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Literature of Indistinction

Blanchot and Caproni

Paolo Bartoloni

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Quelque chose lui est arrivé, et il ne peut dire que ce soit vrai, ni le
contraire. Plus tard, il pensa que l' événement consistait dans cette manière
de n'être ni vrai ni faux.
Maurice Blanchot, L'attente l'oubli

Face-to-Face

On the manuscript of the poem "Le parole" (The Words, 1977), the Italian poet
Giorgio Caproni wrote a note: "In 1946 [I said that] the words dissolve the object, but
only in 1953 Blanchot launched his motto 'the name empties the thing' (il nome
vanifica la cosa)."[i] Caproni, one of the most acclaimed Italian poets of the twentieth-
century, kept a close eye on the work of Maurice Blanchot. Thanks to his command
of French and the outstanding cultural enterprises of the journal *Botteghe Oscure*,
whose issues featured original works of important yet barely known international
intellectuals, in the years 1951-1958 Caproni read, amongst others, Blanchot's "le
retour", "Le calme", "Comme un jour de neige", "L'attente" and *La bête de Lascaux*.[ii]
There is no evidence that Blanchot and Caproni ever met, or that Blanchot read
Caproni (although individual poems were translated into French much earlier,
volumes of Caproni's works in French translation appeared only in the '80s), and yet
their writing enacts an uncanny correspondence, which is not so much an affinity as a
natural availability to be "face-to-face". They stare at each other through their poetic
language, which is also the product of a series of philosophical preoccupations that
they shared with their time. More specifically, it was the reflection on language,
subjectivity and temporality mediated through the work of Hegel and Heidegger that
appears to take centre stage in Blanchot's and Caproni's work. If Hegel led them to
think the relation between sign and thing, Heidegger might have prompted them to
look beyond this relation at the space in which sign and thing are exposed to each
other and, astonished and silent – indistinct – open up. This chapter is an attempt to

trace this coming "face-to-face " of Blanchot and Caproni through a close reading of Blanchot's *L'attente L'oubli*, Caproni's *Il muro della terra*, and the interface between these writings and Hegel's and Heidegger's thought.

The Sound of Presences

Maurice Blanchot wrote *L'attente L'oubli* in 1962, seven years after *L'Espace littéraire* and fourteen years after the first edition of *Thomas l'Obscur*. Giorgio Caproni wrote *Il muro della terra* (*The Wall of the Earth*) between 1964 and 1975. This collection of poems marked a poetic as well as literary watershed, splitting Caproni's work into two major and distinct sections. The historical context in which *Il muro della terra* and *L'attente L'oubli* were conceived is instructive, if only for the relation that literature and philosophy seemed to enjoy at that particular time in European writing. This relation is typified not only by the willingness of poets and novelists to engage with philosophical issues as part of the creative process, but also by the overt stylistic fusion of two discourses that had for many years been deemed separate. Blanchot's work is emblematic of this stylistic encounter in which literature and philosophy melt into each other with linguistic as well as poetic ease. And yet, this apparently happy meeting is the public visage of a much more problematic and painful review of language, knowledge and subjectivity. It is in this sense that the writing of Blanchot demonstrates the simultaneous occurrence of linguistic flow and inscrutability. Blanchot's is a language that speaks the impossibility of expression and, in doing so, exists in the space of its own negativity.

L'attente L'oubli is set in a hotel room in an undefined location at an undefined time. Two characters, a man and a woman, speak to each other, or rather they are seen and heard speaking to each other since the narrative is ostensibly constructed to include the reader, but only as spectator and listener. Later in the narrative, the reader is made to realize that the woman has gone to the man's room after the two, until then strangers, had exchanged glances through their respective windows. There are several instructive things to be learned from this simple narrative structure. The hotel room is an enclosed space, containing and circumscribing the narrative. It is this small and compact space, somewhat reminiscent of meditative monastic cells, into which the gaze and hearing is drawn. Clearly, the expectation is that of witnessing a series of *tableaux vivants* or actions frozen on the page for the benefit of the onlooker. The

narrative structure of Blanchot's *L'attente L'oubli* appears to be crafted specifically for this purpose by providing a well defined architectural space in which a series of existential and metaphysical events can be ordered, stored, crystallised so as to be observed and heard. It is the idea of the meditative mental space so central to medieval thought; a space deemed necessary for recollection and invention. Further, it is unobstructed and uncluttered with day-to-day events, empty and quiet, purified of the contamination of quotidianity. Blanchot's hotel room is the quintessential example of the literary and philosophical exilic zone: solitary and elemental. Nothing can be heard besides the voices of the two protagonists, and nothing can be perceived other than their floating thoughts searching for a language that would ground them in some sort of oral and aural existence. And yet, Blanchot's mental picture lacks visual continuity to the extent that the viewer is confronted by intermittent images whose visibility invariably gives way to moments of darkness and invisibility. We see but also do not see. The visual segmentation so typical of *L'attente L'oubli* generates a mental dizziness and an iconographic short circuit whereby vision soon loses its bearings, becoming engulfed by disorientation and confusion. What is not affected is hearing. But the language we hear is the cause of our visual collapse and the reason for our sense of loss, of being disoriented in a peculiar landscape where representation and communication have vanished.

> He was looking at her furtively. Perhaps she was speaking, but on her face, no expression of good will with respect to what she was saying, no agreement to speak, a barely living affirmation, a scarcely speaking suffering.
>
> He would have liked to have the right to say to her: "Stop speaking, if you want me to hear you." But at present, even saying nothing, she could no longer keep silent.[iii]

The language spoken by the woman says nothing in its uninterrupted saying. It has lost all sense of communication and representational imagery. It merely floats around the room as pure sounds that can be heard but not understood. The English translation is only partially correct when translating "entendre" as "hear." The verb "entendre" implies understanding and the successful outcome of communication. In Blanchot's narrative, the character hears but does not understand what he hears to the extent that he questions whether the woman is actually speaking, "Peut-être parlait-elle"

(perhaps she was speaking). The problem is that words and expression, language and images, do not relate, do not match. As words flow from the woman, her facial expression does not change. In other words, she does not make visible the language she uses through her body. Image and language are separated, fractured. This is language as such, a language that speaks *in* itself and not through something outside of itself. The idea that communication could arise from the suppression of this disorienting noise, in silence, comes to the man as he wishes for the woman to stop uttering sounds without meaning. But this possibility is soon obliterated by a further explanation. It is perhaps that she has forgotten how language works:

> He understood quite well that she had possibly forgotten everything. That didn't bother him. He wondered if he didn't want to take possession of what she knew, more by forgetting than by remembering. But forgetting… It was necessary that he, too, enter into forgetting.[iv]

Remembering and Forgetting

The extraordinary thing that takes place here is that in the apparent aphasia of the woman the man perceives an unquantifiable form of knowledge that he wishes to possess. In this nothing of language the man glimpses something that his knowledge lacks and desires. The sentences that follow are instructive. The entrance into this knowledge clothed by nothingness – the surface of knowledge – might be achieved by two, different routes that conventional semantics treats as opposite: "remembering" or "forgetting." But in this instance, "forgetting" and "remembering" are close; they share a common trait. They both imply a journey, and the journey is in both instances a reversal, a journey of return. And yet, in the case of "forgetting" the journey takes place by accessing a totally new dimension in which the recovery of the origin must start from nothing. "Remembering" is based on the visualisation and meditation of an acquired knowledge, of a recovery of known and stored principles and notions. "Forgetting," on the other hand, depends on the erasure of such principles and notions, on unlearning the foundations of epistemological conditions for the benefit of a new experience. "Forgetting" means obliterating. As such, it is the entrance into the domain of oblivion and the acceptance of knowing nothing: "Mais l'oubli… Il lui fallait entrer, lui aussi, dans l'oubli."

Oblivion is the ban of the known and it is ushered in by the will to forget and by a conscious determination to exclude the known. Forgetting, like remembering, cannot originate in the unconscious. If remembering is a careful elaboration of images and notions, forgetting is the studious deleting of such images and notions attained by pouring onto these very images and notions a layer of contrivances whose effect is to disorient and confuse the already known. In the case of language, the language *through* which we speak can be disoriented by piling over it sentence after sentence whose communicative and representational value is unclear. The result is still a language that speaks in sentences whose grammar and syntax are clear and correct but whose meanings have crossed the threshold of indistinction. The man in Blanchot's *L'attente L'oubli* is determined to connect with the woman by "speaking nothing": "But I will say nothing; be aware of this. What I say is nothing."[v]

A Lit Darkness

In the section "Bisogno di guida" (In need of a guide) of *Il muro della terra* we find the short poem "Istanza del medesimo" (Instance of the similar): "What should I ask for./ Leave me to my darkness./ Only this. That I may see."[vi] In *Il muro della terra*, like in many of Caproni's other collections of poems, the journey is a central image. It is not by accident that one of the three short poems introducing *Il muro della terra*, "Falsa indicazione" (False directions), revolves around the movement in space: "'Border,' the sign said./ I looked for the Customs. Not there./ I saw no trace/ of a foreign land/ behind the fence."[vii] The "I" of Caproni's poetry embarks on a journey to what he expects to be a foreign land. Travelling to the unknown, which is either deep inside, buried underneath layers upon layers – which have been scanned in alternation through metaphysical or psychoanalytical lenses – or high up, into stratospheric distances, is a classical literary trope. What dramatically changes in Caproni's poetry is the intelligibility of the unknown, whose existence is tightly interwoven with the known. The borders are sign-posted and yet the lands which they separate appear identical. A guide is required to travel into this novel terrain which has all the semblance of the old, and yet is new. It is precisely the acute awareness of this novelty clothed in the familiar, an apparent visibility which, however, cannot be correctly understood if read through the usual instrument of learning, that puzzles but also reinforces the subject's desire to be left in a lit darkness, where vision (vedere, to

see) is paired with its own impossibility (buio, darkness). Watching nothing equates with speaking nothing and both inhabit the area of indistinction where knowing is coupled with not-knowing and being with not-being. It is in this sense that poems like "Ritorno" (Return) and "Esperienza" (Experience) in the section titled "Feuilleton" must be read. Their apparently nonsensical discourse, based on a set of antinomic oppositions which simultaneously say and refute what has been said, is determined by a language that has chosen an epistemological route on which visibility and intelligibility are traded for indistinguishability. Clearly, this is a language that inhabits the space of indistinction and potentiality in which myriads of possible meanings and images are intertwined and tightly connected to the extent that no clear image or meaning can be disentangled. What can this language of disorientation (*spaesamento*) and "nothingness" tell us? Further, what kind of episteme can it bequeath us? Let us read the two poems. "Ritorno":

> I returned there
>
> where I had never been.
>
> Nothing, from how it was not, has changed.
>
> On the table (the checkered
>
> cloth), half filled
>
> I found the glass
>
> never filled. Everything
>
> is still as
>
> I have never left it.[viii]

And "Esperienza":

> All the places I have seen,
>
> I have visited,
>
> now I know – I am certain of it:
>
> I have never been there.[ix]

The mirroring assertions and refutations that mark the pace of the two poems, the careful fracturing of meaning through enjambments, are typical of a language that searches in vain for its own face. This is a poetry that dares to watch a mirror that does not reflect, where not even the self of poetry can recover its own features. This negation of visibility and refraction is made even more compelling by the actual presence of poetry and the actual presence of the self, both of which are actually *there*

where they have never been. As such, this is not a discourse that annihilates and negates presence or cognition. It is rather a discourse that locates presence and cognition in a space in which they must be re-discovered and re-learned from regaining the "superficial" language of the origin by discarding the language of referentiality. What I am stressing here is that the area of indistinction that a language which speaks nothing realises is a tangible and experiential zone; a potentiality which ceases to be hypothetical in order to be. A further question thus arises that must be asked in conjunction with the two preceding ones: what kind of *habitus* – in Bourdieu's sense of the word, as a cultural and ethical mindset – can a potentiality as such be?

Vieille Parole

An answer is found in the passage from *L'attente L'oubli* that I quoted as the epigraph to this essay:

> Something happened to him, and he can say neither that it was true, nor the contrary. Later, he thought that the event consisted in this manner of being neither true nor false.[x]

The word "événement" (event) must be stressed here, for it emphasises the taking place of something concrete, a liveable experience that can be investigated and articulated. But this experience belongs in the interstices between truth and falsehood, and as such in the course of a process of cognition in which the impossibility of an evaluation is the fundamental trait of the process's existence and the only possible *habitus* of Blanchot's characters. The ineffability of a potential truth or of its opposite decrees its indistinguishability and ultimately its irrelevance. What remains to be explored and lived is the only possible ontological space which lies in-between truth and falsehood and in-between their respective effability and ineffability and their visibility and invisibility. This is the zone of indistinction. It is here that language can be itself without being forced to speak and where it can roam at ease without losing itself in mere wandering: "An utterance that must be repeated before it has been heard, a traceless murmur that he follows, wandering nowhere, residing everywhere, the necessity of letting it go. It is always the ancient word [*la vieille parole*] that wants to be here again without speaking."[xi]

The messianic project that one finds in Benjamin's reflection on language and his interest in reconnecting with the original language – *die reine Sprache* – is present in Blanchot's work as well, *la vieille parole*. Both Blanchot and Benjamin speak and retrace in their writing the linguistic split that has characterized the Western understanding of language throughout the centuries, and can be traced back to the Fall from grace in the Garden of Eden. The Fall determined the passage from the *in language* before the Fall to the *through language* after the Fall, and the irredeemable fracture between the original language and the many derivative languages that were born as a consequence of this fracture. Benjamin and Blanchot, together with many other writers and philosophers of the twentieth century, engage with this fracture and attempt to understand and articulate its meaning by inhabiting the only possible and available vantage point. This is the fracture itself, where *in language* and *through language* intermingle and disappear into each other. It is the will to be in indistinction that invites the characters in Blanchot's *L'attente L'oubli* to look for the "the poverty in language,"[xii] and that encourages them to "remain ignorant of what one knows, only that."[xiii]

"Eleusis"

In 1796 the young Hegel wrote a poem titled "Eleusis" and dedicated it to Hölderlin. This poem on the Eleusinian mystery speaks of the impossibility of stating the ineffable, of proffering the "sacred": "and in vain," writes Hegel, "strive/ the scholars, their curiosity greater than their love/ of wisdom (the seekers possesses this love and/ they disdain you) – to master it they dig for words [*graben sie nach Worten*],/ in which your lofty meaning might be engraved [*In die Dein hoher Sinn gepräget*]!"[xiv] The only possible way to apprehend the secret of the "sacred initiations" is to remain silent or to "speak the language of angels" (*Spräch er mit Engelzungen*), " to experience the poverty of words" (*fühlt' der Worte Armut*). In this poem the young Hegel reiterates the Platonic idea of words as mere simulacra – "only dust and ashes do they seize" – and the primacy of pure thought, the silence residing in the poverty of words. But the poem does something even more interesting, especially in relation to our present discussion: it appears to offer Blanchot the original platform on which to found his own project of language. Between Blanchot's "pauvreté dans le langage" and Hegel's "the poverty of words" there is clearly a

striking proximity. Indeed, this is a proximity of thought on which a whole philosophical and poetic experience hinges. Blanchot's could well be a "translation" of Hegel's poem, but only if by translation we mean that process that rewinds the work, that breaks its death-mask. In the case of Blanchot we are not confronted with the translation of a given text, Hegel's "Eleusis," but rather with the translation of a philosophical condition; in other words with the "property" Hegel, whose *imago* reaches us through the unconcealment of this very "property" mediated by and in language. But is Blanchot's translation faithful? Does *L'attente L'oubli* say the same thing as "Eleusis"? About one hundred and fifty years separate Hegel's and Blanchot's texts, and many more separate them from the ancient Greek *ur-texts* on being and language from which both *L'attente L'oubli* and "Eleusis" originate. But more poignantly, and definitely more problematically, the space in-between "Eleusis" and *L'attente L'oubli* is occupied by Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. It is well known that the philosophical position articulated by the young Hegel in "Eleusis" is dramatically reviewed and changed by the Hegel of the *Phenomenology*. For the latter, the truth arrived at through "silence" and "the poverty of language," the sense-certainty, is void ("most abstract and poorest truth"),[xv] unless it is mediated by language. It is language that provides truth with a universal meaning and a concrete anchoring which, although plunging the object of utterability into negativity, preserves this object as a property and a universal truth. According to Hegel, language crystallizes truth by bringing to the fore of cognition not so much the singularity of truth (its very thingness) as its universality as opposed or compared to other universalities. It is in this sense that Hegel's dialectic sacrifices the particularity of things in favour of their properties. In effect, Hegel's language is a language that says the object by negating it, by removing the tangibility of the object from view and from knowledge. What we know through Hegelian language is not the object as such, it is not its singularity, it is not its "who." Language speaks the truth by removing it. It is this significant contradiction that characterizes Western thought and indeed generates it.

Aletheia

If the Hegel of the *Phenomenology* is the philosopher of the *logos* and the dialectic, Heidegger is the philosopher who lent the Hegelian logos a fuller and more definite

ontology, in turn changing the inherent negativity of Hegelian thought into a factual presence. One must recognise that for Heidegger the true meaning of Dasein is far more than the commonly assumed "being-there." In a letter to Jean Beaufret dated 23 November 1945, Heidegger writes: "For me *Da-sein* does not so much signify here I am, so much as, if I may express myself in what is perhaps impossible French, *être-le-là*. And *le-là* is precisely *Aletheia*: unveiling-disclosure."[xvi] *Aletheia* is one of the foundational terms of Heideggerian philosophy, a word that the German philosopher returns to time and time again in order to question, problematize and translate. He enters the word and attempts to live it, use it, think it as the ancient Greek philosophers did. This is what translation means for Heidegger. For him translation is not just a mere transposition from one language to another, a simple exchange of word – this for that. It is rather the integration of a whole language and culture, a whole mode of thinking (in his case ancient Greek thinking), into another language and culture (German). This is not just offering hospitality to something foreign; it is more like allowing the foreign to penetrate the familiar, and perhaps to introduce violence to the familiar, to change it forcefully. This is nowhere more apparent than in the essay that Heidegger devotes to discussing Anaximander's saying; an essay that he wrote in 1946, just one year after writing the letter to Beaufret. Anaximander's saying is considered the oldest fragment of Western philosophy, indeed the very basis of Western philosophy. It is assumed that it is from this saying that the following conceptualisations of "being" and "language" have developed, first and foremost through the interpretation that Plato and Aristotle gave of this saying. It is not possible here to provide a detailed discussion of Heidegger's dense analysis of Anaximander's saying. What is of considerable importance for our discussion is first to relate the notion of *aletheia* to Anaximander's saying, and second to see how Heidegger's thinking of it connects with his overall philosophical project, as well as the links between this project and Hegel's reflection on language.

    Aletheia is not a word actually used in Anaximander's saying. The central role that *aletheia* acquires in Heidegger's thinking of the saying, to the extent that it becomes the central key to its understanding and translation, originates form Heidegger's very unique understanding of translation. Heidegger is convinced that the saying, the actual words said by Anaximander, produced an "aura" which contains a broader meaning. The potential discovery of this apparently invisible trace

can only be founded on a careful and rigorous etymological analysis of the semantic and semiotic content of what is left of Anaximander's saying. The two words that Heidegger focuses on to approach a recovery of the lost "whole" are *eon* and *eonta*. According to Heidegger, it is from these two original words that "the fundamental words of the early thinking are said."[xvii] Amongst these fundamental words are *logos* and *Aletheia*. "Only by means of *En* [the one]," writes Heidegger, "which is to be thought back in the realm of the fundamental words, do *eon* and *einai* [to be] become the explicit words for what is present. Only from out of the destiny of being, the destiny of the *En*, does the modern age, after essential upheavals, enter the epoch of the monadology of substance, which completes itself in the phenomenology of the Spirit."[xviii] Here the connection is made between ancient Greek philosophy and Hegel, *qua* modern philosophy. By way of translation, Heidegger does two things: he first bestows on language the power of bringing forward the essence of what is thought in language, and second he exposes the essence of Anaximander by way of his very language. It follows that "being" is that which constitutes itself as "the unconcealed" through language. It is this Dasein, this "being-there in language" that Heidegger calls the authentic being, the truthful being, the *aletheia*. Language is at one and the same time that which conceals being by placing it before the world and also that which unconceals being by throwing it into the world. But if the language of concealment is the language that names and that shows, the Hegelian "This" (*Dieses*), then the language of unconcealment is that which devours the very "This" by annulling it in the process of absorbing it. Paradoxically, it is by articulating language and by turning it into grammar that humans enter the world and partake of it. Therefore, and if one follows this idea to the letter, participation means removing the very singularity of whatever we participate in and with. Participation, communality, being in the world come from sacrificing the very thing that participates, that becomes part of a community, that is in and with the community. In saying "This," the natural language which is responsible for naming things also creates an impassable barrier between the subject and the object, which will continue to confront each other as two irrevocable and invariable singularities. It is by removing the singularity of the object through speaking it that the other can be reached, can be experienced, yet no longer as singularity but as negativity.

The Story

Let us go back now to the Hegel of "Eleusis" and the Blanchot of *L'attente L'oubli*
and compare them not only to each other but also to the Hegel of the *Phenomenology*
and the Heidegger who propounds this reading of *aletheia*. It should be clearer now
that the apparent contradiction between the young Hegel and the mature Hegel is not
a contradiction at all. It is rather an evolution of the same line of thought, an ideal
continuation in which the consistent study of language and being is taken to its
conclusion. For the mature Hegel, as for the young Hegel, the "sacred initiations" –
the essence and singularity of truth – cannot be rescued by language, or be brought to
light and visibility in language. What changes, though, in the passage from "Eleusis"
to the *Phenomenology* is that the impossibility of speaking the essence is not
circumvented in silence or in the "poverty of words" but is actually spoken by
language itself. The difference between the young and the mature Hegel is, as
Agamben has clearly seen, that while for the young Hegel the mystery is guarded by
silence, for the Hegel of the *Phenomenology* it is language that guards the mystery:
"The Eleusinian mystery of the *Phenomenology* is," writes Agamben in *Language
and Death*, "thus the same mystery of the poem *Eleusis*; but now language has
captured in itself the power of silence, and that which appeared earlier as unspeakable
'profundity' can be guarded (in its negative capacity) in the very heart of the
word."[xix]

The simple fact that Blanchot writes is a testimony to the fact that he too
believed that the "unspeakable 'profundity' can be guarded in the very heart of the
word." And yet, when he speaks of silence, his positioning silence so closely to the
"poverty of language" demands attention and a certain degree of caution. Let us quote
again Blanchot's passage, with the addition this time of a further section:

> His desire to hear her well had long since given way to a need for silence
> whose indifferent background would have been formed by everything that
> she had said. But only hearing could nourish this silence. They both searched
> for poverty in language. On this point, they agreed. For her there were
> always too many words and one word too many, as well as overly rich words
> that spoke excessively. Although she was apparently not very learned, she
> always seemed to prefer abstract words, which evoked nothing. Wasn't she
> trying, and he along with her, to create for herself at the heart of this story a

shelter so as to protect herself from something that the story also helped attract?[xx]

It is true that Blanchot writes about silence, but this is a silence that resounds with words and their demand to be heard. Therefore, it is not the mute silence of the Eleusinian mystery, the no-sound effected by closing one's mouth and stopping the flow of words, together with their deadly instantiation of a mere simulacrum. But by the same token it is not the preservation of a "property" either. This "indifferent," indistinct, humming of words, whose interpenetration has rendered them expressionless, does not represent anything, neither the "property" nor the negativity of the object. Its preservation, its *salvare* – if it is a preservation at all – it is the preservation of its own becoming of language in-between sense-certainty and universality. As such, this indifferent language guards more than the negativity of truth; it guards both the negativity and the presence of truth by simultaneously incorporating and con-fusing negativity and presence. The language of indistinction, being the becoming and the potential, is also an auratic fragment, whose abandonment (*abbandono*) of representation and presentation carries their echoes, their haloes, within itself. This language is not silence and it is not expression – "For her there were always too many words and one word too many, as well as overly rich words that spoke excessively. Although she was apparently not very learned, she always seemed to prefer abstract words, which evoked nothing." It is obviously not representation, unless by representation one means the Hegelian guarding of negativity. Indeed, at times Blanchot's *L'attente L'oubli* is nothing more than a Hegelian parable about language and death, language and its commensurability with the void. And yet this tale about the "nothingness" of language tells another story: "Wasn't she trying, and he along with her, to create for herself at the heart of *this story* a shelter so as to protect herself from something that the *story* also helped attract?" Is there somebody telling a story, and to whom, and for what purpose? Clearly, the woman tells a story that the man sets about transcribing. Yet the story that she tells is "unrepresentable" because, like in the Eleusinian mystery, its essence, its secrets, are unsayable: "He picked up the sheets of paper and wrote, 'It is her voice that is entrusted to you, not what she says. What she says, the secrets that you collect and transcribe so as to give them their due, you must lead them gently, in spite of their attempt to seduce, toward the silence that you first drew out of them.'"[xxi] Let us

suspend for a moment the reference to the voice and draw attention not only to the inherent silence of the "secret" but also, more importantly, to the fact that in listening – or, perhaps, merely hearing – the man weaves a story himself and both stories, the woman's and the man's, are ultimately encapsulated within another story. This is why "the story" provides shelter from what "the story" attracts. If words empty the essence of things – "it is a hotel room no different from those he has always lived in, the kind he likes, in a modest hotel. But as soon as he wants to describe it, it is empty, and the words that he uses apply only to emptiness"[xxii] – they also point at them: "Yet with what interest she watches him when he says to her: here is the bed, there a table, over where you are, an armchair."[xxiii] But if the Hegelian negativity of language is so fundamental to Blanchot's story, more important is the way in which Blanchot eschews the negativity that embraces him and his language by letting it be. It is the act of saying the thing of language, its quiddity – which is also the transcription into written language of the voice – that allows Blanchot to produce a language that is both negative and positive and a language that is firmly ensconced in the instant (*nell'istante*). Temporally speaking, the instant is that which makes itself as it undoes itself and, like the language of indistinction, is the temporal cipher of the abandonment of the self. It is no accident that Blanchot's language, the language of indistinction, is also the language of instantiation.

I suggest that we approach the notion of abandoning the self by way of the Italian "*partire da sé*" (leaving from oneself). *Partire da sé* incorporates and includes two apparently opposite and irreconcilable ideas; it can mean constructing something from the self or leaving the self behind. In the first instance, there is a firm connection to and grasping of the self. The self is the grounding and supervising presence. In the second instance there is the taking leave from the self, the shedding of a shell. The link between these two diametrically opposed meanings is provided by the verb *partire* (to leave). In both instances we confront a departure and an abandonment, which is perhaps temporary on the one hand, and definite on the other. But what interests us here, irrespective of the outcome, is that the departure and the abandonment imply and subsume an unveiling and a disclosure. They imply the Heideggerian *aletheia*. And it is precisely in the Heideggerian notion of *aletheia* that the distinction between the two meanings of *partire da sé* become indistinguishable. Moreover, it is in *aletheia* that *partire da sé* draws language and being into an

indissoluble knot. If, on the one hand, language is the original home of human beings, the shelter that protects and decrees (*decreta*) our communality, language is also the very tool through which we risk exposure and unconcealment. In the words of Heidegger, *aletheia* is the sheltering which discloses. And in the words of Blanchot, language is the shelter that protects the woman "from something that the *story* also helped attract." It is because of language that we face the world, and it is also because of language that we enter the world. It is the language of expression that allows us to share universal truths, but this very language also negates our singularity. What remains to be thought, though, is the process that brings about the state of unconcealment, and the passage from singularity to community and from voice to saying.

Language, the word, empties the object and relegates it to negativity. It pushes it aside, out of sight, and replaces it with the representation of its property. This is either the representation of something through a symbol or the presentation of a pure negativity that, although absent, speaks to us through the medium of language. The latter is precisely Heidegger's understanding of language expressed by way of translation. In the essay "Anaximander's Saying" we read these words: "does the word's literal translation pay heed to what in the saying comes to language?"[xxiv] In this rhetorical question – Heidegger's preferred route to reflection – Heidegger not only illustrates what he believes to be the principle task of translation, that is, the process that he himself implements in discussing Anaximander's saying; but he also comes to express clearly and explicitly the coming to language of the "thing," its disclosure – unconcealment – in language. But what is put into language is not the actual thing but rather a mediation. It is the task of translation to rewind language to arrive at that moment of the thing. It is in this sense that for Heidegger translation is the processing of language whose function is to illuminate what lies behind language. Representation and presentation can also be thought of as cohabiting, and not only and exclusively as irreconcilable opposites. Language represents by presenting the symbol of negativity, by presenting an emptiness behind which lies the "thing" of representation. Can we now understand better the Heideggerian sheltering property of language? Language shelters, in Agamben's words *custodisce* (guards), the singularity of the thing by not disclosing it. This is the great ambiguity of language, and also its great power and its *meravigliosa poesia* (wonderful poetry).

Emptiness

It was on 16 May 1970 that Giorgio Caproni put the last touches to his poems "Senza Esclamativi" (Without Exclamatives):

> How high pain is.
>
> Love is such a beast.
>
> Emptiness of the words
>
> that dig into emptiness empty
>
> monuments of emptiness. Emptiness
>
> of the grain that already attained
>
> (in the sun) the height of the heart.[xxv]

How is it possible that Caproni, this passionate lover of language, can impress the mark of emptiness and void on the object of his love? "Vuoto" (emptiness) resounds ominously throughout "Senza Esclamativi," its syncopated rhythm and battering anaphora, the strategically placed enjambments haunt us to the extent that nothing remains besides the sense of emptiness and void. And yet this is not a simple emptiness and, more importantly, it is not an emptiness devoid of presence. It is rather "Vuoto/ del grano che già raggiunse/ (nel sole) l'altezza del cuore." It is the shelter behind which an illuminating image rests and vibrates. It says "emptiness" but in representing and presenting this "emptiness" it partakes of and shares with the reader the essential experience of the thing itself.

Caproni is the poet of small things, of glasses and table-cloths, of wine and taverns. Italo Calvino was very much aware of Caproni's fondness for day-to-day objects. But he also warns us that these objects, this apparently quotidian reality with its strong textures and vivid colours, are not to be trusted.[xxvi] Calvino refers to them as "emblems," Caproni would have called them words. As we saw at the beginning of the chapter Caproni made a point to stress – with a hint of irony – that he anticipated Blanchot when in 1946 he stated that "words dissolve the object". Besides the slight competitiveness in claiming the ownership of an idea, it is clear that Caproni recognizes and acknowledges a poetic correspondence which is not so much based on the privileging of "things" as on their dissolution through language. Or better still, on the celebration of poetic language as the shelter of things. It is to language that Caproni offers his unconditional trust and this trust is based on nothing other than

language's property of emptying its referent. It is in this sense that Caproni turns the apparent inadequacy of language inside out, founding his entire poetic project not on the alleged incapacity of language, but on the very power of this supposed incapacity. As in Benjamin, Caproni's language is a fragment, or, more precisely, a halo through which one can actually *see* the empty presence of the object. In March 1977, seven years after "Senza Esclamativi," Caproni returned with restored clarity to present his poetic word. Here is the poem "Le Parole," published in the collection *Il franco cacciatore* (the frank hunter): "Words. That's right/ They dissolve the object [*l'oggetto*]/ like the fog with trees/ the river: the ferry [*il traghetto*]."[xxvii] Two verses of two lines separated by a blank space with a rhyme that calls up the object by unifying it in the house of language ("oggetto – traghetto"). But it is precisely because of the power of language, its supreme sheltering and guarding prowess – emphasized here by the rhetorical construction of the rhyme – that the object disappears behind the fog and the horizon. It is not that the object is not there, it is only that we cannot see it any longer. Or is it perhaps that we can see it better? But only if we accept seeing its emptiness through the prism of language. The simplicity of this poem is staggering, no less than its magisterial construction. See the engineer of words at work. Caproni breaks the syntax and the flow of language by assembling the words paratactically – obviously remembering the lesson of the other great Italian poet of small things, Giovanni Pascoli and his *Myricae* – simultaneously stressing their individuality and their being together, not only with other words, but also, and more importantly, with the silence of the blank space, and with words' resounding emptiness. There is no continuity, not even a discontinuity marked by enjambments, as in "Senza Esclamativi." There are instead walls of silence and emptiness, that undifferentiated silence that the characters in Blanchot's *L'attente L'oubli* hear resonating and humming in their hotel room. What resonates is nothing other than the object as it disappears, as it departs, carried away on its vessel-shelter: "oggetto – traghetto."

Sono senza parole

The word protects by clothing (and sheltering) our being with an aura of existence and purposefulness and by providing an image of what we are in the world. Being left wanting for words is a traumatic experience. There is a common expression in the

Italian language which is used to express *sgomento* (anguish) as well as an extraordinary sense of vulnerability but also futility: *sono senza parole* (literally: I am without words). In this very short and colloquial saying, whose real meaning is no longer reflected upon, is the powerfully compacted sense of non-existence and the feeling of total loss. And this loss is first of all the loss of subjectivity. *Sono senza parole* means, in effect, "I do not exist," "I am transparent." This being translucent, surfaceless, is the real negativity of being and its irreducible emptiness. To be "without words" means to exist in the impossibility of self-manifestation and disclosure. It is neither the state of concealment nor that of unconcealment. It is rather the state of nothingness. The saying *sono senza parole* takes us out of the world. It is interesting that this saying and its considerable philosophical implications are used not only as a way of sharing the experience of pain, but also as a way of comforting those who suffered the pain. It is as if the pain of the other is met, and thus partly dissipated, by our voluntary departure from existence. The loss is counterbalanced by another loss. Following what we have discussed so far, the loss of language equates with the loss of subjectivity. Our being without words is our non-being. In this sense *sono senza parole* is synonymous with *sono senza me* (I am without me). What is also instructive is that the exit from being is enacted by a linguistic expression. So if it is true that we enter the world with language, it is also true that we exit it with language. Would it be possible, then, to interpret silence as the pause of subjectivity and the waiting of language? In other words, could silence be the resounding halo through which subjectivity *is* waiting to be again? Is this halo that Blanchot and Caproni make visible in their work?

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[i] Nel 1946 [dissi] che le parole dissolvono l'oggetto, però fu solo nel '53 che Blanchot lanciò il suo motto 'il nome vanifica le cose. Giorgio Caproni, *L'opera in versi*, Luca Zuliani (ed.) (Milano: Mondadori, 1998), 1596. My trans.

ii All the texts cited are mainteined in the former library of Giorgio Caproni, Biblioteca dell'Orologio, Rome, Italy.

iii *AwO* 3-4/*AO* 12: Il la regardait à la dérobée. Peut-être parlait-elle, mais sur son visage nulle bienveillance à l'égard de ce qu'elle disait, nul consentement à parler, une affirmation à peine vivante, une souffrance à peine parlante. Il aurait voulu avoir le droit de lui dire: "Cesse de parler, si tu veux que je t'entende." Mais elle ne pouvait plus se taire à présent, même ne disant rien.

iv *AwO* 4/*AO* 12. Il se rendait bien compte qu'elle avait peut-être tout oublié. Cela ne le gênait pas. Il se demandait s'il ne désirait pas s'emparer de ce qu'elle savait, plus par l'oubli que par le souvenir. Mais l'oubli… Il lui fallait entrer, lui aussi, dans l'oubli.

v *AwO* 4/*AO* 13. Mais je ne dirai rien, sachez-le. Ce que je dis n'est rien.

vi Giorgio Caproni, *The Wall of the Earth*, trans. Pasquale Verdicchio (Montreal: Guernica, 1992), 48/ *L'opera* 324. Cosa volete ch'io chieda./ Lasciatemi nel mio buio./ Solo questo. Ch'io veda.

vii Caproni, *The Wall*, 18/*L'opera* 282. 'Confine', diceva il cartello./ Cercai la dogana. Non c'era./ Non vidi, dietro il cancello,/ ombra di terra straniera.

viii Caproni, *The Wall*, 81/*L'opera* 374. Sono tornato là/ dove non ero mai stato./ Nulla, da come non fu, è mutato./ Sul tavolo (sull'incerato/ a quadretti) ammezzato/ ho ritrovato il bicchiere/ mai riempito. Tutto/ è ancora rimasto quale/ mai l'avevo lasciato.

ix Caproni, *The Wall*, 88/*L'opera* 382. Tutti i luoghi che ho visto,/ che ho visitato,/ ora so – ne son certo:/ non ci sono mai stato.

x *AwO* 4/*AO* 13. Quelque chose lui est arrivé, et il ne peut dire que ce soit vrai, ni le contraire. Plus tard, il pensa que l'événement consistait dans cette manière de n'être ni vrai ni faux.

xi *AwO* 4/*AO* 13. Parole qu'il faut répéter avant de l'avoir entendue, rumeur sans trace qu'il suit, nulle part-errante, partout-séjournante, nécessité de la laisser aller. C'est

toujours la vieille parole qui veut être là à nouveau sans parler.

[xii] *AwO* 8/*AO* 19. pauvreté dans le langage

[xiii] *AwO* 6/*AO* 16. ignorer ce qu'on sait, seulement cela

[xiv] G.W.F. Hegel, *Werke in zwanzig Bänden*, vol. 1, *Frühe Schriften*, Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel (eds.) (Frankfurt a/M: Suhrkamp, 1971), 231. English translation in Giorgio Agamben *Language and Death: The Place of Negativity*, trans. Karen Pinkus (Minneapolis: U. of Minnesota P., 1991), 6-9.

[xv] Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford U. P., 1977), 58.

[xvi] Martin Heidegger, *Lettre à Monsieur Beaufret*, in *Lettre sur l'humanisme*, trans. Roger Munier, Paris: Éditions Montaigne, 1964), 182. English translation in Agamben, *Language and Death*, 4.

[xvii] Heidegger, *Off the Beaten Track*, trans. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge U. P., 2002), 263.

[xviii] Heidegger, *Off the Beaten Track*, 265.

[xix] Agamben, *Language and Death*, 13-4.

[xx] *AwO* 8/*AO* 19. Le désir qu'il avait de bien l'entendre avait depuis longtemps fait place à un besoin de silence dont tout ce qu'elle avait dit aurait formé le fond indifférent. Mais seule l'entente pouvait nourrir ce silence. Ils cherchaient l'un et l'autre la pauvreté dans le langage. Sur ce point, ils s'accordaient. Toujours, pour elle, il y avait trop de mots et un mot de trop, de plus des mots trop riches et qui parlaient avec excès. Bien qu'elle fût apparemment peu savante, elle semblait toujours préférer les mots abstraits, qui n'évoquaient rien. Est-ce qu'elle n'essayait pas, et lui avec elle, de se former au sein de cette histoire un abri pour se protéger de quelque chose que l'histoire aussi contribuait à attirer?

[xxi] *AwO* 3/*AO* 11. Il reprit les feuillets et écrivit: "C'est la voix qui t'est confiée, et non pas ce qu'elle dit. Ce qu'elle dit, les secrets que tu recueilles et que tu transcris

pour les faire valoir, tu dois les ramener doucement, malgré leur tentative de séduction, vers le silence que tu as d'abord puisé en eux."

[xxii] *AwO* 7/*AO* 17. c'est une chambre d'hôtel, comme il en a toujours habité, comme il les aime, un hôtel de moyenne catégorie. Mais, dès qu'il veut la décrire, elle est vide, et les mots dont il se sert ne recouvrent que le vide.

[xxiii] *AwO* 7/*AO* 18. Pourtant avec quel intérêt elle le surveille, quand il lui dit: ici le lit, là une table, là où vous êtes un fauteuil.

[xxiv] Heidegger, *Off the Beaten Track*, 267.

[xxv] Caproni, *The Wall*, 58/*L'opera* 339. Com'è alto il dolore./ L'amore com'è bestia./ Vuoto delle parole/ che scavano nel vuoto vuoti/ monumenti di vuoto. Vuoto/ del grano che già raggiunse/ (nel sole) l'altezza del cuore.

[xxvi] See also the discussion of this point in my *Interstitial Writing: Calvino, Caproni, Sereni and Svevo* (Leicester: Troubador, 2003), xii.

[xxvii] Caproni, *L'opera*, 460. Le parole. Già/ Dissolvono l'oggetto./ Come la nebbia gli alberi,/ il fiume: il traghetto. My trans.