

Death, Poetry, and Hope

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The paper revisits the question of immortality with Dostoevsky's reference to 'eternal memory' as a leitmotif. Starting with Agamben's discussion of Hegel, language, and death, the paper notes three ways in which language is understood as mimetic. For Hegel (according to Agamben) language imitates death. However, Heidegger highlighted the challenges of speaking authentically about death in such a way as to raise the further question as to the nature or capacity of language. For Herder, language imitates nature and poetry is the supreme expression of language. How this might work in relation to our thrownness towards death is explored by Michael Theunissen in his study *Pindar*, where he sees poetic language as essentially imitating a divine hope in relation to death. The paper concludes how this might be restated in the context of modernity.

Keywords: Agamben – Hegel – Heidegger – Herder – Theunissen – Pindar – Hermann Broch – Edwin Muir – eternal memory – animal/human – death – language – imitation – nature – hope

For Dostoevsky, the question of God was also the question of immortality, as highlighted in Ivan Karamazov's twofold denial of both. It is in this regard telling that his final novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, concludes with an affirmation of 'eternal memory' (an expression from the Orthodox liturgy for the dead), which is presented as key to the overcoming of nihilism. Since the late nineteenth century, however, the question as to human beings' final destiny has faded from the agenda of the philosophy of religion, which has become more exclusively preoccupied with questions relating to the existence and nature of God, religious language, and, more recently, the meaning of human religious practice. At the same time, questions of human dignity have tended to focus more on moral capacity or some form of socially mediated recognition rather than the traditional idea of having an immortal soul. This

may reflect both general cultural changes but also – especially within continental philosophy of religion – the influence of Heidegger’s definition of human being as a being towards death. This paper will certainly not embark on a proof for immortality nor even a defence of the Christian idea of a resurrection of the body. Nevertheless, and contrary to expectation, I shall seek to explore how Heideggerian being towards death might help towards a rediscovery of just what is at stake in speaking of immortality in the way that Dostoevsky still could. I shall, though, begin with a question that might at first seem to have nothing to do with my title: what is the difference between animals and human beings? What is it that, despite all that we have in common with the animal realm and despite our awareness of the continuity of the evolutionary process, makes us continue to feel that we are not just one more species amongst others but are essentially different?

Western traditions of religion and philosophy offer several distinct but related answers to this question. Amongst the attributes that humans have and animals lack, it has been said, are: that we are possessed of an immortal soul and they are not; that we are endowed with reason, and they are not; that we have language and they have not (a view until recently widespread even amongst evolutionary biologists); that no other species has constructed such an elaborate technical exo-body; that no other species has indulged in intra-specific killing to the same extent that we have done and are doing; that we alone seem to have a consciousness of our own mortality and we alone mourn our dead, a difference that may be especially associated with the distinctive human activity we call religion.

Of course, there is a certain circularity in these statements. The immortal soul has long been identified with our faculty of reason; reason in turn is impossible without language; reason and language make possible the technology that enhances our capacity to kill our fellow human beings without triggering instinctive resistances to doing so; and knowledge of death is, once more, interdependent with the sense of having an immortal soul or – if we no longer believe in an immortal soul – our capacity rationally to reflect on our experience and so to infer our own likely decease from the observed deaths of others. All other humans die, I too am a human, therefore I too will die (although, as Tolstoy’s novella *The Death of Ivan Ilych* illustrates, we mostly prefer to formulate this syllogism in the third person and not to apply it to ourselves, until such time as we have no alternative).

Each of these statements is, of course, subject to qualification and variation. Shaped by the twofold sources of Greek philosophy and Hebrew

Scriptures the Western tradition is very capacious and within this tradition there have been those – Pythagoreans and some esoteric Rabbinic schools – who allowed for the transmigration of souls not only between humans but between humans and animals. In the early modern period, it was reported that some animals too, notably elephants, engaged in religious practices, and it does seem to be the case that elephants and perhaps some other species are conscious of their dead. Several species – including some bird species as well as the higher apes – show clear signs of applying rational calculation to problem-solving. And, as experiments over the last forty or so years have shown, higher apes seem to have some potential for language. Nevertheless, despite the near-universal acceptance of the scientific view that we, like all other animals, are, in the end, products of the same evolutionary processes, these differences continue to influence our sense of what it is to be human.

Without offering definitive conclusions with regard to any of these supposed differentiating factors, I shall limit myself here to exploring how two of them – language and death – throw light on how we understand what it is to be human in a secular age in which not only faith in God but also faith in an immortal soul has been largely consigned to history.

Language and death are, as we shall see, closely associated and my starting-point is Giorgio Agamben's appropriately titled study *Language and Death*. In particular, I shall focus on his discussion of a remarkable passage in Hegel's *Jena Realphilosophie* in which the German philosopher speaks of how the animal first acquires a voice in the face of death. It is unclear from Agamben's quotation whether this refers to the cry of the prey fleeing the predator or something more like the legendary 'swan-song' that anticipates the creature's death in an intense vocalization of its inner life and feeling. Yet whether it is simple fear or some more sublime intuition of impending decease, this 'voice' is merely 'a vanishing trace'; it expresses 'the power of the negative' but it is not yet meaningful, articulated speech, Hegel says. It is a cry in the moment of being cried out - and then it is gone. By way of contrast, language only becomes language when it makes manifest the life of Spirit, which means that it must be both self-reflexive and sustained over time since spiritual life is life that has a self-conscious history. In Hegelian terminology, Spirit must therefore not only confront the advent of death but 'is maintained in death' and 'converts the negative into being'. In other words, whereas the animal merely cries out, the human being exists as and by virtue of being a spiritual entity that knows its own death and understands itself and its life in the light of this knowledge (Agamben 1991, 41 – 46). But this knowledge is only possible

because we have language. Quite simply: life becomes spiritual in that being, the human being, who can say to itself: 'I shall die'.

As expounded by Agamben, Hegel's account of the possibility of articulating knowledge of our death in language implies a kind of mimetic relationship between language and death – the first of three such mimetic relationships that we shall have occasion to observe in the further course of this paper. Language, Hegel argues, is the appropriate form for the realization of our death because the voice itself exists only 'in the element of air' and has no abiding substantial being (Hegel, cited in Agamben, 1991, 42); like death, the voice is 'nothing' (Agamben 1991, 32 – 36). What it speaks forth is pure 'intention to signify' that is 'prior to any categorical significance' and, as such, manifests a 'pure will to understand'. Yet though, or precisely because, it has no determinate content, the pure original form of language gives the freedom also to think death and in this way to enable the human being to *die* and not merely perish as the beasts of the field (Agamben 1991, 59).

But, as we have seen, Spirit can only be Spirit when it acquires persistence in time. We can only be conscious of death if we are able to envisage a future in which we will die, and we can only do this if we are conscious of having a life beyond what we are experiencing in this present moment. At the same time, since what is at issue is death, we can only truly be conscious of time if we are also conscious of the reality that, for us at least, time is finite, that it is ephemeral, ever-passing, and that we, as beings having their being in time, are also ephemeral, ever-passing. But if we are to know this, then the original pure possibility of language must acquire form and be articulated in grammatical structured and semantically meaningful ways. This is what we find in some of the earliest recorded human poetry, as in the ancient Greek poet Pindar: 'Creatures of a day! What is someone? What is no-one? A dream of a shadow' (Pindar 1997, Pythian Ode 8, lines 46 – 49); or, in Psalm 103, 'The days of man are but as grass, he flourishes like a flower of the field; when the wind blows over it, it is gone and its place will know it no more'. Or perhaps, as the French philosopher Vladimir Jankélévitch, it can be said in just one word, a word used to great effect by the French classical tragedians: the word 'Hélas' (Jankélévitch 1974, 192).

In *Being and Time*, a text that would be decisive for the development of continental philosophy in the twentieth century Martin Heidegger argued that human being is distinctive precisely in terms of being a being towards death and, for Heidegger, genuine self-understanding was therefore only possible on the basis of freely 'running towards' the prospect of our own death – although,

as some of the most persuasive passages in his *Being and Time* make clear, this is a knowledge that we are extremely clever at avoiding. It's not that we don't talk about it, but we talk about it in such a way as to 'tranquillize' ourselves. Death is always what happens to someone else or, if it happens to me, then 'not yet' – and Heidegger too uses Tolstoy's Ivan Ilych to make the point, since Tolstoy's hero had never really thought that the universal truth 'all men are mortal' actually applied to him until a late stage of his terminal cancer. By way of contrast, Heidegger proposed that we 'run towards' death not in the sense of actively seeking it out but of being absolutely and unflinchingly clear-sighted about the fact that being thrown into a world not of our own making we are also ineluctably thrown towards death. Such is the force of this 'throw' that we have no possibility of reversing its direction but, Heidegger suggests, we do have a chance of outrunning it and reaching its point of arrival before it itself 'lands', namely, the point of our utter annihilation: death. Only if we do this can reach a position from which to get an all-encompassing view back onto the life we will have lived and therefore be able to know the kind of beings that we are (Heidegger 1962, 279 – 311).

For Heidegger too the role of language was pivotal. As he makes clear in *Being and Time*, language – *logos* – is the basic way in which both our world and we ourselves in relation to our world are disclosed. How we talk about ourselves reveals who we are. But, as we have just seen with regard to how we today, we who are far from the original insights into death of the archaic poets, talk about death, language often serves more to conceal than to reveal. As Heidegger puts it, *Rede* / discourse becomes *Gerede* / 'idle talk' or 'chatter', corresponding perhaps to the Greek *doxa* / opinion or semblance. *Gerede* may not necessarily be false in terms of what it says, but it is a way of saying things that shuts down possibilities for gaining real insight rather than opening them up. If you are asked 'What did Plato teach about the immortality of the soul?' and answer 'Plato taught that the soul is immortal' you have certainly not said anything false, but if you think that what you've said is enough then your ability to give a correct answer is itself a hindrance to deeper understanding, since what you've said says nothing about what Plato conceived either the soul or immortality to be or why it mattered to him. We all know that the earth goes round the sun, but for most of us this is a second-hand opinion, learned at school, and we probably couldn't begin to offer a demonstration as to why this is not only true but has to be true. It's true, but it too is *Gerede*. So, for Heidegger, the point is not just to be able to say true things (such as 'all men are mortal') but really to understand what we're saying when we say them

(Heidegger 1962, 211 – 214). We must, as he put it, listen to what language itself says, listen to the words we use, and think about what we're really saying with them. Unfortunately, the modern world seems to be doing its best to prevent us doing this. Whereas an ancient language, such as Plato's and Aristotle's Greek and, on Heidegger's view, German (but not Latin, the language of Catholic philosophy¹), contemporary usage is more likely to hide or conceal what is being said than to reveal it. This is primarily because of our growing penchant for acronyms, etymologically impossible neologisms, and other ways of disfiguring our language.

This tendency is especially strong in relation to the ever-increasing technologization of life, knowledge, and human relationships. It is not that Heidegger thought science and technology were 'wrong'. The point is that they represent only one side of life and not the whole. But if they are taken for the whole, then disaster is likely to ensue. In his 1951 – 1952 lectures *What is Called Thinking?*, Heidegger draws attention to changes that are occurring in everyday language usage as a result of such technologization. He says,

A symptom, at first sight quite superficial, of the growing power of one-track thinking is the increase everywhere of designations consisting of abbreviations of words, or combinations of their initials. Presumably no one here has ever given serious thought to what has already come to pass when, instead of University, you simply say 'Uni.' 'Uni' – that is like 'movie'. True, the moving picture theatre continues to be different from the academy of the sciences. Still, the designation 'Uni' is not accidental, let alone harmless. It may even be in order for you to go in and out of the 'Uni' and study 'nat. sci.' But the question remains what kind of order is heralded here in the spreading of this kind of language. Perhaps it is an order into which we are drawn, and to which we are abandoned, by that which withdraws from us (Heidegger 1968, 34 – 35 (translation adapted)).

Heidegger's view of the implications of what he called 'planetary technology' for the living, speaking voice are perhaps most succinctly summed up in a comment in the lectures *On the Essence of Language* that we today (i.e., in the 1950s) are experiencing the 'thorough technicization of all languages as instruments of interplanetary information. Meta-language and Sputnik, meta-linguistics and rocket science are one and the same' (Heidegger 1959, 160). In this situation, information replaces understanding and, under the influence of

¹ Nor, to my knowledge, did he ever comment on the possibility of biblical Hebrew having any intrinsic relation to fundamental thought.

this change, whole areas of self-knowledge get closed down. In our own situation of digitalized media, such criticisms are heard more and more often. When we are 'always on', do we become incapable of giving anything attention that is necessary for true understanding?

Specifically with regard to the question of death, it is not hard to see how the 'average everyday' way we talk about death, including the discourse of contemporary medical practice, might be a strategy of avoidance: death is a problem to be dealt with, a project to be managed, or a situation to be negotiated. Again, none of these approaches is necessarily 'wrong', but if we neglect the simple truth that death is integral to our being human and not, as it were, an enemy to be defeated or a problem to be solved, then our thinking, feeling, and action in relation to it are likely to become seriously distorted. A nurse practitioner in New Jersey who works in palliative care of the dying once assured me that, if you are wealthy enough to have private medical insurance, New Jersey is the worst place in the world to die. Why? Not because you won't have access to state-of-the-art medicine. You will. But because you will be put through every possible procedure so as to meet the professional requirement of medical practice to extend life – as well, perhaps, as pre-empting any possible litigation – you will be subjected to extended and unnecessary suffering as well as having to experience a series of false hopes being repeatedly dashed – and all without achieving any significant extension of your life-span.

How, then, might we learn to speak about death so as to speak more truly about it? Heidegger, we have heard, urged us to listen to language, to what language itself, in its deepest roots, is saying to us. But just what are the deepest roots of language?

The question as to the origins of language was one that gripped the eighteenth century, and amongst the most celebrated products of the eighteenth-century debates was J. G. Herder's 1772 treatise *On the Origin of Language*. Against those who argued that language was only conceivable as a divine gift, Herder argued that it was a product of nature:

The human being is therefore, as a listening, noting creature, naturally formed for language, and even a blind and dumb man, one sees, would inevitably invent language, if only he is not without feeling and deaf. Put him comfortably and contentedly on a lonely island; nature will reveal itself to him through his ear, a thousand creatures which he cannot see will nonetheless seem to speak with him, and even if his mouth and his eye remained forever closed, his soul does not remain entirely without language. When the leaves

of the tree rustle down coolness for the poor lonely one, when the stream that murmurs past rocks him to sleep, and the west wind whistling in fans his cheeks – the bleating sheep gives him milk, the trickling spring water, the rustling tree fruit – interest enough to know these beneficent beings, urgent cause enough, without eyes and tongue, to *name* them in his soul. The tree will be called the rustler, the west wind the whistler, the spring the trickler ... (Herder 2002, 98 – 99).

Here, then, we have the second of our three ideas of mimesis or imitation as lying at the root of language. This time, however, it is not the imitation of death, but of life. And, against many of his contemporaries, Herder insisted that the capacity for engaging in such mimesis was entirely natural and did not need any special divine gift, over and above all that human beings were endowed with at their creation.

Bring no Mercury or Apollo down from the clouds as operatic dei ex machina; all of many-sounded, divine nature is language mistress and Muse! ... I ask whether this truth ... can ever be expressed more nobly and beautifully ... than [in the words]: ‘God led the animals to him that he might see how he should name them! And however he would name them, thus were they to be called!’ Where can it be said more definitely in an Eastern, poetic way: the human being invented language for himself! – from the sounds of living nature! – to be characteristic marks of his governing understanding! And that is what I prove (Herder 2002, 99).

But the spontaneity of our original language also means

... “that *poetry was older than prose!*” For what was this first language but a collection of elements of poetry? Imitation of resounding, acting, stirring nature! Taken from the interjections of all beings and enlivened by the interjection of human sensation! The natural language of all creatures poetized by the understanding into sounds, into images of action, of passion, and of living effect! A vocabulary of the soul which is simultaneously a mythology and a wonderful epic of the actions and speakings of all beings! Hence a constant poetic creation of fable with passion and interest! What else is poetry? (Herder 2002, 103)

Consequently, Herder joins what he calls ‘The tradition of antiquity’ in believing that ‘*the first language of the human species was song*’ (Herder 2002, 103). This does not mean that human language was an imitation of birdsong, but ‘song which was as natural to the human being, as appropriate to his organs and natural drives, as the nightingale’s song was natural to the nightingale’

(Herder 2002, 104). In other words, it was as song that human beings originally articulated and integrated their acts of naming. As Herder puts it,

So there sang and resounded the whole of nature as an example, and the human being's song was a concerto of all these voices, to the extent that his understanding needed them, his sensation grasped them, his organs were able to express them. Song was born, but neither a nightingale's song nor *Leibniz's* musical language nor a mere animals' cry of sensation: an expression of the language of all creatures within the natural scale of the human voice! (Herder 2002, 104)

As in Hegel, we have a view of language as involving mimesis, although not, this time, the mimesis of death but of life, the living, rustling, babbling sounds of nature, mirrored and imitated in the medium of song.

These views exercised a perhaps unquantifiable influence on Romanticism, in and beyond Germany, directly and indirectly and we hear an echo of them in Heidegger's own later turn to poetry as the way in which, even in an age of technology, the original power of language is kept alive. When language becomes song, it returns to its origins, not in the sense that the poet's task is to try to re-invent some Ur-language spoken by earlier human beings, but that in becoming poetic song words are gathered and articulated in such a way that what they say shines forth in what is said. And, even if one goes only half-way with Heidegger's critique of the present age of technology, that will also commit poetry to an unceasing struggle with what we might variously call the reification or banalization of language or its reduction to a mere tool or instrument in the service of one or other social or private goal.

But what might this mean with specific reference to our theme of death? That poetry, like religion, has a particular association with death seems undeniable. Songs of lament and the 'praise of famous men' reflect both the grief of discovered mortality and the impulse to raise what has perished above the flux of time and forgetfulness. As far back as the record goes, the word, recited, passed on, written down resists (and is intended to resist) the annihilating power of time. Homer's words – and Isaiah's – speak to us today, we feel, as if spoken today. As Schiller put it in his poem 'The gods of Greece', lamenting the loss of the Greeks' 'beautiful world', 'What lives undyingly in song, in life must pass away' (Schiller 1962, 51). In other words, what must inevitably pass away in life will nevertheless live on, undyingly, in song. And even when the poetic word sheds the Romantic aspiration to undying life, we are likely to hear it continuing to contest the sovereignty of death. Even though

he believed that the wise know 'dark is right', the modern British (Welsh) poet Dylan Thomas famously urged his dying father and all of us: 'Do not go gentle into that good night ... Rage, rage against the dying of the light' (Thomas 1988, 148). In a very different context, the unique pathos of the poetic work of Paul Celan is surely bound up with that poet's struggle for a word that would be both speakable and true to his experience of the death camps. Theodicy, the defence of God's justice, may be impossible after Auschwitz – perhaps it was already impossible after the Somme or even the Lisbon earthquake – but if God can't be defended, the poet may (some poets do) still seek a word that, being spoken, promises the worthiness of speech, something that can be said that isn't just blown away on the wind, like time, like dust and ashes ... In imitating life in its most intense moments, poetry gives us something to remember, something worth remembering. And to that extent at least, poetry gives also the possibility of hope.

These comments are not intended to provide the basis for a general theory of poetry and speak only of possibilities that have been found within the poetic word and that illustrate a recurrent theme in the Western understanding of poetry, a theme that goes back to some of the earliest sources of the Western poetic and intellectual tradition. Pindar, again, provides an outstanding example, and one which the contemporary German philosopher Michael Theunissen has enlisted in the cause of a philosophical grounding of hope. Known also for his work on Kierkegaard and his 'negative theology of time', Theunissen's 1000-page study of the Greek poet, published in 2000, involves an intensely detailed analysis of a number of key passages, amongst which are reflections on Pindar's own poetic task in singing the praise of victorious athletes. Obviously, I cannot do justice to this monumental work, still less, not being a classicist, to the Greek poet himself, but Theunissen can help us move further into the nexus of themes we are considering.

Theunissen's view of Pindar's philosophy as a whole is summed up in the saying that 'what is mortal befits mortals', in other words, that, mortals as we are, we must learn what is fitting and appropriate to us, not seeking to go beyond what is humanly possible or to trespass on the domain of the gods. The Ode Pythian 8 sets one of the boundaries of human possibility when the poet exclaims in lines quoted earlier in this paper: 'Creatures of a day? What is someone? What is no one? A dream of a shadow.' Modesty is consequently integral to wise living and likewise to good poetic practice. If the poet's words are truly to honour those they honour, they must avoid excess. Yet Theunissen will also (and no less emphatically) say that 'In its foundations and as a whole Pindar's thought is

hopeful thinking about hope (*Hoffnungsdenken*)' (Theunissen 2000, 346). In this it offers a strong contrast to archaic poetry that, in one especially striking image, saw human life as like the situation of sailors whose ship is overshadowed by a giant wave, that is at any moment about to crash down and sweep them away. In philosophical terms, Theunissen speaks of what happens in Pindar as a 'transcendence' of time, with the proviso that 'Transcendence, however, does not mean breaking out of time altogether into a supposed timelessness, as in Parmenidean-Platonic metaphysics, but a transformation of time's dominion into another [time]. In this way the change is a turning, a turnaround of time in itself' (Theunissen 2000, 1).

One way of seeing what this means is by examining Pindar's own idea of what it is to be a poet. And here we move to our third kind of mimesis; not the mimesis of death, or nature/ life, but of the divine. But what can this mean?

This theme is most extensively taken up in Pythian 12, in praise of the winner of the pipe- or flute-playing competition in which Pindar inks his own poetic calling to the myth of Perseus beheading the Gorgon Medusa. Athena, he says, invented flute-playing as a (perhaps to our minds somewhat bizarre) imitation of the surviving two Gorgons weeping for their slain sister. In this act of transformative mimesis, the goddess turns the Gorgons' grief into a thing of beauty (Theunissen 2000, 470 – 471). Monstrous mourning is transformed into divine song. But this is more than art beautifying life or sublimating suffering. Two other features of the story reveal further depths. The first is that despite their terrifying appearance, the Gorgons are also acknowledged to have had a seductive allure and a strange beauty. It is therefore not a matter of music spreading an illusory veil of beauty over a horrific reality. Rather, it reveals or perhaps releases the beauty already within, but perhaps also trapped within, that reality. And, in a further step, it is precisely the horrific quality of Medusa's head that then enables Perseus to use it to liberate his mother, Danae, from the living death of her captivity, thus making death an instrument of life (Theunissen 2000, 478). Here, then, is a whole sequence of transformations: the beauty of the Gorgons is transformed into the terrible spectacle of Medusa's beheading, Medusa's beheading is transformed into a life-giving act, and in Athena's pipe -playing the Gorgons' wailing becomes song. The beauty of life is mirrored in death and the terror of death is mirrored in the transformation of life into art. And what is crucial is that the human poet, Pindar himself, is only able to narrate the myth because he has the goddess's own song as an example to imitate. The truth of poetic art rests on its truthful imitation of and therefore its dependence on the divine. As Theunissen puts it elsewhere (with

reference to Olympian 10.79), it is not the natural thunder that the poet imitates but the divine thunder of Zeus – or in this case, the pipe-playing of Athena (Theunissen 2000, 680).

As the myth of the invention of pipe-playing suggests, the ultimate achievement of poetry is thus a kind of triumph over death, which, in turn, is the ultimate instance of time's negative sovereignty over human existence. This same pattern extends to the poet's task more generally: the happiness accruing to the victor on account of his triumph will be washed away into forgetfulness if it is not kept alive by the poet's song (Theunissen 2000, 252) whilst, conversely, the victor's achievements will live forever in the poem that celebrates it (Theunissen 2000, 156). Under the inspiration of the god, poetic song transforms negative time, the ephemeral, into saving time. Such time is no longer empty, hurtling towards annihilation, but is the rich and complex matrix of all experience and life. And although the poet must remember to keep to the law of just measure and to the temporal and material conditions of human life on earth, his poems are able to make some small contribution to re-envisioning that life. Where earlier poets saw this as being suspended in an alien and annihilating fog of ephemeral time that turns all our hopes to illusions, now it is hope that becomes the horizon of life itself. Therefore, when Pythian 4 tells the story of the Argonauts' homecoming, Theunissen reads this as the ultimate story of poetic vocation itself:

As we follow the course of the Ode and mentally re-enact it, we accompany the poet as he raises himself above the limits of human Dasein and makes his journey home. Having transcended the ephemeral, Pindar returns to the ephemeral and from poetic hyperbole he returns to modest words and from the vision of a beyond comes back to this world (Theunissen 2000, 922).

Returning home, back to the material, concrete, and particular and to everyday life, the poet's song provides a point of rest that, at the same time, incorporates the infinity of the journey, providing 'a temporary refuge in the world as it is'. We recall that the first gift of Mnemosyne, mother of the Muses, was forgetting, that is, forgetting human troubles in visions of distant heroic deeds and the divine life of Olympus.

But where has this got us? If this is what Pindar and his commentator have to offer by way of hope and transcendence is it more than wishful-thinking, a refuge or, at most, a respite? Is it anything more substantial than what Kierkegaard described as 'the aesthetic', a consolation that merely sublimates the suffering that the artist vicariously suffers on behalf of humanity. As he

puts it in one of his most concise statements on the subject, 'It is through the negation of the imperfect reality that poetry opens up a higher reality, extends and transfigures the imperfect into the perfect, and thereby reconciles the deep pain which seeks to darken all things. Thus far poetry is a kind of reconciliation, but it is not the true reconciliation for it does not reconcile me to the reality in which I live' (Kierkegaard 1997, 330 – 331). Another of Kierkegaard's images speaks of the poetic idea as caught midway between the real and ideal worlds, seeing only images reflected in the clouds and not able to rise to a view of the pure heavens (Kierkegaard 1944, 214). Art is a kind of halfway house: it lifts us above the earth, but it cannot take us to heaven. Death will come in the end. One day even the poetic word will be forgotten.

In his great elegiac poem *In Memoriam* the Victorian poet Alfred Lord Tennyson set out to refute the view that in the face of death we are each of us no more than 'An infant crying in the night: / An infant crying for the light: / And with no language but a cry' (Tennyson 2007, 396, canto 54) (an image that takes us back to Hegel's notion of the animal cry that, in the face of death, comes close to the edge of speech). But, in the end, isn't the poetic ambition – Pindar's or Tennyson's – reducible to just such infant 'crying in the night'? Shouldn't we do better to take the counsel of another great Victorian poet, Matthew Arnold, who urged us to accept that we inhabit a world in which there is 'really neither joy, nor love, nor light, / Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain' (Arnold 1995, lines 33 – 34.). Poetry may well and may do well to defy the passing of the light, but surely it is an illusion to think that it can do more than empower our defiance? Can poetry alone give sufficient grounds for hope?

Or, to put the same question in another form, where might the poet find the divine song that he is to imitate if his work is to give hope? The Western tradition offers several answers to this question. In the remainder of this talk I shall focus on just one, namely, human solidarity.² I will explain.

Theunissen's analysis suggests that there are in fact striking differences between Pindaric poetics and the 'poetry' of Kierkegaardian aesthetes. Although both see poetic work as aiming to transcend the annihilating power of time, the aesthetes believe that this requires them to abstract the poetic image from the concrete context of social and temporal relationships in which the poet exists. Like the pre-Pindaric poets of Greece, they see time as inevitably betraying and

² Another has to do with poetry's relation to the eschatological future. These themes are, of course, importantly connected in that this future is also that same future in which the saints (or in some cases all of humanity) will be gathered into one.

undoing whatever human beings set out to do or to hope for in the world. Pindar, by way of contrast, understands his poetic practice in its connection to his community, embodied in the patrons who, on some occasions, he also speaks of as friends and the events he commemorates are shared events in the life of the Greek diaspora. By finding connections between the mythical time of pre-history, the historic past, and present relationships and future hopes, poetry is less suspended between worlds and rather a practice of weaving divine hope into the fabric of everyday life and ordinary human relationships. The question is not defined by the choice between a timeless eternity and all-devouring time. Rather, it is a question as to whether, given the indubitable negatives of our entanglement in time, it is also possible to experience another rhythm in time itself and to discover *in time* a saving and healing power. Arising from and speaking to a real community of those bound together by mutual acknowledgement and engaged in the co-operative building of a shared future the poetic word provides a measure for human existence and delivers it from pure transience and self-annihilation and in this way is also a word of hope.

This, of course, seems still to fall short – far short – of religious hope for personal survival of death. But it does open the door to a central aspect of traditional and contemporary religious practice in relation to death, namely, the pious remembrance of the dead, and to that extent, the poet may, within his proper and modest limits, also serve to nourish a hope that is, finally, more than a proximate hope for a materially better future. Those remembered in Pindar's Odes, like so many who have been remembered by poets ever since, were eminent amongst the great and good. Not only successful athletes, they were also in many cases of noble lineage and their present triumphs are depicted as re-enacting the deeds of their mythical ancestors. If not gods, they are kin to gods, demi-Gods perhaps, like Herakles himself, founder of the Olympic Games. Yet already for Pindar they are memorable not solely for the reasons that modern heroes are memorable, namely their distinctive individual qualities, but precisely because of their role in bearing and strengthening the bonds of common life. What is promised in them is also the good of their cities and, at the same time, their virtue is emphatically also the virtue of generously welcoming the stranger. It is not just a matter of celebrating exceptional individual achievement (though it undoubtedly is that) but of exhortation to philanthropy, giving that word all the weight it can bear: *phil-anthropy*, the love of human beings. Remembering their achievements in song, the poet bears witness to the possibility that human life can bring forth what is worth remembering and, even on the bleakest view, if song itself must one day pass

away, what will not pass away is that this has been done, this good thing achieved, this act of honour duly performed. Religious hope may offer an absolute future, but if poetic hope cannot offer this much it may still offer what grammarians call a 'future perfect' and assure us that, whatever is to come, *it will forever be the case that life will have been good.*

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, poetry has inclined away from the praise of famous men in favour of the common man and, eventually, the common woman. Heroic deeds have been displaced by details of domestic and personal life, and hyperbole deflated. Heidegger himself broke with two thousand years and more of intellectual history when he took as the starting-point of his philosophical analysis of the human condition the experience of the average everyday human being, rather than the exceptional persona of the wise man, the hero, the artist, or the saint. And modern poetry and art has done the same. Its subject, as the opening words of a poem by the 20th century Scottish poet Edwin Muir has it, is 'We all...' And this 'we all' must extend not only to all who have done what is good in an average everyday way, but all who were robbed of every chance to do good and robbed of life itself in ways that seem to have effaced them from history – including, as the French philosopher Vladimir Jankélévitch put it, the unknown, unnamed slave who died in 500 BC and the girl who died in the death camp. If 'we all' are the subject of such poetry, its hope is summed up in words from Hermann Broch's novel *The Sleepwalkers*, translated by Muir and his wife Willa. They are words that conclude an essay on European nihilism interspersed into the action of the novel and in which Broch expresses many of Heidegger's reservations about the levelling and dehumanizing tendencies of the age of technology. But where this led Heidegger, for a while at least, to embrace Nazism, it was Nazism that Broch, a Jew, fled. Probably unintentionally but speaking out of a shared cultural history, Broch's words echo but also transform Agamben's Hegelian reflections on the power of the voice. For, Broch said, no matter how far we go in the direction of the 'muteness of the abstract' that characterizes the coming modern age of technology, there remains 'the voice that binds our loneliness to all other lonelinesses, and it is not the voice of dread and doom; it falters in the silence of the Logos and yet is borne by it, raised over the clamour of the non-existent. It is the voice of man and of the tribes of men, the voice of comfort and hope and immediate love: "Do thyself no harm! for we are all here!"' (Broch 1948, 648).

These words are, in fact, a quotation from the Acts of the Apostles. As such, they epitomize the call of religion in face of the age-old prospect of death and of the unprecedented world being brought into being by planetary

technology. It is the call of religion both in the sense that it is the call that recalls us to the possibility of a religious view of life and it is the call that religion itself is called to call out to the world: 'Do thyself no harm! for we are all here!' As such, it is a fruitful gloss on Dostoevsky's call to 'eternal memory' in which each of those he called the insulted and injured are remembered according to the dignity that is due each human being.

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