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**Writing the Caesura: *The Bird of Nothing & Other Poems***

Próspero Saíz's *The Bird of Nothing & Other Poems* was published by Ghost Pony Press in 1993 and since then has received praise by a growing audience, mainly in Europe. Yet here in North America it remains largely unknown. Why is this? Why is it that a work of such sustained and profound poetizing has not found a wider readership here on American soil?

A question like this may sound trite. The fact that poets of worth are rarely recognized in this culture has become something of a commonplace ever since the beginnings of American modernism. And even those that gained an international reputation, among them Pound, Eliot and Williams, often judged this soil as unfit for the roots of poetry to clutch, and so they became either expatriates or sought, in vain I would suggest, to poetize this new locale which was, as Wallace Stevens said of New York, "fascinating but horribly unreal."

However, though this condition may have been essential to the experience of modernism, there is no reason to assume that it persists. At the level of fact, it seems on the contrary that in this century America has never suffered from a dearth of poets. Witness today, when poets are publishing at an unprecedented rate and several schools (if I can be excused for using what is at times a misleading term) have gained an international reputation, for example the "Language poets," not to mention individuals such as John Ashbery, Adrienne Rich or even Rita Dove. Since the end of the decade of the Sixties, ethnic and multi-cultural poetry, poetry by women and by other voices never before heard in the mainstream of American culture have continued to blossom into vibrant sites of individual and collective activity. Nothing seems further from the truth, therefore, than to accept the sometimes pessimistic and often ideologically suspect proclamations of poetry's demise.

However, these facts do not represent the last word by any means. If the initial question could be dismissed simply by pointing out

that it takes time for most any work of a poet to gain recognition even today when the means for production and distribution are so much greater, then perhaps it needs to be qualified by another, the question of what is and what passes for poetry now? That is to say, has “poetry” become an anachronism or a term of convention whose only real function is to designate a complex of production, distribution and reception? This would put matters in a much different light.

This question refers much more than the devolution of hard-won truth into trivialized convention; it has particular relevance to our time and place, which has been the site of an often bitter struggle both in the academy and in literary circles concerning the status of poetry, its continued existence, and what can be said of it if there is anything left to be said at all.

On the one hand, the idea of poetry either as a genre or as, according to some theories at least, the highest form of aesthetic experience has been steadily undermined by contemporary literary theory and criticism. This destruction and displacement is not, however, confined to criticism alone but has become just as much a task of contemporary poetry itself. The work of the Language Poets serves as a particularly good example of this tendency to render poetry a form of critique, one that is in fact identified as its most effective *praxis*. Witness the claim of Ron Silliman who writes, “The social function of the language arts, especially the poem, place them in an important position to carry the class struggle *for* consciousness to the level *of* consciousness” (Language 131). Poetry here is equated with *work* in the Marxist sense; it is the end product of a synthesis of objective determinations (a “determinate coordinate of language and history,” the totality of which he calls the “objective matrix”) and the subjective conceptualization of this very matrix in and through the imagination of the individual poet. (127-28). Poetry therefore does not simply raise consciousness, it *is* consciousness—consciousness at work in the production of its own determinate forms. This leads to his definitive pronouncement that poetry is “*the philosophy of practice in language.*” Poetry, it seems, has gained new life as critique, as work, as philosophy, as praxis.

What then, passes for poetry and what can be said of poetry here? Apparently quite a lot. The strength of Silliman’s position is that

it avoids both the implied essentialism of the question, 'what is poetry,' as well as the temptation to aestheticize poetry by withdrawing it from the everyday. In the latter case, even Valery's notion of the absoluteness of form as an aim in itself seems suspect.

Understood as linguistic praxis, the potential for poetic production increases dramatically. Many of the Language Poets invest poetry with the most worthy of all possible tasks. It will renew language, strip away its reified existence, liberate it from its outmoded grammatical and literary confines including genre and verse forms. Poetry will revolutionize language, and in so doing, create a new consciousness. The practice of poetry will be nothing less than revolutionary language and language as revolution.

Yet this outburst of critical rapture, so undeniably tempting, may do so much with poetry that right from the start it appears ready to sacrifice it on the profaned altar of effective social action. What if this "liberation" of poetry conceals within it another, more sobering truth that "poetry" can no longer be itself? Before I am accused of espousing a form of essentialism, I shall explain more carefully what is meant here.

To refer once again to Silliman, the operative term that defines the evolution of poetic production today is the "new sentence" which is, he writes, "a sentence with an interior poetic structure in addition to interior ordinary grammatical structure" (New Sentence 90). Here the poetic becomes synonymous with formal technique, techniques which call attention to themselves as discursive or poetic effects. In this version of hyper formalism, the defining element of all poetry is the production of a sentence(s) that "keeps the reader's attention at or very close to the level of language" (91). It is a virtual writing machine with the potential to reorganize ordinary sentences in a way that frees them from the referential function (the syllogism) in order to show the conditions of their own meaning production: "The new sentence is the first prose technique to identify the signifier (even that of the blank space) as the locus of literary meaning" (93). This is to equate writing (of which poetry is one of several names) with the production of effects, which are in turn not even aesthetic, but critical.

The irony is that at the very moment when Language Poets like Silliman try to fashion poetry into a condition of possibility for

effective social and political action is the point where an uncanny and remarkable reversal takes place. According to the theory of the new sentence, the principal dimension of poetry is now cognitive. And even though its aim is not to produce such, it is a poetics essentially founded on the Concept. That, however, corresponds precisely to the description of the historical destiny of art made by Hegel over than a century ago. In his famous statement concerning the end of art, Hegel writes,

[art] has lost for us genuine truth and life, and has rather been transferred into our *ideas* instead of maintaining its earlier necessity in reality and occupying its higher place. What is now aroused in us by works of art is not just immediate enjoyment but our judgement also, since we subject to our intellectual consideration (i) the content of art, and (ii) the work of art's means of presentation, and the appropriateness or inappropriateness of both to one another. (Hegel 11)

And if art's means of presentation is now the new sentence, then this increasing sophistication through the use of structural linguistics does not contradict Hegel's statement at all.



Starting from a remark about readership, this essay on *The Bird of Nothing* has digressed considerably into the question of the relationship of poetry and poetics. It is by no means an arbitrary decision to interrogate this relationship against the backdrop of Hegel's aesthetics. Nor have I really digressed. I have only tried to present in terse fashion what the poem is itself mindful of, and what it gathers up into its Saying. In a preliminary sense it can be called a confrontation with that historical destiny theorized with considerable philosophical clarity by Hegel, in which he claims that poetry must in effect *become poetics*, an art that invites "intellectual consideration" and which therefore continues to exist as the *techne* of art in the most extreme sense, namely, of knowledge as technique. "Confrontation" may be and is an inadequate word because of its polemical overtones. There are not two

sides here, and one cannot choose. It is a matter, rather, of a strife in which the *being* of poetry is the issue. It is this that the *Bird of Nothing* puts at risk.

*Only the poem is.*

*The poem may stand only insofar as it shuns poetics, escapes from Literature, and gathers the nature of poetry.*

*The rhythmic flow of poetic saying—not the said—pure and simple.*

These, the words of the preface, have the form of a philosophical statement, but if it offers knowledge, it would have to be called negative. At least at the start. These statements traverse the thought concerning the end of art, but they do so in an uncanny and equivocal way. Hegel has written that art has lost its truth. This would mean that the truth of Spirit, which is freedom, no longer comes to presence *in and as art*. Art no longer stands on its own because its essence has been superseded by another form of realization, and that is philosophy. Consequently, the continued existence of art entails that it be presented not through itself, for its truth has withdrawn, but through the Concept. But if the preface can be considered a rejoinder, it does so by asserting the absoluteness of poetry's being: only the poem is. Is this a poet's defense of poetry against the onslaught of knowledge? Actually no. Because the assertion is equivocal, but essentially so. What if there is a sense in which Hegel is right? What if the essence of art has withdrawn? What then would it mean to say that the poem "is"? The poem cannot stand in absolute presence. Absolved from everything, it would have to emanate only from Being, and Being would have to be fully revealed in the poem's radiance, like the splendor of Rilke's Apollo.<sup>1</sup> But the modern world has little need for this. Modern

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<sup>1</sup> Yet even in his "Früher Apollo" where full presence reigns in the divinity's gaze—"so ist in seinem Haupte / nichts, was verhindern könnte..."—it is already tödlich, fatal, and it seems to suggest a rupture between the sacred and the poem. The sacred does not really come to presence in the poem. For Rilke this becomes a task that remains undone. See by contrast his "Archaisher Torso Apollos."

technology has long ago usurped the task of turning the real into the Concept and has done so very well. The mapping out and structuring of time and space in terms of the virtual is testament to that. Thus, the being of the poem, if it is absolute, withdraws.

What did Hegel mean by his statement that art is a thing of the past and how does this relate to contemporary poetics? Hegel conceives of art as one of the essential possibilities for the presentation of Spirit; that is to say, art is a moment in which the essence of Spirit, which is freedom, realizes itself as actual. Art, therefore, is a mode of presentation that gains its truth insofar as it lets freedom appear in the sensuous, concrete actualization of the Idea of beauty. And as long as Spirit finds its most appropriate form of representation in the sensuous and concrete, art will retain its truth. But Hegel is quite clear on the matter: Spirit as freedom is Absolute, and the absolute will not be limited by either an individual content or a sensuous form. Thus, art is not the highest way of apprehending the concrete universal (Hegel 71).

At that point art does not come to presence out of itself. It tags along with the Concept. In what way? As *intellectualized art*, an art that theorizes itself and presents itself as theory. At the very moment that art seeks to reclaim its absolute sovereignty, as it does in modernism, it does so by becoming its own theory. There will be no poetics outside of art; the latter must become its own poetics. William Carlos Williams was well aware of this when he stressed how modern poetry finds its basis in *structure*:

But that is the exact place where for us modern art began. For that is the essence of Cezanne . . . that we began to say that it is no longer what you paint or what you write about that counts but how you do it: how you lay on the pigment, how you place the words to make a picture or poem. (Altieri 14)

His is a spirited attempt to free art from the dogged tradition of mimesis and to find an absolute basis in the purity of its own structure. Just as surely does Williams's view attest to the fatality that has taken place, for he tells us that art can no longer sustain itself in the realm of sensuous appearance. Art, Hegel maintains, has to harmonize its content, the Idea, with its form, the configuration of sensuous material,

and “bring them into a free reconciled totality” (Hegel 71). Once this synthesis is no longer possible, art loses its character as a concrete totality and is driven into that one-sided dimension which Charles Altieri has painstakingly shown to be the credo of modernist American poetry: abstraction.

The way indicated by Williams’ abstractionism certainly does not exhaust the possible responses to the end of art. The artist can also seek a new synthesis between art and life, where art is viewed as the activity *par excellence* in which modern man fashions himself. This is clearly the conception to which the Language Poets belong. But what is the basis of this new synthesis? If it is not the concrete Idea of the beautiful that is presented in a determinate form, then what? Action, especially political action. The forms and techniques of art, and specifically the diminishing of the referential function, are meant to serve the ambitious aim of overthrowing the commodified character of contemporary society, with its macabre reification of all social relations and exaggerated fetishization, and to aid in the construction of a *community*. Against the reification of modern life this community will be constituted as co-producers, that is, readers and writers whose activity is essentially transformation, the polymorphous perversity of language freed from reference (Language 35).

Community, however, is a troubled thing, especially when one begins from its absence and seeks to fashion it anew by means of art. What sort of community could arise from this new poetics? A community organized by *work*, the work of dismantling ideologies, grammars and rhetorics that situate us as subjects, the production of new anti-semantic readings, the production of works themselves, which become what they are in the completion of a circuit in which the contradiction between reader and writer is *aufgehoben*.<sup>2</sup> We are all writerly readers. We are all gathered in this hyper-productivity in which each reading becomes an event of the emptying, refilling and reconfiguration of signs, ciphers, and graphemes. You and I, part of the immanent community of the now fused Reader and Writer. But is this in fact a new form of immanence? The oldest actually. It is one based on that which defines man *qua* man: Logos. Language, freed from its

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<sup>2</sup> nullified

previous ontological restraints now holds an infinite potential of production and reproduction, and in this our absolutely immanent being is confirmed. We and Everything will become a *work*, the work of language.

This conception of the relation between poetry and community, no matter what its merits, and they are not to be underestimated, denies to community the very principle that lets it be, namely, that it is always already outside of itself, oriented toward an exteriority that it can never wholly appropriate. An immanent community is one always on the verge of implosion because it seeks to compensate for our being exterior to ourselves, our finitude, and transcend it by merging us all into a single body, a single collective, or in the modern version, into the single project of self-creation. But can poetry really help to accomplish this purpose? Blanchot is right: “Whoever acknowledges effective action in the thick of history as his essential task cannot prefer artistic action. Art acts poorly and little” (Space of Literature 213). Why should anyone who wants to complete the work of Wo/Man need art? Even in its strongest formulation according to Silliman, where poetry is identified as consciousness’ own self-production and hence the philosophy of practice *par excellence*, the question is not answered satisfactorily, because the milieu of poetry is never equal to that of action. Its mode of address is, rather, reticence. If poetry is activity, it is a strange one, because whatever it presents is based upon that which is withheld, not as the hidden but as what is radically exterior to any “we,” the members of a society who speak and converse with each other for reasons of common need or contractual relations: it is my own mortality, which is never my own but what dispossesses me utterly of my being-here, which is a solitude that I yearn to share with another and can do only do so by existing beside myself, in being towards an other with whom I am never united, who nonetheless grants to me the gift of my own dying—that I do not simply cease to exist, I die. I die with others, and my dying is also irreducibly other.

The community of those who share what cannot be shared, for it is always other, can indeed be defined by speech, and in this context poetry can assume its place as *mythos*, the gathering word. But this is already too functional a definition of myth, and more than that, it has already understood myth to be a work of creation, a creation of *words*.



But speech, if it is indeed communal, must needs be the speech of the other, of what does not come to presence except as an awaited death that is never there. “Community,” writes Blanchot, “gives rise to an unshared though necessarily multiple speech in a way that does not let it develop in words: always already lost, it has no use, creates no work and does not glorify itself in that loss” (Unavowable Community 12). An unshared speech that is always in excess of words? In this difficult thought perhaps Blanchot has begun to approach poetry’s being. A brief gloss is all that can be attempted here. To speak of what is ownmost to me, my death, would require a saying that is wholly other. If I die, it is the other that gives me my death, and it is only in relation to that otherness to which we are all exposed that my death becomes possible. Else I just simply cease to exist. How can I think an otherness that dispossesses me of everything, including my being-here? If I am mindful not to render it a present being, then one possibility is to think it as a gifting in which we are given nothing except our own abandonment. And how then shall I respond? My response is itself nothing else but an offering to that which has no face, no words, and thus my speech risks irrecoverable loss. I am promised nothing in return. For who shall receive it? There is no circuit of speakers here, no fusion of reader and writer, for my response does not reach the level of words. By contrast, the writerly reader always has her linguistic material, and she makes the most out of it. An infinity of projects become possible within a horizon that is itself an infinite potentialization of the future.

“Each person imagines,” writes Georges Bataille, “and therefore knows of his existence with the help of words. . . . Being is mediated in him through words” (83). It is the term ‘mediation’ that is crucial here for differentiating between words and the speech that does not develop itself in words. The discursive exchange between you and I links us together not just as individuals, but also puts my own existence in relation to universal human existence. You and I: mediated by words in which we recognize ourselves through the universal, we come to know each other. But what I have in fact appropriated is neither your self nor your otherness, but the mediation, the middle term, and this assures our linkage. The business of increasing, deepening and creating the mediations that put us in relation to each other now becomes the

overall project of making our commonality more secure.

By contrast, as an other-saying and a risk, poetry does not mediate. Bataille writes, “Of poetry, I will now say that it is, I believe, the sacrifice in which words are victims” (135). If we interpret sacrifice as a rite that allows for communication with the divine, which is then taken as a metaphor for poetry, then the profound implications of Bataille’s statement are missed. Sacrifice is a dramatization where the one who is sacrificed becomes wholly other, and in that otherness our own being outside of ourselves, our finitude, is communicated. But this communication takes place at the extreme limit of the possible, where knowledge slips into non-knowledge, where words cease to manifest themselves as our property or our production—as *servile discourse*, in short; and they manifest themselves as speech, which is constituted by silence primarily; but in this silence all that we know about our being and being in general is put into question. Language at the extreme limit of the possible is not revelation. No Being is glimpsed there. It is, at the most, a hint:

hint or absent thing  
sound or writing?  
you hear yourself  
but are not present  
to your own counsel  
you mere hint of things withdrawn . . .

oh fading solitary hint



To call poetry an other saying and a hinting can only serve as a preliminary characterization that opens up a possible way toward an experience of the language of the poem. That otherness is two-fold. What is said by the poem is other in terms of its reference: no object or being is signified there, nothing is represented. Things, nature already exist, remarks Mallarmé, we don’t need to create them in poetry. Nor do we need to signify them. But we can evoke their silent, rhythmic relations and correspondences, which immediately transports us beyond

the presentation and representation of beings. Thus, the 'said' is beyond beings. But so too is the 'saying,' and more importantly so. If poetizing can be said to have a function, it is not to render beings present, but rather to open up a place, to *give place* in a manner that is anterior and exterior to the space of presence. Poetry takes place; it happens, but not as an event that comes on the scene, arrives and is here. The space sketched out in poetry's saying is one where beings disappear: you, poem, word and thing evoked, you, reader and poet, mere hint of things withdrawn. The other saying of poetry pays heed to the essential relation of language to beings insofar as every revelation, every appearing is a concealing, every presentation a withdrawal, and every 'said' maintains an unbreakable relation to an exteriority that is always already there, yet never present, like the bird that lies outside of every bird, that takes place 'under the false appearance of the present,' the bird into which every signified bird disappears, a pure notion, the bird of nothing.

purity of the bird	grace of the bison
	lost forever
to reveal yourself	you mask yourself

This presents a problem for interpretation; indeed, it seems to run counter to the logic and aims of hermeneutics, and any attempt to interpret *The Bird of Nothing* must reckon with this difference. The hermeneutic endeavor is predicated upon the idea that something foreign, be it a language, a text, or a life, can be translated into our contemporary language and made familiar to our understanding. Philo, the Hebrew scholar of the early Middle Ages, had already indicated the main characteristic of hermeneutics by singling out the writing of the Jews as that which required translation, partly because it was written in a foreign language, partly because the meaning was obscure. Much later, in the nineteenth century, during the time in which hermeneutics was transformed into a modern discipline, Schleiermacher and Dilthey turn this, the interpretation of a foreign discourse or written record, into the task of developing a general theory and technique of understanding.

Hermeneutics henceforth becomes a matter of developing an understanding which promises at the same time the achievement of our own, that is, a human understanding. In interpreting the foreign and making it accessible as part of a certain socio-historical world, it ceases to be a mere fact existing outside of our lived experience and becomes instead the very means by which we as human beings learn to understand ourselves.

It would seem, therefore, that hermeneutics has already thematized otherness, and that therefore the task of translating poetic saying, with its obscurity or polysemantic character, would have already been adequately understood. However, the sought-after understanding is based on the translation of the other into the same, and specifically on the basis of the *human* which is at all times and everywhere of the same essence: the other is the expression (*Ausdruck*) of the lived experience (*Erlebnis*) of the human spirit that created it, which I, the interpreter, re-experience by a process of transposition. I rediscover myself in the other person. I understand. Otherness is preserved and yet extinguished, and poetry is of necessity translated out of its element. But there is a more fundamental sense for the term hermeneutics. Translating the foreign into the familiar is grounded on the possibility that the being of something can be made accessible as a being, its meaning disclosed within the purview of that being for whom its own being is an issue, which projects itself understandingly into its possibilities for being, that is, historical *Dasein*. Understood as an existential possibility, hermeneutics is a way for historical *Dasein* to make the character of its own being accessible to itself.

But what is the character of *Dasein*'s being? In *Being and Time* and elsewhere, Heidegger names it as *Faktizität*, facticity. Facticity means that proximally and for the most part, *Dasein* finds itself *in the world*. The "there" of *Da-sein* is an opening, a disclosure in which the worldhood of the world, and subsequently, all things encountered in the world, including *Dasein* itself, first appear. *Dasein* is disclosed as worldly; it *is* as its "there," immersed in its world, letting things become present to it as ready-to-hand, ready, that is, for the many possibilities into which *Dasein* projects itself. In its factual existing, *Dasein* has its world and comes to presence in the world, but the source and aim of that originary disclosure, or as Heidegger says, the "whence and

whither” remain a mystery. Dasein never has the origin of its being in hand, and yet it exists as a projection of possibilities for being. In relation to this, hermeneutics represents an authentic possibility for Dasein to be. Insofar as Dasein takes over in an interpretation a “having been there,” a Dasein that has been, and projects it as a possibility that is yet to come, Dasein becomes accessible to itself in terms of its concrete facticity. Hermeneutics articulates possibilities for being that have been taken over, makes them definite, and establishes itself more firmly as an historical being.

Dasein’s being, however, though characterized by facticity, is not limited to factual possibilities for existing. In the “whence and whither” that remain in darkness Dasein comes across an otherness that lies outside of all of its possibilities, or alternatively, is disclosed as an extreme possibility that dispossesses Dasein of all its possibilities, where its being-toward-something is displaced by being-toward-death. Here, at this point where interpretation must reckon with being-toward-death, which is the most essential possibility of Dasein’s being, is where hermeneutics may re-encounter poetry not in order to translate it into an understanding, but this time to *think* that otherness.

In being-toward-death, Dasein is given over to (its) other. That other is mine yet escapes me. I am delivered over to it yet I must take it over as my most essential possibility for being. Yet in the previous section, the discussion of Bataille has already indicated that poetry must be thought as an other-saying that seeks after a *how* of Dasein in the face of the neutral, anonymous, exterior yet most intimate character of its own being.

Thus, a point of encounter between hermeneutics and poetry appears and can be summarized in a question: What would happen if interpretation were to follow the Saying of poetry and tried to make accessible in an understanding the extreme limit of the possible? That we are invited to ask such a question is indicated by the preface to *The Bird of Nothing*:

*Only the poem is.*

*The poem may stand insofar as it shuns poetics, escapes from Literature, and gathers the nature of poetry.*

*The rhythmic flow of poetic saying—not the said—pure and simple.*



The previous lines contain many echoes, and indeed, a mindful reader of *The Bird of Nothing* will hear them resounding from the pages of these poems, but there are two that deserve attention above all—two echoes, two poets, never named, whose poetizing is traced in the words, the inscriptions and silences of each page: Mallarmé and Hölderlin. The subsequent remarks of this essay will focus on the ways in which their poetry is gathered up into *The Bird of Nothing*. At this point Mallarmé and Hölderlin represent nothing more than two possible ways into the poem—two ways, intimately intertwined, in which the nature of poetry has been gathered and decided upon.

The echo of Mallarmé, that is, the echo of the one who names the essential in poetry as the pursuit of black on white, is already there in these juxtaposed lines: ‘you [blank space] mere hint of things withdrawn,’ and, ‘*only the poem is.*’ You, reader and poet, a mere hint of what withdraws, and that disappearance is indicated, *hinted at*, only by a blank space, the whiteness of the page. The poem is; you are not—not there, that is, in the manner of a voice gives presence to the poem: ‘you hear yourself / but are not present / to your own counsel.’ Does that mean that the poem is the true reality? On the contrary, the being of the poem, its ‘is’ strikes one as strange, modified by a ‘perhaps’ that distances it from the realm of the actual: it *may* stand. This ‘perhaps’ indicates that the time of the poem is not the present, but the future. In the present the poem is a virtual thing; it exists only as a promise of the poem, or better to say, the *book* to come. Or as something that has been but has not yet arrived. In itself this poses no difficulty for a reader informed by historical consciousness which, despite recent claims concerning the end of history, still describes most of us. But there is a difference.

In the dialectic of history already referred to under the name of Hegel (and by implication, Marx), presence is deferred to the future in the process of the becoming-absolute of the subject of history. Insofar

as mankind can be that subject, he is revealed as his own project. Poetry can serve this project, providing a concrete Idea for the fully accomplished humanity that is to come. However, in the context of the absolute that poetry is and seeks after, Mallarmé hardly mentions man at all, or if he does, it is only as that which sets into motion a thing that escapes from and remains exorbitant to his actual existence and actualization, namely, the pursuit of black on white, writing. Man writes, man produces the book, but the book is not his. Far from being his creation, the author disappears once it is made. The book does not need him in order to be. ‘Acting. . . meant, oh visitor I understand you, philosophically to effect motion on many, which yields in return the happy thought that you, being the cause of it, therefore exist: no one is sure of that in advance.’ In these few terse lines Mallarmé crystallizes the presumptive character of action and the negative relation between action and writing. Creation confirms the being of the author. The inspiration caused by the book reflects back on the producer as its ‘first cause,’ and even more, the presence of the book, measured by its effect on others, confirms the absent presence of its author. The book communicates his experience. But Mallarmé draws the opposite conclusion. The book is not referred back to the act of making it. ‘Your act,’ he writes, ‘is always applied to paper,’ and as such it is as detached from the writer’s existence as it is from the reader’s, and in no wise does it stand as something created whose meaning is to be sought in the re-experiencing of the author’s *Erlebnis*: ‘one does not write luminously on a dark field.’ To so do would be to accept the illusions of creation, thinking that one, *ex nihilo*, brings things to presence.

What Mallarmé describes here is the very strangeness of writing and book. As soon as it is made it becomes independent from and indifferent to the making. It asserts only that it *is*. But once again it must be stressed that the ‘is’ does not signify presence. Mallarmé is very clear on this when he writes, ‘there is no Present, no—a present does not exist.’ One could say that the ‘perhaps’ of the book to come always virtualizes the present.

It seems nearly incomprehensible; in fact it is. Who would dare assert that books are never present, and that they themselves preserve nothing? Hasn’t the book been our primary form of cultural memory? Who would dare object to the notion that one of the essential functions

of poetry is to bring forth the world into presence and let things be seen as if for the first time? But that is precisely what Mallarmé insists: the book is not actually there. Of course, as a palpable object it is. But as compared to the conditions of real existence and of the ordinary signifying function of language, the book affirms something profoundly unreal. It is not objects but their disappearance, transposed as they are into a system, or better to say, a *place* of pure correspondences that is pure only insofar as every trace of materiality and referentiality has been eliminated. Within this context, Mallarmé's famous statement bears repeating: 'Why should we perform the miracle by which a natural object is almost made to disappear beneath the magic waving wand of the written word, if not to divorce that object from the direct and palpable, and so conjure up its *essence* in all purity?' One could interpret this as the idea that words, written in the book, turn objects into abstractions in order to submit them to the silent play of the blank spaces that surround them, referring them to the place of their appearance rather than their meaning. Mallarmé uses the word "elimination" to describe this process. But the issue involves more than simply a displacement of meaning by syntax and visual appearance on the page; it concerns presence, or the disappearance thereof. Saiz remarks on this fact in his poem, "minimal notes to no one," a poem which could serve as a propeaedeutic for reading *The Bird of Nothing*:

Books are written because all things lack a true origin. We  
desire an origin in our present, and so the book is yet to come.

Two meanings are suggested here: the book is yet to come as the dream of the fulfillment of our desire. We will one day have presence, or may. It is for that very reason exterior to the very idea of origin. If the origin guarantees abiding presence, then the book testifies to its absence. We have books both because of a desire for presence, and also because of the impossibility of that desire. The first leads to the establishment of a project: to produce books is to put us on the way toward our goal, to cross the time between the absent origin and fulfillment. The second lies outside of the project. So completely exterior that one can say that nothing at all is accomplished in a book, except for the game of making things disappear in favor of a pure space that is never really there. It is



always to come.

Statements such as these may seem to reader part of a tiresome academic exercise. It is unfortunate, if inevitable, that the academy is where Mallarmé has ended up. However, there is something far more serious here than the literary task of explicating two difficult poets. It is Blanchot who points to the profound implications Mallarmé's idea has for anyone who would take poetry seriously indeed. "What summons us to write," he asks, "when the time of the book determined by the beginning-end relation, and the space of the book determined by the deployment from a center cease to impose themselves?"—that is to say, when the book is no longer determined either by an origin or as a project that will come to completion as a work? His answer: "the attraction of pure exteriority." Blanchot's response is so simple that it barely needs explanation. The other, the outside, whose anonymity and stark neutrality remain unthinkable, except through a ruse—isn't this the very thing that has always attracted us? Or one could choose to call it by another phrase, this outside: *dying itself, the uncanny experience of having no experience of the outside to which we are so fatefully bound*. The fascination with death is no accident. We have always remained in intimate contact with that which so completely escapes us. Death—the shattering of all project into which we are hurled. Writing—language outside of itself.

Do these thoughts allow for a few groping steps toward *The Bird of Nothing*? The Bird, 'the uncanny bird,' you who have never sung and never will, you, feather, plume, and quill incising black ink marks across the purity of the white page, 'O pen wound'—'all poems repose in thee / oh naked nothingness.' Bird of nothing, nothing to sing, nothing to paint; a silence, yet always giving birth to names—'a name a name we need a name / for true beginnings.' But the bird who never sang has only been written of and upon the blankness, the space, and the rhythmic interval; in between, a *caesura*, whiter and more pure than the vulva of Isis that gives birth to the uncanny, '*inter and enter if you will*,' where Osiris is dismembered and scattered across the world, in glyphs, inscriptions, fourteen traces of the god, food for crocodiles, scattered pages of the Book. Goose, phoenix and quetzal: the first myths that tell of the essence of the gods before the gods—layer of the cosmic egg, creating itself from the fire that burned at dawn, death and

rebirth, the plumed serpent, archae-opteryx lithographia, origin  
*inscribed* in fossil remains, all destined to be disseminated into  
fragments of papyrus bark, where both god and myth disappear.

Casting into pure nothingness. . . .

thy      is pure

thy      is pure

thy      is pure

If we were to try to name the kind of poetizing that occurs here in these pages it would be the idea that essential language, which both the words writing and poetry could signify, *un-works* what we have made and produced, including works of art, by effacing the signifying function of language on the basis of which our everyday relations with the world are established and maintained. The temporality of the poem is as a consequence not the present—the poem’s function is not to make present that which is or has been, nor is it to provide a vision of a possible future presence. The spacing, the blankness of the poem’s page spills over the margins in the manner of a *plus*, whose sense in both English and French is relevant here, that is, as a ‘more’ that folds over every page onto another page, and another, never reaching a closure.

What then is the function of words if they are no longer to be understood as signifying agents? And what is their temporality if not the present? From Mallarmé to *The Bird* and back, folding back across the spacing of an impossible book, *The Bird of Nothing* represents, *if nothing else*, a thoughtful meditation upon the silence that Mallarmé heard and dared to translate:

the flower’s yellowing  
upon the unceasing white  
carrying us homeward  
there to the sealed house  
shrine of the uncanny bird

Even Mallarmé's pure flower, the one that banishes every living flower to oblivion, yellows as a result of its own temporality, which is not so much eternity as the putrefaction of eternity, or—eternity as putrefaction. This does not mean that the primary function of words is sheer negativity in making things disappear. The uncanniness of the bird, the flower's yellowing carries us homeward (an echo of Hölderlin) not to *a* place, but in order to *take place*, to let 'place' happen. Poetry happens; it takes place in the sense of the greek word *topos*: not simply a three-dimensional unit, place gathers; it is an assemblage and conjoining of things that would otherwise never become present. Phenomenologically speaking, 'place' refers to the disclosure of a clearing, an opening that gathers things into its locale and lets them come to presence. But here it also signifies the disclosure of disappearance.

One way to understand this might be by invoking the ontological difference. It is not beings but Being that is brought to presence in poetizing. But to point to the silencing of beings is not enough. One must add further that, rather than coming to presence, Being itself does not arrive, or if it does, it appears as a refusal to appear. This requires that one no longer think Being as presence.

What has apparently been described here is a poem that could never be. A poem without an author, without a reader, without a said, a poem that is nothing human or possessed of any other form of presence that would guarantee its legibility. Not even an appeal to the magical or the sacred as the source of poetic creation would suffice. It would seem that between Mallarmé and *The Bird of Nothing*, we are trying to describe something impossible. A poem, an endless poem, there but not there, incessantly written because of a silent summons to write in the anonymity of pure exteriority. It would be a writing, carrying us homeward, there to the sealed house: the uncanny experience of dying itself, the tomb. The poem's ending seems to suggest no less: 'the impossible night is nearing.' But here in these lines the relation to the impossible is expressed thoughtfully, and there *is* a relation; it, the impossible, the outside that appears as the neutral, the impersonal, *nears*. Thus, this impossibility has a force and power of its own, one that remains outside of power, which is always expressed, as Nietzsche

explains, as quantum and vector within the differential of forces. Power produces effects or the potential for further effects. 'It' nears, from out of the blank spaces of the poem, which is a certain kind of space that opens the way to another space that draws closer from its infinite distance. It nears in the mood of awaiting, which waits for nothing except its own impossibility that is ever nearing and ever near, but never here. In both instances there is a movement from the given reality of our earthly sojourn to the mystery of our being, mysterious not because it is hidden but because it refuses, or better to say: it gives / there is refusal. The movement of poetry toward the mystery of being takes place as dispersal. We do not move to the ground that provides a foundation, but to the dispersal of all presence. Why then does that dispersal hold such a promise? Why then is there such attraction toward and welcoming of that which does not grant? Why, appearances to the contrary, are Mallarmé and Saiz such joyful poets?

'thy            is pure'

^

blank  
space

rhythm

whiteness

blackness

nothing

Being as refusal

is pure.

~

*The Bird of Nothing* is a poem of myth. This is undeniable, and that fact would seem to call into question the previous attempt to view the poem from the perspective of pure poetry. The middle section of the poem recalls several of the major myths of the world, winding its way through the archaeology of fossil remains and the first bird, archaeopteryx lithographica (or was it the first?), written in stone,

through the Egyptian Book of the Dead and the Aztec legend of Quetzalcoatl.

As a gathering of multiple myths, the mode of telling and subject matter of *The Bird* seems a far cry from the poetry of the absolute, since mythic speech, as Claude Levi-Strauss theorizes it, possesses a basically operational value. It refers to events alleged to have taken place long ago while at the same time describing a specific pattern that is timeless; this timelessness is what comprises its sacred character because it refers to an absent origin as a way of overcoming the contradictory character of the social expression of birth, death and sexuality. This turns mythic language into a kind of *tekhnē* that is no different in quality from scientific thinking since both employ the same processes of abstraction. It is only the object to which they are applied that is different. Myth, therefore, is a transmissible unit, a bundle of mythemes that make up a story that can be reworked and translated ever anew.

If, however, there is myth in *The Bird of Nothing*, it is one that does not fabricate or give account of an absent origin. The bird of nothing stands, if it stands at all, before, in-between, and after two blank pages; the ‘forged bird forgotten,’ it is written as primordial myth that has been interrupted at its very inception. What is there before the blank page? And after? As long as one continues to think mythic language as the necessity of a structure, present and re-presented in a repetition, the interrupted myth of *The Bird* remains out of reach, for rather than the determinism of a mytheme, the bird of nothing, repeated ever and again, appears only by chance:

across the vast horizon  
the storm of traces and letters spreading                      marks and glyphs  
in the eye of the storm by the purity of chance . . .  
  
archipelago or constellation  
ink stains against wind and water . . .

It would be far beyond the confines of this essay to explore the poetic dialogue taking place here with Mallarmé’s *Un Coup de dés*. The

echoes are unmistakable. Literary studies have made it clear that in banishing all material objects and transposing words into the realm of a silent music in which pure correspondence would unfold without the need for an author, Mallarmé wanted to abolish chance from the work of art. Yet the main sentence of *Un Coup de dés* asserts, though not as a direct statement, chance's invincibility, which nonetheless may perhaps be overcome by imposing a precise form upon the language.<sup>3</sup>

Drawing out the implications of Mallarmé to the end (and I am suggesting that this is what *The Bird* attempts to do<sup>4</sup>), one discovers a chiasmatic relation between chance and necessity, chance becoming its own necessity, *the purity of chance*, and necessity the movement of chance. But isn't that also the very movement of myth? Didn't Mallarmé also want to give an Orphic explanation of the earth and man? Is not myth the unfolding of the world and of man's place in it within the play of necessity and chance?

What then is written in this book, *The Bird of Nothing*, that appears only at the point of its disappearance? A cosmology of beginning, where writing itself as the play of chance and necessity is part of the stuff of the universe rather than transcending it. That is the primary difficulty with Levi-Strauss's conception of myth: the structure must be independent and *a priori*, discovered by a mental operation that assumes the identity of thinking and being. Whence the bird that tells of the beginning only when it is masked? Whence the bird that gathers together the upper and lower regions, of the river Nile, of being? Does the bird of nothing stand for something or is it itself inaugural, gathering together, showing something yet at the same time holding

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<sup>3</sup> Maurice Blanchot's study suggests, however, that such a formalist reading of Mallarmé's poetics remains superficial as long as we fail to draw out its ontological implications. The complex spatial relations and correspondences to which the poem gives rise take place in a vacant, and one should say, inhuman outside into which we are hurled 'inside ourselves out of ourselves.' The unity of poetic form therefore happens only because the poetic word originally unfolds in the dispersal of the very coordinates of presence—space, time, self, and object—that govern our common logic. ("The Book to Come" 238)

<sup>4</sup> It would be well to recall the statement from another poet, Paul Celan, whose poetizing also owes a great deal to Hölderlin and Mallarmé: 'what would happen if we were to follow Mallarmé . . . ?'

back and sheltering? The originary character of the bird does not appear as the repetition of a first beginning, and no prior image is imitated. There is only the bird that reveals itself in the mystery of its uncanniness, appearing ever as what it is not:

to reveal yourself      you mask yourself  
your form is all too human now

The all-too human form of the bird is itself the uncanny because rather than revealing the human, it shows itself a sign of withdrawal—a death-mask. In other words, the humanization of the bird does not produce a readable image for what lies before and behind, establishing some form of mimetic relation between image and thing. It is precisely the human that cannot be read. “We” a sign, a mask for that which withdraws, “we” are already “other,” already inhuman: ‘the traces do not lie / for they cannot be read.’ Fossil, myth and mask—normally we read these as documents that establish a heritage in which we trace our line of development as human beings in a continuity from past to present. And the relation is a mimetic one: the fossil bird *is a copy of* the original, and comes to us as a trace of an original being that is now absent. However, the bird of nothing is *nothing but* its traces, dispersed throughout the plural spacing of space, from one appearing to another. There is nothing but the written bird, there for us to read; but we, ruse and mask for the bird, cannot read ourselves.



The second poet whose echo resounds strongly throughout the poem is Friedrich Hölderlin. The central place of his poetizing is announced at the beginning of *The Bird*, with the word ‘caesura,’ and then too with the invocation of his river poems, “The Rhine” and “The Ister,” in the following lines:

upper and lower regions  
the river gathers

river

on the way underway  
in this uncanny place

It is thus not only the bird, but bird and river that are poetized together. The river appears as the ‘sacred place of isis / her wings alighting / on reeds and grains.’ In the Egyptian Book of the Dead, Isis’s fetish is often identified as a bird of prey, and before her is Seshat, the lady of books who wrote down on the leaves of the tree of heaven the deeds of both men and gods. One of her hieroglyphs is also the bird. Isis, out of whose vulva flows the waters, lapping waves on the banks of the river. The river’s edge provides a dwelling place for man’s sojourn on this earth, yet the river is always underway. Toward where? It wanders, it flows, echoing the two river poems of Hölderlin, the Rhine that comes ‘from favorable heights’ and rushes forth, hastening away ‘sideways’; but it is the other, the Ister, that wanders and whiles by the source before it departs, and ‘appears almost to go backwards.’ It is the latter river in its aspect of mourning and whiling, Heidegger argues, that pervades the essence of the poet. Bird poem and river poem thus become inseparable.

Heidegger’s lectures on Hölderlin’s river hymns represent one of the few attempts to think the essence of poetry in a poetic way,<sup>5</sup> and in so far as Heidegger too has become part of the text of Hölderlin and vice versa, there is strong reason to include his thought in this discussion as well. *The Bird of Nothing* does not fail to do so. Hölderlin’s hymns poetize the concealed essence of the rivers, in this case the Rhine and the Ister. This is Heidegger’s point of departure. The rivers do not stand as symbols that *qua* symbols point beyond their literal significance toward a figurative meaning that lies in the realm of the supersensuous. Much of Heidegger’s meditation is concerned with destroying this metaphysical interpretation of poetic saying. Rather

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<sup>5</sup> “. . . our thinking is to take the word of poetizing as its measure and to let it be the measure that it is” (Heidegger 150).



than a symbol, the river is a ‘sign’<sup>6</sup> that lets appear the locality of our human abode:

Here, however, we wish to build.  
For rivers make arable  
The land.

“Abode” (*Aufenthalt*) signifies more than simply a particular place, but also involves a temporal dimension, that of ‘whiling’ (*weilen*), which is not simply a stretch of time, but an ‘abiding’ in which human beings can dwell within the repose of their own being-there. Yet though the rivers make arable the land, providing an abode for our sojourn, their essence also involves a wandering, and in Heidegger’s explanation of this double aspect the character of man’s being in the world is brought to language. In the unity of locality and journeying, where the locale itself is set to wandering, Hölderlin names the essential historical character of Dasein, interpreted by Heidegger as a law of encounter (*Auseinandersetzung*) between the foreign and the homely, which are not so much distinct places on the earth as they describe the movement of becoming foreign and becoming homely, a movement of appropriation where one finds one’s own, which as nearest is the most difficult to ‘enown’ (*ereignen*), from out of the journeying into the not-at-home. It is the law of this encounter between the foreign and one’s own that Heidegger identifies as the fundamental truth of history.<sup>7</sup> This

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<sup>6</sup> The difference between symbol and sign (*das Symbol, das Zeichen*) corresponds to the difference between a metaphysical interpretation of language, where the word stands as a sensuous image that indicates a nonsensuous meaning, and a nonmetaphysical one, where the word as sign shows the belonging together of mortals and gods through the pain of their separation of distance. Even though the sign lets the ‘between’ of human and divine beings appear, it is not simply a mediation. It is, rather, the between itself, through which “Teilnehmen” ‘taking part’ and “Mitteilung” ‘communicating’ become possible and in the absence of which neither the divine nor the human would appear in their essence at all. See pp. 16ff. and pp. 149ff. of Heidegger’s text.

<sup>7</sup> The potential for misunderstanding Heidegger’s thought, presented here as an isolated set of statements, is great as long as one does not examine the meaning of “home” ‘die Heima’ and “hearth” ‘das Herd’ and the movement that occurs

is named precisely as the law of becoming homely (*heimisch werden*) in being unhomely (*unheimisch*), and marks what is ‘fittingly destined’ for human beings.

Far from beginning at the source, Hölderlin’s hymn says that human beings are proximally and for the most part not-at-home, that they have not yet learned to appropriate their ownmost being, and thus that their ‘proper’ abode also lies in the unhomely in which the essence of being homely is concealed. Journeying through the foreign, welcoming the foreign as the guest names the essential movement and at the same time the supreme risk that human beings must undertake if the home, that is, the place of one’s abode can be attained, where *perhaps* the essence of human being may reach the level of a decision. However, Heidegger makes it clear that becoming homely does not signify the re-appropriation of an absent origin, for what is fittingly destined for human beings “is never something that has been decided,” but “remains full of destinings and only is from out of them”; rather the ‘thoughtful remembrance’ (*Andenken*) that keeps in mind that which has been forgotten is not a recall of being itself at the source, but of the way in which being endures and sustains itself in self-sheltering concealment. The poet who remembers must be a sign that passes on through the night, letting shine ‘the clarity proper to the night’ in which the not-granting of being—the way that it shelters and sustains itself in refusing to come to presence—is kept in mind. ‘Andenken’ gives thought to journeying into the foreign and in so far as it makes this state of being unhomely its own, points the way toward becoming homely as that which is to come.

However, the point I would like to raise here is that *The Bird of Nothing* in its encounter with Hölderlin and Heidegger uncovers a

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in and as the gathering of foreign and homely, mortals and divinities, characterized by “mitteilen” ‘communicating’ and “teilnehmen” ‘sharing,’ which is never reducible to an identity, and thus must be carefully differentiated from the dialectical operation of negation, which produces an identity of opposites. Unfortunately, I cannot carry out here the careful and thorough reading that would be necessary to show the movement of his thought and which would require as well a careful consideration of what is unthought. Paying attention to the latter would force me to move beyond their presentation as statements.

profound ambiguity in the latter's reading. Heidegger seems to suggest that the homely emerges only out of the not-granting of being, so that there may be no site for the poet to show or point to as the way of becoming homely. As the 'immemorial writing' and 'pure usury of time' that writing is, pure nothingness may be what is fittingly destined.

Here, then, lies something like an encounter between Hölderlin and Mallarmé: is remembrance possible in writing? If there is memory there, it may be one that entombs, which may very well speak of being's refusal, but in a more radical fashion. In Hölderlin the poet is a sign that bears in mind sun, moon and heavenly ones through the night of being's not-granting, and in this fashion, lets the divine shows itself in its withdrawal. In *The Bird of Nothing*, however, the god approaches never *as* god, but as dismembered namelessness in which the god is expended. The god is only as writing, fourteen traces, scattered food, the book that will never be re-assembled because it was never whole.

fragments  
chance for the glyphs  
a site for 14 homeless tombs  
chance of the glyphs

Rather than a stark contrast, it would be more accurate to describe this relation as a possible inflection of Heidegger's thinking-through of Hölderlin, a point where, perhaps, the unthought of his thinking emerges. As written, the god does not so much withdraw as becomes disseminated, multiple seeds dispersed over papyrus bark. But here, the caesura, rhythm established through a turning away and separation of what belongs together—mortal and divine, beginning and completion, song and silence—occurs by way of the abyss of naming. Names without name, this anonymity also marks the trace of the caesura: as blank space, the caesura is passed over and is therefore not read; as the privative that attaches to each name, the 'a-' and '-less,' the caesura is indicated as that which removes or takes away.

a-?  
when will you leave  
or when arrive?

....

a-?  
alone is the fateful

A-nonym, a-drift in language, coming home to home-less-ness, the caesura shows itself in withdrawing, *a-letheia*, marked for us as a(-)text:

a-text a-text                      aztecs as texts  
(lonely privation of the essence)  
ah ye mortals!

With the mention of the Aztecs, the relation of the essence of poetry to myth, their belonging together and separation, reaches the level of the word. Aztecs, the people who dwelled under a sun reborn many times that putrefies the world and expends itself with its own burning rays, who were already as-texts, making sacrifice not in order to be saved but as the sign of the fate that awaited them, to disappear—their world was effaced in the aftermath of the conquest, leaving only traces, ruins that can hardly be read. Nonetheless, their ‘world’ already came to be as a gathering of fragments, dispersed across heaven and earth, a place of suspension in which the caesura had always already taken place.

In this poetic dialogue between poets and with what, past and present, is hardly read and which is *inappropriately* named as ‘myth,’ it seems that *The Bird of Nothing* points to a change in poetic language. If poetry writes and says the caesura now, then it *appropriates* in an original way mythic language in so far as its saying necessarily takes on the appearance of the death-mask. That is, in fact, its essential mode of appearing, especially when it names. In addition to the privative, the death-mask appears through another way of writing; that of the ‘prosopo’ which belongs to the rhetorical tradition of giving voice to the dead—prosopo-poeia.

name-less name  
a-drift in ciphers  
end-less ending

thing-less-ness	
prose-pour	sardonic empty smiling lips
prose- <i>for</i>	poeia
name movement	stilled chattering of teeth
pro-saic survival	das Nichts blue bright
pro-saiz-ation	flesh extinguished plume

Prosopo-poetizing, the poet never fails to write the caesura again and again, which prose-izes the poetic word, turning it away from its properly mythic and orphic origin (a fictional home, which was always already a dead source), toward the tomb of all names, the blank page. Such is the poet, this prospero-saiz-er, roused by a dare to let appear the essence of homelessness that, far from being an echo of the modernist experience of rootlessness, is felt as a call to language from language. Prospero-saiz-er, excavator at Sais, seizing fragments of black on white and finding an abyss, *un saiz-on en enfer*, may you write forevermore with a broken staff:

may the mouth of the river open	“To th’syllable.”
may my mouth open	i fly freely
may i write wide open with it	in the end
give thou to me my mouth that i may die	
my mouth is writing upon my coffin	
scribble-dibble-fibble	
a pure mortality is all	“My present fancies”
	my fancies present
	our revels are
unending. . .	

Prospero, Shakespeare’s magician for whom the Word was the World, who defeated the rebellious Caliban the Cuban, only to find that he had merely hastened the prosaization of the world in which the properly fictional status of art, unworking its own work, is the one thing that could be affirmed.



Hölderlin's question, 'Wozu Dichter im dürftiger Zeit?,' is one that poetizing cannot avoid if it is to remain in touch with our time, which is not only the present but this whiling in which homelessness comes to presence everywhere without being experienced as such. What are poets for in a destitute time, or alternatively, a needy time? At first glance the question does not seem to be relevant to 'our' time at all. Of the many things that are needed now, one cannot count poetry among them. Rather, it is the technological and its imperatives that define both our problems and solutions. Ours is a time of perpetual crisis and crisis management. Technology lives on crisis, and it would be no exaggeration to say that this comprises its *modus operandi* in so far as through crisis, technology puts its sublime logic to work, that of the infinite potentialization of the future. Aesthetics, which has now become inextricably bound to the production of images, participates well in this massive project; poetry, by contrast, recalling the phrase of Blanchot, acts poorly and little. Where, then, does the destitution, the need, and the distress lie? Heidegger recalls Hölderlin's question by characterizing this barely perceptible, paradoxical state of affairs as "the distress of no distress" ("Not der Notlosigkeit"). Perhaps what is most uncanny is that we are not distressed. Perhaps there is nothing that points to our destitute age more than the fact of our own indifference to the not-granting, that is to say, the *nothingness* that permeates the beings that surround us, and equally, the *nothing* that is befalling the world. Is there in fact a 'world' in which we dwell? If we mean by this the disclosure of a clearing that lets beings come forth in their being, then the answer must be a negative one. Under technology, beings have become nothing—nothing but what they are made to be. But when the ground of that making is itself an abyss, then the experience of beings become virtually impossible.

What are poets for in the age of the distress of no distress? Like philosophy, poetry must reckon with the fact of an almost total lack for the desire to question anything—this lack of questioning that goes by the name of business and management, which provide the blueprint for the organization of politics, art, and ethics in our day. Within these spheres

one can certainly speak of problems, but not questions. Ours is a time of no distress. Concealed in that 'not' is the very heart of distress or need. In such a time, technology reveals beings according to the ordering framework that has no further need of anything except itself. If beings are at all, they are there only to potentialize the future. That lack of distress may be one of our only hints of that which no longer grants either itself or the being of beings.

One of the lines of the poem reads, 'the clearing is a ruin now.' Here, a concealed response to the question of the poet's calling can be discerned. In the time of the distress of no distress, the poet remains a seeker that follows the echo of that which withdraws in coming to presence, the truth of being. Where, however, is the truth of being to be sought? Before the abyss, the *Ab-grund*, the groundlessness of beings. Poetry, *The Bird of Nothing*, does not simply bear witness to this event of being's refusal, it is, to use Heidegger's phrase, a 'telling-discovering' of this truth. In making accessible to our being-there this refusal, where the 'not' in beings and being itself holds sway, we may experience the clarity of the impossible night that nears, into which we are already drawn, the being-unhomely for which we have been destined.

"Night is also a sun," wrote Nietzsche. Is the black sun of *The Bird of Nothing* as yet too radiant for eyes that have relied for too long on the light in order to see?

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