other', p. 44.
55 Derrida, 'Psyche: Invention of the Other', p. 6.
56 Jacques Derrida, *Aporias*, trans. by Thomas Dutoit (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), p. 33.
57 Derrida, *Aporias*, pp. 33–34.

home, lineage, name, language and nation. We could say, by way of recalling Derrida's 'Che cos'è la poesia?', that the visitation of the other necessitates a 'traversal *outside* yourself' (CCP, 291).

It is in light of this stance that we can make better sense of Derrida's paradoxical conclusion in 'Psyche' (where he clearly plays on the two distinct meanings of 'invent' highlighted above):

> The other is indeed what is not inventable, and it is therefore the only invention in the world, the only invention of the world, *our* invention, the invention that invents *us*. For the other is always another origin of the world and *we are to be invented*.[58]

Derrida can be seen to turn the seemingly self-evident definition of the *arrivant* and the moment of arrival on its head. The more commonly held view that the *arrivant* depends on the welcome received at the border and that the *arrivant* is reliant on the ones who offer hospitality is clearly rejected. What he proposes instead is the "inventive" claim that the other comes ('*viens*') to invent me:

> In every case and through all the semantic displacements of the word "invention," this latter remains the "coming," the *venire,* the event of a novelty that must surprise, because at the moment when it comes about, there could be no statute, no status, ready and waiting to reduce it to the same.[59]

Breaking through the mirror of the self-same, the *arrivant* forces the ones who receive to relinquish their prior identity.

Derrida's question in 'A Word of Welcome', a colloquium given in 1996 in homage to Levinas, sums up this key aspect of hospitality in the above-cited question: 'Is not hospitality an interruption of the self?' ('L'hospitalité, n'est-ce pas une interruption de soi?').[60] And, we might add, as the French *soi* immediately intimates, is hospitality not also an interruption of the *chez soi*?[61] The violence inherent in hospitality is once again clear in this question. The act of 'breaking in' or the 'rupture' of the self recalls Benveniste's comments on the Latin root *pets*, meaning both power and one's identity. Hence, the loss of identity and power is simultaneous with the arrival of the other. This violent breakthrough also points to the clear Levinasian influence on Derrida's thinking on

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[58] Derrida, 'Psyche: Invention of the Other', p. 45.
[59] Derrida, 'Psyche: Invention of the Other', p. 45.
[60] Derrida, *Adieu*, p. 51 and Jacques Derrida, *Adieu à Emmanuel Lévinas* (Paris: Galilée, 1997), p. 96.
[61] Indeed, in the opening of the speech, he speaks of the presumption of claiming to know what 'at home [*chez soi*]' means and describes this as nothing less than a 'usurpation'. See Derrida, *Adieu*, pp. 15–16.

hospitality. This is particularly evident in 'A Word of Welcome' where he responds to Levinas's view of the subject as hostage. The subject, he argues, is not so much a question as '*in* question'.[62] Exploiting the indeterminacy of the French *hôte*, the following passage is a clear response to Levinas's notion of substitution:

> The host [*hôte*] is a hostage insofar as he is a subject put into question, obsessed (and thus besieged), persecuted, in the very place where he takes place, where, as emigrant, exile, stranger, a guest [*hôte*] from the very beginning, he finds himself elected to or taken up by a residence [*élu à domicile*] before himself electing or taking one up [*élire domicile*].[63]

Thus, the *arrivant* also puts in question the very place where the host may be thought to belong and that he considers his own. Hence, the 'interruption' or 'the 'rupture' — indeed, the 'traumatizing effraction'[64] — of the arrivant's visitation disturbs the significations of 'self, mastery, possession and power'.[65] This semantic concatenation recalls Benveniste's detailed analysis of the etymology of the word 'hospitality' and points to the host's radical interruption. It is the other that lays down or dictates the law upon arrival. Recall the authoritative '*thou must*' of the poetic dictation (explored in Chapter 1) that demands it be protected and looked after — taken *in* without condition: 'I am *a* dictation, pronounces poetry, learn me by heart, copy me down, guard and keep me, look out for me, look at me, dictated dictation, right before your eyes' (*CCP*, 289).

The integral aspect of the arrival of the other is also central to another seminar on hospitality entitled 'Question d'étranger: venue de l'étranger' and translated as 'Foreigner Question: Coming from Abroad/from the Foreigner'. Posing the complex *question* of the foreigner, Derrida explains that this phrase may be understood as referring to the theme of the foreigner as well as to questions that interrogate who the 'foreigner' *is* and what 'foreigner' *means*. It also refers to the aforementioned questions posed to foreigners upon their arrival. Finally, and perhaps before all other considerations, Derrida hears within this phrase the question that is posed *to* the host *by* the foreigner and, hence, the question that comes from abroad or from foreign shores. At its crux, the so-called 'foreigner question' is not so much the question (or issue) of the foreigner or the question posed to the foreigner, but rather, in a typical Derridean strategy and contrary to expectation, the question that the

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[62] Derrida, *Adieu*, p. 56.
[63] Derrida, p. 56.
[64] Derrida, p. 63.
[65] Derrida, p. 57.

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foreigner (as the other) poses to the host (as the same) who, from that instant, may be said to be, to recall a phrase from 'Che cos'è la poesia?', 'lost in anonymity' (*CCP*, 289). The opening gambit of the seminar could not have been clearer on this point: 'Isn't the question of the foreigner [*l'étranger*] a foreigner's question? Coming from the foreigner, from abroad [*l'étranger*]?' (*OH*, 3).

In Plato's dialogues, Derrida observes, it is common for the visitor to pose the questions to the one offering hospitality, or the one who is *at home*. In the late dialogue *Sophist*, for instance, the distinguished, though unnamed, philosopher visiting from Elea (referred to as *Xenos,* meaning 'visitor') joins the discussion between Socrates, Theodorus and Theaetetus, a young Athenian pupil. Significantly, Derrida observes, it is the *Xenos* who attempts to refute the *logos* of the great and respected philosopher, Parmenides, by questioning his otherwise seemingly irrefutable thesis: 'It is that in order to defend ourselves, we will necessarily have to put to the test the thesis (*logon*) of our father Parmenides and, forcibly, establish that non-being somehow is, and that being, in its turn, in a certain way is not' (*OH*, 7). In so doing, he risks committing parricide by going against the Word of the Father. In fact, for Derrida this situation reveals an interesting aspect of the foreigner question, not least since in posing a challenge to the paternal *logos*, the foreigner becomes part of the family. More than mere guest, therefore, he earns the status of a family member and becomes an insider on the strength of questioning the unquestionable. The foreigner's 'revolutionary hypothesis' attempts to challenge that of the respected philosopher and this act of transgression is viewed by the foreigner as one that may be considered to be on par with the murder of one's own father (*OH*, 7). This underlines the gravity of the foreigner's transgression as well as the violence inherent in the act. The nature of his offence lies in his attempt to refute the *logos* of the Father and institute his *logos* in its stead.

Derrida emphasises the violent nature of this altercation and pauses on the words uttered by Theaetetus who, upon hearing the visitor from Elea say that he shall 'forcibly' (or, in another translation, 'by brute force') refute Parmenides' thesis, remarks that they will have to *fight* through the issue. Derrida comments that he prefers the translation in which Theaetetus' words are rendered as follows: 'It does seem that that is where there must be armed war, or combat, in discourses or in arguments' (*OH*, 7). What ensues is not a mere 'debate', as Diès's translation reads; rather, it is an act in which *war* is waged

against the paternal logic.[66] The foreigner's question, for Derrida, is precisely 'the war internal to the *logos*' (*OH*, 9). The confrontational nature of this situation is all the more precarious given the foreigner's status.[67] Indeed, the foreigner is hesitant and reluctant to pursue his line of thought. He acknowledges that it may be viewed as an act of 'madness' on his part and he fears that he will be judged as a person '"who is upside down all over [...] a crazy person who reverses everything from head to toe, from top to bottom, who puts all his feet on his head, inside out, who walks on his head"' (*OH*, 9, 11). He predicts that in the eyes of the city offering him hospitality, he will be considered deranged. The images of reversal here are multiple: 'upside down all over', 'reverses everything from head to toe' and 'puts all his feet on his head', and they all signal the catastrophic consequences of the foreigner's question. The antagonistic relation between the *Xenos* and the *Pater* is clear: 'The Foreigner shakes up the threatening dogmatism of the paternal *logos* [...]. As though the Foreigner had to begin by contesting the authority of the chief, the father, the master of the family, the "master of the house," of the power of hospitality, of the *hosti-pets* [...]' (*OH*, 5). Such is the consequence of the other's invention and intervention on the *power* or mastery of the host.

Indeed, this can be seen as an instance of what Derrida, in 'Violence and Metaphysics', calls the 'rupture of the logos'. Arguing that 'no logos as absolute knowledge can *comprehend* dialogue and the trajectory toward the other', he maintains that only a 'rupture of the logos' can open up the possibility of speech and thus lead to an experience of the other. Far from marking the 'beginning of irrationalism', as the foreigner in the *Sophist* fears, it makes every logos possible. Intriguingly, Derrida here speaks of this vital and violent rupture in apparently contradictory terms as both 'wound' and 'inspiration':

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[66] The Diès translation, cited by Derrida, clearly tones down the nature of the polemical situation: '"There, obviously, is where we must have the debate"' (*OH*, 7). In the authoritative edition edited by John M. Cooper, Nicholas P. White's translation retains the violence that Derrida is keen to stress: 'In order to defend ourselves we're going to have to subject father Parmenides' saying to further examination, and insist by brute force both that *that which is not* somehow is, and then again that *that which is* somehow is not' (Plato, *Complete Works*, ed. by John M. Cooper (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), p. 262).

[67] It should be borne in mind that Derrida stresses the foreigner's status with respect to Parmenides and describes him as a 'parricide Foreigner' and a '*foreign son*' (*OH*, p. 9). In what seems to be an oversight on his part, he fails to remark on the close relationship between the unnamed *Xenos* and Parmenides, who are both native to Elea, a Greek town of Southern Italy. Hence, the foreigner's status is not as straightforward as Derrida seems to suggest. He is surely not a foreigner to Parmenides or his teachings. It is, in fact, as one of his pupils and followers that he claims that he would be committing a parricide by going against the philosopher's (and in many ways, his father's) teachings.

By definition, if the other is the other, and if all speech is for the other, no logos as absolute knowledge can *comprehend* dialogue and the trajectory toward the other. This incomprehensibility, this rupture of logos is not the beginning of irrationalism but the wound or inspiration which opens speech and then makes possible every logos or every rationalism.[68]

The chosen terms are highly indicative of Derrida's view of the violence at the heart of hospitality. As Hägglund has claimed, and as was referred to earlier, 'Derrida's notion of alterity is inextricable from a notion of constitutive violence'.[69] And yet the coupling of 'wound' with 'inspiration' suggests that the 'violent opening' of ethics, to recall another memorable phrase, cannot simply be cast in a negative light.[70] Indeed, Elizabeth Grosz, who prior to Hägglund had emphasised the importance of the notion of violence in relation to Derrida's ethics, remarks that violence is a necessary and positive force within 'the domain of knowledges, reflection, thinking and writing'.[71] Speaking of a violence that is 'justified by virtue of its constructive force', she maintains that more care is called for when assessing the 'modes of strategic functioning' within violence.[72]

In fact, the equivalence between the 'wound' and 'inspiration' cannot but recall Derrida's claim in 'Che cos'è la poesia?' that the poem is both 'wound' and 'benediction'. As discussed in Chapter 1 and developed more fully in relation to Hélène Cixous's writing practice in Chapter 2, the wound represents the inherent violence within the poetic experience understood as the event of the arrival of the other. In the above-cited extract from 'Violence and Metaphysics', in a paradox that captures the necessary violence in the opening of ethics, Derrida locates the moment of 'inspiration' precisely within the traumatic rupture of the wound. Arguably, this violent in-spiration or act of breathing life into something can be seen as parallel to the interruption of the self by the *arrivant*. As we have seen, the *arrivant* disrupts the power and mastery of the unsuspecting host. And it is

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[68] Jacques Derrida, 'Violence and Metaphysics', in *Writing and Difference*, trans. by Alan Bass (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 121.

[69] Hägglund, *Radical Atheism*, p. 76.

[70] Jacques Derrida, 'The Violence of the Letter', in *Of Grammatology*, trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), p. 140.

[71] Elizabeth Grosz, 'The Time of Violence: Deconstruction and Value', *Cultural Values,* 2.2-3, (1998), p. 190. She observes: 'Though his work has strayed very far from many of his initial concerns, Derrida returns to a remarkably similar problematic in more recent works, of which a number are clearly linked to the question of violence and its founding role in the constitution of systems of ethics, morality, law and justice, in the operation of modes of gift and hospitality, in the structure of relations to the other, notions of singularity, heterogeneity, the movement of double affirmation, not to mention in his earlier preoccupations with iteration, trace, and undecidability' (Grosz, 'The Time of Violence', p. 195).

[72] Grosz, 'The Time of Violence', p. 197.

in this sense that Derrida will claim that 'An act of hospitality can only be poetic' (*OH*, 2). It is well to recall the by now oft-cited aphoristic conclusion from 'Che cos'è la poesia?' that 'A poem, I never sign(s) it. The other sign(s)' (*CCP*, 299). The loss of mastery or authority is in evidence in the poetic experience as well as the act of hospitality. And hence the event of the arrival of the other, which is clearly central to Derrida's conception of the 'poem', is an interruption or wounding: 'no poem that does not open itself like a wound, but no poem that is not also just as wounding' (*CCP*, 297).

In her editorial to the *Oxford Literary Review* 2011 special issue on 'Deconstruction and Poetry' (vol. 33.2) Sarah Wood's insight into the possible Artaudian influence on Derrida's choice of the word 'poématique' is, in the context of this discussion, indeed, intriguing. Referring Artaud's 1946 letter to Henri Parisot, known as 'Coleridge the Traitor', Wood remarks on the close connection between blood and poetry that Artaud is keen to stress when inserting the Greek *ema*, meaning 'blood', into the word *poétique*, thus coining (somewhat violently, we may say) the term 'po*éma*tique'. She remarks that Artaud's association between blood and poetry stems from a desire to dissociate his work from the musicality or 'song' that characterises, for instance, Coleridge's poetry: 'He doesn't want to chant verse syllable in assonant or consonant singsong, he wants writing that bleeds, lives, flows, pohaemorrages'.[73] Smirking at the 'formalistic bourgeois notion of Poetry', as Wood argues, Artaud seeks to reinterpret the French *sang* (the past tense of the verb 'song') and underline the more violent association with blood of the polysemic word.[74] As he tells Parisot: 'Let us first make *poem*, with blood'.[75] In light of this countertextual affinity with Artaud whose work Derrida discussed as early as the 1960s in 'La parole Soufflée' and 'The Theatre of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation', the word 'poématique', which as Chapter 1 argues is closely affiliated with the danger of automatic reaction, acquires a meaning that relates it directly with the central motif of the *wound* in 'Che cos'è la poesia?'.

It is here worth turning to Derrida's 'Rams: Uninterrupted Dialogue — Between Two Infinities, the Poem' to dwell on this aspect for longer. In this homage to Hans-Georg Gadamer and compelling engagement with Paul Celan's poem 'Vast Glowing Vault' from

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[73] Sarah Wood, 'Editorial: "It will have blood"', Special Issue on 'Deconstruction and Poetry', *Oxford Literary Review*, 33.2 (2011), p. vi.
[74] Wood, 'Editorial: "It will have blood"', p. vi.
[75] Antonin Artaud, *Selected Writings*, ed. by Susan Sontag (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), p. 476.

the 1967 collection *Atemwende* (*Breathturn*), Derrida significantly uses the word 'interruption' as a guiding thread in the opening part of the essay. Occurring no less than thirty-five times, the word is used in relation to his intellectual friendship with Gadamer and the latter's death, in relation to the hermeneutical analysis of the poem, but also, in line with the foregoing discussion, to denote the 'wound' of the poem. Derrida argues that the poem presents a 'test of an interruption' that exceeds the hermeneutical exercise of interpretation and goes on to call this 'a caesura or […] an ellipsis, […] an inaugural cut or opening'.[76] Significantly for this discussion, Derrida associates this 'hiatus' to the claim that the poem has on the other and the ethical event of unconditional hospitality, which, as we have seen, is marked by the experience of undecidability:

> Such a gaping belongs neither to the meaning, nor to the phenomenon, nor to the truth, but, by making these possible in their remaining, it marks in the poem the hiatus of a wound whose lips will never close, will never draw together. These lips form around a speaking mouth that, even when it keeps silent, appeals to the other without condition, in the language of a hospitality that can no longer be subject to a decision.[77]

It is Derrida's analysis of Celan's last line in the poem 'Vast Glowing Vault' that informs his reflections on the poem as a gaping wound the lips of which can never be sutured. Cited throughout the essay with an insistent compulsion, the line reads: 'Die Welt ist fort, ich muß dich tragen' ('The world is gone, I must carry you').[78] Derrida's painstaking and attentive response to this line may be said to provide a powerful summation of his understanding of the ethical event. For Derrida here attributes the end of the world with the obligation to carry or bear (as the German *tragen* suggests) the other. But also, and perhaps more compellingly, in a reversal of the sequence of the two verbs in the line, that the arrival of the other whom I must carry *brings about* the end of the world. It is the arrival of the other that catastrophically (recall the motif from 'Che cos'è la poesia?') interrupts my world:

> Unless one inverts, around the pivotal axis of an "I must" (*ich muß*), the order of the propositions or of the two verbs (*sein* and *tragen*), that is, inverts the consequence of *if, then*: if (where) there is necessity or duty toward you, if (where) *I* must, myself, carry you, yourself, well, then, the world tends to disappear. The world is no longer there or no longer here, "Die Welt ist fort."

[76] Jacques Derrida, 'Rams: Uninterrupted Dialogue — Between Two Infinities, the Poem', trans. by Thomas Dutoit and Philippe Romanski, in *Sovereignties in Question*: *The Poetics of Paul Celan*, ed. by Thomas Dutoit and Outi Pasanen (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), p. 152.
[77] Derrida, 'Rams: Uninterrupted Dialogue', pp. 152–53.
[78] Derrida, 'Rams: Uninterrupted Dialogue', *passim*.

As soon as I am obliged, from the instant when I am obliged *to you*, when I *owe*, when I owe it *to you*, owe it *to myself* to carry *you*, as soon as I speak to you and am responsible for you, or before you, there can no longer, essentially, be any world. No world can any longer support us, serve as mediation, as ground, as earth, as foundation or as alibi. Perhaps there is no longer anything but the abyssal altitude of a sky. I am alone in the world right where there is no longer any world. Or again: I am alone in the world as soon as I owe myself to you, as soon as you depend on me, as soon as I bear, and must assume, head to head or face to face, without third, mediator, or go-between, without earthly or wordly [*sic*] ground, the responsibility for which I must respond in front of you for you, and for which I must answer in front of you for you.[79]

The abyss provides Derrida with another figure for the opening or the wound that cannot be closed. As we shall see in the next chapter in relation to Paul Celan's oeuvre, the figure of the 'abyssal altitude of the sky', a central one in his 1963 collection *Die Niemandsrose*, represents precisely the catastrophe that marks the end of the world.

Speaking of Derrida's analysis of Celan's line in the last seminar of *The Beast and the Sovereign*, Kelly Oliver emphasises the difference between the Derridean ethical decision and programmatic moral codes. Interestingly, she also points to the loss of power (or what we referred to as 'ipseity' in the foregoing discussion) in the face of the ethical demand:

Ethics must be translated into the world after the end of the world and where there is no world. The ethical obligation, then, is an impossible obligation, one that begins when the world ends. If it were possible, that is to say if it were doable and within the power of the sovereign *I can*, it would be moral rule-following rather than ethical decision-making. In other words, it would be a thing of the world that can be understood and carried out by sovereign rationality and will according to moral principles explainable to all rational beings. Yet, where there is ethical obligation, there is no world, but only the face-to-face relationship that obligates one singular being to another. This radical responsibility interrupts the world, it juts through the world and shatters the ground upon which we stand together.[80]

In line with the central thrust of the argument in this chapter, Oliver speaks of the ethical obligation as coincident with an *interruption*. Indeed, the the arrival of the other, which, as we have seen, interrupts the *self*, also, interrupts the *world*.

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[79] Derrida, 'Rams: Uninterrupted Dialogue', p. 158. In the final session of *The Beast and the Sovereign*, Jacques Derrida proposes another two ways of reading this line. See *The Beast and the Sovereign*, vol. II, trans. by Geoffrey Bennington and ed. by Michel Lisse, Marie-Louise Mallet and Ginette Michaud (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), p. 268.
[80] Kelly Oliver, 'The Poetic Axis of Ethics', *Derrida Today*, 7.2 (2014), p. 130.

This section has shown the similarities between the structure of the poetic experience and the act of hospitality. Recall that the poetic experience as conceived in Derrida's 'Che cos'è la poesia?' begins with a 'traversal *outside* yourself, away from *home*, venturing toward the language of the other'. Moreover, this 'traversée *hors de chez soi*', as Derrida is quick to explain, never leads 'back home' (*CCP*, 289, 291) precisely because the traversal over to the other will bring about the end of one's world: 'Die Welt ist fort, ich muß dich tragen'. This is clearly parallel to the interruption or rupture of the *soi* that, as we have seen, is consititutive of the act of hospitality. The so-called master or host must renounce his home upon the arrival of the other. It is also at this moment that the one at the receiving end or the addressee must invent the singular and unconditional law of hospitality. In the absence of a code or programme, the addressee must necessarily invent (in both senses of the word explored above) the mode of reception on the basis of the arrival of the always singular other: 'là surgit la parole poétique'.[81] Central to the interruptive event, the singular 'you' is at the origin of the act of hospitality and the poetic experience: 'You will call poem a silent incantation, the aphonic wound that, of you, from you, I want to learn by heart' (*CCP*, 297).

Turning its attention to Sophocles' *Antigone*, the last section argues that Antigone invents the law of unconditional hospitality by welcoming her dead and estranged brother. It seeks to draw out the full implications of the preceding discussion by underlining the close affiliation between hospitality as the invention of the singular law and the poetic experience of the interruptive arrival of the other.

Inventing Impossible Hospitality: Welcoming the Dead

Derrida's notion of hospitality is one that situates the threshold between the one and the other in a highly indeterminate place. As anticipated above, the borderlines between home and foreign land, and the distinctions between guest and host, friend and enemy, and stranger and barbarian are not clearly defined. If hospitality begins at the borders, then Derrida may be seen to question the existing boundaries where hospitality may be said — figuratively and literally — to take place. For Ginette Michaud, the most striking aspect of Derrida's work on hospitality is his thinking around the subject of the

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[81] Derrida, 'Une hospitalité à l'infini', pp. 116–17.

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[81] Derrida, 'Une hospitalité à l'infini', pp. 116–17.

dead.[82] As she observes, his exploration of hospitality is at its most radical when he explores the Law of hospitality in relation to death, the burial place and the work of mourning. In turning his attention to Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*, for instance, he considers the burial of the *arrivant* in a foreign place and the secrecy surrounding the *locus* of his anonymous and unmarked grave. For Derrida, the burial site of the dead is one of the nostalgias, alongside that of the mother tongue, of people in exile. Describing the last resting place of the family as 'the place of immobility', he maintains that the site of burial is a fulcrum or pivotal point from where the nomad or rootless person measures their distance. Indeed, it is the burial place that 'situates the *ethos*' (*OH*, 87). Both Antigone and her sister, Ismene, are dispossessed of this *ethos* after their father 'enjoins Theseus never to reveal to anyone, particularly his daughters, the whereabouts of his tomb' (*OH*, 93). Speaking of the importance of the burial site, Derrida argues that Oedipus' decision not to disclose the location of his grave deprives his daughters of mourning:

> Without a fixed place, without a determinable *topos*, mourning is not allowed. Or, what comes down to the same thing, it is promised without taking place, a determinable place, so thenceforth promised as an interminable mourning, an infinite mourning defying all work, beyond any possible work of mourning. The only possible mourning is the impossible mourning. (*OH*, 111)

Indeed, the absent *ethos* and *topos* may be seen to contribute, in large part, to Antigone's tragic end.[83]

The opening scene of Sophocles' *Antigone* sees the eponymous character return home to Thebes, only to find a place that may well be described as foreign.[84] Her brothers

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[82] Michaud writes: 'Ce sera même là l'un des traits les plus frappants de l'approche derridienne de l'hospitalité, soit de la penser non seulement à partir du lieu de naissance de l'étranger, mais depuis son avenir, c'est-à-dire la mort, le lieu de sépulture, la hantise, la mémoire et le travail de deuil' (Ginette Michaud, 'Un acte d'hospitalité ne peut être que poétique: Seuils et délimitations de l'hospitalité derridienne', in *Le dire de l'hospitalité*, ed. by Lise Gauvin, Pierre L'Hérault and Alain Montandon (Clermont-Ferrand: Presses Universitaires Blaise Pascal, 2004), p. 36).

[83] For an insightful reading of Antigone as a refugee whose role extends, counter to the dominant critical view, beyond the *oikos,* see Cecilia Sjöholm, 'Naked Life: Arendt and the Exile at Colonus', in *Interrogating Antigone in Postmodern Philosophy and Criticism*, ed. by S. E. Wilmer and Audrone Žukauskaite (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 48–66.

[84] The motif of the foreigner and the stranger recurs throughout the three plays and is one of the central themes in Sophocles' version of the Theban myths. The experience of exile and homelessness as well as the absence of a proper home is touched upon in each of the tragedies. In *Oedipus the King*, for instance, the unwitting hero eventually suspects that he may, in fact, have murdered King Laius and foresees the fate that awaits him:

> [...] *I* am the man
> no alien, no citizen welcomes to his house,
> law forbids it — not a word to me in public,
> driven out of every hearth and home. (*Oedipus the King*, ll. 902–05)

have slain each other in combat and Creon, her maternal uncle, now King, has decreed that the one-time son of Thebes, Polynices, is not to have a proper burial. Just days after the secret burial of her father, Antigone's decision to attempt, in Ismene's view, the 'impossible' by burying her brother ought to be considered in light of Derrida's observation: she refuses to be deprived of yet another mourning. Antigone is steadfast in her decision to observe the customs reserved for the dead. In spite of Creon's resolute decree, she sprinkles dust and pours libations over her dead brother's corpse. Surely, her father's disbelief upon learning that he shall not be buried in Thebes still echoes in her mind: 'But surely they will shroud my corpse with Theban dust?' (*Oedipus at Colonus*, l. 450).[85] Forbidden to observe the burial rituals to honour her father, Antigone is intent on respecting the dignity of her brother's lifeless body.[86] She breaks the law in full knowledge that she may face immediate death.

In this tragedy of compounded antitheses, the realms of the living and the dead are not as distinct as Creon initially presupposes. Few other plays in the Western tradition are so intimately entwined with death from beginning to end. From Antigone's opening speech about the doom that has befallen her family to the closing scene in which Creon's bitter remorse yields a desire for the end of life, death's presence is as relentless as it is overpowering. Indeed, cognates of the word 'death' can be found on almost every page. And, as some have argued, Antigone's actions can be seen to be influenced by her love for the dead rather than the living.[87] Focusing in particular on Antigone's act of welcoming the dead, this section argues that Antigone's 'impossible mourning' compels her to *in-vent* a singular act of poetic hospitality that earns the status of law; not for the living, as we may conventionally think, but rather, and more hyperbolically, for the dead.

The complex kinship ties in the Theban plays are further exacerbated when the two brothers turn against each other. Polynices, though a brother to Antigone, is also an enemy,

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[85] All translations from Sophocles' plays are taken from the Robert Fagles Penguin Books edition (1984). All line number references provided in parentheses after quotations are taken from *Antigone* unless otherwise indicated.

[86] On Judith Butler's astute reading of the troubled kinship ties in the plays, Antigone's act of burying her brother Polynices may be seen to indirectly compensate for her not being able to bury her father (and brother) Oedipus. See Judith Butler, *Antigone's Claim* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), pp. 57–82.

[87] For instance, and to mention but one example, in *Glas*, Derrida speaks about the close tie between the family and the dead that Antigone honours in the following terms: 'If the family's thing is pure singularity, one belongs to a family only in busying oneself around the dead: toilette of the dead, institution of death, wake, monumentalization, archive, heritage, genealogy, classification of proper names, engraving on tombs, burying on tombs, burying, shrouding, burial place, funeral song, and so on' (Jacques Derrida, *Glas*, trans. by John P. Leavey and Richard Rand (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), p. 142).

who imperils the lives of both his sisters when attacking Thebes. In this respect, he may be considered 'the absolute other' or 'the barbarian' (*OH*, 21), in Derrida's words. Having relinquished the family name in waging war against his *own*, he is now without name and his homeland refuses to host his body in its ground. As estranged family member, Antigone's brother is thus also the unassimilable and *uncanny* other. In a direct echo of his father's own predicament, he is simultaneously both kin and foreign, an insider and outsider. Consequently, there is no written law to which Antigone can turn; in Derrida's words, she is 'a single daughter who must keep a singular relationship to unwritten law' (*OH*, 95). Hence, her decision to ignore Creon's edict and honour the (unwritten) laws of the gods. As Derrida writes, 'these written laws [conditional laws of hospitality based on rights and obligations] immediately remind us of the ones that Antigone will have to transgress in order to offer her brothers [*sic*] the hospitality of the land and of burial' (*OH*, 85). It is precisely the unforseeability of this singular situation that necessitates invention; in the absence of a fitting code of conduct to follow, Antigone must perforce invent her own law.

Judith Butler's reading in *Antigone's Claim* dwells on the question of the invention of the law by highlighting the exceptional case of what she paradoxically describes as 'a law of the instant'.[88] In defying state prohibition, she observes, Antigone may be seen to establish a *law*; yet this law lacks the most fundamental characteristic of a law, namely, generalisability:

> And though she [Antigone] claims to act in the name of a law that from Creon's perspective can appear only as a sanction for criminality, her law appears to have but *one instance of application*. [...] the conditions under which the law becomes applicable are not reproducible. This is *a law of the instant* and, hence, a law with no generality and no transposability, one mired in the very circumstances to which it is applied, a law formulated precisely through the singular instance of its application and, therefore, no law at all in any ordinary, generalizable sense.[89] (my emphasis)

The hesitation on Butler's part regarding Antigone's act is significant. As she points out, a law is characterised primarily by its 'transposability' and yet Antigone's *law* does not meet this basic criterion. Having but one 'instance of application', her law recalls Derrida's notion of the unconditional law of absolute hospitality. In elucidating the distinction between the repeatable, conditional *laws* of hospitality and the singular, absolute law of

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88 Butler, *Antigone's Claim*, p. 10.
89 Butler, *Antigone's Claim*, p. 10.

hospitality, Derrida may, in fact, be seen to provide an insight into Antigone's case. Focusing on absolute hospitality, he remarks: '*The* law is above the laws. It is thus illegal, transgressive, outside the law, like a lawless law, *nomos anomos,* law above the laws and law outside the law' (*OH*, 79). In spite of the lawlessness he underlines, Derrida significantly chooses to retain the word 'law' in this admittedly convoluted description of the Law of hospitality.

The unabated interest in and unyielding fascination with Sophocles' *Antigone* over the last two centuries is surely owing, in great part, to its fundamental concern with the law and to Antigone's role as a law-maker. A comprehensive enumeration of the influential commentators on Sophocles' *Antigone* since the 19th century, when Hegel famously lauded it as 'one of the most sublime and in every respect most excellent works of art of all time', is worthy of a book-length study in its own right as George Steiner attests in *Antigones* (1984).[90] Suffice it to mention, from among the philosophers alone, Hegel, Heidegger, Derrida, Butler and Žižek, all of whom have turned their attention, albeit in varying degrees, to Antigone's relationship with the law.[91] As Steiner remarks: 'Whenever, wherever, in the western legacy, we have found ourselves engaged in the confrontation of justice and of law […] we have found ourselves turning to words, images, sinews of argument, synecdoches, tropes, metaphors, out of the grammar of Antigone and of Creon'.[92]

Reflecting on the phenomenon of the countless extant translations of the play, Deborah Roberts pauses on the Greek word *nomos* as an example of a cluster of words in the play that poses problems to translators. Used by a number of characters in different senses, she observes that whereas *nomos* is very often translated as 'law' or 'custom', it

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[90] G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, vol.1, trans. by T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), p. 464.

[91] A cursory overview attests to the diverse and conflicting views that the play has engendered. Hegel locates the tragic element in Antigone's and Creon's antithetical positions on the law, or more precisely, in the clash between divine and human law (Hegel, *Aesthetics*, p. 464). For Heidegger, Antigone's transgression of the law represents the '*unheimliche*' essence of *Dasein* (See Martin Heidegger, *Hölderlin's Hymn "The Ister"*, trans. by William McNeill and Julia Davis (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), pp. 92–111). Speaking of what he calls Antigone's 'law of singularity', Derrida, in an essentially Hegelian vein, argues that death is suspended between 'the dissymmetrical opposition' of the law of singularity and that of universality (Derrida, *Glas*, p. 142). Butler's analysis considers the paradoxical 'law of the instant' in relation to Antigone's act (Judith Butler, *Antigone's Claim* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), p. 10). Whereas for the ever-controversial Žižek, she can be seen as the 'protototalitarian figure' whose refusal to abide by the law is 'effectively mad, disruptive and evil' (Slavoj Žižek, 'Melancholy and the Act', *Critical Inquiry*, 26.4 (2000), p. 666).

[92] George Steiner, *Antigones* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), p. 138.

'does not map neatly onto either'.[93] She adds: 'Its range of meaning includes statutes, ordinances, conventions, rules, practices, and beliefs, but the most basic sense, shared by all these usages, is (in Martin Ostwald's formulation) that of a norm that "is or ought to be regarded as valid or binding by those who live under it"'.[94] In the light of the present discussion, one important instance of the word occurs just before Antigone is immured alive in her grave. The Chorus, in apparent sympathy with her plight, remark that she has chosen death over life of her own volition:

> Not crowned with glory or with a dirge,
> you leave for the deep pit of the dead.
> No withering illness laid you low,
> no strokes of the sword — a law to yourself,
> alone, no mortal like you, ever, you go down
> to the halls of Death alive and breathing. (ll. 909–14)

The Chorus highlight her autonomous decision to descend into the underworld and the uniqueness of the situation: no mortal has ever embraced death so willingly. Rendered by Fagles as 'a law to yourself' and, more recently, in Anne Carson's terse translation as 'you chose to live autonomous', the Greek *autonomos* points not only to Antigone's act of taking the law into her hands but also to her defiance of sovereignty.[95] And yet, on Butler's reading, this act of transgression is coincident with the inauguration of an exclusive law.

It is here that a question arises: What compels the use of the word 'law' in Antigone's case? If, as Butler rightly points out, her "law" is not generalisable, then why not simply call her action an aberration, an exception or, in Ismene's (admittedly naive) view, a crime? In 'Force of Law: The "Mystical Foundation of Authority"' Derrida addresses a similar situation by remarking on the instant of the inauguration of a new law and its concomitant violence. In his examination of Walter Benjamin's 1921 'Zur Kritik der Gewalt', he observes that the founding of a new law is marked by the violence that allows it to institute itself. This originary violence, it would appear, can only emerge from within an existing law; that is to say, it must challenge and disrupt the present legal system.

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[93] Deborah Roberts, 'Reading *Antigone* in Translation', in *Interrogating Antigone in Postmodern Philosophy and Criticism*, ed. by S. E. Wilmer and Audrone Žukauskaite (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 229.

[94] Roberts, 'Reading *Antigone* in Translation', p. 229.

[95] Sophocles, *Antigone*, trans. by Anne Carson (London: Oberon Books, 2015), p. 38.

Reinterpreting Pascal's borrowed phrase 'the mystical foundation of authority',[96] Derrida argues that the mystical is that which *within* the law itself 'suspends law':

> It interrupts the established law to found another. This moment of suspense, this *epokhē*, this founding or revolutionary moment of law is, in law, an instance of nonlaw [*dans le droit une instance de nondroit*]. But it is also the whole history of law.[97]

The *epokhē* or suspension in which the law still has the status of a 'nonlaw' — if not, in fact, of a crime — marks the hesitation between the *anomos* and the *nomos* that both Butler and Derrida highlight. This is the achronic instance of the 'just decision that must rend time and defy dialectics'.[98] The violent act that breaks the law becomes itself 'law' on the strength of its destabilising power. Emphasising this fundamental violence, Derrida adds:

> Since the origin of authority, the founding or grounding [*la fondation ou le fondement*], the positing of the law [*loi*] cannot by definition rest on anything but themselves, they are themselves a violence without ground [*sans fondement*]. This is not to say that they are in themselves unjust, in the sense of "illegal" and "illegitimate." They are neither legal nor illegal in their founding moment.[99]

In an attempt to place Antigone's action within the order of the Law, Butler too stresses the violence inherent within it. Her questions reveal that one cannot *properly* speak of a law in any conventional sense in relation to Antigone:

> What is this law beyond law, beyond conceptualization, which makes her act and her defense in speech appear as nothing other than a breaking of law, a law that emerges as the breaking of law? Is this one kind of law that offers grounds for breaking another kind of law, and can these grounds be enumerated, conceptualized, and transposed from context to context? Or is this a law that defies conceptualization and that stands as an epistemic scandal within the realm of law, a law that cannot be translated, that marks the very limit of legal conceptualization, a breakage in law performed, as it were, by a legality that remains uncontained by any and all positive and generalizable law?[100]

The Antigone case, clearly a *sui generis* one, thus points to the achronic ("*epokhal*", we might say) and violent founding moment of the law.

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[96] Used by Pascal in the *Pensées*, the phrase 'the mystical foundation of authority' comes from Montaigne. Derrida here seeks to 'reinterpret it and retrieve it from its most conventional and most conventionalist reading' (Jacques Derrida, 'Force of Law: The "Mystical Foundation of Authority"', trans. by Mary Quaintance, in *Acts of Religion*, ed. by Gil Anidjar (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 239).
[97] Derrida, 'Force of Law', p. 269.
[98] Derrida, 'Force of Law', p. 255.
[99] Derrida, 'Force of Law', p. 242.
[100] Butler, *Antigone's Claim*, p. 33.

To answer, therefore, the question regarding Antigone's 'law', it is evident that what earns her action the status of a law is precisely her defiance of the sovereign's decree; as Derrida succinctly puts it: 'that which threatens law already belongs to it'.[101] In 'On Cosmopolitanism', he observes that the arrival of the unexpected other urges us to respond in such a way that is 'just' — 'more just [...] than the existing law'.[102] Recall the above-cited explanation by Hägglund on this point: 'justice and the incalculable cannot be dissociated from law and calculation: Derrida explicitly emphasises that our exposure to the incalculable requires us to calculate and that doing justice to a singular other requires us to invent or transform the law'.[103] The need for this invention arises precisely, as we have seen, when the unforeseeable event (which traumatises existing certainties) compels us to face the undecidable. Like Derrida's necessarily *singular* and *unconditional* Law of hospitality, Antigone's law is inextricably bound to the existing statutory law as decreed by the King. The pure act of hospitality is 'invented for the singularity of the new arrival' (*OH*, 83). It is only through the system of laws that is already in place that the Law of hospitality can break through and emerge as a break-through. In an essay that explores Derrida's understanding of ethics in relation to Antigone's responsibility, Eugene O'Brien emphasises the importance of invention:

> [Antigone's] decision deconstructs the law of Creon and is singular and responsible to her own ethics of an intersubjective human bond. Hers is a profoundly ethical decision as, to paraphrase Derrida, there are ethics precisely because there is this contradiction, because there is no rule. There are ethics because the rule has to be invented every time; because the inheritance has to be reinterpreted every time; because it is only in this situation that there can be responsibility.[104]

As the foregoing discussion of Butler's seemingly contradictory phrase, 'law of the instant', has already made clear, the law must be invented 'every time'.

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[101] Derrida, 'Force of Law', p. 269.

[102] Derrida, 'On Cosmopolitanism'*,* p. 23.

[103] Hägglund, 'The Non-Ethical Opening of Ethics: A Response to Derek Attridge', p. 300. Derrida is careful to distinguish between hospitality by right and just hospitality. For instance, drawing on Montaigne's 'De l'expérience', Derrida remarks that 'Laws are not just in as much as they are laws. One does not obey them because they are just but because they have authority' ('Force of Law', p. 240). At the Villanova Roundtable (1994), Derrida explains that 'justice is not the law' and adds: 'justice is what gives us the impulse, the drive, or the movement to improve the law, that is, to deconstruct the law […] Justice is not reducible to the law, to a given system of legal structures'. Jacques Derrida, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, ed. by John D. Caputo (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), p. 16.

[104] Eugene O'Brien, 'Body Politic: The Ethics of Responsibility and the Responsibility of Ethics', in *Interrogating Antigone in Postmodern Philosophy and Criticism*, ed. by S. E. Wilmer and Audrone Žukauskaite (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 98.

In 'Force of Law' Derrida remarks about the essentially revolutionary spirit that characterises such ethical moments. Speaking of the so called '"great" criminal', he observes that this criminal 'is not someone who has committed this or that crime for which one feels a secret admiration, it is someone who, in defying the law, lays bare the violence of the juridical order itself'.[105] He adds: 'The people's shudder of admiration before the "great criminal" is addressed to the individual who takes upon himself, as in primitive times, the stigma of the lawmaker or the prophet'.[106] In a different context, Steiner captures this concisely: 'The letter of the law (Creon) is challenged by the primal spirit and nascent future of the law (Antigone)'.[107] Indeed, Antigone's principled audacity quickly earns her the sympathy and admiration of the community. In an attempt to sway his father's rigid stand, Haemon points out with equanimity what his father refuses to admit:

> The man in the street, you know, dreads your glance,
> he'd never say anything displeasing to your face.
> But it's for me to catch the murmurs in the dark,
> the way the city mourns for this young girl.
> "No woman," they say, "ever deserved death less,
> and such a brutal death for such a glorious action.
> She, with her own dear brother lying in his blood —
> she couldn't bear to leave him dead, unburied,
> food for the wild dogs or wheeling vultures.
> Death? She deserves a glowing crown of gold!"
> So they say, and the rumor spreads in secret darkly... (ll. 773–83)

Therein lies her 'force of law': like a prophet she foresees the corruption that shall befall the city and lays bare Creon's own violations.

Yet in doing so, as her sister is quick to point out in the opening exchange between the two siblings, Antigone attempts the 'impossible'. In fact, this impossibility is closely related to the second understanding of 'invention' discussed above. Derrida's elucidation of the Latinate *in-venire* in 'Psyche' as the instance of the arrival of the other can also be seen at work in Sophocles' play. Apart from having to invent a law where there is none, Antigone also *in-vents* in the sense of letting the *other* in. Significantly, upon approaching his blind father and sister towards the close of *Oedipus at Colonus*, Polynices is identified as 'the stranger' by Antigone:

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[105] Derrida, 'Force of Law', p. 267.
[106] Derrida, 'Force of Law', p. 274.
[107] Steiner, *Antigones*, p. 83.

> Look there — I think it's the stranger coming toward us
> but at least the man's without an escort, father,
> and his eyes are streaming tears,
> he's struggling on his way. (ll. 1411–14).[108]

Imploring his father's support before attacking Thebes, his request is met by a tirade of insults and 'iron curses' (*Oedipus at Colonus*, l. 1595). Oedipus disowns his power-driven son without hesitation. And yet, in spite of her father's palpable anguish at having been exiled by his own sons and Creon's heavy-handed decree, Antigone still chooses to honour 'the stranger'. Cast out of the family and the city, Polynices is clearly an outsider who has wielded his power as master of the house of Oedipus and of Thebes most despotically. Having decided to offer the burial rites to her dead brother, Anitgone also pays her respects to the frighteningly and unassimilable other. Recall, incidentally, Attridge's remark that 'invention is always the invention of the other'.[109]

Ismene, who clearly represents the unquestioning law-abiding citizen, immediately considers her sister's decision as a defiant act of 'madness' (l. 80). Like the *Xenos* in Plato's *Sophist*, Antigone's defiance of Creon's edict is an act of going against the Law of the Father. The following exchange between the last heirs of the house of Labdacus immediately recalls Derrida's words regarding the invention of the impossible:

ANTIGONE	I know I please where I must please the most.
ISMENE	Yes, if you can, but you're in love with impossibility.
ANTIGONE	Very well then, once my strength gives out I will be done at last.
ISMENE	You're wrong from the start, you're off on a hopeless quest. (ll. 103–06)

Those who, like Ismene, interpret the act of transgression as one of madness, fail to see, to use Derrida's words, 'impossibility as condition of possibility'.[110] Indeed, for Derrida, as we have seen, only the impossible can be invented. In relation to Antigone's predicament, this impossibility entails offering the hospitality of burial to her irreplaceable dead brother even if, in turning against his own, he is also the *enemy*. Indeed, in welcoming her dead brother, who is also the hostile other, Antigone arguably *invents* not the unconditional law

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[108] Interestingly, her willingness to offer hospitality to the stranger will, in turn, earn her the same status. In her last appearance on stage, she twice describes herself as a stranger both in the world of the living and that of the dead (l. 940 and l. 955). Shortly thereafter Creon confirms her status as a non-citizen and calls her a 'stranger' (l. 977). The Greek term is *'metoikias'* (rendered as 'metic'), which means a resident alien or, more literally, as the Greek root suggests, someone who has changed residence.

[109] Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature*, p. 43.

[110] Derrida, 'Hostipitality', p. 262.

of hospitality, but the unconditional law of hos*ti*pitality: in offering a resting place for the dead, she ensures her own premature death. Indeed, as many have argued, Antigone's imprudent resilience in the face of death is a confirmation that she has a greater love for the dead than she has for the living. Jacques Lacan views Antigone as the incarnation of 'the pure and simple desire of death'. Martha Nussbaum speaks of the 'odd coldness' that characterises Antigone's dealings with the living and her 'ambition to be a *nekros*, a corpse beloved of corpses'. Judith Butler remarks on Antigone's 'impossible and death-bent incestuous love of her brother'.[111]

In a compellingly striking post-war adaptation, Bertolt Brecht stages Antigone, played by Helene Weigel, with a door strapped to her body from the moment she is apprehended by Creon's guards. As Olga Taxidou has observed, this Brechtian *Gestus* serves to underline the central themes of the play: 'the *oikos* and the *polis*, home and homelessness, inside and outside the law'.[112] Yet it also undoubtedly highlights her role as a portal into the world of the dead. Burdened with the weight of the door (a visual image that, as Taxidou notes, cannot but recall Christ bearing his own cross along the *Via Dolorosa*),[113] Brecht's Antigone is a reminder that from the moment she transgresses the law, she also crosses over to the world of the dead. Thus Brecht's door can be read as a weighty symbol of the threshold that leads Antigone to her beloved deceased kin. The contamination or *miasma* of the two worlds, alluded to on more than one occasion in the play, is most pithily rendered in Antigone's final death speech: 'I descend alive to the caverns of the dead' (l. 1012).[114]

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[111] Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959–1960*, trans. by Dennis Porter and ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), p. 282; Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*: *Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 65; Butler, *Antigone's Claim*, p. 6.

[112] Olga Taxidou, 'Machines and Models for Modern Tragedy: Brecht/Berlau, Antigone-Model 1948', in *Rethinking Tragedy*, ed. by Rita Felski (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), p. 251.

[113] Taxidou, 'Machines and Models for Modern Tragedy', p. 251. For a recent comparative study of Antigone and Jesus Christ, see William Robert, *Trials: Of Antigone and Jesus* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010).

[114] The concern with the contamination of the living and the dead as well as the pollution of the city is made most powerfully towards the close of the play, when the seer, Tiresais, points out to Creon that he has perverted the natural and divinely ordained course of things not only in refusing to bury the dead, but also, and more perversely, in burying the living:

> […] you have thrust
> to the world below a child sprung for the world above,
> ruthlessly lodged a living soul within the grave —
> then you've robbed the gods below the earth,
> keeping a dead body here in the bright air,
> unburied, unsung, unhallowed by the rites. (ll. 1186–90)

For Heidegger, Antigone's pursuit of the impossible exemplifies *to deinotaton* ('the most uncanny') of the much-discussed Choral Ode (known as the 'Hymn to Man') in the first half of the play. Itself an ambiguous term in the original Greek, the word *deinon* has been rendered variously across many languages.[115] Unlike Hölderlin, who opts for the less contestable *ungeheuer* ('monstrous'), Heidegger's 'liminal' translation, in the words of Stathis Gourgouris, famously renders the term as *unheimlich* ('uncanny').[116] Based on the root *Heim* for 'home', the German *unheimlich*, describes the unfamiliar and the foreign. Yet as Freud's seminal essay on the subject, 'The Uncanny' (1919), immediately points out, *unheimlich* is ambivalently bound to its opposite *heimlich* meaning 'familiar' and 'homely'.[117] Hence the 'antithethical meanings' that Nicholas Royle refers to in his book-length study on the subject of the uncanny where he speaks of the 'peculiar commingling of the familiar and unfamiliar' or 'the revelation of something unhomely at the heart of the hearth or home'.[118] The English 'uncanny' is the usually preferred translation for the German *unheimlich*, not least since the root 'can', meaning 'know', retains the distant meaning of something beyond one's knowledge and experience, or, as the translators of Heidegger's *Introduction to Metaphysics* (1935) remark, 'beyond our ken'.[119] It is in this work that Heidegger first turns his attention to *Antigone* in a reading that focuses almost exclusively on the 'Hymn to Man' and the equivocal *deinon*. Remarking on the suitability of his translation he observes:

> We understand the un-canny as that which throws one out of the "canny", that is, the homely, the accustomed, the usual, the unendangered. The unhomely does not allow us to be at home. Therein lies the over-whelming. But human

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[115] Anne Carson's recent, audacious translation of the word provides an excellent overview of the various ways in which the term has been translated in English. She lists no less than ten words, in the form of a column, to capture the polysemy of *deinon*; namely, 'strange', 'terrible', 'clever', 'uncanny', 'wondrous', 'monstrous', 'marvellous', 'dreadful', 'awful', and 'weird'. Sophocles, *Antigone*, trans. by Anne Carson (London: Oberon Books, 2015), p. 42.

[116] Stathis Gourgouris, 'Philosophy's Need for Antigone', in *Does Literature Think? Literature as Theory for an Antimythical Era* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 134.

[117] For a detailed analysis of the meaning of the word unheimlich across various languages, see Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. by James Strachey et al. (London: The Hogarth Press, 1971), vol. XVII, pp. 220–26. Though Heidegger does not refer directly to Freud's 'The Uncanny', he can be seen to make implicit reference to the essay when he remarks, for instance, that the uncanny has nothing to do with situations of 'inhabitual "intensity"' (p. 71) or feelings of 'anxiety' and 'terror' (p. 74). He also adds that we should not think of the uncanny 'as though it were some impression that is made upon us' (p. 90). Page numbers refer to Martin Heidegger, *Hölderlin's Hymn "The Ister"*, trans. by William McNeill and Julia Davis (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996).

[118] Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 11 and p. 1.

[119] Martin Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. by Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 160.

beings are the uncanniest not only because they spend their lives essentially in the midst of the un-canny understood in this sense, but also because they step out, move out of the limits that at first and for the most part are accustomed to the homely, because as those who do violence, they overstep the limits of the homely, precisely in the direction of the uncanny in the sense of the overwhelming.[120]

As the basic trait and proper mode of *Dasein*, the uncanny is manifest in the violent step out of the limits of the homely and the familiar. The traversal into the realm of the unknown is marked by the violent break with the familiar and the confrontation of what Heidegger calls the 'overwhelming'. Focusing on the 'uncanny ambiguity' of *deinon*, he also outlines the incongruity of the opposing meanings of the word, which means both 'awe-inspiring' and 'violent'. On the one hand, he explains, *deinon* is terrible, 'Furchtbare', in the sense of 'the overwhelming sway which induces panicked fear, true anxiety, as well as collected, inwardly reverberating, reticent awe'.[121] Hence, for instance, Fagles's translation of the word as 'terrible wonders' (l. 377) and 'great wonder' (l. 378) as well as Ruth Fainlight and Robert Littman's 'wonderful and awesome'.[122] On the other hand, however, *deinon* also means 'the violent [*Gewaltige*] in the sense of one who needs to use violence'.[123] As Heidegger explains, the word 'violence' should not suggest brutality; rather it is to be understood as the 'basic trait of the human essence' that characterises humanity's way of engaging in the world.[124] As Derrida explains, recalling the focus on ipseity in an earlier part of the chapter, for Heidegger this violence is linked to the 'effractive departure from self in order violently to break open, to capture, to tame'.[125]

In the 1942 *Hölderlin's Hymn "The Ister"*, based on the last series of lectures on Hölderlin, Heidegger presents his most comprehensive analysis of this aspect. Paying close to no attention to Creon, Heidegger's primary focus is Antigone, whom he considers to be the one capable of the 'reckless daring' referred to in the closing lines of the choral ode; and hence, the one who is *to deinotaton*. Expressing their condemnation of the one who

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[120] Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, p. 161.
[121] Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, p. 159.
[122] Sophocles, *The Theban Plays*, trans. by Ruth Fainlight and Robert J. Littman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), p. 151.
[123] Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, p. 160.
[124] Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, p. 161. The translators point out the close etymological connection among three key terms in Heidegger's explication, namely, *das Gewaltige* (the violent), *das Überwältigende* (the overwhelming) and *das Walten* (the sway). See p. 160, fn. 55.
[125] Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, vol. II, p. 288.

steps out of humanity, the chorus pronounce a harsh warning that foreshadows the denouement of the play:

> but the city casts out
> that man who weds himself to inhumanity
> thanks to reckless daring. Never share my hearth
> never think my thoughts, whoever does such things. (ll. 412–16)

In the opening of the play, Antigone symbolically steps out of the domestic setting (her proper place) and exits the gates, entering, in so doing, the male-controlled *polis*. As seen in the above quoted exchange between the sisters, Ismene is quick to warn Antigone of her transgression and vain quest for the impossible. Heidegger pauses at considerable length on this dialogue, which he describes as an 'essential prelude' to the play as a whole.[126] Commenting once again on the difficulty of rendering the Greek in German, Heidegger focuses particularly on Ismene's words and provides the following translation:

> Though you are capable of much, yet your intent directs itself to
> that against which nothing can avail.[127]

According to Heidegger, it is in these words that the essence of the entire work is to be found. Antigone's resolute pursuit of 'that against which nothing can avail' sets her apart from all human endeavour and places her beyond the limit (*atē*). In seeking to offer hospitality to her brother, she embraces the uncanny as both overwhelming and violent-doing. In Heidegger's terse phrase, 'her dying is her becoming homely' ('Heimischwerden').[128]

This conflict is inscribed in the very name of the eponymous character. As Gourgouris remarks, 'the battle for meaning [is] at the nucleus of the name itself'.[129] For on the one hand, Antigone etymologically describes an opposition to life, or, more precisely, an opposition to the propagation of life. The root *gone* meaning 'womb', 'childbirth' and 'generation' is related to the word *genus* for 'race', 'birth' and 'descent'. Betrothed to Haemon and one of the last Labdacids, she is a potential progenitor of a future generation. Yet she gives this no thought, even while claiming, at one point in the

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[126] Heidegger, *Hölderlin's Hymn "The Ister"*, p. 101.

[127] Heidegger, *Hölderlin's Hymn "The Ister"*, p. 98.

[128] Heidegger, *Hölderlin's Hymn "The Ister"*, p. 104. Martin Heidegger, *Hölderlins Hymne "Der Ister"* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1993), p. 129.

[129] Gourgouris, 'Philosophy's Need for Antigone', p. 133.

play, that she is the last descendant of Oedipus.[130] On the other hand, the root *anti-* also means 'in the place of'. Thus, in complete opposition to the first attestation, Antigone can also mean standing in place of the womb and hence, of the mother.[131] Rather than interpreting her action as a desire for death and self-annihilation, as Lacan does, we may view it as a will to offer place where there is none, where it is denied. Closer to Kierkegaard's stance, therefore, she is the figure of the mother who provides the *oikos* — related to both home and tomb in Greek[132] — to her dead brother.[133] She fulfils the impossible work of mourning through what can be described as a liminal and extreme act of hospitality.

Thus, Antigone may be seen to establish the site of the emergence of the law as poetic invention — we may recall Derrida's words (cited above) and claim 'là surgit la parole poétique'.[134] Following Hegel's reading, Derrida concludes that Antigone 'becomes the best representative of ethical consciousness'.[135] Compelled by the unforeseeable interruption of the uncanny other, the ethical act, as we have seen, results in a response that is condemned by the Chorus as 'reckless daring'. Arguably, this is an instance of the 'violent' 'nonethical opening of ethics'. Threatened and imperilled, like the hedgehog on the *autoroute*, the 'subterranean' Antigone — more lowly, in fact, than the catachrestic hedgehog — allows the (br)other to sign. Both wound and inspiration, the encounter with alterity gives birth to the poetic: 'The poem falls to me, benediction, coming of (or from) the other' (*CCP*, 297). Interestingly, this provocative aphorism provides a direct echo of an earlier work in which the subject of the poetic experience of the uncanny other is powerfully broached. Paul Celan's 'Der Meridian' predates Derrida's 'Che cos'è la

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[130] While this has been read as an oversight on Sophocles' part, it may also be considered a deliberate statement by Antigone about her sister's lack of worth. Early in the play she dismisses Ismene's cowardice as unworthy of a true sister and seems to disown her.

[131] Interestingly, Sigmund Freud makes a direct connection between the womb and the fear of being buried alive in his well-known essay 'The Uncanny' (1919). See Freud, 'The Uncanny', p. 244–45.

[132] Derrida plays on this double meaning in the opening to 'Différance' where he famously invokes the silent 'a' in *différance* and remarks that the 'a' 'is not heard; it remains silent, secret and discreet as a tomb: *oikēsis*. And thereby let us anticipate the delineation of a site, the familial residence and tomb of the proper in which is produced, by *différance*, the *economy of death*' (Jacques Derrida, 'Différance', in *Margins of Philosophy,* trans. by Alan Bass (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1982), p. 4). More explicitly and with specific reference to *Antigone*, in *Glas,* Derrida comments on 'the law of the *oikos* (tomb)' and remarks that the managing of the corpse falls to women whose proper place within ancient Greek societies was the home (also *oikos*): 'the erection of the burial place would be the feminine work' (See Derrida, *Glas*, pp. 143–44).

[133] Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life*, trans. by Alastair Hannay and ed. by Victor Eremita (London: Penguin Books, 1992), p. 155.

[134] Derrida, 'Une hospitalité à l'infini', p. 116.

[135] Derrida, *Glas*, p. 174.

poesia?' by almost thirty years. The influence of this specific speech on Derrida's response to the question 'What thing is poetry?' will be outlined in the next chapter. Suffice it, at the close of this chapter, to juxtapose the above-cited sentence to the following paragraph from Celan's speech: 'The poem intends another, needs this other, needs an opposite. It goes toward it, bespeaks it'.[136] As the next chapter makes evident, 'Der Meridian' offers an intriguing — if uncanny — parallel or double, to Sophocles' *Antigone*. Indeed, the motif of *das Unheimliche* in relation to homelessness, exile and denied burial provide a contemporary counterpart to the 2,400-year-old Theban play. In what is inevitably a more poignant exploration of the poetic experience in relation to the impossible work of mourning, Celan also offers a remarkable statement about the ethical relevance of poetry in our time.

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[136] Paul Celan, *Collected Prose*, trans. by Rosmarie Waldrop (Manchester: Carcanet, 2003), p. 49.

Chapter 4

Paul Celan's Abyssal *Unheimlichkeit*

Delivered amidst growing anti-Semitism in post-war West Germany, Paul Celan's 1960 'Der Meridian' acceptance speech for the Georg Büchner Prize is a reflection on the condition of poetry in the immediate aftermath of the horrors of Nazi Europe. The insistent 'heute' ('today') in the fugue-like speech acts as a refrain that situates Celan's thinking strictly within the historical context of the Shoah.[1] Indeed, it is significant that one of its most prominent concerns is with the place for poetry in a time that is characterised by what Celan describes as *unheimlich*, uncanny or, truer to the German sense, unhomely.

In paying homage to Georg Büchner's work, Celan's speech on the occasion of receiving the prestigious award begins with a tribute to his predecessor's work in which he emphasises Büchner's hostility to art. It is through a number of references to Büchner's work that Celan mounts his own caustic attack on the artifice and automaticity of art. The first sentence begins with complete condemnation: 'Art, you will remember, is a puppet-like, iambically five-footed and — a characteristic mythologically vouchsafed for by the reference to Pygmalion and his creation — a childless being'.[2] Alongside the figure of the puppet on the string, the opening paragraphs also mention the Büchnerian figures of the monkey dressed as a carnival barker and the automatons of cardboard and spring as

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[1] Celan's reflection on poetry cannot, in fact, be severed from the date (or dates) from which it emerges and to which it returns as Derrida's well-known reading emphasises. See Jacques Derrida, 'Shibboleth: For Paul Celan', trans. by Joshua Wilner and revised by Thomas Dutoit, in *Sovereignties in Question*: *The Poetics of Paul Celan*, ed. by Thomas Dutoit and Outi Pasanen (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), pp. 1–64.
[2] Paul Celan, *The Meridian: Final Version–Drafts–Materials*, trans. by Pierre Joris and ed. by Bernhard Böschenstein and Heino Schmull (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), p. 2. Subsequent references to this work shall be provided in the main text following the abbreviation *TM*.

representations of the automaticity of art as described in Büchner's *Woyzeck* and *Leonce and Lena* respectively. Cut off from the human, art (*Kunst*) is theatrical, mechanical, and, hence, *unheimlich.* In contradistinction to this lifeless art, Celan proposes what he calls a 'Gegenwort' or 'counterword'. The instance he singles out to exemplify the counterword is taken from the final scene of Büchner's play *Danton's Death* where Lucile, whose husband, Camille Desmoulins, has just been executed, utters the words, 'Long live the king!'. Bringing the play to a close, for Celan this counterword 'cuts the "string"' and 'no longer bows down before "the bystanders and old war-horses of history". It is an act of freedom. It is a step' (*TM*, 3). Considered treasonable by the newly-founded French Republic, Lucile's interjection leads to her immediate apprehension and subsequent death. Uttered in a then emptied *Place de la Révolution*, this 'counterword' emerges as poetry (*Dichtung*), which, unlike art, bears witness to 'the presence of the human' (*TM*, 3). As Michael Eskin puts it, 'Lucile as an allegory of poetry as counter-word — is capable of withstanding, in one way or another, the onslaught and strictures of state power and history in the name of the singularly human'.[3] Thus Celan's most sustained exploration of poetry begins by emphasising the distinction between *Kunst* and *Dichtung*.

In the preliminary drafts of the speech his renunciation of a certain literary tradition is clear:

> In the poem: that, I believe, does not mean — or no longer means — [...] in one of those phonetically, semantically, syntactically over-differentiated language structures assembled from "words" [...]. Not in the poem that sees itself as "wordmusic"; not in any "mood poetry" woven from various "timbres"; not in the poem as the result of word-creations, word-concretions, word-destructions, word-games; not in any new "expressive art form"; nor in the poem as in a "second" reality that would heighten the real symbolically. (*TM*, 55)

Implicit as it remains in its final and evidently more circumspect and cryptic version, the speech can be read as a repudiation of a number of central tenets of the poetic literary tradition. The above quotation reveals a rejection of the conception of poetry as a textual artefact composed primarily of 'words'. It is also critical of the Romantic conception of the poem as lyrical expression as well as of the late nineteenth-century French symbolist poem. Indeed, soon after he rejects the classicist mimetic view of poetry in the speech,

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[3] Michael Eskin, *Poetic Affairs: Celan, Grünbein, Brodsky* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), p. 27.

Celan casts doubt on the Mallarméan absolute poem by calling into question the possibility of thinking 'Mallarmé through to the end' (*TM*, 5). Aligning his thoughts with Büchner's, Celan is increasingly wary of the formalist and, in his view, reductive approach to poetry adopted by some of his contemporaries. This, he felt, was evident in the formalist stance of Stéphane Mallarmé and Gottfried Benn. In his speech he renounces their respective views on poetry as, on the one hand, an exercise in pure sound and, on the other, an inward-looking object. Rather, Celan thinks of the poem as '*en route*' (*TM*, 9), directed outward and heading toward the other.

Like Büchner, Celan associates the tradition with the mechanical automatons that step beyond the human and into the uncanny. The need to dissociate his poetry from such a tradition is apparent in his notes when he remarks: 'For me it is somewhat uncanny to hear, I hear it sometimes, that my poems have something to do with 'artistry': in fact for me nothing like that is involved' (*TM*, 152). Hence, Celan's pressing need to interrogate art and to continue Büchner's 'truly radical calling-into-question of art'. This questioning is an imperative task for the poet: 'a calling-into-question to which all of today's poetry has to return' (*TM*, 5). In the drafts to the speech he describes this questioning as the 'tension' and 'uneasiness' between 'Dichtung' and the nineteenth century 'Lyrik'; a tension which he goes on to compare with 'an uneasiness … in relation to the word literature' (*TM*, 151). In order to distance his poetry from the 'joyfully expressive' and 'loquaciously communicative' lyric (153), Celan retains the use of the word *Dichtung* throughout the final version of the speech. And for Celan the question he must address to renounce what he dismisses as the 'ease of literature' is precisely that of the uncanny of his time.

Far from being limited to the spoken word or the lines on the printed page, Celan's thoughts extend the meaning of poetry beyond the confines of the literary genre or what he calls 'genre-bound poetry' (*TM*, 125). As Raymond Geuss has recently argued, Celan's conception of poetry is markedly distinct from the more prevalent theories of poetry that have shaped the tradition.[4] He remarks that Celan conceived of his poetry as a 'gesture' rather than 'an object-made' and goes on to assert that it is 'poetry-as-concrete gesture, certainly not poetry-as-song'.[5] In a similar vein, speaking of Celan's poetry, Ulrich Baer claims that 'the gesture of the poem must be disruptive and break with existing traditions, genres, and histories' and, more provocatively, that the Celan poem opens itself 'to the

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[4] Raymond Geuss, 'Celan's Meridian', *boundary 2,* 33.3 (2006), pp. 210–12.
[5] Geuss, 'Celan's Meridian', p. 211 and p. 216.

possibility that it will no longer be a poem'.[6] This cannot but recall the Derridean response to the question 'What thing is poetry?' in which the 'break', to use Nicholas Royle's term, with poetry as a literary genre is amply clear.[7] As we have seen throughout this thesis in our analysis of the poetic experience, Derrida, like Celan rejects the notion of *poiesis*. This is evident in a passage we cited in the introduction:

> The gift of the poem cites nothing, it has no title, its histrionics are over, it comes along without your expecting it, cutting short the breath, cutting all ties with discursive and especially literary poetry. (*CCP*, 297)

Derrida's renunciation of the literary tradition is clearly in line with Celan's conception of the poem in 'Der Meridian'. Indeed, the parallels between the two poetological treatises that emerge in the second half of the twentieth-century goes further still. Derrida's concern with the threat of the automaticity embedded in the expression to 'learn by heart', which we discussed at length in Chapter 1, is also in evidence in Celan's rejection of the deadly automaticity of *Kunst*. Moreover, Derrida's conception of the poem as a *dictation* from the other can be seen to echo Celan's insistent use of the term *Dichtung* to describe the poem as '*en route*' towards the other. For Celan this is significantly a 'homecoming' that requires 'a sending oneself ahead toward oneself, in search of oneself' (*TM*, 11). This 'homecoming' provides an echo of Derrida's notion of hospitality as an interruption of the *soi* and the poetic experience as a 'traversée hors de *chez soi*', which we discussed in the previous chapter. Finally, Derrida's reference to the event of the poem that cuts short the breath is an echo of Celan's conception of the poem as an *Atemwende*, a breath turn, or in Nicholas Meyerhofer's evocative translation, 'a solstice of breath'.[8] Arguably, Derrida's remarks about the poem can be seen as a direct response to Celan's 'Der Meridian' — a speech that Derrida would later describe as a 'poem on poetry'.[9]

In his speech, Celan speaks of *Dichtung* in terms of a 'Gegenwort' ('counterword'), an 'Atemwende' ('breathturn'), a step of liberation and an act of freedom. It is significant for the purposes of the analysis in this chapter that all these terms are directly related to *das Unheimliche*, which, as Derrida suggests, 'expresses the essential bearing of the

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[6] Ulrich Baer, *Remnants of Song: Trauma and Experience of Modernity in Charles Baudelaire and Paul Celan* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 162.
[7] Nicholas Royle, *Jacques Derrida* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 129.
[8] Nicholas J. Meyerhofer, 'The Poetics of Paul Celan', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 27.1 (1981), p. 77.
[9] Jacques Derrida, 'Majesties', trans. by Outi Pasanen, in *Sovereignties in Question*: *The Poetics of Paul Celan*, ed. by Thomas Dutoit and Outi Pasanen (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), p. 122.

"Meridian"'.[10] Whereas the critical work on Celan's poetry has given considerable attention to the admittedly important concern with the other,[11] few have focused on the relation between the uncanny and the ethical in Celan's work. Taking the centrality of the concept of the uncanny in this speech as its foremost concern, the chapter begins by underlining Celan's attempt to locate the place for what he calls the 'groundlessness' of the poem within the threatening uncanniness of art (*TM*, 59).[12] It claims that the ethical force in Celan's poetry lies in its power to confront and overcome the uncanny automaticity of art. The second part of the chapter turns to the collection of poems that was published after Celan's acceptance of the Büchner Prize, namely *Die Niemandsrose* (1963), to explore the recurrent motif of the reversal of the cosmos in relation to what Derrida describes, as we have seen in the previous chapter, as an 'interruption' of the world. Finally, the third part of the chapter suggests that the uncanny in Celan's oeuvre can be seen as the ethical counterpart to the aesthetic of the Romantic sublime, which is arguably no longer possible for poetry *today*.

The Abyssal Sky in 'Der Meridian'

In an early draft of 'Der Meridian', Celan remarks about the impact of a particular sentence from Georg Büchner's 1836 novella, *Lenz*, which is based on the last days of the historical figure Jakob Michael Reinhold Lenz, a Baltic German writer of the *Sturm und Drang* movement. Drawing attention to the influence of this sentence on his reflections, Celan writes: 'I must now return to a line […] with which for weeks, even months, as usually happens with lines of poetry, I've kept company against my will, a line that […] already just because of the irrefutability and imperiousness of its presence, knew how to

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[10] Derrida, 'Majesties', p. 124.

[11] See, among some of the more important critics, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Poetry as Experience*, trans. by Andrea Tarnowski (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999); Derrida, 'Shibboleth'; Krzysztof Ziarek, *Inflected Language: Towards a Hermeneutics of Nearness: Heidegger, Levinas, Stevens, Celan* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994); Gerald Bruns, *Maurice Blanchot: The Refusal of Philosophy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997); Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Gadamer on Celan* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997); Michael Eskin, *Ethics and Dialogue: In the Works of Levinas, Bakhtin, Mandel'shtam, and Celan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

[12] The term 'groundless' (*grundlos*) — having both a literal and figurative import — features prominently in Celan's drafts, though not in the final version of the speech. For instance, in an entry in his workbook (dated 22nd August 1960), Celan writes the following list of words:

> '*Wesengrund* (ground of being)
> *Abgrund* (abyss)
> *Urgrund* (origin)
> *Ungrund* (unground)' (*TM*, 192)

become significant' (*TM*, 54). This line, from the opening of Büchner's unfinished novella, describes a Lenz who, crossing the mountains on the 20th January, feels a sudden urge to walk on his head: 'He felt no tiredness, just occasional regret that he couldn't walk on his head'.[13] For the historical Lenz, 20th January 1778 marked the beginning of a period of mental instability, but it also signalled his momentous step of liberation from the strictures imposed by his overbearing father. Hence, the vertigo described in the opening of Büchner's novella represents the state of mind of a Lenz who seeks to assert himself in the artistic world as he breaks ties with the paternal figure. The strained relationship with the father underlines the son's troubled kinship ties. Interestingly, this echoes Derrida's reflection on the *Xenos* who fears he shall be taken for mad for questioning the *Logos* of the father, as we discussed in Chapter 3 in relation to the 'foreigner question'. Citing Plato's *Sophist*, Derrida remarks on the tensions that arise when the foreigner from Elea, on the strength of questioning Parmenides' thesis, turns son and becomes capable of committing parricide. It is here worth recalling the said extract, discussed in the previous chapter, from Derrida's seminar on hospitality:

> He is afraid of being taken for a son-foreigner-madman: "I am therefore fearful that what I have said may give you the opportunity of looking on me as someone deranged," says the translation (literally, mad, *manikos,* a nutter, a maniac), "who is upside down all over, […] a crazy person who reverses everything from head to toe, from top to bottom, who puts all his feet on his head, inside out, who walks on his head".[14]

Closely linked with the theme of paternity and the state of being "foreign", the image of madness in Plato's and Büchner's respective descriptions, is clearly similar. The madman is portrayed, somewhat disconcertingly, as walking on his *head*, and not as would be expected, and perhaps conceivable, on his *hands*.[15] Such, it would appear, is Lenz's predicament whose 'act of freedom' (*TM*, 3), in the words of Celan, is similar to the foreigner who threatens the authority of Parmenides in Plato's dialogue. The evident relation between madness and this necessary *Gegenwort* or *Atemwende* is clear in a passage that follows soon after Lenz's proclaimed desire to walk on his head compels him to take a headlong plunge into the nothingness beneath him:

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[13] Georg Büchner, *Complete Plays, Lenz and Other Writings*, trans. by John Reddick (London: Penguin Books, 1993), p. 141.

[14] Jacques Derrida and Anne Dufourmantelle, *Of Hospitality*, trans. by Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 9 and p. 11.

[15] One is also reminded of one of the many Marc Chagall self-portraits, namely *Painter at the Easel* (1914) in which the artist is standing, quite literally, on his head.

Towards evening he reached the crest of the mountains, the snowfields that led down again to the westward plain, he sat a while at the top. It had turned calmer towards evening; the clouds lay solid and motionless in the sky, nothing so far as the eye could see but mountain peaks from which broad slopes descended, and everything so quiet, grey, increasingly faint; he felt a terrible loneliness, he was all alone, completely alone, he wanted to talk to himself, but he couldn't, he scarcely dared breathe, his footfall rang like thunder beneath him, he had to sit down; a nameless fear took hold of him in this nothing, he was in empty space, he leapt to his feet and flew down the slope. Darkness had fallen, heaven and earth had melted into one. It was as though something were following him, as though something terrible would catch up with him, something no human can bear, as though madness were chasing him on mighty horses.[16]

For both the foreigner and Lenz, the exhilaration of liberation is coupled with the fear it brings as they challenge the word or *Logos* of the Father. In both instances, the so-called madman can be seen as a figure who refuses the authority of the Law. Significantly, it is the subversive act of the foreigner turned son, or son turned foreigner, that destabilises the sovereign power of the *Logos*. Arguably, this countering 'step' (*TM*, 3), to use Celan's terminology, can be seen as the ethical moment in which an existing Law is threatened by the possibility of transgression. As we have seen in the previous chapter in relation to Derrida's notion of unconditional hospitality and Antigone's 'autonomous' law, ethics begins where the law must be *in-vented*.

Celan's dramatic gloss of Lenz's desire to walk on his head is well-known: 'He who walks on his head, ladies and gentlemen — he who walks on his head, has the sky beneath himself as an abyss' (*TM*, 7). This interpretation can perhaps account for the prolonged influence the line was to have on Celan and its integral role in 'Der Meridian'. The word 'countercosmos', used in the drafts, is an apt description of Lenz's experience of the world.[17] Metonymic for the catastrophic experience that he undergoes, the abyssal sky also points towards the absence of what Celan, in the Bremen speech, calls 'the traditional tent of the sky'.[18] Unsheltered by the so called 'traditional tent', poets, Celan claims, are exposed in an 'unsuspected, terrifying way'.[19] It is this exposure to chaos that compels

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[16] Büchner, *Complete Plays, Lenz and Other Writings*, p. 142. In a poem from the 1967 *Atemwende*, Celan speaks of a similar fusion between heaven and earth: 'Heaven- and earth-/acid flowed together'. Paul Celan, *Breathturn into Timestead*, trans. by Pierre Joris (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014), p. 25. Subsequent references to this work shall be provided in the main text following the abbreviation *PJ*.

[17] The note, in its entirety, reads: 'It [poetry] builds, from the direction of death, at the countercosmos of the mortals' (*TM*, 110).

[18] Paul Celan, *Collected Prose*, trans. by Rosmarie Waldrop (Manchester: Carcanet, 2003), p. 35.

[19] Celan, *Collected Prose*, p. 35.

poets to 'carry their existence into language' as they search for reality in the midst of the uncanny. The image of the abyssal sky or heaven, as the German *Himmel* suggests, is a powerful representation of the 'uncanny' that the poet must perforce confront. As Celan writes in his early drafts for the speech: 'the poem [...] arises from the feeling of such unease' (*TM*, 139). Indeed, such unease becomes integral to the poem that is characterised by the 'Atemwende', or 'breathturn' (*TM*, 7). This neologism, used for the first time in 'Der Meridian', demarcates the caesura or interruption of the poem, perhaps, more precisely, it suggests that the poem itself is a caesura. More silence than word, Lenz's gesture can no longer be described in terms of a 'Gegenwort' like Lucile's revolutionary interjection 'Long live the King!' (*TM*, 3). Indeed, Celan remarks: 'His [Lenz's] "Long live the King!" is no longer a word, it is a terrifying falling silent, it takes away his — and our — breath and words' (*TM*, 7). In taking away his breath and words, however, as Derrida argues in relation to Lenz's desire to walk on his head, this act of falling silent gives voice to the other and may thus be seen in relation to what we described, in the previous chapter, as a poetic hospitality that relinquishes power and mastery.

Indeed, in a manner that parallels the potent effect of the Büchnerian sentence on Celan, Derrida finds himself surprised by this line and Celan's own interpretation of it. Speaking in an interview with Elisabeth Weber he is alerted to the evident echo of Büchner and Celan in a sentence from *The Post Card*: 'I no longer cry when you depart, I walk, I walk, on my head of course'.[20] Responding to the question about this striking similarity, Derrida describes it as an unconscious citation, which is itself a manner of walking on one's head:

> [...] in the sentence that you quoted, there was no explicit reference to Lenz or to Celan, but it happened that they spoke there without my even knowing it. That is also a manner of walking on one's head, of not knowing where one is going when one speaks. One is not sure of one's direction precisely because it is the other who is leading the march or the discourse. To walk on one's head means of course to look at the sky, but also to walk upside down, to do the opposite of what one thought one wanted to do. And to lose one's voice or let the other speak is always in a certain way to walk on one's head.[21]

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[20] Jacques Derrida, 'Envois', in *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 43.
[21] Jacques Derrida, 'Passages — Traumatism to Promise', trans. by Peggy Kamuf, in *Points… Interviews, 1974–1994*, ed. by Elisabeth Weber (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), pp. 392–93.

Hence, the sentence that is so integral to Celan's most carefully studied reflection on poetry also imposes itself on Derrida. In an instantiation of what in 'Che cos'è la poesia?' he describes as an renunciation of one's power to sign, the above remark by Derrida reveals that he does not sign; rather, the other signs. The act of walking on one's head, on Derrida's reading, is an act of letting the other speak; or, we may say, an act of hospitality in which, surprised by the words of the other, Derrida is no longer (or not yet) the host.

Lenz's *Atemwende* — his desire to walk on his head — is integral to the path that poetry, in Celan's view, must traverse in order to reach its ground. In 'Der Meridian' Celan initially makes a clear-cut distinction between art and poetry. Art, he writes, in an essentially Büchnerian vein, is synonymous with artifice and automaticity as represented by the puppet, the monkey and the Medusa's head (on which more below). On the other hand, poetry, which, as he famously remarks 'shows, unmistakably, a strong tendency to fall silent' (*TM*, 8), is said to pay homage to 'the majesty of the absurd as witness for the presence of the human' (*TM*, 3). This distinction however, is significantly blurred right after the reference to Lenz's *Atemwende* when Celan claims — somewhat counterintuitively given the opening paragraphs of the speech — that poetry must travel 'the route of art':[22]

> Poetry: that can mean an *Atemwende,* a breathturn. Who knows, perhaps poetry travels this route — also the route of art — for the sake of such a breathturn? Perhaps it will succeed, as the strange, I mean the abyss *and* the Medusa's head, the abyss *and* the automatons, seem to lie in one direction — perhaps it will succeed here to differentiate between strange and strange, perhaps it is exactly here that the Medusa's head shrinks, perhaps it is exactly here that automatons break down — for this single short moment? (*TM*, 7)

The breathturn requires a direct confrontation of art as the uncanny. It is only such a confrontation that can break the automatons and shrink the Medusa's head. In an earlier part of the speech, Celan uses cognates of the word *unheimlich* to describe the artifice of art as represented by the Medusa's head.[23] Remarking on Lenz's comment regarding the

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[22] Celan makes use of a number of spatial metaphors in the speech. In an attempt to locate the place of poetry he uses a vocabulary that, like Derrrida's poetic voyage in 'Che cos'è la poesia?', describes a physical journey. A comprehensive list would include: 'step', 'path', 'route', 'direction', 'travel', 'place', 'topos', 'utopia', 'distance', 'homecoming', 'the place of my origin' and 'meridian'. The evident Heideggerian terminology has led some critics to read the speech as a response to Heidegger's later work on poetry. See especially, Ziarek, *Inflected Language* (1994) and Lacoue-Labarthe, *Poetry as Experience* (1999).

[23] Cognates of the word *unheimlich* are used six times in the speech. Jerry Glenn translates the word, in all six instances, as 'mysteries' or 'mysterious', ignoring, in so doing, the importance of recognising Celan's speech as a significant contribution to the discourse of the uncanny and as a response to Heidegger's own

artist's desire to turn into the Medusa's head to be able to capture nature by means of art, Celan describes this as a step into the realm of the uncanny and hence, a 'stepping beyond what is human' (*TM*, 5). Indeed, the uncanny is the realm of artifice where the monkey, the automatons and art are 'at home' ('zuhause') (*TM*, 5). Alongside these Büchnerian figures, Celan posits his own figure of the uncanny, namely the abyssal sky. It would appear that, for Celan, the abyssal sky is ('today') the figure of the uncanny *par excellence.* Significantly this same image, as we have seen, is invoked by Derrida when he speaks about the ethical event as the interruption of the world. As we noted in the previous chapter in relation to the motifs of interruption and the wound, for Derrida, in the absence of the world, nothing remains but 'the abyssal altitude of the sky'.[24] The reversal of the cosmos, which, as we shall see, figures prominently in Celan's poetry, is central to his understanding of *das Unheimliche*. And Lenz's desire to walk on his head can be seen to designate the demand to confront the cata-strophic, literally, that which is "down turned" like the abyssal *Himmel* beneath his feet.

Entitled 'Catastrophe', Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe's vigilant reading of Celan's speech emphasises, as the title anticipates, precisely the motif of reversal. He argues that the uncanny of art causes an overturning in which the human, 'das Menschliche', is turned away or forgotten.[25] On Lacoue-Labarthe's reading, the estranging act of *mimesis* casts the human into oblivion and causes its forgetfulness. He explains that 'something turns in man and displaces the human, something in man even overturns, perhaps, or turns around, expulsing him from the human'.[26] Hence, his conclusion that *das Unheimliche* is the catastrophe of the human. And hence, the role of poetry, as Celan conceives it, as 'the

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investigation of the uncanny in relation to Sophocles' *Antigone*. Such a translation also fails to pay heed to the important and surely not accidental nexus of words with the common root *Heim* in Celan's speech, namely, 'Geheimnis', 'Heimkehr' and, of course, 'Unheimliche'. Indeed, Celan's use of the word *Geheimnis* in the context of speaking of the poem's openness to the 'mystery [or secret] of the encounter' ('im Geheimnis der Begegnung') is, as a result of Glenn's choice, less powerfully evoked in his translation. See Paul Celan, 'The Meridian', trans. by Jerry Glenn, *Anthology of Contemporary Literature in German*, 29.3 (1978), pp. 32–33 and p. 38.

[24] Jacques Derrida, 'Rams: Uninterrupted Dialogue — Between Two Infinities, the Poem', trans. by Thomas Dutoit and Philippe Romanski, in *Sovereignties in Question*: *The Poetics of Paul Celan*, ed. by Thomas Dutoit and Outi Pasanen (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), p. 158.

[25] Lacoue-Labarthe, p. 47. In his introduction to Hans-Georg Gadamer's essays on Celan, Gerald L. Bruns, in what comes exceedingly close to Lacoue-Labarthe's reading, writes that 'Art is an estrangement, self-estrangement (causing self-forgetfulness) but also estrangement from the human […]. Art is uncanny in the sense of monstrous, the not quite or no longer human, the almost- or once-human'. See Bruns's introduction, entitled 'The Remembrance of Language: An Introduction to Gadamer's Poetics', in *Gadamer on Celan*, trans. and ed. by Richard Heinemann and Bruce Krajewski (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), p. 20.

[26] Lacoue-Labarthe, pp. 48–49.

interruption of art'.[27] This is not to say that poetry is the reversal of the catastrophe, as Lacoue-Labarthe is quick to point out. It does not, therefore, (re)turn the world to the orderly Heideggerian fourfold in an effort to reverse the catastrophe and restore the unity of the earth, the sky, the mortals and the divinities. It is in this light that we must read Lacoue-Labarthe's paradoxical sequitur that 'poetry is not a catastrophe of catastrophe'.[28] More paradoxical still, in fact, is his contention that poetry is an exacerbation of catastrophe:

> [...] because [poetry] aggravates the catastrophe itself, it is, one might say, its *literalization*. This is what the "figure" of Lenz signifies: existence suddenly "released" at the height of catastrophe, the "mortal's" sudden revelation of himself as the one whose existence rests on the abyss — the bottomlessness — of the heavens.[29]

It falls to poetry, then, in traversing the path of art to release itself from the uncanny. Such is the breath-turn (or in Derrida's words, the 'cutting short the breath'), in which silence or the ab*surd* can be heard to resonate. Poetry, for Celan, is a caesura that marks the step from the forgetfulness of automatic art into the realm of the human, however 'strange' ('Fremd') or estranged it may be. It is precisely this instance — however brief — of walking on one's head that marks the ethical force of Celan's poems. If, as we have seen, walking on one's head is a confrontation of the uncanny as the abyssal sky, then the ethical moment in Celan's poetry begins with the violence of this catastrophe. Recall that Derrida argues (as Martin Hägglund reminds us) that ethics entails a violent opening. In Celan's oeuvre this violence emerges in what Werner Hamacher, in an essay on the figure of 'inversion' in Celan, aptly describes in terms of a withdrawal of the world. Focusing primarily on Celan's language, Hamacher maintains that the prevalent figure of falling in Celan's work designates the failure of language to articulate, and hence capture, the withdrawal of a world. In the absence of 'world', he argues, the only basis from which the poem may speak

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[27] Lacoue-Labarthe, p. 44. On Lacoue-Labarthe's reading, this interruption is similar to the Hölderlinian 'counter-rhythmic rupture' or 'pure word' as expounded in his notes to the Sophoclean tragedy *Oedipus the King*. Here, Hölderlin defines the moment of tragic reversal within the play in terms of a caesura and argues that the rhythm of the play is determined by the timing of the occurrence of such a caesura. He argues that in both *Oedipus* and *Antigone*, the reversal in the rhythm is constituted by Tiresias' speeches. Friedrich Hölderlin, *Hölderlin's Sophocles*, trans. by David Constantine (Northumberland: Bloodaxe Books, 2001), pp. 63–64. For Lacoue-Labarthe's reading of the Hölderlinian undertone in Celan's speech see *Poetry as Experience*, p. 49.

[28] Lacoue-Labarthe, *Poetry as Experience*, p. 51.

[29] Lacoue-Labarthe, *Poetry as Experience*, p. 51.

is the abyss and the only language that may thus speak forth is, in his words, a language '*stood on its head*' (my emphasis).[30]

When Celan remarks that poetry must take the route of art, he points in the direction of the uncanny as the abyssal sky that estranges the human. Yet, on the other hand, he also speaks of another type of strangeness; namely, that which, on the contrary, bears witness to the presence of the human. This coincidence of apparently antithetical strangenesses that keep company on the same path is integral in this speech: 'perhaps there are two strangenesses — close together, and in one and the same direction' (*TM*, 7). Seeking to distinguish one from the other, Celan chooses to stop using the word 'strange' ('Fremd') to designate the strangeness of poetry and opts for 'the other' — more specifically, 'the totally other' ('ganz Anderen') (*TM*, 8). It is, of course, significant that the two are seen to converge and that Celan takes care to point toward their difference ('to differentiate between the strange and the strange' *TM*, 7). Such 'proximity', as Derrida writes, 'is there for contrast'.[31] Indeed, in speaking of the two types of strangeness in the same breath, Celan underlines two important facets in relation to poetry. Firstly, poetry must traverse by way of the uncanny, rather than keep itself safely detached from it. The uncanny is what poetry must confront if it is to bring about the necessary turn, or more strongly, to borrow Lacoue-Labarthe's word, the 'revolt' that characterises poetry.[32] In other words, the uncanny must be endured for the revolt to take place.[33] As Geuss remarks: 'Celan gives as an example that of a madman walking through the mountains who suddenly finds that he experiences the heavens as below him, and the earth above, so that he wants to walk on his head. He has experienced an individual version of the *Atemwende*,

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[30] See Werner Hamacher, 'The Second of Inversion: Movements of a Figure through Celan's Poetry', in *Premises: Essays on Philosophy and Literature from Kant to Celan*, trans. by Peter Fenves (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), p. 338. See pp. 337–87, especially pp. 363–75.

[31] Derrida, 'Majesties', p. 108.

[32] Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe remarks at length about the common path that art and poetry traverse and stresses the revolutionary impulse of poetry: 'Inside art, poetry would succeed — perhaps — in withdrawing from art; it would exit art within art. Thus we must think, in art's greatest intimacy and as the intimacy itself, of a sort of spacing or hiatus. A secret gaping. […] And perhaps for art (the *Unheimliche*), this intimate gaping would be precisely what ceaselessly "estranges" the strangeness of art (of the strange): precisely the caesura of art, the spasm — furtive, hardly felt — of the strange. In which case poetry would not be, in art-outside-of-art, the flaw or failing of art, of language: let us say, silence. But rather the pain of art (of language). Hence, the aggravation of the catastrophe, which is strictly speaking, a revolt (Lucile, Lenz)'. *Poetry as Experience*, p. 54.

[33] This is reminiscent of the well-known remark in Celan's Bremen speech in relation to language, where he remarks that language had to pass through 'the thousand darknesses of death-bringing speech' before it could speak; only then, as the paradoxical conclusion asserts, could language find itself '"enriched"' by it all. Paul Celan, *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*, trans. by John Felstiner (London: W. W. Norton, 2001), p. 395. Subsequent references to this work shall be provided in the main text following the abbreviation *JF*.

which in some sense defines poetry, a revolution, the world turned upside down'.[34] Poetry thus conceived is the response to the 'interruption' of the world or, in Hamacher's terms, its 'withdrawal'.

Secondly, poetry runs the risk of being caught up in the artifice and strangeness of art and must therefore strive to set itself free from the uncanny. Such is the risk that poetry must take if it is to bear witness to the presence of the human. It is, indeed, paradoxical that Celan should come to the conclusion that in order for poetry to bear witness to the presence of the human it must go by way of the uncanny that forgets the human. Such is the narrow path, or 'Engführung' — as the poem by that title has it — on the way to poetry (*JF*, 118). Indeed, 'Engführung' or 'Stretto', is the poem that marks, according to John Felstiner, Celan's step 'into inaccessible terrain'.[35] The reference to the narrow path also emerges in the highly evocative quatrain from the opening poem of the 1959 volume *Sprachgitter*, 'Voices' ('Stimmen') that Celan cites in 'Der Meridian'. The stanza brings together the motif of the poet's act of walking on his *hands* (in a slight modification of the Lenzian desire) and the straits through which he must pass:[36]

> Voices from the nettle-route.
> *Come to us on your hands.*
> Whoever is alone with the lamp
> has only his hand to read from.
>
> (*TM*, 11)

The motif of reversal emerges, once again, this time in the shape of a disconcerting image of a poet who walks along a nettled trail on his hands in search of disembodied voices. Celan here insists that only this counter and difficult way can provide poetry, *today*, with its *raison d'être*.[37]

For Celan the majesty of poetry rests on its supreme endeavour of bearing witness to the presence of the human and to its here and now ('Gegenwart'). In what remains

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[34] Geuss, 'Celan's Meridian', p. 210.

[35] John Felstiner, *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 118.

[36] This recalls Celan's assertion — in an otherwise remarkably tentative speech characterised by the almost obsessive (if ironical) repetition of 'perhaps' — that 'The poem is lonely' (*TM*, 9).

[37] In an earlier poem '*Matière de Bretagne*' the speaker of the poem is also portrayed as walking on his hands. Here, the figure of reversal is closely related to the search for identity and the need for re-cognition. The stanza, enclosed in parentheses, reads:
> (Did you know me,
> hands? I walked
> the forked path you pointed out, my mouth
> spat its gravel, I walked, my time,
> a wandering snow-wall, cast its shadow — did you know me?) (*JF*, 108)

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surely the most ambiguous sentence of the speech, Lucile's counterword is said to pay homage to 'the majesty of the absurd as witness for the presence of the human' (*TM*, 3).[38] Her suicidal 'Es lebe der König!' is a *Gegenwort* because it 'cuts the "strings"' of the inanimate puppet that is wholly under the puppet master's control. It refuses, therefore, to bow down to Sovereign power. In the seemingly contradictory phrase, 'the majesty of the absurd', Celan transposes the sovereign theme of Lucile's interjection into the realm of poetry. Derrida describes this transference as a '*dynamic*' in which Celan attributes sovereign power to poetry.[39] In questioning the concept of the sovereign and redefining it in terms of the majestic power of poetry, Celan, in Derrida's view, hyperbolises the power of poetry. He calls this move on the poet's part a 'hyperbolic bidding up on sovereignty' in which the 'might' and 'power' of poetry are shown to be more sovereign than the pseudo-sovereignty of the King.[40] It would appear that the poetic power ('*potis*') within hospitality, as discussed in the previous chapter, is also central to Derrida's discussion of Celan's 'Der Meridian'. In a word, poetry has the power to put 'sovereignties in question' — as the title to the Derrida volume of essays on Paul Celan underlines. Kelly Oliver's elucidation on this point is relevant: 'Whereas sovereign majesty erects itself up as the most, the grandest, the supreme, His Highness, poetic majesty opens up onto an uncanny otherness that unseats any such self-certainty and deflates the illusion of sovereign erection. Whereas the performance of sovereignty claims to possess the power and potency of the 'I can', the performance of poetry undoes the 'I can' and renders it powerless and impotent'.[41] Incidentally this recalls the discussion of the Cixous's poetic *puissance*,

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[38] The ambiguity of the line is further compounded in translation. Some translators have emphasised 'human presence' whilst others have emphasised 'the present'. Derrida favours the latter translation and argues that the 'present' should be 'recognized in its singular privilege' ('Majesties', p. 117). For instance, John Felstiner's translation reads: 'Homage here [through Lucile's words] is to the Majesty of the Absurd, testifying to human presence' (*JF*, 403). Jerry Glenn's translation, on the other hand, stresses the present: 'They are a tribute to the majesty of the absurd, which bears witness to mankind's here and now'. Celan, 'The Meridian', trans. by Jerry Glenn, p. 31.

[39] Derrida, 'Majesties', p. 117.

[40] Derrida relates the modern political leader with the rigidity of the erect stance. For Derrida, this erect and erected height, as opposed, for instance, to the lowly, humble hedgehog in 'Che cos'è la poesia?' and the 'uncrowned' snake in D. H. Lawrence's poem — the subject of an entire seminar by Derrida (*The Beast and the Sovereign*, vol. I, pp. 236–49), is central to political sovereignty. The coercive force of the sovereign is maintained and exercised from a position of supreme height that pervades all aspects of life, including, and especially, death. Jacques Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, vol. I, ed. by Michel Lisse, Marie-Louise Mallet and Ginette Michaud and trans. by Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), pp. 206–23.

[41] Kelly Oliver, 'The Figure of the Girl in *The Beast and the Sovereign*', *Derrida Today*, 4.2 (2011), p. 276.

which, as Derrida argues, does not derive from *pouvoir* but from her ability to renounce the power to sign '*I*' and make the other sign.

It falls to poetry to confront and challenge the absolute power of the monarch or sovereign ruler. It is, indeed, Lucile's interjection — a parodic salute to the King — that Celan singles out as a *Gegenwort* and as an instance of poetry. Questioning the powers that be, it proposes a different form of sovereignty that Derrida, after Celan, describes as the 'hyper-majesty of poetry'.[42] In fact, in 'Der Meridian' the act of bearing witness is closely associated, albeit in what remains restrained in the final version of the speech, with the National Socialist rule that rose to power in 1930s Germany. Soon after describing Lenz's desire to walk on his head as an *Atemwende*, Celan goes on to remark that the newness of poems today is that they should be mindful of dates: 'each poem has its own "20th January"' (*TM*, 8).[43] The 20th January, as many have noted, marks the anniversary not only of Lenz's journey across the mountain range, but, equally significant for Celan, that of the Wannsee Conference in which the Final Solution to the Jewish Question — in Derrida's words, the 'sovereignly, arbitrarily genocidal decision' — was agreed upon.[44] In another subtle reference to the Nazi atrocities, Celan significantly equates the unspeakable horrors of the Shoah with the uncanny:

> These [the Büchnerian figures] are doubtlessly — and Büchner's voice invites the proposition — old and even ancient forms of uncanniness. That I worry these with such stubbornness today [*sic*], probably is in the air — the air we have to breathe today. (*TM*, 5)[45]

As Adrian del Caro rightly points out, Celan reminds his German listeners 'that the air of 1960 is the same air that carries the ashes of the crematoria'.[46] He goes on to explain: 'If early definitions of *Unheimlichkeit* had stressed conditions that are unfamiliar, foreign, and inhospitable, then the fate of millions who are eternally denied a home in the earth should,

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[42] Derrida, 'Majesties', p. 117.

[43] Taking the date as its foremost concern, Derrida's 'Shibboleth' argues that the date is integral to the poem as conceived by Celan because it gives the poem 'the chance to speak to the other' (Derrida, 'Shibboleth', p. 8).

[44] Derrida, 'Majesties', p. 113.

[45] Cf. Waldrop's translation: 'This uncanny [as it emerges in Büchner's work], Büchner's voice leads me to suppose, takes us far, very far back. And it must be in the air we have to breathe — that I so stubbornly insist on it today' (Celan, *Collected Prose*, p. 43).

[46] Adrian del Caro, 'Paul Celan's Uncanny Speech', *Philosophy and Literature*, 18.2 (1994), p. 214. Nicholas Meyerhofer also remarks on this when he notes the 'subtle yet quite direct allusion to his Jewish consciousness, specifically to the cremation of millions of Jews, whose remains are now 'in the air we breathe'. See Meyerhofer, 'The Poetics of Paul Celan', p. 77.

when reflected upon, convey an inkling of the uncanny'.[47] Implicit as it remains, Celan's remark seeks to underline that the nature of the uncanny *today* cannot be severed from the expulsion and eventual destruction of European Jewry in the 20th century.

Thus, the reversal of the cosmos, in Celan's mind, is closely connected to his plight as a dispossessed Jewish poet in post-war Western Europe. The groundlessness of a Lenz who set out on his 20th January is akin to the Jew's experience as he recounts it in the enigmatic short story 'Conversation in the Mountains'. Written after a missed encounter with Theodor Adorno, the passage centres around the encounter between two Jews, Klein and Gross, who are both in search of someone with whom to have a conversation, which, ironically (given the title of the prose piece), does not transpire. The mountainous region that serves as a setting is immediately reminiscent of Lenz's journey across the mountains.[48] Significantly, the Büchnerian character Lenz is invoked in this narrative to underline the homelessness of the Jew in a manner that runs parallel to Büchner's *Lenz* when, towards the end of the novella, the eponymous character compares himself to 'the wandering Jew'.[49] In what may be considered a step in the direction of Büchner's path, Celan writes: '[...] the Jew, what does he have that is really his own, that is not borrowed, taken and not returned — so he went off and walked along this road, this beautiful, incomparable road, walked like Lenz through the mountains'.[50] Of particular importance here is the correspondence in Celan's mind between the Lenzian figure, now clearly identified with the Jew (and hence Celan himself), and the groundlessness of the poem: 'The poem like man does not have sufficient ground' (*TM*, 88). The poem searches for its ground, we read in 'Der Meridian', and the Jew too, fated to a life of perpetual wandering, searches in the frail hope of finding a permanent abode.[51] Working on both a literal and figurative level, the search for ground can be seen as a confrontation with the Derridean aporetic structure of the ethics of hospitality, even before *there is ground* for hospitality. In

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[47] Adrian del Caro, 'Paul Celan's Uncanny Speech', p. 214.

[48] This is reminiscent of Franz Kafka's short story 'Excursion in the Mountains', which Celan translated into Romanian after the war.

[49] Büchner, *Complete Plays, Lenz and Other Writings*, p. 157.

[50] Celan, *Collected Prose*, p. 17.

[51] The identification between Lenz and the wandering Jew is spelt out in a letter to Hermann Kasack, dated 16th May 1960. Celan writes: 'Roughly a year ago, in August 1959, after a longish stay in the mountains I wrote a small (a very small) story: 'Conversation in the Mountain' [*sic*]. And it said somewhere in it, unsuspectedly and surprising for me too, something about a Jew who, like Lenz, walked through the mountains... Some months later, after many hours spent on Kafka's writings, I had to read and interpret Büchner with the students at the Ecole Normale Supérieure. And here, in Lenz, he returned, the eternal Jew...' (*TM*, 222).

what follows the motif of reversal as it emerges in Celan's poetry, most prominently in *Die Niemandsrose*, shall be explored in relation to what Derrida has described in terms of the interruption of the world. It will be argued that it is precisely within the abyssal groundlessness that the ethical demand of the Celanian poem can be seen to emerge.

Abgrundvers: Celan's *Unheimlich* Poetry

The motif of the uncanny abyssal sky from Celan's 'Der Meridian' speech emerges in his poetry through a reversal of the earth and the heavens, or what may be called an upheaval of the cosmos, and, as the etymology of the word suggests, of the world order. It seems worth invoking Ovid's opposition between the cosmos and chaos in the first book of the *Metamorphoses* to elucidate this Celanian inversion, not least since it makes the obsolete meaning of chaos as 'abyss' resonate.[52] In the story of creation, Ovid portrays the chaos that preceded the separation of the four Empedoclean elements:

> [...] None of the elements kept its shape,
> and all were in conflict inside one body: the cold with the hot,
> the wet with the dry, the soft with the hard, and weight with the weightless.[53]

In Celan one witnesses a precipitation into the world of Ovidian chaos through the inversion of the two supposedly fixed and distinct realms of the earth and the sky. Such that Lenz's desire to walk on his head, now that the earth is suspended above him and heaven is at his feet, is made possible. Heidegger's orderly presentation of the fourfold of the world (the earth, the sky, the mortals and the gods) is thus clearly refused. Indeed this chaos signals the instant when, to recall the last line from Celan's poem 'Vast Glowing Vault', 'Die Welt ist fort' ('The world is gone'). As Derrida observes in relation to the possible meanings of the phrase 'the end of the world' in his analysis of this line, what comes to an end is 'a *cosmos*, an arrangement, an order'.[54] Recurrently and persistently, in Celan's poetry, a heaven is located below an earth that hovers amidst the clouds. It is, therefore, no longer possible to maintain, as Heidegger does in 'Building Dwelling Thinking', that '"on the earth" already means "under the sky"'.[55] Focusing on these instances of reversal in his poetry, this part of the chapter shall reveal that it is precisely in

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[52] Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. by David Raeburn (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 5.
[53] Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, pp. 5–6.
[54] Jacques Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, vol. II, trans. by Geoffrey Bennington and ed. by Michel Lisse, Marie-Louise Mallet and Ginette Michaud (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), p. 260.
[55] Martin Heidegger, 'Building Dwelling Thinking', in *Poetry*, *Language*, *Thought*, trans. by Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), p. 147.

the reversal of the cosmos that we may locate Celan's *Atemwende*. These instances evidence Celan's own traversal through the uncanniness of art and mark the ethical demand of the poem. In countering the automaticity of art, the poem reaches the abyssal open where ethics may be said to begin or to have to begin again (and every time anew). As Celan succinctly remarks, 'The time of programmatic explanations is over — we are alone' (*TM*, 153). In the face of catastrophe where there are no ready ethical codes to follow, 'Die welt ist fort'.

One of the earliest and perhaps best known instances of such a reversal is to be found in the poem Celan remains most known for, the iconic and eternally haunting 'Todesfuge'.[56] Immediately in the first stanza, we read of graves being dug in the air where one does not lie cramped because it is, in the words of the later poem 'In die Ferne', 'geräumig' or 'roomy' (*JF*, 113).[57] This motif is repeated like a refrain throughout the poem with one important change in the development of the fugue. Whereas the first two references to 'ein Grab in den Lüften' in each of the first two stanzas describe the act of digging graves in the air, the subsequent final two references describe the graves as belonging specifically to Jewish victims. This shift is evident in Michael Hamburger's translation, which retains the initial impersonality of Celan's German 'man' as well as the more intimate address in the subsequent 'dann habt ihr' at the close of the poem.[58] The translation of the first refrain reads: '[...] we dig a grave in the breezes there *one* [man] lies unconfined'.[59] What follows is clearly more directly related to the victims: 'then a grave *you* will have [dann habt ihr] in the clouds there one lies unconfined' (*MH*, 62; my emphases).

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[56] And yet one that, as numerous commentators have remarked, he would come to view with much caution following a prevalent critical reception that ignored the content of the poem and relished merely in its form and music. Soon after its publication one critic wrote that the poem 'escapes the bloody horror chamber of history [...] to rise to the ethereal domain of pure poem'. This, alongside other such comments, compelled Celan to forbid its publication in further anthologies and its recital in public readings. See Paul Celan, *Paul Celan: Selections*, ed. and with an introduction by Pierre Joris (California: University of California Press, 2005), pp. 20–21.

[57] In Celan's poetry, the reference to *Raum* — in its various inflections — is closely related to the predicament of the wandering and homeless Jew. 'In die Ferne', for instance, the 'geräumig' house that is sought is described as an asylum in which one can breathe freely (*JF*, 113).

[58] Jerome Rothenberg is also sensitive to this shift from the more neutral to the personal. His translation of the first two refrains in the poem reads: 'we scoop out a grave in the sky where it's roomy to lie'. *Paul Celan: Selections*, ed. by Pierre Joris, pp. 46–47. On the contrary, John Felstiner's translation renders the first two references as follows: 'we shovel a grave in the air where *you* won't lie too cramped' (*JF*, 31; my emphasis); thus bringing in the more personal address earlier on in the poem.

[59] Paul Celan, *Selected Poems*, trans. by Michael Hamburger, (London: Penguin Books, 1996), p. 62. Subsequent references to this work shall be provided in the main text following the abbreviation *MH*.

Significantly, the two voices of the poem — that of the speaker who identifies himself with the 'we' who shovel the earth and that of the SS who spits out the commands at the grave diggers and the musicians — come to an accord towards the end of the poem. In the third stanza, or movement, of the fugue, the harshness of the command to dig the earth deeper, 'Er ruft stecht tiefer ins Erdreich' (*MH*, 62), takes on particular stress in Celan's potent recital of the poem through the staccato effect created as the syllables are carefully parsed and slowly drawn out to lay greater emphasis on the severity of the demand. The contrapuntal voice of the poem, however, insists that the graves are to be found in the air and not, as is proper and as the command demands, in the earth. It is only in the antepenultimate stanza that the two voices of the poem can be heard to echo one another in designating the air as the resting place for the murdered Jews. The harshness and perversity of the SS is powerfully conveyed: '[...] he calls out more darkly now stroke your strings then as smoke you will rise into air' (*MH*, 65). This order is followed by the gentle voice of the speaker that admits to his people: 'then a grave you will have in the clouds there one lies unconfined'. For the first time in the poem, the grave in the air (or the clouds) is directly linked to the mass deportation and subsequent murder and incineration of the many victims — mostly Jewish — in the Nazi death camps. This ethereal realm is the only (non-) place that the Jews are *given* as a gift as the ironic choice of the verb 'schenkt' suggests: '[...] he sets his pack on to us he grants [schenkt] us a grave in the air' (*MH*, 64–65).

The uncanniness of this description lies in what may be called the literalisation of the trope at the centre of the poem's refrain. Indeed, what appears to be metaphorical in the earlier part of the poem is here revealed to be a literal description of the (non-)burial of the Jews. This becomes clear — if clarification is needed at all — through the reference to the smoke rising up to the sky. The crude literalness of what had thus far appeared in the innocuous guise of a metaphor is evident in the undoing of the very figure of the apparent trope of 'ein Grab in der Luft'. Celan's emphatic denial of the use of metaphor in relation to this specific poem is recorded in a letter to Walter Jens, dated 19th May 1961, in which he also refers to the ungrounded charges of plagiarism by Claire Goll who, in the wake of her husband's death (the poet Ivan Goll who was a personal friend of Celan's), mounted a searing attack that put the originality of Celan's work in doubt: 'The "grave in the air" —

my dear Walter Jens, in *this* poem, God knows, that is neither borrowing nor metaphor'.[60] For here Celan turns his attention to the many victims of the Third Reich whose bodies were not laid to rest in the ground, but rather mechanically incinerated in the ghastly crematoria that have come to symbolise the horror of the Nazi regime. The poem thus commemorates an uprooted people that are denied both a land during their lifetime and a place of burial after their death.[61] As Rochelle Tobias observes, the Hebrew and Yiddish phrase for burial ground or cemetery suggests a continuation of life in the next world: *beth olam*, literally translated, means 'the house of eternity'.[62] What Celan seems to stress in the poignant refrain of graves suspended in mid-air is that for those like Sulamith — whose 'aschenes Haar' brings the poem to its close — the house of eternity is also refused them.

The numerous instances in which Celan hints at this uncanny reversal of the world can hardly be developed fully or summarised comprehensively in this chapter. Suffice it to say that each of the nine collections published between 1952 and 1976, reiterates, on more than one occasion, the displacement of an entire people whose fate is characterised by the eternal plight of the wandering Jew through recourse to various images that bring together the theme of homelessness with the motif of the ethereal realm. From 'the stranger's cloud-hair' in the first collection *Mohn und Gedächtnis* (1952) to the 'Nomadforb' in the opening poem of the posthumous *Zietgehöft* (1976), the preoccupation with homelessness is returned to with poignant insistence.[63] The powerful evocations of this exilic and unearthly

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[60] Quoted in John Felstiner, *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 177. In his notes to the speech, Celan remarks that the haunting 'black milk' in '*Todesfuge'* is not a metaphor either. He writes: 'Black milk of morning: that's not one of those genitive metaphors as they are presented to us by our so-called critics, to keep from approaching the poem; it is no longer a figure of speech or an oxymoron, it is reality' (*TM*, 158). In yet another remark regarding the Nazi literalisation of what appears to be mere metaphor, Celan's forceful condemnation of Nazi atrocities is unusually explicit. In what was originally planned as part of 'Der Meridian' speech and subsequently discarded, he speaks about his hometown university and the pride of its Jewish students in particular; he concludes: 'Greater Germany knew how to bury this pride — this, like the poem, is in no way to be understood as a metaphor' (*TM*, 184).

[61] Traditional Jewish ritual requires that a dead person's body is guarded or watched over (*shemira*) until the moment of burial that should not be unduly prolonged since such a delay is considered a humiliation of the dead. As Henry Abramovitch explains, 'Jewish burial practice, since the fourth century C.E. rabbinic reforms, places great emphasis on speed, simplicity, and an explicit confrontation with the facts of finitude. Ideally, a person should be buried, garbed in white, before nightfall, certainly within the compass of a day's twenty-four hours. […] Once death has occurred, the honor due to the dead requires that the deceased be handled with care, watched over and treated always with respect. In this regard, the body is compared to an invalid Torah scroll, which, although no longer fit for ritual use, must be accorded due respect and ultimately buried'. See *20th Century Jewish Religious Thought* ed. by Arthur A. Cohen and Paul Mendes-Flohr, (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2009), pp. 132–33.

[62] Rochelle Tobias, *The Discourse of Nature in the Poetry of Paul Celan* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), p. 66.

[63] The citations are taken from the poems 'In Ägypten' (*JF*, 36–37) and 'Wanderstaude' (*PJ*, 402–03) respectively.

existence constitute one of the most recurrent motifs in Celan's poetry and emerges in varied representations. These include the many references to the air, plummeting stars, the many constellations (as potentially other worlds) and abyssal heavens. In another instantiation, Celan depicts floating and weightless people — or 'urn beings' as one poem puts it — as well as objects, most prominently stones, that hover in the skies defying the law of gravity.[64] The concern with gravity dates back to the early collection of aphorisms and parables — 'Gegenlicht', or 'Counter-light', first published in 1949. The last entry deals specifically with the Law of Gravity and portrays an audience that is only willing to believe the Law of Gravity when the man who has been trying to teach it all long defies the law and floats in the air.[65] In yet another allusion to this unhousedness, Celan doubts the location of the heavens — 'Which heaven's blue? Below? Above?' (*JF*, 98), he asks in the ekphrastic poem 'Unter ein Bild' on the late Van Gogh work 'Wheatfields with Crows' (1890), which itself echoes the lines from one of the Emily Dickinson poems Celan translated around that time:

> The Heaven below the Heaven above —
> Obscured with ruddier Blue — [66]

This is further developed in poems that repeatedly turn to the figure of the abyss through images of deep chasms and unfathomable heights.

Some of the most sustained elaborations of this pressing theme are to be found in three poems from the 1963 *Die Niemandsrose* collection, namely 'Radix, Matrix', 'Hüttenfenster' and 'In der Luft'. This volume of poetry — dedicated to Celan's mentor and 'brother' Osip Mandelstam — presents Celan's most direct and profound reflection on Jewish uprootedness. As Katya Garloff observes in the chapter 'Celan's Revisiting of Eastern Europe', these poems focus primarily on Celan's increasing sense of alienation in the late 1950s and early 1960s. This pressing concern, she argues, coincides with Goll's charge of plagiarism and with the growing anti-Semitism in post-war West Germany. It is,

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[64] The poem 'Landschaft mit Urnenwesen' also describes conversations held 'from smokemouth to smokemouth' (*JF*, 256–57).

[65] The entry reads as follows: 'He taught the Law of Gravity, furnished proof after proof, but people turned deaf ears. Then he took off into the air and, floating there, repeated the lesson. Now people believed. But nobody was surprised when he did not come down again'. Celan, *Collected Prose*, p. 14.

[66] Emily Dickinson, *The Complete Poems*, ed. by Thomas H. Johnson (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), p. 370. Bianca Rosenthal notes that there is almost no information regarding Celan's translations of the existing eight Emily Dickinson poems other than the fact that they were published in 1961 in the German journal *Die Neue Rundschau*. Entitled '*Acht Gedichte*', the poems feature without the original English text, and oddly without acknowledging the poet of the original works. Bianca Rosenthal, 'Paul Celan's Translation of Emily Dickinson's "Because I could not stop for Death—"', *The Emily Dickinson Journal*, 6.2 (1997), p. 134.

in fact, around this time that Celan writes to his friend, the Bukovinian poet Alfred Margul-Sperber (8th February 1962), and describes himself as 'a "rootless" *Steppenwolf* with recognizably Jewish features'.[67] As Garloff demonstrates, Celan's concern is specifically related to the displacement of the *Ostjuden*. This is evident in the many references to Eastern European places and people that are interspersed throughout the collection.

The Latin title of the poem 'Radix, Matrix' immediately introduces the deep-seated uncertainty around the question of origin — in fact, both root and womb can stand, metonymically, for the concept of origin. The conversation between the speaker of the poem and the addressee stretches over an abyssal distance and reaches the speaker 'vom Abgrund', literally, from the place without ground. Celan addresses his murdered mother who speaks to him from an 'up-Hurled' homeland: an image that, like the 'Grab in der Luft' in the earlier poem, imagines the absence of a resting place for the dead as a world in reverse. Unlike the earlier more personal elegies in which Celan's sole concern is his mother,[68] in this poem, in which the addressee remains implicit, Celan portrays the mother as one among the countless other victims of the genocide — 'jenes Geschlecht', 'that stock', in Felstiner's translation (*JF*, 167); but also, through the polysemous possibilities of the word, 'generation', 'race' and 'lineage'. The poem bears witness to his own personal loss as well as the communal loss suffered by an entire people. In 'Shibboleth' Derrida notes that the exterminated race is figured not only in the uprooting of race, but also, as the German word *Geschlecht* indicates, in the uprooting of sex.[69] The suggestion is that both the existing race as well as potential generations to come are annihilated. If in other poems we read of 'black flakes', 'black milk', 'black earth' and 'bloodblack',[70] here Celan portrays an entire people as 'black':

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[67] Quoted in John Felstiner, '"All Poets are Yids": The Voice of the "Other" in Paul Celan', in *Demonizing the Other*, ed. by Robert Wistrich (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 251.

[68] Among the more poignant early ones, one can mention 'Winter', 'Nearness of Graves', 'Black Flakes' and 'Aspen Tree'; all notable for the candour with which Paul Celan addresses his mother. This is evidently less explicit in the later lyrics where the direct address to the 'mother' is significantly absent.

[69] Derrida, 'Shibboleth', p. 55.

[70] In the poems 'Schwarze Flocken' (*JF*, 15), 'Todesfuge' (*JF*, 31), 'Schwarzerde' (*DY*, 77) and 'Huriges Sonst' (*MH*, 329) respectively.

> Who,
> who was it, that
> stock, that murdered one, that one
> standing black into heaven:
> rod and testis — ?

<div align="center">(JF, 166–67)</div>

The poignant parenthetical stanza that follows conveys a people bound to (and by) a legacy of rootlessness:

> (Root.
> Root of Abraham. Root of Jesse. No One's
> Root — O
> Ours.)[71]

<div align="center">(JF, 166–67)</div>

As in the poem 'Psalm' from the same collection and the neologism that gives the collection its title (*Die Niemandsrose*), 'No One' ('Niemands') can here be read as both pronoun and noun. Celan makes this distinction clear in the aforementioned short prose piece 'Conversation in the Mountains' (1959) where he writes that he who speaks, speaks because 'nobody and Nobody' hears him.[72] The ambivalence in this poem seems to momentarily suspend the Jewish people between the nothingness of the pronoun 'no one' and the possibility opened up by the anonymous *proper* noun 'No One' — perhaps, an as yet unnamed or nameless patriarch who is yet to come.

Speaking of the importance of the lietmotif of roots in Celan's work, Vivian Liska remarks that one of the most significant metaphors in the twentieth century is precisely the metaphor of rootedness: 'the idea — transferred to humans — of being organically connected to a region, a landscape, a soil'.[73] This connection, she explains, was made all the more problematic for the Jewish Diaspora who were prohibited from purchasing land well into the twentieth century.[74] For Celan, she notes, the experience of a life in exile compels him to return, again and again, to the question of roots. Indeed, what emerges in Celan's poetry is the disconcerting reversal of roots that must perforce, in the absence of a

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[71] In Franz Kafka's aforementioned short story 'Excursion into the Mountains' the lonely narrator's use of 'no one' as both a pronoun and a noun bears a clear resemblance to Celan's play on the word in this context. Kafka's narrator initially bemoans the fact that 'no one' accompanies him or helps him, only to imagine a scenario in which he is physically surrounded by 'a party of No-one-at alls'. By the end of this one-paragraph story, the narrator, now joined by the 'No-one-at alls', can barely suppress his elation. See Franz Kafka, *The Metamorphosis and Other Stories,* trans. by Joyce Crick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 8–9.
[72] Celan, *Collected Prose*, p. 20.
[73] Vivian Liska, '"Roots Against Heaven": An Aporetic Inversion in Paul Celan', *New German Critique*, 91 (2004), p. 42.
[74] Liska, p. 44.

ground, turn upward. As Liska observes, in the poem 'Ich hörte sagen', the roots of the poplar turn eerily heavenward before they disappear altogether.[75]

In 'Radix, Matrix', the concern with the roots and homeland of a people is seen through the prism of a possible heaven as alternative world. Rather than looking upward, however, the pathway to heaven requires a downward movement toward an abyssal heaven.[76] A similar downward movement or descent into heaven is found in two poems from Celan's early period. In 'Matière de Bretagne' 'the slopes fester heavenward '(*JF*, 108–09), whereas in 'Wohin mir Das Wort', the word falls 'into heaven's ravine', Felstiner's translation of 'Himmelsschlucht' — a striking neologism that arrestingly captures the reversal of the earth and the skies (*JF*, 194–95). 'Radix, Matrix' sees the 'there' of the abyssal heaven and the 'here' of the world of the living come to unison at its close. The present 'here', reminiscent of Celan's insistence on the importance of *Gegenwart* in 'Der Meridian', refers not only to the Shoah, but more immediately to the years following the unspeakable atrocities of 'the Final Solution' in which Celan was deeply distressed by clear signs of a growing anti-Semitism. 'What must we Jews yet endure?' he writes to Nelly Sachs in a letter from this period (20th February, 1960).[77] In the last two stanzas of the poem, the 'there' and 'here' are seen to conflate to suggest that the supposedly separate worlds — of the living and the dead — are indeed one and the same.

> Yes,
> as one speaks to stone, as
> you
> with my hands thrust
> there and into nothingness, so
> it is with what's here:

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[75] Liska, p. 52. She also notes that in using the word 'poplar', *Pappel* in German, in 'Ich hörte sagen' and 'Notturno', Celan plays on the possible etymological root that links the poplar to *populus*, or people. Such a reading further accentuates the theme of the displacement of the Jews in 'Ich hörte sagen', for instance, where the second stanza reads:
> I saw my poplar descend to the water,
> I saw how its arms grasped down in the deep,
> I saw its roots pray heavenward for night. (*JF*, 53)
See Liska, p. 50.

[76] Werner Hamacher notes how Friedrich Hölderlin, and Heidegger after him, comment on the possibility of falling upward and observes that Celan may well have had both authors in mind. See Hamacher, 'The Second of Inversion', pp. 354–55, fn. 14.

[77] Paul Celan and Nelly Sachs, *Paul Celan, Nelly Sachs: Correspondence,* trans. by Christopher Clark and ed. by Barbara Wiedemann (New York: Sheep Meadow Press, 1995), p. 17. In alluding to anti-Semitism, in another letter to Nelly Sachs from this period, he speaks of the 'more ghostly and mute no-longer and once-again' (p. 10). Thus his concern with a post-war Germany that refuses to acknowledge the atrocities of the past ('mute no-longer') and that perpetuates them in more subtle yet nonetheless ever present ways ('once-again').

> even this
> spore bed gapes,
> this
> Downward
> is one of the wild-
> blooming crowns.
>
> <div align="center">(JF, 166–69)</div>

As Werner Hamacher observes, the metaphor at the end of the poem recalls Psalms 132:18: 'His [David's] enemies will I clothe with shame: but upon himself shall his crown bloom'.[78] Yet the lineage that goes back to Jesse's son, he remarks, has now been irrevocably broken: 'the crown that is announced to David and his *Geschlecht* is [...] no longer one that blooms over him and that could be imparted to him from outside'.[79] In light of the poem's concern with Judeocide this downward movement of the fertile soil into an abyssal chasm offers no hope for the future of the survivors. The complete annihilation of a people — 'rod and testis' as a previous stanza asserts — leaves little 'room' for the image of the fertile soil to suggest the possibility of a new beginning. Rather, the 'spore bed' is figured in a downward descent and equated with the now 'insubstantial' — as Hamacher notes — crown of David.[80] Indeed, the poem 'Alchemical' from the same collection, which deals specifically with cremation and the dispersion of ashes, imagines the lost lives as 'Luftkronen' or 'air-crowns' circling weightlessly in mid-air.[81] It appears that Celan not only bears witness to the many lost lives, but also crowns them in an attempt to honour the unburied, and hence, dishonoured, dead. Describing the movement of the 'air-crowns', the closing lines of the poem 'Alchemical' confer sovereignty on the dispersed ashes:

> Huge. Gray. Track-
> less.
> Re-
> gal.
>
> <div align="center">(DY, 51)</div>

In 'Radix, Matrix' the crown, symbolic of regality, is offered to the addressee of the poem — his mother — as well as to all the *Geschlecht*. In Jewish symbology, the crown

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[78] Hamacher, 'The Second of Inversion', p. 372.
[79] Hamacher, p. 372.
[80] Hamacher, p. 372.
[81] Paul Celan, *No One's Rose*, trans. by David Young (Grosse Pointe Farms: Marick Press, 2014), p. 51. Subsequent references to Paul Celan's poems from this volume will be indicated within parentheses after the abbreviation *DY*.

symbolises royalty and honour, and traditionally it was customary to include, among other symbols, a crown on a Jewish tombstone as a sign of honour for the deceased.[82]

One of the most explicit references to the tragic plight of the wandering Eastern Jew in Celan's oeuvre is found in the poem 'Hüttenfenster' ('Tabernacle Window') where a number of motifs that foreground the expulsion of a people are brought together in the powerful opening lines:

> The eye, dark:
> as a tabernacle window. It gathers
> what was a world and still is: the wander-
> East, the
> Hovering Ones, the
> Humans-and-Jews,
> the Cloud Crowd, it pulls
> magnetically on you, Earth, with
> heart fingers:
> you come and you come,
> dwell, we shall dwell, something
>
> — a breath? a name? —
>   (*JF*, 197)

The ominously disembodied eye of the opening line surveys the displaced Jews from a vantage point and gathers the world that 'was' and 'still is', that is, the absent world of the wandering Jew. The ever-present 'eye' of Celan's poems is here, in its darkness, compared to a tabernacle window.[83] The word 'tabernacle' recalls the portable sanctuary carried by the Israelites during the exodus and is etymologically derived from the Latin diminutive for *taberna* meaning 'tent' or 'hut'. The word later came to refer to a temporary dwelling that can be moved and that is constructed of branches or canvas. Celan's concern with the absence of a grounded dwelling place is evidently foremost in this poem. The Jews are portrayed as a wandering, hovering 'Cloud Crowd' ('das Volk-vom-Gëwolk') whose desperate search for a dwelling place is underlined by the contemplation of other constellations as possible abodes.

The pathos-laden address to the 'Earth', followed by the image of the 'heart-fingers' feeling for the earth, emphatically points to the desire for a physical place to call

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[82] Interestingly, prior to the WW1, the individual parts of the Austrian Empire, including Celan's native Bukovina, were called *Kronländer* or crown lands.
[83] As Felstiner notes, the word 'eye' is the most frequently used noun in Celan's entire oeuvre. Felstiner, *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew*, p. 107.

home. Speaking of the bane of nationalism in 'A Kind of Survivor', George Steiner suggests that the Jewish exile-identity need not be considered an affliction. Identity can be grounded in the 'free play of the mind and the anarchic discipline of dreams'.[84] For Steiner, the Jew has an exemplary role in showing that 'whereas trees have roots, men have legs and are each other's guests'.[85] In this poem Celan clearly finds no consolation in such a view. Rather, the poem everywhere denies the possibility of taking solace in one's displacement. Indeed, the almost desperate voice of the poem seems to try to persuade itself that the possibility of reaching an abode is near: 'Earth, [...] / you come and you come, / dwell, we shall dwell'. The hopeful eye, described in the process of an endless going round in search — above and below — of a groundedness, reaches out as far as the Alpha Centaurus and Arcturus, two of the most luminous stars in the southern and northern celestial hemispheres respectively. Far from accepting the exilic existence of the Jew, this poem poignantly scours the entire cosmos for a dwelling place:

> goes, goes around,
> looks about,
> looks down below,
> looks up above, far away, looks
> with its eye, fetches
> Alpha Centaurus, Arcturus, fetches
> a ray of light from the graves,
>
> goes to ghetto and Eden, plucks
> the constellation that he,
> a human, needs so as to dwell here
> among humankind […]

(*JF*, 197–99)

Indeed, the search is relentless and the repetition of 'goes' in the next stanza further accentuates the need to identify a specific location: '*goes* to ghetto and Eden', '*goes* to Aleph and Yud and *goes* farther' (my emphases). The ending of the poem brings the erratic wandering of the poem and its urgent restlessness to a standstill. This cessation is coincident with the building of the star of David. And though it only flares up 'once', it

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[84] George Steiner, 'A Kind of Survivor', in *Language and Silence*: *Essays 1958–1966* (London: Faber and Faber, 1967), p. 177.

[85] Steiner, 'A Kind of Survivor', p. 177. Wary of what the State of Israel represents, Steiner claims that Jews may indeed find strength rather than encumbrance in not being rooted to a fixed place. He adds: 'The Jew has his anchorage not in place, but in time, in his highly developed sense of history as personal context. Six thousand years of self-awareness are a homeland' (p. 175). This seems to be echoed in a Celanian fragment from the notes of 'Der Meridian' where he writes: 'The homeland outcasts […] In the thought of that and what and how they were outcast, lies the actual homeland' (*TM*, 200).

marks the moment when the poem's repeated use of the word 'goes' ('geht') is deliberately replaced with 'stand' ('steht') — a word that occurs with frequent insistence in Celan's poems.[86] This standing or 'dwelling', to borrow Hamburger's translation of the verb, also brings the darkness at the opening of the poem to an end as it finds residence in the Hebrew *Beth*.[87] The temporariness of the hut or tabernacle of the first stanza gives way to the permanence of the house:

> Beth, — which is
> the house where the table stands with
>
> the light and the Light.
> (*JF*, 199)

Yet the question regarding the foundation of the house remains. Can the permanence being sought be found in the constellation, in the Hebrew letters — 'Aleph and Yud' — or in the Star of David? The insubstantiality of each of the possibilities that the closing lines of the poem open up undercut the rootedness associated with a 'house'. It is after all, the *Yod* that marks the sudden end of the Hebrew Aleph-Bet in this poem, and not as would be expected the last letter *Tav*. The letters 'Aleph and Yud' demarcate the first letter and the tenth letter respectively. Significantly, in a poem that reflects on the fate of a 'Cloud Crowd', Celan chooses to bookend the alphabet with the smallest Hebrew letter and the only one that is suspended in mid-air: the *Yod*, that bears an unmistakable phonic resemblance to the derogatory anti-Semitic slur *yid* that designated the fate of so many innocent lives. Commenting on the displacement of the East European Jew in the years leading to and following the Third Reich, Tobias argues that 'Hüttenfenster' 'seeks to recreate a Jewish horizon' where there is none. She adds that the poem 'seeks to restore a celestial sphere that could serve as the basis for the Jewish community even if it is remote and inaccessible'.[88] It is perhaps precisely this ethereal realm that characterises the

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[86] Most memorably and notably in Celan's poem 'Mandorla', from *Die Niemandsrose,* where the verb *steht* occurs 14 times in almost as many lines (*JF*, 173).

[87] Unlike Felstiner and Young who translate the word as 'stand', Hamburger interestingly opts for the English verb 'to dwell'; a choice that alerts us to the relation between standing and dwelling in a number of Celan poems and that is perhaps best captured in the later poem 'Steinschlag' (from the posthumous *Schneepart* published in 1971), namely, 'heimstehn'. Paul Celan, *Poems of Paul Celan*, trans. by Michael Hamburger (London: Anvil Press Poetry, 2007), p. 242. Pierre Joris translates this as 'home-standing' (*PJ*, 382–83), whereas Ian Fairley opts for the phrase 'stand the ground' (Paul Celan, *Snow Part/ Schneepart*, trans. by Ian Fairely (Manchester: Carcanet, 2007), p. 125).

[88] Rochelle Tobias, *The Discourse of Nature in the Poetry of Paul Celan*, p. 66.

insubstantial *Beth* of the poem and returns to the origins of the Tabernacle as temporary dwelling place for God during the exile of the Israelites.

The poem that brings the final cycle of poems in *Die Niemandsrose* to a close, 'In der Luft', returns to a number of important motifs from the early 1960s. Like 'Radix, Matrix' and 'Hüttenfenster', this poem confronts, to recall Derrida's apt phrase, 'the abyssal altitude of the sky'. Ending the collection with an evocatively poignant tone of despair, it marks the beginning of a period of difficult silence for Celan. It would be four years — the longest interval in Celan's post-war publications — before the appearance of *Atemwende* in 1967. Published shortly after the delivery of 'Der Meridian', 'In der Luft' is the only poem in Celan's entire oeuvre to bring together the central concerns of his major meditation on poetry. The 'meridian', the 'uncanny', the 'homecoming', the 'Here and Today' as well as the concern with what drifts 'in the air', as the title anticipates, are brought together in a poem that can be considered Celan's direct confrontation with his own poetics.

The opening lines return to the motif of airy roots that paradoxically merge into something earthly and substantial in the sky: the designated realm for 'the banned' and 'the burned' (*JF*, 211) in Felstiner's translation, which provides a faint echo of the more cacophonous near homophones of the German original: 'Verbannte' and 'Verbrannte':

> In the air your root stays on, there
> in the air.
> Where earthliness clusters, earthy
> Breath-and-Clay.
>
> <div align="center">(JF, 211)</div>

The homeless Pomeranian at the centre of Celan's poem holds on to the memories of his childhood 'Maybeetle song' and motherly love, which recall some of the recurring motifs in Celan's early post-war poems. Yet such positive recollections are ominously intertwined with the far from idyllic realities of the immediate and ineluctable present. This rare one line of wholesome reminiscing is followed by the crude confrontation of the 'here and today': 'the cold winterhard/ syllables' of his dispossessed existence. The meridian, which as Celan writes at the close of his speech may be seen to offer the possibility of a momentary sojourn in an otherwise exilic life lived in perpetual abeyance, is here presented in motion. The imaginary line that forms a circle that passes through the Earth's North and South poles provides a point of reference precisely because (in spite of being

arbitrarily defined) it is fixed. Used as an indicator of longitude, it is an integral tool for mapping; as del Caro remarks, the meridian is 'a locus from which we can determine our bearings'.[89] Celan's choice of the term as the title for his Büchner speech is certainly not accidental. It speaks of the hope, however frail, against a life of permanent displacement in a speech where spatial terms hover between their literal and figurative sense. In this poem even such tenuous hope is shattered as the 'meridians wander' uncannily around the homeless figure. Here, Celan undercuts the possibility of placing his 'finger on the map' and locating a specific geographical location to designate as home, as he does at the close of 'Der Meridian' (*TM*, 12). Arguably, this evocation of catastrophe is an instance of what Derrida describes as the interruption of the world. The sky and the earth are not distinct realms, the roots take ground in the air, the meridians wander and the tentmakers pitch their tents amidst the stars.

Indeed, the second half of the poem presents a homecoming ('heimgekehrt') scene that undermines the supposed joyous event at every turn. The close of the poem remarkably brings together a series of motifs that emerge in Celan's reflections on exile in general and the plight of the *Ostjuden* during the Nazi regime in particular:

> gone home again to
> uncanny anathema
> that gathers the dispersed, those
> led through the star-desert soul, the
> tentmakers up there in the zone
> of their gazings and ships,
> the tiny sheaves of hope
> with a rush of archangels' wings, of destiny,
> the brothers, the sisters, those
> found too light, too heavy,
> too light on
> cosmic scales in their blood-
> defiling
> fruitful womb, the lifelong aliens
> spermatically crowned with stars, heavily
> camped in the shoals, the bodies
> embanked in swollen heaps, — the

[89] Adrian del Caro, 'Paul Celan's Uncanny Speech', p. 211.

ford-beings, whom
the clubfoot of the gods
comes stumbling over — by
whose
star time too late?

<div align="center">(JF, 211–13)</div>

This potent summation of the expulsion, exilic existence and subsequent annihilation of the Jewish people sees Celan's only use of the word 'uncanny' ('unheimlichen') in this collection. Coupling the root word *Heim* in near succession in the words 'heimgekehrt' and 'unheimlichen', the concern with an abode for the eternally alien and alienated is evidently salient in this poem. In what is partly, if only momentarily reminiscent of a dreamy Marc Chagall landscape peopled with floating beings, the focus of Celan's poem, in this second half, appears to be on the living. The tentmakers' upward gaze and hopeful prayers — reminiscent of 'Hüttenfenster' — seem to suggest the possibility of survival through the desert crossing. Yet it soon becomes apparent that death casts its ominous shadow at the close of the poem. The 'dispersed' are not the ones who are scattered across the lands in the Jewish Diaspora but rather, the already dead 'urn-beings' — whose remains are scattered *in der Luft*. Symbolically 'crowned with stars', they are the aerial counterparts of the more explicitly rendered swollen, weighted down bodies in mass graves by the banks of a river; forgotten by the gods of the earth and the sky. In an eerie testimony of the catastrophe that befell his people, Celan commemorates the unspent lives of those deemed unworthy on the 'scales' of the earth by the then dominant power in Europe.

Each of the three poems elucidated above may be read as an act of testimony that honours the dead who lay cramped in anonymous mass graves or whose remains were dispersed as smoke into the air. As Rochelle Tobias notes, Uta Werner has suggested that the poems themselves may be viewed as graves for the victims of the Shoah whose scattered ashes never found rest.[90] Like Antigone, therefore, the Celan poem may be seen

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[90] Rochelle Tobias provides a translation of Uta Werner's remark in her work *Textgräber: Paul Celans geologische Lyrik* (1998) regarding the poem as a site for the dead: 'This missing site gives rise in Celan's work to the salvaging power of language, which does not merely represent the dead like a gravestone, but which would seem to recreate the dead literally in the world of the text'. See Tobias, *The Discourse of Nature in the Poetry of Paul Celan*, p. 5. Pajari Räsänen quotes two letters in which Celan describes 'Todesfuge' as a 'tomb'. In a letter to Rolf Schroer, dated 25th October 1959, he writes: 'Die Todesfuge ist ein Grabmal'. In a letter from the same period to Ingeborg Bachmann (12th November 1959) he speaks of the poem as his mother's only grave. See Pajari Räsänen, *Counter-figures: An Essay on Antimetaphoric Resistance: Paul Celan's Poetry and Poetics at the Limits of Figurality* (Helsinki: Helsinki University Printing House, 2007), p. 183.

to offer hospitality for the dead. Yet as Tobias argues in relation to Celan's work in general, his poems 'do not seek to surmount their displaced condition', rather they 'aim to amplify their uprooted condition by comparing themselves to landscapes in upheaval'.[91] As the analysis in this section has shown, this upheaval or reversal of the cosmos is closely entwined with the condition of exile and the desperate search for a home or abode. Arguably, a consolatory ending to these 'pain-laden' or 'schmerzlichen' (*JF*, 10) elegies would annul the very possibility of an ethical encounter with the other through a confrontation of the uncanny. More importantly, in relation to this discussion, finding the open and 'free ground', to recall the words of 'I have cut bamboo for you', would restore the world to its supposed order without compelling the necessary confrontation of the groundless or *without ground*. In what is arguably the most hopeful poem in *Die Niemandsrose*, Celan's 'I have cut bamboo for you', addressed to his son Eric, ends on a heartening note as it reassures him that he may live in 'free ground' and that 'the cane that roots here, tomorrow / will still be standing' (*JF*, 185). Yet such an optimistic view remains the exception both in this collection and in his oeuvre as a whole.

Indeed, it is Celan's neologism 'Abgrundvers' or 'abyssverse', from the 1967 *Atemwende* poem 'Harbour', that provides a fitting description of his poetry. In the 1958 Bremen speech, Celan famously uses the metaphor of the 'Flaschenpost' to describe the poem's desperate need for an encounter with another and the hope of reaching 'a shoreline of the heart'.[92] Clearly indebted to Osip Mandelstam's essay 'About the Interlocutor' (1913), the figure of the message in a bottle appears far too wholesome for a poetry that wrenches its tortured syllables from the silences it must traverse.[93] Thus the word *Abgrundvers* may be read as Celan's own retrospective description of the ever-thinning chasmed lines and stanzas of his more mature verse. Rather than merely emphasising the journey toward the other, the *Abgrundvers* acknowledges the near certainty of remaining without ground. The uninhabitable site in Celan's poems, 'at once home and hiatus', in

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[91] Tobias, p. 6.

[92] Paul Celan, *Collected Prose*, p. 35.

[93] In this famous and oft-cited essay, Mandelstam speaks about the similarities between a message in a bottle and the poem. He writes: 'Like the poem, the letter isn't addressed to anyone in particular. Nevertheless, both have an addressee: the letter's is the person who will accidentally notice the letter in the sand; the poem's is "a reader in posterity"' (p. 60). See Osip Mandelstam, 'About the Interlocutor', in *Selected Writings*, trans. by Sidney Monas (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1977), pp. 58–64. For an insightful reading of the influence of Osip Mandelstam on Paul Celan's work, see Michael Eskin, *Ethics and Dialogue: In the Works of Levinas, Bakhtin, Mandel'shtam, and Celan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 113–61.

Andrew Zawacki's apt description, is the result of having traversed, not only '*hors de chez soi*', but the uncanny catastrophe of his time.[94]

Hence Celan's parallel between the poem and man: 'The poem like man does not have sufficient ground' (*TM*, 88). It is in this light that the remarks in his 'Der Meridian' drafts regarding the 'Jewification' of the poem as an ethical demand become clear. In a note that Celan must have known he would not include in the final version as he penned it, he equates, in an unusual self-consciously half-sarcastic tone, what he calls 'Jewification' with the task of writing and understanding poetry. In words that immediately recall Marina Tsvetaeva's well-known axiom that 'All poets are Jews', which Celan cites in Russian as epigraph to the poem 'And with the book from Tarussa' (*DY*, 153), he writes:

> Not by speaking of offense, but by remaining unshakably itself, the poem becomes offense — becomes the Jew of Literature — The poet is the Jew of Literature — One can jewify, though that happens rarely, yet does happen from time to time. I believe jewifying to be recommendable — hooknosed-ness purifies the soul. Jewification that to me seems to be a way to understanding poetry [...]. (*TM*, 131)

The difficulty and scarcity of *Verjuden* is related to the inability not only to confront the other, as many critics have argued in relation to Celan's poetry, but also to the inability to walk on one's head. The groundlessness that has been emphasised in this chapter thus far reflects the ethical indecision in the face of the *unheimlichkeit* of a world in which the Law itself has gone mad. In the context of the central thrust of this argument, the groundlessness that has been the main subject in this section can be seen as opening up the possibility for the ethical instance of unconditional hospitality. Arguably, this groundlessness is metonymic for the 'interruption' of the world that is coincident with the beginning of ethics. It is in the absence of 'world', as Derrida's reading of the Celan's last line from 'Vast Glowing Vault' maintains, that 'I must carry you'. Turning its attention to the ethical import of Celan's confrontation of the uncanny *Abgrund*, the final section of this chapter claims that the insistent motif of the reversal of the cosmos can also be seen as a repudiation, on Celan's part, of the Romantic notion of the sublime.

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[94] Andrew Zawacki, '"Relation without Relation": Palmer, Celan, Blanchot', *New German Critique*, 91 (2004), p. 122.

Confronting the Abyssal: Celan's Groundless Ethics

In *Sites of the Uncanny: Paul Celan, Specularity and the Visual Arts* Eric Kligerman focuses on Celan's poems as loci for the forced witnessing of the systematic catastrophic events that occurred during the Nazi regime. At the centre of his work is the premise that the poem is an ethical site which compels the reader to stand in relation to the catastrophic. In Kligerman's view, this act of witnessing does not yield an understanding or a means of comprehending the catastrophe. Rather the poet's or the artist's work 'puts on display scenes of epistemic collapse that position the spectator before an ethical catastrophe that s/he is forced to re-imagine'.[95] Consequently, the reader or spectator experiences anxiety and shock rather than an understanding of the trauma suffered by the other or an identification with the plight of the other. Kligerman explains this in terms of 'structural voids' that deny reader expectations.[96] He argues that in Celan's poetry the frame of the artwork 'splits open and our gaze is consumed by something abysmal'.[97] In refusing to provide any therapeutic or wholesome consolatory resolutions, the poet succeeds in causing a rupture in the process of understanding. In Kligerman's view it is precisely within this gap or interruption that we can locate the ethical dimension in Paul Celan's work. Significantly for this discussion, he makes the claim that Celan's 'Der Meridian' 'renders the uncanny into an ethical concept'.[98] In what is clearly a response to the Heideggerian preoccupation with *das Unheimliche* — which, as we have seen in the previous chapter, is primarily concerned with ontological homelessness — Celan's speech 'turns Heidegger against himself and makes the philosopher's ontological terms say something about homelessness in relation to historical catastrophe'.[99] Rejecting Heidegger's essentially abstract thought on Being, Celan can be seen to address the concrete historical facts of the Final Solution to the Jewish Question. Kligerman maintains that this grounding in historical catastrophe leads to a new category of the uncanny that he calls 'the Holocaustal uncanny' in which identification or empathy with the Other, far from being possible, as some have argued, leads to 'the collapse of such an emphatic

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[95] Eric Kligerman, *Sites of the Uncanny: Paul Celan, Specularity and the Visual Arts* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2007), p. 5.
[96] Kligerman, p. 60.
[97] Kligerman, p. 61.
[98] Kligerman, p. 4.
[99] Kligerman, p. 26. For a discussion of Heidegger's reading of the uncanny in Sophocles' *Antigone* see Kligerman, *Sites of the Uncanny*, pp. 74–78.

imagination' and to 'cognitive lapses'.[100] Kligerman claims that the Kantian aesthetic of the beautiful and the sublime fails to provide the useful framework for his analysis since the sublime, as is well-known, moves from feelings of terror and fear to ones of pleasure and reconciliation. It is the uncanny, which, as Freud argues, affords no such resolution, that provides him with the necessary conceptual framework.

The opening sentence of Freud's essay immediately establishes the relation between the sublime and the uncanny.[101] He begins by noting that as a psychoanalyst he shall venture into foreign territory by treating 'the subject of aesthetics', by which he means 'not merely the theory of beauty, but the theory of the qualities of feeling'.[102] He goes on to remark:

> As good as nothing is to be found upon this subject [the uncanny] in comprehensive treatises on aesthetics, which in general prefer to concern themselves with what is beautiful, attractive and sublime — that is, with feelings of a positive nature — and with the circumstances and the objects that call them forth, rather than with the opposite feelings of repulsion and distress.[103]

Whereas the Kantian sublime is able to transcend the initial feelings of fear caused by the faltering of the imagination in the face of magnitude and power through the faculty of reason, the Freudian uncanny remains overwhelmed by feelings of dread and repulsion.[104] In 'Reflections on the Numinous and the Uncanny in German Poetry', Siegbert S. Prawer

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[100] He explains: 'The Holocaustal uncanny refers to the perceptual disruptions that accompany the spectator's relation to the artwork, resulting in an affective tonality of anxiety. [...] this moment of the Holocaustal uncanny is not an act of union or substitution between the spectator and the place of the Other [...]. The subject departs toward the Other and is caught in an unsettling space of non-identification, a space where fantasies of witnessing or emphatic imagination break down. Instead of forming an emphatic union with the Other, there is dissolution of any imaginary union between the spectator and the scene of trauma'. Kligerman, *Sites of the Uncanny*, p. 24 and p. 25.

[101] Harold Bloom maintains that Freud is the last great theorist of the sublime. See Harold Bloom, 'Freud and the Sublime: A Catastrophe Theory of Creativity' in *Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism,* ed. by Maud Ellmann (London: Longman, 1994), pp. 173–95.

[102] Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. by James Strachey et al. (London: The Hogarth Press, 1971), vol. XVII, p. 219.

[103] Freud, 'The Uncanny', p. 219.

[104] Anneleen Masschelein has argued that, following Freud's 1919 essay, the uncanny only received critical attention in the second half of the twentieth-century in texts like Cixous's influential 'Fiction and its Phantoms: A Reading of Freud's *Das Unheimliche*' (1972). She claims that the uncanny becomes 'an appropriate trope for the intellectual and artistic climate of the post-revolutionary 1970s and 1980s in Western culture: a period marked by late capitalism, the increasing mediatization and virtualization of society and rapid globalization, as well as by confusion, ambivalence, nihilism, and a return of dark romanticism'. Whilst acknowledging the importance of Martin Heidegger's work on the uncanny, she fails to address (or even mention) Celan's own contribution to the concept in 'Der Meridian' and in his poetry. Anneleen Masschelein, *The Unconcept: The Freudian Uncanny in Late-Twentieth-Century Theory* (Albany: State University of New York Press), p. 123.

(1963) claims that in a secularised and disenchanted society, the sensation of the uncanny can be seen to replace the lofty sensations of the sublime.[105] More recently, David Ellison (2004) has argued that the uncanny is 'the sublime of our age', and that it is 'the unruly descendent of Kant's sublime'.[106] Focusing on a number of Modernist writers, he argues that the literature from this period breaks down the 'barriers separating the two heterogeneous domains' of the aesthetic and the ethical.[107] His main contention is that a number of Modernist works manifest the complex interplay of the 'twin grand themes of the aesthetic and the ethical'.[108]

For Kant the sublime places us in closest proximity to the morally good as a result of the experience of terror. Ellison observes how Kant's aesthetic project can be seen to have a mediating function as it points beyond itself and towards the more weighty field of *Sittlichkeit*. This 'moralization of the aesthetic', as Ellison calls it, reveals that Kant's aesthetics is ultimately 'a staging-ground' for the moral.[109] He concludes:

> In the *Critique of Judgment*, we saw the aesthetic tended toward the moral, especially in Kant's "Analytic of the Sublime." The moral could be seen as providing a ground, perhaps the final ground, of the aesthetic. The lifting upward of *Erhabenheit* as the sublime in nature, which is already massively present as a properly moral force in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, provided an antidote to what the philosopher saw as the dangerous charms of the aesthetic in the sensuality of its ornamentation [...]. The aesthetic is saved from itself, so to speak, by the pressure which the moral exerts on the aesthetic in the experience of the sublime.[110]

As we discussed in the opening pages of this chapter, Celan, too, grew exceedingly wary of the aesthetic beauty of the poem. And he, too, sought to 'save' the poem from 'the sensuality of its ornamentation' through recourse to the ethical. Yet, clearly, Celan's ethical stance is in line with a Derridean conception of ethics and not a Kantian one.

Indeed, one crucial difference between the two can be observed through the trope of the abyss (*Ab-grund*) in contradistinction to that of the ground (*Grund*). The abyss, as we have seen, is integral to Celan's *unheimlichkeit* and can be seen to function at both a

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[105] Siegbert S. Prawer, 'Reflections on the Numinous and the Uncanny in German Poetry', in *Reality and Creative Vision in German Lyrical Poetry*, ed. by A. Closs (London: Butterworths, 1963), pp. 153–173.
[106] David Ellison, *Ethics and Aesthetics in European Modernist Literature: From the Sublime to the Uncanny* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 53 and p. 58.
[107] David Ellison, p. ix.
[108] David Ellison, p. xi.
[109] David Ellison, p. 8 and p. 13.
[110] David Ellison, p. 19.

thematic and a formal level. Thematically, Celan evokes the countercosmic abyssal sky, both in his important 1960 speech and across his entire poetic oeuvre, to convey the catastrophe or interruption of the world. Formally, the fractured nature of the lines and stanzas as well as the characteristic stuttering and torturous language attest to a poetry that, in the words of Werner Hamacher, 'delivers itself up to the abyss of possible meaninglessness, indeterminacy, and incomprehensibility'.[111] Significantly, the poems remain abyssal and refuse to offer the consolation of a resting ground. Kant, too, evokes the 'abyss' in his 'Analytic of the Sublime' when he remarks that the imagination feels overwhelmed by the absolute greatness of the object it contemplates: 'This excess for the imagination [...] is like an abyss in which it fears to lose itself'.[112] Yet, for Kant, as is well-known, the imagination is rescued by the faculty of reason that is said to restore the balance between the object of contemplation and the mental experience of impotence upon its contemplation. The subsequent feeling is one of pleasure as a result of the imagination's experience of infinity and boundlessness. Such that the experience is no longer merely negative; rather, in Kant's words, it 'expands the soul'.[113] In the work of Paul Celan, there is no such expansion. Rather, in Lacoue-Labarthe's fine oxymoron, Celan's sublime is 'the sublime of destitution', in which no '"elevation" or "intensification"' is possible.[114] There is no *Erhaben* or upward transcendent movement that can be said to translate the dread of the abyss into a pleasurable state. Indeed, the most prevalent movement or, to recall the Longinian trope of the sublime, 'transport' in his poetry remains a downward one in which things appear to be falling even as they ascend. Eric Kligerman has aptly described this in terms of a downward transcendence: 'transcendence does not refer to a movement upward for Celan, but rather movement toward an abyss'.[115] Thus, Celan's ethical confrontation of the uncanny — at once abyssal and abysmal — may be seen to turn the sublime itself on its head.

Addressing the subject of Derrida's ethics as it emerges in his reading of the aforementioned Celan line ('Die Welt ist fort, ich muß dich tragen'), Oliver reminds us that ethics begins when all the prescribed ethical codes of behaviour fail to account for the

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[111] Hamacher, 'The Second of Inversion', p. 368.
[112] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. by James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 88.
[113] Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, p. 104.
[114] Lacoue-Labarthe, *Poetry as Experience*, p. 89.
[115] Kligerman, *Sites of the Uncanny*, p. 68.

present circumstance.[116] Focusing on Derrida's choice of terms, she maintains that whereas the 'world' represents the conventions, mores, and traditions that provide a ready programme for foreseeable and, hence, pre-determinable events, the 'earth' represents our 'embodied connection to life and home', which, in her view, it is not possible to live without. Hence, her contention that whereas it is possible to conceive of and experience the 'without world', it is not possible to conceive of life 'without earth'. Such that the phrase is always preceded by '*as if*', that is, 'as if without earth'. She concludes:

> Ethics, then, is always necessarily beyond world; at least it requires acting *as if* we had no world to fall back on, imaging [*sic*] that the world is gone and I must carry you. But, even ethics cannot take us beyond earth. For what would it mean to act as if we did not have bodies and were not earthlings? More to the point, what could be the meaning of ethics in this science-fiction fantasy? What does ethos mean disconnected from earth?[117]

Such questions become all the more urgent in light of a discussion of Celan's notion of the uncanny precisely because, as Oliver perhaps fails to see, Celan is, in fact, primarily concerned with those who do 'not have bodies'. Not in the form of a tale spun under the rubric of 'science-fiction fantasy', but rather, and all the more poignantly, in the form of crude historical fact. The world that Celan conjures up and bears witness to is no 'fantasy' even if the victims — not deemed worthy 'earthlings' — were dispossessed both of *world* and *earth*.

In relation to the latter point about 'earthlings' and by way of conclusion, it is worth outlining the relevance of the relatively recently coined Yiddish metaphor for Eastern European Jews — prominent among German Jews and anti-Semites alike in the first half of the twentieth century — namely, *Luftmentsh* or *Luftmensch* in German — literally, man of the air. The term was popularised by the Zionist leader and intellectual Max Nordau who in the 1901 Zionist Congress spoke of the predicament of the

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[116] Kelly Oliver's distinction between world and earth is explained thus: 'Thus, if worlds are associated with cultural traditions, rituals and conventions (whether human or nonhuman), earth is associated with our embodied connection to life and home. In other words, to be without world is to be without the codes and mores that govern our societies. To be without earth is to be without the very conditions of possibility for life itself. If ethics begins where the world ends that means that ethics is beyond the conventions of culture. But, to say that we are as if without earth is to say that we are as if without the very bodies and what sustains them that keep us alive. To be without world is to step into the void where ethical decisions cannot be made based on accepted rules or conventions. If decisions are made merely in terms of 'following orders' or acting on laws or traditions, then they are unthinking'. Kelly Oliver, 'The Poetic Axis of Ethics', *Derrida Today*, 7.2 (2014), p. 128.
[117] Oliver, 'The Poetic Axis of Ethics', p. 128.

Luftmensch as a phenomenon that pertained to Eastern European Jewry. Steven Aschheim briefly summarises Nordau's use of the term as follows:

> The luftmensch was a specifically East European Jewish phenomenon. *Luftmenschen* were an entire class of grown, tolerably healthy men who were unemployed and wandered around in the hope of obtaining a piece of bread by the end of the day. Nordau was careful to distinguish the luftmensch from other marginal and itinerant social types such as the English loafer and the Neopolitan *lazzerone*. Unlike them, the luftmensch was honest and able to work but simply lacked the opportunity. The Jews of the ghetto had become a *Luftvolk* — they had no capital for the present and no reserves for the morrow.[118]

For Nordau the answer to the predicament of the *Luftmensch* was to be found in the reestablishment of a Jewish homeland. Only then could the *Luftvolk* be returned to the soil and earn its daily bread through hard and honest work. Before him, Theodor Herzl, the founder of the Zionist movement, spoke of 'the floating proletariat' that was driven 'from place to place, from land to land' by political pressure and poverty.[119] As is well known, Herzl firmly believed that the succour for this aimless wandering as well as the ever-beleaguered Jewish people was the founding of the Jewish State that would ensure that: 'the floating proletariat would become stationary'.[120] In the words of Theodor Adorno, there are, after all, only two alternatives: 'A man with his feet on the ground [*Tatsachenmensch*] or a man with his head in the clouds [*Luftmensch*]'.[121] At the start of the 20th century, Israel Zangwill had made a similar distinction in the short story 'The Luftmensch', where he describes the *luftmensch* as 'an air-man, floating on facile wings through the aether' and lacking the 'gross contact with solidities' of the 'earth-man'.[122]

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[118] Steven Aschheim, *Brothers and Strangers: The East European Jew in German and German Jewish Consciousness 1800–1923* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982), p. 87.
[119] Theodor Herzl, *The Jewish State* (London: Penguin Books, 2010), p. 59.
[120] Herzl, *The Jewish State*, p. 59.
[121] Theodor Adorno, 'The Essay as Form', in *Notes to Literature I*, trans. by Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 1991), p. 4. Interestingly, Adorno here uses the metaphor of the *Luftmensch* when speaking of the essay as a disparaged form in Germany. He makes a subtle analogy between the fate of the essay form and the plight of the Jewish people. The reference to the yellow star as well as the use of the essentially Jewish term *Luftmensch* reveal Adorno's implicit comparison between the resistance to the essay as a form and the Nazi persecution of the Jewish people. Ulrich Plass explains this apparently disconcerting analogy by commenting on the fact that for Adorno the essay had a 'particular historical relevance'. He remarks: 'Adorno's polemics against scientific and positivistic rules and prohibitions can be read also as attacks on the principles of order and purity as tools of anti-Semitic terror'. Plass goes on to argue that the analogy is also meant as a 'stinging attack' on Heidegger's anti-Semitic terminology in *Being and Time*. See Ulrich Plass, *Language and History in Theodor W. Adorno's "Notes to Literature"* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), pp. 26–29.
[122] Israel Zangwill, 'The Luftmensch', in *Ghetto Comedies* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1907), p. 274.

The metaphor of the *Luftmensch*, as Nicolas Berg explains in a book-length study on the history and development of the word, initially designated the rootless, nomadic subject whose existence lacks a firm grounding in the earth. Having been popularised in the literary circles of Eastern European Jewish communities, the word soon earned anti-Semitic undertones and came to stand for the lucrative and degenerate foreign Jew with his head in the clouds, as the English idiom would put it. Berg's analysis offers insight into the changing connotations of the word over time. What began as a self-critical and ironical description of the Jewish condition by Jews themselves, was soon appropriated by anti-Semites to collectively describe and denigrate a people that is severed from its soil. The reinterpretation of the term *Luftmenschen* captures the Jewish state of being on the way (*Unterswegssein*) and imbues it with negative connotations. It becomes a derogatory label that emphasises the uprootedness of Jews at a time when Nazi propaganda was intent on promoting its *Blut und Boden* ideology and indicting the Jews for the eradication of German peasantry. More to the point in view of this discussion is Berg's contention, when addressing Celan's poetry, that under the Nazi regime this metaphor — especially in view of 'the Final Solution of the Jewish Question' — is actualised and made real.[123] The destruction, or to use a word Celan would use only once in his poems, 'dem Verderben', of European Jewry under the ruthless Nazi mechanizations of death sought to completely eradicate every trace of Jewish existence.[124] To this end, the incineration of thousands upon thousands of human bodies led to the literalisation of the metaphor *Luftmenschen*. This is memorably evoked in André Schwarz-Bart's 1959 novel *The Last of the Just*, which traces 8 centuries of Jewish persecution from 12th century England to the systematic annihilation during the Nazi regime. The closing paragraphs of the novel offer a chillingly concise rendition of the 'Final Solution': 'And so it was for millions, who turned from *Luftmenschen* into *Luft*. I shall not translate'.[125]

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[123] Nicolas Berg, *Luftmenschen: Zur Geschichte einer Metapher* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014), p. 192. My thanks to Christopher Müller for patiently translating the relevant pages of this book into English.

[124] John Felstiner notes that the only time that Celan uses the word in his poems occurs in '*Welchen der Steine du hebst*' ('Whichever stone you lift'). The use of the word, he remarks, is coincident with Celan's painful acknowledgement, in a most memorable final stanza, that his poetry owes 'everything' to 'destruction'. John Felstiner, 'Translating as Transference: Paul Celan's Versions of Shakespeare, Dickinson, Mandelshtam, Apollinaire', in *Translating Literatures, Translating Cultures*, ed. by Kurt Mueller-Vollmer and Michael Irmscher (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 170.

[125] André Schwarz-Bart, *The Last of the Just*, trans. by Stephen Becker (New York: Overlook Press, 2000), p. 374.

In his essay on the uncanny Freud argues that oftentimes readers of uncanny literary works may detach themselves from the uncanny because 'the world of reality is left behind from the very start'.[126] Yet when the creative writer establishes the veracity of the events within the world of common reality, readers must perforce confront the uncanny. Focusing on the distinction between the real and the fictive, he maintains that the imaginative writer exploits the resources of fiction to create the sensation of the uncanny:

> The situation is altered as soon as the writer pretends to move in the world of common reality. In this case he accepts as well all the conditions operating to produce uncanny feelings in real life; and everything that would have an uncanny effect in reality has it in his story. But in this case he can even increase his effect and multiply it far beyond what could happen in reality, by bringing about events which never or very rarely happen in fact. In doing this he is in a sense betraying us to the superstitiousness which we have ostensibly surmounted; he deceives us by promising to give us the sober truth, and then after all overstepping it. We react to his inventions as we would have reacted to real experiences; by the time we have seen through his trick it is already too late and the author has achieved his object.[127]

Uncannily, we might say, in Celan's poems it soon becomes evident that there is no deception at work or 'trick' to be unveiled. Clearly, the uncanny in Celan's oeuvre is exacerbated when what appears to be a figure or a trope turns out to be historical fact. As Vivian Liska observes in relation to his work, the uncanny 'is no longer an abstraction, but historical violence'.[128] Thus the abyssal heaven that we have been referring to as a figure is evidently led 'ad absurdum'. It is, in fact, in 'Der Meridian' that Celan remarks that 'the poem would be the place where all tropes and metaphors want to be carried ad absurdum' (*TM*, 10). Like Celan's lingering phrases from 'Todesfuge' — 'black milk' and 'the grave in the air' — the abyssal heaven is not a figure or an image. For Celan the reversal of the cosmos designates the actual realm of the 'Hovering Ones' and the 'Cloud Crowd', to use the words of 'Tabernacle Window', who, instead of being laid to rest in the ground in accordance with the Jewish burial tradition, were incinerated and dispersed into the air (*JF*, 197). Hence, the heavens, which within the poetic tradition have long represented the lofty realm synonymous with the sublime, here become the uncanny repository of black ash. Celan's reference to the abyssal heavens in his speech and poetry can thus be considered as a refusal of one of the central tenets of the poetic tradition. This is another way in which

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[126] Freud, 'The Uncanny', p. 250.
[127] Freud, 'The Uncanny', p. 250.
[128] Liska, 'An Aporetic Inversion in Paul Celan', p. 50.

Celan's poetry inscribes what Charles Bambach has referred to as 'a reversal of the highest values within the tradition'.[129]

As Derrida would conclude some thirty years after Celan's acceptance speech for the Georg Büchner Prize, in a passage that strikingly brings together some of Celan's main concerns, the poem, always threatened by catastrophe, cuts ties with literary poetry:

> Just this contamination, and this crossroads, this accident here. This turn, the turning around of *this* catastrophe. The gift of the poem cites nothing, it has no title, its histrionics are over, it comes along without your expecting it, cutting short the breath, cutting all ties with discursive and especially literary poetry. In the very ashes of this genealogy. (*CCP*, 297)

As we have seen, Celan's confrontation of the uncanny of his time results in the very undoing of the trope, which is a constitutive feature of literary poetry. His rejection of 'genre-bound poetry' as well as his repudiation of a number of central tenets of the literary tradition ought to be seen in relation to the ethical obligation he ascribed to poetry. Clearly, what we may call the 'abyssal' or 'groundless' ethics in Celan's poetry is a direct result of his confrontation of the uncanny and unassimilable other. And whereas it would appear that the uncanny or, more to the point, the *unhomely* impedes the hospitable and homey, Celan's poems reveal that hospitality can only begin within the uncanny and as a response to it. So that we may suggest at this point and in light of the foregoing discussion, following both Derrida and Celan '*en route*' towards the other, that 'An act of poetic hospitality must traverse the uncanny'.

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[129] Charles Bambach, *Thinking the Poetic Measure of Justice: Hölderlin–Heidegger–Celan* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2013), p. 196.

Conclusion:

The Ethics of Poetic Force

Following closely on the tracks of the rambling *hérisson*, at the risk of going off course and getting struck on the *autostrada*, this thesis has underlined the close affinity between the poetic experience as conceived in Jacques Derrida's catachrestic 'Che cos'è la poesia?' and the ethical event. It has argued that 'Che cos'è la poesia?' engages a new thinking of the poetic that cuts ties with poetry as a literary genre. Focusing on poematic respons(e)ibility, the first chapter revealed the parallels between the Derridean notion of responsibility as the event of the call of the other and the poetic mark that, coming of and from the other, gives rise to its recipient. It claimed that the apostrophe — conceived as a violent interruption — entails an ethical experience because it demands a response; one that must not be a mere automated reaction. Rather, guarding against the threat of mechanisation, poematic respons(e)ibility involves letting the other sign. Addressing Hélène Cixous's work, the second chapter presented an analysis of her writing practice as an instance of heeding the dictate of the other. It made the claim that Cixous's ageneric text is directly related to the poetic puissance of *kommen-lassen*. In letting the other come, while making it come, Cixous gives birth to a monstrous text without norm or precedent. Finally, it argued that ethical force of her writing lies within this monstrosity.

Turning its attention to the notion of hospitality, the third chapter explored Derrida's understanding of hospitality as the instant of traversing outside one's home and relinquishing one's power to the other or the foreigner. It proceeded to maintain that the poetic experience entails a similar abandonment of power in the face of the arrival of the

other whose singularity not only requires me to invent the unconditional law of hospitality, but, more importantly, in-vents me. In a final section, the chapter presented a reading of Antigone's singular law of hospitality as an uncanny act of welcoming the dead (br)other. The fourth chapter addressed the motif of the reversal of the cosmos in Paul Celan's 'Der Meridian' and his 1963 volume *Die Niemandsrose* to reveal the close association between the motif of the countercosmos and *das Unheimliche*. It argued that the confrontation of the uncanny entails an experience of the ethical where there is no viable moral programme or guideline. In Celan's oeuvre, the abyssal *Himmel* overturns the notion of the Romantic sublime to reveal the uncanny catastrophe that is left in its wake.

The emergent themes of the call or apostrophe, the wound, the interruption and, indeed, the abyssal catastrophe of the world all emphasise a certain violence inherent within the poetic experience as explored in this thesis. Like the ethical event that interrupts the ordinary course of things, the poetic experience entails a break or rupture that is coincident with the call or arrival of the other. Hence, the interruption at the heart of Derrida's ethical event is what characterises the ethics of poetic force. The poem conceived as a catachrestic road-crossing *hérisson*, the puissant arrival of the Cixousian 'anarchic' book and the Celanian groundless poem that traverses by way of the uncanny, all have in common the integral confrontation of the unassimilable other. Hence, the ethics of poetic force emerges there where the arrival of the unassimilable other rather than being suppressed or denied is welcomed or confronted. The counterpoetics of these three writers reveals that the renunciation of the genre of poetry (in Derrida and Celan) and the renunciation of genre itself (in Cixous) is intricately related to the ethical concern with the other and with what is other.

By way of conclusion, it is well to recall the guiding questions posed in the introduction: How does the poetic intersect with the ethical event as conceived in Derrida's work? What are the consequences of thinking the poetic as it is conceived in Derrida's 'Che cos'è la poesia?'? How does it contribute to a new thinking about the poetic in our time (if at all)? And what does it mean to think of the poetic in terms of an experience of responsibility or hospitality? And at this point, it is timely to respond *elliptically*; for the sake of brevity, therefore, seven punctual points on the ethics of poetic force:

1. *A Countering Force: counter-, contre-, anti-, gegen-…*

Like the catachrestic and counter-genealogical *hérisson* with its quills at the ready, the ethics of poetic force emerges violently in the form of an apo-strophe, a fertile wound or a hos*ti*pitality. And hence, it is also reactionary: a *Gegenwort* ('Counterword' or 'word against the grain'). Like Antigone, it both opposes the *genus* and stands in its place. The countering force of the poetic as the French prefix *contre* suggests requires that it is 'with-against'. It cannot merely occur or emerge in some remote or utopic elsewhere. Rather, it lodges itself within the existing tradition and deliriously gets off track.

2. *A Poe(ma)tic Respons(e)iblity*

As an implacable and intransigent *thou must*, the ethics of poetic force manifests itself in the dict of a dictation that demands it be guarded against the automaticity of a certain learning by rote. Always already threatened by the machines or *macchine* that bring on death, the ethics of the poetic is never unscathed. The *salut* of the distressed *hérisson* calls for salvation. It seeks to overcome the impulse of parodic repetition yet nonetheless calls out for a 'yes, yes'. It reinvents the meaning of *apprendre par coeur*: that of you, from you I want to learn by heart. Apostrophically directed toward the (other) other, it is a stranger to all production. It turns away from discourse in the direction of a singular 'you' — *vers toi*.

3. *An Impotent Puissance*

Without mastery or sovereignty, poetic *puissance* renounces the power of the '*I can*' and in so doing makes the other come. A poetic animal machine that simultaneously lets come and makes come, the *puisse* of the poetic is an order: would that we might hear it. Humble, lowly, subterranean even, poetic *puissance* puts the majestic height of erected sovereignties in question.

4. *A Hos(ti)pitality*

The ethics of poetic force emerges as an act of hospitality which is also open to hos*ti*pitality — the welcome of the other must be open to welcome the wholly and frighteningly other. Hence, the interruption of the *soi* and the *chez soi* is always simultaneous with the e-vent of the poetic. The *hostis* or *xenos* makes of the host a guest

(*hôte*). And thus *I* must relinquish my mastery and home. Saying ‹‹oui, a l'étranger›› — the foreigner and foreign parts — is also therefore a saying ‹‹oui, à l'étrange›› — the strange and the uncanny where the once familiar becomes unfamiliar. Like the Cixousian ageneric text, the uncanny is impatient of border control and it crosses and recrosses borders indiscriminately.

5. *An in-venire*

The force of the poetic would be there where it invents only insofar as it in-vents. The invention of the singular responsible and hospitable act must *come* from and of the other. Unforeseeable and unpredictable, it is a benediction or a blessing that falls from on high. Yet in receiving it, one may also be wounded as the French *blessure* reminds us. The interruption at the heart of the ethical event is a gaping wound the lips of which may never be sutured.

6. *A Monstrosity*

The uncanny is the other that violates and interrupts the dogmatic slumber that threatens to turn the human into an automaton. And thus the ethics of poetic force is always engaged with the work of the unassimilable and monstrous other. Like an irrepressible force, the uncanny emerges where least expected; recall: the catachrestic *hérisson* without tradition or normative precedent, the unpredictable birth of Cixous's ageneric text, Antigone's hos*ti*pitable welcome of the dead and Celan's abyssal cosmos. As a form of monstrosity, the uncanny protects against the threat of the automaton.

7. *A Cata-strophe*

Mixing the living and the dead, breeding black roots in mid-air, catastrophic chaos announces the end of the world. Down-turned and in reverse, the ethics of poetic force would be akin to the experience of walking on one's head where there is no world. Like Lenz's mad desire, it confronts the abyssal altitude of the sky and therein finds, in the absence of any rule or moral guideline, the beginning of ethics.

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