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The Return to Being

A Study on the Other Voice in Modern Poetry



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Ik verklaar plechtig dat ik de masterproef, *The Return to Being: A Study on the Other Voice in Modern Poetry*, zelf heb geschreven. Ik ben op de hoogte van de regels i.v.m. plagiaat en heb erop toegezien om deze toe te passen in deze masterproef.

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Summary

Alterity is a key issue in modern literature and in related disciplines such as philosophy. The meaning of alterity can be described as an irreducible notion that will always be seen as ‘the Other’ due to its incomprehensibility. In the present study I will investigate several approaches to alterity in modern poetry. More specifically, I will focus on critical reflections on the relation between poetry and otherness of two modern and well-known poets from the twentieth century: Octavio Paz and Paul Celan. Their poetic anthologies will be discussed from a philosophical point of view, since an interdisciplinary approach can provide a better understanding of their ideas and will help to clarify complicated issues such as the interconnectedness between poetic language and Being.

Before I will discuss alterity in relation to poetry, it is first necessary to distinguish between poetic and daily language. Therefore, in the first part of this investigation *What is Literature?* (1948) by Sartre will be analyzed. I believe that his conceptions of literature need to be reconsidered, since they are quite reductive. By this I mean that the meaning of a literary work depends, for Sartre, on the intentions and message of the author. In modern poetry, however, language is no longer used solely as a means of communication. Poetic language has another relevance that can be experienced if we do not approach the text as an object, but instead as a form of being or existence. In this way one will recognize that the text consists of a meaning that goes beyond the control of the author. To put it differently, we cannot determine the ultimate meaning of a literary work simply by interpreting it, because the work makes a claim on the reader as well. Moreover, the title of Sartre’s work *What is Literature?* presupposes a definition of the literary work. Nevertheless, it is my argument that a definition of poetry undermines the continuity of interpretations. Therefore, I will not investigate *what* poetry means, but *how* poetic meaning can develop or happen.

In the second section I will discuss Heidegger’s treatise on ‘The Origin of the Work of Art’ (1935) in order to explain the following three works by Paz from a Heideggerian point of view: the essay ‘Poetry of Solitude and Poetry of Communion’ (1942), *The Bow and the Lyre* (1956) and *The Other Voice* (1990). Several references to Heidegger can be found in these works and by analyzing thematic aspects, such as poetic language, truth and presence, I will attempt to show that Paz’s conception of alterity is similar to Heidegger’s. Namely, both believe that alterity can be approached through an experience with poetry. This is not a visible appearance but rather another experience of reality. Daily life involves an experience truth which cannot be known simply by relying on rational thought processes

or theoretical explanations. Instead, truth can be revealed by means of poetry. Nevertheless, 'the Other' cannot be equated with poetry. Paz argued that "Poetic expression expresses the inexpressible" (1956, 96). Poetry can thus be seen as the expression of the disclosure of meaning, but not the as the actual revelation itself.

In the third part of my investigation I will try to come to terms with the distance between language and alterity by discussing the conceptions of Paul Celan in 'The Meridian' (1960) in relation to the philosophical arguments of Levinas in *Existence and Existents* (1947). Both men were from Jewish ancestry and survived the Shoah. The experiences of the war influenced their post-war ideas about literature, since there is an ethical dimension in which the concern for the other person is emphasized. More precisely, this emphasis is a result of the Holocaust in which people were dehumanized. I will particularly focus on the notion of responsibility, materiality, movement and proximity in order to clarify the ethical dimension in relation to 'the Other'. According to Paul Celan, alterity is a notion that lies behind the language of the other person. 'The Other' cannot be understood as a human being, but it is rather an impossible experience that – in contrast to Paz's understanding – can never become present. He argued that poetry cannot express alterity: there is no word for the experience of 'the Other'. Alterity refers to a prelinguistic realm and therefore the function of poetry is not the expression of alterity, rather it is a relation that is characterized by its openness towards 'the Other'.

More specifically, Celan especially underscored the 'physical shape' of language, which means that poetic language is independent of meaning. In other words, the natural state of poetry is namelessness, which means that a word does not correspond to a phenomenon in reality. The correspondence is bestowed on language by our cognition but this will be inadequate for an understanding of poetry and otherness. Consequently, poetry is associated with silence indicating the impossibility of words to bear a conceptual meaning. Furthermore, the notion of responsibility is inherent to the ethical relation and evokes a movement of poetry to 'the Other' because it responds to the appeal of alterity. The movement of poetry is infinite because alterity goes beyond poetic language. Consequently, the meaning of poetry lies in its continuous movement towards the inaccessible 'Other' instead of reaching a destination: Truth *happens* and thus it is not fixed. In the final part of my thesis I will evaluate the insights that I gathered in the previous parts so that I can address the differences between the conceptions of Celan and Paz.

Samenvatting

Alteriteit is een centraal begrip in de moderne literatuur en daaraan verwante disciplines zoals filosofie. De betekenis kan kort omschreven worden als een onherleidbaar gegeven dat altijd als “de Ander” wordt gezien. In deze thesis onderzoek ik verschillende benaderingen van alteriteit in moderne poëzie. Ik spits me meer bepaald toe op kritische reflecties over het verband tussen poëzie en alteriteit van twee moderne en bekende dichters uit de twintigste eeuw: Octavio Paz en Paul Celan. Hun poëtische anthologieën worden besproken vanuit een filosofisch perspectief, omdat een interdisciplinaire benadering van hun opvattingen een breder en duidelijker beeld kan geven over ingewikkelde kwesties zoals de relatie tussen poëtische taal en het bestaan.

Alvorens alteriteit te bespreken in poëzie, is het evenwel nodig om een onderscheid te maken tussen poëtische taal en alledaags taalgebruik. In het eerste deel van dit onderzoek wordt *What is Literature?* (1948) van Sartre belicht om aan te tonen dat zijn ideeën over literatuur om een herbeschouwing vragen aangezien ze volgens mij reductionair zijn. Hiermee bedoel ik dat de betekenis van een literair werk voor Sartre afhankelijk is van de intenties en boodschap die de auteur voor ogen heeft. In moderne poëzie wordt taal echter niet gezien als een communicatiemiddel. Poëtische taal heeft een andere relevantie die ervaren kan worden als het individu de tekst niet langer benadert als een object, maar als een zijnsvorm. Op die manier wordt erkend dat de tekst een inhoud bevat waar de auteur geen vat op heeft. De titel van Sartres werk *What is Literature?* is een vraag die veronderstelt dat een literair werk gedefinieerd kan worden. In deze thesis wil ik net aantonen dat een definitie van poëzie de veelheid aan interpretaties ondermijnt en daarom onderzoek ik niet *wat* poëzie betekent, maar eerder *hoe* betekenis tot stand kan komen.

In het tweede deel bespreek ik ‘The Origin of the Work of Art’ (1935) van Heidegger om vervolgens de drie volgende werken van Octavio Paz vanuit een Heideggeriaans perspectief te verduidelijken: het essay ‘Poetry of Solitude and Poetry of Communion’ (1942), *The Bow and the Lyre* (1956) en *The Other Voice* (1990). Er zijn talloze verwijzingen naar Heidegger terug te vinden in de werken van Paz en door een bespreking van inhoudelijke aspecten zoals poëtische taal, waarheid, aanwezigheid en realiteit probeer ik aan te tonen dat zijn opvatting over alteriteit overeenstemt met die van Heidegger. Beiden geloven namelijk dat alteriteit kan verschijnen door een ervaring met poëzie. Deze verschijning is niet visueel, maar eerder een andere ervaring van de werkelijkheid. In het dagelijkse leven ligt volgens Paz een waarheid vervat die niet gekend kan zijn door zich toe

te leggen op rationele denkwijzes of theoretische verklaringen, maar die enkel onthuld kan worden via poëtische taal. “De Ander” blijft echter niet permanent aanwezig en het is van belang om te benadrukken dat poëtische taal niet gelijk is aan alteriteit. Paz was van mening dat “Poetic expression expresses the inexpressible” (1956, 96). Poëzie is dus een verwoording van alteriteit, maar niet de eigenlijke onthulling van betekenis.

In het derde deel van mijn onderzoek ga ik na hoe de afstand tussen taal en alteriteit kan worden begrepen door de ideeën van Paul Celan in zijn werk ‘The Meridian’(1960) te verbinden met de filosofische argumenten van Levinas in *Existence and Existents* (1947). De volgende thematische aspecten komen voornamelijk aan bod: verantwoordelijkheid, materialiteit en beweging. Celan als Levinas waren beiden van Joodse afkomst en overleefden de Shoah. De oorlogservaringen vinden weerklank in hun reflecties over literatuur aangezien er een ethische dimensie aanwezig is die de aandacht voor de andere persoon benadrukt. Deze (tegen)reactie spruit voort uit de gruwel van de Holocaust waarin Joden ontmenselijkt werden. Volgens Paul Celan is alteriteit een gegeven dat zich schuilhoudt achter de taal van een andere persoon. “De Ander” is dus niet gelijkaardig aan een mens, maar is een onmogelijke beleving die – in tegenstelling tot de visies van Paz – nooit aanwezig kan zijn. Celan benadrukte dat poëzie alteriteit niet kan omschrijven: er is geen naam voor de beleving van “de Ander”. Alteriteit is prelinguïstisch en zal steeds het menselijke denkvermogen overstijgen. De functie van poëzie bestaat daarom niet uit het verwoorden van alteriteit, maar uit een relatie tot “de Ander” die voortdurend openstaat om zo de aanwezigheid van alteriteit mogelijk te maken.

Celan sprak voornamelijk over de ‘fysieke vorm’ van poëzie wat inhoudt dat poëtische taal geen conceptuele betekenis draagt. De natuurlijke aard van poëzie is namelijk naamloosheid, omdat een woord niet geldt als benaming voor een fenomeen in de werkelijkheid. De overeenkomst tussen woord en ding komt tot stand door cognitieve capaciteiten en deze schieten tekort bij een ervaring met poëzie én “de Ander”. Poëzie wordt bijgevolg geassocieerd met stilte die duidt op de onmogelijkheid van taal om een conceptuele betekenis te dragen. Bovendien is het begrip ‘verantwoordelijkheid’ inherent aan de ethische relatie en dit betekent dat poëzie op weg is naar “de Ander” en wordt aanzet om te reageren op het appel van “de Ander”. Deze beweging van poëzie is eindeloos en hierdoor ligt de betekenis van poëzie in de weg naar “de Ander” in plaats van in een doel dat bereikbaar is: Waarheid *gebeurt* en staat niet vast. Ik sluit mijn onderzoek af met een beschouwing van de inzichten die ik in de voorgaande delen heb verworven om zo de verschillen tussen de interpretaties van Paz en Celan te benadrukken.

Abstract

In this thesis different notions of alterity are explored in the works of the modern poets Paul Celan and Octavio Paz. Both men believed that poetry is characterized by its openness to the meaning of the Other, but the exposure to meaning is not approached in the same way. In *The Other Voice* (1990) Paz argued that an experience with otherness can be possible, since another understanding of reality can be revealed through poetry. In 'The Meridian' (1960), however, Celan claimed that poetry cannot reach the Other so it does not have a disclosing function, but rather stands in a relation of proximity to the Other. The conceptions of Celan and Paz are discussed by relying on 'The Origin of the Work of Art' (1935) by Heidegger and *Existence and Existents* (1947) by Levinas as it is believed that their philosophical ideas help to clarify key issues such as poetic truth and the relation of poetry to Being.

Keywords: modern poetry, alterity, Paz, Celan, philosophy, Heidegger, Levinas, Being, possibility, proximity, relation, truth

Kernwoorden: moderne poëzie, alteriteit, Paz, Celan, filosofie, Heidegger, Levinas, Zijn, mogelijkheid, nabijheid, relatie, waarheid

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“Politics, poverty, riches, etc - these are but backdrops for the grand cinema, the opera: the glory of your life. Sure, change the backdrops, make them better, but it is this insideness that matters most. Nothing else, at the last breath, matters, but your very own poetry. The glory of living.”

— Alex Ebert

1. Introduction

In the present study I propose to explore modern poetry and Being, whose relation to each other is far from clear. By this I mean that in the course of history poetry has been interpreted in many ways. Namely, some will turn to poetry for their amusement or distraction. Others, however, will claim that poetry constitutes a necessity because it provides insights about our understanding of existence and, accordingly, poetry is to be considered as a revelation of meaning rather than a form of escapism. It thus seems to be the case that not everyone supports the same conceptions of poetry. Sartre, for one, argued that the world can very well do without literature (1948, 229). Octavio Paz, however, emphasized that no society has existed that did not know one form of poetry or another (1990, 153). Why did Sartre believe that a society without literature could be possible, while the distinguished poet Octavio Paz granted major importance to poetry? In order to provide an answer to this question, we need to bear in mind that there are several possible relations to language and reality. More precisely, language can be seen as a tool by which we can master reality conceptually. In modern poetry, on the contrary, language takes itself out of our hands and that is why modernist poets such Paul Celan and Octavio Paz advocate an understanding of poetry, the world and the self that goes beyond mastery or reason. How, then, is an experience with poetry possible if it cannot be grasped by our explanatory thinking?

Poetry will always be more than my conscious interpretation can offer, and for this reason I will not attempt an exhaustive definition of poetry. In other words, this thesis will not begin or end with an epistemological viewpoint. Instead, I would like to discuss *how* poetic language manifests itself and *how* an experience with poetry relates to our approach of Being. In this way, I will be able to provide insights without reducing the understanding of otherness, which is inherent to poetry and which is the focal issue of my investigation. The notion of alterity or otherness is a leading thread in Celan's and Paz's account of poetry. In 'The Meridian', a speech on the occasion of receiving the Georg-Büchner Literature Prize in 1960 and perhaps one of the clearest and most comprehensive statements on the nature of poetry, Celan posited that "the poem intends another, needs this other, needs an opposite [...] For the poem, everything and everybody is a figure of this other toward which it is heading" (49). Thirty years later, Paz stated the following lines in *The Other Voice: Essays on Modern Poetry*: "All poets in the moments, long or short, of poetry, if they are really poets, hear the *other* voice. It is their own, someone else's, no one else's, no one's, and everyone's" (1990, 151).

These assertions indicate that Celan and Paz have particular conceptions of otherness in relation to poetry. Otherness is a complex and abstract notion that is denied in a scientific or positivist understanding of poetry. By this I mean that poetry is a unique form of being that defines itself through its openness to alterity, but science and positivism approach poetry as an object which can be interpreted by relying on our knowledge and reasoning (Bruns 1999, 16). In other words, not everyone is willing to recognize that poetry has a being of its own. This is due to the fact that not everyone has a similar conception of truth. It is important to note that I cannot clarify alterity without addressing the notion of *truth* and *relation*. In order to grasp what is meant by the other voice in modern poetry, I must clarify how these terms are interrelated. Consequently, alterity, truth and relation will repeatedly be highlighted in the following parts of my thesis.

There are different ways to approach truth. For instance, the correspondence theory of truth can be opposed to poetic truth. More precisely, the correspondence theory of truth is the view that truth corresponds to an object or fact in relation to reality.¹ In other words, truth is seen as a relational property which means that an assertion is true when it is representational of an object or phenomenon in reality. Therefore, truth can be acquired if we correctly apply language, that is, in a realistic way. Truth is not to be found in things itself, but in the relation or agreement between the object and the statement. In the correspondence theory, meaning is thus characterized by a one-to-one relation between names and the phenomena that they signify. In other words, the relation consists of a unity between the word and the substance. Consequently, something is deemed to be false if language is not used in the right way, i.e. if a word does not resemble the thing to which it refers. This approach to truth presupposes knowledge about the phenomena that we come across in reality so that we are able to articulate them in language. Nonetheless, in modern poetry the traditional view of reality is challenged. This means that we cannot rely on our conceptual knowledge in order to grasp reality. Truth, then, can no longer be derived from reason.

Accordingly, in this thesis I propose to discuss another account of truth: *poetic truth*. This approach to truth assumes a different understanding of relation. The scholar Rodolphe Gasché explained in his book *Of Minimal Things* (1999) that the notion of relation has been an important subject in philosophy since the Middle Ages onwards (2). More precisely, he

¹The Correspondence Theory of Truth. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2009. Web 1st of April 2014. <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/truth-correspondence/>

claimed that relation is a major concern to philosophical thought and stated the following: “Undoubtedly, being-toward-another is an essential peculiarity of relation” (1999, 7). In other words, relation implies reference to the other of the relation (the *relatum*). Consequently, Gasché accurately wondered “If, then, relation is essentially being-toward, and with respect to, something other, can relation have an essence of itself at all?” (1999, 8). With regard to literature and poetry, I wonder whether it is up to the reader to interpret a poem and to bestow meaning on it. Put differently, can poetry not bear any meaning in itself or is its meaning determined by the reader’s interpretation? To Gasché, a relation cannot occur without a possibility of the being-toward-another. He explained that:

“not only does the subject tend toward the other with all the indicated implications for the subject, but also the *relatum* of the relation lets the subject come into a relation to it. There is no relation, then, without a prior opening of the possibility of the being-toward-another” (1999, 9).

This statement shows that the *relatum* can have an impact on the other in the relation and, therefore, it is not simply to be approached as a meaningless object that can become meaningful by its dependence on the relation – which is the case in the correspondence theory of truth. The French poet Valéry once claimed that “Poetic language must preserve itself, through itself, and remain the same”.² If poetry cannot be altered, this implies the signification of something in itself so that its meaning is not dependent on the reader who is faced with a poem.

According to Celan and Paz, poetry is a relational realm that is characterized by its openness to otherness. The main question of the present study, then, is the following: What is the ‘Other’ to which poetry relates? Celan’s and Paz’s understanding of relation does not suggest that relation defines the meaning of its *relatum*. Instead, relation emphasizes the difference between the subject and the *relatum* of the relation rather than presupposing a unity between the two. Put differently, poetic truth does not depend on one’s ability to use language in the right way but it is characterized by openness to the diversity of meaning. Truth, therefore, is not a static phenomenon which can be experienced by relying on our reasoning, but it is a process which could be experienced through poetry. In modern poetry, we are no longer in charge of language and as a result of this, we cannot be in charge of truth either; poetry happens to us and truth happens through poetry.

Celan and Paz both believe that poetry is not an object which can be exhaustively interpreted by the reader. Moreover, they both reject the modern market which turns poetry

²As quoted in Bruns 1997, 3.

into an economic product and the reader into a consumer. There is a fundamental difference between society's economic process and poetry, which can only become visible if one's account of literature goes beyond the rational approach to art. More precisely, in the modern market economic considerations replace literary ones, since the value of a book depends on the number of people who buy it. Nevertheless, the value of literature is not to be reduced to its use and function in society. Despite the fact that Celan and Paz reject a positivist and functional approach of language and truth, they do not have entirely similar conceptions of the nature of poetry. In order to clarify this, I will attempt to explain their views by calling on the support of two philosophers that were very influential for both poets: Martin Heidegger and Emmanuel Levinas. The reasons for picking these philosophers are twofold: Firstly, Heidegger and Levinas were both concerned with the relation between poetry, the self, alterity and being, which are relevant aspects for my investigation. More precisely, their expository language will help to elucidate the ideas that Celan and Paz are implicitly addressing in their poetic anthologies. Secondly, Paz and Celan were extremely familiar with the works of Heidegger and Levinas, so it will be interesting to discuss the similarities and differences with regard to their conceptions of poetry. To recapitulate, the aim of this thesis is to take an interdisciplinary approach by relying on poetic anthologies and philosophical works in order to explain how poetry can be a road to meaning, to another perception, to another voice. Poetry, like philosophy, is a kind of knowledge. Both are concerned with Being, so there is a clear affinity between these disciplines. Nevertheless, as I wish to underscore in this thesis, Heidegger and Levinas and the poets Paz and Celan will address poetry's relation to Being and alterity differently.

Rilke once wrote in 1923 "Gesang, wie du ihn lehrst, ist nicht Begehrt, nicht Werbung um ein endlich noch Erreichtes; Gesang ist Dasein." Put differently: song is being. The world is grounded on the poetic word and can take on meaning and reality through poetry. But is poetry not a dangerous activity? After all, ancient medicine and philosophy attributed the poetic faculty to a psychic disorder. Plato banished the poets from his Republic because they were considered "mere imitators and deceivers, and their art is concerned with the world of appearance, not with reality" (Green 1918, 1). However, the reason for his rejection of poetry comes out of his desire to master and control reality, while poetry goes beyond a conceptual interpretation of reality. Furthermore, poetry can offer a unique perspective on reality because it carries a world within itself that can be experienced if one opens up to the realm of literature. I deliberately use the verb 'invite', because not everyone is willing to take up art's offer. In other words, not everyone is willing to

recognize that poetry can make a claim on us. However, as a student of literature, I have experienced that books are not purely objects of pleasure. A poem or novel can make a profound impression on its reader and I believe that literature should not be seen as a withdrawal from reality, but a contact and a bridge with everyday life.

In the first section of the present study, I will discuss *What is Literature?* (1948) by Sartre in order to demonstrate the shortcomings of his reasoning. By this I mean that a Sartrean interpretation of language opposes an ontological understanding of literature. My argument is that one cannot intentionally make use of language without limiting or reducing the meaning of language. By this I mean that the meaning of a literary work depends, for Sartre, on the intentions and message of the author. In modern poetry, however, language is no longer used solely as a means of communication. Instead, the relation between language and the self requires reconsideration. I will take into account discussions about the nature of poetry of well-established scholars such as Gerald Bruns, Rodolphe Gasché and Krzysztof Ziarek in order to clarify their account of language and Being in modern poetry. Perhaps, then, we will be able to understand why Paz claimed that “the poetic experience is a revelation of our original condition. And the revelation is always resolved into a creation: the creation of our selves” (1967, 137).

In the second part, I will move on to ‘The Origin of the Work of Art’ by Heidegger (1935) and *The Other Voice* (1990), *The Bow and The Lyre* (1956) and the essay ‘Poetry of solitude and Poetry of Communion’ (1942) by Paz. More specifically, Paz’s poetic conceptions will be discussed in relation to Heidegger’s account of poetry because they share similar conceptions of poetic truth and the event of being. As such, I shall concentrate in particular on the notion of truth, presence, the approach to language and the relation between poetry and being in order to clarify the key issue of this thesis: Otherness. Similarly, the third section will be based on the interrelatedness between another poet and philosopher: Celan and Levinas. ‘The Meridian’ (1960) by Celan and *Existence and Existents* (1947) by Levinas will be explored. Here I will mainly focus on the possibility of presence and poetry as proximity, direction and dialogue.

It is important to note that the pairs are established for the sake of structural clarity. More precisely, I do not want to imply that Levinas and Heidegger or Celan and Paz have mutually exclusive conceptions of alterity. Nevertheless, I do believe that Paz’s ideas show more affinities with a Heideggerian understanding of poetry. In the same way, Celan’s perspective comes closer to that of Levinas. In the final part of this investigation, I will

reflect on the insights that I attempted to explain in the previous parts in order to discuss and evaluate the intertwining, yet diverging ideas of otherness. The last section thus will concern the debate between several possible understandings of poetry. Consequently, I will attempt to provide answers to the following questions: Can a certain truth be exposed to us by means of poetry or is a complete access to meaning always denied to us? Is the other a tangible entity or an abstract sense of truth? Is the return to being possible or not? My position is that poetry is an unresolved and continual process of meaning(-making). Meaning can be exposed in different ways: the other voice could either reveal the essence of being, or remain an unattainable alterity. These two perspectives will respectively be associated with Heidegger and Paz, as with Levinas and Celan.

2. How is Poetry Possible?

Between what I see and what I say,
Between what I say and what I keep silent,
Between what I keep silent and what I dream,
Between what I dream and what I forget:
poetry.
- Paz, 'Between What I See and What I Say...', 1976

Before I will attempt to clarify different understandings of otherness, I will first address *What is Literature?* (1948) by the noble prize winner and French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre because it will be helpful to take into account his conceptions of literature. Nevertheless, it might seem unexpected to mention Sartre in a thesis that revolves around modern poetry. After all, Sartre was a 20th century existential philosopher, not a poet.³ However, I do believe it to be a good idea to touch upon the main ideas of this book for two reasons: Firstly, existentialism was both a philosophical and literary tradition running through the 20th century and it had a huge influence on the poets that will come into play later on: Paul Celan and Octavio Paz. More precisely, from a literary or aesthetic point of view, existentialism was concerned with the relationship between existence, freedom and literature. Celan and Paz were aware of Sartre's ideas and this clearly had repercussions on their own conceptions of literature. In other words, to what extent do Celan and Paz support a Sartrean conception of literature? Paz, for one, claimed that "if Sartre's idea of *la littérature engagée* was confused, the interpretations it gave rise to, in Latin America in particular, were actually harmful" (1990, 143).⁴ As will become clearer in the two following sections of this thesis, there are several ways of understanding the relation between poetry, society, and the approach to one's existence.

Secondly, and more importantly, *What is Literature?* contains an interesting take on literature that I, however, do not entirely support. This manifesto first appeared in the journal *Les Temps Modernes* and is at heart a didactic and prescriptive work. More precisely, Caute (1978) clarified that "[*What is Literature?*] informs the contemporary writer what he *ought* to write and what ideals he *ought* to adopt" (xxi). For Sartre, language is a tool: the writer makes use of words for a specific means. Modern poetry, on the

³ It is important to remark that Sartre was not only a philosopher. Caute explains that his "activities as a philosopher, novelist, playwright, literary critic and journalist are interlocking" (1978, vii). Furthermore, Sartre refused to accept the Noble Prize because he did not want to be associated with such a "bourgeois honour" (Bondy 1967, 44).

⁴ This statement refers to Paz's belief that Sartre's ideas turned literature into something which was threatened by a doctrine or a political party (OV 1990, 144). This is harmful because it reduces the meaning of poetry to the dictates of a Party. Paz clarified that he struggled in his youth against "social realism" because it was a doctrine that subjected literature to its own ideals. In addition, he argued that committed literature took away the freedom of writing (143).

contrary, is the reverse of such a positivist approach to language. By this I mean that poetry escapes a mastery or application of language, which implies that a bona fide definition of literature is not possible because it will always be more than our conscious interpretation can offer. Therefore, it is perhaps more fruitful to see how literature manifests itself and what its implications are instead of trying to define it conceptually. In fact, a reconsideration of language preoccupied the minds of modernists and continental philosophers, so the questions that will be raised in the following parts are rooted in a long tradition that seeks to describe – rather than explicate - literature. I believe that *What is Literature?* thus consists of shortcomings that I would like to clarify for a better understanding of the ideas in the following parts of my paper. I will consequently attempt to explain Sartre’s conceptions of literature by focusing on the function of the literary work and his understanding of language alike. Afterwards, I will proceed with a clarification of ontological poetics, which will serve as an introductory basis for the third part of my investigation, ‘The Becoming and Happening of Truth.’

2.1. Pact of Generosity

A central aspect of *What is Literature?* consists of Sartre’s argument that a writer should be committed: “The writer should commit himself completely in his work, and not in an abjectly passive role by putting forward vices, his misfortunes, and his weaknesses, but as a resolute will and as a choice” (1948, 23). This statement indicates that Sartre’s *littérature engagée* is not concerned with esthetic values or personal experiences. Or as Georgiou clarified: “Poetics have no place here. Art for art’s sake is discarded” (2009). Instead, Sartre’s notion of prose has an ethical or political dimension. The writer takes up his pen in order to bring across a message that is directed towards the public. To Sartre, then, “all literary work is an appeal” and “thus, it is not true that one writes for oneself” (1948, 34, 31).

Guerlac stated that in *What is Literature?* “the very existence of a literary work requires a special collaboration between two free agents, the writer and the reader” (1993, 816). In the second chapter ‘Why Write?’ this special collaboration is described as a “pact of generosity between author and reader” (1948, 41). It might seem logical that a literary experience requires a reader since books cannot be opened and read by themselves. But what exactly is meant with this “pact of generosity”? It is necessary to address Sartre’s notion of freedom in order to provide an answer to this question. The pact is namely based

on a reciprocal recognition of freedom between the reader and the author. Before this can be understood, I will briefly expand on the core of Sartre's existential thinking, since the notion of freedom plays a pivotal role in his philosophy.

In his existential philosophy Sartre underscores an individual who is responsible for himself and the world in which he exists because he creates meaning by relying on his consciousness. More specifically, for Sartre, consciousness constructs reality and "if man is the creator of his world, if he has freely chosen his existence, then he is absolutely responsible for it" (Bernard 1984, 132). In a 1945-interview the philosopher claimed that "Man is free in the fullest and strongest sense. Freedom is not within him like a property of his human essence. He does not exist first, to be free later. He is free for that alone is what he is" (qtd. in Merkel 1984, 163). To return to Sartre's conceptions of literature, then, the writer is to take up the responsibility to create a work of prose that appeals to the reader's freedom. Sartre expressed that "to write is to give" (1948, 83) and the writer demands the reader to use his freedom to complete the coming in appearance of the work. The reader who responds to the author's call thus freely completes the work through the act of reading. As Sartre put it:

"The author writes in order to address himself to the freedom of readers, and he requires it in order to make his work exist. But he does not stop there; he also requires that they return this confidence which he has given them, that they recognize his creative freedom, and that they in turn solicit it by a symmetrical and inverse appeal" (1948, 38).

According to Merkel (1984), however, "readers should not be constrained or led into adopting a particular view. They must make a free choice. This means in effect that the author has to rely on the exercise of freedom by his readers in order to give his own free activity a meaning and a conclusion" (1984, 206). So despite the fact that the author addresses the freedom of the reader, it is not guaranteed that his call is returned. So far, it seems to be the case that Sartre underscored the interplay between a conscious author and reader. Yet what is the implication of the relationship between reader and text? Is it right to assume that Sartre's engaged prose could only be meaningful in relation to the reader? In other words, I wonder whether the reader and author can be affected by the content of a work in a Sartrean understanding of literature. More precisely, one could assume that the function of the writer purely consists of being a messenger who is directed towards another being, since Sartre did not draw any attention to the meaning of the text itself.⁵

⁵ In addition, one could wonder whether the message which the author has in mind can be conveyed by means of a literary work without being altered. What I am getting at is the notion of *mediation*. Namely, one could argue that the message cannot come across unmediated and the medium – in this case literature – will therefore

2.2. The Sartrean Other

In view of the above, it should be clear by now that the reciprocal relation between reader and author seems to be the basis of Sartre's ideas in *What is Literature?*: "thus, all works of the mind contain within themselves the image of the reader for whom they are intended" (1948, 53). The other stands for a conscious being that is the aim of the author's intention. I would therefore argue that the ideas in *What is Literature?* are reductive, since Sartre's intersubjective approach undermines the being of the work itself. Even the function of the literary work seems to be directed towards the reader, because the philosopher argued that literature is "the exercise of freedom" and "my freedom, by revealing itself, reveals the freedom of the other" (1948, 80, 41). Literature, then, is a subjective application and, consequently, alterity is denied. As I attempted to clarify in the introduction, otherness is an abstract notion that plays a central role in the works of Paul Celan and Octavio Paz. Nevertheless, in order to grasp what is meant by this, a new attitude towards language is required. Sartre did not take into account the being of the text in *What is Literature?* and therefore it is fair to assume that alterity was not his (prime) concern. By this I mean that his relation to language is based on reasoning and mastery because the author *applies* language. As a result of this, literature is not seen as something *other* than an object that we can make use of.

For Sartre, "all prose writing is political because it necessarily involves changing people's perceptions of the world they live in" (Bernard 1984, 204). In addition, Goldthorpe stated that "the function of the committed writer can provisionally be characterized as that of revealing to the reader both his situation and his freedom to change it, in order that he might affect the critical *prise de conscience* necessary for a transcending of that situation" (1984, 161). Literature thus evokes change but the argument that every form of prose is political simply because it affects people's perspectives is not entirely convincing. Any set of ideas, and not merely literary works, could evoke change. Does this, to Sartre, imply that everything is political in nature? Put differently, is politics identical to change or is there another way to evoke a revelation by means of literature, one which is independent of a political message?

According to Goldthorpe it is not clear "whether Sartre is concerned to describe what committed literature is, or to consider what it might ideally be" (1984, 166). Indeed, throughout *What is Literature?* Sartre evades the details about the message of the engaged

influence the message. In other words, the freedom of the writer can also be determined by the medium which he chooses.

writer. Perhaps little is known about the content of the literary work, simply because the main focus lies on the writer and the functions of a committed author. Or Sartre's evasiveness concerning the functions of *littérature engagée* might be due to his horror of propagandist writing. Guerlac claimed that, to Sartre, the author's message implies a question of values and these values can only be affirmed through free action (1993, 809). Put differently, values cannot be received but they must be generated. After all, Sartre clearly expressed that "the work of art is not reducible to an idea" (1948, 88). He thus rejected the notion of a specific pre-established concept. More precisely, a Sartrean writer does not want to convey a particular message to the reader. Does this mean that the writer does not write from a specific point of view? This seems to be a paradox. Why would an engaged and conscious author want to make use of literature if the content of the work will be unpredictable to him? Is it right to assume that Sartre's notion of intentional consciousness thus comes together with a transfer of unintended meaning? Or would it be better to separate the content of a literary work from the relationship with the reader? Is there, for Sartre, a difference between the two?

At the end of the book, Sartre posited that the literary practice is functional and written in accordance with a socialist collectivity, "for the subject of literature has always been man in the world" (1948, 184 & 120). Moreover, he stated that a work of art is an absolute end that wants to represent "the free consciousness of a productive society" (1948, 180). These ideas seem to deviate from statements such as "a work is never beautiful unless it in some way escapes the author" and "literature, which has delivered him, is an abstract function and an a priori power of human nature" (1948, 160 & 80). After all, if Sartre rejected pre-established values, this implies that the writer does not consciously bring across a specific message. What I am suggesting is that Sartre's account of literature in *What is Literature?* can be confusing: on the one hand, it portrays an intentional writer who is directed towards the reader, while on the other hand, the writer does not seem to be in total control of the message that (s)he brings across and (s)he is dependent on the reader's freedom and society in order to be meaningful. This implies that the intentional author is not that conscious after all, since (s)he cannot master the content of his writing. He rather offers meaning potential to a collectivity – the interpretations of which are a matter of individual agency: "the object he creates is out of reach; he does not create it *for himself*" (1948, 30).

What is clear, however, is that the quality of literature is determined by the bridge with society. Sartre even goes further by stating that the death of literature occurs when it no longer has anything to do with contemporary society (1948, 185). But is it not reductive to

assume that literature is only meaningful when serving society and its readership? Is a literary work not meaningful in itself? Sartre argued that “it is true that Baudelaire died without a public and that we, without having proved our merit, without even knowing whether we will ever prove it, have readers all over the world (1948, 185)”. A piece of writing thus is evaluated by whether or not it can bring about a change in society. This understanding of society is not specified by Sartre and it seems to be a society that cannot be conceived of, because Sartre’s aims are rather utopian. After all, if there are no absolute principles which could guide individuals in making their choices, the only possible criterion which could be used in making decisions seems to be freedom itself. By this I mean that the change and liberation that the writer could offer are not certain. For this reason, Sartre’s argument that literature can bring about a possible change in society is rather idealistic. Firstly, the literary work must be unveiled by another subject and secondly, even if the author could alter the reader’s perceptions, a change in society is not guaranteed. Perhaps I am jumping to conclusions too quickly. Besides, is it true that Baudelaire died without a public? Or could there be another understanding of the public and the recipients of literature? Before I can tackle this issue, I have to turn to poetry and Sartre’s view on language.

2.3. Language as Action

According to Sartre, “the ‘committed’ writer knows that words are actions. He knows that to reveal is to change and that one can reveal only by planning to change” (1948, 14). The following question arises: *How* is the author supposed to know this? According to Sartre, the answer is simple: “Prose is in essence utilitarian” (11) and therefore a writer always *makes use* of words. The function of the work or writer is based on intentionality and, consequently, words are teleological in nature as well. The author never writes for him/herself. More specifically, (s)he is directed towards the reader and words “are referential and directly transitive bearers of unitary meanings” (Goldthorpe 1984, 165). Is there any difference between the language that we use in daily life and the language that Sartre proposes for his committed prose? After all, my words are referential and they carry meaning which establishes a communicative bridge with another person. I use language in order to produce concepts, propositions, and so on. Similarly, to Sartre, “Prose is, in essence, utilitarian” (1948, 11). What about poetry? Is this an insufficient medium to fulfill the functions that the philosopher had in mind?

In the first chapter ‘What is Writing?’, Sartre chose to distinguish between poetry and prose because “the empire of signs is prose; poetry is on the side of painting, sculpture, and music [...] Poets are men who refuse to *utilize* language” (1948, 5). In other words, poetry cannot serve the engaged author because the poet considers words as things and not as signs (1948, 6).⁶ In view of the previous sections, it seems logical, then, that poetry is not the appropriate medium for Sartre because his conception of literature always contains a political message and is applied to evoke change. Put differently, Bernard claimed that “Prose ‘utilizes’ language as a tool; in its essence it is revelatory, disclosing to its audience something about the real world. But more than this, the act of revelation implies change” (1984, 203). Nevertheless, political poetry can also contain reflections about society and the ‘real world’ and therefore I would argue that it can imply change as well. The difference between Sartre’s committed prose and poetry, however, depends on a contrasting view of the self.

More precisely, in modern poetry, the application of language is not possible because poetic language takes itself out of our hands. Therefore, we cannot intentionally or consciously make use of poetic language since, as the hermeneutist Gerald Bruns argued in his article ‘The Remembrance of Language,’ the poetic word is self-standing and withdraws from its function as a sign (1997, 6). Consequently, it is not justified to think of poetic language just as a means of communication. It should be clear by now that there are major differences between poetic and everyday language. Before I touch upon the implications of this distinction, I would like to raise two questions: Firstly, is Sartre’s distinction between prose and poetry justified? And secondly, does his conception of poetry coincide with that of the modern poets?

2.3.1. To Call a Spade a Spade

Sartre outlined two fundamental attitudes towards language – that of the prose writer and that of the poet. He believed that “in prose, words are significative; they describe men and objects. In poetry, the words are ends in themselves” (Caute 1978, viii). Does this mean that poetry cannot signify anything? To Sartre, poetry is closer to painting than to the transparent

⁶ In later works, however, Sartre’s perspective changed because the language of poetry and prose converge rather than being mutually exclusive modes of writing. Goldthorpe argued that “it is the definition of prose which undergoes the most radical transformation: the ‘transparence’ of the prose sign (essential, earlier to its ‘committed’ function but reserved, later, for purely technical language) is reconciled with the ‘materiality’ of the word (hitherto the hallmark of poetic language)” (1984, 162).

language of prose. He claimed that the poetic attitude considers words as things and not as signs (1948, 6). However, for Sartre, words are supposed to be indicative signs rather than expressive ones (Guerlac 1993, 810). In other words, his notion of intentional consciousness comes together with a realist use of language, a language that the writer uses “to call a spade a spade” rather than poetic words “which are made up of vague meanings which are in contradiction with clear meaning” (1948, 219). Consequently, poetry is not the right medium for his conception of literature because poetic language is not representational of the message that the committed writer wants to convey. And this message, as mentioned before, applies language in order to evoke change in society. But perhaps Sartre’s distinction is too simplistic. By this I mean that all language is to a certain degree metaphoric, hence poetic.⁷ Furthermore, poetry is to a (very limited) degree ‘utilitarian’ because a communicative bridge with its audience has to be established. In other words, poetry needs a reader in order to come into being. Or, as Virginia Woolf once stated: “No audience. No echo. That’s part of one’s death”.⁸

It seems to be the case that the Sartrean theory of language in *What is Literature?*, which separates prose from poetry, is based on a different view of the self. As Fell accurately remarks: “Sartre’s strategy is to stress man’s finite freedom in the use of language” (1979, 272). Indeed, the portrayal of the conscious author who uses his freedom with regard to the reader implies an active use of language. This means that the usage of language by the engaged writer depends on his freely chosen ends. Therefore, I would argue that Sartre’s committed prose fulfills the same functions as daily language. However, different interpretations of the self will lead to a different understanding of language. More specifically, in modern poetry, the conscious self and committed prose writer of Sartre are replaced by a poetic self who is not in control of language.

According to Bruns, “Poetry is language –language which hasn’t been tuned out, repressed, or processed by the semantic, propositional or representational operations of the spirit” (1997, 5). In other words, poetry

“is made of language but not of what we use language to produce – meanings, concepts, propositions, and so on. It is much as a response to language as a use of it, as if our relation

⁷ A metaphor is a figure of speech which is based on comparison or resemblance. As such, two different things appear to have similarities through the use of metaphors. I believe it is fair to assume that Sartre rejected this comparison, since his realist use of language is not concerned with figures of speech which can lead to a different thing that he has in mind. Nevertheless, if one is more conscious about one’s use of language, it will become clear that it is practically unavoidable to use analogies or comparisons in daily language, for this is a way of acquiring a better understanding of one thing in terms of another.

⁸ Woolf, *Between the Acts* (1941), 26

to language were as much one of listening and responsibility as one of speaking” (Bruns 1997, 15).

Poetic language addresses us and can be brought to light if the interpreter engages with the text by being receptive to the otherness of words. Interpreting a poem, therefore, is not simply an act of an independent subject on an interpretable object. Reading and interpreting, in modern poetry, are performative acts that happen to us as long as we recognize that our consciousness cannot govern all interpretations. An engagement with poetry, here, is thus the opposite of the Sartrean, conscious commitment that was discussed in the previous subsections. Bruns concludes that poetry alters our relation to language and that a reduction to concepts is impossible (1997, 7). But what is meant with this otherness of words? Moreover, how can we be receptive and how we can bestow meaning on the world and others in it without relying on our consciousness if poetry evades our mastery of language?

These questions are at heart of modern poetics and concerned, among other people, the French writer Jean Paulhan. Paulhan was an important figure the French literary scene and was known as the editor, critic and director of the *Nouvelle Revue française* through which he encouraged and published French writers in the first half of the twentieth century (Syrotinski 2004, 2). His most significant works include *Of Chaff and Wheat* and *The Flowers of Tarbes*. According to Michael Syrotinski, the leading authority on Paulhan’s writings, “the difficulty Paulhan confronted throughout his entire life: How does one make the connection between writing and existence?” (Pouilloux & Syrotinski 2004, 161). By this question, we enter the realm of ontological poetics in which the meaning of being becomes an essential issue. This means that an aesthetic experience could be a learning process in which a reader can experience the significance of a literary text for his or her life. To Paulhan, poetic language should be taken as a means of access to the real. As a result of this, I wonder what happens to that other language which I am currently applying, i.e. daily language. And, more importantly, why would Sartre be in favor of prose if poetry can provide meaningful insights as well? More precisely, it seems to be the case that Sartre rejects poetry because he cannot master it in the same way as prose.

To return to my first question, then, is Sartre’s distinction between poetry and prose justified? I tend to go along with Caute, who questioned:

“whether Sartre’s radical distinction is a tenable one [...] Sartre does not help his own case when he declares his dislike for poetic prose which uses words in order to obtain obscure, harmonic effects and vague, evocative meanings. This suggests that his distinction between prose and poetry is masking a value-judgment: his personal preference is for language which is descriptive and unembellished” (1978, ix).

In addition, I would argue that Sartre's distinction is quite reductive because he overlooks the capacity of poetry to enrich our understanding of being. This, however, does not mean that Sartre's clarification of poetry is nonsense. I do agree with statements such as "the poet does not *utilize* the word, he does not choose between different senses given to it" and "the poet has withdrawn from language-instrument in a single movement" (1948, 6-7). But I am not sure whether it is such a good idea to align poetry on the side of painting, sculpture and music in order to abandon it in favor of prose. I will elaborate further on this in the third section of my thesis when the ideas of Martin Heidegger and his conception of the work of art will be addressed.

2.3.2. The Crisis of Language

In this final subsection I would like to touch upon a remarkable assertion in *What is Literature?* that goes as follows: "The crisis of language which broke out at the beginning of this century is a poetic crisis" (1948, 8). To Sartre, this poetic crisis consists of an "attack of depersonalization when the writer was confronted by words" (1948, 8). Consequently, the author no longer knows how to use words (1948, 8). So far, I have explained that poetry cannot be used as a tool and therefore it might seem no surprise that a writer does not know how to deal with poetic language. However, Sartre's conception of poetry is intrinsically negative. As mentioned before, this is due to the fact that his desire to control language is undermined when faced with poetry. But if we no longer know how to use words, there must be another way to approach poetry.

Fell interpreted the poetic crisis as meaning for Sartre "the danger of the reduction of prose to poetry, the loss of the distinction between word and object: the loss of nominalism and the loss of truth" (1979, 275). This fear indicates that the philosopher wants to remain in control of language, whereas poetry forces him to reconsider his own attitude towards the words he is using. If, to Sartre, a reduction of prose to poetry leads to a loss of truth, this means that truth requires a temporal utilization of language rather than a synthesis between language and thing. In addition, Fell argues that "For Sartre the radical distinction between language and things is a condition of truth. If name and thing, sign and referent, are fused and confused, things themselves cannot show themselves as they are. Poetry, therefore cannot discover the truth" (1979, 275).

Ironically, modern writers have argued that the “acceptance of language’s referential function, or of its conventions, is what makes communication possible, but literature impossible” (Murphy 2004, 73). For this reason, it should be relevant to question how literature is possible, instead of wondering what it is.⁹ Put differently, the title of Sartre’s book presupposes a definition of literature that disregards the complexity of language. But am I not trying to read a mystical meaning into poetry by mentioning “the complexity of language”? What if poetic language is not so different from Sartrean prose? What if the distinction between daily and poetic language is an illusion sprouting from my own desire to discover meaning and truth? Perhaps Sartre is right when claiming that “We would have to be quite vain to believe that we are concealing ineffable beauties which the word is unworthy of expressing” (1948, 219).

However, the contrasting conceptions of poetic language are not a case of right or wrong. It is a matter of perspective. Modern authors such as Rilke, Hölderlin, Hofmannstahl and Borges return to what we take for granted. Words and phrases tend to be overlooked precisely because we take them to be things that need no attention (Syrotinski 2004, 5). Their intention is to overcome the forgetfulness of language which turns language into an expression of ideas rather than perceiving it as having a being of its own. Then again, this conception of language is described by Sartre as “a cancer of words” (1948, 219). But does every 20th century philosopher think along the same lines? Bruns believed that “Philosophers divide into those who see, and those who don’t see, that the language of literature is finally irreducible to its use as a form of mediation in the construction of meanings, concepts, propositions, narratives, and so on” (1999, 14). Perhaps, then, it is not a bad idea to turn my attention to the philosophers who think about a certain otherness of poetic language, instead of maintaining too hasty an understanding, which leads to a form of blindness, and an inevitable erosion of meaning.

⁹ It is thus no surprise that ‘How is Literature Possible?’ or ‘Comment la littérature est-elle possible?’ is the title of a response by the French philosopher Maurice Blanchot to Paulhan’s *Flowers of Tarbes*. This work by Paulhan was published in the thirties and focuses on the question of language and its relation to existence. According to Murphy, Blanchot faced the following question when reading Paulhan’s work: “How to breach the gap between thought, reference, and language, author, text, and reader, when meaning is arbitrary, subjective, and always already subject to interpretation?” (2004, 73). The question “What is Literature?” is meaningless to Blanchot. He argued that such a question presupposed a reflective attitude that disintegrates in the face of poetry or the novel (Gasché 1999, 309). This does not mean that an understanding of literature would be out of the question. Rather, the necessity arises to understand why the “what is” question or reflective approach comes to grips with literature only by disparaging it.

Is it then more real?

2

Tangible idea,
Intangible
word:
Poetry
comes and goes
between what is
and what is not.
It weaves
and unweaves reflections.
Poetry
scatters eyes on a page,
scatters words on our eyes.
Eyes speak,
words look,
looks think.
To hear
thoughts,
see
what we say,
touch
The body of an idea.
Eyes close,
the words open.

Poetry comes and goes between what is and what is not. Does this imply that it finds its dwelling in a borderland? A liminal realm? Furthermore, how can the reader engage in an experience with poetry if it takes itself out of our hands? Indeed, poetry seems to ‘weave and unweave reflections.’ Its in-betweenness undermines categorization and remains resistant to definition. It is what *inter-ests* us.¹⁰ In this poem, ‘Between what I see and what I say,’ I am especially fascinated by the closing of the second stanza: “Eyes close, the words open”. Words do not seem to find their ending on a page, but can have a profound impression on the lives of the reader. Poetry scatters words on our eyes, it bespeaks something, it is an act. Perhaps man’s openness to poetry, which he will let speak for itself rather than reducing its being to that of an object, is a prerequisite for a new attitude towards language. This attitude will be further addressed in the following sections in order to underscore that language can be a condition for man’s existence instead of a consequence of it. More precisely, I will now shed light on a relation between literature and being which differs from the intentionalist view of Sartre.

¹⁰ The Latin origin of ‘interest’ consists of *inter* + *esse*. The etymology of interest thus indicates that what interests us is, literally, in between.

3. The Becoming and Happening of Truth

Die Dinge sind alle nicht so faßbar und sagbar, als man uns meistens glauben machen möchte; die meisten Ereignisse sind unsagbar, vollziehen sich in einem Raume, den nie ein Wort betreten hat, und unsagbarer als alle sind die Kunst-Werke, geheimnisvolle Existenzen, deren Leben neben dem unseren, das vergeht, dauert.
- Rilke, *Briefe an einen jungen Dichter*, 1903

In the previous section I discussed Sartre's vision on language, and it transpired that the French philosopher does not consider poems to be the appropriate medium for his conceptions of literature. In a word: prose is utilitarian while poetry withdraws from a functional use of language. Consequently, poetic language is not relevant for Sartre's realistic and practical approach to language. To him, poetry is on the side of painting, sculpture and music (1948, 5). But is a poem similar to a painting by Van Gogh? Is it not different from a song by John Lennon? In my opinion, Sartre's statement requires clarification because, first, he overlooks the distinction between spatial and temporal art forms. More specifically, time-based art such as music, dance, theater and literature, differ from spatial art forms such as architecture, painting and sculpture. The latter is fixed and has a permanent form, while the former is characterized by a temporary and flowing character. We can look at Rodin's *Le Penseur* for hours, while a poem's last line signals the end of our reading.¹¹ This is an important nuance. Secondly, it is not clear what is meant by the word "poetry" because of Sartre's generalization. According to Fell (1979),

"As always for Sartre, the disclosure of meaning is ultimately traceable to the 'fundamental project'. It is the goal I have freely chosen that determines the nature of the path I take toward that goal. The end determines all of the means [...] Thus, I must take over words and rules for their usage in order to use them for my own ends" (273).

In other words, to Sartre, the distinction between language and things is a condition for the disclosure of meaning. By this I mean that language is a means to attach names to beings that can be logically understood as extralinguistic and independent entities. Put differently, the name does not constitute, but rather signifies an entity. As a result of this interpretation, language is construed as simply the transmission of given meanings. Sartre thus finds teleological reasoning to be the foundation of communication, literature and truth. But what if the relation between word and thing consists of a synthesis? What if the name already belongs to the being to which it refers? And should one interpret this synthesis as a

¹¹ Needless to say, it is possible to look at a poem for hours and in this way, one could argue that it is also permanent. However, an experience with poetry implies that we do not consider it as an object, but as a participatory event.

reconciliation of opposites? In other words, is the meaning of a word always different from the object, entity or being that it bears within its name? Or do the word and thing coincide?

These questions have become key issues in modern discussion about language. In the second section ‘How is Poetry Possible?’ I briefly mentioned modernist thinkers and writers such as Jean Paulhan, Blanchot, Borges, Rilke and Bruns in order to show that poetic language could be interpreted in different ways. More precisely, poetry is not primarily the expression of what needs to be communicated, but it could be seen as a means of access to the Real. If poetry is an access to the Real, then it is implied that truth can only appear through an experience with poetry. Consequently, a mimetic approach to literature will not be the modernist’s concern. Namely, if realism strives to represent reality by means of language, it presupposes an understanding of this reality. Art, however, could influence the very way reality appears before us, instead of merely being an imitation of reality. It is important to determine where one begins. Will one begin with the perspective of the mind, of mimesis, with that of action, or with that of poetry?

In “The Origin of the Work of Art,” (1935) Heidegger stated that the essence of poetry is the founding of truth (47). This claim stands in stark contrast to Sartre’s interpretation of the relation between poetry and meaning. With Heidegger, the themes of the thing, language, truth and the work of art are drawn into a hermeneutical dimension. Though language already plays an important role in Heidegger’s *Being and Time* (1926), the most significant observations about language can be found in his later works. In this section, I will focus on “The Origin of the Work of Art” (1935).¹² This text is based on three lectures given in November and December 1936 and is described by Clark as a radical transmutation of aesthetics, since Heidegger refused to speak of art in terms of ‘form’ and ‘content’, ‘individual creativity’, ‘the artist’s intention’ and so on (2002, 44). My aim is to discuss Heidegger’s conception of poetry and truth in this essay in order to arrive at his understanding of alterity.

However, before looking at OWA, it is necessary to first come to terms with the meaning of language, truth, and being in hermeneutics. Afterwards, I will focus on the main arguments from OWA in order to clarify the Heidegger’s approach to poetry. By doing so, I will be able to address the main issue of this study: otherness or alterity. By this I mean that otherness is a vital aspect of reading Heidegger. The scholar Krzysztof Ziarek, for one, posited that “the other certainly impacts upon and affects what Heidegger calls coming into

¹² All further references to Heidegger’s work will be abbreviated as OWA.

one's own to the extent that this entrance into what one is, into identity, reaches toward the content of what the other is" (1994, 58). But is the other purely a question of identity or being? What about its relation to language and poetry? As I wish to underscore in the following subsections, in ontological poetics language is a condition of man's existence. In order to understand what is meant with this, a new attitude towards language is required. This attitude implies that one takes a closer look at the things that seem obvious or ordinary. More precisely, something *other* could be disclosed through language. I will attempt to clarify what this is and how this happens.

The Mexican poet Paz was familiar with Heidegger's ideas and argued in *The Other Voice: Essay on Modern Poetry* (1990) that

"Between revolution and religion, poetry is the other voice. Its voice is other because it is the voice of the passions and of visions. It is otherworldly and this-worldly, of days long gone and of this very day, an antiquity without dates. Heretical and devout, innocent and perverted, limpid and murky, aerial and subterranean, of the hermitage and of the corner bar, within hand's reach and always beyond" (151).

If a poet calls the title of one of his books "*The Other Voice*," he is obviously concerned with otherness. In fact, to Paz, the most permanent fact that causes us to be human is the fact that we are temporal, mortal and always thrown toward "something," toward the "other" (1956, 49). As befits my investigation, the discussion of the other will take place in the area of poetry and thinking, specifically as an encounter between Heidegger and Paz. My own reading of Heidegger's OWA will help to elucidate the poet's account of poetry and alterity in *The Bow and The Lyre* (1956), the essay 'Poetry of solitude and Poetry of Communion' (1976) and *The Other Voice* (1990).

3.1. Language as the Medium of Being

As indicated earlier, modern poetics is concerned with an ontological understanding of literature in which the relation between poetry and being is an essential issue. In order to see the interconnectedness between the two, the right concept of language and being is needed. More precisely, in philosophical hermeneutics being is considered to be a phenomenon. This means that it cannot be taken as an object which could be defined in terms of *what* it is. Being is thus not a self-evident concept which can be explained by us. Heidegger believed that Being shows "the *how*" instead of "the *what*." In *Being and Time* (1926) he argued that the "guiding activity of taking a look at Being arises from the average understanding of Being in which we always operate and which in the end belongs to the essential constitution

of Dasein itself” (28). *Dasein* refers to an entity that questions what it means to be and that has a preconceptual knowledge of the world due to its thrownness or *Geworfenheit*.

Wall (2003) explained that *Geworfenheit* can be traced back to the Greek term *phronèsis* and that it was used by Aristotle to refer to practical wisdom (317). *Phronèsis* is a way of knowing how to comport in and toward a world in which we find ourselves. More precisely, this knowledge cannot be defined rationally, but it is derived from our experience with entities and objects in the practical world. Heidegger (1926) adopted the meaning of the word and considered *phronèsis* to be inherent to the structure of Dasein as being thrown (‘geworfen’) into a world: “Thrownness, in which facticity lets itself be seen phenomenally, belongs to Dasein, for which, in its Being, that very Being is an issue. Dasein exists factically (223)”. In other words, for Heidegger, facticity is the particularity of life that is inescapable and which designates the character of our Dasein, namely as ‘being-in-the-world’ (1926, 82). If Dasein is always already in a world due to ‘thrownness’, the meaning of Being must already be available to him in some way (1926, 25). Consciousness cannot extricate itself from the history of which it is part. In other words, we cannot rely solely on our consciousness in order to come to an understanding of the world in which we find ourselves because meanings are always already in the world. By this I mean that, due to facticity, we cannot step outside of Being in order to approach and interpret it objectively. Consequently, being cannot be explained logically. As such, it is better to consider ourselves as inhabitants of the world rather than disengaged observers.

Furthermore, Heidegger claimed that we are influenced by the world and history which leads to an understanding of Dasein’s potentiality. This potentiality refers to the fact that humans are faced with several possibilities which enable them to develop (1926, 183). Development thus depends on the decisions that we make. Therefore, the hermeneutist Joel Weinsheimer argued in his book *Philosophical Hermeneutics and Literary Theory* (1991) that “in a sense, Dasein never is, but always is to be” (9). As a result, Dasein is a phenomenon which cannot be subsumed by categories and distinctions. In fact, Theodore Kisiel clarified that Heidegger reacted against 2,500 years philosophizing about being since that ‘being’ was considered to be a self-evident substance, the most general and therefore the emptiest of concepts (1995, 14).¹³ Being, however, cannot be understood in its totality

¹³Theodore Kisiel is a well-known scholar and known for his research on the development of Heidegger’s thought. For further discussion of Heidegger’s early phenomenology, one can consult: Kisiel, T. (1995) A Prefatory Guide to Readers of ‘Being and Time’. *The Genesis of Heidegger’s Being and Time*, pp. 13-20. London: University of California Press.

since humans are intrinsically part of it. As a consequence of this existential situation, we will always have a partial – and thus incomplete - understanding of the world. To be more specific, our identity is a state of uncertainty, since our being is determined by the fact that there is more than we can understand. But if we cannot explain being logically, does this imply that our consciousness cannot produce any form of meaning? How can we deny that we conceptually make sense of experiences in daily life?

It is important to understand that not everyone perceives reality along similar lines. By this I mean that some will say that the mind constitutes reality, while others claim that conceptualization is only an instrument of control. Heidegger, for one, belonged to the latter. Bruns stated that “consciousness is that which confers meaning on the world and on others in it” (1999, 16). But for Heidegger theory, categories and distinctions deny ontological meaning. Our relation with things and with other people thus cannot be simply one of knowing them. Likewise, Octavio Paz argued that

“Reality – everything we are, everything that envelops us, that sustains and, simultaneously, devours and nourishes us – is richer and more changeable, more alive, than all the ideas and systems that attempt to encompass it [...] Thus we do not truly know reality, but only the part of it we are able to reduce to language and concepts. What we call knowledge is knowing enough about a thing to be able to dominate it and subdue it” (1967, 163).¹⁴

Paz’s words indicate that our rational reasoning is insufficient in order to arrive at a full understanding of reality. We use language to designate the phenomena that we come across, but if reality is indeed “richer and more changeable” than we assume, how can static concepts remain representative for a changing and unstable reality? Perhaps, then, there are other ways are to understand the world in which we find ourselves.

As an alternative to the rationalist belief that there is no world except the one that can be governed by our own knowledge, Heidegger starts with language. More specifically, in the OWA he asserted that “language, by naming beings for the first time, first brings beings to word and to appearance” (1935, 46). Or, as Gadamer’s once stated in *Truth and Method*: “Being that can be understood is language” (1992, 474).¹⁵ The belief that things

¹⁴Similarly, the surrealist poet Yves Bonnefoy claimed the following in an interview of 1976: “I was struck by the fact that modern knowledge, founded on atomic physics or on biology, passes across the level of the objects of our existence without really seeing them – the objects our eye perceives, the objects we can love and which can help us to live” (as qtd. in *The Act and Place of Poetry*, 1989, 146). All these men – Heidegger, Paz, Bonnefoy – seem to criticize an outlook which is based on theoretical knowledge. What we *really* know thus requires a new way of *seeing* the outer world.

¹⁵Hans-Georg Gadamer, one of Heidegger’s most famous students, builds on Heidegger’s insights about history and tradition, and *Geworfenheit* in particular constitutes an important aspect of his ideas. Moreover, Bruns claims that Gadamer’s writings on poetry and aesthetics since 1960 “are an attempt to come to

come into being in language thus replaces the idea that words merely signify things. More specifically, language and its meaning belong together so one cannot separate one from another. Fell articulated this as follows:

“The process of naming whereby things come to be things is essentially the process in which a finite being, understanding himself as finite, dwells with things in a particular historical way (wondering about them, using them, looking at them, etc.). This particular way either recognizes or neglects the fact that they come to be things for him only because he dwells, in language, in an articulated region” (1979, 264).

From the previous paragraphs it is fair to assume that different understandings of meaning and language spring from a different interpretation of the self. In other words, in Heidegger’s approach to literature, the relationship between writer and reader is replaced by a relationship between the work of art and one’s existence. As such, the reader can no longer force a text to give up its truth by subjecting it to interpretation. This attitude towards literature opposes the general Cartesian belief that consciousness can guarantee certainty. According to Weinsheimer, readers “need to allow their very being to be called into question in the same process by which they question the text” (1991, 11). In addition, Gadamer stated that “it is not really a relationship between persons, between the reader and the author (who is perhaps quite unknown), but about sharing what the text shares with us” (1992, 391). A text is not simply an interpretable object. Instead, Gadamer posited that a literary text has a being of its own.¹⁶

It is crucial to consider ourselves as inhabitants of the world and language (“the articulated region”) rather than outsiders who can master these phenomena conceptually. Only then we come to realize that what is real is not determined by a language that can provide an intelligible description of reality. Put differently, language is more than an expression of ideas or a medium of communication: it is the medium of being and not a consequence of it. And poetry makes us remember this other relationship to language. Bruns argues that “poetry is simply the remembrance of language. The truth of poetry consists in this remembrance” (1997, 6). Similarly, Heidegger remarked that “language itself is poetry

philosophical terms with the radical thesis of modern poetry, namely the idea that a poem is made of words, not of images or meanings” (1997, 2).

¹⁶ In *Truth and Method* (1960) Gadamer spoke of ‘the fusion of horizons’ (302). This concept referred to the dialogical process between reader and text. In other words, each person look at things from a certain perspective and this is the ‘horizon’. Similarly, a text carries a horizon as well which means that its subject always says something about something. Put differently, the text’s autonomy projects a world of its own and this is the horizon of the text. An expansion of horizons can occur if a reader is invited to explore the dimensions of a reality beyond the limitations of his own existential situation when he is confronted with what a text says (1960, 334). This implies that an aesthetic experience is a learning process in which a reader can experience the significance of a literary text for his or her life.

in the essential sense” (1935, 46). In order to understand what Heidegger is getting at it is necessary to dig deeper down to the very meaning of an aesthetic experience, and to look at the origin of the work of art.

3.2. On the Origin of the Work of Art

According to Clark, “Heidegger is the hidden master of modern thought” (2002, 1). He argued that under Heidegger’s (in)direct influence the traditional, intellectual and scientific search for truth were challenged. By now, it should be clear that Heidegger did not have a traditional view of reality. More specifically, Heidegger undermined what is believed to be known or perceived as reality in positivist thinking. But do we constantly have to remind ourselves that we are unable to grasp reality in its totality? Why would we do this if we could consciously hold on to conceptions and categories? After all, it is easier to face reality with a set of certain ideas instead of questioning everything. At least, that is what many people like to believe. But I would like to raise the following question: are we not being dishonest by disregarding life’s complexity if we classify and name each phenomenon that we come across? After all, Rilke argued that “Die Dinge sind alle nicht so faßbar und sagbar, als man uns meistens glauben machen möchte”.¹⁷

But what exactly does Rilke mean with this? Above all, is it a negative thing that we can only experience a partial understanding of the world? In fact, I would argue that it is more negative to hold on to a fixed view of reality because we can simply not create any certainty. To put it differently, the only thing which is certain is the uncertainty of meaning. More precisely, our thinking does not lead to truth or a correct interpretation of reality because there is always a diversity of meaning that cannot be taken in by our cognitive capacities. As such, it is better to take up an open attitude towards reality, by which I mean that truth is not a matter of right or wrong reasoning. After all, if our being is determined by the fact that there is more than we can understand, our ability to accept that we might be wrong is fundamental to who we are. Truth, then, becomes a matter of relations towards multiple possible forms of meaning. It is not fixed but dynamic. In other words, there is no definite correspondence between a word and a phenomenon, since language can point to several forms of meaning. As I will emphasize later on, for Heidegger, this (open) approach to relation and truth can be experienced through poetry. Perhaps all one needs is thus a new

¹⁷*Briefe an einen jungen Dichter*, 1903

starting point. Perhaps one should leave cognition and begin with art. This is one of the main arguments in Heidegger's essay 'The Origin of the Work of Art' (1935): truth sets itself to work in art (17). More precisely, art is not simply an object that we enjoy looking at. Instead, it can reveal truth. I will now address the Heideggerian conception of truth in order to clarify the meaning and insights that can be offered through an experience with poetry.

3.2.1. The Event of Truth

Before I can elucidate Heidegger's notion of truth, it is first relevant to see what we mean with the word "truth". Is there any difference between truth and reality? According to Heidegger,

"Mostly, we use "truth" to mean this or that particular truth. It means, in other words, something that is true. A piece of knowledge, articulated in a statement is an example of this kind of thing [...] "True," here, is equivalent to "genuine" or "real". What does this talk of "reality" mean? To us it means that which, in truth, is. That which is true is what corresponds to reality, and reality is that which, in truth is" (1935, 27).

Despite this definition, it is not that simple to understand "truth." The truth of which Heidegger speaks in OWA is not similar to what is generally understood under this name. By this I mean that in the familiar, Cartesian view truth is seen as a correctness of interpretation. However, Heidegger did not agree with this. He strove for the resistance to the subjugation of being to theoretical knowledge (Clark 2002, 44). Truth, to him, is the unconcealment of beings as beings and this cannot happen through conscious reasoning. I wish to emphasize the verb "happen," since truth is considered to be an event or happening instead of a fact which can be derived from knowledge. Or, as Heidegger put it: "The unconcealment of beings – this is never a state that is merely present but rather a happening" (1935, 30)

Heidegger stated that "There is much in beings man cannot master [...] The known remains an approximation, what is mastered insecure. Never is a being – as it might, all too easily appear – something of our making or merely our representation" (1935, 29). This assertion demonstrates two things: Firstly, Heidegger rejected the understanding of art as imitation or mimesis. More precisely, literature does not represent or mirror a particular society, emotion or opinion. He believed that "The idea of a copy-relation between a beautiful reality and the artwork clearly fails" (1935, 17). Instead, for Heidegger, the

artwork has an inexplicable mode of being. According to Clark, this inexplicable mode of being is “something for the reader, beholder or listener to dwell within and not merely something to de-code” (Clark 2002, 45). Secondly, Heidegger’s statement shows that he did not support the idea that the author is in charge of knowledge or truth. This might seem no surprise since I mentioned earlier that truth is considered to be an event. In other words, the creator should not be seen as the means by which art happens; we are not in control of art. It “happens,” that is, it happens to me. Heidegger posited that “Modern subjectivism, of course, misinterprets creation as the product of the genius of the self-sovereign subject” (1935, 48). In fact, Heidegger went even further by stating that the artist destroys himself in the creative process for the sake of the coming forth of the work (19).¹⁸

What, then, is the origin of the artwork? According to the usual view, an artwork arises through the activity of the artist. But Heidegger believed that the artist and work of art were in a reciprocal relation on account of a third element: art (1935, 1). Consequently, Heidegger argued that “the origin of the artwork – of, that is, creators and preservers, which is to say, the historical existence of a people – is art” (1935, 49). Art, here, is thus seen as the origin of the artist and the work: it is prior to both. And, more importantly, Heidegger believed that “art allows truth to arise” (1935, 49). But what exactly is it that he wished to lay bare if it had nothing to do with a methodical or subjective model of truth?

First of all, it is necessary to mention that art is never separated from the world. Heidegger claimed that world is “never an object that stands before us and can be looked at. World is that always-nonobjectual to which we are subject” (1935, 23). Jean Grondin argued in his critical essay ‘Gadamer’s Aesthetics: The Overcoming of Aesthetic Consciousness and the Hermeneutical Truth of Art’ that art “is always part of the world out of which it nurtures itself and which it helps understand in turn” (1998).¹⁹ If, however, an artwork merely appears as an object to be hung in a museum, it is reduced to a small element or appropriated as a cultural asset (Clark 2002, 44). Grondin explained that to Gadamer, for one, aesthetic consciousness was the result of an aesthetic separation of art and world which is simply a false abstraction (1998). Similarly, Clark claimed that

¹⁸ This idea was also supported by Blanchot who was influenced by Heidegger’s ‘Origin of the Work of Art.’ He argued in *The Space of Literature* (1982) that a work is a work when it does not refer back to someone who made it (200). In other words, there *is* a work when the author is cancelled. The task of the artist, for Blanchot (and Heidegger), is to let the work emerge on its own terms.

¹⁹ Grondin is a leading scholar on philosophical hermeneutics and he wrote several works about the nature of language.

Heidegger attempted to rescue the possibility of art from aesthetics.²⁰ Moreover, Heidegger questioned the very possibility of effective art in modern society (2002, 44). As such, one could wonder whether Heidegger's philosophy (and that of Gadamer) is anti-aesthetic.

Independent art centers were criticized by Heidegger and Gadamer because they were separated from the rest of the world and dominated by the logic of economics. An artwork always has something to say, regardless of its aesthetic isolation. It is precisely because of this isolation that art's bond with the outside world is violated. As I clarified in the previous subsection, to Heidegger the character of our Dasein is 'being-in-the-world' (1926, 82). Our being and understanding thus always arise out of a specific situation: the very nature of our being is to be contextual. In the same way, art is in the world. Put differently, Heidegger accurately wondered whether a work remained a work when it stood outside all relations (1935, 20). Indeed, does it not belong to a work to stand in relations? Moreover, if Heidegger does not focus on the role of the artist, does this imply there is no relation between the creator and the work? It will be useless to deny the role of the artist, but there is no point in granting absolute importance to him because, for Heidegger, art can reveal insights to the artist that are beyond his control. This means that Heidegger did not support Romanticism's view of the autonomous author who creates an original work of art. The work should thus not be seen as an autonomous creation of the artist himself but as a phenomenon in which the artist has a marginal function. Heidegger argued that "the artist remains something inconsequential in comparison with the work – almost like a passageway which, in the creative process, destroys itself for the sake of the coming forth of the work" (1935, 19).

According to Clark, "Heidegger sees the essential power of art as the setting up of the world within which and after which other views of art could alone become thinkable" (2002, 49). In order to draw the attention away from aesthetic consciousness, then, Heidegger underscored that the experience of art is, first and foremost, an experience of truth. What Heidegger was aiming at in OWA (1935) is a truth which is experienced as *aletheia* or unconcealment: "The unconcealment of beings is what the Greeks called *aletheia* [...] In the work, when there is a disclosure of the being as what and how it is, there is a happening of truth at work" (1935, 16). Unconcealment, for Heidegger, is thus the elemental phenomenon of truth. This means that the traditional conception of truth in which

²⁰Heidegger raised the following questions in OWA: "Well, then, the works themselves are located and hang in collections and exhibitions. But are they themselves, in this context, are they the works they are, or are they, rather, objects of the art business?" (1935, 19).

there is a correspondence of understanding and thing is rejected. Robert Bernasconi explained in his book *The Question of Language in Heidegger's History of Being* (1989) that the correspondence theory of truth presupposes knowledge of phenomena while Heidegger argued that there can only be a comparison between understanding and thing if the thing shows itself or if it is unconcealed (16). Unconcealment, though, cannot be directed by the subject and this indicates, again, that Heidegger did not support the view that the artist is the source of the work.

Instead, Heidegger granted autonomy to the work itself by clarifying that “the artwork opens up, *in its own way*, the being of beings” (1935, 19).²¹ In addition, Clark explained that “the power of disclosure is not our own, it is not a human creation” (2002, 51). But what, then, is the origin of Heidegger’s theory of creation? And is it fair to assume that Heidegger did not consider everyday life to be real? So far, it is clear that Heidegger’s concern was to offer a mode of truth and knowledge that differs from a positivist approach of reality. All art, for him, is involved with truth in the sense of disclosure. Yet, I have not addressed all the relevant issues so far, since it is not clear *how* truth happens and *what* it is that is being disclosed.

3.2.2. Truth as Un-truth

If the power of disclosure is not our own, one consequently could wonder where truth comes from. What is the catalyst that sets truth to work in art? Heidegger answered this question by claiming that “the setting-into-work of truth thrusts up the extra-ordinary [*Ungeheure*] while thrusting down the ordinary, and what one takes to be such” (1935, 47).²² Clearly, this reply is not straightforward, since it is not immediately comprehensible what Heidegger meant with the extra-ordinary. Nevertheless, he frequently emphasized that “Truth will never be gathered from what is present and ordinary,” because “for a work only actually is as a work when we transport ourselves out of the habitual and into what is opened up by the work” (44, 47). This transport out of the habitual, though, means that we

²¹ My emphasis

²² Needless to say, the phenomenon of art cannot be described in terms of what it is, and therefore, it might seem no surprise that Heidegger’s clarification is quite vague. After all, what is meant with the extra-ordinary? I have attempted to demonstrate in the previous part that Sartre’s question “What is Literature?” should be replaced by the question “How is Literature Possible?,” because literature is self-sufficient in nature and resists any terminology. Clark explained that “the resistance of a work to theoretical understanding lies in the fact that, crudely speaking, it has more the mode of existence of a kind of action or of practice than of a static object” (2002, 49).

take a closer look at the ordinary. More specifically, the ordinary is not as ordinary as it seems. Heidegger clarified it as follows: “Fundamentally, the ordinary is not ordinary; it is extra-ordinary, uncanny. The essence of truth, i.e., unconcealment, is ruled throughout by a denial [...] Truth, in essence, is un-truth” (1935, 31). In addition, Bernstein claimed that

“For Heidegger, the effect of great works is equally one of defamiliarization, but only for him the movement is not to a mere renewed vision of some particular... but [a movement] from the ordinary and particular to that which lets the ordinary and particular have their peculiar shape and meaning” (1992, 88).

Denial, to Heidegger, should not be interpreted as a defect or fault. Rather, if truth could get rid of everything that is concealed, it would no longer be itself. Denial thus belongs to the essence of truth as unconcealment. Hence, truth is always its opposite as well. What exactly is concealed? In view of the above, is it right to assume that truth is something which is defamiliarized? I believe that this description is too loose and requires specification. Now that I have explained what the unconcealment of truth implies, it is time to discuss in what way truth happens. In other words: *How* does truth happen?

Heidegger stated that “truth is present only as the strife between clearing and concealing” (1935, 37). The strife [*Riss*] is not a rift or tearing open of a cleft. Heidegger clarified that it should not be conflated with discord or destruction. Instead, he argued that “truth established itself as strife in a being that is to be brought forth only in such way that the strife opens up this being” (1935, 38). This statement seems to imply that the familiar and unfamiliar – the truth and un-truth – come into being through their antagonism. As such, Heidegger did not take one of the two terms in order to determine the other on the basis of it. Bruns claimed that “it is a productive antagonism of mutual belonging rather than a dialectical struggle where opponents aim at overcoming and mastery of the other” (1997, 13). In addition, Clark is correct to point out the subtlety of Heidegger’s non-foundational thinking, namely “the need is to think the relation first and to think both terms of the relation from out of the relation itself” (2002, 56).

To return to the strife, then, this term denotes a way in which truth comes to presence. Heidegger posited that “truth happens only by establishing itself in the strife and space it itself opens up” (1935, 36). It is important to note, though, that “truth is not present in itself beforehand [...] This is impossible since it is the openness of things which first affords of *a somewhere and a place* filled by the things that is presence” (1935, 36).²³

²³ My emphasis

However, since truth is essentially un-truth, the essence of truth is to establish itself within beings in order first to *become* truth (37). Truth is a happening and because of its twofold nature, it comes forth out of concealment. In other words, truth should not be seen as something that merely *is*; this thinking touches on an area which is difficult to understand.²⁴ In fact, Heidegger himself accurately questioned the following: “What, however, is more commonplace than that a being is?” (40). Nevertheless, what is in the work of art is precisely what is unusual.

A specific place, then, allows for the truth to come to presence. Heidegger explained that “in the midst of beings as a whole an open place comes to presence. There is a clearing” (35). The following question inevitably arises: What is this place and how does it appear? According to Ziarek, poetry “names that which, concealing itself in art, makes “place” for art: it “projects” and “outlines” in such a way that it keeps itself from emerging and, in this particular withdrawal, opens art (1994, 26). It thus seems to be the case that this place can be experienced through poetry. In fact, Heidegger posited in his essay that “Truth, as the clearing and concealing of that which is, happens through being poeticized. All art, as the letting happen of the advent of the truth of beings, is, in essence, poetry” (1935, 44). Additionally, the surrealist poet Yves Bonnefoy referred to poetry as “the truth of speech” in his book *The Act and the Place of Poetry* (1989, 144). Octavio Paz and Paul Celan were friends with Bonnefoy and their conceptions of literature are related to each other since they deem poetry to be a possible way of experiencing truth.²⁵ As I attempted to indicate earlier, in poetry language is used differently. Heidegger argued the following: “To be sure, the poet, too, uses words, not, however, like ordinary speakers and writers who must use them up, but rather in such a way that only now does the word become and remain truly a word” (1935, 25). I will now turn to a Heideggerian conception of poetry in order to discuss its relation with truth and being.

²⁴ In the afterword of OWA, the philosopher claimed the following: “The foregoing considerations are concerned with the enigma of art, that enigma that art itself is. They are far from claiming to solve the enigma. The task is to see the enigma”(50). As such, Rilke was not the only who considered art works to be difficult to grasp, since he referred to works of art – which can be remarked in the opening of this part, ‘3. The Becoming and Happening of Truth’ – as “geheimnisvolle Existenzen”.

²⁵ Nevertheless, as I will attempt to demonstrate later on, Paz and Celan have different conceptions of *how* this truth can be achieved.

3.2.3. The Presence of Something Other

Towards the end of his essay, Heidegger focused on the necessity of poetry in relation to truth. More specifically, truth happens through being poeticized, and he claimed that “from out of the poeticizing essence of truth it happens that an open place is thrown open, a place in which everything is other than it was” (1935, 44). Truth, then, is something other – a being that happens. If truth arises through being poeticized, it might seem no surprise that Heidegger argued that art happens as poetry (1935, 49). Poetry and truth are thus interrelated because the latter appears through the former. Or as Heidegger put it: “As setting-into-work of truth, art is poetry” (47).

In the section ‘3.1. Language as the Medium of Being’ I explained that in modern hermeneutics, beings are disclosed through language. As such, Clark claimed that “language cannot be studied, as linguistics does, by evading the question of its mode of being. Nor can we step outside language, for human beings always find themselves in language and the world it opens” (2002, 90). Consequently, it is not we who are in charge of language. A similar statement was made about the art work when I clarified that Heidegger did not perceive the artist as the origin of creation. Therefore, both the artwork and language resist our attempt to treat it as an object. Apart from the role of the artist, I raised another relevant issue in OWA: the rejection of mimesis. This also pertains to the Heideggerian approach to poetry. More specifically, Clark posited that “the poetic engages and can change the most basic sense of things, the overall context or ‘world’ in which things are apparent to us in the first place” (2002, 107). The poetic work thus brings into existence something new and, consequently, it is not reducible to what a reader already understands. As a result of this reasoning, it is no longer sufficient to think of the poem as something we can interpret with regard to the content of the work. In other words, we cannot know it as being ‘about’ something. Instead, a poem opens a space. It has a disclosive power that reveals aspects which are normally too obvious – too ordinary – for us to perceive. In addition, Clark claimed that “Heidegger’s ideal in approaching the poetic is of a non-objectifying non-totalizing reading in which the reader undergoes a critical defamiliarization of the very obviousness of language and the world” (2002, 122).

But what exactly is this other, this truth that poetry brings into existence? Moreover, does it remain present once it has been unconcealed? Heidegger argued that “the establishment of truth in the work is the bringing forth of a being of a kind which never was and never will be again” (1935, 37). This implies that the other or “being of a kind” is

unpredictable and it evades us. Clark clarified that “poetic language, as the bringing to word and to issue of its own primordial disclosive power, always risks falling back into more traditional kinds of language” (2002, 121). This falling back could be a possible explanation for the temporariness of poetic truth. After all, it is important to note that poetic language is not a new language. In fact, Heidegger’s distinction between truth and un-truth can equally be applied to poetic and daily language. By this I mean that poetry is concealed in daily language. As such, it springs from our daily use of language as a form of communication. According to Bruns, “one could as well say that poetry is a response to the uncanniness of ordinary language” (1997, 8). However, ordinary language is not Heidegger’s primary concern.

To Heidegger, poetry is the saying of the unconcealment of beings and what is opened up or concealed is “that in which human existence [*Dasein*], as historical, is already thrown [*geworfen*]” (1935, 47). It thus seems to be the case that poetry can offer access to a reality which cannot be consciously grasped because we are intrinsically part of it. More specifically, poetry goes beyond our rational application of language. In fact, Bruns argued that “poetry is the withdrawal of language from the world or, more accurately, from our grasp of the world by means of concepts” (1997, 10). In Heidegger’s understanding of truth, poetry appears to function as an alternative to cognition. More precisely, it is not through rational reasoning, but through poetry that we can acquire knowledge about reality.

Ziarek posited that poetry envelopes being and at the same time withdraws itself from words and remains other (1994, 22). The sort of world that poetry discloses is, consequently, something which cannot be grasped, because it withdraws from us as well. Clark referred to poetry’s ability as the “power of revealing deep history, those most basic and unthought modes of being” (2002, 109). I would like to underscore ‘unthought’ in the previous sentence, since this indicates that we cannot look for the disclosure that is inherent to poetry. It happens beyond our control. In short, a disclosure of the other does not simply result in cognition, thematization, and absorption of otherness. Instead, otherness preserves its alterity so that we cannot encompass it by our knowledge.

In view of the above, it seems to be the case that we are living in a world whose true nature remains hidden most of the time. It is through poetry, nonetheless, that we can experience something else. To use Heidegger’s words, then: “To see this all we need is the right concept of language” (1935, 45). Perhaps it is not a bad idea to let a poet speak, since I cannot find better words than the following lines by Yves Bonnefoy. According to him,

words require us to “logically” (if I may use the word) conceive of a true place. For if it is certain that there, in the everyday world, the only good worth wishing for is evanescent, so that we are in disarray and divided within ourselves, why should we not ask some other place in this world to restore us to our law? Another place, beyond other encounters, beyond the war of being alone. Having now discovered that travel, love, architecture, all the efforts of mankind are only so many ceremonies to summon presence, we have to bring them to life again on the very threshold of that deeper region. And in the changing light of its dawn, to fulfill them absolutely. Is there not somewhere a true fire, a true face?” (1989, 115)

Bonnefoy believed that the longing for the true place was a vow made by poetry (1989, 166). This other place goes beyond the world of conceptions. It is a withdrawal from our grasp of the world by means of concepts. Andrews (1999) argued that Paz and Bonnefoy conceive the function of poetry as “a corrective to the effects of science on the life of the modern mind. An antagonistic opposition, not just a distinction, between poetry and science is fundamental to the defences of poetry which both poets conduct” (352).²⁶ This statement is similar to Heidegger’s argument that one cannot know the world theoretically or scientifically. In other words, Heidegger’s conceptions allow one to understand how one could approach the other not by conceptualization, but rather through poetry.

Even though I have attempted to shed light on the notion of the other with regard to Heidegger’s essay, there are several issues that need to be tackled and that require clarification. One could, for example, wonder whether everyone can experience the world that poetry discloses. Moreover, does the other remain something beyond our reach and can we, therefore, never completely find access to the real? What are the implications of an experience with the other for oneself? Is a similar disclosure possible in other art forms such as music? I will now turn to the conceptions of the Mexican poet Paz in order to provide a better understanding of otherness in modern poetry. As will become clear in the following sections, there are certain affinities between Heidegger and Paz. In fact, Paz was familiar with ‘The Origin of the Work of Art’ (1935) and he mentioned the following in *The Bow and the Lyre* (1956): “We have not yet heard Heidegger’s last word, but we know that his attempt to find being in existence ran up against a stone wall. Now, as some of his writings show, he has turned to poetry” (87). It will be my aim to discuss to what extent Paz’s and Heidegger’s conceptions of poetry and alterity overlap or deviate from each other.

²⁶ References to Bonnefoy can be remarked in Paz’s works, such as in *The Bow and the Lyre* (1956, 73). Both of them knew André Breton and their poetry is characterized by certain similarities. For example, the critic Roger Cardinal stated that “it is a fact that many modern poets, such as Yves Bonnefoy and Octavio Paz have repeatedly exploited the tropes of love and eroticism [...] as a means to introduce secondary (metatextual) observations about writing itself” (2010, 150).

3.3. Poetry of Revelation

One bee plus one bee
does not make two light bees
or two dark bees:
they make up a cycle of sun,
a mansion of topaz,
a hazardous touching of hands.
- Pablo Neruda, 'Bees', 1969

Octavio Paz (1915-1998) was an important poet from Mexico who received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1990. He did not live a secluded life but was an influential public intellectual who, after 1945, represented Mexico as a diplomat. Moreover, during his lifetime he was an ambassador in India and his political thoughts and activities can thus hardly be underestimated (Wilson 1979, 2). In fact, King argued that Paz's political opinions became increasingly subject to fierce polemic (2003, 423). However, I am more concerned with Paz's conceptions of poetry, so I will not further elaborate on his political life.²⁷ The poet's reflections on poetry and its place in society are apparent in all his works – prose and poetry. Or, as he wrote in *The Other Voice* (1990): "I began to write poems very early in life, and began very early to reflect as well on the act of writing. Poetry is an extremely ambiguous occupation: a task and a mystery, a pastime and a sacrament, a *métier* and a passion" (1).

Paz was a very productive writer who published more than twenty volumes of poetry. In this section, however, I will focus on Paz's works of criticism, such as the essay 'Poetry of solitude and Poetry of Communion' (1942), *The Bow and The Lyre* (1956) and *The Other Voice* (1990).²⁸ More specifically, Paz's approach to poetry will be discussed in relation to Heidegger's ideas because both men share a similar understanding of the interrelatedness between poetry, being and truth. Now that I have tried to explain Heidegger's approach of truth and poetry in the previous sections, it will hopefully be easier to understand what Paz's main arguments are. The key issues that will be addressed are the event of poetic truth, poetry as a relation to being and presence. Of course, the focal issue of this thesis remains otherness or alterity, so I will discuss how poetry could provide the path to meaning, to another perception, to another voice after these previous issues have been clarified.

²⁷ Needless to say, I would not have been able to mention this with regard to Sartre. By this I mean that his conceptions of literature - and poetry - can be seen as an outgrowth of his political ideas. More precisely, the reason why he rejected poetry was because he could not control the meaning of poetic language and therefore he turned to prose in order to control the message that he sought to convey to the public. To put it differently, I believe it is fair to assume that Sartre's disapproval of poetry springs from its apolitical nature.

²⁸ These works will respectively be abbreviated as PSPC, *BL* and *OV*

In *The Bow and The Lyre* (1956) Paz devoted a section to ‘The Poetic Revelation’. More precisely, he stated that “the poetic experience is a revelation of our original condition” (137). The term ‘revelation’ implies a disclosure and I therefore wonder whether Paz meant the same as Heidegger. More precisely, I would like to know whether Paz believed that a poetic experience leads to a revelation of truth. If the answer is yes, then it is right to assume that Paz rejected a conceptual knowledge of existence as well. To Paz, “our original condition” cannot be known by relying on factual knowledge. He believed that the process of reducing reality to concepts stemmed from the anxiety to have reality in our power (PSPC 1942, 164). He argued the following: “I am not worried about the health of poetry, but about its place in the society we live in” (*OV* 1990, 120). Indeed, modern society seems to have negative repercussions on the state of poetry. More specifically, economic considerations replace literary ones since the value of a book depends on the number of people who buy it. Literature is viewed in terms of production and consumption and consequently, Paz posited that best-sellers are not works of literature but they are merchandise (1990, 95). In other words, books become objects in the modern market. Consequently, the relation that people have towards poetry is goal-orientated and stems from the perspective of the subject. Poetry thus fulfills the economic function that society has in mind.

Paz’s criticism of modernity is similar to Heidegger’s rejection of the art business. Modern society overlooks the fact that art does not belong to the era of advertising and instantaneous communication. However, Paz pointed out that technology changes (i.e. printing replaces the manuscript) but the arts, “whatever the technology and the state of society, endure. Public affairs and their preeminent figures pass: poems, paintings, and symphonies do not” (*OV* 1990, 82). In addition, the permanence of the arts was also mentioned by Rilke in the quote at the beginning of this part, namely “die Kunst-Werke, geheimnisvolle Existenzen, deren Leben neben dem unseren, das vergeht, *dauert*”.²⁹ Art and technology thus differ significantly and therefore it would be wrong to conflate them. What, then, is the function of art or poetry if it cannot be mastered or sold?

To bring to mind Heidegger’s ideas, he advocated an alternative understanding of the world which cannot be subjected to our own knowledge or mastery by means of concepts. The starting point for his thoughts is language. More specifically, poetic words are no objects of Heidegger’s thinking but that *through* which he thinks. In the same manner, Paz asserted that a poem is more than language because it reaches to something “that is beyond

²⁹ My emphasis. Rilke, *Briefe an einen jungen Dichter*, 1903

language and can only be reached through language” (*BL* 1956, 12). Poetry has a being of its own; it cannot be grasped by means of a specific theory or method. Consequently, an experience with poetry will lead to another understanding of the world and existence which cannot happen through conscious reasoning. In line with these reflections, Paz stated that

“The application of the methods of natural sciences to the study of society and societal change has not had, so far, the results hoped for. Despite this failure, smug and thoroughly confused theorists have decided to extend the scientific method to literature as well. They forget that different realities require different methods, different criteria” (*OV* 1990, 106).

Nevertheless, what is meant with these different realities and criteria? And what is Paz’s approach to language and poetry? First of all, it is important to draw attention to his understanding of poetry and poems. More precisely, he raised the following question: “When we question the poem about the existence of poetry, are we not arbitrarily confusing poetry and poem?” (*BL* 1956, 4). As should be clear by now, according to Paz, a book of poetry is not simply a product which is consumed by its readers in the capitalist, modern society. However, Paz makes a distinction between poetry and poems. He believed that there could be poetry without poems. By this I mean that Paz considered landscapes, persons and certain events to be poetic (1956, 4). A poem, on the contrary, is always a human product or work. Yet this interpretation is not reduced to literature since Paz applied the term to designate artworks in general: “In their own way, a painting, a sculpture, a dance are poems. And this way does not differ much from that of the poem made of words” (1956, 8).

In ‘The Origin of the Work of Art’ (1935) Heidegger claimed something similar: “If the essence of all art is poetry, then architecture, the visual arts, and music must all be referred back to poesy” (45). However, the linguistic work or poem had, to Heidegger, a privileged position among the arts as a whole. Heidegger thus used ‘poem’ to refer to the linguistic work, whereas ‘poetry’ was used in general to assign different art works. Paz, though, also applied ‘poetry’ to non-linguistic works, to events in life. The following questions arise: Firstly, which criteria does Paz use in order to consider, for example, a landscape as poetry? Secondly, if all arts are seen as poetry, what is the common ground between them? In fact, are Heidegger and Paz not generalizing in the same way as Sartre? After all, as indicated earlier, the latter claimed that poetry belonged to the side of music and painting.

Heidegger argued that poems, architecture and visual arts are all branches of language and therefore, they are all referred back to poetry (1935, 45). This is due to the

belief that poetry, in general, is capable of offering an experience of truth which is not only reduced to the linguistic work. According to Clark, Heidegger dismissed the term 'literature' because these works would relate to values and issues of their immediate historical context. Consequently, the validity of literature is determined by the latest prevailing standard (2002, 104). Poetry then, is something entirely different, "an elusive and easily occluded mode of being" (2002, 105). This mode of being cannot be mastered and, likewise, Paz posited that everything which is alien to the poet's creative will could be viewed as poetry.

Sartre, on the contrary, did not make a distinction between poetry and poems. Poetry was not taken into account because it could not serve the writer. This means that he began with a different perspective in comparison with Paz and Heidegger. More precisely, poetry, to Sartre, is not a way of being. Instead, it comes forward out of a mode of being and is seen as objects of possible knowledge. The following statement from *What is Literature?* (1948) is the exact opposite of what I have discussed with regard to Heidegger: "The quest for truth takes place in and by language conceived as a certain kind of instrument" (5). In fact, Paz alluded to Sartre's conceptions of literature in *The Bow and The Lyre*:

"In prose the word tends to be identified with one of its possible meanings, at the expense of others: *a spade is called a spade*. This is an analytical operation and is not performed without violence, since the word possesses a number of latent meanings, it is a certain potentiality of senses and directions. The poet, on the other hand, never assaults the ambiguity of the word. In the poem language recovers its pristine originality, mutilated by the subjugation imposed on it by prose and everyday speech" (1956, 11)³⁰.

It is fair, as stressed before, to assume that a different understanding of language leads to other conceptions of the self, literature and reality. For instance, a mimetic approach to literature is not Paz's concern; poetic language is not a copy of reality. After all, if Paz and Heidegger have no fixed interpretation of reality, then it would be right to assume that language cannot be a representation of something that is beyond their understanding. According to Paz, "the poem does not explain or represent: it presents. It does not allude to reality; it tries to re-create it – and sometimes succeeds" (1956, 97). The verb 'to present' is extremely relevant when coming to terms with the similarity between Heidegger and Paz. By this I mean that poetry presents an understanding of Being that can be more truthful than a realistic copy-relation. More precisely, a mimetic approach to poetry is, in fact, not realistic at all because it denies the disclosive power of poetry which leads to a happening of truth and consequently, an alternative way of perceiving daily life. I will now further

³⁰ My emphasis

elaborate on Paz's understanding of poetic language and the relation between poetry and being, in order to arrive at his understanding of otherness.

3.3.1. The Hunger for Reality

In the previous section I demonstrated that Paz criticized a specific approach of reality. Modern subjectivism affirms the existence of a reality as a derivation of consciousness, whereas Paz wondered the following: "How can man be the foundation of the world if he is the being who is, by his very nature, change, perpetual becoming who never overtakes himself and who ceases to transform himself only to die?" (*BL* 1956, 203). These thoughts pertain to the artwork as well, since man is not the foundation of a literary work. Poetry, then, cannot be approached as something which is simply there and which can be scanned by our consciousness from the outside. One thus has to perceive reality and art in a different way. According to Paz, "the realm of poetry is the 'I wish' [...] Indeed, poetry is desire [...] poetry is hunger for reality" (1956, 54). Clearly, this statement indicates that poetry is the longing for an experience of another reality. Or perhaps it is better to say it in a slightly different way: poetry is the longing for another experience of reality. Paz's view corresponds to Heidegger's conceptions of art. Namely, the latter claimed that "to be a work means: to set up a world" (1935, 46). This world should be interpreted as that which is disclosed in poetry. In other words, it is the event of truth. Consequently, "Truth does not proceed from reason, but from poetic perception" (Paz 1956, 218). In addition, Paz stated that poetry constitutes an irreducible act, it "reveals this world and it creates another" (1956, 3).

In *Modern Poetry and the Idea of Language* (1974) Bruns discussed two antithetical conceptions of poetic language: orphic and hermetic poetry. The first idea refers to the mythical singer Orpheus whose poetic speech is the ground of all signification. Bruns claimed that the power of orphic poetry "extends beyond the formation of a work toward the creation of a world" (1974, 1). Hermetic poetry, on the contrary, points toward the literary work as a self-contained linguistic structure. More precisely, the poem does not depend on anything external. Bruns declared that "hermetic poetry is intelligible only in terms of the work: "it is not a saying, not a predication or reference or disclosure, it is primarily a "making" – the making of a closed structure of relationships among the components of language" (1974, 235). I now propose to clarify Paz's and Heidegger's conception of poetry

in terms of Bruns's distinction, so that I can dwell further upon the meaning of poetry and its relation to Being.

Both poetries - orphic and hermetic – assert the primacy of language and this is something which Paz and Heidegger believed as well. For example, Paz argued that “All is language” (1956, 10). As explained earlier, Heidegger claimed that one should let language speak on its own behalf. Only then, another reality and the being of language can be felt. This disclosure of another mode of being happens through poetry. Or, as Bruns put it: “It is by means of poetry that the world finds itself present before man” (1974, 3). Put differently, the – daily or customary - world presents itself other than it is. Truth is thus un-truth and it will not be gathered from the ordinary. Paz echoes this view by statements such as “This world is and is not real” (1956, 111) and “We are in a world that is, actually, another world” (1956, 109).³¹ Hence another notion of our relation to reality becomes central in understanding Paz's and Heidegger's account of poetry.

In view of the above, I would argue that Paz and Heidegger support an orphic conception of poetry. As such, the world is brought into being by poetry. After all, Paz did not coincidentally call one of his books *The Bow and the Lyre*. The bow and the lyre are precisely the symbols of Orpheus in the Greek myth.³² According to Bruns, “The power of Orpheus extends beyond the creation of song to the building up of a world, because the sphere of his activity is governed by an identity of word and being” (1974, 207). The activity of Orpheus thus seems to coincide with Heidegger's and Paz's approach to poetry, by which I mean that another world could be revealed through poetry. In other words, language is not simply a set of words, but an Orphic activity. Paz claimed in *The Other Voice* (1990) that the reading of a poem “connects the reader with a realm that is transpersonal, and therefore, in the strict sense of the word immense” (78). This statement indicates that poetry can function as a relation that goes toward another realm. After all, as mentioned earlier, Gasché explained that the notion of relation is always directed towards something or someone else.

³¹These statements also bring to mind surrealist modes of thinking, such as André Breton's assertion “La véritable existence est ailleurs”. In fact, it is important to note that Paz was associated with the surrealist movement and his friendship with Breton can be remarked in his books, since several references appear. For example, Paz wrote the following in *The Other Voice* (1990): “I do not share many of Breton's philosophical and aesthetic ideas, but my admiration for him is still intense and intact. In his writings, as in his life, freedom and poetry have the same fiery face, at once captivating and tempestuous” (61).

³² In addition, Paz commented upon his title at the end of the book: “the lyre which consecrates man and thus gives him a place in the cosmos; the bow which shoots him beyond himself” (1956, 262).

A poem has to be understood both as an event and a structure. It is a text which possesses its own mode of existence. As mentioned earlier, Bruns stated that hermetic poetry is not a reference or disclosure. Nonetheless, it consists of a disclosive power. More precisely, Heidegger argued that the singularity of a work exceeds the intentional labour of the writer. In the same way, Paz claimed that “every poem is a self-contained totality” which cancels out the role of the writer (1956, 40). Consequently, when the work is no longer primarily associated with the writer, there still remains something within its structure. I believe it to be the case that there is a middle ground between the orphic and hermetic dimension of meaning. A nuance should be made, and therefore it is perhaps not entirely justified to consider Heidegger’s and Paz’s conceptions of poetry to be exclusively orphic. More precisely, the meaning of poetry does not only depend on its possibility to disclose a world for others. A poem will always have something to say, for this is the reason why it can make a claim on the reader. If, however, poetry does not create a presence for the disclosure of another world, this does not imply that it ceases to have an existence of its own. Instead, for Paz and Heidegger, we would have to reconsider our attitude towards language.

The double dimension of poetry – its orphic and hermetic character - seems to be indicated in the following utterance by Paz: “The poet’s voice is always social and common, even when it is most hermetic” (1956, 147). In other words, the poem is both a being that discloses itself as an independent singularity and at the same time it reveals another reality, insofar that it is a happening of truth. Therefore, the attention is drawn away from the linguistic structure of the poem. But what exactly is meant with the notion of ‘linguistic structure’? Are poetic words similar to the meaning they refer to? Why else would Bruns refer to an identity of word and being while discussing Orphic poetry (1974, 207)? He stated the following: “For the Orphic character of language is made to consist in its power of synthesis – in its ability to build up into form and idea that which is undifferentiated” (Bruns 1974, 211). Bruns further explained that the value of the word does not lie in the relationship which it forms with other words, but in its identity with being (1974, 235). More precisely, poetry exceeds the enclosure of the poem, since its meaning can be experienced in the world which it brings to being. Similarly, Paz argued that “The place where names and things fuse and are the same: to poetry, the realm where naming is being” (1956, 91). This is similar to Bruns’s thesis of modern poetry: Namely, a poem is not made of images or meanings, but of words (1997, 2). Differently put, meanings are assigned to poems by our consciousness. But the poem is not reducible to concepts. This brings me back

to Heidegger's argument that poetry is something that exists on its own terms, it is a "self-sufficient presence" (1935, 11). Paz stated that "the meaning of the image is the image itself: it cannot be said with other words. The image explains itself" (BL 1956, 94). Meaning and image are thus the same thing.

But is it then true that the image expresses that which language is incapable of saying? Paz claimed the following:

"The word is not identical to the reality it names because between man and things – and, more deeply, between man and his being – consciousness of himself intervenes. The word is a bridge by which man tries to traverse the distance that separates him from external reality. But that distance is part of human nature" (BL 1956, 25).

This assertion seems to imply that we cannot reach the reality which lies behind the word. Language, then, is unable to capture the actual disclosure. In fact, Paz posited that "Poetic expression expresses the inexpressible" (1956, 96). Consequently, poetry is the expression of the disclosure but not the actual revelation itself: "Poetry is the *saying* of the unconcealment of beings" (Heidegger 1935, 46).³³ Heidegger thus argued that truth happens through being poeticized, but poetry itself is not equal to truth (1935, 49). Poetic language allows something to make its appearance. Or, as Bonnefoy clarified: "speech can celebrate presence, sing of its being [...] but it cannot in itself allow us to achieve it" (1989, 113). By now, it is perhaps clearer what Ziarek meant with the following lines "The other thus remains the other, preserves its alterity precisely in its openness" (1994, 57). A disclosure can thus not simply result in thematization and cognition precisely because the other never gives up its otherness and more importantly, because there is no word for the Being that lies behind poetic language. But I must stop here because the next section has almost overtaken me.

3.3.2. The Other Voice

So far, I have attempted to demonstrate that Paz and Heidegger view poetic language as a medium for another experience of reality. Their position is thus that the Other is not a physical entity, but a form of meaning that can be reached through language. Poetry brings into existence something new which is not reducible to what the reader could understand: "Poetry is the *other* voice" (OV 1990, 151). It gives voice to an experience of otherness which is not another form of life, but which is present in the ordinary, in the here and now.

³³ My emphasis

Or, as Paz put it: “I am not concerned about the other life elsewhere but here. The experience of otherness is, here and now, the other life. Poetry does not seek to console man for death but to make him see that life and death are inseparable: they are the totality” (1956, 248).

But what exactly does he mean with this totality? According to Heidegger, “the truly poeticizing projection is the opening up of that in which human existence, as historical, is already thrown” (1935, 47). Is it then right to assume that alterity is a concealed experience of existence which generally remains hidden in daily life? Is poetry thus an experience of something that is more real than the reality by which it is confronted? First of all, it is important to note that both Heidegger and Paz mentioned a “leap”. More specifically, this leap was defined by Paz as follows: “Leaps: acts that wrench us from this world and cause us to penetrate the other shore without knowing for certain if it is we ourselves or the supernatural that casts us there” (1956, 108). Furthermore, he clarified that the “The mortal leap puts us face to face with the supernatural” (1956, 110). Put differently, the leap is a leap toward the experience of otherness. Is it then right to assume that the supernatural is similar to otherness? Paz argued that “the Other is something that is not like us, a being that is also nonbeing. And the first thing its presence evokes is stupefaction” (1956, 113). Stupefaction and a sensation of strangeness are thus rather inherent to the experience of the Other.

Moreover, the ‘nonbeing’ which Paz mentioned in his statement is also touched upon by Heidegger and has to be understood as the familiar beyond where otherness is situated. More precisely, Heidegger posited the following:

“The poeticizing projection comes out of *nothing* in the sense that it derives its gift from what is familiar and already here. In another sense, however, it does not come out of nothing; for what it projects is but the withheld determination of man’s historical existence itself” (1935, 48).

To Heidegger, the leap is a beginning of the poeticizing projection. He mentioned in his essay that “as a leap, the genuine beginning is always a leaping-ahead, a leaping-ahead in which everything to come is already leapt over” (1935, 48). However, the leap itself “cannot release anything more from itself since it contains nothing save that in which it is caught” (1935, 48). Rather, something comes into being by means of a leap. Paz referred to the other voice as the voice of the beginning (1990, 153). More precisely, by means of a leap we can be confronted with the reality that lies behind the word and this reality is always already there, before it can come into presence through poetry. For this reason, Paz considered it to

be the voice of the beginning. Consequently, language could be seen as the voice which seeks to name the beginning, but it is not the beginning itself. The beginning or otherness must be understood as the origin of language rather than the other way around.

Bruns argued that “the act of speech is the opening up of the world to language” (1974, 243). As such, there seems to be a similarity between language and the leap. More specifically, Ziarek posited that the word takes a leap when it escapes us (2013, 104). He stated that:

“When the word fails, when it does not reach words (that is, signs), the word, as it were, also escapes and frees itself from signs. This escape is the opening of the interval, and as such it is the hint of being [...] By working as a leap and not primarily as a sign, the word abides in being” (2013, 104).

When words escape from signs, it becomes something other which cannot be explained by language even though it can only be reached by means of it: “Born of the word, the poem issues in something that surpasses it” (Paz 1956, 96). To repeat a statement that I mentioned before: “Poetic expression expresses the inexpressible” (1956, 96). As such, it perhaps seems logical that we rely on our consciousness for our knowledge of reality. After all, we know what we are able to understand by means of language and concepts, so what is the use of granting importance to something that is elusive and beyond words?

In order to come up with some answers, it is necessary to look more closely at poetry’s place in society. Paz stated in *The Other Voice* (1990) that:

“No society exists that has not known one form of poetry or another. But although tied to a specific soil and a specific history, poetry has always been open, in each and every one of its manifestations, to a transhistorical beyond. I do not mean a religious beyond: I am speaking of the perception of the other side of society. That perception is common to all men in all periods” (154).

This statement indicates that poetry has a broad relevance since it can shape one’s understanding of reality. I wish to underscore the verb ‘can’ in the previous sentence, because participation is required. Namely, through poetry our sense of the whole context and objects around us can be transformed if we acknowledge that it can, indeed, does, make a claim on us.³⁴ Likewise Grondin posited that “an art work with no truth is one that doesn’t speak to us” (1998). Moreover, Paz claimed that “There is one note common to all poems,

³⁴ In line with these reflections, James Risser argued that “undergoing an experience with art means being able to recognize its claim to say something to me, which is accomplished not by being a distanced outlooker, but in a kind of participatory involvement” (1997, 141).

without which they would never be poetry: participation” (*BL* 1956, 14). What, then, happens if everyone would acknowledge the claim of poetry?

According to Heidegger, art offers a mode of truth and knowledge that is more than what is traditionally understood. It influences the very way in which reality appears for us in the first place (Clark 2002, 46). Consequently, poetry offers a different experience of reality. In line with these reflections, Paz stated that poetry’s “testimony is the revelation of an experience in which all men participate, an experience concealed by routine and everyday bitterness. Poets have been the first to reveal that eternity and the absolute are within the reach of our senses, not beyond them” (PSPC 1942, 168). If poetry could reveal an experience in which all men participate, then it is implied that poetry pertains to every man. In other words, poetry thus seems to be valuable for the community’s understanding of the world. However, for the experience and revelation to be realized, a new attitude is needed. Nonetheless, Paz claimed that modern man is born in a society that makes him naturally artificial and converts him into goods (1942, 171). After all, “since the poet’s activity does not benefit society, this pretension converts him into a dangerous being” (1942, 167). Moreover, poetry is not meant for the majority or masses of the modern era since it is not simply something which can enter the exchange of commercial goods. Therefore, it is even more difficult to understand that “poetry is expression of the absolute or the lacerating attempt to arrive at it” (1942, 166).

Yet poetry remains something more. It is the expression of an invisible otherness which gives meaning to existence. More precisely, truth does not proceed from reason, but from poetic perception. This perception should be interpreted as the world ceasing to have a specific shape. It is man’s openness that allows for an experience with the inexpressible. Poetry thus amounts to the following: “search for the others, discovery of *otherness*” (Paz 1956, 241). This discovery cannot be found outside of the poetic realm. Instead, Yves Bonnefoy claimed that “the poem aspires only to interiorize the real” (1989, 122). Poetry is accordingly seen as a relational realm that reaches towards a complex notion of truth or alterity remaining infinite, because otherness cannot be defined by a conscious application of words. The notion of alterity cannot be clarified in terms of *what* it is and therefore, its potential meaning will always be open to us rather than being mastered by a specific interpretation.

3.3.3. There is Another Life Within This Life

I will now turn to poetry in order to give another voice to the issues that were addressed in the previous sections. More specifically, I will dwell upon fragments from the long poem ‘Identical Time’ which appeared in the volume *Days and Occasions* (1958)³⁵:

Today I am alive and without nostalgia
the night flows
 the city flows
I write in this page that flows
I shuttle with these shuttling words
The world did not begin with me
it will not end with me
 I am
one pulsebeat in the throbbing river
[...]
 I know nothing
I know what is too much
 not what is enough
Ignorance is as difficult as beauty
someday I will know less and open my eyes
Perhaps time doesn’t pass
images of time pass
and if the hours do not come back
 presences come back
There is another life within this life
that fig tree will come back tonight
other nights return tonight
[...]
Not the same hours
 others
are always others and are the same
they enter and expel us from ourselves
they see with our eyes what eyes do not see
There is another time within time
still
with no hours no weight no shadow
without past or future
 only alive
like the old man on the bench
indivisible identical perpetual
We never see it
 It is transparency

In ‘Identical Time’ an old man is sitting on a bench, speaking by himself, having forgotten his identity. His reality appears as something other and the thematic aspect which

³⁵ Paz, Octavio. *The Collected Poems of Octavio Paz*. Trans. Eliot Weinberger. USA: New Directions, 1990. Print. P. 69-79.

immediately draws one's attention in this poem is thus the duality between reality and otherness. It is therefore perhaps not surprising that one could be reminded of Heidegger's statement "Truth, in essence, is un-truth" (1935, 31) when reading the following line: "others are always others and are the same". Furthermore, "There is another life within this life" and "There is another time within time" indicate that another conception of life, apart from one's traditional outlook, is present as well. This is similar to a statement in *The Bow and the Lyre* (1956) which goes as follows:

"Otherness is above all the simultaneous perception that we are others without ceasing to be what we are and that, without ceasing to be where we are, our true being is in another place. We are another place. In another place means: here, right now while I am doing this or that" (1956, 246).

Otherness is thus a voice beyond daily experiences, which means that what is deemed to be real conceals another truth, such as "another life" or "another time". However, as indicated before, alterity is not an essentially different realm, but an alternative experience of the same one.

According to Quiroga (1999) "the meaning of 'transparency' here, a word that is important for Paz [...] seems akin to that of identity" (115). Consequently, we become aware of ourselves as elusive and ever-changing beings ("we never see it"). Moreover, the lyrical I in this poem is not a person who consciously interprets the world from his own perspective, which can be indicated by the following lines: "The world did not begin with me" and "I know nothing, I know what is too much not what is enough". These verses can also recall Heidegger's notion of 'thrownness.' More specifically, we are thrown into a world that already exists so the world does not begin with our birth. "I know what is too much" can be interpreted as a realization that reality is too much for us to take in by our cognition. In line with this interpretation, then, "someday I will know less and open my eyes" can imply that the lyrical I will rely less on his knowledge in order to open his eyes and become aware of another perception of the world.

The notion of the image appears in this poem when Paz wrote the following line: "Perhaps time doesn't pass, images of time pass". One could interpret this line as the uncertain attitude of the speaker in the poem towards his own outlook. More precisely, his notion of time as a dimension ordered by hours, minutes and so on could be less real than the image of time. The image, then, can be understood as the poetic image which is something that explains itself and, therefore, it does not become meaningful when we try to bestow meaning on it by relying on our knowledge.

4. Insistence of an Inaccessible Alterity

But the name of a bird and the name of a nameless air
I have never – shall never hear. And yet beneath
The stillness of everything gone something resides,
Some skreaking and skrittering residuum,
And grates these evasions of the nightingale
Though I have never – shall never hear that bird.
- W. Stevens, 'Autumn Refrain', 1954

So far I have discussed Paz's conceptions of truth, poetry and alterity with regard to a Heideggerian understanding of the work of art. The main title of the previous section, 'The Becoming and Happening of Truth,' indicates that the notion of truth is an event rather than a static fact which can be derived from our conceptual understanding. More precisely, the happening of truth can be experienced through poetry. According to Heidegger and Paz, poetry is an event in which existence is brought into being. The existence or other world which is disclosed is a mode of truth; it is a revelation of being that goes beyond daily experience and that differs from the notion of truth which underlies it. However, the world which appears through an experience with poetry is not an essentially different world. Instead, it should be understood as another experience of the same world which cannot be mastered in terms of reasoning and concepts. Poetry, then, provides the path to another place which is brought to presence when one engages in an experience with art. In a nutshell, the function of poetry is a revelation of truth which is something other than what is deemed to be real; poetry, therefore, is a path to poetic truth or alterity.

Nevertheless, I have argued that alterity does not remain present once it has been unconcealed. This is because otherness evades our comprehension. Namely, alterity is a mode of being in which we always already find ourselves. As a result, we cannot grasp otherness in its entirety because we are intrinsically part of it. There will always be more than we can understand and this inadequate understanding of the world is inherent to being human. Consequently, the disclosure of otherness does not result in cognition or conceptualization. Instead, otherness preserves its alterity and it is resistant to comprehension. As such, poetry's relation to alterity remains open. My concern is therefore not the question "*What* is alterity?" but rather "*How* is alterity possible and *how* can otherness happen through poetry?"

Now that I have recapitulated the main arguments of the previous section, I would like to elaborate further on an aspect which I briefly touched upon: the notion of nearness or proximity. Heidegger stated in "The Origin of the Work of Art" that "There is much in

beings man cannot master [...] The known remains an approximation, what is mastered insecure” (1935, 29). This statement of Heidegger indicates that an experience with poetry does not lead to a specific or fixed interpretation of the world. If the knowable world remains an approximation, is it then right to assume that there can never be a complete access to otherness? It is important to note, as I have demonstrated, that poetry should not be equated with the notion of alterity or truth. Instead, poetry is a relational realm the openness of which can lead to an experience of alterity, but poetry itself is not the actual revelation. This is due to the fact that otherness is a pre-articulated region which language is incapable of expressing. Yet Paz and Heidegger claimed that the discovery of alterity can only take place through poetry. They argued that an experience with the other voice happens beyond our control. The possibility of alterity is thus there, despite the fact that we cannot grasp or articulate it.

I wonder, then, whether it is right to assume that Paz’s approach to otherness is contradictory. Namely, if otherness is a notion that remains inexpressible, how can we ever experience it through poetry? To put it differently, is it not better to acknowledge that the possibility of otherness is actually impossible, because poetry is made of words and otherness resists expression or clarification by means of words? Moreover, how can we even assume that an experience with otherness can happen if we are not entirely able to understand what alterity is? I would argue that these questions are relevant because they show that Heidegger’s and Paz’s account of otherness leaves room for discussion. More precisely, there is no specific definition of alterity, but it is rather subject to diverse interpretations. After all, if otherness cannot be mastered or defined in terms of *what* it is, its potential meaning remains open. In this part of the present thesis I will attempt to clarify the nonlinguistic nature of alterity in order to provide an answer to the question of poetry and its relation to proximity. I will rely on the ideas of Emmanuel Levinas and Paul Celan since I believe it to be the case that their approach to poetry forces us to reexamine possible relations to alterity which differ from those of Heidegger and Paz. More specifically, Heidegger and Paz underscored the notion of presence, whereas absence will be more prominent in the conceptions of Levinas and Celan.

By now it should be clear that we can neither think nor conceptualize alterity, and as such nor can we have a fully conscious experience of it. Consequently, we can only experience its proximity. Proximity is a notion which is not elaborately discussed in OWA by Heidegger and in works such as *The Other Voice* by Paz. Nevertheless, I believe that this is an important notion which needs to be addressed in order to understand how an

experience with poetry can possibly relate to alterity. For this reason, I will now confront the conceptions of Levinas and Celan for whom proximity is an integral concept in their account of otherness. My choice here is not a random one, by which I mean that Celan and Levinas were familiar with each other's ideas. More specifically speaking, Hand argued that, for Levinas, Celan's poetry caused a "shift in attitude, away from the basic belief that it is prose and not poetry that remains the only appropriate means of communication in the ethical relation" (2009, 75). Celan, in turn, was aware of Levinas's stance on ethics and he believed that the ethical in language was related to poetry and art (Ziarek 1994, 161). Levinas and Celan were thus concerned with language's ethical dimension and I will show in the following subsections that this has repercussions on their account of poetry and alterity.

According to Hand, Heidegger was a founding influence on Levinas's assessment of the work of art (2009, 64). Even though Levinas was a scholar of Heidegger and was openly influenced by him, he claimed in *Existence and Existents* (1947) that:

"If at the beginning our reflections are in large measure inspired by the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, where we find the concept of ontology and of the relationship which man sustains with Being, they are also governed by a profound need to leave the climate of that philosophy" (1988, 9).

This statement indicates that Levinas attempted to break free from Heideggerian ontology. His objections to Heidegger's philosophy will be explained in the first subsection 'The Priority of Ethics over Ontology.' More specifically, the fourth part of the present thesis will be structured as follows: First I will elaborate on Levinassian ethics in order to clarify his philosophical perspective and his critique of Heidegger's ontological conceptions. I will thereby rely on scholars such as Gerald Bruns, Krzysztof Ziarek, Simon Critchley and Séan Hand in order to provide a better understanding of Levinas's notion of responsibility and subjectivity.

After a discussion of Levinas's ethics and of his objections to Heideggerian ontology, I propose to investigate the relation between ethics and art. More precisely, I will draw upon various selections from *Existence and Existents*. The reasons for picking the latter work are twofold: Firstly, in this book, Levinas clearly explains his understanding of Being and otherness. It is of primary importance to address these issues so that afterwards I can shed light on his account of poetic language. I will in particular focus on aspects such as the *Il ya*, consciousness, materiality and proximity.

Secondly, *Existence and Existents* is relevant for my investigation because it will help to clarify Paul Celan's account of alterity in 'The Meridian' (1960). The Meridian is Celan's speech on the occasion of receiving the Georg-Büchner Literature Prize in 1960 and constitutes his most explicit exegesis on the nature of poetry. This work was referred to by Levinas as "an elliptic, allusive text, constantly interrupting itself in order to let through, in the interruptions, his other voice, as if two or more discourses were on top of one another" (1996, 41). 'The Meridian' by Celan is an important statement on the nature of poetry and clearly foregrounds his poetics of otherness. It is my argument that there are affinities between Levinas's and Celan's conceptions of alterity and poetic language. Namely, both men believed that a complete access to meaning or truth will always be denied to us. I will therefore attempt to explain Celan's conceptions of poetry and alterity by addressing the following aspects of 'The Meridian': poetry as shape, direction and dialogue, the notion of the subject and the Other.

4.1. The Priority of Ethics over Ontology

In the section '3.1. Language as the Medium to Being,' I have explained that the relation between poetry and being is an essential issue in an ontological understanding of literature. To Heidegger, the mind cannot constitute reality. He therefore proposed another way of approaching the world in which we find ourselves, that is, through poetic language. Heidegger believed that things come into being in poetry instead of supporting the rational view that we can master language conceptually. It is for this reason we can no longer interpret a poem by bestowing meaning on it. We have to consider ourselves to be inhabitants of the world and language rather than outsiders looking in, like some form of omniscient narrator; language is the medium of being and not a consequence of it. As we have seen, Levinas criticized Heidegger's prioritizing of ontology over ethics. Ziarek explained that "for Levinas, Heidegger's thought comes short of giving its due to the other" (1994, 5). In order to understand Levinas's rejection of Heideggerian ontology, I will first dwell on a few biographical facts which will hopefully help to clarify Levinas's relation to Heidegger's philosophy.

Levinas was born in Lithuania in 1906, belonged to a Jewish community and his three younger brothers were murdered by the Nazis (Critchley 2005, xv). He was a student of Heidegger as well as Husserl, and Hand has explained that he was credited with introducing phenomenology in France by way of explanation and translation (Hand 2009,

xv). In 1932 he began to work on a book on Heidegger but abandoned it when Heidegger became committed to National Socialism (Critchley 2005, xviii). He stated the following in an interview: “One can forgive many Germans, but there are some Germans it is difficult to forgive. It is difficult to forgive Heidegger” (2005, xviii). Levinas’s life was dominated by the Nazi horror, so it should come as no surprise that his fascination with Heidegger was brought to an end when he discovered Heidegger’s endorsement of Nazism. Moreover, Levinas connected Heidegger’s philosophy with his political past. He stated in 1992 in an interview in *Le Monde* that “The absence of concern for the other in Heidegger and his personal political adventure are linked” (Critchley 2005, 13).³⁶ Instead of an absence of concern for the other, the ethical relation to the other is a central theme in Levinas’s works. In other words, Levinas did not share the ontological preoccupations of Heidegger because they failed to acknowledge the other, and this is precisely what took place in the Shoah - where the other person got lost in the crowd and became faceless (Critchley 2005, 26). In Levinas’s post-war philosophy, then, recognition of the other becomes a fundamental principle. But what exactly is meant with the ‘ethical relation to the other’?

Levinas’s ethics explore the meaning of intersubjectivity and the encounter with another person.³⁷ Thus, his ethics cannot be limited to the cultivation of virtues or moral values. In 1961 Levinas claimed he was developing a “first philosophy” which was a description of a precognitive experience with the other.³⁸ The event of being in a relation with the other is thus what Levinas describes as ‘ethical’. A precognitive experience with the other implies that the other exists prior to the emergence of our consciousness. Therefore, the relation with the other person does not take place at the level of consciousness: the ethical relation is irreducible to comprehension. It is thereby important to note that Levinas’s account of otherness is not similar to a person or physical substance. Alterity should rather be seen as the otherness of another person which will always escape my understanding. In other words, alterity presents itself in the guise of the other. In line with these reflections, Hand claimed that Levinas’s ethical vision “is above all dramatically embodied by him in the *face* of the other [...] and our relation with the *other* which the face stands for, is one that begins, in Levinas’s ethics, even before self-consciousness emerges”

³⁶Nevertheless, Levinas’s claim that Heidegger’s ontology is associated with his turn to Nazism is only one view of the issue. Namely, there are others who argue that Heidegger’s philosophy has ethical implications. For instance, Lawrence Vogel explained in his book *The Fragile “We”* (1994) that the ontology which Heidegger worked out in *Being and Time* offers a fundamental ethics (1). According to Vogel, “it is important, of course, to be careful that the philosophical and the biographical not be confused: that it not be assumed that Heidegger’s comportment represents or follows from the ethical substance of his thought” (3).

³⁷ Emmanuel Levinas. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2011. Web 10th of April 2014. <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/levinas/>

³⁸ Ibid.

(2009, 36). This claim indicates that we are always already in an ethical relation before we can even realize what it means to stand in a relation with otherness. Hence otherness must already be present before we come into existence. Nevertheless, its presence cannot be perceived or experienced by us.³⁹ Libertson explained that “the Other is that which cannot be present or “here,” and which cannot simply be “gone”” (1982, 227).

The notion of the face which was mentioned by S  an Hand is explicitly developed in Levinas’s major work *Totality and Infinity* (1961). Waldenfels has stated that “as the trace of the other, the face keeps the ambiguous character of an enigma” (2005, 78). If the face is ambiguous and enigmatic, then I suppose that it differs from a physical face. In fact, Hand clarified that the face is not a physical detail, but a moment of infinity that goes beyond our comprehension (2009, 36). This moment is infinite precisely because it is more than we can think; the face remains open.⁴⁰ In terms of the notion of responsibility, the face is important because it is the face of the Other which appeals to us and this appeal concerns the very notion of our being-in-the-world. This is not to say that it interests us. Rudi Visker, for example, argued that it “is in opposition to our very interest that we turn towards the Other” (2004, 29). Levinas’s ethical relation seems to imply that I am obliged to the Other since I cannot escape its appeal. Visker’s assertion thus demonstrates that there cannot be an engagement with the face, because if it were possible, then the one who entered this engagement could always withdraw from it. The Levinassian understanding of responsibility, then, is not a free engagement. Instead, ethical responsibility is “an answer without a question” (Visker 2004, 91).⁴¹ More precisely, whether or not the Other is turned to me, I am always turned to the Other. In short, our relation to alterity is based on responsibility and this responsibility is a fundamental aspect of the ethical relation, because it is evoked by the constant appeal of the Other. Alterity thus manifests itself in a face and this face presents the inadequate manifestation of otherness. I deliberately use the adjective ‘inadequate’ because otherness will never completely be revealed to us. Instead, the otherness of the other person can only be glimpsed in and through another as Other. Put

³⁹ I will present a detailed discussion of Levinas’s account of otherness in the section ‘4.2. Existence and Existents,’ because this work contains an elaborate account of alterity and its relation to Being. For now it suffices to touch upon the main ideas about Levinas’s ethical relation with the other so that I can clarify his ethics by pointing out some differences with regard to Heidegger’s ontology.

⁴⁰ In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas clarified that the idea of infinity is equal to the mind that exists before we start to produce ontological reduction, which means “the mind before it lends itself to the distinction between what it discovers by itself and what it receives from opinion” (1969, 25). Infinity is thus, for Levinas, the revelation of the Other which is located in the face, but we cannot consciously experience this since our mind is incapable of doing so. Hand stated that the face is “the emblem of everything that fundamentally resists categorization, containment or comprehension” (2009, 42).

⁴¹ According to Visker, the formula “answer without a question” is constantly recurring in *Otherwise than Being* (2004, 91).

differently, alterity retains its alterity: the other is always already Other than any possible conceptualization.

I would like to consider for a moment what this ethical responsibility means in comparison with Heidegger's philosophy by addressing a quote from Bruns. Namely, Bruns posited that "Levinas's objections to Heidegger's phenomenology of disclosure are well known: the world that is opened in Heidegger's analysis has no people in it" (2005, 222). Heideggerian ontology is not based on a cognitive understanding of the world but Heidegger did believe that beings always already have an average understanding of the world due to their existential situation, that is, due to their 'thrownness.' I am not providing any new information here, as I have already touched upon this before, but I am trying to indicate that Levinas has another conception of Dasein's relation to Being. More precisely, Critchley claimed that, for Levinas, "Dasein's understanding of Being presupposes an ethical relation with the other human being, that being to whom I speak and to whom I am obliged *before* being comprehended".⁴² Heidegger, on the contrary, is more concerned with the notion of ontological truth which makes him lose sight of the other person. For him, Dasein's understanding of Being does not presuppose an ethical relation with another human being. After all, the other person is part of the 'they' or the mass. Therefore, we know the other because it is part of the crowd that surrounds me.⁴³

However, for Levinas the other person is clearly the key issue, since it adheres to his account of alterity. Hand clarified that his philosophy was characterized by a "rejection of the impersonal idea of the other in favour of a primordial indebtedness to the other" (2009, 5). In comparison with Heidegger's ideas, though, the other cannot be reduced to comprehension. Instead, the Other preserves itself which means that there is no disclosure of a mode of Being which lies behind our daily perception of the world. Critchley explains that "Ontology is Levinas's general term for any relation to otherness that is reducible to comprehension or understanding" (2005, 11). For Levinas, the ethical relation to the Other is not a matter of reflection or thought, and therefore, his ethics are not ontological or phenomenological. More specifically, Levinas criticized Heidegger's phenomenological account of intentionality. This intentionality means that being is always directing itself

⁴² My emphasis

⁴³ Heidegger claimed the following in *Being and Time*: "By 'Others' we do not mean everyone else but me – those over against whom the "I" stands out. They are rather those from whom, for the most part, one does *not* distinguish oneself – those among one is too [...] 'too' means a sameness of Being as circumspectively concerned Being-in-the-world" (1962, 154). Despite the fact that Heidegger does not mention an ethical relation, one should not forget that *Mitsein* is a necessity of being with others which always accompanies my being in the world. In this sense, it would be inconsiderate to posit that Heidegger's philosophy is not concerned with the other. Heidegger stated that "Dasein in itself is essentially Being-with" (156).

towards its concerns, or the issues that are stake for it.⁴⁴ In line with these reflections, Bernet posits that:

“what is true of things is also true of other persons when one deals with them in the mode of intentional consciousness or care: they become either another constituted by me or another whom I make into my partner in view of a common task” (2005, 87).

An intentional consciousness thus reduces the alterity of what it is related to because it appropriates or dominates it. Otherness in Levinas’s ethics is not a phenomenon but an enigma which undermines intentionality and which escapes understanding. Therefore, it seems to be the case that Levinas rejects the notion of an intentional subject and, more importantly, he excludes the possibility of a relation with otherness that is based on any kind of comprehension.

Is it then right to approach alterity from the opposite perspective, i.e., is it right to assume that Levinas’s mode of alterity dominates us instead of approaching it as a something that *we* can direct ourselves to? A mode of alterity which goes beyond our understanding seems more abstract and dense than an account of otherness which we can experience through art or poetry. Namely, I discussed earlier how Heidegger proposed another way of understanding the world in ‘The Origin of the Work of Art’, i.e. through poetry. However, Levinas does not even speak of any possibility to understand the Other. Or have I overlooked something? Perhaps I have. More precisely, I discussed the main points of Levinas’s ethical relation and mentioned that the other is the one to whom I *speak* and to whom I am obliged. But how, then, is a conversation possible with something that goes beyond my intentionality and reason? Before I am able to answer this question, I need to clarify the relation between language and ethics. This will be done in the following part by addressing Levinas’s *Existence and Existents* (1947).

⁴⁴ The notion of intentionality can be remarked in the following passage of Heidegger’s *Being and Time*: “When Dasein directs itself towards something and grasps it, it does not somehow first get out of an inner sphere in which it has been proximally encapsulated, but its primary kind of Being is such that it is always ‘outside’ alongside entities which it encounters and which belong to a world already discovered” (1962, 89).

4.2. Existence and Existents

Critchley clarifies that *Existence and Existence*⁴⁵ was Levinas's first book, and that he began writing it in captivity during the war (2005, xxii).⁴⁶ Or, as Levinas put it in the preface of EE: "These studies begun before the war, were continued and written down for the most part in captivity" (1988, 8). In 1946 Levinas had already published a fragment of this book under the title 'Il y a'. The *Il y a* or *There is* is crucial for understanding his notion of alterity. Furthermore, as Bruns claims in his essay 'The Concepts of Art and Poetry in Emmanuel Levinas's Writings,' "for Levinas the experience of poetry or art is continuous with the experience of the *il y a*" (2005, 213). In order to come to terms with this assertion, I first need to distinguish between Levinas's understanding of existence and existents and his account of the *Il y a*, so that afterwards I can shed light on his conception of modern poetry.

According to Alphonso Lingis, an existent refers to a term or a subject of existence (1988, 5). Another term for 'existent' is 'being', whereas 'existence' is designated as 'Being' in EE. First of all, one should understand that both terms are not independent. By this I mean that a being or existent cannot be isolated from Being: they stand in relation to each other. However, Levinas seeks to approach Being separately since he questions how Being can be understood. He provides an answer to his own speculations by claiming that "Being cannot be specified, and does not specify anything" (9). But how can we approach Being if it refuses understanding? Moreover, if Being does not specify anything, is it then right to equate it with nothingness? According to Levinas, "Existence is not synonymous with the relationship with a world; it is antecedent to the world" (1988, 10). In the previous section I explained that in Levinassian ethics we are always already in a relation with the Other, because the Other is there before our self-consciousness emerges. To return to Levinas's statement, then, the Other can be understood as existence, but this existence is not identical to the world in which we find ourselves. More specifically, the world refers to that which comes into existence by our mind and, for this reason, it differs from Being since the latter cannot be a product of our cognition. Levinas argued in EE that "life in the world is consciousness inasmuch as it provides the possibility of existing in a withdrawal from existence" (25). Consciousness, for Levinas, thus implies a negation of existence. Nonetheless, the word 'negation' means that there is something which we can deny. And this 'something' is otherness or Being. In this sense, we can only become aware of Being

⁴⁵ All further references to this work will be abbreviated as EE.

⁴⁶ In 1940 Levinas was deported to Stalag and from there to a labour camp at Fallingbomel. He survived four years in conditions of tough work, isolation and hunger while the majority of his family was murdered, with the sole exceptions of his wife and daughter (Hand 2009, 17).

when the world disappears. However, how can we experience a world which vanishes if our own existence is part of this world? More precisely, it seems to be the case that we cannot speak of the disappearance of a world without making ourselves as existents disappear.

Levinas claimed that “existing involves a relationship by which the existent makes a contract with existence” (1988, 15). One can wonder, however, how we can make a contract with something that we cannot comprehend. This contract refers to the ethical responsibility which I tried to clarify in ‘4.1. The Priority of Ethics over Ontology.’ More precisely, we are seized by existence, even though we cannot come to terms with it. Put differently, the contract is a commitment to exist which is already there prior to awareness. As a consequence of the call of the Other, we sense that something is demanded of us to which we must respond. Such a response can only happen through language.⁴⁷ Due to the ethical relation and our infinite responsibility, however, weariness can occur. Specifically, Levinas clarified that weariness concerns existence itself and he equates it with “the impossible refusal of [the] ultimate obligation”. This means that weariness springs from our attempt to negate existence and our contact with it.⁴⁸ In other words, to be weary is to be weary of being.

When we ask ourselves how a relation with an unintelligible alterity or existence is possible, then this question already presupposes that Levinas does not support the correspondence theory of truth. The ethical relation, or a relation of an existent with its existence, does not consist of a one-to-one relation between our thoughts and the meaning of alterity. More precisely, we cannot think the Other, so its meaning is not a unity between our thought and the phenomenon that it corresponds to; the Other is an enigma and remains undetermined. Levinas argued the following:

“What is Being? – has never been answered. There is no answer to Being. It is absolutely impossible to envisage the direction in which that answer would have to be sought. The question is itself a manifestation of the relationship with Being. Being is essentially alien and strikes us. We undergo its suffocating embrace like the night, but it does not respond to us” (EE 1988, 11).

This statement shows that our only relation to Being or existence is one of questioning and incomprehension. As such, the notion of Being will always be absent. Nevertheless, Being is there and “we undergo its suffocating embrace”. According to Levinas, it “is not a person

⁴⁷Levinas’s conception of language with regard to the *Il y a* will be further addressed in the section ‘4.2.3. Language of Proximity.’

⁴⁸Levinas further claimed that “In weariness we want to escape existence itself, and not only one of its landscapes, in a longing for more beautiful skies. An evasion without an itinerary and without an end, it is not trying to come ashore somewhere” (EE 1988, 13).

or a thing, or the sum total of persons and things; it is the fact that one is, the fact that there is” (1988, 11)”. But what precisely is this fact? I will now elaborate on the *Il y a* in the following subsection in order to provide a better understanding of Levinas’s notion of existence.

4.2.1. A Presence of Absence

So far I have explained that alterity, for Levinas, precedes interpretation. For this reason, we cannot know the Other. More precisely, we move about in a world that is part of existence but we are unable to look beyond the limits of this world, which can be seen as the limits of our reason. The Other, though, is beyond, or ‘otherwise than’ the limits of our reason.⁴⁹ Yet the presence of alterity cannot be denied. It *is there*. Libertson claimed that “the experience of the *il y a* is inadequate to the notion of consciousness [...] yet the *il y a* is that interval in being which is not negation” (1982, 205). This statement indicates two things: first, the *il y a* is unthinkable or unrepresentable, and secondly, it cannot be understood as something which can be excluded simply because of its resistance to comprehension. Levinas described the *il y a* as follows:

“This impersonal, anonymous, yet inextinguishable “consummation” of being, which murmurs in the depths of nothingness itself we shall designate by the term *there is*. The *there is*, inasmuch as it resists a personal form, is “being in general” (EE 1988, 33).

If Levinas refers to the *Il y a* by “being in general,” then it is implied that the *Il y a* is not conditioned by the negative. By this I mean that it should not be understood as non-being in the sense of emptiness, but rather as insecurity. More precisely, the presence of the *il y a* includes absence since it cannot be constructed as a content of consciousness, and this absence leads to insecurity. If the absence of the *il y a* or Other is at the same time a presence, then I wonder how this presence manifests itself. That is to say, what is our experience of the *Il y a*?

According to Levinas, the night is the experience of the presence of the *il y a* (1988, 33). More specifically, when things or forms are dissolved in the darkness of the night, we are no longer dealing with anything. At night, the mind finds itself no longer faced with

⁴⁹ In fact, one of Levinas’s major works was called *Otherwise than Being or beyond Essence* (1974) and Critchley clarified that this work “is the performative enactment of an ethical writing which endlessly runs up against the limits of language” (2005, 19). This basically means that the words which we say are *beyond* essence. More specifically, Hand argues that “poetry is an *otherwise*” and not the language of interpretation (2009, 74).

material things and therefore the world disappears; nothing seems to be there. However, the nocturnal space should not be seen as an empty space, because it is full of the nothingness of everything.⁵⁰ It is important to note that ‘nothing’ does not refer to ‘no thing’ but to a phenomenon which can be encountered, and that therefore it is seen as something which is there. More specifically, it is through darkness that the *il y a* becomes present. In addition, Hand stated that the *il y a* “is what does not and cannot disappear when everything else, including the I, has disappeared” (2009, 31). Due to the darkness, anything can count for anything else and this means that it is impossible to maintain a perspective on the world. Levinas claimed that the absence of perspective does not come forward out of the things of the day world which the night conceals, but “it is due to the fact that nothing approaches, that nothing comes” (1988, 34).⁵¹

Perhaps now it is easier to understand why Levinas referred to the *il y a* as that “which murmurs in the depths of nothingness” (33). More precisely, for Levinas, nothingness is not the same as non-existence: it rather stands for absence that is brought to presence through the darkness of the night. As Levinas put it: “There is nothing, but there is being” (37).⁵² In nothingness, the subject is stripped of his subjectivity and he is depersonalized. Levinas stated that “what we call the I is itself submerged by the night, invaded, depersonalized, stifled by it” (33). This depersonalization is a participation in the *il y a*. However, this can never be a conscious participation since Levinas explained that “to be conscious is to be torn away from the *there is*” (34). Nevertheless, this statement does not mean that an unconscious subject can experience the *il y a*. Instead, Levinas introduced a different understanding of consciousness.

In EE Levinas stated that “Western philosophy does know of other forms of consciousness besides the intellect, but even in its least intellectual meanderings, the mind is taken to be *what knows*” (27). Knowing, in Levinas’s philosophy, however, is “a way of relating to events while still being able to not be caught up in them” (EE 28). In other

⁵⁰This statement can seem contradictory, but I would argue that Levinas’s description of the night is the most comprehensible way to get a grip on the phenomenon of the *Il y a*. Moreover, Levinas posited that “the *there is* is beyond contradiction; it embraces and dominates its contradictory. In this sense being has no outlets” (37).

⁵¹In addition, Blanchot wrote the following in his essay ‘Literature and the Right to Death’ (1949, 332): “In his book *De l’existence à l’existant*, Emmanuel Levinas has “illuminated” under the name *il y a* this anonymous and impersonal current of being which precedes all being, the being which is already present in the heart of disappearance, which at the bottom of annihilation returns again to being, being as the inevitability of being, nothingness as existence: when there is nothing, [*il y a*] being”. Levinas encountered Blanchot during his student years in Strasbourg in 1925 and both men shared a lifelong friendship. Moreover, Blanchot helped to save Levinas’s wife and daughter from the Nazi’s (Hand 2009, 11).

⁵²Levinas further explains in EE that “Nothingness is still envisaged as the end and limit of being, as an ocean which beats up against it on all sides. But we must ask if “nothingness,” unthinkable as a limit or negation of being, is not possible as interval and interruption” (33).

words, our relation to existence consists of separateness so that we always remain outside of objects and history. Levinas explained that “The I is a being that is always outside of being” (28). According to Critchley, “that which exceeds the bounds of my knowledge demands acknowledgment. Taking this a little further, one might say that the failure to acknowledge the other’s separateness from me can be the source of tragedy” (2005, 26). This tragedy can be linked to the notion of ‘weariness’ which I mentioned before and which is a result of a refusal of existence. However, it is important to note that said separateness does not mean that the relation between the existent and existence is broken off; I have already pointed out that the ethical relation is always already there. Moreover, Gasché claimed that the notion of relation is essentially a being-toward-something-other (1999, 8). Levinas’s understanding of consciousness, then, is not the reverse or negative of consciousness. It is rather a mode of being in the world which is prior to every relationship with things (Lingis 1988, 4). As such, it is fair to speak of a ‘pure’ relation that is not determined by the meaning of the other of the relation or the *relatum*. To put it differently, Levinas’s account of consciousness includes an absence of the meaning of things to which it relates so that there is an infinite movement of comprehension possible.

To return to Levinas’s connection between the night and the *il y a*, then, at night one is detached from any object and any content. Therefore, the experience of the night can be seen as existence without existents.⁵³ However, it would be wrong to assume that every form of relation disappears. Instead, the absence of existents should be interpreted as an extraction from the world. That is, the world in which everything is deemed to be functional and subject to our intentions. More precisely, alterity is an objectless dimension in which objects or things cease to be regarded as tools. Another way to approach existence without existents, then, is by means of preobjective relationships. More specifically speaking, I will try to clarify the notion of a pure or genuine sense of relation in the following part.

⁵³ Hence, it might seem no coincidence that Levinas called one of the subsections in EE ‘Existence without Existents’ in the third chapter ‘Existence without a World’.

4.2.2. Existence without Existents

In '4.1. The Priority of Ethics over Ontology,' I indicated that Levinas criticized Heidegger's notion of intentionality since one cannot intentionally approach alterity. There can only be a non-comprehensive relation. However, as Critchley accurately wondered "How can a relation with a being be other than comprehension?" (2005, 11). Levinas's response would be that it cannot, insofar as he supports an alternative notion of comprehension and non-comprehension. By this I mean that the ethical relation to the other is not a relation of knowledge, and as such, comprehension in Levinassian ethics has nothing to do with values or concepts. As mentioned above, alterity is a preobjective dimension. More precisely, Levinas claimed that "sincerity with respect to objects is a hesitation with regard to existence, which appears as a task to be taken up" (1988, 25). This assertion implies that a conscious directedness towards objects in the world leads to a hesitation concerning existence. Hesitation, then, is here to be understood as a resistance, since Levinas explained that we are conscious by resisting the *il y a* (29). As such, a comprehensive relation with the world means that we are denying Being or existence.

However, is there a way of being in the world in which we do not resist existence? In view of the above, it seems to be the case that we can only arrive at a mode of being that does not reject the notion of existence if we are freed from our consciousness. This, however, seems impossible for I do not know how I can unconsciously move about in the world. After all, I would argue that the meaning of the word 'unconscious' indicates that I am not able to master my own behavior and that everything happens beyond my will and intentions. Put differently, how can we unconsciously resist something? Perhaps this question is precisely what Levinas sought to answer.

He stated the following in EE: "In our relationship with the world we are able to withdraw from the world (29)". More precisely, there is a possibility of detaching oneself from objects in the world and this detachment takes place through art. Namely, according to Levinas:

"Art makes [objects of knowledge or use] stand out from the world and thus extracts them from this belongingness to a subject. The elementary function of art [...] is to furnish an image of an object in place of the object itself [...] This way of interposing an image of things between us and the things has the effect of extracting the thing from the perspective of the world." (EE 29)

This assertion demonstrates that art dispossess us from the things in our world. By this I mean that a book, painting or sculpture are still objects of the world, but the things that are

represented through them are extracted from our world because they are no longer subject to our intention or control. Levinas explained that “the intention gets lost in the sensation” (30). As such, in art the notion of sensation undermines subjectivity and it makes way for the impersonality of objects. Consequently, objects of art cease to be familiar to us; they have a character of otherness. In line with these reflections, Wyschogrod posited that “the artwork does not open up the world that the artist knows in his everyday life, an actual world, but rather precedes it” (2005, 198).

In the previous section, ‘4.2.1. A Presence of Absence,’ I addressed Levinas’s comparison of the night with the presence of the *il y a*. Namely, I clarified that in darkness, we are detached from things because their forms are dissolved in the night. Therefore, things no longer seem to be situated and this absence of perspective makes way for the presence of the *il y a*. As a result of the lack of perspective, we do not have anything to hold on to. Levinas clarified it as follows: “one is exposed. The whole is open to us. Instead of serving as our means of access to being, nocturnal space delivers us over to being” (EE, 34). In other words, at night - and during an experience with art - one is detached from a conscious and intentional stance towards the objects in the world. Yet something else can come into presence, namely, the presence of alterity. For Levinas, this is “not *a being*, nor a consciousness functioning in a void, but the universal fact of the there is, which encompasses things and consciousness” (EE, 38). In view of the above, I wonder whether it is right to equate art with the nocturnal experience, since both lead to a disappearance of our perspective on the world and since through both a form of being that precedes the world of our everyday life can become present.

It is important to note, though, that darkness does not coincide with the *il y a*. Levinas claimed that “darkness, as the presence of absence, is not a purely present content. There is not a “something” that remains. There is the atmosphere of presence” (EE, 37). Hence we cannot experience alterity whenever the night appears: alterity itself will always remain inaccessible. We can only sense its nearness. The Other, then, has to be understood as an experience of proximity. To put it differently, sensibility is seen as a proximity to the Other. Hand posits that “proximity, for Levinas, is fundamentally non-reciprocal and occurs before we get any thematization” (2009, 54). In Levinassian ethics, we are thus not talking about first having consciousness with persons and things. Instead, proximity arrives first. Consequently, it should come as no surprise that reaching the other was referred to by Levinas as “the event of the most radical breakup of the very categories of the ego, for it is

for me to be somewhere else than myself” (EE, 51). That is, somewhere else than in the world which comes into being by means of my cognition.

If an experience with alterity is based on nearness rather than on comprehension, and if this proximity precedes my existence in the world, how, then, am I able to talk about this? Put differently, how can I address something that exists *before* me when my own existence is something which follows it? I already mentioned that otherness is a pre-articulated region which language is incapable of expressing. It thus seems to be the case the *il y a* exceeds any description. As indicated in ‘3. The Becoming and Happening of Truth,’ According to Paz and Heidegger, poetry can therefore not be equated with otherness. Instead, it makes a presence for, or out of, alterity, but it is neither identical with nor reducible to the actual revelation. When I reconsider my discussion of Levinas’s ideas, then, one could say that poetry fulfills the same function as the night because the *il y a* can come to presence through darkness or poetry. Nevertheless, I indicated that the proximity of the *il y a* is present in a world that is devoid of subjectivity. Objects become impersonal and as a result of this I wonder whether it is right to compare this with the depersonalization of language in modern poetry. More precisely, words become depersonalized when one realizes that they can no longer be applied. In addition, Bruns posits that poetic language is no longer a form of mediation because it withdraws in its materiality (2005, 222). If poetry is no longer a form of mediation, then it alters our relation to language. By this I mean that words become impersonal and they address us. In fact, I argued in ‘2.3.2. The Crisis of Language,’ that Sartre equated the depersonalization of words with the crisis of language, since his conceptions of literature are based on intentionality.⁵⁴

I have repeatedly underscored that language in modern poetry is no longer something which we can make conscious use of: A poem is thus not reducible to a specific meaning, concept or expression. Of course, the following thoughts need careful thinking, but so far my sense is that the *il y a* seems similar to poetry. Firstly, the Other, like poetry, cannot be comprehended or mastered. Secondly, the Other addresses us in the same way that poetry makes a claim on us. Thirdly, the world or space in which the *il y a* manifests itself is an existence without existents. Nevertheless, what is the similarity between the third argument and the nature of poetry? In other words, the world of the *il y a* precedes our

⁵⁴ Nevertheless, I doubt whether ‘crisis’ is an appropriate word to associate with modern poetry. That is, the crisis which Sartre has in mind. By this I mean that poetry is not relevant in his poetics since they cannot serve him. However, ‘crisis’ can also be seen in a positive way in terms of Levinas’s perspective. More precisely, the shattering of the ego can be seen as a crisis, but this crisis is precisely a condition for a deeper and different understanding of Being.

conscious existence, but poetry can only precede comprehension if it fulfills the following conditions: first, there is an ethical relation between poetry and an existent and secondly, poetry is always already there so we have no control over its origin. However, the *il y a* does not begin with language since, as I explained, it is a nonlinguistic region. How, then, can poetry begin without words? My reasoning seems to have come up against a wall and, therefore, it is perhaps not a bad idea to take a closer look at Levinas's conception of poetry by addressing the materiality of words and the relation between poetry, proximity and the *il y a* in the next section.

4.2.3. Language of Proximity

The ethical relation between the existent and existent consists of an appeal made by the Other. Critchley states that "facing the Other is an experience of a demand that I both cannot fully meet and cannot avoid" (2005, 22). We fall short because the other is irreducible to comprehension.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, Critchley further explained that:

"Although Levinas's choice of terminology suggests otherwise, the face-to-face relation with the other is not a relation of perception or vision, but is always linguistic. The face is not something I see, but something I speak to. Furthermore, in speaking or calling or listening to the other, I am not reflecting upon the other [...] I am not contemplating, I am conversing" (2005, 12).

This statement demonstrates that the approach to the Other is based on a conversation that is detached from any form of understanding. As such, communication does not mean that I consciously make use of words. This is exactly the case in modern poetry. More precisely, Levinas argued in EE that "Behind the signification of a poem which thought penetrates, thought also loses itself in the musicality of the poem" (1988, 30). In other words, the materiality of poetry precedes any form of meaning that we attach to the poem: it is liberated from our cognition. If meaning is anterior to language, it is implied that meaning does not belong to the same area as language. Levinas put it as follows: "There is first the materiality of the sound [...] and a word detaches itself from its objective meaning and reverts to the element of the sensible" (EE 1998, 30). More specifically speaking, the origin of language is wordless because the sound precedes any conceptual understanding. This, however, does not mean that the word ceases to be a word. Instead, it means that the function of thought is set aside and that we are left with the materiality of the word.

⁵⁵ Levinas claimed that "it is not possible to grasp the alterity of the other, which is to shatter the definiteness of the ego" (EE 1988, 51).

According to Gasché, “literary language seeks to attain the absence of the thing, that is, its meaning” (1999, 330). Words in their materiality should therefore be understood as the absence of things. How, then, are we to approach language?

Bruns provided the following answer: “The poet is simply one who listens to the language of his or her environment and responds to it – doesn’t try to reduce it or objectify it” (1997, 4). Perhaps now it is easier to understand the statement that I provided at the beginning of the section ‘4.2. Existence and Existents,’ namely that “the experience of poetry or art is continuous with the experience of the *il y a*” (Bruns 2005, 213). More precisely, Levinas claimed that “there is something which is not in its turn an object or a name, which is unnameable and can only appear in poetry” (1988, 32). It thus seems to be the case that poetic language opens up a dimension of ‘worldlessness’ or a world without things. Or perhaps it is better to speak of things which are freed from the world. Is it then right to assume that the *il y a* emerges out of poetry? Let’s consider for a moment the poem ‘Autumn Refrain’ by Stevens which I inserted at the beginning of this fourth part:

But the name of a bird and the name of a nameless air
I have never – shall never hear. And yet beneath
The stillness of everything gone something resides,
Some skreaking and skrittering residuum,
And grates these evasions of the nightingale
Though I have never – shall never hear that bird.⁵⁶

The “skreaking and skrittering residuum” can be interpreted as the *il y a* which dwells in a region that can no longer be grasped by means of language.⁵⁷ More specifically, the inexpressible nature of the *il y a* leads to a state of insecurity or a worldless reality in which the objects and phenomena cease to be in our control. Yet “beneath the stillness of everything gone” something else, something other, resides.

This fragment shows that the “residuum” cannot be mediated. Nonetheless, for Levinas, “this absence of the other is precisely his presence qua other” (EE 1988, 58). Presence has to be regarded as a proximity or nearness, since nothing appears and we cannot visualize the *il y a*. According to Wyschogrod, Levinas believed that “to speak is not the same as to see” (2005, 199). More precisely, the language of poetry does not reveal or show something which can be perceived. Rather, speech frees itself from visibility. Consequently,

⁵⁶ Stevens, Wallace. *The Collected Poems*. NY: Knopf, 1990. P. 160.

⁵⁷ That is, our ordinary use of language, since language in its materiality can still stand in a relation of proximity to the Other.

words extend beyond the realm of our perception. Similarly, objects in the world are more than our subjective perception reveals. After all, Hand argues that things are also there when we do not perceive them and, for this reason, they exist in themselves. In line with these reflections, Bruns stated that:

“the idea is that in art our relation to things is no longer one of knowing and making visible. Art does not represent things, it materializes them; or, as Levinas would prefer, it presents things in their materiality and not as representations” (2005, 211).

Things in their materiality are thus to be distinguished from things that we perceive from a subjective point of view.

To be involved in the moment when things are free from their conceptual grasp is, for Levinas, similar to being involved in an experience of poetry. The point is that the materiality of existence and the materiality of words provide an access to the nearness of the *il y a*. ‘Nearness’ is not the same as ‘presence’ because the other will always be inadequate to manifestation. As such, Bruns posited that poetry is a relation of proximity (2005, 224). Proximity or nearness implies that there is no unity between language and the experience of alterity. In other words, the relation of nearness comes close to alterity yet cannot reach it. Namely, things are revealed before being approached and therefore words can only be an expression of nearness, but they cannot capture the things in themselves. This can be seen as a contestation of the Gadamerian assertion that “Being that can be understood is language” (1992, 474). Being precedes language, so due to its a-linguistic nature, poetry will remain near, but cannot give voice to it. Nevertheless, it is relevant to stress that for Gadamer, ‘understanding’ was a pre-objective realm of relations as well. But the difference is that poetry can lead to an understanding of Being, whereas Levinas emphasizes the inadequateness of poetry to name the *il y a*.⁵⁸

In Levinassian ethics, then, the argument is that the only form of communication with the Other is contingent on distance. Libertson posited that “its distance is a contact, its inaccessibility an involvement” (1982, 3). The involvement refers to the insistence of alterity with regard to the notion of responsibility. More precisely, it belongs to the very essence of alterity that it summons me and that I therefore must respond to it. This response happens by means of poetry. Hand, for example, claimed that poetry and philosophy share the same “unrealizable ideal” by seeking for and by reaching out to the Other (2009, 76). In other words, the ethical and the poetic both stand in a relation of proximity with alterity, in

⁵⁸ The differences between several understandings of poetry and alterity will be further addressed in the following part of the present study ‘5. The (Re)turn to being’.

contrast to the conceptual and propositional understanding of language or existence. I would like to underscore the adjective ‘unrealizable’ in Hand’s assertion, because communication with the Other is not similar to a dialogue or interchange with a subject. To put it differently, the Other is beyond what can be seen or named by language so a conversation between a you and I cannot be realized. Furthermore, we can respond to the Other by means of poetry, but we will not receive any answer.

At this point it is necessary to bring in the resemblances to the Judaic tradition in order to get a better understanding of Levinas’s impossible conversation with the Other. More precisely, Michael Fagenblat stated that “what the philosopher calls ‘ethics’ is best understood as a secularized and generalized account of the Jewish covenant of faith” (2010, xxv). The covenant should be understood as the notion of responsibility, which means that there is an obligation to respond to the call of God. In this way, there is an unrequited relationship with the other, because God is always beyond and always more of whatever idea I can have of it. Namely, the idea is that the ethical relation to the Other corresponds to the relation between the I and the infinity of God (Critchley 2005, 14). Nevertheless, it will not be entirely correct to suggest that Levinas’s ideas are purely religious because he claimed the following: “I am not a Jewish thinker. I am just a thinker”.⁵⁹ For this reason, I agree with Critchley, who posited that it would be reductive to solely to identify the Other with God in all of Levinas’s works (2005, 14). It is rather the case that the ethical relation of the self to the other resembles this interpretation.

The question, however, remains: What is the value of a question that will never be reciprocated? Wyschogrod states that “For Levinas, Celan’s poetry is a speaking to the other that precedes thematization” (2005, 200). Levinas’s appreciation of Celan’s poetry can be remarked in works such as the essay ‘Paul Celan: From Being to the Other’ (1972). This is hardly surprising as, after all, the notion of proximity is an integral aspect of Celan’s works. Moreover, Ziarek even argued that “perhaps the single most characteristic feature of Paul Celan’s poetry is its concern with the other” (1994, 133). Now that I have explained Levinas’s conceptions of poetry and otherness, it is high time to let a poet speak. More specifically, I will move on to a discussion of ‘The Meridian’ (1960) in order to clarify the relation between nearness, communication and poetry from Celan’s point of view.

⁵⁹ As qtd. in Critchley 2005, 22.

4.3. The Meridian

Oh hasten not this loving act,
Rapture where self and not-self meet:
My life has been the awaiting you,
Your footfall was my own heart's beat.
- P. Valéry, 'The Footsteps'

Paul Celan (1920-1970) was born to a Jewish family in Romania and during the Holocaust Celan's parents were deported to an extermination camp while he himself was sent to a labour camp (Hamburger 1972, 1). His parents were murdered, but he survived and spent most of his life in Paris until his suicide in 1970. Celan's post-war literature has received a great deal of attention because his works, among other things, help us to understand the position of poetry in a period of war and destruction.⁶⁰ In fact, I believe Celan's works indicate that Adorno's claim did not influence his writing, since he wrote nine volumes of poetry after the war in which he - among other things - tried to find a place and expression for the catastrophe of the Holocaust. By this I mean that according to Adorno, it was barbaric to write poetry after Auschwitz, because one could not express the inexpressible horror of what happened (1983, 34). But Celan did not avoid his past, and nor did not turn away from poetry. Instead, he exhausted the topic of the past. Moreover, it is important to note that Adorno changed his statement after reading Celan. He claimed that "suffering also demands the continued existence of the very art it forbids" (2003, 252). It is thus obvious that poetry persists, despite the fact that Celan was no longer writing in his mother tongue, but specifically in the language of the Nazi's.⁶¹ In addition, Adorno claimed in his *Aesthetic Theory* (1970) that if one recognizes that "art is unable either to experience or to sublimate suffering, Celan's poems articulate unspeakable horror by being silent, thus turning their truth content into a negative quality" (443). This is a significant statement which, hopefully, will become clear throughout my discussion of Celan's poetics when I address the notion of silence.

In his Bremen speech (1958), which is a public address on the occasion of receiving the literature prize of the city Bremen and one of the major awards in German letters, Celan

⁶⁰ Derrida's 'Shibboleth: For Paul Celan' (1986) and Gadamer's 'Who Am I and Who Are You?' (1973) are, for instance, works by major thinkers that reflect on the poetry of Celan.

⁶¹ Celan was part of the literary establishment Group 47 whose intentions were to encourage writers to maintain the necessity of writing in the German language after what happened during the war. More specifically, Group 47 advocated that the Nazi propaganda should not lead to a refusal to use the German language, but it was rather the aim to introduce a new style which was sparse and descriptive instead of idealized or embellished. Some other members of Group 47 included renowned writers such as Heinrich Böll, Ingeborg Bachmann and Günter Grass.

stated that: “In this language I tried, during those years and the years after, to write poems: in order to speak, to orient myself, to find out where I was, where things were going, to sketch for myself a reality”.⁶² Pierre Joris, who is a well-known translator of Celan’s works, claimed that:

“Despite the presence throughout the work of the events of the Nazi years, especially the murder of his mother, there is a strong refusal in Celan to let his writing to become simply a repository for a narrative of the Shoah” (2005, 7).

In this section I will not insist on the poet’s personal experiences or autobiographical aspects of his writings. Instead, I would like to clarify Celan’s conceptions of otherness and I will attempt to show that his poetics has an ethical dimension which is similar to the ethics of Levinas. I would like to explain why someone like Ziarek could claim that “Celan’s poetics can be characterized as ethical in the Levinassian sense” (1994, 160). I will discuss ‘The Meridian,’ which is Celan’s speech on the occasion of receiving the Georg-Büchner Literature Prize in 1960. Many critical essays and studies have focused on this speech. Aris Fioretos, for instance, clarified that it “reflects on how language related to the necessity of referring to something other than itself, and thus on the indispensability of an aspect of it about which it cannot provide knowledge” (1994, x). This statement by Fioretos may sound familiar with regard to my discussion of Levinas’s ethics. More specifically, it is my position that through language one can relate to the *Il y a* even though the Other will always exceed our knowledge.

In ‘The Meridian’ Celan discussed, among other things, the question of art in Georg Büchner’s work. For Instance, he stated the following: “I shall search for the region from which hail Reinhold Lenz and Karl Emil Franzos whom I have met on my way here and in Büchner’s work. I am also, since I am again at my point of departure, searching for my own place of origin” (1997, 54). It is through a brief discussion of Büchner’s novels such as *Lenz* and *Danton’s Death* that Celan’s own definition of poetry is brought to the fore. Eshel posited that “Büchner stood for Celan as a German poet who constantly combined ingenious aesthetics with a sense for the ethical” (2004, 60). It is nonetheless not my aim to elaborate on Büchner’s ideas, rather I will underscore Celan’s own account of alterity in his reading of Büchner.

⁶² Celan as quoted in Fynsk 1994, p. 160

In addition, it is important to note that Celan was extremely interested in – and very familiar with – Heidegger’s work.⁶³ Similarly, Heidegger himself appreciated Celan’s writings and, according to Pierre Joris, he even came to rare public readings that Celan gave in Germany.⁶⁴ In 1966 both men met in Todtnauberg where Heidegger lived and this meeting resulted in Celan’s poem “Todtnauberg”.⁶⁵ Given the mutual interest in each other’s works, it is clear that the statements in the ‘The Meridian’ are an appropriation of Heidegger’s account of the work of art (Ziarek 1994, 154). As previously indicated, Levinas criticized Heidegger’s ontology because his ideas lacked attention to the other: Specifically, Heidegger did not give due consideration to the ethical relation. I believe that ‘The Meridian’ can be seen as an intersection between aesthetics and ethics and, while doing so, Celan also moves away from Heidegger in the direction of a more profound understanding of the relation to the other. To put it differently, in Heidegger’s philosophy the Other stands for the otherness of Being, while Celan wanted to distinguish between Heidegger’s account of otherness and the alterity of the other (Fynsk 1994, 169). Perhaps Celan’s emphasis on the other is not so astonishing, given that, as a Jewish survivor of the Holocaust, the failure to acknowledge another human being is a reminder of what happened during the Shoah. As such, the other plays a prominent role in his post-war thinking. Nevertheless, as I have argued previously, Celan’s work should not be reduced to the level of mere commentary on the Shoah. His work concerns the nature of poetry itself, specifically, the possibility of opening a space for the arrival of another, indeed, the Other voice.

In my discussion of Levinas’s *Existence and Existents* (1947) I explained that existence or Being can neither be reduced to a cognitive experience nor can it be explicitly expressed through language. Nevertheless, the world in which we conceptually make use of language cannot be extricated from *Il y a* or existence, so there is always a relation between the expressible and inexpressible. More precisely, the world in which one intentionally approaches language and the realm in which words are beyond intentional control are not different places, but are based on distinctive experiences of language. As I have repeatedly stressed throughout the present study, language can be used consciously – which is the case in ordinary speech – but it can also speak on its own behalf, which is perhaps the major characteristic of modern poetry. Different conceptions of language, then, lead to different experiences of reality. In other words, reality can refer to an extra-poetic world in which the

⁶³ Further information about the relationship between Heidegger and Celan can be found in James Lyon’s book *Paul Celan and Martin Heidegger: An Unresolved Conversation, 1951-1970* (2006).

⁶⁴Joris, Pierre. *Celan/Heidegger: Translation at the Mountain of Death*. USA: Conference at Wake Forest University, 1988. Web 17th of April. <<http://wings.buffalo.edu/epc/authors/joris/todtnauberg.html>>

⁶⁵ Ibid.

subject uses language to designate concepts or phenomena or it can refer to a world which is identified, but not exhausted, by poetry. Schulz claimed the following about the term ‘reality’:

“Dieser Begriff ist insofern zweideutig, als er einerseits sich auf die außerdichterische Realität, die Erfahrungswirklichkeit des Autors bzw. des Lesers bezieht und andererseits auf die poetische Gegenstandswelt, die das Gedicht evoziert, selbst entwirft. Diese beide Seiten sind auseinanderzuhalten, ohne doch voneinander abgesondert werden zu können” (1977, 205).

This statement can be linked to Levinas’s conception of poetry, which I hopefully clarified in ‘4.2.3. Language of Proximity.’ Namely, the “poetische Gegenstandswelt” is a world in which we can no longer intentionally make use of language. In an experience with poetry, we are thus withdrawn from the extra-poetic world. As a consequence, our relation to words alters because poetic language evades our attempts at mastery so that all we are left with is its materiality. The materiality of words is preconceptual and for this reason it is not explainable by the cognitive or conceptual experience which permeates our daily life. Put differently, in poetry words are not used to represent things but they are offered in such a way that the things themselves are allowed to materialize on their own terms. In our ordinary use of language, though, the opposite is true: meaning is not anterior to words because we cognitively bestow meaning on language so that it is reduced to a form of communication.

It is important to emphasize the last sentence in the statement by Schulz, since I am not speaking of two different languages. The word in its materiality and the conceptual word are one and the same. Similarly, the world of poetry is not a different location in comparison with the cognitive world.⁶⁶ Perhaps Bruns articulates this better by positing that “each man dwells in a reality of the mind, an incorporeal world, of which (paradoxically) the corporeal world is a dimension which he shares with other men” (1974, 220). One can thus wonder whether it is possible to merely dwell in a corporeal world, for this implies that we escape the reality of the mind. Nevertheless, I mentioned that, for Levinas, we are detached from a conceptual grasp of words in an experience with modern poetry. As such, I would like to draw attention to the corporeal nature of poetry. Namely, otherness can possibly become present in poetry because they share a similar ground. By this I mean that an experience

⁶⁶ The cognitive world can be understood as an experience of reality which is based on processes of thought that lead to the creation of meaning. More precisely, we are born with certain cognitive faculties that can help us to come to terms with reality. Namely, we cannot extricate ourselves from the mind. Nevertheless, poetry cannot solely be understood in terms of reasoning and interpretations that spring from our associative capacities. Therefore, I believe that poetry cannot be limited to the cognitive world because this would limit its potential meaning.

with the Other or with poetry precedes our comprehension, so that all we are left with is our relation to the materiality of things or words. However, I have also claimed that it is not correct to equate poetry with otherness. Instead of a one-to-one relation, then, the connection between poetry and otherness remains open because they cannot be defined in terms of what they are. More precisely, there is no poetic word which corresponds to the experience of Otherness or Being because it goes beyond the limits of poetic language. Likewise, we cannot explain or grasp poetry by means of ordinary speech. The meaning of poetry goes beyond daily language and for this reason all attempts to define poetry will reduce its potential meaning. After all, if the relation between otherness and poetry remains open, then this openness allows for a continuity of interpretations and meanings. I will elaborate on this in this chapter's final section '4.3.3. Celan's Utopia'.

Coming to terms with otherness via poetry is thus not possible because the Other goes beyond it; its meaning is elusive, inaccessible and excessive. In fact, otherness does not begin with poetry, but it is already there. More specifically, these arguments have to be understood with regard to the *il y a* or existence which precedes existents. In this sense, poetry can be seen as an existent or being that stands in an ethical relation to existence or Being. I mention 'ethical relation' since Celan claimed in 'The Meridian' that "poetry rushes ahead" and is "responding" to something (1960, 45, 49). This sounds as if poetry takes up the ethical responsibility towards the Other by responding to it. But maybe I am jumping to conclusions too quickly by incorrectly identifying Levinas's ideas with Celan's utterances. Furthermore, the following questions can be raised: Does otherness make a claim on poetry so that poetry feels responsible to respond and to go towards it? Moreover, if the other exists before poetry, in which place, then, does it dwell? Before I can affirm my presumptions, I will first need to find an answer to these questions. I will attempt to do this by addressing the interconnectedness between Celan's conception of poetry and ethics. More precisely, I will now turn to fragments of 'The Meridian' in the following subsections in order to offer a better understanding of the poet's approach to poetry and alterity.

4.3.1. Poetry as Shape and Movement

In ‘The Meridian’ Celan speaks of language as a “speaking” and “language actualized, set free under the radical sign of individuation” (1997, 49). It thus seems to be the case that language, for Celan, speaks on its own behalf and its meaning is therefore not determined solely by the subject. Language is set free from the individual and its material aspect is what Celan considers its “physical shape” (39). This physicality means that language is made of words instead of meanings or concepts: it is dissociated from things. Put differently, language no longer points away from itself to things in reality, but it points towards itself. According to Bruns, this is the very nature of language before it has been repressed or forgotten by semantic or propositional operations of the mind (1974, 5). Poetry, then, is a withdrawal from our grasp of the world by means of concepts. It is an unforgetting of language or the remembrance of a language that is not a formal system. Language thus means something in itself and it is not something which is only meaningful when we use it; it is a being that *is*. If poetic language is characterized by its materiality and non-semantic nature, I presume that its meaning cannot be found in the extra-poetic world where the subject makes use of language. What, then, is the value or meaning a language that is beyond our reach? Or perhaps an alteration of this question is more pertinent: What, then, is the right language for meaning that is beyond our reach?

Let me insert several lines from Celan’s poetry in order to clarify his understanding of poetic language:

What is it called, your country
behind the mountain, behind the year?
I know what it is called.
[...]
it wanders off everywhere, like language
Throw it away, throw it away,
Then you’ll have it again, like that other thing.⁶⁷

In these lines the elusive nature of language is associated with a nameless place. After all, if the physicality of language precedes meaning and words are dissociated from things, they do no longer stand for something and become nameless. The repetition of “throw it away” can refer to a command to the subject to abandon language from a conceptual grasp, for it is only then that we will be faced again with language in its original sense. By this I mean that language itself becomes the subject of speech and man is no longer in control. Furthermore,

⁶⁷ Paul Celan as quoted in *Prague Palimpsest: Writing, Memory and the City*. Ed. by Thomas Alfred. USA: University of Chicago Press, 2010. P. 152

the “wandering off” of language implies a movement. In fact, Celan stated the following in ‘The Meridian’: “The poem intends another, needs this other, needs an opposite. It goes towards it, bespeaks it” (1997, 49). Perhaps this ‘other’ from Celan’s statement is similar to “the other thing” which appears in his poem. However, this is a mere guess and does not clarify what is meant with the other towards which poetry is heading. It is relevant, though, to emphasize the verb ‘to need’ in Celan’s quote, since this implies that poetry is apparently not that independent after all and its being is therefore dependent on something other.

This ‘other’, can, however, not be understood as a subject or physical person because, as I already mentioned, in modern poetry the role of the subject is undermined; the poem is autonomous and makes a claim on the reader. As such, poetry can be a sort of strangeness to us because its language frees things from categories and meanings and therefore we cannot define poetry. Or, as Celan put it: “This, ladies and gentlemen, has no definitive name, but I believe that this is... poetry” (1997, 40). Nevertheless, I would like to argue that poetry also experiences a claim from the Other which is equally strange to poetry. More precisely, with regard to Celan’s claim that poetry “needs this other” there must be something else which differs from the poetic realm and this other can make a claim on poetry – for this is perhaps the reason that poetry goes towards it. I will try to elaborate on this in the following paragraphs.

Celan touched upon Büchner’s *Lenz* in his speech in order to indicate that art provokes a distance from the I. Namely, he stated that “The man whose eyes and mind are occupied with art – I am still with Lenz – forgets about himself. Art makes distance from the I. Art requires that we travel a certain space in a certain direction, on a certain road” (1997, 44). I will briefly clarify Büchner’s *Lenz* (1935) in order to understand what Celan means by his reference. More precisely, the content of this work covers a period in the life of the German poet Lenz who lived in the 17th century.⁶⁸ The main events of *Lenz* can be summarized as follows: the poet Lenz is a young man who is drifting around in the woods and who is overcome by melancholy. He spends a few days with a pastor called Oberlin and his company makes Lenz less restless. A man called Kaufmann visits and they have a discussion about art in which Lenz disagrees with him because he does not support the view that art should represent a copy of reality.⁶⁹ When Lenz is alone again, his mental condition

⁶⁸ Gersch, Herbert. *Georg Büchner, Lenz. Studienausgabe*. Stuttgart: Reclam, 1984. Pp. 35-50. Print.

⁶⁹ Moreover, the rejection of realism is also a sign of Büchner’s conceptions of literature. He once wrote the following in a letter to his parents: “Wenn man mir übrigens noch sagen wollte, der Dichter müsse die Welt nicht zeigen, wie sie ist, sondern wie sie sein solle, so antworte ich, daß ich es nicht besser machen will als der liebe Gott, der die Welt gewiß gemacht hat, wie sie sein soll” (Büchner as quoted in Böenkamp, 1965, 7).

deteriorates. At the end of the story, he isolates himself and heads off into nature. In this way the work has a cyclic structure, because the beginning and end are characterized by the same miserable feelings of a lonely writer who is trying to get a grip on life.

Ziarek claimed that art “opens a distance from the I, a distance that furnishes a direction, a road that art traverses. Celan’s own questioning continues precisely within this opening, in the direction suggested by Lenz” (1994, 138). To return to Celan’s statement from ‘The Meridian’, then, during Lenz’s conversation about art, he is no longer conscious about himself and therefore Celan speculated that “Perhaps poetry, like art, moves with the oblivious self into the uncanny and strange to free itself” (1997, 44). In order to understand this claim, it will be helpful to go back to Levinas’s ideas. Levinas believed that through poetry we can withdraw from the world because it extracts words from the belongingness to a subject (EE 1988, 29). As such, the intentional consciousness is shattered and we are depersonalized from words. This depersonalization should not be interpreted negatively, because it is instead a crucial characteristic of the relation between poetry and the Other. Poetry moves away from the voice of the subject in order to respond on its own behalf to the appeal of the Other. To put it differently, the relation of proximity is independent of a subject and his/her conceptual mastery, so that poetry in its “physical shape” is exposed and receptive to the possible meaning of alterity. Levinas further explained that the artwork opens up a new world which precedes everyday life. This can be understood as the *il y a* which is “essentially alien and it strikes us” (EE 1988, 11). With regard to Celan’s statement, then, it can be said that poetry moves toward the *il y a* or otherness which is, for Celan, “the uncanny and strange.” He clarified that the other is strange or uncanny precisely because it goes beyond what is human “into a realm which is turned toward the human” but in which art “seems to be at home” (1997, 42).

In view of the above it is suggested that our world cannot coincide with the realm of the other where art “seems to be at home” (1997, 42). Namely, if the experience of both places would coincide, then this would imply that our consciousness is capable of encompassing the other. But the point is that we live in an extra-poetic world where otherness is not acknowledged and therefore, the Other goes beyond what is human. However, Celan made a distinction between two kinds of strangeness. Namely, the

Furthermore, Celan himself did not support a realistic approach of art either, since he is more concerned with the realm that goes beyond what is human (1997, 42). He inserted a passage of *Lenz* in which the following sentence appeared: “Sometimes one would like to be a Medusa’s head to turn such a group to stone and gather the people around it” (42). Celan commented on this by stating that “*One* would like to, by the way, not: *I* would” (42). This can indicate that, for Celan, the poem is not a representation of reality in the same way that Medusa turns people into a realistic, stone version.

obscurity of poetic language is strange and distant from us because it frees language from concepts. Strangeness, then, can be understood as the sensation in which things and words precede the cognitive domain; it is language and the world in its materiality. I indicated that, for Levinas, an experience with the other is similar to being involved in an experience with poetry. Yet poetry, a physical shape which moves towards the other, cannot be equated with otherness. Bruns posited that the movement of poetry “is not toward a point of being finished but a ceaseless, open-ended movement of indeterminacy toward what is always elsewhere” (1974, 19). Nevertheless, the very fact that poetry moves toward the other and bespeaks it means that it acknowledges alterity, in contrast with ordinary speech. Celan claimed that: “the poem has always hoped [...] to speak also on behalf of the *strange* – no, I can no longer use this word here – on behalf of the other, who knows, perhaps of an altogether other” (1997, 48).

It is important to underscore that Celan’s understanding of poetry and alterity consist of an ethical dimension with regard to another person. In view of Levinas’s ethics, otherness presents itself in the guise of another person. The other appeals to us, hence we must take up the responsibility to respond to its claim. However, since the Other is not identical to a human being, we cannot simply communicate with it by means of dialogue. As a result, an alternative way to approach to the Other consists of nearness or proximity. To return to Celan, then, otherness is not simply the otherness of another person, but rather the otherness of the other person’s *language*. Fynsk explained that “the relation in question is a relation *in and of language*, for the relation to the other toward which the poem moves and which it seeks to bring to speech is given essentially in language” (1994, 175). This means that the ethical relation can only take place in language. Yet the possibility of a conversation is not possible either, since the other is placed “beyond the world, beyond the limits of what can be seen, and what can be named by language” (Ziarek 1994, 146). In its relation to an other, poetry will always reach toward it, but speaking towards the other is waiting for a response that will never come. The movement of poetry to the Other will thus result in silence.

4.3.2. A Strong Tendency towards Silence

In the section ‘4.2.1. A Presence of Absence,’ I tried to make clear that the *il y a* is not similar to non-existence or emptiness, despite its absence. This absence should rather be seen as an absence of subjective control, which is the condition for the possible presence of existence. In the same way, poetic language is not meaningless or empty because it is dissociated from concepts. Instead, the impersonal nature of poetry allows for a relation with the Other. Bruns claimed that “Modern poetry is non-discourse: the modern poetic act is not intentional; it is a refusal to mean” (1974, 195). Nevertheless, I would like to offer a small nuance because I do not believe that poetry in itself can refuse any form of meaning, because this reasoning implies that poetry is a being which rejects meaning. However, I believe that there is no opposition between poetry and meaning, but that it is rather inherent to the nature of poetry since it requires a different approach so that its meaning can be found elsewhere. I would therefore argue that poetry is not a negation of meaning, but rather that its meaning is just not a matter of corresponding to concepts. Namely, I will attempt to clarify in the following paragraphs and section that the meaning of poetry lies in its movement towards an inaccessible otherness which it tries to encounter. Or, to put it differently, the meaningfulness of poetic language lies in its relation to alterity. This relation does not result in a place where poetry and alterity meet, but one should rather consider poetry to be a perpetual relation towards the Other which is independent of our conceptual mastery. More specifically speaking, the Other cannot be reduced to a concept and therefore the correspondence theory of truth would always reduce the meaning of alterity. More precisely, there is more than our conceptualization and this “more” cannot be reduced to a concept so the relation between poetry and alterity remains open.

To return to Bruns’s quote, then, I do not quite understand what this critic means with “non-discourse” (1974, 195). After all, in the previous section ‘4.3.1. Poetry as Shape and Movement’ I touched upon the notion of an ethical relation when I discussed that, for Celan, poetry is a movement and *speaking* to the Other. It is true that a conversation with the Other is not similar to a dialogue and perhaps some will for this reason claim that it is inaccurate to speak of a “conversation.” Yet, Celan posited that “the poem becomes conversation – often desperate conversation” (1997, 49). The conversation is desperate because there will not be any response; the Other maintains its alterity. According to Ziarek, the Other cannot be seen as a participant in a conversation “rather, the other must be seen as the very condition of dialogue” (Ziarek 1994, 148). This can be linked to the notion of

ethical responsibility. More precisely, it is due to the existence of the other that poetry experiences the need to reach it. As I indicated earlier, in Levinas's ethics the notion of responsibility does not mean that I can choose to turn toward the Other. Responsibility is part of the relation to alterity which means that I will always be turned towards the Other, whether I want to be or not. Likewise, poetry takes up the responsibility towards the Other by speaking and moving towards it. Or perhaps it is better to say that poetry speaks precisely because the existence of the Other is there. In line with these reflections, Fynsk stated "For the approach, Celan says, is in 'dialogue': the poem answers to what it approaches or it broaches a "conversation"" (164).

The movement of poetry towards otherness is a matter of nearness or proximity because language gives no words for the experience of alterity. As such, Celan argued in 'The Meridian' that "the poem clearly shows a strong tendency towards silence" (48). It is important to consider what it means to speak about a language that has no words for the Other with whom it stands in relation. According to Schulz, the silence of language with regard to the Other should not be understood as a loss or defect of language (1977, 37). Instead, silence is rather a moment of communication. I wish to underscore that silence does not indicate an inability to speak. More specifically, silence should be understood in a philosophical sense, which implies that it refers to a form of communication with Nothing. I have deliberately capitalized Nothing in order to evoke the analogy with the Other. The Other is not a phenomenon which can be conceptually understood or remain present, namely, it is rather "No thing." The silence of language from, Celan's point of view, then, indicates that the voice of mastery and conceptualization is silenced in order to bring the materiality of words to the fore. This materiality or "physical shape" is language in its purest, silent form and makes way for communication with the Other. In short: silence is a mode of discourse which silences the conceptual voice in order to let language speak. Fynsk, for one, has claimed that:

"Despite its silence, and perhaps even through its silence [...] language gives itself as the persistence of the possibility of relation. A pure possibility, we might say, for in its silence it gives no relation other than a relation to itself as "reachable" (1994, 161).

With regard to Fynsk's claim, it is clearly the case that the relation with the other can become possible through silence. It is precisely in the unspoken condition of language, then, that things exist as beings and not as signifieds. More precisely, the silencing of language is not similar to an absence of words, but to the impossibility of poetry to speak or articulate an unspeakable alterity. As such, language simply *is* and it does not represent anything.

Bruns spoke of a ‘negative discourse’ precisely because poetry cannot be used to signify or represent anything in our world (1974, 194). But this negativity, however, does not mean that poetry is meaningless. Instead, in modern poetry the belief that language is a system of signification is negated. To put it differently, poetry is an *activity* which reaches out towards the Other and in its approach of the other, the poem becomes silent and ceases to signify anything so that its material being or “physical shape” is brought to the fore.⁷⁰ Ziarek put it as follows:

“Attempting to address otherness, to bespeak it, the poem already silences itself, refrains from words, from naming and compromising the other (...) the encounter becomes possible only in silence, yet in silence in a sense produced or induced by words” (Ziarek 1994, 140).

Silence has thus nothing to do with an inadequacy of language, but it is rather a waiting for words in their materiality for the encounter with the Other.⁷¹ The absence of the propositional form of language seems to be a prerequisite for the silencing of language and for a possible encounter with otherness. Nevertheless, pure alterity or otherness will always remain unreachable, so silence can only be a relation of proximity. In the following poem ‘To Stand’ from Celan’s poetry volume *Atemwende* (1967) an image of waiting for the other is presented:

To stand, in the shadow
of the scar up in the air.
To stand-for-no-one-and-nothing.
Unrecognized,
for you
alone.

With all there is room for in that,
even without
language.⁷²

I would like to emphasize the personal pronoun ‘you’ in the fifth line, since it frequently occurs in Celan’s poetry and it, in fact, stands for the Other towards which poetry moves; “for-no-one-and-nothing”. More specifically, the ‘you’ precedes language and comprehension so it cannot be someone or something which can be named by means of language.

⁷⁰ My emphasis

⁷¹ In addition, Maurice Blanchot claimed that in its propositional form language “destroys the world to make it reborn in a state of meaning, of signified values; but, under its creative form, it fixes only on the negative aspect of its task and becomes the pure power of questioning and transfiguration. That is possible insofar as, taking on a tangible quality, it becomes a thing, a body, an incarnate power. The real presence and material affirmation of language gives it the ability to suspend and dismiss the world” (as qtd. in Bruns 2005, p. 201).

⁷² Hamburger, Michael. *Paul Celan: Selected Poems*. UK: Penguin Books, 1972. P. 82.

Celan stated in 'The Meridian' that "only the space of the conversation can establish what is addressed, can gather into a 'you'" (1997, 50). This 'you' is not a subject since a distancing of poetry from the subject is characteristic of modern poetry. Ziarek argued that due to this distance "the other is allowed to appear as other, and the poetic text turns itself toward the other, across the distance of strangeness" (138). As a consequence of this address of the Other, Celan claimed that "perhaps after this, the poem can be itself..." (1997, 47). Basically, this assertion implies that otherness frees poetry from the incorporeal world in order to let it come to its own corporeal nature. More precisely, Celan stated that the poem "heads straight for the 'otherness' which it considers it can reach and be free" (1997, 48). Let me return to the 'you' in Celan's poem, then, because I believe it is relevant to point out that even though the Other is elusive and inaccessible, its traces can still be found in Celan's poetry. For instance, in the first line of the poem 'From Darkness to Darkness' the Other is signaled in Celan's image of the eye: "You opened your eyes – I saw my darkness live".⁷³

In this sense, Ziarek speaks of 'inflected language' because he claimed that Celan's ethical concern can be seen as an inflection of language (1994, 148). More specifically, Celan's concern with otherness marks itself in language because of its directedness towards the Other and the image of the 'eye' is proof of such an inflection in language. In other words, the reference to the eye functions as the veil for alterity while indicating an ethical dimension of language. Moreover, the eye can be seen as a parallel to Levinas's notion of the face. As I explained in '4.1. The Priority of Ethics over Ontology', for Levinas, the face stands for our relation with the Other. Furthermore, the face is not a physical detail but an enigma precisely because it goes beyond our comprehension. Likewise, Ziarek posited that inflection is indirectly marked in language but it cannot be known or described because "the sense it generates does not belong within the cognitive or semantic fields" (1994, 148). To put it differently, the address from the other cannot correspond to a form of being that we can understand. Therefore, we are left only with traces, such as Levinas's face or the signals in Celan's language which can be seen as an inflection due to the Other. These traces one can only be discerned, though, if one recognizes that language is always aware of the Other and that it always addresses the Other.

So far it is fair to assume that Celan's 'Meridian' can be characterized as ethical in a Levinassian sense. Namely, I discussed that poetry stands in an ethical relation with the Other towards which it is heading and this Other is a form of meaning that goes beyond language and comprehension. In the same way, existents stand in a relation with existence

⁷³ Ibid., p. 38.

or the *Il y a* which is equally incomprehensible and which cannot be grasped by means of ordinary speech. It is rather through the materiality of the word and the world that the nearness or proximity of otherness can be sensed. As such, the ethical relation is characterized by a distance because the poetic word can only come near the experience of otherness through silence, but it cannot express alterity.

However, I frequently mentioned that poetry moves in a space towards somewhere else, but I failed to explain whether it is possible to locate this place and whether an encounter with alterity can be realized. Celan asked himself the following question: “Can we perhaps now locate the strangeness [...], can we locate this place, this step?” (1997, 46). Fioretos explained that Celan’s poetry seems to be moving toward an unlocated light (1994, 320). This light was being referred to by Celan as “a u-topian light” (1997, 51). But why did Fioretos use the word ‘unlocated’ whereas Celan preferred the adjective ‘utopian’? Does this indicate that the realm of the Other cannot be found? I will now attempt to clarify this in the final section by foregrounding Celan’s understanding of utopia.

4.3.3. Celan’s Utopia

Whenever we speak of words in their materiality and their withdrawal from our world, Celan argued, “we also dwell on the question of their where-from and where-to, an ‘open’ question ‘without resolution,’ a question which points towards open, empty, free spaces – we have ventured far out. The poem also searches for this place” (1997, 50). This fragment of ‘The Meridian’ indicates that poetry is in search of a specific place in its movement towards the Other. However, at the end of his speech, Celan conceded the following: “None of these places can be found. They do not exist” (54). Consequently, it seems to be the case that the encounter with the Other – which poetry hopes for – cannot happen. After all, it might seem logical that poetry cannot reach something which is nowhere to be found. Still, this sentence requires a reformulation since it is rather the case that poetry cannot reach Being instead of ‘something.’ This Being, existence or otherness is nowhere to be found simply because it cannot be approached as a phenomenon which is part of the poetic realm.

In the essay ‘Paul Celan: From Being to the Other’ Levinas stated the following: “The movement thus described goes from place to non-place, from here to utopia” (1996, 42). This statement shows that poetry is directed towards a ‘nowhere’ which is seen as a utopia. Why, however, would one associate these terms? Namely, I would semantically link

‘utopia’ with words such as ‘paradise’ or ‘promised land.’ A non-place, though, implies ‘dislocatedness’ and ‘statelessness’ which does not sound like a promise to me. I believe it is relevant to address the notion of exile or exodus here, because it is a sign of Celan’s Jewish background which helps to clarify his approach to the realm of the Other as a utopia. More precisely, the exodus refers to the departure of the Israelites from Egypt but this departure leads to “a place that is not a place and where it is not possible to reside” (Blanchot 1993, 125). Similarly, utopia has to be understood as a non-place or a-topia that is meaningful precisely because it is nowhere to be found. To put it differently, in the Biblical account of the exodus the Jewish people were supposed to be delivered by God to a Promised Land, but this land was a place “where it is not possible to reside” and therefore, the exodus can be seen as maintaining a relation with the beyond. That is, a relation with a place that remains out of reach. Or, as Blanchot put it: “The relation with the Unknown one can know only by way of distance, through migration and march” (1993, 126). The “migration and march” should sound familiar with regard to the Diaspora which stands for the essential dispersion of the Jews. Consequently, the Diaspora implies the distance from their homeland. I am not simply dropping the terms ‘exodus’ and ‘Diaspora’ since it is my opinion that the spread of the Jewish people and their search for the Promised Land can be compared with the movement of poetry towards the Other. As such, the notion of exile is a significant analogy to Celan’s account of poetry and its relation to alterity.⁷⁴

I will now return to Levinas’s understanding of existence in order to further clarify the utopic character of otherness. According to Levinas, the *il y a* or existence has to be understood as a Being which is “essentially alien” and there is no answer to the question about the meaning of Being: “What is Being? – has never been answered” (EE 1988, 11). For this reason, I believe I cannot come up with a description of Being in the present study. I am aware of the fact that Being is there, but I cannot possibly convey it by means of language because I will always encounter a limit.⁷⁵ What I am trying to say is that if Levinas

⁷⁴ I would like to emphasize that the notion of exile is an *analogy* to the ideas that I have tried to come to terms with. More specifically speaking, it is reductive to explain Celan’s conceptions by solely relying on his Jewish background. However, it is not my claim that the movement of poetry towards utopia is only identical to the notion of exile. Instead, I believe it to be the case that exile is a significant aspect of the Jewish identity which can help to understand why non-place is a “positive value” (Blanchot 1993, 128). According to Blanchot, “It is with the Christians that we find the disavowal of the here below, an abasement of life, a scorn for presence. To leave the dwelling place, yes; to come and go in such a way as to affirm the world as a passage, but not because one should flee this world or live as fugitives in eternal misfortune. The words exodus and exile indicate a positive relation with exteriority, whose exigency invites us not to be content with what is proper to us (that is, with our power to assimilate everything, to identify everything, to bring everything back to our I)” (1993, 127).

⁷⁵ I am aware that I try to bring across thematic issues which are impossible to fully understand in language and therefore, I question whether the genre of the thesis is an appropriate medium for my topic. By this I mean that

claimed that alterity cannot be defined or seen as something familiar, it is perhaps easier to understand why Celan associated it with a perpetual movement towards a place that does not exist. After all, I attempted to indicate that Celan's poetics has an ethical dimension since I related his conception of otherness to a Levinassian understanding of the Other or *il y a*. Therefore, Celan would diverge from Levinas's understanding if he would claim that a description or encounter with the Other was possible. The point is that Being remains inaccessible. Eshel stated that "Celan envisioned poetry as a form of dialogue, encounter and provocation that avoids the reduction of the other to a single realm of signification" (2004, 59). 'A single realm of signification' indeed reduces the meaning potential of the Other. Namely, I argued that the other is beyond comprehension or language so any definition or description would incorrectly presume that an access to the meaning of otherness is possible. More precisely, if one can grasp it, it is fair to assume that one can convey it by means of language. That is, language which is made up of meanings and concepts. However, there is no single realm of signification because understanding otherness is impossible and more importantly, language will always fall short in the face of the Other because otherness is located in a pre-syntactic realm.

Consequently, it is also incorrect to assume that poetry – in its movement toward the Other – will at one point arrive in a place where the Other dwells. An arrival would imply that poetry has left its own place or poetic realm in order to enter the realm of the Other. As such, the relation with the Other comes to an end. Nevertheless, this will not happen because the relation with the Other is always there and poetry cannot escape it. Instead of a relationship that is closed, then, poetry cannot reach otherness so there is an open-ended movement towards somewhere else. In this sense, Celan stated that "the absolute poem – no, it certainly does not, cannot exist" (1997, 51). A different account of the absolute poem, though, consists of the recognition of its incompleteness. It is incomplete in the sense that the meaning of alterity cannot be acquired. I would like to emphasize for a moment what Blanchot said about the words 'exodus' or 'exile', as he claimed that they do not bear a meaning which is negative (1993, 127).⁷⁶ Therefore, the fact that Celan's poems are on their way to a non-place should not be interpreted as something hopeless or pessimistic. His view

I attempt to explain *il y a*, Being, alterity and utopia, but I know that my words will never be able to encompass the meaning of these issues. This can sound familiar with regard to Derrida's 'The Time of a Thesis' (1980) in which he claimed that "It was already clear to me that the general turn that my research was taking could no longer conform to the classical norms of the thesis" (120). This statement indicates that Derrida questioned the academic mode of writing since he explained that he experienced the impossibility of "summing up or presenting thetic conclusions" (121).

⁷⁶ Blanchot claimed that "the words exodus and exile indicate a positive relation with exteriority, whose exigency invites us not to be content with what is proper to us (that is, with our power to assimilate everything, to identify everything, to bring everything back to our I)" (1993, 127).

rather requires a reconsideration of truth. More precisely, in Celan's poetics meaning is to be found in the nomadic movement of poetry; a movement that does not bind it "to the determination of place or settling close to a reality forever and already founded, sure, and permanent" (Blanchot 1993, 127).

Levinas stated that "the absolute poem does not say the meaning of being [...] it speaks the defection of all dimension; it goes toward utopia" (1996, 46). This "speaking of the defection of all dimension" can be linked to my discussion of the silencing of language. By this I mean that poetic language cannot articulate the inexpressible so its words become silent and nameless. This namelessness, though, implies an openness towards the meaning of the Other. In other words: if there are no words for alterity, then every word can potentially relate to it and the relation is therefore based on infinite possibilities to approach the Other. By now it is perhaps easier to understand why an unreachable and unlocatable otherness is seen as a utopia or promised land. More specifically speaking, it depends on the notion of poetic truth. Fynsk stated the following:

"we may understand better now what it mean to say that the poem is seeking its truth – its truth, in relation. Its truth is the opening of a possibility of relation realized in the movement of reaching poetically for an other. This is not its truth in the sense that this possibility would be something it brings to the other or institutes *from itself*. Rather, it would be something that come about or occurs as it proceeds [...] The poem seeks its truth in going to the other, it *draws out* a relation, a relation that is open-ended" (1994, 173).

The relation can only remain open-ended if otherness is a place that needs to be searched for. More specifically, truth is not to be located, for this would reduce the meaning of the ethical relation. Some could argue, though, that if no place can be found, truth will always remain absent. However, I believe that this reasoning springs from the minds of those who deem truth to be a fixed realm of meaning which can be reached. In modern poetry, however, truth or meaning happens and continues to happen. This happening occurs if and only if there is receptiveness towards the infinite meaning of Being. Truth, then, lies with the impossibility of a possible place. Or, as Levinas put it: "Outside all enrootedness and all dwelling: statelessness as authenticity" (1996, 44). In addition, I would like to insert a statement by Blanchot since I believe it touches upon the core of the relation between poetry and alterity in Celan's poetics:

"if to become rooted in a culture and in a regard for things does not suffice, it is because the order of the realities in which we become rooted does not hold the key to all the relations to which we must respond [...] There is another dimension revealed to man where, beyond every horizon, he must relate to what is beyond his reach" (1993, 127).

I believe that the relation “to what is beyond his reach” is precisely how one can describe the movement of poetry towards alterity. As I wish to underscore once again, this movement - in the sense of exile or exodus - is not meaningless. Instead, its meaningfulness goes beyond conceptualization and finitude into a state of pure relationality which holds open the possibility of the presence of the Other.

In view of the previous paragraphs, the following stanzas from the poem ‘Psalm’ clearly dwell upon the inaccessibility of the Other by presenting it as a “no one.” Moreover, the last three lines indicate the direction of poetry towards the ‘You.’ The personal pronoun can, again, be seen as a Celanian inflection of language.

No one moulds us again out of earth and clay,
no one conjures our dust.
No one.

Praised be your name, no one.
For your sake
we shall flower
Towards
You.⁷⁷

So far I have attempted to explain the utopian character of alterity, but I deliberately left out a part of Celan’s statement that I inserted at the beginning of this section. Namely, my mention of Celan claiming that “None of these places can be found. They do not exist”. Nevertheless, he also expressed the following: “... I find something else. Ladies and gentlemen, I find something which consoles me a bit for having walked this impossible road [...] I find the connective which, like the poem, leads to encounters [...] I find... a *meridian*” (1997, 54-55). This statement leads me to the title of Celan’s speech. Now what exactly can be understood with this “meridian”? According to Ziarek, the poetic meridian marks “the (im)possible encounter of language with the other” (1994, 161). It thus seems to be the case that the meridian is a curve which indicates the direction of poetry towards the other.

This clarification of the meridian might sound familiar with regard to the ethical inflection of language. Namely, I mentioned that the ‘eye’ or the ‘you’ can be a trace of the relation of poetry with the Other. The poetic meridian, then, seems to be a general term for all these inflections in poetic language. In fact, Ziarek explained that “the poetic meridian

⁷⁷ Hamburger, Michael. *Paul Celan: Selected Poems*. UK: Penguin Books, 1972. P. 69.

crosses all poetic tropes and leaves its breath-like trace, an *Atemkristall*, upon language” (1994, 179). Celan explained in his speech that breath is the direction and destiny of poetry (1997, 39). Furthermore, he posited that “Poetry is perhaps this: an *Atemwende*, a turning of our breath” (47). The turn of breath seems to stand for the movement of poetry towards the Other. It is a *turn* of breath because our attentiveness is turned towards the traces of the Other if one acknowledges them in the poem. The turning of our breath, then, can only take place if one does not follow the path of reflection, but the poetic meridian which poetically reaches for the Other in a language that has become silence. Böttiger claimed the following: “Durch das verstummen hindurch sucht Celan deswegen nach einem utopischem Ort [...] Es ist ein Kreisbewegung, keine gerade Linie” (1996, 157). I would like to underscore ‘Kreisbewegung’, because the meridian is indeed a circular movement which does not end in a specific point. As such, this movement sustains the utopian character of the Other and, consequently, of truth.

5. The (Re)turn to Being

Poetry is the expression, in human language restored to its essential rhythm, of the mysterious meaning of the aspects of existence: in this way it confers authenticity on our time on earth and constitutes the only spiritual task there is.

-S. Mallarmé, 1884

In the previous parts of the present study I discussed Paz's and Celan's conceptions of otherness with regard to a Heideggerian and Levinassian account of the relation between poetry and Being. Both poets argued that poetry is a relational realm characterized by its openness to Being. More precisely, there is an openness to the diversity of meaning which implies that Celan and Paz believe truth to be a happening or an event instead of viewing it as a static fact. In other words, the relation between poetry and otherness remains open and therefore it differs from other approaches to truth. By this I mean that poetic truth cannot be acquired by relying solely on our reasoning, because its meaning goes beyond our mastery of reality and beyond our comprehension, which is based on conceptualization. Namely, a one-to-one relation between otherness and poetry is not possible, because this implies a correspondence and poetry will never correspond to alterity. To put it differently, the relation between poetry and otherness is not a matter of coincidence, but of a possible exposure to meaning.

Nevertheless, the exposure to meaning does not happen in the same way in Paz's and Celan's approach to poetry. I would argue that this is due to a slightly different understanding of the nature of poetic language. More specifically, Paz believed that poetry has a disclosive function because it "expresses the inexpressible" (1956, 96). Poetic language can express the experience of alterity, but I want to underscore that this expression cannot attain the core of alterity since poetry can never approach alterity in a conceptual sense. I believe that this is especially foregrounded in Celan's poetics since there is an infinite movement of poetry towards the Other without ever arriving. As such, poetic language cannot reveal any conceptual meaning, since there is no access to alterity. My claim is that the meaningfulness of poetry springs from this inaccessibility. By this I mean that the continuous movement of poetry towards the Other is a relation of proximity which cannot be understood theoretically, because it is not finite and hence cannot be mastered. Meaning, then, is precisely to be found in the pure relationality between poetry and alterity.

It is important to underscore that Paz deemed the presence of the Other to be possible via poetry, while this presence is, for Celan, always impossible. Consequently, for

Paz, poetry can offer a return to Being whereas Celan deems poetry to be a turn to the Other but not a return, for this would imply a possibility of the presence of the Other.⁷⁸ However, it is not my aim to establish a radical contrast between Paz and Celan because I believe that they both defend the significance of the relation between poetry and alterity. In other words, for Celan and Paz, poetry is not a matter of finitude, conceptualization or mastery. Instead, it is a matter of possibility, relation and exposure to meaning. To claim that Paz's conceptions can only be interpreted as a return to Being would therefore be reductive. By this I mean that according to Paz, poetry is also turned towards the Other since the disclosure of meaning does not remain present. In this way, poetry is turned towards the Other in order to provide an access to the possibility of presence. With regard to Celan, though, one should take into account the notion of exile or exodus in order to understand the everlasting movement of poetry towards the Other. More precisely, the relation between poetry and alterity cannot be interrupted by a revelation of meaning, but the meaningfulness consists of the waiting for the presence and reply of the Other. Nonetheless, one could question the value of a form of poetry that infinitely moves towards something that not to be found. After all, why would Celan write poems if meaning cannot be disclosed? The point is that this question is asked from a particular perspective which reduces the nature of poetry to a conceptual failure. The truth or signification of Celan's poetics is not limited to our cognitive capacities and for this reason poetry is perhaps the only way to reach out to the Other.⁷⁹ What is thus deemed to be a failure from a conceptual point of view should be seen as a necessity and prerequisite for a possible encounter with alterity.

Libertson claimed that, for Levinas, Heidegger "remains the philosopher of comprehension who subordinates impossibility to possibility" (1982, 197). I argued that Paz's ideas showed affinities with a Heideggerian understanding of poetry. With regard to the statement by Libertson, then, one could assume that Paz is a poet of comprehension who deems the presence of the Other to be a possibility. In Celan's understanding of the Other, though, poetry leads to another experience of alterity. Namely, the exposure to meaning or

⁷⁸ I will further clarify the difference between Paz's and Celan's account of poetry and alterity in the subsections '5.1.1. The Turn of Breath' and '5.1.2. The Other Shore'.

⁷⁹ I would like to touch upon 'cognitive capacities' by clarifying that it refers to thought processes that can lead to the creation of meaning. An example of these thought processes can be the combination or association of several signifiers. In other words, the mind should be seen as a realm through which meaning can be created. Nevertheless, it is important to note that this meaning is not fixed, but subject to re-evaluation. As such, a cognitive approach to literature resists full interpretation or absolute concepts because there is more than one interpretation possible. To return to Celan's conceptions, then, the Other is not to be understood as something which we can understand through analogy or thinking; it is not a concept. As a result, I believe poetry is an inexplicable being whose relation towards the Other can maintain the meaning of alterity without trying to *think* it – for thinking the Other is impossible.

alterity can only be approached but it cannot be reached. As such, poetry stands in a relation of proximity to the Other. In this final part of my thesis it is my aim to underscore Celan's and Paz's differences in terms of their approach to Truth, language, alterity and Being. I will accordingly begin with a clarification of what Ziarek called "a hermeneutics of knowing" and one of "listening" in order to associate them respectively with the ideas of Paz and Celan (1994, 184). I will particularly focus on the nature of poetic language so that I can demonstrate that a different understanding of truth comes forward out of several possible approaches to language. Finally, I will end the present study with a comparison between a poem by Celan and one by Paz, in order to touch once more upon the differences between their conceptions of alterity.

5.1. Understanding or Listening

So far it should have transpired that alterity is a notion which is associated with something 'other' because it deviates from our daily perception of the world. Consequently, alterity indicates that there is more than we can experience visually or intellectually. I mentioned in '3. The Becoming and Happening of Truth' that Heidegger proposed another form of approaching the world. That is, an understanding of the world which is not identical to our cognition. As an alternative to the rationalist belief that there is no world except the one that can be governed by our own knowledge, Heidegger began with language. More specifically, language is a way of knowing the world in which we find ourselves. In other words, it is through language that beings come into existence, and therefore language is considered to be the medium of Being. Or, to repeat the quote of Gadamer which I mentioned before: "Being that can be *understood* is language" (1992, 474).⁸⁰

However, in '4. Insistence of an Inaccessible Alterity' I argued that Levinas criticized Heidegger's ontology because it reduces otherness to a form of understanding. More precisely, Heidegger's philosophy is characterized by the notion of intentionality which means that one is intentionally directed towards something. Nevertheless, the directedness of poetry towards alterity was impossible for Levinas, since it indicates that poetry is intentionally moving towards something. Namely, Levinas's argument was that the Other cannot be thought of because it resists any form of comprehension. Otherness is thus not a phenomenon which can be approached as a concept, but rather as a relation in which

⁸⁰ My Italics

the presence of the Other can possibly be experienced. Critchley explained that, for Levinas, “the other is not a phenomenon but an enigma, something ultimately refractory to intentionality and opaque to understanding” (2005, 8). Therefore, poetic language cannot intentionally be directed towards the Other, for the (unanswerable) question would always remain the following one: “What is it that poetry relates to?”

According to Ziarek, Heidegger’s hermeneutics of knowing or understanding is changed into a form of listening or a hermeneutics of responding which includes “the enigmatic sense of nearing” (Ziarek 1994). Indeed, with regard to Levinas’s philosophy ‘nearing’ refers to the movement of poetry towards the Other. This direction is not intentional since the claim of the Other is inherent to the ethical relation so poetry continuously responds to the Other’s appeal regardless of its desires. Consequently, in Levinas’ philosophy a being does not intentionally move about in a world, but listens to or responds to the call of the Other. Moreover, what can become near will never be a revelation of meaning, but a form of Being which will always remain other. The reason for Levinas’ rejection of Heidegger’s account of disclosure or *aletheia* is Heidegger’s belief that alterity can be disclosed as “that in which human existence, as historical, is already thrown” (OWA 1935, 47). What is disclosed is a totality of Being which cannot be grasped by our consciousness because we are intrinsically part of it. Poetic language, though, is extracted from our conscious control and that is why it can offer a relation or access to alterity. The following statement from Libertson can perhaps further clarify Levinas’s critique of Heidegger: “For Levinas, the primacy of comprehension in Heidegger subordinates the Other to manifestation [...] Heideggerian comprehension [...] is the image of totality” (1982, 198).

Nevertheless, one could wonder whether Levinas’s account of the *il y a* does not refer to a totality as well, because it is an irreducible form of being which encompasses existents. The important difference is that this totality cannot be disclosed. For this reason, Hand explains that literature is a “fundamental *non-truth*” in comparison with the Heideggerian truth of being (2009, 73). Namely, Levinas’s ethical relation is characterized by the idea of infinity rather than totality and this infinity implies that the Other is more than can be thought. As such, the Other will always be something different than words can express. Furthermore, Critchley stated the following: “Levinas’s critique of totalizing politics leads to the deduction of an ethical structure that is irreducible to totality” (2005, 24). Heidegger’s notion of totality thus evokes, for Levinas, a political dimension which can be associated with National Socialism in which everything was part of a totalizing system.

Instead of a disclosure of totality, then, Levinas emphasized the inadequacy of manifestation.⁸¹ Wyschogrod posited that “the essential task of language is not to express what cannot be expressed” (2005, 189). The Other is an excess which is beyond formulation so it can be desired to be known, but its exposure cannot happen through poetry. Perhaps an alternative formulation of Gadamer’s quote will be more appropriate for Levinas’s conceptions: Being that can be approached is non-language. This ‘non-language’ has to be interpreted as the silence of words that is a form of discourse with the Other in which the voice of mastery or conceptualization is silenced.

5.1.1. The Turn of Breath

In the section ‘4.3.3. Celan’s Utopia’ I briefly touched upon the following quote by Celan: “Poetry is perhaps this: an *Atemwende*, a turning of our breath” (1960, 47). I argued that the turn of breath can stand for the movement of poetry towards the Other. More precisely, a *turn* implies a difference and this is what characterizes the nature of poetry. Ziarek explained that “poetry may be constituted primarily by its turn toward the other, by the turn of its breath. The beginning of the speech [The Meridian] identifies such a turn with a distance from the poetic subject” (1994, 195). More precisely, Celan said that “art makes for distance from the I” and this assertion demonstrates that it was not his desire to emphasize the role of the subject (1997, 44). In fact, I have indicated that subjective control prevents language from appearing in its “physical shape.” In other words, poetry turns away from the subject in order to turn towards an inaccessible alterity which makes a claim onto it.

As a consequence of the distance from the poetic subject, language is no longer a form of expression. The turn of breath, then, refers to a breath that is turned away from speaking so that language becomes silent. Celan clarified in ‘The Meridian’ that it takes “breath and words away” (1997, 47). In addition, Ziarek stated that “Celan’s *Atemwende* marks a readiness, a pause in one’s breath, an opening, or a point where language is exposed, attentive, listening to the other, and, in that specific sense, responsible to her or him” (1994, 195). This “listening to the other” sounds familiar with regard to Levinas’s hermeneutics of listening. More specifically, the relation between poetry and the Other is

⁸¹ In addition, Critchley claimed the following: “When I totalize, I conceive of the relation to the other from some imagined point that I would be outside of it and I turn myself into a theoretical spectator on the social world of which I am really part, and in which I am an agent [...] But for Levinas, there is no view from nowhere. Every view is from somewhere and the ethical relation is a description from the point of view of an agent in the social world and not a spectator upon it” (2005, 14)

not based on a understanding through language, but on a listening to the Other and waiting for its presence. Celan underscored the aspect of “listening” by claiming the following: “When there is talk of art, there is often somebody who does not really listen” (1997, 39).

Listening to the Other implies that poetry is rather passive. By this I mean that there is a big contrast with Paz’s statement that poetry “expresses the inexpressible” (1956, 96). Namely, words cannot convey the inexpressible Other, since it is through silence that poetic language tries to speak to the Other. More specifically speaking, in silence words are no longer signifiers but the unspoken condition of language is rather an opening to possible meanings of alterity. However, this opening will remain because I argued that a disclosure of the Other will never happen in Celan’s understanding of alterity. Consequently, truth cannot appear through an experience with poetry in the same way that Paz’s conception of truth consists of a revelation of meaning through poetic language. More precisely, Paz claimed in *The Bow and the Lyre* that in poetry a world can be created which is more truthful than the daily world in which we find ourselves (1956, 3). In Celan’s view, this world is a utopia or non-place. It thus seems to be the case that truth does not happen as a disclosure, but as an infinite movement towards something that will always remain absence. Therefore, Celan’s conceptions of truth and the Other can be seen as the negative of Orphic poetry.

More specifically, I explained that according to Bruns Orphic poetry is a form of poetry in which a world can be brought into being. Paz stated that “Poetry sings of what is happening; its function is to give form to everyday life and make it visible” (*OV* 1990, 133). Celan’s conception of poetry can be seen as the negative version of Orpheus because there is no world which appears through poetic language. Consequently, the realm of the Other cannot be unconcealed or become present. Instead, there is an absence of alterity. Nevertheless, this absence is present in the relation of poetry to the Other. Relation is therefore a crucial notion which makes possible for an approach to alterity. Ziarek posited the following:

“Poetry, the primordial saying of Being, happens, as Heidegger claims, for the sake of Being, but, Celan adds, it ineluctably takes place also vis-à-vis the face of the other. Since being is neither presence nor absence and cannot be said through words, poetry preserves and maintains this saying indirectly between words” (Ziarek 1994, 161).

The expression of Being is preserved in silence and the silencing of language implies openness to the meaning of alterity. To put it differently, if the Other cannot be expressed by means of language, then the unspoken condition of poetry is a way to stand in a relation

of proximity to alterity. The meaning is maintained *between* words and this should be read in terms of a poetic meridian which marks the movement of language to the Other.

Paz, however, did not mention any silence or movement since he deemed poetry to be an approach to another form of reality that is freed from our conceptual grasp. More specifically, for Paz, the loss of subjective control implied the possibility of presence, whereas Celan put more emphasis on the material aspect of language. This materiality disrupts the act of signification because it refers to a preconceptual dimension of language. In other words, a name first and foremost does not refer to the meaning of a thing, but to the thing itself. As such, poetic language does not signify anything, but it is a being in itself that can speak for itself. Hamacher explained that “at the end of every semantic theory of language and its truth stands the aporetic verdict: language does not speak; it has nothing to say, only itself” (1994, 220). I would argue that Paz’s and Celan’s understanding of poetry is the end of a semantic theory of language, because words no longer represent phenomena in reality: they lead to something else. But a rejection of mimesis does not imply that poetry cannot contain any meaning. In fact, I will try to indicate in the following paragraphs that the meaning of poetry can be interpreted in different ways.

Paz believed that poetry could speak on its own behalf, because poetic speech is not dependent of the subject. But he did not speak of the silencing of language. This is due to the fact that meaning can be found within the poetic realm where the Other can become present: poetry is “the realm where naming is being” (Paz 1956, 91). In other words, poetry does not experience an appeal of the Other and it is my claim that Paz did not speak of the being of language in isolation. More precisely, poetic language is similar to a showing or disclosure of being. Paz stated that “the poem does not explain or represent: it presents. It does not allude to reality; it tries to re-create it – and sometimes succeeds” (*BL* 1956, 97). This recreation of reality shows itself through an experience with poetry. In other words, there seems to be a unity between word and being. This view is most clearly articulated in the following line by Paz: “The poetic word will not consecrate history, but it will *be* history, life” (*BL* 1956, 212).⁸² More precisely, the word does not point towards a form of being outside of the poetic realm but carries this within itself. Bruns put it as follows: “The being of things is disclosed, that is to say, not through the formation of meaning but through the very being of language – through language itself” (1974, 202). The world is grounded on language, like Orpheus whose poetic speech is the ground of signification. More precisely,

⁸² My Italics

this indicates that the Other can become present *in* poetry. I would like to underscore the preposition 'in' because this is precisely what deviates from Celan's understanding of alterity. Namely, the Other cannot appear in an experience with poetry, but it will always be something that remains *outside* of it, since poetry is not a place in which Celan's Other can appear.

However, with regard to Celan's poetics, it is not entirely right to assume that there is a complete separateness between poetry and alterity. After all, in '4.2.3. A Strong Tendency towards Silence' I explained that Celan's reaching for the Other is signaled *in* language by means of inflection. Namely, his poetry contains references to otherness, even though he does not support the view that poetry can disclose the meaning of the Other, since alterity is a form of being that cannot be captured linguistically. This is perhaps difficult to understand, since it indicates that Celan's approach to poetry consists of a movement towards the Other which both happens *in* and *against* language. On the one hand, the openness towards the Other can only take place in poetry, yet on the other hand, poetic language becomes silent because it cannot speak about the Other towards which it is heading. To put it differently, the essence of poetry, for Celan, does not consist in the founding of truth in the sense of *aletheia*: it cannot reveal the meaning of alterity.⁸³ Orpheus is instead turned into a silent singer whose song cannot be heard. Consequently, language should be seen as a void or opening towards the Other instead of a medium for Being.

In order to respect the inaccessible meaning of otherness, it cannot be associated with a proper place or meaning. Ziarek explained that "the utopic character of otherness indicates that it cannot be associated with words themselves, images, meaning or any other formal, or aesthetic qualities of the poetic text" (1994, 140). Yet silence seems to be a way to approach and acknowledge the presence of something which remains other and absent. And this silence, as indicated earlier, is understood as a turn of breath. It implies an act of speech which is not used as a system of signification. In this way, language's tendency towards silence indicates the very being of language: a being which is not masked by surface structures of meaning. Moreover, this being is not identical to the being of the Other. Paz only seems to be concerned with the Being of poetry which can be disclosed as something other if one acknowledges that language cannot be controlled by us. In other

⁸³ Instead of Heidegger's *aletheia* or Paz's revelation of meaning, I would associate the term *aporia* with Celan's conceptions. More precisely, *aporia* literally means "without passage" (a+ poros) and this has to be understood as the inaccessibility of otherness.

words, alterity is a Being which lies behind poetic language and which can only be brought to the fore in an experience with poetry.

Celan, though, was concerned with the otherness of the Other which is something else than the otherness of Being that Paz had in mind. To return to the statement of Ziarek I quoted earlier, poetry is not simply an expression of Being, but “takes place also vis-à-vis the face of the other” (1994, 161). There seems to be an extra dimension in Celan’s poetics which leads to a more complicated and less accessible approach to alterity. More precisely, the difference between Paz and Celan is the difference between an ontological and ethical alterity. Namely, Paz is concerned with the otherness of Being which can reveal man’s historical existence, whereas Celan is concerned with the exposure of poetry towards an Other which remains unrevealed. This exposure means above all a listening to the Other, as poetry addresses the Other who made a claim on poetry. According to Schulz, Celan’s conception of poetry cannot be understood as a completely autonomous language because it is bound to the conversation with the Other: “sie ist und bleibt vielmehr standing rückgebunden an den sprachlich artikulierenden und das Gespräch mit einem Du” (1977, 272). However, the dialogue is suspended because there will not be any answer, and therefore the conversation is reduced to a covenant. Paz also spoke of a dialogue since he claimed the following in *The Bow and the Lyre*: “Language is, by its very nature, dialogue. Language is social and always implies, at least, two: the one who speaks and the one who hears” (1956, 161). Yet this dialogue does not change into a monologue because the reach of poetry towards the Other is reciprocated since the Other can become present. Celan’s view, then, should rather be seen as a non-reciprocal proximity instead of a coming to presence of the Other towards which poetry reaches. In fact, for Paz it is not a matter of “reaching” but of “being reached”. In other words, poetry is not constantly faced with the absence of alterity since its presence becomes reachable through the relation between poetry and the Other.

5.1.2. The Other Shore

Paz stated that “the reading of a poem *connects* the reader with a realm that is transpersonal and, therefore, in the strict sense of the word, immense” (1990, 78).⁸⁴ More specifically speaking, through poetry one can experience a different realm. This realm is another experience of daily life which is no longer reduced to concepts. As such, poetry can make us realize that there is another world which surpasses our cognition. In fact, I briefly explained Paz’s poem ‘There is a Life within this Life’ and this title points very well to Paz’s main argument. Namely, apart from one’s traditional experience of reality, there can be another understanding of life as well. This is another understanding of the same world and can be disclosed through poetry. Consequently, what we deem to be real actually hides something which is more truthful. For this reason, Heidegger explained that the essence of truth is disclosure and that “truth, in essence, is un-truth” (1935, 31). This un-truth which is concealed in our daily perspective on life is always there and can come into presence through poetic language. Nevertheless, it is not similar to poetry. Paz stated that the Other “cannot be explained by language, although it can only be reached by means of it. Born of the word, the poems issues in something that surpasses it” (*BL* 1956, 96). And this “something” is a revelation of meaning.

One of the chapters in *The Bow and the Lyre* is called ‘The Poetic Revelation,’ which refers to the fact that poetry, for Paz, is a “revelation of our original condition” (137). Said ‘original condition’ was being referred to as a “totality” (1956, 248). More specifically, Heidegger clarified that poetry opens up the world in which human existence is historically thrown (1935, 47). This world cannot be known because it is always already present before our birth. Nevertheless, poetry can offer a glimpse of this totality and therefore it can offer a mode of truth and understanding that goes beyond what is traditionally understood. To recapitulate, the Other is a form of Being which lies behind poetic language and which can become present through an experience with poetry. Bruns stated that “The language in the poem is an opening into the realm of language” and this opening implies that we can “return to our origins, thus to locate ourselves in the very being of the world” (1974, 205). The revelation of our original condition is a return to the Being in which we find ourselves, but which remains hidden from us because it goes beyond our comprehension and daily use of language. As such, we cannot master the presence of the Other, because it happens beyond our reasoning and control.

⁸⁴ My Italics

With regard to Celan's poetics, I would like to make two adjustments to the statements by Heidegger and Paz. Firstly, "truth, in essence is non-truth," and secondly, "poetry is nearness" instead of revelation. Truth is "non-truth" because there is no disclosure of meaning and poetry is "nearness" because the Other cannot be reached. Furthermore, I mentioned in '5.1. Understanding or Listening' that Levinas criticized Heidegger's approach to disclosure because it implies a totality. Since I also argued that Levinas's conceptions are similar to the ideas of Celan, it is fair to assume that Celan did not entirely agree with Paz's view of "the original condition". In other words, poetry is an infinite response to the call of the Other and this Other is not similar to Paz's understanding of otherness. Fynsk stated that Celan described "a poetry that would proceed from the turn of an Atemwende, and thus a poetry that would proceed from difference in its approach to the other" (1994, 169). This difference suggests that the Other does not merely hide behind our perception of daily life, but it is something different which cannot be exposed in poetic language, but that rather be approached in a relation that is based on openness towards possible forms of meaning.

Levinas stated that, for Celan, the poem "does not say the meaning of being [...] it speaks the defection of all dimension; it goes toward utopia" (1996, 46). As a consequence, poetry cannot provide any access to another experience of reality. Put differently, there will always be a distance between the being of poetry and the being of the Other. Paz claimed that "everything is real and unreal" which implies that the Other is to be found in what we deem to be real. With regard to Celan, however, I would say that "nothing is real", for this "nothing" refers to the absence of the Other. If the Other remains absent, then it makes sense that the turn towards it cannot be seen as the meaning of otherness. Ziarek stated that "the other becomes significant, or signifying, for language only as a trace" (1994, 187). In comparison with Paz's "original condition", this trace is not a totality at all. In other words, there is no other which can appear through language, except for a trace. Ziarek further clarified that "the significance of this tracing is ethical, as opposed to what inexactly may be termed the ontological sense of Being" (1994, 187). More precisely, the trace is a reminder of the ethical responsibility of poetry towards the Other. In comparison with Celan's view, then, Paz's approach to alterity is less intimate because it is a form of Being which pertains to every man and there is no specific, infinite concern for an Other.

Nevertheless, I believe that Paz's poetics also have an ethical connotation by which I mean that one participates in an experience with poetry in order to allow presence to happen. As such, one takes up the responsibility to establish a relation with a form of

meaning that exceeds our reasoning. Consequently, it is fair to assume that Paz's account of alterity is not only ontological; it is rather a matter of degree or priority. By this I mean that the ethical concern for the Other is a major aspect of Celan's 'Meridian', but he also supported the view that poetry can alter our understanding of reality. More precisely, it is not the case that a poem forever leads to a utopia without having an implication for one's self and one's approach to existence. Poetry is significant for our outlook and, in this sense, Celan's poetics are not solely ethical, but there is an ontological basis to them as well.

According to Fynsk, Celan compares the poem's effort to reach the Other to throwing a letter in a bottle out to sea, "with the –surely not always strong- belief that it could somehow wash up somewhere" (1994, 163). The letter may thus not reach its destination which constitutes a major difference between Celan and Paz. More precisely, Paz deemed a connection between poetry and Otherness to be possible and referred to the place where the Other can appear as "The Other Shore" (1956, 106). This "Other Shore" should not be seen as a place or a "here" where poetry arrives, it is rather a relational realm where presence can be created. But presence can never be approached as a concept because it is elusive and one cannot force the Other to become present. Paz claimed that "poetry is entry into being" (BL 1956, 98). As such, he would believe that the bottle could arrive on the Other shore. For Celan, nevertheless, the destination cannot be another shore towards which poetry is turned. More precisely, poetry can be seen as the letter which will always be floating on waves, without ever being read. Since I am talking in metaphors, it is perhaps better to move on to poetry. In the following section I will present two poems with a similar title in order to touch upon the conceptions of otherness and poetic truth as it is expressed in Celan's and Paz's poetry.

5.2. The Sun above and this Shadow Quadrant

In this last section of my investigation I would like to end with two poems which have a similar title. The first poem, 'What's written,' appeared in Celan's volume *Atemwende* (1967) or *Breathturn*, while the second one, 'The Written Word,' was published in Paz's volume *Days and Occasions* (1958). In both poems I have italicized certain words because I believe they indicate the differences between Celan and Paz's conceptions of poetry and alterity. I will first present the poems and afterwards I will touch upon the words that I wish to underscore.

What's written goes *hollow*, what's
spoken, seagreen,
burns in the bays,
dolphins race
through
liquefied names,
here in *forevered Nowhere*,
in a memory of out-
crying bells in – *but where?*,
who
in this
shadow quadrant
is grasping, *who*
underneath
glimmers up, glimmers up, glimmers up?⁸⁵

The Written Word

Written now the first
word (*never the one thought of,*
but the other – this
that doesn't say it, contradicts it,
says it without saying it)
Written now the first
word (one, two, three -
sun above, your face
in the well water fixed
like an astonished sun)
Written now the first
word (four, five -
the pebble keeps falling,
look at your face as it falls, reckon
the vertical measure of its falling)
Written now the first
word (*there's another, below,*
not the one that's falling,
the one that holds face, sun, and time
above the abyss: the word
before the fall, before the measure)
Written now the first
word (two, three, four -
you will see your face crack
you will see a sun that scatters,
you will see the stone in the broken water,
you will see the *same* face, the *same* sun,
fixed above the *same* water)

⁸⁵ Celan, Paul. *Selected Prose and Poems of Paul Celan*. Trans. John Felstiner. NY: W.W. Norton, 2011. P. 127. Print.

Written now the first
word (go on,
there are no more words
than the words of the measure)⁸⁶

In Celan's poem the "forevered Nowhere" can refer to the utopic character of the inaccessible Other. Here, again, one can see the analogy between poetry and exile which is a movement that does not end or that is not bound to a place. In this sense, the notion of exile opposes conceptualization and underscores the everlasting relation towards the Other. There is thus no specific place where alterity resides so one keeps wondering where it can be found. This is expressed in the ninth line with the interruption "-but where?" In addition, the repetition of "who" and the question at the end of the poem support the enigmatic character of the meaning of the Other. After all, from the first lines onwards, it becomes clear that the meaning of what is written is not similar to the one that the author has in mind because it "goes hollow" and what is spoken becomes "seagreen". This can refer to the fact that words and their meanings are detached from the meaning or intentions that the writer has in mind. The adjective "hollow", then, can imply the silent and preconceptual state of words in which there is an opening to the Other and to possible meanings. Words are not fixed, but "liquefied names." Underneath these names, someone glimmers up, but this verb implies an unsteady or faint light and therefore, the image of the light can be linked to the thematic insecurity of the identity of what is "forever Nowhere."

In terms of Paz's poem, there is no such thing as a "Forevered Nowhere". It is obvious that this poem centralizes the duality of language or meaning. For instance, poetry is a different form of the same language: it is "the other" as it appears in the third line. The definite article "the" stands in stark contrast to Celan's poem where the "Forevered Nowhere" is undetermined. As a result, "the Other" in Paz's poem is something which can be known, while its meaning in the first poem remains vague. Moreover, poetic words carry a meaning that differs from a conceptual ones: something that is said "without saying it." As such, it is not similar to our approach to daily language in which we use it as a form of communication: "there's another, below." And this other "holds face, sun, and time" which can evoke the notion of totality.

⁸⁶ Paz, Octavio. *The Collected Poems of Octavio Paz*. Trans. Eliot Weinberger. USA: New Directions, 1990. Pp. 62-63. Print.

Paz referred to otherness as a realm “at the heart of existence – or rather, of existing oneself – stones and feathers, the lights and the heavy, being born and dying, being oneself, are one and the same” (*BL* 1956, 88). This sameness implies a totality which encompasses every being. More precisely, there seems to be a common identity to words and sensations. The repetition of “same” at the end of the poem can be an indication of this interpretation. Namely, the Other is not something entirely Other or separated but another experience of the “same face, the same sun, fixed above the same water.” Perhaps the semantic opposition between Celan’s “shadow quadrant” and “astonished sun” shows that alterity can either be revealed and is clear like the sun or it cannot appear and therefore is obscure or shadowy. As such, truth is respectively something that shows itself (“you will see a sun that scatters”) or something that remains elusive (“glimmers up, glimmers up, glimmers up”).

6. Conclusion

Paz once claimed the following in *The Other Voice*: “Any reader who does not pause in awe at the beauty of certain strophes is a brutish boor” (1990, 107). When I came across this statement I burst into laughter, because his poetry and his verses frequently make me reflect on the reality in which I find myself. The same can be said of the poems by Paul Celan. As such, I wondered how anyone could be unaffected by their poems. Namely, I would like to emphasize the relevance and significance of poetry for our understanding of reality and Being. In fact, one could resume the foregoing investigation by stating that the relation between poetry and alterity has a potential meaning that reaches beyond our daily perception of life. In this way, poetry can provide insights that are of greater value than descriptions, categories and scientific interpretations. If our perspective is only based on conceptual knowledge, then I believe we will sooner or later encounter a limit. Therefore, it is my opinion that poetry begins where our reasoning comes to an end.

Now that I have reached the last pages of my study, it is time to retrace my steps. This thesis has investigated two different approaches to alterity by addressing the notion of truth, relation, (im)possibility and presence in the works by the modern poets Paul Celan and Octavio Paz. It is clearly the case that both men deem poetry to be a relational realm, the openness to the Other of which can lead to an experience of truth. Nevertheless, their account of alterity is not the same because they have a slightly different conception of the exposure to meaning. This can be due to differing priorities or sensitivities. More precisely, Paz primarily advocated an ontological understanding of Otherness, whereas Celan was more concerned with the ethical dimension of the Other. I attempted to explain their views by calling on the support of Heidegger and Levinas, since their philosophical ideas in ‘The Origin of the Work of Art’ (1935) and *Existence and Existence* (1947) served as an expository background for the conceptions of Paz and Celan.

More specifically, Heidegger argued in ‘The Origin of the Work of Art’ (1935) that truth happens as a strife between concealment and unconcealment (48). In other words, what we deem to be real or ordinary consists of another – more truthful – dimension which can be disclosed through poetry. Similarly, Paz believed that the poem can lead to a possible revelation of alterity. To him, “Now, the poem is just this: a possibility” (*BL* 1956, 14). In other words, a poem can provide access to the possible presence of alterity. Furthermore, what shows itself as the Other is “the unity of being” (*BL* 1956, 137). More precisely, the unity is the historical existence in which we find ourselves and which cannot be understood

in its entirety because we are intrinsically part of it. However, Paz argued that an exposure to the totality of Being can be experienced through poetry, and therefore the relation between poetry and alterity can be seen as a return to Being. The presence of the Other, though, is always something that has to be created so Paz's poetics are not simply about a return and an arrival, but about a constant possibility of presence which takes place in a relation that is not determined by any conceptual boundaries. In other words, the relation of poetry to alterity has to remain open, for this allows presence and the disclosure of meaning.

Nevertheless, alterity cannot be associated with a single form of truth because this would reduce its diversity of meaning. After all, I mentioned earlier that these pages did not propose to explore poetry in terms of *what* it was, but I wanted to indicate *how* poetry can be meaningful. That is, there are several ways to approach poetry and the Other. As such, another account of poetry and its relation to alterity can be found in Levinas's and Celan's works. In Celan's opinion, the Other will not show itself in poetry, but it is rather a matter of coming near it in a way that lets the Other preserve its alterity. More specifically speaking, poetry stands in a relation of proximity to alterity, which implies that there will always be a distance between both. Consequently, the Other cannot be disclosed in poetry. In comparison with Paz, it was not Celan's concern to indicate that poetry can lead to another understanding of Being. Instead, his notion of poetic truth and alterity can be found in the infinite movement of poetry towards the Other.

Celan's conceptions of the Other principally have an ethical dimension, which means that poetry experiences the responsibility to turn towards the call of the Other. This turn, though, will never be reciprocated because if it would, the infinite waiting for the presence of alterity will be brought to an end. To put it differently, the presence of the Other is impossible in Celan's poetics, but it is precisely this impossibility that respects the excess of meaning which is inherent to the Other. As such, reaching the realm of alterity would reduce the openness and continuous interpretations that poetry's relation to alterity can offer. An arrival cannot take place for the Other is a utopia or non-place: a realm which is undetermined and endless. Accordingly, poetry does not offer a return to Being, but a turn to an Other that is beyond comprehension and language.

The similarity between Paz and Celan is that the Other cannot be equated with poetry. Poetry can stand in a relation to the Other, but this relation is always characterized by an openness, since the Other will not remain present once it has been disclosed. Yet, for Celan, language is altered due to alterity, by which I mean that it consists of traces of the

Other. More precisely, these traces indicate the ethical relation in language. Paz, however, did not speak of an inflected language, but it was rather his claim that poetic speech could name the Other. More precisely, he claimed that “The world is a world of names. If the names are taken away from us, our world is taken away from us” (*OV* 1990, 56). In other words, if poetry is taken away from us, the other realm is taken away from us. Celan, though, precisely underscored non-language or silence as a form of communication with the Other. It is through silence that words lose their conceptual voice and in this way there is a receptiveness and opening to the meaning of the Other. However, in Celan’s and Paz’s understanding, the Other will always remain an irreducible notion and therefore it can never be mastered by us or by poetry. I would like to conclude my thesis with a quote of Yves Bonnefoy, because I believe that these particular words express the core of the relation between poetry and alterity, which is the waiting and the openness of one realm to another. He put it as follows:

“I maintain that nothing is more authentic, and thus more reasonable, than to go wandering, for – need it be said? – there is no method for returning to the true place. It may be infinitely close. It is also infinitely far away” (1989, 115).

Acknowledgments

A custom decrees that at the end of works such as this, the student shall state the names of those to whom (s)he owes special gratitude. My debts are many and I will probably not be able to list them all. By this I mean that the smell of rain, the appearance of sun and shadow on the buildings I can see across the street, the sound of the blackbird who is sitting on my rooftop, the crowdedness of anonymous people on the tube, ... were enough to evoke all the delight that I needed in order to sit down and write about poetry on this computer at which I am typing. Perhaps poetry includes all of these sensations.

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Admittedly, my idealistic literary world consists of dead poets and old bookstores. But I need to remind myself of the opportunity that my parents offered me so that I could study languages at the VUB. I am very grateful, even though they do not share a similar drive for literature. Over the years a child could come to the conclusion that parents form the rational backbone which it needs in order to get a grip on the unpredictability of daily life. Due to the guidance of my mother and my father I consider myself to be in touch with that other reality. Thank you for giving me chances to explore life.

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To me, a significant aspect of life is to feel poetry, wherever I am going and wherever I will end up. One can read and analyze literature, but I hope that its intensity can be experienced as one goes about one's routines: sitting on a crowded bus, doing the washing-up, listening to the rain, or simply living the lives that we are supposed to live. That being said, the greatest thing which I learnt during my studies in Brussels is perhaps this: Poetry is indeed to learn to walk through this world. To learn to be silent, like the linden and the oak of the fable. All one can say is that Celan's and Paz's words planted a tree. And I talked, because they shook my leaves. Finally, I would particularly like to praise some acquaintances for the seeds that their glances have scattered over the past four years: Rilke, Gide, Paz, Neruda, Hillesum, Duras, Bachmann, Breton, Celan and Hesse. Thank you for the many conversations.

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